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PROJECT

THE NIGHT PARADE



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Then.

The bat struck the ball with a crack that seemed to echo all the way to the mountains and sent the leather-covered ball hurtling high into the sky.

“Come on, Taichi,” Jiro, the pitcher, yelled. “Get your fat arse in gear and catch it!”

“Yeah, Taichi,” Hibiki said from the other side of the field. “Catch it.”

Taichi back-pedalled as fast as he could, trying to keep his eyes on the ball. Perspiring heavily, he raised his hand to shade his face, but his heel chose that moment to catch on an exposed root and he tumbled backwards. He lay there feeling sorry for himself as the ball fell out of the sky, bounced off his stomach and rolled into the yellowing grass. Laughing, Kazuo strolled the rest of the way around their makeshift baseball diamond.

“What the hell was that, Taichi?” Jiro demanded. “We'll never get him out at this rate and I want a go with that bat.”

Taichi rolled over. “Mum said you had to stop picking on me, Jiro.”

“Yeah, well, Mum's not here to protect you, is she, rice ball?” Jiro poked his little brother with his toe. “I don't even know why I had to bring you along.”

“Mum said...”

“I know what Mum said.”

Jiro kicked him below the ribs. Taichi curled up, biting down on his lower lip.

“Hey!” Kazuo said.

“He deserved it.”

“He dropped a ball, Jiro. It's hardly the end of the world. You want to bat so much, here.” He held out the baseball bat towards Jiro. “I could do with a break anyway.”

“But we haven't got you out,” Jiro said. “I can't have a go until we get you out. It's the rule.”

Kazuo shrugged. “It's only a game.”

He thrust the bat into Jiro's hands and bent down to help Taichi to his feet.

“You okay, Tai?”

“Yeah, m'fine.” Taichi kept his face turned away from Kazuo, not wanting the older boy to see him cry. Big boys did not cry, as his brother loved pointing out.

Taichi was nine years-old and only took part in the others' games because his mother insisted on it. His brother, Jiro, was eleven, and in the same class as Kazuo and Hibiki. This would be their last summer together before leaving for Junior High.

“Don't worry about it,” Kazuo said. “Your brother dropped loads of catches when he was your age. Still does.”

“Yeah, well, so do you,” Jiro said, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand.

“Shinjo Tsuyoshi wouldn't have dropped it,” Hibiki said.

Kazuo shook his head. “Not Tsuyoshi again.”

“Hanshin Tigers rule!”

“Yeah, if you don't mind not winning anything,” Jiro said. “Ever.”

Taichi wiped his eyes with the backs of his pudgy hands. “What happened to the ball?”

“Don't tell me you've gone and lost it, Taichi,” Jiro said.

“No,” Taichi said. “It landed right there. I saw it.”

“Well, it's not there now. Idiot.”

“It can't have rolled far,” Kazuo said. “We just have to look for it, that's all.”

Kazuo led the others away from the open field. They were in a valley. Distant mountains covered with green-leafed maples enclosed them on three sides and there was a gentle slope to the ground. It was just possible, Kazuo supposed, that the ball had carried on rolling down the incline. He just hoped that it had come to a stop before it reached the river. He did not want to have to explain to his father how he had lost it.

The grass gave way to an area of coarse shrubs and bushes, withered by the heat. Kazuo plunged into the undergrowth, wincing as thorns tugged at his jeans and scratched the skin on his hands and bare arms.

“I'm not going in there,” Hibiki said, folding his arms over his Hanshin Tigers jersey. “This is my favourite shirt.”

Jiro snorted. “Scaredy cat. Whatever, you can stay here and babysit Taichi.”

“I'm not a baby,” Taichi said, forcing his way through the bushes ahead of his brother.

“It can't possibly have rolled this far, can it?” Jiro said as the foliage thickened and progress became increasingly difficult. “We should head back.”

“I'm not giving up until we've found the ball,” Taichi said stubbornly.

Kazuo put a hand on his shoulder.

“Jiro's right, Tai,” he said. “We're never going to find it in this.”

“You go back if you want to,” Taichi said. “I'm staying.”

“Yeah, right,” Jiro said. “How do you think Mum would react if I went home without you?”

“Hey, guys!” Kazuo was distracted by movement in the underbrush. “I don't think we're alone out here.”

“Maybe it's a wild boar,” Taichi said, his voice dropping to a whisper. ‘Yumi's father told her that boars come down from the mountains and attack people.’”

“Don't be stupid,” Jiro said.

“Give me the bat, Jiro.” Kazuo said. “I'm going to go and investigate.”

“What?” Jiro said.

“What if it tried to eat you?” Taichi asked.

“That's why I want the bat,” Kazuo said. “You two stay here.”

“No way,” Jiro said. “What if another one comes up behind us while you're elsewhere? Mum'll freak if I let it eat Taichi.”

“What makes you think it's going to eat me and not you?”

“Because there's more meat on you, rice ball.”

Kazuo sighed. “Fine, you can come. But stay quiet.”

As silently as he could, Kazuo crept up on the disturbance in the bushes, trying to ignore the hushed bickering behind him. He raised the bat over his shoulder, ready to take a swing.

The scrub parted.

“What the...”

Kazuo used a word his parents thought he did not know. Involuntarily, Taichi giggled.

The creature on the ground was not a wild boar. Kazuo did not know what it was. Shorter even than Taichi, it wore some sort of red and white robe. The robe hid most of the creature from view, but what Kazuo could see appeared to be covered in brown feathers. The creature tilted its face up to look at him, blinking its large eyes. But it was not the eyes that startled Kazuo. Emerging from the centre of its face... was that a beak?

The creature chirruped at him, but Kazuo could not tell if it was singing, talking or just making random noises.

“Kazuo-kun,” Jiro said, “that... that *thing*... it's got your ball.”

Kazuo looked down. The creature was clutching his baseball in a three-fingered claw. The sight of it broke Kazuo out of his reverie.

“You little thief!” He brought his bat down on the thing's hand. “Give me back what's mine.”

The creature yelped, dropped the ball and snatched its hand back to its chest.

“Freaky-looking thing, whatever it is,” Jiro said, stooping to retrieve the ball.

“It's scared.” Taichi took a step closer. “You're just scared, aren't you, little guy?”

“Get away from it, Tai.” His brother yanked him back by his shirt. “Who knows what kind of mutant diseases you might catch from it. And Mum'd find a way to make that *my* fault.”

“But, Jiro,” Taichi said, “look at it. It's more frightened of us than we are of it.”

“Who's frightened,” Kazuo said, covering up his apprehension with bravado.

There was one emotion he felt that could drive away the fear. He hefted the bat, the grip slipping in his sweaty palms.

“So it's scared of us, is it?” he said. “I'll give the little freak something to be scared of.”

“No!” Taichi yelled, but it was too late.

Kazuo had already brought the bat down with a crack that seemed to echo all the way to the mountains.

* * * * *

Now.

Goto Taichi caught sight of the baseball out of the corner of his eye and had just enough time to jerk his head backwards before the ball flew past his nose and bounced off the wall of the convenience store.

“Watch what you're doing!” he yelled before bending down to pick up the ball. It had been well-used, he noted, if not well looked after. Some of the stitching had come undone and a flap of leather was open.

“Hey, Goto-sama, can we have our ball back?”

It was the Yamadas' kid. The boy was a handful, but he meant well.

“Go long,” Taichi said, winding up and pitching the ball towards the boy.

The boy scrambled backwards, jumped and plucked the ball out of the air.

“Great job.” Taichi gave the boy a thumbs-up. “Shinjo Tsuyoshi himself couldn't have done any better.”

“Who?” the boy asked.

Shaking his head at the youth of today, Taichi turned his back on the boy and entered the store.

“What time do you call this?” Mizuki complained from behind the counter.

“Sorry.” Taichi picked up a wire basket and started filling it with items. “Mother wanted me to stop by the post office for her.”

“Why couldn't she do that herself?” Mizuki asked. “You're a soft touch, husband.”

“She knew I was coming into town anyway and she just thought...” Taichi trailed off under his wife's baleful glare.

“At least you're here now,” she said. “You can help me with the stock take.”

“Can it wait until this afternoon?” Taichi lifted up the basket. “I've got to take Jiro his supplies.”

Mizuki sighed heavily. “When I married you, I didn't realise I was marrying your family as well. If I'd know that, I might have had second thoughts.”

* * * * *

“What do you mean you don't want to go?” Val asked.

“I'm just saying it sounds a bit dull, like,” Tom relied.

A storm was building behind Valentina Rossi's blue eyes. She was in her early thirties with aristocratic features and a prominent Italianate nose inherited from her Sudtirolesi mother. She was wearing her glossy dark hair up and her sleeveless white blouse and khaki shorts showed off her tanned, olive skin.

The object of her ire, Tom Brooker, was tall and lanky and looked like he had just rolled out of bed, which was not far from the truth. His short brown hair stuck up every which way and he had skipped shaving that morning. He was wearing a purple Durham University polo shirt, three-quarter length cargo shorts and, Val noticed with despair, white socks with sandals.

“Dull?” Val said. “Have you seen this?”

Val brandished a magazine in his face.

“This is exactly the kind of thing we travel the universe to see.”

“Well, yeah,” Tom said, “but...”

“And,” Val continued, “it'll make a great article for *Mysterious Times*.”

“And there you go spoiling it all,” Tom said. “This isn't fun, it's *work*.”

“Work's not a dirty word, Tom,” Val said. “I'm not planning to spend the rest of my life hitchhiking through time and space. Sooner or later, I'm going to go back home. It'd be nice to know I still have my journalistic career to fall back on.”

“Whatever, pet,” Tom said resignedly. “You want to work, fine. Me, I'd rather go sightseeing.”

“And what sights there are to see,” said a voice from behind them. “Kyoto boasts some of the finest temples and gardens in all of Japan. Oh to be one hundred and fifty again and discovering it all for the first time.”

“Temples and gardens,” Tom said. “Sounds... great.”

The Doctor glared at him. He was neither tall nor short. Good-looking without being strikingly handsome, the kind of man one might pass on the street without sparing a second

glance. But his eyes... If it was true that the eyes were the windows to the soul then Val did not want to know the things the Doctor's soul had seen.

“Culture, Brooker,” the Doctor said in a voice like ice. “Try it, you might like it.”

“Yeah, I'll, er, do that.”

The Doctor rooted around in the pocket of his grey flannel trousers, removed a leather wallet and tested its weight in his hand before handing it to Tom.

“Spending money,” he said. “Keep your receipts and do try to stay out of trouble.”

“Aye aye, skip,” Tom said, giving the “captain” of the TARDIS a mock salute.

The Doctor's frown deepened. Val knew that Tom's light-hearted approach to life frustrated him, but she also knew that the jokes were simply Tom's way of dealing with how much the Time Lord could intimidate him.

“Well, I'll be off then,” she said.

“I'll show you the way,” the Doctor said.

“But, I thought...” Val stammered. “What about, you know, temples and gardens?”

The Doctor waved her concerns aside.

“When you've seen one temple, you've seen them all, but this...”

He pointed to Val's magazine and the black and white photograph showing a woman with a six-foot long serpentine neck.

“This is a new one, even for me.”

* * * * *

“Hello? Is anyone home?”

Taichi slipped off his shoes in the tiny *genkan* and stepped up into the main body of the house.

“Of course I'm here, you idiot,” a voice hissed back. “Where else would I be?”

“Sorry. Yes, sorry.” Taichi bowed in apology. “That was stupid of me.”

“So what else is new?”

“It's very dark in here,” Taichi said. “Should I open the curtains or...”

He reached for the light-switch.

“No!” the voice shouted from the shadows. “I like it like this. In the dark, I feel almost... normal.”

“But you are normal, brother,” Taichi said.

The voice laughed bitterly. “You think this laughable excuse for a life is normal? Even your brain can't be that much mush.”

“Sorry, brother. So sorry.”

“And stop apologising. It makes me sick to even listen to your voice.”

“I brought you some food,” Taichi said.

“Show me. Let me see.”

Taichi emptied the carrier bag out onto the table.

“We have umeboshi, onigiri, soba, salmon...”

“Yes, yes, out of the way.”

Taichi was shoved to one side as his brother fell upon the table. He could not bring himself to watch as his brother eagerly devoured the provisions, packaging and all, but he could not close his ears to the noise. He felt moisture pooling in his eyes and swallowed hard.

Big boys do not cry, he reminded himself.

* * * * *

Val had found the magazine in a water-damaged box in one corner of the TARDIS library. They had been stuck suspended in the time vortex for days while the Doctor carried out repairs to the ship. The gym and the swimming pool kept her body active, but Val was going stir-crazy without something to occupy her mind, hence her resolution to explore the deeper recesses of the library.

“Take a torch,” the Doctor had advised her. “And don't worry about the cobwebs. The spiders that made them are long since dead. Or possibly mutated into higher life forms. Definitely one of the two.”

Not exactly encouraged, Val had put off the library for a further day. Then Tom had suggested *SingStar* to pass the time and she could not get through the stacks fast enough.

The main body of the library was warm and inviting, an open space filled with light and dotted with reading tables and comfy chairs and ringed all about with floor-to-ceiling bookcases. As one progressed deeper, however, the space between the bookcases narrowed, the ceiling descended oppressively and passageways turned at odd angles, threatening to lose an unwary visitor in a maze of bindings and pages. The Doctor had not been kidding about the cobwebs and Val brushed them aside with the head of her torch.

That was when she had found the box.

The contents of the box were surprisingly undamaged. The magazine pages had yellowed and, when she held them in her hands, they had the texture of old leaves, but they did not fall apart when she touched them, which had been her first fear on lifting the lid.

She was still sitting there, cross-legged with a magazine in her lap, when Tom came looking for her. He was carrying two bottles and a plate of sandwiches.

“The Doctor said you were down here. I thought you might be hungry.” He handed her one of the bottles. “What you reading?”

“Something called *Mandelbrot*,” Val said, showing him the cover of the magazine, “but there are loads of others in here. *Destiny*, *Little Grey Men*, *Fool's Gold*... Name a magazine for the bizarre and unexplained and you can bet it's in here somewhere.”

“So it's chock full of crackpot theories. Got any back issues of *Mysterious Times* in there?” Tom asked, naming the magazine of which Val was the editor.

“*Mysterious Times* is a work of serious journalism,” Val said haughtily. “But no, no copies here. Is that odd? I think that's odd.”

“Maybe you should ask the Doctor about it,” Tom said, sitting down beside her.

“I'm not sure he even knows these are here,” Val said. “There's some good stuff in them, though.”

They sat in companionable silence while Val continued to read. She was so engrossed that only when she looked up some time later did she realise that Tom had left. She also noticed that he had eaten all the sandwiches.

One story in particular caught her attention, though, or rather, one picture.

When she finally made it back to the console-room, the Doctor was packing up.

“All done?” she asked.

“For now.” He snapped his toolbox shut. “The new components need running in.”

“So where are we off to?”

The Doctor watched the time rotor rise and fall. “I don't suppose it really matters.” He turned to face Val, his pale eyes shining. “Where do you want to go?”

There was only one answer.

* * * * *

The photographer, whose name was Inoue Ryota, was a freelancer, but the magazine that had published the story suggested that they try a red lantern cafe he was known to frequent. When the Doctor and Val stepped inside, all eyes turned to face them. Val half-expected them to reach for their pitchforks at any moment. Unperturbed by their welcome, the Doctor strode up to the counter and bowed to the proprietress. Out of politeness, she bowed back, but continued to regard him sullenly.

“Good afternoon,” the Doctor said. “I'd like two bowls of ramen please, with chashu pork and kamaboko.”

“You can have the tonkotsu ramen and like it,” the proprietress replied.

“Sounds delightful,” the Doctor said. He turned to Val and indicated the stool beside him. “Come along, Miss Rossi. An army marches on its stomach, as Boney was want to say.”

Val sat down just as the proprietress slammed two bowls of steaming noodles down on the counter. The Doctor held up a crisp note, which the proprietress snatched from his fingers.

“Keep the change,” he said.

Without a word, the proprietress put two cups in front of them and filled them with green tea. The Doctor snapped his disposable chopsticks apart and dug in to his ramen.

“This is very good,” he said. “My compliments to the chef.”

“What brings you to these parts?” the proprietress asked, somewhat mollified.

“You know, the usual,” the Doctor said. “A desire to see a bit of the local colour the tourists usually overlook. And we're looking for a gentleman named Inoue Ryota. Do you know him?”

“Maybe I do, maybe I don't,” the proprietress said cagily.

“Third table back, nearest the door,” the Doctor said to Val. “I'll wait for you here.” He looked back at the proprietress. “You should really watch your involuntary eye movement, gives you away every time.”

The Doctor returned to his noodles as Val headed for the indicated table. The man sitting there had grey hair and weathered skin the colour of a brazil nut. On the table in front of him was a rectangular board laid out in a nine-by-nine grid. Forty wedge-shaped tiles arranged into two groups of twenty sat at either end.

“Inoue-san?” Val said hesitantly.

“Who wants to know?” Inoue replied.

“My name's Val Rossi and I work for a journal called *Mysterious Times*. I was hoping to ask you about a photograph you took recently.”

Inoue indicated that she should sit down opposite him. Val reached into her handbag and produced the magazine, already folded to the relevant page, which she slid across the table. Inoue sucked in a breath.

“I remember that photo,” he said. “Not easy to forget.”

“I want to know where you took that photo, Inoue-san,” Val said. “I want to see that woman for myself.”

“Woman?” Inoue said. “Is that what you think she is?”

“What else could she be?”

Inoue laughed. “That there's a Rokurokubi, a yōkai.”

“I don't understand.”

“She's a demon, young lady, and you'd be wise to stay away from her in case she eats your soul.”

“I'll take my chances,” Val said. “Where can I find her?”

“I'm not sure I'm in a mind to tell you,” Inoue said.

“I'll pay you.” Val's hand was on her purse.

“I don't want your money,” Inoue said. “I'm retired. Photography's a hobby now, not a living. I've got everything I need.”

“There must be something you want,” Val said.

“Well, now that you mention it...” Inoue stroked his chin. “I've been waiting for a friend of mine. We play shogi together when we're both in town, but it doesn't look like he's going to make it today. And I was looking forward to a game, too.” Inoue leaned forward in his chair. “Tell you what, young lady, play a game with me. If you win, I'll tell you what you want to know.”

“But I've never played shogi before,” Val protested.

“If you want to give up now, the door's right there behind you.”

“What are the rules?” Val replied.

* * * * *

Taichi hurried away from his brother's house. It was a warm evening, but what he had seen had chilled his blood. He tried to focus on the here and now, on the thrumming of the cicadas and the aroma of ripe persimmons, heavy and sweet. A stream bubbled along on the right hand side of the road, feeding the paddy field that stretched out towards the farmhouse in the distance. On his right, the orchard was a wall of jade, hung with orange-gold baubles.

And carried on the breeze, he could hear giggling.

He stopped, looked about. He could see no one else. He could not even hear any cars in the distance. So where was the laughter coming from?

There was movement in the trees. Taichi took a step closer.

Tōryanse, tōryanse. Koko wa doko no hosomichi ja?

The giggling had stopped, but what had replaced it was worse. An eerie ethereal singing.

Let me pass, let me pass...

Taichi's mother had sung him the same song as a child, but then it had been a comfort. Now...

The trees began to part as *things* forced their way between them.

Sweat trickled down Taichi's spine. His teeth were chattering and he clamped his jaw down hard to silence them. He turned, preparing to run...

Chitto tōshite kudashanse. Goyō no nai mono tōshasenu.

There was something standing in the road. Something inhuman. Something familiar.

Those without good reason shall not pass.

“But...” Taichi struggled to find the words. “But you can't be here. You *can't*.”

Iki wa yoi yoi, kaeri wa kowai.

Still the singing continued. Taichi clamped his hands over his ears and tried to ignore it, but it was inside his head. Screwing his eyes shut, he spun on his heel and ran blindly back the way he had come.

Going in may be fine, fine, but returning would be scary.

* * * * *

Val cast her eye over the tiles in front of her. She might be new to this game, but it did not take a genius to see that she was losing. Badly.

The Doctor had finished his ramen and was watching the game unfold over her shoulder.

“Need a hand?” he asked. Almost half of her pieces had been captured and several of those were now being controlled by Inoue.

“I can manage,” she replied.

Inoue smiled serenely, which irritated her all the more. She had the annoying sense that he was going easy on her, toying with her and that, had he really wanted to, he could have won the game a long time ago. She had hoped that his overconfidence might give her an advantage, but it was not working out that way.

“Feel free to concede at any time,” he said as if reading her thoughts. “There's no need to prolong the agony.”

“You haven't won yet,” she said, hoping against hope that that was actually true.

In spite of its differences, shogi was not so dissimilar to western chess, not that that helped. Tom and the Doctor were the chess fans in the TARDIS and would regularly challenge one another to games. The Doctor won more often than not, but Tom could give him a run for his money and, once in a while, would pull a trick that would confound the Time Lord. Mind you, that only served to put the Doctor in one of his moods, but the look on Tom's face was worth it. The last time Val had played the Doctor she had felt that she was doing pretty well, right up until the point he had sprung a carefully orchestrated trap on her and decimated her half of the board.

Val blinked. She studied Inoue's pieces again. Could it be? Yes, yes, it could. He was launching almost exactly the same trap that the Doctor had.

She looked up at the Doctor, saw the twinkle in those pale eyes and realised that he had seen it too, much earlier than her. He grinned when he saw that she had finally realised. She felt like a particularly slow child being patronised by the teacher. Still...

Now that she knew what Inoue was up to, she could avoid it, even turn it to her advantage. His smile faltered as he realised that she was not responding to his attack. Even as more and more of her pieces were captured, she steadfastly persisted in ignoring him, doing her own thing on the other side of the board. Too late, Inoue realised that by moving all his forces down the right, he had left an opening on his left flank. Too late, he realised that his *osho*, his king general, was trapped behind his own advance with nowhere to run.

“Tsumi,” the Doctor said as Val glowed in triumph. “Checkmate.”

“Best of three?” Inoue said.

* * * * *

Taichi stumbled, almost fell, but righted himself and kept on running.

Tōryanse, tōryanse.

Something shoved against him. He tripped, but, before he could tumble, something pushed him from the other side.

Let me pass, let me pass.

Soon he was being passed from one assailant to another, thrown about within a ring like a participant in a game of blind man's bluff.

“Let me go!” Taichi wailed. “Just leave me alone!”

They were laughing again, giggling as they pawed at him, their talons raking at his hair and his clothes.

“Lemego,” one of them chirruped, mimicking him.

“Lemego, lemego,” the others echoed.

And just like that, there was silence.

Empty of noise, his head throbbed. He was still spinning dizzily around, but without his tormentors to keep him upright, Taichi dropped to his knees in the dusty road. Tentatively, he lifted his hands from his ears, expecting the noise to return at any time. Yet all was quiet.

He opened his eyes.

The creature was looking back at him, head cocked at an angle, beak slightly open. Its golden-brown feathers ruffled in the breeze. On his hands and knees, Taichi tried to crawl away, but the creature simply hopped after him, arms flapping.

That was when Taichi saw what it was holding in its hand.

Something long. Something sharp.

Something coming straight for him.

* * * * *

“I remember when this was the Emperor's retirement villa,” the Doctor said as they strolled through the grounds of Nanzen-ji temple.

Val was not listening. She was turning over in her mind what Inoue had shared with them. A few months past, he had been heading up into the Higashiyama mountains to photograph the cherry blossom. Like Val and the Doctor, he had strolled through Nanzen-ji and skirted the edge of the cemetery before the incline steepened as he entered the forest in the mountain's foothills. There was a bridge across the stream and, on the other side, the path turned right as it climbed upwards through the pines and the maples and the katsuras. Curiosity, however, had compelled Inoue to turn left, towards the waterfall that fed the stream.

You could not see it from the path. The angle was such that you had to be right on top of it to make it out, but there was a cave just beyond the waterfall. The opening of the cave was just shy of five feet high, but the chamber opened up within. There was a small shrine against the far wall. Inoue had not got close enough to determine to whom it was dedicated and Val would not have known what to look for. Elsewhere, there were signs of habitation: packet food, bottled water, a sleeping bag. Inoue had been investigating these when the Rokurokubi had returned.

She was dressed innocuously enough, in jeans and a checked shirt. Her face was oval, her hair black and loose. But it was her neck that drew the attention. It was long and sinuous, longer even than the distance from her shoulders to her toes. It coiled and writhed like an impatient serpent and it meant that her head rounded the corner long before the rest of her did.

