



**Trials  
of  
Spring**

**Daniel  
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## **By Daniel Devine**

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# Chapter 1

Guremurin had grown tired of this game. The lies and deceptions had delighted him at first, but he was glad they would end today. The joke had grown stale.

He tied a white sash tight to secure his black robe about him and smiled with pride. He alone among his tribe had been cunning enough to sneak through the forest, past the searchers and through the cracks in their towering walls, and arrive here.

The empire's barriers had been breached in the past, he knew. There were legends. But the braves before him had not been as clever; they had all been tracked down and caught in the end. None had gotten half as far. None would have had the patience to wait for months as he had, playing pretend.

After today, Guremurin knew his name would never be forgotten. The Father of Night's own lips would speak it with praise. His tribe would sing it from the mountainsides.

The screen to the dressing chamber slid open.

"How can you not be dressed?" the abbot croaked, incredulous. Blue veins poked out on his bald, liver-spotted head. "Do you think the Emperor intends to wait until you are ready, Guri? You are not even wearing your kanmuri!"

Guremurin sighed, returning his thoughts to the present. He donned the black lacquered hat and reached back to ensure that the white ribbon trailing from it was centered across his back. The abbot studied his appearance critically then eventually moved on to berate some of the other young priests.

This was to be expected. Guremurin, or 'Guri' as these men knew him, was their newest member so he received the most scorn.

Having spent a good amount of his energy recently manipulating humans, it was transparent to him that the abbot was not really despairing of his appearance. The old man was merely using him as an example to ensure the utmost respect was paid to this ceremony. For his part, Guremurin continued to play along, blushing and nervously making adjustments to his robes.

It was good that he had reached the end of his plotting. Going through these motions had begun to irritate him a bit, and the abbot's opinion was no longer of any real value. But he did not want to draw his peers' attention by acting outside of their expectations for earnest young Guri's behavior.

He turned to Hashi, another young priest who had become his friend and mentor since he first arrived at the monastery.

"I feel like I have enough butterflies dancing in my stomach to bring spring into bloom myself."

The soft-cheeked young man chuckled; his eyes becoming distant for a moment, perhaps reliving his first time participating in the rebirth ceremony. It would not have been long ago.

Hashi patted him reassuringly on the shoulder.

"You will be fine, Guri. In truth, no one will really be paying you much attention." That was something that Guremurin was counting on. "Just try not to drop your censor."

The abbot silenced their chatter with a glare and began lining them up for the procession. As the newest priest, Guremurin's place was all the way at the back. They had rehearsed their part in the ceremony so many times that muscle memory now began to take over and the feeling of routine calmed his nerves.

At the abbot's signal, they filed out of the dressing chamber onto a back corner of the dais outside. Beginning their chant, they swung their censors wide to spread incense upon those nobles with enough imperial favor to be seated near the stage.

The sun was bright above and immediately uncomfortable on Guremurin's brow. Fortunately, during the past months he had grown somewhat accustomed to how strong it shone here, and he scowled little more than the acolytes preceding him. Upon his shoulders, the black robes grew instantly warm, but the crisp breeze kept it from feeling anything like the heat back home.

The crowd's anticipation was something more felt than heard. A more vulgar audience might have cheered to see the rites beginning, but from these onlookers there was barely more than an expectant rustle of cloth. He was aware of their rising interest only from the increased intensity of the eyes upon him.

The amphitheater here was a natural one; and it was a little funny to see so many richly dressed lords and ladies trying to look formal whilst lying about on mats in the dewy grass. Fabrics dyed in expensive blues and purples broke up the green of the surrounding lawn. Servants hustled about in a panic, trying to adjust parasols for shade and provide other comforts.

His procession made its way slowly but steadily across the perimeter of the platform, all of them chanting in deep, guttural tones. In a way it reminded him of the shamans back home. As the priests finished tracing the edge of the stage, the excitement of the crowd reached an almost palpable climax, and Guremurin knew before turning that the Emperor must have stepped out onto the center of the dais.

Emperor Hiroki had not been present during any of the rehearsals of course, so it was the first time that Guremurin laid eyes upon this great enemy of his people. The pretend priest was unimpressed.

While Hiroki's bulky figure had likely once projected strength, it was now stooped and softened with fat. The man moved in a slow and stilted way that to Guremurin bespoke gout or some other infirmity; but the Emperor's experience at performing for an audience was immediately clear. He managed to gird his hesitant movements in a veil of austerity, as if he

moved slowly so as to pay the proper respects, and to ensure the rites were not rushed by human impatience.

Hiroki's garb also guaranteed that he made a marked impression. Though they both wore black, the Emperor's robes were glossy where Guremirin's were dull, as deep as midnight where his were own were faded, and rippled like silk where his hung heavy against the wind—scraping like burlap against his skin, or at least this pale human analog.

With each step toward the altar, Hiroki placed his considerable weight upon the staff he carried for support. Guremurin knew that this powerful relic was originally of his homeland, and that in a way it was a symbol of the very feud between the Father of Night and the Emperor; but he was still surprised to see how visibly its vitality contrasted with the tired trappings of this empire's cumbersome ceremonies.

Unlike the typical deadwood that you saw these people using for all of their construction, the staff appeared formed from a sturdy, living branch. Its circumference was wreathed by glistening green leaves, whose blades where tinted here and there by bands of blue, yellow, and red. Nubs of new twigs sprouted from its umber bark, which was rough and uneven all along its length despite its decades of use.

With their circuit complete, the monastery's priests had completed their part in the opening rites. Hashi stepped off of the stage and back into the shade of the holy vestibule. If Guri hesitated a moment too long to follow, surely it was nothing but the act of another young acolyte, awed by the appearance of the holy Emperor?

“Come on! Off! Off!” Hashi urged him from the doorway, pulling lightly on his sleeve. The abbot saw him lingering upon the edge of the stage and started down the line with surprising speed, no doubt intending to haul his newest charge into the vestibule by the ears if the prior rehearsals had been any indication.

But that young priest was already gone.

Guremurin sighed with pleasure as he finally shrugged off the cramped little form he had been wearing now for so long.

Muscles that he had been clenching tight for many months stretched and flexed, causing his robes to tear to shreds. All it took to close the distance to this supposedly mighty Emperor was a pair of powerful strides.

A quartet of samurai rushed forward from their place against the back wall, probably thrilled with this unexpected break in the typical ceremony's tedium. Guremurin sent two of them flying with a single sweep of his still swelling left arm.

Some highborn lady's shrill shriek assaulted all of their ears, making Guremurin wince. The remaining samurai drew and swung at him with their katana.

The first man's attack was slow enough for him to evade easily, but it forced him to sidestep toward the other warrior, who showcased his quality by connecting with a lightning-quick slash into his side. Fortunately, the ornate ceremonial blade bent backwards upon contact with Guremurin's thickening skin. Still, the gremlin predicted he would have a deep purple bruise to look forward to on the morrow.

Both men thrust their bodies bravely between his hulking form and their Emperor, so Guremurin kicked out with a foot that was now twice the size of its target's head. The slower warrior's helm caved in along with his skull, sending all three figures sprawling into a blood-covered tangle.

The remaining samurai leapt instantly back to his feet, brandishing his bent katana and giving voice to a raw animalistic roar. Guremurin nodded his respect at his adversary, but Emperor Hiroki's assassination was not his goal.

Instead he ignored the warrior and snatched up the fallen staff into his massive fist, as it had conveniently rolled from the Emperor's grasp when the ruler's billowy bulk struck the ground.

Clearly fate favored Guremurin this day.



What he was not prepared for was the way that the relic would fight him. It burned in his hand like a small sun, causing him to drop it at once. Bracing himself for the pain, he fumbled for it again and instantly he could feel thorns sprouting along its length and probing as it sought seams in his still thickening hide.

Enough of Guremurin's black robe and white sash had survived his metamorphosis as coherent rags that he was able to tie the accursed thing into place behind his shoulders. As he did so, the gremlin gave a quick glance behind him.

The idea of dashing off through the crowd, and thinning the empire's nobility in the process, was quite appealing. Sadly, it was just not to be. Some of the Emperor's more militarily inclined retainers had apparently arrived armed to the spring ceremonies, and several were already dragging themselves up onto the dais to mount an assault upon Guremurin's rear.

Returning his attention to the man before him, Guremurin was surprised to see his abbot and former peers streaming out of the doorway beyond his adversary with an assortment of ceremonial knives and other ad-hoc weapons raised in defense of their Emperor.

He probably could have dispatched of the entire lot within a few seconds, but it might have given the Emperor's guard an opening, or allowed the sortie at his rear to close to within the reach of their swords.

Also, to be honest, he felt he had to respect the priests' courage and their dedication to this worthless Emperor. Perhaps Guremurin had lived among these humans too long.

With a flex of now humongous knees, he sprang over the fray. Over fat Hiroki, now scrambling backwards in a rather undignified fashion while still on his rear. Over the furious samurai, who slashed out with his sword only to find that its length was several meters too short. Over the abbot and Hashi, whose faces he last glimpsed filled with a kind of disgusted

curiosity; no doubt wondering how the meek boy they had known could have transformed into this hulking monster with no warning.

Soft, all of these humans inside of their walls. They were nothing like the ones that lined the borders, and they would not last for a minute beyond them.

He wondered if the Father of Night was aware of this, if such knowledge would be more dangerous in his lord's hands than the supernatural relic tied upon Guremurin's back.

The gremlin's clawed feet skidded as he landed upon the summit of the rocky hill, but finally found purchase. He paused to look back at the pathetic scene below. Half of those in attendance were now running in horror away from him, the others pooling impotently upon the stage below and howling up at him in manly frustration.

He showed them his true smile, with all of its fangs and barbs, and scrambled up the jagged stones of the hill, laughing in delight.

## Chapter 2

The cherry blossoms were wilting.

Spring was Saya's favorite season to visit the imperial gardens. The grounds were ornamented with flowers in every imaginable hue; some carted in carefully from distant districts of the empire, others gifted to her father from foreign kings and queens in attempts to earn imperial influence with their botanical beauty.

But despite the exotic blooms, none had ever captured Saya's heart as fully as the cherry tree's. A flower that was so common in her country as to be almost impossible to avoid. Each spring, ladies everywhere would organize flower viewing parties to picnic beneath them and fall in love listening to poetry, while hordes of children would run around their school houses watching in wonder as the wind spun petals through spirals in the air.

The imperial gardens' blossoms were anything but common, of course. Their flowers tended toward a pure and vibrant white with a single line of dark red encircling the tips of their petals. Long ago, the head groundskeeper had arrayed this little grove of trees to form a meadow that caught and curled the breeze, a configuration capable of creating a whirlwind of petals that collected in its center like piles of snow, heaping high enough in places to cover Saya when she had been a giggling child.

Not so this year. Many of the white petals were fuzzy with some kind of mold or rot, and they thudded heavily to the ground in moist clumps without any of their usual magic.

Saya held her eyelids tightly shut against a sudden feeling of profound sadness, refusing to let any tears come.

“So, the blight has struck even here.”

Saya started, having not heard Jota approach.

Her tutor, long one of her father's most trusted advisors, was far from a young man but he showed no signs of stiffness as he rose from where he crouched in the grass among the piles of fallen petals. A number of blossoms had caught in his long hair, white on white, or stuck to the back of his dirty gray robe. He paid them no mind as he moved to inspect a nearby tree.

"Blight?" Saya echoed. "Upon the cherry trees?"

"Upon the whole of the empire." Jota frowned back at her and then shook his head. "What are your impressions of the new season so far, princess?"

Her tutor's scowl was always fierce. It had been capable of paralyzing her young mind back when she had first become his student, but Saya was well jaded to it by now.

"It is taking longer than most to arrive. Few of the capital's trees and plants are in full bloom, and even those seem less vibrant than usual. Insects and animals seem to be following their lead."

Jota spat into the bushes, and to her surprise, wrapped his knobby arms and legs about the trunk of the tree and began to climb it.

"So, just another late spring then?" he asked in between grunts of exertion, now a few feet above her head. "The cold winter weather has lingered on forever, but now that the sun and the rain have returned, we can soon expect everything to flourish?"

His words were a rebuke, not a question. It had been seasonably warm for the better part of a month, with occasional pleasant, drenching showers to wash clean the streets of Heian-kyo.

"I admit, the late blooming does seem unusual given the fair weather, but can you really equate that with some type of all-encompassing blight? The same sickness infecting these cherry trees could not be afflicting every growing thing. That would be..."

“Unnatural?” Jota, who must have completed his examination of the tree’s higher reaches, now startled her by vaulting suddenly from its branches. He tucked himself into a ball as he fell, rolled explosively through a pile of fallen petals, and came to rest just beside her before rising smoothly to his feet.

“I was thinking more along the lines of ‘catastrophic,’” Saya replied, refusing to allow his actions to distract her.

He nodded solemnly.

“Also an accurate assessment; a failure of one key crop would mean starvation for many. A failure of all could have severe implications.” He glanced across the grounds to where her father and brother sat, surrounded by a cloud of attendants. “Empires have fallen because of less.”

Saya was taken aback by his words. While Jota could be quite critical of her own answers to the problems he posed, it was very unlike him to speak ill of the empire.

“Father has ruled well. In times of prosperity he has known to plan for hardship. Our granaries and cellars are stocked for just such an eventuality.” Jota turned back to her, pursing his lips. “It is not like you to make such dire predictions, teacher. What disturbs you?”

Her tutor shook himself clean of leaves and other detritus, reminding Saya of a mangy dog.

“I had thought,” he said. “That this garden would still assail us with its beauty today, that if anyone in the empire had the skill to stop this infirmity of the land it would be our careful caretakers.”

He idly twirled a flower that he still held in his hand.

“But if anything, the symptoms here seem more severe, as if the malady is seeping forth from the very soil of the capital itself.”

He handed her the cherry blossom he had been fiddling with, and Saya saw that it appeared completely healthy and intact. Saya wondered if he had plucked it from the top of the tree. But if so, how had it survived his fall without shedding a single petal?

“I am not certain you have answered my question,” she said

Jota frowned.

“You are familiar with what transpired during the rites of spring this past month?”

“I was in attendance as you are well aware. Mastering the ceremony is one of my duties as a member of the royal line. Watching my father perform it each year is an important lesson.”

It was one of the Emperor’s primary roles to bless the land with health and prosperity each spring. Male members of her family line had been performing the ritual as far back as the histories recorded. Saya herself had been trained in the secret rites; though a female could not perform them, she was expected to know enough to instruct her own son-emperors in the ceremony’s mysteries if it ever transpired that she were the last of her line left alive.

Indeed, until the princess’ mother had died giving birth to her younger brother Hideki, Saya had begun to feel a steadily rising pressure from the court to marry early and produce an heir. She was glad that such talk had now quieted down, though she fiercely missed her mother and would have traded freedom for her return in an instant. Without Empress Aine’s gentle manner and guiding hand, Saya had lost something she could not describe.

