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SANJI'S DEMON, PT. I

by Richard Parks

Kenji the reprobate priest was in a strange mood, even by Kenji's standards. "I've traveled a great deal, Yamada-san, but I think Echizen may be one of the most charming places I've ever seen."

It was the middle of the afternoon. Kenji and I traveled on foot along the Hokuriku Road on our way to find a demon-queller near the village of Takefu. I happily conceded that Echizen had its charm. It was early fall and the leaves were starting to turn; the breeze was pleasantly warm still but with a hint of chill. Even so, Echizen's leaves and mountains and wooded hillsides were not much different than those to the west or north and, like them, after sunset would be stirring with creatures both unpleasant and dangerous. I shrugged. "It's nice enough."

Kenji sighed. "Nice? Lady Shikibu herself lived here for a year. The poets Nakatomi no Yakamori and Ōtomo no Yakamochi were exiled here. They were two of the greatest poets of our grandfathers' time! I can see how this place could inspire them."

I scratched my chin. “Kenji, a great many courtiers get exiled at one time or another, and every single one of them is a poet, by necessity. It stands to reason that *some* of them would be good at it. As for inspiration, Nakatomi’s love was still in Kyoto while he was trapped *here*, so of course he wrote brilliant poetry full of regret and longing. Honestly, what’s gotten into you?”

Kenji just sighed. “I could ask the same of you, Yamada-san. You’re in an exceptionally sour mood, and for you that is saying a great deal.”

I started to answer harshly, but that impulse just proved to me that Kenji was right. At first I thought it was simply because I’d given up saké for the duration of my assignment, and that sacrifice always darkened my outlook, but there had to be more to the matter. My hand kept creeping to my sword hilt as if I wanted to strike someone, and I didn’t particularly care who that someone might be. The idea of losing control, even for an instant, and what I might *do* in that instant, both terrified and infuriated me.

“You know me, Kenji-san. I’m not the easiest person to be near, but I’m neither impulsive nor arbitrary,” I said finally. “There must be a reason. Why am I so angry?”

Kenji rubbed the graying stubble on top of what should have been a properly shaven head, except that, in his case, it

almost never was. “How can I know, if you do not? Have I done something to offend you?”

“No more than usual,” I said, because it was so. “Though I will say that you’re a bit more insufferably cheerful than usual....” A new thought stopped me. “Kenji-san, you’re carrying demon-wards and sutras with you, are you not?”

He patted his travel bundle, which he wore looped around his neck. “Of course. You were a little vague as to the nature of your client’s need, so I brought everything I could think of.”

“Say rather that my client was discreet. Do me a favor—put your bundle down.”

Kenji frowned but did as I asked. He took one step away from his priestly supplies and his frown deepened. “Oh. I feel it now.”

My hand went back to the hilt of my *tachi*, but not out of anger this time. “Demon aura?”

“I think so. With my wards and the holy writs so close, I was oblivious. You’ve been sensing it for a while, no doubt. Which perhaps explains your mood.”

“Perhaps. How close?”

Kenji closed his eyes for a few moments, then scowled and went riffling through his bundle. “Very close.”

My sword was clear of its scabbard before we both heard something crashing through the undergrowth uphill of the

road, something very large and in a hurry. Kenji scabbled to find a ward, but it was too late. The *oni* broke through the undergrowth beside the road and charged straight at us. It was just taller than a man, with pointed talons and long yellow teeth, but I barely had time to note its appearance before it was upon us and my blade was in motion.

I took one quick step to the side and brought my sword across and up as the thing, unable to check its momentum, hurtled past me. I got one clear look at its face before its head separated from its shoulders and went rolling off down the ravine on the other side of the road. It was a foolish thought, but for that moment, I wished I had stayed my hand. In an instant it was all over. The creature's body took two steps without its head and then slammed onto the road, skidding to a stop at the verge, its hot, dark blood pooling in the dust.

“Well done, sir.”

A burly young man stood just above us on the hillside. He wore the plain brown clothing of a *yamabushi*, but unlike a mountain monk, he wore his black hair long and confined it with a red headband. He carried a short sword and leaned on a gnarled club bound with iron. He was breathing heavily as if after a run, but he was not completely winded. He bowed. “Forgive me for putting you in harm's way. The creature was faster than I judged. I am Sago no Daiki.”

Kenji and I bowed in turn. “I was fairly certain of your identity before you spoke, Master Daiki. I am Yamada no Goji. This gentleman is the priest, Kenji. Kenji, Sago no Daiki is our client.”

The young man smiled. “Ah! I was expecting you. I’m also happy to see that your reputation is well deserved, Lord Goji. Again, I must say ‘well done.’”

I pulled a *tegami* from my pouch and began to wipe the demon’s blood from my sword. “My thanks, but I think the credit for this particular demon-slaying incident belongs more to you than to me, Daiki-san.”

Kenji eyed the creature’s body. “With all due respect to Master Daiki, why do you say so? This was a very powerful devil, and I don’t think even my strongest ward could have blocked its attack completely, off-guard as I was. Yet you took it down with one blow!”

I put my sword away. “The creature wasn’t attacking, Kenji-san. I doubt it even realized we were here until it was too late.”

Kenji almost sputtered. “Not attacking? Then, pray, what *was* the beast doing?”

I nodded toward Master Daiki. “Fleeing in terror.”

* * *

The letter I had received the previous week from Master Daiki had, frankly, astonished me. The Sago clan had been demon-quellers of great renown for four hundred years, starting with the clan's founder, Sanji the Demon Slayer. The clan's fame had reached far beyond Echizen, their ancestral province. Yet here was the heir of that noble tradition, Sago no Daiki, asking me for help with, of all things, a demon. The promised reward had been only part of my inducement for agreeing to see him; the remainder was simple fascination. While I was confident enough in my skills, I had no idea what I could possibly do that Master Daiki could not, and I was curious to find out.

Daiki paused in the road only long enough to retrieve the devil's head, then escorted us to his clan's compound north of Takefu. He made no more than polite conversation on the way. I took my cue from him and reluctantly asked none of the questions I was impatient to ask.

While the Sago clan compound was certainly nothing like the grand mansions and gardens one could find in the Imperial Compound, it compared favorably with many other dwellings in the Capital. The gate and green tile-roofed wall were in good repair, and the main living and servants' quarters were spacious and connected by fine covered walkways in proper

shinden style. Master Daiki was clearly studying me as I in turn studied my surroundings.

