

SHI

Volume One:
The End Where It Begins

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– ACT THREE –

Ray

Chapter Seven:

'Rise and shine...'

Bedroom

'Rise and shine, sleepyhead! It's your father speaking.'

_____'s head poked up from his pillow. 'Wait, really?' The familiar voice laughed.

'Nope.'

And suddenly his bedroom walls were receding away, dissolving into unremitting pools of darkness. ____ held his paw out, but it turned white before his eyes, glowing as hot as the sun. It was no longer his paw, but it was even worse than that. He wasn't himself anymore. Something was missing, something so very important...

Floor

'Shiro? Hey, Shiro? Rise and shine, buddy.'

Shiro groaned, kneading his eyes with his knuckles. All of his back fur was standing on end, bristled against the blanket. Squinting in the low light, he reached over to pat it back down.

'Allie, is that you?'

'Afraid so.' The goat somehow sounded even more tired

than he did. ‘Sorry to wake you. You looked so peaceful. If you weren’t actually dreaming, you sure as hell fooled me. But yeah, I thought you might wanna be awake for this. Take it from someone who’s still never forgotten his first time.’

‘First time? First time doing what? What’s going on—?’

But Shiro was interrupted by a spine-chilling rattle. He sat bolt upright in his bed wrap. It came from above, a cold, dead clamour creepier than old bones clacking together in a sack, and crueller than an ailing animal’s final groping breaths before the end. It grew louder and louder, and before he knew what was going on, it was coming from everywhere all at once.

Rat-attat-attat-attat-attat! Rat-attat-attat-attat-attat!

Shiro folded his long ears in, pressing down on them firmly, but it could only do so much to block out the cacophony. ‘Aargh!’ he exclaimed, raising his voice above the din. ‘Pinch me if that’s not the most horrible thing I’ve heard all year!’

‘I’m not pinching you!’ Allie yelled back. The goat’s long, floppy white ears were scrunched up against his head like folds of toilet paper. ‘I’d have to lift my own hooves first!’

Shiro stared up at the rafters. The egg creature was squatting low on the beams, shuddering dramatically with all its fangs splayed out in full force. ‘Is that the kiba-kiba?’ It was almost unthinkable that such a racket could come from so small a creature.

‘No,’ Allie replied. ‘But it is all of them. They always do this in the morning, and always at the same time too. I guess that sort of makes them like Anzen’s roosters, only these hard-boiled toothy pineapples are much, much cuter.’

‘Yeah, well I don’t know many roosters that make a noise like death itself!’

Allie laughed. ‘Then I guess you’ve never lived on a farm. Trust me, an angry rooster is far, far worse than death itself!’

The noise came to a head just as abruptly as it started. Above them, the kiba-kiba flexed its fangs and gave a drowsy trill. Blinking its tiny eyes proudly, they watched it plant itself face-first in the warm straw, where its stubby limbs nestled themselves back within the safety of its shell. ‘I’d like to say you get used to it after a while, but you really don’t.’

Shiro shuddered, pulling his blanket even tighter around himself. ‘You don’t have to tell me.’

The blue fox took a moment to gather himself together. It was still too dark to call it morning; faint shafts of light were just barely beginning to peek in through the patchy holes in the roof. Linn and the wolf were nowhere to be seen, and the black cat remained buried somewhere within her linen cocoon. Shiro had never seen a more stubborn sleeper before in his life. Part of him had to wonder whether she was actually asleep, or if it was only pride keeping her underneath the covers. He suspected the latter, but he wouldn’t have been surprised at the former either. He wished he could sleep like a cat.

‘You know, I used to live near a train station,’ he mused to himself. ‘Lower Prospects Central. The racket it made in the mornings was something awful, especially at the weekend. I could never get more than a few hours’ sleep before I had to get up for work.’

‘That sounds terrible.’

‘Mmm...’

‘Morning, all!’

Shiro nodded thoughtfully as the jangling of Linn’s walking stick drew near. ‘I never thought I’d miss it.’

Fireplace

‘That’s it, easy does it now. You’ll want a nice, hearty cup of tea to start the day off right. Just look at that gorgeous plume of blue steam...’

‘Quit hogging the pot already!’

‘Give the poor fox a chance, Sinn. Not everybody has as many years of practise pouring upside-down as you do. The intricacies can be quite a lot to wrap one’s head around. We must all start somewhere. A master, after all, is only a student that never let their failures deter them.’

‘Yeah, Sinn, give it a rest already. You’re acting like he doesn’t even know how to breathe.’

‘Doesn’t know how to breathe? No, it’s far, far worse than that. It doesn’t matter what uncultured little rock your vulpine pal crawled out from under. He’s in Sakurai now, my country, where the tea flows like water, the gods confer their favour, and our sacred traditions hold the world together. I’d sooner forget how to breathe than how to properly prepare a cup.’

The bedraggled black cat glowered from behind her white camellia comb. She teased the long teeth through the same patch of fur over and over again, until it was gleaming. ‘I don’t see how much help he’s going to be around the inn if he can’t even pour tea correctly.’

Linn sighed. ‘I dare say you’d be right,’ the old badger said, ‘although I hope you’d agree that you’re also making my point for me. Shiro, you’re doing just fine.’ Allie nodded in bleary-eyed agreement, nursing his own small cup between two heavy hooves. He seemed to come alive more with every sip. ‘If any guests at the Chiri Inn require tea, you serve it to them just like that. Just remember that it isn’t a race, and tilting the teacup slightly can help you tell exactly when you need to stop. I know it’s not easy at first, but I promise it’ll be second nature before you know it.’

‘Thanks. I hope so,’ Shiro sniffed. He was still unsure about the badger’s seemingly endless supply of enthusiasm, but he’d accept encouragement over another lecture from Sinn any day. Replacing the kettle back onto its hook over the fireplace, the fox raised his steaming teacup for a satisfying victory sip. Without a single drop spilled, it was at least better than last time. Well, the last two times. He glanced up at the rafters guiltily. The Chiri Inn ceiling didn’t know just how lucky it had it.

‘And while we’re talking about service, I suppose I may as well show you the ropes. I do hope they still say that these days. The ropes?’ The old monk levered himself up with his jangling staff. He went slowly around the inn, gesturing to variously weathered chests, cabinets, compartments and cubby-holes in turn. ‘If you ever need them, the blankets and spare bed wraps are all in here, along with the towels, which the guests should receive warm every morning. This is where the used linen and uniforms go, and this special little chest right here is the most precious of them all.’

Linn drew back the sliding doors with glee. There were bowls, muddling brushes, stacks of ceramic teacups and drawers brimming with fragrant spices. At the very back of the chest, there sat a miniature wooden hourglass. A small portion of glowing blue liquid rested at the very top.

‘This is the only place to go for anything tea,’ he said. ‘Chiri Inn’s own blend is a closely guarded secret, as all good recipes should be, but I can tell you that the ratio of water to ethre is sixteen parts to one. The rest, you’ll just have to figure out for yourself. But feel free to use any of the equipment in here along the way. Back when the other villages were still around, Anzen was home to some of the most prestigious and experimental tea blenders in all the spirit

world. It was a wonderful time in Anzen's history, though anywhere the seeds of renown are sewn, jealousy will surely sprout.

'Soon enough, rumours began to spread that villagers from Anzen were the only animals that retained not only their sense of smell after arriving here, but also their sense of taste. As a matter of pride, the artisans of Anzen refused to dismiss them out of hand. So far and wide were these rumours that they eventually divided the villages altogether, and almost led to civil war in one of the darkest days ever recorded in Anzen's own archives. If not for those brave, brave foxes...'

Partway through the thought, the badger seemed to catch himself. 'But here's me rambling,' he laughed. 'What an awfully roundabout way of saying that we here in Sakurai really do love our tea! Anzen is home to a whopping 531 unique tea blends you know, the tastiness of which I can personally attest to. So whether your palate yearns for toasted rice, barley, kelp, something sweeter or just plain old good tea, a little experimentation will surely find the right one for you. If there aren't any fresh teacups available, it's likely Sinn hasn't been washing hers up again.'

Allie spat a great blue mouthful of tea up into the air. The tip of Sinn's long tail twitched behind her. Her tail pouch threatened to slip off the end. 'And if there are bits of broken crockery all over the floor,' she said, dragging her comb savagely down her neck, 'it's likely the goat was trying to wash up his.'

'Hey!'

She topped up her cup and took a cool sip, making a point to avoid Allie's teacup with the kettle. 'Where's the lie, hooper?' she smirked.

'I dunno. But then you'd know all about lies, wouldn't you,

“mouser”?) the goat riposted. Shiro was surprised to see Sinn so wounded at the jab. As far as comebacks were concerned, he hadn't heard much tamer than ‘liar, liar!’

The badger was similarly unimpressed at the level of pettiness on display. ‘Restlessness makes monsters of the mildest of us,’ he gently chided them. ‘Would that we had the time to sit here and poke holes at each other all day long. Alas, another time perhaps. For now, you should all be readying yourselves for a long road to restoration. Consider your work temporarily suspended until Anzen's fully recovered from the attack. Lady Umeboshi will doubtless have duties laid out for everyone, just like last time. Luckily for you, the Ku Shrine's not far.’

‘Duties?’ Shiro said.

‘Last time?’ Allie said.

‘Everyone?’ Sinn said. Her paw froze mid-comb. Her expression simply demanded that Linn answer her first, and to Shiro's surprise, the badger obliged.

‘I believe so.’

The black cat's inscrutable green eyes narrowed. ‘But you said you. Not we.’

‘Did I?’ The badger patted the greying fur at the back of his head and chuckled. ‘Ah, the foibles of old age. You youngsters will pick us up on anything. Which reminds me, has anybody seen my ring?’

He banged his wooden staff twice against the mat. The brass rings all jangled together. There were three rings hanging from the right half of the bisected circle at the top, but only two on the left. ‘A shakujo just isn't a shakujo without its rings, you know. Anyone? It should be thin, made of brass, not especially large... round.’

But they shook their heads. ‘Ah well. Do let me know if

you see it lying around. You'll make an old badger very happy. A walking stick with only five-sixths of its jingle is a very sorry sight, and an even sorrier sound.' He padded over to the window, where he cupped his striped eyes between the slats and abruptly fell to silence.

'Sometimes I wonder if he's missing more than just his jingle,' Allie whispered to Shiro. Shiro did his best not to laugh.

'Allie...'

'He's always looking for his missing ring. He'll never find it though. I reckon he lost it for good a few decades ago, and he just doesn't have the heart to admit it.' Linn turned around, and Allie shot back into place by the fire.

'Who's ready to get going then? That magnificent peach sky tells me there's still time, but it never hurts to be prepared.'

Sinn gave a stretch, showing off just how far her jagged metal claw guards extended. Shiro suspected that the real claws underneath were rather less impressive, if her hind paws were anything to go by. Everything about Sinn seemed to be narrow, precise and considered. 'Five more minutes to put my armour on, and I'll be there to pick up Lady Umeboshi's lousy laundry list.'

'Wonderful! Allie and Shiro?'

The goat groaned. 'Not yet.' His hoof groped at his neck for something, and when he realised it wasn't there, he looked down in disappointment. Shiro suspected that it was the straw hat he was looking for. Allie didn't have many possessions to call his own, but there was a conspicuously bare hook at the foot of his bed wrap. If he hadn't gone and knocked it off the poor goat's head, it might still be with him. Instead, it was ashes. 'I'm gonna need at least one more cup of tea. Or ten.'

Yeah, on second thought, make it ten.’

‘You can take mine,’ Shiro said, proffering his half-empty teacup. ‘Please, have it. I’m ready whenever.’

Sinn stared at him in disbelief. After trying several times to speak, gesticulating with her paw, the black cat gave up and placed her comb down. ‘You know you can’t go out like that, right? You’re going to get stared at.’

Shiro shrugged. ‘Then let them stare,’ he muttered. It was nothing new.

Linn stroked the grey whiskers on his chin. ‘Unfortunately, Sinn’s right. You’d be far too conspicuous in your current attire, fashionable though it no doubt was. Give me a moment, and I’ll see if I can’t dig out something more appropriate. After all, what else is a badger for if not a good dig?’

Shiro blinked. ‘Oh. Sorry. I thought you meant it was because I was blue.’

The old monk laughed and patted him on the shoulder. ‘Shiro, you’re in the spirit world now. The land of dragons, talking fires and wandering rivers. Foreigners and vagabonds stick out more here than a blue fox ever could. Now if you don’t mind taking off that tattered old jacket, let’s see here...’ He opened one of the nearby trunks and began flinging articles of clothing around the room. ‘If I remember correctly, there should be a uniform befitting of a vulpine around here somewhere.’

‘Wait, there’s a uniform?’ It was news to Shiro. ‘If the Chiri Inn has a uniform, why is nobody else wearing it?’

Sinn found the question amusing enough to furnish the fox with an answer. ‘Do you really think a monk is the right stripe of badger to indulge in something as material as a uniform? Look at him. He doesn’t even wear shoes.’

‘And what about you two?’

She laughed. ‘You think he could make us?’

‘I tried,’ Allie groaned. ‘They didn’t have one in my size.’

‘To be fair, I didn’t know they made goats that small either,’ Sinn said. If not for the paw already trained on the throwing knives strapped to her ankle, Shiro was sure Allie would have lunged for her.

‘Ah, found it!’ the old badger declared. Unfortunately, nobody seemed to be paying the slightest bit of attention to him anymore. If Allie had been a bull, Shiro was certain smoke would have been streaming from his nostrils.

‘Funny.’ Save for a quivering lip, the young goat’s face was a stone slab. ‘You know, it’s weird. I’ve met cats here, and I’ve met cats there, and I’ve met cats just about everywhere, but they always seem to have this one thing in common. You know what they all love more than anything else in the world?’

‘Fish!’

The room fell to silence as the voice reverberated from outside. Shiro recognised that voice. But he never expected to hear it so... happy. If not for the husky rasp that made it sound like the result of a decade’s worth of gravel gargling, he may even have dared to call it musical. ‘Snapper and salmon and octopus legs, herring, squid, eel and sweet yellowfin eggs!’ The front door slammed open, and the Chiri Inn was immediately assailed with the salty smell of the sea.

Kapp was soaked to the bone, naked save for a loincloth and a wooden mask hanging loosely from his neck by a string. The wolf was carrying an enormous swordfish between his fangs, something he looked immensely pleased about. He tried repeatedly to get it through the doorway to no avail, until finally he gave up, took a step back and angled his head. Everybody shot up from the fireplace. They barely had time to

scramble away before he charged in swordfish head first, his arms overflowing with freshly caught fish.

The point of the swordfish drove straight through the back wall, but the great wolf wasn't phased in the slightest. Bizarrely, it seemed to be his intention all along. He levered another two swordfish from the mountains of raw seafood in his paws and stuck them through the wall in descending order of size, before he turned around and loaded the rest of his catch onto the floor before them.

'Fish!' Kapp announced once again, panting away. The wet wolf stood there with his arms spread wide and gave his speechless—and fortuitously unimpaled—audience a sweeping bow. If there was any confusion in his shining eyes, it was only that he didn't appear to understand why they weren't quite as enthralled by the presentation as he was.

Communal Area

'Eat, eat!'

The wolf was as generous with his encouragement as he was with his harvest, pausing only to brush yet another paw's worth of shimmering scales from his knotted beard. But they did no such thing. Allie, Shiro and Sinn were rapt. They knelt a safe distance from the voracious wolf and watched as he slurped, sucked, sliced, crunched and cracked his way through the veritable ocean on the Chiri Inn floor, tossing aside empty crab carapaces and oyster shells as he went. He didn't look like he needed much in the way of help. His enormous tail practically swept the mat behind him.

'He's like a Hoover,' Allie said. The inn's resident herbivore had both hooves pressed to his nose to block out the powerful aroma. It didn't look to be working very well.

'He's like a black hole,' Shiro said.

‘I don’t know what either of those things are, but you’re both right,’ Sinn said. For the moment, the three Chiri Inn workers had forgotten all past indiscretions, brought together by mutual amazement. ‘I’m trying to bring myself to look away, but I just... can’t.’

Linn was quietly watching from the far side of the room. Unlike the others, the old monk was far from impressed, holding his gnarled walking stick close to his chest. ‘What exactly do you think you’re doing with all of this fish, sir?’ he asked him patiently, gesturing with the butt of the staff.

For a moment, the great wolf’s face soured. ‘Eating,’ he grunted. He shifted uncomfortably where he sat and hid his snout behind a teetering wall of crustaceans. The more the badger spoke, the more emphatically the wolf’s yellow fangs chomped away.

