



森見登美彦

Uchoten-Kazoku  
Morimi Tomihiko

有頂天  
家族

二代目の帰朝



幻冬舎文庫

# Uchōten Kazoku 2

## The Heir Returns

By Morimi Tomihiko

Mochiguma Translations

Translator: koiabi

Editor: eerabbit



## Chapter 1 — The Heir Returns

The only thing a tanuki ought to do is have fun.

Why don't we take things from there?

I myself am a tanuki living in the modern city of Kyoto, but not content with that lowly station, I find admiring the tengu from afar and imitating the ways of humans to be great fun. This exasperating idiosyncrasy, quite assuredly passed down generation by generation from our distant forebears, is what my departed father used to call "fool's blood".

My father, Shimogamo Sōichirō, was the Trick Magister, the head of tanuki society in Kyoto. He was widely famed in and outside the city, even earning the grudging respect of the tengu. If he had been a tad more prudent, perhaps he would not have picked a quarrel with the Kurama tengu, or have been made into stew by the humans. But it was precisely because he was an extraordinary fool who was always dancing on the edge of a pot that he had left so many legends behind.

"Just my fool's blood talking," he used to say.

I came into the world in the Tadasu Forest as the third son of Shimogamo Sōichirō. Even as a child I showed flashes of greatness, and even before my footpads had fully developed I was already developing a reputation as the most irrepressible problem child the tanuki world had ever seen. Attempting to smoke out the Navel Stone in Rokkakudō with burning pine needles was only the tip of the iceberg; transforming into everything from bottle openers to mounted police officers, I confounded tengu and humans alike, earning a fair amount of disapproval for my recklessness. But how else could I live? The blood that ran through my veins, I had inherited from my father.

In short, fun things are good things.

One day in May, with the riotous blossoms of spring blooming all over the city and lush greenery covering the peaks of the Higashiyama Sanjūroppō mountains, a certain tanuki was living his usual best life, and it is here that our story begins.



I have loved the month of May since I was a pup, for it is a season which always gets my fool's blood pumping.

Doesn't the flourishing, brilliant green of the forest just remind you of a tanuki?

I hummed as I left the Tadasu Forest that day, enjoying the amiable spring breeze as I walked along the banks of the Kamo River. I was in the form of a blue-eyed, blonde-haired bombshell. Empty-headed students stopped and gawked as I strutted by the river, revelling in my skin-deep beauty.

My parade ended at the Masugata Court Apartments in the rear of the Demachi shopping arcade. Though the crisp breeze outside reached into the recesses of the many alleys of Kyoto, the apartment itself was as dismal as a musty old futon.

This apartment was where Master Akadama, that half-retired old tengu, spent his days flaring his temper only to deflate just as quickly. Still possessed of the august title of Yakushibō of Nyoigadake, he had once been a grand tengu who had lorded over all of the mountain of Nyoigadake. But after being soundly defeated in a turf war by the Kurama tengu, he now secluded himself here behind the shopping arcade, and you'd hardly think it to look at him now that he'd ever been a tengu in the first place.

"Yoo-hoo Master, guess who!" I called into the inner room, to hear the grouchy-sounding Master reply, "Yasaburō?"

"My, but we are in a crabby mood today, aren't we?"

"In all my time here on this earth I've yet to find anything worth being cheerful about."

"Now, now, not this again...but maybe a visit from a winsome wench might cheer you up! Feast your eyes upon these luscious locks of flaxen hair..."

"Enough with your cheap imitations, it sickens me!"

I set down my groceries in the kitchen and entered the inner room to see the Master sitting cross-legged in his wine-stained futon, glowering at a stone which was sitting on a gold brocaded cushion in front of him. It was an ordinary grey stone about the size of a fist, with no distinguishing features to speak of.

"A keystone for tengu stew!" I exclaimed.

"Even a fool such as you couldn't mess up a stew with one of these."

"Now, was that comment really necessary?"

Tengu stew is a hot pot made by throwing tofu and spring onions and cabbage and chicken into a pot filled with water, then putting in that stone and bringing it all to a simmer. It's quite delicious with ponzu sauce. Yet leave out that single stone and the flavor just isn't the same. This particular stone was a hardy veteran that had spent years making the rounds at restaurants all over Kyoto, and the instant you threw it in the pot, it exuded the accumulated savoriness of uncountable stews. There was another keystone in a restaurant by Kōdaiji that even now was continuing to ripen.

According to Master Akadama, tengu stew was intended to be prepared deep in the mountains, and therefore unless you could taste the bracing mountain air in each mouthful it could not be called true tengu stew. Here in the apartment the air was choked with dust and tanuki hair, so stew that was prepared here was only at best an imitation. Of course once I placed the stew in front of him the Master would slurp it up with gusto; such fickle beings are the tengu.

"By your leave," I said, scooping up the stone and holding it up with reverence before heading into the kitchen and beginning to prepare the stew.

"Yasaburō, are you still hunting those damned *tsuchinoko*?"

"Why don't you come along? I'm heading up to Nyoigadake tomorrow."

"Preposterous," the Master snorted. "You only ever did take after Sōichirō's foolishness."



By the time we were finishing up the dregs of the stew, the sun was going down. I patted my full belly, while Master Akadama puffed on a tengu cigar with satisfaction. A trail of purple smoke drifted up from the cigar, coiling around the lampshade like a tiny dragon.

"The days sure have gotten long."

"Another pointless day comes to an end."

"Has Benten written you lately?"

The Master's eyes flickered to me in annoyance. "To what end do you ask?"

"Why won't you just tell me?"

"Silence. Our correspondence is not of your concern."

Benten was Master Akadama's dearest, most prized disciple, and he had taught her everything he knew. With this newfound tengu strength she overpowered real tengu; with her stunning looks she transfixed humans; and with her propensity for dining on tanuki stew she had earned the lasting enmity of every tanuki in Kyoto. Master Akadama had swooped down and spirited her away as she trudged along the shore of Lake Biwa one day; who would have foreseen that she would so rapidly rise to such heights?

Benten had beguiled me into luring Master Akadama into a trap, thereby causing his downfall. Not only that, but she had also made my father into stew and eaten him, at every turn looking to do the same to me. How lamentable, then, that she also happened to be my first love.

"What's wrong with being a tanuki?" I had once asked her.

"Well, I am a human," she had replied.

Whenever I thought about this exchange I couldn't help but squirm.

It was in spring, amidst the magnificent cherry blossoms of April, that she announced she was crossing the sea.

We had been taking an early morning walk along the Kamo River. She was flitting from treetop to treetop, savagely amusing herself by shaking the boughs until not a single petal remained.

I dashed through the storm of blossoms trying to keep up, panting, "What's that about then?"

From her perch on a newly barren tree she surveyed the fluttering petals with delight. "I've grown bored," she said simply. "Take care of the Master for me, won't you, Yasaburō? I'll write, if the mood takes me."

After stripping a great many cherry trees in Kyoto she went to the port of Kobe, where she bewitched some magnate into giving her a luxurious ocean liner, on which she embarked on a cruise around the world. It was only after she had set sail that Master Akadama was informed of her departure, at which point it was too late to go after her.

She had yet to return from her grand, all-expenses-paid voyage.

Only the odd letter from Benten soothed the Master's anguish. That she deigned to write at all was a blessing, but her cold-blooded loathing of having to send these missives was quite apparent. At best she might dash off a few lines, at worst she would only mark the paper with an X or O. Even so, Master Akadama anxiously awaited each letter, poring over each word as if inhaling it, before locking it away in his chest as if it were a national

treasure. The reason I so fastidiously called upon the Master's apartment was in part to sneak a look at these letters after the Master was too soused to notice.

Master Akasama peered into the empty pot and groaned, "Benten, curse her, seems to have gone to England. A more unreachable place I can hardly imagine."

Rummaging through a pile of junk he produced a globe, rotating it round and round until he found England.

"A trifling little island," he scoffed. "Alas, that one who should one day follow in my great footsteps fritters her days away on this damned pleasure cruise. If she would only settle down, devote herself to the path of wickedness..."

"I wonder what she's up to."

"Hmph. Devouring some English tanuki, no doubt."

I heard her whisper in my head then, unbidden, that beautiful enemy of mine: *I like you so much I could just eat you up*. She had betrayed her master, eaten my father, and at every turn was trying to eat me too; yet still I longed for her return. This, even I had to admit, was the trouble with having fool's blood.

"You seem lonely, Yasaburō." The Master fixed his gaze on me. "Because Benten is not here. Is that not so?"

"Hah, whatever do you mean?"

"Know your place, wretch. Think you that she would show mercy to a mere tanuki?" He plucked at his nose hairs. "But if you wish to hurl yourself into a pot I shan't stop you."



That spring I devoted myself to hunting for tsuchinoko.

Humans have a saying: "idle hands are the devil's workshop." It means that a fool with too much time on his hands will always get up to no good. We tanuki have a similar saying, except, well, with paws instead of hands. If you've got time to get into mischief, then you've got time to run around hunting for tsuchinoko, and the latter would be better for all involved. Wise words, if you ask me. I'd gotten started with tsuchinoko hunting because of my late father; when he was young he was always scurrying around helter-skelter looking for tsuchinoko, and that must have been his way of working off his roiling fool's blood.

A tsuchinoko is a funny-looking sort of snake, short and stout, that has a long and honorable history as a cryptid, being recorded as far back as the early 18th century in the *Illustrated Sino-Japanese Encyclopedia* under the name *nozuchihebi*. Every so often a tsuchinoko-hunting craze will sweep over the tanuki world, in a phenomenon that started long before I was born. I've heard it said that my father spent about 80% of his turbulent childhood on some adventure or other looking for tsuchinoko. This spirit of adventure is no doubt due to the fool's blood that runs through our veins, affecting some in our line to the point that the hunt for this mythical creature drove them to ruin.

My mother never understood what was so exciting about tsuchinoko. "These tsuchinoko, they're like bamboo shoots, right?"

"No, bamboo shoots are *takenoko*! And they're not even close!"

"But you can eat them, can't you?"

I showed her a picture.

"What a funny little snake. I'll bet the meat is chewy as can be." She seemed to be fixated on the idea of cooking them. "No, no, they don't seem tasty one bit!"

"I told you already, you don't eat them!"

"Don't eat them? Then what do you do with them?"

"I'm starting to feel like this isn't for you, mother."

"Now that I think about it, Sō used to hunt for these things when he was young. Goodness, I just don't get it! Little tanuki boys are always interested in the strangest things!"

And forthwith she transformed into a beautiful young man and went on her way to the Takarazuka Revue.

I headed to the well on the grounds of Rokudō Chinnōji and asked my brother Yajirō whether he wanted to join me in the hunt for the tsuchinoko.

He demurred, though, claiming, "Even if we found one, it'd probably gulp me down in one go. It's a snake, see, and I'm a frog."

There was no arguing with that.

At the time, Yaichirō, our eldest brother, was always coming and going from Nanzenji, his hands full working behind the scenes to resurrect the Nanzenji Tanuki Shogi Tournament, which had been co-founded by Father along with the previous head of the Nanzenji clan. Father had always been fond of shogi, but then again he had also been fond of tsuchinoko-hunting. In spite of that, Yaichirō obstinately insisted that shogi had more cultural merit than tsuchinoko-hunting did.

"Stop chasing after phantoms!" he was always admonishing me, which meant that inviting him was a non-starter.

In the end I had to drag Yashirō, my unwilling little brother, into joining the Tsuchinoko Expeditionary Brigade. Here was the chain of command: Father, the founder; myself, Father's successor and current brigade leader; and Yashirō, the first and so far only enlisted member. I was always on the hunt for new recruits.



The day after I called upon Master Akadama I led the Tsuchinoko Expeditionary Brigade into the forests of Shishigatani and wandered the foot of Nyoigadake. The boughs of the trees were lush with new foliage, full and thick as a tanuki's bushy tail, and the wind whispered through the thousand rays of light streaming through the leaves.

"Smells like spring, doesn't it Yasaburō?"

"Come on, focus. They could be hiding anywhere."

"But do you think they're really out there?"

"Not, this wouldn't be nearly as fun if we knew for sure, would it?"

Seeing as tsuchinoko have never been confirmed to exist, in my mind it stood to reason that capturing them would require an equally unfathomable strategy. All the ordinary tactics had already been tried; it was the things that made you ask yourself, "What's the point?" that had a real shot at working. We hid hard-boiled eggs sprinkled with

MSG and gourds filled with cheap sake in tree branches, and recorded any mysterious tracks we found in our field notes.

I had intended to use this opportunity to instill the joy of tsuchinoko-hunting in my little brother and set him on the path to becoming a useful brigade member. But rather than showing any interest in the mysteries of the tsuchinoko right in front of him, he preferred to talk about the intricacies of magnetism. In the end he opened up the clasp of his backpack and pulled out a textbook, reading as he walked along like a studious little schoolboy. If he would apply just 1% of that studiousness to tsuchinoko-hunting...but when I brought this up to him, he just said innocently as if he didn't understand, "They say that genius is 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration!"

The cheek of him.

"Not quite, Yashirō. It's 99% foolishness, 1% inspiration."

"Then where does the perspiration come in?"

"You just have to wait for providence."

"I don't think it works like that, Yasaburō."

"Cheeky little squirt!" But hardly had these words left my mouth when the trees suddenly began to rustle as if an invisible giant was stirring. In the sky, a queer whistling started getting louder and louder.

"Get down!" I forced Yashirō down and used my body to cover him, just as something came hurtling through the canopy past my head. The sunlight rippled and a shower of leaves rained down around us. I felt a loud *thump* reverberate in my bones, before silence returned.

Trembling, we looked up.

Above us, nestled in a tree branch and covered in leaves, was a velvet sofa. Its crimson fabric glittered magnificently in the sunlight.

Yashirō looked at me and wondered, "Yasaburō, is this what they called tengu hail?"



Tengu hail is what tanuki call the phenomenon of expensive objects raining down from the sky. It's generally the result of tengu playing tricks, or merely being careless with their belongings, and in the old days they used to drop everything from cash and coins to sake barrels and koi. Mother claimed that when she was young cotton candy had fallen out of the sky at the end of the bridge on Sanjō Avenue over the Takase River. One enterprising tanuki had even opened up a well-known museum by Mount Funeoka showcasing a collection of tengu hail. Back when Master Akadama had soared the skies in his prime, he had often driven his pupils out into the streets to search for things he had dropped.

For the past few days the talk of the town had revolved around the chic tengu hail that had been falling: gleaming sets of silverware; a venerable, distinguished-looking violin; a gold-footed bathtub; a Persian carpet that looked like it might fly off into the sky on its own. All in all, a most lavish assortment of items. According to custom dating back to the Edo period, as long as no tengu claimed it, tengu hail belonged to whoever happened to find it. Little wonder that the tanuki of Kyoto were in an uproar.



By custom, then, this velvet chesterfield was now property of the Shimogamo clan. My brother and I managed to wrestle it down from the tree branch. The crimson fabric felt wonderfully luxurious beneath my bottom. It felt like being a guest of honor in some manor house. Even the slightly musty smell only made it seem more grand. The two of us lay back like pampered princes and sighed with satisfaction.

"It's so soft I can't even feel my butt!" said Yashirō in euphoria.

"Now this is the real deal. It's what you'd call an antique."

"Mother will be so happy when we bring this home!"

"Very good. Henceforth the Tsuchinoko Expeditionary Brigade shall become the Chesterfield Moving Company. Private, move to the end of the sofa and pick it up."

"Sir yes sir!"

Hoisting the sofa up between us, we huffed and puffed our way down the mountain. It was a distinguished looking sofa with a heft to match, and we soft, coddled pups of the modern age found it hard going.

"My arms are sore!" Yashirō whined.

"This mountain ain't called Mount Sorearms for nothing, you know."

"No it's not, it's called Nyoigadake!" he giggled.

A short while later he whispered nervously, "Yasaburō, are we gonna get in trouble for going tsuchinoko hunting all the way out here?"

"Who's going to get mad at us?"

"Doesn't this place belong to the Kurama tengu?"

"Kurama, Schmurama. How would we ever find a tsuchinoko if we were scared of the likes of those guys? And anyhow, Nyoigadake belongs to our very own Master Akadama. He may have lost his territory in a turf war, but he's still way stronger than the Kurama. Compared to the Master, those guys are just a bunch of pipsqueaks!"

"Pipsqueaks, eh?"

All of a sudden the sofa got a whole lot heavier. I pulled and pulled, but it wouldn't budge an inch. "Yashirō, you holding up your end over there?"

I turned my head around to look, when right next to my ear a voice breathed, "Hootie-hoo!" I froze, feeling a cold breath prick my neck, just as someone grabbed me by the scruff of my neck.

"Real wise guy, aren't ya? Where you boys from?" Perched on the sofa was a man in a black suit.

I shrank back. "Uh, how do you do, Mr. Kurama Tengu sir! Lovely day, isn't it?"



Yashirō and I were marched up to the fire pits of Daimonji. Yashirō's courage had shriveled up and he reverted to his tanuki form, whereupon the tengu picked him by the nape of his neck like he was a cat.

Back when Master Akadama had lorded over the entirety of Nyoigadake, all the tanuki pups of the Akadama School had been dragged out to his mountain under the guise of holding practicums. Sometimes we were taken to Iwayasan or Takaragaike, but most of

the time we roamed around the Master's own Nyoigadake. I still remembered fondly how we'd practice our transformations at the Daimonji fire pit and reenact battles from the Genpei War.

"This way, move!" the Kurama tengu snarled, leading the way up the slope along the giant "dai" character.

Trampling over the springy grass, I looked back and saw lying there, beneath the cloudy sky, the great shining city of Kyoto. This was how the tengu saw the world.

About halfway up the slope was a red and white striped parasol that reminded me of an ice cream stand, and seated at a round table beneath it were four Kurama tengu, playing at *hanafuda*. Some wore their suits and ties neatly, while others sat there with their arms folded, veins bulging in their forehead. Each time they tossed down a card there was a metallic clatter, as if they were tossing coins on the table. Tengu are notoriously short-tempered, and once they get into a game they tend to tear or bite at the cards, which explains why tengu hanafuda cards are always made from steel.

The tengu leading us up shouted, "Hootie-hoo, Reizanbō!"

One of the tengu turned around. He'd taken his suit jacket off and was wearing sunglasses.

"Hootie-hoo, Tamonbō. Who're the knuckleheads?"

"These wise guys was slanderin' us, see, and I couldn't just let that slide."

"Oh, we know how to put tanuki in their place. What were they sayin'?"

"Said we was a bunch of pipsqueaks!"

The tengu at the table burst into laughter, the sound of their cackling drifting over to us on the wind like a dark, ill-omened cloud. Reizanbō, Tamonbō, Teikinbō, Getsurinbō, Nichirinbō: these five were part of the Kurama Ten, followers of Sōjōbō of Kuramayama, and the very same tengu who had usurped Master Akadama's domain of Nyoigadake. They all looked alike as acorns, though, and it was impossible to tell one from the other. Master Akadama had once sneered during a meeting at Mount Atago, "Nothing but a bunch of mountain acorns stuffed into three-piece suits!" A very sensible observation, in my opinion.

I got down on my hands and knees in the ashen dirt and said, "My name is Yasaburō, third son of Shimogamo Sōichirō! Accompanying me is my brother, Yashirō."

"Ooh, a bona fide celebrity!" The tengu hooted and clacked their cards together, babbling over each other.

"So this is *the* Shimogamo Yasaburō!"

"Hear Benten's got a shine for him!"

"Sōichirō, that's that poor sap they made into soup, ain't that right?"

"I remember him!"

"He always was too big for his britches. Musta been cuz that Yakushibō was always egging him on."

"That old clown's always been like that. Thinks he's hot stuff just because some tanuki are suckin' up to him!"

Reizanbō (the one in sunglasses) chomped down on his cigar and sneered, "One lucky SOB, that Yakushibō. Don't matter how far he falls, he can always count on some

tanuki to prop him up. Well, Nyoigadake's ours, so you can scurry on back and tell him to choke on that!"

"If I may." I raised myself from the ground and let the sophistry begin to flow. "It is true, I did call the illustrious Kurama tengu a 'bunch of pipsqueaks'. But it seems to me that perhaps, the Kurama tengu, the cream of the crop, the lords of the sky, living up in your ivory towers, may not be fully acquainted with the uncouth language such as we lowly tanuki are accustomed to using. You see, we change the meanings of our words along with the times, and so the word pipsqueak, which formerly meant 'small, juvenile, unworthy', now has come to mean 'grand, manful, improbably genteel'. It is a most decorous and complimentary word. Far be it from me to ridicule the great Kurama tengu!"

The Kurama were struck dumb with amazement, the only sound the clinking of the hanafuda cards. Reizanbō pushed down his sunglasses to leer at me and grinned unpleasantly. "You think you're real smart, don't you?"

"I don't like tanuki with big mouths," Tamonbō commented, grabbing Yashirō by the scruff and lifting him high into the air. "Say, how far do you fellas think I could make this little furball fly?"

The tengu all grinned and clacked their cards.

"I'll give you odds that he makes it over the Kamo River!"

"Sure, cards was boring me anyways!"

"You want we should bet on peaks or valleys?"

My father, the Trick Magister Shimogamo Sōichirō, had once transformed into the entirety of Nyoigadake and scared the Kurama tengu out of their wits, in retaliation for their tormenting his old teacher, Master Akadama. It was known as the False Nyoigatake Caper. It was a mad thing to do, and as such had earned a glorious place in the history not just of the Shimogamo clan, but of all tanukidom. To my clan, this was a victory of historical proportions, but to the Kurama tengu, it had been a black day in their history, and this grudge of theirs against my father would eventually lead to him being turned into the Friday Fellows' stew.

The lesson that wise tanuki will come away with is this: to defy tengu is to invite misery. Tengu are those which torment tanuki. That is what makes them tengu.

"Well, Yasaburō?" said Reizanbō. "Anything you wanna say?"

"I'm afraid that whenever my little brother is being bullied my old tendency starts to act up..."

"Tendency? What tendency?"

"Ooh, I can't stop it! I beg you sir, beware!" I moaned, falling to all fours and inflating my frame. Clenching your buttocks and concentrating is key when transforming into anything big. In the twinkling of an eye my legs grew as stout as the pillars of the Parthenon, the rising slope of my back turned as white as plaster, and my nose extended long and high into the air. I had transformed into a giant white elephant.

The Kurama tengu still remembered very well being chased around by a white elephant back when my father had transformed into Nyoigadake. Taking advantage of the brief moment where they were all transfixed by the memory of that humiliation, Yashirō

wriggled out of Tamonbō's grip, rolling down the slope like a tsuchinoko and making his escape.

"All right, tough guy, that's enough of that," Reizanbō grimaced. "We don't hold with elephants around here, see? You just get back to your normal size, or else we'll—"

It was precisely at that moment that a valise came whistling out of the sky at tremendous speed and slammed smack-dab into Reizanbō's face. This was nothing more or less than punishment from heaven. Reizanbō dropped without a word, and the other tengu toppled like ninepins as if he had bowled them down, taking the parasol along with them. Jangling hanafuda cards flew left and right.

"What's (*baroom*) going (*pawoo*) on?" I trumpeted, looking up to the sky.

Gliding down on the west wind was a lone English gentleman.



"How novel. An elephant on Nyoigadake." The English gentleman touched down on Daimonji and gazed upward at me, his hand moving to his top hat.

I shrank my form into that of an unkempt college student, upon which he commented, "But of course, a tanuki. Very good." He made a show of applauding silently.

The tengu looked like a foreigner, with his Western attire and fair skin, and he had the anachronistic air of an expatriate recently returned from travels abroad. A shiny silk top hat, an impeccably fitted three-piece suit, a bone-white shirt and black bowtie, leather gloves, and a walking cane. It was notoriously difficult to guess a tengu's age, but in human terms he appeared to be in his late thirties, and devilishly handsome to boot.

Picking up the valise, he addressed the groaning Kurama tengu. "Good day, gentlemen. And what might you all be doing over there?"

The Kurama tengu got up and gawped at him in amazement. Reizanbō suddenly whipped his sunglasses off and exclaimed, "Say, ain't you Yakushibō's heir? How come you're back after all this time?"

"I have seen all I intended to see. I do hope your patriarch is in good health, I intend to call on him once things have settled down. By the by..." The Heir frowned and looked around. "I was expecting more of my belongings would have arrived by now."

"Ah, yeah," Reizanbō said frostily. "They were taking up too much space, so we tossed 'em."

"And why would you do that? This is not your mountain."

A flick of the eyes from Reizanbō, and the rest of the Kurama tengu circled out around the Heir. The air grew tense.

"Little behind the times, aren't ya? Nyoigadake is ours, now."

My fur quivered in anticipation of seeing a clash of tengu. Tengu clashes were awfully uncommon these days. The battle between Master Akadama and the Kurama tengu over Mount Atago, or the great tug of war over Chikubu Island between Shiga and Kyoto, or the assassination over Mount Ibuki—all had passed into the realm of legend. Any tanuki that witnessed one of these monumental clashes for himself would have something to boast of at the pub for the rest of his life.

But the Heir seemed utterly disinterested, and the challenge fell on deaf ears. "Ah, I see. Very well."

"That all you gotta say?" Reizanbō challenged him, as if taken aback. "You're one stone-cold fella. Don't you realize we kicked your old man off his own mountain?"

"And that would make Nyoigadake yours, then," replied the Heir, looking unfazed. "Or do you mean to say that you feel remorse for what you did?"

"Whadda we gotta feel sorry for, eh?"

"Then carry yourselves proudly. You are tengu! If you wish to fritter away your days fighting over territory, who is to say that you are wrong? Now, may I trouble you to tell me what has become of my father?"

"He moved to some grubby apartment behind the Demachi arcade now, spends his days getting wait on hand and foot by some tanuki."

"Then I suppose it falls to me to put him out of his misery. Good day, gentlemen."

With a courteous tip of the hat, the Heir ascended into the sky, as smoothly and elegantly as if he was riding an unseen escalator. The Kurama tengu watched him go, their jaws slack with amazement. After he was out of sight, they turned to each other and started jabbering, practically frothing at the mouth with excitement. Fallen hanafuda cards jangled as they tread them underfoot.

"That asshole ain't changed one bit."

"But who'da thunk he'd ever come back?"

"We gotta let the boys at HQ know."

"Think Mount Atago's already heard the news?"

The fact that I'd called them all pipsqueaks seemed to have slipped their minds. Hardly believing my luck, I turned back into a tanuki and raced down the mountain.

As I was passing through the forest, my brother popped out of a bush.

"You're alright!" he squeaked with joy.

After the happy reunion was over, I transformed into the college student, my brother into a little boy, and we ran down the crowded slope in front of Ginkakuji and along the canals beneath the cherry trees.

This was no time for worrying about tsuchinoko or tengu hail. I needed to make sure the Master was safe. Considering the century-old rift between the two, and what the Heir had said about "putting him out of his misery", it wasn't out of the question that he might show up on the Master's doorstep, intent on violently settling the score. The Master had been the teacher of many a tanuki before me, including my father, and his father before him, and so on and so forth. Even though his status as a tengu was practically nil, I couldn't just stand by and watch his candle be extinguished.

As we sprinted down Imadegawa Street, I told my brother to return to the Tadasu Forest.

"Tell Yaichirō that Yakushibō's heir has returned. Yasaka needs to hear about this too."

"What're you gonna do?"

"I'm heading to Demachiyanagi. The Heir has a grudge against the Master, and he's bound to try to settle the score. I have to get the Master out of there before he arrives."



Yashirō raced off like the wind towards the Tadasu Forest, and as for me, I headed towards the Masugata Court Apartments behind the Demachi shopping arcade.



In Osaka's Nipponbashi there is a second-hand camera store run by a retired tengu by the name of Konkobu of Iwayasan. I had visited him on several occasions. Konkobu was one of the few whom the Master counted as a friend, and he had told me much about the Heir.

The Heir was born in Kiyō, the city which is now known as Nagasaki. He was whisked away to Kyoto by the Master around the twentieth year of the Meiji era, when the turmoil of the Meiji Restoration was already fading into memory. The Master had introduced the Heir to Konkobu as his own son.

Konkobu remembered quite well the Heir's arrival in Kyoto. He had been a fair lad, still traces of the boy in him, but his eyes were piercing, and he struggled to keep his fiery temper in check. It was plain to see he had the Master's blood in him.

The revolutionary transformations of the Meiji era were of no interest to the young Heir. While the Biwa canals were dug, electric lines were laid, buildings were thrown up, and the city was coming into the modern age, up on Nyoigadake the Heir threw himself into the Master's harsh tengu instruction. Yet he was not satisfied with the way things were. The real reason that he engrossed himself in training was so that he could reach the apex of his powers sooner and overthrow his hated father.

In this way years passed, a new century dawned, and the world moved on to the Taishō period.

The Heir grew up into an exemplary young man, and no longer cooped himself up on Nyoigadake. He befriended Sōjōbō, the patriarch of the Kurama tengu, and together the two spent their days masquerading as students at the local high school and dragging along tanuki for nights on the town. The Master frowned upon his antics, but the Heir steadily grew his tengu strength and openly defied the Master. Both father and son waited and watched, hawk-eyed, for the spark that would ignite the powder keg.

This spark turned out to be a woman.

During those days a Western hotel with a clock tower sprang up on Karasuma Boulevard. It was called the 20th Century Hotel, and she was the sheltered daughter of the war profiteer who had built it.

It took only a single glance for the Heir to fall head over heels for her, but the Master declared that it was his duty to chasten any disciple of his who had strayed from the path of wickedness. At the time the Master was at the height of his tengu powers, and the depravity of coveting his disciple's first love was hardly enough to give him pause.

On and on the browbeating went against the backdrop of the blazing lights of the hotel, until at last the Heir's long simmering grudge finally boiled over.

For three days and three nights their battle shook the Higashiyama Sanjuoppo mountains. Neither paused for rest or sleep, their bodies covered in cuts and bruises like a couple of cavemen, until they finally crawled up to the roof of the Minami-za, which at the

time had not yet been rebuilt to its current facade. Pale lightning rent the sky above them, and rain poured down on the city as they mustered what little strength remained for one last clash. They stuck fingers up each other's nostrils and pulled at each other's hair, resembling less two tengu locked in a life-or-death struggle than two children engaged in a schoolyard tussle. But experience won the day, and Master Akadama kicked the Heir off the roof down to Shijō Boulevard below, letting out a screech of triumph. Pelted by raindrops, the defeated Heir vanished into the night.

One hundred years had passed since then.

Upon his return from England, the heir to Yakushibō of Nyoigadake established a grand residence at the Hotel Okura in Kawaramachi Oike, and was there in his chambers now making preparations to confront his father.

Meanwhile, Master Akadama was holed up in his cheap flat behind the Demachi shopping arcade, hugging a one-eyed daruma and praying for Benten to return, muttering her name over and over to himself: "Benten...Benten..."

Wherefore had such a wide gulf opened up between father and son?

The story was a true tengu tragedy.



Fortunately, the Heir had not yet arrived when I burst into Master Akadama's apartment.

Spring sunlight was shining through the raggedy curtains, illuminating the garbage that was piled up on the tatami. The Master was lying on his futon in his yellowed underwear, snoring uproariously. In contrast to his beggarly surroundings, the Master's expression was utterly enraptured. No doubt he was dreaming of Benten's behind.

"Wake up!" I gave him a shake, but the Master only turned over in his sleep, probably seeking to bury his head ever deeper in that luscious dream of ass. "I don't believe this. Of all the times to be sleeping!"

Scattered around the futon were tengu cigars, the Fūjin Raijin fan, Benten's haphazardly written postcards, the Master's favorite handkerchief, and other of the Master's personal effects. I gathered them into a cloth and tied it up, then heaved the Master up onto my back. He wouldn't be pleased to wake up from his dream and find that he had been transported to a forest full of tanuki, but I didn't have time to let him leisurely wake up on his own.

I opened the door and was about to step outside when I noticed, standing on the other side of the wall, something very few people would expect to see in Demachiyangi: an English gentleman.

"He sure doesn't waste any time!"

I was forced to retreat back into the apartment.

The Heir's mental image of Master Akadama was a hundred years out of date; he would most certainly not expect to be seeing him in such a derelict state. What if I were to transform into Master Akadama instead? I might just be able to pull the wool over his eyes,

and if I greeted him warmly enough I might even be able to bring a thaw to this frozen century-old relationship. Why not?

I dragged some garbage out of the closet and stuffed Master Akadama, still clutching the daruma inside, futon and all. Just as I slid the door shut, I heard the sound of the Heir's knock on the door.

"Is this the residence of Yakushibō of Nyoigadake?"

I transformed into the Master and sat down cross-legged in the center of the room.

"Enter!" I loudly commanded.

The Heir opened the door and stepped inside, glancing into the room from the kitchen. He was covering his nose and mouth with a snow-white handkerchief. The room reeked of tengu cigar smoke and port wine and mouldering bento boxes and earwax-laden cotton swabs and worn then discarded underwear and old man stench and tanuki hair. It was such a chaotic room that it seemed to have overpowered the Heir, who stood at the threshold of the room looking aghast.

Summoning all of my shapeshifting guile I recreated a facade of tengu majesty.

"How glad I am that you have returned, my son. Not a day has passed that I do not regret the injustices I have done you. Will you forgive this old man?"

Hearing these lily-livered words dribble unconvincingly out of the mouth of Yakushibō of Nyoigadake—he who steeped himself in the ways of wickedness, he who spat on all creation—was almost more embarrassing than I could bear. Seeing me open my arms to him, the Heir approached, wiping the tatami clean with his handkerchief before coming down to his knees and gingerly returning my embrace in such a manner so as not to dirty his suit jacket. It appeared that this century-old rift between tengu father and son was at an end.

Suddenly the Heir whispered in my ear, "You seem to have acquired the stench of tanuki, Father."

"They frequent my abode, from time to time. A most intolerable state of affairs, I assure you."

"So you say, but I might venture to guess that you are quite fond of them."

"Foolishness. How can you say such a thing?"

"Why else would you have a tanuki tail?" The heir gave me a smack on the back, and immediately took a firm grasp on the tail that came shooting out. In a twinkle my transformation came sliding off and I found myself hanging upside down, regretting ever thinking that hoodwinking a tengu by transforming into a tengu was a good idea. It was hard to imagine a more humiliating, not to mention painful, experience. Tanuki are meant to live right side up.

Dangling there viewing the world askew, I squirmed and begged for mercy. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"I say, you're the tanuki from up on Nyoigadake." The Heir brought his impeccably formed nose up close to me. "So you were one step ahead of me."

His anger subsiding, the Heir placed me down on the tatami.

I rubbed my aching tail and looked up at the Heir. "Your forgiveness, I beg, for my fatuous fraud. I am Yasaburō, third son of Shimogamo Sōichirō. Allow me to wish you joy of the occasion, sir, on your safe return from your travels."

"You may dispense with the horrid formality. Now, where is my real father?"

"Ahem. I'm afraid I don't know where he's gone."

The Heir sniffed and looked around the room, his eyes coming to rest on the closet door which I had hastily slid shut moments before. Inside that closet, Master Akadama was drooling and hugging his daruma and dreaming of Benten's ass. For a second I was deathly sure that the game was up, but rather than investigating the closet the Heir simply muttered, sounding in equal parts admiring and exasperated, "What gallant creatures you tanuki are."

"That we are, sir," I replied. "Should you want for anything just say the word. I expect you'll find many things inconvenient returning after such a long absence, your furnishings being one."

"Yes, quite. Those Kurama fools seem to have scattered my belongings to the four winds."

"May I take care of that for you, sir?"

The belongings that the Kurama tengu had tossed off Daimonji had probably ended up in the hands of tanuki all over town. But as long as the Heir invoked his right of possession, it was still entirely possible to reclaim them from the tanuki dens in which they now lay.

"That would be a great help," the Heir assented, producing a golden coin from his pocket and attempting to press it on me. "Of course I would never think to ask for your assistance without proper compensation."

"But sir, tengu are by nature greater than tanuki. You should think nothing of it."

"I dislike being indebted to others, Yasaburō. And furthermore," added the Heir, "I am not a tengu."



The return of the Heir set the tanuki world abuzz.

To us short-lived furballs, witnessing the appearance of a new tengu is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Throngs of curious tanuki jostled in and around the Hotel Okura, hoping to catch a glimpse of the fabled new tengu. Even some of the old furballs of Tanukidani Fudō who had one paw in the grave made the trek out, for someone had started a rather irresponsible rumor that seeing this tengu would add years to your life.

In the midst of all this hullabaloo, I received a summons from Yasaka Heitarō, leader of the tanuki world, and so my elder brother Yaichirō and I found ourselves paying a visit to Gion.

"What a pain in the ass," I scowled as we headed east from the Shijō Bridge towards Yasaka Shrine. In my experience, being called to a meeting with the Trick Magister meant one of two things: either I was about to get a lecture accompanied by lilting Hawaiian melodies, or I was about to be saddled with another onerous job.

According to Yaichirō, he and Yasaka Heitarō had presided over a meeting yesterday concerning how to respond to the return of the Heir; said meeting had adjourned inconclusively, with all concerned putting off making any decisions in favor of asking me what to do.

"You're the only tanuki who's spoken to the Heir," Yaichirō explained. "And you've been dealing with Master Akadama for a long time. When it comes to tengu, it's got to be you."

"It's not like I have a degree in tenguology..."

"Don't be smart with me. Just do your civic duty, for the tanuki world's sake."

The honorable Yasaka Heitarō was not only head of the Yasaka clan, whose territory extended from Maruyama Park down to the streets of Gion, but also the Trick Magister who held together the many tanuki of Kyoto. His office was located in the alleys of Gion Nawate amongst narrow pubs and bars, in a defunct proctology clinic. The clinic had served the tanuki of Kyoto faithfully and well for many years, and in my younger days I'd visited it to deal with an unfortunate outbreak of mushrooms.

The dilapidated waiting room was stuffed with tanuki waiting to plead their case, so we settled down on an ancient leather sofa to patiently await our turn. At last we were shown into the examination room, which was adorned with island decor, where Heitarō was lounging on a wicker chair idly plucking at a ukulele.

"Mahalo, mahalo, thanks for coming. Welcome to my own personal Hawaii."

The room was painted to look like the blue sky and sea. A couple of fake palm trees were planted in the corner, and hula dancer bobbleheads and leis and Hawaiian shirts festooned the walls. Yasaka Heitarō had been obsessed with Hawaii ever since he visited on a vacation when he was young, and he was eager to foist the Trick Magistership on Yaichirō and make his getaway to the South Pacific. There was nothing his heart desired more than to retire and spend his days relaxing on the beach sipping a coconut.

"Looks like business is booming," I commented.

"Yeah, shame this job doesn't actually pay anything. There're better things I could be doing, you know?"

As the Trick Magister, whenever disagreements arose among the tanuki of Kyoto he had to be the mediator; whenever there was a large gathering, he had to take charge; whenever some young tanuki was having a quarter-life crisis it was his job to show them the way. Sometimes people even came to ask about their love lives. But tanuki have a tendency to overlook the big things, and freak out over the small things. Rare was the problem which Heitarō faced that required some witty King Solomon-esque judgement. So now that a tengu-sized problem had come falling out of the sky, It was only natural for Heitarō to be completely bewildered.

The Trick Magister ushered us into our seats, and took out some mango frappuccinos from the fridge. His ukulele twanged. Now this was more like it.

"Now Yasaburō, I brought you here because no one else can deal with the tengu like you do," Heitarō began.

I liked the way this was sounding.

"This 'Heir'...is he the real deal?"



According to Heitarō, if the Heir was a real tengu, and the legitimate successor to Master Akadama, then as a matter of courtesy the tanuki would need to send an official delegation to greet him and hold a proper welcome ceremony. Considering that it had been a hundred years since he had last set foot on his native soil, too, the pomp would have to be that much more ostentatious. At the same time, they were only too well aware of the quarrel that had taken place a century ago, and of the discord that existed between Master Akadama and the Heir. What if the Master refused to recognize the Heir and chose instead to cede his seat to Benten? What if the tanuki sent a delegation to the Heir, only to befall the wrath of Master Akadama and Benten combined?

I told him of everything that had transpired with the Heir. "From everything I've seen, I reckon he's a real tengu. It's kinda funny that he says he's not one, but...maybe he just has identity issues."

"That sounds even more complicated to deal with."

"Him and Master Akadama are getting along as badly as ever, and once Benten comes back we're sure to have a fight on our hands. Play with fire, and you're going to get your ass singed, if you catch my drift."

"Language, Yasaburō!" Yaichirō chided me.

"No worries," said Heitarō. "So, what do you think, Yaichirō?"

Yaichirō folded his arms, his expression turning stern. "My brother is a fool. But I believe his judgement is sound."

Heitarō plunked at his ukulele and thought.

When my father, the previous Trick Magister, was made into the Friday Fellows' stew, Yasaka Heitarō was tapped to succeed him by dint of having been friends with him since childhood. Thrown into turmoil by the sudden loss of their leader, all the tanuki bigwigs started tossing the hot potato around, and to his great bewilderment it was the unsuspecting Heitarō who ended up getting his hands burned. At the time, Ebisugawa Sōun had attempted to seize the seat for himself, but lacked the necessary status, and many tanuki figured that given the choice they'd be better off with Heitarō in charge. Hence, while Heitarō hadn't had any notable successes, he hadn't had any particularly egregious failures either, and the fact that he'd continued to stolidly carry out his functions despite being entirely unsuited to the job was respectable in itself.

"We're tanuki, after all. Haste makes waste." At last he stopped strumming and slapped his knee. "Here's what I think, then, as the leader of this whole shebang: we watch and we wait. Once we see which way the wind is blowing for the tengu, we'll wag our tails that same way. For the time being, I just need you to keep an eye on them, shoots?"



I requested Heitarō to announce the Heir's claims to the tengu hail and reclaim the items now lying in fur-strewn dens all over town. Next I headed to Kiyomizu Chūjirō's antique shop on Teramachi Street and persuaded him to set aside part of the shop for my use as the collection point for all the returned tengu hail. Many tanuki were loath to part

with their precious tengu hail, moaning and pouting and making a scene, and I heard a fair number of them calling me a killjoy under their breaths.

The Heir had brought back an astonishing variety of things from England. Among them were: a writing desk; over ten different canes; several dozen pairs of leather shoes; wooden dressers; a great many valises; a collection of spyglasses; magnifying glasses, microscopes, and other assorted scientific equipment; indoor slippers; silverware and candlesticks; a violin; a chessboard; a mysterious ring of keys; three overcoats; lamps; a bathtub; Persian rugs; hunting caps; hundreds of books; newspaper clippings; and this represents but a mere fraction of his belongings. We also recovered the sofa that my little brother and I had found at the foot of Nyoigadake.

For the next week I was so swamped in sorting everything out I could hardly breathe, let alone think about tsuchinoko.

Tsuchinoko are fantasy. Tengu are reality.

While this was going on, the Heir spent his days at the hotel in Kawaramachi Oike. With his princely looks and tengu majesty he enthralled the staff, who in turn treated him like royalty. His old-fashioned English charm was right at home whether he was sitting in the stately lobby or in the café, putting his tengu-ness on full display. It was his custom to take an hour-long walk every day at five in the afternoon, rain or shine, his route always the same. He cut a conspicuous figure in the crowds of Shinkyōgoku, every head turning to get a second look. On his return to the hotel he always stopped before the door to check the time, and every movement, from the way he took out his pocket watch to the angle of his chin as he observed the position of the hands, was as precise as clockwork. The way napoléons poured forth like water from his waistcoat pockets hinted at the vast amount of wealth at his disposal, but rather than squander that wealth on nightly debauchery he lived a rather quiet life.

Each evening I headed to the hotel around the time I estimated he would return from his walk to deliver the day's haul of repossessed goods.

"Ah, Yasaburō. Splendid work today, as always."

Over the course of my daily visits, the hotel room slowly began to take on the semblance of a posh little slice of Europe. Each day, the Heir would greet me in a spotless white dress shirt, relaxed and ensconced among his favorite accoutrements. He would often attempt to press a gold coin into my pocket, but having my own sense of tanuki dignity, I always found a way to decline.

"I don't like being indebted to people," he insisted.

"Sure, sure, but I am a tanuki."

"Then I will rephrase. I don't like being indebted to tanuki."

"I'll be honest with you, I'm planning on collecting on this debt in a big way someday. A couple of gold coins wouldn't nearly be enough. I'm so busy these days I don't have time to go tsuchinoko hunting anymore."

"Lo, the trick is revealed. I suppose if I took my eyes off you for a second I'd be robbed blind."

"Being rich enough to be able to consider that possibility without batting an eye must be quite wonderful."

"Touché. Is that a pearl of tanuki wisdom, perchance?" The Heir smiled ruefully, but I still refused to take the coin.

Of all his possessions, the Heir was most eager to recover a German-made air rifle. It was crafted in the 19th century, and used a powerful pneumatic pump to compress air and shoot lead pellets. It had been brought over to England from the Continent, passed down as a prized heirloom of a noble house for many years before being bought by the Heir. In the picture I saw it was quite beautiful, almost like some kind of brass instrument. When I heard the term "air rifle", I imagined in my head some sort of peashooter.

"It's nothing so benign as that," the Heir laughed. It was rumored to have been used to assassinate a government minister in some faraway country, so any tanuki unfortunate enough to be shot by this weapon would find himself on a one-way trip to the afterlife.

"I would have assumed that your furry brethren wouldn't be fond of rifles."

"Of course not. It's just that I've never actually seen a real one before."

"I would be most appreciative if you found it as soon as possible. I would hate for it to be used for some ill purpose."

This whole time I was making these frequent social calls, Master Akadama remained blissfully unaware of the Heir's return. No tanuki wanted to be on the receiving end of his wrath, and besides, the fact that he was cooped up in his apartment meant there was hardly any opportunity for him to find out. When I visited once to bring him a bento, I found him hunched over the low table in the middle of the room, writing a love letter to send to Benten.

How pitiable indeed, that only the Master remained unaware.

As this thought passed through my head, the Master suddenly swiveled his glare towards me. "Yasaburō."

"Yes?"

"You're hiding something from me, aren't you?"

"Don't be silly," I said, trying to sound as nonchalant as I could. "You know I've got more secrets than you could shake a stick at."

The Master snorted, then turned back to his letter.

"Very well. I'm sure it's of no consequence, anyhow."



It was in mid-May, about two weeks after the Heir's return, that Master Akadama finally found out what was going on.

Given that he had been cooped up in his apartment this whole time, it could only have been one of his old tengu friends who had clued him in. When I heard that Konkobu of Iwayasan had been seen leaving the Demachi shopping arcade carrying a large bottle with a *mizuhiki* indicating gratitude wrapped around the neck, I knew that the time had finally come. Fearing the worst I ventured to the Master's apartment, but when I got there he was already gone.

Following this the Master disappeared from Kyoto. "e's done a runner!" some of the more excitable tanuki claimed. "Didn't have the guts to square up to his son, no doubt!" But

his former students, myself included, countered that Master Akadama would never do such a thing.

Our former teacher, having lost the ability to soar the skies as he pleased some years back, no longer retained any of his old tengu strength. What he had retained was selfishness, lechery, and his domineering arrogance: in short, all the worst traits of a tengu. In spite of that, he had still hung onto his tengu pride, and that in spades; he'd rather be crushed to death by a giant block of freeze-dried tofu than let some tanuki upstarts snigger about him behind his back.

"The Master'll be back!" his disciples insisted.

Not more than a few days had passed when a tanuki appeared claiming he had seen the Master skulking around Kumogahata. Kumogahata, in the north of Kyoto, lies upstream on the Kamo River, deep in the cedars of Kitayamasugi far from the city streets, and has been the domain of Konkobu of Iwayasan since antiquity. It is far removed from the earthly affairs of man and tanuki, and seeing that he had chosen such a lofty place in which to seclude himself we disciples believed that we were about to see the Master get serious. There was no doubt in our minds that our great teacher was shaking off the dust that had accumulated over his years of seclusion, and sharpening mind and body once more in preparation to meet the Heir head on.

"That's Master Akadama for you. Even in his old age, he's still Yakushibō of Nyoigadake!"

It was looking as if the Master's name might finally be on the up-and-up again in the tanuki world.



To show my support I decided to bring some *mamemochi* to the Master up there in his training camp. But Kumogahata was a long way away. I thought about borrowing Yaichirō's automaton rickshaw, but my stingy elder brother was leery of lending it out. He was especially afraid that the Master, in one of his fits of pique, might carelessly blow it to smithereens. I resigned myself to laboriously pedaling my bike up the long, tortuous route, but it was so far that I soon grew weary. Countless times I considered turning back and eating all the mochi by myself.

Gritting my teeth, I finally reached the end of the winding mountain road. Given that it was a tengu training site, I had been expecting the valley to echo with the din of battle, but the hamlet of Kumogahata was the very picture of tranquility. Bright greenery enveloped the village; blinding summer sunshine fell upon the stone walls and the old primary school. The only sound was the rush of water through the irrigation canals. Here it felt like time slowly oozed by like molasses.

I stopped in front of the local ward office to sit and rest in the shade of a tree.

Without warning someone said from above me, "Well, if it isn't Yasaburō of the Shimogamo clan?"

Startled, I looked up to see perched on the concrete overhang of the ward office an older gentleman wearing a white button-up shirt with a bolo tie, leisurely sipping a Fanta Grape. It was Konkobu of Iwayasan, one of the few Master Akadama could call a friend.

"What a pleasant surprise, Konkobu, sir."

"You're here to see Yakushibō, I expect?"

"I had nothing better to do."

"Ha! Ha! As kind-hearted as ever, I see. Allow an old man to accompany you? The tengu training ground is just up there."

I followed Konkobu up the steep stone steps leading to Kōunji. Rather than entering the temple grounds, Konkobu followed a small rivulet that flowed leftward deeper into the mountains. Passing beneath the bright sparkling greenery, further on the rivulet entered a chilly copse of cedar trees, their dark trunks towering up all around me. The serenity of the mountain village faded, replaced with overpowering tengu presence.

A small, sienna-coloured gourd hung at Konkobu's waist, emitting a light sloshing sound.

"There's dragonwater in here," he explained.

The region around Iwayasan Shimyōin is well known as the source of the Kamo River, but in those mountains a number of dragonstones are also embedded in the earth. The water that trickles from these stones is known as dragonwater, and is prized by tengu as an energy supplement. Konkobu was taking some to the Master as a pick-me-up. It would seem that Konkobu wasn't the slightest bit interested in stopping the looming father-son conflict.

"Tengu aren't very good at wrapping things up nicely in a bow, you see."

"If there's a more stubborn father-son duo out there, I haven't met them!"

"I do appreciate your concern, I do, but there's no need for you to wear yourself out trying to patch up their dispute. Just let them be."

After following a canal along for fifteen minutes, we came to a great number of toppled cedar trees blocking the path: obviously the work of a tengu. Konkobu formed his hands in a sign and muttered an incantation. Immediately the trees rose up and moved aside one after another, like interlocked fingers separating themselves, and opened up a path.

The trail led us to the tengu training ground.

There in the midst of the trees was a field of grass, shaped like a giant's footprint, and right around where the arch of the foot would be was a massive lone cedar thrusting up into the sky. At the foot of that tree was a familiar looking futon, carried all the way here from that apartment behind the Demachi shopping arcade, and sitting on it was Master Akadama, clutching a daruma to his knees and puffing away at a tengu cigar. If it wasn't for the trees this scene could have been taking place right there in his apartment.

Taking the gourd of dragonwater from Konkobu, the Master scowled at me. "And what might you be doing here, Yasaburō?"

"I was chasing after a tsuchinoko when I lost my way. Please accept these mamemochi as a gift."



"Tramping about again..." He must already have been aware that I had been playing dumb in regards to the Heir, but seemed disinterested at this point in venting his spleen on me. "Very well. And how is he?"

"He's staying at a hotel in Kawaramachi Oike."

"No doubt thinking of a way to wring my neck while I sleep. Pah, I'd like to see him try!" Master Akadama uncorked the gourd and guzzled down the dragonwater, then wiped his mouth. "Damned fool. I see that he still has not changed, still concerning himself over trifles and straying from the path of wickedness. Yakushibō of Nyoigadake will not run or hide! Cry, havoc! Let slip the dogs of war!"

"He is not the same as he was, Yakushibō," Konkobu said gently.

Hearing that the Master snorted but said nothing.

When I was a young furball, Master Akadama used to dump all of his disciples in a handbasket and fly up to this training ground, in what he called "extracurricular lessons". While all of us were frolicking around in the grass, the Master would be up at the tip-top of the cedar smoking a tengu cigar, delighting us by sending smoke rings of all shapes and sizes soaring into the pale blue sky.

It was a real blast from the past seeing that giant cedar again, and I walked a slow circuit around it. It was so tall that I couldn't see the top. Here and there *senjafuda* were stuck to the enormous trunk, and in the branches I could see forgotten liquor bottles, ornamented roof tiles, and faded handkerchiefs fluttering in the spring breeze.

On one occasion during my youth, I aroused the Master's ire to the point that he bound me to the top of the tree as punishment. But at some point he forgot I was there, leaving me to stew up there until Yaichirō came and took me down.

When I brought this memory up to him he claimed that he didn't remember.

"What do you mean, you don't remember!? That's awful!"

"I did the same to your father, and his father before him. I can hardly be expected to remember every time I've disciplined a tanuki."

Eventually Master Akadama got up, shook the gourd, and approached the roots of the cedar. Turning the gourd upside down he poured what remained of the dragonwater into the ground.

"What's that for, then?" inquired Konkobu.

"This cedar has known me longer than most. What is it to you whether I give it a sip?"

His visage was permeated with the tengu majesty of Yakushibō of Nyoigadake, then, as he poured the dragonwater on the roots. I remembered him as he had been, the lord of Nyoigadake, raining contempt and spittle wheresoever he pleased.

Master Akadama thrust the empty gourd back into Konkobu's hands, then took out a sealed envelope from his pocket. I immediately assumed that it was a love letter, until I saw it was addressed as a letter of challenge.

"Bring this letter to him. Swear you will fulfill this duty, on your sacred honor."

I knelt before him. "I, Shimogamo Yasaburō, swear on my honor."



I delivered Master Akadama's challenge to the Heir in the lobby of the hotel in Kawaramachi Oike. Though his father had poured out his heart and soul into this letter, the Heir received it as indifferently as if he was taking a pamphlet on the street, not the slightest hint of emotion showing on his face.

"Perhaps I shall go. Perhaps I shan't," he said. "I would rather not have to disappoint anyone."

In contrast to the Heir's lack of enthusiasm, the entire tanuki world was fired up at the prospect of a clash of tengu. Would Master Akadama repeat his victory of a hundred years prior and banish his son from Kyoto once more, or would the Heir triumph and usher in a new age? The tanuki world waited with bated breath for the day to arrive.

Tengu are those who look down on all creation from atop the pinnacle of arrogance. They are great because they are tengu, tengu because they are great. From this viewpoint of this unassailable logic, tanuki are mere furballs, humans are unwashed apes, and even other tengu are nothing but paper tigers.

'Twixt heaven and earth none is worthy but I—such is the tengu way.

That meant both that the father was greater than the son, and that the son was greater than the father.

There was no way this was going to end well.



The night of the duel, Master Akadama crawled unsteadily up to the roof of the Minami-za. Wearing a headband with his sleeves tied up, he had clearly come intent on doing battle, but given that he was crawling on all fours with his rear end wobbling in the air, he didn't exactly cut much of a tengu-ish figure. Choosing to hold the duel at the site where he had defeated his son a hundred years earlier had obviously been an ill-advised decision. But persist the Master did, pulling himself up with indomitable fighting spirit until at last he made it to the top.

"To soar the skies as you please, that is the mark of a tengu—oof." The Master sat himself down and wiped away his sweat, before lighting up a tengu cigar.

Thick plumes of smoke were borne away by the agreeable nighttime breeze. To the east sparkled the festival-like lights of Gion Shijō, and to the west Shijō Bridge and the rest of the city glittered and shined.

From the rooftop of the Kikusui restaurant on the other side of Shijō Avenue, the scrumptious aroma of sizzling meat wafted through the air. The lantern-festooned beer garden on the roof had been reserved in its entirety by the Kurama tengu, who seemed to have declared today "Heckle Yakushibō Day" and were holding festivities to mark the occasion. More likely than not it was just an excuse for them to watch the scuffle between Master Akadama and the Heir from box seats, beer steins in hand. As far as tengu are concerned, battles and bloodshed are nothing more than hors d'oeuvres to go along with drinks.

The Kurama tengu lined up along the guardrail and leaned out over Shijō Avenue, waving fans and megaphones, shouting encouragement.

"Give it your best, Yakushibō!"

"Don't you worry, we'll pick up your bones once it's finished!"

"Yeah, and toss 'em in the Kamo River so's you can swim with the fishies!"

Pint glasses smashed, sending foaming beer flying through the air, as the Kurama tengu hooted and jeered.

The Master ground his teeth. "Accursed mountain acorns. I'll drown them in Lake Biwa one day, mark my words."

It wasn't just the Kurama tengu who were dying to see the fight. Hordes of tanuki disguised as human drunkards massed around the Shijō Bridge, eager to see how the confrontation would go down. Even the Trick Magister Yasaka Heitarō was spectating alongside my brother Yaichirō at the end of the bridge. Across the river, Konkobu of Iwayasan was seated alone on the lantern-lit rooftop of the Tōka Saikan, supping on aged rice wine as he waited for his old friend's fight to conclude.

A dark blob detached itself from the night sky like a drop of ink dripping from a fountain pen. It was the Heir, descending through the air dressed in black from top to toe. He greeted the Master with a frosty tip of his top hat, and then addressed him as stiffly as though he was speaking to a stranger on the street.

"Good evening, sir. What business brings you up here?"

"I am waiting for someone."

"Indeed? I have a rendezvous here as well."

"...Who is it that you are waiting for?"

"He is a most disagreeable fellow, hardly worth describing."

"Humph, quite a coincidence there. The fellow I am waiting for is also most disagreeable." Master Akadama stubbed out his tengu cigar and wobbled to his feet, his back bent as he glowered at his son for the first time in one hundred years. "He was once my son, and my disciple, but now he is neither. He was but halfway through his training when he was blinded by lust, and turned against me. To think, that rather than choosing to one day follow in my great footsteps, he allowed some strumpet to toy with him and lead him astray from the path of wickedness. For many moons now he has been on the lam, and never popping in for so much as a how-d'ye-do. But now he has come back, and as he is too much a coward to show his face I took the liberty of sending him a challenge. I am of a mind to teach him another lesson when he arrives."

In the face of Master Akadama's provocations, the Heir remained calm and collected, and said nothing. Father and son glared at one other, neither moving a muscle.

After a while the Kurama tengu on the opposite rooftop grew impatient and started to jeer.

"Would you hurry it up?"

"Quit wastin' our time 'ere!"

"Is youse here to fight, or kiss and make up?"

"Aw, that's so sweet!"

The Heir raised a leather-gloved hand and doffed his shiny black top hat. He pressed it to his breast, almost as if in prayer, before turning his cold stare on the Kurama tengu, and without the slightest warning he whipped the hat at the beer garden where they were having their leisurely party. Apparently his top hat had been made from a melted down artillery shell from World War I, because the instant it struck a table it pulverized it with an almighty crash, leaving the Kurama tengu speechless.

The Heir faced the Master once more, meticulously primping his hair. "Teach him another lesson, you say. Why, I'd like to see you try."

"Have at you then, you whippersnapper!"

Master Akadama reached into the folds of his robe, and when he pulled his hand out again he was holding the Fūjin Raijin fan.



The Fūjin Raijin fan is an incomparably powerful artifact; wave it facing the one side and it stirs up a powerful whirlwind; wave it facing the other and it will call up a thunderstorm. It was once counted among the Seven Treasures of Yakushibō of Nyoigadake, and yet was treated so very carelessly. Tengu and tanuki alike tutted with disapproval when he presented it to Benten as a "token of love", but last year after a series of twists and turns it had finally made its way back into his possession.

In his current state the Master did not have the strength to call up a tengu gale. At best he might be able to muster a breeze that lightly ruffled the Heir's hair like a zephyr passing over a field of lotus flowers. But with the Fūjin Raijin fan, even in his twilight the Master was capable of blowing the Minami-za off its foundations.

"Behold!" the Master thundered, raising the fan high above his head.

But as his hand was on its way up the fan slipped out of his grasp and went spiraling through the air towards the Kamo River. It may have been powerful, but unless someone waved it it wasn't a lick of use. Reaching for the fan, Master Akadama's hand closed on air, and losing his balance he went tumbling head first onto the tiles, as the fan rolled away from him.

Both the Fūjin Raijin fan as well as my mentor were on the brink of peril. I sprang forth from the shadows across the rooftop, catching the fan and stuffing it into my pocket before stopping Master Akadama from rolling any further.

Without a word Master Akadama rose to his feet, then sat down with his legs crossed beside me. He'd hit his nose quite hard, and he applied pressure to it with tears in his eyes, but otherwise he seemed unharmed.

The Heir's voice rang out sternly from above us. "Is that Yasaburō down there?"

Out at the edge of the roof I knelt to the floor. "Shimogamo Yasaburō, at your service."

"And what might Shimogamo Yasaburō be doing here?"

"...You might call it my fool's blood talking."

"Riding to the rescue, then," the Heir sighed. "How foolish you tanuki are. Charming little creatures, I will grant, but foolish nonetheless."

"If you will permit me, that is a very tengu-like thing to say."

"I am not a tengu. What is a tengu? A miserable little pile of feathers!" He indicated the Master with his chin. "Look how he prides himself on his powers, how he struts and gives himself airs. Yet where were those powers when the Kurama took his domain, when he was banished to a muck-strewn human domicile? He may think himself great, as I am sure he does, but he is naught but an emperor without clothes. He cannot call up a tengu gale, he cannot fly, what *is* he capable of doing? His is a truly meaningless, farcical fate. But that is what it means to be a tengu, and this is a tengu's end. Truly, I say, this is pathetic to witness. To cling to life, relying on the charity of a tanuki, of all things..."

The Heir's handsome countenance became stony, and his eyes coldly regarded Master Akadama below.

"For shame, sir. For shame."

The Heir's words seemed to have struck a nerve, for Master Akadama staggered to his feet and thrust me aside, attempting to crawl up to the top of the roof. Each time his strength faltered and he slipped down a little ways, he would somehow manage to regain his footing and resume his advance back up towards the Heir.

The Master shook his white mane wildly, his breath coming in ragged gasps. "You just wait. I'll hurl you...down...again!"

His father struggling to climb up the roof; me, looking on in apprehension; the great unwashed masses writhing in the city below: the Heir looked haughtily over it all. His icy gaze spoke volumes, and what it said was this: *Twixt heaven and earth none is worthy but I*. The Heir claimed that he was not a tengu, and yet I was mesmerized by that glimpse of his brilliant tengu inner light.

A thin smile came to his pallid cheeks. "Still you cling to life, father?"

Through gritted teeth Master Akadama choked out, "Come kill me yourself, if you wish it so!"

The Heir snorted. "That would hardly be worth the effort. You may die in whatever manner you see fit."

Without waiting for the Master to crawl all the way up, the Heir sprang from the roof. Soaring easily over the Kamo River, he paused at the roof of the Tōka Saikan to give a polite nod to Konkobu of Iwayasan who sat there sipping his rice wine, before he floated off into the twinkling lights of the city and was gone.

Master Akadama silently watched him go, his mouth agape.

And thus did the curtain fall on the tengu duel.



"Running away again, the pathetic cur."

Master Akadama sat cross-legged at the midpoint of the roof, serenely smoking a cigar like he had just put in a good day's work. I sat down beside him, toying with the Fūjin Raijin fan and looking out at the bright lights into which the Heir had made his exit.

After a long time the Master muttered incredulously, "By thunder, you do make the most unexpected appearances."

"I do like to take people by surprise."

"Well?" the Master asked, poking me in the side. "A glorious victory, was it not?"

"...Er, how do you figure that one?"

"Pah, I can see there's no sense in speaking of it to you."

The Master took a pleasurable draw on his cigar and gazed down at the Kamo River flowing southward. The wooden riverside terraces were already being set up in anticipation of the summer, and lights shimmered dreamily on the river's surface. It was exactly the kind of opulent nightscape where you'd expect to see Benten living it up.

The Master seemed to have had that exact same thought. Looking down at the river, he murmured, "Where is Benten now, and what might she be doing?"

"Once she returns—I'm sure there'll be no shortage of excitement."

"She should have been here, this night." The Master looked up at the moon hanging in the sky, and murmured, his voice hardly louder than a sigh, "How I long for Benten. Oh, how I long for her so."

## Chapter 2 — Nanzenji Gyokuran

It is said that when a male tanuki and a female tanuki fall in love, the two are bound by the red fur of fate.

There is no shortage of tanuki who, led on by this utterly baseless fable, pick through their own fur searching for that precious crimson strand. Even as we speak, trysts between tanuki gentlemen and tanuki ladies are happening discreetly under the shade of the trees on Mount Yoshida, on the temple grounds of Gōjōin, inside the greenhouses at the Kyoto Botanical Garden. *You're the only tanuki in the world for me, my sweet!* whispers the one. *You're the only tanuki in the world for me, my love!* swoons the other. *I think I'm gonna hurl,* says I.

Here's a furry little love story for you.

Once upon a time, in the forests of Tanukidani Fudō near Ichijōji in Sakyō Ward, there lived a tanuki girl by the name of Tōsen. Her name meant “peach sage”, for she was always just peachy keen, and nimble as an elusive mountain sage. From dawn till dusk she would frolic on the 250 steps leading up the temple path, driving away any foolish enough to make light of her with a brisk “Drop dead!” The other tanuki pups in the neighborhood referred to her with a sort of awe as the Stairmaster.

One day, an unfamiliar group of tanuki pups came swaggering into Tanukidani Fudō. A tsuchinoko craze was sweeping the city, and this gang of ne'er-do-wells was causing no end of trouble in the neighboring mountains, calling themselves the Tsuchinoko Expeditionary Brigade. They sang as they marched up the steps, and ignorant of Tōsen's reputation they approached her with sneers on their faces.

“Outta the way, runt!”

“What'd you call me, jagoff?” Flying into a rage, Tōsen launched herself into their midst. “Drop dead!”

This confrontation kicked off a furious battle over those stone steps, pitting the neighborhood kids of Tanukidani Fudō against the Tsuchinoko Expeditionary Brigade. Tōsen conducted herself particularly admirably in her defense of their turf.

Many moons later, Tōsen would descend once more the steps she had once fought so fiercely to defend, but this time dressed in bridal white. She was leaving behind Tanukidani Fudō and departing for her new home in the Tadasu Forest.

As her feet took the steps one by one, her thoughts drifted back to the boys who had sung so loudly as they had tramped up those steps, and the girl who had stood in their way. The leader of the Tsuchinoko Expeditionary Brigade, the jagoff who had shouted at her, “Outta the way, runt!” was named Shimogamo Sōichirō: yes, none other than our father. And the little tomboy who had answered him so defiantly was, as I am sure you have guessed, our very own mother. 'Tis furry little love to which we brothers owe our very existence.

