

First Story

~Kamaitachi~

Tokuemon

A street entertainer performing in the style of Mikawa Manzai. He learns his craft from his severe father, Chuuemon. What is manzai? Originally, it was an art of chanting and dancing to exorcize the beasts, insects, and diseases that plagued the farmlands, and subdue the spirits of deer and crabs that ravaged the rice fields. The style most popular in the Mikawa and Owari provinces is called Mikawa Manzai.

Kumano Priest of Genkai

A shrewd man who steals and commits crimes, and continues in his travels with a nonchalant look about him. What is a Kumano priest? In the Kumano region of Ise, people are given a talisman from a large shrine such as Mt Hakusan, and travel to adherents in various countries to pray and perform tricks to earn a few coins.

Kugutsushi

A Buzen puppeteer. Within the imperial palace's Board of Retainers, they perform kagura (Shinto music and dance) of threads, using musical notes as mending with the divine authority of the god of war Hachiman to exorcize misfortune and bring good luck. They perform a puppet show while raising a ritual prayer.

Kakubeejishi

With his son Yohei, he performs the lion dance art of the Echigo region.

Medicine Vendor

In possession of the taima sword. He appears whenever there are signs of a mononoke.

Kamaitachi

People use this by holding a bamboo tube and chanting a spell. When done, a fox suddenly comes from the tube to answer questions. (Inoue Enryou “Explanations on Superstitions”)

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Year by year, we wish for a prosperous world

This morning we welcome in the first day of a new spring

Truly an auspicious season...

The sound of drums and chanting resound throughout the hut, with its crumbling walls and the cold winter air streaming in through the roof. A pot with a chipped rim hangs over the hearth, providing at least a little warmth. The Mikawa Manzai street entertainer, Tokumon, faces his

father Chuueemon as his deep voice chants New Year's greetings. Tokuemon matches his rhythm by striking a tsuzumi drum. The sound was supposed to align with the chanting and dance, but it wavered slightly. At that moment, his father charged and struck Tokuemon's cheek hard.

"How many times do I have to tell you?"

The stench of his father's sweat and grime mixed with the stench of his own blood.

"How are you going to make money with that sort of performance!"

He knew why the sound shook.

"I'm hungry..."

Before he could finish, he was struck on the opposite cheek.

"Donors don't care about your empty stomach. I'm hungry too. Go make some rice."

"You want me to make some when there's no more rice."

"If there's no more, go buy some."

"Out of money too..."

Thereupon Chuueemon scooped up boiling water from the pot and, without hesitation, flung the ladle at his son's face. Tokuemon cries out and tries to make his escape.

"If there's no more rice, go buy some. If there's no money, go make some. If you can't make money, why not just steal it? How many times do I need to repeat myself?"

The steam within the hut rises, and he can see the face of the ugly, aging man across the hazy landscape. His yellowed teeth are bared, and incessant abuse pours down from between them. It is a scene that has repeated countless times for as long as he could remember.

He wasn't thinking. He couldn't think at all anymore as his mind hollowed out. All the pain and fear fade away, and in resignation, he would for forgiveness. That would have made his father feel better, and all he would have to do is be careful not to disobey him.

And yet this day was different. The thrashings were strong and the reprimands neverending. The pain continued to reverberate through the void in his soul. Before long, it became a black torrent that began to swirl in that supposedly empty spirit and erupt from that hole all at once.

"This is..."

Something was lifting up in front of his father. It was not a ladle that had been used to draw the boiling water, but a long, thin, silver ornament. The tip was honed to a tapered point; to be stabbed with such a thing would be a death sentence even if it didn't hit a vital point.

Tokuemon's rage and torrential fear engulfed him.

The next thing he knew, his father was gone, leaving only a dark puddle of blood to spread inside the hut.

I

Youths clad in trailing hakama and eboshi hats sing and dance to the sound of the tsuzumi drum. Tōshiyō Daigongen, the sovereign of the nation, granted permission to travel throughout the seventeen provinces of the Kanto region and eventually the rest of Japan, as a result of his inspection of the country and his efforts to coordinate the affairs of the region. The drum is the source of the music, and is used as a tool to celebrate all things beneath the heavens.

And there is the entertainer who devotedly performs Mikawa Manzai.

“...may your family be happy and prosperous for generations to come.”

Tokuemon bowed his head low as the manzai song finished, placing a shuugibukoro envelope there. He confirms its weight and hurriedly tamps down his smug expression. Waiting for his next turn, the Kumano priest directed an irritated glare at him, telling him to make room.

Normally, the “rude” performers who come to sell their craft are detested. They can’t stay in any village, nor rest in any main house, even if they wish for lodgings on their journey; however, the new year served as an exception. The wealthy invite in the street performers to purge the new year of its wickedness and bring in good fortune.

“Performers who have concluded their presentation, please move off to the side.”

The village headman’s clerk offers a polite greeting. This was an unexpected level of hospitality. The performers are taken up to the main house and offered food and sake. It means that there was a special celebration happening at the house. For those bound to their villages, the traveling performers do more than just dispel wickedness; they also carry away that evil that has attached itself and bring in good fortune.

“...the country bumpkin sows the seeds and the crows come to dig them up. Learn this well, don’t pick at other people’s fields, to keep the nation safe and secure...”