She lunged at him, yelling at him to get out of her home. Inoue recalled the fairy stories his mother had read to him as a child. He recognised her, knew what the demon could do to him, so he fled, though not before snapping a couple of quick pictures with his camera.

The Rokurokubi was in her cave now, exactly as Inoue described, but she was not about to chase anyone away this time. She was lying on her back, eyes closed, her neck coiled beneath her head like a pillow.

She was not moving.

She was not breathing.

* * * * *

“No, I don't know where he is,” Goto Mizuki said, talking to her mother-in-law over the phone. “The last I knew he was taking lunch to his brother. Yes, I know that was hours ago, I've had to manage the shop all afternoon without him.”

Mizuki held the receiver away from her ear as her mother-in-law let fly with a stream of invective.

“He and Jiro probably just lost track of time,” Mizuki said. “Yes, I'll be sure to get him to call you as soon as I see him.”

Her mother-in-law seemed to have no interest in ending the conversation and, realising that it would be some time before the woman ran out of things to berate her with, Mizuki simply hung up on her.

Taichi's probably just hiding out to get away from her, Mizuki mused uncharitably.

The truth was, however, that she was worried about him. Rushed off her feet that afternoon, she had been too busy to stop and think, but now that she was closing, she could not help but accept that this prolonged absence was not like her husband. And the idea that he might simply be shooting the breeze with his brother? That was patently absurd.

So where was he?

Could he have been in an accident? Someone would have called her, surely. Unless...

Mizuki's hand was trembling as she locked the front door of the shop and rolled down the metal shutter.

The road to Goto Jiro's house was not well travelled. What if Taichi had fallen or been hit by a car or suffered a heart attack and was lying in a ditch somewhere waiting for someone to find him?

Mizuki retrieved her green bicycle from the side of the shop, but rather than heading home, she struck out in the direction of her brother-in-law's house, worrying her lower lip all the while.

* * * * *

“Is she..?”

“Dead?” the Doctor asked as he crouched beside the body.

“I can see she's dead,” Val snapped, more unsettled than she cared to admit. “I meant, is she human?”

“What else would she be? A demon?”

“Of course not,” Val said, “but what with the neck and... well, basically the neck.”

“Yes, that is curious,” the Doctor agreed, “but despite that little... detail... this woman is most definitely human.”

“So what killed her?” Val asked.

The Doctor threw something underarm to Val. It was a pill bottle. And it was empty.

“It would need an autopsy to confirm,” the Doctor said, “but an overdose seems likely, wouldn't you say?”

“Suicide?”

“Given the absence of evidence of anyone else...” The Doctor stood up, brushing dust from his trousers.

“But why?”
“She has a copy of your magazine.” The Doctor pointed with the little finger of his right hand. “Maybe the sight of herself in that photograph...”
“You mean she couldn't stand looking like that anymore?”
“People have killed themselves for less. More's the pity.”
“But that doesn't make any sense?” Val said.
“Oh?” The Doctor turned his pale eyes on her. “And on what basis do you challenge my deductive reasoning, Miss Rossi?”
“Well, if this is just a physical deformity...”
“Just?” the Doctor scoffed.
“Look, my point is she must have been born with it,” Val said. “She must be... what? Late twenties? Early thirties? If she wanted to... to...”
“Kill herself?”
“She'd have done it long before now.”
“Maybe.” The Doctor drummed his fingers against his chin. “Unless she wasn't born with it of course.”
“Doctor, people don't just grow an extra six feet of neck overnight. Do they?”
The Doctor opened his mouth to reply, but hesitated. A strange, ethereal sound was wafting out of the trees in their direction.
Tōryanse, tōryanse.
“Is that singing?” he asked.

* * * * *

There was no lighting along the road and with the moon hidden behind a cloud, Mizuki only had her bicycle lamp to see by. As a result, she almost missed the shape huddled to one side. She rode right past it, her mind only registering what she had seen once it was behind her and she braked suddenly, turning to look over her shoulder.

The shape was clambering to its feet.
“Who's there?” Mizuki asked.
The shape staggered towards her, tottering unsteadily.
“Taichi, is that you?” There was a tremor in her voice.
The shape extended a hand towards her.
“Taichi, speak to me.”
But Taichi could not and, as the light from the bicycle lamp hit his face, Mizuki could see why.

She staggered away from her bicycle, barely hearing it clatter to the ground. A hard lump had formed in her throat. She glanced back at her husband, her mind still struggling to process what her eyes were telling her, but no, the image was just as she had seen before. And just as impossible.

Clutching her stomach, she doubled over, retching.

* * * * *

Tōryanse, tōryanse.

The words unravelled as they were translated inside Val's mind, a consequence of her travels in the TARDIS.

Let me pass, let me pass.

The melody was familiar and it took Val a moment to place it. It was the same tune that had played at the traffic lights when she and the Doctor had been making their way to Nanzen-ji.

“It's a nursery rhyme,” the Doctor said in answer to her unspoken question.

“So they're just kids?”

“There's that word again,” the Doctor said. “Just.”

There was something sinister about the singing, something that caused Val's heartbeat to quicken.

“I'm not sure I want to stay here and meet the vocalists,” she said.

“To quote Falstaff,” the Doctor said, “the better part of valour *is* discretion. When I give the signal, make for the bridge. I'll be right behind you.”

He paused. The wind swept through the trees, rocking them from side to side. No, Val realised, not the wind. Something, maybe even *lots* of somethings, was forcing the trees apart. She could see a talon digging into bark, a handful of brown-gold feathers, the curve of a beak...

“Run!” the Doctor shouted.

Val ran.

The narrow path was covered in loose stones and exposed roots. The torchlight magnified each and every obstacle and she flapped her arms wildly to retain her balance. She could see the stream up ahead, the moonlight reflecting off the slow-moving water.

“Doctor,” she said, panting for breath, “we've almost made it.”

She glanced over her shoulder, but he was not there. Instead of following her, he had chosen to run *towards* the trees, towards the creatures. Of course he had, Val berated herself. What else should she have expected?

She watched as he approached them, his hands raised non-threateningly. Her mouth went dry as the creatures circled him, poking at him, shoving him back and forth between them. She could hear his shouts of protest, pitched somewhere between apprehension and anger. He was a head and a half taller than any of his assailants, but somehow they swarmed over him, dragging him down until he disappeared from view.

Body vibrating with fear, Val started back up the path. A twig snapped underfoot. The noise it made was tiny, yet, as one, the creatures all turned their heads to look at her, their eyes pools of liquid darkness. They surged towards her, arms flapping, beaks open as they cawed and taunted. Val scrambled back towards the bridge, but the delay had cost her. One of those creatures now blocked her way.

She could not afford to hesitate, not again, so instead she veered left, plunging into the forest. Branches and pine needles raked at the bare skin of the arms she raised to protect her face. She burst onto a hiking trail, the sudden absence of obstruction almost causing her to plunge forward. She turned her ankle as she righted herself, but bit back the hot, sharp pain.

Goyō no nai mono tōshasenu.

Those without good reason shall not pass.

Using her hands and fingers as much as her feet, Val scrambled up the path. It took her to a clearing, the path spider-webbing out in at least eight more directions. Val picked one at random and kept running. She could hear the creatures behind her, singing and laughing. Gaining on her.

No, wait, they were not behind her, not anymore. They were ahead of her, blocking the path. How had they got by her? Val tried to stop, but her injured ankle betrayed her and she went down, grazing her knees in the dirt. Her limbs were on fire, but somehow she staggered back up. Dizzily, she realised she was surrounded, ringed by a wall of feathers. She tried to push the creatures aside, but whenever she reached for one, it shifted like smoke. They were substantial enough, however, to shove her off her feet and back down to the ground.

“What are you?” Val asked.

“Waaryu!” the creatures squawked. “Waaryu!”

“What do you want with me?”

“Wayuwan! Wayuwan!”

Val could feel their talons on her skin. She tried to fight them off and they backed away from her flailing fists and arms. Then one grabbed her by the hair, its sharp claws scratching her scalp and, try as she might, she could not reach around to dislodge him. Emboldened, another of the creatures stepped forward. It was holding an object in its hands. The blade of the scalpel flashed white as it caught the light of the moon.

“No,” Val said. “No, no, no, no, no!”

The laughter of the creatures grew louder. It was the last thing Val heard before everything went black.

* * * * *

The room was four and a half tatami mats in size. There was only one door and no window. The blue paint of the walls was peeling, revealing a white undercoat. A moth fluttered in circles around the single bare light bulb. Every so often, it would land on the bulb then shoot off to the far corner of the room, burned.

Ajari watched the moth. There was little else to do. He had been here so long that he had almost forgotten what the world beyond these four walls was like. His universe consisted solely of this room and the insects that kept him company.

And the other.

Ajari had an itch he was finding difficult to scratch. Hands tied behind his back, he could not rub the irritated area against the wall because the chain that bound him to the heavy iron ring in the middle of the floor was not long enough. Ajari closed his eyes, trying to remember a happier time, but the memory was too faded, too distant.

His throat was dry. There was a bowl near the door, but he had long since emptied it and it would not be refilled until morning. Nevertheless, Ajari opened his beak and began, mournfully, to sing.

Tōryanse, tōryanse

Koko wa doko no hosomichi ja?

* * * * *

The first rays of peach-coloured dawn were starting to claw their way through the trees when Val woke up. She was lying at the side of the trail, curled up amid the brambles. A thorn had torn a hole in her top and there were a myriad tiny cuts and scratches on her arms and legs.

“Help me! Help me! Help me!”

The voice was not her own. It belonged to a man and yet it seemed to echo around inside of her skull. Perhaps she had a concussion. There was certainly an ache at the back of her head. Tentatively, she raised her hands to probe the damage. Her fingers walked through her hair and her heart almost stopped when they encountered the wound. It was huge! How could she have a hole that big in the back of her head and still be conscious, still be alive even? And yet, when she held her fingertips up to the light, she could see no blood.

Fighting down bile and revulsion, Val continued to examine the damage. The wound was ringed by a pair of flesh protuberances above and below. These seemed firm and undamaged, with no evidence of the tears of abrasions Val would have expected from cutting her head open. Her fingers wormed their way between them.

“He-ee! He-ee!”

The voice was muffled now, slurred and distorted. Val tried to put it out of her mind, but it sounded like it was coming from right on top of her.

The inside of the wound was warm and moist. Her fingertips floated over a hard set of objects. At first she assumed that they were fragments of her skull, but the edges seemed to smooth, too regular and there were so many of them. And there was something else, something flapping at her fingers under its own power, rasping over them like a slug.

“Gee-ow! Gee-ow!”

The voice was trying to say something else now. Still puzzling over the curious structure of her injury, Val withdrew her fingers.

“Get out! Get out!” The voice yelled, able to form consonants once again.

Val stiffened, suddenly realising where the voice was coming from, what it was going to say next. She could not breathe.

The fleshy flaps around the wound. The too regular wall of bone fragments. The flapping slug.

Lips. Teeth. Tongue.

“Get your hands out of my mouth!” the voice said.

Val screamed.

* * * * *

Tom hated to admit it, but the Doctor had been right. When you had seen one temple, you really had seen them all. Okay, so that was not entirely true and maybe under different circumstances, he might have been better able to appreciate the differences, but the fact was the he was bored. Really bored.

And lonely.

More than once, he had turned around intending to share some observation with Val only to find she was not there. She was off doing her own thing. Her job. Did that mean she was thinking of leaving the TARDIS? If so, when? And what was Tom supposed to do if she did, stay behind with her or carry on travelling with the Doctor? He was not ready to give up travelling just yet, but he could not imagine doing it without Val either. Actually, he could imagine it. It would be much like this afternoon, not much fun.

Maybe they would be someone else. He and Val were not the first travelling companions to share the TARDIS with the Doctor. Tom had already met two of his predecessors, Tamara and Grae, and he knew that there had been others. How long would it be before the Doctor picked up

someone else to replace Val? It would not be the same. No matter how good she was, she would not *be* Val.

And yet, mooning over Val was not healthy, particularly when she would never, *could* never, return his feelings. He smiled sadly as he recalled their time in Lahore, the moment they had shared beneath the Tomb of Anarkali, a moment that could never be repeated. To save Val's sanity, the Doctor had robbed her of her memories of her experiences in India, and with them, so it seemed, her feelings for Tom. He had forbidden Tom from saying or doing anything that might remind Val of that time, which might undo his work, and so Tom had to keep his own feelings in check. For Val's sake, good friends was as close as they could ever be.

What about Tom's own sanity? He had tried to put Lahore out of his own mind too, throwing himself into his adventures, but always that moment in the tomb gnawed away at the back of his mind and, when things were quiet and he was short of distractions, the thought would come out swinging. Tom had come to hate the lull between adventures. He knew how to react to a psycho alien with a gun, but how he was supposed to act during breakfast with Val was a mystery that continued to elude him.

Maybe it would be better if she left. Maybe it would give Tom a chance to move on and forget about her.

Yeah, maybe.

His meanderings had taken Tom away from the tranquil temple precincts on the east side of the Kamo-gawa to the high energy shopping districts of the west. Crowds swirled around him, carrying him along like a wave, and he ducked into a narrow alleyway to escape the press of bodies. It was dark in here, the only light coming from inside the tiny bars and restaurants lined up on either side. Laughter spilled out onto the street. That was what he needed, Tom decided. A night without responsibilities. And if it took getting mind-alteringly drunk to help him forget... *stuff*, then so be it.

He was striding purposefully towards the bar when someone clapped a hand around his shoulder.

"Why so glum, chum?" the stranger asked.

He had slicked back dark hair and a square face and was wearing a black suit over a wide-collared white shirt, the top two buttons of which were undone.

"Mori's the name," the stranger continued. "Mori Hibiki. And you, my friend, look far too miserable to be in our beautiful city of Kyoto."

"I've got things on my mind," Tom said.

"Haven't we all," Hibiki said, "but I wouldn't be a good host if I just let you walk away like that."

Tom shook his head. "Listen, I don't mean to be rude, but I just want to get a drink."

"In *there*?" Hibiki raised his eyebrows. "That won't do at all. We can't have you going back to America bemoaning the quality of Japanese entertainment simply because you went into the first place you happened to chance across."

"I'm not American," Tom said.

"Let me be your guide." Hibiki draped his right arm across Tom's shoulders and pointed at imagined sights with his left hand. "Let Hibiki show you all the delights the city has to offer, then you can go home and tell all your American friends about it."

"I'm not American," Tom repeated, considering Hibiki's offer.

On the one hand, all he really wanted to do was find a quiet dive in which to drown his sorrows. On the other, that was hardly going to help him forget his problems and, whatever else Hibiki might be, he seemed determined to be a distraction.

Tom shrugged. "What the hell."

* * * * *

Ashleigh Milligan checked the time on her phone as she hurried along beside the canal. She did not want to have to explain to Mama-san why she was late for work again, not for a third time this week. Across the way, Ashleigh could see a geisha standing outside an ochaya. She looked perfect, of course, with her painted face, dark wig and midnight blue kimono decorated with maple leaves in autumn colours. She would never hurry anywhere. Reflexively, Ashleigh bowed to her and the geisha bowed in return, perhaps sharing a tacit acknowledgement that their roles tonight were not so very different. Or, perhaps Ashleigh was simply romanticising her own situation.

Ashleigh turned off of Shimbashi and headed in the direction of Torminagachō-dōri. In less than a hundred metres, it felt like she had travelled several hundred years, leaving behind the beauty of old Kyoto and plunging headlong into the lurid twenty-first century. Colour and noise, lust and avarice.

Caught up in the wonder of the transition, Ashleigh was not looking where she was going and was not agile enough to avoid the two gently swaying men who stepped out in front of her. Knocked off balance, Ashleigh tripped and fell. She thrust out her hands to break her fall and felt a jarring pain in her left arm as she struck the ground. Eyes watering, Ashleigh started examining her hands for any grazes. Mama-san would be less than thrilled if Ashleigh turned up for work with visible injuries, she might even go so far as to send her straight back home.

"Are you all right, pet?"

Ashleigh was vaguely aware of one of the men crouching down beside her.

"Your English is very good," she said automatically.

"I should hope so," the man replied.

Ashleigh looked up, taking in the smiling, sunburned face and wavy brown hair.

"You *are* English, aren't you?" She tried to place his accent. "Manchester."

"Close. Newcastle," Tom replied. "And if I had to guess, I reckon you're from Australia."

"New Zealand." Ashleigh smiled wryly. "At least I had the right country."

"Go on," Tom protested. "Australia and New Zealand are practically the same place."

"Is that so?"

"Ashleigh-chan?" The second of the two men had recognised her. Ashleigh looked up at him and her face darkened.

"Hibiki," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm just showing my new friend the best that Kyoto has to offer," Hibiki said, indicating Tom.

"I'll just bet you are," Ashleigh said.

"But shouldn't you be at the *Aphrodite*?" Hibiki said. "Mama-san won't like it if you're late. Nor will Nakamura-san."

"Like he cares." Ashleigh allowed Hibiki's friend to help her stand. "It was nice meeting you."

Tom shrugged. "Sorry if I made you late for work. Maybe I should come with you and apologise to your boss or something. I wouldn't want to get you in any trouble."

"Ashleigh can take care of herself, Tom-san," Hibiki said, "isn't that right, Ashleigh?"

"I'll be fine," Ashleigh said to Tom before bowing farewell to both him and Hibiki.

She would have liked to have stayed and talked with the Englishman some more. There were not a great many westerners in Kyoto so it was rare that she got the chance for a proper conversation in her own language. She missed that. The problem was that Hibiki, for all he was a creep, was also right. She was too easily replaceable to be able to take her job for granted.

Ashleigh tried to ignore the neon sign above the building as she entered. In the lift, she swapped her pumps for the thoroughly impractical high-heeled shoes she kept in her bag and removed her coat. It was uncomfortable wearing a coat in summer, but it was less uncomfortable than having passers-by leer at the dress she was almost wearing as she walked from her apartment in Demachiyanaagi to the club. She just had time to check her makeup in the lift's reflective interior before the doors opened on to the fifth floor.

Mama-san was waiting for her. She tapped her watch when she spotted Ashleigh.

"Sorry," Ashleigh mouthed. Her arm still ached, but she tried not to let that show on her face.

Nakamura was standing at the bar. He was wearing a blue suit, black shirt and grey tie with some kind of crest Ashleigh did not recognise. His reddish brown hair curled around his collar. He turned to face her, a tumbler of whiskey in his right hand, and appraised her with his eyes, while Ashleigh waited meekly for him to finish.

"We've got some special guests in tonight," Nakamura said. "The Hanadaka. I want her at their table."

"No," Mama-san insisted. "She was late. She doesn't deserve special treatment."

"Have you forgotten who's in charge here?" Nakamura said. "I decide who entertains whom and I want the Hanadaka to have the best."

"Her? The best?" Mama-san covered her mouth with her hand as she laughed. "I don't think so. Besides, the Hanadaka are big tippers. How will it look to the other girls if I reward her for her tardiness? I will not do it."

"It's not your decision," Nakamura said. "I own this club."

"And you employ me to run it," Mama-san said. "But if you're not happy with the way I do things then maybe I should look for new employment elsewhere, neh?"

Nakamura scowled.

"Fine," he said, "but this conversation isn't over."

Mama-san bowed. "Of course, Nakamura-sama."

Ashleigh had seen this argument play out between them on many occasions and on many topics. Mama-san always won.

Mama-san glared at her.

"Well, what are you standing around for, girl?" She clapped her hands. "Chop chop, get to it."

* * * * *

Hibiki had taken Tom fully in hand. First, they had visited a yakitori-place, where they had filled up on beer and chicken-skewers, after which Hibiki had insisted that the visit a sentō, a communal bathhouse. While Tom was not exactly thrilled with the idea of stripping down in

company, he did not want to offend his host, who was obviously desperate to make a good impression, so he went along with it, scrubbing himself thoroughly before lowering himself into the warm bathwater shared by half-a-dozen others. Despite his reservations, the experience was relaxing and Tom soaked away his cares while listening to locals complain about their day.

Thoroughly steamed, Hibiki took Tom, together with a couple of friends they had made in the bath, to a nearby karaoke bar, where they commandeered one of the booths and proceeded to murder a few classics and considerable more not-so-classics. Hibiki had a decent singing voice, but Tom had laughed at his pronunciation of the English lyrics so Hibiki insisted that Tom try his hand at an AKB48 number, much to the amusement of the others.

It was gone midnight by the time that they emerged back on to the street. Tom was ready to call it a night, but Hibiki, still full of energy, would not hear of it.

“I know just what you need, Tom-san,” he insisted, “and it's not far at all.”

It turned out to be a club on the fifth floor of a somewhat dull building, the name of which – so Tom was informed by the blue, neon sign – was *Aphrodite*. The light within was low and golden, cast by lamps on the flock wallpapered walls. Tables – some round, some long – were spaced about the kidney-shaped room, surrounded by wooden chairs or grey leather sofas. A waist-coated bartender stood behind the bar along the wall opposite the window and, at the far end of the room stood a baby grand piano.

“This place is owned by a friend of mine,” Hibiki said. “You'll like it here. All you have to do is relax and the girls will do all the work.”

The girls were sitting at the tables, keeping the club's patrons – predominantly middle-aged or older salarymen – entertained, topping up their drinks, lighting the cigarettes, laughing at the jokes and listening to their troubles. And, Tom noted, every so often politely but firmly removing wandering hands from thighs and elsewhere.

“You know, I'm really not sure this is my kind of place,” Tom said.

“Rubbish,” Hibiki replied. “Just let me have a word with the mama-san and I'll see you're looked after. But first...”

Hibiki swaggered over to a Japanese woman in a blue dress and pearls. She bowed to him, he bowed back and they both laughed. Hibiki gestured to the piano, the woman nodded and Hibiki sat down on the piano stool. The woman raised her hand and, from somewhere unseen, someone muted the soft jazz being piped over the club's sound system.

Hibiki straightened his jacket, cracked his knuckles and then began to play.

* * * * *

Ashleigh could see him standing near the door doing his best impression of a little lost lamb. What had Hibiki called him? Tom? Ashleigh gave the man she was sitting beside an embarrassed look.

“*Gomennasai*,” she said. “Sorry, I have to, umm...”

She channelled her ditzzy blonde and the salaryman smiled and nodded, giving Ashleigh all the permission she needed to wriggle out of her seat and start towards the bathroom. Maybe she could hide in there until Tom left or at least use the time to come up with a better plan of escape.

She never made it.

“Ashleigh?” Tom said, causing her to freeze like a deer in headlights. “What are you doing here?”

“I work here,” Ashleigh said, keeping her voice low. “You shouldn't be here.”
“Hibiki brought me,” Tom said, glancing over to the piano, “before he abandoned me.”
“Hibiki likes to play whenever he's in,” Ashleigh said, “and he and the owner are old friends.”

“He said.”

Tom looked around the club. Ashleigh's heart sunk as she watched him forming judgments, the way Westerners always did when they found out how she made her living.

“So what kind of work do you do, exactly?” Tom asked.

The hint of pity was the worst part and it triggered a swell of anger.

“What business is it of yours?” she snapped.

Her raised voice attracted the attention of Mama-san, who sashayed over from the piano where she had been flirting with Hibiki.

“What's going on here,” Mama-san asked, taking in Tom's shorts and sandals with disdain. “You're supposed to be working, Ashleigh-chan, not wasting time with your friends.”

Ashleigh glanced back to where the salaryman was waiting for her. Or not. He had already turned his attention to one of the other girls, doubtless boring her with the same stories about his job Ashleigh had had to endure. Ashleigh did not need any more of that tonight.

“He's not my friend,” Ashleigh said. “He's a paying customer.”

Mama-san looked doubtful so Ashleigh dug Tom in the ribs.

“Order champagne,” she hissed.

Tom was quick to take the hint, though he could feel the Doctor's disapproval even as he reached for his wallet.

* * * * *

Ajari looked up as the door to his world opened and Kazuo entered. He held a bat in one hand.

“What's the matter with them?” Kazuo complained. “I'm the guy in charge. I'm the guy who pays their wages. So why won't they give me any respect? I deserve respect, right?”

Ajari did not answer so Kazuo slammed the bat down heavily on the mat.

“Right?”

Ajari nodded vigorously.

“You respect me, don't you?” Kazuo said. “It only took the once to make you see the error of your ways.”

Kazuo hefted the bat, slapping it against the palm of his hand, and Ajari retreated as far as his chain would allow. This seemed to amuse Kazuo.

“You changed my life, you know that?” Kazuo sat down, his back against the wall, the bat resting across his knees. “Everything I am today, I owe to you. That alone should earn you a taste of this.”

He swung the bat in a lazy arc, but from his seated position he could not reach Ajari.

