

## **Third Story**

*~Tamamo no Mae~*

### ***Fujikawa Koharu***

*Lives in a rear tenement row house in Fukagawa. Her father is the ronin Fujikawa Takaharu. She carries around a pair of dice she received from the medicine vendor.*

### ***Fujikawa Takaharu***

*A charming ronin. Working to establish himself as a master flower maker. For a poor man, he keeps a tidy dress and appearance that he uses as an asset, and he maintains relationships with Hatamoto residences and merchant families in possession of small fortunes. Has taken an interest in Kei the flower maker and speaks highly of her.*

### ***Hana***

*Daughter of a couple who drifted in from Oushu Shiroishi to a rear tenement row house in Fukagawa Sagacho during a famine. Receives a single die from the medicine vendor.*

### ***Kei***

*Hana's mother. Born to a merchant in Rikuzen, but when he failed in business, he fled, leaving mother and daughter behind. Mother and daughter then decided to head to Edo. Along the way,*

*while her mother was working as a hostess at a hot spring inn in Nasu, Kei met a nine-tailed fox in the mountains and found herself clutching a pair of shining black dice in her hand. Currently makes a living as a flower maker.*

## ***Tamamo no Mae***

***There exists a fox in Nasunu in Shimono Province. The name “Koko” is derived from the Nio-kyo Sutra, which says that the deity “Tsukano” was once a deity who took the heads of a thousand people from the country of Tenra and held a festival. She became a praetorian in the Great Tang dynasty, and as the queen to King Yuu of Zhou, she finally overthrew him. (a chronicle from Emperor Jimmu to Emperor Kakoi “Shinmei Kagami”)***

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*The god's dice be, the demon wolf be  
At the uncle as well, at the aunt as well, I, I be  
Next year too, thirteen be  
The woman was fated for the game  
A man was fated to raise, to raise, to raise*

Sweet lips sing a song from a faraway land. When the singer realized she was being watched closely, she stopped, balling her hand into a fist and puffing out her cheeks.

“Koharu-chan, it’s embarrassing when you watch me so intently!”

“I’m not watching. I was listening to Ohana-chan’s song.”

“Same thing!”

“Not even close!”

The two girls wore matching smiles on their faces. In this beautiful spring, the government is in turmoil with the fall of a powerful member of the shogun’s council of elders and talks of finding his replacement.

It was the mother of a girl named Ohana who drifted into one of the rear tenement row houses of Fukagawa Sagacho from Oushuu Shiroishi to escape a great famine some ten years ago.

"Tell me all about Oushuu things," she had begged her mother. However, her mother would barely tell her anything about her journey or Oushuu Shiroishi.

"But you have your country's song, right?"

"Mom told me not to sing in front of others because it makes me look like a country bumpkin."

"I don't think so."

She wanted to hear her singing one more time, but Ohana just shook her head bashfully at Koharu's begging.

"Instead of that, we should play sugoroku."

Ohana takes out a small die from inside her pocket. Koharu couldn't help but admire the shining, polished die.

"Where did you buy this?"

"A traveling medicine vendor gave it to me as a freebie."

"I want one too!"

"He said he'd be back."

Koharu let out a sigh. Together with the sigh, her stomach rumbles. Ohana lost her smile, and once she returned from her row house, she held something wrapped up in her hands, as if it were important.

"My mother made rice cakes. Let's eat, Koharu-chan."

Inside were small rice cakes; red bean paste wrapped in glutinous rice and steamed. She was never served such wonderful things at home. When she put it in her mouth, the nice sweetness and the sticky texture of the glutinous rice melted in her mouth as one.

"Sorry, you can only have one piece," Ohana said apologetically, and Koharu realized that she hadn't just grabbed one for herself.

"Well then let me bring you something next time!"

"Is Koharu-chan making rice cakes too?"

Ohana's expression suddenly lit up.

"U-uh...my mom can help me with it."

"Then I'll be looking forward to it!"

The sun is going down. It would be time to go home soon, and Koharu waved hand as she left through the row house gate. As she turned a corner at a street, she looked back and saw Ohana seeing her off. Koharu's steps suddenly become heavy as her friend's figure leaves her sight.

The number of people on the main road suddenly diminishes as the evening draws near. When she looked up, she suddenly realized that any signs of people on the street had disappeared. At this time of day, the setting sun should still be bright, but a dim, cold feeling fills the street. Koharu's steps sped up as she became scared, but the townspace was no longer the familiar sight it should have been.

"Dad..."

There was a strong stench of a beast. A shrill howling left her body frozen. She is in the streets of the capital, the shadow of a bad dream she's had many times in her childhood. It was a nightmare that left her looking for something in the darkness.

She tries to call for help, but her voice won't leave her parched throat. There was the sound of footsteps chasing after her.

No matter how much she runs and runs, the footsteps right behind her don't go away. She was out of breath and dizzy, and just as she stopped dead in her tracks, something seized her shoulder. Her face froze as she turned to look behind her, and there was her mother's figure.

"What's wrong? You look scared."

"Huh? Well, there was nobody on the street, and I got scared..."

Her mother wore a puzzled expression. She realized that the street is the same as it always is pre-dusk, with many people coming and going. The sky is still far from the loneliness of twilight and the brightness of the sunlight is the same as it was when she lost sight of Ohana.

"Why are you here, mom?"

