

KinuQuest 1: Enter the Assassin

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Overview

At long last, I've been waiting to write this for a good while now. The first time in which players will be able to control Kinu in a truly playable fashion, as well as bring forth the decisions in which were made in raising her.

Part of this questline is an unabashed deconstruction of Raphael from the first game — the flat-out assumption that you as a female PC should obviously fall for his all-encompassing charm, the deny, attack, reverse victim offender should you reject him, the open disgust and dismissal of you should you not meet his very stringent requirements.

It is, also, at the time of writing, the first concrete move that Taoth and his agents make upon the world that is viewable by the player. It's been hinted that things have been going on behind the scenes so far, but with this questline events are finally brought to the fore.

While I've been mulling this over for about two years now, the devil is always in the details. I'm sure that things will change between this being in my head, planning, and the final writing which I'm doing now.

Kinu

As mentioned before, how you raised Kinu as a child plays an important role in her stats and skills. She is level 3 at the start of this questline, and always has the foxfire and mass drain abilities as her at-will and encounter powers. Since she will be facing multiple enemies and suffers from lack of action economy, it's okay for her to be overpowered for a level 3 entity by general standards: enemies are planned to come in packs of 2-4.

Kinu affinities cunning, willpower and agility.

The following modifiers are applied depending on how you raised her:

- Inari gains +2 to toughness, willpower and strength. Hime gains +2 to cunning, agility and presence.
 - If these numbers are insufficient to offset her action economy disadvantage for this section, adjust accordingly by increasing the bonuses or adding other stats.
- Inari gains bark skin as a recharge power. Hime gains leech.
- Inari will be equipped with field clothes. Hime will be equipped with royal kimono.
- If she favours the naginata, she will start with it; same goes with hankyu.
- Naginata gains +1 to strength and toughness. Hankyu gains +1 to cunning and agility.
- Naginata gains cleave as her second recharge power. Hankyu gains triple threat.

Stats for weapons and armour should be comparable to that of companions, etc. I'll have them below.

If the stats aren't enough, her equipment or the bonuses can be adjusted. She is solo, and should definitely feel stronger than the norm and play like the child prodigy that she is. She isn't meant to be unbeatable, far from it, but she should feel like the kind of person who could conceivably take out packs of foes by herself as opposed to the champion, for whom soloing is not possible.

Is it possible to give her 2 actions per round? By balancing up the action economy, we might be able to make things a little less extreme on the bonuses. Yeah, give her 2 actions per round.

Important question: is it possible for Kinu to have her own inventory while in this event? Of course, there won't be any saving while in it. It's not THAT important — mostly the ability to let her have a bunch of healing items to use either in combat or top off between fights. If not, then it's not too big a deal. Maybe give her 100% regeneration between fights if she can't have her own inventory.

Raphael

The antagonist of this questline, and the first concrete move that Taoth makes in the PC's sphere of influence. The man and his underlings are sent to murder your daughter and any other children you may have, raze your home, and generally punish you as the PC for aligning yourself with the fluffs, as proven by your willingly and enthusiastically doing tasks for them (and possibly formally marrying Kiyoko in the process, too). Since it's not easy for them to strike at you directly, they'll kill the people you love first. Also, they fully realise that your daughter is going to grow into a massive threat (remember, she's overpowered for a level 3 entity) down the line, and want to nip that problem in the bud.

I won't deny it; Raph is going to be pretty unsympathetic. The CoC1 character by Merauder which he's the spiritual successor to was, as far as I'm concerned, a complete creep. I understand that I'm not the target audience for him (who happens to be straight women), but at the same time, the mannerisms which he exhibits — straight out of bored housewife bodice rippers — can be very easily made disgusting and creepy just by changing the man behind them ever so slightly.

Like I mentioned above, some time will be spent deconstructing the character. I understand that having him attack your daughter and any other children you may have will be a cheap shot, perhaps too much so, but at the same time someone's got to do it.

At the same time, while writing this I took a leaf from Rejan — aggravating and truly unlikable in several ways, all while firmly self-possessed of the idea that he's doing the right thing.

How This Works

KinuQuests will be told in retrospective, that is, Kinu telling the Champion about it after the fact and recounting the events that happened. This allows the player to easily retry the sequence should they fail in some manner (for now, getting Kinu raped/killed/etc, although I'm sure there'll be more failure conditions in the future arcs) by allowing daughter dearest to pull a Prince of Persia and say "wait, hold up, that didn't really happen. Let me try retelling that again..."

The other reason I'm telling the vignettes in this form is basically that people are *really* attached to daughter dearest. To be honest, I don't see anyone genuinely pursuing an avenue where they allow her to be removed from the game like UrtaQuest does to Urta if you fail. The knock-on effects of removing her from the game afterwards involve pretty much everyone and everything foxen-related, and keeping track of that alternative game state is frankly not worth the immense effort required given the extremely low predicted use it'll ever get.

So yeah, Prince of Persia it is. If you do manage to get Kinu murdered, she'll just go "wait, I told the story wrong. Let me try again from the beginning..."

Cheap? Perhaps. But useful, no doubt.

What buttons need to be locked, if any, during external vignettes like this? Journal? Appearance? Some considerations need to be taken to the UI for external vignettes.

Notes to self: the event dialogue will need to vary some if Kinu is the only child, or if she has her three principal siblings and any other kits the PC may have produced. We'll be counting on the player to not quite remember the gender of the kits that they produced all that time ago, heh.

- 4 kits total is the threshold for Asagiri to be present at the den quarters. 5 or more means there will be other siblings.
- 2 kits total is the threshold for Aya to be present at Kiyoko's home.
- 3 kits total is the threshold for Tatsumi to be present at the fields/shed.

There are always minor discrepancies, but I think this is the best way to handle this.

Prelude

//A Kinu vignette.

//Triggers when 1) fluff task #1: metal has been completed, 2) Kiyoko housewarming event has been seen, and 3) whatever other timers the other Kinu vignettes use. Actual activation is upon stepping into the tile that houses Kiyoko's home (tile 2 of the home map).

//Remove PC party, add Kinu.

<i>Some time ago...</i>

Your sleep is troubled. Rest is important — [kinu.isInari

 |even if you didn't have to get through all the tasks of managing the den, working the fields takes a strong constitution, and you won't be of much use if you're all dog-tired tomorrow

 |as someone of your station, you have precious little time to yourself and so much of <i>that</i> is spent on other less official obligations

]. Yet as you toss and turn on your futon and hug your pillow, slumber continually evades you. It's not too cold, nor too warm under the blankets — but as you stare up blankly at the darkness of the ceiling, listening to the crickets chirping beyond the walls of your chambers, you can't stop your ears from continually twitching, nor can you stave off the horrible knot that your stomach has tied itself into.

You roll about a few more times, gathering your tails about yourself under your blankets, and finally sit up in bed. This isn't working; your body simply refuses to obey your desires and release yourself into sweet oblivion. It's... frustrating.

<i>...Hmm? What's that sound?</i>

Your ear swivels towards the screen door to your quarters, wiggles and twitches. At first, you think it's the creaking of one of your storage trunks, the lid being lifted, but when your eyes fix upon where you keep your clothes and other things, there's nothing amiss. Then, it comes again — another faint creak, so soft as to be barely audible, akin to that of pressure being placed on wooden beams or planks. Maybe it's just the building settling, but then you hear something like a bell, a ring of metal against metal. No, that has to be out of the ordinary.

...It's coming from outside, from where your wooden porch is. Is someone there?

[kinu.isInari

 |That jolts you to wakefulness, and you dart upright in bed. You can feel your heart hammering in your chest, and blood rushes through your veins where it was sluggish but seconds ago. If someone or something is out there, lurking in the cover of darkness... this is your home, and you won't abide this in the least.

 |As a kitsune noblewoman and Mother's heir, it is your responsibility to defend the den while your parents are away; that has been drilled into you from the days of your

early childhood. Are you afraid? Yes, even if you would never admit it. But as Kohaku likes to say, bravery is not the absence of fear, but acting in the line of duty despite it...

]

...

<i>Let's go check it out.</i>

Still in your sleepwear, you pause to grab your [kinu.kinuWeapon
|naginata from where it's displayed on the wall
|hankyu from where it's displayed on the wall, along with your quiver
], and [kinu.isInari

|throw open the screen door with all your might, ready for anything from wild beasts to marauders in the night. You turn your gaze this way and that, [pc.weapon] at the ready, and shout a challenge that rings into the moonlit night air.

Nothing.

|carefully slide open the screen door without a sound, holding your breath as you prepare yourself for anything from wild beasts to marauders in the night. When nothing immediately draws into view, you push the door a little wider apart and step out into the moonlit night air, eyes darting this way and that as you survey the path outside; your gaze pierces into the shadows, looking for irregularly-shaped silhouettes or patches that're darker than they ought to be. Nothing leaps out to assail you, but it's only when your ears stop twitching that you allow yourself to relax.

]

Slowly, the ugly knot in the pit of your stomach eases up, and you [kinu.isInari|feel the fire in your blood slowly cool|let out the breath you'd been holding].

<i>There's no one there, and the sound stopped, too. Did I imagine it all?</i>

<i>No, my senses have never betrayed me in such a fashion. I... I did not imagine it.</i>

Just to be sure, you make a round of the den — first your quarters, then the <i>torii</i> gate[kiyoko.numKits 4] and your siblings' living space]before finally making a patrol of [kinu.isInari|the paths that lead through the fields|your mother's domicile]. All appears as it should be, and yet tonight has unsettled you in a way that you can't quite explain nor ever admit to anyone. Someone with responsibilities like you do doesn't have the luxury of showing weakness...

You sigh, turn tail and head back for your chambers. Yet no matter how you try, the memory of wood creaking and metal ringing clings to your mind as you hang your [kinu.weapon] back up on the wall and curl back up in your futon. The mere thought of having your home [kinu.isInari

|trespassed upon... it fills you with a simmering anger that

[being less than completely safe... it fills you with a sense of uncertain dread that
] roils in your mind as you finally succumb to slumber, pounding away at the inside of your
skull. You'll have to bring this up with [kinu.isInari|Granny|Matron] Komari tomorrow...

//end encounter

//Return PC party.

Initiation

//Must have viewed the prelude.

//Triggers when all the conditions are met and the PC attempts to talk to Kinu.

[kinu.isInari

|As you approach your fluffy daughter, it soon becomes apparent that Kinu's beset by hesitancy, dragging her feet and tails as she crosses the fields to approach you instead of bouncing along like her usual lively self. Your daughter's never been one to hide her thoughts and emotions very well, and when you get within speaking distance she puts her fingers together and starts fiddling with them.

<i>"Uh, hi, Dad."</i>

Why, hello there. What's got your precious little fluffball of a daughter down like this?

<i>"Umm..."</i> Kinu purses her lips and twiddles her fingers some more. <i>"Well, something happened while you [party.has kiyoko]and Mother]were out, and it was pretty big. I consulted with Granny Komari, and she said it would be better if I were the one to tell the story instead of her, because I was the main person involved..."</i>

Something big, huh?

Kinu turns her eyes away from you, but doesn't say anything.

...Does she <i>want</i> to say it? You're not going to force her into anything against her will.

<i>"I want to, and I don't want to, Dad."</i> Kinu sighs. <i>"To be honest, I think you're the one who needs to be more prepared for it than I am."</i>

Oh?

<i>"I'm ready whenever you are. Just ask me to tell you the story about it all when you want to hear it."</i>

You'll make note of that. Now first, though, let's see if you can't cheer up your daughter a bit first...

|As you approach your daughter, you spy that she's acting with a little hesitancy, even as she turns to you and half-bows. Ever so calm and collected, something's managed to perturb Kinu to the point where your fluffy little princess' usual unflappable demeanor is... well, thoroughly flapped. She's clearly holding herself back as she maintains a respectful distance between the two of you, ears folded forward against her hair.

<i>"Greetings, Father."</i>

What's the matter? She looks out of sorts, most unbecoming for someone of her station.

<i>"Ah... something happened while you [party.has kiyoko]and Mother]were out. It should not be of great concern, considering that the matter was most deftly resolved, but Matron Kurokawa insisted that you should be informed nonetheless. After all, you share this home with Mother... "</i>

...Does she <i>want</i> to say it? You're not going to force her into anything against her will.

<i>"What I want is immaterial in this regard, Father. The Den Matron is right — you need to be informed of a security concern to your own home. And since I was the main person involved in all this and the best witness, the task falls to me to relay the story as best as I can."</i> She pauses and looks pensive for a moment. <i>"It is a long one."</i>

You have time. Even if you don't, you'll <i>make</i> time for your daughter.

<i>"That is good to hear, Father. I... I will recount the events when you have prepared yourself."</i>

Right. In the meantime, you'll see if you can't cheer up your fluffy little princess a bit...

]

//Add [Story] to Kinu's main menu options.

//Display Kinu main menu.

[Story]

//Get Kinu to recount the events that transpired while you were out{//not first time: and try to get her story straight this time around}.

This will start a flashback story sequence. You will not be able to save or load your game, or access several game elements while playing as Kinu.

First Time

[kinu.isInari

|<i>"I guess there's no avoiding it, huh?"</i> Kinu looks around, and then her shoulders slump. <i>"All right, Dad. Let's find someplace to sit, and I'll tell you all about it..."</i>

The two of you find a low wall some distance away from the fields, and your daughter swings herself up onto it, using her tails for balance and leverage. You follow her up atop it, and Kinu gets a strange faraway look in her eyes as she gazes out over the fields, as if she's speaking more to the crops than to you...

<i>"Well, I'd better start from the beginning, right?"</i>

|<i>"I suppose it must be done."</i> Kinu closes her eyes a moment, squares her shoulders, then gives you a nod. <i>"Let us make ourselves comfortable, Father, then I will recount the events..."</i>

The two of you take seats at the low table, and Kinu is kind enough to brew up a little hot tea that tastes as bitter as it smells. Fitting, perhaps, for the mood of the story she's about to tell.

<i>"Let us start from the beginning, then..."</i>

]

Subsequent Times

[kinu.isInari

|Kinu grins sheepishly, although you can tell from her eyes that she's anything but amused by the prospect. <i>"All right, Dad. I'll try to get it right this time around."</i>

There're no worries. You understand that this must have been an extremely harrowing experience for her.

<i>"Still... I shouldn't make a fool of myself like that. C'mon, let's not talk while standing around — I need a break, anyway."</i>

The two of you find a low wall some distance away from the fields, and your daughter swings herself up onto it, using her tails for balance and leverage. You follow her up atop it, and Kinu gets a strange faraway look in her eyes as she gazes out over the fields, as if she's speaking more to the crops than to you...

<i>"Well, I'd better start from the beginning, right?"</i>

|<i>"Ah."</i> Kinu lowers her eyes. <i>"I must apologise for the last time, Father. I will endeavour to get the facts right in this recounting."</i>

She doesn't need to beat herself up like this; you understand that this must have been an extremely harrowing experience for her.

<i>"I made a fool of myself and diminished the weight of my word; that is more than concern enough."</i> Kinu closes her eyes a moment, squares her shoulders, then gives you a nod. <i>"Let us make ourselves comfortable, Father, then I will recount the events..."</i>

The two of you take seats at the low table, and Kinu is kind enough to brew up a little hot tea that tastes as bitter as it smells. Fitting, perhaps, for the mood of the story she's about to tell.

<i>"Let us start from the beginning, then..."</i>

]

//Remove pc party.

//Add appropriate Kinu with appropriate modifiers.

//start flashback sequence.

Opening

Your sleep is troubled.

For more than a week now, you've been unable to rest well at night. Fears, worries and anger fill your mind when you lay yourself down to rest, making peaceful repose impossible. It's foolish, you know, but there are things beyond your ability to control, despite how ashamed you may feel at yourself for such weakness.

Is it paranoia? Are your instincts trying to tell you something? As you lie down in your futon, hugging two of your tails about yourself, your memories keep on drifting back to that night — the memory of the mere possibility of having the sanctity of your home fouled is one that [kinu.isInari

|continues to gnaw at you relentlessly, filling you with seething anger, no matter how impotent and ultimately fruitless it is

|continues to gnaw at you relentlessly, filling you with worried concern, regardless of how irrational it all is

].

This won't do; you'll be tired tomorrow, and your work will suffer. This can't go on. Mother is [party.has kiyoko|away with Father on the road|out for the night with [kinu.isInari|Granny Komari|Matron Kurokawa]]; when she's away, you're in charge and thus responsible for everyone and everything in the den. Shouldering such a burden while being increasingly fatigued by the day is not good for anyone, yet you [kinu.isInari|need to be able to do this by yourself without getting help from anyone|don't want to complain and thus be a burden on anyone].

You turn again in bed, and then one of your ears flicks, bothered by a noise. It's the creaking of wood as weight's placed upon it, eerily similar to that night which you remember. Soft, faint, and yet it drives a [kinu.isInari

|red-hot spike straight into your heart, igniting the blood in your veins

|spike of ice straight into your heart, the blood in your veins running cold

] Tensing up under the covers, every muscle in your body pulled taut, you quiet and listen for the soft ringing of metal you remember from last time...

There it is!

It's coming from outside again...

The crickets aren't chirping tonight, even though the weather isn't that cold yet; the air is still tonight. And then you smell it:

Smoke and ashes.

Still in your sleepwear, you spring out from beneath the covers, racing for your [kinu.kinuWeapon|naginata|hankyu and quiver] on the wall. [kinu.isInari

[The feeling of having a weapon, a means of *<i>action</i>*, in your hands only inflames your blood further, and your confidence surges. Finally, *<i>finally</i>*, you can put this to rest, whatever it is. Anything that threatens your home, your family, your fields, must *<i>die</i>*.

[Though your hands still tremble a little, you force down the fear and clutch your weapon tightly. It is the duty of every kitsune noblewoman to defend home and hearth; you have been taught this since you were a kit, and even so... nothing could have prepared you for this reality. It is one thing to learn about such histories; it is another to participate in them being made, dressed as you are in your sleepwear and with [kinu.kinuWeapon|naginata|hankyu] in hand.

What you want is irrelevant. Your family is depending on you.

]

The creaking of wood just outside of your door has intensified into a soft scratching, louder now but still not quite enough to wake you were you asleep. There, then. [kinu.isInari

[Gritting your teeth, you throw open the screen door, [kinu.weapon] at the ready[kinu.kinuWeapon|| with an arrow nocked and ready to loose].

[No sense in not garnering every advantage you can, then — you don't trust the back entrance, either, so it behooves you to slip out the window after opening it from the inside and circle around to the front. It's a bit of a tight fit, but you make it through soundlessly, [kinu.weapon] at the ready[kinu.kinuWeapon|| with an arrow nocked and ready to loose].

]

You see them, crouched by your door. Lithe and vulpine, easily mistaken for one of your own in the dim moonlight.

But there the similarity ends. Clothing and light armor in the style of the natives, the sort which you've seen in the cat-woman's shop in the native settlement to the south. One tail, where even a newborn kitsune has two. And where human faces ought to be, muzzles, and above that black-and-white masks that obscured the remainder of their features, like

something out of a theater. They're not anemic by any means, but there's a certain *thinness* to them that transcends the mere material.

The scent of heavy mineral oil, common to these lands, meets your nose. Behind them, a heavy wooden bar, clearly meant to wedge the screen door shut. A faint flicker of yellow sparks, the scratching of flint against steel.

All this floods your mind in the silence between two breaths.

[kinu.isInari

|And then, rage. How dare they?

How *dare* they?

They drop the metal canister of oil, ducking out of the way [kinu.kinuWeapon
|as you bring your naginata down upon them in a mighty cleave, the blade of
your glaive flashing in the moonlight
|as you loose the arrow you've had at the ready, point and fletching whistling
through the air

]. As one, the invaders draw slender, sharply pointed blades of bronze, weapons in the style of — wait, these are **not** weapons the local natives use — and advance upon you. They had meant to burn you alive in your bedroom, bar the exits and prevent you from escape, and now that that's no longer an option there's only one option left.

You grip your [kinu.weapon] with white knuckles; fire burns in your heart and lungs as you realise, indeed, that the stakes here are life and death.

It's a fight!

|You must act *now*.

You are afraid, you are terribly afraid and aware of that fact, but you have no choice. So much of your life has already been decided for you, and you can only play out the steps to their end.

They drop the metal canister of oil, ducking out of the way [kinu.kinuWeapon
|as you bring your naginata down upon them in a mighty cleave, the blade of
your glaive flashing in the moonlight
|as you loose the arrow you've had at the ready, point and fletching whistling
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You grip your [kinu.weapon] with white knuckles; a horrible acrid pit yawns open in your stomach as you realise, indeed, that the stakes here are life and death.

Battle is joined...

]

//Begin opening fight against two Taothians. See combat section for details.

//For loss, see bad ends.

Victory

Tired and breathless, bleeding from scratches from the swords' sharp points, you loom over your defeated foes. Somewhere in the fight, your nightgown has torn in a couple places, but [kinu.isInari|you couldn't care less|there isn't time to deal with that now]; you have priorities. One of these lithe humanoid creatures has fallen in battle, but the other, wounded, is trying to half-limp, half-crawl away, having disengaged from the fight and left its companion to your tender mercies.

You know what you must do; there's no doubt in your mind as to your next course of action. A few strides is all it takes to catch up with the miscreant and grab it by the scruff of its neck, hoisting it up to eye level with you. Eyes gaze at you from behind the mask as fingers scrabble at your arm and reach for your throat; there's no doubt that this is some<i>one</i>, not some<i>thing</i>, behind that mask.

[kinu.isInari

|Not that it matters in the end. The vulpine-faced creature babbles something in the Belharan; you know the words, but as far as you're concerned they're meaningless and not worth your time. It's not as if you've never gutted fish, disposed of a field mouse or killed a weed before. They're all the same to you, and this pest is no different.

|<i>"I yield,"</i> the vulpine-faced creature half-gurgles, half-gasps. <i>"Mercy, please!"</i>

<i>"If you had just tried to kill me, I might have considered it,"</i> comes your reply.
<i>"But you threatened my family and home, and that is not something I can forgive."</i>

]

The creature snaps and struggles in the face of its fate, but you've beaten the strength out of it; it doesn't have the wherewithal to resist you as you grab it by under the jaw and with every last iota of strength you've left, [kinu.kinuWeapon|take hold of your naginata just below the guard and shove the blade right into its chest|take hold of one of your arrow and shove point and shaft right into its throat].

The sound that follows is horrific. Hot blood splashes out onto your hands and sleeves, bringing with it the smell of iron — deep, heavy and metallic; [kinu.isInari

|Mother is going to be furious at you having ruined your nightgown like this. The masked creature snaps and claws at your neck in furious desperation, lashing out in one last act before bleeding out itself; you scream a scream that should not belong in a noblewoman's mouth and do your damndest to throttle the creature. The more effort it puts into trying to tear out your neck, the faster it'll bleed itself dry. Exactly how long you hold out for, you don't know, but the strength finally ebbs from your foe's body and it goes limp in your hands, slumping to the side with a yip.

No, you are not very ladylike right now, but that doesn't matter

|it drips down your trembling hands, and your breath comes up short as your head spins. What you've just done is something any noblewoman would be expected to do if the need arose, and yet...

How did things come to this point? No, it's their fault, you wouldn't have had to do this if they hadn't tried to kill you in the first place. You wouldn't have just laid down and quietly accepted your fate, would you? A bout of light-headedness washes over you as the rush of battle fades. How much of this blood is yours? You're aware that you've suffered several cuts and scrapes, but exactly how much of the blood on your nightgown is yours?

Your injuries will have to wait

]. Your home is burning, smoke and ashes interjecting themselves amidst the blood; an orange glow rises into the night sky as the rooftops burn.

Despite the death, blood and fire, a strange sense of peace and purpose comes over you as you toss the limp body to the bloodied ground and pick up your [kinu.weapon] once more.

[kiyoko.numKits 2

|You need to make sure the rest of your family is safe, that's what responsibility is

|Since your parents are out, the duty of the den's defense falls to you

], and you will *not* run.

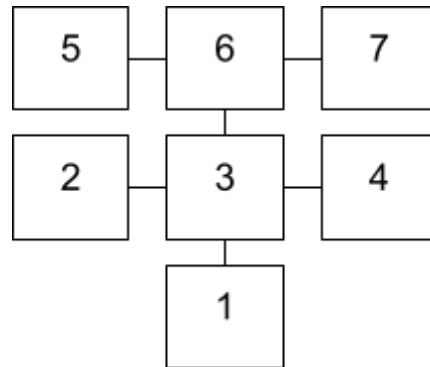
The night beckons...

//End encounter.

//Enter map.

Event Map

Map



- Players will start at tile 4. After checking in on the situation locally at tile 4, the event will take them first to tile 2, then tile 7, and finally tile 1. Basically, the event flags are as follows:
 - Check in on the den quarters (4).
 - Check in on Kiyoko's home. (2)
 - Check in on the fields. (5)
 - Attempt to leave, or alternately, guide everyone to safety. (1)
- All of these have to be done in order.
- Beyond the opening fight, there are two scripted fights: one upon first entering tile 3, and a second upon entering tile 3 again after having dealt with tile 5.
 - There are no random encounters in this event.

Room Descriptions

1. Den Entryway

The pathway leading into your home is eerily tranquil, lanterns doused and darkness reigning here against the backdrop of the burning den's orange glow. It's an uneasy peace, one that could be broken any moment, but you don't think there are any of those invaders lingering about these parts — they're beyond the den's limits, after all. They'd be <i>in</i> your home being up to no good, not lurking about the outskirts to pick off stragglers... would they?

Would they?

The thought worries you, but you can't let what-ifs paralyse you from action. {\\shed not checked:

You can't leave now, not when you haven't fully swept out the invaders from your home. [kinu.isInari
|You won't forgive them for doing this... you'll show them as much mercy as they would have you.
|Someone like you would never allow simple fear dissuade her from the duties of her station, would she? If you won't defend your home... what good are you?
]

Like it or not, you were born to this — there is no running away.
//shed checked:
You've just about made a sweep of the entire den and flushed out as many of these invaders as you can with your [kinu.weapon]. [kiyoko.numKits 1 2 3
|With your duties dispensed with, you've got to go and get help
|Now that Aya is safe and you've dispensed with your duties, you've got to go and get help
|Now that your siblings are safe and you've dispensed with your duties, you've got to go and get help
]. The portal through the <i>torii</i> gate is down, so that means a trek through the woods...
}

[North][Leave]

2. Mother's Abode

This is where Mother has taken up residence, her new home now that she has chosen not to return across the ocean to the land of her birth. [kinu.isInari
|While you know that she used to reside in a sacred tree as a girl and this is humble by comparison, even this was always too fancy for you
|This is the kind of residence you'd have liked to take up in someday, something quaint and practical, yet refined and elegant
]. Now that the roof and walls are ablaze, lanterns fallen to the ground and crushed underfoot... the question rings hollow, doesn't it?

The door lies open, clearly forced open from outside — the mere sight sets your teeth on edge. They will pay for this.

{//den quarters checked:
[kiyoko.numKits 2
|Aya was supposed to be housesitting today while Mother was out... you have to make sure your sister is okay. The girl may be boisterous, but boisterous doesn't necessarily mean brave.
|Mother's valuables, and more importantly, her tools of the trade and marks of station... they're in here. While there's no way that you could carry them off

with you from the burning building in time, it would be better for them to burn than let these invading things pilfer them for their own purposes. If they dare strike at the sanctity of your home, the least you can do is to ensure they don't profit from it.

```
]
//kiyoko's home checked:
    You've already been here and done what's necessary. Time to move on.
//den quarters not checked:
    You're getting ahead of yourself — you need to head back to the den quarters and
    check if [kiyoko.numKits 4 5
        |Asagiri is fine
        |Asagiri and your other siblings are fine
        |there're any more of the invaders lurking around
    ] before extending your sweep.
}
```

[East][Check]

3. Crossroads

At this time of night, the den crossroads would have been lit with foxfire, but someone has doused the lanterns. You haven't the time to light them — and nor do you want to. The darkness serves you just as well as these invaders... you think. Do they see better in the dark than you do? So many questions unanswered...

The path... the well... did they always look this menacing? Or are you just seeing them in a different light — or rather, lack thereof? The benches, broken, the fine cloth used to cover them stolen. Will they stop at nothing?

Lingering here will give you neither answers nor the chance to act. You must move.