The Kumano Shintoist of Genkai ended his *ahodara* sutra and came towards Tokuemon with sweat beading on his ruddy face, belying the cold of the new spring. Priests are granted the sacred symbols of great shrines such as Ise, Kumano, and Mt Haku, and travel to meet adherents across the land. They perform prayers and other tricks at these festivals to earn a few coins.

"The master of the Kanke house, he's generous don't you think?"

"A house with the blessing of the pipe fox, you mean?"

While inspecting his father's belongings, he learned of a village in Mikawa where people head for the new year. Near the border of Shinano, that village's leader is hospitable to street performers and is the wealthiest farmer in the country. The source of that wealth is the "pipe", also known as the izuna, or kamaitachi. Tokuemon did not know why his father knew about it, but he saw in his notes that it was a must-visit place during the new year, so he traveled there.

"Young man, is this your first time here?"

"I heard about it from my father."

"Didn't the previous generation of manzai performers, Chuemon, pass away?"

"Yeah, within the last year."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

The shintoist chanted a stanza of the Amitabha sutra in a gravelly voice.

"I'll present him with an offering."

"I didn't ask you to."

"Do you think street performers only perform when asked to?"

The monk's eyes squinted, as if they were about to be buried in his flesh. "It is the performer who pushes for the money," he said.

"I hail from Genkai. As fellow performers, let's stay on good terms with each other."

This was not the time to become careless; Tokuemon was on guard. The reason the villagers don't rent their main building to the street performers was because they are seen as imprudent criminals. People say the same about him and his father. They watch for an opportune moment from someone nearby and take the fruits of their labor. They pillage and rape, then continue their travels to the next village without a care in the world.

Tokuemon never knew his mother's face. His father had told him that he had picked him up during his travels, but he was sure that man had had his way with her in some village then came and stole him away once she gave birth to him.

"I can't wait to enjoy myself at the feast."

While Kugutsushi demonstrates his craft in front of the gate, Genkai rests his elbows on a rock by the roadside and watches on, bored.

"Was that Mikawa Manzai? Your old man's craft was a big deal, you know."

The style most popular in the Mikawa and Owari provinces is called Mikawa Manzai. Originally, it was an art of chanting and dancing to exorcize the beasts, insects, and diseases that plagued

the farmlands, and subdue the spirits of deer and crabs that ravaged the rice fields. The spells and dances were transformed into comical chants and gestures.

In front of the gate, Kakubeijishi continues to perform acrobatics for young children.

"We have you from Mikawa, me from Kishuu, a puppeteer from Buzen, a lion dancer from Echigo...all the arts of the world have come together. There's even a medicine vendor. I wonder if that guy is from Etchuu?"

The priest says such things easily, and yet the village was still as death despite it being New Year's Day, and the ostentatious kadomatsu before the headman's gate, which looked as tall as the headman himself, seemed to be empty.

"There seems to have been an epidemic."

Tokuemon tore off a plantain leaf growing on the roadside and put it in his mouth.

"That's why the medicine peddling crowd has been loitering around since New Year's."

The medicine vendor appeared to be a young man. His face features makeup not unlike *kumadori* markings and he wears a strange, flamboyant robe that resembles swirling clouds.

"That guy's medicine is the profitable kind."

"What have you seen?"

"Ah. I've been keeping an eye on the road from the Totoumi border, and it seems he helps the sick wherever he goes. The medicine in that wicker box is something else."

It was unseasonably warm for the new year. Tokuemon wiped the sweat from his brow. The Kumano priest found his gaze drawn to the medicine vendor's wicker box.

"We will now begin the New Year's banquet. If everyone could please head to the parlor."

The young proprietor invited the traveling performers into the estate.

II

His father had never brought him to this estate. The arrival of the New Year's street performers was one of the most exciting times of year. And yet, for the past few years, he had been ordered to stay only in the village for New Year's. He had once asked his father to introduce him as a New Year's guest, but he just beat him and that was the end of it.

The Kumano priest was the first to kick off his *geta* as he headed up to the main building. Tokuemon tidied up his tools together with Kakubeijishi's child. The lion tamer's child looked up at Tokuemon curiously, as if he had never seen Mikawa Manzai attire before.

"Is this the first time you've come here, kid?" Tokuemon asked, and the boy shook his head.

"We get a lot of money when we come here, big brother."

"Does your old man give you a reward?"

"He won't give it to me," The boy said irately, then chuckled.

The boy wouldn't utter a word when his father was present, but once his figure disappeared into the main house, he suddenly became quite talkative.

"My name's Yohei, " the lion tamer's child gave his name.

Echigo was a rice-producing region, but the traveling performers had no land to cultivate. He wasn't allowed to play with the village children and had to practice his craft from dawn until dusk. Doing well got no acknowledgement, but a blunder led to a beating. The beatings were unbearable, so he tried desperately to perform his craft well, but there was no reward for a job well done.

"He can't do that," Yohei spat.

"Since I was a kid, my old man took me here and there to tell funny stories. I never once thought it was fun."

As he heard Tokuemon's words, the boy began to laugh once more.

"I guess all traveling performers are like that."

"I wouldn't know. I don't talk to other performers much."

"Me neither."

Tokuemon also had three younger brothers. One died as an infant, and the remaining two were sold off elsewhere. If they were nearby, they'd be no better than Kakubeijishi's child. He once thought he would rather live in a barn, sheltered away from the wind and rain, than be treated as a slave by his father or spend his days wandering through a hard journey in exile.

