

—TALES FROM—

*Terra  
Fauna*

Mae L. Strom

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*Content warning: Contains strong language, mature themes, and scenes of a sexual nature between consenting male adults.*

*(18+)*

*C R O S S E D*  
**SWORDS**



## *ichi*

It was not yet daybreak when Jiro awoke, his tail still sore from the ecstasy of the previous night. His first thoughts leapt to his sword. Before the tiger had even opened his eyes, a well-practised paw swept the ground before him, to no avail. Cracking the striped knuckle of his forefinger, he allowed the dust to trickle through his claws. He must have left it back at the entrance. After twenty years of serving the Tsuki Clan, there was only one vice left that could induce such sloppiness in him, and it wasn't the sake, though there had certainly been no shortage of that either.

These were dangerous times. With civil war looming on the horizon, family was poised to fight against family. This would be a war unlike any Jiro had seen before, enough to bleed the realm dry of its fighting-age males, and, if the worst came to worst and the southern famine spread, starve the unfortunate mothers and cubs left behind. A warrior that slept without his sword at his side wouldn't be a warrior for long, and there were as many enemies of the samurai as there were farmers in Sakurai. Luckily, Jiro was nestled in the arms of the next best thing. Another samurai.

Like the yellow sun at the heart of his clan's crest, Kichi burned brightly, even in his sleep. Contending with the brisk night air, Jiro pressed himself closer, eagerly drinking in the heat radiating from his

stripes. Between the other tiger's legs was something even hotter. It prodded along the small of his back, searching in vain for somewhere warm to bury itself. If it found what it was looking for, Jiro knew that he wouldn't be going anywhere for the rest of the day.

The thought was not entirely an unpleasant one. It was not unknown for the shorter tiger to rut in his sleep, and without his usual cocksure restraint, it would be a ride like no other. More than once, Jiro had awoken to find Kichi still moving inside of him, leaving him slick, sore, and wanting more. Over the years, the two warriors had crossed swords on every rock, beside every brook and behind every waterfall, in every conceivable configuration, and not once had Jiro regretted a single one of their sparring sessions.

Until today.

It was with a heavy heart that Jiro extricated himself from Kichi's embrace. He laid his arms beside him on the tatami mat, marvelling at the finely sculpted figure before him. Sometimes, on those rare evenings when Jiro permitted himself to lay exposed, Kichi would explore him with a finger, tracing over old wounds from which his fur would never grow again, like slender veins of farmland, once fertile, now razed to the ground. He claimed it was out of jealousy, but Jiro wasn't sure he believed him. 'I can't wait to show off my own battle scars, if my wits and claws should ever grow as slow as yours!' as he so graciously put it.

Anybody fool enough to be jealous of another tiger's ill-earned stripes would surely find a way to earn his own, Jiro reasoned, and yet Kichi's skin was as smooth as the day he'd been born, from the pillowy mountains of muscle protruding from his chest to the fuzzy rivulets that ran down to his naval, contracting and relaxing with every breath. For a peasant toiling away on the fields from spring to snowfall, it would have been impressive. Lessons learned from an errant kama swing were not soon forgotten. But for a samurai, let alone one with so sanguine a reputation, it was nigh on unheard of.

Kichi's twin braids were symmetrical and straight, his perfect, kissable

pink-tipped nose had never been broken, and his jawline had been sculpted by demons to be handsome even during its cruellest sneers. And his eyes? Frankly, the less said about his eyes, the better. *And somehow, he's lying in my bed. I'd think that I was dreaming, if only I possessed the imagination to conjure him.*

Offering his lover a tender kiss for the road, Jiro murmured his apologies and rose to his knees, only to feel a tug from behind. Kichi's tail was still wrapped around his own, the last limb obstinately refusing to let him go. Luckily, Jiro possessed the one thing that Kichi's money could never buy him, something he could only dream of having. *Patience.* Slow as the trickle of a sōzu fountain stream, Jiro unwound his tail, stealing it back one stripe at a time. Kichi's tail could sense Jiro's absence, but without its owner to investigate further, it contented itself with the next best thing. It encircled Kichi's bare arm like a lovesick viper, eliciting a brusque snort from its master whenever the tip tickled under his nose.

Once the world had been spared from Jiro's nakedness, he bent down to retrieve his short sword. It was waiting for him by his helmet, unapologetically crossed beneath Kichi's. The two swords could not have been more different. Like all of Jiro's possessions, his wakizashi was unadorned, from its weathered handle to its deceptively keen edge, concealed within an oversized wooden scabbard that would scarcely draw a second glance at a marketplace. *A thing only survives long enough to be weathered by standing the test of time,* Jiro thought proudly. *Never stake your life on unseasoned steel.* Kichi's tachi, on the other hand, was as outrageously ostentatious an affront to taste and common decency as one was likely to find this side of the Sakuranese shoreline. Its engraved blade was jet-black, the handle a violent red, and its scabbard nothing less than the golden impression of a tiger's maw, into whose waiting jaws the wielder was expected to deposit their steel after a fight. Freshly forged, it was impractically long, unreasonably beautiful, and had absolutely no place within a thousand shakus of a real battlefield. But then again, neither did Kichi.

