

Sample Translation

**Will Look After Yokai Children
(2016)**

**By
Reiko Hiroshima**

Sample word count: 7,975
Estimated word count
for entire novel: 52,000

Translated by Megumi Noda

Synopsis

In 19th century Edo (present day Tokyo), twelve-year-old Yaské lives in an old row house with his young, handsome blind guardian, Senya. Their identity has been a mystery ever since they arrived in the row house community, but the two are practically inseparable, Yaské so attached to Senya that he won't speak to anyone else. Only Kyuzo, their landlord's playboy son who is always teasing Yaské, knows that he can actually speak. But who are Yaské and Senya, and how did they come to live together?

Yaske is troubled by a recurring nightmare in which a woman's arm is eaten alive by a mass of darkness. One day, when he sees a stone that reminds him of this arm, he smashes it on the ground and cracks it in half, not knowing that it was home to a yokai (fantastical creatures in Japanese folklore often depicted in a grotesque or fearsome light). This yokai, Ubumé, is a childminder who looks after yokai children while their parents are busy, and when she goes missing following this incident, the yokai parents are up in arms. As punishment for his deed, Yaské is made to substitute for Ubumé until she—and a new stone suitable to house her—can be found.

Yaské receives nightly visits from yokai parents wishing to leave their offspring in his care. The yokai children breathe new life into the row house, now bustling with activity thanks to their quirks and personalities. What's more, this newfound responsibility causes Yaské to open up and become more independent. He even raises his voice for the first time when cheeky Umékichi, a young plum yokai, won't stop wailing. And when Tsuyumi, a toddler yokai with low self-esteem, confides in Yaské that he thinks he is unloved, Yaské devises a plan to test whether this is true. Other times, the unwitting Kyuzo takes the brunt, as when Kiriko, an infant yokai of a hairdresser's scissors, complains that she is hungry, and a drunken Kyuzo's head of hair is offered as her meal!

Kyuzo has a flaky reputation, but he is open and trusting, and has a good heart. This is brought to light when he and Senya sit down for drinks and reminisce about the past: Kyuzo was the first person to help the two when they were still newcomers to the row house community. In those days, Senya was cold and aloof and was clueless about how to raise a small child. When Kyuzo saw them confronted by a drunken samurai (legally permitted to kill any who show disrespect), he jumped in to rescue them, proceeding to teach Senya how to be warmer and more approachable, and also letting him know that saké is not appropriate to give to a child! It turns out that it was in fact Kyuzo who taught Senya how to take care of Yaské.

Meanwhile, Yaské's childminding duties continue, and one day, when he is given an egg to watch over, it soon hatches to reveal Hina-no-Kimi, a baby yokai princess purportedly hunted by the vicious yokai-eater Kurahami, recently freed from confinement. It's only a matter of time before Kurahami finds their row house, and when he does, he pretends to be Yaské's mother and asks to be let in.

This unlocks Yaské's suppressed memories, and he remembers everything: that he was a small child traveling through the mountains with his mother and was told not to make a sound while she went to collect some medicinal herbs. When Kurahami crossed his path, however, a terrified Yaské couldn't hold back a scream. As his mother valiantly confronted Kurahami to give Yaské time to escape, he had to witness the worst: his mother being eaten alive by Kurahami—she is the arm in his nightmares. It was from this point on, fearful of his own voice that caused his mother to die, that Yaské stopped speaking.

Back in the present, despite his fears, Yaské refuses to let Kurahami pass, determined to protect Hina-no-Kimi. As Senya arrives, it is revealed that Hina-no-Kimi is in fact Ubumé in disguise, wishing to see for herself that Yaské is worthy of her forgiveness. Ubumé, the embodiment of maternal love, can show extraordinary strength in order to protect the children under her care. Having forgiven Yaské, she successfully drives Kurahami away with a blinding light; in it, Yaské sees the image of his own mother, bringing him a sense of closure.

Senya finally reveals that he too is a yokai. He had been a very powerful one until his eyes, the source of his powers, were taken away as punishment for reckless behavior. It was just after this, when he was in the depths of despair, that he came across the young Yaské wandering alone in the mountains. The responsibility of looking after Yaské restored a sense of purpose in Senya, and he vowed to protect the boy with his life.

Ubumé accepts a suitable replacement for the broken stone and returns to business. Just as life appears to be back to normal, Yaské receives a letter stating that Ubumé, thoroughly impressed by his determination to protect Hina-no-Kimi, would like him to become her new assistant! It seems Yaské won't be saying goodbye to his yokai friends just yet.

About the Work

Publisher: Tokyo Sogensha
Original Language: Japanese
Publication: 15 April 2016

Genre: Historical Fantasy
Dimensions: 105 x 148mm
Pages: 301



Selected cast of characters



Written by Reiko Hiroshima, one of Japan's bestselling YA and middle grade authors, *Will Look After Yokai Children* (2016) is a fun, cozy historical fantasy full of lovable characters and with a dash of spine-chilling darkness. It takes the often frightening concept of yokai—fantastical creatures often depicted grotesquely in Japanese folklore—and presents them as quirky little babies, sometimes mischievous and always adorable. Readers will find themselves easily invested in the characters, all fleshed out with idiosyncrasies and endearing flaws, as the mystery of the two protagonists' identity unravels. While there are obvious differences, fans of J.K. Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* may be drawn to this book.

This work deftly balances comedy with deeper subject matter, making it enjoyable for adults and younger audiences alike. Originally written for adults, it has already been adapted into a manga series, as well as an abridged version suitable for younger readers. The unique combination of its historical Japanese setting, fantasy elements, and youth appeal also set this book apart from others. With the recent surge of interest in yokai, this book is sure to find a devoted audience among English-speaking readers.

This is the first volume of an ongoing series, with “Season 1” comprising ten volumes. The fourth volume of “Season 2” was released in April 2024.