[North][South][East][West]

4. Den Quarters

Smoke in your nose, hot ashes on your tongue — bitter and hateful, [kinu.isInari
|and the sight awakens a grim determination within you
|leaving a foul aftertaste in your mouth
]. Fire dances on the rooftops — while most of the buildings are still derelict, [kiyoko.numKits
16|even with as many siblings as you have,]the mere sight of your home on fire twists at
your heart.

{//den quarters checked:

While the fire rages on — helped along by mineral oil, it's far too widespread for you to have any hope of containing, let alone dousing it — at least you've [kiyoko.numKits 4 5

|made sure that Asagiri's safe and sent her on her way to the den entrance
|made sure that your siblings are safe and sent them on their way to the den entrance
|swept out the area and made sure there aren't any more invaders lurking around this part of the den. You will <i>not</i> stand for this trespass upon your home

]. It's time to move on.

//den quarters not checked:

And it's your heart that leaps into your throat when you realise [kiyoko.numKits 2
|the little side abode where your [kiyoko.numKits 3|siblings live|sister lives] is on fire, too, flames leaping from the wooden, tiled roof even as cinders drift to the ground
|the enormity of the situation that you're in right now. If it had been merely just your own private quarters... but as the orange glow rises into the sky and cinders drift down to you, the realisation hits you like a boulder

]. In that moment, the way forward becomes clear: you have to [kiyoko.numKits 2|save your family|repel the invaders until every last one of them is [kinu.isInari|dead|scattered to the winds]].

}

[West][Check]

5. Fields

[kinu.isInari

|No... not the fields. You had hoped that their spite would not extend this far, but it has. What these twisted monsters could not hope to steal, they have burned; why did you think the fields would be spared? You had drained the paddies ahead of the rice harvest, and now that is going up in flames, burning on the stalk. The daikon and turnips are trampled, the beans similarly aflame. For several seconds, you stare at the sight, dumbfounded, eyes glassy and mouth agape.

And then you realise you are weeping.

You, you can understand. [kiyoko.numKits 3|Your siblings|The den buildings], perhaps you can understand. But perhaps it is exactly because the crops are so small and insignificant in the scale of things that the sheer <i>pettiness</i> of these <i>creatures'</i> actions in destroying them truly bites home and sends every muscle in your body coiling and shaking with the fury of the earth itself.

At this point, you don't want the invaders dead. You want to drain their bodies of every last drop of blood and water your fields with that so the next crop will grow

extra well. As the old saying goes, the grass is always greener where bodies have fallen, after all... everything else be damned.

You stand there for another few moments, gasping, heaving until the fit of madness passes and you're able to control your body again. Sometimes, even you scare yourself...

[The invaders have been thorough — even the fields are ablaze. While you do not work them yourself — that task is left to [kiyoko.numKits 4]your siblings|the workers you loan from Matron Komari] — you can nevertheless appreciate the effort that went into the rice harvest and the roots, and to see the former burning on the stalk and the latter trampled makes your heart ache.

Even so, better them than your family. Their sacrifice may have bought you just that extra bit of time — and you need all that you can get here.

]

{//fields clear:

This is about the lot of it all — you've swept all the important locations in the den and [kiyoko.numKits 3]made sure everyone's safe|cleared the place out as much as possible]. Since the <i>torii</i> gate isn't working, you'll have to head out the entrance and get help that way...

//else, kiyoko's home checked:

With the central buildings checked and cleared, you can take the time to move on outward. [kiyoko.numKits 3]Didn't Aya say your brother headed off in this direction to see what was going on? He's still missing, as far as you know...|Maybe some stragglers headed out into the fields... and you have to assess the damage to the sheds, anyway.]

//else, kiyoko's home not checked:

You'll have to circle back to here eventually, but for now, you have more pressing business to deal with in other parts of the den, where more of these miscreants are likely to be. You'll need to continue with your sweep somewhere else, flush them out into the open before returning.

}

6. Torii Gate

At least they haven't managed to damage the <i>torii</i> gate — not physically, at least. While the structure still stands, the portal won't activate no matter how many times you try; the telltale shimmer in the air between the gateposts gone. If the invaders have some way of rendering it useless, these aren't simple brigands, seeking mere plunder — killing you was not incidental to their goals, but the entire point of them being here in the first place. If they know how to do these things, then this is more than what you'd imagined — mere thieves don't know how to jam portals.

Once you've made sure your home is clear[kiyoko.numKits 2] and everyone's safe], you have to go and get help. Whatever the bigger picture is here, this is clearly in and over your head.

7. Lumber Shed

You don't even need to get close to figure out there's nothing left for you here. Given that there was plenty of fuel stored here, all that remains in a burnt-out husk of where the shed once stood, the main support beams the only parts of the old shed that still stand. Charred into uselessness, they'll need to be torn down and the ground cleared before a new one can be put up.

...So much, all gone to waste. Why?

Combat

Kinu's Equipment

Naginata

//By kitsune custom and tradition, the glaive is the quintessential woman's weapon, and doubly so for someone with your lineage. Ever since you were a girl, your mother painstakingly trained you in the use of the naginata, mornings upon mornings going through the forms...

... And today, that training holds your life in the balance.

- 40 damage
- 5 accuracy
- 5 crit
- 15 evasion
- Bladed, Two-handed, Melee

Hankyu

//The half-bow — a shortbow suited for someone of your small stature. Not as impressive as [silly]Azami's[Ishida-San's] azusa-yumi, but still it has been yours ever since you were a kit. While your mother favoured the naginata and you learned the forms of that weapon anyway, you've always felt more at home with string and fletching. Archery, after all, is still a respectable calling for a kitsune.

...Now today, you put your life in the hands of your weapon and your training.

- 40 damage
- 10 accuracy
- -10 crit
- 10 evasion
- Ranged, Two-Handed

Field Clothes

//Comfortable clothes, allowing for freedom of movement and the skin to breathe under the heat of exertion and daylight. Mother was always annoyed by your habit of sleeping in the same clothes you'd wear out to the fields the next day, but it always made <i>sense</i>.

Nothing fancy in the least — linens and wool — but simple as they are, the clothes are respectable, and more importantly, bring you joy. There is something to be said for simple beauty by virtue of utility, and the hardy, tear-resistant, fading-resistant fabric is a mark of that. If Mother can't see the value you do, that's her problem.

- 75 Armor
- 35 Ward
- 10 Evasion
- 25 Physical Resistance

Royal Kimono

//Even when sleeping, there's no reason why you shouldn't look your best — the true test of character is how you behave when you think no one's watching, after all. Ostentatious, perhaps, to sleep in silk, but when you dress the part, you *<i>feel</i>* the part, and in turn you *<i>act</i>* the part a lot better.

And now more than ever, you need to do that to the utmost of your ability. By virtue of your position and bloodline, you have duties that you need to uphold.

- 35 Armor
- 75 Ward
- 20 Evasion
- 15 Magical Resistance

Enemies

Taothians

People who have become aware of the demonic threat to their world and have turned to this foreign god for salvation from this incursion. Taoth's main claim to fame is having opposed the demons on Mareth before, and knowledge of their methods and tactics in order to effectively combat this new incursion. Of course, while disconnected from Mareth and his power base, he needs temporary reserves before a metaphysical supply line back to Mareth can be established. These people, made desperate in the face of corruption and Kasyrra's demonic incursion, are part of those reserves as the foreign deity changes them more and more into forms he can effectively use.

Their combat names should be simply "?????" to reflect the fact that Kinu does not know who or what the fuck they are.

There are a total of four fights in the vignette — one group of two in the opening as an introduction, two groups of three, and one group of four. They should be level two (or maybe three?) and come in two distinct flavours:

Physical

- Scale Armour. Dual-Wielding short swords.
- Powers
 - Smoke bomb
 - Leananstone

- Bloodlet
- Dirty Trick

Magical

- Leather Jerkin, Metal Wand, Wicker Shield
- Powers
 - Fire Bolt
 - Heat Weapon
 - Mirror Image
 - Vulnerary

The exact composition in each of the encounters are randomised.

Raphael

The russet rogue, as he likes to call himself, appears at the end of the event and personally tries to kill your daughter. *He is not meant to be beatable at this point.* Since Kinu can only deal penetrating, fire and blight damage, we should probably give him 50% resistance to penetrating and 100% on blight and fire, then add sky-high evasion and duelist's stance on top of that. Also, two or maybe even three actions per round. Make him level 5 or 6, too.

He should not outright down Kinu in one action, but each hit should *hurt* just enough for her to go down in one and a half to two rounds.

If by any chance Kinu does manage to win — eg, the player cheats by stat editing or using the console — the text is going to call them out on that and proceed as if he won anyway, because honestly given the stats there is no way your daughter can win this hopeless boss fight.

Now, I *could* have it all take place in prose and not go through all this bother, but this is the first time daughter dearest is going up against an obstacle that for all her inherited genius and ability simply cannot surmount on her own (Inari) or is left without guidance from her superiors and elders (Hime). I want players to experience Kinu's initial surprise, then horror, then finally desperation *as nothing she does works and she realises she is going to die, and after that they are going to kill her family as well.*

For someone who has effortlessly breezed through life's obstacles as a child prodigy and never truly been challenged, staring down her first true failure with the stakes being her life and family is going to shake your daughter to the core, and I want players to feel that impotent desperation and rage against Raphael as he toys with your daughter and cuts her down piece by piece. That should set up the scene for the future vignettes in this questline.

And the best thing is, looking at Merauder's writing in old Raphael's code, I don't even have to change his lines that much. Context is so lovely.

Room Events

4. Den Quarters

Kiyoko.numKits >= 4 variant: Asagiri has been born. Kinu heads in to help her sister and any other siblings.

As the firstborn and heir apparent, you've the privilege of private quarters all to yourself, but even so the den living spaces are but a stone's throw away across the path from the quarters where your siblings have taken up residence. The ground feels warm underfoot and cinders sting your soles as you sprint between buildings, burning tiles and other debris falling about you in the flickering light. Somewhere off into the distance, you hear one of the older derelict buildings on the outskirts collapse in on itself with a roar and crash; even from here, you can see the plume of ash and cinders that the destruction's thrown up.

You swallow hard, and will your feet to carry you forward just that bit more swiftly.

Through the entrance, and into the courtyard; the building is large, and the only thing you can think of is that there's a lot of fuel to go around. More than half of it is already on fire, the warm orange flames spreading fast and the stench of mineral oil redolent in the air.

<i>"Asagiri!"</i>

No reply save for the roar of flames. You curse, then cup your hands to your mouth and yell again.

<i>"A-sa-gi-ri!"</i>

This time, you get some kind of response — a quiet, terrified mewling, barely audible even as you swivel your ears to try and get some kind of bearing of where it might be coming from. This is followed shortly by a pounding on the side of the building; you double-time it to the source to find the door jammed shut by a metal-reinforced bar. The fire isn't too strong on that side of the living quarters, as opposed to the other half that's a complete conflagration by now, but even so sweat's soaking your nightgown even before you've even started to try and lift the wooden bar jamming the entrance shut. Whoever placed it here clearly didn't intend for it to be removed ever again.

You grit your teeth. <i>It's so heavy.</i>

The pounding starts up again, just on the other side, and your little sister's whimpering openly turns to terrified screams[kiyoko.numKits 5 16

]; this is quickly joined by more voices behind her

]; this is quickly joined by many, many more voices behind her

].

If you fail, the blood, guilt and shame will be on your hands for the rest of your days. The mere thought of that... [kinu.isInari

|finally, the robustness of your body is paying off, and fuelled by the thought of your [kiyoko.numKits 4 5|little sister|family] burning alive, you will your body into action
|you were never the sort suited for manual labour, but the mere thought of your little sister as an angry spirit haunting you for the rest of your days is enough for you to will your body into action

]. Your muscles burn — fury and terror lend you strength, which they will demand repayment with great interest later on — but you lean your weight backwards, and with a terrible grinding noise manage to drag the heavy beam out of position and unjam the door. Instantly, the sliding door bursts open and your little sister tumbles out[kiyoko.numKits 5 12

|, the rest of your siblings in her wake

|, the rest of your many siblings in her wake

]. She's got a long-bladed <i>tanto</i> in an overhand grip, her fingers shaking violently as she rushes forward at you, her green eyes wide and absolutely terrified.

[Next]

It's a small matter for you to drop your [kinu.weapon] and catch Asagiri by the forearm and shoulder. <i>"Asagiri! It's me! Calm yourself!"</i>

Your little sister looks dumbfounded for a second or two, then her fingers loosen and the long-bladed dagger drops to the floorboards with a clatter. Asagiri's entire body slackens, and then she leans into you with a big hug and begins to cry in earnest. You move the <i>tanto</i> out of the way with your foot, then gently return your little sister's embrace and pet her on the head.

<i>"[silly|Onee-sama|Big sis]!"</i>

<i>"There, there."</i>

You examine Asagiri as you lead her [kiyoko.numKits 5]and your other siblings]away from the burning building — your little sister's white hair and fur are but singed, so no true loss there. However, her nightgown is charred in several places, blackened holes in the fabric from having been set on fire; she's been burned a little, but it's not too bad.

Asagiri yips and shrinks back as you examine the worst of the burns, instinctively flinching before holding out her arm for your inspection. <i>"It hurts, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]... all the doors were sealed..."</i>

[kinu.isInari

|If you were angry before, the cold fury that grips your heart threatens to rend it in two. Each and every one of those monsters just signed their own death warrants on this spot.

<i>"..."</i>

<i>"What's the matter?"</i>

Your little sister looks away, not daring to meet your gaze. <i>"[silly|Onee-sama|Big sis], your eyes. They're scary..."</i>

<i>"..."</i> Are they? Good. If you didn't feel this way about those who would burn children alive, you would never be able to forgive yourself. If actual had actually come to your little sister

|Poor Asagiri was never very brave, forever Mother's pet... to have her hurt like this, even if it wasn't very much... it's enough to move one to tears.

<i>"Don't cry, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]. It hurts, but I'm fine."</i>

<i>"..."</i> She's not, neither of you are fine, but you aren't about to press the issue now. To kill children in this most horrific manner, by burning them alive... even if you'd saved her in time, this is unforgivable.

]

<i>"You have blood on your clothes and fur, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]... are you okay?"</i>

<i>"[kinu.isInari|I'm not, but it doesn't matter|That is not the case, but I have no choice]."</i>
Bending down, you [kiyoko.numKits 5

|give your other siblings a quick look-over one at a time, but no one seems too much worse for the wear — cuts, scrapes and light burns, but thankfully nothing more. Only Asagiri suffered such horrific burns... she needs medical attention, but you have none to give and all of your lives are still in danger. Those who did this, they must still be around.

<i>"[silly|Nee-san|Sis] saved us,"</i> one of your brothers pipes up. <i>"She ran into the fire to drag us out..."</i>

You look at Asagiri again, and she lowers her eyes.

|check over Asagiri's burns again. Your little sister is holding up fine, but all of your lives are still in danger. Those who did this, they must still be around.

]

<i>"[silly|Nee-sama|Big sis]..."</i>

You pull Asagiri into a low hug, and pick up the <i>tanto</i> and force it into her hand. Her grip is trembling, insecure, but she takes the long-bladed dagger in her fingers anyway.

<i>"Asagiri, I'm proud of you."</i>

<i>"..."</i>

<i>"Aya and Tatsumi, they aren't here?"</i>

Your little sister shakes her head. <i>"They were house-sitting Mother's abode tonight."</i>

<i>"Then I have more to do. Listen very carefully: does it still hurt?"</i>

<i>"It does, but... you're worse off than I am, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]."</i>

You wince. You'd almost forgotten the pain; but Asagiri's words just bring it all back to the fore. <i>"We have to be strong. I want you to [kiyoko.numKits 5|take everyone and]head through the outskirts and orchard to just by the den's entrance. Not <i>at</i> it — whoever did this is likely to have posted a guard nearby in case we try to escape, but near it is enough. Hide until I come — you're good at hiding, right?"</i>

A nod.

<i>"I'll bring back Tatsumi and Aya, and we'll escape together. I'm counting on you to keep [kiyoko.numKits 5|everyone|yourself] safe until then, you hear me?"</i>

<i>"W-what do I do if I see... them?"</i>

<i>"Hide. But if you must..."</i>

Your eyes are drawn back to the <i>tanto</i> in Asagiri's hands, and her fingers tighten about the handle. Your little sister looks absolutely terrified at the prospect, but nods. She might have a pretty face, but at least she can follow instructions even when distressed.

<i>"Now go. Hurry."</i>

Without another word, Asagiri scampers off, [kiyoko.numKits 5|leading the other kits behind her|disappearing like the morning fog]. You take a moment to catch your breath, clear some of the smoke from your nose, but there's little time for anything else. You need to head to mother's abode and check what's become of your other siblings... and fast.

//end encounter.

Kiyoko.numKits < 4 variant. Kinu rescues the hired help who were staying overnight at her place.

As the firstborn and heir apparent, you've the privilege of private quarters all to yourself, but even so the den living spaces are but a stone's throw away across the path from the quarters where [kiyoko.numKits 2 3|your sister and the hired help have|your siblings and the hired help have|the hired help has] taken up residence. The ground feels warm underfoot and cinders sting your soles as you sprint between buildings, burning tiles and other debris

falling about you in the flickering firelight. Somewhere off into the distance, you hear one of the older derelict buildings on the outskirts collapse in on itself with a roar and crash; even from here, you can see the plume of ash and cinders that the destruction's thrown up.

You swallow hard, and will your feet to carry you forward just that bit more swiftly.

Through the entrance, and into the courtyard; the building is large, and the only thing you can think of is that there's a lot of fuel to go around. More than half of it is already on fire, the warm orange flames spreading fast and the stench of mineral oil redolent in the air.

<i>"Hey!"</i>

No reply save for the roar of flames. You curse, then cup your hands to your mouth and yell again.

<i>"Hey!"</i>

This time, you get some kind of response — a pounding on the side of the building; you double-time it to the source to find the door jammed shut by a metal-reinforced bar.

<i>"Is someone there? Help, please! It's getting hard to breathe!"</i>

The fire isn't too strong on that side of the living quarters, as opposed to the other half that's a complete conflagration by now, but even so sweat's soaking your nightgown even before you've even started to try and lift the wooden bar jamming the entrance shut. Whoever placed it here clearly didn't intend for it to be removed ever again.

You grit your teeth. <i>It's so heavy.</i>

The pounding starts up again, just on the other side, and you redouble your efforts, feeling tendons and joints cry out in protest at the strain.

If you fail, the blood, guilt and shame will be on your hands for the rest of your days. The mere thought of that... [kinu.isInari

finally, the robustness of your body is paying off, and fuelled by the thought of your these innocent people burning alive, you will your body into action

[you were never the sort suited for manual labour, but the mere thought of repaying these peoples' help with failure is enough for you to will your body into action

]. Your muscles burn — fury and terror lend you strength, which they will demand repayment with great interest later on — but you lean your weight backwards, and with a terrible grinding noise manage to drag the heavy beam out of position and unjam the door. Instantly, the sliding door bursts open, letting out the field hands into the courtyard. The half-dozen of them waste no time in clearing the building and making for the courtyard, gasping and wheezing for breath as they gather their wits. As one, the field hands recover enough to manage a perfunctory half-stumble, half-bow as the support beams collapse in on themselves behind you. Another moment, and it'd have been too late...

<i>"[kinu.isInari|Lady Otomo|Princess]... you have our eternal gratitude. W-what is going on?"</i>

<i>"Someone is attacking the den."</i>

Blank looks all around. <i>"Why? How?"</i>

<i>"[kinu.isInari|I don't know, but it's my job to find out. Is anyone hurt?|I am unsure, but the task falls to me to discover the perpetrators. Are there any casualties?"</i>

<i>"We're fine, a few minor burns, but nothing serious; we're all able-bodied."</i>

You heave a sigh of relief. Keros' tails, the small mercies fortune is willing to afford you. You'll take them anyway. <i>"[kinu.isInari

[[kiyoko.numKits 2 3

|My sister isn't with you, is she?"</i>

<i>"She left at dusk for your lady mother's residence."</i>

Right, that makes sense. You'd scheduled Aya to do the house-sitting today. On one hand, that means that she wasn't trapped in this burning building... on the other, it means you'll have to go look for her.

|My brother and sister aren't with you, are they?"</i>

<i>"They left at dusk for your lady mother's residence."</i>

Right, that makes sense. You'd scheduled Aya and Tatsumi to do the house-sitting today. On one hand, that means that they weren't trapped in this burning building... on the other, it means you'll have to go look for them.

|It's good that all of you are fine. If any of you had been seriously injured, I wouldn't have been able to help. The people who did this — they must still be around."</i>

]

[[kiyoko.numKits 2 3

|My sister, would she not be amongst your number?"</i>

<i>"She left at dusk for your lady mother's residence."</i>

Right, that makes sense. You'd scheduled Aya to do the house-sitting today. On one hand, that means that she wasn't trapped in this burning building... on the other, it means you'll have to go look for her.

|My siblings, would they not be amongst your number?"</i>

<i>"Your brother and sister left at dusk for your lady mother's residence, young lady Otomo."</i>

Right, that makes sense. You'd scheduled Aya and Tatsumi to do the house-sitting today. On one hand, that means that they weren't trapped in this burning building... on the other, it means you'll have to go look for them. [It is good that all of you are unharmed and able-bodied, at least. The people who did this... they are still around, I know it. We are not out of danger.]</i>

]]

You sweep your gaze over the assembled farmhands, uncertainty and fear written all over their faces. [kinu.isInari

[You've never been very good at speaking to people, but you have worked alongside these people for some time now and actions have more weight than words, don't they? Even if you can't inspire them with speech alone, they know who you are, and that's what's important

[This is what you were born to, this is why you exist. When the common people falter, they look for the divine for guidance, and you must inspire them to more than what they think themselves capable of

]. Taking a deep breath and squaring your shoulders, you step up to the most capable-looking one and address him in a quick whisper.

<i>"This is the plan. [kinu.isInari

[I want you to take everyone and head through the den's outskirts, cut through the orchard and head for the entrance; the torii gate is almost certainly being watched or inoperational. Unless you're absolutely sure the coast is clear, do not make a break for it — whoever did this is likely to have posted a guard nearby in case we try to escape. If you're still around when I return, I'll come and get you. You get me?

[I want you to lead everyone along the den's outskirts and through the orchard — they have yet to set that ablaze. Do not try to make for the torii gate — whoever our enemies are, they have some knowledge of us and are sure to be watching the portal. Unless you are absolutely confident, do not attempt an escape just yet, either — whoever did this is likely to have posted a guard nearby for just that eventuality. Wait and hide by the entrance — should you still be around when I return, I will effect our retreat. Do you understand?

] "</i>

A nod.

[kinu.isInari

|<i>"[kiyoko.numKits 2 3

|I'll go get Aya

|I'll go get Tatsumi and Aya

|I'll go make a sweep of the den, deal with these marauders

], and we'll escape together. I'm counting on you to keep everyone safe until then, you hear me?"</i>


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|<i>"[kiyoko.numKits 2 3
    |I will retrieve my sister
    |I will retrieve my siblings
    |I will dispense with my duty as a noblewoman, and defend my home. Wait for
    my return
], and once I am done we will make our egress. You are responsible for keeping your
people safe, do you understand me?"</i>
]

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<i>"W-what do we do if we encounter... <b>them</b>, Lady Otomo?"</i>

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<i>"Hide. Preserve your lives. But if you must..."</i>

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The final words are left unspoken, and better that way. The handful of farmhands turn to leave, but there's a brief spate of discussion and they turn to you again.

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<i>"Lady Otomo, if you will have us, we want to fight at your side."</i>

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Your answer's simple and direct. <i>"[kinu.isInari
    |Don't be dumb. You have no weapons, aren't trained in their use, and are frightened
    and exhausted. You'll just be a hindrance, and risk your lives for nothing. Don't make
    all my efforts in saving you go to waste.
    |Your loyalty and bravery are appreciated, but you have neither weapons nor the
    training required to make effective use of them against these foes. None will fault you
    for cowardice if I order you to leave, and this is a direct order: go, and do not put my
    efforts in saving you to naught.
]"</i>

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They look almost relieved at these words, bow as one, and then are gone into the night. You watch the farmhands disappear into the darkness between the flickering flames, then steady your [kinu.weapon] and break into a run. There's still much to be done, and time is running short. You need to head to Mother's abode and check what's become [kiyoko.numKits 2

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3
    |of your sister
    |of your other siblings
    |of it
]....</b>and fast.

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//end encounter.

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3. Crossroads

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//Trigger when entering tile 3 after having completed the event in 4.

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Entering the well crossroads from the den quarters, you're stopped by the sight of three flickering lights in the distance. Voices, carried on the wind, although they're speaking too quickly for you to be able to discern what's being said. The crossroads is an open space by design, but you duck behind the well, huddling up with your [kinu.weapon] in your lap, pressed against your bloodstained nightgown even as you curl your tails about yourself.

They're getting closer, lithe figures much like the duo lurking outside of your door; your heart hammers in your ears as you force your breath to still, lest they hear you. The light cast from their torches brings with it the heavy scent of mineral oil, a smell you've grown to hate very, very recently.

<i>"...That's how you get demons. Wait for the parents to be out, then seal up the nests and burn out the younglings. Works on imps, makes sense it'd work on these, too."</i>

They're speaking Belharan, you figure as much.

<i>"...I don't like this..."</i>

<i>"Best to get them while they're young. You'd rather have an infestation of full-grown soul-suckers in a few years?"</i>

They've passed by the old well, the shadows stretching outward having hidden you well. You could just leave them and slip by... but that was never an option, was it? [kinu.isInari
|Just staying hidden until now has tried your patience to its limit, the pointed vengeance of the blooded stayed but momentarily in wait of the perfect time to strike.[kiyoko.numKits 4| The sight of Asagiri's burns is still fresh in your mind, and every muscle in your body screams and tightens.]

And through it all, at its very heart, an empty, cold clarity.

|That would merely leave these three to wreak more havoc upon your home, and you would have failed in your duty and position. Even if you know the truth of the matter, Matron Komari's reputation is forever ruined for allegedly valuing her life above that of her responsibilities...

...They still tell tales of her as a cautionary example to children back in the Old Country, you've heard...

Enough excuses for your fear. These monsters have attacked your home. This is unforgivable.[kiyoko.numKits 4| The sight of Asagiri's burns is still fresh in your mind, and you feel your heart harden.]

]

<i>Unforgivable.</i>

<i>"Demon!"</i>

[kinu.kinuWeapon

|The edge of your naginata flashes as you dart out from behind the well, the glaive's blade

|The arrowhead gleams as you draw back the bowstring, the point

] nearly taking off one of the trio's vulpine tails. They whirl around, drawing more of those slender, double-edged blades and spreading out in practiced combat formation. Multiple enemies usually just tended to get in each others' way, but these appear practiced at fighting as a unit.

Three to one. Good, it wouldn't be fair otherwise. Despite their numerical advantage over you, they're clearly cautious, advancing closely in a front and clearly intending to surround you when the opportunity presents itself.

<i>"What are those idiots doing? One of them got out!"</i>

<i>"Don't let the demon touch you, or there won't be anything left but a husk!"</i>

[kinu.isInari

|<i>"Demon. Is that it? Is that what I am?"</i> Hate and hunger twine about each other, a white-hot needle piercing pain and fatigue alike. All your life you've been holding back the hunger, but if now is not the time to embrace it when life and death hang in the balance, then when? <i>"Then I'll show you how demonic I can be!"</i>

It's a fight!

|For a moment you can almost pity the faces behind those masks, feel their fear of <i>you</i>, what they think must be a monster. Then you recall their earlier conversation, and your sympathy evaporates. They had their doubts, and made a choice — and so have you, here and now.

Miko always teases you for being too soft-hearted and making excuses for yourself and others...

Battle is joined...

]

Victory

[kinu.isInari

|You gasp, sweat pouring down your face and heat rising off your body. Whirling around, tails flowing in your wake, you half-expect the fight to have brought more of these invaders bearing down on you, but whether it's from how short and ferocious the battle was or the chaos in the den, the altercation has gone unnoticed for now. Not that you expect such luck to hold for long...

A brief bout of dizziness overtakes you as the surge of adrenaline passes. You're starting to lose blood despite the makeshift bindings about your wounds, you know that — the frailties of the flesh are starting to creep up on your strength of will, and you lean against the well for a moment or two, disgusted with your own weakness. But amidst all that... there's a sense of pride in that most of the rust-red stains adorning your nightgown didn't originate with you. Still, it doesn't hurt to tear a couple more strips of cloth from the fallen invaders' clothes, change your dressings; it's only a moment, after all, and you need all your strength.

