

妖怪の国

YOKAI COUNTRY™

- Part Two: Preview -



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THE BLUE WANDERER

The air is cool and moist and the land is covered by a thick morning mist. With only the faintest rays of sunlight illuminating the world, a passerby can only scarcely make out the oppressive silhouette of a massive temple. A single bell chimes amidst the solitude of this dreary place; long abandoned due to unspeakable circumstances. There are no monks left who tend to the gardens or to polish the bronze bells. None remained to give offerings to the kami. None remained who could recite the sutras of the great and noble Ascended One who's commanding wooden statue is now covered in green moss. Spiders of every variety carve out their own tiny corners of the temple; transforming it into a sanctuary for raising their young whilst trapping prey to feast on. In essence, it appears as though nature has slowly but surely reclaimed the holy site.

Yet despite the apparent emptiness of this abandoned complex, there is still one person who dares to roam the vast vermillion halls of this dilapidated place – a strange woman dressed in a faded kimono. Her hair, disheveled and unkempt, is longer than the entire length of her body and drags along the dust-ridden floor. The blackness of her hair suggests a youthfulness yet her gait is hobbled like that of an elderly person; slow and wobbly. The woman limps all throughout the temple as she quietly sobs to herself; her hands covering her face. In time, she exits the temple and egresses outside.

Aside from the plentiful gardens which abound, a vast majority of the temple grounds are dedicated to the dearly departed in the form of cemeteries. In Hitoku, and much of Wakuni at large, it is the custom to cremate the dead rather than bury them. This is to avoid the possibility of a vengeful spirit reanimating an unsuspecting corpse. Hundreds upon hundreds of graves dot this hilly and uneven terrain each consisting of large vertical slabs of stone engraved with the names of the deceased. These tall yet skinny stones are also erected in close proximity to one another in dense clusters.

The forlorn woman slowly limps across these narrow walkways of polished bricks which cut through the many columns of vertical stone graves. With every troubled step, the sounds of her wailing grow ever louder. Most sinister is the fact that the tear droplets which fall from her face carry a scarlet hue... They are tears of blood. After about an hour of aimless wandering, this grieving woman reaches a most spectacular grave made of high-quality stone that is taller than the average man. Whoever was buried here must have been fairly important in life for they were kindly afforded ample space within this otherwise tightly-packed cemetery; the grave itself placed atop a hill far from the others.

Even more impressive is the sight of a colossal cherry blossom tree which looms over the grave as its numerous pink petals fall gently like delicate flakes of snow. It is here that the mournful woman ceases her gait and breaks down into a much more dramatic display of tears.

“Inosuke...” She cries. “Oh, my Inosuke...”

Despite the loudness of her deafening cries of sorrow, she is interrupted by the approach of another lone individual concealed by fog. Even with the sound of incoming footsteps, the woman does not turn to face this stranger. She remains

fixated solely upon the gravestone of her beloved Inosuke. It is only seconds later that the wanderer is revealed. He is a man clad in blue sapphiric robes which flow down to his knees. A red sash is tied around the waist and is wrapped by a medium-sized leather pouch which stores all manner of goods and trinkets. Adorning his shoulders and forearms is sleek black armor consisting of segmented plates sourced from a mythical metal. His skin is pale and his hair black and unruly. His eyes, oddly, are of a deep cerulean hue. Finally, his head is topped by a simple conical straw hat known as a *sugegasa*. Though he was once called by another name long ago, today he is simply known as Temujin Mugen.

“Who was he?” The blue wanderer inquires from a safe distance whilst firmly gripping a *tsurugi* straight sword in his left hand.

“... You should leave...” The woman warns, never once diverting her gaze from the grave.

Temujin looks around and admires the spaciousness of the area surrounding this lonesome grave. The ground is paved with only the finest of stones and there are even high walls erected with decorative bamboo tiles. The big sakura tree is also a nice touch which impresses the hunter.

“It is unusual to see a grave receiving such special treatment. Especially in a temple as famous as this where so many are buried. He must’ve been real heroic in life... So who was he?”

