

Preservation

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Ginko goes to a small town following rumors that someone had been killing people. When he arrives, he soon discovers that it's a young girl who had been eating people. Trust has to be earned, and Ginko finds that out the hard way when her brother acts as her gatekeeper. Will he be able to get close enough to help, or will everything be lost? GinkoxOC There will be some death.

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Chapter 1

Hilo. So I fixed the chapter up, but I didn't want to do any drastic changes to it, just because I didn't feel like it. I just made a few changes here and there. Thank you Duct-tape Alchemist for the help. I realize that the dialogue is a bit awkward, but I always write that way when it comes to dialogue, so basically this story, along with my others here, will be more practice for me. I'm just going to move on and try and get the second chapter in. It's been what, seven months? Yeah, this story is going to take a while to get into, so please be patient and I hope you enjoy it.

"Do I scare you? Good. My job is done then."

So this is the city, huh? I thought.

I had never been to this small town before and the thought of coming would have never crossed my mind if it hadn't have been for a rumor I had heard. A young woman had packed all of her belongings and was traveling to another town because some 'evil thing' had brutally murdered her husband and child. She was warning everyone that passed her to not go. She was too distraught to give any specific details so I got curious.

Sooner or later, my curiosity is going to give me more trouble than what it's worth, I thought as I gazed at the streets and the people wandering in it, casually scratching the side of my head.

It was basically another town that profited from rice like so many other places I had been to. There were few houses scattered on the outer parts, and in the center of the town was a small market that sold a variety of necessities and goods. I had planned on asking a few of the people some questions about the evil thing to see if it was real or just some delusion that was made up, or at least get a room to stay for the night, but something else caught my attention. There

was a group of people hoarding around something on the side of the dusty road, yelling and raising their fists at it. Some of the people even held a scythe used in the rice fields.

What the hell's going on? I thought. I hurried to get a closer look, but the crowd was too thick. I tried to push my way through, but they pushed back, yelling at me to stay out of their way. I put my medicine box down on the edge of the road and tried to get through the crowd again, but I was knocked off of my feet and I hit my medicine box, making it topple over. I hurried up to make sure that nothing fell out, which, luckily, nothing did.

I looked to see what had hit me and I was a little surprised at what I saw. A boy about 18 was crouching down on the ground, protecting a girl from the people throwing rocks at them. The boy had black hair that was tied at the nape of his neck, tan skin, and dark brown eyes. He wore a light blue cotton wrap tied with a dark brown sash and tan pants. "Leave us alone!" He yelled, his voice was deep and loud, as if it came straight from his chest. He flung his arm which made some of the people back off a bit.

He hurried and pulled the girl up on her feet. She was probably only a year younger than him. She had black hair down to her shoulders, dark hazel eyes and her skin was a lot paler than the boy's. She wore a dirty light blue kimono that was too big for her. She looked at me for a second as she was being pulled along. "Sorry Mr. Medicine-man," she said before she started running along with the boy, grabbing her straw hat along the way. Her voice held a desperate cracked edge to the soft mumble.

The town's people were still throwing rocks at them as they ran across the bridge I had walked over to get in to the city and disappeared in the thick forest. The people yelled, "Get outta here! Stay out! Go die you filthy murderers!" And when the boy and girl were completely out of sight, the crowd dispersed and went along with their business, but there seemed to be this miasma of rage that clung to the air.

"Murderers?" I thought aloud. Those two? I don't believe it. They're still only kids!

A woman with a child and her husband were the only ones that stayed. "Oh my, are you alright mister?" The wife asked. She had dark brown hair up in a bun and peach skin. Her eyes were black and she wore a light pink kimono. She had a babe about a year old on her hip that was chewing on the dark brown sleeve of his clothes.

The husband helped me up to my feet by offering his calloused hands. He had short black hair and black eyes to match. His tan skin covered his hardened muscles from work, which I concluded that he was probably a farmer. He wore an olive colored wrap with a dark brown sash tied around his waist and brown pants.

"Yeah, thanks," I said. "I'm alright." I patted the dust off my clothes and inspected my box a little more closely.

"Oh, that's good," she said with a smile. "So, why did you come here? It's obvious that you travel a lot."

"Actually, I heard something as I was traveling towards another town and, well, I was curious," I cautiously said this, analyzing her and her husband's reaction.

Her smile instantly disappeared. She held her baby a little tighter and her husband stepped closer to her with a serious face. They knew something.

"I met a woman on the way and she said that a demon like human was living around here and--"

"That was probably my sister," the wife said. "She finally got enough money to move. That's what everyone is going to do if the murderers aren't killed soon. All they ever do is hide up in the mountains so we can't find them and then kill at night." She held a lot of anger under her despair in her voice.

"I'm sorry, but could you tell me what happened with your sister?" I asked.

The husband stepped in front of his wife and child with narrowed eyes. "That's enough. Leave us alone now." They turned around and were going to leave.