“It was a tragic and horrifying event,” the princess continued. She shuddered recalling the way the hideous beast had charged toward her father and killed several of his guards. It was the first time she had ever witnessed that type of violence firsthand, and she had been certain in that moment that she would lose him too. “Clearly, the Border Fortress will need to answer for how such a monster could have eluded them. I am unsure, however, how this may relate to the current state of our gardens.”

“Really! So, you think it a mere coincidence that the ritual of rebirth was not completed and the land now shows signs of sickness?”

“The ritual was completed,” Saya pointed out. “The very next week, once my father had recovered from his shock and the injury to his leg. According to the annals, that is well within the boundaries prescribed by tradition.”

“But without the holy staff!”

“While the staff of fertility is a prized artifact, it is the blood of the Emperor that is required to grant the ceremony its potency.”

Jota wrinkled his nose at her, but she knew deep down he would be pleased she was able to debate him coherently. Though he would likely never openly admit it, Saya knew that he valued her as a pupil.

The disheveled old man gave a theatrical sigh.

“Let us test your knowledge then, princess. What exactly can you tell me of the importance of the spring ritual?”

This was a subject that he and others had drilled her in relentlessly, but his inquiry was overly broad. The real question was what information Jota would deem pertinent to their current conversation.

“The ritual is the holiest of our holy days. Some believe it the Emperor’s most vital purpose, even more significant than directing the empire’s laws or wars.”

Jota rolled his eyes.

“That tells me only half of the story. Why is the ritual so crucial?”

Saya fought off the temptation to shrug. Why did people believe in any kind of fable or superstition?

“Legend says that my line is directly descended from the sun goddess. Our human ancestor was an intrepid explorer who scaled the top of mighty Mount Iwate while trying to map the mysterious, unknowable land of Desu.

There he happened unexpectedly upon the goddess, where she takes her rest each night, waiting to leap back into the sky the next morning.

“She and the handsome young prince fell in love upon first sight and many months later were blessed with a little boy. Amaterasu wanted her son and his people to prosper, so she granted him command over her most faithful followers, the plants. This power is said to pass from Emperor to Emperor through their royal blood, allowing the land they rule to prosper beyond its natural fertility.”

Jota raised an eyebrow as thick and furry as a caterpillar.

“So the legends make no mention of the staff?”

“Some do, some do not,” she answered truthfully. “In multiple sources, the goddess speaks her blessing and then hands her son the staff. One could imply that she is therefore bestowing her blessing through the staff and the mere name of the artifact would support this. But to my knowledge, this is never specified and I would note, as someone trained in the actual performance of the ritual, that its presence is not something I was ever taught was vital to the success of the rites.”

“An interesting point,” her tutor admitted, pulling at knots in his beard. “But the workings of the gods’ powers are inscrutable, and what has not been forgotten about the true meaning of the rites over time was most likely never known to begin with.”

It was rare that Saya doubted Jota’s instruction. Even when he said something empirically false, she had learned he was usually laying some logical trap to ensnare you.

“To be clear, tutor, you are saying my father has lost the goddess’ magical stick and without it the land and the empire will suffer?”

“Strange, you sound skeptical of the rites’ influence over the land.” Jota tilted his head. “Yet, I believe you just mentioned that a number of learned men consider the regeneration of the earth each spring to be the true source of the Emperor’s authority?”



“At least an equal number of learned men would claim such a belief is rank superstition,” she observed.

“Not within earshot of your father.” Her teacher made a sharp barking noise then cleared his throat before continuing. “But let us say this debate over the worth of the rites is warranted. Is there any evidence to support such a claim?”

Saya paused for a moment, unclear what he was asking.

“There have been a few cases where women inherited because the previous Emperors had no sons,” she hazarded. “And in all cases the years of each Empress’ reign proved tumultuous until the throne passed or a male heir began performing the ceremony as a surrogate.”

Jota began to smile, an expression that quickly evaporated as she continued.

“But one might argue that the unrest was due primarily to their male rivals’ displeasure with a state of female rule, which did not abate until a new Emperor was crowned or the line of male succession was clarified. In any case, a woman has not held the throne in many years, due in large part to this very belief—that the absence of an Emperor of Amaterasu’s blood will lead to disaster.”

“A belief I infer you do not share.” Jota shook his head. “But perhaps it is one you should. Do you happen to recall the accounts of the three Empresses’ troubled reigns? In specific, their depictions of famine and poisoned soil?”

“And of disease and dragons and earthquakes and any other thing that could possibly point to the importance of putting a man back in charge?”

Jota shrugged, not entirely arguing the point.

“If you read Genki, Satugi, and Momo careful, you may be struck by the consistency of their accounts; regardless of the fact that each was recorded decades apart.”

He tapped her hand where she still cupped the cherry blossom.

“Momo’s description of the dying cherry trees may interest you, in particular.”

She examined the beautiful flower for a moment then her eyes trailed to the mounds of rotting petals.

“What are you saying?”

“That one way or another, we need to face the fact that the ritual of rebirth has failed.” He raised both hands, palm up. “Given that the only difference between this year’s ceremony and those your father has presided over in the past was the theft of the staff...I would think the conclusion obvious.”

When Saya failed to respond, Jota made a huffing noise and began marching quickly across the lawn to rejoin the rest of the imperial party. She followed in his wake.

“Again Hideki,” her father was saying as they rejoined the rest of the royal party.

Saya’s five-year-old brother rose and began speaking. His voice was unsteady and the young prince was clearly unnerved by the attention of so many advisors with eyes focused upon him.

Watching as her brother bowed and clapped his hands above his head to a silent rhythm, Saya felt her stomach turn to ice. Though she did not turn to face her teacher, she could feel Jota’s eyes on her from where he stood off to her side.

She already knew each of Hideki’s words before he spoke them.

“Blessed mother,

All we have we owe to you,  
Without you our world is barren,  
All we have done we have done because of you,

Without you we are barren,  
All things live only with your consent,  
Without you our world is barren,  
Please extend to us your kindness and your love,  
And keep us safe from the darkness,  
Though in truth we are undeserving.”

The prayer was the third from the spring ritual that she and Jota had just been discussing. Though his oration left much to be desired, Hideki had remembered the words without error. When he finished, the Emperor smiled and dismissed him to meditate upon the garden paths.

Her father now began to rise. Given his age and girth, as well as his recent injury, this was a task that took some time and involved the aid of a pair of burly young attendants.

“Beginning the boy’s instruction early, I see,” Jota observed, shouldering boldly through the circle of courtiers to reach the Emperor’s side. The counselor paused and stroked his beard as if just now considering the implications. “Always a prudent course, but some will ask if this means you doubt your health.”

It was, of course, considered one of the Emperor’s key duties to train his son in the secret rites as Saya would have had to train her own. But it was unusual for instruction to have advanced this far for a boy at such a young age. Exceptions were generally made only in cases where one feared the death of the reigning Emperor was imminent, due to illness or war.

The princess had had no idea that Hideki was already learning the ritual, and this certainly did not appear to have been his first lesson.

Saya studied her father more closely. Though he had hurt his leg while falling during the recent attack, he had shaken off the small injury so quickly that it had impressed even his doctors. His color was good and he looked as hale as ever.

Perhaps aware of her scrutiny, he quickly waved away Jota’s concerns.

“Bah! We have observed that the boy is bright for his age and good at memorization. As you just heard, he barely hesitated over a word. He needs to grow more comfortable speaking in front of crowds, but that is something best learned through practice. We see no reason not to progress with the boy’s learning if he is capable,” The Emperor pointed a thick finger at Jota’s chest. “We intend to sit the throne for some years yet!”

“May you rule a thousand years! Indeed, nothing would give me more joy than to stroll these garden paths with you a thousand more times.” Jota smiled for a moment before his more habitual frown returned. “It is a pity, though. I had hoped the flowers here would have been in fuller bloom by now.”

In light of what they had just been discussing, Saya realized that Jota’s comment might possibly be construed as a challenge to Emperor Hiroki’s potency as ruler. Coming on the heels of a statement questioning her father’s health, she wondered at the wisdom of his words.

The Emperor gave Jota a long look, and the old man returned it stoically. Indeed, Jota’s face seemed almost beatifically calm and untroubled.

The uncomfortable silence stretched for what seemed a long time. Emperor Hiroki gave in first, sighing loudly and motioning to the rest of his retinue.

“We wish to speak alone with our esteemed advisor. Grant us ample privacy and see that our son and daughter are well tended.”

The court members bowed, and Saya soon found herself politely pushed back out of earshot of the conversation between Jota and her father. Only a few of her father’s favored guards were allowed to remain anywhere close to the pair.

As the Emperor had directly requested that she be cared for, Saya was suddenly surrounded by a veritable swarm of servants. After refusing several attempts by them to provide her with refreshment or other, more excessive comforts, she set out across the garden paths to inspect the chrysanthemums.

It was unfortunate that the gardens' faltering flowers offered so little beauty to distract her. A herd of pampering courtiers trampled along behind her, destroying any possible sense of solitude and preventing her from focusing her thoughts.

Saya found the conversation with her tutor had deeply disturbed her, and the scraggly, muted growths that the gardens offered this spring proved to hold little capable of soothing her mind.

## Chapter 3

“Wake up, boy. Time to go hunting.”

Ori opened one eye to find a somewhat blurry Ueda Nobu had barged into his room. The grizzled samurai was fully girded for battle.

“Lord Tanamen has assigned me the important task of keeping his walls safe throughout the night,” Ori mumbled. “In order to serve him to my utmost it is imperative that I use this time to rest.”

Ori pulled a pillow over his head, but Nobu tore it from his hands and threw it across the floor. The warrior leaned over him and sniffed loudly.

“Sir, you, ah, may find upon my breath the faintest touch of sake. I have discovered that a tiny sip before bed calms my nerves and helps me to sleep.”

“You smell like a whorehouse.” Nobu grunted. “But no matter. His lordship is leading a party beyond the border, and he wants every able-bodied man with him. I have decided to stretch that definition to include you.”

Nobu motioned toward someone outside the door, and before Ori’s sleepy brain had fully grasped what was happening, he found himself doused by a large wave of ice-cold water.

Roaring, he leapt to his feet. A pair of young servant boys, barely more than toddlers, dropped a bucket at his feet and fled in fear. Nobu, however, did not even flinch. Looking up at Ori he made a disgusted noise as he kicked the bucket off into a corner.

“We muster in a quarter of an hour. You are a samurai and I expect you to look presentable.” He glanced about Ori’s unkempt room as if skeptical of the possibility. “Oh, and you’ll want to eat something if you have the time. We may be out in the field for a while.”

Nobu was gone before Ori realized he'd forgotten to ask what the emergency was.

Groaning, he closed the door to his quarters, stripped naked, and used his wet clothing to give himself an impromptu cleaning. After poking around a bit with his toes, he chose a set of less damp undergarments from the selection of gently-used options piled loosely about his feet.

Over these he bound a trio of robes firmly, each belted tighter than the last. Though the clothing was light, its fabric was strong, and the overlapping layers would be difficult for even a penetrating blade to cut through.

Next he pulled on his armor, hanging strips of hardened leather that were strung together in a lattice and dyed in colorful reds and oranges. Once satisfied that its skirt was pulled down enough to cover and protect his thighs, he pulled the armor's laces tight until sure it would hold firmly in place and knotted them quickly.

Only then did he turn his attention to his weapons. After belting his daisho about his waist, he practiced drawing each sword in turn, inspecting their edges, and oiling them with a cloth before returning them to their scabbards.

Deeming himself sufficiently presentable for duty, he then hustled down the fort's stairs two at a time, holding his horned helmet in the pit of his arm. A glance out the window at the sun told him he had reached the kitchens with a decent amount of time to spare.

It was past the typical morning mealtime, and there was not much in the way of breakfast remaining. Ori filled a bowl with some rice balls and sliced fruit that had been set out and went to sit on one of the mats near the hearth. It appeared that he was not the only warrior whom Nobu had recruited on short notice from their nightly duties.

“Does anyone know what this is about?”

Yoshiro, an older samurai, looked at him and shrugged but otherwise ignored the question as he instead concentrated on wolfing down his own

food as fast as possible.

Tsuro, who was near to Ori's own age but much smaller in stature, shook his head.

"Rumor is that we allowed a gremlin to cross over the border some months ago."

Ori plunked himself down next to Tsuro and popped a rice ball into his mouth with his chopsticks. The rice had been sweetened with bean paste, but unfortunately it was now cold and somewhat gamey. He chewed it down diligently, knowing he would need his strength if they were going outside the walls of the fortress.

"Be the first I heard of it. But if that's true, it seems a bit late to do anything about it. And is there any point in going into the borderlands then?"

"Oh we will be."

"Umm, but if we know he already crossed over the border, wouldn't that kind of be looking for him in the wrong place? Shouldn't we track the beast and catch it while it's trapped upon imperial soil?"

Ori and the other samurai of the Border Fortress took pride in the fact that few of the Father of Night's brood ever stepped foot onto the Emperor's lands alive.

But it did inevitably happen that on rare occasion one of the more cunning beasts slipped by somehow, and then they were called upon to put it down before it managed to terrorize too many peasants.

"The Emperor has dispatched plenty of soldiers with those orders exactly. We're not going to be chasing the monster this time. We'll be lying in wait in case he comes home."

Ori chewed on that for a long moment along with his breakfast. If true, this was bad news for many reasons.



First, the mere fact that the creature had caused enough mischief to attract the notice of the Emperor before their own men had dealt with it should be a source of shame for all of them.

Also, Ori didn't think it would really be helpful for the empire's other troops to get involved. The imperial army wouldn't be prepared to catch a gremlin. They tended to turn their noses up at stories of the Father of Night and his black magic.

Put one of them outside in the borderlands for an hour and they would stop laughing quick.

“And Lord Tanamen thinks he can catch the creature himself?”

Tsuro shook his head.

“This is no joke, Ori. Word is this gremlin attacked the Emperor! We've been told to expect a visit from the member of the court soon.”

Ori raised his eyebrows. If somehow a creature from the borderlands had snuck by their defenses months ago and ultimately attacked the Emperor himself, Ori sure wouldn't have wanted to be in his liege lord's sandals.

Lord Tanamen would clearly be feeling pressure to prove his worth to the capital just now. Ignore the miles of land between the Border Fortress and Heian-kyo, and all of the Emperor's armies; it was the lord of the Border Fortress and his samurai who were held responsible for holding the line against the Father of Night, even if others no longer fully believed in or respected their foes.

Emperors tended to be unaccustomed to having their life threatened directly. They could react...unpredictably toward those they believed accountable. They would have to do whatever they could to ensure that Lord Tanamen kept his head.

A visit from one of the Emperor's attendants would be no small matter. Lord Tanamen's castle in Desu was about as far as one could get from the capital and remain in the empire. Perhaps not geographically, but in spirit.

What few visitors they did receive from the court viewed them as the rudest of country samurai.

Ori, was perhaps the rudest of all of them. He was big, both tall and wide, in a way that made people instantly doubt his intellect. His mother had died of illness when he was young, his father to a gremlin when he was not much older. Lord Tanamen had been kind to keep him on and raise him as a samurai to honor his father's service. He had said before that Ori was practically "a son of the fortress" and that there was no way he could turn him out.