Additional Information:

- Promo page for Season 1 Box Set, including brief volume synopses (Japanese):
<https://www.webmysteries.jp/archives/23274946.html>
- Promo page for Season 2, including brief volume synopses up to vol.3 (Japanese):
<https://www.webmysteries.jp/archives/30378286.html>

About the Author | Reiko Hiroshima

Reiko Hiroshima is one of Japan's bestselling authors of YA and middle grade fantasy. A prolific writer, she marked her debut in 2006 by winning the Junior Adventure Novel Prize with her work *The Forest of Water Nymphs* and has since gone on to write numerous popular children's series, including *The Ten Year Shop* and *Will Look After Yokai Children*. Her most famous work, *The Mysterious Sweets Shop Zenitendo*, has not only sold over 3.5 million copies but is now a popular anime series, with a live-action film set for release in December 2024. Hiroshima's works have already been translated into Korean, Taiwanese, and Vietnamese.

Selected Publications:

- *The Chronicle of Enchanted Flora* (*Yokamaso monogatari*), Komine Shoten, 2024, ISBN 978-4338287272
- *The Kaleidoscope Photography Studio* (*Hazama no mangekyo shashinkan*), Kadokawa, 2023, ISBN 978-4041140154
- *The Firesmith's Daughter* (*Hokaji no Musume*), Kadokawa, 2023, ISBN 978-4041137932
- *The Fantastical Library and the Demon Lord Glymon* (*Fushigi na toshokan to maoh Guraimon*), Kodansha, 2022, ISBN 978-4065266328
- *Secrets from the Gallery of Magical Gemstones* (*Himitsu ni michita masekikan*), PHP Kenkyujo, 2019, ISBN 978-4569788852
- *The Ten Year Shop* (*Junen-ya*), Sayzansha, 2018, ISBN 978-4863894532
- *Will Look After Yokai Children* (*Yokai no ko azukarimasu*), Tokyo Sogensha, 2016, ISBN 978-4488565022
- *The Mysterious Sweets Shop Zenitendo* (*Fushigi dagashiya Zenitendo*), Kaiseisha, 2013, ISBN 978-4036356102
- *The Forest of Water Nymphs* (*Suiyo no mori*), Iwasaki Shoten, 2006, ISBN 978-4265820030

Additional Information:

- Interview with author about *Will Look After Yokai Children* (*Yokai no Ko Azukarimasu*) (Japanese):
<https://honto.jp/cp/hybrid/writers-interview/035-hiroshimareiko.html>

About the Translator | Megumi Noda

Based in Tokyo, Megumi Noda translates from Japanese to English and from English to Japanese. In 2024, she was selected as a mentee in the American Literary Translators Association's Emerging Translator Mentorship Program, working with seasoned translator Takami Nieda. Megumi's literary interests include memoirs, as well as children's literature and works that help to broaden one's imagination. When she is not translating, she can be found casting threads onto traditional wooden looms at a *kumihimo* shop in central Tokyo.

Will Look After Yokai Children [excerpt]

Prologue

The age was now approaching two hundred years since the Tokugawa clan brought peace to the land. Under the auspices of the shogunate, the city of Edo and the cultural lives of its residents were flourishing. The days were brimming with lively businesses run by those who took pride in refinement and in stylish new trends. Rare objects were brought in from faraway regions, while theater and *ukiyo*e prints only added to the cultural brilliance.

Naturally, like moths to a flame, the people migrated to Edo in ever increasing numbers, and there was never any shortage of candidates wishing to move into any of the countless row houses.

Into one such row house, a dilapidated one called Taiko, a blind *anma*, a specialist of the art of shiatsu, moved in with a child in tow.

The child was a boy, about seven or so. Because the shiatsu specialist was a young man in his early twenties, they didn't appear to be father and son, yet they also bore such little resemblance to each other that one could hardly suppose them to be brothers. What's more, the child almost never spoke.

The townspeople all looked upon their strange new neighbors with curiosity. A blind young man with a child who hardly spoke made for a most peculiar pair indeed.

Where did they come from?

How did they come to live with each other?

It was only natural to wonder about such things.

But neither the *anma* nor the child gave any heed to these inquisitive looks. In an age when maintaining neighborly relations was an essential part of everyday life, it was as though these two lived in a world of their own. In the beginning, the shiatsu specialist had such a coldness about him that it practically repelled all those around him.

Who were they? Perhaps the child was the secret offspring of a well-to-do family, deliberately sent away to this obscure corner to remain hidden and avoid stoking conflict. In the early days, the residents of the row houses kept each other entertained with one outrageous possibility after another.

But even the most unusual of things lose their fascination with the passage of time. After a number of years, the neighbors lost interest and began delighting in the latest rumors and gossip.

Indeed, the two quiet residents had been accepted as part of the row house community.

Chapter One

There was an arm. A single, pale arm, flung out and suspended in the darkness. It was plumper around the shoulders, the fingers long and slender. Ah, this is a woman's arm. But whose, it remained unknown. Nothing could be seen beyond it.

Little by little, the creeping darkness began to swallow the arm from the shoulder.

Very soon, this pale arm will disappear completely.

This inevitable thought drew tremendous dread, but somehow it was known that worse was about to unfold.

Oh, terrifying, terrifying. Fear wrapped itself around the heart, as if to squeeze it to death.

I don't want to look. I don't want to see any more.

Yet, paralyzed and unable to look away, there was no choice but to keep watching the vanishing arm.

Then, it happened.

As the devouring darkness reached the wrist, the fingers, utterly still before, began to twitch and writhe like netted icefish.

She's alive! She's being eaten alive!

He covered his mouth with both hands to keep from screaming.

No, I mustn't let out a sound. Not my voice, not my voice, not my voice!

But the fear was overwhelming.

I can't breathe. Help! Help!

"Yaské."

Suddenly, a voice called out from beyond the darkness. Calm and steady, this gentle voice drove the darkness away like a ripple.

Ah, it was a dream.

Realizing this at last, Yaské opened his eyes. Though it was pitch black, he knew that Senya was beside him, facing him.

Senya's here. After these night terrors, just to know this brought such relief to the twelve-year-old that tears welled in his eyes.

"You had another nightmare," Senya said softly.

Yaské nodded. "Sorry to wake you."

"Don't worry about it. I wasn't sleeping anyway."

Chuckling faintly, Senya lit a flame in the paper lantern, not for himself but for Yaské.

The image that rose out of the dim light was not their room in the familiar old row house, but a small, simple room with clean, undamaged tatami. The ceilings showed not a single stain from leaks. Just as Yaské was starting to feel bewildered, he remembered.