## CROSSED SWORDS

True beauty, as the poets say, was as rare as good china, and every bit as fragile. Why should that matter to someone such as him? The only duty of a samurai was to their daimyo, and to their daimyo alone. Jiro knew it well. He was sworn to serve Lord Oshi until the day he died. But he also knew that he would never stay his blade if it meant the loss of some great beauty in the world, be it grown, written, painted, woven, or sung. Not long ago, the gods had entrusted him with a great beauty, the likes of which Sakurai had never seen, and what had he done with their trust? Why, he had murdered it, of course. He had murdered it using nothing more than his tongue.

Slinging his wakizashi loosely through his sash, Jiro retreated out into the night, hoping to find solace beneath the moon. His lover was already dead where he lay. He just didn't know it yet.





*ni*

It was in the early hours of the morning that Jiro felt the most connected to the world around him. Pearly drops of dew were still forming on the maiden grass, and the shadow of the moon was still clinging to the high heavens. Kichi may have been a tiger of the sun, but the day was not yet here, and the night was Jiro's domain, just as the crescent moon belonged to his clan. This was the only time Jiro felt comfortable loosening his topknot, unstringing his fundoshi and letting the current take him, like he was still that little tiger cub living alone, half-wild, in the mountains.

There was nothing more bracing for the mind, body and spirit than a stream whose bitterness the sun had yet to temper. Jiro watched the breath of the water roll off the surface in waves, matching the streams coming from his own nostrils as he shivered in delight. Lesser swimmers would have perished there and then, lock-limbed and gasping to the last, but Jiro was born for this, from the heavy layers of fur insulating his strong, muscular core, to the fine webbing that stretched between his fingers and toes. The tiger submerged, resurfaced, then submerged again, gliding between misty pillars of moonlight as effortlessly as the dragons of yore were once fabled to glide through the clouds.

More than once, the temptation arose to linger beneath the surface a little longer. To hold his breath until his cheeks were bulging, his claws

were scrabbling and his lungs were screaming, and then to let the cold in, all at once. Two or three deep, icy draughts ought to do it, filling him up inside until he was fit to bursting, and then it would all be over. The current would be strong enough to carry his body away, somewhere Kichi wouldn't have to see it. Wherever it washed up, the beasts of the land were welcome to their fill. A natural death was the only way to ensure that Kichi wouldn't seek retribution for his passing, or worse, attempt to join him. Shortly after he'd been born, Kichi's father had attempted to drown him in a lake, along with his littermates. He hadn't set foot in water since.

Yes, perhaps this was the way to go. No stones, no armour, no fanfare. Just an act of pure will. *As all life comes from water, so too must life return to it*, Jiro mused to himself, running his pads through the soft silt bed at the bottom as a tree frog darted just out of paw's reach. The bubbles erupting from his muzzle didn't evade his attention, trailing like precious strings of pearls. It would be an honour to become part of the soft silt bed lining the world, feeding the next generation of farmers, poets, fighters, lovers and leaders. Jiro could only hope that they'd be more fortunate than he was. Learning to die was the first, and final, lesson for a samurai. Some would say it was the only true test.

Soon enough, the pearls were churning to foam before his eyes. If Jiro could only hold his nerve, then Kichi wouldn't have to die. Jiro would be able to stay true to his heart, without disobeying his daimyo and disgracing his clan. One of them may yet survive this war.

The heart's drum is loudest when it senses the final beat approaching. This far below the surface, Jiro could barely hear a thing, but the thrumming in his eardrums was unmistakable. Never before had his duty consisted of doing absolutely nothing. It should have been as simple as closing his eyes, as simple as waiting for the oil lantern's waning flame to fizzle out after a long night's reading, and yet when his final breath escaped him, and the stream's icy claws closed around his throat, he found his own claws rising to meet them. Decades of discipline were

overtaken in an instant by instincts as old as instinct itself. He tried to push off from the bottom, but he must have been even deeper than he thought. His groping soles found no purchase, only clouding the crystal waters with silt until right was left, down was up, and everything was darkness. Even the moonlight vanished beneath the murk. In all the confusion, he made the mistake of opening his mouth, and that's when the cold rushed in.

Sake burns sweetly, and fire burns jealously, but the water that scorched Jiro's lungs burned with a bitterness beyond belief. By now, he knew that he only had precious moments left before his fight was over. Without his well-honed senses to guide him, his powerful limbs were useless. Even the sharpest sword is only ever as sharp as its owner. He was all but ready to curse his tail, still swaying obliviously behind him, when he suddenly realised what was making it move in the first place. *The current!* The stream was coursing straight through him, which meant that he was wasting valuable energy fighting against it. Still blind, he reorientated himself in the water.