You take a few deep breaths and steady yourself. A drink of water would be nice, but you don't have the time or strength to draw one from the well

[You gasp, coming up short of breath; this is far more physical exertion than what you're used to in your daily routine. Yes, it's true that you still [kinu.kinuWeapon|go through the naginata forms every day, especially when Mother is at home|practice your archery every day with [silly|the warden|Ishida-san]], but this is still unprecedented. While you half-expected the fight to have brought more of these invaders bearing down on you, the altercation has gone unnoticed for now. Good fortune, or good fate...

A brief bout of dizziness overtakes you as the surge of adrenaline passes, leaving you weak in the stomach; you force down the urge to vomit and take several deep breaths until the nausea passes. Even so, the stench of blood lingers in your nose; it feels like it will never leave you.

There is no one that can help you here; you are the highest authority, and indeed, it is others who are going to look to <i>you</i> for guidance...

What do you do now? No, that is a stupid question. Just do as Mother and Matron Komari would have done... and what would they do?

]. Mother's abode is just across the other side of the den's heart, and as far as you can tell it's not on fire yet. There's still time. You... you must press on; [kiyoko.numKits 2 3

|as much of a brat Aya can be at times, she's still your sister.

|Aya and Tatsumi need you.

|the most valuable things in the den are with Mother. The thought of these monsters laying their hands on them, committing sacrilege — it's enough to [kinu.isInari|make your blood boil|give one pause].

]

[kinu.kinuWeapon

|Fresh blood adorns the edge of your naginata's blade, and you pause to wipe it off on the grass before allowing yourself to relax

|Arrows stick out of the fallen bodies, and you take the time to retrieve as many as you can. No sense in wasting them.

].

Duty beckons. Pausing just long enough to [kinu.isInari
|spit on the broken corpses and kick them aside
|offer a small prayer to the August Master At The Center Of Heaven
], you heft your [kinu.weapon] and double-time it down the path.

2. Mother's Abode

By the time you get to Mother's abode, it's too late. The door hasn't merely been forced open — it lies on the ground, completely torn off its hinges and slashed in several places, the marks clearly belonging to that of an axe. You swallow hard and pick up your jog into a sprint; there's still hope. Unlike you and [kiyoko.numKits 4|Asagiri|the field hands], the invaders chose not to seal the exits and burn everything down; the reason for such soon becomes apparent. Mother was always such a stickler for tidiness ever since you were a kit, and the state of her home would have her shedding all over the place from the sheer disarray it's in.

Every single trunk upended, their contents spilled onto the floorboards. Every set of drawers and wardrobe pulled out and ransacked. Even the scroll calligraphy and paintings have been torn down, perhaps to check for anything hidden behind them. And of course, everything that's remotely of value, pilfered.

Are there foes still in here, or is everything gone by now? Mother's abode isn't very big, unlike the old cabin you used to live in during your childhood, but it still has to be the best the colonies can offer for someone of her lineage. Your breath catches with each room you peer into, half-expecting to find [kiyoko.numKits 2 3

|your sister, dead or alive
|your siblings, dead or alive
|pillagers about the dirty deed

], but all is peaceful, too peaceful for the mess that's been made.

[kiyoko.numKits 2 3
|<i>"Aya!"</i>

No reply. Dread gnaws at your heart, and you head on to the back.
|<i>"Aya! Tatsumi!"</i>

No reply. Dread gnaws at your heart, and you head on to the back.
|Onwards and forwards, then...

]

[Next]

Fork: Kiyoko.numkits >= 2:

And then you hear it when you enter the landing: vulpine yipping, followed by the sound of wood splintering as furniture cracks. [kinu.isInari|A surge of fire rushes through your limbs|You swallow hard] as you rush down the corridor past strewn cushions and upended plant pots, throwing open the screen door and charging in with [kinu.kinuWeapon|naginata ready to swing|fingers on your bowstring, ready to draw]. The duo of masked invaders harassing your sister turn at your entrance, just in time for one of them to get [kinu.kinuWeapon|a gash in her side|an arrow in her side] from you.

And that's all the opening Aya needs. Without a weapon in hand, your sister has allowed the hunger to partially consume her, so that she may fight for her life; orange fur sprouts from her arms from the shoulder down, her fingers twisted into animalistic, clawed protrusions wreathed in foxfire. The snapping vulpine fangs that fill her jaws are clearly giving the invaders some pause; as each moment passes and the hunger dominates her more and more, her form wavers and shifts, becoming less and less human in appearance.

Caught between the two of you, the one remaining demeanour changes as his companion falls, and then Aya gets in from behind, locks her teeth about his throat, and rips it out. Brutal, yet painfully efficient — [kinu.isInari
|it feels inefficient to follow up on your sister's attack by finishing off the bastard, but you've got to be sure
|no matter how necessary you know this to be, you still shudder at the sight and the mess it's creating on the tatami flooring
].

The deed done, your sister turns her gaze to you and snarls, ears folded back.

<i>"Aya! Get ahold of yourself!"</i>

Something shifts behind your sister's eyes; for a moment she looks as if she's going to pounce on you, then relents. The amber-orange fur encasing her limbs retracts back into her body, and her fingers revert to something more human in appearance. Even her teeth come back under control; where there was but moments ago a monstrous creature ready to tear out hearts and eat livers, all there is now is a fox-eared girl kneeling on the floor amidst the strewn cushions and broken furniture, sniffing softly.

Tired and breathless, bleeding from scratches and cuts, your little sister whimpers as you gather her in your arms and drag her away from the cooling corpses on the ground.

<i>"[silly|Onee-sama|Big sis]!"</i>

<i>"Are you fine?"</i>

Aya looks down at her own torn sleepwear and bedraggled hair and fur, then at you, and her eyes widen. You can only imagine what you look like right now, what she sees in you, but [kinu.isInari
|there's nothing to be ashamed of here, hard to swallow as it may be

[there are no good options in a situation like this. You don't blame her; you'd be afraid of yourself, too

].

<i>"I... it's just a [silly|flesh wound|scratch], that's all,"</i> your sister insists. <i>"It's nothing. I... I can still walk. Run, even."</i>

Her wounds are more than physical, but Aya is a resilient soul; she'll get over it with enough time. You hope. <i>"It's all right, Aya. They can't hurt you any more, they're dead. We put them down together."</i>

Your sister looks abashed for a moment, then she freezes in your embrace, muscles tensing.

<i>"[silly|Nee-sama|Big sis]! Look out!"</i>

Aya pushes you out of the way; you don't resist her and tumble to the floor as a dagger flashes in the darkness, aimed between your shoulderblades. You turn the tumble into a roll, and the pointed edge whistles through thin air; the invader whom you first brought down has crawled all the way over despite her mortal wound, determined for some last-minute revenge. [kinu.isInari

[Cursing yourself for your sloppiness, you [kinu.kinuWeapon
|heft your naginata and drive the blade between the miscreant's ribs
|grab an arrow from your quiver and plunge it into the miscreant's throat

]

[You hug your sister close as the two of you watch the miscreant bleed out, having failed in her final purpose

]; the thin, twisted figure shudders, and is still.

[Next]

<i>"That was close,"</i> Aya mewls.

You have to agree. <i>"What happened here, Aya?[kiyoko.numKits 3| Where's Tatsumi?"</i>

<i>"They... they woke me up by breaking down the door,"</i> your little sister admits, hanging her head and folding her ears forward. <i>"Then they came in, eight to ten of them... started ransacking the palace, taking everything that wasn't too heavy to carry and trashing the rest. I... I was so scared, I went into the study to hide because the place is warded..."</i>

You nod. <i>"Go on. Calm yourself, I need to know what's out there. You said there were eight to ten of them — I count only two here."</i>

<i>"Most of them took Mother's things away in the trunks that held them, anything exotic or valuable. These two came up to the study and found me hiding under the table, and — "</i>

<i>"And by the looks of things, they haven't looted this place yet, because of you. Good work protecting Mother's most prized treasures. Two of them are here and dead... so that leaves at least six to eight more of these things out there[kinu.isInari for me to put down]."</i>

[kinu.isInari

|Your sister looks up at you, mouth slightly agape as she shivers. <i>"Y-you're going to kill them?"</i>

<i>"Of course. Aya, they were going to burn [kiyoko.numKits 4 5|Asagiri|Asagiri and the rest of our family|the field hands from Granny Komari's] alive. They were going to burn me in my bedchambers, bar me inside until either the smoke or the flames killed me. As far as I'm concerned, I will make each and every one of their deaths as excruciatingly painful as practically possible. No one hurts my family and gets away with it, and you are of my blood, too."</i>

<i>"..."</i>

<i>"Sometimes, Aya, being responsible means bearing sins and shame upon yourself so others don't have to."</i>

<i>"[silly|Nee-sama|Big sis]... please don't die."</i>

<i>"I don't intend to bleed out in a ditch, if that's what you mean."</i>

<i>"You..."</i> your little sister searches for the right words. <i>"You feel like someone else right now, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]..."</i>

You allow yourself a dry chuckle and pat your little sister's head with a bloodstained hand. <i>"And you weren't back there, fighting for your life?"</i>

<i>"..."</i>

|Your sister winces. <i>"There's more of them than that, I'm sure..."</i>

<i>"So many just to kill children."</i>

Aya gives you a weak grin. <i>"Isn't that a compliment, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]? Needing such numbers just for us?"</i>

<i>"The den is large with many derelict buildings, and I suppose they wanted to be thorough. It is what I would have done, were I in their position. I just need to make sure the most important places are safe... or at least, overlooked."</i>

<i>"[silly|Nee-sama|Big sis]... please don't die."</i>

There are several things you could have said to that, but you aren't willing to say anything that's disheartening or an outright lie. Instead, you settle for patting your little sister on the head and leaving it at that.

]

[kiyoko.numKits 3

|<i>"Right. It's just you here. Where's Tatsumi?"</i>

<i>"He said he was going to work late in the field shed getting all the new things organised, and that I should go to bed first without waiting for him..."</i>

Ah, of course. That makes perfect sense. <i>"I'll have to go and get him, then."</i>
|<i>"Is everyone safe? Are we going to get out of here now?"</i>

<i>"I don't know. There are some places I still have to scour, like the fields and the shed, make sure I didn't miss anyone working late, for example.[kinu.isInari| That, and not going to fall back until I absolutely must — I haven't had my fill of these monsters' blood yet.]"</i>

]

Aya nods.

<i>"Okay, listen up. You know where Mother's treasures are in this room, the most valuable ones. Go and get everything that you can easily carry, and head off to the den's entrance. I've told [kiyoko.numKits 4|Asagiri|the field hands] to wait for me there while I clear out our home; go and join them. Keep as much as you can from being pilfered by these thieves, but at the same time don't throw your life away doing it. Do you understand me?"</i>

<i>"Y-yes, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]."</i>

<i>"Good. I'll see you at the entrance."</i>

You hug Aya one last time, then leave her to it, breaking into a brisk jog as you head downstairs and out the door. Your task tonight is still far from done...

//end encounter

Fork: kiyoko.numkits = 1:

The second floor of Mother's abode is in much the same condition as the first: ransacked and looted. Without anyone around to stop them, the invaders have been able to conduct a thorough search of the place; you yourself know where Mother keeps her valuables in the study, and they're all gone. Not that there were very many places to hide things in this much smaller home, but even so all of the hiding spots in the study have been rooted out and pilfered.

Yes, it's true that nothing stored here is irreplaceable — anything that precious would be on Mother's person at all times — but even so, the thought of your things, *<i>kitsune</i>* things, in the hands of these people who will certainly have no appreciation or understanding of their value only makes you [kinu.isInari]all the more upset[sad]. It does belie the fact, though, that whoever conducted this search had to have some measure of competency in these matters in order to be able to defeat Mother's little glammers and tricks...

There's nothing left for you here now, and lingering in Mother's study only makes the hollow emptiness in your ribs and pit of your stomach weigh all the more heavily[kinu.isHime], reminding you of your failure]. If nothing else, the invaders haven't torched the building yet, small consolation as that is; [kinu.isInari

 |you'll just have to hunt them down elsewhere

 |you have to move on before they decide to return and finish the deed

]. You still haven't checked the fields and the adjoining storage sheds; that feels like a good place to try next...

Time to get moving, then.

//end encounter

5. Fields

The ground is warm beneath your feet, heavy smoke rises from the burning fields as you pace through them, [kinu.isInari

 |not knowing or caring if they see you now. The sight of scorched stalks and trampled leaves — even the fury in you is gone as you double-time it through the ashes of the harvest, replaced by a numb vacuousness that presses against your eyes from the inside of your head. Everything feels like a dream, unreal; despite the roar and flicker of the flames that linger, everything is quiet and muted. You have never walked through a battlefield before, but given the histories you've read, perhaps this is what it might be like.

 It is a struggle to not give in and break down crying completely and utterly, but you will *<i>not</i>* give these barbaric monsters the satisfaction of that.

 |hot air rushing through your lungs as you pant and sweat. Maybe you should have stopped for a drink of water at the well, but it's too late to regret past decisions now.

 The harvest is going up in smoke; the rice, the beans, even the root crops. Pettiness; what they could not easily steal or glean, they destroyed. Even if you can understand the reasoning and motivation behind such actions, it's all such a terrible waste...

]

The paths through the fields are winding on purpose to accommodate the irrigation ditches; the shortest route to the storage sheds is through them. Dangerous to cross the fields right now like this, even if the flames are burning themselves out; still, it's less [kinu.isInari

[time-consuming than the alternative. You need to be fast on your feet, and... well, there is the desire to be with your children in the last moments of their lives, agonising as they may be...
]dangerous than running into more of those invaders on the road.

]

And then your heart sinks as the other edge of the fields draws into view. Whether it's because you got here last or they were first to arrive, these being on the edges of the den, the destruction is complete; only burnt-out husks remain of the sheds, blackened support beams sitting amidst a sea of ashes. Half of the makeshift granary has collapsed in on itself, popping and crackling sounds coming from within as the contents continue to smoulder; the ground here has been churned into dirt, what looks like dozens of feet having come and gone without care for stealth or subtlety.

There is nothing left here; that which has not been stolen has been destroyed.

Fork: kiyoko.numKits >= 3:

That, though, is only one of the things that you're here for. Though the loss of the stores hurts, they can be replaced; your baby brother can't. You're about to call for him, and then the clash of metal on metal draws your attention. By the charred shell of what used to be where you kept the seeds, two silhouettes clash with each other, two more bodies on the ground. Tatsumi has grabbed one of the invading monsters' weapons and is fighting the last standing one of their number. You dart forward, [kinu.weapon] at the ready, but your baby brother doesn't need your help and is handily dealing with his foe. By the time you're within [kinu.kinuWeapon|striking]range, he's pressed his attack and rammed the long, slender bronze sword through the invader's guts. With a sharp yank, Tatsumi extracts the still-dripping blade, and his shoulders and tails relax as his foe slumps to the hard earth.

Huh. You knew he'd been taking lessons from [kinu.isInari|the military provost|Nakano], and yet you had no idea he could just pick up a completely foreign weapon of a different material than what he's used to, with different grip and balance, and at least do passably with it. But his face...

As far back as you can remember, [kiyoko.numKits 4|ever since Asagiri was born,]your little brother has always been, or at least done his best to keep smiling. As far as you can remember, there hasn't been a single memory of yours that doesn't have Tatsumi hopefully optimistic at the very least.

But even so, knowing that he is no longer a child, seeing him cut down your enemies with their own weapons, seeing the sickle and trowel wet with blood, discarded upon the dry earth... you can never look at your baby brother in the same light again. His tattered old scarf, the one you knitted for him when he was but a kit, flutters in the breeze, lit by the dancing lights of the burning fields and granary.

Very poetic.

<i>"Tatsumi!"</i>

He half-turns, and you see his fingers tighten about the slender foreign blade, clearly deliberating whether to let it fall to the ground or not. Eventually, he opts to keep it in hand, and your eyes meet. Your baby brother smiles, but the boyish charm that it once held is gone, and you wonder if it will ever return with time, even if you already know the answer to that. He's scrutinising your face as hard as you are his, and you can only wonder if he sees something similarly changed in you. Not necessarily broken, but incontrovertibly changed forever. At last, the moment passes, and Tatsumi sinks back, leaning the slender foreign sword against a blackened tree stump.

<i>"Are you all right?"</i>

<i>"I've had worse accidents with the hoe and sickle."</i> Your baby brother grimaces momentarily, unwraps his scarf from around his neck, and with a sharp rip tears it in two. Completely numb or otherwise incognizant of the pain, he ties one about his arm and his thigh; no sooner has the old woollen cloth come into contact with flesh that the bloodstains start spreading into its weave.

You want to laugh and cry at the same time. He's <i>not</i> all right, he's clearly not all right, and yet you would have done the exact same thing in his place.[kiyoko.numKits 4

| For if he were to get upset, little sensitive Asagiri would pick up on it too and start fretting...

... Gods, you mustn't tell him what happened to her, and yet you can't put it off forever. Later. Later. He'll find out on his own eventually, anyway...

]

When Tatsumi is done binding his wounds with his scarf, he retrieves the blade and swallows hard, the small smile on his face trembling and forced. He's fooling no one with that facade...

<i>"[silly|Nee-sama|Big sis]. I'm sorry to make you see this."</i> He kicks the twitching bodies and makes to drive the point of the sword downwards upon them. <i>"Please turn away."</i>

[kinu.isInari

|You pout. <i>"You don't need to feel responsible for me; [kiyoko.numKits 4|I'm not Asagiri who needs|I don't need] to be coddled. In fact, I'm supposed to be responsible for you. A little blood is nothing."</i>

Your baby brother looks like he's about to argue, then bows his head and gets to the grisly work of granting mercy to the fallen

]You nod and turn, but even so you've seen enough tonight to imagine what Tatsumi is doing as he gets to the grisly work of granting mercy to the fallen. Only when the noises have ceased do you turn around again, doing your best not to look down
].

<i>"Are you going to keep that thing on you?"</i>

<i>"This?"</i> Your baby brother looks distracted for a moment, then realises what he's doing and lowers the point of the bloodied blade. <i>"At least until we're out of danger. What are you doing here, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]?"</i>

<i>"Looking for you! Aya told me you were working late!"</i>

<i>"I was about to do the same."</i> He gives you a rueful, sad smile. <i>"But I got held up."</i>

<i>"So you did. You did well."</i> A sigh. <i>"You didn't need me, I guess."</i>

<i>"I got lucky and managed to ambush them. Really, it was but a one-on-one fight."</i>

You shake your head. <i>"What happened here?"</i>

<i>"Those... people came while I was sharpening the tools, arriving from the north. They must have climbed over the crater wall... or used the gate somehow."</i>

<i>"Don't be ridiculous. Miko and Mai have control over the torii gate from the other side, there's no way to change who it activates for or where it goes from here. Even Mother doesn't have that kind of power."</i>

Tatsumi shrugs. <i>"I don't know very much about that. What I do know is that they came from that direction, [silly|nee-sama|big sis], twenty of them at least. They started going through the sheds and taking all our things, and what they couldn't easily move, they piled up by the granary and burned everything with that foul-smelling oil."</i>

You nod.

Your baby brother continues speaking, his voice gone strangely flat as he recounts the events. <i>"I went and hid by the trees, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]; I couldn't move because they were all around. But when they went so far as to set fire to the fields, I couldn't take it any more. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I just stood by and did nothing. So I waited for those people to thin out, and when there was a small group left over after the last of them had finished taking our stuff, I..."</i>

He motions down to the bloodied trowel and sickle on the ground with his free hand, and you nod.

[kinu.isInari

|<i>"You don't need to feel sorry for or regretful of what you've done. I'm proud of you."</i>

<i>"Really?"</i>

<i>"People who would stoop this low need to die. If anything, you were too merciful."</i>

|<i>"I see. I don't relish it, either, but..."</i>

Tatsumi glances at the [kinu.kinuWeapon|bloodied blade of your naginata|bloodied tips of the arrows in your quiver]. <i>"...Responsibility flows upwards."</i>

You smile. <i>"It does."</i>

]

<i>"What now, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]?"</i>

<i>"I've been picking them off for a while now, and so have you; it won't be long before they notice some of their number is missing, if they haven't already. It won't be easy to get isolated groups we can manage like these any more; they'll stick together. I want you to make for the den entrance and join Aya and [kiyoko.numKits 4|Asagiri|the field hands];

[kinu.isInari

|as much as I want to stay and drive off all these sick sons of bitches, you all being safe comes first. Once I return and send you off, go through the woods, get help from Granny Komari and her people. Do you understand me?"</i>

Your baby brother doesn't meet your eyes. <i>"You don't intend to come with us, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]."</i>

<i>"Someone has to make these monsters pay for [kiyoko.numKits 4|trying to burn us all alive|what they've done]."</i>

<i>"Don't do this, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]. You'll die."</i> Tatsumi's voice is empty and flat as he forces the truth from his lips. <i>"I got lucky to ambush a group of three, making them but one, and come away with only flesh wounds. You may be good, but more than twenty at once... please don't throw your life away."</i>

<i>"Once I know you're all safe, I won't have any reason to hold back any more."</i>

<i>"No. I know it hurts, [silly|nee-sama|big sis], but please don't. Please."</i>

How can he understand? How can your precious baby brother ever understand? No, you don't need Tatsumi to understand; you just need him to obey. Despite your pains and aches, despite your scratches and gashes, you plant your feet firmly on the ground and stare him down despite being more than a head shorter than your baby

brother. Not even able to maintain a rueful smile at this point, Tatsumi lowers his eyes and folds his ears, then dashes off into the night.

He will remember this, and maybe he will hate you for it, but he will obey. That is all you need...

[once I've finished making sure that as much of the den is as secure as I can, we'll all make our escape together. If we just try to go it alone, we'll be alone and separated, easy pickings like our enemies were."</i>

Tatsumi looks askance at the cooling bodies lying in slowly spreading pools of their own blood. <i>"They got overconfident."</i>

<i>"They expected to only have to murder children and loot the place while our parents were out. Who would not be?"</i>

That brings a ghost of a smile back to your baby brother's face. <i>"But we're not children, are we?"</i>

<i>"If we were, I daresay we are not any more. Once Mother started leaving us more and more to our own devices, it was only a matter of time. Those days are over."</i>

<i>"Those days are over."</i> Your little brother twitches his ears. <i>"Everyone else is safe, aren't they? What will you do now, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]?"</i>

<i>"Not me. Us. You are the last one — you circle around the edges while I draw their attention. We will reconvene at the entrance, and then go and get help. I had thought to try and sweep the den clear myself... but even I cannot take twenty or thirty on my own. We need assistance; anything else would be throwing our lives away for nothing. There is no shame in understanding you need help and asking for it."</i>

Tatsumi nods. <i>"I understand. I'll meet up with everyone back at the entrance, then."</i>

Your baby brother lowers his eyes and folds his ears, then dashes off into the night like a fleeting shadow, leaving you to finish your sweep of the fields.

]

...It's time for you to go, too.

//end encounter.

Fork: kiyoko.numKits < 3:

[kinu.isInari

[Damn it, damn it all. Never before in your life have you felt more impotent and incompetent than you have right now — even if you did manage to save the field hands[kiyoko.numKits 2] and retrieve your sister], failure stretches out in front of your eyes as far as the eye can see. Everything looted or burned... it feels like wherever you go, no matter how quickly you hurry, you just weren't fast enough, capable enough, to stop whatever was happening from happening anyway.

It's true, your failure isn't complete, but partway isn't, has never been good enough. You've arrived too late, there's nothing you can do here.

[You slump against one of the charred beams, not caring that you're smearing soot all over yourself at this point. Exhaustion and dizziness threaten to overwhelm you — never before in your life have you felt more impotent and incompetent than you have right now. Even if you did manage to save the field hands[kiyoko.numKits 2] and retrieve your sister], failure stretches out in front of your eyes as far as the eye can see.

Did you do things correctly? Had you chosen to handle the situation in a different order, would things have turned out better for you? Now more than ever, you're made keenly aware of the painful irony of your own inexperience, yet the only way to gain experience is to start off by being inexperienced. Without the benefit of guidance, how would you have known how to best go about this sweep? Or did you truly do everything you could, and this is the best outcome possible, as sour as it is?

]

The light of the burning fields stretches a good distance, perhaps more than it has any right to; movement in the distant shadows catches your eye, irregular shapes near the horizon. You creep a little closer, using the burnt-out storage sheds for what cover they afford, then slink into the irrigation ditches.[kinu.isHime] To say having so much dirt pressed so close to you is awkward in the least, but at this point with your clothes bloodstained and torn and sweat and soot all over your skin, the distinction is meaningless, isn't it?]

More of the invaders, eagerly carrying everything you and [kiyoko.numKits 2]your sister[the field hands] have worked so hard to create. And you were so close to being self-sufficient at this point, too... you do a quick tally, and come up with no less than twenty, no more than thirty of them still in the distance, packing away their ill-gotten gains. And how many are there still wandering the den?

Yet another tight knot forms in your guts, joining the half-dozen that've already taken up residence within. The realisation that you've been lucky, very, <i>very</i> lucky strikes home, and his divine lordship does really tire after carrying a single person on his shoulders for too long.

And yet... [kinu.isInari

[you can't let them go. They may ridiculously outnumber you, but you just. Can't. Let. It. Go. If you just ran, you'd never be able to live it down; you'd feel eternally ashamed of yourself for letting these bastards get away with it. All your anger, all

your determined promises of vengeance for razing your home and fields, would all be empty and impotent if you didn't even *try* to make them pay for it.

Circumstances may have changed since you made those promises to yourself, but it won't change the fact that your own words will ring all the more hollow if you flee in the face of... of *this*.

How much of what little success you've had tonight is yours, then? And for all that, haven't they accomplished so much of what they meant to do?

It is true that you're but one and they have so many on their side, but you're supposed to be more than just another pair of hands. Escaping with your lives isn't even the bare minimum of what your station demands of you; after all, you are expected to defend your home with your life if it comes to that.

]

You swallow hard. You'll... you'll decide what to do later on, when you've evacuated [kiyoko.numKits 2]Aya and]the field hands from this place. Time is of the essence, and it's time for you to go, too.

//end encounter.

3. Crossroads (2)

You see them coming from the side of the den crossroads, approaching from the east even as you head in from the north. A group of four, keeping tightly together, definitely more cautious than the others you've encountered so far; they're actually keeping silent as they move, as opposed to engaging in idle chatter. Did they find the bodies you've left in your wake? What a silly question — of course they did. The bodies of the last group you slew are gone, and nothing else could produce that sense of trepidation and fear that's practically sloughing off them.

[kinu.isInari

|At last. It's time for them to be afraid for once, instead of you. The feelings of your foes quaking in terror, even as they try to appear brave... they weren't expecting this, were they? Of course not, they were expecting to kill only defenseless children and get away with it

|All the frustration at your impotence, your incompetence, your inability to rise beyond the call and save everything you've ever loved from being broken or outright destroyed — all of that tightens about your heart and drives you to push yourself just that bit much further

].

And now...

You don't even bother with an ambush, [kinu.isInari
|allowing your rage to propel you forward, all subtlety be damned
|moving swiftly as the wind, your tails flowing behind you from the sheer rapidity of
your advance
]. Foxfire pours off your body, lighting up the path with a ghastly blue glow as you
[kinu.kinuWeapon
|vault into your foes' midst, feeling the memory of the forms you practiced with
Mother all those years ago surge through your muscles
|circle around them, loosing your first volley
]. They're quick to respond, falling into formation and drawing long, thin bronze blades to
meet your advance; you can't help but feel a twinge of pride at finally being taken as a
serious threat.

A wordless cry rings out into the night as you meet each other; the time for any kind of words
has long since passed, if it ever existed to begin with.

