

森見登美羽

有頂天家族

Uchoten-Kazoku
Morimi Tomihiko



幻冬舎文庫

Uchōten Kazoku

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Prologue

During the reign of Emperor Kammu, vast multitudes left behind the land of the Manyōshū¹ and poured into Kyōto.

These people raised the capital, multiplied in number, struggled for dominance, paid reverence to the gods, made entreaties to the Buddhas, painted pictures, composed poems, clashed swords, and no sooner had they set fire to the city than they rebuilt it, multiplied once more, toiled unceasingly at the wheels of commerce, diverted themselves with the pursuit of knowledge, and revelled in an age of peace, but were terrified at the arrival of the four Black Ships, and in their confusion once again burned down the city, and with “Westernization” as the slogan of the day, paid no heed to their past mistakes but once again rebuilt the city, passed through the war years, came to tears on the cusp of laughter and laughter on the cusp of tears, and thus it has been up to the present day.

Twelve hundred years have passed since Emperor Kammu established the seat of his imperial authority.

Presently, over 1.5 million people live in the city of Kyōto.

But hold, a moment.

Of the warriors and nobles and monks who run amok through the narrow confines of the capital in *The Tale of the Heike*, one-third are foxes, and another third are tanuki. The remaining third are the tanuki merely masquerading as humans. This being the case, it is obvious to see that *The Tale of the Heike* is not a human tale, but really a tale of us tanuki. Young and old, great and small, be ye proud to declaim this truth far and wide! It is not our history that rides the coattails of the history of mankind, but their history that clings to ours!

...or so some old windbag once claimed, in a feeble attempt at rewriting history.

Naturally, he was a tanuki.

He was so hirsute that he resembled less an old, venerable tanuki than a fluffy ball of fur rolling about behind the Amida Hall in Chionji, and the memory is still fresh in my mind of how several years ago, he really did turn into a motionless ball of fur and died a poet's death.

Perhaps this stuff about *The Tale of the Heike* was no more than the fancy of a short-lived furball, but nevertheless it remains a fact now more than ever that the grounds of the capital teem with tanuki. At times they hobnob with the humans, dashing this way

¹The Manyōshū is a collection of poetry that was compiled in the Nara Period during the reign of Emperor Kammu, prior to his moving the capital; hence, “land of the Manyōshū” refers to the old capital of Nara.

and that. Tanuki are always seeking to imitate humans, as if reprising background roles in *The Tale of the Heike*.

Withal, there are some tanuki who claim that the history of this city was created by tanuki and humans, paw in hand.

But hold, a moment.

Since time immemorial, the skies above the palace have been our domain.

We soar through the firmament as we please, displaying the supremacy of the tengu far and wide, raining contempt and spittle wheresoever we please. The rabble who crawl along the surface of the earth below are but subjects at our beck and call. Humans chunter on about their accomplishments, looking smug as you please, as if the whole of history was written by their paltry, paper-thin efforts. An absurd proposition! Laughable! Even had the tanuki lent them a furry hand, what could the likes of humans hope to accomplish? Magickal creatures that we are, disasters and catastrophes are ours to command. The fate of the realm lies wholly within our hands.

Look up to the mountaintops that surround the city. Fear us! Honor us! We who abide in the skies!

...or so someone once haughtily declared.

Naturally, he was a tengu.

Humans live in the city, tanuki creep along the ground, tengu soar the skies. This triumvirate has co-existed since the capital was established in Heian, and so the wheel continues to turn. Tengu lecture tanuki, tanuki impersonate humans, humans fear and venerate tengu; tengu spirit away humans, humans make tanuki into stew, tanuki catch tengu in their traps; round and round it goes.

Nothing interests me more than watching this wheel spin round.

I myself am a tanuki, but not content with that lowly station, I find admiring the tengu from afar and imitating humans to be great fun.

And that means there's never a dull moment to be had in my hectic, exhilarating life.

Chapter 1 — The Goddess on the River Terrace

In the Masugata Court Apartments, to the north of the Demachi shopping arcade, there lived a retired tengu.

He rarely left his apartment. The sole sustenance by which he maintained his ancient existence was a ghastly gruel boiled with whatever happened to be available at the shopping district. He was frightfully old, and his abhorrence of baths was such that the texture of his skin was not so different from that of dried squid, yet were one to rub that desiccated flesh, one would be astonished at the remarkable absence of dirt and detritus. His ego soared high into the autumn sky, but for all his boastfulness there was not a single thing he was capable of accomplishing on his own. Once upon a time, he had possessed powerful magicks and toyed with the fate of the country, but those days were far behind him, his powers long since vanished. His libido was still going strong, but in that capacity, too, his prowess had dried up long ago. Now he sat, scowling and drinking port wine, and as he drank, he would talk about the chaotic, long-ago wars of the foolish humans. Droning on about the Bakumatsu, he would veer off into the Ōnin War, and as he started talking about the Ōnin War, he would drift into the fall of the Heike, and as he began to explain the fall of the Heike you would find yourself right back in the Bakumatsu: in short, there was no rhyme or reason to his tales. He resembled a fossil more than a living, breathing organism. In fact many people fervently hoped that he really would turn into a rock, and that sooner rather than later.

Everyone called him Master Akadama, but I also called him my mentor.



Tanuki in Kyoto learn many things: their three R's; the skills of transformation; the craft of arguing; the proper way to sweet-talk a young tanuki maiden. They learn these things from the tengu. As there are many tengu in Kyoto, so too are there many schools of thought. The most prestigious of these groups is the Kurama Group up on Mount Kurama, known far and wide as a gathering for the elite. Master Akadama of Nyoigatake used to be just as acclaimed, and in fact he was once known rather ostentatiously as "Yakushibō of Nyoigatake".

Long ago, Master Akadama would gather tanuki and give lectures in a borrowed college classroom in the corner of a building. He would stand at the front of the room under the dingy lights facing the students who crowded the tiered seats, pontificating to his heart's content, his haughty bearing wholly befitting of a tengu. The students dared not protest, for in those days the Master still possessed true majesty. Was he majestic because he put on airs, or did he put on airs because he was majestic? Only one who could quash such pointless quibbles without any discussion at all could be considered truly majestic.

The Master always wore an immaculately pressed suit, and as he spoke he would glare out the windows with great intensity, as if he were trying to bore holes in the trees outside with his gaze. The sight left quite an impression on me. "I despise you all," he said, on many occasions. "But not just you. I despise all who are not me."

The Master soared through the sky, stirred up whirlwinds when the mood took him, carried away any girl who took his fancy, and rained contempt over the world at large. Heady days for him, they were. Who could ever have imagined that such a tengu would fall so low as to be reduced to living in a cramped apartment in the rear of the shopping district?

For generations, every tanuki born into our clan has gone on to receive instruction from Master Akadama, and I, being no exception, dutifully entered his school when the time came. Thinking back, Master Akadama was constantly scolding me. Why? Well, if I had to say, I suppose it was because I never bent my talents for the good of my clan. I was willful, always aiming to walk my own path, be my own tanuki.

Master Akadama was a solitary being, but he hated it when others sought to strike out on their own. But back then, I was determined to be like him.

Of course, that was a long time ago.



That day, on my way to visit Master Akadama's apartment, I stopped at the Demachi shopping arcade. The street was packed with shoppers, and along with them came the stench of humans. I purchased Akadama port wine, toilet paper, Q-tips, and a bento box, among other sundries, then headed north up a little alley. It was late in the afternoon on this fine summer day; the Gion Festival had already come and gone, and July was nearing its end.

I had taken the form of a bubbly high school girl. Transformation was the one thing I had always been good at, and people were always taking me to task for constantly changing my shape. These days, tanuki aren't as adept at transforming as we once were, and changing shape whenever you please is for some odd reason frowned upon. Utter tosh, I say. We tanuki are the sole beings with the ability to transform; why shouldn't we be free to enjoy using our powers wherever and whenever we please?

I had specifically taken on this form in order to please the Master, sure that the sight of a pretty young damsel delivering his groceries would put him in a good mood. But when I entered his apartment, I received a rather hotter reception than I had wagered on.

"You blithering idiot, stop that tomfoolery at once!"

The Master sat in his futon in the middle of the 4½-tatami room, and hurled whatever happened to be within reach at me: hanging scrolls, lucky cats, tea utensils, vases, and even Shigaraki-ware tanuki statues, all of which were covered in a fine layer of dust.

I returned fire from the kitchen with rolls of toilet paper. "What do you mean *blithering*, you smelly old coot? You spend every day just sitting in this room withering away, and here I was, trying to be a breath of fresh air in the dull grey life of my poor old Master!"

The Master spat on the tatami mat. "I'll thank you to remove your 'refreshing' furry hindquarters from my sight!"

"Don't you appreciate the artistic perfection of my transformation? Attend, if you will, to the impeccable curve of the bosom, the narrowness of the waist, to say nothing of the many other fine details of this vivacious young..."

"Enough, enough! I'm about to be sick."

"Scold me all you want, but no amount of misplaced anger can deny the inner stirrings of your heart..."

"You think that a transformation of your mediocre talent could ever hope to fluster me? Pah, don't give yourself airs!"

Here the Master fell silent, gingerly rubbing his lower back.

The rays of the setting sun penetrated into the narrow room through the window, illuminating vast fields of dust dancing in the sunlight. Surrounded by piles of rubbish on all four sides, the age-worn Master sat cross-legged on his futon, looking for all the world like a king who has lost his kingdom.

I had been bringing groceries to the Master for over six months now, unable to look on as he slurped up that nauseating gruel, which was hardly fit to feed a stray dog. But the selfishness of the Master knew no bounds, only increasing the hardships of my noble endeavor. The Master would not touch any food that he did not like, so he picked out only the parts he liked out of the bento box, leaving the rest behind. He loved mandarin oranges, but only if I peeled them for him, and if I did not he would throw a tantrum. He would only deign to drink coffee that was ground from Blue Mountain beans and brewed in front of him, grumbling that anything else was "not coffee", and if he didn't have any coffee for more than three days he would throw a tantrum. Whenever he was in the midst of one of his incessant tantrums, the only thing he would allow to pass his lips was Akadama port wine. Truly, an *enfant terrible* in the flesh.

"Have you seen Benten of late?" he asked gruffly.

"No, I haven't seen her in some time."

"It's been a long time, since she was last here. Neither hide nor feather I've heard of her, for..."

As impotent as the Master was, he cared much for the wellbeing of Benten. She was all he would talk about each time I saw him.

"I doubt she would want to return to a place like this," I remarked.

The Master's only reply was a tremendous fart, and even he looked surprised at the sound.



Benten is neither tengu nor tanuki, but only a human. In spite of that, her beauty is incomparable, beyond words, and so I cannot describe it here.

In her younger days, Benten's human name was Suzuki Satomi, and though she showed tengu-esque flashes of arrogance and ill-humor, she had been just another beautiful human girl living in the countryside.

It was Master Akadama who, still in his glory days, had been flying over Lake Biwa on his way to Chikubu Island to pass on New Year's greetings when he spotted Benten trudging aimlessly on the shore, snatched her up, and whisked her back to Kyoto. In a word, kidnapping. Master Akadama spared no effort in teaching the girl the ways of the tengu, and for her part Benten took in his lessons voraciously, progressing in leaps and bounds on her way toward becoming a tengu. She progressed so swiftly, in fact, that in the end she used Master Akadama as a springboard on her way up, one sharp kick with her elegant legs sending him hurtling groundwards.

Today, nothing remains of the Benten of old. Though still human, she is more tengu-like than tengu themselves. Leaving Master Akadama to shrivel into a shadow of his former self, she lives a profligate existence, splitting her time between Kyoto, Ōsaka, and Kōbe as she pleases. Her youthful, pouting, cotton candy features have melted into a cold, beautiful countenance. The girl who walked aimlessly on the lakeshore is no more—in her place is a woman grown, and merciless. Most fearsome of all is her unpredictability: find yourself unfortunate enough to be in her way, and she will crush you.



Rebuffing the Master's demands for Akadama port wine, I forced him to finish his bento.

"Today is Friday," he said, making a face as he chewed. "Benten is with the Friday Fellows, of that I am certain."

The mere mention of the Friday Fellows made my hair stand on end. Feeling my whole body quivering, I set myself to work tidying the loose odds and ends strewn around the Master's room.

"I'm sure she's enjoying herself."

"What in blazes could possibly be enjoyable about fooling around with a bunch of humans?"

"Benten is human too. Don't tell me you've forgotten?"

"Just think of her, frittering her nights away. If I took my eyes off her for a moment, she'd abandon the path of wickedness altogether, I know it. Impossible woman!"

"Shouldn't abandoning the path of wickedness be a good thing?"

"Silence!" the Master screeched, rice grains spraying across the room. He tossed aside the remains of the bento. "Disgusting stuff, how can anyone stomach this slop!"

He had finished about half the box, which I took to mean that it had been moderately pleasing to his palate. I handed him the bottle of port, which he sipped at his leisure.

Lowering myself down to the floor in front of him, I took a deep breath. Outside the window, the light was fading. I had taken the liberty of clearing a path to the window and throwing it open, letting a gentle evening breeze flow in.

"The breeze isn't so bad in here," I commented.

The lights on the ceiling flickered for a moment. A single moth lit on the edge of the teacup the Master was drinking his wine from, basking in the electric light and sluggishly moving its wings.

"How wretched it is, that my only visitors are insects and you!"

"A word of thanks would be most welcome."

"And who requested your presence, pray tell?" The Master reclined on the floor.

"You were always a nuisance of a student. What would possess you to believe that I would be pleased to see you, after finally having rid myself of your mewling mug? Mercy, I've not the patience to scold you any further."

"Well, everyone knows teachers love a rebel."

"I've never heard such nonsense, you reprobate!"

I lit up a smoke, while the Master rummaged through a black lacquered cabinet and produced a hookah. We puffed away in silence, save for the soft burbling sound of the Master's pipe.

"If you have so much time on your hands you might as well make yourself useful," the Master said, quite unreasonably. "Find Benten and bring her here."

"No, thank you. She's not liable to come no matter what I say to her."

"Imagine her, making a hussy of herself with the Friday Fellows. I must give her a lecture."

"I'm not going. I hate them both, Lady Benten and the Friday Fellows!"

"While you're out, buy some Q-tips. Itchy ears put me in a foul mood, and being in a foul mood makes me blow up whirlwinds."

"I've put new Q-tips by the sink. How many times do I have to tell you I'm not going, you senile coot? Clean your ears like a good boy, and go to sleep!"

"Hold a moment. I shall write a letter."

We seemed to be having two completely separate conversations. The Master sat at a low writing desk buried in the rubbish and meticulously smoothed out a wrinkled piece of paper, then painstakingly began to write.

"Benten, Benten," he muttered, as if he was counting beans.

I let out a conspicuous sigh.

Master Akadama was waiting for Benten's return, because he was madly in love with her.

Sadly, no matter how you looked at it, this old-timer's love was doomed to fail. There had been a time, once, where he had cut a shining figure and achieved glory on the battlefield of love, but those days were no more than a distant memory, and each passing day it looked more and more likely that he would have to lay down his arms for good. The fact that he was still fighting was in itself near miraculous.

The Master finished writing the letter and thrust it at me.

"This letter must be delivered to her tonight. Swear you will fulfill this duty, on your sacred honor."

I was tempted to beg off on my honor, scurry back to the Tadasu Forest, and crawl back into my soft bed, but I felt a great sense of obligation to the tengu arrogantly lounging

on the floor in front of me, and overcome by the weight of that obligation I prostrated myself on the tatami.

"I, Shimogamo Yasaburō, swear on my honor."

I had no illusions that my intervention would somehow turn the tide in this already losing battle, but nevertheless I steeled myself to play the role of Cupid, a transformation in which I felt out of my depth. Still, an idea had formed in my mind, and on my way out I swiped a bow and arrow from the mountains of garbage cluttering the room. *Might as well have the tools of the trade*, I thought to myself, inwardly smiling.



In Higashiyama Maruta-chō, in the neighborhood to the west of the Kumano Shrine, there is a fenced-off, ancient cedar tree called the Demon's Perch. Since ages past, tengu have used its branches as a convenient place to rest, hence its moniker. Though rooftops have since supplanted trees in terms of popularity, for many tengu in Kyoto the Demon's Perch remains a trendy spot to rest, have coffee breaks, and even exchange sweet nothings with their lady companions. Master Akadama was no exception, and could often be seen resting his talons there. Prior to his banishment to Demachiyanagi, he had maintained his domain in Nyoigatake, and each time he made the journey into town, he would stop periodically to rest, flying from Mount Yoshida to the Kyoto University clock tower to the Demon's Perch.

Once, there was a great earthquake to the west².

As an adherent of the path of wickedness, Master Akadama considered it his duty to attend to the site of the disaster, though he had not caused it, and cackle at the misfortune of the humans there. The lecture that day was cancelled in order for him to make the journey.

When I heard about the Master's trip, I was enraged.

I was fully aware of how little regard tengu had for humans; after all, tanuki fared just as ill in their dealings with tengu. But riding on the heels of a disaster that had just occurred and mocking the humans' misfortune seemed to me vulgar and unseemly. In my youthful eyes, carrying out such sanctimonious cruelty in the name of preserving some sort of tengu reputation was, on the contrary, a stain on the honor of both tengu and the Master himself.

Enter Benten.

At the time, she was steadily gathering the power of the tengu, seeking to shed her human trappings and transfigure herself into a tengu. I am not ashamed to admit that I had fallen head over heels for her. When I shared my indignance at Master Akadama with her, she quickly agreed and whispered in my ear that we should teach him a lesson, together. I was inspired. The word *together* particularly took my fancy.

It was Benten's idea for me to transform into a copy of the Demon's Perch, and the ruse came off flawlessly. The Master was exhausted after his long journey, and he circled

²The Great Hanshin earthquake of 1995, which struck near Kōbe to the west of Kyoto.

the skies over Kyoto, confounded as to which Demon's Perch was the real one. Unable to make up his mind, Yakushibō of Nyoigatake crashed to earth at last, tearing a great hole in the roof of a house exactly midway between the two trees.

After that, the Master's downfall was swift, like the fall of a cherry blossom.

Having injured his back in the crash landing, the Master became almost entirely unable to fly and spent most of his time sleeping. His already waning magick disappeared entirely. Suffering a crushing defeat in that year's tengu capture-the-flag tournament, his turf on Nyoigatake was seized by the Kurama tengu, and he stepped down from his tanuki lectures, eventually holing up in Demachiyanaagi.

While the Master was undergoing this extraordinary collapse, his plunge in fortunes seemed to have tipped the scale in Benten's favor, and her power grew. She was in unusually high spirits, almost as if she had been freed from the shackles of the Master, and instead of staying at his side, she roamed the skies as she pleased. It was plain to see that I had been used, but with respect to that I have nothing more to say.

I made one last clumsy plea to her: "What's wrong with being a tanuki?"

She simply replied, "Well, I am a human."

And so ended my first love.

Tanuki and tengu, both humiliated by a human. Overcome by shame and embarrassment, I dared not show my face in front of the Master, and effectively expelled myself from his tutelage.

It was several years before things cooled down and I was able to visit the Master once more. And that is the sordid history of how I came to devote myself to the lord of this grubby apartment.



I boarded a bus at the Kawaramachi Imadegawa intersection. It had been a long time since I rode a bus, but it was wonderful watching the town fly by in the night. As the bus continued south past Oike Street, blazing lights streamed by giddily on both sides.

Inside the bus, I sat illicitly reading Master Akadama's letter. There was something irreproachable about someone who had the courage to pour his heart out onto paper and ink. But as my eyes scanned the page, I soon realized that this was more akin to a missive written by a lovelorn high schooler, dripping with syrupy platitudes and bereft of restraint, and the embarrassment I felt almost kept me from reading it to the end.

I was indignant.

What had happened to the Master Akadama we had all so admired? Had the sweetness of this overripe infatuation addled him so, he had thrown everything including his tengu pride down the drain? In the letter he had specified the Minami-za as the location for his rendezvous with Benten, but how exactly did he plan to extricate himself from that musty futon and make it all the way to the theater?

I got off the bus at Shijō Kawaramachi, still in a huff, and walked through the crowded avenue toward the Kamo River. For some reason, many strange men were calling

out to me, which I thought was odd until I remembered I was in the form of a high school girl.

I had heard that the Friday Fellows, a group whose very name is loathsome to speak, was holding court on one of the many terraces that overlook the Kamo River during the summertime. I crossed the Kamo Bridge and looked up at the glittering Minami-za theater rising high into the night sky, thankful for the sporadic relief of the night breeze in the sticky summer heat. The lanterns decorating the beer garden on the roof of the building glowed merrily, like ripe red fruits waiting to be plucked.

For a moment I pondered how best to proceed, but since I had already obtained the bow, I decided that I might as well catch a glimpse of Benten's face if only from afar.

From the bridge I descended to the bank of the river and walked north. On the other side I could see many terraces, all dotted with the orange pinprick glow of lanterns. The farther I walked from the bridge, the more distant the noise of the crowds became, leaving only the lights over the murky water. Banquet upon banquet was taking place all along the opposite side of the river; it looked like a scene from a dream, and all the orange-lit revelers with cups in hand merely players.

Only on a single terrace was the atmosphere subdued and quiet. There the scene resembled a depiction of the Seven Gods of Fortune: six men guffawing heartily, and among them a single woman, her face cold as ice—Benten.

These were the Friday Fellows, and tonight they were in high spirits: a genial introduction to a group of such ill repute.



The secret society known as the Friday Fellows was established in the Taishō period. They would meet once each month at various establishments around Gion and Pontochō to eat, drink, and be merry, and always on a Friday, a practice from which their name originated. The membership consisted of college professors, authors, men of middling wealth, and others of the ilk, and though the individual members might change, their number was always seven.

Each member of the club was named after one of the Seven Gods of Fortune. Benten, as the only woman in the group, seemed to bask in her role. Everyone, myself and the Master included, called her Benten, but in fact that name had been given to her on her accession to the Friday Fellows. The previous Benten had been a burly, bearded man, so in that sense the current Benten was probably more suited for the role.

For all their secrecy, there was no indication that the Friday Fellows were scheming to bring about strife and upheaval, and by all appearances they seemed to be an altogether peaceful confederation of like-minded acquaintances. That was all well and good, but there was one problem.

At the end of each year, the Friday Fellows host a party, and at this party they perform an act so foul, so abominable as to incur the everlasting hatred of all tanuki-kind.

Each year, the Friday Fellows partake in tanuki stew.

The thought of it makes me want to scream.

It is practically unfathomable. In this civilized day and age, how could anyone still excuse the eating of a tanuki? Utterly barbaric. If you are so desperate to proclaim your individuality to all the world, there are many other fantastic creatures to choose from: a toad, for instance, or a black-crowned night heron, or one of the monkeys prancing around Yase, or even a *kamenoko* scrubbing brush. I would be quite interested in hearing why they chose to eat tanuki.



The Kamo River rushed by before me, lights sparkling and bouncing off its surface.

I tied the Master's letter to an arrow and took aim at the Friday Fellows. Finding my sprightly bosom a hindrance, I shrank it in short order. Though I wore neither helmet nor armor, in my mind's eye I imagined myself as a modern-day Nasu no Yoichi. People walked along the opposite bank beneath the raised platforms, laughing and chattering, but I was supremely confident that my arrow would find its intended mark.

On the terrace Benten suddenly stood up. She was wearing what appeared to be a white business suit, though it was hard for me to tell precisely. She walked around the terrace with a gaudy tasseled folding fan, the jet black frame gleaming as she waved it around and around through the air. It looked as though she was performing some sort of dance step. The fan was painted with depictions of Fūjin and Raijin, the gods of wind and thunder; it had been given to her by Master Akadama as a "sign of his love", and she often boasted to me of it. The fact that the Master had given such a prized possession to Benten only diminished my opinion of him.

Fixing my gaze on Benten, a tantalizing thought occurred to me: I could replicate Nasu no Yoichi's famed feat in *The Tale of the Heike*, and hit the fan with my arrow. It was because of things like this that my eldest brother was always scolding me and Master Akadama was always furious at me, but once an idea had seized my imagination there was no stopping it.

Before I could get cold feet, I stepped up and loosed my shot.

The shaft traced a gentle arc through the air and pierced the fan in Benten's hand, just as I had planned. The men on the terrace shouted and rose to their feet. From my vantage on the other side of the river, I could hardly believe what I had just done, and it felt more like I was watching a play. As I stood there dazedly appreciating the pandemonium I had unleashed, Benten stepped to the edge of the terrace and put her hand on the guardrail, looking squarely at me. A sweet smile was playing on her lips. I felt a chill in the pit of my stomach.

The other members of the Friday Fellows ran up beside Benten, their eyes scanning for the culprit. I scampered along the riverbank and made my escape, forgetting, in my haste, to re-inflate my bosom.



Though I was the cause of all this trouble, my conscience felt oddly clean, and a sense of elation welled up inside me as I trotted down Shijō Avenue.

I decided to lay low at the Scarlet Pane, until my emotions had settled down. The Scarlet Pane is a favorite haunt of my fellow tanuki located underground near Sanjō Teramachi. During the day it is a café, and at night it operates as a bar.

Most of the shops on Teramachi Street were already shuttered, and only a smattering of people wandered up and down the deserted path. Occasionally the silence was shattered by the needlessly loud exclamation of a drunkard.

The entrance to the Scarlet Pane was through a narrow staircase whose walls were papered and repapered with a thick layer of flyers. As I descended, strange music seemed to reverberate up through the bowels of the earth, like I was descending into the depths of hell. That wasn't just a figment of my imagination; the Scarlet Pane was endlessly wide and vast, and no one was quite sure what lay at its innermost reaches. It had played host to many a large gathering, but supposedly no matter how many guests poured into its interior, there were always more seats waiting to be filled. The further you delved into its recesses the closer the walls became, until at last it was no more than a dim, narrow corridor filled with red velvet chairs and wooden tables, and every so often a wood-burning stove. Here it was always winter, and the corridor led directly to the underworld—at least, that's how the story went.

At this hour, the Scarlet Pane had switched over from its respectable daytime guise into an after-hours speakeasy. As I approached the counter, the bartender shot an apprehensive glance at me.

"Don't worry, it's me," I said, twitching my nose.

"That you, Yasaburō?" the bartender scowled. "Would you cut it out with that form already?"

"What's wrong with taking whatever form I like?"

"Transformation ain't a thing you should treat so lightly," the bartender said, looking at me sternly and twirling his loach-like whiskers. "At the very least you should take on a more appropriate form for a bar. Keep me from getting all confused."

Letting his lecture wash over me, I ordered a Faux Denki Bran. Nursing my drink, I listened to the music and wondered, chin on palm, whether Benten had read the Master's letter. It was impossible to imagine Benten running off to a rendezvous, heart aflutter, just because some doddering old tengu had taken the time to write a heartfelt letter. If anything, the letter had been so sickening it was more likely to repel her from coming anywhere near the proposed meeting place. With so many checkered eons of experience under his belt, surely the Master should have realized this obvious fact, yet here we were. It truly was a sorry, shameful state of affairs.

As I sat there lost in thought, I heard someone say, "I'll have an akawari." At the same time, an ice-cold hand gripped the back of my neck. I immediately recoiled and turned to look.

Benten was sitting beside me.



An akawari is a cocktail composed of shōchū cut with Akadama port wine. Benten threw back her head, exposing her pale throat, and noisily quaffed the pink liquor, as the clamor of the Scarlet Pane drained away like a receding tide. A stealthy flick of my eyes revealed a deserted room: the sedately drinking patrons had all vanished. Only the bartender remained, unable to leave his post, and he was backed as far into the corner as he could behind the counter. I could almost hear his knees quaking as he made a great show of concentrating on some task or other, the coward. It was like watching a school of fish scatter at the approach of a shark, but Benten paid it no mind. After all, for her, this happened every day.

With her finger she drew the arc of an arrow flying through the air.

"Just what *was* that back there? It gave me quite a shock."

"The Master tasked me with delivering a love letter. The river was wide, and so I took the liberty of delivering it by way of arrow."

"Do you intend to provoke me?"

"You might consider it an expression of our love-hate relationship."

"When someone picks a fight with me, I do so enjoy giving them what they are looking for."

"You really mustn't."

"My precious fan, all ruined. The Friday Fellows were in quite an uproar. I told them I wasn't feeling well and excused myself."

"If I meant to hit you, I would have, hahaha..."

"And I'm sure you would have, ohoho, like this, right in the eye."

Benten took out the fan in question and spread it out on the counter, tracing the large rip in its center with a long, slender finger. Each of her nails was painted with a mysterious design, and they glittered red and black whenever she moved her fingers, their eerie shapes shifting and swirling uncannily as if they were alive.

"My humblest apologies for the fan. If you'd like, I could—"

"Never mind. I'll hold onto it." She snapped the fan shut.

"Have you read the letter?" I asked.

"I did. Another one of his tantrums?"

"He sulks and sulks, I've never seen him so prickly."

"I'll bet," tittered Benten. "It's been a long time since I was back."

"Perhaps you could consider going back once a week?"

"I don't recall asking you to probe in my affairs."

"Of course, I'm not going to poke around where I don't belong. Even a dog knows better than to stick his nose in when two lovers are quarreling."

"And what about tanuki?"

"What's wrong with being a tanuki?"

"Well, I am a human," she replied with a flat look, and I remembered that we had shared a conversation much like this one, long ago.

"It's a shame that you're not looking for a fight. I would have been quite happy to oblige you."

"Perish the thought!"

"I would have caught you, and made you into tanuki stew for our year-end party."

"Now, I'm sure that's quite uncalled for..."

Coolly maintaining my composure, I raised a hand to hail the bartender, seeking to disperse the storm clouds that had abruptly gathered over the conversation. But the bartender wasn't there. Standing rigidly in his place was a grossly oversized Shigaraki tanuki statue: this was the transformation his fear-addled mind had chosen. Having no choice, I went to the other side of the counter to pour another Faux Denki Bran for myself, and mixed another akawari for Benten.

Benten reached over the counter and prodded my chest. "So, why the coquettish form today? Girls like you don't belong in a place like this at this time of night."

"Charmingly put together, don't you think?"

"It is that indeed."

"I thought a fresh-faced damsel might add some spice to the Master's life..."

"How very touching your devotion is."

"...but all I got in return was a heaping earful."

"Things would be much better for you if you simply left that miserable old crow to himself."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

Benten took a sip of her drink, giving me a hard stare. "The incident with the Demon's Perch still bothers you."

"I see the same isn't true for you."

"Why should I be bothered?"

"This, this is why humans are so despicable. You're worse than tengu."

"Well, my apologies. But as for you: you still don't understand the Master in the slightest."

Benten smiled and drained her akawari, then rose to leave.

"The Minami-za," I said, as she turned to the exit. "The Master will be there waiting."

In an instant Benten's face morphed into the terrifying visage of a demon. She lunged over the counter and seized my collar.

"Whether I meet him or not is not your concern," she hissed. Her pale complexion was now sheer white, the only color the blackness surrounding her eyes. Her breath almost left frost in the air.

"I didn't mean to overstep—" I started to say, but the words had hardly left my mouth than she leaned in and kissed me hard on the lips, with a loud smack. Her mouth was so cold I thought my lips would freeze, and when she finally pulled away I yelped, but without a word Benten turned and exited the Scarlet Pane.

"You all right?" called the tanuki statue. "My word, I don't know how you're still breathing!"

"This is what makes life worth living," I answered.

"Mark my words, one of these days you're really going to end up in a stew."

I stood up and touched my lips. Pink crystals flaked off, sparkling in my palm, and putting them into my mouth I tasted Akadama port wine.

"Here, have a drink. Unbelievable," the bartender muttered.

"On the house, right?"

"Sure, bottoms up."



I reminisced about the day I met her.

At the time, she was not yet Benten.

I ascended a long staircase up to the spacious rooftop of the Rakutenkai building, overlooking Karasuma Boulevard in the glorious spring sunshine. Wispy clouds drifted lazily along the azure sky, so vast it felt as if it would swallow me up. Passing a cosy little Inari shrine and a grimy water tank, I came to a grand, ancient cherry tree in the very center of the rooftop. Its branches were resplendent with petals, so exquisite they looked like they were spun out of candy. Every time the wind passed by over the skylines of Shijō Karasuma, a flurry of cherry blossoms would descend upon Karasuma Boulevard. It must have seemed very strange for the people walking on the street below to run into a sudden shower of flower petals.

I was there by request of my father to deliver liquor to Master Akadama. My father was the only one who could speak his mind freely to the Master, so sending me to deliver liquor to the Master's private rooftop cherry blossom viewing must have been his idea of a practical joke.

A short distance from the cherry tree was a large patch of moss, over which spread a large umbrella, and seated on the moss were Benten and the Master, gazing at the blossoms. The Master was clothed in stately traditional robes, and as a symbol of his status as a noble tengu, he was puffing on a cigar large enough to be used as a cudgel. Noticing me huffing and puffing toward him with the bottle of Akadama port wine in tow, his face grew ever more stern and remote. I trembled at the sight, thinking that I was in for a dressing down, but I later learned that this dour expression was his way of hiding embarrassment.

"Why have you come?" he solemnly inquired. "What is that you bring?"

"It is I, Yasaburō, third of the Shimogamo clan. I come bearing gifts for Yakushibō of Nyoigatake."

"My thanks."

With that, the Master turned his eyes back to the cherry tree, retaining his overbearing demeanor. Benten smiled and stood up, lightly smoothing out the wrinkles in her skirt. Back then, her appearance had been utterly normal, no different than any other girl on the street. Considering that she had been spirited away by a wizened old conjurer, she seemed to have taken it all in stride.

"You have our thanks," she said, bowing low, then taking the bottle from me and clutching it to her breast. Looking me up and down, she giggled, "What is that form?"

I have no recollection whatsoever of what form I had taken, for I was always changing forms at the drop of a hat, and bollocks to whoever tried to warn me off. Ergo.

"Why don't you share a drink with us?"

"I must respectfully decline your invitation."

"Are you sure you're not a human yourself?"

"I like to keep people guessing. What about yourself?"

"I'm just humble Suzuki Satomi."

"That's enough, I say, enough. Don't encourage the whippersnapper," the Master snapped. "A scoundrel if I've ever seen one."

"I think he's intriguing."

"Intriguing, my foot. He's capable, I'll admit, but he hasn't the faintest notion of self-control. He'll never amount to anything worthwhile."

"I see you're quite fond of him."

"Utterly preposterous!"

Benten laughed and escorted me to the base of the tree. "Have a look for yourself," she said.

Cherry blossoms fluttered down all around the two of us, like a scene from a dream.

"Enchanting, don't you think? Look, you can't even see the branches for all the petals."

I said nothing, staring enthralled at the cherry blossoms.

"Go on, do it as I taught you," the Master broke in, in the gentlest voice I had ever heard him use.

"Oh? But I can't do it yet."

"Give it a try."

Benten looked up at the tree, seemingly dazzled, and she sucked in her breath with apprehension before kicking slightly off the ground. Before my eyes, she began to float upward through the air. Rising through the shower of cherry blossoms, she took hold of an outstretched branch and used it to propel herself yet higher into the air, almost weightless. I watched her ascent, dumbstruck. The Master stood beside me, nodding approvingly, his gaze trained upon her.

"I've done it!" cried Benten, looking down at us, petals floating down all around her.

The Master nodded solemnly. "To soar the skies as you please: that is the mark of a tengu."



Night had fallen, yet the stream of people over the Kamo Bridge continued unabated.

Thrown off kilter by Benten's icy kiss, I had taken full advantage of the bartender's generosity, throwing back glass after glass of Faux Denki Bran until I was wholly inebriated. Now I was cutting a dashing figure leaning on the guardrail of the bridge, using the night wind to sober up.

The roof of the Kikusui restaurant on the east end of the Shijō Bridge was aglow with the lights of the beer garden, the smooth, round tower thrusting up from the center of the building just as bizarre as it had been on the day I had first laid eyes on it. Through my

bleary eyes, the whole edifice looked like a miniature model, down to the slender rays of light twinkling from the pairs of tall windows adorning the facade of the building.

As I contemplated what it would feel like to scale that smooth protrusion, Benten glided by the tip of the tower. She alighted on it briefly, then pushed off with a tremendous leap, circling the lights of Gion before landing on the great roof of the Minami-za. The tiles must still have been scorching hot from baking under the sun all day, but Benten walked atop them with a mask of cool indifference.

At last the Master made his appearance on the south side of the roof, but from the look of things it was a miracle that he had made it to the Minami-za in one piece. Each breath seemed a struggle, and his entire body was trembling as if the screws that held it together had come loose. This climb was pushing the great Master Akadama to his limits. Unable to rely on his elegant black cane due to the slope of the roof, the Master had no choice but to resort to crawling on his hands and knees. I had to admire how intensely he was exerting himself all for the sake of meeting Benten, but given that he was essentially groveling on all fours in front of her, it was hard to conceive of this effort turning the tides for him in this one-sided, already losing battle. The harder he tried, the more she slipped through his fingers.

Benten stood before the Master. On his hands and knees, the Master looked up at Benten. They exchanged a few words. Benten shook her head coldly. In the illumination of the night, the Master's face was gaunt as he looked up at the radiant beauty in front of him. It would have been a sight to behold, if it hadn't been so painful to see the Master in such a state. It was apparent that no matter what he did, this battle was lost.

Witness my glory as I stand here before you; let me embrace you, and together we shall sail the starry skies, mocking the simpleminded rabble who crawl the dusty earth below—it was easy to tell what he was saying, but with both his head and rear end wobbling in the air as they were, it was less certain whether anything he said was reaching Benten.

Deciding that it was time to step in, I began to head towards the Minami-za.

But before I had reached the east end of the Shijō Bridge, the long-delayed rendezvous between the Master and Benten had come to a close, and nary a trace of tenderness remained.

Leaving the immobile Master behind, Benten floated off into the night sky before anyone had a chance to stop her. I watched as she sprang over the Kamo River in a single breath, lit momentarily on the Spanish tower atop the Tōka Saikan restaurant, then fled away over the glittering city lights.

Himself unable to take to the skies in pursuit, the Master could only writhe helplessly.

As she left the Master lying there, Benten let out a tengu cackle that rang out across the stars.

She pulled it all off so deftly, even the most seasoned tengu would have gone white.



After a laborious climb down, the Master sank to the floor in the shadow of the Minami-za and caught his breath. His tan suit was disheveled and smudged, and his shirt was hanging out from his slack trousers.

"Fancy seeing you here, Master!" I called out to him.

"Oh, it's you," he said, peering into my face curiously. "You've been drinking."

"Heh, just a nip."

"A wastrel, as ever."

"Yes, well, I'm calling it for tonight."

"A moment. Hail a taxi, for I must return as well."

"But Master, why take the slow way in a taxi when you could be home with a flap of your wings?"

The Master fixed a keen glance on me, but a moment later he dropped his head despondently. "Such mockery is not right," he said, tapping his cane on the ground sulkily, like a child. "Entirely unbecoming. My condition has been strained tonight."

I flagged down a taxi on Kawabata Street and carried the Master to it on my back. His body was limp, almost weightless, and as he clung to my shoulders he gave a sigh laden with utter mortification.

"You damned fool, have I not instructed you to cease your impersonation of this lass?"

"I look like a doting granddaughter, come to pick up her elderly grandfather."

"Given a piggyback ride by a girl...it doesn't feel right!"

He reached forward furtively and gave one of my breasts a fondle.

"Humph. Obviously fake," he sniffed, with an air of vindication.

The taxi continued to glide along beside the Kamo River. Lights smeared into blurs as they passed by outside the window, and soon downtown faded into the distance behind us.

"You delivered the letter to Benten, then."

"Yes. The Friday Fellows are a scary lot, so I delivered the letter by arrow."

"Still you persist with these brazen acts. I tell you, this cannot continue."

"Do you think Benten will return?"

"I don't know. She, too, must abandon her dissolute ways."

"So what exactly were you doing there?"

"I was in the mood for a drink in Gion."

We sat in silence for a time.

The Master realized that I had read his love letter, and I realized that he had realized that I had done so. This was not a one-off exception; the Master and I had known one another long enough that we often knew what the other was thinking. But the Master never used that as an excuse to speak his mind, and I for my part never took our mutual understanding for granted. One must never carelessly overstep the boundary that exists between master and student.

Two images turned over in my mind: Benten, flying away through the night sky; and conversely, the Master, his upturned rear end quivering on the roof of the Minami-za.

"To soar the skies as you please: that is the mark of a tengu," the Master muttered, staring out at the river. "Is that not so?"

"But I think taking a taxi every once in a while isn't so bad."

"Hmm. This is true."

"Even tanuki get tired of transforming sometimes."

The Master snorted on hearing this. "Only a fool would compare tengu and tanuki," he said, before slumping down into his seat and letting out a big yawn.



I had bitterly regretted the incident with the Demon's Perch, and after voluntarily excommunicating myself, I did not see the Master for six months. During that period, the Master returned to his lonely podium, attempting ever more desperately to hold on to the majesty that was slipping away from him like sparkling sugar through his fingers, but his efforts were in vain, and rather than haplessly let his dirty laundry continue to air for all to see, he chose to leave the classroom for good. Holing up in that rundown apartment, he whiled away his days downing bottles of Akadama port wine and eagerly hoping for visits from Benten. Inasmuch as he had been weakened he spent an equal amount of energy lashing out at those around him, and even those students who still visited him found his company difficult to bear. In the end, the Master's trickle of visitors dried up completely.

Early in spring this year, rumors reached me that Master Akadama was practicing to fly again by the bank of the Kamo River in the wee hours of the morning. I went to see for myself.

A frigid, piercing wind whistled through the wide, deserted stretch of riverbank that lay north of the Aoi Bridge. In the denuded trees that shivered in that desolate landscape, a solitary shadow crept on the bank of the river. It was Master Akadama, who was ambling along very casually, but every so often he would give a little hop in the air. Occasionally he succeeded in floating in the air for a moment, but that was all: by any standard a far cry from soaring the sky as he pleased.

"Good evening, Master. Chilly, isn't it?"

Hearing my voice emanating from the darkness, the hopping Master jutted his chin upward at me, glaring.

"Quite chilly, indubitably. That is why I hop, you see: to keep myself warm."

"May I hop as well?"

"Certainly. Keep yourself warm."

And together we hopped along.

At this point we had already developed that mutual understanding of one another. The Master knew that I was mildly smitten with Benten, and that it had been I who had transformed into the false Demon's Perch and deceived him. But of these things he spoke not a word. Admitting that he had been bamboozled and forced into a crash landing by the likes of a tanuki would have been for him, I am sure, tantamount to setting one foot in the grave.

Since I had been the one to excommunicate myself, I saw no problem in revoking that excommunication of my own accord. First, I had to demonstrate to the Master my sense of decorum. I presented him with an expensive-looking bottle of imported wine, nicked from the Scarlet Pane, and bowed my head.

But the Master refused to take even a sip. Instead, he ungraciously deplored what he called my characteristically tanuki inability to tell real from fake.

"This is a cheap imitation. Clearly you are no student of wine. Real wine is always labeled 'Akadama Port Wine'."



Inside the taxi, Master Akadama had fallen fast asleep. A string of drool, long as a pheasant's tail, trailed from his mouth as I exited the taxi and placed him again on my back. Treading softly up the stairs of the Masugata Court Apartments, I dumped him into his futon and fell back exhausted. The Master snored uproariously like a bellows, drool still dangling from his mouth. He did not stir, even when a moth landed on his forehead to rest its wings.

I allowed myself to rest there and took a swig from a bottle of unfinished Akadama Port Wine. There was a melancholic sweetness that lingered on the tongue after each mouthful of this, the Master's favorite drink.

Standing up in front of the begrimed mirror that dangled before the sink, I transformed myself into Benten.

It felt strange, taking the form of one with whom you are in love. Though each feature was identical down to the last toenail, I felt nothing staring at the reflection in the mirror. That was of course because every motion was exactly as I expected it to be. The difference between what you expect a person to do and what they actually do is precisely what causes your heart to skip a beat. Then again, I suppose the strangest part of it all was that a tanuki would fall in love with a human.

"You've returned. Come to me," came the Master's voice, heavy with sleep.

I sat by the Master. He looked to be only half-awake.

"I tell you, I may be unable to fly, but 'tis only a temporary setback," the Master muttered in a tone of reproval. "One day my health will return, and when I am restored, I shall instruct you in many things once more. In me is the power to shake the ground, the power to summon whirlwinds and topple skyscrapers...when the mood strikes..."

"But of course, I don't doubt that for a moment."

"Wretched is the state I find myself in. I vow that one day, heaven and earth shall suffer my wrath once more. But now is not the time to delve into arcana. I find myself so dreadfully...sleepy..."

"Do get some rest."

"Yes. Sleep...sleep. You should sleep here yourself, from time to time."

And caressing my rear end, the Master fell asleep, oblivious to the fact that it was not Benten's rear end he was caressing, but mine. An understandable mistake, given that

he was half-asleep, but gut-wrenching nonetheless. Then again, perhaps this was another of our mutual understandings, and he was only pretending not to notice.



Once, I had grappled with the question of what it meant to live as a tanuki.

I thought I understood how to enjoy each day to its utmost, but was that all there was? Napoleon once said, "When you don't know what to do, do nothing." I frittered my life away doing nothing, and gradually I came to the realization that there was nothing more to life besides enjoying yourself.

All was quiet in the Demachi shopping arcade; the shutters of the shops were all rolled down. At this time of night, not a soul could be seen. I walked briskly through the empty street. Passing the shrine to Benzaiten, where lanterns still burned in the darkness, I made my way towards Shimogamo Shrine. The rust-colored moon was peeking out above the black outline of the Higashiyama mountains. Tiring of this form, I went back down to all fours and began to run.

Benten, that fearsome human, was probably still flying all over town. Master Akadama, the fallen tengu, was lying in his futon snoring loudly and sadly, while I, a tanuki, scampered along the river on all fours. Tengu, tanuki, human—the three creatures that turn the wheel of this city. Watching the wheel turn is fun, of course, but having too much fun is tiring, and I was getting terribly sleepy.



I returned to the Tadasu Forest.

My little brother opened his eyes in the darkness as I crawled into my soft bed.

"Yasaburō! You're back!" he whispered.

"That I am."

"What were you doing?"

"Playing cupid."

"Was it fun?"

"Yep, sure was."

And patting my brother's head, I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 2 — Mother and the Thunder God

It is an indisputable fact that the bloodline of my clan extends back into the ancient mists of the Heian period. We may be tanuki, but we most certainly do not emerge into this world by falling out of the hollows of camphor trees like fur-ridden gumballs. I have a father, and obviously my father had a father, and so on and so forth.

Take, for example, the Shimogamo clan, to which I have the humble honor of belonging, and the Ebisugawa clan, which is an offshoot of my own esteemed clan. These families trace their lineage back to the tanuki of old who, during the reign of Emperor Kammu, moved along with his capital from the town of Heguri in Nara to the land of milk and honey in Kyoto. Personally, I believe that this great migration was less a conscious decision to leave the land of the Manyōshū, and more like an unruly mob of tanuki following around the scent of freshly cooked rice and soup emanating from the humans' kitchens. Thus they multiplied, unasked for and unwanted: actions hardly deserving of the lofty title of "forebears".

Since the Heian period, we have been inexplicably fettered by our wildly criss-crossing bloodlines. Even a bohemian tanuki such as myself finds it difficult to just throw off these ties that bind. Petty squabbles that would normally be flushed down the drain can turn into mortal conflicts, merely because of the blood that flows through our veins.

Small wonder I can't stand the saying, "Blood is thicker than water".



My father was an eminent tanuki, famed throughout the capital. He commanded the respect of tanuki everywhere, and with that respect he held the tanuki world together. Unfortunately, he breathed his last several years ago.

The legacy of my great father consisted of four sons, including myself. Unfortunately, none of us boys had quite been endowed with the capacity to carry forth the bright flame of our father's torch. But having to live up to the name of our great father was just one of the myriad misfortunes that surrounded us siblings.

As we grew up following the death of our father, talk of us began to spread: our eldest brother was uptight, but had a tendency to fall apart when push came to shove; our second-eldest brother was a shut-in; I was a dilettante in the tradition of Takasugi Shinsaku; and our youngest brother had the worst transformation skills that perhaps the world had ever seen.

"What a shame that these children are all that remains of the great Shimogamo Sōichirō's legacy," people would whisper, and soon our reputations were sealed.

Overhearing these whispers, my eldest brother furiously took out his anger by ripping off the straw belts girdling the pine trees in Okazaki Park.

"I'll surpass Father, and show them all!" he vowed, his right fist clenched in rage.

"Good luck with that...just don't get me involved," our second-eldest said, blowing bubbles at the bottom of his well.

I said nothing, and gorged on castellas, my favorite snack.

Our youngest brother curled into a ball, mumbling, "I'm sorry, Mother," but he was never one to turn down a castella, either.

Somehow, none of this fazed our mother, and the reason was very simple: she refused to believe with a single hair on her body that her sons, of all people, could be the laughingstocks of the tanuki world. She was convinced that each of us was more than worthy to carry on our father's legacy. The way she persisted in her unwavering, almost irrational faith was what made her a mother, and it was what made us, us.

Our father was a great tanuki, but our mother was great too, in her own way.



The city sweltered under the burning rays of the sun as August made its entrance.

In spite of that, our home in the Tadasu Forest by Shimogamo Shrine remained pleasantly cool. My little brother and I spent our days cooling our feet in the little brook that ran through the forest, drinking *ramune* from porcelain Kiyomizu-ware bowls, and delivering bento and Akadama port wine to Master Akadama. Occasionally, I would even seat myself at one of the gigantic desks at the Okazaki library and bury my nose in the wisdom of the ancients...or at least I would daydream about it, anyways.

"Sit there daydreaming all day, and you'll turn into a fool!" Mother would chide me if I sat there long enough, which was my cue to accompany her to play billiards. A scolding usually meant that she was feeling lonely.

A peculiar couple would occasionally drop into the billiards hall atop the café at the west end of the Kamo Bridge. They were quite well known in the area for their singular appearance: the man was a beautiful pale youth who always wore a chic black suit with a deep crimson necktie, his hair smoothly and meticulously coiffed, and the woman was a sweet young thing draped in clothes white as snow, like a sheltered mademoiselle. There was something theatrical about the duo, both in appearance and in mannerisms, like they were straight out of the Takarazuka Revue.

I speak of these two in the third person, but the sheltered mademoiselle is really me, and that improbable modern-day dandy is my mother.

Ah, the fabulous Takarazuka!

Mother has been an ardent fan of the Takarazuka Revue since the springtime of her youth, and she hops on the Hankyu line to make a pilgrimage any chance she gets. Takarazuka syndrome is an insidious disease, contractible by both humans and tanuki, and once it has taken hold the chance of recovery is close to nil; even with bleeding-edge medical care, full remission is considered impossible.

Knowing this, we had never really tried to take away this happiness from our mother, but after the death of our father, her Takarazuka syndrome progressed to the point of no return, and at sundown each day she would suddenly appear in the gloom of the Tadasu Forest in the form of a dashing young fop and sally forth for a night on the town. As she always took on a male form, whenever one of us brothers was called forth to accompany her, we almost always played the part of a demure young lady. Our outings attracted a lot of attention, and the occasions on which local TV crews hunted us down on Teramachi Street were a source of great terror for us, though our mother was always delighted to give an interview.

As far as I knew, Mother had never so much as laid hands on a cue stick before, but one day out of nowhere she grew a passion for the sport and became a regular at the billiards hall. Hobnobbing with students and old-timers alike, she picked up tips here and there, and soon enough she was dominating the felt.

"Gallant young lads and elegant sports like billiards go hand in hand," she insisted, another one of her quirky, old-fashioned notions.

In both human and tanuki circles, she was known as the Prince in Black, and by all accounts, she had come up with the nickname herself.