"Not normally these days."

The boy looked surprised when Tokuemon said this.

"What's the fun in that?"

"The fun is my old man going to hell."

The boy let out a cackle, but the moment his father's form came from the gate was the moment his laughter stopped, and his expression returned to that of a cold, gloomy mask, putting on a performance.

He noticed the medicine vendor watching their exchange.

The estate stretched far and wide, and the floor was so polished that it almost seemed to reflect his face. Signs of winter still had a marked presence at the border of Mikawa and Shinshuu during the new year, but the camellias still glowed crimson in the cold air.

"This way, please."

An elderly man who seemed to be the head clerk opened the shoji door for the reception hall and invited the guests in. It seemed that the banquet was already prepared; the zen tables were set with abalone, kelp, and other such charms, along with a cask of sake.

"Well, well, well."

The Kumano priest grinned widely.

"Their care and attention only seems to look up year after year. This should be more than enough to purify the defilements and disasters and replace them with happiness and prosperity."

The street performers went for the food as soon as the head clerk took his leave.

There were many delicious delicacies unique to the area, such as kari-mari, miso-pickled melon cucumber, hebo-meshi rice cooked with hornet larva, and arame-maki, or grilled goby wrapped in seaweed. It was called "oogochisou," or the large feast, and they could eat as much as wanted of the main dish made of radish, taro, and tofu simmered in a large pot.

"Oi, manzai!"

Yohei's drunken father came over to pester him.

"So what happened to your old man? Heard he kicked the bucket."

"Yeah, he passed away last winter."

"Passed away, yeah right. He kicked the bucket. I don't see a performer leaving this world with that much dignity. They usually just die," the man said with steady eyes as he brought his nose close to Tokuemon's shoulder.

"You, you reek of blood."

"W-what is this?"

Tokuemon quickly put some distance between them.

"You killed him, didn't you? Wouldn't blame you if you did, mind. But that bastard is not the sort who dies of some disease."

"No telling what might happen on the road."

"Yeah, that's true enough. Anything can happen."

Yohei's father clicked his tongue and sat across from Tokuemon. Next to them the medicine vendor silently used his chopsticks. While the Kumano priest and Kugutsushi seemed to be old acquaintances, as they started hurling insults at each other in loud voices before too long, there was no indication that the medicine vendor was exchanging words with anyone.

The medicine vendor sat with an upright posture, a tantou blade placed by his side. If he recalled, blades of any kind were supposed to be kept by the entrance, but evidently this man ignored that. Traveling performers, of course, are not allowed to carry swords, but they usually keep at least a dagger on them for self-defense and daily use.

Still, it was a strange dagger. The curve was nonexistent, the scabbard was inlaid with beads of various colors, and the pommel was decorated with a lion oni. Those eyes seemed to stare right into Tokuemon's soul, and he reflexively averted his gaze.

"Hey, nice tool you've got there," Yohei's father said rudely as he tried to touch the blade. The medicine vendor didn't even spare the man a fleeting glance.

"What? It's nothing to worry about."

However, as the man's hand reached out, he was left to stroke at the tatami mat in vain. The blade was no longer there. The medicine vendor sat there quietly, showing no sign of having put the dagger away.

"You've got some nerve to use such a strange trick." Yohei's father clicked his tongue a second time.

III

"That's your fault," the Kumano priest chided, "it's taboo to mess with a person's business tools."

"Are flashy knives required for selling medicine? Besides, there are no taboos in our profession."

Kakubeijishi's retort was disagreeable before he left the room, saying he was headed to the privy. However, opening the shoji door simply revealed a corridor with more doors. No matter how many times he opened that shoji door, he couldn't leave the garden.

When Yohei's father turned around, he noticed the other street performers giving him puzzled looks.

"What are you doing, flailing in front of the garden like that? Is your heavy drinking causing you to lose your mind?" the Kumano priest said teasingly.

"Come bring me a camellia from the garden, why don't you?"

"Do performers regularly employ each other for free?"

"If you bring it to me, I'll pay you half of the money I made today."

It was no surprise that the mention of money changed the street performer's tune. The Kumano priest bravely headed to the corridor. However, after putting his hand on the shoji door and exiting to the hallway, he just turned around and around in the same place, never making it down to the garden in front of him.

"Wha...?"

The Kumano priest kicked the door out of frustration. His foot slipped on something just before it could hit the door, though, and the priest fell down in a heap. There was something odd about this room. Tokuemon realized it as he was trying to run out himself.

A cold breeze grazed the tip of his nose, and he stopped in a hurry. He touched his nose with his finger and saw it come away sticky with blood.

For those living on the streets, sensing danger was as important a skill as sniffing out money. It's where bandits gather, where beasts lie in wait, where officials raid, and those with murderous intent aim their weapons at their rivals...

They can smell the hostility in the body odor of those who wish to do harm, and if they can't hear them coming, they will disappear like dew on the side of the road. It was a skill those in the performer trade had to learn before even their craft.

It was awful.

If something went wrong, they had to find a way to survive. If one could save themselves alone, they'd sacrifice anyone to do so. More to the point, they might end up sacrificing an arm and a leg. That was how performers learned to make a hasty retreat, and hone their instincts to preserve their lives. Of course, even when he had been put in a good mood by the lavish banquet and high compensation, he could never forget the suspicion that it was all a trap.