[kinu.isInari
|It's a fight!
|Battle is joined...
]

Victory

[kinu.kinuWeapon
|The last invader standing lunges at you with a thrust aimed at your gut; you narrowly
sidestep the blow and catch the bronze blade with the guard of your naginata. With a
quick flick using your palm as leverage, you pull upwards; he? she? it? doesn't have
enough stamina to withstand the sudden application of force and the weapon goes
careening away into the air
|The last invader standing lunges at you with a thrust aimed at your gut; you narrowly
sidestep the blow and pull away, gaining enough distance to effectively draw your
half-bow while he recovers from the attack. This time, you don't aim for him, but the
weapon; you loose the arrow and it strikes the long, thin blade near the hilt.
Weakened from the fight, your foe doesn't have the wherewithal to keep his? her?
its? grip and the weapon clatters to the ground
]. In a flash, you close the remaining distance between the two of you, getting right up into
the invader's personal space. The spindly vulpine thing looks around, eyes darting behind
that black-and-white mask, perhaps not quite believing the sight of its fallen
comrades-in-arms or the fact that they've managed to lose despite outnumbering you four to
one.

<i>"You don't belong in this land, demon. Go home!"</i>

<i>"...I was born here. This is my home. [kinu.isInari]I have known no other[Everyone I am responsible for lives here]."</i>

It backs away, stepping over fallen bodies in its haste to get away from you. <i>"That doesn't change anything! You still don't belong, and never have!"</i>

<i>"...Maybe."</i> [kinu.isInari

|For all of the umbrage thrown at you, no mere words can shake your resolve, your conviction, your sure-footed knowledge that these creatures had tried to murder you and yours in your sleep in the most cowardly way possible

|Those words, they have the ring of honesty, but not truth. Truth, then, as this poor soul believes it; in this moment, you can almost pity your enemy, redirect your hate and frustration not upon the pawn itself, but reserve it for the hand that drives the game forward

]. Ah, it all changes nothing. [kinu.kinuWeapon

|A quick jab with the naginata

|A well-placed arrow

], and it's all over.

[kinu.isInari

|It's certainly not ladylike, but it feels so <i>good</i> to be able to strike back, do <i>something</i>, no matter how small. A surge of strength and perhaps even jubilation at defending you and yours from those who would harm them.

|More deaths, more blood on your hands; you don't feel proud or a sense of achievement for having slain enemies in defense of your home and furtherance of your responsibilities. All you feel is empty inside.

]

But...

Curiosity gets the better of you, and you reach down and take hold of the half-mask, the thin porcelain — or at least, what feels like it — smooth under your touch. You hesitate as your fingers find purchase, then pull and the string holding it in place snaps.

What did you expect? You're not sure yourself, but what meets your eyes is a full fox-face, not too different from the wolf-people natives of these lands, slender and androgynous. Very much like yours would be if you gave in to the hunger enough to revert to that state... and perhaps that's what's so uncanny and disquieting about it. You're nothing alike, but it does bear what you could become...

...No, that's not right. You're nothing alike; who you are and what you become are more than your appearance. And though the dead, ashen face beneath you is plain, you know better than to misjudge someone that way; monsters don't have to be ugly, after all.

You straighten and shake your head, letting the mask fall and smash to pieces on the path. Sating your curiosity has produced no answers, and only more questions, questions that you're not likely to resolve anytime soon, if ever.

Time to move on...

//end encounter

1. Den Entrance

Finally, here you are. You have to search the persimmon grove a little bit, but it doesn't take too long for you to find [kiyoko.numKits 2 3 4 5

[Aya and the field hands hiding off by the side in the shadow of the trees, within view of the waterfall grotto. Your sister comes rushing up to you as she sees you approach, wrapping her arms about your waist and burying her face in you.

<i>"I'm so relieved, [silly]onee-sama|big sis]! I thought you'd never come!"</i>

<i>"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting,"</i> you reply, then turn to the field hands. All six of them seem to have made it in one piece, although the unspoken word goes that everyone's quite harrowed by the experience. Well, with any luck they'll be safe soon and the night will be over... for them, that is.

<i>"[kinu.isInari|Are you all ready to go|Is everyone prepared to depart]?"</i>

Aya turns her ears down and to the side. <i>"Let's get out of here, [silly]nee-sama|big sis]."</i>

[your siblings and the field hands hiding off by the side in the shadow of the trees, within view of the waterfall grotto. Your sister comes rushing up to you as she sees you approach, wrapping her arms about your waist and burying her face in you.

<i>"I'm so relieved, [silly]onee-sama|big sis]! I thought you'd never come!"</i>

<i>"She was sniffing and crying for you the whole time,"</i> Tatsumi adds, coming up beside you.

<i>"[kinu.isInari

[Don't blame her, Tatsumi; she had to lose herself to the hunger to fight for her life

[She is not at fault, Tatsumi. Anyone would be similarly unstable and prone to being distraught after having come so close to the brink of the hunger to fight for their life

]."</i> Sighing, you pet Aya on the head, murmuring sweet nothings to try and calm your sister's frayed nerves. Needless to say, it would be really bad if she snapped during your escape. <i>"[kinu.isInari

[It's okay, it's all right; I'm here now. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting

[Shush... there, there. I apologise for having kept you waiting for so long
]."</i>

With your sister less of a nervous wreck, you turn to the field hands. All six of them seem to have made it in one piece, although the unspoken word goes that everyone's quite harrowed by the experience. Well, with any luck they'll be safe soon and the night will be over... for them, that is.

<i>"[kinu.isInari|Are you all ready to go|Is everyone prepared to depart]?"</i>

Aya turns her ears down and to the side. <i>"Let's get out of here, [silly|nee-sama|big sis]."</i>

[all three of your siblings hiding off by the side in the shadow of the trees, within view of the waterfall grotto. Aya, Tatsumi and Asagiri are huddled by the roots of one of the largest specimens in the grove, the former two circling their little white-furred sister protectively; as they see you arrive, Asagiri detaches herself from the trio and gives you a hug, wrapping her arms about your waist and burying her face in you with a soft sigh.

<i>"Does it still hurt, Asagiri?"</i>

<i>"...Yes..."</i>

Despite the quiet calm of your little sister's voice, she must still be in considerable pain, even if the worst of it has passed. Good thing, then, that you're getting out of here and getting help.[kinu.isInari| Or at least, they are...]

<i>"And you two? Are you ready to go?"</i>

Aya and Tatsumi share a glance, then turn to you and nod wordlessly.

[all of your siblings hiding off by the side in the shadow of the trees, within view of the waterfall grotto. Aya and Tatsumi are keeping watch while Asagiri fusses over the rest of the kits, huddled by the roots of one of the largest specimens in the grove. As everyone sees you arrive, Asagiri detaches herself from the group and gives you a hug, wrapping her arms about your waist and burying her face in you with a soft sigh.

<i>"Does it still hurt, Asagiri?"</i>

<i>"...Yes..."</i>

Despite the quiet calm of your little sister's voice, she must still be in considerable pain, even if the worst of it has passed. Good thing, then, that you're getting out of here and getting help.[kinu.isInari| Or at least, they are...]

<i>"All right, then. Quick roll call, just to make sure no one's missing."</i>

[kiyoko.numKits 12

|With so many brothers and sisters, it takes a moment for everyone to sound off, but you want to be absolutely sure no one's missing. It's so much like gathering up everyone for a family outing with Mother... oh, but if only it were.
]The roll call's done quickly and quietly, and when you're satisfied that everyone's accounted for you turn to Aya and Tatsumi and give them a nod.

<i>"And you two? Are you ready to go?"</i>

Aya and Tatsumi share a glance, then return the nod.
|the field hands hiding off by the side, within view of the waterfall grotto. All six of them seem to have made it in one piece, although the unspoken word goes that everyone's quite harrowed by the experience. Well, with any luck they'll be safe soon and the night will be over... for them, that is.

<i>"[kinu.isInari|Are you all ready to go|Is everyone prepared to depart]?"</i>

<i>"Yes, Lady Otomo. Please, lead the way?"</i>

]

[Next]

The trip through the waterfall grotto is hushed and quiet; [kinu.isInari
|while you use this exit every now and then in order to sneak into the native settlement to the south, none of your siblings have a reason to ever pass through here when the <i>torii</i> gate is a thing
|you don't really use this exit often; no one does when the <i>torii</i> gate is a thing
]. The cold and damp are really getting to you, a small irony after the blazing heat of your home burning down... but it'll be over soon, right?

Behind you, [kiyoko.numKits 2 3 4 12

|Aya and the field hands follow in silence; your sister tries to retain some of her bratty good humour, but it comes across as forced and half-hearted. The field hands trail behind, sticking close to you; it's true that everyone expects danger this far from civilisation in the colonies... but not quite of this kind, and these are but common working folk. You'll have a talk with [kinu.isInari|Granny|Matron] Komari later, see about rotating them out and giving the lot some time off in the bargain. They deserve it, after all, and you could take a holiday yourself, if you were to ever be allowed such a luxury.

|Aya, Tatsumi and the field hands follow in silence; your sister tries to retain some of her bratty good humour, but it comes across as forced and half-hearted while Tatsumi looks a little brow-beaten.

The field hands trail behind, sticking close to you; it's true that everyone expects danger this far from civilisation in the colonies... but not quite of this kind, and these are but common working folk. You'll have a talk with [kinu.isInari|Granny|Matron]

Komari later, see about rotating them out and giving the lot some time off in the bargain. They deserve it, after all, and you could take a holiday yourself, if you were to ever be allowed such a luxury.

[your siblings follow in silence; Aya tries to retain some of her usual bratty good humour, but with how forced and half-hearted it feels no one's buying any of it. Tatsumi's still fussing over Asagiri, who at least has stopped whimpering and is limping along, trying not to fall too far behind the three of you.[kiyoko.numKits 5] Your other younger siblings huddle together, clearly frightened, but there's nothing you can do but get out of here.]

Bedraggled rats rather than foxes, skulking about trying to remain unseen... while you knew the colonies were supposed to be dangerous, the very idea of having your home invaded like this is surreal given your childhood in the Astral Plane. Sure, it happened to Mother, but why did it have to happen to you more than two centuries down the line?

Why does *anything* happen?

[your siblings follow in silence; Aya tries to retain some of her usual bratty good humour, but with how forced and half-hearted it feels no one's buying any of it. Tatsumi's still fussing over Asagiri, who at least has stopped whimpering and is limping along, trying not to fall too far behind the three of you. Your other younger siblings huddle together, small bundles of frightened fur; you can only hope no one gets lost or left behind with Tatsumi bringing up the rear.

Bedraggled rats rather than foxes, skulking about trying to remain unseen... while you knew the colonies were supposed to be dangerous, the very idea of having your home invaded like this is surreal given your childhood in the Astral Plane. Sure, it happened to Mother, but why did it have to happen to you more than two centuries down the line?

Why does *anything* happen?

[the field hands follow in silence, sticking close to you and looking quite morose. It's true that everyone expects danger this far from civilisation in the colonies... but not quite of this kind, and these are but common working folk. You'll have a talk with [kinu.isInari|Granny|Matron] Komari later, see about rotating them out and giving the lot some time off in the bargain. They deserve it, after all, and you could take a holiday yourself, if you were to ever be allowed such a luxury.

]

But the exit looms ahead, the roar of water crashing down into the pool, and you remember the choice you'd resolved to make. In a sense, that has already been decided for you; [kinu.isInari|as much as you want to go back and fight|looking at your charges], there's no way they're making it through the forest alone as they are. A warrior would think differently, but you do not tread that path; as Mother likes to remind you, you are her heir. That means you have different priorities and responsibilities, and cannot live for yourself even if it means incurring shame in other areas...

...Or are you just making excuses to shy away from danger and almost certain death?

Little matter, the worst of this nightmare is almost over. The roar of the waterfall is deafening at this point, drowning out all sound as you help [kiyoko.numKits 2|Aya|one of your charges over the slippery rocks]. Exhaustion has taken its toll on you, and although you have to keep up a strong facade for everyone at least you can relax a little more now —

<i>"Don't move, demons."</i>

The moment you break your head out of the curtain of water, you're greeted by the sight of burning torches and no less than fifteen bows levelled at you. [kiyoko.numKits 2 4

|Aya squeaks, looks for somewhere to duck behind, and finding no good cover, eventually settles for you

|Asagiri mewls at the sight, clutching at your tattered clothes with both hands as if squeezing you will make the terror go away. It doesn't

|You swallow hard and look back at your charges. All the field hands have expressions of weary resignation on their faces, as if inviting death to finally make it all end. Not exactly the best thing for your own morale

].

<i>"And don't try to retreat, either. We have the other end of the passageway covered, too."</i>

<i>"They're not lying,"</i> [kiyoko.numKits 3|Tatsumi|one of the field hands] calls out from the rear. <i>"There are lights behind us."</i>

<i>So in the end, is this how [kinu.isInari|Granny|Matron] Komari felt? To fail despite one's best efforts, which were simply not good enough, and stare that failure in the face?</i>

They stand on the far edge of the waterfall pool, placing it between you and them; torches light up the forest, casting long shadows from the massed invaders as they form a cordon about the pool. Your mind races, trying to come up with some way in which you and your escape to safety, but comes up with nothing.

<i>"Now then, demoness, throw your weapon to the ground. One false move, and we fill your [kiyoko.numKits 2|family|people] full of holes. You might be able to get out of the way in time, but we won't miss **everyone**."</i>

<i>"You'd kill unarmed children?"</i>

<i>"We know what you can do, and none of you are children as we understand them. So, I'll not repeat myself: throw your weapon to the ground, demoness, or we fill your [kiyoko.numKits 2|family|people] with holes.

They're no longer satisfied with merely killing you, they want vengeance for having suffered losses in raiding your home, and that stays their hand for the moment. Whether it's something you can turn to your advantage is another question entirely.

[kinu.isInari

|You snarl. <i>"You're just going to kill us anyway."</i>

|You scowl in a most unladylike fashion. <i>"I doubt you have any intention of allowing a single one of us to live."</i>

]

<i>"Do you feel confident enough in your words?"</i>

You look at [kiyoko.numKits 2|Aya, still trying to hide behind you][kiyoko.numKits 3|, Tatsumi, his gaze distant and steely][kiyoko.numKits 4|, Asagiri, clutching at your clothes and whimpering softly|, the field hands, who had all only signed up to help Mother rebuild her home and ended up being thrown into danger].[kiyoko.numKits 8| The rest of your family, too...]</i>

They followed you to the bitter end. They trusted you both as Mother's heir and because of their belief in your abilities, but you've doomed them. Now, though it's your duty to hold fast while others sink into despair, it's becoming more and more likely that you'll watch as their lives come to an end.

And although [kinu.isInari

|some wild part of you still wishes to die in a blaze of glory and defiance

|you are cognizant of what is expected of you

], by virtue of who you are and where you stand... their lives are not yours to give, despite the shame it brings upon you.

Reluctantly, you throw down your [kinu.weapon] by the pool's edge.

[Next]

The invaders are quick to act. You're separated from the others and marched off to the side where a figure waits, sitting on top of a small crumbled wall that might have been the den's outer perimeter in Mother's time. The invaders push you roughly to your knees, and you feel the tingle of eyes upon you even as you're forced to bow your head at swordpoint.

<i>"Ha-hah! Another daring [silly|caper committed|adventure] by..."</i> he exclaims boastfully in a sharp, young, dashing voice, sitting tall and proud on top of his perch. He takes the time to strike a pose. <i>"...the Russet Rogue! And his helpful associates, of course."</i>

<i>"Daring,"</i> you spit. <i>"You intended to kill children!"</i>

He tsks. *"Children who managed to murder roughly ten of my people in cold blood. Demonspawn aren't as helpless as they would seem, wouldn't it? They were good people, and will be missed. Oh, whatever will I tell their grieving families?"*

You glower, and finally look up. Like all the other killers, he's a humanoid red fox, looking down on you with a triumphant smirk on a tapered snout; most definitely male and masculine. Although not the broadest figure around, his muscles are lean and strong, and his contoured torso flares up above narrow hips and gives him a body that has an agile deftness to it. Having donned a loose, red-brown jacket and supple deerskin pants in the style of the natives -- he's far better dressed than his subordinates -- and the ensemble is completed by a red sash across the hip and soft-soled boots below. The outfit does much to complement the vivid crimson of his fur, broken only by the white fur running down his chest and towards his crotch. He's lithe, too; the only two things that are large about him is the clear bulge in his thin leather pants and the bushy tail that flicks playfully from side to side.

You burn every single detail of this man into memory; he will pay for daring to even attempt to hurt your family when the time comes.

When the time comes.

"But do allow me to introduce myself! Why, I am Raphael — previously adventurer extraordinaire, redistributor of misplaced wealth and connoisseur of all things fine in life. I will say, for demons, you people have such exotic and exquisite wares and such beautiful aesthetic; it truly brings me back to my younger days."

"That surely isn't your real name."

"But it is! Oh, to be doubted so — I am terribly wounded by the aspersions upon my honour!" The fox puts his hand to his forehead and pretends to faint. He rights himself just before he hits the ground, however and lands in a kneel before your feet. *"Those past larcenous days of disrepute are over, and I have turned over a new leaf, found a new profession worthy of respect!"*

"Demon hunting, if you so would. Protecting our world from soul-sucking monsters from a different land, a distant land."

The ridiculous amount of theatrical flourish, the swagger with which he saunters towards you in a disarming, wide stride — you were never a threat to this man to begin with, and he certainly acts that way while toying with you like some kind of pet despite the situation. But at least you have a name now — you're almost certain it's completely and utterly fake, but it's still a name.

"So, I'm a demon now. Is that it?"

"Do you deny that you, ah, feed on helpless people, my pretty flower? Seduce them and drain them of their life-force to sustain yourself?"

<i>"We always give back in equal — "</i>

<i>"You admit it, hhhmmm?"</i> He smirks, then turns to his underlings. <i>"You all heard it from the demoness' mouth — she admits it herself!"</i>

You tense, but the sword point presses harder into the back of your neck, reminding you to not try anything funny.

<i>"Of course, of course, fair blossom; I am misrepresenting you and all that. So, I and all the peoples of this land are to accept cannibals because they use knives and forks. Because they are civilised about it. I think not. So excuse me — "</i> he leans in, and his smirk widens, voice lowering dangerously — <i>"if me and mine would rather not be your cattle to be fed and farmed, or your prey to be sought out and dallied with."</i>

You have no reply for that.

A chuckle. Suddenly, Raphael's features grow soft as he looks down upon you, forced on your knees before him. You get the feeling he's undressing you with his eyes and catching a peek at your cleavage whilst at it[kinu.isInari

|, but you can't be sure

| — no, you're certain of it. He tries to hide the lecherous thoughts and does it well, but you can read him like a book; he's no match for even the lower courtiers who sometimes come to visit Matron Komari on imperial business

].

<i>"And for all that, here I thought I had searched the entire place, found every treasure, pilfered every gem, but it seems I've overlooked the greatest jewel of all!"</i> Raphael's smirk turns into a would-be charming, boyish grin as he cups your chin with thumb and forefinger, jerking your face upwards so your eyes meet his and looking deeply into yours. His own are a deep emerald green, contrasting sharply with his bright red coat. They are set below a sturdy brow that gives him playful maturity and a rough regal elegance. <i>"Such beautiful blue eyes you have there... you do not mind if I take them with me, my fair lady?"</i>

His words are accompanied by the soft scraping of metal against metal, of a knife blade being drawn; it's the sort which you remember hearing outside your door, and your blood instinctively runs cold.

This man is completely <i>insane</i>. You've never met a more disgusting blowhard in your entire life, and that's saying something given you're aware of Takahiro's existence.

Still, what do you do?

[Spit][Swoon][Stall]

[Spit]

//Defy this madman if it's the last thing you do. You're as good as dead anyway; might as well use your last breath to spite him.

(Grey) //You... you don't have it in you to do this.

//Hime can't do this. Hide if so.

You've had it. Enough of this repellant fox-man and his airs of what he imagines to be playful, amused mastery, enough of his damnable self-righteousness, enough of this casual air towards gleefully murdering all of you with fire. All your rage and frustration — you channel it behind your lips and even as he holds your chin in a three-fingered grip, make to spit in his face.

He sees it coming, and barely manages to dodge out of the way, dropping your chin as he twists his body and your spittle goes flying. For a moment before he rights himself, you see Raphael's expression darken in disbelief, his self-delusion of being the suave and charming ladykiller broken by one simple rejection.

<i>"Oh, dear. I can assure you, my beautiful foreign blossom, that I had no intention of tainting your honour."</i>

Those mere words, when contrasted with your field clothes, now little more than bloodsoaked rags, the numerous cuts on your body, and the sweat and dirt on your skin... he's nothing but an ugly, habitual liar, both to others and to himself. Raphael sees you gearing up for another shot at him, and grabs you by the throat just under the jaw, pressing in with thumb and forefinger until the agony makes your eyes water.

<i>"It is clear I was twice the blind fool!"</i> the self-styled Russet Rogue declares, his playful smirk turned derisive. <i>"You might look like one, but verily, you are not a lady. I would advise you to gain manners, but sadly, a hag cannot be taught female grace with any greater aptitude than a pig can be taught to dine with silverware. You will remain, at best, a very curvy mangirl, and have my condolences."</i>

<i>"On the other hand, I do enjoy a woman with spirit, even if in not quite the same manner as proper ladies are to be enjoyed by gentlemen of leisure like me."</i>

He lets go of your throat, and you slump, gasping; Raphael kicks you in the side, then turns to his underlings.

<i>"Return the demoness her [kinu.kinuWeapon|glaive|bow], and give us space. Since she wants to fight so badly, let her die fighting."</i>

//go to converge point.

[Swoon]

//Oh, so he thinks he's the charmer, is he? It sickens you to even consider it, but if you can get him close and drop his guard...

(Grey) //Just the thought of this madman near you is repulsive to the core of your being. No, not even if your life depends on it.

//Inari won't do this.

Keros' tails, damn the repellant nature of this fox-man and his airs of what he imagines to be playful, amused mastery, his damnable self-righteousness, and most of all, his casual air towards gleefully burning you all alive... if you can only lure him close enough, perhaps that might do the trick. Surely a lech like him would be susceptible to flattery, wouldn't he?

Forcing down your revulsion, you make to mask your true emotions; shifting your weight onto one knee, you even contrive to blush a little despite the circumstances. Let him think the attention he's showering upon you is actually working, play to his self-delusions of being the suave and charming ladykiller. Given your tattered, bloodstained nightgown, let alone the circumstances, it certainly wouldn't work on anyone else; nevertheless, Raphael is clearly so full of himself that he might actually be taken in.

<i>"Oh? Is my little flower blushing?"</i> He holds your gaze, the emerald shimmer in his rich green eyes intensifying as he burrs with an obviously faked accent, not even bothering to remain consistent. <i>"Perhaps destiny willed this fateful meeting, for Lord Taoth to order me and my men here tonight? Then again, I am attracted to extraordinary splendour, so perhaps I would have found you no matter what."</i>

[kiyoko.numKits 2

|<i>[silly|Onee-sama|Big sis], what are you doing?"</i> Aya yells, but is quickly silenced into submission by a hard blow to the back of her head.

]

Time to get into the act. Raphael's face is close enough to yours that the cloying smell of perfume and cologne is practically suffocating; a man with no idea of how to use any of it and simply tossed the lot on. You're sure his smile is meant to be dashing, but it's anything but; nevertheless, you force yourself to swoon and titter, to wrap one arm about his neck like in some stupid oversexed romance while his verdant green eyes peer into yours daringly. The Russet Rogue leans in, clearly intending to steal a kiss with that sharp muzzle of his.

Now! Balling your free hand into a fist, you concentrate and make to punch upwards into his chest, to summon foxfire and give him a literally burning embrace —

— And your focus is broken as Raphael snaps back, springing away from you. His hand darts out in a blur, grabbing you by the wrist and twisting it cruelly until tears of pain well up in your eyes.

<i>"Oh dear, oh dear,"</i> he says, the smirk on his face disgustingly smug and superior.

<i>"It looks like this beautiful foreign blossom conceals poisonous thorns beneath her petals.

And even though I would gladly suffer through a thousand indignities for a mere touch from one such as you, death is not one of them."

Raphael twists again, and this time your tendons pop and you scream, falling forward onto the ground. You gasp, lungs heaving, tears flowing down your cheeks, and yet there's a sense of satisfaction in knowing that your rejection stung this madman deeply enough for him to lose his composure and finally drop the suave rogue act.

"On the other hand, I do enjoy a woman with spirit; such a pity, though, the flower who refused to bloom." Raphael kicks you in the side for good measure, then turns to his underlings. "Return the demoness her [kinu.kinuWeapon|glaive|bow], and give us space. Since she wants to fight so badly, let her die fighting."

//go to converge point.

[Stall]

//Keep him talking, stall for time. Maybe a miracle will happen...

Your mind races, but you come up short of any course of action that doesn't get you and yours all killed. Raphael grins down at you, practically oozing the kind of confidence that has him acting as if he owns the place — and you. Maybe... maybe if you keep him talking, you'll buy enough time for an opportunity to present itself.

Maybe...

"What are you getting at? What do you want?"

"My, whatever do you mean, my pretty? Are you accusing me of being less than forthright?" He raises his shoulders in a shrug. "I think I've been very clear in my desires — we want you demons gone from our land instead of spreading and preying on the innocent, helpless, and those too foolish or incontinent to control themselves. And if you won't go... well, burning you out is always an option, as you can see. Such a pity."

"And my eyes, you wanted them..."

You know what he meant, he knows you know what he meant. The fox-man snickers into his fist and snorts unseemly; he clearly takes an undue amount of pleasure in watching you squirm and stall for time, which is almost certainly why he's playing along with your game.

"I meant exactly what I said, my fair flower." From his hip, Raphael draws a slender dagger and tests the tip against his thumb. "Such beautiful light blue sapphires, they rouse in me the excitement of my younger thieving days. Such jewels, filled with passion and ardor, inflaming desire as they speak of avarice."

The point of the dagger is now less than two inches from your face; your heart pounds in your head, blood rushing, muscles trembling.[kinu.isInari] Perhaps you should be afraid; anyone else might be given the danger you're in, but all you can feel is boiling hatred for this repulsive man and his endless stream of flowery words, an overwhelming desire to break his jaw so he'll finally shut up.]

<i>"I cannot say that I'm in the habit of collecting trophies, but there is a first time for everything; I have never met a woman... quite like you, hmhmmm. And is that not the deepest desire of a lady? To be so charming and attractive that the sheer power of her magnetism compels honest and noble men to terrible deeds of infamy?"</i>

<i>He's</i> the one with a knife pointed at your eye, and making <i>you</i> out as the villain. The sheer audacity, the lecherousness, the madness. Does he really think that if he just makes the right gestures and says the right words as if from a script, you'll fall swooning at his feet no matter what he does?

No, you can't take it any more. There's no point in stalling for time any longer, not if this creep is going to take perverse pleasure in tormenting you. As Raphael makes to toy with the dagger in his hand, you dart forward, craning your neck and seeking to sink your teeth into his wrist; feeling them transform from human to something sharp and vulpine within your jaws in a matter of moments. He realises it almost too late, jerking back his hand, but is not quite fast enough. Your canines scrape through his fur, raking across flesh, breaking skin and drawing blood; for a moment before he rights himself, you see Raphael's expression darken in disbelief. His self-delusion of being the suave and charming ladykiller, the entire facade broken by one simple rejection. One of his people comes forward, uttering cries of alarm and concern, but he waves off his underling.

<i>"No matter, no matter. 'Tis but a flesh wound. Nothing to be concerned about."</i>
Raphael sees you gearing up for another shot at him, and grabs you by the throat just under the jaw, pressing in with thumb and forefinger until the agony makes your eyes water. <i>"A worthy price for you to reveal what you truly are in front of everyone, demoness."</i>

He draws back his bloodied hand and sends it across your cheek in a firm backhand, tossing you to the ground. You gasp, lungs heaving, tears flowing down your face, and yet there's a sense of satisfaction in knowing that your rejection stung this madman deeply enough for him to lose his composure and finally drop the suave rogue act.

<i>"On the other hand, I do enjoy a woman with spirit; such a pity, though, the flower who refused to bloom."</i> Raphael kicks you in the side for good measure, then turns to his underlings. <i>"Return the demoness her [kinu.kinuWeapon|glai|ve|bow], and give us space. Since she wants to fight so badly, let her die fighting."</i>

//go to converge point.