I sat by the window in the billiards hall, a mild-mannered maiden gazing down at the evening settling over the Kamo River. Cars and buses passed by, their headlights glittering as they crossed the Kamo Bridge. Clouds stretched far off into the distance, and the sky over Higashiyama was as black as if someone had spilled ink all over it.

Mother was utterly focused on the billiards table, not a hair coming out of place no matter how she stooped over the table. I had no interest in the game whatsoever, looking on absently as she concentrated on the balls tumbling across the table.

"So, what's this I hear about you running into Benten?" she asked, cue stick in hand. "You know how dangerous that is!"

"Everything's fine, Mother."

"That woman is not to be trusted. Slip up once, and you could find yourself being thrown headfirst into a stew! You know that's something we've always had to watch out for. Humans are so much crueler than tengu, or foxes."

"Well, what choice did I have? Master Akadama asked me to."

"That tengu is always worrying about things that are inappropriate for someone his age. And people like that are always the hardest to deal with." She sighed ruefully.

Master Akadama's abduction of the girl named Benten from the banks of Lake Biwa was well known in Kyoto, as was his devoted instruction of her in the magickal arts and her subsequent public snubbing of him.

With a crack, Mother sent the multicolored balls scattering across the table. As a spectator, it looked terribly simple, but things never went so well when I tried for myself. Mother had previously spent much effort attempting to teach me, but found me an unwilling student. Apparently she had now turned her sights on my younger brother.

"Obon will be here soon, and we still don't have a pleasure barge ready. I do hope Yaichirō is on top of things; have you heard anything from him?"

"Nope, he hasn't said a word to me."

"I hope everything's alright. After all, we don't have the Manpuku Maru anymore." The black-clad youth before me frowned, his eyebrows knit. "I do wish he would ask you for help and stop trying to do everything by himself all the time."

Every year on the night of the Okuribi, our family goes out in a pleasure barge. This barge is equipped with a special apparatus which burns alcohol as fuel and allows the craft to fly through the air. The family tradition of sailing amongst the summer stars on Obon and watching the fires light up on the mountains below was started by my father. But last year, we were drawn into a silly quarrel, and our barge, the Manpuku Maru, was burned down to the hull. Alcohol-powered boats that soar through the sky are not exactly easy to find, and my eldest brother was supposed to obtain a replacement, but I wasn't interested in prying into the particulars of how.

"As far as I can tell, Yaichirō isn't too keen on the idea of relying on us youngsters."

"And I want you to try and get along a little better with him, do you hear?"

"But of course, I love my brother. He's a good guy!"

"That's quite enough sarcasm out of you!" said Mother, glaring at me. "Yaichirō is too straightforward and naive to know how to deal with a rabble-rouser like you. You need to tone it down if you want to get anywhere at all."

"I think I'll pass on that."

"Fickle, yet stubborn to the bone: you must have inherited that from me. Still, you can only take that attitude so far."

A few schoolboys with whom Mother was acquainted made their appearances. Seeing me standing there demurely, they hesitated, but I decided that now was a good time to make my escape and see my second eldest brother at Rokudō Chinnōji. Interrupting Mother jawing with the schoolboys, I pulled her into a corner and told her my plans. She beamed when she heard that I was going to see my brother.

"Excellent!" she said. "Make sure he's still breathing."

"You should go see him too. You still haven't been even once, have you?"

"He wouldn't be comfortable with me there."

"I'm sure that's not true."

"Being there is the right thing for him, but I think he'd be embarrassed for me to see him down there."

She made to return to her billiards companions, but abruptly wheeled back to me.

"Oh, and on your way back, be a dear and pick up Yashirō from the Ebisugawa power plant. Treat him to a nice meal, too; I think he's sick of all that training."

Two days ago, my youngest brother Yashirō had started an apprenticeship at the Faux Denki Bran distillery by the Ebisugawa power plant to get some hands-on training.

"The weather's looking a little cloudy today, Mother. I think you'd better wrap things up soon. If it starts thundering we're going to have another mess on our hands."

"I know, I know," sniffed the Prince in Black, returning to the billiards table. Her exquisite coiffure shone under the lights of the room. She may have looked like someone

who had showed up at the wrong costume party, but inside that outlandish appearance burned the fiery spirit of a mother. Mothers really are something else—maybe even a little scary in their own way.

I curtsied daintily at the gathered schoolboys, receiving sickly smiles in return, and went down the stairs.

By the time I reached the Kamo Bridge, the petite mademoiselle was no more, replaced by a surly, long-haired male college student. This was my customary form when out and about in the world of humans, and as a consequence I was sometimes known as the Unkempt Undergrad.



Twilight hung above as I pedaled my bike down Higashi Ōji Avenue, heading for Rokudō Chinnōji, south of Kenninji. My brother had been holed up in a well on the grounds of the temple for some years now, taking a very premature retirement. He was famous as the most lackadaisical tanuki in all of Kyoto.

Since he was no more than a pup, he had jealously guarded displays of exertion on his part like a tiger guarding its cub, and his lack of color when interacting with others made everyone think he was a simpleton.

As he grew older, his demeanor remained largely the same, but being allowed to drink alcohol gave him new opportunities to show his quality: a few drinks to loosen up, and his reticence would vanish like the morning mist. Night after night, he would transform into his specialty, a simulacrum of an Eizan train, and rush through the streets of Kyoto, scaring the wits out of unsuspecting humans just looking for a good time.

Father often took my brother out to drink, but their outings usually involved him urging my brother to “do your thing”, and riding the false train all through the city, roaring with laughter. He was quite fond of my brother’s train.

Because they went pub crawling so frequently, my brother probably spent more time with Father than he did with anyone else, and I’m sure he saw a side to him that no one else got to see. It was no surprise that our eldest brother, a teetotaler, was bursting with jealousy. Father’s death was an especially hard blow for our second brother, causing him to give up Faux Denki Bran entirely and slip back into his shell.

The worst of it came when, hearing him mumble, “I can’t be bothered to keep breathing,” our enraged mother tossed him into the Kamo River. Emotions were running high, what with our recent loss, though that is no excuse for a mother to hurl her son into a river. But the most shocking part was the way our brother gurgled, “Swimming is just too much of a bother,” and simply let the river carry him all the way down to the Gojō Bridge without any fuss. There he caught on one of the pylons, so my little brother and I retrieved him and carried him dripping all the way home.

It was during this time that he decided to quit being a tanuki.

We were all convinced that our brother had finally lost his marbles, but once he had decided on something, there was nothing anyone could do to change his mind. Spurning

our pleas, he left the Tadasu Forest, choosing to settle at the bottom of a well in Rokudō Chinnōji and turn into a frog.

Since that time, he has not taken his tanuki form. I can no longer remember the way he used to look.

Mother has never once come to visit him in his well, and for some years now the two have not spoken.



The glimmer of night spread through the streets of Gion surrounding Yasaka Shrine.

From the bottom of the stone steps leading up to the shrine, lights glittered exuberantly down the length of Shijō Avenue. Hanamikoji Street stretches south from that wide boulevard, but crowded as it was, I soon took one of the narrow alleys branching off of it instead. Away from the main thoroughfares, the neighborhood was hushed and still. I pedaled along past eateries and cafes, their lights flying past then falling away smoothly behind me, dreamlike.

Making use of a gap in the wall, I entered Kenninji. Its grounds seemed to stretch out boundlessly in the gloom, and not a soul was in sight. Sodium lamps cast their yellow light between the rows of gloomy pine trees. I left the temple and came out onto Yasaka Street to the south, following along as it sloped upwards towards Higashiyama Yasui.

Rokudō Chinnōji is in a block of buildings on the south side of the street. Visiting hours were over and there was little chance of being seen, so I boldly hopped a block wall and made my way round to the back of the main temple building, clambering over a wooden door and peering down into the opening of a disused well.

"Yajirō," I called.

A faint, gurgling reply echoed up from the black depths, bouncing off the gravelly sides of the well. "Yasaburō?"

I sat on the edge of the well and scanned the bottom, my eyes narrowed, but couldn't make out anything in the darkness below. It hardly mattered, though, since all I would have seen was the shape of a frog.

"I'm eating dinner here, if you don't mind."

Sitting down by the well, I dug into a takeout bowl I had bought from a *gyūdon* place in front of Yasaka Shrine.

"That *gyūdon* must taste real good," Yajirō said earnestly at the bottom of the well.

"I bet you must eat nothing but bugs down there."

"What can I say? This frog thing isn't just for show, you know."

"Don't they ever stick in your throat?"

"Well, if I'm lacking anything down here, it's not water," he reasoned. "And I'll tell you, there's nothing like the feeling of a perfectly sized bug sliding down your gullet."

"Sounds like you're really getting the hang of it," I observed, wolfing down my *gyūdon* with renewed appreciation.

The grounds of the temple were hushed; no one came to visit the well at this time of night, and with the temple nestled deep in from the street, the rumble of cars could be heard only distantly.

About two years ago, we learned that Yajirō had become so accustomed to being a frog that he was unable to turn back into a tanuki. But whereas the rest of us had been going to pieces at this horrible revelation, Yajirō had spoken of it as sanguinely as if he had been talking about the weather.

I once asked him if he felt sad about it.

"Sad?" he replied. "I suppose I was a little down the night I realized, but hey, there's nothing I can do about it now." It was remarkable how easily he had stopped trying.

I suggested that perhaps our grandmother could set him to rights.

"I'd rather stay as a frog for the rest of my life than let that barmy old bat help me!" he huffed. "I never meant to go back to being a tanuki, anyway, so it's all for the best."

And with that, my brother casually resigned himself to his fate.

"I know it's been a while since I last visited. I hope you haven't been too lonely without me," I said, between mouthfuls of beef.

The dry puffing sound I heard appeared to be my brother laughing. "What with everyone taking turns to come and ask the same thing, I don't hardly have time to be lonely."

"You get a lot of visitors, then?"

"Not as many as last year, but they show up from time to time. I'm busier now than I was when I was a tanuki. Kinda strange, when you think about it."

"Well, you didn't exactly have too many friends when you were a tanuki."

"You know who came to visit me the other day? Master Akadama."

"Lamenting his lost love, no doubt?"

"*Benten, my fair Benten*...he used to be such a grand tengu, didn't he? Where did all that go? I couldn't hardly believe my ears. You ask me, I'd say he's overdue for an intervention."

"It's too late for that. I think he's going to be stuck like this for the rest of his life."

"The Master kept rambling on and on about his love life, so I just kept quiet and hunkered down, and by and by he left. And who else showed up then but Yaichirō!"

"Yaichirō came here? Why?"

"He must have been feeling torn about something. Didn't say anything either, just stood a while, then left."

"Maybe he was going to lecture you, then gave up?"

"It didn't seem that way to me. He's got a lot on his plate, you know."

"You don't need to remind me."

"Lately I've been feeling sorry for him. He's wound so tight doing everything he can to fill the shoes of our father, one of the greatest tanuki to ever live, and all he's got for brothers are a frog, a fool, and a little kid, not one of them worth a darn."

"You won't hear any arguments from me on that. I couldn't think of any if I tried, anyway."

"I'm glad I wasn't the oldest son." He sighed heavily. "If I were him, I think I'd turn into a frog and go live in a well."



At some point last year, making pilgrimages to Yajirō's well became something of a fad amongst troubled tanuki of all shapes and sizes.

When he was still a tanuki himself, hardly anyone gave him the time of day, and even younger tanuki would call insults towards him as he passed by the playground. It seemed a cruel twist of fate that after leaving the tanuki world and turning into a frog, he suddenly found himself in the limelight.

Nobody knows who started the trend, but seemingly out of nowhere, tanuki would visit the shrine, lower their heads to the mouth of the well, and whisper their pent-up worries to my brother. Irresponsible rumors began to swirl that the morning after, all their problems would have cleared up, whether it was constipation or a pimply complexion, and soon my brother's fame was such that each night tanuki lined up at the well, clamoring to have their problems heard. Even tengu began to pay visits to the shrine. Inevitably, the visitors would leave with a new spring in their step, leaving my brother sitting sullenly at the bottom of his well.

"It's like they're trying to bury me alive with all their problems," he grouched. But my brother had never been one to let anything ruffle his fur, and as a frog he no longer had any fur to be ruffled at all, so he soon became accustomed to the complaints washing over him. This was, after all, his favorite spot.

The many troubles that bedevil this world can, in broad terms, be split into two categories: those that are trivial, and those that are not. Both have in common the unwavering fact that worrying about them accomplishes nothing of any use. If a problem can be solved by applying effort, then it is better to work on it rather than to worry about it, and if it cannot be solved in this way then there is no point in worrying about it. But every so often a problem comes along that can't be pigeonholed so easily. Problems like these call for stress relief, even if only temporarily, and that's where my brother's well comes in.

Obviously, no one expected that talking to a frog in a well was really going to solve their problems. They just talked. Without any expectations, they didn't have to worry about being disappointed when their lives didn't magically improve. Just talking to my brother, maybe shedding a tear or two, would lift the weight from their shoulders without Yajirō saying a word.

"Anyone would feel silly talking into an empty hole," he mused. "There's no point spilling your secrets if no one's listening. But talking to another tanuki would be mortifying, and you can forget about humans and tengu. Most people barely even consider me a tanuki, considering that I'm stuck as a frog forever, and you never need to worry about me going anywhere. That's probably why I'm such a big hit."

"You don't try to give them advice?"

He shrugged. "Why would I? Those are their problems to deal with. Besides, sometimes people like talking to someone who doesn't try to get cozy. That's why they come here."

"You think that's what it is?"

"Beg pardon, guv, but it ain't nuffink to do with me," he said. "I'm just a frog in a well, who's never been out to see the open sea."

What about the rest of us and Mother? Do we matter to you?"

"Even I'm not that heartless," Yajirō pouted, looking a little offended. After a moment of troubled reflection, he added, "But when it comes down to it, I'm still a frog."



I finished up my meal, hoping that I would never grow tired of the simple pleasure of *gyūdon*, and spent some time looking into the well and talking with my brother. We had always been close, but somehow we seemed to talk more after he turned into a frog and holed up in this well. Yajirō seemed to be more comfortable in this skin than he had ever been as a tanuki.

"So, nothing troubling you in particular these days?" he asked. "You never did like to complain, even when you were a kid."

"There's nothing to complain about, really. One of the perks of living life for fun and profit."

"How're things going with Kaisei?"

"Her life is none of my concern."

"Now, now, don't be shy. You can tell your dependable big brother everything...even if he is a frog. But frogs are like bad pennies: you can always count on us to turn up."

"Father's the one who decided this betrothal business on his own. And for his part, Ebisugawa's done away with the agreement, anyhow."

"But you've still been seeing each other, I hear?"

"Hunh. I never have the slightest clue what she's thinking. I still haven't gotten a good look at her face."

"Ah, young love. It's enough to make a green frog go red all over."

"You can have all the wet dreams you want down in there. But up here, things aren't all sunshine and rainbows. If old man Ebisugawa was my father-in-law, that would mean that pair of idiots Kinkaku and Ginkaku would be my brothers-in-law. Imagine the living hell that would be."

"Mmm, that would be enough to make me go hide in a well."

"It sounds like you would always end up at the bottom of a well no matter what."

"Look, this sounds rough, but it's what Father decided, after all."

"Putting it like that doesn't help very much."

"Still, I'm sure he must have had his reasons."

"On the contrary, it wouldn't surprise me if this was just a scheme to get his hands on some Faux Denki Bran under the table."

"Don't be silly. He loved his alcohol, sure, but even he wouldn't go that far..." Yajirō objected.

The spirit known as Faux Denki Bran is renowned within the city of Kyoto, beloved throughout the tanuki world, and is even said to harbor a few secret admirers in the human community. An imitation of the famous Denki Bran manufactured in Asakusa, this elixir was first concocted in the Taisho era, and to this day it is brewed in secret at a distillery behind the Ebisugawa power plant. Both production and distribution are controlled by the Ebisugawa clan, who alone hold the secret recipe. Ebisugawa Sōun, the head of the Ebisugawa clan and de facto chief of the tanuki in Kyoto, married into the clan, and is in fact Father's younger brother.

The Ebisugawa clan was originally an offshoot of the Shimogamo clan, but there has always been bad blood between the two families. Over the years, many attempts have been made to solve the longstanding feud, the marriage of Sōun into the Ebisugawas being one of them, but far from defusing the tension, Sōun grew to harbor a burning enmity towards his former clan and did all he could to fan the flames of the conflict. The Shimogamo clan was left looking like fools.

The rivalry grew after Father's death, and Sōun's two sons inherited their father's hatred of us. They were twins, Kurejirō and Kuresaburō, but everyone called them Kinkaku and Ginkaku. We all studied under Master Akadama at his school for tanuki, though we were more like cats and dogs with the way we were always at each others' throats. I was befuddled when Father decided to betroth me to their younger sister, Kaisei. It seemed utterly preposterous. Incidentally, Father was the one who came up with her odd, most un-tanuki-like name: "Sea Star".

Mother was absolutely incensed when Ebisugawa Sōun came to the Tadasu Forest after Father's death to inform her that he was cancelling the engagement. She had always been particularly fond of Kaisei, but that day she went completely berserk, screaming "Drop dead!" and literally kicking Sōun out of the forest. Strangely enough, Sōun said nothing in return and simply took his leave, an odious smirk on his face.

For me, the end of the engagement came as a relief, but that incident marked the severing of ties between our two families, a break that has continued to this day.

"A damn fool situation, all right," Yajirō reflected. "Do you think our families will ever stop fighting?"

"If Father was still here, he'd put a stop to Sōun throwing his weight around."

"No doubt, he would have made a better go of things."

"Say, Yajirō. Do you think Sōun was responsible for what happened to Father?"

When he heard this, Yajirō abruptly closed his mouth, and for a few moments there was silence.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Best you avoid saying anything reckless," he finally answered, sounding uncharacteristically strained. "Nothing sillier than getting yourself in trouble over some idle chitchat."

I shut up.

Somewhere, I could hear a bicycle whirring through a narrow alleyway.

"With Obon coming up, I've been thinking about Father," mumbled Yajirō softly. "You'll be going up in a pleasure barge during the Okuribi, yes? Not that I'll be joining you, being a frog and all."

"Yaichirō is supposed to be getting another one, though I haven't the slightest idea how he's faring."

"Right, because the last one got burned up."

"Thinking about what happened gets me so riled. Damn those two, Kinkaku and Ginkaku!" I kicked the side of the well.

"Easy, easy. Father would have just laughed it off, I bet." Down in the well, Yajirō seemed to be reminiscing about bygone days. "When he died, Yashirō was still a newborn, and you had just entered Master Akadama's school, huh?"

"Time flies, I suppose."

"You know, Father always used to go on about you when we went drinking. I've never told Yaichirō this, because I know how jealous he'd get, but Father always thought of you the most highly out of all of us. Apparently he even told Master Akadama to take special care with you. Said you resembled him the most."

I sniffed, my nose suddenly prickling in the night air.

"Do you remember the last thing he said to you, Yasaburō?"

"No, can't say that I do."

"I've racked my brains about it over and over, but I just can't remember either. That's always bothered me," said Yajirō. "Some son I turned out to be."



Our cruise through the night skies over the Gozan no Okuribi has been a cherished tradition of our family since the time of our father. Each year, we enthusiastically see off the visiting spirits of our ancestors on their journey back to the other side, but when I was younger it never occurred to me that one day I would be sending my own father to the land of the dead.

The summer that my younger brother Yashirō was born would also be the last summer Father would ever see.

Our barge glittered resplendently as it drifted over the city. Father had taken the form of a pot-bellied Buddha and was boasting about his newborn son. I remember vividly how broad his grin was under the light of the lamp hanging at the prow of the ship.

As Yajirō had said, I couldn't recall Father's last words to me, but then, his death had come so unexpectedly. You could hardly blame it on a lack of filial piety, so there wasn't really any need for Yajirō to be so hard on himself. None of us could have imagined what was going to happen.

There we stood on the grounds of the temple, tanuki and frog, heads bowed in solemn remembrance of our father.

Yajirō broke the silence, sounding terse. "Hold on now, we've got a big one coming on."

"A big what?" I asked, taken aback.

"My rump is itching. Looks like Raijin will be paying a visit."

"That's not good!"

I stood up and scanned the sky. The face of the darkened sky was hidden by clouds. I didn't hear any rumbling, but I trusted the judgment of my brother, who had developed an intuition for water in all its forms.

"Thanks for dropping by," he burred from the bottom of the well. "Take care of Mother for me...since I am a frog and all."

I was up and running before he had finished his sentence.

On Yasaka Street, a frigid gale had started to blow.



"Drop dead!"

Mother would unleash this densely laden imprecation whenever she flew into a rage.

Following her example, each of us brothers without exception had learned to yell "Drop dead!" whenever we entered a rage of our own. It is a crisp phrase of absolute denunciation, a phrase that rolls readily off our tongues from constant usage.

Mother hated to hear her sons use that phrase, but for all her admonitions to "love your enemy", she wouldn't hesitate to let out a full-throated, wrath-filled "Drop dead!" to any lout who raised her ire. Sometimes, if someone really got her going, she would go after them, throwing off our attempts to restrain her, and try to show them what she really meant by those words. Her awesome shows of force were valuable lessons to us about walking the walk.

The Achilles' heel of that plucky mother of ours was thunder.

A single clap of thunder would send her scurrying for cover, her fur all tense and aquiver. She wouldn't calm down again until she was safe within the mosquito net hanging in the inner recesses of the Tadasu Forest, with all of us at her side.

All of us would hurry back to her side at the first hint of thunder, huddling around her inside the mosquito net. We watched over her as she froze at the lightning flashing across the sky, and held our breaths, waiting for the thunder god to pass on by.

The most worrying part of all was that thunder would cause our mother's transformation to come undone. The sight of the illustrious Prince in Black turning into a furry tanuki as he aimed his cue stick would most certainly cause no end of consternation, both in their world and in ours.



I pedaled like the wind down Higashi Ōji Avenue, past the streetlights reflected on the underbellies of the brooding clouds above.

Suspecting that Yashirō might already be heading towards Demachi Yanagi himself, I made a hard left at the Okazaki canal, going towards the Ebisugawa power plant. Water sloshed along sluggishly behind the sluice gate under the spare illumination on its journey

down from Lake Biwa. Across the water stood a lonely bronze statue of Kitagami Kunimichi, the old prefectural governor and mastermind of the Lake Biwa canals. Apparently, one of my ancestors, Shimogamo Tetsutarō, was on such good terms with the governor that they referred to each other as “Tets, m’boy” and “Kuni dear!”, or so I’ve been told. Then again, for six months after his death Tetsutarō was still pretending to be alive, so the veracity of this claim is very much in question.

Approaching the sluice gate, I observed a commotion playing out atop the small bridge that spans the canal.

In the center of the bridge was a small tanuki curled up in a ball, not even trying to hide its quivering. From the way his behind was trembling so undependably, I knew without a doubt that it was Yashirō. A lucky cat statue roughly the size of an Asian elephant arrogantly reclined on the ground, blocking the north end of the bridge and leering at my brother with gleaming eyes.

My beloved little brother was being bullied by a slouching, slovenly lucky cat!

Sensing that I had a duty to fulfill as an older brother, I pedaled up and cried, “Never fear, Yasaburō’s here!”

The lucky cat’s bulbous eyeballs rolled in my direction. I hopped off my bike and ran over to my brother, who buried his face in my arms. Gathering his furry body up to my chest, I stood up and glared at the lucky cat.

“Well, well, lookie who’s here!” the cat cackled, ogling us with a look of satisfaction. Its chest heaved with each peal of laughter, jogging the wooden plaque that hung from its neck. The plaque said “Back in the Game” in bold vaudeville-style lettering.

“Boom!!” a second voice shrilled, and out of the sky behind me fell another lucky cat, this one black. In addition to blocking the road behind us, it also crushed my bicycle. The plaque around its neck read “Higuchi Yachiyō”.

Before us, “Back in the Game”—behind us, “Higuchi Yachiyō”. Of all the tanuki in the world, there were only two who would take pride in advertising their own stupidity by wearing slogans around their necks: Kinkaku and Ginkaku. These walking billboards were fascinated with four-character idioms, and were convinced that wearing them made them suave. But most of the time, they didn’t even know the idioms meant; Higuchi Yachiyō wasn’t even an idiom in the first place.

“Yasaburō. I’ll have you know, *your* brother dumped all his work on the distillery floor and ran out of the shop!” Kinkaku appeared to be reveling in his lecture. “We let him study here out of the goodness of our hearts, and as repayment for our kindness, he tosses aside his work in our faces midway through the day. Most intolerable!”

“That’s right, Kinkaku!” Ginkaku piped up behind us. “Intolerable!”

“It is the mark of a finished tanuki to exert himself without complaint until he has finished the work he is given,” continued Kinkaku, who had never exerted himself for anything in his life. “I most certainly have no intent of meddling in your affairs, but I am *deeply* concerned for the future of the Shimogamo clan.”

“The Shimogamos aren’t but a bunch of good-for-naughts!” interrupted Ginkaku, a good-for-naught who never did anything more than halfway.

"That's right. Their second son is a frog, the third is a fool, and their youngest amounts to, well, *this*. But for the efforts of our family, the future of the tanuki world would look grave indeed."

"We've got you, Kinkaku! You're the shining star that lights our way!"

My brother was still shaking, and had completely forgotten how to transform, but I knew that he had dashed out of the factory in order to get to Mother. He was sensitive to a fault, and terrible at transforming to boot, so the merest hint of stress would send his tail shooting out. This unfortunate trait gave rise to his ignominious nickname, "Lil' Bushytail".

"Hey, Ginkaku," I responded. "You know that Higuchi Yachiyō isn't an idiom, right?"

"Don't try to trick me. Who do you think you are, some sort of idiom expert?"

"I hate to break it to you, fellas, but Higuchi Yachiyō is the name of a person," I said, in a pitying tone. "Names and idioms are very different things."

"Is that true, Kinkaku?" A note of uncertainty crept into Ginkaku's voice as he questioned his older brother, but Kinkaku's response betrayed no such doubt.

"Don't believe him. 'Higuchi Yachiyō' refers to a single bedraggled leaf caught at the end of a rain gutter. It is an idiom that expresses the melancholy of autumn. I read it in a book."

"I knew you were right, Kinkaku! That's what I thought it was, too."

"This simpleton is not worth our time," declared Kinkaku, taking an earthshaking step forward. "Now, hand over your rascally brother. We need to teach him a lesson. Our father has entrusted us with full authority, and that means teaching Yashirō the true meaning of work. We can't shirk our duty halfway through, can we?"

"I respectfully decline, with my compliments," I said, hugging my brother close.

"As self-centered as ever, I see. I often think to myself what a *deplorable* state of affairs it is, for a tanuki to flout the rules so brazenly."

"That's rich, coming from you two!"

"We are superior, after all," Kinkaku stated, adding, "Footloose and fancy-free."

"Amazing, Kinkaku! 'Footloose and fancy-free' is such an obscure idiom!" Ginkaku crowed in admiration.

"Unlike certain people, we don't stalk the cherished daughters of other families," Kinkaku said snidely. "And by certain people, I mean *you*."

"What did you say, you miserable git?" I cried. "I've never done anything like that in my life!"

"Father was quite concerned about the encumbrance you would impose on Kaisei's future going forward. The agreement has been rescinded, yet still you persist. We no longer have any use for the blood of the likes of the Shimogamos."

Quite independently, the blood rushed to the heads of both me and my brother, and we simultaneously yelled, "Drop dead!"

"Is that so? Then I'm afraid your belligerence leaves me no choice."

"Get them, Kinkaku! Smash them into smithereens!"

A rumbling sound like the grinding of a millstone echoed through the sky. The thunder god had finally arrived above the city.

Yashirō whimpered and pressed his cold nose into my chin.

"Mother's in trouble, Yasaburō!"

"I know that!"

The longer I bandied words with Tweedledee and Tweedledum, the longer it would take for us to get to Mother. But Kinkaku and Ginkaku had the advantage in strength, and trying to take them head-on would be sheer folly. For the moment, it would be wisest to retreat, and think of a stratagem to squash these two another day, preferably without getting my hands too dirty.

Two gigantic lucky cats blocking the way in front and behind, and my hands full carrying my little brother. My mind raced to think of a way to make a quick escape.

But it turns out I didn't need to.

"Kinkaku! Ginkaku!" a voice snarled from behind Ginkaku, followed by the bowel-shaking roar of an enormous tiger. The blood drained from the faces of the terrible two, their appearances literally resembling porcelain lucky cats.

Panthera tigris: class Mammalia, order Carnivora, family Felidae. Ranking with lions as the largest of the big cats, tigers can reach lengths of over two meters and weigh over two hundred kilograms. They are covered in elegant coats of golden fur with black stripes, and have been known to occasionally take down bears. In Asia, they are revered as the king of the beasts. They feast upon many things: humans, tanuki, porcupines, turtles, and even grasshoppers.

Wild tigers do not exist in Kyoto—that is, unless a tanuki transforms into one.

"It's Yaichirō!" Yashirō exclaimed.

Our eldest brother conformed strictly to the taboos of tanuki society, and as such he would never transform willy-nilly. The only exceptions were when his fury reached such heights that he transformed into a majestic tiger.

This tendency was what had earned him the nickname, "The Tiger of the Kamo River".



In a frenzy, Yaichirō sank his teeth into Ginkaku's hindquarters, which were conveniently located right beside him.

"Kyaa, not my butt!" squealed Ginkaku in an unnaturally high-pitched voice, and the next instant he had turned back into a scruffy tanuki.

Gently gripping the furball's rump in his fangs, Yaichirō swung his head in a wide arc, sending Ginkaku tumbling through the pale light of the streetlamps into the sky.

"Someone catch me! I don't know how to fly!" wailed the airborne furball. His shrieking continued until he fell into the canal with a plop, and all was quiet again.

I prayed that the current would carry him far, far away.

Seeing his brother being swept down the canal toward the open ocean seemed to have hardened Kinkaku's resolve. His pudgy legs became lithe and slim, and his round, heavy belly shrank down. The extra fat around his paws melted away, and his rolling eyes narrowed into a cold, calculating look.

Kinkaku had transformed into a full-fledged lion, complete with a tawny mane around his head. He glowered at my brother, his body tensed and ready to pounce. Yaichirō tucked his head in and approached him cautiously.

My brother and I sheltered behind a telephone pole and watched as the improbable battle between lion and tiger unfolded before us.

Without warning, Kinkaku pounced at Yaichirō. Between blurs of bushy mane and black stripes, it was hard to tell what was what, but after a few moments, I heard Kinkaku screech, "Not my happy place! Anywhere but my happy place!" and hanging limply from his "happy place", he turned back into a tanuki.

With a flick of Yaichirō's head, Kinkaku followed the path his brother had taken through the air, splashing into the Kamo River with a plop, and things were quiet once again.

A flash lit up the sky, and raindrops began to pitter-patter down around us.

Yaichirō reverted back to his usual human form, a young man wearing traditional robes. For a moment he glowered at Yashirō and me as we cowered behind the pole, then turned and gave a sharp whistle. A rickshaw came trundling up from the road where it had been patiently waiting. The rickshaw driver was actually an automaton, built by a famous craftsman in Kyoto a long time ago. It was quite old, having been passed down to Yaichirō by our father, and its movements were jerky and stiff, but Yaichirō treasured it as a memento of our father, and had lovingly repaired it many times over the years.

Boarding the rickshaw, Yaichirō turned to us and shouted, "Stop dawdling! Hurry and get on!"

I rushed up to the rickshaw, still carrying Yashirō in my arms.



The rickshaw plunged through the maze of narrow streets. The rain was beating down harder now, but the driver paid it no mind and rushed mutely onwards.

Yaichirō had been attending a meeting in Gion concerning the balance of power in the tanuki world. His use of the rickshaw was probably an attempt to evoke my father's legacy, since my father had always ridden around in this same carriage, but this time the meeting had broken up inconclusively.

He was still stewing over the failure of the meeting, and with his worry about Mother's fear of thunder occupying his mind on top of that, it was plain to see that he was readying a lecture for his two useless little brothers, who had allowed themselves to be bullied by the Ebisugawas. He was scowling so ferociously that it was hard to imagine how his face could be more puckered than it already was.

"How could you let those Ebisugawas walk all over you and not say a word?" he demanded. "Have you no pride for our family, no instinct to defend our name?"

"I'm sorry," mumbled Yashirō in a small voice. He was in his usual form as a little boy, but Yaichirō's wrath had set him quaking again, and I was expecting his tail to pop out any moment now. "I did tell them to drop dead, though," he added nervously, though Yaichirō showed no sign that he'd heard.

"I'm afraid I'm not too familiar with the concept of 'family honor'," I opined.

"I daresay anyone who thinks only of amusing himself wouldn't understand," retorted Yaichirō. "Wayward as you are, I bet father is rolling in his grave."

"Father would never have worried himself about that sort of thing."

Hearing my rejoinder, Yaichirō was silent.

By the time we reached the café at the west end of the Kamo Bridge, the rain was pouring down, and a white haze flickered over the asphalt on Imadegawa Street. The sound of thunder struck fear into all of our hearts.

There was no sign of our mother in the billiards hall above the café.

Seizing one of the cue stick-holding students, we interrogated him for the whereabouts of the Prince in Black. According to his story, the black-clad youth's pale face had turned even paler at the very first thunderclap, and he tottered down the stairs out of the club. Shortly after, a hue and cry was raised downstairs—something about the sudden appearance of a tanuki—but by the time the players rushed down, the Prince in Black was nowhere to be seen.

"Must have gone home, I guess?" the student shrugged. We asked him where the tanuki had gone. "Dunno, it just disappeared," he replied, looking suspicious.

Our mother was missing.

The odds that she would make it back to the Tadasu Forest in this thundering storm on her own were slim to none. Maybe she was cowering in some dark recess, soaked to the bone; maybe she had been so petrified by the thunder that she had been captured by humans; maybe she had met her end on the bumper of a car. Each flash of lightning that bedazzled the surface of the Kamo River brought new terrors swirling forth in my mind.

"Ah, Mother!" cried out Yaichirō, tearing at his hair in his distress. "If only you hadn't been playing pool!"

Yaichirō's emotional fragility was brought to the fore in times of crisis, causing his groomed veneer of decorum to fall apart. He demanded that we send out messages to every tanuki in Kyoto and organize a great search party for our mother.

"That's going way overboard, Yaichirō," I advised. "Do you seriously think that Mother would leg it all the way to Gojō or Nishijin? Let's just split up and search around the bridge."

"Yes, that's what we shall do. I shall take charge!" cried Yaichirō, raindrops trickling down his face. "Yaichirō, you go search around Dōshisha University. Have you got that? Oh—that's me. Never mind, I shall search towards Dōshisha. Yasaburō will search north along the river, and Yashirō will take the bridge. That leaves, er, Yasaburō to search the south by the river. Look carefully!"

"You do realize that I can't go north and south at the same time, right?"

"Incompetent wretch. Yajirō will go south then."

"Yajirō's at the bottom of the well in Chinnōji. Plus, he's a frog to boot."

"He revels in being useless, does he!" Yaichirō raged, tearing at his hair. "What have I done to deserve to be saddled with such a useless lot of brothers!"

"Easy there, Yaichirō. You're the most undependable one of all of us."

Yaichirō's agitation was concerning, but nevertheless we all went our separate ways through the storm to look for our mother.

Headlights floated hazily through the shroud of rain as cars passed by over the Kamo Bridge. Orange lamps burned on the guardrails of the bridge, like markers guiding the spirits of the dead that were descending upon the city.



We scoured the area around the Kamo Bridge in the pouring rain, drenched and flinching at each thunderbolt.

I found Mother hiding in the darkness under the bridge.

I was wandering along when she raced madly up the riverbank and jumped into my arms, her fur thoroughly soaked, right as a blast of thunder shook the air. Tremendously relieved, I wiped her face, carefully parting the wet hair that was covering her eyes. She sneezed, *kerchoo*.

"The Ebisugawa girl was with me," she whispered, stiffening each time a flash of lightning split the sky. "She saved me just when I was on the verge of falling in the river."

It was pitch black under the bridge where she had been hiding, but I knew that Kaisei was in there peeping at us. Wiping raindrops off my face, I squinted into the blackness.

"What're you looking at?" Kaisei asked, sounding peeved. "Don't just stand there, get back to the forest already!"

"Well, I think a thank-you is in order."

"Never mind that, are you trying to give your mother a cold, you dummy?" Kaisei showed no sign of coming out from under the bridge.

I still haven't gotten a good look at her face—what I had said to Yajirō hadn't been modesty talking. The simple fact was that I had yet to lay eyes upon my ex-fiancee, whether in her tanuki form or in any other form. Neither did she deign to reveal herself to me. Instead she hid in darkness my eyes couldn't penetrate and belittled me. For someone who wouldn't show herself, she certainly had a foul mouth, which I am inclined to blame on her upbringing. To me, Kaisei was violence made verbal, flying out the darkness to assault me when I least expected it. Bellyfuls were the one thing she gave me in spades.

Back when we had still been betrothed, I often turned two things over in my mind: the weight of my father's promise, and the weight of having to live with this abuse from my unseen fiancée. Both these things seemed equally heavy, and it was a miracle that the invisible set of scales in my mind was able to take the strain. But during the course of all this agony, my father died, and our betrothal was called off.

Farewell, Kaisei, may we never meet again, I naively thought at the time, but to this day she still pops up when I least expect it, always with some new bone to pick. It is most disagreeable to be treated as an object to stave off boredom. And even worse than that is the abject indignity of being falsely accused by the Ebisugawa clan of dogging her footsteps. Hardly a person in the world would fault me for taking offense.

Tonight, though, Kaisei had saved Mother, and for that I owed her my gratitude.

I bowed my head to my unseen ex-fiancee and said, "Thank you. Give my regards to Kinkaku and Ginkaku." (*When you see them floating down the canal*, I added parenthetically.)

Kaisei snorted in the darkness. "Take care on your way back," she said.

There we parted ways.

"The Ebisugawas can all drop dead," Mother remarked as I carried her along in my arms. "All of them, except for that girl."



I called over Yashirō from his aimless traipsing on the riverbank and caught Yaichirō as he galloped up and down Imadegawa Street, and boarding the rickshaw together, we dashed through the rain back to the Tadasu Forest.

The moment we entered the forest, the dense canopy above reduced the torrential downpour to a fine drizzle. The sound of raindrops pattering on the leaves enveloped the trees stretching all the way to the north. Here and there, pale shafts of light stabbed down to the path, but inside the forest there was nothing to fear. I carried our mother in my arms, my two brothers close beside, as we walked down the long path.

Nestling inside a small mosquito net, we huddled our furry bodies close and stifled our breathing. Still soaked, Mother wrapped herself in a white towel and sniffed as she looked up to the treetops, watching the thunder god pass overhead. Yashirō snuggled up close to her, while Yaichirō and I bookended the two. Our breaths felt warm and damp in the gloom.

Pressing close to everyone and listening to the rain and thunder put me in a reminiscing mood.

I thought back to when Yashirō had just been born, my father had still been alive, and Yajirō was not yet a frog holed up in a well. Even Yaichirō had had his happy-go-lucky moments from time to time, not yet having taken up a mantle that was far beyond his ability. Then, we had still gathered around Mother whenever thunder rumbled across the sky. Mother would gather us all in her arms, her eyes shut, and father would squeeze us all in his broad embrace.

The memory always put me in an uncharacteristically sentimental, misty-eyed mood.

At last the thunder god moved on towards Lake Biwa, bringing the ruckus to the leeward side of Higashiyama.

"I'm so glad to have you all with me," Mother said in the still darkness. "Sō may not be here anymore, but at least I still have you."



Our departed father, Shimogamo Sōichirō, was the Trick Magister, and a great tanuki.

Not only was he the patriarch of the Shimogamo clan, his influence radiated far and wide throughout the tanuki world, and even the tengu that fly over the high-rises of Karasuma afforded him their respect.

Tanuki are a genial, unbegrudging bunch, generous to a fault. They are unrivaled in their love of alcohol and shogi, and despise bad booze and pointless turf wars. But once their ire has been roused, they will use all their strength and all their cunning and all their skill at transforming to obliterate whoever has provoked their rage in the most diabolical fashion possible. A dear friend of Yakushibō of Nyoigatake, otherwise known as Master Akadama, Father once played a trick on the tengu of Kurama and sent them scattering in panic. No other tanuki could have pulled off such a feat, besides my great father.

The tanuki that unites all of tanuki society is known as the Trick Magister.

As long as Shimogamo is the Trick Magister, Kyoto will be at peace. That used to be the general consensus, until my father's most unexpected demise.

The human secret society known as the Friday Fellows consumes tanuki stew at their annual year-end party. This practice is what has made them the scourge of every tanuki in Kyoto.

The year my younger brother Yashirō was born, the Friday Fellows gathered at their party, as they always did, and ate their stew.

The tanuki in the stew that year was my father.

When we learned that our father had died, we spent half the day in shock, before the tears started to flow. Yaichirō cried; Yajirō cried; I cried. Yashirō was just a baby, so he had been crying from the start. Once we started crying, we did not stop for a long, long time.

"As long as there have been tanuki, there have been tanuki stews. There's nothing extraordinary about it!" our mother said sternly to us wailing tanuki pups. "Your father was a splendid tanuki, and I'm sure that he was laughing quietly to himself all the way into the pot. And a fine stew he must have made it! That's just the kind of tanuki I expect each of you to become: high-minded, easygoing tanuki that can laugh in the faces of the Friday Fellows and their stew. But never try that out for yourselves!"

That was as far as she got before she too dissolved into tears, and gathered us all into her arms. "Please, don't any of you turn into stew!"

But my father quietly turned into stew, and his passage through the innards of the eccentric Friday Fellows heralded the coming of troubled times for the tanuki of Kyoto.



We stayed up until the storm had passed, talking.

"It's like you said, Mother; you raised us to be easygoing, but none of us three have turned out to be any use," I commented. "The fourth, of course, being a frog."

I could almost feel somehow the bitter smile on Yaichirō's face.

Mother pushed her nose into Yashirō's sleeping face. "You can be frogs or whatever you like. What matters to me is that you're still here." After a moment's contemplation, she added, "Besides, you're splendid tanuki, every one of you. A mother can always tell."

Chapter 3 — The Battle of the Daimonji Pleasure Barges

To imitate the beauties of nature is sublime, but there is nothing so fascinating as imitating humans. Walking alongside them through their daily lives and undergoing their yearly rituals is strangely delightful. This irresistible idiosyncrasy was almost assuredly passed down generation by generation from the distant reign of Emperor Kammu, and my departed father used to call it “fool’s blood”.

“That’s your fool’s blood talking,” he used to laugh whenever one of us brothers stirred up mischief and caused a ruckus.

Humans make merry during the Gozan no Okuribi, that poetic embodiment of summer. That we tanuki mirror their revelry on that night is no doubt the doing of our fool’s blood.

I am particularly fond of the Gozan no Okuribi, because of my memories of Father that are entwined with it. Father had gaudily decorated our pleasure barge, the Manpuku Maru, and was having a grand old time, gazing down at the fires on the mountains below as the barge sailed through the stars. I can still vividly recall him reclining at the prow of the ship, grinning that happy grin and boasting about the present hale and hearty state of the clan to the spirits of our ancestors.

Even after his abrupt departure to the other side, Mother and we still went out on the barge every year on the night of the Okuribi. Our honored ancestors were the furthest things from our minds. Occasionally we would reminisce about Father, but for the most part we simply enjoyed ourselves high up in the summer sky.

We can’t help it. We’re tanuki.

It’s just the doing of our fool’s blood.



It was August, and the Okuribi was drawing near.

The day was broiling in the beastly early afternoon heat as I took Yashirō along with me through the Tadasu Forest, crossing the Aoi Bridge and leaving Shimogamo Shrine, traipsing along towards the Demachi shopping arcade.

At the arcade I bought a bento box and Demachi Futaba mochi to present to my mentor, Master Akadama. Master Akadama was a tengu who bore the illustrious moniker Yakushibō of Nyoigatake, and had conferred his wisdom on many a tanuki, but now he lived a secluded life in a cheap apartment behind the shopping arcade, spitting contempt on the world at large.

The other day, I had paid a visit to the Master in the form of a young maiden, intending to lift his spirits, but had instead been met with a barrage of humiliation. I had been the very model of a good disciple, yet for my commendable thoughtfulness I had

received only insults, leaving me seething. This time the boiling heat was driving my mind ever more towards trickery, so I had taken the form of a scruffy college student.

My little brother, Yashirō, walked around in his form as a little boy, clutching a large bottle of Akadama port wine to his chest. This was the only transformation he knew how to do, and if something happened to startle him even in the slightest, his tail would come shooting out, earning the poor kid the nickname “Lil’ Bushytail”.

That summer, he had secretly confided to me, “Guess what, Yasaburō? I can charge phones!” He proudly put his little fingertip to his phone and started charging it. He may as well have used that ability to power an electric rice cooker, for all the use it was; with all the wires stretching around Kyoto there wasn’t much use in being able to charge a phone. It might be useful if you had lost your way, but that was all. Still, once the Faux Denki Bran distillery had entered its summer recess, Yashirō spent every day under the shady boughs of the Tadasu Forest, playing around and charging his phone.

“Who exactly are you going to be calling, anyways?” I inquired.

“Mother, of course!”

“But aren’t you two usually together anyhow?”

“That’s not always true. Like when I’m at the distillery!”

So we chatted as we strolled along.

At the midpoint of the shopping arcade is an alley running to the north, and a little way into this alley there is an old apartment. This apartment, most unsuited to be the dwelling of beings that soar the skies as they please, is the residence of Master Akadama.

Our visit was not merely to offer food and alcohol to a tengu who would otherwise subsist on a frightful gruel of his own making. We had another piece of business in mind.

That business was the matter of the Manpuku Maru.



The Okuribi was drawing near, yet we, the Shimogamo clan, had no flying pleasure barge to speak of.

The reason for this was that our own Manpuku Maru had been lost during the previous year’s Okuribi, in a pointless battle with the Ebisugawa clan.

“The fire was sparked by celebratory fireworks. It was merely an unfortunate accident,” claimed the Ebisugawas. But to call it an accident seems quite odd, for I had seen with my own eyes those two Ebisugawa idiots, Kinkaku and Ginkaku, bafflingly chanting, “Strange boatfellows! Strange boatfellows!” while they shot off fireworks in our direction. If anything was an “unfortunate accident”, it was the birth of those two miserable tanuki into this world, emphasis on “unfortunate”.

I had some ideas about where to get our hands on another barge, but my older brother Yaichirō instead relied on his political skills to sort everything out, for he had a deep distrust of his brothers’ ability to get anything done. He had never had any faith in me from the start, and all my suggestions fell on deaf ears. Being snubbed like this infuriated me, and I went to Rokudō Chinnōji to hurl obscenities at Yaichirō, where they would sink into the well.

Mother very much looked forward to watching the Okuribi fires from the barge, and while the order of the night was always merrymaking, it was also an important occasion to reminisce about Father. Therefore Yaichirō spared no efforts to obtain the Manpuku Maru Mk. 2, and at last he was able to borrow a barge from an acquaintance in Nara.

However, on its way over to Kyoto in the dead of night, the barge suddenly fell out of the sky, and without being given a chance to show its quality, the Manpuku Maru Mk. 2 came crashing down to earth on a sandbar in the middle of the Kizu River. With scant time left before the Okuribi, Yaichirō's schemes were sunk.

Prodded on by Mother, Yaichirō bowed his head to me.

"You see where things stand. Is there nothing you can do?"

This all would have been so easy if he had just asked for his capable little brother's help in the first place. Keeping my back turned to him, I cooled my feet in the stream that runs through the Tadasu Forest and gulped down a porcelain bowl of *ramune*.

"Yaichirō was at fault here. You're the only one we can depend on now," Mother told me.

"I'll do something, if he gets down on his hands and knees," I said. Yaichirō's fur bristled with fury, but he began to lower himself to the ground.

But before he could do so, my mother flew into a rage. "That's enough!" she shrieked, and shoved me into the brook. "What kind of person would force his brother to grovel in front of him!"

I hauled myself out of the water, sopping wet and shivering.

Having no choice but to wipe up my brother's hairy mess for him, I set my plan in motion and went to borrow Yakushibō's Inner Parlor from Master Akadama.

Yakushibō's Inner Parlor is a sort of conveyance used by tengu, formed in the shape of a traditional tea room. It is fitted with open verandas on all four sides, making journeys through the sky quite pleasant. Repulsed by the idea of relying on a vehicle to bear him aloft, Master Akadama hardly ever used it all, yet he refused to sell it to one of his acquaintances who happened to be an antiques dealer. I was convinced that it was still sitting somewhere gathering dust.

What possible reason could there be for a tengu whom age had robbed of the power of flight to refuse such a convenient way to take to the skies? I'm sure he had his feeble excuses, like not wanting to advertise the fact that he was weakened and facing an identity crisis as a tengu. But there was more to it than that.

Master Akadama's parlor burned Akadama port wine as fuel in order to take flight. And faced with the prospect of feeding wine to a flying conveyance, he would much rather pour it down his gullet instead and use it as fuel to take flights of fancy through the wild skies of his imagination.

I was tempted to ask him if any tengu could really be satisfied with that.



I stepped into Master Akadama's apartment to find it as warm as a sauna. Garbage was piled up everywhere, and dust danced in the light streaming through the window. Just the sight of it made my nose itch. Yashirō sneezed, sending his tail shooting out.

"Oh, it's you two," Master Akadama said, sounding bored, though he was already entertaining another guest. Wearing only his yellowed underwear, he sat cross-legged in the middle of the narrow room on the tatami mats, facing another elderly tengu.

This tengu's name was Konkobu of Iwayasan. He turned to face us and said, "Yasaburō, of the Shimogamos. What a splendid young man you have grown into." His voice was unusually gentle for a tengu. White light glinted off his black-rimmed spectacles, and a bolo tie hung around his neck over his sweat-dampened dress shirt.

"Don't be a fool. A tanuki, being splendid," Master Akadama snorted, fanning himself with an *uchiwa*. "You coddle these tanuki far too much. That's why these furballs all give themselves airs."

Konkobu had handed over leadership of the Iwayasan tengu to his successor, and now he ran a secondhand camera store in Osaka for fun. Master Akadama often mocked him for his love of cameras, deeming it a hobby unworthy of a tengu.

Mentioning that he had only just arrived, Konkobu swiftly unwrapped a parcel on the tatami. "Yakushibō here doesn't want the refreshments I brought, so why don't you lads have them instead?"

"Taking the train to get here from Osaka...no tengu would suffer himself to be seen flying with you," Master Akadama muttered petulantly, prompting a wry smile from Konkobu.

"Just you try flying from Osaka to Kyoto in the middle of summer. Why, you'd fry your brains! The Keihan trains are nice and cool."

"Utterly shameful!"

"I must say that this was quite a surprise. Here I come all the way to Demachi to see you, and I fly up to Nyoigatake only to find it crawling with the Kurama tengu! Gave me a shock, it did, to hear that you'd moved down here to the Demachi shopping arcade."

"Maintaining the place was too much of a nuisance, so I've let them handle it."

"Aye, but I don't believe that's something Yakushibō of Nyoigatake should be doing," said Konkobu, looking sternly at Master Akadama as if he was lecturing a spoiled child. "I don't like those Kurama tengu. Pale as beansprouts, that uncanny bunch."

It had been a year since Master Akadama was defeated in the tengu capture-the-flag match and been booted from Nyoigatake, but he would never admit that he had lost. "I am merely allowing them to look after my mountain," he stubbornly insisted. His obstinacy was pitiful to witness.

"If you want to drive them out, I could get my successor to help," Konkobu kindly suggested. "The tengu of Mount Atago would lend their aid as well, if you asked. Tarōbō may not see eye to eye with you, but he loathes the Kurama tengu."

