

Stay with me

Diana Silva

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With fleeting seasons
A silver fox and black dog
One yearns, one hungers.

PROLOGUE

The legend of the black dog

There once was a god of war and chaos and destruction who took the shape of a great black dog and rejoiced in the battles of men. Men would offer bloody sacrifices in its honour, and such worship fed the god's power and ego. But as time passed and the ways of war changed, so did the gods of men. The once great black dog was soon forgotten, left to wander the woods of the Great Mountain, weakened and starved.

One day, the fallen god came upon a fox of silvery fur that had caught fresh prey. Salivating, the dog demanded: *"Relinquish to me that flesh, for I am the Great Black Demon Dog of yore."*

The fox laughed in its face and teased: *"If you are a fearsome god, why are you so starved and weak you cannot catch your own?"*

The dog's pride was wounded but he complained that men were now faithless and no longer knew the old ways of worship. The fox pitied the proud old dog as it told its tale and, in the end, shared some of its prey alongside these words of advice: *"How low you have fallen yet how tall is your pride. Heed me – humble yourself to smaller worship or offer more with your bargains, for there are plenty of the fool and desperate to play with."*

The dog then set off in search of the fool and desperate, until coming upon a destitute woman shivering in the bitter cold wind. In all his dignity, the old god roared: *"Bow before me for I am the Great Black Demon Dog of yore."*

The woman took in the sight of the flea ridden, starving creature and she too laughed. “How could such a mutt be a fearsome god of yore?”

The dog mustered its power to enlarge himself into a fearful size, and through giant pointy fangs bellowed, “*You will worship me, woman, or you will die right here and now!*”

Unfazed, the woman remarked, “No gods have answered my prayers when I most needed strength. What have you to offer?”

The dog thought of the fox’s words and reconsidered, “*I shall grant you a sliver of my power, so you may call upon the strength of the Great Black Demon Dog.*” And with this the dog gave her a single hair from his black coat of fur.

Upon swallowing the hair, the woman was imbued with a monstrous strength – for even a sliver of divinity is tremendous power for a human. She felled many trees on her path to crush the men who had wronged her. Then she rose in society, married the most powerful warring lord in the land and birthed many strong children.

Across the land, all came to fear the warrior woman with the strength of the *Great Black Demon Dog*. Though her revenge was completed, her hunger for power was not diminished. There was always an emptiness gnawing at her heart.

The strong, greedy woman decided it was time to seek out the same old god. After wandering the Great Mountain for many days and many nights, she found the black dog even weaker than before, for she had entirely neglected her side of the bargain.

“*You lied to me, damned woman!*”

The woman kicked the feeble beast with disgust and said: “How can anyone worship one as gullible as you. Be content knowing that if not for me, your name would be all but forgotten.”

With its last breath the once great god of war and chaos and destruction howled bitterly: *“I curse you and that silver fox, for you both teased and toyed with my hunger and pride, so shall they consume you and yours.”*

The woman cared not for such words and finally took what she came for. Starting with the fur, she devoured the body of the dog bit by bit. With every bite she felt the power in her grow, but she wouldn't be satisfied until she had consumed all of it.

At last, when all strands of black hair were swallowed and all flesh chewed and the last of the bone marrow sucked, the woman realized her hunger had overtaken her and the only powerful being left to consume was herself.

CHAPTER I

Takeshi Kanzaki

Morning

Arriving late to the stuffy meeting and ignoring all rules of decorum, Takeshi offers a half-hearted apology with the loudest most insufferable tone he can muster. He is greeted by the foul smell of old men's sweat badly masked by incense, the morning already far too warm to be stuck in a room full of people he hates. A low murmur spreads like sizzling fire behind the magistrates' fatigued fans, though Lord Shiratori's pointed silence speaks the loudest. Takeshi couldn't care less.

Sadao Shiratori, the Daimyo's heir and perfect mirror, shoots him a sideways glance as Takeshi sits beside him, one raised knee supporting a careless arm. "Late again," Sadao hisses under his breath, "And smelling like a whorehouse."

"Wouldn't want them to forget me so soon," Takeshi whispers back, provokingly. Sadao turns his face away, a slight flare of his nostrils the only crack in his perfectly sculpted poise. But Takeshi can read him like an open book, he knows all his tells, and just how far to push him. For years they have teased each other, in games of wit and provocation. There was no greater joy than to melt away Sadao's icy front, layer by layer, until the fiery volcano hidden underneath erupted.

Takeshi takes in the sight of the young man, lingering in the delicate curves of his profile, the sharpness of his cheekbones. And the

silvery hair brushed into a prim topknot, kept in place by a plain bone hairpin. It didn't really suit him, the simplicity of the pin's design, the washed-out colour of the bone. But Takeshi had carved it himself, a peace offering of sorts given a few years ago, under the discreet glow of the moonlight. The pit in his stomach tightens but he pushes the feeling away.

Refocusing on the meeting, he defies the lingering stares of the other lords, weak mediocre men who have long mocked his family's decline. He recalls every insult, veiled or not, every time he was ignored or underestimated. They have underestimated the wrong lord and would soon face the consequences. His jaw clenches, outwardly calm but inwardly seething, he still has to put up with one last meeting with these wrinkled worms. Not for naught, he will take with him every bit of leverage to assure his triumph.

"Has the size of Lord Tanaka's invading force been confirmed, Lord Kanzaki?" Lord Shiratori, initiates with all the authority and composure as befits the Daimyo.

"Couple of thousand was the latest report." The numbers he provides are very far from reality, he is setting the bait. If Lord Shiratori takes it, Takeshi can count on an easy win.

The previous night, as several before, had been spent not with kind courtesans that poured their sake, but in the less pleasant company of Lord Tanaka and Lord Ikeda's envoys. Together they would comprise an alliance of three daimyos – the first two well established, and Takeshi laying claim to his lineage's lost title. Lord Tanaka, especially, understood the strength of the Kanzaki lineage and spared no means to bring the wrath of the Great Demon Dog to his side. Everyone in here would soon label him a traitor, a defector – but he preferred to see himself as a winner.

They had begun their first move as Takeshi welcomed Lord Tanaka's forces into his own castle, the one Lord Shiratori believes forcefully occupied.

“How is it that two thousand men crossed a mountain and overtook a fully garrisoned castle right under your nose?”

“Well, my lord, as I was not there to witness it myself, I can only guess,” he starts, his voice meek and subdued slowly building into a festering roar, “but it seems there might have been a few defectors eager to betray what they perceived as a neutered dog.” He pauses for effect. “Seeing as so many here have done their utmost to undermine my reputation, I’d ask them.” His words hang in the stunned silence, even Sadao’s posture falters, his eyes wide in shock. Takeshi has always been outrageous, but he believes this is a new best.

A furious tiny man so unaware of his insignificance is the first to cut the silence. “How dare you, you boor! You will mind your words and show deference to Lord Shiratori!” Takeshi takes a hand to his chest, in an exaggerated gesture, as though deeply wounded by the remark, and another magistrate picks up. “Such disrespect towards your elders will not be tolerated!”

Yet another, just as tedious though slightly more refined, sneers, “What a pitiful attempt to deflect the blame for your failures onto others, while you conduct yourself exactly as rumoured.” Chaos ensues, with the crowd pointing fingers and spitting hate he has become desensitized to. But they are doing it out in the open, in a formal meeting, in front of the Daimyo. Takeshi grins, watching the pillars of society show their true colours.

“Quiet!” Lord Shiratori commands. He looks around at his shushed retinue, his face like a statue, and Takeshi does the same. Sweat beads merge together on their path down the old men’s foreheads, dripping like tiny cascades, and the stale summer air is almost unbreathable. The daimyo finally calls for a break, adding, “Lord Kanzaki – a word.”

Amid the creaking of old bones, shuffling fabrics, and rushed steps, Takeshi feels familiar fingers finding his under long sleeves. “Have you lost your mind?”

“Worry not, I said all I had to say. Now I shall be on my best behaviour.” Takeshi reassures, caressing Sadao’s hand with his thumb. Then, a little more subtly, he mouths “Tonight?” and Sadao’s slight nod is all the confirmation he needs. “If I survive the ire of your father.” He smirks, masking the growing tightness twisting his heart.

The glory of the Kanzaki name will be restored, Takeshi will see it done, whatever the cost. Even if it meant him and Sadao would soon be standing on opposing sides.

Afternoon

The words just won't come, every attempt is hesitant, and the paper blotched. Unlike the previous two letters, which even codified were written much faster. One, a missive to Lord Tanaka informing of the outcome of today's endless meeting – three thousand men, following the route of the eastern valley. The other to his general at Kanzaki Castle, similar but with a few extra orders. And yet no words come as Takeshi stares uselessly at the wreck of a letter in front of him, illuminated by the sun beam pouring through the narrow window of the stables.

Sadao, I –

An incipient headache slams at his temples, and he still doesn't know what he wants to tell Sadao when Isao whistles from the entrance. Someone is coming, so the letter will have to wait. With a sigh of relief, he pockets the stained paper and quickly slips the sealed missives to Isao.

When the stable hand arrives, Takeshi is already grooming his horse, casually humming a tune. The physical work soothes his nerves, though he must bear the groom's reproaching glances. "Not the place for a lord." He's heard it all, he barely acknowledges it anymore. Though he still cannot fathom how reputable lords spent their time. If he were confined to a desk all day, he would surely snap and burst a wall or two to escape.

So, for as long as the relentless sun shines, he makes the rounds to check on his subordinates, joining in their banter or drinking games, but mostly helping with menial tasks. There are many crates to carry, many carts to load, and Takeshi alone can complete double the work in half the time. It speeds up the preparations and gives reprieve from his thoughts. And when he notices any glances or murmurs from the estate or other magistrate's servants, he smirks, drops whatever crate he is carrying and lifts a whole cart instead. Just to show off. Just to spite them.

But also, because he wants to remind those who are about to become his enemies what the true strength of the Great Demon Dog entails. To usurp this free web of whispers to rekindle the terror his father's title used to evoke. Because on the battlefield, fear is power.

Takeshi remembers very little of his family but has a marked memory of the magnificent aura his father exuded. He had been one of the most powerful warriors in centuries, but when treaties were signed and a new era arrived, where battles were fought by sleazy politics and administrative manoeuvres, he had no talent for it.