"Well, if it is true that we have failed in our duty to the Emperor, we must do what we can to restore our lord's honor." Ori saw that Tsuru had already finished his meal and was just waiting for him, so he quickly gobbled down his final pieces of fruit. "Come, we should go and join the others."

Lord Tanamen was already speaking to his assembled samurai when they arrived in the courtyard. Dozens of men were forming up into units, while dozens more listened as they looked down from the tops of the fortress' walls, five stories above. Ori stood straight for a moment, allowing him to see above the mob and locate the flag sporting Nobu's three-leafed crest, then he lowered his head in hopes of escaping their lord's notice as he tugged Tsuru through the crowd.

They managed to reach their unit without being trampled in the chaos. Ori left Tsuru at the back lines with the best of their archers and shouldered his way to his own position amidst the formation's first few lines. Two of his comrades made room for him, nodding in silent greeting. The young warrior exhaled as he looked about the courtyard, glad his slight tardiness had not garnered much notice.

Feeling something rough and leathery brush against his neck Ori froze rigid. He looked over his right shoulder to see Nobu standing directly behind him, glowering and shaking his head. His superior removed his hand and continued his way down the line. Ori cursed silently.

“It is rare that we pass beyond the walls in these numbers!” Lord Tanamen shouted to the assembled men.

Ori saw this was true. There had to be around a hundred men assembled and he had only ever seen that many muster a few times. Those had been sorties to disperse the enemy when tribes began to mass too close to the Border Fortress’ walls. Still, he always wondered what may have happened in the past. These grounds had clearly been laid out to hold ten times their current host. Of course, the samurai of any other castle would have had rode horses and their animals would have taken up more space.

“Today we will do more than simply hold the line!” their lord shouted. He stood above them, surveying his forces from the first landing of the switchback stairs that led up the interior of the walls to the catwalks Ori would routinely patrol each night. Tanamen’s words had a metallic ring to them, imparted by the beak of the golden, hawk-shaped helm he wore. A white cape with his red, holly bush insignia stitched into the back blew about his gilded armor as he spoke. “Today, for once, let us take the fight to the Father of Night!”

The assembled troops gave a deafening roar and, at the okay of the sentries above, the main gate ground open with a scrape of metal on stone that Ori could feel in his bones. Slowly, the soldiers began to file out. Given the width of the gateway, this was a process that would probably take over another hour, but Ori was fortunate to be near the front lines of one of the first units to depart.

The walls of the Border Fortress were so thick, and the route through them so convoluted, that Ori soon found himself in what appeared to be a long tunnel. None of the noontime sunlight penetrated here, and he could see the men in front of him only by the light of sparsely hung torches, already flickering in the drafts created by the movement of those ahead.

The air quickly grew chill with a deep-set cold that seemed to radiate from the stone of the walls. To Ori, this twisting passage always served to heighten the sense that in leaving the fort he was stepping outside of his world, and would soon be entering another.

A helpful reminder to one about to travel beyond the border.

The passageway brightened and Ori eventually stepped out into hazy sunlight beneath a cloudless sky. For many yards beyond the exterior gate, the ground was trampled flat, so nothing grew to offer shade or shelter.

This was not due to a lack of effort by the plant life of the borderlands. Each day, Lord Tanamen assigned teams of men to keep the ground surrounding the fort clear, and by the next morning the dense forest had always begun to creep back toward its walls once more.

The air outside the fort smelled strongly of wild grasses and the blossoms of crawling vines, an odor that always made Ori somehow feel itchy beneath his armor. Insects could be heard buzzing loudly from all around them, though he could not locate any in the air.

Nobu immediately began calling out orders to head into the foliage off to the right and so they could ensure that the surrounding area was safe for the coming troops. Out of the corner of his eye, Ori was aware of the unit preceding them forking off to the left to do the same.

This close in to the Border Fortress, and in broad daylight, it was hard to believe that the sentries high above wouldn't have alerted them to any danger, but they didn't want to take chances if Lord Tanamen's himself would be with them. Besides, it was best to take nothing for granted in the borderlands.

Forcing his way into a tangle of leaves half-again as high as his head, Ori was struck once more by the simple "otherness" of the world outside the fortress' walls. Though the temperature did not really change, the humidity seemed to spike as soon as he stepped into the vegetation, bringing a quick sheen of sweat to his skin and making the very air feel like it was resisting his motion.

At first, the light that shone through gaps above remained bright but what filtered down took on a greener hue, absorbing or reflecting some of the color of the surrounding leaves. Soon the discomfort of the sun on his brow

began to recede, and the foliage grew so tall and thick that he could not see more than a few feet through the gaps in the branches ahead while everything else became cloaked in shadow.

They stalked forward in unison. It was important out here for Ori to keep in sight of the four men surrounding him, because he had no clear view of the members of his unit beyond them. Though everything around them seemed calm, it was far too common for a man on the edges of a patrol to take one step too far out here and for no trace of him ever to be found again.

The followers of the Father of Night were devious and cunning and could move in near silence when they chose.

An order to halt reached Ori, passing along the line mouth to mouth from where Nobu stood directing them at their center. Receiving the instruction from old Gotu behind him, he leaned forward to bark it at the neck of Ohto ahead.

“I hate this heat,” Iho grumbled from Ori’s left. The plump soldier, fat but strong, was already taking a sip from his canteen. Sweat ran freely down his completely bald head as he removed his helm. “I hope it doesn’t take us long to stumble upon our adversary.”

Shingen snorted from Ori’s other side.

“Not very likely with a hundred of us banging around in these bushes.” Though not much to look at in his battered old armor, Shingen was one of the better swordsmen in the unit. “Hard enough to sneak up on the beasts in a five man patrol.”

Unfortunately, he raised a good point.

“True,” Iho countered. “But with this many of us blundering about, we probably can’t help but trip over something.”

“Look alive,” rumbled Gotu behind them. “Straight ahead march!”

Ori passed word on, and they began pushing deeper into the wilds of Desu, the walls extending from the fortress somewhere unseen off to Ori's right. The young samurai kept his eyes active, searching the brush around him for any signs of movement or recent tracks, but never lingering anywhere for long before they returned to the forms of the men around him.

After what seemed like a long time, Nobu once more called them to a halt. They were ordered to turn and face toward the border wall, which Ori thought he might be able to make out as distant specks of gray if he squinted between the proper leaves.

"This feels... very strange," Shingen said, his voice barely more than a whisper. Ori did not need to ask him what he meant. Patrols outside the wall always moved deeper into the borderlands in an attempt to gain intelligence on what the Father of Night was up to.

Standing idle as they were, with their eyes toward the empire they protected; it was almost as if they had brazenly turned their backs on their foe and were daring him to strike. It was not a comfortable feeling.

If a single gremlin really had survived the many miles to the capital and back, it seemed like a fool's errand to sit still as they were and assume that it would cross the border right here and right now on its way back. Ori hoped that Lord Tanamen had access to some word of its movements that they did not.

It may not be that, of course. It might simply be a blind gamble by a desperate man.

The gremlin would have to cross the borderlands somewhere if it wanted to get back to the realm of the Father of Night, and with a long enough string of troops it could not avoid them all.

Hopefully Iho was right. It would blunder into the center of their host and their hunt would soon be over. But Ori had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach that he was going to end up wishing that Nobu had left him in bed.



## Chapter 4

Saya drew her short-sword and swung it toward her opponent in the same motion. Somehow he had anticipated this and deflected it away with his own blade. He followed immediately with an attack, and she was forced to twirl away to the side to avoid it.

Trying to regain the initiative, she cut toward his midsection, but he backpedaled nimbly out of her reach, his balance still centered despite his failed assault.

As soon as Saya had recovered her stance, he surged forward. She raised her sword to block his attacks, but the pure violence of them pushed her backward and the impacts stung the tired muscles of her arm.

The princess spun to her right, slashing low toward her opponent's thigh. Again her blade was batted away, but less smoothly, desperately. She had almost gotten him that time.

In response, her foe only grew more determined. He regained his poise and his blade swept down viscously from overhead.

Their blades locked again, Saya barely able to halt the other using the full strength of both her hands. They stood locked for a moment, sweat trickled down the princess' neck and back as she strained; then her opponent shifted his stance and focused his entire weight on their point of contact. Using his greater bulk, he shoved her whole body backwards.

The princess stumbled to one knee. Seeing this he smiled and lunged once more.

Saya raised her wakizashi with as much speed as she could muster, only to have it struck from her hands.

Her opponent bowed to her and fell to one knee.



“You are improving, princess, but you absolutely must learn to avoid situations where your enemy can bring their superior strength and size to bear,” Mymoso said. Her sword instructor offered a hand to help the princess to her feet. “This is crucial. It is likely you will always be much smaller and lighter than any foe you face.”

“If I had been just a step quicker I would have struck through your defenses!”

Mymoso shrugged, and it occurred to the princess that his steely hair was exactly the same shade as the swords hung on the wall behind him. Despite his much greater age, he was still quite handsome when he smiled as he did now.

“Perhaps, and you may have wounded me somewhat if you struck, but I doubt I would have been out of a real fight.” He pointed the tip of his wooden practice sword toward where hers lay a few feet away on the practice mat. “You on the other hand would have been completely at my mercy.”

He tutted a bit in his infuriatingly smug manner and bowed to her again.

“Still, it is good to see you progressing to the level where you can *almost* hit me, princess. It does make me feel a certain level of accomplishment as your instructor.”

Sheathing his sword, he untied it from his waist and handed it to an attendant to store upon a weapon’s rack, signaling the end of the lesson. He flashed another smile.

“It appears I am not the only one who seeks the honor of impregnating you with fresh knowledge, and you seem too worn out for more of my own personal instruction. We will continue again tomorrow?”

Saya turned to see Jota approaching her, still dressed in his riding cloak and clothes. He nodded briskly to Mymoso, and stood silently for a moment regarding the man with a sour expression as he took his leave.

“I’ll never understand why they allow a princess to practice such barbaric pursuits. Shouldn’t you be studying household finance or some other more useful task?”

“My tutor was away so I had no recourse but to rely upon less intellectual exercises,” Saya answered, inclining her head toward him. “Besides, I am told a fit body makes for a fit mind. And it was judged by all as a practical consideration that a future Empress should know how to protect herself from harm.”

“It appeared prudent several years ago when she had no brothers to inherit. Now it simply strikes one as an unwomanly habit that might continue to scare likely suitors away from the eccentric girl.” He stroked his beard. “Why, I would not be surprised if our wise Emperor only allows these lessons to continue because, with the myriad of duties upon his shoulders, he has simply forgotten that he granted permission for them so long ago.”

“And you wouldn’t dare remind him!”

Jota pursed his lips. “I suppose not. But still, I have things I would discuss with you, and would prefer to do so with you appropriately garbed and perfumed.”

“So says the man smelling of horses.”

“I did not mean to imply that I would not take the opportunity to undergo further grooming myself.”

“I shall meet you in the library in an hour then.”

Jota nodded. “I shall look forward to it.”

Saya’s servants had already prepared her a hot bath, it being her habit after her sword exercises. The water felt wonderful on her sore muscles, and though she was curious what Jota might want to meet about, she did not rush herself on his account.

His manner had implied that this would not be a typical lesson, but that he wanted to impart some specific knowledge that he had uncovered during his recent travels to the east. She was not sure as to the official duties he had been fulfilling there for her father, but he had traveled across many provinces in the past week.

Finally dragging herself from her bath, she waited impatiently as her retainers dressed her and bound her hair—though she had to admit that the pale, buttery yellow of her dress and the matching ribbon in her hair proved quite pleasing in appearance after she saw them in the mirror.

When she and Jota met a short time later, her tutor had also changed clothing and now sported a fresh robe of dark brown cloth. Both his hair and beard had been thoroughly combed, with all of the knots brushed out.

This was something of a rare sight. Sadly, Saya knew from experience it was unlikely either his wardrobe or his own self would be this clean again until the next time he returned from a journey.

Jota was already seated upon a mat in the library when she arrived; a scroll on the low table beside him open to a map of the northeast illustrated in beautifully vivid greens, browns, and blues.

Upon seeing her enter, Jota rose and bowed deeply. Noticing her attendant, he motioned to the scroll on the table and said, “I think you will find that today’s reading is somewhat intensive and it will require your full attention, princess. It may be best if your servant was not to disturb us.”

Saya saw that Jota himself had not brought any of his retainers for the meeting, and she motioned for her maid to leave the two of them alone. The girl seated herself against the wall of the library’s adjacent room; far enough not to be a nuisance or to eavesdrop, but close enough to come if called and to observe propriety.

“So, whose history will we be studying today, teacher?” asked the princess demurely.

“Mine.” Jota stabbed a finger toward the bright green province of Sagami. “Let us quiz you on your geography. A good ruler should have a feel for their land.”

“Very well. Sagami is part of the Kanto plain, famous for its horses and agriculture. Much of the rice we eat here in the capital is grown in that area, for example. Though hilly in spots, the plain stretches from the ocean in the south to the mountains in the north. It is fed by two major rivers...”

Jota waved his hands to interrupt her. “Yes, yes. Very good. The pertinent point for our lesson today being its importance as a food source for the surrounding territories.”

He traced a finger from Sagami back to Heian-kyo.

“All along this route, the harvest falters.”

Saya blinked at the map as this sunk in. Her teacher’s finger swirled outward, traveling over nearly the entirety of the Kanto plain.

“I was unable to make it very far from the main road on my journey, but word is these areas are no better off.” He frowned and shook his head. “I have sent men to check in person, but enough merchants were telling the same tales it is hard to believe that they were all lying.”

Saya folded her hands in her lap and digested this information.

“So, the harvest grows worse instead of better. But perhaps we must simply give it a little more time?”

Her teacher’s palm rang down loudly against the table

“More time will do nothing!” Out of the corner of her eye, Saya saw her maid look up at the harshness of Jota’s tone. The princess hung her head like an admonished student, and the girl soon looked away.

“Hideki’s rites...” she protested, for her brother had repeated the spring ceremony in secret, only a fortnight past; an admission by her father that the

Emperor feared he no longer held heaven's favor.

“Were a failure as well. Let us accept this. We would have seen some improvement by now.” Jota's expression softened slightly. “Not the boy's fault, to be sure. He made an earnest effort, but he is a prince not the reigning Emperor, he lacked the staff, and the ceremony should be performed at the earlier date.”

“If the date is of such importance, then we have no further hope of somehow correcting the ritual and receiving the goddess' blessing,” she countered.

“Precisely.”

The cold certainty in Jota's words gave her pause.

“Meaning what? It is time to begin preparing for starvation?”

“It is past time!” He paused, mastered his emotions and then pointed far to the northeast on the map. A bluish-green color dominated the small area between the northeast boundary of the empire and the sea. It was decorated by pictures of plants whose flowers bore eyes and teeth and with a variety of fantastical beasts. “I did speak with a few men who had served at the Border Fortress.”

The distant wilds of Desu were so inhospitable as to be the only place on the islands that did not technically belong to the empire. It wasn't that the land was in a state of rebellion, just that no men lived there at all.

