

Small Mercies

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Western Shinomen Forest, Tenth Century

To pass on, a soul must be at peace. This is why the world was flooded with ghosts. Who meets their end having accumulated enough things, having solved all their problems with an untroubled heart? Preoccupied by endless worries and desires, they don't notice when death comes. The moment passes and they are left behind, invisible and unseen, feeding off the living.

Nyotaka was glad to banish them. He had not been born with the ability to see ghosts, but he had learned how after his *gempuku*. For this, he thanked his sensei and the way of the Falcon.

"That's the last of them," he said, flicking his blade. The other *yureigumi*, the phantom hunters, knelt by the fading lights left by their banished foes, whispering prayers for Emma-Ō's attention. "They were probably Forest Killers in life. Damn bandits. They're a pain even when dead!"

Close by, Masaomi laid a scrap from a sutra over a fading ghostly light, murmuring. His other hand fed his sword—a purified katana with a handle wrapped in sacred scriptures—to its sheath.

"Even the mockingbird doesn't waste his chirps," Nyotaka remarked.

Masaomi centered Nyotaka in his mismatched eye, the pale one with the mother-of-pearl shimmer. It was proof of his lineage to Yotogi, the clan founder. Nyotaka could not look upon it without the heat of jealousy.

"We've done them no favors, sending them confused and lost with the additional weight of their new karma. They couldn't help themselves as *ukabarenai* souls." *Those who cannot rest in peace.* "Don't you feel sorry for them?"

So much for the playful jokester he'd known in his youth.

"Does one feel sorry for a shadow? For a breeze?" Nyotaka shook his head. "They are what they made themselves. Emotions without a mind. Desires without a body. If this is a punishment, it is self-inflicted. To slay them is a small mercy. There is nothing human left to pity."

"Nothing human is left?" Once more he felt Masaomi's pale gaze. "Are you so certain?"



"Yes." Nyotaka replied. "In the heart of a samurai, there is no room for doubt."

"Masaomi!"

They jolted at the *gunsō*'s bark.

"The others are moving on," the sergeant growled through his mossy beard. "Will you be left behind?"

"No, cousin," Masaomi replied. Then, red-faced, corrected himself. "No, Taguchi-*sama*."

Where Masaomi had only one, Taguchi could see ghosts with both eyes. Yotogi's blood ran stronger in his veins. That was the only reason he was a *gunsō*. He set his hand on Masaomi's shoulder.

"Remember your task," he said. "The Lady appears perhaps each generation. A chance like this comes but once a lifetime." His face grew stern. "I won't see you squander it!"

"I won't," Masaomi promised. "I'll make father proud."

Taguchi turned, setting Nyotaka squarely in his searing glare. Nyotaka knew why—Taguchi considered him an outsider, a nuisance, and a bad influence on his little cousin. It had been so ever since they were children.

Nyotaka returned the glare. Masaomi was a gentle soul with no ambition to rise in the clan. No one here would look out for him, much less Taguchi and his constant pushing—his preoccupation with titles and glory. He didn't understand Masaomi like Nyotaka did.

The squad continued their march in grim silence. Their lanterns were blue orbs weaving between long gray trees.

Movement above. While he did not possess Yotogi's sight, his clan's training honed his senses. A nocturnal falcon perched on a low branch, transfixed on something. A field mouse, perhaps.

"We've arrived," Taguchi finally said. The others set their lanterns down, pushing the darkness back. In the clearing, a bell hung from a stone arch, turned green with time. Trees surrounded the glen like the bars of a cage.

Had he been here before? Nyotaka listened to the brittle crunch of leaves and watched the shivering branches. All quiet glens looked the same. Perhaps he'd huddled here years ago, during his *gempuku*.

He had been deep in the Shinomen marshes when his sensei abandoned him, leaving him alone to find his way back. No one had told him this was the rite of passage to become a Falcon Clan samurai. That would have defeated the entire purpose. Some fellow students claimed ghosts had led them back. Others said they were attacked, spirits chasing them through haunted woods. For Nyotaka, his *gempuku* was just another unremarkable night. He could barely remember it at all.