But which way to swim? He was already choking on his second breath when his tail drifted over his ears, colder at the tip than the tailbone. Before Jiro even had time to think, his instincts knew where to go. The top of a river always runs warmer, because warm water rises. When he used to fish for his breakfast every morning, the hardest part was never entering the water, but rather leaving the tepid shallows for the icier depths. Was that always the case, even when the sun wasn't there to heat it? Jiro's mind was fast losing the capacity for reasoning, but his body, with all its years of half-forgotten memory, was prepared to stake his life on it. The cold water was above him, which meant that Jiro needed to swim downwards, even if his legs were growing heavy, and his extremities were growing numb, and his front crawl had regressed into rapid one-armed flailing whilst the other clutched at his throat, claws bared as if ready to tear apart a thousand invisible foes. *Swim down*, he told himself, thrashing against the darkness. Somehow, his

## CROSSED SWORDS

tail propelled him through the endless murk...

Until finally he broke through the surface, gasping and twitching on the bankside like a freshly landed trout. Every time he opened his muzzle, muddy water spilled out, running over his whiskers and soaking into the rushes until his lungs were empty, his chest was heaving, and the bank was slick with bile. But he was alive. 'Never again!' the samurai spluttered, twisting onto his back as the first rays rose to swallow the moon. Beneath the blushing light of day, he pressed a paw over his exposed manhood, wiping his muzzle with a shudder. 'Never again...'



*san*

It is as important to understand your environment as it is to know your opponent, if you don't wish to have another enemy to contend with. As Jiro was preparing to strike, he closed his eyes, reconstructing the world around him. The field of wild blood grass tickling at his ankles only extended as far as the copse up ahead, where it melted into the shadow of the pines. The shadow's direction told him that he was facing due east, and the sweet scent of pine, tinged with fresh tree blood, told him that he was downwind, but he knew that already from the way the grass brushed his bare paws. The wounded trees were Kichi's doing, Jiro knew, though the thought should have ended there. Kichi never used a honing pad to tend to his claws, least of all when offered one. 'The world is my scratching mat,' as he always said. And didn't the forests of the world know it?

Too late, Jiro realised that he had become distracted. Relinquishing his sword handle, the tiger cursed himself silently, using language better saved for a place where even the wind can't hear you. Two failures in one day was impressive, given that the day had barely begun. *It was no failure*, Jiro contended. *Failure would be allowing yourself the luxury of death when you have already given in to fear. Farmers die afraid. Mothers die afraid. Coin counters, basket weavers and hoof polishers all die afraid,*

*but never samurai. Never samurai. Now once more, from the beginning.*  
The soil beneath his paws was moist, packed loosely...

With his katana still under wraps in the tent, Jiro's wakizashi would have to suffice, but it was just as well. Enemies were rarely considerate enough to let you rifle through your arsenal before they began their assault. More often than not, the weapon that saved your life wasn't the noble katana that all hot-blooded samurai secretly dreamt of dying with, or the more practical hachiwari that you'd drilled a thousand times before. It was simply the weapon to hand, be it a fan, a pipe, or even, in one regrettable instance, a red-hot sticky mochi skewer, fresh from the fireplace. For as long as he lived, Jiro would never forget the sizzle that it made sliding through the eyehole of the bandit's paper mask.

Fortunately, they were far from prying eyes here. Jiro had made camp in the middle of nowhere, the only place he could ever truly call home. The big cities all turned his stomach, what with their endless festivals and high walls, which were still never high enough to block out the desperate cries for millet and seed, though one was expected to pretend otherwise. Nobody living within walls too grand to scale meant well for the world. Here, there was almost nothing to disturb the horizon. When a gust of wind blew through the fields, you could track its progress right up until the moment it hit you, tousling your fur fondly like the fingers of a loved one. Somewhere behind him, Jiro could even make out the faint singing of a hollow trunk over the stream. Those city musicians may consider themselves clever, conjuring notes from silk strings, hollow reeds and taut leather skins, but as far as Jiro was concerned, they had yet to match the ingenuity of the wind, for whom the world itself served as its instrument.

Once, when he was younger, Jiro believed that spirits lived in the very breath of the wind, waiting with the wisdom of ages long past for those who only had the patience to sit and listen. Jiro had need of their wisdom today. Practising his draw could only stave off the day for so long, especially when his chest was still too tight for all but the most

rudimentary stances. Closing his eyes to doubt, the samurai opened his ears to the heavens, and asked them, 'What should I do?' For the first time that morning, the winds grew still. Jiro could hardly blame them. It was rude to ask questions for which you already knew the answer.

Perhaps it would have been better if they had never met, or if they must, that one had triumphed over the other. The first time their clans fought, it was as though Jiro was fighting himself. Every stab and swipe met its brother riposte, and it was only the elements that turned the tide of battle, leaving Kichi exposed after falling prey to a slick stone. Though he paused at great length that day, Jiro ultimately relented from delivering the killing blow. Sometimes, he wondered if it would have been kinder to the both of them if he had simply finished the job.

Failing that, perhaps he ought to have feigned madness and fallen upon Kichi's blade, safe in the knowledge that at least one of them would live on. With a smile as bright and sharp as the steel of his blade, Kichi could have just about anyone in Sakurai. But he didn't want just anyone.

