

# SHI

Volume One:

*The End Where It Begins*

Mae L. Strom

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– ACT TWO –

Sole

## Chapter Five:

*'Already... dead?'*

*Anzen*

'Already... dead?'

He stepped back, and the goat's hoof fell from his shoulder. 'Don't be ridiculous,' Teal said. 'Do you know how crazy that sounds?'

'Oh trust me, I know. But isn't it even crazier that it only makes more sense the more you think about it?'

Before he could reply, Teal's mind shot him back to the smoking remains of the car. He couldn't recall seeing a single drop of blood. That was strange for a car crash, wasn't it? All those supposed wounds, and not a single drop? It seemed like he'd been lost in that fog forever. 'I... look here...' he stuttered. His mind was racing.

'Hey, it's okay.' The goat smiled. He looked up at Teal with his clear blue eyes. 'You're doing great. You're taking it a hell of a lot better than I did!' There was no judgement concealed within his gaze. Only understanding, and something Teal feared a whole lot more. The smallest hint of pity.

‘It’s spreading around the perimeter!’

‘Reinforce the iron doors! We need a Shrine Keeper at every corner of the village! Lady Umeboshi’s orders!’

A troop of animals bearing staffs rushed by as the bells rang out. Around them, panicking villagers were affixing charms and paper prayers to the doors of their thatched houses. A stout Amami rabbit barged past the two with his burgeoning wheelbarrow of cabbages, clutching a straw hat to his head. Sacks of talismans jostled around on top, spilling out into the road. ‘Outta my way. I’m needed at the entrance!’

But one look at the great iron doors, and the farmer dropped the handles with a shriek. Cabbages pooled into the dirt as he raced off, and then the great horn sounded once again, this time louder than ever. Teal and the goat covered their ears from the piercing sound and turned to the entrance.

For a moment, it looked like it was raining. But then Teal realised what was really going on.

The shadow dripped upwards from the edges of the great iron doors, continuing straight into the air like it was streaking along an invisible windowpane. And it wasn’t just at the doors. All around the village walls, a silent torrent of ebony rain rose higher and higher into the sky, so heavy that in some places, it was starting to blot out the very stars themselves. No light could escape it.

Onlookers pointed up at the night sky and cried, and as they watched the surrounding countryside slowly flicker out of view, even Teal felt his stomach drop. ‘This isn’t real,’ he told himself, the colour steadily draining from his cheeks. Had it always been so cold? ‘None of this can be real.’

‘We’ll be fine,’ the goat shuddered, reluctantly tearing his own eyes away from the encroaching shadow. ‘It doesn’t stand a chance of breaching the walls – not while Lady

Umeboshi is here. Right now, I'm more worried about you. You're not looking too good. I knew I shouldn't have said anything. We need to go find Linn before something really bad happens. He'll know what to do.'

'No, I'm fine,' Teal lied. But something was indeed very wrong. His insides were on fire, his fur bristling up from the tips of his toes all the way to his quivering fingers. 'Look at me,' he said, and he held his paws out to demonstrate. 'Fine and fresh as a fall-time fox. I just need to lie down for a while. Just need to...'

He tried to take a step, but one of his legs gave way underneath him. Before he knew it, he was stumbling forwards into empty space. Flailing wildly, he reached for anything to hold onto. Luckily, his paws found themselves wrapping around either side of one of the many stone lanterns lining the streets. The floating yellow flame whipped around inside. It was just like the lantern back at the waterfall.

He moved to lever himself up, but before he could get a solid grip, the lantern dug its claws out of the ground, shrugged him off and promptly tottered away, haughtily replanting itself a few feet away, safely out of arm's reach.

Panting, Teal rolled over onto his back and just stared up at the starry sky. When the goat rushed over to help, nervously gnawing on one of his hooves, Teal was surprised to find that he was laughing. What a strange dream this was turning into.

'Jeez, are you okay?'

But he just grinned. 'It moved. Of course the lantern moved.'

'Well sure it did, and can you blame it? How would you feel if a stranger tried leaning up against you? Now I'm sorry, but please, you've got to take my hoof. It's already started, so we need to get you up and somewhere safe while you can still

walk. There's an inn not too far from here...'

The goat continued speaking urgently, but Teal could no longer make out what he was saying. Everything was muffled all of a sudden, like he was swimming underwater. He didn't remember the ground being wet either, and yet he could feel the slick fur of his tail matting to his back. In fact, both his jacket and his trousers were sticking to him, weighing him down to where he lay. Was he sitting in a puddle? No, apparently not. The streets around him were as dry as a bone.

He looked back up to find the goat with the broken horn standing over him, trying his best to conceal how nervous he was. There was something to be admired in the way the small goat's shoulders were hunched over, ready in earnest to try and pull someone so much larger than himself up from the ground.

Teal's eyes drifted down to his outstretched hoof. The lily-white wool was glowing in the moonlight, as soft and pure as a newborn lamb's. He raised his own paw and held it up against the full moon. The fur was as black as pitch, densely tangled and matted with dirt, and yet even the moon's surface, whose own ethereal light silhouetted his paw, was pocketed all over with crags and craters. For some reason, at that moment, the sight struck him as profoundly beautiful. He hoped he'd remember it when he woke up.

Everything grew still, like the calm before the storm, and then the goat spoke to him once more. Teal only heard the low, dull vibrations, but watching his mouth move, he could make out exactly what he was saying. 'Do you trust me?' Strangely enough, he did. Grunting from the effort, he leaned forwards and grabbed his hoof. Water poured from the folds of his sleeve, glistening in the light.

He blinked, and suddenly, Teal wasn't in the street

anymore. He was floating. Icy water gushed from every direction, seeping into his clothes and splashing over his face, but try as he might, he couldn't move. Something over his chest was holding him down. Cracks spread along the dashboard like spider webs, and as he turned to the sound of the passenger window caving in, struggling to keep his chin above the water, the map floated slowly past his face. The red ink was bleeding down the page.

With an ear-splitting groan, the car lurched forwards. He stopped grappling with his seatbelt and braced himself for impact. Holding his breath, he closed his eyes as a fresh wave of water rose to meet him...

And opened them again to find himself gasping and shivering in the middle of the street, still clenching the goat's hoof like a vice within his paw. He was drenched to the bone.

'I was drowning,' he managed to splutter, water dripping down the sides of his cheeks. The goat just nodded, muttering words of comfort and doing his best to pull him up from the sodden ground. 'Not here, but in the other place. The car. Oh my god, the car! I was back in the Foxtail Duster. How was I back there?'

'You weren't,' the goat said. He hoisted him up, and Teal's shoe somehow managed to find purchase on the ground. His bare hind paw squelched in the dirt beneath him. 'You're not drowning either. You're just confused, like I was. Your head's going back to the last thing you remember.'

'But it was so real. I could move and look around like it was still happening. I was still alive!'

A bead of water ran down into his eye, and he blinked again. For the split second before he reopened them, he was back in the car. He could still hear his own haggard gasps for breath, still feel the cold water soaking into the fur up to his

waist, weighing him down to the seat. His tail felt like it was about to snap off behind him. He reached past the mangled car seat to untangle it from the myriad of seat straps, his paws trembling with adrenaline, and with a sudden jerk...

He was back in the village. Teal's head was reeling. Still leaning on the goat's shoulder, he reached back for his tail, frantically pulling it around. Apart from being wet, it was completely fine. It even gave a reassuring wag in his paw, and yet the pain rang out loud and clear in his head, as though they were both still there. 'Okay, I take it back,' he winced. 'It's real. All of this is real. No dream could feel like this.'

'I know it hurts. I'm sorry, really, I am. But it's not going to get any better on its own, so we've got to get moving. Come on, I'll take you to someone who can help.' The short goat pulled his shoulders back, wrapped Teal's arm around his neck and slowly started making his way down the road, one plodding step at a time. Water seeped through his white robes.

'You should go find cover. I'm only going to slow you down.'

But the goat just shook his head. 'Not as much as I slowed you down,' he replied. 'And did that stop you?' With a huff, he set his hooves into the ground and picked up the pace. That was the end of that.

### *Streets*

Every time Teal's eyes closed, he found himself back in the car, so he did everything he could to keep them open. 'What's going on?' he said, as they limped past frantic farmers who barely batted an eyelid in their direction. Most of them were busy nailing talismans to every square inch of their homes, while others had already given up, and were trying to

cart all their worldly possessions off down the road to the nearest shrine. 'Why is this happening to me?'

'Because you're impossible. You shouldn't even be here right now. Oh thank god, some of the kiba-kibas made it out okay.'

'Some of the what? Oh... ' Teal looked up to find a few of the egg-like creatures congregating around a nearby well. The small group sat down by pieces of the broken bucket to watch them go by, trilling mournfully all the while.

'Look, the last thing you remember is the last thing that ever happened to you, but at the same time, you're here, so your head doesn't know what to do. It's trying to bring up everything it can remember. Now don't tell anybody I asked you this, but you drowned, right?'

'How am I supposed to know if I drowned? I don't remember any of it. And why would it even matter if I'm already dead?'

'Because if your spirit can summon the water back, I don't know what else is coming.'

Teal wiped a trickle of water from the side of his mouth. Both his ears were dripping, drooping down low over his eyes. He brushed them aside. 'I thought you said it wasn't real.'

'It's not. But you don't know that yet, or we'd both be dry right now. You said something about a car. Are you sure you weren't sitting in a train, or something even bigger? We both lived when there were planes, right?' Teal nodded. The goat's eyes widened. 'Are we gonna have a 747 drop on our heads?'

Teal shook his head. 'No planes,' he said. He was pretty sure there were no planes. But it was difficult to concentrate on anything when at any moment, he could find himself trapped underwater again. 'It was just me on the road, I think. There was this river on either side...'

The goat sighed. ‘Good.’

‘Good?’

‘Just trust me on this one, buddy. Drowning’s not a bad way to go. There are plenty of worse things you could be reliving over and over again. Plenty of worse things...’ The goat took another step and stumbled on an uneven patch of ground. Teal’s eyes slammed shut...

And suddenly his lungs were burning in his chest. The water was too high, and only growing higher with each passing second. Though he was still strapped firmly to the seat, he could feel his legs lift from the seat cushion, floating freely in the water. He couldn’t feel his tail at all.

Another wave splashed over him, and for a few seconds, his entire head was underwater. Everything went quiet. He tried to squint through the murk at the belt buckles, but his eyes stung so much, he could barely make out...

His own paws in front of his face, as clear as day under the village lanterns. They were shaking, his curled claws still jutting out, glinting savagely in the light. His legs dragged underneath him, somehow even more useless than before. Teal thought back to the goat’s words with dread. There were things worse than this? He wasn’t sure he believed him. ‘I don’t want to go back again,’ he said. ‘How do I make it stop?’ But the goat seemed hesitant to answer him. ‘Look, whatever it is, I’ll do it! Just tell me what I have to do.’

For a time, they stumbled through the streets in silence. The goat seemed to know where he was going. Within a few turns, they managed to leave behind the rough rows of thatched cottages and farmer storehouses and make it onto the main thoroughfare, where the marketplace was set up. There, Teal received his answer. ‘It’s simple. You have to stop thinking about being dead.’

‘Oh, well that’s great.’

‘I know.’

‘Easiest thing in the world.’

‘I know.’

‘Do you know how hard it is to stop thinking about something when you can see it every time you close your—?’

‘I know!’ he snapped. Teal recoiled, and the goat heaved a heavy sigh. ‘I’m sorry. But trust me, I know. It seems impossible, but you have to try. Think about something else.’

‘Like what?’

‘Anything. Your home town, your favourite flavour of ice cream... anything to take your mind off it. Actually, yeah, tell me about your favourite ice cream.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘I’ve never been more serious about anything. Lay it on me. I want to know everything about it.’

Teal and the goat slowed to a snail’s pace as they made their way around an abandoned wagon in the middle of the road. Wooden stalls of every shape and size surrounded them, lining the cobblestones underneath bright banners, and even brighter rows of paper lanterns.

There wasn’t a single windowpane to be seen, and yet Teal could feel glass crunching underneath his hind paws. It took a moment for him to realise that it was coming from the windscreen. It wasn’t real, he reminded himself, but the cold water trickling down into his eyes was harder to ignore. He swatted it away with his free paw, fighting the urge to blink it out. ‘The southern wall is falling!’ he heard a distant voice shout somewhere behind them. ‘Protect the south side! All reinforcements to the south side!’

And sure enough, several villagers flew overhead to answer the call, clutching quivers to their breasts and casting

long shadows on the streets below. Above them, the shadow rains continued to rise. ‘Come on,’ the goat urged Teal, pressing them both on. His shoulders trembled, but somehow, he was still standing. ‘How about that ice cream?’

Teal took a deep breath. He could barely believe he was about to do this. ‘My favourite flavour of ice cream was blue raspberry,’ he began. He stopped to rub his eyes... and with the most satisfying click he had ever heard in his life, the seatbelt buckle snapped back. He was free. Holding his breath, he reached over for the door handle, but it was already too late. The battered frame refused to budge.

Three times, the windscreen crackled like breaking ice. Then, it burst inwards. Something blew up and hit his head, and as the world went dark, the maelstrom swallowed everything...

And then he opened his eyes again. It was okay, he told himself, even as he was shuddering. Everything was fine. He was back. Allie’s hooves were plodding along the uneven cobblestones just like before, and the banners around the marketplace were still billowing in the breeze. He shook his head, and tried to carry on from where he left off.

‘My favourite flavour was blue raspberry,’ he repeated. ‘Always was. Even when I was a kit. But I never ate it in front of anybody, because I knew the other kids would tease me about it. They always did. So every time the ice cream van came around, I’d hide around the corner and give my pocket money to my friend. And he’d always come back with an ice cream that cost twice as much as the money I gave him. I’m talking sprinkles, flakes, strawberry syrup, chocolate fish... the works.’

