



HELL'S VILLAGE

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Jigokumura, Wakayama Prefecture, Japan

I walked to the abandoned shrine, on my way to meet Mioku. The cool autumn wind chilled my ears and fingers, and my feet crunched on yellow ginkgo leaves littering the deserted street. I passed through the faded Torii gate, tossing a small tantou dagger from hand-to-hand and up in the air, catching the handle and throwing it back up as fast as I could. My teacher would be furious if he knew I practiced with a real blade, Mioku too, if she found out. I put the dagger back in my school bag before I got caught.

I saw Mioku in the distance, standing in front of the eight-meter high Buddha, her back to me. The statue was a few centuries old; once revered, but now dirty and damaged from years of neglect. I hurried over to Mioku and put my arms around her. The breeze blew strands of her hair across my face and I drew in the subtle scent of jasmine and roses.

"Hey, beautiful," I whispered. "What are you doing?"

"I was wondering why no-one comes here to care for the Buddha anymore. Do you know what happened to this place?" She pulled my arms tighter around her, snuggling back into my chest for warmth.

"Nope, but whatever it was, it was before we were born."

"Do you think the Gods will ever return here?"

I laughed. "Who knows? No-one comes here looking for them, so maybe not."

"I guess you're right. Come on, it's cold. Let's get out of the wind." She pulled me by the hand and we went behind the Buddha statue. Years before, people had made a sheltered cave inside the bushes. The clearing had enough room for maybe four or five people to sit, but it was mostly a place for lovers.

Mioku ducked under the branches and went in first. When we were inside and comfortable, I pulled her to me and kissed her hard. She held me tight, matching my kisses. It gave me courage to run my hand up her bare leg, but she pushed me away.

"Is sex the only thing on your brain?" she asked, frowning.

"Of course not. I'm also wondering what your present is," I said, trying to hide my frustration. She'd been teasing me all day about some kind of present – it obviously wasn't what I had been hoping for.

She smiled, forgiving me, and searched through her bag.

"Ah, here it is." She showed me a large, ripe persimmon. "Your favourite, right?" She leaned back and took a bite, teasing me again. "Well, this persimmon comes from Mrs. Aoki's garden, and you know they're the best." She took another bite and juice dripped on her chin. While she ate, she wiggled her legs around to get comfortable and her pleated skirt, already short, hitched up so high I could see her striped cotton pants.

I groaned, and wondered what she was up to.

"Are you going to give me a bite?" I asked.

"Better!" She pulled another persimmon from her bag and tossed it to me. It was perfect - bright orange, but still firm.

I took several bites and was in heaven, the slightly bitter fruit had a way of relieving my body and mind of all tension.

She grinned at my response. "Is that the best persimmon you've ever eaten?" She leaned closer to me. "You look so happy right now."

I watched her thick lashes flutter and I closed my eyes anticipating her kiss. I felt dizzy and feverish, and stupidly thought it was the effect of Mioku's seductive voice. The sickness got worse and I had a strong urge to vomit. I opened my eyes, needing help, but Mioku was smiling wickedly at me. Her eyes widened and sparkled like bright emeralds, blazing with

light from within. I began choking and coughing. I tried to grasp her arms to steady myself, but she shoved me hard away from her. I fell back against the metal of the Buddha and struck my head. I couldn't see clearly at all - her blurred image seemed to magnify and rise up before me. Her voice deepened to a tone I'd hoped never to hear again in my life. It chilled me to my very core.

"You'll never be the one, Hajime!" A creature from Hell spoke to me, and for just a second I saw the demon's true self. Its image spun before my eyes and I passed out to the sound of evil laughter.

I woke with a start, shaking myself back to reality. I reached under my pillow for the photo of Mioku I kept there; needing to see her smiling face to reassure me she was fine. We were fine. It was only a dream, but it tugged on an old memory I longed to forget.

Sounds drifted up the stairs, pulling me from my thoughts. Music. I looked at the clock and saw it was only three a.m. I got up and walked through our small house to the back patio. I found my mother, sitting on a stool and playing her nikko, a small, two-stringed instrument from China. She took lessons when I was young, but I hadn't heard her playing for several years. She played well, a simple melody, yet coupled with the frightening dream I'd just had, it made me want to hold Mioku tight and never let her go.

The glass door was open, so I stood in the kitchen and listened for a few minutes, letting the music calm me. When she stopped, I went outside.

"It's nice to hear you play again, Mum," I said.

She smiled, but her eyes held a familiar sadness.

"I was thinking of my mother today. Strange. She's been gone so long, but sometimes my heart aches for her."

I could understand.

"Time doesn't change anything," I said simply. As I spoke, I felt a light shiver. It made me look out into the darkness. Yes, there was my father, standing still in the shadows. I nodded slightly to acknowledge him, but didn't say anything to my mother.

She stood up and collected her things.

"My handsome son." She kissed me softly on the cheek. "I did my best for you, Hajime."

"I know, Mum." I kissed her goodnight.

When she was gone, I went over to my father.

"Why don't you ever talk to her?" I asked him.

"She knows I'm here. She can't see me, but she knows." My father stood completely still; his face, soft and unsmiling, but somehow kind.

"Why can't she see you?" I'd never asked him this.

"The last time she saw me alive I was trying to kill her." He looked towards the house, now hidden in darkness. "She doesn't want to remember my face, and so she shouldn't."

"She knows it wasn't you, Dad." I wanted to reassure him that he wasn't blamed for the evil that controlled him that night.

"She doesn't remember any of it now; as long as she doesn't see my face. Mafisa erased her memory," he said.

