

THE BOY AND THE DRAGON

A WYVERN
WAR'S SHORT
STORY



ERYNN LEHTONEN



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Hidekazu dreamed, once, that he was the king of the sky, a coil of azure scales and sinew, a being of constellations and belligerent storms. Not a night passed where he didn't long to return to his place in the clouds, the sea for dragons, but never did the dream return.

Dreams are like stars: untouchable except for in the imagination. Genshu Hidekazu's dream was to meet a dragon.

The dragons left long ago, of course. A shishajya would be second best.

Damp earthiness and mildew overpowered Hidekazu's senses while he crawled through the dark passage. Now, at eight, he was almost too big to fit, and would soon have to find another way to sneak out of the Cedar Palace with his brother.

Flecks of moonlight danced across the mossy stone. Hidekazu reached for the rusted grate but stopped as a shadow flitted ahead. Masanori bumped into him from behind and grunted his annoyance.

"What's taking you so long? I'm suffocating in here."

"Shhh."

The shadow deepened, and Hidekazu recoiled, pushing against Masanori to avoid detection.

A pair of small hands wrested the grate from the wall, then reached in to grab Hidekazu by his collar. He tried to rip free, but the little girl dragging him out was stronger than she looked.

"What are you, a rat, crawling through the vents? And you are still late." The girl dumped him on the ground, and he rolled away with a huff.

"You're just upset because you're too old to fit, Aihi." Masanori pulled his legs from the hole and shoved the grate back into place. Specks of moss and lichen covered his haori, and he picked at the pieces and discarded them on the floor.

Aihi yanked Hidekazu's wrist, and a disapproving glare flicked between him and the fabric. A jagged tear cut through the embroidered dragons, fraying the fine layers of silk.

"Have you no mind? Your mother will kill you," Aihi said.

Hidekazu dusted the torn sleeve. "She won't notice. You worry too much."

Of course Sachi would notice. But she would save the lecture until after the ceremony. Hidekazu did feel guilty about the ruined haori, though. Of the many he owned, this was his favourite, the one he always wore for the shishajya's arrival.

"At least you cannot blame me this time." Aihi crossed her arms, but the long sleeves of her icy blue furisode made the movement awkward, not intimidating. Indigo ribbons were laced through her braided raven hair, and her face was painted white.

"You look like a ghost," Hidekazu said.

"Thank you, dear Hide, for making this miserable experience worse. I had not thought it possible." She turned and shuffled away from the old shrine, pushing maple and azalea branches away as she went.

Masanori rushed after her, hissing when one of the branches snapped against his cheek, and disappeared through the trees after Aihi.

Hurting her feelings hadn't been Hidekazu's intention, he was just shocked to see her wearing so much makeup. His uncertainty pinned him in place, but after a moment of fighting with himself, he raced to catch up.

"Are you doing the dance tonight, then?" Masanori said.

Aihi chuffed. "You would not find me running through the trees and collecting imprudent brothers were I given that honour."

Imprudent. Hidekazu frowned. He had no idea what that word meant, but he gathered it was not the most flattering.

They followed the main garden path, trodding over fallen violet wisteria petals toward Tatsu-Ji, where the Shishajya's Ceremony would take place. Up ahead, a crowd of excited city folk gathered around the navy torii gates.

The stoic face of the Goddess' statue extended far above the crowd, and her crown of antlers and horns stretched higher still. The throng obscured the rest of her likeness, as well the pagoda behind her.

Bushi waited along the wisteria path, bowing to the children as they neared. “Blessings for the Exalted Dragon Princess, Ferocious Daughter of Storms and Heir to the Warlock Throne, Furahau Aihi!” Uriku said. He was one of the Shōgun’s personal guard.

Thousands of excited faces pushed away from the central path and bowed to the princess as she approached, each of them murmuring the eight kami blessings.

Hidekazu found himself lowering his head out of habit, but he kept the prayers silent on his tongue. He and Masanori walked eight paces behind Aihi, as they had been trained to do as toddlers.