A number of stories told of demons and ogres hiding beyond the walls of the fortress, the children of the fabled Father of Night. But Saya had always figured that the fort's walls and samurai truly served to keep forest predators from straying into the peasants' fields. At least, until the recent attack on her father.

“The borderlands teem with as much life as ever it appears. The weather this spring suits them just fine.

”

Saya pondered this for a moment, but could make nothing of it.

“How does that help us? The land there is not large enough to support the population of the empire; and even if it could, Desu seems more likely to devour our citizens than to feed them.”

Jota’s lip twitched and he grunted.

“True, but it maintains its vitality. Perhaps we can partake of that as we did in the past.”

“How so?”

Jota grinned, a yellowy old smile with a few missing teeth.

“By sending you to visit your ancestor and ask that she help you recover the staff.”

Saya blinked.

“Sending me? I believe you must have misspoken, teacher. Last time I checked it was my father who was the Emperor and the representative of the goddess.”

Jota looked down at the map for a moment, shrugged and raised his eyes to meet hers. When he spoke his voice was slightly softer and more conspiratorial.

“We both love your father, but let us be honest. A man in his physical shape with a recently wounded leg; do you really envision him blazing his way through forests and climbing impassible mountains?”

Saya had to bite back a laugh at the very thought.

“Perhaps a portion of the army could carry him?”

Jota frowned. “After the attack at the ceremony, we’d never convince a general to allow him over the border. And before you even suggest it, we

also cannot count on Hideki. The child gets nervous talking to his shadow; do you really want him responsible for pleading our case to a goddess?”

“Well, I’m glad you feel much more comfortable sending me off into the clutches of colossal creatures and celestial beings! Ever the expendable imperial daughter! And I certainly hope that you’re not suggesting I seduce Amaterasu like my forefather?”

Jota merely snorted.

“You’re a far better warrior than your brother, and arguably your father at his current...weight. And it’s not as if I’m suggesting you don’t bring along allies. Demand that the entire host of the Border Fortress accompany you and they’ll likely listen.

“As for the goddess, you certainly aren’t shy about pleading your case to anyone; and I see no reason why she shouldn’t be favorably disposed toward any of her other descendants, regardless of their gender.”

He rubbed cautiously at his beard, as if he did not fully trust it in its shampooed state.

“Unless you think a little flirtation would help your cause? I’ll leave that up to your discretion.”

“Vile!” Saya’s attendant looked up again at the vehemence in the princess’ tone.

Saya studied the girl for an instant, then her eyes stuck on the shelves of the library beyond her maid.

“Would it be safe to assume, given that this request is being made of me in secret and conspicuously away from my father and the other members of the court, that this is not an officially endorsed mission to my death you will be sending me upon?”

Jota raised his palms.

“Well, it is true I have not yet discussed these plans with Emperor Hiroki himself, but that is mainly because I wished to do you the courtesy of ensuring they had your support before proceeding to make any suggestions.”

The princess knew her tutor well enough to sense when he was attempting to obscure something.

“So, if I agree, you will go to my father and ask for him to fund an expedition for me to climb Mount Iwate?”

“Ah, well.” Jota hesitated, pulling on his beard a mite harder this time. “You understand such a move might look a bit...desperate in the current political climate. Your stated goal might be something slightly more limited, such as reviewing the state of the Border Fortress and ruling the appropriate response to their recent failure of security.”

His eyes brightened.

“I trust you to find ways to use your influence to extend your mandate as necessary, however.”

Saya was silent for a time.

“It is a sign of my love my people, and for you as a teacher, that I would even consider such lunatic ideas,” she said finally.

Jota nodded solemnly. “The lengths you are willing to go through to prevent the suffering of your subjects does you much honor.”

Saya grumbled some rather unladylike phrases to herself under her breath.

“I will think on this and let you know my decision.”

Her tutor bowed deeply.

“As always, I serve at your whim.”





## Chapter 5

Guremurin gazed at the vast horizon of stone separating him from his homeland. He had arrived here far faster than he had dared hope.

At times he had seen packs of mounted men nearby and once more resorted to hiding in human form, but where the forests were dense he had bounded through them wildly in his natural state, sending wolves and other local predators fleeing in terror.

Despite the occasional delays required to avoid pursuit by the Emperor's men, the journey had been like a sprint in comparison to the slow crawl he had made toward the capital in the past.

After passing over the border from Desu, stealth had been his sole priority. He had been forced to work his way slowly from village to village, careful to give no hint of his true identity and all the while trying to learn the rules of this confusing new culture and the location of what he sought.

No such subtlety was required now. Speed was key. He need only escape the empire before he could be caught.

It was strange to see this barrier, this border, again and to find it representing a sign of home. From his earliest memories and onwards it had stood only as a hated symbol of their foe, a fence lain down by the enemy to hem in the Father of Night's children and to limit their strength.

Too tall to jump and too solid to break through, the seemingly endless wall had long held his brood in check. And the crack through which Guremurin had slipped many nights ago had looked to be well repaired.

He was almost sure this was the place where he had breached it. If he squinted he believed he could even see a slight discoloration where a patch of the stone and cement did not quite match its surroundings.

The gremlin was not entirely certain what to do.

The men patrolling the top of the barricade seemed surprisingly active, marching back and forth at regular intervals. One would expect them to be looking the other way, outward toward the tribes of the Father of Night. He wondered if they were looking for him personally or if they always did this, on orders to prevent people from escaping their empire.

He found that the gap between the patrols was more or less constant, so that with effort they could be avoided.

Still, this forced him to scrunch himself up into a tiny form and scramble between the few areas of cover available along the roads paralleling the border, careful to keep himself behind one watcher and ahead of the next.

For a time he considered returning home the same way he had infiltrated the human's capital; pretending to be a human. He could work his way into the ranks of those guarding the border and once properly positioned, it should be a simple thing to wait for a moment when he was alone to flee.

But no, that was not really a valid option. The humans here were a different breed and an alarm against him had already been raised. They were too observant and would ask difficult questions. He might be able to sneak through given time, but his possession of the staff would be noticed.

Besides, being this close to his goal was making him feel impatient. In truth, he simply did not want to wait so long when glory was in his grasp. He wanted to be sitting at the Father of Night's fire tonight, to let his legend begin.

Guremurin worked his way slowly to the northeast, sprinting periodically between whatever hiding places presented themselves. The land near the border wall was as thoroughly cleared on this side of the barrier as the other; another sign the enemy here was disciplined and vigilant.

After half a dozen miles he had given up any lingering hope that he might discover some other gap in the wall. If he was going to cross back to his homeland it would be necessary to take matters into his own hands.

Finding some dense bushes, he pulled skin and bones tightly toward his center and shrunk his form. There was nothing to do but wait for the next sentry to pass, and then wait some more.

When the man on the wall was finally out of sight, the gremlin hurried in the opposite direction, back west toward the Border Fortress itself. The small copse of trees he had noted earlier was farther away than he recalled, and he was forced to hide himself on two more occasions and wait for watchers to pass so he could run through the gaps between them.

The gremlin considered the droopy, dull-leaved growths. The scraggly little trees didn't appear very healthy, though this very fact had perhaps allowed their continued existence.

Guremurin suspected that if they had been a few yards closer to the border or even just thick enough for someone to easily hide behind, they too would have been razed.

It was not much to work with, but it was what he had. He scanned the wall, searching the horizons for more men.

Time would be short. The enemy was clearly on alert for just this sort of desperate attempt at a crossing. Still, there was no helping it.

Unfurling his muscles, the gremlin stretched himself to his full size. Suddenly, felling a tree offered no great challenge. Unfortunately several trunks broke off above their roots, giving him less wood than he had hoped.

Guremurin knew he was the strongest of his tribe. He was the largest too, by a fair margin; the grandmothers all said they could not remember anyone as tall and the other braves always backed away from his challenges.

And he was cunning, smart enough to outwit foolish humans on his worst day. But he was no human siege engineer. The Father of Night's tribes did not wage that type of war, hiding behind stones. Even given tools and much more time he would be unlikely to come up with an eloquent solution to scaling the wall.

Grunting deeply, he hefted the first shattered trunk, and hurled it fifty yards toward the wall. Without pausing, he shouldered the next and sent it flying. A few of the trees fell short of his target, but the majority impacted off the base of the barricade with an echoing boom.

The border guards would come running in moments, he knew. They would probably think that someone was assaulting them with a trebuchet rather than simply making a big pile of sticks.

He launched the remains of the last tree through the air like a missile and ran after, following the shadow till it crashed against the bottom of the wall. There he scrambled about frantically, trying to stack the logs into the tallest structure that seemed stable enough to hold his weight.

The result raised him to no more than a third of the barricade's height. He would have to jump the remainder.

Men were yelling somewhere above him and beginning to rush toward him in larger numbers now. A few arrows from the overly eager impacted the soil several feet to his left.

This was most likely his last chance at returning home.

Between these men on the catwalks above him and the mass of troops scouring the countryside behind, Guremurin knew he would ultimately be caught if he tried to flee back into hiding now. He had given away his position and the net would only tighten from there.

The jump looked almost impossible, but he reminded himself that the Father of Night's brood should not fear the impossible, they dabbled in it all the time.

He would simply have to be strong enough, because he had no other choice.

Guremurin took a quick moment to ensure the accursed artifact was still tightly secured to his back. It stung his hands as he padded at it.

The gremlin paused, eyes closed, focusing all of his weight and strength into his legs and thighs. He leapt.

## Chapter 6

The enemy was here, somewhere. Ori could hear sentries screaming atop the walls nearby, though he could not make out any individual words. Through gaps high in the canopy he was able to discern frenzied motion atop the wall but little more.

Only moments ago there had been a series of crashes in the distance—half felt, half heard—like the repeated pounding of a giant fist. It had seemed to come from the other side of the border.

Ori shifted his weight from one leg to the other anxiously, awaiting further orders. He was fidgeting with the tightness of his sword belt when Ohto suddenly cried out. The boy glanced toward the older man then followed his eyes upward to the shadow suddenly blocking out what he could see of the sky.

That shadow was growing rapidly larger.

Ori backpedaled furiously, stumbling over roots and deadwood, and something struck the ground only inches from his feet. The projectile hit with such force that the earth itself shook. Ori was thrown several feet through the air, stopping only because his back collided painfully with a tree stump covered in thorny vines. A shockwave of dislodged mud and debris struck him in the face a split second later, blinding him and making him gag.

He spent a moment stunned before tearing himself free and regaining his feet. Finger-long thorns had found gaps in his leathers, and he gasped in pain as he pulled away. He moved his sword arm experimentally.

There was blood dripping down his back, and his left side felt quite bruised, but he did not think it was anything serious. A wipe of his palm mostly cleared his eyes, though some persistent pieces of grit left them watering with irritation.

What had just happened? Was someone from the empire attacking the Border Fortress with catapults? It made no sense.

Then the projectile stood up and he realized his error.

The gremlin was easily more than twice the size of the largest Ori had ever seen. Shreds of filthy, torn cloth covered its shoulders and bound its waist like a parody of human clothing.

This was it! This must be the very beast that had attacked the Emperor!

Ori could not see the thing's eyes clearly in the shade, but its head swiveled in his direction and it bared yellow teeth as big as butcher's knives.

The boy approached cautiously, one hand on the hilt of his katana. The other samurai around him had also been thrown back by the force of the gremlin's landing. Somewhere in the bushes to his right he could hear Iho calling for reinforcements from the rest of their unit, the man's voice swelling over more distant calls from the sentries on the wall to alert everyone to the enemy's location.

The gremlin kept completely still as Ori approached it, showing unexpected resolve. Usually the Father of Night's whelps preferred to strike fast and disappear. This one stood as stoic as a master swordsman. Just as Ori began to consider how he would engage the beast, it whipped out with an arm.

Ori dodged instinctively, though he was still well beyond the thing's reach. This proved fortunate as Ohto's flailing form flew past, missing him by a whisker. He heard the man impact solidly with something behind him and Ohto's scream turned into a soft, sad whimper.

Leaves rustled at Ori's side, but fortunately it was only Iho stepping forward to join him in his advance. The gremlin now raised its arms into a fighting stance and squared itself to face them. Ori saw motion in the shadows behind it and realized that Shingen was attempting to flank the beast. He was moving slowly and appeared to be dragging one leg.



As Ori closed that final distance, he felt the calm of battle fall over him. He had fought gremlins before, on more routine patrols, but similar to those occasions a part of his mind now seemed to shut down so that any thoughts beyond the present faded away. His eyes fixed upon his foe's, trying to read any hint of his intentions. Each step forward was made with the utmost caution, ensuring he maintained perfect balance on the uneven, root ruttled ground; allowing him to strike or dodge as needed.

The beast flinched, but Ori held steady, sure this time that it was just a feint. He guessed correctly, and the thing's lips twitched as if it was smiling back. With arms that length, the creature was truly intimidating. Ori would be within its reach long before he could strike it with his own sword. Realizing this, Iho had already drawn his own blade so that he might use it for defense, but Ori's instinct told him to wait. His instructor had always drilled into him that he should not draw his blade until he was ready to strike.

One more step, two more steps, there! Ori couldn't have said what warned him, it seemed like something he felt more than he saw. Titanic arms terminating in knife-like claws swept toward him in a broad arc.

The gremlin's limbs were so large it was more like dodging a thrown table than a blade. Ori was forced to hurl himself prone onto the ground and to roll through the leaves and moss to completely avoid the blow.

The metal of Iho's katana rang like a bell as he parried the very same attack. The bulky man succeeded in protecting himself, but the raw strength of the creature tossed him into the air like a doll. Iho sailed up through the canopy and disappeared from Ori's sight.

The gremlin turned toward the young samurai and barked out a wet, guttural sound that may have been a laugh. It raised its one huge paw above its head. As the boy struggled to regain his feet he heard shouting from all around him. A few arrows whizzed blindly through the air.

The rest of his unit had arrived, but they were going to be too late for Ori.

A massive fist swung down at Ori, but miraculously, twisted aside at the last moment as the creature shifted to fight off Shingen's surprise attack. Ori heard his ally's blade scrape along the beast's thigh and hip as it turned.

The gremlin roared and kicked toward its adversary, but Shingen somehow managed to dance away, as if ignoring his own leg wound by sheer force of will.

Seeing his chance, Ori set his feet and drew his weapon as he rose. Its edge did little more than scratch the thick skin of the gremlin's back leg, though it drew a thin line of blood where it traced across the back of its knee. As its point swung further up the beast's back, Ori's katana nearly tangled in the crooks of a club or a tree branch slung from the monster's shoulders, forcing him to step to the side and wrench his weapon free.

The creature retreated slightly, leaping backwards to ensure that both he and Shingen were in its field of vision. Ori imagined he saw its huge shoulders slump as it took in the extent of their onrushing reinforcements for the first time.

Shingen stepped forward, swinging high, but the gremlin altered its form, shrinking more than dodging out of the way.

