

# SHI

Volume One:

*The End Where It Begins*

Mae L. Strom

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– ACT THREE –

Ray

## Chapter Eight:

*'I guess this is it, then.'*

*Nendo*

'I guess this is it, then. Whatever "it" is, anyway...'

Shiro's duties may have had him zipping around town like a hummingbird, but the first day belonged to Potter's Dug, an upturned stone dome on the edge of Anzen. It looked as though the Main District had taken the unsightly thing up in its paw and thrown it as far away as it could, only for it to fall just shy of the village walls. The clay, which was invariably green and thick, was so prevalent on the stone walls and ceiling that it appeared to be growing, spreading throughout the humble abode like a fungus. It had even infected the unfortunate owner.

Nendo was a mole. At least, Shiro suspected he was a mole. Nobody in Anzen was entirely sure what species Nendo belonged to, if indeed he wasn't an entirely separate category unto himself. Like his home, he sported sturdy foundations, with strong claws for digging and a minuscule pair of perpetually squinting eyes. Everything else, however, was caked under layers and layers of clay. It encased his limbs like

armour, decorating his shoulders like an officer wearing the badges of his profession and bulging from his back in an unsightly green hump, which, although not quite hardened, caused the old potter to effect a most unusual hobble to get around. Shiro offered the suspected mole his arm at least three times before he managed to lead him under the dome to his earthy den, where the fruits of his labour were on full display.

They were some of the most exquisite pieces Shiro had seen. Each one was a story, as detailed as a mural and yet more delicate than cherry blossom petals, the designs around which there were more than their fair share. Great dynasties bloomed and withered like wild flowers. Ancient lovers lost to tragedy traded tears with entire species lost to time, surviving only under the glaze of more vases, teapots, cauldrons, pitchers and plates than Shiro dared count. Very few were green like the invasive clay, although a few celadon pieces were hidden towards the back of the burrow, buried behind old shelves and gnarled overhanging roots.

Shiro squinted at one of them, a simple but elegant radial pattern of straw hats on a saucer, and felt a pang of guilt. He remembered the look Allie had given him as he waved him on, the goat's duties pointing him as far from the priceless pottery as it was possible to be without being slung at the walls himself. Even when she hadn't said a thing, Lady Umeboshi was not one to mince words.

When the probable mole first told Shiro they were going to be making pots, he thought he must be joking. Of course he was joking. Why him? The most impressive thing he'd done with his paws since his 'stickfox family on the fridge' days was the perfect run he'd netted on his favourite track of Krayzee Kangaroo Karter's Karting Kingdom 4.

Luckily, it turned out that they were only making pots to

replace the ones that were destroyed when the southern wall broke. They didn't have to be works of art. Their biggest, and only, requirements were a solid waist-high construction, and a distinct lack of holes. All the same, Shiro made no promises. All he could do was try his best to follow Nendo's lead, all while the likely mole merrily made guesses at his fur colour, his tail spinning the potter's wheel like it was second nature.

'Cobalt?'

'Nope.'

'Cerulean?'

'Unfortunately not.'

'Mmm... mineral?'

'Can I ask why the colour of my fur is so important?' Shiro said.

Nendo laughed, his voice the only part of him that didn't carry the weight of so many years of hard graft. 'So guarded, for someone so young. What, don't you trust someone with a little clay under his claws? Or in his ears? Or up his back? You think of a master potter in your head, and you see this spotless hoary bore in an apron?'

Round and round and round, the potter's wheel squeaked. 'I mean, yeah. I guess I expected something like that.'

'Ha! That's what they all think. Not what they all say of course, not to this crazy old kook. But it's what they all think. They'd be wrong though. Being precious around a little dirt won't get you far. We're all just clay, at the end of the day. I'm clay, you're clay, and as I always say, what's a little more clay to clay but clay? It's only when you're knee-deep in yourself that you truly know what it is you're made up of. Then, you can start to separate the silt from the rest. Never trust broth from a thin cook, never trust the works of a happy poet, and above all, never trust porcelain from a clean potter.'

‘I’ll have to remember that.’ And Shiro would. His father had said something similar during an incident at a parents’ evening, advising him to never, ever listen to life advice from a primary school teacher. It being the head, he’d needed to change schools afterwards, but there was never any doubt between them that it had been well worth it.

‘So is the colour of your fur important?’ Nendo continued. ‘Of course not. But it is interesting. All animals would make a fine design, I like to think, as long as you get their colours right, and if nothing else, it’s a great way to pass the time down here whilst everybody’s bickering about gunpowder and gold up there on the surface. That’s a nice blue. If I had my kiln all fired up right now, ready to make you a dish, what colour glaze would I be preparing?’

Shiro thought for a minute. ‘I’m not sure there is one,’ he said. ‘And if there is, I have no clue what it would be. When I was younger, I used to have a friend that I flicked through paint shop colour charts with. It was just a stupid game we played, but he’d always win. None of them were ever quite right for me. I think royal got the closest, but some furs are just plain easier than others. Why, what would yours be?’

‘Have a guess.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Oh, go on. You know you want to.’

‘Green?’

‘Not even close!’ he laughed. The plausible mole raised his claws to itch at a snout entirely encased in clay, his strong tail working the wheel all the while. ‘Why do they always say that?’

There was no need for the pots to have handles, lips or maker’s marks, but that didn’t stop Nendo as he cranked them out by the dozen, adding small variations and flourishes to

each one. Shiro was sure he could have made them twice as fast if he really wanted to, but it wasn't the old potter's way, even as he performed techniques that seemed impossible. His claws and leather chamois moved through wet clay like water, and more than once, Shiro caught him plunging his dirty wrists into the ground, only for the claws to come back clean, leaving no hole behind.

'How are you doing that?' he finally asked when he plucked up the courage. He took the wonky pot from his own wheel and put it with the other seven to dry. He couldn't help but smile; it was his best one yet.

'It's all just clay,' came the answer, accompanied as always by a laugh. Shiro combed a green paw through his matted hair and nodded. He was starting to believe it. There wasn't a clean inch of fur on his body.

'No, but seriously. There's... someone I know that can create garments from thin air. No materials needed, just memory alone, and judging by your collection, they haven't been here nearly as long as you have. I don't think you actually need to use a pottery wheel. I'll bet you don't even need that kiln.'

Nendo threw his arms in the air. 'Then you'd bet correctly,' he laughed. 'Guilty as charged. Hey, you're good. If I ever leave the den, remind me never to bet against you.'

'But then why do it this way? Why go to all this effort when you could pull a hundred pots from the past and be done in five minutes?'

Nendo sighed. 'If you could make anything just by thinking about it,' he said, 'why would you? What'd be the point? Now I know a big part of life is wanting things to be easy, but if it's something you love, something you really love, would you still love it as much? Or would you spend the rest



of your life wanting other things to be easy too, slowly whittling your journey away until there's nothing left for you but the destination? Not being able to do something is what teaches you how to do it, and learning how to do it is what teaches you to do it better. If I can spend all this time playing with dirt and still learn new things about it every single day, I'm sure there's plenty of stuff out there for you too.'

'But it's so hard.'

'I know. But that's just the way it is. It's sort of like the smell of this burrow. You haven't said anything, but those whiskers say it all. It's awful, isn't it?'

At the risk of being impolite, Shiro nodded. He noticed it the moment he descended into the burrow. The clay's heady aroma had practically enveloped him, pungent and fresh in a way that could only be called alive. He remembered something about 'living cultures' from an old DT lesson. But there was a huge difference between reading two lines in a school book and experiencing it in the flesh, or at least what passed for flesh these days. He couldn't have closed his nostrils fast enough. It was like petrol.

'And yet you keep breathing it in.'

Shiro looked away. Guilty as charged. Damn, those mole eyes were sharper than they looked. 'You hate it, but I see that nose tweaking every now and then to check that it's still there, even though we both know it's not going anywhere. And in a way, I think that's life. It's not all that nice when it's going on. For most of it, you wish something else was happening. And yet you keep finding reasons for just one more sniff, just one more, even though you'd almost certainly rather be doing anything else. Even when life is over, we're both still at it. Just one more sniff. We can't let it go. We can't move on. And it might just be that we're stupid, because if all we are is

clay, how much is clay even supposed to know anyway? But maybe, just maybe, it wasn't as bad as we were making it out to be. Maybe, life is like that smell you're too guilty, or too stubborn, to admit that you liked. Mostly unpleasant, often enjoyed, and ultimately gone too soon.'

Shiro drew his wheel to a halt. 'That's the most poetic lecture about bad smells I've ever heard,' he said.

'Well that warms the bottom of my clay heart. I hope you're in the mood for more, because we've got another hundred pots to go.'

### *Chiri Inn*

Night had fallen by the time Shiro made his way back to the Chiri Inn. The moon kindly lit his journey, a big, beautiful beacon in the sky. Kapp was fast asleep in the straw, sprawled out with his muzzle pointed up at the silvery orb. Tablets the size of tombstones adorned the necklace hanging from a upturned claw. Sinn was outside practising her throwing stars. He couldn't see her, but he could hear her sharpening them as he approached the back door. 'Good day?' he asked the night air.

The night air was quick to reply. He never saw it coming, only a blur before his eyes and a dull thud. A whisker's width from his nose, a shuriken had embedded itself in the door frame. 'I'll take that as a no.'

Curious. He could have sworn shuriken were supposed to be used for misdirection. He lifted his leg to take a step, but his sash had caught on something, and refused to budge. He looked down. It was the handle of a throwing knife. And there was the misdirection. 'Good aim,' he said to the night.

A second blade shot out of the dark to shatter the handle of the first. The pieces glimmered like a jagged grin on the floor.

‘Sinn, can I go now?’ A third blade came to split the second. ‘How about now?’ The sharpening sound had stopped. He sighed, stepped over the blade and drew the door back. The shuriken fell to the ground with a soft pat.

Shiro barely had the energy to tend to his fur. He sat on the enclosed porch with a hard-bristled brush and scoured away in a daze, watching clouds slowly inch by the moon. Even so, he was sure to nod to Linn when the old monk strolled off down the path, the rings of his staff tinkling like bells. ‘Evening, all!’

By the time he was finished, he was seeing stars. He stumbled to his bed wrap and rolled left and right until he was well and truly buried. The last thing he saw before he fell to darkness was Allie’s hat resting on its hook. He smiled.

### *Scholars*

The second day took Shiro to the Paradise Archives. Lady Umeboshi was absent when he went to collect his duties, brandishing the now customary ‘Morning, Mr Magpie!’ Most of the villagers took it in their stride as a good omen. Better to take twice the time to do a job properly, than half the time at the risk of not doing it at all. Shiro wasn’t so sure. The other villagers hadn’t heard what he had. But there was nothing he could do, and besides, there was work to be done. They had their job, and he had his.

Contrary to its name, the Paradise Archives was a ramshackle pavilion of truly mundane proportions. Shiro walked past the narrow windowless walls and belching blue chimneys several times before he realised the glowing pendant was pointing him to the entrance.

The centrepiece of the paint-stripped door was its big dragon head knocker. Redder than red it was, with whiskers

like tusks, horns like daggers, and a horseshoe of a knocker that hung from the dragon's nose, thicker than Shiro's wrist. Blue curls of smoke rose from its eyes. Shiro stared at his reflection in the red dragon head and gave it a smile. Five twisted foxes grimaced back. After checking and retying the ribbon around his wrist, he reached up to the heavy knocker.

*One, two, three.*

There was noise from within, deadened by the heavy door, but no response. After a few moments, he tried again. *One, two, three.*

This time, the noises stopped. He waited for the best part of a minute, fiddling with the ribbon, but it was to no avail. He'd all but given up by the time he raised the knocker for the third and final time. *One, two...*

And before it could strike down again, the door cracked open. Blue smoke streamed out, heady with incense and as viscous as honey. Shiro held his breath and peered through the gap. The smog was impenetrable. 'Excuse me. Is this the Paradise Archives?'

Two glowing eyes appeared in the crack. 'Depends. Are you the fox?' Shiro raised the blue tablet on his necklace.

'That's what the duty says.'

'Then you're excused. You're just in time. The scholars have an urgent need for paper. If you go to the marketplace and find Washichi, tell him Joshu sent you. He'll sort out the rest. Oh, and be quick about it too. Heaven may be perfect, but these are only its archives, and paradise waits for no mammal.'

The door slammed shut, the knocker rattling against the red dragon's nose until it drew to a halt. 'Well okay then,' Shiro said. 'Find some paper at the marketplace. How hard could it be?' And so the goose chase began.

*Marketplace*

Finding the paper crafter seemed to be the easy part. Washichi's reputation as the greatest, and kindest, of all of Anzen's washi makers preceded him, and the goose was well aware of it. Shiro spotted his signature birthmark from a mile away - a pale rectangle on the cheek, just like a sheet of washi. Actually getting the paper from him proved to be a different matter entirely.

The goose was busy on the riverside, stripping bark at the back end of his shop. His well-practised wings weaved effortlessly through the icy waters. 'Oh, so Joshu sent you, eh? And he says I owe you a fresh batch of washi too? He must have wanted to know how nice that muzzle would look with a wooden palate. Do you have any idea how much paper those pompous freeloaders swindled out of me? As if being able to write things down automatically makes anything you say worth a squit. No, I don't owe him a glob of my morning spit. If you want that paper, you're damn well working for it. I need these pallets delivered while they're still cool. Get that done, and Washichi will see to your papers.'

And just like that, Shiro became an impromptu new recruit to Anzen's paper delivery service. There was no handy glowing necklace for these duties, but luckily, his time at O-Bun Sesame had more than prepared him for the deluge of orders he received.

Urusai's washi remained at the bottom of the stack at all times; the poet couldn't bear the sunlight ruining the delicate paper's freshness before she had her paws on it. Hasami's order was the widest, because he preferred to cut his washi himself. Heiho and Maru were both neighbours, but under no circumstances were their orders to be mixed up. Heiho's

paper was square cut, to be delivered to the round-shaped shop with the square roof, while Maru's washi rounds were to be sent to the square-shaped shop with the round roof. Shiro wasn't concerned. He'd worked in fast food. Jules regularly fielded weirder orders from the O-Bun Sesame telephone. Jules...

Shiro's service was impeccable. He returned with a stack of empty pallets before the hour was done. 'Happy?' he asked the goose between breaths.

'Over the moon,' the goose grinned back.

'How about those papers then?'

'Ah, yes,' he said. 'About that.'

Shiro's hackles jumped. He didn't like the washi maker's sudden change of tone. 'Well I did say that if you helped me with my orders, Washichi would see to your papers.'