“What you see here is not a home, but the gratitude of generations of people who were protected by my family,” he said, sounding almost embarrassed. “I am but the caretaker until the next heirs of the Sago clan are ready to take on my burden. Speaking of which....”

“Chi-chi-san!”

Daiki laid his club and his trophy aside just in time. The words jumbled together almost like the children themselves. Two little boys and a girl, none more than five years old, came scampering down the steps and into their father’s—or so I surmised—arms. They were followed closely by a distressed young woman dressed as a servant.

She bowed low. “Forgive me, Master Daiki, but when they heard you were home, it was impossible to contain them.”

Daiki looked stern, or perhaps as stern as one *could* look with an armful of laughing progeny. I felt a pang of envy just then, which was not an emotion I experienced often, but I did not bother denying it to myself. A proper home of my own, a wife and family...these were things I once thought that I, too, would one day possess. Knowing that such a thing could not be so, and knowing the reasons, did not quite remove the desire.

“You’re not at fault, Aniko. No one can contain a son or daughter of the Sago clan if they do not *wish* to be contained. Still...” He set the children down again and lined them up in proper order. “It was wrong of you to run away from Aniko and wrong also to ignore our guests. Where are your manners?”

The children managed to restrain their giggles long enough to bow formally in my and Kenji’s general direction. Now that they were standing somewhat still, it was easier to sort one from another. The two boys were the oldest, perhaps five and four, with the girl no more than three or so. If this had been the Capital, Daiki’s wife and any children would either have resided in a separate household or remained in the care of the wife’s family, but here in the provinces such arrangements were less common. Daiki kept his family close to him and obviously preferred it that way.

“Lady Takara is away on a pilgrimage, fortunately,” he said. “So she does not yet know of our misfortune.”

It was the first time Master Daiki had touched on the matter that had brought us here, however obliquely. He sent the children off under Aniko’s care, after first instructing her to see that refreshment was prepared and our lodgings made ready. When we were alone again, he merely said, “Gentlemen, if you would follow me?”

Daiki led us through the front garden and around to the rear of the main house. There the compound continued for about a bowshot until the walls ended at the base of a stone outcrop, where sat what appeared to be a large shrine. Kenji was not the most proper of monks, to put it mildly, but to his credit he sensed the demon spoor before I did.

“The place fairly reeks, Yamada-san,” he whispered.

Another few moments and I had it, too—an acrid, musty scent which I can only describe as equal parts animal, decay, sweat, and fear. Though what I thought of as a scent was probably the product of a higher sense, rendered, perhaps, in terms more easily amenable to human interpretation. The “scent” was as much sensation as smell, much like I had felt in a different way the demon’s rage and fear earlier that day on the road.

“Yuichi should be here,” Master Daiki said, looking around. He sounded puzzled.

“Who is Yuichi?” I asked.

“He’s been in the service of the Sago clan since before I was born. He oversees our gardens and the grounds and especially the family shrine. He was away visiting relatives, but I was told he had returned.”

“And he’s usually found near the shrine?”

Daiki smiled. “As well one could say that the shore is found near the ocean. The man is scrupulously attentive to his duties.”

Still, there was no sign of anyone near the shrine. The grounds were deserted except for two guards, bowmen wearing the Sago *mon*, who could be seen patrolling along the outer walls.

“The compound is under guard at all times?” I asked.

“Yes, Lord Yamada. One doesn’t answer my clan’s calling without making enemies, demonic and otherwise. Besides, there are always one or two bandit clans active in the area, despite Governor Ishikawa’s and my own best efforts. It’s wise to be cautious.”

“Indeed.”

We proceeded to the shrine building and went inside, and we immediately understood where the demon-aura was coming from. One look and I revised my perception of the building from “shrine” to “trophy hall.” The building was long and relatively narrow, ending against the rock face at the north end of the compound. The walls were lined with the skulls of demons: some very old by the look of them, others gleaming white as if they had just returned from the rendering vat. There were greater and lesser demons, monsters, and a few creatures I could not identify and frankly had no wish to.

Master Daiki paused. “Yuichi?”

An old man with thinning white hair and stooped shoulders was adjusting a skull that hung crooked on the wall. When he heard Daiki’s voice, he immediately turned and bowed low.

“Greetings, Master Daiki,” he said. “I am pleased to see that you have returned safely.”

“And I am astonished, Yuichi-san, to see that you have entered the shrine. I know how you feel about this place.”

The old man bowed lower. “With so little life left to me, I did not wish to spend what remained as a coward. Besides, my assistant is ill and there was work to do.”

Daiki practically beamed. “Well said. These are my guests, Lord Yamada no Goji and the priest Kenji.”

“I am honored.”

I frowned. “Yuichi-san, am I to understand that you don’t normally enter the shrine itself?”

“Demons frighten me,” the old man said, and he bowed again. “Even dead ones. I have always been ashamed of this failing.”

“More like common sense,” Master Daiki said. “Come with us. Lord Yamada may have more questions for you.”

We continued down the length of the building, Yuichi following a few paces behind, while Master Daiki spoke.

“You have heard something of my ancestor, Sago no Sanji?” he asked.

Kenji grunted. “There are few who deal with spirits and monsters who have not. The founder of your clan, he was a minor provincial official who slew a particularly troublesome monster and was awarded the title ‘Demon Queller’ by the Emperor Temmu himself. Since that time his descendants have carried on this proud tradition.”

Daiki bowed slightly. “I have done my best, as did my father and those who came before him. But it all started with Sago no Sanji, who kept the preserved body of the demon he slew as a trophy. It was to house this precious heirloom that this shrine was constructed. As you see, our clan has added to the collection over the centuries.”

“It is not a pleasant place,” I said frankly, “but I imagine the very knowledge of its existence gives pause to all but the most vicious and determined monsters.”

“That is my hope as well,” Master Daiki said, “though the presence of the first demon, as I said, was the reason the shrine was established. Which brings us to the crux of my problem.”

There was little light near the north end of the shrine, and the poor illumination didn’t add to the cheeriness of the place. We were fairly close before we saw what was there. Or rather, what wasn’t there.

A square hollow had been carved into the face of the rock, twice as tall as a man and about half that in width. In that alcove sat a sort of raised dais, and on that was what appeared to be a stool with a low back. It was empty.