‘He sounds like a hell of a friend.’

‘He was,’ Teal said. ‘The best.’ His paw clenched into a

fist at his side. ‘And I’m never going to see him again.’ At this point, water was streaming from his clothes, bubbling down the stones. Torn pieces of the map floated in the puddles they left in their wake. Teal’s head felt so light, and yet his legs were barely moving.

‘Hey, stay with me buddy! Don’t think about that. How about you tell me something else. Why were the other kids teasing you, huh? Why was that?’

‘Because I was born blue, and my name is Teal,’ he uttered through gritted teeth. ‘I know, right? What a laugh riot.’

‘Shh, keep your voice down! Nobody’s allowed to know your real name here – it’s forbidden. You’ll get in even more trouble than you’re already in.’

‘Sorry. But since it’s already too late, you may as well tell me yours.’

‘What?’

‘That way, at least we’ll both get in trouble together.’ The goat looked taken aback.

‘Allie,’ he whispered, after a pause. ‘You can call me Allie.’

‘Well there you go. Nice to meet you, Allie. I guess we’re partners in crime now. Sorry about that, but if it makes you feel any better, you’re not the one who’s drowning on dry land. What an introduction for the ages.’

Allie laughed, but his shoulders were quivering under the strain. They both knew the small goat was only a few steps away from buckling. ‘We’re never going to make it to Linn at this rate,’ he breathed. ‘Damn it. For once, I wish Kapp was here. Hello, is anybody there? We need to find Linn!’

The door to one of the nearby houses drew open, and candlelight streamed into the street. ‘Are you nuts?’ an unseen figure barked at them. ‘Get yourself to the nearest shrine, kid.’

It's the end of the world out there!'

And with that, the door swept shut, slamming against the doorframe with such intensity that a tuft of straw fell from the roof and landed in the long stream behind him. The yellow strands curled in on themselves, and they watched the wet clump float gently down the road and out of sight.

'Okay, hold on tight...' Allie unwrapped Teal's arm from around his shoulder. The weight almost dragged him down then and there, but he managed to stumble over to a ceramic stand, where he gingerly lowered Teal to the ground. The painted pottery on sale clinked as he propped him up against the side, water sloshing over his hooves. Countless crumpled banknotes spilled from Teal's pockets and mushed into a pulp on the stones below.

'What are you doing?'

'We're not getting anywhere like this. By the time we made it to the inn, you'd already be repeating, and I think you'd agree that going through all this once is bad enough.' Teal blanched. He gave Allie a short, sharp nod. 'Linn's the only one I know who might be able to help. After all, he helped me. If you wait here, I can bring him right to you.'

'But I'm fine, I swear,' Teal protested. 'I can't even see anything when I close my eyes anymore. Just watch...' He tried to lift himself up, but his paw slipped from underneath him, splashing in the cold water. The subsequent ripples dissolved the mush of banknotes into dust between his fingers.

'I am watching. You can barely move. To be honest, I'm surprised you can still talk. You're a tough cookie, buddy. Way tougher than me.' Allie smiled and patted him on the shoulder. 'Just remember, whatever it is you see, it can't hurt you now. It's just memories. I'll be back before you know it. Scout's honour.'

But the goat struggled to even stand, clutching his shoulders like his arms could fall off at any minute. With another smile, and one last reluctant nod, he turned his back on Teal and broke into a lumbering, zigzagging jog across the street. Teal looked around. There wasn't another soul in sight, and up above, around the village perimeter, the deathly rains were ever rising.

'Please don't leave me!'

Steeling himself, he reached over and pushed himself off the wooden stall. It was a long and protracted struggle, with the pottery clattering loudly in protest, but at long last, he managed to drag himself back onto his hind paws, despite barely being able to feel them. Unaided, he stepped back into the moonlight. He was trembling like a reed. His jacket billowed around him as wind whistled through the street, swinging the hanging lanterns to and fro. 'See, I told you I was fine.'

The goat turned around, and his mouth dropped open.

'What? What is it?'

But he wouldn't say. He just stood there, frozen to the spot with the whites of his eyes showing. It was just like before in the field.

'Allie, what's wrong?' Teal looked around, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. He tried to follow the goat's eyes, but they were just staring down at the ground. So he looked down. His paws were clean off the floor. He was floating.

Teal kicked his hind paws underneath him, but all it did was make him sway back and forth. Slowly, inch by inch, he was rising into the air. His mouth agape, Teal stared first down at the ground, and then at Allie. Allie stared at Teal, and then down at the ground, and then back at Teal. It seemed to take both of them a moment to process what was going on,

and by the time Teal found his voice, he was already several feet off the cobblestones.

‘A little help?’ Teal hoarsely called, but Allie did nothing of the sort. His muzzle trembled, but no sound was coming out. He was paralysed. ‘Come on, I can’t get down by myself!’ But Allie was in another world. Teal wasn’t even sure he could hear him. What started out as a feeling of sickly giddiness was quickly turning into cold dread, which pitted his stomach like a stone. ‘Allie, please!’

Hearing his own name finally seemed to snap him out of it. Allie shook his head and rubbed his eyes. It was like he’d just woken up. When he saw Teal, his arms dropped limply to his sides. ‘Oh gods...’

‘Quick!’

It all happened so fast. Allie stumbled towards him, stretching his hooves out as far as they could possibly go. Teal swung around to grab them, but it was too little too late. Allie’s hooves barely clipped his paws, sending him careening forwards. Somersaulting uncontrollably, he scrambled for something, anything to hold onto, but there was nothing nearby. Teal rose into the air, higher and higher over the streets of Anzen, and there was nothing to stop him. There was nothing between him and the beckoning sky.

### *Sky*

Everything was spinning. The entire world was a chaotic, nauseating mess of bleeding colours and blurring shapes. At this speed, Teal caught only the briefest glimpses of the village below, glowing faintly with its smears of orange light, before it span out of sight again, leaving nothing but a dark void broken up by tiny, streaking pinpricks, and an enormous white smudge.

He felt like he'd just been shot out of a cannon. The only difference was that all the cannonballs fired throughout history had come back down eventually.

For him, there was no such guarantee.

With panic setting in, Teal did everything he could to slow himself down. He stretched out all of his limbs like a skydiver, beat his tail like a rudder and even wrapped himself into a ball, but nothing seemed to work. Carried by the wind, he sailed straight past the marketplace banners and over countless abandoned stalls. A white blur followed closely underneath, careening into the stalls and apologising profusely as it followed the winding street up the hill towards Anzen's peak.

The cold wind buffeted Teal's ears relentlessly. It was difficult to make out much of anything above the constant clamour of the bells, which was why, even spiralling through the air, he smiled to hear a faint voice coming from down below. 'Hey, are you okay up there?' Over the streets of Anzen, it was a very welcome sound.

'I think I'm about to be sick!'

'Oh thank the gods, you're still awake! About to be sick is good – it means you can still feel stuff. Hold onto that! I'm just gonna try and get you down!'

'How? Why am I floating now?'

'I have no idea!'

'You have no idea how I'm floating, or you have no idea how I'm supposed to come back down?'

'Exactly!'

'But what happens if I keep going?' he called. The night sky wasn't getting any smaller.

'I don't know!'

'But I'll stop eventually, right? I've got to stop eventually. It's not like I could just keep rising forever...'

For a few seconds, the ground below was conspicuously silent. The hoarse reply eventually came between pants. ‘Just hang in there!’

Teal shuddered. That was an even worse answer than he’d been expecting. At this point, he wasn’t sure what to do. Even if he could make it stop, at this height, it didn’t look like it would make for a very pleasant landing. There was a story about two foxes that flew too high into the sky. It didn’t end well.

When he was younger, his father used to take him to their local Krispy Kadets every year for his birthday. At the end of each meal, they made a point to release the complimentary helium balloon into the sky, to let his mother know that he was okay, and that he’d be staying for another year. As a kit, Teal had always felt so sad, watching it gradually fly out of sight. He couldn’t help but wonder if this is what it had felt like to be one of those balloons, lost in the wind without its string. If it was, he vowed to himself, he would’ve stopped the tradition a hell of a lot sooner.

Teal was dragged sharply back to the present by the sound of something whistling past his ear. What on earth? He looked around for what it could be, but it had already hurtled past. Was he being shot at? There was another one, and then a grey blur that zoomed right between his ears. He only realised that it had been a rock when another managed to clip his thigh. ‘Ow!’ he grunted, outraged. He patted the tender spot with his paw and glared down at the white blur below him. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’

‘Slowing you down!’ came the reply. ‘Sorry, by the way!’ Sure enough, Teal seemed to be spinning a little slower. He almost wished he wasn’t, and when the third lucky shot amid the next dozen or so stones struck his chest, there was no

doubt about it, even in the midst of a seemingly endless stream of apologies from the streets. Allie was lucky he was still too high to aim a volley or two of his own.

Without the disorientating spinning, Teal was able to look around properly for the first time since he left the ground. Unfortunately, the dizzying heights were almost worse than the confusion.

He could see so much of the village. The flat, roughly hewed rows of farmhouses over by the great iron doors, which gradually gave way to the colourful marketplace at Anzen's heart. The old shrines that sat at each of its four corners, and the enormous shrine in the centre, inside which most of the terrified villagers appeared to be huddled, praying, chanting, or simply kneeling in contemplative silence. Everything was enclosed within the village's troublingly thin walls. Outside, the looming shadow waited. It was only from up here that Teal realised just how much it towered over them all.

At the southmost corner, the wall was already starting to bow. Even the battalion of defenders stationed there, who looked like a mass of swarming dots from so far away, were only slowing it down. Teal prayed that they'd be able to keep it at bay. If not, maybe the sky was the safest place after all.

Far below him on the ground, Allie was racing across the narrow red bridge that separated the marketplace from the Main District, holding a hoof over his face to shield it from any falling drops. Here, the buildings grew taller and more ostentatious as the slope of the hill became more pronounced. Everything seemed to converge upon the hill. There were gilded inns, teahouses, and Teal even spied a colossal black forge that was still belching smoke into the air, apparently oblivious to all the chaos going on around it.

But it was the top of the hill that Teal was slowly floating

towards, and once he saw it, it commanded his undivided attention. It was as though he was being drawn to it.

On the highest point, a lofty red tower stood alone. Nothing lay beyond it except a small lake, and the village walls themselves. The base of the tower may have been overgrown, but it did nothing to diminish its commanding presence on the rest of Anzen, over which it leaned imperiously. Each of its nine floors had a balcony that overlooked the intricately tiled, umbrella-shaped roof of the floor underneath, and hanging from the corner of every roof was a paper lantern. Together, the lanterns flickered in the breeze, almost like distant stars, but Teal had something else in mind. To him, the tall rows of lights looked uncannily like a landing strip.

‘That’s where Lady Umeboshi lives!’ he heard Allie call from below. Teal was just about to shout back when he suddenly realised how loud and clear the goat’s voice was. It didn’t sound far away at all. Confused, he wrenched his eyes away from the tower. Before he knew what was going on, there were walls on either side of him.

A clothes line shot right over his head! Barely a moment later, he was forced to duck under a hanging street sign that came out of nowhere, but alas, he was too slow. The corner clipped his ear, sending him spiralling through the air once again. The surrounding buildings seemed to be growing taller by the second, even faster than he was ascending.

It was the hill, he realised dizzily, groping for a handhold and finding nothing but thin air as he corkscrewed around. He cursed himself for not grabbing the street sign when he had the chance. The natural slope of the town was rising up to meet him, and from what he could make out, Allie was dead ahead. At this rate, he was going to crash right into him.

‘It’s okay!’ Allie yelled, in a voice that suggested things was anything but. Between spins, Teal caught flashes of him darting back and forth in a blind panic, wildly waving his hooves over his head. ‘I’ve got you! This time, I’ve really got you!’

The goat reached out to him, and as he drew nearer, Teal held his own paws out too, holding his breath and silently counting down the spins. He could barely bring himself to believe it was almost over. They were so close now. Far, far behind them, the great horn sounded, followed a few moments later by a distant cry. He wasn’t sure what it meant, but he knew that whatever it was, it wasn’t good. His clothes whipping around him, Teal felt his fur stand on end. He turned his head to face the sound...

And just like that, the wind direction changed, and Teal was sent careening off towards the edge of the village. Aghast, Allie shambled after him. ‘No, no, no, no, no!’

But Teal could barely hear him. The breeze was blowing so fiercely, there wasn’t anything he could do. Tumbling head over tail, he found himself sailing down the middle of an increasingly narrow street, away from the tower and the Main District and towards the slums, where the shadow rains were waiting.

There was an impenetrable wall of death around Anzen, and Teal was heading right for it.

His heart sank in his chest. Luckily, it wasn’t over just yet. ‘Do you see the tailor up ahead?’ It was Allie calling from down below. Teal looked up.

It was an old rake of a building, tall and positively teetering in the breeze. The village walls were only a few doors further down. Its sign was barely holding on, and each of its three floors looked like they could fall to pieces at any

moment, but the longer Teal stared, the more the disrepair seemed to be nothing more than a front. Past the gnarled balcony posts, cloth mannequins stood proudly, padded with straw and adorned in some of the most finest, most extravagant clothing he'd ever seen. 'I see it!' he shouted back.

'Good. Try to head towards it!'

'I don't think I've got much of a choice. But at this rate, I'll sail straight over it!'

'Have you got a better idea?' Allie didn't waste time waiting for an answer. As Teal completed another slow spin, he watched the goat race over to the door and slam on it with his hooves before he fell back out of sight. Somewhere behind the door, the dull, repetitive clunk of hammering rang out. Anxious, Teal waited, listening intently. When he heard the door squeak open, accompanied by a quiet voice, he craned his neck to try and get a better look. In the back, the hammering continued.