Only when he was much older, under Lord Shiratori's charge, did Takeshi learn of his father's weaknesses, miscalculations, and the bad advice he'd been fed. After a series of bad decisions, he had squandered all the family's wealth and reputation. As their territories struggled more and more, he kept borrowing more and more, favours upon favours from several lords, but none more than Lord Shiratori.

In the end, his father drank himself to death, leaving a legacy in ruins. Takeshi's mother and uncle had done their best to take over, but they were far too deep in debt and lacked the skills to rebuild. Lord Shiratori swooped in, and an amicable annexation was agreed with the blessing of the Shogun. The Kanzakis would retain rule of their territories but abdicate the title of Daimyo to become a retainer for Shiratori. In exchange Lord Shiratori would help manage the crisis by taking over administrative duties and delegation of resources but still assuring the education of Kanzaki's heirs.

As Takeshi makes the last round, twilight has set into a deep indigo sliced by orange and pink streaks. It is the last twilight he will see in this estate, at least for a long while, and nostalgia creeps into his stomach. He will miss this place, his home, and the family he knew.

He doesn't hate Lord Shiratori, he actually admires him. Even as he infuriatingly restricts Takeshi's ambition, clipping the feathers to ensure he doesn't fly too high, the fact remains that he knows how to play the game. Besides, he did provide Takeshi a privileged life, strong

education, and, inadvertently, plenty of time with Sadao. It's everyone else – with their incessant disrespect – that drives him to the edge, intensifies the pull of his bloodline. He wasn't even supposed to be the heir, he was supposed to live the lavish life of a third-born son. Until his brothers were caught in a stupid accident, and Takeshi was suddenly the only heir, left all alone to face the whispers of contempt that followed his every step.

Just like someone is following him right now – a group of four or five judging by the sound of the footsteps. They keep a constant distance even after four nonsensical turns. Takeshi changes route again, and steers further from the main house. He takes the path that leads into the main garden, deserted at this time, and providing enough cover should the worst happen. The steps follow.

He ditches the path and increases the pace, leading the pursuers into a secluded clearing, a circle of dense trees and rhododendron bushes providing privacy. His muscles tense, and his hands crave the sword, but he stays them. He would prefer to talk first. He would prefer to talk only.

"I hadn't realized you had a fondness for the gardens." Takeshi recognizes the magistrate strolling into the clearing with four bodyguards in tow. Lord Watanabe, barely of age, the youngest and frailest of Shiratori's retinue. He is usually the quiet type. The observant type.

"And I didn't realize you fancied me. Why else would you follow the demon samurai into a dark secluded clearing?" He maintains a slack posture but brings his hand to rest on the hilt of his sword, and he pointedly looks each of the samurai in the eye before adding, "With no protection."

The samurai exchange glances, as the magistrate's face turns red. To his credit, he gathers himself swiftly, holding his chin a little too high. Takeshi combs his fingers through his hair, loosely tied in a half

bun, and sighs, “It’s been a long day, and I am sure you are as famished as I am.” His voice betrays a hint of irritation. “So come on, on with it.”

“Very well, if you insist on dispensing with pleasantries.” Lord Watanabe purses his lips into a tight line, likely reevaluating his initial plan. “I find the words you spoke this morning... hard to believe.” He clears his throat. “That your men would have so little loyalty as to change allegiances as easily as you claim. After all, you practically behaved like one of them all day.”

Takeshi had half expected this sometime today, but not from the mouth of a boy. He smirks, amused. “And this is relevant because...?”

“It leads one to wonder why you feel the need to deflect the question in the first place,” the young man delivers promptly, his voice a little high pitched. *The balls on this man, yes sir*, Takeshi approves.

“Perhaps I have grown weary of ridicule and wished to see others lose face. It was certainly entertaining, you must admit.”

“I fail to see the humour, Lord Kanzaki. And you failed to convince me.” His eyes narrow, as if saying I will keep an eye on you. Then he adds, “But as you say, we are late for supper,” he adds with a sweep of his hand, beckoning them to return together, “unless you truly are fond of the gardens after dark.”

Night

Takeshi lies awake in the stillness of the night, lost in the details of the dimly lit bedroom that has become their haven. The piles of hastily discarded robes melt into the shadows cast by the dying oil lamp. Though faint, its light gleams in the golden pond mural intricately painted across sliding doors. It gives the pale swirling lotus blossoms a beautiful, ethereal feel.

Next to him, Sadao sleeps soundly, a picture of serenity and peace, in stark contrast to the moments they just shared. As soon as Takeshi had snuck in, they clashed in a tangle of limbs and far too many layers of clothing, thankfully skipping any argument over Takeshi's little spectacle at the magistrate's meeting.

Beneath Sadao's cold and regal demeanour hides an insatiable fire, a fire to match his own and reserved only for him, which they ignite in the quiet hours of the night. Or as quiet as they can be, he muses with pleasure. Takeshi wants to remember this scene for eternity, with all the memories it stirs. The complete wonder of a man he fiercely loves, who challenges him, tempts him mercilessly, and soothes his rage. And Sadao's touch. Sadao's scent. Sadao's taste.

"Sadao..." he catches himself whispering, his voice trembling, but he only turns around, his body falling in place against Takeshi's, but does not awaken. Let him sleep, he would never follow, Takeshi tells himself, his resolve returning. Though it tears him apart, how much he will miss him, how much he already does, he has made his choice. Takeshi Kanzaki chose legacy. Chose family. Chose power.

If only he hadn't. If only the other lords had shown a little more respect. If only he had managed to ignore the calling in his gut, the gnawing hunger of his lineage tearing at him bit by bit. If only he could stay. But now their time has been even further reduced. He had planned to officially desert only when they clashed with Tanaka's and Ikeda's forces, doubly surprising Lord Shiratori's men when his cavalry,

supposed allies, turned on them. But after the little conversation with that bold young man, it wouldn't be wise to wait any longer.

Craving fresh air, Takeshi slips out of bed and onto the porch where the song of cicadas grows louder in the warm night, without so much as a breeze to wrestle his discomfort. He holds up the marred letter he never finished. It is very unlikely that he will cross paths with Sadao on the battlefield, but not impossible. And what of the outcome? If – when – their forces bring Shiratori's down, and all this garden is trampled, what happens then?

“Aren't we restless tonight,” Sadao's purr and lewd embrace surprises Takeshi, interrupting his brooding thoughts. “Have I failed to exhaust you?”

Takeshi chuckles faintly, and turns around, pulling Sadao closer to him. The thin pale blue robes hang loose around his shoulders, long silky hair cascading down his perfect skin. This man was sin incarnate and Takeshi was ready to take him again. “I would never tire of you, my silver fox.” His voice low and hungry, thanking Sadao's light sleep for doing what the night air failed to do, for taking him out of his head. And granting him a few more hours, a few more memories.

He leans in to steal a kiss, but Sadao deflects it with a graceful turn of his head. “First, mind sharing where you caught that awful perfume.”

Unfazed, Takeshi changes course to his neck, biting the soft skin. He enjoys it as Sadao squirms against him, he knows it is all part of his seduction game. Once satisfied, Takeshi brings his lips to Sadao's ear and whispers, “You're not jealous, are you?”

Sadao, does not move but says icily “I thought you were working on your reputation. This morning did not earn you much favour with the magistrates, or father.”

Takeshi sighs in his ear and pulls away. Sadao narrows his eyes but says nothing. “I am past caring what those old farts think.”

“You will be together on the battlefield, isn’t it wiser to have friends rather than enemies covering your back?”

Takeshi brushes his own unruly hair back, nails dragging along his scalp. “Look, can this wait until tomorrow? Just...” He searches for words, still clutching the blotched paper, then ventures, “The moon looks so beautiful tonight.” Takeshi, blessed with the strength of the Great Demon Dog of old, utters a hesitant line of poetry to soften his man of ice.

Before Sadao can complete the wince of mockery spreading in his face, Takeshi closes the distance between them, takes Sadao’s hands in his, and begs into those melting eyes “Please.” Sadao’s lips part, whether for an incipient witty remark or something else does not matter. Takeshi pulls him into a slow deliberate kiss, with a gentleness foreign even to himself. And it opens a door to a new world of sensation. Their bodies work in unison, not with the eagerness they grew accustomed to, but in a slow exploration where every touch, every taste, every sound, is stretched and savoured. As if each were the very last, as if tonight was their last night together.

Come the morning, the first ray of sun would glimmer in Sadao’s silver hair, and Takeshi would be gone. Soon Sadao would hate him, but tonight they were one.

CHAPTER II

Sadao Shiratori

Early morning

Sadao Shiratori has had enough of his son's shameful behaviour. A plethora of frivolous games of seduction, manipulation and bullying with no real purpose other than thwarting him. The lewd gatherings he doesn't even bother hiding, pursuing only pleasure and debauchery. Even his interest in the arts, which Sadao fully endorsed at first, is marred by the filthy content he produces – shocking political or overtly erotic “poetry”. The bold indulgences and irregular hours he keeps do not help his already precarious health. And after each late night, comes another fit.

Sitting in the low chair by Kiyoshi's bed, patiently waiting for the sun to disturb his sleep, Sadao's thoughts drift. He wonders if Takeshi's words, spoken over two decades ago, had been a curse after all, as they rang truer every day, his family's ruin closer than ever.

“You will only understand when your family name is dragged in the mud,” Takeshi says, one bruised eye locked on his, a festering wound in place of the other. Injured, captured, subdued, yet still unyieldingly proud. “I cannot apologize,” he adds, glancing at Lord Sakamoto, Lord Shiratori's right hand who keeps watch behind Sadao.

“Will not,” Sadao corrects bitterly. Would it make a difference if he did?

Takeshi's lips twist into a sad smirk, "Very well. I concede to your victory, silver fox."

An incredible victory, an historical victory, and a sour victory, nonetheless. Yes, Sadao had played a key part in the war efforts. He had fully grown into the role of the strategic general expected of the daimyo's heir. He had been fuelled solely by vengeance digging at the gap in his aching chest. His early tactics had turned the tide on what seemed like certain doom.

