

# NIGHT OF THE DEMON

By Crowscratch



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Kaiyo sat on the large wicker food hamper, her knees drawn up to her chest, cradling them for warmth against the sharp chill of the night wind. Beside her, leaning against the hamper, was her *katana* (what we call a sword). Behind her was a large handcart with two great wooden wheels, the pull-shafts resting on stacked branches to keep it evenly balanced. On the bed of the cart was what appeared to be a corpse. It was wrapped like a mummy in cotton gauzing from head to toe. Silk banners with embroidered writing draped the body. These were the clan symbols of Kaiyo's master: Lord Hashimi Hokura.

Before his death, Lord Hokura had ordered his servant, Kaiyo, to take his body to the great *kusu-no-ki* tree (which we call a camphor tree) at the crossroads where the pilgrim's path met the road to the city of Edo. And that is why, under the spreading branches of the great kusu tree, Kaiyo, a girl still in her teens, spent three nights in a row battling a demon.

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How Kaiyo came into the service of Lord Hokura was a sad but common story for the times. Her parents were tenant farmers on a blighted piece of land that brought forth nothing but bitterness. They fell deeply into debt, and couldn't pay the rent. Despairing, desperate, they gave up their heart's delight, their clever little daughter Kaiyo, to the lordship's household.

She was just six years of age when she came to work at the great house. It was magnificent back then, bustling with activity. Servants ran about cleaning, cooking, feeding, dodging in and around the samurai soldiers engrossed in constant training. In the courtyard were ponds filled with beautiful koi fish—flashes of gold, red, white, and speckled black—darting under small foot-bridges that arced like lacquered rainbows. There were magnificent gardens carefully cultivated and arranged; nature's chaos bent to man's will to create harmony. And there were the flowering trees that exploded in springtime with white, pink, purple, and red flowers—blossoms so stunning that the Shogun himself said on a visit: "Heaven would not look more beautiful." Yes, it was more beauty than could possibly be contained between four high, well-guarded walls.

But not for Kaiyo. For her it was a miserable routine. She worked in the kitchens. Her life consisted of rising before the sun, hauling bucket after bucket of water from the well outside the walls, and taking them to a small cistern beside the stoves. Then she'd fill the huge cooking pots from the cistern, and load up the wood for the massive stoves. Then she'd chop the vegetables and meat. And chop, and carry water, and carry wood, and chop, and sweep up the kitchens until it was time to go to sleep on her mat on the bare floor in the cramped building filled with exhausted snoring servants who farted in their sleep. Then she'd wake before the sun, and start it all over again.

Soon the sight of the beautiful gardens, flowering trees, and shimmering fish were just a bitter reminder of her relentless, exhausting toil.

And if they didn't do the trick, there was always the lord and his family to remind her of her lowly place in the great wheel of the world. When they passed, she was taught to bow, her nose scraping the ground. When they needed something, she was taught to drop everything and fetch it. Their wish was her command. And in return, she was treated as an inconvenience, an ugly necessity to be tolerated and ignored until needed again. And if she made a mistake, she'd be beaten or sent off without food. In short: life sucked.

Things changed however, when she got old enough and was put in charge of collecting the offal (the parts of cattle, pigs, rabbits, and fish that the cook could not use) that was meant for the hounds. She would mix it with the leftover rice and scrapings from the dinner plates into a big sticky mess, then take it to the kennel.

In the kennel were the lord's four hunting dogs. They were massive beasts imported from the northern district of Akita, with thick coats, black faces, and curling tails. They were fearsome, and would growl at anyone's approach. At first Kaiyo was frightened of them, but slowly over time, she began to feel a kinship. She was locked in a cage as well, and only wished she shared their courage to growl at her masters.