At the same time, its other arm elongated even further, and shot straight out toward Ori. The boy's reflexes saved him, and he brought his sword up in time to block the points of its claws, but his blade rebounded off the front of his helm hard enough to knock him over onto his back.

A dark shadow loomed over him, and once more Ori feared this would be the end, but it did not pause to ensure his death. Their foe must not have liked what he saw in their growing numbers and it bolted.

Ori tried to right himself, but a sudden wave of dizziness sent him stumbling back to the earth. He heard more yelling, soon followed by screams of pain, the sounds spreading out and away from the wall. Someone had bent down next to him and was shouting in his ear, but Ori was having trouble making sense of their words.

He closed his eyes for just a moment to try and focus his thoughts, but they only fluttered away one by one, like moths through a hole in the net of his mind. He found himself contemplating the void.

With a jolt he came back to his senses. He must have lost time, for he was on his feet now, walking while leaning down against the smaller Nobu for support. A number of his comrades surrounded them, many bloodied or clutching at less obvious wounds, and they did not appear to be in proper formation.

“...can’t handle one little goblin!” his commanding officer was saying, with no small amount of disgust.

“That thing was no goblin,” Ori replied, thinking he’d heard enough to know the gist of the complaint. “It was an army.”

Nobu eyed him in grim silence for a while and then spat.

A few steps later, their party emerged into the cleared area directly in front of the fortress gates. Ori sighed as cooler air blew against the sweat on his neck.

Columns of dejected-looking men stood flanking the entrance, some perking up with curiosity as the wounded marched by. It appeared Ori’s part in the search was over.

The full weight of this fact struck him anew. The enemy they thought they would never find had jumped right into his unit’s midst, but he had not been strong enough to stop it. He had failed his comrades and his lord.

Ori closed his eyes and hung his head in shame. The return trip through the dark cold passageway into the Border Fortress proper seemed a long one. His peers must have been considering their own dark thoughts. No one spoke from the time they entered the corridor until they emerged out into the courtyard.

“Is that him? Bring him here!”

Nobu changed direction abruptly, catching Ori off guard, and the two nearly unbalanced and tumbled on top of each other.

“Pay attention and pull yourself together,” Nobu hissed.

The young warrior opened his eyes to discover they were being hailed by no less than Lord Tanamen himself. The liege lord had removed his beaked helm but still wore his armor. He stood talking with a much smaller, slighter samurai that Ori did not recognize. The warrior’s armor was enameled a pure, unblemished white and was clearly of high quality—it featured real metal and chain in places where Ori had to make due with stiffened leather and straps.

The unknown samurai had turned in their direction with Tanamen’s shout, and Ori saw that his helm was adorned with a fully painted facemask. It mimicked the visage of some fearsome demon with its leering orange eyes and serrated teeth dripping vivid red blood.

Having just faced a real monster, Ori found himself less appreciative of the artistry than he would have been otherwise.

“Do you think you can stand on your own now, boy?” Nobu whispered. Ori nodded back silently. “Good.”

Releasing his arm, the gruff officer stepped forward to kneel before the pair, bowing deeply from the waist. Ori noted that it was the white warrior who motioned for him to rise.

This must be the representative from the capital then. Ori stiffly began to make his own obeisance, struggling against the bruising in his back and side, but the white warrior waved for him to stop.

The demon’s voice was surprisingly high-pitched, bringing to mind some his favorite jokes about the effeminate courtiers from Heian-kyo.

“Your actions today have shown your loyalties, you need not suffer further on my behalf.” A slight pause as he straightened, gratefully. “You fought with the beast?”

Another wave of shame washed through him.

“I did, my unit did...” he glanced toward Nobu, but his commander was staring intently at the dirt and offered no guidance. “But I was one of those where it...landed. Shigen and I both struck it with our swords, but in truth we seemed to do it little harm.”

Should he mention its size, the thickness of its skin? All gremlins had tough hides; in fact, the border samurai were intentionally taught to fight with heavier swords just so they could penetrate it. Only this one had had skin like steel.

But those details would sound too much like excuses. It was no secret that the capital already thought most of what they reported about the Father of Night came more from campfire stories and sake than experiences in the real world.

There was probably no need to go into detail. He would let others judge the fearsomeness of the gremlin by the chaos it had wrought.

“I was defeated in combat. I failed to kill or capture our foe.”

The white warrior looked at him for a long moment. Lord Tanamen fidgeted uncertainly at his side. Ori found himself wishing that he could see the workings of the face behind the demon mask.

“That much we knew already. At least you are still breathing, and if you laid a blade on the beast you did more than most.” The samurai gave Tanamen a sidelong look and the liege lord responded with a nervous bow. “Tell me did the creature have anything in its possession?”

“It fought like a beast, using claws and teeth rather than a blade,” he answered. “It was clad only in dirty rags. It did carry something across its back. I fear I did not get a good look at it.”

“A pack of some type perhaps?”

“No, it was more like a tree branch, I think. I recall it had leaves. I thought it an overly crude weapon, but the beast showed no inclination to use it.” Ori shrugged. “You do occasionally catch gremlins carrying all manner of odd things, though.”

“As totems,” Tanamen agreed. “They seem a very superstitious lot.”

“I am certain. Thank you.” The white warrior’s shift in tone and posture clearly indicated dismissal. Nobu nodded to Lord Tanamen.

“I will see Ori here to the doctor and resume my duties.”

“Of course.”

The two pairs parted, heading in opposite directions through the courtyard. Ori watched the others go, seeing how unsure his usually steady lord appeared in the company of the Emperor’s representative.

Ori could only hope the honor of the Border Fortress was not tarnished in their eyes by his own failures.

## Chapter 7

Saya should never have let Jota talk her into this.

The princess rubbed her temples, fighting an encroaching headache. She was glad to be alone in her own quarters for the first time since she had set out from home, even if the Border Fortress' plushest guest room was approximately as luxurious as the servants' quarters back in Heian-kyo.

It was also nice to get out of that uncomfortable armor. She'd used it on the road to disguise her identity and to keep the court from gossiping about the motives behind her trip.

On a whim, she had not removed her mask or armor upon arrival and spoken little, in hopes the soldiers here would think they were being reviewed by some expert military counselor rather than the Emperor's young daughter.

Now she wished she had allowed her father to send someone more experienced in truth. She was completely at a loss as to what type of punishment to recommend. On the one hand, Lord Tanamen had clearly been tripping all over himself to present to her the readiness of his troops and the strength of his defenses. She'd practically had to order him to stop giving her tours of the battlements just to have a chance to rest up from her travels.

The fortress was an impressive sight, and it was not lost on her that it appeared well maintained. The troops—who had likely had some advance warning of her arrival—seemed fit and well disciplined.

Even beyond that, their devotion was somehow palpable. The samurai here honestly believed they were acting as a shield against all that lay beyond the empire, and it showed. Tanamen appeared to have both the faith and the respect of his men.

But how to balance that against the fact that mere hours before her arrival, he had led a small army against the creature that she was chasing and lost?

If he couldn't marshal his forces to defeat a single opponent, one could hardly put much faith in him stopping the Father of Night's fabled legion of terrors if they chose to attack.

She sighed loudly. Best to forget it. Her review of the fortress wasn't her real goal anyway, only a cover. She would tell Tanamen that a full report was being composed and sent to her father for his consideration, so that the Emperor could choose the appropriate punishment for their failure personally.

Such a pronouncement would probably paralyze Tanamen with fear, which would at least keep him from interfering with the rest of her plans. To the extent that she had any plans.

Heading into a dark forest filled with hordes of monsters was looking less appealing all of the time, especially now that the men she had planned to take with her for protection had shown themselves incapable of facing even one of the things head to head.

It was tempting to tell her retinue to turn right back around and return her to the capital. Even if Jota was right, and famine struck the land, the royal family would be the least affected. She should be able to simply ride out events until a solution was found. No one beyond her crazy tutor was expecting her to take any action whatsoever.

But even in her short trip to the border, the desperation of her people had already been transparent. Food prices were rising steadily at the markets. The children looked thin and laughed little. Everywhere they had stopped for the night, the local talk had been dominated by concerns about the late harvest.

Even if she could turn a blind eye to her subjects' pain, what then? Go back home and return to her life as a display piece? Something to be polished and trotted out for ceremonies, eventually married off to seal a favorable bargain? The thought made her stomach churn. Perhaps it would be better to die in the wilderness.



So, what was her next move? Jota had given her a goal but not very solid instructions. She wished he had been able to accompany her on this journey, but his duties to her father had directed him elsewhere, and an Emperor's orders could not be ignored.

Well, she would start with the one she'd interrogated. He had been practically as large as the monster itself, no doubt why he'd survived a dueling with it. That gave her some confidence. He hadn't appeared very bright, but it was possible his brains had still been addled from being on the losing end of combat with a giant. He'd been observant enough to take note of the staff of fertility. That was a good sign.

Hadn't the young samurai also mentioned another man fighting at his side? She should bring him along as well then, assuming he wasn't dead. Both of them had at least struck the beast. The monster had bolted after confronting them and somehow slipped through a veritable sea of men untouched, though it managed to slay a handful along the way.

Tanamen had assured her, from the very moment she arrived, that his men were still pursuing the gremlin and were sure to capture it soon. But 'soon' had not yet come and as more and more men kept returning from the borderlands, she had overheard their grumbling about how it had left no trail. It was clear from their tone and posture that the hunters had lost the scent, even if their lord refused to admit it.

She now had in mind two of her guides to lead her up the mountain, but how many more should she demand? How many would Tanamen be willing to give? The whim of a princess was powerful, but men had a tendency to stop and look only to other men when the conversation drifted to the topics of swords and samurai.

This was probably an area where she was going to need to look to someone else for assistance. What sized party was most likely to successfully scale the mountain? A large one that could force its way through, or a small one that could avoid detection?

Today's events made her lean toward the latter, but the only ones knowledgeable enough to give her sound advice would be the border samurai themselves. She couldn't imagine asking Tanamen for counsel; he'd be too concerned with preserving his own station to give an honest answer. It was probably better to ask one of those who actually spent time with their feet outside the borders, instead of some lord who spent most of his time at his table.

Saya checked her appearance in the mirror, adjusting her hair and her clothes slightly. She had brought along some fine garments from home, in case Tanamen had wanted to turn her visit into something highly official, but fashion here on the border was based solely upon necessity and she would have felt very out of place wearing them. Instead she had on a simple gown of white silk, decorated by a lovely pattern of saffron flowers.

It seemed enough to project her station. What few women lived here appeared to lack access to fabrics smoother than whatever they could spin themselves.

A pair of the men who had escorted her on her journey stood guard outside her door. A few more rested on benches to either side. The great creaking of metal when she exited her room, as several rose and all hastened to bow, must have awakened anyone else on the floor resting in their chambers.

"May we be of service, your highness?" asked Junkei, the most senior of her guard.

The big one, what had been his name?

"Ori... The man who fought with the gremlin." Several eyes blinked at her in confusion. "I wish to speak with him again. Take me too him."

"Of course, at once." Junkei, to his credit, managed to sound as if the princess spontaneously demanding to see some minor hedge samurai was an entirely sensible request. He nodded to one of the younger men who ran off, no doubt to find a servant whom they could ask for directions.



## Chapter 8

Why were people always waking him up when he needed sleep?

“Up! Up! Up!”

Despite the insistently whispered words of the doctor, Ori felt no desire to rise. The slightest movement sent stabs of pain across his back or up his side, his head throbbed, and the remainder of his muscles all seemed sore.

Even the bed was uncomfortable, too short for his length, the straw mattress too scratchy. But after feeding him some foul tasting herbal concoction, the doctor had demanded that he rest here in the fortress’ small surgery.

“It would be best if you don’t sleep at all,” the doctor had advised him. “But if you must then do it here where I can observe you. Sometimes when a man takes a strong hit to the head and goes to sleep too soon after, he never wakes.”

Ori had argued that he might as well die comfortably in his own room, but the man had no mercy.

“My sincerest apologies,” Ori heard the surgeon say now, his voice far more polite and pitched louder for others to hear. “It appears his injury has made him sluggish.”

A young woman’s voice answered, it sounded somehow familiar.

“No, I should not have intruded. It appears he was more seriously wounded than I was aware.”

“I’m fine,” Ori protested, forcing himself up into a sitting position. His elbow bumped a nearby table as he shifted, and he heard something roll across the floor. The doctor grumbled, but it didn’t sound like anything had broken.

The boy opened one eye and then, liking what he saw, the other. A pretty young noblewoman stood before him, her long dark hair contrasting nicely with the white silk of her robes. Ori could not recall ever seeing her around the fortress, he was sure we would have remembered her.

Intelligent eyes studied him, and he found himself reflexively pulling the blanket more completely about his waist. Besides his undergarments he was clothed mainly in bruises.

“Uh, well hello there, lady. Who might you be?”

As soon as the words left Ori’s mouth, he sensed he might have just committed some type of breach of etiquette. He deduced this from the strangled gasp that escaped doctor at his side, which was echoed by a pair of nurses on the other side of the room whom he had not noted earlier, given the way they were kneeling and bowed forward so severely that their noses nearly touched the floor.

Ah, another member of the delegation from the capital no doubt, and probably someone reasonably high ranking. There was something vaguely familiar about her face that picked at his memory. Maybe he had met her once long ago?

The woman stiffened, her face reddening beneath raised eyebrows.

“I have the privilege of being Imperial Princess Saya, daughter of Emperor Hiroki. We spoke yesterday, you may recall?”

Imperial princess? He had seen her face before, of course, who had not? But the artists’ renderings apparently didn’t fully do her justice.

Uncertain how to correct his error, Ori immediately flopped forward onto his stomach while mumbling an unintelligible apology. This was a move he immediately regretted as it dislodged his blanket and he felt his clothing slip down slightly from his waist.

“Compose yourself!” she shouted, averting her eyes. “I simply wanted speak with you a bit further, but if you don’t even remember me then

perhaps you are not well enough for there to be much point.”

“No, no, it’s not that!” Ori winced as he rose more quickly than the muscles of his back would have preferred. With the help of his doctor he awkwardly made himself more presentable. “You are the white demon! I simply didn’t realize you were a... I didn’t recognize you without your armor, your highness.”

It occurred to him belatedly that referring to a princess as a demon might not be socially superior to forgetting to address her with respect. Coincidentally, he noticed the doctor and his nurses silently bowing their apologies and backing away toward some suddenly remembered duty; rats fleeing a sinking ship. At least he had stopped himself before calling her a man.

Fortunately, she seemed to take no further offense, perhaps already too distracted by his other breaches of protocol.

“Earlier, I believe you mentioned another warrior who fought at your side?”

“Against the gremlin? Yes, Omani Shingen.”

“I don’t believe I have met him yet. Did he survive the encounter unharmed? Do you know where I might find him?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure. We were separated after I was knocked unconscious. I believe he may have wounded his leg, but it was not serious enough to incapacitate him.”

Ori’s memory of the events after the fighting was largely blurry and confused.

“I don’t recall him being brought in with the other injured, so most likely he’s fine and may still be taking part in the pursuit. He is a masterful fighter and extremely devoted.”