With his betrayal, Daimyo Shiratori faced the force of two powerful daimyos, plus the fierce Demon Dog and his contingent of specialized cavalry. Takeshi had not merely defected to Tanaka and Ikeda's side, but reclaimed the title of daimyo his family had foolishly lost. Sadao had been the greatest fool though, blinded to the signs of Takeshi's ambition.

It took the alliance's first ambush – and devastating outcome – for Sadao to believe the rumours of Takeshi's betrayal.

Their forces had been caught before they reached the castle. They had sent for reinforcements, but too late. It was a crushing loss, Shiratori's army overcome by more than double the estimated numbers, thanks to Ikeda's covert contribution. His own father had been badly wounded. Witnesses said the terrifying Demon Dog himself had carved a path straight to Lord Shiratori, slicing armour, men and horses alike, a trail of fire behind him. It was a wonder the Daimyo had survived. They must have thought it so easy to fell the Shiratori family, as if they were nothing without Lord Shiratori. But they miscalculated. The new leader was driven by an icy rage that cleared his mind.

Sadao saw all the moving pieces on the board, and he knew how to exploit them. It was a bold move, to ignore the split enemy armies advancing on their territory aiming to take two more fortresses, just because they could, because they had the numbers. He dismissed every advice, every call to retreat and hide away. How could they miss the obvious – keep their late reinforcements on the original route, retake

the Kanzaki castle. Trap two massive armies within their territory, disrupt their supply line, cut off the head of the snake.

It worked. The split armies panicked, they were no longer a united front. Then it was a matter of keeping them apart, exploiting their weaknesses. And though it had taken more than three years to bring the conflict to an end, they had not only recovered the entirety of their territories but annexed new ones.

There was only one loose end, the last piece to be felled. Takeshi's defeat was achieved through the very expertise he had personally taught Sadao. Exploiting the perfect moment when the rising sun is blinding, Sadao's specialized cavalry regiment attacked Takeshi's encampment from the east. Surely a disorienting experience to the drowsy cavalry soldiers, not used to combat on foot. Yet another battle where Sadao's clever strategy triumphed. And the fox's cunning surpassed the strength of the dog.

This he had in common with his son, cunning and manipulation their greatest assets. Though their similarities ended there, because Kiyoshi had no sense of duty, diligence and discipline.

Kiyoshi's stirring pulls him out of his own thoughts. "Father, so kind to visit me in my deathbed, be a dear and close the shades. Allow a poor soul the slumber of oblivion." His voice is raspy and sluggish, quite telling of the indulgences of the previous night. Kiyoshi coughs, forced at first, then building up into a genuine fit.

"Very humorous. I hope you have enjoyed your last night of debauchery." Sadao mocks, before informing plainly "Your gatherings will cease immediately. It's more than time you start acting the part of my heir." Kiyoshi rolls onto the other side of the futon, waving a hand dismissively. "Yes, yes, message received."

Sadao commands complete obedience without even raising his voice, "Do not turn your back to me."

Kiyoshi rolls back exasperated, his groggy eyes barely open. “What.”

“Do convince me you are sufficiently cognisant to understand my meaning.”

Kiyoshi blows his lips and sits on his knees perfectly stiff. “My parties are forbidden until further notice,” adding under his breath “your lordshit”.

Sadao boils inside, but he prides himself in full composure. “You will take your duties seriously. Do you expect to survive off sake and decadence like a courtesan?”

“Of course not, father, I don’t expect to survive at all.” These might be the sincerest words Kiyoshi has ever spoken to Sadao, even if veiled as a jest. They wound him deeper than any of the ones that follow. “Yet, if fate is so kind, I may come to embrace the life of a stone – perfectly dull and lifeless, much like yourself. That reminds me, I composed another piece just for you.”

He looks around, obviously searching for the clothes from the previous night. The same ones the maids had collected, along with the filthy poem he is alluding to. The one about a Daimyo whose pristine kimono falls open in the middle of a ceremony, thus exposing the pair of miniscule, shrivelled, rotten beans for all to see. Which made the maids laugh and whisper until Sakamoto had put a stop to it. Nothing surprising.

“If you are not swayed by words, I will find a more fitting punishment.” Sadao rises and gestures to him to do the same. “Get up. Ready yourself for practice.”

Kiyoshi looks at him bewildered. “Why do you insist on tormenting me when I can barely hold a wooden sword! Isn’t that why we have the dog’s bastard anyway?” Shiratori does not hide his disdain. The way his son speaks of Yoru Kurosawa, the young retainer who is nothing but loyal, affects him more than he expects.

But every move Sadao makes is calculated. “That bastard, as you so put it, will be shadowing your every step from now on. So, it may be wise to tame your tongue.” Kiyoshi eyes him sideways, shoulders slumped, a budding retort playing in his lips. Shiratori does not have a temper, he is in full control, and he will be obeyed. “Weakness will be tolerated no longer.” His tone final, his mood soured.

Late morning

“Kurosawa has grown even more excellent with the blade,” Lord Sakamoto appraises as the sounds of the wooden swords echo in the training quarters.

Sadao agrees in earnest, “His form is a delight to see.”

“But I fear his spirit is weak.”

He glances at Sakamoto, “Still hesitating?”

“Yes. Though not bold enough to question directly, I can tell he struggles with the orders.”

Sadao nods knowingly. He has noticed the gaunt, vacant stares and stronger perfumes Kurosawa dons after the more challenging orders. “I shall speak with him.”

Sadao hired the young samurai more out of spite than anything else. Sakamoto had tracked down the rumours and recommended him for his combat skills and malleable character but had been polite enough not to mention the obvious – the man was the spitting image of his father, Takeshi Kanzaki, the demon samurai.

Despite his incredible strength and impeccable form, Kurosawa burned all his bridges due to his extreme awkwardness and the peculiar obsession with overwhelming perfumes. After a series of discontented superiors, he had been more than eager to grovel to Shiratori’s kindness. Actually grovel at his feet.

A pang of guilt shoots up Sadao, as he recalls the pleasure of having this awkward incarnation of Takeshi entirely in his thrall, shamelessly pitting him against Kiyoshi in futile attempts to toughen up his son. By the time he had grown fond of Kurosawa and regretted his own pettiness, Kiyoshi had added a new grudge to his collection, and the young samurai had come to see his lord as an untouchable divine figure. Sadao could see the change in Kurosawa’s posture, the glint in his eyes, the craving for approval.

Takeshi stares at Sadao through one swollen eye, conceding defeat. Sadao was not prepared for the torrent of feelings rushing through him. The sight of the man he loves and hates with such intensity, bruised and mauled, kneeling and tied up, yet still defiantly himself, proves almost unbearable.

This is not what Sadao wanted, he was supposed to have the upper hand, to control Takeshi's fate., play with him, savour it. He should be humiliated, prostrated, kissing the dirt under his feet. Begging for forgiveness. Begging to be spared.

Except sometimes what Sadao really wanted was for Takeshi to sneak back into his bedroom and embrace him and reassure him that it had all been a ruse to gather information on Tanaka. To say he would never leave him behind.

Sadao has thought of such countless scenarios, often alternating between the most ludicrous idea – to forgive him – and the utter opposite – have him ripped apart by hounds. An acceptable outcome, satisfying, poetic.

They have become different men, shaped by a ruthless war; yet the inexplicable pull between them remains as strong as ever. A longing intense enough to drown all the hurt and hatred he's been harbouring in a matter of seconds.

It doesn't feel like a victory anymore. Sadao swallows the knot stuck in his throat, as his last words taste like bile on his tongue, "You gave me no choice." If you did, I would have followed you to the end of the world, he longs to say but cannot. Not after the betrayal and all the death, and especially not under Sakamoto's watch. That's it then, he can delay the inevitable no longer.

Except... he does. He hesitates. Hidden in his fist lies the hairpin Takeshi had given him. He grasps it tighter. "Only wish I could end you myself," he spits out. Adding under his breath, "but I can still hurt

you,” and slaps him as hard as he can. Takeshi’s neck swings and he grimaces but brings his chin high again.

“Leave us,” Sadao commands without turning.

“But, my lord, your father...”

Sadao turns sharply to face Sakamoto. “My father did not win this war – I did.” He stares the man down, leaving no room for disobedience, “Leave.”

If only he wielded the same power over his feeble lazy son, who is currently disgracing himself before their eyes in the training quarters. “I would hardly call this sparring.” He spats loud enough for his son – landing on his rear once again – to hear.

“Would you tell your dog his disgusting perfume is killing my lungs?” Kiyoshi retorts, his hateful gaze morphing into a strong coughing fit. Kurosawa shuffles between stepping away and stepping closer to Kiyoshi to help him up. Shiratori signals them to conclude.

“Not even Kurosawa’s swordsmanship can keep this entertaining.” He turns and walks briskly away, Sakamoto at his heels. He takes a breath before asking “What was it about the other matter?”

“The matchmaker sent word – one more proposal rejected. We are running out of options when not even the Hidaris will have him.” Sakamoto informs.

Sadao rubs at his aching temples, “Not in the mood for more bad news.” Every single proposal they had sent to begin talks of a betrothal for Kiyoshi had been politely but pointedly declined. They started with the most reputable families and were almost ready to settle for lower ranks, as long as the woman was likely fertile.

Though it seems few wanted to settle for Kiyoshi. Not entirely his son’s doing, but his abhorrent conduct certainly didn’t help. Shiratori’s

own reputation faltered, his lack of heirs a stain on his pride. The numerous stillborn babes, both before and after Kiyoshi, were a heavy burden to bear, haunting him as much as it had his late wife. To make matters worse, despite Kiyoshi's lewd behaviour, he has yet to father any child.

Sadao's headache worsens, as he considers his options, how many variables can he still control. His life since the war has been meticulously structured. He hasn't let himself relax for a moment, never letting his guard down. The cold façade crystallized completely after his lowest point, after Takeshi had ripped his heart into pieces, drained him of life. It had never healed, only been patched up with more and more walls of ice.

He would never allow himself to be in that position again, that vulnerable, suffocating in his own silent screams. His chest feels heavy, it's too painful to draw breath. Only his sister had gotten through to him, always been the best of them, a grounding force. "Your duty... your name... your family...." He could always soothe himself with her voice.

Sadao inhales deeply, realizing Sakamoto awaits a reply to something he missed. Sakamoto elegantly repeats his words, saving grace. "What about Watanabe's oldest daughter? A young widow but coming out of mourning soon."