"Wait, where can I find the murderers then?" I asked. I didn't want to use that term, but I had a feeling that if I hadn't they wouldn't be as cooperative, as if I would try and help the kids escape.

They turned around and stared at me. "Why would you want to go there?" The wife asked.

"Are you insane?" The husband asked forcefully. He obviously was not amused with what I was trying to do.

"I wouldn't put it past me if I was," I said. I was getting annoyed because they weren't complying and was just asking useless questions. "Will you tell me where they are now?" I let my irritation leak through that question so they got the hint that I didn't want to waste any more time.

"They live up the mountain," the husband said. "Just follow the path where you came in and when you get to a fork, go left. It's a way up, but sooner or later, you'll find their old broken hovel." I think the only reason he told me was to let me die, because of the distress I had caused to his wife, but I didn't care. What was happening to those two young people were more important, and with the kind of people there in the village, harming them without even realizing what could be happening, it made me a little angry inside at their ignorance.

"Thank you," I said as I turned to pick up my medicine box to leave. I still couldn't fully believe that those two, that I saw only a few minutes ago, killed with an animalistic intent. And even if I did somehow prove that they were innocent, I didn't think that the people in the town would believe it either. Or at least wouldn't forgive them anyway.

After only a couple of hours of walking it was almost twilight. I either had to camp out or keep going and just hope I found that house. I decided on the latter so I kept going. Unfortunately, because it was getting dark, I didn't see the rope and when I realized it was a tripwire, it was too late. The next thing I knew I was in some sort of net hanging in the air and wooden bells were ringing.

This can't be good, I thought. I struggled, but with the medicine box on my back, I felt like a turtle flipped over. I realized that the more I struggled, the more the bells kept ringing, which would mean that someone had to be coming, right? "Hey!" I yelled. "Is anyone out there?" I paused, listening for anyone coming. "Can someone get me down?"

After about ten or fifteen minutes there were rapid footsteps and a few rocks were kicked around. When it stopped, I got a little worried. There was a low mumble before anyone spoke. "Will you leave us alone if I get you down?" A young man asked. I recognized it as the person who was protecting the girl in the town.

"I actually came to help," I said.

There was a pause, which probably meant that he was considering it. "What makes you think you can help?" He asked in a threatening tone. "Many doctors came to 'help' already... Hell even a few monks came because they thought that she was being possessed by demons! We've had enough of 'help.' Go home. We don't want any of your help."

'She?' The girl did it ? I thought. I was even more skeptical that she would have murdered those people, at least without anything abnormal in her. "Have you ever heard of mushi?" I asked.

"Mushi?" He repeated. "No, I haven't. What does that have to do with anything?" He was being less threatening than at first. He was also being very considerate, which probably meant that he was still desperate for help, despite his harshness.

"If you let me down and let me take a look at her--just a look to confirm my theory--then, I'll leave and never come back again."

"What happens if you think that your theory may be right?"

"Then I'll explain what mushi are and I'll try and help her as best I can."

"You mean 'cure' her? We've already heard that befo--."

"I don't necessarily mean that. Sometimes, mushi can't be gotten rid of. So maybe a way to suppress what ever has been happening to her, or to make it so she can coexist with whatever is inside of her. I would never promise a 'cure,' even if I was so sure of myself." I waited for a response from the young man. It was a big decision for one so young and it seemed as if the parents were out of the picture. *Did they leave too? Or did she...?*

"Okay," he mumbled. "I'll let you take a look, but *only* a look." He was stern with that sentence.

There was some tugging on the rope and then I was being let down slowly. *This is good*, I thought.

"Oh crap!"

"Wha--?" All of a sudden I was dropped, but it was only three feet from the ground. "Ow," I groaned. I had landed on top of my medicine box which I had heard a very distinctive crack from. "Oh, damn," I mumbled.

Hilo again. I already got two reviews for this chapter, but more reviews always help, hint hint nudge nudge. ^-^

"I like you, when I rule the world, your death will be quick."

Chapter 2

Hilo everyone! I finally updated and hopefully this flowed better than the first chapter. Important notice: I changed the rating to M for potential gore, and character death. You were warned.

"Have you ever been hurt and the place tries to heal a bit, and you just pull the scar off of it over and over again?" - Rosa Parks

"Sorry 'bout that. The ropes are pretty old," he said holding up one of the torn ends. There was a lantern set down by his feet casting ominous shadows on his face. "Are you okay? I thought I heard a crack." He was concerned, but he was being distant about it. He still didn't trust me, which was understandable. Why would he show so much concern to a person that might harm his girl after all, right?

I got my arms out of the straps before getting up. "I'm fine. No broken bones," I said casually. I looked at my medicine box and, even with it getting dark, I saw a crack right along the side. "But my box isn't," I mumbled. I carefully tilted it up to see the further extent of the damage. I was just hoping that nothing inside was broken especially since I had some mushi that I had caught, which was stored in a few of the drawers. I decided that it would be safer if I checked on the mushi in the young man's home since there would be more light, and more supplies.