Now I understood. Master Daiki's problem wasn't a demon, but rather the lack of one.

"The demon's corpse...?" Kenji began, and Master Daiki finished.

"...has been stolen."

* * *

Despite the day's events, sleep did not come easily nor did it last especially long. Dawn was barely evident before I used Kenji's snoring as my excuse to stop lying where I was and rise. From our guest quarters I could hear very faint voices as if the servants were already up and about preparing the morning meal and getting the household ready for the day. I visited the privy and then took the opportunity to walk around the compound.

There were guards about as before, though a different shift from the previous night. I could not fault their attention; it was quite evident that they took their duties seriously. Yet somehow a thief—or more likely several—had managed to slip into the compound unseen and make off with the corpse of a seven-foot tall demon. Granted, the desiccated trophy could

not have weighed as much as the demon did in life, but it would have still been too large and clumsy for even a strong man to handle alone, never mind the problem of getting it over the wall or through one of the gates without being detected. And who would wish to steal a dead demon in the first place?

Again I went over everything I knew of the matter: Yuichi had been visiting family, so he had been away when the theft apparently occurred. His assistant was ill and under the priests' care at Mt. Hino Shrine, so as best I could tell no one had been in the trophy building for a few days. It was quite possible the demon corpse was missing for some time before anyone noticed. I idly wondered if the Lady Takara had seen anything unusual, since the theft may have happened at about the time she was preparing to leave for her pilgrimage to Hino Temple. I made a mental note to speak to her as soon as she had returned from her pilgrimage and then went in search of breakfast.

After some rice and fish, I was feeling a little more restored. Master Daiki had just sent the children off with their nurse Aniko when one of the *bushi* on watch entered the room and presented Master Daiki with a letter. He had not read more than a moment or two when he went pale, then bolted upright. "Tell Tarou and Ichigo to meet me at the front gate, armed and ready to travel."

"My lord, they are asleep—"

“Then wake them! Now!”

The guard was gone in an instant. Master Daiki turned to us. “This letter is from the Chief Priest at Mt. Hino Shrine. My lady’s party was attacked by bandits before she reached the temple. Her escort was slain...every one.”

“Buddha be merciful,” Kenji said, rising only a heartbeat slower than I did. “Is there word of your lady?”

“She’s alive, but her condition...I don’t know.”

“We will go with you, of course,” I said. “The matter of the theft can wait.”

“Thank you. I normally travel on foot, but we’re in a hurry. I must go to the stables first.”

Kenji and I paused only long enough to gather up my sword and Kenji’s supplies before we joined Master Daiki at the main gate. The two *bushi* arrived only a few moments after us. They were looking a bit disheveled, but they were armed, one with a spear and the other a sword and bow, and both men were clearly ready to go. Servants brought out five horses from the clan stables and Master Daiki vaulted into the saddle of the lead mount.

“If you fall behind, find me there,” was all he said, and he was gone. All the way to Mt. Hino we saw little of the man save the rear of his horse.

* * *

The shrine to the gods of Mt. Hino was one of the oldest in the province. The mountain itself was impressive, but we had no time to appreciate it properly. Attendants saw to our horses, and a young priest led the two guards and myself to where Lady Takara was being tended. Kenji stayed behind.

“Forgive me, Lord Yamada, but I’m not always welcome in such places. Perhaps I had best wait here.”

As a Buddhist, Kenji might be seen as competition by the servants of the gods. While many shrine priests would not object to his presence, as many more just might. Since we had no leisure to test his reception at the shrine, I agreed.

A junior priest led us to one of the outbuildings of the shrine set aside for travelers. The two guards took up positions outside, and I went in to find Lady Takara propped up by cushions, attended by an old priest and a relieved-looking Daiki. Custom demanded that the lady be veiled, and so a translucent curtain had been arranged in front of her bedding, but it was a mere formality and barely obstructed our view. It was my first look at Master Daiki’s wife. She had a sweet face and long, black hair, but her eyes were red and puffy. She had clearly been weeping uncontrollably for some time and every now and then would break out sobbing anew.

The old priest whispered something in Master Daiki’s ear, and he frowned, nodded, and then turned to me. “May I ask

you to wait outside for a moment, Lord Yamada? My lady wishes to speak to me in private.”

“Of course.”

I bowed and withdrew, and the old priest followed me out as well. “Lord Yamada? My name is Jurou. I’m the senior priest at Mt. Hino Shrine.”

I bowed. “I value the meeting, if not the circumstances. You were here when Lady Takara was found?”

He nodded. “One of our junior priests came to the scene after the bandits were gone. Her guards and attendants were all slain, I’m afraid, and Lady Takara was hysterical. She told the boy that Yamaguchi no Mikio’s bandit clan had attacked them in great force, but she didn’t say much else. She was close to collapse, as one might imagine. She is better today but still in a very delicate state, as you saw.”

“Indeed. Do you think that your priest’s sudden presence might have startled her assailants into fleeing? If so, she is extremely fortunate.”

The old man looked uneasy. “It’s possible, I suppose.”

“But you don’t think so?”

“My chief concern now is Lady Takara’s well-being.”

“I share that. Even so, you must admit that these circumstances are a bit strange. Men who would slaughter both

a lady's guards and her female servants would not hesitate to kill their mistress as well."

"I don't know how to answer you, Lord Yamada. She told me that a bandit was coming for her, waving his sword, when Mikio himself called the man back. I admit that is strange and I don't pretend to understand it. I know only that the bandits took everything except for Lady Takara's life, for which we must be grateful, even as we grieve for those who did not survive."

"Forgive me. I also count Lady Takara fortunate; it is just my nature to try to understand why. Do you know where the bodies have been taken?"

"To Hino Temple, which is further east along the mountain road."

That made sense. A dead body was a serious ritual impurity for a shrine, but the Buddhist temples often specialized in funerals.

"I know that Master Daiki appreciates all that you have done."

"The gods are merciful," the old priest said, and then he bowed and withdrew. I went outside to the shrine's *torii* gate to find Kenji.

"Are you familiar with Hino Temple?" I asked.

"Only that it exists. I've never been there," Kenji said.

“Then this will be your first visit. If you gentlemen care to accompany me, we’ll be going there now.” So quiet was Master Daiki’s approach that even I had not heard him. He had a strange look in his eye. I had questions, but one look at the man’s face and I knew they had best wait.