The first, and least successful, of Jiro's attempts to right their unspeakable wrong had been trying to find Kichi a wife. Kichi was usually receptive to new ideas, which had proven to be a boon over the years. None, in Jiro's experience, had received such an adamant rejection from the off. Nor indeed had the tiger expressed much interest in the female folk at all, despite Jiro's repeated attempts to impress upon him the numerous virtues of tigresses. 'No mistress of mine shall experience the joys of bearing fruit whilst your womb remains so woefully barren, Jiro. I won't allow it.'

'If you're waiting for me to quicken, sir, I'm afraid you'll be waiting a long time.'

'It may surprise you just how patient I can be,' Kichi had replied, 'when the object of my desires is within grasping distance.' That very night, the two tigers redoubled their efforts. Kichi wasn't known for making idle threats.

Jiro's next plan, to pair Kichi off with other samurai, proved only

marginally more successful. During their brief stay in the capital, cleverly disguised as masterless rōnin, they chanced upon the great Saburō outside the doors of the lupine master swordsmith Munemune. Waited upon hand and hoof by a zealously devoted entourage of attendees, he certainly made for quite the impression. ‘Saburō the Boulder is the strongest bull you could ever hope to meet,’ Jiro told Kichi, on the way back to the inn. ‘He’ll keep you safe. Rumour has it that he trains alone with boulders in the Kurobe Valley, because no living being can withstand his mighty blows.’

‘Mighty indeed is the warrior who makes enemies of pebbles. I’ll have to remember that, when next I grow weary of foes that fight back,’ Kichi retorted.

Next came Watashi the Sly, when stories of the shoebill’s latest cunning exploits in the imperial court flew in from the south. ‘He’s quick with his pipe, sharp as a fish knife, and besides, even the emperor himself would call him financially secure. You’d never need work again.’

‘Which is just as well. Waking up to that face every morning would be work enough.’

If he wasn’t too old, too bald, too fat, too vain, too wild, too tame, or too handsome, Kichi would be sure to find something else. Before long, he had turned his perfect nose up at just about every one of Jiro’s allies, along with, Jiro was ashamed to admit, even a few of his enemies. Konbō the White Tiger was his last resort. ‘Konbō is known for two things,’ he told Kichi one frosty morning, after yet another fruitless night. ‘The stout club at his side, and the even stouter one between his legs. There is no more experienced a lover this side of the Chūkan River.’

Kichi’s silence on the matter gave Jiro hope. Never before had he paused for thought. Perhaps the matchmaker had finally found his equal. ‘Konbō’s weapon *is* legendary,’ Kichi admitted at length, ‘as are his skills at arms. Every noblewoman in Sakurai knows it, as do half their husbands. It’s surely more than all but the most skilled lovers could handle alone.’



Jiro could barely conceal his relief. 'I'd imagine so,' he agreed. 'Then it's settled. We'll share him.'

And share him they did, many, many times, until it became the only one of Jiro's attempted matches that he did not regret. *Before I knew Kichi, I was on the verge of finally achieving inner peace. He was sent by the gods to test me, and in my moment of weakness, I failed. Like the sun, he burns too hot for the likes of mortal flesh. He will consume me utterly, from sole to whisker, and the worst part is, I cannot be sure that I would even care. I will never love another.*

Feeling a tug at his bladder, Jiro rescinded his training and took to the trees. When he was sufficiently lost among the brush, he pulled his fundoshi to one side, and relieved himself against the tallest pine. But no sooner had the stream straightened up than he shook himself off, and tucked it back in again. Something was wrong.

An easterly wind blew through the treetops, whipping up the grass and glancing off the nearby stream, but the hollow trunk was no longer singing. Why was that? Something, or to be more precise, someone, had stepped in front of it, blocking the way. *Sloppy*. Moments later, a twig snapped an arrowshot to the right. *Very sloppy*. Kichi should have known better. Always in a hurry to get the job done, instead of taking the time to do it properly. *Kichi is the lord of sloppiness*. Jiro would remind him more often, were it not for the wry retort that he could already hear ringing in his ears. He had less than a minute before his stalker came into view...

And just like that, cold steel rose from behind to kiss the ruff of his neck. Perhaps Kichi wasn't so sloppy after all. 'Did you miss me?'



*shi*

‘Does an ox miss the grindstone?’

‘Depends how good-looking the grindstone is.’

Jiro sighed. ‘A tiger’s business is his own, Kichi,’ he said. ‘If you insist on dogging me at my heels, perhaps you should have been born one instead.’

‘I’ve certainly been known to wag like one,’ came the reply. ‘When the mood takes me.’ Jiro felt Kichi’s shadow fall upon him. His warm body pressed up to him, daring him to nestle into it as the black blade lowered. One paw went to his rear, testing it as one would a ripe peach in the marketplace. The other crept around to the front. Kichi whistled at the glistening trail, which zigzagged up and down the crags of the tree trunk. ‘You know, if you needed someone to hold it straight, you could have just asked. There’s no shame in it. Tigers of your age have been known to experience certain... difficulties.’