He thinks of Lord Watanabe, the sheer intellect compacted in that feeble constitution. His family still quite reputable, growing stronger even. "As I recall, Watanabe was also quite frail. May not be the best match."

"The matchmaker says Lord Watanabe's children take after the mother's side in matters of health, and those who were married for longer have borne several healthy children. Plus, they are known for their iron will and strict honour, so she might be able to set the young lord straight."

Shiratori closes his eyes and rubs his forehead. A widow still in mourning, they were stooping disappointingly low. “Like you said, we are running out of options...”

Evening

“You have my gratitude,” Sadao tilts his head in a curt bow, his gaze fixed on Kurosawa’s, keeping him from shying away.

They sit in the daimyo’s study, with an exquisite celadon-green ceramic tea set arranged on the low table between them. With the same grace he would show a lord of high standard, Sadao pours Kurosawa a cup of fragrant herbal infusion, his movements elegant and practiced. He turns the cup slightly, so the delicate motif of a golden chrysanthemum blossom faces the young samurai when he receives it.

“You have impressed Lord Sakamoto with your swift handling of the executions.” Kurosawa takes the praise quietly, struggling to maintain eye contact, his usual eagerness absent. *Just as Sakamoto mentioned*, “Your discomfort is palpable. What troubles you?”

“Apologies my lord, I do not wish to burden you,” the young samurai bows deeply, a whiff of camellia oil overpowering the fragrance of the infusion, when he should be pouring Sadao’s tea instead. Shiratori patiently waits for him to notice and can’t hold back a hearty laugh when the flustered man overreacts and, in his haste, breaks the handle of the teapot.

“Enough apologies for now,” he dismisses swiftly and waves away the servant peeking through the door. “Let us be candid with each other.”

Flushing crimson red, Kurosawa clutches his hands tight, “My lord, you are too kind.”

“Then, please indulge me.”

Kurosawa’s shoulders slump and he seems to withdraw further. His restless gaze lands on the teacups, one full, one empty. He takes a deep breath and dares, “If it isn’t too much trouble, could we have something stronger?”

Sadao arches an eyebrow, amused by the unexpected boldness – a spark of Takeshi’s fire he didn’t think Kurosawa possessed. Were it anyone else, Sadao would not forgive the insolence, but what better way to encourage earnest conversation?

The tea set is soon replaced by a narrow-necked flask and a pair of small cups. Their crude design and earthy colors offer a different, but no lesser, kind of beauty.

By the time the last servant bows and closes the door, Kurosawa has already filled Sadao’s cup with steaming sake. After they both down a few – the young samurai a little too eagerly – Sadao finally coaxes a reluctant confession of Kurosawa’s struggles.

“I understand you do not enjoy it,” Sadao’s tone meant to be comforting, “the violence. The killing.” Kurosawa winces and shifts in his seat. “I can appreciate that. I do not relish it either. But we are under tumultuous times, and I do not wish to see another war. Harsh measures are needed to prevent the spread of treachery. Be assured that my decisions do not come lightly.”

“I wouldn’t presume, my lord,” Kurosawa says, still not entirely relaxed, even as Sadao begins to feel a little lightheaded. He should have guessed, Takeshi’s blood runs thick after all.

“Even seasoned samurai struggle with their conscience. We all do. Just don’t let it consume you. Use it to ground you, yes, but ultimately your loyalty is to me.” He pauses, but Kurosawa misses the cue – all rules of polite etiquette lost to this naïve man. And nothing Shiratori says seems to take effect.

He decides to shift tactics before his alcohol tolerance is outmatched by this young samurai, “Kurosawa, is it true you enjoy the gardens?”

The youth seems surprised by the change in topic, his eyes widen, “Yes, my lord, they are marvellous.”

“Our gardens are breathtaking indeed. But there is one reserved for my own peace.” He rises, a little unsteady, and slides the panels to the courtyard open, “Come.”

Sadao welcomes the nostalgic scent of damp earth after the afternoons’ rain and the chill evening air feels cool against his throbbing temples – as the morning’s headache grows stronger still. Kurosawa stares, mouth agape at the scenic garden soaked in the warm yellow light of the stone lamps. Having not visited this place before, an honour reserved for only a select few, his reaction is not very different from most visiting magistrates, only more sincere.

“Other than for official visits, this space is kept completely private,” Sadao shares, “with the only other person allowed free access being the master gardener.” She is the talent behind the delicate cloud-shaped pine trees and the pristine pale sand raked into waves and ripples.

“My lord, I have never seen anything like this. These are... stunning.”

Sadao himself upkeeps the two bonsai trees that caught Kurosawa’s attention, flanking the entrance to the courtyard. “Heirlooms from several generations back. They are older than the Shogunate.” His tone turns bittersweet, “I can only pray that my son will take over their care someday,” he sighs before adding, “I cannot get through to Kiyoshi at all, it’s as if we are from two worlds apart.”

Kurosawa shifts weight on his legs, uncomfortable, as Sadao steers the discussion to his most recent orders, “I understand he is not easy to handle. But I am asking you to stay by his side even so.” *A damper to Kiyoshi’s follies.* “I hope I can count on you to help shape him into an honourable man.”

“Yes, my lord.”

They take a few steps in silence, turning the corner to reveal the massive maple tree which paints more than half of the courtyard in blood red, its twisting branches sprawling low and dense.

Not stopping to gauge Kurosawa's reaction, Sadao explains, "This garden was designed to help me think clearly. When my mind feels clouded, I let the unnecessary and superfluous flow away in the waves," he gestures at the rippling sea of sand punctuated by vein-streaked rocks, "and search for my core truths to anchor them on the islands." As he walks the stepping stones leading to the maple tree, he adds, "I want to invite you to do the same," turning around for effect, "any time you feel the need."

Surrounded by the low hanging branches expertly layered, the courtyard and estate beyond become but a distant reality. Sadao lets Kurosawa take in the details that surround him at his leisure, answering any questions he has. The young man is finally relaxing. Sadao might not get the full extent of Kurosawa's worries this time but has at least opened a line of communication.

"I need you focused and able to perform your duties, and, since you follow my command..." Sadao lifts Kurosawa's chin so their eyes meet. "I shall take responsibility for your actions. I shall bear your burden so you can ease your conscience."

The red leaves surrounding them bring out Takeshi's fiery lines, it suited him so much better than the usual blacks he wore. Sadao can't help tilting his face to that taunting angle. His heart skips a beat. For a moment, the young man in front of him is not Kurosawa at all, but a ghost from the past.

Takeshi's aura of defiance shifts the minute Sakamoto leaves the room. "I am sorry," his murmur low and choked, "I couldn't have asked you to..."

“Asked me?” Sadao doesn’t let him finish, “To what – betray my family? Run away with you?”

Because I would have done it. That’s how much of an idiot I become when near you. *He masks these thoughts under a calculated sneer, “Pathetic, your delusions run deeper than I imagined.”*

“You’re right. I fucked up.”

Takeshi is getting to him again, stirring the wrong feelings, luring out the fool Sadao tried to bury within.

“I should have ignored my pride, stayed by your side. You make a much finer daimyo than I ever would.”

“That’s enough,” Sadao doesn’t want to hear it. He mustn’t believe anything out of this liar’s mouth, poison dripping with every word.

He turns and walks to the low table placed in the centre of the room. He takes a moment to calm his pounding heart, in vain. With a slight trembling in his hand, he trades the hairpin he was holding for the short blade laying there. The one engraved with the Kanzaki name. The one meant to give him the honourable choice.

“There is only one way you are leaving this room.”

The restrained, maimed man who searches his eyes has dropped all defiance. But his former prideful look has been replaced not by humility or fear but... affection?

“Do you understand?” Sadao insists. The blade feels cold in his hand. His chest so heavy he can hardly breathe. Still, his movements are swift as he joins Takeshi on the mat. He feels his own eyes impossibly wide, his best attempt at drying the tears welling from within. “You are dead.”

With a flick of Sadao’s wrist, the ropes come undone. He repeats with emphasis, “You are dead.”

Takeshi takes Sadao's hands in his, a thumb caressing his blue veined wrists. The touch is impossibly warm, and the light pressure awakens a tingling sensation. "You are incredible." Takeshi leans closer, his next words brushing Sadao's lips, "I missed you so much."

"No, stop..." Sadao's voice cracks, but he lingers there, a breath away. This is real, not a dream or an illusion. This is the real Takeshi and Sadao can almost taste him. "You are... dead."

"If it will help you heal, then do it," Takeshi slowly pulls the blade in Sadao's hand towards his own abdomen. "I am tired of fighting, just let me die in your embrace."

"My lord, are you feeling well?" Kurosawa looks at him strangely, something like confusion in his hesitant voice.

Whatever spell had possessed Shiratori thankfully breaks. Yet a tightness remains in his chest and his headache thrums stronger than ever. He withdraws his hand, turns around to gather himself. How could he lose his composure?

"You remind me of someone I knew. He burned too bright, too fast."

"I'm sorry, my lord," Takeshi's – no, Kurosawa's voice sounds distant, muffled. "I don't understand."

"Please ignore my ramblings." Sadao's voice wavers, as he feels exhaustion take over. His knees wobble, so he tries to steady himself on the maple tree's rough trunk. Maybe head one too many cups of sake after all. "It has been a long day, perhaps I should..."

The world goes black.

CHAPTER III

Yoru Kurosawa

Evening

The dojo is oddly quiet this evening, as Kiyoshi's shallow breaths replace his usual extensive complaints. Despite the young lord's overt disdain for training, he had called for an extra sparring session with Yoru. But he seems miles away, lost in his own thoughts. Probably due to the impending betrothal, as preparations are nearing completion. Kiyoshi has shown his displeasure throughout the two years, both in sneering outbursts to Lord Shiratori, and privately venting to Yoru. Though, surprisingly, he's refrained from being outright rude to his stern bride-to-be or her family.

Yoru has done his best to stifle his own emotions. With the young lord's marriage, he would surely be reassigned to other primary duties, meaning more time handling difficult issues outside of the estate, not just the odd assignment. Meaning less time in the gardens, less time for poetry, less time with Kiyoshi.