'Allie, thank the heavens you're alright—!'

'We can talk later. Right now, we've gotta get him down.'

'What? Who?' Head over heels, Teal caught sight of a tall sable standing in the doorway in a simple floral kimono, tightly tied with a golden sash. A necklace of thimbles hung from her neck, and loose threads trailed from her sleeves. One of her paws was wrapped protectively around Allie, along with her long brown tail. She held the other up to her eyes, staring up at the sky and brushing aside the single lock of hair that wasn't pinned back behind her ears with chopsticks shaped like knitting needles. When she saw him, her paw fell to her side. 'Allie, what did you do...?'

'Kon, there's no time!'

'Right.' Kon nodded resolutely. 'Head to the second floor

at once, and see if you can reach him from there.’

‘Where’s Peito?’

‘Busy.’

The tailor disappeared into the building without another word, and Allie quickly followed behind, his hooves thundering up the staircase. Through the window, Teal followed Kon as she hopped from ladder to ladder on the back wall, rummaging through rolls of materials. ‘Peito, we would really appreciate a little help right now,’ the sable called, casting measuring rods and thread reels aside with increasing urgency. But there was no reply. ‘Peito?’ Nothing to break the silence. ‘Peito, please. He’s only a kit!’ Just the sound of hammering.

Meanwhile, Allie burst through the door on the second floor. For the first time since Teal started rising into the air, they were able to see each other eye to eye. The small goat was quite a sight to see, red-faced, panting and soaking wet, but that didn’t stop him from breaking out into a nervous grin as he made for the balcony.

To his surprise, Teal found himself smiling back, although it didn’t last long. He was close enough to make a grab for his hoof, but the arc of the spin was all wrong. Allie made to the edge just in time to watch him sail up and over the balcony posts.

But the small goat was undeterred. With no time to lose, he threw himself back inside as the second floor fell out of sight. Teal could no longer see what was going on. There was nothing left to him but the open air and the crooked wall, along which he was revolving helplessly. The only thing he could hear was the goat’s hooves clattering up the staircase, and the incessant hammering in the background.

Desperate to catch hold of something, he flailed around

blindly, but his paws only grazed the wall. His claws bounced harmlessly off the wood, scraping along the side, and then, without warning, the scraping stopped, and he found himself swiping through thin air. This must be the third floor. He looked down by his thrashing tail to see the thin, patchy roof above it, and beyond that, only the open sky.

There was a loud crack from within the building. Upside-down, Teal strained his neck to watch Allie emerge onto the third floor landing, untangling himself from a sheet of fabric. He threw it to the ground just as Teal drew level with him. Wind raced through his fur. 'You're not getting away that easy!'

He scabbled underneath work tables and threw himself breathlessly between mannequins to get to the balcony. Despite bumping into every other stall in the marketplace, he managed to avoid every single one. 'I've got you!' he said, climbing onto the narrow ledge and teetering back and forth on the tips of his hooves. If he'd been stretching his hoof out any further, his arm would have been out of its socket. 'I've got you, I've got you, I've got you!'

Teal reached out to him for all he was worth. They were only inches away. No, not even that. Allie was only standing on the nail of his hoof, but somehow, impossibly, even with his legs quivering like jelly, he managed to close the gap.

Teal's paw grazed the edge of Allie's hoof. They'd done it. They made contact. His fingers scabbled around for purchase over his large, clumsy digits, but there was nothing to hold onto. Nonetheless, he clung onto what little he could reach as his legs and tail continued over his head, gently pulling him skyward. For a few seconds, he was anchored to the ground, swaying in the wind. Water streamed down his sleeve, twinkling in the moonlight.

Then, his paw began to pull away. They stared at each other fearfully, but there was nothing either of them could do. Millimetre by millimetre, his fingers slid up Allie's hoof, and when there was no more hoof left, Teal found himself slowly drifting away. 'It's okay,' he said softly, rising over the roof. The straw rustled pleasantly in his ears. It was a cruelly gentle breeze. High above, the silent void was waiting.

Allie made one last desperate leap for him. But this time, his hoof fell short, and he hit the balcony hard, bouncing off the ledge with a yelp. The goat was left hanging off the side of the balcony, with only a wooden post between himself and the long fall. With his free hoof, he reached wordlessly up to the sky, his single intact horn scuffing against the wall.

Teal closed his eyes. For once, he truly didn't know what was going to happen. Maybe it was going to be okay after all. Maybe dying a second time wouldn't be so bad.

'No one else is dying today!'

Teal opened his eyes. The sable was clinging to the edge of the straw roof like her life depended on it, a spool of brilliant red ribbon over her shoulder. The golden sash around her waist billowed in the breeze. Unspooling a few lengths of ribbon, she began to whip it around her head. A rock was crudely tied to the end of it.

As he continued to rise, carried by the wind, she followed him up the roof, her claws digging deep grooves into the straw. 'Mark me carefully, stranger. We've got one chance at this. Are you ready?'

'I'm ready!' he lied. There was no time in his life in which he'd be ready for a moment like this. But it was now or never.

She took a moment to line up the shot, holding a thumb in front of her eyes. 'Then here goes nothing. The gods be good...' It swung swiftly around her head. Once, twice... and

then on the third spin, she volleyed it into the air.

The stone sped towards him, leaving a lifeline of bright red ribbon behind it like a bloody trail in the air. For a split second, it looked to be a perfect shot, but then it started to dip. It was going to fall just a few inches short.

Luckily, the arc of his spin carried him forwards. He swiped through the air with his claws, and the ribbon managed to snag on the claw of his index finger. The rock hung down. Quick as a bolt, he plucked it out of the air and wound the ribbon several times around his wrist. Teal held onto it tightly, unable to do much more than watch the long crimson line slowly grow taut.

He bounced once, then twice in the air. Then, finally, he seemed to come to a stop, wavering back and forth slightly in the breeze. It was over.

Far below on the ground, the sound of the hammering had stopped.

### *The Tack and Thimble*

‘Thank you.’ Allie nodded his appreciation as Kon passed him a steaming teacup. He was sitting between the back wall ladders on a plump cushion, buried within the thickest, fluffiest towel that Teal had ever seen. It was like he’d been swallowed by it. Only his face and hooves were visible.

Water dripped slowly from his wool. Kon was dabbing at it concernedly with a dry rag, much to his dismay. Teal had never seen anybody so concerned about a bit of water. ‘I don’t know why you’re worrying so much,’ Allie sniffed, lifting the teacup to his muzzle. But every time he came close to taking a sip, he hesitated and lowered it again. ‘I’m fine, really.’

‘There’s no such thing as too much worrying where you’re concerned, little one,’ she told him. ‘And we both know that

right now, everybody is far from fine. Anzen hasn't seen an attack like this in years. Nobody was ready, not even the sentries. If that horn blows again, I swear I'm going to have to pull my sleeves up, march past those iron doors and deal with it myself. To think that you were outside the village walls when it all started. Just the thought of it makes my blood run cold.'

She shuddered. 'But enough of that. You're still here with us, and that's what matters. I can't imagine what this workroom would be like without your face brightening it up.' Kon leaned over and pinched his cheek, laughing when the goat wrinkled his nose up at her.

'Well you've got T—' But Allie caught himself just in time. 'I mean, him. You've got him to thank for that.'

'Is that so?' The sable turned to Teal, who sat swaddled in his own sodden fortress of towels. The towels were the only thing keeping him down, and it was only by the eighth one that he'd finally felt his tail rest against the floor. After soaring helplessly over so many rooftops, he never wanted to take them off again. A loop of the lifesaving red ribbon still hung from his wrist.

Allie nodded. 'He's the only reason either of us made it inside before the iron doors closed. When I saw the... the... when I saw...' But the goat couldn't bring himself to say it. Every time he tried to speak, his eyes clouded over, and he grew deathly still. Eventually, he just gave up altogether, retreating behind his teacup with a silent shudder.

'It was the shadow,' Teal said. For a moment, the room went quiet. Even the crackling of the fireplace seemed to abate. Maybe that was why it suddenly felt so cold. 'He just froze up a little when he saw it rolling over the hills. I did the same thing the first time I saw it. I think anybody would.'

‘But not everybody would have stopped to help him,’ Kon said softly. ‘Much less a stranger. I don’t know what it’s worth, but that makes you a friend of ours any day. We may never know your name, but The Tack and Thimble’s doors will always be open to you. If there’s ever a day when you find yourself wanting, you need only ask.’

From within his tower of towels, Teal found himself blushing. He could barely bring himself to meet her gaze as she spoke. ‘You’re too kind,’ he said.

‘There’s no such thing,’ she replied with a smile. ‘Kindness deserves nothing less than itself. Now you must excuse me for keeping you waiting. I know it’s very poor form to serve your guests one at a time, but in my defence, we’ve been running terribly low on ethre lately. For the last couple of days, we’ve really had to stretch out our stocks any way we can. You get used to brewing your tea by the cup. I won’t, however, apologise for the flavour. Ask around if you like, they’ll all tell you. Nobody makes a cup of tea like Kon.’

After one last dab for good measure, the sable got up to wring the rag out of the window. Bars of milky light crept in through the shutters, illuminating the tabletops cluttered with bobbins, scissors and scraps of fabric. It seemed there wasn’t a square inch of the workroom that wasn’t occupied by one thing or another, and yet there was something warm and cosy about the place too. Despite the run-down exterior, Teal felt safe here.

Strewn around the room were several colourful pin cushions, each one sewn in a different design. There was an orange koi, with its gigantic puckered lips and impressive moustache, and a fluffy green hammer that didn’t look half as threatening as the hundred gleaming points sticking out of it. Teal even spied a tiny cushion in the shape of a sable kit. It

was tucked away in the corner, propped up against the wall with its long, cream-coloured neck, and a dainty head with large, imploring eyes. The sable kit was the only pin cushion not to have a single pin in it.

There were half-folded blankets and musty old books, piles of downy pillows and even a smouldering fire, over which the old kettle had just begun to whistle. Wiping her paws dry on her kimono, Kon hung the rag from her sash and paced over to check on it. She lifted the lid, sprinkled in a few herbs and left it to simmer. Then, after leaning over to pinch a log from the basket nearby, she patted down her kimono and knelt by the hearth.

‘I’m afraid I’m in a bit of a hurry,’ she said. ‘We have a guest waiting, so if it’s not too much trouble, would you mind giving the kettle a good boil?’ Teal was just about to ask Allie who she was talking to when the fire answered back.

‘Depends,’ it fizzled. The low flames licked lazily up and down the hearth’s stony walls. ‘What’s in it for me?’ Kon rolled her eyes and retrieved the log from behind her back. The fire gasped in delight, reaching up with countless tiny flaming wisps to take it from her. ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah, that’ll do nicely!’

‘I had a feeling it might.’ The fire flared up before her, crunching into the log like it was savouring the first bite of an apple. Before they knew it, the kettle was singing merrily.

Teal was still staring at it when Kon pressed a piping-hot teacup into his paws. He barely even noticed it was there. He was too busy watching the flame nibble contentedly along its prize, hypnotised by its flickering, ever-changing features. He’d never seen a fire smile before. ‘Is this the first fire spirit you’ve come across?’ she asked him. Teal nodded dumbly. ‘In that case, please allow me to apologise for Irori’s...

bluntness.’

‘I heard that!’ came the distant reply. ‘And you’d best believe there ain’t nothing blunt about me. If anybody disagrees, they can come over here and shake on it!’ Kon sighed.

‘Elementals are proud spirits by nature. At times, they can seem awfully self-centred, but in truth, they mean no harm, and it’s a great honour for one to choose to live with you. Which reminds me, do make sure to take a sip of your tea before it gets cold. It would be a shame for Irori’s hard work to go to waste, though between you and me, I doubt there’d be many complaints if the old spark got another log out of it.’

‘Oh, sure. Thank you.’

Teal looked down at the teacup in his paw. Just like Allie’s, it was upside-down, with copious amounts of steam issuing from the rim. Was it just him, or was there a faint glow around the bottom? What sort of tea was this? His nose twitched. Whatever it was, it smelled delicious.

‘There’s not much wrong that a little ethre can’t make right. I know you two have been through the wars today, but I promise you that after the first sip, you’ll feel as right as rain. We already managed to get you back on the ground before anything unpleasant could happen. Once you’ve had a bit of a rest and got some tea in you, we’ll see what we can do about keeping you there. Just make sure that whatever happens, you don’t—’

But it was too late. He’d already turned it over. The three of them watched the steaming blue liquid spiral into the air and splatter on the ceiling, pooling in the rafters. By the time he’d corrected his mistake and spun the cup back around, only a few scant drops were left. One of them wormed its way along the rim and fell straight up, splashing in the small

puddle over their heads.

It took a moment for Teal to process exactly what happened. It was just like the waterfall. ‘I’m... so sorry.’ He got up to try and clean the mess, but two of the towels fell off, and the corner of a third drooped over his eyes. He ended up hovering blind an inch above the floor, kicking his hind paws underneath him to no avail and sending thread reels flying.

‘Don’t mention it,’ the sable chuckled, ducking underneath one that zoomed over her ears as she reached for the mop. Still wrapped in his own towel, Allie waddled over to help him down. ‘We won’t if you don’t.’

It said a lot that watching Kon swab away at a glowing blue puddle on the ceiling wasn’t the strangest thing Teal had seen that day. At this rate, it might not have even cracked the top five. ‘I’m sorry again about the tea,’ he winced when she was finished. He’d just finished winding the last loose trail of thread back onto the reel. Aside from a slight bluish glow to the mop head, the workroom seemed to have survived the ordeal mostly unscathed.