Converge

[Next]

The assembled invaders look at each other worriedly at that, but the self-styled Russet Rogue waves a hand airily, dismissing their concerns with a laugh. *"Are you afraid of her? Well, I suppose you are. Don't worry, I'll deal with the demoness myself. Now, return this poor creature her arms, and let's see how she handles herself with them. I admit to being curious, since you put up more of a fight than the others before you."*

<There were others?>

Your thoughts are interrupted by the clatter of your [kinu.weapon] landing on the ground before you; the invaders seem loathe to approach your person now that their leader has dismissed them. Even the one holding you at swordpoint quickly clears away. Raphael, on the other hand, has already drawn his weapon — a long, thin bronze sword much like those of his underlings, only this one has fine golden filigree about the guard and even has a tassel; no doubt he imagines it makes him look very classy.

<"Now, my lady, this is a man's weapon in every definition of the word."> He beams and draws the blade from the silver-reinforced sheath with a cold metallic swish. Of course the bastard doesn't bother to check if you're watching, of course you're supposed to be captivated by the very sight of him — or so he thinks. *<"Notice how its long hard length stands tall and fierce, upon a sturdy hilt designed for deep thrusts into warm flesh.">*

<"Do..."> you draw a deep breath, and feel your ribs ache and burn with the effort. *<"Do you actually think that is witty and clever?">*

Raphael leers, then points the long, thin blade downwards and directly at you; he carefully traces the point across your skin, making sure you feel the coolness of the edge as it slices through your ripped, bloodstained [kinu.isInari|field clothes|nightgown], exposing even more of your person to the eyes upon the scene. The bastard is deliberately humiliating you in front of his underlings[kiyoko.numKits 2] and more importantly, your family], paying you back for daring to defy him out of turn.

<"Notice the roving tip, how she searches for an opening upon a quivering body's wavering guard.">

With those words, the lech moves to place the point between your breasts, and you snap. With a sharp jerk of your body, you whip your chest back and tumble into a roll, using your tails for balance; Raphael realises you're not about to play along with the ritual humiliation and lunges, but he's too late. The swordpoint meant to slip between your ribs goes wide, and he loses his balance; the vulpine rogue gracefully rights himself easily enough, but not before you've grabbed your [kinu.kinuWeapon|naginata and levelled its blade at him|bow and nocked an arrow in his direction].

<"So eager, so frisky,"> he snarls excitedly. *<"Whatever happened to foreplay? Shouldn't you buy me — ">*

<i>"[kinu.isInari

|Just shut the fuck up already, you lech!"</i>

|Just shut up. You are not smart, you are not witty, you are not dashing; you are just someone who has heard of all these things and desperately wishes to partake but fails to understand what they are to begin with, so you prance around in their trappings without any substance within that shell. For all your fine clothes and flowery speech, all you are is a small-souled creature who uses the pretext of a noble cause to murder children, rob others and intimidate those whom you think are at your mercy, all for your own perverse pleasure.</i>

<i>"You have never actually managed to love anything, have you? Of what worth are your claims of deepest adoration when you hand them out so freely?"</i>

And with that, the mere fact that you've been allowed to say all this, the crack in Raphael's facade through which shocked disbelief shines through before quickly turning to rage — you <i>know</i> you've struck at the heart of this would-be womaniser's insecurities, and it feels <i>good</i> to lay bare his small, rotten soul even if it's the last thing you do.

]

<i>"If that's the way you want it. The night is still young, after all. Join me! Together we shall paint the forest russet red!"</i>

[kinu.isInari

|It's a fight!

|Battle is joined.

]/

Victory

//By all rights, this is not a possible thing. However, since some players are perfectly capable of using the console to cheat in stats and powers, we don't want the game to simply crash like how MGQ did if you actually managed to beat Tamamo on the first try.

Oh. You managed to get here to this scene. By all rights, unless you cheated in one way or another, you should not be able to access this scene; it is a fallback in case something goes terribly wrong, after all. Given Raphael's stats compared to your daughter's, there should be no way in which she can conceivably beat him, even with perfect RNG on your side. Hence, you really must have cheated to win; if you didn't and the game bugged out or some kind of edge case exception was caught, then just ignore the following. Please make a bug report on the forum, too!

While I understand that the game is often played for its power fantasy appeal and that Raphael is truly a hateable character by design, trust me when I say he'll get his

comeuppance in time. Kinu's story is one of being broken, adversity, eventually made whole and being more beautiful for the breakage.

Now, I could have it all take place in prose and not go through all this bother, but this is the first time daughter dearest is going up against an obstacle that for all her inherited genius and ability simply cannot surmount on her own (Inari) or is left without guidance from her superiors and elders (Hime). I want players to experience Kinu's initial surprise, then horror, then finally desperation as nothing she does works and she realises she is going to die, and after that they are going to kill her family as well.

For someone who has effortlessly breezed through life's obstacles as a child prodigy and never truly been challenged, staring down her first true failure with the stakes being her life and family is going to shake your daughter to the core, and I want players to feel that impotent desperation and rage against Raphael as he toys with your daughter and cuts her down piece by piece.

Is it better to have everything intact and perfect, to slide into senescence? Or through the threat of loss, truly begin to appreciate the value of what we take for granted?

Through adversity, strength. Through struggle, triumph. Through pain, acceptance.

Is it better to live a painless life of free leisure, and be defeated by peace? Loss, synthesis, and improvement through destruction and repair or rebirth... or maybe this is all pseudo-philosophical blather to disguise the fact that I just really like yanking on y'all's chain?

Embrace the art of *kintsugi* and the understanding that something can be more beautiful for having been broken first.

I apologise for any distress caused from not being able to immediately kick Raph's butt, but that's the way the cookie crumbles.

Now, back to our originally scheduled programming...

//Go to defeat

Defeat

This can't be happening. It can't be happening. [kinu.isInari

|You're a prodigy; ever since you were a kit, you were the smart one, the one who learned the fastest. You beat all those invaders two, three, *four* on one by yourself, and yet this small-souled guttersnipe has somehow managed to best you
|You've always kept a close and hopefully honest assessment of your capabilities; knew where your boundaries lay so you could push them in increments. Every time

something's come up, you've had the wisdom of Mother or Matron Komari to guide you to the correct decision... only you have absolutely no idea what they would do in this situation, where this madman and monster has the upper hand on you

].

No matter how hard you try, Raphael simply uses gymnastic feats of avoidance to dodge your [kinu.kinuWeapon|blows|arrows], kicking moss about and dragging furrows through the forest floor with roving feet. Meanwhile, he uses his scabbard to deflect the occasional kick or impromptu blow you try to weave in, angling it just so to turn the impact to the side. He's a wreck, but his skill is undeniable; your efforts don't affect him, they're no match for his strength. It wears you down, chasing after the fox-man, often forcing him into awkward positions below your assault, but you never quite manage to [kinu.kinuWeapon|strike him properly|]and a shot on him. He even mocks you by cutting one of your arrows out of the air at the last moment, gracing you with a raised eyebrow and snide smile].

He's bleeding you out, killing you by a death of a thousand nicks; Raphael's petty anger at his wounded pride from you having rejected him is spiralling out of control, seething despite the cool mask of indifference he wears upon his face. With more gentle care than you bother to apply, the fox-man pricks the tip of his sword against your guts and ribcage more than once, letting you know he could've run you right through but refrained from doing so. Of course — he wouldn't be able to humiliate you in front of his underlings and your family if he just killed you outright.

But at last, your strength fails you. The stinging bites of several dozen cuts bring you down; your clothes are shreds, leaving you half-naked in front of everyone. Raphael continues to stand firm and proud, sliding the point of his slender sword down between your chin and throat and forcing your gaze upwards yet again.

<i>"Pity for such beauty to be caught in the clutches of a demoness, such that its extinguishing is necessitated. Such a fair flower, cut with the chaff,"</i> he says with a smirk, adding as much theatrical flourish as he can to his words. <i>"But you'll find that I'm not as easy prey as others for the likes of you. [silly|Die, monster. You don't belong in this land.|Any last words?]"</i>

Your eyes turn to your [kiyoko.numKits 2 4

|charges and family

|family

|charges

], to the torches flickering amongst the trees, down the length of the slim bronze blade to its wielder.

[kinu.isInari

|<i>"Go fuck yourself."</i>

Raphael laughs. <i>"Defiant to the end, I see. I'd expect no less from a demoness of your stature."</i>

*"You can intimidate, bully, seduce and deceive others into compliance." Your voice shakes as you draw ragged breaths, the bronze point pricking against your throat. *"But has anyone ever wilfully loved you? Not what they believe you to be, but **you**?"**

Raphael grins like he saw it coming, but the smile on his muzzle beneath the mask is far from convincing. *"Lies spill from your mouth like water from a broken dam, demoness. It is my duty to silence you forever."*

]

His forearm tenses, clearly readying himself to drive the point of his blade through your throat, and then several things happen.

The first is that several arrows fly out of the trees, sickening wet smacks rising into the night air as they sink into flesh. One comes flying straight for Raphael, and the Russet Rogue is forced to bring the point of his blade up and away from your throat to slice it from the air. Why he didn't just settle for simply dodging it while keeping you at swordpoint is beyond you — maybe his instincts for leaning to the theatrical and dramatic worked against him this time.

The next thing is that foxfire erupts by the pool, flickering ghostly flames bursting into existence, blazing away with intense, blinding light despite the lack of heat. Multiple roars ring through the air, deafening thunderclaps that shake the trees. The standing invaders rally into formation, pulling out not their weapons but various arcane implements after the fashion of the natives of this land — wands, runestones, other means of defending themselves from the two-pronged assault.

The opening is small, but it's all you need and hope is a far more generous lender than terror is. Quick as he is, by the time Raphael's recovered and has his swordpoint trained back on you, you've grabbed your [kinu.weapon] and are rapidly disengaging from the scene.

"[kinu.isInari

|Going so soon, my pretty? Don't struggle so much, you'll wound me!

|Don't you dare run, demoness. You don't get to sully a man's reputation with your filthy lies and just leave without being taught a lesson.

]"

What was he expecting, dumb-minded compliance when you've already proven yourself to do anything but that? Maybe like the way he relies on his sword, he's spent too long around brainless bimbos who swoon at his every word to actually believe that a woman might not mindlessly obey him.

Whatever, your [kiyoko.numKits 2 4

|charges and family

|family

|charges

] need you this moment. [kiyoko.numKits 2 3 4 12

|Aya yips and squeals as you grab her by the waist and drag her off amidst the chaos, her tails grabbing at you for purchase as you hoof it through the chaos, picking up the field hands along the way

|Aya yips and squeals as you grab her by the waist and drag her off amidst the chaos, her tails grabbing at you for purchase as you hoof it through the chaos, picking up the field hands along the way. Ever the opportunist, Tatsumi's grabbed yet another of the invaders' weapons off a fallen body in the melee, covering your retreat with all of his inexperienced but valiant efforts

|Aya yips and squeals as you grab her by the waist and drag her off amidst the chaos, her tails grabbing at you for purchase as you hoof it through the chaos; Asagiri limps along, determined to not fall behind and get caught in the growing melee. Ever the opportunist, Tatsumi's grabbed yet another of the invaders' weapons off a fallen body, covering [kiyoko.numKits 5|the rest of your siblings'|your family's] retreat with all of his inexperienced but valiant efforts

|Aya yips and squeals as you grab her by the waist and drag her off amidst the chaos, her tails grabbing at you for purchase as you hoof it through the chaos; Asagiri limps along, determined to not fall behind and get caught in the growing melee. Ever the opportunist, Tatsumi's grabbed yet another of the invaders' weapons off a fallen body, covering the rest of your siblings' retreat with all of his inexperienced but valiant efforts. There are a lot of you, but the chaos is rapidly spreading and the invaders have more pressing concerns than corralling children at the moment, especially when the only one whom they've been led to believe is a threat is rapidly retreating

|With more pressing issues on the invaders' minds than corralling a bunch of beaten-down, unarmed field hands, you're able to quickly get to where they were being held and slash open their bonds with [kinu.kinuWeapon|the edge of your naginata|an arrowhead]. Urging them forward despite your own doubts about your leadership, you cover their retreat as best as you can in the chaos before allowing yourself to withdraw. Responsibility flows upwards, after all

] Behind you, you hear Raphael [kinu.isHime|raging and]rallying his men, urging them to press the attack in your direction despite the fact that the fight is already starting to turn against them. He may be skilled, but even so one man can't compensate for this kind of situation alone.

It stings, it hurts, and you're certain that your body is going to exact a cruel revenge upon you for mistreating it so, but so long as there's any hope that your [kiyoko.numKits 2 4

|family and people

|family

|people

] might make it out alive now that the situation has changed, you can't give up.

And the greatest irony is that if the madman that was Raphael hadn't been such a would-be dashing rogue, you wouldn't have been able to stall him long enough for help to arrive in the nick of time. If he'd only just saved the theaterics and outright murdered you when he had the chance...

Ha.

<i>"[kiyoko.numKits 2][silly|Nee-sama|Big sis], w|W]e're almost there!"</i>

And so you are. Never in your life have you been so glad to see familiar faces — Azami, Miko and Mai, and most of all, [party.has kiyoko

[[kinu.isInari

]Hitoshi. Even as the line of kitsune sweep past you to join in the skirmish, Miko and Mai taking charge of [kiyoko.numKits 2 4

|your family and the field hands

|your family

|the field hands

] from you, he leans in to take you in one hand and your [kinu.weapon] in the other. Quietly, Hitoshi accepts the hug you give him, then pats you on the head between your ears as he towers over you.

<i>"You're safe now."</i>

<i>"..."</i> Anyone else would have been crushed by your embrace, but not him as he slowly reverses course and leads you into the back line. After the harrowing experience, it's nice to have someone solid and reassuring to cling to.

<i>"...Let's not get in the others' way. I'll take care of you."</i>

[Nakano. Even as the line of kitsune sweep past you to join in the skirmish, Miko and Mai taking charge of [kiyoko.numKits 2 4

|your family and the field hands

|your family

|the field hands

] from you, he sheathes his <i>nodachi</i> and foists it upon his back so that he has both hands free to catch you and your [kinu.weapon] as you slump into his embrace. There's that certain trepidation there as he no doubt realises that this is far too familiar — no, intimate — for your stations, but of course, he does what he must in your service no matter the personal cost.

He's sweet like that.

<i>"Are you all right?"</i> It's a formality, of course; both of you know you're not all right, but the words are reassuring to hear. <i>"Allow us to fight in your stead — my only regret is that we did not arrive sooner."</i>

<i>"Then..."</i> you gasp, feeling your pains and aches finally return in force, <i>"Forgive me for adding to your shame — I know you wish to be out there, but I require your services."</i>

<i>...Lady Otomo, you are the heir to my liege's liege, and of divine blood."</i> Nakano sighs, and pats you on the head; his touch through the gauntlet is hard, yet paradoxically reassuring and tender. *<i>"There is no greater honour than to attend to your desires, regardless of any other sacrifices I may be called upon to make in that line of duty."*</i>

If not for his armour, you would surely crush him with your embrace. There's a certain instinctive reluctance in him as he slowly reverses course and leads you into the back line; you know how much he's longed for an actual enemy to fight, and for him to walk away from this for you has to be incredibly hard on him.

<i>"You need help. Allow me to take you away from this place."</i>

]

[Mother. [kinu.isInari

[You'd never thought the day would come where you'd actually be glad to see her, but extenuating circumstances are what they are. The two of you will almost certainly go back to being at loggerheads tomorrow, but here and now, the two of you have come to a detente at least...

[It feels so *<i>good</i>* to have her back with you, to be close to her, to know with certainty that someone wiser and more experienced than you is in charge here, especially when all of your recent decisions have merely worsened the situation.

]

Mother finishes with tossing a gout of foxfire out into the fray, then receives you into her bosom, one hand coming to rest on the back of your head and the other between your shoulders. Her fingers sink into your sweaty, grimy hair and start petting away, making you feel like you're a kit again.

<i>"There, there,"</i> Mother murmurs, leading down to kiss your brow and pet you between the ears. [kinu.isInari

[Any other occasion and you'd have vociferously protested, but... it has been true that Mother hasn't shown you such outward affection for a long, long time. The soft motions and soothing voice take you back and awaken a distant, buried memory, that of a time when you were Mother's only child and you didn't have the adult responsibilities of caring for your younger siblings and more that were foisted upon you from an early age.

It must have been good to be carefree, once, even if you don't recall very much of that time. For a while, you allow yourself to set aside your dignity and indignation and allow Mother to fuss over your hurts while you lay your head on her bosom like a child.

[You can't help it any more — now that no one else's paying too much attention, you allow yourself to snifle, sob, and finally start crying into Mother's bosom as her fingers soothe your hurts.

<i>"I am so scared, Mother."</i>

<i>"Hush, hush. I will not allow what happened to me to befall my daughter, even if only in partial measure."</i>

<i>"Mother — !"</i>

Mother's stature may be small, but her presence extends far beyond her body, warm and enveloping. You haven't hugged her like this for a while now, and it feels good; you can only hope to be able to project this kind of calming presence so effortlessly in time...

]

<i>"Come,"</i> Mother whispers. <i>"Let us be away from this place — we are only getting in the way of others who are fighting in our stead."</i>

[kiyoko.numKits 2 3 4 5

|<i>"Aya and the field hands,"</i> you choke. <i>"They — they — I have to see to — "</i>

|<i>"Aya and the field hands,"</i> you choke. <i>"They — Tatsumi was watching them, but I have to see to — "</i>

|<i>"Asagiri was burned,"</i> you choke, suddenly rising with a start. <i>"I — she needs — Tatsumi will take it terribly when he realises — "</i>

|<i>"Asagiri was burned,"</i> you choke, suddenly rising with a start. <i>"I — she needs — Tatsumi will take it terribly when he realises — "</i>

<i>"Quiet, child. Calm yourself."</i>

<i>"And then there's the matter of everyone else, if they all made it out safely — "</i>

|<i>"The field hands,"</i> you choke. <i>"I would have led them to their deaths. They — I have to see to — "</i>

]

Mother tsks and pokes you on the forehead with a finger. <i>"[kinu.isInari

|Doggedly stubborn, as always. Well, if you weren't, I suppose I'd have to worry if the experience shattered you, but by all accounts you're still the daughter I know

|It's all right, it's just us now. You can leave the rest to me; you don't always have to measure yourself up to my level, my dear daughter. After all, I do have so many years on you

]. Now then, let us depart and leave the clean-up to others. That boy of Komari's [kinu.isHime]you fancy]finally has the glorious battle that he's been hungering for all his life. Pretty underwhelming, really, but let him have his time."</i>

]

[Next]

//Go to epilogue

Epilogue

//Follows up from after Kinu's defeat.

<i>Some time later...</i>

<i>"Now, don't ya even try sittin' up, lil' sis. [party.has kiyoko|Cus|Yer lady mother] said ya were to stay in bed, an' Miko an' I ain't got no reason to disagree none. Ya jus' lie down here like a good girl an' recuperate; ya done lost a lot o' blood an' ya done pushed yerself way past what no one's got any right to do. Ain't no permanent damage yet, but if'n ya don't listen none there could be plenty, so I'm tellin' ya f'r th' last time: stay in bed. Ya done hear me right?"</i>

You twist and turn on the futon, trying to get up, but each movement is accompanied by several dozen stinging aches and a half-dozen deep-seated pains.

<i>"Well, ain't ya feisty, lil' sis."</i> Mai takes a deep drag from her pipe and blows a plume of smoke, adding to the already choking smell of winterstem to the chamber. <i>"Keros' tails, so help me if'n ya disobey me, I swear on the name o' th' August Master at th' center ' heaven himself that I ain't hesitatin' to tie ya down with rope an' all."</i>

[kiyoko.numKits 4

|<i>"No. Asagiri..."</i>

Mai reaches over and slaps your hand down. <i>"Yer lil' sis is jus' fine. Miko's tendin' to her now, an' yer lil' brother ain't leaving her side none either."</i>

<i>"She... her burns, they — "</i>

<i>" — Ain't nothin' f'r ya to get yerself riled up about none."</i>

<i>"[kiyoko.numKits 6|She ran into the flames to pull out her little brothers and sisters|The bastards set the building she was in on fire], Mai. I have to — "</i>

<i>"Do what, exactly, lil' sis? Whatcha gonna do?"</i> Mai blows another smoke ring, her expression completely cold and impassive. <i>"Ya gonna show up like this in front o' yer kid sister an' scare her half to death when what she done needs is some peace o' mind? That ain't bein' responsible none, that's jus' bein' several kinds o' selfish. Ya ain't concerned f'r her, ya jus' want release from yer own guilt. An' to that, I'm sayin' no. Ya stay right here an' don't risk gettin' yer cuts infected none."</i>

<i>"..."</i>

<i>"Ya still gonna argue?"</i>

<i>"...How bad is it, at least?"</i>

<i>"Her face weren't burned none, it's still as pretty as ever. Now git yerself back down 'fore I get th' mind to put ya down."</i>

You consider that for all of a moment, then a thought hits you. <i>"You said it was just her face, what about the rest of her?"</i>

<i>"Ain't nothin' f'r ya to fret about."</i>

<i>"You're evading the question."</i>

<i>"Granny done thinks it would be good f'r yer kid sister to join us at th' shrine when she's up an' 'bout th' place, train her to be a priestess.[party.has kiyoko] Yer mom ain't got no problem with it none."</i>

<i>"..."</i>

|<i>"No. Did — did your people make it out, too? [kinu.isInari

|I know I didn't really speak to any of them even though we worked together, but there're things that get across without needing to say a word. I... I'd feel bad if anything awful were to happen to them.

|I know I hardly ever see them save to give them their tasks at dawn and to review the day's work at dusk, but even so...

] I wouldn't blame them if they didn't want to help out on my side any more.

<i>"Ain't a single pretty hair on their tails so much as touched, lil' sis. Can't say th' same for their spirits... but ain't no one getting outta that kinda bind without them getting disturbed some."</i>

<i>"I almost led them to their deaths. Would have, if you didn't come along."</i>

<i>"Responsibility flows upwards, don'tcha know."</i>

]

That's all that Mai's willing to share on the matter, so you try a different approach.

<i>"[kinu.isInari]How'd you find out something was wrong[How did you come to realise something was amiss]?"</i>

Mai sighs and leans back, gathering her thoughts. She gathers foxfire on her finger and you think she's going to mess with her pipe again, but you see her bring out a censer and light its contents — whatever's inside it, it burns with a refreshing scent as opposed to the heavy drowsiness of winterstem, the two blending together to make you feel clear in head yet heavy of limb. Part of her ploy to keep you in bed, you suppose.

<i>"We-ll. Weren't two hours into my shift 'fore I noticed the torii gate weren't workin' right. [kinu.isInari|Na|Hitoshi][silly]-kun] had th' idea to go visitin' ya at that time o' night, an' I weren't 'bout at be askin' him what f'r. But th' gate didn't work none or open to begin with, an'..."</i>

<i>"You got suspicious."</i>

<i>"I tried to fix it an' eventually got fed up, so I went to find granny. She done figured out that th' gate weren't broke, it was that someone were jammin' it from th' other side. Wouldn't take an idjit at that point to figure out somethin' were wrong... we rounded up Ishida[silly]-san]'s and Na[silly]-kun]'s people went to take a look-see."</i>

You sink back into the pillow with a sigh and stare up at the ceiling. <i>"[kinu.isInari
|Great timing. A minute or two later, and I'd be dead; you certainly made your
entrance at the most dramatic moment. But... thanks for coming for me. If not for
myself, then for [kiyoko.numKits 2|my family|the folks you lent us]
|Thank you for coming for me; you arrived in the nick of time. I... I thought I was
going to perish there, but more importantly, [kiyoko.numKits 2|my family|my charges]
would have followed me, and that is something that still troubles me
]."</i>

More silence. Mai eventually runs out of winterstem; she reaches into her shrine maiden's uniform, draws out a little silvered box, and looks dismayed at its emptied state.

<i>"I'm gonna go now, 'lil sis; this pipe o' mine needs fillin'. When my eyes ain't on ya, yer gotta stay here, okay? Don't get up an' go walkin' aroun' or nothin'. Like I said, wouldn't want any o' yer cuts gettin' infected an' all. Ya jus' stay here an' rest... th' charms an' smoke, they'll help keep th' nightmares away. Sleep tight."</i>

[Next]

More time passes, and you drift in and out of consciousness during that period; fear and hope alike send in their invoices in the ensuing hours and days, demanding repayment of lent strength with as much interest as you'd expect. People come in and out of the room, and you're vaguely aware of voices speaking around you while you lie in your convalescence; even when Mai comes in to change the dressings on your wounds, wipe you down and help you to the washroom it all feels like a delusion. You know it's not, but for the first time in your life you don't have any daily responsibilities, social obligations, or pressing matters to attend to.[kinu.isInari] They say there aren't any holidays on a farm... but the fields are and paddies are gone, burnt, and you don't even know if there's anything left to salvage.]

Even so, the deadening effect of winterstem can't block out all your thoughts and worries, drunk on the atmosphere of your chambers as you might be. You don't have any nightmares... but at the same extent, you don't have any pleasant dreams, either. Everything seems as illusory and transient as the morning fog, there one moment and gone the next; even keeping track of time eventually becomes impossible. [kinu.isInari]

[Sometimes, you become aware of Hitoshi besides you, completely silent but with his hand wrapped completely around yours. Those are your most lucid moments, when he comes in from the fields every evening and feeds you something or the other that he's prepared that day; the scent of dirt and sap that cling to him and the strength in his fingers are a welcome change from the constant grey dullness of winterstem smoke that numbs your senses and nerves.

Hitoshi never says much, but then again you're not the best of conversationalists, either. You're just content to have his presence around you whenever possible.

[Sometimes, you become aware of Nakano besides you, completely silent but with his hand wrapped completely around yours. Those are your most lucid moments, when he's finished with his duties in the evening and comes in to sit beside you. He talks while Miko works on you when she comes off shift, distracting your attention from her poking and prodding. The topics are never quite on point — sometimes it's about den matters, other times it's politics across the ocean, or something trivial yet interesting he managed to learn that day.

Under no circumstance, though, does he ever speak of the aftermath of that day, or his own poetry, for that matter. Miko being around probably has something to do with that. You don't remember half of what he says, but you're glad for the attempt to keep you informed, and for keeping you company. His presence is enough, a welcome change from the constant grey dullness of winterstem smoke that numbs your senses and nerves.

]

[party.has kiyoko

[Sometimes, you wonder if Mother will ever show up, but she doesn't — not by your side, and not in your dreams. But of course, she wouldn't be able to come, and neither would Father — the both of them are away saving the world, and you're here...

... How long will it be before they're back, before they realise what's happened to their home in their absence? [kinu.isInari

[Will they ever be back? Father was always gone, days, weeks, months... there were times when you swore that [pc.heShe] was sneaking around you while you were sleeping up on the hill, trying to leave without greeting you. Of course, you never said anything about it, dutiful kid as you were... and now Mother's gone as well.

That's stupid... they'll be back, right? Only you remember waiting ten years, and then —

But in the end, that's why you needed to be independent. In the end, that's why you needed to grow up, and finally, hopefully soon enough, you'll be able to marry Hitoshi and be gone for good. And now it's been proven beyond any ability of yours to deny it that your best may not be enough...

You're not scared or anything. It's just exhausting to think of.

[You were left in charge while they were gone, and look at the mess you've made of this whole thing. Of course, you know what your parents will say — that they're glad that [kiyoko.numKits 2]everyone is alive and unharmed|you're still alive], but the den, the buildings, the fields... everything was either burned or stolen. That kind of shame... even if you're forgiven, that doesn't erase the stain in the least. Perhaps it even makes it worse...

The thought of Mother gone all the time fills you with a dark, sickening dread whether you like it or not. While it's true that Matron Komari is around to guide you in Mother's absence as her retainer, Mother herself has always been a presence in your life ever since you were a kit, until recently. And now look at what's happened...

It's just... exhausting to think of.

]

[Mother drifts in and out of your convalescence chambers when she can, although by virtue of her position she can never stay very long. You can understand that perfectly; after all, you share many of the same responsibilities, if yours are smaller in scope. [kinu.isInari]Still, that doesn't prevent a knot of resentment from twisting inside of you, no matter how much you realise how petulant you're being|You're always glad for her presence, no matter how brief; it's always been this way since you were a kit. In a way, it brings you relief in a way winterstem can't].

You don't remember very many of the words she says during your brief time together, not with everything you perceive filtered through the smoky, medicinal haze, but you're sure that she's no delusion of a fevered mind and are glad for it.

Everything just feels so exhausting.