"This is none of your business!"

"Isn't it time you settle things and hand over Nyoigatake to your own heir?"

"That fool is dead to me."

I had heard that Master Akadama had a son. He was said to be an Adonis of a tengu, so handsome that it was hard to believe that he was related by blood to the Master, but over the years the stories about him had been so embellished that it was hard to tell fact from fiction.

Long ago, this beautiful tengu had dared defy his own father, their quarrel shaking the peaks of the Higashiyama Sanjūroppō mountains. Master Akadama had still been a powerful, imposing tengu then, and without hesitation or mercy he had rushed to meet his son head on. People likened it to a lion testing the mettle of its cub, but I suspected that the Master had simply been working off the excess from a temper tantrum.

The battle had continued for three days and nights, but in the end the youthful heir had suffered a tremendous defeat and fled Kyoto. After wandering the length and breadth of Japan for a time, he had supposedly quit for England, and since then his whereabouts have been unknown. Perhaps he had striven too hard to take on the trappings of a gentleman, and became too ensconced in his British ways to ever come back to Japan.

Incidentally, that quarrel had apparently been fought over a woman.



"Nothing can change until your heir comes back."

"He won't come back," said Master Akadama, flapping his fan noisily and staring at the blazing sunlight streaming in through the window. After a moment, he muttered, "I have another candidate in mind, one worthy to follow in my footsteps."

"I've not heard that you had another son?"

"Not a son. She may still lack in training, but she has much promise."

My hair stood on end, and I shuffled towards the Master on my knees. "If you'll pardon the question, Master, but this candidate wouldn't happen to be Benten, would it?"

Seeing the Master nod, the three of us sighed in unison.

"Now that simply will not do," Konkobu groaned. "That one's a nasty piece of work."

"How could any tengu be nasty? Don't talk such piffle."

"She's bound to bring disaster, mark my words. You had best steer well clear of her."

Master Akadama glared sulkily at Konkobu for a moment, then snuffled like a pig, tossed the fan away, and threw himself on the floor. Despite the fact that he was several centuries old, Yakushibō of Nyoigatake still resorted to his signature move of sulking in bed when things weren't going his way.

On his knees facing Master Akadama, Konkobu bowed his head. Droplets of sweat fell onto the tatami.

"The Okuribi will be coming soon. Does it not trouble you, not to be on your own mountain?"

"Spectating is much better down here. Up on the mountain, I can hardly tell what's what."

"And there you go again..." With that, Konkobu gave up talking, and the Master shut his eyes tightly, while the seconds ticked pointlessly by.

Mount Daimonji, where the character for “Dai” or “big” is located, lies on the western slope of Nyoigatake.

As the lord of Nyoigatake, it was a point of pride for Master Akadama that the Daimonji fire was under his jurisdiction. Feeling it his overseer’s duty to keep a baleful eye on the proceedings, he would cruise around Daimonji on the night of the Okuribi, knocking over the carefully arranged piles of pinewood and being pursued by cops from the Shimogamo station. But that was all before he was chased away into retirement in the Demachi shopping arcade by the Kurama tengu. Now he could only look up at his mountain, side by side with the very humans he had once so ridiculed. How grievous must be the wounds on the poor Master’s heart.

I timidly ventured to speak. “About the Okuribi, Master...”

“What is it, Yasaburō,” the Master grunted, his eyes still closed.

“You are aware, I am sure, that we take a pleasure barge out every year on the Okuribi.”

“I am. Tanuki are such incorrigible fools.”

“Last year, we were caught up in one of the myriad dastardly plots of the Ebisugawa clan, and our barge was burned up. We have contrived to find another barge, but to no avail...thus, we have come to humbly beseech you to allow us the use of your inner parlor for a single night.”

“Inner parlor? What do you mean?”

“You know, that small tearoom-like contraption that flies through the air.”

“Ah, yes, that thing. Now where did I leave it...?” The Master slowly sat up, a vacant expression on his face. “Oh, of course. I gave it to Benten.”

The room was silent, each of us struck dumb by amazement.

I still remembered how disgusted I had been when Master Akadama gave the Fūjin Raijin fan to this Benten, witnessing this woman of ill repute drain him of all his possessions. Now that he had given her the parlor, he hardly had anything left to his name. Unable to fly, unable to summon whirlwinds, only a tengu-like air of penury hung about him now, and that in abundance.

I held a great deal of respect for the Master whom I served, but my patience had been pushed to its limits. This was not an infrequent occurrence.

“I can’t believe you!” I shouted. “How can you just give her everything you have!”

Sitting cross-legged, Master Akadama’s face flushed red, and his already wrinkled expression crumpled even further. He grabbed a large *daruma* that was lying beside him and hurled it at me. Konkobu attempted to placate him, but the Master’s rage could not be contained. After the *daruma* came a lucky cat, then a *fukusuke* statue, then another *daruma*, flying at me one after another. I ducked my head, running helter skelter to avoid the projectiles flying through the air.

“Still you fail to understand, you fool?” cried the great Master. “I only wish to see her smile!”



Finally having managed to appease the Master, my brother and I accompanied Konkobu out of the apartment.

"I hear Yakushibō owes his everyday livelihood to you," Konkobu said as we walked through the Demachi shopping arcade. "That's kind of you, uncommon kind indeed."

"I just let myself get forced into it during a moment of weakness. None of his other students visit him either."

"Yakushibō may only ever have complaints to give, but I have no doubt he appreciates what you do."

"I would appreciate it if you would avoid giving compliments you don't mean."

"Alas!" Konkobu smacked his forehead. "How unbecoming of me."

"I'd never make a living if I was always expecting handouts like those."

"That is most likely true."

Konkobu was planning to stay a while at Iwayasan. He seemed rather pleased that the Master's heir had reached out, and while he had no plans to return to Japan, he had invited Konkobu to pay him a visit. On the night of the Okuribi, Konkobu intended to come down from the mountain and watch the spectacle from below.

"Why don't you invite Yakushibō to your pleasure barge? I may just impose on you as well."

"That seems perfectly reasonable to me."

"Farewell, then. Have a care for Benten."

Konkobu was going to take the bus from Demachiyanagi station over to Iwayasan, so we parted ways at the west end of the Kamo Bridge. The sun glared down from its zenith above the shallow waters of the Kamo River. We watched as Konkobu tottered along the baked pavement of the bridge.

The Master had informed us that Benten would be visiting Nishizaki Gen'emon, the famous fan store in Sanjō Takakura, so we boarded a bus on Kawaramachi Street. Yashirō was frozen stiff in his seat, looking as if his tail would pop out at any moment.

"Benten doesn't eat tanuki stew every day, you know. It's only at the year-end party," I reassured him. "If you want, you can go home now."

But Yashirō was adamant. "I'm going too. Mother says I need to learn to keep a stiff upper lip."



Nishizaki Gen'emon lies a short distance from the Sanjō Takakura intersection in a quiet neighborhood, in a building that looks just like the old-fashioned houses that surround it.

I pulled open the sliding door, inlaid with glass into which the name of the shop is distinctly etched, and stepped inside, calling out a greeting. The dim interior of the shop was cool and fragrant with the scent of incense. Gorgeous fans were exhibited on display stands on the dirt floor, like butterflies coquettishly resting their wings. We said hello to Gen'emon, who was sitting at the edge of a raised wooden floor conversing with a customer, then took off our shoes and headed farther in onto the wooden floor.

We brushed past a deep blue curtain into a hallway. The deeper we went, the heavier the scent of incense became, and drawing breath grew more and more difficult. The brackish air made the soles of my feet stick to the dark floorboards. The sounds of the city streets faded away, and we were surrounded by a stillness so absolute it felt as if we were burrowing down to the edge of the world when we heard the cry of a seagull somewhere high up in the sky. Light was streaming into the corridor ahead where the hallway bent to the left.

We turned the corner and found ourselves at the front of a small diner.

A salty breeze ruffled the curtain at the entrance to the restaurant, and light reflected from the waves flickered throughout the room. The restaurant was lined with modest tables, the walls covered with faded paper signs advertising the menu, but not a customer was in sight. Just outside the café was a jetty where several small boats were tied up, and beyond it was the wide expanse of the sea, sunlight sparkling on the lapping waves. With the sounds of a wind chime tinkling in the breeze, the shrilling of seagulls wandering across the azure sky, and the roar of the ocean all mingling in my ears, it was hard to believe that I wasn't traveling the world on a lonesome journey and was still, in fact, in the middle of Sanjō Takakura.

An old woman came out from the kitchen.

"Is Lady Benten at the clock tower?" I inquired.

"Yes, she is indeed," replied the old woman, pointing out over the sea. Though the mist made it difficult to make out, I could see the silhouette of a tower looming over the ocean in the distance.

"The waves have been rough as of late, but today the weather is quite lovely," said the old woman, making her way over to the pier and preparing one of the boats.

Yashirō and I boarded the boat and set out bobbing over the water, the waves splashing noisily at the waterline. At first Yashirō seemed to be quite enjoying himself, but the deeper the water got, the worse the pallor of his face became. Once I turned to make certain that I was still rowing in the right direction, and when I turned back the little boy was nowhere to be seen, replaced by a furry tanuki curled up in the boat.

"Couldn't hold it, huh?"

"Sorry, Yasaburō. I'm just too scared to hold onto my transformation."

"Well, that's alright. Just relax and let me take care of things."

We approached the towering building.

This august ruin, weathered away by wind and rain, had been built by a prosperous merchant in the Taishō period in the Occidental style, but now eighty percent of the edifice lay below the waves. Once it had been a hotel, and its clock tower, which still proudly rose over the sea, had proudly featured as its emblem. For years the celebrated clock tower had endured the salty sea air until its mechanisms had rusted away, its hands never to move again.

Beneath the clock tower, a platform bobbed on the water, complete with a colorful parasol.

"Heeey!" I called. Sitting up, Benten waved a hand at us. She was wearing shorts and a T-shirt with a tasteless idiom emblazoned on it in large characters: "Peerless and Unrivalled".



I stopped the boat by the floating platform. Benten took one look at the furball cowering in the corner of the boat and took off her sunglasses.

"How adorable. Your little brother?"

Scattered under the parasol were Benten's favorite radio set, a small paperback, an assortment of donuts, a telescope, and a large bottle of Faux Denki Bran. Benten offered us a partially eaten donut, which Yashirō took, fidgeting as he gnawed on it. Occasionally he made a gagging sound when a crumb got caught in his throat.

"Goodness, you look hot in that outfit. Couldn't you transform into something lighter?"

I sat down and crossed my legs before her, unsmiling. "What's with the shirt? I would have expected you to have better taste."

Benten glanced down at the curve of her bosom. "I got it from the Ebisugawas."

"Kinkaku and Ginkaku?"

"That's right, along with this Faux Denki Bran."

Taking smooth sips of liquor, Benten listened while I explained the purpose of our visit. When I got to the part where Kinkaku and Ginkaku had burned our pleasure barge, she burst into laughter, slapping her porcelain-white thigh.

"Just yesterday, Kinkaku and Ginkaku came and told me that you would be visiting. They asked me to stay out of tanuki disputes and left me with this silly T-shirt and a bottle of Faux Denki Bran."

"A cheap sort of bribe!"

"Isn't it? I could get my hands on these things any time I wanted."

"Those idiot brothers could never come up with anything more sophisticated than this."

Benten cackled roguishly. "So you want the parlor?"

"With all the hairs on my chinny chin chin."

"What to do, what to do. There's nothing in it for me, after all." She drew her knees up to her chest and looked out at the sea with an air of amusement.

Sensing that pushing her any further would be fruitless, I decided to ease off for the moment. "What are you doing today?" I asked instead.

"Waiting for a whale."

"You mean there are whales around here?"

"Sometimes they pop their heads up, over there," she said, pointing. "When I woke up this morning, I had a sudden desire to pull the tail of a whale. That's why I came. Of course, now that I'm here, there aren't any to be found."

"That's life."

I continued to make idle conversation, keeping her company during her whale waiting. At her urging I had some Faux Denki Bran. Between the heat of the day and the liquor and the rocking of the platform, I felt my head start to spin.



A boat came scudding in from the direction of the jetty. It was being rowed by Gen'emon, from the fan store.

Benten stood up, smiling beatifically. Gen'emon knelt and presented her with a small wooden box, then promptly returned to the boat and rowed off.

"What's that?"

"See for yourself," Benten replied.

In the box was a splendid folding fan.

It was the celebrated Fūjin Raijin fan. Master Akadama used to keep it in his pocket, using it to change the weather in Kyoto as he pleased. Waving the Fūjin side would raise a great tempest, and waving the Raijin side would call down a thunderstorm. Using this power, Master Akadama would often cancel engagements that he did not wish to attend. Giving this fan to Benten so heedlessly was most certainly one of the most imprudent acts in history.

"I asked Gen'emon to repair the fan. You tore a hole in it last month, doing your Nasu no Yoichi impression. Or have you forgotten?"

"I prefer not to dwell on the past."

"You naughty tanuki. I want you to think on what you've done."

Benten removed the fan from the box and spread it.

Flecks of gold sparkled on the fan in the summer sun. Laughing merrily, Benten waved the fan around through the air. It looked as if she was dancing, though I doubted that she actually knew how. Finally, glaring at the sea, she raised the Fūjin Raijin fan high over her head and gave it a wave. Out of nowhere a squall brewed up, and something white and hazy flew forth into the sky, spinning like a top.

In an instant the sky was covered in clouds.

A sound like the grinding of a gigantic millstone rumbled through the sky all around us. Lightning crackled, washing blue light over the clock tower rising up from the ocean. Immediately large raindrops started to pound the surface of the water, and the metallic grey waves heaved and roiled as far as the eye could see.

"Such beautiful weather, gone to waste," said Benten, sounding delighted. "I've decided. Because it's you that's asking, I will let you use the parlor."

"Thank you very much."

"But what would I do with you, if you were to ruin the parlor like you ruined my fan?" she frowned. "You're such a troublemaker."

"I shall treat it with the utmost care."

"I know!" The frown vanished from Benten's face, and she clapped her hands together with delight. "If you ruin the parlor, I'll have you perform at a banquet for the

Friday Fellows. It just so happens that they asked me to provide entertainment. If you fail to amuse us, we'll turn you into a stew and eat you!"

"I assure you, I would not be tasty at all."

"That's all right. I like you so much I could just eat you up."

That was Benten; old friend or not, if she said she would eat you, she would eat you. Being devoured by your first love was in its own way a pretty romantic way to go, but there was still too much for me to do to let that happen.

A particularly loud clap of thunder boomed through the sky. Yashirō left out a muffled yelp.

"Oh, look!" Benten cried, snatching up the telescope and surveying the ocean like a pirate captain.

A huge black mass slipped in and out of sight between the billowing waves. It was enormous, perhaps the size of a small island. This must be the whale.

Benten bent over lithely and threw off her clothes. Naked as the day she was born, she leapt into the air, tracing a graceful, tengu-like arc through the air towards the whale dipping in and out of the water in the distance. Skimming on the surface of the ocean below the lightning dancing through the low, dark clouds, she hovered over the dark backside of the whale. As the whale made to dive back down into the depths, Benten grabbed hold of its great tail fin and tugged it upwards, attempting to drag it up out of the water.

Watching the great struggle between Benten and the whale, I heard a *plop* sound behind me, like the sound of a pudding dropping onto a plate. I turned to find that my fainthearted little brother had regurgitated his donut. Rain-soaked and pitching on the waves, he was observing the remains of the donut, looking bewildered.

I gathered his shivering body into my arms and waited for Benten to return as her high-pitched tengu cackle pealed over the desolate gray waves.



Yashirō and I took possession of the inner parlor from Benten on the rooftop of a building by Shijō Karasuma.

The inner parlor is a 4½ tatami room fitted with a decorative alcove, earthen walls with charming round lattice windows, and low-paneled paper sliding doors. It is bare, other than a small chest of drawers used by Benten. Just outside the sliding doors is a narrow platform that circumscribes the tea room; during flight, one may sit here to enjoy the nighttime view, dangling one's feet in the air. There is also a mean little wooden door, but not being tengu, we are not at liberty to use it. There is no platform outside this door, and were one to step foot through it during flight, one would quickly find oneself freefalling towards the buildings below.

In the middle of the tatami is a fireplace, and set atop this fireplace is a *chagama*³ engine shaped like a *kagami* mochi. The *chagama* is quite a marvelous thing, for not only does it power the parlor through the air, but one can also boil water in it as well.

Benten rummaged noisily through the drawers in the corner, carelessly pushing aside expensive handbags and gemstones, and finally produced a bottle of Akadama port wine. "Pay attention. This is how you operate the parlor," she said, and poured wine into the *chagama* on the fireplace. With a rattle, the parlor lifted itself into the air.

For a while, we simply enjoyed our cruise through the sky above the twinkling city lights. At last, Benten handed over control of the parlor to us, with one final admonition.

"I trust that you won't break it," she said, before pushing open the wooden door and floating off into the stars, towards what I'm sure was a night of extravagant delights.



Giddy with elation, Yashirō and I piloted the parlor across the sky.

Upon our triumphant return to the Tadasu Forest, Yaichirō sulked, "You expect us to take this unseemly thing out to the Okuribi? Ludicrous!" He was rather unhappy at not being in charge.

But Mother commented, "I think it's very nice!" and she started to roll around comfortably on the tatami with Yashirō.

We spent the few days left before the Gozan no Okuribi toiling away, remodeling Benten's parlor into the Manpuku Maru Mk. 2: dusting every nook and cranny; arranging paper lanterns along the outer platforms; tying on lamé streamers; and stockpiling food and drink for the feast, as well as offerings for our ancestors. Once, in the midst of all this drudgery, Yashirō and I playfully fed some Akadama port wine to the *chagama*, sending the parlor floating off to nowhere in particular. Afterwards, we got an earful from Yaichirō, who had fallen off the side.

"Will the Ebisugawas be coming out in another grand ship this year?" Mother wondered, placing lanterns on the verandas.

"I expect so," replied Yaichirō with a steely expression. "I won't let those fools Kinkaku and Ginkaku get away with setting another fire again. I'll bet it's their father who puts them up to it."

"I do hope we can avoid any trouble," said Mother with a sigh.

The evening prior to the Gozan no Okuribi, I went to call on Master Akadama to invite him to ride on our pleasure barge as Konkobu had asked me to do.

"You mean to ask me to ride on a boat owned by furballs to watch the Okuribi?" The corners of the Master's mouth turned down. "What insolence!"

"Mother will be making *chirashizushi*..."

"Tanuki-made sushi? I'd choke on the fur."

"Anyhow, if you feel so inclined, please come to the Tadasu Forest at seven tomorrow night."

³ A cast iron pot used to heat water for tea ceremonies.

"If I remember, I may come. Then again, I may not. Wait, by all means, but do not presume anything of me."

I informed Mother that Master Akadama would probably be coming.



The long summer day finally drew to a close, and darkness crept over Higashiyama. The clamor of the multitudes jostling along the Kamo River for a good view of Daimonji reached all the way to the Tadasu Forest. The preparations for the festivities on the parlor had been completed, the lanterns on the outer veranda were burning, and all that remained was to pour wine into the *chagama* and ascend into the night sky. The only thing missing was Master Akadama.

We sat in the parlor waiting in vain, not touching the food before us. Yaichirō had transformed into Hotei, the potbellied Buddha, his round belly wobbling like a bowl of jelly.

Before he died, Father had transformed into Hotei for each Gozan no Okuribi. I don't know why, but that was the tradition. Yaichirō took up the mantle from Father, urging the rest of us to transform into the other members of the Seven Gods of Fortune, but the more you insist that a tanuki do something the less likely they are to do it. I stuck with the form of the Unkempt Undergrad; Yashirō wasn't strong enough to transform into anything; and Mother insisted on transforming into her favorite form, the gallant Takarazuka-style young man. Nobody paid attention to Yaichirō, so alienated from the rest of us, he wobbled his belly and picked at the tatami mats.

I sat outside on the veranda and waited for the Master to arrive.

After some time, Master Akadama appeared through the trees, swinging his walking stick. Now and then he would stop and look up at the boughs of the trees, or tear at a blade of grass, whiling away the time. He should have noticed us by now at this distance, but he didn't want to look too eager to accept the invitation of a tanuki, hence his current charade of pretending to have stumbled upon us.

"Ah, Yasaburō. What brings you here?" said Master Akadama, pausing to hail me.

"My my, if it isn't Master Akadama. What a coincidence. Out for a stroll?"

"Indeed. It is a pleasant and cool evening."

"I'm glad to hear it. By the way, were you aware that tonight is the Gozan no Okuribi?"

"Now, is it really?"

"You've happened along at the perfect time. We were just about to go up in the parlor which we borrowed from you to see the Okuribi fires. If you're not in a hurry, would you consider honoring us with your presence? We have prepared some humble refreshments."

"Ah, yes, you did mention something about this."

Master Akadama knit his brows, pretending to think. At last he nodded, feigning reluctance. "I was just considering taking a rest. I will join you, if it doesn't take too long."

We brought our pantomime to a close, having been fully aware of each other's true intentions all along. Master Akadama crawled onto the veranda and settled down

cross-legged inside the parlor at the place of honor. Eyeing the Hotei, he asked, "Yaichirō, I take it?" in a tone of disdain. "Wherefore have you arranged yourself in this form?"

"Tonight is a night of revelry, Master Yakushibō. Even I let loose from time to time," said Yaichiro, looking disconcerted.

Yashirō trundled into the middle of the room carrying a bottle of Akadama port wine. Master Akadama prepared himself to receive the liquor, but his eyes opened wide at the sight of my brother emptying the contents of the bottle into the *chagama*.

"Such a waste, to give liquor to a *chagama*!" the Master moaned sadly, as the parlor rose into the air. Brushing aside leaves and snapping off branches, in a moment the parlor was swaying above the forest.

Throwing open the sliding doors, we could see Daimonji to the east.

"There is Nyoigatake, Master. Can you see Daimonji there?" I said.

The Master glanced over dismissively. "I see it. Yes, I can see it indeed."



The night was calm, with only a gentle easterly breeze.

We rode the wind ever higher, cruising up over Goryō Shrine. I surveyed the city from out on the veranda, enjoying the cool evening wind. With night deepening, uncountable lights flickered on. In the midst of that brilliant glow, I could see a silhouette rising up into the sky, then another one, and even from this distance I knew that they were pleasure barges coming up to view the Okuribi. I counted one near Kitayama, one above the imperial palace, and several between Mount Uryū and Tanukidani Fudō, each giving off a faint glow as they wobbled through the sky. Though we were far away, faint din of the festivities aboard the other ships was still audible.

We commenced our banquet before the fires of the Okuribi were lit, eating Mother's sushi and drinking alcohol. The *chirashizushi* was delicious. Even the Master had an appetite for once, but he would not stop muttering darkly about what a waste it was pouring wine into the *chagama*.

Yashirō was running up and down the veranda outside excitedly with a bottle of *ramune*.

"Don't run out there too much, you'll fall," called Mother.

Presently Yashirō exclaimed, "The Ebisugawas are here!" Yaichirō and I rushed outside.

A vessel was approaching from the south. With its large paddles it looked like an old-fashioned steamboat. The deck and masts were strung up with lights like a Christmas tree, blinking garishly. All the chairs and tables crowding the deck made it resemble a floating beer garden.

"Look, there's Sōun," said Yaichirō.

Ebisugawa Sōun, our detestable uncle, had also transformed into Hotei. He sat at the prow of the ship, legs folded beneath him, in all his arrogant corpulence. With the advantage of experience behind him, his mastery of transformation was clearly superior to that of Yaichirō's half-baked appearance.

In place of sails, a giant electronic display was mounted on the mast, reading "EBISUGAWA SŌUN" in massive vulgar pink lettering. Red lanterns printed with the name "Ebisugawa" tightly packed the border of the display.

Beside our uncle stood two identical incarnations of the god Ebisu, both grinning creepily. Safe to say, they were Kinkaku and Ginkaku. They stood there with their arms folded, staring at us insolently.

When they were about fifty meters away, the Ebisugawas pulled their ship alongside our own and brought it to a halt. As if to ridicule the meanness of our 4½ tatami room, they intentionally flashed their lights at us, shouting and carousing and making great displays of drunken tomfoolery. Bottle after bottle of Faux Denki Bran was carried onto the deck, which was already loaded stem to stern with monstrous spiny lobsters, towering wedding cake-esque confections, and steamed buns the size of seat cushions.

Since they didn't seem to be directly challenging us to a fight, we carried on with our own feasting.

Sensing someone alighting outside on the veranda, I looked over and saw Konkobu of Iwayasan riding in on the evening wind, carrying a bottle of sake. Seeing Master Akadama sitting in the room, he said, "Hallo, hallo!"

Master Akadama only looked sour and growled, "So, you have come as well."

"Thank you for having me," Konkobu greeted us, bowing his head, then sitting across from Master Akadama and beginning to drink.

After several rounds of drinks we were all rather enjoying ourselves, and went out to sit in a row on the veranda and look down at Daimonji. The fires in the shape of the "Dai" character had been lit, and we could hear cries of excitement from the people down below in the city.

Only Master Akadama stood behind us by the sliding door, refusing to join us. "What contemptible stuff. It's hardly worth all that fuss down there," he grumbled.

Konkobu looked around and asked, "Would you not entertain the thought of returning there?"

"It means nothing. That place would only bring more trouble now," said the Master with his hands in his pockets, staring down at Mount Daimonji, the place that had once been his domain.



Myōhō, Funagata, Hidari Daimonji, Torii—our viewing of each of the Okuribi bonfires ended without incident, and while we continued our banquet in the softly rocking parlor, our conversation turned to Shimogamo Sōichirō, our departed father.

For once, Master Akadama let the booze go to his head and rambled about his history with Father, which we all attended to closely with pricked ears. The two had once been very close. The time that Father had scared the daylights out of the Kurama tengu on behalf of Master Akadama was a proud moment not only for Father, but for us as well.

"Sōichirō showed much promise," the Master ruminated. "A pity that he was a tanuki."

The room was hushed as we all reminisced about Father, but beside us, the earsplitting din on the anchored Ebisugawa ship continued unabated. The lively performance of the brass band was all well and good, but the constant bang of fireworks going off touched a nerve.

I stepped out onto the veranda to survey the hullabaloo and saw a bunch of boisterous tanuki swinging around hand cannons alarmingly. In their midst stood Ebisugawa Sōichirō, facing a bewitchingly beautiful girl in a yukata. Seeing that she was chugging a giant bottle of Faux Denki Bran, there could be no mistaking her for anyone but Benten.

"Benten's on the other ship," I murmured, utterly stupefied like a sailor captivated by a siren. Hearing that, all thoughts of my father were banished from Master Akadama's head. He ground his teacup between his teeth in vexation that Benten, who was supposed to be sitting by his side, was instead sitting over there.

"Why? Why does she not come here?" We had no answer to give him.

The sound of firecrackers drew closer, and white smoke came borne on the wind. Sniffing the fumes, Mother made an annoyed choking sound. Each time a firework burst outside, the veranda was lit up as bright as midday. They seemed to be aiming for us, if only indirectly. Soon the parlor became so filled with smoke that we could hardly make out one another's faces. Yashirō couldn't stop coughing, while Master Akadama drank his liquor through pressed lips and Mother ground her teeth.

"This is too much. I shall lodge a protest with Uncle." Yaichirō stood up, but no sooner had he stepped out onto the veranda than there was a loud *bang*, followed by a shriek from Yaichirō, and a tongue of flame sprang up on the platform. Hotei leapt back inside with his cloth sack ablaze, throwing the room into confusion.

One of the rockets had struck a lantern, setting it alight, and the flame had spread to the sack that my panicked brother was carrying. Showing his tendency to panic when something went wrong, Yaichirō grabbed the fire extinguisher that we had set aside in the alcove just in case and let loose, but he was pointing it straight at the center of the room. He doused the flames, but he also deposited a layer of fine power over the entire room.

"Silence!" Master Akadama snapped, at no one in particular.

I went out onto the veranda to put out the blazing lantern. Loud hooting and jeering came from the occupants of the Ebisugawa ship, who were apparently finding this all great fun.

A figure was moving amidst all the white smoke. Mother was carrying an enormous firecracker as big as an oil drum, struggling to get it out onto the veranda, while Yaichirō held her back.

"This is a time for restraint, Mother!" he pleaded. "We absolutely must not retaliate. There is too much at stake—"

"Ngh! I'll teach them to make fools of us again!" Mother snarled, like a rabid hound. Glancing at the scorch marks on the veranda, I shoved Yaichirō back into the parlor and helped Mother lug the giant firework outside.

"Aim carefully! Try to hit them squarely amidships!" Mother directed.

As they imbibed their drinks leisurely, Ebisugawa Sōun and Benten caught on to our plan mid-sip. Benten floated nimbly up to the top of the mast, still clutching that giant bottle of Faux Denki Bran, while Sōun glared at us scornfully with his brooding eyes. Beside him, Kinkaku and Ginkaku got up and started shouting something.

"To err is tanuki, to forgive—" Yaichirō wailed, while Mother and I shouted, "Drop dead!"

Our cannon roared flame.



The shot from our oil drum cannon burst square in the middle of the Ebisugawas' festivities.

In the midst of that sudden bedlam, the panicked partygoers shot off their own fireworks in every direction, throwing everything into even greater confusion. Bottles of Faux Denki Bran were shattered, and mounds of delicacies were kicked and scattered across the deck. Spiny lobsters and giant meat buns rained down from the sparkling ship over the city streets.

At the top of the mast, Benten sat enjoying the spectacle of the fireworks shooting up from the deck below.

Kinkaku and Ginkaku ran hither and thither, shouting orders to their tanuki underlings. At length, their ship turned and approached us with dismaying speed, shooting off fireworks at us.

Finally grasping that the situation was beyond a peaceful solution, Yaichirō joined in as we returned fire with the fireworks that we had stocked up to celebrate the end of the festivities. Incoming rockets tore holes in the sliding doors, knocked down the lanterns, and ignited small fires here and there, keeping Yashirō busy with the fire extinguisher.

With the scurrying tanuki on the Ebisugawa ship closing within spitting distance, we ran out of rockets to fire. Mother gathered whatever was at hand—empty bottles, the Master's walking stick—and started chucking it at them.

"I think it's high time we get out of here," I started to tell Yaichirō, when a number of hooks attached to chains came whistling through the air and thudded fast into the veranda.

"That's dangerous! You could kill someone with those!" Mother yelled, but Sōun and Kinkaku and Ginkaku merely snickered.

The chains began to retract, reeling in our ship.

"There're just a few of them! Pull 'em in and blow 'em to smithereens!" Kinkaku yelled, leaning over the rail.

On their deck, someone had produced a giant rake and was reaching up to draw us in. The chains creaked as they continued to wind us in.

I stood in the doorway by the smoldering sliding door, showing no fear, when Benten caught my eye, from all the way atop the mast. She casually tossed aside her drained bottle of Faux Denki Bran and smiled at me. Winking, she pointed towards the interior of the parlor and mimicked opening a drawer.

What was she on about?

I turned to look into the parlor. Mother was rummaging about, looking for more fireworks to shoot at Ebisugawa Sōun's face. As a last resort she had thrown open Benten's chest of drawers in the corner and was fishing around, squeaking as she tossed out the contents, "Nothing, nothing, nothing!"

In the pile of things she had thrown aside was a familiar looking fan.

Without picking it up, I already knew that it was the Fūjin Raijin fan.



The lights of the Ebisugawa ship shimmered beyond the scorched ruins of the sliding door.

As the chains stopped, the entire parlor tilted to the side, sending bottles, plates, lacquered boxes of food, and Master Akadama tumbling over the tatami. A loud splintering came from the walls and pillars of the parlor. Outside, the dazzlingly bedecked paddle steamer was stopped alongside the veranda. Amongst all the lights, flutes twittered and *taiko* drums pounded and a brass band blared, creating a jumbled cacophony of incomprehensible music mingled with cheers.

"Bring out Yaichirō!" commanded Ebisugawa Sōun, reclining on the deck.

I checked Yaichirō before he could step out onto the veranda, and went out myself instead. The tanuki lining the deck burst into howls of derision upon my appearance. Some of them were holding pink cannons, training them directly at me. Flanked by Kinkaku and Ginkaku, Ebisugawa Sōun's potbellied Buddha smirked down at me.

"Instead of the firstborn we get the third," he drawled. "Where is Yaichirō? No doubt cowering in the corner of your parlor?"

Ignoring Sōun, I looked up to the top of the mast.

Benten was standing there idly on one leg. Without a word, I raised my right hand and showed her the Fūjin Raijin fan. When she saw it, she cackled, her face splitting wide into a smile like a *kuchisake-onna*⁴. With a little toss of her short black hair, she departed in the direction of Mount Hiei, understanding full well that the jeers below her were about to transform into a hellish symphony of screams.

"Well, have you nothing to say?" called Sōun, leaning forward.

Ignoring him, I called out in a loud voice, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear! He who has eyes to see, let him see! For I am none other than Yasaburō, third son of Shimogamo Sōichirō!"

"Yes, we know that," interjected Sōun.

Beside him, Kinkaku opened his mouth to cut in. "What we mean is, hurry up and bring out that big brother of yours! We have a score to settle with him biting our butts the other day!"

"He almost split my butt in half again," added Ginkaku, very conscientiously.

"You know, Yasaburō, I'm quite frankly amazed that you insist on calling that thing a pleasure barge," Kinkaku continued mockingly. "That's not a ship, that's a tea room!"

⁴ An urban legend of a woman with her mouth slit wide open, like a Glasgow smile.

As popular as it is for tanuki to mimic humans with their holidays and wild escapades, moderation is paramount. I am not fond of conflict, but in order to follow Father's teachings and preserve harmony and tranquility in this world, it was only my natural duty to straighten out those unruly tanuki who would ruin the atmosphere of this celebration.

I bowed my head and silently apologized to the spirit of my father for being about to blow away my dear uncle and cousins. In my mind, Father burst out laughing heartily. "Fine, fine," he declared bountifully. "Let 'em have it!"

I opened the fan and raised it above my head.

Sōun's face froze like a candy sculpture.

"Well, Uncle, I bid you good evening." And like I was putting out the dying embers on Daimonji, I waved the fan.

A great tempest rocked the Ebisugawas' ship. Sōun, Kinkaku, and Ginkaku were all facing the squall directly, and their faces flattened out like spongy mochi, making their expressions very strange indeed.

The ship rolled heavily in the howling wind, like a gigantic ornate folding screen beginning to collapse. The tanuki on the deck seemed to be screaming in terror, but not a sound reached me, for their cries were all carried by the wind. The remaining refreshments all tumbled away into the sky, plates and all. A single rocket managed to shoot off towards us, but it too was blown away by the wind and vanished in a twinkle. The mast swayed to and fro, and buckling under the strain the wooden boards of the deck splintered and burst open. A great crack split the electronic display on the mast.

With the Ebisugawa ship being borne off into the distance, the chains pulled taut, and a great cracking sound came from the hooks embedded in the veranda. Before anyone could react the veranda split apart. I was standing outside taking in the scene, and I would have been thrown off into the inky darkness, if not for Mother who grabbed hold of the nape of my neck. She would have fallen off with me, but Yashirō grabbed her and Yaichirō grabbed Yashirō, and with Konkobu lending a hand we managed to stay in one piece.

Dangling from the broken floorboards of the veranda, I saw off the foundering Ebisugawa ship.

Farewell, Ebisugawas; happy is he who lets the wind take him where it will, and fall where he may!

Clinging to the lurching ship, Sōun and Kinkaku and Ginkaku glared furiously up at us, their delicious expressions lit by the colorful illumination of the ship. I stuck out my tongue at them.

The Christmas tree lighting stayed on as they plummeted towards the city, but suddenly they all went out at once, and finally there was a loud thump in the distance.

As I clambered back on board, Master Akadama was standing there casting a gimlet eye down upon me.

"Tanuki truly are incorrigible fools," he declared, taking a sip of Akadama port wine.



We shouted with elation after taking down the Ebisugawas. Konkobu of Iwayasan took out an old-fashioned camera, saying he wanted to take a picture to commemorate the event. We lined up along the ruined veranda, grinning at his camera. "There's a fine family. Your father would be proud," said Konkobu, clicking the shutter.

To our great mortification, however, we soon found ourselves following after the Ebisugawas.

The inner parlor was puffing along on its last legs when we realized that we had run out of port wine. We searched all over the room, but there was not a drop of Akadama port wine to be found. In our panic, we tried pouring *shōchū* in, but the *chagama* spewed boiling *shōchū* all over the place and leapt out of the fireplace, completely unmanageable.

Having run out of options, we sat in a circle and ascertained the truth of what had happened.

Looking down at the fires burning on Mount Daimonji, his old domain, Master Akadama had been outwardly unmoved, but inwardly he had wept, his heart overcome with melancholy. Yet the drunken Konkobu had boasted about the warm reception he had received from his successor on Iwayasan, only fueling the Master's feelings of envy. His beloved Benten was on the Ebisugawas' ship, and hadn't even bothered to come and offer her greetings here. The foolish tanuki were so engrossed in their silly battle, they took no notice of Master Akadama, who should have been the guest of honor.

If no one is going to pay me any attention, what reason have I to idly watch bottle after bottle of my favorite Akadama port wine being wasted on this chagama? Master Akadama asked himself. He was Yakushibō of Nyoigatake, and tonight *he* was the guest of honor. He was greater than these tanuki. He was greater than that *chagama*. Was it not the birthright of a tengu to drink what he pleased, and take flights of fancy through the wild skies of his imagination?

Thus, while we were valiantly fighting off the Ebisugawas, Master Akadama took bottle in hand, and drank the parlor dry.



We came down in the vicinity of Goryō Shrine. The silver lining was that none of us were hurt. The not-so-silver lining was that the Ebisugawas also managed to escape without injury. They had crashed on the bank of the Kamo River, north of the Izumoji Bridge.

So the Gozan no Okuribi came to a close.

Things ended in a draw, on account of both parties withdrawing due to injury, but by far the biggest loser of the night was myself.

This most unprofitable night had left Benten's inner parlor in ruins. That in itself was enough to make me tremble in fear, but in addition to that I realized that I had also dropped the Fūjin Raijin fan when I had almost fallen off the broken veranda.

In the space of just one night, I had lost both of the things that Benten had entrusted me with—how on earth was I ever going to explain this away? I stood facing the

remains of the inner parlor, completely paralyzed, feeling the hair on my back tingling on end.

In that moment, I could practically see Benten's year-end party before me. In the center of the toasty room a pot was simmering gently, and in that pot, floating amongst the tofu and scallions, was none other myself, Shimogamo Yasaburō. Under the bright lights, Benten dipped her chopsticks into the Yasaburō stew. Her eyes sparkled—my first love, this half-tengu—and a slight flush came into her cheeks.

"I like you so much I could just eat you up."

If she really had meant that, then this was what I had always longed for. But at the same time, I didn't much fancy being eaten.

Of the Thirty-Six Stratagems, fleeing is best—in other words, discretion is the better part of valor.

I decided to abscond into the shadows.

Using all the wits at my disposal I was able to lay low for quite some time, and from late summer all the way into autumn, I was known far and wide as Yasaburō, the Fleet.

Chapter 4 — The Friday Fellows

In Kyoto, there is a secret society which has existed since the Taishō period.

The purpose for which this society was founded is shrouded in mystery, though some say it is merely a gathering of like-minded persons. The membership is fixed at seven, and each of the members is called by the name of one of the Seven Gods of Fortune. These seven discommodious individuals gather once a month to hold a banquet in Gion or Pontocho, eating and drinking and making merry to their hearts' content over the course of the night. Natural enemies of the tanuki, their name alone is enough to hush crying pups. They are the Friday Fellows.

Why are they our natural enemies? Why, because they eat tanuki stew at their year-end parties.

Tanuki society in Kyoto has long since moved past the merciless struggle for existence of the natural world. Those organisms audacious enough to take us as prey have long since vanished from the face of the earth. Furthermore, as tanuki are omnivorous and perfectly willing to guzzle down all manner of things without complaint, the hills and the fields and the streets are teeming with delicious things to eat. Countryside or city, each region has its own unique delicacies. We live comfortably without fear of being devoured by any natural enemies, eating at our leisure from the fruits that grow on the trees of paradise. Bloody struggles over food are but a distant memory for our species, and the term "struggle for existence" no longer appears in our lexicon.

Once each year, this idyllic existence is shattered by a nightmare.

Even my great father, Shimogamo Sōichirō, met an abrupt end in the pot of the Friday Fellows.

The horrid culinary custom in which the Friday Fellows take such pride is a reminder to all tanuki of the everyday terrors that their ancestors once faced as they roamed over hill and dale; it is a reminder of the law of survival of the fittest, eat-or-be-eaten, the circle of life.

And thus we all remember—it is humans who stand at the top of the food chain.



For two months from late summer going into autumn, I led a double life between Nipponbashi in Osaka, and Kyoto.

Konkobu's secondhand camera store is located in Nipponbashi, and while living there I also helped run the shop. Occasionally I would return to Kyoto to sniff out which way the winds of the tanuki world were blowing, but owing to the presence of a certain half-tengu named Benten, who patrolled the skies like an ominous bird of prey looking to swoop down and gobble me up, I was unable to show my face openly even on my own turf.

Even were I to radically transform myself beyond the pale of normal tanuki etiquette, with Benten at the apex of her tengu skills (not to mention her woman's intuition), there was no telling when I would be found out.

Whenever I sojourned to Kyoto, I had no choice but to hole up on the second floor of antique shops or underground passageways, relying on hearsay to keep up with current events in the capital.

In mid-October, I escaped disaster only by a hair's breadth.

Having just arrived in Kyoto on the Hankyū line, I was walking among the crowds in the tunnel beneath Shijō Avenue. The displays in the windows of the Daimaru department store were so dazzling that I couldn't help but stop and stare, when who should descend majestically down the stairs but Benten, baring her ivory shoulders in a black dress like a star of the silver screen. Surrounding her were four men stuffed into black suits, throwing their weight around needlessly at random passersby. These were Kurama tengu, underlings of Sōjōbō of Kuramayama, and they were known as Benten's Honor Guard.

Being preoccupied with the luxury trappings she had just bought at Daimaru, Benten failed to notice me standing petrified in front of the store windows. As soon as she had swept by me with the Kurama tengu trailing in her wake, I got right back on a Hankyū train and returned posthaste to Osaka.



My first time living in Osaka was exceptionally interesting.

Konkobu, the proprietor of the secondhand camera store, had handed off leadership of the Iwayasan tengu to his successor, but with his laidback nature he had no head for business whatsoever; on windy days he would come in late, and on rainy days he wouldn't come in at all. I was happy to follow the lead of such a cultivated boss, and stifling all thoughts of industry and commerce, I munched on *takoyaki* as I strolled through Den-Den Town, did some people-watching on Ebisu Bridge, and bought mysterious signs in curio shops. Konkobu was a fan of the Yoshimoto Shinkigeki comedy troupe, so sometimes he brought me along to visit the Namba Grand Kagetsu theater.

Mother came to Osaka to visit me once.

Being afflicted with a serious case of Takarazuka syndrome, she often rode the swaying train over to Takarazuka city. She had informed me that she was stopping by Umeda on her way back, so I made my way over from Nipponbashi and accompanied her into a café. She was transformed into a pale youth, her favorite form, while I transformed into an old man wearing a bolo tie, patterning myself after Konkobu.

"It'll all blow over soon," Mother said confidently, with her usual self-assurance. "Benten is frightening, sure, but she'll get tired of it soon, that fickle woman."

"I hope so, for my own sake."

"Yaichirō went to ask Master Akadama to smooth things over, but he came back huffing and puffing, 'I'll never bow my head to the Master again!' And his hair was all standing on end! Goodness, that boy needs to learn to keep things from getting through his fur, doesn't he?"

I had no idea how angry Benten really was, and sometimes I thought optimistically to myself that if I worked up the courage to seek her out, I would find that it was all water under the bridge. On the other hand, it would be no laughing matter to go meet her only to find that all was in fact *not* forgiven.

"Humans really are much nastier than tengu," I blew out a sigh.

Mother nodded. "But on the whole, I think humans are quite nice."

"That's because one of them saved you."

"You never would have come into this world, if not for Mr. Yodogawa," said Mother, staring out the window. "Of course I'm thankful."

Mother's savior was named Yodogawa Chōtarō. Apparently he had fed her a rice ball when he had saved her life, and she still held the memory of that taste dear to her heart.



All tanuki have one or two weaknesses which, when triggered, will force them to reveal their true furball identities, no matter how skilled at transformation they are. This weakness is a tremendous nuisance, because it means that tanuki must always wear their transformations with the greatest of care when living alongside humans.

My mother is terribly frightened of thunder. Whenever Lord Raijin lumbers through the sky, Mother's disguise slides right off. She has been emboldened by the many times she has walked the razor's edge, but just once, her life truly fell into peril. It happened before I was born, back when Yaichirō and Yajirō were still so small that they were nigh indistinguishable from a dust bunny.

One day, Mother went to see our grandmother, who lived in Tanukidani Fudō in Sakyō Ward. Father stayed behind in the forest of Shimogamo Shrine to watch over Yaichirō and Yajirō. It had been a long time since Mother had ventured out by herself, and being a tanuki, her fool's blood throbbed hot in her veins. An impulsive giddiness came over her, and she ran about here and there to have some fun. Suddenly the sky clouded over, and the rain came pouring down. As she ran along shrieking, there came a flash through the purple sky, accompanied by a bowel-shaking crash of thunder. In an instant, a bedraggled tanuki was standing where a human had been running along just moments earlier, dazed and gaping at the low clouds hanging overhead.

While she sat there whimpering forlornly, a car came speeding along.

I mentioned previously that we tanuki have no natural predators in Kyoto. But though the savage creatures that once roamed the land have long since disappeared, these metal beasts now attack us in their stead. Caught in their dazzling headlights, a tanuki stripped of her transformation has virtually no chance of survival.

"I thought for sure that I was done for!" Mother explained.

At the time she was fairly young and managed to dodge just in time, but the bumper still grazed her, breaking her front leg. Overwhelmed by the searing pain, she was unable to walk. If she had continued to lie there on the pavement, her fate would only have been to be snatched up by some municipal employee or impoverished college student and made into stew. With immense pains she pulled herself to the drain by the side of the road and

crawled in. The throbbing pain throbbing in her leg was overwhelming, and freezing water cascaded through the drain. The torrential rain made a pale mist as it hit the asphalt, and purple streaks of thunder raced through the cloud valleys above. Mother curled into a tiny dripping ball, not quite sure if she was still alive. Her thoughts turned to the husband and pups she had left behind in the forest.

When she came to, the large figure of a human was peering at her. She started, but had no energy left to flee. The deluge pounding on her head suddenly ceased, and she heard the sound of raindrops hitting an umbrella. The person, a man with a Hotei-like face, looked anxiously at her.

"You poor thing!"

Mother shut her eyes tightly in resignation. She was terrified, yet at the same time utterly detached, and she felt as if her consciousness would flicker out any moment now.

"You're hurt, are you? There, there." The man reached out his huge, hairy hands, and scooped up my drenched mother into his arms.



The days in Osaka flowed into weeks and then months like the waters of the Kamo River, and soon enough it was entering November.

I arrived in Kyoto and went up to the second floor of the antique shop on Teramachi Street to have lunch.

The storeroom I was borrowing overflowed with musty old furniture, and hardly any light managed to seep inside. The shopkeeper was an acquaintance whom I trusted, and there was a fire escape in the back for emergencies, which made it the perfect hideout. In Kyoto I took on the form of a white-haired antiques collector and holed up to nibble my food in the darkness of the storeroom.

I sprinkled some dried whitebait I had bought at Nishiki Market on top of a bowl of freshly cooked rice. On the table in front of me, a brimming cup of roasted green tea rested next to a dust-covered *daruma*. I glared back at the *daruma* as I blew on the piping hot rice to cool it down before stuffing my face. With the cheerless existence of a fugitive weighing heavily on me, the rice tasted much better than it normally would have.

As I patted my full belly, a muffled voice emanated from a bureau in the corner of the room. "You eat like a fatty!"

"Kaisei?" I said, looking at the bureau. "What are you doing in there?"

"Shut up! That's none of your business!" The bureau rattled and shook.

Kaisei was my cousin, and ex-betrothed. Her brothers were the infamous idiot twins Kinkaku and Ginkaku, with whom I (being the learned, noble tanuki that I am) naturally clashed. Kaisei's personality had been warped by the influence of her stupid brothers. She had been renowned for her foul mouth since she was young, and for some reason she refused to show herself to me, though I had no idea what there was for her to be bashful about. My former fiancée only ever expressed herself in the form of abuse hurled from the shadows, and I could hardly describe any part of her as charming.

Every time I came to Kyoto, Kaisei would brief me on the state of the tanuki world. Though her words were ill-bred, it was a relief knowing that she would never give me up to Benten. Kaisei despised Benten, and once claimed, "I'd rather die than listen to that half-baked tengu!"

According to her report, things were starting to come to a head in the tanuki world going into December, for the election of the next Trick Magister was soon approaching. The recognized frontrunner was Ebisugawa Sōun, the younger brother of my father, and the father of Kaisei. The old furball controlled the distillery that produced Faux Denki Bran, that favorite drink of tanuki. His name held a lot of clout in the tanuki world. Yet for all that, he was a shifty character, and the Ebisugawa Guard Corps that his sons Kinkaku and Ginkaku led was well known for its checkered history, so there were many that bore no love towards him. Seeing his opportunity to take advantage of those weaknesses, my brother Yaichirō entered the political arena, aiming to become the next Trick Magister himself. There was nothing Yaichirō liked quite so much as political maneuvering.

"My stupid dad and my stupid brothers are always running all over the place for their stupid campaign. It's such a pain in the butt!"

"Isn't my brother pretty busy there himself?"

"Yeah, but Yaichirō just doesn't have what it takes. He thinks that's all it'll take to knock down my stupid dad and become Trick Magister, but I'd say he's neck-and-neck with my stupid brothers, ability-wise."

"Useless or not, he's still my brother," I said hotly, rapping the table. "Don't compare him with your stupid brothers!"

"You dummy, don't call my brothers stupid!"

"You called them stupid yourself!"

"No one said you could call them stupid too! Don't get all snippy with me, you half-witted palooka!"

Kaisei kept up the barrage for a while, so I just pretended not to hear her. After the stream of insults petered out, I asked, "Yajirō still doing well?"

"Mhm. He's just dandy down there in his well, still doing his advice sessions. I like Yajirō a lot. Sometimes I go visit him. But I hear that Benten goes to see him, too..."

I spit out my tea in disbelief. "What could Benten, the Peerless and Unrivalled, possibly have to worry about?"

"How should I know? I bet she's wondering which tanuki to put into the stew for the next year-end party." She lowered her voice. "I hear that you're going into the pot this year. Is it true?"

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

"She's been going around asking about you. Things look pretty dicey. This is what happens when tanuki get involved with a half-baked tengu like that."

A tingle went through the fur on my bottom, and I suddenly found it hard to sit still.

"You'd better get back to Osaka. Stay around here too long, you're really going to get eaten!"

"As long as there are tanuki, there will be tanuki stew. I am more than prepared to go into the pot laughing, if it should come to that."

"Stop trying to sound brave, you ball-less wonder."

"Take this, just in case worst comes to worst and I get caught."

"What's this, something to remember you by?"

"It's a tengu cigar. Give it to Master Akadama for me."

In the absence of someone to attend to his needs, Master Akadama would revert to ridiculing everything around him and forget even about simple affairs such as eating. Being absent from Kyoto, I had tasked my little brother to care for him, but Yashirō had his hands full keeping up with all of the Master's unreasonable demands and complaints. The best way to shut the Master up was to stuff a tengu cigar into his mouth. Packed with the finest tobacco available, a single tengu cigar took at least two weeks to smoke. I had gone to Tenmabashi to get my hands on it so that I could shut up the Master and earn Yashirō a few weeks of respite.