He was sure the others had survived so long because they could do the same.

Those street performers were all rendered speechless from shock.

"Everyone."

It was the Kumano priest who opened his mouth to speak.

"We may have wandered under the heavens, and seen or felt things not of this world. We know that there are strange happenings in this world. That's why we came here, is it not?"

In the meanwhile, Yohei's father was checking the doorways on all sides of the reception hall. The confusion from a short while ago vanished, revealing the highwayman's determination to escape this predicament.

However, those keen senses weren't enough to see through this trick. Beyond the unopened shoji screens and the uncrossable corridor, the bright rays of the new spring's sun poured in. The performers all looked at each other as they sunk into silence.

"Hey you, you seem suspicious."

Kugutsushi peered into the face of one unmoved medicine vendor.

"You're the only one here I haven't seen before. Where did you come from? How do you know about this estate?"

The medicine vendor sits upright, silent.

"I go wherever there are signs of a mononoke."

"Mononoke?"

"What is that? Like an ayakashi?"

"They are different things. An ayakashi works on the logic of another world as they exist in this one. 'Mono' is a savage god, 'ke' is a curse placed on a human. The state of the matter, the state of the heart, these things act as a trigger, and when they meet with an ayakashi, it results in a mononoke."

"And what's that got to do with what's happening here?"

Kugutsushi surveyed the hall with an unpleasant look; however, the new year's sunlight shines through, with no hint of any apparition.

"Is it that...mononoke, or whatever it is, is that what's trapping us? If so, how do we get out of here? Hey, you know something don't you? That's why you look so composed."

The medicine vendor barely saw Kugutsushi, "Where there's an entrance, there's an exit," he seemed to mutter.

"So then, where is that exit?"

The medicine vendor gently brought his lips up to the intimidated priest's ear, whispering something or another.

The priest frowned as he disengaged, "The truth and reason? I don't get it," and threw his disguise on the shelf.

Tokuemon quietly stole a glance at the medicine vendor. From the time he entered this estate, both his presence and expression have remained unchanged. This man knows what's about to happen. He also understands why.

If he wanted to save himself, best to follow those who know the way. Although, it helps if the path is reliable, but if it's the case that he was following someone who lied and bluff and hid his self-satisfied smirk, it was a death sentence.

Can I bet on this man? Well...

There were still too many unknowns. The street performers were gathered here and trapped. Anyone dressed in such a flashy outfit was trying to conceal their desolate heart. Since shabby is not appreciated, the surface is beautifully mended while the lining is full of frayed edges.

But this medicine vendor...

Tokuemon stared at the cuff of his robe. There was no sign of any travel dust on it. He wasn't sure how long it had been with him on the road, but it even looked to be newly tailored. At that moment, a cuff was thrust before his eyes.

"I-I wasn't staring!"

"Behold."

"What?"

"That shape, that truth, that reason."

The pattern on the cuff was a swirling vortex before turning into a giant eye, glaring at Tokuemon. Tokuemon cries out and falls on his backside, while the Kumano priest laughs at the sight.

"Is it so frightening? That's alright, I'll just take your robe when you die."

Even in times such as this, he couldn't set aside such greed. On hearing this, though, Tokuemon regained his composure.

"Then I'll just take that big rosary you wear around your neck when *you* die. They look like dirty wood, but I bet some of them are gold."

The priest's expression stiffened in an instant, "It would take dumb luck for you to overcome my strength. I won't make the same mistake as your old man."

At that moment, there were signs of another person down the hall. As the street performers prepared themselves for whatever it was, a handsome man with a large build, different from the head clerk, appeared. He wears a black fox-looking mask and stands behind a shoji door. The street performers quickly prostrated themselves before that man, contrary to their expectations to voice their objections.

"New Year's blessings upon you, Seshuu-sama."

Realizing that he is the head of the estate, Tokuemon hastened to put his own hands on the tatami mat.

"We are truly grateful for the kind hospitality we have received this year, though it seems that we've fallen prey to a mysterious trick. We humbly request the master of the house to take pity on us and help us."

His voice, though theatrical, was strained.

The master of the estate, who was called Seshuu-sama, began to speak slowly from under his mask.

"We are the Kanke family. During the past new year, someone stole the heirloom pipe."

The street performers look at each other at the words of the head of the house.

"The Kanke family has been able to flourish thanks to that divine beast, the pipe fox. When our house is prosperous, our village is prosperous, and when we are healthy, the village people do not suffer from the calamity of wounds and diseases."

Still, the master's voice strengthened.

"This past new year, a villain amongst the performers stole a family heirloom."

Tokuemon didn't come here during the past new year so it didn't concern him. However, the others in the room kept glancing at each other, checking their demeanor.

"The heirloom you mentioned, what is it?" Tokuemon inquired in a hushed voice as the elder lion tamer rubbed his head against the tatami mat next to him. He was unsettled by the feeling of the medicine vendor's eyes on him as he asked the question, but he was still curious about the heirloom regardless.

"It is the treasure of the Kanke family, so it must be related to the Kamaitachi."