That's right. This isn't the Taiko row house but the grand residence of the elderly Sawa.

In his days, Sawa had been a most wealthy merchant whose name was known throughout Edo. Now, having passed his business down to his son, he had retired to this stately home, somewhat out of the way, and devoted his time to caring for his bonsai. Despite his old age, neither his appetite nor his alcohol tolerance showed any signs of waning, but there was just one thing troubling this otherwise hardy old man: he had a bad back. His lower back pain had flared up yet again yesterday, and so he had summoned Senya, his trusted shiatsu specialist.

It was quite a way out to the retiree's residence, and the sun had long set by the time Senya finished massaging. And so it was suggested that they stay the night.

Yaské always felt uneasy whenever he had to spend the night at other people's homes. It made him feel like he was slowly being strangled by the unfamiliar atmosphere, smells, and gazes.

Was that why he'd had such a terrible dream?

Just then, Senya gently patted Yaské's head. "Don't let it bother you too much. A dream is just a dream."

These words comforted Yaské. He looked at Senya, who was facing him with an almost indiscernible, curious smile. His eyes, however, remained closed. Though they had lived together for years now, Yaské had never seen them open.

Senya was blind.

He really is handsome, Yaské thought as he fixed his eyes on Senya. Senya's fair face with its well-proportioned features looked pure and ethereal. That his eyes were always shut, and that he kept his head cleanly shaved, probably added to the effect and made him look all the more otherworldly. There was a quality to his beauty that was different from others, unapproachable.

Maybe that was why there wasn't a single woman who tried to get close to Senya. They were all so taken by his looks and his calm, dignified air, that their feelings for him never reached the realms of lovestruck obsession. They were happy just to observe from afar, perhaps with a sigh and a "isn't he gorgeous," but nothing more.

Even the *okami*, the female heads of the row houses, notorious for being busy-bodies, left Senya alone. "It doesn't do any good for a young man to be left all on his own," they'd usually have said, and then gone about introducing prospective matches.

Kyuzo, the landlord's playboy son, often complained that it was like casting pearls before swine. "It's such a shame, Sen-san, having such a pretty face and living like a priest. Why don't you put on a wig and at least pretend to have a mischievous side? All the women of Edo would flock to you! Ah, what a waste, what a waste!"

Not only did Senya possess these undeniable good looks, but he also never seemed to age. By now, he should have been at least twenty-five, but he didn't look a day older than twenty. Senya himself claimed not to know his actual age, and Yaské always wondered what it might be.

That said, Yaské didn't know his own age either. Senya adopted him when Yaské was just four or five. He knew from stories that he was found crying alone in the mountains, but Yaské had no recollection of it, nor of anything before that. By the time he had any awareness, he was already living with Senya.

Meals, clothes, memories made for every passing season—it was Senya who gave him all of these. To Yaské, Senya was everything.

If Senya still had his sight, he probably wouldn't have become an *anma*, one of the few occupations available to the blind. He surely would have done something else, something vastly different. Nor would he have crossed paths with Yaské, and even if he had, it surely wouldn't have been possible to spend all hours of the day together like this.

Yaské was already twelve, but he still hadn't found a vocation and was instead joined at the hip to Senya on the pretext of looking after the blind guardian's affairs.

But I bet Senya would manage just fine even if I weren't here. He can do everything on his own and has his infallible intuition, just as if he could actually see.

As soon as this thought crossed Yaské's mind, Senya's expression clouded over.

"You're entertaining silly thoughts again."

Yaské stuck his tongue out at Senya's usual shrewdness. Despite his blindness, Senya was always reading Yaské's mind, and because Yaské took this for granted, he had difficulty interacting with anyone else. People weren't as astute as Senya; they couldn't understand Yaské the way Senya could, nor pick up on what it was he was trying to say. This made Yaské

uneasy around others. As long as Senya was there, that was all he needed, all that mattered, and Yaské frankly didn't care about anyone else.

"Do you think it'll be morning soon?" Yaské asked in his usual childish tone.

"Mm. Dawn is approaching... Why don't you go and take a stroll around the garden? It'll help clear your mind."

"All right." Yaské could hardly go back to sleep, so he decided to do as he was told.

He tiptoed down the hallways of the house, its occupants still fast asleep, and quietly stepped out into the garden from the deck. There was still darkness all around, but just as Senya said, there was a feeling that dawn would soon break.

The air was as cold as a katana. Though it was still autumn, the chill made it clear that winter was on its way. But right now, Yaské was comforted by the crisp air, feeling as though it was wiping away the lingering scent of his nightmare.

Gradually, his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He could make out the expansive garden, as well as a small forested area stretching beyond it. With his sights set on these woods, Yaské made his way toward it.

He wasn't afraid of the dark; at least not the darkness of nightfall. He knew that the sun would rise sooner or later. But that dream he kept having—that darkness. That alone he couldn't stand. Fear would rise up from the pit of his stomach. That blackness, that depth, that bottomlessness. He broke a sweat just thinking about it.

Calm down. It's a dream. It isn't real.

As he kept repeating this to himself, Yaské found that he had already entered the forest. The air here was different. It smelled of decomposing grass and of trees having shed their leaves; of the cool earth; and of stones. The air, filled with a combination of these scents, was damp and thick. It gave the impression that it didn't appreciate the presence of humans.

I should probably head back soon.

Just as he turned around, Yaské caught sight of a white object out of the corner of his eye. He recoiled, thinking it was the ashen arm from his dream.

Instead, it was a stone.

It was round, about the size of a pickling stone. No—the shape was more like an egg, the surface smooth and white. It almost looked as though it was glowing, and its features inevitably reminded Yaské of *that* arm. It was just as pale, just as smooth, and...

Agh! I can't take it!

An inexplicable agitation suddenly burst open inside Yaské like a chestnut roasting over hot pebbles. Soon, he was gripping the stone with both hands. It was heavier than it

looked, but in his heightened state, Yaské raised it above his head and slammed it strongly against the ground.

CRACK.

A frightfully loud sound echoed as the earth trembled.