"C'mon then. You can fix it at our house." He lifted up the lantern and held out his other hand for me to take, which I accepted. I noted that his hands were calloused as well. He looked down the path I came from, and he squinted his eyes to peer farther down the darkening path. "No one... followed you, right?" He looked back at me, his dark eyes still narrowed slightly, but for a different reason.

"I don't think so," I said in an absolutely sure tone. "The villagers seemed to be too scared, a family that I talked to seemed pretty

spooked, and it's already getting dark. I don't think that they would risk their lives to attack this 'evil thing' when it's getting dark." I carefully picked up my box by the straps and found that the box was pretty much in tact with just that one hairline crack along the side. I just had to be meticulous about jostling it as I walked so that if any cupboards or drawers were broken from the inside the damage wouldn't spread.

"You're wrong," he said. "There are some that are ruthless. You'll see what I mean when we bring you home." He still looked serious as he raised the lantern high over his head. He turned around, looked toward the trees, and said, what was meant to be in a casual tone, "Aa-chan, you can come out," but his voice was so deep that it almost sounded a bit threatening. He tried clearing his throat, and repeating the sentence again, with only a minimal change.

He probably forced himself to speak like that for so long that it became natural, I observed.

The girl whom was named "Aa-chan" came out from behind a tree and maneuvered through the bushes to get onto the path. I couldn't see her very well until she stepped into the lantern's glow. She clutched her hat in her hands and held it to her chest which enabled me to see her face. A thin trail of dried blood peaked from above her right brow to the corner of her eye, probably from when the villagers were throwing rocks at them. She only looked up at me with her dark eyes mirroring fear. The sleeves of her kimono slid down to reveal the scars on her wrists, as if whatever had caused them was coiled around her thin limb. I wanted to ask, but I could always ask about it later at the house.

The boy saw what I was staring at and stood in front of me, protecting her. "This is my sister, Ayano. I'm Goh," he said, purposely trying to sound intimidating. It was obvious that he didn't want me to ask about anything, at least until my mushi theory was confirmed, and at this point, I couldn't confirm anything at all.

"Ginko," I replied calmly. I looked from his unyielding eyes, to hers which quickly sunk to the ground. I knew, mushi or not, that I would have a lot of questions, and, if they (Goh) would let me, I could send someone who did specialized in whatever this was their way. "Could someone help me with this box? I don't want to shake it too much as we walk."

Goh handed Ayano the lantern and was immediately behind me, supporting the box. Ayano walked right beside me on my right, lighting the path for us. I took peeks at her, trying to find any signs of mushi about her, but I didn't see anything out of the normal; however, that in itself was ringing a sort of alarm in my head. Something was definitely wrong.

She started sneaking peeks when I was shamelessly staring at her, just to see what she would do. Her cheeks flushed noticeably, she swallowed, and she squinted her eyes as if she was trying to come up with something to do to make me stop. It was an uncomfortable situation for her, but I knew she wouldn't say anything, or tell me to stop staring at her. I quit after a few more minutes and heard her relieved exhale. Other than that, the trek was silent. No one asked any questions or made any comments. I was getting tired and I was more worried about my box for the moment, plus we were slowly gaining altitude so the air was getting a little thinner, so why waste it on speaking.

When we reached their home, all I could do was stand there, and stare at the broken mess. Their home was a complete wreck! The walls and windows had holes as if someone had swung a pickax at them, and I saw black scorch marks on the corner of the roof and on one of the walls. What once was probably plants and grass around the home was now just a black ashen layer on top of dry dirt.

Goh carefully let the box down and said, "Told you. Happened a month ago and I'm still trying to fix it up."

Ayano walked ahead, still holding the paper lantern, with Goh in toe behind her, and I followed them some distance away, still trying to be

careful of my box. The ground crunched beneath my shoes, and the door crackled and squeaked as Goh opened it. I admit, I was getting a little pissed just looking at their home, but I had to remain impartial or I might make a mistake that could cost lives, I had never dealt with whatever it was, and I had never heard of mushi being involved in this way. It still might not even be mushi at all, which would be disappointing on my part.

When I stepped inside, making sure I slipped out of my shoes first, it didn't look much better. There were more scorch marks, and holes, shelves and tools were broken, more doors were barely clinging on straight, and there were articles of clothes were torn and scattered on the floors, some of which were obviously in the middle of being sown back together. I closed the door behind me and put my box down in the corner, inspecting it by the lantern that Ayano hung up from the middle of the ceiling. Luckily nothing inside, especially the containers for the mushi, was broken. A few of the drawers were crooked, and some of my equipment was slightly damaged, but nothing was irreparable. Just a bit of wax, some glue, and it should be okay to travel with for a short distance, and Adashino will just provide me another set when I get over there.

Goh was staring at me, waiting for me to do something.