“Why so frightened?” Kazuo asked, laughing. “You know I'd never do anything to you that you didn't deserve.”

Ajari curled in on himself.

* * * * *

“So there I was, like, being chased through this underground Russian bunker by these zombie-soldier-things, when...” Tom paused in his recollections. “I’m not boring you, am I, pet?”

“Um, what?” Ashleigh turned to face him. “Sorry, I was... distracted.”

“So I noticed,” Tom said. “I hope you’re not like this with all your clients.”

Ashleigh frowned.

“Hey, don’t glower at me, love,” Tom said. “Tell me about the man with the big snout instead. You know, the one you’ve been staring at all night.”

“That’s Ryūhōbō,” Ashleigh explained. “He’s the head of the Hanadaka.”

“Hanadaka?”

“Local business,” Ashleigh said. “I think they’re in property or something.”

“Doesn’t look like much,” Tom said.

Ryūhōbō wore a steel grey suit with a wine-coloured shirt and tie. His hair was a slightly lighter shade of grey than his suit. He had a puffy, weathered face, the most prominent feature of which was his large aquiline nose.

“His looks aren’t exactly important,” Ashleigh said. “The point is that he’s a big tipper, maybe the biggest we get in here, and he should have been mine tonight. Only I was late, thanks to you, and Mama-san decided to punish me by sticking me with the salarymen looking for a night away from their wives so Iyumi’s going to get tonight’s big payout.”

“That seems like kind of a mercenary attitude,” Tom said.

“Do you think I do this job for the witty repartee?” Ashleigh shot back. She sighed. “Sorry, I’m not being much of a hostess, am I? I’m supposed to be all smiles and giggles and ‘aren’t you a handsome man, sir’, ‘can I fix your drink, sir’ and ‘do you need a light, sir’.”

“Well, I don’t smoke,” Tom said, “and if I drink much more you’ll be carrying me home, so that’s those two covered, but if you want to compliment me on my rugged good looks, I wouldn’t say no.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Ashleigh said.

“Wow, thanks, pet. If I ever need a kicking when I’m down, you’ll be the first I call.”

“Happy to oblige.”

Tom shook his head in amusement and took a sip of champagne. He sneezed as the bubbles went up his nose and Ashleigh laughed at him.

“Glad I can provide you with some entertainment,” he said. “Seriously, though, keep smiling like that and that’ll be enough for me.”

“I’ll do my best,” Ashleigh said, still grinning.

“That’s a good lass,” Tom said. “So, if not for the conversation, why do this job?”

Ashleigh’s grin evaporated.

“It’s just a means to an end,” she said.

“What end?”

“That’s the part of the plan I haven’t figured out yet.”

“Seems like a pretty important part to me.”

“Yeah, well, you’re at least ten years older than me. You got your goal in life figured out yet?”

“Ouch!” Tom put his hand over his heart. “Direct hit. You’re lethal, you are.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

The night had moved on. Most of the patrons had left for the evening, going back to their real lives after a night of pretending to be someone else. Hostesses with no one to host gathered at the bar, chattering in groups or texting on their phones.

“Mama-san's giving us the eye,” Ashleigh said. “I think she's looking to close up.”
“You mean it's hoyin' out time?” Tom said.
“I've no idea what that is, but yeah, if you like,” Ashleigh said. “Meet me outside?”
“Sure, I guess,” Tom said. “Why, what'll you be doing.”
“I've got to collect tonight's pay from Mama-san,” Ashleigh said, “and I'd like to grab a word with Ryūhōbō before Iyumi poisons him against me completely.”

* * * * *

Kazuo was locking the door to Ajari's room when Hibiki crept up behind him.

“Kazuo-kun, still looking after our little friend, are you?”

Kazuo drew the bolts on the door and pocketed the key.

“Hibiki-san, I didn't know you were in tonight.”

“Oh, you know, I was in the neighbourhood. Thought I might relax by tickling the old ivories.” Hibiki made a piano-playing mime with his fingers.

“My customers really seem to appreciate it when you stop by,” Kazuo said. “If you're ever interested in a more formal arrangement...”

“Are you offering me a job, Kazuo?” Hibiki laughed. “That's very kind, but I doubt you could afford me.”

“Are your 'friends' still supporting you then?” Kazuo asked with distaste.

“They've been very good to me. Very generous. You really should meet them at some point.”

“No, thank you,” Kazuo replied. “I don't need that kind of friendship.”

“Don't you?” Hibiki asked. “You've got a wife and son to support and this place has seen better days.” He rapped his knuckle on the door. “*My* friends are still very interested in *your* friend.”

“You should never have told them about him.”

“But I did and now they want him.”

“To do what? Dissect him?”

“Probably.” Hibiki shrugged. “It's not my place to ask questions. It *is* my place to tell you that they are prepared to up their original offer by twenty per cent.”

“I'm still not interested.”

“Really? Think what you could do with the money.”

“I'm sorry, Hibiki,” Kazuo said, “but the alien is not for sale.”

“Maybe not now,” Hibiki agreed, “but he will be. When he is, Kazuo-kun, you know where to find me.”

Hibiki turned and climbed back up the stairs leaving Kazuo seething on the landing.

* * * * *

“Let me get that for you,” Ashleigh said, elbowing Iyumi out of the way.

Iyumi stumbled against the table, knocking over glasses and spilling champagne over dress.

“Look what you made me do!”

“Looks to me like you need to go and get changed.” Ashleigh smirked. “Don't worry about Ryūhōbō-sama. I'll be sure to look after him.”

Dripping on the carpet, Iyumi stalked off to the bathroom while Ashleigh retrieved Ryūhōbō's coat.

"You must really want the honour of handing me my coat," Ryūhōbō observed, slipping his arms into the sleeves as Ashleigh held the garment out for him.

"I didn't want to miss out on the chance of getting to meet the great Ryūhōbō-sama," Ashleigh said, "and I'm the kind of girl who'll go a long way to get what she wants."

"Is that so? I should bear that in mind." Ryūhōbō turned to face her. "What is your name, young lady?"

"Ashleigh Milligan." Ashleigh bowed at the waist, hands on the front of her thighs.

"Ashleigh," Ryūhōbō repeated, stumbling a little over the letter "L". "Next time we meet, we shall have a longer conversation. It could prove very profitable to the both of us."

"I'll look forward to it very much," Ashleigh said, bowing again.

Ryūhōbō inclined his head, the slight bow of a superior to a junior, then followed his entourage out of the club.

* * * * *

"All sorted?" Tom asked as Ashleigh emerged from *Aphrodite*.

"Yes, thanks." She opened up her purse. "How much do I owe you for the champagne?"

"Don't worry about it."

"No, I insist. I did twist your arm into buying it."

"Seriously, don't worry about it," Tom said. "The company was worth it."

"Is that the alcohol talking?"

Tom grinned. "Anyway, it wasn't even my money. It belongs to my skipper."

"Skipper? So you work on a ship or something?"

"Something like that. And I should be getting back to her."

"This ship of yours," Ashleigh said, "she's probably docked in Kobe, right?"

"That would be the closest port, like?" Tom asked. "In that case, yes, she's probably docked in Kobe. I mean, she couldn't be any closer, could she?"

"Uh huh." Ashleigh nodded slowly. "And you're planning to head all the way back to Kobe at this time of night?"

"From the look on your face, I'm getting that'd be pretty daft, like."

"That'd be one word for it."

"Well I'm not staying in one of them capsule hotels."

"I wouldn't wish that on anybody," Ashleigh replied. "Listen – and this most definitely *is* the champagne talking – why don't you crash at my place, just for tonight. It's not far and I've got a spare futon."

"You serious?"

"Not if I can help it," Ashleigh said. "What's it to be, sailor-man?"

Tom looked away, thinking of the TARDIS. Val and the Doctor were probably too caught up in their investigation to even miss him and it would do him good to strike out on his own for a bit, meet new people and all that.

"Just let me text me friends," he said, "and then I'm all yours."

* * * * *

The Doctor opened his eyes.

It was raining. He could hear it hammering down on the ground around him. His clothes were soaked through and water dripped off of the end of his nose. And yet...

His eyes were telling him that he was indoors. The tatami mats on the floor in front of him were completely dry without even the slightest hint of damp.

He took a step forward, then another. His perspective did not change. It was as if the room had moved with him.

A car horn honked and he heard the vehicle speed past him so close he could feel the rush of air across his face. The car splashed through a puddle drenching the Doctor from the knees down.

But he could see no car. He could not even see a road. And if he was standing upright, why was his perspective only two feet above the tatami-covered floor?

He took a step back. Again the room remained fixed around him. He paused, studying the room, searching for clues. The wall opposite was a paper shōji screen. Some wag had painted eyes on the washi paper, making it up to look like a Mokumokuren, a demon from Japanese folklore. A pair of eyes blinked. Another pair looked shiftily from side to side.

Okay, so they were not painted on. Perhaps what he was looking at really was a Mokumokuren, haunting the gaps in the paper. The Doctor was not usually one for superstitions, but he had seen too much to be completely dismissive. There was something off about the pair of eyes directly opposite, however, something in the way they were studying him or in the very pale blue of their irises.

The Doctor looked to his left and out of the corner of his own eye, saw the pair watching him look to their right. The Doctor looked right, the eyes looked left. The Doctor felt his hearts quicken inside his chest as he realised what he was really seeing and who exactly those eyes belonged to.

He was not looking at a paper screen or even at a Mokumokuren. He was looking into a mirror.

* * * * *

Kazuo poked his head into his son's bedroom.

“Hey, Ichirou, what are you still doing here?” he asked.

The boy was curled up on a beanbag and playing with his Nintendo.

“Nothing,” he said sullenly without looking up.

“I thought you were going out to Murayama-kōen with your friends,” Kazuo said. “You know, get some air, kick a ball about, that kind of thing.”

“Didn't want to,” the boy said.

“Oh.” Kazuo looked down at his son. “Well... okay then.”

Troubled, Kazuo went downstairs and found his wife in the kitchen, ironing.

“What's up with Ichirou?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” Maemi said.

“I don't know, he just seems... withdrawn.”

“He's always like that,” Maemi replied. She put down the iron and began folding the now crease-free shirt. “So long as he's got his video games he's happy.”

“He doesn't seem happy,” Kazuo said. “Doesn't he go out playing soccer with his friends on Sundays?”

“He hasn't done that in ages.”

“He hasn't?”

“If you were ever here, Kazuo,” Maemi said, “then you might pay more attention to what our son is going through at school.”

“And what is he going through?”

Maemi put down the shirt she was holding.

“The other kids pick on Ichi because of his height,” she said. “He'd rather hide in his room that have to face them.”

“Ichirou's being bullied? Why didn't he tell me?”

“He might have done, if he ever saw you, but you're always out at that club of yours.”

“*Aphrodite* pays for all this.” Kazuo gestured expansively to take in the house and garden. “At least tell me you've spoken to the school about it.”

“Of course I've spoken to the school,” Maemi said, “and they've spoken to the other boys. They deny it, of course, so it's just Ichirou's word against theirs. And now they think Ichirou's a tattle-tale so the bullying is even worse.”

“So what are you doing about it?” Kazuo asked, raising his voice.

“What can I do about it?” Maemi raised her own voice to match.

“Mum, Dad, what are you fighting about?”

Ichirou stood in the kitchen doorway. He looked like a Bunraku puppet someone had abandoned, his limbs flopping uselessly by his sides. His body had been though a growth spurt, but the boy inside had yet to grow to inhabit it.

“We weren't fighting, Ichi-kun,” his mother said, taking a few steps forward.

Kazuo held her back.

“Don't smother the boy, Maemi,” he hissed. “That's half the problem.”

He turned to his son.

“You've grown up a lot while I wasn't looking, haven't you, Ichirou?”

“I guess.”

“You guess? Well *I* guess it's about time you started taking on some adult responsibilities.”

“Are you sure, Kazuo?” Maemi whispered.

“It'll make a man out of the boy,” Kazuo said. “Since you've got nothing better to do today, Ichirou, I've decided that you've going to come and help me down at the club.”

* * * * *

Val had taken shelter rain in the back seat of a taxi. She gave the driver her desired destination and tried to ignore the voice heckling her from behind.

“Shut up!” she hissed, a little too loudly. She looked apologetically at the driver, whose white-gloved hands rested at ten-past two on the steering wheel. “Not you, sorry.”

The driver raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Once over her initial horror at finding out she had an additional mouth in the back of her head, Val had been able to listen to what it had to say. It was not just any mouth, it was the mouth of Goto Taichi, who owned a shop just outside of the city. He had been attacked by the bird-creatures just as Val had, only while they had added to her, they had taken from him.

Taichi was as terrified as she was, he just reacted differently, yelling at her and accusing her of being responsible for his predicament. Except the he was not yelling at *her* specifically.

His mouth might be part of Val now, but she had no idea where his eyes and ears were and, without the input they provided, Taichi had no way of knowing where exactly his mouth was. The threats and pleading and general babbling seemed to be his way of coping with the fear. In the past hour, Val had learned that Taichi was married, had an older brother and still lived with his mother. He and his wife were trying for a child and Taichi was hoping for a son so that he could name him Tsuyoshi, after his favourite baseball player.

The problem was that his constant chatter was attracting attention. Val could not exactly pass off his voice as her own and it was difficult to tell him to shut up when he could neither see nor hear her.

So Val had decided to go and find him. The only way she could get past the idea of a *freaking mouth in the back of her head* was to focus on doing something about it. The Doctor would know what to do, but he had not been there when Val had regained consciousness, which meant that he had probably been taken. The Doctor was many things, not all of them flattering, but if he was still free then he would not have abandoned her. It was down to Val to find him and rescue him. That meant learning more about the aliens that had taken him and her current best hope for doing that was by questioning the only other witness to their activities she was aware of, namely Taichi. And if she was going to interrogate him, she wanted it to be somewhere where she could look him in the eye rather than talking to the back of her own head. More importantly, it needed to be somewhere where he could actually hear the questions and it was fortunate that in amongst the raging torrent of words, Taichi had happened to let slip his address.

Of course, Taichi had no idea that she was on her way to see him and kept up his prattle unabated. Val leaned back into her seat, hoping the leather would go some way to smothering the chatter, and closed her eyes, settling in for a long ride.

* * * * *

The Doctor forced himself to consider his situation rationally. His eyes were in one location, the rest of him somewhere else.

“Miss Rossi?” he called out. “Val, are you there?”

No answer.

He studied the eyes in the mirror. None of them appeared to belong to Val. He hoped that that meant that she had escaped while he was leading the aliens away. His own situation was of concern enough without having to add fear for his companions into the mix. Val could take care of herself. For the time being, she would have to.

Wherever his eyes were, they appeared to be in no immediate danger. The rest of him, wandering blindly, had already almost got itself run over. He had to get to somewhere safe before he started trying to reason this out. He closed his eyes, blocking out the distraction of the other room and focussed on his other senses.

He already knew that he was beside a road, but his ears told him that it was not a particularly busy one. It could be early morning, he supposed, but his body clock was of the opinion it was later, meaning the most likely cause of the lack of traffic was that he was some distance from the city centre. Of course, “some distance” could cover anything from miles to light years, but his instinct was that it was closer to the former than the latter. He jumped, confirming the gravity to be that of Earth. The smell and taste of the air was also consistent of that of twenty-first century Japan so unless everything had been deliberately arranged to confuse

him, it was unlikely that he had been moved far when he had been unconscious. And that meant that the TARDIS had to be nearby.

The bond between a Time Lord and his TARDIS went far beyond that of a simple captain and his vessel. In the case of the Doctor and his ship, this link had been strengthened by centuries of travel together, of facing danger together, of taking pleasure in each other's company. They shared an intimacy that the Doctor had not shared with anyone else since...

The Doctor shook his head. His mind was wandering off topic, retreating from the situation at hand. Understandable really, but far from helpful. The point was that he was tied to his ship and he should be able to follow that umbilical cord back home.

He rotated slowly on the spot, reaching out for the TARDIS with his mind, trying to determine the direction in which the signal felt strongest. Finally satisfied, he straightened his shoulders and strode forwards.

He collided with a table and went down in a tangle of limbs and second hand books.

* * * * *

When Val opened her eyes, she was no longer inside the taxi.

She was no longer in Japan.

She was sitting in a wicker chair looking out over a garden. She wore a light muslin dress that left her arms bare and she could practically feel the heat of the sun darkening them.

And she was not alone.

Hello again, Val, the voice in her head said.

This was not Taichi. This voice was female, seductive and purring. And familiar.

Still drifting, I see. Still letting others make the decisions for you. Still unable to make your mind as to what you really want.

“Who are you?” Val asked, her voice thick, her tongue heavy in her mouth.

Don't you remember me? Of course not. Just one more choice that was taken out of your hands.

“I don't understand.”

I'm you, Val. A part of you, anyway. Now and forever, no matter how much *he* tries to hide me. You can build all the walls around me that you like, but all walls eventually come tumbling down.

There was a silver tea service on the table in front of her, a table Val could have sworn had not been there a moment ago. She picked up the pot, examined her reflection in the concave surface.

Cat-like eyes stared back at her.

Boo!

The pot fell to the ground with a clang.

* * * * *

The noise jolted Val back to wakefulness.

She sat in the back of the idling taxi. The driver looked expectantly at her and Val belatedly realised that they had arrived. It had just been a dream, she thought to herself as she reached for her purse, no doubt brought on by her current situation. Nothing to worry about.

Probably.

She got out of the car, the door swinging closed behind her. The building in front of her, just like all the ones around it, was an unremarkable two-storey wooden box, painted a white that had long since weathered to pale grey. There were a couple of bicycles propped up against the wall.

A curtain twitched.

Val steeled herself and pressed the doorbell. Almost as soon as she had taken her finger from the buzzer, the door opened an inch, a chain in place across the gap, a wrinkled set of eyes peering up at her.

“Good morning,” Val said, trying her best to smile. “Does Goto Taichi live here? I have something that belongs to him.”

* * * * *

There were grazes on the palms of the Doctor's hands, but his knees had fared worse. He was leaning against the buildings on his left, using them as a guide as he tried to navigate his way back to the TARDIS. His progress faltered as he walked into objects other people had left in the street - planters, bicycles, vending machines – forcing him to slowly work his way around the obstruction before he could continue on his way. The Doctor was not a patient person at the best of times. This was not the best of times.

He could hear someone approaching, a child to judge by the pitch of the voice.

“Excuse me,” the Doctor said, “could you tell me how far it is to...”

He never finished his question. Instead, the child looked into his eyes, or rather into the holes where his eyes should have been, and screamed. A palm struck the Doctor in the chest, forcing him backwards. The hand was too high to belong to the child, and the tirade of distressed language that followed the shove confirmed that it belonged to the boy's mother. The Doctor held up his hands, trying to apologise, but the mother had already scooped up her son and fled, leaving the Doctor alone with his guilt and shame.

He slammed his fist against the coarse brick wall, hot stinging pain shooting up his arm. With the fingers of his other hand, he probed the damage, feeling the tiny flaps of torn skin, the stickiness where he had drawn blood. Was this what he had been reduced to, something to frighten children? How was he supposed to get his eyes back when he struggled to walk down a street?

He threw back his head and howled out his frustrations at the sky.

* * * * *

When Ashleigh entered the kitchen, Tom was already up and dressed. Ashleigh's first floor flat consisted of just three rooms, the kitchen/living area that one entered first on arrival, her bedroom off to the left of that and a tiny bathroom to the right. By moving a table out of the way, she had made enough space in the kitchen for Tom to sleep on the floor and had left him to it. She just wished that the sliding screen that separated the kitchen from her bedroom was better able to keep out Tom's snores.

“Morning,” she said, blinking away sleep.

“Morning,” Tom said, removing his head from a cupboard. “I would have made breakfast, but you don't seem to have much in.”

“I usually eat out.” Ashleigh ran a hand through her hair. “I’ll treat you if you like. Just let me freshen up.”

She went into the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

“You know there’s a cockroach in there, don’t you?” Tom said.

“You mean Joe? He and I are old friends.”

“You have a cockroach as a pet?”

“Have you seen the size of him? I wouldn’t want him for an enemy.”

Fifteen minutes later, they were walking down the street towards Demachiyanagi station, the sky above heavy with the promise of rain. It was Sunday morning and the streets were mostly quiet and empty. They passed through a Y-shaped junction where three boys played football in the road. The father of one of the boys was keeping an eye on them while playing Go at a table outside a convenience store.

Their destination was just on the other side of the station, a cafe that resembled nothing so much as an American diner.

“Not very Japanese, is it?” Tom said as they sat down at a booth in the window from where they could look out over the river.

“I’d say it’s very Japanese,” Ashleigh replied. “The Japanese are great accumulators. They take on bits and pieces of everyone else’s culture and make it their own. Just don’t tell a local that, they’d hate to think their culture was anything less than pure Japan.”

“Do you enjoy living out here?” Tom asked.

“There’s nowhere else in the world quite like it,” Ashleigh said. “It’s so rich and so full of contradictions, you could spend a lifetime just trying to understand it. It fascinates me, but I’m not sure I’d go as far as to say I like it.”

“So why here?”

“It’s not home.”

A waitress came over and Ashleigh ordered coffees and pastries.

“My Dad works at a bank in Auckland,” Ashleigh said, looking out of the window. “He wanted me to go work for him when I finished college.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Tom said.

“Yeah, not if you don’t mind the rest of the world hating your guts,” Ashleigh said. “Thanks but no thanks.”

“So you do hostessing for the adulation?”

“And what’d be the problem if I did?”

“I just don’t understand how a bonny lass like yourself ends up doing something like that.”

“It’s not so bad and it really isn’t what you think,” Ashleigh said. “All I have to do is keep some lonely men company and let them escape from their dreary lives for a bit.”

“Company. Is that what you call it?”

“Yes, that is what I call it,” Ashleigh snapped, “because that’s all it is! Christ, Tom, you sound just like my Dad.”

The waitress chose that moment to return with their breakfast. Tom tore open a sachet of sugar and poured it into his coffee.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“No, I’m sorry,” Ashleigh replied. “I’m just so used to people jumping to conclusions – the *wrong* conclusions – about what I do that I’m a bit sensitive about it. I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

“Hey, I've got a thick skin. I can take it.”

“It's a game, as much as anything else,” Ashleigh said. “A bit of make-believe. And who doesn't need some fantasy in their life every now and again. Anyway, it pays well. Japanese men find white-skinned, blonde-haired girls like me exotic so I'm always in demand – much to Mama-san's disappointment – particular since the government tightened up the law on foreigners working in hostess clubs. And when I've got enough money squirreled away, I can move on again.”

“Where to?” Tom asked.

Ashleigh shrugged. “Anywhere. Everywhere. There's a whole world out there, Tom, and I've hardly seen any of it. But you must know what that's like.”

“What what's like?”

“The urge to travel. Isn't that why you're on a ship's crew?”

“Not... exactly.”

“Well anyway, I'm so jealous of you,” Ashleigh said.

“You wouldn't be if you knew what it was really like,” Tom said.

Ashleigh grinned. “Try me.”

Before Tom could reply, Ashleigh's phone chirped. She frowned at the display.

“Sorry,” she said, “I've got to get this.”

Tom tried not to eavesdrop, but he could hear that Ashleigh had raised the pitch of her voice, talking in a cutesy, babyish way. It made his skin crawl.

“Anyone important?” he asked when Ashleigh terminated the call.

“Ryūhōbō,” Ashleigh said. “He wants to take me out to lunch.”

“Isn't he a little old for you?”

“That's rich coming from you. Anyway, dates with clients are part of the job.”

“I see,” Tom said flatly.

“It's just dinner,” Ashleigh said. “Some men like to be seen in the company of attractive young women. It makes them feel worth something.”

“Even if they're paying for it? Don't you find that kind of sad?”

“It's a business transaction. They get what they want and I get a free meal.”

“Well, that makes it all okay, like,” Tom said.

“Tom, don't be like that.”

“Be like what? If this is how you want to live your life then who am I to argue.” Tom stood up. “I should be getting back to my ship. Have fun on you 'date'.”

“Tom!”

But the door was already swinging shut behind him.

* * * * *

The Doctor sat cross-legged on the pavement. He had been stumbling along for hours, but felt he had hardly made any progress at all. Was this all it took for his enemies to defeat him, by depriving him of a single one of his senses? Millions of people coped with blindness every day, why couldn't he?

Tiredness embraced his limbs like a leaden straightjacket. He did not know if he had the strength to get up anymore, did not know if he even cared. Give him an enemy to fight back against and he knew where he stood, but this..?