"Me? Hold on now, I'm here to pick up Koharu, you know. We should go home."

She turns her back and promptly walks away. She was so happy that her mother came to pick her up that she tried to hold her hand. However, her mother lightly shook it off. *She always does*, Koharu thought dejectedly as she walked behind her.

"Have you seen your dad?"

Her mother turned back around as she asked the question.

"He told me to go home first, because he has to work."

"Did you see his workplace?"

"I didn't see it."

She was never to go to his place of work because she would only get in his way. That was the promise she made with her father. That was the only time her gentle father had worn such an angry look.

Koharu lives in a rear tenement row house in Fukagawa, a few towns away from the row house where Ohana is at, in Fukagawa, Fuyuki Village. Her father is said to be a ronin that drifted in from the direction of Kazusa, but Koharu didn't know the details. The reality is that her father, with a bamboo sword at his waist, makes flowers and sells them to a merchant who manages the business, and finds way to make ends meet.

"Dad said he would be back before the doors close."

"Is that so?"

Her mother's voice had a bite to it. The thorns coming off her mother scared Koharu. She worries that those thorns will one day burst the little bubble of happiness they live in day by day.

"Um, today Ohana-chan gave me a rice cake, and I want to return the favor, so I want you to make some for me."

"We don't have money to make something as lavish as rice cakes!"

If she says that there's no money, she would just have to be patient.

"Then I'll work too."

"There is no job for you yet...wait, yes there is."

Her mother turned to look at her.

"If you accompany your dad while he works, you can see how he works, right?"

"But he told me I couldn't do that."

"If you do, I'll make you your sweets so that you can return the favor from Ohana."

Koharu couldn't refuse. Her father told her not to watch him work, but she's sure he's just quietly working with his hands in his workshop anyway. She didn't understand why her mother told her to look into such a place, but it was worth doing for the sake of the rice cakes.

Besides, it was the first time her mother had ever asked her to do something instead of ordering Koharu or scolding her.

## II

Ohana's mother, Kei, was born to a merchant family from Rikuzen.

“My family was prominent,” Kei sometimes told her daughter. At the capital, one would see a number of vast estates. This town is essentially for the lords, surrounded by high walls with no end in sight, while the hatamoto and gokenin live in the gaps, and the townsfolk live shoulder-to-shoulder on the excess land.

Both on the other side of the wall and on this one.

Once one crosses over, it is difficult to return. Kei’s mother told her that when she was little. The story was that they once had the status to live in the wealthy society on the other side of the wall. It was like a fairy tale that captured Kei’s heart and would not let go.

However, reality was no pipe dream.

The plan was to settle down as a peasant wife and live a poor but peaceful life. Then the Great Famine struck. Many people in the village were starving and ill, and the domain could not provide relief in time. The impoverishment of the village folks led to the deaths of the artisans.

Kei did not know her father’s face.

After failing in business and incurring many debts, her father disappeared. Her mother told her that he was dead, but just before he left his hometown, a neighbor told her that he must have fled to Edo. So, at the time, she was happy when she heard they were going there too.

It was extremely difficult for mother and child to travel from Oushuu Shiroishi to Edo. Kei’s mother worked as a hostess at a hot spring inn in Nasu for a while, and saved up money by working hard in body and soul. Kei remembered little of what happened during that time, but one thing remains strong in her memory.

While her mother was working, she would play in the rivers and mountains, picking flowers if it was the warm season. Although her mother chided her again and again for going too deep into the mountains, she felt more at home there than in the city, where she was ashamed that she couldn’t make friends due to being an outsider.

The azaleas on the mountain were particularly pretty that day, and as she looked at them, she walked off the familiar road. As she wandered around, she found herself in a rocky wilderness lacking even grass, let alone azaleas. There was a strong smell of sulfur wafting off the wellspring.

In the headache-inducing miasma, Kei saw fourteen beasts on a stone. They looked like dogs, but when she got closer, she realized it was a fox.

“In this place...”

She forgot her headache as she helped the fox up. Oddly enough, the fox had several tails. Half of those tails were torn off or gone. Holding the body of the beast, which was too large for a young child, she tried to leave the area.

“Such a sweet child.”

A voice is heard from somewhere. When she realized it was the fox on her back, she almost threw it down, but then she remembered that he was hurt and held on.

“Gather my fragments. Then everything in the world will be as you wish it to be. You will have all the riches and honors you have lost, and even eternal life.”

“Fr-fragments?”

“The prisons of greed, obsession, and resentment that feed me. Join my divided soul and take hold of my great power.”

The smells of beast and sulfur make her feel faint.

Her headache intensified, and Kei found herself in front of the shrine to Inari at the entrance of the hot spring town. She felt some pain in her hand, and she opened it to find a small die made of shining black stone.

After that, Kei and her mother managed to sneak into Edo, and managed to survive while picking up the leavings of the people and money that swirled around the city.

“Mom, Koharu-chan was really happy.”

Kei smiles as Ohana’s voice brings her back to herself.

“That’s good, right?”

“She’s going to make some to give next time.”

“That’s nice. I’m sure there will be a bit of money coming in when I finish this current job, too.”

Kei makes a living making flowers. She had really wanted to pursue a career in ikebana, but poverty would not allow her to apprentice with a suitable teacher. Furthermore, it costs a lot of money to grow the beautiful flowers needed for ikebana. The period in which the flowers are in full bloom is also exceedingly brief.

