

SHI

Volume One:

The End Where It Begins

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– ACT TWO –

Sole

Chapter Six:

‘Unfortunately...’

Lady Umeboshi’s Study

‘Unfortunately, that’s it. But I think that covers just about everything that happened after I got lost in the fog. Even this thing.’ Teal held his paw up, but the loop of red ribbon shuffled down his sleeve. He pushed it back along his arm and carefully retied the knot, pulling the other end with his teeth.

Lady Umeboshi made no attempt to break the silence while he worked. In fact, she hadn’t said much since she called the magpie up to tend to the ceiling. Somehow, he managed to arrive from his last job completely dry. When he was finished, she thanked him, and he quietly bowed out of the room, carrying his mop over his shoulder. That was the last time she’d spoken, and it had been a while ago. Too long.

‘You see, after Kon and Allie helped me down, I couldn’t take it off,’ Teal explained. He decided that even his own voice was better than the uneasy silence. ‘I don’t know where I’d be without this little red ribbon, you know? Well, I guess you probably do.’

‘Mm...’

Cigarette smoke curled around the old cat's eyes. The confectionery had long since vanished from the table, the trays all stacked to the side. Lady Umeboshi had made short work of that. All that remained in front of them now was the teapot, whose own impressive plume of blue steam had gradually depleted over the course of Teal's story, and both of their teacups. She reached for hers and took a deep draught. It was empty by the time she placed it back down. Teal wasn't sure how many cups that made it. He'd lost count.

'I don't like your story,' she said. 'I don't like it for many reasons. It's overly long, lacking in important details and almost absurdly implausible. But most of all, I don't like your story because against my better judgement, I somehow find myself believing it.'

'I think you'd know if I was lying by now. You could have fried me a dozen times already.'

'True.' Lady Umeboshi rose to put her cigarette out over the balcony. 'Very true. And still could,' she reminded him. 'But you're right. Unfortunately, I do believe you. It's one fanciful tale, though. You must have many questions.'

'You have no idea.'

She chuckled to herself. 'Perhaps more than you'd think,' she said. 'If only we had the time. But alas, you took longer than I expected. When the clock strikes twelve, I need to be at the iron doors, so here is my proposition.'

Lady Umeboshi glided over to her golden shrine, where she sorted through a rattling box of incense sticks until she found a stout one with nine short ridges. She placed it into one of the holes on the side of the hanging incense burner. With a click of her claws, the tip of her cigarette holder burst into flames.

'Hey, what am I lightin' here?' Clinging tightly to the edge

of the metal, the tiny fire spirit seemed very surprised to have been conjured out of nowhere. At least until it saw Lady Umeboshi. ‘Oh, heya plums!’

The old cat inclined her head slightly. ‘Good evening to you.’

After sizzling the end of the incense stick to a crisp, the fire spirit gave an exuberant bow to the room. ‘And that, ladies and gentlefoxes, is how you do it.’ With another click, the flame vanished. Lady Umeboshi sighed. She took out a small cloth and wiped the scorch marks from her cigarette holder just as smoke began streaming from the cherry-red end of the stick. Strangely, the incense didn’t appear to have a scent.

‘We have until the stick burns down,’ she told Teal, joining him back at the table. ‘You may ask me as many questions as you like, on any subject. I will answer them all.’

‘Really?’ Teal’s eyes glimmered at the promise of answers.

‘Now I’d like to leave it at that, but you don’t get anything in this world for nothing. For every three questions you ask, I’d like one in return. You are my guest, after all. Three for one seems like more than a fair trade, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Depends. Is that a question?’

‘Only if that is.’ She refilled her teacup and took a measured sip. ‘It’s good to see that we’re on the same page after all. Perhaps there’s hope for you yet. By all means, proceed with your first question. But be warned, I can only promise you answers. I can’t promise that you’ll like them.’

Teal nodded. He was unprepared for the sudden flood of questions that assaulted his mind. Just when he seemed to settle on one, a dozen more appeared out of the blue. He could ask any question he wanted. After everything he’d been through, where in the world was he supposed to start? ‘What

is this place?’ he said eventually. He had to start somewhere.

‘This is Shoganai Tower. You’re currently sitting in the middle of my study, which occupies the ninth floor...’

‘No, but I mean this place. This village, this land, this... whole crazy world, where fire can talk and lanterns can walk and eggs are made of teeth and I don’t even know what else. Just trying to figure out where to start is making my head spin, so I’m trying to stick to what I know. Like history. I don’t know much, but I know my history, and I swear I’ve seen this village before. It looks like it jumped right out of one of my course books on seventeenth-century Sakurai, and however weird that is, it’s got nothing on the fact that there’s a tower standing over it all that by all rights shouldn’t even exist. The architecture alone predates the rest of Anzen by hundreds of years. Now that’s weird, right? It’s not just me.’

Lady Umeboshi glanced around the room and smiled. ‘Oh, I’d certainly say so.’

‘And the roofs outside aren’t just decorative either. From what I remember from my studies, the last true nine-storey pagodas burned down sometime in the eighth century, well before the turn of the millennium. But my eyes are telling me something else. Is this even possible?’

‘Is that your third question?’

‘No. Wait, what?’

‘Well that certainly is. To answer the first question, yes, it most certainly is possible. After all, you’re sitting in it. I must say, that was a terribly squandered first round. I can only hope things pick up before we have to part ways.’

Teal’s mouth fell open. ‘I thought you were supposed to be helping me.’

Lady Umeboshi coolly sipped at her tea. ‘You can’t help someone that isn’t helping themselves,’ she said. ‘And I’m

not a charity either. The worse questions you ask, the more time I have to learn. Now listen closely. Everything about you tells me that you're from a different time, but it goes further than that. Your turns of phrase are strange, and your clothing stranger still. I know you're not a native Nahashi.'

'How do you know that?'

'I believe I was the one asking questions.' He bit his lip. This was a cruel game. He was going to have to get a lot better at it if he wanted to leave any wiser than he went in.

'Nobody from Nahashi would have made it this far inside my tower with their shoes still on. Well, shoe in your case. Not even the Sakuranese would have dreamt of such a thing.'

Teal stared sheepishly at his trainer from across the room. He hadn't even thought about it. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I didn't mean to be rude. Although to be fair, I was floating above the ground wearing two iron buckets only a few minutes ago.'

'I'm afraid that wouldn't have made a grain of difference to a Nahashi.' There was a glint to the old cat's blue and amber eyes as her lips curled into a grin. 'Now let's see here. I've never been one for water, but I did a fair amount of travelling in my time, and I'd know that accent from anywhere. There's only one part of the world you could possibly be from, and it's a kingdom very, very far from here. You are either from Gaelynd, Britannia or Haedria, and judging from your expression, I don't even need to ask which one. So here, child, is my question. Are you surprised that I was so quick to ascertain that you were from Britannia?'

It was Teal's turn to smile. 'No, because you're wrong. I'm not from Britannia.' Technically, he wasn't lying. After all, Britannia hadn't existed for decades. Not since the empire was still around.

Lady Umeboshi stared at him in disbelief. Her long claws

clacked against the metal guard of the umbrella. ‘You liar.’

‘I’ll swear on anything you want. I’m not from Britannia. And I think that means it’s my turn now.’

‘I suppose it does,’ she uttered through gritted fangs.

Teal thought long and hard before he spoke again. He only had three questions left before his turn was over. A bit of errant phrasing, and the entire thing would be for naught. And yet he couldn’t take too long. With every passing moment, the incense stick burned down just a little more. He tried not to look at it. ‘If I were to ask you to succinctly and helpfully sum up the history of Anzen and the nature of the spirit world, how would you do it?’

Lady Umeboshi leaned back. Beneath the gleaming golden headdress, her face was utterly inscrutable. ‘Better,’ she said finally. Teal breathed out in relief. ‘I said better, not good,’ she added, and his shoulders sagged. ‘You see, the framing of the question offers too much room for manoeuvre. How I would do it is an entirely separate proposition from what it is I’d be doing. But since you’re learning, I’ll grant you this one concession. Let it never be said that I’m not a gracious host. Ahem.’ And she paused to clear her throat.

‘Anzen, which has a long and storied history, is the world’s last refuge for wayward spirits and wandering souls. There used to be many villages just like it across Nahashi and mainland Sakurai, but over time, they... fell away.’ Teal was surprised to hear her voice catch in her throat, but she moved on quickly. ‘You see, when the vast majority of animals die, their spirits move on, and that’s the end of it. But for a select few, their story isn’t over. They’re left behind in the fog, to wander and to wonder until they’ve earned their passage.’

‘Over time, rituals were developed that a village could perform to tether their souls to the spirit world. There, they

could watch over the world of the living, and protect it from malevolent spirits that would seek to do it harm. When the next generation came along, they could then pursue an existence of selflessness and introspection until their past crimes were scrubbed clean, and they could join their forebears in the heavens, and so on and so forth. But those rituals have long been forgotten. Anzen is the last village that ever performed them. That was after Nahashi's battle for independence during the civil war, in which Anzen fought valiantly on the front lines.

'This village was built in the same place Anzen used to be, and where other villages have no doubt sprung up since. After all, the lay of the land is the same for one world as it is for them all. The realms of the dead and the living reside alongside one another, in the space between the spaces. We exist in the impressions of the waking world, in every pond and every stream, every mirror and in the reflections of every eye. We are the residents of a dreamerless dream. Both worlds can never touch, but under the right light, one may cast a shadow on the other.'

'Okay...'

Lady Umeboshi rolled her long whiskers thoughtfully back and forth between her thumb and forefinger. 'Is it a lot?'

'No,' he quickly replied. It was a lot. 'So this isn't heaven, then. Or something like it.'

'Does it feel like heaven?'

'I don't know. I'm not sure what heaven would feel like, even if I found myself there.'

'That's a fair point.' She laughed. 'It isn't, but it's a fair point. Could the same not also be said for hell?'

Teal hesitated for a moment. 'It's not hell,' he said quietly.

'How would you know? Are you thinking rationally, or is

that just optimism talking?’

His throat felt very dry all of a sudden. ‘I believe it’s still my turn.’ He reached for his cup and knocked back a sip.

‘Only for as long as we still have time to burn. Your flame is dwindling fast. If you still have questions remaining, make it quick and word them well.’

Teal bit his lip. He’d done well not to waste another question, but there were so many things he still needed to know. And there was one question that he absolutely wouldn’t be asking, no matter how relentlessly it nagged at the back of his head. He just had to say something first, in order to rid himself of the temptation. ‘What were you talking about when you said terrible evil earlier?’

Lady Umeboshi’s face darkened. ‘The terrible evil you brought with you, let us not forget. The blight that’s still haunting these very skies as we speak.’

‘Of course.’ He bit his cheek and stared down at the floor mat.

She sighed. ‘Scorn,’ she said. ‘The spirit has no name, but its nature is scorn, and all things deserve the courtesy of being recognised for what they are. Everything in nature has a spirit. It may once have been a river spirit, or a mountain spirit. It might even have been the spirit of moss, or a waterfall whose river was diverted or dried up. That matters little now. What’s important is that it ended up in the interlands, a lonely, desolate expanse where even things that cannot die go to wither.’

Teal shuddered. He harboured no love for his time there. ‘I remember. There were old stumps and empty fields as far as the eye could see. I came across a great white tree in the fog. It stood so tall. But it was already dead.’ Lady Umeboshi stared at him like he’d just sworn in front of her.