'You did.'

'And Washichi always keeps his word. Unfortunately for you, I'm not Washichi.'

'What?'

'Washisan, third-best paper crafter in Anzen at your service.'

'But you've got the birthmark on your left cheek!'

The goose tapped it with a wry wing. 'Wrong cheek,' he said. 'Thanks for the help though. If I were you, I'd try the one next door. Tell him Washisan sent you.'

Shiro was less than impressed as he approached the next shop down. It was half the size, and decorated far less gaudily than that of Washisan's. True to his word, however, the goose manning the stall had a pale birthmark on his right cheek. In every other manner, he was identical to the first, even down to the voice. 'So Washisan sent you, eh? I'll bet he did.'

The goose had both wings busy with a large wooden pan,

which he was rinsing rhythmically through a tub of cloudy water. Once he had some water in the pan, he swished it back and forth, back and forth, slowly building up layers and draining the excess. The sweet, pulpy scent rising from the tub was as pleasant as it was strangely nostalgic.

‘Come to apologise for all his years of theft, no doubt,’ the goose said. He didn’t look up from his work. ‘The very best paper crafters in Anzen don’t need to steal their customers, but then what would he know about that? He’s certainly not getting a free pallet out of me. Those shutters need to be at the Red Lantern by midday. They’re delicate, so don’t bang them about. When you get back, then we can talk about washi.’

Shiro tried his best to explain his predicament, but it didn’t take long for the fox to realise that his words were falling on deaf ears. The goose’s work had become his entire world. Somehow, he found himself roped into a job yet again. Heaving up the shutters with a sigh, he promised himself that this would be the last time.

The landlord of the Red Lantern was overjoyed at the delivery. A rat as white as snow, with eyes like pitted cranberries, he looked remarkably svelte for the owner of a tavern, if no less capable of handling any unruly patrons. ‘Thankee kindly, and not a shake too soon. My regulars haven’t been happy ever since that wolf went and punched a hole through my wall. It’s been letting out the ambience ever since. My customers pay good money for that ambience. Some of ‘em haven’t seen natural light in decades, and that’s not changing so long as I have anything to say about it. Lend us a paw to take the old one out.’

‘But I—’ Shiro tried, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it. ‘Okay.’ That promise hadn’t lasted long.

Inside the Red Lantern, there was no air to be breathed,

and very little light to be seen. The clientele inhaled only cigarette smoke, exuding breaths every bit as grey and stale as they had been going in. Were it not for the violent shaft of sunlight intruding through the back wall, the only undiffused light would have come from the blue glow underneath their glasses. The landlord warned Shiro to keep his tail low as they walked the replacement shutters in. ‘Most of this lot are running on little more than old shots of ethre topped with chilli oil, natto, fermented ginkgo seeds, and anything else I can get my pads on. And when I say old shots, I mean older than you, your pap, and your pap’s pap too.’

Shiro was surprised at his concern. ‘So they’re not even drunk?’ The rat’s stern eyes bore into him.

‘What’s the bigger concern here? Half a dozen boozers sloshed off their seats, or a roomful of empty souls that haven’t been able to enjoy a drink in centuries? Have some pity for the wretched. They lived and died in second-hand bottles. Now, it’s all they can do to look out through the glass.’

His words were still ringing in his ears when Shiro made his way back to the paper crafter. Very few of the Red Lantern lot looked up from their drinking, dicing and general wallowing to watch the landlord and Shiro slide the fresh washi screen in, removing any last glimmer of the outside world. One such animal was the Sakhalin Husky to the back of the bar. He wore a bolt of white fur over two eyes of cracked ice. Both of his arms stopped at the elbow, so he held his brush between his fangs, etching a haiku directly into the bare wood of the table. Either the husky was unaware that the bristles had long since rotted away with the scroll, or else he simply didn’t care.

Few things played as much upon Shiro’s mind as the



contents of that haiku. He hadn't dared read it, and he knew that if he ever returned to the tavern, he'd avert his gaze every time without fail. He badly wanted to know what it said, but something told the fox that he was better off not knowing.

'Timely,' the goose greeted Shiro with a nod. As before, he was wings-deep in his tub, having built up an impressive stack of paper drying behind him, but it was as much acknowledgement as Shiro was likely to get. 'So what are you after exactly? How much real washi is my brother looking to get his wings on?'

'It's not your brother that wants the paper. It's Joshu.'

'Joshu?' The goose almost dropped his pan. One corner careened into the side of the old tub, splashing milky water out into the road. 'Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no. No sirree, we're not talking about Joshu. You helped me with my shutters, so I'll see if we can't work out something between us. If you ever need a washi-related favour down the line, consider it done. But Washini will be damned to an eternity of paper cuts before he wastes another pallet on Joshu. Frankly, I'd rather eat my own mother's eggs.'

'I'm sorry?'

'You heard me, my mother's own eggs—!'

'No, before that. You're... not Washichi?'

The goose shook his head, confused. 'I'm Washini,' he said, 'the paper crafter extraordinaire. Second-best in Anzen, as it happens.'

Not again. Shiro felt like he could explode, if only he wasn't so exhausted. Surely, someone out there was laughing at him. 'But the birthmark...'

The crane tapped a wing to his right cheek. 'Wrong cheek,' he said. Shiro wasn't sure how that was even possible, but he was too tired to argue. 'If it's Washichi you need, I'd try next

door.’

‘Okay...’

Shiro was practically dragging himself down the road by the time he made it to the last shop. It was the smallest and most humble of the three. Outside, a familiar-looking goose in a cotton fundoshi was putting out long strips of washi to dry. There was a big patch of white down on his left tail feathers.

‘Washichi?’ Shiro said. The goose turned to him, simply delighted, and spread his wings.

‘That’s me!’

There was a pause.

‘Washichi the paper crafter?’

‘Guilty as charged!’

There was another, much longer pause.

‘Washichi the goose, the best paper crafter in Anzen? The greatest and kindest, with the pale birthmark like a sheet of washi?’

‘The very same. Will you be wanting some washi?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Coming right up! Is it for you, or a certain special someone?’

‘Not a special someone. Joshu...’

‘I see.’ The goose laughed. ‘Well I just hope he cherishes my work as much as I do. Around these parts, he’s been known to take to kindness rather like an open flame to kindling, but I’m sure he’ll remember his dues one day. One day. In the meantime, I can’t complain. I get to make washi day and night, and what more could a goose ask for? Give me two ticks, and I’ll get that washi cut for you.’

When Shiro returned to the archives, he was clutching the bundle of papers to his chest like his own swaddling babe. One bang of the big red dragon knocker, and the door swept

back. ‘Where have you been?’ A wing jumped out to grab him, and before Shiro knew it, he’d been dragged inside.

Inside where exactly, he couldn’t have said.

The air was a broiling, ever-churning abyss that rolled over the eyes, and invaded the lungs like tendrils. He couldn’t see his own paws in front of his nose, but the further within he was led, the more the blue smoke began to coalesce into vague suggestions of shapes. ‘Come on, keep up. I think we’ll both agree that you kept them waiting long enough already...’

Over there was a wall perhaps, if it wasn’t a wing, and that right there must have been a scroll cart, if only it hadn’t just gotten up and wandered off. Shiro was sure he could hear beaks clicking and paper rustling somewhere, but even that seemed worlds away, muffled beneath a veil thicker than wool. His ears, eyes and nostrils may as well have been stoppered up with corks. He’d never been so happy to simply recognise something when Joshu drew to a halt by a rickety table, holding the washi in his wing like it was a gift from the gods themselves. With the table as his focal point, other things slowly fell into view.

Four similarly garbed birds knelt at the table with a battered deck of cards, languidly dipping their beaks into flutes of ethre as tall as they were. Shiro found himself embarrassed at the extent to which they swayed and slurred, bobbing about like fishermen’s floats. They were more drunk and disorderly than anybody from the tavern.

‘Come now, Joshu!’ one of them called, a white wagtail whose feathers looked like they hadn’t been preened since the turn of the century. ‘Joshu, Joshu, Joshu. Jostle, Jowel, Jingle... Jinto. Why hast thou forsaken us so? You promised us a game of Menko hours ago, and we wouldn’t dream of starting without you. Where’s the fun in playing without the

designated loser? It'd be like playing Kendama without any balls, or Daruma Otishi without a Buddhist tied to a chair. I see you've brought along a friend. It's no bother. He won't be enough to help you, but he's welcome to lose too!

'I like how he stares at us,' another hiccuped, a portentous owl whose head swivelled back and forth on his shoulders like a half-screwed light bulb. 'Almost like he's seen...'

'A ghost?' a third finished, and they all erupted into squawks of laughter, thumping their sides. When the woodpecker moved to right himself with the table, the leg thumped down and he went with it, scattering cards into the air and prompting an even more raucous encore.

Joshu nudged the woodpecker's flailing claws aside as he bowed, got to his knees and dutifully eased the washi underneath the uneven table leg. The white wagtail brought both wings down on the table, but the finely cut paper held firm. 'That's more like it!' he said fondly, giving the tabletop a staggered slap for good measure. 'Nothing holds a table still quite like fresh washi. Now am I getting my game, or what?'

Shiro watched on in abject horror. The fox was too shocked for outrage. 'You sent me on that wild goose chase all around Anzen, just so you could prop a table up?'

'Of course not,' Joshu bawked, as though it were the most ludicrous thing he'd ever heard. 'I sent you to Washichi so I could prop a table up. Now that's done, you'd best make yourself useful while you're still in the service of the scholars. Grind their inksticks, fetch them old scrolls for reference, and don't get in their way. Oh, and try not to get "lost" again, especially near any taverns. For the next few hours, you're going to be under the wing of some of the wisest and most learned figures from Nahashi history. If you've got even a rin of respect for the nobility of this ancient institution, you'll

start acting like it.’

A barely stifled belch from the woodpecker perfectly punctuated Joshu’s puff of pride. ‘Hey, how many drinks do I need to down to get a drink around here?’

Grinding ink? Fetching scrolls? No, it couldn’t be. Not after all that hard work. Shiro’s paw groped for the glowing tablet around his neck. ‘But the duty said I’m supposed to help the scholars make a record of the attack. Lady Umeboshi wants my personal account. I’m the only one that saw it from start to finish.’

‘What’s the rush?’

The fourth and final scholar at the table cracked an eye open for the first time. The kingfisher was the youngest of them, and yet he moved like he carried the globe on his glittering blue shoulders. ‘We’ll all still be dead tomorrow, you know. If it takes an hour or a decade to put your account to paper, it will be done all the same. One thing you will come to learn quickly here, is that time stands still for those whose time is done. You will have tens of springs to put your every mortal thought to paper, and wonder at just how little ink it took. You will have dozens of winters to ponder over the mysteries of our world, only to arrive at a hatchling’s cluelessness. You will have a hundred summers to die with the ghosts of your past. Come live a little first. And pass me another flute of ethre before my beak falls off.’

### *Paradise Archives*

Shiro learned many things during his time at the Paradise Archives. He learned to steer well clear of Nageki the Dredge, so unfortunately named because he was quick to drag anybody within clutching distance into a story about his life, and very, very reticent to let them leave again.

‘I wrote a masterpiece, you know. Well, several masterpieces in fact, but I refused to publish my first until I found something worth dedicating it towards, as one does. My sister had long battled the pox, poor thing. When it finally took her, there was much crying to be done of course, yes, many tears, terrible tears. But she was finally at peace, and more importantly, I finally had my dedication. She was still warm when the ink dried on that first volume. The tale ended up being a huge success, and I counted myself lucky. Lucky? Ha! That was only the beginning.

‘By the time my second was done, my grandfather had fallen to mange. The third was my father, the fourth my second-favourite cousin, and so it went on, each new work receiving its own dedication until I was the most famed and prolific writer in all of Nahashi.’

‘Well that’s good. At least something came from all the hardship.’

‘But don’t you see, child?’ Nageki’s voice grew pained. ‘It was all my doing. By the time I reached my twenty-fourth tale, there was only my mother and brother left. I vowed never to write again, never to make another dedication, and I never lost another soul. In my inestimable hubris, I had asked for names, and the gods had graciously obliged. I had killed my own nest mates as surely as if I’d throttled the life out of them myself. Travelling the length and breadth of the country to burn every copy I could find wouldn’t undo that. Striking my name from the history books wouldn’t undo that. Becoming the ghost that haunts these very walls won’t undo that.’

‘So how are you supposed to move on?’

‘Move on?’ Laughter rattled in his throat like stones in an empty can. ‘Oh, I’m not going anywhere. Get back to something more worthwhile before I bore you to tears with

my endless woes.’ Shiro was only too happy to return to the swirling void. ‘But before you go, did I ever tell you...?’

Even without the smoke, the labyrinthine rooms of the Paradise Archives were all but impossible to memorise. The long sliding walls lined with crumbling scrolls, folded tapestries and hand-written tomes never seemed to sit still for long, but it was remarkable how quickly he could figure his way around when he recognised the familiar plodding steps of Nageki the Dredge.

Shiro also learned that although nubbing and wing clipping were recent practices, there were plenty of stranger customs that had come before. One fox was missing his tail entirely. Sewn in its place was a patchwork tail as big and bushy as a red panda’s. It trailed on the floor behind him, gathering dust without managing to turn any heads. At first, Shiro thought it nothing more than an elaborate replacement after the result of some long-lived accident, but then he encountered the jovial Yokina, who was able to take her wings off on request. The duck performed tricks with them at the slightest excuse, even going so far as to douse them in ethre, set them alight and juggle them with her bare jutting shoulder blades. When he asked her how she did it, she only laughed.

‘Get executed, I suppose,’ was her answer. Most scholars were very candid about their deaths, he would come to learn. It wasn’t unusual for the older ones to boast of their terrible treatment, while the youngest, all of whom seemed to be around four hundred years old, turned deathly pale at the subject. Yokina had been sentenced to an unimaginably grisly fate after dishonourable conduct, but the duck didn’t let it bother her. Over half a millennium later, it seemed like nothing more than water off her wings.

‘But then why don’t you have any scars?’

She laughed again. ‘Of course I have scars,’ she told him. She flapped her wings, and suddenly there they were, cruel biting seams along the flesh where her wings had been sawn. Another flap, and they were gone. ‘If we all had to look the way we looked when we died, this place would be a hell of a lot more like hell, wouldn’t you say? Rows and rows of nothing but stumped heads, smoking breasts, and arrow-gouged eyes. Hell, it’d be even worse than home!’

Shiro thought back to what Sinn had said. ‘In the land of the gods, imperfection is a choice...’ The black cat may have had a point after all. But if it answered one question, it only raised another. In a world where your lost limbs weren’t lost forever, what was that fox doing with a patchwork strapped to his back?’