“Blessings for Genshu Hidekazu and Genshu Masanori, sons of Dano Genshu, the Saviour of Kawawata!”

The twins kept their heads high as they passed into the circle of people, and Hidekazu trained his eyes on Shirashi’s statue to avoid the strings of awed whispers as he and Masanori passed. With the gathering subdued, the Goddess’ image stood before him in full glory, her lithe human form draped in dragon scales, an impossible melding of human and dragon.

A dull indigo glow emanated from her outstretched hands, collecting in an orb that, except in the days preceding the shishajya’s arrival, remained translucent and empty. Now, as the messenger serpent’s visit neared, the ki within became more vibrant.

They followed the path around the luminous statue and toward the pagoda’s entrance. The temple was built of eight winged layers of gold and cobalt, and the dragon lanterns hanging from the eaves lit up the night.

Chilly wisps of ki tangled around Hidekazu’s aura as he neared, the energy whispering to him in the language of the Goddess, but the words had always been too muted for him to understand.

Ahead, Aihi bowed as she passed beneath the temple’s threshold, and a thin curtain of blessed water doused her, cleansing any impurities before rising and returning to the spout above.

Hidekazu braced himself for his and Masnaori’s turn. Icy water jabbed at his scalp and shoulders, but before the chill set in, the liquid evaporated into mist and rose. He shivered,

though thankful that the temple didn't eject him from its confines with scalding rain instead.

The temple's floors were a mosaic of a thousand shades of blue, a full rendition of the Goddess' dragon form, a spiral of serpentine divinity. Along the opposite wall was the lowest shrine in the temple, an arrangement of floating, horizontal slabs littered with thousands of offerings from visitors.

The trio climbed to the top floor of the temple, but their trek was absent of their usual harmless banter. Was Aihi truly upset with them? Or was she just disappointed to sit out yet another dragon dance?

"You are late, sweet children."

Hidekazu folded his arms at the sound of Sachi's voice. Half out of deference, half to obscure the torn sleeve from her keen gaze for as long as possible. He opted for a bow, too, to avoid eye-contact.

"Princess, herding stray pups is not your responsibility. You are the jewel of Seiryuu, a bright star our people come all this way to view," Sachi said.

Hidekazu winced at his own mother calling him and Masanori *strays*. He glimpsed up at her, *up*, as she towered above the children and most natives of Seiryuu. Golden dragon irezumi decorated her bare arms, and ivory ribbons held curly blonde hair out of her face. Her wispy indigo robes flowed around her like flower petals in a gentle rain.

"I will do better, High Priestess." Aihi bowed her head and then turned for the balcony. "However, you should know better than to attempt flattery with me. The people come to witness the shishajya, not I. My father parades me about for their enjoyment only to lure out a potential suitor."

Sachi joined her overlooking the courtyard. "You are far too cynical for a girl of ten. Where did you abandon your innocence today?"

"She probably swallowed it with her morning tea," Masanori said. He claimed one of the plush beds, earning a critical look from both Aihi and Sachi when he tried to lay front-first. He corrected himself before either had the chance to scold.

Hidekazu took his usual place, standing where he would have the best view of the messenger serpent as it came. Below, the luminescent wisteria marking the path to the Cedar Palace lit the deepening night with pink and amethyst light.

A subtle vibration enhanced the azure glow of Shirashi's statue, marking the imminent arrival of the shishajya.

"I have no use for innocence," Aihi said, "and thus granted it to my fool brothers when they were not looking."

"Explains why you're incapable of having fun," Masanori said.

Sachi chuckled. "It also explains why you prove incapable of managing your responsibilities."

"Only Masanori has trouble," Hidekazu corrected. "I am a week ahead for each of my tutor's lessons already."

The glare Masanori shot him might have burned down a building.

"Hush, now. The ceremony must begin." Sachi raised her arms to the people below and enhanced her voice. "Beneath the grace of the full moon, our Goddess' love shines brightest. Her energy pours from these very walls, bathing you in her mercy and protection."