"I'm not going to start any examinations tonight. My tools need a bit of repair, and there isn't enough light," I said to hopefully calm his coiling nerves. "I will, however, need some questions answered tonight. After I fix my box of course."

His jaw was still clenched, but his eyes showed that he was going to let me ask. Even he wasn't so narrow-minded where he would just refuse questions that could help in the end. He was just being a protective older brother, no different from the other people just like him, so I knew how to handle Goh. Ayano was sowing an elegant, and rather expensive looking kimono, a shame that it was ripped apart, but it was an odd article to be around, considering how poor they looked.

"First off, I just want to know if the rumors are true." I took a quick glance at Ayano, just in time to see a flinch. "You killed the village woman's son and husband?"

There were cicada chirps before Goh answered. "Yes, it's true. Ayano killed them." I had expected him to answer most of the questions, but it was still annoying when I clearly wanted my patient to answer.

"So ripping apart the husband's throat and eating the flesh of the baby is also true?"

The cicadas seemed to be louder this round, and neither of the siblings were willing to answer right away. Eventually, Ayano answered. "Yes... I did." Her voice was airy, and held anxiousness partnered with fear. She had tears in her hazel eyes.

What she did had to have been unintentional, but if it was a mental illness, she probably wouldn't have remembered or have tears of guilt. If it was a 'possession,' she definitely wouldn't remember, and probably wouldn't be in control right now. I was checking a mental list of other possibilities, but I still couldn't cross out that mushi weren't involved. Now that I really look, there aren't many mushi around at all. That was the oddity giving me a bad feeling. Not many things could repel mushi, so there was an even higher possibility that it could get dangerous for all of us.

Hilo again, so how was it? Reviews would be much appreciated.

"When you have only two pennies left in the world, buy a loaf of bread with one, and a lily with the other." - Chinese proverb

Chapter 3

Hilo to what few readers I have for this story. Finally, I have updated, it's several months late, but I have done it. Sorry for the slow update. Poor class planning equals drained energy until the weekend where I tend to sleep in. I'm surprised I woke up as early as I did for a Saturday. I had the first paragraph in my document folder for a long time, and wrote the rest last night, but I was too tired to update that second.

"When you kill one enemy, you then must plan for the one hundred enemies you have now created. No enemy ever stands alone. He comes with a mother and father, brothers and sisters. He has a wife and children, friends and neighbors. When you kill this enemy, you must be ready to face the angry revenge that comes from the grief of this loss for all the people who knew and loved this man. The only way to stop this endless chain of enemy is to forgive it. And in doing so, teach each one that life is the most important, precious and valuable thing." - Anwarsha Anwary

Maybe I shouldn't have asked that outright, I thought. After answering the second question, Ayano refused to answer any more, took the sewing into her room, making sure the door was firmly closed, and not tilted or hanging. Goh, narrowed his eyes at me as if I had done something wrong, and then said that he needed to start dinner, before walking to their small kitchen to steam the rice. Then he went outside, leaving me to try and fix whatever was broken. I had to take all of the drawers out and lay out the contents to make sure that I hadn't missed anything.

After only a half hour, I noticed how quiet it was. No birds, the cicadas seemed to be taking a break, and I couldn't even hear any scurrying animals. Heck, not even the wind. If any one of those villagers came close to this place, the two would have had enough time to get some decent distance, and hide. It's probably how they heard the bell when I was trapped in that net.

"Why was there a trap there anyway?" I mumbled aloud. I was still a little irked about getting trapped and left dangling.

"They're my brother's," someone said suddenly, right behind me, and a little over my right shoulder, making me jump with fright.

I quickly turned around with wide eyes, and saw that it was only Ayano. "Oh, really?" My voice lightly cracked, giving away my attempt to hide that she had scared me. *How the hell did she get so close without making a sound?* The thought of how close she could sneak up on me, along with how dangerous she was rumored to be, was scary.

"They're to catch boars, so he sets traps all over the place, and checks them every week or so." There was a short pause before she continued. "We didn't expect to catch a person since the trap was clearly visible." The corners of her mouth quirked up some.

I gave her a blank stare, not appreciating the mock, since that day had been a bad day for me. Walking aimlessly until a rumor came my way, rude vendors who thought I didn't have any money to pay for food, rude people, my box getting repeatedly damaged, and that was only the first half of the day. It was probably her revenge for me staring at her earlier. "It was getting dark. I couldn't see it," I tried to explain, but from the look of her biting the inside of her cheek, it looked as if she didn't believe me. I lightly sighed, to show her I wasn't going to put up a fight about it, and asked, "Mind if I smoke?"

Her eyebrows sank to the middle, and asked, "Why would a doctor smoke if it's not healthy?"

I gave her a light smile. I honestly felt sorry for her, for being pegged a murderer, even though she seemed guileless. She wanted to trust people, but, with what had been happening, Goh was right to be overprotective. "I have this condition, so I need to smoke something so no one else gets hurt."