“You’re presenting your crafted flowers to the castle now, right?”

“I don’t know which castle, though.”

Since ancient times, where the capital was located in Yamato, there was already a custom of arranging artificial flowers on rocks at festive banquets. It was said to have had the power to animate people’s spirits or, conversely, calm them down. During the Heian Period, there as a custom of decorating hair and crowns with artificial flowers, which is described in the diary of Murasaki Shikibu and other such writings.

Even a defective flower tree will bloom in the end.

As in the poem, "*The Flower of the Sea*," silk flowers were loved separated from natural flowers, and artificial flowers made of silk were actively produced at the Imperial Palace in Kyoto and other such places. The tradition has been carried on in Edo as well, and is used on Buddhist altars and flower hairpins as "oasikumono."

Originally, she had been practicing the technique of making artificial flowers little by little since she was in Oushuu Shiroishi. However, it was not until after her husband passed away that she began making flowers in earnest.

A man called Mutsuya Washizou, a friend of the tenement landlord and the head of a haberdashery business would suggest that she could be a master flower maker.

"I believe your daughter is called Hana as well. Just as well, is it not?"

It was not uncommon for landlords to take care of their tenants. They were tending to their business, after all. But this Washizou shows up whenever he has free time from his store on the main street and meddles as he pleases.

"It's bad for a man to come and go so regularly."

By now, she had come to suspect that this man was employing flattery on her when he said such things. Then, a ronin called Fujikawa Takaharu appeared.

Flower-making is directed by a manager who consults with the owner of a house, room, or garden as a whole to determine the type of flowers needed. That was what the Fujikawa ronin took over. Though poor, he keeps a surprisingly tidy appearance, and has relationships with hatamoto estates and merchant families with small fortunes.

"Okei-san's crafted flowers are lustrous," Fujikawa commended.

"Lustrous..."

Kei forgot how to breathe for a moment. She earned her daily income through making flowers, and if she made them as ordered nobody commented, but if they were not done well, she received sarcastic remarks instead of pay. Since she had never received praise, she focused her efforts on making flowers that would loosen the purse strings of her customers instead. Yet that Fujikawa ronin praises them for being lustrous.

This ronin was also lustrous. She knew that the kimono was made of paper and the sword was of poor workmanship. Even still, she gets a strange feeling when she suddenly notices the wisp of hair hanging down on his neck or the mixture of cheap incense burned in his robe and body odor reaching her nostrils. She thought she had once smelled that fierce odor reminiscent of a beast.

Kei had not been aware of the smell of a man in many years, not since her husband had passed. But she had lost her husband, and with her being the only one to provide for her daughter, Ohana, she had to remind herself that it was shameful to consider her love life.

“You are also lustrous.”

When he looks her straight in the eye and tells her that, something she thought she had lost reared its head. Fujikawa’s advances are not overt. She was frustrated, and she didn’t like to think about it, but the reasoning that won her over was the fact that she had her daughter Ohana, and Fujiwaka had a wife and child. Then there are those who would try to break down that reasoning. A bewitching nine-tailed beauty whispered in her ear for her to do as she pleased.

### III

“Rice cakes, right...”

Botamochi with chestnuts were often made in her hometown on the outskirts of Sendai. As a child, her parents used to feed her botamochi, but as the house fell into poverty, botamochi became nothing more than a memory. This town has everything. One could get whatever they desired as people and things came together. Provided you had the money, or so it was said. Looking in her wallet, it seemed there was enough left over to buy red bean paste for rice cakes. However, considering the remaining quantity in the rice bin and pickled vegetable barrel had her tightening her purse strings.

When she gets a bit more work, she could make all the rice cakes she wants.

Now, there’s a job opening up to Kei through word-of-mouth of Fujikawa Takaharu; an order from a Ryougaku rice broker. A rice broker and the house of an extremely wealthy merchant. It was considered normal to use fresh flowers to decorate rooms, but nowadays, it is thought to be fashionable to dare to use artificial flowers.

There are a number of other in-house artisans besides her that make flowers. Everyone is poor and silently making a single flower in a room in a rear tenement row house. Bringing together some of them is the Fujikawa ronin, and even further up is a merchant who is the manager of the organization. There were also several former managers in Edo, and Fujikawa and Mutsuya Washizou were different stores that had no relation to each other. That was why she took the job in the first place, but she didn’t expect this to happen...

“The direction of the petals of this gentian tilt slightly, like this.”

Fujikawa visits Kei’s house every few days and talks about making flowers, sometimes touching Kei’s hand warmly. At first, she was quick to come to her senses and put some distance between them. But one day, Fujikawa was still there.

“Is it close?”

“The flowers...”

“Your flowers are beautiful.”

She found herself wrapped up in the man’s strong arms. She did not wish for it. She must reject him, but her body didn’t work. It wasn’t just because he was burly. The fingering and tonguing, like touching a flower, made Kei self-conscious of her ripe flesh.

The man was skilled in romance. While she lost herself in ecstasy many times over, she also felt serenity. That serenity mixed together with passion, and a boil ran through her whole body, like submerging heated iron in cold water.

“...I will be back.”

Fujikawa waits as Kei puts her disordered hair and clothes in order. They had to make it look like they didn’t “get up to” anything before and after they entered this room. No voices are heard. Not even their rough, panting breathing could leak out of the room.