‘I believe we’re both fully aware of what I’m asking, Kapp. There’s no wildlife to be found this side of the pond, and even the most learned Shrine Keepers would be hard-pressed to conjure a fish out of thin air. So where you have been?’ Linn’s paw reached out to the mask around Kapp’s neck, but the wolf span it around to the back before Shiro could get a closer look at it.

‘Hunting,’ came the reply. ‘What hunters do.’ Accompanying the retort was a grin as broad and proud as any Shiro had ever seen, as the wolf dug back into his feast with renewed gusto. His tail pounded the ground behind him. Eating seemed to have found its savour once more. ‘Monks monk,’ Kapp said simply. ‘Hunters hunt.’

He plucked a swordfish from the wall to demonstrate, using its bill to crudely fillet one of the common soles. As bits of bone flew into the air, both the swordfish and the soles’ dead, glassy eyes stared out at them like a desperate plea for

help. Allie looked like he was just about ready to faint.

Linn shielded his eyes from the chunks of fish raining down. ‘Oh dear,’ he sighed. ‘In the name of all that’s scaled and holy, would we not have been better equipped to appreciate your... bountiful generosity outside? The floor is quite literally swimming with fish.’

‘Yes, yes, enough for everyone!’ Kapp was quick to remind them, inhaling a slew of inch-thick octopus legs like spaghetti. ‘Even you.’ He pointed the bill of the swordfish at Shiro. Much to Shiro’s relief, the wolf didn’t immediately run him through the heart with it. Instead, he proffered one of the giant crabs like a kind of peace offering. The mighty claws clacked together, its glistening legs rattling about as he gave it a hearty shake. ‘Eat.’

Shiro laughed nervously. He wasn’t going to pretend that the smell wasn’t enticing. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten something, and he was a huge fan of seafood on the rare occasions he and his father could afford it. On the other hand, the claws alone were the size of his head, and besides, he still wasn’t so sure about the logistics of eating in the afterlife. ‘Thank you, I’m honoured. Maybe later...’

But the great wolf wasn’t asking him. ‘Pup insults hunters, pup beds down hungry. Pup insults head hunter, the pup is next in the pot,’ he warned. ‘Eat, eat!’

Shiro looked to Linn for help, but the old monk only shrugged. ‘It won’t kill you,’ he eventually offered the fox. It was enough. He reached out and grasped the nearest claw with both paws. It was slipperier than he expected, but once he had something resembling a decent grip, the wolf wrenched the giant crab back quick as a flash. With a visceral crack, the claw came clean off. The wolf nodded, pleased. It was like they’d broken a wishbone together. Still holding his

nose, Allie tiptoed over and made a tentative pinch at one of the legs.

‘Well, well, this is all fine and dandy.’ Sinn was less than impressed. She watched it all from the sidelines, her arms folded and her tail carefully curled around her waist. ‘But where are those deathly stares from yesterday? All that stuff about drowning in the sea? I’m not going to say I was praying for a fight, because we all know how that would’ve turned out, but it would’ve at least been more entertaining than pretending everything’s as sweet as mochi when it’s not.’

‘Survived the night, not a threat,’ Kapp glibly replied. He dug a pale bone out from between his fangs and casually flicked it away. ‘Weeds don’t choose their roots. Tiller does though. Something will uproot it soon. Stray firework, maybe. Then, it will be gone.’

‘All residents of the Chiri Inn are entitled to stay precisely as long as they need to,’ the old badger reminded them. His tone remained as cordial as ever, but Shiro could have sworn the dusty lenses were gleaming as he adjusted his pince-nez. ‘And just for future reference, he is a fox and his name is Shiro, just as Linn is mine, and Kapp is yours.’

The wolf ground the other crab claw into powder beneath his pads. ‘Didn’t ask,’ he muttered, picking through remnants of shell to find the soft, pale flesh within. ‘Don’t especially care.’

‘Are you sure?’ Sinn interjected. ‘It seemed like you cared a whole lot last night. Some might even say you looked a little... nervous?’ Kapp suddenly burst out laughing. ‘Well I think you did—’

But the wolf’s uproarious laughter continued. Before long, he was pounding his swordfish against the floor like a club. Shiro felt the thin walls of the Chiri Inn shaking around them.

‘Scared of a pup!’ he repeated to himself, louder and louder. ‘Scared of a pup! Scared of a pup!’ Bits of half-chewed fish flew across the room as the giant bellowed his mirth for all to hear, showering everything in saltwater. He howled like a storm, his gruff voice only growing steadily gruffer, but still he carried on, either unable or unwilling to stop amid Sinn’s repeated failed interjections.

Eventually, the black cat gave up altogether. She picked up her folded armour, with the white camellia comb laid neatly on top, and left the room to change. Though his mood seemed as wild and uncontrollable as the weather, the wolf’s eyes seemed to soften somewhat as he watched her go. He would leave to check on her more than once before they departed for the Ku Shrine.

It was only when the patterned screen door closed behind her that the laughter relented. Kapp shook his head, running his claws through the back of his dripping furry mane. His gaze gradually settled on Shiro. ‘Wolves fear nothing,’ he told the fox. He snorted and spat out an entire backbone. Slime oozed between the vertebrae. ‘Eat your crab.’

‘Would you mind if I cooked it over the fire first?’

‘Eat!’

Shiro didn’t need to be told twice. He raised the heavy claw to his nose and gave it a quick sniff. It certainly smelled like crab. It was so fresh, he wouldn’t have been surprised to hear the ocean if he pressed it up to his ear. That was something to hold onto as he fished out a hunk of raw, wibbling flesh from the end. Of all the words to describe the unique texture, gelatinous was the one that most came to mind. Appetising, unsurprisingly, was among the least.

If his mother had been presented with a giant crab claw, she’d have known exactly what to do. She would have

whipped up her signature crab salad in no time, along with the most amazing pineapple and coconut vinaigrette. He'd never actually tried it himself, of course. He'd been far too young at the time, but it was something his father still pined for on occasion in the evenings. The old tod was no stranger to cooking, but it was the one thing he could still never get quite right.

Shiro had promised him that they'd perfect the recipe together. There weren't many days that crab salad recipes hadn't occupied at least one tab on his laptop browser, but he supposed that was all behind him now. Just one more leaf in the endless trail of broken promises he'd left in his wake...

'Now you might want to prepare yourself,' Linn was polite enough to warn him, as the blue fox closed his eyes and prepared to bite the bullet. 'Far from what you'd expect, food in this world is actually rather notorious for tasting like—'

'Bleurgh!' Shiro spat it straight back out, frantically clawing away at his tongue. 'Dirt and ashes and grime and sawdust and old half-chewed cigarette butts!'

'Ah.' The old monk scratched the back of his head. 'And here I was going to say absolutely nothing at all.'

Linn dug a paw into the hood of his robe. After much rummaging, he managed to produce an assortment of colourful star-shaped candies, which he offered the grateful fox in his time of need. Somehow, they managed to taste just as dreadful, but Linn's face didn't change at all as he popped one in his cheeks and gave it a good crunch. It was the same with the handful of hay that he plucked from one of the stacks by the back door. Shiro was shocked to see the badger casually chewing on it like a herbivore. He swallowed it down like it was nothing.

'If you think that's impressive, I only wish you'd been

around to witness the insatiable Kiga. He was as polite and soft spoken as they come, no larger than the average tiger, and yet entire crowds would gather in the evenings to watch him take a set of chopsticks to a restaurant. And I mean that quite literally; timber and stone went down just as easily as the dishes, along with the dishes themselves, naturally.

‘Spirits have absolutely no sense of taste, you see,’ he explained. ‘And don’t say that makes sense looking at me! Still, your reaction is very curious. Without the need, eating is usually a rather humdrum affair. Most of us that still partake only do so out of habit, or some slavish adherence to tradition.’

The badger glanced at Kapp, who snapped off the swordfish bill and effortlessly skewered a dozen or so of the plumpest salmon. ‘Perhaps the taste of food is still strong in your memory. One thing’s for certain, Shiro. I don’t believe you’re going to be taking a second bite of that crab.’ At the risk of attracting the great wolf’s ire, Shiro nodded.

He was surprised, then, to see Kapp’s tail stop wagging. The wolf seemed genuinely forlorn for the split second before he caught himself, and the spark reignited in his eyes. ‘Good,’ he growled, brandishing a grin that bared his fearsome fangs for all to see. ‘More for me.’

The giant stomped up to them, leaving a trail of splinters and claw prints in his wake. And yet his paw was surprisingly gentle as he reached over Shiro’s head, careful not to touch the fox directly, and pinched the hefty claw between two similarly sized yellow claws of his own. A moment later, there was a great crunch as he impaled it on his improvised skewer, mottled shell and all.

‘Wolves do not waste,’ he said gravely. ‘Forbidden by the gods.’ He bent down, picked up the morsel Shiro had just spat

out, and gulped it down in one. It didn't even touch the sides. 'Wasted things return in the judgement. Leave a bite of crab claw, the crab will be back to take bites out of you. Sea of wasted claws, sea of hungry crabs. Not so funny then. Understand?'

Chirp! Even the wolf was startled at the interruption. They all turned in the direction of the sound.

Somehow, the goat had managed to sneak all the way up one of the ladders without anybody noticing. He was straining to reach the rafters where the kiba-kiba was perched, staring down at him with two inquisitive black dots for eyes. One of the giant crab legs extended from Allie's hoof, prodding the straw around the creature's own stubby appendages. 'Come on Sir Snoozalot,' he muttered. 'Almost there. You'll like it this time, I promise. There's got to be something in this world you'll eat...'

He didn't seem to be aware that the rest of the room was watching him. The old badger heaved a sigh. 'Allie?' he said.

'Ah!' The goat only just caught himself in time. Barely hanging on by the crook of his arm, his horn head-butted the wall, and within the wall it stayed. His hind hooves kicked the air underneath him. 'What? Yes? What? Yes? What?'

Linn sighed. He shuffled underneath, ready to break the fall with his own body if needs be. Allie was fortunate that the badger's stout eight feet would have made for a very short drop. Unsurprisingly, the wolf that could have plucked him straight out of the air hadn't moved an inch. In fact, he appeared to be actively relishing the display, peeling and chewing prawns like popcorn. Something told Shiro that if Sinn hadn't stormed off, she'd be joining him.

'Pray tell me what the kiba-kiba are,' the monk called up to him. 'When you've found your feet, of course.'

Thankfully, Allie managed to hoist himself back up. After a little wrangling, the horn popped right out, although it left a terribly unsightly gash in the wood. He rubbed the horn gingerly at the base. If he was afraid of repercussions, it showed considerably less than his sheer relief at not having lost the other horn too. ‘The kiba-kibas...’ he began, pausing to catch his breath. ‘Ancient and mysterious guardians that watch over the spirit world?’ Linn nodded.

‘And what don’t we do with ancient and mysterious guardians that watch over the spirit world?’

Allie sighed. ‘Feed them crab.’

‘That’s right. After all, immortal spirits aren’t supposed to eat food in the first place. They never required sustenance like we did...’ But no sooner had Linn spoken than the kiba-kiba lunged forwards, nabbing the crab leg that had been lying idly in the straw. They watched in morbid fascination as it sucked up the leg with all the merciless precision of a paper shredder, its body of juddering fangs slowly devouring it whole, shell and all.

When it was over, the tiny creature trilled and waved its arms about like a kind of victory dance. The room was left in something of a stunned silence. ‘Knew that thing was evil,’ Shiro heard Kapp whisper to himself. The wolf’s hackles gained him at least an extra foot in height, not that he of all animals needed it.

‘Well I’ll be alive,’ Linn chuckled. ‘You really are never too old to learn something new. At any rate, Shiro, your new clothes are here when you need them. I suppose this would be an excellent time to make a move.’ There were no mirrors. Animals in the spirit world had no reflection in water, ceramics or mortal glass, but Linn lent Shiro his very own Ishikoridome mirror shard with which to comb his whiskers.

‘Yup!’ Allie called down. ‘Just make sure mouser’s ready to go first. Or not. On second thought, forget I said anything. Get that uniform on before she notices, Shiro, and you can have my tea rations for a week. Scratch that, a month!’ He disembarked from the ladder with all the grace of a fledging pigeon, and went to pull his trainers on. ‘Kapp, you coming?’

The great wolf was busy gathering his leftover fish together. ‘Coming?’ he rumbled. He made a fist with his right paw and thumped his breast four times. ‘Try to stop me.’ Allie laughed, but the wolf’s burning eyes never left the ceiling.

Anzen Thoroughfare

‘So how does it feel?’

‘Not bad, thanks. A little baggy in a few places, maybe. Why, what does it look like?’

‘Oh, fine, fine. It looks fine.’

‘Allie...’

The goat looked away, concealing a sheepish grin. ‘A little baggy,’ he agreed.

Shiro was still adjusting to his new uniform on the way to the Ku Shrine. The Chiri Inn’s sole five residents had just joined the Anzen Thoroughfare, a broad road that wound throughout the village, starting at the iron doors and continuing all the way up to the foot of Shoganai Tower. Allie had shot ahead almost immediately, with Kapp bringing up the rear and Linn acting, as ever, as the mediator. Shiro wanted to talk to him, but the badger waved him on to keep Allie company. He hadn’t thought about his mother since he first arrived. There were questions that needed answering.

Sinn smouldered in silence, perched as she was atop the wolf’s broad shoulder. Twelve feet off the ground, she didn’t look entirely unlike the pirate monkeys of yore, not that Shiro

would ever have dared utter it to her face. Occasionally, she'd turn and mutter some dry observation or other into one of Kapp's large ears, which never failed to elicit a guttural chuckle from within the depths of his chest. Shiro had no idea what the wolf had said to convince her to come, only the time it had taken him. Something told him he wouldn't have had as much patience with Allie.

Even with all her armour and equipment, the wolf barely seemed to feel her on his shoulder at all. 'Puckenbones,' he affectionately called her when she first hopped up, light as a feather. Shiro hadn't heard the word since secondary school. Puckens. The thin-boned flightless birds had been extinct since the Middle Ages, though there were no illustrations on record. The historian in him wondered what agricultural insight Kapp might possess, if only the wolf didn't despise his very existence so.

But then what did the historian in him know anyway? That guy never planned for him having to contend with the worst shoes ever created. Of all the aspects of his uniform Shiro was still getting used to, it was the shoes he was having the most trouble with. What was the point of incorporeality anyway, if one still had to suffer the likes of uncomfortable footwear?

Waraji was something he was very familiar with from his studies, albeit something he never dreamed he'd have to suffer himself. Each one was woven from straw rope, a paltry thin sole secured around his ankles with straw braided as fine as twine, and they were just about the most cruelly uncomfortable way to travel animals had yet devised that didn't involve a bed of nails.

Every step was a battle. They stuck in the mud, did nothing to protect his pads from the elements, and the straw itself itched like a politician on election day. It was bad enough that

having anything around his ankles reminded him of his time bobbing above the iron buckets, a few scant lengths of rope away from oblivion. No wonder Allie decided to stick with his trainers. Industrialisation had been a boon to anybody with feet.

But beggars couldn't be choosers, and without a single possession to his name, he realised he didn't know what else to call himself. Even the proverbial shirt on his back wasn't his. For Shiro, there was nowhere to go but up. He hoped that wherever 'up' was, they had some better shoes.

Thankfully, the rest of the uniform was a dream by comparison. Leaving his treasured jacket behind had been the hard part, but even he eventually agreed that it had to go, scuffed and filthy as it was. Its replacement, a textured navy blue kimono with a golden trim, was rather loose around the waist, but that was nothing a little tightening of the sash couldn't fix. He was a big fan of the two golden pockets at the front, inside which his paws could rest comfortably as they walked. They were good deep pockets, with the lining segmented into sections for personal effects like chopsticks and coins, as well as for cleaning rags and the like.

As always, the red ribbon remained wrapped around his left sleeve. His paw crept up to it every now and then, just to check that it was still there. It was such a trivial thing, and yet he didn't know where he'd be without it. He made sure to tighten it for the umpteenth time before moving on to the sash around his waist.

'How's this?' Shiro asked the goat. He pulled it tighter and tighter, until it started to more closely resemble a tourniquet. Traditional inn greeters in Sakurai would have been expected to have even thinner waists, all the better to entice, and occasionally drag, unsuspecting travellers into their

establishments for the night.

Allie covered his eyes. ‘Looks about as comfortable as those old corsets they used to make does wear,’ he bleated.

‘Nah, it’s fine.’ Shiro took a deep breath and tied it off. The spare material around the waist was more pronounced than ever. ‘It’s way more comfortable than my other uniform, and I didn’t even have to pay for this one. You know, you’re lucky to have a badger like Linn around. He really, really seems to cares about you lot. Not everybody’s as kind, or has as much of a clue about what they’re doing.’