We recovered our horses and mounted, save for the *bushi* named Ichigo, who was left behind to keep watch over Lady Takara. We set off down the road again, though at a more reasonable pace this time, which was fortunate, as I did not think Master Daiki’s horse was fit for another gallop.

The other guard fell behind slightly to protect our flank. As we rode, I kept a close eye on Master Daiki. After a mile or so, the quiet fury I had read in him before gave way to a deep sadness. It was only then that I dared to speak again.

“Was your lady able to describe the persons who attacked her party?”

“Vividly. Their leader is someone known to me, and with my lady’s description of him, there can be no doubt. I did not think him fool enough to commit such an outrage upon my family, but no matter. The shrine has sent messengers on my behalf to Governor Ishikawa, and we will deal with him in due course. For now I have more pressing business at Hino Temple.”

“It was to Hino Temple that your lady intended to go on pilgrimage, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” Master Daiki fairly spit out the word.

“There is more to this matter of the ambush. You know there is.”

His expression went as cold as ice but did not last. He finally sighed. “Lord Yamada, I am ashamed to tell you.”

“You have suffered grievous losses, but your lady has survived. Some men might not count that so heavily in the balance, but you are different. Tell me what your lady said to you, if you can. I would not ask if I did not think it important.”

“I do not know what you suspect, Lord Yamada. It’s certainly nothing that would have occurred to me....” His voice trailed off. “Lady Takara herself is the one who took Sanji’s demon.”

* * *

We could hear the chants from the funeral rites as we approached the building in the temple compound set aside for the purpose. Master Daiki and Kenji accompanied me. I was reluctant to let Master Daiki out of my sight since, unless I completely misread the man, he wanted nothing more than to burn the entire temple to the ground. Considering the story his lady wife had related it to him, I couldn’t say that I blamed him.

According to her account, Lady Takara had received a visitor, a monk from Hino Temple on his way home from the Capital. He had warned her of the imminent return of the spirit of the demon slain long ago by Sago no Sanji, that the signs and portents pointed to the destruction of her family unless she headed the spirit off by bringing the demon's corpse to Hino Temple, where—for a suitable donation—the priests could properly ward it against the vengeful spirit's return.

Master Daiki had been away hunting the demon that brought him to Kenji and myself on the Hokuriku road, so the next morning she had taken it upon herself to have the two guards on duty bundle the corpse and place it in an oxcart along with several bolts of fine cloth as an offering to the temple. No one knew save herself, her personal attendants, and the two guards. All were dead now except the lady herself.

“Do you really think the temple was in league with the bandits?” Kenji asked.

“I do,” Master Daiki said.

I had to admit that this wouldn't be the first time such a thing had occurred, but there was a flaw in the reasoning. “They must share the blame in any case, if they are the reason Lady Takara was on the road. Yet, even assuming the monk was from Hino-ji, why attack the procession? The offering was theirs to begin with.”

Daiki looked grim. “Sanji’s demon was what they really wanted. And this way no one could prove that they were involved...until I get my hands on that worthless Mikio. I’ll wring it out of him!”

“Why would the temple want the corpse in the first place?” I asked.

“To shame my family and weaken our position. It’s no secret that relations between the Sago Clan and Hino Temple have not always been the best. They see our activities as an incursion into matters best handled by the Temple. Meaning that the rewards and prestige should come to them, not us. If it were not for my family’s honor, I would let them have the risk of it as well. See how well the abbot sings that song after a demon pulls his head off!”

Kenji might have been a disreputable Buddhist at best, but he was a loyal one. “Your pardon, my lord,” he said dryly, “but some followers of the Eightfold Way do know a thing or two about demons.”

I held up a hand. “That may be true, but it’s not relevant to the matter at hand. And Master Daiki, I’d consider it a personal favor if you’d let me speak to the abbot before you ‘accidentally’ drop a club on him.”

“As you wish.” The man practically growled the words.

We received word that the abbot was detained but would greet us shortly. I wanted to use that time to attend to an unpleasant but necessary duty. We entered the hall where the monks were chanting sutras. The bodies had been laid out on four biers in the center of the hall. They had already been washed as was the custom. Kenji spoke a word to the monks on duty, and they ceased their chants and withdrew, though not without a few scowls in my direction.

“Master Daiki, you knew these people. What follows may be a bit indelicate. You may not wish to see it.”

“There is little I have not seen, Lord Yamada,” he said, but the anguish on his face was plain. I resolved to do what I needed to do as quickly as possible.

One by one I went to each bier and pulled aside the white funeral robes covering the body, and one by one the story they told was the same. Both the men and women had been killed in the same fashion—several powerful sword blows. One poor girl, probably no more than fifteen, had been cut nearly in half. Brute force was evident but no art. Any competent swordsman would have done the job with one stroke each and no wasted effort. What had happened to Lady Takara’s attendants was sheer butchery by comparison. I covered the last body.

“Curious,” I said. “Even if taken by surprise, the two *bushi* should have given a better account of themselves. It’s clear that

whoever attacked them did not really understand swordsmanship.”

“Bandits are noted for viciousness, not for skill,” Master Daiki pointed out. “It’s possible the guards were simply overwhelmed.”

“Judging from the number of sword-cuts and the lack of consistency in angle of attack, I’d say you were right.”

“Something’s bothering you, though,” Kenji said.

“Many things are bothering me at the moment,” I said. I did not mention that the least of them was the sheer *enthusiasm* of the attack. Bandits were often deemed vicious by the simple necessities of their chosen profession, and there was no denying that some even took pleasure in that viciousness. Yet I couldn’t get past the feeling that whoever had done this had enjoyed it to a degree beyond anything I had ever seen before or ever hoped to see again.

We had just emerged from the funeral hall when the abbot approached. He was an old man, frail, discreetly supported by two young monks on either side.

“Forgive my tardiness, Master Daiki. At my age one cannot move very quickly.”

Daiki gave a perfunctory bow. “Abbot Hideo, this is Lord Yamada and his associate Kenji-san. They are acting on my behalf.”

Hideo raised an eyebrow. “Indeed? We only just learned of your wife’s unfortunate encounter.”

Master Daiki’s smile was all teeth. “Indeed?”