The stone was cracked in two. Like a Japanese flour cake cut in half, the stone was perfectly split, black fracture lines running across its surface like a spider's web.

Seeing this filled Yaské with an immediate sense of relief.

This stone isn't smooth like that arm anymore.

Gradually, he calmed back down.

That's right; I have to go back—get back to Senya and head home together.

With a fresh look on his face, Yaské turned back the way he came, his steps quickening to a jog.

Chapter Two

Yaské and Senya returned to their Taiko row house that afternoon. Thanks to Sawa generously hiring a palanquin for them, their journey home was quite comfortable indeed.

For Yaské, however, it felt somewhat lacking—he rather enjoyed the long, leisurely walks with Senya, where Yaské would guide his blind guardian, leading the way and describing everything he saw in intricate detail. Yaské's role was to be Senya's eyes, and he held this responsibility with pride. And now, because of the palanquin, he felt robbed of his chance to shine.

Senya gently whispered to a sullen Yaské, "Put the kettle on for me once we get home. I hate to ask it of you when I know you're tired, but I'd like to have some tea. And Sawa has shared some delicious bonito with us, so let's have that with tea over rice. Would you do that for me?"

"Of course!" Yaské suddenly lit up, having been given this new task.

And so, with Yaské leading Senya by the hand, the two returned to their row house.

Through the front door was the earthen floor, with a water pail and stone oven. Beyond that was a small tatami room with four and a half mats, and in it, there sat an exceptionally large wooden chest. Left behind by the previous tenant, it was large enough that even after throwing in all of their belongings, there was still plenty of space inside. Yaské would occasionally climb in and take naps here.

This chest further limited the space in this already small room. With its thin walls, stained ceiling, and dinginess owing to a lack of natural light, it could hardly be called a

luxurious home, but thanks to Yaské's meticulous cleaning, it was kept simple and uncluttered.

This was Yaské and Senya's castle.

It had been five years since they made this place their home. Before that, Yaské had vague recollections of following Senya in the mountains from one hut to the next, but his memory was hazy. As far as he was concerned, home was this row house.

There was usually a sense of relief whenever Yaské got home, but not today. He lifted his brows as he saw the uninvited visitor in the back of the room.

"Hey, welcome back. Where'd you two go off to?" The entitled guest, lying down, asked with a chuckle as he rolled over to face them.

He was a young man. Though not as handsome as Senya, he still had looks that most would find attractive. Besides which, he clearly put a lot of effort into his appearance: his kimono sash was fashionable, and although inexpensive, his tobacco case and netsuke were nonetheless quite stylish. His hair was neatly tied up into a top knot, and a nice fragrance followed him, most likely from an incense pouch he must have been carrying.

"You've snuck in again, have you?" Senya said, unfazed.

"I wish you wouldn't put it like that, like I'm some sort of intruder. It hurts my feelings, Sen-san."

The man wore an endearing, crinkled smile. This was Kyuzo, the landlord's son. At twenty-three years old, he was a notorious playboy around this part of town, unemployed, never helping his parents, and always drifting around looking for fun.

Though Kyuzo habitually claimed that he didn't like men and children, he was unusually attached to Senya and Yaské and frequently showed up at their place, letting himself in even when they weren't home, at times eating up the pickles that Yaské had poured his heart into. Above all, Kyuzo always hung around Senya, which marked him as a nemesis in Yaské's eyes.

"Senya, tell him not to come here uninvited!" Yaské said, glaring at Kyuzo. It was said in the faintest of voices, almost a whisper, just loud enough that only Senya, standing directly in front of him, could hear. Senya was the only person to whom Yaské could speak at a normal volume. He so disliked speaking to others, let alone one on one, that everyone assumed that he physically couldn't.

Kyuzo was one of the few who knew that Yaské could speak. Grinning, he teased, "Oh? Little tanuki cub mewing something, is he? What's that you say?"

"Tell him not to call me a tanuki cub, Senya!" Yaské stamped the ground, only feeding Kyuzo's amusement. It was true that there was a slight resemblance between Yaské—with his small frame, round eyes, and sun-baked skin—and a baby tanuki.

“Come on, can you really not say anything without Sen-san? What a handful you are,” Kyuzo moaned. “Speaking of which, where did you go, Sen-san?”

“To the residence of the elderly Sawa.”

“All the way out there? Well, that’s a lot of work.”

“And why are you here, Kyuzo-san?” Senya asked.

“I thought I’d eat with you last night, so I came by with some sushi. But neither of you came home, so I had to eat it all myself,” Kyuzo replied. “It was *delicious*.”

“I see,” Senya remarked.

“How come you don’t gain any weight, eating three servings like that!” Yaské hissed. “I bet you’re a yokai! Go on, Senya, tell him!”

“That’s not the sort of thing you should go out of your way to voice,” Senya replied. “Besides, Yaské, you shouldn’t say such things. It’s disrespectful to yokai.”

“Sorry...,” Yaské shrank back, deflated by the reprimand.

Not knowing when to stop, Kyuzo nosed his way closer.

“What was that? I couldn’t quite catch it. What did he just say about me?”

“Kyuzo-san, shouldn’t you go home to your parents instead of spending so much time here with us?”

“No way,” said Kyuzo. “Your face is much more pleasant to look at than those old geezers’. You really are a handsome fellow. Easy on the eyes.”

Yaské wanted to punch Kyuzo and his spineless laugh. This was starting to push his limits.

Just then, Senya slid closer to Kyuzo and pinched out his tobacco case.

“Yaské, go and take this to the landlord. It’ll let him know straight away that his prodigal son is here.”

“Now, Sen-san, that’s not right! All right, all right,” Kyuzo relented. “Hey, tanuki! You stay right there! Fine, I’ll leave. Hmph! Fine, fine. I know scores of people who’ll be more than happy to let me stay the night.”

Grumbling indignantly, Kyuzo finally left the row house. Senya let out a sigh.

“Well, he’s quite a troublesome one.”

“I hate him! Always teasing me like that! And he’s overly casual with you, too, calling you ‘Sen-san’ this, ‘Sen-san’ that!”

“...Are you jealous?”

“...”