Tokuemon had heard of an ayakashi called Kamaitachi before. It was a violent gale with the power to tear apart whatever body it came in contact with. Walking in the mountains can sometimes result in injuries that go unnoticed. Most of those injuries are caused by the sharp thorns and needles of the plants, trees, and insects, but they can cause deeper wounds that are harder to explain. Those people traveling the mountains and main roads called it "izuna" or "kamaitachi".

A small smile seemed to surface on the medicine vendor's lips, but it quickly disappeared.

"Anyway."

The Kumano priest turned towards everyone present with a scowl.

"There is a criminal within this estate, and unless we smoke him out, we will be unable to leave."

"What if you're the criminal, though?"

Kugutsushi throws out a jeer, "You're just trying to get away with it by saying the right things. The power of the Yuya Gongen could reveal your various misdeeds," he retorted with wide eyes.

"That's your side of the story."

The pair glared at each other, and the head of the estate brought up his hand in order to hold them back. His sleeve fell back to reveal a sinewy arm. That arm was covered in countless scars.

"I don't intend to punish the one who stole the izuna's pipe," the master said.

"The spirits of the mountain, or ayakashi, or whatever you wish to call them, do not use their power for us alone. If you are worthy to use the power of the izuna with us, we would like you to share in its glory."

This set Tokueemon on his guard, and he wondered if the sweet words were meant to get the thief to admit to his crime. The same was true for the other street performers.

"Then Senshuu-sama, how are we to share in that prosperity? Shall we find out who stole the master's treasure, and make him confess to the crime?"

The master shook his head at the priest's words.

"It is because of their skills that my ancestors were able to reach this land and achieve such prosperity in the past. Only those who are worthy of the people's respect and are skilled enough to befriend the izuna may leave this room."

"You mean we win or lose by our performance..."

With that being the case, the street performers dispersed to the four corners of the room, glaring at each other.

"You'll have to wait."

The medicine vendor stood in the middle of the reception hall unnoticed as this was called out.

"The presentations could be performed in any order. There is always something to see."

"Normally, just performing at your own convenience is not an option, or...indeed, it could be. However, if we're going to judge the relative merits of the performances, we need an audience. No matter how exceptional my technique, I don't think they would enjoy it."

The Kumano priest surveys the other street performers with a doubtful look.

"When our ancestors gained the power of the pipe fox, Izuna himself recognized our skill and lent us his power. This reception hall is the place Izuna inhabits. If he approves that skill, you will be given grace."

With those words, the master's figure disappeared down the hall.

"What, is he just looking on from afar?"

The priest spat.

"I thought you said such hateful language could be overheard?"

"I didn't say who, did I?" Kugutsushi said nastily, and the priest frowned at the retort.

The pair glared at each other once more, and the first thing they did was demonstrate their skills. It was the puppeteer who made the first move. The two-shaku child doll begins to dance in time with the puppeteer's handiwork. The medicine vendor narrows his eyes in interest.

"Our puppet graciously inherits the lineage of the mikagura dance from the imperial palace's board of retainers. I call on the divine grace of Hachiman to purify the calamity that has fallen on Seshuu-sama and invite good fortune. If it's the case that this competition is to happen, then let me show you the secrets of my art."

Kugutsushi began chanting in a low roar. It sounded like Hachiman's prayer of invocation. The strings controlling the puppet disappear, and the puppet turns into a one-man show.

A man is trying to steal something in the public eye. The child doll then changes to sport a beard and a shaved head. The Kumano priest's face changes complexion. It looked just like him.

The puppet, that had been changed into the priest, searches around the estate and takes a roundabout path behind the storehouse. There was a small shrine located there, and the Kumano priest, after having thrust his hand inside it, gently took something out of it. It was a dark, thin, brush-sized pipe.

"What a great performance. As expected, he's the criminal."

"Dad, that's a puppet you know."

"...I knew that. Shut up."

The elder lion tamer glared at him, and his cub shrunk his neck away as if frightened. When he caught a glimpse of the scabbard of a short sword within Tokuemon's robe, though, the panicked look disappeared, and a small smile replaced it.

The puppet, disguised as the Kumano priest, steals the pipe from the shrine and begins to perform tricks in front of the estate, before a small raven begins to cling to it. The raven pecks at the puppet dressed as the Kumano priest with its beak and talons. Finally, the puppet's disguise was peeled off, and Kugutsushi covered it in a shroud for protection as it returned to its original form.

"W-what the hell are you doing to my business tools?"

Blood flowed from Kugutsushi's head where the raven pecked at him.

"If you want to voice a complaint, you should first repent for trying to pin the crime on me with your half-hearted puppet show. I am the one who brings the blessings of the Kumano Sanzan to the nations. It is before the divine blessing of Kumano that warriors stand to swear their oaths."

He seemed to wiggle his beard with pride, as if asking if he knew the reason why.

"The gods of Kumano don't ever tolerate lies. How dare you falsely accuse me, a servant of that god?"

The raven took on the form of the priest's Kumano amulet and returned to him. Tokueemon was inwardly surprised to see that. Although the worshippers of Kumano claim to have mysterious spiritual powers, he had figured that they were all just pretty words.

"That's it. Now, atone for your deception."

He threw the amulet up in the air and it became a giant bird this time, chasing around Kugutsushi.

"I'm not going to be trapped in this horrible place with you people. I'll take my defeat!"

Kugutsushi held his puppet close and admitted defeat.