‘You may have waltzed your way across those plains in an afternoon, but don’t think for a second that that means you understand them. Before mortal souls find their way through the fog, they can spend years, and sometimes even decades retracing their steps, lost in a liminal fugue. There are no words for such loneliness. Anzen may be at the brink of annihilation, but outside those walls, Scorn knows not what it does. It’s no different than a wounded animal acting out of instinct. You may have been the first thing it had seen in a thousand years. Imagine how much laughter, a smile, or even the simple patter of footsteps would mean to you after so many centuries of being alone. It’s little wonder Scorn latched onto you so tightly, its shadow blanketed the land.’

The fur on Teal’s forearms stood on end. ‘It was never night time there.’

‘There is no night and day in the interlands. There are no stars, and no seasons either. You were followed by a spirit so desperate for your company, it loomed over you like a rain cloud. It was the praying mantis trying in vain to embrace its prey with scythes for arms. And now it’s here.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I know.’

‘Is there anything I can do?’

‘Absolutely not. A waste of a question, but at least that one had some gumption to it. So this is who you are. Even after everything that happened to you, your thoughts still dwell on helping others. If there was something you could do to help, even if it placed you in certain peril, you’d do it without a second thought, wouldn’t you?’ He nodded. She laughed. ‘The naivety of youth. I won’t patronise you by suggesting this is bluster, but it would be wise not to risk your eternal existence before you know what it means to have one.’

She lit up another cigarette and took a slow, deep drag. ‘I miss the taste of tobacco,’ she muttered to herself. Smoke streamed from her nose. ‘My child, nobody in your shoe would be able to fix the mess you’ve helped to make. But when the day is done, you’re more than welcome to stay and help put the pieces back together. It’ll ease your mind, if not your soul. Now if I’m not wrong, I believe I’m owed another question.’

‘You just asked one,’ Teal said. ‘But I won’t count it. If I turned the conversation into as much of a game as you want it to be, we may as well not be talking.’

‘Very true. And that’s just as well, because my next question isn’t as much for my benefit as yours. Now listen closely. You didn’t arrive in this world of your own accord, and I’d hope you’re not naive enough to think this was all an accident. It’s my belief that you were tricked into coming here. You mentioned earlier that when you were travelling in your metal wagon, a mysterious figure forced you off the road. In the days leading up to the accident, do you remember meeting any strangers, and if so, exactly what did they say to you?’

Teal scratched the back of his neck. That was a hell of a question. ‘Well sure. Leaving the country, you have to talk to lots of animals you don’t know.’

‘No, this one should stand out in your memory. It should be unusual.’

‘Well I suppose there was this one pudú that got into some trouble on the streets. But it wasn’t like he asked me for anything. Nook was just an eccentric old homeless deer that nabbed my lunch. We barely even spoke. Apart from that, the driver that picked me up acted a little strangely, but that’s it.’

‘Did he ask you for your name?’

‘I’m sorry, which one—?’ But before Lady Umeboshi had

time to answer, the cogs were already whirring. It didn't even occur to Teal that she was still asking questions. 'No, wait. The homeless guy did ask me what my name was. I gave it to him too. But the driver didn't. We were in too much of a hurry to leave. Even on that long journey, Ki never once asked me for my name, and yet somehow, he... he knew it. It was the last thing he said before he drove away.'

'Did the two sound at all similar?' Lady Umeboshi asked him. Teal's heart stopped. That was the final piece of the puzzle.

'Identical,' he breathed. The queasy nausea of knowing rolled over him in waves. 'I couldn't put my paw on it at the time, but they sounded exactly the same. I knew I recognised his voice from somewhere.'

'Just as I suspected.' Lady Umeboshi leaned back, satisfied. 'You didn't come here by mistake. That spirit was watching you for a long time before it made its move. It may even have contrived that very situation in order to get close to you. Now there are several spirits out there that can change their form at will. Usually, that makes a situation like this very complicated, but your account narrowed things down significantly. If I were a betting cat, my money would be on Tan.'

Tan? Teal knew that name. Lady Umeboshi had mentioned it before. 'He's a tanuki, a dangerous trickster known for his careless nature, insatiable appetite and association with gold. But whether this was for financial gain, amusement or something even more nefarious, I couldn't say.'

'The driver had a string of coins around his waist.' Teal felt numb. Utterly, utterly numb. 'I didn't think to ask why. I just thought... I... I...'

'It's okay, child. What's done is done. Nobody can hurt you here.'

‘But why me? Of all the animals in the entire world, why pick me? I never hurt anyone. I’m a nobody.’ For the first time, Lady Umeboshi was reluctant to speak. Coils of smoke trickled from the glowing, ever-diminishing end of the stick. The two of them sat there and watched it burn in silence.

‘That may well be why.’

Teal looked up, but the old cat’s head hung low. Her headdress teetered back and forth atop the many locks of grey hair. Shame had carved deep lines into her face. She wouldn’t even look him in the eye. ‘Forgive me,’ she said quietly. ‘It was a terrible thing that was done to you. There’s no heaven waiting for the spirit responsible. But this is why when someone wishes to live in Anzen, they must first cast off the shell of their former life. The past is behind you, and behind you is where it belongs. What matters is that you are here.’

‘What am I supposed to do now?’

‘Now? You continue to ask questions, of course. You continue to ask questions in the knowledge that you are safe and welcome within these walls for as long as you choose to stay. Whoever did this will never hurt you again. For that, you have my word.’

‘And you promise he’ll never do this to anybody else?’

For a moment, she hesitated. But her eyes were resolute when she gave Teal a decisive nod. ‘Tan will harm nobody.’

He sniffed. ‘Okay.’

‘Now do you have another question for me?’

Teal did. There were hundreds of them, all howling around his head around a cyclone, but he was in no state to be asking questions to anybody. He had half a mind to waste it asking where the nearest cherry blossom trees were.

What he needed more than anything else in the world was a dark, quiet place, where he could lie down, close his eyes,

curl his tail over his nose and be still. Maybe just for a minute. Maybe for a whole lot longer.

‘For a while, I thought all of this was one bad dream. So much about it seems familiar somehow, but it’s all wrong.’

‘If you’re about to ask me whether this is real or not, I’m afraid I’m going to have to disappoint you.’ Lady Umeboshi flashed him a sombre smile, leaning over to top up his teacup. ‘My answer is meaningless. I’d be as much a part of the dream as everything else.’

‘No, it’s not that.’ Teal reached for his smoking cup, and after a moment of hesitation, he downed the lot. He was surprised to find that it didn’t burn nearly as much as the last one did. He could get used to this. It said a lot that it took something hotter than fire to start putting the feeling back in his limbs. ‘I want this to be a dream more than anything, which is why I’m so sure I’m awake right now. But there’s one thing I still don’t understand. If this really is an old village, one straight out of warring, feudal, isolationist Sakurai—’

‘Nahashi,’ Lady Umeboshi corrected him.

‘Nahashi,’ he added hastily, ‘then how come I can understand you? Nobody back then was speaking Britannian, and I don’t speak Sakuranese either.’

‘Well that’s perfectly simple.’ She took a leisurely puff of her cigarette. ‘Neither of us are talking right now.’

‘Oh.’ Teal’s brow furrowed. ‘I don’t want to sound stupid, but this feels a lot like talking to me.’

‘I’m sure it does. But talking is as much a biological function as walking or breathing is. You won’t be saying much worth hearing without a good tongue, palate, cheeks and teeth, all of which sap blood like a plant drinks water if you don’t want them dropping off. As something rather less

than corporeal, that's a bit of an issue, wouldn't you say? Tell me, did you never question how you're able to see in the first place, if you have eyes that you never need shut? Or how your sense of balance works, or how your nose still recognises familiar scents?'

As he became more and more aware of the incongruity of his own senses, Teal's head began to spin. 'I... I guess...'

'Don't worry about it. Just listen. You're not seeing right now because you have a pair of working eyes, and you're not smelling all the subtle nuances of my incense and cigarette smoke because your young nose is as sharp as ever. You're an animal. From birth, your senses were the only tools you had to learn about the world around you, and because of that, they became your world. Your residual memories are why sights, sounds and smells still feel so real. You mentioned earlier that you weren't able to read any of the talismans on the walls of the mountain you were ascending.'

'That's right.'

'A mountain so tall, you should by all accounts have frozen to death halfway up the peak. And yet by the time you were marching down the road to this village, you were reading the signs along the way. What did they say?'

'Anzen.'

'Indeed,' she said, 'and in the same language as the talismans. But we didn't write our signs in Sakuranese any more than you were reading them in Britannian, any more than we're both talking right now, flapping our bloodless lips about. We all come from a single source, which recognises itself in all its disparate pieces. Because of this, it isn't words we're using to communicate as much as meaning itself. After all, words are such messy, primitive things, what with their jagged edges and their grammar, and the way the cut of your

fangs and the shape of your ears can change them so completely. A sound is a slippery thing when a thousand ears will hear it a thousand different ways.'

'So it's kind of like a universal language,' Teal said. His mind was racing.

'Oh, very much so. The language newborn kittens communicate to their mothers with, and the language trees use to warn the grass below of the oncoming storm. It's pure understanding, although after an existence of doing nothing but talking, it's no surprise that your mind is still framing it as a conversation. I can appreciate that it may all sound a little strange at first, but the reality is that this world simply operates by different rules. Spirits feel no hunger. There's no thirst, exhaustion or cold, and yet you'll still find yourself blinking and breathing simply because living things are creatures of habit. A mortal spirit will never die from a fall, no matter how great. In fact, very few things can harm them, and fewer still can kill them. But perception is important. If you believe yourself to have suffered loss of limb, or stayed underwater for too long, you'll suffer the consequences, which is how I can watch a fox swim across the night sky without a drop of water in sight.'

Lady Umeboshi smiled at him, but Teal just looked away, intensely self-conscious. 'When this happens, Shrine Keepers will do what they can to help align your self-perception with the immaterial truth. But it can be a lengthy process. As long as you remember what it was like to be alive, that life will be the basis for your reality.'

'But the wiser you become, the more you may be able to open your mind and discover other, less fallible ways of experiencing the world. Would it really be much of a surprise to learn that there are spirits out there that can taste truth in

the air the same way your tongue tastes sweet and sour? That there are spirits for whom malice can starve or sate an appetite, or for whom the entire world is a single spinning disc, which they observe from beginning to end with nothing in the way, because there is nothing in the way, and no beginning or end to begin with?’

‘That was... a hell of an answer for one question.’ It wasn’t hyperbole either. In less than a minute, Lady Umeboshi had made Teal alarmingly cognisant of so much of his experience that hadn’t made sense, even if part of him felt like she was only using the opportunity to show off. It was so much more than being told that you were blinking and breathing at the same time. It was more like being made aware of how many individual bacteria there were wriggling in your gut, and he wasn’t sure he liked it one bit.

Of course, there wasn’t really any bacteria in his gut. He didn’t have a gut. Or did he still have a gut for as long as he remembered what having a gut felt like? If so, would there still be bacteria in said gut? He was certain only of one thing. If he thought about any of this a moment longer, it was sure to drive him insane.

‘Apologies for the tangent,’ Lady Umeboshi said. ‘But studying the intricacies of mortal life is just so fascinating to me. It’s something of a hobby.’

‘Wait, so you’re not mortal?’

She flashed another one of her signature grins, showing off her flawless fangs. ‘I am many things. When you’ve been around for as long as I have, you stop counting. A peruser of the arts, a scholar, an elemental spellcaster... you need not concern yourself with them all. I believe it’s my turn again.’

‘No, wait. You didn’t answer my question. Are you mortal or not?’

Lady Umeboshi's eyes narrowed. 'I'll forgive your rudeness as an momentary oversight, but my nature is not yours to impugn. Have you any understanding of the sheer power that lies within a single tip of a single one of my claws, just waiting to be unleashed? Mortal spirits are weak. They require protection, from others or from themselves, and as you can clearly see, I'm fine, which means that we're fine, and that Anzen is doing just fine too. The last thing I want the world to hear is that we are a village in great need...'