"Not happening. I can't even see it."

"That's because you're inside the bureau. Just come out of there already!"

"Uh-uh, no way!"

"Oh, come on! What do you expect me to do then?"

As we argued back and forth, the shopkeeper shouted urgently from the bottom of the stairs.

"You must flee, sir, at once! Benten is coming into the shop!"



I ran to the fire escape in the back, only for an ill-omened shadow to fall over me. I looked up to see the Kurama tengu swooping over the streets between the buildings, silhouetted against the clear autumn sky. Inside the shop, Benten was beginning to ascend the stairs. Caught between a rock and a hard place, there was no way for a poor little tanuki to make his escape.

I rushed back into the storeroom and transformed into the first thing that caught my eye, the *daruma*, before rolling onto the floor.

Benten entered the room. Eyeing me, she picked me up and turned me over in her hands before placing me next to the *daruma* on the table. A Kurama tengu came in and pulled out a chair with armrests, delicately wiping the dust off with a handkerchief. Benten sat down in the chair without a second thought. Her strapless dress was skimpy for a chilly autumn day like today, and a single glimpse was enough to make any man think he had died and gone to heaven.

"Is that Yasaburō fellow here?" asked the Kurama tengu.

"They don't call him 'Yasaburō the Fleet' for nothing. Perhaps he's already escaped, Teikinbō."

"What will you do? Shall I escort you to the Friday Fellows?"

"I'm a bit tired. I think I'll rest here for a moment."

Benten's gaze flicked back and forth between the two *daruma* on the table.

Each time I thought she had caught on to me with that smile of hers, her eyes would shift towards the other *daruma*. Her black hair was piled up in a bun, and the frozen strands sticking up towards the sky made her already icy smile even more chilling.

"Tell me something, Teikinbō. Don't you think there's something funny about these two *daruma* here? They both have a scorch mark in the same place, and they're worn in the exact same way."

"I see what you mean. That certainly is mysterious."

"Yasaburō always was so good at transforming."

It dawned on me that I had been too clever for myself by half.

Benten took the tengu cigar that lay on the table and put it between her lips.

Teikinbō bent down and lit it for her. The cigar flared up, and Benten started puffing like a steam locomotive. Immediately the room was filled with thick smoke, so much that it almost seemed like the room was on fire. *This must have been what was like for our ancestors to be smoked out of their cozy burrows*, I thought, sympathizing with the pain they must have felt. I attempted to hold my breath, but before long a cough managed to escape me.

Benten's eyes immediately snapped onto me, and her lips formed into a honeyed smile.

"It's good to see you again, Yasaburō."

"How did you know I was here?"

"Kinkaku and Ginkaku paid me a visit. They told me that their younger sister had been going out by herself lately, and that they suspected that she was being led astray by some wicked boy."

"Those two just don't know when to leave well enough alone."

"They're such thoughtful big brothers, don't you think?"

Benten tossed the tengu cigar into her glossy black handbag, still burning. Picking me up, she walked out of the room, her footsteps clacking loudly. "Let's go, Teikinbō. Call over Ryōsenbō and the rest."

The frown didn't leave my face as Benten pressed me into her bosom and carried me along. She went down the stairs and nodded ever so slightly to the shopkeeper, who was prostrate on his face, before slipping out onto Teramachi Street. Dragging along the black-suited Kurama tengu behind her, she walked north along the bustling shopping arcade, grinning wide like a cat as she looked down at me. "You're so cute when you're round. Just stay a *daruma* for a little longer."

"Where are we going?"

"You smashed my inner parlor to pieces, and you lost my precious fan—didn't you promise to perform for the Friday Fellows? Don't tell me you forgot."

"I have no words to express my sincere regret for what happened at Daimonji. However—"

"I don't need your apologies," Benten said pleasantly, looking up. "If we don't like your performance, we'll just throw you into our stew."



There is a certain sukiyaki restaurant on Teramachi Street.

It is an old establishment that dates back to the Meiji period, housed in a building of wood and concrete that blends the architecture of Japan and the West. People say that merely looking at the ostentatious lanterns adorning the building is enough to make one's mouth water. It is dark past the entrance curtain. The dim golden light of lanterns spills over the wooden planks of the hallway, but beyond the reach of that light all is darkness. The sight of that border between light and dark holds the ineffable promise of something exquisitely delectable. Guests are shown to the upper floor. The stairway is narrow, like a hidden passage, and so steep that even a cat would be hard pressed to keep its balance. The darkness presses in ever closer as the stairs go higher and higher, while that indistinct expectancy of deliciousness only grows stronger. Soon it is impossible to tell whether the tantalizing aroma of the beef that awaits you ahead is real, or just fantasy—and once you have reached that point, even the gleaming black stairs have begun to look scrumptious.

I sat with Benten in the tatami room on the top floor of the restaurant, awaiting the arrival of the members of the Friday Fellows. Two round tables were placed in the middle of the 10-tatami space, and floor cushions were stacked in the corners of the room.

I sat stiffly on my heels in the corner, taking on the safe, tried-and-true form of the college student. Benten was lounging by the window with her arm draped over the sill, staring out at the view of the clustered buildings outside. Directly below the window was the roof of the Teramachi Street arcade, stretching out north and south. Benten, who was used to soaring the skies as she pleased, must have thought it quite dull, but for a tanuki who crawled the earth it was quite a novel sight.

The cirrocumulus clouds floating lazily over the sky were tinged with pink, while the autumn wind brought with it a deep feeling of melancholy.

"Do you like sukiyaki?" asked Benten.

"There's nothing in the world that I don't like to eat, aside from tanuki stew."

"I'm rather more fond of tanuki stew than I am of sukiyaki."

"What strange tastes you have. I couldn't begin to describe how much more delicious beef is."

Benten cast her gaze far off into the distance. "Your father turned into a stew. That was years ago now, wasn't it?"

"Don't talk like you weren't there sitting around the pot."

"I'd only just been inducted into the Friday Fellows. That was my first time eating tanuki." Benten's alabaster cheeks were rosy in the light of the setting sun. "And what a delicious stew it was."



The Friday Fellows made their appearance as the pale lights of the Teramachi Street arcade flickered on under the deep indigo sky.

Each time one of them entered the room, Benten inclined her head and said, "Tonight's entertainment," by way of introducing me. I was thankful that she didn't introduce me as, "Tonight's main course."

The last member entered the room with a broad smile that stretched over his entire face. "Good evening!" he greeted Benten.

"I'm glad you could make it, professor."

"Jurōjin and Fukurokuju won't be joining us tonight. I've already let the restaurant staff know."

With Five Lucky Gods and one tanuki in attendance, the banquet commenced.

Two cast iron pots were placed on the tables, and beer brought in bamboo bottle carriers. The room was filled with the fizz of beer being poured and the cracking of eggs. Waitresses coated the pots with oil, sprinkled glittering sugar crystals, and laid the beef in the pots, which sizzled merrily and wafted tantalizing aromas through the air. Next in was the soy sauce. At last the meat was simmered through. Everyone ate. More meat went in, and spring onions, and tofu. The Friday Fellows gorged on meat and guzzled down beer and unable to put such unutterable delight into words groaned with *oohs* and *aahs* of satisfaction.

Only during those moments when the party was busy downing their glasses did the room fall silent, and glass by glass the atmosphere became more animated.

"Sure, I could drink beer all night surrounded by these sounds and smells."

"You stick to beer then, Ebisu. I'll take your share of the pot!"

"Hands off, I say! The main course is what makes the accompaniment satisfy!"

"Meat so succulent must needs be poison to the body, no?"

"A learned man once said, cows eat straw, and so sukiyaki is really just simmered straw⁵. Surely straw contains no cholesterol. Isn't that so, professor?"

"Do cows eat straw these days, I wonder?"

"Modern cattle drink beer while listening to Mozart."

"Then would it be accurate to say that we are eating beer while drinking beer?"

"That would be like eating rice with a side of rice!"

I sat unwillingly next to Benten, eating meat while surrounded by my mortal foes. Thoughts of Father's tragic end, survival of the fittest, and the food chain swirled round my chest, but they all melted away and dissolved into the savory flavor of the meat dipped into raw egg. Impious. Ungracious. Delicious. The iron pot was bursting with culinary delight. As I sat there absentmindedly chewing, Benten whispered about each of the Friday Fellows into my ear.

The man pecking at the same pot as Benten and me was Hotei. He cleared out the contents of the pot with great voracity and tended his round stomach with care, the glutton; Benten had called him "professor" because he really was one. Three other men surrounded the pot next to us. The young man in traditional robes was Daikoku, the proprietor of a traditional *ryōtei* called Chitoseya. The muscular formidable-looking one was Bishamon, and he was the manager of the Gyōunkaku hotel in the Okazaki neighborhood. His flushed, ruddy face and belly-shaking laughter gave off the impression of a mighty nomadic horseman. Lastly there was Ebisu, a big shot at some bank in Osaka, whose drooping face and hooded eyelids made him resemble a wax figure melting in the heat.

⁵ A paraphrasing of a quote by novelist Uchida Hyakken (1889-1971).

"There are two more who aren't here today. I was so hoping to see Jurōjin."

"What's Jurōjin like?"

"He's a real predator."

"What kind of predator?"

"A shark," Benten grinned.

"You mean a card shark?"

"More like a loan shark."



These were the people who had eaten Father. I had determined not to fraternize with them, but the cold, bubbly golden beer and the mouthwatering meats soon overwhelmed that steely resolve. Unable to repress the urging of the fool's blood I had inherited from my ancestors, I found myself gradually starting to enjoy myself. It's a common tendency that tanuki just can't seem to avoid.

I waged a fierce struggle for control of the meat with the university professor sitting around my pot. We each sought to anticipate the other's movements, dueling with our chopsticks like a miniature fencing match. Belying his appearance, the professor's hirsute hand moved nimbly, manipulating his chopsticks to snatch up strips of meat one after another. His dexterity was truly something to behold. While Benten looked on, our naked gluttony clashed openly and our mutual passions burned unabashedly, like the meeting of two rival gang leaders on a dry riverbed.

"Lucky for us that Hotei isn't at our pot." "Leave a bit of meat for even a moment, cooked or no, and Hotei would gobble it right up!" "No question about that!" The three at the other pot murmured among one another with relief.

"Can you believe this? Look at those complacent sluggards over there, peaceably sharing their meat! They have no idea what victory tastes like!"

"That's exactly right. Hot pots are war!"

"This just won't do. What do you say we teach them the harsh truth of reality?"

Together the professor and I raided the neighboring pot, sharing the spoils amongst ourselves amid our burgeoning friendship.

With a bit of alcohol in me, I lost my sense of fear. I even felt like performing of my own accord. Rather than cower in fear, I would walk the cocksure, blue-blooded path of the tanuki. I removed one of the sliding screens and had Benten hold it. She slid it back and forth, alternately hiding and revealing me, and each time I reappeared I showed them another one of my transformations. Not one of the Friday Fellows suspected that there was actually a tanuki in their midst putting on this revolving masquerade. "A splendid magic trick!" they shouted in admiration. There was no shortage of transformations up my sleeve—a tiger, a lucky cat, a steam locomotive—and I was quite pleased with the burst of applause that met each one.

For my finale, I decided to do something I hadn't done in a while and take on the form of Benten.

Even a bunch of drunkards were apt to raise a fuss if they saw two Bentens with the same face, so I opted to give them only the enticement of my turned back. The professor's gaze burned hot on the nape of my false Benten's neck, and he let out a quavering whistle. Buoyed by my success, I started to pull down the shoulders of the dress to give them a view of my bare back, but behind the screen Benten looked at me venomously, hissing furiously, "Get carried away and you're soup!" I quickly tamped down my more adventurous drunken impulses.

Turning back into my original form, I took a bow, to one more burst of thunderous applause. "Incredible," breathed Bishamon, the hotelier, still looking amazed. "Nothing less than what I was expecting from a guest of Benten."

"I couldn't see the trick at all! You're not a tanuki, are you?" Ebisu said, unwittingly hitting the nail on the head.

"Haha...you are correct. I am a tanuki," I answered him directly.

"Indeed, this is one of my tanuki acquaintances," said Benten. "Doesn't he look scrumptious?"

"No, it would be a waste to devour such a talent. I could never!"

"I've taken a shine to ya! You're astounding! Simply fascinating!" the professor said with real feeling, grasping my hand. "Be sure to drop by next time!"



"Eat up, eat up!" Benten scraped up the remnants of the pot and deposited them on my plate. I couldn't tell if she was just being nice or forcing me to clean up. The professor looked at my plate jealously.

"I guess I'll let you off the hook tonight," said Benten.

"Does that mean you're not putting me in the stew?"

"Who knows what tomorrow will bring?"

The banquet had reached a lull in the proceedings. The ruddy-faced Friday Fellows sat on the tatami quietly sipping beer. Benten opened the window letting the cool evening breeze inside. She took out the tengu cigar and placed it between her lips, whereupon the professor knelt and gave her a light. Benten thanked him coolly, blowing the smoke out into the air over Teramachi Street.

"We'll be having a tanuki stew at the year-end party next month, aye?" asked Bishamon.

"And naturally we'll have it at Chitoseya, as is the custom?" said Ebisu.

"Of course, I would be quite happy to host. After all, I doubt any other *ryōtei* would prepare a tanuki stew."

Bishamon drained his beer in one great gulp and opened his eyes wide, like a fearsome *komainu* statue. "Why is it that we have tanuki stew every year, anyhow? I'd much rather have beef."

"That kind of talk will get you expelled," Ebisu cautioned him. "Rules are rules."

Daikoku folded his arms and mused, "Wasn't it Tanizaki Junichirō⁶ who decided on the stew?"

"You sure about that?" said Bishamon.

"I heard from Jurōjin that Tanizaki Junichirō used to be a member."

"A likely story!"

"Would Tanizaki have eaten tanuki? I feel he would have been a conger eel kind of guy."

"But eels are a summer food."

"It's Hotei's turn to bring the tanuki, isn't it?" said Bishamon, looking at the professor. But the professor paid him no attention because his gaze was fixed on Benten, who was smoking alone away from the group

Benten suddenly turned to face him from her perch on the windowsill and asked, "You like tanuki, don't you, Hotei?"

These words brought the professor back to reality, and his nostrils flared wide as he nodded fervently.

"Oh, sure. They're adorable little things, just adorable." A torrent of words began to pour forth from the professor concerning his love for tanuki, and from the smiles on the other members' faces as they listened, I knew that he had lectured them on this subject many times before.

"First off, just take their endearing podgy little bodies. Podgy—now there's a word I'm convinced was invented just for tanuki. The black markings around their eyes, and the way their paws get dark at the tip: absolutely adorable. And the blank look in their eyes when they stare at ya, and the way their tiny little butts wiggle as they scurry around...even their poop is small and round and cute. There's so much to love about them!"

The professor's eyes misted over, and his voice became even more impassioned.

"It was oh, several years ago now that I fell head over heels for tanuki. It was just so cute. I was walking along Kitashirakawa when I found it hurt in a gutter at the side of the road. Female, I think it was. It was awfully stormy that day, and the poor thing was drenched, and shook like a leaf every time the thunder boomed. Maybe it was because of how her leg was hurt, but she didn't make a fuss all the time I was carrying her back to my home. I treated the wound and gave her a rice ball. That tanuki would gobble up anything I gave her, the little glutton. Just like me. Even the way she hates thunder is like me. She'd get so scared every time she heard thunder, sniffing and running all over, poor thing. So on nights when it thundered I'd wrap her in a blanket and stay there with her the whole night. She healed up nicely, so I took her back to the mountains, but she kept looking at me when she left. She'd go a little ways and look back, go a little ways and look back, like that. Ah, you don't believe me, Bishamon. But you weren't there! You never saw how cute she was. She felt grateful for me saving her life, she was. They're clever, tanuki are. Her little butt wiggling as she trotted away, and glancing back at me with those precious eyes, I tell you. I kept urging her on, 'Get on now,' and that was what real anguish is, I think. It was so

⁶ One of the most famous modern Japanese novelists (1886-1965).

adorable, and yet my heart was so heavy, it moved me to tears. And that was it, I've been in love with tanuki ever since..."

Here Bishamon found an opening to interject. "That's what I find so bizarre. Everyone knows you're infatuated with tanuki, Hotei. And yet every year you eat tanuki stew with so much relish. Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"There's nothing contradictory whatsoever about loving tanuki and eating them. You always make faces as you choke it down, Bishamon, but I find eating tanuki stew such a joy. I'm very well-versed with making tanuki into stew. There's a secret technique to eliminate the gaminess from the meat. But they're absolutely delicious, tanuki. Eating with gusto and savoring the taste is simply good manners!"

"Well, sure, but you don't really need to eat tanuki, do you? There are plenty of other delicious things out there."

Inwardly, I agreed wholeheartedly with Bishamon's pointed rebuttal.

But the tipsy professor would not be dissuaded from fervently arguing his strange case. His was an argument that tanuki would find rather unsympathetic. Hearing "I love you!" as you are sliding down someone's gullet is not a very reassuring thing.

"I love them so much I just want to eat them up!"

"You and I have known each other for a long time, Hotei, but I say, you still baffle me," Bishamon chuckled ruefully, stroking his stiff moustache. "You're stranger than fiction, my friend."

The alcohol continued to flow and the professor's pronouncements became increasingly cryptic, until he finally said, "Tanuki are sweet, but I think there's someone among us who's equally as sweet," and approached Benten amorously.

"My dear, Hotei's gone and drunk himself silly again!"

"Poor chap. His feelings are quite understandable, but this simply will not do!"

Turning away as the other fellows shouted and held the professor down, Benten whispered in my ear, "You know, I've grown rather tired of this. Why don't we get some fresh air?"



The banquet dissolved into a slovenly mess around us like a sugar cube that had fallen into a schooner of beer, as Benten made her escape through the window.

Pulling me by the hand she waltzed out onto the elevated canopy over the arcade.

"Benten, come back!" implored the Friday Fellows back in the room, but paying them no heed Benten went forth, light as a feather, along the rooftop of Teramachi Street.

Our footsteps echoed softly as we trod over the narrow route of the arcade. Smoke wafted up from Benten's tengu cigar and dispersed in the wind among the canyon of buildings.

The arcade continued south along the ravine. The deck below us intercepted the lights of Teramachi Street below, letting off a pale glow in the darkness of the night. We were walking along a service route, normally off-limits, and the glowing path was deserted as far as the eye could see all the way down to Shijō Street. Above us twinkled the lights of

cafés and bars, the figures of people sitting at the tables enjoying their Friday night resembling mannequins. The hour was already late, and below our feet the clamor of Teramachi and Shinkyōgoku was dying down.

Before us in the night sky rose the great orb of the moon, so big it almost seemed an illusion. "Such an enormous moon tonight!" Benten murmured as if awe. "I do love things that are round."

"Is that so?"

"I want the moon!" Benten suddenly cried out, looking straight at it. "Go fetch it for me, Yasaburō!"

"Don't be absurd...that's beyond me, even if it's you doing the asking."

"Useless, totally incapable...what a sorry tanuki you are."

"If it pleases you to say so."

"Seeing the moon so beautiful makes my heart ache, just a little."

"You're drunk."

"I am *not*...it'd take more than that!"

Below us I could see Shinkyōgoku Rokkaku Park.

The arcade rooftop was a jumbled mess of electric cables. Benten leaned out over the side and gazed down at the park. On the other side was the Shinkyōgoku arcade. Pinched between the two streets, the park was nearly deserted, being late as it was, and the few lonely trees in the park were already bereft of leaves. The singing of a lone youth seated before the gates of Seiganji quavered in the air.

Farther on, we came to a dark building. A curt sign reading only "Café & Bar" faced the street, next to a small table and two round stools. Light seeped out from an open window on the fifth floor. A great golden gong-shaped bell hung from the window, and trailing from it was a long cord that reached all the way down to the table.

Benten sat on one of the stools and tugged the cord. The bell jangled, and a bald, mustachioed man poked his head out from the window. Benten held two fingers up, at which the man nodded and pulled his head back inside the window. After a moment, a tray was lowered down from the window on another string, carrying two glasses of Benten's favorite drink, akawari.

Seated at that hidden bar, we drank a toast to the moon. Between sips of her drink, Benten kept sighing, "How sad. How very sad." At last she stood up and, still holding the glass of rose-tinted akawari, began to skate over the roof of the arcade.

"What do you have to be so sad about?"

"I feel sorry for you because I'm going to eat you."

"Perhaps you could just not eat me?"

"No, I'm quite certain that one day I'm going to gobble you up."

"Do you mind not saying 'I'm going to gobble you up' so casually?" I said. "This is life and death for me here."

"I like you so much I could just eat you up," murmured Benten, returning to that favorite phrase. "But if I eat something that I like, that means it will disappear."

"Obviously! You can't have your tanuki and eat it, too!"

"Heeeey!" Just then a slow, stupid voice interrupted.

Tottering unsteadily across the narrow superstructure of the arcade came none other than the professor, fresh from browbeating the banquet with his overweening love of tanuki. He was drenched in sweat and gasping for breath as he labored to reach us, his hair disheveled and his belly wobbling, clutching his giant satchel to the breast of his smudged suit.

"Hello there, professor. So eager to join us again?" remarked Benten.

At last he caught up and added himself to our Friday Fellows' afterparty, up in this world of rooftops.



Facing the professor, Benten extended an invitation to view the autumn leaves.

Settling the bill for the akawari, she made her way over a little iron bridge that spanned the top of the arcade to a spiral staircase attached to the side of a building. Coming up to the roof of the building, she floated over to the top of the adjacent building, and in this way she skillfully traversed the whole row of buildings. Seeing the professor and I standing petrified at the sheer height, she returned and took our hands, guiding us across the roofscape under the light of the moon.

"Benten!" wheezed the professor. "You really...do...get around!"

"You're quite spry yourself, for your age."

"I travel to the jungles of the tropics from time to time, for my research. The conditioning of the old men there, that's something else!"

"Just hold tight for a little longer."

"Bless me, if I didn't know better I would have said you were a tengu!"

Tickled by the professor's ignorance, Benten cackled gaily under the full moon.

At last we arrived at the roof of a particular building. It was hushed, nestled in a little ways from the main thoroughfare. Next to a vending machine, which I suspected hardly anyone would go this far out of their way to visit, was a tree vested in the colors of autumn. Utterly spent, the professor and I crumpled onto a blue bench by the vending machine. Benten stood at the base of the tree puffing on her tengu cigar, looking up into the branches. The crimson leaves soaked in the glaring illumination of the vending machine, looking almost like translucent glass. The smoke from the tengu cigar coiled up through the air, drifting over the rooftop into the night.

I reminisced about the day that I had brought the bottle of Akadama port wine up to Master Akadama and Benten at their rooftop cherry blossom viewing, back when I was still young. That had been the day that Benten first took to the sky, when she had only just taken her first steps on the path of the tengu with those elegant legs of hers. Tonight, witnessing her in mastery of all her powers, I no longer saw any trace of the girl who had beamed so happily at her master simply because she was floating through the air.

The night passed slowly as we admired the leaves. I took out a camera to capture the scene.

In a while the professor said, "You know, I was just thinking of the day we first met."

"Please, you'd be better off forgetting that memory!"

"I would never. We were having our year-end party that day. I went to see the caged tanuki in the inner room. And when I did, I saw you, lying down sleeping peacefully beside the cage. You were curled up like a kid, using a pile of cushions for a pillow."

"Was I really?" Benten placed a hand on the trunk of the tree and walked a circle around it.

"I didn't know who you were, see, because I didn't know that it was a young woman that had just joined the Friday Fellows. I thought you were one of the waitresses at Chitoseya who'd fallen asleep guarding the tanuki. *Poor girl must be tired out*, I thought to myself. The tanuki inside the cage was a fine specimen, dignified even, not the slightest hint of fear on his face. And while we were having our staring contest, you woke up, came beside me, and started talking to the tanuki!"

"I don't remember at all, it was so long ago."

"You were having a whole conversation with it. 'I feel sorry for you because I'm going to eat you.' And then, 'But I'm still going to eat you.'" The professor was smiling, his eyes shut. "That was it. That was when I fell in love. *I know exactly how you feel*, I was thinking. *You're not alone.*"

"You're mistaken," Benten scowled up at the leaves. "I don't recall ever saying those words."

"If you're sure," said the professor with a big yawn. "But I remember." Still mumbling something under his breath, his head drooped and he dozed off to sleep.

Benten walked round and round the tree with a sorrowful look on her face.

"Benten?" I called, but she did not reply. Flame flickered up from the end of her tengu cigar, and smoke shrouded the boughs above her. Benten's slender form appeared and vanished within the smothering column, occasionally accompanied by a red glow of flame, like some fire-breathing beast.

I pushed through the swirling smoke and approached Benten. "What are you doing?" I asked. As I moved closer through the roiling fumes towards her bewitching silhouette, she nimbly skirted away even further into the depths of the smoke.

"No closer, please," she said from within the swirling depths. "If you do I'll eat you. I'm serious!"

I stopped in my tracks, choking on the smoke. "If I may be so bold as to ask, is something the matter?"

"The moon is just so lovely I can't help but be sad. A bath would be marvelous right around now. I'm leaving."

"You can't be serious! Surely you're not just going to leave us here on the roof?"

"Be sure to take the professor back with you, Yasaburō."

The smoke became suffocating, rising up into a swirling vortex with incredible speed and power—

And then it stopped. The smoke dispersed in the night wind, and when it had all finally cleared away, Benten was nowhere to be seen. The stub of the tengu cigar lay smoldering among the roots of the tree.



The chilly night air pierced me through as the autumn moon wended its way through the sky.

I witnessed many things as I leaned on the rusty handrail, looking across the city: a woman reclining on a deck chair on the veranda of an apartment building, gazing at the moon; a group of men in business attire paying a visit to a tiny lantern-lit shrine on the roof of a building; a *maiko* dancing with a person in an eggplant costume at a bar on the top floor of another building. Surely this was a taste of what it was like to be a tengu, as I presided over the queer pageant in this silent, rooftop world.

With a loud snort the professor opened his eyes. "Where's Benten?" he asked, shivering.

After a short time, he begged leave for his hunger and, opening his large, misshapen satchel, produced a great many rice balls wrapped in aluminum foil, lining them up between the two of us. At his urging I took a few of them. Some were filled with egg, others kombu. There was also a large bottle of sake in his satchel. In one of his large, hairy hands he held a rice ball, lapping up sake from the cup in the other.

"Not half bad, eh? I make 'em myself," chuckled the professor. "I'm rather fond of rice balls. They're delicious hot or cold, and you can eat 'em anywhere you please."

We munched on rice balls together, sharing the sake.

"Benten doesn't seem to be coming back."

"She's done a Benten on us. She's always disappearing in the middle of things without any notice."

"She really is difficult to figure out."

"You're a student, aren't you? How do you know Benten anyhow?"

I couldn't exactly say that I was a tanuki who happened to be old friends with a half-tengu, so I spun him a realistic tale about having made her acquaintance in town which even I half believed.

The professor hmm-hmmed as he listened, nodding his head. "At any rate, she's quite the eccentric beauty!" he burst out, unable to contain his emotions.

"You're a little eccentric yourself, professor."

"Me, eccentric?"

"It's not every day you come across an appetite like yours."

"It's true, I am a glutton," he admitted. "I've eaten all sorts of things over the years. But it was partly for research, too."

"But you eat tanuki, too—"

"And many other things, besides! I've been all over the world, and there's not a bug or a plant or an animal or a fish I wouldn't eat."

"And you enjoy it?"

"If I eat something, I'm going to enjoy it. That's the duty of the eater. But let me tell you something. Whenever you eat anything that was once living, it's delicious—that's how you've got to look at it. That's how I try to look at it, and that's why I eat all sorts of things. Well, I make an exception for poisonous things...I'd prefer not to die, doncha know. But I'm like a frog in a well. Just look around the world, people eat everything you can imagine. It's

shocking how gluttonous we are. I think that's just swell, whenever it comes to mind. To eat something is to love it. Humans eat all sorts of things, and that means humans love all sorts of things. Hooray for humans!"

"But think about it from the perspective of the eaten. They aren't saying 'hooray'."

"Of course they don't like it. I wouldn't like it if a bear or a wolf was gnawing on my head. No one would. But if someone's going to be eaten, I'd like to be the one doing the eating. Of course I feel sorry for them, but I like tanuki so much I just want to eat them up. Not only tanuki, of course. We eat all sorts of adorable things. It is a little sad, but they taste so good. This brings us to a paradox, doesn't it? That's love. I don't entirely understand it, but it's probably love. It must be love."

"The only reasons humans can say that without thinking is because they don't have to worry about being eaten."

"You sure do feel for the critters being eaten. But that's an important point. You're right, we humans don't need to worry about being eaten. We don't have any natural predators. The closest we get is being cremated and turned into ashes and being eaten by microbes in the dirt. But the thought of that makes me awful sad, getting eaten by microbes. If I've got to die...as long as it didn't hurt, I'd want to be eaten by tanuki. Better to be a tanuki's supper than to shrivel away and die in a hospital. You can't turn into anyone's nourishment if you die in a hospital bed, and that's just real sad. It'd be much better for me to fill a tanuki's belly."

"I think it'd be kind of a tall order for a tanuki to eat you."

"Maybe so...that, and I'm sure I wouldn't be tasty. Ah, that's disappointing." The professor downed another rice ball. "No tanuki would want to eat an unappetizing thing like me. What a sad thought for a human to have!"

"I've never heard of a human who would feel sad about something like that."

"A tanuki told me that, a long time ago. I still think about it sometimes. Why, you think I'm lying! But of course you do. No one would believe that a tanuki could talk. That's why I never talk about it." The professor grinned. "But gosh, he was such a grand tanuki."



That had been the night that Benten had first joined the Friday Fellows.

The professor, wanting to look upon the captured tanuki, had gone into the inner parlor of Chitoseya. Only a single electric lamp in the shape of a traditional floor lantern cast its light onto the tatami, while outside the window the Kamo River flowed serenely by. In a corner of the room the floor was spread with newspaper, on top of which had been placed a cage. An unfamiliar woman lay by the cage with her head on a stack of cushions, curled up and dozing on the floor. Suddenly flustered by the sight of her exquisite features, the professor approached the cage trying not to wake her.

Inside the cage was a large tanuki rolled into a ball. Its fur was slick and glossy in the light, and its body was majestically plump. Noticing the professor's approach, it turned to face him, but it made no sound and showed no trace of fear. Its eyes stared back at the

professor calmly, and somehow it seemed that behind them lay a great intelligence. The professor was moved by its dignified demeanor.

"What a fine being you are," he murmured. "I bet you're a distinguished fellow in the world of tanuki."

The tanuki slowly rose up as if attending to the professor's words. The professor took out a rice ball from his bag and offered it to the tanuki, which approached and sniffed it, before munching it down. Watching it eat, the professor squatted in front of the cage and continued to ramble.

"We're going to eat you tonight. You may not want to be eaten, but that's our rule, to have tanuki stew at our year-end party. Being born as a tanuki sometimes means being eaten by a human. I'll tell you though, and you may think me selfish, but I'm very happy to get to eat you, because it means I've encountered something new."

The tanuki peered up silently at the professor as he spoke.

"How can you be this calm, eh? Aren't you even the least bit worried?" said the professor.

Finally the tanuki opened its mouth.

"I have done all that I wanted to do, and now my children are grown. My youngest may still be small, but he has his brothers, and I have no doubt they will support each other and become fine tanuki. I have sown my seed, and helped them grow. I have fulfilled my duty as a tanuki. What days remain to me are the grace of heaven. A bonus, so to speak. So, now, it is of no concern to me if I am eaten here by you all. If you wish to eat me, then eat me."

"How strange," muttered the professor. "I could have sworn I just heard you talk. I must have been imagining things."

"Indeed, I am speaking."

"Well if that don't take all. You shouldn't scare people like that!"

"I felt that, perhaps, I could chance speaking to you. My last trick, you might say. My fool's blood talking."

The two chatted for a while. The tanuki was utterly calm, but there was one thing which he worried about. "I fear I may not be very tasty," he admitted.

The professor thumped his chest. "Never you worry, you have my guarantee I'll make you into a delicious stew."

"I'd appreciate that greatly. I could never bear it if I were to ruin a perfectly good stew."

"You're a great tanuki, and that means that you are delicious. There's nothing to fret about."

Hearing that, the tanuki nodded with satisfaction. "May I ask your name? I would like to take it to the afterlife."

"My name is Yodogawa Chōtarō."

The tanuki sighed contentedly. "So it *was* you, then."

"Well gosh, you know who I am?"

"You helped a member of my family, once."

"Well, in return why don't you tell me your name?"

The tanuki drew himself up as far as the cage would allow.

"I am the Trick Magister, Shimogamo Sōichirō."

Just then the woman dozing on the cushions woke up.

"Who are you?" she asked the professor.

Without thinking the professor put his finger to his lips and hissed "Shh!", but when he turned back to the cage, the tanuki had curled back into a ball and was snoring uproariously, his stomach bulging and full from the rice ball. The professor was taken aback.

"Are you Hotei?" the woman inquired, bowing her head. "I'm very pleased to meet you."

"Ah, you must be the person Jurōjin mentioned. Didn't hear that you were a girl, though."

She smiled. "I am Benten."

Benten stood up and peered at the tanuki in the cage. "He's sleeping so peacefully," she murmured, watching the sleeping tanuki quietly. "I feel sorry for you because I'm going to eat you," she said. "But I'm still going to eat you."

That majestic tanuki, my father Shimogamo Sōichirō, never woke from his slumber, and until he slid down into the stomachs of the Friday Fellows he never said another word again.



The moon traced its arc through the sky as the autumn night wore on.

The professor chuckled out loud. "I don't expect you to believe such a fanciful story."

"I think I could," I told him.

"I'm happy to hear that. I wouldn't have talked about it but for our friendship."

"But we only just met tonight."

"I feel we two are bound by fate. There's no such thing as coincidences. So here's to our meeting tonight, cheers!"

"You're sure it's okay for a college professor to be drinking in a place like this in the middle of the night?"

"Nothing to worry about. It's just my fool's blood talking," he smiled. "But would you look at that moon!"

Whenever one of us brothers stirred up trouble, Father would laugh it off, saying, "That's just your fool's blood talking." When I heard the professor say that same phrase, for some reason I couldn't help but notice the strange resemblance to Father. I should have hated him for eating my father, and yet somehow I only felt affection towards him. His large, hairy hands smelled just like Father.

The professor yawned over and over, rubbing his eyes. "Fighting sleep is a losing battle," he said. "Benten probably won't be coming back, so I say we get down from here. Gosh, how I miss my bed."

Figuring out how to get down from up there was no simple task. Scratching our heads, we suddenly happened on a long ladder, which we were able to climb down to

Gokomachi Street. It was rather suspicious to find a ladder sprouting up in the middle of town, and eerily convenient. I faced the darkness between the buildings and ventured, "Kaisei, is that you?"

"Hurry and go home and sleep, you blockhead!" Kaisei replied. "Next time I'm leaving you up there!"

"Thanks."

While I squinted into the darkness at my invisible fiancée, the professor had gone on ahead. He turned and shouted back, "Hey! Teramachi Street is this way, isn't it?"

We walked down the deserted avenue, and at Kawaramachi Street I parted ways with the professor. He invited me to visit his lab as he got into the taxi, fishing around in his bag for a business card, though there seemed none to be found. The card he finally dredged up was incredibly crumpled, but nevertheless he politely presented it to me with both hands. It read, "Yodogawa Chōtarō - Professor of Agriculture".

"So long. I hope we meet again!"

I stood there and watched the professor's taxi disappear into the night.



I crossed the Shijō Bridge and walked through the nocturnal streets towards Rokudō Chinnōji.

As I walked I thought of Professor Yodogawa, and of Father. What was going through Father's head, when he learned that he was to be eaten by the person who had saved Mother's life? Was I wrong to think that it might not have been so agonizing after all? Somehow I couldn't help but feel warm inside when I imagined this conversation between Professor Yodogawa and Father.

The well at Rokudō Chinnōji was pitch black.

It had been a long time since I had been to see my Yajirō, my older brother who had left his tanuki trappings behind to dwell here in this well as a frog. After the tumultuous day I had just lived through, I missed him terribly.

"Heeey," I called, but there was no reply. Turning into a frog myself, I hopped down into the well, falling down into the water with a splash.

In the darkness, Yajirō yelped, "Wah!"

I poked my head up from the water. "Yajirō, it's me!"

"Oh, Yasaburō. You're still alive. I was worried about you."

"Fit as a frog, as you can see."

My brother lit a little candle, casting a glow through the bottom of the well. In a recess was an island made by a small mound of dirt, and on that island was a tiny shrine-like building. Beside it perched a little frog, waving at me. I swam over and crawled out of the water.

"Are you planning to renounce your worldly trappings and become a frog, too?" sighed Yajirō. "Imagine the waterworks from Mother if she discovered that *two* of her sons had become frogs."

"I just need to stay for the night."

"Oh, well all right then."

I sat next to Yajirō by the water. Watching it ripple we talked about what had transpired that day.

"Well, that's one way to spend a day," commented Yajirō. "Well done you!"

"Hey, Yajirō."

"What's up, Yasaburō?"

"I just don't get it. Why don't I hate them? I've gotten to like that professor a lot, and Benten, the person who made Father into stew and ate him...how could I fall in love with her?"

"Obviously that's just your fool's blood talking," laughed Yajirō. "And besides, we're tanuki. Sometimes we just get eaten. You can't blame humans for eating tanuki."

"That's such a mature way to look at it. You're so perceptive."

"Nah, I'm really only pretending to understand. After all, I'm just a frog in a well."

"Trying to dodge responsibility again?"

"No, I mean it. I don't understand a thing." Yajirō sank into the water and blew bubbles. "I still tear up whenever I think of Father."

Unexpectedly we heard signs of someone approaching the well, so Yajirō hopped over and extinguished the candle. The person stared into the well, unmoving.

I inched towards Yajirō. "Someone else seeking your wisdom?"

"Nope. That must be Benten," he whispered. "She never says a word."

We sat there in the darkness, listening to Benten's breathing. After a while, briny teardrops started to fall, wetting my nose.

"She always does this, just cries by herself. The water in here's getting pretty salty."

Two frogs sat at the bottom of the well, looking up at the sky. Benten said nothing, but her salty tears continued to fall, drip drop, drip drop.

"Why is she crying? What has she got to be sad about?" I wondered. "Is it because the moon is so beautiful?"

Yajirō looked up at the falling tears and said simply, "Sometimes children cry for no reason at all."

Chapter 5 — Father's Final Farewell

As long as one draws breath, there is no escaping farewells.

This is true for humans as it is true for tengu and tanuki.

There are many types of farewells. Sometimes farewells are sad, and sometimes they are joyful, felicitous affairs. Some say farewell with great fanfares and feasting, and some say farewell alone, having no one to see them off. There are long farewells, and short farewells. It is quite common to see someone say farewell, only to slink back shortly after, looking thoroughly chagrined. On the other hand, some say farewell professing that they will only be gone a short while, and do not return for a long, long time. And lastly, there is the type of farewell from which there is no return at all, the kind that happens only once in a person's life.

When I was a newborn trundling around the Tadasu Forest, Father said short farewells. Shimogamo Sōichirō was a great tanuki, the leader of the tanuki world, and he was exceedingly busy. He frequently made trips, saying goodbye to the forest where we all waited for his return. Because of this, it was very difficult for us to come to terms with the fact that the farewell that winter when he went into the stew at that year-end party was a final farewell.

When our father said farewell to this world, his great bloodline was split into four.

Yaichirō inherited only the sense of responsibility, Yajirō inherited only the lightheartedness, Yashirō inherited only the innocence, and I inherited only the foolishness. The only things that held us wholly dissimilar brothers together were Mother's love, deeper and more boundless than the sea, and the farewell of our great Father.

Sometimes a single, enormous farewell can bring together those left behind.



With the entrance of December the last leaves fell from the roadside trees.

Even tanuki shiver their butts off in the Kyoto winter, and there's no point whatsoever in teasing us just because we happen to have fur. Seeking to escape the cold that was creeping up into the rest of my body, I took refuge in a café on Shimogamo Boulevard, dozing off cosily by the side of a *daruma* stove. I was, of course, in the form of the Unkempt Undergrad. Every so often I opened my eyes and looked out the broad glass window at the winter sunshine, as the mood struck me. Though the days only continued to get more frigid, I counted my blessings for being able to welcome in the winter months with my family here in Kyoto.

After the Gozan no Okuribi I had left Kyoto and made my living in Osaka for a time, on account of having incurred the wrath of Benten. While in hiding I had snuck into Kyoto on several occasions, though it took three months for the residual heat to finally die down.

At the end of November, I accompanied Benten to Arashiyama at dawn to view the autumn leaves. Cackling wildly, she sent the leaves whirling and scattering, while I dutifully did what I was told and gathered them up into a cloth wrapping. Thanks to Benten's handiwork, all the leaves in Arashiyama fell in a single night. Perhaps because of this great act of mischief, she seemed to have shaken her autumn blues. Because of that I was able to move out of my hideout at the used camera store in Osaka and make my triumphant return to Kyoto.

The tanuki I met on the street offered words of congratulations severally, and no matter where I went I was greeted with bouquets and tears of joy. The news of the return of "Yasaburō the Fleet" spread quickly through the tanuki world. When I went to say hello at the Scarlet Pane on Teramachi Street, the bartender said, "And here I thought you'd been made into stew and eaten long since!" Then he added, "Not that there's much difference, mind you, as I expect you'll be eaten sooner or later."

"That's not a very nice thing to say..."

"Drink up while you can, then, and think on how good it is to be alive."

Back in the café, I fell fast asleep.

I was hardly just whiling away the days, though. I was set on finding the Fūjin Raijin fan I had lost during the Okuribi and presenting it back to Benten. Every day I prowled the west bank of the Kamo River, burrowing into empty houses, crawling through thickets, wandering the grounds of Goryō Shrine, and devoting all my time to the search, with nothing to show for it. Having spent the entire day in this manner, I was now in the café doing a post-mortem.

As I listened to the soft crackling of the stove, the glass door opened, and a small boy entered the café. His countenance was sparkling, like Kobayashi⁷ of the Boy Detectives Club. I attempted to shrink down into my seat, but his sharp gaze found me, and at once he ran up.

"Yasaburō!" sobbed Yashirō. "Help me!"



All of us brothers studied under the tutelage of Master Akadama. "Master Akadama" is only a nickname; his real name is Yakushibō of Nyoigatake. Having hurt his back, he was chased out from his stronghold of Nyoigatake by the Kurama tengu, and withdrawing even from his tanuki lectures he holed up in the Masugata Court Apartments behind the Demachi shopping arcade: a thoroughly sulky, ill-tempered tengu from beginning to end.

To be sure, Master Akadama had more than his share of mortification.

His once-mighty powers had allowed him to soar the skies, but now they had diminished to the point that it was all he could manage to float a few centimeters above the tatami. His prowess in the field of love had declined just as precipitously, and though his grey-haired desires were still as strong as ever, no matter how ardently he pursued Benten she wouldn't give him the time of day. The only ones who called on him now were foolish tanuki, and door-to-door missionaries. What could you call this, if not mortification?

⁷ Leader of the fictional Boys Detective Club, created by famed mystery writer Edogawa Ranpo.

The Master's face was perennially furrowed with fury at his own impotence, and his now-baseless arrogance raged throughout the cramped confines of his 4½ tatami room.

I felt responsible for Master Akadama's downfall, having had a hand in it myself. This was the reason I stayed by his side, always poking my nose into his affairs, though there are few creatures on this earth as difficult to manage as a fallen tengu. Absconding to Osaka had been an excellent pretext to rid myself of his custodianship, and I would be lying if I said that I wasn't thinking about washing my hands of it once and for all when I entrusted Yashirō with his care.

But the Master's wilfulness proved too much for my skittish little brother to handle.

Together we exited the café and crossed Izumoji Bridge. As we walked along the bank of the Kamo River, over which a cold wind was blowing, my dear little brother related his woes of how the Master refused to take a bath.

Master Akadama loathed baths extremely.

How much did he dislike bathing? Well, he had destroyed the filthy bathtub in his residence, so that it would never be used again. In this day and age, even the tanuki who lived in the forest of Shimogamo Shrine used product in order to avoid split hairs, yet the Master refused even the idea of wiping himself off with a dampened towel, contenting himself merely with dabbing a bit of his favorite cologne on the back of his neck. He would beg off if you invited him to the bathhouse, complaining that the weather was poor, or that his rump itched, or that his back was sore, or that he didn't like your face. And if you attempted to drag him by force, you would soon find a heavy *daruma* flying in your direction.

If you let things go on long enough, the room would become clouded with a piquant funk, as if something were fermenting inside, but even then the Master would only sprinkle more cologne everywhere. Merely sitting there was enough to make your eyes water unceasingly, and at that point, with no further postponement possible, a battle would ensue. I had managed to take Master Akadama to the bathhouse several times before, but on each occasion I had to be ready to pay a price of blood and fur.

Yashirō was on the verge of tears as he walked beside me. "I'm so useless, Yasaburō. I c-couldn't even get the Master into a bath..."

"Don't cry, Yashirō. That's not a skill you need to be ashamed of not having. There are plenty of other things you should learn."

"The Master blew up a tengu g-gale."

"What! I never knew he still had it in him."

"And he made my hair all frizzy. If this keeps happening, I bet it's gonna turn into an afro!"

"Using up his last few powers on a little kid, what an embarrassment of a tengu! I'll knock him into the steaming water myself!"

"Don't be too hard on him, though."

"I know that." I patted Yashirō's head. "I just wanted to see how it sounded out loud."

We worked our way through the crowds of shoppers and entered the little alleyway off the Demachi shopping arcade.

I went up the stairs and rapped at the door, calling, "It's Yasaburō!" No sooner had I stepped over the threshold than I was enveloped by a thick mist of cologne. Tears sprang to my eyes. Yashirō coughed, and his tail immediately sprouted out. "Your tail! Your tail!" I hissed. Yashirō grunted, doing his best, but his fluffy tail didn't seem to want to cooperate, and his butt wiggled continuously.

Pushing our way through the mountains of bento boxes and bottles of Akadama port wine, we went into the inner room and found Master Akadama squatting on the tatami beneath the rays of sun streaming in through the window. He was wearing a brand new quilted coat, spraying water on the cactus perched on his low writing desk.

I turned on the vent fan and threw open the window, letting cold air inside. "Yasaburō?" the Master said without looking up, sounding put out. "I haven't seen you since the Okuribi. Frittering your days away in idle amusement, I have no doubt. Unfilial wretch. You think of nothing but enjoying yourself."

"I most certainly was not enjoying myself, but it has certainly been a long time since I last contacted you."

"Contact from you is quite unnecessary. In fact I was glad indeed to be rid of it."

"Now, there's no need for that. If you were lonely, you can just say so."

"Impertinent brat!"



The initial exchange of insults quickly bogged down in a bout of haggling over going to the bathhouse. We spent over an hour engaged in this pointless struggle. I used my sharp wit to attack the Master's filthy existence; my opponent allowed anger to dictate his words, letting out explosions of flatulence in between loud outbursts of pedantry; and Yashirō cowered in the corner of the kitchen, paralyzed in terror. While all this was going on the sun went down outside the window, and the temperature dropped even further.

"And just why should I allow myself to be chaperoned by the likes of tanuki for a bath!" he bellowed, veins bulging in his head. "Utterly preposterous!"

"You refuse to go with us, eh? I see, I see. Then would you go if it was with Benten?"

"Don't ask silly questions. I would like nothing better!"

"You dirty old tengu! Why don't I just transform into Benten, hey? I could give you something to really be aroused about!"

"Just you try it, I'd break you with my pinky, I would!"

"Go ahead and do it then, you stubborn old coot!"

The Master stripped off his puffy coat, glowering openly at me. His eyes opened wide, and lit by a single bloody ray of sunlight amidst the mountains of trash, his visage resembled that of a demon. His white eyebrows were raised high on his brow, and his eyes blazed with a fiery light.

"Now you've done it," he growled like a wild animal. "You'll not last a moment against my tengu gale!"

"Go on then!"

I backed off to the kitchen sink and transformed into a black bull, ensuring that no matter how strong a wind the Master drew up, he wouldn't be able to blow me away. Yashirō's transformation had lifted completely, and he rolled around deliriously, clinging to my hind legs.

"Ha!" shouted the Master, like a monk upbraiding a novice, and hearing this we braced ourselves and shut our eyes. *Watch out, any second now we'll be hit head on by a tengu gale! It'll probably hurt, and we'll probably lose chunks of fur, it's coming, any second now...* We held our breaths and prepared ourselves for the worst, only to be met with...nothing.

At last we felt what seemed to be a gentle spring breeze caress our faces. We timidly opened our eyes to find Master Akadama with his knees pulled up to his chest, staring blankly into a corner of the room. Dust was swirling around and around. Mutely we watched as a roll of toilet paper reluctantly rose into the air and unspooled itself, a long white sheet spiraling through the air. It was fascinating to watch, but hardly threatening, and it appeared that the Master's ability to vent his rage amounted to no more than a gentle untidying of his room.

The roll finished unwinding itself, smothering the room in blankets of white. The Master's shoulders slumped, draped by toilet paper. After a moment he snorted, reached out and tore off a scrap of toilet paper, folded it carefully, and blew his nose loudly.

I shuffled my hooves in the kitchen uncomfortably, feeling oddly self-conscious that our heated exchange had somehow ended in such an anticlimactic fashion. The Master continued to blow his nose to hide his embarrassment, and I lowed experimentally to hide my own. In the corner, Yashirō idly nuzzled the scented toilet paper and sniffed.

"What are you doing in the corner there, Yasaburō?" said the Master. He had finished blowing his nose and was now staring out the window at the darkened landscape. "That's quite enough mooing."

"Master, you seem to have worked up a sweat in your anger."

"Hmm."

"Occasionally, taking a bath can be splendid."

"Hmm."

At last the Master assented to leave his room.

There were no bathhouses nearby, so to bathe the Master we needed to go up Teramachi Street all the way north of Goryō Shrine. The Master refused to walk that long journey on his own feet, and therefore I had to borrow Yaichirō's automaton-powered rickshaw.

A quick phone call by Yashirō revealed that Yaichirō had been dragged by Mother to the billiards hall to the west of the Kamo Bridge. Days of political maneuvering had left him irritable and on edge, and so Mother had taken him there as a diversion. On the phone, Yaichirō seemed unhappy about using Father's treasured keepsake to transport around some stubborn old git, but he was a student of Master Akadama's too. His sense of duty wouldn't allow him to be stingy about lending out the rickshaw.

By the by he came trundling up wearing the robes of a young esquire, stopping in front of the Masugata Court Apartments. He hopped down looking glum, and the Master

clambered up in his place. Yashirō and I pushed him up as he struggled to climb up, cramming in beside him.

"An honor to see you again, Master," said Yaichirō, bowing his head respectfully.

"A chilly day," muttered Master Akadama, glowering and pulling his coat tightly to his chest. "Yaichirō!"

"Yes, Master."

"You must think me a burden."

"By no means is that the case."

"Speak the truth, man!"

"I am speaking truthfully, I assure you."

Master Akadama sniffed and smiled. "Very well," he said. "Stop dawdling there, let us be on our way!"



The rickshaw clattered onto Teramachi Street and headed north. Cotton candy clouds stretched along the pale pink sky. Along the long temple wall we proceeded, and presently a brown smokestack came into view, thrusting up into the sky. The closer to the bathhouse we came, the more the Master fidgeted, saying, "Tiresome, tiresome indeed."