As he lost interest in the fate of his body, his attention returned to what was in front of his eyes. The room in which they were stored was no longer empty. Five individuals gathered inside. The Doctor recognised them as the bird-like aliens he had encountered near Nanzen-ji. They were wearing a curious patchwork of clothes, alien robes of crimson and violet supplemented by items from twenty-first century Earth. One wore a military-style jacket with bright badges pinned in a line down the left sleeve. Another had scavenged a pair of pink cowboy boots, the toes of which had been cut away to accommodate the creature's talons. A third had on a pair of *Hello Kitty* earmuffs and a fourth wore a pair of white, fuzzy leg warmers, or attempted to at any rate. It had to keep bending down to pull them back up over its skinny, scaly legs.

The five were talking to one another, but, with only his eyes present, the Doctor could not hear what they were saying and the shape of their beaks made it impossible for him to lip read.

Far away, his body leaned forward.

Words were not the only way in which people communicated with one another. In fact, it could be argued that words were a minor part of communication. So much more could be gathered from observing body language. Of course, not knowing what these aliens were, meant that the Doctor did not know the context in which to place their movements, but he had been around the universe a few times and that experience had to count for something.

They were arguing, that much was obvious. The largest had singled out one of the others as his target and the remaining three had sycophantically rallied around him. He pushed the little one across the room and the victim tripped over his own feet and fell, prompting laughter from the others. The Doctor's body tensed. Though he could not hear them now, he remembered that laughter well enough from the evening before. But there was something else, something about the looseness of their movements, the way they did not quite finish their gestures cleanly, as if they were not completely comfortable in their own bodies. As if they were still growing into them.

With a look of grim determination on his face, the Doctor hauled himself upright.

"I will not," he growled, "*will not* be beaten by children."

"Is that so?" a new voice asked. "Perhaps I can help with that."

* * * * *

"Let me help you with that."

Val started to rise as Mizuki returned carrying a tray of tea things. The shrill voice of Taichi's mother brought her to a halt, however.

"My daughter-in-law can manage perfectly well on her own," she said. "All we require from you is that you put my son to rights."

"I would if I could," Val said, glancing over to where Taichi was kneeling on the floor. The blank expanse of flesh between his nose and chin drew her eye.

"Seems simple enough to me," Taichi's mother said. "You took his mouth. You can give it back."

"She didn't take anything, Okachan," Taichi said.

Val did not know where to look. His voice was coming from behind her, but Taichi himself was on the other side of the *kotatsu*, a table incorporating a blanket and an electric heater.

"Miss Rossi is as much a victim here as I am," Taichi continued.

“And on what do you base that conclusion?” his mother asked. “Because she said so?” She shook her head. “You young people have a lot to learn. In my day...”

“Tea, Okasama?” Mizuki said, cutting her off.

Taichi's wife had now settled on the tatami mats that covered the floor, her legs folded to one side of her while she poured green tea into plum blossom tea bowls. Her mother-in-law took a bowl in both of her hands and sipped at it.

“Pah,” she spat. “Too bitter. You always make it too bitter.”

“Well I like Mizuki's tea, Okachan,” Goto said, “speaking of which, would you mind if...”

He started to rise, but his wife waved him back down.

“I've got it.” She picked up a tea bowl and turned to Val. “May I?”

Holding the bowl in one hand, Mizuki started brushing Val's hair away from Taichi's mouth. Mizuki tentatively tipped the bowl, feeding him the tea. She poured too quickly, however, and a small amount trickled out of the corner of her husband's mouth. Val flinched as drops of hot liquid scalded her head and neck.

“Sorry,” Mizuki said.

“It's all right,” Val said. “Carry on. Take your time.”

Little by little, Mizuki drizzled tea into Taichi's mouth until the bowl was empty. Mizuki used a napkin to dry Taichi's lips and the back of Val's head and neck.

“Thank you,” Taichi said, inclining his head towards the both of them. “I needed that.”

A thought popped into Val's head.

“How long ago did they take your mouth?” she asked. “How long since you last ate?”

The notion of Mizuki trying to feed Taichi through Val's hair hardly thrilled her, but still...

“I'm good for a while yet,” Taichi assured her. He patted his stomach with the palm of his hand. “Mizuki's been saying I should go on a diet for a while now.”

“That's because your wife doesn't appreciate what she's got,” Taichi's mother interjected.

“Okachan, you know that's not true,” Taichi said.

His mother rolled her eyes. “What you see in that girl is beyond me. Your brother would never have made the same mistake.”

“And look what happened to him,” Taichi snapped back.

The colour drained from his mother's face.

“Okachan, I'm sorry,” Taichi said, thunderstruck. “I didn't mean...”

“I know exactly what you meant, Tai-kun,” his mother said.

She stood, her elderly joints protesting.

“I'll be in my room,” she said. “Not that anybody cares.”

“But Okachan...” Taichi hurried after her.

“Is it always like this?” Val asked Mizuki.

Mizuki started collecting up the tea things.

“This is a good day,” she said.

* * * * *

His name was Saburō and he was a Shinto priest. He had been tending to his shrine when he had heard a child's screams and chose to investigate.

“Bet you weren't expecting to find this,” the Doctor said, moving his hand in a circular gesture to indicate his face.

“I didn't know what to expect,” Saburō replied. “We should get you to a doctor.”

“I am a doctor,” the Doctor said, “and no Earth doctor could treat this. I need to find who did this and persuade them to reverse the procedure.”

“Persuade them?” Saburō asked. “How exactly are you intending to do that?”

“I'm sure they'll listen to a reasoned argument.”

“And if they don't?”

The Doctor clenched his fist, wincing slightly as he stretched the broken skin.

“It won't come to that.”

“But if it does,” Saburō pressed. “Forgive me, Doctor, but you seem to be carrying a lot of anger.”

“Of course I'm angry,” the Doctor snapped. “They took my eyes. Who knows what they've done to Val. At least one woman is dead because of them and there could be any number of others.”

“Dead?” Saburō said.

“She committed suicide because of what these people turned her into.”

“So she took her own life,” Saburō said. “These 'creatures' of yours, they didn't actually kill her themselves.”

“They might as well have done.”

“But it wouldn't do to judge them too harshly,” Saburō said. “You did say they were just children, after all.”

“That doesn't absolve them of responsibility,” the Doctor said, “or of their guilt. Someone needs to remind them of that.”

“And that someone is you?”

“In the absence of anyone else.” The Doctor sighed. “Look, there's no need for you to get involved. I just need some directions back to my... well, back to Nishiki Market, I guess. I can make my own way from there.”

“Don't be ridiculous, Doctor,” Saburō said. “You'd never make it that far on your own. I'll guide you.”

Saburō took the Doctor's right hand and placed it on his own left shoulder.

“This would have nothing to do with wanting to keep an eye on me,” the Doctor said, “and making sure I don't do anything you disapprove of, would it?”

“Shinto teaches us that the world is one great family, Doctor,” Saburō said. “How can I shirk my responsibilities to a brother in need?”

“And they people who did this to me, do you consider them your brothers too?”

Saburō did not reply.

* * * * *

It was clearly going to take some time for Taichi to calm his mother, not least because he was having to do so without the benefit of a voice (and Val was so not stepping into a family dispute just to help him out on that score), so Val decided to make herself scarce for the time being. It was still spitting about with rain, but Val was not about to let that worry her. It was not as if her hair could get into a worse state.

A fence ran along this stretch of riverbank. Val leaned against it and sighed, letting all the pent-up emotions of the past twenty-four hours out in a single breath. She should call Tom, make sure he was okay. Knowing Tom, he would be worrying about her and...

There was a text waiting for her on her phone. Tom must have sent it last night.

STAYING THE NIGHT WITH A GIRL I MET AT A CLUB. ALL GOOD. CYT.

Yeah, he was really worried about her.

What did you expect? We both know about his wandering eye.

That voice, again, the female one from her dream. Why did her words seem so familiar?

Because we've been here before, you and I.

The face reflected in the gloss surface of her phone was not her own. It was feline and furred, the bone structure thrust forward. And yet the eyes... those were hers.

You can't hide from me forever.

"Miss Rossi?"

Val jumped at Mizuki's approach.

"Sorry," she said, "I didn't mean to startle you. I just wanted to check that you were okay."

She held a blue umbrella. She lifted it up so that Val could shelter beneath it as well.

"I'm fine," Val said. "I just needed to get out of there."

"My mother-in-law can be a bit much to take," Mizuki agreed.

Val smiled politely and looked out across the river. A fisherman stood upright in his boat, rod in his hands as he waited for a bite.

"It's so peaceful out here," she observed.

"Too peaceful." Mizuki said. There was a question in Val's eyes, so she continued. "My husband and I run the local store, but you don't get many people this far out and the loyalty of the locals will only get us so far. I've been trying to convince Taichi that we should move to the city, but..."

"But he doesn't want to leave his mother behind," Val concluded.

"It's not all his fault," Mizuki said. "He still feels guilty over what happened to Jiro."

"And Jiro would be his... brother?" Val guessed, recalling the earlier conversation. "What's the story there anyway?"

Mizuki paused.

"Taichi should really be the one to explain that," she said, refusing to be drawn on the subject any further.

* * * * *

Tom's anger lasted until he reached the other side of the road. He was no longer even sure what he was getting worked up about, but the thought of Ashleigh and how she made her living and at her age...

(At her age? Man, when did I become such an old git?)

And storming out in a huff was helping the situation how, exactly? He should go back and apologise, though she had every right to throw the apology back in his face and...

He sighed. He had screwed up. Ashleigh seemed to have a decent, if slightly mercenary, head on her shoulders. She could take care of herself. Better he just walk out of her life now rather than diving back in and making things worse.

Speaking of things getting worse, the rain was getting heavier. Tom turned up the collar of his polo shirt and wished he had thought to bring a jacket. He took shelter beneath one of the raised terraces that jutted out from the restaurants that lined this side of the river. A college age Japanese lad had got there ahead of him, sitting on the ground and playing some sort of bamboo flute. Tom hunted around in his pocket for some coins to give him, but could not see a hat or similar receptacle to throw them in.

When the rain finally eased, he set off again, walking briskly in case the heavens decided to have another go. He turned right, angling away from the river and making his way past the Takashimaya department store and into the heart of the city's shopping district. Five minutes later and he had arrived at the covered Nishiki Market, a narrow street of traditional stalls selling locally produced pickles, dried seafood and other food items (many of which Tom thought it best not to try to identify). The stallholders gleefully gave out samples of their wares and Tom, who had abandoned most of his breakfast, was not reserved about accepting, though the shibazuke pickle followed by the steamed bun filled with red bean paste was perhaps a taste sensation too far.

The Doctor had landed the TARDIS in a gap between two stalls.

“Hi, honey, I'm home!” he called as he entered.

There was no answer save for the ever-present background hum of the TARDIS. He searched around the console for a message, even just a Post-It note, but there was nothing to be found. He checked his phone again, but Val had still not replied to his text.

Where were they? And were they really having such a good time that they had forgotten all about him? He expected this kind of thing from the Doctor, but he had thought that Val might show a bit more in the way of concern.

Well sod the pair of them. Tom could have a perfectly good time without them.

And with that thought in his head, Tom marched off in search of the TARDIS swimming pool.

* * * * *

They walked back up the hill together, sharing Mizuki's umbrella.

“I guess I can't really blame Taichi for wanting to stay here,” Val said. “My life is all go, go, go. I can see the appeal of life in the slow-lane.”

“You thinking of giving it all up?”

“Maybe,” Val said. “I mean, there's still so much I want to do, but I can't keep doing it forever. I guess I look at what you and Taichi have and I think, you know, one day.”

“I suppose I should be flattered,” Mizuki said. “Do you have anyone in mind that you're planning to settle down with?”

Val decided to change the subject.

“Taichi tells me that you're trying for a baby.”

“Well, not so much trying anymore.” Mizuki put a hand on her stomach.

Val's eyes widened. “Congratulations! How long have you known?”

“A few days.”

“But you haven't told Taichi yet?”

“I've been waiting for the right time. Seems like I waited too long.”

“You'll get your chance,” Val promised her. “We'll put this right. My friends and I, it's what we do.”

“If that's so,” Mizuki asked, “then how come they let this happen to you?”

* * * * *

It had stopped raining. The dark clouds had parted and the heat from the summer sun was soon at work drying the Doctor's clothes.

Saburō had guided him down street after street without complaint. He had warned the Doctor of every obstacle in his path, helped to steer him around them and slowed his pace to one the blind Doctor could match. None of this was enough to prevent the Doctor stumbling, however.

He grunted angrily as his toe caught on an uneven pavement slab. Saburō caught him before he fell, but the Doctor pushed him angrily away.

“Don't judge yourself too harshly, Doctor,” Saburō said calmly. “You're making excellent progress.”

“But it's not enough, is it? I need to be better than this.”

“You're a man of action, Doctor,” Saburō said. “This must be torture for you.”

“You've got that right, Saburō,” the Doctor replied, “but not for the reasons you think. There are people relying on me, whether they realise it or not. What good am I to them like this?”

“These things take time, Doctor,” Saburō said. “You are learning to look at the world in a whole new way. Of course you're going to make a few mistakes along the way.”

“A few?” The Doctor laughed bitterly. “Every step I take seems to be a wrong one.”

“So learn from that. Do better next time.”

“And how many people suffer – or worse – because I can't learn fast enough?”

“People like that woman you found? The one who committed suicide?”

“She didn't have to die,” the Doctor said. “If I'd only got to her sooner... if anyone had thought to treat her as the human being she was instead of a freak...”

“Her death wasn't your fault.”

“No,” the Doctor agreed, his voice cold and hard, “that's on their heads. But if anyone else dies when I could have prevented it, that's on me.”

He tilted his head. Now that he could feel the sun on his face, he could orient himself by its position in the sky, only it was not where it was supposed to be.

“Saburō,” he said. “I thought you were taking me to Nishiki Market. Why are we going in the opposite direction?”

* * * * *

In the harsh light of day, *Aphrodite* looked decidedly less glamorous. Mood lighting could hide a multitude of sins, but when he exited the lift, Kazuo could not help but notice the worn patches on the carpet, the peeling paper and the fact that one of the tables was in a different style to all the others. The whole place was in need of gutting and refurbishing, but he could not afford the loss of revenue that would result from closing the club for the duration of the works. Maybe he should take Hibiki up on his proposal after all, he thought.

“I suppose you'll want me to help with the clean-up,” Ichirou said, his eyes following the cleaners who were hard at work putting the club to rights.

“That's not why I brought you here, Ichirou,” Kazuo said.

He crossed the floor to the door near the bar and unlocked it.

“You're taking me to the office?” Ichirou swallowed, nervously. “You're not going to want me to do any accounts or stuff like that. You know I'm rubbish with numbers. All my teachers say so.”

“Not everything in life is about how you do at school,” Kazuo said.

Kazuo started down the stairs and Ichirou had no choice but to follow. A single light bulb illuminated the staircase and Ichirou had to keep his eyes on the steps to avoid tripping over his feet. It was cold out here and the boy rubbed his hands together to warm them up.

There was a short landing at the foot of the stairs that led to another featureless door. Kazuo paused, his hand hovering over the door-handle.

“What I'm about to show you, I don't show just anyone, Ichirou,” he said. “I wanted you to know that.”

He opened the door.

Bile flooded Ichirou's throat. The floor turned to jelly and he had to put a hand on the wall to stop himself falling. He tried to focus on the mundane details, the shape of the room, its small size, the blue paint on the walls. The chain.

And bound by that chain, a... Ichirou did not have the words. It was a half-bird, half-man *thing*. And it huddled on the floor, cooing to itself. Incongruously, Ichirou recognised the tune as that of an old Japanese nursery rhyme his mother used to sing to him.

“This is Ajari,” Kazuo said. “Can you believe I used to be scared of him? But he taught me that all fears can be conquered, that if you want something, all you have to do is reach out and take it. He taught me what it is to be strong.”

Kazuo held something out to Ichirou.

“Now he's going to teach you,” Kazuo said.

Ichirou looked down, took in the baseball bat in his father's hands.

“Take it,” Kazuo said. “Take it and pretend that he's all those kids at school that bully you.”

“You want me to..?” The bile was rising again.

“Show me how strong you can be, Ichirou,” Kazuo said. “Take the bat and use it.”

Ichirou took hold of the bat. It shook in his trembling hands.

“Prove to me you're man enough to stand up for yourself,” Kazuo said.

Ichirou dropped the bat, turned and vomited into a corner of the room. When he had nothing left to retch up, he heard a slow hand-clap coming from behind him.

“Guess the boy doesn't have the stomach for it,” said a new voice, “or for much else by the look of things.”

“Hibiki,” Kazuo said grimly. “What are you doing here?”

“I just wanted to see if you'd given any more thought to my offer.”

“I've already told you, the answer is no.”

Hibiki shrugged. “I thought you might have changed your mind, that's all.”

He picked up the baseball bat and took a few practice swings against empty air.

“Nice balance,” he said. “You should really try this out, Ichirou. Like this!”

The bat struck Ajari around the head. The bird-creature tried to raise his arms to protect himself, but Hibiki swung again and again and again. When Ajari stopped struggling, Hibiki threw down the bat and turned to face Kazuo. He was breathing heavily and his eyes were blazing with the rush of adrenaline.

“You will agree to what my friends are offering, Kazuo,” he said. “It's only a matter of time.”

Straightening his tie, he exited the room, nudging Kazuo out of the way with his shoulder as he did so. Ichirou barely noticed. He was still staring at the blood clotting around Ajari's eye.

* * * * *

“Where are we, Saburō?” the Doctor asked.

“I'm sorry I misled you, Doctor.”

“I trusted you. What was I thinking?”

“Doctor...”

Saburō reached out towards him, but the Doctor knocked him aside and staggered away. He did not get far, his flight abruptly terminated by a tall wooden pillar in his path. He clung to the pillar to keep himself upright.

“I should have known better. You look at me like... like *this* and all you see is a victim, right? Someone you can exploit?”

“Is that what you see, Doctor? Is that how you see yourself?”

“Answering a question with a question, Saburō? It's not big and it's not clever.”

He pushed himself away from the pillar, took half a dozen brisk steps to his right and stretched out his arms until his hands connected with another pillar.

“What are you doing, Doctor?” Saburō asked.

“Proving I don't need you.” The Doctor gestured behind him. “I'm guessing these two posts are connected at the top by a crossbeam. Probably two. Am I right? Don't bother to answer that, I doubt I'd believe you anyway.”

The Doctor's fingers crab-walked over the surface of the post, taking in a raised pattern running vertically up the pillar.

“Interesting,” he said, launching himself off the pillar once again, but this time staggering at right angles to his original direction. As expected, his lunge was terminated by another pillar, this one with a different pattern painted on it.

“Another torii gate,” the Doctor said, “and more writing. A company logo, if I'm not mistaken. And I'm guessing that if I keep climbing up this hill I'll find gate after gate after gate, which means there's only one place on this miserable planet where I can possibly be. The only question that remains, Saburō, is why exactly have you brought me to Fushimi-Inari-Taisha?”

“I... I don't know.”

“You'll have to do better than that, Saburō, if that's even your real name.”

“That is my name,” Saburō said, a crack in his voice.

“So it's just everything else that's a lie.”

“Yes. No. I don't know anymore.”

“You don't know?” The Doctor tilted his head, trying to follow the sound of Saburō's footsteps. “Where do you think you're going?”

“You're confusing me, Doctor.”

“*I'm* confusing *you*?”

“You lied to me, didn't you? There was no suicide.”

“Why would I need to lie about that? And what does it matter to you anyway.”

“It matters.” Saburō's voice was faint, as if he were talking to himself rather than to the Doctor. He spoke up. “The people who... altered... her, maybe they didn't know that she would take her own life.”

“Then they should have thought more about what they were doing. Actions have consequences, Saburō.”

“And have you never done anything that you wish you could take back, Doctor?”

There was a pause before the Doctor answered. “This isn't about me.”

“Isn't it?”

The Doctor could hear Saburō moving across the courtyard.

“Hold still, will you.”

“Why? What punishment have you got planned for me? The same righteous vengeance you have planned for whoever took your eyes?”

“I'm not in the vengeance business,” the Doctor said. “I just want justice.”

“And who decides what's just? You? Morality isn't an absolute.”

“That doesn't mean you can't tell right from wrong.”

“I'm not so certain of that. Is morality something we're born with or is it something we acquire?”

“I'm not interested in a philosophical debate.”

“Of course you aren't. That might interfere with your 'justice'.” Saburō spat the last word. “You're familiar with this place, Doctor? You know what lies at the heart of the Inari shrine?”

“A mirror,” the Doctor said. “So what?”

“The mirror is sacred,” Saburō said. “It hides nothing. Everything good or bad, right or wrong, is reflected without fail.”

“So whatever else you are, you do know your Shinto.”

“As do you, Doctor. What do you see when you look in the mirror?”

“I don't see anything at the moment, do I. Is this all some elaborate joke at my expense?”

“I think the joke's on both of us, Doctor. The mirror is a metaphor as much as an actual object. Sincerity is the mother of all knowledge. We can lie to others, but we gain nothing from deceiving ourselves. What do you see reflected back at you?”

“Better question: what do you see, Saburō?”

“Answering a question with a question, Doctor?”

The Doctor had not heard footsteps approaching, but Saburō's voice was now just behind his ear.

“How did you..?”

“I flew,” Saburō replied. The Doctor felt the pressure of a scalpel blade on his throat. “I could kill you now. I probably *should* kill you.”

“So why don't you?” The scalpel was cold, like an icicle above his Adam's apple, but beads of sweat trickled down his neck all the same.

“I was hoping you could explain it to me. What is it about you that holds me back?”

“I don't think it's anything to do with me, Saburō?” the Doctor said quietly. “I think the answer lies in that mirror of yours.”

The Doctor felt Saburō's grip on the blade weaken so he pressed his advantage.

“They say we see our true self reflected in the hearts of those around us,” he said. “When I look at the people I've known, the people who travel with me, I'm reminded of all the mistakes I've made. Do you know what centuries of guilt and shame and regret look like, Saburō? It's

standing right in front of you. But in those same people, I see all the good I've done, all the effort I've made to balance the scales in my favour. I like to think I've made a difference.”

“But you don't know that for certain.”

“Any man who claims he does is a liar,” the Doctor replied, “but what I do know is that I am the man who fights the monsters and, when I look at myself in the mirror, that's enough.”

The Doctor paused to take a breath and realised that the scalpel was no longer at his throat.

“Saburō?” he said.

“And what of the monsters?” Saburō asked, his voice travelling from far away. “What if they just want to be better too?”

“Our mistakes don't define us, Saburō,” the Doctor said. “The measure of a man – of any individual – is how he responds to those mistakes.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Saburō said. “You've given me a lot to think about. What you're looking for is at the summit of the mountain. I wish you luck.”

“Saburō, wait!” the Doctor called out, but it was too late.

Saburō was gone.

* * * * *

“Jiro was their first victim,” Taichi explained.

He was sitting on the front door step, his head in his hands. His mother was still stubbornly refusing to leave her bedroom, but Taichi had given up on her by the time Val and Mizuki had returned from their walk. The two women were sitting in folding chairs outside the front of the house. The rain had finally stopped and they were taking advantage of the break in the clouds. Val was drinking from a can of *CC Lemon* while Mizuki had a bottle of *Jūrokucha*. A second bottle was on the ground by the leg of Mizuki's chair. Every so often, she would pick it up and offer Taichi a drink. She was using a straw this time around to avoid spillage, a detail for which Val was grateful.

“Mother had such high hopes for him,” Taichi said. “Jiro was always the smart one, the athletic one, the one that might amount to something. Jiro had had a business meeting that day and he had brought me along as his assistant.”

“His gofer,” Mizuki said. “Let's call it what it was.”

“That's not fair,” Taichi said. “Jiro was trying to do right by me.”

“Your brother's never tried to do right by anyone but himself,” Mizuki said. “What happened to him doesn't mean we have to rewrite history to paint him as a saint. You see the best in everyone, Taichi. It's one of the things that attracted you in the first place, but Jiro exploits that.”

“Maybe,” Taichi conceded. “The point is, we were on our way home when we saw this group of birds in the middle of the road. Big birds. Not quite as tall as me, but bigger than birds are supposed to be.”

“I've seen them,” Val said.

“Yes, of course you have. Then you can probably guess what comes next. I froze. I tried to convince Jiro to turn the car around and find another way home. I didn't want to have to deal with those things again.”

“Again?” Val asked. If Taichi heard her, he ignored her.

“Jiro was having none of it. He took it as a personal affront that they were blocking his way, so he floored the accelerator and aimed right for them, intending to knock them down like so many bowling pins. Being birds, though, they could fly. They simply rose up and out of our way. They spoke with this weird, high-pitched kind of birdcall that sounded a bit like laughter. It only infuriated Jiro even more. He turned the car around to face them again, intent on having another go.

