

*He was a writhing mass of shadow and claws and long, unruly tendrils of hair. Crooked fangs and a single eye glowing menacingly against the darkness of his form. The faces of his family and friends staring at him, eyes wide with disgust, fear. Hatred. They scream, but he cannot hear them. The scene is eerily quiet. He can't tell if they're running from him out of fear or walking away out of loathing. Either way, they leave him, one by one.*

Hikoboshi jolted awake.

This was becoming a pattern. Sometimes he'd be lucky and his exhaustion would overcome even his ability to dream, blessing him with a deep and dreamless sleep. He hadn't been very lucky the past few months, though, and most nights were not so peaceful.

In the day, he was numbed to any emotions that might otherwise plague him: shame and sadness and guilt. In the night, these forgotten feelings haunted him - ghosts of the past, present, and future coming to torment him with a vengeance. Like they were angry that he'd discarded them so easily and tried to escape their grasp.

Not that the process had been "easy." It actually had been, at first - not feeling anything was great. He could simply exist and not be tied down by the negativity that had trapped him in an unbreakable spiral of darkness.

But as time went on, he began to grow weary.

He sighed. Once he awoke from a nightmare, he could never fall back asleep. Usually he would take a walk to clear his thoughts during these frustrating moments. Since it was a nice night with scarce few clouds to cover the soft light of the starry sky overhead, he decided to do just that.

His intention was to *stop* thinking about all that ails him, but his demons were especially persistent tonight. He couldn't stop his mind from wandering back to the things he'd seen, heard and, most importantly, *felt*. Should he have asked the Witch to take his that, too?

As he walked down the forest path which surrounded his home, he could see a figure appear in the fog ahead of him.

He was both surprised and not surprised to find the older Elnin out here waiting for him. A small prickling of annoyance itched at the back of his mind at the way Ifrit always seemed to be following him, watching him. He thought he made it clear already how he didn't need him. How much longer would he go along with this charade for Meltem's sake? Did he truly care, or were those just leftover feelings from his former self? His patience was beginning to wear thin.

"What do you want?"

It was spoken in the monotone voice that had become characteristic of his transformation, but surely Ifrit could sense the exasperation running between the lines.

"To help guide you, as always."

"How many times do I have to tell you I don't want your guidance?"

"You say this, and yet I can sense deep turmoil within your spirit."

That made his eye narrow slightly. "I think I know me better than you do."

Heavens, that annoying look he always gives him. Like he thinks he knows something he himself doesn't. Rarely does anything bother him like this anymore, but Ifrit always had a way of bringing that out of him, however buried it may be.

Neither said anything for a few moments until Ifrit spoke again, a single calmly-given command. "Sit."

Hiko really didn't want to. He wanted to turn heel and go back home. But his exhaustion must have made him more passive, so he obeyed despite his annoyance.

Ifrit looked Hiko directly in the eye. "What are your nightmares about?"

Hiko had never directly told anyone about them, though it was probably obvious in the way he twisted and turned in the night and the dark bags he wore on his face from lack of sleep. He wasn't really eager to share them, either, but if it would get Ifrit off his back...

"Me being a monster."

Ifrit was patient, giving him a few moments to continue. When he didn't, he prompted, "What kind of monster?"

"Shadows." He said curtly and then added, "Not like them. Just... a monstrous form everyone hates."

"Everyone?"

He was getting annoyed again. "Meltem. Pixis. My family, everyone." Images of their faces from his dreams came back to his mind and he did his best to shove them away.

And then he asked a question Hiko had been avoiding thinking about this entire time.

"Do you feel better than you did before?"

Ironic, asking if he *felt* better now when the entire point was to not *feel* at all. And yet, it was strangely the only question that mattered. He *could* still feel. Faintly, sparingly, but it was there.

Like he was underwater and everything was far away. But still there. And the thing he could feel most in the sea of his numbed emotions, the crux of the matter, he's come to realize, was fear.

Fear.

It was one of the biggest things he hoped the Witch would rid him of completely. Allow him to do anything he wanted without fear weighing him down and preventing him from living how he wanted to live. He couldn't ever have guessed the scope at which his offer would have affected him, nor the complications and consequences of what he had done.

Despite his apathetic behavior and, at times, annoyance towards those he once held dear... he didn't want to harm them. He didn't want to turn into something that could hurt them - not just physically, but emotionally, metally. He didn't want anyone to go through the pain and despair that led him to seek out the mysterious fae in the first place, least of all them. During the day, he could ignore the faded feelings brought upon by this distant fear, but they often lingered directly after a nightmare and he just had to suffer through it until they disappeared.

All this time, he assumed that lack of true emotion gave him strength. That it made his life easier and he truly was better off this way. He told Meltem as much almost every single day. Was he wrong? A faint choking feeling pushed through his hollow chest and he remembered that this was what it felt like to want to cry.

Even though he didn't directly answer Ifrit's question, the older 'nin seemed to understand what he was thinking and simply waited patiently for him to respond. Eventually, finally, he croaked,

"Am I... broken?"

In that moment, his voice sounded so small, so uncharacteristically timid for this new form of his. Because, for the first time since he struck that deal in the middle of the woods all that time ago...

He feared he made a mistake that could never be undone.