At that, the goat raised a sceptical eyebrow, but Shiro was adamant. ‘You’ll just have to trust me on this one. You can do a damn sight worse than having a wizard for a boss. And he got my hat size just right.’

He wasn’t lying. Shiro could barely feel the cloth hat, which sat so lightly atop his head like an empty upturned bowl, tied under his chin with a string and proudly displaying the Chiri Inn insignia. It fit him better than the O-Bun Sesame employee caps ever had; the ear holes felt like they’d been cut specifically for his ears. But that wasn’t what he was most pleased about.

‘You have no idea how good it feels to be able to move my tail in this thing!’ As if his tail wagging a whirlwind behind him hadn’t make it abundantly obviously. If it were possible to wag your own tail off, Shiro would have been in serious trouble, and there was no sign of him stopping anytime soon. There were no back straps. There were no back straps at all!

Something Shiro said managed to pique Sinn’s curiosity. After a moment of deliberation, the black cat leapt from Kapp’s shoulder, alighting upon the road like a leaf in the wind. Shiro didn’t even know she was there until he felt her breath tickling the fur at the nape of his neck. ‘Your tail?’ she

asked him. His tail jumped like it just had a thousand volts put through it.

‘My what?’ he exclaimed.

‘Your tail,’ she said, strolling alongside him. Her own slender tail twitched involuntarily behind her. ‘What about your tail? You said you could move it.’

He flushed. ‘Oh, that. It’s nothing, really. I was very lucky to have grown up when and where I did. Ignore me. I’m just complaining for complaining’s sake.’

‘No, I want to hear it.’

Shiro shrugged. They weren’t going anywhere fast. ‘Where I come from, most animals have to have their tails fastened up at work.’

Sinn’s pink, whiskerless nose wrinkled up. She seemed more confused than anything. ‘Even birds?’ she asked.

‘Pretty much, except they band those instead. If they’re not already clipped or nubbed, that is. Stops them from injuring themselves, contaminating food, that sort of thing. It’s the same at school, although at least that’s only in the classroom.’

‘I remember that.’ Allie shuddered. For a moment, the goat seemed to forget the rules about speaking of the past. ‘They never let you take your wrap off, not even during lunch. There was this one rebellious roo at primary school, the cool kid, who always refused to put his on because his tail kept going numb. Well it ended up pretty numb anyway, because that’s exactly where he got fifty lashes with the metre stick every day.’

‘That’s terrible! Kangaroos aren’t even supposed to wear tail wraps. It warps their spine.’

‘Yeah, well I think he knew that at the time.’

Sinn cleared her throat like there was a family of hawkfrogs nesting in it. The two animals looked up. ‘You two

should thank the gods you ended up here,’ she said. ‘Because it sounds like you came straight from the pits of the pits themselves. I wouldn’t believe either of you if the hooper could lie to save his life, and if you didn’t consider yourself too high and mighty for that sort of thing. I’ve never been more proud to be Sakuranese in all my death. In these parts, there are only three stripes of animal that would even dream of strapping their tails—their own limbs, counterbalances and fighting aids—to their backs, let alone take a blade to them. Invalids afflicted with tail rot, shinobi, and monks whose sole purpose in existence is reminding you how terribly interesting their suffering is.’

‘But you’ve got straps yourself.’ Allie was quick to point it out, gesturing to the open straps running up her back.

‘Really? Huh. Well how about that?’ There was a curious glimmer to the cat’s green eyes. ‘If you want to butt heads, hooper, I’m all for it, but I’d advise you to take a long, hard look at yourself first. You’re at least a good horn short.’

‘Alright, that’s enough!’ This time, Shiro had to hold the goat back from her. Sinn didn’t appear phased in the slightest, though that didn’t stop her fingers from surreptitiously curling around the metal claw hanging from her belt.

‘Is it now?’ she said. ‘What’s he gonna do? Faint on me?’

‘Look, I know I’m new around here. There’s a lot about this world that I’ve yet to learn, but I’m not an idiot. I’ve seen enough of this to know that it helps no one. Why can’t you just leave the poor guy alone in peace? He’s no threat to you. How does his missing horn harm you in any way?’ Allie’s hoof rose to his head, as if to cover the stump.

‘How do my words harm you in any way?’ the black cat calmly riposted. One of the plasters on Shiro’s paw cracked. He had to remind himself that there was no blood coursing

through his veins, because he was pretty sure he could feel it beginning to bubble.

‘Your words harm everybody,’ he said. ‘Helping to create a world where animals feel ashamed to look the way they look harms everybody.’

‘Are you quite done yet?’

‘Depends. Are you?’

Sinn’s tail was taut. Her fingers slipped from the metal hook as she crossed her arms, impatience written plain as day across her face. But still she listened. Allie was so surprised, his mouth fell open. He seemed to forget how outraged he was supposed to be.

‘Pecking away at someone’s insecurities doesn’t make them better, and it doesn’t make you intelligent or astute. It just makes you a vulture, waiting until you’ve rotten their confidence away and then consuming it, piece by piece. But just like carrion, it’s tainted, which is why you have to keep doing it. You want it to fill you up, but the rot just makes you feel even emptier. If this was really about being different, you’d have come after me. I’m twice the target he is, but then maybe that’s why you haven’t said a word about it since we first met.

‘Now I don’t know how rough you’ve had it, but I do know my history. Regardless of what period you grew up in, I’ll wager it wasn’t easy. I’m happy to help you work through whatever baggage you’re dealing with, I really am, but we have to start somewhere. Nobody can help the way they look, Sinn.’

‘But that’s just the thing,’ she said. ‘They can. He doesn’t have to look like that, any more than you have to look the way you do. Deformity isn’t the disease, but damn me to all eight hells if there isn’t a better symptom. In the land of the gods,

imperfection is a choice. It's not my fault if a hooper like him isn't smart enough to make a better one.'

'A choice? What exactly do you expect him to do? Turn back time and un-break it?'

Sinn sighed. 'You know, Shiro, for all your bluster, you were right about one thing. You really don't understand much about this world at all. At any rate, it appears we've reached the line. When you actually know what it is you're talking about, I'd be more than happy to draw out a nice, long apology over tea.'

'If I'm wrong, I'll apologise,' Shiro vowed. 'But don't hold your breath over it.'

'Or do,' Allie whispered with shaded eyes. Shiro shushed him, and the three of them made their way to the back of the queue as Linn and Kapp came up to meet them.

Sinn was quick to flick up her crimson hood. Something told Shiro she wasn't exactly the patient type. 'Kannon's mercy,' she cursed, 'this is interminable.' No surprises there. 'One thing they don't warn you about death – the sheer amount of damned waiting involved. We'll all be looking like Linn by the time this line is through!' Linn seemed pleased more than anything at her remark.

'You should be so lucky.' The monk patted his plump belly and smiled. Kapp grunted; he didn't look like he'd heard a word from either of them. The wolf had left a long trail of nibbled fish bones in his wake. All that remained, a club of a swordfish with great hunks taken out of it, he cradled in his arms, as tenderly as a newborn and as ravenously as a fresh ear of corn. Judging from the fish's expression, it was as excited for the wait as the rest of them.

Line

It was a long and strikingly uniform line of villagers, stretching all the way down the thoroughfare, over the red bridge and into the Main District proper, where the Ku Shrine was presumably waiting for them. That was Shiro's guess anyway. The shrine itself was so far away, he had yet to see it for himself. There was much talk about Lady Umeboshi, not the least of which came from a surprisingly socialite badger monk, but Shiro only managed to catch brief snippets of chatter between animals that were otherwise pretending, often quite poorly, to keep to themselves.

'You know, I heard the Lady of the Tower is going to be there herself.'

'The what?'

'The Lady of the Tower?'

'Ah, yes, I heard that too. How exciting! I heard she was even going to have her Shrine Keepers with her.'

'Then you're as deaf in death as you were in life.'

'What?'

'Umeboshi wouldn't waste her time with the likes of us. Not with that demon still lurkin' around outside the walls. What was it, Spurn?'

'Scorn.'

'Same difference.'

'Not meaning to boast, but my cousin spoke to Lady Umeboshi a week before he went up. Didn't summon me over to give me no great advice or nothing. I just wanna know what in eight hells she told him. It'll have been three centuries by the next full moon. You'd think a vole could catch a break.'

'Those three centuries were your break. If you seriously think there's anything waiting for us on the other side, I've got a couple of giant gold dragon statues to sell you.'

Sinn didn't look thrilled at the mention of Lady Umeboshi

and her Shrine Keepers. Not one bit. ‘That old long-whiskers isn’t going to be snooping around is she?’ she muttered. Her head darted around. ‘I thought it was just going to be her pet magpie doling out the orders like last time.’

‘I hope she’s there,’ Allie said, really taking the time to relish the moment. Sinn stared down at him with a gaze that vowed that if he were any smaller, he’d already be coating the underside of her boot like so many insects before him. ‘I hope they’re all there. Toushin, Koishi, Arashi, Shizuku, and the other one too. I’d want to see how long it’d take them to rat you out to the crowd. I reckon it’d be pretty quick. Nobody likes a thief after all.’

At the mention of the word, a concerned ripple ran through the row. A dozen or so places up from them, a speckled weasel dropped the buckets she was balancing on two straw-laden shoulders. Grain spilled out from the otherwise straight arrow-shot of a line.

‘Thief? What thief?’

‘Cat burglar. It’d take some nerve to show her tail around these parts again.’

Sinn groaned. ‘I’ll see to my duties later,’ she said, pulling her hood down low over her nose. ‘All of them.’ Her glowing arrowhead eyes trained on the goat. Allie hid himself behind one of Shiro’s long sleeves. ‘If anyone asks, I was never here,’ she told Shiro. Her gaze drifted down to his collar, where it lingered momentarily. The corner of her mouth twitched. ‘If you don’t want to wake up with a dagger in your eye.’

Crouched down by the side of the road, the black cat melted into the long grass. For a few seconds, Shiro was able to follow her rapidly arcing circle around the thoroughfare by studying the very tips of the blades. But then the wind picked

up, and she was well and truly gone, lost amid a green sea of thin, waving hands. By the time she re-emerged in the far distance, whirling her metal claw through the air, spreading her arms and launching herself over rooftops with a lightness that defied belief, she was but a dot in the eyes of the unenviable denizens of the Ku Shrine queue.

Shiro whistled. All impressions of Sinn aside, there was no shame in being impressed at the impressive. If it turned out that she wasn't a shinobi, he vowed to eat his hat. He meant it too. In this world, it wasn't at all beyond the realm of possibility. 'Would you look at that,' he mused. 'Almost like the Wolf-Spider himself.'

Allie went stiff as a board. 'Wolf-Spider?'

Shiro laughed. 'Yeah. You know, the Wolf-Spider. The web-slinging Wolf-Spider?' But the goat only stared at him with two wide eyes, his blue irises verging ever closer toward the grey. 'He's a famous character from comic books. I'm surprised you haven't heard of him. He swings from skyscraper to skyscraper, fighting crime and saving citizens in need after mutating from a spider bite.'

'Well he's not saving me.' The goat shuddered and tugged his long ears over his eyes. 'I hate bugs. They wear their bones the wrong way round just to creep you out. That's the one good thing about this place – no creepy crawlies. He can keep his eight legs and hairy pincers to himself.'

'He doesn't actually have eight legs,' Shiro explained. He wasn't expecting it to be this difficult. 'Just two. He doesn't have pincers either.'

'Really?' Allie laughed. 'Sounds like a pretty crummy spider to me.'

'He's really more of a wolf than a spider.'

'Well if he's anything like Kapp, those citizens would be

better off with a wolf-sized spider.’

‘You sure about that?’

They both turned to find the wolf loudly smacking his chops. The six-foot swordfish in his paws had been all but reduced to bones, and without the distraction, he was growing restless. Linn was rather unsuccessfully attempting to explain the rationale behind waiting in line.

‘Queue? Ha! Wolves do not queue.’

‘They do if they have any interest in drinking their weight in ethre,’ the old badger reminded him. ‘Besides, best not to rock the boat, eh? Especially not so soon after last night. Lady Umeboshi might have something to say about it.’

‘She will.’ The wolf’s black lips curled back in disgust. ‘Always does. The small ones always talk. Smaller they are, the more words pour out. Talk comes cheap from those with brittle claws. And wolves don’t wait for witches.’

With that, he stepped out past the line and padded his way down the thoroughfare, bouncing the swordfish on his bare shoulder like a finely gnawed club. When the other animals saw what he was doing, they tried to reorient themselves against him, but he held the swordfish lengthways and ploughed straight through them, scattering the villagers like skittles. There were many noises that followed, grunts, wails and cries chief among them, but none were louder than that of the great wolf’s laughter.

Shiro and Allie took one look at each other. ‘Wolf-sized spider,’ they nodded.

Main District

Together, Shiro and Allie waited. And waited. And waited. And then they waited some more. Eventually, they left the grassy thoroughfare behind for long and winding back roads,

around which the line snaked, double-backing on itself for seemingly no other reason than to add insult to injury. All the welcoming inns and steaming teahouses in the world couldn't distract from the fact that they were close enough to shake paws with parts of the queue they wouldn't be reaching for another hour.

It certainly seemed as though the entirety of Anzen had turned up before them. Allie cursed Sinn for their late arrival. Shiro wisely decided to keep his silence. There was no use enflaming the issue further. But that wasn't to say that the goat didn't have a point, in between all the minced oaths.

On more than one occasion, Shiro was ashamed to find his paw dipping into his pocket to check the time. He cursed the habit, but that didn't stop him from doing it. It only made him mourn the loss of his old Cherry Logic all the more. He'd lived lifetimes in the albums on that phone. It was all very well for parents to gaze upon their kit's glowing screens and proclaim the doom of a generation, but they didn't know what they were missing out on. Popping on a quick game of Grub Grub Panic had saved Shiro's life during many a dull train ride.

It pained him to admit it, but right now, he'd have given one of his right toes for five minutes on the time trial mode. He dreaded to think what he'd sacrifice for a full hour.

It wasn't until the streets finally opened up that he was able to pass the time doing what he loved – people watching. It was fascinating looking out on all the hustle and bustle. Here he was, surrounded by spirits who would never age, starve, thirst or tire, and yet they were acting out lives that the world of the living, and indeed the centuries themselves, had long forgotten.

Plump field mice exchanged stories at their windows,

merrily beating the dirt from their genken floor mats. Empty hourglasses collected in woven baskets by the door, not unlike the milk bottles from home. Elders nursed downturned smoking teacups on the edges of wells, and kiba-kiba perched in pairs on the rooftops, trilling not unlike the pigeons Shiro brushed tail with on his morning commute. Painters painted, hoof shiners shined, and paper crafters took turns pounding pulp in stout wooden tubs, ready to be stretched into tomorrow's washi. One day on from the attack, and the streets of the dead were very much alive with laughter and song, though he noted that not a single kit could be heard or seen among them.

His nose pointed him to the marketplace, where countless goods changed paw. He wasn't particularly interested in food, but it was worth a visit to see if anybody would be willing to part ways with a map. When Allie asked him if he thought any of the vendors sold hats, his heart crumpled like tissue paper. He resolved to do something about it, scouring the stalls from where they stood.

It was a delectable, if powerful, bouquet that wafted through the air, and the stalls themselves were packed with more varieties of food than Shiro had name for. Imitation sashimi slices moulded from vegetables were among the most popular items. Hats, unfortunately, were not, but what puzzled Shiro even more was that he spotted neither penny nor purse among the merchants and customers. He wondered what Linn would have to say about it, but when he looked over his shoulder, the badger had disappeared completely. The answer he received from Allie was less than satisfactory.

'Money? Oh, yeah, money! I remember that. The Grand Britannian Pound. They don't really do that sort of thing around here.'

‘What do you mean?’

The goat rolled his shoulders. ‘Something something, material wealth, something something, mortal sin, something something. I dunno. You’d really have to ask Linn.’

‘I thought you said Linn was missing more than just his jingle earlier.’

‘Oh, he is. Listen to him when he’s out on one of his late-night ring hunts, and you’ll see. Almost made me pass out laughing one time. But... he’s also honest, and kind, and he can tell you just about anything you need to know. Even if it’s just something to make you feel better. I mean, he took me in. No one else would. Nobody else even knew how to ground me when I first showed up here, all alone.’ The goat’s face grew grave. ‘If you ever need a helping hoof, Shiro, he’s the only badger to trust. I know this is gonna sound crazy, but I think that batty old monk knows more than just about anybody else in the village.’