One day when no one was around, she took a special treat she'd made—slices of pig heart steeped in sweet sauce—and brought it to the lead dog's cage. The lead dog's name was Amato. He was bigger and tougher than the others, and looked you straight in the eye. His merest snarl could make a grown man's knees shudder. She pushed her hand through the bars, holding the treat, but Amato snapped at her, so she pulled her hand out lightning fast.

Amato glared at her. She glared back. Then she put her hand in again. Once more, Amato snapped. Again she pulled it back quick-as-a-wink. This went on four more times, so Kaiyo left without giving the dog the delicious pig heart smothered in sweet-sauce.

The next day she came back and tried it again. Again, Amato snapped and growled. Again, the experiment failed and she left without feeding the dog the treat from her hand.

But the following day something changed. She tried it again, and again Amato snapped. But the sixth time she pulled her hand away, Amato looked her straight in the eye, cocked his head to the side, and whimpered. So she slowly put her hand back in with the sweet pig heart slice, edging forward, cautious but steadfast. This time he approached slowly, sniffing, then licked it. He turned his massive wedge of a head sideways and began to eat from her outstretched fingers. When he was finished, she scooped more of the treat from her sack. Amatao eagerly lapped it up, licking her fingers.

Feeling emboldened, she reached out and touched him. Under the coarse outer hair on his neck, was a soft, thick coat that felt like goose down to her calloused hand. Amato turned his head to offer the back of his ear for a scratch. She scratched. He groaned in delight.

Suddenly, a voice interrupted, harsh and deep. "What are you doing?!" it said. Kaiyo turned to see Wanizame standing behind her, an angry scowl on his scarred face.

Wanizame (which means "shark") was the former bodyguard of Lord Hokura and in charge of training the samurai. He was as thick as a tree trunk, with knotted muscles, and a rooted bearing. A scar ran down his face from the top of his brow to the edge of his chin. The story was that he got it saving the life of the lord in battle.

Kaiyo froze. These may be the lord's kennels, but everyone knew they were Wanizame's dogs.

"I asked you a question, girl," said the grizzled soldier.

Kaiyo's mind raced. She quickly pulled her hand from the cage, and began formulating an excuse. "I... I..." but nothing more came out.

"You trying to soften them up? Turn them into pets?!" Wanizame demanded.

"Oh no, sir," replied Kaiyo quickly. Unfortunately, that's when Amato started whining, pushing his big wet nose through the bars, and demanding Kaiyo scratch him again.

"Hm," said the warrior. He came closer, towering like an oak over the crouching Kaiyo. She stood up, trying to be brave. "What is your name?" asked Wanizame.

"Kaiyo."

"You make the food for them?" he said, nodding to the dogs.

"Yes, Lord."

"Hm," he said again, digesting the information. "He has smelled your scent on his dinner before. That's why you still have a hand. You're very lucky."

She looked at Amato. The massive dog was shoving the side of his head against the bamboo bars, begging for her to continue scratching. He yowled playfully, like a giant demented puppy. She reached in and rubbed his head. He moaned low and contentedly. Kaiyo smiled. “Yes, Lord. Very lucky.”

“Enough!” barked the master. Kaiyo quickly retracted her hand, as Amato quickly hunched down. Wanizame’s eyes burned under his heavy brow. “These are not playthings!” said the samurai. “They are bred for a purpose: to hunt; to kill.”

“Yes, Lord,” said Kaiyo, her head bent, eyes staring straight at the ground. She knew she was in trouble—terrible, deep trouble.

“But,” began the fearful warrior, “that doesn’t mean they are not capable of more.” He turned away, his hand stroking his chin in thought. His voice softened slightly. “From this day forward,” he said, “you will be in charge of the hounds. You will feed them, run them, and train them under my command. Is that understood?”

“I what, Lord?”

“Is that understood?!” barked Wanizame.

“Yes, Lord!”

“Good,” he said, then started to walk off.

“Lord?” she asked.

He stopped, and turned. “What?”

“Why me?” she asked.