"No one else?" She quoted. She was confused, not that I gave her any real information.

"Do you know what mushi are?"

"Mushi?" She tilted her head to the side, and relaxed her eyebrows. "No, I haven't. What are they?" She didn't sound as timid or cautious as before, which was a good sign that she would be more cooperative.

I scratched the back of my head, not exactly knowing how to explain something they probably couldn't see. "Well, let's put it this way: they are sort of like ghosts, with odd forms, that have a tremendous impact on life, and other creatures. Some are harmless, some are actually helpful, while others are annoying, or they are extremely dangerous to mess with." She looked like she was taking the information in, but she was still skeptical about it. "It's hard to explain if you can't see them."

"What do you mean? Not everyone can see them?"

"No, most can't. Most of those kinds of people are the reason that mushi are misunderstood, and are automatically thought of as nuisances that should be gotten rid of." Even though I didn't get my answer, I took out a cigarette, and lit it anyway. If they didn't like it, they can tell me. Ayano didn't seem to mind, it looked like she was still thinking about what I told her about mushi.

She looked at my supplies, and furrowed her eyebrows again at a small jar that were next to a couple of my instruments that were out while the wax dried. I didn't want to interrupt her, since this was my chance to observe, just in case. I never got any finer details on Ayano, so I didn't know what 'triggered' her violence, if there was a trigger at all, or even if it was something else entirely. She carefully picked up the glass jar that fit in her palm, and asked, "So, is this a 'mushi' that you were talking about?"

"Oh, so you *can* see them." It wasn't entirely surprising that she could see mushi. I seemed to meet at least one with every journey I make, and maybe with her sight, I could get some answers on how this all began.

"Is this one of the dangerous kinds?" She looked back at me, curious, and cautious to know the answer. The mushi inside were small yellow specks that clumped together, or floated around in the jar. Even the people that could see mushi would have a hard time noticing that the yellow dust actually had life, from the way they moved, or that they clumped in a specific way, which was in a cone shape. It would have looked like I just snipped off the center part a lily.

"Nah. That particular kind of mushi merely helps flowers bloom to increase the pollen count. They disguise themselves as pollen so birds, or bees that go to get food, pick them up and go somewhere else help the mushi fertilize new potential homes. However, if there are too many of them, people or animals can inhale them, and they grow inside their lungs to make them sick. No one has died from them though since they seem to have short life spans and wither away before they can do more harm."

"Oh." That was all she had to say about it. She looked interested enough, and seemed to take in all of what I told her, but just didn't know how to respond. Being isolated from others tended to make people socially awkward. She took another look at the mushi, turning the jar to inspect different angles, and then, just as carefully, put the jar back from where she picked it up.

I saw her scarred wrist again. Since Goh was gone, for who knew how long, it was probably going to be the only chance I got. "What happened to your wrists? Were they from previous 'healers?'" I asked casually. I analyzed her as I took another drag of my cigarette.

Her eyes widened slightly as she swallowed a nervous lump, and her hands started to shake.

"It's okay," I said, changing my mind. "You don't have to talk about it. I already have some sort of idea, but I could still be wrong. I was just a little curious about them." For now, I had to focus on what was happening, and not what methods other people used before I came.

She visibly calmed down after that, and took a calming breath. She asked if I had other jars that I could show her, ones with mushi that weren't dangerous, which I readily complied. It wasn't often that someone was interested, even if she didn't physically show enthusiasm, at least she was willing to learn about them. After a couple of samples, and a look at a few scrolls, she commented that she used to see a lot of mushi in the forest, but she only just realized recently that nearly all had disappeared. They had slowly started moving on, and then they suddenly just left after the villagers set part of their home, and the trees on fire.

That was what I needed to hear the most. I didn't even need to physically examine her to know that a mushi was definitely involved, most likely somewhere inside of her. I only felt sorry that a mushi-shi didn't come sooner to realize the problem, and not some monks or purifiers who didn't know a thing about this stuff, but still claim for a cure. We talked a little more on mushi in general, and was more specific in my condition, but staying away from hers for now.

"It must be hard to travel all the time, not being able to stay in one place for long. If it makes you feel better, being forced to stay in one place isn't so swell either, especially if your neighbors are out for blood." I think she was trying to joke with me again about her situation, but it wasn't funny due to lack of practice with other people.

"It's hard, but it isn't so bad. I get to study plenty of different kinds of mushi, I sometimes get souvenirs to sell, and I heard new stories all the time."

It was getting easier for her to talk to me, probably because I hadn't hurt her like the siblings were expecting. There was a hint of hesitation before she asked, "Have you ever heard of my situation

before?" She was getting desperate for answers inside. It got me curious as to how long her feeding on people had been going on.

"To be honest, I haven't, but I know where I can get information. I just need something before I go there."

"What do you need?" She looked like she knew where I was going with this, but she needed to ask anyway.

"A demonstration. I need to know how you behave during those lapses."