]

In the times you're left alone to your thoughts, memories of [kiyoko.numKits 2 3 4

|Aya rabidly half-reverted, fighting for her life

|Aya rabidly half-reverted and Tatsumi tearing his scarf

|Aya rabidly half-reverted, Tatsumi tearing his scarf and Aya's skin weeping

|your home in flames

] surface from the depths of your consciousness, rising to the fore of your mind to torment you before sinking back again. You toss and turn in your futon, the ointments and medicated bandages needling and stinging you until winterstem and citrus claim you for the umpteenth time.

[Next]

<i>"We've finished the investigation, Great-Great-Grandmother,"</i> Nakano says as he strides into the chamber, helmet tucked under one arm. A flicker of disgust crosses his face

as winterstem smoke hits him in the face, but he quickly corrects that moment of weakness. Mai sets down her pipe and covers the censer, then throws a glance at [kinu.isInari|Granny|Matron] Komari off at a corner table, compounding yet another of the many poultices that've been applied to you over the past days.

<i>"You mean Azami finished the investigation while you seven ran around the countryside hunting down stragglers who knew nothing useful."</i>

<i>"We couldn't take that chance."</i>

[kinu.isInari|Granny|Matron] Komari sighs; it's one of those sighs that happens in all three of her official capacities as den matron, shrine mother and imperial governor. <i>"Go on, then. Out with it. I know you're just making the report verbally so that Kinu here can overhear it, otherwise it'd be in the form of a written missive on my desk. Tell us the things that she doesn't already know, then, and I'll catch up on the rest in my own time."</i>

Nakano winces, [kinu.isHime|far more strongly than you've come to expect from his stoic exterior,]and bows. <i>"By all appearances, the attackers were natives of this land. However, their bodies have undergone considerable transformation to something more... foreign, or at least, a people not native to this part of the world."</i>

<i>"They were by and large not professional combatants, but they were not untrained either, and judging by the methodical way they conducted their attack on High Lady Otomo's holdings there is some semblance of strategy there, even if it was not executed perfectly. A level of aptitude one might expect from conscripts, or a militia at best — but much better funded, equipped, and directed than expected."</i>

[kinu.isInari

 <i>"Wouldn't be surprised,"</i> you say, sitting up in your futon with a big yawn and stretching your limbs. Gods, are you stiff... <i>"The bastard who led them looked like he had plenty of money to burn; too bad it's harder for money to buy people who aren't idiots, even if it's not impossible. Did you catch him?"</i>

 <i>"Their ringleader was a man of considerable means, by the way he clothed himself in finery,"</i> you venture, sitting up and accepting the herbal brew Mai offers you. <i>"Did you manage to apprehend him?"</i>

]

<i>"It pains me to say that such is not the case, Lady Otomo. He... evaded us, although it was not without cost to him in terms of his people. Nevertheless, the man is still at large, and all that was taken from your home has not been recovered, either."</i>

[kinu.isInari|Granny|Matron] Komari looks a lot more troubled at this than she should, which is saying quite a bit considering that it was Mother's — and thus her liege's — home that was invaded. She pressed her thumbs to her temples, gestures for Mai to come over and finish compounding the poultice in her stead, and walks over to grab Nakano by the wrist.

<i>"Outside, grandson. There are private instructions that his divine lordship have entrusted me to pass along to you in case of certain... circumstances. This is one of them. Now, outside."</i>

Nakano looks a little surprised, but bows and follows the den matron out, the door sliding shut behind them. You turn your gaze to Mai, working away with mortar, pestle and cloth, and rub your eyes.

<i>"[kinu.isInari|How long was I out| Might I ask how long have I been here]?"</i>

<i>"Oh. Eh. Ain't longer than three or four days. Yer young an' bouncy, an' ya done bounced right back no problem. The wounds ya might carry... they ain't in yer body."</i>

<i>"I... [kinu.isInari
|I've never been afraid in my life, and even if I have, I'm not about to let it cripple me
|there is no point in lingering on it, once everything that can be done has been done
]."</i>

<i>"Ya say that, an' it's easy to say. But take it from someone who's done been in a bad place: it ain't as easy as ya might think."</i> Mai shakes her head. <i>"Now, layin' down too long ain't good for ya none either. How d'ya feel?"</i>

<i>"[kinu.isInari
|Stiff and achy."</i>

<i>"Go out an' work those joints, an' them pains should mellow out a lil'. Ya been in bed f'r this long, only reason ya wouldn't hurt none would be if'n ya were goin' numb
|A little dizzy."</i>

<i>"Ya been suckin' winterstem smoke f'r three straight days, I'd be surprised if'n ya weren't high as a kite at this point
|. Go out an' get some fresh air, an' I'll see ya back here in an hour."</i>

[Next]

<i>"[kinu.isInari
|...And that's about the long and short of it, Dad.
|...And that is the whole tale, Father.
]"</i>

For several moments, you look Kinu deep in the eye and wonder what's going on behind that carefully guarded gaze of hers, what it took her to tell you all this. [kinu.isInari
|For someone as fiercely brave and self-determined as your daughter to admit fear, even if it was not for herself, but for others — that's something to be said for her sense of self here

[For someone who prides herself on her duties and responsibilities like your daughter to admit failure and detail exactly her role in that failure and how it came about, especially when it came to impact others than herself

]. Your daughter slowly bows her head as you eye her, ears folding flat against head, and then in that moment everything you'd noticed in the den since coming to visit today makes sense, each and every one of the slight differences. Of course everything looks newer because it had to be rebuilt. [Of course all the other kits still look a little harrowed.]And of course, your firstborn daughter carries herself a little differently now. Who wouldn't?

<i>"[kinu.isInari

|You're not upset with me, are you, Dad?

|You are not ashamed of me, are you, Father?

]"</i>

Of course you aren't. How could you be? Kinu squirms a little as you reach over and hug her, [kinu.isInari

|clearly unused to such intimate contact on a regular basis

|instinctively shrinking away from what would under normal circumstances be a breach of propriety

], but quickly relents and presses herself into your embrace.

Because of all of Kinu's responsibilities and proclivities, it's sometimes hard to remember that your firstborn fox-daughter is only eighteen to nineteen summers of age. And yet that still is the case... others would have run away and saved themselves, but she didn't. If anything, <i>you're</i> the one who should be ashamed — first you missed her growing up, and now you weren't there to save her in her time of need.

[kinu.isInari

|Kinu sighs a little and pulls away from you, her eyes still downcast. <i>"I know it's hard on you, Dad. It's hard on me as well. But as much as you might want to, you can't take care of me forever, and I don't want to be taken care of forever anyway. What happened that night was but a reminder of how little I truly am equipped to deal with the realities of the world. To forever hide under your protection would just mean none of us would ever move forward."</i>

Somehow, you fully expected that she would say that.

<i>"Don't feel guilty for not being here for me, Dad."</i> Kinu gives you a thin and plainly forced smile. <i>"Does it hurt sometimes? Of course it does. But life isn't about avoiding pain — I wouldn't be where I am, who I am, without it as well. I just wish... no one else had gotten dragged into that entire mess."</i>

|Kinu bites her lip and turns her gaze away from you. <i>"Please do not grieve overlong regarding such matters, Father. While I understand your remorse... when you hurt, I hurt, too. For our own sakes, let us not dwell on what is impossible to change, and move onto what is. For all that was stolen and destroyed that night, we all still have our lives and each other."</i>

Somehow, you fully expected your daughter dearest would say that.

<i>"Look, how quickly we have rebuilt the essentials of what was taken. Please, Father... do not fret overmuch about me. Please. I have been repeatedly assured that given the circumstances that I faced, there are few who could have done much better in defense of my home. I do not wish for you to worry, please."</i>

]

There's a quiet desperation in Kinu's words, one that perhaps even she herself doesn't pick up on. It's not that your fox-daughter doesn't believe what she's saying, but quite the opposite — that she believes it all far too much, and too intensely.

... It's probably not the time to pry into it now, but there is little doubt that the last vestiges of childhood innocence have been burned away from your daughter by the attempt on her life. And though how Kinu reacts to its loss is up to her to determine, its passing is a sign of... you can't quite put it into words, really. Perhaps it is selfish in a way, to want to keep your daughter stunted like that just to be able to enjoy that naive charm just a little longer, but emotions rarely make sense, do they?

You smile and give Kinu a rub on the back, trying your best to be warm and affirming. Well, however she wants you to take this, there is something you can do for her.

<i>"That is?"</i>

If you ever see that Raphael bastard while out there in the wild, you'll gut him in the most horrible and excruciatingly painful way possible for daring to treat your daughter like that. She's no demoness, has never acted like what they're supposed to, and anyone who claims as much while acting in the way he did is a self-serving bastard of the highest degree. And that's getting in before what's going to happen to someone who so much as harms a single strand of fur on any of your children's tails.

Kinu's thin smile widens. *<i>"[kinu.isInari|Dad|Father]..."</i>*

You'd move the world for her[kiyoko.numKits 2 3|and her sister|and her siblings], make no mistake about that. So yes, if you ever do come across this man, he's in for a world of pain.

<i>"[kinu.isInari

*|Okay, okay, you've made your point, Dad; I love you, too."</i> Kinu perks up a little, and she swings herself to her feet. *<i>"I kind of feel better after all this, knowing that you're not just dropping everything to avenge me, Dad. Thanks for not babying me.</i>**

<i>"Well, there's still work to be done today, and the day isn't getting any longer. I'll see you later, okay?"</i>

With that, your daughter starts pacing down the path back to the fields, very pointedly not looking back, eyes forward, feet straight. You can only smile at the sight — it's so typical of strong-headed Kinu to act that way, even after such a harrowing experience. If that were to be torn from her... no, there's no point thinking about it. Even after all this, she's truly unafraid, and that's what makes her your beloved fox-daughter.

|I will not deny that it is quite flattering to have a parent who is so devoted to your defense; I can only hope that I will feel the same way about my own future kits."</i>
Kinu perks up a little, and she swings herself to her feet. <i>"And knowing that not just you, but everyone else, was so motivated to come to my aid when I needed it most — it only makes me feel like I ought to repay them all the more. This kind of trust and dedication, it is not something a man like that Raphael wretch could ever conceive of. The way he treated his underlings, continually pretending to be what he was not and forever looking over his shoulder — I am truly blessed.</i>

<i>"But such blessings do not divest me of my duties, and I must depart now. The day is not getting any longer — if you will excuse me, please."</i>

With that, your daughter rises from her seat and excuses herself, departing from the room. You're left to finish the cooling tea and wonder at her sudden departure — that, and wonder about the future and safety of your fox-family.

]

//end encounter.

Bad End?

//Happens if you lose to any of the Taothian enemy groups during the event.

//Prince of Persia time, basically.

You must have gotten unlucky — no, not unlucky, *careless*. Only fools and lazy layabouts blame fortune for their failures, after all. Nevertheless, you see the point of the invader's sharp blade too late, too late, and pain blossoms in your side as the point slips through your ribs. The last thing you remember is the horrified realisation that your lungs are punctured and filling with blood...

[Next]

*<i>"[kinu.isInari
|...And then I died. The end
|...And then I unfortunately perished, bringing this tale to its conclusion
]."</i>*

Wait a moment there. If she died there, how are you talking to her right now? You're pretty sure you're not talking to a vengeful spirit at the moment; you'd probably notice something like that.

*<i>"[kinu.isInari
|Ah. Smart of you to point that out, Dad."</i> Kinu sticks her tongue out at you, but nevertheless looks sheepish as her expression turns serious. *<i>"I must've made a mistake in the telling of the tale somewhere. My head goes all fuzzy when I try to remember some of the details, you see..."</i>**

Like not dying at any point in the experience.

<i>"Yeah. I did get a bit carried away in the telling, too..."</i>

What she needs to do is sort out her thoughts and recollections, and then get them all in line before trying again at telling the tale. You have no doubt that the harrowing experience rattled her somewhat.

*<i>"Hey, Dad! I wasn't *<i>that</i> afraid, I just got confused for a bit back there. Why don't you ask me tomorrow; I should have my head sorted out by then."</i>**

You laugh and clap Kinu on the back. You'll see her tomorrow, then.

<i>"Yeah. There's still work to be done, and it's not doing itself. Catch me tomorrow, okay?"</i>

With that, your daughter swings herself off the wall and starts pacing down the path back to the fields, her tails swaying behind her. Wonder if she's really as unperturbed by the whole experience as she's trying to present herself as being... but she wouldn't be Kinu if she didn't put on a strong front. All right, you'll ask again tomorrow.]But have you ever seen an angry kitsune spirit before, Father? The result of one neither having one's name on the clan records or family altar, nor dying without having the rites performed? How would you know I am not one if you have not experienced one for yourself?"</i>

Well... you know your beloved daughter, and if she were to become a restless spirit she'd be very, very different from how she's acting now.

<i>"I suppose there is that. It would be an unfortunate day if I felt the need to haunt you after my untimely death, Father."</i> Kinu gives you a sad little smile, then her expression grows serious. <i>"But yes, I must have made a mistake somewhere in that chain of events. That is most improper of me, who needs good and accurate recall as a matter of course."</i>

What she needs to do is sort out her thoughts and recollections, and then get them all in line before trying again at telling the tale. You have no doubt that the harrowing experience rattled her somewhat.

<i>"Still, it is not an excuse. But I shall take your advice and sort out my thoughts and recollections before endeavouring to present them in a coherent and concise fashion."</i>

You'll see her tomorrow, then.

<i>"Indeed. What has happened to me does not divest me of my duties, and I must depart now. The day is not getting any longer — if you will excuse me, please."</i>

With that, your daughter rises from her seat and excuses herself, departing from the room. You're left to finish the cooling tea, and shake your head at the enigma that Kinu has become as a young woman — well, you'll be back tomorrow, then...

]

//end encounter.

Aftermath

Loot Received

//Triggers when next talking to Kinu after having completed the event.

As you approach Kinu, your fox-daughter [kinu.isInari|brightens up and comes up to you in a brisk jog. You catch her in a hug, taking the chance to pat her on the back and ruffle her hair|graces you with a small smile and gives you a genial half-bow, a gesture you feel compelled to return]; she certainly is in a good mood today.

And that's good. For all that's happened to her given what she told you on your last meeting, it's good to see her smiling again; [kinu.isInari

|you know your fox-daughter well enough to understand it's nigh-impossible for her to wear an emotion on her sleeve that she doesn't truly feel. The smile on her face may not be absolutely beaming, but it is genuinely warm, and her ears and the rest of her body language follow suit.

<i>"Ah, Dad!"</i> Kinu squirms out of your embrace and clears her throat. <i>"Okay, that's enough, sheesh. There's something I've got to give you."</i>

|while you know that it's one of her informal tasks to put on a pleasant face so the people around her don't worry, there's still something to be said for the clothes making the man — or the fox, in her case. Kinu's expression betrays her true emotions less and less these days, but you've never known her to intentionally deceive you.

Aah, look at you. Doubting your daughter like that...

<i>"A fortuitous arrival, Father. I was just thinking of you — there is something that I must pass along to you. I was concerned that there might not be another opportunity to do so within a reasonable timeframe."</i>

]

Oh? A gift?

<i>"[kinu.isInari|Well, kind of sort of|Not as such. To say it is a gift would imply mindful intent behind the giving, and it is not as much; rather, I am passing along something from the Den Matron to you]."</i>

Hmm...

<i>"[kinu.isInari

|Granny Komari and her pet madman artificer just finished dealing with most of the evidence we collected from the attack on our home, Dad. There're a bunch of bits

and bobs that the invaders left during their retreat that can be recycled, but they also left this that I think might be useful to you out there. I don't really care about these kinds of magic, but even I can tell that it's more valuable as-is than broken down for components

[The den matron and honourable artificer have finished analysing the evidence gathered from the attack on our home, Father. Most of it can be dumped, repurposed or broken down, but there are a few objects that are more valuable as-is, such as this one. It may be helpful to you on your adventures[pc.ra kitsune] in his divine lordship's service]

].

With that said, your fox-daughter reaches into her clothes and draws out a silver rod, capped at both ends with rubies but otherwise plain in appearance. It's perhaps as long as your forearm, retracts into itself to about half its length with a pin to either hold it extended or collapsed, and as thick as a finger.[pc.isMage] You instinctively recognise this as a spell focus after a fashion and give it a quick look-over; while you don't detect anything lingering on it that might be harmful, you're not entirely sure about the wisdom of repurposing such tools.] Kinu notices your hesitation, and gives you a nod.

[kinu.isInari

|<i>"Don't worry, Dad, it's safe. If Granny Komari's pet madman says there won't be a problem, it'll be fine."</i>

|<i>"Its origin should not be a concern, Father. The honourable Fukuisumi may have his eccentricities, but if he has given the go-ahead then I have confidence that it is safe to use."</i>

]

What's this, anyway?

<i>"[kinu.isInari

|Granny says it's what was used to jam shut the torii gate from our side. That Raphael bastard certainly wasn't any kind of magician, but someone must've supplied him with this and it kept the spell of whatever primed until he was ready to use it. Now that it's expended, all that's left is a focus, and a pretty decent one at that

You see.

<i>"Hey, if you don't want it, I'll be passing it along to Miko and Mai. [kiyoko.numKits
4

|Since Asagiri's going to be joining them soon, it might as well go towards her education if you're not going to be using it out in the field, Dad

|They've expressed interest in wanting another magical doodad for...
whatever shenanigans they get up to when no one's looking

]. You want it or not?"</i>

[The matron has determined that this was what used to disable the torii gate from our side, preventing speedy response to the attack. The invaders' leader was no magician, but someone supplied him with this and the spell contained within, primed and ready to be unleashed at a moment's notice. Now that the magic has been expended, it has reverted to being a simple focus."</i>

Ah.

<i>"If you decline, Father, there are other less pressing uses I could put this to, of course; Mikoto and Miyuki have expressed interest in acquiring it for themselves.

[kiyoko.numKits 4

|Since Asagiri is going to be joining them soon enough, they will probably reserve such for her extended education

|I have little doubt they will find some way to get into trouble with it, inadvertently or otherwise, but we have all come to expect as much from those two

]. Now then, would you like to requisition this for yourself, Father?

]

[Yes][No]

[Yes]

//Sure, why not.

Yeah, you'll take it. If you actually managed to use this against that bastard Raphael and his flunkies, wouldn't that be a pretty ironic note — defeated by their own weapons. And if not... well, it might still come in handy. Adventuring is partly about keeping one's options open, and having more options in reserve can never hurt.

[kinu.isInari

|<i>"Well, here you go, Dad. Hope it can be of some use to you.[silly] Of course, what I know you're going to do is to take one look at this stuff's stats and probably either hawk it or sell it to the nearest vendor first chance you get, but you can't itemise gear such that it's good for everyone, can you? At least this game doesn't give you the option to disenchant it in front of me, that would just make me mad. Psh.]"</i>

|<i>"If that is your desire, Father. Here, may it serve you well over the course of your tasks.[silly] Of course, you would not be the kind to take one look at the statistics this has and either sell it to the nearest merchant or leave it to collect dust in storage, would you? Ah, we know the answer to that question — but then, one cannot itemise equipment such that it is desirable to everyone, such is the nature of providing options to players. Well, at least there is not the option of having you disenchant the item in front of me after I just handed you your quest reward. That would just make me quite unhappy, I assure you.]"</i>

]

Kinu hands you the rod, and you tuck away the rod with your other possessions. It's cool to the touch and quite solid despite being light and compact; must be the tubular design.

//Add 1x Control Rod. Off-hand wizard-y item.

//A retractable silver rod with a ruby affixed to either end, used as a spell focus. Whatever magic it had originally stored has long since been discharged, leaving it an empty but nevertheless useful tool.

[kinu.isInari

|<i>"Right, that's that done and over with. Now then, Dad, what did you need me for today?"</i>

|<i>"And that is settled. With that, Father, can I assist you in any way today?"</i>

]

//display Kinu main menu.

[No]

//If it can be of better use elsewhere, you'll pass on it.

<i>"[kinu.isInari

|Huh, you don't want it, Dad?"</i>

You think you're well-equipped enough for your adventures that you don't need the cast-offs of some bastard who tried to humiliate and murder your daughter.

<i>"Ah, okay. Yeah, when you put it that way I can see where you're coming from. I wouldn't want to keep it around if I were to look at it that way, either."</i> Kinu puts the rod back into the folds of her work clothes. <i>"I'll hand this over to Mai when I drop by the shrine this evening, then. [kiyoko.numKits 4

|I'm not exactly sure what part of Asagiri's upcoming education as a shrine maiden would find this useful, but then again what do I know? I'm just there to make offerings

|I'm sure they'll be getting up to all kinds of no good with this, and to be frank I'm kind of curious as to what trouble they'll be making

]."</i>

|If that is your wish, Father."</i>

You think you're well-equipped enough for your adventures that you don't need the cast-offs of some bastard who tried to humiliate and murder your daughter.

<i>"That is... right. When you put it that way, Father, I suppose just looking at the thing overlong with that thought in mind does indeed provoke a sense of revulsion. I would not want it near me for any length of time, let alone trust it to carry me in a time of need."</i> Kinu looks pensive for a moment, and then tucks the rod back into the

folds of her finery. *<i>"Please, Father, accept my apologies for so thoughtlessly offering such to you."*

Oh, she doesn't have to apologise. You know that your darling daughter only meant well.

<i>"Even so." Kinu stiffens. *<i>"I suppose I will have this over to Mai when I make my absolutions this evening, then. [kiyoko.numKits 4*

|While I am not entirely sure how this will be helpful in Asagiri's incipient education and training as a shrine maiden, I have no reason to distrust the sisters

|Lacking the aversiveness you and I have to this rod, certainly the sisters will be better able to put it to good use than you or I will

]."

]

Agreed. While the rod may appear innocuous, you don't want it around you, and don't have need for it.

[kinu.isInari

|<i>"Right, that's that done and over with. Now then, Dad, what did you need me for today?"

|<i>"And with that, the matter is settled. Now, Father, can I assist you in any way today?"

]

//end encounter.

Den Situation Talk Topic Updates

//Various kitsune NPCs have a [Situation] topic to talk about the progress of this questline, these all need to be updated.

Kiyoko

<i>"[rand

|Twice this place has come under hostile scrutiny, and twice has it suffered losses," your fox-wife says with a sigh. *<i>"But at least this time around, nothing that was irreplaceable was lost. We all still have each other, beloved, and that is the most important thing of all. What was destroyed can be rebuilt, what was stolen can be replaced, but a life taken cannot ever be given back. [kinu.isInari*

|Our daughter and I may have some disagreements from time to time, vehement ones, perhaps... but at the end of the day, she is still my flesh and blood and I do not wish for her to perish, even if she thinks as much of me |I confess, if I were to lose her[kiyoko.numKits 2| or any of our children], I am not entirely sure what I would do. I fully believe our daughter is the kind of

prodigy who only surfaces once every few generations, and if her life were to be snuffed out by such cruel happenstance the tragedy would be immense
]."

That's one silver lining, yes; that Kinu and her sister and her siblings are safe... but it's undeniable that she has been wounded, and not necessarily physically. For that, you aren't ever going to forgive her attackers.

Kiyoko gives you a weak smile. "I was not asking you to, beloved. Indeed, they must be taught a lesson for daring to harm our daughter... a terrible one at that." Our firstborn daughter has been very quiet of late," Kiyoko says, her gaze shifting this way and that as she looks a little troubled. [Kinu is]

[Well, more than usual. She was never quite the one for idle conversation, but after the attempt on her life, she has become outright morose. She spends all her spare time about that big block of a farmer boy these days, practically clinging off him like moss on a tree

[Well, for who she is — Kinu has always been so gregarious, and now she is reduced to not much more than making social pleasantries in order not to be impolite. No one says anything, but I think everyone understands that she's not her usual self, and they politely give her some space; she spends all her spare time about Komari's great-great-grandson, the military provost

]."

That's not hard to figure out — she probably feels a lot more secure about him than anywhere else right now. It must be hard with the memory fresh in mind, not being able to feel safe in your own home, not being able to rest easy at night. But as the saying goes, time heals all wounds, and hopefully it holds true for Kinu.

"She has been throwing herself into her work," Kiyoko replies. "Which is not an incorrect thing to do — there is value in the mind-clearing nature of simple, repetitive tasks, which [Kinu is] low-skilled labour such as what she favours certainly falls under [Komari has been kind enough to dole out to her on a daily basis]. It is our way, and certainly better than lying idle and allowing her mind to wander and dwell upon ugly thoughts and memories."

Mm...

[Kiyoko is]

|

"There is another matter, too. Asagiri has asked for my permission to study to be a shrine maiden under Miko and Mai; this request has been backed up by Komari herself. It would appear that after [Kiyoko is] showing considerable bravery in pulling her siblings out of the fire [having had such a harrowing experience], our little white-furred daughter has experienced a spiritual awakening. If she is to have a religious education, I can think of no better teacher than Komari, be it in the colonies or otherwise."

Just... just how bad are Asagiri's burns? Everyone you've asked has danced around the subject. You know that they aren't life-threatening, but...

"They are not serious; she was more frightened than actually wounded. In a sense, that is better — she was able to act despite her fear. That is to be lauded."

Phew.

*"Strictly speaking, Mikoto and Miyuki do not **need** another pair of hands around the shrine, but it would be welcome. That, and the prestige and social regard that comes with it is not inconsiderable, especially in a backwater like the colonies. The white-furred shrine maiden or priestess is the quintessential Kerosite symbol, as it were... if they think of Kinu as some kind of princess, then Asagiri as a shrine maiden... it will give people hope, and that is what they need."*

You... you see. While you don't know the full ramifications of all of this owing to cultural differences, you trust your fox-wife as the mother of your kits to do what is best for them. That's about the best you can hope for.

"Asagiri has become... inflamed. Passionate. She may have been largely unharmed in the physical sense, but something has irrevocably changed in our daughter as a result of the experience. In all of our children." Kiyoko sighs and looks away. *"They grow up so fast. Was it but the blink of an eye ago that I was holding Kinu as a newborn kit in my arms?"*

...

"I'm sorry. But no, you have no objections with our daughter pursuing this path in life?"

Well, it sounds like everything was already decided before you even came along — that, and you wouldn't know enough to bring up a reasonable and coherent objection if you had one. Sure if that's what your wispy little daughter has become, then that's what she'll be.

]

[When I first chose to settle in this place more than two centuries ago, I did so because it was defensible. The crater walls created a natural bulwark against the outside world, and the entrance hidden by the waterfall grotto and pool made for a secure home — or so I thought, anyway. Fresh water and even a thermal vent welling up from underground, fertile soil and safety." Kiyoko sighs, and a faraway look enters her eyes. *"And now what has happened to me almost happened to my daughter. Were I more superstitious, I would consider this place cursed."*

She can always retreat to Komari's den if worst comes to worst; you know her retainer would be more than happy to receive her and [kiyoko.numKits 1]Kinu[your children].

<i>"[kiyoko.numKits 8

[The arcology may look impressively large from the outside, but much of the space within the living tree is meant for purposes other than living quarters. When one needs to maintain the potential to be completely self-contained at a moment's notice, room that is not being utilised in some fashion is hard to come by. Furthermore, even the poor in the Old Country are expected to live with some measure of dignity, no matter how destitute. Being packed together like sardines on a skewer is no way to live, even in a frontier prospecting camp, and the seat of the colonial governor is anything but. People must have space and room, and with a family as large as ours imposing on her is simply out of the question.</i>

<i>"Furthermore, h

[No. H

]is divine lordship was kind enough to restore part of the den for me, and tasked me and my issue with finishing the task for him. Abandoning a task directly issued by divinity is out of the question. I will not give up; I will complete the task I started more than two centuries ago and either found a home here or die trying. I cannot just keep on living off my retainer indefinitely."</i>

[It is a strange feeling, knowing that your children have been attacked, and yet almost successfully having escaped from the raid on their own. Given such overwhelming odds, one might have expected them to certainly perish, as opposed to hold out for long enough for help to arrive. I feel sad that they have had to grow up so fast — seeing [kiyoko.numKits 2 3 4]Kinu and Aya[Kinu, Aya and Tatsumi]Kinu, Aya, Tatsumi and Asagiri[Kinu] changed so profoundly makes the heart ache. Yet there is a sense of pride in understanding their accomplishments and willingness to survive despite the odds. Ah, how it makes the heart ache."</i>

Oh, you understand <i>exactly</i> how she feels. It's heartwarming to know that the young have come into their own and proven themselves against real adversity, yet there's the desire to shield them from that adversity just a little longer, let them enjoy their childhood for just a bit more.