The man called shark took a moment, then: “Amato should have bitten your hand off. But he didn’t,” said Wanizame. “He chose you. Not I.”

And that’s how Kaiyo came to be in charge of the hounds.

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It’s not that her days differed too much in length or routine now that she was mistress of the hounds. She still slept amongst snoring and farting servants, still rose before the sun, still hauled water, loaded stoves, and chopped meats and vegetables for hours. But in between the collecting of the scraps, and sweeping of the kitchen, she got to run with the hounds.

...And it was heaven.

She learned how to train them with a whistle, learned how to control them, dominate them, and discipline them. But she also learned how to let them go, let the wolf in them run free, going on pure instinct.

Along with Amato, was Kana (the pretty girl), Mikio (clever but lazy), and Han (the clown). They worked hard practicing quartering their quarry. But they also romped and played and wrestled. Kaiyo loved them more than anything she had known in her whole life. And in return, they loved her.

“They are devoted to you,” said Wanizame. “They would die for you.” Then he looked at Kaiyo sternly, “That is a great responsibility. Remember: the loyalty and sacrifice of others is not a measure of your worth. It is a measure of their honor.” He looked away, darkness crossing his grizzled brow. “If you abuse that honor, take advantage of it selfishly, that does not make them foolish. It makes you unworthy.”

Kaiyo suspected that while he may have been speaking about her, he was actually talking about Lord Hokura.

Lord Hokura was an ambitious man, and spent money extravagantly. Not just on the lavish household, but on war after war with the neighboring lords. He expanded his lands by spilling coin and blood. Many were the soldiers who paid with their lives for the lord’s obsession with power.

His ambitions grew so great, that they eventually warranted a cautioning visit from the Shogun (whom we would call “Emperor”). The days before the supreme ruler’s arrival were a frenzy of panic and preparation. Nobody slept a wink. But it was all worth it, for when the Shogun arrived with his retinue, Lord Hokura’s household shone like a glittering jewel laid on a silken pillow. Lord Hokura spared no expense in entertaining his noble guest—a man whose throat he’d have happily slit in a heartbeat if it meant gaining the throne. There were days and nights of feasting and drinking, of song and dance.

But the highlight was the hunt. Twelve wild boar had been captured then released for the emperor. One of them had even been lamed, ensuring that the Shogun—an uncoordinated buffoon who fancied himself a sportsman—would get a kill.

Kaiyo’s hounds were dazzling. They worked together as a team, corralling, quartering, running down the hogs, giving the royalty on horseback enough time to aim their arrows and finish the boar. The Shogun was incredibly impressed with the dogs. “Then they are my gift to you,” said Lord Hokura. And with that, Amato, Kana, Mikio, and Han were crated up the following day, and taken away by the Shogun.

Kaiyo was destroyed. It didn't feel like her heart was broken, it felt like it was ripped out of her along with her stomach and lungs. She felt an emptiness and pain she didn't know possible. Wanizame found her in the kennel, crying uncontrollably, her body heaving, wracked with sobs. "Enough!" he barked.

She stopped, and looked at him. In her eyes, behind the tears, burned a rage. Wanizame saw it and softened slightly. "Be here at nightfall tomorrow," he said, then turned and walked away without explanation.

And that's how Kaiyo became a samurai.

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Wanizame told Kaiyo she needed to learn how to protect herself. She was blossoming into a pretty girl, and in a house filled with rough soldiers, that could be a bad thing. And now that her dogs were no longer around to protect her, she had to take on the responsibility herself. With that, he held out a *bokuto*—the wooden training sword used by the samurai.

"I can't," said Kaiyo. "I'm not allowed. It is forbidden."

"It is not an offer," said Wanizame. "It is an order."

Kaiyo took the wooden sword. It was heavier than it looked, with a multitude of dents and dings along its oak shaft.

"Don't hold it like a soup ladle!" barked Wanizame. "Show it respect!"