I thought it prudent to interrupt. “Sir, before Lady Takara undertook her pilgrimage, she was reported to have received a visitor from your temple. With your permission, we would like to speak to this person.”

“I am afraid that is not possible,” he said.

Daiki would not keep silent. “Abbot Hideo, I *will* discover the people who attacked my lady and killed several treasured members of our household. I will do it with or without your cooperation.”

The old man looked grim. “I have no intention of interfering. I, too, would like this matter resolved. Members of my temple travel the Hokuriku Road often, as well as pilgrims to and from here. It is in both our interests to ensure their safety.”

“Then why may we not speak to your priest?” I asked.

“You misunderstand me,” the abbot said. “I didn’t mean that I wouldn’t allow it. I meant that it was impossible that Lady Takara received a visitor from this temple. Hino-ji was in a period of ritual seclusion that only ended yesterday. No one has been allowed to enter or leave this temple for the past two weeks.”

Daiki was obviously skeptical, so the abbot grudgingly allowed us to fully search the temple and grounds. There were many offerings in their storehouse, as one would expect, but no sign of the cloth that Lady Takara had taken from the Sago Clan storeroom nor, of course, Sanji's demon. Daiki equally as grudgingly admitted that he didn't have enough proof to raze the temple. I wouldn't have called it a reconciliation, but at least matters between the Sago Clan and Hino Temple were no worse than they had been.

Master Daiki scowled. "I was so certain we'd find proof of Hino Temple's guilt in this. Yet I still find it hard to believe that the bandits acted alone. Why court their own destruction?"

"Court? Ask rather why they guaranteed their destruction by leaving a witness. I am pleased beyond measure that Lady Takara lived, yet also puzzled."

Master Daiki scowled. "Lord Yamada, surely you're not suggesting that Lady Takara is complicit in this? Other than removing the trophy from our shrine, I mean."

"Hardly. But as I said, I am puzzled."

Just then a young man arrived, a mounted messenger bearing the *mon* of the provincial governor. The messenger presented Master Daiki with a letter and then rode with us to await any reply.

“Ah! A detachment of *bushi* from the governor’s own forces will join us tomorrow. Fifty in number, and that’s more than enough. Perhaps tomorrow all our questions will be answered.”

“Perhaps,” I said, though my thoughts were elsewhere. “Supposedly the person, whoever it was who spoke to Lady Takara, came by in the afternoon? Who would have been on guard then?”

He frowned. “That would have been...Tarou and Ichigo.”

“The same Tarou riding with us now?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Probably nothing. But there is some small matter he might be able to assist me with. Excuse me.”

I dropped back until I was riding beside Tarou. He was perhaps thirty years old and of a blunt but cheerful disposition. “My Lord?”

“You and Ichigo were on duty the afternoon that Lady Takara received her visitor, yes?”

“So I am told,” he said.

I frowned. “‘So you were told’? Can you explain that, please? Any visitors would have to pass by the gate, yes? One of you would have seen him.”

Tarou looked extremely uncomfortable. “If Lady Takara said she had a visitor, then of course she did.”

I smiled a grim smile. “You’re avoiding the question, Tarou-san, and I have to say you’re not very good at that. No one is blaming you for what happened, but I do need to know about that visitor.”

Tarou admitted defeat. “I am at a loss, Lord Yamada. I spoke to Aniko that very evening, and she told me that Lady Takara received a visitor, a young monk. I don’t understand how that can be. No one came to the compound that day. I remember clearly—the gate was never opened.”

“You’re certain?”

He looked miserable. “I am. Which means that someone must have slipped over the wall unseen. We failed our duties and placed Lady Takara in danger. This is our fault.”

“That may or may not be the case, but I would not repeat that story to anyone else. Let it be our secret for now.”

I rode back to the front of the column. “Master Daiki, will you have need of this messenger today?”

“Today? No. I won’t report to his Excellency until after we’ve cleaned out that bandit viper’s nest.”

“Then, with your indulgence, I will borrow him.”

* * *

I was doubtful that Daiki would be able to find the bandit’s hideout in any reasonable time, but I had underestimated the esteem in which the Sago Clan was held. He merely had to let it

be known that Yamaguchi no Mikio's bandits were the ones who attacked Lady Takara, and information from the countryside suddenly became available in abundance. There were a few false leads, as one would expect, but the others all pointed to an isolated farming compound west of Takefu. Now Kenji and I watched with Daiki opposite the dilapidated south gate as his men took up positions around that compound. Once they were in place, Daiki would give the word to attack.

He never got the chance.

Almost immediately there were shouts and the sound of steel meeting steel from the hillside on the north side of the compound. Daiki swore and picked up his club.

"They've been warned!"

He set out across the meadow in a dead run with Kenji, myself, and five or six of the governor's *bushi* not far behind. He barely hesitated at the gate, taking his massive demon-queller's club in both hands and smashing it into the gate as soon as he reached it. Whatever strength the timbers had once contained had clearly fled years ago. The gate shattered into splinters hardly big enough for kindling, and Daiki was through.

I wasn't sure what we'd find in the compound, but the answer proved to be hardly anything at all. Two women in

peasant clothes hugged each other in terror as they tried to hide behind a well, but there was no sign of anyone else.

“Take everyone alive!” Daiki shouted to the warriors behind us. “I want prisoners, not bodies!”

The only sounds of fighting were from the hillside beyond the north gate. Two *bushi* remained behind to search for anyone else hiding and to guard the women, but the rest of us sped out the north gate. By the time we reached the fighting, it was over.

The captain of the hillside detachment bowed to Daiki. “I’m sorry, my lord, but they didn’t give us much choice. They were determined to escape.”

Daiki ignored that. “Where is he?!”

I didn’t have to ask whom he meant, but it seemed that Daiki, in this one regard, was not going to get his wish. The *bushi* produced two flea-bitten, scruffy men. Both were bruised and bloody but alive. Two more were not. One of them was Yamaguchi no Mikio. Daiki kicked the body so that it rolled face up and studied the dead man’s features.

“*Che....* It would seem the bandit has escaped me after all.”

Whatever Daiki had thought to do with Mikio, killing him would perhaps had been the least of it. But that was a moot point now. By the time the prisoners were bound and the rest

of the soldiers recalled, the *bushi* left behind had completed their search of the compound.

“We found this in the storeroom and more besides,” the man said, showing us several bolts of cloth. “Do you recognize any of them?”