Every little furball that is born into this world has a furry little love story waiting for them.



The beginning of June brought with it the rainy season. It also found me sitting in a cage in the Kyoto City Zoo.

The Kyoto City Zoo is in the Okazaki museum district next to Heian Jingū. Within its brick walls, all manner of birds and beasts bray, bellow, and sing out in a cacophony of cries. Alongside the enclosures for the usual elephants, lions, giraffes, and hippopotami, you will also find a cage for tanuki.

Tanuki are extremely afraid of cages. Our special ability of transformation is inextricably linked with our sense of freedom, and being tossed into a cage would take away that freedom. No freedom equals no transformation, and no tanuki is fond of that.

For many years the tanuki of Okazaki have served in the role of professional tanuki cage sitters, rotating in shifts. Whenever they go on R&R, tanuki from other regions must needs replace them; obviously it's not a popular job, and I wouldn't have taken it if the pay wasn't so good.

In order to serve as a replacement cage sitter, I had to undergo Zoo Tanuki Behavior 101 with the head of the Okazaki tanuki. The Okazaki tanuki take very seriously the business of teaching other tanuki the proper way to behave.

"Charm is paramount. Yet you must not appear to be cajoling," admonished the head of the Okazaki, who was instructing me on their philosophy. "You must play the role of a tanuki with pride. That is the key. You cannot display raw realism, otherwise all will be spoiled. You cannot merely play it naturalistically; you must wait for the moment when you are more tanuki than a tanuki, and seize it. This is also part of shapeshifting."

Sure enough, going inside that cage gave me the creeps, and I spent the first day feeling completely discombobulated. Unable to transform, unable to leave for a spot of fun whenever I pleased; being unaccustomed to all this I found the sensation of being watched round the clock exhausting.

That evening Mother came to check on me, worrying about me being stuck alone in a cage all day long. As always she had taken on the form of a beautiful young man straight out of the Takarazuka Revue, and as if that wasn't enough the green frog riding on her shoulder made her stand out all the more.

The frog wriggled between the bars into the cage.

"It won't be so lonely with Yajirō to keep you company," Mother reassured me.

So Yajirō kept me company from the second day on, which made the ordeal much more bearable. Yajirō rode around on my furry head as I waddled around the cage in front of crowds of children, who shrieked, "There's a frog driving the tanuki!"

"You do keep yourself busy, huh. Color me impressed," Yajirō commented.

"Eh, I didn't have anything better to do."

"That reminds me, did you ever get your hands on a tsuchinoko?"



"C'mon, Yajirō, do you really think I'd be sitting in here if I had? I'd have my hands full going to press conferences and galas!"

That night, Yajirō sat hunched over in the corner of the cage pondering something deeply.

"Whatcha up to?" I asked, peering over his shoulder to find him solving shogi puzzles.

The Tanuki Shogi Tournament, sponsored by the Nanzenji clan, was due to be held in June, and Yajirō was planning to enter.

"Any port in a storm," he mumbled. "There aren't a whole lot of tanuki who give a hoot about shogi in the first place, and I'd feel bad for the Nanzenjis if the tournament turned out a bust 'cause nobody entered."

"You ever wonder what Father was thinking when he decided to organize the tournament?"

Our Father, Shimogamo Sōichirō, was an avid shogi player, and for love of the game he joined forces with the previous head of the Nanzenji clan to set up the Tanuki Shogi Tournament. But tanuki in general don't even have the patience to remember all the pieces, let alone sit still in front of a shogi board for an entire game. Father's dream of bringing shogi into the tanuki mainstream was never realized, and after he was made into stew the tournament was halted. No doubt Yaichirō was extremely pleased with himself for bringing it back.

A thought occurred to me. "Hey Yajirō, do you remember the shogi room?"

"Sure I do, it was Father's secret hideaway. Fun little room, wasn't it?"

"Whatever happened to it?"

"It's supposed to be somewhere in the Tadasu Forest, but I couldn't say where."

Whenever he could spare a moment in between his hectic duties as Trick Magister, Father always came to the shogi room to relax and decompress before rushing off to the next fire. It was a little 4½ tatami room, filled with a trove of accumulated shogi manuals and old shogi boards, and Father would sometimes take us there to instruct us in shogi.

I started to reminisce about the time I had spent in that room. Father would be sitting happily on a floor cushion surrounded by pointlessly massive tatami-sized shogi pieces and oddly-shaped boards. There was a large skylight in that room, and through it we could see the clear blue sky and branches hanging low with ripe persimmons. I used to drive Father crazy by clamoring for those persimmons.

The strange thing was, whenever Father took us to that room he always had us cover our eyes. All I could recall was jumping down into a hole in the earth with the wind whistling through my ears.

"You think Yaichirō would know where it is?"

"Doesn't sound like it," replied Yajirō. "He's searched every nook and cranny in the forest, but apparently he never found any hole like that. Father must have hidden it pretty well."

Here Yajirō gave a little sigh.

"I wonder if I'll ever see that room again?"



An unexpected visitor came to see us on our last day at the zoo.

It had been cloudy all day with the occasional drizzle coming down, and the zoo was deserted. The red smokestack of the meandering choo-choo train and the fun-sized Ferris wheel were both melancholy in the grey haze of the rain. No matter how I flaunted my tanuki charms, very few people were going to stop in front of my cage on a day like today, so with that in mind there really wasn't any point in making any effort.

As I let out a wide yawn of boredom, a small girl came up to the cage. She was about the size of a kindergartener, and her red umbrella and red wellingtons stood out brilliantly. Showing no interest in either the choo-choo train or the Ferris wheel, she twirled her umbrella round and round as she made a beeline straight for the tanuki cage. She must really have liked tanuki. Poking the umbrella into the cage, she watched wide-eyed as I paraded around proudly. But before long she began to giggle.

"You make such a marvelous tanuki, Yas!"

Startled, I came to a halt.

"If it isn't Gyokuran," Yajirō said atop my head. "What brings you here?"

"I heard Yasaburō was filling in here, so I just had to come cheer him on."

"Not a patch on the regulars, right, Miss Gyokuran?"

"Oh, stop it with the 'miss'," she chuckled, with a little wince.

Nanzenji Gyokuran was the younger sister of Shōjirō, the head of the Nanzenji clan. Her precocious intelligence had made her a favorite of Master Akadama's, back when we were pups studying under the old tengu's tutelage. Those pupils with the most outstanding grades served as assistants to the Master. Gyokuran and my brother Yaichirō fulfilled their duties admirably, herding around rowdy students in the classroom like sheepdogs. That was why I always called her Miss Gyokuran.

Gyokuran was positively bubbling with excitement for the shogi tournament. She told us she'd just come back from inspecting the tournament venue for the play-in round with her brother Shōjirō.

"You'll come watch, won't you, Yas?"

"Eh, we'll see. I'm not much of a shogi fan," I yawned.

"After all that work Yaichirō put into reviving it. Don't be such a wet blanket, I'm sure it'll be lots of fun!"

"Well of course *you'd* say that, wouldn't you."

Gyokuran had had an infamous reputation as a shogi fanatic ever since she was a kid. The whole Nanzenji clan was into shogi, but Gyokuran was far and away the most obsessed of them all. I'd heard all sorts of whispered rumors about her—how she'd fallen into one of canals leading to Lake Biwa once but just kept on solving her shogi puzzle, how she'd swallowed a piece because she just liked it so much, how she went to sleep every night hugging a shogi board—and I was half-inclined to believe them true. Gyokuran claimed it was all nonsense, but I knew for a fact that she used to force other innocent students to play shogi at school. How did I know that? Because I had been one of the kids running away while she chased us around waving a shogi board shouting, "It's lots of fun, I

promise!" Her overzealous obsession with shogi was precisely what made her an ineffective spokesperson for the game. Most likely it was the disgruntled tanuki she'd used to chase around the schoolyard who were responsible for spreading these rumors.

"I don't suppose Yaichirō still refuses to play?" she suddenly murmured.

"Won't go near a board," said Yajirō gently. "You know that better than anyone."

"Why won't he let it go? He's grown into a fine furball, and yet..."

"Have you said that to him?"

"I...I can't. I don't know why, but I just can't."

Father had left behind a shogi board in the Tadasu Forest which Yaichirō treasured just as much as he did his automaton rickshaw. It was stored in a paulownia box, and its surface was gouged with a ferocious bite mark. That mark had been left by Yaichirō, who in his rage had transformed into a tiger and savaged the board. In his youth he had been notoriously prone to allowing the blood rush to his head and transforming into a tiger when the game wasn't going his way. He detested that side of him that would emerge, and that was what led to him quitting shogi. He had been playing against a girl his age when he had gotten so frustrated that he sunk his fangs into the board, and I'm sure the thought of it still stung his pride.

"I'll see you at the shogi tournament then!" Gyokuran said as she parted from us, making her way through the hazy rain back to the forests of Nanzenji. She twirled her red umbrella as she walked, just like a real girl.

"'Tis love, furry little love..." murmured Yajirō from atop my head.

"What was that?"

"...Nah, it's nothing."

"Being a tease, huh?"

"Even a frog living at the bottom of a well's got secrets to keep."



One night in mid-June, we all went as a family to Nanzenji.

Dense clouds shrouded the sky so not a star could be seen, and a humid breeze was blowing.

Yashirō led the way proudly like a drum major at the head of a marching band, holding aloft a lantern bearing our family crest. We walked along the long walls that stretched around the mansions in the dark neighborhood, until we entered the grounds of Nanzenji, which was teeming with tanuki bearing their own lanterns from all over Kyoto.

Tonight was the night the Nanzenji clan were hosting the Tanuki Shogi Tournament.

Mother looked around the temple appreciatively. "Quite a nice turnout, isn't it?"

"This tournament hasn't been held in the many long years since Father's death, after all," Yaichirō proclaimed with pride. "But the effort has paid off. Father would be proud."

"He'll be even prouder if Yajirō manages to take the prize home," I declared.

Yajirō squirmed on my shoulder. "I don't know, I wouldn't get my hopes up if I were you."

"See here, Yajirō, that just won't do. You must defend the honor of the Shimogamo clan!"

"C'mon, Yaichirō, I didn't learn to play shogi so I could defend some honor or whatever."

"You'll make a fine opponent against Gyokuran!"

"I don't know," Yajirō repeated.

"I know you can win," Mother encouraged him. "But in the end, the match comes down to luck."

Most of the tanuki gathered at the temple were so hopeless at shogi that they couldn't tell rooks apart from bishops, so they were really only here for betting and bacchanalia. Beneath the *sanmon* gate, which soared up into the darkness from amidst the pine trees, the owner of the Scarlet Pane on Teramachi Street was discussing betting odds with some companions. These blokes lived for placing bets whenever there was a competition to be had.

As I was walking along I hailed the Scarlet Pane's owner. "Howdy. Wasn't expecting a shogi noob like you to turn up here."

"Ho there, Yasaburō, we're expecting a good show from you off the board, if'n you catch my meaning," he shot back cheekily. "That's what you do, innit, steal the show?"

Just as I was about to make my retort, Yashirō waved his lantern and shouted, "Mr. Yasaka's here!"

With a modest fanfare of trumpets, the tanuki of Yasaka entered Nanzenji. As always, the Trick Magister was wearing his trademark Hawaiian shirt. Seeing us there beneath the *sanmon* gate he veered towards us, slapping Yaichirō heartily on the shoulder.

"Yaichirō! You did great, bringing back tanuki shogi!"

All through the spring Yasaka Heitarō had been getting ready for his retirement, incrementally heaping his Trick Magister duties one by one on Yaichirō instead. "I hardly have time to close my eyes!" Yaichirō was always grumbling, yet in spite of his complaints he could always be seen downing some dodgy energy drink procured in Shinkyōgoku and zooming about the city like he'd been born to do this.

Yasaka Heitarō addressed Yajirō, who was squatting on my shoulder. "And look who made it through the play-ins! Who'da thunk it, eh, that you were so good at shogi!"

"Father did teach me well. And besides, it's not like I had anything better to do down there in the well."

"Ha, I'll bet shogi wasn't the only thing Sō taught you, eh? Me too. When we were kids, it was tsuchinoko hunting, and once we grew up it was all about shogi and booze and Hawaii. Sure, we were always dead broke back then, but I wouldn't have traded it for nothing. Sō was always good at everything, ya know?"

Mother snickered. "And you, Heitarō, you were always such a klutz!"

"Now c'mon, isn't that a little much?"

"Well, you may be a klutz, but I think it's marvelous that you're always enjoying yourself."

"I just can't win with you, can I?" chortled the Trick Magister, quivering with mirth.



Nestled in the bosom of the mountains of Higashiyama, Nanzenji is an ancient temple of the Sōtō Zen school.

The Nanzenji clan claims as its turf the forests stretching from Nanzenji to Keage. About eighty years ago, Sakata Sankichi, a shogi player from Osaka, played a match in one of the halls at Nanzenji against another player who had traveled there from Tokyo. This game is popularly known as the Showdown at Nanzenji. Sakata, who had kept a low profile for some years, shocked the shogi world with the bold opening of pushing up his right-side pawn.<sup>1</sup> The story was famous enough that even I, a shogi greenhorn, had heard it before. The fearsome battle went on for seven days, as the tanuki of Nanzenji looked on from the sidelines in awe. The story about the three Nanzenji brothers having been taught shogi by Sakata Sankichi himself was farfetched at best, but it seemed apparent that the Showdown at Nanzenji had awakened the Nanzenji clan's passion for shogi. From then on the clan had poured themselves into the game, spending a great deal of time and energy proselytizing amongst the rest of the tanuki community. It had been the previous of the Nanzenji who had taught the game to Father in his youth.

Following the directions of the tanuki of Nanzenji, the crowd moved off across the temple grounds, holding their lanterns high.

Passing beneath the Suikoku aqueduct looming up in the darkness, and ascending a stone staircase, we could hear the sound of water rushing through the canals from Lake Biwa. Here in the shadow of Higashiyama the air was so doleful that it took your breath away. As the parade of lanterns passed through a dim copse of cedars it looked down upon the garden of Nanzen-in. I heard the chortling of Yasaka Heitarō coming from the head of the column as someone blared a trumpet.

Yaichirō's eyes darted all around him as he walked. "I don't see Kinkaku and Ginkaku anywhere."

The turmoil that capped off the previous year had seen the downfall of Ebisugawa Sōun, who had for many years used his position as owner of the Faux Denki Bran distillery to line his own pockets. Ever since he had absconded with his ill-gotten wealth, his whereabouts had remained unknown, and rumor had it he was relaxing somewhere in a hot springs town.

Kinkaku and Ginkaku, idiot brothers extraordinaire and laughingstocks of the tanuki world, took over for their father. At this point everyone assumed that the long and noble history of Faux Denki Bran was about to gutter out like a candle, when who should come along but Sōun's daughter Kaisei, who was quite a shrewd businesswoman. Kaisei put her older brothers on a tight leash, and ever since then the idiots could occasionally be spotted on the streets at night, blubbering after getting a scolding.

"I'd think those two are too stupid to be interested in something like shogi."

---

<sup>1</sup> In chess terms this is similar to opening on black with a6. Basically, it's the early 20th century shogi version of a [Bongcloud](#).

"They're probably still smarting from the drubbing they received in the play-ins. But they did say they were going to play on the main stage. Kaisei supplied the Faux Denki Bran, so we couldn't just kick the Ebisugawas out of the rest of the tournament."

"They've gotta be up to something. Well, if they want a fight, I'll give 'em one!"

"I warn you, Yasaburō, keep the fighting on the board!"

Eventually we came to a clearing in the midst of the forest.

Braziers burned solemnly, illuminating the trees as well as the giant shogi board that had been constructed in the middle of the clearing. This was where tonight's battle would be fought. The board was surrounded on three sides by tiered spectator seating, in front of which were placed bubbling *oden* pots, a dizzying assortment of *onigiri*, and giant Faux Denki Bran bottles galore—a display which was guaranteed to get every tanuki in attendance drooling.

Nanzenji Shōjirō, head of the Nanzenji clan and older brother of Gyokuran, came to the front, dressed in traditional robes.

"Esteemed guests, thank you for coming tonight to the Nanzenji Tanuki Shogi Tournament. Since the death of Shimogamo Sōichirō, this tournament has regrettably lain dormant, and it was only with your generous support that tonight we have been able to hold it once more. It is my sincere hope that this tournament will continue to thrive for many years to come. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Kaisei of the Ebisugawa clan, for her generous contribution to tonight's proceedings."

"Hurrah for tanuki shogi! Hurrah for Faux Denki Bran!" shouted the tanuki, many of whom were already a glass in.

Almost as if they had been waiting for that burst of applause, a line of black-clad English gentlemen came parading in holding their lanterns high. Visible on the lanterns was the name "Ebisugawa". Wearing a vulgar golden top hat, Kinkaku basked in the cheers of "Hurrah for Faux Denki Bran!" with a smug, self-satisfied expression on his face. Behind him was Ginkaku, wearing a silver top hat and looking just as pleased.

"Thank you, one and all, I'm Kinkaku!"

"Thank you, I'm Ginkaku!"

"Kinka-who?" I hooted, eliciting a general roar of laughter that rustled the leaves.

Kinkaku glared at me, pouting. He and Ginkaku both stuck out their tongues at me, so I promptly returned the favor.

Tanuki shogi, as played in Nanzenji, was the invention of the former head of the Nanzenji in collaboration with Father. It did follow the same rules as human shogi, but the difference was that the giant pieces were all played by shapeshifted tanuki. The opposing players sat atop their respective king pieces, and whenever they made a move on the normal-sized boards beside them, the tanuki-pieces on the giant board dutifully moved to follow. Was it a sight to behold? Sure. Was it also incredibly silly? You bet.

Nanzenji Shōjirō read out the names of the two players who had come through the preliminaries.

"Representing the West: Nanzenji Gyokuran."

Gyokuran stepped forward, dressed in a resplendent kimono, and bowed to the audience.

"Representing the East: Shimogamo Yajirō."

At Shōjirō's cue, I cupped my hands and lifted Yajirō high into the air.

"Lookit, it's Beauty and the Frog!" someone yelled, to another burst of laughter.

Mother and Yashirō heaped up their plates high with oden and went up to sit in the stands. Yaichirō and I placed Yajirō up on a cushion and carried him up to the top of the king.

"Just relax and take it slow," I said, trying to lighten the mood.

"The honor of the clan is at stake. Don't let us down!" insisted Yaichirō.

"Would you two make up your minds?" Yajirō rolled his eyes.

While we were arguing, Gyokuran came over from the other side of the board.

"Good evening, Yaichirō."

Yaichirō stood there unnaturally stiffly. "Good evening, Gyokuran."

"I want to thank you for all the work you've put into this shogi tournament. This day wouldn't have happened without you."

"There's no need to thank me. The relief is assuredly mutual."

Gyokuran smiled down at Yajirō. "Don't expect me to go easy on you, Yajirō."

As he watched her return to her side, Yajirō said, "She's awful disappointed that you're not playing, Yaichirō."

"I'm a novice, I wouldn't have made it through the play-in round. I'd hardly be worthy to play an opponent such as Gyokuran."

In between keeping naughty students in line, Yaichirō and Gyokuran had often faced off across the shogi board when they were pupils of Master Akadama. Though they started off learning together, as they grew older the gap in their skills grew more and more apparent.

It was Gyokuran who had smashed Yaichirō's pride into smithereens, provoking him to leave those tooth marks in Father's shogi board.



In shogi, no piece is superfluous. Those who disrespect the lowly pawn do so at their own peril.

But naturally, any tanuki would much rather be chosen to play one of the flashier pieces, and each time Nanzenji read out an assignment the designated tanuki was brought either to elation or despair. I was appointed as one of Yajirō's knights, and Yaichirō proudly took his place as a rook. On the other hand, the detestable duo of Kinkaku and Ginkaku had been chosen for the prestigious roles of gold and silver generals at the enemy camp, and looked fittingly smug.

Yajirō was chosen to make the first move, and thus the game commenced.

During the opening the pieces moved only cautiously, and being unfamiliar with the finer points of shogi I was bored out of my mind. The tanuki in the stands were far more interested in chatting and gossiping over oden and Faux Denki Bran than they were in the match unfolding before them. I kept glancing at Yajirō, silently willing him to order a gallant

knight's charge out onto the field of battle, but his eyes hardly seemed to register his unruly knight, his expression calm as he analyzed the board.

I must admit that to this day I fail to understand what is so interesting about shogi. In my younger days Father tried his best to teach me the game, but dull concepts like strategy and maneuver went in one ear and out the other, and none of it stuck. Game after game I went straight for the jugular, leaving my own defenseless king to be surrounded by the enemy before going out in a blaze of glory. Eventually I started making up my own silly pieces, like the Foolish Sage, and the Peachy Tanuki, and the Minister of Yee-Haw, throwing the rules out the window. Eventually even Father gave up trying to teach me the game. I washed my hands of shogi then, and sought my excitement off the board.

As I was thinking about all this, the match moved into the middle game, and pieces started to clash on the board. At last Yajirō issued orders for his knight to move out, so I pranced forth into the center of the board.

Gyokuran moved her silver general up, putting me face to face with Ginkaku, who was scraping away shrilly at a violin in his gentleman's getup.

"Cut that out, Ginkaku!"

"You clearly have no appreciation for art," he smirked patronizingly. "We are currently studying the ways of the English gentleman. Playing the violin is a most gentlemanly pursuit!"

"A Shōgoin daikon has a better chance of becoming a gentleman than you!"

"How dare you! You, you...saucy fellow!"

"Ignore him!" Kinkaku shouted out from the enemy ranks. "Remember, splendid isolation!"

"Yes, yes, splendid isolation. Kinkaku and I have resolved to carry out the policy of splendid isolation, like the British Empire of old. We shan't treat with idiots!"

The way that Kinkaku and Ginkaku always put their idiocy on full display, they were already fairly isolated in tanuki society. Witnessing their lofty ideals be in agreement with the rest of the tanuki world felt almost like a miracle.

"Splendid isolation without splendour is just isolation, methinks," I remarked.

"Be quiet!"

"Ooh, watch out, or Kaisei's going to get mad at you again!"

"Hmph. I'm not afraid of Kaisei, nohow!"

"Come on, you always start crying when she scolds you."

"I do not cry! I do not!" Ginkaku flailed his violin bow in the air furiously. "Kinkaku! What do I say here? I'm fuming mad!"

"Hold on, Ginkaku. Your brother's coming to rescue you!" cried Kinkaku.



As quick to abandon his splendid isolation as he had been to declare it, Kinkaku shoved forward in a most unbecoming show of autonomy for a shogi piece, sending other pieces toppling onto the board. "You don't have permission to move!" cried Gyokuran, but Kinkaku wasn't one to do what he was told.



"Ho, Yasaburō. I see time has not changed your ruffian ways!"

"He doesn't ever change, does he, Kinkaku?"

"And that is where he and we differ. We are always changing and evolving, that we are."

"We change, and we evolve. Have a care!"

Moving in sync, Kinkaku and Ginkaku turned into even larger shogi pieces, these marked with the names Drunken Elephant and Prancing Stag.

"There's no such pieces as those," I scoffed.

"As uncultured as ever, I see," Kinkaku drawled, his lip curled in derision. "These are pieces that were used in the shogi of olden times. We are far too distinguished to use those ordinary, commonplace pieces!"

"See, Kinkaku knows all sorts of things! He might not be any good at shogi, but he's terribly clever, you know!"

"Now now, in moderation, Ginkaku. Overeager flattery is not becoming of a gentleman."

"Oh, beg pardon. How very unbecoming of me."

Seeing these two idiotic pieces towering above me, I thought back to the 74 fairy pieces I had invented and unleashed onto the board as a kid against my long-suffering father. *Keep the battle on the board!* Yaichirō had warned me, but we were on the board, and besides it had been Kinkaku and Ginkaku who had made the first move. It was only natural I should reply by showing off some pieces of my own, and so I transformed into one of my Big Four, my magnum opus, the Foolish Sage.

In unison Kinkaku and Ginkaku bleated, "There's no such piece!"

The game was forgotten, and the other pieces only looked on in bemusement. Up in the stands the spectators were starting to lean forward, sensing an impending brouhaha in the works. Kinkaku and Ginkaku shifted into avatars of Jizai-tennō and Gozu-tennō<sup>2</sup>, while I countered with the Minister of Yee-Haw, and in the end Heaven & Earth stood shoulder to shoulder with Vainglory against the technicolor Lord of the Cosmos.

After a few rounds of this stubborn contest Yaichirō finally blew his top. "That's enough, Yasaburō!"

"I'm keeping it on the board, aren't I?"

"This is an important day for the Nanzenjis! Stop fooling around!"

"You can't seriously expect me to back down now!"

"Are you trying to embarrass Gyokuran!?"

"Oh ho," Kinkaku said, a leer in his voice. "Just as I suspected. I knew there was something shifty about Yaichirō."

"What do you mean, *shifty*?" Yaichirō demanded.

"You've always been so obliging to the Nanzenji clan, when you won't give us the time of day! You wish to become the Trick Magister, so isn't it unfair that you only ever favor the Nanzenji? You've been so involved with this tanuki shogi business. We Ebisugawas

---

<sup>2</sup> Jizai-tennō, is a piece in the ancient *maka dai dai* variant of shogi which shares its name with a Buddhist deity; Gozu-tennō is a Japanese deity who was formerly the patron deity of Yasaka Shrine.

donated a whole barrelful of Faux Denki Bran, but do we hear a single word of thanks from you? It's outrageous, I say! Woe, woe is us. It's enough to make an honest tanuki go crooked!"

"Well said, well said. Who could blame us for going crooked, Kinkaku?" shouted Ginkaku.

"It seems to me that Yaichirō favors the Nanzenji because of Gyokuran. He resurrected tanuki shogi so that he would look good in front of her, so that he could hear her tell him, *Oh Yaichirō, how wonderful you are!* Ladies and gentlemen, this is scandalous. Is this not the corruption of public office for private affairs? I ask you, is this the kind of behavior you expect to see from a future Trick Magister?"

You could have heard a pin drop on the board. The spectators waited with bated breath.

There was no way that could possibly be true of my brother, that square, and I was fully expecting him to vehemently deny these ridiculous claims.

Instead, when I turned around it was to see Yaichirō darting his eyes around, stammering, "Th-tha-th-tha."

It appeared that Kinkaku was right on the money. Setting aside the morals of mixing public business with private, imagine how humiliated Yaichirō must have been, having his feelings for Gyokuran exposed by Kinkaku and Ginkaku, of all tanuki, in front of this massive crowd. You had to feel for him.

Emboldened, Kinkaku and Ginkaku both transformed into kimono-clad Gyokurans and writhed suggestively on the board.

"Mm, after playing with hard wooden pieces all day I need a man's touch!"

"Please, Yaichirō, make me a *woman!*"

It was then that Nanzenji Gyokuran snapped and leaped onto the board. Transforming into a tigress, she unleashed a deafening roar that shook the board and reduced the terrible two to blubbering babies. Ginkaku reverted into a furball and rolled about the board, whereupon Gyokuran savagely sunk her fangs into him. His shrieks rent the air like the sound of silk being ripped. With a great swing of Gyokuran's head, the little bundle of fur went sailing into the air, and his thin wailing cries vanished into the darkness beyond the cedars.

Fearing that they'd be embroiled in this mess, the remaining pieces poofed back into furballs, pushing and shoving in their rush to escape the board. Kinkaku tried to blend into the crowd, but with a well-placed kick I sent him sprawling back towards Gyokuran, who pinned him to the ground with a powerful paw.

Squeaking in dismay, he tried to appeal to Gyokuran's better nature. "Okay, Gyokuran, maybe I did go a tad bit too far..."

The board was in shambles, and continuing the game was out of the question. Gyokuran's howling shook even the most besotted tanuki awake from their feasting. Just as Yasaka Heitarō was slowly rising to his feet to quell the situation, the bottom fell out from the clouds, and a great torrential rain drenched the proceedings. Tanuki screeched as they scattered left and right to escape the downpour.

And thus the Nanzenji Tanuki Shogi Tournament drew to a most turbulent close.



The rain continued through the night, shrouding the city in grey. The bridges over the Kamo River and the buildings along the riverbanks were obscured in the ethereal mist that lay over the city.

Tanuki shogi turned out to be an unexpected hit among the tanuki of Kyoto, and even Yasaka Heitarō made noises about holding it next year. Many tanuki had enjoyed the confused Ebisugawa-Shimogamo-Nanzenji melee on the board last night like it was part of the festivities. Kinkaku and Ginkaku were rather put out, claiming that their punctured posteriors pained them to the point that they couldn't work. They were obviously exaggerating, however, and Kaisei made it known in no uncertain terms that neither compensation nor concern were needed, so the Nanzenji clan simply sidestepped the issue.

Tanuki like to wrap up their problems gracefully in nice, fluffy packages.

But Yaichirō and Gyokuran stood against that tide. Ignoring the admonitions of her family, Gyokuran secluded herself up at the top of the main gate of the temple, while Yaichirō refused to leave the Tadasu Forest and sulked from dawn to dusk. His face was as stormy as the raincloud-choked sky above as he lectured me on and on.

"I told you not to rise to their bait! Think of the shame you have brought to the Nanzenji!"

"Well, those two started it!"

"If you are going to fight, you must consider the time and place."

He had a point, which made me dig in my heels even further.

"I mean, why didn't you tell them to go pound sand? You wanna talk about shaming the Nanzenji, you could have put a stop to the whole thing right there. It's your fault that Gyokuran ended up looking like a floozy!"

Unable to come up with a riposte, Yaichirō flew into a rage.

"Why were you born into this world, except to confound me!"

My brother's head couldn't have been harder if it had been chiseled out of stone. That hard-boiled disposition of his was probably his way of trying to steer us onto the right path. After all, he bore the weight of the clan's future on his shoulders, and all he had by way of brothers were a frog, a fool, and a little runt. But telling me that tripping him up was the only reason I existed was going too far.

I clambered up to the top of an elm tree and yelled, "That really hurt, you know. I'm not coming down until you get on your knees and apologize to me!"

"Suit yourself. Perhaps being so high up will make you realize how foolish it is always having your head in the clouds!"

"Try saying that to a tengu and see what happens!"

The next day when Yaichirō realized that I was still up there, he was so appalled that he didn't say anything to me.

The humid rainy season always made the fur around my nether regions stick, and even though I'd only gone up the tree on account of my confounded pride, now that I was

up here it actually felt pretty comfy. Leaping from branch to branch high above the ground, I listened to the rain continue to patter on the canopy. It felt magnificent up there, watching my family rustle around in the undergrowth and visitors go back and forth along the shrine road. It was almost like being a tengu, and it made me think of the time that Master Akadama got so mad at me that he tied me to the top of the cedar tree in Kumogahata.

Every so often Yashirō would climb up to visit, bringing with him a satchel containing a thermos and a few steamed buns.

"How come you're not coming down yet?" he asked me once, sounding worried. "Are you gonna spend the rest of your life up here?"

"Don't be silly," I replied, stuffing a bun into my mouth.

"Oh, that's good. Mother said that if you keep this up you might turn into a tengu. You shouldn't make her worry too much."



Late at night, as I explored the branches to stave off boredom, I stumbled upon a large hollow. I peeked inside to find that it was surprisingly spick and span, and contained a small chest of drawers among other belongings.

This must be Yaichirō's secret stash.

"Got anything good?" I murmured, rummaging around.

But being that this all belonged to my straight-laced brother, there wasn't a single thing of interest in there. A tome on tanuki history and customs bound in traditional *watoji* style, entitled *Heritage of Fur*; a half-eaten dried persimmon, hardened to the point of shattering teeth; spare parts for the automaton rickshaw; and not a scandalous item in sight.

"Bo-ring!" I muttered, continuing to fish around, when I spied a large paulownia box bundled up in an elegant cloth.

It was Father's well-loved shogi board. It was a sturdy, magnificent 4-legged board, and exuded such a solemn aura that just sitting in front of it made you feel like you were getting better at the game. The effect was ruined, however, by the giant bite mark in the surface that Yaichirō had left behind.

"That's pretty gnarly. Awfully immature of Yaichirō," I thought to myself. "But then again, at the time he was basically just a kid."

I still remembered the day he had ruined the board. Father, usually so busy, was relaxing in the Tadasu Forest, and around dusk Nanzenji Gyokuran came to call. At the time she often visited the forest to play shogi with Father and Yaichirō. In her human form she also was active in various shogi clubs around town, and wherever you could find a willing opponent there you'd find Gyokuran. Father took out his favorite shogi board, and Yaichirō and Gyokuran began to play.

Since Father was watching that day, Yaichirō tried even harder than he usually did. Whenever he tried hard things tended not to go his way, and as the game went on his situation on the board grew steadily more dire. But in the endgame Gyokuran uncharacteristically made blunder after blunder, drastically changing the flow of the game,

and Yaichirō eked out a miraculous victory. But he was far from pleased. As soon as the game was decided he transformed into a tiger, and blinded by his rage took a bite out of the board.

Proud as he was, Yaichirō must not have been able to take the humiliation. He would much rather have taken a sound beating than be shown mercy by Gyokuran in front of Father.

Ever since, Yaichirō had forbidden himself from playing shogi, and no matter how Father encouraged him, he had never touched a piece again.



On the third day of my treetop protest against Yaichirō, Mother came climbing up to reason with me.

"I brought you some yummy *yōkan*!" Lining up the sweets along a branch, she opened up the thermos hanging around her neck and poured a cup of *sencha*. Together we sat on the branch and munched on the sticky black jelly.

The pitter-patter of the falling rain on the forest was almost like music.

After a while, Mother suddenly declared, "I like Gyokuran very much."

"Miss Gyokuran is a fine tanuki," I nodded.

"She'd make a fine match for Yaichirō. Yes, I've made up my mind."

"That's...a little out of nowhere, Mother."

"What do you think?" she murmured. "I think the connection's there."

"The red fur of fate, you mean?"

"But it'll be difficult. Yaichirō hasn't got the slightest idea how to play the game of love, and Gyokuran's a bit of a shrinking violet..."

Mother savored a sip of tea, then continued on as if she were talking to herself.

"Then again, Yaichirō has a kind younger brother, who I'm sure will think of something to help out. He's such a thoughtful boy, and I know that he does feel a little sorry for causing such a ruckus at the shogi tournament. I'm sure he'll pitch in and help. Yes, I'm sure of it. A mother knows."

Talking herself into that conclusion, Mother took another bite of *yōkan* and smiled.

"What delicious *yōkan* this is. Absolutely first-rate."



After helping myself to a serving of first-rate *yōkan* from Mother, there was no way I could just continue my furry tengu pretensions.

That afternoon, I bid farewell to my life in the trees and headed out to Nanzenji.

Walking along the canal from Okazaki towards Keage, I could see on the opposite side the rain-slick Ferris wheel at the zoo, and hear the plaintive calls of birds from faraway lands. A light rain beat on the forest of Nanzenji across from the Lake Biwa Canal Museum, and the trees appeared swollen from the ample rainwater they were soaking in. Passing by a dignified *ryōtei*, I entered the grounds of Nanzenji.

Passing through a damp grove of red pines, I saw rising up before me the misty outline of the *sanmon* gate. Sheltered from the rain beneath the dark, worn pillars was Nanzenji Shōjirō, sitting alone before a shogi board. Seeing me approach he smiled.

I sat cross-legged before him. My butt felt nice and cool.

"How is Miss Gyokuran?"

"Still shut up like the goddess Amaterasu in her rock-cave. Once she's made up her mind to lock herself away, she won't listen to anyone, not even her own brother. Perhaps she might come out if I did a silly dance to lure her out, like in the myth."

"I'm very sorry about everything that happened."

"Don't fret yourself over it. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right?"

The rain continued to pound steadily on the roof of the gate.

"My brother can be such a bonehead."

"...Well, we're all tanuki here," Shōjirō smiled, spinning the shogi board round and round. "I know Yaichirō quite well, and if my father was one of the most famous tanuki in Kyoto to ever live, and I felt like I was being watched by him all the time, why, I might foul up things that people wouldn't normally foul up. When you let yourself go with the flow, you don't usually make big mistakes, but when you're nervous and stiff, you're sure to muck things up. Isn't that how tanuki are?"

"You're probably right. Being relaxed is the tanuki's calling card."

"But I am fond of Yaichirō."

Nanzenji Shōjirō was always kind to the Shimogamo clan. Unlike Yaichirō, who despite being a square was quick to turn into a tiger and run amok, Shōjirō was always calm and collected. While other tanuki made sure to check which way the wind was blowing before taking a position, Shōjirō always had Yaichirō's back. Yaichirō trusted Shōjirō, and Shōjirō trusted Yaichirō.

Staring at the shogi board, Shōjirō murmured, "Whenever Gyokuran gets like this, I can't help but think about the god of shogi."

"The god of shogi?"

"A long time ago, she often used to barricade herself up there to do some shogi training. And that, supposedly, was when she saw the god of shogi."

According to what she had told Shōjirō, Gyokuran had spent days upon days staring at the board in intense, unbroken concentration, almost forgetting to breathe in a state of deep thought. One day, for just a brief moment, that board of 81 squares had seemed to transformed into an infinite plane; the pieces, their movements, were one with her soul; she realized that this small board was in fact larger than Kyoto, than Japan, than the entire world; and she almost swooned, overcome by a spine-tingling tremor of terror and elation.

In that moment, she saw the furry god of shogi pass by on the board.

Shōjirō was rather perturbed when he heard Gyokuran's story.

In the years since the Nanzenji clan had been awakened to shogi by the Showdown at Nanzenji, a few of their number had met unfortunate ends after falling a little too deeply into the game. Some had been lowered into stewpots, still turning their minds over a shogi problem; some had been run over by cars, pondering the mysteries of shogi; and some had

vanished on training retreats, never to return. It was said among the Nanzenji clan that tanuki who disappeared in that manner had been spirited away by the god of shogi.

"I'm just worried sick that Gyokuran will be spirited away, too," murmured Shōjirō, staring at the board. "I always wonder whether there's someone out there that might be able to hold that part of her back. And do you know what, Yasaburō? I wouldn't mind that person being Yaichirō."

"Yaichirō? Really?"

"...It doesn't matter what I think. All that matters is that my sister chose him."

I bowed to Shōjirō, then made my way up the steep steps through the gloomy light of the lanterns. Working my way around the inner sanctuary which was dedicated to the Buddha, I proceeded down the long outer corridor. The handrail was slightly damp.

Through the rain I could see all the rest of Kyoto. On the left I saw the Miyako Hotel towering up on a knoll, wrapped in greenery that looked as soft as silk, and in front of me was the skyline of my beloved city where today, as on every other day, tanuki and tengu and human alike wriggled through the streets. In the distance was Mount Atago, domain of Tarōbō of Atagoyama, as well as other mountain peaks extending alongside it like a dark green folding screen.

I pushed open a sturdy door with nipple-like rivets protruding from it.

"Not a word, Yasaburō." Gyokuran's voice came from the darkness. "I'm reflecting right now."



Nanzenji Gyokuran sat alone in the middle of the dark room, looking pensive.

"I'll bet your butt must be pretty sore after sitting here for so long," I remarked.

"You mustn't talk about butts to a lady."

"Cold butts are bad mojo. You ought to come down now, Miss Gyokuran."

"...Don't call me Miss."

Gyokuran was sitting primly upright in her dress, her back stiff and erect as she stared down at the shogi board in front of her. The cool floorboards felt almost damp, and air was thick with the scent of incense and a most un-tanuki-like solemnity. The pillars were adorned with vivid images; the Buddha statue set at the inner altar seemed to be glaring at us, and even the peacocks on the ceiling stared down upon us imperiously.

Sitting down across from Gyokuran on the other side of the board, I looked down to see that the nearly arranged pieces had yet to move from their starting positions. Observing her expression, I reached out my hand and moved up my right-side pawn. Gyokuran continued to stare at the board without saying a word, but at last she reached out and moved a piece of her own.

We traded moves, listening to the rain pounding on the rooftop. My play was so wild and reckless that eventually Gyokuran couldn't help cracking a smile.

"Now this is really too bad, Yasaburō! This is hardly shogi at all!"

"That awful, huh?"

"It's like your pieces are beside themselves with laughter!"

"The pieces are only as foolish as their player."

I must have been a handful for Gyokuran back when she was one of Master Akadama's assistants. Yet she was always kind to me, shielding me from the Master's iron-handed discipline, even taking me to see a specialist at the proctology clinic when I came down with a bad case of butt shrooms. And the tanuki who had implanted in me the belief that cold butts are bad mojo had been none other than Nanzenji Gyokuran herself.

"The fool's shogi will continue until you agree to come down from here."

"Please, no! I'm going to die of laughter!"

"Then come on down. Everyone's worried about you."

"...It's almost like we've switched places." Gyokuran looked up from the board and smiled. "Remember when you got tied to the top of the giant cedar in Kumogahata?"

"You mean when Master Akadama tied me up and then forgot about me?"

"You kept insisting that you wouldn't come down."

"Did I?"

"You did. I still remember it so well. Yaichirō was worried because you hadn't come back even after the sun went down, so I went with him to Kumogahata to look for you."

That night, Yaichirō and Gyokuran had crossed the pitch-black field in search of me. The tengu training ground had never been the coziest place for a tanuki, and at night the atmosphere was even eerier. There were so many stars in the sky, many more than you could see down in the city, that it was almost frightening, and a fevered wind rustled restlessly over the endless sea of grass.

When they reached the center of the field, Gyokuran felt a terror so great she could hardly breathe. For some reason she was rooted to the spot, seized by a horrible feeling that she would never find her way out of the grass again. Yaichirō came up beside her and squeezed her hand, and only when he did that did the feeling of falling into space fade and the earth feel firm beneath her feet. Finally able to breathe again, Gyokuran held tight to his hand, and she didn't let go.

Finally the two came to the foot of the shadowy towering cedar.

"Hey! Yasaburō!" they called.

"Yo!" came the nonchalant reply, drifting down through the air.

Climbing up the trunk, the two found me still strapped to the top of the tree. They were so relieved that they both almost burst into tears. I, on the other hand, was still young and brash, and scowling like a gargoyle threw a tantrum and refused to come down, stunning them both.

"I'm gonna stay up here until I train myself into a tengu! Then, I'm gonna overthrow Master Akadama from his own mountain!" I declared, in decidedly un-tanuki-like fashion. I must have been pretty pissed off at the Master.

Gyokuran smiled as she retold the tale, rearranging her pieces on the board. "We had to drag you down from there that night. You were being so very stubborn."

"Young me was a fool."

"Hah, and you've hardly changed since then."

"Well, what's it going to be? Still need more convincing?"

"Oh no, I've had quite enough of fool's shogi."



We both came down the narrow stairway, to find that the rain had tapered off to a drizzle.

"I'm back, Shōjirō," said Gyokuran, bowing her head.

Shōjirō looked up and smiled. "Welcome back."

"I'm going to pay a call to the Tadasu Forest. You don't mind?"

"...Certainly. Off you go."



I sat at the side of the brook that runs through the Tadasu Forest. Twilight was descending over the forest, and the lights of Shimogamo Shrine gleamed brightly beyond the shadowy trees.

In front of me was Father's shogi board, which I had retrieved from the hollow in the elm tree. I was carefully sitting up the pieces, listening to the babbling of the brook, when a firefly came drifting down onto the board, bringing my gaze onto the bitemarks which Yaichirō had left behind.

By and by Yaichirō poked his head out from the grass.

"Yasaburō! What have you done with Father's shogi board?"

"It's right here. If you want it back, you're gonna have to apologize to me."

"Apologize for what?"

"Don't feel like apologizing? Fine, we'll play for it. If I lose, it's all yours."

"Shogi? Don't be absurd."

"What, you scared of losing to me?"

Yaichirō scowled at me for a moment. But eventually he came over to the edge of the brook, apparently having calculated that there was no risk of actually losing to me, and sat down reluctantly on the other side of the board.

Come to think of it, this was the first time I'd ever played a serious game of shogi with Yaichirō. My brother played with the utmost caution, as if he was testing the waters with each piece, while I selected only the most maverick moves.

"Be serious about this!" he snapped.

"I'm trying a new strategy," I countered.

As the board grew ever more convoluted, a look of unease grew on Yaichirō's face. All I was doing was playing fool's shogi, but inside that hard head of his Yaichirō was driving himself wild trying to find my hidden stratagem, to the point that he'd lost the thread.

Before long he closed his eyes and started to ponder.

This was the moment I'd been waiting for. Taking care not to make a sound I slipped away from the shogi board and swapped places with Gyokuran, who'd been hiding in the brush nearby. She composed herself and sat down, glaring at the chaos of the board.

Naturally Yaichirō was in for a shock when he opened his eyes.

"What are you doing here? What happened to Yasaburō?"

"Yasaburō's beaten a strategic retreat."

"Curse him, what's his game? I must apologize for all that trouble."

"Never mind," Gyokuran said softly. "Let's play some shogi."

"Please, not that."

"Why won't you play with me?"

"...I never want to disgrace myself like that again."

"I won't ever lose on purpose again, I promise. I just want to play shogi with you."

Gyokuran looked deep into the shogi board.

Finally Yaichirō pulled himself together and sat up straight again.

Nanzenji Gyokuran must really have been visited by the god of shogi, for even amongst the confusion of the board which I had worked so hard to create she seemed to have seen a ray of light. She hunched over the board as she moved her pieces, and with a look of determination on his face Yaichirō answered each one.

The shogi pieces glimmered faintly in the darkness of the evening.

Move after move, neither Gyokuran nor Yaichirō had eyes for anything but the board, not uttering a word even when I emerged from the bushes and sat down by the board.

The firefly illuminated the board with a pale greenish glow, then took flight once more.

Looking at the two sitting at the side of the brook, I thought back to the days when Gyokuran had used to come to the forest to play. Gyokuran and Father and Yaichirō had been glued to the board, even after it got so dark that you couldn't see the pieces anymore. Looking at them, I had often thought to myself, *What's so interesting about shogi?* Every time Father bowed his head to Gyokuran and muttered, "I concede," I always felt like I was seeing the most ridiculous thing in the world.

As Yaichirō's position crumbled in the endgame, his breathing grew labored. He glared at the board, and his back began to swell outward in the fading light. He seemed to have forgotten himself, and in his tiger form, I was expecting Yaichirō to sink his fangs into the board any moment now. On the other side of the board, Gyokuran's furry shape enlarged into that of a tigress. She couldn't afford to give ground either.

Now just as Gyokuran reached out a furry paw to delicately move a piece, I heard an odd *snick* sound like a clasp coming undone.

"What was that?" Yaichirō frowned.

"What's that doing here?" The very instant that Gyokuran pointed at the board a blast of wind howled up, and with that she disappeared into thin air.

Stunned, Yaichirō reverted back into a tanuki. "Gyokuran!" he shouted, scurrying around and around the board.

"Calm down, Yaichirō!" I said, turning my gaze to the corner of the board which Gyokuran had pointed at. A tiny hole was opened up in the board, and air was quietly whistling out.

Yaichirō put his front paws up on the board. "You don't suppose she could have been sucked into this hole, do you?"

"You really think she could fit through this pinhole?"

The hole where the square on the board should have been was small enough that you wouldn't have been able to fit a tanuki's paw in there. Looking straight down into it, I spied a faint flicker of light down at the bottom of the otherwise pitch-black hole.

"Weird little hole, ain't it?" I reached out to see what was inside, and the instant I did I was forcibly dragged into the hole like an ogre was wrenching my arm from the other side. The shogi board stretched out to fill my vision. *I'm shrinking*, I realized, but by that time my transformation had been removed and I was about to fall into the depths of the hole.

The last thing I heard before I went in was my brother's shouting, which soon faded into the distance.



Waiting for me at the bottom of the hole was the furry form of Nanzenji Gyokuran.

"Goodness, that gave me such a fright!" she remarked. "What's going on?"

"We're in the shogi room."

"I've heard of it! Sōichirō's secret hideaway, wasn't it?"

"I guess it was hidden inside his shogi board. No wonder no one ever found it, the way Yaichirō had the board tucked away."

I slid open the latticed paper door in front of me. Bright light slanted in through the large skylight on the roof of the 4½ tatami room, just as it had in the days when Father had taught me shogi here. Mysteriously, the sky beyond that skylight was still that unchanging hue of blue, and the persimmons that I had pestered Father about still hung there, as if time for them stood still.

But besides that, everything else had changed.

Father's prized shogi room was almost unrecognizable now; in its present state it would more accurately be described as a garbage dump. After Father's death no one came here to clean it, so a little dust would have been excusable, but that alone did not explain the devastation wrought here. The fastidiously organized books on the shelves had been bundled up with twine and dumped on the floor, and I opened up a mildewy cardboard box to find it crammed full of empty Akadama port wine bottles.

"How awful. This doesn't seem like Sōichirō at all."

"Well, it definitely wasn't this filthy when I was a kid."

At this point Yaichirō finally showed up. He got one step into the room before his jaw dropped in amazement. "Incredible, so this is where it was!"

"Yeah, but what I want to know is, why is it so dirty?"

"...How would I know that?"

In the center of the room amidst the heaps of garbage were a shogi board and a flimsy cushion, the latter still bearing what appeared to be indents from Father's bottom. Beside them was a battered pipe resting upon a clay plate. Father used to pack that pipe with the remains of tengu cigars he obtained from Master Akadama and puff away. I could still clearly see in my mind the smoke curling up through the skylight and dissolving into the autumn sky.

Yaichirō and Gyokuran waddled around the room, still in their tanuki forms. Gyokuran happened upon a six-sided board, used for tengu shogi. Long ago, great wars had been fought over the outcomes of tengu shogi games, and for that reason the boards

had been sealed away, no longer used even in the tengu world. We were all puzzled as to what such a thing was doing in this room.

Gyokuran sniffed. "I've been wondering, but why does it smell like curry?"

"Father loved curry," I replied.

"Indeed he did. But how could the smell have persisted all these years?"

"Never underestimate the power of Indian food, Yaichirō."

"I think it's coming from here." Gyokuran pointed to the garbage bags piled high up along a wall.

We began to excavate the heap, trying to discover the source of the smell, and before long something heavy rolled down to my feet with a thud. I reached down and realized that it was the flying *chagama* engine. It was the same engine that had powered Yakushibō's Inner Parlor last year before it was lost during the Battle of the Daimonji Pleasure Barges last year. Master Akadama had given it to Benten, and it was only during the chaotic end of the previous year that we had managed to recover and return it to him.

"What's the *chagama* engine doing here in the shogi room?"

Beyond the wall of garbage there was another sliding door. Unlike the door we had entered through, this one was badly ripped and covered in dark red stains. I smelled the sweet aroma of Akadama port wine, and the smell of fresh curry simmering in a pot wafted through the tears in the door. We all transformed into human forms and exchanged looks.

"Where do you suppose this door leads?" inquired Gyokuran.

"I believe I know the answer to that," answered Yaichirō.

"Same," I said.



At that same moment, in the Masagata Court Apartments in the rear of the Demachi shopping arcade, Master Akadama was instructing my younger brother Yashirō to cook tengu curry for that night's supper.

The secret to tengu curry was no different from that of tengu stew. All you did was throw the Master's treasured stone in the pot, along with whatever delectables of land or sea you cared for as well as supermarket curry powder, and simmer the whole lot together. About twice a year the Master would petulantly insist on having tengu curry, but if you made it too spicy he would throw a tantrum and put all your effort to waste. On the other hand you couldn't let him perceive it as being too mild, either, for Master Akadama saw eating mild curry as below his tengu dignity.

Yashirō stood intrepidly in the kitchen, wearing an apron and stirring a large pot of curry.

"It smells great, doesn't it Master?"

"Hmph. Curry rice is child's fare. Yet it is not so bad once in a while, when naught else will do."

"Won't the stone smell like curry?"

"Wash and dry it, and all will be well."

"I love curry. Yaichirō likes curry, and so do Yajirō and Yasaburō. Mother likes it too. Basically, all tanuki like curry!"

As he stirred the pot, Yashirō sang a little song. "Cu-rry, cu-rry, yummy yummy cu-rry!"

"Stop that singing, now, and mind your duties!" Eagerly awaiting his curry rice, the Master tapped on the low table with a silver spoon.

"Co-ming!" Yashirō called, piling a plate with fresh, steaming rice.

"I want plenty of curry, and mix it well!"

Dutifully carrying out the Master's orders, Yashirō mixed the curry and rice together, cracked a raw egg on top, then brought the dish in and set it on the table.

"This is tengu curry," the Master declared.

Just as the two were about to dig in with their gleaming spoons, there was a loud crash in the closet. With screams and shouts, Yaichirō and Gyokuran and I fell through the sliding screen. Yaichirō stumbled into the table and tripped, sending the dishes flying. Gyokuran shrieked, "Aieeee!" and batted the flying curry away, which splattered everywhere. The Master's room was in shambles.

The distinguished Master wiped dripping curry from his beard, and brushed off bits of carrots and potatoes from his cheeks.

"What are you furry imbeciles doing!?" he thundered.

We all hastily prostrated ourselves on the floor.



There once lived on Chikubu Island a tengu who loved shogi.

Master Akadama would sometimes go out to the island and play shogi with this tengu, who eventually presented him with the shogi board which contained the shogi room. The board was actually one of two, the counterpart in the possession of the tengu on Chikubu Island. Though Chikubu Island and Nyoigadake were on opposite ends of Lake Biwa, with these wondrous boards the two tengu could play tengu whensoever they pleased.

But as we have already seen with the tengu wars, when tengu play shogi, the battles tend to spill off the board. What started as a dispute over a game boiled over to the point that Master Akadama and the tengu on Chikubu Island refused to speak to each other for some time. As proof of how serious he was, the tengu sent Master Akadama the other board. Later on the two would reconcile, but as both understood that playing shogi again would only lead to another squabble, the boards stayed put at Nyoigadake.

Here Shimogamo Sōichirō of the Tadasu Forest makes his entrance into the story. Knowing how our father would engross himself in shogi, and having no use for the boards, Master Akadama lent him one of the pair as a wedding gift. Simply put, Father's shogi room really belonged to Master Akadama.

The Master only told us of this history after we had wiped up all of the splattered curry and he had filled his belly with what remained in the pot. Once Gyokuran poured his cup full to the brim with Akadama port wine, the Master was finally content again.

"But Master," I interjected. "You still shouldn't fill the shogi room with trash like that."

"If you wish to clean it up I shan't stop you."

"So you're just going to foist it on us, then."

"The impertinence of you furballs. Without that room, Sōichirō never would have been wed. You furry lumps owe every hair on your hides to that room!"

"How do you mean?"

"Had not Sōichirō told you?"

"I did hear that you rendered him a service when he got married."

"Outrageous. The granting of such a favor by one so distinguished as I should have been a tale passed down to his children, and his children's children. Gratitude, indeed!"

In our clan there are two accounts of how Father and Mother were wed.

I have already told the tale of how Mother, once boldly known as the Stairmaster, and Father, leader of the Tsuchinoko Expeditionary Brigade, met in Tanukidani Fudō. A friendship had blossomed between them over the course of that turf war, but as they came of age a bashfulness sprouted up and they grew distant.

The way Mother told it, Father, unable to stop pining for her, had gone to Master Akadama and requested that he arrange a marriage interview between the houses of Shimogamo and Tanukidani. Father's version was much the same, only it had been a lovelorn Mother who had approached the Master instead.

Since Father and Mother had refused to concede an inch to the other, the only point we brothers could be sure of was that Master Akadama had had *something* to do with it all.

"Bah! What drivel those two speak, Sōichirō and Tōsen!" And Master Akadama told us the truth.

In truth, the Master had become fed up of watching the glacial proceedings between Father and Mother from the sidelines. At any rate, he was the sort of tengu who would swoop down on the shore of Lake Biwa and carry off a girl if the fancy took him, the sort who believed in charging headlong into love.

"Damned furballs, waffling over love!" he snorted, and confined them to the shogi room. "Will you wed, or won't you? Neither of you shall leave this room until you have made a decision!"

It was a rather unreasonable, unasked-for intervention, but thankfully for us brothers, Father and Mother in the end decided to wed.

"What helpless creatures you furballs are!" Finishing his tale, the Master eyed Yaichirō and Gyokuran beadily. Gyokuran hastily scurried off to the kitchen, and a flustered Yaichirō went after her to help.

"What airs you give yourselves. What is it but the course of nature that two tanuki should be intertwined?" The Master sighed, scraping around in his ear with a cotton swab. "But of course, he would take that from Sōichirō."



As he expounded the tengu theory of charging headlong into love, our benefactor's tongue gradually grew thick from wine and fatigue, and eventually he nodded off into

dreamland. Thanking our lucky stars, Yashirō and I pushed him into his futon, where he hugged his arms around a daruma.

Leaving the apartment, we walked through the Demachi shopping arcade. Yashirō was taking a Tupperware container filled with the remainder of the tengu curry back for Mother, and the gentle aroma of the mild curry trailed us through the silent thoroughfare, surely causing those who occasionally crossed our paths to turn their thoughts to hearth and home.

"No need to walk me home," said Gyokuran when we reached the west end of the Demachi Bridge, bowing her head. "Shall we play again sometime, Yaichirō?"

"I should be delighted," Yaichirō replied.

Gyokuran nodded to me as well. "Thank you, Yasaburō."

"Not at all, Miss Gyokuran."

"Enough with the 'Miss' already!" she scowled, before turning and crossing the bridge towards the lights of Demachiyanagi Station. At the halfway point she turned and waved at us, and with a *pop* like the cork of a champagne bottle, Yaichirō's tail came shooting out. He waved back at Gyokuran with a solemn expression, holding down his tail and not saying a word all the while.

As I turned in the direction of the Tadasu Forest, Yaichirō murmured suddenly as if the idea had just occurred to him, "Do you two have time for a drink?"

"The night's young, brother. I'm thinking we'll have time for more than just one."

"Drinks will be on me tonight."

"I'll drink to that!" I cried.

"Drink to that!" echoed Yashirō.

## Chapter 3 — Tenmaya, the Conjurer

At some point during the long history of the emperors, the tanuki who dwelled in the land of the *Manyōshū*<sup>3</sup> came across the knack of shapeshifting themselves into humans. Over the following centuries, the tanuki mastered the secrets of transformation, and awaiting their opportunity, they first made their mark on human history in what is now known as the Genpei War.

At least, that is what the tanuki manuscript entitled *Heritage of Fur* would have you believe.

But as the centuries passed on, the tanuki began to rest on their ancestors' laurels. Idle paws are the devil's workshop, as they say, and more and more tanuki began to content themselves with donning flimsy transformations and pulling off half-hearted pranks. The daring, innovative spirit of our pioneering ancestors dispersed like the mist, leaving the tanuki world in a sorry state. Ever since, the tanuki have been beaten at their own game by wandering conjurers, and many have fallen into bubbling stew pots.

Ever since the Meiji Restoration, humans have wielded the theme of modernization to considerable effect, and in the face of that, the most tanuki are capable of these days is running around the city transformed into fake trains. Given that the prevailing view these days is "don't make waves" and "go with the flow", it's no wonder that transforming too freely is now frowned upon. Whereas in the past many tanuki would hawk horse manure disguised as red bean mochi or print counterfeit banknotes made from discarded fur, most now have fallen in line with the law-abiding capitalist mainstream.

Humans are dreadfully frightening. In this dog-eat-dog world, they're always tricking and being tricked, learning and adapting every second of the day. There's nothing more dangerous than these partially-enlightened humans who see the whole world as a free-for-all.

While the tengu rained spittle down on the world from their lofty pinnacle of arrogance, and the tanuki rolled foolishly on the plains, the humans were honing their wiles. It does not do to underestimate them.

We have entered an age where it is humans who deceive tanuki instead.

And so the stage is set for the entrance of the enigmatic Tenmaya.



One day in mid-June I was minding a curio shop on Teramachi Street.

---

<sup>3</sup> The *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.



"I'm off to the acupuncturist," Kiyomizu Chujirō, the shop owner, had announced as he departed, but he had yet to return. Perhaps he was lying melted on the pavement somewhere underneath the blazing sun. There was a distinctly tanuki-esque ambience in the shop, and there were few visitors, meaning that the only thing I had to talk to was the daruma sitting on the register counter. Gazing through the glass door at the traffic outside, I yawned and tried to keep myself from going mad.

"You know, Mr. Daruma, I'm only doing this for Mother. Tickets for the Takarazuka don't come cheap."

Allow me to explain tanuki economics.

Obviously, we don't have to worry much about things like food, clothes, or keeping a roof over our heads. Our bodies are wrapped with fluffy fur; we can sleep in any treetop as we please; and as omnivores we can eat anything that sprouts, flies, walks, or swims. The only time cash comes into the picture is when we've got a hankering for capitalist luxuries like *gyūdon*, Faux Denki Bran, or tickets to the Takarazuka Revue.

Yaichirō, our eldest brother, was always put in charge of managing all sorts of things around the tanuki world, which made him the cash cow of the family, so to speak. But owing to the fact that he was always pouring money into some political intrigue or other—whether it was entertaining bigwigs, or holding conclaves, or lavishing people with gifts—the money flew from his wallet as quickly as it went in. Mother would occasionally come into large sums of money, but when she did it was always through some get-rich-quick scheme, and her astonishing lack of long-term planning made her rather unreliable. Yajirō was a frog in a well, so only a fool would expect anything from him in the first place.

In light of all this, the only reliable streams of revenue for the Shimogamo clan were Yashiro's apprenticeship at the Faux Denki Bran distillery, and my part-time work here at the curio shop.

*Grab those clinking coins and make a stash, la la la la...* I was arranging a set of assorted Shigaraki-ware tanuki statues into an avant-garde art installation, humming a melancholy melody, when Yashirō came to play, fresh off his shift at the distillery. He was transformed into a little kid, wearing a large wide-mouthed backpack which was no doubt bulging with difficult academic books; a more studious little tanuki I had never seen.

"Well you're early today," I remarked.

"Kaisei said I could go. When're you gonna be done?"

"That depends on Chujirō. Must have gotten lost, I bet."

"I'll wait here with you, then." Yashirō sat down on a chair and smiled, then asked a rather bizarre question. "Yasaburō, can tanuki turn into English gentlemen too?"

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard of."

"But, um, Kinkaku and Ginkaku went to the hotel to see the Heir. They said they're learning from him so they can turn into English gentlemen. Do you think that's true?"

"Don't listen to them, Yashirō. Idiocy is contagious."

No sooner had I said this than a furious voice issued forth from within Yashirō's backpack, breaking the stillness of the shop. "Don't make fun of my brothers!"

Yashirō jumped and his tail sprang out. He tried to turn his head around to look into his backpack, spinning around and around like a dog chasing its tail. After calming him down, I took the backpack in my hands, which just made the muffled voice angrier.

"Get your hands off me, creep!"

"Now what exactly would Kaisei be doing in here?"

Ebisugawa Kaisei was the youngest daughter of the Ebisugawa clan, heir to the Faux Denki Bran distillery, and my ex-fiancée.

I had no idea what my furry former-betrothed had to be so embarrassed about, but she refused to show herself to me, and for reasons which eluded me she was extremely foul-mouthed. Our engagement had long since been broken off, and yet every so often she would still appear out of nowhere like a phantom to heap abuse on me. The way she did this without ever showing a glimpse of herself infuriated me. I tried to drag her out of the backpack, but she started screeching, "Perver! Sissy! Drop dead!" and other such imprecations, finally resorting to a threat of mutual assured destruction with, "I'm gonna puke on you!"

"Isn't it hot in there, Kaisei?" Yashirō asked.

"I've got an ice pack in here, so it's nice and cool in here."

"So *that's* why my back felt cool!" my brother marveled.



I poured some cold barley tea and brought out some buns that Chujirō had stashed away. Kaisei had been working herself to the bone of late, and seemed to be dealing with a lot of pent up stress. Given how she had to keep a tight leash on the two idiot brothers while running the distillery at the same time, that was to be expected. Unfortunately for me, I happened to be her punching bag.

When I warned her about letting Kinkaku and Ginkaku hang around the Heir, she replied, sounding exceedingly fed up, "How come I have to micromanage every little thing that they do? If the Heir gets mad at them, he can tan their hides himself for all I care."

"You can't seriously be thinking of leaving those two to him."

"Why not? It's not like he has anything better to do."

"Do I have to remind you that he's the son of a tengu lord?"

"Oh yeah? Then what's he doing just sitting around in some hotel all day? The showdown at Minami-za was a letdown, too. What's he even doing around here?"

"...You can never know what a tengu's thinking. There must be some kind of profound method to his madness."

After the duel on the roof of the Minami-za in May ended with a whimper, the Master had retired once more to his sequestered apartment behind the Demachi shopping arcade, while the Heir resumed his life of leisure in his penthouse suite at the Hotel Okura.

I would frequently show up at the Heir's side to do his bidding, before scurrying off to Master Akadama to do *his* bidding, living the life of a double agent. Both father and son were on heightened guard, suspecting that the other would attempt to do him in when he least expected it, and made no attempt to end this futile cold war.

"Here I was, hoping to see a full-blown tengu war," Kaisei sighed belligerently. "And don't even try to pretend that you weren't too!"

"You never know. Benten might always show up out of the blue."

"You're so gross. Immature little ass, always smirking to yourself whenever you think about that half-assed tengu coming back!"

Unable to restrain my irritation, I grabbed the backpack and shook it. "How about you shut your fat mouth for a change, huh!?" I snapped.

"Cut it out, I swear, I'm gonna hurl!" she shrieked.

Here Yashirō took a bite out of a bun and said something very unexpected. "So when are you going to get married?"

I was flabbergasted, and Kaisei went unnaturally quiet.

"Where'd you get that from? Who said we're going to get married?"

"...I mean, Yaichirō and Gyokuran are going to get married soon, right?"

True, everyone was waiting for that to happen. Ever since the shogi tournament, Yaichirō and Gyokuran had been visiting each other frequently, their bond growing across the board, and yet all they did was stare at the grid, as if unable to find their next move. Tanuki from both clans were doing their best to resolve their endgame, but try as they might, checkmate continued to elude them.

"Yaichirō and Gyokuran are going to get married," Yashirō declared. "Doesn't that mean that you and Kaisei are going to get married too? That's what I always thought."

"How do you figure that? It's going to take a lot more than that to chain us together."

"Exactly!" Kaisei agreed.

Yashirō looked confused. "Why not? You get along so well."

"We do not get along," I argued.

"Not even a little bit," Kaisei chimed in.

"And even if we did, our engagement is already broken off."

"Totally, that agreement has nothing to do with anything now."

"But wasn't it Uncle Sōun who canceled it? And Uncle Sōun's not here anymore. Mother likes Kaisei a lot. No one's going to say no." Yashirō naïvely pressed on with his bold logic. "I think that if Yaichirō or you wants to get married, you should just get married."

"I think this one's a little too hard for you to understand," I told him, putting my big brother status to work. "One day I'll explain it to you. Just be quiet now."