Yoru steadies himself, as he moves to adjust Kiyoshi's weak grip on the blade. "Something is puzzling me." Kiyoshi's whisper catches him off guard. Yoru withdraws from the young master's wrist and takes a full step back, hiding his hands behind his straight back.

"Yes, my lord?"

Kiyoshi eyes and rubs at the spot Yoru touched, almost as if inspecting it. "How can you be so gentle when instructing me, yet so rough with the brushes?"

Yoru fumbles with a few incomprehensible noises. The young lord wasn't thinking of the betrothal at all! "Don't get me wrong, I do appreciate you not snapping my bones like twigs, but it seems you have better control over your strength than you let show."

Yoru blurts out, "I don't break them anymore", which prompts a full laugh from Kiyoshi.

"Tell that to the dozen you murdered this year! And your calligraphy is still horrendous."

Yoru has previously confided how embarrassed he felt for constantly damaging things. He had cost his grandparents a small fortune, one of the reasons why he hadn't hesitated at the offer to become a bodyguard. He wanted to repay all of it. He had tried at first to help his grandfather with the wood carvings, learn the trade, but that was absolutely a lost cause. And even after Grandmother had found him a job helping carry merchant goods, he always ended up messing things up.

Still Yoru cannot reveal just how afraid he is of hurting Kiyoshi, how much effort it takes to manage the tension building in his muscles, uncontrollable if he lets his guard down. This *thing* inside of him is only happy when fighting or destroying. Ever since it woke up.

He throws punch after punch, an unfamiliar rage rushing through him. The neighbourhood kids teased him, mocked how small and meek he was, and beat him. He usually lets them. But this time they are spilling awful lies about his mother – his mother was not a demon's whore! Yoru wants to stop their lies, so he latches onto the son of the potter, and does not let go. He can see it all happening as if floating above, higher and higher, their small bodies becoming smaller and smaller.

When he comes to, there is a crowd of people, familiar faces who had deemed his family pariahs because he had been born. They all

stare at him with a whole new expression. Even as his grandfather pushes him to walk away, Yoru looks back at the potter carrying his son in his arms. He wants to apologize; he wants to take it all back, and never do that again. As the tears overflow, he wipes his face, and that's when he smells it, the sticky blood that covers his hands.

“Yoru?” Kiyoshi asks, his brows knit together. Yoru had been brooding for too long, again. He shakes the haunting thoughts away, though the scent lingers. He offers a poorly planned excuse, “I think maybe my fingers are too rough, I can’t hold the brush properly.”

Kiyoshi’s voice is teasing, “They seem gentle enough to me.”

Yoru shies away and, out of ideas, simply says, “I suppose words just don’t like me.”

“I disagree. You have a way with words when you really try.” Yoru fails to grasp Kiyoshi’s meaning, just as he does half of the time. The young lord likes to tease, even if his more elaborate pranks have died down when they started to get along. About the same time that Kiyoshi decided to help him develop intellectual sensibilities, guiding him through the new worlds of calligraphy and poetry.

If I must suffer you breathing down my neck, you have to become less dull, he had said. Not as harsh as the times he compared Yoru to a tatami mat.

Kiyoshi still has that unsettling glint in his eye, like he knows something Yoru doesn’t, as he returns to the last stance they practiced. Yoru can’t help but laugh at how Kiyoshi not only grossly misplaces his wrists but completely destabilises his posture. “And you are a master at ignoring my advice.” In a single stance he had impossibly managed to undo two years of practice. Almost as if on purpose.

“Well, are you going to teach me or not?”

Yoru moves behind Kiyoshi, flexing his fingers. He inhales deeply, then lifts one hand to a thin shoulder, the other to the opposing hip.

Yoru startles as Lord Sakamoto clears his throat, making his presence known. Yoru's body immediately straightens into a respectful stance, flustered under his senior's piercing gaze. How did he miss Sakamoto's footsteps? Lord Sakamoto tosses a missive at Yoru, urging, "Kurosawa, get ready. We leave immediately." Yoru nods and reaches for his katana even as Sakamoto turns away.

"What is happening?" Kiyoshi asks, annoyed.

Yoru skims through the short message, his shoulders dropping and the pit in his stomach widening, "They finally located Ikeda's spy," hiding at a less than reputable inn. He grimaces, knowing this will be another covert assassination. Another death. The lords' games never cease. "I should go."

Kiyoshi grabs his wrist and pulls him back. "Wait!"

Yoru is locked in place as Kiyoshi's hand slides down his wrist, slender fingers intertwining his. Yoru's face reddens and breath quickens. He steals a glance at the door Sakamoto had just crossed, while a strange, dangerous, warmth spreads through him.

"I have a bad feeling about this..." Taking a short step forward, Kiyoshi beseeches, "Please, be careful."

Yoru doesn't like the crack in the young lord's voice, the worry in his eyes. He tries to reassure him, "I am the strong one, remember? It will be alright." It's true, Yoru has handled many such issues for Lord Shiratori over the years, though Kiyoshi has been mostly spared the details.

Kiyoshi closes the distance and burrows his head in Yoru's chest. His body feels cold even after exercising, yet Yoru is burning hot. Kiyoshi murmurs something that he struggles to discern over the

roaring heartbeat in his ears. *Kiyoshi is embracing me*, he marvels. Yet his free arm hovers in the air, hesitant to return the embrace.

Night

Lord Sakamoto had sent a couple of men ahead, to be their inconspicuous back up. Both Yoru and Lord Sakamoto wear thick winter coats with wide hats, keeping their faces down.

Yoru is deeply grateful for the pelts, particularly while bracing the raging wind at the back entrance of the pleasure house. His thoughts drift to the soft touch of Kiyoshi's hand when the door opens and a pair of giggling women enlighten him of the many ways they could warm him up. His gaze drops, suddenly finding the pebbles on the ground quite interesting and worthy of thorough study.

"Leave him alone," Lord Sakamoto shoos them away, returning to lead him up a cramped staircase.

As they creep down the hallway, Yoru tries his best to disassociate from the sounds assaulting him from every direction. This is not the time to be embarrassed.

"I will block the exit. Subdue him, but see that he remains fit for questioning," his senior instructs, as if for the first time. Granted, it is the first time in such a public setting. Lord Sakamoto's interrogations are usually as brief as his curt, need-to-know orders – and have one inevitable end. Yoru has become a blade that Lord Sakamoto wields, since the elder can no longer fully trust his ageing body.

"If... How do we clean up?" Yoru's sense of unease grows when his question is met with nothing but a pointed glance towards their target's door. There isn't time to push further.

Yoru slides the panel open in a fluid motion and invades the room, gripping his katana tight. A panicked escort grabs her robes scrambling to cower in a corner, while a half-undressed man curses and reaches for his own weapon.

“Don’t,” Yoru threatens, feeling Lord Sakamoto step in behind him and shut the door. Yoru’s brow drips with sweat, his heart races. The thing inside longing to play.

“What is this?” The slight slur in the man’s words betrays his inebriation, but he has the bearing of a fully-fledged samurai. Even drunk he should not be underestimated. For a moment, recognition colours his eyes, “Lord Kanzaki?”

This man knew Yoru’s father. Not so surprising, as they belonged to the same, losing side of the last war. Yoru’s command comes out strained, “Daimyo Shiratori has ordered your capture – surrender now!”

The spy shakes away his confusion, “So it’s true. Your sleazy lord did get his hands on one of his bastards, Lord Sakamoto.”

Such contempt, even from a spy, ignites a rage in Yoru and he snaps, “Do not disrespect Daimyo Shiratori!”

The terrified woman flinches. Yoru softens his expression and bids her to leave with a nod of his head, stepping aside as she flees.

Her gurgled cry stuns him. Something twitches in his periphery.

Shit.

The spy charges at him.

With a burst of power, he parries, catching the man’s katana with the whip-like flick of his wrist. The man’s eyes bulge as he finds himself gripping air. Yoru brings the tip of the blade to his throat, thoughts racing. His ears ringing loudly, a lump caught in his throat.

“Very efficient,” appraises Lord Sakamoto. Always the same words, and Yoru loathes them so. “Where is the message?”

The spy remains quiet, determination written on his face. Lord Sakamoto walks behind him, into Yoru’s line of sight. From his elder’s unsheathed blade, blood drips thickly to the floor. “If you won’t speak, the interrogation is over.”

“You are making a mistake boy, you hurt me and war will rage,” the spy warns. Every muscle in Yoru’s body strains, begging for the final blow. Yet he doesn’t want to do it.

I shall take responsibility for your actions. I shall bear your burden so you can ease your conscience, Lord Shiratori had promised under the red maple tree. The same day his lordship had shown him a different, earnest side, which made Yoru feel even more horrible once the poison kicked in.

The poison he had sneaked into Lord Shiratori’s sake cup, to quench his own beast’s pestering thirst for revenge. He had regretted it immediately, thankfully with enough time to administer the antidote and avoid suspicions.

For a while after the incident, despite being granted free access to the inner courtyard, Yoru kept his distance. Until Lord Shiratori reiterated his invitation. At first, Yoru suspected it was a way to pry upon Kiyoshi’s affairs, beyond the formal reports. But their conversations did not linger on the lord’s son at all, instead they grew far broader and deeper. Even if Yoru would never dare call Lord Shiratori a friend, he struggled to find a word that better described their bond.

Though Yoru’s conscience could never be clear, his lord’s promise still helps him endure and fulfill his duties. To make it easier, Yoru thinks of this spy’s scorn for Lord Shiratori. He thinks of the threat the man poses to the delicate balance of peacetime. He thinks of Kiyoshi’s safety.

In one clean blow, the spy is no more. Yoru does it, not the beast. He allows himself a minute for the tremors to subside before cleaning and sheathing the blade.

Tense in place, he watches as Lord Sakamoto rummages through the man’s belongings as if in a market stall, the droplets trailing him getting smaller and smaller. Yoru can’t grasp the needless cruelty – why

couldn't Lord Sakamoto let the girl just leave? They could have clarified the situation with her later, and these women were known for their discretion, were they not? He reaches for the largest piece of clothing he can find and covers her, avoiding as much of the gory scene as possible. He is terrified of looking. Terrified of one more haunting memory.

