



Cuckoo Bird

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Enormous raven heads with unfathomably dark eyes stare at her. Their beaks move — speaking, she has to assume. Yet, no words come out, only the mocking cawing laughs of a crow. One monstrous talon reaches towards her and pushes itself **into** her chest. All Shuro can do is scream. Scream as she remembers.

Remembers her parents fussing over her after she fell out of a tree. Her father's strong arms rocking her gently after a nightmare. Her mother's wry comfort after that fool Keitaro made her cry. The joy that she felt when her little brother was born, and the tears she shed when he didn't survive the winter. Shuro remembered her promise, her promise to her parents that they wouldn't lose her, that it didn't matter who she married or where she went, she would return.

Yet, how can she do that now, trapped as she is by these monstrous creatures? The yellow beaks can't smile, but Shuro can almost see their amusement as she is tormented by the claw inside her chest. It twists and pulls at her, but she sees no blood. She can barely manage to keep her eyes open. The feeling of heat and pain overwhelms her as the second bird monster human grabs her head. The talon is painful as it cuts into her scalp, and Shuro can only vaguely distinguish her own voice begging them to let her go.

"Awaken." The word slams into her mind harder than the rampaging boar had slammed into the village walls two years back.

Shuro gasps as she sits up from the cold ground. Ignoring the bitter snow, her hands move over her body, touching her chest where the monster had forced its talon in her. Nothing. No sign of what happened – just the signs of her beginning her journey to adulthood. Reaching up to grasp her head, her fingers run along her black hair to feel perfectly smooth skin. No scaring from the monstrous talon that had cut into her.

Was it all a nightmare? Just some baku from the Realm of Dreams tormenting me for their own purposes? Standing up, Shuro brushes off the cold wet snow from her heavy clothing and looks around at the forest. Dark pines tower up towards the early morning sun as the wind as near pristine white blankets the ground around her. She doesn't know this place; this copse of trees isn't her usual grove where she goes to get firewood. *How did I get here?*

The question makes her head hurt, and Shuro shakes herself. *I must have fallen down when climbing a tree.* One of her hobbies that makes her mother go around the bend whenever she catches her daughter, but it is so much fun! Still, she should get back to the village. Not empty-handed though. With a careful eye, the young girl picks up a bundle of sticks, mostly dried and ready to be fed into a fire.

The bark feels cold to her touch as Shuro hefts her bundle of wood in her arms. *That should be enough for the fires.* The winter had come so suddenly this year. The little clouds that form from her breath puff up into the air as she walks. The winter has been so sudden, yet the animals knew somehow. Not one could be seen, almost as if they were hiding from her, but she was just a young girl. Why would they bother? It was for the best really. While bears and wolves don't usually come this far towards the river, when they did, well, there were stories.

Shuro was relatively sure she couldn't outrun a bear.

You couldn't outrun the crow.

A frown forms on her face. *What is that?* Has she thought something strange? Stopping for a moment, she looks around again at the forest, trying to piece together what had made her feel so uneasy all of a sudden. Her stomach gnaws at her like it had when she had watched Moka confess to Tsuma, not knowing that Tsuma had just gotten engaged to Rika. Shuro knew then she should have warned the other woman, but there had been no time. She had just found out herself and it was all a mess. *What was I thinking about?*

It doesn't matter, Shuro decides and keeps walking back to the village. She just wants to go home and eat a nice unadon. They still should have some eels for the rice bowl dish unless father ate them all again. Only she and her father like the oily fish. Her mother claims eel is just too much and sticks to trout or carp. Shuro loves her mother, but they can't agree on this at all. The thought of them playfully arguing about the best fish brings a smile to her face as she crests a small hill to see the village.

Named 'First Rain Village' officially, Shuro had never called it anything but 'the Village', because it was the only one she knew. Laid out in a twisting grid surrounded by a firm log palisade, the village is a few li away from the

river so that flooding wouldn't take everyone. It is still close enough for people to go to every day for water and food. Smoke wafts from the chimneys as she begins to hurry to the gate. *It will be good to get out of the cold.*

Not that you have felt cold or warmth since you woke up, have you?

Yes, she can almost feel the warm embrace of her father even now.