‘No, I believe you. Like you said, he’s a wizard. But that still doesn’t answer my question. When you said you don’t do that sort of thing around here, were you talking money? As in, any money? Coins, notes, gold, silk, rice, jade... salt?’

‘Pretty much.’

‘But then how are you supposed to get paid?’

‘We don’t. It’s good for our immortal souls, or whatever. Work is supposed to cleanse the spirit, you know? Prepare it for the next one? It’s very New Testament.’

But Shiro wasn’t buying it. It sounded like something Mr Jeffries would proclaim moments before taking another of his unscheduled work breaks. He could only imagine what the flying fox would make of an entire village’s worth of free labour. Probably a real pig’s ear of it. For some stupid reason, the thought inspired pity instead of anger. ‘Working to

cleanse your immortal soul sounds pretty poetic on paper, but it's the kind of thing animals only say when it's work they don't have to do. Spirits or no spirits, I find it hard to believe that there's nothing greasing Anzen's wheels besides altruism. Every society has a hierarchy.'

The goat shrugged. He looked up at the clear blue sky, and found his answer in the tower whose shadow loomed over them all. 'Well I guess Lady Umeboshi's at the top, and we're all on the bottom.' The goat laughed.

'Sure,' Shiro said. It was a thought, though. He'd never seen a more lavish place in his life than the ninth floor of Shoganai Tower.

'Maybe we're just better than that here,' Allie suggested.

Shiro smiled at the idea. He wasn't sure he'd ever been as optimistic as Allie, but part of him wished he had been. 'If that's the case,' he said, 'then maybe we're in heaven after all.'

He leaned out of the way of a speeding cart and looked back to the marketplace. Staring closer, Shiro spotted the tiny blue hourglasses being passed back and forth. The motion was so well-practised, it was difficult to catch at first. There was always one, and sometimes two, but rarely more than three, always hidden in sleeves and under wraps. The wooden rims of larger hourglasses could be found poking out from behind the merchant's stalls, ready to be exchanged for crockery, fine incense and other such luxuries. 'But I wouldn't count on it, Allie. Money always finds a way. If there's one thing all those years studying history taught me, it's that money always finds a way.'

Line

'Please remember that there are stations situated at all five

sacred shrines!’ a somewhat desperate-sounding voice announced, as Allie and Shiro moved up another place in the endless queue. ‘Unless the Ku Shrine requires your urgent visitation, please consider coming back later, or reporting to a shrine of a different elemental dedication to collect your duties. Chi, Sui, Ka and Fu are all available.’

Unsurprisingly, the line held firm. Nobody in their right mind was walking away from the opportunity to meet the Lady of the Tower if they had anything to say about it.

Carts bearing straw and grain swept past them by a whisker’s width, driven not by beasts of burden, but by the hard-wearing hooves of the farmers themselves. Shiro had to wonder whether the grain would even be eaten, or if it was being harvested merely out of habit, only to sit and rot en masse in the storehouses. Did things even rot in a place such as this? If the villagers themselves weren’t perishable, what was? He still had no idea what was supposed to be fuelling the floating flames at the heart of Anzen’s stone lanterns. He glanced at the nearest one, a pitiable, moss-ridden forgotten old thing, and wondered which genius had decided that it was worth lighting them in broad daylight...

Right before the affronted lantern burst from the roadside, as surely as if it had heard the fox’s very thoughts! A hail of dirt showered any villagers unlucky enough to be caught nearby as it skittered away, fat tubers trailing from its long-clawed foot. As the cries of dismay rose from around the corner, Shiro stared at the stone paving guiltily. If a single glance was all it took, it was anybody’s guess how they’d managed to stay rooted all this time. Was everybody going about their business with half-shaded eyes?

The street sweeper was far from impressed. ‘Alright, who thought this was a clever day to be messing around with the

Chinamida?’ The tatty excuse for a broom in the ancient murrelet’s wing was tied together in so many places, it had probably been sweeping the streets of Anzen as long as he had. His eyes were wide, his beak was yellow, and as authoritatively as he puffed out his silver wings, his voice had a wonderfully chirpy warble to it, as though he could burst into song at any moment. ‘Come on now, I want names.’

‘Well it weren’t me!’

‘Koumori, you’ve been blind since before you were born. No one with any semblance of sense is saying it was you.’

‘Mark me, he was awful quick to the defence though. You know what they say. “He who shouts the loudest spilled the millet.”’

‘Look at him! Does that look like someone that’s ever wasted millet?’ There was laughter all around, not the least of which from the pot-bellied bat in question.

And then, just as it began to die down: ‘It’s them that did it! The Chiri Inn lot!’

The line hushed soon enough after that. The other villagers made a show of keeping to themselves, politely turning their heads and hats this way and that, but Shiro could feel curious eyes training in on them all the same. The street sweeper waddled his way over, and in his head, Shiro noted that this would be an excellent time for Linn to show up out of the blue again. Unfortunately, it looked like he was going to have to fix this mess himself. He was inclined to believe that the goat hiding under his sleeves agreed.

‘What do you think you’re doing causing all this bother? You think the lanterns appreciate having to find another place to roost? It could take all day before that one’s settled down, especially with all the attention the furore’s stoking up.’ He gave his broom handle a pat, and the thing damn near split in

two. ‘You think I do this job for fun, eh? You think I flounce around these beautiful Anzen roads, clearing away leaves and talking to my favourite folks out of choice? Because I do, but that’s very much beside the point. We don’t want no more trouble out of you, if you don’t wanna be sweeping the streets till sunrise. And that’s my job, so clear off if you know what’s good for you.’

‘I will.’ But before Shiro had a chance to apologise, another of the stone lanterns made a desperate bid for freedom, scarpering up one of the back roads. The murrelet’s expression was incredulous to say the least. The vein bulging between his forehead feathers was as fat as a worm.

‘Did you listen to a word I just said?’

‘But I didn’t...?’ He felt Allie’s hoof tighten over his paw. ‘Sorry, it won’t happen again,’ Shiro said. ‘A third time,’ he added hastily. ‘I’m still trying to learn the rules, you see. How do they always know when you’re looking at them? Why do they run away?’

‘Never you mind why they run. You keep your eyes where it’s good for you, and you leave the Chinamida alone now, you hear? They never did no harm to you, so don’t you do nothing to them. I’ll be having your name now, if you please.’

‘Shiro.’

‘Ah, Shiro. Yes, I’ll remember that. Why’s it always them with the innocuous names?’ The ancient murrelet was still talking to himself as he waddled from the line, brushing away at nothing in particular and leaving the aftermath of both lanterns behind. ‘You never see your Kamisoris or your Ingos getting up to no trouble in earshot of a holy shrine...’

Sweep, sweep, sweep.

When he was gone, Shiro felt Allie tug at the corner of his ear. He bent down. ‘Thanks for covering for me,’ the goat

whispered. ‘Sometimes, I still forget not to look.’

‘No problem, buddy. What else are friends for?’

‘Friends?’ For what felt like the next hour, the goat was starry-eyed. He barely seemed cognisant of the furtive glances and hushed whispers he was eliciting from some of the villagers. Unfortunately, Shiro was less oblivious. He’d lived through too many years of such treatment – a lifetime, in fact.

Part of it may have been his broken horn, and part of it may have been his accent, but Shiro knew there had to be more to the story. He heard mention of the Chiri Inn more than once, the name never so much spoken as it was uttered, always accompanied by a knowing look. Almost as soon as the street sweep left, a portly vole up ahead turned to offer her sympathies. There was honeysuckle behind her ear, and flowers of every shape, size and hue bulged from her obi sash like a wreath.

‘Don’t fret dearies,’ she began, wearing a smile that would make the sun jealous. ‘We all make mistakes...’ But it shrivelled up at the sight of Allie, and by the time her eyes settled upon the insignia of Shiro’s hat, they were as black as lychee pits. She took hold of her sash and wrenched it tight; the colourful flowers wilted at her sides. ‘Some bigger than others.’ The vole turned on her heels, and they heard no more from her.

It was the most unusual feeling. Strangers looked past Shiro as if they’d never seen a more mundane sight in all their lives, and if they noticed the hat, it was the hat that drew their consternation. Not the blue fox wearing it. No matter which world he was in, others always seemed to be finding reasons to stare, but as he folded the cloth hat up and popped it in one of his pockets, Shiro considered it a welcome improvement. No, it was Allie he was worried about.

In his restlessness, the goat strayed a little too far from the line. A protruding elbow accidentally clipped one of the wooden carts that came to meet it, and the cart stopped dead in its tracks. The farmer let the handles loose to clatter into the dust. His arms were like cantaloupes.

One look at him, and all the life drained from Allie's eyes. Anxious blue gave way to uncomprehending grey as the goat's back went stiff as a board, and he dropped like a chest of drawers at the farmer's hooves. He hit the ground with such a petite thud, the dust had already settled before his statuesque rocking came to a halt. The ram stepped over him as one would an errant pebble. He flicked up the side of his straw hat, and took a look around.

The thickset ram wore his wool long, cascading over his shoulders in curls. The last time Shiro had seen horns as impressive, they'd been in the display case of a museum. The ridges alone were inches thick, notched like vertebrae, and as they twisted in on themselves, they circled around his head in a wide arc to come together in the middle. From head-on, they looked to form an almost perfect figure eight, which went round and round and round forever more.

Ceremonial tusks adorned either side of his chiselled chin. They were white, like ivory, but veined with a fine flower design that flowed red like blood around the base. Three heads of barley lay between his molars, yellow on white. Unable to do anything to help, Shiro watched in silence as he crunched each of them up in turn, husk and all, before he finally spoke.

'Is the runt yours?'

The farmer's voice wasn't particularly deep. Shiro wouldn't have deigned to call it smooth or rich either, but there was a disarming honesty to it. He knew without a

shadow of a doubt that no insult had been intended. The ram saw a runt in the figure on the floor, and that was all the truth he knew. Even Shiro, ashamed as he was to admit it, wouldn't have been at all surprised to learn that Allie had been the smallest of his siblings.

His question wasn't rhetorical either. The stranger simply wanted to know if Shiro was responsible for him, because it was as clear as day from the gaggle of averted gazes that nobody else was. 'You could say that,' Shiro told the goat.

He nodded. 'No need to worry. The fainting is harmless, and he will wake soon as though it never happened. All the same, the roads are no place for a kid. Keep him closer next time, or the Shrine Keepers may be needed to extract him from some other unlucky ram's spokes. I've never seen your like before, but I heard tale of you in the Red Lantern. "The Blue Demon," they call you, because you fell out of the sky, bringing with you the bile of another world. Do you mean the herds of Anzen harm?'

'Never,' Shiro said. 'I'll swear it on all the gods you want.'

'All I want is for you to speak truly. Blue is no less comely a colour than any other, and demons may yet be more honest than tax collectors. Unfortunately, some animals care less for truth than others.'

'Not me.'

'Then it will be others. A word to the wise – tread lightly. Until they come to trust you, you'll find no peace here.'

'Do you trust me?'

The ram's left ear flicked. 'I trust only what my eyes, ears and nose tell me.'

'And?'

He inclined his horned head. He had already collected his duties, which hung from his neck like pendants. One of them,

glowing a pale blue, beat a rhythm like a heart. ‘You believe what you say. Whether I can trust your judgement remains to be seen. All the same, I wish it so. I wish it so. If truly you were once a fox, I would very much like to hear the tales of your world, and perhaps even share a few of my own, if you would have them.’

The farmer heaved up the handles of his cart. Before he left, he gave a bow so low, the tips of his horns left scores in the dirt. ‘My name is Hikari Yamichi. A humble name of even humbler roots, but remember it well. If you’re the demon they say you are, you will need it to plead for mercy before I am finished.’ Shiro’s fur prickled at the back of his neck. He watched the cart roll away as the farmer whistled a merry tune.

When he was gone, Shiro rushed to Allie’s side. To his relief, the farmer was right. No lasting damage had been done. It was just as well – even Melanie wouldn’t know how to treat a concussion in the spirit world. When the goat came to, he looked more embarrassed than anything. ‘I haven’t done something that dumb since I was ten,’ he sniffed. His limbs quivered as life slowly eked back into them. ‘Sorry. I guess I should’ve looked for a wall.’

‘Don’t be sorry. I just want to know that you’re okay. What happened?’

Allie gave a unconvincing bleat of laughter. ‘What do you think happened? I went and fainted, didn’t I?’

‘But why?’

‘No idea.’

After a quick brush-down, the goat teetered to his hooves. His legs were still very much in a state of de-jellification. More than once, Shiro had to catch him and set him straight. ‘But I’ll bet that’s exactly what happens when you don’t have enough tea to start the day off right. I knew I should’ve gone

for the straight ten cups!’

Shiro had his suspicions, but he nodded and laughed just the same. Something about the farmer had clearly set the poor goat off. But what? He doubted it was his size, not when he and Shiro could see each other eye to eye. They lived with a beast a dozen times more fearsome in the inn, and Allie barely batted an eyelid. Even in the face of Scorn, a tidal wave of death that swept the countryside, his legs had held just fine. Shiro suspected he would find answers, but later. It wasn’t his place to pry.

Besides, when he was nervous, Allie spoke a lot. And right now, the goat was barely pausing for breath. ‘I’m just glad Sinn wasn’t there to see me on my tail. Can you imagine? As if she needs another reason to laugh at me. Bet you she wouldn’t have blinked twice if she saw me between those spokes. Wouldn’t even reach out to poke me with a stick.’

‘Probably would have taken a video,’ Shiro said.

‘Definitely,’ Allie said, and they both laughed. ‘A what?’

Talking seemed to set the goat at ease, so Shiro was more than happy to oblige him. Besides, it helped to distract from the occasional mutterings of ‘Blue Demon’ that he caught as they moved further and further along the line. There was one figure in particular whose monocular stare he was most unhappy to see again. It had nestled itself in the one place he couldn’t avoid, directly under the red archway at the Ku Shrine entrance like it had been waiting for him. If there was any truth to its predictive powers, it may well have been. The spirit’s iron lamp hovered over its unblinking orange eye like the lure of an anglerfish.

‘Greetings, Blue Demon,’ Uso-Uso croaked. The four points under its trailing blue patchwork gyrated in a perverse kind of salute. Whether the gesture was meant mockingly, or

merely poor in its imitation, Shiro scarcely cared to guess. He kept his back firmly to the wall, holding his breath as they edged past. The line couldn't have moved fast enough.

'I've got nothing to say to you.'

'Yet still you speak. Would you prefer Liar, weary fox, guilty fox, broken fox? Perhaps Murderer?' Even Allie, who'd wisely decided to keep his silence, jumped at the word. Shiro felt a stab of guilt at his reaction.

'Watch it,' he hissed at the amorphous tent. His tail arched behind him. 'I've already told you, I wouldn't hurt a moth.'

'Wouldn't doesn't mean couldn't, and couldn't doesn't mean won't,' the spirit said. 'To fear the future is only to fear yourself.'

'You're not saying anything a thousand horoscopes haven't said before. I'm starting to wish I'd never let you read my stupid paw.'

'And yet if you had the option to unknow it, you would still refuse. Content only in discontent, as is the way.'

'How do you know?'

'Have it your way, Not Fox. Would you allow me to purge all knowledge of your thread?' Shiro thought back to the skeletal arms that leapt from the patchwork rags, and shuddered. They weren't going anywhere near him. 'You would remember nothing, not even that you had known.'

'Then how do I know you haven't already? I don't know about you, but that sure sounds like a racket to me. You could be charging half the village every morning to satisfy their curiosity, only to relieve them of their guilt when they come back at sundown with buyer's remorse, ready to start the process all over again.'

In response, the spirit wheezed and groaned, contracting within the patchwork like a bellows as the orange eye

continued doing what it did best. Staring. ‘Ingenuity matched only by cynicism. How very mortal. Uso-Usu exacts no toll to read the loom. There is no crime and punishment. The true price of knowledge is in the knowing.’

‘Well the joke’s on you, because even for free, your fake reading still wasn’t worth it,’ Shiro said. Allie nodded his support beside him. He would have spoken, but for the two hooves clamped tightly over his muzzle. The spirit’s pupil narrowed, a singular black void into which no light escaped. ‘We shall see.’

It was with unutterable relief that Shiro left the fortune teller behind, moving through the red archway that gated the sacred space of the shrine from the rest of the village. There wasn’t the slightest bit of danger of him looking back. He never wanted to see, hear or smell the charlatan again; Uso-Usu would have to pester some other poor souls for entertainment. It was more of a struggle for Allie however, who, although he’d managed to remain mute throughout, had absorbed the fortune teller’s every word with saucerpan eyes.