"Don't waste your time on that treacherous whore," Lord Sakamoto remarks dryly, stopping to stretch and huff. He rubs his bad knee, adding impatiently, "Help me search."

Yoru finds a couple of missives that he hands to Sakamoto, before a whiff of smoke hits him.

"Idiots have no patience," Lord Sakamoto curses under his breath.

"What do you mean?" Yoru manages after a bad cough.

For a moment, Sakamoto looks a hundred years older, his usual stern demeanour replaced by a heavy weariness, "Listen kid, you said it yourself – we have to clean up the place. If anyone gets out, Lord Ikeda *will* know what happened here and there *will* be a war."

The moment passes, but Yoru's shock doesn't. His mind struggles to reconcile such brutality with orders from the Lord Shiratori he knows.

"Compose yourself." Lord Sakamoto slaps him with the back of his hand, and Yoru's lower lip splits open. "A samurai that won't do his duty, is a dead one." He snaps, before heading to the nearest door.

Yoru watches in horror as his elder's partially hindered form offers the kiss of death indiscriminately. As a man flees past Yoru and down the stairs, it isn't Yoru drawing his blade and giving chase – but the abhorrent demon he despises.

Long dark hair, wet and sticky with red snow, whips his face wildly in the roaring wind. With a twist of his wrists, he slides the katana from the silhouette's torso, the head lolling oddly as the body drops to the ground with a thud. Heaving, he looks around at the foggy, empty street ravaged by the raging snowstorm, then back to the slain man lying in front of him.

Yoru's mind clears and his mouth fills with bile. Sinking to his knees, he retches his dinner onto the soft layer of snow that coats the back porch of the brothel. He welcomes the unsavoury bitter taste, for it masks the metallic tang of murder. Someone pats him on the shoulder, before dragging the thin body inside, the smell of smoke already spreading outside.

Back at the bathhouse of the Shiratori estate, Yoru frantically washes the stains from his hands, the stickiness from his hair. Only when his skin is inflamed red does he soak in the lukewarm water of the wooden tub. He can still smell it, the lingering stench that torments him.

Once again, Yoru hadn't been himself, merely a powerless observer, watching everything unfold through the monster's eyes, his own eyes. He feels worthless. But there is no redemption after tonight. He had murdered innocents, and Sakamoto just burned their bodies along with the entire building. All to cover up the assassination of a spy. After all, a spy caught in an accidental fire raises less suspicions than a plain murdered one.

He wonders about the extent of this madness, the reach of the monster. Had his father felt the same? Had he struggled as much as Yoru, or had he embraced it from the start?

"Did you mean my father?"

Lord Shiratori blinks twice, his attention drawn from the small tree he had been trimming, "Come again?"

"When you said I reminded you of someone. Was it my father, the demon samurai?"

"Why now?"

Yoru doesn't want to reveal it, Kiyoshi's joke that had made him consider his lord's words under a different light. If he mentions Kiyoshi, there is a good chance Lord Shiratori might clam up. But what he offers is also partly true. "I was studying the Battles of the Mountain Pass, as Lord Sakamoto suggested. For perspective, he said." Yoru feels self-conscious under Shiratori's gaze, he speaks too fast and when he pauses to catch breath, it's loud and unsteady. "Uhm... One of the texts mentioned you grew up together."

"Had you truly so little knowledge of your origins?"

"Apologies my lord, my education is lacking." Yoru looks down at the stone path, embarrassed. "All I heard were the rumours and... I wasn't sure I wanted to know more."

"There are many who would kill to have his blood running through them. You are one of a kind, Kurosawa."

Yoru thinks those people have no understanding of how hard it is to keep sane, how frustrating when one fails to keep control.

"What do you want to know?"

Yoru has so many questions, yet Sakamoto's warning lingers in the back of his mind. Tread carefully Kurosawa. Your father's name has been taboo in this estate for many years. Except Lord Shiratori's voice is gentle, an invitation, encouraging his curiosity. "I suppose... How was he? Before, well, the war."

"That is not a simple question." The lord shifts in place, considering. "He was many things – infuriating comes to mind. And

boastful, arrogant...” His expression softens, “Funny and kind. He was my best friend,” then turns saddens, “until he wasn’t.”

Yoru wipes the tears marring his face and composes himself as befits a samurai. On the way to his quarters, he procures the usual scented wood and the strongest incense he can find. As the first curls of scented smoke fill the room, he sits on the futon holding a small ceramic jar. He takes a portion of the camellia oil within, and applies it to the full length of his damp hair. The camellia oil is pungent, but not enough. Even when his eyes sting, sleep does not come. So, he stares absently at the shadows dancing on the plain door panel that leads to the porch.

He had danced like them,
To the blood’s tune, like branches
Breaking in the storm.

Part III

“What are you doing?”

Yoru’s heart jumps at the unexpected presence disturbing his silent ritual. Icy words that pierce through him in place of a blade. Kiyoshi finds him at the bridge of the innermost pond of the main garden, under the frozen tendrils of the lonely weeping willow. Dressed in white pelts, and with his silver hair down, Kiyoshi blends beautifully with the winter landscape.

“My lord, I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Irrelevant. Answer my question,” his commanding tone, sharp as the wind, contrasts to last evening’s affectionate touch. Or maybe Yoru had imagined it all, for how could Kiyoshi possibly care for him? “It’s an order.”

“I needed some air.” Yoru lies. He doesn’t understand how, but Kiyoshi just managed to foil his plan. His plan to end the beast once and for all.

Yoru hadn’t slept, had barely closed his eyes at all. There were too many voices, too many memories, too many doubts burying him deeper and deeper in a pit of self-loathing. So, he decided to go for a walk. Maybe, just maybe, he didn’t have to go back. He did not expect anyone to find him, not so deep in the gardens, not this early in the morning and not in this weather.

So why is Kiyoshi here? He usually prefers the chaotic beauty of the infinity gardens at the edge of the estate. And, with his frail constitution, he should not be bracing the icy winter air. Yet here he is, approaching, a calm rage in his steps. *Kiyoshi must hate me. He knows what happened – the innocents, the blood – and now he hates me.*

“I don’t believe you. Show me your hands.”

Yoru hesitates. Kiyoshi grabs his arms and tries to pull them free, to see what he is hiding behind his back. But it's futile, Kiyoshi can't move a mountain.

"No," he exhales, in a panic.

"Don't hide from me! I asked you not to go – I told you to stay with me." Realization dawns on Yoru, the words his ecstatic heartbeat had drowned out. *Stay with me*. Of course, that request was unrealistic, he couldn't have refused Lord Shiratori's orders. His chest aches. If only he had–

"I felt you splitting apart."

Yoru can't breathe.

He surrenders his arms, allowing Kiyoshi to take the short blade from his grasp. Though he doesn't seem surprised, his gaze lingers on the engraving. *Kanzaki*.

Yoru's tears well up, "It was my father's."

Kiyoshi's voice softens, "I know."

For a few moments, a heavy silence hangs between them.

"How did you get it?"

"Lord Shiratori gave it to me."

Kiyoshi gives him a sceptical look, "Why?"

"So, I could have something of his."

"That doesn't sound like father, except if he was gaining something from it. Buying your loyalty?" He considers before adding, "Or expecting exactly what you came here to do."

Yoru's heart tightens at the pain in Kiyoshi's voice. In his self-loathing, he had only seen the good it would do to disappear, not the evil.

"It's not like that. Your father is..." his last word comes out strangled, "kind." Even as he says it, flashes of his own blade dripping with innocent blood overtake him. "Oh Gods, I don't think I can bear it any longer."

"Clearly not. What happened? Why..." his voice cracks, "Why would you even consider this?"

"I have to resign..."

"You can't just leave me. What about us?" Kiyoshi draws short rapid breaths, his desperation palpable. "You didn't consider how it would break me?"

Yoru takes a step back, supporting himself on the bridge rail, melting the pillowy snow under his hand to reveal pops of red paint. This is insanity. There is no world where they could be together. Two men of different standing – a daimyo's heir about to get married, and a shell of a bodyguard barely hanging on. "Apologies my lord," Yoru swallows drily, "I fear I cannot fulfil your expectations."

Kiyoshi's expression alternates between fury and hurt, yet his voice is perfectly soft as he recites:

By the cherry gates,
The thread of fate came undone
When my heart met his.

Yoru freezes. These are his own words. The poem he wrote with unsteady hands, in the ugliest calligraphy known to men. His secret, shameful longing out in the open. How could Kiyoshi know it? It was supposed to be hidden in the back pages of his journal, just like the memory it evoked is hidden in Yoru's mind.

The first time he saw Kiyoshi he was in awe, thinking him a vision of a kami. It took several months before Yoru felt the same budding

pull again, and the more he unveiled Kiyoshi's human side, the more he nurtured it. But only in secret, for he would never dare presume...

"I told you, your words are powerful. You are powerful. Not just your strength – your heart." Kiyoshi's nose and cheeks flush the palest shade of pink, and he blinks rapidly. "I remember that day too. I thought I hated you then, but it was something else. I'd never felt that way before, so..." He hesitates, averting his gaze, "I'm sorry I hurt you."

"My lord—"

"Please don't call me that. Not now." He pleads.

"I... have nothing to offer you. I don't deserve happiness, and I can't give it either."

"That's not true. I hate to see you so bent on self-destruction. It frustrates me to no end that I cannot undo your mindset, no matter how hard I try." His voice hoarse, punctuated by a wheezing noise.

"You don't understand..."

"Then help me understand. I was an idiot before, but I am here now. Give me a chance."

"I hate it. I hate my blade. I hate myself when I wield it. It's my duty, and it's... it's necessary. We must keep the peace..."

"My father has many hands, if you don't want to—"

"But it's the only thing I am good for, and it will get worse, I will get worse. When you marry and I am sent away, I will have to fight more."

"What do you mean?"

Yoru hardly hears him. And he doesn't really want to go on. He has never shared this with anyone, not even Lord Shiratori. But now he

has started, he has shaken the ground, and the mountain is already crumbling down fast.

“The curse is real. The wrath of the Demon Dog is so difficult to contain, and my hands are stained with so much blood. It haunts me, the smell follows me everywhere.” He can’t hold back the torrent pouring down his cheeks. “And the more I fight, the more the demon craves. I can’t let it hurt anyone else... or risk hurting you...” He finally runs out of words, as the wood he clasps creaks and splinters into a misshapen dent.