"Superiority is determined by the purity of one's artistic craft, or the muddy waters of simmering greed..."

VI

"Well, he's toppled it."

Yohei's father, who had been watching with his head resting on his arms, gets up. The giant bird opens its beak wide in an attempt to finish it off. As the jet black edge pierced the front of the puppet, its four limbs scattered.

"We're next. Are you ready for this?"

He then looked at Tokuemon as if in challenge. The idea of being prepared or anything bewildered Tokuemon. It was explained that those who excel in their performance would be the ones who could escape this reception hall with Izuna's blessing. The puppeteer and the priest may have divine power behind them, but his Mikawa Manzai was just a celebration with auspicious words.

Rage welled up within him again.

If his father had such an art, he should have dropped a hint. In the end, he was a man who only cared about satisfying his own greed. Anyway, if he wanted to get out of here alive, he needed to present his craft.

"Well, let us show you. Yohei, prepare yourself."

Yohei puts a small lion mask on his head, then cuts a dragonfly with a pop to show off.

"From Koshi Jigata, we bring many local specialties..." the father states in a rough voice.

"I take a nap at the entrance of the room and dream of the blooming of flowers. The lion of Echigo, the divining elephant of dreams, has no peonies, but riches and rank, and blooms in his own form, and blooms in his own form..."

It was a sight worth seeing, but painful to watch. Still, the Kumano priest beat his hand in time with the performance.

It was as though Kugutsushi had lost heart, his gaze fixed on the demolished puppet. For street performers, the destruction of the tools of their trade, tools they spent years training to mold to their hands, may as well be the same as killing them.

"The shape is revealed. As for the truth and reason..."

The medicine vendor, who had said nothing up until now, turned to Tokuemon and said those words. He asked the medicine vendor what he meant, but there was no answer. However, if they were to compete in their performances, all he could do was just that.

He stands on the podium, mentally preparing himself. The manzai is performed by two people; though there is usually a spoken dialogue, one person is meant to play the instrument and one is meant to chant and tell stories. Tokuemon didn't have the ability to do it all on his own. A manzai without music was also not an option, but then the sound of a tsuzumi drum could be heard.

Looking in the direction of the sound, there was the medicine vendor with a bang, once, twice, as he easily smacked the drum.

"Oi, a little help here?"

The elder lion tamer lodged his complaint.

"Each one of us must compete regardless of our insufficiency," the medicine vendor calmly retorted, and the elder lion tamer seemed to consider that for a moment.

"Well, alright. It's one less thing to worry about."

He turned to the medicine vendor seated in front of the drum, and quickly raised his mallet. He rushes forward and speaks up.

There are various methods for Mikawa Manzai, but Tokueemon's school first describes the origin and efficacy of this manzai. Many performances are accompanied by spoken word, but Tokueomn's father put special emphasis on it.

"I don't care about the content. Nobody's listening anyway."

However, if the statement isn't good, people won't think of offering money. This is why the lining may be ragged, but the front must be dazzling and clean; the opening statement must attract attention, no matter its contents.

"Oh! Those thousand years of Kichijoji, on the dawn of the new year, and this auspicious opportunity, to see the talent of the previous three performances! I will come, I will come. Should *Tayu-san* have his way, I would not eat or drink, but roam Mt Fuji and straddle the Suruga Sea..."

As he was speaking, Tokueemon remembered why he came here. He didn't know whether this Izuna was an ayakashi or a mononoke or whatever else, he just had to earn his keep by celebrating it.

"May this house be at peace, I offer this prayer. Five gods protect the east, west, north, south, and center. Three guardian deities are worshiped at the shrine gate to drive out the evil gods..."

He was not just stating auspicious words, nor was it only the verbal statement that mattered. The power to purify misfortune and invite in joy was also found in manzai. The medicine vendor's drumming was more proficient than expected, and Tokueemon's manzai began to build momentum.

However, it was as if he was blocked, as a lion surpassing his own stature stood in his way.

Tokueemon's manzai and the lion's dance cross with the rhythm of the medicine vendor's drumming. The more the manzai chanting of the pleasures of the world continues, the more he rejects them, flames peeking out from between his bared fangs. The old lion tamer looks on with satisfaction as the lion rampages.

"Deal with him!" he commanded.

The lion leapt at Tokueemon, and he narrowly avoided its claws. Fear floods him and nearly stops the manzai. However, the beat of the medicine vendor's drum wouldn't allow that. However, what really stopped him from trying to run away was the lion itself. Claws and fangs sundered the sky a moment before Tokueemon.

Tokuemon was not particularly skilled in martial arts, and he could hardly keep his feet on the ground while chanting his manzai. And yet, the lion only appears to attack, adding its own consideration. The lion's face suddenly contorted in pain. The old man was wielding a whip on his back.

"What are you doing? Hurry up and eat him!"

However, the lion roared fiercely, as though to express his resistance, and his fear and anger. Tokuemon's manzai is tinged with shivers. Seeing that, the old man lion tamer shouts in exultation.

"That on-the-spot companion doesn't make for a good performance. Maybe we should compare it to the brat's! It's a good thing I trained him so well."

The whipped lion turns its bloodshot eyes to Tokuemon. The words of manzai change bad luck to good, and good luck to bad. The lion's eyes widened as its cowardice turned to courage.

"Now, Kirikiri...slice him in two..."