"Kay," nodded Yashirō.

At this point the glass door opened, and Chujirō finally returned. "Hey there, Yashirō!" he said. But he looked a little frazzled, and only took a brief second to ruffle Yashirō's hair before turning to me with a deadly serious look on his face. "Now I know this is a little out of the blue, Yasaburō, but could I ask you for one more favor?"



I followed Kiyomizu Chujirō along through the Teramachi shopping arcade. Arrays of lanterns hung along the pathway, and Gion festival music jangled from the speakers.

Chujirō led me to an old-fashioned haberdashery, where dull-hued suits hung in the almost underwater gloom. The proprietor was as mirthless as his shop, not a hint of tanuki-ness in his demeanor, and his face was as grey as if it was leaching the colour from the suits.

"Surely there was no need to call Yasaburō, of all people..." he scowled, clearly not pleased at the prospect of bringing me in. "I just don't want this to get out of hand."

We ascended the narrow staircases to the third floor, which was being used as an office. Passing between mountains of fabric spools and cardboard boxes which must have been piling up for at least a generation or two, we came to a window which looked out over Teramachi Street. Stuffy, shimmering air rose from the roof of the Teramachi arcade, which was baking in the rays of the summer sun. I thought fondly of that night last autumn when I had gathered together with the Friday Fellows around those hot pots, the night when I had traversed the rooftops along with Benten and Yodogawa through the slumbering city.

"Look there," said the haberdasher, throwing open the window and pointing with his right hand.

On the rooftop service walkway in the direction of Shijō Boulevard was an illegally erected little shack. It had the appearance of a ramen cart that had been squeezed long and thin, and a bright golden banner bearing the name "Tenmaya" fluttered in the sultry wind. There was even a flowerpot of morning glories as well as a watering can the color of green peas.

"We've been trying to get rid of it, to little success."

This was the shopping arcade's little Tenmaya Problem.

At the beginning of July, a rumor had begun to spread that a strange entity was traveling on the roof of the Teramachi shopping arcade. Some swore that it was a car-sized *akabeko* toy, its head bobbling as it trundled back and forth; others that it was a procession of samurai retainers.

At first, most assumed that it was a trick played by either tanuki or tengu. But once the humans of the shopping arcade got a glimpse of the odd squatter that was illegally occupying the roof, things took a rather strange turn.

A group of representatives from the shopping arcade association went up to evict the squatter. When they got there, a man in a flaming red shirt poked his head out from the shack. Make demands as they might, the man only grinned and stroked his chin. Eventually, one of the representatives noticed something queer: the man's chin appeared to be slightly longer than it had been a moment ago. The man grinned even wider, and then his chin really began to grow. Soon it was as long as a French baguette, and swinging it like a cudgel the man drove the group away.

"It would seem that all of those mysterious happenings were the work of this man."

"Have you reported him to the police?"

"Once the police arrived, he vanished without a trace, which made us look like a bunch of dunces. And once the police left, he popped out of nowhere again. I don't know how he does it."

"Sounds like a real prankster. My type of guy!" I chuckled.

"I certainly hope not," the haberdasher sniffed.

Eager to learn more about this man, I climbed through the window and dropped down onto the service walkway.

"Be careful, Yasaburō!" Yashirō called, looking on anxiously.



I continued along the walkway, heading for the shack. I could hear the murmur of the crowds and the tinny festival music coming from beneath my feet. As I approached, I could hear the golden Tenmaya banner flapping in the wind, and smell the tantalizing aroma of curry noodles wafting between the buildings.

"Hello there!" I shouted.

The red-shirted man came out from the shack. He was short, middle-aged, and his shirt stretched tightly over his trim frame. There was an almost uncanny air of self-assurance about him, like he wouldn't have been fazed even if he was hit by a dump truck. His ruddy, sun-baked face was shining as if there was a sheen of oil on it, and the eyes with which he gazed at me were as round as a koi's. In his left hand there was a bowl of noodles, and in his right he held a half-eaten onigiri and disposable chopsticks.

He flashed his porcelain-white teeth at me in a smile.

"Well well, a young man, and a bold one, too!"

"Not a patch on you, I'll bet!"

"Ah, and don't I know it!" The man took a satisfied slurp of his noodles. "All the world's my oyster, savvy?"

"Heh, I reckon I can top you there."

"Ho! And what makes you so sure of that?"

"Nothing, really. Don't need any reason to be cocky."

Upon hearing this, his face relaxed into a kindly expression. He was really more approachable than his seedy appearance would belie.

"Now there's a boy after my own heart!"

"I don't know who you are, but you can't be putting up your shack up here."

"Is that so? Let me tell you: there's nought more unprofitable in this world than doing what others tell you. You'll just have to wait 'til I'm good and ready to leave, won't you?" the man contended. "Unless you've got the gumption to contest me, that is?"

"Why don't we play a little game?"

"Oh ho?" The man looked intrigued.

"Close your eyes and count to ten. I'll show something to knock your socks off!"

"That I'll have to see!" the man grinned, closing his eyes obediently without the slightest hint of apprehension.

Ever since I'd heard terrifying stories about man-eating brown bears from Professor Yodogawa, I'd practiced transforming into one many times, harboring a secret ambition to let out one of those earth-shattering howls. But even I'm not the type of lunatic that enjoys going around scaring innocent passersby out of their wits. If anything, I'd call myself a principled tanuki who uses transformation for noble purposes. This challenge just

happened to be a perfect opportunity for me. I stumped up to the man and raised my paws as if I was about to maul him.

"Done yet?" The man opened his eyes.

I unleashed a bowel-shaking roar that surely shook the cobbles of Teramachi Street below and stopped everyone in earshot dead in their tracks.

But to my dismay, the red-shirted man didn't flinch at all, rather poking my belly with his chopsticks. "Are you daft?" he derided me. "What would a bear be doing here?"

He dunked his onigiri into his noodle soup and stirred until it broke up into little bits, before slurping it all up in one go.

"Now I think it's my turn to return the favor." Tossing the empty bowl behind him, he reached into his pocket and took out a handkerchief. It was a white cloth, faded from many washes, with a pattern of akabeko marching over it.

The man held it up and made it flutter in the air. As I stared at it, my vision began to waver and lose focus.

I realize now that at that point I must have already been under his spell.

The akabeko on the handkerchief began to bobble their heads, and tumbled out from the surface of the cloth. They were each the size of a hard-boiled egg, milling about the walkway.

"Hey! Ho!" chanted the man, and each time he waved the cloth, more akabeko came clattering onto the ground like acorns falling from the treetops. In no time at all the narrow walkway was teeming with akabeko, and no matter how many I cleared away they just kept coming.

I looked up to see the red-shirted man floating in the clear sky, showering innumerable akabeko down on me as he ascended. "All the world's my oyster!" his voice boomed out.

"You wouldn't happen to be a tengu, would you?" I called.

The man grinned, flashing those impossibly white teeth. "Don't be silly! No tengu could hope to match up to me!"

There was a sudden shimmer in the sky, and then the whole shebang flipped from bright blue to darkest black. For a second, the only thing that could be seen was that devilish pearly-white grin suspended there in the darkness.

As for what happened after that, I don't remember a thing.



For a while I didn't know where I was. Everything seemed foggy, like my brain had turned to almond pudding.

At last I heard as if from a great distance Yashirō sobbing, "Yasaburō! Yasaburō!" Using his voice as a guide I fumbled through the darkness, before I heard Kaisei scream right next to my ear, "Pull yourself together!"

And like I was breaking up through the water's surface, the world came rushing back.

Judging from the dim light, we seemed to be under a bridge. I reverted to my tanuki form and immediately started shivering, my fur completely soaked. "Where are we?" I asked.

"He's awake!" Yashirō cried, smothering me in a hug. From far away I could hear the incessant wail of a siren, and even down here below the bridge I could sense a commotion on the streets.

Kiyomizu Chujirō peered into my face. "At last, you're awake. That was reckless of you, and no mistake!"

"What is it, what's going on?"

Kaisei's voice came frantically from the darkness. "We gotta go! Someone's gonna find us!"

"What? What happened?"

"You don't remember any of it? You were well and truly befuddled."

Chujirō picked my sodden body up and started to run. As we made our escape he told me of how I had fallen under Tenmaya's spell, still in my bear form, and had returned to them with my head in a fog. Despite their best efforts to stop me I had shambled down the stairs and out onto Teramachi Street. The screams of fleeing pedestrians had mixed with the jangling festival music as the town descended into bedlam. That my mind hadn't transformed into that of a bear and caused me to attack anyone was the only bright spot in this whole fiasco.

"You wouldn't respond to any of us, and it didn't look like you'd go back to your normal form any time soon, so we were in quite the pickle. It was Kaisei's idea to dunk you into the Kamo River."

"Thanks, Kaisei," I said gratefully.

But Kaisei only snapped, "What kind of tanuki lets himself get tricked by a human!?" There was nothing I could say.



That following weekend I fled the revelry of Yoiyama and the Gion Festival and crossed through the old Ōsaka no Seki checkpoint to Lake Biwa. I exited the turnstiles of Hamaōtsu Station and crossed through a green park to find water as far as the eye could see. Sitting on the edge of the breakwater and dangling my feet over the lake, I must have looked like a student going through a quarter-life crisis.

And to be honest, I was a little down.

The Tenmaya incident had earned me a tongue-lashing from Yaichirō, which included an order to remain within the confines of the Tadasu Forest. Considering that my ursine rampage through the streets had occurred in broad daylight, I couldn't blame him for being furious with me. I knew it was my fault. That's what made me angriest of all.

There were extenuating circumstances, though, given that I'd only challenged Tenmaya at Chujirō's request. He and the haberdasher came to the Tadasu Forest to explain this to Yaichirō, who eventually relented on keeping me in the forest.

My rampage made the paper and the evening news, which had the effect of trumpeting my defeat to Tenmaya to every corner of the earth. I heard through the grapevine that Kinkaku and Ginkaku were gleefully spreading the story every chance they got.

"Beaten by a human, he's a disgrace to all tanuki, without question!"

"Yes, without question!"

Of course, they never mentioned the fact that there was no other tanuki in the world who would have dared try to stand up to Tenmaya in the first place.

"You're pathetic. How're you just going to sit here and mope?" I murmured, gently swinging my legs.

Waves lapped softly beneath my feet, the swells glimmering dully beneath the setting summer sun, and further out the distant expanses of the vast lake blurred like a mirage. At the wharf on my left, sightseeing boats were lit up for the evening, waiting to embark. With the lake breeze whispering by, I felt as if I were a long way from home.

As I took in that lonesome, magnificent view, I suddenly thought of Benten.

Benten originally hailed from the shores of Lake Biwa. At the time that Master Akadama had carried her off, she had just been a young human girl, trudging along the snowy lakeside. But now she was a half-tengu, easily able to fly over the whole of the lake, and steadily climbing the ladder towards one day becoming a full-fledged tengu.

It'd been disappointing how she'd been absent from Kyoto for such a long time, gone to foreign shores on a whim. Once she heard about the Tenmaya incident she'd be slapping her knee with mirth, no question. That tengu cackle of hers would wipe all my mortification clean away. The thought of getting a laugh out of her thrilled me.

Whenever they're faced with something great, tanuki always burst into laughter.

"All the world's my oyster," I said to myself, getting to my feet.



The residence where the artist known as Ayameike had lived for half a century was located in a quiet neighborhood, behind which lay the ancient temple of Onjōji on Mount Nagara.

I was walking along a row of cherry trees, their new leaves silhouetted against the indigo canvas above, near where the canals of Lake Biwa tunnel beneath Mount Nagara. Dark water flowed soundlessly through the canals beneath the embankments lush with summer grass. Nestled in the quiet neighborhood was an odd house where the plants grew wild and untamed, and affixed to the stone gate was a thin wooden plaque on which was written in brushstroke the name "Ayameike". Peering through the gate, I saw a rough trail trodden through the overgrown grass leading up to a sliding door, which glowed orange beneath the electric light. It was exactly the type of house where you'd expect a human with an affinity for tanuki to live.

"Hello?" I called after sliding the door open, but there was no response.

I went inside, padding along the wooden floorboards down the corridor. On the right I found a dining room, and beyond it was a kitchen, where a woman with an apron



was running water noisily in the sink. On the left was a disorganized room containing a bureau and a low table, and sitting smack in the middle of that room was Professor Yodogawa.

The professor was staring intently at a set of tanuki pictures. He'd been smitten with them ever since he found them last month at a bar in Yontomi Kaikan, and contacted his daughter who worked at Ōtsu city hall. Since then he'd become a veritable regular at the Ayameike residence, and earned the artist's trust.

"Evening, professor."

"Ah, hello! Aren't these pictures just marvelous?"

I sat down beside Professor Yodogawa and looked at a picture. It depicted a roly-poly collection of tanuki and daruma and pebbles in simple, unornamented brushstrokes. It was hard to tell the tanuki from the daruma from the pebbles, it was all so childishly drawn. As a tanuki myself, I couldn't help but be a little miffed that the artist had put so little effort into drawing the tanuki faces.

"Well? Splendid tanuki, wouldn't you say? A fine display of the staggering genius of Ayameike. There's a power in looking at things. To truly look at something is to love it. It's love for the tanuki that lets the artist draw these lines so bold and true. Each line contains the furriness, the cuteness, the softness, the sheer liberty of the tanuki!"

"This one just looks like a furry rock to me."

"A furry rock, you say? You had better look again!"

The professor stabbed his finger at the picture, but even then all I could still only make out a pebble with hair.

"Here is depicted the luxurious fur coat of the tanuki. Certainly well fed, I should think, and what fecund droppings it must produce! But what I should call the most sublime aspect is how, cloaked in that wonderfully soft coat, the tanuki attempts to hide its unease. That would be the call of the wild, no? Even a tanuki cannot live off of cuteness alone. See how it plainly snarls, *I would eat anything to survive!* That is indispensable. This is its true state, its true nature, the Platonic Idea! These are the paintings of a master, shining a light on the hidden reality of the tanuki world. Hallelujah!"

"Is that what it is?" I scratched my head.

The professor suddenly glanced toward the veranda and stood up. "My, but how dark it has gotten!"

The garden was indeed dark as midnight. The setting sun still lingered in the sky, but the dense foliage blocked all its rays. I went out to the veranda, breathing in the scent of the mosquito coils, and squinted at the trees.

"To the artist, this garden is his whole universe. He hasn't stepped foot off the property this past quarter-century, you see. He's a terrible recluse, he is, the lord of this garden." The professor let out an ardent sigh.

The sound of chopping from the kitchen stopped, and the aproned woman came into the room, dusting off her hands. Seeing me there, she exclaimed, "Now what is wrong with me, not even realizing we had a visitor!"

Every inch of her eighty-year-old frame exuded the grace of a lady with a proper upbringing, from her neatly pinned white hair to her immaculate apron. She was the artist's wife.

I dipped my head and introduced myself. "My name is Yasaburō."

"A young man like you must be quite hungry at this hour, and we're just about ready for a hot pot. Is he still out there?"—this last to the professor.

"Oh yes, he's still in the garden."

"He must be with the tanuki. Once he's taken an interest in something he forgets the time until it's dark."



The secret society known as the Friday Fellows is famous throughout the city for its consumption of tanuki stew at its year-end party. In order to combat this cabal of gastronomic blackguards, Professor Yodogawa founded an organization of his own, called the Thursday Fellows.

We two were its only members.

We went to gatherings of the Friday Fellows and tossed flyers declaring, "Tanuki meat is murder!" into the air, but all they did was ridicule us, hardly giving us the time of day. When it came down to it we were more like drinking buddies than an actual secret society. Professor Yodogawa and I would hold the occasional evening get-together, talking over plates of delicious food.

The professor apparently specialized in nutritional science, and he was surprisingly well traveled, trotting all over the globe in his tireless quest for new culinary heights. The outrageous chronicles of his gluttony-fueled adventures were well worth a listen, for they gave you a glimpse of just how indomitable the professor truly was. Without that toughness he wouldn't have been able to spout sophistry such as, "Restraining yourself from eating something is also love!" or been able to turn over a new leaf and be expelled from the Friday Fellows with a smile on his face.

There was only one thing that Professor Yodogawa regretted with regard to his expulsion, and that was Benten.

"Remember that night when we took that walk with Benten? Say, do you suppose that if she comes back we could pick up where we left off? I'm planning on giving her a gift, you see—*Belle's Nosehair*. It's a fruit that I found in South America, and quite tasty, despite the name."

"Well, you can never know with Benten."

"Not a whisker of a chance, then?"

"She's just out of our league."

"I see. Out of our league, that she is." The professor's eyes glazed over, as if he was recalling something from long ago.

As he got progressively drunker, teardrops began to spill from his eyes as he thought about tanuki.

"I did eat you, didn't I? I ate you all," he muttered to some unseen audience. "Ah, but I couldn't help it."

The Friday Fellows held a considerable amount of sway in the shadows of the human world, and ever since his expulsion at the end of last year Professor Yodogawa had tasted more than his share of privation. Yet rather than complain, he set up the Thursday Fellows, and redoubled his efforts to visit his righteous wrath on the Friday Fellows.

His was a truly noble spirit, with a most self-sacrificing love of tanuki.



The professor and I split up in the garden to look for the artist.

"Mr. Ayameike! Mr. Ayameike!"

I waded through the grass and into the darkness of the trees.

What I found there was a wondrous place, a garden that transcended the very definition of a garden. There the grass was left to grow wild, unmolested by scythe or shears; boughs of trees whose trunks must have borne uncountable rings hung heavy with leaves. The air was stiflingly warm. It was impossible to see the evening sky above, and the garden seemed to go on forever. As I went further and further in, the light from the veranda faded from view, and I was enveloped in a blackness as unfathomable as the darkest moonless night.

Something moved in the weave of the grass, and I made out someone's snout faintly glistening.

"What tanuki might you be?" asked the furry inquirer.

"I am Yasaburō, third son of Shimogamo Sōichirō," I answered.

"I am Onjōji Kenzaburō. Your name is known to me; I had the privilege of meeting your brother Yaichirō at the Keiji Tanuki Conference some time ago. The artist is this way. Allow me to guide you."

Sticking close to Kenzaburō's tail I passed through the trees, and finally the sky popped into view above me. Here in the midst of the dense foliage was a small pit in the ground; around it in the evening light the grass was lush and green. At the bottom of the pit was a thin, elderly man in a faded workman's smock, sitting on a wooden chair and smoking a rustic pipe that resembled the root of a tree.

"Mind your manners with him, now," Onjōji Kenzaburō murmured behind me, hidden in the shadows of the grass. I sensed a number of other furry beings moving around me in the trees. It seemed that the entire Onjōji clan had turned out to keep an eye on me, this intruder who dared approach the artist.

The pit was as quiet as the bottom of a pond as I descended into it.

"Pardon me, Master Ayameike. I've come to fetch you."

The artist didn't seem to mind me much, smoke drifting through his long white beard.

"This pit was once a pond," he calmly observed. "I dug it myself, some fifty years ago. I was young and sprightly then, and preferred to do most things myself. I enjoyed the pond for many years, but unfortunately the spring below dried up...But it is because of that I now

have this wonderful pit. Sitting down here gives me a most pleasant feeling, as though I am a frog at the bottom of a well."

He regarded me with his limpid eyes. His gaze was like that of a boy watching a grasshopper, and being under it made me start to squirm. For some reason his look made me want to undo my transformation.

"Dinner will be served soon. Shall we return to the house?"

"I suppose that will be all for today, then. Much obliged," he muttered to no one in particular, standing up. I was expecting him to hobble out of the pit leaning on a cane, but instead he beat into the brush directly without the slightest bit of hesitation. Clearly he wasn't called the lord of the garden for nothing, for he slipped between the trees as quick as the wind.

Suddenly he stopped and pricked his ears.

"If I am not mistaken, that is the sound of a festival. Now where might this festival be?"

And certainly I could hear from somewhere far away what seemed to be Gion festival music.

"Ha, I see that he has arrived," muttered Ayameike.

"Who?"

"A visitor. He is wont to bring the festival with him wherever he goes."

Ayameike soon took us back to the veranda, but Professor Yodogawa was nowhere in sight. I listened carefully and detected a voice calling for help somewhere in the trees. Having gone to find the artist, it seemed the professor had fallen into distress in this wondrous garden himself.

"I shall go retrieve him," said Ayameike. "Perhaps I could trouble you to meet our guest at the door?"

Through the sliding door I could see the silhouette of the visitor, his head hanging low.

"Good evening. It is I, Tenmaya."

The voice sounded quite familiar, as did the name, and half in disbelief I slid open the door. A bright red lantern was thrust inside, followed by that man in the red shirt, his sparkling white teeth ready to chew up all the oysters the world had to offer. I was so taken aback that for a second he appeared to me like a hellish ogre who had come to grind my bones to make his bread.

Seeing me there he stared for a moment before bursting into a chuckle. "Hah, I wasn't expecting you'd be here tonight too! Good to see you again."

"My name is Yasaburō."

"Ah, an old-fashioned sort of name, old-fashioned and noble. Glad to make your acquaintance, Yasaburō. Tonight you're going to feast upon something you don't get to see every day, courtesy of yours truly!"

He thrust his hand into the sack next to him, and yanked out something black and slippery, holding it up proudly as it gleamed in the red lantern light.

It was a giant salamander.



Though their Japanese name means “giant pepper fish”, according to Professor Yodogawa Japanese giant salamanders are in fact the world’s largest amphibian. They crawl along the beds of streams and spend their days nibbling on frogs and freshwater crabs. They’re said to possess the ability to regenerate their bodies, even after being bisected (“though that’s most certainly codswallop, after all we’re not talking about planaria here”, added the professor), which had earned them the nickname, *hanzaki*, or “cut in two”. It wasn’t a hard story to swallow either, with their black-flecked, light brown bodies, and the odd warts around their heads, and their mean-looking mugs. Even the most gluttonous tanuki would think twice before trying to stick a fork into one of them.

Waving the salamander around, Tenmaya barged into the kitchen. “It’s salamander stew for us tonight!”

Tenmaya being Tenmaya, his words caused quite a commotion in the house.

“I certainly hope you’re not expecting me to eat that creepy, awful thing!” Ayameike’s wife frowned, while Professor Yodogawa wrinkled his nose and said, “Japanese giant salamanders *are* a protected species, and their trade *is* prohibited under the Washington Convention...” All the while Ayameike said nothing and ran his hands over the warts.

“Ah, but this ain’t a Japanese giant salamander, Professor Yodogawa,” winked Tenmaya.

“I’m quite sure that it is, sir,” the professor patiently replied.

“No, see, this ain’t nothin’ but a giant Japanese salamander.”

“Yes, and I am telling you that a giant Japanese salamander is, in other words, a Japanese giant salamander!”

“Come on, you know things aren’t ever as simple as that! Even professors don’t know everything, hey?”

“I would say the same of you, Tenmaya.”

I realized then that this was not the first time that Tenmaya and Professor Yodogawa had met, though they didn’t seem to be on particularly good terms.

“Alright, professor, let’s be real generous and say this is one of those protected species,” said Tenmaya, an oily, ill-bred grin on his face. “And Washington or Roosevelt or whoever you please says you ain’t allowed to eat them, fine, fine. But see, this adorable little fella’s already croaked, in what you might call an unfortunate accident, and all that’s left of it is an empty husk that cooks up into a real tasty broth. You ain’t about to let this poor little fella just rot away and be wasted, are you? And who do Washington or Roosevelt think they are, telling you not to eat it?”

Even the professor found himself flummoxed by this little bit of sophistry.

Tenmaya pressed his advantage home. “I’ll bet you’d like to try a nibble, eh?”

“Well,” the professor said slowly. “I hear they *are* quite tasty.”

“Don’t you fret, I learned how to cook these babies up in the mountains of Okayama. They look like awful little critters at first glance, but you’ll understand once you’ve had a taste!”

Tenmaya grabbed hold of a large kitchen knife like an ogre, and with dazzling knifework prepared the carcass for the pot. He removed the guts, then chopped up the flesh leaving the skin attached, rinsing the large chunks under water. A wonderful peppery aroma spread from the kitchen into the room and even all the way into the garden.

After placing the meat into a stewpot along with some vegetables, Tenmaya reached into his sack and pulled out a strange bottle, sprinkling its black powdery contents into the pot.

"This here is Tenmaya's secret stuff, guaranteed to make salamander meat as tender as tender gets!" he boasted.

Thus we all gathered around that salamander hotpot, but I was so enraptured by that scrumptious taste that I entirely forgot the closeness of that muggy July night. In stark contrast to its monstrous appearance, the taste of the salamander was pure and unclouded. The skin felt wonderfully springy in the mouth, and the more you chewed the tastier it got. I kept going back for more. We all moved our chopsticks, wordless, unconscious of the sweat that dripped down our faces, and I eventually realized that even the artist's wife had done an about-face and was happily scarfing down a bowl of her own. The Japanese giant salamander is most certainly not to be underestimated.

Tenmaya looked around at all of us with pleasure as we smacked our lips.

"Tasty, eh? Eh?" he pressed. "This was a difficult one, I will say. I've traveled the world, seen the sights, tasted all the delicacies it's got to offer. But I owe Ayameike too much to serve him something pedestrian, something plain. Why, then old Tenmaya would be a laughingstock! So I took a little walk by the Kamo River, and before I knew it I'd come to Kumogahata. The day was fading, the rain torrential as I perambulated along that river, when something black and slimy came hurtling down from the sky. Now that gave me such a shock! I poked around with my walking stick, and then I heard this awful little croak in the dark. Scared me out of my wits, I can tell you. So I looked down at my feet and saw our salamander friend here, breathing his last. An unfortunate end, to be sure, but I'd say it makes a pretty handsome present."

Tenmaya looked at the pot and pressed his hands together. "May you find your way to paradise. Namu namu!"

While he was saying this, the salamander was already sitting comfortably at the bottom of our stomachs.

Professor Yodogawa and I went to the kitchen to wash the pot and dishes, using the sound of the running water to cover our hushed conversation. Tenmaya and Ayameike's wife sat in the room drinking cold barley tea and appreciating the artist's tanuki drawings.

"Who is this Tenmaya guy, anyways?"

"I've seen him with the Friday Fellows before, doing Jurōjin's bidding."

"That explains why he seems so shifty. He could be a spy!"

"It is odd, though," Professor Yodogawa frowned. "Some years ago he brought Jurōjin's wrath down on his head after fouling something up, and was forced to flee Kyoto. Why would he come back now?"

As the night drew on, the wondrous garden outside was plunged into darkness, yet here and there the unnerving cries of animals and birds outside could still be heard, sounding perhaps even more animated than before. Ayameike leaned over the railing of the veranda and pointed out a clearing where the grass had been cut away and several stones had been placed. That was where the tanuki appeared.

"They always stay quite still when I am drawing. Clever, adorable little creatures they are."

"So that's how you create such marvelous pictures!" the professor gushed. As we talked, it became apparent that the picture that he had seen in Yontomi Kaikan had actually been sold to the bar by Tenmaya, who had received it as a gift from Ayameike.

"That is rather disappointing," the artist said disapprovingly, but Tenmaya just rubbed his bald head and grinned like a kid who had been caught playing hooky.

"No offence intended, I can assure you! I hope you can understand that. I've never once done anything with malice aforethought, not once since I was a babe. Sure, I may trade in deception, but always with the best of intentions! Won't deny that some people find it frightening, of course. You know what they say, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions...but enough about that."

He really did enjoy listening to himself talk.

"Now you just say the word, and I can sell your pictures for a pretty penny. You can rest easy with me, your honor, I know people in galleries all over Shijō and Gion. I'll even take care of the advertising! Want a TV spot? Not a problem. Advertising's all about deception, when it comes down to it. You just gotta make people believe what you want them to believe. Once you start raking it in, you can spruce up the place, buy the lot out back to expand the garden, pump that old dried up pond full of water again. I owe you a great deal, your honor, and I just want you to live a better life."

But the artist quietly demurred, "I am quite content with the life I have."

"Ol' Tenmaya's just got no chance with someone as high-minded as you, sir," Tenmaya sighed dramatically. "No chance at all, with a sage who contents himself with conversing with rocks and tanuki."

"I am no sage. Sure, I am not so illustrious as that."

"You most certainly are not!" his wife agreed. "I couldn't count the times this man has driven me out of my mind over the years. A sage, my foot!"

"A man of the world then, is he?"

"I quite assure you he is!"

"That's fine, just fine. I'm a man of the world myself, you see. Huzzah for worldliness!" Tenmaya slapped his knee in a fit of mirth, forcing his mouth into a smile as though he was wrenching an iron plate into place. "A little performance, then, for this gathering of worldly folk."

He lit a flame in the red lantern that he had brought, waving it back and forth before our eyes. My vision gradually started to blur. I remembered having felt this same sensation before.

"Oh!" gasped the artist's wife, pointing at the garden.

Within the depths of the black trees, the flame of a lantern flickered to life. At first it was one, but soon there came another, and another, and in no time at all the forest was filled with an uncountable array of lanterns. The name Tenmaya burned brightly in the darkness as the lanterns advanced through the trees towards us. Soon this wall of red flowed over the edge of the veranda like a tsunami and flooded into the room. It was as bright as though the floats of the Gion Festival had come crashing in, and my ears rang with the jangling of the music of the Gion Festival. I recalled what the artist had whispered to me in the garden—*He is wont to bring the festival with him wherever he goes.*

"And scene!" The voice of Tenmaya rang through the air, and in an instant everything vanished as though it had been a dream.

The artist's wife and Professor Yodogawa and myself had fled into the kitchen; only the artist and Tenmaya remained seated in the room, looking unperturbed.

"Now that's what I call an illusion," Tenmaya winked.



Professor Yodogawa and I left the master artist's house and walked along the quiet streets. Ayameike's strange garden, the appearance of Tenmaya accompanied by that festival music, the salamander hotpot, and that illusion—it had seemed as if the banquet had gone on into the wee hours of the night, yet it was only around 9 o'clock. I felt the effects of the banquet lingering in my head, to the point that I couldn't be sure whether or not I was still under Tenmaya's spell.

"That was some illusion, huh?"

"Be a good fellow and slap me on the cheek? The suspense is simply intolerable!"

The sound of my open-handed slap echoed loudly through the hushed neighborhood.

"I suppose this must be real, then," the professor winced, holding a hand to his cheek. "I say, you certainly don't take half measures!"

"If you're alright, I must be alright too."

"Now, I daresay that isn't right. This experiment has established the fact that I am not under a spell, but it says nothing about you. Surely it says nothing about whether you are under a spell?"

"But I saw you react to being hurt."

"And how can you be sure that was not part of the illusion?"

"Are you asking me to hit you one more time?"

"No, no! It's you that needs to be hit."

"How come? Either way I'll pass, thanks. I tend to avoid doing things that involve pain."

As we continued our philosophical sparring beneath the streetlights, Tenmaya suddenly loomed out of the darkness before us, bearing that red lantern like some sort of demon. We were dumbfounded in horror.

Tenmaya flashed his pearly whites. "Say, professor, I heard you got ran out of the club?"



"...And what if I was, Tenmaya? That is certainly none of your business," the professor declared resolutely, continuing forth on his way, but Tenmaya wriggled up beside him.

"And you've started some sort of petulant resistance, I hear? Not very wise of you, not wise at all!"

"...Now who on earth did you hear that from?"

"The all-knowing Tenmaya has eyes and ears all over Kyoto, yes indeed. And those precious little ears most certainly heard on the grapevine that Professor Yodogawa dared stand up to the great Jurōjin! Now that's what I call growing a backbone, you old rogue, you! But word of advice, I would cut that out sharpish, you being a respectable college professor and all."

"You're a spy, aren't you, Tenmaya?" I accused.

Tenmaya looked injured. "I assure you, meeting you at the artist's house was entirely a coincidence!"

"A likely story!" The professor squinted at him. "I thought you'd gone on a journey?"

"I had, I had. But I'll tell you the unvarnished truth, my innocent curiosity got me on old man Jurōjin's bad side. These days I just drift where the wind takes me, just like the puffy white clouds up there in the blue yonder. I've got no reason to do the Friday Fellows' bidding anymore, and as a matter of fact I've taken a shine to your little rebellion here." He whacked the professor's shoulder playfully. "We're both outcasts, ain't no reason we shouldn't get along. You want my advice, just say the word."

"I'll have to decline. I'm sure your consulting fees are nothing to sniff at."

"You know, professor, Jurōjin can be a frightening man. I would be careful, if I were you."

When we came to the Biwa canal, Tenmaya remarked, "Good evening, gents," then hopped easily over a wall, bouncing along the top of the embankment like an old-fashioned kickball. At the bottom of the grass-covered embankment a crude little boat was bobbling in the dark water of the canal. Tenmaya placed his lantern at the prow of the boat, then got in himself. The little boat glided along, that speck of light glowing at the bow, before it was swallowed into the darkness of the tunnel beneath Mount Nagara.

"What a ludicrous little man! You simply can't let up your guard when he's around."

"You should go on home, professor. I've got to swing by somewhere."

"Ah, that so? Very well, they do say there's nothing like a nice long stroll for digestion!"

After seeing Professor Yodogawa off, I promptly turned around and headed back to Ayameike's house.

Tenmaya hadn't once mentioned our confrontation above Teramachi Street tonight, but as he said his farewell he had given me a sly wink. Of course the professor hadn't noticed, for the challenge had been meant only for me: *fool me if you can!* And as soon as I saw that wink, the foolishness that I had inherited had me determined to take Tenmaya down.

Apparently, eating a Japanese giant salamander really gets your fool's blood pumping.



Ayameike was sitting tranquilly on the veranda, silhouetted against the light leaking through from the dining room. The smoke from his pipe drifted in and out from his white beard, so it was impossible to distinguish where one ended and the other began.

I returned to my tanuki form and padded into the garden.

Ayameike took out the pipe from his mouth and smiled.

"Ah, so you have dispensed with transforming, Yasaburō?"

I had had a sense that tanuki transformations didn't work against his penetrating gaze. I went over to the front of the veranda and bowed my head.

"Very pleased to make your acquaintance," he said, reaching down from the veranda to shake my paw.

I pulled myself up and plopped down beside him.

"Is your wife asleep?"

"Presently she is in the bath."

As he mentioned this, I heard within the sounds of splashing water.

"I am not fond of baths myself, but my wife is quite the opposite. She'll be in there for quite some time."

"Tanuki love baths, too. Wonderful invention, those."

"What do you do for all that time?"

"Count our hairs, I suppose. Father once made me count a hundred of them before getting out."

"I see. Tanuki and humans both have hairs," laughed Ayameike. "But counting hairs seems to me rather tiresome. I should much prefer not to engage in what seems to me nothing more than a schoolboy's exercise."

Beside us in a rough clay plate, a mosquito coil sent up thin tendrils of smoke. Ayameike gazed at it, seeming to find the sight of the green incense slowly crumbling into grey ash captivating.

"I never tire of it," he remarked.

The two of us continued to stare at it. After a while, Ayameike asked gently, "Have you forgotten something here?"

"I want to know more about Tenmaya," I answered him candidly. "He fooled me once before, and I want to return the favor."

"Tenmaya fooled a tanuki?"

"Sure did. It was pretty horrific for me."

"What a rascal that Tenmaya is."

"...What was he doing here?"

Ayameike looked at me with those clear eyes of his, but said nothing. His gaze seemed to pierce through my fur down into my very soul, as if he was testing my mettle. Straightening up, I told him about everything that had transpired with Tenmaya. As he listened to my tale, he exhaled little puffs of smoke.

"I see," he said once I had finished, and stood up. "Come with me. I shall show you whence Tenmaya came."

Descending from the veranda he strode into the trees.

Beyond that darkness-enveloped grove was a small shed. It was filled with flashlights and scythes and sickles and old suitcases. Sifting through the jumble, Ayameike pulled out what appeared to be a large panel covered by a heavy cloth.

"I hide this here whenever Tenmaya comes calling. He would attempt to burn it otherwise. Burning that which belongs to another is quite unacceptable."

Beneath the cloth was a two-paneled folding screen depicting an image of Hell.

I picked up a flashlight and shone its beam on the screen to reveal an unsettling landscape. Flecks of red spattered a black landscape of rocky crags, the color of fire, and of blood. Hairy, brawny demons chased around the dolorous dead, drowning them in the lake of blood, crushing their skulls with iron clubs. With my nose pushed up right next to the painting, I fancied I could actually smell the raw stench and hear the piteous cries. If I were dropped in this place, no doubt every strand of fur on my body would be singed off before I hit the ground, a most terrifying fate. The fur on my butt prickled, and I began to find it hard to breathe, but then I noticed in the upper right a kindly light radiating down upon the scene. There was a Buddha that very much resembled a tanuki, lowering a spider's thread into Hell from the side of a lotus pond. Given the rough brushwork this was clearly an addition made by Ayameike.

"I was entrusted it by someone who found the image rather disturbing. The requester asked me to draw a likeness of the Buddha here. I dislike performing 'work' as it were, but when I saw this picture I agreed to the request. For you see, I pitied these sinners."

"A ray of light in the darkness, huh?"

Ayameike pointed to the spider's thread that the Buddha was lowering into Hell. The glinting thread reached down into the blackened depths of blood and flame, where a mass of sinners were clinging to the thread and pressing their hands together in supplication towards the Buddha in paradise.

"This was the spider's thread which Tenmaya climbed to escape," said Ayameike. "He was once in this diptych of Hell."



It was late at night by the time I came back into town on the Tōzai subway line.

The man who had requested the addition to the painting had been the chief priest of a temple in Nakagyō Ward, but as to who actually owned the painting Ayameike did not know. I thought about what Tenmaya had said, about him having "gotten on old man Jurōjin's bad side." And I wondered whether this dreadful painting hadn't once belonged to the head of the Friday Fellows.

I crossed the Sanjō Bridge and walked through the deserted Teramachi arcade.

"Don't do it," groused the haberdasher, whom I'd roused from his slumber, but that salamander hotpot had really gotten me fired up, and I was more determined than ever to knock Tenmaya down a peg and even the score.

Finally overwhelmed by my persistence, the haberdasher grudgingly let me in. "Fine, fine, but I'm going straight back to bed!"

Once I went out onto the arcade rooftop, the pyjama-wearing haberdasher snapped the window shut behind me and closed the drapes.

I started off across the still, silent rooftops.

The round moon was boring its way across the night sky, its cool light washing over the streets below. In my mind's eye I saw Benten walking before me. *I want the moon!* she had cried that wondrous autumn night, but instead of that capricious beauty tonight I was dealing with a stoutly built middle-aged conjurer.

Tenmaya was sitting on the roof of his illegally zoned shack. He seemed to be enjoying an impromptu moon-viewing party.

"Don't get too many visitors at this hour," he said airily with his back still turned to me. Moonlight shone through the transparent glass in his hand, though even that did nothing to make the charred-brown liquid it contained look more palatable. It was a non-alcoholic cocktail of Tenmaya's own invention called the Namahage, a mixture of miso and cola topped with a garnish of pickled radish.

"What a fabulous moon, don't you think? To the moon!" he toasted.

I said nothing, but took a deep breath and began to transform.

My shapeshifting is truly a sight to behold.

Tenmaya turned around, frowning, and immediately the blood drained from his face.

What he saw was an enormous head about the size of a sake barrel. It was as if someone had dumped a bucket of red paint over one of the oddly shaped boulders from Cape Muroto and given it blazing watermelon-sized eyeballs, two horns curving out through the unkempt hair, and a mouth full of razor-sharp fangs that grinned from ear to ear.

During this year's Setsubun festival, Benten had wanted to throw beans at an ogre, and so I had transformed into one in order to grant her request. Now that experience came in handy. I had every confidence that my efforts had produced a demon who looked like he had spent the last few hundred years in the wind-swept basins of Hell.

Tenmaya practically wet himself at the sudden appearance of an ogre.

I bared my fangs and summoned up a roar from the pit of my stomach. "GAAAH! TENMAAYAAA!"

Tenmaya spilled his vile cocktail and crawled over the roof, rolling off the other side.

I climbed on top of the shack and bellowed, "I'VE COME TO DRAG YOU BACK TO HELL!"

In the light of the moon, my musclebound ogre must really have looked like a hunter from Hell. Tenmaya screamed like a little girl, flailing his limbs and wriggling in circles in his attempt to escape.

"No! Please, I beg you!" he screeched, looking more dead than alive.



Tenmaya stumbled all over himself as he fled from the red ogre following close behind.

Even as a tanuki I hadn't dared hope for my plan to go this splendidly. Like a cat toying with a mouse, I neither rushed up to snatch him nor fell too far behind, content to chase behind and holler, "Stop! Stop!" After frightening the moonlight out of him, I planned to take him to task for misusing his illusions like that. But ecstatic at having pulled one over him, I grew overconfident. Tanuki have long been known to be lax when it comes to finishing anything.

Tenmaya abruptly whirled around to face me. The next moment, I found a metal tube shoved up in my face, cold steel glinting beneath the moonlight. Screeching to a halt, I crossed my eyes trying to see what it was. I suddenly felt a cold murderous intent emanating from the blackness within the tube, and realized that what Tenmaya had pointed at me was the barrel of a gun.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" I immediately raised my hands in surrender and reverted to my student form. "Ranged weapons are cheating!"

Tenmaya was astonished to see me. "Yasaburō? Not bad, not bad at all!"

Tenmaya's gun was quite beautiful. It resembled a gleaming golden brass instrument attached to an elegant wooden stock, exhibiting such nobility that it looked like it belonged in a museum. You didn't see guns as beautiful as this every day. There was no doubt that this was the lost German-made air rifle that Yakushibō's heir had brought back from his European sojourn.

"You found that lying around somewhere, didn't you?"

"And how would you know that, eh?"

"An acquaintance of mine lost it, and I've been looking for it ever since. Please, give it back."

"Ha, that so? But I've gotten pretty fond of this baby. You want it back, you'll have to do more than ask nicely!" said Tenmaya unfeelingly. He seemed both incensed, and a little amused.

"Why don't we be partners?" he asked suddenly. "I've taken a liking to you, kid."

"That's gonna have to be a no. You're just planning on wrapping me up in another illusion, I'll bet."

"I know you like the back of my hand. Don't know where you learned your illusions, but you just can't help yourself from enjoying every second of it. Fearless, like. That's youth for you. But it's a wide world out there. Sooner or later you're gonna come across some real tricky conjurers, and then you're really going to get burned. Happened to me, too. Times like that show what you're really made out of. If you're smart, you'll learn the virtue of being humble. If you're dumb, you'll end up throwing your life away."

"Yeah, but using guns is unfair!"

"I'm an unfair guy. A dyed-in-the-wool swindler, even."

"Now you're admitting it?"

"Come on, I'm just a softhearted guy trying to teach you an important lesson. I never said I would settle everything through illusions, did I? Life ain't like the Olympics. You gotta win, whatever it takes. Even the most dishonest swindler's got to have a few honest tricks up his sleeve. If you're gonna take on a guy you don't have the least clue about, you've got to be ready for that much. Hey, when I put it that way, I sound like a real go-getter, don't I? The sort of guy that could take over the world, or unveil the secrets of the universe. I'm telling you, Yasaburō, there'd never be a dull moment if we put our minds together!"

As Tenmaya babbled on happily the muzzle of the gun swung back and forth through the air. As I watched it I began to feel faint, and when I snapped to the moon hanging in the sky was wobbling like a pudding. I was already under Tenmaya's spell.

"That should about do it." Tenmaya stretched his hand into the sky and without any fuss plucked my moon out of the sky, placing it on his palm and rolling it around. The orange-sized orb shone brightly in his hand, illuminating his wide-faced grin. "I'll be holding on to your moon until I get an answer I like."



The moon that had until a moment ago been shining so brilliantly over the city was now sitting in the palm of Tenmaya's hand.

It was an upsetting feeling, being robbed of a full moon, and the surroundings suddenly seemed so very dreary. I couldn't bear the thought of living the rest of my life without a moon. But there was nothing I could do.

"I have to compliment you on that ogre, though. Gave me a turn, it did!"

"I heard that you're afraid of the ogres of Hell."

"Heard that from Ayameike, did you?"

"That's right."

"...Then that means you saw the picture?"

"Yep," I responded.

Tenmaya clicked his tongue. "Dammit, I knew it was still in that house! That old man may look like a senile coot but he doesn't miss a trick. Believe me when I tell you, things would be better if you incinerated that nasty old painting."

"You were in Hell, right?"

"I was trapped by Jurōjin's illusions!"

"What did you do to make him so angry?"

"You're full of surprises yourself, I see. How do you know Jurōjin?"

His suspicions raised, he leveled the air rifle at me again.

I couldn't exactly say that my father had been made into the Friday Fellows' stew.

"...I met him through someone called Benten."

"Benten!?" Tenmaya howled the instant that name left my mouth. His already ruddy face turned an even deeper shade of crimson, and I half-expected steam to come whistling out his ears. The barrel of the gun trembled in his wrath, making me more than a little anxious for my well-being.

"I tell you that woman is the cause of all my troubles!" cried Tenmaya, spraying spittle everywhere. "Can you even imagine what sort of evils I've been subjected to because of her? I've seen Hell, yes, in the flesh. Using her feminine wiles to get close to Jurōjin, whispering all sorts of half-truths into his ear... I will admit she is beautiful. I will admit she is entrancing. I will admit that she is out of my league. But why should that mean I should let her toss me into Hell on a whim!? I am Tenmaya, the incomparable! I will not resign myself to rot in Hell! I have returned, and when next we meet that woman will rue the day she crossed me!"

That was when it happened.

A white object came whistling out of the sky and slammed into Tenmaya's face, knocking him flat on his back. I looked to see that the object was an expensive-looking pure white valise. The unfortunate Tenmaya was dazed by the pain, blood spurting from his nostrils, and the air rifle which he had been pointing at me had gone sailing onto the floor. I went to grab it, but Tenmaya immediately lunged up and scrabbled over on all fours. He cradled it in his arms like it was his child, with blood still dripping from his nose, and petulantly exclaimed, "It's mine, I tell you, mine!" His determination was impressive, which was to be expected for someone who had gone to Hell and lived to tell the tale.

A woman came floating down from the sky, landing with the point of her stilettos poking directly into Tenmaya's skull.

"Owowowow!" he shrieked.

"Good to see you again, Tenmaya," said Benten. "I'm glad you're looking well."

○

"You would make such a good public speaker," ruminated Benten.

Tenmaya squirmed beneath her feet. "...What a surprise, Miz Benten. How long have you been listening?"

"Oh, since you said 'she's out of my league.' What a lovely compliment."

"You'll put everything after that out of your mind, I hope?"

I promptly said in a loud whisper, "He said, 'When next we meet that woman will rue the day she crossed me!'"

"What are you on about, Yasaburō!" Tenmaya hissed in a laboured voice beneath Benten's heels. "It's just a figure of speech. It's what you'd say to a woman who catches your fancy, hey?"

Benten dug in her heels a little harder.

"Hoyvin!" squeaked Tenmaya, screwing his face up in pain. "Ooh, my head's ready to split!"

"Tenmaya, do you *wish* to go back to Hell?"

"Of course not, heh heh. Fact is, being under your ladyship's feet is paradise!" Tenmaya assured her with a strained grin, his face covered in blood. "So, when did your ladyship get back to the country?"

"Just now, actually. I must say, I wasn't expecting to see your face so soon."

"Seeing as I was in Hell for so long, what say you we leave our old bickering down there, let bygones be bygones?"

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't. After all, you are lower than a worm to me."

"Hey, even a worm's got feelings, you know."

I hadn't seen her in four months, but she was just as perfect as always. She was wearing shorts and a garish T-shirt that said "THE BEAUTIFUL DIE OLD". No doubt Kinkaku and Ginkaku had given it to her as a farewell present. The troublesome two had set up shop in a corner of the Faux Denki Bran distillery to pump out T-shirts bearing nonsensical idioms, but as no one would buy them they had taken to foisting them on every tanuki who came into the factory, which had not made them very popular.

"Oh!" Benten suddenly cried. "How lovely!"

She stooped over and picked up the shining moon that had fallen to the ground beside Tenmaya, cupping it in her hands and marveling at it as if she were appraising a massive gemstone.

"What a beautiful moon this is, Yasaburō!"

"Well of course it is. That's my moon."

"Is it now?" she laughed. Perhaps I'll hang it up in my room. I've always wanted something like this."

"I'd rather you didn't. It's hard for a tanuki to have a belly drumming session without a full moon."

"That's funny, coming from someone who's never belly drummed for me before."

At that moment, the long-suffering Tenmaya growled like a tiger and reared up his head. Taking advantage of Benten's momentary loss of balance, he leaped backwards like a wound up spring. His blood-covered face was grotesque, like a demon that had just crawled out of a lake of blood.

The muzzle of the air rifle was aimed squarely at Benten.

Without the slightest hesitation he pulled the trigger.

With a slight flick of her pale hand, Benten sent the bullet tumbling harmlessly into the night as easily as if she was swatting away a fly. To a tengu, being shot at is no more dangerous than being pelted with beans.

Benten grabbed the gun with both hands. Tenmaya in turn desperately threw his whole body onto the gun to keep it from being wrested away. The next thing I knew Benten had lifted both gun and Tenmaya into the air, and began to swing them around like she was throwing a hammer. Tenmaya seemed frozen in astonishment, his eyes as round as dinner plates.

Benten released her grip, and Tenmaya went hurtling in the direction of Shijō Avenue.

To my surprise, as he sailed through the air still clutching the air rifle, I could have sworn that Tenmaya gave me a wink. I could hardly believe he was still so confident even on the brink of death. Fooling a tanuki, squaring off with a tengu—you could never guess what this madman was going to do next.

As I watched Tenmaya disappear over the horizon, I commented, "I think you killed him."



"As if that would be enough to do him in. The man's a rubber ball: he always bounces back," Benten said, wiping off her hands with a handkerchief.



"This really is a lovely moon." Benten smiled sweetly down at the little orb in her palm.

Watching her, I felt a relief come over me, as if a hole that had long remained empty in my heart had finally been filled. A schemer who had overthrown her own master; the murderer of my father who also happened to be my first love; and a natural enemy who had tried to make me into stew and eat me up. That I was celebrating her return to Japan could only be my fool's blood talking. I'd been waiting for her smile to come and stir things up again. Benten had come back to turn this town upside down.

Benten pointed her chin towards her fallen valise. "Take that for me, won't you Yasaburō? I'm going to say hello to the master."

"Excellent. I'm sure he'll be overjoyed."

Master Akadama might even blubber tears of joy. As his disciple I'd rather not witness that sort of thing, but nevertheless I picked up the suitcase. It was as heavy as if it was stuffed with gold bars.

I looked up and saw that she was spinning my moon on the tip of her finger.

"If I may, Lady Benten?"

"Yes, Yasaburō?"

"Before we set off to the Master, may I have my moon back?"

"Must I give it back?"

"With humility I beseech you. Living the rest of my life under moonless nights would be most disagreeable."

"But I've finally gotten my hands on Mr. Moon..."

For a moment Benten hesitated, but eventually she wound up like a baseball pitcher and threw it into the night sky. My beloved moon settled into the hole in the sky it had left behind and once more shined its radiant light down upon the city. Now I'd be able to enjoy eating round *tsukimi-dango* under the full moon again.

All's well that ends well.

I bowed my head deeply. "Thank you, Lady Benten."

But Benten didn't seem satisfied. She looked at me, her eyes narrow and cold.

"Aren't you forgetting to say something? You naughty little tanuki."

"What's that?"

"Tell me you missed me, Yasaburō."

"I missed you deeply. Welcome home, Lady Benten."

Benten nodded with pleasure. "I'm glad to be back. Things are about to get a lot more interesting, Yasaburō."

## Chapter 4 — The Battle of the Daimonji Pleasure Barges

Once upon a time, great tengu wars roiled the land.

I first heard of them at Hyakumanben Chionji, from the High Elder.

People said that due to some underworld administrative mix-up he'd never gotten his death notice in the post. He looked just like a great dust bunny rolling around behind the Amida Hall; however, he was just bursting with zeal for education, and whenever some lost little tanuki wandered into the temple he would seize them and force them to read *Heritage of Fur*, reciting a litany of tanuki-centric history facts. He probably saw this as his contribution to tanuki society, but as far as we tanuki pups were concerned it was all a great bore.

"During the war—"

Whenever he said this, we knew that he was referring to neither the Pacific War, nor to the Onin War, but the Tengu Wars.

I've forgotten most everything that he talked about in those outdoor lectures, but I do remember how biased his view of history was. The way he told it, the whole of the history of Japan was driven by the furry little paws of tanuki. *What a load of horse hockey!* I used to think as a pup. Even back then I already knew that the world was driven by the trio of humans and tengu and tanuki.

Once the High Elder proclaimed, "That tengu should interfere in the affairs of tanuki: this is not right. That tanuki should interfere in the affairs of tengu: this is also not right."

I didn't like that at all. For one, this was just after Father had pulled off the False Nyoigadake Caper, and I was in awe of my father for having stood up to those Kurama tengu in order to preserve the honor of Master Akadama. What did he mean, we shouldn't get involved in tengu affairs? *The Yakushibō* of Nyoigadake had come all the way to the Tadasu Forest to express his gratitude to Father, bringing a fancy box of sweets. So I kept chirping away impudently at the poor old High Elder. This was of course, the age when I had attempted to smoke out the Navel Stone at Rokkakudō with pine needles, the age when I was the biggest fool that I have ever been.

Time flows on. Both Father and the High Elder behind the Amida Hall have long since passed on to the afterlife. And whenever the Gozan no Okuribi draws near, I am reminded of these things.



Mother was going out to Tanukidani Fudō to visit Grandmother, so I decided to go along with her.

We got off the Eizan Line at Ichijōji Station and walked east down Manshuin Road.

The streets were baking beneath the midsummer sunshine, and the damp towel I'd brought with me from the Tadasu Forest was already as parched as a sheet of dried kelp.

Crossing Shirakawa Street, we passed by Ichijoji Sagarimatsu, where the swordsman Miyamoto Musashi once fought a famous duel. It was still a long way to Grandmother's secluded forest. The way to Tanukidani Fudō went through still residential neighborhoods and dried-up fields, and along a neverending shrine road cutting its way up through shady cedar trees. In her customary form as a dashing fop from the Takarazuka, Mother at first glance appeared to be cool and unfazed, but it was she who let out the first complaint.

"It's burning!" she moaned. "What I wouldn't give for a drop of rain!"

"Rain is all well and good, but what happens if it thunders?"

"Then your mother would lose her transformation, of course. What would you expect?"

"So I'd have to carry you all the way home, you mean..."

"Oh, I wouldn't like that at all. Just the thought of that makes me feel sweaty!"

I hadn't seen my grandmother in Tanukidani Fudō for quite some time. Like the High Elder, Grandmother had long since transcended the usual tanuki lifespan, and had turned into a beautiful pure white furball. Grandmother's secret to longevity was spending her days in Tanukidani Fudō fluffing herself and pushing the boundaries of softness. The tanuki of Tanukidani Fudō had a long tradition of New Age health practices and Eastern medicine, and Grandmother was revered by a great many disciples, who called her the Matriarch.

"Grandmother will know just the right medicine to help Yajirō."

"He says it's a case of autonomic neuropathy."

"Your mother may not understand difficult words like that, but all he needs is to get his chutzpah back, right? You can't transform without chutzpah."

"Do you think he'll drink the medicine, though? He can be pretty stubborn when it comes to this stuff."

My frog brother was not terribly fond of Grandmother.

As the longest lived tanuki in the world, over the course of her many years Grandmother had somewhat cold-bloodedly divided the world into a) things that contributed to longevity, and b) things that did not. She was constantly updating these lists, and eventually even we, her own flesh-and-blood grandsons, came under her magnifying glass. In order to allot her remaining lifespan most efficiently, Grandmother put away her feelings of love for us. In her eyes, Yaichirō, the eldest, was her only grandson, and the rest of us were beneath her notice. Yajirō had it worst of all; at first she had adored him, but little by little she ceased to pay any attention to him whatsoever, and the pain he felt from this caused him to become quiet and withdrawn. Since we'd never held such expectations of her, Yashirō and I were spared the worst of it.

At last Mother and I finally reached the entrance of the shrine road. Around the moss-covered stone plaque engraved with the words *Tanukidani Fudō-in*, Shigaraki-ware tanuki statues were gathered like seashells on the rocks. Weathered by the elements, they looked into the sky as if laughing good-humoredly.

Past them was a stairway leading up through the cedars, with a total of 250 steps in all. At this hour Grandmother would be leading her adherents in morning calisthenics, covering the temple grounds like a hairy carpet in their quest for health.

These were the very same steps where Mother, then known as the Stairmaster, had had her legendary face off against Father and his Tsuchinoko Expeditionary Brigade.

"See how this step is a touch worn away? That's because your mother used to jump off it."

"Don't try to pull that rubbish with me."

"Rubbish? Do you know how many thousands of times I jumped off these steps? Of course it would be worn away. I was jumping around as I always did when Sō came marching up here, with his, er, Takenoko Expeditionary Brigade, was it?"

"*Tsuchi-noko*, not *take-noko*."

"Right, right, *tsuchinoko*. Whatever is so amusing about chasing after a chubby little snake?"

"Father was trying to catch a *tsuchinoko*, but instead he ended up catching you, Mother."

"How insulting, comparing your mother to a *tsuchinoko*! For one, I would certainly be much tastier!" Mother pouted, before letting out a little shriek of frustration. "Oh! How much longer are these stairs? I'm sure they must go all the way up to heaven!"



At long last we reached the square at the top of the stairs. On the left a scaffold rose up against the backdrop of the emerald forest, like the platform at Kiyomizu-dera, and sitting at the top of it was the main building of Tanukidani Fudō-in.

Few pilgrims had climbed all the way up here in the broiling August midday heat, and only the singing of the cicadas echoed across the deserted temple grounds.

Mother approached a small shrine on the right. Jostling around it were more tanuki statues—some covered in moss, some chipped, some brand new, and some hardly even recognizable as tanuki.

"Hello!" Mother called softly, crouching down and coming around to the rear of the shrine. There the trees drew close, and the air was dark and gloomy.

"Oh!" A voice suddenly cried out from beneath the shrine. I peered inside to see a small ornament of Daikoku, the god of wealth, smiling and waving his mallet. "I certainly wasn't expecting a visit from my little sister!"

This was my Uncle Tōichirō, who currently served as the director of the organization to which Grandmother's many disciples belonged. There was a neverending stream of tanuki coming to seek advice on their health, and without my uncle there to keep things moving along it never would have been managed.

Seeing me there my uncle smiled. "And Yasaburō, I haven't seen you in a while there."

"It's good to see you again, Tōichirō. I'm here to request something of Mother."

"You are, are you? Let's be on our way, then."

The Daikoku ornament sprouted fur and turned into a tanuki, then began to scurry along the grounds, while Mother and I followed behind him. Along a stairway by the temple and under a red torii, and we came to a hiking trail that led up Mount Uryū. My uncle went

up the path a ways before turning aside into a gloomy copse of cedar trees. It wouldn't do to startle Grandmother, so Mother and I reverted to our tanuki forms.

We arrived at a large cedar where a crowd of tanuki was gathered. Red lanterns bearing the words *Everlasting Life* hung from the branches of the tree, beneath which many tanuki were jostling playing a children's game. Elsewhere, other tanuki were rotating prayer beads the size of apples; while others still were flipping through all 600 volumes of the Mahayana Sutras with each page joined end-to-end like an accordion, generating a great amount of wind.

My illustrious grandmother was curled up on a soft scarlet cushion, enjoying the breeze from the sutras ruffling her white fur. She was about the size of an orange, and her face was hidden in her fur so it was impossible to tell whether she was awake or asleep.

We made our way through the disciples and arrived before her.

"Mother, it's me. It's Tōsen," whispered Mother.

The white furball puffed out like a disc of mochi, and exclaimed in a voice like a bell, "My dear, Tōsen?" As she grew older, her voice and demeanor on the contrary grew younger, and now she sounded almost like a young girl.

"Yes, your daughter, Tōsen. I'm sorry to wake you."

"You don't need to apologize for anything. I wasn't sleeping, you see."

"Oh, good. You weren't sleeping."

"Yes, that's right. I was thinking of something wonderful."

"What's that?"

"A pretty pond, and the reflection of the green leaves. A sunbeam, shining through the translucent leaves. And a cool breeze rustling by."

"What a lovely thing to think about, Mother."

"Isn't it? Yes, I am Mother," laughed Grandmother. "Oh, I thought you'd gone off to be married."

"I did get married."

"I knew it! I was so sure of it. And are you living a happy life?"

"I am living very happily."

"You smell lovely." Grandmother suddenly dropped her voice to a low, concerned tone. "...Say, would you mind sniffing me?"

Mother brought her damp nose over to Grandmother's white fur and sniffed.

"Do I smell...strange?" Grandmother fretted.

"Not at all. You smell very nice."

Grandmother relaxed. "I knew it!" she said. "I didn't think I smelled strange. But sometimes I do worry."



Mother recounted Yaichirō's latest doings as Grandmother listened happily.

"I wanted your advice." Mother finally came to the point, explaining the story of a tanuki who had gotten too comfortable in his frog skin and become unable to change his shape.

"Hum," Grandmother pondered in that adorable voice. "He can't transform because the water in his belly is drying up."

"But he lives at the bottom of a well. There should be plenty of water."

"The water in a well isn't the same as the water in a belly."

"What should he do?"

"I'll give you some good medicine. He should drink it while practicing transforming," Grandmother declared, instructing Uncle Tōichirō to prepare some pills.

According to Grandmother, water was the source of everything. From sauntering tanuki swagger to the tengu power to move mountains, everything flowed from water. At the moment that we come into this world our bodies are positively overflowing with pure water, but the winds of the world are withering, and the older we get the more we dry up. That Grandmother's mind and body were still so sprightly at her advanced age was supposedly due to her ability to retain that water.

While we waited for the medicine to be prepared, Grandmother asked, "Who is that there?"

"I'm just a passing tanuki. My name is Yasaburō," I answered.

"Well hello there. Have we met before?"

"Several times, I think."

"I knew it! I was so sure of it. Will you come a little closer?"

Mother looked unsure but nudged me forward. I approached Grandmother.

Grandmother sniffed my scent, and her fur ruffled with pleasure.

"My eyes can't see anymore. I don't know when that happened." She didn't sound terribly sad as she said this. "But I can see water flowing. This world is a great big river with everyone flowing along. And it looks like the flow of the river is starting to slow down."

"Is that like constipation?"

"Just like that, just like that."

"Hah, that doesn't sound too good."

"Don't say that like it doesn't concern you. This is where you ought to show your stuff. Open your eyes wide and keep that fur spick and span! Then you'll be ready to cause a ruckus, a fine old ruckus!" Grandmother laughed gaily. "That's all I wanted to say. The end!"

I stared at her in astonishment. She didn't say anything after that, so I leaned in to listen and realized from her soft breathing that she was sleeping like a baby.

Yajirō's medicine was finally finished, and with Uncle Tōichirō seeing us off Mother and I departed from Tanukidani Fudōin.

Though the cries of the cicadas reverberated through the sultry forest as we descended the long stone steps, Grandmother's words still rang in my ears—*this is where you ought to make it count!* Now, what was my illustrious grandmother telling me I had to do? I had no idea what she was getting at, but in the voice of my grandmother, that soft white furball who straddled the boundary of life and death, I had perceived a gentle solemnity.

"Your grandmother certainly does say some strange things," said Mother.

"It kind of went over my head, but I guess I'll just have to try my hardest."

"Oh!" murmured Mother suddenly, stopping in the middle of the steps.

A woman in a sundress was coming up the steps, holding a parasol. Hearing my mother, she looked up at us and smiled in the dappled sunlight.

"Good day. Quite a long stairway, isn't this?" beamed Nanzenji Gyokuran.



That evening, we took the medicine Grandmother had given us and visited Yajirō down in his well in Rokudō Chinnōji.

Yajirō lived on a craggy little island overgrown with ferns and moss at the bottom of the well. There was also a toy-sized shrine whose sacred lanterns read "God of Shogi". In the light of those lanterns he was studying a shogi board covered with tiny pea-sized pieces.

It was cool here even during the summer, and for once Yajirō actually had a guest. A rust-coloured toad was squatting on the island, facing Yajirō across the board.

"Yasaburō?" it croaked, and to my surprise I realized it was Yaichirō.

I crawled onto the island in my own froggy form and slapped myself down next to the board. "What're you doing here, Yaichirō?"

"What, why shouldn't I be here?"

"The more, the merrier!" Yajirō piped up happily. "It's really jumping down here tonight!"

"I thought you'd gone to Nara, though?"

"I did. Then I came back. That's why I'm here," scowled Yaichirō.

"You see," interrupted Yajirō, "I'm actually teaching him shogi."

According to Yajirō, Yaichirō had come humbly beseeching him for coaching, seeking to close the gulf that existed between himself and Gyokuran. Of late Yaichirō and Gyokuran had been visiting each other regularly, conducting examinations across the board for the red fur of fate. Against Gyokuran, the most fearsome shogi player in all of tanukidom, there was no hope of victory, but Yaichirō stated, "I at least wish to lose with dignity," which was a very Yaichirō-like thing to say.

Here I also learned that my older brothers had been nosing around Father's shogi room, dusting off the heaps of books that were piled high and studying shogi as they went. Nanzenji Gyokuran had joined them, and borrowed a shogi book published in the Edo period that contained some exceedingly difficult shogi problems.

"Look at you guys, off having all this fun. How come you never asked me to join?"

"Ask someone who has no interest in shogi whatsoever?"

"I might not care about shogi, but I care about Father's belongings."

"This is all about shogi, see. We bring you in, you'd just tease Yaichirō about Gyokuran. Our big brother's a bashful lad," chuckled Yajirō, causing Yaichirō to stare down at the board and turn the colour of lead.

Yaichirō and Gyokuran were two wallflowers spending day after plodding day quietly playing shogi and leaving when they were done. At this rate they'd still chastely be prodding at the board when they were old and grey. By now everyone just wanted to skip the

courtship and get to “happily ever after”, thoroughly sick of watching these two gingerly edge toward each other across the board like they were afraid the next square might drop them into lava.

“Just checkmate her already!”

Yajirō agreed with me. “Yasaburō’s right. Dragging out the game is impolite. I’ll bet she’s just waiting to concede.”

“What a terribly irresponsible thing to say. How can you two possibly know that?”

“Two tanuki falling in each other’s arms is just the natural course of things, isn’t it?”

“Silence, you scandalous hairball!”

“C’mon, what’s scandalous about the natural course of things?”

“I have responsibility. I cannot be some rogue living on a wing and a prayer, or renounce the world and exile myself to the bottom of a well. I have my own way of doing things!”

“All right, all right,” said Yajirō soothingly. “Yasaburō was just trying to help out, Yaichirō.”

“Yeah, tell him!”

“Hmph, all the while hiding a smirk, no doubt. It’s quite obvious,” sniffed Yaichirō, before sullenly going quiet.