In front of the pagoda, Shirashi's statue flared, the stone blazing like a star.

"We beckon to you, O mighty serpent, messenger of starlight, keeper of our Goddess' dominion. We beckon to you..."

The crowd murmured along with Sachi's prayers, and below, the Shōgun and emperor emerged to perform the sacred summoning dance. Instead of the ritual, Hidekazu trained his focus on the glittering night sky, searching for any hint of the shishajya.

The head star in the Goddess' constellation twinkled and expanded, shooting toward the statue in a long arc. White light exploded through the darkness, slowing as the dance reached its climax. Mika and Takeha whirled below, their folding fans halting as the creature of starlight and scales stopped to hover above Shirashi's statue.

Everybody in the crowd before the pagoda sank to their knees and pressed their foreheads to the stone, finding room to fully prostrate themselves despite the packed space. Masanori, Aihi, and Sachi bowed, and Hidekazu was supposed to follow, but the shishajya

was so close, closer than it had ever come before. He leaned over the railing, trying to further close the gap.

A body of liquid cerulean coiled through the air, riding invisible ocean waves. Pressure built as ki thickened in the serpent's presence, and Hidekazu's knees wobbled, but he refused to kneel. The shishajya spun in place, scattering stardust through the courtyard.

Their eyes met—orbs of silver, scattered with sapphire specks. The shishajya's mouth opened, revealing fangs as long as his arms, but he saw nothing more, for a hand wrapped around his ankle and yanked him to the ground.

He swore he heard the shishajya laugh.

Hidekazu's palms slapped the floor, jarring his joints and sending his mind whirling. The shishajya had never looked at him before, never acknowledged his existence. All his life, he'd wanted to meet a dragon. Maybe he could never accomplish that, but here he was, but a few metres from a shishajya.

"My Golden Priestess, I welcome the invitation to your divine home," the shishajya said. Its voice rumbled in its throat, sending shockwaves through the ki soaking the air.

Sachi rose, keeping her head bowed. "Eight hundred blessings upon you, messenger of Shirashi."

"Our Blessed Goddess brings the people of Seiryuu eight years of good fortune and joy to honour of the naming-month of the young Exalted Dragon Princess and the Golden Priestess' children," the shishajya said. "Rejoice in her name, for you are her chosen."

In the moment of silence that followed, Hidekazu glanced at Sachi and the magnificent creature addressing her. Sachi stood at the edge of the balcony, the sacred shishajya stopping mere inches from her hands.

No one else dared look up, but Hidekazu stared, his disbelief so thick he almost couldn't breathe.

"The kami are restless," the shishajya whispered. Hidekazu barely heard the words from only a few feet away. "I sense O-Kurama's pets in your domain. Reduce them to ash, for the sake of our mother, and the rest will remain in order."

"As you command," Sachi said.

The shishajya turned and sprung into the sky, trails of stardust lingering in its path.

Hidekazu leapt to his feet, clutching the rail with both hands, and strained to lock his eyes on the shimmering spiral as it sailed across the sky. Not back to the heavens, but through the city's protective barriers and into the world beyond.

He craned his neck, trying to estimate the shishajya's route. The serpent had looked at him with purpose, and now he would find the creature and discover why before it returned to Shirashi's domain. But where would it have gone? The glow disappeared beyond the Sparkling Forest skirting the rice paddies and fields outside the city proper.

"Hidekazu." Sachi's voice was low, almost a growl, when she snatched his wrist. "You are lucky the shishajya thought your disobedience amusing, not—" Only then did she notice the torn sleeve. "Your lack of discipline disappoints me greatly, my sweet Hidekazu. I expected better from you." She dropped his hand, and he dropped his head. "You have yet to master deference and the art of kneeling. Two hours of seiza will be your punishment."

"But, Mother—" Hidekazu started, but the harshness in her eyes silenced his excuses.

