

500 years ago...

Dai-oni was asleep when men first arrived on his mountain. At first, they were barely a flutter in his unimaginable dreams. Gradually, the tick of axes felling trees, the clank of hammers and chisels pounding stone, seeped into his mind. His thick bristled eyebrows wrinkled into a frown over the deep sockets of his lidded eyes. Then he tasted the pain. Sweet pain pulled at his senses, seeping down from the toiling workers through fissures in the rock. He breathed it in. With a squirm of delight, he tasted loss, despair, humiliation mingled with the fear and pain inflicted on humans by their own kind. Nectar.

However, such things are transient and the flow slowed to a trickle, barely maintained by the misery of the servants in the new mansion gracing the mountainside.

Dai-oni dozed again.

Eventually, from the anguish distinct flavours began to emerge that intrigued him even more. The spicy fire of lust and craving, the rolling thunder of passion and the lightning flashes of ecstasy brought his eyes open, his long tongue flicking languidly across his bulging lips.

His great bulk stirred, shifting into a crouch. His minions chattered, sensing his cruel curiosity with anticipation. A seething mass of clawed limbs, horns and fangs shifted in the darkness around Dai-oni. How long can a human endure the extremes of ecstasy, he wondered? Which would be the sweetest, the first or the last? What delicious concoctions might be created by mixing lust and despair? Or pleasure and humiliation? His teeth bared in a hideous grin. How long could the feast last?

The lesser oni surrounding him hissed and fidgeted as Dai-oni pulsed with a building hunger. He sensed an opportunity to let his fetid imagination run wild. Done slowly enough, it would create barely a ripple in the spirit world, saving him from the trouble of interference. After all, what good is power if you don't use it? With terrible purpose his gnarled features twisted towards the gay summer mansion full of courtiers and their ladies...

PROLOGUE

Izo panted as he struggled along the slippery road, his eyes searching frantically in all directions. He knew they were out there, following him. He had caught fleeting glimpses of three so far but he heard more of them cackling off among the scrub. The sound made the back of his neck bristle. They may have looked like dogs but they definitely did not sound like dogs. Was his hearing affected after swimming across the river? Was he thinking straight? Was this a dream? A nightmare?

The cold, wet mud and the ache in his calves tried to tell him he was awake. He stopped to get his bearings, looking for landmarks. Cold rivulets ran down from his hair and soaked his clothes. He should be seeing Aya's village by now. The sky was blotted out by a tumbled mass of low dark cloud sitting wetly across the plain and up into the mountains. Glossy green foliage dripped and rattled in the fetid air. There was something wrong with this rain, Izo thought. He was a farmer. He knew rain. He had seen all different sorts of rain, but nothing like this. It did not fall right. And something smelled wrong. Desperately, he scanned ahead for the shape of a roof.

He had heard nothing from Aya for two weeks. Nothing had been heard from anyone in Mizukiri. Trade had stopped. People had begun to talk, but no-one wanted to risk the journey in case it was sickness or plague. At least no-one he knew would risk it. Someone would have to. He had stood at the end of the Kuzuryu bridge looking across into the Mizukiri domain, scanning the village on the other side for signs of life. The damp gloominess of the still buildings in the distance had drained the warmth from his belly. Something was wrong. He felt it in his bones. He had stood there battling between running home to carry on with his life and his desire to see Aya again.

Some may have seen her as plain and unattractive, but Izo felt differently. He had seen her brightness. Yes, her teeth were a bit crooked and she was a bit dumpy, but she embraced him fiercely and made him feel warm when she smiled just for him. Her lovemaking was always enthusiastic and full of energy, unlike any other girl he had known. He had had to admit to himself that he wanted to marry her.

Finally, his concern for Aya had motivated him to cross the river. For some reason it seemed like a good idea to head upstream and swim across out of sight of the bridge. He avoided the woodcutter's hamlet at the foot of the hills and skirted the woods, heading for

Aya's village further into the domain. That was when he had started hearing the noises coming from the trees.

A hollow chuckling sound echoed from behind him. Izo's head snapped around, eyes wide, searching for the source. Another cackle replied from his right spurring him into a panicked run. He struggled for breath, nearly hysterical in his flight. The damp ground slid out from under his cramping feet and he tumbled into a roadside ditch. He scrabbled out of the stinking water on his hands and knees, panting wildly. The tramp and rustle of something hurrying through the underbrush along the sides of the road spurred him to his feet again. Pain and fatigue turned his run into a furious limp. He risked a hurried glance behind him, hoping there was nothing there, thinking he had really just scared himself and it was alright to stop running.