‘Hey, it’s your loss, pal!’ Teal was surprised to hear the fire brusquely reply. ‘Long as I get to keep my log, you can consider yourself well and truly forgiven. We can’t all be as quick as a blaze. And I should know...’

Kon just shook her head and smiled. ‘An honest mistake is an honest mistake. I’m not going to pretend that’s the last cup of tea I’ll be mopping from the rafters either. Was that your first time drinking ethre too?’ He nodded. ‘Well I’ll say this much at least. Today is turning into an excellent day for firsts.’

They all laughed. Even Teal joined in, sheepishly hiding his burning cheeks behind one of the towels. But then a bang sounded off somewhere beneath them. The laughter stopped

abruptly. There were a few muffled footsteps, followed by the sound of metallic clinking. Teal held his breath. His ears twitched back and forth, following the sounds as they drew nearer and nearer.

‘Sorry, where on earth are my manners? As you already know, my name is Kon. Humble tailor and tea extraordinaire, at your service, and this is my work partner and good friend, Peito.’ When it seemed like the footsteps couldn’t possibly get any closer, they stopped completely. Then, after a moment of silence, the basement door drew open.

### *Workroom*

A gruff crane in a leather smock ducked in through the doorway, a stout hammer in his wing and a gleaming jacket of mail over his shoulder. He was tall and unnaturally lean, but around each of his limbs were solid ribbons of sinewy muscle, and he walked with a gait that suggested that nothing short of a steel door was going to get in his way. He went straight to Kon, shouldering through Allie and Teal as though he didn’t even know they existed. ‘Are you hurt? Did it touch you?’

‘Not a scratch,’ she told him, patting the red crown of feathers at the back of his head back down. They were clumped together in a crude sort of ponytail. At first, he didn’t look like he believed her, but sure enough, his arched shoulders eventually flattened. He grunted back.

‘Put the kettle on, would you?’

Marching over to the nearest table, he brushed aside any loose materials with his wing, laid his handiwork flat and struck up a candle as Kon laid out two cups for them. Bent over the black mail, he wafted the flame from ring to ring like he’d done it a thousand times. Though the armour looked plain at first glance, the more the candle moved, the more

colours seemed to dance and arc around the dark rings, bleeding together like a rainbow in an oil slick.

It seemed strange to Teal just how methodically he went about it. Not a single link was bent, wrinkled or otherwise out of place, that much was immediately obvious, and yet the crane's keen eyes were moving along the rows at a crawl, as though he was seeing something the rest of them were not. For a while, he had eyes for nothing else.

It was only when he was satisfied that he gave another grunt of approval, patted his white, grease-stained wings down and glanced briefly in Teal's direction for the first time. 'That the kid?'

Kon nodded. 'He was a brave soul up there,' she said, tending to the kettle hanging over the fireplace. The sunken hearth was square, its stony walls pitted with ash. 'They both were. I don't believe I've ever seen the like before. He was just drifting through the air, like a loose feather in an updraft. I had to climb onto the roof to pull him down before the rains could take him. Even then, we barely made it. He was one red ribbon away from the end.'

She handed him his teacup. Nodding his thanks, he slipped it under the mail and immediately upturned it. In less than a second, the armour had absorbed all traces of the blue liquid. It glowed bright blue for a few moments, and then returned to its base colour. For the first time, the crane's beak creased into a hint of a smile. 'Good thing you were there then,' he replied.

There was a shrill ceramic screech right behind Teal's ear. He turned to find Allie's teacup rattling in his hooves. Within the folds of his towel, the goat looked positively seething. 'You could've flown up there and gotten him down in ten seconds flat,' he uttered quietly, his eyes downcast.

The crane shrugged. Placing his hammer aside, he drew a set of scissors from his belt and began cutting back the leather trim beneath the links. ‘I was working,’ he said. The scissors snipped away quietly. ‘You know how I work. Once I’ve started something, nothing in this world or the last is gonna stop me till it’s done. I don’t make the rules.’

Allie raised the teacup to his muzzle, hiding his face behind the steam. ‘I bet you’d have stopped if Kon had been up there instead.’ Peito shot him such a look that Allie nearly dropped his cup.

‘Please, you two! It’s not like there aren’t more pressing matters to be dealing with right now...’ Kon shook her head. The sable was pacing back and forth across the room, deep in thought. Her paw went unconsciously to the loops of thimbles around her neck, which she rolled back and forth between her fingers. Unattended, her steaming teacup rested on the table nearby. ‘The village is under attack from all sides, and we have someone in great need under our roof.’

‘Not much we can do about the attack when the festival’s still going,’ Peito muttered, his eyes still fixed upon his work. ‘Though if the Shrine Keepers want to try anything, we’ll know about it.’ He rustled the mail under his wing. ‘They’ll have to stop by for this first.’

‘My thoughts exactly. But we may still be able to help our friend here.’

Teal scratched the back of his ears. ‘I’m sorry, but what festival?’

‘The festival,’ Peito repeated. Even Kon was looking at him like she didn’t quite understand the question. Luckily, Allie recognised his confusion.

‘It’s okay, I hadn’t heard of it either. I think it’s called Sebutan,’ the goat told him. ‘Or was it Setabon? Tetsubun?’

Kon smiled. ‘Setsubun,’ she corrected him gently.

‘Thanks, that’s the one! Setsubun. It’s the time of year when our world and the spirit world come the closest. Back in Sakurai, folks put up fish heads and throw beans around to drive any demons and wandering spirits away.’

‘Fish heads?’ Teal shivered. Why did that sound so familiar?

‘Yeah, that’s right. I forget why though. Maybe it’s the smell. I mean, if I were a demon, I wouldn’t want to haunt a place that smells of grilled sardines either. But yeah, the point is that in our world, the festival’s all about keeping spirits out. But here, Anzen welcomes them in and gives them a place to relax and unwind for the day. The village is a safe haven, after all. Taking care of spirits is what it does. It’s illegal not to let everybody in until the festival’s over.’

‘It’s not illegal,’ Peito snorted. ‘It’s far, far worse than that. It’s rude.’

Allie crossed his arms, wrapping the towel even tighter around himself. ‘Folks with bad manners get treated like criminals here anyway, so what’s the difference?’

‘If you do something illegal, the good citizens of Anzen’ll take you out. If you do something rude,’ the crane grinned, ‘they expect you to have the decency to do it yourself.’ Allie’s grip tightened on his towel. ‘And it’s not rude to keep ’em out anyway, or we’d be ashes by now. It’s rude to turn ’em away at the gate. Can’t turn them away at the gate if you don’t greet them at the gate.’

‘It’s strange though,’ Kon said, pacing slowly. Her tail thumped anxiously behind her. ‘Most of the time, spirits as large as this one are extremely shy, content to hide in the mountains and fords that make their homes. What could have possibly possessed it to make a move like this?’

In the workroom, there was nothing to answer her except a long silence. That was when Teal noticed that the snipping had stopped.

‘I’ve got a few ideas,’ Peito said. He clicking his beak and looked to Teal, and for a moment, Teal was tempted to try and make a break for the door. The crane’s eyes were so sharp. Once again, it felt like he was seeing something that nobody else was. Then he smiled, and Teal breathed out in relief. ‘But enough of that. You been given a name yet, stranger?’

‘Only the one I was born with,’ Teal shrugged.

‘Well come on then, let’s take a look at you.’ Brushing flecks of leather from his smock, Peito strolled over and casually flicked the towels away. Teal found himself floating just like before, the sleeves of his jacket billowing around him. When his stomach dropped, his body went into full panic mode and he began to flail, swimming frantically in the air. Drops flew everywhere. In his mind, Teal was right back on the rooftop. He didn’t want to fly off again. Not again.

Luckily, Peito held out his wing. Hyperventilating, Teal latched onto it with both arms, his legs kicking out underneath him. ‘It’s okay, little hatchling. I’ve got you. I’ve got you...’ The crane dragged a table over. ‘Just hook your claws underneath the crossbar. There, that’s it. Damn, you’re lighter than one of my feathers right now. And trust me, a crane doesn’t say that lightly.’

Clinging onto Peito’s wing for dear life, Teal felt around blindly with his hind paws. When they brushed against the bar of wood, he stuck them firmly underneath it. The skyward pull lessened greatly. It was a huge relief, even with his tail sticking straight up like a compass needle. As his breathing slowed down, he looked up to see Allie gnawing on his hoof a few feet away, stuck between wanting to help them both and

trying to keep back a safe distance.

Kon had stopped pacing altogether, and had instead taken to pulling the loose threads from her sleeves and winding them around her fingers. Judging from her look of disapproval, she didn't seem to be too happy with her work partner. 'Peito, you could have warned the poor child first.'

Allie was quick to back her up. 'Yeah, you could've warned him!'

'Aye. He's a brave soul though, so I knew he could take it. But I'm afraid he's no child.' Peito chuckled. 'This fox here is fully grown. From the same place as the goat too, judging from his threads. A tod no younger than eighteen years, I'd say.'

'But definitely no older either,' Teal was quick to add.

'It can't be.' Kon looked baffled. 'Just look at those string bean legs. He hadn't even started filling out yet. Are you sure?'

'Pretty sure,' Teal muttered. If anyone else had said it, he was sure he would have been offended, but he knew there wasn't a malicious bone in Kon's body. If spirits had bones, that is. He was more confused that so far, nobody had deemed it worthy to mention his blue fur even once. The idea that it might somehow be normal here made him feel weirder than any of the playground insults ever had.

Fiddling with the loose threads around her sleeves, the sable continued to stare at him searchingly. 'Has it really been that long since I last saw a young face?' She looked to Peito for an answer, but she didn't receive much consolation from him. Only a grunt and a shrug.

'Anzen is stuck in the middle of nowhere,' he reminded her. 'We don't exactly see a lot of new faces around here.' Allie coughed loudly. 'None worth seeing, anyway,' the crane

added with a wry grin. If Teal didn't know any better, he would have sworn he heard the goat growl back.

Kon conceded with a weighty sigh. Her mind seemed to be somewhere else. 'Such is the passage of time. But this day is not for me. If you don't me asking, stranger, how are you feeling?'

Teal thought for a moment. Dripping wet, clinging tightly to Peito's wing inches above the ground, what wasn't he feeling right now? Scared? Almost certainly. Confused? There was more than a hint of that. Embarrassed? Without a doubt. Even now, he fought the urge to hide his face behind his paws. There weren't many worse things in the world than being caught wet in public. He'd rather have been bleeding from the eyes in front of them than being soaked to the bone.

'I don't know,' he said eventually. It was the truth. At this point, he wasn't sure which feelings meant what anymore. None of this felt right. That was the only thing he was certain about. 'Scared. I don't know if I can feel my tail. That's never happened before. Apart from that, a little cold, I guess.' He shivered. 'And maybe a little run down too. It might just be hunger. I can't remember the last time I ate something.'

Kon and Peito exchanged a look with each other. 'And do you see anything when you close your eyes?' she asked. 'I understand your concern, but it's quite alright. What you see cannot hurt you, and you need not share it with us.'

'Though the trust is much appreciated,' the fire added behind them. 'Specially if it's a story worth hearin'!'

It was with great reluctance that Teal allowed his eyes to close again, and even greater relief that he saw nothing except darkness behind them. 'Not anymore,' he grinned. 'I don't see anything anymore. That's good, right?'

Kon frowned. 'Well I don't believe it's any worse. If I

remember correctly, there should be a period of rest before it returns. We ought to head out before it does; we wouldn't want the whole district flooding.' Teal's eyes widened. Wait, did he hear that correctly? The whole district?

She continued. 'But right now, I'm not sure there's much more you can do. Even when I caught you by surprise using that cup of tea, the apparition of water never stopped. It was still going strong, soaking right through the towels, and that gentle pull towards the sky never left you either. At this rate, keeping your mind distracted isn't going to be enough. We need help. Rumour has it that some animals were able to ground themselves using nothing but prayer and meditation, but that takes time and expertise, neither of which we have at our disposal.'

'I was going to take him to see Linn,' Allie said. 'I mean, he's the one that rescued me.'

'Oh, Allie.' Kon sighed and patted his head. The goat's cheeks turned a light pink. 'I can see what you were thinking. He has a kind heart, but I really don't know what that old badger is capable of. I wouldn't trust a hermit with an empty hearth. No, short of Lady Umeboshi herself, the only one that might be able to help us now would be a priest.'

'Well ain't it damned lucky that five of them are on their way now?' Peito grunted. He looked down at Teal hanging from the side of his wing. 'So just to get this straight... you drowned, right?'

'Peito!'

'Well everybody's thinkin' it! Floating in the air like that, what else could it be? Unless it was wind. It's not wind, is it? Mind you, I wouldn't put it past you lot. You mammals are strange things.'

'Peito, I wouldn't expect this of a newborn.'

‘Of course you wouldn’t. You wouldn’t expect a newborn to get to the bottom of this either. How long was he stuck in the interlands before he managed to get out? Was he with anyone? If not, how did he know what he was supposed to do before he crossed over? Don’t be afraid son, we only wanna know what happened. We can go from there.’

‘I don’t remember,’ Teal said. He was hesitant to cast his mind back to it. ‘It was foggy. There was an accident. I’m pretty sure I was alone... I hope. All I remember is waking up on dry land and finding my way here through the waterfall.’

Kon’s ears perked up. ‘Waterfall?’

Teal nodded. ‘Yeah. The biggest waterfall I’d ever seen.’

‘Then you came from the mountain pass.’

‘The one with all the charms and prayers stuck to the rocks? I thought it’d never end.’

Kon paced over to him. ‘Listen to me. The fog world, the grey one. How long were you lost there before you came to this place? Days, months? A few years? How long?’