‘Tigers of my age?’ Jiro smirked. Less than a decade separated the two of them, though Kichi wouldn’t hear a word about it. It was one of only two things in the world that Kichi refused to joke about. Fast-flowing water, and his own inexorable descent into middle age. Not that one would be able to tell by looking at him, of course. Their late-night dalliances might have raised a few more eyebrows otherwise. ‘A tiger of

my age would experience absolutely no difficulty putting you in your place.'

The paw around his rear held him firm. 'And where exactly is that?' Kichi asked him. 'Towering over you? Standing tail by tail at your side? Or perhaps kneeling beneath you, to save you the trouble of finding another bough?'

The sheer nerve of it made Jiro scoff. 'Even you're not thirsty enough for that.'

Kichi laughed. 'Are you so sure?' he said. 'Place a wager, sir, and we shall see.' Tempted though he was, Jiro knew better than to call his bluff. For someone who drew out his coin purse at the first sign of trouble, Kichi had never lost a bet.

'Thanks, but I'm not the gambling sort.'

'Of course you are! All animals wager in this crazy game of life. You're just not the winning sort. Why else would you throw in your lot with me?' Kichi dropped the strings of Jiro's loincloth with a sigh. 'Fine, have it your way. You know, you should hire yourself a dedicated taster. Shouldn't be much for someone on the Tsuki Clan's payroll. It might just save your life. There are illnesses out there that can turn your water sweet.'

Jiro remained unconvinced. 'There are far worse illnesses out there,' he said, 'such as ones that can compel a tiger to consume another's water.'

'Illnesses?' Kichi balked. 'Have you seen how much vendors charge for a fresh, steaming pot of samurai tea these days? The lepers and rotten-tails would quaff it up and ask for a second serving.'

'And the gods wouldn't soon forget who sold it to them.' Sometimes, Jiro swore that Kichi only said half the things he said in order to get a rise out of him. Then again, few things could make him rise quite like Kichi. 'To take advantage of such desperation would be... unspeakable.'

'Thank the heavens,' Kichi said, stifling a yawn. 'Then I've been saved another lecture.'

'Lesson,' Jiro gently corrected him.

‘No,’ Kichi rebuked, leaning into him until the tiger’s chest muscles strained for the effort. Rooting himself to the ground, Jiro’s paws stood firm. ‘Lessons are learned. Lectures are merely attended, and occasionally slept through.’

‘I’m sure a scholarly feline such as yourself would have no experience of that.’

Kichi rested his chin over Jiro’s shoulder. ‘Only when you’re the one teaching them,’ he whispered, adding a playful squeeze below for good measure. As his arms rose to encircle him, Jiro sighed, melting into his warmth like a snow-dappled paddy in the early days of spring. High above, cicadas serenaded them with their chirpy summer chorus. The pine trees hushed, as if to better watch the lovers in their reverie. When stripe was joined to stripe, and their strong, steady hearts beat as one, nobody could tell them that they were two separate souls.

Today, Jiro’s heart was beating a little faster than usual. He knew that Kichi could tell, because he felt his lover’s tail slowly intertwining with his own, as if to tell him that it was alright. Everything was going to be okay. But it wasn’t.

‘Kichi, I’ve done something terrible.’

Quiet curiosity gave way to rapt silence, as the forest grew still around them. Kichi’s knuckles gently brushed the cotton of Jiro’s fundoshi. ‘Don’t be ashamed,’ he whispered to Jiro. ‘It happens to the best of us. Give me ten seconds, and I’ll coax him back out.’

‘Kichi, I was being serious.’

‘And I wasn’t...?’

When the attempt at levity fell flat, Kichi nuzzled at Jiro’s neck, breathing into his fur like he was offering the tiger his life’s energy. ‘If something’s the matter, then you must allow me to make it better.’

‘As generous as your offer is, sir, I’m not sure even you are capable of that.’

‘It couldn’t hurt to try.’

This time, it was Jiro’s turn to smile. ‘I’d hate to contradict you, but

in my experience, the comfort offered by sword wielders often hurts.'

But Kichi was in no mood for japes. 'Is it me?' he said quietly. The breathlessness of his voice betrayed his genuine concern. 'If it is, just say the word, and I'll be gone. I'll... lie down in the dirt somewhere, bury myself under a rock where the worms can finally suck the sins from my bones.'

Jiro tightened his tail around Kichi's. 'It isn't you,' he said, pulling the other samurai closer. Kichi slowly released the breath that he'd been holding in. 'I don't want you to leave me.'

'Never.'

'But at the same time, you cannot stay.'

Kichi huffed. In the quiet of the forest, Jiro could practically hear his thoughts swarming over one another, like wild bees at the height of the honey season. 'If it would make you happy,' he said eventually, 'I'll give my top half to here, and my lower half to there. That way, I'll neither be staying, nor going.' He paused to smirk at a private joke. 'Or perhaps you'd like it better the other way around?'