Only one thin wall separated them from the neighbors on either side. Even though he is an artisan who goes to work during the day and his wife works as a maid, he does not know where any eyes and ears might be. The guilt of doing this secret thing makes her body burn.

They make flowers.

Kei wasn’t sure whether it was the flower making or her own flesh. But when the affair is over and Fujikawa leaves, and she starts to do the housework before her daughter returns home, her shoulders become heavy. She has become more diligent in her work, but the affair also leaves her fatigued.

Kei hurried in dressing herself as there were signs of someone outside the door.

“Get out of my way.”

The one who entered was Mutsuya Washizou, the manager of the master flower maker.

“This job...who did you receive it from? Are you not being ungrateful?”

“The relationship between a master flower maker and a manager should be on a job-to-job basis. I have fulfilled exactly what was ordered before.”

“If one job is done, then the ex-employee’s duty is to request the next one. Is it not the duty of an ex-employee to at least wait?”

His voice was cold, and grave. Her body heats up remembering the warm, light whispers from earlier.

“I hear you’ve been bringing a man into this house.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It seems he’s aiming for a less public time, but a back-alley tenement is quite the meeting place.”

“I have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Kei’s voice became grave as well.

“Don’t get so angry. If you’re attracted to a married man, there is no future for you.”

“Is it okay for you to come into the room of a woman who lost her husband and meddle in this and that?”

She could live without the blessing of work from this man. That hope made Kei feel assured. As always, Washizou stood up silently and left the room, expecting to be reprimanded. Despite and eerie feeling, Kei was relieved and set about preparing dinner.

#### IV

Accompanying her father, Takaharu, to work is boring. But staying at home is even more boring. Even at home, her mother and father hardly spoke to each other. Although they didn’t argue violently, the chill of their silence made Koharu want to run away.

“I asked you to do it today.”

The secret request she received from her mother lit up her boring days. Normally, it was a very difficult task. Her father has good instincts, and when she approaches Ohana’s house, which he says he uses as a work area, the door is usually opened.

“Go play over there.”

When she was told to do so that coldly, she really had no choice but to obey. But the face of a friend could heal even the most despondent feelings.

When she returned home in the evening, she felt awkward about telling her mother that she couldn’t see what was going on with her father’s work. It hurt to see the knit of irritation appear for an instant between her mother’s eyebrows, only to disappear as quickly as it came, as if it were an illusion.

“There were lotus flowers blooming by the side of the moat today.”

The voice of her friend eased that melancholy.

Ohana, as her name implied, knew a lot about the seasonal flowers. Koharu’s father never taught her about flowers, even though her parents still make a living as master flower makers.

After a season passes, the flowers that bloom change. When the rain comes up, another flower blooms. The moon and stars are bound to the flowers as well. From Koharu's perspective, the words of the flowers seemed like a gift from the spirits of the earth who had been under her feet but know nothing of her.

"Right, I want to go see flowers with Koharu-chan."

Koharu's heart leapt when Ohana said that.

"That flower bloomed on the beach."

Flowers bloomed from the earth. She assumed they weren't in the ocean.

"I like the beach flowers. Because they can breathe in the power of the sea, that's why they look the prettiest."

Koharu had never thought of such a thing, but there was a sparkle in Ohana's eyes that convinced her; if this girl said it, it must be true. She just couldn't allow her heart to be caught up in that brilliance today.

"Why do you want to see my mom's work?"

The question bewildered Koharu.

"Because I want to see how they make pretty flowers."

"But I'll take you somewhere prettier, with living flowers."

Koharu's heart was shaken by the expression on her friend's face, which she had never seen before.

"But...it's what my mom asked me to do."

The corners of Ohana's lips turned down, and she turned her back and ran away. Koharu almost chased after her, then stopped. How happy she would be if she could go see the beautiful beach flowers with her friend...

In the row house, women happily chat after finishing their morning chores, and a young child playing at their feet runs up to Koharu and pulls on her sleeve to play with her.

"Koharu-chan's dad is busy making flowers, right?"

His voice was surprisingly loud, and the women who had been talking at the well turned to look at her. Without saying a word, they all go back to their respective homes with a suppressed laugh showing on their faces. The mother of the young child also avoids making eye contact with Koharu, but rather leaves with the child's hand in order to avoid her gaze.

A small silence falls on the eaves of the row house. Koharu remembers the twilight hours of a few days ago, when she could no longer hear the bustle of the main street. The sun still shines at this young hour, but a cold wind envelops her that makes her knees shiver.

She looks up to see a black shadow standing at the end of the row house.

“D-dad...?”

She isn't trying to peek into his work, but she gets scared thinking about the face her father showed her, and she runs away in the direction of the row house gate without thinking. But the gate was closed tightly even while the sun was still high in the sky. There was no sign of the old man guarding the gate.

Suddenly, she heard a clacking sound that was like the clattering of teeth.

“The shape of Tamamo no Mae is given,” said a voice close to her ear.

Not wanting to be subjected to that nightmare again, she frantically pounded on the gate, and it opened slowly with a creaking sound. Koharu, who had slithered out through the narrow gap, hit something hard but supple and was pushed back. When she looked up, terrified, she saw a strange man standing there who was different from both her parents and the residents of the row house.

He stooped down, not feeling the weight of the wicker box he was carrying on his back, even though it surpassed his own height.