Old Misato stretches, cracking her back as the worn woman looks to the gate at Shuro with some surprise. "Shuro, aren't you...?" "Just got back with some wood, Auntie," Shuro says with a smile. "Do you need any kindling?" The older woman frowns in confusion but slowly nods. "That's mighty kind of you, Shuro, but weren't you going with your father to the dock?"

Shuro tilts her head. "No? Let me help you inside, Auntie."

Misato nods slowly and lets herself be taken inside. Shuro sets down some kindling for the old woman and starts a fire for her. *It was the least that I should do for an honored elder,* Shuro thinks.

That Old Misato always gives her a treat for that is simply her being nice and in no way a bribe. The fire crackles and Shuro bows. "Take care, Auntie. I should really get home,"

Misato reaches into a jar and produces a small arare and hands it over to Shuro. "Thank you Shuro. Take care of yourself."

Inhaling the delicious rice cracker, Shuro picks up her bundle of sticks and continues onwards to the Headsman House, or, as she had always known it, home.

Shuro doesn't like the looks that people give her. Usually, people smiled or at least acknowledged her, but they never stared at her like she was out of place before.

Hiroto just stares at her like he is trying to figure out why she is here. The lumberjack hasn't made any sign of noticing her words or hearing her.

Midori gives a nervous laugh before saying that her baby needs her. While Ichirou is a needy baby, Shuro doesn't hear anything.

On it goes. The people she knows, the people Shuro calls her extended family all stop and either stare at her or just make excuses to leave.

It was as if they are looking at a ghost, but she is real. She can feel the world around her. She lit a fire for the Fortunes' sake. Shuro huddles, finally feeling cold as she watches her best friend Sayuri babble something about a kettle and run away from her.

What is going on?

Mother would know. Mother knows everything. Shuro forces herself not to cry as she reaches the large minka that she has lived in all her life. The sloping thatched roof towers over her as she steps inside.

"I'm home!" Shuro calls as she moves to drop off her bundle of wood in the rest of the pile.

The sound of movement as Mother comes out of the kitchen, her hands wrapped around a cloth. "Shuro? What are you doing here?"

What kind of question is that? "I live here?" Shuro offers. "I brought wood."

The older woman frowns slightly. "You went with your father this morning to the dock, and after the scare we had, I can't imagine him letting you out of his sight."

"Scare?" Shuro shivers. She doesn't know why. "What are you talking about?"

A flat look from Mother, "Shuro, this doesn't become you. Even if you say you're fine, you were gone for five days!"

Five days? She doesn't....

They took you. They made you. Five days sounds right.

No, I wasn't gone five days! Shuro knows she would remember that, knows that the nightmare was just a nightmare. "Mother," she begins. "I just went to the forest to get some wood..."

The memories of the crisp morning, Lady Sun yet to rise. Shuro knew the forest like the back of her hand. She was almost a woman herself, and she could handle going to the woods all on her own. Her mother fretting anyway, and her father calming everything down the way he always did...

Mother takes a step back, looking at Shuro wearily with green eyes so like hers. "Do...do you not remember, Shuro? You were lost in the forest. You said a murder of crows had chased you into a cave."

Shuro shifts, rubbing her arm for comfort, that sounded, well it sounded like something that had happened, but at the same time not to her. It was easy to imagine how the beaks had felt and the talons of course. "...I'm sorry mother, no, I don't remember that."

Mother frowns then. "Go get some rest, I'll talk with Monk Kenta, maybe he'll have some medicine for you."

Nodding dumbly, Shuro goes to her bed and lies down. The worn futon does little to keep her above the tatami mats of the bedroom, but with enough blankets, she is comfortable enough. Comfortable enough to doze as her mind tries to figure out why she can't remember.

Shouldn't I remember being attacked?

Shuro's own shout jolts her out of her half awake state. "Who is this?"

It is odd. Shuro doesn't remember opening her mouth to talk, let alone shout. Sitting up, she looks around the room to see herself standing there, arm outstretched and pointing. Shuro never really liked how she looked, too gangly and awkward. Her green eyes were her best feature. It feels strange to look at her doppelganger, the scratches of beaks and talons visible on her head giving her a character that Shuro lacked.

With a swallow, Shuro answers. "I'm...I'm Shuro"

"You can't be Shuro!" The other her yells. "I'm Shuro!"