“I had my hands over my eyes at this point so exactly what happened is a bit of a blur. Perhaps if I'd been less of a coward I might have been able to stop them, but I wasn't and I couldn't.”

“It doesn't sound like any of this was your fault, Taichi,” Val said. “If your brother had followed your advice and gone another way in the first place...”

Taichi shook his head. “You don't know the full story.” He paused before continuing. “The birds landed on top of the car. There were feathers on the windows, over the windscreen, blocking out the light. Jiro tried to steer, but we couldn't see where we were going and we swerved off the road into a ditch. Jiro was furious now. He threw open the door and clambered out of the car, intending to give the bird-creatures what for. They just laughed at him. He lashed out, but they just swirled around him, enveloping him in a blanket of feathers and then... and then...”

Goto wiped his eyes.

“I couldn't look, but then it all went quiet. When I finally plucked up the courage to open my eyes, Jiro was gone. But they had left me behind and untouched. Why did they leave me behind?”

“Because you didn't try to hurt them?” Val suggested.

“Then why do this to him now?” Mizuki said.

Val has no answer.

“Jiro reappeared a few days later,” Taichi said, “wandering just outside of town, but he was... changed. He couldn't come home, didn't want to face...” Taichi laughed cynically. “I was going to say 'normal people', but what does that make us now.”

“You're my husband and I love you, Taichi,” Mizuki said. “This hasn't changed that.”

“You think?” Goto said. “What happens if I'm stuck like this for the rest of my life? What becomes of us then? Have you thought about that?”

Mizuki looked away, but Val caught the glint of tears in her eyes before she did.

“Where's Jiro now?” Val asked. She wanted to say something comforting for Mizuki's sake, but could not find the words.

“There's an old farmhouse not far from here,” Taichi said. “They say it's haunted so no one goes there anymore. I helped Jiro restore it and he lives there now, undisturbed.”

“Did he ever tell you what happened during the time he was away?”

“He didn't want to talk about it. I didn't want to pry.”

“Well, at the risk of sounding unfeeling, don't you think it's about time you did?”

* * * * *

Ryūhōbō was already waiting for Ashleigh when she arrived at the restaurant.

“I'm not late, am I?” she said, using her kawaii voice, her pitch slightly higher than normal.

“No, no, not at all,” Ryūhōbō said. “Please, sit down.”

Ryūhōbō had chosen a traditional Japanese restaurant, with the tables down at ground level. Ashleigh was relieved to note, however, that the table was actual set in a hole in the floor so she could sit western-style, by sitting on the edge of the hole and dangling her legs over the side, rather than having to kneel, a posture that became uncomfortable for her very quickly. A waiter poured sake for them both.

“Your health, Ashleigh-chan,” Ryūhōbō said.

“And yours, Ryūhōbō-sama,” Ashleigh sipped from her cup.

The fermented rice drink was an acquired taste, but she had been working at the club long enough to know how to mask her real emotions in front of clients. They wanted to see happy, bubbly Ashleigh and that was exactly what Ryūhōbō was going to get.

“I was so glad you called,” she said. “I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since last night.”

“Nor I you, Ashleigh,” Ryūhōbō said. “You intrigue me. When I look at you I see... possibilities.”

There was an undercurrent to Ryūhōbō's words and, as discretely as she could, Ashleigh glanced around, confirming the locations of the exits. One of the waiters glided over, carrying a tray laden with dishes.

“I took the liberty of ordering for both of us,” Ryūhōbō said. “I hope you don't mind.”

“No at all,” Ashleigh said. “I'm sure you have excellent taste.”

Ryūhōbō smiled thinly.

“Please,” he said, “help yourself.”

“*Itadakimasu*,” Ashleigh said, pressing the palms of her hands together and bowing slightly before reaching for a tempura prawn with her chopsticks.

Ryūhōbō waited for her to add a few more items to her bowl before helping himself to some rice.

“I must compliment you on your skill with chopsticks,” he said, “and your grasp of our language. You are very accomplished.”

Ashleigh giggled, coyly hiding her mouth behind her hand. “Maybe for a westerner.”

“But of course,” Ryūhōbō said. “That's what I meant. Still you must have lived in Japan for some time to have become so proficient.”

“Only four months,” Ashleigh replied.

“Four months, is that so? And do you plan to try and stay on when your visa expires?”

“Maybe,” Ashleigh replied. “I want to travel, but...”

“But to travel one needs money,” Ryūhōbō said. “Money such as the work at Nakamura-san's club provides. Generous though Nakamura-san doubtless is with his wages, after bills, rent and food and clothes, how much do you really have left? How long will it take you to save up what you need?”

“A while,” Ashleigh admitted.

Ryūhōbō leaned forward. “What if there was a way to earn everything you needed in one night?”

Ashleigh stiffened and put down her chopsticks.

“Ryūhōbō-sama,” she said, “I don't know what impression you have of me, but I'm not that kind of girl.”

Ryūhōbō laughed and Ashleigh felt her cheeks burn.

“The impression I have,” Ryūhōbō said, “the impression moreover that you wanted me to have, is that you are the kind of girl who will go a long way to get what she wants.”

“I didn't mean...”

Ryūhōbō held up a hand. “It doesn't matter, since that is not what I am suggesting, though you may find that preferable to what I am asking you to do.”

“And what are you asking, Ryūhōbō-sama?” Ashleigh's voice had resumed its usual pitch, all pretence abandoned.

“At the club where you work, there is a back-room, is there not?”

“Yes,” Ashleigh said, “but only Nakamura-san is allowed in there. Oh, and Mori-san.”

“Ah yes, Mori-san.” Ryūhōbō formed a steeple with his fingers. “And what do you suppose is in that back-room, Ashleigh-chan?”

“I've no idea. Like I said, I'm not allowed back there.”

“But a determined young lady such as yourself could find out, couldn't she?”

“Maybe, if she wasn't concerned about losing her job.”

“Find out for me, tonight, and I'll pay you what you need to leave that club far behind you.”

“You don't know how much I want,” Ashleigh pointed out.

“Name your price.”

Ashleigh did a quick calculation, came up with a figure, then added an extra zero on the end.

Ryūhōbō did not even blink.

“Would you like that in cash or should I have the money wired direct to your bank account?” he asked. “After you've completed your assignment, of course.”

Something about the speed with which Ryūhōbō had agreed unsettled Ashleigh.

“What if I refuse?” she asked.

“It's my understanding that there are all kinds of laws around westerners getting positions in Japanese entertainment establishments,” Ryūhōbō said, “laws someone like Nakamura Kazuo would probably prefer to circumvent. You're working illegally, aren't you, Ashleigh-chan, on a tourist visa no less. If someone were to say a few words into the wrong ear... Well, let's just say that by this time tomorrow you could very well find yourself on a plane back to Auckland with no hope of return. Do we understand one another, Ashleigh?”

* * * * *

The steps were uneven and strewn with loose branches and dead leaves. Careful consideration went into negotiation each step. The Doctor shuffled his foot forward until his toe touched the next step before he attempted to climb. He was developing a rhythm now and it been a while since he had tripped. He Doctor did not know whether to be grateful or not that he was getting used to navigating without sight. It was not something he wanted to become accustomed.

The pathways of Fushimi-Inari were lined with hundreds of torii, Japanese shrine gates, each one sponsored by a business hoping for good fortune. The tunnels they created helped the Doctor stay on the path. But the path twisted and branched maze-like up the mountain and the Doctor had no way of knowing if he was even going in the right direction any more, always assuming that Saburō had not misled him in the first place.

There was no one else climbing the mountain, which struck the Doctor as odd. It was possible that the earlier bad weather had driven everyone away, but he would still expected to have encountered one or two hardy souls. Instead, he was all alone, climbing ever closer to... what? He had walked these paths before, knew that they were lined not just with torii. He could

not see them, but he knew that dozens of stone foxes – kitsune – watched his every move. And it was not just kitsune either. There were graves scattered about the mountainside. Was he intruding on somewhere he did not belong?

The Doctor stopped. He took a deep breath and shook himself, throwing his fears out of his fingertips and his toes. The silence and his sightlessness were playing tricks on him. He knew better than to fall for that.

Unless...

“Is anybody there?” he yelled into the void. “I know you're watching me.”

“Took you long enough to spot us,” a high-pitched voice replied.

“You're not seeing me at my best,” the Doctor replied. “Who are you?”

“He claims not to know us,” a second voice, slightly deeper than the first, said.

“Then why does he seek ingress to our Aerie?” the first voice said.

“Your what? I'm only here because Saburō sent me. He seemed to think you could help me.”

“Saburō sent you?” the first voice asked, but his query was drowned out by the cries of the other.

“Lies! The mammal lies, Tarōbō! Do not let him trick you so. You know Saburō would not betray us.”

“Perhaps not, Sōjōbō,” the first – Tarōbō – said, “but, despite appearances, the mammals words have the pitch of truth.”

“To your ears, maybe, Tarōbō,” Sōjōbō said, “but not to mine.”

A rustling of feathers, a gust of wind and the Doctor felt talons digging into his shoulders and hauling him up off of the ground. He could hear the beating of massive wings, feel the disturbed air tugging at his clothes as Sōjōbō – it could only be he – carried him high into the sky.

“Let go of me,” the Doctor protested. “You're making a mistake. Put me down!”

“I intend to, spy,” Sōjōbō sneered. “May your punishment in the hereafter be everlasting.”

And Sōjōbō dropped him.

* * * * *

They cycled to the farmhouse, Taichi sneaking glances at his wife as they rode. He knew that his words had hurt her and he hated himself for that, but she needed to accept the reality of the situation. It had been years since Jiro had been attacked and they were no closer to finding a way of restoring him, so why should Taichi be any different? Was this what Mizuki had pictured as a husband and the potential future father of her child? The right thing, the selfless thing, would be to let her go, to let her find someone undamaged, but Taichi did not know if he could do that.

What could he do? He wanted to talk to his wife, to tell her how he really felt, but how could he do that in front of Val, a stranger. Some things could only be shared in private. But without Val, he could not talk to Mizuki at all.

He glanced across at her again. His eyes traced the curve of her cheek, the proud tilt of her chin. He recalled the smell of her hair, the way her skin felt pressed against his own, the taste of her lips when they kissed.

A knife twisted in his gut as he realised he might never be able to kiss his wife again.

* * * * *

Mizuki could feel her husband's eyes on her, but she did not turn her head. She knew that if she did so that she would not be able to hold back the tears.

She knew that Taichi did not hold out much hope of getting his mouth back, knew too that he expected to spend the rest of his life as a recluse like his brother. He already had his future mapped out, had already decided that Mizuki would leave him. Did he really know her so little?

She remembered their first meeting in the grounds of Kyoto University. He had collided with her, running like a man possessed. Her arms had been full of textbooks, his full of bobtail cat. The cat was white, with a patch of black fur over one eye, and it had been struck by a car at Hyakumamben crossing. On seeing the injured animal, Taichi had scooped it up and rushed to the nearest building, which happened to be the university, looking for help. Together, she and Taichi had nursed the cat back to health and Mizuki had helped him post flyers around the area appealing for the cat's owner to come forward. She knew how painful it had been for Taichi to hand Patch, as they had taken to calling him, back to the woman who came to claim him, but the woman's grateful smile was the only reward he asked for.

But he had won himself so much more than that. Taichi had captured Mizuki's heart.

So what if he never got his mouth back? Would it be difficult if he could not talk to her or sing with their child? Of course, but that did not mean that they could not find a way to make it work, that it would not be worth the struggle.

She just wished Taichi could see that for himself.

* * * * *

Wind howled past the Doctor's ears as he fell. At least he could not see the ground rushing towards him, he mused. Thank Rassilon for small mercies.

The fall was unlikely to kill him, not unless he got really unlucky, but it would be the next best thing. What would happen to his eyes, he wondered. Would they regenerate where they were or would they return to his new body? Worse, would they become permanently detached, his new self beginning his life as blind as he had ended it?

His descent terminated abruptly, but not due to impact with the ground. Instead, a pair of strong talons plucked him out of the air and started to climb heavenwards with him.

“Tarōbō, no!” Sōjōbō said. “What are you doing?”

“This is not our way,” Tarōbō said.

“For which I for one am particularly grateful,” the Doctor said.

“Don't be,” Tarōbō said. “When we reach the Aerie, you will be put to the Question. And should you fail the Question, stranger, you will find that your execution has been merely postponed.”

* * * * *

It was still daylight by the time the three of them arrived at the farmhouse. Heavy curtains or wooden shutters covered the windows.

“Jiro doesn't like the light,” Taichi explained. “The darkness means that he doesn't have to see what they did to him.”

He stepped up to the door and wrapped loudly on the frame.

“Jiro, it's Taichi. Can I come in?”

“Two visits in two days,” Jiro rasped from inside. “What's the occasion? Is it my birthday? Has your lovely wife baked me a cake?”

“We just want to ask you a few questions, Jiro,” Taichi said.

“We?” Jiro raised his voice. “What is this 'we', Taichi? Been collecting more waifs and strays have we? If you carry on like this, we're going to need a bigger barn.”

Taichi pushed open the door and stepped inside. Narrow beams of light worked their way through chinks in the shutters and illuminated the motes dust floating in the air.

“This is Miss Rossi,” Taichi said. “She wants to know more about what happened to you?”

“Is that so?” Jiro asked. “And what, brother dear, is her affliction?”

He stood in the far corner of the room. Wrapped in darkness, his eyes gleamed. Val turned around so that her back was to him.

“Take a long hard look,” she said.

Jiro clapped his hands together.

“Every man's worse nightmare,” he said. “A woman with *two* mouths to berate him with. Bet you're glad this didn't happen to Mizuki, eh, brother? Or worse, Mother?”

Jiro drew closer making a strange clacking, scratching sound as he did so.

“But whose mouth is it?” he asked.

“Whose do you think?” Taichi said.

Jiro laughed.

“Oh ho ho, this is priceless. So our feathered friends finally got to you, did they? Took them long enough.”

“Have some sympathy, why don't you?” Mizuki said. “They're just as much victims now as you.”

Jiro's voice dropped an octave.

“You think what happened to them in any way compares to what they did to me.”

He scuttled forward out of the shadows. Mizuki gasped and Val felt her own breath catch in her throat. From the waist up, he appeared to be a healthy Japanese man in his mid-thirties. Val could see traces of Taichi in Jiro's face, though the features were more pinched, the mouth twisted into a permanent sneer. His dark hair was long and unkempt and he was leaner than his brother, the kimono he wore hanging loose around him. So far, so normal, but it was the lower half of his body that had caused Val to break out in goosebumps.

From the waist down, Jiro had the body of a giant spider.

The spider's swollen abdomen was a vivid, metallic green and its black legs glistened in the half-light.

“Do you have any idea what it is to be like this?” Jiro said. “No, of course you don't. They left you alone, didn't they, beautiful, unblemished Mizuki.”

He raised one of his spider-legs and used it to stroke her cheek. Mizuki recoiled and tried to pull away, but Jiro simply scurried after her until he had her backed up against a wall.

“What's the matter, Mizuki?” Jiro asked. “Don't you like what you see?”

“Leave her alone!” Taichi snapped.

“So the rice ball has a spine underneath all that flesh. Who knew?” Jiro lowered his leg to the ground. “Don't waste your breath on her, brother. Do you really think she'll stay with you now that you're a freak like me?”

“Don't listen to him, Taichi.” Mizuki rushed to her husband's side then turned to face Jiro. “You want to blame them for turning you into a monster, but the truth, Jiro, is that you were a monster before they got to you. They can't change what's inside of you and whatever they may have done to Taichi, he's still the man I fell in love with.”

“The pair of you make me want to heave.” Jiro spat on the floor. “Maybe you should ask my little brother about what happened when we were boys. I guarantee he's not the person you think he is.”

“That's enough!” Val snapped. “We came here to help me.”

“I sincerely doubt that.”

“We want to find a way to reverse what they did to us.”

“So you want to help yourselves. Helping me is immaterial.”

“Maybe so,” Val admitted. “That doesn't mean you can't benefit.”

Jiro paused, considering.

“All right,” he said. “What do you need from me?”

* * * * *

“What is this place?” the Doctor asked.

To judge by the echo, the chamber was vast. Wrists bound behind his back, he hung upside down, suspended by his ankles from a rope. Blood pounded inside his skull, making it difficult to think.

“This is our council chamber,” Tarōbō explained. “Here you will be put to the Question.”

“We will extract the truth from you, mammal,” Sōjōbō said, “and if it is not to our liking then the Nue will feed on your liver.”

“I wasn't aware truth cared about people's opinions of it,” the Doctor said.

Squawking with anger, Sōjōbō struck the Doctor with some kind of pole-arm. The Doctor spun dizzily on his chain.

“Leave him be!” a third voice commanded. “The mammal speaks with wisdom. Truth is impartial. She owes fealty to none. If the prisoner speaks answers the Question truthfully then he will be permitted to live, whatever our view of the answer. Do you have a problem with that, Sōjōbō?”

“No, Master Myōgibō,” Sōjōbō said contritely.

“Good.”

“I'm happy to answer whatever questions you want,” the Doctor said. “Just ask away.”

The Doctor felt a taloned hand on his head, steadying his swing as the claws parted his hair. He tensed as he felt the talons penetrate his scalp.

“What are you doing?” the Doctor asked. His heart quickened as he felt Myōgibō's hand inside his head, passing through his skull as if it were so much water vapour.

“I'm doing just as you suggested,” Myōgibō replied, the tips of his talons settling on the surface of the Doctor's brain. “I'm asking the Question.”

* * * * *

“But that's all I remember,” Jiro said, massaging his temples with the fingers of his human hands. “There was this hall, like you see in a temple, old-fashioned with mats and paper screens, and I was lying on my back. They were all around me and I couldn't move and... and...”

“You must have seen something that can help us,” Val said. “Maybe you caught a glimpse of something out of the window or...”

“I was too busy focussing on the knives!” Jiro said. “They had knives and they did *this* to me. I didn't think to take notes at the time.”

“Sorry,” Val sighed. “Look, why don't you just close your eyes and try to relax. Maybe something will come to you.”

“This is pointless.” Jiro threw up his hands. “Why don't you try asking one of the others?”

“Others?” Mizuki said.

“You haven't told her?” Jiro chuckled darkly. “I warned you he was keeping things from you, Mizuki.”

“What haven't you told me?” Mizuki asked Taichi.

“I didn't want you to worry,” Taichi said.

“Worry about *what*?”

“Ooh,” Jiro stage-whispered, “sounds like you've gone and made the little woman mad.”

“Can't you just shut up?” Val said.

“First you want me to talk, now you want me to shut up. Why can a woman never make up her mind?”

“Taichi,” Mizuki said, “what haven't you told me?”

Taichi hung his head.

“You need to see the rest of the farm,” he said.

* * * * *

Myōgibō cupped the Doctor's cerebrum in the palm of his hand. Intellectually, the Doctor knew that he should not be able to feel anything, yet he could not rid himself of the sensation of maggots writhing through his thoughts. Myōgibō did not merely have hold of the Doctor's brain, he was rifling through his memories, searching for his desired truth. Scenes played back in his mind's eye. His arrival in Kyoto, Val playing shogi, the Rokurokubi, Saburō...

But that was not all he saw. Unfamiliar images played out like a slideshow inside his head. He saw the bird-like aliens – Daitengu, a voice explained – striding across dimensions, brushing aside the barriers like rainbow curtains of light. And he was walking among them, arriving on Earth in the aftermath of the disaster that wiped out the dinosaurs. He and his fellow Daitengu settled here, building castles in the clouds from which they looked down on the rise of mammals and of *Homo sapiens*.

These were not the Doctor's memories. They could only belong to Myōgibō and if their minds were linked in some way then that meant that the Doctor could...

“Get out of my head!” he yelled, focussing all of his mental defences in a single spear-thrust.

Myōgibō recoiled, withdrawing his fingers from the Doctor's skull and clutching his hands to his own head. The Doctor slipped his hands from their bonds – using a trick he had taught Houdini – and proceeded to untie the rope from his ankles. Before forcing Myōgibō from his mind, the Doctor had taken the opportunity to view the chamber through his eyes and he kept that image uppermost in his mind.

The room was even larger than he had suspected, conical, with a wide round base and tapering to a point high above. Constructed of wood and glass, a series of vertical-slit windows

penetrated the walls and gave a view of the rose-coloured sky beyond. The Doctor was vaguely aware of a number of Daitengu seated around the circumference of the chamber, but they were too far away to cause him any concern. Instead, he focussed on his three interrogators.

Myōgibō was still reeling so could be ignored for now. Sōjōbō, with his golden-brown feathers and green robes, was a more immediate threat. Sōjōbō, however, was still under the impression that the Doctor could not see him, which gave the Doctor a few precious seconds. Holding onto the rope in one hand, he kicked out with his legs and swung across the room. The arc of his swing took him around behind Sōjōbō and as his momentum carried him back, he lashed out again with his feet, knocking Sōjōbō to the floor. He dropped to a crouch beside him, his hand scrabbling across the floor until it clasped hold of the naginata Sōjōbō had dropped. Sōjōbō tried to rise, but the Doctor had anticipated this. He lashed out with the blunt end of the bladed pole-arm and made sure that Sōjōbō stayed down.

The main threat disposed of; the Doctor turned his attention to Tarōbō. He pictured the black-feathered Daitengu's eyes widening in shock at his prisoner's escape. Imagined him brushing his crimson and silver robes aside, he reached for the sword strapped to his left hip, fully expecting the Doctor to lunge at him with his stolen weapon. Instead, the Doctor took the naginata in both hands and snapped it in two over his knee. The crack of splintering wood echoed around the chamber.

The Doctor gestured to Sōjōbō.

“He struck me,” he said. “I don't take kindly to that kind of behaviour. But you and I, Tarōbō, I think we may have got off on the wrong foot.”

He bowed in the Japanese style.

“What do you say we start over?”

* * * * *

Taichi led them away from the farmhouse along a narrow track between the fields.

“You own all this land?” Val asked.

“It came with the farmhouse,” Taichi said.

“You never told me,” Mizuki said. She trailed a little behind, her arms wrapped around herself. “How much is all this costing us?”

“It isn't,” Taichi said. “We make the farm pay for itself.”

“We'?”

In reply, Taichi gestured ahead to where two figures, a man and a woman, were planting Shishigatani pumpkin seeds. The man wore a pair of sunglasses, while the woman wore a floppy sunhat and a white surgical mask. The two of them looked up and waved. The man had an eye implanted in the palm of his hand.

“They're victims, too, aren't they?” Val said quietly.

“I found Shunsuke and Hitomi and brought them here,” Taichi explained, “somewhere they wouldn't have to feel like outsiders.”

“And they work on the farm?”

“Those of them who can most easily hide what happened to them, yes,” Taichi said.

“So there's more than just the four of you then?”

Taichi nodded. “We've converted one of the barns into a dormitory.”

“How long has this been going on?” Mizuki said slowly.

“A few years now,” Taichi admitted. “When I realised that there were other people out there like Jiro... well, I couldn't just stand by and do nothing, could I?”

“You always were a sucker for birds with broken wings,” Mizuki said.

Taichi smiled wryly. “Less of a fan of the birds these days if I'm honest.”

“I can't believe you didn't tell me about all this,” Mizuki said.

“I wasn't sure that you'd approve,” Taichi said. “I thought you'd think it was dangerous.”

“I do,” Mizuki said. “That doesn't mean that I'm not proud of you, though.”

She put her hand on Taichi's upper arm and squeezed gently.

* * * * *

Tom was bored.

He had swum lengths of the pool, finished (well, started) a novel, spent an hour on the games console, even managed to tune the TARDIS scanner into local TV (and been thoroughly baffled by the result). And still Val and the Doctor had not returned.

Tom was starting to get worried. He had tried calling Val, but her phone just went straight to voicemail and she had yet to reply to any his increasingly agitated messages. He wanted to go and look for them, but he had not the first idea where to start. Had the Doctor been here then he would have whipped up some kind of tracking device in no time at all, but, for all his electronics skills, that kind of jiggery-pokery was still beyond Tom.

So he had a choice. He could sit around here in the TARDIS waiting and moping, or...

Mind made up, Tom raided the wardrobe room for a black suit in his size, a royal blue cotton shirt and black leather loafers. He examined himself in the mirror, tweaked his hair. Satisfied, he straightened his lapels and headed out for a night on the town.

Naturally, he had only one destination in mind and it was only a short walk across the river to Aphrodite.

* * * * *

Val pored over the map spread out across the table. They had put pins in it to indicate all of the locations where attacks had taken place.