Kaiyo gripped it like she'd seen the samurai do, holding the blade with two hands, and straight out before her.

"Good," said the master. "Feet further apart. Balance. That is the key." She did as she was told, widening her stance and feeling her weight lower. Wanizame looked her over. "Tell me," he said, "are you sad, or are you angry?"

Kaiyo thought a moment. "Both," she replied.

"Then let us use that anger," he said, "let it drive you. Forget your sadness. Only time can heal that." Then he paused a moment, and his eyes went to the horizon. "They were good dogs," he eventually said.

And so every night, regardless of rain or snow, Kaiyo would practice with the wooden sword, going through her *katas*—a series of choreographed moves designed to build a repertoire of defense and attack into her very muscles; her very reflexes. Wanizame was merciless. He treated her exactly as he would any of his soldiers. "At me!" he would command, and she would

charge, rushing at him, missing, then finding his cane stinging across her back. "Again!" he would command.

But with each night, each practice, Kaiyo got a little better. And as the nights stretched into months, and the months into years, Kaiyo became quite good.

Of course, all of it was at a terrible risk. Training a girl in the ways of the samurai was forbidden. And it was not easy to keep it a secret. Certainly the other servants who spotted them dared not speak of it, if only out of fear of Wanizame. But keeping it from the lord and his family was another matter altogether. Still, somehow, miraculously, they managed.

"Why?" asked Kaiyo after one session. "Why risk all this trouble for me?"

"Bah! You think I want to?" replied Wanizame. "You have courage and skill. The sword is as natural to you as breathing. It is my duty as a sensei. It's just my rotten luck you were born a girl."

But the truth was, he was very proud of his protégé, sometimes even openly encouraging (something he never did with his soldiers), devising tricks to help her compensate for her slight frame; showing her strategies he did not even show his own men. And while Kaiyo still missed her dogs (in her dreams she would see them running and playing), she loved the strength and confidence her nightly training gave her. It made her forget the emptiness in her heart, and the drudgery of her days. For her, it was a pretty good life.

...But as she'd learned: All good things come to an end.

One night, hired assassins slipped over the walls to kill Lord Hokura. They were ninja, stealthy and deadly. Wanizame was awake. He saw the killers flicker like shadows in the courtyard, sneaking into Lord Hokura's room. He grabbed his katana and ran to help, raising the alarm. He burst into the lord's room and saw Hokura stabbed, bleeding. Wanizame carved a path to him, getting between the lord and the assassins. He fought them off, giving the wounded Hokura time to scramble to safety.

...But paid for it with his life.

Wanizame was buried on a rainy day. And because she was just a serving girl, Kaiyo was not allowed to attend the ceremony. So that night, she held her own ceremony, building a small shrine of stones in the empty kennels. She covered the shrine with a piece of white paper she'd stolen from the kitchen ledger (in order to keep the impure spirits of death out), then she bowed, and promised she would continue to train night after night, to honor her friend and master, Wanizame, the great shark.

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Things began to unwind quickly after that. Lord Hokura was bed-ridden with his wound and his enemies took advantage of the opportunity. They attacked, and soon his lands began to disappear, dissipating as fast as his wealth. His children had always spent his fortune recklessly, living lavishly in the capital city of Edo. On top of that, there was the household—the servants, stables, gardens, the personal guard—the list went on and on.

He began to drink more and more, becoming miserable and bitter. Slowly everything drifted away and decayed. The flowering trees were cut down for firewood, the koi fish filled the cooking pots, the servants ran off, and the samurai were sold to other lords. In no time, the callous Hokura was left with little more than his festering wound.

But Kaiyo stayed. She had been taught by Wanizame that there was no greater honor than loyalty. Besides, she knew of no other home. Where else would she go? So she stayed and cooked and chopped and hauled, and at night, she practiced her sword skills.

However one night, as she was deep in training, she saw Lord Hokura spying on her through a window. The next day, he sent for her. Kaiyo went to his chambers fearing the worst.