Senya was right. Yaské disliked anyone who got close to Senya, for fear of losing him. Yaské was precious to Senya right now, but what if someone else entered the scene and took his place? He couldn’t stand that, even knowing that it was selfish of him.

Senya gently stroked Yaské's face, puffed out from disappointment.

"You don't have to worry. I'll always be here by your side. As long as you want me here, I'm all yours."

His voice was kind and matter-of-fact. Senya always said exactly what Yaské wanted to hear. The prickly feeling inside Yaské subsided, and he began to feel embarrassed for throwing a tantrum.

"Sorry, Senya."

"There's no need to apologize."

Senya smiled softly, a kind, beautiful, saintly smile.

That evening, after they'd eaten their supper, been to the bath house, and were just about to go to bed, someone decided to pay them a visit. *Tap, tap, tap*, the visitor knocked at the door.

"Who is it?" Senya called out, but there was no reply. Only the quiet tapping continued.

More often than not, when things like this happened, it was Kyuzo, having quarreled with one of his many lovers and stealing into the quiet of the night to discreetly seek shelter. That, or perhaps he'd come to escape punishment from his parents. Whatever the case, he was always running from something or other.

"If it's Kyuzo, can I punch him?" Yaské asked Senya.

"He'll go on about it for ages and give you a very hard time."

"I'll just tell him I thought it was a burglar," Yaské quipped. "So? Can I?"

"...Try not to hurt him."

One could say that Senya had a soft spot for Yaské.

Having received permission, and with a twinkle in his eyes, Yaské grabbed a pestle and leapt down to the earthen floor. The tapping continued at the door. This persistence could only be Kyuzo.

Yaské threw open the sliding door, simultaneously raising the hand that firmly gripped the pestle.

Take that!

But there was nobody there.

"Huh?" Puzzled, Yaské tilted his head, took a few steps outside and looked around, but indeed there was no one to be seen.

"Yaské, get back inside!"

Just as Yaské heard Senya, someone grabbed him by the collar.

Agh!

Kyuzo must have circled behind him. Yaské flailed his arms and legs, but they hit absolutely nothing. Just as he was realizing the futility of his effort, Yaské's feet left the ground. A tremendous force was lifting him up.

This wasn't Kyuzo. A slight man like Kyuzo wouldn't have this kind of superhuman strength. Then who is it?

Fear began to creep in.

"Let go of the child!"

Yaské could hear Senya shouting behind him with an almost roaring voice that he'd never heard before. But whoever it was that had Yaské in their grip did not relent.

Rasping voices rained down from above, one after the other.

"We have come to apprehend the criminal."

"We will not allow any interference."

"No, we will not."

"Obey and do not resist!"

Still unable to move, Yaské flitted his eyes left and right.

High officials? But why? What did I ever do?

Stunned and confused, Yaské's body relaxed, and in that instant, a blindfold was placed over his eyes.

"What could this child have done," came Senya's voice again, this time so cold and calm that it could send a chill down one's spine. Yet, it was clear that an intense rage simmered just beneath the surface, ready to erupt.

Even the captors seemed taken aback by Senya's hair-raising voice. After a brief silence, they spoke in a subdued tone, this time as though they were trying to persuade him.

"We belong to the Magistrate's Office. On Tsukuyo-no-Gimi's orders, we shall detain this individual so that he may receive his judgment."

"Tsukuyo-no-Gimi... you say?"

"That's right. It is our duty to apprehend criminals. Therefore we shall take this child. This child is indisputably a criminal."

Countless hands, every one of them rough and ice cold, firmly grabbed onto Yaské's arms and legs. There was a flutter of wings, and Yaské could feel himself getting further and further away from the ground.

"Give him back!"

Even Senya's cries were hardly audible anymore. It wasn't so much the flying but that he was being torn away from Senya that made Yaské cower in fear.

"Senya! No!"

Yet, the many hands would not let Yaské go, and the beating of the wings showed no signs of stopping. Traveling at a terrifying speed, Yaské finally passed out.

Chapter Three

“Here, wake up, human child.”

Yaské woke to an unfamiliar voice, its deep, echoing sound giving him a jolt. A frightening face suddenly came into view: with round, glistening red eyes, the face was covered in black feathers, a large black beak protruding from it. Despite being a bird, there were also human characteristics, creating a most grotesque appearance.

Yaské let out a yelp and tried to scoot back, only to fall over as ropes wrapped around his small body two or three times over, painfully digging into him.

Trembling from pain and fear, Yaské tried to shake away the avian beast. Despite the large wings growing from its back, its body looked like that of a human. Dressed like a mountain hermit, it donned a small, hexagonal, box-like hat, tied beneath the chin.

Could this be the yokai karasu-tengu?

With its taloned hands, large, cold, and rough, the *karasu-tengu* took hold of Yaské’s neck. Now he was sure that this was one of his kidnappers.

Is this where they’ll kill me?

But all that the *karasu-tengu* did was straighten the boy’s back, looking down at him as though it were ashamed of him.

“Sit up straight, boy. Tsukuyo-no-Gimi will be arriving soon. Your trial is about to begin.”

Yaské looked around and realized that he was in a small courtyard, surrounded by high lacquer walls on all sides. There didn’t appear to be an exit anywhere. Beneath his feet, the entire ground was packed with tiny white pebbles, sparkling so brightly that it was almost blinding.

Out in the front was a distractingly large red torii.

As soon as Yaské saw it, the hair on the back of his neck stood up. This wasn’t like the torii he was used to seeing at ordinary shrines. It gave off an aura as though it were alive.

It was then that Yaské fully appreciated the extent of his predicament and that he had been brought to an outrageous location. An irresistible urge to escape rushed over him—but there was nowhere to go, and besides which, the *karasu-tengu* had its red eyes locked firmly onto him. Terrified, Yaské continued to shake uncontrollably.

And yet, anger also began to rise.

Why do I have to be put through this?

The *karasu-tengu* seemed to read Yaské's mind. Glaring with its frightening eyes, the *karasu-tengu* remarked, "It's your own fault. You hurt Ubumé, of all things. All the yokai parents were up in arms and came rushing to us all at once, demanding that we capture the criminal. All the *karasu-tengu* at the main office were nearly crushed!"

"U-Ubumé?"