“We got some pills at Tanukidani Fudō,” I announced, explaining what had happened there.

Yajirō’s look soured, and he didn’t say anything, probably reliving in his mind the many injustices he had received at the hands of Grandmother. Yajirō had a tendency to get snippy whenever the topic of Grandmother came around. For his part Yaichirō was in a difficult spot, for he had ended up shunting Yajirō aside and taking all of Grandmother’s love, and so he half-closed his eyelids like the Great Buddha in Nara and kept his mouth shut.

“Fine,” muttered Yajirō, after a long period of silence. “No point in being stubborn, I suppose.”

“So you’ll drink it? You’re going to love being able to transform again.”

“I’ll take the medicine. Once my powers are back, I’ll go and thank her.”

“The medicine of Tanukidani Fudō is highly esteemed,” Yaichirō declared, sounding relieved. “Gyokuran mentioned that she has gone there before, to fetch medicine for the former patriarch of the Nanzenji.”

“Right, right, we bumped into Gyokuran,” I interrupted. “Mother invited her to our pleasure cruise.”

Using the Okuribi as a pretext, Mother was intent on forcing Yaichirō and Gyokuran together. When it came to matchmaking her views tended to be airy yet unequivocal. In her own words: “Just put ‘em together in a tight space, and they’ll come together on their own. Fluffy is practically a tanuki’s middle name, after all!”



Flying through the night sky in a pleasure barge on the night of the Gozan no Okuribi and seeing off the spirits of our furry ancestors is a long-cherished tradition of the Shimogamo clan. The Manpuku Maru, the pleasure barge that we had used when Father was alive, had been lost in a fiery crash two years ago, so last year we had made do with Yakushibō's Inner Parlor, a flying tearoom that we borrowed from Benten. But that had been smashed into splinters following a heated aerial battle with the Ebisugawas. Yaichirō's aforementioned trip to Nara had been for the purpose of borrowing a pleasure barge with which to soar the skies on the Okuribi.

"I'm sure there'll be sparks flying this year, with both you and Gyokuran on the pleasure barge."

But Yaichirō and Yajirō looked at each other, their faces downcast.

"What, something wrong?"

"There isn't going to be a pleasure barge, Yasaburō," murmured Yajirō.

"But didn't you say you were going to get one from the Nara tanuki?"

Yaichirō's face was forlorn as he told me, "Those hopes are dashed."



It was late last night that Yaichirō had walked out of the darkened streets into the Nara Hotel.

Yaichirō, that paragon of caution, had gone there many times since the dawning of the year to secure the use of the SS Tang Envoy from the tanuki of the Nanto Alliance. But at the eleventh hour the winds changed for the unexpected, throwing Yaichirō into a tizzy.

Yaichirō's interview with the representative of the alliance took place in a tearoom facing out into a garden. The representative's breath stank of alcohol, and he tampered with his bolo tie constantly, dodging the question of when the ship would be handed over. "Sometime around September," he said apologetically when Yaichirō pressed him. Even the most laidback of tanuki wouldn't be so stupid as to plan to go up in a pleasure barge *after* the Gozan no Okuribi had passed. Naturally my brother was rather exasperated.

"As you know, the barge plunged into the Kizu River last year," the representative prevaricated. "The repairs are yet to be completed."

"But it's been a year since then. Why is this the first I'm hearing of this?"

"Blaming the messenger won't do you any good."

As Yaichirō glared at the distressed representative, a lightbulb went on in his head. This surely was the hand of another at work.

In his anger he was on the verge of transforming into a tiger, but it would not do to wreck the tearoom at the stately Nara Hotel. Swallowing his rage he ground his teeth and looked out at the dim reaches of the garden, but when he was calm enough to turn round again the representative had already fled.

Sure enough, my brother found this discourtesy more than he could bear.

The next day Yaichirō sent visitors and deer alike scattering at Nara Park, tracking down the elders of the Nanto Alliance in order to confront them directly.

But the leadership were all wasted, having just come from a banquet that had gone on for several days, and were in no condition to spill the beans. They could barely tell who they were talking to, let alone remember anything about the ship they had promised to the Shimogamo clan, but since he'd come all the way down to the Kasuga Forest why didn't he have some Faux Denki Bran, courtesy of those nice Ebisugawas up in Kyoto?

So Yaichirō headed back to Kyoto empty-handed.

"Kinkaku and Ginkaku have snatched the ship from under our noses!" Yaichirō raged.

"Those Ebisugawas don't pull their punches, do they?" observed Yajirō.

In my head, I imagined those idiot brothers chanting, "He who fails to prepare, prepares for failure!" No doubt they were toasting their success right about now.

But they'd messed with the buck, and now they were about to get the horns.

"We oughta find where they're hiding it and take it back!" I declared.

But Yaichirō frowned and shook his head. "Even if we were to succeed, they would hardly take it lying down. We would end up in a tug-of-war with them all the way up to the Gozan no Okuribi."

"Bring it on, then!"

"I have no intention of repeating last year's quarrel with them, even less now that we have invited Gyokuran. We cannot afford to embroil the Nanzenji into our family quarrel."

Stepping into my dismayed silence, Yajirō reflected softly, "Someone must've put those schmucks up to it. Those two would never have thought of buying off the Nanto Alliance on their own, and I doubt it was Kaisei that gave them the idea."

"It must be Sōun pulling their strings!" The toad that was Yaichirō quivered in anger, beginning to sprout tiger-striped fur. "It's been over six months since he disappeared. He must have tired of his hot springs tour and moved against us. Damn him, he shall not get away with this! We brothers will surely bring the iron hammer of justice down upon him! He shall kneel before Father's grave before we pluck out the fur from his tail and scatter them into the river!"

"That's all well and good, but what do we do about the Okuribi?" I interjected.

We all looked at each other, but none of us could come with a plan, and eventually night fell over the well. Yaichirō just sat there silently like a rock, while Yajirō pushed shogi pieces around with his tongue. Supposedly three heads are better than one, yet not a single eureka moment was to be had. This was looking like a problem better left for me to ponder over.

"I'll think of something," I assured them.



When you're stuck on a problem it's best to play around. That's the tanuki way.

So with that in mind, the next day I took Yashirō down to Sanjō Karasuma.

Karasuma Street was bustling, even in the unreasonable midday heat. The rays of the midsummer sun penetrated into every nook and cranny; this must have been what it was like to be in a frying pan. Even the curmudgeonly statue of Shōki that scowled down

upon us from the eaves of an old house looked burnt black. The heat made me long for the shady boughs of the forest.

"It's so hot!"

"Sure is."

"Yasaburō, the Heir's mamemochi are gonna melt!"

"Well, we can't have that. Let's pick up the pace."

The Heir of Yakushibō of Nyoigadake had regretfully left his residence at the hotel in Kawaramachi Oike last week. His new lodgings were in a seven-story building, down Shinmachi Street and on the left. Above the mugwort-green tiles at the entrance was the English name of a textiles company. Wrapping around the sides and the back of the building was a series of stairways and spiked iron fences whose oddly convoluted appearance resembled an optical illusion. It looked like a fortress of the Far East, and hardly anyone would ever expect that on its roof lay the residence of a tengu.

At the top of the long stairs lay the boundless blue sky. The space was wide enough to accommodate five Eizan railcars put end to end. "Auu!" gasped Yashirō as we were hit by a sudden blast of hot wind.

"Hold on." I checked my brother here.

The Heir was standing in the middle of the vast roof, being one with himself. The sleeves of his white dress shirt were rolled up, and his back was perfectly erect. In front of him was an ironing board. Hanging from the drying racks around him were more dress shirts, nearly gleaming in their spotlessness. The Heir's left hand was placed on the ironing board, and his expression was solemn, almost as if he bore the weight of the world on his shoulders. The only sound was the whistling of the wind; under the dizzying vastness of the cosmos, there was a crushing tension in the air.

Without warning the Heir opened his eyes, and began to iron his shirt.

His handling of that lump of metal was magnificent; he ironed shirt after shirt with exquisite skill. Each time the iron let out a hiss of steam, an evanescent rainbow would appear for a brief moment. Before we realized it Yashirō and I had come right up to the ironing board, transfixed by that display of artistry. There was not the slightest hesitation in the Heir's handling of the iron, so smooth and masterful that it was almost soporific. Each time he took a piping hot shirt by the collar and gave it a brisk shake in the air, a wonderfully fresh scent tickled our noses.

Once he had brought order to the last shirt a small smile broke through his stern gaze, like a ray of sunshine peeping through the clouds.

He looked up and addressed us. "Good day, gentlemen. I apologize for the delay, for you see I was quite engrossed in my ironing."

"I'm amazed you're doing ironing on a sweltering day like today. Don't you feel hot at all?"

"In truth I do, though I have excised such animalistic concepts as 'hot' from my consciousness. But the heat must be quite intolerable for a furry being such as you. Have you considered perhaps shaving the fur off?"

"That would kind of ruin our charm, and most importantly we wouldn't be able to transform."

"Ah. My condolences." The Heir chuckled. "By the way, I don't believe I have been introduced to your companion."

I gave Yashirō a prod in the back, and he came up and offered the cloth bundle, bowing his head. "I am Shimogamo Yashirō, fourth son of Shimogamo Sōichirō. We present this humble offering to you, sir, in commemoration of your new abode."

"How very kind of you," said the Heir, and shook a flustered Yashirō's hand. "Now, I don't suppose you gentlemen have some time on your hands?"

"More than we could shake a stick at."

"Splendid. I was just considering taking a brief rest after bringing a bit of order to my corner of the world. As a token of gratitude for your gift, might I invite you gentlemen to a spot of tea?"



The Heir's residence took up the eastern third of the roof.

It was a smart villa-esque building, a pale green triangular roof atop white walls. Trees grew lushly bounded by a white picket fence, and just by the garden gate was a gas lamp brought over from Europe. There was a spacious veranda with a deck chair, and through a French door an even more spacious drawing room which, even furnished with the Heir's European collection, still had room to spare. It was quite pleasant there with the air conditioning running. A tengu-like elegance pervaded the space, along with the scents of antique furniture and old books and tobacco smoke.

We sat at a large table draped with a pure white tablecloth. The Heir brought out a gleaming, very fancy-looking tea set, and served us tea. Yashirō's tail immediately sprouted out when he tasted the hot tea, but on the other hand the Heir found the sticky mochi difficult to manage.

"Is it not to your liking?"

"Nothing of the sort. It is quite delicious; however, I do prefer foods which allow me to avoid soiling my hands," the Heir replied, taking a nibble of the mochi.

"This is a very nice house," I commented.

"It was once the villa of a rather accomplished tanuki. It reeked quite strongly of tanuki when I first acquired it, but that has been remedied by an extensive remodeling."

I had a bad feeling when I heard the words "accomplished tanuki".

"If you don't mind me asking, would this house happen to have been offered to you by Kinkaku and Ginkaku?"

"Just so. Their father has left Kyoto, and so the house lay empty."

"Owing those two might be more of a headache than you were expecting."

"Owe? I owe them nothing. They came away with a bowlful of golden Napoléons. It was a most transparent transaction, their avarice fully satisfied. Therefore I owe them nothing. You, on the other hand, stubbornly refuse to take my coins, and so I find rather that it is you who are a headache to me."

I had known of Kinkaku and Ginkaku's visits to the Heir, but if they were going to try to hedge their bets on which tengu would come out on top, I'd have to keep my eye on

them. I was willing to bet that the coins that had rolled out of the Heir's pockets had been the very same coins which those two had used to pay off the Nanto Alliance.

"I would advise against associating with those two."

"They said the same of you. Shimogamo Yasaburō is a knave, a rogue, a constant thorn in the side of the Ebisugawa clan, and one who never passes up an opportunity to show up a tengu."

"You mustn't take what they say at face value. They're complete and utter fools, the both of them."

"Are not all tanuki fools?" smiled the Heir.

Unlike most tengu he led a very tranquil life, not once seeking to rock the boat, and hopes amongst the tanuki of Kyoto that a New Tengu Age would rise were dimming. They were all convinced, the fools, that the domineering likes of Master Akadama and Kurama tengu were "proper" tengu. Some even snidely predicted, "Benten'll put the Heir in his place sooner or later!" If you don't put the fear in tanuki, they start to get too big for their britches.

When the Heir wasn't taking his daily stroll in his anachronistic getup, he was organizing his collection of journals from his European days, or rearranging his furniture, or reclining on his velvet sofa engrossed in some detective novel. It seemed to me that his tengu powers were being wasted, which was a mild concern.

"Letting loose every now and then wouldn't be so bad, would it?"

"A regular rabble rouser, I see," he sighed. "As I have told you, I am not a tengu."

"I do wish you wouldn't be so stiff-necked..."

"Furthermore, I am exceedingly busy. This room is still quite slovenly."

But in my opinion the villa didn't look slovenly at all. In terms of form and function everything looked right where it was supposed to be. Even the half-read books stacked on his desk were meticulously sorted with their spines all aligned. It was a far cry from the turmoil of Master Akadama's apartment; the father was the avatar of chaos, the son the paragon of order.

I described to him the Master's filthy apartment, down to the last lurid detail. Raising his eyebrows distastefully, the Heir coldly said, "I urge you to burn it to the ground. It would have a most cleansing effect on your soul, I am sure."



The Heir was quite pleased to learn that my brother was interested in magnetism. Apparently, in his younger days he had spent a great deal of time studying it himself.

"Take this, Yashirō; you will find it to be of great use in shielding your eyes from harm." The Heir took from a large iron chest in the corner an old pair of flying goggles. It had once belonged to a boy in England whose heart had roamed the skies. Yashirō was over the moon, and immediately put them on pretending to be a boy pilot.

Each of the Heir's belongings had a memory of Europe entwined with it. His favorite pipe was given to him by the owner of a used bookstore in Czechoslovakia; the velvet Chesterfield on which he reclined to read his books was a gift from a noblewoman in

Vienna; his mountain of detective novels had been obtained from a philosopher at Cambridge, who plunged himself so deeply into his field that the only opportunities he had to come up for air were reading detective novels and going to the movies.

The Heir reminisced over his memories at length, but there were two things that he absolutely refused to discuss. One was the reason for his departing on his journey abroad, and the other was the reason for his return. Whenever the conversation veered too closely to either of those topics, the Heir would immediately change the subject.

Eventually he glanced up at the grandfather clock, which was striking two in the afternoon.

"My furry friends, I must ask your leave to retire."

"Beg pardon, I hadn't realized we'd been here for so long."

"I always nap atop my sofa before setting out for my daily stroll."

At this moment, a figure landed on the veranda. As the Heir glanced over frowning, the French door opened, and Benten came sweeping in wearing a cool white sundress, accompanied by a blast of hot air. At Yashirō and me she smiled sweetly, but for the Heir she did not spare a glance, sweeping her gaze over the room before proceeding directly to the velvet sofa and throwing herself upon it, lounging there as if she owned the place.

I whispered in the Master's ear, "The Lady Benten."

"So I see," he said coolly.

Ever since her return in July, Benten had had her eye on the Heir. Benten, the Peerless and Unrivalled, expected everything and everyone in Kyoto to kiss her feet, and the festivities with which she was welcomed on her return by tengu and tanuki and human alike seemed to bear that attitude out. The Kurama tengu threw a huge welcome-home bash for her; the cream of tanuki society came bearing gifts for her; and the Friday Fellows convened a special session to celebrate her return. With respect to Master Akadama, I wouldn't have been surprised if he had gotten down on hands and knees and literally tried to kiss her feet.

The only person who disdained to get involved in all this hullabaloo was the Heir.

He silently rose from the table and walked over to the sofa where Benten was reclining, looking down on her with all the frigidness of a statue.

Benten returned his gaze, but did not move from her position. "Yes?" she smiled sweetly.

"I hate to intrude on your repose, madam, but I must ask you to return this sofa. I am due for my afternoon nap."

"Oh, but I'm using it."

"This is my favorite sofa, madam."

"And I can see why. It's wonderfully comfy. Why, I might just fall asleep here myself!"

Understanding that his gentlemanly parley had been rebuffed, the Heir silently turned on his heel and came back to the table where we had just had our tea. Taking the white tablecloth in both hands, he gave it a swift tug. The teaware atop the table did not so much as move a millimeter. The Heir turned round and, fluttering the tablecloth like a matador before a bull, approached Benten and laid the cloth down before the sofa, fastidiously pulling out the corners. Overcome by curiosity, Benten sat up ever so slightly.

"That's quite all right, madam," the Heir said kindly. "As you were, as you were."

Going around to the back of the sofa, he leaned against the sofa, which tipped over. With a small shriek Benten was ejected onto the ground.

Brushing off his hands with a satisfied look, the Heir smiled down at Benten, who was flat on her backside. "Pray forgive the imposition, madam. But while it is delightful that you are comfortable, what is important here is the fact that I am not."

The Heir lay himself down smoothly on the sofa. "Good day, then, and good night."

Outwardly Benten affected a calm demeanor, but it was apparent that she was forcibly restraining her seething rage, which in turn was making her even angrier. I could almost hear the roiling sound of her fury. Standing up, she stared at the Heir with eyes of pure hatred.

"What a strange tengu, Yasaburō," she breathed.

"Lady Benten, I beseech you to restrain your anger—"

"This is hardly enough to make me angry."

She looked as if she would stalk directly out the door, but apparently she wasn't quite able to tamp her feelings down completely, for she suddenly turned around and opened the Heir's closet, yanking out every last one of the carefully ironed shirts and crumpling them up in her hands. Then, throwing them on the floor, she stamped all over them before leaving through the door.

All the while, the Heir lay unmoving on the sofa, quietly snoozing.



After leaving the Heir's villa, Benten lit north along the city's rooftops like a skipping stone. She flew to city hall and to Kyoto Shimbun headquarters and to Kyoto Prefectural University of Medicine and to other places besides, shattering windows, bending antennas, gashing water tanks.

After all this she visited Master Akadama's apartment.

"Benten, Benten, how glad I am you have come."

Benten sat down on the floor beside the beaming Master with a thump. "Oh, what a shock I've had!"

"Now what has gotten you flustered?"

"It was awful, just awful, Master! Look!" Playing the part of an injured maiden she put out her dainty elbow, showing him the faint bruise which was the proof of her tumble from the couch. Or perhaps she had come by it after imprudently elbowing a water tank. To Benten it was all the same: all of it had happened because the Heir would not give her the time of day. She complained about the Heir's incivility, even nonchalantly hinting of certain monstrous threats made to her chastity.

His own lecherous ways notwithstanding, the Master thundered, "None may raise his hand to my disciple and live to tell the tale!"

Thus, the seeds of yet another tengu quarrel were sown.

The encounter between Benten and the Heir became the talk of the town in the tanuki world as well. Judging from the sheer scale of Benten's tantrum, it was obvious to all

just how acrimonious their meeting had been. A few tanuki were eager to finally witness a tengu war, but most assumed that Benten would expose him. While the Heir was unassailable where etiquette was concerned, his tengu credentials were somewhat lacking, at least in the unqualified opinion of the tanuki.

At night I went to the Scarlet Pane on Teramachi Street, where as always the owner was taking bets.

"Ah, Yasaburō there, which one d'ye reckon'll come out on top?"

"Not this again. How about you stop worrying about this stuff and try to do something constructive with your noggin for once? Following tengu squabbles is for weirdos."

"Oh, drop the high-and-mighty act. I know you're enjoying this more than anyone else."

"No question it's top-rate entertainment, wondering how it'll all play out...but this isn't the time for my eyes to be glued to tengu drama. Got other fish to fry."

"What, no luck with the pleasure barge then?"

"Nope. I'm at a dead end here."

"That's bloody disgraceful, mate. Your ancestors must be turning in their graves."

A few days after that, a pleasure barge was transported over from Nara, arriving at the Faux Denki Bran distillery with great fanfare.

Yaichirō was so incensed when he heard the news from Yashirō that he nearly passed out. His plans were all dashed, and following this, whether awake or asleep he could often be heard grinding his teeth and muttering, "Damned Ebisugawas!" which made it very difficult for the rest of us to fall asleep at night.

"Yaichirō will grind his teeth to dust if he keeps this up," Mother murmured wearily. "At this rate, we might have to retract our invitation to Gyokuran!"



In the midst of all this I was summoned by Master Akadama, putting me in an even more dispirited mood.

I hesitantly edged into the apartment behind the Demachi shopping arcade to find that the Master had boarded up the windows in anticipation of an assault by the Heir. It was hot as a sauna in there as he puffed away on his pipe.

Hot sunlight pierced like laser beams through the gaps between the makeshift barricades constructed from piles of garbage. Violet smoke and motes of dust drifted in and out of the rays of light, and with no outlet through which to escape the eye-watering odor of aged tengu whirled up in eddies, making the room nigh unbearable. Not only that, the Master had scattered caltrops all over the floor, creating quite a hazard for my tender tanuki footpads.

"Shimogamo Yasaburō, at your service," making sure to avoid stepping on any caltrops as I prostrated myself. "You seem to be down in the dumps, figuratively and literally."

"I hear that the scoundrel has violated Benten."



"Well, calling it *violating* is a little much."

"And furthermore, you yourself were there. What were you doing there, skulking about that ruffian's domicile? Explain yourself!"

"I was merely presenting a gift to commemorate his moving there. A modest one, of course."

"How many times must I tell you!" the Master barked. A puff of purple smoke came out of his mouth and formed itself into a dragon, writhing through the room. "He is not my son, not a tengu, not my heir. He is a spineless cur who knows not the slightest thing about what it means to walk the tengu's path. He could never be fit to walk in the footsteps of one such as I. It is Benten who shall succeed the great seat of Yakushibō of Nyoigadake. As I have declared, let it be so!"

"You really needn't work yourself up like this, Master," I assured my heated old master. "After all, you're not retiring anytime soon."

"Silence. I forbid you from calling him the Heir ever again."

"Dear me. Then whatever shall I call him?"

"You may call him the Salacious Squire." The tip of the tengu cigar smoldered in that unctuous, molasses-like darkness.

I suddenly realized to my great surprise that the Master was tapping off the ashes into the chagama engine which had once powered the now-lost Yakushibō's Inner Parlor through the skies. This engine had seen a lot of action, not just during the Okuribi, but also at the fracas at the close of the previous year, enabling us to retaliate against the Ebisugawa plot. It was a wondrous device that with the help of a little Akadama port wine could make anything fly through the sky, and using it as an ashtray of all things was criminally negligent, even for a tengu down on his luck.

"Master, I must insist you stop putting your ash in there!"

I hastily ran to the kitchen and found a small chipped bowl, replacing it for the chagama engine next to the Master. I dumped out the ashes from the vessel and painstakingly wiped it out with a damp rag.

The most wonderful idea flew into my head then.

"Master, would it be possible to briefly borrow this chagama engine?"

"What would you use it for? All the damned thing can do is wobble through the air guzzling wine."

"You are aware, of course, that we view the Gozan no Okuribi bonfires from the air?"

"Hmph, is it that season already?" he murmured, looking up at the sky for a moment before bringing a gaze full of majesty to bear on me. "Yasaburō. You intend to make some piffling thing fly, do you not?"

"This is a matter of honor for the Shimogamo clan. My lord, I humbly ask your favor."

Master Akadama puffed away on his tengu cigar for some time, whiling the time away. This ceremonial interlude is indispensable to exhibiting tengu majesty. I couldn't afford to say something chipper and incur his displeasure, so I remained silent and low to the floor.

At last he gave his reply. "Very well. I will allow it, subject to one condition."

"As my lord requires."

"You will not invite me to see the Okuribi. I will not allow it."

"How grieved I am to hear such words!" I cried dramatically. "Our gathering simply cannot do with you, Master!"

"I have better things to do with my time than attend furball banquets. Fur spoils the wine, and furball *chirashizushi* sticks in my throat. No, take the engine and do with it as you will."

Tengu are exceedingly difficult beings to manage. For starters, they were originally expelled from human society because humans found them so tiresome to deal with, and in fact, tengu find themselves difficult to manage as well. I knew from long years of experience that breezily saying, "All right then, toodles!" and sauntering out the door would hardly suffice here.

"I beg you to reconsider!" I pleaded over and over, while the Master stubbornly insisted, "Stop wasting my time!"

After many exhausting rounds of this, the Master was finally satisfied.

"I will go, if I find myself at liberty. Gracious, there is no pleasing you tanuki!"

I picked up the chagama engine and stepped out the door, pursued by one final reminder from the Master.

"There will be no need for any furball sushi! None whatsoever!"

I made a mental note not to forget the *chirashizushi*.



It is an ancient tanuki tradition to sail out in pleasure barges on the night of the Gozan no Okuribi.

According to legend, it had been a young tanuki pup, an aviation aficionado who had long dreamed of soaring the skies, who first made an appeal to Tarōbō of Atagoyama.

The skies have always been the domain of the tengu, and they do not suffer tanuki to fly about willy-nilly. Hearing this adventurous tanuki's appeal, the tengu gathered at Mount Atago and held an all-Kyoto tengu conference, and at the end of much heated discussion, they decreed that tanuki would be allowed to fly through the sky just one night a year. That night is the night of the Gozan no Okuribi.

The tanuki were overjoyed and eagerly set to work, each family pooling their efforts to construct their own pleasure barge. However, there was one problem: the flight system. Some gave tribute to the tengu in return for an engine, while others turned to sketchy backyard tinkerers for help. One by one the pleasure barges went up in a glorious display of tanuki ingenuity, and henceforth the skies over the Gozan no Okuribi became a much livelier place.

But in the long history of pleasure barges, no one had ever piloted a fake Eizan railcar through the sky. And that was exactly what I intended to do.



The night of the Okuribi, Yajirō drove up the path towards Shimogamo Shrine in the guise of an Eizan railcar. Lights blazed through the windows and washed over the gravel, and the strong smell of Faux Denki Bran pervaded the air. Yajirō was already tipsy, having imbibed some liquid courage in order to shapeshift, and he nearly ran over Yaichirō, who was trying to guide him up the shrine road.

"A fake Eizan railcar, of all things," grumbled Yaichirō.

"Pretty original, right?" I said proudly.

"I'm glad to play a part in keeping the Shimogamo tradition alive," Yajirō confessed. "It is a shame that I won't be able to raise a glass with you all though, seeing as it's my first Okuribi in years."

"Drink up while you can. I don't want you falling out of the sky and wiping out our entire bloodline!"

"Relax, Yaichirō," I assured him. "At least we'll all be in the same boat—er, train!"

"I've already practiced tonight hundreds of times in my head down in the well."

"Oh, how *lucky* I am to have such dependable brothers," groaned Yaichirō.

In a little while Mother and Yashirō came scurrying out from the trees. The moment black-clad Mother laid eyes on Yajirō she threw her arms around the body of the train and cried, "Bravo, Yajirō! Well done, well done!"

As we waited for Nanzenji Gyokuran, the guest of honor, to arrive, we toiled away getting everything ready on our pleasure locomotive. Wearing the flying goggles, Yashirō carried the chagama engine into the train, installing and inspecting it with single-minded focus. Yaichirō brought in crates of Akadama port wine, while Mother delivered chirashizushi and lacquered wooden boxes full of stewed vegetables and other such comestibles. Outside I was busy attaching glittering streamers to Yajirō's rear end.

"Think Yaichirō and Gyokuran'll finally settle their engagement tonight?"

"Dunno," I shrugged.

"Haven't you been practicing with Yaichirō?"

"...Imagine how well it went for me."

Mother was scheming to use tonight to finally bring Yaichirō and Gyokuran across the shogi board and into each other's arms. And in order to accomplish that, she needed Yaichirō to get used to murmuring sweet nothings.

So that was why I had ended up transforming into Gyokuran and practicing with Yaichirō, but it had been tough going getting my square of a brother to say his sappy lines.

"Pull yourself together, man!"

"Just say it!"

"Take my hand! Do it!"

With the help of my drill sergeant encouragement, Yaichirō finally managed to squeak out a confession of love, but the toe-curling repulsiveness of two brothers professing love to each other made us feel sick, and both Yaichirō and I were bedridden for some time afterward.

As we were finishing up the preparations, Nanzenji Gyokuran came strolling up the shrine road. Yaichirō hastily lit down from the train to greet her, and the two stiffly bowed to one another.

"I thank you for extending such a gracious invitation on this solemn occasion."

"The pleasure is mine. It is our honor to welcome you to the Tadasu Forest."

"It's good to see you again, Yajirō," Gyokuran called. "You make a lovely train. And who else would have thought of using an Eizan railcar for your pleasure barge but Yasaburō?"

"You know me too well, Gyokuran," I grinned. "We must look like a bunch of fools to you."

"Yes, but a lovely bunch of fools!"

Now we had but to wait for the arrival of the Master.

At long last, Master Akadama came hobbling along on a walking stick up the long white path between the trees. He stopped, glaring at the blazing lights of the fake Eizan railcar in the cerulean evening.

"You there, furballs. What manner of merriment is this?"



Flight goggles firmly in place, Yashirō announced from the driver's seat, "Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats. The aircraft will be taking off shortly."

Thus our pleasure locomotive chugged off from the Tadasu Forest on its journey into the night sky.

Our departed father used to love riding around on the Yajirō Express. Perhaps Yajirō was reminiscing about those good old days when it had been just him and Father, two drunkards against the world, for in his excitement he nearly ran us straight into Shimogamo Shrine.

"Safely, if you please!" Yaichirō hollered as the train just grazed the top of the vermilion gate, and with that we were off into the sky.

It was too soon to relax, though. As the railcar rocketed into the sky it tilted sharply upwards, sending everything inside tumbling to the rear in a tangled heap. A container of soup burst open, drenching all of us passengers and making us all smell of *dashi*.

"Tanuki have not the faintest idea of what it is to fly," grumbled Master Akadama. "I honor you with my presence, and yet you show me this disgraceful display!"

While Yajirō and Yashirō figured out the controls, we all feared for our lives.

After what felt like an eternity the railcar gradually leveled out.

"*Ding*. The aircraft has reached cruising altitude. You are now free to move about the cabin."

"Yashirō, I thought I asked you to drive safely!"

"Well, Yajirō was just going so fast!"

"Sorry," I heard Yajirō rumble apologetically. "I just got a little carried away."

"Don't sweat it, Yajirō. Tonight's all about cutting loose!"

"You silly furballs have not forgotten that I am aboard, I trust!"

"Oh dear, the soup's gone everywhere," Mother murmured sadly. "But the chirashizushi was always mixed up anyhow, so that's alright. We'll just need to tidy it up a bit, that's all!"

Cool night air whistled through an open window as we brushed ourselves off and began to reassemble the feast. I clambered onto a seat and looked out through the window at the scene outside.

The nightscape below was speckled with innumerable pinpoints of light. Floating up through the air very close by was a contraption that resembled an oxcart<sup>4</sup>, which must have been the pleasure barge of the tanuki of Gosho. I leaned out the window and waved, and they rolled up the bamboo blinds and waved back. Hearing them blare their trumpets in salutation, Yajirō tooted his horn in reply. Trailing a glittering rainbow collage of streamers, our pleasure locomotive continued on its way through the night sky.

One after another, the bonfires were lit on the mountaintops.

"Look, Master, the bonfires!"

"Yes, I know."

"You oughta take a look yourself."

"And for what purpose? Wherefore should I take part in this silly human carousing?" Master Akadama steadfastly refused to look out the window.

The mountain of Nyoigadake on which the Daimonji bonfire burned was the former domain of Master Akadama, otherwise known as Yakushibō of Nyoigadake. Our father had used his once-in-a-generation shapeshifting prowess to pull off the False Nyoigadake Caper in order to strike a blow at the Kurama tengu, who had been causing havoc all over the Master's domain. Yet Father's heroics had all been for naught, and Master Akadama had been drummed out of Nyoigadake and forced into his present straits.

As it happened, I had had a hand in the incident at the Demon's Perch, which had precipitated the Master's downfall. What our great father had risked his life to protect, his fool of a son had thrown away. It was a trite, all-too-common tale, but that didn't mean that I didn't feel remorseful about it.

But Master Akadama displayed nary the slightest hint of fondness for Nyoigadake, instead ravenously digging into the chirashizushi and happily downing his cup of Akadama port wine, which Gyokuran kept refilling for him.

He turned and frowned at Yaichirō. "Yaichirō, why do you not take the form of Hotei tonight?"

"There is no need for it tonight," said Yaichirō, looking unruffled in his robes.

"Come, you preen yourself overmuch. Is tonight not a night for, as you say, 'cutting loose?'"

"He's on his best behavior because Gyokuran is here," I whispered in the Master's ear.

"Hmm-hmm!" The Master cleared his throat with a knowing look. "A marriage interview between furballs. There's no reason to be shy, I say, have at it then!"

"Master, this isn't a sumo match," Gyokuran said firmly. "You're making Yaichirō nervous!"

"Yes, Master, Gyokuran is quite anxious," added Yaichirō.

---

<sup>4</sup> The oxcart, or *gissha*, is also known by the name *gosho-guruma*, referencing its ceremonial use at Gosho, the imperial palace in Kyoto.

The Master looked up from his cup and glared at the two. "You furballs and your pretensions. How much more of life I have seen; think you that you could hide your affections from me?"

While it was dubious whether the Master was any great shakes at the game of love, when he went off on one of his unreasonable lectures his tengu majesty was undeniable.

"You damned furballs simply do not know your place..." As he began his lengthy pontificating, his eyes blazed brightly, and his hair stood on end as if the air was electrified. Perhaps his ire was being raised because this had reminded him that Benten was not by his side. Anguished over his own inadequacy to pursue love in his old age, it was no wonder he found it infuriating to see the overly cautious relationship playing out between Yaichirō and Gyokuran. At last he bit into his cup, spraying Akadama port wine through the air, and shook the whole locomotive with a thunderous shout.

"If you love each other, then say you love each other!"

Yaichirō and Gyokuran looked unswervingly into each other's eyes.

"I love you."

"I love you."

Their tails sprouted out at the same time, making it rather obvious what was going through their heads.

"Hmph. Go, then, and be happy," declared the Master.

Mother was on cloud nine as she poured a cup of Akadama port wine for the Master. "Oh Master, you certainly do have a different turn of phrase!"

"Obviously. Who do you think I am?" he boasted.



Stepping away from the animated banquet, I ducked beneath the handstraps and went up to the driver's seat. Through the windshield I could see the vast nightscape beneath us. The Gozan no Okuribi was drawing to an end.

From next to my ear I heard Yajirō say happily, "What a great night it's been. Fun things are good things!"

"It's a shame you had to stay like this the whole time."

"S nothing to be sad about. Feeling you all happy in there makes my belly warm. Your belly tends to be cold all the time when you live down in a well, see?"

"Fun things are good things."

With the glad voices of my family ringing in my ears, I looked out into the night, and thought about Father, who had once sat at the center of this happy gathering. When I thought of Father he was almost always laughing. There'd never been a tanuki who laughed so heartily as him, laughing until tears ran down his face. I'd never seen him weep before, but when I thought of it he was always crying as he laughed. That laughter must have been his fool's blood talking.

"Huh?" Yajirō suddenly said. "It feels like something's riding on my back."

"I'll go take a look."

"You be sure not to fall off."

"I climbed out from the driver's window and hopped onto the roof of the fake Eizan railcar. The night wind lashed at me. Clinging to the slick metal I squinted and saw on the other side of the black, skeletal pantograph a luxurious-looking sofa. Lounging there in a yukata taking in the night air was Benten. In the spare light I could just make out her listless eyes taking in the night panorama.

"The air's fine, Yasaburō. Come on over."

After I pulled myself there across the roof, Benten offered me a half-emptied glass. By her feet was a large bottle of Akadama port wine.

I took a sip. "What is the Heir's sofa doing here?"

"I'd wanted to take in the view from the air on this lovely sofa. I visited him just a while ago, but he wasn't home, so I took the liberty of bringing the sofa with me."

"I don't think he'll be pleased with you taking his belongings without permission."

"Don't tell me you're scared?"

"Of course I'm scared."

"What we need to worry about at this moment is whether or not I am comfortable. Isn't that right?" she said, echoing the Heir. She put the bottle up to her mouth and took a swig, swallowing gulp after gulp of Faux Denki Bran. Her pale face was like a white flame lighting up the darkness, and the more she drank the whiter it became.

"Tell me, Yasaburō. Which do you like best: me, or the Heir?"

"I respect both of you as tengu," I answered carefully. "It is only natural for a tanuki to respect tengu."

"I hate wishy-washy answers like those. Say it again and I'll make you into stew."

"...You seem quite angry with the Heir, Lady Benten."

"Why, I'm having the time of my life. I couldn't be happier," she said with a straight face, looking down at the city below.

Without warning a wrinkled hand came up and gripped the edge of the roof in front of me, and a wizened head popped up, its white hairs blowing this way and that in the wind like dry pampas grass.

Master Akadama tried to pull himself up onto the roof as if his life depended on it. "Surely that is Benten there?" he cried with delight. But he seemed to be having a hard time getting up here, wriggling and squirming. "Just a moment, just a moment. I shall be up presently."

I rushed over to pull him up. But just as I did so, Benten rose from her seat and cried gaily, "Oh, look, Yasaburō. Your friends have come to say hello!"

Coming up behind us was the ship of the Ebisugawa clan.



The ship, which would have been ours but for a bribe of Faux Denki Bran, was decked out in typical garish Ebisugawa fashion, flashing and blinking gaudily in the skies over Kyoto as it bore down upon us.

I leaned over the edge of the roof and called out to Yaichirō. "The Ebisugawas are here!"

Everyone rushed to the windows to look.

"Ugh!"

"How distasteful!"

"Damned ship of fools!"

The crimson hull of the SS Tang Envoy blinked with countless flashing lights like it was Christmas, while scarlet red beer garden lanterns were hung indiscriminately all over. On the electronic display mounted to the mainmast, random slogans flashed in large pink lettering: *Proper English Gentlemen, Smooth Sailing, Thank You For Your Patronage, We Couldn't Have Done It Without You!* In its current state advertising such idiocy, it was hardly recognizable as the stately old Nanto Alliance ship, and it certainly bore no resemblance to the intrepid ships of old which had dared the perilous Genkai Sea to reach the mainland.

The disgraceful ship slowly pulled up beside our own. The Ebisugawa Guard Corps, a group of tanuki wearing pink *happi* coats emblazoned with the name Ebisugawa, gathered along their starboard railing, raining down drunken jeers on our heads. They were clearly spoiling for a fight.

On the roof I stood up and yelled back, "Drop dead! Drop dead!" After a few rounds of this back-and-forth, a gap opened in the ranks of the Ebisugawa Guard Corps, and who should show up triumphantly but the idiot brothers extraordinaire.

Kinkaku and Ginkaku were shifted into the shape of suit-wearing Hoteis, complete with top hats.

"Greetings, Shimogamo clan! As a proper English gentleman, allow me to say a few words," called Kinkaku superciliously. "Surely that is a train, not a pleasure barge?"

"I bet it's just Yajirō shapeshifting, Kinkaku," Ginkaku piped up.

"Ha. Then this is not even a train!"

"We wouldn't be caught dead flying in something like this!"

"But you know, Ginkaku, these are shameless fellows," Kinkaku sneered contemptuously. "Really, using a train to mask their failure to obtain a real pleasure barge. Any proper tanuki would be so ashamed that the furs on their tails would fall out! But look at us, and our magnificent pleasure barge. Observe, our impeccable sense of taste! Stocked and stowed, smooth sailing. That is the mark of a capable tanuki!"

"Stocked and stowed! Smooth sailing!"

"Well? Do you have anything to say in your defence?"

"Shut up, Kinkaku," I shouted from the roof. "That was supposed to be our ship! You just played dirty and stole it from us!"

"Us, steal it?" Kinkaku shrugged, feigning innocence. "Come now, Yasaburō, enough of this absurdity!"

"Enough of this! Enough of this!" chanted Ginkaku.

Kinkaku raised a finger in the air and paced up and down the deck.

"Ever since the departure of our distinguished father, the future of the tanuki of Kyoto has been entrusted to myself, the scion of said distinguished father. Not a tanuki in Kyoto denies it! And as a tanuki in such an important position, it would only be manners for me to go say hello to the Nanto tanuki. 'G'day, my name is Ginkaku! Here's to a prosperous relationship!"



"Manners, that's our Kinkaku! He's not like you uncivilized tanuki!"

"Yes, yes, after all we are English gentlemen." Kinkaku doffed his shiny golden top hat. "Of course, with such a greeting it is only fitting that one bring a gift, no? And could any gift be more exquisite than our own handcrafted Faux Denki Bran? Of course not. It was only a matter of course that the Nanto tanuki would wish to repay our good will. I will admit I was hesitant to accept the use of such a storied ship as the SS Tang Envoy, but the Nanto elders insisted, and I quote, 'It would honor us greatly for the honorable Kinkaku of the Ebisugawa clan to accept this offering!' How could I possibly refuse?"

"That's right, Kinkaku. Besides, our pleasure barge crashed last year."

"Just so. And who was it that caused it to crash—oh yes, none other than you, Yasaburō!"

Kinkaku thrust his finger, trembling with rage, directly at me.

"It was *your* ungentlemanly behavior which caused us so much grief. Kaisei, poor Kaisei, even said, 'I don't want to ride the pleasure barge because Yasaburō's gonna do something silly again! I'd rather just keep working!' Even now she has shut herself up in the factory. How wretched! Oh, my poor, warped little sister!"

A sudden murmur broke out among the Ebisugawa Guard Corps. The figure of an English gentleman had emerged from the red-painted cabin, and I realized that without a doubt it was the Heir. I was absolutely gobsmacked. I'd known that Kinkaku and Ginkaku had proclaimed themselves his pupils, but I never expected to actually be aboard their ship.

The Heir stood at the railing and glanced down at our fake Eizan railcar.

His gaze took in Master Akadama, sitting cross-legged by the pantograph, as well as Benten sitting on his sofa, and immediately his eyes grew cold as ice. It was immediately clear that he had filed these two away in his head as undesirables to be disregarded. I had never before in my life seen a look so filled with contempt as his was in that moment.

"Enough to try the patience of a saint, don't you think?" murmured Benten behind me, standing up from the sofa. "Say, Yasaburō. Wouldn't it be fun to burn that tub to the ground?"



Inside the railcar Yaichirō was frozen in place like a statue.

In the first place he was loath to cause a ruckus at a public event like the Gozan no Okuribi, and in addition with Gyokuran on board he bore a responsibility to the Nanzenji clans, which meant that he was even more restrained than usual. But on the other hand, he was exceedingly conscientious when it came to the honor of the clan, and he was not about to just sit here and listen as these idiot brothers threw mud over the family name on a night when he was supposed to see the spirits of our ancestors off to the other side. In other words, Yaichirō wasn't paralyzed—he was just listening to his patience groaning under the strain.

Gyokuran lost her head before Yaichirō did. Leaning out the window she shouted, "Kinkaku, Ginkaku, that's enough!"

"Whaaa?" Kinkaku's eyes went wide and round. "What is Gyokuran doing there?"

"I've been listening the entire time, and you two have been very rude. Apologize this instant! You used to be cute when you were little furball pups; I don't know what you ate to grow up so big and stupid. Why would you ever want to be so stupid and unlovable?"

"Ooh! What a mean thing to say!"

"That really hurt!"

"Did it now? Then good. Now, apologize! If you don't, I'll run off and tell Kaisei!"

Kaisei, my ex-fiancée, had a foul mouth to be sure, but Gyokuran's words held a different kind of weight all their own. Kinkaku and Ginkaku held their bellies and moaned as if they had been struck with softballs in the stomach, swelling up like great bruised blobs of *daifuku* mochi. As much as they wanted to retort, they couldn't. Striking the railing with their top hats in their torment, at last they let slip some rather rash remarks.

"You shogi fiend!"

"Go back to Nanzenji and play with your toys!"

At those words, Yaichirō's last thread of patience finally snapped. "What did you say!?" he roared, throwing himself half out the window, one of his hands already striped orange and black. "You dare insult even Gyokuran? You won't get away with this!"

A mass of golden fur pushed its way out of the window and leapt from the train towards the pleasure barge. Be it for Gyokuran's sake, even so it was awfully bold of my brother.

Terrified by the roar of the Tiger of the Kamo, the Ebisugawa Guard Corps scattered over the deck, while Kinkaku and Ginkaku transformed into a pair of gold and silver lions and met him head on. Fur flew as the savage melee got underway, and soon the three big cats were just a shining blur tumbling about the deck.

Even in his rage, two lions were probably too much for Yaichirō to handle alone. As his little brother I had a duty to help him out. Nothing good would come from sitting here and watching.

I got ready to leap off the side of the train.

But just as I did, a voice directed, "Commence bombardment!" The Ebisugawa Guard Corps formed up on the starboard railing and unleashed a simultaneous volley of fireworks at us. Rockets came whistling through the air, and Yajirō twisted and yelped, "Hot, hot, hot!"

"This is not looking good!" I took cover inside the train, but the interior was choked with so much brightly coloured smoke that it was impossible to breathe. Chased around by fiery pinwheels, Mother and Gyokuran shrieked and jumped onto the hand straps, clinging on for dear life. Meanwhile, Yashirō kept trying to pour Akadama port wine into the chagama engine.

Yajirō let out a sudden yowl. "Waagh! My butt's on fire!"

The streamers that were tied to Yajirō's rear were ignited by the pyrotechnics that were showering the train. The body of the railcar was starting to wobble, but I'd stuck the streamers on pretty good, and they wouldn't come off without a fight. Now I wished I hadn't been so gung-ho about preparing for the Okuribi.

"We've gotta land, Yajirō!" I shouted.

"Where am I supposed to do that?"

"We'll have to land on the Ebisugawa ship!"

Amidst the thick barrage of fireworks, the fake Eizan railcar did an about-face and pointed its headlights directly at the ship. The blazing streamers trailed behind us like flaming filaments of goldfish poop. Once the flames reached the back of the train we'd all go hurtling down to earth, and that would be the end of the Shimogamo clan. The Ebisugawa Guard Corps could shoot all the fireworks at us they wanted, we were going to land on that ship or die trying.

The train smashed onto the deck, knocking aside tables laden with sumptuous plates, sending the Ebisugawa Guard Corps scattering, and after slamming into the mainmast finally came to rest. The world abruptly upended itself, and before we knew it we were thrown out onto the deck. I scrambled to my feet, and looking around saw a small frog moving around feebly in a pile of burning streamers.

"Save Yajirō! He's going to burn!" Mother screamed.

I ran over and kicked aside the streamers to rescue Yajirō.

"Well, at least everyone's in one piece," he blithely quipped. "It was getting real warm down by my nether region. Hey, but I hear heat therapy works wonders for your nervous system."

Up on the tilted mast, the electronic display guttered, then came falling into the deck with an almighty crash.

A silence settled over the ship. The only thing I could hear was the sound of spitting sparks coming from the ruined display. The deck was completely gutted, as if a hurricane had just swept through. Scraps of food and smashed wine bottles littered the planks, and the acrid smell of gunpowder prickled my nostrils. The Ebisugawa Guard Corps had lost their will to fight and were huddled at the gunwales; Yaichirō and Kinkaku and Ginkaku were equally bewildered.

"Tanuki truly are incorrigible fools, aren't they?" Benten said pleasantly, descending from the sky. In her right hand she was carrying the sofa, and dangling from her left was Master Akadama.

Master Akadama was clutching his walking stick and a bottle of Akadama port wine while Benten carried him by the scruff of the neck like a naughty kitten. Here his inability to fly, a most disgraceful weakness for any tengu, was on display to the whole world, yet he glared down at all of us tanuki, his gaze filled with awesome tengu majesty.



At this point I noticed the Heir standing alone at the bow.

His back was turned to the tanuki free-for-all, his top hat was perched perfectly on his head, and his hands were clasped behind him. No doubt he found all this chaos on deck distasteful, and his mind was probably back in his perfectly ordered drawing room.

Without turning around he began to float into the air.

Master Akadama rapped his walking stick loudly on the deck.

"Running again?" he scoffed, his voice terrible. "Is that all you can do?"

The Heir turned round, and raised his eyebrows as if he was looking at a wriggling caterpillar.

It had been three months since these stubborn father and son had last faced each other on the roof of the Minami-za, and only the second time since the return of the Heir. It could hardly have come at a worse time. The deck was crowded with tanuki; both the Heir and Master Akadama were in supremely foul moods; and Benten was just itching for a reason. Not only that, but Benten was sitting on the sofa she had pilfered from the Heir's house, clearly meaning to provoke him.

"How unseemly," the Heir sniffed. "Clearly tanuki have not evolved in the slightest."

"These furballs hardly have it in 'em to evolve."

"Yet is it not the responsibility of tengu to teach them manners?" The Heir walked steadily back down the bowsprit, the soles of his dress shoes clicking on the wooden spar. He raised his hands, motioning in the air almost as if he was ironing out wrinkles in his shirts again, and the excited murmuring of the tanuki died away.

The Heir turned his glare on Benten, sitting on the sofa. "Who is that woman?" he demanded.

"My prized acolyte," said the Master. "She is very capable, unlike the last lily-livered lout!"

"A conniving thief for a disciple; you must be very proud. And riding piggyback through the sky, how delightful that must be. Now, if you wish to publicly announce your dotage, that is your affair; but I must request that you teach this woman sufficient manners to stay out of my sight."

There was no way Benten was going to take that one lying down. The whole tanuki congregation trembled in fear, watching her expression anxiously. But Benten only continued to smile, remaining unnervingly silent.

"Is that all you have to say?" From the folds of his robe Master Akadama produced the Fūjin Raijin fan and braced himself.

Imagine what chaos would ensue if the Master were to wave that fan on this little tub. He'd unleash a rain of tanuki down on all those crowds heading home from the Okuribi festivities. "My stars," murmured Mother, gathering Gyokuran and Yashirō into her arms. The Ebisugawa Guard Corps crouched down at the railings, holding onto whatever was in reach. I approached Master Akadama and grabbed his arm. "Master! If you use that fan here, we'll all be blown away!"

"This is a tengu affair. Tanuki need not interfere!"

"But tonight's Okuribi viewing was a tanuki festivity, and the argument was originally between tanuki. You must see that. Surely it would be strange for tengu to stoop into tanuki matters!"

"It's alright, Yasaburō." Benten rose from the sofa and stooped down to whisper in the Master's ear. "Master, may I handle this?"

Master Akadama nodded and sheathed his weapon. "...Very well. Take care of it."

Benten in her white yukata, versus the Heir clad in black from top to toe. The tanuki collectively held their breath and looked on, while the two stared each other down at the foot of the slanted mast. The caved-in screen of the fallen electronic signboard spat up

white sparks as their gazes met, Benten holding in her anger, the Heir his disdain. A cold smile came to Benten's face.

"The weather was stormy, the day we met in London," spat Benten cryptically. "And how I have hated you ever since."

Her face burned with a white-hot anger for the Heir. But the instant I looked upon that anger my chest was filled with an indescribable sorrow. I don't think a single tanuki on the ship that day understood what I was feeling.

I was the only one that was absolutely certain—  
Benten was going to lose to the Heir.



The Heir easily dispatched Benten and floated down once more to the deck.

The tanuki on the deck were silent, looking at him with a newfound reverence.

From this night forth, all the tanuki recognized him as Master Akadama's true heir, and as a new breed of tengu. After all, he had just sent Benten, Benten whom all had venerated and feared, crashing down to earth. No one could doubt now that he was truly a tengu.

Yet nary a look of triumph could be found on the face of the Heir, who seemed to find the awestruck looks of the tanuki quite annoying. Taking his beloved sofa in hand, he looked around at us all. "My furry friends, I bid you all good night."

A tip of the top hat, and he was off again to that tranquil, orderly villa. He didn't give the slightest acknowledgement of Master Akadama, nor did the Master raise a voice to him.

At last Kinkaku and Ginkaku regained their senses, and gawked at the ruined deck, looking as if they were about to cry.

"We hold you responsible for this!"

"Our beautiful ship, in ruins again!"

"Curse you, Shimogamos!"

Their bleating ceased when Master Akadama raised the Fūjin Raijin fan above his head and thundered, "You fools!" Squeaking like pups, they poofed back into their furry tanuki forms.

"Silly furballs, blathering on about responsibility. Both of you are to blame!"

"But, Master!" blubbered Kinkaku. "Surely you wouldn't be so cruel—!"

"Silence. Return this ship to the ground at once. Else I shall blast this flimsy tub to smithereens!"

If the ship were blown out of the air the Master would be in a tight spot himself, but the Ebisugawas quaked in fear at his words, and at once dashed over the deck making ready to return to ground.

So with a sharp word from this great tengu, the Battle of the Daimonji Pleasure Barges drew to a close.

While the ship descended, I was looking over the edge. Below me was a web of light, but as I turned my gaze further north the lights became sparse. I guessed that Benten must

have fallen to earth upstream along the Kamo River, somewhere north of the black forests of Kamigamo Shrine.

As the ship began its descent, the Master came up beside me and surveyed the city below.

"You know where Benten fell, Yasaburō, do you not?"

"Yes, I saw it."

"We must go fetch her. You will come with me."

"Of course, Master."



Once, behind the Amida Hall, the tumbling High Elder instructed a tanuki pup, "That tengu should interfere in the affairs of tanuki: this is not right. That tanuki should interfere in the affairs of tengu: this is also not right."

Now that I thought about it, given his long years of experience the High Elder must have known painfully well just how tanuki longed to get involved in tengu fights, and how tengu rared to get involved in tanuki fights. That's why he gave us those dour warnings. But his prayers were for naught, for even now tanuki long to get involved in tengu fights, and tengu rare to get involved in tanuki fights.

The Master and I took a taxi up along the Kamo River. It was the first time that Benten had ever been rendered so powerless, and I felt very somber going up to meet her.

Staring out the windows into the darkness as the taxi glided up the road, I saw it again vividly in my head, Benten and the Heir staring daggers at each other as they floated above the ship in the night sky. Surely at the time she hadn't dreamed that she would be drubbed so soundly by the Heir.

I took a subtle glance at the Master. He didn't seem frustrated, or upset. His eyes were stern and fixated on the darkened houses flying past, yet behind them was a gentle light. I had a feeling I had seen that look on his face before, a long time ago.

Eventually the taxi driver broke the silence. "We're almost to Kamigamo Shrine. Where would you like me to stop?"

"I believe it is close."

"I think it's a little bit further," I said, my chin pressed against the window.

"Then we shall alight at the next bridge, and search on foot."

We got off the taxi at the West Kamo Bridge, and began to walk along the left side of the river. Everything was so quiet that the battle that had just taken place seemed like a faraway memory.

The Kamo River meandered through quiet neighborhoods and broad fields, towards the looming silhouette of the mountains in the north. On the opposite bank I saw bicycle repair shops and cement factories, shuttered and looking almost abandoned in the darkness. There was no one around, and only a few cars passed by. The dim streetlights that lined the road seemed to go on forever to the ends of the earth.

It was me who spotted Benten first.

She was sitting alone on a grassy sandbank in the middle of the river. She seemed to have splashed down in the river: her long black hair was disheveled, and her yukata was soaked and filthy. A single streak of mud ran down her cheek.

The Master and I came down the embankment, but Benten didn't even look our way. She just stared at the surface of the water, like a lost child.

Master Akadama waded across the river to stand beside her.

"Frustrating, isn't it?" I heard him ask.

"Yes. I'm frustrated."

"I see. I expected so," the Master replied gently.

I was taken back to the first time Benten had flown in the sky.

At the time she had just been snatched up from the shore of Lake Biwa, and had only just begun under Master Akadama's instruction to hesitantly touch the tengu power within her. I had gone to present him with a bottle of Akadama port wine, and before me the Master had said to her, "Go on, do it as I taught you." With that gentle encouragement, Benten floated into the air for the first time, amidst the falling cherry blossoms. Ever after I could never forget the way her face peeked between the branches, joyfully crying out, "I've done it!"

Master Akadama sat down on the long grass.

"Even tengu may fall, now and again," he murmured, staring out at the water beside her. "If you are frustrated, become stronger."

## Chapter 5 — Arima Hell

Since ancient times, tanuki and hot springs have gone hand in hand.

When I was a young furball, an Arima hot springs craze was sweeping the tanuki world, and hordes of tanuki descended upon the town. Located at the foot of Mount Rokkō, the Arima hot springs have been steaming since the time of the *Nihon Shoki*, and its fame is such that even Toyotomi Hideyoshi is said to have immersed himself in its waters.

On one occasion, Yasaka Heitarō had been so enamoured by the hot springs that he locked himself in his room at the inn and refused to return to Kyoto. Each of the tanuki sent to fetch him in turn became enraptured by the coiling steam, and for a time it seemed as if every tanuki in Kyoto would be sucked into Arima. It was Father who charged alone into Arima to bring them all back. Upon their return, the steam that they brought back with them engulfed the whole city, and thus the Arima hot springs became renowned within Kyoto.

When Father came back to the Tadasu Forest he was almost unpleasantly steamy. Under the noble pretense of bringing back Heitarō and all the other tanuki, he seemed to have enjoyed a leisurely soak at Arima himself.

Master Akadama stopped by the Tadasu Forest that day, and upon seeing Father's glowing face, snorted, "You've been to a hot spring, Sōichirō."

"Indeed. It was a most agreeable experience."

"Impertinent rascal."

"I take it you don't hold with hot springs?"

"Soaking in such a thing would only turn me into a fool!"

Hot springs really are foolish things: floating atop the water like a great hairy bubble, feeling the rising steam meld into your tanuki being, lured towards a state of nirvana in those inexhaustible waters. We tanuki have nothing but reverence for this uncommonly splendid pastime.

Ah, if Paradise is real, it must be a hot spring.



In mid-October, I headed to the Arima hot springs in search of the missing Professor Yodogawa.

At the end of August Professor Yodogawa had taken a leave of absence from his lab in Imadegawa and set up camp at a research station in the mountains of Hanase. This research station was in a simple prefabricated hut in the pristine forests, with neither electricity nor gas nor running water. For assistance the professor could only count on Suzuki, one of his grad students. Each time I visited them I found that they had cast off a little bit more of the trappings of civilization, until one day I found them sharpening



bamboo spears in order to do battle with the wild boars. The two were like pioneers living off the land, setting up stakes on this untamed frontier.

Professor Yodogawa explained the situation while heating bamboo leaves over a gas range.

"The associate professor's staged a coup, wouldn't you know! And so I find myself banished from the lab."

After returning in August from an expedition to Indonesia with a mountain of grotesque and exotic specimens in tow, the professor had been abruptly summoned before department HR to explain a sexual harassment claim of which he had no knowledge whatsoever. The accusation was a house of cards built on unproven facts and unfounded speculation, but for whatever reason he was denied a chance to defend himself, and almost immediately after the department chair and vice-chair came to visit the lab.

"We'd prefer to keep this all hush-hush. Why don't you take your research off to Hanase, until the heat dies down?" mumbled the vice-chair, clearly avoiding the professor's gaze.

It was then that the lightbulb switched on inside the professor's head. "It's a conspiracy!"

Suzuki, the grad student, testified to us that while Professor Yodogawa had been away in Indonesia, a shifty red-shirted man ("Like, shiftiness personified!") who identified himself only as a representative from the Friday Fellows had paid a visit to the assistant professor, accompanied by the department chairs; their closed-door discussions had lasted nearly half the day. It was pretty obvious that the red-shirted man had been none other than Tenmaya, secretly dispatched by the Friday Fellows.

"Those Friday Fellows and their tricks. Ooh, it's tough being a grown-up, I tell you!"

"So you're just gonna put up the white flag?"

"Whatever do you mean? I'll do whatever it takes to protect tanuki from the stewpot. The Thursday Fellows are here to stay!"

At a glance it was easy to see that Professor Yodogawa's exile, far from being a punishment, had only fired him up even more; in September the professor crashed a gathering of the Friday Fellows at the Tsukiyama *ryōtei* in Maruyama Park, scattering flyers and shouting, "Tanuki meat is murder!" Not content with that, he even visited each of the Friday Fellows door to door, preaching his love for tanuki. The Friday Fellows' scheme had fallen flat.

Then came that morning in October.

I hadn't visited the forest in Hanase in some time, and when I arrived at the hut the professor wasn't there. I was sipping a cup of bamboo leaf tea and waiting for his return, watching the autumn sunshine glimmer golden on the waving pampas grass, when Suzuki appeared from the depths of the forest carrying a bow and arrows, with a mountain pheasant swinging from his hand. According to him, the shifty red-shirted man had visited this morning and taken Professor Yodogawa away.

"The professor left a message for you, saying the Friday Fellows would be at Arima hot springs tonight."

And so I set off for Arima hot springs to rescue the professor.



I caught the Hankyu train at Kawaramachi and rode it down to Sannomiya, then transferred to the private Kobe Electric Railway the rest of the way to Arima.

After exiting the ticket barriers at Arima Station, I followed the Arima River where concrete hotels loomed above the dusky ravine like a row of battleships. Rising up majestically on the mountaintop to my left was the Arima Hyōe Kōyōkaku, where Yasaka Heitarō and his fellows had once shut themselves up.

The leaves were beginning to change their hue, and soon it would be the season to fully appreciate the wonders of the hot spring. In a corner of town near souvenir shops and a bus station was a building whose sign advertised a hot spring reservation agency, and on the ivy-entwined second floor of this building was an old-fashioned ice cream parlor. I sat by the window, sipping a milkshake looking through the strands of ivy over the town.

The Friday Fellows eat tanuki stew at the end of the year. It was already October, and by now their preparations must have been seriously under way. They'd attempted to beat Professor Yodogawa into submission to save themselves from having to look over their shoulders, but that had only made things worse. It wasn't unthinkable that they would change tack and try a new sunshine policy to turn his rebellious bones into jelly: pickling him in a luxurious hot spring; feeding him to bursting with the rarest of epicurean delights; softening him into submission with the whispered seductions of a ravishing beauty. If that was their game, they'd definitely come to the right place.

I silently willed the professor to be strong.

At that precise moment, I fancied I heard someone quietly call my name.

I jerked my head up and looked around, but there were no other customers besides me. The owner was idly keeping one eye on the old CRT behind the counter, which was displaying the rain forecast for the Kinki region.

Suddenly the sugar bowl on my table quivered slightly and whispered, "Hey, dumbass!"

I didn't remember ever having picked a fight with a sugar bowl before. "What'd you say to me?" I hissed, going to prod it.

"Hands off, doofus!" squeaked the sugar bowl.

"What're you doing here?"

"I can be wherever I want, whenever I want!" As always, Kaisei was raring for a fight. "What's it to ya, anyways?"

"We're in Arima!"

"Yeah, you don't say!?"

After Ebisugawa Sōun absconded from Kyoto, the management of the Faux Denki Bran distillery had fallen to Kaisei, who found her new responsibilities quite difficult to manage. Filled with worry seeing how her once proudly immaculate fur was now constantly bedraggled, Kinkaku and Ginkaku racked their nonexistent brains and settled on renting lodgings in Arima in order for her to take a break. It was really their uselessness that was causing Kaisei so much trouble in the first place, but their unexpected display of concern

almost moved her to tears. So, for the first time in a long time, Kaisei got to take a breather, and came with her brothers to Arima. Kinkaku and Ginkaku had been imbibing in a hot spring and soon drank themselves under the table, so Kaisei was left to wander the streets by herself.

"Unlike *some* people, I don't get to treat every day like it's a vacation!"

"I'm not here to mess around, either! I came to stop the Friday Fellows and their evil plan!"

"Well it sure *sounds* like you're here to mess around," she said rudely. "So you came all the way out here to Arima to throw yourself in a stewpot, is that it?"

"I know the difference between stewpots and hot springs!"

"I mean, it's going to happen sooner or later, I bet. You're gonna be like, 'Oh wow, this hot spring is great!' And then next thing you know you're swimming in a bunch of cabbage, because you're so *dumb*!"

"C'mon, that's messed up, even for you."

"I bet you're just here to ogle that half-baked tengu, anyways," snorted Kaisei. "I can't believe you're here making googly eyes at someone who eats tanuki stew. There's gotta be something wrong with you upstairs. Ugh, I'm so annoyed. If only the Heir had finished her off, it would have saved everyone so much trouble..."

"Watch your mouth. Benten's here in Arima, too."

Ever since the night of the Gozan no Okuribi, Benten had avoided contact with the Heir. She was clearly fascinated by him, but even I wasn't so foolish as to point that out to her face. With Benten, there were two types of anger—one that you could poke at and manage to get away with, and one that you absolutely, positively did not want to get anywhere near—and as a tanuki who frequented her acquaintance, knowing the difference between them was life and death. Her issue with the Heir was most definitely one of the latter.

Continuing to brood over the town, I eventually spotted Benten loitering in the streets. She was perusing the old souvenir shops on the other side of the road like a beautiful butterfly flitting between flowers. Looking at her in her yukata drinking mouthfuls of *Teppō-sui* cider directly from a bottle, I could almost smell the steamy water rising from her exposed neckline. She was just so perfect. It wasn't only the surrounding Friday Fellows whom she knocked dead with her insolent beauty; all the passersby in the streets stopped and stared, and everywhere she went she left a pile of bodies in her wake.

I stood up with force. "I'm going. Don't follow me."

"How about you don't tell me what to do!" Kaisei snapped back.



I went down the stairs into the streets, and began to tail the Friday Fellows.

They seemed to be going wherever Benten's fancy led them, following her even when she meandered into some residential back alley for no apparent reason, laughing all the while. I followed them along a stone wall with crape myrtles peeking over the top,

peered at the scowling demon-faced roof tiles at Onsen-dera, traipsed up and down golden-hued mineral encrusted stone steps until I lost all sense of where I was.

The Arima hot springs are nestled within the mountains, and crisscrossed by narrow winding paths like a labyrinth. The little alleys that threaded the houses were already enshrouded in darkness, and it felt like even a single block in this tiny village contained countless trails threading into the mountains. Pools of silver and gold were hidden all over this maze, sending up lazy clouds of steam into the autumn afternoon.

The Friday Fellows entered a narrow street lined with wooden two-story houses, where they looked at *tansan-senbei* and bamboo knick-knacks. I was looking on from my hiding spot by a shop that sold *tsukudani*, when Kaisei whispered from within the red postbox in front of me, "These guys sure are taking their time."

"You just go back to your inn already!"

"In a little bit."

Four men milled around Benten as she picked out some tansen-senbei. The macho one who wouldn't have looked out of a place riding a horse on the steppes was Bishamon, the hotelier; the droopy-faced one was Ebisu, who was on the board of a bank in Osaka; the young one squinting into the streets was Daikoku, the proprietor of a traditional ryōtei called Chitoseya in Pontochō; and the one who kept excitedly recommending crackers to Benten was Fukurokuju, the president of a health foods company.

"I don't see Jurōjin anywhere."

"Who's that?"

"He's the head honcho of the Friday Fellows, and if you cross him, you'll find yourself going to hell in a handbasket. Even Benten defers to him, so you can bet he's not your average schmo."

"Jealous much?" Kaisei smirked.

After purchasing a considerable amount of tansen-senbei, the Friday Fellows resumed their walkabout around town. It was the men who carried all the souvenirs, while Benten strode along in front.