Every time he found his head starting to turn, the goat gritted his teeth, gripped his horn with two determined hooves and yanked it forward again. It was a battle that Sinn may well have lost, and yet to Shiro’s admiration, the goat was holding strong. At least until he gave up, bit the bullet and tugged on the corner of Shiro’s ear again. ‘You’re not really going to do someone in, are you?’ he whispered.

Shiro chuckled. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said to him. ‘I’ve never really been the whacking type. But if I ever change my mind, I’ll let you know.’

‘Phew!’ That was that sorted. For Allie, it really was as simple as that. Shiro envied him for it. ‘I knew it was just telling tall tales. It told me that I was going to die on the moon

at the hands of a fox. Crazy, right? And that was back when I first got here. Shows how much that creep knows.’

‘Yeah,’ Shiro said uncertainly. He smiled at the goat, and Allie beamed back, but inside, the cogs were whirring furiously. Against his better judgement, he forced himself to think back to that car trip. Whatever feelings he may have harboured for the ‘trickster’ that landed him here, someone else had put the tanuki up to it. He said so himself.

It was his boss, someone he’d described only as a ‘real piece of work’ that he was lucky he’d never have to meet. Someone who clearly had no scruples as far as morality was concerned. Someone who’d do just about anything. Someone who also, coincidentally, just so happened to be a fox. ‘Shows how much they know...’

Ku Shrine

‘Good morning, Mr Magpie!’

‘Why do they all greet him like that?’ Shiro wondered aloud. ‘It couldn’t possibly be his name. Could it?’

They were only half a dozen or so places from the temple entrance, underneath which Umeboshi’s magpie caretaker knelt on a tasselled cushion, drawing odd-looking necklaces from a ceremonial pitcher of ethre. As each new villager approached—always with the same genial ‘Good morning, Mr Magpie!’—the magpie would first ladle the ethre over their paws, which they used to cup and swill before spitting up into the air, then over their tails, and finally over the handle of the ladle itself, before handing them their dripping necklace of duties. It was all being conducted under the watchful eye of the Sakuranese Bobtail herself, while behind her, the Shrine Keepers looked to be packing for a long trip.

‘His name? I don’t think so,’ Allie laughed. ‘Not unless his

parents were the meanest birds around.’

‘Then why say it?’

Unable to look over the shoulders of the animals in front, the short goat craned his neck around them to watch the magpie perform the ritual. ‘Because it’s bad luck not to. I mean, I guess I wouldn’t actually know if it’s bad luck or not. I just say it when I see him like everyone else does.’

‘Every single time?’

‘Every single time.’

‘So you never got curious enough to find out?’

The goat stared at him. ‘Look, this world has some weird rules. I’m not dumb enough to start messing with them now, and nowhere near smart enough to get away with it if I did. I don’t wanna wake up one morning with feathers instead of wool any more than you do. Besides,’ he added, turning back to the ritual, ‘it doesn’t hurt anyone, so what does it matter? I’m more interested in what they’re getting up to over there. It looks like they’re being baptised, except it happens every time you visit. No idea why. As far as our parish was concerned, once was enough. Last night was actually the first time I’ve ever been inside before, and it freaked me the hell out. I kept asking if it was going to interfere with my christening, but nobody seemed to know what I was talking about.’

‘It looks like a simple purification ritual to me,’ Shiro reassured him. ‘Just a little something to cleanse the mind and body, so you don’t track in any muddy footprints from our unholy world.’

‘Body?’ Allie whispered. ‘But we’re already dead.’

Shiro nodded. ‘And yet all the spirits here are still happily living in houses, drinking tea, brushing their tails and ploughing the fields. We all have our traditions. I’m guessing you’re still praying, even though there’s no reason your god

shouldn't be able to just hear you in a place like this.'

'Maybe...'

'See. If they really wanted you spick and span, you'd be going straight in the river, like Sakuranese priests used to do. Sometimes, rituals are less about what somebody's doing, and more about what it means to the folks doing it. This is no different. It's a Shinto thing.'

'How do you know it's a Shinto thing?' Allie asked him.

'Because this is a Shinto Shrine,' he said.

'Ah.'

Sure enough, there was the red torii gate that they'd just stepped under, and the five sets of stone stairs that marked the approach, the largest of which Shiro couldn't have imagined had been built with animals in mind. The stone lanterns lining the walkways watched their visitors wearily. Their roots were far older, and ran far deeper than their sprightly single-clawed brethren, and there were no flames to be found floating in their weathered hearts. Nonetheless, from the right angle, sunlight glanced through the fire boxes, winking at the two of them as they slowly but surely shuffled up the line.

The Ku Shrine temple itself was as grand as Shiro could have hoped for. It only took a glance to understand how half the village had been able to hide inside during the attack. The ornate roof was enough to make Shoganai Tower jealous, and unlike the dilapidated tower, the temple had clearly been lovingly and painstakingly maintained, even though it may well have been older. Duties or no duties, Shiro knew he'd find himself back here. The very air around the temple shimmered, mysterious, fragrant and mist-like. He suspected it was the sheer amount of incense wafting from within, but he was wary of simple answers in a place such as this.

Each of the shrines in Anzen was dedicated to a different

element. The Ku Shrine's element was spirit, the ethereal void, and nowhere was that more apparent than in the feel of the grounds themselves. Shiro may not have believed in the gods, most of which were simply powerful spirits, but he was still around. There had to be some reason why. As Allie asked him about the enormous rope hanging over the entrance, straining his limited knowledge further and further, he couldn't help but wonder if the intermittent creaking of the temple's ancient foundations was trying to tell them something.

Though they talked much about what they saw, neither of them made mention of the wooden shutters, which had fallen as swiftly and silently as a shadow over the adjoining building the moment Shiro and Allie arrived, obscuring its contents from view. It was a silent admission from the two of them – there were things in Anzen that spirits such as themselves were not permitted to see.

'But we're already so, so, so far behind, and it's so damned heavy. Why are we—hrumph!—taking it with us anyway?'

'To purify it, Koishi Shorthorn.'

Shiro's attention turned to the Shrine Keepers, who between the two of them were lugging an enormous ceremonial bowl back to their well-stocked cart. It was as broad as it was shallow, beautiful in every way, save for the thick trail of drool that it left behind. 'You're not putting it back in that temple until every inch has been scrubbed and scoured spotless. By the gods, that beast is a piece of work. Shambling about with that poor spine over his shoulder. If he had half a jot of wit for every inch...'

Shiro bit back a smile. The description sounded more than a little familiar. 'What brand of brute seriously expects there to be no consequence to bounding through the lines, heaving up the sacred chozuya basin and lapping at the ethre like

‘twere some commoner’s begging bowl?’

‘My brand of brute?’ the other priest suggested with a grin. In the light of day, the shorn faces of the Shrine Keepers were more striking than ever. Unencumbered by fur, the heifer’s brazen grin took on an almost youthful appearance, accentuated by bright eyes and deep laughter lines.

By contrast, the eagle’s pink, plucked features served only to make her look all the more severe, goose pimples and all. The trenches of wrinkles weren’t born as much from joy as they were a weary brow that was always furrowed, two suspicious eyes that were always narrowed, and a savage beak that was always pursed, a well-oiled engine of admonishment in waiting. ‘Such talk is unbecoming of your profession, Koishi,’ the eagle warned her shrewdly.

‘Almost as unbecoming as the pay then, Arashi,’ the heifer quipped back. ‘Say what you will about beggars, but in a hundred years’ time, they’ll have more in their bowls than you will.’

‘You consider it a competition?’

‘Me?’ Koishi balked. ‘Never.’ On the count of three, the heifer ground her hind hooves into the stone, heaving the basin up and onto the cart. ‘Not as much as some of us anyway,’ she added under her breath. While she held it in place, Arashi got to work affixing it with lengths of rope. Some may have called the eagle’s technique graceful, and measured. Others would have called it wasting time, as the heifer’s face steadily grew redder, and redder, and redder.

Behind them, the other Shrine Keepers were working together in perfect harmony, passing provisions from the temple to the cart. Teal spied talismans, incense burners, ritual batons, pails of salt, food offerings for the gods, and wands with knotted paper streamers showering from the tips.

The Sika deer and the black bear were only too happy to chat while they worked, but at the far end, the squirrel kept her peace. There was something odd about her, Shiro thought. She hadn't spoken at all during Lady Umeboshi's confrontation with Scorn, and even in the Tack and Thimble, he couldn't recall her saying a single word. Perhaps she'd taken a vow of silence. There was certainly no lack of focus in her silvery eyes.

The Sika deer stopped for a moment, scratching the pale folds of her neck. 'Do you think I'll need my gunbai for this one?' she said. She held up a iron fan with a jewelled tassel trailing from the handle. The decorated head was flat and wide, like that of a paddle.

'Did we need it for the Brothers Goryo?' the bear asked her. Shiro recognised her silky voice from his time beneath the towels. But he'd been a different fox back then. That fox had been the proud owner of at least two names. He knew only one, and it would have been a stretch to call it is.

The Sika deer shrugged. The digits on her free hoof were tapping away at a million miles an hour, totting up invisible values in her head. 'I don't believe so.'

'Then we'll be just fine, sweetling.'

'Are you sure?'

'Would I say so if I wasn't? Besides, my gunbai's been packed since before sunrise. Shizuku, you worry too much.'

'And you don't worry enough. An open wound stretches all the way from the interlands to our doorstep. Who knows what void wisps and vengeful demons we may find crawling through. What if it takes too long to heal the tear, or even worse, if we can't heal the tear at all? What becomes of Anzen then? We're in completely uncharted waters.'

'Uncharted waters may yet be the most clement. That's

what makes them uncharted. There's no precedent.'

'But that's exactly my point. We don't know what to expect. Nobody's ever crossed over without performing the rites before. Nobody.'

Ahem. The two of them looked up at the sound of the squirrel clearing her throat, and the Sika deer locked eyes with Shiro. The rest of their work was carried out in silence, with terse nods and cryptic gestures.

'Lady Umeboshi! Lady Umeboshi!' A ripple ran through the line. Even the Shrine Keepers looked up to see what all the fuss was about. There was an old crow hobbling up the smallest set of stone stairs. Her plain clothing melted into the mass of her unkempt feathers, black against the white of the stone.

At first, there was nothing remarkable about the sight. Indeed, it was almost painful watching her carved cane slowly tap down on the steps, again and again and again. But the closer she came, the more confident her stride grew, and it didn't take the onlookers long to notice that there was far more than just a twinkle in her eyes. 'Lady Umeboshi, I do believe I've been blessed by something bloomin' marvellous!'

With her next step, she left her straw sandal behind. But rather than flop back down the staircase, the sandal hung where she left it, perfectly still like it was frozen in the air. One more step, and the other sandal joined the first, and by time she reached the third, her wings lifted free of the cane altogether, leaving it standing as straight as an arrow on the stair. Her eyes glowed with a heavenly golden light, which spread slowly down her feathers like drops of molten rain. Everything the light touched burned bright and pure and true. Lady Umeboshi hurried down to meet her, ushering the curious crowds back.

‘I... I never thought it’d happen to me, milady.’ The old crow fell to her knees and prostrate herself before her, touching her brow to the ground. By the time Lady Umeboshi bade her rise again, she was golden from crown to talon. Shiro’s eyes burned just to look at her.

‘My kin went up long ago, you see. I watched them all leave, one by one, helping in the ways only an old gram can, and when they were gone, well, that was that. The gods had accepted my offerings, and answered all my prayers. For the longest time, I was happy with that. It was when I was watching the shadow fall over our little village here, big as a dragon and hungry enough to swallow the world. There was this feeling of peace, like, and that everything was goin’ to be okay. I knew I’d done all I could, and that I’d lived a good life, and had none too shabby a death while I was at it. There was no fear, and all of a sudden, my eyes were shinin’ like fireflies on a summer night. I came here quick as I could.’

Lady Umeboshi was a tapestry. Underneath her headdress and regal poise, there flashed the faces of a thousand Sakuranese Bobtails. One was youthful and proud, fit to bursting in the corners of her blue and yellow eyes. Another, much older and stonier, hid in her long downturned whiskers, the face of a leader that knew only to remain composed at all costs. There was joy, surprise, resentment, grief, and even guilt, so much so as to be overwhelming, and yet too brief to capture more than a glimpse before it was gone.

‘I will tend to you at once,’ she said. ‘Old Sobo, kindest of heart, and the last of her line and her era, your time in this plane is done. The gods beckon, and their will cannot be denied for long. Come with me.’

‘Am I finally ready to go? Truly? After all these years? Don’t get my hopes up now, milady, or I swear the whole of

Anzen'll be under!' The glowing crow wiped away a single golden tear. Tiny droplets hung like bubbles underwater.

'I will escort you to Shoganai Tower myself,' Lady Umeboshi told her.

'Seven heavens, for me? All for little old me?'

She inclined her head. 'To release your name and perform the rites of passage would be, and I don't say this lightly, an honour.' The old crow squeaked.

'I always dreamt I'd hear you say that, milady,' she whispered. The diminutive cat raised her red umbrella, and the crow took it under her wing like the crook of her arm.

'And not a moment too soon. Sobo was part of Anzen since before Anzen was Anzen, you know.' Shiro started when he heard Linn's voice behind him. Where had he come from, all of a sudden? 'My heart aches like nothing else to watch her go. But it's a good kind of hurt, mind. A happy kind.'

'Do not delay your mission a single moment,' Lady Umeboshi called to the Shrine Keepers behind her. 'When the time is right, I will find you.' She turned back to the crow. 'Whenever you're ready, Sobo.'

The old crow took her first tentative step. Her bare talons stopped just short of the ground, hanging there as if suspended on a thread. Lady Umeboshi followed in kind, and gestured for her to continue. She took another step, and with a giddy laugh that belied her many years, the crow left the ground behind for good, beaming like a fallen star. Together, they climbed above the Ku Shrine roof and continued, higher and higher, striding to the tower through a perfect sapphire sky.

Temple

There weren't many dry eyes left on the ground below.

Between the intermittent sobbing, the ethre cleansing and that same familiar greeting, the line thinned out quickly.

‘Good morning, Mr Magpie.’ *Sniff sniff.*

‘Good morning, Renga. Here are your duties. Today, you’ll be assisting with the efforts on the southern wall.’

‘Are you serious?’ The horseshoe bat groaned, rubbing her noseleaf dry on an open patch of wing membrane.

‘Everyone’s on the southern wall. Mother’s on the wall, father’s on the wall, every flyer from here to Shoganai Tower’s perched on that damn wall. Don’t you have anything more interesting in that pitcher of yours?’

‘Not unless you fancy joining the lady’s excursion to the interlands, I’m afraid.’

The bat snatched the necklace from the magpie’s wing quicker than Shiro could blink. ‘That southern wall needs all the help it can get,’ she said.

‘It certainly does. You have a wonderful day, now.’

‘Yep.’

And with that, Shiro found himself standing before the magpie. He wasn’t sure what to do next. For the majority of the queue, he’d politely insisted that Allie go in front, but the crafty goat somehow managed to find a way behind him, and Linn was nowhere to be seen. Some of the villagers had bowed deeply, others not at all. He settled on an exaggerated nod. ‘Good morning, Mr Magpie,’ he said uncertainly.

The magpie smiled and bowed back. He was disarmingly good-looking, self-assured with a sharp beak, kind eyes, and the most amazing iridescent plumage hidden in the folds of his white wings. There was no telling how old he was. ‘Good morning, Shiro. It was no mean feat, standing up there before Scorn and the rest of Anzen too. My lady would never say it, but I think she was proud.’

‘Thanks. I’m really sorry for the lift, by the way. And the tea. I was more than happy to get on the ladder myself, but—’

‘But for the shame you would have brought upon your host, allowing a guest to clean up with a mop and bucket. It’s all part of the job.’

‘The first time I saw you, you were dusting one of the floors underwater. I thought you were just the cleaner, but later on, you were bearing Lady Umeboshi’s standard at her side. Just who are you exactly?’

He smiled. ‘I’m my lady’s wings,’ he said. And the magpie left it at that.

The ethre tingled running up the back of Shiro’s paws. Following the example of the others, he cupped them together and brought them to his muzzle. Swill, swill, gargle, spit. It tasted none too bad either, albeit uncannily close to Lady Umeboshi’s tea. The only unpleasant part of the experience was when the ladle went to his tail. The sensation was just a little too close to the numbness he suffered during his waking nightmare. He shook it dry and hugged it close to his side. He was never taking his tail for granted again.