But alas, the wanderer’s unwanted commentary is met with silence as the woman refuses to acknowledge him.

“Was this Inosuke your father? Or perhaps maybe he was a lover? A brother?”

“Leave...” The woman grumbles.

“Was he your son?”

All of a sudden, powerful gusts of wind emanate from within the woman herself which causes the mist to clear up in an instant; revealing dozens of skeletons on the floor. The gales also spread the cherry blossom petals; pelting the cemetery in a blizzard of pink. Temujin, feeling a dark and ominous ki starting to rise from his target, widens his stance and prepares himself. But the woman simply stands there stiffly as though a statue. Then, with heavy and guttural breathing, she speaks; her voice taking on a wicked texture.

“... Fool... You should have left this place when I said so... My Inosuke... He must not be disturbed by the likes of you... Inosuke is... Inosuke is...” She then turns around to face him. “YOU SHALL NOT DISTURB HIS REST!!!”

The woman’s body begins to transmute into a more appalling and hideous form; resembling the despair which festered in her soul. Her face becomes reprehensibly ugly; full of warts, protruded veins, black and yellow eyes, sharp fangs, and two deer-like antlers sprouting forth from her skull. In a way, she bears a striking resemblance to the oni which terrorize this accursed land. Her fingernails rapidly grow to exceed the length of even the longest spears with a tip sharper and stronger than a newly forged blade. But her most terrifying trait is her size which increased by a factor of several times. Though she now walks on all fours, the Ogress already looms above Temujin; a genuine monument to the horrors that yokai personified.

“I knew it...” Temujin sighs whilst adjusting his conical hat. “It’s always a *Kijo* in the cemeteries... Ugh.”

Without warning or hesitation, the demoness swings her elongated claws at the blue wanderer with a crazed and incoherent series of deadly swipes. As she does so, the Ogress roars maniacally as if reduced to the primitive state

of a mindless beast. Given the extraordinary range of her spear-like nails, Temujin is left with no choice but to dodge out of the way; channeling precious ki to his feet in order to increase both his agility and jumping power. But to his disdain, she proves remarkable fast despite her large size. Suddenly, her lower torso extends in length and sprouts out multiple legs; bestowing upon her the visage of a depraved caterpillar. With these foul limbs, the giant Kijo races across the cemetery with unusual quickness; destroying a great multitude of gravestones in the process.

Temujin tries to learn her moves and attack patterns as he evades her every swing. Although, such meticulous feats are no simple task as the Ogress strikes faster than he can possibly dodge. If he jumps too early, then he'll be swatted like a gnat. But jump too late, and he'll be sliced to ribbons. It doesn't help that her attacks are all over the place. Unlike a true warrior who devotes years of his life into perfecting the usage of the martial arts, the cadence and rhythm of the Demoness' strikes are seemingly random and devoid of any such discipline. With every swing, her nails cleanly slice through anything, be it solid stone or wood. Entire sections of the temple walls are obliterated by her powerful swipes and yet, despite the clear danger she poses, Temujin is at last starting to recognize the various quirks and subtleties in her movements. Out of curiosity, Temujin runs over to Inosuke's gravestone and steps on top of it to see how she might react. Outraged by the wanderer's desecration, the Ogress swings wildly with all arms to try and cut Mugen down like fresh sashimi. But to her affright, all she manages to do is destroy Inosuke's grave; the agile yin-yang master having already jumped out of the way like a grasshopper leaping from one blade of grass to the next.

“INOSUKE!!!”

The Ogress, overcome with unfettered rage, begins to grow additional legs which sprout forth from her oversized body. Blinded by fury, she leaps towards the wanderer and attempts to devour him whole, only to slam straight into the high walls as Temujin dodge rolls out of the way; causing the stone to tumble and collapse on top of her. Temujin is barely able to avoid being eaten, however, as her extra legs seem to have given her yet another boost in speed. And as if things couldn't get worse, her nails grow even longer in tangent with her newly formed limbs. No longer caring about any damage to property, she lashes out in all directions. So powerful are her swings that even the cherry blossom tree, its trunk thicker than the width of several bulls, is cut down by the yokai's devastating claws.