Around the ground floor of the archives, the only section that hadn’t been chained off, he was sent to help other scholars that were similarly attired, and his curiosity only grew. A deer bore a heavy set of wooden wings on her back. Fine silk cloth billowed between the struts like sails on a ship. Shiro had to know why.

‘Fashion.’ Of all the answers, he hadn’t been expecting that. ‘It is a great honour to emulate the perfect features of the emperor. I may not have been blessed with feathers myself, but these bring me just that little bit closer to the great pheasant that once ruled over all of Sakurai. Many emperors tried to unite Sakurai and Nahashi together. All of them failed, but Emperor Akiko came the closest. I’ll never forget how lucky I was to serve under him.’

Shiro was lost in wonder at the name. If he wasn’t getting his emperors mixed up, Emperor Akiko had ruled in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. As she spoke, it was all he could do not to gawk at the fact that he was listening to someone that was eight



hundred years old. There were countries younger than her! If only Doctor Singer could see him now.

‘No doubt you’ve already seen Migaku, and his rather fetching red panda tail. The Imperial Family hadn’t been red pandas for long. Poor Emperor Tanoku was only five, two months in power before he succumbed to water on the lungs. Migaku took a blade to his tail that very day, to be followed by hundreds of others. He’s never been closer to the Imperial Family since.’

‘But that’s awful.’ Shiro couldn’t help but shudder at the thought of so much mutilation. The scholar couldn’t have disagreed more.

‘That was life. Sometimes, it makes me laugh thinking back to it. For example, when the Andean bears were in power, there was an entire generation that went without fur. Everybody shaved daily, all because fur refused to grow on them, for whatever reason.’

‘It was probably genetic,’ Shiro said.

‘Hmm?’

‘Nothing.’

But by far Shiro’s most interesting lessons came from his time with the elemental spirits. These were the spirits that had no mortal lives to speak of, like Irori, who would go on long after every other soul in Anzen had moved on. They were a great deal more eccentric too, which for the Paradise Archives was saying something. One of them, a water spirit, demanded that Shiro bring it something to write with at once. When he rushed back with a stack of washi and an inkstone, its undulating features were positively steaming.

‘Hey skin and bones, this your idea of a joke?’ Mizutamari gurgled. Bits of sediment, which had been resting so placidly near the bottom, began circulating through its transparent

body faster and faster like silt blood. ‘How’s a water spirit supposed to write its hotly anticipated centennial retrospective with this? It’ll be pulp before I’m halfway through my first witty anecdote! Bring us ten buckets of contrition and a quarter-filled bucket of spring water before I boil over.’

‘Deepest apologies.’ Shiro bowed low. He’d seen Joshu try to handle an elemental’s wrath before, and he wasn’t about to make the same mistake of talking back. ‘I wasn’t aware that you could write in water. That’s not something a lot of animals tend to do back home.’

‘Well of course you can!’ it said, incensed. Other spirits watched under cover of the blue smoke, too fascinated to try and calm it down. ‘Water remembers, don’t you know?’

‘I didn’t, actually.’

‘We’ve got a right one here. Use those big hairy twitchers of yours and you might just learn something. You were alive once, and you had memory. And since you were made of water, it follows that water has memory too. Take it from a water spirit. Everything’s alive. Everything has memory. It might surprise you, like the sun every morning, but animals are more water than earth, fire, air, ethre, or anything else.’

‘Oh, well I did know that.’

‘A likely story. Get me my bucket, and I’ll show you the length and breadth of all your worldly knowledge.’

Other elemental scholars were more concerned with complaining about the bizarre habits of their mortal counterparts. Their forms were less easy to place. Some were green, leaf-veined and as tall as Sinn, yet thinner than washu when they turned their sides to rustle past. Others, like fungi, didn’t so much walk as sink their dotted fleshy caps into the ground, only to reappear elsewhere, travelling along some invisible network. They were among the most paranoid of the

lot. 'I'll never understand why they insist on shutting out any semblance of life from their homes, only to then cut the heads from flowers and bring them inside to die.'

'Mad, isn't it? I think it's jealousy, collectively. They can't bear to watch something thrive on its own. They'd rather condemn them both to die together, rather than watch one live on. They do much the same with members of their own species. And they call us morbid...'

It all came to a head when one of the more curious spirits plucked up the courage to approach him. At a tap on the shoulder, he looked up from his mop. 'I've got a, uh... a question for you, mortal. If I may be permitted to ask it.'

Shiro wasn't sure what element it was supposed to be, if indeed it was an elemental spirit at all. It wore the face of a fox, but all of the flesh had been peeled away. There was no hint of skin, tendon or sinew. Only a perfect configuration of milky white bones. Shiro stared into the empty eye holes, expecting to see the back of the eye cavity. Instead, he saw nothing. Absolutely nothing at all.

'Go ahead,' he said uncertainly. He shifted his eyes to avoid looking at it directly. It was a little too close to staring at death itself. Many of the fairy-tales from his childhood cast death as the skeleton of a fox, and this spirit had managed to capture the image unnervingly well.

'Well it's nothing much,' it said, scratching idly at its jaw bone with a finger nub. Without a tongue and soft palate, its careful speech was more intelligible than one might expect. 'I was just wondering if you could tell me what it feels like for your flesh to rot from your bones.' Shiro blinked. 'For your water to wick away, and for your fur and claws to continue to grow, exuding from your ever-wrinkling body like putty.'

Another spirit in the guise of a roe skeleton rushed through

the smog to drag it away. ‘We’ve talked about this, Kurome. Mortal spirits jump out at the point of death. They don’t writhe around in agony first, and they certainly don’t spend decades decomposing. That’s just an old rumour, invented to make light of wisplings fool enough to believe it. Like yourself.’

The fox skeleton was intensely self-conscious. ‘That’s easy for you to say,’ it protested. The roe spirit struggled to get a good grip; bone clacked uselessly against bone. ‘I don’t remember you ever dying. You’ve been awfully quiet, fox. What say you? Is it terrible? Is it mortifying? Is it true?’

‘It’s none of your business,’ Shiro muttered. He took the mop and bucket up in his paws and left to change the water. He certainly didn’t need reminding of what he’d left behind. Somewhere out there in the big wide world he once called home, the body of a fox that once belonged to him now lay in the wilderness, alone and untended—

No. No, that simply didn’t bear thinking about. Not one bit.

The mop head was glowing the same lustrous blue as his necklace as he wrung it out, with perhaps just a touch more force than was strictly necessary. The scholars were liberal with their ethre, so liberal that they were only too happy to share it with the walls and the floors as well as each other. ‘Everything alright?’

Shiro started at the voice behind him. It was only a water shrew. ‘Yep, everything’s fine! A great honour it is to work here too, a great, great honour...’

‘Are they driving you as crazy as they drive me?’

Shiro said nothing.

The water shrew stroked his white chin and laughed. Shiro could tell that he was old. Not by his face and voice, which

were barely approaching middle age, but by everything else. It was getting easier to tell. ‘So what do you make of paradise, then? I have to admit, it’s grown on me over the decades, not unlike some of the mushrooms you’ll see about the place. Anzen will never be the same again without all its lords and ladies, samurai and geisha, but even so...’

‘There were samurai?’

‘Of course.’ The water shrew went to help him with his bucket. His thin tail curled half a dozen times around an old panel on the wall, flicking it open with a twitch of the tip. A collapsible bamboo pipe assembled itself before their very eyes. Fresh spring water danced into the basin.

‘We’ve had plenty of samurai through those big iron doors. The hard part is keeping them.’ He laughed. ‘You see, the most principled, honourable and self-assured among us don’t usually have a lot to work through. For many of them, it was just about getting over the horror of having held their own guts in their paws. Nasty business, you understand, but nothing the average physician or midwife doesn’t see every other week. Some didn’t regret their deaths at all, which I can understand. If it brings your disgraced family back into good standing, who’s to complain? That’s better than any closure you and I are like to see.’

‘Is that why some animals find themselves here, and others don’t?’ Shiro asked. It wasn’t so much a question as the blue fox thinking aloud. ‘A lack of closure?’

The water shrew shrugged. ‘I suppose so. Maybe. Perhaps. Your guess is as good as mine. But if there’s one thing I’ve noticed, it’s that you don’t tend to find a lot of monsters this side of the reflection.’

‘Monsters?’ The water shrew leaned in so close, his whiskers tickled Shiro’s.

‘Monsters,’ he whispered. ‘The warmongers. The religious fanatics, the chest thumpers that call themselves benevolent gods and drown their naysayers in blood to prove it. If this truly was a hell, you think there’d surely be a pit somewhere filled to the brim with them, but no such pit exists. This plane holds no judgements for morality. It’s not their “virtues” that saved them from it, I guarantee you. It was their certainty.’

‘So Anzen is a village filled with doubt.’

‘Anzen is a village filled with nothing. Atonement and redemption ravaged the best of us like plague, and now we’re all that’s left. It’s a village that can only dwindle. You’re the first new face I’ve seen here in decades, and I wouldn’t bet an hourglass on ever seeing another. That’s the irony of living forever. Nobody knows how they did it. Now that you’re here, you could easily decide to stay and study for the next thousand years, free from every mortal concern, but nobody that thought they deserved it ever ended up with it.’

### *Daylight*

Shiro emerged like a newborn into the light of day. For a while, it was all he could do to stand at the entrance Joshu had so unceremoniously shoved him through, gawping like a freshly landed fish. His lungs needed time to reacquaint themselves with the taste of fresh air, untainted by the heady aroma, and his eyes had forgotten just how unforgiving sunlight could be without protection from an ethereal smog. Whatever they were breathing in the Paradise Archives, it wasn’t oxygen. Fascinating. That may well be why their records had survived so long. If he was still corporeal, he was certain he never would have made it out of their doors alive.

He turned to the roads as a huge tawny blob stomped by, dragging a dozen similarly sized cream blobs on wheels

behind it. Without the weighty iron clink, Shiro never would have guessed that the grey tree lights twinkling about the tawny blob's shoulders were chains. He may have had his suspicions, but it was only when one of the smaller passing blobs stopped the procession dead in its tracks that he realised who it was. The great wolf's growl was unmistakable.

'I'm so, so, so, so sorry...'

'Move.'

'It's m-my fault, I didn't look where I was g-g-g-going...'

'Move.'

'If th-th-there was anything I could d-d-d-do to help...'

'Move.'

'With the ch-ch-chain...' The blob made a grab for Kapp's mane, intending to pull the chains down. That was its undoing.

As casually as one might swat a fly, the wolf lifted a leg and launched it through a nearby wall. Other concerned blobs amassed upon it like tiny white blood cells, but the wolf only snorted, shook the hind paw and heaved up the heavy leash of tree lights. Then, he was on his way once more. Shiro rubbed his eyes. The gyrating circles at the wolf's feet gradually morphed into clacking cart wheels, the cream blobs billowy cloth banners that shielded their cargo from view, bearing the twin marks of Lady Umeboshi and Nendo the potter.

A few doors down, Allie had just emerged from what could only be described as a hole in the ground. A dusty trapdoor drew back and the bedraggled goat climbed out, heaving himself up with the tall stone thumb of a pillar that marked the entrance. There was a hole at the very top, through which eight coloured ribbons had been tied. They whipped back and forth like snake tongues tasting the air.

'Thanks for accepting my services,' Allie said, stifling a

sneeze. It was just as well — it was his own hat that he had poised over his muzzle. ‘Just think about a hoover or two is all I’m saying. It’s dustier than an attic down there, and I’ve seen my fair share of attics.’ He stopped brushing himself down long enough to offer the trapdoor a bow. The last glowing remnants of his duty escaped through his hoof.

To Shiro’s surprise, a figure leapt through the hole to alight without a sound beside him. Much like the foxes Shiro had seen during the long march to the iron doors, he was tall, wreathed in flowing black robes with a mask over his muzzle. The fox bowed back to Allie, but his eyes never left the streets around them. ‘Until next time, little one,’ his voice murmured from behind the black cloth.

‘Next time, Kata!’ Allie chimed back.

The fox’s dark eyes narrowed. Allie gulped. ‘Oh, sorry Sama.’ The fox shook his head. His muzzle curled into an outline of a smirk behind the mask. ‘Kichi? Shini? Tsunu?’ But the fox’s eyes narrowed further at each suggestion, and eventually, the goat ran out of names. Cycling through the list on his hooves didn’t appear to help either. ‘I’m so sorry. I don’t think I have the slightest clue who you are. I thought there were just eight of you.’

‘There are nine,’ the veiled figure replied blankly. ‘Hence the name. The Nine Tails.’

Allie went as red as a beet. ‘Yawa,’ he said finally. ‘You’re Yawa. Yawa, fourth of the Nine Tails.’ The fox said nothing, but Shiro thought he spied a flicker of pride in the tail tied to his back. ‘I can’t believe I forgot. I hate it when somebody gets my name wrong. Please promise me you won’t tell the others, okay? Especially now I know what you lot get up to down there.’

The fox’s left paw flinched momentarily, though Allie



seemed not to notice. There was suddenly a glint of steel between his claw guards. He pocketed the throwing star, gazed up at the rooftops outlining the Main District and gravely shook his head. Shiro followed his eyes, but there was nothing there to see. Only a wisp of crimson smoke that vanished beneath the roof tiles. He looked back. In the fox's other paw were three small throwing knives, which he was quick to discard. Shiro wasn't sure how those got there.

Allie seemed to think that the fox had shaken his head in answer to him. Flustered, he made his apologies, bowed three times in quick succession and marched off down the Anzen Thoroughfare, the list of names coming hot off his tongue. 'Kata, Sama, Hana, Yawa, Kichi, Shini, Tsunu, Muru, Memo,' the goat repeated to himself. 'Kata, Sama, Hana—' He hesitated. 'Hana... Yawa, Kichi, Shini, Tsunu, Muru, Memo...'

So intent was Allie on memorising his list that he walked straight past Shiro. He was still mouthing the names when he finally noticed who it was quietly padding alongside him. 'Sorry about that, Shiro.' He flushed. 'Crazy day.'

'Really?'

'Oh, you have no idea.'

He grinned. Frankly, Shiro begged to differ, but the blue fox listened politely all the same. Tales of his own wild goose chase could wait for another time. 'Kujin Castle is like a maze. There's no way in a million years they'd ever have to worry about me telling anybody their secrets, even if I wanted to. I couldn't even figure my way through the front door.'

'Wait, there's a castle?'