'What I'd like is irrespective. It's what I love that will kill me.'

There was another, much longer pause. Then: 'You sound lost, Jiro.'

'I am lost, Kichi...'

After a moment, Jiro felt Kichi's fingers weaving through his own. Plump pink pads settled over his black ones, warm, callused, and familiar. 'And now you are found, never to be lost again. How can you be lost, when I have you right here?'

'Then perhaps we are both of us lost.'

Kichi shrugged. 'I'd rather lose myself with you, than be lost without you.'

'At this point, I'm not sure either of us have any say in the matter.'

At that, Kichi released a booming chuckle that broke the spell of silence in the forest. The trees all heaved a collective sigh of relief, as a four-ringed gecko sprang for cover up a nearby pine. 'As if I gave you any say before,' he gently chided, gracing Jiro's cheek with a generous

lick. 'Look, when you've finished counting the clouds in yonder azure sky, come and find me in the tent. Make it back before my armour's strapped on, and I'll even let you have my tail. It's been too long since you last made me roar.'

Kichi's tail curled under Jiro's chin, offering his lover one final caress before he strutted away, crunching down the overgrowth. 'That tiger will be the death of me,' Jiro told himself with a gulp. But sure enough, his legs followed.



*go*

‘I’m only here to talk.’

Kichi reacted with dry amusement, brandishing his indelible smile from the other side of the bed. ‘That’s what all samurai say, before their clothes fly off and their sword flies up.’ The tiger’s pearly whites were almost as keen as his wandering claws, which strutted across the lean, war-torn landscape of Jiro’s bare chest as if they owned the place. Kichi had almost certainly laid claim to it during one sparring session or another, though not in the traditional fashion. His armour sat untended in the corner, a forgotten heap of gleaming ebony plates and finely decorated silks.

In Kichi’s company, holding onto his thoughts soon proved as futile an endeavour as drowning with decorum. Jiro’s only respite came when Kichi turned his attention to the flask on the table. One cup quickly spilled over into two, then three, but rather than succumbing to the sake’s numbing pleasures, Kichi only grew sharper in his focus, as though the warm liquor were fuelling the fires blazing deep within.

He didn’t pour one out for Jiro, which would have been the height of impropriety, were it not for the fact that they both knew Jiro wouldn’t be touching the stuff. Jiro didn’t drink during the day. It was a kind of madness that even Kichi couldn’t induce in him. ‘I really wish you’d

help me finish this tokkuri, Jiro. It would be a crying shame to let it go to waste.'

'Then I'll consider it my sworn duty to stand guard until every drop of sakurashu has been savoured,' came Jiro's reply. 'But alas, my troubles are not the sort that can be solved with drink.'

'On the contrary,' Kichi said, lapping at his fourth cup. 'Your troubles are the *only* sort that can be solved with drink. In your mind, you choose to suffer a thousand crushing defeats every single day, in every possible permutation, instead of submitting to the whims of providence and experiencing it but once on the battlefield, when the time has come for you to feed the weeds. Is it too much to ask that for one morning, you forget your troubles, tear off my underrobes, flip me over, and fuck me so hard, my legs forget how to walk?'

Kichi certainly had a way with words. Jiro hadn't so much as glanced at the sake flask, and yet already, his head was swimming. His loins ached to give his lover everything he needed, to hoist his legs over his shoulders and hammer him into the sheets until his growls gave way to whimpers, but he knew that if he succumbed to his desires now, it would be too late for both of them. *Was it too much to ask?* If the cost was Kichi's life, there was no price too great. 'I'm afraid so,' he replied haltingly. 'These troubles of mine are bigger than either of us.'

'Bigger even than this?' Kichi made a grab at his own ample pouch, smiling savagely. 'A defamatory statement if ever I heard one. Recant your cruel words, sir, or I'll be forced to bend you backwards over the bed and watch you swallow them.'

'You'll do no such thing,' Jiro said, wishing that he felt half as certain as he sounded.

'Really?' From the tone of voice alone, Jiro knew that Kichi could sense the chink in his armour. Save for a single strip of cloth over his modesty, his body had been laid bare, ripe for the taking. Impatience was the only thing that now stood in Kichi's way, and as he himself had said, his patience was endless where it counted. Closer and closer, his



claws crept towards their prize. ‘How queer. I don’t remember hearing any complaints last time...’

‘Then I’d advise that you listen to me now!’ Jiro growled. For the first time, Kichi heeded his advice. ‘You’re no longer safe in my company. Pieces are being drawn across the board. The Tsuki Clan has expectations of me, and Lord Oshi himself has given orders that would be... unwise to refuse.’

‘Lord Oshi...’ Kichi repeated the name with barely concealed derision. He could never understand why Jiro would ever pledge his services to a master without stripes, let alone claws. ‘The Tsuki Clan. Expectations from half a castle’s worth of irrelevant old cud chewers. Is this truly what darkens your days of late, my love?’ Jiro declined to respond. Kichi sighed. ‘What more could they possibly ask of you that they haven’t already?’

‘Your head.’