Hastily catching the Master at the threshold of the women's bath, we thrust him into the men's dressing room. We'd come this far, yet the Master still stared at wanted posters and the TVs placed above the lockers and sat in the massage chairs and tried to barricade himself inside the toilet. By the time we managed to cajole him out into the steam room, both Yaichirō and I were completely worn out. The other customers glanced at us curiously as we dragged the Master along.

Yaichirō and I and the Master lined up in the bath. Yashirō looked around in delight, immersing himself in the bath and jumping into the sauna and finally yelping "Uhya!" as he dipped his toes into the cold bath. "This bath is freezing, Yasaburō!"

"What did you expect? It's water."

In stark contrast to my excitable brother, the Master pouted and sulked.

"How is it that I have come to bathe with the likes of you furballs?"

"Never fear; we're transformed into humans, so there's little fur to go around," said Yaichirō, moving his hands vigorously. The Master couldn't be bothered to soap himself up, so he ordered Yaichirō to do so instead.

"If only it was Benten scrubbing my back," the Master groused petulantly. "How I long to bathe with Benten. Ah, how I long to bathe with Benten!"

"Master!" Yaichirō hissed, stifling his voice. "Such overt salaciousness! Please, I implore you to think of your reputation!"

"As your disciple I'm ashamed," I tutted. "Even if Benten came with you, you could hardly go into the ladies' bath anyhow."

"Enough quibbling!" The Master swung a towel, slapping the side of my face. It hurt quite a lot.

"Yasaburō. Were you not with Benten and the Friday Fellows recently? You seem to have a tendency to follow her around recklessly. A mere furball would not come to have feelings for her, surely?"

"Of course not. What kind of tanuki would fall in love with a human? That kind of love must be against some kind of rule!"

"You would just as soon break wind upon a rule as follow it. One never knows what a perverse fellow like you is scheming."

"Once again, you flatter me in the strangest ways..."

"Far be it for me to be concerned for your wellbeing. However, treat that human girl lightly and you will be eaten. With a little more devotion and a little less straying from the path of wickedness, she will become a great tengu. One day she will follow in my footsteps, and become the second to take the mantle of Yakushibō of Nyoigatake."

Finishing our scrubbing, we entered the bath and stared up lethargically. The ceiling was painted with strange green shapes and in its center was a depressed skylight. Dim light shone in, faintly piercing through the thick haze of steam.

The Master seemed to be feeling much better after scraping off the months of dirt that had accumulated since late summer. Lounging in the bubbles that issued forth in the jet massage bath, he mused, "Benten could blow away those damned Kurama tengu in an instant." A wide smile came to his face.

"Our father played quite a trick on them, too," said Yaichirō.

"Sōichirō? Yes, I suppose he did," Master Akadama said, lying back comfortably in the bath and staring at the light from the window. "That tanuki always did show great promise."



Here's a story from long ago.

Struggling with his younger brother Ebisugawa Sōun for dominion over the tanuki world, Father prevailed and attained the title of Trick Magister. Thenceforth, until he was made into a stew at the hands of the capricious Friday Fellows, Father held sway at the top of the tanuki world in Kyoto. The crowning moment of that long, glorious period was the False Nyoigatake Incident. Never before or since has a tanuki outwitted the tengu with such a tremendous feat.

The genesis of the incident lies in the feud between the Kurama tengu and Master Akadama.

Tengu are knaves and ruffians, and it is rare that they get along. Rarer still was the acrimony between Master Akadama and the Kurama tengu. Even the mediation of the gentle Konkobu of Iwayasan failed to bring any change to the situation. During the yearly gathering at Mount Atago, the Master picked a fight with the black-clad ranks of Kurama tengu, sneering, "Nothing but a bunch of mountain acorns stuffed into three-piece suits!" The banquet was blown asunder by the competing tengu gales of the two factions, Kurama and Nyoigatake, and with it went any hopes of repairing the rift. Both the Kurama tengu and Master Akadama were given a severe tongue lashing by Tarōbō of Atagoyama.

Shortly afterwards, the Kurama tengu snuck onto the mountain to avenge the affront, and, taking advantage of their numbers, harassed the Master in turns, seeking to utterly humiliate him. Day and night they would drink and sing loud, bawdy parodies insulting the Master. Master Akadama was so agitated he hardly slept, and ground his teeth all day, forgetting even that he was standing at the podium in the classroom. Yaichirō, still a student then, was greatly perturbed; on the other hand, Yajirō would take the opportunity to sneak out of class and go to the movie theater in Shinkyōgoku.

It was Father who took action, unable to look upon the Master's suffering with indifference. He came up with the magnificent idea of transforming into the totality of Nyoigatake, and it is from this that the incident takes its name.

Lured onto a perfect replica of Nyoigatake, the Kurama tengu carried on their feasting in blissful ignorance, but when they attempted to leave, they noticed that they were unable to get off the mountain. They tried to take to the skies, but the thickly tangled overgrowth bore down on them, forcing them back down to earth. They walked on and on, only to realize that they were going in circles. As they went around and around, they were attacked by all manner of strange creatures: a flood of *daruma* pouring out of the hollows of the trees; a singing, dancing troupe of chickens called "The Gorgeous Chickens"; a white elephant crossing the fog between the trees. Utterly discombobulated, they dashed all over the false Nyoigatake, and after a week of this, looking like nothing so much as a ragged band of cavemen, they fell prostrate before Master Akadama and begged for his forgiveness.

For the moment, the feud between Master Akadama and the Kurama tengu was over.

The incredible, once-in-a-lifetime feat of transforming into an entire mountain for over a week left Father just as exhausted as the Kurama tengu, and for a full month afterwards, he slept in the Tadasu Forest. Master Akadama, who had never so much as given a tanuki the time of day, even visited the forest, bringing with him a box of confections. He nearly trampled a little furball rolling around the dry leaves beside my slumbering father. That furball was me.

The first thing out of Master Akadama's mouth was, "How simple it must be to be a tanuki, sleeping blithely all day long."

Sitting up on his bed of dry leaves, Father grinned and said, "'Twas a foolish thing to do. I enjoyed it very much, though I may have let myself get carried away."

"Control, control, you must learn control. Have a care for yourself."

"Your concern is very much appreciated."

Master Akadama was most thankful, though he did not put it in words. Father understood that, and instead of demanding gratitude for risking his hide to protect the Master's honor, he said nothing at all.



Master Akadama despised baths, but once he went in, he stayed in for a long time.

"I think it's about time we head out," I ventured, to which the Master angrily replied, "You drag me all the way here to take a bath, and now you tell me to get out. Haven't you the decency to let me wash in peace?"

But Yashirō was no longer frolicking and was in fact beginning to pant and get dizzy from the heat of the bath. Fearing that his tail might come shooting out in public any second now, I left Yaichirō to look after the Master and hastily marched Yashirō to the dressing room.

Sitting on wicker chairs, we sipped coffee milk and watched TV.

"Mm, this is sweet, Yasaburo!"

"Sweet it is!"

"How come coffee and milk are gross, but coffee milk tastes so good?"

"That's the power of synergy."

"What's sin-ur-jee?"

"It's what happens when two things come together by destiny. Anything can be sweet when they've got synergy."

Yashirō thought about it deeply, and took a swig of coffee milk.

"Master Akadama says mean things, but I think he likes you."

"Heh, and don't I know it."

"And you like the Master too, don't you?"

"Shh, not so loud! I could never show my face in public again if word got out."

"The Master was always saying stuff when you were in Osaka. 'How is Yasaburō? Has he been eaten by Benten?'"

"How thoughtful of him."

We shot the breeze for a while, and Yashirō let out a tiny belch.

Yajirō, the frog in the well, had once asked me, "Do you remember the last thing Father said to you?" He had floated there at the bottom of the well, mortified at his own inability to remember.

What had I been doing that day?

I thought back to that winter morning.

I followed behind Father through the Tadasu Forest, over to the brook. Father sniffed, so I did the same, sniffing and taking in the scents of our surroundings. The air hanging over the forest had a new scent. It was the smell of the winter that was slowly creeping into every corner of Kyoto. We waddled down the deserted bank, sniffing as we went. That was the last morning I spent with Father.

It was a day just like any other.

Father took Yaichirō and went out; Yajirō rolled around pretending to be a *daruma* before aimlessly departing to parts unknown; Yashirō clung tightly to Mother; and I went to attend Master Akadama's lessons. I had been warned to be careful now that the Friday Fellows' year-end party was approaching, but that didn't frighten me at all. The day was ending, and Yaichirō came back without Father, but no one thought anything of it. After finishing their business in Gion, Father mentioned that he had an important rendezvous to attend, and they went their separate ways. Being the head of tanuki society, it was hardly unusual for important business to suddenly come up and keep him. Yajirō returned to the

forest later that night. He had been out enjoying himself, and came back extremely drunk. Ignoring Yaichirō's attempts at lecturing him, he smiled beatifically like Hotei, and eventually dropped off to sleep mid-lecture. Mother went to bed too, still holding Yashirō in her arms.

But instead of going to sleep, I went dashing through the forest.

I approached the shrine road and watched the lanterns smolder faintly at the shrine. After a while Yaichirō came to tell me to go to bed. I wasn't listening to a word he said, so he sat down beside me. We stared at those warm lights, Yaichirō and I, but I don't recall feeling particularly uneasy at the time. I was just sitting there spacing out. I don't remember if I was thinking about Father.

Father never came home that night.



Yashirō and I were watching TV, enjoying the breeze from the large wall-mounted fan, when we heard a loud commotion from the entrance onto Kuramaguchi Street and in rushed a drove of men.

Rather creepily, they all had nearly identical faces with the same stout belly, and they all wore nothing but loincloths and white happi coats. I heard the lady at the front desk shriek, but the men deposited the fee in front of her one by one and continued to surge in, like a stream of *daifuku* mochi rolling down a conveyor belt. For all their numbers, all that could be heard was the sound of them breathing through their noses, for not one of them said a word. At the onset of this bizarre phenomenon, the other customers in the dressing room quickly dried themselves, put on their clothes, and fled the scene.

Before long the strange cohort had packed the room to the gills, all of them staring up silently at the coffered ceiling, mouths pressed down and bellies pressing up against each other. Yashirō and I were bounced back into the baths, while the men glared malevolently at us through the glass doors.

"What's that commotion?" the Master cried from his bathtub. "What foolishness are you tanuki up to now?"

"The Ebisugawa Guard Corps?" said Yaichirō, emerging from the sauna swinging a towel.

The Ebisugawa Guard Corps is a gang of hoodlums lured by the promise of all the Faux Denki Bran they can drink, led by Ebisugawa Sōun's two idiot sons, Kinkaku and Ginkaku. As those mochi-bellied men-cum-tanuki glared at me, I could only sigh dejectedly. It had been hard enough getting Master Akadama into the bath, and now I had to face Kinkaku and Ginkaku as well. This was synergy at its finest.

"What did you do this time, Yaichirō?"

"Uncle must have ordered them here to tell me to withdraw. The next Trick Magister will be chosen this month. It's between Uncle and myself, and no one knows how things will turn out..." Suddenly he flew into a rage. "I run around all day doing everything by myself, and not one of you ever helps out! What a useless lot my brothers are, every one..."

"There you go again."

"While I was struggling with all these burdens, you just ran off to Osaka!"

"You could hardly blame me for that, considering that my life was in peril."

"This is all your fault in the first place, because you—"

"Hold on, Yaichirō. Look!"

Two even more corpulent men had pushed their way through the sea of mochi. They were wearing strange silver underpants, on which were written the phrases, "False or Deceptive Advertising" and "Do Not Tilt Package". Advertising their own stupidity by wearing four-character phrases they didn't understand—it could only be those two.

"It's Kinkaku!" "It's Ginkaku!" cried the two silver underwear-clad men, standing there proudly.

"We don't need you to tell us that," spat Yaichirō.

Kinkaku's belly wobbled. "If you understand that, then you must also understand why we are here."

"You think I'm going to just withdraw quietly?"

"I knew you would say that, but according to my cool-as-a-cucumber calculations, your chances of winning are just about nil. Perhaps you haven't heard? Mount Yoshida has come over to the Ebisugawas, and, er, Takaragaike is on our side too. Support from Yase is streaming over as well!"

"Gosho, the imperial palace, has already declared for me, and Nanzenji would never side with you. And what's true for Nanzenji is true of Ginkakuji. It's only a matter of time before Kōdaiji and Rokuhara also give me their support!"

"That may be so, that may be so," said Kinkaku, his words faltering. "...Is that true? All of those? That's not what I was told. Topsy-turvy higgledy-piggledy!"

"Don't give up, Kinkaku!" Ginkaku chattered. "Give it to them! We still have our secret weapon!"

"That's right! Secret weapon, secret weapon!" smirked Kinkaku.

"What are you talking about?"

"We can't just give away our secret weapon so easily, because it's secret. So I'm not going to tell you. But you'd better give up! The only one who can hold together tanuki society is our father, and after him it'll be me. We have no more business to discuss with the small fry from the Shimogamo family! Indubitably!"

"Indubitably!"

Hearing these insults Yaichirō lost control and turned into a tiger, baring his teeth.

For a moment Kinkaku and Ginkaku flinched, and the Ebisugawa Guard Corps all jiggled with fear behind the glass doors. But the duo soon regained their composure, haughtily flaunting their glittering metallic underpants.

"Don't think you can scare us by threatening to bite our butts again! We bullied a master blacksmith in Nagahama into making these iron underpants. Try biting us again, and all your teeth will fall out!"

"What do you think about that! Kinkaku is so clever!"

"And don't think you can take them off so easily, either! After all, I have a hard time getting out of them myself."

"It makes our bellies pretty cold too. Kinkaku and I have it pretty hard!"

"Indubitably!"

Here, Ginkaku suddenly made a face, like he had just realized he had an upset stomach. "Kinkaku, I feel like I just had a really close call. I'm a tiny bit nervous!"

"Actually, I did too," Kinkaku confessed. He turned back to us and hurriedly said, "Now, say you won't be the Trick Magister! If you don't hurry and say it, things will get very ugly!"

"That's all right, thanks," we replied.

Kinkaku and Ginkaku dithered on how to proceed. Racking their nonexistent brains for a clever plan that inevitably self-imploded on their own heads had been their specialty since they were kids.

Irate, Yaichirō let out a great howl, sending Kinkaku and Ginkaku scrambling to protect their buttocks. They were so concentrated that their transformations came completely off, we were left staring at two cowering tanuki trying to burrow themselves into two large sets of iron underpants.

"Scoundrels!" Yaichirō leaped forward. Kinkaku and Ginkaku dashed madly out of the underpants, slipping and sliding over the slick tiles in their haste to escape. Yaichirō went for Kinkaku first, nipping at his butt and picking him up. A toss of his head, and Kinkaku went soaring through the air with a "Hyaaa!" before splashing down into a bathtub. A column of water came down all over Master Akadama, who bellowed, "Be silent!"

Staring dumbfoundedly, Ginkaku was next on the chopping block, and he went sailing through the air just like his brother. It was a sight I seemed to have seen before.

Having finished off two tanuki, Yaichirō fixed his glare on the dressing room. In a twinkling, the large men filling the room deflated into tiny little rats and disappeared like a receding tide. The Ebisugawa Guard Corps were that only in name.

Yaichirō turned back into his human form and dragged Kinkaku out of the foaming bath.

"Goodness, Kinkaku. Don't you know how to use a bathhouse? First, you can't go into the tub with a towel on. Second, you're not allowed to do laundry here. And third, you have to rinse yourself before you go into the bathtub. You can't just jump in headfirst. Now, how could a fool who doesn't even know how to use a bathhouse properly ever hope to become the head of the tanuki in Kyoto?"

"That's because you threw me in there! I wouldn't jump in there myself!"

"Well, let's put that aside. So what's this secret weapon of yours?"

"...I'm not going to say."

"Ah, I see. So you're not going to talk."

Yaichirō picked up Kinkaku and held him over his head, squirming and yelping, before walking over to the cold bath next to the sauna. "If you don't talk, then I'll toss you in here and put on the lid. Do you know to know what it's really like to have a cold belly!"

Covering his belly, Kinkaku soon capitulated. "All right, all right! I'll talk!" he screeched. "My stomach hurts!"

He sat down in front of the tub. "It's about your old man. Do you know how he died?"

"What's this, now? Father was made into stew," Yaichirō answered.

Kinkaku smirked unpleasantly and shook his head. "Don't you think that's funny? How could such a great tanuki be caught so easily by the humans? I am wise beyond my years, and I thought it was funny. So Ginkaku and I investigated, see? And we found out the truth. If it was exposed, I can assure you the Shimogamo clan would never recover."

"What do you mean?"

"On the night Uncle was captured, he was out drinking with someone late into the night. He was so drunk that he got careless. Drinking was deadly for him. And yet the person who was drinking with him that night has kept mum to this day. I think that's just unforgivable. Shouldn't he take responsibility and apologize to everyone, as a fellow tanuki? Especially because Uncle was the Trick Magister!"

Yaichirō stood up suddenly. The blood had drained from his face.

"Who was he drinking with? Spit it out!"

Kinkaku looked up at him and cackled shrilly.

"He's at the bottom of the well in Chinnōji. It was your own useless brother, Yajirō!"



Yaichirō let out a howl and dunked Kinkaku into the bath. Ignoring Kinkaku's spluttering screams of "Code! Idd code!" Yaichirō rushed out of the bathhouse stark naked. I chased after him, while Yashirō followed behind, calling, "Yasaburō, what's wrong?" We transformed into forms less likely to attract public outrage and boarded the rickshaw, heading south down Teramachi Street. When we reached Imadegawa, Yaichirō stopped the cart.

"Yashirō, go back to the forest," he shouted. "Stay with Mother!"

Yashirō tried to protest, but the look on Yaichirō's face was so fearsome that he was cowed into silence and quickly got off the cart. Leaving him standing there at Imadegawa forlornly, Yaichirō and I raced down past the forest on the Imperial Palace grounds.

"Why did you leave Yashirō there?"

"Because I would feel bad."

"So you do dote on him after all."

"No," seethed Yaichirō. "I meant for Yajirō."

He drove the cart on east towards Marutamachi, clattering through the indigo-veiled streets in a harrowing frenzy.

His cherished clockwork driver was creaking and groaning but Yaichirō did not care. The rickshaw whipped indecorously past pedestrians in the gloom, but before they even had time to make a fuss we had whipped past the corner and were gone. We crossed the Kamo River and raced along a deserted alley past the Ebisugawa power plant.

Eventually we drew near the lights of Gion. I instinctively put a hand on Yaichirō's shoulder, but he showed no signs of slowing. It was only when we were careening through crowded Hanamikoji Street past the denizens of the night that I truly understood how angry he was, for the Yaichirō I knew would never cause trouble and raise mischief like this. Passersby shrieked and leapt out of the way as we rushed through their midst.

At long last we arrived at Rokudō Chinnōji.

We hurdled the wall and approached the well. The inside of the well was pitch black. "That you, Yaichirō?" we heard Yajirō burble from the bottom of the well. "And Yasaburō, too? Fancy seeing the two of you here together."

"How've you been recently, Yajirō?" I said.

"My world's not too big, you know, so it's mostly the same old, same old. I do live at the bottom of a well, you see." Yajirō chuckled drily. "But come to think of it, I did hear that you'd left hiding and come back to Kyoto. A hearty congratulations."

"Word reaches you fast for someone who doesn't get out much."

"Kaisei came by yesterday to deliver the news."

"...Say, Yajirō."

"What's up?"

I closed my mouth, not knowing how to proceed. Noticing this beside me, Yaichirō placed his hands on the rim of the well and leaned over to stare down into the inky depths, his expression hard.

"Yajirō."

"What's wrong, Yaichirō? Sounds like you've got a frog in your throat today. Come to lecture me over something or other?" Yajirō remarked flippantly. "I can't promise you I'll be able to give you what you're here for. After all, I am a frog."

Still hunched over the well, Yaichirō delivered his words into the darkness.

"Yajirō. I remember very well the day I last saw Father. That day, I accompanied Father to see the elders of the eastern side of the city. By the time we finished our business it was late in the day. We visited the tanuki of Gion last. After that, Father said that he had an important engagement to keep. 'You go on home first,' he told me. There was nothing uncommon about it, because, of course, he was always busy. He took me over to Higashiōji Street and saw me off at the bus stop, and then he went walking towards Shijō Bridge. I still think about that sight to this day, because it was the last time that I ever saw Father."

"Yaichirō..." Yajirō mumbled uncomfortably.

"I wanted to ask you when and where you last saw Father. Do you still recall that? I've heard a terrible story, just now, and I came all the way here because I just don't want to believe it. If you tell me it's not true, that will be the end of it. Well? Did you meet Father that night? Did you drink with him? Did you get drunk? And what of Father? Did you leave Father there, drunk, all alone? Tell me it's not true!"

There Yaichirō swallowed his voice and closed his eyes. He clenched his hands on the rim of the well, his feet spread wide and his head bowed, as if bracing himself to hear the answer from the bottom of the well.

After a silence, the sound of bursting bubbles came from down below.

"That's the truth of it, Yaichirō," I heard Yajirō say. "I'm the one who let Father die."

"Agh! What have you done!" Yaichirō collapsed by the side of the well. "You cursed, utter fool!"



Yajirō has always been infamous as the laziest tanuki in all of Kyoto. Respected by none, my useless layabout of a brother spent his days rolling around like a *daruma*, and the only time that he could be bothered to show motivation was when he was drinking. Father was also an aficionado of Faux Denki Bran, and the two often went into town to drink together.

The important engagement that Father had spoken of before he parted from Yaichirō had been with Yajirō. Father wouldn't normally have prevaricated so, but that day had been special, for Yajirō, who had inherited Father's carefree spirit and went where the wind took him, was struggling with a particular problem.

Father and Yajirō went drinking at a small tavern tucked away in an alley in Kiyamachi. The matter was one which they did not wish to leak out, and so Father had specially chosen a bar which was not frequented by tanuki, in order that they not be overheard. They sat face to face in a tatami room on the second floor, nursing their drinks.

Yajirō suffered from an unrequited love, one which would never be fulfilled, and he had confided in Father to seek his advice. The reason this love would never be realized was that the tanuki he had fallen in love with was still exceedingly young, and in fact already had a betrothed. His anguish came from the fact that this tanuki's fiancé was none other than his own younger brother. In other words, Yajirō's love was my own former fiancée, Ebisugawa Kaisei.

Over and over Yajirō told Father that he wanted to leave us and depart from Kyoto. But Father would not have any of it.

Surely someone who had pulled the wool over the eyes of tengu couldn't possibly have anything to fear, or so my brother had thought. But that day he learned that there was one thing which my Father feared—that his sons would grow apart, or worse, that they would come to hate one another. This was the fervent wish of Father, whose relationship with his own brother, Ebisugawa Sōun, had unhappily become one of mutual enmity.

"My blood is split between the four of you. If any one of you goes missing, the rest can never be whole. People say cruel things about you, but in all things there is equilibrium. I say to you, you are the weight that anchors our family, and don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise. You must not leave your brothers."

"But Father," Yajirō interrupted. "Does that mean I must continue to bear this burden?"

Father thought for a moment, then said, "I have an idea. I don't know if it will work, but for the moment leave everything to me. Just be patient for a little while longer."

After that, Father and Yajirō turned to the alcohol and drank their worries away. The hour was late by the time they stumbled out of the bar. As they wandered the streets singing daffy songs, Father turned to Yajirō and commanded, "Do your thing!"

Yajirō transformed into an Eizan railway car, a form with which at the time he often set Kyoto shaking, and letting Father aboard began to rumble through the night along the streets of Shijō. Astonishing drunkards and taunting police officers, Yajirō raced on and on, faster than the wind. Father transformed into Hotei and stood at the front of the car, his great belly wobbling as he convulsed with laughter. They had enjoyed these hijinks many times before, but this would be the last time Yajirō would transform into the train. The cold

December wind nipping at his flushed, alcohol-warmed body—the sparkling lights of the town reflecting off his windows—the pleasure of running on and on and on—Father, giving off great belly laughs, roaring in delight—Yajiro remembered it all. But that was all: his memories stopped there, glittering fragments suspended in the night.

The next day, Yajirō woke up in the Tadasu Forest, immobilized by a tremendous hangover. Father didn't even cross his mind, and he spent the day groaning in bed. It was nighttime by the time he learned that Father had not returned. He didn't know what had happened to Father after that.

Father didn't return that night, either, and the following day we learned that the Friday Fellows' year-end banquet had taken place the previous night.

Of course we all wept and wailed when we discovered he had been made into a stew, but I can't even begin to imagine what Yajirō had been going through. He must have been devastated. *I left Father, in the city, drunk and alone, to fall into the clutches of the Friday Fellows*, he had thought to himself.

Standing by the well listening to his confession, I thought back to everything that Yajirō had done after Father departed this world. I remembered how listless he became, and how he had lost even the will to drink. I remembered how he had mumbled, "Breathing is such a pain," and been kicked by Mother into the Kamo River. I remembered how he had been carried along by the river down to Gojō Bridge, how limp and sorrowful his body was when we dragged him up. And I remember him kicking us away as we tried to stop him from leaving the Tadasu Forest, and how terribly desolate he had looked.

Yaichirō and I listened to him silently. His voice grew quieter and quieter, becoming almost impossible to hear.

"I killed Father. It's just like everyone always said. I'm a completely worthless tanuki. And it's not even that I'm just useless, it's that I did something terrible which can't be undone. How could I possibly confess that to everyone? I couldn't go on like nothing had happened with the rest of you either. So I swallowed it all down inside me and became this frog in a well. I gave up on being a tanuki." Finally we heard him sobbing. "I can't look Mother in the eye ever again. I'm not fit to call myself a son!"



On the way back, Yaichirō said nothing and stared at the lights going by.

We had reached Demachiyanagi by the time we finally realized that we had left Master Akadama at the bathhouse.

"We'll have to go and fetch him," said Yaichirō, sounding exhausted and rubbing his eyes.

"That's alright. You head on back, and I'll go get him."

Yaichirō disembarked at the end of the Demachi Bridge, and I spurred the rickshaw on towards the bathhouse.

Even at this late hour, and later besides, the little curtain at the entrance still fluttered, indicating that the bathhouse was open. It looked to be very crowded, and clattering from within echoed out onto the street. I parted the curtain and nodded to the

lady at the counter before heading inside. The dressing room was jammed with young and old alike, and the terribly human smell of body odor mixed with tobacco smoke mixed with steam saturated the air.

In the midst of this frothing, bubbling clamor sat Master Akadama, glaring at the paneled ceiling as if mug shots of the Kurama tengu were pasted on it. In his left hand was a fistful of *kaki-pi* rice crackers, and in his right he clutched a can of beer. The large electric fan mounted on the wall revolved in his direction, ruffling the white hairs on his head. The sight was formidable, almost unearthly, and the other bathhouse guests seemed to be instinctively keeping him at a distance. Here, at least, he seemed to have retained some of his tengu majesty, if only a little.

The Master scowled when I knelt in front of his massage chair. "Neglecting your master," he harrumphed. "Do you mean for *me* to walk all the way back on my own?"

"Please accept my humblest apologies."

Enduring his curses and shows of reluctance, I dragged him out of the bathhouse and stuffed him onto the rickshaw. The wheels clicked quietly on the long dark road as I walked alongside. The thick padding in the Master's quilted coat made him look like a chubby toddler, and when I complimented it, the Master bragged, "Jealous, are you? Kaisei presented it to me."

"How come?"

"While you had impudently abandoned me and gone off to Osaka, Kaisei often came to see me. And by and by she mentioned that the weather was getting chilly and handed this coat over to me. That girl's language may be vile, but she is most discerning."

"So you don't care whether they're tanuki or human, as long as they're female, eh?"

"Silence!" spluttered the Master. "...I have very few pleasures left, very few."

We proceeded in silence.

Teramachi Street was awfully dark and deserted, and it seemed to stretch on forever. Stars twinkled cheerfully above in the exhilarating night sky. I walked along wordlessly, puffing out white breaths before me. Father had once puffed out white breath too, in the still, quiet predawn darkness of the Tadasu Forest. The murmuring of the brook and Father's sniffing as he breathed in the scent of winter rose into my mind. The fact that my recollection of this scene was so hazy made me feel wretched, and after these thoughts had taken up my mind for a while, I started to feel like I had done something that couldn't be undone. I was so overwhelmed by my failure to have appreciated it for all these years that I almost stopped dead in the street.

"Yasaburō," said the Master. "What is the matter? Your silence is most unsettling."

"I was just losing myself in memories of Father."

"Mammaries? What foolishness has come over you now?"

"Memories, Master, not mammaries."

"I see. Memories, not mammaries." The Master exhaled deeply. "And what of Sōichirō? Those who have passed on do not return, no matter how much you may wish it so. Thinking otherwise is what makes you such a fool."

"I just learned that the last person to meet Father was my brother Yajirō. I never had a clue. Father drank with him that night, and got drunk, and fell into the humans' hands."

"He fell into the stewpot, you mean."

"That is also true."

"All are bound to fall eventually in life, whether tengu or tanuki. The day may well come when even a tengu who soars the skies as he pleases falls and crashes into the roof of a building. It's a damned disagreeable world we live in. There is nothing strange about a tanuki falling into a stewpot. Sōichirō committed no fault to fall where he did."

"I know that already!" I said heatedly.

The Master was silent, like he was sulking, but when he at last spoke again his voice was gentle: "It was not Yajirō who last saw Sōichirō."



The night Father turned into a stew, Master Akadama was down at the Scarlet Pane in the Teramachi Street arcade, drinking wine alone. In a foul mood over Benten's failure to return to him, he was putting about bars he knew, hoping that she might be there. Of course, he had no way to know that Benten was currently with the Friday Fellows, gathering around Father's stew.

It's said that were all the tanuki in Kyoto to assemble at the Scarlet Pane, there would still be seats left unwarmed. That was because its underground depths continued onwards and inwards, and no one had ever seen the end of it. The further you went in, the more confined the space became, until it was so narrow it resembled nothing more than a gloomy tunnel.

The pub was filled with the clamor of both humans and tanuki transformed into humans alike, so the Master moved ever deeper in search of a seat, wine bottle in hand. He was so put out that Benten was not by his side that if any silly drunken jobber had gotten too loud he might well have raised a tengu gale then and there.

After he had gone in a considerable ways, he sat by a stove, warming himself and sipping his wine. He was too distant for the hubbub by the bar to reach him. Here, the only sounds were the soft crackling of the stove, and occasionally a strange jangling like the traditional ensemble of a faraway festival. The sound seemed strangely familiar to the Master. "I recall hearing it when I had my first bath after being born," the Master told me, but it was difficult for me to picture something that was basically ancient history. Besides, tanuki aren't in the custom of commemorating first baths.

The Master thought of Benten. At the time, she had gotten into the habit of leaving the Master without notice and enjoying herself with strange humans. The Master was deeply uneasy for he had heard that she would get on the Eizan line and go to Kurama, and he feared that she was being deceived by those Kurama tengu.

He had sunk deep into these misapprehensions, as well as into the wine, when something scurried past on the dark floor. He glanced over, surprised, to find a tanuki sitting there meekly, its eyes shining in the lamplight as it looked up at the Master. It was shivering despite its sleek coat of fur, probably because of how cold it was in the hallway, the Master assumed.

"Good evening, Master. Fancy seeing you here," said the tanuki.

"Sōichirō?" chuckled Master Akadama. "How cold it is here. What would you say to a glass?"

"Don't mind if I do, then, just the one."

Father clambered onto the chair on the other side of the table, then onto the table itself, and sat there fidgeting with his paws. Master Akadama thought it odd that Father didn't try to transform into something more convenient. He asked why, to which Father replied, "I am no longer in any shape to transform." Master Akadama poured a glass of wine and offered it to Father, who cradled it gingerly and lapped it up with his tongue. "My final drink," he said finally, wiping his mouth. "Thank you."

Master Akadama looked evenly at him.

"Sōichirō, have you died?" he asked.

"I regret to inform you that I was just made into a stew."

The Master took back the glass of wine from Father and downed it in one go. "What foolishness you have wrought upon yourself!"

"Don't be so hasty with your words. This is a path that all come to walk."

"Have I not told you to be restrained with your mischief?"

"That's not something done so easily, seeing that I'm a tanuki. It's just my fool's blood talking."

After this, Father spoke of many things. Of how he had taken instruction under Master Akadama when he was young. Of how the Master had scolded him for falling out with his younger brother, Ebisugawa Sōun. Of how the Master had helped him meet Mother. How he had taught the Kurama tengu a lesson. Of how he hoped to send all four of his children to study under the Master, and how he hoped the Master would take special care with the third, Yasaburō.

"Pray give him all the guidance that he will require."

"That one is a scoundrel, I know. His foolishness reminds me of his father. But do you not think it exceeds yours, perhaps too much so?"

"Indeed that may be so...but I have great faith in him. I know he will be a great nuisance, but still, I beg you to give him your favor. I do not doubt that one day he will be of great service to you."

"Very well."

Father jumped off the table. "I think it is time I was on my way."

"Sōichirō," Master Akadama suddenly interjected. "I shan't say this to another soul...but am very sorry, to see you go."

"I am very glad to have heard that. I shall treasure this memory, in the afterlife," Father chortled, his fur rippling in waves. He stood erect and offered a furry paw to the Master. The Master stooped down and took his paw, and they shook hands in goodbye. Father drew himself up then, and said, "Farewell, Master. I, Shimogamo Sōichirō, am departing on a journey, by your leave. My life has had its share of troubles, but on the whole it was an enjoyable one. I am eternally indebted to Master Yakushibō of Nyoigatake, for the great kindness he has bestowed on me over these many years."

Master Akadama watched as Father proceeded down that long hallway to the next world. Further and further he went in, until the gleaming sheen of his fur disappeared into

the darkness. The Master sat there alone, drinking the rest of the wine, until he heard that strange jangling sound again. It was the sound of a farewell.

"A fool he was, until the very end," said the Master. "It's a pity that he was born a tanuki."

And thus, Father departed.



I brought Master Akadama back to his apartment behind the Demachi shopping arcade, swiping a bottle of Akadama port wine on my way out. Parking the rickshaw by the Demachi Bridge I went down to the Kamo Delta. The sky was gloriously clear. Flowing down from the north, the Kamo and Takano Rivers glowed silver, reflecting the lights of the city. On such a chilly night there was no one in sight. I sat down at the tip of the delta and drank the wine. My head started to pound as the alcohol took effect, and swaying unsteadily I murmured "Oh, Yajirō" and "Oh Father" as my head drooped lower and lower. The cold wind moaned.

Finally, unable to withstand the freezing cold, I returned to the Tadasu Forest.

As I moved along the shrine road between the dense trees, the lights of the shrine came into view up ahead. Mother and Yashirō were sitting under that wavering light, looks of worry on their faces. Seeing me coming towards them they waved halfheartedly, and Mother beckoned me to come quickly.

"What happened?" asked Mother when I stepped off the rickshaw, her voice filled with worry. "Yaichirō came back with oh, such a dreadful look on his face, but he wouldn't say anything!"

"We went to see Yajirō."

"And then? Did you have an argument?"

Without another word I headed into the trees, returning to my tanuki form. Dead leaves crunched beneath my paws. Mother and Yashirō followed close behind.

Yaichirō was curled up in his bed, motionless. He didn't seem to be sleeping, and when I went up beside him I could smell in the air the scent of his tears.

"Yaichirō," I called, but he seemed to have been struck dumb. He was curled up facing away from me, but I could tell that he was listening.

"Mother's worried," I said. "Say something to her."

At last he stirred and exhaled heavily. "Mother," he muttered.

"What is it?" said Mother, coming up to his side. "What's wrong?"

"Did you know, Mother?"

"Know what?"

"Why Yajirō shut himself in the well."

Mother looked at me, her wet nose glistening. I said nothing but nodded. Mother returned her gaze to Yaichirō, and thought for a while. I noticed her demeanor become tranquil as a lake. *Ah, so Mother did know*, I thought to myself.

"He is my child. I'd feel terrible if I didn't know," she said.

A shiver went through Yaichirō's fur, but he did not reply.

Mother nestled up beside him and softly murmured, "Please, Yaichirō. Don't be so hard on him." Her quiet voice penetrated through the cold darkness of the forest, and into my and Yashirō's chests. Yashirō was prodding his nose into my back, warming it like a hot water bottle. We listened silently to Mother's words.

"I understand him. I understand that child," she repeated. "And if you're his brother, you should try to understand how he feels, too."

"I do understand, Mother. He's my little brother. I understand that, too." Yaichirō said, still curled into a ball. "I do understand, and that's why it hurts."

Chapter 6 — The Machinations of Ebisugawa Sōun

After Father's death, the tanuki of Kyoto began to refer to us brothers as fools who had squandered the inheritance of their great father's blood. Gossipy and malicious though they were, even a broken clock is right twice a day. But the charge that Father's blood had evaporated into thin air was born out of sheer resentment. In any event all tanuki are more or less fools. And what's more, the fact that we are fools is proof more than anything else that Father's blood runs through our veins. After Father reached the summit of the tanuki world, his foolishness grew worse and worse until at last he was put into a stew.

Mother had once instructed us, "Your Father was a great tanuki; I'm sure that he was laughing all the way into the pot, and what a delicious stew it must have been. You must all aspire to become tanuki just like him." But she had also said, "You must never find out for yourself what kind of stew you would make."

Foolishness is next to godliness—we all took pride in that idea. *Fool if you watch, fool if you prance, if you're a fool either way, then you might as well dance*⁸, as the old chant goes, and I intended to dance as skillfully as I could manage it.

Not once have we ever been ashamed of the fool's blood that flows thickly through our veins. Pleasure or pain, happiness or sorrow: everything we taste in our journey through this halcyon world is brought about by our fool's blood. Our father, and his father, and his father before him: the fool's blood spoke through each generation of the Shimogamo clan in turn, and at times they transformed into humans, or brought tengu low, or fell into bubbling iron pots. Far be it for us to be ashamed, for this is something to boast and be proud of.

Though our fool's blood may bring us to tears, even then we are proud of it, and it is in this that the repute of our family lies.



Winter trudged on day by day, and the dead leaves by the road blew restlessly hither and thither, east and west.

The day on which the next head of tanuki society would be chosen drew fretfully close. From what I heard, Yaichirō was so worked to the bone making the rounds greeting tanuki bigwigs and giving addresses at shady underground organizations (such as the Society for the Discreet Denunciation of Ebisugawa Sōun) and navigating the web of time-honored, esoteric ceremonies of tanuki society that he hardly had time to shut his eyes.

In the opposite corner, his mortal enemy and uncle: Ebisugawa Sōun. He was the owner of the Faux Denki Bran distillery, and not a few tanuki had been enticed by the

⁸A chant used to keep time in the traditional Awa-Odori dance.

sweet fumes of moonshine to throw their support behind him. But even those drunkards readily admitted there was no telling the harm he would do if he were elected head. "That crafty feller is always looking for it anywhere he can get it," they said. "Give him the chance and he'll suck the teat dry!"

That was where Yaichirō was hoping to get his shot. My brother was so straight-laced that he could never be so shrewd as to attempt to fill his own pockets by graft, something that many found frankly astonishing.

All over Kyoto, whether in Gosho, Nanzenji, Gion, Kitayama, Tanukifudō, or Mount Yoshida, opinions of Yaichirō and Sōun were equally divided. The task of compiling all these disparate views and making a decision fell to the elders of Ōtō, a cabal of tanuki so elderly that they were apt to be mistaken for the dust bunnies one might find lurking beneath a seat cushion.

This winter, anywhere you found a gaggle of tanuki you were bound to hear them talking about two things. One was the upcoming election, and the other was the Friday Fellows' tanuki stew.

Two heads are better than one, or so they say, and yet when it came to the tyranny of the Friday Fellows no one seemed to be able to come up with any ideas. The tanuki of Kyoto saw the tumultuous happening at the end of the year as a regular, unavoidable natural disaster. Of course this was a misconception through and through, for the Friday Fellows were nothing if not a manmade disaster, but nevertheless the tanuki faced it with a glum sense of resignation.

"There's nothing wrong with humans eating tanuki," Yajirō had once said. I think he meant it in a spiritual sort of sense, but furballs who wriggle along the ground with butts held low are hardly wont to give thought to lofty things like spirituality.

That is to say, we are fools one and all.

Each time the end of the year approaches, all the tanuki in Kyoto think to themselves, "What are the chances that it'll be me?" Once someone does get eaten, the rest of them tremble and weep, before putting it from mind just as quickly. It's the same story year after year. We all indulge in our natural slugabed ways, averting our eyes from the manmade tragedy before us. Yet for all that, we are terrified of it, and few are the tanuki who can hear the name of the Friday Fellows without shedding their transformations in fear. Just try going to any street corner and shouting out, "The Friday Fellows are coming!" Without fail every tanuki in earshot will drop into a deep, feigned sleep.

Tanuki are a long way away from being able to perceive the will of heaven and accept fate.

Not that I claim to be an exception.



Adhering to the principle of nonviolent resistance gradually wears on you, however. Surely a little scheming here and there doesn't hurt.

I made up my mind to scout out the movements of the Friday Fellows.

Mother looked worried, and Yaichirō admonished me, "Don't do anything rash!" Yashirō was already quivering in fear.

"I'll go to see Mr. Yodogawa and sound things out with him."

"Are you sure you'll be alright?"

"Don't worry about me, I always feel better when I go out to face things head on."

I transformed into my favorite form, the Unkempt Undergrad. The neighborhood of Hyakumanben was in fact full of other unkempt undergrads, owing to the presence of Kyoto University, so no one would pay me any particular mind.

I left the Tadasu Forest and crossed the Takano River, relying on the crumpled business card the Professor had given me to navigate past Hyakumanben. The Professor's lab was located smack in the middle of the school of agriculture. I walked through the north gate onto campus, where innumerable fallen ginkgo leaves turned the path golden, swirling in the biting wind. I shivered. With lectures over for the calendar year, the number of students roaming the campus had dwindled, leaving behind an air of desolation.

Professor Yodogawa's lab was on the third floor of the agriculture building. I knocked and entered. It was a spacious room, with desks lining the walls and a large brown table with an electric kettle taking up the center. Around this table sat Professor Yodogawa and a male student wearing a white lab coat, gnawing at a tree stump. *But of course they would have tree trunks for their afternoon tea! This is Professor Yodogawa's lab, after all!* I marveled to myself for a moment, before I took a closer look and realized that the tree trunk was really an oversized baumkuchen.

"What a fascinating idea, Suzuki," said the Professor, talking in between chews. "But it's not a fart of use."

"You're right, it's not worth a fart. What fun life would be if things only had to be interesting."

And the two of them laughed.

The pair finally looked my way when I called out. "Blechmee!" the Professor gaped, his face brightening around his baumkuchen-filled mouth. "It's you!"

"I brought the photograph I took that day."

"Photograph? When did you take it?"

"It was up on the rooftop..."

"Ah! Yes! The couples shot with her, what a precious thing!"

"The student squinted at him. "What do you mean, couples shot? Is this some kind of raunchy business? Are you having an affair?"

"What on earth do you mean, an affair? I would most certainly never do anything raunchy!"

"Sure, sure. I'm not going to poke my head into your private life. Goodbye, Professor. I have a lot of not-worth-a-fart things to deal with." The student hastily stuffed the remnants of the baumkuchen into his mouth. "And I wouldn't want to accidentally spend New Year's here in the lab."

And with that parting shot Suzuki left the lab.

I took out the photo, a memento of that autumn night when the three of us had escaped the Friday Fellows' gathering and wandered the rooftops of Teramachi. The photo

captured the Professor sitting by that red-leaved tree with a huge grin, while beside him sat Benten with the most listless of smiles. The composition was quite well done, if I do say so myself. During my time working for Konkobu of Iwayasan at the used camera shop, I hadn't missed the opportunity to polish my photography chops.

The Professor shrieked like a schoolgirl as he looked at the photo, his eyes glittering. "Oh, that's breathtaking! Yes, the leaves too I suppose, but Benten! It's like she descended upon us from heaven!"

After discussing the events of that night, including the finer details of Benten's beauty, I asked, "How are the preparations for the tanuki stew coming along?"

The Professor frowned and shook his head. "Not so well, wouldn't you know," he sighed. "And it went so well last time, too. I could never live it down to my pop if I got kicked out!"

The responsibility for preparing the tanuki stew each year rotated among each member of the Friday Fellows. Here, preparing didn't mean standing in the kitchen; rather, it referred to the task of obtaining the finest, freshest ingredients for the stew. Since there were only seven members, that meant that each member of the Friday Fellows had to gather their wits and catch a tanuki once every seven years. If this had merely been a confederacy of dunces the tanuki of Kyoto would have been safe, but unhappily the Friday Fellows were clever, one and all. As far as I knew, they had never failed to enjoy a tanuki stew at a single one of the year-end parties, and this year the duty had fallen to Professor Yodogawa to proclaim a death sentence over some poor tanuki.

"Don't you think it would be best to end this uncivilized practice of eating tanuki?"

"I'm sure that would never do."

"You love them, don't you? How can you stand to eat things you find so dear?"

"I said, didn't I? I love them so much I just want to eat them up."

"Doesn't your heart break for them?"

"Well sure it does, but I eat anyway. I eat them because eating is love."

"Think about this, then. You saved a tanuki's life once, didn't you? The cute little thing that kept looking over its shoulder at you as it scooted back into the mountains. Could you still eat the stew if it were that tanuki floating in there?"

"What a horrible thing to think of. You're a villain!" the Professor grimaced. "I...I couldn't say, not unless it were right in front of me!"

"There, see? You say you'll eat this tanuki, but you won't eat that one. If you're going to say that you spread your love all tanuki unconditionally, you can't pick and choose like that. That's a double standard!"

"Now I didn't say I wouldn't eat it, I said I didn't know. Maybe I would eat it. And love isn't bound to the rules of logic anyhow. Love isn't fair!"

"Sophistry! That's sophistry!"

"They always did have high hopes for me as a young man in the sophistry club. But this is a tricky issue to get out of and no mistake!" pondered the Professor. "At any rate why are you so interested in the welfare of tanuki?"

"And why are you so fixated on the Friday Fellows? You'd be much better off quitting that bunch."

"It doesn't do to be so rash. As a student you can say whatever you like, but the world of adults is a complicated place. There's always more to things than meets the eye."

"Human society really is bizarre, isn't it?"

"Some things you're better off not knowing about. Anything that you need to know about you'll eventually learn, and if you can get away without knowing about something then all the better."

"Well, in any case I hope it all works out for you."

"Thanks, I'll do my best."

I averted my eyes as I spoke, though, and I was hopeful that perhaps the Professor would fail to catch a tanuki after all.



Just past the point where you turn from the canyon of office buildings on Karasuma Street onto Rokkaku Street is the 18th out of the 33 temples of the Saigoku Kannon pilgrimage, Shiunzan Chōhōji. It is commonly known as the Rokkakudō for its famous hexagonal temple building, but there is one other famous landmark on its grounds. That landmark is the Keystone, a six-sided rock that is also known as the Navel Stone. The word "navel" refers to the center of Kyoto, because it is said that when Emperor Kammu built his capital here, he laid out the city using this rock as a reference point.

Some people scoff, "How do you expect me to believe that? I mean, that was over 1200 years ago!" To these people I say that that is not the most unbelievable thing about it.

The Navel Stone does not exist.

Then what is that funny six-sided rock plopped down on the grounds of Hōchōji? It is not the Navel Stone but a fake, and in fact is not a rock at all but merely a tanuki pretending to be one.

"That's ridiculous!" many people will say.

"That's ridiculous!" I thought as a young pup. "It's just a rock. It doesn't even have any hair! You're just trying to pull a fast one on me!"

At that age I was brittle as glass, and always looking for a fight. As a little daredevil with a chip on my shoulder I crept into Hōchōji at night and set to work pestering the rock any way I could.

I tickled it with a peacock feather I had swiped from a used good store in Teramachi; I set a giant ball of ice on top of it; I showed it photos from a tanuki girly magazine; I presented it with plates of the most heavenly-smelling, mouthwatering yakitori. This was all out of pure curiosity, of course. If the famous Navel Stone really was a tanuki, then I reasoned that it would give itself away and send its tail shooting out. In the end I was apprehended attempting to impertinently smoke it out.

My youthful shenanigans sent shockwaves throughout the tanuki world. I received a scorcher of a scolding from the elders, which many claimed was the worst tongue-lashing in a quarter-century, and as a result of the fright I slept for two weeks afterwards.

I still remember what happened very well.

I fanned the burning pine needles with a rigid fan varnished with persimmon juice⁹, until at last the smoke-enveloped Navel Stone began to quiver like a bowl of pudding. With a whoosh a brown tail-like thing came sprouting out, and the Navel Stone turned into something that resembled a wobbling cushion. My eyes opened wide in surprise, but before I could do anything else I was caught in a net and pushed to the ground, so I didn't get to see what happened to the Navel Stone after that.

It was a full half year after that forbidden escapade before I was allowed to pass the gates of Hōchōji again. The Navel Stone sat there before me, looking like nothing more or less than a rock.

With tears in my eyes I knelt on the ground and apologized for my rudeness to the Navel Stone, as the sun set on that summer evening.



The Navel Stone is highly revered, and as such it must be informed whenever the torch is passed at the top of the tanuki world. Hence, all the bigwigs were to assemble at the Rokkakudō.

To kill the time until the gathering was to commence, I read magazines at a nearby convenience store before heading off west down Rokkaku Street. The city was embraced in the crisp air of winter, and the sky was bracingly clear and blue. I pushed open the door of a café at the intersection with Higashinotōin Street, to find Mother and Yaichirō sitting inside meekly. Yaichirō was in his young master's form wearing traditional robes, while Mother cut a dashing figure as a young man straight out of the Takarazuka.

Looking irritated that I had taken so long to join them, Yaichirō started griping and bringing up the past. "We'll be lucky if the Navel Stone isn't in a foul mood."

"But it's been a long time since then, don't you think? The Navel Stone has gotten its proper due since then, I'm sure it'll be quite pleased."

"Don't be so naive, Mother. Yasaburō will get cocky again if you say things like that."

The Navel Stone is an unreasonably patient tanuki, so much so that the likes of peacock feathers and yakitori couldn't force it to raise a peep. If it were not so, it could never stand to stay in the form of a rock day in and day out. Yet that virtuosic shapeshifting skill proved, if anything, to be a curse, because the tanuki of Kyoto avoided it on the pretense of showing it respect, treating it more like a pebble lying at the side of the road. It was only when my shenanigans revealed it to be an actual tanuki that other tanuki started to visit it in droves once more, realizing that this tanuki was actually pretty impressive after all.

"Sounds like the ol' pine needle smokehouse treatment paid off for the Navel Stone in the end, didn't it?"

Hearing this, Yaichirō huffed, "Things like this are why you are such a good-for-nothing. Keep those thoughts to yourself inside the Rokkakudō!"

⁹ Fans that undergo this process are known as shibu-uchiwa; the varnish makes the fan more durable and heat resistant.

At long last my adorable little brother showed up having rushed over from his apprenticeship at the Faux Denki Bran distillery.

"You're late!" snapped Yaichirō.

"Sorry," Yashirō mumbled.

"Shouldn't the distillery have been off today?" I asked, at which Yashirō's cheeks swelled up in resentment.

"Kinkaku and Ginkaku were mean and made me do all this dumb stuff!"

"Never mind, never mind," cooed Mother reassuringly. "Stupid is as stupid does."

"Exactly!" Yaichirō and I agreed.

It was under this harmonious atmosphere of mutual accord that our family rose and departed for the Rokkakudō.

From far and wide the tanuki of Kyoto had come, jostling before the great *senjafuda*-covered¹⁰ gates. Those unable to make their way into the temple proper crowded in the parking lot and the bell tower across the street. Some disguised themselves as sushi delivery men, or clad themselves in monks' robes, or impersonated the ladies of Kyoto Notre Dame University, or even pretended to be foreign tourists. It was a veritable exposition of transformation.