“Most of the incidents seem to be clustered around here,” she said. “There are a few up in the hills here and here, but they definitely seem to prefer this area as their hunting ground.”

“You think they live around there?” Mizuki said.

“Perhaps.” Val chewed on her lower lip.

This part of the barn was crowded with the people Taichi had “rescued”. A man without a head was sitting in a corner and having a quiet conversation with Hitomi, who had removed her mask to reveal a slash of a mouth filled with razor sharp teeth. One woman, a snake from the neck down, slithered out from beneath the table.

“That's also the area where Jiro was attacked. And, from everything we've heard, he was the first victim.” Val looked up at Taichi. “You think that's a coincidence?”

Taichi shrugged. “How should I know?”

“Jiro seemed to imply that you know more than you're telling.”

“My brother says a lot of things.”

“You shouldn't pay too much attention to Jiro.” Mizuki rushed to her husband's defence. “He loves to mess with people's heads.”

“Yeah, that's probably it,” Val said.

She looked out towards the barn entrance. There was a tree just outside the door. At first, Val had thought that the fruit hanging from the branches were peaches. That was until she realised that they were human heads. *Living* human heads.

“There must be a way to track them down,” she continued. “We could try searching this area...”

“That's a lot of ground to cover,” Taichi said. “We could search for days and never find them.”

“Have you got a better idea?”

A little girl ran past Val's legs. She had a big red ribbon in her hair. And she had no face.

“We have to do something,” Val said.

“What if we could get them to come to us?” Mizuki said. “We know where they hunt. We could lure them out.”

“With what?” Val asked. “They've already left their mark on all of us.”

“There is someone they haven't touched yet,” Mizuki said. “Me.”

“No!” Taichi said. “This is a terrible idea.”

“Are you sure about this?” Val asked. “I mean...”

She looked down at Mizuki's stomach.

Mizuki threw Val's words back at her. “Have you got a better idea?”

* * * * *

Mama-san met him at the door. She pursed her lips, appraising him from head to toe, trying to reconcile his current sharp-suited appearance with the shorts and sandals-wearing ruffian who had crashed her club the night before.

“You clean up well,” she said finally. “Brooker-san, wasn't it?”

“It is.” Tom tried to imitate the bow he had seen the Japanese do. “I'm sorry about last night. I wasn't expecting to end up in a place like this.”

“That much was obvious,” Mama-san said, “but they say even a wise man makes a mistake one time in a thousand.”

“I wouldn't say as I was a wise man,” Tom said.

“Pshaw. You choose this club out of all the others in Kyoto. I say that makes you wise. Now we must find you a girl who can make your evening pass most pleasantly.”

“I was sort of hoping Ashleigh might be in tonight, like,” Tom said.

Mama-san shook her head.

“That one is otherwise occupied,” she said with a more than a trace of bitterness. “But you will have Mama-san's very best girl. No, make that best two girls.” She clapped her hands. “Iyumi, Momoko, where are you?”

The two girls hurried to Mama-san's side. Iyumi, the taller of the two, had glossy black hair that hung, long and straight, past her shoulders. She was wearing an ivory dress slit up to mid-thigh on the left-hand side. Momoko had a rounded face and more ready smile. Her hair was a mid-brown with gold highlights and had been gathered in a bunch at one side of her head by a large ribbon.

“Iyumi, Momo-chan,” Mama-san said, “this is Brooker-san. I want the two of you to take extra-special care of him.”

“It will be our pleasure,” Iyumi said.

Beaming brightly, they took one of Tom's arms each and started leading him deeper into the club. Tom looked about and spotted Ashleigh sitting at one of the tables next to Ryūhōbō. She looked up and caught Tom's eye. He grinned at her and she hastily looked away. Dispirited, Tom turned back to his hostesses.

Momoko squeezed his upper arm.

“Feel how big and strong he is, Iyumi,” she giggled. “I find big, strong, western men so sexy, don't you?”

Iyumi rolled her eyes and Tom did his best not to sigh aloud. This looked set to be a very long night.

* * * * *

Tarōbō had taken the Doctor back to his nest at the top of one of the castle's glass spires. This had involved another dizzying flight clutched in Tarōbō's talons and the Doctor was glad that he had not eaten anything all day. Myōgibō had been invited to join them. Sōjōbō had not.

“You're dimensioneers, aren't you?” the Doctor said. “That's how you travelled to Earth.”

“Our home was lost, Doctor,” Tarōbō explained. “The survivors searched for a new place to settle for a very long time. This world was not ideal, but by the time they reached here, the expedition was prepared to compromise.”

“Earth's not so bad,” the Doctor said with a wry smile, “particularly when you can look down on it from your ivory tower, or whatever this thing is made of. Those images I saw in my mind, they were your memories, weren't they, Myōgibō? You were part of that first expedition?”

“I had that honour.”

“But you arrived on this planet millions of years ago.”

“As humans' measure time,” Myōgibō replied. “Time means something different to us.”

“I'm sure it does,” the Doctor said. “And you, Tarōbō, were you part of that expedition too?”

“That was a little before my time,” Tarōbō said.

“Tarōbō and Sōjōbō are my sons,” Myōgibō explained. “They were among the first chicks to be hatched in this new world. My greatest achievement and I know no prouder moment than when Tarōbō was elected leader of the Council.”

“Dimensional engineering explains how your children were able to do... this,” the Doctor gestured to his empty eye sockets. “Surgery conducted by folding dimensions like origami. My eyes may be far away in one set of dimensions, but are close enough to still be attached to my optic nerves in another.”

“Dimensional sculpture is a skill that can take thousands of human years to master,” Myōgibō said, “but to some of our young it is nothing more than an amusement.”

“Do I look like I'm laughing?” the Doctor said.

“I still find it difficult to believe that you encountered our hatchlings, Doctor.”

“I saw his memories, Tarōbō,” Myōgibō said. “He is telling the truth.”

“I know what you think you saw, Father,” Tarōbō replied, “but this man's mind was strong enough to eject you. Perhaps he planted those images for you to find.”

“Could have,” the Doctor said. “Didn't. You said before that you could hear the truth in the pitch of my words. Listen to me now and tell me I'm lying.”

Tarōbō sighed. “It would be easier if you were, Doctor, but I find myself believing you all the same.”

“We dwell apart here,” Myōgibō said, “above your world.”

“Not *my* world,” the Doctor corrected, “but I take your point. I assume the Aerie exists in a dimensional pocket.”

“Just a feather's breadth removed,” Myōgibō replied, “but it is enough for us to pass unnoticed. Saburō must have opened a gate for you.”

“Which explains why I didn't encounter anyone climbing the mountain,” the Doctor said. “I wasn't where I thought I was. What does any of this have to do with your hatchlings?”

“Youngsters get bored easily,” Tarōbō said, “and if you tell a hatchling that something is forbidden...”

“It only encourages them to attempt it,” the Doctor said. “I was young once too.”

“Our children found their way to somewhere where they could play without adult supervision.”

“So stealing people's eyes, turning them into monsters, that's just a game, is it?”

“To them, yes,” Myōgibō said. “They don't know any better.”

“And whose fault is that?” the Doctor asked.

“We will bring our hatchlings home,” Tarōbō said, “and restore your eyes, Doctor.”

“And what about their other victims?”

“We will put right what our children did wrong,” Tarōbō said.

“For some, it's already too late for that,” the Doctor said, “unless you have some way of bringing the dead back to life.”

Tarōbō could not answer.

“No,” Myōgibō said in his stead, “that is beyond us and I am sorry for it. The important thing now is to find our hatchlings before they target anyone else.”

“Unfortunately all I can see is that they're in a room somewhere,” the Doctor said. “My eyes aren't exactly mobile.”

“Yet you are still connected to them,” Myōgibō said. “If you'll let me, I can trace that link back to our hatchlings.”

“You want to go inside my head again.”

“I promise you, Doctor, I won't look at anything you do not wish me to. You have my word.”

“You set great store by truth, don't you, Myōgibō?” the Doctor said.

“Our former home was undone by lies,” Myōgibō said. “I won't see that happen again, not as long as I live.”

* * * * *

“It's not too late to change your mind,” Val said.

She and Mizuki were standing in the road where Jiro had been attacked, the same road where, just the night before, Taichi had also been claimed as a victim.

“I need to do this,” Mizuki said, “but...”

“Yes?”

“There is something you could do for me.”

Mizuki leaned forward and whispered in Val's ear. Val coloured, but nodded.

“That's... kind of weird,” she said, “but I get it.”

She turned around. Mizuki reached out and parted the hair veiling Taichi's mouth.

“Just in case this doesn't work,” she whispered before rising up on tiptoes and planting a kiss on her husband's lips. She lingered for a moment, eyes closed, imagining that Taichi was whole again, then she stepped away.

“Are you okay?” Val asked.

Mizuki shook her head.

“But I'll get by,” she said. “You should go hide. They won't come out if you're still here.”

With Val concealed within the trees, Mizuki began to walk down the road towards home, taking her time about it. Dusk was falling and, although it was still a warm evening, her sleeveless dress was insufficient to protect her from the gentle breeze. Or perhaps she was trembling for another reason.

The smell of the persimmon orchard was strong this evening and she could hear the cicadas out in force. She rested a hand against her stomach and wondered again if this was such a good idea. She was doing this for Taichi and for the family she hoped to have with him, but what if something went wrong? What if...?

She stopped. Her subconscious screamed danger signals at her, but at first, she could not work out why. Then she realised what was wrong, what was missing.

Something had silenced the cicadas.

She quickened her pace, not caring any more that she was supposed to be acting as bait. She could not outrace the words carried on the wind.

Tōryanse, tōryanse.

Mizuki started to run. One of her sandals came off and was lost behind her. She did not care.

A feathered shape dropped from the sky, blocking her way. Unable to slow in time, Mizuki collided with it and the creature wrapped its arms around her.

Let me pass, let me pass.

She struggled to free herself, but the creature held firm, talons drawing blood on her bare arms as she tried to pull away. She looked about for help, but all she saw were more of the creatures emerging from the sky and the trees, surrounding her.

The creature holding her threw back its head and squawked in triumph.

* * * * *

“Is that the door?” Ryūhōbō asked as Ashleigh leaned in close to light his cigarette.

“The one leading to the back-room?” Ashleigh whispered. “Yes, I think so.”

“Good. You know what you have to do?”

Ashleigh nodded. “But Mama-san's watching the door like a hawk. I'll never get by her.”

“Leave that to me,” Ryūhōbō said. “Just be ready.”

He stood up and walked over to the bar.

“I wish to make a complaint,” he said.

“A complaint?” Mama-san said.

“Yes, a complaint. I come in here expecting the very best refreshment and you pass me off with cheap alcohol that I could get at any street-corner *Lawson*.”

“I assure you, Ryūhōbō-sama,” Mama-san began haughtily, “our drinks are of the finest...”

“And another thing,” Ryūhōbō said, cutting her off. “I was hoping for live music. Where is Mori-san this evening?”

“Unfortunately, Mori-san is a friend of this club rather than an employee. He comes and goes as he pleases.”

“That is a pity. Perhaps I should find out what other clubs Mori-san frequents and see if they are better suited to my tastes.”

While Mama-san was distracted trying to mollify her VIP guest, Ashleigh scuttled over to the door. Glancing left and right, she turned the handle and pulled. The door did not budge.

Of course it would be locked. She should have thought of that. Nakamura would have a key, but there was no way he was going to give it to her. But she could hardly return to Ryūhōbō empty-handed, not if she did not want to be packed off on the next flight home.

Weighing up her options, Ashleigh heard someone unlocking the door from the other side. She ducked down behind the bar just in time to avoid Kazuo as he entered the club. He took a step forward, releasing his hold on the door and allowing it to swing shut behind him.

Ashleigh took a deep breath. This might be her only chance. Bracing herself for the consequences, she dived forward, brushing past Nakamura and through the narrowing gap in the door. She was halfway down the stairs before Nakamura even thought to turn around.

A door stood at the end of the landing. A vertical line of light down one side where it had been left slightly ajar. Licking her lips nervously, Ashleigh crept up to the door as quietly as she could.

Suddenly, the door was thrown open. Ashleigh cast about for somewhere to hide, but the landing was open and empty. She braced herself to confront whoever emerged from the other room, but was not prepared for the lanky child who stood silhouetted in the doorway.

“Hello,” the boy said. “Please, you have to help me.”

* * * * *

The words of the nursery rhyme chilled Val's blood and for a time she could do nothing but watch the scene unfold, frozen to the spot by fear as she recalled being in Mizuki's shoes not so long before. The touch of Taichi's hand on her shoulder snapped her out of the trance. Val nodded to him and stepped out into the road.

“Wait!” she called to the creatures.

As one, the birds turned to face her. Val tried to remain calm.

“Let the woman go,” she said.

The creature holding Mizuki ran its talons through her hair. Mizuki whimpered.

“Why are you doing this to us?” Val asked. “What did we ever do to you?”

“Hurt us,” one of the creature's hissed.

“Hurt you? But when? How?”

“Taught us a new game.”

The lead bird stepped forward.

This was all the encouragement Val's allies needed. They burst from the trees, yelling inarticulately as they brandished farm implements as improvised weapons.

“No, wait,” Val shouted, but it was hopeless.

The victims from the farm set upon the creatures with abandon. The snake-woman wrapped one up within her coils. Hitomi sank her fangs into another's wing. Shunsuke and the headless man lashed out blindly with hoe and pitchfork respectively. Val's head rang as Taichi barked out orders to direct them. But, though boosted by fear and rage, the strength of Val's makeshift band could not match that of the birds.

The snake-woman was tied up in knots. Hitomi was thrown to one side, a tooth coming loose as she struck the ground. Shunsuke screamed as one of the creatures grabbed him by the hand, its talon piercing the eyeball in his palm.

“Leave my friends alone!”

“Sayumi, no! You were supposed to stay at the barn,” Val yelled at the girl with no face as she charged into the heart of the melee. She clumsily brandished a rake too big for her to handle and a red-feathered bird easily snatched it from her and tossed it away. Sayumi wailed as the bird picked her up, holding her upside-down by her ankle.

“Leave her alone,” Val said, her voice shaking.

The bird laughed at her.

Val picked up the rake.

“I said leave her alone!”

She swung the rake, barely hearing the wet thunk as it connected, only dimly registering the bird dropping to the ground. She swung again and again, sending bloody clumps of feathers up into the air. The bird cried out in pain, but Val did not care. This was for Sayumi and for her and for everyone the creature had ever victimised. She lifted the rake again and...

...and she was in an Indian jungle. Langur monkeys hooted in the trees overhead. Humidity glued her clothes to her body. She had the creature pinned beneath her, its blue-black fur glistening with moisture. (*Fur? What happened to the feathers?*) She held the spear (*spear?*) to its throat.

And there was that voice again.

That's the spirit, Valentina. Taste his blood, take his life. You know you want to.

Val was seeing double. Japanese rural road overlaid by Indian watering-hole. The strumming of cicadas blending with the howls of monkeys. Bird becoming cat becoming bird again.

She hesitated and, in that moment, the creature lunged forward, wrenching the spear/rake from her hand and striking her around the head with it.

Val's world exploded.

* * * * *

The boy's name was Nakamura Ichirou and he was the son of Ashleigh's boss.

“Can't you just ask your Dad for help?” she asked.

Ichirou stepped to one side so that she could see the alien bird-thing chained up on the floor. Ashleigh swore, belatedly remembering that there was a child in the room.

“Sorry,” she said. “Um, don't repeat that in front of your parents, okay.”

“It's okay,” Ichirou said. “I've heard worse.”

“What is that thing?” Ashleigh asked.

“He's not a thing,” Ichirou replied. “His name's Ajari.”

Whatever it was, Ashleigh knew it was what Ryūhōbō had sent her to find. She snapped a picture of Ajari with her phone and sent it to Ryūhōbō's number.

“What are you doing in here, kid?” Ashleigh asked.

“I came back for Ajari,” Ichirou said. “Dad showed him me earlier today. After we'd gone home, I slipped out, came back, broke a window and climbed in.”

“But why?”

“Look at him,” Ichirou said. “It's not right that my Dad keeps him locked up like this.”

“He might be dangerous,” Ashleigh said.

“Does he look dangerous?”

Ajari looked up at Ashleigh with one mournful eye. His other eye was swollen shut, blood forming a crust around it.

“Ajari just wants to go home,” Ichirou said.

“You spoke to it?” Ashleigh said. “It can talk?”

“It has been a long time,” Ajari croaked, making Ashleigh start, “but yes, I talk.”

“We have to get him out of here before someone else comes,” Ichirou pleaded. “Please.”

Ashleigh looked from Ichirou to Ajari and back again.

“I know I’m going to regret this,” she said, “but see if you can find something we can use to pry open the links of that chain.”

* * * * *

Val opened her eyes, but still could not see. All around was darkness, shadow upon shadow.

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

Hollow echoes of her own words came back to her.

She reached out with her hands, seeking out walls, trees, anything that might help her define this place. She found nothing.

Nothing except a hand.

It clasped around hers, firm, strong and familiar.

“Tom?” Her voice caught in her throat. “Tom, is that you? Everything’s turned about and I don’t know what’s real anymore.”

“I’m real, pet,” Tom said. “I’m real and I’m getting you out of here.”

She could not tell him how much of a comfort his warm Geordie tones were, but there was something else niggling away at the corner of her mind. A sense of déjà vu, like she had said and heard these words once before.

“This way,” Tom said, pulling on Val’s hand, “it leads to a rear entrance.”

“I can’t,” Val said. Her feet felt wrong, her legs bent at an odd angle and she stumbled as she tried to walk.

“Yes, you can,” Tom assured. “I’m going to be with you every step of the way.”

Val allowed him to draw her to him, let him take some of her weight on his shoulders. She looked into Tom’s light green eyes...

And saw a monster reflected back.

“Val?” Tom said.

The monster – Val – bared her fangs.

“Forgive me,” Val whispered before ripping out Tom’s throat.

* * * * *

Iyumi silently cursed Ashleigh, for stealing her best client from her, and Mama-san, for assigning her to this westerner. Most of all, she cursed the western barbarian whose presence she had to put up with. He stank. Did western men not know how to bathe? Not that the smell seemed to bother Momoko. She was all over him, complimenting him on his good looks and laughing riotously at his feeble attempts at humour. At least Momo’s efforts meant that Iyumi did not have to bother. She flashed a smile every time the westerner looked in her direction, but

otherwise she sat quietly, calculating just how much champagne she would have to drink to numb her senses to the whole experience.

She was looking around for something – *anything* – more interesting, when she noticed that Ashleigh had disappeared. More importantly, that meant that Ryūhōbō was free and unprotected. Well, Ashleigh had stolen him from her last night so it seemed only fair that Iyumi return the favour. It was not as if the westerner would miss her, not with Momo monopolising his time.

Iyumi shuffled out of her seat and sashayed over to Ryūhōbō's table.

“Ryūhōbō-sama,” she said, “I couldn't help but notice that Ashleigh-chan has abandoned you. I can only apologise for the thoughtless and unforgivable actions of my fellow hostess. Might I be permitted to keep you company in her place?”

“I am fine as I am,” Ryūhōbō said.

This was not the answer Iyumi either expected or desired.

“But Ryūhōbō-sama,” she said, changing tack, “if Mama-san saw you drinking alone, she might decide that Iyumi-chan was not doing her job to the best of her abilities. I would be punished, or worse, fired. You wouldn't want that, would you? At least let me sit next to you in case she looks this way.”

“Fine, you may sit,” Ryūhōbō said, “but try to be quiet.”

Ryūhōbō's phone buzzed. He checked the message and smiled.

“Good news, Ryūhōbō-sama?” she asked. “Of course it is. I am sure a man of your talent and authority has people queuing up to wish him only happiness.”

“I thought I told you to be quiet?” Ryūhōbō said, standing up.

“Please, don't go!” Iyumi took hold of his arm in both her hands. “If I have done something to offend you, I apologise. Please, stay for just one more drink and tell me what I did wrong.”

“Are all Japanese women this irritating?” Ryūhōbō said as he placed his fingertips against her forehead.

No, Iyumi realised as her stomach did a backflip, his fingers were not *on* her forehead, they had passed *through* her forehead and deep into her skull.

“Sleep,” Ryūhōbō said.

That was the last thing Iyumi remembered.

* * * * *

“Val, wake up,” Mizuki said, nudging Val with her shoulder. “Please, Val.”

“Tom,” Val murmured. “Tom, I'm sorry. Don't leave me. Don't...”

“Val!”

Val blinked. Her mind had only one foot in reality, with one foot still in the dream.

“M-Mizuki?” she stammered.

“Val, thank goodness.” Mizuki sighed with relief. “I was afraid that you weren't going to wake up. They hit you pretty hard.”

At first, Val thought that Mizuki's hands were tied together behind her back, but that was not the case. Mizuki's hands had been removed and her wrists melded together so that her arms formed one continuous loop. Val tried to move her own arms and discovered that the same thing had been done to her. She and Mizuki were not alone. Hitomi, Shunsuke and the other victims were all similarly bound. Even Jiro had been taken, though he had refused to play any part in the

ambush. They had been gathered in a large hall, the floor covered with tatami mats, the walls made of paper in wooden frames. One wall, Val noticed with distaste, was decorated with human eyes.

“Where are we?” Val asked.

“I guess they brought us home,” Mizuki replied.

“They?”

Mizuki tilted her head in the direction of the door, which was sliding open. Five of the bird-creatures climbed up into the hall, led by the one with the golden-brown feathers. They were dressed in a mishmash of scavenged clothes. Incongruously, the leader was wearing a pair of *Hello Kitty* earmuffs.

The eye of his red friend – the one who had attacked Sayumi – was swollen shut. Val found it difficult to feel any sympathy for him.

“Who are you,” she asked, “and what do you want?”

“My name is Zenkibō,” the leader said, “and we are the Daitengu.”

“But the Daitengu aren't real,” Mizuki said. “They're just a myth.”

“Do we look like a myth?” Zenkibō laughed.

Val struggled to her feet. It was not easy with her hands tied behind her back, but somehow she managed it. From this position, she could look down on Zenkibō, who could not be more than four foot six.

“You didn't answer my other question,” she said. “What do you want?”

“To have fun.” Zenkibō shrugged. “What else?”

“And you think this is fun? Torturing innocent people?”

“Isn't it?” Zenkibō asked. “There's nothing to do up at the Aerie. It's all rules and people telling us what to do and it's so *boring*. But down here...”

His beak opened in a smile.

“Down here there are all of you to play with.”

Val was disgusted. “You sound just like a bunch of kids using a magnifying glass to set fire to caterpillars.” The penny dropped. “Oh my god, you *are* just a bunch of kids, aren't you? Do your parents know what you've been getting up to?”

Zenkibō looked down at the ground and shuffled from one foot to the other.

“You can't just go around doing these things to people,” Val said. “People aren't toys. They have lives and feelings and it's not right to play with them like this.”

Zenkibō looked hurt. “But you taught us the game in the first place.”

“I most certainly did not,” Val said.

“Not you,” Zenkibō amended. “Them.”

Zenkibō was pointing at Taichi and his brother.

“It's not what you think,” Taichi protested. “We never meant...”

“Just tell me what happened,” Mizuki said, unable to meet her husband's eyes.

Taichi hung his head in shame.

“It was twenty years or so ago,” he said, “the summer before Kazuo, Hibiki and Jiro went off to Junior High. The four of us were playing baseball and I... I lost the ball.”

“You didn't lose it, rice ball,” Jiro said. “They stole it.”

“Maybe. I don't know. We searched for it and we found one of them holding it and Kazuo... You have to understand, he was scared and angry and he was only a child at the time and...” There were tears in Taichi's eyes. “He hit him. He beat him with his baseball bat.”

Mizuki covered her mouth with her hand.

“Tell them the rest, brother,” Jiro said, his voice low and wheedling. “Tell them how you took a turn with the bat next.”

“Is that true, Taichi?” Mizuki asked. “Tell me it isn't true.”

But Taichi could not deny it.

“We saw,” Zenkibō said. “We watched the game and it looked like fun.”

He advanced on Taichi.

“We wanted to try for ourselves.”

Something appeared in his hand, something long and sharp and vicious.

“Now we can.”

“Zenkibō, stop!” yelled a voice from the doorway. “This is wrong.”

Zenkibō turned to face the newcomer, another Daitengu. His feathers were a black and he wore the white robes of a Shinto priest.

“Saburō,” Zenkibō said. “We thought you had abandoned us.”

“Never,” Saburō said, “but I needed to go out into the world to learn and to grow. Inflicting suffering on others is wrong, Zenkibō. It's beneath you.”