'Oh yeah, a super old one. Not that you'd ever see it unless they wanted you to. There's this huge web of tunnels underneath Anzen, kinda like the trenches during the First

World Schism, and only one of them leads to the castle. Creeps me the hell out too. Hoof on heart, if there were any bugs in this world, there's no way they'd have convinced me to go down.'

'Where do the rest go?'

'The bugs?'

'No, the tunnels.'

Allie shuddered. 'I don't know,' he admitted. 'Dead ends, maybe. But some of them were booby-trapped for sure, and since we're already dead, if you ever got stuck in one, you wouldn't be dying again. You'd just be trapped there, without a Shrine Keeper to help... maybe forever. One of the foxes, Shini I think, asked me if I wanted to know what it felt like to be blown into a hundred pieces and still not be able to die. When I said no, he told me not to go wandering off again. I never did.' His long ears curled at the thought.

'I can imagine.'

'But that was the hard part. Once I actually got there, all they wanted me to do was pass messages back and forth. They were crazy busy for some reason. I was basically their telegraph for the day.'

'Their not-so-instant messenger,' Shiro laughed.

'Sure.' Allie smiled back uncertainly. 'Still, I'd rather be doing that for a month than the duty we've got planned tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?'

'The magpie let it slip. We're on the southern wall.'

'What could they possibly want with us on the southern wall?'

The goat scratched his white chin and gave a nervous bleat. Shiro wasn't sure he liked where this was going. 'Have you ever heard of the phrase, "canary in the mines"?''

Sometimes, Shiro hated being right.

*Southern Wall*

On the morning of the third day, Shiro had to battle to extricate himself from his bed wrap. His stomach was as twisted as the sheets. Even Allie was unusually quiet. The goat hid behind his straw hat, knocking back cups of tea like they were shots. Linn couldn't brew the stuff fast enough. There was no competition from Sinn, who'd been missing since late evening. The only thing she'd left behind had been a fresh set of scars in the back door frame.

There was still no sign of Lady Umeboshi and her Shrine Keepers, as Allie and Shiro made their way up the stone staircase to the Ku Shrine temple. This early in the morning, the queue had been less than half its usual length. Somehow, it didn't make them feel any luckier. 'Good morning, Mr Magpie!' they chanted in almost perfect unison. The magpie greeted each of them in turn, but all the assuring smiles and nods in the world couldn't conceal his own unease.

'Good luck,' he bade them as he handed their dripping necklaces over. That was the most telling sign. He'd never wished them good luck before.

The worst part was the wait. There was still another hour to go before they were on the chopping block, and it was all they could do to leave their glowing necklaces alone. Today, they had only a single duty apiece, both with the same task and location inscribed in cold stone. 'Dispatch. Southern wall.' The three words were damning in their brevity. Shiro preferred to bite the bullet and make his way down early, but Allie wanted nothing to do with the wall until it was time for Shiro to drag him there, kicking and bleating every step of the way. He asked if they could go to the marketplace instead.

After much discussion, Shiro eventually caved in. The hardest part of agreeing had been hiding his own relief.

‘Maybe I’ll find a map down there. It’d be nice to finally know where I am, or where I’m supposed to be at any rate. What are you looking for?’

‘Flowers,’ came the wistful reply. ‘Not to buy, obviously. I don’t have anything worth trading. Just to appreciate. Flowers are pretty great, you know? They give the world so much beauty, and they never ask for anything back. They have the most amazing smelling bouquets in the stalls over the bridge. They’re still not a patch on, well... my patch, but that doesn’t make them any less sweet.’

‘Your patch?’

‘Yeah! I have my own patch out in the fields, not far from where we first met. I’ll take you sometime.’ Allie’s tuft of a tail fluttered at the thought. There were stars in the goat’s eyes, though it didn’t take long for cold reality to descend. ‘Had,’ he corrected quietly. Shiro didn’t know what to say. Whatever flowers Allie had been tending to were long gone now, in the same place as the rest of the countryside, those storage barns, a great hunk of the southern wall, and anything else Scorn had been able to desecrate.

To Shiro’s relief, there was no shortage of bouquets for Allie to marvel at in the marketplace. In the absence of his mobile, he quickly found himself joining in. Allie delighted in pointing out the different strains to him, sometimes without even having to see them first, like some sort of flower whisperer. Over the red bridge, which bisected the market into north and south, there seemed to be more stalls that had flowers than didn’t. Everything short of the cherry blossom was there, ripe for the sampling. Unfortunately, Shiro had no such luck when it came to his map.

Several of the merchants carried small, self-inked scrolls for personal reference. Regrettably, they were of little use to Shiro, but each was fascinating in its own regard. He could have drawn a better map than some of those he saw, and yet others were rendered with such affection. These were cross-hatched and charcoal-rubbed, with lists of family trees, individually coloured symbols for each of the shrines and even small sketches of Shoganai Tower.

The maps he was able to find on sale weren't much better, though at least these were equipped with proper legends, extending beyond the bounds of Anzen's walls. They displayed the surrounding farmlands, each of which had its own name and landholding, as well as the long and winding Nagai River, which zigzagged up and down the map like a fly, and yet cut straight through the middle of Anzen like a hot katana. To the south, the celestial Mukizu Waterfall met the sky from the top of Kanmon Mountain, his experience atop which Shiro remembered only too clearly. The Weeping Wilds encompassed the lands further north, outgrowing any scroll that attempted to contain it.

But as far as towns, cities, counties and states were concerned, the maps may as well have been blank sheets, and the merchants were no more forthcoming. Anzen was supposedly built where its counterpart on the other side of the reflection had fallen. Therefore, it must have existed somewhere. Where exactly, Shiro couldn't have guessed, other than somewhere on the Sakurai-Nahashi border. Lady Umeboshi had mentioned something about a battle for independence during the civil war, but that wasn't how the airport exhibit had put it. 'Failed rebellion,' he seemed to recall from the display. Two guesses how that turned out.

'Excuse me. I was wondering how much this would set me

back.’ Shiro knew he couldn’t afford it. Even with all his experience in the Opus City markets, it was hard to haggle with two empty pockets, but he’d never forgive himself for leaving with asking first. The brushwork was exquisite. It was exactly the sort of thing he could imagine hanging from the Chiri Inn wall, right by his bed wrap.

The answer was swift and unimpressed. ‘Twelve hourglasses.’ The vendor had no time for idle chat. Shiro gingerly lowered the scroll back down.

Behind him, the doors to one of the nearby teashops snapped apart. An unexpected breeze blew through the marketplace, beating the banners ruffled for the split second it took for them to close again. Shiro shuddered. He span on his heels, but all he saw were flocks of villagers milling around, minding their own business with an eye to the goods and a paw on their necklaces.

‘Spare some mon for an old sinner?’

Shiro found himself muzzle to muzzle with a crone of inestimable antiquity. Rags were pulled so far over her eyes, he wasn’t sure she’d able to make out the floor beneath her hind paws. The feline clutched at her knotted walking stick with a death grip, but the rest of her frail body trembled under folds of filthy cloth, jangling the wooden mask and small round pouch at her waist. ‘Just a bit of bronze,’ she croaked. She teetered like she was drunk, though if the smell was any indication, the only thing she’d been consuming for days on end had been rotten herring. ‘A scrap? A speck? A speck of a speck’s speck?’

One paw went straight over his nose. ‘Sorry,’ Shiro said. He went to turn out the lining of his golden pockets, but before his paw could make it inside, the crone startled him with a ghastly cackle.

‘Now there’s a fox after my own heart.’ All of a sudden, the voice was starting to sound a whole lot more familiar. She drew back the rags from her face, and two familiar eyes stared back at him. One was bright blue, the other a savage yellow.

‘Lady Ume—?’

But the crone clasped a grubby paw over his muzzle before he could finish the word. ‘Stranger, I am nothing more than an old crone,’ she rasped. ‘Just as you are no more than a fool to see anything different.’

Shiro looked around. Luckily, nobody seemed to have noticed. He lowered his voice. ‘What are you doing here?’ he whispered urgently. ‘Everybody thinks you’re still away.’ It was hard not to look at her as he spoke. Even now, it was a task and a half to see the Lady of the Tower in the crone’s sneering features. Short of the eyes and the long drooping whiskers, it was like staring at a different creature altogether, a much taller one unburdened by her heavy headdress and fine silk dress of innumerable layers.

‘We are away, child,’ came the reply. ‘Many, many miles from here, taking a brush to the unholy mess you dragged so unceremoniously through our doors.’

Shiro’s ears flattened. ‘I’m sorry.’ The old cat sighed. For just a moment, the crone melted away and he saw Lady Umeboshi as she truly was, in all her pride and fear and infinite regret. Then, she was gone again.

‘Would that sorry could reseed the fields, layer brick back on brick and stack stone against stone. I’d scarcely have time for anything else. Unfortunately, although we have arrived just in time, as my Shrine Keepers are wont to do, and although we have prevented matters becoming a great deal worse than they otherwise would be, your arrival appears to have achieved the impossible, Shiro. You have confounded

me.’ Shiro’s heart jumped. That didn’t sound good.

‘There is a tear between the worlds, an open, bloodless wound not in the spaces, but between them. What salves does one apply to a wound you cannot see, hear, smell, touch or even sense? A wound whose existence one can only be made aware of through the sheer malice that pours out of it. Am I expected to heal it, to sift back through the eternal sands and prevent the wound ever having been made in the first place? Or am I only to prolong the inevitable? On this, the gods are strangely silent. You may expect gods to be a great many things, child. But not mute. Not here.’

‘Is there nothing I can do?’

She hesitated. A claw brushed the back of the wooden mask on her waist. ‘Nothing that hasn’t already been considered,’ she said. ‘So long as we are here, the wound slumbers. It may not be healing, but it will not fester either. There is shrapnel of a sort, some foreign body keeping it open, and I will not rest until I have discovered what it is. When we return, rest assured that we will bring either doom or salvation with us. Until then, Shiro, you will do everything in your power to help keep my village safe. Swear to me, child. You owe me nothing less than that.’

‘I will,’ Shiro was compelled to vow. ‘If I’d known this was going to happen—’

‘Shiro, we are past such talk. If exists in the same realm as sorry now. Do your duty, and we will do ours. And speak of Anzen’s plight to nobody. This conversation never happened.’

She replaced the rags and clutched at her back with an exaggerated moan. ‘Not even a copper,’ she griped, thrashing through the crowds like a drunken snake. The other villagers made sure to give her a wide berth. ‘Not even an old copper mon for little old me. What would the gods say to that, I



shouldn't wonder. What would the gods say to that?'

One of the braver villagers attempted to pacify the crone with an old bronze coin, only to flee in pulse-pounding terror when she tried to repay his kindness with a kiss. She gurgled and licked her lips, snarled sideways, twisted her whiskers rugged and pulled at her long locks, but even with all the theatrics, it was easy for Shiro to tell just how much Lady Umeboshi delighted in her performance. Clearly, the old cat didn't get the opportunity to haunt her own subjects very often. She'd be damned if she wasn't going to make the most of it.

The old crone staggered thrice past every stall before she made to the far end of the marketplace, where a ramshackle inn stood on the corner. After making certain that she was free from any inquisitive eyes, she gave the ground two quick taps with her walking stick. The door opened onto a rocky mountainside overlooking endless fields. The air smelled brisk. Far, far into the distance, Shiro could have sworn he spied the outline of Anzen's walls just before the door closed behind her.

A moment later, it opened again and the landlord swaggered out, nursing a steaming shot of ethre between his hooves. There was nothing of note behind him. Just a recently lit fireplace, piles of damp linen and the timber of the back wall. The smell was gone too.

'Shiro, where've you been?' Allie came rushing up with an arresting vine of pink buds wrapped around his horn. They continued down the horn hole of his straw hat like they'd sprouted from the top of his head. It was an inexplicably endearing sight. Shiro would later learn from Allie that the flowers were bougainvillea, though what that meant was anybody's guess.

‘You won’t believe what just happened! Here I was, minding my own business smelling the flowers like any respectable billy when suddenly, the nicest doe you’ve ever seen comes out from behind her stall and threads this around my good horn. I told her I couldn’t afford it, but she said it didn’t matter. You weren’t supposed to pay for gifts. Isn’t that just the nicest thing? They haven’t even opened yet, and I already know they’re my perfect colour! I rushed straight back here to show you. She didn’t half look surprised to see me go. Hey, Shiro? Shiro, you okay? You look like someone just told you the world was gonna end.’

‘Yeah,’ Shiro muttered. ‘Funny that...’ He felt like he ought to say something, but he thought better of it and stopped himself short. Allie’s ears drooped down low over his shoulders. Any excitement about the flower encounter had been long forgotten. The goat went in for a hug, but decided partway through that a comforting shoulder pat would be more appropriate.

‘Something on your mind, buddy?’

The blue fox shook his head. ‘It’s nothing,’ he said with a smile. ‘That’s a beautiful colour. The doe’s got good taste; they really do suit you. But don’t you think there’s somewhere we ought to be?’

Allie’s hoof shot straight to his glowing tablet. He clenched it so tightly, if the duty had already been performed, it would have surely shattered into dust. ‘Funnily enough, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Really, Shiro, no clue at all. Where on Terra Fauna would that be then?’

### *Breach*

The southern wall was a wreck. The villagers had done all they could to plug up the hole, piling up sacks of grain, rocks

and bales of hay as high as they dared, but it looked about as useful to Shiro as sticking a plaster on an open wound. If a similar spirit happened upon Anzen with the same intentions, there'd be nothing to stop it. A hundred hay bales couldn't hide the damage that had been done.

Scorn had wrenched the delicate tiling from the top, peeling back the wall's various layers like strata of rock. The outermost layer, the beautiful skin of paint, had been scorched away to reveal slabs of mud hardened with straw, clay and sand. Beneath the mud was an insulative layer of blessings and protections, inked scraps of washi bundled together like straw nesting, and underneath the blessings, a small, solid core of stone had been exposed. It was jagged and biting, jutting out from either end of the gap like elbows of exposed bone.

Beside the wall, bulging bags of soil, seed and water had been bundled together. Able birds and bats of every feather and stripe flocked back and forth between Anzen's walls and the fields beyond, returning only to wipe their foreheads, dump the empty patchwork sacks and collect a new one between their claws before they were gone again. The birds didn't even need to wipe their heads. Their plump chests thrummed, their beaks chattering and their neck feathers fluttering to let out the non-existent heat. Old habits died hard.

Allie and Shiro watched them come and go with increasing trepidation. They may have been the only flightless mammals in sight, but wings or no wings, they were expected to follow them over all the same. A crude set of handholds had been carved into the mound covering the breach. The hummingbird overseeing the proceedings didn't take kindly to Shiro's suggestion that they simply leave through the iron doors.