Kiyoshi reaches for that same monstrous hand, still crushing the bridge’s railing. Even when Yoru recoils, he seizes it. Tenderly.

“No one endures what you have and remains so human, so gentle. You are so much stronger than me.” He closes the distance. “I would have been discarded long ago if not for my father’s name. That is all I am to any of them, a disappointing heir too stubborn to die and too weak to live up to their expectations.” Kiyoshi is offering a piece of himself, a sincerity unlike anything he shared before.

Yoru wants to disagree with him, he wants to comfort Kiyoshi, to assure him Lord Shiratori struggles so much because he is afraid of losing him. But he manages only to shake his head as Kiyoshi doesn’t stop to breathe. “I have felt nothing for years. No matter how much power I wielded, no matter what pleasures or torments I sought, I was numb through it all. Except with you – exasperating, oblivious – you. You make me feel alive.”

“Damn this thing,” Kiyoshi drops the blade he was still holding. It lands tip down on the snowy wooden planks before falling flat by their feet. “Damn my father, and damn everything else.”

He brings his freezing hands to Yoru’s cheeks, his thumbs wiping away the lingering tears. “Yoru, I love you. Whatever you are going through, I want to be there to help you get past it.” He pauses, looking

deeply into his eyes. “You can stay, or you can go. I don’t care where, I don’t care when. I am not leaving your side. Ever.”

Yoru wants to believe him.

Kiyoshi Shiratori

Part I

Tendrils of smoke rise from the incense sticks and merge into the thick cloud veiling the elaborate ceiling of the temple. It dims and diffuses the yellow light emitted by the countless hanging lamps. The throaty rumbling of the monks' sutras reverberates through Kiyoshi, as he pinches the last of the powdered incense into the brazier arranged before the altar. Before his father.

Lord Shiratori, dressed in a pristine white kimono, lays with his arms placed at his sides and partially covered by a silk shroud. His expression is impossibly serene, at odds with the sombre man Kiyoshi knew.

On his way back to the head place at the front of the tatami mat, Kiyoshi takes a glance at his children. The pair sit perfectly still, but in the candlelight their eyes and cheeks glisten wet. They will miss their grandfather deeply. Kiyoshi is glad they got to know a different, softer side of Lord Shiratori. Even if he and his father had never fully closed the distance between them, he had come to understand him better. The weight of a daimyo's responsibilities is absolutely crushing.

Before he can sit down, Kiyoshi fails to suppress the second coughing fit of this ceremony. *At this rate you'll take me with you, old man.* He curses the prolonged rituals his weak lungs never could stand. His wife discreetly helps steady him, offering a sip of water. He can picture what gossip this little fluke will produce.

Despite having taken over most of the daimyo's duties in the past years, he must still prove his competence as Lord Shiratori's successor. And any show of weakness under the scrutiny of the society gathered here can be dangerous.

Once fully composed, Kiyoshi leads the last prayer. As boredom overtakes him, his eyes drift to the golden leaf motifs decorating the trims and beams of the room. Loops of leaves and small birds he has mostly memorized by now.

The delicate carvings carry him to one of his favourite fantasies – what if he had fled this life, if he had gone with Yoru somewhere far away. Would they have found a quiet corner to be themselves? Where they could stroll about the countryside reciting poetry to each other, and cultivate a humble vegetable patch. Perhaps Yoru could finally master his wood carvings and sell them for small coin. In his flights of fancy, Kiyoshi always chooses to ignore the likely reality – that his health would have proven a burden. And that leaving a gap in the daimyo’s succession would portend skirmishes, war, famine...

As the last of the sutras die down, the day’s ceremony comes to an end, and with it the three-day long wake. The family can finally retire to the privacy of their quarters, away from the prying eyes of the visiting lords.

Exiting the temple, Kiyoshi blesses the cleansing fresh air. Though his aching body craves respite, he does not refuse his daughter’s cry to be picked up. He holds her close to him as she sniffles. Thankfully, she is still small enough for him to handle the effort.

“Don’t cry Kiyoko. Grandfather promised he would watch over us,” little Sadao says to his sister. Though his eyes glisten and he holds tight to his mother’s hand, he keeps his chin high. Every bit the embodiment of his namesake.

After a quiet supper with his wife, Kiyoshi lounges alone for a few minutes. A hesitant messenger finds him, “Your lordship” he bows deeply, both hands offering up a letter, “Lord Ono requested an audience – pressing matters relating to this missive,” the man says before Kiyoshi dismisses him with a wave of his hand.

Thanks for the warning. Kiyoshi takes in the paper, fine and scented. Pompous. It bears the seal of the intolerable relic, Lord Ikeda. Indeed, this man has pointlessly harassed his family for so long, it's almost a joke. Still, Kiyoshi dreads to read it. He does not need whatever bad news it holds.

What part of private mourning do they not understand? Kiyoshi wonders, while going through great lengths to dodge the secretary ready to ambush him. Whatever war is brewing can wait. He smirks, imagining what his father would say about this evasion of duties. *Didn't you ever take a day off?*

His light steps lead him away from his public quarters, but when he turns the bend in the hallway, he is confronted by a mighty presence. His wife's eyes narrow in suspicion. "Why do you look like you tied someone's sandals together?" She asks, her lips twitching.

"Please don't tell on me," he begs, rubbing his hands together above his head in mock prayer. "Spare me the endless ramblings of wrinkly old Ono, you know it is never just a missive with him."

She can hardly suppress a smile, but lifts her shin defiantly, "What do I get in exchange?"

"My darling, what can I offer someone who has everything? Whatever you wish is yours!" Truly, he has long relinquished all the power and independence she desired. Fierce and brilliant, she has helped manage everything from household to state matters. Without her, Kiyoshi's life would be ever so boring and overflowing with bureaucracy.

"I'll hold you to that." She relaxes her posture, "Very well, I'll see what Lord Ono wants."

Kiyoshi is so grateful he even pecks her on the cheek before sliding the door open. “You are the most wonderful of wives, you know?”

“I know,” she says, then frowns, “Are you going out now, at this hour? Shouldn’t you *actually* rest?”

Caught again, he muses.

“I will, I promise,” he says already halfway out the door, covering his silver hair with the dark cloak of mourning.

Part II

He walks briskly, despite his complaining lungs, away from the main house and in the direction of his private quarters. Just one more day of funeral rites left – the most important day. Tomorrow his father will be buried.

Kiyoshi is so tired of the many masks he wields, respectful lord, reliable father, grieving son. He needs to recharge, to shed all skins weighing him down and just be himself for a while. That will help him much more than mere sleep.

Located at the edge of the estate, by the infinity gardens, are the private quarters where Kiyoshi can unwind from his duties. It is well known that his poor health often brings him here to convalesce. He had ordered this building in preparation for his marriage, to maintain independence from his father while he was still the daimyo. After moving back into the main house, he kept these as secondary quarters.

He rushes through the chaotic gardens past the overgrown experimental designs left by countless young gardeners over hundreds of years, past the ruins of the ancient estate, and past the privacy wall that surrounds the building. Until he sneaks upon the familiar figure sitting under the cherry tree – their cherry tree. No longer in full bloom, but perhaps even more beautiful. Its fragility allows the delicate pink petals to dance and soar even in the gentle breeze.

Kiyoshi collapses dramatically onto his lap. “Hello there,” he says, smiling at the flawless face above him.

“You need to work on your stealth, I could hear you all the way from the gate.” Yoru says, shifting his position slightly to better cuddle Kiyoshi.

“Worked well enough on old Ono.”

Yoru snorts lightly, “Hardly a challenge.” He adds, “I saw you with Kiyoko, she’s getting a little too big for you.”

Kiyoshi feigns hurt, “You wound me.”

“She’ll be the one carrying you before long. Why not join the kids for the sparring lessons? Build up some muscle.”

“Grant me reprieve from such agony! I am not ready for Sadao to crush me yet.” His ten-year-old most certainly would. Kiyoshi eases his tone, sitting up, his hands feeling the blades of grass by his sides, “You are good with them.” He pauses a moment before asking, “Do you ever regret it? Staying with me... not having children of your own?”

“You are my family.” No hesitation whatsoever. “Kiyoko and Sadao are my family too.” Yoru looks away into the last pink-streaks fading in the dark blue sky, his voice barely more than a whisper, “I... I don’t want to pass on my burden.”

Kiyoshi finds his hand and squeezes, knowing very well what he means. He has witnessed first-hand the struggles Yoru has faced – still faces, though to a smaller extent. And every day Yoru chooses to *stay* is a victory for both.

Kiyoshi had promised himself he would protect Yoru. He swore he would find reasons to make him want to be alive. That’s when Kiyoshi dropped the rebel act and did what was expected of him. He behaved when he wanted to lash out. He bore the endless bureaucracies when he wanted to tear his hair out of boredom. And he married the implacable widow chosen for him, though he counted himself lucky on that account. Slowly but surely, he collected whatever wisps of sway he could use on his father, to ensure Yoru would be kept away from the executions, the covert duties, the dirty work. And to keep him close.

Kiyoshi was sure his father caught on quite early, though not a word was said. Lord Shiratori was not one to air out shameful matters, quite the contrary.

Nonetheless, for as long as Kiyoshi behaved, Lord Shiratori consented to his suggestions. He came to see it as a kind of unspoken pact between them. *I’ll be who you want me to be, and you will leave*

Yoru out of your games. He supposes it only helped that, for whatever unfathomable reason, Yoru and Lord Shiratori were on good, friendly terms. Yoru, with all his heart and sincerity, had become like a bridge between them.

But Kioshi doesn't want to think of his father anymore. Not today. Not after three gruelling days of public mourning.

Kiyoshi rests his head on the soft nook of Yoru's neck. He takes in his subtle scent. "You will leave a different kind of legacy. In your poetry, in your students." A couple of swirling blossoms change course mid-air but come to land together on his open palm. He offers one to Yoru and adds, "Your voice always steers me to seek the kindest alternatives, even when they are very hard to see."

Yoru holds him tight, his warm breath brushing Kiyoshi's face. "How do you always know what to say?"