He had always wanted to meet a dragon or the shishajya, yet his childish whims had never taken over logic and duty. The shishajya had no reason to acknowledge a child. And yet the way the creature looked at him, the way it opened its mouth as if to speak, not strike him down, told Hidekazu he could not let this opportunity pass. He would find the shishajya, regardless of how many hours of seiza his mother set on him.

"*The kami are restless,*" the shishajya had said. Why tell only Sachi, and not the entire city? Hidekazu understood very little about the situation. Only that now he had to search for the shishajya and that he couldn't let Sachi find out.

* * *

At the ceremony's close, midnight neared, and Hidekazu's eyes drooped through the last of Sachi's prayers and offerings of thanks for the Goddess' renewed eight blessings. The Goddess gave out many types of blessings, but rarely for intervals longer than a single year, and according to the stories, decades had passed since the last eight-year blessing.

Since the births of Aihi, Hidekazu, and Masanori, three eight-blessings had been given to Seiryuu. Hidekazu didn't understand the significance; only that, to the citizens of Nagasou, that meant the trio was somehow special.

Once they were finally back in the Cedar Palace, Hidekazu stopped Aihi and Masanori on their way to bed.

"It's late, Hide," Masanori said. "Can't you complain about Mother's punishment tomorrow?"

"I'm going after the shishajya." Hidekazu paused. "Tonight."

"Are you mad, or just stupid?" Aihi caught a loose strand of hair between two fingers and flicked it over her ear. "The shishajya is long gone, back to Shirashi's celestial home, until she deems us worthy of another visit."

"I saw it fly out of Nagasou."

"What does it matter? Wherever it went, you will never catch up. You are a boy, it a sacred serpent. I know you wish to meet a dragon, dear Hide, but it will not happen this night. Go to bed. Find the shishajya in your dreams." Aihi's eyes fluttered shut, and she covered her mouth to yawn. "I know I will seek no adventure tonight, behind that which I find in my bed."

Aihi gave a half-wave as she left through the golden fusuma doors of the palace's royal wing. Hidekazu turned to Masanori, still confident he could convince his brother to go with him, but he was slumped over on the nearest lounge, already snoring. Shameless enough to fall asleep here instead of completing the trek to the Genshu manor.

Hidekazu crumpled the sleeves of his too-long haori in his hand. No brother, no sister, to back him up. No matter. They wouldn't keep him from fulfilling his dream.

* * *

A stream of stardust lingered in the night, and that was how, after slinking through various hidden passages beneath the Cedar Palace, Hidekazu tracked the shishajya's path. He tromped through waist-deep water, further ruining his ceremony wear.

"If I find the shishajya, it will be worth it," he mumbled.

It would be worth it.

Hidekazu escaped into the outer city, and by the time he reached the edge of the Sparkling Forest, he buckled with exhaustion, his tiny legs unable to carry his weight. He lay in the grass beneath the stars, chugging water from a gourd he'd snatched from the palace kitchens. The full moon hovered in full view over the magnificent city of Nagasou, and to its right, the Goddess' constellation twirled in the night.

Yet the head star was not as vibrant as usual. The shishajya had yet to return.

The creature was still in the mortal plane somewhere, and Hidekazu couldn't stop his pursuit now when he was so close. Shimmering silver specks descended above his face, and he held out his palms, the shiny fragments of solid ki landing on his outstretched fingers. He clutched the energy and climbed to his feet.

The forest of pine and oak loomed over him, darkness overriding the luminous stars, contrasting with the moonlight glimmering on the rice paddies behind Hidekazu. A knot settled in his belly at the thought of going into the forest alone. Close to the city or no, there were still plenty of wild beasts and yōkai hidden within. He learned some spells to protect himself, but he'd only just started his training. He might not know enough.

Ahead, the fading stardust glinted in the trees. If Hidekazu hesitated for too long, it might disappear altogether. He took a deep breath and stepped into the woods.

"I wish Aihi and Masa hadn't gone to bed," he said.