Because of the way she zoomed from place to place, they

only caught brief snatches of her haughty response before she was gone again, doubtless overlooking some other important matter. ‘Never heard such nonsense... Lady Umeboshi herself commanded the doors stay shut until her return... dropped on your shell as a chick I shouldn’t think... all necessary provisions waiting for you over the wall... hooper knows what to do... nothing he’s not done a thousand times before...’

And just like that, she was gone. Shiro couldn’t have been happier to watch her leave. The sickly scent of the nectar pouch strapped to her back had been buffeted at them, and the incessant beating of her wings was starting to make him feel dizzy. A hummingbird without a ready supply of nectar wouldn’t be humming for long. It was a wonder that any animal could think so fast.

They got to work climbing the makeshift tower. Shiro made sure Allie went first, propping him up along the incline whenever his hooves looked fit to slip. If the worst happened, at least he’d have somebody to cushion his fall. The reverse didn’t bear thinking about. It was a slow but steady climb. Grain sacks made for surprisingly effective handholds, depressing just enough to get a good grip between his pads, whereas even the sturdiest-looking bales turned to powder under Shiro’s claws. Surprisingly, the small goat had the easier job of it. He swung his legs over the top before Shiro was even halfway up.

Allie cupped his eyes and whistled. In the full glare of the sunlight, his white wool looked like it was glowing. ‘Hey Shiro, you’ve gotta see this!’

Shiro begged to differ. He didn’t want to imagine what devastation awaited him over the walls. Smoking black fields, endless forests of tree stumps, and wounded stubs of watch tower legs poking out of piles of grey ash. And the worst part

of it all was that none of it would have happened without him. ‘Look upon your work, if you can,’ he told himself as he climbed. ‘Look upon your own work and despair.’

He took a deep breath, clamped a quivering paw over the hay bale at the top and pulled himself up, leaving gouge marks behind him.

The fields were green. Every one. Yes, the grass may not have been all that long, and yes, the trees may not have been all that tall, but damn it, there was life! And sometimes, that was enough. The verdant stubble of the land was already inches tall, the tree saplings entire feet, too stubborn to let a little scorn keep them down for long.

‘How is this possible?’ he found himself asking nobody in particular. He slid down the mound and fell to his knees before a thicker patch of grass, whose fine blades curled outward from the same place, like a tiny head of hair. He stroked one of the blades with the pad of his index finger. It was velvety to the touch. He got onto his elbows, closed his eyes and gave it a good long sniff. It smelled fresh and dewy, and faintly sweet, just like everything else. It smelled alive.

Allie trotted up to join him, brushing hay from the back of his legs. ‘Time goes by quickly for things that can still grow,’ he said. ‘That’s why I love it so much out here. There’s no Sinn, no strangers with their suspicious eyes, and nothing to break. Just green as far as the eye can see. You’ve gotta remember where we are, Shiro. No spirits can die in this world. No spirits except us, I guess.’

He rubbed the back of his neck and laughed. ‘Nothing but ghost fields of ghost grass for ghost farmers. Not the invasive species, of course. When I first got here, I got in so much trouble for calling it ghost grass. There was this huge mix-up and everything. I’d like to say I’ll tell you about it sometime,

but it's so embarrassing, I don't think that's gonna happen. When there's nothing left to lose, maybe.'

Save for the wing beats overhead, the only thing to hear from this side of the wall was the sound of the fields themselves. The gentle rustle was like a whisper, and in the quiet, Shiro could have sworn he could hear them growing, wordlessly encouraging each other to stretch their shoots towards the sun.

Shadows swept across the fields as farmers worked tirelessly to rejuvenate their plots, dive-bombing down the land to sprinkle first soil, then seeds, and finally water from innumerable fine holes in the sacks. Shiro had to marvel at the sight. Birds had always made for the best farmers. The way they beat their powerful wings in brazen defiance of the ground, climbing to full height before lazily spreading them out to ride the current, it was truly beautiful. Outside of the cinema, he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a bird take to the sky.

When he was at the beach, perhaps? But he'd been young then. All the fledglings that knew the secret lauded it over their nest mates, daring each other to flap further and further up the walls of the orange safety net. None of them ever reached the top, however. Only their parents could climb so high, and even they wouldn't have dared. One wrong move, and they'd have been tangled up like a fresh catch. Even then, under a perfect sky, netting had been stretched over the promise of limitless freedom like iron bars.

Flying died with the invention of the modern plane, as they say. It lost its savour when the potential to be sucked into a turbine came about. An eagle teaching assistant once told him that the beating heart of all birds had died that same day, but it wasn't until he saw the formation of farmers in the sky that he

understood what she meant. They were soaring with ears of wheat in their beaks, and the thrill of the flight glinting off their eyes. Oh, to be a bird without a care in the world. It was surely the only thing one would choose over being a fox.

Shiro picked himself up off the ground. He turned to Allie, who was carrying out a grass inspection of his very own. Apparently, the young grass didn't taste quite as sweet as it smelled. 'What are we doing then?' he asked him, dusting himself off. He gave his wrist a quick pat. Yep, still there.

Allie nodded to the carts behind them. It was the same train that Kapp had been escorting through the streets. Filled from wall to wall with clay pots, they were linked together by iron chains as thick as Shiro's fist. His shoulders were aching already. 'Please don't tell me we've got to drag that down the countryside.'

Allie laughed. 'No, silly!'

He grabbed him by the paw and led him around to the back, where a smaller cart with two handles was waiting, freshly stocked with empty pots. There was even a wonky pot or two in the mix, which made Shiro's heart flush with guilty pride. 'We're going on another cart trip,' the goat grinned. 'Except this time, you're gonna be pulling your weight. Literally too; we're on ethre duty. Someone's gotta fill all those pots. Before you came along, it was just me on my own. It'll be nice to have some company out there.'

Shiro didn't understand. 'Why are we being sent all that way where there are bigger, stronger birds out here that'd do it in half the time? Especially when there could be another attack any day now?'

'I guess they can't afford to lose the birds,' Allie said with a shrug. He heaved up the wooden handles and held them out. 'Now do you wanna be left, or right? Think carefully first. I

really don't like changing once I'm in the groove.'

Shiro didn't understand Allie sometimes. The goat seemed to be afraid of all the wrong things. 'Ethre's one of the most valuable commodities in Anzen,' he mused to himself. He chose the one on the right, and on the count of three, they both took their first faltering steps. It was heavier than he expected. 'Strange thing to trust to us.'

'Who better?' Allie laughed. 'What are we gonna do, run off into the woods with it? We wouldn't last a week. Nobody's gonna miss two strangers from the Chiri Inn.'

'Right,' Shiro said. Of course. It was just like Allie said. Somebody had to be the canaries.

### *Endless Green*

'So just how old are you, anyway?'

'Wha...?'

'Well we've got nothing else to talk about. I thought we may as well start somewhere. I wanted to go with fifteen, because you remind me of some of my friends when we were doing our GCSEs together. It's so hard to tell with goats though. The height might be throwing me off, but cross my tail, I'll eat my own Chiri Inn hat right now in front of you if you're older than me.'

'Shiro!' Allie dropped his handle in the grass. He bent down to pick it back up, muttering exasperatedly all the while. 'You can't just ask a spirit how old they ar—were. That's past life stuff!'

Shiro sighed. He hadn't intended to cause offence. 'Sorry. There were plenty of spirits in the Paradise Archives that were happy to talk about it.'

'Yeah, well the spirits in the Paradise Archives are happy to do a lot of things. I'm pretty sure that's how most of them



ended up there in the first place.’

‘We talked about Captain Cormorant and Pesky the Pelican. Isn’t that past life stuff—?’

‘Shh!’ Allie jumped up and clamped his hooves over Shiro’s muzzle. Both of the goat’s ears shot up as he looked around frantically. Shiro could feel his pulse quickening through his grip. His chest was buzzing like a fridge. All of a sudden, the small goat was like an animal possessed. His eyes stared straight through Shiro’s without a ounce of recognition. For a few moments, he wasn’t Allie, and Shiro wasn’t Shiro. He was just a goat in the grass, scanning the environment for movement.

It felt like it could last forever, but thankfully, when Shiro felt the hooves starting to ease up, he knew the moment had passed. Allie’s dewclaws had dug a weal right into the side of the poor fox’s nose. Shiro winced and gave it a rub as the goat clutched at his sash, offering as many apologies as he could fit into one breath.

‘I’m so sorry, Shiro. I never meant to... not in a million years... you see, I had to make sure we were alone.’ Shiro looked around. The fields were just as empty as ever. They’d long since left the farmers behind.

Allie tiptoed up to him. He leaned in so close, Shiro could feel the hairs of his chin tickling his ear. ‘Even if I wanted to talk,’ he whispered, ‘Lady Umeboshi hears everything. Some folks say that the Lady of the Tower is always listening at one of Anzen’s doors, no matter the time. She’s always there. Not behind every door, but any door.’

Shiro thought back to his marketplace encounter. What would have seemed like paranoid ramblings only a few days ago suddenly didn’t seem so far-fetched. Though he was well within his rights to begrudge Allie his weal, he couldn’t well

begrudge him his silence too. For all he knew, the goat was right. Somewhere out there, Lady Umeboshi could be lying in wait, listening. Not behind every door. But any door.

### *Mountains*

The first sign of the well was a faint crease in the sky. At first, Shiro wasn't sure if he was just seeing things, but sure enough, it became clearer the closer they grew. The line was almost completely straight, just slightly darker than the otherwise perfect blue above, and cutting through the grey mountains further south. Shiro couldn't make out the waterfall at the top of Kanmon Mountain, but he knew it had to be there. Somewhere, past all this empty farmland.

Only a few days ago, he'd been racing down those same rocky hills with his arms out, happy enough to be back under a sky full of stars. Allie was right. Time did go by quickly here. 'You know, if we really wanted to, we could drop the cart right here and make a break for the waterfall.'

Allie laughed. 'Ha, ha, very funny.'

'I wasn't joking.'

'Then I take it back. Shiro, that's crazy talk. Everybody knows you can't go back through the waterfall.'

'And why's that?'

'Only about a million reasons. Way too many to name, and besides, it's not allowed, so I don't know why we're even talking about it—'

'Have you ever tried?'

Allie had no answer for Shiro. His red face said it all.

### *Well*

Unremarkable from a distance, the tiny mouth of the well only opened up when they were standing on top of it. A

steady stream of ethre wavered back and forth in the wind like smoke, thicker than caramel. The smell was indescribable. It was something even Lady Umeboshi's tea could only hint at. Liquid fire came close, but there was something unmistakably earthy too, overwhelmingly rich and tinged with spice, like tree sap and bone marrow and honey and fresh ginger and blood all at once. After a few huffs, Shiro had to close his nose to the aroma. If he carried on like this, it was sure to get him drunk.

Beneath the small ridge lay a network of caves, on the roof of which the ethre streamed, lighting the rocks a luminescent blue. Keeping their cart close at hand, they followed the blue glow until they could go no further. From a vein of a crevice that seemed to go down forever, pure ethre poured forth, running so straight, it appeared not to be moving at all. In the darkness of the caves, the stream drew the two of them like moths to a flame.

'It's easier to fill the jars down here,' Allie told him. 'The one above moves too much. This way, the wind can't get to it.' They parked the cart next to the crevice and got to work. In less than a minute, the first clay pot was brimming. The cart only held a dozen or so pots, Shiro realised. It was going to take them less time to fill them up than it had taken to drag them all the way out here in the first place.

His first pour went about the same way as his first two cups of tea. He overestimated how much space remained to be filled, but luckily, he only wasted a few dribbles. Any ethre that escaped climbed up his paws and the sides of the pot to ripple into the glowing blue river over their heads. Shiro licked his paw clean of the rest. It burned like nothing else. Now this was what things used to taste like. It's no wonder spirits couldn't get enough of it.

‘Do you ever get tempted to have a drink yourself?’ Shiro asked, as Allie heaved his fourth clay pot past him. When he stumbled on an outcrop of rock, Shiro’s paw was there to steady him. There was a pang of guilt when he saw that the goat had been holding a wonky one. That was why Nendo made all of his with handles, he realised. If ever he had to make them again, he promised himself he’d learn how.

‘Stealing ethre straight from the source is one of the biggest crimes you can commit,’ Allie said gravely. ‘So I couldn’t see myself doing ever something like that.’ He flopped his long ears over his eyes, cupped his hooves into the stream and took a long sip, doing his best to bite back the makings of a smile. ‘Never, ever, ever, ever, ever...’

The pots were filled in no time. When Shiro took hold of his cart handle once more, right side of course, he was delighted to find that the cart barely weighed more than it did before. The clay pots tinked together in the back, the only hint of a glow emanating from the base. If they didn’t get ambushed by thieves or any more misunderstood plagues on the way back, it might turn out to be a good day after all. ‘That wasn’t so bad.’

‘Don’t count all your chickens yet, fox,’ Allie warned him. ‘This is just the first round. We’ve got a lot more pots to fill.’

‘But there were some many of them. When are we supposed to stop?’

Allie took up his handle and ground his hooves into the unyielding rock, readying himself for the first step. ‘When there are no more pots,’ he replied.

### *Endless Green*

The tension of the trip eased up by the end of the second delivery. Even journeys fraught with risk eventually find

themselves falling into routines of a sort, and Shiro knew that if he ever saw Scorn again, one of two things was going to happen. Either they were going to be able to outrun it, or they weren't. It was all rather simple when he put it that way.

With a little prodding, Allie started to open up too. There was little else to do during the long walks there and back. 'But we're not allowed,' the goat insisted at first. 'What if Lady Umeboshi finds out I'd been talking about the sins of my past? She's everywhere, remember? Not behind every door, but any door.'

'Agreed.' Shiro gestured to the endless green. 'But do you see any doors around here?'

Allie's muzzle slowly curled into a grin.

It was only small things at first, always in the middle of a run. He'd look from side to side, and then under his breath, he'd mutter a few words before quickly changing the subject.

His favourite colour was green, and his favourite kind of ice cream was astronaut. His favourite time of year was spring, and his least-favourite time of year was autumn. Watching his carefully cultivated collection of flowers wither was always worse than the following season without them. He'd had a girlfriend, and the possession he was most proud of was his very own radio, which in a break from family tradition had been acquired through entirely legitimate means. Slowly but surely, a picture of the shy goat's life began to form.