Kiyoko gives you a small smile, a brief moment of levity in all this. <i>"Being a parent is hard. From start, to middle, to end — never a moment's rest. [kinu.isInari

[Well, at least our daughter is putting that independence she so prides herself on to good use, isn't she?

[Well, at least we now know our daughter is hiding some good steel beneath that fine silken appearance, isn't she?

]"</i>

You chuckle at that.

|When I first settled this place, I thought the crater walls would be sufficient natural deterrent and defense to dissuade anyone or anything from making forays into my newly-founded den. That has proven to be insufficient to the determined... I have considered additional defenses, but without enough skilled hands to man them they would be not much better than what is already there. One can only imagine how it must be for the isolated homesteads and prospectors out there in the wilderness; the frontier is a wild, lawless and dangerous place, after all."

You've noticed that, yes. Once you get past the gates of Hawkethorne, the Marches are a free-for-all, and moreso after Kasyrra's arrival. Komari herself is understaffed and underequipped when it comes to security, and she's the best the foxen have around... no, to be honest, her people may be more skilled and disciplined than the Hawekthorne militia, less than that of an established power like the Winter City.

<i>"It is, like so many other problems, a multi-generational one. Parents must work tirelessly, knowing that they will never live to see the fruits of their efforts; their labours are passed on to their children, who must understand the importance of the task and be ready to receive it without complaint."

]

Komari

<i>"[rand

|I know this shouldn't need to be said, but do talk to your daughter some more whenever you can. [kinu.isInari

|While she prefers to be alone most of the time, that doesn't mean that she doesn't want to reach out, or that you wouldn't be welcome. Kinu may be quite stubborn, but even rocks can change their shape over time if you keep on chipping away quietly at them.

|She may keep on a pleasant face so much of the time, but that is partially because the people are so sensitive to the moods of their beloved princess. She knows that if she allows herself to be upset, they will be too; it is part and parcel of her job. Yet at the same time, the brave face does not necessarily mean that she is truly well. She is quite adept at hiding her emotions, after all.

]"</i>

Yeah, you will, especially in the wake of all that has happened.

<i>"You can tell that it troubles her — not just the errors she made in the heat of the moment, the sting of failure from being defeated by the invaders, and the loss of much of what has been built since the den was resettled. What she needs, perhaps, is someone who is not from her root culture to speak with her, someone who does not necessarily have the same notions of failure and shame that we do and she feels she can open up to without necessarily being judged for her failure. She is rather too hard on herself..."</i>

Such is the fate of the overachieving daughter who faces her first true failure that she cannot explain or rationalise away to herself.

Komari closes her eyes and leans back in her seat. *"Harsh, but accurate. Such is her fate."*

"While I know much of the talk regarding the attempt on your family's life has been centered about your daughter, [pc.ra kitsune|your Eminence,]I would caution you to be careful as well. By her own recounting of the events, your firstborn daughter [kiyoko.numKits 2 3|and her sister |and other children]were attacked because those rogues neither dared get to you or the High Lady Otomo directly; they deliberately chose a moment when the both of you would not be at home to strike. Now that they have met with partial success, they will grow more bold and desperate alike."

Does she mean that these people, whoever they are, may be planning an attempt on you or Kiyoko next?

"I cannot say for sure; there is too much conjecture to be certain, and probably some misdirection in the mix. We ourselves have noted some disappearances in the outlying camps on the border in the last few months, but we always thought... well, some people come to the colonies to vanish."

Vanish?

"To hide, to let themselves loose, and sometimes, to just give up and die far away from home where their passing will not bring further shame to their clan name. It has been this way for years; some who are sentenced to banishment to the colonies simply wander out into the wilderness and don't return, or meet unfortunate ends. This land is a cold, hard mistress. But now... we may have a more sinister explanation for the recent spate of disappearances."

She doesn't say...

*"I urge you once more, [pc.ra kitsune
|your Eminence, please be careful. You have declared where your allegiances
lie in the deepest and most profound fashion possible
|please be careful. You have lain with and sired children by what they deem a
demoness
]; no doubt these people regard you as a traitor to your own kin. Beyond the dens'
immediate environs, I cannot guarantee your safety."*

If you were looking to be safe, you wouldn't be on this quest in the first place, you wouldn't be going on adventures.

<i>"That is the case, yes, but still... please come home safely to your daughter[pc.ra kitsune], your Eminence]. That is all I ask."</i>

|<i>"Be careful out there. These people who attacked your daughter may have been ruffians led by a pompous rogue, but someone of considerable power is backing them."</i>

She's sure?

<i>"I am absolutely sure[pc.ra kitsune], your Eminence]. Torii gates are based upon the technologies which inform the operation of the waystone idols of Old Belhar, and those are still functional despite literal centuries of being exposed to the elements in the harshest of climates. To deliberately override the protocols of one of our gates and jam its function to its owners requires considerable magical knowledge to begin with; to be able to compress such a spell into a focus and have it activated by someone who by all appearances was untrained says even more.</i>

<i>"The enemy we are facing here is dangerous and powerful. Please do not underestimate it, whatever it may happen to be. Ruffians and rogues like those who attacked your daughter are plentiful and cheap; a mastermind is not."</i>

|<i>"Ah... in that moment when I received the news that the Young Lady Otomo's residence was under attack, I was truly brought back years..."</i>

It must have been hard on her to realise that the same thing was happening again, more than two centuries later.

<i>"By rights, the High Lady Otomo is my liege. And should she pass before his divine lordship sees fit to end my penance, the Young Lady Otomo will be my liege in her stead. To allow your daughter to perish... when it happened to her mother, I was cursed; should it happen to her, I do not know if his divine lordship would bear another failure on my part. Once already I have failed the Otomo clan in so grievous a manner, and once it will remain."</i>

To hear Kinu tell it, she came at them with everything she had.

<i>"I... did not want to take chances. The last time, it was just the ten of us and the harpies against the wraiths' flesh-puppets and worse. At least now all we faced were no more than forty ruffians."</i>

Flesh-puppets, huh. Kinu mentioned their bodies were changed, had begun to change, were changing... the invaders were not quite wholly flesh and blood, either.

<i>"The autopsy results of the two corpses we retrieved are both... interesting and disturbing. More disturbing than Kazuo himself, which is a small feat in and of itself. Still... circumstances were different this time. Allow me to express my resolve that no further harm will come to the Otomo holdings in the colonies."</i>

Is that all right? You know her people are terribly stretched as-is. If she laxes security on her own people...

<i>"If we cannot even protect the High Lady Otomo, her family, and her holdings, what good are we?"</i>

|<i>"After examining the silver rod used to jam the torii gate, we've managed to discover a heretofore undiscovered exploit in the enchantment architecture that would have allowed someone else to override the security protocols. This is quite important as a lot of movement of people and goods throughout the empire now happens by means of the gates; this would not only have allowed whoever it was to prevent use, but also redirect the destination completely. Kazuo and I have sent our findings back across the ocean with utmost haste, this is quite the important concern.</i>

<i>"But with this problem fixed, at least if they make another attempt on your daughter's life they won't be able to prevent us from using the gate the same way that they did the last time. A small mercy that something good has come out of all this."</i>

]

Kohaku

//Update her "events" random talk with this new set of responses.

[rand

|<i>"It is quite terrible what has happened to Kinu — I mean, the Young Lady Otomo,"</i> Kohaku begins. <i>"[kinu.isInari

|While she is the strong, silent type as far as such things apply to girls, I know for a fact that everyone in the fields respects the work she puts in alongside them, and the expertise she does it with, nojya. That there is a young woman who knows what she's doing and isn't above getting her hands dirty for a good cause, and people in the colonies appreciate that

|She is so beautiful, and so courteous to everyone according to their station; everyone cannot help but like her at this point for the simple reason that she can make everyone feel wanted and in their place

]. The mere thought of the Young Lady Otomo coming to harm has a lot of people deeply upset and angry, and there's the occasional talk of reprisal. I really hope it doesn't come to that, nojya."</i>

You're perfectly fine with reprisals... so long as they're directed at the right people; you have half a mind to go and hunt them down yourself. You don't want the foxen just striking out at anyone willy-nilly; it goes without saying that such would be bad.

<i>"Such things can quickly escalate out of hand, nojya. I hope everyone's emotions are constrained by the fact that we do not have the numbers for any kind of serious

outward intervention, and things can pass until collar and more rational heads can prevail. I don't do the kind of business that profits from violence, nojya..."</i>
<i>"The matron has ordered me to open the storehouse to both high and young lady Otomos, nojya. Anything that they may desire to be used in the reconstruction efforts is to be given to them without question."</i>

That's really kind of them, and you're really grateful for all the support that's being given to your family in their time of need. Rebuilding and replacing what was lost in the raid would certainly be a lot slower if they had to source their material themselves, too.[kiyoko.numKits 4] And that's not to mention all the labour that's being borrowed in the bargain...

<i>"Just between you and me, [pc.ra kitsune|your Eminence,]the matron is really determined to see her liege succeed. She considers it part of her penance, you see... in any case, I've been kept busy sourcing things I don't usually have reason to acquire very much of, nojya."</i>

You hope it hasn't been too much trouble...

<i>"Oh, no no no, none at all[pc.ra kitsune|, your Eminence]! Perish the thought, I am glad I am able to help, nojya! It's good to see everyone rallying around the young lady Otomo — in a sense, she has truly become the jewel of the colonies.

[kinu.isInari

|Hardworking and unafraid to get her hands dirty when need be — she really speaks a lot more to the people here than the perfumed princesses across the ocean in the capital, living lives of luxury! Not just that, but she can make herself look good while doing it, nojya! I wish I could work as hard as Kinu without getting myself dirty all over... how does she do it?

|Just hearing her speak is enough to make one enamoured of her voice... ah, it's so captivating. If I were a more suspicious girl, I'd have wondered if she was using magic to affect our minds... no, shame on me for daring to speak ill of her like that, nojya!

]"</i>

You're just really, really glad that Kinu is in such good hands while you're away, that so many people are willing to help, and as you've seen, fight and possibly die for her. It's a good thing that she's across the ocean and stuck in the colonies, lest she make waves in the Old Country..."</i>

<i>"The high lady Otomo did abdicate for a reason, nojya... one of them being marking her line as truly being one of us here."</i>

<i>"Everyone has been showering the young lady Otomo [kiyoko.numKits 2 3]and her sister [and her siblings]with gifts whenever they show up here, nojya. No one wants to see [kiyoko.numKits 2|them|her] unhappy... I myself always take a little more time to cook up some extra taiyaki when I prepare any for myself. Kinu really

loves my taiyaki; the honey glaze coupled with the red bean filling is to die for.

[kinu.isInari

|She doesn't say anything, but she always breaks from her fieldwork

|She's always so busy with the many tasks the matron's setting her these
days

]to come and try it when I drop by with some, nojya. Everyone wants to see her
happy, and I'm counted amongst those people, of course."</i>

Wow...

<i>"There's nothing strange about it, nojya; it's but the first divine law of equivalent
exchange. Kinu would do, and has done the same for any of us if we were in the
same straits as her — [kinu.isInari|she wouldn't be obvious about it and would
probably even hide it was the fact that it was her who helped out or gave a gift if
possible, but we'd all know it was her —]that's just the way things work. I've been to
many places, visited many peoples, and while I of course don't have the full picture I
still think that this aspect of how we do things is better than anywhere else I've been.
People just want to help each other out and the young lady Otomo happens to be the
latest recipient, nojya. That's all."</i>

Still, you must thank her and everyone else for watching out for your daughter when
you're out on the road. Having to be away from your fox-family for long periods of
time can be a drag, but you'll be able to rest a lot better knowing that Kinu has so
many people watching out for her welfare in your absence.

<i>"Consider it reciprocity for all the work she has put in here without expecting
compensation or reward, nojya. Kinu is here at noon every day [kinu.isInari

|working the fields with everyone else

|in the matron's office

], rain or shine, and doesn't go home before stopping at the shrine in the evening
when Mai arrives. That's some dedication, and people notice — you'd think there'd
be jealous people and there probably are, but they're probably too ashamed to do
anything about it, ahahaha. Princesses are divine and untouchable as a matter of
course, and Kinu is ours. Anyone who raised a hand against the colonial
princess would be in for a terrible time.</i>

<i>"So don't worry about any more nasty raiders coming to harass your daughter,
[pc.ra kitsune|your [pc.mf|lord|lady]ship.[okay?] Now that we know they're coming
and they won't be able to jam the gate in the same way again, we'll be able to rush
over at the first sign of trouble, nojya."</i>

Thanks again. You really mean it.

Kohaku beams. <i>"It's really good to have friends, [pc.ra kitsune|your
[pc.mf|lord|lady]ship,]so make a lot, okay? It's hard to go through life alone even if
you have so many other comforts."</i>

[Kohaku looks a little furtive as she considers your question, making sure none of her underlings are in earshot before speaking. *"There's been a bit of tension in the den, nojya. People are very unhappy that an attempt was made on [kiyoko.numKits 2 3*

*[the lives of the young lady Otomo and her sister
[the lives of the young lady Otomo and her siblings
[the life of the young lady Otomo*

] — I would even go to say a few are outright enraged at what happened to [kiyoko.numKits 2|them|her]. Princesses — *<i>hime</i>* are divine and untouchable, and even though the High Lady Otomo has abdicated, that changes nothing in the nature of her bloodline. On a more practical level, this may be our only chance for the colonies to gain respectability, and be seen as just another province instead of a dumping ground for criminals and other unsavoury characters."*</i>*

That doesn't sound good. You're Kinu's sire and have the most reason to be furious over what happened to her[kiyoko.numKits 2| and the rest of your family], but you know where to direct your anger. Hopefully it doesn't blow up to the point of demanding reprisals blindly, that would be bad. Really bad.

<i>"The people of this land are mostly decent and ordinary like everyone else, nojya. A bit backward, but that's only to be expected what happened here two centuries ago. Someone is gathering followers with fear and inspiring them to lash out at us. It is sure that the natives have some reason to fear us kitsune, but I would like to disbelieve that we are horrible demons just yet."</i>

The most compelling deceptions are usually centered about a grain of truth, yes. It's what makes them so damning.

<i>"I'm doing what I can to dispel misconceptions when I make a caravan and head out, but there is only so much I can do, nojya. The fact still remains that if I were to be discovered for what I am under my disguise, my end would not be a pleasant one. You can walk freely amongst the native peoples of this land[pc.ra kitsune|, your Eminence] — I am not sure what exactly someone like you could do to help the situation, but if the opportunity presents itself, please do what you can, nojya."</i>

You'll do your best to ensure that cooler heads prevail and things don't spiral out of control. If the one who should be the most aggrieved urges a rational, calculated response, then no one else should brook argument.[pc.ra kitsune| After all, are they going to talk back to the divine champion [pc.himHer]self?]

<i>"After what's happened, I'm being more careful about moving my caravans, nojya. I never really needed to worry that much about security on the trip; my bodyguards are mostly for when I'm in native settlements... but now that someone or something has been revealed to be actively hunting us, everyone's being more cautious. [pc.ra kitsune

[But with you around, your Eminence, I'm sure you'll be hunting them right back, won't you, nojya?]"</i>

Right now there aren't any concrete leads, but once you find a trail worth following you damn well are going to be sitting down the bastards who hurt your daughter for a nice little talk.

<i>"Of course someone like your [pc.mf|lord|lady]ship would not let such a slight upon you and your family go unresolved, nojya. Best of fortune to you, your Eminence, and be careful."</i>

Given that they were afraid of you to the point where they waited for both Kiyoko and you to be away from home before descending upon the den, a head-on confrontation is unlikely. Rather, you'd be more worried about a stab in the back if these people dared to target you in the first place.
[You should be more careful on the roads too. If these people were daring enough to target Kinu, you might be next, nojya."</i>

Frankly, you're hoping they'll try — it'll save you the time hunting those bastards down. Why go to them when you can make them come to you?

<i>"Ah, that is one way to see it, nojya. Sometimes I forget that not everyone is a peaceful procurer of goods like I am. Well, if you are going to hunt those who hurt the young lady Otomo, I can only wish you the best of fortune. It will be a relief to not have to worry about being targeted on the roads again."</i>

Mm.

]

<i>"Stay safe, okay? The roads are getting more dangerous by the day, nojya. We can always partake of The Ways Between, but even so some legwork to the final destination is always needed."</i>

]

Miko

//Miko does not have a "situation" talk topic by default; this appears after this quest is done under her highest level talk topic menu.

[rand

|<i>"Oh aye, what's done happened to lil' sis is abso-lutely terrible, [pc.ra kitsune]yer Eminence[I tell ya], a downright tragedy that coulda been a lot worse if'n we'd been but a half-hour late. As it stands, from what lil' sis told us, we done arrived jus' in th' nick o' time to save th' day."</i>

Good timing, that.

<i>"It coulda been better,"</i> Miko admits, the smile vanishing from ehr face as she bites her lip. <i>"Lil' ol' me had one o' them premonitions, and it weren't good, in a big way. Problem is that particular one didn't have nothin' to say 'bout what kinda danger it was... so without no way to say what or where somethin' mighta be goin' down, it was kinda hard to tell anyone. I did tell Granny an' Mai, but they couldn't do nothin' without knowin' no details, either..."</i>

<i>"Next thing I knew, Mai was tellin' me somethin' had gone wrong with th' torii gate and 'fore I knew it, Granny had marshaled up everyone who could bear arms. She'd done kept them on high alert all day. When th' gate were workin', we bumrushed it through th' forest like big damn heroes... an' ya know th' rest."</i>

You do. You ought to thank her for watching out for Kinu when you weren't home.

<i>"Ain't no effort too great to make sure lil' sis is safe. Ya rest easy knowin' we've got her back, ya hear me?"</i>

<i>"Ya know, [pc.ra kitsune|yer[pc.mf|lord|lady]ship,]both times folks snuck into her home lil' sis done got a bad feelin' in th' back o' her head, like summat was wrong somewhere. To hear her tell it, it weren't strong, but it still were enough to wake her up in th' nick o' time to not get boarded up in her own chambers an' burned out. Can't help but wonder if'n she's jus' a teensy bit spiritually sensitive. Nothin' like Mai o' me, o' course, but jus' enough to save her life an' that o' everyone else."</i>

Preternaturally sensitive or not, you're just happy she managed to figure out what was going on quickly enough to be able to respond. But is such a thing possible?

<i>"As a shinshoku clan, we Kurokawa done been spiritual advisors to th' Otomo f'r generations now. That bloodline ain't known f'r their spiritual power, but bein' descended from divinity done mean sometimes a bit o' a spark do go 'bout showin' itself. Wouldn't be somethin' ya could harness or train, but mighta just kick in to save yer life."</i>

You see.

<i>"Ain't nothin' I can prove when it comes to lil' sis, [pc.ra kitsune|yer[pc.mf|lord|lady]ship,]but it damn well is quite th' romantic notion an' lil' ol' me jus' happens to be a sucker f'r th' romantic. An' maybe it's better lil' sis ain't got no strong gifts... 'cause those tend to come with prices, an' painful ones at that. Things are taken f'r what's given to ya... and things are given f'r what's taken from ya. That's th' way our world works when it done come to th' spiritual..."</i>

You can see how it mightn't be good to push one's luck asking for too much from chance.

<i>"An' sometimes, that there spark sometimes grows into a downright blaze, an' it's beautiful. Oh, destructive all right, but oh so beautiful while it burns. Ya agree[pc.ra kitsune|, yer Eminence]?"</i>

You give Miko a long, hard look, and shake your head.

[kiyoko.numKits 4

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<i>"On a more serious note, [pc.ra kitsune|yer[pc.mf|lord|lady]ship,]th' records o' th' Otomo clan do have one or two folk who were done really powerful in th' spiritual sense. Like, on th' level of Kuzonoha's son. Wait no, that probably don't mean much to ya, cultural reference, ya see."</i>

You can figure out from the context that it's not something to be sniffed at, all right.

<i>Damn straight[pc.ra kitsune|, yer[pc.mf|lord|lady]ship]. It misses most in th' bloodline, but when it done deign to show itself it's downright scary, lemme tell ya. Last time this sort o' thing happened to the Otomo clan, it was before th' shogunate... so give or take mebbe seven, eight hundred years an' all. And yer kit Asagiri... I done seen her runnin' 'round th' den before, doin' errands f'r her mom and big sis. Weren't nothin' back then, but now..."</i>

She can be straight with you. As much as you're angry at what happened, you know enough to not fly into mindless rages or shoot messengers.

<i>"[pc.ra kitsune|Much appreciated, yer Eminence.]Well then, I'll be straight: somethin' done awakened in th' lil' wispy girl when she done made up her mind to save her family. Somethin' great an' terrible — ya remember me talkin' 'bout sparks turnin' to blazes turnin' to infernos? This done be one of them."</i>

Miko pauses and watches you closely, perhaps ready to spring back should you erupt, perhaps trying to figure out what's going on in your mind. Keeping your face as straight as you can, you motion for her to go on.

<i>"Her aura before, it weren't nothin' to write home about. Nice, bright an' colourful, but ya expect that from a young gal of her lineage an' all. But when I done looked at her when Granny brought her up to us an' said we was to take care o' her learnin' from now on... it done completely changed.</i>

<i>"I ain't gonna lie, once we done realised our senses weren't lyin' to us none, Mai an' I were scared o' what we saw, an' it takes a lot to scare Mai. Yer lil' wispy girl's overflowin' with spiritual energy... it were pourin' off her 'cause her thin body ain't able to hold it all none. If'n she weren't a colonial,

she mighta been shipped off to th' Isle o' th' Sun back home... but that ain't an option f'r the lies o' us."</i>

That, and you think your daughter would be much happier being able to be with her friends and family instead of having to go to what you can only assume from the context of Miko's words to be some kind of monastery or covenant.

<i>"Eh. Close enough, I guess."</i> Miko chews her lip. <i>"Things are gonna get pre-tty interesting 'round these parts, that's all I'm gonna say. Not that they weren't already, but..."</i>

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|<i>"Must say, ya came at a pre-tty good time today[pc.ra kitsune|, yer Eminence]. Things done been quite busy 'round these parts here at th' shrine. When there's danger, folks done start lettin' their thoughts wander towards th' divine; when things are all comfy an' safe, they start forgettin'. Same ol' , same ol', been that was f'r generations now."</i>

And you can say it's the same across peoples. Although frankly, even now you don't see very many people in Hawkethorne's chapel. Maybe there were fewer before all this got started? Then again, the kitsune are certainly a more spiritual folk than the peoples of the Marches.

<i>"Jus' sayin', 's important for folks to keep in good with th' gods 'fore calamity strikes. Ain't gonna be much use if'n ya come beggin' and tuggin' at them forelocks f'r salvation at th' last minute. The way I see it, they oughta be part an' parcel of yer daily life, workin' small an' regular, instead of prayin' an makin' huge offerin's at th' last moment. I ain't sayin' no to sudden bursts o' godliness, but there's a better way to go 'bout these things, too."</i>

[[kinu.isInari

|<i>"Ya know, it's only when things done get tight an' yer facin' down danger that ya mettle is truly tested an' ya know what ya truly think is worth fightin' f'r. My cus — he's always been summat o' a slowpoke, but when he done heard trouble done found lil' sis he was up an' about in no time flat. I've known my cus Hitoshi since he were a kit, an' I've never seen him move so fast in my life. He ain't a fightin' man, either — brave, no doubt, but that don't mean startin' fights f'r no reason.</i>

<i>"Th' man ain't cared f'r much in the whole 'o his life, but yer daughter done inspired him to look beyond his lil' world[pc.ra kitsune|, yer Eminence]. That there's something neither Mai nor I could do even with all our childhoods an' all our strength... now ain't that romantic?"</i>

It might be under normal circumstances, but you're having conflicting emotions about this given how this is Kinu she's talking about. You know, <i>your daughter</i>.

Miko titters at that, hiding her face with her fan. <i>"Well, [pc.ra kitsune]yer [pc.mf]lord[lady]ship,]why don't ya look at it this way... those two, they're downright made f'r each other. Lil' sis, she's th' type who'll always have somethin' put by for a rainy day. Th' type who'll have a passel of kits 'cause she's terrified of goin' blind or lame in her old age with no one around to take care of her. We ain't got nothin' but a storehouse here, but she's th' type who'll buy somethin' useless or order a cheap snack in a teahouse jus' to avoid leavin' a shop without buyin' anythin'."</i>

<i>Th' type desperate to live up to expectations... an' they're all her own. Ain't her mum's. Ain't yers. All her own. An' it's gonna crush her eventually if'n she tries to make it through life on her own like she's been doin'. Even now, she ain't stopped beatin' herself up over what done happened; she sees is as her personal failure to protect her [kiyoko.numKits 2]family an']den. It ain't a burden even her own folks can help her carry."</i>

... You see.

<i>"That's th' long an' short o' it, an' what ya wanna do 'bout it is up to ya, [pc.ra kitsune], yer Eminence]. If'n ya wanna do anythin' — ain't nothin' wrong with sittin' on yer hands..."</i>

|<i>"My cus done been takin' it pretty hard on himself 'bout what happened to lil' sis. He ain't been showin' it in public, but I had to stop him from drinkin' yet again."</i>

You'd damn well hope he's upset about this whole ugly affair. As far as you understand it, Nakano had one job, one job, and he couldn't even do it right. This goes doubly for the fact that Kinu is supposed to mean something to him, and yet this managed to pass by him.

Miko winces at that. <i>"[pc.ra kitsune
|Yer Eminence... far from it being my place to correct ya... but the situation were really extenuating. That, an' it's an open secret that my cus done happens to be shamefully understaffed an' underequipped. Th' colonies are a large place, and ain't nobody knew those assassins, raiders, what have ya could jam th' gate closed."</i>

And just what is she saying? Is she making excuses for her cousin?

<i>"Ain't nothin' o' th' sort, yer Eminence... jus' that ain't much ya can do to him that's worse than what he's already doin' to himself. That kinda stain — bein' unable to defend a princess in yer case — it don't wash out none. An' th' way he mustered his folk an' rushed out once we done figured out what was goin' on... cus Na's already zealous enough, but ya could tell how much he done cared about lil' sis. I know

he ain't given ya much cause to like him on a personal level, but at th' same time I'm beseechin' ya to be merciful, [pc.ra kitsune], yer Eminence]."

...Hmph. You might consider it.

[Now, that ain't fair none. It ain't no secret that my cus done happens to be shamefully understaffed an' underequipped. Th' colonies are a large place an' a lot o' land to cover, and ain't nobody knew those assassins, raiders, what have ya could jam th' gate closed, stop us from sendin' help quickly."

So, she's making excuses for him.

"I get yer upset — we all are, we all love lil' sis and don't want her to suffer none. Ya say I'm makin' up excuses f'r my cus — well, ya weren't there, and shouldn't be usin' this to beat up someone ya don't like. Ya say he was late in comin' to save her, where were you as lil' sis' sire? Huh? Ya say he's got a responsibility to watch f'r th' safety o' th' colonies, but where's yer responsibility to look after yer daughter, make sure she's safe when yer gone?"

"Throwing blame 'round can help find th' source o' problems, sure, but doin' it outta spite or anger ain't helpin' no one. Ain't much ya can do to him that's worse than what he's already doin' to himself. That kinda stain — bein' unable to defend a princess in yer case — it don't wash out none. An' th' way he mustered his folk an' rushed out once we done figured out what was goin' on... cus Na's already zealous enough, but ya could tell how much he done cared about lil' sis. I know he ain't given ya much cause to like him on a personal level, but at th' same time yer jus' sinkin' down to his level by bein' spiteful. Ain't no good in that."

...Fine, whatever. It just drives home the fact that no matter how much you mingle with these fox-people, some part of them will always be opaque to you.

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"Lil' sis ain't stopped coming to th' shrine, even if'n she don't bring any offerin's no more. Wouldn't expect her to be, given her situation an' all... an' I'm sure his divine lordship's a very understanding fellow when it comes to genuine hardship. But th' show o' piety is appreciated — she ain't been coming **more** like what some people mighta do after a calamity, but jus' th' same ol' daily after-work despite bein' faced with hardship. That there's somethin' I can respect as a spiritual woman, ya know?"

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Mai

//Mai does not have a "situation" talk topic by default; this appears after this quest is done under her highest level talk topic menu.