“There's no need to be frightened.”

That voice was a bit like her father's. Kind, and cold.

“I am a traveler who sells medicine.”

“Just now, there was something scary, but...”

“Now that this gate has been opened, you are safe. The traveler's deity will protect you.”

She feels something approaching from behind her. Instinct tells her that she must not turn around to look at “that.” She tightly clutches at the hem of the man's robe unconsciously. The feel of a large, gentle hand on her shoulder and the sharp eyes looking up at her told Koharu that her initial impression might have been mistaken.

“That thing over there cannot advance past this gate.”

Next she realized, Koharu was standing outside of the row house gate with the man. He didn't give his name, he called himself a “medicine vendor.”

“Is that my dad over there?”

“It's a mononoke.”

“A mononoke...is that like a monster?”

Without answering, the medicine vendor takes a pair of dice out from within his wicker box and hands them to Koharu.

“I’m not buying medicine though...”

“When you can’t move forward, you can throw these. When the truth and reason are in place, the dice will show the way.”

While Koharu was tilting her head at the confusing words, the medicine vendor’s figure had disappeared.

## V

From each of the row houses, one could hear the sounds of babies laughing and crying, and the voice of a mother comforting her child. The sound of someone making toothpicks or shaving woods with a small knife could also be heard leaking out. However, there was no sign of her father making flowers.

Her father said he works at the far end of the row house, in Ohana’s house. Even though she was strictly ordered not to get in the way of the adults’ work, her mother rarely asked her to do anything. If she could fulfill her request, maybe she would be nicer to her.

She walked to the back of the tenement house, creeping up with stealthy footsteps. What if she saw a strange shadow again? What if her father reprimanded her for it? She thought hard about an excuse while she walked.

There was no Ohana next to her, whom she always played with. She was mean to Koharu, then went away somewhere. She came to her father because she was lonely. Here he is.

This time she successfully arrived at the front of Ohana’s house. It is quiet and still, but if she strangled her ears, she could hear a rustling noise. She knew that flower making made that sort of sound because it uses a lot of colored paper and cloth.

As she was afraid of what people might think if she put her ear to the door, she went around to the back to put her ear to the wall instead. The sound through the walls is frustratingly muted and not enough to make out what’s going on. She searched all over the wall until she found a small hole to look through.

The hole is small and it was dimly lit inside, so she couldn’t see clearly. However, the sound could be heard more clearly than before. It was like labored, ragged breathing.

Was her father, or Ohana’s mother, not feeling well? She presses her eye against the peephole to get a better look. There she saw some people lying down. She was about to say that they must not be feeling well after all, when someone suddenly grabbed her hand.

“Shh.”

Ohana holds up a finger and gently pulls Koharu away from the wall.

“Enough, alright?”

The sight of the figures lying on their side was burned into her mind. It looks like two bodies piled on top of each other. She didn't know what it meant, but she was impatient, as if she had seen something she shouldn't have.

“I'm scared,” she said without thinking, and Ohana hugged Koharu tightly.

“Let's just go look at pretty flowers.”

“Just pretty flowers?”

“Yeah. Flowers won't disappoint Koharu-chan. They won't scare you.”

Ohana was right, after all. There was always a reason for why she was ordered not to look. Her mother's request must have some reason, but her father's command must be because Koharu isn't supposed to see it.

Ohana tells her about pretty things. She shows her beauty. What could she give back to her friend? When she pondered it...

Koharu ran toward the ocean hand-in-hand with her best friend to erase the unfamiliar and unpleasant memory.

## VI

It wasn't long after she was told that a big job had come in that she noticed a seductive smell coming from her husband, Takaharu.

He was entrusted to make a small garden of flowers for a wealthy merchant's tea room. Although he's a ronin, he's not proud to be a flower-making artisan, even though he is in a position to hold both swords. Nevertheless, the anticipation of a big payoff, something she had not had for some time, made her heart flutter.

This man remained untrustworthy even from the past.

Hagino continued to be suspicious of her husband. It was Takaharu who stole away Hagino, who had originally taken another man as her husband. Adultery, of course, was not permitted, but Takaharu used his sexual skills to bone Hagino, and erased her previous husband from this world, leaving no evidence.

The pleasure of being loved by a beautiful, cruel, powerful flower was soon replaced by the fear that the same betrayal would be turned against her. Her anxiety grew stronger as she became pregnant with his child and her morning sickness worsened, her postpartum health deteriorated, and she and her husband had less and less contact with each other.

“Are you cheating on me?” She once boldly asked Takaharu.

“Do you have any evidence for what you’re claiming?”

“Do you need to go to a hairdresser and burn incense in your robe just to make flowers?”

Her husband straightened his posture and gave Hagino a grim look.

“Flower making is a business that sells beauty. The customers pay for beauty. These are not the times where it’s good enough for an artisan to be filthy so long as the product comes out.”

When pushed on the front of her own work, Hagino had no choice but to stop talking. From then on, the fact that she could not question him directly resulted in her becoming even more frustrated.

“Play with me, mom.”

She gets angry when her child clings to her while she’s feeling pessimistic.

“I’m not in the mood right now.”

“But I got some dice from the medicine vendor.”

In Koharu’s hands are small, flimsy dice. There were the kind of dice her previous husband loved to use in cho-han-bakuchi. The house was as poor as it was washed up, and it could be said that Takaharu saved the day there. She just didn’t want this incessant anxiety.