A helpless shrug is all she can offer to Other Shuro. "I don't know what to tell you."

Her father comes in then. The large man looks between them, his eyes darting from one to another in confusion. "Wait...two of you? How?"

Behind her, the Monk, Kenta-sensei, the man who had taken over for Shuhei-sensei, comes in. Kenta is older than her by a few years. Usually Shuro enjoyed watching him from time to time; his handsome face was always so kind.

It was not kind now, set in a thin line of hard determination and suspicion. His brown soulful eyes only hold cunning wisdom as memories flicker through them.

"It appears so..." Kenta says. "I've heard of this. Sometimes yokai from the realm of mischief like to prank us humans by impersonating people we love. One of them must be a spirit of some kind."

What?

Shuro stands up, rubbing her arm as she stares at her other self. *A prank then?* What sort of humour is there in a joke like this? Why would anyone impersonate her of all people? Yes sometimes she climbs trees and yes sometimes she gossips, but she is just a normal girl. The only thing remotely special is being the daughter of the village headman. That isn't enough to...to be worth acting on, is it?

"Then how do we tell them apart?" Her father asks. His eyes flicker to the other her.

A sinking feeling forms in Shuro's gut. "I...I can answer anything you ask me father,"

"Who did you give your first kiss to?" The other her demands.

Flushing, Shuro answers. "Keitaro stole my first kiss, but I gave my second to Sayuri..."

The other her frowns. "...I never told anyone that."

Father sighs. "I thought you two were close, I didn't think that close. What did I tell you when the storm came in and ruined Toshi's house?"

"That the gods are to be appeased, not understood." Both Shuro speak at the same time.

Shuro draws on her own memories, a secret she knew that no one else should know then. "What's my real favourite animal?"

"I thought she liked cats," Kenta murmurs.

Other Shuro looks aside. "I... it's so uncute, but I like scorpions."

"...Because they have that stinger. It was so neat when that merchant came through and showed us her pet scorpion skittering around chasing crickets," Shuro continues.

Kenta steps forward. "I told you once that I had aspired to be something else. What was it?"

The monk had always been so kind, a friend that was adult but not. An adult that would judge her, and Shuro could remember him telling her that all that pressure was bad for children. It was why he had given up being a noble and become a monk.

"You were supposed to be ruler of Ginasutra..." she answers in sync with Other Shuro again.

"Wait, you're a noble?" Her father asks.

Kenta shakes his head. "Gave it up to become a monk...but I told her that in the shrine where the trickster spirit shouldn't have been able to overhear."

Father looks between them. "Then what do we do? I only have one daughter and the other is an imposter."

"I'm your daughter!" Shuro half-shouts now. "I don't know who this is, but she's not me."

"No, I'm his daughter, you fake!" The other Shuro looks ready to jump her.

To be fair, Shuro knows it's only because she just got up that she isn't ready to attack the Other Her, as well.

"There is another way. Ito, you have a knife?" Kenta asks.

Her father produces a sharp knife usually used for cutting wood. "Here you go?"

The monk swallows. "Only humans bleed red blood, so I'm going to ask you both to let me make a cut and that will tell us the truth. We can...we can decide what to do after that."

Shuro swallows and holds out her hand.

Don't do it, it won't end well.

She has to prove that she is real, that she is the daughter of Ito and Ayumi, the Heads of First Rain Village.