Having seen enough of her tendencies, Temujin is now prepared to go on the offensive. While keeping a suitable distance and jumping to avoid her swipes, Temujin reaches into his waist pouch and grabs a small clump of ofuda tags made of a special paper. As he runs around the Ogress, he throws a single tag which attaches to one of the Koji's legs; sticking to her skin as if it were tar. He repeats this process over and over again at least ten or twelve times, inundating her body at different points with paper tags. Then, with a single hand sign, the spells which are already stored within these talismans and sealed in ink are all activated at once. With synchronized harmony, the ofudas explode in a fiery blaze similar to that of small ceramic bombs favored by the feared shinobi clans of Monomi province. This multitude of explosions manage to tilt the Koji off-balance, causing her to tumble and fall on her side which exposes her soft and vulnerable underbelly... This is it!

Taking the initiative, Temujin grips his trusty sword and channels ki into it. The blade, now wreathed in what appears to be an outpouring of azure flames, is enhanced by ki in order to prevent shattering upon contact as yokai are known to harbor durable iron-like skin. With ki directed to his feet, Temujin pushes against the ground and dashes forth with incredible speed; plunging the blade straight into her guts. Then, with a sudden twist of his posture, he attempts to slice her belly open to allow her guts to spill all over the floor. But alas, the Ogress manages to swat Mugen away as if merely a bug. Seconds later, the Koji regains her footing and starts lashing out once again in a crazed mania. Even more tricky is the fact that she is able to channel her own demonic ki and, with a deep breath, spits out a volatile deluge of searing flames from her mouth.

The Ogress' lethal flamethrower technique completely scorches whatever remains of the defiled sakura tree. The air becomes robbed of any moisture as temperatures rise well above what is deemed comfortable. Temujin struggles to breathe as both of his lips become chapped with alarming swiftness. The rampant Koji then launches yet another fire attack; spitting flames and shifting her head to ensure that she covers as wide an area as possible. Temujin, trying to discern if it would be faster to utilize ofuda or not, chooses the manual option and performs a rapid series of hand signs whilst uttering a discreet chant. As a result, Temujin gathers a sizable chunk of ki at the base of his stomach and, with a mighty breath, spits out a rushing torrent of water in an effort to douse the flames. The ensuing clash between hellish fire and gushing water causes super-heated steam to spread in all directions; masking the cemetery in yet another thick fog. Temujin uses this reduced visibility to his advantage.

The Koji calms down to assess the situation. Even with her enhanced senses, it is difficult for her to see through so dense a mist. Relying on sound alone proves insufficient as the crackling of what few bundles of flame remained seems to drown out all other noise. But with her sense of smell, she can detect his distinctively human stench. He is coming and fast. Eventually, Temujin leaps forth from the fog with his sword in hand and swings down only for the Koji to counter with her spear-like nails; slicing the wanderer in two. Yet her victory is short-lived as the two severed halves transform into bits of torn paper.

“Shikigami?” The Ogress laments. “I see... So you’re an onmyōji after all.”

“Not quite.” Temujin answers as he approaches from a different direction. “I’ve long since switched occupations.”

“Former or not, you’re still a pest!!!”

With lightning-fast reaction time, the Koji turns around and strikes again, this time crushing Temujin to death as his guts spill like fresh-squeezed juice. But this too proves to be a decoy as the corpse transforms into yet more paper. Her frustration only magnifies when up to seven Temujin clones assault her in unison – each striking from a different angle.

Though the Koji deduces that they are all mere clones conjured by onmyōdō, she has to conclude that the real one is hidden among them. With this in mind, she proceeds to attack as though they are *all* real. With each doppelgänger being snuffed out by the yokai, one of them reaches into his pouch and tosses a single ofuda at the floor before he too is destroyed. One by one, the Ogress dispels the clones via a combination of slices and thrusts – even going so far as to roll over and crush a few with her oppressive weight. But despite having vanquished all seven of these duplicitous clones, not

one of them was real as they all end up reverting back to their prior shikigami state.

“WHAT?!? Where’s the real one?!”

“Right here.”