“So, Koharu, did you do what I asked?”

A slightly bewildered expression showed up on Koharu’s face, and she shook her head.

“Dad got scary when he told me not to peek...”

“Is that so?”

When Hagino narrowed her eyes disapprovingly, her daughter ducked her head apologetically. Even gestures such as that irritated her.

“Then, does anyone else have access to the room of the person working for him?”

“...maybe the landlord.”

“Any others?”

“Some people who would come around often to ask Ohana’s mom for work before dad. Someone named Mutsuya Washizou, from Sagachou.”

“Okay, so maybe that person knows a lot about how your dad’s work is going. Koharu, you can play with Ohana-chan without worrying about your dad’s work anymore.”

Her daughter was useless, so she would just have to take care of it herself. Hagino once snuck out to sneak a look at the row house Takaharu went out to. But a woman who is not a resident of a row house stands out when she wanders around. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a figure that looked like her, but she was a thin, shadowy woman who only sort of resembled her, the kind of woman that Takaharu would have liked. She was even angrier when she found out that woman’s daughter was close to Koharu’s age.

The woman had a crafted lotus flower in her hand. It annoyed her that it was so vivid, so gorgeous in its fragility, so vivid that even if it was only for a moment, it was a sight to behold.

After about three days of asking her daughter to investigate her husband’s situation, she was growing restless. Men and women smell different. The man smells of a woman who is not his wife. After confirming the source of that smell, to not cut him off would be inexcusable.

After Takaharu went out with Koharu, Hagino left the house as well. There was something suspicious about him not allowing his daughter to peek in on him. Hagino dressed neatly and decided to first look for the store on the main street of Sagachou that Koharu had mentioned. She thought that the person who had been working with the suspected woman might know her, or at least of her.

Although the number of large stores with tile roofs and wide frontages were increasing, Mutsuya was a small store with a frontage of only two rooms. The entrance was so modest that when she stepped inside, she was blindsided. Various colorful crafted flowers were displayed separately for each season. Flowers in different seasons never bloomed at the same time. They were all artificial.

“Will you let me ask you something?”

A gray-haired man who was tending to the flowers with a careful hand, as if he were touching fresh flowers, turned around and uttered an apology.

“Did you want a set of crafted flowers for decoration?”

“So I did. Please, tell me the details.”

The man offered Hagino a seat.

“I saw a beautifully crafted lotus flower when I visited a woman’s tea room. Lotus flowers bloom only in the water and can only be viewed from the tea room as a borrowed landscape. However, these crafted lotus flowers gave off an aromatic and fragrant beauty.”

Hearing Hagino’s words, Washizou’s previously unfriendly expression suddenly softened.

“...you seem to enjoy crafted flowers.”

“Yes, that’s it. Knowing the transience of the falling flowers, we yearn for the eternity of crafted ones. This too is one of the kinds of elegance we should have.”

“Time advances on, and all things change. Crafted flowers are another example of this, but it keeps people from that transience and shows only that beauty. You had mentioned that you had seen crafted lotus flowers, right? The artisan who made that is now out of my hands.”

“That woman is...what kind of artisan is she?”

Hagino’s question had Washizou brooding for a moment.

“She has a skilled hand and a good heart.”

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?”

“So she is. As far as her flower making is concerned, it can be said that she has something beautiful in her heart. If she wasn’t going down the wrong path, she could create something even more splendid.”

As she listened to his story, she sensed that he had an emotional attachment for the artisan he held close. She had a filthy feeling that that woman was cajoling this merchant as well. Pushing that thought away,

“You certainly want to ask something of that woman.”

Hagino presents some money wrapped up in a small silk wrapper.

“I believe it’s twice the market value.”

Washizou thought for a moment to inspect the inside, then returned half.

“You really want to ask after this artisan, don’t you? Let’s discuss it, then.”

Hagino mentally cried out in joy. This merchant will be glad to have a new reason to see his lover. Now all that was left was to throw this man into the coupling spot, and it was bound to result in carnage.

## VII

Her mother told her that she didn’t have to watch her father anymore, so Koharu no longer had to suffer when she came to Ohana’s row house.

She is more than happy with that. She had no intention of peeking into her father’s work, and since that day, her mother hadn’t asked her to check on him again. Her mother became even colder, but Ohana helped relieve her loneliness.

Beautiful flowers bloom not only along the water's edge like rivers, ponds, and the sea, but even in the hidden shadows of a rear tenement row house. However, for some reason Ohana intentionally kept taking Koharu far away from the row house where their parents work, which she found odd.

She's sure Ohana was also told by her mother not to see her doing her work. It also explains why she tried to stop Koharu before when she asked about the situation at the workplace.

She walked into Ohana's house, which her father used as his workplace, and out came Ohana.

"Let's go far away today!"

She smiles and tries to tug at Koharu's hand. At that time, however, the door to Ohana's house opened and her father's face appeared. His hand beckoned her over, and,

"I forgot my tools at home. I have a tube with a small knife for crafting in a drawer in the closet, and I want you to bring it to me," he said.

Her father had never forgotten his work tools before. While she was thinking about how unusual this was, she rejects Ohana's offer in order to return home again instead. However, Ohana would not allow Koharu to go, and she shook her head obstinately.