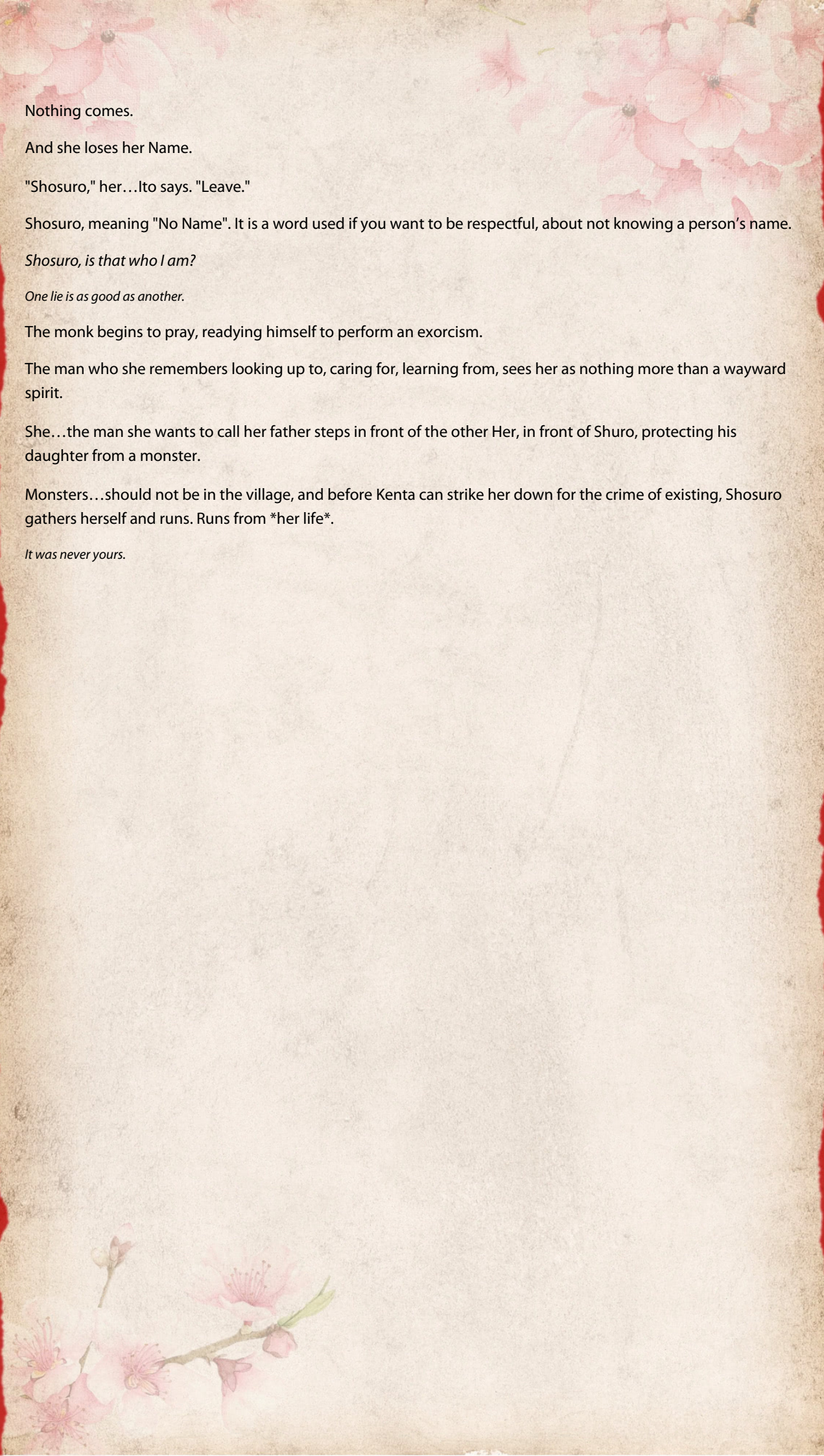
"I'll go first."

Kenta nods. "Sorry for the pain." He says, and he does seem sorry.

The metal cuts into her hand, and then...nothing. Nothing comes out. The pain of the metal is there, the feeling of her skin parting is there. But there is no hot gush of red blood, no smell of copper filling the air.

Shu--

She holds her hand in front of her, willing, demanding that something come out, anything, but nothing does. All she can do is stare at the cut on her hand as it slowly begins to knit itself together.



Nothing comes.

And she loses her Name.

"Shosuro," her...Ito says. "Leave."

Shosuro, meaning "No Name". It is a word used if you want to be respectful, about not knowing a person's name.

Shosuro, is that who I am?

One lie is as good as another.

The monk begins to pray, readying himself to perform an exorcism.

The man who she remembers looking up to, caring for, learning from, sees her as nothing more than a wayward spirit.

She...the man she wants to call her father steps in front of the other Her, in front of Shuro, protecting his daughter from a monster.

Monsters...should not be in the village, and before Kenta can strike her down for the crime of existing, Shosuro gathers herself and runs. Runs from *her life*.

It was never yours.