The princess absorbed this with a nod and grew quiet, chewing on her lip as if thinking.

“What other men here do you trust?” she asked after a moment. “Whom would you want with you if you had to go across the border?”

“I trust all of my brothers,” Ori answered slowly, now very conscious of whom he was speaking with. “But Shingen is probably the best soldier in my unit, along with Ueda Nobu our commanding officer.”

“And beyond your own unit?” she prompted.

Ori shrugged, uncomfortable with being asked to judge his peers.

“Any of the unit commanders would be very capable. I possibly would choose Toto Sagi and Fuwi Ietani if I had to fill out the rest of a patrol.”

“So, you patrol in groups of five?”

“Most often. Usually our goal is just to ensure the area encircling the fortress is clear, so we use small parties that stick close together.”

The princess studied Ori’s face for a long moment. Whatever she discovered there led her to sigh deeply.

“But today Lord Tanamen sent out a much larger force. Is that what you would typically do if you wanted to travel deep into the border territory?”

“Well, yes, but we hardly ever go out in numbers that large. Generally, we are just keeping small packs of gremlins away from our walls, and for that a five man patrol is sufficient.”

Ori noted the skeptical look on her face.

“You do understand the typical gremlin is far smaller and easier to frighten away than the one we faced today?” Saya nodded, so he continued. “That means the only time we really march across the borderlands in force is if a tribe takes up residence too close to the fortress or simply starts to grow too large and needs to be dispersed. We never travel deeper into enemy territory than we have to. That would just be inviting trouble.”

“Of course,” she said, her tone sounding strange.

Ori wondered why she was here, talking to him and not to Lord Tanamen or one of the higher-ranking samurai. If she had questions about the Border Fortress' strength or their defensive strategy, he seemed a strange person to ask.

He bowed again, hoping to perhaps recover somewhat from the conversation's awkward beginning.

"I appreciate your taking the time to check on me and our wounded, princess. I deeply regret that I was unable to stop the beast that attacked the Emperor, and I am unworthy of such attention."

The princess' lips twisted into something Ori couldn't quite call a smile.

"How would you feel if I offered you another chance?"

"Another chance?" Though he struggled to keep his face blank, Ori's stomach ran cold. Had she singled him out for punishment otherwise? Was he to be stripped of his position due to his failure?

"To slay the beast. Can I share something with you in confidence?"

Ori nodded, not trusting himself to speak, as he no longer felt quite sure what was being discussed.

"Evaluating the state of the Border Fortress is only a part of the reason for my visit. My real aim is to strike out beyond the border; to pursue the creature that assaulted my father or, failing that, to scale Mount Iwate.

"To do so, I will require the assistance of the samurai here. I would like you to assist me in selecting the necessary personnel to make such a trip safely."

The young warrior felt like the more she spoke, the more confused he became. As the Imperial princess, he was sure his liege lord would offer her use of his entire force if she just so much as asked.

"I'm sure Lord Tanamen would be willing to offer you whatever assistance you need..."



“I do not wish to go through Lord Tanamen for this request, I want to choose my own men.”

Was she implying that Tanamen was not to be trusted?

“But...”

The princess shook her head.

“I have my own reasons. Are you willing to assist me, or not?”

Ori swallowed, knowing there was no real choice here. He could not reject the request of a princess, any more than he could expect to be forgiven for doing whatever she demanded of him when Lord Tanamen found out.

“I live to serve, my princess.”

“Excellent, if you are sufficiently recovered, I think you should dress and help me locate this Shingen fellow.”

## Chapter 9

In the end there were only five of them—Ori, Shingen, Nobu, his young friend Tsuru who was barely larger than Saya herself.

“He’s a good scout,” Nobu had insisted.

For many tense moments it had appeared that Ori had made an error in enlisting his commanding officer’s aid; so persistent was Nobu in demanding (albeit politely) that the idea of an excursion to Mount Iwate must be brought to Tanamen’s attention.

Overall, Saya’s discussions with these men had convinced her that going to the lord of Border Fortress would be an error. While she technically had the authority to demand the use of his forces, because she was a woman they would not simply let her command them.

Saya could hardly explain to them that she lacked the Emperor’s authority to make the request, and might be denied the opportunity if Tanamen delayed her and sent word to her father for confirmation as she now believed he would.

She was forced to protest weakly that the lord of the Border Fortress had enough to do in correcting whatever errors in his defenses had allowed the gremlin to both cross into the empire, but safely return home; and that she would plan her expedition independently.

It was obvious that Nobu and the other samurai were not fooled, but they seemed to read some deeper meaning into her words. In the end, she felt like the commander only relented because of her status, and not because she had tied any logic to her request that assuaged his fears.

To minimize the chances that Tanamen would receive word of her plans before they headed out, she ended up choosing just the few soldiers directly from Nobu’s unit that he and Ori had recommended. She could not help but notice that Nobu and Shingen seemed concerned with the size of their force given her lofty goal of traveling as far as the mountaintop, but the absence of an entire unit would have been instantly noticed and she feared asking

other commanders for assistance given her difficulties in convincing just Nobu.

After her argument with the commander, it became clear in hindsight that she must also exclude Junkei and her own men. Though technically under her orders, they were her father's men, and would likely bind her and take her home before they let her place herself in danger.

Though it left her further shorthanded, this decision seemed to please the border samurai, who apparently had some type of institutional rivalry with the standard imperial army.

At least entering the borderlands proved easier than she had feared. News that Saya herself was the visitor from the capital seemed not to have trickled down to the common foot soldier yet. Certainly, Ori had been surprised when she presented herself, she thought with a rueful smile.

Hidden behind the mask of her armor, the guards at the gate had protested only weakly when Nobu explained that one of the representatives from Heian-kyo wanted to go out on a short patrol to see the borderlands for himself.

Their fear of Nobu was clearly greater than any worries about why they hadn't received proper notification that anyone would be going outside.

Again, this gave Saya mixed feelings. It allowed them to slip easily into the chilly stone passage that lead outside the bounds of her empire, but it showed once more that there may be cracks in the system of those charged with the defense of her home.

Word would travel soon enough that they were gone, but it mattered little now that they had left the fortress and could no longer be detained.

The samurai had told her to expect another world outside, but even appropriately forewarned she could not help but be astounded by what she found. Jota had been right when he said the land here was flourishing. She had never encountered anything remotely like it.

Of course, the majority of her exposure to nature had come within the confines of the carefully controlled imperial gardens. This had given her the somewhat mistaken impression that plant life would always be accompanied by a convenient path to transverse while observing its beauty or a nearby bench at which to rest.

In the real world it appeared nature was much more active than passive. Spines scratched constantly across her armor and pulled at her gloves and sword belt, slowing her down. Each step was either a trudge through a clump of bushes or a wrestling match with roots and vines intent upon tripping her.

The canopy devoured almost all of the morning light, leaving them in a sort of perpetual twilight, but somehow the day's heat was wet and oppressive regardless.

From the moment they had realized she could not be dissuaded from making this foolhardy trip, Nobu and the others had drilled into her that she needed to stay close to them and ensure she was within sight at all times. She had thought them being overprotective, but now realized the sense of their advice almost immediately. A few steps into Desu, the samurai surrounding her had already become little more than vague glimpses and signs of motion in the dense growth.

Where she to allow them to get more than a few steps away, they would be gone, vanished. Ori's raw size was at least a slight comfort there; it seemed like he would stick out a little if he made an effort, no matter what.

Saya traveled at their center with Shingen and Ori to either side. Tsuru was little more than a blur in the bushes ahead, so it took effort for her to follow in his path. Nobu occasionally growled advice to his comrades from behind and they would quickly comply, changing their heading or their speed.

She got the distinct impression that she was slowing their intended pace, but it was clear they would stay around her however slow she walked, lest she be left lost and undefended.

It would take a few days reach Mount Iwate, approximately. She had gathered from the men's sidelong glances at each other when she asked questions that this number was a rough estimate, though no one seemed willing to admit it. Apparently, it had been some time since anyone traveled even that far from the fortress. Their estimate did not include however long it may then take to climb to its summit.

The legends she knew did not tell of her ancestor having to fight his way through packs of gremlins to arrive there. Were they omitted from the stories or a "newer" development since the founding of the empire?

None of the men seemed to feel pleased at the concept of camping in the field, but they would have no choice—the journey was too long. Each of them had performed nighttime patrols in the past, and the deep forest was barely any brighter beneath the sun, so she wasn't entirely sure what they were scared of.

Saya had hoped they might cut the journey short by tracking down the cause of all of these problems, the beast that had slipped past with the staff. But all of Lord Tanamen's troops had given up the pretense of pursuit by now. The trail had gone cold and the thief had almost a full day's lead on them. He would not be caught.

To hear Shingen tell it, the immense beast had disappeared without a trace. If so many men had searched all night and not picked up its trail, she had little hope they could do so now. That might be a blessing, of course, given how the thing had decimated a legion of samurai. Engaging it again might well be suicide.

"Quiet everyone!" Tsuru's harsh whisper interrupted her thoughts. She stumbled forward until she felt Nobu's hand on her shoulder, steadying her and guiding her to the ground.

A hush fell over them. She heard nothing but leaves scratching against each other in a mild breeze. The movement of air did nothing to break the heat. Sweat ran down her arms inside her armor. There was a very faint rustle of grass, a sound like farm animals grunting.

With a sudden shout, Shingen leapt into the broad shoots of the plant obscuring everything to their left, his blade swishing free of its scabbard as he moved. She heard a squealing yelp. Ori ran after him, his hand on the hilt of his katana.

Nobu was pulling her up to her feet, half dragging her forward.

“Keep our men in sight! There may be more foes than we believe.”

A creature lay twitching at Shingen’s feet. It was the same as the one that had attacked her father, in the sense that a palace cat was the same as a panther. It was smaller than Saya in size but it shared the fangs, claws, and greenish-gray skin of the other beast.

Another gremlin was fleeing the confrontation, but Ori’s large strides ran it down from behind. He drew and smashed his sword into its side. She could hear bones break as it tumbled to the ground.

Something leapt toward them from the shadows of the surrounding bushes, but Nobu batted it to the ground with his blade and quickly got in between it and Saya.

“Princess! Look out!”

An arrow whizzed by her and she spun to see it almost strike a gremlin sneaking up behind her. The thing cackled as it evaded the missile and then showed her its teeth.

Her eyes went wide with panic, but she told herself to be calm and remember her lessons. She let it close another few steps to be sure of the range then swung at it with her wakizashi.

Her blow hit the thing square in the belly and the creature’s progress was halted by the force of the contact. It looked down in surprise, but she saw the blade had not punctured its skin.

The gremlin hissed around yellow fangs, but lost its nerve as Shingen and Nobu rushed to her side. It darted into the undergrowth followed shortly by a flight of Tsuru's arrows.

The men followed after.

“Are you alright princess?” asked Ori, who moved to stand by her with his sword raised. Though he spoke to her, his eyes darted constantly around their surroundings. Tsuru joined them a moment later, brushing leaves and clods of dirt from his armor.

“Fine. I was just surprised, the others?”

As if in answer, Nobu and Shingen stepped back into view, shaking their heads. The commander handed a pair of arrows to Tsuru.

“Should we pursue?” the archer asked.

“I don't see much point,” Nobu replied. “It will lead us off course, and we should try to avoid fighting rather than seeking it out.”

Ori frowned.

“The Father of Night's children will know we are here.”

Nobu only shrugged.

“They would have heard or scented us regardless.” He looked about them for a moment. “Your point is still valid however. We will want to camp far from here so that we don't run into trouble if that one comes back with reinforcements.”

He looked up at the sky. There was still light up there, and it was certainly fainter than it had been, but Saya could see no way one could possibly track the time of day with any reliability.

“Given that it will be dark soon, we had better get moving.”

“Were those creatures after us?” the princess asked.

“Unlikely, as we seemed to surprise them,” Shingen said. Tsuru nodded silent agreement.

They resumed their earlier formation and marched onward, but suddenly everything felt very different. While Saya had been vaguely anxious before, now every noise struck her as the hallmark of another fanged beast about to jump at her from just out of sight.

And to think, it would still be days until they reached their goal.



# Chapter 10

It was quite a relief to be back.

Guremurin's return to his homeland had been rather spoiled by the unexpected pack of humans lying in wait to greet him. He had had little time to savor the shade or his escape from the uncomfortably dry air of the capital.

When he had leapt from the top of the barricade, he had certainly not expected to land in the center of an armed welcoming party.

It had been a close thing, and he had nearly been surrounded in the early part of the fight. He had just begun to despair at the idea of capture so close to his goal when ultimately he had managed to break through their lines and avoid his many pursuers.

There had been humans everywhere. It was almost like being back in one of their cities. He had not lost them for almost a full day, but by the next sunrise they seemed to have given up the chase.

Further proof that none were the equal of Guremurin, in either strength or cunning.

Now the moment he had been dreaming of was finally upon him. His victorious and triumphant return. He could smell the scents of his tribe ahead: gremlin musk and mountain goat and roasting meat. A soft vibration could be felt through the ground, meaning that his tribe would be dancing to the beat of the shamans' drums.

Guremurin smiled at the thought. If he were lucky, the Father of Night himself would be in attendance.

Thick vines hung down between the trunks of the two trees ahead, creating a curtain beneath their intertwined branches. Guremurin pushed through them and into the much wider space beyond that was typically home to his tribe during this season.

A large bonfire roared in the middle of the clearing. The sweat on the bodies of the shamans encircling it glistened in its light as they beat on their chest-high, goatskin drums. Many wore strings of teeth or bones about their bodies that clinked rhythmically as they moved, creating their own song.

In a wider ring around them danced those females seeking mates, their skins stained in the eye-catching colors of dyes concocted from crushed up flowers mixed with other ingredients of secret feminine formulas.

Outside of all that activity sprawled the remainder of the tribe. Young braves challenging, posturing, and not uncommonly coming to blows as they tried to catch the eye of a favored dancer. Established pairings with their young and grandmothers beyond childbearing age; simply there to enjoy the spectacle.

His eyes rose above them all, to a seat elevated upon the stones ringing the fire pit, positioned so close to the great flame as to almost be inside it, its occupant nothing more than a shadow against the red.

Fortune had smiled upon him once more. The Father of Night was indeed here to personally witness his return.

Guremurin's tribe noted him, and the drumming paused, and then changed to a less somber tune of welcome. He heard braves and warriors gasping out his name. The silhouette rose from its seat and slowly advanced toward him, climbing down from the stone ring. Like Guremurin, the Father of Night towered over the assembly, but he was more human in form.

Some of Guremurin's friends and former mates had begun to rush toward him, but all fell onto their haunches and shuffled to the side when they recognized their Father's approach.

"My son." His Father's voice seemed deeper than even the pounding of the drums. "I never lost faith that you would come home to us."

His proximity lent little detail to his figure. Moonlight etched monochromatic lines revealing the boundaries of his form—the shape of his

face, the bridge of his nose, the crude metal crown—but without adding color. No matter where his Father stepped, the flames seemed reluctant to further illuminate his being.

Rather than answer, Guremurin tore the staff free from the scraps at his back and held it high.