He'd been born a few years after the end of the Second World Schism. When he was little, he used to live in the countryside with his parents and siblings. He had to learn the different plant species when they were foraging in stranger's fields, or else he would have starved. 'I say we lived in the countryside. We sort of lived everywhere. We moved around a lot. Anywhere we could blag ourselves a roof for the night.'

‘That sounds rough.’

‘Haha, I guess so.’ He shrugged. ‘I don’t know. It’s nice to have a roof over your head, but nothing beats a sky full of stars. Now that I think about it, that’s not really true, but it’s what Albie used to say anyway. Except when it rained.’

‘I’m sorry, but who’s Albie?’

The goat flushed. ‘My brother Albert. He’s the oldest. Sorry. I’m not used to talking about myself. Teddy would be telling me to get a grip right about now, or else he’d pull my other horn off and stick it where the first one ought to be.’

‘Teddy?’ The goat went a deeper shade of pink.

‘The youngest,’ he said. ‘Theodore. Still older than me, or so he says. We’re all part of the same litter, so I dunno who he thinks he’s fooling. If he wants the extra five minutes, he can have them. My little sister came a lot later, so at least by then, I wasn’t the youngest in the family. I’d rather be dead than the youngest—’ But he burst out laughing before he could finish the thought.

He was the the youngest in a litter of six, all brothers, and sons to a boer goat father and myotonic goat mother. The goat struggled to muster much enthusiasm as far as his fainting mother was concerned. He didn’t say much about his father at all. ‘I knew you were myotonic!’ Shiro called when he first heard. Allie’s ears twitched in annoyance. It was clearly a sensitive subject.

‘Two guesses why,’ he grumbled.

‘Your cashmere coat of course,’ Shiro said quickly. ‘You don’t get wool like that from a boer.’ It was a good save. Allie almost bought it too.

Unbelievably, they even managed to have a similar taste in music. Allie reeled off the list of bands he used to watch on Top of the Clops, and Shiro was astonished by how many he

recognised.

‘Mitochondria the Powerhouses of the Cell?’

‘Great band.’

‘Skull Receiver?’

‘Yup, my dad’s obsessed with their first album. He still plays it on vinyl every now and then. It’s weird, because I’m pretty sure he was only two when it came out, but still.’ Allie didn’t say anything, but Shiro could see his brain working out the maths from behind his eyes.

‘Paperweights?’

‘Only heard the one single, but then again, so has everyone else on the planet.’

‘Hmm, what else? What else? I think that’s just about it.

Oh yeah, and Underbite too, I guess.’

‘Wait, you know Underbite?’

‘Of course.’

‘They’re my favourite band!’

The goat jumped up. ‘Mine too! That’s crazy! I didn’t think anybody else in the world even knew about Underbite. I only found out about them when we moved to Drumlin Street. They played their first ever gig five minutes from my house.’

‘You liar.’

‘I’ve got the track list to prove it,’ Allie boasted proudly, tapping the side of his head. He reeled off the songs one by one for good measure.

‘So how was it?’ Shiro had to know.

The goat chuckled. ‘Awful,’ he said. ‘Nigel Cox was completely out of tune, which is weird considering he only had three strings to worry about, and Danny Tanner kept trying to time his drums with the clapping of the crowd, which was about ten of us in total, my brothers included. But it was pretty amazing too. I had my first beer. It was like the

best thing I ever tasted.’

‘How old were you?’ Shiro asked. The goat puffed his chest out.

‘Thirteen,’ he said. ‘It was the third of June, 1965... I think.’ He looked immensely proud. ‘I’m amazed you’ve heard of them. Don’t tell me they’re still making music.’

‘Twenty-two albums at the last count,’ Shiro said. Allie looked on in wonder.

‘So they’re doing okay, then? Old Davie Bowen, Danny Tanner and Three-String Nige?’ Shiro’s eyes widened. The headline on his laptop news feed flashed through his mind. ‘Underbite Lead Singer Found Dead in Hotel...’

‘Great!’ he blurted out suddenly. ‘They’re all doing great! Just finished a world tour, in fact. Completely sold out.’

‘Phew!’ Allie looked relieved. ‘I was always worried they might split up. A lot of personality clashing, you know? Especially from the lead singer. Davie’s as rocker billy as rocker billies come. I always wanted to be a goat like him, but I was never brave enough to go out looking like that. It’s good to know that he’s still around, bringing music to the folks that need it most.’

‘Yeah...’

The day went on. The cart was filled and emptied and filled again, and all the while, they talked. The seeds of brief titbits gradually grew into anecdotes, and from the blooms of anecdotes, entire conversations flourished. Shiro assuaged Allie’s fears about his unorthodox baptism in a stolen font, as well as his concern for the girlfriend he’d left behind.

‘It’s not that she needs me,’ he was quick to clarify. ‘She can hold her own. She’s the one that looked after me. Even if she’s a hundred, she’ll still be head of the herd. I just wonder sometimes if she misses me. If she ever thinks of me.’



‘I’m sure they all do, Allie.’

Allie nodded back, but Shiro wasn’t sure he was listening. Though his hind hooves still stomped up and down the empty hills, his blue eyes were glazed, going on grey. ‘It’s funny. Back then, I thought that when I finally got a girlfriend, everything would change. The other goats would stop calling me a tail lifter, and the bigger bucks would stop shoving me against the wall and hiking my tail up to prove it. But they didn’t. That’s when I realised that they didn’t really care whether I was a tail lifter or not.

‘To them, a tail lifter was just someone who spoke like I did, someone who walked and talked and acted like me. When I wanted to hold hooves with another kid, even with a doe, that was exactly what tail lifters did. But nobody said a word when they were stealing each other’s towels in the showers. Slapping each other on the rear? Measuring each other’s horns? Hey, that’s just what bucks do! But flick your ear the wrong way, and they’ll make damn sure you know about it. Do you think any of them are still alive?’

‘Most of them, I imagine.’

‘Huh.’ Allie bent down to pick a wild head of lavender. The purple shoot was still young. ‘You know, I’ve had a lot of time to think about it. A lot of time. A few years ago, I decided that I don’t want to see them burning in eternal flames for a million, million years after all.’

‘That’s generous of you.’

‘Nah. Five minutes alone with a pitchfork ought to even things out.’ Allie crunched the head of lavender and threw away the rest. By the sound of it, it was some good lavender.

The two of them were still talking when the sun set. Shiro wasn’t sure about staying out in the dark, but there were still pots that needed filling, and Allie didn’t seem to mind. It was

a still night. Above the caves, the fine stream of ethre was a glowing beacon among the stars.

In another stumbling incident, Allie accidentally discovered that his duty had been fulfilled. When Shiro tested his own, sure enough, the tablet turned to dust in his fist. They decided to fill the last of the pots and call it a night. The rest of the chained train could wait another day. Allie was unusually excited to get back out of the cave.

‘Like I said, wasting ethre is a real bad thing around here,’ he said when the task was done, dragging the cart back onto the grass. He lifted a clay pot from the end and set it on the ground, bottom-side up. Grass stubble shimmered around the lip. ‘Property of the gods and all that. But you know, sometimes, it’s just so heavy that you can’t help but...’

The goat nudged it over. The pot fell onto its side with a gentle pat, cushioned by his trainer. ‘Whoops.’

Ethre poured out of the exposed end. Allie jumped into it as it rose, and it turned into a contorting bubble around him. The goat’s distorted image waved back at Shiro from inside the slowly rising puddle. It was difficult to make out exactly what he was saying, but his laughter was unmistakable.

Allie performed tricks like he was at the bottom of a swimming pool. One moment, it was all somersaults and handstands, and the next, he was swimming the puddle back and forth like he was doing laps. It was such a strange sight, Shiro couldn’t help but join in the revelry. Before long, they were both laughing, Shiro’s laughter loud and clear, and Allie’s thin and tinny, like it was emerging from an old water pipe.

Before the puddle reached too high for comfort, Allie swam to the edge and broke through the surface with a well-placed breaststroke. He’d clearly done this before. The

goat alighted back upon the grass like nothing had happened.

‘Hey, are you okay?’

Allie was better than okay. He was ecstatic. He grabbed the pot and rushed straight back into the cave to refill it. ‘You wanna do the next one?’ his voice echoed from within.

Shiro took one look at the endless abyss above, pocketed with tiny white holes, and shuddered. One paw clenched at the wrist with the red ribbon, so tight, he could feel his claws itching to come out. ‘I think I’ll pass, thanks,’ he replied. ‘But you go again. I’ll be cheering you on every step of the way.’

Shiro was calling out tricks for Allie to perform well into the night. When they finally decided to head back to the breach, elated and full of ethre, they weren’t even tired. They returned to Anzen under a blushing sky. This was the morning of the fourth day. And on the fourth day, Lady Umeboshi and the Shrine Keepers returned.

### *Anzen*

He started the day off by collecting his duties.

‘Good morning, Mr Magpie!’

‘Good morning, Allie! Good morning, Shiro!’

They felt somewhat lighter around his neck. Maybe it was just that sort of day, but he could have sworn it was getting easier. He knew exactly where he was going, and what he was doing. Nothing eased anxieties quite like a routine.

The first port of call was Potter’s Dug. There were still plenty of empty pots waiting in the bigger carts, but Nendo thought it was worth making a start on the next set.

The morning was a lesson in how he made his clay. Shiro found it utterly impossible to follow all of the steps. The minutiae of exactly how much clay, feldspar and silica to add, how warm to keep it, when to beat it with the mallet to

achieve the right plasticity, and how long to store it before it was ready to be moulded may as well have been quadratic equations as far as the blue fox was concerned. It was more complicated than mud had any right to be, but he was still happy to help. He was even happier when he learned how to make the perfect handles.

His arms were greener than Anzen's fields by the time he climbed back out of the disputable mole's musty den. He returned to a blinding sky. The weather was unusually good today. There wasn't a cloud to be seen, though the air carried with it a faint scent of rain. That should have been the first warning.

Next, he was due at the Paradise Archives. Unlike Joshu, he was under no illusions regarding his work with the scholars. He spent several hours helping a buck with one antler search for an old ink painting, only for it to crumble when he finally got his hooves on it. He refilled their ethre, set fresh wash under the legs of the wonky table, and brought them games to snap and dice and paddle the day away, chowing down tall bowls of seed. There was a strange sensation in his jaw as he watched them. He rubbed it, but it didn't seem to go away.

Shortly afterwards, one of the scholars approached him, a spindly grey wolf with milky eyes. From his sash, he drew forth a stick with three balls of charred pink flesh. To Shiro's relief, it was only watermelon. 'Carnivore's itch,' the wolf explained. 'Don't expect the seed crunchers or the hay munchers to understand. You might not need meat anymore, but your jaws don't know that. Give them something to chew on every now and then. It'll help.'

'Thanks.' Shiro nodded his appreciation. It didn't taste much like watermelon, but it wasn't as putrid as the crab either. Was he really forgetting the taste of food so quickly?

Apart from that small encounter, it was a quiet day at the Paradise Archives. That should have been the second warning.

There was no third.

Shiro and Allie were out in the fields. There was still some time left before they were due to make the long hike back to the well, and they were exploring the grasslands together.

On the bank of the Nagai River, the old mole rat Wasabi was obsessed with trying to plant copious roots of his namesake, to little success. Shiro wasn't sure if it was his real name or just what the other farmers called him, but it was nothing if not apt. He refused to talk about anything else. 'I need my wasabi, my precious wasabi,' he'd moan on and on and on. 'I can still taste it, you see. I can't taste noodles or rice or sake or good beer, but I can still taste wasabi. Wasabi is a food you can taste with your eyes!'

Further downstream, half-naked farmers were using their wings to dredge up buckets of ash from the bottom. It was the only residue of any kind that Scorn had left behind, an ashen silt that lined the river bed. Water glanced off their bare feathers to glimmer in the sunlight. Any drops that touched them directly spiralled into the sky. 'Hey goat, you're not up to much. Bring that horn over here, and come give us a wing!'

With not a little encouragement from the sow on the river bank, Allie hiked up his robes with a huff and went to join them. They even had a spare bucket.

When each section of the bed had been cleared, the farmers planted their crops and moved further down. Wasabi followed after them. Their efforts soon went washing down the river with the current. In their place, there was room for only one plant. 'Oh, I do so love me some wasabi, morning, afternoon and night!' he sang.

‘We know!’ the other farmers yelled back, but he never heard them. There was a rumour that his ears were plugged up with wasabi, and if they ever got his scalp off, a root of wasabi was all they’d find behind the eyes. ‘If only I had a second set of paws, I could clear away all those nasty inferior roots faster, and grow twice as much of my beautiful wasabi. But what can I say? Nobody wants to help old Wasabi with his old wasabi. I’m a mole rat with a great need indeed.’

As he spoke, a shadow fell upon the land. The farmers tilted their hats back and cupped their eyes in wonder. Shiro’s whiskers stood on end. At first, he thought it must have been a Zeppelin. Nothing else could be so large. It wasn’t until he looked up and saw the enormous trailing whiskers that he realised what it was. It was a dragon. A familiar green dragon.

‘I arrive,’ Midori announced in its customary booming monotone.

‘Well it’s about time!’

The farmers in the water started panicking. They bellowed at old Wasabi with all their worth, hiking up their cloths and splashing towards him, but he didn’t heed their call. From the look of things, he could barely hear the dragon. His focus was squarely on the ground, rummaging through the fresh baskets of wasabi seeds at his side without a care in the world.

‘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—?’

‘Look, I just need help clearing the river, son. Can you do that for me? Clear the river?’

There was a pause, a short, terrible pause. And then...

‘It is done.’

What followed was a thrum so powerful, Shiro could feel

it in his bones. He watched in dread as the dragon's shadow loomed large over the river, every one of its emerald scales burning brighter like stars. Confused, Wasabi hovered a wrinkled pink paw over his darkening baskets. When the mole rat finally had the good sense to look up, he continued backwards and lost his straw hat to the current.

The jagged horn at the tip of the dragon's nose began to pulse with green light. Three times, the power seemed to resonate. On the fourth, following a moment of silence more deafening than any noise, a four-pronged fork of green lightning struck the heart of the river. The thunder clap was like that of a mountain being split in two.

'I depart.' Pleased with its work, Midori shook the fields with a tail flick and three strokes of its mighty limbs. Sure enough, the dragon was gone.

After being shaken about like rag dolls, the poor limp farmers were left hovering an inch or so over the river, slowly spinning as if they were weightless. Their eyes were as pale and clear as the rushing waters. Shiro met eyes with Allie, but the goat didn't look back. His straw hat slowly sidled down his horn, inch by inch, until the tip dipped into the water. A small gust of wind, and it came clean off. Still Allie hung there, unknowing, staring into the void.