"I think you should stay here."

She doesn't listen to her assertion.

"I think you should stay here today, Koharu-chan."

She couldn't believe her ears.

"You'll be safe here."

There was a frantic look in her eyes.

"Nothing's changed for me. I want to see pretty flowers and play with Koharu-chan."

"I want that too, it's just..."

This was the second time she saw her friend act differently. The first time was when she tried to peek into her father's workspace. Now she was trying to go back to grab her father's work tools.

"We have to stay here so that I can protect you."

"Protect me, what do you..."

An older man passes by the bewildered Koharu. She followed his back with her eyes, thinking he was the merchant who worked with the flower makers, and the man stopped just shy of the door. Like she had the other day, he seemed to be peeking in.

"Koharu-chan, don't you want to play sugoroku?"

Ohana tugged on her sleeve to draw her attention back to her.

“Play sugoroku?”

“You should have some dice.”

“I do, but you want to do it now?”

“If we don’t do it now, we can’t move forward.”

Koharu was astounded by Ohana’s words. In her pocket were the two small dice she got from the mysterious-looking medicine vendor from when she lost her way on the path forward. Now that the autumn winds are blowing in the relationship between her mother and father, it was her friend who saved her from coming to a standstill in her anxiety.

At that time, she could see her mother’s figure at the row house gate. Her mother had her hand inside her pocket, clasping onto something from what she could see. Her eyes are bloodshot, and she doesn’t even seem to see her daughter in front of her.

“Let’s start the sugoroku.”

Koharu clutches the dice as if saying a prayer, then throws them high up in the air. Suddenly the wind blows, engulfing the area in the fragrance of flowers. Koharu and the others find themselves on a giant sugoroku board.

## VIII

“This is...”

A dice as tall as Koharu and the others was just about to finish rolling in front of them. Each dice changes into a seasonal flower, and the different flowers are spectacular as it rolls.

“Koharu-chan, you got a three.”

The first die is a one, the second a two.

The sugoroku board, then, has a “starting point” and a “finish.” Koharu’s sugoroku began within one square of her mother’s. If she looked closely, she could see countless paths extending in all directions on the board. Each is intersecting and moving away from each other, converging and diverging.

“Amazing, right...?”

Ohana looks on at the board and holds her hand over the countless intersecting path.

“The finish is in the house.”

Several of the paths lead to a mass that resembles the row house Ohana lives in. First, the owner of Mutsuya was approaching the finish. With each stop at a square the owner, who was a young boy, grew up and took a wife. The square is bright, and it is surrounded by beautiful flowers.

Koharu felt jealous while looking at the distant view. Although it is normal in this world for people to marry the person who their parents decided they would marry, it is not uncommon for people to fall in love and stay together until death. She suddenly wondered how her parents got married.

On every sugoroku, the figure of a strange man flickers. Stare and he disappears, avert your eyes and he appears. By the time she had come to believe it was the medicine vendor, he was disappearing.

There are many roads that intersect with Washizou, but one of them is particularly dark in color. Even Koharu didn't know what was there. There was a thick cover of ivy and tree clusters from where Washizou's path separates from Ohana's mother, Kei.

“Why are Washizou-san and Ohana-chan's mother on the same path?”

“I don't know...”

Another one of Kei's paths crosses with a father's path and Ohana is born, and soon the father's path peters out. Koharu had heard that Ohana's father had lost his life to an epidemic when she was little. Ohana watches her mother's piece progress with a dark look on her face.

There is one piece that goes after hers.

“Dad...”

The path taken by Takaharu is perpetually accompanied by a suspicious black shadow. The closer he gets, the more Kei's piece changes to a red color. That piece there must not be allowed to catch up with her friend's mother. Koharu tries to roll the dice out of impatience, but the dice won't move if it isn't her turn. However, Takaharu rolls the dice again and again and proceeds.

“He's cheating!”

Koharu was indignant, but her father is not the kind of person who cheats when playing with his daughter. His profile was covered by something ominous she had never seen before. Her mother is following fervently after her father. Koharu glanced at her friend's profile and saw that she seemed sad, her eyes cast downward.

She couldn't permit her father to go to her friend's mother.

Washizou approaches Koharu's impatient piece.

“Koharu, may I borrow some of your dice?” He asked, “I want to help your mother and father.”

“You just want to be the first to get to the finish, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes,” Washizou said without hesitation, “I don’t care when it’s over. I’ve seen Kei grow up, I’ve even seen my grandchild’s face. All I have to do now is to get rid of the demon possessing us.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was me who abandoned Ohana’s mother. After failing in business in Oushuu Shiroishi, I accrued debts and fled to the capital, leaving my wife and Kei behind. I had planned to come back for them someday, but it never came to pass.”

*Clink*, sound the teeth on the sword.

“The truth is revealed...”

The medicine vendor stood next to Koharu.

“That was so selfish!” Koharu exclaimed.

Gripping the dice tightly, Ohana kneeled down in front of Koharu, who had her back to Washizou, and told her to lend him the dice. Koharu became sad; she was taking the side of a man she didn’t know well, instead of her own.

“I thought Ohana-chan was my friend.”

“It doesn’t matter what you say. For Koharu-chan’s sake, we need to let this person go first.”

It’s the look of desperation that she wears on her face when Koharu does something different than what she wants.

“Is that really the face you’re going to make...”