Jiro told Kichi everything. The Tsuki Clan’s plans to march on the capital; the offensive they had already launched on the southern coast, cutting off imperial reinforcements from the eyries. Once the Emperorfishers had been beaten back, the otters of the Asari Clan would be defenceless against a counterassault from the palace, ridding the Tsuki Clan of two of its greatest enemies in one deft stroke.

Taiyo Castle was next. Lord Oshi’s forces were only a day’s ride behind Jiro when he set out to make camp. It was no coincidence that he had pitched his tent in the vast expanse of land that lay between the Tsuki Clan’s winding hillock retreat, and the towering castle town that their rivals, the so-called ‘tigers of the sun’, called home. The only thing he couldn’t bring himself to mention was the reason behind his visit. Had he come to warn Kichi of the impending attack, or to take his head? Not even the samurai himself knew for certain. What mattered

was that they were both here. Before nightfall, the hills would run red and the skies would be black with smoke, rife with the clash of steel, the bays of battle.

Though Kichi listened respectfully enough, he reacted to the news exactly as Jiro had feared; not at all. Instead, he licked his lips, inching his pads further and further down Jiro's fundoshi. 'So you want my head, eh?' he repeated after Jiro, pinching at the cloth with a smirk. 'I suppose it's nothing I haven't given you before. If the mighty Tsuki Clan wanted a demonstration this time, who am I to refuse them? They could even join in, provided you don't mind being trampled underhoof...'

'Damn it, Kichi!' Jiro caught the wayward paw dead in its tracks. After a moment of surprise, the claw on Kichi's ring finger crept out to stroke along the ridges of Jiro's palm, but his iron grip only tightened. 'Are you deaf, or just a bloody fool?'

'I'm afraid I haven't quite decided. Ask me again, slightly louder this time.'

'Kichi...'

Kichi wrenched his wrist free. The smirk was gone. 'Perhaps you're the fool,' he said, 'to think that no one else in Sakurai could have possibly caught wind of the Tsuki Clan's midnight braying. Do you truly believe that after all these years, nobody saw us together? That nobody suspected? You're not the only one with orders, Jiro. I answered this question the day we met. Or have you already forgotten?'

Jiro looked away. 'I'll never forget that day.'

He felt something settle underneath his chin. Warm fingers threaded between Jiro's whiskers, turning his head until their eyes met. The sight made Jiro's heart quicken. Kichi's eyes were pale blue, still as a winter lake, and ringed with fire. Those eyes had lied a thousand times, to as many animals as there were icicles threading each cavernous pupil, and yet not a word of what he was about to say contained even a fleck of falsehood. They couldn't. 'Everything that I have belongs to you. My sword, my heart, my head.'

‘Kichi, you don’t understand...’

‘No,’ Kichi replied, and his smile returned. ‘No, my love, it is you that doesn’t understand. How long do you think it took me to get here? How many lives do you think I’ve wasted prowling these shores, sailing these seas and flying these skies without you? After all these years, I finally found you. What makes you think that there’s anything in the mortal realm or high heavens that could compel me to give you up? Lift your heels, and I’ll kiss the very ground you walk on. Just don’t make me pretend that I’d rather be anywhere else. Even you don’t have that right.’

‘Even if it might save you?’ Jiro asked him, dreading that he already knew the answer.

‘Save me?’ Closing his eyes, Kichi pressed his nose to Jiro’s, lightly brushing Jiro’s brow with his braids. The breath from his nostrils came short and sharp, fraught with a thousand things the eye couldn’t see. ‘Don’t you see that you already have? “And thus, the lone soul cursed to die each day is touched, and blessed to live forever.” If you wish for us to fight, then we shall fight. And if one of us must die, then one shall die. Nothing that you say or do could ever hurt me, Jiro.’

Jiro did his best to mirror Kichi’s smile. ‘I wish I could say the same. It’s not unknown for honour to make enemies of the heart and head. I swore a solemn vow.’

Kichi’s icy pools opened once again, even brighter than before. Unconvinced, he ran a lazy tongue along Jiro’s cheek. ‘Oh?’

‘On my knees,’ Jiro told Kichi, turning away to hide the makings of a grin. ‘Before the clan leader himself.’ Rolling his eyes, he took one last glance around the room. Standing proud by the entrance, bathed in light, Kichi’s tachi remained dormant in its golden scabbard. His own wakizashi lay with his prized katana at the foot of the bed, betraying itself with a half-inch grin of brilliant bared steel. Something about the heap of ebony armour in the corner caught his attention that he hadn’t noticed before. The lace cords had been cut short, which meant that once they were fastened up, you wouldn’t be able to undo them without

a knife. Kichi didn't intend on wearing his armour again.

'That does sound serious indeed,' Kichi agreed, slinking down Jiro's body to the base of the tatami mat. 'There's no more solemn a vow than one made on your knees. I should know. I've made a few of them myself.'

'I'm well aware,' Jiro replied imperiously. He tried to hide his slowly tenting manhood underpaw, for all the good it did. 'Most of them were made to me.'