‘Here are your duties,’ the magpie said. From the underside of the pitcher, he plucked a necklace with half a dozen stone pendants on it and whistled. ‘No southern wall for you. By the look of things, you’ve got a real odyssey ahead of you.’

Shiro hung it from his neck and sifted through each of them, waving the last few drops of ethre away. The pendants were long and thin, like a tablet, and inscribed with writing from end to end. The characters on the foremost pendant glowed a pale blue. One pleading look at the magpie, and he understood completely. ‘The glowing duty’s the active one,’ he explained. ‘Just make sure you’re in the right place at the

right time, and the Anzenian you're working with'll sort out the rest. It's all on the tablets. When it's done, you can crumple it up in your paw. You did a great job yesterday. You'll be fine.'

'Thank you.'

'Thank you. You said you were going to do everything you could to fix the damage. Around here, a promise like that isn't taken lightly, nor the work soon forgotten.'

The necklace was surprisingly light, considering all the pendants hanging from it, but it was still a little loose for Shiro's liking. He set to tightening it as he and Allie walked back underneath the red archway, past the last dregs of the queue. Thankfully, whatever Uso-Uso's fate entailed, it hadn't involved lying in wait for Shiro's return.

'I still don't get why they had to have foxes statues outside the temple,' Allie grumbled, fiddling with his own much shorter necklace. He only had half the duties that Shiro did, so he was hiding them in his hooves and pretending to count them over and over again. 'It's always foxes. What's wrong with a good old goat?'

'Goats aren't envoys for powerful spirits, apparently,' Shiro replied. He took one last look at the shuttered building before it disappeared from view. The building itself was as unremarkable as they came: a humble wooden construction with an illegible fascia, an oddly featureless wooden mask hanging from a line and not much else. He could have sworn he heard the shutters start to inch their way back up, but when he hopped back through the arch, they were exactly as they'd been before. 'You know what they say. God is a fox.'

The goat scoffed. 'Only foxes say that.'

'And only other animals say that only foxes say that. Hey, do you have any idea where Potter's Dug is?'

‘Mmm... maybe. If it turns out that foxes don’t know everything in the world after all. Why?’

Shiro held the tablet out. ‘One of my duties is there. None of the others are though. It looks like they’re trying to send me to every corner of the village. It’s anybody’s guess as to why. Maybe it’s an experiment to see if it’s possible to give a spirit a heart attack.’

‘But don’t you see what Lady Umeboshi’s doing?’ Allie said excitedly. ‘She said she wanted me to show you around. What better way to do that than to literally send us all around Anzen? And I have a feeling you’re really going to like our first stop.’

‘Really?’ Shiro raised an eyebrow. ‘Why? Where are we headed?’

The Tack and Thimble

‘It’s wonderful to see you two again so soon. You must allow me to take your hats. Oh, I see. Well I’m sure it’ll turn up somewhere, little one. It’s not like you to be without it. Peito, Allie and Shiro have come to pay our humble workshop a visit!’

‘Huh? Shiro? Which one’s that again?’

‘If it’s that clutz that watered your ceiling yesterday, tell him he can stay full time! Nobody’s ever gotten Kon to break her one log a day rule before, and a fire works up one hell of an appetite, if you catch my drift. If he should just so happen to say, I dunno, “accidentally” waste another five pots of tea, I’d be more than happy to split the logs fifty-fifty. On that, you have my word. Nowt’s as fair as fire, as they say, or so help me you can stamp me out yourself!’

‘Nobody’s stampin’ you out, Irori.’

‘Well of course they ain’t! But there ain’t many things

more satisfying than watching ‘em try. Just let ‘em at me, I say, let ‘em at me!’

‘Don’t fool yourself, old spark. Nobody thinks you’re big enough to be worth putting out.’

‘Coming from the wing-clipped apron-wearing cellar dweller. Is this really the kinda thanks an elemental gets for all its years of hard service? Warming your cold hearth every night, heatin’ your kettles on request, and constantly resisting the urge to give this dry house of kindling a lickin’ like it ain’t never seen before?’

‘I’ll give you a licking like you ain’t never seen before.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well you know what?’

‘What?’

‘What I really think?’

‘Out with it, coal warmer.’

There was a pause. ‘I don’t think either of us old timers’d be worth the time it takes to douse us out.’

What followed next was a most unexpected sound. Laughter. Peito’s muffled chuckles rose up from the floorboards, and the fire made a sound like it was spitting in the next room. Kon sighed and closed the front door to. ‘Please make yourselves at home,’ she said. ‘Stay as long as you like, or at least as long as sanity permits.’

Workshop

Shiro slipped back into the warm, cosy atmosphere of the Tack and Thimble as easily as one might an old coat. Even the omnipresent hammering, slow and steady as it was, seemed to Shiro’s ears to be more and more akin to the heartbeat of the workshop itself, thrumming away beneath their feet. A

piping-hot teacup had been pressed into his paws before he even had a chance to kick off his waraji torture devices. He only raised it to his muzzle for a quick taste, but it was so hard to stop at just one sip. He hadn't been in Anzen long, but if there was one thing the fox could be sure of, it was that—

'Nobody makes a cup of tea like Kon!' Allie certainly seemed to agree, breathing in the blue steam like it was oxygen. Kon performed all the customary gestures, shielding her eyes and telling her guests they were simply too kind, but they were all well aware that it was not a word of a lie.

'More talk like that, and I may just have to keep you here after all. Irori will be simply thrilled. But all levity aside, it's good to see you both safe and sound after last night. Especially you, Shiro.' If he didn't know any better, he might have noted a sprig of jealousy in the goat's eyes. 'Such Nahashi finery suits you. As you are, I wouldn't know you from the dozen other inn workers on our road. Your uniform fits you like a glove.'

'I thought it was a little loose around the waist actually.' Shiro held his arms out, and the robe sprouted from his sash like a soufflé.

'I didn't say it was one of my gloves, dear,' Kon smiled. 'This far from the Main District, you'd have better luck fitting your fingers at the cobblers. But that's nothing I shouldn't be able to fix. It'll only take a moment.'

Shiro expected to see the sable wandering through her maze of equipment tables, assembling various odds and ends into her satchel. Imagine his surprise, then, when she marched straight up to him and placed a paw on either side of his head. 'Is this comfortable?' she asked him.

'It's not uncomfortable,' Shiro said, adjusting his ears. It was strange seeing her this close up. He didn't like the idea

that the face he was looking at, the kind, well-groomed face, younger than some of the students he'd seen roaming around campus, had once gone through the same pain and confusion that he did. The thought didn't cross him until that very moment, but it was likely the last face she had ever worn. She wasn't an old crow, someone lucky enough to have seen more than her fair share of years. Even his father was older than she would have been. He couldn't even bring himself to look at Allie.

'Close your eyes,' Kon told him. Shiro did so gladly, and the world mercifully turned to darkness. He felt her pads rest lightly over his face. The claws tickled at his temples. 'Good. Now I want you to imagine yourself visiting your most trusted tailor.'

Shiro smirked in spite of himself. 'We don't have as many of those where I'm from. But I guess it would be Maneys.'

'Picture yourself walking up to Maneys' establishment in as much detail as possible. Can you see the doors?' Shiro nodded. 'Describe them to me.'

'Tall. They're very tall, made of glass, with discount labels all over them and streaks of half-dried cleaning fluid. Antler cosies were half price, which means it's just coming up to the spring. As I walk up to them, the doors open.'

'The vendor holds them open for you?'

'No, they open by themselves.' Shiro waited there with Kon's paws on his face, but for a time, she was silent.

'There'll be plenty of time for jokes and japes later, little one.'

'I'm being serious.'

She sighed. 'Very well. The magical doors open, and you find yourself inside. Remember the sights, the sounds, the smells.'

Shiro thought back to his time in Maneys. For some reason, his childhood memories were the most vivid. There was always this strong smell of gator leather in the shoe department, a cheap, nostalgic tang, though there had been a big push towards imitation in recent years. He loved playing hide and seek in the coat racks, a game this father never quite seemed able to appreciate as much as he did. It was probably because he was nowhere near as good. Half the fun of hiding was in the waiting to be caught, so he was always quick to drop to his knees, crawling through battalions of puffy sleeves and breathing in the new coat smell as his father searched for him. Watching the pair of disembodied legs march to and fro was always entertaining.

Hearing his frantic voice was considerably less so. But sooner or later, Emmett would find him, and Shiro would giggle with childish glee. Any consternation was short-lived as his father's terror gave way to relief. 'See,' Shiro would often tell himself when he was alone, long after the game was done. 'The mean kits in school are wrong. He does love me. He does, because otherwise, he wouldn't come looking for me. If he really didn't want me, he'd leave me behind with all the coats.'

'Can you see your tailor?' Just like that, Shiro snapped back to the present. He nodded, his eyes still shut.

His 'tailor' was a particularly prickly porcupine by the name of Pernicia. At least, that was what it said on the name tag. In all his life, he'd never run into a spined animal he didn't like, but she was something else. He had no fond memories of the Quick-Fit kiosk assistant, often times running from her deathly glares as a kit, and yet every time he walked in through those double doors, there she was, waiting for him as certain as death itself. At one point, he became convinced

that she could taste his fear in the air.

‘You’re doing great. Now take yourself back to the last time you were fitted. Bring that memory to life. The unspooling of the measuring string, the questions they were asking, the feel of fabric tightening on your fur...’

The questions? Oh, Shiro could remember the questions alright.

‘What’s this?’

‘Ouch, that hurts! What’s what?’

‘This,’ the porcupine said, and he felt a pinch at his stomach. ‘Disgusting.’ He didn’t dare look down for fear that her quills would spike him in the eye, but he knew exactly what she was talking about.

‘Dad says it’s only puppy fat,’ he winced. He hoped his father would be back soon. It was the final stop before the school disco, and they were only there to make some last-minute adjustments to his cousin’s old hand-me-down jacket. He dared not tell him about her.

‘Only puppies have puppy fat. What, did you want to give your school an even bigger reason to point and laugh at you?’

‘Nobody’s gonna laugh at me.’

‘If you really believe that, you’re even dumber than you look, kid. Now here’s how it’s really going to go down. The nice ones will do it to your face. The rest will go behind your back, but make no mistake. They’ll all be laughing. Laughing at the fat little blue kit. Alright, arms up.’

She unspooled the measuring tape and wrapped it around his waist. She pulled it tight, then tighter, and then a little tighter still. Even as Shiro remembered it, he could feel the clothes around his own body slowly closing in, constricting. One of her quills stuck firm in his wrist, but he didn’t cry. ‘And arms down. I know you’re here for the sleeves, but if I

take the waist down a notch as well, your blubber won't stick out so much.'

'But what about the rest of me?' the fox kit whispered. The porcupine stared back, safety pins glinting like knives between her teeth.

'Does that look like my problem?'

'And voila! What do you think?' Shiro blinked.

'Of what?' That's right. He was in Anzen. His paws leapt to the golden trim of his navy blue robe. The waist was no longer loose. In fact, it felt like it had been made for him. Even Allie looked impressed. 'Kon, that's... amazing.'

'Thank you. Consider it a gift from us. One kind turn always deserves another.' The sable gently relinquished his forehead.

'How did you do it?' he asked, rubbing his wrist. 'I thought you might have needed a pair of scissors at least.'

'Wouldn't be much of a tailor if I did,' she answered with a smile. She waved a paw over her own sleeve. Just like magic, the loose hanging threads knitted themselves together before Shiro's eyes. Another wave, and they were back to the way they were. 'When you've been working with clothes as long as I have, it only takes a little spark to get them going. Remember, they're not real. The robes you're wearing are built from memories just as much as we are. If you're looking for something brand new, of course you have to start it from scratch, but once you have something, it's never truly gone. Just one more adjustment, and I'd be proud to give it my personal Tack and Thimble seal of approval.'

'Great. What is it?' Shiro watched as the sable reversed the wrap of his robe, folding the right side over the left. 'Oh.'

'Not quite as dramatic as you were expecting?'

'Yeah.'

‘I can only apologise. But the details are important, you know. This should stop you getting any more strange looks on the street. Trust me, a tailor knows. A tailor always knows.’

‘But I could have sworn I read about this before. It was one of the captions from my additional reading. The collar is supposed to go left over right, right? Never right over left? I thought this was how the Sakuranese dress their dead.’

‘Well...’

‘Oh, I see.’ Shiro flushed. ‘In that case, thank you. Thank you very much.’

‘And that’s how you tell the smart ones from the rest of us,’ Peito said. Shiro almost jumped out of his skin. It was only then that he registered that the hammering in the background had stopped. ‘The fancy bushi that were taught their characters always swear they’ve read it all before. They light up their candles and strain their eyes up and down a hundred volumes o’ poetry before they know which way’s up, and which way’s down. The rest of us just use our eyes. By the way, anyone seen a spare set of snips? These finally went and died on me.’

‘If you’ve been good to them, it may be worth trying to coax them back from snip heaven with a new bolt and a little grease. But failing that, I’d check the back wall by the callipers.’

‘Back wall, callipers.’ The crane grunted his thanks.

Try as he might, the fox couldn’t deny that Peito had a point. All that people-watching, and he’d never once noticed. If there was one thing he’d learned in his time at university, it was that knowledge was no substitute for common sense. And yet, as Peito closed the basement door behind him, Shiro was all too aware of the way the crane’s wing was already raised, ready to wrap around the sable’s waist before he thought

better of it, and returned it to the pocket of his leather smock.

Just last night, he'd been spinning her around in the air. Shiro eyed him warily. Work partners and good friends, eh? Peito wasn't the only one that could use his eyes.

'I can't believe Sinn didn't notice,' Allie said. The goat was so thrilled at finally having something over her, Shiro didn't have the heart to tell him that she'd probably known all along. He glanced down at the collar of his lily-white robes. Right side over left. Shiro opened his mouth to ask why he hadn't said anything, but he realised Allie probably wasn't too sure himself. No doubt Kon had been looking out for him as far as those sorts of things were concerned.

The question was best washed away with another sip of tea, although like before, it was almost impossible to stop at just the one. When a smoking blue drop landed on his paw, he chased it down with his tongue before it could become another casualty of the ceiling. 'This is really good.'

'Thank you, Shiro. But delicious though it may be, I'm guessing you didn't just come here for the tea.'

'Could've fooled me,' Peito grumbled from the back wall. His wing clattered down rows of chisels, tongs, files and spare hammer heads. 'Two half-fledged lads with big smiles and blue beaks, slowly drinking us out of house and home. See how long they stick around when the kettle's empty. If either of 'em had half an hourglass to their name, I'd have started a running tab by now. That's the thing with spirits these days, especially you mammals. No respect at all.'

'Didn't you used to steal whole barrels of sake from your local monastery, Peito?'

There was not a whit of shame to the boyish grin that lit up Peito's beak like a sunrise. 'Aye,' he said, and he ran a vain wing through his long crown of crimson feathers. 'But at least

I had the respect and common courtesy to do my thievin' behind their backs under cover of darkness, like you're supposed to. Aha, got you!' The crane brandished a spotless pair of tinner's snips victoriously. The old set went straight over his shoulder, careening into one of the tables and taking half a dozen thread reels with it.

'If you want, we could always come back later when you're asleep,' Shiro joked. 'Wouldn't be any trouble.'

'Oh, I think there might be. Even I'm not hateful enough to dare you to try.' He held the snips up to the light and gave them a few test squeezes. Under the apron, the crane's lean muscles bulged until the metal began to squeak. He gave the pair an approving nod, and on his belt they went. 'I see you've got both claws on the ground this time, hatchling.'

'Only thanks to you three.'

'You plan on keeping 'em there, and leaving the skies to the experts from now on?'

'Are you kidding? Being up there was one of the worst experiences of my life! You can keep them.' Peito chuckled.

'You startin' to come to terms with what happened, then? The water, the floatin', and all the junk that came before?'

'Bit by bit.'

Peito hopped up to him. All of a sudden, his expression had changed completely. The middle-aged crane was as giddy as a teenager. 'So why'd you do it?'

'Do what?'

Kon jolted upright like she'd just been electrocuted. 'Peito!' she exclaimed. Her paw shot straight to her thimble necklace.

Allie looked up from his empty teacup. 'Wait, what did he say?'

'He said nothing, Allie. Isn't that right, Peito? You said

absolutely nothing.’ He shot the sable a wink, but she looked just about ready to explode. The room went deathly quiet, save for the crackling of the fireplace. Nobody dared move, not even the wicks in the lanterns overhead.

‘I dunno about you,’ Irori loudly opined, ‘but I’m startin’ to think he said something.’

Kon sighed. ‘How may I help you two?’