“But how can it be wrong when it's so much fun?”

The other Daitengu cawed their agreement.

“Where's the fun in witnessing another's pain?”

“Don't you get it, Saburō?” Zenkibō replied. “That *is* the fun.”

“If you honestly believe that, Zenkibō,” Saburō said, “then I'm sorry for you.”

Zenkibō sneered. “You sound just like the adults back at the Aerie. They don't know what real fun is either.”

“Maybe they know more than we do,” Saburō said. “Maybe it's time we all grew up.”

“Or maybe it's time we took this game to the next level,” Zenkibō replied.

He lunged forward, plunging his blade deep into Saburō's chest. Saburō cried out as he collapsed to the ground, dark blood pooling around him.

“Now that,” Zenkibō said, “was fun!”

There was a collective gasp from the other Daitengu.

“What?” Zenkibō said, looking at each in turn. “The only thing better than tormenting the mammals is tormenting one of our own.”

His friends looked unconvinced.

“Go on, try it.” Zenkibō forced the knife into the hand of a white-feathered Daitengu. “You go first, Naigubu, but the rest of you needn't to worry. There's plenty to go around.”

“No!” Taichi threw himself across the room, collapsing in front of Saburō. “This is all my fault. If you want him, you have to go through me.”

“If you like,” Zenkibō said.

“Taichi, get away from there!”

Mizuki started forward, but Val held her back.

“Think about the baby,” she said.

“Baby?” Taichi said. “What baby?”

The building started to shake. A typhoon had whipped up outside and was rattling the walls. Paper tore, wooden beams cracked, a screen bowed inwards. Mizuki used the distraction to push past Val and run to her husband. Taichi lowered the loop of his arms around her and held her close. A wall collapsed, bringing a section of roof. Val hurled herself forward, using her body to knock Sayumi out of the way of the falling debris. Val screamed as a wooden crossbeam came down hard across the backs of her legs. The Daitengu milled about in panic.

“Run!” Val yelled to her fellow prisoners. “Get out of here while you still can!”

Several people started to clamber out through the hole in the wall, but Taichi and Mizuki crawled to Val's side.

“We're not leaving you,” Taichi said.

The wind rose, with it came a heavy thrumming noise, like the beating of a hundred wings. Val looked up through the hole in the roof and saw dozens of Daitengu descending towards them.

“You should have left when you had the chance,” she said. “I think things are about to get a whole lot worse.”

* * * * *

Yanking hard, Ashleigh finally forced apart the chain link. It sprung free, ricocheting off the wall. Ashleigh flinched away, expecting it to rebound in her face.

“There you go, Ajari,” Ichirou said. “You're free.”

A length of chain remained attached to the collar around Ajari's neck, but he was free.

“Free,” Ajari repeated uncertainly.

“We can't hang around here,” Ashleigh said. “Someone might find us.”

“Someone already has,” Kazuo said from the doorway. His eyes widened when he caught sight of his son. “Ichirou, what are you doing here?”

“I came back to help Ajari, Dad,” Ichirou said.

“Why?”

“You said I had to learn to be a man,” Ichirou said, “and to stand up for myself. What you've been doing to Ajari is wrong, Dad.”

“But, Ichirou, you don't understand. I *need* him. I'm nothing without him.”

“Then nothing is what you shall be!”

Ryūhōbō stepped out of the shadows. Or rather, the shadows stepped with him like a cloud of so many black... feathers? Ryūhōbō's aquiline nose elongated into a beak and wings flowed out from his shoulder-blades and down his arms.

“I am taking my son back,” Ryūhōbō said. “Get in my way and I swear I will go through you.”

“Your son?” Ashleigh said.

“Indeed,” Ryūhōbō replied. “Thank you for confirming his location, Ashleigh-chan. I'll see that you are suitably compensated for your trouble once he and I are safely home.”

“You brought him here?” Ichirou looked at Ashleigh with hurt written across his face.

“I didn't know he was... whatever that is.”

“I am a Daitengu,” Ryūhōbō said, puffing up proudly. He turned to Kazuo. “Try and stop me. I would enjoy taking you apart for what you have done to my son.”

“I really don't think you're in any kind of position to make threats,” a fresh voice drawled.

“It's getting like K Road in rush hour in here,” Ashleigh muttered as Hibiki strolled through the door.

Clad in a blue suit with a black shirt and gold-cufflinks, Hibiki stood with a gun pointed at Ryūhōbō.

“The little guy is mine,” Hibiki said, smiling.

“Never!”

Ryūhōbō lunged at Hibiki.

The gun went off. Ashleigh screamed.

Ryūhōbō exploded. Feathers went everywhere. As they slowly floated to the ground, however, Ashleigh noticed that feathers were all there was. Of Ryūhōbō's body, there was no sign.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Hibiki said. “Whatever. Now, who else wants to argue with my ownership of the alien?”

* * * * *

The Doctor lay back on the operating table.

“This won't hurt a bit,” Myōgibō assured him.

After the adult Daitengu had rounded up the hatchlings, a search of the building they called home had turned up the various stolen body parts, including the Doctor's eyes.

“Just make sure you put the right eye in the right socket,” the Doctor said.

“You're in good hands,” Tarōbō said. “Most of the dimensional sculpture that decorates the Aerie is Father's work.”

“That might be more comforting if I could actually see the sculpture. If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not end up looking like a Picasso.”

Myōgibō let out three high-pitched chirps, his version of a chuckle.

“Don't you have better things to do, Tarōbō,” he said, “than disturb my patient. Away with you, before I'm forced to throw you out of the nest myself.”

“I'm going, Father, I'm going,” Tarōbō said. “I'll be with Saburō if you need me.”

“Thank him for me, would you?” the Doctor said. “Tell him...”

“I will,” he promised before leaving the operating theatre.

“I can relate to them, you know. The hatchlings,” the Doctor told Myōgibō. “Not that cruelty – that I can't forgive – but the urge to explore, that can be a powerful motivator.”

“I led the Great Exodus, Doctor,” Myōgibō said. “You don't have to convince me.” He clamped something to the back of the Doctor's head, *through* the back of the Doctor's head. “I just need to make sure you don't move. This is delicate work.”

“And if I promised to sit still?”

“I'm going to be approaching your eyes with a scalpel. Do you really believe you won't flinch.”

“Point.” The Doctor pursed his lips. “But if exploration's so important to you, Myōgibō, why do you hide yourselves away like this?”

“It is better this way,” Myōgibō said. “For everyone. There was a time when we tried to mix with the mammals.”

“I thought as much,” the Doctor said. “Human history has turned you into legends.”

“There are worse memorials. Tell me one of those legends. It will give you something to do as I operate.”

Elsewhere, a talon swam into the Doctor's field of vision, seemingly appearing out of nowhere. A scalpel gleamed. The Doctor swallowed.

“This one seems appropriate under the circumstances,” the Doctor said. “It's called *Kobutori Jiisan*.”

“Go on.”

“Right, well...” The Doctor kept getting hints of the scalpel out of the corner of his eye. “A long time ago there was a kindly old man who had a tumour on his face. One day, up in the

mountains, he encountered a group of Daitengu who invited him to dance with them. So impressed were they with his dancing that the Daitengu offered him a gift. They removed the tumour from his face.” The Doctor cleared his throat. “I assume that that's a reference to your surgical skills.”

“Probably,” Myōgibō replied. “Does the story end there?”

The Doctor tried to shake his head, but the clamp held it firmly in place.

“The old man returned home and his neighbour, who had a tumour of his own, saw what had been done to the man and asked him how. When he learned of the Daitengu, he immediately set off into the mountains to get some of this good fortune for himself, but it was not to be.”

“He did not find the Daitengu?”

“Oh, he found them all right,” the Doctor said. “As before, they invited the stranger to join their dance, but the neighbour had two left feet. Um, that's a human expression. It means he danced like somebody's dad.”

“I resent that implication,” Myōgibō said, chuckling again.

“Poor choice of words,” the Doctor conceded, “but you get the idea. The Daitengu were less than impressed and, as punishment, they not only refused to remove the neighbour's original tumour, they implanted the old man's tumour in his face as well.

“It's that way with a lot of legends,” the Doctor said. “They seem confused as to whether you were benevolent spirits or cruel demons.”

“Can't we be both?” Myōgibō asked. “People are rarely just one thing or another and we were never purely good or ill. Yet our skill and technology were so far beyond that of primitive humankind that our influence became magnified. A minor act of kindness on our part could reshape lives, not just of individuals, but of flocks and nations and our crimes...” Myōgibō trailed off. “When the Council realised the true impact our presence was having, they voted almost unanimously to withdraw. It was for the best.”

“Then, maybe,” the Doctor said, “but humanity isn't as primitive as it once was, nor as ruled by superstition. They could learn so much from you, and you from them.”

“Isolation has served us well,” Myōgibō said. “I see no reason to break it now.”

“Tell that to your hatchlings,” the Doctor replied.

* * * * *

Momoko topped up Tom's glass. She did not stop pouring even when the glass was full and champagne spilled out onto the table where it flowed over to the side and dripped into Tom's lap.

“Hey!” he protested, scooting to one side.

“Oops,” Momoko giggled. She shook the last few drops from the neck of the bottle. “All gone. Guess you should order another, huh?”

From the glazed look in Momoko's eyes, Tom could guess where most of the champagne had ended up.

“Maybe we should call it a night, pet,” he said.

“But Tom-san,” Momoko wheedled, “we're having so much fun.”

“And people actually pay money for this,” Tom murmured to himself.

He was standing up to leave when a gunshot echoed through the club. Momoko sat bolt upright.

“That came from downstairs,” she said.

“Wait here,” Tom told her.

Tom kicked open the door to the bar then saw Hibiki coming the other way. He dragged an alien-bird-creature behind him with one hand and pointed a gun at Tom's chest with the other. Tom raised his hands.

"I like you, Brooker-san," Hibiki said, "but if you do not stand aside, I will shoot you."

Hibiki smiled as he said this. To Tom, that just made his words more disturbing. He stood aside. As Hibiki hurried by, the alien he dragged cast a mournful look up at Tom. Tom followed them with his eyes until they ducked into the lift and disappeared from sight.

Then he rushed down the stairs two at a time.

"Is anyone down here?" he yelled as he struck the landing.

"In here," Ashleigh called out from behind a closed door.

"Mori bolted the door from the outside," another voice said.

"I see them," Tom replied, sliding back the bolts top and bottom.

He opened the door and saw three figures inside a blue room with a broken length of chain on the floor. One of the figures was Ashleigh, the other the club's owner and the third a gangly Japanese boy.

"You took your time," Ashleigh said.

"Remind me not to bother next time," Tom replied. "What's been going on here?"

"Well, it's like this." Ashleigh started counting off points on her fingers. "Nakamura here has been keeping a bird-alien locked up and his dad hired me to go and find him, only I didn't know he was his dad or what he was looking for. We're freeing the alien when dad turns up to claim him, only your friend Mori thinks he has a prior claim and since he has a gun his claim takes priority." She looked to Kazuo. "Does that about cover it?"

"Just another day at the office for me than," Tom said. "What do we do now?"

The boy pushed past him, heading for the stairs.

"Now," he called back to them, "we rescue Ajari."

* * * * *

When Val woke up a familiar figure sat beside her.

"Doctor!" she exclaimed. "Am I glad to see you."

"Given the situation," the Doctor said, "that really should be my line. Tell me the truth, do my eyes look okay to you? I'm worried about the colour in the left one."

"They look fine," Val said, not quite understanding. Her hand went to the back of her head, searching for her second mouth.

"You're all back to normal," the Doctor said with a smile. "Myōgibō operated on you while you slept. Taichi's mouth is back where it belongs."

"They didn't have to, you know, shave my hair or anything, did they?" Val asked.

The Doctor laughed. "It's all still there, Miss Rossi, I promise you."

"Well, that's a relief," she said. "So what now?"

"Now? Well now that Myōgibō's restored everyone and the hatchlings have been rounded up, our work here is done. We can collect Tom and get out of here."

"Just like that?"

"No, not quite." The Doctor frowned. "Tarōbō and I need to have a conversation. Then we're done."

"Tarōbō?"

"The big cheese at the top of the pecking order."

“Really, Doctor?” Val said. “Bird puns?”

“Allow me this one indulgence. It's been a stressful couple of days.” He turned to face Val. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't be,” she said. “It's just another day in the life of the good ship TARDIS and all who sail in her. Let's go see the chief and get this over with.”

The Doctor nodded and started for the door. He did not quite reach it before Val called him back.

“Doctor,” she said, “I've been having these weird dreams. Well, more like memories, I guess, memories of a trip to India. But we've never been to India, have we?”

“You shouldn't put too much faith in dreams, Val,” the Doctor said. He held open the door for her. “Come on.”

Val followed obediently, but she could not fail to notice that he had not answered her question.

* * * * *

“Sōjōbō...”

The word rippled through the air of the twisted tower. Sōjōbō turned away from the window.

“Who's there?”

With a sound like the beating of a thousand wings, a cloud of black feathers appeared in the centre of the room and from the cloud stepped Ryūhōbō.

“Showing off again, I see,” Sōjōbō said dismissively.

Ryūhōbō fell forward onto his knees, dripping blood onto the floor.

Sōjōbō kept his distance, circling the other Daitengu suspiciously.

“What happened to you?”

“The mammals,” Ryūhōbō said, forcing the words from his beak. “The humans.”

“I warned you that living among them was dangerous.”

“Had to. Only way to find my son.”

“And did you?”

Ryūhōbō nodded. “Found him, but... Sōjōbō, if you had seen what they had done to him.”

“The humans are animals,” Sōjōbō agreed. “I see this, even if my brother cannot.”

“I left him behind,” Ryūhōbō said. “Don't you understand? I left Ajari in their hands!”

“And we will get him back,” Sōjōbō said. “I will raise an army and we will destroy their city. They will pay for what they have done.”

“You will do no such thing, Sōjōbō!”

Myōgibō stepped through the door, which remained closed, the wood rippling slightly as he past.

“What are you doing here, Myōgibō?” Sōjōbō asked.

“I sensed the disturbance caused by Ryūhōbō's arrival and came to investigate. It seems a good thing I did.”

“Myōgibō, they have my son,” Ryūhōbō said. “I must get him back.”

“And we will,” Myōgibō promised, “but by reasoning with the humans, not by the use of force.”

“You are weak, old man,” Sōjōbō said. “You no longer have the stomach for a fight.”

“There will be no fight,” Myōgibō said. “I am your father and I forbid it.”

“I do not recognise your authority over me.”

“But you will recognise the authority of the Council,” Myōgibō said. “When I tell them...”

His words were cut off in mid-sentence. Blood welled up in his throat, choking him.

“I’m sorry, old man,” Sōjōbō said, withdrawing the blade of his new naginata from his father’s back, “but I can’t allow you to do that.”

“Sōjōbō,” Ryūhōbō said, “what have you done?”

“What I should have done a long time ago.”

Myōgibō staggered forward, then, with a final death rattle, collapsed on top of Ryūhōbō. Ryūhōbō cried out in alarm.

Someone knocked on the door. It was thrown open and another Daitengu – Daranibō – barrelled in.

“I heard...” He saw Myōgibō’s corpse in Ryūhōbō’s arms. “What happened here?”

“It was terrible,” Sōjōbō said. “Ryūhōbō was ranting and raving about what the humans have done to his son. My father tried to calm him, but Ryūhōbō was in a red haze and...” Sōjōbō choked on the words. “He killed him.”

“That’s not true! I didn’t!”

Ryūhōbō pushed Myōgibō away from him. His feathers were covered with the older Daitengu’s blood.

“Lies!” Sōjōbō said. “You killed my father and, as his son, I will have vengeance.”

“But...”

Sōjōbō spun his naginata and, with a single swing, lopped off Ryūhōbō’s head. It rolled across the floor and Sōjōbō brought it to a halt beneath his foot. Ryūhōbō’s sightless eyes looked up at him accusingly.

“Don’t worry, my friend,” Sōjōbō whispered. “Your sacrifice will not be in vain. Thanks to you, I will finally be able to lead our people back to greatness.”

* * * * *

“Taichi, Mizuki!”

Val ran over and hugged the husband and wife. The Doctor brushed a speck of lint from his sleeve while he waited. The pair of them worked their way through the infirmary in search of Tarōbō. They arrived in the room where the people from Taichi’s farm were being treated.

“Are you two okay?” Val asked.

“I’m better than okay,” Taichi said. “I’ve just found out I’m going to be a father!”

He put his arm around his wife and kissed her.

“I’m so happy for you,” Val said. “Both of you.”

“I just wish Jiro could...”

Taichi trailed off, looking over to where his brother huddled in a corner. The Daitengu surgeons had restored his legs, but Jiro was far from whole.

“Get them off of me,” he muttered to himself, scratching at his arms, his back and his chest. “Hundreds of spiders. Hundreds, I tell you. Get them off!”

“Doctor,” Val said, “what’s wrong with him.”

“Transformations of this scale, they take a toll on the mind,” the Doctor said. “You can restore the body, but some scars may never heal. Those who suffered the most extreme surgery at

the hands of the hatchlings, their minds may be broken forever. Speaking of which, how are you feeling, Miss Rossi?"

"Me? I'm fine."

"Really? No lingering after-effects?"

"No. Well, not unless you count the dreams."

"Ah yes, the dreams," the Doctor said. "I suppose it's possible that your previous experience built up your psychic defences. It bodes well for your recovery."

"My recovery?" Val repeated. "And what previous experience?"

The Doctor ignored her and turned instead to Taichi and Mizuki.

"We're looking for the bird-in-chief," he said, holding his hand, palm flat, at head height. "Big guy." He lowered his hand. "Well, big for a Daitengu. Have you seen him?"

"I think he's through there," Mizuki said, pointing to an arched doorway, "with his son."

"Excellent!"

The Doctor strode through the arch.

"Tarōbō," he said, "we need to talk."

"Now is not a good time, Doctor," Tarōbō said. He was standing beside a bed, his hand ruffling the feathers on the head of the bed's occupant, Saburō.

"Doctor!" Saburō tried to sit up, but winced in pain as he stretched the area where Zenkibō had stabbed him.

"I'd like to spend some time with my son, Doctor," Tarōbō said. "Alone."

"Of course you would," the Doctor said, "what with you being such a devoted parent and all."

"What do you want, Doctor?"

"I want someone to take some kind of responsibility for everything that's happened."

"You can't blame Saburō and the others," Tarōbō said. "They're just hatchlings. They didn't understand what they were doing."

"And whose fault was that, Tarōbō?" the Doctor asked. "Where were you when your children needed you?"

"We tried to keep them safe," Tarōbō said. "We forbade them from leaving the aerie or from interacting with the humans."

"Which only encouraged them to want to do so," the Doctor said. "It's natural for children to want to explore and to test boundaries. It is the responsibility of the parent to encourage this desire to learn while at the same time explaining why the boundaries exist and teaching the difference between right and wrong. You can't just lock them in a box and hope they stay young and innocent forever. Children grow up, not matter how much we might wish otherwise, and what they grow into is down to you. You failed your children, Tarōbō."

"You've got it all wrong, Doctor," Saburō said from the bed. "My father is a good man."

"I've got a bunch of people next door who would disagree," the Doctor replied.

"Doctor," Tarōbō said, "what right do you have to judge us?"

"Somebody has to. Somebody has to hold you up to the standards you seem unwilling to apply to yourselves."

"Doctor, I..."

Before Tarōbō could finish, a crowd of Daitengu burst into the room, Sōjōbō at their head. He held a bloody object in each taloned fist.

"Don't listen to him, brother," Sōjōbō said. "The mammals lie. They only wish to harm us."

“That's not true,” the Doctor said.

“Isn't it?” Sōjōbō threw one of the bloody objects to the ground. “Look on the head of our father, Myōgibō, cruelly slain.”

“Father is dead?” Tarōbō collapsed against the side of the bed in shock. “Who did this?”

“Ryūhōbō wielded the blade, brother,” Sōjōbō said, holding aloft the second bloody head, “but I have administered justice for us.”

“Ryūhōbō? I don't believe it.”

“Daranibō witnessed the whole thing,” Sōjōbō said, “didn't you, Daranibō?”

“Well, not the *whole* thing,” Daranibō said. “I didn't see him strike the killing blow, but I arrived a moment later to see Myōgibō dead and Ryūhōbō covered in his blood.”

“Hardly conclusive proof,” the Doctor said. He turned to Tarōbō. “Can't you use the Question? Feel around in people's minds until you find the truth?”

“Only Myōgibō had that gift,” Tarōbō said. “Myōgibō and Ryūhōbō.”

“Both of whom are now dead. Convenient.” The Doctor narrowed his eyes at Sōjōbō. “What motive would Ryūhōbō have for murder?”

“I'm so glad you asked that, Doctor,” Sōjōbō said. “He had been driven mad by the actions of your kind.”

“That's a stretch.”

“Is it, Doctor? Is it so far-fetched that his mind had been corrupted by the time he spent among the humans, searching for his son? Is it so unbelievable that, on finally finding Ajari and seeing what the humans had done to him, he would finally snap? *Is it?* Ryūhōbō may have struck the killing blow, but it is you humans who are responsible for my father's death!”

“Where is the son of Ryūhōbō now?” Tarōbō asked.

“The humans still have him, brother,” Sōjōbō said. “They refuse to give him up. We cannot allow these crimes to go unpunished.”

“Our father would not wish us to act rashly,” Tarōbō said.

“Our father was tender-hearted,” Sōjōbō said, “and we loved him for it, but see where it brought him in the end. What we need now is a strong leader, one able to take the strong decisions, to strike at our enemies like lightning.”

“The humans are not your enemies,” the Doctor insisted.

“I understand that this is a lot to take in, brother,” Sōjōbō said. “If it is too much, I am willing to take charge of the Council in your place. Just until you are fully recovered, of course.”

“And now we get to the heart of the matter,” the Doctor said. “Don't listen to him, Tarōbō. He's twisting the facts to his own ends.”

“Silence, Doctor,” Tarōbō said, straightening up. “For Daitengu to kill Daitengu is unthinkable. There have been no deaths here in the Aerie in hundreds of years. Not since we cut ourselves off from the humans. Not until you forced your way back into our lives.”

“Yes, brother,” Sōjōbō said gleefully. “Now you see the truth.”

“I am the Head of the Council, Sōjōbō,” Tarōbō said, “and so I will remain, despite your best efforts.” He looked around the gathered Daitengu, taking in the anger and offence in their eyes. “But you are right that the death of our father must be avenged. The humans must be taught what it means to anger the Daitengu.”

“Release the Amanozako!”

* * * * *

Hibiki ran north, dragging Ajari along by the chain around his throat.

“My people are waiting for us,” he said. “We just have to meet up with them and then you can start your new life as an experimental subject.”

He laughed, thin and high.

Ajari stumbled again and Hibiki cracked him around the head with the butt of his pistol.

“Keep up, why can't you?” he complained. “You're slowing us down, tripping over your feet every five minutes.”

Ajari whimpered.

“Let him go, Hibiki!” called a voice from the other side of the road.

“Brooker-san,” Hibiki said, “I warned you not to follow me.”

He fired a warning shot into the building behind Tom. The sound of the shot, however, attracted the attention of two police officers who came running towards Hibiki from the other direction.

“There's nowhere for you to run, Hibiki.”

“We'll see about that.”

Hibiki dragged Ajari down the sloping bank of the river towards a set of turtle-shaped stepping-stones. The earlier rain had swollen the river and it surged vigorously, the water lapping over the stones. Hibiki tested the first stone with his foot. It rocked a little from side to side, but seemed stable enough so he climbed on, hauling Ajari after him. He repeated the process with the second stone and then the third.

Kazuo ran to the water's edge.

“Hibiki-san,” he yelled, “what are you doing this? I thought we were friends.”

“Friends,” Hibiki echoed. “I looked up to you, Kazuo-kun. I idolised you.”

“So what happened to change that?” Ashleigh asked.

“Has he told you how we found it?” Hibiki asked, gesturing towards Ajari. “How the four of us – Kazuo, Jiro, Taichi and me – discovered it one afternoon and how he, being the oldest and the strongest and the leader, showed us how to punish it for stealing from us? We all took a turn with the bat, like we were sealing a pact between us and because Kazuo said that it was right, no one argued. Well, no one except Taichi, but he was the baby so no one listened to him.

“It was Jiro's idea to keep it. We clubbed together and found somewhere secure to hold it and Kazuo took on the responsibility for keeping it fed and watered. And every so often we would visit it and try to recapture the thrill.”

“The thrill?” Ashleigh asked.