He'd been at the top of his class before that night. But now Masaomi was on the rise, forced into increasingly risky, dangerous missions. Nyotaka conducted only lonely patrols, lighting the lanterns of the Valley of Spirits every night on his own. Nyotaka had been left behind, while Masaomi was pushed ahead where Nyotaka could not protect him.

But not after tonight. As the others formed a circle around the bell, Nyotaka moved beside Masaomi and glanced at his troubled face, his wounded expression.

Taguchi produced a small mallet and struck the bell with a dull ring. As one, the squad turned to the east, waiting. In the branches above, the falcon watched them all.

"There!"

A crimson light peeked between layered trunks, moving, growing closer. The gathered samurai shifted nervously, a few exchanging whispers until Taguchi shushed them.

Masaomi will never forgive me for this. But Nyotaka didn't care. Masaomi was not made for crawling the swamp, his beautiful heart hardening with each new horror. Surely, he would understand. Eventually.

A short figure entered the clearing in a halo of crimson light, the red lantern swinging from a bamboo staff. The pale woman wore a style of layered robes that Nyotaka had only seen before in old paintings inside his father's study. She crossed in graceful silence, not even the crunch of fallen leaves.

"I am Toritaka Taguchi, sergeant and phantom hunter of the Falcon Clan." He bowed low. "We come as you summoned, Honored Lady."

Nyotaka's mother once told him that the Lady appeared to the first Falcon and many others since. Whether she was a ghost herself, an immortal sorceress, or simply the great-great-granddaughter of the woman who guided Yotogi, none could say for sure.

"A new threat comes," she whispered.

Taguchi straightened. "The Falcon are ready."

The lantern threw long shadows across her porcelain face. "A willful, ancient soul has escaped the Realm of Hungry Ghosts. It dwells in a palace within these woods, drawn to something within."

"We can depart at once," Taguchi offered.

"Only one may go," she warned. "More, and it will smell you coming." She looked from one wondering face to the next. "Which of you is willing?"

Taguchi cast a glance at Masaomi, who tensed, ready to accept this task on behalf of the Falcon.

I'm sorry, Masaomi. I hope you'll understand.

"I will!" Nyotaka announced, pushing past Taguchi's stunned face before Masaomi could even speak. He fell to a knee. "I am Toritaka Nyotaka, head of my class! I am ready to honor the pact!"

Silence. She didn't even acknowledge him. The others exchanged confused looks. Masaomi, face pained, just looked away.

"Forgive him," Taguchi hissed. "He forgets himself."

Nyotaka sprung up. "P-please! I am faster, quieter, a better swordsman!" Each word stabbed at his heart, but worse was the thought that Masaomi might face the danger alone. "Give me the chance, my Lady! And I will—"

"How long has he been following?" she asked.

"Since we entered the forest," Masaomi croaked. "I...I let him."

Nyotaka spun. "No! I came of my own will! Do not blame—"

The Lady's face softened. "Poor thing. You don't remember how it happened, do you?"

His gempuku night. Turning a corner, his sensei gone. Dropping his sword. Where had it fallen? He didn't have it even now...

"It's my fault," Masaomi spoke. "I took the fire striker from his bag, so he would be lost in the dark." Moisture welled in his eyes. "It was only a joke."

That night had been so cold. What had happened afterward? He couldn't remember returning. Couldn't remember...

The Lady smiled. "Your regret reminds me of *him*, Masaomi. So I do you this favor."

She lowered her lantern. A chorus of gasps. Now they all could see him. Nyotaka drew his gaze slowly down his translucent hands, where the red light now passed through, and down to his legs where his feet vanished into darkness. His sword was gone. His armor was gone. Taguchi shook his head. Where there had surely been anger in his eyes before, Nyotaka now recognized pity. Pity for the dead.

"He knows what he is now," Taguchi said. "It's time, Masaomi. Make your father proud."

The Falcon blade was in Masaomi's hand. "I'm sorry," he said, a wet gleam in his pale eye. "I won't forget you."

"It's not true," Nyotaka murmured. "I still feel. I..."

The blade fell. From above, the falcon scooped the field mouse with its claws and carried it past the canopy, into the darkness beyond.