‘Oh right, the duty!’ Allie stopped running his hoof around the inside of the teacup, and reached for the glowing tablet around his neck. ‘We might need to borrow the cart again. If it’s okay with you of course. The Shrine Keepers kinda... well... they want their armour back.’

Peito was less than amused. ‘Ha!’ he crowed. “‘Their” armour? That’s rich. After the way they treated it last night, they’d be lucky if I let them fall to their knees and polish the toes. No, that masterpiece is staying right where it belongs. With me. If they really wanted it that bad, they’d be here themselves to wrench it from my cold, dead wings. May as well snap that duty in half and get on with your day, boys, because it ain’t happenin’. It’s a damn good joke though. And they say the Shrine Keepers are a solemn bunch, when they come out with crackers like that.’

‘Peito...’

‘In the meantime, Kon, you can go back to making bookmarks, or whatever it is you were doing. Tealeaf, you’re with me. Got me some work to do, and you’re just the billy I need. About time you started earning your keep.’ The crane took one of Allie’s ears and gently led him to the basement door.

‘M-me? Help you?’ the goat stuttered, trotting along behind him. ‘What could I possibly do?’

‘Oh, I dunno. I’m sure I’ll think of something. Never know

when you might need a new draft excluder. Besides, I wanna know more about what happened last night.’

‘W-what do you mean?’

‘What do you mean, what do I mean? You wouldn’t have helped us the way you helped him in a million years.’

‘I would too...’

‘No use talking the hero with me, goat. We both know you’re no wolf-hearted samurai. You damn near shed yourself the first time my forge coughed a coal at you, so out with it. What were you really doing carting a stranger halfway across Anzen, when the face of death itself was leering at us from the sky? I swear if I didn’t know any better...’ The door slammed shut behind them. Their muffled voices faded beneath a procession of tentative clops, and much heavier, more self-assured claw taps.

The fire wasted no time capitalising on their absence. Irori’s features flickered over the edge of its stone hearth, beckoning them closer. ‘Okay, so I’m pretty sure I’ve got what old greasy wings was sayin’ figured out. The real question is, what’s that sorta knowledge worth to two generous, upstanding spirits such as yourselves? A log, mightn’t ya say? Two logs?’

‘If I give you a log now, will you promise never to speak of this again?’

‘You drive a hard bargain, lady. But you know what? I like your style. Make it one of the good ones, and you got yourself a deal.’ The fire spirit blazed in excitement as she approached. ‘Now that’s the stuff! You know I love me a good slow burner.’ The orange flames licked the log from end to end, savouring the crispy bite of the bark most of all.

‘You know you’re never going to get that armour from Peito,’ Kon said. It wasn’t a question, but Shiro nodded all the

same. 'It's been his darling ever since he first started work on it, and he's been working on it for an awfully long time. He'll never forgive them for leaving it in the dirt the way they did.'

'Neither would I, if I ever made something so beautiful.'

'Interesting. You'd call it beautiful?'

'Well, beautiful, terrible. The armour itself looks amazing, but it's definitely something I'd rather see in a museum than down a dark alleyway.'

'As unlikely as it is for me to wander alleyways at night, I'd have to agree.'

'Why were you making bookmarks earlier?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Peito said that you were making bookmarks before we showed up.'

'Oh.' She flushed. 'That's just a little joke of his. He's very practical, as you can tell. He doesn't share the same love for the simple things that I do.'

Underneath loose pins and bamboo knitting needles, wads of coloured paper littered her desk. One of the sheets, a beautifully thin green piece with repeating bird patterns on it, had been folded several times, and was currently sitting in the shape of a diamond. 'Even if origami wasn't responsible for such delightful paper creations, it's still something to keep the pads busy. The Tack and Thimble hasn't been seeing as much traffic as I'd like. You may not believe it, but in this part of the district, many animals are reticent to pay our humble establishment even the courtesy of a visit.'

'Because you and Peito are together?'

'S-Shiro!' The sable's face went as pale as her kimono, the tufts of her cheeks pinker than the flowers on the floral design. Her tail wrapped itself up in such a knot, he was sure it would disappear into itself at any moment. 'You shouldn't... we

wouldn't... one does not speak of such things.' Even as she spoke, her fingers were picking the ends of her sleeves to threads.

'Kon, it's okay.' Her ears fell flat against her head.

'Is it really so obvious?'

Shiro hesitated. 'Only if you're already looking for it,' he lied. 'But don't worry, I won't tell anyone.'

He thought back to what he saw in the Main District. Dormice beating rugs from the windows of their dormouse houses, with their dormouse husbands and their dormouse parents. It was never unusual for close friends, and even lovers, to transcend species. The emperors of Sakurai were infamous for housing at least one concubine of each species within palace walls. But mistresses were not wives, and sharing the same bed was a world away from sharing the same roof. 'I can't imagine how hard it was, living when you did. But if it's any consolation, things are very, very different in the future. All sorts of animals live together now. Some of them even have kits. Just don't ask me how. It's... complicated.'

'Kits...' Kon repeated after him in disbelief. 'You make it sound like you come from a different world altogether.'

'I do. It's not perfect, but it is big, and strange, and every now and then, maybe even a little amazing too. You can talk to someone halfway around the world, and freeze moments in time onto pieces of paper to carry with you. Everybody walks around with this... thing in their pocket, that's like a library, an abacus, a clock, a notepad and more, all rolled into one.'

She shook her head. 'It sounds more and more confusing by the moment. Do they still repair clothes, and fold colourful bits of paper into interesting shapes where you're from?'

'Of course.'

‘Then I’d probably be content at that.’ Kon took the paper diamond from the desk and made a few deft folds. Just like that, a small green crane was sitting in the centre of her paw. ‘Cute, is it not? Of all the designs I know, this is my favourite, though I know I’d never hear the end of it if Peito found out. The crane may be proud, and it may seem sharp, but don’t let that fool you. It needs a kind paw to shield it from the rain just like any animal. And though it’s slow to trust and quick to offer a paper cut, the defences are only paper thin. If it opens its wings to you, those wings are open forever.’

The triangular head bobbed up and down as she stroked a claw down the back of its paper neck. ‘I’m sure it sounds like the silliest thing, but when I was very small, I was told the legend of a thousand cranes, and it never quite left me. Anyone who folds a thousand paper cranes is blessed with a wish from the gods. Any wish at all, be it personal or world-spanning. Even if I could trust myself to speak truly, I’d never know what to do with such a boon, so every time I find myself with a new paper crane, I give it to my real one and make him a promise. Once he has a thousand, I’ll thread them together into a senbazuru, and give my wish to him.’

‘I can’t imagine how many wishes he must have made by now. Have any of them come true?’

‘I’m afraid I couldn’t tell you.’ Her smile turned sad. ‘I don’t know that we’ve ever reached a thousand.’

‘What? Why not?’

‘He loses them. I give him a crane one moment, and it’s gone the next. I never see them again. He’s not superstitious, you see. Eyes such as his can see all the majesty in the world in the paper construction, but nothing in the luck. He has no time for gods and curses and ancient blessings. Not when he has a good hammer in his wing, and an anvil at the ready.’

‘I know someone like that. But if all I had to do to give him whatever he wanted was to make some cranes, I wouldn’t let anything get in the way, even if I had to make them all in secret and throw them over his big stupid ears like confetti. You can’t trust them to know what’s best for themselves all the time. If they did, they wouldn’t need us.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Have you tried telling him how important they are to you? I’m sure he’d take better care to hold onto them then.’

‘I appreciate the thought, but it’s really not that important, Shiro. Just a silly little ritual for a sable that should know better. Now I don’t know about you, but they’ve been terribly quiet down there. Do you remember the last time they shared the same room without argument?’

‘No...’

She smiled. ‘Me neither.’

Basement

Shiro crept down the staircase, one sneaky step after another. *Toe, heel, toe, heel, toe, heel*. His bare toes pressed lightly onto the cool wood, feeling around for the slightest hint of a creak. *Toe*. If it started to give, he eased up on it immediately, but if it held firm, down the hind paw went. *Heel*.

It was darker than he expected. He was starting to wish he hadn’t pulled the door to behind him, but it was too late to turn back now. There was only a faint flicker of light at the bottom, not orange like a lantern, but pale blue, so he pricked up his ears and raised his nose. The warm air wafted up to meet him, rich with smells. Most were familiar, leather, iron shavings and coal dust, and yet others were new, neither comforting nor unpleasant, but metallic, piquant, and even

sweet.

It was his ears that had the hard job. One scarcely needed to be a fox to discern the hoary breath of the forge, but no amount of straining would raise the two voices above that of a whisper. It wasn't until his heel rested flat on the middle stair that the murmured m's, hanging h's and sibilant s's finally merged together into words.

'... closer you are to the jaws, the more effort it takes. It's all about leverage. You ain't no tool, so let the tool do the work. Put your hoof further down the handle and try again.'

'Hey, that is easier.'

'Told ya. Now just line it up with the others, and... that's it. Second-best one I've seen today. A little more curl around the edges, and it could've been plucked straight out of the bushes by the iron doors.'

'Except that they're shrub roses. This is a polyantha.'

'Yeah, well it's also made from steel, wise guy. Point is, you're gettin' there. Don't believe me? Just look at what you're doin'—'

Creak!

Shiro silently cursed the staircase, along with his own inept hind paws. He'd been so absorbed by the conversation, he hadn't been paying attention. 'Just me!' he called, in as casual a tone as it was possible to force. He hopped down the few remaining steps and turned the corner.

He found the two of them leaning over a broad work table, lit up by the impressive blue flames of the crane's brick-lined forge. Peito had been slouched over it, one supportive wing on Allie's shoulder and the other directing him, but his demeanour changed the moment he saw Shiro. He appeared to grow two feet instantaneously. 'Just like I said,' he grunted. 'Useless.'

He flicked the pair of pliers from the goat's grasp and swept a heavy dust sheet over the table before Shiro could spy its contents. The indiscernible lumps beneath the hemp gave nothing away. 'How many times have I gotta tell you, wether? Look at what you're doin'!'

Allie caught on quickly. 'Jeez. I'm sorry, okay? I thought a good workman wasn't supposed to blame his tools.'

'Hey, kid, you're no tool. Tools are useful, and bad tools can be fixed or melted down for scrap. You're a royal pain in the tail feathers is what you are. Now go check if Kon needs something broken. Shiro and I have some serious business to attend to. I'm gonna see if I can't use him to keep my armour safe, get the Shrine Keepers off my back and strike off those duties while there's still tea to save, all with the same stone. What can I say? Ain't nobody more efficient at killin' birds than another bird.'

In an extremely uncharacteristic move, the goat left without further comment, though his gaze lingered a moment on the dust sheet before he took to the stairs. 'Later, Shiro.'

From the sound of it, he bungled his step just before he made it to the top of the landing, where the paper door slammed shut not once, but twice for good measure. Then, Peito and Shiro were alone. The crane wasted no time returning the loose pair of pliers to the back wall. The tools hanging from his extensive rack were ordered first by type, then by size, and finally condition. He moved each of them one space along to make room for the set. They were the third-oldest pair in the smallest plier section.

Judging from the age of some of the pieces, it seemed that trying to convince the crane to part ways with his equipment would be like pulling teeth, which, appropriately enough, if the mood were to take him, he had innumerable implements

for. As far as Peito was concerned, if it still worked, it still had a place on his wall. He gazed upon his collection, wiped his oil-marred wings on his leather smock, and gave a non-committal grunt.

‘Don’t like it.’

Shiro turned to him. ‘The pliers?’

‘The name. May be five letters long, the second-best length for any name, but it’s also duller than old coals. Shiro fits you about as well as your clothes did before Kon worked her magic. How’s it compare with the first?’

‘The first? Well, I... don’t know.’ Shiro’s tail wilted until it brushed the back of his legs. Admitting it out loud felt almost like swearing. ‘I lost all memory of it when Lady Umeboshi put it down in the Folio no Shinzo.’

‘You tellin’ me you didn’t think to write it down first?’

‘I didn’t even know that was an option.’

‘Huh. Well at least you’ll never make that mistake again. Imagine not even knowin’ your own name. I guess you don’t need to. You’ll have to tell me what it’s like sometime.’

‘You mean you still know yours?’

‘Course.’ Peito nodded. ‘I was never gonna be just another name under the wrap of that mouser’s golden chains. Your name is what you are, and what you are is all you’ve got. Only a coward or a fool’d give that up to someone else.’ The worst part of listening to the crane’s words was that Shiro couldn’t even bring himself to disagree. Shiro? No, he wasn’t Shiro. Not really. The name had been chosen for him, just like everything else. Hell, even the choice had been chosen for him. Perhaps he really was a reed after all.

‘But everybody can’t be a coward or a fool. What about all the other animals in Anzen?’

The crane shrugged. ‘I rest my case.’

‘And Allie?’

‘Rest my case.’

‘And Kon?’

Peito scowled. ‘I told her not to.’

‘So does that make her a coward, or a fool?’

Peito glared at him like he was contemplating in how many separate pieces on the floor the fox’s jaw would look best.

He’d never been more relieved to be a guest. ‘Look, she chose her cuffs. Would it better if I chained her to my wings and told her I was her jailer? It’s not my place. Wouldn’t be with her in the first place if she weren’t smart enough to make her own choices.’

‘With her? So you are together?’

‘Course. I’d pluck out every feather for her, and her every whisker for me, though I’ll be counting worms before she could get to the third. If I happen to hear talk of that outside these walls, however, you and I will be takin’ a little fly together. And a crane’s wings can get awful tired this time of year. Understand?’ Shiro nodded. ‘Great! Now are you gonna help me or what? I may be one of the finest metalworkers you ever had the good fortune to bother, but even my armour ain’t walkin’ itself.’

As Shiro followed Peito to the armour stands, weaving past empty tabletops, he kept his eyes sharp for origami cranes. Unfortunately, the only crane he could find was very much life-sized, but what didn’t pass him by was just how neat and orderly the rest of the room was. It was neither better nor worse than the explosion of cosy chaos upstairs. Just different. ‘The basement’s not at all how I imagined it.’

‘The what?’

‘The basement.’

There was a pause. ‘Yeah, we don’t really bother with

those in Nahashi. The typhoons, earthquakes and damp see to that. This is just the forge. Go round the back and it follows the slope of the street. And how's it different anyhow?'

'Oh, it's much nicer. Cleaner.'

Peito clicked his beak. 'I'll take that for the compliment it might've been, instead of the insult that it was.'

Forge

'Course it's clean. That's why I live here. How's a crane s'posed to work if there's more loose books, cushions and patchwork than floor? It's Kon that needs the clutter. In five minutes' time, the handles from my old snips will be somethin' new. You think birds are bad? I've never seen a crane line her nest like she does. At least down here, you can still see your talons.'

That was an understatement if ever Shiro had heard one. Underneath the workshop, everything had its place, even if Shiro didn't recognise half of the equipment. It was a regimented room of hard corners and straight lines. The work tables filed rank just like the forging hammers, quenching buckets and jars of oils and waxes, all under the cool light of the forge's ethre-blue flames. The hammers in particular looked to be absolutely lethal in the right wings.

'This seems like a great place to be on a bad day. For you, I mean. Not for whatever you're making.'

'Hardly. You won't make much worth a damn like that. You wanna let your anger out, you stick your head in the forge or go pick a fight in the Red Lantern. When you've cooled down again, then you deserve the hammer. This stuff is art, don't ya know? Painters don't go around beatin' pigment into their scrolls.'

'It might be more fun if they did though.'

Peito chuckled. ‘What d’ya mean “might be”?’

There were several things that immediately caught the curious fox’s attention. There was a marvellous piece of craftsmanship in the corner, a lock box wrought from a single piece of iron. It was sculpted in the shape of a closed wing, though there were no latches or locking mechanisms to speak of. When he enquired about its contents, all the crane would say was that it held something more precious than all his works put together. Considering how seriously the crane took his work, Shiro couldn’t begin to imagine what was concealed within. It was very beautiful. Perhaps all it held was more versions of itself, each one slightly smaller than the last. It was as good a guess as any.

Another such item was Peito’s masakari, a luxurious green axe that looked to be carved entirely from jade. It may well have been the deadly mottled edge that drew Shiro’s eye, or the feathered tassel that joined the axe from heel to blade, but what Shiro found most curious was its positioning. Every other weapon was surrounded by tens of its kin in tightly organised racks on the floor. This one had been given pride of place on the wall, where it hung from the tassel on its own hook. It was the only jade weapon of its kind.