The lion turned slowly towards his father. The father, confused, wields his whip violently. Blood spurts from the lion's shoulder, but the fear from before does not return. Past the muscles of the lion's angry, heaving shoulders, he could see the father's face, riddled with fear.

Get eaten by your own child turned lion, and leave this competition and this life.

Just as Tokuemon thought that coldly, a voice called out, "That's far enough."

The medicine vendor finally stopped beating the drum.

"Whoever stops the performance first loses."

The lion reverts back to the form of a child, his shoulders heaving from his breathing. He walked up to his father, who had wet himself and was shaking with his head in his hands, then smiled and held up his hand. He brushed off his father's hand as he tried to grab it back, urging him to hand over the whip he was holding.

VII

"I suppose that means we have to settle this ourselves."

The Kumano priest's face was brimming with self-confidence.

"You can't beat me with your craft. Why don't we make a deal? In this contest, the loser is beaten to the point where it hinders his craft even in the distant future. Your Mikawa Manzai is a performance with a partner. But, we can't always count on that medicine vendor."

Tokuemon looked back at the medicine vendor, who had not moved from in front of the drum. Although his face was slightly downcast and his expression hidden, he seemed to be able to help until they could leave this room.

"You showed a considerable amount of intelligence in using Kakubeijishi's child in your performance, but you still have yet to reach a certain level of good sense."

The Kumano priest stood up and began to sing an invocation prayer in a sonorous voice. Something like a small, black insect began to drift in the air in time with that prayer. When Tokuemon suddenly throws out his hand, it gently lands on his palm. On closer inspection, it seemed to be a three-legged raven.

"This is different from the bird that attacked the puppet earlier."

"It is indeed changed. The gods of Kumano do not permit lies. If your performance, your prayers of happiness for the master, turn out to be lies, the beak of this divine bird will pierce your guts!"

He knew the priest's words were not an idle threat, thinking back to his previous bout with Kugutsushi. Mikawa Manzai had several scripts. There was no way there could be any falsity in the happy words of the New Year's chant. The medicine vendor looked over his shoulder, raising the tsuzumi mallet.

There was nothing more the Mikawa Manzai performer could do but to perform.

He spread his hands wide in time with the medicine vendor's drumming. The gesture of the crane of longevity is combined with a prayer for happiness to celebrate the benefactor's good fortune for the year ahead. A number of three-legged ravens are dancing overhead.

"What gives you the right to perform the New Year's celebratory chant?"

The Kumano priest released several divine symbols into the air. They transform into a single mirror, reflecting Tokuemon. As he chanted a cheerful manzai, a shadowy figure appeared next to him.

"What do you see? That azure hue reflects the falsehoods that lurk deep within your heart."

The figure soon changed into a tall man clad in a glittering robe. A deep voice is chanting something. That was familiar to Tokuemon. One person chants manzai to the void. There is no brightness or cheerfulness before the master; it is melancholy and difficult to hear. This was his father's way of training, and if he got it wrong, he would get flying fists or kicked in the leg. When his back was turned, he was never allowed to end up ahead.

He is chanting and doing some sort of trick with his back rounded. He slowly approaches his back, feeling palpitations as if committing a taboo. His father was always hiding something. Any attempt to get close to those secrets was met with a severe beating, whether intentional or not. And yet while the father of today should have felt the presence of his son's approach, he does not stop the work at hand.

He quietly peered over his shoulder and saw a slender silver stick in his hands. There was a small hole running through the stick, and when his father held it up, he saw a small amount of light coming through. Beyond that light, there was also the Kumano priest. The priest receives the stick from his father and admires it with satisfaction.

"What do you see?" the voice of the Kumano priest asks.

"A thin stick with a hole in it...and you."

He didn't intend to answer, but his voice responded of its own accord. Is the silver stick in his father's hand, reflected in the mirror, the pipe which Izuna, the pipe fox, used to dwell in?

"It seems to me there's no doubt that your old man is the criminal!" the priest exclaimed, ignoring his own reflection.

"Admit your sins before the gods of Kumano. Your father isn't here, you must concede the power of Izuna to me instead."

With a vague notion of the truth of that, he turned his head to the medicine vendor and his drum. The sound of the drum, which never stops beating, barely keeps his hazy mind sane. The medicine vendor moved his lips in time with the drum.

"The shape...the truth...the reason..."

What could they do about that? Tokuemon hesitated. As he looked at the Kumano priest's proud face, a memory welled up from his foggy consciousness. His father and the street performers assembled here in the new year for a reason. He already saw the shape of the *izuna*. But then what was the "truth?"

The Kumano priest was insistent on getting the truth from them, but what about him? He reached for the mirror in front of him and turned it with a jerk.

VIII

"What the hell are you doing..."

"You were working with my father, weren't you?"

Tokuemon's question left the Kumano priest at a loss for words. He turns away from his reflection in the mirror and tries to flee the reception hall. But the mirror shatters, becoming a jet black arrowhead sticking out of his back. Tokuemon couldn't help the smile that formed on his face at the sight of the unmoving priest.

The power to manage the riches and honors of a village were within reach. He didn't want to laugh anymore, but he kept laughing. Tears streamed down his face and he threw up all the

contents of his stomach, but still he kept laughing. The sound of the drum gradually became lower and heavier, and his whole body trembled as if being struck with the mallet, suffocating him. He opened his mouth to try to pull in more air. He holds his throat and keeps his mouth open at the sensation of his whole body expanding like a closed sack.