‘I don’t know! I have no idea!’ Teal’s hackles were up. Only a few moments ago, they’d been having a conversation, but it already seemed to have turned into some kind of interrogation. Hanging onto Peito’s wing, he felt as lightweight and helpless as a leaf. All the crane had to do was step outside and flick his feathers, and he’d be off into the night. ‘But I woke up when it was still light out, and it was pitch black by the time I found the waterfall, after one of those egg things... those “kiba-kibas” helped me. So twelve hours, maybe? No more than a day.’

‘A day? Are you certain?’

‘Yeah, definitely.’ He nodded rapidly. ‘It could only have been a day, max.’

‘And what rites did you perform?’

‘Rites?’

‘Yes, yes, the rites. In the mountains, before you entered the waterfall.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ Peito and Kon glanced at each other again. ‘Why, is that bad?’

Kon rushed over to the back tables and began packing things into a bag. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I truly, truly don’t know, and that scares me more than anything. I knew something was wrong the moment I wrapped those towels around you and saw you shiver. Spirits can’t feel the cold. They don’t tire, and they shouldn’t be able to feel hunger either. But this is something else entirely.’

‘Those talismans on the walls weren’t just for show, boy,’ Peito told him as she went. ‘It’s like a stopper in a basin. All sorts of things dwell in the interlands. If you don’t perform the rites and leave something holy behind to keep ‘em out, you might just find one of them coming back with you.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘He’s saying that you need to keep your head down. We should have left ten minutes ago. There’s only one animal in the village that can help you now.’

*Tink, tink, tink.*

It was the wind bell by the entrance. Kon stopped dead, silently raising a finger to her lips as it softly chimed. The whole room went quiet. Even the fire shrunk itself down to an ember. You could have heard a pin drop, though neither Kon nor Peito carried themselves like they had dropped a single pin in their lives. In the distance, the village bells rang out. A troupe of muffled footsteps was drawing near.

The sable dropped down and glided stealthily across the floor to the entrance, her long tail swishing behind her. Peito gestured to the basement door, but she pointed at the window

between them and shook her head vigorously. Instead, she pressed one ear to the entrance doorframe. After a few seconds, she raised a single paw and held up four fingers. Teal was still wondering whether the fingers were a head count or a countdown when one of the fingers came down. Three to go.

*Tink, tink.*

Peito knelt in the corner of the room and laid Teal flat, heaping towels over him. The footsteps were getting louder. ‘Don’t breathe,’ he whispered. ‘I’ll be damned if I have to take on the Shrine Keepers for a stranger.’ Shadows flitted across the beams of moonlight that streamed in through the window, but it wasn’t until the final towel was down that his body rested flat against the floor. Teal was well and truly buried. Another finger fell. Two to go.

*Tink, tink, tink, tink, tink.*

Allie tore his own towel off. Crouched down on the floor, the panicked goat mopped up as many of the water splashes as he could, catching himself on more than one table leg as he tried to manoeuvre his way around piles of pillows and bunched-up blankets. He managed to wipe away the glistening trail that led to the large pile of towels just as the penultimate finger lowered. Only one to go.

*Tink. Tink. Tink.*

Kon’s free paw felt its way to the edge of the sliding door, ready to draw it open. There were no further footsteps, only the gentle, pleasing tinkling of the wind bell. They were here.

The final finger of Kon’s paw curled down. She leaned over to slide the door open, and Allie suddenly noticed Teal’s single shoe sitting in the porch. With no time to lose, he volleyed his towel over. It landed in a perfect heap over it. Kon nodded approvingly. She drew the door back just as Peito pulled the last towel down over Teal’s eyes. Entombed in

thick cotton, everything went dark. Teal held his breath and waited.

There was a moment of silence. Then, to his surprise, an amused chuckle. ‘And here we had barely raised a paw to announce ourselves. It seems the rumours are true, Kon Sable. You do have a sixth sense for hospitality.’

‘Only a good set of ears and an open hearth, I’m afraid,’ he heard Kon reply. ‘But my humble home is yours. Koishi, Shizuku, Toushin, Arashi, Tamashi...’ There was a short pause after each name. ‘Won’t you come in?’

‘Very well,’ came the reluctant response. There was a procession of soft footfalls as the group filed into the room, one by one. ‘But we won’t take tea. We cannot stay a moment longer than we must. A terrible evil rains from above. You know why we are here.’

‘O-of course,’ Teal heard Peito stutter. He was surprised to hear the crane so anxious. There was a lot of clattering as things moved about in the workroom. ‘Just give me a sec. No, not even that! The pieces are all done, I just have to find ‘em all. I’ve been working on the set night and day since you commissioned it all those years ago. Finished up the jacket only a few minutes before you walked in, as a matter of fact. Funny that.’

There was a new voice, this one silky and smooth like honey. ‘Very timely. Lady Umeboshi does say that if the Shrine Keepers were male, we would all be roosters.’ She laughed. ‘It’s supposed that even at birth, no Shrine Keeper can be born prematurely. The universe is just late.’

Laid flat against his head, Teal’s ears were starting to ache. He cocked his head ever so slightly to adjust them, and the smallest crack appeared between the towels. Freezing in place, he peered through. At first, he could only make out the floor

underneath him. But after another imperceptible nudge of the towel, more of the room came into view, and he saw the Shrine Keepers for the first time.

There were five of them in total: a squirrel, an eagle, a sika deer, a black bear and a Sakuranese Shorthorn heifer. They stood straight-backed in a line, wearing simple, muted robes that were knotted at the waist, wrapping around their right shoulders in several layers. Their hind paws were bare, barely making a sound on the floor mat. Rosary beads hung from their necks, but it wasn't the simple adornments of jewellery that Teal found himself staring at. It was their fur, or to be more precise, their lack of fur.

Each one of them was shaven completely, without the slightest hint of wool, fur or feather about them. Teal had no idea why he found it so shocking, but he couldn't look away. Everybody suffered a little fur alopecia eventually, but he'd never seen anything like this before. They were as pale as plucked chickens, and the wrinkles of their skin ran deep. If he were at gunpoint, he wouldn't have dared to hazard a guess at how old they were.

Sitting cross-legged by the fireplace, Allie's eyes darted between them as he gnawed at his hoof. The strangers seemed to have eyes only for the armour set that Peito was hastily assembling for them. The only Shrine Keeper that so much as acknowledged his existence was the black bear, the one whose silky voice Teal had heard earlier. 'Are you okay, kid? You seem nervous.'

'Mhm. I'm good. It's all good.'

'Aside from the end of the world out there, you mean?' she smiled. He nodded robotically back. 'You must allow me to make it better then. Nothing soothes nerves like a nice fresh cup of tea. I see there's still a little glow underneath the kettle

lid, though I rather suspect there'd be enough for a full cup if some unlucky soul hadn't already spilled theirs.'

'What?'

She nodded to the glowing mop in the corner. 'Which of these four cups is yours?' Allie reluctantly handed her his teacup. She turned it over. 'Marvellous! Thank you kindly.'

'Thanks...'. After a little encouragement, Irori was blazing once more. The black bear took the kettle off the heat just as it started singing, topping up Allie's cup. The kettle's singing, however, was nothing compared to Irori's.

'Hush,' Kon muttered, flushing. 'There's no need to show off in front of our guests. I'm sorry, it's been a quiet day. We haven't had visitors in a while.'

But the black bear just laughed. 'It's quite alright. Shrine Keepers enjoy a good tune as much as anyone. On a different day, I may even have been tempted enough to risk a dance, if there weren't so many towels strewn about. I can't help but wonder what could possibly require so many of them. There are at least three towels for each of you, and yet you and your work partner are both as dry as a bone. Are you sure we're the only guests you've had this evening?'

'As certain as the day is long,' Kon replied with a bow.

She glanced casually around the room. 'And you're not expecting company?'

'Company? At The Tack and Thimble?' Kon laughed. 'Chance would be a fine thing. No, as always, it's quiet but merry, as I like to say. Quiet, but merry.'

'Indeed.' The black bear's gaze seemed to linger on the mound of towels. For a moment, Teal could have sworn she was looking at him. He couldn't breathe. He stared her directly in the eye through the tiny gap, not daring to move a single whisker. But then her eyes drifted past and returned to

Kon. Even then, he didn't dare breathe a sigh. It was too close.

'And here we are!' At long last, Peito laid all the pieces of the armour out. The crane was practically hopping with excitement. 'I know, I know, it's a thing o' beauty, but you'll never believe that it's also lighter than this smock. You don't get craftsmanship like this on the other side. That's several lifetimes of dedicated metal work right there. The joins in those rings are invisible. Invisible, you hear me? Point one out, and I'll remake the entire set from scratch...'

'No need,' the heifer said, running a hefty hoof over it. 'And no time anyway. This'll do just fine.'

'Just fine...?' Crestfallen, the crane patted his ponytail of red feathers. He looked like he'd just been punched in the face.

'Yeah,' the heifer said, barely concealing her amusement. 'Isn't that usually enough for you blacksmiths?'

'I've told you lot before, I'm not a blacksmith—'

'Peito Red Crown!' The eagle marched forwards.

'Arashi...'

As tall as he was, Peito seemed to shrink before her. Teal didn't blame him. The eagle was like a storm in a bottle. She was as pink and pale as any of the mammals, with sharp, all-seeing eyes sunken into her face and goose pimples down her neck. She had no wings at all. Instead, a thin set of paper feathers had been attached in place of the real ones, which she was using to hold a pail of salt. 'There's a brave warrior waiting for us by the southern wall, willing to make the ultimate sacrifice should the defences fall before midnight. If he's not wearing your armour when they do, he won't be able to use it to contain this malevolent spirit now, will he?'

'No.'

'And if nobody's there to contain it, Anzen will fall and the shadow rains will rend us all to ash, so unless there's a

more pressing matter than your occupation, you can save your petty squabbles for the road.’ She made for the door without another word, the others following swiftly behind. Peito grunted and left to pull his boots on.

‘I suppose you’ll be needing me too,’ Kon said. ‘Peito can adjust the mail, but if the fit of the leather itself isn’t skin-tight, your warrior doesn’t stand much chance against living rain.’

‘Only if there’s no good reason to stay,’ the black bear smiled.

Kon hesitated only for a second, her eyes flitting briefly to the towels over by the corner. Her paw brushed against her thimble necklace. ‘Allie, hold the fort.’

‘But Kon—’

‘No butts, mister! This place may not be so pretty on the outside, but it is old. Protections were built into the foundations. It’s no Shoganoi Tower, but you should be safe. And while I’m talking about the tower,’ she began, now addressing the Shrine Keepers as she pulled a satchel over her shoulder, ‘it’s strange not to see Lady Umeboshi with you. Especially considering everything going on.’

The eagle clicked her beak. This time, it was the deer’s turn to answer. ‘This is not to be shared with anyone,’ she said, ‘but Lady Umeboshi has been missing for much of the day. We’ve been organising Anzen’s defences in her stead.’

Kon looked shocked. ‘But why would she leave?’

‘She wouldn’t say. All we know is that she was searching for something, perhaps whatever was responsible for the attack. She returned to the tower about an hour ago, but she hasn’t spoken since. For her own protection, she cannot be allowed to leave before the festival is over. But come, if you are ready, there’s no time to lose. Anzen needs your help.’

‘Then I guess we’d better get a move on.’ Strapping a

leather band to her arm, she threaded it with needles. Then, after checking one last time that her necklace was still there, she joined the others at the door. ‘Although if I ever needed help myself,’ the sable added loudly, ‘Shogonai Tower is the first place I’d go. I know I’m just a humble tailor, but there’s no one in the village as wise as the Lady of the Tower.’

‘I’m sure Lady Umeboshi appreciates your faith in her.’

‘Aye,’ Peito said. ‘I’d probably take the old cart with me too. You know, lay low and stay out of sight.’

‘Indeed,’ the deer frowned, nodding in confusion. ‘This way, please.’ Kon followed Peito and the other Shrine Keepers out, but not before giving a sly wink to the room just as the door drew shut. For twenty seconds, the workroom was as still as a grave. Then Teal burst through the towels, and took in his first breath in what felt like five minutes.

‘I know where we have to go!’ Allie gasped. The goat got to his hind hooves and leapt to the window. Once he caught his breath, Teal plodded over to join him, lumbering underneath the weight of all those towels. Together, they gazed out past the nearby houses, shops and shacks, all the way to the top of the village, where the leaning tower stood. He couldn’t shake the feeling that it was staring back at him, somehow.

Teal sighed. ‘Well it isn’t going to get any closer. But I’m never getting anywhere like this.’

Allie nodded. ‘One sec. I’ll see what I can do that.’ He ran over to the basement door and promptly disappeared down the staircase. After much rummaging, he eventually returned, dragging an old, musty cart behind him.

Teal’s eyes widened. ‘You can’t be serious.’ he said. ‘I’m not getting in that.’ Allie grinned.

*Old Cart*

‘Comfortable?’

‘Comfortable? Come under here and I’ll show you comfortable—’

‘Hush, we’re getting close!’

Teal grumbled to himself from beneath the woven cart cover. As cramped as he was, he forced himself to keep still, resisting the urge to wriggle. The towels underneath him were sodden through and bitterly cold, squelching every time he moved or tried to adjust himself. Two lengths of rope around his waist kept him securely tight, digging into his ribs every time the cart wheels jumped or jostled on the road. Towels pinned him in on all sides, and at his hind paws, two rusted iron buckets clattered back and forth.

If he had a choice, he’d have taken even the rusty Foxtail Duster over this.

Much of the journey was quiet and uneventful, but in all the upheaval, things could change in an instant. More than once, the small cart was forced to grind to a halt whilst they waited for footsteps to thunder past. Though he strained his ears, Teal was unable to hear much of anything underneath the cover, and Allie had warned him several times already that it was too dangerous to risk a peek.