Daiki barely glanced at them. “Lady Takara wove that cloth herself. I’d know it anywhere. What about Sanji’s demon?”

The *bushi* was a hard-bitten man who looked as if he also had faced down a demon or two in his time, but he was almost pale now. “My lord, it’s not here.”

“It has to be here! I’ll find it if we have to take every building apart plank by plank!”

In the end, that was exactly what Daiki and his men did. But when the dilapidated compound was reduced to piles of rotting wood, Sanji’s demon was still nowhere to be found.

* * *

(Concluded in [Issue #39](#))

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Richard Parks lives in Mississippi with his wife and a varying number of cats. He collects Japanese woodblock prints but

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IN MEMORIUM

by Alys Sterling

When I jumped out of Madame Madelaine Frenier's bedroom window on the third floor of Monsieur Frenier's Paris townhouse, my life didn't flash before my eyes. There wouldn't have been time.

Instead, the fall itself imprinted on my mind in excruciating detail, the rough grey stone of the house flying past, the roses below rushing up to meet me, velvet-soft petals shining in the sunlight as though lit from within, the wind in my hair, the petals flying up in a pink cloud around me as the thorns scored my bare chest. For Monsieur Frenier had arrived in the bedroom above before I had finished buttoning my shirt.

The lovely Madelaine threw my coat out after me. It also landed in the rose bushes, whose thorns clung like talons to the embroidered velvet as I pulled it free. Too bad. Defenestration had turned out to be interesting. I might try it again, but not if I was going to need a new coat every time. I threw the ruined coat over my shoulder, then plucked a rose and walked off down the street twirling it, while Monsieur Frenier leaned out of his wife's window, pop-eyed with astonishment.

After such a public display, it would not be wise to go straight back to Gaumont's house. Besides, I didn't fancy

spending my evening reading dusty, and mostly incorrect, books on magic, or perhaps trying to turn lead into gold. So I went to see my friend Hibou, who inhabits the body of an iron gargoyle, at LaChaise necropolis.

The necropolis is Paris in miniature—a city of sepulchers, its tombs and monuments laid out in regular streets and avenues, and crowned with grinning winged skulls, bats, and gargoyles as the larger buildings of Paris itself are crowned with urns and fleurs-de-lys. Hibou lives on top of the Milrais family crypt, where by day visiting mourners think him but another grotesque piece of ornamentation. I climbed up and found him there, lying in the sun like some great iron lizard.

“So, it’s over with Madelaine then.” Hibou turned his head with a slither of well-oiled metal to eye my already-healing scratches and torn coat.

“I’m through with women.” I tossed the rose at Hibou, who caught it mid-air on a talon.

“That’s what you said after Annelise.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but Hibou went on before I could get a word out.

“And you said the same after Babette, and Minou, and Madame Soupir as well, if I recall.”

“You’re right,” I said, to shut him up. A catalogue of all the women who had made me swear off their sex would have taken

the rest of the afternoon. But when you don't need to eat or drink, can't be killed in a duel or even lose at cards without trying, what else is there to do? "I should never have possessed Gaumont."

"Here we go again."

"What?"

"This is the part where you rant on about how you should have just done what the alchemist wanted, even if it was boring. Go on, don't let me stop you."

"Why did he have to draw the circle wrong?" I bit the tip of my finger and trailed blood across the stone, drawing a perfect pentagram and circle on the roof of the mausoleum. "It's not so hard to do it properly, is it?"

"You still didn't have to possess him."

"I should have just ignored the gap. He probably only wanted some simple little job done. I mean, an alchemist who can't even draw a proper circle couldn't possibly think of anything really complicated to ask a demon to do."

Hibou didn't answer that one. After all, he had only been asked to animate an iron gargoyle, and here he was, still stuck in it. Just as stuck as me, only Gaumont's body couldn't fly.

"Don't you sometimes want to go home too?" I asked him.

"No. I like it here." Hibou stretched like a cat and lay back down in the sun, resting his pointy chin on iron-scaled claws.

Hibou hadn't killed the alchemist who summoned him, just ran away.

"You don't get bored?"

"Not at all."

"I do." I lay back in the sun next to Hibou, feeling more heat radiate off his black iron side than I did off the stone beneath me. The scratches on my chest had healed to nothing already, and my fingertip had stopped bleeding. "It's not so much being stuck in this plane, I suppose." I stared thoughtfully at my finger, watching the wound heal. "It's being trapped in this damned body. It feels like a prison I'm carrying around with me. And people notice more than you'd think they would. They know there's something strange about me."

"You mean, like the way they can't kill you?"

Hibou was being sarcastic, but I nodded anyway. It had caused no end of trouble when I turned up at the Chat Noir to watch Babette dance the night after her husband had shot me in a duel. She fainted dead away on stage, and after that everyone started saying the club was haunted. The manager had barred me in the end, for driving his patrons away.

"I wish they could kill me."

"Are you serious?"

"No. Yes. I'd do anything to be free of all this." There – that at least felt certain. I'd been in Gaumont's body for so long,

sometimes I had trouble separating his human feelings from my own, though I wasn't about to admit that to Hibou. "Of course, if I wait long enough, I'll just die of boredom."

"I've heard of something you might find interesting."

"Oh?" I kept my tone noncommittal. Hibou was up to something, though his iron countenance made it difficult to guess what.

"Have you ever heard of Lavigny?"

I shook my head. "Is it a place?"

"A place, and a man, or it was. It's an old chateau, near the Bois Leger."

"And what's so special about this chateau?"

"It's haunted."

I laughed so hard I had to gasp for breath. "I suppose," I said, when I could speak again, "I suppose the young men of Paris dare one another to spend the night in it. And you turn up, to play the ghost."

"I don't," Hibou said primly.

I only laughed the harder at that, for I knew full well he played exactly that sort of trick on boys who dared each other to visit the streets and avenues of the necropolis after dark and lovers who came there thinking it a safely private place for a tryst.

“No, really,” Hibou said when my laughter had died down. That nearly set me off again, but the look on his face made me hold quiet and listen. It was as close to fearful as an iron mask could look, and fear has no place on the countenance of a demon. Even a half-animate one.

“What then?”

“I overheard some mourners at the DeMille crypt last night. They laid wreaths for a young man, Armand DeMille, but they carried the coffin as though it weighed nothing.”