“The rush that comes from having power over someone else,” Hibiki said. “Having power and using it. I figured that was how Kazuo felt all the time.”

“I didn't have any power,” Kazuo said, shaking his head.

“I know that now,” Hibiki said, “but back then you were like the coolest kid I knew. When Jiro and Taichi's father died, they had to move away to look after their mother, but I stuck around with you, Kazuo-kun, because I was still trying to learn how to be just like you. I hadn't yet realised just what a loser you really are. It was after graduation when I finally met up with people who had real power. That's when I realised that you'd been play-acting your whole life. You've no idea what real power is. You could have been someone, Kazuo-kun, but you never had the stomach for it. I do, and my new friends showed me that. You were my senpai, Kazuo-kun, but I surpassed you long ago.”

Hibiki rattled the chain around Ajari's neck.

“You don't deserve this gift,” he said.

“He's a person,” Ichirou said, running out across the stepping-stones, “and you don't deserve him either.”

Time seemed to slow down.

Hibiki twisted, swinging his gun around to cover Ichirou.

“No one is taking my prize from me,” he said.

“No!” Kazuo yelled, launching himself at his son.

The gun went off. Kazuo struck Ichirou with his shoulder, knocking him off-balance and sending him tumbling into the river. The bullet, meant for Ichirou, struck Kazuo in the chest and he spun in mid-air, landing awkwardly, half on a stone, half in the water.

Tom waded into the river, scooped up Ichirou and tried to drag him back to dry land, but the boy was having none of it. Instead, he fought his way to his father's side.

“Dad?” he said, tears in his eyes.

“Ichirou.” Lying on his back, Kazuo cupped his son's face in his hand. “Whatever did I do to deserve a son as remarkable as you? I'm sorry I wasn't more of a father. Sorry I wasn't more of a man. But today at least I know I got something right.”

Then he died.

Ichirou buried his face in his father's chest, his frame wracked by sobs. Tom stood over him, glaring daggers at Hibiki, with Ashleigh standing slightly behind and to his left. Hibiki's gaze took in all three of them.

“Well that was a head rush,” he said. “Who wants to be next?”

* * * * *

“What's going on, Doctor?” Val asked as the Daitengu filed through the infirmary.

“Tarōbō is making a serious mistake,” the Doctor said. “You'll rue this day, Tarōbō, mark my words!”

“Enough, Doctor,” Tarōbō said. “I have tried listening to you and look where it got me. My father is dead!”

“For which I am truly sorry,” the Doctor said. “Myōgibō was a good man. But this is not the way to honour his memory.”

“I will honour his memory later. For now, I just want to see someone pay for what they have done. Isn't that what you wanted, too, Doctor? To see those responsible held accountable for their actions?”

“Not like this, Tarōbō. Never like this.”

The Doctor and Val followed the Daitengu up to a circular platform, perhaps fifty foot in diameter, at the very summit of the Aerie. A low wooden balcony ringed the platform and, from the edge, Val could see the whole of Kyoto laid out far below. It was as if she looked at the city through a heat haze. An effect, the Doctor had said, of the dimensional pocket.

At the platform's dead centre, a shard of black glass thrust towards the sky.

“Behold,” Tarōbō said, “the Warp Scythe.”

The Doctor paled. “It's not too late to stop this, Tarōbō. You still have a choice.”

“No, Doctor,” Tarōbō replied. “Your kind took that choice away from me.”

He turned to Sōjōbō.

“Activate the machine.”

Sōjōbō grinned. “With pleasure, brother.”

The Doctor clenched his hands into fists.

“Doctor, what is that thing?” Val asked.

“You know how I said Tarōbō was making a serious mistake,” the Doctor said. “I lied. There aren't the words in your language to describe just how much of a mistake Tarōbō is about to make.”

The heavens split asunder.

* * * * *

Thunder cracked over Kyoto. The sky turned the colour of a rotting meat and a great chasm opened in the sky. Light spilled from the rift, light so bright that it was painful to look at, and crawling out of that light came a mass of darkness. It oozed and crawled and flowed, growing and writhing and blotting out the moon.

And then it started to feed.

It corrupted everything it touched. Kyoto Tower twisted and coiled until it snapped. The lake around Kinkaku-ji, the Golden Pavilion, bubbled and boiled away as steam. The gold on the temple itself blackened and peeled away in clumps. The roof of the Imperial Palace burned with purple fire while horrifying, shadowy shapes frolicked through its gardens.

As for the humans the creature touched - they died screaming.

* * * * *

“Amanozako,” the Doctor said. “A creature from Japanese legend whose name translates as Heaven Opposing Everything. It is said to be the bottled up rage of the god of the sea, a thing of pure hate and destructive power.”

“But what is it really?” Val said, unable to take her eyes off the chaos down below.

“They say that the Void is empty,” the Doctor replied, “but it isn't, not really. Life finds a way, even there. The Daitengu are dimensioneers, able to open up doors between realities. And into the spaces *between* realities. That thing, that Amanozako, it's a creature from the space between dimensions.”

“And that's bad, right?”

“You have no idea.” The Doctor laughed bitterly. “A creature like that, it is anathema to the physical laws we take for granted. It unravels and rewrites substance with its very touch, just as exposure to our reality causes it nothing but agony. Pain is driving it insane and encouraging it to ever greater acts of terror and violence.”

He turned to Tarōbō.

“And you thought it was a good idea to let that creature loose. Have you completely lost your mind?”

“I...” Tarōbō struggled to respond, transfixed by what he had unleashed on Kyoto.

“Why?” the Doctor asked. “What possible purpose does this serve?”

“The humans must be punished,” Tarōbō said, his words hollow.

“For what? For killing your father? Ryūhōbō did that, or at least that's what Sōjōbō *says*.”

“They still have Ajari,” Tarōbō said.

“And if I found him and brought him back to you?” the Doctor said. “Would you stop this?”

Tarōbō hesitated. “Yes, Doctor. If Ajari was safe, I would recall the Amanozako.”

“Then there's no time to lose,” the Doctor said. “Come along, Val.”

“No,” Tarōbō said. “The woman stays.”
“Don't you trust me, Tarōbō?” the Doctor asked. “I thought we had an understanding.”
“That was then,” Tarōbō said.
“I will go with you, Doctor,” Saburō said. He was limping, but had managed to make his way to the summit of the aerie. “I still trust you, even if my father does not.”
Tarōbō looked pained. “Saburō...”
The Doctor turned to Val. “Stay alert. And watch Sōjōbō. I don't trust him.”
“And you trust the others?”
The Doctor cast a sideways look at Tarōbō.
“Maybe,” he said.
“Hurry, Doctor,” Tarōbō said as his son led the Time Lord away. “Hurry while you still have something left to save.”

* * * * *

“So who wants to be next?” Hibiki asked.
His laughter had a touch of hysteria about it, but the hand that held the gun was steady.
Thunder rippled through the air and the eyes of all of them turned skyward as the rift opened up and belched out the Amanozako.
“What the...” Ashleigh said.
“Welcome to my world,” Tom told her.
Ajari curled up into a ball, shivering in fear.
“Get up, damn you! Up!” Hibiki hauled on the chain, but Ajari refused to budge.
“Leave him alone,” Ashleigh said. “Can't you see the little guy's terrified?”
“I thought you'd be on my side, Ashleigh-chan,” Hibiki said. “After all, aren't you just in this for the money.”
“I never signed on for beating up children.” Ashleigh's eyes turned to Kazuo's body. “Or murder.”
“Pity.” Hibiki tugged on Ajari's chain again. “You know, I think all he really needs is a little encouragement. Encouragement like seeing one of his friends shot in the head.”
He moved the aim of the gun from Ashleigh, to Ichirou, to Tom.
“Now which will it be,” he said. “Eeny, meeny, miny...”
A bolt of black *something* fell from the sky and struck Hibiki square in the chest. He looked down at the smoking hole that it had left, exposing the remains of his lungs and ribcage.
“Well that's different,” he said.
His flesh began to bubble and blister, sloughing off in great black clumps.
“Don't look,” Tom said to Ichirou, putting his arms round the boy and hiding his face in his chest.
Hibiki's bones dissolved, fizzing in the open air. Hibiki held up his hand and watched in wonder as it fell apart before his eyes. Then his eyes melted down his face. In moments, all that remained of him was a puddle of slime on the stone, soon washed away by the lapping river.
Tentatively, Ashleigh approached Ajari.
“It's all right,” she said. “You're safe now.”
“No, not safe.” Ajari looked up at her. “They've unleashed the Amanozako. None of us will ever be safe again.”

* * * * *

Saburō flew down the mountainside, his talons clamped around the Doctor's shoulders.

“How are we ever going to find Ajari in all this?” Saburō said.

“By trusting to luck,” the Doctor replied. “I think we're both due some.”

He held Val's phone in his hands.

“There's another friend of mine somewhere in the city,” the Doctor explained. “The last time I saw him, I told him to stay out of trouble.”

“Sage advice,” Saburō said.

“That it may be,” the Doctor said, “but I'm sure I can rely on Brooker not to have followed it. He's nothing if not dependable in that regard. Wherever the heart of the disturbance is, that's where he'll be.”

He raised the phone to his ear.

* * * * *

Tom's phone buzzed in his pocket and almost vibrated out of his hands and into the river as he tried to answer it.

“Val, is that you?” he said. “Where've you been, pet?”

“Brooker, it's me,” the Doctor replied. “I'm just borrowing Miss Rossi's phone.”

“Is she all right?”

“For the moment. Now listen very carefully, I need you to do something for me.”

“What do you mean 'for the moment'?”

“I mean that Val's continued safety very much depends on what we do next,” the Doctor said, his voice growing increasingly exasperated. “In case you haven't noticed, death and destruction are raining down on Kyoto. It's a sign of how desperate the situation is that I'm resorting to telephoning you for help.”

“Thanks very much, I don't think,” Tom muttered.

“Brooker, just shut up and listen. Have you seen the thing in the sky?”

“It's pretty tough to miss, Doctor.”

“Stay out of its way.”

“Really? That's the best advice you can come up with? Because I hadn't figured that out for myself, like.”

“If you would allow me to finish, Brooker,” the Doctor said, “I was about to say that in order to stop that creature wreaking havoc in Kyoto and beyond, we need to locate a Daitengu child. By the way, a Daitengu is...”

“I know what a Daitengu is, Doctor. As it happens, I've got one with me now, like. His name's Ajari.”

For the longest moment, Tom savoured the silence.

“You've found Ajari. Excellent work, Brooker. I take back everything I've ever said about you.”

“Really.”

“No,” the Doctor replied. “I need you to bring Ajari to me at Fushimi-Inari-Taisha.”

“I don't know where that is, Doctor.”

“Then find someone who does,” the Doctor said. “And hurry, Tom. We're already running on borrowed time.”

* * * * *

“The Doctor will be back,” Val said. “He always finds a way.”

Tarōbō was not listening. He watched the destruction below then turned to Sōjōbō.

“Recall the beast,” he said. “Use the Warp Scythe to send it back whence it came.”

“What?” Sōjōbō said.

“The humans have been punished enough.”

“They'll only be punished enough when they're all dead,” Sōjōbō said. “I won't let your weakness betray everything I've worked for.”

“I don't understand.”

“Of course you don't,” Sōjōbō sneered. “Father's favoured son, the obvious choice for Head of the Council, you've never had to work for anything in your life. You've just maintained a policy of stagnation and inaction made by those who should have known better. But I *do* know better. We don't have to rot up here in our castle in the sky. There's a whole world out there waiting for us. We just have to fumigate the place first.”

Sōjōbō spun his naginata.

“I didn't let Father stand in my way, Tarōbō,” he said. “I won't let you.”

Sōjōbō lunged, but not at Tarōbō. Instead, he turned right, shoving the blade of his weapon deep into the controls of the Warp Scythe. Sparks flew. Cracks radiated out from the point of impact, working their way slowly, but irrevocably up the length of the Warp Scythe and, when the longest crack finally reached the tip of the crystal, it shattered into ten thousand glistening shards that fell to the ground like black snow.

“What have you done?” Tarōbō said.

“Taken away the last hope you had of stopping me,” Sōjōbō replied.

“Don't count on that.” Tarōbō drew a sword from the sash at his waist and held its gently curving blade out in front of him. “If you give yourself up, I'll show leniency.”

“That's always been your problem, brother.” Sōjōbō began to circle Tarōbō in a clockwise direction. “You're too soft.”

Sōjōbō feinted with his blade. Tarōbō raised his sword to riposte, but Sōjōbō was already skipping away.

“While you were sitting on Father's knee learning how to be nice to everybody,” Sōjōbō said, “I learned how to defend myself. And how to strike first.”

Despite his apparent calm, Sōjōbō's wings were beating furiously. He slowly rose up off the ground until he hovered six inches off of the floor.

“Your problem, Tarōbō, is that you lack the killer instinct.”

“Is that a fact?”

Tarōbō flapped his wings once, generating sufficient force to power him high into the air. He plunged back down towards Sōjōbō like a comet, his sword leading the way. Sōjōbō soared up to meet him, parrying the sword with the blade of his naginata before reversing the weapon so that he could strike his brother on the leg with the wooden haft. They broke apart, spiralling about one another high above the Aerie.

“You're out of practice, brother,” Sōjōbō taunted, “whereas I am only getting warmed up.”

“You talk a good fight, Sōjōbō,” Tarōbō said. “Could that be because you're scared to face me in an actual one?”

“In your dreams.”

The brothers engaged again. Blades sang as they clashed, wood shavings danced in the air as Sōjōbō blocked Tarōbō's sword with his pole-arm. Severed fragments of feather fluttered down as both opponents got closer than they desired. They whirled in an aerial battle, first high, then low, now together, then apart. The time for talk was past and both brothers were breathing heavily, weapons heavy in their hands.

But Sōjōbō had one final reserve of strength. Tarōbō swept his sword in an arc towards his brother's float, but the swing was slow and lazy, easily parried by Sōjōbō. Sliding his naginata down the sword's blade, Sōjōbō flicked it upwards, slicing across Tarōbō's fingers. Tarōbō let out a cry of pain, his hand spasmed and his sword fell from his grasp, clattering to the ground far below.

“You fought well, brother,” Sōjōbō said between gasps. “I'll give you that. But it was never going to be enough.”

He thrust the naginata forward, deep into Tarōbō's chest. Tarōbō's wings froze in mid-beat and he plunged from the sky like a stone.

Val rushed to his side, but recoiled as blood coated her hands. Sōjōbō landed gently on the other side of the platform.

“And so one era ends and another begins,” he said. “My first act as Head of the Council will be...”

“Will be over my dead body,” Tarōbō said, struggling to stand.

He ripped the naginata from his chest, ignoring the blood flowing freely from the wound.

“This is for Father,” he said.

Drawing back his arm, he hurled the naginata like a spear. Sōjōbō was too stunned to dodge. The blade of the weapon struck him between the eyes. He stumbled backwards, the backs of his calves struck the top of the balcony rail and he tumbled over, disappearing into the darkness below.

Tarōbō's legs gave out under him and he dropped, Val lunging forwards to catch him.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I'll live,” Tarōbō replied. “More than that, who can say?”

* * * * *

Tom rolled the taxi right up the steps of the Fushimi-Inari shrine. They had flagged down the vehicle as soon as the Doctor had hung up on them, but the driver had taken one look at Ajari and fled, leaving Tom to take the wheel while Ashleigh gave him directions, directions hampered by the fact that all around them wooden buildings were melting like wax into the roads.

“What kept you?” the Doctor said, leaping down the steps to meet them.

“Thank you, Tom, for driving like a loon halfway across town and nearly getting yourself killed in the process, like. That's what you meant to say, right?”

“It's always about you, isn't it, Brooker,” the Doctor said. “Now then, where's Ajari?”

Ajari emerged from the back of the taxi, closely followed by Ichirou.

“Excellent. I'm the Doctor, this is my new friend Saburō and you...” He pointed at Ajari. “...you may just be the most important person in the world right now. Shall we get moving while there's still a world left?”

“What, up there?” Tom said, taking in the flights of tori lined steps zigzagging their way up the mountainside.

“Next time, Brooker, I'll be sure to ask the bird-aliens to build their nests on the ground just for you,” the Doctor said. “In the meantime, can we get climbing?”

He did not wait for an answer, instead racing up the mountain in the expectation that everyone should follow.

“So that's the Doctor?” Ashleigh said as she jogged through a tunnel formed of a dozen red torii gates. “He's shorter than I expected.”

They reached a clearing where the path forked and they paused while the Doctor determined the best route.

“How much further?” Tom wanted to know. “I'm properly paid out.”

“I think I can carry you the rest of the way,” Saburō said.

“Are you sure?” the Doctor asked.

“If Ajari is up to it?”

The younger Daitengu nodded so Saburō snatched up the Doctor by his shoulders and carried him high into the air. Ajari followed, carrying Ichirou aloft with him.

“Hey up, what about us?” Tom called after them, but they did not hear him. He shrugged. “I'll guess we'll just wait for you right here, like.”

There was a vending machine at the edge of the clearing. Tom hunted around in his pocket for some loose change.

“I can't offer you champagne like the rest of your dates,” he said to Ashleigh, “but I'll treat you to an iced coffee, if you like.”

She smiled.

“Best offer I've had all day.”

* * * * *

Saburō set the Doctor down on the platform at the summit of the Aerie.

“I found Ajari,” the Doctor said, not wasting any time, “now fulfil your side of the bargain. Recall the Amanozako.”

“They can't, Doctor,” Val said. “Sōjōbō destroyed the Warp Scythe.”

“Sōjōbō? I thought I told you to watch him.”

“I tried.”

Ichirou tugged on the Doctor's sleeve. “What's a Warp Scythe?”

“A machine for opening doors between dimensions,” the Doctor explained. “We were going to use it to send the monster back where it came from.”

“Can't you fix it?”

“Fix it?” the Doctor yelled. “Have you seen what's left? I wouldn't even know where to start.”

“Sorry.” Ichirou's lower lip trembled.

“No, I'm sorry,” the Doctor said, moderating his tone. “It's just that we were so close.”

“There must be something you can do?” Val said.

“Must there, Val?” the Doctor replied. “I'm open to suggestions.”

He slammed his hand against the balcony rail.

“I hate feeling so useless.”

“What about the TARDIS?” Val said. “Can't you use that to take that thing back to its home dimension?”

“The TARDIS is designed to travel through time and space,” the Doctor said. “Dimension-hopping's a bit beyond her. But...”

His eyes blazed.

“I could reconfigure the TARDIS interior!”

“What good would that do?”

“It would make the TARDIS large enough to contain the Amanozako,” the Doctor said, “at least temporarily.”

“Temporarily.”

“The TARDIS is a product of this universe,” the Doctor explained. “Contact with that creature would cause it to start degrading almost immediately. I might only have seconds, but that would still be long enough to make a short hop into the heart of a star.”

“But that's suicide!” Val protested.

“For me, yes,” the Doctor agreed, “but it would save the rest of you, not to mention Earth. A price worth paying, I think you'll agree. Now where's Saburō? I'll need a lift back to my ship. Saburō?”

“Saburō's gone, Doctor,” Ajari said.

“Gone? Gone where?”

“There.”

Ajari was pointing out over Kyoto, towards the Amanozako.

“What does he think he's doing?” the Doctor asked.

Tarōbō stood at his side, leaning on Val for support. “It looks like... yes, I'm sure it is... he's attempting dimensional sculpture on the creature.”

“He's what?” Val asked.

“He's binding himself to it.”

“But won't touching it kill him?” Val said.

“No, no it won't,” the Doctor said, his voice tinged with awe. “Oh that's clever. That's really quite brilliant. By joining with it, he's made himself a part of it. It can't affect him now.”

“But that still doesn't explain what he's trying to do.”

“Can't you see it?” Ajari said. “He's trying to drag it back through the rift.”

“But it's too big,” Val said. “He can't possibly be strong enough.”

“Let it go, Saburō,” Tarōbō said. “Give it up and come home, before...”

“Look!” Ichirou cried, pointing. “There's more of them.”

Five more shapes flew in formation towards the Amanozako, five more Daitengu. Naigubu and the other hatchlings, Zenkibō included, took up positions around the monster and began weaving its substance together with their own.

“This is madness,” Tarōbō said.

“Is it even possible?” the Doctor asked.

“I don't know,” Tarōbō admitted. “I would have said not, but Father always taught us that, if you want something badly enough, anything is possible.”

“Then they must really want this,” Val said, “because they actually seem to be winning.”

The Amanozako thrashed and bucked, but could not dislodge the Daitengu welded to its flesh. With Saburō taking point, the six hatchlings fought their way towards the rift in the sky, inching forward little by little as they hauled the Amanozako along behind them. As they passed over the lip of the divide between this dimension and the next, the rift flared and the observers had to shield their eyes from the glare.

“What happened?” Tarōbō asked anxiously. “What's going on?”

Val blinked spots from her eyes.

“The rift,” she said, “it's closed.”

“And the Amanozako?” the Doctor asked.

“Gone.”

Everything was dark, silent and still.

“What about the hatchlings?” Tarōbō asked. “What about my son?”

“I don't know,” Val admitted.

“I see them!”

Ajari jumped as five shapes began winging their way back to the Aerie. Five shapes, not six.

Tarōbō grabbed hold of Zenkibō as soon as he landed.

“Where is Saburō? What happened to him.”

“I'm sorry.” Zenkibō looked down at the ground.

“Someone had to stay behind,” Naigubu said, “to hold the creature on the other side of the rift while the rest of us sealed it shut.”

“No, not Saburō! Not my son!” Tarōbō dropped to his knees, holding his head in his hands.

“Doctor?” Naigubu said. “Before the rift closed, Saburō gave us a message for you. He said to tell you that he was taking responsibility for his mistakes.”

“Not like this,” the Doctor said quietly. “It didn't have to be like this.” He turned to Tarōbō. “Tarōbō, I'm so sorry. If I could exchange places with Saburō, I would.”

“And if I could swap your life for my son's I would do so in a heartbeat, Doctor,” Tarōbō said. “You drove him to this. You cost me my son.”

“Tarōbō, I...”

“Get out of my sight, Doctor,” Tarōbō said. “Get away from here before you do any more damage.”

* * * * *

The first rays of dawn were peeking over the horizon as the TARDIS travellers made their way back to their ship. The roof had been torn off Nishiki Market and several of the stalls had been twisted into abstract shapes. There was no sign of any bodies, however, which Tom took to be a good sign.

“So you and your friends travel between the stars?” Ashleigh asked, sipping at a can of iced coffee.

“And through time,” Tom said.

“And I want to travel,” Ashleigh reminded him. “This is the part where you ask me if I want to come with you.”

Tom hesitated. He had certainly thought about it. He had seen himself continuing his adventures in the company of Ashleigh when Val decided to stay behind. Now that the point had come to ask her, however, he found himself unable to get out the words.

“It's all right,” Ashleigh told him. “I'd have said no anyway. After everything we've seen, I think it's time for me to go home.”

“Back to Auckland?”

Ashleigh nodded. “There are so many things I haven't said to my Dad, things I really should say while I have the chance.”

“Take care of yourself, lass.”

They kissed each other awkwardly on the cheek.

“You know,” Tom said, “if I’m ever in the neighbourhood again, I’ll look you up. Take you on a spin round the universe.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Ashleigh said, smiling sadly.

They both knew that it would never happen.

“Get a shift on Tom,” Val called from the TARDIS doorway, “or we’ll go without you.”

“I thought you were staying behind, like,” Tom said as he jogged over. “You know, getting back into the swing of *Mysterious Times* and all that.”

“One day.” Val stroked her fingertips over the wood grain of the TARDIS exterior. “I can’t be a nomad forever, but for right now there’s too much left to see and do. You?”

“Couldn’t agree more, pet,” Tom said. “And there’s no one I’d rather being doing it with.”

The Doctor stood apart, his eyes on the sky as he made his own silent goodbye. This was not the first time that someone had stepped in front of a bullet meant for him. The fact that Saburō had in part been encouraged to do so by the Doctor only made the guilt sharper. One day, though, his luck was going to run out and he would have to make that stand himself.

“And on that day, I guess we’ll find out what measure of man *I* am,” the Doctor said, “won’t we, Saburō.”

With that, he spun on his heel and entered the TARDIS. The door slammed closed behind him.



Arriving in twenty-first century Kyoto Japan, the Doctor and Val investigate a photograph of a strangely mutated woman while Tom explores the city's nightlife.

The Daitengu, a race from legend is making strange alterations to the local population. Their cruel handiwork is revenge for the kidnapping and torture of one of their number by human children twenty years earlier. The Doctor, Val and Tom must find out why or a power will be unleashed that will corrupt the fabric of reality.

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