'No!' Shiro dashed along the river bank to scoop the hat up. There was no reaction from Allie when he leaned over to jam it back onto his head, careful never to broach the water's edge. The goat was cool to the touch. 'What the hell am I supposed to do? They're not blinking, they're not breathing. It's like they're just... dead.'

There was a snort of laughter behind him. The sow farmer held a trotter over her snout as though that made a lick of difference. Shiro had never hated a stranger so passionately as

he did in that moment. He wiped his eyes and drew his lips back to bare his canines. ‘What’s so funny?’ he snarled at her. ‘Are you gonna help me take them back, or is there a space at the trough you should be occupying?’

Unbelievably, the sow received his indignation with great amusement. ‘Yeah, real scary, pup. Here’s a little tip for next time. Try to save your tears until after the insults. It’ll be more convincing that way.’ Looming large on the river bank, she crossed her arms and slowly looked him up and down. Shiro wiped his eyes again, and fought to pull the floating goat back over dry land. His sash had come undone, and though the river wasn’t deep, the tug of the current was insistent. ‘Never seen a group stunning before, Blue Demon?’

‘I...’

‘Relax, they’ll be fine. Just give them time. You can’t blame them for needing a minute after a strike like that. Lightning from a dragon is enough to knock any spirit on its tail, be it mortal or otherwise. Now in any other circumstances, I’d be more than happy to help you round them up, but your kind words have convinced me that you really don’t need any help at all. Go on, then. Show me what you foxes can do.’

Shiro formed a makeshift lasso with his own sash. One by one, he caught each spirit and conveyed them back onto the grass, where they continued to hover, refusing by some inexplicable forces to be lowered down. The sow watched him while he worked. He couldn’t see her face, blinded as he was by the sun perfectly outlining her head and translucent curved ears, but he didn’t imagine she was very impressed.

When Allie’s tail gave its first twitch, Shiro thought it was too good to be true. He didn’t know whether he was imagining it or not. After the twitch came a groan. That wasn’t much better. It was too quiet to be sure. But then Allie



looked down, gave a surprised yelp and plonked onto the river bank below. That did it. ‘Ow, my horn!’

Shiro helped him to his hooves just as the sound of cart wheels rose from over the hills. His sharp ears swivelled this way and that. There were five travellers on foot, if he wasn’t much mistaken. They came from downwind, so Shiro lifted his nose to the air. It hit him immediately. He’d recognise that strong perfume anywhere. Lady Umeboshi was back.

He saw her first. The left side of her headdress had melted down from the top, and her dress was singed and torn. The Shrine Keepers that followed were even worse for wear. The eagle and the squirrel pulled the cart between them, the burns black against their pale, wrinkled skin. Behind them strode the black bear, carrying the Sika deer in her big arms. Shiro hoped that she was only unconscious. The iron fan they’d been talking so much about hung from her waist on its tassel.

At the rear of the cart, the heifer, the cheeriest and most animated of the group, solemnly attended to the figure within. Two stubby brown legs poked out from underneath the drapes. An unnatural taint clung to the entire procession, like the smell of death itself.

‘Lady Umeboshi! Lady Umeboshi!’ The Lady of the Tower had never looked more her age. The two bags under her eyes barely rose as she watched Shiro race up to her. The Sakuranese Bobtail’s expression was implacable. She surveyed the scene: the farmers circling in the sky, squawking news of her arrival to each other, the sow standing dumbfounded by the Nagai River, and the collection of dazed farmers who were still waking up on the side of the bank.

‘In the mountains, we found what remains of the southernmost watch tower,’ she told Shiro. To her credit, her voice was no less resolute, her eyes no less sharp. ‘They will

require my urgent attention. However...’ She lifted her paw from the umbrella, curled her claws around his blue collar and wrenched him down to bring them whisker to whisker. ‘We also discovered the nature of the foreign body.’

Shiro looked around expectantly. ‘Well? What is it?’

‘Not what,’ she said. ‘Who.’

Lady Umeboshi didn’t need to say another word. From her expression alone, Shiro knew. ‘As long as you are here, the wound will continue to bleed, and the attacks we’ve thwarted at the breach will find their way to Anzen. The void sticks to you like flies on carrion. It will draw such an evil as you could never imagine. The Shrine Keepers and I are already in discussion about the measures we may be forced to take. Emergency measures,’ she emphasised, and her eyebrow quivered.

The old cat had no further words for Shiro, and there was no consolation to be found either. Relinquishing his collar, she patted his leg at the knee before continuing on to the village. Behind him, the bells had just begun to sound.

### *Empty Fields*

‘Come on, try it! I promise you’ll like it. I even got this from Kon, just in case.’ Shiro looked down. Allie was holding a bundle of red ribbon. ‘Promise I won’t let you go again,’ he said, and he crossed his heart twice to show he meant it.

‘Maybe another time.’ Shiro lugged the pot back down the cave to refill it. It was the last of the lot. ‘I don’t want to stay here much longer. We shouldn’t have gone out again. The second it started getting dark, we—’

‘Wait, I’ve got an idea!’

Uh oh. Shiro didn’t like the sound of that.

Luckily, it turned out to be a good one. Allie tied one end

of the ribbon around his ankle, and the other around the handle of the cart. When the ethre lifted him up, Shiro found that he was able to steer the goat around. Allie laughed himself purple inside the ball as Shiro worked to balance speed and surface tension from the outside. There was a killer joke about speed-boating in there somewhere, but he realised Allie probably wouldn't know what he was talking about, and so he kept it to himself.

Higher and higher the goat went, making the most of his time as a cloud while he still had it, and all the while, the slack of the ribbon dwindled down. Before long, the goat realised just how high he was. 'Pull me down, pull me down, pull me down!' he called in a blind panic, flailing about.

Shiro yanked the ribbon, but the cart was still moving, and Allie burst from the puddle to land right on top of him. Over and over the two rolled, falling down the side of the hill, until they landed in a heap at the bottom. 'Are you okay?' Shiro groaned. He lifted Allie's arm from his face to reveal... the goat laughing back at him.

'I didn't mean like that!' the goat panted. He groped for a hunk of grass and threw the tiny blades in Shiro's face. Shiro laughed and shook his head. Lying back, he stared up at the night sky. Allie's wool tickled the fur on his forearm.

'You won't believe where we are,' Allie said when he caught his breath. Shiro tilted his head back and shrugged. There were empty green fields to the left of them, and empty green fields to the right. Allie sat up and ran a hoof through the green stubble. 'My patch,' he said, and his smile turned sad. 'This is my patch on farmer Teiboku's plot. Well, was. Used to be. This is where we first met. I was grabbing him some green onions when you found me. You can still see the flowers if you look close enough. Unless it's just me.'

But Allie was right. There was an undisturbed impression of the flowers outlined in the soil. There were so many petal shapes that Shiro didn't recognise. It was like a floral explosion. 'I know it's not much, but it was mine. Flowers don't need much here. Just a little love, and they bloom. They were so bright, I didn't even have the heart to take a bunch back with me to the Chiri Inn. They would have brightened up the place so much. I guess I should've taken my chances while I still had them.'

'I'm sure they were very beautiful,' Shiro said.

Allie's tail wagged behind him. 'Thank you,' he beamed. 'You know, this may be the most random question in the world, but it's been bothering me ever since I got here.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Where are all the sumo wrestlers? You know, the big ones that fight in the ring. I would've thought there'd be loads of them here, but I haven't seen a single one. Even Teiboku's only retired, and he made me swear not to tell anyone.'

'Hmm...' Shiro rolled his cheek fluff back and forth between his pads. 'Well I'm really not sure. If I had to guess, I'd say it's because sumo wrestling was banned for a few centuries, right up until the 1860s. Too much fighting on the streets. Most animals here seem to come from a very specific time in the 1600s, which would have been when the sport was still illegal.'

'Huh.' Allie leaned back. 'Does it hurt your shoulders to keep that head up?'

Shiro laughed. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I wish I knew half the stuff that you do. I'd feel like the smartest goat in the world.'

'Trust me, you wouldn't.'

'But it'd be something at least. I could be as smart as you,

or as wise as Linn, or perfect like Sinn, or even strong like Kapp. Instead, I'm just... this.' He tugged at his horn and sighed. 'Even my ears come from the wrong side of the family. All I got from my mum was anxiety. I wish I looked like you.'

Shiro bit back a knowing smile. 'Are you sure about that?'

'For sure. You look... good.'

'Good?'

'Bah!' The goat flopped back in the grass. 'You know what I mean. Normal.'

'Normal?' Of all the things Shiro had been accused of, normal wasn't one of them. 'You do know I'm blue, right?'

'Yeah, but aside from that,' Allie said.

'Sure,' Shiro grinned. 'Aside from being blue.'

Allie elbowed him in the ribs. Shiro burst into laughter. 'Hey stop twisting my tail! You're just as bad as my brothers. Considering what foxes look like, you know you can't complain. Most dogs wouldn't know the difference anyway. You're basically completely normal. You have no idea what's it like to be stared at all the time.'

'Oh yeah?' Shiro chuckled. 'Tell me about it.'

Allie's hoof patted around the base of his horn stump. 'It's the worst thing in the world,' he said. 'Not having a horn is like being neutered. Even the adults look at you funny.'

'I don't see why it'd be so different.'

'Yeah, of course you don't. You're a fox. I'm a herbivore. These are like my fangs. Imagine waking up one morning with only half the teeth in your mouth.' Shiro ran a tongue over his pearly whites and winced.

A long time ago, Duna had chipped one of his fangs during football practise. It had only been three days before he had the cap put on, but until then, he'd been unable to eat properly.

Every lunchtime, the other martens sidled up to the table, and before Shiro and Finn could chase them away again, they'd spit out their half-chewed lunches onto his tray like he was a baby bird. Something told him that schools hadn't been any more forgiving half a century ago.

'One horn means no squaring up in the playground, no horn marbles, no apple spearing, and no butting with your siblings. Imagine not being able to butt with your own siblings!'

'I couldn't,' Shiro said honestly. 'I'd have to imagine siblings first.'

'I'm so sorry. How many did you lose?'

'None. I'm an only fox.'

'Weird. One-kit litters are pretty rare. I joke about my brothers, but I don't know where I'd be without them. Apart from dead.' He shook his head and laughed. 'Albie always made me promise never to try it on with anyone. "Algie," he'd say in his deep voice, "even if you were as big and strong as me, I wouldn't risk it with only one horn. Be careful. Strangers will stare, and other goats will sense your weakness. Use it to your advantage. No one expects the meek."' He was clever. He showed me how to get by.'

'Algie?' Shiro asked him. The goat blanched.

'Did I really say that? Haha, I don't know what I'm talking about tonight. I think I had a bit too much ethre to drink...'  
He sighed. 'No, that's not it. You've been kind to me. I owe it to you to be honest. My name's... not really Allie. And since I know yours, I guess it's only fair that you know mine too.'

Shiro's tail fluttered momentarily. Of course Allie knew his name. How could he have forgotten? 'Wait, so you don't want me to guess first?'

Allie got up and started pacing. 'Go on then. What do you

think? Looking at me, I mean. What do I look like?’

Shiro stared the goat up and down. ‘Steve,’ he said.

Allie gawped at him. ‘I’m not a Steve! You’re a Steve!’

‘Yeah, yeah, sorry.’ Shiro laughed. ‘How about Davie?’

‘Davie, huh? Better. Not warmer, but better.’

‘Danny?’

‘Nope.’

‘Nigel?’

‘Are you just naming all the members of Underbite?’

‘No...’

They both laughed. ‘So what is it then? Don’t look at me like that, I promise not to laugh. I’m sure it’s a great name.’

The goat pushed his long ears back. ‘Algernon,’ he said, biting his lip. ‘So? What do you think?’

‘I like it,’ Shiro said. ‘It suits you. Very traditional.’

The goat’s tail perked up. ‘You really think so?’

‘Of course! The only thing I can’t say is whether it suits you better than my name suits me. Ever since Lady Umeboshi put it away in her Folio no Shinzo, it’s like something’s been missing. I’d give anything to know what it is. Anything.’

Allie fiddled with his hooves. He didn’t seem to know where to look. ‘I guess it wouldn’t kill you to tell you...’

‘Exactly. I mean, you know yours. How exactly do you still know yours?’ The goat looked down at the ground.

‘Peito.’ Shiro might have guessed. Grumpy or not, the gruff red-crowned crane was a sharp one. ‘He said a spirit as powerful as Lady Umeboshi ought to know when someone’s been released from her charge, and nobody’s come after me yet. We don’t know for sure though. That’s what you could be risking if I tell you. Eternity and all that. Is it really worth it?’

‘Allie, please...’

‘Sorry. Of course.’ The goat took a deep breath. ‘It’s Teal.’

The blue fox's eyes widened. Somewhere deep inside, there was a spark of recognition. 'T-Teal?'

'Yeah. Why, don't you like it?'

'No, it's not that.' Teal. Teal. Tee-uhl. He said it over and over in his head. It sounded right. All of the pieces fit. But what a cruel name to give to a blue fox. What were his parents thinking? He flexed the back of his paw and winced. It wasn't even the right shade of blue. Teal, really? Of all the names...

'Thanks, Allie.' Teal shot him a smile, and the goat smiled back. Teal? That was him, wasn't it? Teal the fox, son of Emmett? This was going to take some getting used to. 'I guess it makes sense now, just how much ribbing I got at school. It's no wonder I tried covering myself up.'

'You tried to cover yourself up?'

Shiro, that is to say Teal, wasn't sure whether it was trust in Allie, or just intoxication from all the second-hand ethre he'd been breathing in, but as he closed his eyes, he could feel himself preparing to reveal something that no living soul had ever heard before. Allie sat down and scooped a little closer.

'I did actually, when I was little.' He laughed at the thought. What a funny thought it was too. 'I think I was five at the time. There was this big kit in school that I absolutely loathed. Eddie. He was always picking on me, but when I got invited to his birthday party, I thought I finally had a chance to turn things around. All I had to do was not look like me.'

'Oh god.' Allie's ears swooped over his eyes. He peeped out from behind them. 'So what did you do?'

'First, I went around the house looking for a mask. I already had this white set of woollen mittens that I put on whenever I went outside—'

'Organically donated wool?'

'I think so? We bought it whenever we could afford it. We



don't support the factory stuff. But I couldn't find anything. My tiny socks wouldn't stretch all the way over my head, and a hood wouldn't work either. Pull it back, and I'm suddenly right there for all the world to see, in all my blueness.'