There was an audible intake of breath from the surrounding crowd, and Guremurin could see moonlight glint from the Father of Night's teeth as he smiled for one of the few times the gremlin could remember.

Immediately the foul artifact wrenched in his claws, twisting as if alive and jabbing barbed thorns at his hand and wrist. Fortunately, he had been ready this time and thickened his hide in anticipation. Still, he doubted he would have been able to hold onto it for much longer than the few seconds required for it to change hands.

The moment the artifact entered into his Father's grasp, its struggling weakened. Guremurin seemed to sense it was struggling to return to his possession as he pulled his own hand away. The branch arched backward toward him with an audible creak, almost to the point of breaking, and the leaves along its length began to brown and droop.

“Excellent!” shouted the Father of the Night in clear satisfaction, and he actually reached up to pat Guremurin's shoulder in congratulation. The gremlin struggled to maintain his calm exterior, though a shiver of excitement went through him.

The Father turned to stand beside him and face the assembled tribe.

“Our bravest son has done the impossible! He has breached our enemy's lands and stolen their most valuable treasure.” His Father shook the staff for emphasis, causing dead leaves to shake loose and fall lightly to the ground. “What I hold in my hands is the Empire's prosperity itself. Without it their crops wither, their tribe will weaken, and we shall take that which should have always been ours!”

Guremurin doubted whether most of his tribe understood all of their Father's words, but the emotion behind them was unmistakable. Everyone cheered enthusiastically and then began chanting his name. It was everything that the gremlin had imagined.

“Now let us celebrate Guremurin's triumph and his return!”

It was somewhat later in the night when word arrived, Guremurin did not know exactly when.

He had been plied with much drink, had been offered his choice of the dancers as a reward. He had chosen all of them, and the Father of Night had toasted his boldness and granted his request. After that, it had proven hard to keep track of time.

He was dragged from his tent to join what was clearly a war party forming in front of their Father. A gremlin Guremurin did not know stood before the fire panting.

The Father of the Night nodded to Guremurin as he noted his arrival.

“Well, my champion, it appears that your work is not yet done. Mikoshi here was attacked with his brothers. It seems there are humans approaching our mountain.”

“They may have come seeking me, Father. A number chased me from their wall, but I thought I lost them long ago. Perhaps these simply refused to give up and are left blundering around the mountainside.”

The Father shook his head. “Perhaps, but I do not think so. I expected someone might come, and I... may want to collect one of these, as a pet.”

He clapped his hands and at his command those assembled began making their way from the clearing out into the forest. Dawn was already breaking overhead.

Guremurin would have been perfectly happy to never see a living human again, but whatever this was it seemed a further part of the Father's plan.

And he had called Guremurin his 'champion.'

That would not be soon forgotten. There would be more time for celebrating tomorrow. He joined the rest of his tribe's warriors, who allotted him a place of respect beside the Father of Night himself.

# Chapter 11

They walked as far and long as they could manage that first night, but Ori would have liked to press on even further.

After sunset, their hooded lanterns lighted the path almost as well as the meager daylight had earlier. Tsuru claimed to have them pointed in the direction of the mountain, and Ori had occasionally glimpsed its distant outline through the canopy.

Unfortunately, it was soon obvious that the Imperial princess was not used to long marches in armor, even if she gamely refused to complain or ask them for rest. When she tired to the point that they were spending longer periods waiting for her to recover than advancing, Nobu ordered them to start looking for a place to bed down.

Tsuru soon found a large bush that made a sort of natural tent; one side grew against the wide bough of a massive fallen tree trunk, creating a wall at their backs, and the long-stemmed, spade like leaves offered enough space for them to cluster together underneath and stay completely out of sight.

Ori and Tsuru took the first watch, as they were already accustomed to walking the Border Fortress' walls on later shifts. The princess seemed quite appalled at the prospect of sleeping in no more than a blanket atop grass, but her exhaustion won out, and she was asleep as soon as she covered herself with her bed roll. Nobu and Shingen, being old soldiers, knew enough to take advantage of allotted rest and also began snoring almost immediately.

Despite the eeriness of the forest, the two boys did little talking. Ori caught Tsuru watching the princess sleep on more than one occasion. The little samurai would wiggle his eyebrows suggestively when he noticed Ori's attention, but the larger boy preferred to keep his focus on the night around them.

The hours passed, tense but boring. Once or twice they heard strange calls in the distance but they were not answered. It sounded on several other occasions as if small things were moving about just outside the leaves covering their shelter, but whatever they were they passed quickly without causing trouble. Finally, Tsuro judged it was time to wake the other men and he and Ori lay down practically on top of each other; doing their best to give the princess space in the cramped shelter.

It was still dark when Nobu woke them. They breakfasted on tough jerky and tepid water from their flasks. They had brought along some rice cakes but saved these for the princess, who was awoken last. Someone had procured a small jar of zeri from the kitchens before leaving to sweeten them, so that her food would not be as flat and tasteless as their own.

No doubt it was a far cry from the luxury she was used to, but it was the best that they could provide under the circumstances.

They made better time that morning. Though she grumbled about stiffness, the princess seemed reenergized by the night's sleep and fought through the brush with renewed vigor.

After a few hours they came across a small but fast moving stream. The water smelled clean and in the dim morning light they could see the shadows of fish moving beneath its surface.

Nobu was glad for the chance to refill their flasks since they did not know how long it would take them to reach to the top of the mountain, and perhaps because the princess seemed to require far more water than the rest of them, a factor they had not planned for when gathering supplies the expedition.

Tsuro deftly speared a few fish with the tips of his arrows, Nobu cleaned them, and the five of them ate them raw. Though it was a bit early for a midday meal, the cold water and fresh food lifted their spirits even further. They encountered no more of the Father of Night's brood and Ori came to find the afternoon march almost pleasant.

After a time, they heard a rustling in the bushes and he and Shingen dashed forward, only to discover a large boar snuffling through the mud ahead. It is hard to say which of them was more surprised. The samurai had never seen such creatures come anywhere near the fortress and would not have guessed there were any living in these parts. Had the beast charged, it likely would have gone badly for them, but it was unfamiliar with men and chose to flee instead.

Later on, their path joined an earlier track of trampled grass and bent branches. Ori never would have noticed these signs himself, but they were clear enough once Tsuru pointed them out. He assured Ori it was the work of bears and not gremlins, but they still chose to skirt the area.

By the time the sun was beginning to set, Ori had noticed that the ground was starting to slant consistently, if very gradually, uphill. Tsuru had led them true and they had reached the lowlands at the fringe of Mount Iwate. Within another day they would truly be mounting its slopes.

The growth surrounding them appeared to change slowly in nature. The grasses became thinner and spikier, and in places where moisture collected, they were sometimes replaced by a slippery moss. The latter was something Ori first learned in an ungraceful fashion.

Hearing him cry out, the others clustered about in his defense, only to find him sitting on his rump in the mud.

“Wonderful, if the enemy did not know our location, you can be certain they do now,” Nobu said, cursing. “Always place your feet with care!”

The princess only laughed though, which set Shingen and Tsuru smiling. Ori felt his face grow red, but the embarrassment seemed worth it, for it appeared to raise Princess Saya’s spirits and she was more talkative afterwards despite Nobu’s periodic grumbles for them to stay silent.

“The vibrancy of the life out here really is amazing isn’t it?”

“Yes, princess, though I had hoped it might thin as we climbed higher and make our passage easier.”



“No, no, this is a very good sign!” she insisted, though a sign of what he had no idea. “Perhaps our quest will not be in vain.”

Ori nodded, but at heart found her admission that they might be making this trip for no reason disturbing. He did not raise the subject out loud. The princess had thus far been insistent that she needed to travel to the summit of the mountain. But any requests for details received the sort of withering gaze achieved by the nobility only through generations of practice.

“Whatever is necessary,” had been her sole answer to the question of what she would do when she got there. That proclamation had seemed ominous enough, but now that they were nearing their goal she seemed more optimistic than she had when they first set out.

“Uh, now that we are approaching the mountain, princess, is there anything that we need to prepare ourselves for?”

Princess Saya was silent for a long time, and he worried whether his inquiry had spoiled her mood, but she must have only been thinking for when she answered her tone still seemed pleasant enough.

“The thing you saw that monster carrying when you fought? You thought it was only a tree branch but it was... an important relic of the royal family. It may be hard to explain, but I believe a great number of people in the empire will suffer if it is lost to my father.”

Ori tried to think back to his battle against the gigantic gremlin, but it had all happened so fast. All he could conjure was a glimpse of wood and leaves. Did the plant perhaps have some type of medicinal properties relied upon by the Emperor?

“It seems unlikely that we should find it again, given the thief not only escaped the empire but evaded you and your brothers.”

Ori could not help feeling guilt, though it was clear she was just speaking the facts without judgment and not attempting to lay any blame for the creature’s escape.

“But there is still some chance that the relic itself is not what is important, that it might be replaced.” Ori saw the demon mask turn and fix its gaze upon him. “This is not a certainty, but it is a reason to hope. So, we travel to its origin to discover what we can.”

He noted appreciatively the way she continued to climb while her eyes stayed upon him; her body anticipating, feeling, and reacting to the land on its own now. There was perhaps more of the soldier in her than one would first realize.

The boy was somewhat surprised that Nobu had not once more barked for silence, but then he saw the way that the other samurai had closed ranks with them. They too were curious about the goal of their mysterious mission, and had crept closer to listen.

Princess Saya still studied him and she seemed to be expecting a response.

“As long as there is hope, we must strive for victory,” he said.

His words sounded lame to his own ears, but they seemed to pass muster with the princess, for she nodded and turned once more to the path before her.

“Indeed.”

It seemed that she would have said more, but that was when the ambush began.

## Chapter 12

That day and that night had been too gentle, too calming.

Saya had still been in something of a state of shock when she had bedded down the night before; the sense of panic from their confrontation with the small pack of gremlins having not yet fully dispersed.

Her exhaustion had overtaken her to the point she had not argued about removing her armor and laying down beside the men in the dirt. It was only in the morning that she realized how inappropriate and appalling the sleeping situation had been. If only her handmaids could see her now.

The rations the samurai had brought with them had proved almost pitiful, but they were trying so hard to please her with their offering of cold rice and jam that she did her best to choke it down. She saw that their own meal had been even blander fare. Perhaps with practice she could acquire a soldier's palate too.

The day had passed quite smoothly. The stream they had chanced upon was beautiful in a wild fashion, and the fresh fish they caught for lunch a definite improvement.

She could almost imagine she was spending the day on a hunt with her father and his court.

Eventually, she got to talking with Ori, who seemed as clumsy and earnest in speech as he was at other things. But like all of these men, his heart was clearly in the right place. They had not hesitated to obey her though she had given them no real explanation of the fears behind her actions or what she was hoping to accomplish.

She had not meant to deceive them or otherwise keep them in the dark, but had worried that no one would be willing to aid her if they knew she was chasing a fairy tale. Certainly, she had been reluctant to believe Jota about the necessity of their task.

Such secrets had been a mistake, she saw now. These men's very lives were a thing of folklore. They battled against Father of Night each day, at least in some small way, from the time they woke to the time they slept. They would probably be more willing to believe salvation lay in the finding the home of a goddess than to conclude it would be found by following some imperial edict.

And so, she had found herself beginning to explain herself and their true cause. The samurai deserved at least that much.

And, of course, that was when the Father of Night had chosen to strike.

With a keening cry, a horde of gremlins erupted from between plant fronds while a second wave fell down upon them from the branches overhead. Some charged on two legs, wearing rudimentary armor, and could have been mistaken in the shadows for small men or children. Others scampered about on all fours like animals, snapping their teeth and raking out with the claws that adorned both their hands and their feet.

It was Ori she was watching when they sprung, and she did not realize they were under attack until she saw him draw his blade and fell two of the smaller creatures in unison. She heard Tsuru cry out in pain from up ahead, but lost sight of him as he dove beneath an onrushing wave of the creatures. Nearby, she could hear Shingen and Nobu grunting as they struggled with foes of their own.

Fortunately, relatively few of the creatures made it between her guardians to within reach of Saya, but she still found herself outnumbered three to one. The first beast clutched at her greedily but made the mistake of assuming she was defenseless.

She felt certain the slash of her short-sword would have severed a human's arm, but it barely scratched the lead gremlin's hide. Still, she had felt bone splinter when she struck, and it pulled back hissing; shrinking the size of the injured arm and somehow elongating its neck and other limbs.

The remaining two creatures darted in opposite directions, trying to circle behind her, so that she was forced to retreat. She swung at one wildly in an attempt to back it off, but the gremlin caught her short-sword between its claws. This unbalanced her completely and the other lunged, recognizing her weakness. She pulled the weapon free at the last moment and stumbled just out of reach.

Now both charged, joined by the one she had wounded earlier. When the gremlin on her right reached her first, she struck it a solid blow to the head and it crumbled. Unfortunately, her sense of triumph was short lived, as she soon realized she wouldn't be able to turn and raise her guard in time to defend herself from the others given the inhuman speed of their advance.

She gritted her teeth and braced herself for contact.

Instead Shingen appeared suddenly out of the melee at her back, his katana already sketching an arc that partially decapitated one of her foes.

The gremlin she had wounded earlier stumbled over its comrade's collapsing form, fouling its own attack. In an economy of motion, the samurai stepped forward to flatten the fallen creature's head beneath a heavy boot and brought his blade back up into a guard position.

As she began to thank her savior a tiny gremlin, no larger than a toddler, landed on his shoulders from some branches above. Before she could even scream, it had doubled in size and scratched cruelly at his face. Yelling in rage and pain, he crushed its skull in a mailed fist and tossed it to the ground.

"Princess, it has been an honor," he said, sketching a slight bow.

"Our fight is not yet over," she urged him, but he did not seem to hear, as he had broken down into a fit of wet coughing. She saw blood blossom from his throat and across his cheek where the thing had raked him with its claws, and he crumbled softly to the ground.

She should have been easy prey, standing there defenseless with shock as she watched him fall, had one of Ori's large hands not encircled her arm

and roughly pulled her away and further upslope. The two of them followed Nobu, who was determinedly hacking a trail through half a dozen of the creatures. Tsuru had not been seen since he had been engulfed by the initial assault. They all assumed the worst.

“Enough of these games!” The booming voice struck suddenly, like a thunderclap. It rebounded off the side of the mountain that climbed above them and seemed to originate from everywhere at once. In its wake everything felt frozen in time for just a moment.

Hearing it, even the gremlins backed away, though they continued hissing and spitting at her and her friends.

A tree a few yards to her right shook and fell and a giant stepped into sight atop it. More than twice as tall as its brethren, it could only be the beast that had dared threaten her father and steal the strength of his empire.

Saya turned to face it, assuming it must be the speaker; only to jump when the powerful voice rumbled again from just behind her.

“Throw down your weapons now and surrender. There is no reason to prolong your men’s deaths.”

Ori and Nobu drew even closer to her, neither showing the slightest inclination to comply with the demand. At some unspoken agreement, Ori turned to face the enormous gremlin, while Nobu positioned himself nearer to the other newcomer.

