

CURSEBREAKER



A SHORT STORY BY JOSHI ZHANG

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CURSEBREAKER

“I hear you’re leaving for Kanazaka, Mizuki.”

Mizuki placed a plastic convenience store bag on the floor, taking his seat across from Toshiro. The warmth of Toshiro’s forge felt homey and safe, as orange light flickered across their faces. For so many years, Mizuki had come to see the bladesmith, smuggling in Toshiro’s favorite treats under the noses of the Hashimoto clan, who kept the older man captive.

This would be the last time for a long time that Mizuki could enjoy his company like this.

“Yeah,” replied Mizuki. “Some punks are interfering with our operations out there. They want me to infiltrate, do some recon. Even Kuroura doesn’t know I’m coming—the elders don’t trust the Kanazaka branch not to blow my cover.” He waved a doughnut in front of Toshiro’s face. “I just came to make sure my dear Toshiro-ojisan had his fill of treats before I go.”

“No, you didn’t,” replied Toshiro, smacking it away to reach for a bottle of tea. “You only bribe me like this when you want my advice.”

Mizuki gave a half smile. “Damn. Am I that easy to read?”





“The tells you had as a boy are still present in the man you’ve become,” said Toshiro. “What’s on your mind?”

“This mission,” Mizuki said, his tone becoming serious. “I’m a little worried about it.”

Toshiro stroked his chin pensively. “I can understand why; these kids sound like quite the handful.” He uncapped the bottle and sipped it slowly. “The Hashimoto elders must have great faith in you, to entrust you with a task like this.”

Mizuki sighed. “Look, I get that these Kanazaka punks are a problem. All right, they’re slippery enough to mess with our weapons shipments and get away with it. But . . . they’re also my age. Some younger, even. And they’re not part of a rival family. They’re just fighting with all they’ve got to survive. When I think about how I might have to hurt people like that . . .” Mizuki fiddled with the chain on his mechanical arm. “I guess I don’t really want to.”

Toshiro folded his arms and leaned back, nodding solemnly. “You have never been cruel enough for this life, Mizuki.”

“You always say that.”

“Do you disagree? Have you given any more thought to leaving all of this behind?”

Mizuki squeezed his eyes shut. “I can’t. You know I can’t. I’ll be punished.”

“By the elders?”

“And the curse.”

The image of Mizuki’s childhood flooded his mind. “I’ve been running from it my whole life, ever since it took Mom. Back when Dad and I moved here, he thought it wouldn’t follow us. But look how wrong he was. No matter how much money he spent on good luck charms, how many exorcists and priests he hired . . . it didn’t matter. He still died.”

Mizuki put his head in his hands in grief, tousling his hair.

“It’s not like I asked to walk the gokudō path. This was my fate. And you’re telling me I should just leave? Fight against the inevitable the way Dad did? I can’t. If the elders don’t get me—if *she* doesn’t get me—the curse will. Either way, I’m screwed.”

A conspiratorial light glimmered in Toshiro’s eyes. “Curses can be broken, Mizuki.”

The bladesmith reached for the weapon sitting in front of him—a large, heavy

kusarigama. The dancing light of the forge reflected off its wicked blades as Toshiro coiled its chains neatly into his calloused hands. Even to Mizuki's untrained eyes, the gleam of its signature steel was unmistakable. "This is . . ."

"An anima avatar weapon," the blacksmith finished, his eyes twinkling with pride. "After so many years of crafting dismal blades, I was itching to unleash my full potential again."

"The elders all think you've lost your touch. If she finds out you made this for me . . ."

Toshiro raised an eyebrow and held out the weapon. "You'd best not let anyone discover it."

Mizuki gingerly took the sickle. Despite the ember glow of the room, the weapon seemed to emit a mysterious green hue, inviting all who saw it to wonder about its secrets. As he caught his reflection mirrored in the sickle, he somehow believed that leaving with it really might change his fate.

"Mizuki," said Toshiro gently. "I understand that your family's passing weighs heavy on your shoulders. But you must face the demons waiting on the road ahead, for turning back at a crossroad will not lead you forward. I offer you the same advice I once gave my daughter: you must find your own path."

Mizuki clenched his hands around the metal. "I don't even know where to start."

"Embrace the journey ahead of you, and you will have already begun. In Kanazaka, no one will know your true identity, right? Make friends. Seek peace. You will only find your place if you venture to look."

He was right. Mizuki *knew* he was right. And yet . . .

"What if I'm not strong enough?" he asked finally.

Toshiro's gaze was kind but blazing. "Would I have forged you a masterpiece if I thought you weren't?"

Mizuki turned his focus back to the weapon, shifting it in his hands. He could tell that its weight, shape, and purpose had been precisely calculated just for him.

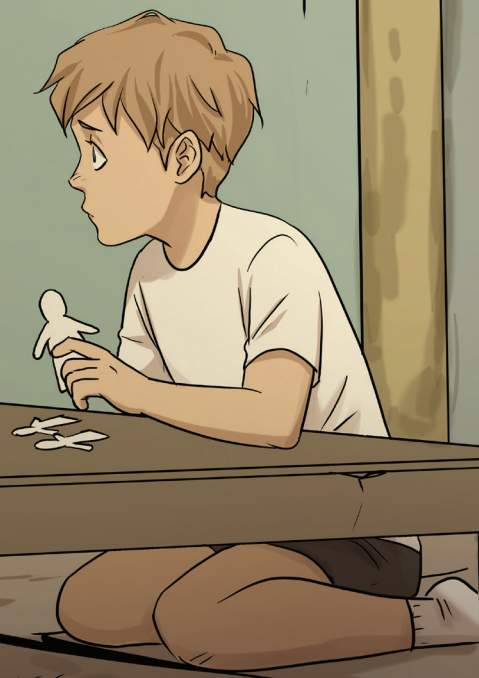
Somehow, he felt braver.

"Okay, ojisan," said Mizuki. "I won't let you down." He stood to leave. "I need to get going. You going to be okay without me?"

"Of course."

"You sure?" He playfully elbowed the older man, trying to lighten the mood. "No





more tea, no more doughnuts, no more midnight shogi games?”

But unlike usual, Toshiro didn't joke back. He picked up Mizuki's doughnut, gazing at it with gentle melancholy, the cellophane wrapper crinkling quietly between his fingers.



“*Kiwotusker*, Mizuki,” he said finally.

A knot formed in Mizuki’s stomach, and as he turned away, he buried his emotions as deep as they could go.

“Thank you, Toshiro-ojisan. You too.”