"This is the Eastern Palace of the Yokai Magistrate's Office. Tsukuyo-no-Gimi, who runs this place, will hand down your judgment. Now, sit still and wait. Any minute now—any minute now, he'll be arriving."

Almost simultaneously with those words, the red torii lit up brightly, and the silhouette of a slender man stood on the other side, walking beneath it as he made his way toward Yaské.

The man was young, dressed in scarlet garb reminiscent of aristocrats from the Heian era, his long, white hair let down like a woman's as she prepares to wash it.

His face was exquisite, as though it embodied the elegance of a crescent moon. Like a whetted sword, this man's beauty was sharp and pointed, accentuated all the more by the blood-red *hannya* demon mask hiding the right side of his face.

On top of it all, the man had large, fox-like tails. Their length almost matching his height, three platinum-colored tails extended from beneath the hem of his clothes. Behind these tails were mice, no more than four inches tall, dutifully holding them up. Uniformed in black kimonos, they all looked very serious as they made sure these tails never touched the ground.

In any case, the man was stupendously good-looking. It seemed that beauty coursed through every fiber of his being, right down to the ends of his tails. Yaské was dumbfounded to witness someone whose looks matched, if not surpassed, that of Senya's.

Moving as though he were drifting, the man approached until he was directly in front of Yaské and examined him closely. His gaze was cold, devoid of any human warmth, and his pleasantly shaped lips were curled up into a sneer.

"I am Tsukuyo-no-Gimi, magistrate of the Eastern Palace of the Yokai Magistrate's Office. Are you the human who subjected Ubumé to insult and degradation?"

Yaské, unable to tell him that they've got the wrong person, could only stare back in silence. Tsukuyo-no-Gimi continued, his tone even steelier than before.

"Well, what a mess you've created. Higuro. Read out the petition."

"Yes, my lord!"

The *karasu-tengu* Higuro took out a sheet of paper from the bosom of his kimono and began to read aloud with an officious air.

“On this day, in the early hours, the ubumé stone, residence of Ubumé, was damaged. The stone was cracked in half, effectively made uninhabitable for any yokai. This incident having caused her great emotional pain, Ubumé has taken flight. It is not known where to, or when she will return, and we the yokai parents are left deeply troubled. Therefore, we request a trial. It is clear that the human child named Yaské is the perpetrator who destroyed the stone. We request in the strongest terms that the criminal be granted his due punishment.”

Higuro then handed the document to Tsukuyo-no-Gimi, who condescendingly waved it in the air.

“Did you hear that? That is your crime, Yaské. Do you dare deny it?”

Yaské felt a tug of hesitation. He didn’t know a thing about this so-called Ubumé. Yet, it was true that that very morning, he had gone into the woods and cracked a stone in half. It had evidently been the home of a yokai, and now because of this, Ubumé had gone missing, creating an uproar among the yokai parents.

But Yaské didn’t know that the stone belonged to a yokai. He wanted to protest as much, but as if to forestall him, Tsukuyo-no-Gimi suddenly said harshly, “Ignorance is no excuse. Ubumé is indispensable to yokai parents. To put it in human terms, she is practically a walking deity. Do you understand?”

“A... walking deity?”

“Ubumé is a yokai born of a mother’s love for her child.”

Tsukuyo-no-Gimi’s voice softened. The imperious coldness disappeared, and in its place was left an undiluted air of gravity.

“It is Ubumé’s nature to protect all children as though they were her own. This is why she ran a childcare service, looking after yokai infants in the place of their busy parents. This was more than the parents could ever have asked for. Despite conflicts constantly erupting among yokai, Ubumé welcomed all yokai children, regardless of allegiances.

“But then, *you*.” Tsukuyo-no-Gimi glared at Yaské as a pale blue flame flashed behind his eyes, “You injured her. You destroyed Ubumé’s home and shattered her heart into pieces. Except where children are concerned, Ubumé is remarkably fragile. I can easily picture her sobbing as she ran away, who knows where to. All are cooperating in the search for her, but even if she were found, it’s impossible to say whether she would agree to return. Ubumé is very particular. It’ll surely take some time finding a new home to her liking. Even *my* hands are tied.”

Tsukuyo-no-Gimi said this with great loathing, and Higuro beside him, and indeed even the mice holding up Tsukuyo-no-Gimi’s tails, nodded in agreement.

Everyone was angry with Yaské. That was how serious an offense he had committed. Realizing this, he broke out in a cold sweat.

Yaské felt terrible. If only he could go back to that morning.

B-but I... I really didn't mean any harm...

Even his thoughts trembled.

As the boy hung his head, Tsukuyo-no-Gimi looked on with a stern expression.

“So, there you have it. It is incontrovertible that you are a criminal, and a heinous one at that. Punishment must be served, no matter what. Your excuses will not be heard.”

But...! Yaské's eyes widened in despair. He fully understood the gravity of his actions, but to be denied the chance to tell his side of the story felt unfair.

Yet, once again, human norms were of no consequence.

“My word is law here,” Tsukuyo-no-Gimi said. “Whatever I say is deemed to be correct. And I do not like humans. Besides which, there's another reason I will not listen to your protestations.”

Here he wrinkled his nose as if repulsed and covered it with the end of his sleeve.

“I dislike your smell. It reminds me of a certain rogue and makes me nauseous. The audacity to stand here before me while you bear his scent! That alone makes me want to give you a harsh sentence.”

How can someone so temperamental be the magistrate! Yaské thought as he looked to the heavens in defeat. This was beyond unfair. Tears began to well up from indignation and helplessness.

Senya! Help!

But Senya wasn't there, and everyone surrounding Yaské was very angry with him.

Tsukuyo-no-Gimi announced stentoriously, “The punishment shall be thus! Human child Yaské. The damages you have caused to the yokai parents are severe. As reparation, I hereby order you to protect and look after yokai children. Until Ubumé returns, you shall serve as childminder and undertake this role with sincerity. Thus concludes the sentence!”

As he finished his announcement, Tsukuyo-no-Gimi grinned for the first time, a spiteful-looking smile.

