

From the New World, by Yusuke Kishi

Tale of the Fiend

This is a story from about a hundred fifty years ago. There was a boy gathering herbs on the mountain. Engrossed in this activity, he came to the Holy Barrier. He had picked just about all the herbs inside the barrier when he happened to look up, and saw that there were still plenty of herbs outside.

He had always been warned never to step outside the Holy Barrier. If for some reason he absolutely had to, he must have an adult with him.

But there were no adults around. The boy was tempted and thought stepping outside for just a little bit was okay. He poked his head out first. He just needed to duck under the barrier, pluck some herbs, and come right back. That will be okay.

The boy slid quietly under the rope. The streamers swayed and rustled.

At that instant, he suddenly had an unpleasant feeling. In addition to the guilt at disobeying the adults, there was another feeling of unease he had never experienced before.

Reassuring himself that nothing was wrong, he approached the herbs.

Then he saw a fiend coming toward him. Even though it was the same height as the boy, it had a scary appearance. Its anger swirled like a fiery halo, burning everything around it. As the fiend approached, it mowed down everything in its path and made the foliage burst into flame. The boy went pale, but he forced himself not to scream and stepped back. If he could just slip under the rope, the fiend should vanish.

But a branch underfoot snapped.

The fiend turned its head, face completely devoid of emotion. It stared at the target of its anger. The boy ducked under the rope and took off as fast as he could.

Everything would be okay as long as he entered the protection of the barrier. But when he looked back, the fiend had also ducked under the rope! In that instant, the boy realized that he had done something irreparable. He had invited a fiend into the barrier.

The boy cried as he ran down the mountain path. The fiend chased him relentlessly. The boy ran along the edge of the barrier, toward the stream in the opposite direction of the village. When he glanced behind him, the fiend's face was hidden by the underbrush. Only its glowing eyes and leering mouth were visible. The fiend was seeking a path to the village. He couldn't let that happen. If the fiend followed him back, the entire village would probably be destroyed.

As he cleared the last of the underbrush, a sheer cliff appeared before him. The roaring of the river at the bottom reverberated up the walls. Across the gorge hung a rope bridge. Worn out by years of exposure to the elements, it swayed eerily as if beckoning to him. The bridge could fall at any time. No one had used it in over ten years, and he had always been warned not to.

Slowly, the boy started across the bridge. The ropes made a disturbing creaking sound. The planks were made of oak, but looked ready to break at any moment. When he was about halfway across, the bridge lurched suddenly. Looking back, he saw that the fiend had also stepped onto the bridge. The bridge swayed more and more wildly as the fiend came nearer.

The boy glanced down at the bottom of the valley. It was dizzyingly far. He looked up. The fiend was already closing in on him.

When he could clearly see the fiend's unpleasant face, the boy brandished the sickle he had been carrying, and in one movement, cut through the ropes holding the bridge. The bridge swung down, and the boy almost slipped off but somehow managed to grab onto the rope. Did the fiend fall to the bottom? The boy looked. Somehow, the fiend was also clinging to the rope. It slowly turned its murderous gaze toward him. The sickle had fallen into the valley. He couldn't cut the ropes anymore. What should he do? He prayed to the heavens. It doesn't matter if I die; please don't let the fiend get into the village. Did the boy's wish reach the heavens? Or was it that the ropes could no longer bear their weight? The rope snapped, sending them down into the valley. The boy and the fiend disappeared from view. Fiends have never appeared since then.