Men in black suits stood in formation before the gate, letting in who they chose and turning the rest away. They all wore yellow armbands that read, "EBISUGAWA". We surveyed them with displeasure, guessing them to be the Ebisugawa Guard Corps and underlings of Kinkaku and Ginkaku. Just as we had feared when we attempted to enter the temple they challenged us and began to quibble, claiming that they didn't recognize our transformations and demanding that we prove we were members of the Shimogamo clan. Of course, this argument was entirely farcical.

Mother softly growled her favorite phrase, "Go to hell!"; a vein throbbed furiously on Yaichirō's forehead; I shoved my body wordlessly up against the men, chest to chest; and Yashirō backed away and rolled into a small ball.

"Go home!"

"No, *you* go home!"

While our ripostes flew pointlessly back and forth, the crowds before the gate only swelled. Thankfully, the head of the Nanzenji clan soon arrived and gave the Ebisugawa Guard Corps a stern talking-to, defusing the situation.

As we passed through the gate, Nanzenji chuckled serenely at Yaichirō. "Hard times, eh, Yaichirō?"

"I am deeply ashamed."

"He's a real piece of work, that Ebisugawa, but today isn't a day to be quarreling."

A ray of light pierced through the winter sky between the office buildings, coming to rest on the Rokkakudō.

Smoke curled up from sticks of incense beneath the solemn eaves, occasionally set whirling by gusts of wind. The drooping branches of the large willow tree in front of the Rokkakudō swayed gently.

¹⁰ Paper slips that are affixed to shrine and temple buildings by pilgrims and worshippers.

I cast a glance across the temple and saw tanuki staring up at the swaying branches, or pretending to be *warabejizō*¹¹, or wailing as they fled the snapping swans in the pond, or spreading out sheets under the eaves and eating bentos, or clambering up the moss-covered camphor trees, none of them bothering to hide their tanuki natures.

Only the area by the willow where the Navel Stone was enthroned was calm; here, important tanuki were doing their best to look stern and dignified. Pushed on by Mother, Yaichirō pushed through the crowd and approached them. I saw Ebisugawa Sōun look up, glaring at him.

We stood in a corner and watched the proceedings unfold over the packed temple grounds. A pigeon flew over from the handwashing basin, which Mother flapped her hands at to shoo away. "No! Scram! Don't poop here!"

Finding itself unwelcome, the pigeon flew off.

I gazed up at the Ikebonō building¹² towering to the north of the Rokkakudō. Just north of it on Karasuma Street was the Rakutenkai building, which was owned jointly by the tengu of Kyoto. On the roof of this building there was a grand old cherry tree, and during spring it would shower the surrounding buildings with falling cherry blossoms. It had been in the midst of one such flurry of flower petals that I first laid eyes on the woman known as Benten.

Nestled up to Master Akadama as she watched the cherry blossoms float through the air, she had seemed as pure and chaste as you could imagine, not letting the tiniest hint of the true nature that would one day out-tengu the tengu themselves show through that facade. It felt these days that the girl of old had been no more than a dream. At the time I had often visited the Master on behalf of Father, and that had been the reason that a lowly tanuki such as myself had nearly fallen in love with a half-tengu.

"Father never did visit Master Akadama much back then, did he? And I thought they got along so well, too."

"But didn't you and Yaichirō go in his place?"

"Even so, I know the Master was lonely. He never once asked for Father to come, but I'm sure that was because he was too proud."

"Oh, Master Akadama is hopeless, isn't he? Him always being with Benten. Sō never did like being around her."

"She was such a sweet girl back then, though. I'm surprised a tanuki like Father would be so afraid."

"I guess it wouldn't do any harm to talk about it now..." Mother began. "Once, Master Akadama took Benten to the forest. All of a sudden, Sō just couldn't transform anymore. He tried and he tried, but he was so anxious with Benten being there that his transformations just came right off. And he was the best tanuki in Kyoto when it came to transforming!"

"I've never heard this story before."

"He kept it a secret from his entire family, you know. Only Master Akadama and Benten know about it."

¹¹ Small statues resembling children that depict the guardian bodhisattva Jizō.

¹² Headquarters of the Ikebonō flower arranging school, which was founded at the Rokkakudō in the 15th century.

"Is it like how your transformations come off when you hear thunder?"

"After that Sō always avoided Benten. And back then the Master took her with him everywhere he went."

"So that's why me and Yaichirō started going in his place?"

"That pretty much sums it up." Mother sighed. "Master Akadama must have been lonely, but that was all his own doing. I think Sō must have felt even sadder than he did."



A procession of tanuki emerged from the gate with a flourish of trumpets. Walking in the middle of the retinue was the distinguished tanuki who had taken over the reins of the tanuki world from Father, Yasaka Heitarō.

The garish Hawaiian shirt he wore despite the fact that it was winter spoke eloquently to how eager he was to foist the duties of Trick Magister on someone else and set off to some tropical island. His tendency of looking perpetually distracted probably had to do with the fact that his thoughts had long since left behind the world of tanuki and were running along a beach somewhere—the sun sinking below the horizon—waves breaking and retreating on the sand—a large muscled man and his lady friend laughing and throwing coconuts at each other.

Trailing along behind Heitarō came the elders, carried along atop fluffy cushions. They had all neglected their chance to depart from this world and no longer had the strength to transform, but freed from the fetters of being tanuki they now enjoyed their little furball lives. We come into this world as furballs, and depart from it as the same. It almost seems as if there is some deep meaning here, but chances are there isn't any.

"Close the gates!"

The Ebisugawa Guard Corps shut the gate to prevent outsiders from getting in.

With all these tanuki squashed shoulder to shoulder in the narrow temple, something was bound to go wrong.

A great hullabaloo rose up just before the beginning of the assembly. One of the temple pigeons decided to pick up a furball and carry it off into the sky for fun, sending the cushion-bearers into a panic and the other furballs tumbling. We all worked together to chase down the pigeon and retrieve the elder from its beak, but the elder was completely unfazed and simply wheezed, "I'm alright, I'm alright!" Such was the impressive mindset of an elder, but the task of returning the other elders to their proper cushions proved to be more difficult. Being that they were all furballs, it was impossible to tell them apart.

At last calm was restored to the temple. Heitarō stood in front of the Navel Stone in his Hawaiian shirt. Yaichirō and Sōun sat beside him, while the elders sat down encircling them, and the remaining tanuki pressed in all around them.

"Silence, please." Yasaka struck his belly with a hollow *pong*. "This meeting is now in session. I would like to express thanks to Shiunzan Chōhōji for extending us special permission to have this meeting. I greatly appreciate the elders taking time out of their busy schedules to attend. I have the great pleasure of announcing that the Navel Stone has

graciously offered some prepared remarks to commemorate this occasion. Please stand up as I read them."

In unison, the tanuki in the temple stood up.

"The weather is getting cold, so be careful not to catch cold. Colds are bad mojo! Thank you."

In unison, the tanuki in the temple bowed and sat down.

Yasaka Heitarō bowed once to the Navel Stone, then turned and surveyed the audience.

"The sudden death of my predecessor, Shimogamo Sōichirō, was an unprecedented shock, and an unprecedented loss for the tanuki community. Even now, the sorrow and grief remain as strong and fresh in my heart as they were that day, and I am certain that the same is true for you all. Shimogamo Sōichirō was an extraordinary tanuki, the likes of whom we shall not see again. I can still hardly believe that I, an utterly ordinary tanuki, was chosen to take his place. And it was only with the support of all of you here, and all tanuki in and around Kyoto, that I was able to fulfill the duties of this great office. I humbly offer my profound gratitude to all."

Applause.

"Now." Heitarō cleared his throat and looked at Yaichirō and Sōun meaningfully. "Shimogamo Yaichirō and Ebisugawa Sōun have put forth their names to succeed the office of Trick Magister. Here I would like to formally announce their candidacies to the great Navel Stone."

Yaichirō and Sōun stood up, and after exchanging glances of pure hatred, bowed their heads to the assembled tanuki, prompting cries and whistles of support from the crowd. "Silence!" shouted Heitarō, thumping his belly.

Following this, Yaichirō and Sōun turned to the Navel Stone and bowed deeply, then approached it and gave it the briefest of touches.

More applause.

The two returned to their seats, and Heitarō allowed a satisfied smile to come to his face.

"The Navel Stone has been duly notified. I now have several announcements for upcoming events that I would like to put to a vote. Firstly, the elders' meeting is scheduled to be held on the night of December 26th, at Sensuirō in Kiyamachi. Are there any objections?"

The tanuki in the temple were silent.

"Then I will register no objections. Next, one further order of business. It is our tradition to invite the lord of the Kurama tengu as an observer to the election of the next head of the tanuki world. However, we have received word from Teikinbō of the Kurama tengu that due to the poor condition of his stomach he will not be able to attend. When informed that we wished to extend an invitation to another of the tengu lords to attend the election, he replied, 'Have Yakushibō do it!' Therefore I would like to extend an invitation to the election to Yakushibō of Nyoigatake. Are there any objections?"

Many in the crowd shrugged in puzzlement, but nobody raised a voice in dissent.

"I register no objections. Then the elders' meeting will take place on the night of December 26th at Sensuirō in Kiyamachi, and an invitation will be sent to Yakushibō of Nyoigatake for the election. That is all."

Nobody moved. Heitarō frowned and sat there absentminded for a moment, before finally noticing and declaring, "Henceforth today's meeting is adjourned!"

The crowd bowed down to the ground in a rolling wave, before coming to life like a thousand frothing bubbles.



The scarlet leaves had largely scattered from the trees in the city, but from a distance the mountains that rose up around the valley were still draped in luxuriant hues of red and gold. Though surrounded by the warm colors of the mountains, the city steadily became chillier. Even the pine trees that lined the Kamo Delta had been wrapped with straw mats to prepare for the bitter cold of the Kyoto winter.

Looking at the pines I recalled how Yaichirō used to go around ripping off the straw mats whenever he was in a mood. These days, as the head of the Shimogamo clan he would loudly urge his useless younger brothers along, or at least try to, yet even he had once let himself become preoccupied in useless vices of his own. Being violently stripped of their protective straw mats was rough for the pine trees, but it was rough for me too, because I was the one who had to go around wrapping them back up.

December 26th, the day of the election of the Trick Magister, also happened to be the day that Father was made into stew.

Each time that day approached, Mother would become noticeably tense.

I would take her to the billiards hall by the west end of the Kamo Bridge, but her heart wouldn't be in it. I would show her pictures of the Takarazuka, but she would only sniff. Whenever Yaichirō and Yashirō were away from the forest she would worry about whether they would come home safely, and the same was true whenever I was away as well.

One day Yashirō didn't come home from the Faux Denki Bran distillery, so I waited with Mother, shuffling back and forth along the shrine path. Mother's cell phone dangled around her neck. A considerable length of time had passed since Yashirō called to say that he had left the distillery.

"It's a good thing that Yajirō is a frog in a well," she said, scanning the entrance to the shrine.

"Why's that?"

"Because I don't have to worry about a frog being made into tanuki stew. If he hadn't been a frog then I would have had one more child to worry about, and then I might really go crazy!"

"Why don't you stop Yashirō going to the distillery? We can live without money. After all, we're tanuki."

"That's not going to happen," Mother snapped, her butt wiggling in fury. "It was Sō who asked them to train Yashirō, and I couldn't withdraw from that agreement just

because I feel like it. And you know what kinds of things Ebisugawa would say if Yashirō were to quit halfway. I just couldn't stand it! And besides, if he did quit, where would I get the money to buy tickets to the Takarazuka?"

"I could lend you the money. I've still got some saved up from the camera store."

"You know, though, Yashirō said he couldn't stand to run away either," Mother smiled. "I'm so proud of him."

"I guess even Yashirō couldn't stay a baby forever. But I know if it were me, I couldn't bear to work for Kinkaku and Ginkaku at the factory for even three days."

"Sō knew that, and that's why he didn't arrange to have you work there. But you need to stop slacking off and learn a trade too! While you're at it, make some money too, so you can buy me tickets to the Takarazuka."

"But I thought you didn't feel like going to the theater?"

"Well, now's really not the time to go. But after the new year begins I plan to go again."

While we were talking, Yashirō showed up at the entrance to the shrine and started to trot towards us. Mother heaved a massive sigh of relief.

Yaichirō's late returns were another source of concern for Mother. As if he felt some sort of fateful connection with that date, December 26th, he was still soldiering on all over the tanuki world running his campaign. Always worrying about him, Mother took Yashirō and me to the discount store at the shopping arcade and bought mountains of energy drinks, forcing them on a reluctant Yaichirō.

"I can't drink any more, Mother!" he shrieked. "My nose is going to start bleeding!"

"A nosebleed means you're drinking the right amount," Mother said unreasonably, lining up another row of energy drinks. "After all, this time it's do or die."



A fine, grey drizzle fell on Kyoto all through the day of the winter solstice. It was the kind of day that made your butt unpleasantly chilly.

As furry as we are, tanuki find winter rain quite unpleasant. Yaichirō and Yashirō went out early in the morning, but I refrained. Wandering around outside and getting your butt drenched is sheer folly; the only thing to do on a day like this is roll around under the protective umbrella of the trees.

I was buried in the dead leaves nibbling on a *daifuku* mochi, protecting my hindquarters assiduously, when Mother called for me.

"Yaichirō just called. Be a dear and run to Master Akadama's for me."

I burrowed deeper into the leaves. "I'm a little, uh, occupied at the moment."

"Looks like you're just keeping your butt warm to me."

"Cold butts are the root of all evil, Mother. Keeping warm is important!"

"Master Akadama is saying that he doesn't want to attend the election. He's moaning and whining and making a scene."

"But it was Yasaka who proposed sending him an invitation. Sounds like it's a done deal already."

"But it isn't, since it was all so sudden. Everyone's worried, and Yaichirō thought the Master might listen to you."

"Oh, so now that it's convenient for him I'm suddenly useful again? Look, I'm not that close with the Master!"

"Well I told him I'd send you to the Master right away. So off you go. Go on, go on!"

Mother brushed away the dead leaves and kicked me out from under the tree. The tanuki version of tiger parenting involves kicking out their children from their warm leaf beds into the freezing winter rain, a thoroughly vicious act of cruelty. I attempted to wriggle back in, prompting Mother to aim another kick at my behind.

"Fine, I'm going, I'm going!"

"Honestly, thinking of warming your own butt when your brother's in trouble!" Mother fumed. "Oh, and make sure to buy some energy drinks from the Demachi shopping arcade on your way back. Yaichirō could always use more."

Bidding my comfortable bed farewell, I left the Tadasu Forest and headed out towards the shopping arcade.

Passing north over the Aoi Bridge I saw cottony clouds strung out over the distant mountains. Grey waters rushed by magnificently beneath the bridge. I concentrated on angling my umbrella, doing everything I could to ensure that my butt stayed dry.

The sound of the rain echoed through the shopping arcade as I turned into the alley and walked towards the Masugata Court Apartments, where I found a line of visitors snaking out of the Master's room and all the way down the stairs, jostling and shoving each other. The fact that they had all transformed into human forms made no difference to the Master, who of course was so put out by the presence of so many tanuki that he refused to listen to even the most reasonable of proposals.

I pushed my way through, saying, "Hello, Yasaburō here, pardon me, Yasaburō coming through," and a whisper started through the entire crowd: "Yasaburō's here!"

Shoving my way up the stairs, I entered the Master's tiny apartment.

Master Akadama was sitting cross-legged in his yellowed underwear, his back facing the entrance to the room, scrutinizing the wall scroll as he plucked his nose hairs. Bottles of Akadama port wine were lined up before the tatami in hopeful offering, and the hallway from the kitchen to the front door was packed with important tanuki prostrating themselves on the floor, leaving nary a place to set foot.

"Whoops, 'scuse me there."

"Watch where you're stepping, Yasaburō!" came a hiss, and I looked down to see that I had trod on none other than Yaichirō.

"How's it looking?"

"He won't budge an inch. I've sent for additional offerings, but I'm out of ideas. He's squeezing us dry!"

"I can hear you, Yaichirō," said Master Akadama. Yaichirō started and fell on his face again, while the other tanuki backed towards the entrance. I sat on my heels and scooted forward, stopping at the edge of the tatami.

"Master. It is I, Shimogamo Yasaburō, come to call on you."

"Why have you come? I don't recall summoning you."

"There's no need to get bent out of shape. Just think of it as a year-end party."

"Pah. I don't want to get hairs mixed in with perfectly good alcohol."

"No need to pretend you're not secretly pleased, either."

"How dare—!"

Master Akadama whipped his head around, purple with fury, and the rest of the tanuki fled the kitchen like a rolling tide from the kitchen, leaving me all alone. Even Yaichirō turned tail and retreated in the most unseemly fashion. But the last time the Master had tried to call up a whirlwind he had ended up only wasting a roll of toilet paper, and perhaps remembering the disgrace of that previous experience he merely glared at me but expressed his anger no further. That saved me from having to come up with needlessly clever countermeasures like turning into a cow.

Finally, the Master snorted and turned back to his hanging scroll.

The tatami was quiet, save for the sound of the dripping rain outside. I stared at his back, not saying a word. His bony back stood out in relief against his yellowed undershirt. At length he lit up a cigar and puffed out a thick cloud of smoke. Picking up a nearby *daruma*, he said softly, "Yasaburō."

"Yes."

"Go purchase some cotton swabs. Itchy ears make me foul-tempered and apt to blow up whirlwinds. I really will."

"I understand. I shall make the arrangements with utmost haste."

"Must I really attend this gathering of tanuki?"

"By all means, I implore you! It cannot begin without your presence to grace it. The tanuki of Kyoto eagerly await your words of wisdom."

"I'll wager Kurama plotted to push this onto me."

"I cannot deny it is so."

"I knew it was something of that ilk!" The Master clutched the *daruma* and feigned a show of tears, letting a high-pitched fart squeak out. "So, they mean to say I am but suited only for the menial work of choosing the leader of the tanuki, do they? And so they have saddled me with this dreary task, those damned Kurama pipsqueaks! I am Yakushibō of Nyoigatake, he who once held the fate of the realm in his hands! And you tanuki, you all think only of using me to suit your own ends, getting the closest tengu at hand in order to keep up appearances. Of this I have no doubt. Is there even one among your number who truly gives the honor I am due? Well? You furballs, you're nothing but talk!"

There the Master's rant broke off, and he hung his head.

It was somewhat of a stretch to consider the Master as having held the fate of the entire realm in his hands; in fact, I would deem it rather questionable whether he had ever even controlled the lands east of the Kamo River.

I shuffled forward on my knees. "What need has the great Yakushibō of Nyoigatake of the respect of furballs such as us? Does your pride come from the respect of tanuki? Are you proud because you are respected? Surely such a thing would not be worthy of you. You are proud because you are a tengu. Tanuki and humans may flap their tongues for all they like, but is it not that indisputable majesty that makes a tengu a tengu?"

The Master hugged the *daruma* to himself and said nothing.

"I shall keep the words you spoke earlier to myself, Master," I said. "Please, put such things from your mind."

The Master snorted. "Tell them to prepare alcohol and wait. I may come, if I am so inclined."

I knew that he would come, but just as I was smirking inwardly to myself, Master Akadama patted the *daruma* and said, "Yasaburō. You thought to yourself just now that I would come without fail, did you not?"

"You know me too well, Master. One of those mutual understandings?"

"Of course it was. You tanuki and your simpleminded thoughts. Fools, one and all."

I bowed low to the floor by the kitchen.

Having completed negotiations with the Master I left his apartment, to find the other tanuki crowded outside waiting with bated breath. "Well? Well?" they asked.

"He'll come," I replied.

The bigwigs all sighed with relief, muttering amongst themselves.

"If that don't beat all..."

"Everything's set, then."

"Thank goodness!"

"Well done!" Yaichirō clapped me on the shoulder. "I knew that every tanuki had to be good for something!"

"Well, excuse me!"



With my butt thoroughly drenched from the cold rain, it was high time for me to pickle in a piping hot bath. Fortunately, today being the winter solstice meant that yuzu baths were in season. Leaving the Master's apartment behind, I went to the bathhouse and lowered myself into a bathtub.

As I let my backside warm thoroughly, I watched the tendrils of yuzu-perfumed steam spiral up through the light from the high glass windows. Yaichirō never went into the yuzu bath, claiming that the smell made him sneeze. Perhaps that was why, despite his insistence on keeping up appearances, he was always sucking on Asada cough drops. Year after year my scrupulous habit of taking yuzu baths had protected me from catching colds, but Yaichirō kept parroting the old superstition that "Idiots don't catch colds!", which infuriated me to no end.

Taking advantage of the fact that I had the whole bath room to myself, I floated along the water as naked as the day I was born, occasionally even transforming into a yuzu with my butt bobbing up in the air. A feeling of peace and tranquility spread through my body from my nether regions as I enjoyed myself. Apparently, this sensation is most usually followed by disaster.

After Father's departure to the afterlife our quarrel with the Ebisugawa clan had simmered along slowly, but with the climax of the heated Trick Magister election approaching, it was starting to reach a boiling point. But I was a little sick of the whole thing. Tanuki are beings who love peace and tranquility. Nowhere is this more true than

when we are sitting in a hot bath, for this causes our passion for peace and tranquility begin to rise like the bubbles in the bathwater. What does peace and tranquility mean for tanuki? It's the feeling you get when you're lying on the bank of the Kamo, staring at the blue sky overhead. That's all there is to it.

These days, tanuki who set their sights on the position of Trick Magister are scarce to be found. On the one hand, you have the carefree, unfettered life of a tanuki. On the other, you have the life of a Trick Magister, who is hounded day and night when problems arise and must take charge and lead the way in all sorts of matters. Most upright, clearheaded tanuki will look at these two choices and think to themselves, "The title of the Trick Magister is one steeped in tradition and prestige, but is it really worth throwing away a cosy, easygoing life?"

In order to obtain this little-sought position, Yaichirō waded, no, threw himself headfirst into the quagmire of the election. Given that the brothers of the Shimogamo clan were a collection of deadweight, he fought this battle mostly alone. In order to assuage my guilt, I made up a little ditty to cheer him on.

*To become the Trick Magister
Yaichiro works for you
He might choke when it matters most
But there's nothing he won't do
Through thick and thin—*

"What a stupid song!"

I had gotten out of the tub and was singing as I scrubbed myself when a stinging rebuke came flying out of the women's bath, giving me a start.

"Kaisei? You here to warm up your butt a little too?"

"Don't talk to a lady about butts, you gross little pervert!"

"If you wish to avoid the sniffles, you would do well to keep your butt protected from the cold."

"That's none of your business!"

The sound of vigorous splashing came from the women's bath and the cursing subsided for a time, as Kaisei seemed to be concentrating on keeping her butt warm. There didn't seem to be anyone there but her, and all was quiet. I finished scrubbing myself and went back into the bath. One tanuki in the men's bath, one tanuki in the women's, both floating there not saying a word. I was sitting in the jet bath with pounding bubbles soothing my body, when Kaisei blurted out, "Nice bath, huh? Ahaha."

"It really is quite nice," I said. "The yuzu is especially good."

"Sure is." For once, Kaisei answered me without any snark.

"It's been a while since I got to see the Navel Stone, and somehow it's still rocking the same look. I gotta be impressed with how it's managed to stay transformed like that for so long."

"I bet you'd never pull that off. You'd drop the act in a flash!"

"I could too do it, if I tried. I wouldn't lose to Yaichirō, or even Mother. There's not another tanuki out there who could beat me when it comes to transforming."

Kaisei snorted with laughter. "Didn't you roast the Navel Stone before? You're such an ass!"

"I didn't roast it, I *smoked* it."

"Same difference."

"Let's just let the past be the past. Things got pretty nutty at the Rokkakudō, when the elder got carried away by a pigeon."

"I know!"

"Were you even there?"

"You dummy, of course I was. I was hiding and watching from the top of the camphor tree."

"You're insane...when are you just going to come out and show yourself?"

"Like I'd show myself to you!"

"You could just pop over to the men's bath for a little bit."

A round bar of soap came hurtling over the partition. I swiftly picked up a plastic washbasin bearing a picture of a frog and ducked under it to protect my head from the swarm of projectiles flying overhead. Eventually the entire supply of soap in the women's bath found its way onto this side, Kaisei's tantrum subsided, and once again I heard her sigh with contentment, "Nice bath, huh?"

"So the Trick Magister is being chosen next week. The day's almost here."

"Yaichirō isn't going to make it, you can quote me on that."

"Why do you say that?"

"He just doesn't have what it takes."

I floated there morosely, when she suddenly added, "Friendly word of advice. Tell Yaichirō to watch his back."

"What, are your two stupid brothers filling their empty heads with more dumbassery?"

"Don't call my brothers stupid, you smelly ball of lint! But yeah, that's pretty much it."

"Well I doubt it'll amount to much, but thanks for telling me anyways."

Kaisei sighed. "My stupid brothers are getting craftier. They're being sneaky now to make sure I don't find out what they're up to. If you underestimate them you're going to get tripped up."

"Hmph. Tripped up by those guys?"

"Stick your nose any higher in the air and you'll turn into a tengu, Yasaburō."

"Fat chance of that. I'm just a tanuki, after all."

"...One more thing." Kaisei was silent for a moment. She seemed to be tapping on an overturned washbasin, making a *pong* sound that reverberated off the high ceiling and throughout the room.

"What's wrong?" I called, and I swear I heard my erstwhile, unseen fiancée mutter, "Sorry."



As far as I could remember, my ex-fiancée had never shown concern even once in her life, which made her pronouncement all the more confusing. More than confusing, it was unsettling. I attempted to pry further, but she had sealed her lips like a *daruma*, and before long all signs of her vanished from the women's bath. I pursued her outside, but the vixen was already vanishing somewhere into the twilight, no doubt still steaming from her cozy bath.

And with that, Kaisei disappeared from my sight—or should I say, since she had never shown herself to me in the first place, she ended the conversation there.

The city grew livelier with each day closer to Christmas. I prowled the city, searching all over—under bridges, in dark alley corners, inside chest drawers in secondhand stores—but Kaisei was nowhere to be found. *Sorry*—it had been the faintest of whispers, no louder than a sigh, and yet each time I thought about that word trailing over from the women's bath, I felt a strange sense of foreboding somewhere in my chest.

"That wasn't just an apology," I thought to myself. Then what was it? I didn't have a clue.

At last Christmas Eve arrived.

There's nothing wrong at all with tanuki celebrating Christmas. On the contrary, it's fair to say that there's nothing tanuki like more than the pointless clamor of this holiday. Mother prepared a Christmas cake, I went to buy KFC, and Yashirō traipsed off to the home improvement store by the river to buy Christmas lights.

As the darkness of twilight fell over the Tadasu Forest, Yashirō exerted himself sending current through the wire, and with a little effort the little multicolored lights coiling around the branches of the great tree began to blink cheerfully. "That's amazing! Keep practicing that skill, Yashirō!" said Mother approvingly, bringing a proud grin to Yashirō's face.

Yaichirō returned to the forest. The Trick Magister election was being held in two days. "To do this now of all times," he scowled darkly, but I persuaded him that this celebration was intended to wish him good luck and let off a bunch of party crackers to silence his continued protests.

Tanuki love fried chicken. By some counts, tanuki make up about half of the customers who frequent KFCs in Kyoto. Yaichirō's frown immediately turned upside down when I placed a plate of fried chicken in front of him. Under the Yashirō-powered twinkling lights, we all set to work devouring the chicken in ecstasy.

"I vow that I shall carry on Father's legacy," Yaichirō stated repeatedly, full of vim and vigor and chicken. "Just you wait, Sōun. Just you wait!"

"Keep an eye out for those Friday Fellows. I don't want you running around carelessly now!"

"I know, Mother," said Yaichirō, puffing out his chest.



Sometimes knowing that you're going to be frowned upon for doing something makes you want to do it even more.

After the fluffy Christmas party got underway, I decided to take a gift over to Master Akadama. It was a walking stick inset with a small sake bottle, quite suitable for filling with Akadama port wine, that I had bought in an antiques store in Ichijōji. I had initially planned to present him with the Fūjin Raijin fan now that Benten had cleanly forgotten all about it, but after months of searching I still had no ideas as to its whereabouts.

It was quite late when I set off to the Master's residence. The shops were all closed and their shutters rolled down in the Demachi shopping arcade, with the exception of the pubs, which had put out the short curtains at the entrance. I walked briskly along the street, the long, thin package tucked under my armpit.

The front door at the Masugata Court Apartments was unlocked: the carelessness of a tengu who lives alone. Inside, multicolored lights flashed on and off over the garbage strewn all over the tatami. It was quite odd, and not at all fitting, to see a blinking Christmas tree standing in the corner of the room of a tengu who boasted to once have held the fate of the realm in his hands. Master Akadama was cross-legged in front of the plastic fir tree, holding a *daruma* and drinking himself senseless. The tiny lightbulbs flashed in turns, sending red and blue and yellow light over the ridges of the Master's forehead. Apparently this was how he was spending this holy night: putting up decorations and downing a full three bottles of Akadama port wine, alone. It was a sorry sight to see, and I couldn't help thinking that he could have just invited me.

"Master, Master!" I called. "What's up with the tree?"

The Master lifted his head, looking irritated, and wiping away drool from his mouth cast his bleary eyes around the room. "Dunno," he muttered, before letting his head droop listlessly once more.

Seeing that there was no use talking to him in this state, I rolled out his futon and stuffed his slender frame into it. "I duneed your shympathy," he slurred. "Leave me alone!"

"As if I could!" I crammed the *daruma* into the futon as well, which he immediately hugged tight. No doubt he was dreaming of his beloved Benten's round behind. He may have been my mentor, but all the same there was no denying he was an old lecher.

Pretending to be a fuzzy Santa Claus, I placed his gift by the side of his pillow, but just as I turned to leave, the door to the apartment opened with a soft click, and who should blow in with a chilly blast of wind but Benten. She was obviously intoxicated, her cheeks ruddy and glowing, and she was dangling a wrapped wooden bento in her hand. Her mouth split into a grin when she noticed me, and she sang out, "Ah, I'm *wasted*!"

She let out a little gasp when her eyes lit on the flashing Christmas tree in the corner, and she plopped down by the sleeping Master, watching the lights flicker on and off. Her eyes closed, as if she was soaking in the colors as they washed across her face. The tiny lightbulbs kept extinguishing themselves like they had burned out, only to blink on again a moment later. In those intervals of darkness, her smooth, porcelain-like cheeks would float up through the gloom.

"This takes me way back. I bought it for him, you know."

"That makes sense. I was wondering why the Master would have a Christmas tree in his room."

"It was years ago now. I just love Christmas!"

"Tanuki love it too. The pointlessness of all this celebrating and revelry is what makes it so fun."

Benten picked up the parcel under the tree. "Now what have we here?"

"It's a present for the Master, a smart walking stick."

"Look like someone's getting into the season...and what about my present, hmm?"

"There isn't one."

"Why not?"

"What could the great Benten possibly want for Christmas? You've got everything you could ever want."

"Now that's not nice at all. I never get what I want, never!"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

Benten suddenly stood up and brought over a new bottle of Akadama port wine from the kitchen. She poured it into two cups and offered one to me. Wrapped snugly in his musty futon, Master Akadama frowned in his sleep, completely oblivious that his beloved Benten was sitting right beside him. Benten's eyelids drooped as she sipped her wine languidly.

"Brr, it's cold. I expect the snow will really start piling up after New Year's."

"Maybe sometime in January or February is my guess," I replied.

"I get so lonely whenever it snows."

"That, coming from Benten, who doesn't have a care in the world? You're not going to find anyone who sympathizes with you there."

"Humans aren't like tanuki or tengu...some nights we just drown in our own thoughts."

"Tanuki have their own thoughts to worry about too, you know."

"Ours are deeper than that though, much deeper. They're not comparable at all."

"Well, let's just leave it at that."

"You know, before the Master brought me here, I lived next to a huge lake in the mountains. It snows a lot on that side of the mountains, like Old Man Winter dumps all the snow over there and runs out by the time he gets over here."

"You think that's how it works?"

Benten stroked Master Akadama's white hair and continued. "I used to take walks and look at the dried up paddies and green bamboo thickets near my home, all buried in snow. Nothing made a sound. A little further on I would come on to the beach. The shore was all covered in snow, too, and not a single footprint in sight, or a person. The big lake stretched out as far as I could see, and it looked so cold, and so vast. I felt so lonely, so alone, but I couldn't stand *not* to walk out there, either, where there were no people. I didn't have a destination in mind, though. As I walked my mind would start to go all blank. Whenever I feel lonely, I always think of that scenery, and myself, walking through it. I was always so lonely, lonely, seeing that landscape every year, and so now loneliness and snow

are all tied up in my head. That's why the pit of my stomach is always so cold. Poetic, isn't it?"

"Didn't you have family or friends when you lived in the mountains?"

"Those things have nothing to do with what I was just talking about. I wouldn't expect a tanuki to understand."

"Snow makes my butt cold, so I like to avoid it where I can. Maybe I'd rather not understand after all."

"You could always try being alone?"

"No thank you. Tanuki aren't meant to be alone."

Remembering that I was carrying a picture of her, I reached in my pocket and took it out. "Come to think of it, why don't I make this your Christmas present?"

Benten took a glance at the photo and remarked, "Well if it isn't Professor Yodogawa? But I don't want this photo."

"Don't say that, look how well it's framed. I'm a pretty good photographer, hey?"

"I said I don't want it."

Just then there were signs of stirring from the futon. Master Akadama peered over my shoulder at the photograph and mumbled, "Who is that?", his voice still heavy with sleep. "Benten, how wretched it is that you get on so with a human such as this!"

"My my, Master, you're looking a bit green."

Nimble slipping through the Master's fingers as he attempted to grab hold of her from behind, Benten got to her feet.

"Surely you can stay?" Master Akadama said piteously, with the grubby futon draped around his shoulders like a cloak. "It has been such a long time since you came. Surely you will not leave yet?"

Benten pointed to the wooden bento box on the table. "I only came to bring you a party gift. I'll be taking my leave here tonight."

"Perhaps you could stay the night?"

"Oh, I could never impose on you like that, Master."

"What! Impose! Come, let us celebrate Christmas. I shall give you a gift. Yes...what do I have left. The Fūjin Raijin fan? ...no, I gave that to you already. Wait! Wait! I will find something! There must still be something here!"

"Master, I really don't think you have anything left," Benten whispered to him.

The Master's eyes rolled wildly at her, before he muttered, "You are right. I no longer have anything left to give you."

"I'll be going then," said Benten, smiling back at the Master as she turned the doorknob. "Do be careful not to let your jealousy stick in your throat. If you were to choke on it and die, why, I would feel quite lonely."

And leaving those parting words, she walked through the front door and vanished into the darkness.



The day of the Trick Magister election—

in other words, the anniversary of the death of our father—
in other words, the day of the hated Friday Fellows' year-end party—
had arrived.

I woke early that day and sat up slowly. It was still dark in the Tadasu Forest, and no sunlight filtered through the trees. I could hear the soft snoring of the rest of my family still asleep. Not feeling particularly like going back to sleep, I crawled out of bed. My nose prickled at the chilly kiss of the pre-dawn air. The forest was still, and not even the birds were chirping.

The pale morning mist rolled along slowly through the forest while I made my way over to the brook, dry leaves crunching underfoot. Following along its course, I congratulated myself for waking up earlier than anyone else, right before I came across Yaichirō sitting along the bank. He was sitting up straight with his eyes closed, like he was gathering his inner being. His ears twitched as I approached. "Yasaburō?" he said, sounding surprised. "Will wonders never cease."

"What are you doing up at this ungodly hour?"

"Idiot. I always rise early, in order to exercise my inner being. You wouldn't know that, though, considering how you always sleep in until late, you lazeabout."

I sat down next to my brother and attuned my ears to the murmuring of the brook. Stilling my inner dialogue, I took in a deep sniff of the air around me, taking in the scent of the world as it was. Amongst the myriad smells commingling in that crisp, chilly air, I detected a thread of Father's scent. Though he was only a fraction of the tanuki that Father had been, I traced the scent back to Yaichirō. I thought back to day when I had walked through the forest with Father, taking in the scents of that cold winter morning. A feeling of loss took hold of me, and I found myself sniffing.

"A Trick Magister must bear the weight of the tanuki world on his shoulders,"
Yaichirō suddenly intoned.

"Come on, isn't it a little early for serious stuff like this?"

"The tanuki who is chosen as Trick Magister must be fit to shoulder such a heavy burden. That is why I have tried as best I can to prepare."

"Uh-huh."

Those words might have gotten a better reception if Yaichirō had spoken them back in the old days when Master Akadama had taken his first bath. As it was, though, what with the humans modernizing and how closely we relied on them for our every need, times had changed. The tanuki world had changed right along with the humans too; all our natural predators had vanished from the face of the earth, and wars were a thing of the past. These days, the only things we have to fear are the dreadful Friday Fellows with their ghastly tanuki stew, and traffic accidents. With the carefree way we live, choosing some kind of fearless leader is the last thing any tanuki is worried about; it's almost impossible to find anyone who worries enough about the future to consider entrusting everything to the Trick Magister. The future of the tanuki world is not something that anyone needs to shoulder: the prevailing sentiment is *just leave it alone, and it'll all float on all right*. The Trick Magister that my brother spoke of was a dead relic, just a bygone ideal. It was exactly what Father had been.

"That's real admirable, Yaichirō," I said, exhaling white steam over the water. "It's great to dream big. But—"

"No, no more. Not another word." His laugh sounded almost pitiable. "I know what you're thinking. And I bet you know what I'm thinking. Maybe I am just a fool. Maybe I am just blindly idolizing Father, like Uncle thinks I am. Maybe the tanuki world doesn't really need Trick Magisters anymore. But if I intend to be like Father, if I truly intend to make that dream come true, what choice do I have but to become the Trick Magister?"

The two of us sat there for a moment, silently cooling our butts. Up in the treetops a bird chirped.

"This is what you wake up early every day to think about?"

"Just so."

"You should try sleeping in once in a while."

"Perhaps I should."

"That aside, though, you oughta be careful today."

If Yaichirō didn't make it to Sensuirō to sit down with the elders, they would consider him as having withdrawn his candidacy for Trick Magister. Ebisugawa Sōun seemed to think he had it in the bag, but it was entirely likely that he would try to prevent Yaichirō from getting there just to snuff out the slightest possibility that things would not go his way.

I told Yaichirō about Kaisei's cryptic warning and urged him again to be cautious, but he loftily dismissed it. "Ridiculous. If those idiot brothers try anything, I'll just take 'em by the hiney and toss into the freezing Kamo. No love bites this time; I'll make sure to split 'em a new one!"

"It's good that you're raring to go, but you'll want to tone it down a bit. It's pathetic to see you slip up and fall flat on your face at the most important moments."

"Don't you get cheeky with me!"

"Cheeky! I'm just concerned for you here!"

Just as we started to get into it, Mother showed up out of nowhere and barked, "No fighting!"

Dawn was finally breaking, and warm rays of sunlight shimmered at the tops of the trees. We all gathered back at our beds to go over our plans for the day.

Yashirō was heading to the Faux Denki Bran distillery, where he would wrap up work early and come back to the forest. Yaichirō would call on the neighbors before going to Nanzenji for a pre-election meeting with their clan head. At dusk, he would depart the woods of Nanzenji with his campaign staff in tow and head to the Sensuirō in Kiyamachi. At the same time, Mother would take Yashirō to Teramachi and make preparations for the banquet at the Scarlet Pane. Following the election of the Trick Magister, Yaichirō would go to the Scarlet Pane, for a victory feast, or else a consolation session; either way the revelry would take its course into the wee hours of the morning.

"What will you do, Yasaburō?" Mother inquired.

"I think I'll just enjoy myself around town."

"Irresponsible wretch!" Yaichirō fumed.

"I might go fetch Yajirō from the well, while I'm at it. Today's the anniversary of Father's departure to the afterlife. I'd feel awful leaving him there all alone."

At this, Yaichirō had nothing to say.

"Then make sure to check in with the owner of the Scarlet Pane. Ask him if it would be all right to invite Master Akadama, and if it is, make sure to send the Master an invitation," Mother added.

"Aight."

With the sun rising higher in the sky, Yaichirō said, "I'd better get going."

At the shrine path, Mother and I and Yajirō bid him farewell as he climbed aboard the rickshaw. Suddenly remembering something, Mother dashed back to her bed and returned with a piece of flint, striking sparks from it¹³ onto Yaichirō's back.

"Don't forget, you are the son of Shimogamo Sōichirō. Take pride in yourself!"

"I will, Mother."

"But in the end, it all comes down to luck. Don't forget that either!"

"I know." Yaichirō bowed his head to Mother then leapt up onto the cart. "Goodbye, Mother. Take heart, and await news of my victory!"

And with great aplomb, he set off down the broad shrine road.

As proudly as he drove off on that rickshaw, that precious memento of Father's, as his little brother I knew perhaps better than anyone how inadequate he was as a tanuki.

I don't remember when it was that I first noticed the singular manner in which Yaichirō was always struggling to fulfill grand ambitions that were clearly out of his puny reach. If I had been a halfway decent little brother, I wouldn't have balked at the hefty labors that towered over him, but as it was I never lifted a finger to help my brother attain his lofty goals. Even so, when I watched him huffing and puffing away, his face red, having misjudged his efforts yet again, I would sometimes think to myself, *This must be his fool's blood talking*. Sometimes I got so choked up watching him try so hard despite his lack of ability that I couldn't help but be overcome with the urge to let him struggle to his heart's content.

None of us took our eyes off the rattling, swaying rickshaw until it turned on Mikage Street and rolled out of sight.

For some reason, I wanted to shout out and stop the rickshaw as it grew smaller and smaller. I wanted to run up to Yaichirō as he climbed down and give him a good whack on the back.

Somehow, at that moment I felt like I would never see my brother again.



My first stop on my meandering through town was the Scarlet Pane near Teramachi Sanjō. It wasn't open for business yet, but in his dim nook the bartender was already getting things ready, with a surly look on his face. "Tonight's the night, eh?" he said, bringing me a glass of orange juice as I plopped down on the sofa. "D'ye reckon Yaichirō's got a shot?"

"It all comes down to the luck of the draw, says I."

¹³ A practice called *kiribi* which is said to bring luck and ward off misfortune.

"It's them elders what decide it all in the end, anyhow. Still, there's no accounting for taste, your brother and Ebisugawa wanting to become Trick Magister. Why anyone would want to go through all that hassle is beyond me. Abnormal, some might say."

"Well whatever happens, win or lose, tonight we party."

"What, and so you came here to check on things, that it? It's all sorted, don't you fret. Who do you take me for?"

"I take you for a tanuki."

"Ah, stuff it, you little git."

"One more thing. Mind if I invite Master Akadama?"

The bartender frowned. "Don't know about that 'un," he said. "See here, this bar is mostly for tanuki. People'd be frightened out of their wits with a tengu coming in here."

"Oh, the Master's really just lonely, that's all."

"Lonely or not, he'll throw a tantrum soon as look at you. I've got a policy against tengu gales in here."

"Not to worry, the Master can't stir up a wind anymore."

"He that weak, now? Really?"

"Yup."

"Huh, even the great Master Akadama...I suppose even a grand tengu like that can't beat old age. Right then, go ahead and invite him. But not Benten, she'd drive off all the customers."

"I know that."

I left the Scarlet Pane and whiled the time away around Shinkyōgoku, checking out the movies that were playing at the theater and reading at the bookstore and rubbing *daruma* heads at an antique shop. It was early in the afternoon on a weekend, so Shinkyōgoku was jam-packed all the way down to Shijō Avenue.

I turned east down Shijō and crossed Shijō Bridge, going to see Yajirō. Making my way through Gion, I hopped the wall of Chinnōji and snuck into the temple.

"Hey ho!" I called down into the mouth of the well.

From the darkness came an answering "Hey ho!" from my brother. "What's up, Yasaburō?"

I tossed some leftover chicken wrapped in a paper napkin into the well.

"What's this? It smells fantastic!" The sound of nibbling echoed up from the well.

"Fried chicken!" I called, looking down towards the bottom. "That's your share from Christmas Eve."

"Who knew chicken could be so great!"

"It's really tender. Your mouth must be dried out from eating bugs all the time, eh?"

"I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate being able to eat fried chicken living down here in this well. Y'know, sometimes I think to myself how great it is having a little brother. So you had a party on Christmas Eve?"

"Yajirō lit some lights for us. He's getting pretty good at that."

"I would have liked to see that. You think he's going to open a one-man power company?"

"Dunno. As it is, all he does is run around being useless doing useless things."

"Now that's not like you at all. Every tanuki gets full of himself and thinks about being useful, eventually."

Yajirō chuckled to himself as he nibbled on the chicken. I sat down by the well and drank a can of coffee bought from a vending machine.

"Tonight's the night, Yajirō. The next Trick Magister is finally being chosen."

"Hopefully it'll all settle down after this," said Yashirō. "Don't tell Yaichirō I said this, but whether it's him that gets chosen or Sōun, I don't think it'll make a lick of difference. What does it matter, as long as the tanuki world calms down? I mean, It's been years since Father died."

"That's true."

"I've been thinking about Father since this morning."

"Everyone has."

"It's always hard not to think about him, but today especially. He just hasn't left my head all day. So I've been racking my brains trying to remember: what did he say to me? What were his last words to me? Then again, I've had years to think about this exact thing down here in the well. No matter how many times I retrace what I did that night, after a point my memories just stop. Sometimes I wonder if I'm just going to live the rest of my life not knowing, and even being a frog that makes me feel real sad." Yajirō sighed.

Suddenly recalling something, I asked him about Kaisei. "Have you seen her around lately?"

"Now that you mention it, she hasn't been here in a while. You two haven't fought, have you?"

"Well, we fight every day, but she's seemed a little off lately."

After I told him about what had transpired at the bathhouse, Yajirō sank into thought. "That does seem off," he mused.

"Right? It just felt so jarring."

"You know, when Kaisei talks to me, she gets all quiet and gentle like that sometimes too. After talking for a while, she just...stops. Like there's something that gets caught in her throat. I wonder what it could be. Could just be lovesick for all I know, considering her age, but the funny thing is she's been like that for years."

"I can never tell what she's thinking about. When she found out that I was stuck as a frog forever, she came here and cried for a long time. So she's got a soft side too."

"That...well...I guess."

"Since I've been down here so long, most people have forgotten that I used to be a tanuki by the name of Shimogamo Yajirō. Nobody cares who's sitting at the bottom of the well, they just come here to get out what's on their mind. But you all still come here to visit me, don't you? Other than my family, the only person who's ever come here to visit ol' Shimogamo Yajirō, is Kaisei."

"Yajirō, are you still in love with her?"

The choppy sound of the waves down at the bottom of the pitch black well must have been Yajirō churning up the water. At last he said, "Of course I do," barely controlling the anger in his voice. "But Yasaburō, that's not something you ought to be asking a frog in a well. You're just gonna end up making him real sad."

"I'm sorry, Yajirō."

I thought about Kaisei's "Sorry." The more I thought about it the harder it was for my butt to sit still.

"Still, Kaisei really does seem off," Yajirō wondered out loud. "I may not be able to see much, sitting down here at the bottom of this well, but I can see the sky and the stars, so don't count me out. My world may be small, but night after night I sit here and watch the stars, like some kind of cosmogonical frog. Looking out into space, my mind becomes still, and I can feel a profound wisdom flowing in. And if you ask this wise frog right here, something really, terribly awful is about to happen."

I thought about Yaichirō, heading to Nanzenji, and Yashirō, at the Ebisugawas' Faux Denki Bran distillery, and Mother, sitting back at the Tadasu Forest fretting about her sons.

Raising my head from my thoughts to look up at the sky, I noticed something very curious. That curious thing was a number of white streamers, spinning like tops on their way up into the sky. As I watched the path of those mysterious objects, the sound of the city faded out, and my mind suddenly felt like it was going somewhere far away. Reaching the apex of their trajectory, the objects glimmered and then suddenly showered in all directions like breaking glass, and I felt my mind return to my body.

A frightfully strong wind suddenly blew through the grounds of Chionji. I clung to the edge of the well. "Whoa, where did all this wind come from?"

"Hmm, it's all quiet down here."

"Well of course it is!"

"Look, up there. The sky looks quite strange."

From the other side of the towering mountains surrounding the valley, heavy clouds were lumbering into the sky over Kyoto, like balls of cotton being gathered by the wind. In a moment the formerly clear sky was swirling with storm clouds like the surface of a marble, and the city was occluded by an unexpected shadow, as if threatening night.

A thick streak of blue light raced between the clouds, and the accompanying clap of thunder set all of my hairs on end.

"The thunder god has arrived!" I yelled.

"Hold on now, that's a bit out of the blue," said Yajirō, in the dying echoes of the thunder. "Doesn't this strike you as a touch odd?"

"Someone must have used the Fūjin Raijin fan. Damn, where did they even find it?"

"You've got to get to Mother, Yasaburō!" I heard Yajirō groan, splashing around at the bottom of the well. "Not again, why am I always so useless! There's just nothing I can do as a frog in a well! Not that I can really help it, though."

"Don't worry about it, Yajirō. Leave it to me."

"Be careful out there, Yasaburō," said Yajirō. "Be careful. I've got a bad feeling about this."

I set off at a run.



The rumbling thunder set Kyoto in an uproar.

People crossing the Shijō Bridge shrieked and pointed upwards at the dark clouds looming overhead. Streaks of lightning raced like dragons through the rifts in the clouds, which, lit by pale flashes from within, looked like great, ominous lanterns towering in the sky. Whoever had used the Fūjin Raijin fan was clearly an idiot with no concept of self-control.

I returned to the Tadasu Forest with thunder crashing overhead, but Mother was nowhere to be seen. As a rule Mother would always wait in her mosquito net for Raijin to pass by, but in the dry safety of her bed there was no sign that the net had been hung up.

I went all the way out to the Kamo Bridge. On the other side, I saw orange light glowing within the billiards hall, Mother's favorite haunt. I dashed across the river through the pouring rain, and just as I pushed open the glass door thunder boomed very close by, shaking the windows with all the force of the hammer of Raijin. The glass trembled with a sound so intense it seemed as if it was going to shatter. The humans inside the building were all holding their breaths, awaiting Raijin's next move. I asked one of the workers, but he shrugged, "The Prince in Black? Haven't seen 'im."

I used the pay phone in the corner to place a call to Nanzenji. Through the windowpane, I could faintly see the Kamo Bridge shrouded by the misty haze of the pounding rain. The head of the Nanzenji clan picked up, sounding nonchalant.

"Is my brother there?"

"We were supposed to go to Kiyamachi together, but he said he had to return to the forest and dashed out. Don't suppose he forgot something there?"

"About how long ago was that?"

"About when it started to thunder, so I'd say he should be arriving at the Tadasu Forest right about now. Then again, he might be somewhere taking shelter from the rain. It doesn't seem safe to be driving around a rickshaw in this weather."

I thanked him and hung up, then called Yashirō's cell phone.

No one picked up for a while, fraying my nerves. Finally a strange voice answered with a "Hoy!"

"Yashirō?"

"Ahh!" yelled the voice, and line went dead. I checked the number and called again, but couldn't get through.

I had the feeling that something very strange and wrong was going on.

I left the billiards hall and crossed the Kamo Bridge, getting completely soaked. An enormous cloud rose above the black peaks of the Higashiyama mountains like a giant climbing over, letting out flashes of lightning as it spilled over.

I returned to the Tadasu Forest and stood on the shrine road, with thunder crashing and rain pounding down on me.

My family was nowhere to be found.

The pealing of thunder had always been the signal for the Shimogamo clan to come together. For us Shimogamo children, it was practically a part of our credo that whenever thunder threatened, we would drop whatever we were doing and race back to our Mother. It had already been some time, yet neither Yaichirō nor Yashirō had returned. This had never happened before.