“I could subject you to brutal punishment and let everyone watch as you suffer. But that would only serve as a temporary diversion. Better to make the best use of what is available to me. From this night onward, you shall be the caregiver of yokai children. Mm, an ingenious punishment, if I do say so myself. Is it not, Higuro?”

“Yes, my lord! But... Do you think this one is capable of looking after infant yokai?”

“If he fails, then I shall deal with that when the time comes. Merciless punishment for disobeying my orders will do. Bring me the yokai seal.”

“Yes, my lord!”

All this while, Yaské stood still as a stone. At first he was relieved that he wouldn't be executed, but as he took in the full implications of his sentence, he became overwhelmed.

Substitute for Ubumé? Look after yokai children? But I couldn't possibly!

Just as Yaské was about to object, he felt the collar of his kimono being pried open. Though he resisted, he was easily pinned down, and he felt something being pressed into the back of his neck. His skin felt like it was on fire.

Ahhhhhhhh!

Yaské felt a scream about to escape from the back of his throat.

No. I mustn't let out a sound. Not my voice, not my voice, not my voice!

Gritting his teeth, Yaské bore the pain in silence. As his field of vision began to darken, he realized that he was about to pass out.

Tsukuyo-no-Gimi's languid voice echoed through the drowsy fog.

"That is a yokai seal, a proof of contract. Henceforth, the busy yokai parents will be guided by that seal and seek you out to leave their children with you. If you so much as attempt to reject the role of yokai childminder, that seal will act as a poison and shave off years from your life. If death means nothing to you, then reject as you wish. If you can, that is."

The last thing Yaské heard was Tsukuyo-no-Gimi's steely laugh.

Then, he lost consciousness.

[.....]

Chapter Six

There stood an old lady, no more than four inches tall. Hair all white, she wore a simple kimono made for fieldwork and carried a woven bamboo basket on her back. Her round, wrinkled face was all red, as though it had been painted with rouge. *She reminds me of something*, Yaské thought.

The red-faced old woman turned her bulging eyes onto him.

"The new childminder, I presume?"

Yaské somehow managed a nod as he held his breath.

"I see. I'd like you to watch over my grandchild for one night."

But there was no child in sight.

The old woman then lowered her basket and removed the straw matting covering it, revealing a green, doe-eyed child looking up at Yaské from inside.

"This is my grandson Umékichi."

It was when he heard the name that Yaské finally put two and two together. They must be plum yokai. He also realized what the older one had reminded him of: a pickled plum, or *uméboshi*.

Suddenly, the old woman glared, as though she had heard Yaské's thoughts.

"I am not *uméboshi*, I am Umébah. Well, I'll leave him to you for the night, then. Umékichi, I'll be back to get you in the morning. You be good now."

"Yes ma'am," Umékichi answered in a childlike voice.

Umébah bowed, then disappeared like a puff of smoke, leaving Umékichi and the basket holding him.

A stunned Yaské remained frozen in place, but he couldn't stay there like that for long. Who knows when a neighbor might pass by and see Umékichi? It would be a huge hassle if they found out that Yaské had dealings with yokai.

Anxious and jumpy, as though the basket might bite, Yaské cautiously reached out toward it, picked it up, and went back inside.

"You've accepted an infant yokai, then?" asked Senya.

"Y-yeah. His name is Umékichi. Tiny little one. He must be a plum yokai."

Yaské slowly lowered the basket to the floor.

Umékichi climbed out, looking around curiously. Even smaller than Umébah, he was only about an inch in height. His hair tied up in a top knot, he wore a wide waistband, its brown cloth patterned with little white plum blossoms. His skin was as green as an unripe plum.

"Wow, so this is what a human dwelling looks like."

Then, Umékichi noticed Senya.

"Oh? Who are you?"

"I am Yaské's guardian. My name is Senya."

"Wow, even in my world, you don't often come across anyone as good looking as you are."

"H-hey, stop bothering Senya!"

Yaské tried to pinch Umékichi up, but he was tiny and quite quick on his feet. Umékichi dodged Yaské's hand and, face full of intrigue, tottered over to Senya.

"Wow, the longer I look at you, the more handsome you get. You might even stack up against Tsukuyo-no-Gimi. Why are your eyes shut? Can you not see?"

"No, I can't. I lost my eyes many years ago, but I get by just fine."

"I see... I'm Umékichi. I've never really seen humans before, but there's something peculiar about you... I wonder why?"

Yaské grew irritated as Umékichi continued to stare intently at Senya. *Don't act so entitled, you're just a yokai!*

"Don't concern yourself over me," Senya said. "Anyway, why have you been brought here, Umékichi?"

"Gran is busy with work tonight, so she said she'll leave me with the childminder's."

"Work?"

"Helping out with plum wine preparation. The mountain ogres asked for her. All it takes is for Gran to give them a hand, and the flavor comes out infinitely better."

Umékichi said this with his chest puffed out, as though he were talking about his own achievement. Yaské scratched his head.

Preparing plum wine? That's odd. It isn't the right time of year. Aren't plums in season in May and June?

Umékichi continued, as if having heard Yaské's thoughts.

"The plums they're preparing today are a special variety. They're called autumnal plums and come in season right around this time of year. When you soak them and let them ferment over winter, they make the highest quality plum wine that even the greatest of yokai can't resist."

And, he continued to explain, this plum wine was the mountain ogres' favorite. Come this time of year, it was tradition for all ogres to help out and, under Umébah's direction, pick the plums, clean them gently and thoroughly, and soak them in barrels or large clay pots.

But of course the ogres were enormous, and some weren't as watchful as you might expect. With tiny Umékichi scuttling around, who knew if an ogre might take him for a real plum and dunk him into a pail. And that was why Umébah, thinking she couldn't possibly concentrate on work with that kind of worry, decided to leave her grandson with the childminder.

Yaské and Senya exchanged looks.

"That doesn't make sense though, does it, Senya?"

"Indeed. If that were the case, then Umébah would equally be in danger, would she not?"

Umékichi gave a laugh.

"Gran's fine. Her face is all red and wrinkled. Even the dopiest ogre wouldn't make *that* big a mistake."

Point well taken.

Umékichi then looked closely at Yaské.

"I've had Auntie Ubumé look after me before, but you sure are different from her. You don't look as kind, and you don't smell as nice either."