The party made their way up a plateau deeper in the village, where the bustle of the hot springs receded. I looked down at the intricate network of tiled roofs and drying racks of the houses below, and beyond that I saw the line of concrete hotels along the Arima River, their illuminations flickering on in the falling dusk like the lights of a distant town.

The Friday Fellows arrived at their destination, a complex that resembled an abandoned sanatorium. Through the large gate was a three-story building that sort of looked like a city hall. Yet the grass grew freely all over the path, and the bushes around the entrance had been abandoned to their own devices. All was darkness beyond the glass doors, and not a single light glimmered anywhere in the building.

Chatting happily amongst themselves, the Friday Fellows passed through the doorway.

"Don't tell me you're actually thinking about going in there?" Kaisei objected from behind me.

"You go back to your inn, warm your butt up and take it easy," I told her.



I hid in the thicket in front of the entrance and made sure the coast was clear before opening the door and slipping inside.

Faded green slippers were scattered throughout the lobby, and the dim space smelled strongly of dust and mold. On my right was a ruined reception desk, and on my left were a couple of discolored sofas facing a CRT television. It was all such a desolate sight.

Going to the end of the lobby and turning right I found a long hallway. I followed it all the way down to a slightly ajar door that said *Banquet Hall*, light oozing through the crack.

I shapeshifted into a small mouse and ever so cautiously squeezed inside.

The room was so huge it could have accommodated a whale turning over in its sleep. The window at the other end was covered with a dark maroon curtain. In the middle of that slick, immense floor was a dark folding screen, in front of which a single candle on a stand was burning. A large man wearing a yukata was sitting on the ground, his back turned to me, drinking wine from a gourd.

The man suddenly turned, and looking directly at me called, "Yasaburō? Come, come."

The moment I saw his face I felt a horrible wrench in my stomach, for you see, that man looked exactly like the human form my father had used to take. Forgetting that I was a mouse, I stood up on my hind legs, frozen to the spot.

"How long it has been!" laughed the man, waving the gourd.

I turned back into a human and studied the man's face closely in the flickering light.

"...Who are you?"

"Your very own father, of course. Surely you have not forgotten my face?"

What was strange was that I couldn't detect the faintest whiff of Father's scent. I suddenly recalled what had happened after Yasaka Heitarō and the other tanuki had come back from his long stay at Arima. Having soaked in these hot springs for such a long time, their fur was so slick and so shiny that they had completely lost their tanuki scent. For a tanuki, losing your scent is like losing your ID card. The other tanuki shunned them, finding their ghostly lack of scent unnerving, and so until their scents returned Yasaka and the rest found life rather mortifying.

There was only one tanuki in the world who had been soaking in hot springs long enough to lose his scent and had also known Father well enough in life to imitate his shape. I glared at my father's impostor and growled, "So this is where you've been hiding, Sōun!"

"Seen through it, have you? Well done!" The impostor chuckled waspishly, pouring wine from the gourd into a sake cup and offering it to me. "Have a drink."

I approached and took the glass, then dumped it on the floor in front of him.

Sōun sneered, then turned back to face the folding screen.

In the flickering light of the candle, I could see without a doubt that the folding screen was the same diptych of hell I had observed in Ayameike's house. From a distance the surface looked entirely black, but if I squinted I could make out the crimson hellfires in that abyss, which I could have sworn seemed to be moving, and if I listened close I could

make out the agonizing cries of the damned and the whistling blades of the demons who pursued them.

"Leave it to Jurōjin to have such a ghastly picture in his collection," drawled Sōun. "You can almost feel the hot winds of hell on your face, can you not?"

As Sōun gazed at the diptych, I stood behind him, waiting for an opportunity to pounce.

This was the villain, the tanuki who had teamed up with the Kurama tengu and Benten to push Father into the Friday Fellows' stewpot. I'd heard rumors that he was frittering away his Faux Denki Bran fortune on a grand tour of hot spring towns, and it was a stroke of luck that I'd found him here. I'd drag him back to Kyoto and force him to sit for three days and nights before Father's grave, before shaving the fur from his tail and tossing him in the Kamo River.

But Sōun didn't particularly seem to notice my anger. He poured himself another drink from the gourd, murmured, "A toast!" and downed a large gulp.

"The traitor Hotei has been expelled, and a seat has opened up in the Friday Fellows. Tonight, a new member will be welcomed into their number. Do you know who that member is?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

Sōun glanced at me and sniggered. "No? Why, it is me, Ebisugawa Sōun."

I was aghast. Somewhere a foul wind began to blow.

"So you're a tanuki who wants to eat tanuki? That's got to be the worst joke I've ever heard!"

"What is it to me? I have cast aside my tanuki identity," Sōun spat. "And as for who drove me to this decision—why, surely you are aware."

Without warning he reached out and snuffed out the candle.

The vast banquet hall was plunged into darkness, and I jumped back to gain some space. I strained every one of my senses to try and feel him out, but the hot springs of Arima had erased his scent, and making use of that he melted completely into the darkness. I could hear his voice in the stifling darkness; one moment it would sound far away only to swoop right up beside me in the next. A ghastly dread swept over me.

"My illustrious brother spent his entire life closing off paths to me, bullying me around, pushing me out of the tanuki world. And now, I do what I must to survive in this terra incognita."

"Enough with your crap. You're the one who killed Father!"

"One day you will understand, Yasaburō," Ebisugawa Sōun chuckled in the darkness. "You are all headed down the same path as me."

I pounced towards his voice, but my fingers grasped only empty air.

That foul wind continued to blow in the darkness, and the next thing I knew I was face to face with the diptych of hell. The candle was extinguished, yet I could still see those red tongues of flame licking on the paper, and even hear their low roar. The wind that rushed out from that world of heat and iron almost took my breath away.

"Shall I give you a taste of hell?" Sōun suddenly whispered right next to my ear, giving me a shove in the back.

I put out my arms to brace myself against the diptych, but my hands felt nothing, and in fact went right through into the darkness. Before I had a chance to even register my surprise, I found myself falling into the screen. The last thing I saw as I began to tumble were the red flames of hell rising to swallow me up.



When I came to I was standing on a blasted plain where that foul wind was blowing. The red-brown dirt continued all the way to the edge of the horizon, and no sun nor moon nor stars could be seen in the inky black sky above that Martian landscape. In my vicinity a few rusty pipe-looking things were growing out of the dirt. A dim reddish glow illuminated the scene, though I couldn't tell where it was issuing from, just as I couldn't tell whether it was night or midday.

"Heeeey, is anyone out there?" I called.

No one answered me in that wasteland; the only sound was a continuous rumble in the distance.

With nothing else to do, I trudged up a craggy knoll nearby. As I climbed the stairs hewn into the jagged rock, I was hit by a stomach-turning odor. It smelled like someone had thrown a thousand dead crayfish into a hole, cracked a thousand rotten eggs on top, and churned the whole thing up. It was so vile that tears sprang to my eyes.

Passing the top of the knoll, I came to the side of a river, so unctuously black it looked as if it was oil rather than water flowing along the riverbed.

On the other side of the river was a strange rust-colored settlement that bore somewhat of a resemblance to the Great Wall, extending along the bank of the black river. The buildings seemed to be cobbled out of random bits of scrap metal, and a forest of stovepipes belched out a neverending stream of black smoke and hellfire.

What was really creepy about the whole iron town was that it seemed to be writhing like a living creature. Taking a closer look, I saw massive gears and pistons grinding without pause, the shrill din of countless pieces of metal scraping against one another echoing across the water.

"The hell is this place?" I grimaced.

I walked along the river for a while, until I spotted a small wooden train station on my left.

There was no one inside the lonely waiting room. There was a ticket barrier leading to the platform, while on the right was a standing-room-only ramen stand, with a bright golden curtain that bore the name *Tenmaya*.

I hopped over the counter and went to the back. It seemed to have been closed down for quite some time, and the dim galley was covered in a layer of sticky black muck. In the corner was a pile of animal bones, and the bowls on the shelf were the size of halved watermelons.

On the wall I spotted a faded photograph of Benten. It must have been from just after she entered the Friday Fellows, for there was still a tinge of gentle innocence in her

face. As I stared at the picture, Tenmaya's words rang in my ears again: *I will admit that she is out of my league.*

The bowls began to clatter on the shelf; I felt the low rumbling get stronger, as a jet black steam locomotive pulled up to the platform. The hissing of steam split the air; the train doors opened with a clatter; and a flood of ogres poured through the ticket barrier.

It was at this moment that I finally realized that I had been cast into Hell.

"Damn you, Sōun. What have you done?"

I hid behind the counter and transformed into a musclebound red ogre wearing a loincloth. I wasn't about to let myself get caught and tossed into tanuki Hell.

A young blue female ogre came in and rapped on the counter. "Hey, you. Serve it up."

"So sorry." I looked at her, my heart thudding in my chest. "We're not open."

"Aw, jeez. What happened to old man Tenmaya?"

"He's run off, to who-knows-where."

"Ah, the spider's thread. Damn, the crafty sonuvabitch!" The female ogre clicked her tongue. "I liked his ramen, too."

The she-ogre's workclothes were scorched and stained, and her unkempt golden hair was tied back in a ponytail. She leaned forward sluggishly and put her elbows on the counter, daintily tapping the horns that poked through her hair. What appeared to be hammers and wrenches dangled from the chain link belt around her waist.

"So, whatcha doin' here?"

"I was just looking around, maybe thinking I might start a shop here."

"Then open a ramen stand, why dontcha? I was really looking forward to it, see."

Ogres continued to stream out of the train without end. Seeing someone she knew, the she-ogre waved and hollered, "Yo!"

"Youse is gonna be late!" they shouted.

"Yeah, yeah," she called back flippantly.

"What's going on?" I inquired.

"You mean you dunno?"

"Yeah, I'm new in town."

"You come from Tapanā? Or maybe Avici<sup>5</sup>?"

"Somewhere thereabouts," I waffled.

"Jeez, that musta been rough," said the ogre, in a suddenly sympathetic tone. "I pulled myself outta the pit too, made myself into an engineer. Must been a shock poppin' up here, huh?"

"You have no idea."

"This here's what we call the Industrial Revolution. Crazy time we live in, that's for sure." The she-ogre eyed my body up and down. "Hey, we don't see a lotta guys as big and strong as you these days. That's the pit for ya!"

---

<sup>5</sup> The Buddhist equivalent of Hell/Purgatory is divided into many layers, Tapanā and Avici being among the lowest.



I was clueless as to what she meant by that, but nodded and thanked her anyway. She had no idea that behind this paper tiger facade was just a fuzzy little tanuki.

"Maybe you could hack it," she mused, poking at my hairy belly and whistling. "It'd be a good chance to make a name for yourself. Come on, I'll take ya there!"



The she-ogre and I exited the station and joined the procession of ogres marching on.

That low rumble in the earth resounded up into the black sky. The she-ogre was extremely gregarious, blathering on about how uncivilized that simmering hodgepodge of ogres and the damned was down in the nether regions, and now that I'd clawed my way up from there I'd better start studying up on the steam revolution and get with the times, and while fur underpants were kinda behind the times it was pretty manly to stick to your own thing and not get swept away with fads, and so on and so forth. I guess you can find kindness everywhere, even in Hell.

The she-ogre abruptly stopped and pointed up into the distance towards the right. A twinkling hole was opened up in the sable firmament, from which a glimmering strand dangled towards the ground.

"That's the spider's thread over there. You'd think the Buddha'd have more compassion than to joke about this sort of thing, huh?"

As we progressed further into the wasteland, we came across more and more crude huts and material stockpiles. Steam issued forth from the ground, covering the whole area in a fog.

"They're gonna develop this place too. Apparently it's gonna be a hot springs!" said the she-ogre with relish.

Beyond this hellish frontier construction site, the lone and level sands stretched far away. A great many ogres were gathered there, hooting and hollering. According to the she-ogre, a celestial maiden would sometimes descend from the sky and participate in sumo matches with the ogres. Pushing through the wall of ogre bodies, I made my way to the front and saw a raised sumo ring in the ground, where the ogres and the angel were already underway.

Squaring off against a large, muscled blue brute was Benten.

She dispatched the ogres one after another, laying them flat on their backs as easily if they were a pack of playing cards. Each time she did so, the surrounding ogres burst into cheers. The defeated ogres all laughed with chagrin and docilely bowed their scraggly heads to Benten, who would break off their horns and tuck them into the pocket of her yukata, smiling like a child collecting acorns.

"The horns'll grow back quick enough, but *gawd*, that's embarrassing!" The she-ogre clutched my arm. "Why don't you give it a whirl? Not like you've got anything to lose, right?"

And that's how I ended up walking up into the ring and bowing to Benten. Her face was slightly flushed, and she looked at me with a faintly amused smile.

A tremendous roar went up from the ogres around the ring.

"It's me, Yasaburō the Ogre. A pleasure to see you again, Lady Benten." I brushed aside my scruffy hair and winked.

Even Benten was taken a little aback to realize that behind the facade of this hulking loinclothed brute was a fluffy little tanuki.

I howled with all the gumption I could muster and rushed at Benten, who wrapped herself around my neck and whispered, "Did you really follow me all the way down here? I do hope you're not planning to spend the rest of your furry life down here!"

"Actually, my uncle tossed me into the diptych, you see."

"I don't believe it. How silly can one tanuki be?" Benten cackled, then lifted my entire frame up with both hands and started to spin me around and around.

The surrounding ogres howled with laughter, drumming the red earth with their feet. As their roaring reached its climax Benten hurled me up into the air with incredible force.

The earth shrank below me as I neared the lightless sky. I turned my body over to look at the crowd of ogres squirming in that steamy haze. Among them I spotted the she-ogre who had led me here. I couldn't just leave without thanking her for her kindness. Waving, I turned back into a little floofball, and saw her eyes go round with shock.

Benten leapt up from the ring and caught me floating in the air, then turned and waved at the ogres before taking off through the sky.

"I come down sometimes to collect ogre horns. It makes for a nice workout."

"I must thank you for allowing me to return to the real world."

"Knowing you, I'm sure you would have led a merry life down here, no?"

"Perish the thought. Oh, I can't wait to get back to the real world!"

Benten skimmed through the dark sky, crossing over the black oily river. Here at last I was able to get a glimpse of the whole expanse of Hell.

It was a giant mortar whose sole purpose was to grind the dead.

The entire plane was about the size of the basin of Kyoto, encircled by the black river, and within that loop all was ruled by fire and iron. It resembled a sprawling industrial complex, belching hellfire and black smoke as far as the eye could see, and the rising vapors formed into black clouds from which pelted down a miserable rain.

Beneath that charcoal rain, steam engines brought countless machines to life, producing a horrifying din, churning without end. Massive pincushions wriggled like gigantic porcupines; rows of gigantic arm-like hammers smashed and pounded; innumerable many-toothed cogwheels turned in swarms.

I was wondering why everything was all so red, when I realized that it was because even the incessant rain wasn't enough to wash away the flowing blood from all the sinners, who looked as small as sesame seeds.

"We'll need to go through the bottom of Hell," said Benten, reflections of hellfire shining on her face. "Hold your breath. The stench is atrocious."

We dropped through the sky, heading towards a narrow pit at the bottom of the mortar.

Here it was just as the she-ogre had said: the Industrial Revolution had not yet arrived in these pits of darkness. It was impossible to distinguish the damned and their

rakshasa tormentors, and it felt as if we were passing through a wall of jellied meat and putrefaction. I stopped breathing and shut my eyes tightly, but horrible sounds continued to flow into my ears unabated. The excruciating cries of the damned as they were torn from limb to limb echoed up from the pit of Hell, all the cries blending together until they were as one cry, as though the world itself was from beginning to end nothing more than a single enormous scream of pain.

I finally understand what that low rumble I had felt was.

And then the screams stopped.



I was very glad to be out of that picture of hell with the help of Benten, though I was less pleased to find that during our transit a passing flame had lit my tail on fire. I yelped and rolled around until it was extinguished. All the while, Benten watched me thrashing about on the floor with amusement, the cruel woman.

"That's what you get for sneaking into Hell, you naughty furball. I hope you've learned your lesson."

"I didn't sneak in on purpose, I assure you," I answered her, my eyes searching the dark expanse of the banquet hall. "Huh, where's Sōun disappeared off to?"

"Perhaps the banquet's already started."

"Where might the location of this banquet be?"

"It's in Jurōjin's train."

Benten walked through the darkness and thrust aside a curtain. Blinding light flooded the room.

Jurōjin's train towered up in the middle of an overgrown garden, as the sun descended through the sky. It seemed to be composed of three Eizan railcars stacked one on top of the other, and it was an impressive sight, though I couldn't imagine what sorcery had been used to transport it into this garden. Its crimson-painted body gleamed in the setting sun like a newly unwrapped toy, and orange light flickered in the spotless windows, so that the whole thing resembled a burning lantern in the autumn evening. That wasn't all; there even seemed to be a bamboo thicket and an outdoor bathing pool on the roof, and steam rose up luxuriously into the indigo sky. I'd never in my life heard of a means of conveyance this grand, or this foolish.

I transformed into my human form, and Benten folded up the diptych and made me carry it.

Opening a glass door, we walked into the garden towards Jurōjin's train. The leaves of the pristine grove surrounding the garden glowed a brilliant red in the light of the train.

The faces of the Friday Fellows peeked at us from the steam rising from the top of the train.

"At last, Benten is here!"

"Come, have a dip before the feast begins!"

"The water's just fine!"

Benten waved a hand at them, then stepped through the front doors into the train.

The ground floor was furnished like a private study, filled to bursting with trinkets from Japan and abroad, from Orient and Occident, and at a writing desk in the middle of the room sat a well-built man wearing formal robes, reading a book.

This was Jurōjin, the doyen of the Friday Fellows.

As befitting the personal collection of the most feared loan shark in all of Kyoto, every one of the assorted items had an aura of prestige. There were gleaming black sandalwood cases displaying wooden *netsuke* and antique pottery, and from the ceiling hung Chinese *shanshui* landscapes depicting bamboo forests and rugged mountains. Even the most unassuming vase in this repository would have made old Chujirō at the curio shop go green with envy.

"I have returned." Benten walked up to Jurōjin's desk and took out the cloth containing the ogre horns, pouring them out rattling into a ceramic incense burner.

"Well, well." A large smile spread over his face, and he picked up one of the horns between thumb and forefinger to admire it. In the light of the lanterns, the horn looked like a fiery, translucent lozenge.

As I set down the diptych by the window, Jurōjin glanced at me with suspicion.

"My name is Yasaburō," I said, bowing my head.

"Do you remember? He was at Chitoseya, in Pontocho at the end of last year," added Benten. "He is a very interesting boy."

"Interesting things are good things," Jurōjin smiled.

"I ran into him in Hell. He claims that Ebisugawa kicked him down there."

"What!" gasped Jurōjin, though the look on his face betrayed his amusement. "How very ghoulish of him."

"Surely it was no coincidence I found him there. You wouldn't mind the boy partaking in our banquet, would you?"

"Who could refuse a request from the esteemed Benten?" Jurōjin stood up from the desk and came by my side. "It must have been very frightening," he said, looking into the diptych. I timidly gave the painting a poke, but this time the paper felt firm, and there seemed to be little worry of being sucked in.

"The gate of Hell does not long remain open," intoned Jurōjin. "However, few pass through and return to tell the tale. It is only Benten who passes to and fro with such ease. Truly, she may be more fearsome than Hell itself."

"I can hear you," Benten smiled.

Jurōjin looked at the Buddha which Ayameike had added to the painting and pressed his hands together. "My fear of this painting was such that I entrusted it to a certain artist. It is only a few days since it was returned to me. Now, under the Buddha's gaze, I may safely gaze upon it once more."

"Do you fear Hell as well?" I inquired.

"...But of course. It is as though I were seeing my own entrails."

Jurōjin's white whiskers trembled, as if blown by the wind of Hell. His wizened face exuded the same timeworn grandeur as a tengu. Over his long tenure as the head of the Friday Fellows, so many dozens of tanuki must have come to rest in his belly that I wouldn't have been surprised if he had one or two tails sprouting out of him.

"Perhaps you two might enjoy a spell in the bath prior to the banquet," Jurōjin observed, stretching his back and sniffing the air. "The stench of Hell does tend to interfere with the wine bouquet."



Beyond Jurōjin's desk at the back of the train was a spiral staircase leading upwards. The second floor was a Western-style room with a scarlet carpet, where the dining table was already set for the feast. The third floor in this truly incomprehensible train was, for reasons unknown, a bathhouse.

We emerged onto the roof of the train, where the steam billowing in the pale light of evening wreathed the bamboo stalks in an ethereal fog. Following the trail through the grove we came to a small dressing room, itself constructed from bamboo as well, and beyond that was the outdoor bathing pool, brimming with golden water seemingly drawn from one of the hot springs in Arima.

The Friday Fellows were pickling in the cloudy water, looking up into the indigo sky dimming above them and sighing with contentment. I plopped into the water, intent on scrubbing the stink of Hell off in that murky brine.

"Pardon me, gents, Yasaburō coming in."

Bishamon looked at me, his head wrapped in a towel. "Well if it isn't Yasaburō of the Thursday Fellows!" He shouted into the mist, "Hey, Yodogawa, your chum's here to see you! The Thursday Fellows and the Friday Fellows, all together in one place!"

Professor Yodogawa was at that moment sitting against a rock in ecstasy. He seemed pretty cheerful for someone who had been abducted. From the blissful look on his face he was enjoying the bath to the utmost, even holding a bottle of coffee milk in one hand. I sidled over and exchanged a firm handshake with him under the clouded golden spring water.

"So they bought you off with a bath and a bottle of milk, huh?"

"If you think their sunshine policy was sufficient to change my mind you're greatly mistaken, my friend. But I must admit that this outdoor bath is a wonderful thing. It is here that coffee milk truly shines!"

"What're you going to do now?"

"I'm going to give them a great speech at the banquet!"

"You think that's really going to work after all this?"

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained!"

"Would you mind putting away your little schemes here?" called Daikoku, seeing us huddled and whispering. "I will remind you that tonight is intended to be a reconciliation banquet."

"And who said I've agreed to reconcile just yet!"

"This man and his ego," Daikoku sighed. "Let's just all get along, Yodogawa."

Ebisu grinned, his face red as a boiled octopus. "We're here to inaugurate a new Hotei, anyhow!"

The autumn wind lifted away the steam, revealing a sullen-looking Ebisugawa Sōun, submerged in the water to his chin. He stood up reluctantly.

"A most pleasant bath, don't you agree?" he said, though his eyes flashed at me. Clearly he hadn't counted on the nephew he had cast into Hell returning so quickly and leaping right into the same bath as him.

"Charmed, I'm sure." I leered indecorously and offered my hand, feigning ignorance. Knowing that it wouldn't do to blow both of our covers in front of these humans, Sōun screwed up his face even further and grudgingly shook my hand.

"Why the long face?" I prodded.

"The steam has gotten into my eyes," he replied curtly.

"The minerals are very potent. Why, I'll bet this water could scrub even the blackest soul clean!" I splashed the water, and told myself that if I saw the slightest opportunity to hinder my hateful uncle I would take it.

"Goodness, how dark it has gotten." Daikoku said, leaning over the rocks.

The quick-moving autumn sun had already sunk below the horizon, and stars were beginning to twinkle in the azure sky. Here in this isolated corner of Arima, all that could be heard were the wind in the bamboo grove, and the chopping of the water. Someone looked up through the drifting steam and began to count aloud the stars, while someone else sighed with real feeling, "Nice bath, huh?" My heart had shriveled up from the shock of Hell, but now it felt as if it were loosening up again.

Hot springs are mysterious things. Sitting there in the soothing waters watching the leisurely steam rise up relaxes both body and mind. Though this company had its share of disagreements, for the moment everyone concerned themselves only with unwinding in the water. I thought about what Kaisei had said: "Next thing you know you're swimming in a bunch of cabbage!" Whether friend or foe, all are boiled alike in the stewpot known as the hot spring.

A voice came from behind me. "Gentlemen, how's the water?"

I turned just in time to catch Benten slipping into the water.

It was as if we were attending the birth of Venus; golden bubbles burst forth each time she took another step into the water, and I fancied I could hear a heavenly choir singing in unison. There is no better pairing than a beautiful woman and a hot spring; if Paradise is real, it must be a hot spring.

"What a lovely bath," Benten remarked with pleasure, extending a pale arm towards the heavens and rotating it around. The water gleamed on her alabaster skin, almost as if even her very bones were made of gold.

Struck dumb by the divine splendour of it all, I stared at her, mouth agape.

"Mind you keep it in your towel, there," Bishamon growled from behind me. "I do understand how you feel, but surely you know better than this!"

I looked around to find all the other men with their backs dutifully turned to Benten.



We robed our steaming bodies in light yukata with a padded kimono on top, then trooped down the spiral staircase like a pack of old pensioners.

And who else should be awaiting our arrival in the second-floor banquet hall, wearing a spotless white waiter's vest, than Tenmaya—that immortal, Hell-escaping conjurer. Flashing those white teeth he gave me a wink.

"Ah, Yasaburō! We meet again."

"Glad to see you're still alive and kicking."

"The day I keel over'll be the day Hell freezes over!"

"So I see you're Jurōjin's lapdog again?"

"Ah, it's a dog's life for me. Don't know if this is how he gets the best out of me, or if it's just all his whimsy. Frankly, it's beyond my peabrain to fathom."

Decorative fireplaces and antique grandfather clocks adorned the second floor banquet hall. In the center of the scarlet carpet was a long, darkly gleaming table, arrayed with sparkling silverware. The lights of the chandelier reflected off the dark windows, sending countless dazzling rays bouncing throughout the room.

I sat at the table and waited, and eventually Jurōjin came up from the study, seating himself regally at the head of the long table.

With a raise of his wine glass, the meeting of the Friday Fellows was officially underway.

"Tonight we have in our company our new Hotei, as well as the members of the Thursday Fellows. Let this night be one to remember. A toast!"

Fueled by spirits, the banquet drifted into the long autumn night.

Bishamon and the other Friday Fellows conversed pleasantly, blissfully unaware that two tanuki had infiltrated the table. Ebisugawa Sōun dispensed his Faux Denki Bran liberally, earning himself in return a great deal of goodwill.

Seeing him smile on the other side of the table, my anger came bubbling up to the fore. We'd only been a bunch of hairless pups, my brothers and I, when our Father Shimogamo Sōichirō had been tossed into the pot by the hand of his own brother. But although we had squandered the blood which we had inherited from our great father, comes a day when even the baldest of pups grows in his fur. I was prepared to do whatever it took to bring justice down upon this doddering excuse for a tanuki.

"You seem pretty cheerful, Mr. Ebisugawa," I remarked.

"I am joining the Friday Fellows tonight," Sōun replied. "It is a tremendous honor. How could I not be cheerful?"

"And you can eat all the tanuki you want. Who knows, maybe one day you'll even sprout a tail of your own!"

Hearing my words Sōun forced himself to smile, though it took so much effort it looked as though he were bending a piece of sheet metal.

Now, Professor Yodogawa hadn't said a word, focused entirely on devouring every plate set before him. But this silence was only so that he could better pontificate on his love of tanuki later on.

"That's quite the appetite you've got there, Professor Yodogawa!" Tenmaya said as he set down another plate, eliciting a roar of laughter around the table.

Tenmaya was bustling around cheerfully playing a picture-perfect waiter, which I found unsettling. He had once aroused Jurōjin's ire and been cast down into Hell, yet here he was looking utterly unfazed, working to undermine Professor Yodogawa. He was truly unfathomable. And all it took was one glance at Benten's cold expression to see that she loathed him from the bottom of her heart.

"So, Tenmaya, when are you going to betray us next?"

"Perish the thought!" Tenmaya shrank back in surprise. "I've learned my lesson, that I have!"

"It'll happen soon; I can see it written all over your face."

"Surely not, my lady Benten!"

Benten filled Jurōjin's wine glass, beguiled Bishamon and the Friday Fellows, minded Professor Yodogawa, scorned the servile Tenmaya. Between these interactions she snickered, looking back and forth at me and Ebisugawa Sōun. Clearly she was thinking, *now what are you two tanuki doing here?*

As the feast was hitting its peak, Ebisugawa Sōun announced, "Tonight's entertainment!" and produced a blue glass bottle. Sitting at the bottom of the water inside was a small rock, about the size of a Go stone. Rolling up the sleeve of his yukata Sōun reached in and pulled out the rock, wiping it off fastidiously with a napkin.

Benten peered into his hand. "Oh, what an adorable little rock!"

Tenmaya placed a celadon plate at the center of the table, onto which Sōun placed the now completely dry rock.

"My lords and ladies, I ask you to observe this rock."

We all leaned over the table, our heads jostling for a closer look.

At first glance it looked just like any old rock you could find sitting down at the bottom of a river. We stared at it for a while, but nothing changed. "I don't..." Bishamon began, when Daikoku interrupted him.

"Wait!" he hissed. "There's water. Water is coming out of the stone!"

A few drops of water had coagulated on the surface of the rock. Gradually the drops got bigger, until they ran down the sides of the rock and a steady stream of crystal-clear water was flowing onto the plate.

I reached out my hand to touch it, but Sōun swiftly slapped it away.

"I discovered this dragonstone at the source of the Kamo River. This miraculous water gushes forth from it 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It is said that within this stone resides a tiny dragon, and that whenever the heavenly dragons rage the stone becomes more powerful and displays many other mysterious properties as well. Tonight it is my privilege to present this dragonstone to my lord Jurōjin."

"Oh, this is too great a kindness."

"Not at all; it is merely a small token of gratitude. You would do me a great honor in accepting it."

A sly smile appeared on Sōun's face as he said this. It was just like the scoundrel to bribe Jurōjin, in order that his ascendance into the Friday Fellows might be assured.

Jurōjin accepted the dragonstone with a look of pleasure, then promptly dropped it into the palm of Benten.



"A present for you, my dear."

"For me?" Benten cocked her head.

"What has been presented to me is mine to give away," Jurōjin fixed his gaze on Sōun. "Is this not so?"

Taken aback, Sōun could only mutter, "But of course."



The night carried on there in Arima, and the Faux Denki Bran continued to flow. At length Bishamon staggered to his feet and cried, "My friends, a toast to Ebisugawa, the newest member of the Friday Fellows!"

Cries of "Hear hear!" echoed around the room, and glasses of wine were taken in hand.

But here at last was the signal for Professor Yodogawa, that irrepressible tanuki lover, to begin his rebellion. There at the foot of the table he clanged on a platter and shouted, "Objection!"

"What's this?" Jurōjin glanced at him sharply from the other end of the table.

"I have something I wish to say to Mr. Ebisugawa. I tell you, it is not too late to withdraw from the Friday Fellows. The eating of tanuki stew is a most barbaric act!"

Ebisugawa Sōun didn't seem to have expected this, but soon replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "But my dear professor, have you not eaten plenty in your own time?"

There could be no denying that, and Bishamon and the rest joined in with cries of approval.

"That's right, Yodogawa. You've eaten more than I have!"

"And haven't you been expelled? What right have you to object?"

"Leave it to an Old Sophistrian to complain about everything!"

"After sitting in *our* hot spring, drinking *our* coffee milk, gorging on *our* banquet, how dare you call us barbarians! Surely we have been more than hospitable enough to deserve a reprieve from your accusations!"

Despite the shower of censure, none of it seemed enough to budge Professor Yodogawa an inch.

"It's true: I did sit in your hot spring, I did drink your coffee milk, I have gorged myself on this feast. But what has any of that to do with this? For you see, all of that is a question of gluttony, but tanuki stew is a question of love!"

The Friday Fellows let out sighs of indignation, or maybe resignation.

"At last, Professor Sophistry shows his true colors!"

"We're not interested in more debate!"

"And enough with scattering around all those silly flyers! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"If you don't want to eat tanuki stew, Yodogawa, you are free not to do so. But if we want to eat tanuki stew, are we not also free to do so? Why must you impose that love on us?"

Professor Yodogawa stood up boldly, and waving his right hand in the air began his impassioned speech.

"Why? Because love is something that must be imposed! What kind of love can be explained by rational analysis? Food transcends all boundaries, and love transcends all reason. I impose my love of tanuki on you all, so that your inner tanuki love may awaken. True, I have eaten tanuki. At the time, that was how I showed my love. But now I apologize, for I was mistaken. Now, all I can do is oppose the foul tradition of the Friday Fellows as an evangelist. You say that having eaten tanuki myself, I have no right to persuade you. Then in return I say to you: I do not seek to persuade you. I seek only to inspire you!"

As a tanuki I was overcome with emotion by his stirring oration, but everyone else remained unmoved, finding this love far too heavy. They all sat around the table, their mouths agape.

"His ideas are dangerous, don't listen to him," Ebisu warned. "Now you just calm yourself, Yodogawa. You're on thin ice, in more ways than one!"

Only Benten, leaning forward resting her face on her palms, laughed with approval. "Love is illogical. Isn't that what you mean, Professor?"

"Exactly, Benten! If no one else will, perhaps you would come around?"

Jurōjin silently raised a hand. An electric tension raced around the table, and the banquet hall went as quiet as if someone had doused the proceedings with a bucket of water. A smile came to Jurōjin's face as he addressed Professor Yodogawa on the other side of the table.

"You mean to say that you will not stand down."

"I will not stand down," Professor Yodogawa shook his head, a comely expression on his face, flushed with his love for tanuki.

"That is most disappointing. Three generations of Yodogawas have I shared a table with to savor tanuki stew." Jurōjin scowled at the professor. Then he abruptly barked, "Tenmaya!"

Without a sound Tenmaya appeared behind Professor Yodogawa and swiftly bound him to his chair, then produced a red daruma from within a wicker basket and placed it on the professor's head.

*What's he doing?* I was wondering, when from behind me I heard a metallic sound like something being screwed in. I turned around and immediately recoiled in horror. With a coldblooded look on his face Jurōjin was pumping the lever of the German air rifle, getting it ready to fire. Around the table we all looked at the glittering gun, our eyes wide, as Jurōjin wordlessly rested his elbow on the table, took aim, pulled the trigger. A dry *bang* echoed through the interior of the train, and the daruma atop Professor Yodogawa's head went flying.

The stunned Friday Fellows turned towards Jurōjin in unison.

"Now, Jurōjin, just hold on a moment!"

"Surely this doesn't call for a gun!"

"Not blood! I can't stomach the sight of blood!"

"Is any tanuki really worth throwing your life away?" Jurōjin threw back his head and laughed, swiftly loading another round into the rifle.

"I wholeheartedly concur, sir!" said Tenmaya, setting up a second daruma. The synchronization movements of Jurōjin and Tenmaya were mesmerizing, like watching craftsmen pounding mochi in tandem on New Year's Day.

Professor Yodogawa stared down the barrel of the gun, his face white.

Jurōjin took aim at the daruma once more. "There is no shortage of ammunition. I can keep shooting all night!"



As a fellow member of the Thursday Fellows, I couldn't bear to sit back and watch Professor Yodogawa be subjected to this William Tell farce. Without thinking I crawled onto the table and interposed myself between Jurōjin and the professor, raising my hands in the air.

"A moment, please!"

Jurōjin pointed the rifle up towards the ceiling, narrowing his eyes. "What is it you want, young Yasaburō?"

"There's something I'd like to say to Professor Yodogawa."

I stood up on the table and looked at the professor. He looked up at me, mystified, bound to the chair and balancing the daruma on his head.

"We ran thick as thieves in the Thursday Fellows, you and I," I told him. "But I'm going to be honest with you now: I'm sick to death of your tanuki love. I only ever went along with it so I could get free grub. Ramen and sukiyaki, French and Italian, chicken and turtle and pufferfish stew, anything and everything I could ever ask for! But as delicious as it all was, I just can't put up with your sick, twisted love anymore, and today I'm bringing it all to an end!"

"...Et tu?" Professor Yodogawa murmured. "Say it ain't so!"

"I hereby declare my resignation from and sever all ties with the Thursday Fellows. As of today, I have decided to declare my allegiance to the Friday Fellows. If Professor Yodogawa persists in his unreasonable harassment of this respectable assembly, I pledge to do everything in my power to stop him, as contrition for all the trouble I've caused you fine folks. Enough of your ridiculous sophistry and imposition of your love, I say! I have my own definition of love!"

I delivered this spiel all in a single breath, and when I was done Bishamon and the others rose to their feet and burst into applause. They probably just wanted to make as much commotion as they could to distract the incensed Jurōjin from waving around his gun any further.

"There's a boy with a head on his shoulders!"

"Hear hear!"

"Very modern of you, well said!"

In contrast to the Friday Fellows' desperate cheering, Professor Yodogawa's expression was one of heartrending sorrow.

"How could you!" he cried. "Weren't we friends? Didn't we spend all those hours talking about how adorable tanuki are?"

"...Actually, I've been dying to try tanuki stew."

"What!?" Professor Yodogawa gasped.

"Aren't you the one who said eating is love? I agree with you completely. Ever since last fall when Benten was kind enough to invite me to one of your banquets, I haven't for a moment been able to get the thought of tanuki stew out of my mind. I think it's absolutely fantastic, this esoteric tradition of yours. The modern world may frown upon it, and yet still you bravely dare to eat this taboo cuisine, flying in the face of their censure. It's just all so magnificent, I can't help but to admire it..."

I was starting to worry about where to go with this ridiculous speech next, when Benten, who had been listening attentively the whole time, made a very drastic proposal.

"Why don't you join the Friday Fellows, then?" she smiled innocently, looking around the room at our stunned faces.

No one was more shocked than Ebisugawa Sōun. He stood up and staggered away from the table, looking thunderstruck by this nightmarish turn of events. He stared at the Friday Fellows as they whispered amongst themselves, then turned towards the head of the table. Jurōjin seemed to be deep in thought, his eyes closed, the rifle pointed up at the ceiling.

Benten raised a hand in the air and loudly snapped her fingers.

"Tenmaya!"

"Right away, ma'am."

With a great deal of pomp Tenmaya carried a paulownia chest and a bottle of Akadama port wine to the table.

Benten motioned me to get off the table, then took out a chagama from the chest and set it on the table. There was no mistaking the copper glistening beneath the light of the chandelier: that was Master Akadama's flying chagama engine.

"Benten, that's—" I blurted out.

She glanced at me sharply, her gaze all but saying, *be silent*.

With the doubtful stares of the Friday Fellows upon her, Benten uncorked the bottle, and poured its contents glugging into the chagama.

Jurōjin, who had this whole time been deep in thought, slowly rose to his feet. Setting aside the air rifle, he leaned forward over the table, his eyes glinting as he stared at Benten's hands.

With a shuddering groan, the entire triple-decker train lifted into the air.

The hose which supplied the hot springs water detached, golden water trailing through the air as the nozzle fell past the window. In panic, Bishamon rushed to the window and yelped, "We're flying!" drawing all the other Friday Fellows to the windows as well.

The train rose up from the rear garden of the sanatorium into the sky, bringing the nightscape of Arima into view, nestled in the hills. As we rose higher and higher, Mount Rokko and the other peaks came into sight, and in the distance I could even make out the twinkling lights of Kobe. Jurōjin came to the windows as well, and exhaled softly in approbation.

Benten sat alone, looking at the flabbergasted gaggle.

"Yasaburō and I offer this, as a gift."

"A fine gift, for my 120th birthday." Jurōjin looked at me. "You are hereby granted the seat of Hotei. Welcome to the Friday Fellows."

I looked at Benten, who put a finger to her lips.

That was either a warning to keep silent, or a challenge to open my mouth and stir things up.



After burning through the fuel the train lost altitude and came to rest in the garden of the sanatorium once more. There was a silence for a time, the occupants of the train stricken with amazement.

The Friday Fellows eventually all came up to me to shake my hand.

Ebisugawa Sōun finally seemed to wrap his mind around this horrible turn of events. His face was so pallid that I half expected him to keel over at any moment, and his gaze was murderous. His clenched fists trembled with rage, and blue veins throbbed in his temple. If he wasn't careful his tail might come shooting out.

"What is this farce!"

His bellow rang throughout the room, which immediately went quiet. Everyone shrank from him.

"What's this, Ebisugawa?" said Jurōjin. "Does something displease you?"

"This is outrageous! Was it not I who was to be brought into the Friday Fellows this night?"

"Plans may change."

"Even so! Even so! Why must it be *him*?" Sōun thrust a quivering finger at me as spittle frothed at his mouth. "Lady Benten's prejudice cannot be denied. You are being deceived. I repeat, you are being deceived. I tell you he is a most monstrous blackguard!"

But this didn't seem to perturb Jurōjin in the slightest. "That is quite splendid. I do so enjoy keeping the company of blackguards."

Without a word Sōun stepped backwards, sweeping his gaze around the table at each of us with unbridled fury. Daikoku averted his eyes apologetically, while Bishamon muttered, "Tonight simply was not meant to be." Tenmaya clapped Sōun's shoulder and murmured, "Cheer up there. You ever need someone to listen, I'm your man."

But Sōun roughly shook Tenmaya's hand off.

"I would like you to return the dragonstone," he said. "If this is how I am to be treated, there is no sense in offering any present."

"I gave it to Benten," Jurōjin said.

"What's mine is mine," demurred Benten, balancing the dragonstone on her palm.

"There you have it, Ebisugawa," declared Jurōjin. It was astonishing how casually unreasonable they could be.

"You devil!" Sōun stamped his feet on the floor, having reached the end of his tether. "How much of your egotism have I suffered through!? Who was it that made your purchase of this sanatorium possible—me! Who was it that trekked all the way to Mount Iwaya and

dug through the earth for this dragonstone to present to you—me! Do you understand how much I have suffered!? What effort that prating fool Yasaburō has done, I have done a thousand times over and more!”

His eyes flashed at me.

Jurōjin said, quite calmly, “Why is it you wish to join the Friday Fellows so?”

Sōun stopped cold. The light faded from his eyes, and his mouth hung open uselessly as the blood drained from his face. “I...I only...wish to get my vengeance on those accursed tanuki...”

“You wish to become a demon?”

“Vengeance...vengeance...” Sōun panted to himself. The transformation in his appearance was almost horrifying. It was as if the fires of Hell had burned away his fur, leaving only a naked tanuki sitting amongst the ashes. Though he had been spending his days squandering his wealth at hot springs, in reality his mind had been bent this whole time on joining the Friday Fellows and getting his revenge on the tanuki world that had cast him out.

“Raagh!” Sōun suddenly howled, flipping over the table and sending the remnants of the feast flying. “Yasaburō! Why must you always thwart me thus!”

He sprang at me and seized my collar, attempting to wring my neck. The surrounding Friday Fellows attempted to drag him off, but he continued to scrabble at me, his expression deranged as he pinned me down. His face was so close that our noses were practically touching, spraying spittle all over me.

“I am always being thwarted!” he screamed. “I finally rid myself of my brother and yet now you—!”

His twisted features began to bulge and turn red, and a horn pushed its way out of his forehead.

“Don’t!” I yelled, but Sōun was beyond hearing. He transformed into a red ogre, so tall he almost pierced the roof. Swinging me around the room he trampled the fallen food and silverware and let out a roar. Fragments of glass rained down from the shattered chandelier and the room was plunged into darkness, as the terrified Friday Fellows milled around trying to make their escape.

While I was pinned against a window having the air crushed from my lungs, I heard Jurōjin sharply call out, “Tenmaya!” and the sound of the air rifle being cocked.

“Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!” My strangled voice was hardly audible.

A dry bang rang out, and at once a terrible howl shook the room. The massive ogre’s hand that was pinning me against the wall shrank away, and I rolled down into the shattered glass and silverware that was scattered on the carpet. I pulled myself up to find that Sōun had vanished. Jurōjin lit a small lamp, illuminating the devastated train compartment, which looked as if a tornado had just blown through.

The Friday Fellows were cowering along the windows.

“Who would have guessed he was such a monster?” Daikoku quavered.

“Here be monsters,” muttered Jurōjin, looking out the windows into the darkness. The look on his face was half mirthful, and half stony with cold fury. “After all, beneath the hot springs lie the caverns of Hell.”



I exited the train into the garden, looking for Ebisugawa Sōun.

Relying on the light that shined from the windows to search the brush, I found a fresh trail of spattered blood leading into the darkness of the overgrown trees. I looked back as I followed the trail, to see the Jurōjin's triple-decker train looming there, silently throwing off light. Everything that happened inside there felt like it had been a dream.

"Sōun, where are you?" I whispered into the darkness.

Right then, Arima felt a long, long way from Kyoto. I remembered what Sōun had said: *I do what I must to survive in this terra incognita.*

By the time I was old enough to understand the world around me, Father was already the Trick Magister, and Ebisugawa Sōun was already the manager of the Faux Denki Bran distillery. Even as a young pup I sensed the animosity between the two. Yet if you went back in time, even Sōun had once been a tiny furball rolling around in the Tadasu Forest, playing happily with Father. Crossing hill and dale in search of tsuchinoko, playing shogi, walking side-by-side to Master Akadama's classroom—they must have been just as close-knit as my brothers and me. How had Sōun become so alienated from the tanuki world as to come to this?

I came to a place very deep in the trees. Here was a chilly darkness where the light from the train did not reach. It was almost surprising how cold it had gotten, and I could feel the warmth from the outdoor bath being stolen from my body.

Ebisugawa Sōun had fallen on the ground, his furry body unable to transform. Hearing my approaching footsteps, he exhaled a laboured breath.

"Witness my disgrace. It seems I did not even have what it took to become a demon."

I reached out my hand to touch him, but he snarled menacingly like a rabid dog. His torso was covered with an appalling quantity of blood. The pellet from the air rifle seemed to have gone straight through the old tanuki's belly. Ignoring him I tried to stanch the wound with my hands, both of which were immediately drenched in blood.

"Hero or villain, in the end all are merely furballs," Sōun groaned.

"Don't die here, I'm taking you back with me."

"...You have avenged your father. You ought to rejoice."

In his tanuki form, Sōun exuded astonishingly little dignity. There was little to show for all of the wealth he frittered away going around all those hot springs; his emaciated backside protruded through the stiff, scraggly fur on his bottom. On the ground before me was nothing more than a scruffy-looking tanuki, and it was hard to believe that this was the very same Ebisugawa Sōun who had once been regarded as the head tanuki in all of Kyoto. In his face I could just make out the faint resemblance to Father.

"What's the matter with you, Uncle? You can't just let it end like this." Despite myself I found tears springing to my eyes. All the anger that I had built up for him scattered like dandelions blowing away in the wind. That made me terribly frustrated: once, that anger had been so real that I could almost feel it in my body, and now it was all just...gone.

A moment later Sōun let out a loud moan, his bloody nose glinting. His eyes shone bright, opened wide as if he had been startled by something in the darkness. But those eyes no longer saw the light of the triple-decker train, or the cold gloom of Arima far from home, or the face of his detested nephew who had foiled his plans so often. Now he was seeing a new light, a light that came from a place far beyond the edge of this bustling, living world.

"Ebisugawa Sōun, may you find your way to the other side."

I exhaled a long breath and shut his eyes.

Hero or villain, in the end every furball returns to dust.



I knelt beside the motionless Sōun, bowing my head.

The cold of this autumn night chilled his body, and mine.

I'd wanted to hunt him down, but I never wanted things to end this way. To be honest, I hadn't known what I wanted to do. All I knew now was that I felt dreadfully sad. Father's murderer was dead, yet here I was crying as if it was Father who lay dead before me.

Suddenly I heard a voice coming from the shade of the trees. "Is that my dad?"

I looked up and sucked in my breath. And after a while, I answered. "Kaisei?"

"How come you're crying, Yasaburō? That's my dad, isn't it?"

"He was shot by Tenmaya."

"Is it bad?"

"Yeah...but he's not in pain anymore."

Kaisei gasped and went quiet. I didn't say anything.

That was the moment I realized that Kaisei hadn't come to Arima for a vacation. She'd realized that Sōun was hiding out here and had come to find him.

"Can you give me some time alone with my dad?" she said quietly at last. "Thank you, Yasaburō."



## Chapter 6 — Ebisugawa's Heir

This story happened right after Mother got married and moved from Tanukidani Fudō to the Tadasu Forest.

My father's father—in other words my grandfather—lay on his deathbed, whining about having to depart to the afterlife empty-handed. What he wanted to take with him to the other side was a reconciliation between the Shimogamo clan and the Ebisugawa clan. The long feud between the two houses had been handed down through many generations, and Grandfather was thoroughly tired of it.

"Something must be done before I shuffle off this mortal coil!"

And so he opened a dialogue with the Ebisugawa clan and arranged a reconciliation meeting.

In a ryōtei by the banks of the Kamo River, Grandfather and his sons met with the previous head of the Ebisugawa clan and his daughter. The trilling of evening cicadas were audible in the tatami room as Grandfather expressed his fervent wish for peace, to which the Ebisugawa head quickly assented.

"In actuality, I have been turning an idea over in my mind for some time..."

The idea Ebisugawa proposed was this: to have Shimogamo Sōjirō, Father's younger brother, marry and be adopted into the Ebisugawa clan. Upon hearing this unexpected proposal Grandfather was dumbfounded, but without a moment's hesitation Sōjirō stated at once, "I wish to accept this proposal." It seemed that Ebisugawa and Sōjirō had been holding discussions secretly behind Grandfather's back.

After some consideration, Grandfather accepted Ebisugawa's proposal.

Thus, Shimogamo Sōjirō bid his farewells to his father and his brother and left the Tadasu Forest behind to move to the Faux Denki Bran distillery.

Not in his wildest dreams did Grandfather think that this would be the spark that would ignite the most ferocious conflict the two clans had seen, and with a sigh of relief that the long feud was finally over, Grandfather passed on to the afterlife.

But Sōjirō had no intention of ending the feud.

In his heart of hearts he harbored an ambition to crush the Shimogamo clan to dust and show the world that he was a greater tanuki than his brother Sōichirō could ever be. The longstanding desire of the Ebisugawas was thus entrusted to the newest member of the clan.

And eventually, Sōjirō took on a new name: Ebisugawa Sōun.

The events that followed would become infamous throughout Kyoto.



Accompanied by Kaisei and her brothers, Ebisugawa Sōun was returned to the Faux Denki Bran distillery in Kyoto, where a black mourning flag was draped atop the flagpole.

It had been ten months since he had fled at the end of last year.

When the limousine that carried the body of Sōun passed through the wrought iron gates, the sirens at the distillery let out a long wail of respect, and the tanuki workers doffed their caps and bowed their heads in silent prayer. Once the gates were shut, the distillery shut down for the day.

The news of Ebisugawa Sōun's passing spread like wildfire through the tanuki world.

After returning from Arima, I popped into the Scarlet Pane on Teramachi Street for the first time in a while. The dim interior was teeming with tanuki gossiping in low whispers. When they saw me they lowered their voices and whispered even more furiously. I shouldered through the nosy crowd up to the counter, feeling like my face was on every wanted poster in town.

The loach-whiskered bartender set a glass of Faux Denki Bran down in front of me. After a moment's silence, he grinned wryly. "It was you that done it, then?"

"Don't be stupid," I growled.

The bartender snorted. "Well, I'll leave it at that, then. Whatever the truth may be, I'm with you til the end. Sōun was a blaggard, and no mistake."

"I told you, I didn't do it!"

"If you say so."

"I do say so!"

"Now you'll have to forgive me, but as far as the public is concerned I'm still a loyal Ebisugawa man. Bloke can't run a bar without a steady flow of Faux Denki Bran, can he? Don't think of me too badly, now."

"Some friend you are!"

The bartender filled me in on the conspiracy theory about Ebisugawa's murder which was making the rounds around town. After being exposed for having tossed the former head of the Shimogamo clan into a stew pot, Ebisugawa Sōun fled town. He leisurely whiled away the days at hot springs, funded by his Faux Denki Bran wealth, but unbeknownst to him the Shimogamo brothers had vowed revenge and were hot on his trail. The eldest, Yaichirō, managed to sniff out Sōun's hidey-hole at Arima and immediately dispatched his younger brother Yasaburō to finish him off. At the conclusion of a thrilling duel to the death involving a great deal of flying blood and fur, Sōun was finally brought down by an air rifle fired from the dark.

Of course it was all poppycock.

First off, I had no idea where that stick in the mud Yaichirō was supposed to have been hiding his secret mastermind ways for all these years. He was more bewildered by Sōun's death than anyone.

Following the return of their father from Arima, Kinkaku and Ginkaku had been rushing about making preparations for Sōun's funeral. They were said to be using the considerable resources at the Ebisugawas' disposal to plan the most ostentatious funeral service the tanuki world had seen in a long time. No doubt they were attempting to whitewash the venality of Sōun's twilight years and etch only the memory of his accomplishments into the collective memory of the mourners who would attend.

"D'ye reckon the Shimogamo clan are going to show their faces at Sōun's funeral?"

"You bet we will. We don't need any more funny rumors sprouting up."

"Rough going, sounds like."

"Still, what kind of tanuki ever had a grand funeral like this?"

"Oh aye? From what I recall, there was a right bacchanal for yer dad when he died."

I wouldn't have really called that a funeral, though. Tanuki streamed into the Tadasu Forest from every corner of Kyoto and beyond. No altar or sutra chanting or black drapes or mourning clothes; that night in every corner of the trees, tanuki drank and reminisced about Shimogamo Sōichirō until the sun came up. Everywhere you went you could hear tales of his legendary exploits being discussed. As the night wore on, tanuki all over the forest started an impromptu belly drum, beating away until the trees themselves were shaking. The drumming reverberated deep in our bellies, tickling us brothers until we were all rolling on the floor laughing with Mother. Caught up in it all I started drumming myself until my belly hurt, then fell fast asleep. The next morning when I woke up, I was astonished to find the forest deserted again, as though all those drumming tanuki had only been a dream.

I sipped my glass of Faux Denki Bran, reminiscing about the drumming that had shaken the forest that night.



The day of Ebisugawa Sōun's funeral dawned, the sky as clear and perfect as could be for a day at the park.

Beneath the dappled sunlight at the Tadasu Forest, we changed into human forms wearing mourning attire. Even Yajirō, croaking on my shoulder, had the barely perceptible imprint of a bow tie at his throat. There were few tanuki as experienced as Yaichirō when it came to attending funerals, so he lined us all up and inspected our attire with a gimlet eye.

"Stop croaking, Yajirō," he instructed.

"Dunno what it is, the hiccups just keep coming today...*croak!*"

We proceeded out of the Tadasu Forest as a family. As we crossed the Demachi Bridge, Mother sighed, "What lovely weather it is today!" leaning on the railing and looking up at the black kites wheeling through the autumn sky. Ever since she had heard of Ebisugawa Sōun's death, Mother often shut herself up in the Tadasu Forest and sank into her thoughts.

"Both Sō and Ebisugawa have crossed to the other side. How very tired I am of it all!" Mother gazed pensively down at the surface of the Kamo. "Tanuki really are just a bunch of good-for-nothings. Just plain silly!"

We got off the Keihan Line at Jingū Marutamachi and emerged from the underground station. As we strolled down the tree-lined avenue along one of the Biwa canals, we heard the dry crackle of skyrockets and the blaring of a woodwind ensemble.

"Tanuki just don't know the difference between a funeral and a festival," sniffed Yaichirō.

The gates of the Faux Denki Bran distillery were draped with the traditional black-and-white-striped curtains of mourning, and many tanuki mourners milled about.

That day about a thousand mourners were supposed to have come to attend the funeral from Kyoto and beyond, proving that the prestige of the Ebisugawas and their distillery were alive and well. Black-clad furballs wriggled all over the grounds, and there to cater to their needs were rows of booths and stalls, like a black-themed Gion Festival. Many of the mourners seemed to be under the impression that any old black attire would do, for in the crowd could be seen a great many fancy tuxedo coattails as well as happi coats bearing the mark of the Tenrikyō sect.

Passing the distillery as well as the innumerable warehouses, we came to the plaza of Inazuma Shrine, which was dedicated to the inventor of Faux Denki Bran, which was where the funeral service would be held. The reason we were able to get so far inside despite the massive crowd probably had something to do with the murder theory that was circulating around: all the other mourners gave us a wide berth, which allowed us to stroll right through the throng without any fuss.

Seeing us in the crowd, Nanzenji Shōjirō and Gyokuran called out to us.

"Well done, getting all the way in here. From the crowds you'd think there was a festival going on!" said Shōjirō.

"Have we made it in time?" said Yaichirō anxiously.

"The priest's just arrived, so it should be starting any minute now."

"It's disgraceful, all these ridiculous rumors floating around. Irresponsible clods, they all ought to be ashamed!"

"Don't worry about it. Though knowing you, I expect that's not an option."

"I don't wish to bring the Nanzenji clan any trouble."

"Don't be such a stranger. Rest assured, neither I nor Gyokuran are bothered by any of it."

Gyokuran nodded with a serious look. "Not a bit!"

At the back of the square was an ostentatious altar decorated with chrysanthemums, in front of which were arranged folding chairs for the family of the deceased. Sitting there was Kinkaku, who upon turning around and spotting us whispered something no doubt very ill-mannered in Ginkaku's ear. Beside them was an overturned wicker basket, black as India ink, which I assumed was where Kaisei must have been hiding. Even at a time like this she still refused to show herself.

At last the priest from the tanuki-run temple of Rakutō Kenenji came up and began to mumble sutras, and like a receding tide, the babble of the crowd in the square died away.



Yasaka Heitarō, the Trick Magister, came to the front, looking grim.

"I can hardly repress the grief that has wracked me since I heard of the death of my dear friend Sōun. All must one day depart from this earth, yet never did I think that one day I would be giving a eulogy on behalf of the tanuki world at the funeral of a tanuki whom I used to play with as a pup."

Here Heitarō sighed impressively and looked up into the sky. Someone shouted, “Bravo, Trick Magister!” which was obviously quite inappropriate for a funeral and earned the speaker a hiss of reproval.

Yasaka Heitarō resumed, his expression one of exaggerated grimness. “I scarcely need tell you that it was the brilliant invention of Faux Denki Bran in the Taishō period that put the Ebisugawa clan on the map. As you all know, the inspired synergy of electromagnetism and zymurgy ushered in a new age in the world of synthesized spirits, and has gone on to lead countless lords and ladies into many an alcohol-steeped night. And it was none other Ebisugawa Sōun who revitalized the distillery and brought it into the modern age. After leaving the Shimogamo clan to join the Ebisugawas, Sōun left no stone unturned and spared no effort in his pursuit of innovation, leaving an indelible mark upon the illustrious history of Faux Denki Bran. That he was so suddenly whisked away to be with his furry forebears when he had so much left to accomplish here is simply heartbreaking. On behalf of all tanuki I express my gratitude for the incredible legacy he left behind, and reverently offer up a prayer that he finds rest in Paradise.”

Heitarō wrapped up his eulogy, having thoroughly extolled the virtues of Faux Denki Bran while smoothly avoiding any mention of Sōun’s scandal-embroiled later years. Truly, a performance worthy of a seasoned politician.

After the eulogy, the assembled tanuki lined up to offer incense. Proper funerals like this were rare, so everyone milled around uncertainly in front of the altar.

When it finally came time for the Shimogamos to offer incense, a flurry of whispers broke out around the venue. I placed my bow-tied brother on my shoulder and walked up to the altar, looking down upon the still form of Sōun surrounded by flowers in a tiny casket. Sōun looked so small and pathetic, more like a poorly made facsimile than the proud, hated uncle I had once known.

True, I would never forgive him for luring Father into a trap and making him into the Friday Fellows’ stew. But it seemed to me that Sōun had reaped his rewards for that deed, felled by that gunshot in Arima and meeting a sad and lonely end far from home. If he had lived I might still have considered shaving his ass bald, but nothing would come of mocking a furball who would speak nevermore. The Shimogamos were not so twisted as that. Rest in peace, Sōun; *namu namu*.

As I pressed my palms together, I felt Yajirō squirming around on my shoulder.

“What’s wrong, Yajiro?”

Yajirō silently darted his eyes around wildly, until at last a “Croak!” escaped from his throat, and that single hiccup unleashed the flood. “Croak! Croak croak croak croak!”

Hearing this, Kinkaku and Ginkaku at once got to their feet.

“What are you laughing at, you rascal!?” they cried, their voices full of indignation.

“Now just hold on,” I said, flustered. “You’ve got it wrong. My brother isn’t laughing at all!”

“Just listen to him, croaking away, the wicked frog!”

“Listen a little closer, then. He’s hiccuping!”

“How dare you tell such a baldfaced lie!” Kinkaku was absolutely seething. “You are at our Father’s solemn funeral! See all the weeping faces around you! Just because you are

a frog who has quit being a tanuki doesn't mean you have the right to laugh at our Father's funeral!"

A buzz went around at Kinkaku's words.

Yajirō hastily tried to apologize, but his words were buried in a storm of hiccups.

"Icroakdon'tcroakmeancroaktocroaklaugh!"

"You croaking villain! Croak at me, will you!" cried Ginkaku.

Still the croaks continued to bubble out one after the other like fizz bubbling to the top of a ramune bottle.

The harder I tried to keep from laughing, the funnier everything seemed. "Croaking villain!" I whispered, against my best judgment, and at that point I couldn't suppress my giggling any longer. I didn't want to laugh, not in the midst of a solemn funeral—but "croaking villain" just made me lose it. Yaichirō rushed over and clapped his hand over my mouth, while I did the same to Yajirō.

Kinkaku and Ginkaku yelled, "How dare you! Right in front of Father!" In her basket Kaisei shouted, "Get a grip!" The ceremony seemed all but lost.

Right then, a gentle ponging sound echoed through the square. The sea of mourners parted, and a young monk came striding forth calmly pounding on his belly. His black robes were faded and tattered, and his shaved head was as grimy as an overturned flowerpot that had been left out in the rain. The stench that emanated from his body was almost palpable.

The monk came all the way up to the altar, continuing his belly drumming and not saying a word. With a start of recognition, Yasaka Heitarō started to drum on his belly himself, and the rest of the mourners followed his lead.

The drumming became softer, then louder, like a wave approaching and receding; gradually the tempo increased like it was rushing up a hill; and just as it reached a climax the drumming abruptly stopped. As the last reverberating drumbeat pounded by the mysterious monk faded into the autumn sky a hush settled over the crowd.

"Who's that?" the tanuki whispered amongst themselves, staring at the enigmatic monk.

The monk silently placed a stick of incense in the sand, then turned to look at Kinkaku and Ginkaku.

"Kurejirō, Kuresaburō. Have you been well?" There was a weight in his voice that belied his youthful appearance.

Kinkaku and Ginkaku were dumbfounded. They'd gotten so used to their nicknames that they seemed to have forgotten what their actual names were.

"Was I Kurejirō?" Kinkaku wondered out loud.

"And who are you?" Ginkaku demanded.

The monk looked down at himself, examining his dirty robe. "You do not recognize me...but that is hardly surprising. I myself never expected to come back."

"Aren't you...Kureichirō?" Kaisei suddenly interjected from within the basket. "It's our big brother. Kureichirō's back!"



A week had passed since Ebisugawa Sōun's funeral.

An autumn rain fell on and off all the morning; the shrine road that threaded through the Tadasu Forest was enveloped in a fine spray, and the tower gate of Shimogamo Shrine looked hazy, like a classical scroll painting.

I was keeping my butt warm snuggled in my bed of dead leaves. The bitter experience of coming down with a bad case of butt shrooms in my youth had taught me that taking care of your butt was the key to staying healthy. The slightest hint of dampness and cold would attract the spirits of colds and fungi, so you needed to take extra precautions during the lengthy rains of autumn.

Mother was out shopping at the Demachi shopping arcade; Yaichirō was meeting with Yasaka Heitarō; and my little brother Yashirō was at the Faux Denki Bran distillery. All I could say was, risking your butt going out on a cold, rainy day like today just meant you weren't taking your health seriously.

I was nibbling on an *ajari* mochi when I heard a voice in the bushes calling, "Hello, hello!"

It was Gyokuran who emerged from the brush in her tanuki form. "Oh, is it just you, Yasaburō?"

After getting engaged to Yaichirō at the beginning of autumn, Gyokuran often came to the Tadasu Forest, her feet carrying her here before she realized where she was going. They really should have just tied the knot already, but apparently Yaichirō had vowed to have the ceremony after he became Trick Magister. Leave it to Yaichirō to be a stickler for this sort of thing.

"Look at you, lazybones. Planning to roll around in bed all day?"

"Miserable day like today, you've got to focus on protecting your butt."

"You're far too concerned about your butt. It's practically a neurosis!" Gyokuran plopped herself down beside me. "The mushrooms were traumatizing, I suppose. Poor little Yasaburō, being taunted by Kinkaku and Ginkaku. You were just about ready to cry!"

"I was not!"

"Goodness, no need to get so angry!" Gyokuran laughed, fluffing her fur. "It was only a joke. You never did cry when you were a pup."

Hearing that Yaichirō was yet to return from his meeting, Gyokuran pulled out a shogi board from the bottom of the pile of leaves and set up the pieces. "I think tanuki who play shogi on rainy days are so handsome, don't you?"

But no amount of transparent cajoling could entice me into a game. For starters, I was a horrible player. Abandoning the idea of persuading me, Gyokuran hummed a song through her nose and began to move the pieces around intensely.

"How come you're using that cheap board when you could just use Father's board?"

"I couldn't do that. You know how much Yaichirō treasures it."

"What belongs to him belongs to you," I told her.

Gyokuran cackled, her face contorting into a devious expression. "That's true. But still, I couldn't."

During a lull in the rain, I could hear water dripping from the trees all around the forest.

The red fur of fate had led Mother from Tanukidani Fudō to the Tadasu Forest, and now Gyokuran had come here from Nanzenji. I'd never imagined that the girl who had taken me to the proctologist to address the butt shrooms when I was still one of Master Akadama's pupils would one day become my sister-in-law. You never can know what fate will bring.

Still pondering the shogi board, Gyokuran suddenly murmured, "I hear that Ebisugawa Kureichirō has been chanting sutras in front of his father day and night."

"That's monks for you."

"He used to be such a crybaby, too, and look at what a splendid monk he is now."

"Did you know him well?"

"I talked to him occasionally, but he was a strange boy. One day he just disappeared from Kyoto when he was still a student of Master Akadama, and I haven't heard from him since."

Ebisugawa Kureichirō was Ebisugawa Sōun's eldest son, and older brother of Kinkaku, Ginkaku, and Kaisei.

According to Gyokuran, Kureichirō had been a very sensitive pup, so very different from that greasy father of his that it was difficult to tell that they were related at all. He was prone to getting lost in thought, staring glassily at the sky or the forest or the rain, and sometimes when he skipped Master Akadama's classes he would be found carving a statue of Buddha or reading scriptures.

His un-tanuki-like piety and aloofness came to a head when he lost his mother right after Kaisei was born. As the heir apparent of the Ebisugawa clan, Sōun had given him a very spartan education, but Kureichirō's grey matter simply would not retain any information that had practical use, frustrating both father and son. Day and night the relentless instruction went on, until at last Kureichirō was driven to escape.

"I hope he's not too messed up," I said.