"Well...good job."

It's a familiar voice, albeit husky.

"How..."

Something blocked his mouth and his voice.

"Izuna lives in a 'pipe'. That 'pipe' depends on the person. The soul of the person on whom the tube depends must have a hole to accommodate the tube. Namely, that soul's hole is rage and hatred, as well as resignation..."

There was the sound of a jawbone being snapped.

Was it to become the receptacle of Izuna that he had been tortured by his father?

"I bear no grudge. Rather, this was the wish of our ancestors. What it took to recover the stolen treasure."

His father's voice and body collapsed and melded together, with only his legs visible from the floor. A flash of something black and rat-like runs across his vision, in between his legs, and jumps into his mouth.

"Our ancestors lived in this village, and the blessings of Izuna meant they lived prosperously. One year, however, a street performer stole that power and chased them out of the village. Our clansmen, scattered about, became street performers and gathered here again to accumulate that magical power and take back the stolen Izuna."

Before long his whole body swelled with power, and a violent gale flew in all directions of the hall. This was the power of Izuna, the power to control both the riches and honors, and the fate of man. At that moment, though, there was a single, dry-sounding *clank*.

The fangs of the lion dance snap together, emitting a sound to purify evil. However, those are not the fangs of the lion dance. The lion head on the pommel of a vividly decorated short sword looked at Tokuemon. That sword was held by the medicine vendor, taking a stance.

"Ah, the medicine vendor, what sort of tricks do you have hidden away?"

His father no longer retained a human form. The robe that had been covering the medicine vendor has also disappeared, revealing an impressive physique, and serpentine patterns swirling around his form.

"Where did you hear about the Izuna? I won't hand it over to anyone!"

His father bared his long front teeth and howled. Another violent wind blows in the reception hall, which should have been kept out by the shoji screens. The wind grazes his cheek. When he touched it with his finger, he found it split open. The blade winds become an invisible storm that rushes towards the medicine vendor.

"And how is one sheathed sword meant to oppose the power of Izuna?"

Izuna's form appeared around his father in countless numbers, and in the next moment fresh blood fell from the medicine vendor's four limbs in a flash.

"The truth has been revealed. However, that's not enough without the reason," the medicine vendor says as he moans. In the meantime, the wounds inflicted by the wind blade finally cause him to fall to his knees.

Tokuemon's body wouldn't move even if he wanted to help.

"What you all lack is power. With the power of this Izuna, I will have an eternity of riches and honors. I will take new wives and have many children to establish my own kingdom. Just as our ancestors once did, just as the master of this house who stole Izuna did!"

He tries to stand up with all his strength, thinking he had become that "tube" for his father, who had become an ayakashi, but he still can't muster the strength to do so. His father was out of the picture, and his body became as useless as an empty sack.

"I'm useless without that damn old man within me," he cursed. Seeing that, his father just smirks at him.

"Don't worry. Next time I'll find a more decent mother and take care of my new son."

He had been told this many times for as long as he could remember. To his father, he was just someone he raised to up his earnings. No, he wasn't even treated as a person. Kugutsushi, who had embraced his puppet after his defeat by the Kumano priest, had been more compassionate.

I'll kill you again.

A tremendous killing intent swirls around his empty flesh. It fills Tokuemon as a torrent of all-consuming darkness. Kugutsushi and his puppet, the Kakubeijishi father and son, the Kumano priest and his amulet, and his father who became an unsightly deformity, and what was satisfied turned into something new. This was what "Izuna" truly was.

Did the greed and egotism of the traveling performers, who took possession of the lives of the people in the mountain villages and their modest wealth, turn the mountain ayakashi into a disfigured mononoke?

...

"The reason is revealed."

...

With a *clank*, the lion decorating the pommel of the sword snapped its fangs. Before Tokuemon appears a swordsman wearing a serpentine pattern across his whole body. The glimmer of the sword seemed even more brilliant than the sparkle of his gold brocade.

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In front of a crude house on the outskirts of the village, there lies a field of a few acres that has fallen into disrepair. A young man wields a hoe alone amidst the grass that has grown taller than him.

"Come take a break, big brother," a boy drying beans in front of the house calls out.

"I'm still getting used to it."

"We need to prepare the soil before the spring comes."

Yohei listened to Tokuemon and showed him how to cut a dragonfly in front of the stump.

"I thought there could be nothing more difficult than being a street performer, but it's hard for peasants too."

"I like it, though."

He dropped the hoe and mopped the sweat from his brow. The early spring winds of inner Mikawa are cold, but the sweat still flows when wrestling with soil under the sunlight. Tokuemon touched the scar on his belly. The medicine vendor's sword should have surely cut him in two, and yet this was how he was still alive.

After that, the street performers collapsed all around the rotting reception hall, and the medicine vendor was sitting upright, back to his original form. Tokuemon asked the medicine vendor, who had picked up his wicker box and was about to leave, what had happened to him.

"The mononoke appeared, so I slayed it."

That was the only answer he received.

The street performers who still lived left dispirited, while those who had no desire to continue their craft remained in the village. The divine protection of Izuna was no longer on the headman's estate or Tokuemon's body.

And yet, so far, he felt more fulfilled than ever.