She obviously didn't like it, and tried to change the subject by picking up a scroll. When she opened it up, she asked, "Can you read this to me?"

"You can read it if you want. I don't care as long as you don't lose it. It's not exactly mine."

She looked at me, then looked away with a light blush. "I can't read," she said quietly, as if she was ashamed of it.

I kept the hand with the cigarette on my mouth. "Oh," was the only thing I could think of saying. Then there was more silence, and the longer it lasted, the more awkward it seemed to get. "Didn't you learn when you were younger?"

"I was taught only a little, but Mother died and there were only a few times where Father was teaching me. Then he died, and Goh didn't seem to have time to teach me any more." She didn't seem to be ashamed after she explained, but she was still embarrassed about it.

At that moment, Goh finally came back from checking on the traps, and gathering mountain vegetables. The instant he saw Ayano sitting next to me with one of my scrolls in her hands, he sent me a glare harsher than all the previous glared, but didn't say anything. Ayano seemed relaxed, and we supposed that it was a good thing. It was better than her hiding in her room.

Hilo again. Hope you enjoyed this installment so far. I hope for you patience with the next chapter.

"In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost." - Dante Aligheri

Chapter 4

Hilo! It's been a little while, but I finally got a chance to update this. There is a hint of Japanese mythology, and if you decide to research it, you'll learn more. I only wanted to touch on it and not go into detail because this is about mushi, and not gods or demons, and because I didn't feel the need to write in the gory details. Yes I decided to rate this as M because it would be gory, but that will come later. At most, ten chapters later. Hope you enjoy.

"God then made man. The Italians for their beauty. The French for their cuisine. The Welsh for their voices. The Germans for their cars. And so on and on until He looked at what He had created and said, 'This is all very well, but no-one is having fun. I'll have to make Irishman.'"

Dinner was strange. Not that it wasn't decent, it was just what was being served was strange. The rice, a fish for each of us, and mushrooms with roots were normal, but it seemed that they had more cucumbers than the rest of the plate. Some was just thinly chopped, some were made in the soup, and the rest was heated in a wok with the mushrooms. I had noticed when I came into town that a few houses had personal cucumber gardens, but I was sure that these two didn't have a garden. Goh mentioned that they got by fishing, scavenging for vegetables and roots, and buying rice from the town on the other side of the mountain, who hadn't caught a word of them. So why the heck were there cucumbers more than anything else? They were too hard to grow in the mountains.

There was no table, so we just sat around the cooking area, trying to keep warm. Since the place was a wreck, I assumed that the table was destroyed along with any furniture. I knew that because I saw pieces of polished wood in the fire that was used for dinner.

Ayano was quietly eating, looking between her brother and me, waiting for something to happen. Probably for her brother to blow up

in his usual annoyance towards me. Even so, Goh was paying more attention to his food, trying his best to ignore me.

Well the cucumbers had nothing to do with whatever mushi I was going to be dealing with, so I thought I may as well not look into it. However, due to past experiences, sometimes the little things did matter, from Maho covering his ears, to Sayo just going out to make new memories everyday. Unfortunately, I usually learn it later than what I would have liked, but trying to catch it immediately was futile. Why would cucumbers matter anyway, right?

"The villagers are convinced that I'm possessed by a Kappa." Ayano had answered my question. She was quite observant. There probably wasn't much that anyone could hide from her. She seemed fine telling me that, but only because it was ridiculous.

"Ayano..." Goh looked at her, as if telling her that it wasn't relevant, or that I didn't need to know.

"He was looking at the cucumbers, so I thought he was wondering."

It did make sense, somewhat. At least from the villager's point of view. "How did the villagers come up with something like that?" I didn't think the villagers came up with the Kappa theory on their own.

Goh brought one of his hands to his nose, agitated again. "Around seven years ago," he was smiling sardonically as he said, "a monk came by with 'all of the answers.' He said he was closer to the sun god, Amaterasu than anyone, so would know what to do. After only two hours, he said that there didn't seem to be anything wrong, but urged to stay longer for further observation since the rumors seemed too compelling." Goh refused to show his face to Ayano, just as she turned hers away from us. "Three nights later," Goh refused to say 'after the demonstration,' "he changed his mind and claimed that the Kappa had taken hold of her body, using it so it wouldn't lose its strength. He claimed that since a powerful suijin had made a 'contract' with Ayano, there wasn't anything he could do to cure her. Instead, he tried to kill her, and claimed he would save her soul from

the Yomi (Underworld) in a charm. Now the people keep throwing cucumbers with their names carved into them into the river and they flow where I fish."

A Kappa is a water god who loves to eat the liver of children, and that has a dent on its head with a lily pad filled with water. They're crafty but they have a knack for etiquette and politeness, so if one bows to it, the Kappa bows back, emptying the water in the lily pad, and gets stuck or loses its strength. If you manage to trick it into promising something,, they are compelled to keep the promise. The one thing that a Kappa loves more than children are cucumbers, so people had often thrown cucumbers into rivers, ponds, lakes, or anywhere a Kappa was known to inhabit it with the child's name carved into it, hoping the Kappa will leave him or her alone.