But Lady Umeboshi trailed off, distracted by the lanterns overhead. Their flames were fluttering in a sudden breeze. Shadows in the study whipped wildly back and forth, and then abruptly stopped. The air grew still. 'Guard yourself,' she warned, as the lanterns went out one by one. Darkness fell upon the room. 'We are not alone.'

Lady Umeboshi slowly rose to her hind paws, her sleeves unpooling from the floor mat without making a sound. She turned to the golden shrine in the corner.

Below the shrine's many resplendent carvings, golden statuettes and engraved incense burners, a simple rosary of prayer beads hung over four plain wooden bowls. There was something rising from the furthestmost bowl, a thin, sparkling trail of what looked like green crystal shards. They tinked together faintly in the air, wavering like they could drop back into the bowl at any moment.

Without looking away, Lady Umeboshi reached for her umbrella. 'Get behind me,' she said. Teal scrambled to get back. 'You will do nothing unless first prompted. Is that clear?' Teal nodded.

'Is it Tan?' he breathed.

'No.' She cracked a knuckle on the cold steel of the handle. In the silence, the incense burner swung to and fro, screeching

forebodingly on its metal hook. 'It's something far, far worse than that.' Her grip tightened on the umbrella, her eyes burning with concentration. Then, she breathed out, smiled, and paced over to the balcony. Teal watched her go, realising far too late that something was already there, waiting for them both.

'I arrive.'

Balcony

It was a single gigantic green eye, as fierce as fire, and broken only by a thin ebony slit that was still taller than Teal. He could have walked right into it, and he wouldn't even have touched the sides. Whatever it belonged to fell out of sight behind the tower columns, though a whisker thicker than Teal's torso waved in and out of sight above a row of emerald scales. The eye gazed curiously around the darkened room, blocking out any hint of the moon or the starry sky behind it. A single translucent eyelid blinked slowly.

Lady Umeboshi's arms spread wide, and the pupil widened as its gaze settled on her. 'Midori!' she exclaimed.

The huge eye blinked once more. After a time, a slow, booming voice ponderously followed. 'The night burns brilliant bright with the scales of my kin.' It took Teal a few moments to figure out exactly what was being said. The sounds were very easy on the ear, as natural as a crashing wave or the rumbling of thunder, but the words themselves came out strange, as though they were being spoken by something that wasn't much used to speech.

'Blindingly so,' the old cat replied sharply. She leaned over the balcony and gave the corner of the eye a good rap with the umbrella. 'We can scarcely look up at such splendour for fear of going blind and spending the rest of our existence

bumping into things. Isn't that right, my friend?' The whisker jumped in the air, and the pupil turned its attention to Teal. Lady Umeboshi jabbed him sharply with the umbrella.

But there was no reply. Teal was utterly transfixed by the eye. It felt as though the weight of an entire mountain was pressing down upon him. It was only when Lady Umeboshi got him a second time in the ribs that he finally snapped out of it. 'Oh, yeah,' he stuttered. He stared straight past the eye and tried not to look at his gargantuan audience directly. 'I've never seen a more, uh... resplendent sky.'

The thick, scaly hide around the great eye wrinkled; it seemed satisfied. The deep voice thundered once again. 'I beseech you mortal souls to listen to my plea. You are in great need. I, the elemental Midori, have heeded your call, and in my immortal power, I am duty-bound to serve. In what manner may I assist you—?'

'No need!' Lady Umeboshi interjected with a hasty laugh. 'You're very kind, but I'm afraid somewhere along the line, you must have gotten the wrong end of the stick. As you can clearly see, we're all doing just fine over here!'

The great eye narrowed. 'A foul shadow lingers beyond the walls, lapping at your door. It will not leave of its own accord.'

'Well you know how much I enjoy a challenge,' Lady Umeboshi said. Her smile thinned ever so slightly. 'Once again, I must thank you for your generous offer of assistance. You and your kind really are, well... too kind, but Anzen has always been a safe haven for us temporal souls, and that's not about to change tonight. As the festival draws to a close, I'm sure there must be plenty of spirits in greater need beyond our humble, and yet assuredly sturdy, walls.'

The eye blinked slowly. 'One would think,' the voice

boomed. ‘Is this conclusion one shared by the rest of your village?’

After a short silence, Lady Umeboshi gave Teal another prod. ‘Oh, yeah!’ he jumped. ‘I’m pretty sure Lady Umeboshi’s got it covered. But thank you again. You’re simply...’ But words failed him. ‘I... don’t think there’s even a word for it.’

‘Midori,’ the voice rumbled.

‘That’s the one...’

The giant eye blinked again. Its rippling whisker drooped a little in the air, and beyond the balcony, there was a noise like a peal of distant thunder. ‘Very well. I depart.’

Its gaze drifted forwards, and after one last lazy wink to the room, the eye began to float past. Its whisker whisked by, leaving behind what felt like an endless wall of twinkling emerald scales in its wake. Far below the balcony, great unseen limbs danced, swimming effortlessly through the air.

Faster and faster it went, ruffling tapestries on the walls and knocking the lanterns to and fro. Teal and Lady Umeboshi stood together and watched the spirit sail by. They didn’t move until the entirety of its long, snake-like body had moved on, which it announced with an oblivious tail flick that threw all the flowers into the air, and sent the old cat’s papers flying. Over by the shrine, the tiny green crystal fragments dropped back into the bowl.

The old cat’s shoulders sagged. Breathing a heavy sigh, she propped her umbrella up against the wall and drew out her long cigarette holder. Once again, she snapped her fingers, and the tip was ablaze. This time, however, the fire spirit read the room and wisely kept its silence. Leaving the cold night air behind, she wasted no time going from lantern to lantern, grumbling to herself as she breathed new life into each one.

Meanwhile, Teal tiptoed onto the balcony to sneak a peek over the wooden railing. The green spirit was like a snake in the air, coiling and uncoiling as it rode the wind. Or perhaps the wind was riding with the spirit instead. It was difficult to tell. ‘Damn it, Midori,’ Lady Umeboshi muttered to herself as she worked. ‘Why does your kin always make it so much more trouble than it’s worth? You’ll never be a bigger help than when you finally decide to take a day off. But I suppose that’s what you get with dragons.’

‘Dragons...’ Teal repeated with a whisper. He watched in awe as the enormous spirit grew smaller and smaller against the orb of the full moon.

‘Aye, dragons,’ Lady Umeboshi affirmed with a sigh. ‘Troublemakers more like, at least until they’re old enough to “burn brilliant bright” with the others. Don’t misunderstand me, child. I spent many a night in my youth in the company of candles, reading all about the legends of the great dragons Akaikasai and Saidaikasai and the rest of them. We all did. Unfortunately, the truth rather pales by comparison. They aren’t charitable gods or pernicious demons from the sea. They’re just between jobs. Doing deeds throughout the land is how they join their brothers and sisters among the stars, and most of them have had plenty of time to work at it.’

‘How much time is plenty? Centuries?’

‘Oh, easily. It’d be millennia for most of them. Except old greeny, of course. Midori’s barely a twinkle in the eyes of its kin, which was why it was so determined to earn its scales. The small ones are often like that.’ Teal’s eyebrow arched. Small?

‘But dragons come from a place before places, and they are all born from a time without time. Make no mistake, their nature is not the same as ours. They can never die. Death is a

foreign concept to them, as are many other mortal concerns. Sanity, for example. Or pain. So mark my words – if a dragon ever comes to you offering help, politely turn it down and run the other way as fast as those long legs of yours can carry you. Hopefully, you’ll survive with your tail still between them. If they want to beg around for their constellation, they can do so somewhere their panhandling won’t endanger mortal souls. Anzen has enough problems already. Do you understand?’

‘I do,’ Teal nodded. He thought for a moment, and then he smiled. She glared at him suspiciously.

‘What is it?’

“‘Their nature is not the same as ours.’”

‘Yes, that’s what I said. What of it?’

‘And earlier, you did call us both temporal souls.’

‘That I did.’

‘So I guess that means you’re mortal too.’

Her left ear twitched. Lady Umeboshi lowered the cigarette holder and snuffed out the flame with her bare claws. ‘We’ve got work to do. Get back inside and help me with these papers before I give in to temptation and throw you from the top.’

Study

‘I shtill don’t know why thish ish nesheshary.’

Teal was standing in the full light of the moon, holding his head back with his jaws wide open. Atop her stepladder, Lady Umeboshi peered over him with her imperious eyes, pulling his muzzle this way and that. Every now and then, she paused to lean over her desk and make notes in an enormous black book, whose thick golden chain rattled against the golden binding.

‘It’s very simple,’ she said. ‘When you first entered my

study, I was under the impression that you were trying to deceive me. Now that it's clear you're actually a fox, I need to know what I'm dealing with. And do try to keep still; I'm in no mood to lose fingers tonight.'

Teal was about to ask her how that was even possible, but before he could say anything, Lady Umeboshi took hold of his jaw and opened it even wider. She laid his head flat, staring inside and around all the nooks and crannies every which way, muttering notes to herself all the while. 'Average red male with irregular regal-blue colouring and black accents. Six foot five from the tips of the ears, and criminally lean.'

'Where I come from, we usually measure height from the top of the head,' Teal interjected. Growing up, he'd never had particularly long ears, and no matter how many times teachers told them that the lengths of their ears and antlers didn't matter, that never stopped the comparisons. Finn had always been a vocal proponent of the ear height argument, for obvious reasons.

'Really? Fascinating,' she said. 'Where I come from, we don't.' And she leaned into his mouth to continue her observations. 'Seemed to be healthy with all his teeth intact. That said, there's a small fracture towards the back. Some sort of altercation, perhaps? More likely a sporting accident or bout of clumsiness, and... my my, your diet went by the wayside in your early teens.'

'I wasch shtressed!' he protested. But Lady Umeboshi only shook her head and prised his jaws open even wider.

'Not a natural smiler,' she muttered. 'And with far less smiling than there used to be.'

'Maybe there isn't as much to smile about.'

'Perhaps.' Without closing his mouth, she moved on to the rest of his head. She rolled the soft tips of his ears back and

forth between her fingertips. ‘You also never waited for your ears to dry properly before you went to bed.’

‘It takesch too long.’ Teal’s muzzle was really starting to ache, but no sooner did he give his lower jaw a little slack than Lady Umeboshi pulled them both apart once again. He groaned.

‘Suffering a cold takes too long,’ she said. ‘Especially for a tod of working age like yourself. Now where would I place you? Six, no seven...’ She pinched his cheek fluff together and jostled it about. ‘Aha!’ she exclaimed. She relinquished the fur with a delighted flourish. ‘Eighteen it is!’

Teal winced and rubbed his cheeks. ‘And how exshactly can you tell that?’

‘Because the face you’re wearing is far too weary for seventeen, and yet still too optimistic for nineteen,’ she said simply. She picked up one of his paws and inspected the claws individually. ‘Excellent craftsmanship,’ she added to herself. ‘Though not superbly maintained.’

‘Look, I file them onesh a week like everybody elsh.’

‘You filed them?’ She flexed her own claws and tutted. ‘What a naive nation you hail from.’ The old cat alighted from the stepladder and softly padded away. ‘You can close your mouth, by the way. We’re finished here.’

‘Thank god.’ Teal straightened up, cradling his aching jaw. He thought it’d be comforting to know that any pain he felt was only in his head, but somehow, that didn’t help at all. If anything, it made it even worse.

‘Just one more thing, and we can both be on our way.’

‘Great! What’s that?’