“I know Armand,” I interrupted. “He lost six hundred francs to me ten days ago. You don’t mean to say he’s dead? He never paid me, the fiend.”

“Apparently, he was broke,” Hibou said, his tone dry, his eye fixed accusingly on me.

“That wasn’t my fault. I didn’t force him to keep playing.”

“No, you couldn’t, not in Gaumont’s body.”

Which nailed my present difficulties in one succinct phrase. “So, what happened?”

“He staked all he had left, ten francs they say, at odds of a thousand to one that he would spend the night in Lavigny and live to see the morning. Not the first such wager to be made, so I hear, and not the first to be lost, either.”

“So, he died? What killed him? And why was there no body?”

“Precisely. The very thing no one knows. DeMille’s friends entered the chateau the next day at noon, when he still had not emerged, but they found nothing, not even rats.”

“He ran away to escape his debts.”

“But no, why should he? When he would have come out ten thousand francs richer the next morning?”

“Good point, I must admit. So, you advise me to spend the night in Lavigny and see if I survive? Well, it may alleviate my boredom, if nothing else.”

I had no difficulty in locating Lavigny. Though many chateaux were burned and looted during the Revolution, most have been restored, inhabited now by the bourgeoisie and foreign aristocrats – those chateaux nearest Paris at any rate.

Lavigny, at first glance, appeared in a fantastic state of preservation, neither burned nor ruined. Even the windows remained intact. A high wall encircled the chateau and park, the gardens and woodland inside having run wild so that I could only just glimpse the house as I peered through the gilded curlicues of the gate. When I pushed it, the gate refused to move, either locked or simply rusted shut, but even in Gaumont’s body I had no difficulty scaling the wall.

I dropped down on the other side into an avenue lined with yew trees once clipped into pleasing shapes, now grown into grotesque mockeries of the creatures they had resembled.

Rabbits had become towering, twiggy beetles, peacocks turned to gigantic snails. I walked up the avenue, skirting a dry fountain with a cracked marble basin and moss-grown figures of nymphs and frogs, pausing now and again to admire some particularly fine grotesquerie.

The front door of the chateau swung open at my touch to reveal a grand hall, filthy but apparently unlooted. A gilt mirror, the glass so obscured by dust that I could not see any reflection in it, hung on the left-hand wall above a console table which bore on its marble top several objects of apparent value: a vase, a snuffbox, and a card-tray. The tray held several cards, the top-most bearing DeMille's name. I did not hesitate to add one of Gaumont's. If Hibou had sent me on a fool's errand, at least I would have added to my reputation for reckless behavior. It pleased me to think placing that card might be the last deed I committed as Gaumont. Though I scarcely dared hope that would be the case.

Looking through doorways right and left I beheld once-sumptuous chambers gently illuminated by the low rays of the setting sun, their satin-upholstered furniture now sadly fading, their crystal chandeliers draped with cobwebs, but all still retaining the shadow of a former elegance. Penetrating further into the chateau, I began to wish I had brought a lamp. Imprisoned in Gaumont's body, I could no longer see in the

dark, something I had forgotten in my haste to see this haunted chateau. It occurred to me there might be candles in the kitchen somewhere, so I went in search of them.

As I searched the kitchen, the light dimmed further, until looking up from the last drawer, I saw through the window that night had truly fallen. I decided to abandon my fruitless search and return to the front rooms, where I had seen a comfortable-looking though dusty armchair, to await adventure. If none occurred, I could at least continue my exploration of this charming residence at sunrise. Considering its reputation, perhaps I should move in. Gaumont's house, though adequate, could hardly compare to the grandeur of Lavigny.

I left the kitchen via the rear hallway, which had sunk into complete darkness. To my annoyance, I had to feel my way along the wall until I came to the door which led from the servants' area into the main hall. I opened it to a flood of silver light which threw every object in the hall into high relief, including a row of statues along each wall which I had not noticed when I first entered the chateau.

These figures of dark stone stood half again as tall as a human man. Though their forms seemed carved along human lines, robes and hoods fell in concealing folds of stone around them. The mirror above the table seemed larger in this different light, the height of a man at least, brilliantly reflecting

the statue opposite as though to make a corresponding figure in its row, though when I passed it, it still refused to show me Gaumont's form.

Entering the parlor where I intended to await the coming of the ghost, or whatever being professed to haunt this place, I found the effects of the moonlight yet greater. Satin upholstery which in daylight had appeared a faded rose now shone blood red, with the gleam of new silk. The gilded carvings of the woodwork, which ran in bands around large wall panels, sprang into movement as I watched. Vines became writhing tentacles, fruit the bulbous bodies from which those tentacles extended, all crawling around the ceiling throwing white shadows in the strange light. The panels surrounded by those carvings had shown painted birds and flowers done in the Chinese style on gilt backgrounds, as faded as the rest of the room. Yet now the gilded ground turned silver and the birds and flowers gathered into pools of ink which ran down the walls to drip onto the floor below, leaving panes of the same lucent silver as the mirror in the hall. From the depths of these, tall grey shapes advanced, figures robed and hooded which might have been the models for the statues in the hall.

I stood mesmerized by the soundless rippling of those mirrored surfaces, watching the statues advance. This, certainly, was something I had never seen before. When next I

saw Hibou, he would receive my profuse thanks. Then, one of those figures raised its arms, extending hands as grey as its robes to grasp the edges of its hood.

I felt, or rather Gaumont did, and with such force that it took me a moment to throw it off, a sudden desperation not to see what lay beneath that heavy drape of fabric. My own curiosity won out, of course. I watched eagerly as the hands drew back the folds of grey material to reveal a granitic face, human in form, but so frozen that its wrinkles might have been carved from stone. Closed eyelids bulged and rippled, then opened to allow nests of threadlike tentacles to uncurl, reaching towards me.

I could sense Gaumont's terror even through my own disappointment. What horror could I feel, I who had counted more bizarre monstrosities among my friends? I watched the beings file past, then followed them into the hall, to find only the double row of statues standing there. A stealthy movement caught the corner of my eye. I whirled, to confront Gaumont's pale reflection, showing at last in the mirror over the table. The hooded figures had entered through mirrors; could they have exited through one as well? Could I? Did my path to freedom lie beyond that glass?