‘You were flying over Anzen like a Zeppelin just a few minutes ago,’ Allie told him. ‘We can’t be the only animals that know you’re here. Peito said to keep low. If they’re on the lookout for someone to blame this all on, you’ll be the first on the chopping block.’

‘But this is mad. I feel like a piece of contraband being smuggled for my own good,’ Teal muttered. ‘Just like Captain Cormorant with his big wagon of sprat flakes.’

‘Oh my god...’

‘What?’ Teal whispered, tensing where he lay. The cart wheels turned in the silence, and then he heard a laugh.

‘Captain Cormorant! I remember him.’ Teal breathed out. “‘Frosted Sprat Flakes – they’re criminally good!” Those adverts were always on TV when I was a kid. It was the only thing worth adjusting the aerial for. Old Pesky the Pelican hatching schemes to steal his precious sprat flakes, but he always found a way to screw himself out of them in the end. They were the dumbest thing. I loved them. We never ate that stuff, obviously, but the adverts always made me wonder what sprat flakes tasted like. I checked the corner shop for them every time my parents sent me out.’

‘They’re alright. They still make them, you know.’

There was a sharp intake of breath. ‘They don’t...’

‘They do! There are a load of different flavours too, but since I never liked the others, my dad only buys the original. Bought,’ Teal corrected himself, closing his eyes. ‘He bought.’

There was a long pause before either of them spoke again. The wooden frame of the cart heaved under the strain, its wheels softly creaking away. Allie’s hooves clomped in the dirt as he pulled it along. Far away, strangers were shouting, and bells were chiming.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ Teal said eventually, blinking blindly under the darkness of the cover. His paw brushed against the raised fur on his forearm. ‘Kon did say that spirits weren’t supposed to be able to feel cold, or tired. If this is the time of year when two worlds come together, maybe I’m not supposed to be here. I just got lost in the fog, and crossed over by mistake somehow. And if I’m not... you know, then maybe there’s still a way to get home.’

Teal heard a sniff. ‘Maybe.’

‘Hey, we can hope, right?’

‘Oh, sure,’ Allie said quickly. ‘Yeah, definitely. We can hope.’

‘Hey, you!’

The cart came to a sudden stop. ‘Allie, what is it?’

‘Shh,’ the goat muttered under his breath. ‘Not one word.’

Teal held his breath and waited as the strangers drew near. It sounded like there were dozens of them. They were all talking amongst themselves in thin, burbling voices.

‘Oh, it’s just a kid.’

‘What kid? Anzen don’t have no kids.’

‘Yeah it does, you drip. You’re looking at ‘em.’

‘It’s that goat that Linn dragged back with him. The one that works in the inn.’

‘What inn?’

‘The Chiri Inn, I think.’

‘Don’t sound like much of an inn to me.’

‘Yeah, but what’s a puddle like you know about inns anyhow?’

‘Yeah, kid. What’s a puddle like him know about inns?’

‘I... I...’

‘Typical mortal,’ one of the voices tutted. ‘All about himself.’

‘I-I thought you were all supposed to be gone by now. The festival’s almost over.’ Teal noticed that his voice had suddenly changed. It sounded much more meek than before.

‘Can’t wait to be rid of us, eh? Well we don’t wanna be here any more than you do. We’ll be back in our ponds just as soon as the rain lets up. But enough about us. What are you doing on your own at a time like this?’ one of the spirits asked him. ‘And with a cart, too.’

‘The S-S-Shrine Keepers sent me,’ Allie said quietly.

‘The Shrine Keepers?’

‘Yeah, right!’

‘What would the Shrine Keepers be doing with a reedy little eel like you that never mattered to nobody?’

‘I’m small. Less chance of being s-s-spotted.’

‘Well that blew up in your face now, didn’t it? So what’s under that cover? If the Shrine Keepers got anything to do with it, it’s gotta be good, and unless there’s someone round here to say otherwise, I reckon it’s as good as ours now. Consider it our fee for letting you go on your way.’

Somebody strolled right over and thumped the base of the cart. Underneath the cover, Teal almost had a heart attack.

‘Whoopee! What a haul!’

‘But what is it?’

‘Ethre, it’s gotta be ethre. Anyone else think it’s ethre?’

‘It’s not ethre,’ Allie said.

‘Well come on squirt. Spit it out, or you’ll be spittin’ dust!’

‘That’s it, you’ve got it. It’s dust.’

There was a snort of derision. ‘Dust?’

‘Yeah. Well not everyone managed to get inside before the s-s-shadow took over, you see. Lady Umeboshi wants the remains so she can lay them to rest when Anzen’s safe again.’

All around the cart, there were gasps of dismay. ‘By the gods...’

‘You dirty little liar, you!’

‘It’s okay. I can show you if you don’t believe me.’ Teal heard him trudge over. With horror, he watched in silence as the cover began to draw back. ‘Just be c-careful none of it blows in your face. The wind is pretty heavy out here.’

‘No, no, no.’

‘We believe you, we believe you!’

But Allie insisted. Teal felt the cart move around him as

the goat lifted the handles and wheeled it from spirit to spirit. They stumbled over themselves to get back.

‘You stay away from us, you... pond scum!’

‘How dare you disrespect the remains of your fallen. What kind of creature lacks such honour? Be gone with you!’

‘If you insist...’

It was a while before they left the horrified crowd behind for good. Even when it had long since fallen silent, and Allie dropped the cart handles and pulled the cover back completely, Teal half-expected to find himself surrounded. He emerged blinking into the moonlight and laughed. ‘I can’t believe that worked. Allie, you’re a genius! Why did they believe you?’

‘Because I’m a reedy little eel that never mattered to nobody,’ Allie replied quietly. All hints of the stutter were gone. ‘Why would someone so small and defenceless lie? Trust me, runts get plenty of practice talking their way out of trouble. But you can thank me later. We’re here.’

### *Shoganai Tower*

‘So when you were talking to those spirits earlier, were you genuinely terrified, or are you just that good an actor?’

The goat scratched his horn and laughed. ‘Yes,’ he said.

As Allie helped Teal up the stone path, taking one awkward step after another inside the iron buckets tied around his ankles, the last thing he expected to think was that the tower had seen better days. And yet the closer they drew, the more Shoganai Tower seemed to lose of its initial majesty.

Thick, tuberous roots clung to the base. Time had dug its claws deep into the tiled roofs, leaving large patches of bare wood where once tiles would have shone in the light.

Originally, the painted beams may well have been violently red, but now, there was a languor to the faded brown that the

wood still clung to. Up close, even its slight lean over the rest of Anzen no longer seemed imperious. Instead, the tower just looked weary, exhausted even. The glowing lanterns hanging from the roofs were the only sign that it had been visited in years. This was a relic, a monument to a bygone age that the village had sprouted up around.

With every heavy plod of the buckets, Teal's tail thumped against his head, pointing as it was straight up to the sky. He silently cursed it, along with each of his limbs, which constantly longed to rise up into the air, pulled by forces beyond his control like the strings on a marionette. He had to fight just to keep his arms down. But at least the water had slowed down to a drip. Outside, it was cold enough already.

He took another step and looked up. The tower may not have been as imposing as it first appeared, but its sheer height was still staggering. He couldn't even make out the spire at the top. 'Amazing. I shouldn't even be seeing this right now.'

'Really?' Allie came to a stop on the stones. 'Why not?'

'Because it doesn't exist. I studied them in my very first module at uni. There are no surviving nine-floor pagodas in Sakurai. There are rarely more than five, one for each element. They burn down easily, you see. So this is... impossible.'

'Impossible?' Allie shook his head and patted him on the shoulder. 'Welcome to Anzen, buddy.'

As Teal's gaze drew back down to the twin doors at the entrance, he noticed another small door on the side of the building. It was only open a crack, but the moment he set eyes on it, it suddenly snapped shut. A shiver ran up his spine.

There was an iron tube by the entrance that ran all the way up the wall, disappearing into the roof above. Allie had to stand on the tips of his hooves to reach the opening, which was finely carved to resemble the head of an enormous

Asagao flower. He took a few deep breaths before he leaned into it. Teal even saw him practise a few times first, silently mouthing the words to himself.

‘Excuse me,’ he started. But barely two words in, and noise was already emerging from the head of the tube. He shut his muzzle abruptly and held his head up to it, nodding repeatedly as he listened along. ‘Uh huh, uh huh...’ More than once, he was zealous enough with his nodding that his left horn clinked loudly against the tubing.

Teal watched him, fiddling with the plasters on his fingers. His hind paws swayed uneasily half an inch or so above the base of the buckets. While he waited, he looked down at the village from the top of the hill. Fortunately, it didn’t look like they’d been followed, and yet he didn’t feel like they were truly alone either. More than once, his eyes drifted over to the door on the side. It didn’t move again.

‘Well I know,’ Allie said, teetering back and forth on his hooves. ‘But I didn’t know what else to do.’ He leaned in and listened to the reply. ‘Yeah, I can think of a few. Floating, for one. That’s right, floating through the air. No, he’s not a bird. He’s a fox. That’s right, two arms and two legs. You heard me right, normal arms. No, I don’t think he’d be very interested in talking to you about his mother. Hello?’

There was a new voice on the other side. Just like that, the tone of the conversation seemed to change completely. ‘Oh, hello...’ Allie’s cheeks turned red. ‘Good evening to you too. Yeah. Yeah, that’s the one. Thank you! You won’t regret it, I promise!’ He waited a moment, and when there was no further reply, he breathed a sigh and pushed off from the wall.

‘So what did they say?’ Teal asked him. ‘Are we going up?’

Allie smiled at him. ‘No, we’re not,’ he said. ‘But you are.’

‘Hello? Hello?’ Together, they parted the twin doors and poked their noses around the corner. ‘Anybody here?’

But it was empty. In fact, the entire ground floor looked like it had been hollowed out. The floors, walls and ceilings were all bare, save for the thick web of brown roots and verdant shoots that carpeted almost every surface. There was a staircase towards the back, but it was in ruin, the wood charred black. Huge chunks of it lay in pieces on the floor. The only thing that still seemed to be intact was a tiny unassuming lift compartment at the very heart of the tower. It was barely big enough for the two of them.

Allie knelt down and drew back the collapsible bamboo doors. Then, he took Teal’s paw and carefully helped him inside. *Clunk, clunk, clunk*, the buckets went underneath him. Water sloshed around inside. There were no buttons or levers, and in fact, there didn’t seem to be much in the way of operating the lift at all. Just a single waist-high pulley in the corner by the door.

‘Now before I go, there are a couple of things you should know,’ Allie told him, heaving the buckets into place. Teal was surprised to feel his ears brush against the ceiling. He looked up, but the ceiling wasn’t getting any lower. Instead, the upward pull was getting stronger. ‘But we’re out of time, so you’ve just gotta listen to me.’

The rope keeping him tethered to the buckets was perfectly taut, biting into his ankles, and the pitter-patter of water was already turning into a steady stream. He stifled three sneezes in quick succession. It was bitterly cold, but what really scared Teal was the muffled noise of rushing water in his inner ear. He could only hear it in the intermittent moments when he blinked. Was this what they were talking about earlier? Was he starting to repeat? ‘When you arrive, call her

Lady Umeboshi unless she says otherwise, do whatever she tells you, and don't do anything that might be considered rude. Apart from that, you'll be just fine. You're a smart fox.'

'But what about you?'

He shrugged. 'Don't worry about stupid old me. I'll go somewhere dry, the Tack and Thimble maybe, and wait it out by the fire. I'll be better off than you.'

'I hope so,' Teal said uncertainly. He held his paw out. For all he knew, this could be the last time they'd ever see each other. 'Thanks, Allie. For everything, I mean. You didn't have to help me.'

'Don't mention it,' the small goat mumbled, taking it in his hoof. His white robes were drenched instantly, but he didn't seem to care. 'You didn't have to save my life. You still did though. I just dragged you around in a cart for a bit. Although if you liked it so much, I could always take you back in it...'

'Not for all the money in the world,' Teal shuddered. They both laughed, and Teal felt a twinge in his stomach. The water in the buckets was rising. 'I owe you one,' he added.

'Nope,' Allie replied, pulling twice on the pulley and hopping out of the compartment. 'That's still me.' And before Teal could reply, the shutters closed, and the lift was off.

### *Lift*

'Always call her Lady Umeboshi, do what she says, and don't be rude. Always call her Lady Umeboshi, do what she says, and don't be rude...'

The compartment inched its way up. It creaked and heaved in such a way that he was sure it would collapse at any moment, and yet somehow, it managed to hold itself together. Though it spluttered like it was suffering from a terrible bout of indigestion, it hadn't quite reached the point of trying to

spit him back out. Not yet, anyway. Teal crossed his fingers.

Bobbing uncertainly above the iron buckets, there was little more he could do than watch each level slowly rise and fall through the gaps in the shutters, flattening his ears to stop them crumpling against the low ceiling.

The first few floors were almost as empty as the ground floor. Barring some upturned tables and vases, it was obvious they hadn't been home to much more than moss for a long time. But the air was fragrant, and every inch of them was teeming with life. Vines weaved through deep fissures in the wooden beams, and vases were the only place where the flowers would not grow. Where parts of the walls and floor were missing, huge swathes of honeysuckle had bloomed, almost like nature itself was trying to patch up the ravages that time had wrought. But there was only so much it could do.

It all came to a stop on the fourth floor. There, there were no more flowers to be seen. In fact, there was nothing at all. Absolutely nothing. Teal stuck his fingers through the shutters and pulled himself down to get a closer look. He'd never seen a more empty room in his life.