Lady Umeboshi’s paw was hovering over her book, which lay open beside a small rectangular dish of black ink. The ink appeared to be composed of countless minuscule characters.

They jumped and danced around in the air, chattering amongst themselves. She looked up at him and smiled. ‘Just your name.’

A drop of ink fell from her brush and blotted the paper, leaving a smudge of wriggling characters an inch from the long columns of notes she’d written up, and the rough portrait of Teal that sat to the side of them.

‘Oh.’ Teal’s tail lashed behind him. ‘I... don’t know if I can say. Someone warned me not to tell anybody my name.’

‘And who would that be?’

‘The same animal that told me how I ended up in this world in the first place.’

She looked up. ‘Somebody told you about your predicament before you came to see me? Who was it? Was that the same time your hind paws left the ground?’

Teal bristled. He knew immediately that he’d made a big mistake. ‘I don’t know who it was,’ he lied. ‘Just one of the villagers, I guess. They didn’t stick around. I wouldn’t recognise them if I saw them.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Hmm...’ She leaned over to dip her brush back in the ink dish. Tiny characters, and even smaller flecks of punctuation clung to the bristles as she brought it back up. ‘Well they weren’t wrong. A proper name is a substantial thing here. We are rather less than that. If you know the name of something, you know its nature, and if you know its nature, its nature becomes yours. Hence my *Folio no Shinzo*.’ She gave the hardbound book a pat.

Ornamental corner pieces protected each of its four corners, and the cover itself was an exquisite gilded design of stars, talons, orbs and angelic wings. The thick golden clasp, over

which the heavy chain had been draped, was shaped like two paws whose carved knuckles were intertwined, although in its separated form, the fingers looked rather more to Teal like teeth. ‘This hefty tome contains the names of every single soul in this village. For as long as I hold them here, they need not fear that any other spirit take them, because—’

‘They’re already yours.’

The old cat chuckled. ‘Would you rather they be yours instead? It’s a far greater responsibility than merely holding someone’s life in your palm. A mortal lifespan is worthless, a blink in the eye of the cosmos. Their eternal existence is not, but somebody has to hold the reins.’

She pushed the book towards him and the end of the golden chain fell from the table. It thumped hard against the wood. Teal took a step back. ‘Would you trust yourself with your own existence?’

‘No,’ he admitted. ‘But I wouldn’t trust anybody who told me they could be trusted with it either.’

She smiled. ‘Very wise. I dare say I even agree with you. But there’s the bind. I’m not telling you I can be trusted with it. I’m telling you that somebody has to be, and if that animal won’t be yourself, it must needs be someone else. Try to imagine yourself under my headdress for a moment. If you saw a young kitten playing by itself on the road, oblivious to all the dangers of the fast-approaching wagons, would it be wise to leave them to their own devices? Would it be conscionable, even if the kitten thought it knew best?’

Teal didn’t like where this was going. ‘I suppose not,’ he said.

‘And thus, you see my predicament. I’ve been watching over Anzen for a long, long time, and I’ve seen innumerable spirits like yourself enter and leave these walls holding their

names to their breasts. None of them are here now. I'll leave you to ponder on why that may be. In a way, I suppose it's lucky that most animals aren't very adept at hiding their true nature. You may think otherwise, but all the signs are there, if only you knew how to read them. Even for you.'

Teal's eyes widened. 'You're not a liar, child, even if you spent your life living in the things unsaid. You wear an honest face, Teal.' He flinched at the mention of his name.

'Hush now, it's quite alright. I'm not going to do anything with it. It's very simple. Do you trust yourself?'

'No.'

'And do you trust anyone else?'

'Of course not.'

'Then it's settled. One cannot stand on both sides of a doorway when the door slams shuts, and closed this door must be. Closed and bolted. Quickly now, snap to it!' She lowered her brush, and a few of the ink spirits clambered down and waddled into place on the page, forming his name. After a quick blow to set them into place, Lady Umeboshi closed the book with a weighty thump. The carved knuckles interlocked, and the golden clasp snapped shut. 'See, that wasn't so hard, was it? You didn't feel your very soul eking out of you?'

'No.' In fact, he didn't feel any different.

'So what was your name again?'

'That's easy. It's... it's...' It was on the tip of his tongue. He knew it. He knew that he knew it, because he'd known it for as long as he'd ever known anything. It fitted him as comfortably as his own skin. And yet for some reason, it just wasn't coming to him. It was right there, and yet somehow, it wasn't. He eyed the Folio no Shinzo warily.

'Safe,' Lady Umeboshi concluded. 'Your name is safe, and as long as I'm the only one who knows it, safe is where it'll

stay. But it wouldn't do for you to go wandering about like some forgotten nameless thing, so you'll need a new one.'

'I don't know if I could give myself a new name...'

'Agreed. After all, any name you choose would still reflect the essence of who you are. Your new name is something you must don, like a mask. What say you to Shiro?'

'I don't know,' the fox said. 'I don't think I like it.'

'Good,' she replied. 'If you did, I'd have to change it. I'm hardly in love with it myself, but if nothing else, Shiro is a blank slate. It can be a new beginning, much like mine was all those years ago. The fact that it means nothing to you will keep you safe. The final choice is yours, but before you answer, remember that this name is only a veil. Never trust a beautiful disguise. Trust one so mundane, it inspires nothing in you. Indifference can be more powerful than fear.'

The fox thought long and hard before he gave his answer. He hadn't been nameless for long, and already, unrest was setting in. It was like standing in the middle of a bustling street and not being seen. All things deserved to have a name. It didn't have to be long and prestigious. It didn't have to be beautiful, or even roll off the tongue. It just had to exist.

'Okay,' Shiro said. He could tell this was going to take some getting used to. 'Now could we please go and take care of the shadow while the village is still standing?'

'Are you forgetting something, child?'

'I don't think so...'

'The incense is still burning.'

Shiro looked to the table, and sure enough, there were a few millimetres left of the ninth and final ridge. Smoke sputtered intermittently from the end. 'Our time is not yet up. It's still your turn, and I believe you had one question left.'

'I did?'

‘We both know that you did.’

‘Did we?’

‘If you think I’m letting this lazy attempt at self-sabotage count, you have another thing kind. There’s something you’ve been wanted to ask me from the beginning, and neither of us are leaving my study until it’s been answered.’

‘Okay.’ She was right. The words were there, but he didn’t know if he had the strength to say them.

‘I know what you’re thinking. You might think you don’t want to know, but you do. They all do. Whether it takes a day, a month or a year, everybody eventually ends up right back here with the same question on the tips of their tongues. For your own peace of mind, you may as well get on with it.’

He took a deep breath. Was he really about to do this? ‘See, I thought maybe there was a chance I crossed over by mistake, what with the festival and the two worlds being closer and all. And if that was the case, maybe I could just... go back the way I came? I don’t know. I guess what I’m asking is...’

‘Yes?’

He looked down. ‘You know what I’m asking,’ he said.

‘And you know my answer,’ Lady Umeboshi replied.

The blue fox breathed out. She spoke so calmly, but the old cat’s words struck him like a sledgehammer to the chest. ‘Then will I ever get to say goodbye? Will I ever go back?’

Her long, drooping whiskers curled into an apologetic smile. For some reason, it unnerved him even more than her earlier outburst. ‘I’ll say this much. When Anzen blows in the wind, and we take tea on top of the moon itself. When great koi swim through the sky with as much ease as the cranes who seek to land them. Maybe then.’

‘I understand.’

‘Good!’ she said, and she hopped up from her desk with

aplomb. ‘Because there’s a spirit that needs dispatching. Are you coming or not?’

‘I—’

‘That’s what I like to hear!’ She flicked the dead end of the incense stick from the pot and drew out a new one, which she lit and nestled behind her ear. ‘Put your best paws forward, keep up and don’t ask any foolish questions.’

She glided over to the back door, where the staircase to the tower should be, and tapped her umbrella twice against the mat. When she drew it back, a brisk breeze blew across the room. After one last adjustment of her headdress, she stepped through and impatiently gestured for him to follow. ‘Quickly now, Shiro.’

But he was still tying his laces. For some reason, the loops kept falling apart in his paws. ‘And leave the shoe!’ she added. ‘If I needed you to look presentable, we’d be here all night.’ Dazed, Shiro let the laces fall to the ground. He kicked his trainer off and stumbled through the doorframe...

Only to find himself standing at the top of the hill, with the marketplace, the district of shops and the long stretch of thatched farmhouses far below them. ‘But weren’t we just—?’ He turned around. He was back at the base of Shoganai Tower, standing outside the same side door that had been open before. Staring through it, he could still make out the trail of smoke issuing from the cigarette holder at the end of the table.

But the Lady of the Tower was already making her way down the hill. With another tap of the umbrella, the door slammed shut behind them. ‘What did I say about keeping up?’

‘Sorry...’

At that moment, the magpie from earlier emerged from the main entrance, holding a tall flagpole bearing the tower

insignia. He quickly joined his lady at her side. But even as Shiro ran along the path and followed the hill down after them, his gaze lingered on that unassuming door.

Streets

The further Lady Umeboshi strode through the village, the more attention they seemed to get. The dark windows of seemingly abandoned shopfronts suddenly lit up, and doors cautiously inched their way open. Low bows and a chorus of adulation followed her wherever she went.

‘Lady Umeboshi?’

‘Thank the gods, it’s Lady Umeboshi!’

‘Please help us, Lady Umeboshi...’

Before long, a crowd had swelled behind them, congregating behind the flag. There were farmers clinging fearfully to their sickles, and scholars hiding behind glistening notes that still had yet to dry in the night air. There was a mole plastered from top to tail in clay, ash-covered spirits fresh from the forge and even a group of foxes dressed in matching dark clothing, all of whom had their faces carefully covered. For the life of him, Shiro couldn’t tell them apart. They kept a distance from the others.

It felt like the entire village was marching with Lady Umeboshi under the ever-growing shadow. By the time they passed the huge shrine at Anzen’s heart, even Allie had joined their ranks. Allie was a welcome face amid the myriad of strangers, who gazed upon the bedraggled, barefooted stranger walking with the Lady of the Tower with a mixture of reverence and suspicion. Even among the rooftops, he couldn’t shake the suspicion that he was being watched by unseen eyes. But before he could make his way over to him, Lady Umeboshi took the incense stick from behind her ear

and handed it to him like a baton. ‘Shiro, with me.’

It took him a moment to realise who she was talking to. Embarrassed, Shiro hung his head. He took the smoking stick and held it aloft as the crowds behind them grew. The magpie nodded at him approvingly.

There was no longer any hint of the moon in the sky up above. Only a silent obsidian ocean, which hung in the air like it was just waiting for an excuse to crash down on them all. But Lady Umeboshi didn’t rush. With her umbrella in hand, she strolled as calmly and deliberately as though she was leaving her tower to smell the roses, the long, vibrant sleeves of her dress trailing behind her like butterfly wings.

Even as they approached the bowing southern wall, which the Shrine Keepers were so desperately fortifying with blessings and buckets of salt, she barely batted an eyelash. Shiro, on the other hand, could barely contain himself at the familiar sight of Kon and Peito behind the Shrine Keepers’ cart of supplies. They were busy adjusting the helm of a truly gargantuan warrior, who was completely concealed within Peito’s own resplendent black suit of armour.

The finished set was a sight to behold. Inch-thick plates of engraved metal lay over the shimmering mail like rows of ribs, and the ornate mask, the huge fangs of which protruded like eager knives, straddled a terrifying expression somewhere between unbridled rage, and pure bestial hunger. Peito craned his neck up at his work like a proud father.

‘Kon! Peito!’