"What? Mum remembers nothing about how you died?" I rubbed my jaw in disbelief.

He shook his head.

"She knows I was possessed, and that you killed me to save her, but she can't remember it. There's no way to separate the image of my face and the demon's in her mind - if she's sees me, she'll see the demon again and remember everything. No one wants that."

A flash of Mioku in my dream blinded me for a second, but it was my mother's screams I heard in my head. Now I was sure my father had come to see me tonight for a reason.

"Why didn't you erase my memory?" The question had puzzled me for a long time. "I can see you, and I don't think about the demon. Actually, I have a really hard time trying to picture it."

"I think it's because you didn't look the demon in the eye, you only saw my body from behind." He didn't need to mention me stabbing him with a katana sword. I was just a kid, only eight years old, but I knew I had to kill my father in order to kill the demon too. In a town like mine it's something everyone knows, but it's rarely done. If the demon had heard me and turned around I probably wouldn't have done it either.

"Yes you would have."

I forgot my father could pick up my thoughts if I left my mind open to him. I slammed it closed with practiced ease.

"I was a kid, that demon would've killed me in seconds if it had seen me," I said.

"No Hajime, it wouldn't have. I can't believe your mother still hasn't talked to you about all this. You're seventeen for God's sake." He seemed frustrated, a strange emotion for a ghost.

"What are you talking about? You just said she doesn't remember!"

"Right, she doesn't. But she knows about you."

"You're not making any sense." I started to walk away, not wanting to play games.

He reappeared in front of me and stared me down.

"I wanted your mother to tell you, but I need you to know now." He fixed his eyes on mine. "You can't die Hajime – you're immortal."

I wanted to laugh, or at least argue with him, but my father's stern face told me it was true.

"How?" Was all I could ask. I sat down on the edge of the patio-decking, but he didn't join me.

"Your mother...we were in a car accident one night. She died on the road-side, but Mafisa found us and brought her back to life. She was pregnant with you at the time, although we didn't know that until a few weeks later. The embryo must have had a heartbeat when the spell was cast."

There was a brief silence while I processed what he told me.

"Who the hell is Mafisa anyway?" I didn't really care. I just didn't know what else to say.

"She's the daughter of the Great Bear Goddess. She's a very powerful witch, and a shape-shifter."

"I've never heard of her. This town is full of witches and spirits though. Do they all know what I am?"

"No, no one knows apart from Mafisa, your mother, and me. We wanted to protect you."

"If I can't be killed, why do I need protecting?" I looked at my hands and cracked a few knuckles, hiding my confusion.

"You can't die, but you could be tortured, or locked away somewhere. You could be manipulated and controlled, forced to do terrible things."

"Can I be possessed?"

"Yes, that's another concern. If a demon possessed you then it couldn't be killed, only exorcised and that is almost impossible to do." He frowned. Not a pleasant topic for him.

"This is so much to take in." I stood up again and stepped a few feet away from my father, suddenly needing the space.

"I know, I guess that's why your mother hasn't told you already. But you're very special Hajime, and you're going to be called on in the near future to protect someone."

"Who? Mioku?" I should've told him then about my dream, but I hesitated. "Wait, you're not going to tell me are you?" I was used to my father's ways.

"Forgive me, Hajime. Please be patient as I tell you what you need to know and trust that I'm protecting you by not telling you some things."

I let out a deep sigh. So this was how it was going to be: a ghost giving me vague instructions and warnings, and assuming that I'll do exactly what he says. I played along, "Sure, I trust you."

You may think I'm being unfair, but spirits have their own agenda. Their living families aren't their priority anymore. I'm not saying that father had become evil, just that he now sees our world and its connection to the lower-world differently.

"So, you need me to protect someone. Someone I love?"

"I can't tell you who; it will cloud your emotions and I need you to prepare." He crossed his arms, ready to instruct me. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

"I have weapons. And you know I've been taking karate and kenjitsu for years. What else do I need?"

"Well, you need to learn how to deal with your immortality. If you're stabbed, for instance, you won't die but it'll be painful and an opponent could still beat you in a fight. They could get away with the person you're protecting."

"So, I need to get used to being hurt? To keep fighting, even with a knife in my chest? I guess I need to know how long certain wounds take to heal too."

My father nodded again, pleased that I understood.

"Yes. It won't be pleasant training, but I assure you, you need to be in control of your body and know your weaknesses."

My father had dumped a heavy load on me tonight, but as we talked something clicked. I could accept that I had this gift and that it wasn't to be ignored or wasted. Emerald eyes in a vile demon's face flashed before me but I didn't flinch. If my dream was a premonition, Mioku would need me and every skill I had.

I looked around the garden for a weapon. I could've gone in the house to get a sword, but it would have been too heavy for my father to yield. As a spirit, he could hold material objects, but only for a short time, and nothing heavy.

"Perfect!" I pulled a slim metal stake from one of the pot plants on the patio and wiped the dirty end on my sweatpants.

"What's that for?" my father asked.

"Here, take it. Stab me through." I held the stake out.

My suggestion clearly took him by surprise. He looked at me intently for a moment, perhaps finally seeing me as an adult, a man, ready to become a warrior. I watched the emotion on his face change from surprise, to pride, and then back to concern.

"Hajime, we can start with something simpler..."

"Come on, give it a try. That's why you're here tonight, isn't it? To test me?"

He took the rod from my hand and couldn't hide his grin. We both knew he wanted to do it.

This town is not called Hell's Village for nothing.

--The End--