



Hidden in the Folds

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*Swallowed by the unforgiving mountains of Etchu Province
Battle-worn ronin flees the looming end of an Emperor's reign
Fangs of thick, grey clouds menace low in the sky
His only comfort an animori clutched close to his heart*

*Battle-worn ronin flees the looming end of an Emperor's reign
Shifting mud sucking at his feet, cold rains drench like despair
His only comfort an animori clutched close to his heart
Fear of pursuit, fear of worse, drives the ronin on*

*Shifting mud sucking at his feet, cold rains drench like despair
Treachery among slick rocks, fissures spew hot, heavy breath of demons
Fear of pursuit, fear of worse, drives the ronin on
Light from a distant lantern beckons and brings hope*

WELL AFTER SUNSET, THROUGH BLUSTERY WIND AND driving rain, A weary *ronin* sought shelter at a small, well-kept temple tucked away in the folds of a bamboo grove. As he passed under the *torii* gate, the pugnacious wind ceased its mordant bluster, though he could still hear its vehemence and see the branches of the nearby cedar trees flailing beyond the grove. Peace settle over him, though, as he felt cupped in the protective embrace of this hallowed dell. The warrior drew a bamboo *animori* from around his neck and gave it a thankful kiss as he turned to what he hoped would be a reprieve from an another harrow ing night's sleep. *Shinemawa* were wrapped around the gate's supports and also on a nearby boulder. A faint smile

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caressed his lips at a familiar thought, for he always wondered how long it took to twist the straw into strands, or to fold the paper prayers into such intricate, zigzag designs.

Painted paper lanterns adorned the rafters, and as he passed through the curtain that adorned the doorway, tallow candles illuminated the inside and pungent incense stung his eyes and nose. His gaze then fell to the center of the room where a stone carving of *Saruta-biko* sat. Without wasting another moment, he crossed the wooden floor and knelt before the stone god of travelers, clasped his hands together and offered a fervent prayer of thanks.

“A visitor, on a night like this, you must be lost or mad.”

The *ronin* turned at the shrill voice, but when he regarded the speaker, he rose in surprise and put his hand to the hilt of his sword. Before him was a small creature right out of a faerie story. It stood no taller than his sword, with skin as red as the paint on the torii gate, and a nose at least three hand widths in length. It was dressed in priestly garb, held prayer beads in its hand, and its head was shaved bald. But the thing that startled him the most, though, was that it had wings and claws where its arms and hands should have been.

“Please close your mouth, it is very impolite.”

As if he were ordered by a *daimyo*, or the Emperor himself, the warrior closed his mouth. So unnerved was he that the *ronin* tripped over a step as he backed away in disbelief. “But . . . you are . . .” the warrior could not say its name. Stories from his childhood flooded his mind; mischievous pranksters, capricious imps, vengeful, easily insulted . . .

“I am now a monk, atoning for my sins; nothing more.” The creature’s piercing voice pricked at the hair on the back of the warrior’s neck. He could not take his eyes off it as it hopped across the floor. It picked up a straw broom in its claws and began to sweep. “So, which is it?”

The *ronin* struggled to keep up. “Which is what?” He could not hide the mistrust in his voice.

The creature continued to sweep the floor and took no perceptible notice of the warrior’s wariness. “Are you mad, or are you just lost?”

The warrior, determined to regain his composure, drew his sword. “You are *tengu*.” Confidence and strength replaced the temporary shock.

The *tengu* paused from its errand and sighed, “I am a monk; you are a warrior; I am *tengu*; you are man. One should not judge by labels.”

The *ronin* was taken aback, flushed with confusion, like a hand that had just clapped him on the side of his head. “What are you doing?” He wanted to ask more, but how does one question a creature that up until now was thought a mere child’s story told to instill obedience?

“I am sweeping the floors.” Only a hint of irritation could be heard in the imp’s response. “Other than that I am trying to start a civil conversation. If you are opposed to that, let me finish my chores and I will take my leave of you.” The