Peito didn’t even appear to hear him, barely fluttering a tail feather in his direction, but the sable at least was delighted to see him again. ‘It’s so good to see you...?’

‘Shiro!’

‘Shiro!’ She laughed, packing a pair of fabric scissors

away into her satchel. Her long tail swooped back and forth behind her. ‘And with two hind paws on the ground at that. I don’t know what sort of tea they’ve been giving you, but it’s really put the colour back into those cheeks. I dare say I may have some competition after all. Do you promise you won’t be flying away again anytime soon?’

He smiled. ‘I promise.’

Shiro thought the warrior Kon and Peito were tending to was formidable enough already, but as he made his way around the cart, he was stunned at the realisation that they had only been sitting on the ground with their legs crossed the entire time. At the sound of the approaching villagers, the enormous head turned, and the titan rose to his full height.

Shiro had never seen an animal so huge in all his life. Not the tallest elephants, nor the stoutest rhinos. His solid arms were tree trunks, and within the gauntlets, his monstrous paws looked like they were broad enough to pop heads like berries. The shape of the helmet suggested to Shiro that it was probably a wolf, but everything else told him that it didn’t matter in the slightest what species lay beneath the armour. If it wanted something dead, that thing was as good as dead, armour or no. The fact that he didn’t have a weapon said it all.

The helmet made a slow sweep of the crowd, and as the view from the closed visor inched its way past him, Shiro felt a primal pang of fear, like a bullock devil had just set him in its sights. Judging from the concerned murmurings behind him, he wasn’t alone.

Lady Umeboshi, however, was utterly unperturbed. The diminutive cat marched straight past the giant’s two-toed armoured boots and instead addressed the Shrine Keepers directly. They were concentrating so hard on their work, they didn’t even notice she was there until she announced herself

with her magpie at her side, proudly bearing the flag. ‘My Shrine Keepers!’

Four of the five of them jumped, and the ox almost dropped her salt pail into the dirt. The squirrel was the only one who didn’t react. ‘The village thanks each and every one of you for your excellent contribution in my absence. Arashi, you’ve led them well.’

The shaven eagle bowed deeply, rustling the paper feathers of her wings together. The sika deer looked delighted for her, while the ox just rolled her eyes and threw another hoof’s worth of salt. ‘But if you’ll kindly join me at Anzen’s great iron doors, I believe it’s time somebody finally brought this festival to an end. Oh, and as you can imagine, this means your warrior is no longer necessary.’

Lady Umeboshi turned around to walk back to the main thoroughfare. But before she could move, the warrior stepped in her path, kicking a huge cloud of dust up into the air. Silhouetted, the two found themselves at a standstill. And with that, the entire village was silenced.

The hulking figure loomed over her, so ludicrously large that even with her headdress, the old cat barely reached the thick armour plating of his knee. Hot breath billowed from behind the mask into the night air like smoke from a dragon. His blazing, white-hot indignation was palpable. And yet, when Lady Umeboshi lifted her slippered hind paw, arched it forwards and calmly pressed it down into the dirt, it was the warrior who took a step back.

‘Your bravery is unquestionable. In fact, I’d venture to say that with your stature, it’s unlikely that anyone has ever dared question it before. But I’m afraid your services are simply no longer required.’ She set the tip of her umbrella in the dirt and leaned on it with both paws like a cane. ‘There need be no

fight tonight. That is, unless you disagree.’

Everybody held their breath as the warrior stomped right up to the Lady of the Tower. His heavy armour rattled and clanked like a charging tank, and even from where he was standing, Shiro could feel his every step impacting the ground. The giant stopped only a foot shy of crushing her under his boots. He growled and huffed, stomped, snorted and howled, but the wily cat merely stood there, quietly watching the display. He could have reached down, plucked her from the ground and crumpled her up like a piece of old parchment. Instead, he grappled with his right paw. He grew more and more frustrated with it, until finally, he wrenched the gauntlet off and threw it at her feet. She smiled.

He turned tail and marched away without a word, grumbling incoherently to himself and continuing to tear parts of his armour away. Peito followed close behind, anxiously collecting the pieces as he went. The two soon fell out of sight, though the warrior’s angry mutterings could still be heard long after.

The entire village seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief. Even Lady Umeboshi allowed herself a moment to adjust her headdress, tucking away a long lock of grey hair that had fallen over her eyes. Then, without further delay, she assumed her place back at the head of the crowd, and with five Shrine Keepers at her side, they were on their way once more. The southern wall bulged ominously behind them.

Iron Doors

By the time Lady Umeboshi and her congregation made it to the entrance, there was something waiting for them, lurking at the foot of the great iron doors. It was hunched over, veiled in a patchwork of blue rags. Lady Umeboshi marched over

immediately, the Shrine Keepers keeping close to her back. 'Usō-Usō, how fares the night?'

'You're just in time,' it rasped with a voice like sandpaper. And sure enough, the bells rang out all around them. It cackled. 'It's the hour, it's the hour!' As it turned around to cast an eye on the rest of the village, Shiro had to restrain himself from jumping on the spot. That wasn't what he was expecting to see. It wasn't an animal at all.

The long patchwork dragged on the ground, supported at the top by four points and hanging loosely in the middle like it was draped over a crooked four-poster bed. At the front where the rags were pulled back, a thin iron arm stuck out with a small lantern attached, illuminating not a face, but a bright orange eye as big as his head.

Lady Umeboshi wasted no time ascending the stone staircase that overlooked the sea of shadow before them. The magpie followed doggedly behind, holding his lady's flagpole high, and the Shrine Keepers assumed strategic positions along the village walls, each of them bearing their own tools of purification. They were mirrored on the ground by armoured villagers bearing staffs, who clutched at their feeble wooden weapons with all the desperation of someone preparing to bat away the oncoming tide with a toothpick. Nonetheless, they held their ground. Meanwhile, the eye had turned its attention to Shiro.

'New fox?' Usō-Usō crooned. The prostrate patchwork dragged itself up to him, rattling and rustling and groaning away. 'Come, new fox. Kind fox, friendly fox, dangerous fox? You think you know, but how can you know what you are until you know where you're going? Lend me a thread, and I'll show you how it spins.'

Shiro turned around, but everybody's eyes were fixated on

Lady Umeboshi atop the wall. Reluctantly, he held out his paw. Out of nowhere, two bony arms shot out from beneath the rags to grab it. The eye widened, and there was a sharp intake of breath. ‘Murderer,’ it whispered.

‘What? No, I’d never hurt anyone.’

But the grasping arms pulled him ever closer, gripping his paw so tightly, the plasters on his fingers started to crack. The cycloptic orange yolk of an eye narrowed knowingly. ‘But you already have, Blue in Name and Blue in Nature. It may not be written on your heart, but the stitch is sewn. You claim to be mortal?’

‘Y-yeah,’ he said.

The spirit hissed. ‘You lie. You are no fox. A fox is a line with a beginning and an end. Yours is but a circle that goes round and round and round and round and round and round—’

‘Shiro? Shiro, where are you? The night started with you, and it must end with you too.’ It was Lady Umeboshi. Shiro wrenched his paw away, but even as he fled up the stone staircase after her, Uso-Uso looked satisfied. The emaciated arms retracted back beneath the blue patchwork, and the spirit’s single eye wrinkled, blazing with purpose.

Shiro stood with Lady Umeboshi, staring out at the shadow from the top of the walls. He never felt more out of place in his life than he did standing next to her, clinging to his poor battered jacket with matted fur, a tail like a toilet brush and not even a pair of shoes to his name. The crowds of villagers all waited down below, hushed in an expectant silence. Lady Umeboshi gestured for him to lean closer. Against the darkness, the layers of her exquisite silk dress reflected all the colours of the rainbow like a prism. ‘You didn’t talk to Uso-Uso, did you?’ she murmured.

‘No,’ he said quickly. The old cat stifled a laugh.

‘Well I’m sure you’ve learned your lesson. Are you ready, Shiro?’

He gulped. ‘Am I supposed to be?’

‘No.’ She smiled. ‘But the ocean doesn’t ask you how ready you are. If you fall overboard and fail to paddle, it’ll swallow you all the same.’

Standing before Anzen’s great iron doors, gazing up at the darkness that blanketed the land and blocked out the sky, the Lady of the Tower spread her arms and spoke thusly: ‘This village is a sacred place and holy refuge. As the guardian of Anzen and its sole protector, I, Lady Umeboshi, request an audience with the spirit behind this attack. Scorn, I name thee. Assume your chosen form and speak.’

For a while, it looked as though her words were falling upon deaf ears. The shadow continued writhing and twisting over Anzen’s invisible dome of protection, as silent as the grave. Loose prayers and paper charms fluttered from the walls and turned to smoke long before they could touch the smouldering surface.

But then bubbles began to form. Great viscous bubbles churned out from the centre, and over by the entrance, the shadow began to coalesce itself. Greater and greater it grew, and from a simple, solid mound of swirling blackness, a torso began to form, and limbs began to sprout. Before long, it was as tall as the iron doors, but it didn’t stop until all the rains around the village had receded, and it towered over the walls, darker and more terrible than ever before.

Shiro shuddered. Even straining his neck, he struggled to make out where it ended. At its full height, it must have been as large as Shoganai Tower. All of Anzen was in its shadow.

The form it had assumed seemed restless, uncomfortably

so. Inky streams poured from its body like open wounds, pooling at its feet and slowly slinking back up as it constantly adjusting its approximation of what an animal should look. Was that a crude set of hooves it was standing on, or razor-sharp talons? Were those arms dripping down from its shoulders or wings? It was difficult to make out exactly what it was. It seemed to Shiro that it was trying to be everything all at once. Each time he blinked, it looked different. But far from making it amiable, the effect of assuming a form was deeply unsettling. Unlike oil, the shadow reflected no light, and nothing could be seen through it. No light could escape it. It was an all-encompassing dark.

And just when it seemed that it couldn't be any more intimidating, it started to speak.

It would be a lie to say that it was words that issued from the maw of the shadow beast before them. The creature produced many noises. It gurgled and squelched, rumbled, bellowed and wailed. It sucked in on itself like quicksand, and cracked its appendages together like shattering ice. Before long, it seemed that language was the only sound the creature's mass was incapable of producing.

Lady Umeboshi listened intently, her long, ornate sleeves dancing in the wind like they were communicating in their own way. Occasionally, she would incline her head, but though her face might have filled a thousand pages, she said not a single word until the noises came to an end, at which point the dripping behemoth bent down, awaiting her response. The Shrine Keepers stared at her uncertainly.

'Scorn. Your story is as long as it is tragic,' she began. Every word was measured. 'You've come far. I understand your plight, but you'll find no sanctuary here. Our farms have been ravaged, our watchtowers rendered to dust. Once, you

may have been welcome, but centuries of suffering has rendered your very touch a poison of the cruellest and most corrosive kind. Sharing your pain with us will not half it, I swear. It will only spread it further, until the entire land is a smoking ruin, and still you will be left to wander this plane alone. If you truly desire the help you claim to need, you'll return from whence you came without delay. When the time is right, I will seek you out, and with the help of the last holy Shrine Keepers of Anzen, I will do everything in my power to undo the damage that has been inflicted upon you. But you will not pass these doors, and you'll find nothing beyond our walls, should you insist upon continuing this assault, besides a short, sharp, swift and sudden end.'

The shadow creature pointed a colossal dripping finger down at the two of them. From its maw emerged an accusatory rumble that set Lady Umeboshi's whiskers on end. Even with her white fur coat, the old cat was suddenly looking pale. 'What? Him? He's but a mewling babe—'

She was interrupted by yet more rumbles. 'Yes. Fine, fine.' She turned to Shiro. 'The spirit wishes for you to speak.'