His room was dark, lit only by a small lamp. It smelled of stale wine and rotting flesh. The lord was propped up in his bed. He had withered since he'd secluded himself in his chambers. His breathing was raspy and labored, and his skin hung loose and gray. He asked her to approach. She did, bowing.

“I’m dying,” he said.

“I’m sorry, my lord.”

“I do not fear death,” he went on, “I fear what follows.”

Then, through wheezing breaths and fits of coughing, he told Kaiyo a story.

### *LORD HOKURA'S TALE*

Even as a little boy, Hokura had great ambition. He saw himself as ruling the entire country one day, and believed he would know no peace until he was the most powerful lord in the land.

Unfortunately there was a problem: Hokura was the second son of a slightly impoverished lord. He had an older brother who was destined to inherit what little there was of their father's titles and lands. The only way Hokura could seize them, was if his brother were to die. However, if his brother died violently, if he was killed by assassins or poisoned, he knew all suspicion would

fall on the man who stood to gain the most from it: himself. So he did nothing, and the frustrated ambition ate away at him like a rat trapped inside his belly, gnawing to get out.

Finally, when he could stand it no longer, he took desperate action. He found a witch and hired her to conjure a demon. After all, a supernatural creature could get the job done without any suspicion falling on Hokura.

So they went to a nearby crossroad (the traditional meeting place for demons), and the witch conjured up a ghastly creature from the netherworld. The demon listened to Hokura's dream and desire, and made an offer: he would kill the lord's brother in a way that looked like an accident, clearing Hokura of all suspicion. But in return, he'd have the lord's soul when he died.

Hokura thought about it, and came to the conclusion that this was a bad deal. "No," he said. "The death of my brother is just one small step on a long and perilous journey. What I want is to rule, and ruling is a constant and dangerous struggle. Therefore to get my soul, you must struggle too. It is only fair."

So the demon offered a new deal: upon Hokura's death, his body was to be taken to these very crossroads, then over the course of the next three nights, the demon would come for it. Hokura, however, could have a champion stand vigil, and protect the corpse. But if the demon held any part of Hokura's body for longer than six heartbeats, the soul was his.

The lord thought about it, and agreed. Then they both cut their hands, and sealed the deal with blood. Three days later Hokura's brother drowned when a freak wave sank his pleasure boat off the coast of Edo. That same day, Hokura started looking for a champion—the strongest, fiercest fighter to protect his soul from the demon in the event of his death.

...And that's how he found Wanizame, the man called shark.

"He was your sensei, your teacher," said the dying lord.

"No—" began Kaiyo, but Hokura cut her off.

"You think me a fool?" he said. "I have seen you train many times. There were whispers years ago that he was teaching you his technique, his style. You must fulfill his vow to me and protect my soul."

Kaiyo said nothing. She simply looked at the floor.

Now, the dying lord may have been callous and indifferent, but he was no fool. He could order the girl to do it, but what would stop her from simply ignoring the command after he died? She was not samurai. She was not bound to him by a code of honor he could exploit. There had to be another incentive, another approach...

He smiled as it came to him. "If you do this," he said, "the katana is yours." And with that, he nodded towards a sword held in an ornately carved wooden holder, resting on a table. This wasn't just any katana. It was beautiful. It was legendary. It was the Hokura family blade, made by master sword-smith, Masamune. It was called "The Singing Katana," and even in the dim room it glowed, its polished steel catching the faintest light.

"The blade cannot be taken or sold," said the dying man. "It can only be given. And I will give it to you, if you promise to protect my soul." He noted the light in Kaiyo's eyes as she looked at it. "Go on," he said. "Pick it up."

Kaiyo went to the blade and slowly raised it. It was lighter than she'd imagined. She felt the blood-red leather handle. It was natural and perfect in her hands. She brought it up, taking her stance. She slashed down, and the blade made a single clear note as it cut through the air.