The most mundane thing he noticed may well have been the most fascinating, if not incriminating, of the lot. Most of it was hidden underneath the dust sheet, but he saw enough sticking out from the broad work table to know that it was part of a simple mechanism. There were gears, pulleys and counterweights, all centred around a hammer with a shortened handle, and a steel round shaped like the sounding block of a gavel. When he walked past, he couldn’t resist the urge to unsheathe a claw and give one of the counterweights a prod, only to have a heart attack when the hammer suddenly struck

down on the table, making the cast steel sing.

Ring! Round and round the mechanism went, and the hammer with it, until it was lined up for another shot. *Ring!* Peito dashed back to the table, but he wasn't fast enough to stop the hammer coming down one last time. *Ring!*

The crane was mute as he gathered the mechanism together and hastily stashed it under the dust sheet. It was the only time he could remember seeing Peito nervous. He exchanged a look with Shiro, and Shiro nodded back. That was all that needed to be said.

Peito's collection of armour was no less impressive than the rest of the works on display. There was the classic red armour of the samurai, with its famous crested helm and scaled cuirass. There were lightweight jackets of iron-plated karuta mail, thin enough to roll up into a ball, and barrel-chested nanban pieces inspired by the West, designed for the sole purpose of soaking up as many tanegashima rounds as possible. Suspended over the stands on fine threads were wing guards and gilded horn toppers, claw grips, talon blades and kiseru battle pipes. He wondered how often Peito borrowed them from the display. The tubes themselves were spotless, and polished to a fault, but Shiro's nose didn't lie.

The loose pieces included boiled leather greaves and vambraces suspiciously similar to Sinn's, and an angry, long-beaked Tengu mask that Shiro was shocked to see within a hundred miles of the crane's forge. Work really was just work as far as Peito was concerned. If only Shiro knew what the crane would make of the current cultural exchange regarding the damaging effects of traditional media stereotypes on avian-mammalian relations. Something told him his response wouldn't have changed in the slightest.

It was only at the tail end that Shiro came face to face with

Peito's latest masterpiece. It wasn't nearly as big as he remembered it being since last he saw it, but the grotesque expression on the mask curled his toes just as quickly. The jet-black armour plating rested against a full-body jacket of mail that drank firelight like nothing else. The detailing was immaculate, the rings themselves darker than night, and yet if he looked close enough, colours seemed to swirl in an inky slick between the gaps. 'Beautiful, ain't it? Doesn't even have its own name yet, but still. What a beauty.'

Shiro had to agree. He was all but certain that he'd never see its like again. Imagine his surprise, then, when the crane stepped behind the stand and dragged out its doppelgänger from nowhere. The second set was indistinguishable from the first in every way, save for the detailing, which like a mirror image ran from left to right, instead of right to left. Peito could only pull them so far apart. They both shared the left leg, which jumped when the second stand had moved as far as the first would allow.

When the two sets of armour were side by side, sharing their strange conjoined leg in the middle, Peito looked up at Shiro and grinned. So this was what the crane needed help with. 'You ever pounded mochi before, boy?'

'Is that a euphemism?'

'If you hafta ask, then no, it ain't.'

'In that case, I haven't.'

'That's just as well, because this is absolutely nothing like poundin' mochi. Would've been useful though. I guess I'll have to try somethin' else. You ever had an ingrown feather?'

Shiro didn't like where this was going. 'Do I really have to answer that?'

'Only if you don't wanna be out of a job.'

He sighed. 'Yes, I've had ingrown fur before. Everyone

has, I hope.'

'Good. Now you know what it's like when you start pullin' at it. It's all tough and waxy, so you gotta go slow. But as it starts to come lose, it gets quicker and easier until it's so smooth, it even stops hurtin'—'

'Yes, yes, I know what you mean!'

'Great. Well that's pretty much exactly what we'll be doin', except the bit about it hurting less.' Shiro gulped. 'Hey, I never said you're the one that's gonna be hurtin'. You got the easy job. All you've gotta do is pull when I tell you, like a midwife, or a sake thief hostin' barrels over the monastery wall. I'm the one that's supposed to be manufacturin' ten years of hard graft out of thin air. Before we even get started, I'm gonna need a straight shot of ethre and ten minutes of quiet. You ever pulled an unsheathed uchigatana out of your behind?' Shiro shook his head. 'Me neither. Let's find out what that's like.'

And so, in a rather unceremonious fashion, they began.

It was a slow, laborious process, most of which involved patiently sitting still and fearing further instruction. In other words, it was just like the average university seminar. He felt right at home. Shiro held the original set of armour at the knee, gripping the cool obsidian plates tightly while Peito paced around the room, muttering things not meant for vulpine ears. Sometimes, he'd stop dead, raise a leg and stand perfectly still. Other times, he'd lower himself to the ground to meditate for minutes on end, and once, he even fed his own wing to the hungry flames of the forge, dispassionately watching his feathers curl without scorching.

Shiro watched everything. He was often confused, and sometimes concerned, but he never asked questions. It wasn't his place to interrupt. His role was to be there for the rare

moments when Peito would bound up to him, practically buzzing with inspiration, and place both wings to the armour. There followed long, painful stretches of silence. There would be sighs, hisses and beak clicks, but then...

‘Pull.’

And Shiro would gently pull the two legs of armour apart. To start with, the difference was minuscule, so small, he couldn’t be sure they were moving at all before the whole process had to be started again, but over time, it grew to inches. Slowly but surely, like a butterfly from a chrysalis or a snake from its own skin, the second leg of armour shed the first. Solid plates of metal came seemingly from thin air, like a mirror being pulled back, but there was nothing miraculous about it. The labour was written plain as day across Peito’s face.

By the time Shiro parted heel from toe in a single smooth movement, separating the two sets of armour for good, Peito wasn’t the only one sighing with relief. ‘Is it over?’

‘Hell, it’s better than over,’ Peito told him between pants. His red crown was dripping. ‘It’s done. They can take it. They’ll never know the difference. Hell, if you asked me drunk, I might not even know. So what d’ya want?’

‘Pardon?’

‘For your time.’

‘Oh, I didn’t expect there to be payment. I thought you didn’t use currency here.’

‘We don’t,’ he grunted. ‘But I’m not sendin’ you on your way with empty pockets for services rendered. Work is work is work. There must be somethin’ you want.’

‘Well I’d love to know if there are any cherry blossom trees around,’ Shiro mumbled to himself.

‘Pardon?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Look, I don’t much care for flowers. Foxes are supposed to have good noses, when they can see past the end of ‘em, that is. Try following it. I’d have thought you’d wanna know how to get home.’

Shiro’s tail jumped. In a heartbeat, the crane had his undivided attention, and they both knew it. ‘All you have to do to return to the world of the livin’ is to make it back through that waterfall. Many have tried, and some even succeeded, if you believe the rumours.’ The crane’s feathers brushed over the handle of the jade masakari. ‘Returned to their own bodies and everythin’. Now ain’t that a trick?’

‘If it was that really simple, there wouldn’t be a soul left in Anzen,’ Shiro said, forcing the words through the growing lump in his throat.

‘Eh? I said all you had to do was get through the waterfall. I didn’t say there was nothin’ simple about it. But that’s not somethin’ I could give you anyway, even aside from the rules. You want silk? We’ve got rolls of the stuff. Very precious in a world with no worms. How ‘bout weapons? No? Well I didn’t have you down as the murderin’ type, but it don’t hurt to ask. Not most of the time, anyway. What about jewellery, or clothes? Any threads from the past that you wish you were wearin’ right now? Anything you saw on your betters? I could have you lookin’ flash as a lord in no time flat, provided your memory’s up to the job. Wouldn’t be a pinprick on what we just did. Wouldn’t take the two months we advertise neither, but don’t tell our customers that.’

Shiro was at a loss for words. Hope had been pulled out from underneath him no sooner than it appeared. What did it matter what petty trinkets the crane could give him, compared to that? What could he possibly want for? The only thing he

could think of was how much his hind paws missed his old pair of trainers. Was it possible that the waraji rein of terror was finally over? ‘So you could make me anything I wanted, so long as I remember it?’

‘That’s the deal. They don’t call me master for nothin’.’

In the silence, faint voices drifted down through the floorboards. A comment was made, and then Shiro heard Allie’s laughter. His whiskers rose as a smile slowly crept across his face. ‘Anything?’

Streets

‘Can you believe it? I can’t believe it. I can’t believe she actually said yes.’

‘Congratulations!’

‘Kon’s never taken on an apprentice before, but I just know she’ll be great. She’d make the best school teacher, wouldn’t she? She’s so smart and understanding, with a smile so pretty it makes you ashamed to be a goat, and she never shouts at you, or calls you a waste of good wool when you screw up.’

‘So you’re going to learn how to make clothes?’

‘Well that’s kinda what I thought too. Apparently, that’s what seamstresses do. She’s a tailor, which is something different, but she kinda knows how to do it all anyway, because that’s just how amazing she is. Makes sense to me. If I had a couple hundred years to kill, I’d get really good at my job too. She says she wants to teach me how to sew, knit, fold paper, make patterns... and something about helping her with her joinery.’

‘Joinery?’

‘Yeah. There’s this thing where you put a broken cup back together with gold glue, so you can still see the cracks. Kin

something, I think it was. Kinsari? Kinsugo?’

‘Kintsugi?’

‘That’s the one! It’s bad luck if you break them yourself, but she loves doing it. She said she might have more opportunities to practise with me around.’

‘I think she may have been joking, Allie.’

‘Oh, haha. M-maybe.’ The goat flopped his long ears over two rouge cheeks. ‘Thanks for not saying it’s a dumb idea, by the way. What with my stupid hooves and all.’ He lifted a hoof from the cart, glaring at his thick-nailed digits as though hating them enough would transform them before his very eyes. ‘I know I’m no raccoon, but nobody works harder than I do when given a chance, and I wanted to say thank you for all the times they’ve helped me out. That, and it’ll make me feel a little easier around Peito.’

The cart wheel jumped on a stray pebble and lurched dramatically, almost taking their cargo with it. Shiro insisted upon checking the armour personally. He didn’t want a certain someone seeing what else lay beneath the dust sheet. After making sure it was okay, he gave it a quick pat before he pulled the sheet back over. ‘You know, I really don’t think Peito minds you drinking tea over there.’

‘You sure? He’s so loud about it.’

‘Yeah, but some animals are like that, you know? Tough love. It’s their way of showing they care.’

‘Could’ve fooled me,’ Allie sighed. ‘I’d be more than happy with just the love. You can take or leave the tough. Isn’t everything else tough enough already?’

High above the streets of Anzen, the lights of Shoganai Tower were aglow, golden lanterns twinkling brighter than stars against a blue sky. The finial at the very top pulsed yellow light, and all around, there was an unnatural stillness.

It reminded Shiro of how it felt just before a kiba-kiba disappeared. The air was dry, the moment itself trapped in perpetual anticipation. It was like an unscratchable itch, a sneeze waiting forever on the horizon, just out of—

Clunk!

‘Sorry,’ the goat apologised. Shiro heaved the old cart back on the road and shook his head.

‘No, that one’s definitely on me. I wasn’t paying attention.’ Helping Allie with the cart opened Shiro’s eyes to just how much trouble the goat had gone to the previous night. It was no mean feat, dragging someone all the way to Shoganai Tower on your own. ‘I was thinking about what it was like the last time we used this cart,’ he said.

A wicked grin spread through Allie’s face. He pulled the cart around. ‘I won’t tell if you don’t,’ he said.

‘What do you mean?’ Shiro yelped. ‘I’m not getting back in that thing!’ Allie grabbed his sleeve and mockingly pulled him back towards the cart. Shiro played along. Allie was a clear foot shorter; there was no way his hind paws were moving an inch otherwise.

‘Hear that?’ Allie said. He turned his head and made the sound of a tremulous whistle. ‘The old cart’s calling to you, T—Shiro. You’ve gotta answer it. Don’t be rude. You know what they do around here to folks that are rude.’

‘Yeah,’ Shiro said. ‘They put them in the cart!’ They both laughed. ‘But seriously, you didn’t have to help me out last night. You could have left me to drift into the wind like a birthday balloon, but you didn’t. You could have said no when Kon and Peito wanted you to take the cart to the tower, but you didn’t. I’ve been racking my brain all day about how I might pay you back. If there was anything I could do...’

A flash of golden lightning stopped the thought dead in its

tracks. Shiro and Allie dropped the cart handle in perfect unison and looked up to the sky. There were three blinding pulses from the top of the tower. Each one was eerily silent. Then, after a few moments, a solid beam of light shot straight up, so bright, Shiro couldn't bear to look at it. What followed were three primordial rumbles, so deep, it felt like they were coming from within his own chest. He couldn't tell whether he was growling or not. It felt like they were all growling together. The world itself had bared its teeth.

Then, the light vanished. The lanterns pattered out in the breeze, and it was like nothing had ever happened. He turned to Allie. 'Was that... Sobo?'

'Huh?' The goat still had his ears tightly wrapped up. Shiro unfurled one and repeated the question into it. Allie nodded. 'You never really get used to that either. That's only the second time I've ever seen someone go up. You think you're finally settled in, and then something like that goes and happens. I just hope wherever she is, she's at peace now.'

'Me too. I'm sure she is,' he lied. As far as life and death were concerned, the only thing Shiro could be sure about was that he wasn't sure about anything anymore, but it was a nice thought all the same. And if half the village were to be believed, it was well deserved.

'So what is it you were saying?'

'Oh, that.' Shiro shrugged. 'It's nothing important. I just wanted to give you this.' He pulled the straw hat out from under the sheet and offered it to him.

Allie stared back at the hat.

'Well?'

His big blue eyes may have been wide, but the rest of his face was a blank canvas.

'Allie? Allie?' Shiro inched one step closer, bracing

himself to catch him.

Internally, he was starting to panic. He'd only seen it for a few seconds before he knocked it clean off Allie's head and made history of the thing. He hoped the details were correct. It had been large for his size, that much he knew, cone-shaped with a wide brim, but without a chin strap. At the top was some simple embroidery of two intersecting blades of grass. He couldn't remember if the design had featured ear holes or horn holes. On that matter, he had deferred to the expert, a crane in possession of neither, who seemed to recall two cutouts for either horn.

When it looked like Allie wasn't going to be moving anytime soon, Shiro pressed the straw hat into his hooves and respectfully stepped back. The goat blinked. Though his eyes were still unseeing, his hooves began to feel around the familiar edges of woven straw. The back of a nail brushed over the embroidery work. He was quite lost for words. 'For me...?'

'Of course. I hope you like it.'

'Like it? Like it?' Allie slipped the hat over his horns and burst out laughing. It fit him like a Tack and Thimble glove. 'I love it!' He zipped into Shiro like a bullet, almost knocking the fox off his hind paws. 'It's perfect.'

Shiro felt a glow of pride as he returned the hug. 'Well I couldn't just leave you hatless, could I? Not after ruining the last one.' He never thought in a million years that he'd be responsible for bringing another hat into the world. Deep down, he felt like Finn would approve. His eyes were already beginning to smart at the thought. 'Now come on,' he added quickly with a smile, 'or we'll never get this duty done.'

'I'll finish it,' Allie proudly declared. He flicked his new hat up and took the handle in his hooves.

‘Are you sure?’ He wasn’t sure why he was asking. The goat’s test stomps seemed pretty decisive. Was it just Shiro, or did he seem slightly taller too?

‘Hell yeah, I’m sure! This is the best day I’ve had since I got here. Just do one thing for me, okay? Take my duty, and break them both into a zillion pieces. Really smooch them up. It’s prettier if you do it quickly.’ Allie took the blue tablet from his necklace and handed it over.

‘I really don’t mind lending a paw,’ Shiro said. ‘You don’t have to do this.’

‘Neither did you. Still did though. I guess that’s what really makes the difference at the end of the day, huh? Doing the stuff you don’t have to do. Maybe that stuff is actually the most important stuff of all. Or maybe I’m just giddy as a goat.’ He tilted his hat to Shiro before he left, trailing dust and endless mirth in his wake. Shiro watched until he was out of sight. More than one stone lantern joined the goat on his run.

When he finally stopped chuckling, the fox took both tablets in his paw and closed his fingers over them. Blue light throbbled faintly through the cracks. A little effort, and the pendants were dust in the wind. The light melted from the crumpled characters and rose into the air as blue wisps. One duty down. He watched them drift away, noticing only then how much the position of the sun had changed. He wondered how much longer he had until the next one.

This time, his paw only made it halfway to his pocket before he caught himself. And so his labours began.

Author's Note:

'Thank you...'

Thank you for reading Chapter Seven of *The End Where It Begins*! I hope you enjoyed the start of Act Three! Keep your eyes peeled for Chapter Eight, which is coming soon!

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

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

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

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