It was grey. If ever it had been painted, every fleck of paint had been painstakingly removed. Even the wooden flooring had been dug up and stripped bare. The only feature of the room at all was a thin, bitter wind, which rattled away despite the fact that the floor wasn't even open to the air. Teal shuddered. There was something bad about this room, something hidden that he knew he wasn't supposed to see. The lift couldn't have moved past it fast enough.

*Splash!*

Teal looked down in dismay to find both buckets brimming underneath him; the water was just cascading down the sides. The compartment floor was gleaming. For just a

moment, before his eyes shifted to his own reflection in the puddle, he could have sworn he spotted a chunk of license plate sitting in the corner. He shook his head and tried to push it out of his mind. Why was it taking so long? Surely the lift could go faster than this. He gave the pulley a few tugs, but it was to no avail. The water was already inches deep.

‘Hello?’ he called. ‘Anybody there?’ For good measure, he gave a tentative rap to the thin compartment walls. In the long silence that followed, he almost found himself turning red. What in the blazes was he thinking? By now, he was easily tens of feet off the ground, suspended by a single thin rope in a wooden cupboard barely taller than he was. Every floor of this cursed tower had been empty. Who was he expecting to answer him?

Teal sighed. He wished Allie was still with him. It was nice having someone to talk to, and he was the only one that seemed to understand how strange everything was. None of this is right, he reminded himself, turning to face the shutters as the bitter scent of burning wafted in. All the while, the water was steadily rising.

The next floor looked like it had just survived a terrible fire, if survived was even the right word. Dust hung in the air like it was dotted on a windowpane. What little remained was caked in inches upon inches of ash. Much of the ground had given way, and even the supporting pillars had been eaten into. A few chunks of the wall were missing entirely, through which he managed to catch a brief glimpse of the village far below. It was only now that he realised just how high up the lift had taken him. The night air whistled through the holes, but it had little to do with how much his fur was standing on end, even as it left everything else strangely undisturbed.

Then the room fell out of sight. The lift was silent once

more, save for the rising water and the muted creaking of the rope above. That rope was the only thing separating Teal from a long, long fall. But even if it broke, there wasn't much the fall could do if he was already dead, right? Right? Sniffing, he hugged his arms around his sodden sleeves. He wasn't so sure.

The floor above looked much the same as the previous one, if not slightly worse for wear. Teal jumped as he felt the icy pool start to lap at his ankles. The bubbles of air from the iron buckets' final breaths broke on the surface. The compartment was heaving underneath the weight of all the water. He pulled himself towards the shutters and rattled them with both paws, but they wouldn't budge. One firm tug of the pulley, and the thing came clean out of the ceiling. 'Hello? Is there any way to stop this thing? The place is filling up!' But just like before, there was no reply. This time, Teal was on his own.

He wasted no time looking for any hatches that might open to the outside. There was nothing on the ceiling. With one paw on the rope around his ankles, Teal drew himself down into the cold water, feeling around blindly from one corner to the next. But the wooden walls were smooth and bare, and his paw glanced uselessly off them. There was definitely something down there, however.

When he dredged it up, a few thousand-sen notes melted to mush in his palm. 'What isn't real can't hurt you, Teal,' he muttered to himself, wiping his paw clean on his jeans. 'What isn't real can't hurt you...'

The water wasn't even draining from the shutters. When the ashen floor fell out of view, taking the astringent burning smell with it, he poked a finger through the gaps to the other side. The empty lift shaft was completely dry. Muttering a hasty apology, he unsheathed his claws and swiped straight through the compartment walls, and yet the water continued

rising obliviously, creeping over his waist like the holes weren't even there. It was like some otherworldly force was holding it all inside. What was he supposed to do now?

'Help, I need help! Please, can anybody hear me?' With nothing left, it was all Teal could do to bang against the walls and yell his voice raw. Luckily, just shy of the next floor, the lift came to a sudden halt.

Teal didn't dare move. The compartment was groaning and creaking around him like the bow of a ship. Through the shutters, he caught a faint hint of blue light from the floor up above. 'Hello, can you hear me? Is there any way to get rid of the water? If we're not careful, the lift's going to floo—'

And that was as far as he got before the compartment jolted up, and a solid wave of water rushed in. Teal barely had time to react before it thundered over his ears, forcing him under. Losing his sense of orientation, he turned head over heels, tethered only by the rope around his ankles. Unlike with the Foxtail Duster, the water that flooded in was warm, pleasant even, and everything was crystal clear. By the time he stopped spinning, the entire compartment was full.

Submerged, the relentless skyward pull finally disappeared, and he found his hind paws gently alighting on the ground by the buckets. Even his tail stopped pointing up, though it still hung uselessly behind him. Holding his breath, he pounded on the walls as the compartment continued to rise. Then, as the lift drew level with the floor, the walls began to shimmer and dance. He turned around to see where it was coming from, and his clenched fists slowly unfurled. A few bubbles escaped his open mouth.

Beyond the shutters, the entire room glowed with a serene blue light. There wasn't an inch of it that wasn't underwater, and yet somehow, it still looked like a place that someone

would call home. Each of the tables was set. There were cushions for sitting, and even artwork on the walls. Everything seemed to waver back and forth slightly, languid in the warm, peaceful quiet. Teal's mind nagged him that the open inkwells should have been bleeding like smoke into the air, but somehow, it made sense that they didn't. After all, it wasn't like the room had just been flooded. The water was as fundamental a part of this floor as the furniture. It was all perfectly preserved, like a scene in a snow globe, or a ship in a tower-sized bottle.

Teal was still staring after it when the room sank beneath the compartment floor. It may just have been that it was the first floor that wasn't a total dilapidated wreck, but Teal wished it hadn't gone by quite so quickly. It was so peaceful. Bobbing between the compartment walls, his heartbeat thrummed quietly in his ears, and then the next floor inched into view. To his surprise, it was just like the last one. The only difference was that this time, there was a magpie sweeping in the middle of it.

A few more bubbles escaped from his nose. Teal could barely believe he was seeing. Squinting, he paused to rub his eyes, but sure enough, when he opened them again, brushing aside his trailing whiskers in the water, the magpie was still there. Dumbstruck, he lifted a paw and gave him a little wave.

The magpie wiped his forehead with a slow, heavy wing. He gave only a brief bow to the lift before getting back to work. If he was holding his breath, or even the slightest bit aware of how fantastical his surroundings were, the magpie didn't show it. The brush went slowly back and forth, back and forth, and every time it connected with the floor, Teal felt the dull vibrations reverberating all around him.

As the lift began to move on, Teal even found himself

drifting to the bottom of the compartment, just to keep the magpie in sight for a little longer. But his lungs were burning in his chest, and his vision was starting to blinker. He raised a fist to the compartment wall, but by the time it connected, the blow barely registered. He lazily slashed down it with a finger. It may as well have been with both paws for all the good it did.

He gazed up at the ceiling and watched the colours meld together. The world was so hazy all of a sudden. He couldn't help but wonder how much longer it was going to take before the darn lift arrived. He'd already passed, what, at least a hundred floors by now? And waiting was very tiring work.

Just as he opened his mouth to let out his final breath, a bright light appeared at the top of the compartment. It was a line above the water, as perfectly formed as if it had been sliced through the air itself. For some reason, water couldn't pass through it. Down it came, slowly but surely, and though the world was darkening, the light only grew brighter. As it fell over his eyes, he thrust his muzzle up and sucked in as much blessed air as he could take. And there he lay, gasping and spluttering like a fish as the last of the water drained away.

With a final weary groan, the lift came to a juddering halt. The bamboo shutters slowly parted. Soft, glowing bars lit up the compartment around him. Blinking blindly into the light, Teal felt himself rise from the floor, the slack rope around his ankles gradually tightening once more. At long last, he had reached the top of Shoganai Tower. This was the ninth floor.

It was like the lift had just transported him back in time. The room was rich to the eyes, every inch bursting with detail. It was almost too much to take in.

Great tapestries of crashing waves, burgeoning treetops and huge dancing koi lined the walls, gilded in golden thread alongside only slightly more humble pieces of wall-length

calligraphy. Poems, ancient histories and even older fables lay upon them, all brushed with the deftest of strokes. Below the tapestries, and alongside an enormous golden shrine in the corner, intricately carved chests and cabinets of innumerable drawers stood proudly, home to antique vases bearing flowers that, despite being brilliantly bright pops of colour, lacked any scent at all. There was something cold about them.

And yet the air was so warm and welcoming, carrying with it a sweet, somewhat spicy aroma. Teal looked for the source, and found a black pot of incense hanging over a low table at the centre of the room, smouldering away beside a steaming teapot. Thin trails of steam and incense mingled together under the light of the yellow lanterns high above. Everything else was illuminated by the lustrous silver light of the moon. The room ran all the way from one side of the tower to the other, and both ends were open to the sky.

But there was something else in the air too, something strong, bitter and unmistakably earthy. Almost like... tobacco? He followed his nose to the right-side balcony, and sure enough, a lone figure was standing with their back to the room, facing the open air. A slender cigarette holder lay nestled between long, clawed fingertips. Teal's breath caught in his throat, but it had nothing to do with the smoke.

They must have been half his height, silhouetted by the enormous orb in the sky. And yet they stood there, sleeves pooling out over the balcony, in such a disciplined and dignified pose that for a time, Teal couldn't be sure that they were anything more than a statue casting an impressive shadow on the rest of the room. But eventually, the figure lifted the cigarette holder and took a lengthy drag. The embers glowed red at the tip, and with two quick taps, an inch of pure white ash fell from the balcony rail, crumbling into dust in the

air.

‘Well come along then,’ she said, taking another puff. ‘I suppose we’d better take a look at you. And after that, we can talk about the terrible evil you’ve brought upon my village.’

*Lady Umeboshi’s Study*

‘It’s about time. I hope the lift didn’t give you any trouble.’ With one final tap of the cigarette holder, the Lady of the Tower turned around.

Teal’s eyes may have been drawn upwards to the Sakuranese Bobtail’s ceremonial headdress, and her labyrinthine weave of long grey hair, liberally pocketed with fine combs and chopsticks. They may have glanced over her whiskers, which drooped down further than those of any cat he’d ever seen, or fallen upon the finery of her silk dress, whose countless layers boasted every colour under the sun, along with a few that even the light of day may never have seen. They may have noticed how sharp her fangs were, tempered behind a regal smile, or how deeply laughter lines were etched into the white fur of the old cat’s face.

All these things and more he may have seen, and would yet come to notice, but from the off, it was her eyes that commanded his attention. One was golden, and the other a pale blue, but both seemed to stare straight through him. Even against the moonlight, they were bright, and when she stepped into the light of the lanterns for the first time, her long sleeves trailing behind her, it was all Teal could do not to retreat to the back of the lift and tug the pulley rope to threads.

It wasn’t like that was possible anyway, he realised with alarm. The rope was lying in tatters on the floor, right next to the dirty old buckets he was wearing, and the deep gauges he’d made in her nice compartment walls. ‘Trouble?’ he

gulped. His eyes flitted from one dripping wall to the other, and he tried to remember what Allie had told him. ‘Nope, no trouble at all, Lady Umeboshi! I mean, barely. A smidge. Nothing I couldn’t handle.’

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ she said. ‘And please,’ she added with a smile, ‘call me Ume.’

As the Lady of the Tower made her way over to him, she seemed to glide effortlessly across the floor, wafting a strong, heady scent of perfume into the room. With a snap of her claws, a bamboo stepladder over by the balcony unfolded itself and rolled along behind her. ‘We would have longer to talk if you’d been more timely, but such is my hospitality that I will also shoulder some small portion of the blame. If I hadn’t allowed myself to be distracted by the ongoing assault on my village, you would have floated right up to my balcony without a fuss. But once those bells rang, you disappeared below the rooftops, and well, that was the end of that.’

‘Wait, so you were the one controlling the wind earlier!’

‘Clearly.’

Passing the table, she reached over the teapot and assorted confectionery to pick up a small platter of rice balls, along with a gleaming set of golden chopsticks. The bamboo stepladder continued obliviously past her. Looking closer, Teal realised that there was a small lump underneath the floor mat, pushing it along. ‘Manipulating the elements is no mean feat, and who else would have been so intent on drawing you to my tower? But enough chit-chat. We have a serious matter to address.’

With another snap, the stepladder juddered to a halt by the lift. The lump under the mat promptly dispersed, and with four paces, the Lady of the Tower gracefully ascended to the top step, drawing level with the floating fox. For the first time,

the two were able to see each other eye to eye.

Clicking her chopsticks impatiently over the platter, Lady Umeboshi wasted no time scrutinising every inch of him, from the tufts of his ears right down to the laces of his single sodden trainer. Teal held his breath as she did so, his heart racing. She was so short. So why did her gaze feel so much like two laser beams were burning into him? ‘Child, how heavy are you?’

For a moment, Teal thought his ears were playing tricks on him. ‘How... heavy am I?’

‘No, you’re quite right,’ she said, brandishing a grin that showed off her sharp, pearly canines. ‘What a perfectly foolish question. How heavy did you think you were?’

‘How heavy did I think I was?’

‘Oh dear. Here I was under the impression that I’d be entertaining a fox tonight, and yet all my guest seems capable of doing is flying across the sky and repeating whatever he hears back to me. Are you sure you’re not a parrot instead?’

Flushed, Teal looked away. ‘Sorry, Lady Umeboshi.’

‘Ume, please.’

‘Ume...’

‘That’s more like it. Still repeating after me, I see, but at this rate, I’ll take it. Have you an answer to my question or not?’

‘About how heavy I am? Or used to be, or...?’ Teal was so confused. Breathing through his mouth, he closed his nose to the strong perfume and tried not to let the platter of rice balls distract him as he mulled it over. There were exactly six of them, as plain as Teal had ever seen, but that’s exactly what made him suspicious. You see, they were all perfectly uniform. Not a single grain of rice was out of place.