'What?' In an instant, the butterflies in Shiro's stomach had turned to hornets.

'It wants to know why you led it here, with all your promise of warmth and life and vibrancy, only for it to be spurned by strangers at the door, as it has been for so much of its cruel existence.' He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

'But... but I didn't lead it anywhere!'

'It isn't me that's asking, child.' Lady Umeboshi pointed up at the inky colossus with her umbrella. 'Scorn is waiting, and I can't speak on your behalf. You've amassed yourself quite the audience too, so whatever you decide to say, say it well. As long as you're under my protection, you not only

represent my good name, but every single animal in this village. Try not to disgrace us all. Are you a known orator?’

Shiro glanced briefly behind himself. That was a mistake. Dozens of eyes were burning into his back, narrowed, fearful and judgemental all at once. ‘I mean, I’ve done one or two presentations before.’

‘And was the punishment for failure death?’

‘It sure felt that way.’

‘Excellent. You should have little trouble then. If all else fails, you’re a fox. Foxes don’t land on their feet. Foxes don’t need to land at all, unless they so choose. You’ll think of something.’ Lady Umeboshi tapped her umbrella twice against the stones, and an otherworldly silence fell upon the village.

Shiro cleared his throat. Then, he cleared it again. He could have heard a pin’s pin fall in the stillness. He almost wished he did, as his tall ears twitched back and forth like nervous radar dishes. It was a strain just to crane his neck back far enough to see the shadow’s torso. Getting the closest thing it had to a head into view was all but impossible, let alone making out its features, but far from despairing, Shiro counted himself lucky. He thought back to the advice his father gave him, all those claw-gnawing nights before a group presentation or spoken word essay was due. He could hear his voice like it was yesterday.

‘Stand straight. Breathe deep. Never look your audience in the eye. Instead, look slightly above them or to the side. Always above, or to the side. And if that doesn’t cut it, T, just picture them naked. Always worked for me.’

Shiro smiled. There was a flutter in his stomach at the memory. If he could still stand in front of that thing and smile, perhaps there was hope after all. The blue fox stood himself

straight, arched his shoulders back and took a deep breath, staring slightly off to the side of the churning, undulating mass before him.

‘Scorn,’ he began. It seemed as good an opening as any. He could have sworn he heard the shadow creature squelch back, but he pressed on. ‘I’m sorry. I’m new to this world and its rules. I made a terrible mistake coming here. I didn’t mean for you to follow me, and I take responsibility for everything that happened. You didn’t know any better. Maybe you still don’t.’ He hadn’t been interrupted yet. That was a good sign.

‘But you’ve got a choice. You didn’t choose to be left alone for so long any more than I chose to put myself here. You don’t choose to suffer. Suffering chooses you. But when it’s over, you get to decide what happens next. Nobody else. Only you. You alone can choose to be cruel or to be kind, to be vengeful or forgiving, monstrous or gentle. The world put you through hell. You don’t have to do the same to others. I’m going to stay here in Anzen and do what I can to help rebuild. If I could leave this all behind tomorrow and go back to my own world, I still wouldn’t, and not because I don’t want to with all my heart.

‘It’s because it’s the right thing to do. It’s because when you realise you’ve done something wrong, something awful that hurts those around you, you can either sink your heels in, turn a blind eye and carry on, or own up to your mistakes and try to make things better—’

The creature screeched. Raising its barn-sized fists, it bellowed and protested, making all manner of ear-rending noise, but the Lady of the Tower stood firm. ‘Hush now,’ she said, speaking in much the same tone of voice that a mother cat would use with her unruly brood. ‘The child was more than fair. Setsubun is over. Our festival is done, and frankly,

you've overstayed your welcome. Since you don't appear to have caused any irreparable harm, I will allow you to go on your way. I pray you have a more restful night than the one you decided to inflict upon us. Be gone with you.'

And with that, Lady Umeboshi turned her back to it, seemingly satisfied. Shiro let out the breath he'd unknowingly been holding in.

The shadow creature was furious. It beat its oily limbs bloody against the ground, coiling its torso like a snake and lashing a huge serrated tail from side to side. But Lady Umeboshi was already gliding her way down the stone steps. Shiro stumbled after her. 'No irreparable harm?' he said. 'I don't know if you know just how many kiba-kiba were mowed down in the fields, but I was there. I saw it.' Even now, the sound of so many hundreds of squeaks being abruptly silenced was vivid in his mind.

Lady Umeboshi only shook her head and chuckled. The long train of her silk dress descended gracefully after her. 'Do you seriously believe that a little scorn would be capable of inflicting so much as a scratch on those ancient wardens? My child, you have so much to learn. We're the only mortal spirits here.'

There was another thunderous roar behind them, but before Shiro could even turn around, she swatted him sharply with her umbrella. 'Don't give it the attention it craves,' she told him. 'It is over. This isn't a war cry. It's a tantrum.'

And indeed, the old cat seemed to be correct. Before long, the roar had subsided into a timid croak. Where once its great limbs had relentlessly pummelled the smoking earth around it, the shadow creature now knelt before the iron doors, prostrate with its appendages hanging limply at its sides, oozing and weeping from a thousand invisible wounds. There was one

final half-hearted, closed-fisted thump of the ground before it. Then, the limb fell clean off, dissolving into a simmering puddle.

The creature's other limbs soon followed, and while its head moved from side to side, watching itself slowly fall to pieces, it emitted a quiet, pained whine, until even its face was dripping down. At that point, the noises stopped. The once hulking figure of shadow melted behind the great iron doors in deafening silence. From the ground, the uneasy villagers closed their eyes and strained their ears. All they had to fill in the blanks was their imagination.

When at last the solid mass of its chosen form had disappeared, vanishing amid an undulating black sea, the spirit slunk itself away, oozing back along the landscape it had just devastated. The ground was smoking like a battlefield after the fires had died down. There was no hint of the life that had so vibrantly sprouted from it only hours prior, but when the Shrine Keepers gave Lady Umeboshi a decisive nod from atop the village walls, Shiro knew at long last that the shadow was gone.

The Lady of the Tower raised her arms. After relishing the hushed, expectant silence for a few moments, she proudly declared it to the heavens. 'It is done!'

Anzen

The villagers of Anzen received Lady Umeboshi with a hail of cheers. They were bellowing and guffawing, sobbing in each other's arms and slyly exchanging quips just quiet enough to get away with. Kon jumped straight into the wings of a very confused Peito as he rejoined the fray, spinning around faster and faster in a merry blur of fur, feathers and laughter. Kiba-kiba trilled from the rooftops, and spirits made

of water, gemstones and clumps of bark appeared from the back streets in their droves, finally able to leave.

‘Knew it,’ Uso-Uso yawned.

Lady Umeboshi herself seemed very relieved for the ordeal to be over. The old cat was basking in the glory with her customary toothy grin. The Shrine Keepers descended from the stony steps, joining her side with their stoic smiles as the magpie soared overhead, holding the flag aloft. After another quick adjustment of her ceremonial headdress, the Lady of the Tower cleared her throat to speak, dwarfed as she was by her many adoring onlookers. ‘Citizens of Anzen. Though the festivities may be over, at the end of this year’s Setsubun, I do believe—’

Bang!

Screams rang out as a rocket shot through the crowds. Terrified animals fell to the floor as it hurtled over their heads and past their ruffled wings, leaving a dark trail of smoke in its wake as it headed towards the Lady of the Tower. As quick as a flash, she drew out the umbrella and thrust it open with a cry. The rocket bounced harmlessly off the red canopy, ricocheting straight up into the air where it exploded in a small shower of sparks.

Everybody watched them fade into the starry sky, and then all was still. Nobody dared speak. Shiro tried to follow the trail of the firework back to its source, but the smoke had already dissipated.

The old cat sighed, taking a moment to brush down the remnants of gunpowder from her silk dress. ‘Though the festivities may be over,’ Lady Umeboshi started once more, ‘I do believe some celebratory fireworks may be in order.’

A nervous titter ran throughout the crowd. ‘Break out the ethre, I say,’ she told them. ‘Break out the ethre and let the

sky be bright, and just remember that the next Anzenian not to take heed of their firework's trajectory will be lashed to the back of the following ones.'

There was a loud cheer, and then the villagers of Anzen were celebrating once more. 'Now does anyone know where I can find Allie? Allie the goat? He's a myotonic cross, if memory serves. He's new to our shores.' The crowd herded the terrified goat to the front before Shiro could count to ten.

'Whatever I did, I'm sorry, Lady Umeboshi,' Allie said. His knees were knocking together like wind chimes, and his blue eyes were planted firmly on his trainers.

'Don't be silly,' she laughed. Her eyes narrowed. 'But your apology is accepted. I'm sure you're aware that this poor fox was trailing across the sky not too long ago.'

Deathly pale, the goat gave a silent nod.

'Some fool had the brilliant idea of outing his condition to him before my Shrine Keepers could get to him. Now I have no idea who it was, but until I find out, somebody has to be responsible for him. Why not you?'

'I—'

'Marvellous! You'll find him a place to stay without delay, and tomorrow, you'll do your best to show him around and answer any questions he may have. There's work to be done, and we cannot spare a single paw, hoof or wing. Shiro, I hesitate to say you're in the best of hooves, but I wouldn't dare suggest that they were anything less than heartfelt and hard-working. I bid the two of you a sound night.'

Allie took Shiro's paw, leading him away before he could think of anything to say. It was only when they had disappeared down one of Anzen's many back streets that the goat finally came back to life, looking up from the dirt. Even though he was a clear foot shorter, he still nearly toppled the

fox over. ‘Shiro, I can’t believe it’s really you! I didn’t know if I was even going to see you again.’

‘Of course! I’m glad you made it through the night okay too.’

‘What, cowering in some shrine somewhere? You stood in front of that thing like it was nothing!’

Shiro flushed. ‘I guess.’

‘So the new name, huh? I like it. What does it mean?’

‘Huh?’

‘Well you must have picked it for a reason.’

‘I didn’t pick it. Why, did you pick yours?’

‘Of course.’

‘So what does Allie mean?’

The young goat looked away. ‘Something dumb,’ he said. ‘Anyway, I’m glad you’re okay. Tomorrow, we can look at finding you a proper place to live, but in the meantime, you’re welcome to stay with us.’ He laughed. ‘I mean, we do live in an inn!’

Allie led him up the street as the first smattering of fireworks went off above them. They passed a puddle that reflected the kaleidoscopic display beautifully. The only thing strange about it was that the way the surface rippled so vigorously, despite nothing falling into it. Shiro made sure to steer well clear of the water as he stepped around it.

‘How’s that possible?’ he asked Allie. ‘It’s not raining.’

‘Not on this side it’s not,’ the goat answered. ‘Damn, you and Lady Umeboshi were just in time.’

Shiro looked up to find that a huge chunk of the southern wall was gone. A swathe of the nearby storage barns were missing entirely. All that was left was a smoking line between the stones of the road, and nothing at all.

Lake

‘What do you think of that, then?’

‘It’s something alright.’

Shiro stood on the edge of a small lake, directly under Shoganai Tower’s looming shadow. Though the goat was close enough that he could lean over and dip the tip of his trainer in the cool, still waters, he didn’t appear to have any hint of a reflection on the surface, no matter how searchingly Shiro stared. He cast his mind back to the long walk from the car crash, and the murky water that had boxed him in at both sides. Did he still have a reflection himself? He wasn’t sure he wanted to find out. He never imagined that such a small thing could twist his stomach so, and yet it did.