But he saw eyes following him. Flashing red eyes. Eyes the colour of pain. With a startled cry he broke into a run, lungs burning from the exertion, eyes tight with pain. He recognised a small Jizo shrine by the side of the road. It was the one just outside her village. He was nearly there. The mud spread beneath his sodden sandals, threatening to slide out from underneath him. He frowned slightly when it registered in his panicking mind that the statue in the shrine had fallen over. It should not be like that. He slowed down and panted in relief as he approached houses lining the road. He was safe. But where was everyone?

Izo's eye flicked from house to house as he hobbled down the street, looking for signs of life. He heard a tap-tap-tap off somewhere behind the maze of timbered walls. Was it someone working? A woman at a loom perhaps? Or was it just water dripping? He reached the stone lantern in the middle of the village. His numb hands gripped at its roof as his forehead rested against the cool, wet stone. He closed his eyes and sucked in deep breaths.

His head shot up in fright at the sound of squelching mud. He saw the bedraggled figure of an old woman as she shuffled along the street, supporting herself with one hand on the side of a house. He sighed in relief. There was life here after all. Aya's house was down the street to the right. He pushed himself off the lantern and headed towards her place. A screen slid open in a building back near the lantern. He glanced over his shoulder as he approached Aya's door. The bent frame of a middle-aged man stepped out behind him, eyes fixed on the ground. The old woman had turned the corner, making her way down the side street towards Izo. Something felt wrong, but he could not put a name to it. At least he had made it to Aya's house.

He slid open the door. ‘Aya?! Is anyone home?! Aya!’ From across the room he could see the sitting figure of Aya in the corner, rocking back and forth slightly. She looked thinner, her kimono uncharacteristically stained and frayed, the dark mass of her hair uncombed. The room was cold, a damp draught coming through the open back door. Rain ran off from the eaves and splattered on the ground outside. He scanned the room quickly, noting with surprise the leaking roof and the clothes scattered and mouldering on the floor. It must be a sickness that is affecting everyone, he thought. Aya would never let her house get like this otherwise. ‘Are you alright, Aya? Aya!’

‘Oh, Izo,’ she rasped hoarsely, ‘You came. You came.’ She rocked back and forth, head bowed. ‘I’m so hungry,’ she sobbed.

He stepped inside. He saw people in the street moving out of the corner of his eye. With an uneasy feeling, he closed the door, shutting out the scraping and shuffling sounds. ‘What’s going on, Aya. What is wrong? No one has heard from here in weeks.’ He breathed heavily. ‘Are you alright? I sent you a letter. You didn’t reply.’ He swallowed hard, unsure of what to expect. She did not seem happy to see him.

‘Oh, Izo,’ she cried. She rushed to him, her arms spread to embrace him just as she always done.

He breathed a sigh of relief. She still liked him. He opened his arms in response. They embraced in mutual longing. But she did not release him. As the embrace continued he started to get uncomfortable. She sobbed endlessly. There was a stench rising from Aya, filling his nostrils. She had obviously been sick. He thought she must really be scared to hug him this hard. He felt her grip tighten. This was ridiculous. Izo tried to disengage her. He tapped her on the back. ‘It’s alright, Aya. I’m here now. You can let me go.’

She sobbed harder into his chest. ‘Oh Izo, I’m so hungry. So hungry,’ she mumbled deeply.

Her arms tightened with a jerk, arching Izo’s back and lifting his feet off the floor. He mouthed a scream, but there was no air in his lungs. He pushed at her shoulders but could not move her. The strength of her embrace seemed inhuman. What was happening? This was all wrong! He must get away from her. Spots started to swim before his eyes. He clenched his teeth and struck her in the side of the head, but she just tightened her arms even more.

‘Aya!’ he gasped as his spine and ribs shrieked in agony. ‘Please!’

Slowly, she looked up at him. ‘Oh, Izo. I’m ssooo huungryy.’ He grabbed a handful of her hair in each hand and pushed her head back, trying to make her break her grip. He felt the blood pounding in his head. He looked down into her eyes. Her pupils were red. The colour of pain. She wrenched again with her arms. Izo’s vertebrae separated, muscle and ligament tearing. Ribs splintered, puncturing his heart and lungs. Izo’s final breath exploded in a gout of blood that covered Aya’s hideously fixed grin.