‘Self perception. It’s not complicated, dear. When you

used to look in the mirror, did you see a land whale, a twig, or something in between?’

‘S-something in between,’ he replied.

‘Marvellous, I assumed as much.’ The chopsticks pushed the sixth rice ball to the back of the platter. ‘I was erring closer to twig myself. Even aside from the floating, you look like someone a strong breeze could put over its knee. And how resilient were you against personal tragedy?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Personal tragedy,’ Lady Umeboshi repeated with a patient sigh. Her chopsticks hovered over the fifth rice ball. ‘You know, disease, starvation, devastation... the rest of it. When tested, most animals will either hold fast until they snap, like bamboo, or bend like a reed in the slightest hint of wind. So which were you? Reed, or bamboo?’

Teal thought for a moment. The question was tougher than he anticipated. ‘A reed,’ he eventually answered quietly.

‘Excellent!’ The chopsticks pushed the fifth rice ball away as well. ‘Now I assume your parents raised you properly, and taught you all about the dangers of talking to strangers, and especially taking food from them?’

‘Of course.’

She nodded. ‘Very sensible advice too. Anyway, I’m a stranger, and I’ve got four rice balls with your name on them.’ Lady Umeboshi clacked her chopsticks together with glee. ‘Now remember to chew, and don’t let a single grain go to waste. If you do, I bear no responsibility for the next time you decide you want to join the stars. Even the gods may not be able to reach you up there.’

The first rice ball was the hardest. Though the texture was familiar, the rice ball itself had absolutely no flavour at all. Heeding her words, Teal did his best to chew with his mouth

shut. Every movement of his jaws felt like it could spell disaster. But sure enough, by the time he swallowed it down, there was already some slack on the rope around his ankles. The second rice ball he ate faster, and the third faster still.

When he gulped down the fourth and final rice ball, he breathed a deep sigh of relief as his hind paws splashed down into the water of the iron buckets. There were no words for how satisfying it was to finally be back down on solid ground once again. It was the first time in a long while that he felt like he had a real sense of presence. His ears no longer heard rushing water when he closed his eyes, and he could make out nothing in the darkness either. He didn't even feel cold.

There was a brief moment of panic when he felt something brush against his back, but then he realised that it was nothing more than his own wagging tail, which he was overjoyed to discover he could feel again. No longer was it hanging numbly in the air like some possessed appendage. He pulled it around and hugged it tightly with both arms. It was wagging so vigorously, he could barely hold it still. 'Thank you so much! So is that it? Am I on the ground for good?'

'Unless you start growing feathers,' Lady Umeboshi drily replied. Placing the platter down, she reached into her deep, billowy sleeves and drew out a paper fan. The other paw she placed in the centre of Teal's chest, where it squelched against the fabric of his jacket.

'Don't – you'll get wet!' he warned her, but she just smiled.

'My dear, everybody knows that water in this world doesn't fall. It rises, just like everything else. There's no water here. Just a memory.' She flapped her fan once, and the force of the wind blasted through him like a tornado, leaving him bone-dry. He turned around to find a distinctly fox-shaped arrangement of drops on the back wall of the lift. 'And

memories are best left in the past. Now if you'll kindly put this stepladder back, you may join me at the table,' she said. He quickly bent down to untie the ropes. 'We have much to discuss.'

Both buckets went in the corner of the lift, along with Teal's single trainer. As he rolled the folded stepladder past her, the old cat gracefully lowered herself into a kneeling position on the floor mat. She sat straight, with the soles of her hind paws painfully parallel with the floor, and yet her face betrayed not a hint of discomfort, even with a headdress that looked like it could easily weigh as much as she did.

The bamboo stepladder went back against the wall. Before he left to join her, Teal snuck a quick glance over the balcony. To his relief, the impenetrable wall of writhing shadow had yet to climb this high. He wondered what Lady Umeboshi had been staring at when he first arrived. Aside from the endless countryside, there wasn't much to see from the back of the village. Just a few hot springs, and a small lake far below.

Lady Umeboshi nodded, her eyes narrowing momentarily through the wisps of smoke and incense as Teal sat down at the other end of the table. She watched him silently as he tried to mimic her stance. But it was impossible. His ankles felt like they were on fire. After a few stumbling attempts, he settled for crossed legs. She seemed satisfied. 'Tea?' she asked, and she proffered the ceramic teapot.

Teal wasn't sure he trusted the contents of the teapot. But he'd been told not to refuse anything from her, and besides, he was already four rice balls deep. If she truly meant him harm, the damage was done. He nodded.

'Excellent choice,' she said, placing the spout within the small hole at the bottom of the cup and filling it in an smooth, practised motion before pouring her own. She went back and

forth between them, adding to each cup until they were both steaming. Despite the speed, not a single drop was spilled.

‘You should know that it was a trick question anyway. Tea is never optional in Nahashi, and that cup of tea is better than any of the swill you’ll find outside these walls. Sharp, piquant and refreshing, if you’ve only got the taste buds for it. Pure ethre doesn’t need spices to mask the natural flavour, and you’ll never find it over anything as primitive as a flame either. It’s hotter than any natural fire, and anathema to all but mortal souls. It’s heating itself in your cup right now.’

‘That sounds... incredible,’ Teal said. It did. ‘Probably wasted on me though,’ he added apologetically. ‘Knowing me, I wouldn’t be able to tell the difference anyway.’

Lady Umeboshi smiled, but Teal caught one of her eyes twitching momentarily. ‘Perhaps not,’ she said. Her bobtail bristled behind her. ‘I also prepared an inspired assortment of sugar confections. Feel free to help yourself.’ She gestured to the platters around the teapot. There were tiny squares of cake, jellies, multi-coloured sugar candies and sweet buns.

‘Thanks, I will.’

‘Are you sure you don’t want one right now? All the favourites of the living are here. Yokan, higashi, manju...’

Teal gazed at the perfect arrangement uncertainly. ‘Maybe later.’

‘Suit yourself,’ she said, and she swiped up a small handful of the sugar candies. ‘Like you said, you probably wouldn’t be able to appreciate it anyway,’ she added with a sly crunch. ‘Well? Are you going to take a sip, or just wait for the teacup to hop up and make its own way over to your lips?’

‘Sorry,’ Teal said. ‘Thank you for the tea, Lady... Ume.’ He stared down at his own cup. The very air above it seemed to warp and bend. Steam eked out from the bottom, somehow

thicker than normal. There was an otherworldly heat emanating from it, even more so than with Kon's cup back at the Tack and Thimble. He could feel it just by looking at it.

The old cat rolled her eyes. 'Very well,' she said. She lifted her own teacup to her muzzle with both paws and quickly drained it in one. The cup returned to the tabletop with a delicate tink. 'I hope that proves that there is nothing untoward going on in my teapot. Now will you please try the tea? What exactly are you afraid it's going to do? Kill you again?'

'I don't know. Could it?'

'I don't know,' she said. Her eyes glimmered. 'Could it?'

He reached out a paw and curled his fingers around the ceramic body. The heat was palpable. It was an odd design. Both the top and the bottom were enclosed, which didn't seem to leave much of an area to drink from. At any rate, at least he knew better than to turn it over like the last one.

'That's the spirit,' she said. 'Now just make sure to—'

But it was too late. As he lifted it, the top part of the teacup came clean off, leaving the bottom segment still on the table. Just like last time, Teal watched in shock as the smoking blue liquid slowly sailed into the air, collecting on the ceiling.

'Hold the bottom...' Lady Umeboshi finished, as he spun it back around and caught the last few drops on the rim. She held her forehead in her paws. 'Ethre rises, as you're no doubt aware. The teacup comes apart to give you somewhere to drink from. Otherwise, you'd have to lap at the hole where the spout goes, and well, we're not barbarians, are we? Are we?' She took a deep breath and straightened up. 'Fear not, I'll have my magpie take care of it later. You should consider yourself very lucky. That ceiling is the only part of my study that an ethre stain wouldn't do irreparable damage to.'

‘I’m so, so sorry!’

‘It’s fine. The look on your face alone suffices as payment. But pray tell me what you think of the little tea you saved.’

‘Oh. Okay.’ He raised the top half of the cup to his muzzle and very slowly, very carefully tilted it. A few stray drops hit the roof of his mouth. They trickled upwards, climbing his palate like tiny worms, but he forced them down with a gulp. The sensation was otherworldly. It was neither warm nor cold, without much taste at all, and yet it felt like he was drinking fire itself. All the fur on his body stood on end. ‘It tastes great!’ he spluttered, returning the cup to the table.

Lady Umeboshi collected his teacup with a smile. ‘Well I suppose they do say everything’s better in moderation. It warms my heart to hear you enjoyed your drop of tea, it really does. But now I fear we must get down to business.’

She reached underneath the table and pulled out an old red umbrella, which she laid on her lap. In a second, the entire atmosphere of the room had changed. She wasn’t smiling anymore. ‘This has all been a most enjoyable game. I’ve played along just as you wanted, but now I must insist that you tell me exactly who you are, and what it is you’re doing.’

‘I... don’t understand.’

‘Come now Tan, I’ve played a hospitable host. I invited you within my walls, and served you the finest ethre from my own stocks. The least you can do is start being honest with me. Or perhaps it’s one of your little friends. The suit is very convincing, I’ll give you that.’

Teal felt dread settle like a pit in his stomach. ‘The suit?’

‘The guise. Your form, your mask, whatever you want to call it. The only reason you furnished my ceiling with your tea is because you knew it was a test. Nothing born outside the mortal realm can stomach ethre. It’s pure, undiluted spirit,

poison to all creatures that have never known a body. But you already knew that, didn't you?

'You didn't so much as sniff at my assorted confectionery either, which any real fox would have jumped at in a heartbeat. Maybe it's just because you never had much of a sweet tooth. Understandable. Or, more likely, you've never had much of any tooth at all, because you failed to do the most basic research about what mortals are like before you decided to slap this meagre facade together. Admittedly, I don't know how you managed to keep those rice balls down for so long, but you've been quivering like a willow tree since you first arrived, so I won't hold my breath in that regard. You see, real mortal spirits can hear, and smell, and taste, and love, and lose, which I highly doubt you'd know the first thing about. You wouldn't know good taste if it walloped you across your imposturous taste buds.'

'But—'

'And I know I'm being incredibly generous to you, but that's only because I have to be. I have an entire village that looks up to me. But don't think for a single moment that I've forgotten what you've done. At some point, there was a real fox out there. I should know, because I spent most of the day out there looking for them. Some poor, innocent, confused little soul, lost in the interlands for gods know how long before you found them. Even my Shrine Keepers can't tell me what happened to them. Only that nothing now remains.'

'And as if imitating that unfortunate spirit wasn't enough, you decided that it would be clever to inflict this plague of a shadow upon our land when you crossed over. I really don't care whether it's Tan I'm speaking to right now, or a demon, oni, dragon, trickster spirit, shapeshifter, witch's fox or any other phantasm. Mark my words. I will make you pay for

what you've done.'

Her long claws tightened on the carved handle of her umbrella. As she drew it back, any hint of light and colour evaporated from the study. Great bolts of lightning began to spark, and the air itself grew heavy and sulphurous. In the darkness, her eyes burned like two stars. 'You aren't entitled to a hearing, and if anybody in this village has come to an ounce of harm on your account, the hands of the gods themselves won't be quick enough to stay my own. Anzen is my court, and I preside over it as its sole protector. So I will ask you one final time. Who are you?'

'I'm me!' Teal cried. 'Please, just listen to me. I'm not a trickster or a demon, or any of those other things you mentioned. I'm just a fox, I swear! A fox that lost his way.'

Lady Umeboshi's laughter echoed like a thunderclap. 'Are you seriously expecting me to believe that one fox spirit managed to evade my relentless search, and make it all the way through the interlands by itself in only a few hours?'

'But I didn't! One of those egg things helped me. It was a ki... kiba...?'

'Kiba-kiba?'

'Yeah! And a lantern with a floating flame led me through the forest when it got dark. There was a moth as well...'

'When it... got dark?' The lightning bolts ceased. Lady Umeboshi's long claws rested on the handle of the umbrella. One of her knuckles cracked. 'Are you sure about that? I must warn you — lying to me will be the last mistake you ever make.'

'I promise,' he said. 'I'll swear on whatever the hell you want. I came here to get help. I've got no reason to lie.'

Teal stared her dead in her blue and yellow eyes, silently pleading for her to recognise the truth in them. And sure

enough, the unbridled fury melted away into mild irritation. She frowned. ‘Ah,’ she said. She slid the handle of the umbrella back, and in an instant, the study was back to normal. She placed the umbrella to her side. ‘Then it appears you have a lot of explaining to do.’

Lady Umeboshi poured herself another cup from the teapot and took a long, measured sip. ‘You might want to try your paws at a second cup. We may be here a while.’

# Author's Note:

*'Thank you...'*

Thank you for reading Chapter Five of *The End Where It Begins*! I hope you enjoyed it! Keep your eyes peeled for Chapter Six, which is coming soon!

This book is free, published online exclusively at [www.t-larc.com](http://www.t-larc.com), and there will never be any pay walls or barriers to entry. As a result, if you'd like to support me directly, it'd be awesome if you could chuck a [Ko-fi](#) or [PayPal](#) tip my way! It keeps me drinking tea and eating sandwiches, and I'd greatly appreciate any donations that you feel like sending!

But if not, that's cool too! You're already supporting me by reading and enjoying my stuff, so thanks a ton! And if you'd like to support the project in other ways, share the link, spread the word and get a conversation going on social media! Fan art and fan theories are both welcome!

So what are your favourite characters and scenes? Which secrets have you spotted, and what do you think is going to happen next?

Until next time, stay safe, stay kind, and as always, stay hydrated!