Kichi grinned. Ducking out of sight, he nuzzled at the sole of Jiro's left hind paw. Each poke of his wet nose made Jiro flinch. He forced himself to close his eyes. 'Kichi?'

But Kichi was busy kissing the soft pink pads on every toe.

'Kichi, I swear by the gods...'

'Jiro, you surprise me. Ready to make another vow so soon?'

'I... I...' It was getting harder and harder for the tiger to concentrate. Kichi was entirely too good at that sort of thing. Jiro curled his toes around his lover's nose, trapping him in place, but that only seemed to encourage him. Kichi's thorny tongue could be gentle when it wanted to be.

Kichi made short work of Jiro's resolve. Once his hind paws had been thoroughly attended to, he kneaded his way up Jiro's thighs, leaving a slick trail of kisses in his wake. He kneaded every square inch of his chest, suckled hungrily on his fingers, and even buried his snout underneath Jiro's muscular arms, where he chuffed from the bottom of his chest. When he came up for air, he searched for it behind Jiro's tongue, which Jiro was only too willing to provide for him.

Jiro's moves were fewer, but more deliberate. The first time Kichi dared to tease at Jiro's nipple with his teeth, Jiro returned the favour by claspng both paws firmly around his rear, pulling him closer with a growl. The second time, he added a finger for good measure, chuckling as Kichi moaned and writhed on top of him, grinding against his own excitement with the slightest twitch of his digits. Kichi always lolled his head back when Jiro was preparing him. A little further, and he'd be in

prime position for a good clamp on the neck, which melted his resolve like nothing else. Outside of their first encounter, Jiro couldn't recall him ever losing a fight. To admit defeat in the bedroom was among the guiltiest of pleasures.

Three fingers later, and Kichi was a drooling, dribbling mess. Jiro swiped his free paw through the glistening puddle on his chest. When he raised it to Kichi's lips, he began licking without hesitation, holding it aloft like it was a gift from the gods themselves. The barbs on his tongue combed between Jiro's fingers, searching hungrily for every last drop. 'Just do it!' Kichi panted, when he was finished. Lowering Jiro's paw, he hiked up his tail, leaving it draped over his shoulder. Every time his hardness jumped, it gave an involuntary twitch.

Jiro's ears perked up. 'Do what, exactly?' he demanded, curling his own tail possessively around Kichi's bulging abdominal muscles to keep him in place. He couldn't help but smile as Kichi's tail tip gave him away, quivering with pure longing. He could have lain back and watched it for hours. 'What is it that you'd have me do?'

'Must you really make me beg for it every time?'

Jiro's dark eyes glimmered. 'Yes,' he rumbled back. Kichi still wasn't much used to being on the other end of things. Sometimes, he needed a little encouragement to get going. Jiro offered him a slow, rolling pelvic thrust to send him on his way.

Kichi groaned. 'Please...' Sure enough, Jiro felt his captive's hips buck back. He began to ride him in earnest, urging him deeper inside, and Jiro knew that he had won. 'You're killing me!'

And just like that, Jiro's sword shrank from red-hot iron to a wilting stalk of bamboo. It was funny what a single word could do. Kichi only noticed when he raised himself onto his knees, feeling around for it. He pressed his muzzle to it, in the hopes of coaxing it back to life. 'Jiro?'

'I swore,' Jiro told him. 'On my honour as a samurai.' Shame forced him to look away. In spite of himself, he was growing firm again. *Damn Kichi's tongue. Damn it to every hell and back again...* Before long, he

was even harder than before. 'I swore an oath to kill you. "When next my sword is drawn, it shall not be sheathed again, except within my mortal foe."'

'You could always hang up the sword, flee your clan in shame, and run away with me?'

Jiro chose not to dignify the suggestion with a response.

Kichi sat back. 'Then I guess you have no choice but to stab me,' he said, and he lowered himself down with a gasp.

Jiro grunted. It was warm, impossibly warm, and tight, impossibly tight, and even more impossibly, it was his, all his, and no one else's, just as he was Kichi's, and no one else's. 'And if that doesn't work?' he asked his lover.

'Then you'll just have to stab me again.'

When he was buried to the hilt, Jiro dug his claws deep into Kichi's waist, and, after a nod of confirmation, he began to move inside him, opening him up slowly, stroke by stroke. 'And again, and again, and again, and again, and again...' Kichi repeatedly breathlessly. His face was a painting. Creased by concentration, with his ears down, his perfect eyes shut, and his lips curled back in a grimace of delight, reverent for no animal other than him, and for no time other than this moment, it was the only thing Jiro wanted to see.

Wrapping his arms around him, Jiro opened his muzzle, and offered Kichi his life's breath. Together, the two tigers laughed, and gasped, and groaned, and roared. They took solace in each other again and again and again, each time sweeter and deeper and more desperate than the last. Under the light of the rising sun, the two lovers crossed swords for the final time.

Neither would live to see it set.



### *author's note*

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Until next time, stay safe, stay kind, and as always, especially during these difficult times, remember to stay hydrated!