The shishajya's path offered a shimmer of light in the darkness of the forest, and Hidekazu followed, determined to see this through. He'd find the shishajya no matter what, and then he could brag about it later.

He dodged massive ferns and padded over long stretches of moss. The silver dust started falling toward the forest floor quicker than before, and Hidekazu moved faster, trying not to think of how he would find his way back home.

Ahead, moonlight peeked through the trees, and the underbrush began to thin, revealing a small clearing. Hidekazu pushed through the bushes, and the branches snagged on his haori. He twisted, trying to pull free, but the branches wouldn't let go.

Panic beat its drum inside him, and he jerked his arms, the snagged branches tearing the silk garment, releasing him and sending him tumbling to the ground. For a moment,

Hidekazu lay there in a bed of moss and decaying leaves, breathing in the musty earthiness of the forest while he worked to calm himself.

“Why are you so afraid, Hide?” he mumbled to himself. “It’s just some branches, not a yōkai.”

Hidekazu sucked in and released a final deep breath, and then climbed onto his knees. That’s when he smelled the blood.

Just coppery notes at first, a beat where he sensed something wasn’t right. He stilled his breathing, letting the scent linger in his nostrils, and glanced over his shoulder. Now, for the first time, he realized how still the forest was.

No nightbirds or critters, no watchful kodama, no wind in the trees.

He swallowed hard and glanced at the clearing. The shishajya’s trail was almost gone, now, just a smattering of hoary dust on dead leaves and grass. Would he find the shishajya here, or had he come all this way, only to become hopelessly lost?

Hidekazu suppressed a sharp breath and pulled himself onto shaking legs. It was too late to turn back. He needed to...

As he turned, moonlight kissed the ruby droplets spattered across a nearby fern. He froze, his eyes travelling the length of the plant, to the sanguine pool on the forest floor.

To the bone-white fingers peeking from the underbrush.

A breathy grumble shuddered through the forest. The leaves on nearby trees fluttered and fell still as if disturbed by a passing breeze. The gourd fell from Hidekazu’s hands and bounced from the rocks at his feet. He dug through his kimono in search of his staff. With it, he could call for help or protect himself, but the fabric was too tight, and he couldn’t get his fingers beneath, and he realized his shaking wasn’t just him but the whole *world*—

He stilled when the shadows around him deepened. Throaty, animalistic breaths reverberated through the trees to his sides. Hidekazu dared not look, but not looking didn’t prevent him from smelling the odour of death and filth.

Not looking didn’t stop him from noticing how the blood pooled at his feet vibrated with the growing pressure of ki in the air.

Nor did it stop him from glimpsing the hulking figure's glittering teeth just as it lunged.

Hidekazu threw himself to the side, hitting the ground and scrambling through the bushes. He scraped his palms against the rocks but kept enough presence of mind to keep moving, to get away, to stay alive.

He shouldn't have come: Masanori and Aihi were right. Leaving the city had been foolish. Why, why, why?

His thoughts disintegrated when he hauled himself over a log, right into the arms of another corpse. "Goddess, oh, G-goddess, s-save me." He choked on his prayer.

Hidekazu scrambled away from the farmer. Steaming blood leaked from the massive hole in the man's torso, hot against his back and skin. Or, perhaps, fear had turned Hidekazu's skin icy.

He screamed.

The creature behind him laughed, and a string of guttural speech boomed through the trees. Hidekazu couldn't find the energy to pull himself back to his feet.

A sob caught in his throat, and he dragged himself toward the clearing, his tiny frame getting caught in the wild underbrush. He thrashed in the bushes, desperately clawing at the moss and soil.

Talons dug into his calf, shredding his flesh as it dragged him back toward the trees. Hidekazu yelped and flailed, but the creature threw him on his back. In a stunned daze, he stared up at the beast before him, disbelieving.

Crimson skin. More fangs than Hidekazu had fingers. Twisted horns protruding from a narrow brow.

Not just any creature.

An oni.