He was no great fan of mirrors, even after eighteen years, but catching his reflection every now and then was something he’d always taken for granted, one of those simple, anxiety-reducing ways of grounding himself when everything else felt like it was a hair’s width away from falling apart. He wasn’t sure what it meant to lose it, only that it wasn’t good. It made him question just how much of that original fox was still there with him. How real could something be when even water didn’t recognise it?

‘Don’t you want to get a little closer?’

But Shiro was shaking his head before the goat even finished talking. There was absolutely no danger of that. ‘No, I think I’m good where I am.’

‘But how else is that badger going to hear us?’

‘Badger? What badger?’ Shiro gazed around, and finally he saw what the goat had been looking so pleased about. There was something in the middle of the lake, and as he took a step nearer, Shiro realised that it wasn’t a something at all. It was a someone.

The badger was sitting on the water with his legs crossed, bare-pawed and clad in a simple hooded robe with a big straw hat atop his head. Like most badgers, he was a large figure with a broad back and a generous paunch. Grey whiskers adorned his chin, but it was impossible to ascertain his age. His generous eyebrows were creased in a look of serene contemplation, and on his shoulders, he seemed to carry the weight of someone who could have been fifty or five hundred.

A gnarled wooden staff stood on the water next to him. Five brass rings hung down from the rounded tip, glimmering in the moonlight, but only the staff was reflected in the azure blue. There wasn't a ripple to disturb them, nor the slightest breath of wind about the badger's fur.

'What's he doing?' Shiro whispered. Even from so far away, it seemed unthinkable to raise his voice and risk disturbing the peace. Allie cocked his head, confused.

'He's meditating,' he said.

Shiro sighed. 'I mean in the middle of a lake.'

'Oh, that.' The goat planted a hoof in the middle of his forehead. 'Dunno. Says he likes the quiet. Never made much sense to me, because not all that much happens around here anyway. It's hardly getting away from all the motorways and shopping centres, but I guess if it helps the old guy think, more power to him.'

'Let's not disturb him. We could always come back later. He looks so peaceful.'

'Nah, it's fine.' The goat smiled. 'He'll appreciate the interruption.' He took a deep breath and cupped his muzzle. 'Hey, Linn!' One of the badger's eyebrows raised. 'Anzen nearly got wrecked by an evil shadow demon!'

'Did it now?' Linn spoke softly, but his words easily carried across the water.

‘Did it heck! Are you telling me you didn’t see that thing covering the whole village?’

The wide-eyed badger shook his head, though Shiro thought he could make out the faintest glimmer of a smile playing on his lips. ‘I’m afraid I must have missed it.’

‘Missed it? What on earth were you doing?’

The badger glanced at the tower behind them and sighed. ‘Just imparting my humble counsel upon the world,’ he said.

‘What, from the middle of a lake?’

He pushed his hat back and looked from side to side. ‘Apparently.’

‘With both your eyes shut?’

‘How else?’

Allie blinked twice. ‘Okay!’ the goat called back. He turned to Shiro. ‘A few eggs short of a Sunday breakfast, this one,’ he whispered with a wink. ‘The nicest badger you could ever hope to meet, but sometimes I swear he’s on a different planet. Wouldn’t last five minutes on Drumlin Street.’

Shiro’s ears pricked up. ‘Drumlin Street? I pass by Drumlin Street all the time to get to work.’

Allie hastily cleared his throat. Branded on the young goat’s features was a look of terrible guilt, like he’d just let something important slip. ‘So anyway Linn, I was wondering if it would be okay for someone to stay with us for a bit. He doesn’t have anywhere else to go. He’d be happy to work. You would be happy to work, right? Yeah, he’d be happy to work!’

‘Of course,’ came the calm reply. ‘Just give me a moment. I find it tends to help if I can see who it is I’m talking to.’ One arm slowly rose to grasp the wooden staff at his side, and in a single smooth motion, the old monk was back on his paws.

It was a slow shuffle along the unusually still surface of

the lake, and yet for all his shuffling, Shiro noticed that the badger didn't seem to rely much on the staff itself. As he neared the shore, Shiro also spotted the gleam of a bracelet from within his sleeve. He couldn't tell much, only that the interlocking pieces were shaped like a figure eight. 'So can everybody just walk on water here?' he asked Allie.

'I wish,' the goat said. He knelt down and ran a hoof through the water to demonstrate. His fingers sank straight down. Allie gestured not to the delicate web of ripples that spread out towards the approaching monk, meeting him halfway, but rather to the string of drops that soared straight up from his trainer, twinkling into the air just like the ethre. 'We can't even touch the stuff. Water doesn't like us for some reason. We're water reticent, just like those blankets firemen use, except for water instead of fire.'

'Do you mean water retardant?'

Allie flushed. 'Probably.'

When the badger drew within handshaking distance, Shiro was surprised to see that he was wearing an old pair of pince-nez glasses. They were so dusty, he couldn't see through the lenses at all, but for some reason, he couldn't help but picture the eyes behind them as being small but kind.

'Hey, thanks for letting me stay with you,' Shiro began. 'It's really nice of you. I'm—'

'I'm so sorry,' the badger said. He stepped from the edge of the lake, wrapped two big arms around Shiro and gently held him.

'For what?' the blue fox asked him, his arms hovering confusedly at his sides.

'For everything,' Linn replied. 'The world won't apologise, but somebody should. I'm so sorry for what happened to you. I'm so sorry you found yourself here. It was a terrible thing

that was done to you.’ After a moment of silence, Shiro hugged him back, speechless. He rested his head against the badger’s pillowy chest, and allowed himself to close his eyes for the first time. ‘Someone with your whiskers, you couldn’t be older than twenty.’

‘Eighteen,’ Shiro mumbled. The badger held him even tighter.

Next to them, the goat was watching with his hoof in his mouth. He was practically chewing it off. ‘B-b-b-but we’re not supposed to talk about that sort of thing. Lady Umeboshi says—’

‘That old plum says exactly what she says,’ the old badger told him softly. ‘This young fox just lost something very precious to him, and nobody else in this village is going to understand when they’ve been here for so long, they’ve forgotten what they lost themselves. What do you propose I do? Ignore him?’

‘N-no, it’s just...’ the goat stuttered. His eyes flitted to the enormous tower more than once. ‘You might get in trouble.’

‘Then let there be trouble,’ the badger replied. He gave Shiro’s shoulder one last gentle squeeze for good measure before letting go. ‘A little bit of trouble never hurt anyone. You two have nothing to fear as long as I’m around. Now I’m terribly sorry, but in all the fuss, I don’t believe I caught your name.’

Shiro hesitated for a moment. The old badger banged his staff and chuckled. The rattle of the old brass rings rang out like tinny laughter. ‘I see she taught you well. I only meant your new name, son.’

‘Shiro,’ Shiro said.

‘Ah.’ Linn grinned. His bright eyes flashed knowingly. ‘Now I may call her an old plum, but let nobody tell you that

the Lady of the Tower doesn't know exactly what she's doing. I have a feeling she intended for you to stay with us from the beginning. Don't worry, you'll be safe at the Chiri Inn. We're quite a ways off from where all the trouble happens. From where most things happen, as it happens.'

'And you?'

'And my what?'

'Your name.'

He laughed. 'Oh, my name is far too long, boring and old for anybody to care about. Even I find myself forgetting it from time to time. You may call me whatever you wish, and make no mistake, folk often do. But Linn is how my friends greet me. Friends, and those too polite to suggest otherwise.'

'In that case, it's good to finally meet you, Linn,' Shiro said. The badger bowed, barely able to contain his delight.

'Shiro.' His paw engulfed Shiro's, and they both shook as an errant firework shot over their heads, erupting in a blazing carousel of yellow sparks. After a brief lull, the fireworks were starting up again. 'Now you two should go and get yourselves settled in. It's a long walk to the middle of nowhere, and no better time to start than ten minutes ago. I still have a little unfinished business to attend to in the middle of my lake, but I'll see you back at home.' And with that, they made their goodbyes and were soon on their way.

It was a quiet walk to the Chiri Inn. The two spent much of it looking up at the sky. It was a lot easier to appreciate the full moon without the shadowy spectre of death hovering overhead. Midori was right, Shiro realised. It really was a beautiful night.

'Thanks for letting me come back with you,' Shiro said. 'You didn't have to.'

Allie shrugged. 'Nah, it's no trouble. You didn't have to

drag me down the road to the iron doors, but you still did. They'll be happy to have you. Damn lucky too. We don't usually get a lot of visitors at the Chiri Inn, but you know what they say. "It's the folks what make a house a home!"

Shiro nodded. He recognised the line. He couldn't remember where it was from, perhaps an old television advert, but it was something the two of them shared. The two of them smiled together at the memory of a distant home. Despite any reference to your past life supposedly being banned, the goat didn't seem to be able to stop making them. 'It's the folks what make a house a home,' Shiro agreed.

'So what do you think?' the goat said. They came to an abrupt stop on the grass.

Abandoned Hovel?

'Of what?' Shiro asked. He looked up to find that they'd drifted off the beaten track, ending up in front of some sort of dilapidated barn. The districts and the main road were far behind them.

'Of the inn, of course.'

'Ah.' So this was the inn. 'I think I'm glad to be staying with the best folks,' Shiro replied diplomatically.

Chiri Inn

It would be extremely generous to say that the building that languished before Shiro looked inhabited. Great swathes of the straw roof were missing, and the torn doorframe, complete with an arrow jutting out of the top panel, looked like it had been used as target practise for anything from darts to throwing stars. The door itself was hanging on by a splinter, swinging in the breeze. Even the sign was upside down.

'It's not much, but I like to think there's some kind of old,

rustic charm to the place.’

‘Sure,’ Shiro said, unsure as to whether it was the former or the latter he was agreeing with. ‘So do you get a lot of guests here?’

‘Guests?’ Allie just laughed and patted him on the shoulder. ‘Shiro, this place is gonna be in a different stratosphere with you around. The Chiri Inn didn’t know what it was missing...’

The goat’s tour of the inn took them around the building to the back, where mounds of straw were piled up. A tankard as long as Shiro’s arm rested atop a hefty cast-iron rice barrel. *Shink, shink, shink!* The sharp noise emerged from within the paper-thin inn walls. ‘Just be gentle with the doors, okay? As you can probably tell, this place has seen better days, and Sinn flips her lid every time my stupid hooves break something. Try not to do any more damage if you can.’

Try not to do any more damage? If Shiro were armed with a hatchet and a free weekend, he wasn’t sure how much more damage he could do to the place. But all the same, he smiled and nodded politely as the goat continued showing him around. ‘But hey, it’s not all doom and gloom and boring rules around here. Just look at that adorable snoozle!’

Shiro looked up at where the goat was pointing, and found two tiny black eyes nestled between the roof rafters. The small creature yawned, sending a lazy ripple around its fanged, egg-like body. ‘Oh, it’s one of those kiba-kiba.’

The goat nodded. ‘This one doesn’t have a name yet. It arrived out of the blue, only a day or so before you did actually, and nobody’s been able to get rid of it. It’s been stuck there ever since, like the world’s most adorable limpet.’

‘A limpet that’d have your paw off if you ever tried giving it a pet,’ Shiro noted.

‘True,’ the goat said. ‘Still worth it though. Isn’t that right, you sleepy peepy?’ The kiba-kiba gave a half-hearted chirp of a yawn and rolled over. One of its eyes winked lethargically at them. ‘That’s my sleepy peepy!’

‘Can it understand you?’

‘Psh, I wish. If these critters could understand us at all, it would’ve been scared away by Kapp’s threats ages ago, but old drowser there didn’t care in the slightest. Kapp doesn’t like these things. He’s superstitious like that, even though they’re supposed to bring good luck.’

‘How can he be superstitious in a place like this?’