Surprisingly, Saya saw that the speaker appeared to be human, though intimidating enough in his own right. He was as tall as Ori but not as broad, his form elegant rather than squarish.

He stepped closer, laughing softly as if pleased at their stubbornness, and she saw that his high cheekbones and hawkish nose gave him an aristocratic appearance. Indeed, he wore some type of crude circlet across his brow. The lantern Nobu still held did nothing to brighten the man’s face as he grew near. His skin must be as dark and black as the enamel on his armor, she realized, but his features themselves were handsome.

“You are the Father of Night,” she said, discovering it was true only as she heard herself speaking the words. The samurai gasped at this revelation then straightened, holding their blades tighter.

“I am.” He had continued stepping slowly toward them as they conversed, leaning upon a great stave that appeared to be his only weapon, but the Father finally paused now to regard them as they in turn studied him.

Then, without any obvious shifting of his weight, he darted forward and sprang back in the time it took Nobu to flinch.

He moved so quickly Saya was struck before she even saw it coming.

A hot, moist breeze ruffled her hair like the breath of someone standing too close. He had knocked her helmet and mask clean off her head, but she was otherwise unharmed.

Ori cried out and lunged toward her but the Father held out his hand for calm and he and his minions made no further move to attack. Nobu tightened his grip on his sword and nodded silently. After a quick glance to ensure that Saya was unharmed, he did no more than retreat a few steps from the Father in her direction to ensure he stood closer.

“Ah, and just as I thought, you are a daughter of the daylight. My son, Mikoshi, was quite excited when he scented you,” the voice, which began as a deep purr now harshened. “A poor likeness of her, in truth, but I suppose it will have to be enough.”

Saya found herself stepping back involuntarily, sensing a kind of predatory hunger behind the words. She raised her sword, but it seemed a pitiful defense. “Who are you?”

“Who? But you just named me.” The dark figure spat in disgust. “I am Tsukihito, the Father of Night. The very husband from whom your ancestor stole the love of Amaterasu.”

Seeing Saya’s expression, he laughed again, though this time it contained to mirth at all.

“Oh, your legends don’t tell you that part of the tale? Why am I not surprised? You see, I have languished here in darkness since, shunned by the light itself.” He shook the staff before him. Brown leaves, dry and lifeless, were dislodged by the motion. Suddenly, its shape became familiar to her. “But I am not above petty vengeance. And I am patient, oh how patient. I will see your line and everything it has built ground into dust! My children will dance upon your graves in the moonlight!”

His eyes had become lost somewhere in the distant past, but they snapped into focus on Saya once more, and his smile turned even more grotesque.

“But you my dear, you I intend to punish *personally*.”

The Father’s voice was hypnotic, lulling, but like the warriors defending her, Saya was not about to surrender to it. Shingen was dead, no doubt Tsuru as well; and the three of them remaining could not hope to defeat the rest of these monsters. But maybe, with enough luck, they could still escape.

Dropping her sword, she leapt at Tsukihito instead, grabbing the staff just above where it supported his weight against the ground. Her hands tingled strangely as they found purchase and she pulled with all her might, using gravity and her momentum to add to her strength as she rolled down the incline.

She had managed to surprise the Father, and for just a moment the staff began to slip from his fingers, she felt it pulling free. But then his grip tightened, his feet shifted and her slide down the faint slope halted abruptly.

The princess quickly twisted around onto her knees, trying to hold on. The Father of Night was by far the stronger of them, but as Saya focused her entire will on removing the staff from his possession, she saw green bloom across the artifact’s length; dead leaves fell free as living shoots and twigs sprouted to replace them. Suddenly stalks and vines were wrapping tightly about her wrists.



“What is this?” The Father growled in surprise. His might was such that he lifted her into the air along with the staff with a single hand, but he seemed unable to shake her free. Thorns and brambles began to thrust forth from the bark along his edges that he held.

For a heartbeat, everyone around them seemed to watch in fascination, as they wrestled for the artifact’s control. Then the gremlins yelped a shrill battle cry and charged at her and her remaining samurai.

Nobu screamed at them in response, a wordless cry of fury, no less bestial in nature. His sword moved like death incarnate. No creature that closed within its reach moved again.

The giant charged like a bull toward Ori, who bravely set his feet and prepared to meet it, but at the last moment it leapt and twisted nimbly past him through the air. Saya found herself staring at the points of one massive claw.

“Princess!” She heard Ori call out in warning, but she was no more able to dislodge herself from the embrace of the staff than the Father of Night was in his fury. For all her efforts, she flopped helplessly at its end like a fish on a rod, powerless to change her fate.

With a reverberating crunch, like a hammer breaking stone, fate gave way to momentary chaos. Ori had made an astounding leap of his own and tackled the monster in mid-air, altering its trajectory. She heard the young warrior grunt in pain then they all crashed together into a jumble of bodies.

There was a crack of wood, so clear and crisp it could be heard above the confusion, and she was no longer being held up in the air. As she thumped down onto the uneven ground, a light flashed so brightly that closing her eyes did nothing to lessen its sting. Her ears popped as a sudden gust of wind rushed past them.

It was long moments before she regained her feet, still blinking away dots of light. Her arm was tangled in something, and she saw that she still held a few inches of the staff. It ended just beyond her knuckles in a mangled

break though its web of vines and leaves still knotted about her forearm beyond her elbow.

Ori was also rising from the ground nearby. He was turned so that she was facing his right side. She could see holes there in his armor near his shoulder and thigh, both running with blood. More red seeped from between the fingers of the large hand he used to steady himself.

The creature beneath him had somehow halved in size. It twitched weakly, impaled upon a length of black wood which was studded with cruel barbs and spikes.

“You will pay for this!” The Father of Night shrieked.

A few of his gremlins, scared into motion by his fury, dragged themselves from the torn grass but most remained still.

Nobu’s armor creaked as he too straightened from where he knelt on one knee. His helm was gone now revealing the faint stubble of his hair, and he squinted against the blood dripping into one eye from a cut on his brow, but there was a sense of serenity to his fighting stance that gave the impression he was unruffled by all that had occurred.

Saya wished she had achieved a similar mastery of Zen. She stepped warily toward where she had dropped her short-sword, aware she held no real weapon.

“We are the wall that protects the empire!” declared Ori, advancing toward the Father of Night. The young samurai had lost his primary blade somewhere during the collision, but had drawn his own wakizashi in its place. The short-sword looked almost silly, like a grandiose knife given Ori’s size; but Tsukihito retreated before him, and the princess noted how awkwardly the Father held his hands.

One of Tsukihito’s arms hung limply at his side, hard to make out given its perpetual shadow, but three of the fingers on that hand appeared gone. The other palm he shook before him as he retreated as if it burned. He was leaking a dark fluid to the ground.

Nobu snarled and lashed out at one of remaining gremlins. The strike did little more than slap against its hide, but it was enough to convince the creature that odds were no longer in its favor. It shrunk its form and to create a smaller target and bounded upslope on all fours. Its peers looked at each other briefly then did the same.

The Father of Night glared them and growled fiercely, a sound of such malice that Saya felt it shivering her bones but then, amazingly, he too turned and fled.

The three of them looked at each other as if seeking confirmation that they had really won. Nobu gave them a brisk nod.

“Well done.”

Ori sheathed his sword and moved immediately to Saya’s side.

“Are you alright, princess?” She nodded in response; far more concerned about the amount of blood he was dripping upon her than her own injuries.

A soft clapping came from behind them. Saya turned to regard the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. Her unbound hair was dark and luxurious, her skin a white so unblemished it appeared to glow. She wore a gown of dazzling yellows and warm oranges, but both paled in comparison to the brightness of her eyes.

All of them fell immediately to their knees before her; aware her perfection was beyond human.

The goddess was far shorter in person than Saya would have imagined, her features small and delicate and her movements graceful and refined. She radiated such a profound dignity that the princess felt clumsy just to look upon her.

Amaterasu gestured toward them, raising an eyebrow expectantly. The men quivered, speechless so Saya dared raise her own voice.

“Blessed mother? Is it truly you?”

“Of course, my daughter. I came when I felt that burst of power. It would appear my gift to the empire of man has been destroyed.” She nodded toward the now still form of the large gremlin.

“That, um,” Ori cleared his throat roughly. “I believe that was the result of my actions.”

The goddess considered him, tilting her head.

“That it was but given that you acted bravely, and from the good of your heart, I can hardly hold it against you.” Her smile, when it came, was almost childlike. “I suppose we cannot fault your honesty.”

“The empire, your people,” Saya began before doubt halted her tongue.

Amaterasu regarded her with interest, her visage supernaturally calm. How did one make requests of a goddess? It was folly to demand assistance, but would she take a poor view of pleading as well? The princess pressed on, she had not come this far to falter; she could only say her peace.

“This monster stole the staff of fertility and interrupted our spring rites. The empire’s fields have lain fallow since. Its people are suffering, the poorest already starving. My father has done what he can to prepare for misfortune, but if the power for the ceremony has been lost along with the staff... it will not be long before the empire itself wilts.”

Saya heard Nobu grunt softly in surprise. The goddesses nodded, her expression apologetic.

“I had sensed something amiss in the balance of things, but I had not yet divined its cause. A season, to me, is like the blink of an eye. And now that the staff is broken, the power of that ceremony is lost. Without it the land will no longer support our people.”

“Can you help us?”

The goddess laughed.

“Of course, child, do not look so fearful. You were bold to come and seek me out. I have no desire for my descendants to go hungry. Indeed, I would have dealt with Tsukihito had you not sent him scampering off upon my arrival.”

The goddess’s eyes drifted toward the path down which Father of Night had fled, but her eyes seemed to be looking into the past.

“He is little more than a brutish bully, and like all bullies he seems far smaller once you stand up to him. Your ancestor taught me that once, and for that alone I would still owe him a great debt.”

When Amaterasu looked back at Saya, her face seemed infinitely sad, but the goddess quickly masked her emotions with another perfect smile. Reaching out, she brushed a delicate finger against the nub of wood that the princess still held and whispered softly, “Grow.”

The vines twined about Saya’s arms pulled back and released her, but at the same time she felt a rush of heat and motion as the fragment in her palm stretched and pulled. When she looked down, the princess found she now held a trident-shaped branch slightly longer than she was tall. Pure white cherry blossoms fluttered softly at its tips. She cried out in delight.

“Unfortunately, the time for the traditional spring rites has already passed, and their power has been broken.” Amaterasu’s words became far graver in tone. “Their performance now would do nothing to prevent the current year’s blight.”

“I understand.”

Amaterasu shook her head. “I’m not sure you do, a goddess defines ceremony, she is not bound by it. My daughters have sacrificed for the empire for as long as my sons, perhaps it is time they were shown more respect.”

“I’m sorry?” She had thought the goddess’ meant that for the current year nothing could be done, but that while they would have to endure a great blight and famine, they would do so with the knowledge that it would last no longer than the following spring.

“The old rites have failed us and so we begin anew. Henceforth, Saya, only you and the princesses of your blood may wield the staff and reenergize the land. Woe be unto the Emperor who has no sisters.”

The princess could not help but smile. For a moment, in her mind’s eye she had a sense of it. An unraveling of the court’s long history of treating women as nothing but convenient tools for arranging alliances; cursed at for not being born sons.

It may take time to sink in, but things would change now.

“Thank you, goddess!” She bowed deeply to her ancestor.

“Go with my blessing child, and live well. I will see you safely back to the empire.”

Amaterasu rose into the sky, glowing brighter as she climbed, until she broke through the clouds above into brilliant dawn.

The trio descended down the slight incline of the mountain’s base, leaning upon one another for support. They were all too filled with wonder to speak, lest it wake them from some shared dream. At the foot of the mountain, they stepped through a stand of trees they had passed through earlier, only to find themselves inexplicably standing before the gates of the Border Fortress.

As the guards rushed out to meet them, they all fell to their knees once more and prayed.



# Epilogue

“How do I look?”

“Here.” Jota adjusted her robe. “That is a bit straighter. Beyond that, you are on your own. I fear for the future of our empire if I am your most preeminent advisor on fashion.”

“But you are my most preeminent advisor on all things,” Saya told him. “And all of our people owe you their thanks. I would never even have undertaken my quest without your counsel.”

“Well, perhaps.” The old man shuffled about on his feet, looking uncomfortable. He was dressed in a formal black robe, which he did not wear with ease. “Do you remember all of the ritual?”

Saya scoffed. “I should think so. I’ve been practicing it for nearly a decade.”

“Hmm,” he grumbled. “You seem far more self-assured than your royal brother.”

“Perhaps because I am far more capable.”

“Well, do try not to mispronounce something and curse us with another decade of famine. The whims of goddesses can be fickle.”

“I feel fairly confident in my relationship with mine.”

Jota had no retort for this. It was funny how, in the beginning, she was amazed at her tutor’s belief in the supernatural, what had seemed like foolish fairy tales. Now he was the one in awe of her firsthand knowledge of their patron deity.

“What’s with this oaf you’re elevated to the head of your personal guard?” he asked, deciding another angle of criticism might be more secure.



“Oaf? You mean Ori? You should be more respectful, tutor. We are speaking about the warrior who slew the very same beast that attacked the Emperor. He stared down the Father of Night. His bravery and loyalty are beyond reproach.”

“I’m certain they are, but a country samurai here in the capital? I own butter knives that are sharper than that boy. He’s going to prove about as politically adept as a dead fish.”

“I think you’ll find he’s smarter than he seems upon first impression.”

“I think you’ll find you are deluded, I can tell by the way your face flushes when you talk about him.”

Saya touched at her face, realizing too late that the motion was somewhat of an admission.

“Good luck with that. Hero or no, I doubt your father will see you matched to someone with no family.”

Saya smiled viciously.

“He’ll see me matched to whomever I want if he wants to see his people fed.”

Jota snorted.

“You wouldn’t really hold the entire empire hostage for some selfish romantic urge?”

“My wise teacher taught me to use all available strategies to achieve my goals.”

“Your teacher was a doting, short-sighted fool, apparently,” he grumbled.

“Which is why we love him.”

She heard a hush fall over the crowd outside as the monks began their procession across the stage, chanting. Soon she was stepping through the

doorway, toward her people, who chanted and cheered her name.

As she strode forward to the altar, Ori nodded to her from his post along the wall. He looked awkward in the glossy metal armor he wore, but she knew the swords at his hip were the same plain, doubly thick iron of the Border Fortress' forge.

The number of samurai he directed was now a dozen, all of them drilled in tactics for fighting gremlins. If the Father of Night wanted to interfere with these ceremonies again, he would not find it easy.

She looked out over the assembly, catching the eye of Ueda Nobu who sat only a few rows back from the stage—a position of honor owing to his recent appointment as Lord Tanamen's replacement, though he had kept his former liege lord on as a deputy.

Closer to her she saw her father himself, looking noble and proud as she spoke the opening prayer.

And as the cherry blossoms upon her staff glowed like white fire in the rays of the morning sun, she felt optimistic about the future that lay ahead.

**The End**