[rand

|<i>"Well, 's good lil' sis is on th' mend. Her body's jus' fine thanks to my efforts, but she's gonna need some time to set her head on th' mend — plenty o' loose ends rattlin' 'bout inside of that skull o' hers, I daresay. She's gonna need a lot o' cheerin' up in th' days to come, even if she ain't lettin' it on."</i>

And is she going to help herself?

<i>"D'ya think I'm good at cheerin' folks up, [pc.ra kitsune], yer Eminence]? I ain't so dead inside I don't know cheerin' folks up oughta be one o' th' last things I shoulda be doin'. I done my part tyin' her down to th' futon an' makin' sure she stayed off her feet. Ain't gonna lie, she's got a strong will an' it took a whole lotta druggin' 'fore she'd lie down an' keep quiet, recover from her wounds. But thing is, even th' strongest will done got a point where it'll break, an' lil' sis has been through a lot o' late.</i>

<i>"Now, I ain't blamin' ya none f'r not being around when all this here stuff was goin' down; there ain't no way you coulda known yer home was gonna get raided[pc.ra kitsune] an' I woulda never accuse yer Eminence of negligence]. All I'm sayin' is that I done my part, an' beggin' yer pardon, but now it's time f'r ya to do yers an' stand by yer family an' all. Three cornerstones of yer life and th' people 'bout ya — yer liege, yer clan an' family, an' th' gods. Make good on them, yeah?"</i>
|<i>"I'm glad nothin' happened to lil' sis."</i>

You're glad nothing happened to Kinu, too. You —

<i>"She's th' only one in th' den aside from Granny who can play a game o' shogi worth a damn. Ain't fun in th' least playin' someone who ain't able to put up a fight, an' I can't be askin' Granny to be playin' me every evenin'. Would be sad if'n she weren't 'round to play me no more."</i>

You give Mai an incredulous look; she returns your gaze by blowing a large plume of winterstem smoke into the air.

<i>"[pc.ra kitsune]Something th' matter, yer Eminence[Yer lookin' at me funny now; was it somethin' lil' ol' me said]?"</i>

You just shake your head. Of all the things Kinu is to so many people, the most outstanding quality of your daughter's, the one Mai would miss most — or at least, the one that comes to mind immediately — is her skill at a board game?

<i>"Ain't nothin' to turn yer nose up at, [pc.ra kitsune|yer Eminence|ya know]. Lil' sis an' I got plenty o' games in when she was on bedrest an' I done had to watch her, make sure she didn't sneak out. 'S were good game, especially 'cause th' both o' us were as high as damn-all while at it. Lil' sis made a couple o' plays I'd never considered... not that it done her much good, heh. There's already plenty o' people singin' her praises for bein' pretty, brave, lovin'... ain't out o' th' question fr someone to be admirin' her for bein' able to play a killer game o' shogi. I'm sure ya agree that yer daughter's done got a whole bunch o' facets, an' every one o' them are woth somethin', ya know?"</i>

Kinu spending days upon days lying in bed drugged up on winterstem smoke, playing board games — you're not sure how to feel about that.

Mai shrugs. <i>"Had to give her somethin' fr th' pain. Was that, or have her moanin' an' itchin' all over. Think we can agree on not causing lil' sis any unnecessary pain than it were, yes?"</i>

|<i>"Ya know, [pc.ra kitsune|yer [pc.mf|lord|lady]ship,]I downright had a scare when th' torii gate done started malfunctionin' an' all. Ain't never seen nothin' like that, an' it's Miko and my job to keep it in shape, amongst other things. After Granny an' her pet madman done had a look-see at th' jammin' device an' figured out how it was done, I don't think it'll be happenin' again — leastways, not with th' same exploit they done used this time to lock down th' gate."</i>

It's not something she expected, was it?

<i>"The base o' the workin's, they're based on th' old waystones that were common 'bout the Belharan Empire three centuries ago. Then on top o' that, we done made a whole bunch o' refinements to th' base concept on our own. Like I said, fr somethin' like this to show up, it means the bastards who done gone after lil' sis had backin', an' powerful backin' at that. Ya got someone with knowledge o' how these things work, an' the power to put that knowledge to use. That there's a dangerous mix, lemme tell ya.</i>

<i>"Still, Granny just done prepared a report to send back across th' ocean, so all th' other gates can be hardened against interference an' all. Ain't no one lettin' that vulnerability stand fr long — someone's gonna lose their head outta shame fr this. What happened last time ain't gonna happen again, I tell you — first sign o' trouble an' we'll be gettin' to lil' sis lickety-split."</i>

|<i>"Did ya notice any damage to th' den when ya returned home?"</i>

Actually, no. It wasn't that much different from when you left, actually — one could easily believe that nothing of import had happened while you were away. Well, there was a bit of soot here and there, now that you think about it, but until Kinu told you about what happened to her you could've believed that everything was just peachy keen.

<i>"Ain't it great when folks done come together an' get stuff done? Lil' sis weren't on bed rest that long, an' we done made th' place livable before then. A couple o' days more, an' it was mostly right as rain. Ain't a single soul 'round these parts who didn't want to pitch in an' fix up th' place — not just for High Lady Otomo, but also lil' sis as well. The old buildings that weren't in use, we let stay scorched an' burnt, but everythin' that lil' sis [kiyoko.numKits 2]an' yer family]done use, we all got together an' threw up new ones in record time. Ain't nothin' to be afraid of when we're all gathered together close-like."</i>

|<i>"[kiyoko.numKits 4

|I din't quite believe it when Granny first told me she were bringin' yer lil' wispy gal Asagiri back to th' shrine and making her a shrine maiden along with th' two o' us. Then I took one look at her, an'..."</i> Mai takes her pipe out of her mouth and whistles appreciatively. <i>"Damn if her aura weren't an utterly amazin' an' terrifying sight. I used to see her playin' around th' den, buggin' Kohaku for taiyaki while out on' errands, an' she weren't nothin' to write home about. Now, her aura's done overflowin' like a geyser, pourin' out spiritual energy all over th' place."</i>

The experience Asagiri went through, her siblings and eldest sister went through, it changed them all. For better or for worse on the whole remains to be seen, but the change is undeniable.

<i>"Have ya seen her?"</i>

N-no, not really. It hurts to even think about it... and enrages you at the same time.

<i>"I can understand. Jus' to keep in mind... th' gal's ain't ruined by th' experience, but is stronger for it. Asagiri, she ain't any worse off than Mai or me, we jus' done got prettier faces and are better at hidin' it, that's all. Th' gal's genuinely cheerful despite all that's happened to her and her kin... 's a small mercy. Even somethin' like this ain't puttin' yer gal down an' it shouldn't make ya despair or get blinded by anger[pc.ra kitsune], yer Eminence]. Jus' remember that."</i>

You'll try. Is she doing well?

<i>"Kinda too early to tell, but by all means ter gal's doin' quite well in the days she's done been with us. Asagiri's smart — though she ain't as smart as her [silly]big sis]nee-sama] — and can read fast. Her body still ain't done healin' an' it's hurtin' some even through th' medication, so we ain't askin' her to do many physical chores. Th' potential to be so much more is there, though — 's overflowin' off her thin lil' wispy body. Her aura ain't too different from a geyser, plumin' upward from her head in a huge wash o' colour an' falling onto all th' folks 'bout her. That there's something ya don't see every day."</i>

You sigh. You've [pc.raMulti hunter barbarian scholar acolyte
|encountered certain species of pines in your past as a hunter in the
wilderness
|encountered certain species of pines out in the wilds back in your
days as a barbarian
|read about certain species of pines in this part of the world in the
library
|read about certain species of pines in this part of the world in the
monastery's library
|heard about certain species of pines in this part of the world
]. They can only scatter their seeds after a wildfire — the flames scorch the
cones and release the seeds within, which find plenty of space and fertile ash
to grow in after the fire has passed. This is something similar, you suppose...

<i>"Sure looks like it. Ain't no one in their right mind wants harm to come to th'
defenseless... but at th' same time, one oughta not let their kits lead too
sheltered a life. I ain't sayin' nothin' 'bout Asagiri, but ya get my general gist,
right?"</i>

|<i>"Lil' sis — she's been askin' me f'r some winterstem. Not yer weak stuff ya
can find growin' in th' woods or what I done used to keep her down durin' her
bedrest, but th' strong stuff I keep f'r myself. An' each time she's asked, I've
said no; she an't gettin' none o' mine."</i>

Good call. Thanks for doing that — you certainly don't want Kinu stuck with a
pipe in her mouth all day like Mai.

<i>"I ain't smokin' this stuff f'r fun, I smoke it 'cause I need to, an'
probably will f'r th' rest o' my life; ain't no curin' what I have, an' I don't wanna
be cured nonehow. Lil' sis, she's hurtin', but pain's got a purpose — it done
tells ya what's wrong with ya, an' unlike me that hurt o' hers can heal. If'n I
dope her up, make her dead inside like I am, ain't no goin' back from that —
not easily anyhow."</i>

To emphasise her point, Mai takes a long drag on her pipe and blows a ring of
fine white smoke. You're... you're thankful she told you this.

<i>"[kinu.isInari

|Lil' sis ain't good at lyin' or hidin' her emotions, so it'd have come out
sooner or later — but by then it mighta be too late

|Lil' sis ain't one to let her emotions show f'r th' sake o' others, but I
ain't 'bout to let her go to these lengths

]. I know yer always on th' road an' out an' 'bout, [pc.ra kitsune|yer Eminence,
]but still... drop in on yer family an' do what ya can from time to time. Please.
We're watching out f'r yer family... but all the same, we ain't no replacement
f'r ya.

All right, you get it.

<i>"Thanks. Was worried lil' ol' me wouldn't be gettin' my point across loud an' clear."

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Kinu

//This updates the "recent events" subheading of her talk topics.

[kinu.isInari

[[rand

|<i>"I'm doing fine, Dad."</i>

No, she isn't. She's a terrible liar when it comes to her emotions — your little girl has always been about expressing herself directly and freely, and when she tries to do the opposite it <i>really</i> shows. Although in this case, it's pretty obvious what's been bothering her.

<i>"I know it's no use worrying about it, Dad. That's what makes it so infuriating when my head insists on doing so when the rational thing to do is stop worrying about something you can't change from fretting about it. I... "</i> Kinu deflates with a huge sigh and grabs one of her tails, bringing it about her front and hugging it like a big bolster. <i>"I feel exceedingly stupid and pissed off with myself at the same time, Dad, and being that way all the time is really tiring."</i>

She doesn't look like she's been sleeping well.

<i>"It's that obvious, huh?"</i>

It most certainly is. Like you said, concealing her emotions isn't Kinu's forte.

Your daughter shifts her eyes and folds her ears forward. <i>"Yeah, I guess, Dad. I can't sleep well, because I can't feel safe in my own chambers anymore. On particularly bad nights I have to ask Hitoshi to come in and sit by my side until I doze off. He's never said no, but I still feel bad for keeping him up like that.</i>

<i>"I just hope this passes soon, Dad. It's really annoying and I need to get work done instead of moping around, but I won't cooperate with myself and more often than not I get exhausted at the end of the day. After I finally fall

asleep, I wake up just as tired as when I'd gone to sleep. It's not an enviable position to be in."

Well, the good thing is that she's willing to talk about it, and seek help from others that she trusts with regards to her more personal well-being, even if it's but just one guy.

"I don't know, Dad. Every time I have to ask Hitoshi to come and sit by my bedside until I doze off, I feel so weak and useless. This is something that I should be able to handle on my own, and yet..."

You chuckle. A young couple together inside a lady's bedroom... there's no scandal? Ah, she doesn't have to give you that exasperated look, you were just kidding.

Kinu folds her arms and pouts. "When half the den is treating us like we're married already and the other half inquiring when the wedding will be, I really didn't need that kind of jibe on top of everything else. It gets tiring, Dad. I'm not about to rush into anything, especially not at a time like this."

Ah, fine, fine. Just know that if she needs anything from you, she just needs to ask. You can't be here all the time and she knows it, but at the same time you're determined to do what you can with what you have.

Your fox-daughter looks away and down. "All right, Dad."
"Every time I think back to that night and remember Raphael's face, my stomach turns. The man's an utter creep."

Anyone who would dare to hurt your daughter or kill children is an utter creep.

"I don't mean in that way, Dad. The man wore all the right things, said all the right lines, and had all the right skills, all the way down to the perfume, and it didn't change who he was one bit. When I think back on the events, there's just a complete and visceral revulsion to the man."

Well, that's a good thing to hear. You'd be asking her if her head was working right if she didn't have anything but utter contempt for the likes of Raphael, especially when she's been so plain and straight with her thoughts and desires ever since she was a kit. You can give a pig a bath, dress it in finery, feed it lavish cooked meals, and at the end of the day the pig will still be a pig. Charisma isn't something you can buy or wear
|, you know this from your old days from rubbing shoulders with the upper crust. F

|— f

Finery might get someone's notice, but that's all it is, a foot in the door. It's something that you are, and while wearing nice clothes can help with

one's confidence, they're not a substitute for it. As far as you understand these things, that's the vibe she was picking up from that bastard.

Kinu gives you a warm, if thin smile. *"Wow, Dad. To hear you put it so eloquently... I can't say you're wrong. That doesn't make the creep any less of a threat, though, just a more disgusting one. Can't deny that he's skilled."*

That's generous of her, to admit an enemy's strengths.

"I mean, Dad, there's no point in lying to myself. As much of a creep as he was, Raphael didn't just manage to beat me, the man was openly toying with me for his amusement and would've killed me had everyone arrived just a moment later. He's got no small measure of skill, and if I don't acknowledge that and start making excuses for myself I won't be able to get to the point where I'll finally be able to wring his neck."

Now it's your turn to smile. It's nice to have life goals.

The way I see it, Dad, being angry is better than being afraid. I'm not about to let the matter go until I find him and make him pay."

|How's your whitest, fluffiest daughter holding up? She looks absolutely exhausted. You can understand if she hasn't gotten that much sleep of late, but even just lying down in bed and resting is better than stretching herself too thinly.

"No rest for the likes of me, Dad; someone in my position can't take any days off. As they say, responsibility flows upwards, and there'll be time enough to sleep when I'm dead. There's just so much to be done, so much to rebuild — the work helps keep my mind off the stuff I don't want to think about."

Ah, you see.

*"Dad... I know you're worried about me, and I'm not going to say that I don't have problems, but I think that so long as I'm not completely destroying myself I should be allowed to work out my own matters without everyone rushing in to baby me. It's not that I'm ungrateful for everyone saving me and working so hard to rebuild the den **and** giving me all kinds of things, but at some point it goes a little overboard and starts to get embarrassing."*

"I just need to do some of this myself, pull through under my own power — I know it seems all very strange, even to me, but I'm supposed to be in a position of some authority here with more of the same in my foreseeable future. Just don't coddle me, okay?"

It's hard to not do just that, though.

A sigh. *"I know, Dad. I know."*

[[kiyoko.numKits 4

"Asagiri... now she's gone off to be a shrine maiden. She spends most of the day there now with Miko and Mai, and doesn't go home until I come to pick her up in the evenings. The poor thing's always been quiet and docile, but after what happened she's become even more so."

You... you don't even have words at the moment. Just thinking about it makes you furious.

"I know, Dad. I know. Maybe... maybe she wouldn't have ended up so heavily scarred if I'd gotten her help sooner instead of forcing her to wait for the better part of an hour and limp along behind me, but..."

She did what she could, given the circumstances.

"And the question is always, was it enough? Could it have been better?"

Going through life doubting herself all the time isn't any way to live.

"I don't doubt myself all the time, Dad. But this is a very special case." Kinu folds her ears forward and sighs. "She was going to be my second-in-command, too, do all the busy paperwork and the like I really hate. Maybe this is a better future for her instead of playing second fiddle to me — I'll have to teach Kasumi to do her work in her stead, then. But with Asagiri wearing the white and red, she does look happier — when I can bring myself to look at her. Good thing Tatsumi's taken on caring for her, or else everything would be really awkward..."

You've heard it going around the den that her little sister's experienced some kind of spiritual awakening. Does she understand what that means for Asagiri? You're a little unclear on the matter; it's just one of those things that kitsune just assume you know, and you don't.[pc.ra kitsune] It can be a bit awkward being the champion of their god and not knowing the culture, to put it lightly.]

A shrug. *"Beats me, Dad. Granny Komari tried explaining it to me and I probably could've understood, but I wasn't listening at the time. It's a step in the right direction for who she's become, what she's become, and as a shrine maiden her looks won't matter as much if she garners fame for her other qualities. I think this is probably the*

best one can make out of a situation like hers... although that's not saying much. I just wish all this could have been on me, instead of dragging the rest of my family into it. It would've been for the better."

That's not true; it most definitely would *not* be better if she took it all upon herself. There are plenty of people around who would care if something happened to her, and be sad for it, too.

Kinu turns her ears to the sides. *"Hey, thanks, Dad. Yeah, I know that, but it's still nice to hear someone say it out loud."*
"I can't help but think back to the labourers and fields hands who were staying over at the den that night, Dad. All they wanted was to help out our family, maybe curry a little favour with Mother and me on the side, and they almost ended up paying with their lives for it. That's already bad enough on its own, but it was I who led them all that way, and they almost paid for their trust in me with their lives."

That, fortunately and unfortunately, is part and parcel of taking responsibility and making decisions that affect peoples' lives. While you know that your daughter's been her mother's majordomo ever since she was a kit, the impacts of her decisions have never been that great or with that much potential for danger when she was living in the Astral Plane with her mother. Now... the stakes are higher, the costs of failure — and the price of success — more dear. Kinu's no longer a child, and you can only hope that the lessons of her childhood were enough to carry her into her adult life.

"They weren't," Kinu replies flatly. *"Not in this instance anyway, Dad. I just... well, I don't know. I guess I feel inadequate, that's all. It's a me problem, that's all it is, and I'm sure it'll pass. Everything turned out just right, didn't it? I just need to find some way of making sure this never happens again, that's all — yeah, Dad, I know it's far easier said than done, but still."*

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"You know what hurt me the most about this entire mess, Dad?"

No, you don't. It'd be interesting to hear her thoughts.

"They burned the fields and paddies. What they didn't have the time to take, they torched, and what looked like it wouldn't burn easily, they trampled. Those were just plants, they didn't need to do any of that. I wouldn't have minded if they'd actually stolen the crops ready for harvest. But there was

absolutely no reason to destroy everything like that, save to spite me. It's not as if they burned very well, anyway."

Maybe they knew it would hurt her, that's why they did it.

"If they'd had their way, I'd be dead, Dad. That's one thing to be said about death — you can't hurt any more when you're dead. I don't think that's it."

"But back to the point... I can understand why they burned the buildings, even the derelict ones. I can understand why they looted the sheds and then burned them down. I can understand why they tried to kill me, my family, the people Granny Komari sent over — burn us out while we slept. But this... there was no reason to do any of it, and it would have taken so much time and effort to do so. The depths of that spite just boggle the mind; I can't quite believe it."

Well, perhaps she could look at it another way; those crops were intended to give their lives so she could survive. The time the raiders wasted in spiting her and her work by destroying the crops actually bought her enough time for help to arrive, without which she would have perished. By her own admission, it'd come down to a matter of minutes, hadn't it?

Instead of appearing relieved or comforted, Kinu just looks sadder at that, gathering up one of her five tails in the crook of her hand and tapping her fingers together. Emotions flit across her features — she was always one for wearing her heart on her sleeve — and then at long last, Kinu looks away from you.

"I guess that's one way to put it, Dad."

It's clear that there's a lot more going on inside her head than she's willing to talk about, but you also know now's not the best time to press your daughter. You'll ask for her thoughts some other time... although with how she's behaving, you can guess them already.

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"I am doing very well, Father. While it is true that much misfortune and malice have befallen us in so short a time, it simply means that we must make a display of fortitude and show that we cannot be beaten down. I am endeavouring to live as normal a life as I can in the wake of the raid on our home, spite the attempt to make me cower in fear since they could not take my life."

Is that healthy?

<i>"There is no perfect option here, Father," Kinu replies, perhaps a little more curtly than she ought to be. <i>"That would be to not have this misfortune have happened at all. But since what has happened has happened, we must make do — morale is exceedingly important, and I must lead by example. IRefusing to be bowed while maintaining some reasonable degree of caution, it is a better outlook than looking over one's shoulder at every turn. So many people are depending on me, and I cannot afford to indulge in bouts of self-pitying."

She doesn't look like she has slept well.

<i>"Of course I have neglected to rest overmuch, Father — no one has. There are so many reconstruction efforts to oversee, and I already have spent so many valuable days off my feet in a room filled with winterstem smoke. I assure you, I get as much respite as I need to, not as much as I want to. Your concern is appreciated and you mean well, but there is no need to overly concern yourself with the nuances of my situation, Father."

|<i>"It is quite clear from my conversations with people during my daily routine that no one appreciates what has been done to me. There is an air of tension about the den, like a strand of silk pulled taut... but by leading by example and pursuing a calm and measured yet vigorous response to the attempt on my life, I can soothe unease and yet not appear to be inactive upon a direct insult upon my person. While it is enjoyable to know that so many people deeply care for me to the point where harm to my person causes them to be deeply aggrieved, rash action can be problematic."

That's right. You don't want the kitsune lashing out at the entirely wrong people. That would cause more problems than it solves.

<i>"At best, it would be a waste of resources,"</i> Kinu agrees. <i>"And despite the way people live in the governor's estate, there really is not much to be spared for anything in the way of drawn-out, violent action. It would doom us all, and the effort would be wasted."

Hmph. And what of her squeeze? Is he going to be running around demanding that heads be chopped off?

<i>"Oh, he already is. But at least he is looking to chop off the correct heads, at any rate." Kinu gives you a thin, sly smile. *<i>"I may have given Nakano some instructions which he may find irksome but has no choice to obey — after all, I am not only the heir to his liege's liege, but also by religion and tradition, divine and untouchable. Matron Komari is more than content to let me have his services as military provost to keep him out of trouble... or at least keep him in the right kinds of trouble which will serve to be constructive."*

There's something about Kinu's placid little smile that sends shivers down your spine. She's always so refined and soft-spoken, but you need to remember that this is the daughter you raised, after all.

"There are no issues, Father. I help him with his poetry and moderate his drinking. It is something to pass the time. If I can properly guide a man like Nakano along the direction which I need him to go, I am sure I can do the same for everyone else. At the end of the day, it is a matter of properly focusing efforts and energy so that I can pry further into the matter of the attempt on my life[kiyoko.numKits 2] and that of my family] in a calm and measured manner without waste. Please, do not concern yourself overly with this matter or my well-being, and focus on your own tasks."

[[kiyoko.numKits 4

"Matron Komari has taken Asagiri to be a shrine maiden under the care of Mikoto and Miyuki. I cannot say that this is a bad move — given what has happened to my little sister, this is probably the best course of action."

You sigh. That as it may be, you just didn't wish any of this had happened to your family. Recompense is no substitute for prevention, as it were. It's good that your children are able to recover in some measure from the attempt on their lives in their own ways, but nothing will ever be the same again.

Kinu gives you a thin smile that's probably meant to be pleasant. *"I am not the same person as opposed to when I was a kit, Father. Things change. Circumstances change. We have to assess whether they are for the better or not and act accordingly, but once a day has passed it will never come again, for better or for worse. That is something that no one can do anything about."*

"But back to the point. With Asagiri suddenly having a change of vocation, I suppose it falls to me to replace her. She was going to be my second, such a quiet, wispy thing good at clerical work and other such mundane matters... I suppose I shall have to train Kasumi to take her place."

She's got all of this planned out, hasn't she?

"Much of a den mother's business is administration, Father. If I were not good at it, my worthiness of Mother's title would certainly be quite diminished, would it not? It feels strange to be picking up Asagiri every evening from the shrine when we go home... but Mikoto tells me that if she were anywhere but in the colonies, she would have to go to the Isle of the Sun for coming into possession of this kind of spiritual

power. An untrained wellspring like her is a danger not just to herself, but the people around her. Needs are as needs must... so long as everything is running smoothly, this is the best I can hope for."

"I will admit, Father, that there are times when I wonder if I had done something different, I could have made the situation better back during that night."

She can't change what happened.

"Perhaps not, but by looking back and reflecting on the past, we can avoid making the same mistakes in the future. In fact, while learning from your own mistakes already places you a cut above the rest, it is better to learn from other peoples' mistakes. Not that this is applicable in this case, but it is useful to know."

"Nevertheless... could I have done something better? In retrospect, I should have realised that trying to leave the den through the waterfall grotto was a bad idea, as it was a chokepoint for an ambush and the only way in or out. Yet at the same time, trying to scale the crater walls as we were, frightened, exhausted and injured, might have been equally if not more perilous. We have to make do with incomplete information and come to decisions that can easily cost lives, so even though what has come to pass cannot be taken back, reflecting on it is nevertheless highly beneficial and of vital importance."

Well, when she puts it that way, she's certainly convinced herself of the necessity of what she's doing. And has she made any progress?

"Some. Matron Komari has been kind enough to give me two hours off every day from my duties, and I spend them with Nakano, going over the events and speaking of the strategies the raiders used and possible countermeasures that would produce the most impact for the least cost. He keeps me apprised of what his subordinates have been doing... while this is the first true action that he has seen, the enthusiasm with which he takes to his duties is palpable. That is something I can use."

You just shake your head at that. Kinu notices the gesture, and inclines her head towards you with a small smile, ears folding forward.

"Fret not overmuch, Father. We are taking this and learning from it, growing stronger. Yes, so are they, presumably, but that just means we have to work harder in order to catch up, is that not the case?"

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"Everyone has been very kind to me ever since the attempt on my life. Well, everyone is very kind to me all the time, but moreso than ever of late. I

cannot go by a handful of days without small gifts, polite inquiries as to my well-being, and other helpful gestures. It is really nice to be flattered so, but I should not let it get to my head."

Well, it makes perfect sense. Your darling daughter is a symbol for her people to rally around — they want to make sure that she's lacking in nothing in the wake of such a danger. Oftentimes, it's only when what you love is threatened that you suddenly stop taking it for granted and realise how important it truly is to you.

"Ah ha ha. Wise words, Father, wise and true. At this point, Kohaku prepares taiyaki for me every other day; I can't eat it all myself and have to spread it around. [kiyoko.numKits 2

|Aya is always running around all day and is always willing to partake of something sweet, so I am more than willing to let her have most of it

|Mikoto is always hungry no matter how much she eats, so I am always more than willing to allow her to partake of what I am simply unable to stomach myself

]. It feels a little shameful to be passing on gifts like this, but the alternative would be to let them go to waste. Still, it is not the material gifts which are important, but the spirit in which they are given. The latter alone would have been sufficient for me, but things are what they happen to be. Refusing another's gift is tantamount to saying that it is worse than worthless, after all, and I would not insult anyone by doing as much."

[Kinu smiles and waves a hand. "It's amazing how much can get done in so short a time when you have able and willing hands working together in coordinated concert. Would you not agree, Father?"

That's right — if not for the burned shells of the derelict buildings on the outskirts of the den and that the crops in the fields and paddies are newly planted, you'd never have known that this place was raided not too long ago. Whatever else you may think of the kitsune, their ability to come together at a moment's notice and finish tasks without question or complaint is impressive.

"I would not say it is a trait endemic to **all** of us, Father, but it certainly is prevalent enough to be considered useful and helpful. The quiet knowledge that you will be similarly aided in your time of need by those obligated to reciprocate works wonders for motivating even the laziest stayabouts into working, if but out of a sense of self-preservation. It certainly has made recovering from this setback a lot easier."

"Of course, that also means that I am obligated to give back to the people as much as I have received from them, otherwise an imbalance will be created that has to be corrected. One should not allow these things to be taken too far — no matter how great the goodwill, riding on its back too far is

always dangerous and fickle. You have to give back in equal measure to what you take out."

You're just glad that your daughter has grown into such an empathic and conscientious young woman. [pc.bg nobleScion

|The upper crust in so many societies, the one you came from included, so often has terrible reputations when it comes to their duties. After all, you had a front-row seat to all the antics they got up to in your past as a noble scion, one of their own

|People don't usually have an actively positive view of the people who rule over them, generally tending towards indifference, but you're glad that she's turned out differently

]. Kinu has that something about her that makes people believe she cares about them and want to love her, and you're just glad that she's using it for good and not evil.

Your fox-daughter clicks her tongue and tsks. <i>"Oh, Father. What jests you make."

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