“Well, sorry to disappoint you!”

Yaské gave Umékichi a flick on the forehead. Instantly, Umékichi began to cry. His wails were ear-piercing, causing the walls and floors of the old row house to shake, dust raining down from the ceiling.

“This is terrible,” Senya groaned as Yaské clung onto him.

“Senya! D-do something! Tell him to stop crying!”

“You’re the one who made him cry, so it follows that you should be the one to make him stop, Yaské.”

“But!”

“I’m not very good with crying children.”

“Neither am I!”

All the while, Umékichi kept crying. At this rate, the entire row house might collapse. And yet, Senya made no effort to approach Umékichi. Instead, he grimaced as he pressed his hands against his ears.

This wailing must be worse for him, because Senya has such good hearing...

Yaské finally realized that it was up to him to do something. Above all, he must relieve Senya’s pain.

Yaské pinched Umékichi up and did something he had never done before: he shouted.

“Stop crying! If you don’t stop crying, I’ll tell all the other yokai that you were crying with your face all red, even though you’re green!”

Umékichi’s wailing stopped abruptly. Still hiccupping, he looked indignant as he countered back at Yaské.

“I-I’m not green! And I don’t turn red!”

Yaské let out a sigh of relief as Senya patted him on the shoulder.

“Nicely done.”

As soon as Yaské saw Senya’s unfazed expression, he realized he had been tricked.

“Senya... You said you’d help me look after them.”

“You can’t be asking for help with something this simple. Everyone tells me I’m too soft on you, after all.”

“What do you mean ‘everyone,’ it’s mostly just Kyuzo, isn’t it?”

“Never mind. Don’t trouble yourself with minor details. Umékichi, aren’t you hungry after all that? There’s some leftover tea rice. Would you like some?”

“Yes!”

“Well, there you have it, Yaské. Make them into rice balls for him. Small ones so they’re easy for him to eat.”

“Yeah, make them small, Yaské.”

“ ... ”

Despite his exhaustion, Yaské rolled the tea rice into acorn-sized balls and handed them to Umékichi, who scarfed them down one after another.

“They’re good! They’re good, Yaské!”

“Is that so. Sheesh. Crying your lungs out like that. Sooner or later, all the neighbors are gonna come yelling at us, and then what’ll you do about it!”

Umékichi looked up and answered, “It’s all right. There’s an invisible shield put around this house, ordered by the Yokai Magistrate’s Office. No matter how bad the ruckus, what happens in this house stays in this house.”

“What? A sh-shield?”

“Yup. You were taken away by *karasu-tengu* yesterday, weren’t you? There would have been a shield up then, too. None of your neighbors noticed, did they?”

Yaské realized for the first time that no one from the row house had said anything about last night’s commotion, despite Senya shouting out of character and the *karasu-tengu* making a considerable amount of noise. Even now, it didn’t appear that any of the neighbors were making their way over to see what’s happened or to raise any complaints.

Maybe even the likes of Tsukuyo-no-Gimi are capable of showing some consideration. In any case, Yaské was grateful that this yokai affair wouldn’t be found out and rubbed his chest in relief.

It was then that he noticed something else that made his heart jump. This whole time, Yaské had been able to carry on a normal conversation with Umékichi. True, Yaské wasn’t exactly projecting his voice, but it was still loud enough to be heard. What’s more, he spoke while looking Umékichi in the eyes. Until now, Senya had been the only person Yaské could do that with.

Yaské felt dizzy, incredulous of his own actions.

The rest of the evening passed by in a blur. Umékichi begged for more rice balls, so Yaské obligingly made seconds, and when Umékichi fell asleep with his belly full, Yaské carried him back to his basket. Before long, dawn was about to break.

There was a knock at the door.

Yaské hastened to answer it, sure that it must be Umébah. Indeed, there she stood, bowing politely after putting down a clay pot that was almost the same size as she was.

“I’ve come to collect Umékichi.”

Yaské quickly went to fetch him. Careful not to wake him, Yaské left Umékichi in the basket, carried it gently, and laid it down in front of Umébah. Umébah smiled, pointing to the clay pot. “A token of my appreciation.”

Would he be able to speak properly to Umébah as well?

Heart thumping, Yaské took a deep breath.

“W-what’s inside?”

There. He managed to get the words out.

Umébah answered straight away. “These are pickled plums I prepared. I hope they’re to your liking.”

Just then, Umékichi woke up.

“Oh, Gran. You’ve come to get me.”

“Yes, indeed. The ogres and I were able to get things done with great peace of mind, thanks to you not being around.”

“You’re awful, you make it sound like I’m in the way.”

“Never mind that, and say a proper thank you to this young man. He looked after you, after all.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Umékichi looked up at Yaské from inside the basket. “Thank you for the rice balls. They were really good. I’ll come back to have some more.”

“You *really* don’t have to!”

“Well, that just makes me want to come back all the more.” Umékichi grinned, and Yaské was barely able to hold back a laugh, seeing Umékichi’s mischievous expression.

Umébah and Umékichi vanished, and Yaské went back inside and closed the door.

“A first job well done,” said Senya.

Nodding back, Yaské quietly said, “Senya. I... I was able to speak to them. I could hold a proper conversation with them.”

“So it appears. It surprised me, too. I thought I was the only one with that privilege.”

This time, his voice sounded a little strange, almost as though he were displeased.

“...Are you jealous? Because there are other people I can talk to now?”

“Stop being silly and get some sleep. Come now, quickly.”

Spurred by his guardian’s stern expression, Yaské hurried to his futon, but it didn’t seem like sleep would come easily.

What’s this feeling? I feel like I could burst. To think I’d be able to talk like that to someone other than Senya...! Maybe I’ll be able to speak to the next yokai, too. Maybe I can do this.

Oddly enough, the fear he had initially felt toward yokai was already fading. It might have helped that his first customers were Umékichi and Umébah—tiny, cute, and not at all frightening. Besides which, she even brought back a gift. How very polite.

Let me prepare something later with Umébah’s pickled plums. No doubt it’ll be delicious. I know—maybe I’ll mix it into rice with some dried fish and make some rice balls.

Drowsiness soon came over Yaské as these thoughts raced through his mind.