‘I know. Weird, right? But some things never change. I guess even in heaven, there are still some folks throwing salt over their shoulders, no matter what the big guy tells them.’

‘You think there’s a big guy up there?’

Allie looked up at him. ‘I lived my whole life down here, Shiro. There are a lot of big guys. Bound to be one that’s just a bit bigger than all the others.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘But we can talk about that stuff later. It’s been a long day. I can’t imagine how you’re feeling right now.’

‘Tired,’ he said. In truth, he wasn’t sure exactly how he felt, but saying the word seemed to cement it into reality.

The goat smiled, unconsciously raising his right hoof to scratch at the horn that wasn’t there. ‘Actually, I think I can imagine that just fine. You ready?’

Shiro shot him a hesitant nod. ‘Ready.’

‘What are you two lads readying yourselves for, anyway?’

It was Linn’s voice. Startled, they both turned around to find the badger casually stacking hay over by the door, fork in hand. Shiro’s jaw fell open. ‘But we came straight here. How did you—?’ The old monk laughed.

‘Don’t bother, he won’t tell you,’ Allie said. The goat crossed his arms. ‘I think he’s a wizard myself. Well?’ he said to the badger. Linn just shrugged and grinned back.

‘Wouldn’t be much of a wizard if I told everyone I was a wizard now, would I?’

Allie clicked his hooves at him. ‘And there you go. Classic wizard. Now come on Shiro, it’s about time we introduced you to the others. Well, the other at least. Kapp’s probably busy beating up an innocent wall somewhere. Make sure you wipe your hind paws first. We really need to get you some new kicks. If any of my stuff had half a hope in hell of fitting you, you’d be welcome to it...’ Linn drew the door open for them, and the two stepped inside.

The floor mat was worn, and there was a smell of straw in the air, but otherwise, the interior of the Chiri Inn really didn’t seem all that bad, even if it still didn’t hold a candle to Lady Umeboshi’s luxurious study. There were bed wraps at three of the four corners on the ground floor, along with numerous little trinkets and personal effects. Wooden ladders on either side of the room led up to unoccupied cots separated by sliding screens. *Shink, shink, shink...*

The heart of the Chiri Inn was its humble stone fireplace, over which an amply sized kettle had been hung, and around which a good dishwasher’s worth of used teacups lay, each of them upside down. A short-haired black cat knelt beside them, coolly sharpening her knife on a whetstone block. She must have been in her early twenties. And Shiro thought he was a little on the lanky side.

She was as tall as she was wiry, garbed in loose crimson robes that lay underneath sparse patches of black leather armour. Her preened, pristine fur was perfectly trimmed to an almost alarmingly obsessive level of precision, and not a

single whisker extruded from either of her cheeks. It made her look not unlike a unusually small panther, albeit one that was well-equipped. Several tools hung from her belt, including a length of rope and a jagged metal claw. He was surprised to see that she was still wearing shoes inside. Her thin-soled boots had only two toes on them, wrapped like a sandal, but they looked to be good for gripping.

‘Evening, all!’ the badger said. ‘I’m proud to announce that the Chiri Inn has a new employee, who’ll be staying with us for what I can only hope will be a good long while. He’s a red fox, and his name is Shiro. Please do your best to make him feel welcome. He’s a long way from home.’

‘Red?’ The black cat smirked. ‘Doesn’t look very red to me.’

Allie looked like he was just about ready to charge. ‘That’s rich coming from a stupid old cat called Sinn,’ the goat bleated back. ‘The only difference is that your name is bang on!’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Jealousy’s a sin too, you know.’

‘And yet somehow stupidity isn’t.’

Linn placed a broad paw between the two. ‘Come now,’ he chuckled wearily. ‘The Chiri Inn only gets one chance at a first impression. Let’s not bicker his poor ears off before he’s even had a chance to grow sick of us.’

To Allie’s utter bewilderment, Shiro marched straight past the old badger and held his paw out. He’d met plenty of animals like Sinn before. There was no real animosity in her words. How could there be when she didn’t have the slightest clue who he was? It was all just to test the waters, and nothing ever disarmed them quite like confidence.

‘Pleasure to meet you,’ he said. ‘My name’s Shiro, but feel

free to call me bluebell, blueberry, blue tang, pea-not, sherbet face, curasour, and any of the other clever and very original nicknames that might come to mind. I may be a red fox, but don't let that put you off. As you can clearly see, I'm red in name only.'

She stared at his outstretched paw for several moments before she placed down the knife and cautiously extended her own. There were metal guards over her claws. 'Sinn,' she replied. It was a short, sharp handshake. 'Also in name only.'

'I guess I'll have to take your word for it. Would you mind if I sat with you?'

'Only marginally less than if you sat as far away as possible. Tea?'

'Please.'

Shiro knelt down at the opposite end of the stone fireplace and motioned for Allie to join him. Linn gave an approving nod. Allie reluctantly clomped over, highly suspicious of the proceedings. Just because he accepted a cup of tea from Sinn didn't mean he couldn't give her a deathly glare while he sipped away at it, craning his neck. Sitting alongside the other two made the diminutive goat look especially small. 'I don't know if you knew, but Shiro and I were chased right up to the village walls by that evil shadow thing. We were the last ones inside before the iron doors closed. It was crazy out there. So what were you up to when the world was ending?' Allie asked her. 'And don't say you were busy sharpening your knife.'

'Why? What's wrong with sharpening knives all of a sudden?'

'Nothing, except that it'd make you just as bad as Linn. Shadows literally raining death from above, and you'd swear some folks didn't even bother looking up. It's just like home.' Allie paused to take another sip. 'So what were you doing?'

‘Sharpening my knife,’ she replied. He groaned. The black cat turned to Linn. Her satisfied grin faded somewhat. ‘Do you know what the big guy makes of him?’

The old badger grimaced, scratching uncertainly at the nape of his neck. ‘No,’ he muttered. The sound of stomping footsteps grew louder and louder. ‘But I’ll wager we’re about to find out.’

‘Big guy?’ Shiro said. No sooner had he spoken than the front door slid open, and the biggest wolf he had ever seen leaned in. Shiro left his steaming teacup where it was and shot to the back of the inn without a second thought.

It was the same wolf that had been wearing Peito’s armour, Shiro was certain of it. Even on one knee, he was struggling to lower his head to fit it within the doorframe. It was like a scene from a monster movie. The only thing more unnerving was that nobody had deemed the sight concerning enough to immediately start running for their lives. Shiro had to wonder whether he was seeing the same thing as everyone else. Grimy bandages were wrapped around his enormous arms, but there was nothing covering his bulging chest save for a long, tawny mane, which flared up along his back like a mohawk.

Linn sighed. ‘Always through the front,’ the badger said. ‘And just when I thought we’d finally agreed that the front was for patrons, and the back for staff.’ But the wolf didn’t reply. He’d already seen Shiro, and it seemed he had eyes and ears for little else.

Shink!

Shiro’s heart skipped a beat as Sinn’s knife returned to the whetstone. The back door was within leaping distance, but he didn’t dare move from the spot. All he could do was watch and wait.

The wolf slowly climbed inside, and inch by inexorable

inch, he dragged himself up to the fireplace. The indents around his yellow claws were stained black. Without breaking eye contact, his huge slab of a paw felt around for the steaming tea kettle. He poured himself three cups and downed them in quick succession. Dribbles ran up the sides of his great knotted beard, which fell over his navel. The cup was like an eggcup in his grip, lost amid the mass of fur.

‘What’s the matter, Kapp?’ Sinn chided, her long tail lashing behind her. Curiosity had gotten the better of her. She wasn’t even pretending that her green eyes were still focused on her work. ‘Never seen a blue fox before?’

The wolf’s voice was a throaty rumble. ‘I seen blue folk before. Whole tribe has. Blue, white, red. One every litter. Sometimes two.’

‘A pleasant folk too, as I’m sure you’d agree,’ Linn said, nodding approvingly at Shiro. Shiro grimaced back.

‘Wouldn’t know,’ the great wolf grunted. ‘They bring rot. We leave them for the sea.’

The room went quiet. He drained another cup and ran the back of a paw along his yellow fangs. The wolf’s piercing amber eyes regarded Shiro less like a piece of steak than a mass murderer in waiting, and frankly, Shiro wasn’t sure whether that was better or worse.

Thankfully, the silence was interrupted by a distant smattering of fireworks. Linn rapped at the window frame with his gnarled walking stick, whistling as the colourful spark trails faded. ‘Would you look at the hour! That beautiful dark sky won’t be dark for much longer. It’s practically blushing.’ The badger gave a dramatic stretch. Shiro noted the distinct lack of an accompanying yawn. ‘Time to say a quick prayer to whatever gods you happen to hold to and then turn in for the night, methinks. Anzen stands another day. I suggest

we all do the opposite and try to get some rest. There's lots to be done. It'll be an early rise in the morning.'

Linn set up Shiro's bed wrap alongside Allie's, proudly ushering him over when it was all ready. It didn't seem to Shiro to be much more than a blanket and a quarter-stuffed sack on the floor mat, but he thanked the old monk all the same, sipping away at his lukewarm tea. Allie seemed to settle in without much of a problem. His modern-looking trainers had pride of place among his humble collection of possessions.

Stifling a yawn, Shiro gazed around the room. The goat was caught in a heavy yawn of his own, and Sinn didn't appear to have many more minutes of sharpening left in her. Though the black cat stared resolutely at her work, her eyelids were beginning to droop. *Shink... shink...*

Even the kiba-kiba was exhausted. After letting out one last sleepy trill, the egg finally lay still. Shiro could make out its stubby limbs retracting between the rafters as its fangs locked into place.

'Good night, Shiro,' Allie whispered. 'If it helps, and I know it won't, but if it helps at all, I'm glad you decided to stick around. Hope you sleep well.'

'Thanks, Allie. You too,' Shiro whispered back. And with that, the goat was out like a light.

It was with great reluctance that the wolf eventually hunkered down against the wall, though it still didn't stop him from towering over everybody else. He encompassed almost the entirety of the front half of the inn, and there he remained. He made no attempt to sleep, slowly and methodically cracking each of his shaggy knuckles in turn. His eyes never left Shiro.

After draping the blanket over him, the old badger offered

Shiro a reassuring pat on the shoulder before he padded away with his stick. ‘You may find yourself unable to sleep in this current form, but it’s still traditional to pretend. Most animals use the downtime for reflection. Hey, once or twice, you might even fool yourself. But this dark day has dragged on for long enough. I shan’t drag it out any longer. Good night, all.’

‘You’re not staying?’

Linn turned around. ‘I spent most of my waking hours with my eyes shut. That’s more than enough sleep for one lifetime, wouldn’t you say? Rest easy, young one. If the world is kind, the worst should be behind you.’

The screen doors quietly parted, and then he was gone. Shiro was on his own. It was the end of his first day as someone else. Swaddled in a thin, scratchy blanket with his eyes tightly furled shut, he tried not to think about the monster of a wolf watching him only a few feet away. It was all too much to take in. He begged for sleep to take him, but for once, sleep did not oblige.

The blue fox lay there on the hard floor, tail curled over his nose, until his limbs were numb and his head was as light as fuzz. Only then did it spirit him away. Not to some distant, friendlier land, or a welcome dream of home.

Only to an edgeless, blue-tinged void, too deep for thoughts to intrude. All the same, he was grateful for it. He could have stayed there forever.

Author's Note:

'Thank you...'

Thank you for reading Chapter Six of *The End Where It Begins!* That's the end of Act Two! I hope you enjoyed it! Keep your eyes peeled for the start of Act Three, which is coming soon!

This book is free, published online exclusively at 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!