She knew she was her best friend, she was just being selfish. Koharu was upset.

“Look at that over there.”

What Koharu sees as she looks in the direction Ohana points in leaves her astonished. As he approaches Ohana’s house at the finish, her father, Takaharu, is transformed into something grotesque. Several huge tails sprout from the back of his kanagashi, his ears on his head, and fangs are peeking from his lips.

The ends of those tails lead to the sugoroku board that Koharu and the others all take, and to each square on it.

“What is that...?”

“That must be the mononoke’s shape. The nine-tailed sugoroku is the mononoke’s truth.”

Koharu started at the sudden voice near her ear.

“M-medicine vendor...?”

“However, the reason has not yet been answered.”

“The reason...?”

“Yes, the reason, or the state of the heart.”

It was too hard for Koharu. However, she understood that she couldn't stop her father if she didn't do this.

“That mononoke over there is a nine-tailed fox spirit from China, otherwise said to be called Tamamo no Mae. It flew from the land of China and was imprisoned in Nasu, but just before it was sealed, it scattered its body across the world, scheming to one day be resurrected.”

Takaharu's piece finally arrived at Ohana's house. A ronin, transformed into an apparition, puts his hands on the door, but it will not open. Washizou and Hagino catch up with him. The moment they reach the door, Ohana's house is engulfed in a fierce blaze.

“Grief and remorse, envy and hatred...these are the source of the fox spirit's power.”

The voice of the medicine vendor resounds quietly.

The paths taken by the four people emerge in the flames. A parent's regret, a man's greed, a woman's jealousy, a mother's hesitation, all of them come together to transform into a fox-headed, humanoid mononoke.

“Aren't you going to roll the dice?”

“And what am I waking up by rolling them?”

“There is nothing to fear. You can face the truth and reason.”

“Koharu-chan.”

In Ohana's hand was a single die.

“The medicine vendor said that he could help me when I lost my way, and I couldn't move on. But now I want to help my mom.”

A tear rolled down her cheek. The two players throw the three dice onto the board together. The dice create a path of flowers, through which the medicine vendor leaps as if dancing. Tamamo no Mae notices his presence and attacks, clad in white flames.

The medicine vendor's swordsmanship was shocking, and he had Tamamo no Mae cornered. At that time, however, the flame-clad fox spirit stroked his face. There was the face of the ronin, cloaked in a demonic spirit.

The flame transforms into a long sword, and his stance changes completely. As they cut at each other violently, it was now Tamamo no Mae who had the medicine vendor cornered.

“Dad, stop it!” Koharu shouts without thinking.

When the mononoke wearing her father’s face glared at her, a chill ran through her body, and Koharu crumpled to her knees. Ohana caught her in a panic and called for her mother. The face of Tamamo no Mae, who had kicked away the medicine vendor as he stood in the way in order to protect Koharu and the others, changed to Kei’s.

Abandoned by her father, she lost her husband early, and for the first time in her hardships, a man had feelings for her. The pleasure and guilty feelings of this shock her soul. Tamamo no Mae’s face changes to Hagino’s. Jealousy at her husband’s infidelity and anger at Kei swirl as a whirlpool inside of her. Then Washizou. Feeling guilty for abandoning his wife and child and surviving on his own, he is shaken by his feelings for his daughter and grandchild, whom he reunites with in the capital. Tamamo no Mae, obsessed with the sexual appetite of Fujikawa Takaharu, seeks to collect the fragments of its own soul that have been captured by the souls of Kei and her family.

*You can’t do this!* Koharu cried out from her heart, *I’m going to go see the flowers with myself, and my family, and my friend and with my mother!*

The fox spirit was roughing up its captives to silence them, but the medicine vendor stepped in to take advantage of the opening. The faces of Hagino and Kei are pushed out like shields before a blade.

“To resurrect the mononoke is to share and break the hearts of people. To seal the mononoke is the heart that connects and cares for people...the reason is revealed.”

*Clink*, sound the teeth of the lion on the pommel of the sword as they snap shut. A snaking golden pattern emerges from brown skin. His eyes turn a deep red and his hair, silver. Then his hand is drawing an enormous sword.

Without changing his expression, the medicine vendor flashes his sword, and with a high-pitched scream, the fox’s head flies off.

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The water’s edge in spring is filled with vivid signs of life. What is most wonderful is the fleeting yet powerful fragrance and color released by the flowers.

“Koharu-chan, there are seaside mulberry flowers blooming over here, too.”

The two young girls are sauntering through the greenery in search of spring flowers.

“While crafted flowers are good, living ones are also splendid, right?”

Hagino spreads out her wrapping cloth under the spring sun, arranging the bento she prepared from home. Takaharu picks a flower a short distance away and writes down its appearance in a notebook.

“If I’m being honest, I had a gap too. I had an ulterior motive.”

Kei bows her head to Hagino.

“But it was our family who took advantage of it. It was really shallow of me to try to hurt you in a roundabout way when I could have just asked them directly. I know it’s not enough to say that everyone was foolish, but...”

Hagino let out a sigh.

“I might have made mistakes whether or not there was such a thing as a mononoke. That’s what Kei’s father taught me.”

“I guess that means we start another round of sugoroku.”

“So we shall. Hopefully the road to the next ‘finish’ is a fun one for those kids over there, right?”

They looked at each other and smiled, setting aside their mixed feelings.