Three more lumbered from the darkness, their shadows piling over Hidekazu. Warmth spread between his legs as his bladder loosened.

He struggled, shrieking, but the oni's claws dug deeper into his flesh. Blood gushed from the wound, and the demon said something in its abyssal tongue. It barred its fangs at Hidekazu and snapped toward his abdomen.

Sapphire streaks of light punctured the space between him and the oni. No, *through* the oni. The creature exploded in a shower of scarlet mist. Chunks of demon meat splattered the forest floor and his front, filling his senses with death. More death.

He should be dead.

Hidekazu scampered away from the remaining oni. Cool, lush grass soothed his raw palms. He blinked ichor out of his eyes just in time to see the demons roar and charge at him as if *he* had somehow managed to kill their companion.

Silver dust speckled the air around Hidekazu. The demons breached the threshold between forest and meadow. Coils of cerulean flashed, the faint flutter of feathered wings as another creature spiralled through the air, deadlier than any blade or ki.

The oni had only a second to scream before they, too, exploded in a fine mist, painting blades of grass scarlet. A hunk of a demon's face landed next to Hidekazu, and he recoiled from the twitching eyesocket.

He lay there, shivering despite the warmth of the blood painting his kimono, blinded by the glow in the air. He lacked the willpower to stand, and yet, whatever had slain the oni at his heels would surely come for him next.

"P-please..." Hidekazu croaked. "I d-don't..."

The creature hissed. "Terrified of me, is it, after I saved its life?"

Sapphire orbs glinted in the shadows. There, stardust solidified into a body of sinew and storms. Electricity crackled along the serpent's length as it both fluttered and swam through the air, the ivory wings branching from the base of its skull stained with crimson gore.

The shishajya. Hidekazu opened and closed his mouth. Upon encountering the oni, he forgot about his quest to find the shishajya, had all but considered his journey a fool's errand as the stardust lost potency.

And yet here was the Goddess' messenger serpent, azure scales slick with blood and scattered bits of demon brains.

Hidekazu forced his muscles to move into a kneeling position, and he bowed to the sacred creature. Warmth transferred from the grass to his forehead, but he held his breath, resisting the urge to vomit.

"No, no. Bowing, it is, now, foolish snake, what have you done? Tut-tut," the shishajya said. "Rise, child, why has it come here?"

"I... I tried to follow you." He wiped the blood from his face with a trembling arm.

The shishajya opened its mouth, revealing sharp fangs. Hidekazu winced at the memory of the oni, and it took the last of his self-restraint not to scamper further away.

"The child of the Golden Priestess. Lucky, it is, to have the Goddess' eye upon it."

"My... my deepest thanks f-for saving me. Eight hundred blessings to you, serpent."

The shishajya curled in the grass around Hidekazu. "Come, we must return it to the sanctuary. Next time it will not be so wasteful with the Goddess' favour, yes?"

"I... I will be more careful." He eyed the shishajya's muscular body. "You want me to... to ride you?"

The shishajya just fluttered its wings, not dignifying his question with a response.

Hidekazu hesitated before climbing onto the serpent's back. Before he had the chance to think twice, the shishajya lifted its head and shot into the sky.

A horrified scream tore through Hidekazu, and his fingers latched onto the feathers at the base of the shishajya's wings. He wrapped his arms and legs around the snake and squeezed his eyes shut for good measure, trying to ignore the rocketing breeze grabbing his haori and slicing down his back—the faintest hint of ozone and frost.

"Afraid of the sky, it is. Poor child, to live in a time where humans have forgotten how to fly." Their spiralling course slowed, and the serpent's wings spread, falling into a gentle glide. "Now look. And remember."

They passed through a puffy white cloud and over a wispy one filled with scattered ice crystals, and Hidekazu braved a peek through one eye. The golden waves of the Kin Sea glittered in the moonlight. His grip tightened.