It was a ridiculous theory to me, but I supposed if no one had ever heard of mushi, they would blame the demons and gods. Still, to go so far as kill someone and claim that it was for pure purposes, and also claim to save the soul, was unforgivable. Almost taboo. These two had been conned for a long time, so could easily tell the difference between what could be possible, and what would only benefit the other person. All it would take was the attitude of the 'healer' before and after the demonstration.

So the cucumbers have nothing to do with anything. "Wouldn't that just convince the people that she is possessed if you take the cucumbers?"

"Free food is free food. It's their fault for believing such a hoax."

Point taken. "What happened to him?"

"He left and kept sending more imbeciles to take care of the problem, telling everyone in the village that if anyone could kill her, he would provide an 'eternal blessing.' Stupid holy chauvinistic coward. If I knew where he was, I would go there to kill him myself."

Ayano flinched, but didn't protest or do anything. She stopped eating because her hands were shaking. I caught another glimpse of her old scars around her wrists as she put her food down and went to her room. Goh looked a little guilty, but he didn't regret giving out the threat. Even if she was uncomfortable, I had to get more information.

"And he was the start of the line of healers?" I reached for my cup of tea.

"No. She's been like this since we were little, so Father would always go to nearby towns and try and find people."

I couldn't take the sip. "How long, specifically, has she been like this?"

"Hunting and eating live animals?" He was trying to intimidate me. This was obviously not the first time he has had to answer these questions. "Since she was six, so about over ten years." He wasn't joking.

Considering how long Ayano had been "possessed," I probably wouldn't have been able to get rid of the mushi, whatever it was. I could hardly believe it. *How had no mushishi ever heard of this? Did they really believe it was the gods possessing her? "So, only monks and healers have ever come by? No other mushishi or other specialists?"*

"Not that I can recall. We had never heard of mushishi before today."

"Why are you being friendly with me then, if you've never met a mushishi? For all you know, I could just be a conman."

"Would a conman really admit he was a conman, or provide the possibility? If you were just another healer I would have let the wolves get you down from the trap, but since you were different... Well, we're just desperate right now."

"Has Ayano ever mentioned seeing strange things floating about?"

He gave me a skeptical look. "No. And you never told me what 'mushi' were."

Trying to explain to someone what mushi were when they couldn't see them, especially when he already thought I was shifty, was difficult. By the end of my explanation, he looked more confused than ready to kick me out of the home. It was as if he was thinking that it might have been crazy enough to be true. In the end he just went back to eating, and when he was finished, he gave Ayano the dinner she left. This whole thing was going to be more difficult than what I had imagined.

He sat back down in his spot and looked me straight in the eye. "You haven't asked the big question."

"Which was?" Of course I had questions, but where would I start? I hadn't read this kind of case in any reports, and I haven't seen any kind of mushi activity, as strange as that was already.

"When does she usually hunt?"

"There's a pattern?" I was more than shocked. Of course there had been patterns in the past. For example, when a boat would return to the shores after three years, or when Sayo would forget the things she less thought of. However, if he knew when she was going to hunt, it could save me a load of trouble.

"It's never exact, but it's around every month. The next cycle is roughly a week from now."

"Ireland remains a deeply religious country, with the two main denominations being 'us' and 'them.' In the unlikely even you are asked which group you belong to the correct answer is: 'I am an atheist, thank God.'"

Chapter 5

Wow, it's been over a year. Well, it wouldn't be the first time that has happened, and it probably won't be the last, plus I'm tired of apologizing, so I won't. I haven't given up on this story, I'm just wondering how to go about certain "scenarios" if you get my drift (no promises it'll happen). Anyway, got this done, so here it is. I'm glad you're still enjoying this story, and I hope you continue to do so, even if it takes me another year to get a chapter out.

"I'm troubled, I'm dissatisfied, I'm Irish." - Moarianne Moore

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I couldn't get much out of Goh after he told me of the pattern. He said that it would be easier explaining everything as it happened so I could see for myself. The only thing he did tell me was that the boars he had to trap weren't for us; they were what Ayano had to hunt instead of the people in the village.

Just hearing those made me imagine the worst. Suddenly, I didn't have much of an appetite. After several images materialized in my head, they refused to leave, especially when I wanted to go to sleep. Believe it or not, no matter how gentle Ayano seemed, being in a house with a potential killer didn't sit well with me at all.

Well, it wouldn't have been the first time someone tried to kill me.

When I did finally fall asleep Goh shook me awake, harshly whispering my name. "Ginko! Wake up!"

"What's going on?" I asked, trying to hold in a yawn.

"You and Ayano have to go, and hurry up!"