"You know, I don't think he's a bad tanuki," Gyokuran said, looking up from the board. "Wait, did you hear that rumbling sound just now?"

I crawled out of bed and pricked my ears. Through the red canopy of leaves, I could hear Raijin, the god of thunder, distantly striding across the sky. Immediately my mind went to Mother shopping at the Demachi shopping arcade. Whenever Lord Raijin shakes the sky, Mother's transformation comes sliding right off.

I leaped out onto the shrine road, just in time to see a dashing Takarazuka-style youth dashing towards me, shopping bags in hand. As a particularly loud boom of thunder pealed through the sky, Mother tossed the bags aside, reverting to her tanuki form, and jumped straight into my arms.

"Oh, what a fright!" Mother quivered. "That was too close for comfort!"

After that we huddled in the mosquito netting, listening to the thunder passing by.

"Forgive me, dear," whispered Mother, shaking like a leaf. "Thunder just makes skin come right off!"



"For me it's the trumpets that tofu sellers blare on the street," Gyokuran whispered back. "Hearing them sends a shiver right up my spine!"

"You're all weak. I don't have a single weakness!"

"Oh, really? But you get all nervous when you're trapped in a cage, don't you?"

"Well, besides cages," I chuckled.

I've boasted of having a thick skin ever since I was a kid, which has definitely helped me keep my cool when going toe-to-toe with tengu and the tanuki-devouring Friday Fellows.

Nanzenji Gyokuran put her nose up to the netting and sniffed, drawing in the scent of the rain that pattered down on the forest. "It's wonderfully cozy huddled here in the mosquito net with everyone."

"But it gets hot as hell in the summer. You'd better be ready for it, Gyokuran."

It is a rule in the Shimogamo family that whenever thunder crashes in the sky, we must always rush to our mother's side. One by one the other brothers made their way back to the forest. First back was Yaichirō, who seeing Gyokuran there in the mosquito net uttered a small surprised cry, beaming with delight. Next, returning from his lab at the Faux Denki Bran distillery, was Yashirō. And last of all was Yajirō.

Yajirō walked up the shrine road, his T-shirt thoroughly drenched, but in the next moment he poofed back into his tanuki form, and after scampering through the trees for a moment or two he suddenly poofed back into a frog. As he approached the mosquito net we cheered for him like he'd just finished a marathon, and Gyokuran lifted the skirt of the netting to let him in.

"Hey, looks like the gang's all here. Gyokuran, too," Yajirō commented. "Ah, I really need to stop losing focus whenever I get a glimpse of Mother."

"You did very well," said Yaichirō, giving him a rare compliment. "Your practice has paid off."

"It makes me so happy that you came back for me, Yajirō!" Mother smiled.

"Look, Mother, look!" Yashirō stuck his head outside the netting, sounding happy. "The thunder's almost gone already. Nothing to worry about anymore!"

The thunder was indeed moving off, and pale sunlight was once more filtering through the trees.



A thocking sound came from the direction of the shrine road. It seemed to be the sound of a temple block.

We all turned into our human forms and approached the road.

From the south of the Tadasu Forest came a group of black-clad monks, beating on temple blocks as they walked. From the foolish, utterly undignified looks on their faces, it was immediately apparent that these were shapeshifted members of the Ebisugawa Guard Corps. Leading them at the fore was Ebisugawa Kureichirō, while Kinkaku and Ginkaku trailed behind him looking rather put out. The duo were wearing shabby work clothes, with wooden placards hanging from their necks that said, "Your Humble and Obedient Servant".

When they reached us, Ebisugawa Kureichirō turned toward us and bowed low. "It has been some time, Yaichirō."

"It has, Kureichirō," Yaichirō replied. "How many years has it been since you left Kyoto?"

"It has been over a decade, certainly."

"What have you been all this time?"

"I was journeying. Blown by the wind, soaked by the rain, with tree roots for my pillow—" Kureichirō's bright eyes narrowed as he looked up into the barren, lonesome branches above. "I was running from myself, that I might find myself anew. I forgot that I was a tanuki, forgot where I came from, forgot the face of my beloved mother, forgot even the face of my father whom I despised so much. And what then was left? Only the whistling of the wind, the shimmering of the forest, the falling rain. Only when you are prepared to discard all that you are can your true self be seen."

After making this enlightened, un-tanuki-like speech, Kureichirō swiftly prostrated himself on the ground. With a sound like dry beans being thrown, Kinkaku and Ginkaku and the Ebisugawa Guard Corps also got on their knees on the hard gravel. We could only stare in amazement.

His head held low, Kurichiro said, "The innumerable crimes of my departed father, as well as those of my brothers, were outrageous, unpardonable, inexcusable. The Shimogamo clan is right to be angry. A thousand years would yet be insufficient time to atone for those sins. But I implore you, grant these foolish Ebisugawas your pardon; we throw ourselves on your mercy, that the Ebisugawas and the Shimogamos might live in harmony once more."

He turned around to show us his behind, turning around Kinkaku and Ginkaku as well.

"Now, we ask that you pluck our tails, until your honour is satisfied!"

"Your humble and obedient servant!" shouted Kinkaku.

"Your humble and obedient servant!" shouted Ginkaku.

Now, in all my time as a tanuki, I had never had another tanuki turn his butt to me and ask me to pluck his tail. There was no greater disgrace for a tanuki than to bare his exposed, defenseless tail, which was proof of how far the Ebisugawa brothers were willing to go to abandon their pride. As I was debating whether or not to grab a fistful of fur, Yaichirō said in a voice full of majesty, "Kureichirō, put away your tail and raise your head."

"No, we ask your judgment be swift!" Kureichirō squirmed. "Come, quickly!"

"Kureichirō, I do not forgive my uncle for what he did. And yet what would pulling out your tails now accomplish? My father has passed on to the other side, as has your father. What matters now is how we decide to live from here on out."

Kureichirō turned around, straightened his back, and looked at Yaichirō. "How we decide to live...?"

"Shall we live arm in arm, or continue to bare our fangs against one another?"

"...I wish that our two families should never bicker again. I returned here in hopes of ending this senseless feud once and for all."

"Then from this day on let us fight no more. We are tanuki. Let us live in harmony."

Yaichirō thrust out his hand.

This was the most dignified thing I had ever seen Yaichirō do in my whole life. It was all so irreproachably dignified that Mother wiped tears from the corners of her eyes, Yashirō let out a soft gasp of emotion, and Yajirō trembled with excitement atop my shoulder. As for Nanzenji Gyokuran, her face was flushed with such adoration that it looked like she might keel over on the spot.

Ebisugawa Kureichirō stood up and gripped Yaichirō's hand firmly.

Almost as if it had been waiting for that moment, a gust of wind whooshed through the gate, stirring up a bright storm of fallen leaves and shaking the Tadasu Forest out of its dull torpor. The clouds parted, letting through a single ray of sunlight to illuminate this historic reconciliation.



A few days after the historic reconciliation of the Shimogamo and Ebisugawa clans, I found myself hurrying across the Aoi Bridge and rushing through the Demachi shopping arcade. The sun crossed the sky quicker and quicker as autumn wore on, and if you weren't paying attention the day would slip away from you.

Approaching Master Akadama's normally gloomy apartment I was surprised to find the door ajar, with light and lively conversation audible within.

"Shimogamo Yasaburō, at your service."

I left the shopping bags on the kitchen counter and peeked into the inner tatami room.

There I saw Master Akadama sitting at a *kotatsu* with a white cape draped around him like a *teruteru bōzu* doll; and brandishing a large pair of shears near his head was Benten. With a snipping sound like she was cutting grass, Benten was snipping away at the Master's long, unkempt hair. The Master's bristly strands were the bane of barbershops the city over, and whenever the job was done by tanuki it took a full day to shear off his locks.

Benten beamed when she spotted me. "If it isn't Yasaburō?"

"Hello, Benten. Hard at work cutting hair, I see."

"Hehe. Just doing my duty to the Master. Shall I cut your hair as well?" Benten smiled wickedly, snicker-snacking the shears above the Master's head, but I knew that if I allowed Benten to have her way with those blades I might as well kiss every last strand of hair on my body goodbye. When I demurred on hands and knees, Benten simply let out an "Oh," and continued to cut the Master's hair.

Tidying things up in the kitchen, I spotted a bottle of Akadama port wine with a bow tie around it and a tag that read "Ebisugawa Kureichirō".

"So Kureichirō's come to visit, has he?"

"He came to apologize to me for his long absence," said the Master.

"What an awfully well-mannered tanuki."

"I'd always thought him an incense-smelling little crybaby, but the boy seems to have grown a bit of spine now. And he tells me that he has reconciled with the Shimogamos, is that not so?"

"We'll see how it goes," I muttered.

"Friendship is beau-ti-ful," sang Benten as she waved the shears.

"Just so, just so," Master Akadama agreed.

"Finished!" Benten cried out at last, tossing away the shears and dusting off her hands. Master Akadama grinned, seemingly pleased with the avant-garde sculpture that now adorned his head.

While I vacuumed the tatami, Benten sat on the windowsill, picking hairs from her arms and blowing them outside. Tonight she was wearing an alluring jet-black dress like she was attending some fancy dinner banquet. The spiky-headed Master Akadama burrowed into the kotatsu, gazing spellbound at Benten and gnawing on a tansan-senbei like an oversized porcupine. Benten had brought the crackers back from Arima, and the Master savoured them like they were some incomparable delicacy, refusing to share any with me.

After I finished vacuuming and got in the kotatsu, Benten turned around. "Yasaburō, have you found everything for the Friday Fellows' stew yet?"

"Just you wait and see. It's going to be absolutely perfect."

"If you need any help catching a tanuki I'd be more than happy to give you a hand."

"No, that won't be necessary. Just let me handle everything."

Benten chuckled. "If it really comes down to it all we'll have to do is put you in the pot. Simple!"

"What stew?" the Master frowned.

Benten lowered her voice as if letting him in on a great secret. "It's tanuki stew. Yasaburō's joined the Friday Fellows."

The Master rolled his gaze onto me. "What foolishness has gotten into your head now?"

"It's just my fool's blood talking, you see..."

"There simply is no curing a fool. It beggars belief!"

I quietly refilled the Master's cup with Akadama port wine.

Benten nimbly came down from the windowsill and draped a shawl that resembled an angel's plumage around her graceful shoulders. "Well, Master, I must be off."

"But, the night is yet young. Pray, say not such lonesome things!"

Only smiling wordlessly at the Master's sad entreaty, Benten bent over and looked at a mirror on top of the kotatsu. Giving her coiffure a pat, she scowled at her reflection as if it belonged to someone else. "Tonight I have a rendezvous at Kiyomizu-dera," she said ominously.

"A rendezvous!?" The Master's sake cup shook in his hand. "With whom?"

"You'd be angry if I told you."

"Surely it is not...him? Is't him?"

"Do be careful not to choke on that cracker." Leaving behind a mysterious smile, Benten drew her shawl around her and departed.

Those barely veiled words were all but assured to turn the Master green with envy. He fell silent, refusing to touch his bento box.

I swept out some of the Master's prickly hairs from beneath my butt and thought to myself. A rendezvous—that had to mean a romantic tryst. And from the way she had hinted at things, the other party must have been—

"Is she talking about the Heir?" I mumbled.

"That snot-nosed, womanizing scalawag!" Master Akadama growled. "Surely he cannot have beguiled my innocent Benten?"

Glossing over the matter of Benten's supposed innocence for the moment, the rendezvous surely meant trouble.

In a moment Master Akadama began to make ready to set out. He bundled up in his favourite padded coat which Benten had presented to him last year, and took in hand the cane I had given him for Christmas.

"I am going to Kiyomizu-dera. You will come with me."

"Of course, sir."



With all the tourists gawking at the fiery autumn leaves at Kiyomizu-dera it almost felt like a festival.

The cane clacked loudly on the stone as Master Akadama walked along the narrow slope, passing narrow cafés and gift shops selling pottery. Whenever someone pointed and laughed at his extraordinarily spiky hairdo, he would chase them off with an impatient wave of his cane.

"Fools, as far as the eye can see!" he huffed. "We will never find Benten in this crowd."

"No need to worry. Benten always makes a splash."

On the other side of the dark mass of people before the front gate, the Niōmon gate and the pagoda came into view.

We mingled with the crowd and entered the temple grounds, looking for Benten. Scarlet leaves flamed in the beams of spotlights.

"That's quite a sight," I said appreciatively, looking up at them.

"Ridiculous," snorted the Master, though his mood improved when a couple of passing coeds complimented him on his hairdo.

"Why don't you stay here and drink some *amazake*? I'll keep looking for her."

I sat the Master down on a camp stool at a café and ascended to the famous veranda.

I found Benten and the Heir without too much trouble. After all, they stood out like sore thumbs.

They were standing on the veranda admiring the sparkling nighttime view. The Heir was wearing a jet-black tuxedo, looking every bit the former expatriate he was. Not to be outdone, Benten stood beside him in that voluptuous jet-black dress. They were like swans among ducklings, and even the most avid leaf-watchers found it hard to ignore them.

I shapeshifted into a little girl and approached them, listening in on their conversation.

"Look," said Benten, leaning over the handrail and pointing at Kyoto Tower.

The Heir grimaced and shook his head. "...How very unsightly."

"Really? I think it's cute, like a candle. Whenever I'm feeling lonesome, I go up and sit on the tip of the tower. It helps me feel better."

"It would seem that eyesore has at least one use, then."

"What a contrarian you can be. Just like the Master."

"That sounded like an insult."

"I intended it as one."

Benten and the Heir smiled at one another, but their respective gazes were cold, like two masks staring each other down. It certainly did not resemble very much a saccharine lovers' tryst.

Benten reached out her pale hand as if stroking those twinkling lights, explaining the amusements of modern Kyoto to the Heir, whose knowledge of nightlife was a century out of date. Every so often a murderous aura started to flow forth from Benten, but each time this happened the Heir would tamp it down with a quick glare. To the casual eye, they simply looked like an anachronistically dressed couple sharing a romantic evening, but in reality it was a cutthroat battle of wills. My tail twitched uneasily as I listened, for it felt like standing on top of an unexploded bomb that might go off at any moment.

At last the Heir sighed and leaned forward onto the handrail, looking into the distance with a weary expression. "Enough of this, madam. This is a waste of time and energy."

"...Perhaps you're right." From her breast Benten produced a long string. She dangled it from one end, letting it sway and glimmer in the night wind.

"What is that?"

"I made it from the Master's hairs. I was planning to strangle you with it."

"Try it, if it so pleases you."

"You never gave me a chance. Really, you are *such* a bore," Benten pouted, letting the strand float away on the wind. For a moment that sturdy whisker of my mentor's glinted silver in the glare of the spotlights, before vanishing into the darkness. With a bored look on her face, Benten leaned on the handrail and sighed, just like the Heir had done. She looked like a little girl who had just had her toy taken away.

"Thank you for accompanying me today," Benten said, her voice sounding as bored as her expression. "It was truly a pleasure."

"Given the choice between accompanying you and having my neck wrung in my sleep, this was certainly the lesser evil."

"...Oh how high and mighty thou art!"

"Quite so. Certainly higher and mightier than you." The Heir straightened, taking in the lights with his gaze, and spoke. "Madam, allow me to give you a warning. Abandon the idea of becoming a tengu. That path holds nothing for you."

"Are you telling me I should become like you? Or that I should become nothing at all?"

"I do not go so far, but there are many other paths to take."

"That's very easy for you to say."

"I say what I say out of the kindness of my heart."

"If you've fallen for me, why don't you just say so?"

"I would rather not hear such idiotic things."

"And I would rather take the advice of a tanuki than listen to you!"

The Heir turned white and closed his mouth.

"What a half-hearted little man you are," Benten smirked, poking the Heir's chest.

"Why did you come back? To this country, this town?"

The Heir's eyes shone coldly, but he did not answer. Instead he turned on his heel, walked away from the railing, and disappeared into the crowd.

Benten surveyed the temple grounds, still with that bored look on her face. Below her, a sea of red leaves stretched along. Beyond them the Koyasu Pagoda rose up from the forest like a phantom in the spotlights. For a moment Benten leaned forward as if she was about to float off the veranda, but she thought better of it and walked away.

I followed her down from the veranda back to the cafe.

Master Akadama was dozing on his stool, his spiky head drooping. A long string of saliva trailed all the way to the red leaves on the ground. Benten put her hand on his shoulder. The Master looked up blearily, before his face rearranged itself into shock, as if he was a kid who had been caught doing something naughty.

"What are you doing here, Master? Benten asked kindly. "You'll catch a cold. Come on, back home we go."



Once December came around the howling winds began to smell of winter, and the time around dawn and dusk grew bitter cold. The peak of the glorious autumn leaves on the mountainsides had passed, and it was during this season that I grew especially fond of my bed of dry leaves.

I was minding the curio shop on Teramachi Street when Yaichirō made an unexpected appearance.

"When will you be done here?"

"Once Chujirō comes back from his meeting, should be around 4 or so."

"I want you to come with me to the Faux Denki Bran distillery. Kureichirō has granted Yashirō a new laboratory, and I want to see what it's like."

"Oh, sweet. Count me in!"

"Oh, how chilly it has gotten. Blast that Old Man Winter."

This afternoon Yaichirō's schedule was clear for once, and with a grunt he eased himself down onto a chair. I didn't see much fatigue in his face; on the contrary he seemed to have plenty left in the tank. Yaichirō had been absolutely swamped recently—taking over ever more duties from Yasaka Heitarō, meeting bigwigs and attending ceremonies in preparation for taking on the post of Trick Magister, and now on top of that reconciliation talks with Ebisugawa Kureichiro—and he often didn't come home until the wee hours of the morning. Work came flying at him from every direction, yet he never allowed the slightest shadow of weariness to darken his cheerful demeanor. This likely had something to do with

the nosebleed-inducing quantity of energy drinks which Mother kept forcing upon him, but also the support of Nanzenji Gyokuran. Yaichirō spent every spare moment he had playing shogi with her, evidently quite energized at the thought of their upcoming marriage at the beginning of next year.

I poured him a cup of *bancha*.

"You know, you're actually starting to give off a sort of distinguished aura. I guess Trick-Magisters-to-be are just built different."

"Keep your mockery to yourself," said Yaichirō, though he didn't really sound angry. "It was very touch-and-go for a while, with that assassination rumor flying about."

"But the job's as good as yours now, no?"

"No, I cannot rest easy yet. There is a proper procedure to these things."

As I drank my tea and listened to Yaichirō wax poetic about his plans after getting married, Kiyomizu Chujirō made his return, so my brother and I left the shop and headed for the Faux Denki Bran distillery. People went back and forth on Teramachi Street bundled up for the winter. The most thickly bundled up of all I knew were tanuki, and each time we passed one Yaichirō made sure to fussily exchange greetings with them.

Along the way, Yaichirō sang the praises of Ebisugawa Kureichirō.

After the reconciliation in the Tadasu Forest, Ebisugawa Kureichirō had been exceedingly gracious to the Shimogamo clan, not once asking for anything in return. Not only had he publicly repudiated the assassination rumors, he was also assisting Yaichirō with his immense workload, and in honor of the reconciliation of the two clans had even had produced a limited edition run of Faux Denki Bran and distributed them to all parties involved, free of charge.

"Kureichirō is truly a splendid tanuki."

"Sure, he's nice, but he's still Sōun's son, y'know?"

"I assure you, he is so unlike Sōun that I can hardly believe that old tanuki's blood flows through his veins."

Now that the uproar after Sōun's death had subsided, the distillery was back in full operation.

Once we passed through the gates and entered the distillery's austere entrance hall, Ebisugawa Kureichirō quickly came scurrying down the stairs. He'd been back in Kyoto for some time now, yet he still wore those tattered robes, still had the grime of the road on his face. Apparently he was continuing his ascetic lifestyle. Living in poverty was all well and good, but I really wished he'd do something about the smell.

Kureichirō gripped Yaichirō's hand with evident pleasure and led us through the distillery.

"You have been very kind to Yashirō. Thank you," said Yaichirō.

"No, no, it has been my pleasure. In fact, Yashirō has taught me a great deal."

"He's always nose-deep in a book," I commented.

"Indeed, I regard him as a genius of our times. It is truly wonderful."

Yashirō's laboratory looked like the lair of a mad scientist, and both Yaichirō and I were taken aback by just how elaborate it was. In the center was a lab countertop about two tatami in area, stacked high with vacuum tubes and circuit boards that had seemingly



been dredged out of the recesses of the warehouses. The surrounding walls were almost completely blocked off with piles of mysterious equipment; the bookshelves were crammed full of dog-eared books on magnetism and biographies of famous figures.

Yashirō came crawling out from behind the countertop, dressed in work fatigues and proudly wearing the goggles which the Heir had given to him. Behind him he was dragging a device that looked like a rice cooker, which was spitting out blue sparks.

"You're not thinking of creating an artificial human in here, are you?" I asked in amazement.

"Isn't it awesome? Kureichirō said I can use whatever I like!"

"At any rate it was all just gathering dust in the warehouses," Kureichirō said.

"Nothing would please us more than to see it being put to good use."

"Will any of it electrocute you?" Yaichirō said, sounding worried.

"Sometimes I get a little shock, but that just perks me right up!"

Yashirō may have been a scaredy cat and a terrible shapeshifter, but when it came to electricity he excelled. In fact, he had the very un-tanuki-like trait of being able to discharge electricity from his fingers. It was a peculiar twist of fate that Mother, who hated thunder so much, should have a son who was so skilled with manipulating electricity.

Yashirō was attempting to recreate the original recipe which Professor Inazuma, the inventor of Faux Denki Bran, had come up with back in the Taishō period. He laid out the professor's notes which he had discovered in the lab and went on to explain how to apply voltage and the circulation rate of undiluted solution and the inner workings of the electrical discharge apparatus, but all of it went right over our heads.

"Incredible. I don't understand a single word," Yaichirō muttered.

But the experimental Faux Denki Bran which Yashirō had concocted was absolutely vile; it tasted like a rotten egg mixed into brush ink. The instant it entered our mouths we all cried out in anguish.

"It certainly has a depth of flavor," Kureichirō said.

"Depth, or perhaps a little funk," Yaichirō said.

"I'm going to be honest, this is the worst stuff I have ever tried," I said.

Yashirō tried a sip of his experiment and nodded knowingly. "Just like I thought, there's something wrong with the electrical discharge apparatus. I'll look for another one in the warehouse."

With a scholar's determination, Yashirō stormed out of the lab, glaring at his notes all the while.



"Take your time," said Ebisugawa Kureichirō, exiting the lab.

Yaichirō clutched his cup like it contained precious nectar, grimacing as he sipped the failed Faux Denki Bran and walked around Yashirō's lab.

"You know you don't have to drink it all, right? You're going to regret it later."

I didn't hear what Yaichirō half-heartedly mumbled back, but looking at his turned back I could feel a sort of reverence for Yashirō's incomprehensible talent. He was like a

proud father watching his son take his first steps out into the world. I was quite sure now that it had been Yaichirō who had asked Kureichirō to give Yashirō his lab.

Yaichirō finally came back and sat on a wooden chair in front of me. He stared at the cup in his hand with a very serious look on his face. "This is a good opportunity. I'd like to ask your advice on something."

"Ah, finally decided to put things in your capable little brother's paws, have we?"

"I wouldn't put it that way, precisely, but...I suppose so. I have known ever since Kureichirō returned to Kyoto that I would eventually have to have this talk, but it is a very delicate topic, you see. You know all too well, how dense I can be when it comes to things like this, and in fact I do not know how to proceed. However, what must be said must be said, and this sort of thing requires one to go through certain procedures; the sooner it is done the better, but of course one must also consider the feelings of the opposite party..."

He was being so roundabout I had no idea what he was talking about. "Yeah, I know exactly how awkward you can be. Now can you get to the point?"

"Don't rush me, I was just getting to it." But rather than doing that, he launched into a grandiose retelling of the history of the Shimogawa-Ebisugawa feud, and how dearly Grandfather had wished for this reconciliation. After several minutes of this, the end was still nowhere in sight. Yaichirō always embarked on these grand detours whenever he was tiptoeing around a sensitive subject.

At last, he took a deep breath, and asked firmly, "Would you consider renewing your engagement with Kaisei?"

I stared at him, slack-jawed. "C'mon, where'd that come from?"

"Of course, we would need to consult with Kaisei and Kureichirō..."

When we were still pups, Father and Ebisugawa Sōun had pledged to have Kaisei and me wed. Now that I thought about it, it was pretty unlikely that Sōun had ever intended on following through on that promise. After Father was made into stew, Sōun had unilaterally cancelled the engagement.

But Kaisei had never exactly been much of a blushing bride-to-be. Around the time we entered the throes of puberty she began to hide herself from me, though in spite of that she still read to me from her dictionary of insults every chance she got. Fed up, I considered the cancelling of the engagement to be a blessing, and I had no intention of reinstating it now.

"No, thank you," I declared, shaking my head. "You haven't gotten your own marriage done with, and you're already looking for a bride for me? You need to slow your roll, brother."

"It's tanuki like you who need to find a bride and settle down, the sooner the better. Who knows what mischief you will get up to otherwise. I wouldn't put it past you to fall into a stewpot."

"So that's why you're saying I gotta keep an eye on the Kaisei prize?"

"What I am saying is that you need to have something to protect."

"I'm sure this'd be real convenient for you, solidifying the reconciliation and all. But I wouldn't get engaged to that foul-mouthed, invisible weirdo for anything. And besides what would happen to Yajirō? You ever think about him before proposing this idea?"

Yaichirō had to know that Yajirō was in love with Kaisei.

Yaichirō's voice softened. "Yasaburō, this idea *came* from Yajirō."

For a moment I couldn't find my voice. I thought of that little frog down there in the well, glaring at his shogi board.

"Yajirō's going to leave Kyoto, isn't he?"

"I think it is best we let him go."

"I don't want to!" I shouted. "How come you're not gonna stop him?"

"He must walk his own path."

"I never took you for such a coldhearted tanuki!"

"He must walk his own path, and you must walk yours. I am considering the future of the Shimogamo clan. Father is no longer here. If I do not think of the good of you all, who will?"

An unreasonable fury bubbled up from the pit of my stomach.

"I never asked you to take Father's place!" I said. "You can't replace him. You're just full of yourself!"

Sometimes I still think about what a cruel thing that was to say.

I was expecting him to shout back, but instead he just hung his head and smiled.

"Yes," he murmured. "You're right."

The door opened, and Yashirō came in precariously balancing a cardboard box filled with bits and bobs. When he saw me he flinched and stopped in his tracks.

"Yasaburō, how come you look so mad?"



Twilight indigo had enveloped Rokudō Chinnōji when I visited that evening.

Yajirō had removed himself from tanuki society and holed up in this old well when Father passed to the other side. I wondered how many times my feet had taken me here since then.

This well was known in the tanuki world as a place for young tanuki who had lost their way to come and bury their troubles, but I might have been the most frequent visitor of all. Sometimes Yajirō and I would just babble on and on to each other into the night until light was creeping into the sky overhead. It had been a year now since that night when Yajirō and I had witnessed Benten shedding tears into the well under the light of the full moon.

I called into the mouth of the well. "Hey, Yajirō. Still alive down there?"

"...Is that Yasaburō? I figured you'd be showing up right around now."

I turned into a frog and hopped down into the well.

The lanterns of the tiny shrine shone dimly over the island at the bottom of the well. Water lapped along the shore, where Yajirō was sitting and staring at his belongings which were laid out on top of an arabesque-patterned cloth. I crawled onto land and glanced at the toy-sized collection, which appeared to be the sum of Yajirō's earthly possessions.

"Looks like everything a frog owns can fit into a handkerchief," remarked Yajirō.

"Surprises me even, a little. But I suppose it's best to travel light."

"So you're really leaving on a journey, then?"

"...I know what you want to say. You're against it, right?"

"Isn't your shapeshifting still a little rusty?"

"I'll get by. I've got Grandmother's medicine, too."

"Mother'll be heartbroken."

"Oof, I really wish you hadn't said that. But I'm definitely going to come back one day." Yajirō croaked offhandedly, like he was trying to lighten the mood. "All right, wanna take a look at my treasures?"

He started to go through his belongings one by one, picking each item up carefully and explaining its history.

There was the miniature shogi set which he had received from Nanzenji Gyokuran; Father's shogi puzzle books; the tengu beans which Master Akadama had given him on Setsubun; a pouch containing Grandmother's pills; a good luck charm of Shimogamo Shrine from Mother; a Polaroid of an Eizan railcar which he had used to practice transforming. Even the ordinary-looking river stones and marbles each had a story behind them.

As I watched him pack, I felt a lump growing in my throat.

Ever since he was a pup Yajirō had always been a little lackadaisical, never showing any flashes of brilliance, only ever thought of as an idiot. He was unusually morose for a tanuki, hardly ever got fired up for anything, could never be counted on to do anything. But oh, how I loved his gentle wisdom.

"Don't go, Yajirō."

"You depend on me too much, Yasaburō," Yajirō said kindly. "And we all depend too much on Yaichirō."

With a soft *hup*, Yajirō stretched his little wobbly body and started doing some peculiar-looking warm-up exercises. I watched him with confusion until to my surprise he dived into the water with a *kerplop*. Apparently he was training his body in the freezing water to prepare for the long journey ahead. Yajirō swam smoothly out to the edges of the well where the lantern light didn't reach, bobbing up and down in the water. I remained sitting on the shore, watching him.

"Aren't you cold?"

"I'm freezing. It feels like my heart'll stop beating!"

"Isn't that actually bad for your body?"

"Hah, this is nothing. I've got a long road ahead of me, after all."

I went back to the handkerchief and looked at Yajirō's belongings. There I saw a daruma, its red body shining like a polished apple, one eye painted black. On a whim I picked it up and turned it over, and to my astonishment found written on the back in bold black lettering, "WISHING SHIMOGAMO YAJIRŌ A SWIFT RECOVERY—EBISUGAWA KAISEI".

"Yasaburō!" Yajirō shouted from the murky water. "Do you believe in the red fur of fate?"

"I'm not too sure."

"There are these two tanuki I know pretty well, and they're wrapped up real good by the red fur of fate. It's a funny thing, this red string. It's so apparent, looking at them from

afar, but apparently those two haven't even realized it yet," Yajirō mused, floating in the water. "Ah, young love. It's enough to make a green frog go red all over."



I understood where Yaichirō was coming from, but I really didn't want to get re-engaged to Kaisei. I understood where Yajirō was coming from too, but I didn't want him to go on his journey. I knew I should return to the Tadasu Forest and talk it over with Yaichirō, but I didn't want to do that either.

I just didn't want any of this at all.

This is precisely where the tsuchinoko comes in.

"I know, I'll go tsuchinoko hunting!"

Leaving the well at Rokudō Chinnōji I entered the mountains, roaming Higashiyama on the trail of these mysterious creatures, not returning to the Tadasu Forest. To be honest about it, I was running away from home.

The forest in December was frigid and still, and there was not the slightest trace of a tsuchinoko anywhere. I wondered whether they might not be hibernating. Not being sure whether these noble cryptids still adhered to a typical reptile lifestyle, I kicked up fallen leaves, sniffed around, dug holes with a shovel, and continued my unrelenting search.

When the curtain of night fell my thoughts went back to my family waiting at home in the Tadasu Forest, and decided before going to sleep that I would go back tomorrow, but the next day, I resumed my hunt for tsuchinoko. I was so engrossed in the hunt that I dreamt that I had become a tsuchinoko myself. I started to doubt whether I was hunting the tsuchinoko, or whether I was the tsuchinoko that was being hunted.

A week passed in this way.

Back in the Tadasu Forest the Shimogamo family, including Nanzenji Gyokuran, huddled in discussion. Even those who had at first advised to let me alone started to worry when my absence dragged on. At the end of the meeting Gyokuran was entrusted with clearing up the affair, and paid a call to the Faux Denki Bran distillery.

It was in the reception rooms that she conveyed to Kaisei the news that I had gone AWOL in the mountains.

And that's how my ex-fiancée ended up trekking up into the mountains to talk me into coming down.



After having a soak at the natural radium hot springs in Kitashirakawa and slurping up a bowl of udon, I rambled around Mount Uryū until the sun went down. I arranged a bed of dry leaves at my campground, turned on a battery-powered lantern, and nibbled on a hard biscuit. The branches around me were gradually melting into the darkness which crept steadily through the trees.

I had turned into my human form, clad in the regalia of the Tsuchinoko Expeditionary Brigade. Having a hard time falling asleep, I just stared mistily at the light of the lamp.

*Do you believe in the red fur of fate?* Yajirō had asked.

It had been back during the distant mists of puberty that Kaisei had last shown herself to me, and now all I could remember of my ex-fiancée's appearance was a brown blob that resembled a Kamenoko scrubbing brush. It was a bit much to expect me to feel some sort of destiny with a scrubbing brush that spewed out a stream of insults every time it opened its mouth. Plus, supposing we did get married, I would be well and truly stuck with those two bottomless idiots Kinkaku and Ginkaku, and that was a future depressing enough to warrant tearing off even the red fur of fate. I couldn't allow my future-self to suffer this fate.

"Oh, woe is me..."

Exactly as I said this, I heard a voice saying, "So this is where your dumb ass has been hiding!"

An overturned black basket came shuffling out of the woods like some woodland spirit.

"What're you doing all the way out here?"

"Duh, I'm here to get you, you dumb oaf!" The black basket shook. "You're making your mom and Yaichirō and even Miss Gyokuran worry. You're so irresponsible I can't believe you call yourself a tanuki. Are you a baby?"

Though her words were poisonous she wasn't wrong, which annoyed me even more. Surely there was a softer, more tanuki-like way to convey the same thing. I was so peeved that I rolled over to face away from her.

"Yeah, sure, I'm a baby. Now leave me alone."

"See, you're sulking! Ugh, you're such a pain!"

"I never asked you to come get me. I just want some time alone to think, okay?"

"Hmph. What could your peabrain possibly have to think about? It's not like you ever have any good ideas when something serious happens, anyways. The only thing you're good for is acting like an idiot!"

"Could you shut up already? Otherwise I'm going to come over and pluck your tail bald."

"Ooh, why don't you come here and try it then?"

"I'm not talking to you anymore!"

"Then I'm not talking to you either!"

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

My ex-fiancée went quiet, and silence descended on the darkness-ensconced campsite.

I tried to fall asleep, but Kaisei didn't seem to be leaving. She kept skulking around, her footsteps crunching on the dead leaves heavily like some kind of robot, wandering through the light of the lamp, stumbling over tree roots.

"I'm just talking to myself here," she finally muttered. "I don't want to restore the engagement. So don't lose any sleep over it."

"I'm just talking to myself too, but that's just fine with me."

"We're in agreement, then. I've already got two idiots to deal with, I'd never be able to deal with a third!"

Irritated, I got up and glared at the black basket. "I'm already over it. Only a freak would ever want to be engaged to you!"

"A freak, huh?"

"You're stuck up, foulmouthed, and you haven't shown yourself in years. I just don't get you!"

"Yeah, yeah, I bet you don't."

"When I heard the engagement was cancelled I was so relieved."

"Me too. I was relieved that I wouldn't have to get married to a big idiot!"

"I'd be happier getting married to a pickling stone!"

"If you'll take a pickle stone, then I'd rather get married to the Navel Stone!"

Kaisei expounded on what a good husband the Navel Stone would be. It wouldn't call her stupid, it wouldn't quarrel with Kinkaku or Ginkaku, it wouldn't hang around with people who eat tanuki stew, and it certainly wouldn't fall in love with a half-baked tengu named Benten, among other things. At last the insults began raining down on me like confetti at a ticker tape parade, including such glowing hits as "Townie!" "Bristletail!" "Simp!" "Babyrager!" "Double simp!" Strangely enough, she was starting to sob.

"What're you crying for?"

"Who said I'm crying! What do I have to cry about!" she shouted furiously.

"Yeah, but..."

"If you wanna see me so bad, I'll show myself to you. Then you'll understand why we could never be betrothed!"

Ebisugawa tossed aside the basket that covered her head. It wasn't a grotesque demon that appeared in the lamplight, but a female tanuki, her glossy fur shining, and the cutest tanuki I had ever seen, maybe even in the entire world. But the instant I laid my eyes on her, my butt gave a little twinge and my tail came sprouting out. As I looked on, aghast, my transformation came sliding off, and I turned back into a furball.

I stared at my furry paws in astonishment.

"What did I tell you!" Kaisei looked at me furiously. "Whenever you see me, your transformation comes undone!"



Kaisei had come to this realization when we were still students of Master Akadama.

This had happened at exactly the same time that my butt had been beset by a plague of mushrooms, and having been thoroughly ridiculed by Kinkaku and Ginkaku I was feeling particularly down. During those days Nanzenji Gyokuran took me to the proctology clinic many times, and every time my transformation came undone I blamed it on the mushrooms.

"It may just be your nerves, boy. These things do happen," said the goateed doctor at the clinic.

Only Kaisei suspected what the real cause of my slump was.

Each time she tried approaching me, I wound up reverting into a tanuki. Seeing how I would come to the end of my rope being chased around my Kinkaku and Ginkaku, she gradually stopped coming near me altogether. After all, there was nothing Shimogamo Yasaburō was more proud of than having a thick skin and being able to transform as he pleased. As Kaisei disappeared from my sight, I gradually convinced myself that it had been a lingering symptom of the mushrooms and eventually became obsessed with protecting my behind. What a simpleton I was.

Still, I could scarcely believe that Kaisei had kept this secret locked up in her heart by herself all these years. I didn't know what to call this extraordinarily noble effort, except a real waste of time.

I was so shocked that I let something unwise slip out. "...You really are an idiot."

Kaisei's fur bristled in the lamp light. "I'm the idiot?"

"Who else would it be?"

"Fine, I'm an idiot!"

"Saying it out loud doesn't make it better, you know."

"Okay, I'm a loudmouth, I'm an idiot, I'm a shrinking violet, whatever! What do you want me to say, I'm just a tanuki!" Kaisei glared at me across the lamp. "...So that's that, there's no way we're going back to being betrothed!"

We continued our staring contest for some time.

Suddenly Kaisei's gaze flickered, and she looked uneasily over her shoulder into the darkness. "Hey, do you hear that weird voice?" She walked hesitantly around the lamp towards me.

I pricked up my ears and heard in the darkness what seemed to be weeping coming intermittently from the dark. Not only that, but the ghostly voice sounded like it was coming closer. Kaisei had always been deathly afraid of ghost stories since she was young, and now she pressed her incredibly warm body against me, her nose quivering with trepidation. "What is that freaky voice?"

"It sounds like a kid crying."

"At this hour? This deep in the mountains?"

We stayed pressed against one another, holding our breaths and listening to that weeping.

At last the sound came right up to the edge of the trees, and then a white will-o'-the-wisp-looking thing came bouncing out of the darkness directly at us.

Kaisei shrieked, but I grabbed hold of her. "Calm down, it's alright. It's just Grandma, from Tanukidani Fudō."

"Huh? Grandmother?" Kaisei said, looking amazed.

The sobbing, citrus-sized ball of white fluff rolled up to our feet, worming her way in between us without saying a word. Then, giving a little shake of relief, she whispered in that girlish voice of hers, "Oh, how frightening that was! But it's warm and cozy here."

"Are you by yourself? What are you doing here?" I inquired.



"I was taking a walk when I lost my way. I can't see anything, you see." Grandmother took a whiff of my scent. "Oh? Do I know you, young man?"

"I believe you do. We met in the summer."

"I thought so! But I don't know this young lady."

"My name is Kaisei," said Kaisei, managing a proper introduction despite her shock.

"Kaisei...I'll remember that. Tell me, Kaisei, I don't smell strange, do I?"

Kaisei sniffed Grandmother's white fur. "You smell very nice."

"I knew it! I didn't think I smelled strange," Grandmother exclaimed happily.

Grandmother had set off from Tanukidani Fudō on a whim, but not knowing the way back had stumbled around and around the forest. Tanukidani Fudō is down Mount Uryū towards the northwest, and at the moment it was probably buzzing like a beehive with all of Grandmother's disciples searching frantically for their founder.

Grandmother curled up between me and Kaisei, telling us how scary the mountain at night had been. She claimed that she had been being chased by a slender angel of death, which strode after her on its long limbs. "If it had caught me it would have taken me to the other side like that!" shivered Grandma.

After a pause, she suddenly asked, "Are you two married?"

"No we're not!" answered Kaisei.

"Oh. But you're all tangled up by the red fur of fate, aren't you? I can see it."

"Well, we'll be married someday. We're engaged, see," I interjected.

"I knew it!" Grandmother exclaimed, quivering contentedly and looking pleased with herself.

"Do you think we can make it?" I asked her.

"Is that what you're worried about?" Grandma giggled. "As long as you keep things light and fluffy things will work out. We're tanuki, you see. Fluffy is our middle name!"

"Well, all right then."

"Let me let you in on a secret. I was once married, too. I've forgotten all the painful things, and I only remember all the wonderful things. I gave birth to many adorable little furballs, I think...and now that I'm thinking about them, I wonder where they've all gone? Those laughing, tumbling little furballs..." Grandmother gave a wide yawn. "I always fall asleep so easily, no matter when, or where."

Just before she nodded off, Grandmother murmured sleepily, over and over, "Do your best, young man. Do your best."

"I will," I answered, stroking her brilliant white fur.

"The flow is muddying. You've got to keep your fur spick and span, hmm?"

"I know, spick and span."

"You've got to make a ruckus and stir things up."

"I'll make a ruckus, a fine old one."

Hearing me say that Grandmother smiled, and a quiver went through her soft fur. "Fun things are good things. Isn't that right, young man?" And then, deflating like a soufflé, she fell fast asleep.

After listening to her soft breathing for a little while, Kaisei and I whispered between ourselves and agreed that we should take her back to the tanuki at Tanukidani Fudō. Kaisei

transformed into a girl scout of the Tsuchinoko Expeditionary Brigade and picked Grandmother up, holding the lamp high above the dark road. I remained a tanuki.

Together we descended the mountain path towards Tanukidani Fudō. Before long we sensed the presence of many tanuki in the woods. Countless flashlights glimmered in the darkness below the cedars.

"That's Uncle and the disciples coming up," I said. Kaisei held the lantern high and swung it side to side so that it could be easily seen from below. In her arms, the white fluffball that was Grandmother slowly expanded and contracted, breathing adorably in her sleep.

Kaisei squatted down and whispered in my ear, "Are you sure?"

"...Yeah, I am."

"But you won't be able to shapeshift when you're with me."

"It'll work out somehow."

"...You are so irresponsible."

"It's just my fool's blood talking."

"Hmph!" Kaisei snorted and stood up. Cradling the sleeping Grandmother in her arms, she silently watched the lights winding towards us.



There's an urban legend that says Kyoto Tower is just a tanuki transformed.

Along the same vein, it's widely known that the Navel Stone that sits ensconced before the Rokkakudō on the grounds of Shiunzan Chōhōji is a tanuki. It was me who in my younger days attempted to expose that fact to all the world with the genius idea of smoking it out with burning pine needles. I'd been of a mind to use the same method to expose Kyoto Tower, but the severe scolding I'd gotten after the Navel Stone incident had put paid to that idea. To this day I haven't been able to clear away my doubts about that tower.

The morning Yajirō left Kyoto, he and I stood before Kyoto Station, looking up at that orange toadstool soaring up into the crisp blue sky.

"Don't you think it looks like a tanuki, Yajirō?" I asked.

"I've thought about it before. But don't you go trying to smoke it out, Yasaburō!"

"Come on, you know I'm past that sort of stuff." I pointed to the tip of the tower. "Apparently Benten sits up there sometimes drinking cocktails."

"It does look perfect for a tengu perch."

"...Father did always like this tower for some reason, didn't he?"

"By the time I get back to Kyoto, I might be homesick for this tower too."

Our father, Shimogamo Sōichirō, used to visit tanuki all over Japan on behalf of the tanuki of Kyoto, and every time he came back he used to say he missed this tower more and more. There must be something about it that triggers a tanuki's homesickness.

City buses streamed in and out of the station without end, and commuters and students bustled past breathing white steam into the air. I was disguised as a college student, and in his suit and tie Yajirō blended right into the morning commute crowd. He

carefully adjusted the cloth bundle he was carrying, which contained all of his worldly belongings.

At last Yaichirō came along, bringing Gyokuran and Yashirō with him.

"My apologies for the tardiness, Yajirō. I couldn't find Mother."

"That's not your fault. That makes it a little easier for me to leave."

"Well, perhaps so."

"You know Mother would try to stop me from leaving. I wouldn't get anywhere!"

"Mother really is quite bad at goodbyes," agreed Gyokuran.

Last night during the farewell party at the Scarlet Pane on Teramachi Street, Mother had thrown a fit and refused to come to the sendoff, and when we tried to get her this morning she had led us a merry chase around the Tadasu Forest, before jumping into a taxi and departing for only she knew where.

She had been this way even when Father was still alive, so awkward when it came to sending someone off on a long journey. Once, when Father was going to the island of Iki in Kyushu, she had come to the station, which was all well and good. But she was so reluctant to say goodbye that she actually jumped on the train and accompanied him all the way to Kobe, taking a detour to the Takarazaka Revue to mollify herself before coming back.

"Yajirō, you've got the medicine, right?" asked Yashirō. "Don't forget to take it, or you'll turn back into a frog!"

"Yep, Grandma's medicine's right here in the bundle."

Yajirō opened up a thick train timetable and showed us his route on a map. First he was visiting the tanuki of the Komachi hot springs at Kurashiki. The tanuki clan here was a branch that had split off from the Nanzenji clan some decades ago, and Yajirō was visiting them on behalf of Nanzenji Shōjirō. After spending several days at Kurashiki, he would swing round Onomichi and Tomonoura visiting tanuki there as well.

"I'll take my time there thinking about what to do next."

"If you end up going across Shikoku, be sure to say hello to the Kinchō clan," Yaichirō requested.

The Kinchō clan of Komatsushima had had a good relationship with Father, who had taken Yaichirō and Yajirō to visit them once. After Father's death, there had been precious few chances to further the relationship, and Yaichirō wished to rekindle this partnership that crossed the Seto Inland Sea.

Nanzenji Gyokuran produced a flint that Mother had entrusted to her and struck sparks over Yajirō, who ducked his head. "Now you're ready. I'm sure you'll have a wonderful trip, Yajirō!"

"Thank you. By the time I return, you'll be my sister-in-law, I suppose?"

"I don't know why you bring something like that up now," Gyokuran blushed.

Composing his expression, Yajirō bowed low to us. "I am humbled that you have come to see me off. I depart now on a journey, that I may return an embiggened tanuki. I bid you all a fond farewell."

"Come back whenever you feel ready," said Yaichirō. "We'll all be waiting."

"We'll all be waiting for you!" echoed Yashirō. "Bring us back some souvenirs!"

"You'd better come back, you hear?" I demanded.

"I know that I have a home, now. So don't you worry, I'll be back."

Swinging his bindle, Yajirō walked determinedly through the ticket barrier, and with that same confident stride disappeared into the crowd. For a long time after we lost sight of him, we all stared at the ticket barrier as if in prayer. It felt like doing that would give Yajirō a bit more luck on his journey. Yaichirō remained there longest of all, still unmoving even after the rest of us had turned away.

Thus, Shimogamo Yajirō departed on his journey.



I found Mother at the billiards hall on the west end of the Kamo Bridge.

Through the glass door, the interior of the hall was warm and cozy, and sunlight spilled onto the floorboards through the windows that faced onto the Kamo River. I could hear the crack of a cue ball coming from the second floor. With a cup of coffee in hand I went up the stairs, to find a princely young man perfumed with the aura of the Takarazuka leaning over a table, alone. I sat down on a chair and sipped my coffee, watching silently over Mother as she knocked around the balls.

At long last Mother opened her mouth. "Has that boy gone?"

"We just saw him off at Kyoto Station."

"Just when I thought he'd finally come back to the forest, off he goes again."

"Yajirō'll be back."

Mother took the offered coffee and walked to the window, warming her hands around the cup. "...Sō was always afraid of him leaving Kyoto. He said that he might not come back. That's why I didn't want to let him go, especially him."

Today was the first really cold morning of winter. White herons swooped over the Kamo River, and far-off Higashiyama stood out as clearly as though I was looking through a telescope. But Mother saw none of those things, her unfocused gaze only looking out into the distance. Reflected in her eyes, I knew, was the image of Yajirō passing through the ticket barrier at Kyoto Station.

"...Perhaps he thought me cruel, for not coming to see him off," Mother said faintly, like she was talking to herself. "But I just didn't know that I could let his hands go. If I'd looking him in the eyes, if I'd begged him to stay, that child never would have been able to go—"

"He was very upbeat when he left. I'm sure it'll be a good journey."

When I said that, Mother turned around and smiled. "Yes, I'm sure it will," she said. "It's what you all decided, after all. Sō would have let him go."

I was sure then that Yaichirō letting Yajirō go on his journey had been the right thing to do.

Yajirō would have a splendid journey. He'd meet all sorts of kind people and tanuki, and the sun would always shine on his fur. And most importantly of all, Yajirō would without any doubt one day return to Kyoto.

I truly believed that from the bottom of my heart.



Having nothing in particular to do I spent the first half of December lazing around the Tadasu Forest.

I passed the time listening to the sound of the wind shaking the tree branches, drinking honey ginger tea to stave off colds, and accompanying Mother to billiards disguised as a shy young mademoiselle.

While I was loafing around, Yaichirō was dashing through the snowy streets of Kyoto in his automaton rickshaw, panting out white steam from under the red muffler that Gyokuran had given him. New work sprang out for him from around every corner, and yet he dealt with it all so indefatigably that it was as if his blood had been entirely replaced by energy drinks.

Yaichirō had also found time to discuss with Kureichirō the matter of reinstating the engagement between Kaisei and me. It seemed that Kureichirō had raised no opposition, but as Sōun's funeral had taken place only a short while ago, the official announcement would have to wait for a more opportune moment. Perfectly reasonable, if you asked me.

Mother would often fuss me about Kaisei while I was rolling around in bed. "Why don't you go see here?"

But I didn't want Kinkaku and Ginkaku to see my transformation coming undone, and anyways seeing Kaisei felt highly embarrassing. No doubt she felt the same way, and we probably wouldn't even manage to have a proper conversation.

"I don't wanna go see her. She's just going to get mad at me."

"Why would your fiancée get mad at you?"

"Whenever she's flustered the first thing she does is get mad."

"You shouldn't speak of your fiancée like that!"

"So what do you want me to say to her?"

"Dear me, is that something you should ask your mother? You just say things that are, well, *embarrassing*. Oh goodness, I'm getting so very embarrassed myself!"

"She might be my fiancée, but that doesn't mean we're just going to start whispering sweet nothings to each other!"

"Oh, how embarrassing," said Mother, burrowing into the leaves.

All that being said though—

Ever since Sōun had passed on to the next life, everything had been going suspiciously well. We had had a historic reconciliation with the Ebisugawa clan, my betrothal with Kaisei had been reinstated, Yajirō had left on his journey, and it looked all but certain that Yaichirō would become the next Trick Magister. Even the Master Akadama-Benten-Heir front had been quiet since that night at Kiyomizu-dera. Everything was smooth sailing as far as the eye could see.

As a tanuki I am quite fond of the quiet life, but my fool's blood was whispering to me, *There's got to be more than this.*

*Let's raise a ruckus  
A mighty fine ruckus*

*Let's raise a rumpus  
A down and dirty rumpus*

I was sitting on the bank of the winter-parched Kamo, making up a dangerous, un-tanuki-like song, when the automaton rickshaw rolled up and stopped in front of me. Yaichirō was sitting inside.

"Yasaburō, I need you to come with me. Yasaka needs your help."

I jumped up. Whatever this was, it smelled interesting.

"Another problem pop up?"

"Rejoice, you're up again."



The problem in question was the kerfuffle over who would serve as witness for the tanuki election.

The Trick Magister is chosen during a ceremony held by the tanuki elders at the end of each year. It is a time-honored tradition that a tengu be invited to witness the election, but as tengu tend to hold tanuki in contempt, they often will hem and haw find some excuse or other to get out of the job. Last year the Kurama tengu claimed that they all had bellyaches, forcing Master Akadama to attend.

Yaichirō scrunched up his face and folded his arms as he drove the rickshaw along. "Master Akadama simply refuses to serve as this year's witness. He claims that he will recommend another in his stead, but..."

"Don't tell me. Benten?"

"Surely this is too much. Benten is a member of the Friday Fellows! Does he mean us to invite a human who eats tanuki stew to the banquet at which the tanuki leader will be chosen!?"

"Besides, she's not even a tengu, and we can't have that, can we?"

"Certainly not. The authority of the Trick Magister is founded upon the will of the tanuki and the approbation of a tengu. Throw away this rite, and the Trick Magister might as well be a paper tiger!"

"There's just no getting around tradition, is there?"

In front of the Masugata Court Apartments in the rear of the Demachi shopping arcade, a queue of jostling tanuki snaked into Master Akadama's residence like a crowd of impatient debt collectors. While Master Akadama hated being accosted by such a great drove of tanuki, the tanuki themselves saw their numbers as the only way to show him the proper respect.

When Yaichirō and I alighted from the automaton rickshaw a murmur went around: "Yasaburō's here!"

Yasaka Heitarō himself came out to meet me.

"Yasaburō, sorry to make you come all the way out here. I needed the help of a real tengu expert."

"Starting off with flattery, are we?"

"Master Yakushibō's stuck his head in his sand and refuses to listen to me. I've given him gifts, sung his praises, even got down on my knees and cried. I'm just about at the end of my tether. Work your magic, get him to agree to witness the election."

I opened the door and went inside to find the kitchen floor so inundated with gift-wrapped Akadama port wine bottles and boxes of chocolates that there wasn't a place to step. Master Akadama was wormed into his kotatsu beneath the pale winter sunshine, munching on an enormous sliced up tuna roll and staring at a shogi board beside him. He didn't seem to be at all concerned about the tanuki bigwigs that were lined up outside his door.

"Shimogamo Yasaburō, at your service."

"Why have you come? I have not called you."

"Throwing a tantrum, tormenting tanuki? That's Yakushibō of Nyoigadake all right, a tengu among tengu!"

I sat down cross-legged on the floor while the Master glowered at me.

"I see through you, you furry miscreant. You mean to use your quibbling to lure me out. No doubt that sniveling Yasaka Heitarō came scurrying to you."

"Wow, you don't miss a thing."

"Your wheedling led me to no small misery last year."

"But you had your fun, didn't you?"

"Fool!" the Master snapped. "Benten shall be the witness, and that is the end of it!"

And with that Master Akadama flopped down and rolled over away from me.

I tried a few maneuvers, but the Master kept pretending to be asleep and didn't say a word.

Outside the sun began to go down in the sky, but the Master refused even to pull the cord to turn on the lightbulb, so the room became as dark as an abandoned ruin. I could hear outside the sounds of the restless tanuki uncorking bottles and beginning to drink and carouse, the laid-back mongrels. Yaichirō offered me a bowl of rice topped with eel tempura, which I scarfed down in the kitchen.

At last the Master got up slowly in the darkness. The scents of tobacco and cologne and old man stench mingled as the dim smoldering of a tengu cigar flickered in the darkness.

"...Another meaningless day comes to an end."

"Why don't you turn on the light?"

"Wherefore must I stretch out my own hand? You turn it on."

"No. Turn it on yourself!"

I pondered over why Master Akadama wanted to make Benten the witness.

He was the only one who wanted to install her as the next Yakushibō of Nyoigadake; all the other tengu of Kyoto, Konkobu of Iwayasan and Tarōbō of Atagoyama included, had their misgivings. Now that the Heir had come back brimming with tengu strength, Benten's position had become rather precarious. Master Akadama must have been plotting to install her as the election witness in order to cement her succession as a fait accompli. For the tanuki it was nothing less than a calamity being swept up in this war over tengu accession, but even we have our self-respect to uphold.

The smouldering of the tengu cigar went out, and the Master remained there mutely buried under the kotatsu. He seemed to have fallen asleep. In the corner I prostrated myself and touched my head to the floor. "I have stayed too long. Good evening, Master."



A tent had been pitched in front of the apartment to house the Committee for the Resolution of the Matter of Yakushibō of Nyoigadake, and beneath it the festivities had started to resemble a neighbourhood block party. Beneath blinding white incandescent lights, Yasaka Heitarō and company were warming their toes by electric heaters and imbibing liberally.

Spotting me clanging down the stairs, the tipsy tanuki quickly plastered solemn expressions on their faces.

I spread my arms. "No dice."

Groans escaped them, white puffs of crystalline disappointment dissolving into the air.

"That's it then? We truly have no choice but to invite Benten?" the jostling tanuki whispered, shivering. A few of them downed their drinks for extra courage, while others scanned the sky fearfully as if Benten might swoop down onto the roof of the apartment at any second. I went into the tent and sat down.

"So what's the play, Yasaka?"

"I don't know. I don't know." Yasaka Heitarō folded his arms and blankly stared into space.

Behind his glassy-eyed gaze he was almost certainly thinking of his promised land, about white sandy beaches stretching around him, free of any sort of responsibility or duty. He was desperate to get over this last hurdle, with the fewest possible pyrotechnics, and start packing for his island retirement. The way this old tanuki made a show of pondering wisely while simultaneously managing to avoid saying anything definitive or concrete—this was what the tanuki way of peace and quiet was all about.

Yasaka looked at Yaichirō, as if searching for an out. "What do you think, Yaichirō?"

"What to do, indeed," Yaichirō sighed, crossing his arms.

All the tanuki looked grave beneath the incandescent lights and said nothing. Looking around at all of them, Grandmother's words echoed in my ears: *You've got to make a ruckus and stir things up*. Lapping at my hot sake and pondering things over, I suddenly had a flash of inspiration.

"I've got an interesting idea!" I said.

"A disreputable one, I've no doubt," groaned Yaichirō.

"We'll ask the Heir. If he signs on, even Benten won't be able to do anything about it. She did have that ignoble fall from grace on the night of the Okuribi, see?"

"That may be so, however..."

Interrupting Yaichirō's grumbling, Yasaka Heitarō leaned towards me. "Do you think the Heir would agree?"

"No harm in trying, right?"



"I suppose not. We can only hope that he will give his assent..."

"I cannot concur," Yaichirō interjected. "A tengu succession is their affair alone. We must avoid becoming embroiled in such a tengu struggle at all costs. If we ask the Heir to serve as witness, we risk incurring the wrath of Master Akadama and Lady Benten."

"We'll just tell 'em that it was all my idea. I'll handle it."

"Surely you cannot be serious!"

"Fun things are good things, dear brother. Leave it to me!"

"Very well," Yasaka Heitarō declared, slapping his thigh. He seemed relieved that the immediate problem was out of the way, though the surrounding tanuki just looked resigned. "We'll let Yasaburō handle this one. Good thing for little brothers, hey, Yaichirō?"

Glancing sideways at the chortling Yasaka Heitarō, Yaichirō scowled but said nothing.

I slapped Yaichirō on the back. "What's up, Yaichirō? Cheer up, why don't you? Things are about to get interesting."

*Leave it to me!* My declaration had made a pretty impression on Yasaka and the other tanuki, but this was a big risk for a tanuki to be taking. My plan involved me walking a tightrope in between two feuding giants, and if I made the slightest miscalculation I'd find myself hurtling headfirst into a stewpot courtesy of Benten.

I could almost hear her voice in my ear: *I like you so much I could just eat you up.*



The next afternoon I paid a call to the Heir's villa, in order to persuade him.

The chic triangle-roofed building basked quietly in the winter sunshine.

The Heir was wearing a cardigan over his white shirt; he had put out a table in the garden beneath the barren trees, and was taking in the sun while doing some upkeep on his pipe collection. I placed my hand on the white picket fence surrounding the garden and announced myself.

"Shimogamo Yasaburō, at your service."

The Heir looked up from his pipes and smiled.

"Good day, Yasaburō. What business brings you here today?"

"No business in particular. I just wanted to apprise you of the current state of affairs."

"Well, sit down. Let me just finish with my pipes."

I sat down in a chair across the table from him. The Heir picked up each of his pipes in turn and described them: one carved from elephant ivory in the shape of a hideous beast; a shiny one carved from briar root; another carved from meerschaum, which looked like it could impale a tanuki if thrown. The sizes were just as varied as the materials: some resembled Lilliputian souvenirs, while others were as long as Nasu-no-Yoichi's bow.

At the end of all this the Heir took up a pipe which was made of cherrywood and filled it with tobacco, then struck a long match and lit it. Sweet smoke drifted up into the clear blue sky. The Heir narrowed his eyes with pleasure, watching the smoke float off, enjoying the scent of the imported leaf and the warmth of the sunshine to the fullest.

The sunshine was pleasant, and the wind had stopped, and it felt as if that rooftop drifted untethered to the flow of time.

"First, I'd like to update you on the matter of the air rifle."

I told him everything that had transpired in Arima from beginning to end.

Since May I had been delegated authority by the Heir to retrieve his scattered belongings from all over Kyoto. I'd reclaimed all the things that had been picked up by the tanuki, but the most dangerous article had yet to be recovered: the air rifle, which had fallen into the hands of Tenmaya.

When he heard that the air rifle had been used to take the life of Ebisugawa Sōun at the Arima hot springs, the Heir arched an eyebrow in displeasure.

"It is rather disturbing to hear that that piece of art is being used to slaughter tanuki."

"This Tenmaya character is something of a prestidigitator, slippery as an eel, and there's been no word of his whereabouts since that night. Even if I did find him, it'd be pretty difficult to lay on him with his command of illusions. This is entirely my fault. I don't know how to apologize to you."

"Whatever do you mean? I owe you a great deal. It's because of you that I've recovered all of my furniture. Though it does discomfit me to say so, I am greatly indebted to you."

Without skipping a beat I looked up and asked, "Do you really dislike being indebted to tanuki so?"

"I would rather you would simply take money in exchange..."

"Would you say that you still owe me a great deal, even after the matter of the air rifle?" I pressed him.

The Heir drew on his pipe, astonished. After a moment a smile creased one side of his mouth. "Now then," he uttered. "I daresay this business is starting to smell of tanuki."

"The smell is difficult to ignore once you've noticed it, isn't it?"

"Where will this conversation lead, I wonder. Out with it, then."

I told him about the approaching tanuki election at the end of the year.

To Yaichirō, stepping into the shoes of our departed father as the Trick Magister would be the realization of a long-cherished dream. And as his younger brother, I wanted to help him make that dream come true.

But the Heir demurred, and instead proposed that Benten do the job. As much tengu power as she might wield, Benten was not officially a tengu, and on top of that she was a card-carrying, tanuki-stew-slurping member of the Friday Fellows. Inviting such a human to attend the conclave at which the leader of the tanuki would be chosen was simply too much, no matter how much Master Akadama ranted and raved and threw his tengu tantrums. The tanuki world simply could not accept it.

"...And that's why we request you, sir, to serve as the witness."

Puffing on his cigar, the Heir scrunched up his face. "Do you ask me to become a tengu?"

"No, no, I'm merely asking you to become our witness."

"But is not the witness meant to be a tengu?"

"The tanuki and tengu may see it that way, but there's no need to get caught up by those antiquated views. As long as we let them think what they like, all will be well. You can just witness as yourself."

I thought it was a pretty clever bit of sophistry on my part, but the Heir would not be won over so easily.

"I will not be made to clean up that old fool's mess."

"...I see. I'm sorry to hear that." Outwardly I slumped my shoulders in dejection, but my mind raced to find my next play.

The Heir looked up at the sky and took a puff on his cigar. "You are certainly not a tanuki to be underestimated."

"Heh. You're exaggerating, I'm sure."

"You were spying on me at Kiyomizu-dera, were you not?"

"Ah, you'd noticed?" I scratched my head, suddenly embarrassed. "My motives were entirely innocent, I assure you."

"That old fool came crying to you, did he?"

"I must reserve comment on that point."

"Using a tanuki in order to track the movements of his beloved...I hardly have the words to describe it. That is the ugliness of old age. I loathe that woman Benten, and I would certainly not make the sort of mistake that old fool worries about. The very fact that I am suspected of such things is an affront."

"You really do hate her, don't you," I remarked.

The Heir turned his icy gaze on me. "I do not hate her, I loathe her. And there is a good reason for me doing so."



The root of the matter goes all the way back to the Taishō period.

The rift between father and son over the heart of a woman would develop into a furious battle that would shake the Higashiyama Sanjuroppō mountains. Master Akadama, who at the time still had tengu strength to boast of, secured a hard-fought victory and kicked the Heir down from the roof of the Minami-za to Shijō Boulevard below, as I have previously narrated.

Rain pelted the Heir as he fled into the night, defeated.

Kyoto then was not as it is now, and the streets were so empty as to hardly be recognizable. Add to that the crashing thunder of the storm, and it was hardly a surprise that not a soul was to be seen. The rain hurled itself down on the tile roofs of closely packed houses, and each flash of pale lightning that split the sky set the gravel roads aglitter for a brief moment. Clinging to lattice doors and telephone poles, the Heir made his way north across Karasuma Street, until he saw, illuminated by a bolt of lightning, a clock tower.

The building to which that clock tower belonged was a Western-style hotel, built by a merchant who, after moving into defense manufacturing and making a fortune during the world war, had poured his newfound wealth into its construction. Heedless of the lashing

storm, it sent its light out into the night, glittering like a chest of jewels. Upon its brass nameplate was inscribed its name: 20th Century Hotel.

The Heir came to the entrance, and seeing his wounds the doormen flew into an uproar.

"What's happened?"

They attempted to assist him, but the Heir shoved them all aside. "Where is she?"

The doormen were all quite acquainted with him, but now they looked at each other uneasily and said nothing.

Spurred on by a feeling of unease, the Heir dashed through the lobby and flew up the stairs, leaving a trail of rainwater behind him. Passing along corridors of velvet carpet and stucco walls, he came to a particular room and rapped on the door.

But there was no answer.

He opened the door to find the room an empty husk.

The young lady who lived in this room was the daughter of the owner of the 20th Century Hotel.

Inasmuch as the owner had showered the wealth which he had gained from the battlefields of Europe on this glittering hotel, he had also showered it on his daughter. She was so beautiful that she looked like an angel come down from heaven, or so the Heir claimed, but seeing as he was talking about his first love from a hundred years ago, it was probably best to take his words with a pinch of salt.

The young lady would sometimes venture into town dressed as a man, and even run the Heir and Master Akadama around for her own amusement, which was in itself quite extraordinary. She might have looked like an angel, but delicate she certainly was not.

One of the doormen caught up to him at last, averting his eyes as he spoke. "She went off, yesterday, without telling a soul."

"Where?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't say. We've been busy as bees since yesterday, so I really have no idea."

"Did she leave a message?"

"She told us to give you this letter."

The Heir ripped open the envelope, but there were no romantic parting words, nor even a single word for that matter. The only mark on the paper was a large X.

Anger boiled up in the Heir's head until he thought it might explode. This life-and-death struggle with Master Akadama had only occurred in the first place because he had fallen head over heels for this angelic young lady. And yet, while the two tengu had been locked in mortal combat in the skies above Kyoto, the young lady had branded the Heir as a failure and vanished without a trace.