I climbed up onto the table, knocking its contents aside, to press myself against the mirror. Instead of cold glass, I felt a

soft, gelatinous surface yielding to let me through.

It sucked me in, squeezing the breath from Gaumont's body. I heard a snapping, crunching sound, echoes perhaps of the breaking vase. Everything went black then, as I fought for breath. I tried to open my eyes, to push through the rubbery stuff which so painfully pressed against me.

At last, I broke through, feeling as though I had been released from the depths of some airless dungeon. I attempted to take a deep breath and found myself expanding to fill my proper shape. I looked back at the mirror and saw neither glass nor reflection, but a sparkling haze in the shape of Gaumont's body sinking backwards into the dark, paneled wall. Free! I felt a moment's elation, followed by a creeping sense of dread. The mirror had freed me from Gaumont's human body, but evidently not from his emotions. Furthermore, certain suspicions about my current situation occurred to me.

I had fallen into a trap. The fact that it had been constructed to hold not demons but human souls might yet work to my advantage. It all depended on who had built the thing, and how it worked.

I looked around, hoping for a clue. To either side of me stretched an endless hallway of closed doors, the space between each and the next occupied by one of the robed statues, all unhooded, each with the same stony face.

I spread my wings and flew – what joy to fly again – down that corridor, looking for a way out. I went faster and faster, pushing myself to tremendous speeds, but still saw no end to the corridor. After a while I became convinced that, rather than going on forever, the corridor must loop round on itself.

Which left the doors. These should have opened easily to the touch of my mind, yet they held fast against me, nor could I pass through them. It was as though they were not doors at all but part of the solid surface of the walls. Then the thought came to me that perhaps, as at Lavigny, I needed a mirror instead of a door. Yet, there were no mirrors here, only the endless rows of statues.

Possessing the statue had nothing in common with possessing Gaumont. Its appearance suggested stone, but inhabiting it felt as though I had immersed myself in a bath of cold glue. It took all of my will to force the thing to step across the corridor and reach for the nearest doorknob. At the statue's touch, the door swung open, revealing a wall of darkness. I gathered my will again and forced the statue to take one further step.

I came out into a large room, bare of furniture. Across an acre of polished wooden floor, I saw a wall of curtained windows, such as might lead out onto a terrace. Tattered grey

curtains billowed, though I could feel no wind, letting in a light which seemed warmer than the moonlight before.

The light of dawn – the night must be nearly over. I had succeeded. I could have danced for joy. But when I tried to move, the cold grip of the statue held me. I had only traded one prison for another.

If I did not get out by daybreak, I would be trapped in Lavigny forever. Hibou had been right. The place was haunted, and by something far worse than even I could ever have imagined.

I fought to disinhabit the statue, but it clung to me, refusing to give me up. I could, however, still make it move. Step by dogged step, I drove it towards the windows.

As I took the final step, I saw, through a rent in the curtains, what lay without. Not daylight at all, but a congealed, grey substance more solid than any fog, pressing against the windows, smearing them with dampness.

I tried to stop, then, that oily greyness filling me with foreboding, but the statue had already begun its final, fatal step. All my power failed to prevent it from smashing through the glass into the roiling substance beyond.

I felt a moment of shock at the impact, and then my wings were free. The heavy carapace of the statue had disappeared. I had no idea where lay up or down; if I were falling or flying.

Around me, I could see only the fog. It burned like acid on my skin, and in my mind. It wanted to eat my soul, which was quite unfortunate, because it wasn't going to find one.

Now if ever, my life should flash before my eyes, I thought, remembering the fall from Madelaine's window. The greyness fastened on that. I could feel it drinking in every detail the way a spider sucks the fluids from a juicy fly. The meal seemed to slow its attack on my mind, so I cast about for something else to feed it, and remembered Babette, the hours I had spent in her dressing room at the Chat Noir, the duel with her husband, and the night after that. I fed it sweet Minou, and shrewish Annelise, and even Madame Soupier—not a lady at all but Gaumont's special friend, and my first human lover.

I fed the greyness every woman I had known, every fight with a jealous husband, every game of chance I had won, even all my hours of boredom. I began to feel motion again, and knew I still flew on, though whether the greyness had any end, I could only hope.

I fed it the instant of my summoning, the moment I entered into Gaumont, the surging, sizzling sensation of taking on flesh and emotion. I began to imagine I could see the fog thinning around me, shapes and colors almost emerging through it.

I fed it the day I had met Hibou, sunbathing on top of Notre Dame, when I had climbed up to see if throwing myself from the topmost spire would kill me; the heat of the sun on the dark stone of the roof, the smell of hot iron, my own shock at seeing one of the gargoyles move, and Hibou's sarcastic voice urging me to go ahead and try, if I wanted so badly to fly, for he had seen my nature in an instant. As the greyness sucked that memory dry, I pushed myself to greater speed, knowing I had nothing else left to offer it.

I felt the acid burn into me then, into what little was left that I could call myself, but even as it bit, the fog around me dispersed and I could see real daylight, the sun coming up beyond a stone wall. Instinct, or some last remaining scrap of memory, told me that if I could only make it to the other side of that wall, I would be safe.

I looked back and saw a house with silvered windows, reflected in them people whose faces seemed vaguely familiar, whose names I almost knew. But I had to reach the wall. I could not afford the time to try to remember them. I turned again and flew on, passing over the top of the wall as the sun burst into full glory and the sky changed in an instant from dawn pink to brilliant blue above.

An animate gargoyle of black iron stood at the gates, looking in. A gaunt human in a torn velvet coat staggered out of

the house and down the avenue, stopping short when he saw the waiting gargoyle. I flew over them and onwards.

There was something I had wanted to do, if only I could remember what it was.

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Alys Sterling shares a small flat in London with the Cult of Khoshek, who refuse to leave due to a prophecy that the Great One will manifest any day now, via her television set. She plays bass guitar in a band called Witching Hour. Her fiction has previously appeared in Daikaiju 3: Giant Monsters vs the World.

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COVER ART

“Chinese Steampunk Village,” by Raphael Lacoste



Raphael Lacoste has been an Art Director on Videogames and Cinematics for over seven years; he worked at Ubisoft on such licenses as Assassin’s Creed. He won a VES Award in 2006 for his work on Prince of Persia and the Two Thrones. He currently works as Senior Art Director for Electronic Arts Montreal. View his gallery at www.raphael-lacoste.com.

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