Just then, I saw Yaichirō's beloved automaton rickshaw come trundling up the shrine road from the south, and breathed a sigh of relief thinking that he had safely returned. But when the rickshaw pulled up there was no one in it, and moreover it was horribly maimed. One of the rickshaw driver's arms had nearly been pulled out, and the wheels were wobbling unevenly. The mute driver just stood there with rain trickling down its face, not saying a word in spite of its grievous wounds.

I was aghast.

Amidst the pattering of the rain against the canopy and the crashes of thunder rending the sky, I suddenly sensed the presence of a tanuki deep in the trees.

"Mother?"

"It's me, you dummy," said Kaisei, as usual sight unseen.

I projected my voice into the gloom of the trees. "What are you doing here? I was looking everywhere for you!"

"My brothers were keeping tabs on me, so I was hiding behind Kiyomizudera." Words started pouring from her mouth, faster and faster. "Wait here all you want, but no one's coming back. My brothers called down Raijin, and the Ebisugawa Guard Corps carried Auntie off. Yashirō's probably at the distillery. Yaichirō's probably been caught, too."

"What are you talking about?"

"My dad's going to make Yaichirō into stew. Just like what happened with Uncle."

"I see," I said. "I should have known."

"Yeah." Her voice shuddered with sobs now. "It was my dad that made Uncle into stew!"



The rain beat down violently on the canopy of trees above, dissolving into a fine mist that hung over the road through Shimogamo Shrine.

Each blinding flash of lightning was accompanied by a rumble of thunder that shook the forest, Kaisei's small voice fell away briefly. Listening to her speak from the shadow of the trees, I was transported back to the night that Father fell into the hands of the Friday Fellows.

That night, Father had taken Yaichirō to a meeting at Gion. Following the end of the meeting, Father had seen Yaichirō off at the bus stop in front of Yasaka Shrine, and then taken himself to a tavern in Kiyamachi to meet up with Yajirō and drink the night away. Urging an intoxicated Yajirō to transform into the false Eizan railcar and running roughshod through the nighttime streets, Father had sent Yajirō home to the forest, alone. This was where Yajirō's memories grew fuzzy.

Of course, Father hadn't escaped the bout of drinking with Yajirō unscathed. Perhaps his legs had been a little unsteadier than usual. The hour was late as he walked through the streets, heading towards Chitoseya, the *ryōtei* in Pontochō.

Ebisugawa Sōun sat on the tatami there in Chitoseya, wearing his usual fine robes, waiting for Father to arrive.

Having a fondness for Jintan mints, Sōun opened his pillbox, which sported an image of a golden pheasant on its finely lacquered exterior, and popped one in his mouth, perfuming the air around him with a pungent aroma. A fine *netsuke* in the shape of the goddess Benzaiten was attached by a string to that magnificent pillbox. Sōun did not know it, but that *netsuke* was Kaisei in disguise.

With all the wealth he had gained from the profitable Faux Denki Bran distillery, Sōun had accumulated a considerable collection of fineries such as *netsuke* and pill boxes, hoarding it all away in auxiliary warehouse #1 next to the distillery. Kaisei was fond of sneaking in there and admiring the collection. That day, she came in by the secret entrance, and was laying out the various baubles to play around with when Sōun unexpectedly returned. In a flash she transformed into the Benzaiten *netsuke*, but in a stroke of great misfortune, Sōun unwittingly chose her to take along.

Father finally arrived at Chitoseya.

"Hope I didn't make you wait too long," Father said, his ruddy face splitting into a grin.

"Brother," Sōun smiled, greeting him with a bow of the head.

Sōun and Father were alone in that wide, austere room. Electric lanterns in the shape of traditional floor lamps illuminated the space, though their dim light didn't quite reach the shadows in the further recesses of the room. The pair drank as they looked through the glass at the nighttime scenery along the Kamo River.

Once upon a time, following tanuki tradition, Father had taken Uncle along with him to learn at the feet of Master Akadama. It's not certain what caused the first cracks to appear in the relationship of those two brothers, who had once happily traipsed off to class side by side, but around the time that the union between Father and Mother was sealed, Uncle was married off into the Ebisugawa clan. After Yaichirō and Yajirō were born, Father and Uncle clashed once again, this time over the seat of the Trick Magister, further deepening the rift. Casting a bitter eye at Father, the newly minted Trick Magister, Uncle poured himself into developing the Faux Denki Bran distillery, and eventually took on the name Ebisugawa Sōun.

The reconciliation meeting that night had taken place at Sōun's invitation.

"I'm afraid I've caused you great pain over the years."

"Never mind, Brother. We were young. Your wife, the Trick Magistership, all of that is past. I have become a great tanuki in my own right, and I have children of my own now. Let us not worry about such petty things."

"I am heartily glad to hear you say that. Indeed, you have become a most splendid tanuki."

"Come, come, if there is anyone worthy of such praise it is yourself."

By and by, Father glanced into the corner of the room and frowned. "What is that there?" he asked. "It appears to be a cage."

"So it does," Sōun replied. "Shall I tell them to put it away?"

"No, there's no need for that. Still, a curious thing to have sitting around," said Father, letting out a yawn.

"Had enough to drink already, Brother?"

"Never you worry. It'll take more than that to drink me under the table."

But Father was drunk, for otherwise he would never have failed to notice the snare that Sōun had laid for him.

"As you say. Then I am anxious to get the reconciliation ceremony over with. I took the liberty of calling a witness tonight. After the oaths and formalities are over, we can drink to our hearts' content."

"That's a lot of trouble to go to. Couldn't we get it over with ourselves, just you and I?"

"No, Brother. We two carry the future of the tanuki world on our shoulders. Therefore I must insist we observe the proper rites."

"Very well."

At a signal from Sōun, the screen to the adjacent room slid open almost impatiently, as if it had been waiting for this moment.

Tall electric lanterns gleamed brightly in all four corners of that room, and the tatami was covered with a scarlet carpet on which had been set a table and chairs. The chairs were occupied by Kurama tengu, all with sloppily arranged neckties, who tossed back wine and glared at Father silently. It had only been a short while since I was born, and the troubles between Master Akadama and the Kurama tengu were still fresh. For the tanuki, the False Nyoigatake Incident had been a spectacular achievement, but for the tengu it was a stain on their honor.

In the midst of the glowering tengu sat a slender young woman, puffing on a cigar.

I'm not certain how she came to be acquainted with the Kurama tengu. Perhaps she, having come into possession of the technique of soaring the sky as she pleased, had been on a jaunt through the sky when they approached her. Thereafter, she would often ditch the Master to go play hooky at Kurama, becoming infamous throughout the underbelly of Kyoto for her frequent nighttime sojourns in that notorious company, and arousing Master Akadama's jealousy.

Stubbing out her cigar, she glided over into the room.

"It is my honor to introduce our witness, Suzuki Satomi," said Sōun.

Father looked at her with widened eyes, for unexpectedly he had come face to face with his one weakness. His cup trembled in his hand, and the merest glance from her was sufficient to send it tumbling to the floor, spilling its contents all over the tatami. He closed his eyes. For reasons unknown even to him he was seized with a terror so dreadful that he could not bring himself to move an inch. In the twinkle of an eye his transformation melted away, and his fur sprouted out.

In a moment there remained nothing but a tanuki plopped down on that exquisite cushion. "Whyever are you here, Miss Suzuki?" said the tanuki. "This is the last place I expected to run into you."

"That's because you never come to see me. Do I truly frighten you so?"

"Does the Master know about this?"

"The poor thing, he hasn't got a clue."

The tanuki curled up on the cushion, as if resigned to his fate. The young woman picked him up and let out a burst of laughter.

"Splendid! Splendid!" cheered the tengu sitting in the other room.

The previous Benten had decided to retire from the Friday Fellows late in that year, leaving an opening to be filled. Jurōjin, the most senior member of the Friday Fellows, had come across Miss Suzuki Satomi in the nightlife of Pontocho, and decided to endorse her as the newest member. In order to be admitted, though, she was given a task, and that task was the preparation of the year-end party: in other words, the tanuki stew.

Sōun looked contemptuously down at Father, who had been shut inside the cage.

"Farewell, Brother," he spat. "I don't suppose we shall ever meet again."

As Sōun turned to leave, Father softly asked, "My brother, is this what you truly wish for?"

Unwittingly falling into this trap woven by tanuki and human and tengu, Father thus fell into the depths of the iron pot.

What came to pass after that?

The Friday Fellows had their stew; Ebisugawa Sōun avenged his grudge of many years; Suzuki Satomi was accepted into the Friday Fellows as Benten; having grown prodigiously as a tengu, Benten enticed me, unsuspecting, into bringing about the incident with the Demon's Perch; as a result, Master Akadama hurt his back and lost most of his tengu powers; and the Kurama tengu won that year's tengu capture-the-flag tournament and chased their long-time foe Master Akadama out of Nyoigatake.

On that night, in that room, the destinies of tengu, human, and tanuki intertwined, and with Father's descent into the pot, each was set hurtling on its own path.



My head sagged as I listened to Kaisei's tale.

As her godfather, Father had always doted on her, and Kaisei had adored him right back. But unexpectedly surrounded by tengu, she could only watch as her own father did something unspeakably vile that no tanuki should ever do. This was the cause of her frequent visits to Yajirō's well. They had been very close since she was small, but even so she couldn't exactly just go up to her cousin and tell him, "Hey, my dad made your dad into stew." Eventually Yajirō had become so accustomed to being a frog that he lost his ability to turn back into a tanuki, and thus losing her chance to confess the heartache she had concealed for so long, Kaisei stood by the side of his well and cried.

"I'm sorry," Kaisei said from the shadows.

"I figured it was something like that. In fact it's so close to what I thought that I'm actually kind of shocked," I replied. "So where are they holding Yaichirō? And what about Mother?"

"I don't know—kyaa!" she suddenly shrieked. "Let go of me, dammit!"

The undergrowth rustled furiously, until out of nowhere it went still. "What's going on?" I shouted, but there was no reply.

I began to step into the brush, when many lanterns rose through the gloom of the trees, all emblazoned with the bold word "EBISUGAWA". As if protected by the light of those lanterns, the sinister face of Ebisugawa Sōun suddenly emerged. The Ebisugawa Guard

Corps held up snake's-eye umbrellas, protecting him from the rain dripping from the treetops.

As he stepped onto the shrine road, I stepped back, keeping a wary distance between us.

"Yasaburō," he said with a loathsome grin, "Don't pay what Kaisei said any mind. She's sleepwalking, can't tell what's dream and what's real. That's why she said what she did. Sheltered girl, always so sensitive."

The Ebisugawa Guard Corps fanned out onto the road, encircling me.

"Whatever the outcome of tonight's issue, I was going to invite the Shimogamo clan over to a feast. Your entire family is there already. The only trouble is, we didn't know where you were."

"That's very kind of you, but tonight we've already reserved the Scarlet Pane."

"Foolish boy. That reservation might as well be scrap."

One of the guardsmen stepped forward, attempting to put the umbrella over my head, which I quickly dodged.

"I'm drenched at the moment, and quite unlearned in etiquette to boot, so I'm afraid I'll have to decline to attend your joyous little gathering."

"You won't get away, one way or another. It would be foolish to court harm to yourself. I need to make ready to go to the Sensuirō. Don't waste any more of my time."

The Ebisugawa Guard Corps approached me, inch by inch.

"Stay away from me!" I barked. "Next one to get close to me gets torn a new one!"

At the sight of my bared fangs the guardsmen jumped and shuffled backward. It was a staredown.

A dulcet voice suddenly rang upon us from the tops of the trees. "What are you doing here, Ebisugawa?"

I looked up. A flash of lightning split the sky, and silhouetted in that light I saw Benten descending toward the road. With her hair soaked, presumably from her flight through that downpour, she looked even more bewitching than usual.

"What a storm. I'm just a mess!" she remarked. Taking fright, the Ebisugawa Guard Corps stood nervously a good distance away from her.

"Lady Benten, you're looking as lovely as ever," said Sōun.

"I thought I just said I wasn't?" said Benten, patting her hair. "I was sheltering up in the trees, but I see that Yasaburō is here. Perhaps I'll have him transform into an umbrella for me."

"It would be my pleasure, Lady Benten, to become an umbrella or whatever else you would like," I swiftly agreed.

"Yes, but—" Sōun stammered.

"Yes, Ebisugawa? Did you have something to say?"

"We were just about to attend a reconciliation banquet, you see. It would be most unfortunate if madam were to take him now."

"And what concern of mine is it whether it is or isn't fortunate for you? Or are you telling me to go home alone soaking in this rain?"

"O-of course, by no means."

"Then I'll be taking him for a spell."

Transforming into an umbrella, I felt Benten's icy hand grip my handle and open me up with a *whump*. She twirled the Yasabrella around and around, before walking off. Fine drops of rain hit the top of my body as we moved down the shrine road.

"What a storm!" she repeated.

"You saved me from a pretty scrape there. Thank you."

"Did I now?" she said in a singsong voice. "No need to thank me for anything."

Benten walked briskly through the midst of the rain, looking unconcerned as she strolled along the Kamo River even as thunder rumbled overhead. Except for us the riverbank was deserted, and the Kamo River looked frigid as it roared by, its waters muddy and grey. I continued to keep quiet.

"What's wrong?" Benten said suddenly. "Not feeling chatty today?"

"You worked with Ebisugawa to lure Father into a trap. Why didn't you ever say anything?"

Benten looked at me with a puzzled expression. "Why, you never asked."

"Humans are such despicable creatures..."

"I am a tengu."

"No, you're a human. Whatever you may think you're still a human."

With an impish grin, Benten reached out from underneath the umbrella to feel the rain. "So, you're giving me the silent treatment because you're angry?"

"I'm not done. Ebisugawa's got my brothers. Isn't today the Friday Fellows' year-end party? What if Yaichirō goes into the stew?"

"Dear me. You're saying that I might be eating your brother tonight? What a tragedy!"

"Won't you do something for him?"

"Not interested."

"Why not? Is it because he's a tanuki?"

"Well, I am a human." And looking pleased with herself she let out a tinkle of laughter.

"If you won't do anything, then fine. I'll do something myself. Where is the party being held?"

"At Chitoseya, in Pontochō. But nothing too violent; you always do get carried away."

When we reached the northeast corner of Kawaramachi and Imadegawa, Benten stuck out her hand and hailed a taxi coming south down Kawaramachi Street. Hanging the Yasabrella on the handle of an illegally parked bike at the side of the road. As the taxi stopped in front of her and opened the door, she unexpectedly stooped down and whispered to me, "Professor Yodogawa is going to get his tanuki this afternoon. Apparently, he's planning to meet someone who claims to have caught one."

"Professor Yodogawa, got it."

"The rest is up to you. I'm a human, and if I come across a tanuki stew I'm going to eat it. I won't lose any sleep over it."

Patting her hair, she boarded the taxi. I watched the taxi disappear to the south, then thought to myself, *Now, where are you, Professor Yodogawa?*

If he was in his lab on campus, then I could just tail him to the meeting. Time was of the essence, and I was just about to cross the Kamo Bridge towards the Professor's lab when a middle-aged man came waddling over from the east side of the bridge, carrying a cloth-wrapped package. His shoulders were slumped, his belly was round, and his face bore more than a passing resemblance to Hotei. Without a doubt, this was Professor Yodogawa, hurrying towards his rendezvous for the tanuki.

"Speak of the devil! This must be my lucky day!" I rejoiced.



I transformed into an old man leaning on a cane and hobbled my way through the holiday crush in the Demachi shopping arcade. With the deluge outside, the air was damp and close inside the enclosed arcade. Bumping the large cloth package into things all around him, Professor Yodogawa dallied and dallied along on his way.

At last he emerged onto Teramachi Street.

Nearby was a restaurant called Chikurintei. The professor paused before it and sniffed with his nose. The facade of the restaurant was narrow, and a Shigaraki-ware tanuki statue reclined beside the timeworn lattice door. The professor rubbed his belly, then slid open the door and entered.

Chikurintei is a venerable soba shop. Master Akadama used to frequent this establishment, prior to his banishment to the rear of the shopping arcade. Now that he had forsaken the world and shut himself up alone in his apartment, the only thing that he made in his kitchen was that vile gruel; as such it was hardly an exaggeration to say that the provisions I brought him from this shop were a most critical lifeline. Being a fan of the *tamago-don*, Benten could often be found here as well. On occasion she had even brought me with her before, and I must say that the *tamago-don* here is indeed quite tasty.

I scrutinized the surroundings thoroughly before following the professor into the shop.

To the right of the entrance a *daruma* stove warmed the room. On the left was a shelf stuffed full of magazines, on top of which were an old rotary payphone and a black-and-white lucky cat figure. It was almost as cramped as a train car, and to the left and right along the walls were placed tables just big enough to seat four.

The professor glanced blankly at me, giving me a shock, but he didn't seem to realize that the old man who had trailed in behind him was actually me. I purposefully mumbled something under my breath, sat in the corner, and looked up at the innumerable wooden menu tags hanging on the wall.

Chikurintei is famous for its unreasonably large menu; though the curtain hanging over the entrance advertises it as a soba shop, its menu includes anything and everything up to *tenshinhan*, which oddly enough is actually quite good.

"Scuse me!" I called out while perusing the menu, but the kitchen was silent, seemingly empty.

The professor abruptly stood up and vanished into the restroom.

After a while, the cook finally poked his head out from the kitchen.

"One *tamago-don*," I said.

After the food was brought out I began to eat, but still the professor did not come out from the restroom. Not knowing when the trade for the tanuki was to take place, I was hardly in a mood to savor my meal, and I scarfed the entire thing down in a flash.

The professor did not show up.

Neither did the person who was supposedly delivering the tanuki appear.

It was all very queer.

Unable to sit still any longer, I decided to try calling my little brother one more time. I got up from my seat and picked up the receiver of the rotary payphone by the door. Perhaps I had just overeaten, but my body suddenly felt leaden. While listening to the ringing on the other end, I glanced at the arrogant lucky cat statue perched beside the phone. Picking it up and weighing its considerable heft in my hand, I noticed that it bore bold characters on its back reading "Back in the Game". *Funny slogan for a lucky cat*, I thought to myself as I waited, until at last someone picked up on the other end of the line.

But it wasn't Yashirō.

"Back in the game!" said the voice on the other side.

At precisely the same moment, I heard a voice behind me also saying, "Back in the Game!" I whirled around in shock. The professor had finally come out of the restroom and was standing in the middle of the cramped restaurant, holding my brother's cell phone in his hand. He winked at me slyly, and a triumphant smirk spread across his face.

Somewhere an unseen wooden clapper sounded, and at that signal a tricolored stage curtain rapidly drew across the exit. It too was emblazoned brightly with the words "Back in the Game". With a sound like shuffling cards the wooden menu tags hanging on the wall all turned over one after another.

On the opposite of each tag were written the words "Back in the Game".

Back in the game—to return from a defeat, ready to strike.

The grin on the professor's face stretched even wider, and narrow cat whiskers sprouted out from his cheeks. His small eyes grew round and wide, and began to shine with a yellow light. His gloating, unbearably loathsome smile grew so wide it threatened to overflow the sides of his face.

In a rage I rushed at the curtain, but it was soft and springy like a giant green-and-orange-and-black-painted mochi, and I merely bounced off it. My joints felt oddly fuzzy, too, and I couldn't seem to summon any strength. By the time I realized that the *tamago-don* must have been drugged it was already too late.

I collapsed onto my butt on the floor, still clutching the curtain, hardly able to move.

The restaurant began to rumble, and from the ceiling I heard a voice say, "We really pulled one on him, didn't we Kinkaku!"

The Professor Yodogawa impostor looked up at the ceiling and laughed, "Fine work, Ginkaku!"

"Drop dead," I mumbled. I was so mortified at having been so thoroughly hoodwinked by these two idiot brothers, the laughingstock of the tanuki world for as long as I could remember, that I would gladly have jumped into the pot myself.

Kinkaku cackled as he stood over my prostrate form. Unwrapping the cloth bundle and taking out the cage within, he sonorously proclaimed, "And now, gentlemen, the day of our vengeance is at hand!"

Chapter 7 — Uchōten Kazoku

While I was slumped on the floor of that fake soba restaurant, caught in a trap by Kinkaku and Ginkaku, my little brother was slumped on the floor of a warehouse.

How did he end up being locked in there?

Let us return to noon that day, back when I was still puttering around the neighborhood of Shijō Kawaramachi.

Yashirō was inside the Faux Denki Bran distillery in Shōgoin Rengezō-chō, staring out the window. Looking down through the smudged windowpane on the third floor, he could see the Ebisugawa Dam silently sparkling in the soft rays of light, as well as the offices of the Kyoto Municipal Waterworks Bureau protruding into the canal like a peninsula. On the other side of the canal, the trees lining Reisen Street had been stripped bare by winter, and looked terribly lonely.

Kinkaku and Ginkaku were lounging around on a black leather sofa, patting their bellies and smoking unpleasant-smelling cigars.

"Get the old switchboards in auxiliary warehouse #1 boxed up and squared away!" they ordered him.

In his head he thought to himself, *Oh brother, here they go again.*

Faux Denki Bran has undergone a number of refinements since the Taishō period, when it was first produced by employees of the Kyoto Central Telephone Bureau. Each change in the recipe produces a plethora of now unneeded switchboards and teardrop flasks and vacuum tubes and specialized refrigeration equipment to deal with. The secret manufacturing process of Faux Denki Bran is not allowed to leave the premises, so the disposal of all this equipment would take a great deal of time and effort. Consequently, it has become somewhat of a custom to stuff every single one of these newly downsized bits and bobs into auxiliary warehouse #1. Tanuki are strikingly deficient when it comes to organizing, and it's rumored that somewhere in the depths of auxiliary warehouse #1 is a wicker trunk stuffed with records of the trials and tribulations of an individual known as Amagi, the creator of the very first batch of Faux Denki Bran.

Inside auxiliary warehouse #1 is the very history of Faux Denki Bran, piled up high in a chaotic jumble, the sight alone of which is overwhelming. Plainly it was a task that my brother could never have hoped to tackle by himself.

"Come, come, we don't have all day," barked Kinkaku. "We are extremely busy. Our hands will be full all afternoon with preparations for tonight."

"We can't leave until we've seen that you've begun!" Ginkaku chimed in.

Yashirō decided that this must be part of his training.

That was both very admirable of him, and very foolish.

Yashirō rolled up his sleeves and headed for the warehouse. The heavy iron door was several times taller than him, and it took the grunting exertions of him and Kinkaku and Ginkaku combined to pull it open.

"These switchboards and old gizmos may be triggered by cell phone waves. We certainly wouldn't want you to get hurt," said Kinkaku in his most coaxing tone. "Just leave your phone there."

Yashirō placed his cell phone at the foot of a gingko tree next to the warehouse.

Stepping into the midst of that anarchistic landscape of junk Yashirō began to despair, but there was nothing for it but to get to work. As he picked out switchboards from the nearest heap and stuffed them into a box, he noticed that the room seemed to be getting oddly dim. He turned his head only to see the great iron portal steadily closing. In a panic he rushed towards it, but not quickly enough, and with a cruel, echoing clang, he was locked inside the pitch-black warehouse. His tail came shooting out in sheer terror.

Outside the warehouse, Kinkaku and Ginkaku seemed to be beside themselves rolling on the floor in laughter.

"These Shimogamo brothers really are such fools!" hooted Kinkaku. "Failure to plan is a plan for failure, as they say!"

"Can I use the Fūjin Raijin fan, Kinkaku? Can I start flapping away?"

"Stay cool as a cucumber, Ginkaku. Wait until we've pinned down Yaichirō's location. Perhaps he's at Nanzenji? And where has Kaisei run off to? If anything goes amiss, our plan will go up in smoke."

"After we catch Yaichirō and Auntie, it's just Yasaburō, right? He's going to be a pain in the butt."

"Don't get fainthearted now. Father is sure to catch him, and if somehow he gets away, I'll be sure to get him."

"You're so clever now, Kinkaku! You're so clever it scares me a little. By the way, what do we do with the frog in the well?"

"Him? Just leave him there. He's completely useless."

And Kinkaku and Ginkaku walked away.

Yashirō slammed himself against the iron door and called for help, but auxiliary warehouse #1 was just a storehouse for junk, so nobody ever came by. He knew that his family was in danger, but had no way to contact them.

Before long an earthshaking tremor rumbled through the warehouse, and the roof began to rattle like someone was throwing stones at it.

The thunderstorm had arrived.

He couldn't stand thinking of Mother out there running helter skelter to escape Lord Raijin. The seconds ticked by. He screamed and hurled himself at the door until he was completely exhausted, and only then did he throw himself into the pile of switchboards to weep.

"Mother! Yaichirō!" he cried, as the sound of the rain falling on the roof of the warehouse drowned out his sobs.



Utterly ignorant of what his little brother was going through at that precise moment, Yaichirō madly spurred the automaton rickshaw on through the lashing storm, heading toward the Tadasu Forest.

He had planned to head to Sensuirō in Kiyamachi after a short visit to Nanzenji. But in the midst of their meeting he abruptly cut things short and dashed pell mell through the driving rain, out of worry for Mother.

Just as he was flying down Reisen Street past the Ebisugawa power station, a young tanuki came tumbling straight into his path. Attempting to avoid a collision the rickshaw overturned violently, and Yaichirō was flung into the street in the pouring rain. He struck his knee hard on the pavement, and as he howled in pain he returned to his tanuki form and was immediately scooped up by Ebisugawa's henchmen. The young tanuki that was the source of the commotion was merely a stuffed animal, thrown by a minion hidden in the trees along the road.

The Ebisugawa Guard Corps stuffed Yaichirō into a cage and tossed him into a car. He was taken to a building to the west of the Kamiya Bridge in Kiyamachi. The walls on the first floor were bare concrete, and indeterminately old wooden racks were filled with faded, mouldering magazines. Only an empty birdcage hanging by one of the walls provided an eerie touch of gentility. At first glance it looked simply like an old secondhand bookstore, seemingly uninterested in turning a profit and devoid of customers, but in actuality it was running a brisk trade selling Faux Denki Bran under the table.

The Ebisugawa Guard Corps carried Yaichirō's cage into the shop and went through a door at the back of the store. The room behind the door was just as drab, lit by a single bare lightbulb dangling from the ceiling. Surrounding him were innumerable sake bottles: this was how the Faux Denki Bran manufactured at the distillery was transported to distributors throughout Kyoto, night after night.

Yaichirō's attention fell upon another cage also holding a captive tanuki in the corner of the storeroom.

It was Mother.

Tears of frustration sprang to Yaichirō's eyes as the Ebisugawa Guard Corps set his cage on the cold concrete floor and left the room.

Inside her cage, Mother's eyes were shut in resignation. Yaichirō rattled his cage.

"Mother! Mother!" he shouted.

Mother's eyes opened slightly. "So they got you too, Yaichirō."

"Mother, I'm going to get you out of there!"

But no matter how he struggled he couldn't break out of the cage, and he couldn't muster the concentration to transform. "I can't get out, dammit!"

"There isn't anything we can do in these cages, Yaichirō," Mother sighed. "You were trying to come to me because Raijin had arrived, weren't you? What a terrible thing I've done to you. This all happened because I'm so afraid of thunder."

"That's not true!"

"I wonder what's happened to Yasaburō and Yashirō. I do hope nothing terrible has befallen them."

"It's an Ebisugawa conspiracy!" Yaichirō howled. "He's a fellow tanuki! How could he do this? Drop dead!"

But howl as Yaichirō might, the sturdy cage wouldn't budge an inch. Yaichirō and Mother waited a long time in that chilly storeroom with thoughts of trepidation swirling around their heads. Mother kept sneezing.

At long last the door opened, and Ebisugawa Sōun entered the room accompanied by an old man. They both wore grand robes radiating composure. Yaichirō glared intensely at Ebisugawa, who only looked back at him indifferently.

"Here we are," Ebisugawa announced. "How much will you be requiring?"

The old man's face was round and benign, but the look in his eyes as he swept his gaze around the bottles was unnervingly cold, and Yaichirō regarded him with great apprehension. Stretching out his neck to peering around at the stacked bottles around him, the old man pondered, "With Benten, we will require enough for ten."

"Now that you mention it, I met Lady Benten earlier. And I must say, it was quite...unpleasant."

"Was it, now?"

"Lady Benten does get carried away with her jests from time to time. It can be perturbing."

"Well, that cannot be helped. That is what makes her so endearing."

At this point in the conversation the old man's eyes fell upon the pair of cages sitting in the corner of the gloomy warehouse. "Well well well, what might be these tanuki doing here?"

Sōun rattled Yaichirō's cage. "This one I've promised to Professor Yodogawa."

"Indeed? I suspected that Hotei would require assistance. Shameful, really. Of late Hotei seems to have lost his nerve when it comes to tanuki. It simply will not do."

"That is where I offered to lend a hand."

The old man's eyes narrowed into serpentine slits, and he stared through Sōun. "I was not aware that you engaged yourself in such a trade, Ebisugawa. You are a true blackguard."

"You flatter me."

"Two tanuki, then, for tonight. A luxury, indeed."

Upon hearing these words Ebisugawa's face clouded, and he moved to put himself between Mother's cage and the old man. "That won't do. It won't do at all."

"You will only part with one?"

"I'm not at liberty to give this one away, even to the great Jurōjin."

"You have a soft spot for this one, eh?"

"...That is correct."

The old man's mouth twisted up into a smile. "Very well," he said. After making his selection of Faux Denki Bran, he told Ebisugawa, "Have these delivered to Chitoseya." The two left the room, with Ebisugawa showing the mysterious old man out.

"Have you got any ideas, Mother?" asked Yaichirō. "I seem to have found my way onto tonight's menu."

"I won't stand for that, I won't! But right now I just don't see what we can do."

"The only one who could help us would have been Yasaburō, but I suspect he's been captured as well. Sōun wouldn't have been so composed otherwise."

"You mustn't give up!" Mother said forcefully. "We can't say that he's been captured for sure yet. Yasaburō's quick on his feet and fearless, so I still have faith that he's all right!"



Contrary to Mother's expectations, I was currently stuffed inside a cage.

Spiking what should have been a delicious *tamago-don*: a truly disgraceful act for a tanuki. Benten, a *tamago-don* aficionado, would surely have brought down the flaming hammer of justice upon their heads.

I wanted to transform into a dragon and give Kinkaku a good bite on the ass, but penned in on all four sides like a furry block of tofu, I couldn't summon the strength. A cool head is paramount whenever tanuki transform, but how was I supposed to keep a cool head in a situation like this? It was all I could do to stir faintly and glare.

"Oi, Kinkaku," I said. "Let me out!"

The fake Professor Yodogawa sat atop my cage, then swooped down with his lucky cat's face down to stare at me. His nostrils flared triumphantly. "What are you, a fool?" he sneered.

I was so infuriated I couldn't speak.

"A fool like you must not understand what's happened. Allow me to explain. It was plain as day to me that you would tail Professor Yodogawa and attempt to help Yaichirō."

"Plain as day!" squeaked a voice from the ceiling of the restaurant, or rather Ginkaku disguised as the restaurant.

"I wasn't expecting you to fall for it so easily. Pathetic, really. This is why the Shimogamos are so useless. Didn't you think that it was a little too convenient. Are you a fool? Yes, you are. It was too convenient for Professor Yodogawa to just come strolling over the Kamo Bridge. Sheer opportunism. You told yourself, 'This must be my lucky day!', didn't you?"

"Plain as day!"

Kinkaku had hit the mark, if only by dumb luck, and I could say nothing back.

"Father failed, because of Benten's interference, but he had nothing to worry about with worthy scions like ourselves. I'm sure he'll be quite pleased with us. I must say, though, my shapeshifting is superior, but I'm surprised you failed to see through the fake professor. There must be something wrong with your eyes. Aren't you supposed to be friends with him?"

"Kinkaku...Ginkaku...when I get out of here, I'm going to split your asses in eight. That's sixteen asscheeks between the two of you, if you're keeping count!" I glowered at the fake professor's butt, then turned my eyes to the rest of the shop, searching for the second butt.

Kinkaku smirked at me. "It's no use. We're wearing the iron underpants we forced out of that master blacksmith in Nagahama," he boasted. "And we even put in hand

warmers to keep our butts nice and toasty. Behold, this flawless plan! This staggering genius! Slow and steady wins the race!"

"It was all Kinkaku's idea. We dotted our i's and crossed our t's!"

"Ready to throw in the towel, Yasaburō?"

"Hah, not by a long shot. I'm just getting started."

"Stubborn fool. I've been carefully devising this plan since last year, using my superior intellect. Father is going to deliver poor little Yaichirō right into Professor Yodogawa's hands. Your brother, Lil' Bushytail, is trapped in the warehouse at the Faux Denki Bran distillery, and with that big round padlock there's no way he's getting out. We're holding your mother as well, and now you're locked in a cage inside Ginkaku's belly. Come, surely you've got to admit defeat. Who could possibly save you now?"

"There's still Yajirō."

"You idiot. What can a frog sitting at the bottom of the well hope to accomplish? The Shimogamo family is scattered to the four winds. All that's left is to wait until nightfall." Kinkaku pressed his hands together in prayer. "Namu Amida Butsu. May Yaichirō find his way from the stewpot into nirvana. Namu Amida Butsu."

"You're a scumbag. Even the most foolish tanuki knows that there are things you can and can't do!"

"I'm not interested in lectures from a fool like yourself. Yaichirō will become stew, and Father will become the Trick Magister. And someday, I will carry the torch as the next Trick Magister. I am the future: the strong, wise, shining hope of all tanukidom! Indubitably!"

"Indubitably!" rumbled the fake restaurant.

Kinkaku sat on a chair and took a leisurely sip of tea. "Now, to use up the rest of this phone's battery," he declared, taking out Yashirō's phone. He placed a call to Kaisei, who after being caught in the Tadasu Forest had been taken back to the distillery and restrained inside.

"Please, just wait until tonight. No, not right now. I'm taking Yasaburō to task at Chikurintei. Oh, oh, please, don't say such things to your big brother. He's very hurt, see?"

Kaisei was raging so loudly I could hear it from the speaker. "Good! I hope you drop dead!"

"I'm begging you, don't say that...you're still unmarried, all right? You need to be more careful about how you..."

Unable to withstand the torrent of abuse, Kinkaku ended the call. For a moment he was dumbstruck. He opened up the Fūjin Raijin fan and stared at the painted visage of Fūjin. "I'm only doing this for her sake," he mumbled.

"Yeah, I can *really* tell that she respects you a lot."

"Oh, be quiet."

Slowly but surely, I could feel time trickling by like a dissolving cough drop. I snapped my head over to look at the clock on the wall. Every moment that ticked by was another moment closer to Yaichirō going into the pot. Even I had to admit to myself—maybe this really was Yaichirō's last day on earth. As my mind was filled with thoughts of chagrin and regret, the hands on the clock moved steadily forward.



At that same moment, Yaichirō was also glaring at a clock in the corner of the warehouse. Surrounded by bottles of Faux Denki Bran in that still storeroom, the only movement around the two caged tanuki were the hands of that clock. Mother's face was pressed up against the bars, and her eyes were closed.

Suddenly seized by anxiety Yaichirō called out to her. "Mother, are you all right? Have you taken a chill?"

"I'm all right. I'm not cold."

"You were so still I got concerned!"

"I'm just saving my strength. I wouldn't get anything done by thrashing around now, except hurt my fanny."

At that moment Sōun returned to the storeroom. The bare lightbulb swung to and fro, illuminating his dispassionate expression. Yaichirō stared up at him from his cage. Sōun was holding a folded wrapping cloth.

"Professor Yodogawa has arrived. After handing you off, I shall proceed directly to Sensuirō. Rest assured that the future of the tanuki world is in good hands," he said. "Farewell, Yaichirō. Be a good little stew now."

"Drop dead!" Yaichirō writhed. "You think it's all going to go your way? I'll not be cooked up so easily!"

"Don't forget, your mother is in my power. What do you think would happen if you were to run off?"

"How much lower can you sink, you coward!?"

"Say what you will, it matters not."

Sōun picked up Yaichirō's cage. Yaichirō pressed his face against the bars, looking at Mother, who looked back at him from the concrete floor. Tears were brimming at her eyes, but she didn't seem to have lost hope yet, and she kept nodding as if to encourage him. Clinging to hope, even in such dire straits, was truly the spirit of a mother.

Mother called out as Sōun turned to leave with Yaichirō. "Ebisugawa! Have you really changed so much? I think it's a terrible shame, I do, and I know that Sō would feel the same. He would grieve to know that his own younger brother had turned into a tanuki who would do such a terrible thing!"

"Sō?" Sōun turned to face Mother. "My brother and I had a mutual understanding of one another."

"No tanuki would ever do such a terrible thing. Only a tengu, a human would do something like this! Ebisugawa, Ebisugawa, I beg you, please, stop tormenting my children!"

"You call me Ebisugawa."

"But you are an Ebisugawa!"

Sōun turned away. "Then what concern is it of mine what happens to the brood of you and my brother?"

Sōun strode out of the storeroom. Just before the door shut, Yaichirō heard Mother cry out from within the storeroom, "If you get a chance to run, just run and don't think twice!"

Professor Yodogawa was standing in front of that bleak, barren store, holding an open umbrella.

"Hello there!" he greeted Sōun. "That's him?"

"One tanuki, as promised," Sōun said, handing Yaichirō's cage over to the professor. The professor's eyes misted over as he peered down at Yaichirō. Yaichirō stared back at the professor.

"A very fine creature," the professor sighed. "But I'm afraid that tonight, we're going to eat you."

Yaichirō was horrified. As the professor carried him along, he thought of Mother and his little brothers, and felt a sadness he had never felt before in his life. It was an unfathomable sadness, like a bottomless pit that threatened to swallow him whole. *Father must have felt this sadness too*, he thought to himself, trying to muster up the kind of dignity that would befit a great tanuki, but unable to hold it in he pressed his face into the bars and quietly cried.

The cloth around the cage came undone, and raindrops fell wetting Yaichirō's face.

Noticing the cloth, the professor squatted down by the trees along the Takase River. Every time the thunder rumbled he gave a little squeal of fright. In the midst of rearranging the cloth his hands stopped, and his gentle eyes held Yaichirō in their gaze.

"I'm sorry, I've let you get all wet." And taking the cloth he wiped Yaichirō's face dry.



Yashirō's face was stained with tears too, inside that dim warehouse.

Creeping around in the chilly darkness, he rummaged through the mountains of trash, his lip quivering, until his hands fell on something familiar. It was an old emergency strobe, for warning when something had gone wrong in the manufacturing process. With a jolt from his special knack for generating electricity, it flickered on and gave off a yellow light. Taking heart from the light, Yashirō kept digging through the trash and found a clinking box full of small bottles of Faux Denki Bran. He had never tasted it before in his life, and on his first sip a warmth spread through his belly, emboldening him even further.

But no matter how energized he was, alone Yashirō was no match for that iron door. Time after time he hurled himself against it to no avail, and he had turned away from it with head held low when, in the midst of the pouring rain and crashing thunder, he heard a small voice calling, "Yashirō, Yashirō!" There was a scratching sound, like someone was clawing at the door. In the slight opening between the door and the wall came the probing beam of a flashlight, shining on Yashirō's startled face.

"Kaisei!" Yashirō thrust his face at the crack. "Get me outta here!"

"I can't, it's locked and it's too heavy!"

"But I have to go, right now!"

"I know, relax. There's a secret door in the corner, go find it! Once you lift the bar you'll be able to get out," she instructed him, before vanishing from the other side of the door.

Using the light of the strobe to guide him, Yashirō searched along the warehouse wall. Just past the second hand-less dial of a great clock which had probably once kept the time in the distillery, he came across a rusty door, just big enough to admit the passage of a tanuki cub. Throwing it open with all his might, he was splashed on the nose by a rude spray of rain. It was not yet sundown, yet the sky was dark as if evening had already fallen, and lightning crackled violently overhead. Turning into his tanuki form he picked up a small bottle of Faux Denki Bran in his mouth and squeezed through the door.

Seeing Kaisei standing in the rain holding a flashlight, Yashirō ran up and hugged her.

"Where are my brothers?"

"Yaichirō's been caught by the Friday Fellows. Kinkaku and Ginkaku called earlier and told me that they were sticking it to Yasaburō."

"What about Mother? Is she here?"

"They caught Auntie too, but I don't know where she is." Kaisei's fingers dug into Yashirō's back as her words came out breathlessly. "She's not at the distillery. Dad must have locked her up somewhere else. I bet it's at the Faux Denki Bran sales office."

"They're terrible!"

"If we can get Yasaburō out, I think it'll work out."

"Please, my lady!" A shrill voice rang out, and in no time the two were surrounded by a ring of lanterns marked "EBISUGAWA". "You must return to your room, I implore you. Master Sōun will be very displeased with us!"

The lanterns slowly closed in on them. Kaisei picked up the wet lump that was Yashirō and whispered in his ear, "You gotta get to Chikurintei!"

"But Kinkaku and Ginkaku will just kick my butt if I go alone! Come with me and let 'em have it!"

Kaisei scowled at the approaching lanterns. "I can't leave the distillery. You have to go alone!"

Just as the Ebisugawa stooges fell upon her, Kaisei wound her arm up and hurled my furball of a brother into the air. Thunder rumbled as Yashirō went sailing through the air and splashed down to earth by a large ginkgo tree in a puddle of mud. He hastily transformed into little boy, but a thunderclap almost sent his tail shooting out.

As he turned to look back at her, Kaisei yelled, "Keep your tail in! Run, run!"

Clutching his little bottle of Faux Denki Bran, Yashirō fled into the storm.



Emerging onto Kawabata Street, Yashirō was greeted with the sight of gathered storm clouds looming grey over the city. His spirits sank at the sight. He was alone, and Yaichirō had been delivered to the Friday Fellows, and he had no idea where Mother was, and Yasaburō had fallen into Kinkaku and Ginkaku's trap. Seeing no chance of success,

bitter tears came to his eyes, intermingling with cold drops of rain as they ran down his cheeks.

Yashirō was bringing up the bottle of Faux Denki Bran for a shot of liquid courage when his hand stopped dead. Lightning flashed again and again, each bolt momentarily illuminating the twilit riverbank. He recalled what Kinkaku had said on the other side of the iron door: "Him? Just leave him there. He's completely useless."

Was Yajirō really useless after all?

Was he really alone after all?

Were things really so hopeless after all?

Grasping the bottle tightly he turned and ran off directly towards Chinnōji.

Why would Yashirō think, at that moment, to do what no one else would ever have thought to do and seek the aid of a frog at the bottom of a well? This, what seemed to be a desperate measure taken in desperate straits, turned out to be a brilliant, divinely inspired, once-in-a-lifetime idea. If he had not turned aside in the midst of that storm, it is very likely that the Shimogamo clan would have met its end.

On and on he galloped, puffing and panting, all the way until he reached the well on the grounds of Chinnōji. "Yajirō!" he shouted into the dark depths, but that was all he could manage, on account of his sobbing and gasping for air.

"Hey now, Yashirō. What are you doing here?" Yajirō burbled. "Raijin's going wild. Why aren't you with Mother?"

Yashirō managed to wheeze, "Yajirō...Ebisugawa's got 'em all!"

"You can't be serious! I should have known!"

"You're the only one I can depend on now!"

"But I'm a frog sitting in a well. What could I possibly do?"

"I've got an idea. Look up here and open your mouth!"

"Come on, I really don't think now is the time to be catching raindrops on my tongue."

"Just do it!"

Taking a deep breath, Yashirō uncapped the bottle, then leaned over the rim of the well and looked inside. Another flash of lightning illuminated the bottom, revealing a frog with its mouth open wide, peering up at him.

"Don't miss a drop!" said Yashirō, before tipping the bottle on its side. A light orange, sweet-smelling stream of liquid poured out from the mouth of the bottle like a beautiful transparent thread, falling straight into Yajirō's wide open gullet.

In pouring that entire bottle of Faux Denki Bran into Yajirō's mouth, he gave Yajirō a taste of something he had not tasted ever since he had given up on the tanuki world, something that he had used to love.

Yashirō held his breath and waited.

From the depths of the well Yajirō's voice came booming out, sounding more jubilant and energized than it had ever been since Father's death.

"I'm back in the game!!!"



A long time passed.

The clock on the wall finally struck five in the evening, and as the bonging rang out through the room, the face of the clock suddenly seemed to blur in my vision. I must have been crying.

Tanuki are easygoing creatures, but there are some things you just can't laugh off. *So long, Yaichirō*, I thought to myself. Memories of him flooded my mind: Yaichirō scurrying frantically around the Kamo Bridge looking for Mother; Yaichirō transformed into Hotei and sulking by himself; Yaichirō scrubbing Master Akadama's back at the bathhouse; Yaichirō proudly driving along in his automaton rickshaw. In my head, Yaichirō was tearing at his hair, shouting, "What have I done to deserve to be saddled with such a useless lot of brothers!"

It had always been hard for Yaichirō to lead us useless brothers along. He had striven in so many ways to follow in Father's footsteps, yet instead of taking his place as head of tanuki society, he was now following him into the pot. "Please, don't any of you turn into stew!" Mother had told us so often, and yet here we were making her cry yet again.

"Are you crying, Yasaburō?" asked Kinkaku. "Your brother was a fine tanuki. A pity. It almost brings tears to my own eyes."

"Liar!"

"I'm serious. Of course, my butt still twinges from time to time. He did almost tear me a new one. But I won't deny that he was a very upstanding tanuki."

"Then help him!"

"That just won't do. We have to follow Father's orders. It's not easy being in the family business." Kinkaku glanced at the clock. "It'll be dark soon."

It happened then.

The false soba shop shook with a *whump*, and I felt a sensation like we were being carried away. My cage slid along the floor, Kinkaku staggered and fell on his rump, and the lucky cat statue rolled away. The tables rattled violently and the chairs toppled, and the wall clock crashed to the floor with a sound of breaking glass.

"What's going on, Ginkaku?" Kinkaku yelled as he rolled along. "Why is everything shaking?"

"I don't know, Kinkaku! I feel like I'm going somewhere really fast! My butt's wubbling like jelly. I'm scared!"

"Calm yourself, Ginkaku! Don't let your transformation come off!"

"I'm scared, Kinkaku! I can't take it anymore!" Ginkaku screeched, just before everything went sideways.

"No!" yelled Kinkaku, but once a transformation starts to slip off it doesn't slip back on. The false soba shop warped like it was made of konjac jelly, and my head started to spin along with it. The tables and the chairs and the *daruma* stoves and the wooden menu tags and the lucky cat statue all slid towards the back of the shop and were swallowed into the kitchen.

"I said nooooo!" wailed Kinkaku, attempting to cling onto the sliding furniture. But his efforts were in vain, and at last even the walls and ceiling were slurped into the kitchen like paint being washed away—and then the world flipped itself.

We were riding inside an Eizan railcar.

The train seemed to be rolling along Teramachi Street. Kinkaku and Ginkaku scampered over to the windows, placed their faces up to the glass, and simultaneously said, "Huh?" before putting down the window and starting to shriek, "Heeeelp!"

As I sat wondering what on earth was going on, a boy came running up to me and opened my cage. I tumbled out, gave a big, long stretch in relief, and exclaimed, "Boy, does that feel good!"

"Yasaburō! We came to rescue you!" said Yashirō with a huge grin, and I heard Yajirō disguised as the train call out, "Hey, Yasaburō! How's the ride?"



The fake Eizan train rushed south past the forests of the Kyoto Gyoen National Garden.

Kinkaku and Ginkaku were losing their minds staring out the window, so surprised that they had reverted to their normal furry selves. Together Yashirō and I pounced on them, wrestling off the iron underpants that protected their behinds.

"Stop! You reprobate! I say, get your hands off our underwear!"

"You'll regret this, really you will! Stop it!"

Ginkaku tripped over Yashirō and went sprawling, so I ripped off his pants and sank my teeth into his behind. "Kyaaa!" he shrieked. "Kinkaku, my butt's splitting in half!" he bawled, clinging to his brother. Seizing advantage of Kinkaku's immobility, Yashirō tore off his underpants, and I swooped in for the kill. Needless to say, I made sure to give him an extra bite.

"Owch! Owie! My butt's splitting in eight!"

I picked up the two writhing tanuki by their necks and mashed them both into the cage, exacting my vengeance for my previous indignity and improving my mood considerably.

"It's very cramped in here!" complained Kinkaku. "This violence is unbecoming, Yasaburō!"

"You're one to talk!"

At last, I had recovered the Fūjin Raijin fan I had been searching for since summer. "So you had it all along!" I kicked the cage, drawing high-pitched squeals.

"I found it by the Aoi Bridge," pleaded Kinkaku. "We didn't steal it!"

"Same difference. It belongs to Master Akadama, so back to him it goes."

The fake train was passing through Marutamachi. The sky, which had been so turbulent only a short time ago, had done an about face, and with the rage of Fūjin and Raijin sated, the storm clouds dispersed and moved off in no time at all. The sun was already low in the deep azure sky. Streetlights blinked on one by one along Teramachi Street, another indicator of just how little time was left. Yaichirō could already be walking

the plank over the edge of a bubbling pot. That, of course, was a crisis, and knowing how useless Yaichirō was in situations like those I wasn't sure how long he could hold out.

Yajirō raced faster than greased lightning along Teramachi Street. The bare trees trembled and swayed in his wake; astonished drivers hastily yielded the road and pedestrians pressed themselves against the buildings at the sight of the train barreling down from the north.

"Make way! Make way!" Yajirō blared. "Eizan train coming through!"

I stuck my head out the window and felt the cold wind going by.

The city was gleaming with all sorts of lights: house lights, streetlights, shop window lights, lanterns hanging in front of bars, restaurant lights, lamps adorning antique shop storefronts, all glittering and washing over the train as it surged by. Reflecting the illumination of the night, the fake train continued on, people moving out of its way as if it was parting the Red Sea. Taking in that thrilling spectacle, it was like seeing Yajirō's glory days come to life once again. And Yajirō's glory days had been Father's glory days; I could almost see Father in the hefty form of Hotei, urging Yajirō on and shouting, "Keep at 'em!"

"I remember now!" Yajirō cried, flying faster than the wind. "This is it. This is it!"

Yashirō and I got on our knees atop the seats, leaned out through the windows, waved our hands, and screamed, "Woo-hoo!"

"What do I do, Yasaburō? Yaichirō's in trouble, the head of our family's in trouble, but somehow I'm just having so much fun! It doesn't make any sense, does it?"

"Don't worry about it, just keep going! It's just your fool's blood talking!" I cried. "Fun things are good things!"

All of a sudden the train started veering left and right all over the road, grazing the rain gutters on the buildings and even almost smashing the bright store windows.

"Whoa, Yajirō, you okay?"

For a moment Yajirō said nothing and continued to sway all over the road, but after a while he replied, in a voice half-choked with sobs, "That was the last thing Father said to me. That's what he told me that night. All that time down there in the well I couldn't remember, but finally, now, I remember!"

I could almost feel the fool's blood heating up in his veins, almost hear his heart beating, and together he, Yashirō, and I shouted out as one:

"Fun things are good things!"



Past Nijō the road started to narrow. Only just avoiding crashing into the building at the edge of the intersection, the fake Eizan train narrowed its own frame down and continued hurtling southbound. I stood at the front of the car and looked on as we passed the greenery in front of city hall. Before us the Teramachi Street arcade was rapidly drawing near on the other side of wide Oike Street, glowing white in the deepening evening gloom like a portal to another world.

"Yajirō, you just going straight into the arcade?"

"What's that? I can't hear you!"

"Pontochō! We've gotta get to Pontochō!"

"Pontochō? Where's that again?"

Taking full advantage of the fact that the traffic light was green, Yajirō ploughed straight through the intersection without slowing down, straight into the arcade, and in flash we were enveloped by dazzling lights.