Rain beat against the dark window in that room, clacking like gravel against the glass.

The Heir despaired and plunged from the 20th Century Hotel once more into the storm. The events of that tempestuous night were etched deeply into the Heir's heart. It was so humiliating that he buried the memory deep, deep within him and swore never again to recall it again. Thus, he left Japan.

A hundred years passed.

In the northern suburbs of London is a park called Hampstead Heath.

One chilly morning, not quite summer yet, the Heir was out for a walk, cane in hand. After some minutes a rumble crossed the dark sky, and sleet began to fall from the sky. The icy pellets clattered down all around the Heir, who sought shelter beneath the trees and waited for the rain to let up. From in between the trees he could see a dreary knoll covered with withered grass, and crackles of lightning raced over the gaps in between the low storm clouds overhead.

At that moment the Heir spotted a lone woman climbing the otherwise deserted knoll. Sleet continued to fall and the thunder murmured continuously, yet the woman strode forth as though she was out for a picnic. Half in disbelief the Heir continued to watch her, and before he realized it his intrigue had willed him to start walking out of the trees, towards the woman.

The woman stopped at the top of the hillock, looking up at the lightning-pierced sky.

"It is dangerous to stand there, madam," the Heir called, warding off ice pellets with the back of his hand.

The woman turned around, and shook her drenched locks. In a voice full of suspicion she called back, "I'm quite alright. May I trouble you to leave me be?"

That woman had been Benten, who had reached the shores of England on her cruise around the world. The moment he saw her face, the last hundred years melted away, and the Heir found himself back in that stormy night in Kyoto, right here on this knoll in England. The shameful memory which he had thought was locked away for good came rushing back to him.

"Can you imagine my shock, Yasaburō?" The Heir sighed wearily. "If I hadn't known better, I would have thought Benten and that young lady were twins."



The sun hid its face behind the clouds, and all of a sudden the rooftop became rather chilly.

The Heir shut the velvet-lined box containing his pipe collection and began to pace through the garden in front of his mansion. The fallen leaves crunched drily beneath his gleaming black shoes.

By the wicket gate was a gas lamp patterned after the street lamps of old London, and as the sun drew lower in the sky it flickered on automatically, casting a soft glow across the garden. It had been he who had spotted that eerie glow on the grounds of Takenaka-inari Shrine on Mount Yoshida and brought it back here with great pains.

The Heir stood below that lamp and listened to the faint din coming from the streets. "I can hear Christmas music."

"These days you can hear it just about anywhere you go in town."

"How strange. What is it about this holiday that absorbs them so?"

"Tanuki love Christmas because there's just something fun about it. The fact that there's no particular reason for it is what's so great about it. And KFC's delicious, too. No tanuki would say no to KFC."

"I can't say I've ever had it. Perhaps one day I will give it a try."

I walked up beside the Heir and looked over the garden gate. Beyond the edge of the roof, the tops of buildings rose and fell, a roofscape of dull concrete, outdoor HVAC units, water tanks, fire escapes, tangled webs of wiring. This world was not for tanuki—it was a tengu's domain. Perhaps somewhere out there in this world of rooftops, Benten was smoking a tengu cigar.

If one loves overmuch, that love can turn to hate. But by the same token, if one hates overmuch, that hate may also turn to love.

"I find you are quite kind to Lady Benten."

When he heard me say this, the Heir's pale cheeks flushed with anger. "What a foolish thing to say. I feel no kindness towards her at all, none whatsoever."

"Begging your pardon, but I was listening at Kiyomizu-dera. You told Lady Benten not to become a tengu. Surely that was meant for her sake?"

"How utterly absurd! You are under a terrible misapprehension."

"Am I really?"

"I merely meant that that woman was not fit to become a tengu."

Though he would not admit it, it was apparent that the reason that the Heir had come back to Japan after one hundred years was his meeting with Benten.

But after a century's absence, he found that the father he had sworn vengeance upon was old and decrepit, and fell asleep every night dreaming of Benten's ass. The father, in love with Benten; and the son, who had been drawn back by her. That the two were playing out the selfsame farce a hundred years on was probably more shameful than the Heir could bear. Everything was loathsome. Why had he come back to this country, to this city? Was he daft? It was all that woman's fault. She was the source of it all. He hated her, how he *hated* her—and that hatred was where I would find my in.

I prostrated myself before him and intoned, "If things remain as they are are now, Lady Benten will succeed Yakushibō of Nyoigadake as his heir. Can such a thing be allowed to come to pass? There is none we can turn to now to stop her, save you. I implore you, lend us tanuki your aid!"

"Stop this unsightliness at once!"

"I will not stop, until you have consented to aid us!"

"...Very well. Very well, I say." The Heir sighed and raised his palms. "Tell your fellows that I consent to serve as witness."

"I thank you."

"And Yasaburō? This makes us even."



Shiunzan Chōhōji, 18th of the 33 temples on the Saigoku Kannon pilgrimage.

It looms up without warning amongst the buildings, and on its grounds, beneath the drooping boughs of a willow tree, sits a curious hexagonal stone. This is the Keystone of Kyoto, also known as the Navel Stone, and a storied rock it is indeed. In fact it is a tanuki masquerading as a rock, though this is a secret known only to the tanuki, and thus the Navel Stone is in fact more distinguished than even the Trick Magister. It is a long-held custom that prior to the Trick Magister election, the most prominent tanuki in the land assemble at the Rokkakudō to offer it their greetings.

That day, I went along with my entire family to the Rokkakudō.

Above the buildings not a cloud was in sight; the sky was the same shade of blue as it had been one year ago.

Yaichirō was in a fine mood, and before we headed to the Rokkakudō he had finished off not one but two seat cushion-sized Hamburg steaks.

"The Trick Magister must have the energy to carry out his duties. One cannot go the distance on energy drinks alone. Eating a proper meal during the day to replenish one's strength is essential."

"It is nice to eat lots of yummy things," Mother agreed. "But goodness, the size of those Hamburg steaks! Why, they were practically the size of a whole tanuki!"

"You mustn't say such ill-omened things, Mother. You make it sound as if I was practicing cannibalism!"

"Out of the stewing pot, into the fryer..." My mind went down a rather dark pathway. I didn't want to turn into stew, but neither did I want to be ground up into mincemeat.

"I think Hamburg steak is delicious!" Yashirō proclaimed.

Our back-and-forth continued as we walked down Rokkaku Street, and as we approached the gate of the Rokkakudō we saw overflowing into the street a great mass of tanuki of all shapes and sizes.

I've noticed that though a single tanuki on its own can masquerade as a human tolerably well, there is always a distinct whiff of tanuki when a great number of us get together, as if the air itself is growing fur. Maybe we furballs just tend to put down our guard whenever we gather in one place.

Black-robed monks stood in front of the gate, directing the milling tanuki into the temple. Of course they weren't real monks, but rather the Ebisugawa Guard Corps acting under the direction of Kinkaku and Ginkaku.

As I passed through the gate, I spotted the terrible two, disguised as monks themselves.

"Huh, you guys are awfully well-behaved today."

"Ah, Yasaburō." Kinkaku pressed his hands together and bowed his head. "What sublime weather it is today; the Navel Stone is surely pleased. How wonderful, how wonderful."

"Splendid, namu namu!" added Ginkaku.

Their enlightened way of talking totally creeped me out.

"You guys haven't eaten anything...*funny*, have you?"

"Whatever do you mean? We aim to shed our earthly foolishness; night and day do we train ourselves under the instruction of Brother Kureichirō."

"Kinkaku and I, our hearts are as soft and mild as steamed buns."

"Brother Kureichirō is a great tanuki, as great as Kyoto Tower stacked on top of Kinkaku-ji. Ah, what fools we were!"

"Shameful, shameful of us! Were there not a hole we should wish to dig one ourselves and hide in it, namu namu!"

"I wholeheartedly recommend the path of Buddha to you, Yasaburō. The age of fools has passed."

The entire tanuki community had long ago given up on Kinkaku and Ginkaku as incurable, incorrigible fools. How exactly were these two supposed to shed their earthly foolishness? They'd probably keep peeling layers of idiocy off like a couple of hairy onions until there was nothing left of them at all.

"Well, good luck with that. I'm rootin' for ya!" I encouraged them, before heading into the temple.



Surrounded by tall buildings, the Rokkakudō was dim and cool like the bottom of a pond, and looking up from its grounds the sky seemed an even brighter shade of blue.

Throngs of tanuki teemed in the cramped temple. Some fidgeted and stared avariciously at the gleaming golden orb atop the roof; others sniffed in incense smoke and sneezed uncontrollably, giggling all the while; and others still laid out red tablecloths in front of the stone *warabejizō* and unwrapped bento boxes.

"It's all just like a picnic, isn't it?" said Mother.

"We should have brought our own bento," Yashirō opined.

Yaichirō left us and walked over to the Navel Stone. I saw Yasaka Heitarō, Ebisugawa Kureichirō, and Nanzenji Seijirō stand up to greet him. Yasaka was laughing heartily, and seemed to be in a fine mood. Eventually the elders, a bunch of furballs, were carried onto the temple grounds on an eggplant-colored cloth, wheezing, "Go on then, go on!"

"Close the gates!" went out the order, and the gates of the Rokkakudō swung shut.

Standing by the Navel Stone wearing his usual Hawaiian shirt, Yasaka Heitarō swung his gaze around the temple with a grave expression. Multitudes of tanuki crowded around the Navel Stone, waiting for the ceremony to begin.

"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. It is my pleasure to announce 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.

"If you catch a cold, keep your feet warm and your head cool. That way you won't need a doctor. Honey ginger tea is also highly recommended! Thank you."

In unison, the tanuki in the temple bowed and sat down.



Yasaka Heitarō bowed once to the Navel Stone, then coughed and cleared his throat.

"As you all know, last year's election was disrupted by a heretofore unprecedented disturbance, which was quite unfortunate. As no Trick Magister could be selected, I, unworthy as I am, put off my retirement for another year, to my great regret."

"Well done!" I shouted, to which Mother added, "Thank you for your service!"

Yasaka Heitarō put up a hand and smiled grimly, then continued on. "However, this year is nearing its end, and I am filled with joy. Shimogamo Yaichirō, our candidate for Trick Magister, is an upstanding tanuki, and I am pleased to be able to retire and entrust our future to such a promising young tanuki. Following my words, Ebisugawa Kureichirō will give a speech in support. Kureichirō is another promising young tanuki who, following the passing of Ebisugawa Sōun has taken up responsibility for upholding the Ebisugawa clan. The future rests on the shoulders of these two shining stars. Now, I yield the floor to Kureichirō."

Ebisugawa Kureichirō stood.

"I am Ebisugawa Kureichirō, eldest son of Ebisugawa Sōun." He bowed his head deeply, then began to address the crowd.

"I offer my apologies for my absence these many years. Although my father, Ebisugawa Sōun, spared no effort in modernizing the Faux Denki Bran distillery, his hands were steeped in crimes most foul, and we must not forget the sin of his twilight years. In spite of that, Yaichirō was willing to let the quarrel between our two families be water under the bridge, and said to me thus: *Let us live in harmony*. Where shall we find such a magnanimous tanuki again? Yaichirō will undoubtedly become a splendid Trick Magister. The Ebisugawa clan pledges its unwavering support for the new Trick Magister, in confidence that together we will forge a brighter tomorrow."

Yaichirō stood up, his face flushed with emotion, and stuck out a hand to Kureichirō. "Thank you, Kureichirō. Thank you."

Yasaka Heitarō was beaming fit to split his face as he watched the two clan heads shake hands.

"Huzzah for the youth!" "Bravo, lads!" Shouts of elation rang out from the assembled tanuki, who cheered and clapped until the entire temple was shaking. The storm of applause for the two rising stars stirred up a light breeze ruffled the fur of the elders sitting on their cushions.

Yaichirō bowed low to the Navel Stone, then extended his hand and softly touched it.

The applause continued to reverberate.

At last Yasaka Heitarō put up a hand. "Ladies and gentlemen, your silence please." From the way his face was glowing he might as well already have been lying on the beach.

"The Navel Stone has been duly notified. There are now several matters to report which I wish to bring to a vote. First, the elders' meeting will take place the night of December 26th at the mansion of the Heir of Yakushibō of Nyoigadake. Are there any objections?"

The tanuki in the temple looked puzzled, but no one raised a voice.

"Then I will register no objections. Next, one further order of business. Last year, we extended an invitation to Yakushibō of Nyoigadake to serve as witness to the election of the next head of the tanuki world. However, as Lord Yakushibō is not at liberty to attend this year, the invitation has been extended to the Heir instead. This was made possible by the strenuous efforts of Yasaburō of the Shimogamo clan. I express to him our thanks."

Yasaka Heitarō winked at me, as if to say, *It's all up to you now, bub!*

"Are there any objections?"

Slack-jawed, the tanuki in the temple said not a word.

"Then—"

At that very moment, a cool voice came fluttering down from the roof of the Rokkakudō.

"I object!"



Benten landed upon the roof of the Rokkakudō, glaring down coldly at the tanuki below. She was wearing an ominous jet-black, long-sleeved kimono with a scarlet *obi* tied around her waist, and in her hand she was holding a long smoking pipe. The golden head of the pipe glittered, catching the sunlight that slanted between the buildings. A single glance was enough for me to perceive the roiling anger she was only just holding back.

I was entranced by her appearance, but not so the other tanuki. For the tanuki of Kyoto, it really had nothing to do whether or not she was beautiful or not. She possessed a tengu's powers, yet she was not quite a tengu; she ate tanuki stew, yet she was not quite a human. She was more like a flying calamity, and there was nothing you could do against a flying calamity except duck your head and wait for it to pass.

"Lady Benten has arrived!"

Yasaka Heitarō fell on his face, and the rest of the tanuki followed suit. I kept staring stupidly until Mother dragged me down, pinning my arm firmly to her chest.

A frozen silence descended upon the temple.

"My master told me I would be the witness for the tanuki election," Benten said, taking a drag on her pipe. "...But it looks like I'm not wanted."

Yasaka Heitarō looked up fearfully. "A-ah, was that so? There must have been a mixup somewhere along the way..."

"If that tea-swilling fop wants to play kingmaker, that's not my affair."

"Yes, ma'am."

"But however did this mixup happen, I wonder? That's what I would like to know. Perhaps you tanuki wouldn't like me as your witness?"

Yasaka Heitarō was quivering so much his tail was liable to shoot out any second now. "I assure you, nothing could be further from..."

"No, no. I get it. I'm a human, a woman who eats tanuki stew. I'm no fool, I know how you all must feel." Her voice was a low purr, entirely devoid of sincerity. "...But even knowing that, I'm still going to eat you. After all, I'm a human."

Beneath her withering gaze, Yasaka Heitarō looked as if he was about to faint.

The other tanuki stood stone still, like the warabejizō statues scattered around the temple.

At the edge of the roof Benten stretched out her arm, and started pointing as if she was counting the tanuki in the temple. It looked like she was choosing a tanuki for this year's banquet. The more important tanuki blanched and started to fidget.

"Look at all the tanuki stews I could make." Benten blew out a ring of smoke, letting it settle on the tanuki below.

Pigeons fluttered into the air, grazing past the willow tree, while the elders tumbled off of their cushions. The sound of tails poofing out began to ring out, and like a pool of lotus flowers blooming at dawn the crowd of tanuki began to revert to their furry forms en masse.

Suddenly Benten's gaze fell upon me. "Well well, Yasaburō. So that's where you were hiding."

The tanuki surrounding melted away at once, and before I knew it the only ones left by my side were Mother and Yashirō. In a panic Yaichirō hurried toward us.

"I suppose this was all your idea?" Benten drawled, looking down upon me. "I don't know how you wheedled him into it."

"I'm sure I have no recollection whatsoever as to..."

"Lies."

"Yes ma'am, my apologies ma'am."

"What an astounding tanuki you are, turning your back on your Master's commands, and playing me for a fool."

"Your Ladyship is quite well acquainted with humble Yasaburō. My fool's blood coaxes me into doing all manner of strange things, such that I hardly know what I want to do myself. Betraying Master Akadama, and yourself, and cozying up to the Heir..."

"I despise that man, you know."

"The Heir says that he despises you as well."

Benten snorted. "And what about you? Which do you prefer, me or him?"

"...I respect you both as tengu."

The moment those words left my mouth Benten raised up her arm and hurled the golden pipe at me. It whistled through the air and buried itself deep into the ground at my feet. Mother and Yashirō squawked and clutched at me tightly. I said nothing and looked up at Benten.

Just at that moment the gate of the Rokkakudō opened. In unison, the tanuki in the temple turned and looked.

In the gateway stood the Heir, wearing a silk tophat and a chilly expression.

Benten turned away from me and stared haughtily down at the Heir.

"Good day to you," said the Heir, addressing the tanuki. "I heard from the tanuki named Kaisei that something of an incident was occurring at the Rokkakudō. But I don't seem to see anything of the sort."

The Heir looked around, never once directing his gaze upward toward Benten.

Benten glared at us both, then abruptly turned sulkily away. Shaking out the sleeves of her kimono, she stared at the golden orb atop the roof. "Silly child," she finally uttered. "Do as you please."

"I thank you for showing us compassion."

"You don't understand a thing, Yasaburō," she said before taking to the skies. "I've always been compassionate."



The next day a letter arrived from Yajirō.

*The Tadasu Forest*  
*Care of the Shimogamo Clan*

Greetings.

I hope you all are well.

I am currently in the port of Tomonoura in Hiroshima, on the Seto Inland Sea. It is a town with a long history, and you can still see remnants of the Edo period scattered here and there. Off shore is the small island of Sensui, and it's here behind the public lodgings that the tanuki live. They greeted me very hospitably, and for the moment I believe I shall rest quite comfortably here.

At first when I left Kyoto, it was quite a struggle journeying while at the same time maintaining my transformation, but now I have become quite used to it. I met many tanuki and had many strange encounters in Kurashiki and Okayama and Onomichi, but this stationery is far too small to write about them. I hope to recount the tales to you all someday when I return to the Tadasu Forest.

It is great fun traveling to all these far-flung, distant towns.

At the lodgings on Sensui Island I met a tanuki who had crossed over by boat from the town of Marukame on Shikoku. We got to talking and bonded over our love of shogi. He intends to return to Shikoku on the next ferry, and I am planning to travel over with him and offer my greetings to the Kinchō clan in Komatsushima.

I'm doing quite well, and my journey has been very pleasant. I feel like I am growing stronger each and every day, almost like a furry bamboo shoot.

Please take care of yourselves. I will write again.

Yours,

Shimogamo Yajirō



I didn't read my brother's letter until everything had blown over. By the time it reached the Tadasu Forest I was already on the lam, keeping out of Benten's sight.

Of the Thirty-Six Stratagems, fleeing is best—

Once more, the name Yasaburō the Fleet could be heard whispered all over town.

In the dead of night I slipped through the Ōsaka no Seki checkpoint, and headed for Lake Biwa.

## Chapter 7 — Blood of a Tengu, Blood of a Fool

In mid-December, Shimogamo Yasaburō vanished from Kyoto like a wisp of smoke.

According to Nanzenji Gyokuran, who came to visit my hidey-hole on Christmas Eve, my whereabouts remained a complete secret, and there were even rumors going around that I was dead.

I had fled to Lake Biwa.

Benten's hometown was on the shores of Lake Biwa. Perhaps she hated the past that she had bottled up there on the other side of the Ōsaka no Seki checkpoint, for she rarely went near the place. Lake Biwa is very close to Kyoto, but as far as Benten was concerned it might as well have been on the far side of the moon, which made it the perfect hideout.

The night I fled Kyoto I paid a call to Ayameike's residence.

I hadn't visited since that night in July, and the sight of the thin carved wooden nameplate at the stone gate and the orange light glowing through the sliding door called forth a wave of nostalgia in me.

"Well now, fancy seeing you here." Ayameike and his wife greeted me warmly, and though I'd only intended to stop by and say hello, before I knew what was going on I was sitting at their table enjoying dinner, and afterwards as I lay in a food coma they informed me that the bath was ready. After enjoying a soak in there I came out to find a beer waiting for me and Ayameike buried in the kotatsu urging me, "Come in, come in!" As I drank my beer there and chewed on chilled persimmons, white powdery sugar covering their skins, one thought surged into my mind and refused to leave: *I'd love to stay here.*

Could there be any safehouse out there as wonderful as this? No, there could not. And so I decided to hide out at Ayameike's house.



My life on the lam was laidback and pleasant.

At night I would sleep on the veranda, and during the day I would join Ayameike in sorting piles of raked leaves, drawing pictures of pumpkins, digging up bugs to look at, and so on. Every day after my afternoon siesta I would have a plate of snacks before playing shogi with Ayameike.

We placed the board on top of the kotatsu and sat on opposite sides, but Ayameike was not concerned with winning or losing so much as he was getting his pieces into a formation that pleased his sense of aesthetics.

"Let us sit my gold general here, if he pleases," he muttered to himself. "That will make the shape most intriguing."

"Huh, you think so? Then have a look at this!"

"Oh my, but that is a rather clever move."

Once the sun set, I would melt into the shadows and go on a stroll around Ōtsu. In the shopping arcade that lay past the residential district, aged apparel stores sat side by side with unruly pawn shops, but by the time I headed out on my walks the exterior shutters were already rolled down. From the chilly port, you could see the glow of the towns on the far side of the lake, as well as lights from the portholes of sightseeing boats cruising over the black waters.

Passing through the darkened streets in front of the former city hall, I came across the location where the Ōtsu Incident had taken place, when the crown prince who would go on to become Emperor Nicholas II of Russia had nearly been cut down by a saber-wielding assassin. Now it was a street corner that looked just like any other, but as I stood there I thought about the imperial crown prince and the entourage of rickshaws which had jogged along the lakeside long ago.

During the reign of the Meiji Emperor, the humans were set afluster by the waves of modernization that were sweeping over Japan, but the tanuki were flustered themselves, transforming into phantom trains and chugging along the tracks. This was the era during which the Heir, plucked by Master Akadama from the streets of Nagasaki, holed himself up in the mountains around Nyoigadake and reluctantly ascended the steps towards full tengudom. That ruddy-faced youth, still pining for his mother, surely never would have dreamed that he would one day cross the ocean, not to return for over a hundred years.

"Humans and tanuki and tengu sure all have come a long way," I reflected to myself on my way back to Ayameike's house.

During my life of leisure out here, I was frequently reminded of my family back at the Tadasu Forest. When we said our goodbyes that night beneath the shadows of the trees, Yaichirō had bitterly regretted ever involving me in these tengu affairs.

"How will it all end?" he had lamented until the very end.

"It'll all work out somehow?" I had assured him, though I had no idea how.



The afternoon of the winter solstice, as Ayameike and I were playing a game of shogi, the sliding door rattled open and a voice cried out, "Hello there!" We went out to the foyer to find Professor Yodogawa standing there, bundled up snugly like a mountain climber out to summit a peak.

"Ah! I didn't realize you'd be here!" the Professor cried happily.

"That's quite a getup. You going mountain climbing or something?"

"The snow's blowing something fierce out at the research station. If you're not careful to bundle up, you're sure to run into trouble. Say, why do you think humans aren't furry like tanuki are? Evolution made a big mistake when it took away our fur, I should think...oh, but I daresay we humans have our ways of fixing that mistake!"

Professor Yodogawa curled up beneath the kotatsu, zoning out blissfully like a monkey pickling in a mountain hot spring. Out from his knapsack tumbled a gigantic bulbous kabocha and brightly colored yuzu.

"Goodness me, what lovely yuzu!" remarked Ayameike's wife.

"It is the winter solstice, after all. You are never a whole person until you've taken a yuzu bath!"

"I dislike taking baths," Ayameike said, looking chagrined. "Taking baths makes my head itchy."

"He's always been this way! He never would take one if you left him alone, you know."

"But, Master Ayameike," said Professor Yodogawa with a look of doubt, "Surely it would itch more not to take baths?"

"Once the initial itchiness has passed, it itches no more. So long as I do not enter a bathtub, there is no itching to be felt. As in other matters, it all comes down to the initial forbearance."

"Oh, you dirty old man!" his wife scowled, wrinkling her nose.

"Hah, is that what it is? I had no idea. But then again, I love taking baths. Over at the research station I heat water in an oil drum and get in. Looking at the steam rising up, up through the snow falling over the pitch-black forest makes me feel grand, like I'm one with the universe. Brushing away the snow that piles up and pouring out for myself a glass of whisky, I can't hardly tell whether I'm among the living or the dead!"

The Professor's kitchen knife thunked on the cutting board as he chopped up the kabocha for simmering.

"They say that young ladies are made of sugar and spice. Well I'd say I'm plenty sweet and spicy, so what does that make me?"

"Kabocha's very good for you know, got plenty of beta-carotene and vitamin C!"

"Deep in the heart of China, I came across people who lived in giant hollowed-out kabocha. I thought they'd been gobbled up by mutated gourd-beasts!"

We alternated between fits of laughter and sober contemplation as we listened to the Professor's stories (some edifying, some less so), and after we'd finished the sweet simmered kabocha (mostly eaten up by the Professor himself) he said, "Well, I'd better be getting back to the mountain," and started to bundle on his layers again.

I saw the Professor off at Miidera Station. The light of orange street lamps reflected on the dark surface of the silently flowing Biwa canals.

After glancing around the surroundings, Professor Yodogawa said in a low whisper, "The Friday Fellows' year-end banquet is approaching. They must be getting worried by now."

"Well, there's no way I'm preparing a tanuki for them, nohow!"

"You had me worried when you joined the Friday Fellows, but I must say that was a brilliant stroke. If you can keep from being discovered, their plans will all be dashed!"

"Serves 'em right, heh heh!"

"Ah, but knowing Jurōjin, he'll likely have something else up his sleeve. I'm especially worried about that slimy Tenmaya."

"You might be right."

"If it comes down to it, I'll be ready to charge in and save the poor tanuki!"

Professor Yodogawa grinned fearlessly in the light of the street lamps. There was a new resolve in his face, hardened by his ascetic life in the mountains, and his eyes burned



with his love for tanuki. Looking at him I had no doubt that he was prepared to do exactly what he said he would.



Tanuki love Christmas. The holiday's lack of purpose is what makes it so enjoyable.

On Christmas the Shimogamo clan usually eats fried chicken and admires our Yashirō-powered Christmas lights, but this year I couldn't join the festivities, which left me feeling rather lonely. That's why when I smelled the distinctive aroma of the Colonel's secret recipe wafting from the front door on the afternoon of December 24th, my heart leapt with joy. Nanzenji Gyokuran had come to visit.

"I crossed the mountains so no one would see me. Your Mother asked me to check on you." Gyokuran was wearing a muffler, red to match the one Yaichirō had, and had brought me a care package of fried chicken. After bowing and introducing herself to Ayameike, Gyokuran took one look at the shogi board on top of the kotatsu and exclaimed, "What in tarnation!? I've never seen a game quite like this before!"

"You must be very skilled at shogi."

Hearing this gracious compliment from Ayameike, Gyokuran blushed pink.

The two of us went outside and talked as we strolled through the snowy garden.

Gyokuran told me that she had been invited to the Christmas party at the Tadasu Forest. Apparently Yashirō had strung together some components from the Faux Denki Bran distillery to create a truly spectacular Christmas light display.

"I hear that Ebisugawa Kureichirō will be there, too. He's very kind, always helping Yaichirō with his work. I can scarcely believe that little crybaby I used to know has grown up into such a splendid tanuki."

Gyokuran filled me in on what had happened in Kyoto since I had disappeared. Twin waves of resignation and relief had swept the city: resignation, that no one would ever see the unfortunate Yasaburō alive again; and relief, that since I was going to be eaten no one else had to worry about the Friday Fellows.

Yasaka Heitarō did ask about me, though in spite of that he still continued to pack his bags for Hawaii and had already vacated his office in Gion Nawate. As soon as Yaichirō and Gyokuran's marriage ceremony at the beginning of the year was over, he intended to head straight for the airport.

"You can't really blame him for being eager to retire, being that he never wanted to become Trick Magister in the first place."

"Hardly anyone does, unless they're weirdos like my brother."

"And who was it that put his life on the line for that weirdo and ended up having to go on the run? If you ask me, you're just as splendid a weirdo as he is. Pot calling the kettle black!"

"The whole Shimogamo clan is just a bunch of weirdos."

"Ah, so you're saying that I'm a weirdo who's marrying into a clan of weirdos?" Gyokuran giggled, kicking up a pile of leaves.

Afterwards, she looked down at the ground, looking a little heavyhearted. "...Master Akadama's expelled you."

"Huh. Figured as much." I'd been expecting this to happen, so I wasn't terribly surprised. "Tengu have their pride to uphold, and we tanuki have our dignity."

"And it was really him that was being so unreasonable, too..."

"I'll bide my time until everything's cooled off. He can hardly get by without me, anyways."

Once upon a time Benten had goaded me into causing the incident with the Demon's Perch, which resulted in me distancing myself from the Master. But that had a voluntary withdrawal on my part; this was the first time I had been handed down a genuine expulsion.

Looking up at the barren tree branches swaying in the wind, I thought of the Master, hunched over in his dark, dreary apartment: hugging a cold daruma in lieu of Benten's behind, drinking Akadama port wine, smoking a tengu cigar in the gloom, alone.

"Gyokuran, mind taking an offering to the Master for me?"

"Already on it."

Don't forget the cotton swabs. If he doesn't have cotton swabs his ears will get itchy and he'll blow up a tengu whirlwind," I reminded her. "Well, more like a gentle breeze."

"Relax, I'll take care of it."

"That old tengu is a real handful. A honest-to-goodness pain in the butt."

"...You really are fond of him, aren't you?"

"Shh, don't tell anyone. I'd never be able to show my face in public again."

Hearing me say that, Gyokuran let out a hearty chuckle.



So the days rolled by for me at Ayameike's house, and at last the day of the Trick Magister election drew nigh.

The night before, I was lying below the garden veranda, rolled up in an old blanket which exuded the sweet scent of Ayameike's pipe tobacco. A little while ago the tanuki of Onjōji had been tramping all over the garden, but now they had gone from my sight. Having a hard time falling asleep, I counted the hairs on my front paws and waited for dreams to take me.

The winter's night silently dragged on and on.

Passing the sleepless hours, I began to think the night Father had turned into stew. Perhaps my family back in the Tadasu Forest, and Yajirō lying somewhere beneath the stars, were thinking about him as well.

I'd heard the tale of his final moments from Professor Yodogawa during the autumn of the previous year. I pictured it all in my mind—that cold, cavernous tatami room; the lights of the city glittering on the other side of the Kamo River; my Father drawing himself up proudly in the cage—as vividly as if I had seen it with my own eyes. The night Professor Yodogawa told me of all this, he split with me a foil-wrapped onigiri, and in that cold rice I had tasted the onigiri that had been Father's last meal.

Eventually I suppose I nodded off.

The silence of the sleeping garden was abruptly shattered by the sound of breaking glass deep in the woods. In a flash the trees were covered in frost. A chill that made my tailbone ache covered the ground, freezing the neatly swept piles of fallen leaves in pure white. Crawling out from beneath the veranda, I saw that every tree was laden with alabaster flowers of ice, like cherry blossoms in full bloom, delicate frozen petals falling through the air. A pale, mysterious light illuminated the scene.

Benten emerged from the trees.

Her cheeks were pale in the cruel chill that lingered about her body, making her look almost like a little girl. Her eyes were lonely, distant, as she watched the fluttering ice petals dance all around her. Perhaps she had looked just like this, on that long-ago day when Master Akadama had swooped down and carried her away as she stood on the banks of Lake Biwa watching the snow fall.

Her lips curved into a smile when she saw me there. Tears coursed down her porcelain cheeks.

"Why are you crying?"

"I feel sorry that you're going to end up in my stomach," she said.

With a jolt I opened my eyes, and found that all was still dim.

"Just a dream," I thought to myself, and wriggled out from beneath the veranda.

Between the trees, the crisp light of dawn was seeping into the cobalt sky.

I yawned and wandered around the garden, knocking off the frost that had gathered on a bucket. Breathing in the freezing morning air, I exhaled a puff of white vapour. "It's morning," I murmured.

That's how 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 Friday Fellows' banquet—  
a wild, chaotic, momentous day—  
quietly began.



Yaichirō also rose early in the morning that day.

Padding out of bed quietly so as not to wake Mother and Yashirō, he set off on a walk through the Tadasu Forest over the fallen leaves. A pale, chilly mist hung all throughout the wintry woods.

Yaichirō washed his face in the bitingly cold brook, and with Father's shogi board before him went sank into contemplation. Gradually his mind cleared, and strength flooded into his limbs.

"So, at last this day has come," he thought.

A little while later Mother came trotting over, preceded by little white clouds of vapour, and plopped down beside him.

"It's finally here," she said.

"It is finally here," said Yaichirō.

And together they watched the Tadasu Forest fill with light.

Yashirō was first to leave that morning, heading off to the Faux Denki Bran distillery. He was attempting to decipher Professor Inazuma's experiment logs, spending day after day in the lab. All he could produce right now was undrinkable swill, but he continued to insist excitedly, "I'm almost there!"

"Don't do anything too crazy in there. Electricity is serious business!"

"Uh-huh, I'll be careful. You be careful too, Yaichirō! I'll bring the finished drink to the afterparty!" Wearing his book- and notes-laden backpack, Yashirō left the forest.

Yaichirō made ready to leave. After attending a pre-election celebration with Nanzenji Gyokuran and some other younger tanuki, he would go to the Heir's mansion where the elders' meeting would be held.

Mother saw him off, striking sparks onto him for good luck. "I've got everything prepared at the Scarlet Pane. Once the elders' meeting is over head there straight away. I expect Yasaburō will be coming back from the forest tonight."

She watched him climb onto the automaton rickshaw, her eyes bright. "Oh!" she cried suddenly, unable to hold back her emotion. "You're finally becoming the Trick Magister!"

"...I hope Father is proud of me."

"Of course Sō is proud of you. He's chortling there on the other side, I just know he is!"

"Goodbye, Mother. Take heart, and await news of my victory!"

And so Yaichirō left the forest.

The automaton rickshaw raced down the shrine road towards Demachiyanagi. The pine trees lined the triangular strip of land that thrust into the Kamo River were wrapped with woven straw mats, and hawks wheeled lazily through the sky. The almost spring-like sunshine shone down gently on the banks of the Kamo; everything seemed perfectly at peace.

Yaichirō drove the rickshaw south along the river.

Happiness bubbled up within him each time he thought of how at last he would be stepping into Father's shoes as the Trick Magister. No more would we be known as the pitiable brood that had squandered the great inheritance of Father's bloodline. Father's spirit would be pleased, Mother would be pleased, and Gyokuran would certainly be pleased. The Shimogamo clan would regain a little bit of glory, and the tanuki world would progress forward just a little bit under his direction. Maybe they would even erect a bronze statue of him which would bring him a little bit of glory. Maybe the cranes would leave little droppings on the nose.

As he lost himself in these daydreams, an unconscious smile spread across his face.

Yaichirō drove the rickshaw up to the Tōka Saikan at the west end of the Shijō Bridge. Slapping his cheeks to knock the silly smile from his face, he composed himself and entered the old-fashioned hand operated lift. Upstairs he found Gyokuran dressed in a formal kimono, waiting for him in the corridor.

"Everyone's already here!" Taking his hand, she led him to the banquet hall. Round black tables were arranged on the wooden floorboards, where Nanzenji Seijirō and several

other tanuki were waiting for him. Sunlight streamed in from the tall, narrow windows that overlooked the Kamo River, and through them could be seen people streaming across the Shijō Bridge as well as the great roof of the Minami-za on the other side.

Too impatient to wait for Yaichirō's arrival, Nanzenji Seijirō already had a glass of Shaoxing wine in hand, and once he saw Yaichirō there he hastily covered it with his other hand.

"Seriously!?" Gyokuran reproved.

"Almost time, isn't it Yaichirō?" Seijirō said with a chagrined chuckle. "Now all we do is wait."

Black-clad Ebisugawa Kureichirō stood up, bowing his head. "I offer you my heartfelt congratulations."

"No, no, it's too soon for congratulations, Kureichirō."

"Surely such caution is unnecessary now, Yaichirō."

All around Yaichirō the tanuki took their glasses in hand and stood, toasting to the new Trick Magister who would soon bear their fortunes on his shoulders, and to his little bit of glory.

Everyone was smiling and laughing, as if the election was already over and done with.

Yaichirō looked out through the window at the peaceful cityscape outside. He was lost in thoughts when Gyokuran came up to him. "You're thinking about your brothers, aren't you?"

"You read my mind," he answered, startled.

"Of course I did. You're always worrying about them," she chuckled. "Yasaburō's been enjoying his runaway lifestyle. I'm sure Yajirō is fine, too. He should be crossing Shikoku right about now, shouldn't he?"

"...I suppose I am a worrywart."

"I know you are. But why don't you concentrate on yourself for once, just for today?"



At 10 in the morning on that same day, Yajirō got off the train at the JR Minami-Komatsushima Station.

Komatsushima is a city in Tokushima prefecture that lies on the Kii Channel, and since antiquity it has served as an important seaport linking Shikoku and Kansai. It is well known as the location of the Awa Tanuki War, and the descendants of the hero of that legend, Higaino Kinchō, have kept their furry bloodline in that city to this day.

"I'd better keep things formal. They're a pretty noble family, after all." In the bathroom at the station Yajirō transformed himself a pressed suit. Outside the station, taxis waited with their red vacant lights on, though there were only a few people walking around. In the corner of the plaza stood a small statue of a tanuki.

Yajirō started trudging through the streets of Komatsushima, heading for Kinchō Shrine. Along the way he passed banks and harbour offices, while warm, glorious sunshine

beat down on the town. It seemed—and perhaps this was because he was by the sea—the sky was a slightly different colour than it was in Kyoto.

The ties between the Shimogamo clan of Kyoto and the Kinchō clan of the old province of Awa have existed for centuries. Legend had it that it was one of our old Shimogamo forebears in the Edo period who, by chance passing through the area, had lent his claws to the Kinchō cause during the Awa Tanuki War—though, since this legend was fabricated by that old blowhard Shimogamo Tetsutarō in the Meiji period, the likelihood of the story being true was nil. However, by all accounts it is true that our steady friendship with the esteemed Kinchō clan does indeed date back to the Edo period. My globetrotting grandfather used to stay at the Kinchō manse on his way around the 88 temples of the Shikoku Pilgrimage, and Father used to visit on occasion as well. The Shimogamo clan spared no expense in hosting whenever the Kinchō clan came to town, and their patriarch had often regaled us brothers with tales of the Awa Tanuki War. We were all so awed at the many dashing exploits of the very first Kinchō patriarch that we could hardly believe he had been a tanuki just like us.

Just past noon, Yajirō finally reached Kinchō Shrine.

Surrounding the shrine were winter-withered dandelions and residential buildings.

Passing underneath the black-stained stone torii, Yajirō entered the shrine grounds, where leaves lay strewn all over the stone tiles. With the purification fountain to his right, the main shrine building lay just ahead, and inside hung a great red lantern inscribed with the name of the clan. On the other side of the offertory box were large wooden casks and a *mikoshi*, and prominently displayed were the impressive words “Lord Tanuki”, the title which had been bestowed upon the first patriarch. The tanuki who constituted the bloodline of that great ancestor kept this shrine as their headquarters.

But there wasn’t a trace of tanuki anywhere in the shrine.

“I’m pretty sure this is the place...” Going around to the back of the shrine, Yajirō stopped in his tracks.

A little girl was leaning against the back of the shrine, waving a stalk of green foxtail grass. Though it was winter, she was wearing only an egg-yolk-yellow dress which was faded from too many turns in the wash. She was barefoot, and her unruly light brown hair shone in the midday sunshine. Though her appearance was coarse, her eyes were beautifully limpid as they stared back at Yajirō. Clearly she was a tanuki.

The girl wordlessly turned and jumped away, keeping a wary distance from Yajirō.

“Are you one of the Kinchō clan?” Yajirō asked. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. See...”

As he took a step forward, his foot went right through the ground, and his body was sucked in. Taken aback, Yajirō turned back into a frog, and when the dust had settled he found himself at the bottom of a hole.

Yajirō sullenly looked up at the sky. The girl peeked over the edge of the hole, and when she saw him her eyes widened in surprise.

“Thought you were a tanuki, but you’re a frog!” she exclaimed. “I’ve never seen a frog that could shapeshift before. You must be really famous in the frog world!”

“I’m a tanuki, not a frog!”

"Pooh-pooh! How could any tanuki be so smooth and shiny?"

"It's true. I stayed transformed into a frog for a long time, and now whenever I lose my focus I turn back into a frog. I've really got fur, you know."

"Oh, how odd! That is very odd!" The girl cocked her head to one side and grinned. "Whyever did you turn into a frog for so long? Was it because you thought frogs were cute? I turn into frogs a lot myself. Frogs are so wonderful! They hibernate in holes during the winter, so they must understand how wonderful being in holes is. I don't much fancy eating bugs, though." Leaving Yajirō to sit there looking befuddled, the girl kept blathering on and on. "I dug this hole myself. Father tells me not to dig holes, but I'd much rather be dead than not dig holes! I think I must have been born to dig holes. I'm so very contrary, and whenever people used to tell me to come out a hole I wouldn't. It's so peaceful at the bottom of a hole. But I've yet to dig my ideal hole yet, so I just keep a stiff upper lip whenever Father scolds me and persevere onwards."

"You're a real artist," Yajirō finally managed to squeeze in.

"Yes, yes, yes! An artist! Holes are how I express myself!" the girl agreed wholeheartedly. "...But sometimes, an oaf comes lumbering along and blunders right into one of my holes."

The girl suddenly shut her mouth as if something had surprised her, and squinted suspiciously down at Yajirō. "I don't know why, but I feel like I can talk to you about anything."

She reached her hand into the hole and picked Yajirō up. Cupping him in both hands, she put her face right up beside him and sniffed, then brightened up. "You're one of the Shimogamo tanuki! You let me ride in the fake Eizan railcar. Don't you remember?"

Yajirō thought back to the time when he had visited the Kinchō clan with Father. At Father's urging, Yajirō had transformed into an Eizan railcar as entertainment. Loading the Kinchō tanuki on board he'd raced through the countryside, earning their great esteem. There had been a little girl in the driver's seat, glued to the windshield and screaming with delight, "Amazing! Amazing!" The Kinchō head had been very thankful that his daughter had finally come out of her hole.

"So you're that Shimogamo tanuki. I'll take you straight to Father then." The girl raised Yajirō high up in the air like he was an offering to heaven. Then she crawled beneath the floor of the shrine, singing, "Lalala, froggie frog frog!"



Around that time, I was sitting on the veranda at Ayameike's house, smoking a pipe. It was a little past noon, and the garden was bathed in tranquil sunshine. Ayameike and his wife had laid out their futons in the tatami room and were taking a pleasant afternoon nap.

Everything was so quiet that I could hear the cinders smouldering in the ashtray. Earlier in the afternoon when I was playing with Ayameike, I could hear bikes whirring past and children liberated for winter break shrieking in the street, but now everything was so

still it was as if time itself had come to a halt. The only signs of motion came from the wisps of smoke from my pipe curling up through the transparent sunshine.

*Yaichirō must be heading to the election right about now*, I thought to myself.

As I dangled my feet from the veranda, my ears detected the sound of paws scurrying over fallen leaves, and a lone tanuki emerged from the trees. *Hey, she's pretty cute*, I thought, but no sooner had the thought crossed my mind than my transformation came right off and the pipe fell to the ground with a clatter. I scrambled to douse the pipe with my tea.

"Don't just pop out in front of me like that!" I chided her.

Ebisugawa Kaisei sat down in the garden and laughed. "I just came to see you, because you never come to see me!"

"Don't be silly. I'm a wanted tanuki, you know."

"It's your fault for picking a fight with a half-baked tengu!"

"Come on. I'm putting my skin on the line for the good of the community."

"Sure, like you're not doing this for the thrill of it. If you end up going into a stew it's your own fault!"

It wouldn't do to be quarreling with my fiancée in the garden of a human's residence, so I came down from the veranda and took Kaisei through the trees to the dried-up, leaf-filled pond.

I was surprised to hear her tell me that she had escaped from the Faux Denki Bran distillery.

"What do you mean, escaped?"

"My brother Kureichirō's just being really *weird*."

Since he had returned to Kyoto from his decade-long absence, Kureichirō had been so energetic you'd hardly believe that he had once renounced the world to live as a monk. With Yaichirō's inauguration coming up, he had been assisting with the business of the tanuki world, accompanying Yaichirō around to greet the elders, and just all around making himself perfectly helpful. He was also proving to be a remarkably gifted manager at the Faux Denki Bran distillery, and before Kaisei had realized it he had lifted all of the duties that burdened her shoulders and placed them on his own. Thoroughly smitten by his charisma, Kinkaku and Ginkaku obeyed his every command without question.

"He's just pushing himself because he's head of the family, no?"

"Kureichirō was never that kind of tanuki."

"It's been ten years, he must have changed."

"That's not all. It gets even sketchier."

What Kaisei told me next was pretty hard to ignore.

A few days ago, Kaisei had been moping around the distillery grounds, when she spotted a suspicious figure skulking about Inazuma Shrine, which was built around the grave of Professor Inazuma. That shrine was sacred ground to the Ebisugawa clan, and even distillery employees didn't tread there lightly, let alone some unknown outsider.

She had been on the verge of shouting at him, when Ebisugawa Kureichirō swiftly came striding up and shook hands with the stranger. Kaisei hid in the shadows and observed as the pair entered the shrine and began a secret discussion.



"He was talking to that weirdo conjurer," Kaisei confided.

"Hold up. You're telling me Kureichirō was making a deal with *Tenmaya*?" I was taken aback. An image of pearly-white dentures flashed through my mind. "That *is* sketchy."

Ever since then, Kaisei had been doing some sniffing around, but Kureichirō was not an easy tanuki to tail. And eventually, Kaisei realized that she herself was being watched. Wherever she went, the Ebisugawa Guard Corps followed. Interrogate them as she might, they would only play dumb, but the only thing she could think of was that Ebisugawa Kureichirō had put them up to it.

"Plus, I don't think Kureichirō likes that we're engaged again."

"Didn't he say to Yaichirō that they'd put out an official announcement next year?"

"That's just what he says in front of Yaichirō. Waiting until Father's mourning period is over is just an excuse. All I know is, something's going on with Kureichirō." Kaisei grinned. "So that's why I left a note saying I'm eloping with you and got outta there. Bet Kureichirō won't be expecting that!"

"You seriously...this is going to turn into a pain in the butt, isn't it."

"I'll be a pain in your butt if you don't grow a pair!"

"Eloping right after we've just gotten engaged...you are seriously out of order."

Just as Kaisei opened her mouth to retort, she clammed up and darted her eyes towards the trees. Her wet nose sniffed the air, and she murmured, "Something doesn't feel right."

I turned around and scanned the trees, but all I saw were the withered branches of the forest.

"There isn't a festival around here, is there?" Kaisei whispered uneasily. "I think I can hear the music..."

Suddenly from the depths of the forest came a dry *bang*, and I felt something cut through the air. Kaisei screamed and collapsed to the ground. I ran over to her. "What's wrong!?" I shouted, shaking her, but her unfocused gaze only stared limply up at me. Her front paws twitched, and then her eyes closed.

"Ho ho ho!" The cheerful voice of Tenmaya rang through the grove. He stepped out from behind the trees, wearing a resplendent *haori* over his trademark red shirt, and shouldering the gleaming air rifle. He looked nothing so much like some nouveau riche out on safari. I didn't understand how he had concealed his presence all this time.

I dragged Kaisei over, attempting to flee the advancing Tenmaya, but my unconscious fiancée was out like a sack of bricks. And now I couldn't transform and pick her up. I could only gnash my teeth and bemoan the inconvenience of this four-legged form.

"Santa's got another present for ya!" Tenmaya hollered.

I felt a sharp prick at the base of my neck, and then a burning sensation spread throughout my body. My vision started to swim, and everything looked very far away.

At the end of the black tunnel that enclosed my vision, I could just make out the furskin-wrapped figure of Tenmaya lumbering toward me. Swinging from his hand, gleaming in the wintry sunlight, was a large cage.

And then I blacked out.

Burned into my eyes until the very last was the sight of Tenmaya's impossibly white teeth.



The earth in the dim space beneath the floorboards of Kinchō Shrine was honeycombed with tanuki tunnels.

The girl transformed into a tanuki, put Yajirō on her back, and dived into a large hole. After clambering in a ways, the tunnel expanded into a large burrow reinforced with brick walls, and eventually they saw the light from old-fashioned oil lanterns and emerged into a large wooden-floored corridor.

"Here we are, the Kinchō burrow!"

Taking on human forms, the girl and Yajiro walked down the corridor.

The zigzagging hallway continued on a very long way, with many rooms connected to it on each side. As they passed each room, the tanuki rolling inside would shout hallos affably to the girl. Some rooms were full of tanuki dressed in pilgrims' garb, while in others whole families sat happily at round dining tables. Each room had a veranda facing onto a garden, and though you could see white walls at the far ends of the gardens, the skies in each room were all different: some had towering mid-summer thunderheads, and others hard driving rain pelting down beyond the closed shutters.

"All of these rooms belong to Lord Sagamibō of Shiramine," the girl informed Yajirō as she walked briskly along. "The clan only rents them from him."

"How many are there?"

"Oh, you wouldn't believe how many there are, just thinking about it makes me tired. And this hallway is always changing too. Lord Sagamibō comes and takes rooms away, or adds new ones on. There's a great kerfuffle every time, what with all the tanuki having to move around."

Finally they came to a great room as wide as a banquet hall.

Here lay a pleasant early summer sky, and handkerchiefs of many colors fluttered in the breeze on drying racks in the garden. In the middle of the room was a neat collection of old cameras, which two men were peering at.

One of the men wore a white yukata with thick black stripes, and a gourd hung from his neck, dangling over his shock of luxurious, manly chest hair. He wore a thick beard, and his body was quite round. Though he was in a human form, he clearly did not deign to hide his tanukiness. This was the head of the clan, 18th of the Kinchō name.

The large man kneeling beside him smiled. His glasses glinted in the light, and his kimono was impeccably neat. This was the famed counselor of the Kinchō, Fujinoki-dera-no-Tonbi.

The two tanuki paused in their discussion of the cameras, and glanced questioningly at Yajirō.

The head of the daughter introduced Yajirō, then said, "Good-bye!" and skipped out of the room.

Yajirō proceeded to Kinchō and knelt on the ground, bowing his head low to the floor. "It is an honor to see you once more. I am Yajirō, second son of Shimogamo Sōichirō. I am glad to see you well."

"Well, well, a Shimogamo." Kinchō and Tonbi exchanged flustered glances, then bowed their heads to Yajirō.

Yajirō noticed then that there was one more tanuki in the room. on a dirty futon in the corner of the room lay a man snoring loudly, his head shaved like that of a monk. His round stomach was exposed, and in his right hand he clutched a half-eaten onigiri. Clearly he wasn't too concerned about hiding his tanukiness, either.

"Must be a guest of Kinchō," Yajirō thought. "Not much for manners, obviously."

Yajirō told Kinchō and his counselor of the recent happenings in Kyoto, that Yasaka Heitarō would soon be retiring from his post to be replaced by Yaichirō, that the new Trick Magister would be visiting soon to greet them in person, and that he hoped to continue the strong relationship established by their fathers before them.

Kinchō smiled with gratification. "The Trick Magister...Yaichirō has grown strong. If there's aught I can do, aught I can do at all, you need only ask. The son of Shimogamo Sōichirō will always have a friend in the Kinchō clan!"

"Ah, but how sorrowful was the fate of Sōichirō!" Fujinoki-dera-no-Tonbo said mournfully.

"Indeed, indeed," sighed Kinchō, his round body quivering with sorrow, and the gourd around his neck sloshing quietly with it.

Yajirō lowered his voice and spoke of the machinations of Ebisugawa Sōun which had been brought to light the previous year. When Kinchō heard of how Sōun had made Father into stew, his face clouded.

"An infamous tale!"

"But Uncle has passed away, and the rift between the Shimogamo and the Ebisugawa clans has been mended.

"Then, who now heads the Ebisugawa Clan?"

"It is my pleasure to inform you that Sōun's eldest son, Ebisugawa Kureichirō, has returned to Kyoto."

At these words Kinchō and Tonbo were astonished.

"How very queer," Tonbo murmured, gazing astern. "For Ebisugawa Kureichirō is at this very moment staying in this house."

It was Yajirō's turn to be astonished. "Truly?"

"Indeed, it has been over a year now," replied Kinchō. "He disciplines himself, and he does not; he is enlightened, and he is not; a very strange sort of monk, to be sure. He claimed that he had seen the light at Cape Muroto, only to realize that it had only been his imagination. He eats enough for fourteen tanuki, and he sleeps sometimes for three days and three nights. I find him quite impossible to understand."

"Interesting discussion you've all been having," came a voice.

"Ah, Kureichirō. Awake at last?" called Kinchō.

The monk who had been snoring so uproariously now sat up. The nibbled onigiri rolled off his chest, and hastily he grabbed it and stuffed it into his mouth.

"You may call this tanuki in Kyoto 'Kureichirō' if you please," said the monk, staring at Yajirō and rubbing his bald pate. "But in that case, who am I?"



At 3 in the afternoon, Yaichirō's procession set out from the Tōka Saikan with great pomp and circumstance.

Trailing behind Yaichirō down Shijō Avenue were the other tanuki from the party. According to Nanzenji Seijirō, Yaichirō already gave off the regal air of a Trick Magister.

The elders had gathered at the Heir's mansion. When Yaichirō and his party arrived in front of the ground floor of the building, waiting for them at the entrance were Yasaka Heitarō and other heavyweights of the tanuki world, dressed up in formal kimono.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you all for this day," said Yaichirō, bowing his head.

The tanuki fearfully climbed the stairs up to the roof. The sun was already setting, and a butt-chilling winter wind was blowing.

The Heir greeted them by the gas lamp at the garden gate.

"Welcome, gentlecreatures."

He had redecorated his residence for the conclave. His meticulously arranged furniture had been moved to the back wall of the sitting room and piled up one on top of the other with exacting precision. At the very apex of the stack, almost touching the ceiling, was the Heir's favorite sofa, perfectly balanced in tengu fashion. From the ceiling hung a chandelier, shimmering like a fortress made of glass, and on the floor was a Persian rug that looked as if it could seat a hundred tanuki on a magic carpet ride.

"I will observe the proceedings here," said the Heir, floating up through the air to rest on the sofa and lighting up a pipe.

Cushions were put out on the carpet, and the elders were installed in their seats.

With Yasaka Heitarō at the fore, the tanuki all bowed to the Heir.

"On behalf of all the tanuki, I humbly offer our gratitude for your gracious hosting of our conclave. I must disclose that this conclave may not be resolved for some time, and I beg your indulgence."

"Very well, Yasaka Heitarō. Carry on." The Heir looked around and frowned. "By the way, I don't seem to see Yasaburō here?"

"Owing to having incurred the wrath of Lady Benten he is currently on the run."

"Dear me, he certainly does get around."

Atop that magnificent Persian rug, the elders' conclave began. It was a decidedly unhurried affair. The elders whispered amongst themselves, their voices soft as bursting bubbles, and they fell asleep and woke up as they pleased, hovering on the boundary between life and death. People said that they flitted between both sides of that boundary, considering matters both of this world and the next, but the truth was no one was quite sure.

While this was going on Nanzenji Gyokuran sat at the rear, awaiting the outcome of the conclave. She watched with great interest the Heir up in his perch near the ceiling. He

was sitting with one long leg crossed over the other, sending out clouds of smoke from his pipe to float around the exquisite chandelier.

*Do tengu find it funny for tanuki to hold conclaves?* Gyokuran wondered, looking around the solemn faces in the crowd.

Something odd struck her then.

Ebisugawa Kureichirō was nowhere to be seen.



At the same time, Mother was worrying herself sick in the Tadasu Forest.

At around 3 in the afternoon the winter sun began to go down, and the first shadows of evening crept into the trees. Dry leaves tumbled over the ground, blown by a chill wind.

The more she thought by herself, the more seeds of doubt sprouted in her mind. Normally Mother had more pluck in her body than all of us brothers combined, but today was the anniversary of Father's death in that stewpot, and her mind was filled with swirling misgivings.

"Sō, oh Sō. Watch over those boys." Mother prayed to Father on the other side, that her children would come to no harm.

Engrossed in her anxiety, Mother nearly jumped out of her skin when her phone suddenly rang. She retrieved her phone from her bed and answered, to hear the sobbing, very out-of-sorts voice of Yashirō on the other end.

"I'm in trouble, Mother! I caused a big accident!"

"What accident?"

"The lab is all blown up, and Kinkaku and Ginkaku are really mad at me! But I don't know how it even happened!"

"Calm down. Stay put until I get there."

Mother transformed into the Prince in Black and flew out of her bed, dashing like the wind down the shrine road and across the horseriding ground onto Shimogamo Boulevard. Jumping into a cab, she shouted, "To the Ebisugawa power plant, stat!"

Fifteen minutes later, Mother came hurtling through the gates of the Faux Denki Bran distillery. Around the ivy-entwined black-tiled buildings and the warehouses the air was strangely silent. The slanting sunlight glowed orange in the smudged windows of the distillery. In front of the entrance to the distillery was parked the Ebisugawas' private fire truck, its lights flashing red.

Going up the stairs and down the long corridor, Mother began to pick up the sounds of a great hullabaloo.

A firehose was stretched in front of Yashirō's laboratory, and the Ebisugawa Guard Corps were hard at work clad in firefighting gear. In their midst Yashirō huddled by the wall despondently, his tail on full display. Mother ran up to him and peeked into the lab, where she was met by a shocking sight.

The interior of the lab looked as if the wind god Fūjin had just howled through, a perfect cataclysm of smashed machinery and smouldering cinders. Finally comprehending

just how big the accident had been, Mother became afraid, patting Yashirō's face and tugging on his ears and making sure that his tail wasn't on fire and that he was all right.

"I'm okay," Yashirō groaned.

"You certainly don't look okay! What's going on?"

Kinkaku came striding out from the mass of firefighters, looking smug in a glittering golden firefighter's coat. "A catastrophe, that's what!"

According to him, one of the machines that Yashirō had been using to develop his Faux Denki Bran had run amok, an unexpected chemical reaction chaining into a massive explosion. Luckily, Yashirō had been away taking a breather at the time, which was why he was unharmed.

"I would certainly like to know how the Shimogamo clan is educating its children! Never before has an explosion of such historical proportions happened here at the Faux Denki Bran distillery. I was in my own room when I heard the boom. It was so loud my tail popped out!"

"That can't be right. Nothing could have exploded!"

"Poppycock. What would an amateur inventor know? I had always feared that such an incident would occur. Our brother Kureichirō lent you this laboratory out of the kindness of his own heart. A fine way to repay him! No good deed goes unpunished, I say!"

"I'm gonna do a full investigation—"

As Yashirō tried to enter the lab, Kinkaku jumped in his way and eyed him menacingly. "Don't even think about destroying any evidence! This crime scene is under our jurisdiction!"

"Wait, Kinkaku," coaxed Mother. "I am truly very sorry that this happened, but isn't it a little early to jump to conclusions? You heard what Yashirō said, there must be some mistake."

"A mistake, you say? Look at the evidence before you, madam!"

*"Don't you call me madam!"* Mother snapped testily.

"...In any case, thanks to the explosion that has occurred in this laboratory, our electrical systems have been disrupted, and the production line has had to be shut down. Bigly damages of historical proportions! Rest assured that we will be billing you for recompense. We'll sue for every last hair on your tails!"

"Where is Kaisei? I'd like to talk to her."

"Kaisei has locked herself in her room. She's been removed from management of the distillery, and so she is sulking. Girls her age are very difficult to deal with!"

"Sulking in her room during an accident like this? That's not the Kaisei I know."

"I must insist you leave her alone. Merely entering her room is grounds to be called all manner of uncouth names. Hairy turd, overgrown amoeba...ooh, my sensitive soul is permanently scarred, I tell you."

Hearing that Kaisei refused to appear, Mother's suspicion was raised. "What are you Ebisugawas planning?" she demanded, drawing Yashirō into her arms.

At that moment, Kinkaku came out of the ashen laboratory wearing a silvery coat. "Kinkaku! Look at what I've found!" he said, handing a shiny long golden object to Kinkaku.

Kinkaku waved that horrible invention in front of Yashirō's nose. "And what would this be doing in your laboratory?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything about it!"

"This is the German air rifle that the Heir has been looking for, the very same one that took the life of our poor old father at the Arima hot springs!" Kinkaku accused, glaring at Mother and Yashirō. "What is it doing in your laboratory!?"

Mother was shocked, her arms wrapped around Yashirō.

"What is the meaning of this?" said a voice from behind them.

They turned around to see Ebisugawa Kureichirō standing there, a stern expression on his face.



Not once did the thought that anything like this might be occurring cross Yajirō's mind as he boarded the Nankai Ferry and set sail across the Kii Channel. He stood on the deck breathing the smell of the sea deep into his lungs, watching as Tokushima Port receded into the distance. In no time at all the warehouses, the cement factory, and the red and white smokestacks shrank into nothingness. The ferry plied its way across the channel towards Wakayama as the sun set over the waves.

"I wouldn't have minded doing a little more traveling," he sighed, leaning over the handrail and bidding farewell to the old province of Awa disappearing over the horizon. The tanuki of Kinchō had been most accommodating, and seeing Yajirō's shock at having come across him Kureichirō had suggested that they return to Kyoto and take stock of things. Crawling through the burrow and exiting the tunnel beneath the floorboards of Kinchō Shrine, they had come across Kinchō's daughter, in the middle of devoting herself to her art. "Hopping on home already?" she chirped, but despite her look of surprise, she'd already been informed of the situation by Kinchō, and had a car ready in which to drive them to the port.

*The world is so full of kind tanuki,* Yajirō reflected.

Kureichirō approached him, slurping up cup noodles. "How quickly recedes the land of Awa," he said, watching the port recede.

Even inside the car Kureichirō had been stuffing his cheeks with a steamed bun, and had browsed the stores at the port right until the last moment before the ferry's departure, making Yajirō rather anxious. "My apologies," Kureichirō remarked. "I've been sleeping so long that I find myself quite famished."

Yajirō kept sneaking glances at his former schoolmate, but he simply could not reconcile the sacrilegious monk who stood before him with the pious tanuki cub who had stood reading scriptures under the trees all day. The Kureichirō who was already in Kyoto bore a much closer resemblance to the Kureichirō of old.

"You must have done a lot of training, Kureichirō."

"He who boasts of having trained is yet far from enlightenment."

"And are you enlightened?"

"Not at all, not at all. Ah, he who remains unenlightened deserves an empty belly." He slurped up another mouthful of noodles.

Yajirō told him of everything that had happened in his absence. Kureichirō never raised an eyebrow the whole time, not even when heard that his father had dishonoured his legacy with the foul deed of killing another tanuki, nor when he was informed that Sōun had been sent off to the next life by human hands.

"A not unexpected end for my father."

"Don't you feel sad?"

"That is how Father lived. How a single tanuki lives, how it dies, it makes little difference to the universe. Yet every furball has his part to play. A wicked tanuki he may have been, yet even Father had his own sort of dignity. Now that he is dead, I cannot help but think that it is not such a bad thing for such a tanuki to come into this world now and then."

Suddenly Kureichirō looked at Yajirō with curiously limpid eyes. "Forgive me. To you he is your father's murderer. I ask pardon, Yajirō."

"Don't sweat it," said Yajirō, who even now felt no anger.

"Now, who is it who is masquerading as me?" Kureichirō wondered, sounding amused.

"To me, at least, he looked like the real you."

"I look forward to returning to Kyoto and seeing this imposter face to face. *If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him*—if you meet yourself on the road... And while I'm there, I suppose I shall read a sutra before my father's grave, one fit for a fool."

Shivering in the chilly wind, they stared out at the broad sky and the wide sea.

"Once things have been cleared up, I'm thinking of crossing back to Shikoku," Yajirō mentioned.

"Very good," grinned Kureichirō. "I'm sure Kinchō's daughter will be delighted."

"What're you laughing about, Kureichirō?"

"I'm not laughing about anything, Yajirō."

Yajirō recalled his parting with Kinchō's daughter on the dock at the port. There she stood, not a care in the world for the passersby staring at her bare feet, telling him, "Come again, and next time take me on that train again to Cape Misaki!" As Yajirō and Kureichirō made their way up the gangplank, she raised herself up on tippy toes as high as she could go, waving her hands and shouting, "Bon voyage!" He already missed her sparkling eyes.

"What was her name again?"

"You mean you don't know?" Kureichirō's eyes were round with surprise. "Shabbier than I expected of you. Her name is Seiran. It means 'wave of stars'."

"That's a nice name, reminds me of space. Bit like Kaisei, don't you think?"

"It would, I should think," smiled Kureichirō. "'Twas the Trick Magister Shimogamo Sōichirō who gave Seiran her name."





When I regained my senses, I wasn't sure where I was. My head was unpleasantly fuzzy, and the world was swaying something terrible. I lifted my nose a bit and touched the cold metal bar of a cage. The cage was wrapped with a purple cloth so that I couldn't see anything outside it.

"They got me good. Guess I'm headed straight for the Friday Fellows' stewpot."

Kaisei was curled up in a warm ball beside me, sleeping. Her face looked peaceful, as if she was dreaming of a giant *onsen-manjū*, and though the cage swayed and shook she showed no signs of stirring from her slumber. My nose tickled by her fur, I gave a little sneeze, *kerchoo*.

That same instant, the swaying cage suddenly stopped and was lowered to the ground with a rattle. I hurriedly feigned sleep, while Tenmaya undid the cloth and peered inside. He was clothed in a hideous fur coat, like some moneyed old crone; a golden bracelet hung on the wrist of the hand with which he was rattling the cage, while his fingers were adorned with numerous garish rings. He was all decked out in the vulgar wear of the nouveau riche, but on his white puffing breath I detected the faintest scent of Jintan breath mints.

Outside the cage was a bustling thoroughfare which I seemed to recognize. We must have been taken from Lake Biwa back to the streets of Kyoto. I caught a fleeting glimpse of the sky, which was tinged in pink.

"Right-o, then," said Tenmaya, bundling the cloth over the cage and setting off once more.

After about ten minutes of swaying, I heard the sound of a door being slid open, and everything went dark.

"Good evening. It is I, Tenmaya."

"Tenmaya, well done." I heard from far away the voice of an old man, like a voice from the heavens.

Through the purple cloth I smelled aged wood, tatami mats, moist earth, incense, the scents all melding into one harmonious perfume. We seemed to be in the inner courtyard of a traditional house. At long last Tenmaya undid the knot and pulled away the cloth.

"I've come to deliver the tanuki."