From the urgency in his voice, I looked around and saw Ayano with a bag and the lantern in her arms, standing by the frame of the door. It

was still dark outside, and even though I still didn't know what was exactly going on, they weren't faking. I quickly made sure I had everything in my box and followed Ayano through the forest. "Why isn't Goh coming with us, wherever we're going? Where are we going?"

"He's going to try and talk to the villagers while we make our way higher up the mountain."

"The villagers are coming? How do you know?"

"They fell in a trap and I heard the bells." Her voice was in a soft whisper, cautious, almost as if she didn't want to break the quietness of the morning. The fog seemed to absorb the sounds. She looked back to me. "We'll get a better look from a higher ground, so this way." We must have walked for at least an hour, and at least fifty feet higher than their home was. I had insisted that the villagers probably already left, but she insisted that we keep walking. When Ayano finally decided to stop, she pointed down at the tiny glowing lights. "The villagers are there with their lanterns."

I had to strain my ears to just hear a raised mumble. It was obvious that they were talking loudly, but not loud enough for me to hear clearly. The lanterns barely made it through the mist-it looked like a bunch of lightning bugs. They were still there?

"Goh's trying to convince them that I didn't eat you, and that you're going to try and help me."

"Are you speculating, or can you really hear?"

She looked at me from the corner of her eyes, deciding whether or not she should tell me. "About a couple weeks before I, um, I, you know, my senses get stronger. I see things better, I hear things I wouldn't normally be able to hear, and I can discern the difference between the smell of carp or eel being cooked in the kitchen with the doors and windows closed. Even my sense of taste gets so strong

that it's hard to eat some of the mountain vegetables because they're bitter. It's how I heard the bells from the base of the mountain."

I was slightly surprised. A mushi giving a person abilities wasn't unheard of-common in fact, but it still seemed rather odd in this case because of its apparent viciousness. "How clearly can you hear them?"

"As if they're arguing right in front of me."

"So if they want to know if I'm fine, then why aren't I down there with your brother?"

"They aren't making sure you're alive, they want another excuse. Even if you were down there, you're trying to help me live, therefore not of them." She started shivering, so she reached into her bag for a scarf to wrap around her shoulders, and sat down with her knees to her chest.

I sat down next to her and watched the lights. From what Ayano said, the village's logic made about just as much sense as the Kappa theory. "Have they ever tried to burn the entire mountain?" From the look of their home, and the villager's desperation, it was something that should be held in great concern.

"No, they haven't burned the entire mountain. They thrive on it just as much as Goh and I do. Even if they did try it, Goh and I would have just escaped by following the river to the town on the other side of the mountain. They know this after trying to burn our home the first time, and not doing a very good job of sealing all the exits."

As if Ayano's mushi problem wasn't hard enough to figure out, the villagers were bound to make it worse. Waking me up in the middle of the night after practically no sleep wasn't helping either.

"You haven't told Goh everything, have you?"

"Like what?"

"That you can see mushi, for one."

She sighed, wondering what to say. "I have told him, but he never believed me. After all the healers started coming around, and the fire, I thought it would be best if I just didn't talk about it anymore."

"Hoping that if you ignored it long enough that it would just disappear?"

Ayano looked completely away from me. After a while, she mumbled, "I wasn't exactly hoping mushi would disappear, I knew they were helping somehow. The only thing I was hoping for was that if I waited long enough I would get better, somehow."

"Maybe," I answered. "There are some mushi who only need a bit of time to live out their lives, and the infection is over. Perhaps this mushi just has a long life." Or maybe whatever it was breeds inside of the host so the infection happens over and over-one of many theories that could be happening in this situation, but I decided to keep that to myself.

I tried to get her to talk a bit more, but the only thing she would respond to was when I asked for her to relay what the villagers and Goh were saying. It wasn't good, and it seemed to make her feel more depressed, which reminded me of another problem that could arise. If she didn't have any hope for herself, she may not even want the chance to get better, and may decide to end her life. Even though she was less skeptical than her brother, it definitely didn't make her an optimist.

After a half hour, my stomach gurgled. Loudly.

It made Ayano giggle at least, so that was strangely good. If she could smile, she still had something to live for. She reached into her bag and brought something out-probably food. She took out a small bento box. I was hoping it would be rice. "Cucumber?" She opened the box to reveal the cucumber that was cut into slices.

I knew that after a few days of this, I would grow to despise cucumbers. I would probably never eat them again after this was all over. It amazed me how she and Goh could keep eating them after years of the treatment the village had cast on them... but if they didn't have much food, I guess it was better than starving. I thanked her for the cucumber slices and decided not to complain. The look on my face probably revealed my lack of enthusiasm.

We had to wait until dawn before Ayano cleared it as safe, saying that they were leaving. The trek was, for the most part, silent. When we arrived back at the house, Goh seemed unharmed but uneasy. "They'll definitely come back within a few days." That really was bad news.

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"Irish patient to the fellow in the next bed, 'Look, the doctor's coming around soon. Try to cheer him up because he's very worried about you."