And that is how Kaiyo found herself at the crossroads in the cold of night, watching over the remains of Lord Hokura with a legendary sword in her hand, waiting for a demon.

\* \* \*

On the first night of her vigil, Kaiyo managed to finish her preparations just as evening fell. Wanizame had schooled her well in the way of the sword. But he'd also taught her that a warrior's greatest weapon was his mind. Most battles were already won or lost before the katana even cleared its sheath. Kaiyo knew she would never be able to beat a demon, so she had to strategize; had to be two steps ahead. She only hoped that two steps would be enough.

The moon was high. It shone over the nearby field dotted with sheafs of dry grass. They had been cut and bundled, making them look like shadowy sentinels. A dirt road cut through the field. It was called "the Pilgrim's Path." Walking up it was an old man with a long gray beard. He was hunched, and needed the help of a long staff. He hummed a song, but stopped as he approached the crossroads and saw Kaiyo and her little camp. "Hello!" he called out with a smile, and headed over.

Kaiyo smiled back, but her hand rested on the hilt of her sword. "What brings you out at this hour?" she asked.

He chuckled. "I could ask you the same thing!" he said, his eyes taking in the encampment and the body on the cart. "Oh, my," he said. "Is this a funeral procession?" he asked.

"No," said Kaiyo, "it is a vigil for my master."

“Oh,” said the pilgrim, “my sincerest condolences.” He took a moment and mumbled a small prayer. When he’d finished, he asked: “Who was he?”

“Lord Hashimi Hokura,” said Kaiyo.

“No! The great Lord Hokura?!” he exclaimed. “I met him once, many years ago! I sold him two of my finest koi. I took them to his home. Such beauty! Such splendor! I had never seen a home like that.”

“It was nice,” said Kaiyo, remembering her first impression of the Hokura compound as well.

“May I pay my respects?” said the pilgrim. And with that, the old man began to approach the body.

“Um... I’d rather you didn’t get too close,” said Kaiyo.

“Nonsense,” said the old man. “I’ll be fine. Whatever disease he caught is probably long gone.”

“It’s not that...” said Kaiyo, putting her hand on the old man’s shoulder to stop him.

He spun at her touch, faster than lightning, the back of his hand striking her across the face. It was powerful—impossibly powerful. She went flying, managing to twist her body, flip backwards, and land on her feet. Her hand went reflexively to the hilt of her sword, clearing it from its sheath.

But the old man was faster. His staff struck like a cobra, smashing the katana from her hand. He spun the staff, twirling it about his body, and struck again, hitting her right in the stomach. She fell hard to the ground, stunned.

The old man stood over her smiling. His face started to change, lengthening, teeth becoming longer and jagged. His old dry chuckle turned into deep, malevolent laughter.

It was the demon.

“Did you really think to best me?” it said, horns sprouting from its temples. “Stupid girl.” With that, the demon started towards Hokura’s bandage wrapped body. He took a step and suddenly, surprisingly, shot up, hauled into the air. He spun crazily, upside down, screaming. He looked up to see that his foot was in a noose. He was dangling from a branch of the camphor tree like a snared rabbit. “Nooooo!” he cried.

“Yes,” said Kaiyo rising, and picking up her sword. She walked over to the flailing demon.

“You can’t...!” it shouted.

“I just did,” she said, and ran the creature through.

Immediately it exploded into a burst of thick, oily smoke. Kaiyo covered her face, coughing.

When it finally cleared, the demon was gone, sent back to the netherworld from whence it came.

\* \* \*

The next night came ugly and early, as the earth and sky disappeared into a dark gray haze of cold, drizzling rain. Kaiyo stood close to the tree, seeking the protection of its heavy branches. Thunder growled and rumbled far off. She shivered, her eyes scanning the crossroad, waiting for the demon's arrival.