Kiyoshi feels the intensity in Yoru. Not just in the rhythm of his breathing, the warmth radiating from his skin. It's the tingling sensation spreading from within Kiyoshi's own chest, the way he can always tell when Yoru is hurting – or burning.

"It's my one redeeming quality." He replies. A wicked smile plays on Kiyoshi's lips, as he anticipates Yoru's.

After all these years, Yoru's kiss is still tentative, measured. His touch still careful and tense. But only at first. Just until he rediscovers the boundaries. Until he finds the balance between yearning and control. And Kiyoshi is more than patient, because Yoru is worth it all.

Under the emergent starlight, they shed all the layers which had buried them during the day. All masks discarded, burdens lifted, and responsibilities forgotten. The spring breeze prickles Kiyoshi's bare skin, but each tender caress sends sparks down his spine. This is where they come to find themselves, find each other. It's where they belong. In this moment – together.

Part III

Kiyoshi rose earlier than the sun, claiming a few quiet hours to pay someone a visit. He waits by the ruins in the infinity garden for Yoru, who went to the main kitchens to retrieve some sweets. They can't show up empty handed.

Yoru crosses the overgrown hedges, a lacquered box presumably filled with delicious treats in one hand, and a steaming bun of red bean paste in the other. Kiyoshi takes half of the bun, burning his tongue in his eagerness.

"It feels like we are a couple of mischievous kids," he laughs.

They take the eastern path and wander into the misty conifer woods that shelter the ancient cemetery. Lord Shiratori will not be buried here, but in another more auspicious location to the north, approved by the head of the temple. In fact, no one has been laid to rest in this cemetery in over a century – except of course, Kiyoshi's infant siblings.

Kiyoshi's mother had shared her love for this place with him, though he didn't realize at the time that they were the odd ones. Most people felt uneasy in these woods. It was said that the old kami still wandered here, preying on the weak of spirit. Most people did not find the eerie, melancholic scenery soothing, but unsettling. They did not see a haven in the shade of the tall ancient cedars and firs and cypresses. They missed the understated beauty of the tilted moss-covered tombstones.

But Kiyoshi felt lighter every time his mother brought him to visit the childlike statues stacked into a pyramidal shape. Not all of them belonged to his siblings, but his mother didn't want them to feel alone. They always left the lower steps full of small offerings and, when needed, replaced the faded bibs for new bright red ones.

Young Kiyoshi had suggested the addition of the two fox idols, their family's patrons, and gave them bibs of their own, so his siblings

would be well protected and cared for. He felt closer to his mother here than anywhere else, and today he could use their support.

Yoru unwraps the cloth and opens the flat lid of the box, revealing an assortment of sweet mochi wrapped in cherry leaves. Together they make an offering along with a quiet prayer.

The silence lingering between them is comfortable. In these woods, even the birds fall mute. Only the rustle of small leaves whisper with the voices of the spirits. Kiyoshi struggles to understand them today.

“How are you feeling?”

Yoru’s tender words bring him back, but he cannot shake the numbness creeping through him. “Not ready to face the day yet.”

“Your father was very afraid of getting hurt. Of losing you too...” Kiyoshi only sighs, though he is very aware of the dozens of kind small faces watching them. “And leaving you unprepared.”

“I can believe that.” But deep inside, nothing stirs. Had he come to these woods seeking the emotions he had felt for his siblings and mother? To fill the gap of absent grief? Kiyoshi knows he should be feeling something. Something other than apathy. He should be feeling what Yoru is feeling. “And you?”

Yoru looks away, his voice barely more than a whisper, “I miss him.” He takes a deep breath. “He used to tell me about my father. It helped me see him as more than the monster people remember. So, in a way, it’s like I lost them both.”

Apparently, Kiyoshi had underestimated his father’s capacity for meaningful connections. The Kanzaki name had always been such a sensitive subject, a friend turned traitor... it’s why Kiyoshi used it to spite the impassive Lord Shiratori. But it made sense, this would have brought Yoru and his father together.

Yoru's grief materializes in fat tears rolling down his cheeks. Kiyoshi can't help but embrace him tight. Yoru sinks into his shoulder. "I'm sorry," Kiyoshi offers helplessly. *What is wrong with me, I should be the one needing solace.* His gaze locks on the fox idol behind Yoru. *It just hasn't sunk in,* he tells himself.

"I wonder if he is still alive..."

Kiyoshi must have misheard the wet muffled words. Does he mean Kanzaki? It's a well-known fact that Takeshi Kanzaki was executed as a traitor after losing the war. He had refused the honourable way out. Yoru knows that. Yoru has his wakizashi.

Kiyoshi's back stiffens, but he doesn't reply.

"I need to show you something," Yoru's dark gentle eyes, red and swollen, turn to him. It seems a lifetime ago since he last saw this expression. This overwhelming sadness. Kiyoshi feels it in his chest. He brings Yoru's face to his, their noses and foreheads touching, their breaths merging. "You know you can tell me anything."

Yoru nods, closing his eyes for a moment, "It wasn't my story to tell. But now..." He shuffles through his sleeve, retrieving a small pale object – a hairpin. A very simple hairpin that seems to be carved out of bone. Kiyoshi recalls Yoru's attempts at wood carving, always yielding miserable results. Has he found a medium that can handle his strength? "Did you make it?"

"No," he breathes heavily, "my father did."

Strange that Yoru had never mentioned it before.

"For your mother?"

"For your father."

Kiyoshi had suspected. To an extent. He had joked about it to annoy his father, trying to undercut his pristine composure, never

putting too much weight on it really. It wasn't easy to gauge what lay underneath the ice.

"So, they were...?"

"Yes."

Kiyoshi finds it difficult to imagine his father showing actual emotions. But that he had shared *this* with Yoru was truly baffling.

"It hurt him deeply. I don't think he ever healed." Of course, this paints the betrayal in a whole new light.

"But he couldn't do it, he couldn't execute him. He forged the whole thing, even the witnesses." A frightening thought, that the demon Takeshi Kanzaki could still be out in the world somewhere. Yoru can't be serious. He cannot be considering...

"Do you want to find him?" he can't stop the sharp edge in his words.

"No. I mean, I wouldn't even know where to begin." Kiyoshi lets out the breath he had been holding. The thought of Yoru leaving was smothering. If Kanzaki's betrayal had felt anything like this...

"I just thought you should know too." Yoru takes Kiyoshi's hand gently.

"Lord Shiratori gave me the pin, and I am grateful, but..." He unfurls Kiyoshi's fingers and drops the hairpin in the open palm. It's light and smooth, and, despite the simplicity, well crafted.

Such a small object, yet a tangible piece of their fathers' secret history. There was so much Kiyoshi didn't know. Had he even tried to know?

Yoru presses Kiyoshi's fingers back around the pin and enfolds them in his warm callused hands. His soft request resounds with an ancient sorrow, "It belongs with him."

Kiyoshi rushes to the temple, interrupting the final preparations of the body. He bids everyone leave, demanding a minute alone with his father. The temple quietens but the heavy air keeps weighing him down. He is coming to loath this place and the smoke that stings his eyes and his lungs and permeates into his mouth with each erratic gasp.

He unshrouds his father's face. It will be the last time he will see it. Kiyoshi cannot maintain his gaze as he says, "I visited mother today. And the babies." He winces, embarrassment creeping up in him. Unlike the woods, in this room even the lowest whisper becomes amplified in the echoes that surround him.

I wish you had talked to me about her. About them.

Kiyoshi releases his grasp on the hairpin Yoru asked to return. For Kiyoshi, it was the symbol of a father so different from what he knew. The man of ice and stone or the man of fire and heartache? *About him.*

His eyes blur as he secures the plain pin next to the ostensive golden one already adorning the primly styled topknot.

Why didn't you show me you were human?

The legend of the silver fox

Long ago, on a moonless night, a young man came upon a fox of magnificent silvery fur who had been caught in a hunter's trap. The fox watched the man with weary eyes but unwavering will and spoke in a voice that was ageless and enchanting: *"Release me and I shall bestow upon you the blessing of the moon."*

With kindness in his heart, the man claimed no need for a bargain, for any creature of such resolve deserved to be free. He released the fox and did not chase it. Before disappearing into the dark woods, the fox took a last look at the man and bowed.

The man continued his path home to his parents where he lived a humble life, unaware that the fox observed all from afar, puzzled by this kind man who had declined its blessing. When the time came for the man to marry, and a match had been found, then the fox knew jealousy, for it had fallen deeply in love with the man.

The fox sought the wife-to-be as she bathed herself in the hot springs and offered: *"Answer me three questions truthfully and I shall bestow upon you the blessing of the moon."* The young woman was a little afraid and very much in awe and immediately accepted.

"Have you felt true hunger in your belly?" Asked the fox. And the bride nodded yes.

"Have you carried bitter jealousy in your liver?" Asked the fox. And the bride nodded yes.

"Have you love in your heart for the man you are to marry?" Asked the fox. And the bride nodded no.

Satisfied, the fox finalized the bargain: *"When the moon rises in the night sky, I shall borrow your skin, and you shall never hunger*

again. And thus, it is agreed upon us, for you have known jealousy as I have too, and you do not love this man whereas I do.

And so it was that on the wedding night, as in all other nights where the moon kissed the sky, it was the fox who laid with the man, and during the day the family prospered and there was always plenty of rice on the table.

It was not long before the woman's belly grew round and full, and the fox and the wife shared a deeper bond and felt as one. Every night the fox would caress their belly and sing the cradle song of the moon, with their loving husband by their side.

On the night of the birth, as the fox held the small babe in her arms, the fox and the wife knew a new kind of love. Their husband had been away, to fetch a gift for their babe he had said but would soon be returning.

At last, the husband arrived bringing with him a small black dog with a silky ribbon round his neck. But the black dog barked and barked and frightened the fox. As the spirit of the fox fled the woman's body in haste, the man recognized the silver fox and bid it to wait. The fox said only with sadness and longing:

"The spell has now been broken, and I may never return. I beg you three accept my last blessing for you have shown me true love and joy."

The man understood then why the wife he had loved during the day seemed different from the wife he had loved during the night, and his heart broke in half.

But the gentle wife that remained at his side brought him the babe, and the man saw fine silvery hair upon his child's head and unwavering will upon his child's gaze, and he knew that the fox would always walk with them.