We were in a dim, chilly 6-tatami room. Jurōjin, the head of the Friday Fellows, was sitting in the middle of the room, his back to the alcove. Beside him was a painted tanuki statue carved from elephant ivory, which he was stroking in lieu of an armrest. In the alcove was a hanging scroll depicting a tanuki looking at the moon. Jurōjin narrowed his eyes, peering at me as I feigned unconsciousness.

"Excellent work, Tenmaya. Now we shall be able to have our stew."

"...So, you will be striking the new guy, Yasaburō?"

"Benten recommended him, but be that as it may we cannot accept someone who fails to bring a tanuki to our year-end banquet. It seems Benten misread him."

"I thought he was a pretty interesting lad. A real shame, that."

"That is not of your concern."

"I must say, drawing the short straw ain't to my liking. I'm the great Tenmaya! Having to clean up other folks' messes is beneath me." Tenmaya placed the rifle he had been concealing on the tatami. "All it took was one shot from this gun, *blammo!* It was just a sleeping dart, so it's still as fresh as they come. It'll be dreaming blissfully until it's sliding into the pot, I reckon."

"Where did you get it?" asked Jurōjin.

"In the garden of that artist, Ayameike. Our good friend Ebisugawa was kind enough to clue me in. Told me that there was a tanuki living there, and all I'd have to do was sneak up and knock it on the head. And what do I see when I get there, not one but two tanuki having a little tryst. Talk about a stroke of luck! Beautiful sight, how they were cozying up to each other. Horny little bastards, aren't they!"

"How pitiable, that their tryst will have to be continued in the pot."

"They do say that stews are better shared with a friend!"

Damn that scummy monk, selling a tanuki to the likes of Tenmaya! I doubted that he'd expected Kaisei, who'd snuck out from the distillery, to be caught up in it. Kureichirō had finally shown his true colors, not that I was in a position to do anything about it.

"My 120th birthday approaches; this tanuki stew will be just the nourishment I require." Jurōjin stood up and slid open the paper door, walking out along the corridor that encircled the dim courtyard. Tenmaya picked up the cage and followed behind. Passing out the rear of the house and through an even darker storehouse, we came to an open space surrounded by a wall topped with barbed wire.

There, Jurōjin's beloved three-storied train towered into the air.

At the front of the train on the first floor was the driver's compartment. Jurōjin went inside, and with a flick of a switch, lights twinkled on all over the train. Installed next to the driver's seat was Master Akadama's chagama engine. With this tengu's toy in his possession, it seemed that Jurōjin had in mind to take the skies over Kyoto for his own.

Jurōjin seated himself at his desk in the study and eyed Tenmaya. "I must say, you do seem to have come into a good amount of money."

"Heh, money makes the world go around, and it's all coming into my pockets. Ebisugawa wanted my pretty little air rifle here something fierce, so I sold it to him for a pret-ty penny."

"Yet you have it in your possession."

"...Oh, so it is. I wonder how that happened?"

"You deceived him." Jurōjin narrowed his eyes.

"Now that doesn't sound respectable. Call me a seller of dreams."

"You are wicked, Tenmaya. One day you will certainly fall into Hell."

As Jurōjin said those words, a foul wind emanated from the diptych standing in the corner of the study, rippling the pages of the bound books on Jurōjin's desk and the scrolls hanging from the ceiling. An uneasy grimace came to Tenmaya's face, and he took a step back.

"The winds of Hell blow today," smiled Jurōjin behind the desk. "Perhaps they will come for you before too long."

"Don't say things like that, yer honour. I'm fond of this life, at least twice as much more than your average person."

At that moment the foul wind rose to a howl, and someone whooshed out of the diptych. Tenmaya let out a panicked squawk and tossed away the cage, backing up against the windows. But rather than a sergeant of Hell, it was Benten who emerged.

"Oh, Tenmaya," she said, dusting off tongues of flames from her dress. "I thought something smelled in here."

"That's not very nice of you," grumbled Tenmaya. "And anyways, wasn't it your ass I had to cover for getting this tanuki, since Yasaburō's run off and all?"

"I'd rather be toasted over the flames of Hell than let your hands anywhere near my behind."

"All that effort and not a word of thanks. Gives me the chills, it does."

"Why should I have to thank someone who's so far below my league?"

Benten leaned down and looked at me and Kaisei inside the cage. The dragonstone hanging from her neck clinked against the cage.

There was a silence, and then I felt a warm, salty droplet fall on my nose. I wasn't sure if Benten had noticed that I was still only pretending to be asleep.

"Hah. So even demons cry," observed Tenmaya.

"I feel sorry that you're going to end up in my stomach," Benten whispered to me, putting her arms around the cage. "But I'm going to eat you just the same."



Daylight was fading outside the French doors of the Heir's villa, and the chandelier blazed now as if it illuminated a gilded ball attended by the cream of society. Utterly bored by the proceedings, the Heir was stretched out on his sofa, as motionless as if he was asleep.

The elders began to all shuffle back into this world, their long discussion reaching its end, and soft murmurs of "Very well, very well..." began to bubble up. With his moment of glory drawing nigh, Yaichirō drew himself up regally, when all of a sudden the French doors burst open.

"Stop the vote!"

"What is the meaning of this, Kinkaku!" Yasaka Heitarō's voice was wroth. "How dare you shout out in such a manner in the midst of the elders' conclave! And in front of the Heir, to boot!"

"You can scold me later, Mr. Yasaka!" Kinkaku looked elated as he shoved aside perplexed tanuki and led a troop of the Ebisugawa Guard Corps to the front. Ebisugawa Kureichirō appeared at the open doorway and swept inside, his expression stormy.

Kinkaku turned around and said to Kureichirō, "You'll let me handle this, won't you?"

He beamed like a celebrity prosecutor who's just pinned down his prey, and taking the German air rifle from one of the guardsmen triumphantly held it up for all to see.

"This was discovered at the Faux Denki Bran distillery in the laboratory of one Shimogamo Yashirō!" he announced, looking around at the tanuki. "There is no question,

this is the very air rifle which took the life of our father Ebisugawa Sōun. That rank *amateur* Yashirō caused an explosion at the lab, you see, and in the course of our investigation of the scene we discovered this rifle. I was utterly shocked! Why would Yashirō be hiding such a thing in his laboratory? How very suspicious! I find it highly suspect!"

The elders went still, while an uproar broke out among the rest of the tanuki. Kinkaku waved the air rifle around, and wherever the muzzle pointed the crowd flattened itself to the ground in terror.

"Surely not!" Yasaka Heitarō's lip trembled.

Kinkaku smirked at Yaichirō. "Yashirō and your mother are at the distillery. Ginkaku is questioning them for information. I'm sure it won't take long for Yashirō to spill the beans!"

"You have no right to detain Mother. Release her at once!" Yaichirō rose up to his knees. "This is a conspiracy! It's an Ebisugawa plot!"

"Yet here lies the cold evidence before you. Why were you concealing it? Why else, but because you were the ones who used it to kill our father! You murderer!" Kinkaku aimed the rifle at Yaichirō. "No doubt you put that loose cannon Yasaburō up to it. And isn't it true that Yasaburō was the only one to witness Father's death at Arima? Being the wise tanuki that I am, it struck me immediately. I have seen through all your schemes! You ordered Yasaburō to assassinate Father, and made Yashirō conceal the evidence. Then you would become Trick Magister, all the while feigning knowledge of the whole affair, and when things had quieted down you would return the murderous instrument to the Heir! A fine connivance! A veritable confederacy of brotherly love!"

Ebisugawa Kureichirō sank to his knees and wiped a tear from the corner of his eye with a bandaged arm. "I did not want to believe it. To think that Yaichirō, of all tanuki, would have assassinated Father. A life for a life, an endless cycle of death—"

"Your scheme to become Trick Magister is at an end!" crowed Kinkaku.

The murder conspiracy theory that had been making the rounds during autumn now seemed to be hanging over the room like a dark cloud once more. The elders were silent, as were the gathered bigwigs. Yasaka Heitarō asked for opinions, but all he got were mumbled prevarications about how they couldn't possibly be up to the challenge of such a weighty decision, that they had no knowledge of the matter, that they wholly agreed with the opinion of their neighbour, and so on and so forth.

The shock of the accusation was so great that Yaichirō could only sit there stunned, as if he was under a spell.

Just as the gas lamp flickered on in the gloom of the front garden, a member of the Ebisugawa Guard Corps scampered into its circle of light coming toward the villa. Panting for breath, the tanuki rushed inside. "Shimogamo Yasaburō's been caught by the Friday Fellows!" he yelled. "He's probably been cooked up by now!"

"...Yasaburō?" Yaichirō sucked in his breath and stood up.

A vague sort of resignation pervaded the room. Yaichirō could clearly see that most of the assembled tanuki were thinking, *that Yasaburō always was too bold for his own good*. Fury gripped him. Yasaburō had risked his neck and courted Benten's anger for the good of

the tanuki world. Now Yasaburō had been caught, and all they were doing was standing around?

Looking at Kureichirō's calm, composed expression, Yaichirō suddenly realized that this trap must have been set in motion by this furball of a monk. He was the true mastermind behind it all. How could you not have seen the evil he was hiding, you utter, damned fool!

Suddenly Gyokuran was beside him, gripping his hand tightly. She said nothing, only standing by him and waiting for his decision.

Yaichirō's blood came to a boil then, and a laugh welled up from the bottom of his belly.

Yasaburō was his little brother. *His little brother.*

And if his little brother was in peril, there was nothing left to think about.

Yaichirō's fur ruffled out into the striped hide of a tiger. He took a step onto the Persian carpet and howled. "Damn the tradition, damn the tanuki world, and damn the Trick Magistership!"

The venue shook.

"All according to plan," said Kinkaku, a grin spreading across his face. "We heard it from your own mouth. And in front of the elders, no less!"

But Yaichirō did not flinch or falter. Solemnly he declared, "I am Yaichirō, first son of Shimogamo Sōichirō: none other than him who was said to have squandered the great inheritance of his father's blood. But in me, too, runs the blood of a fool. Though my path lead me to the bottom of a stewpot, still I shall rescue my brother. You all may play at your own games as you please!"

As Yaichirō finished his thunderous address, Gyokuran hopped nimbly onto his back.

Yaichirō stared straight at Kureichirō. "If you covet the Trick Magistership so, you may have it!"

Leaving the thunderstruck tanuki behind, Yaichirō leaped out onto the rooftops with Gyokuran on his back. The day was ending, and streetlights were beginning to come on. It was the perfect wintry evening for a hot pot.

As he galloped over the rooftops, Yaichirō shook with excitement. "I'm sorry, Gyokuran. I suppose in the end, I am nothing but a fool."

"I know," Gyokuran laughed, clinging to Yaichirō's neck. "Why do you think I'm here?"



Around this time, Mother and Yashirō were in a warehouse on the grounds of the Faux Denki Bran distillery.

Around them were jumbled piles of worn out machinery and the concrete floor was very cold. Only the faint red glow of an electric heater lit the surroundings.

"Goodness, trapped in a cage again. This is just like last year!"

"My butt feels really cold."

"And I'm famished. I was supposed to be waiting for Yaichirō at the Scarlet Pane, but now thanks to those Ebisugawa idiots, what a fine year-end party this is turning out to be!"

The door of the warehouse opened, and Ginkaku came walking in.

"Scure me, I'm here with your dinner. I'll put in an egg for you."

Ginkaku cracked a raw egg on top of the bowl of gyūdon and placed it inside the cage, then poured miso soup from a thermos into a small bowl. Ginkaku had prepared it with fried tofu strips and chopped green onions, and to Mother's gratification it was much more delicious than she had been expecting. The gyūdon and the miso soup warmed their bellies, and Mother and Yashirō began to feel a bit calmer.

"This heater isn't helping much," frowned Ginkaku, fiddling with the control.

"Say, Ginkaku," Mother called. "You don't really believe that we killed your father, do you?"

"Umm, I don't know what you expect me to say!"

"But, these are my sons we're talking about!"

"Parents always say that," said Ginkaku, holding his hands in front of the heater.

"Our dad always used to say that. *My children couldn't possibly be so stupid!*"

"Well, anyone would say that, looking at you two..." Mother sighed. "I recall your mother was always worried."

"I don't want to talk about Mother," said Ginkaku. "It makes me sad."

Ebisugawa Sōun's wife, the mother of Ginkaku and Kinkaku, had died shortly after giving birth to Kaisei following a sudden illness. Having been prized and sheltered during her Ebisugawa upbringing, she could be prissy and self-centered, but as Mother told it, there was no doubt that she had been a good mother to her children.

"It must have been so hard for you two, losing your mother so early in life."

Hearing those words from Mother, Ginkaku said nothing and stared into the red glow of the heater.

"I knew she must still be very worried about you. No matter how old their children get, tanuki mums and dads always worry. And that goes double, when our children are fools. I know deep down you're a kind tanuki, and you must love your mother very much. You must get lonely sometimes on cold nights. And I don't think that's anything to be ashamed of, at all."

"I'm not lonely," muttered Ginkaku, sounding lonely.

Mother continued to plead with him to open the cage, but Ginkaku just kept shaking his head. "I can't," he told her. "My brothers'll get mad at me."

"I know you, though, you're a good boy."

"...Am I?"

At last Ginkaku stood up and made to leave the warehouse, but reaching out his hand to open the door he stopped and thought for a while. "I can't let you out of the cage," he mumbled. "But I might be able to ask Kaisei."

"Yes, you do that. We'll be waiting right here."

Mother put all her hopes on Kaisei and waited for Ginkaku to return.

Sounding as if he was about to cry, Yashirō asked, "Is Yaichirō not gonna be Trick Magister anymore?"

"Well, things have gotten rather tangled up."

"...Yasaburō's gonna figure something out, I bet."

"Will he? He doesn't know what's happening here."

But it was Mother and Yashirō who didn't know that I was teetering on the edge of the pot; they weren't aware that Yaichirō had already renounced the Trick Magistership and stormed out of the conclave; and they certainly had no idea that Yajirō was heading back to Kyoto from Tokushima in the company of a second Kureichirō.

A while later Ginkaku came back and gave them some surprising news.

"What do I do? Kaisei's not in her room! I'm in a whole lot of trouble!"

"What do you mean?"

"...I found this letter. What does 'elope' mean?"

Mother read the letter and sniffed. "Dear me...now what in the world is going on?"



While I pretended to be asleep, I eventually fell asleep for real.

When I woke up I was in what appeared to be a dim, chilly hallway. Red velvet chairs and wooden tables were lined up along the wall all the way along into the murky, unseen depths of the corridor. Here and there were burning old-fashioned stoves.

*This is the Scarlet Pane*, I realized.

The Scarlet Pane on Teramachi Street is a favorite haunt of tanuki from all over Kyoto, and people said that no matter how many tanuki packed its confines there were always more seats waiting to be filled. The interior stretched on without end, and no matter the time of year it was always wintry cold inside. The rumor was that the corridor led to the land of the dead. Perhaps I was even now about to cross the border between the living and the dead.

Faintly I heard the sounds of a festival coming from the lightless depths of the corridor. Alone, I sat at a table and listened to that strange sound. It sounded to me like a farewell. Resting my head on my hands, my breath froze into clouds of frost. It reminded me of when Father and I had walked along the brook in the Tadasu Forest one wintry morning.

Before I knew it, Father was sitting on top of the table in his tanuki form.

For some reason, I wasn't surprised.

"Father, have I already fallen into the stewpot?"

"No, you have not. You are only sleeping. This is a dream of yours."

"How come you're still in your tanuki form?"

"...Because my body may no longer change its form."

"But it's a dream; you can transform into whatever you like."

"You cannot always do everything you like, even in a dream."

For a moment I stared back into Father's kindly eyes, and then I blurted out, "You're an awful tanuki." Father had picked fights with tengu, courted the enmity of Ebisugawa Sōun, and then fallen into a stewpot leaving his family alone in the world. Father might

have been prepared for that to happen, but it was a shock for all of us he left behind. The bonds of our family had been strengthened, but only after going through great suffering.

"I am sorry," said Father. "It's just my fool's blood talking."

"We always blame everything on our fool's blood."

"Are you talking about me, or you?"

"Yeah, you got me."

"The apple never falls from the tree, and the same is true of furballs." Father studied his furry forepaws. "Yasaburō, are you living a fun life?"

"Sure am," I said, before remembering that I was about to be made into tanuki stew. "I'm having so much fun that I'm about to take a dive right into a stewpot."

"I will be there to greet you when you do."

"Thank you, Father...but I can't afford to do that just yet." I said, shaking my head. "I always thought that when the time came I'd go down laughing, just like you, but I can't drag Kaisei in with me, and there's still so many things left for me to do."

"Fine, fine!" Father laughed. "Everyone walks this road eventually. There is no need to rush into it."

I let out an incredulous sigh. "How can you still be laughing when your own kid is about to turn into soup?"

"That is not very like you to say, Yasaburō." Father regarded me with kindly eyes. "We are tanuki. There is never a time when we should not be laughing."

Up to this point I'd been talking quite calmly, but now my eyes filled with tears, to the point that I could no longer see Father. From far away I heard the sound of that farewell. I tried to call out to him, but the words wouldn't come. The darkness of the corridor closed in until nothing could be seen.

"Take care of Master Akadama for me," I heard Father's dear voice say. "There is still much you have to do."

When I opened my eyes, I was still in the cage.

While I was out, the cage had been brought up to the third floor of the train and placed in a corner of the changing room. Kaisei was still sleeping peacefully beside me.

I suddenly sat up in shock.

A strange figure had appeared and was quickly tiptoeing towards the cage. It was wearing the black cape of a Taishō period schoolboy, and a flimsy paper tanuki mask.

"Ponpoko Ranger is here to save the day!" Professor Yodogawa declared.



"Of the Thirty-Six Stratagems, fleeing is best, my furry friends!" Professor Yodogawa reached out with his hairy hands from the folds of the cloak and picked up the cage.

But just as he did, jolly voices began to come up the stairs from the banquet room. The Friday Fellows had come to say goodbye to the stew-bound tanuki.

"We've got two tonight, two!"

"Tenmaya's certainly on his game. I don't think we could finish two entire tanuki, though!"



"Jurōjin seems to be of a mind to make up for last year's fiasco."

"Ooh, just the sound of it gives me indigestion!"

The voices approached us, and four of the Friday Fellows—Daikoku, Bishamon, Yebisu, and Fukurokuju—appeared at the top of the staircase. Their conversation died when they saw this stranger holding the tanuki cage, and they stopped in their tracks.

"Hey, who do you think you are?"

"Oh, look! He's making off with the tanuki!"

But none of them were foolhardy enough to leap on the masked intruder. The Friday Fellows and Ponpoko Ranger stared each other down there in the changing room, scattered hampers lying around them on the floorboards.

"So? Who are you?" Bishamon asked.

Professor Yodogawa puffed his chest out proudly. "I am Ponpoko Ranger, friend of all tanuki everywhere!"

No sooner had they heard that voice than the Friday Fellows all rolled their eyes.

"Oh, it's just Yodogawa. Silly me, letting myself be surprised."

"Don't you feel ashamed of yourself, a college professor in a getup like that!"

"What you're doing here is trespassing!"

But Professor Yodogawa didn't back down.

"Heaven and Earth and Humanity are calling me, calling me to save the tanuki! The laws of man are null and void in the face of my love for tanuki! There's not a statute in the books that can hold me back! Sophistry is the new law of the land, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

"Alright, alright, Yodogawa. We get it already."

"What an incurable character. Pin him down!"

But the professor scattered a handful of oddly shaped cockleburs on the floor, preventing the Friday Fellows from approaching. "There's poison in those thorns," he shouted, sending the Friday Fellows shrieking and tumbling down the stairs to the second floor in a hasty retreat. The professor tossed hampers and dressers into the stairway to block it, then carried the cage up to the rooftop.

But it was too late: the three-storied locomotive was ascending into the sky.

The rooftop bamboo grove rustled in the wind, and beyond it the pond lapped and rippled. Rising into the dark blue sky the train turned and slowly moved off, skimming the tops of the buildings like an airplane.

The professor clung to a stalk of green bamboo and looked chagrined at the lights flying past below. "I wasn't expecting them to fly right through the center of the city..."

Here the Friday Fellows made their return, wielding wicker baskets and yukata obi.

"We don't want to hurt you! Come quietly!" shouted Daikoku.

"You can go, but leave the tanuki!" added Bishamon.

The Friday Fellows chased the professor around the bamboo grove. There in the floating train these men, so distinguished and honourable in the world below, fought each other over a couple of tanuki. Daikoku took a shove from Professor Yodogawa and fell into the water, while Ebisu simply stood at the edge of the fray, too intimidated to go in himself.

In the end it was the burly Bishamon who showed off some mail-order kung-fu techniques to corner Professor Yodogawa at the edge of the lake.

"You're not just a professor, are you?"

"Of course I am not a professor. I'm Ponpoko Ranger!"

"Still on about that? Well, I'll admit that you've got spirit!"

Fukurokuju came lunging out of the bamboo and grabbed hold of Professor Yodogawa's black cape. Sure, the professor may have been in disguise, but that cape was definitely a baffling choice. While the professor was staggered, Bishamon and Daikoku swiftly threw themselves on him, finally bringing him down.

The Friday Fellows attempted to wrestle the cage away, but Professor Yodogawa stubbornly clung on to it like a kid whose attempt to sneak a stray dog into the house has just been discovered.

"Just let me go!" he wept.

As his hot tears rained down on me, I thought to myself that if his struggle didn't pay off and I ended up turning into stew, I'd have to visit his bedside one night and express my thanks to him as a furry ghost.

Tenmaya abruptly showed up in the bamboo grove, grinning that grin of his.

"What's this now, what's all the commotion?"

His face glowed pale and the German air rifle glinted in the city lights. "Now, Professor Yodogawa, you can't be hogging the tanuki all to yourself!"

Even Ponpoko Ranger couldn't stand up to that air rifle.

Just when I was thinking it was all over, I heard a loud beast-like howl from the neighbouring building. The Friday Fellows looked up to see what it was and were immediately petrified at the spectacle of two tigers bounding their way along the rooftops in hot pursuit of the train.

"Now just a moment!" Bishamon groaned. "Why did there have to be tigers again this year?"

The two tigers roared and leapt towards the train.



A cloud of gloom hung over the Heir's villa.

After Yaichirō's dramatic exit, the rest of the tanuki sat there forlornly on the Persian rug like a group of children who had been suddenly abandoned on a picnic.

The Heir sat up on his sofa and looked down at the tanuki. "What a predicament, to be sure. Now, I am terribly sorry, but I am a busy man. Might I ask you to finish things up?"

"Could you give us a moment?" Yasaka Heitarō murmured faintly.

The Trick Magister's despondency was painful to witness. Everything was set for his flight to Hawaii. His office in Gion Nawate lay empty, his Hawaiian knickknacks disposed of. The only thing he had retained was the charm from Hawaii Izumo Taisha that he had bought during his vacation with Shimogamo Sōichirō and the former Nanzenji head. "My Hawaii..." He let out a soft moan.

It was Kinkaku who broke the unbearable silence.

"A suggestion, if I may."

"What is it, Kinkaku?" groaned Yasaka Heitarō. "Out with it."

"How about we make my brother Kureichirō the interim Trick Magister? If a dependable Trick Magister were to be installed, you could go on your merry way off to the islands. The elders would decide whether to officially install him at a later date, of course."

"...You were the last tanuki I was expecting to come up with a plan," Yasaka frowned.

The tanuki began to whisper amongst themselves, and gradually the mood brightened. Since his return to Kyoto, Ebisugawa Kureichirō had made a name for himself as an upstanding, hardworking tanuki, and as the inheritor of the renowned Faux Denki Bran distillery, tanuki put faith in him. He wasn't a problem child like Kinkaku or Ginkaku. *Could he not serve as the Trick Magister, at least provisionally?* the elders murmured.

Ebisugawa Kureichirō nodded solemnly and said, "I, Ebisugawa Kureichirō, humbly accept the position of provisional Trick Magister. I solemnly vow to do my utmost to serve the tanuki community."

The tanuki crowd milled into a semblance of rows, sat on their haunches, and bowed to the Heir seated above.

"By your leave, sir."

"Goodness, is it over already?" The Heir floated down to the floor. "Now, my air rifle."

Kinkaku offered the glittering golden air rifle to the Heir reverentially, but after inspecting it the Heir quizzically cocked his head to the side.

"This is a fake. You couldn't kill a goldfish with this toy. It doesn't even fire. What is the meaning of this?"

"Surely that—" Kinkaku waffled wordlessly, while the tanuki crowd gasped.

"A strange development, wouldn't you say, Kureichirō?" The Heir's voice was genial, but his eyes were stony.

Kureichirō's face drained of color, and he hemmed and hawed, "I ask your pardon, sir, but that cannot be the case."

"I tell you it is a fake."

"That cannot..." Kureichirō's voice faltered and trailed off.

Yasaka Heitarō looked on anxiously at this distressing sequence of events. The other tanuki held their breaths, watching Kureichirō and the Heir.

Just then a strange monk opened the doors facing the garden and wandered inside.

"Who in the world?" everyone wondered in astonishment.

The monk was wearing a large rock around his neck which looked a bit like a turban shell, and he was carrying a grubby sack on his back. His body exuded the scent of brine, the scent of many days and nights spent by the sea at Cape Misaki. In his hands he held a large bowl, boorishly shoveling rice into his mouth as he walked. And on top of his freshly shaven head rode a small frog.

Seeing the frog, Yasaka Heitarō jumped to his feet. "Shimogamo Yajirō! I thought you'd left on a journey!"

"I've come back posthaste from Shikoku, because there's something I had to inform you of," said Yajirō, picking up his webbed feet and putting them down on his smooth perch. After crossing the Kii Channel on the Nankai Ferry, he'd transferred from the Nankai

Electric Railway to the Midōsuji line to the Hankyu line and ridden it up to Karasuma and then made his way here.

"Ah, is that him? Is that my impersonator?" the strange monk exclaimed, crossing the room and pushing the tanuki aside. He munched on his rice and stared down at Kureichirō. Then without warning, he burst into a fit of laughter, spraying rice grains all over Kureichirō's face."

"Oh, how very amusing. And you all thought this was Kureichirō?"

"How dare you! Who are you, anyways?" Yasaka Heitarō demanded.

"I am Ebisugawa Kureichirō."

"Preposterous! Ebisugawa Kureichirō is sitting right in front of you!"

"Are your noses all clogged up? This tanuki sitting in front of you all is Ebisugawa Sōun."

Every tanuki in the room turned to stare in shock.

Kureichirō stared back in defiance and scorn, painstakingly wiping off the grains of rice that were stuck to his face.

At this point Yasaka Heitarō finally lost his voice and gave up. He closed his eyes, and prayed for someone, anyone, to come and put an end to the madness.



Jurōjin's three-story train floated in the skies above the city.

The two tigers who had thrown themselves from the rooftops pulled themselves out of the pond and shook off the water, then lunged at Professor Yodogawa and snatched away the cage. Tangled up in his cape the professor tumbled over and fell helplessly into the pond like an acorn. I felt bad for him since he'd gone to such lengths to save my life, but to be fair to Yaichirō, the way things had been going it was hard to tell friend from foe.

"Yaichirō, watch out for the air rifle!" I shouted.

Yaichirō dodged Tenmaya's hastily loosed shot just in the nick of time, and before Tenmaya had a time to load a second shot the tiger was upon him, sending the conjurer flying into the pond. Crimson with rage, Tenmaya tried to crawl out of the water, but with Professor Yodogawa wrapped around him all he could do was wriggle around.

The Friday Fellows fled into the bamboo thicket, scattering like baby spiders.

Finally free, I transformed into a human and stretched my arms and legs.

Gyokuran shook the cage with Kaisei sleeping inside. "Kaisei won't open her eyes!" she cried.

Making sure not to look directly at the sleeping Kaisei, I told her, "Tenmaya shot her with a sleeping dart!"

"How terrible!" Gyokuran's voice quivered with indignation. "How did all this happen?"

There was so much we wanted to ask one another, but Tenmaya had shaken off Professor Yodogawa and was pulling himself up. First things first, we needed to get out of here.

We hurried along the little path through the bamboo.

"Hey! The train is ascending!" warned Yaichirō. "How do we escape?"

"We'll hijack the train!" I declared.

At the end of the path was the bathhouse chimney, and beside it was the entrance to the staircase leading to the lower floor. Bishamon was peeking out, fearfully surveying the situation. Yaichirō let out an earth-shaking howl and charged straight for him. "They're coming!" shrieked Bishamon, pulling his head inside.

With Yaichirō leading the way, we descended the spiral staircase.

"Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!" squealed the Friday Fellows, tripping over themselves as they fled. Round and round the spiral staircase we went, and soon enough we found ourselves in the study on the ground floor. Yaichirō went on a rampage through the curios, picking up the fleeing Friday Fellows in his mouth and tossing them aside. The scrolls hanging from the ceiling were ripped asunder, and pottery-laden shelves went toppling with almighty crashes.

"What clamour is this!"

Jurōjin turned around in the driver's seat, his eyes blazing.

Here I leapt forward and attempted to wrest Jurōjin out of the seat, but he clung for dear life to the yoke, bellowing, "Insolent fool!" During the tug-of-war over the yoke, the train lurched this way and that, sending antiques and passengers alike flying around the room. Wails of "We're going to crash!" echoed around the walls. Jurōjin was preternaturally strong for someone who was about to hit his 120th birthday, and refused to give up the yoke.

"The skies of Kyoto are mine!" he hissed.

"The skies of Kyoto belong to the tengu!" I retorted. "You cheeky human!"

I pulled Jurōjin's white beard. Grunting in pain, he pulled his head away, and Yaichirō used that moment to seize hold of his collar and peel him away from the seat.

I immediately jumped in to replace him and took hold of the stick, grabbing a bottle of Akadama port wine beside me. Dumping its contents into the chagama engine, I pulled up on the yoke with all my might and held on for dear life. The train rocketed upwards into the sky, the chassis tilting and sending everything, myself excluded, tumbling to the back.

From the driver's seat I could see the whole city sparkling below me. In front of me were the glittering Kyoto Tower, the lights of Shijō Avenue stretching over the Kamo River, the resplendent glow of Yasaka Shrine in Gion, the towering black peaks of the Higashiyama Sanjuroppō mountains. I brought the train around and scanned the earth for a place to land.

Suddenly a fragrance wafted into my nose from behind, and a white arm came snaking around my neck, yanking me away from the yoke. Another cheek placed itself against mine, smooth and cold.

"That's quite enough, Yasaburō," whispered Benten.

"...Ah, if it isn't Lady Benten."

"You don't know when to call it quits, do you, you naughty tanuki? Your father went into his pot so obediently."

"I've still got so much left to do."

Here I finally spotted the pinprick of light I had been looking for and cried out with joy.

There—at last—was the light at the end of the tunnel.

“Lady Benten, what would you say about ramming our way straight in there?” I pointed at the lights of the Heir’s villa. “I’m sure that will give the Heir quite a shock.”

For a moment Benten was unable to speak, craning her neck and glowering at that pinprick. Then, an unblemished smile spread across the face of that conflicted goddess, like she’d just received a new toy to play with on her birthday. And if anyone was going to smash the toy to smithereens, it was going to be the birthday girl herself.

Benten slapped me on the back. “Oh, Yasaburō, you *naughty* boy!”

And now, there was no one to stand in my way.



I aimed for the twinkling gas lamp and set the train plunging through the sky.

The train landed on the roof, its wheels shrieking, barreling straight at the Heir’s villa. In ecstasy I blasted the horn, over and over again.

The train crushed the white picket fence, toppled over the gas lamp, smashed through trees. As the headlights splashed over the veranda, I spotted the tanuki popping back into their furball forms one after another and falling over each other like an avalanche, fleeing to the other side of the house.

The train leapt straight over the veranda and smashed into the villa. The French doors were obliterated, the roof tumbled down upon itself. The train came to rest, its back half sticking out of the villa.

“Brilliant!” Benten picked herself up and clapped her hands, going to the rear of the train to check on the Friday Fellows. Her queries were met by a chorus of groans.

While Benten was at the back, Yaichirō and Gyokuran came up to the front.

“I thought we were done for, Yasaburō,” Yaichirō moaned.

I went out the front exit, and surveying the scene even I had to feel a little twinge of regret.

The Heir’s proud villa was utterly destroyed. The roof was caved in, and in the gap between it and the train the stars were peeking through. The floor was strewn with the remains of the chandelier and what had once been furniture. Thick clouds of dust and splinters drifted through the headlight beams.

The tanuki were piled up against the far wall, holding their breaths. In their midst sat Ebisugawa Sōun, his eyes flashing.

“So you live, Yasaburō,” said he, glaring at me.

“And I thought you were on your way to the next life, Uncle,” I replied.

“It seems we both were too loath to depart from this life.”

“Now it all makes sense. You planned all this from the start!”

Sōun no longer bothered to hide his true identity, sitting there in his real form proudly and openly. He’d been caught by the tail under the Heir’s questioning, and with the return of the real Kureichirō from Tokushima, he had been forced to return to his true

form. Now that his nephew, who should have been bubbling in a stewpot, had come crashing in on the three-storied train, he must have realized that it was all over. But rather than shrink and cower, his eyes gleamed with stubborn defiance, looking even more alive than before.

It wasn't anger that welled up within me, or surprise. It was a feeling of admiration: *this guy is really something*. From his staged death at Arima hot springs to his return as the fake Kureichirō, everything had been a pack of lies, but Ebisugawa Sōun had fooled the entire tanuki world. Here was a tricky tanuki if there ever had been one, a villainous master of deception, and it had all been so splendidly ambitious that all you could do was laugh.

But once he saw Kaisei curled up in Gyokuran's arms, even Sōun was aghast.

"Kaisei was shot by Tenmaya," I informed him.

"What...?"

"That's what all your scheming has gotten you. You should be ashamed of yourself!" From the darkness something hopped onto my shoulder.

"As reckless as ever, I see," croaked Yajirō. "I was almost trampled to death there."

"Oh, Yajirō. What're you doing here?"

"I think there's something else we'd better focus on first."

I turned around.

The Friday Fellows were crawling out of the train. In the dazzling headlights Jurōjin got to his feet uncertainly. Cold rage seethed from every inch of him. Beside the fearsome doyen of the Friday Fellows stood Tenmaya, shouldering the German air rifle. Tenmaya looked at the crowd of tanuki and whistled.

"Now that's a sight if I've ever seen one. We'll have our fill of stew tonight!"

"Tenmaya, I want you to take every tanuki here and cook it!"

"That's a pretty tall order!"

Hearing this the tanuki began to squeak piteously.

"Ho, Yasaburō. You're a real scamp!" Tenmaya laughed at me.

"Don't shoot them, Tenmaya," I said.

"No can do, now that I'm someone's dog again. I still wouldn't mind teaming up with you, though...even if you are a little bit furrer than I realized."

Yaichirō jumped in their way and roared, but Jurōjin and Tenmaya didn't seem impressed in the least.

"He's only a paper tiger. See if I don't make a rug out of you!" Jurōjin rebuked him.

Ponpoko Ranger, also known as Professor Yodogawa, suddenly appeared out of the shadows and stood in front of them with his arms outstretched. His now-tattered cape flapped around him like he was a swamp creature covered in seaweed, and the remains of his mask teetered precariously on the tip of his nose. But his love for tanuki remained strong and unwavering, in the face of a gun.

"I won't let you have a single one. If you want to shoot the tanuki, you'll have to shoot me first!"

"A real troublemaker, you are," Tenmaya chuckled drily.

"Ignore the fool. Tenmaya, shoot them all!"

Tenmaya leveled the rifle at him.

But before he could pull the trigger, Ebisugawa Sōun came flying out of the crowd, racing over the floor. Tenmaya tried to kick him away, but Sōun latched onto his leg, scurried up his torso, and sank his fangs into Tenmaya's ear. Tenmaya let out a bloodcurdling scream and flung himself around.

"You ruined everything!" screeched Sōun, tearing at Tenmaya's face with his claws. "This is why humans are so...!" Sōun's voice was desperate. Not only had Tenmaya sold him a fake gun, he'd used the real one to shoot his beloved daughter, and now all he could think of was wreaking vengeance. We all watched Sōun's apoplectic frenzy in horror.

Out of nowhere, a tremendous bellow shook the villa.

"TENMAAYAAA!"

The voice seemed as if it reverberated up from the bowels of hell, and everyone in the room flinched and shrank away. Even Tenmaya was seized with fear, and in the midst of attempting to fend off the half-crazed Sōun he froze like a statue.

"I'VE COME FOR YOUUUUUUU!"

The very next moment, the windshield of the train shattered, and a squall of laughter rang out. A massive, thick ogre's arm came thrusting out of the opening; the bristles sprouting from it were thick as bamboo shoots, and the skin was as red as a boiled octopus. Quick as a cobra strike, the hand darted out to snatch up Tenmaya and Sōun both, and then disappeared back into the train.

It all happened so quickly, like the two had been suddenly swept out to sea. The unexpected fright had knocked the humans to their knees, made Yaichirō revert into a furball, and left the tanuki quivering uncontrollably.

I cautiously peered through the broken glass of the windshield.

Benten was smiling to herself beside the diptych of Hell. In the depths of the picture I could see flickering tongues of flame, and a foul wind emanated forth. Floating in on that wind from Hell, Benten quietly touched down onto the ground.



Bringing a chill with her, Benten casually stepped into the Heir's villa and crossed the sitting room. Stopping in the middle of the room, she took off the dragonstone that hung from her neck.

She looked up at the ceiling and opened her mouth, then tossed the dragonstone up in the air. Her throat worked as she swallowed the stone. With that font of tengu power sitting in her stomach, her cheeks turned pale and white, and icicles dangled from her hair.

Benten picked up the sofa with one hand, then approached the mass of tanuki by the wall.

"Come out, you coward." The freezing wind which emanated from her caused the tanuki to scatter, revealing to my surprise the Heir at the bottom of the pile. Disrespectful as it is, up until that point I'd completely forgotten he existed.

He was sitting against the wall with his knees drawn up like a resentful youth. His elegant garments were covered in tanuki hair, and his hair was tousled and disheveled. His



eyes were lethargic as he looked around at his villa, overrun by tanuki and humans, and he took great desperate gulps from a bottle of Akadama port wine.

Benten placed her hands on her hips and looked down upon him, sneering. "So this is where you've been sulking, you pathetic excuse for a tengu!"

"Shut up. I am not a tengu."

"...You really are despicable."

Benten hurled the sofa at him, which the Heir deflected with a raised arm.

"All around me are impertinent fools!" raged the Heir, bringing down the bottle of Akadama port wine and smashing it. "You disgust me, all of you! How can this be so! How can tengu and tanuki and humans all be such fools! Fools, everywhere I look!"

His temper having reached its breaking point, the Heir looked fit to burst. Flames erupted from his body, sending flickering light over the ruined room, leaping to the broken furniture and dancing merrily. Benten looked at him with an air of amusement, seemingly having anticipated this happening.

Tanuki are powerless in the face of tengu rage.

"The Heir of Yakushibō of Nyoigadake has come forth!" I yelled, hastily gathering the elders into my arms. "All forces, retreat!"

At my signal, humans and tanuki fled the scene.

As I raced onto the rooftop, the roof of the villa went flying, and I saw Benten and the Heir rise up into the air.

In the confrontation that followed, both Benten and the Heir went for the kill.

They leaped from building to building, sending tengu gales at each other, hurling tiles, ripping telephone poles from the ground and smashing them together with great showers of sparks. The Heir wielded high-voltage power lines like a lash, while Benten froze the jets of water that were gushing from a water tank and attempted to impale the Heir. Each time the rampaging pair set foot on a building every window in the structure exploded, sending people in the streets below screaming and running for cover.

We could only look on at the awesome battle taking place above our heads.

"When will it end?" Yaichirō shouted.

"Do you see anyone here who can stop it?" I shouted back.

The Heir's villa was consumed by hellfire now, all of his European accoutrements turning to ash. The towering flames singed the heavens black. Above the billowing smoke, I noticed the black-suited Kurama tengu wheeling overhead in the night sky like ominous birds of prey, watching the duel play out between the Heir and Benten. The smoke rose up in a column, like a beacon signaling another impending tengu war.

By now the two combatants were battered and bruised, and having exhausted the limits of their strength as well as their tengu majesty, the pair now resorted to grappling with each other like two children having it out. Round and round the pillar of smoke they went, visages of demons, pulling at one another's hair: Benten's once-elegant hairdo now more resembled the scrabble of a mountain-dwelling hag.

The Heir suddenly caught her in an embrace, and brought his face close until it looked like he was kissing her hair. Stunned, Benten tried to wriggle free, but all of a sudden

her hair burst into flame like dry hay that had been set ablaze, illuminating that corner of the sky.

Benten let out a wordless, agonized scream and pushed away the Heir, streaking towards the earth helplessly, trailing a bright blaze after her like a falling star.

The Heir was breathing hard, watching as she fell, yet making no motion to follow after her.



We watched breathlessly as the Heir floated down to the rooftop. His once-immaculate attire was ripped and torn, to the point that he was almost half-naked. His eyes flashed with pique. The tengu whirlwinds that raged around him blew his hair this way and that, and small fires smouldered all over his body.

He looked his way, making tanuki and humans shrink back. Then he walked towards his villa. He stood in front of the blazing house, not moving to put out the conflagration. Each time he blew up another tengu gale in a fit of pique, the column of flame rumbled like it was being fed by a giant bellows. Thick smoke weaved in and out with the crimson flames, like the undulating belly of a dragon soaring up into the heavens. The heat was so intense that I felt dizzy even here at the far end of the roof. Around me, the tanuki watched the Heir, glistening in the light like fur-ridden gumballs.

I didn't have the slightest clue how I was going to pacify the raging Heir.

A sudden clap of thunder split the sky, and all the tanuki squeaked and curled into little balls.

In an instant the firmament was obscured with clouds.

Lightning flashed between the brooding storm clouds. The wind had picked up along with that clap of thunder, and large raindrops came splattering down. The flaming villa snarled and hissed, but gradually the fire was tamed. The searing wind turned into a warm zephyr.

With a clap of thunder, Master Akadama—Yakushibō of Nyoigadake—appeared on the roof.

Heedless of the downpour, he glowered at the huddled tanuki. In his hand he held the Fūjin Raijin fan.

"Yasaburō!" he called, spotting me in the crowd. I pulled myself out of the furry mass and prostrated myself.

"Shimogamo Yasaburō, at your service."

The Master looked at me solemnly. "Yasaburō, I commend you for your splendid efforts."

"You honor me with your words."

"Hmph." Master Akadama nodded, then headed through the pelting rain towards the Heir. His drenched beard plastered itself to his face.

His back to the dying flames, the Heir glared at Master Akadama. A rivulet of blood trickled down his pale cheek, washed away by the falling rain. All pretensions of the English gentleman had been stripped away, and on his face I saw now many others: the boy who

had been snatched away as he lay on a sofa; the youth who had spent all his days training on Nyoigadake; the young man who had quarreled with his father over his first love and shaken Kyoto for three days and three nights in a desperate duel. And finally, the failure who had dragged his injured body away down a dark alley, pelted by the rain and Master Akadama's tengu laughter. Ah, but 'twixt Heaven and Earth, *still* none was worthy but him. He was greater than his father. That was what lay at the heart of the Heir's fierce tengu nature.

It was as if the continuation of that duel a century ago was playing out before our very eyes.

But Master Akadama tossed aside the Fūjin Raijin fan and continued unarmed.

"The Master's tossed away his fan!" the tanuki whispered amongst themselves. "He'll be killed!"

I started to get up, but I felt someone touch me softly on the arm. "Don't move, Yasaburō," I heard someone say. "The Master has his own plans."

Surprised, I looked beside me, and saw Mother reaching out a tiny paw, carried in Yashirō's arms. They had managed to convince Ginkaku to let them out of the distillery, and had only just arrived on the roof.

Obedying her words, I pulled back my arm.

I looked at the Master, and saw then that though he could not fly, though he had no weapons, he looked so much more grand. He had seemed a wizened old man facing off against the Heir only moments ago, but now it was the Heir who looked no more than an indecisive boy. There now was the child who had only just begun to reluctantly climb the ladder to tengudom. He stared at his father, and did not move.

The conflagration was by now extinguished, and the rain continued to fall on the bleak rooftop.

The Heir suddenly staggered, and put his balled-up fists to his face. And mixed with the sound of the falling rain, we heard the Heir begin to cry. We all stood there silently, watching him cry like a child.

"Are you frustrated?" asked Master Akadama, filled with majesty. "If you are frustrated, become stronger."



Six days had passed since we rang in the new year.

Hearing that Kaisei had woken from her sleep, I paid a visit to the Faux Denki Bran distillery.

The clouds that drifted through the sky sparkled as if they had just been born. In the streets that ran along the Kamo River, the air was fresh and new.

The Ebisugawas' distillery was still in the midst of their New Year's hiatus, and the grounds were quiet. The loop at the end of the driveway in front of the distillery was host to the largest New Year's pine decoration in all the tanuki world.

I walked down the long hallway and peeked into my little brother's lab. The only person still hard at work in the otherwise quiet distillery was Yashirō, putting the pieces of

his lab back together. You'd be hard pressed to find any other tanuki who would still be working so diligently over the New Year's break.

Most of the smashed equipment in the lab had been disposed of, and now all that remained were a handful of measuring devices and an old trunk, plus a banged-up desk. Yashirō was at the desk drawing up schematics in notes, explaining some of his working theories to Ebisugawa Kureichirō, who stroked the rock from Cape Misaki that hung from his neck as he oohed and aahed in admiration.

"I see. What clever things you think of."

"Can I try them out?"

"By all means. I've no doubt it will be fascinating," he said, clapping Yashirō's shoulder heartily and looking up. "Ah, Yasaburō. A happy new year to you."

After the turmoil at the end of the year, the real Kureichirō had moved back to the distillery. At the time he had intended to depart on his solitary travels after eating a square meal, but being that Ebisugawa Sōun had been swallowed into the diptych along with Tenmaya, and Kaisei had yet to awaken from her slumber, and Kinkaku and Ginkaku had been sentenced to confinement after getting a good tonguelashing from Yasaka Heitarō, the Ebisugawa clan was teetering on the precipice. "Things are heading towards a disaster!" the employees of the Faux Denki Bran distillery had cried and pleaded with him, and so with little choice he had put his journey on hold.

Kureichirō chatted happily as he led me to Kaisei's room. "She's still slightly out of it, but a little more nourishment will soon put that to rights. She's already so peppy as to be a little bit tiresome. Always going on about, 'how come you turned into such a weirdo monk?' or, 'you didn't used to look like a con artist'...one does wonder about her upbringing. But I will admit that I was quite an adorable furball before I left on my travels."

I stifled a chuckle as Kureichirō lamented on and on.

Entering Kaisei's bedroom alone, I found her sleeping in a four-poster bed like some kind of slumbering princess. The moment her furry form entered my sight my transformation came undone. I clambered up to the bay window next to her bed and pulled aside the curtains to let the light in.

"Hey, wake up, Kaisei. Wakey wakey!"

Kaisei mumbled something, and cracked open her eyes. When she saw me she screamed and dived back under her blankets. "What're you doing here?" Her voice shook with anger.

"I'm here to see you, what else? Kureichirō let me in."

"Screw that stupid wannabe monk! I'm his little sister, for crying out loud! Like what, it's okay just because we're engaged? All that sitting around at Cape Misaki totally turned him into a smooth brain! I can't believe him! Drop dead!"

In the midst of all her spluttering she poked her face out of the blanket. "...Happy New Year, Yasaburō."

"Happy New Year."

"I can't believe it went by without me knowing. I don't remember anything at all!"

"You looked like you were snoozing real peacefully. Dreaming about a giant onsen-manjū, I take it?"

"How did you know!?" Kaisei opened her eyes wide.

Actually, during her Tenmaya-induced slumber Kaisei had dreamed that a million onsen-manjū fell from the sky. Each of those nut-brown, glistening buns were soft as cotton candy with just the right amount of sweetness, and the more she ate, the more delicious they became. *This. Is. Awesome!* she thought to herself, going around the dream stuffing buns into her mouth, and when she finally, blissfully opened her eyes, she found herself here in the bed.

But the Shimogamo family had slept through the new year, too, and in fact after all of that commotion, I wouldn't have been surprised if every tanuki in Kyoto had been so exhausted that they slept through it, too.



I sat on the bed and filled Kaisei in on everything that had happened since she was shot in Ayameike's garden.

It all felt as if it had happened long, long ago.

After the Heir bent the knee before Master Akadama, the tengu and the tanuki blended into the flock of onlookers attracted by the burning villa and made their escape, as did the Friday Fellows.

The three-story train had gone up in flames along with the house, and was now just a sad, charred wreck pelted by the rain. Jurōjin's prized collection had all burned to a crisp, and while Jurōjin himself had vanished I had no doubt that I'd earned his lasting enmity.

The day before I visited Kaisei I'd gone to the forest in Hanase to see Professor Yodogawa. Snow crunched beneath my feet as I crossed the field. Professor Yodogawa was standing there all bundled up, sipping on bamboo leaf tea and gazing at the trees as the sun rose in the sky.

"Hallo!" he shouted when he saw me, waving his hand enthusiastically.

After we exchanged New Year's greetings, Professor Yodogawa looked at my face wordlessly. I knew that he was attempting to say something about the queer events that had occurred, but it was all so confusing that he was lost for words. Finally he sighed.

"...Strange things happen in this town, wouldn't you say?"

Inside the professor's corrugated metal hut was a mountain of canned food and bottles of sake and all other manner of gifts. All the tanuki world had been touched by the sight of the professor throwing himself between the pile of tanuki and that air rifle, and every night tanuki snuck into the hut to show their thanks. The gifts made the professor quite happy, but also very confused.

"Say, who do you think is leaving all these presents?"



As both Ebisugawa Sōun and Tenmaya had been swallowed up into Hell, I could only guess at the extent of their plans.

I presumed that Sōun's plan to sneak back into Kyoto by impersonating Kureichirō must have been simmering in his mind for some time. That's why he'd joined forces with Tenmaya. He probably hadn't anticipated my sudden appearance at his hideout in Arima, but with Tenmaya's aid he'd managed to improvise an act convincing enough to make everyone think he was dead. It'd been a masterful performance from Sōun, a once-in-a-lifetime deception. Following that, Sōun had changed his skin to that of Kureichirō and made his grand appearance at his own funeral. He'd handed me over to the Friday Fellows, framed the Shimogamos for his assassination in order to stop Yaichirō from assuming the Trick Magistership, and eventually planned to be officially installed as Trick Magister himself. Not a single tanuki in Kyoto (certainly not Kinkaku and Ginkaku, who had been so enthralled by the impostor) had caught on to his true identity. If he hadn't been betrayed by his erstwhile partner Tenmaya and outed because of the replica air rifle, his scheme might very well have succeeded. It was such a thorough, impeccable plan that it was hard to believe it had been thought up by a tanuki.

"I don't believe it!" Kaisei sighed. "First he was dead, and then he was alive. Then he was alive, and now he's been swept off to Hell. I'm so confused right now!"

"You can be sure he's still alive. He's probably boiling noodles in that ramen cart in Hell with Tenmaya."

Kaisei looked at me, her eyes wide. "...And you're okay with that?"

"What can you do? He's just the sort of tanuki that just refuses to die."

Kaisei said nothing.

"All right, I should get going. I'm a busy tanuki, after all. I'll visit some other time."

"Hmph. Whatever you say, it's not like I'm going to chase you away."

"You know, the Tsuchinoko Expeditionary Brigade is still recruiting. Why don't you sign up once you're all better?"

Lying in her blankets Kaisei snorted, "Not gonna happen."

I left the room just as Kureichirō came walking down the hall. A large cage was swinging from his hand, and inside that cage were Kinkaku and Ginkaku, looking sulky as could be.

"Hey, Kinkaku, Ginkaku! Happy New Year!" I called out breezily.

Kinkaku's fur bristled. "And what's so happy about it? Do you know how many times we have been made to apologize this week alone? You won't find many tanuki better at apologizing than us!"

"We're professional apologists," Ginkaku piped up. "Apologies are what we do!"

"And in the first place, why must we apologize? We were only being deceived by Father! We're the real victims here! Though I will admit that perhaps we shouldn't have blown up Yashirō's laboratory."

"Or hidden the German air rifle and tried to pin the blame on us?"

"What choice did we have? The fake Kureichirō told us to do so!"

"Respect your elders! Respect your elders!"

"All right, you two professional apologists, it's time for your sutras," announced Kureichirō.

"Eeghh!" Kinkaku and Ginkaku groaned together. "We've already chanted so many sutras our throats are cracked and bleeding!"

"I cannot depart on my journey until I have beaten your natures into shape."

"There's no reforming us, why don't you just put us from your mind and head off on your journey?"

"That will not do. I have already promised Yasaka." Kureichirō rattled the cage and made to walk off, but suddenly turned around as if he had just thought of something. "Oh, yes. I have a message from Yasaka."

"Huh, what'd he say?"

"The elders have approved a pardon. Wonderful, isn't it? I myself feel rather relieved."

Yasaka Heitarō had formed a committee to investigate the Ebisugawa Sōun assassination conspiracy, working all through the New Year's break and eventually establishing Yaichirō's innocence. With proof in hand, Heitarō had proceeded to the elders to pass on New Year's greetings as well as to present the evidence. Burning with zeal for his retirement, Heitarō had, in his final official act as Trick Magister, at last persuaded the elders to recognize Yaichirō as the new Trick Magister.

"All's well that ends well. Congratulate Yaichirō for me," said Kureichirō, chanting a sutra as he walked away.



The marriage of Yaichirō and Nanzenji Gyokuran was held at Shimogamo Shrine near the end of January.

The morning was frightfully chilly, and dancing snow wrapped the city.

Tanuki bundled up in traditional formalwear gathered at the Western-style assembly hall on the west side of the shrine, milling around the carpet. In attendance were the Shimogamo family; our uncle and other denizens of Tanukidani Fudō; Nanzenji Seijirō and the rest of the Nanzenji clan; and Yasaka Heitarō, who was anxious to leave for Hawaii.

The crowd of tanuki hid their tails inside their stiff formalwear, cordial exchanges of hearty congratulations going around the room. "Fancy seeing the Prince in Black in a kimono!" everyone said to Mother, to which she always responded with the same embarrassed line: "Oh, stop it!"

Glancing toward the front of the hall, Yashirō interjected, "Look, isn't that the Master?"

A taxi had stopped amidst the fluttering snow, and Master Akadama emerged.

The tanuki hurriedly lined up at the door to greet their honored mentor, for all of the guests at Yaichirō's wedding were former pupils of Master Akadama.

"A rather high-strung gathering of furballs, hmm?" The Master squinted around.

Mother bowed her head low to him. "Lord Yakushibō of Nyoigadake, we are honored by your presence."

"...Sōichirō is also proud this day, I am sure." Master Akadama lightly patted Mother's back as she wiped tears from her eyes.

We all entered the waiting room and sat at tables to drink tea while we waited for the ceremony to begin.

White, sparkling snow fell on the other side of the windows, but inside the hall it was nice and cozy. Mother was beaming as she munched on white steamed buns with the double-leafed aoi crest stamped on top. "These buns are absolutely first-rate!"

"They're so yummy!" Yashirō agreed.

"They sure didn't skimp on the details," said Yajirō. "Look, there's even gold flecks in the sencha! It all makes me real nervous. What'll I do if I turn back into a frog in the main hall?"

"Why don't you take a nip of Faux Denki Bran, just to be safe?"

"C'mon, Yasaburō, I can't start drinking now!"

"I don't see why you couldn't. There will be sake during the ceremony, and at any rate you're going to start drinking at some point," Mother reasoned.

Just then Yaichirō, wearing a *hakama* bearing the family crest, wobbled into the room. His face was white as a sheet, presumably from his nerves.

"You really should try to look a bit happier," Yajirō commented. "It looks like you're being forced to get married! Gyokuran's going to be worried sick."

"I just don't understand why I'm so deathly nervous."

"Come on, just relax, and hold your head up high! And make sure to keep your tail in."

"Please don't remind me about my tail, Mother. It feels like it might come shooting out any second now."

"Then why don't you just let it hang out, loud and proud?" I told him. "Trying to maintain your dignity might just make it worse."

"Fool, I can't just let my tail swing about inside the shrine!"

"You all look like you're having fun," came a bell-like voice.

We all turned around to see Gyokuran standing there in a white kimono. Without further ado Yaichirō's tail came shooting right out, prompting Yashirō and me to frantically try to stuff it back inside his robe.

Together Yaichirō and Gyokuran went up to Master Akadama and bowed to their old teacher. Stuffing a steamed bun into his mouth, the Master got to his feet, leaning on his cane, and glared at the two.

"Incorrigible things, furballs. The only thing they're good for is multiplying!" He patted their heads softly. "Go now, and be happy."

After that, Yaichirō and Gyokuran, bearing umbrellas, led the column of guests to the main shrine building, where the ceremony was held.

White snowflakes danced around the bright scarlet *rōmon* gate.

As the tanuki wedding procession passed through the shrine, tourists stopped to marvel.

"Look, a wedding!"

"Isn't it wonderful?"



The stately procession of furballs continued on its way as pictures were taken and congratulations filled the air, the onlookers never dreaming that beneath the robes each of the participants was hiding a tail.

Looking up at the grey sky, I whispered to Master Akadama beside me, "It's snowing, Master."

"Indeed it is. How very wretched."

"...Just to be clear, has my expulsion been revoked?"

"If this makes you unhappy, I can expel you again!"

"Unhappy? Perish the thought!"

"You are an incorrigible fool, but at times you can be useful." The Master didn't say anything about the tumultuous end of the year, and I decided not to ask.

"In any case, Happy New Year, Master!" I said.

"Hmph," the Master snorted. "I see this is the beginning of yet another tiresome year."

We entered the dim interior shrine, where a red carpet had been laid out

The ceremony proceeded as the tanuki of both houses looked on with solemn faces, and by the time the bride and groom exchanged their nuptial cups<sup>6</sup>, Yaichirō had calmed down sufficiently that he exuded the dignity befitting a bridegroom. Beside him Gyokuran cast her eyes down at her white kimono, looking a little embarrassed.

Finally, Yaichirō unfolded a piece of paper, his sonorous, dignified voice sounding very much like that of Father as he read out the vows:

*Here before the gods and spirits of Kamomioya<sup>7</sup> Shrine I hence proclaim  
That on this day, we, Shimogamo Yaichirō, Trick Magister, and Nanzenji Gyokuran,  
Do swear a vow to cherish our partner in matrimony,  
And rejoice that with your sacred blessing shall we be wrapped joy to joy,  
Now and forevermore. Let us be fixed in our path, ne'er to stray,  
On each other leaning, that our house be ever bright, and our clan flourish evermore:  
So we swear.*

*Trick Magister, Shimogamo Yaichirō  
Shimogamo Gyokuran*



After Yaichirō's wedding, I sent Master Akadama back to his apartment.

---

<sup>6</sup> In traditional weddings this is known as the *sansankudo*, or the 3-3-9 exchange. First the groom drinks 3 cups of sake, then the bride drinks 3 cups, and finally the groom drinks another 3 cups for a total of 9.

<sup>7</sup> The formal name of Shimogamo Shrine.

Pushing my muttering mentor under the kotatsu I left the apartment and came down the stairs to find the Heir standing in the snowy alley, watching me from under a black umbrella.

I hadn't seen the Heir since that business last year. As all of his earthly possessions had been reduced to a pile of ash, the Heir had once more taken up residence at the Hotel Okura in Kawaramachi Oike as if nothing had happened. Apparently he no longer handed out gold napoléons like candy anymore.

It was obvious that I had been at the root of that incident, and I was expecting him to give me a good dressing down, but instead he merely raised a hand in greeting.

"Good day, Yasaburō. Still chaperoning that old fool around, I see."

"He was my teacher, after all."

"What gallant creatures you tanuki are," the Heir muttered. Then, not looking at the apartment, he asked, "And how is he?"

"Cold. Bored. Throwing a tantrum."

"I see. I am glad to hear it." The Heir turned and began to walk away.

"You're not going to see the Master?" I asked, scurrying after him.

"That is not why I came," he answered curtly.

Together we walked through the Demachi shopping arcade.

"I will certainly say, that was a most unpleasant way to end the year."

"...My apologies."

"Where did your plot end, and the accident begin, I wonder."

"I couldn't tell you myself. Conspiracies are such convoluted things, you see...but I should tell you that commotions of that sort aren't uncommon in this country, 'specially in this town."

The Heir narrowed his eyes at me. He seemed to be quite aware that I was playing dumb, but decided not to press the matter. And I, knowing that he knew this, had also decided as a matter of mutual understanding not to bare the depths of my furry soul to him.

"You are rather an interesting tanuki. At times it seems that you don't miss a thing, that you think of everything: and yet at other times it seems to me that you don't think at all."

"Aren't those the same thing?"

"Is that a pearl of tanuki wisdom?"

"It's just my fool's blood talking."

"I can see you will grow up to become a splendid tanuki."

"And you will become a great tengu."

"...I will not become a tengu." The Heir fell silent.

We came out of the arcade and walked from the end of the Demachi Bridge down towards the Kamo Bridge. The riverbank was bleak and deserted, and freezing snow continued to fall. Students and monks bundled up in winter gear passed over the Kamo Bridge, while city buses rumbled back and forth. Looking north over the railing of the bridge, Mount Hiei glittered white like it was sprinkled with sugar, while the mountains beyond it were obscured by the falling snow.

I kept looking through the snow up at the grey sky. It was too quiet, as if something was missing. Of course, I knew exactly what that thing was.

The Heir suddenly mumbled like a shy schoolgirl, "Do you think we could become friends?"

"That's awfully kind of you, but I don't think that'll ever happen."

"...Why not?"

"Because I'm a tanuki. And tengu are beings which lord over tanuki."

The Heir smiled when I said this. I hadn't seen him smile so freely since his return to this country in spring.

"You are unique. Truly, one of a kind."

"Thank you kindly."

"Drop by the hotel some time. No need to be shy." And the mock English gentleman walked off into the falling snow.

I leaned on the railing of the bridge and watched his dapper form disappear. Why didn't he use that power, I wondered, that tengu power which his father had cultivated in him, that power which some tanuki admired from afar?

But tanuki do not understand tengu concerns, as tengu do not understand tanuki concerns.

Tengu have their pride to uphold, and we tanuki have our dignity.

And that is precisely why the blood of a tengu resonates with the blood of a fool.



I made my way through the crowded Sanjō Meitengai arcade. The end of January was approaching, and the ebullience of the new year was fading from the city; the squeaky clean streets of Kyoto were starting to take on the new year's squalor.

I stopped at a fan store in Sanjō Takakura. The sliding door was inset with glass embossed with the name of the shop: *Nishizaki Gen'emon*. Pulling it open, I was met with the floating aroma of incense. Gorgeous fans were displayed throughout the dim interior of the shop like a collection of butterflies. Every time I came here, I was also struck by the feeling that time was standing still.

"Hello there!" I called out. Gen'emon came out from the back of the shop.

"Welcome, Yasaburō."

"How's it looking today?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid. The sea is still angry."

"I'll just take a little look-see."

I parted the dark blue curtain and walked along the floorboards down the long corridor. The briny smell grew stronger as I went further along, and I began to hear the sound of lapping waves.

I turned at the end of the corridor and came out into a diner, which was just as deserted as it had been when I had visited Benten here last summer. The wooden floor was wet with raindrops and the spray of the waves. I stood at the center of the diner and looked

out over the open sea. Beneath the rolling, beastly storm clouds, the sea churned as if roiled by countless whales.

After suffering that defeat at the hands of the Heir, Benten had holed up in that hotel on the sea. I'd visited many times, but the waves were always too rough to put out a boat.

While I waited for the weather to change, I thought back to the first time I had ever met Benten. That day was the first time she had floated into the air, peeking out between the blossom-laden branches of a cherry tree. And ever since that day, I had fallen head over heels into a love, my first love, which would never be requited.

"What's wrong with being a tanuki?" I had asked, to which she had replied, "Well, I am a human."

After I had waited an hour, the wind and rain died down, and a bit of clear blue sky poked through the tumbling clouds.

I immediately jumped into the boat and set off across the grey sea.

In the distance a whale spouted a stream of mist into the air, and a purple streak of lightning flashed in the clouds.

At last, the hotel and its clock tower came into view. In a room on its top floor, which had only just escaped being sunk beneath the waves, burned a solitary light.

I clambered up the wall and broke the window of another room to get inside. Exiting the ruined room, I found myself in a corridor with a neat row of identical doors on both sides. Here and there the floorboards were ripped up, and the plaster on the walls was peeling.

I walked over the creaking floorboards and imagined the former glory of this hotel. It had been an age when traces of the boy still lingered in the Heir's face, and Master Akadama had been flush with tengu majesty. The clock tower, now rusted by the sea air, had proudly chimed out the hour. The floor had been covered with rich red carpet, and the walls had been painted spotlessly white. At night, the glowing lights of this palace must have made it look like a chest of jewels fit for a queen. In my mind's eye, I saw the glory of this place come to life once more.

At last I stopped in front of one of the doors and knocked.

"Shimogamo Yasaburō, at your service."



That room was so cold I thought I might freeze. There was a small desk and chair by the window, and on top of the desk was a Western-style lamp. Through the windowpane could be seen the grey sea, and dark clouds gliding through the sky.

Benten was curled up in the bed by the wall, asleep. I sat in the chair that was by the bed and watched her breathing quietly.

I wondered what she was dreaming of.

An image came into my mind of a girl walking along the frozen shores of Lake Biwa. The barren fields, the pale bamboo thickets: all was buried in snow. The girl walked silently along the beach, not a single footprint disturbing the field of white. She couldn't stand to

remain where she was, yet she had nowhere to go. She felt the latent power coursing beneath her skin, yet she had no idea how to play with it. In all the wide world she was alone, and all that was by her side was solitude. When a tengu came plunging out of the sky with his hand outstretched, the girl looked up into the cold winter sky, and without hesitation reached out a hand of her own—

As I sat there thinking about these things, Benten opened her eyes and rolled over in her bed.

She looked at me, not saying a word. Hot tears ran in her eyes, as if she had been having a terrible nightmare, and they glittered with a strange light. Her hair, burnt off by the Heir, had been shorn as short as a schoolboy's.

Without saying anything I reached out and touched her soft, new hair.

"...I'm pitiful, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are pitiful."

Hearing those words from me, great big teardrops flowed from her eyes, and she buried her face in her pillow. I could hear her muffled sobs, as she cried just like a little child.

"You ought to pity me more."

"I do pity you more."

The drumbeat of the rain got louder again, fat drops of rain hitting the windowpane. The room was still, the only sounds the rain that enveloped the 20th Century Hotel, and Benten's wracking sobs.

It was exactly as the Heir said: tanuki are gallant creatures.

As I stroked her hair, I finally came to a realization.

It wasn't me that Benten needed.

I'm nothing more than a tanuki.