Then something caught her attention in the tree. It was a trill, a chirp. She looked up and saw a slash of yellow. It was the beak of a magpie, the rest of the black bird lost amongst the dark shadows of the branches. She smiled, grateful to have company on such a miserable night.

Then another magpie appeared, its yellow beak and mask contrasted against the blackness above. It started to trill and chirp along with the first. Then another appeared, and another. They came fluttering down, landing on branches, or simply emerging from the shadows like they'd been there all along. The trilling and chirping became a cacophony; a relentless, grating symphony of discord.

*This is not right*, thought Kaiyo. *Something's wrong*. With that, she whipped out the sword...

And the birds attacked. They streamed from the branches, diving straight for the mummified lord. Kaiyo leapt onto the cart, legs astride the bandaged body, sword up and ready. The first bird came within striking distance, and... SLICE! Kaiyo's blade cut straight through it. The bird exploded in a burst of thick, oily smoke.

It was the demon. All of the birds were the demon. *All* of them.

A streak of black slashed across Kaiyo's arm, and blood sprouted along the welt. She hacked the bird, and it evaporated into thick smoke, just as another attacked, and another, and another. The birds swarmed her like a frantic black and yellow fog, trying to get under her sword to the corpse below. Yellow beaks pierced her skin and talons scraped her face. The sword was a blur of motion, singing its deadly song as it sliced through the air, cutting through the swarm. The caws and shrieks of the birds became almost human: "*Give him! He is mine! Mine!*" they seemed to scream.

Kaiyo fought on. Her arms grew heavy. Blood stung her eyes, and thick oily smoke choked her lungs, but still she fought on. It seemed to go on for hours, until finally her sword slashed, and the last bird exploded in a puff of smoke. She kept the blade up, ready, waiting, arms shaking

with the effort, chest heaving with exhaustion. She held the stance for as long as she could, then lowered the blade. They were all gone.

She collapsed to her knees. She was cut and scratched all over, the arms of her tunic shredded. Her breath rattled out in a sob. Her bottom lip trembled, as tears threatened to mix with the blood stinging her eyes. This was madness. This was too much.

She looked over at the clan symbols adorning the gauze-wrapped form of Lord Hokura. She did not do this for him. She did not do it for the sword. She did it for Wanizame, the great warrior, because she knew he would want her to. It was what must be done. Her sacrifice was not the measure of Lord Hokura's worth. It was the measure of her honor.

She wiped her eyes, got up, and went for water. There was still one more night to get through.

\* \* \*

The third night fell cool and clear, revealing a star-filled sky. The River of Heaven (what we call the "Milky Way") was a thick bright band across the cosmos.

Kaiyo sat on the wicker food hamper, concentrating on her breathing, emptying her mind, preparing for battle. Last night the demon nearly defeated her. She hadn't expected the birds. The demon was clever. It changed tactics, adopted new strategies. So she had to as well. As a result, she'd spent the day planning, preparing. She hoped it would be enough.

Then he appeared, and she knew it would not.

He strode towards the campsite, his thick tree trunk body encased in armor. The moon glinted off his metal chest plate; off the red lacquered coverings on his forearms, legs and hands; off the pointed morion helmet with its horsehair plume, and that ugly *menpō* face shield with the ridiculous mustache that she used to make fun of.

It was Wanizame.

Now, Kaiyo realized it wasn't her master and mentor (and the only friend she'd known outside of the hounds, Amato, Kana, Mikio and Han), but still, her arms seemed unable to raise her sword. "M—Master?" she stammered.

The warrior came closer. His eyes glinted from the shadows under the brim of the helmet. She saw the brows swoop down in that familiar scowl. "Master?" she said again.

Still the warrior said nothing, moving like an armored mountain. He pulled out his sword. It was his father's katana—the one he'd shown her many times, the one that was buried with his ashes.