Teal shook his head and laughed again. 'So I went to the bathroom. As usual, I couldn't find anything worthwhile at my height, but when you've got a stool, anything's possible. The medicine cabinet looked like a good bet. The door was so heavy, I had to use both paws. That was a good sign. The harder it is to open up, the better the stuff inside. That's the rule when you're younger.

'On the shelves, there were these little bottles of... well I'm actually not sure what they were. Leather polishes maybe, or whisker tints. But yeah, one was bright orange, and at the back, I found another that was blinding white, so I squirted them on my cheeks and started to mix them in. It burned a little, but that was okay. It didn't even matter that it was streaky. When I closed that medicine cabinet door, the first thing I did was look in the mirror.

'And for that split second before I tripped off the stool and smeared it all over the floor, I saw a normal looking fox staring back at me. No blue, not even a trace. Just orange and white, like the big birthday kit. Like everybody else.' Teal laughed.

Allie got up and sat beside him. Both of them were outlined in silver by the moon. 'You okay, buddy?'

'Of course I'm okay,' Teal said quickly. 'Why wouldn't I be okay?'

'Well your muzzle's laughing, but your eyes aren't.'

Teal looked away. 'I'm just fine. If you're okay, I'm okay.'

'And if I'm not?'

‘Then I’ll do what I can to make it better.’

The goat’s hoof brushed against Teal’s paw. Allie looked down. He raised it, and gently set it over Teal’s fingers. ‘You know you’re allowed to not be okay, right? The rest of the world will carry on just fine. You don’t have to make everything better.’

‘But I do.’

‘Why?’

Teal knew well why, though he wasn’t sure it was the kind of feeling he could put into words. He shrugged, and took in a deep breath of night air. That was it, nice and crisp. Slowly in, and even slower out. That was the way. ‘Because someone has to,’ he said finally. ‘I just want to help. Honestly, that’s the truth of it. That’s all the truth I know. I just want to help.’

They both turned to look out at the sky. The stars were bright tonight, as was the moon, even if a sliver had been chopped off the side. The bells had scarcely stopped ringing since Lady Umeboshi’s return. Either they were finished now, or else they were too far away to make them out. Either way, there was nothing left to disturb them. Nothing to see, nothing to hear, and no dangerous scents on the air. The evening was content in its stillness.

Eventually, somebody had to break the quiet. ‘My dad,’ Allie confessed. Teal turned to him.

‘Pardon?’

He sighed. ‘When we were in the queue that first time, you asked me why I greyed out. I said it was because I hadn’t been drinking enough tea, but... that wasn’t true. The farmer reminded me of my dad.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘That’s why I don’t talk to a lot of goats. Don’t get me wrong, he wasn’t a monster or anything. As long as you didn’t

give him an excuse to show you the strap of his belt, he left you alone. But he smelled like a distillery and sounded like the docks, and whenever he looked at you, he always had this look in his eyes like he was drowning, and he didn't know whether he wanted you to help so you could drag him out, or so he could drag you under too. My dad wasn't a very good goat. My uncle was. He was the best I ever knew. Until he went away.'

'For work?'

Allie's nose twitched. 'You could say that,' he whispered with two glassy eyes. 'He was the only one that believed in me. We used to talk forever about what I was going to be when I grew up. He made me promise not to be a soldier. "It's the gravest duty a buck can perform," he used to say. "I only did what I did so you would never have to." I don't know exactly what he did out there, but whatever it was, it wasn't good. I think he killed someone. And in a way, they killed him too. He was always warning me that he was going to die. Next week, or next month, or next year. In a hail of dirt and gunfire, under a bleeding sky. That was what he said.'

'The last time we spoke, he told me not to mourn him. He didn't think he was the kind of goat that ought to be remembered. Death was coming, he could feel it, but he wasn't afraid anymore. He was tired of running. We found him a week later. Teddy was trying to wake him up in his chair. He didn't... he didn't seem to understand... his hooves were so red.'

Allie closed his eyes and laughed. 'You wanna know the worst part?' he said. There was no answer, except a whisper of wind over the fields, bidding the goat to continue. 'I can't remember his name. He made me promise not to remember, so that's what I did. I blotted it out. And now, all these years

later, I can still remember everything, but I can't remember that. But then why do I still remember my dad's? Why's it fair for his name to go on, but for my uncle's name to fade away?

'Why do we always remember the days when we tripped up and fell flat on our face, or lost something super important, but never the days when the sun was bright, and we held hooves with someone we loved?'

Allie turned to him. The wool around his eyes was glistening like morning dew. 'I'm sure we've both done things we regret,' the goat sniffed. 'Things you wish you could just forget.'

Teal nodded. 'Yeah,' he said quietly. 'There are a lot of things I regret.'

'I wish I hadn't done it,' the goat said. His voice was a whisper.

'Done what?' But Teal already knew.

'I was just so sick of them, sick of it all. It's like a broken vase. If someone breaks it once, you can usually glue it back together again no problem. But break it again and again, and eventually the pieces get so small, you just have to ask what the hell the point even is. When I talked to Linn about it, he listened all patiently, just like you're doing now. But when I got to this part, he kept comparing it to ki... kin... kintsugi.

'But he's wrong. For once in his whole life, probably, he was completely, stupidly wrong. Cracks don't make you stronger, and you can't just find all the pieces every time you break apart. Nobody drinks from a glass with a hundred cracks in it. Nobody even drinks from a glass with a single chip. One, the size of a hair. You don't try to fix it. You throw it in the bin with the rest of them. Why should I put myself back together again, when the next goat that comes along is just gonna break me apart like nothing was ever fixed?'

‘When pieces of glass get small enough, they turn to dust. And by that point, it doesn’t matter how much golden glue you’ve got. There’s no putting that glass back together again. Once it’s dust, it’s just... dust. Forever.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Why? You weren’t the one grinding me down. I tried everything to fit in. I even started saving up for a horn graft. How’s that for irony? After psyching myself up all that time to finally get rid of it, I was gonna pay someone a small fortune to put it right back on again. But it was only a dream. I was never gonna have that much money, not if I lifted as many bricks and plastered as many walls as all my brothers put together. After seventeen long years, I realised all that I was ever gonna amount to. I didn’t hate myself enough to make it to the next one.’

Teal wrapped his arm around his shoulders. Allie put a hoof up to his paw, and gently played with his claw sheaths. His head nuzzled back against his chest. ‘You don’t have to talk about any of this, Algernon,’ he said.

Allie smiled at the mention of his name. ‘No, I want to talk about it. It feels good to talk about it. Have you ever been to Sakurai?’

‘I... don’t think so. This place doesn’t count, does it?’

‘What, the edge of Nahashi in the world of the dead?’

‘I was just asking.’

Allie chuckled. ‘It doesn’t. I think you’d like it though. It’s beautiful. The most amazing cherry blossom trees you’ve ever seen. There was this big job in Sakurai that my dad couldn’t say no to. All my brothers had to go, but because my mum got sick, I couldn’t stay home, so they had to take me too. Those three days in the hotel was like being in heaven. The rooms were so clean, and everything was free. My pockets were so

full of teabags, if you stuck me in the huge bathtub, you'd have made enough tea to keep the whole hotel going!' Teal smiled.

'But on the last night, I learned why my dad really brought me along. He asked me to get him a Clove-A-Spritz from one of the vending machines in the hall. They had vending machines for everything. When I came back, the room felt... strange. It was quiet, like a graveyard. I knew something was wrong when my dad smiled at me. He'd never done that before. He took the can and handed me a wad of notes. Five hundred sen. The can cost me fifty. He told me it was time to make my own way in the world. "Maybe you'll amount to something after all," he said. "But not under my roof. Not anymore."' "

Allie wiped his muzzle. His nose had begun to run. 'I wanted to do biology, you see. I wasn't big and strong like my brothers, and I couldn't speak fancy like my mum, and I didn't even know my numbers too well, but one thing I did know was plants. I thought if I could only pass the tests for Opus City University, they might have a place for me. It was my last chance. My dad would rather have seen me in prison. He swore that if we ever met again, I'd either be a buck, a proper buck this time, or else I'd be dead. And that was it.'

'It?'

'None of my brothers said a word when my dad marched me to the door. They just stared like their eyes were gonna fall out, like that was gonna make a difference. Even Albie was silent. You'd think...' He moved to say something, but thought better of it. This time, the goat stayed silent for a long while. Unprompted, there was nothing to break the silence but his own faltering breaths. His hoof tightened and loosened over Teal's fingers like he was trying to wring the words out.

‘I didn’t even regret it,’ he sniffed. ‘Not at first. Even when I got to the interlands and I realised what happened. At that point, it started happening again, and again, and again. It was kinda like being in a living nightmare, because I hadn’t... I hadn’t... done it properly.’ He made a noise that might have been a laugh, and yet his hoof had Shiro’s paw in a vice.

‘When Linn found me, he helped me to stop. It was so easy for him. I think he had a lot of practice. He put the paper on the wall, and he helped me through the waterfall. Even when I arrived, and nobody wanted anything to do with me, I still didn’t regret it. This is what heaven’s supposed to be like, right? No more school, no more Dad, no more rams pinning me down, trying to make my horns match.

‘But then I remembered the good times. Sometimes, when she felt up to it, Mum would read to me. She always did the best voices. I went to see my brothers every day after school. Whenever the foreman wasn’t looking, they’d bounce me up and down on the tarpaulin, all five of them, like a trampoline. Albie taught me to hide, and Teddy taught me how to punch with my hoof without breaking the nail. My sister Molly. She was so tiny. Nobody spent more time at her crib than me. I wonder if she knows she had a younger brother. Did she ever get round to saying my name? Does she even know it?’

Over time, Teal began to feel as though Allie was trying to ask him something without saying it directly. He would have answered in a heartbeat, if only he’d known what the question was. After another long pause, he could sense that something was coming. The tiny heartbeat quickened against his chest.

‘Shiro? Sorry, Teal. Teal, Teal, Teal. Do you think... that is, would you say...?’ The goat took a few stabs at the question before he composed himself. Its unspoken shadow had loomed large over their entire conversation. When it

finally emerged, it was like they were in the eye of the storm. Amid so much seething turmoil, suddenly, all was still. All was clear. ‘Am I a bad person? For what I did?’

‘Of course not.’ Teal’s answer came without thinking.

‘But I did an awful thing, Teal. An awful, awful thing. I didn’t want to go, not really. I just... didn’t want to stay. And now, I can never go back. I can never say sorry. I miss them all so much. Even Dad. What the hell’s wrong with me?’

‘Nothing. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with you, Algernon. You went through more in your life than most goats could possibly imagine. Plenty of other animals have had thoughts like that, at one point or another.’

Algernon gulped. ‘Even you?’ he said, looking up at him. Teal gave the goat a sad smile, and wrapped a second paw around him to join the first. He hugged him close.

‘Sometimes.’ Even the single word was hard to say, but he had to force it out. It was important. ‘There were a few times when I thought I might not be around for much longer. I was quiet. I pushed everyone else away, and I kept to myself. Nobody knew why. They just thought it was that weird blue fox being weird again. But if I ever did something, something I might regret, I didn’t want to hurt anyone else.’

‘So what stopped you?’ Allie asked him. ‘From doing something you might regret?’

Teal closed his eyes and smiled. ‘Well I had to show up all the naysayers, didn’t I?’ Allie laughed. ‘Wouldn’t be much of a blue fox if I couldn’t show them that blue foxes can do anything those pesky reds can, if not better. That, and my dad. Somebody has to look after him. He’s not the sort of fox you want to see alone.’ He went quiet at the thought.

‘So... I’m not a monster?’

‘No more than I am.’ Allie gently extricated himself from



Teal's grip. Turning where he sat, he ran the back of a wrist along his glistening nose and studied Teal's face closely.

'I don't think you're a monster,' he said, after a time.

'Then that makes two of us. You're not a monster either, Allie. You're not stupid, or weak, or selfish, or a coward, no matter what anyone says. You're just someone that had one too many bad days. That's all. I don't think I could've walked so far in your shoes. You're one of the bravest goats I know.'

Allie's cool blue eyes were inscrutable. For a moment, Teal was worried they were going to go grey on him. But then Allie looked up, and there they were, clearer than they'd ever been before. Tears streamed up the side of his face. In the light, it almost looked like they were glowing. 'Thank you.'

He ran at the blue fox with both arms wide. Once they were around his neck, Teal felt the rest of his body go limp, like a switch had been flicked. Relief washed over him like rain. 'Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you...'

'Hey, it's okay!' Before Teal knew it, he was crying too, and the two of them were wet cheek to wet cheek, laughing and sniffing and shivering without a care in the world. Intertwining in the air, their tears climbed higher and higher, silver and gold in the moonlight, until they stretched far over the mountaintops and beyond.

### *Mukizu*

'Ready to head back?'

Teal surveyed the land. They were only a few minutes south of the well, though Anzen was still a ways off. Behind them, the lofty grey mountains tickled the sky. 'I'd love to. I've just got some thinking to do first. Why don't you make a start?'

‘You sure?’

‘Yeah. I’ll be done before you know it.’

Allie gave him a hug before he took each of the cart handles in tow. ‘More tea for me,’ he called back with a grin.

‘Not if I’ve got anything to say about it!’ Teal laughed. He watched the diminutive figure weave his heavy cart between the hills, gradually fading into the landscape as the magpie’s words resounded in his ears. ‘You said you were going to do everything you could to fix the damage.’ Everything he could...

The moment Allie was out of sight, Teal turned tail and fled up the hill. Where it grew too steep, he flicked his claws out and gouged his way up. The same meadows he’d once ambled through with countless kiba-kiba shot by his head in a flash, but he had eyes only for Kanmon Mountain. All that mattered was that he get to the top before he could change his mind. ‘I’m sorry,’ he panted. ‘So, so, sorry. So, so...’

And then it was Lady Umeboshi in his ear, dressing him down as brusquely as if she was standing right there beside him. ‘Sorry, Shiro? Really? I think it’s time enough for sorry. Would that sorry could reseed my fields, layer brick back on brick and stack stone against stone. Anzen isn’t safe with you around. Didn’t you see my poor Sika being carried? Didn’t you see those legs sticking out from the cart...?’

Shiro clambered and groped, scrambled and begged his way up the mountainside. The surrounding rocks grew craggier, the grassy slopes more steep, until finally, he came to that familiar ridge. Breathless, he stepped over it, and suddenly there it was, gleaming before him in all its splendour. Light dappled it, refracting a million, million times in every drop. The Mukizu Waterfall was perfect in every way.

And it was frozen solid.

# Author's Note:

*'Thank you...'*

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

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

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

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

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

hydrated!