Yajirō blew past the gate to Honnōji, scattering illegally parked bicycles, blowing away racks of dresses in front of clothing stores, and rippling the pages of the innumerable art books on display in front of the secondhand bookstores. Closely packed stationary stores, cafés, art supply stores, confectioneries, and restaurants appeared and vanished just as quickly outside the window. Yajirō was going so fast that he was generating a strong wind behind him, and behind us I saw gorgeous fans and writing paper that had been sucked out from Kyūkyodō dancing in the air in the middle of the arcade.

"Yajirō, do you think you can turn left on Sanjō?"

"Don't think that's happening."

We approached the Teramachi Sanjō intersection, but it was practically impossible to change our direction. In fact, Teramachi Street, usually so straight, bent slightly to the right here, so as we passed between the local police box and the Kani Dōraku, Yajirō got flustered and ended up turning to the right. A sign saying "Please walk your bike" went flying into the window of a fast food joint, sending shattered glass everywhere.

"Oops, my bad," Yajirō muttered, clipping the side of Mishimatei and shearing off a lantern as he proceeded ever southward.

"Yajirō, don't you think it would be best to stop the train and go on foot?"

"Sorry, Yasaburō, it just ain't working out right now."

"Fine, let's just get to Shijō Avenue."

We raced on towards Shijō, but strangely enough Shijō Avenue just wasn't coming up. Stranger still, it should have been a straight north-south shot on Teramachi Street between Sanjō and Shijō, yet the path seemed to be curving ever so slightly. We kept passing the same familiar storefronts over and over again. What really tipped me off that something funny was going on was the second time I saw the multitude of orange lanterns decorating the Nishiki-tenmangu shrine. There could only be one Nishiki-tenmangu.

"We're going around in circles, Yasaburō!" Yashirō shouted, hanging out the window.

On closer inspection, the dazzling lights on the street shone fixedly, the startled pedestrians had all disappeared, and the stores lining the street were all deserted. As a test I tread on the floor and noticed that it seemed to be slanted upwards, even though Teramachi Street was supposed to be level.

"Yajirō, something's going on. Slow down a little!"

"Awful particular with the driving, aren't we?"

Yajirō did his best to slow down, but the fool's blood coursing through his body refused to be tamed. As we plunged on helplessly through the vacant Teramachi Street, the road inclined ever more heavily until it was pointing upwards at an impossible angle, and in front of us was no longer Shijō Avenue, but rather the full moon shining in the night sky.

"This Teramachi Street is fake!" I turned around to see Kinkaku and Ginkaku in the cage, whispering into Yajirō's cell phone. They squealed as I fell upon the cage and ripped the phone from their paws. "Who were you talking to?" I cried.

They both smirked. "Now now, Yasaburō. Haven't you ever heard the saying, 'Out of the fire and into the frying pan? We called the Ebisugawa Guard Corps and tipped them off, we did!"

"You rat, what does it take to stop you sneaking around?"

"How do you like that?" said Kinkaku, smugly flaring his nostrils.

"How do you like that?" echoed Ginkaku.

And they both cheered, "To the bottom of the Kamo you go!"

"This isn't looking good, Yajirō!" I called, returning to the front of the train, but overwhelmed with all the excitement Yajirō only grunted in reply.

In front of us, the fake Teramachi Street veered sharply to the left, heading towards the Kamo River. The moon vanished from in front of us. There was nowhere to go for the fake Eizan train but along the fake Teramachi Street. The uphill climb sharply leveled out, and I felt the churn in my stomach that comes when you're sitting in a rollercoaster at the top of a hill, right before you started freefalling. The glittering arcade traced an arc downwards and to the left, like a gigantic slide. Yajirō could no longer stop himself. The leftward curve of the road slackened, and at last we saw the end of the fake Teramachi Street, and beyond it the gleaming surface of the Kamo River.

"Yajirō, we're going to crash straight into the river!"

"The Kamo's pretty cold at this time of year. You'd better do some warming up now!"

"We got you, we got you!" Kinkaku taunted us. "Back in the game! Back in the game!"

"Hey, you're going into the river with us too!"

"Hmph. We're just in the same boat, that's all."

"Strange boatfellows! Strange boatfellows!"

Tracing a path in the sky above the city, the fake Teramachi Street came to an abrupt end, pointing straight at the Kamo River.

The fake Eizan train came flying out, carried on by its momentum. Looking through the window I saw that glowing white tunnel rising up from Teramachi Sanjō, zigging and zagging through the night sky over Teramachi and Shinkyōgoku and Kawaramachi and Pontocho, stretching all the way over to the Kamo River. It was pretty gutsy stuff, I had to admit, and I had to tip my hat to that transforming, even if they were my foes.

Below us I saw the coursing Kamo River.

"We tricked you! We tricked you!" Kinkaku chanted with delight.

But Yashirō shouted out bravely, "You're the ones getting tricked!" and jumping up to grab a red strap, he pulled down on it with all his might.

The floor of the fake Eizan railcar opened up, and a familiar *chagama* rose up from underneath. It was the very same *chagama* that was at the heart of the engine that powered Benten's Inner Parlor through the sky. Pulling out a bottle of Akadama port wine hidden under the seats, Yashirō filled up the kettle to the brim, and in no time Yajirō had transformed into a Flying Eizan Railcar And Fake At That, something so ridiculous I had a hard time coming to grips with it.

The fake Eizan railcar came skimming to a stop, hovering just over the surface of the river. "Oh, that's cold!" gasped Yajirō, who apparently was low enough to feel the spray coming off the water.

Rocking softly in midair, I looked out the brightly lit buildings and old *ryōtei* of Pontocho lining the river. One of them was Chitoseya, and beyond its glass doors I saw an assembly of faces that I knew only too well. They were the Friday Fellows, and they were preparing to devour Yaichirō.

The year-end party had already started.

"It's not fair. How did you outwit me again?" Kinkaku blubbered. "I'm finished. I can't think of any more schemes."

I grabbed them both by the scruffs of their necks, lifted them out of the cage, and carried them to the window.

"Just a moment!" they shrieked. "Timeout! Give us a timeout!"

"Nope, don't have the time for that. I hear Osaka Bay's lovely this time of year." I tried to toss them into the river, but they fought tenaciously, grabbing onto the window frame with their furry little paws and refusing to leave.

"I don't wanna go back in the water! It's cold, I-I'll freeze in there! Really!"

"See here. The Friday Fellows are holding their year-end party right there." I looked at the two of them dangling from the window frame with a sardonic grin. "Would you prefer the freezing Kamo River, or a boiling iron pot?"

Faced with such a draconian choice, Kinkaku and Ginkaku clung on to the edge of the window for a minute, twitching their noses with indecision.

"We'll take the river," they muttered sullenly, and dropped into the frigid water, leaving two plopping sounds hanging in the air.

Sometimes they just were so bumbling it was impossible to hate them, but on the whole that pair of idiots were simply detestable. Now that they were off on their long journey towards the distant ocean, there remained but one thing left for us to do. Yashirō poured more port wine into the *chagama*, and Yajirō came around to point himself square at Chitoseya.

"It sure feels funny floating in the air like this."

"Yajirō, the Friday Fellows are right there. Put us up right behind the restaurant!"

"That might be a bit tricky. It is my first time, after all."

"Should I give you a push with the Fūjin Raijin fan?"

"Try not to overdo it, alright?"

"I'll be gentle."

I opened a window and gave the fan the lightest of waves, but even that seemed to have been too much. The fake Eizan train wafted over the Kamo River towards the restaurant, but with far too much momentum. The glass doors leading into the room approached with alarming rapidity, and without slowing down the fake flying Eizan train slammed straight into it.

The second floor of Chitoseya exploded.

Tatami mats flipped, lightbulbs shattered, ashtrays went flying, and pots overturned. The Friday Fellows screamed and shouted, and somewhere in that cacophony I could have

sworn I heard Benten laughing hysterically. After crumpling the splendid folding screens like so much tissue paper the train's momentum was finally halted.

"Oh, my nose..." Yajirō quietly groaned, and the fake Eizan train rolled over, ejecting me and Yashirō and the *chagama* into the room.

His true form completely exposed, Yashirō hid himself by the *chagama* engine, which had rolled into the decorative alcove.

I transformed into the college student and stood up in the dark room. Picking up my cowering brother by the scruff of his neck, I placed the Fūjin Raijin fan in his mouth.

"Yashirō, you hurry over to Sensuirō and disrupt the elders' meeting."

"Okay!"

"Draw it out as long as you can. If things look dire, just give the fan a little wave. Once you're finished, return it to Master Akadama. He's supposed to be there too."

"What about Yaichirō?" Yashirō mumbled through a mouthful of fan.

"We'll come after you once we rescue him. Get on now. Stay around any longer looking like that, and you'll be eaten up!"

With a frightened little squeak Yashirō dashed off into the hall and out of sight.

All the lights had been extinguished, but I could hear the Friday Fellows groaning somewhere in the room. Where had Yajirō gone? And where were they keeping Yaichirō? As I sniffed around in the darkness, I heard a muffled whisper. "Yasaburō?"

It was Yaichirō, locked in his cage.



I opened the cage, catching Yaichirō as he tottered out. "Damn it all, damn it all!" he cursed, his fur bristling, his face glistening with tears of rage. He tried to shake my hand off. "You must think me a fool. Imitating the humans, running around campaigning and electioneering, and this is how I end up. I didn't realize how frightening it all was. How could a pathetic tanuki like me ever hope to shoulder the fate of the tanuki world? It would have been better for me to be eaten."

"That's a little extreme, don't you think? Or are you aiming to make Mother cry again?"

"Yes, but still, what a worthless tanuki I am..."

"That's just your fool's blood talking, Yaichirō." I slapped him on the back. "What's so bad about imitating humans? What's so bad about doing what you like? Weren't you going to follow in Father's footsteps?"

"...Yes, you're right."

"Let's kick Ebisugawa's ass, and get revenge for Father!"

"What do you mean?"

"It was Sōun who handed Father to the Friday Fellows."

A small object hopped out of the shadows onto the back of Yaichirō, who looked up with suspicion.

"It's me, Yaichirō!" chirped the shadow.

"Yajirō!"

"Hurry up, Yaichirō, let's go. I sent Yashirō to Sensuirō already. Mother will be pleased."

"Oh! Mother!" Yaichirō grabbed at me agitatedly. "Have you rescued Mother? Well?"

"No, not yet. I don't know where she is."

"The Faux Denki Bran sales office, in the warehouse. They're keeping her in a cage. We've got to help her!"

"Calm down, Yaichirō. I'll go."

At that moment, a lantern flared up in the middle of the room.

"Who's there?" a hoarse voice rasped.

In the pale flickering light an eerie shadow rose up swiftly, stretching through the broken sliding screens all the way up to the ceiling. I attempted to flee with my brothers, but from behind us a cord came snaking up and wrapped itself around my foot. It looked like it would take some time to undo, so I pushed Yaichirō and Yajirō into the hallway, away from the light of the lantern.

"Get out of here, Yaichirō. Leave Mother to me!"

Looking as if he was holding back tears, Yaichirō nodded, then waddled off through the corridor along the wooden floorboards, underneath the hanging antique lanterns.

I looked back to see a well-built old man, sitting formally in the middle of the ruined room.

That looming shadow belonged to this old man. Beside him Benten sat unassumingly, a smile on her face. The other Friday Fellows, including Professor Yodogawa, were still suffering from the lingering effects of the earlier shock, sprawling on the ground in the corners of the room, cradling their heads. Only Benten and the old man remained ensconced there, unperturbed.

Benten whispered something into the ear of the old man, whose face broke into a felicitous smile. His attitude was nonchalant, almost as if he were merely a spectator, which made me think that he was not quite ordinary. This must be Jurōjin, the doyen of the Friday Fellows.

"Well, well, how extraordinary," said the old man, looking at me. "Who might you be?"

"I heard a commotion, so I came to check it out," I replied, untying the cord from around my leg.

"A mere passerby, then, eh?" The old man eyed me critically. He flicked his hand, and in the blink of an eye the cord had returned to him. It was almost like magic. Benten stuck her tongue out at me, so I scowled back at her. Jurōjin looked at her doubtfully. "An acquaintance of yours?"

"That's right, Jurōjin. He's quite an amusing fellow."

"Is that so. It is good to be amusing."

Sensing that things had come under control, the other Friday Fellows turned towards us and came one by one into the light of the lantern. I recognized them as the same people I had fought with over sukiyaki, what seemed like a long time ago. The one with the shaved head whom I didn't recognize must have been Fukurokuju. Thrusting his gleaming pate aside, Professor Yodogawa came scrambling towards me. His scarce

remaining hairs were disheveled. He took one look at the empty cage at my feet and shrieked, "Agh!" He sounded heartbroken. "My tanuki's run off!"

The professor grabbed my shoulder in distress. "What happened here? Something came banging in from the Kamo River, and now it's all gone out of kilter! Look, the room's all askew, and the tanuki's gone..."

"Calm yourself, Hotei," Jurōjin ordered.

"But I worked so hard to get that tanuki!"

"I tell you, no good will come of arguing with a mere passerby. Mysterious happenings like these occur in this city from time to time. There is no sense in shortening your life by going to pieces all the time."

The professor sank to the floor.

Jurōjin proceeded in a more soothing tone. "Fear not. Earlier, while I was at the Faux Denki Bran sales office by the Kamiya Bridge, I saw a tanuki. It is in the possession of one of my acquaintances, but fearing that this sort of misfortune would come to pass, I have already made preparations. Tonight, we shall have that tanuki for our stew."

The dismay I felt at those words was indescribable.

Jurōjin smiled and looked around the room. "Well, well," he said. "What a state this place is in. Most unfortunate. It is time for a change in venue. Where shall we go?"

"Perhaps this would be a good chance to see your fabled private train?" suggested Bishamon, the manager of the Gyōunkaku hotel.

"Alas, it is currently undergoing repairs. In its stead, let us consider Sensuirō. It is a quite distinguished *ryōtei*, just down the river from Shijō Kiyamachi, by Toriyasa. Anticipating that something of this nature would occur, I arranged to take ownership of it some days ago. Tonight it has been reserved by another group, but I will have them squeeze us in."

"Just a minute!" I raised my hand. "Could I be allowed the honor of accompanying you?"

"You would wish to join us?"

"I've always wanted to try eating tanuki. And I'd love to see it live and moving around before I eat it. I've never seen a real, live tanuki before."

Jurōjin's long eyebrows up and down as he looked at me. His expression was genial, but somehow the smile pasted on his face didn't quite seem to reach his eyes.

"I don't mind at all," Benten cut in. "Why not?"

"Very well, if Benten is of such a mind. I must apologize, but as you are a young man I have work that needs doing. There is Faux Denki Bran in the galley. You will carry it to Sensuirō."

"I'll get right on it."

"I must say I'm impressed, Jurōjin. Getting your hands on a tanuki at the eleventh hour...and here I'd already given up!"

"It was nothing. I merely happened to lay eyes on it at the warehouse in the office. My acquaintance entrusted it to me, therefore what happens to it is my affair."

"Doesn't its owner treasure that tanuki? Won't he be angry if we eat it?"

"No, no, he will say nothing. But, Hotei."

Still brooding down on the tatami, the professor jerked his head up in surprise.

"You are most fortunate that we were able to obtain another tanuki. Whatever the circumstances, if we do not eat tanuki stew tonight, you will be expelled from the Friday Fellows."



Sensuirō is about five minutes' walk south from the Shijō Kiyamachi intersection along the Takase River.

It is in a wooden two-story building, not particularly big but quite beautiful, with the distinctive air of a longstanding establishment. The rear of the building faces the Kamo River directly, and in summer they set up a terrace overlooking the water. Its facade is a showy affair, with orange lanterns hanging all along the frontage.

Having left Chitoseya a step ahead of us, Yashirō dashed into Sensuirō, only to be immediately cowed by the sight of Ebisugawa Sōun, who was delivering a lengthy harangue on the subject of the absent Yaichirō, and appeared to have all but clinched his accession to the Trick Magistership.

Seeing how unfavorable things were looking, Yashirō cracked open the sliding screen in the hallway, and waved the Fūjin Raijin fan.

Immediately the room was engulfed by a powerful blast of wind, and the row of elders went tumbling like so many dust bunnies, making it quite difficult for them to render a decision. The attendants rushed to and fro making a fuss as they returned them all to their proper locations, and this time it was Master Akadama who, waiting in an adjacent room and drinking wine, bellowed, "Silence!"

Master Akadama was attending that day, albeit with great reluctance, and he refused to sit among tanuki, instead taking the use of a separate room for himself and his drink. Whenever it seemed likely to him that a decision would be made, he would raise a great hullabaloo with no regard whatever for appearances. It was plain as day to him that they were slighting him, and there was nothing that the great Master Akadama hated more than being slighted.

The look of wrath on the Master's face as he threw his conniptions froze Yashirō as he listened in from the hallway. He seemed to Yashirō to be in fine ill humor today, and once his lectures started they dragged on interminably, giving the listeners no chance to cut him off. That was quite fortunate in this case, because it bought time for Yaichirō and Yajirō to reach the venue.

At last Yaichirō arrived, with Yajirō riding on his back. He listened in the hallway to Yajirō's explanation of what occurred, with Master Akadama droning on in the background.

"Well done," he said, patting Yashirō on the head. "Let's go on in. Return the fan to the Master and get him to back down."

Yaichirō screwed up all his courage and slid open the screen, to find Master Akadama standing in the center of the room giving his lecture while distinguished tanuki cowered all around him. The instant the tanuki glanced up and saw Yaichirō, looks of relief

spread across their faces. A murmur went around the room. "Oh, there's Yaichirō!" "Finally, Yaichirō's here!"

Yaichirō looked at Sōun with a look of pure fury. For a moment, Sōun looked as if he had seen a ghost, but quickly recovered his composure and looked back at Yaichirō patronizingly, his lip curling.

"We've all been waiting, Yaichirō," drawled Sōun. "How dare you impose such arrogance upon us. Surely you will, at the very least, apologize to the elders!"

"Hold now, hold!" interrupted Master Akadama. "I have not finished speaking!"

"Master! We've come to present you with this!" Yashirō prostrated himself at the Master's feet and held out the Fūjin Raijin fan.

The Master's expression quickly softened. "Well, if it isn't the Fūjin Raijin fan," he muttered. "I had heard that fool Yasaburō lost it."

"We have only just found it, and came directly to deliver it to you!"

"Indeed, indeed."

"Master," said Yaichirō, sensing that his mood had improved. "Now that I have arrived, we should be able to come to a conclusion forthwith. Please, be at ease, and bear with us a while longer."

"Hrmph. Very well. But do not forget it would not be wise to tempt me," said the Master, gazing at the Fūjin Raijin fan as he spoke. "Anger me, and I may just raise up a tengu gale."

"Of course, I am only too well aware."

Letting Yashirō pull him on by the sleeve, Master Akadama disappeared into the adjacent room.

Yaichirō sat on his heels and bowed his head low to the elders. "My humblest apologies for keeping you all waiting; however, I was delayed by mitigating circumstances. Until moments ago, I was in the clutches of the Friday Fellows."

A tremble rippled through the gathered tanuki when they heard that name.

"The reason that I fell into their clutches, even had my own actions been negligent, lies solely in the machinations of intrigue of that tanuki, Ebisugawa Sōun. In order to seize the seat of the Trick Magister, he imprisoned the entire Shimogamo clan, myself included, and threw me in a cage before handing me to the Friday Fellows. This treachery cannot stand!"

"Is this true?" the elders said, quivering atop their cushions.

"It is a lie," Sōun said calmly. "I am not a tengu, nor a human. What tanuki would do such a terrible thing as to make another tanuki into stew? Not only does he make excuses for his own lateness to this hallowed gathering, he seeks to besmirch my good name. A low, vulgar trick! This is unfounded, outrageous slander!"

"It is true," insisted Yaichirō.

"Where is your proof?"

Yajirō hopped down onto the tatami and chirruped, "He's telling the truth!"

The elders observed the talking frog with great interest. "Why, if it isn't Shimogamo Yajirō!" they said. "You haven't shown yourself in a long, long time."

"What difference does the word of a frog make?" Sōun thundered, shaking the room. "He may look like a frog, but is he not a member of the Shimogamos? They've always despised the Ebisugawa clan, and now they've cooked up a story amongst them to tarnish me. And how strange that he claims that I handed him to the Friday Fellows, yet here he is! Should you not be in a pot by now?"

Yaichirō and Sōun went back and forth like this for some time.

"Shhh! Humans have entered the next room!" an attendant suddenly hissed. Everyone strained their ears. From the room opposite the chamber where Master Akadama was drinking away, the clomping footsteps of a great many humans could be heard.

"Now," said one of the elders, breaking the hush. "The longer you two go at it, the more confounded we will get. What we need is to clear our heads and think. Yaichirō, Sōun, I want both of you to shut up for a while."

And the elders all silently started to ponder.



The Friday Fellows were on their way to the new venue.

Many things must have lined up for an establishment like Sensuirō to pass into the ownership of Jurōjin, the loan shark. It made my heart hurt to think about it. By pure chance it had fallen into Jurōjin's hands, and thus tonight this old *ryōtei* would be occupied by humans and tanuki and tengu, each separated only by a single sliding screen. Though it may not have been by design, the price of this blunder would be high. In but a single night, this storied building would be blown to smithereens, and the long tradition of the poor Sensuirō would come to an end.

I was lugging the case of Faux Denki Bran all the way down from the north end of Pontocho, and even though it was winter I had worked up quite a sweat. Glancing sidelong at me as I set the case down on the dirt floor of the antechamber huffing and puffing, the other Friday Fellows went up one by one into the dining room. The old proprietress came out to greet us, bowing her head low to Jurōjin.

I was on tenterhooks as I followed them up, expecting to see a tanuki to pop its furry head at any moment. I could only imagine what chaos would ensue if they knew that they were sharing a roof with the Friday Fellows. We'd be treading on tumbling balls of fur sprouting tails left and right.

We were shown to a room on the second floor overlooking the Kamo River, and with horror I saw that the stewpots and implements were already in place. The Friday Fellows grumbled about the cramped room, but the hostess could only bow and say, "I'm terribly sorry for the inconvenience."

"Can't we have the next room over?" Bishamon asked, pointing at a screen painted with a tiger in a bamboo thicket.

"The next room is extremely full."

"Pretty quiet, for a full house. Sounds like there's no one there!"

"Yes, they are very quiet." With that vague answer the waitress exited the room.

I squeezed myself into a corner, holding my breath and wondering when Mother would arrive.

Benten left her seat in the ring of Friday Fellows, and slid over the tatami to me. She chuckled and lit up a cigar, puffing away with one knee pulled up to her chest. "So, what are you planning now?"

"I'm not telling."

"I don't care what you do, as long as it's amusing. Just don't get carried away."

I looked at the screen painted with the tiger in the bamboo thicket. I was thinking of Yaichirō.

The waitress's voice rang out in the hallway. "A package has arrived."

There are many painful things in the world, but surely none of them could be more painful than the sight of my own mother trapped in a cage, being carried into a room full of ingredients for a stew.

The cage was carried in by two waitresses, moving slowly and respectfully. Deep down they must have felt ashamed, bringing a hairy tanuki into such a storied *ryōtei*, but in front of Jurōjin, the owner of the establishment, they probably didn't dare let their emotions show. Then again, they probably weren't aware, either, that most of their customers tonight were tanuki.

Jurōjin gave the cage a little shake, and the curled up tanuki inside slowly raised her head.

"Ah!" "Splendid!" "What a beautiful tanuki!" The Friday Fellows clamored in admiration, but I was too shaken to do the same.

It was all I could do to keep myself from springing at Jurōjin. While I stood there grinding my teeth, Mother noticed and stared at me with wet eyes, sniffing her nose. I gave a tiny nod.

"What a fine tanuki. Would you not agree, Hotei?" Jurōjin addressed Professor Yodogawa.

But strangely enough, that tanuki lover of a professor looked completely stunned, and did not reply. His mouth hung open, as he stared at the tanuki in the cage.

"Something wrong, Hotei?" inquired Bishamon.

Professor Yodogawa fidgeted.

Just as I was about to call out to Jurōjin, the tension in the heretofore silent room next door finally snapped.



The elders were so deep in thought that at last they all fell asleep, their furry bodies rising and falling. Glancing briefly at them, Sōun opened his mouth once again. "Enough with these pathetic lies, Yaichirō. It's disgraceful!"

"How dare you!" shouted Yaichirō, sounding outraged. "How dare you tell such lies, you scoundrel!"

"You address your uncle in such a manner? Know your place!"

Yaichirō finally forgot that he was in the presence of the elders. "Uncle, my foot! You miserable cur! You made Father into stew!"

A shockwave went through the assembled tanuki, and even the elders were called back from the brink of eternal rest back into wakefulness.

"He made Sōichirō into stew?" repeated the patriarch of the Nanzenji clan. "That is an accusation we cannot ignore."

"Wait! Wait!" Sōun put up a hand. "Calm yourselves. This is yet another baseless lie. Seeing that his lies are futile, he contrives now to stir up memories of his father in desperation. But there is no proof of this whatever. Can anyone else prove your claims?"

"Kaisei witnessed it. Your own daughter witnessed it!"

"Girls that age often dream up the most dramatic things. Are you not ashamed to take her flights of fancy at face value? Do you seriously believe that I made Sōichirō into stew?"

"You're just going to keep playing innocent, aren't you!"

"Everything you've said is ridiculous. Not a single tanuki believes your dreadful tale." Sōun faced the elders and asked, "Well? Do any of you believe I did such a thing?"

The elders quivered and said nothing.

Sōun continued. "It's true, the tale of how Sōichirō became the Friday Fellows' stew is shrouded in mystery. It is strange, how such a grand tanuki could have fallen into the hands of humans so easily. However, the story changes if we consider whether Sōichirō was intoxicated at the time." His glare swept onto the frog sitting on the tatami. "I have heard that on the night that Sōichirō was captured by the Friday Fellows, he was out drinking with another tanuki. Surely that was the cause for Sōichirō falling into the hands of those hateful humans. All this time, that tanuki has refrained from coming forth and naming himself. He was responsible for the leader of our world falling into a stewpot, and yet has said nothing. I have also heard that this cowardly was so ashamed of his craven actions that he went into hiding somewhere in a temple at the bottom of a well!"

Unable to restrain his fury Yajirō leaped up straight onto Sōun's face and tried to pull Sōun's nostrils apart.

"Yaaagh!" Sōun shrieked, tossing away the frog. Yajirō went sailing through the air, and Nanzenji managed to catch him right before he pancaked onto the sliding screen.

"Enough of you!" His rage boiling over, Yaichirō transformed into a giant tiger. "Uncle or not, I'm going to flatten you myself!"



From the next room over we could hear a furious row going on. The deep, full voice must have been Sōun. I heard Nanzenji shouting, "Calm down, Yaichirō!", and a number of shrill voices which I assumed belonged to the elders.

Jurōjin eyed the sliding screen. "It seems our neighbors have decided to show us what they are made of."

The Friday Fellows pricked their ears and listened as the muffled voices steadily grew louder. Soon we could hear the sound of running on the tatami, and someone yelling, "Foul! Foul!"

"Are they holding a sporting event, perchance?" Jurōjin muttered. At the same moment there was a large thump, and a large dent appeared in the sliding screen amid the bamboo stalks. The screen shook and tore open, and a corpulent man came rolling through into our room. Next, a real tiger came bounding as if in pursuit, ripping through the painted tiger on the screen. It was an enormous beast, and the ferocity in its gaze was enough to make your blood run cold.

The tiger pinned the groveling man in place with one great paw, and unleashed a howl that shook the building. The man wailed in terror.

"My goodness. A tiger!" Benten casually remarked beside me.

In a twinkling the other Friday Fellows had retreated and were huddled beside the wall on the opposite side. Only Jurōjin paid the rampaging tiger no mind, instead looking down at Mother in the cage and saying, "What a tumultuous night it has been!"

Beneath the tiger's paw, Ebisugawa looked up. Directly in front of him sat Jurōjin, and beside Jurōjin was the cage. Seeing Mother, he cried out.

Yaichirō cried out as well. His black and gold fur undulated and rippled, and the fury left his sagging shoulders. In spite of that he still managed to retain his transformation, which for Yaichirō was no small feat.

Facing Jurōjin, Sōun howled, "How! How did you manage to get your hands on that tanuki? I left her in the warehouse!"

"Ah, Ebisugawa. You see, things have not fared well on our end, so I am borrowing it."

"Borrowing it to do what?"

"To make our stew."

"That is not borrowing! I have made it quite clear that it is not to be made into stew! That is my tanuki!"

"Indeed it is. And what of it?"

"You cannot make her into stew. I will not allow it!" Frothing spittle flew from Sōun's mouth. "I'll never send you another bottle of Faux Denki Bran again!"

Jurōjin snorted. "Then I will simply take it from you. Do you concur, Benten?"

"Why, certainly."

"I knew it would come to this! This is what makes humans so despicable!"

This argument was my chance to rescue Mother. But just as I started to stand up I was thrust aside, and another human dived for the cage.

Professor Yodogawa clutched Mother's cage in his arms. Mother looked up at him and sniffed her nose.

"Now what is the matter, Hotei?" Jurōjin asked softly. Professor Yodogawa looked at him and started to back away, holding the cage tight. He shook his head, his mouth working.

"No more. I can't just look on," he choked out. "She's the one. She's the tanuki I rescued. I won't let you have her!"

"I went to such pains to obtain her, all because you let the other tanuki escape. A year-end party without tanuki stew is like *gyūdon* without beef. Do you intend to breach the honored tradition of the Friday Fellows?"

The other Friday Fellows added their chorus to Jurōjin's reprimands.

"You'll be expelled, Hotei!"

"Then expel me!"

"Whoa, look who's fighting back!"

"I knew I wasn't cut out for this. I've lost. My ideology's been crushed. And that's all right! Here we are, civilized as you please, and yet we're still eating tanuki stew. Darn the Friday Fellows, and darn the tradition!"

"But you've eaten just as much as any of us!"

"Is eating not an act of love? Is that not what you have always claimed?"

"Yes, eating is love. But to refrain from eating is also love!"

"How can you say such egotistical things with such a straight face?"

"Sophistry! That's sophistry!"

"Call it what you will! I'm not asking for opinions!" shouted the professor. "I've turned over a new leaf!"

"Turn as many leaves as you like, but leave the tanuki," Jurōjin ordered him gravely, but with his back against the wall the professor instead stepped on Ebisugawa Sōun, kicked over the rent sliding screen, and fled into the adjacent room.

All bedlam broke loose after that.

The next room over was stuffed with the elders and an entourage consisting of the cream of the crop of the tanuki world.

"It's the Friday Fellows!" As soon as the cry went up, the room was filled with wordless screams, and as the tanuki collectively lost their heads their transformations popped off one after another. The sudden appearance of an untold number of furballs transformed the floor of the room into a writhing, hairy carpet. "Sorry! Sorry!" cried the professor as he rushed through the room, apologetically sending furballs flying everywhere.

"What a magnificent sight," breathed Jurōjin, standing up imposingly and staring into the room. "We shall have our fill of stew tonight!"

The tanuki tumbled headlong over each other in their haste to escape. Fighting through that wave, the professor got tripped up and went sprawling, throwing Mother's cage into the air.

It was Yaichirō who went diving for Mother as she sailed through the air. He had shrunk away in fear from Mother's peril like a paper tiger, all but forgotten, but now he snatched her from the air with his paw, and puffed himself up once again. Sliding the cage under his belly, he roared to intimidate the Friday Fellows, but to no effect. They were all stunned by the sudden appearance of this petting zoo before them, and only sat there opening and closing their mouths like a school of koi waiting to be fed.

Yajirō crawled up to my feet, having only just escaped the chaos. I picked him up and put him on my shoulder. "Welp, this is a mess and no mistake," he commented.

"Professor!" called Benten, making her way over to him. "Are you hurt?"

In the midst of everything, only Jurōjin seemed to be taking it all in stride, neither flinching nor faltering at the appearance of the great tiger and the tanuki. He stood up to Yaichirō and bellowed, “Be silent!”

Yaichirō howled right back at him.

The waitresses showed up to investigate the commotion and promptly fell back on the floor.

“Tiger!”

“Tanuki!”

The tanuki squeaked as they ran around, attempting to slide open the screen and escape into the hallway, but being clumsy as well as completely panic-stricken, they only succeeded in piling themselves up against the wall like they had been swept there by a broom.

The tanuki scrambled, the tiger howled, Jurōjin thundered, Mother sat in her cage, the Friday Fellows sat dazed, the waitresses gibbered on the floor, the ideologically defeated Professor Yodogawa fell on his ass, Benten went to her knees to help him, I stared at it all amazed, and on my shoulder a tiny frog mumbled, “What a mess”—indeed, who could possibly sort out this great jumbled mess of tanuki and human and half-tengu?

The sliding screen beyond the mass of wriggling tanuki opened with a snap.

Standing there was Master Akadama.

His face was red as a lobster, and he looked as if steam was about to come shooting out of his ears. In his right hand he held the recently recovered Fūjin Raijin fan, and in his left he held a string that led to a confetti ball dangling from the ceiling above him. Yashiro was entwined around his feet, trying with all his might to keep the Master from exploding. One sharp kick, and Yashirō went tumbling over the floor and reverted into a tanuki.

We had all forgotten about the Master.

Trembling with rage, he jerked the string furiously, and the confetti ball popped open. Amidst the fluttering confetti, a scroll unfurled itself, reading, “Congratulations, Trick Magister!!!”

“How long do you intend to make me wait! Pull yourselves together, or I will blow you all away!” he bellowed, showing us the Fūjin Raijin fan.

When I saw that, a devilish plan wormed its way into my mind.

I felt bad for what I was about to do to Professor Yodogawa, but there was only one way to clear the slate, and that was to blow this mess away with an even bigger mess. I ran up behind Benten and shoved her, sending her toppling onto the professor. The professor grabbed her to stop her fall, leaving the two in a most compromising position.

I knelt on the floor and shouted, “Lord Yakushibō of Nyoigatake! Bear witness to this display of infidelity!”

Master Akadama’s eyes opened wide, and he glared at Benten and the professor, who were embracing each other foolishly on the ground, all according to plan.

“What are you talking about!?” the professor yelped frantically. “I assure you, it’s not what it looks like!”

“Ha! I knew it was you! I have seen the photograph!” the Master spat. “How dare the likes of a human lay hands on Benten—but you are not the only one at fault. All of you

share the guilt. You humans, you tanuki, think you to feign innocence with those foolish looks on your faces? You all disgust me! Hear me, now! Witness a tengu! Can you not see how I despise you all!"

His arm came up above his head, and with it the Fūjin Raijin fan, gold flecks sparkling in the light.

"I am tengu! I am mighty, for I am tengu! I am tengu, for I am mighty! Lay down thy quarrels, and kneel before me! Render thanks unto me, for I am merciful! Thou art in the presence of a Great Tengu! Bow down, one and all, and know thy place!"

And looking just as he had in his glory days, Master Akadama waved the fan.

Tengu cackling filled the air as a terrible, awesome tengu gale reduced Sensuirō into splinters, and tengu and human alike joined hands as we were all whirled away into the sky.



Sensuirō dates back to the Edo period, but even after putting a provisional end to its history, the Master's anger remained unabated, and tengu gales continued to rampage throughout Kiyamachi. Human and tanuki scattered into the shadows, some on foot, some riding the wind. Those who managed to escape were lucky. Professor Yodogawa, who thanks to my efforts found himself tarred with the ignominious title of paramour, was not so fortunate.

Master Akadama chased him around and around, waving the fan. The trees of Kiyamachi bent so far they threatened to snap, the waters of the Takase River flowed backwards, and drunkards who wandered unwittingly into his path found themselves flying through the air. Professor Yodogawa's hair blew this way and that, and falling all over himself he fled from Kiyamachi into the bright lights of Shijō Avenue. Even so, Master Akadama stayed hot on his heels, making full use of the cane I had given him as a Christmas present, displaying a vitality that I hadn't seen in years.

"Master! I implore you! He has been punished enough!" I shouted behind him, but the Master took no notice.

Shijō Avenue sparkled in the darkness of the night, as it always did. Tall buildings loomed on both sides of the street, brokerages and beauty salons and financial institutions and banks and electric billboards lighting up the night sky. Crowds were bustling on the sidewalks, buses and cars crisscrossed the intersections, and taxis lined up awaiting their next passenger.

Professor Yodogawa fled west down the road, and wherever he went, screams and chaos followed close behind. Dolled up maidens, youthful buskers performing in front of the Shijō Kawaramachi Takashimaya department store, college students heading to year-end parties: all were mowed down by the fierce winds blowing through that canyon of buildings. The waiting taxis creaked and shuddered, the buses came dangerously close to tipping over, and the traffic light poles bent and twisted backwards. Countless apples were blown from the beds of heavily laden discount fruit trucks, making sticky messes of the

surrounding luxury stores. Electronic signs projecting out over the street blew out in spectacular fashion, sending sparks flying like fireworks before guttering out.

"Looks like the old man's still got it!" Yajirō shouted, clinging to my shoulder.

Yaichiro and Yashirō caught up as I rushed down the street. "Do something, Yasaburō!" Yaichirō wheezed. "I've never seen anything this bad!"

"Can't you tell I'm trying?"

The Master finally showed signs of tiring, and leaned on his stick to catch his breath. The winds slackened for a moment, so we all ran up to restrain him, but just as we were about to grab him he waved the fan once again.

We were all blown up into the open sky, holding onto each other like a human chain.

"We're gonna die, we're gonna die!" Yaichirō shrieked.

"I'm scared! I'm scared!" Yashirō sobbed.

We sailed through the sky in sheer terror, before Benten came swooping down to save our hides.

"Goodness, what a rascal he is," she sighed. "Nice work. I'll take it from here."

Benten threaded her way through the violent eddys and landed on the ground. Setting us down, she walked up to Master Akadama, who was marching past Fujī Daimaru, and called out, "Master!"

The Master stopped in his tracks and lowered the fan.

"Master, haven't you had enough?"

The Master turned around. "Benten?"

"I think you've taught him enough of a lesson. So please, stop."

"But—"

"I bought cotton swabs. Let me clean your ears for you. How long has it been since you laid your head on my lap?"

"Hrm."

"Please, Master, let it go," she said gently, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Let's go home."

Master Akadama scowled and watched Professor Yodogawa running down towards Shijō Karasuma, but finally he nodded and tucked the Fūjin Raijin fan into his robe. The last breath of the tengu gale ruffled his white hair. Benten took his hand, and elegantly raised her other hand to hail one of the taxis cruising down Shijō Avenue. A car soon stopped in front of her, and the door opened.

As the Master was about to enter the taxi, he suddenly turned and laid his gaze on us brothers.

"What are you all playing at? Hurry up and return to the forest," he said, waving his cane. "Screw around at night, and you furballs are bound to get eaten up!"

All four of us brothers all bowed our heads to our great mentor.



After watching the taxi containing Master Akadama and Benten drive off, we breathed a collective sigh of relief.

I tried to collect my thoughts about everything that had happened over the course of this long, long day, but it was all so mixed up. But that was okay. It wasn't exactly wrapped up neatly with a bow, but for the most part things had worked out as well as you could hope.

"So how long are you going to stay a frog?" Yaichirō said to Yajirō, who was still perched on my shoulder. "It can't be very convenient."

"Well you see, Yaichirō, I haven't quite got back the hang of it yet. I expect I'll have to stay a frog for the moment."

"What's going to happen to the Trick Magister?" Yashirō asked.

Yaichirō grimaced. "I did end up losing control of myself in front of the elders. But then, now that Sōun's vile deeds have been exposed for all to see, there's no chance he'll get it either. I presume that Yasaka will maintain the position. And he was so looking forward to retiring to that tropical island, the poor chap."

"Oh! Mother!" I shouted.

"Oh, yes!" Yaichirō said, visibly flustered. "I told her to head over to the Scarlet Pane. I hope she's made it safely there!"

Yashirō took out his cell phone, which thanks to Kinkaku's heavy usage was dead. But that didn't faze Yashirō, who simply gave it a little jolt.

"See, you can be useful," muttered Yaichirō, who hastily added, "No, I mean you are a very useful fellow!"

Yashirō dialed Mother, while the rest of us strained our ears to listen.

"Mother, where are you right now?"

"I've just arrived at the Scarlet Pane. Ooh, my shoulders are stiff after spending half the day cooped up in that cage. Are you all alright? No one's hurt?"

"Yup, we're all here. I'm giving it to Yasaburō."

"Ready for duty, Mother!"

"Yasaburō? You did wonderfully today!"

"Haha, that was nothing. Here's Yaichirō."

"Mother, today was a travesty. I am truly sorry. And I am very sorry to say it, but I no longer believe that I will be able to become the Trick Magister."

"That's alright. There'll always be something new waiting around the corner."

"I apologize. I will pass it over to Yajirō."

Yaichirō held the phone up to my shoulder. Yajirō shuffled up to it haltingly, like he was trying to figure out what to say.

"Yajirō? Why aren't you saying anything?" said Mother. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

Fat teardrops began to roll down the little frog's face. "It's been a long time, Mother. It's been such a long time. I'm so sorry!"

"That's alright. I understand what you're feeling. So no more tears, okay?" Mother said softly. "Okay, it's been a long night. I'll be waiting for you all to get here!"

It had been years since all of us brothers had gotten together in one place.

"This is a good time for a belly drum!" Yaichirō suggested. I winced. Tanuki belly drums are an outdated relic; besides, doing belly drums always upsets my stomach. But I didn't want to spoil his mood, so just for tonight I decided to humor him.

"Ready!" shouted Yaichirō, and we all slapped our bellies with a *pong*, before setting off for the Scarlet Pane.



"One day, I expect that you'll follow in my footsteps," Father had once said to Yaichirō, while they waited for the bus amidst the throngs of Gion. "There are all sorts of disagreeable tanuki out there, and you've always been obstinate, so I wouldn't be surprised if you got into fights all the time. But for every enemy you make, you've got to make a friend. If you make five enemies, you've also got to make five friends. Even if you go on making enemies until you've got half the tanuki world against you, don't forget, you've got three brothers alongside you. That's a very reassuring thing. One day that'll be your ace in the hole. I've always regretted that I never had that. I didn't trust my little brother, and he didn't trust me. That's why the two of us fought. There's no worse enemy than one who shares your blood. That is why you must always trust one another. A band of brothers! That's what you are, and never forget it. A band of brothers! You've all got the same fool's blood flowing in you, after all."

After saying all this, he laughed dryly. "Then again, this blood ain't much to be proud of."



It had been an overly exciting end to the year, and everyone fell into a deep slumber, thoroughly worn out. All of Kyoto's tanuki society went dormant for a time.

And that was how we rang in the new year.

The weather is usually fine on New Year's Day, and this year was no exception. Under the crisp, boundlessly clear skies, the city was bustling with crowds making their first shrine visit of the year. Tanuki crept out from their beds, sniffing and taking in the scent of the new year.

Feeling fine, we all went out as a family to Yasaka Shrine. We visit Shimogamo Shrine every year, but we hadn't been to Yasaka since Father departed for the next world.

Walking along the banks of the Kamo under the bracing sunshine, we boarded a Keihan train at Demachiyana Station.

From the end of the Shijō Bridge, vast multitudes choked the street from Shijō Kawaramachi to Gion, all on their way to visit Yasaka Shrine. I saw women wearing kimono, toddlers bundled up thick like *daruma*, and couples walking hand in hand; people of all shapes and sizes streamed towards the already choked gates of the shrine.

"Ugh, that's a lot of people!" Yaichirō stood on tiptoe looking over towards the shrine and frowned. "Will we even be able to enter the shrine?"

Yaichirō had received a reprimand for wreaking havoc in front of the elders as a tiger that night, but only for the sake of appearances, and given the extenuating circumstances he was readily forgiven. Still, in the midst of all the hullabaloo they couldn't possibly have chosen the next Trick Magister, and so for the time being Yasaka Heitarō

carried on in that position. By all accounts he had been so ready to go off to his tropical island that on hearing the news he had ground his teeth in vexation.

"I don't want any of you getting crushed," fretted Mother, putting her hands on Yashirō's shoulders.

"I'm at the most risk here, being a frog and all," Yajirō croaked on my shoulder. "You'd better not drop me, Yasaburō, or I'll be trampled flat!"

Yajirō still hadn't managed to turn back into a tanuki. He had proposed to split his time between the well and the Tadasu Forest, coming and going between the two. As a frog he probably still felt more comfortable living in the well.

As we slowly moved along with the cross along Shijō Avenue, we ran into Professor Yodogawa coming the other way.

Being caught up in all that fuss didn't seem to have fazed him; apparently real culinary connoisseurs are made of stronger stuff. Accompanying him was a string of students, among which I saw Suzuki, whom I had last seen eating baumkuchen with the professor.

"Ah, fancy seeing you here! Happy New Year!"

"Hello, Happy New Year. Taking your students to your first shrine visit? They must adore you."

"No, no," the professor waved his hand with an embarrassed sort of grin. "After this I'm going to have to treat them to a nice meal, of course. I can already hear my wallet weeping."

"How are you feeling?"

"Hmm? Fine, fine. You know, I've thought and thought about it, but I just can't wrap my head around what happened that night. It sure wasn't pretty, though. I mean, getting expelled from the Friday Fellows and all..."

"The important thing is that you're alright."

"True, true. That's what matters in the end."

"C'mon, professor, let's go get some grub. No cheaping out, there'd better be a mountain of deliciousness waiting for me!" Suzuki urged the professor.

"Well, there you have it. Goodbye now, do drop by the lab sometime!"

After parting with the professor, we waited patiently in front of the gates for the crush of people to shuffle forward.

Even after we finally made it into the shrine, all around us was a sea of black-haired heads as far as the eye could see. People swarmed around the street stalls that had set up on the grounds. We moved towards the main sanctuary, holding hands tightly and letting out stifled yelps when I saw yonder a line of stern-faced men wearing grey suits threading their way through the crowd.

I nudged Yaichirō in the side. "Yaichirō, look over there!"

Yaichirō looked towards where I was pointing. "Kurama tengu?"

"Who knows how many tengu and tanuki are mixed in the crowd here," said Yajirō. "These days, even frogs open the year with shrine visits."

"I guess tengu do too," I observed.



"And what's wrong with that?" said a voice behind me.

I flinched and turned around to see Benten, dazzling in a gorgeous scarlet kimono, and Master Akadama, wrapped in a coat and muffler. Benten was munching on a piping hot *taiyaki*, and a bit of *azuki* bean was stuck to the corner of her crimson lips. It had been years since the two of them had visited a shrine together on the first of the year.

"If it isn't the great Yakushibō of Nyoigatake! Allow me to offer my greetings on this New Year's Day." I bowed my head.

The Master looked pleased. "Indeed."

"I just love New Year's!" Benten exclaimed. "It's got its own special smell, and I love how it's like a great big festival all over Japan."

"Quite true, quite true," the Master nodded agreeably.

"Will you be visiting the shrine, Master?" asked Mother.

Master Akadama straightened up and scanned the masses of people jostling in front of the sanctuary. "I would have, but it seems more trouble than it's worth," he growled. "I have no intention of waiting here for who knows how long."

"Let's make a visit, Master? Please?" Benten cajoled him. "We're already here."

The creases on the Master's forehead immediately melted away. "Well, all right. Perhaps it's not so bad waiting around once in a while."

We all inched forward slowly as the crowd moved forward at a glacial pace. To stave off his own boredom, Master Akadama lectured us all by way of a New Year's greeting. It was dreadful. Each of the Master's proclamations was accompanied by a poke in the head, not to mention a giggle from Benten.

"Yaichirō, you must learn to soften that hard head of yours."

"Yajirō, you must quit being a frog and return to your true form."

"Yasaburō, you must not cause any more trouble than you already have."

"Yashirō, you must grow up as quickly as you can."

Only Yaichirō listened earnestly to the lecturing, which in any case was of rather questionable utility. Since Yajirō was a frog it was hard to tell from his expression whether he was taking it seriously or not, and Yashirō was buried somewhere in the crowd, so that I only occasionally heard him reply, "Kay!" Needless to say, I completely tuned out.

Over the course of Master Akadama's year-opening exhibition of tengu majesty, we finally made it to the sanctuary, but there were so many people surrounding it that it was still quite a ways off. We ended up deciding to pitch some loose change in the general direction of the offertory box.

As I rummaged for change, I noticed two chubby boys nearby saying their prayers.

"Ah!" I gasped, looking at them.

"Ah!" they gasped, looking back at me.

"If it isn't Kinkaku and Ginkaku. Happy New Year. Getting the year off to a foolish start?"

"You really did a number on us that night," Kinkaku sniffed. "We ended up catching terrible colds and were bedridden until last night. We were almost done for!"

"Idiots don't catch colds, they say, but I hear fools do."

"How dare you!"

Their father, Ebisugawa Sōun, had disappeared after that momentous uproar, merely informing them that he was going to a hot spring before absconding into the night. Nobody knew where he had disappeared to, but last I heard the majority of his ill-gotten gains, including the *netsuke* collection in the distillery warehouse, had simply vanished. Some said that he had gotten a faceful of Master Akadama's tengu gale and had no hope of recovery, while others claimed that the elders had ordered his retirement. Whatever the case, he had thumbed his nose at us before his accumulated wickedness could come to light. Nobody knew when he would come back to Kyoto, but as far as I was concerned it was better if he never came back at all.

From somewhere in the crowd I heard a voice castigating Kinkaku and Ginkaku. "Come on, you dummies, can't you at least do a proper New Year's greeting?"

"Kaisei?" I scanned the crowd. "Where are you?"

"Ha, you'll never find me!" she snickered. "Happy New Year, everyone!"

After Sōun's disappearance, the management of the Faux Denki Bran distillery had fallen to Kinkaku and Ginkaku. It was rather questionable whether these idiot brothers were even up to such a demanding task, but Kaisei was in absolute command over the entire operation, idiots included, so the distillery was probably in good hands. Business was booming, and I hoped that would keep them too busy to stick their noses into our affairs. Once I had some new tricks up my sleeve and Kinkaku and Ginkaku had started to siphon off resources to fill their own pockets, I might start playing pranks on them again.

As we stood there glaring at each other, Master Akadama used a *hamaya*¹⁴ to bop each of us on the head.

"Stop wasting time with your idiotic quarrels, you silly furballs. Hurry up and throw your coins!"

We hastily tossed our coins in the direction of the offertory box.

"I'm so thankful that we could all come out to the shrine like this," Mother said sincerely, tossing out her offering. "I'm sure Sō is smiling."



A pleasant aroma wafted into my nose, and I glanced over to see Benten standing beside me.

"I've got a lot of wishes this year," she whispered to me, wrapping a mound of coins in the *taiyaki* wrapper and throwing it.

"I knew you'd be greedy, Benten."

"Is that greedy?"

"If you don't narrow your wishes down, none of them will come true."

"Really...then I'll wish to meet my soulmate!"

"There you go again, being all cute like that!"

¹⁴A ceremonial arrow used as a lucky charm; often given out around New Year's.

"Then, what will you wish for, Yasaburō?"

The clamor of the shrine faded away.

Hmm.

I thought about it.

But there was nothing I wished for in particular.

A lot had happened over the last year, but everyone was in one piece, and enjoying life. I was sure that a lot would happen this year, too, but as long as everyone was in one piece and enjoying themselves, that would be good enough. We are tanuki. If anyone ever asks me how tanuki should live, I always answer—the only thing a tanuki ought to do is have fun.

Ye tanuki who teem throughout the capital, throw aside your lofty ambitions.

"There's nothing I really want to wish for," I answered.

Benten smiled, then clapped her hands together and closed her eyes.

I gazed at her face for a little while, then clapped my own hands and closed my own eyes.

And I quietly whispered—

May our family and our friends see glory—at least, a little bit, anyways.