Suddenly, he rushed, sword raised, and attacked. She barely got her blade up to defend. His sword struck like a viper, furious and swift, raining steel down on Kaiyo. Her katana blocked the strikes, but the clanging note it sang was desperate. He slashed, and she dove back, stumbling to the ground. As she scrambled back up, a searing pain blossomed on her arm. She looked down to see blood spreading on her tattered tunic, pouring out of an ugly cut.

Wanizame took his stance again. It was him—his moves, his technique—but it couldn't be, could it?

He attacked, rushing at her, sword high. This time she was better prepared, blocking, dodging, striking back. She lunged, but he spun out of the way, his blade arcing up, and slashing across her back in a perfect counterstrike, the tip of his sword slicing a groove along her spine.

The pain was terrible. She was lucky to be alive.

Wanizame stood there, contempt in his shadowed eyes. "I am disappointed," he said. His voice may have been muffled by the metal mask, but it was unmistakably his. And even though she knew that it couldn't truly be him, the words still stung her heart. She swallowed down her pain and tried to focus. She took a breath, stood up, and braced herself.

Wanizame attacked again. Time slowed. He leapt in the air, sword high. But at the last second, he spun. It was an opening. Kaiyo struck... and fell into his trap. Out of nowhere, his forearm brace caught her sword as simultaneously, his katana swept across, shearing her sword in two. The legendary sword sang a sour note as the top half of the blade flew across the road and into the field. Wanizame's fist came thundering down, smashing Kaiyo across the face. She heard something crack in her jaw as she fell to her knees. She was dazed. Her vision swam. And she waited for the killing stroke.

But instead, came a low rumbling laughter. It was the demon's laugh, gurgling up from Wanizame. "You never stood a chance," it said, turning and heading to the bandaged body on the cart. "Still, you fought well... for a girl."

Kaiyo tried to rise. The world was vague and uncertain under her feet. In her hand was the hilt of the katana. She didn't have much time. Six heartbeats was all it needed to take Hokura's soul.

The demon took off the helmet and face guard. Its horns sprouted, and hot steam shot from its mouth. Then it took off its gauntlets in preparation to touch the corpse. It looked down at the

gauze-wrapped form before it, and savored the anticipation. New souls were so fresh, so tasty. It grabbed the body's arm and counted. One, two, three, four, five, six heartbeats. The soul was his.

...Except nothing happened.

It looked at the prone form and tried again.

Still nothing.

Confusion growing, the demon gripped the arm tighter—only to have it come off in its hands. It looked at the sagging bandaged thing and saw...

Straw.

The gauze wrapped arm was filled with straw; straw from the nearby field. It frantically tore at the rest of the corpse, talons rending it to shreds.

Straw. Nothing but straw.

“Where is he?!” bellowed the demon as it spun—just in time to see Kaiyo plunge the hilt of the legendary sword into its stomach.

The demon sunk to its knees, eyes desperate and wide with confusion. But Kaiyo's face betrayed nothing. Slowly its body began to break into charred bits, bursting into black smoke. The smoke evaporated, disappearing back to the eternal depths that spawned it.

Kaiyo picked up the sword hilt from the ground. It may have only been half a sword, but it was enough. And the truth is, it had already done its most important job earlier in the day. She looked at the shredded straw man on the cart and smiled. Master Wanizame had taught her to think a step ahead of the enemy. She had. Her task was to keep the remains of the lord untouched by demon hands for three nights at the crossroads. After barely surviving the first two, she was certain she'd lose on the third. She was no match for a demon. So what could she do? Then it hit her: nobody ever mentioned what condition those remains had to be in.

She walked over to the wicker food hamper and raised the lid. Inside, flies crawled over the pile of bloody limbs, entrails, and organs that used to be Lord Hokura.

That afternoon Kaiyo had chopped the body up so it would fit snugly into the hamper; chopped it up using his family's legendary sword.

Kaiyo smiled. She knew Wanizame would have scolded her for being so disrespectful. But she also knew that secretly, he'd be proud.

THE END.