He'd never seen a view so stunning. Even in the dead of night, from this height, the full moon seemed to illuminate the whole world. Nagasou was but a luminous dot below, though the vast plateaus and towering cedar forests made it an impossible-to-miss landmark even if the defensive ki-shields had been invisible.

He released a breath as they passed through another cloud. "I will remember."

"Good." The shishajya guided their descent toward Nagasou, zig-zagging through the sky.

"Shishajya, I must ask you a question."

"If it must, then we will answer."

"Why did you save me?"

"The Goddess' light shines upon it."

The answer was nowhere near satisfying for Hidekazu, even if he knew he should just be happy to live at all. To have met the shishajya he set out to find. To ride upon its back and glide through the sky.

"All my life, adults have told me I am special because my ki manifested early. I memorize kigou quicker than any other child, even the Exalted Dragon Princess." He burrowed his face in the feathers blanketing the scales between the shishajya's wings. My parents argue how best to train me, but I don't understand any of it. I just want to be me."

They neared the city. Through the shishajya's feathers brushing his cheeks, Hidekazu glimpsed the towering cedars of the Palace District.

"To forget your strengths is to forget yourself," the shishajya said, addressing Hidekazu directly for the first time. "You are one with a future birthed in books. Pages are your roots, and within them, one day, you shall unearth your latent power's origins."

With that, the shishajya confirmed it was no fluke that Hidekazu was stronger than he should be, didn't it? That the Goddess had twice-eight blessed him and Masanori, and the shishajya chose to rescue Hidekazu this night for a reason.

"You mean I will find the truth somewhere, so long as I keep looking," Hidekazu said. "There is a reason for... what I am."

“One day, it will learn.” The shishajya let out a long breath, and a cloud smacked Hidekazu in the face. “We look forward to the day it learns to fly.”

Hidekazu had no reason to believe that would happen any time soon. Still, he kept his mouth shut, trying to find more questions for the shishajya to answer before its inevitable departure. They hovered over the Cedar Palace, and the serpent weaved around the massive trees toward the gardens behind the royal wing.

No more questions came. The exhaustion that had hung over Hidekazu before he entered the forest settled in his bones again, and he fought to stay upright and keep his eyes open. The shishajya descended into the gardens, spiralling through the hydrangeas and around bamboo before settling just beyond the terrace outside Aihi’s bedchamber.

With shaking arms, Hidekazu released his hold on the serpent, stumbling, but staying upright.

The shishajya lifted its head, staring down at Hidekazu with its sapphire, storm-laden eyes. A heartbeat passed.

“You live because the Goddess wills your survival,” the shishajya said. “But your life does not come without a price. Our Blessed Mother will call upon you, and you will answer.”

Hidekazu shivered, but he was uncertain whether that was because of the finality in the creature’s words, or because of the deliberate switch in tone.

He bowed his head. He would have sunk to his knees again if he wasn’t afraid he would collapse and splatter his brains all over the sharp rocks bordering the garden path.

“I will answer.”

The shishajya mimicked his bow, and then its wings fluttered, and the creature disintegrated into stardust and shot into the night sky, a white streak ascending to its heavenly home at the head of the Goddess’ constellation.

The star winked at him one last time and then dulled to its usual brightness.

Hidekazu blinked, and then he collapsed anyway.

* * *

He woke to violent shaking.

“Hide! Hide!”

Aihi's voice. He blinked open his eyes, seeing double, and closed them right away.

"Go... A-Aihi, I'm so tired," he said.

"You are covered in blood. Hide, what did you do? Are you hurt? Do I need to kill someone?"

He managed to laugh. "Oni. Already dead."

The silence lasted much longer than expected, and Hidekazu chanced opening his eyes again. Aihi was leaning over him, wearing a pensive expression. The Goddess' constellation glimmered in clear view behind her.

"You did not..." She bit her lip. "If you found an oni, you should be dead."

"They... found me," Hidekazu said. "I found the shishajya."

Aihi looked at the serpent-like formation of stars another world away. Lingering stardust descended upon the garden, illuminating the golden pathways like dancing fireflies.

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