From the lone ofuda tag which was sneakily thrown onto the floor by one of the felled doppelgängers, the spell written on its surface activates. With a dramatic explosion of vaporous clouds, the *real* Temujin emerges. Given the tag’s close proximity to the Koji, the yokai hunter is in a prime position to strike. His blade fully charged with ki, he makes his decisive swing; severing the Koji’s head from the rest of her monstrous body. The slice is so quick that she did not realize that it had even occurred at all. No blood spills from either the decapitated head or the exposed neck as the ki emanating from Temujin’s tsurugi burned with such heat as to essentially sear her flesh shut.

After a few more uneasy seconds of motionlessness, the yokai’s body finally collapses onto the ground with a loud thump. Immediately after, it begins to evaporate into well over a million particles of bright and luminescent dust. Once the Koji itself vanishes, only a single ethereal orb of scarlet fire remains floating over the ground which pulsates like a beating heart.

Relieved that the battle was at an end, Temujin sheathes his sword into the scabbard attached to his back and slowly approaches the ghostly sphere. With one arm holding the Ogress’ head, he carefully grabs the levitating orb with his other hand and consumes the yokai’s essence; ingesting its ki as it becomes part of his own. Satisfied with this meal, he wipes his mouth and rummages through his waist pouch to inspect his inventory of onmyō tools.

“Still more than half... Not bad! And in record time.”

Temujin then removes from his neck a simple pendant and channels ki into it. As it glows, the pendant pulls and tugs until breaking free of its tether as it expands in size. Before long, a large and chimeric beast manifests in front of him. The creature itself is an amalgamation of various and distinct animal traits. Its overall frame is akin to a horse with silvery snake-like scales covering its entire body. Its head resembles that of a dragon with massive deer-like antlers as horns, whiskers similar to that of a koi fish and a glorious mane of turquoise fur comparable to those of male lions. Across the lands of Wakuni, this beast goes by many names. The Tengu of Sōjōbō refer to them as Qílín. However, in Hitoku, these rare and mystical steeds are called Kirin.

The draconic beast, having been sealed inside of that pendant for far too long, stretches and shivers to get the blood flowing. Then, in gratitude, it trots over to Temujin and licks his face with its long and serpentine tongue. The blue wanderer reciprocates this by petting and caressing the kirin in the same manner riders care for their horses. After a few more strokes of the mane, Temujin attaches the Koji's lifeless head onto the saddle and hops atop his kirin.

“Now let's go collect our reward, Kuromaru.”

The people of Kamado Village are ecstatic upon the hunter's return. Everyone gathers around Temujin and his majestic kirin with fervent fanfare as he parades the head of the now vanquished yokai – a menace which had terrorized them for too long. So jubilant are the residents of this small and unassuming village that one would think a festival was currently taking place. Their celebrations are soon joined by

large groups of ascetic monks who are each dressed in brightly colored robes typical of those who willingly devote themselves to the Ascended One. An older monk steps forth from among these docile and clean-shaven acolytes to then address the hunter in a feeble and gentle voice.

“Wanderer, Temujin Mugen... You have liberated us from the horrors of that Ogress... Inosuke’s mother can now move on from this world... We are forever in your debt.”

“Well, money is always nice.” The hunter grins.

“Of course.” The elder monk chuckles as he hands over a hefty purse full of coins. “A full three-hundred coppers as promised, and an additional fifty for accepting the contract.”

As Temujin shakes the purse, he is delighted by the sound of clinking coins. He briefly opens it up to inspect its contents; further thrilled by the ample sum for a job well done. The hunter then places the purse inside of his pouch. Lastly, Temujin untethers the Koji’s rotting head from the kirin’s saddle and allows it to drop onto the floor.

“She’s yours to do with as you please.”

Villagers and monks alike look at the inanimate head of the Ogress and reel away with a mixture of disgust and guilt. Though they are indeed happy to be rid of such a demon, it is not without a hint of remorse. The elder monk kneels down and places a hand over the head.

“Lady Kōdai was such a kind and gentle woman who always had this town’s best interests close to her heart. She was one our temple’s most generous patrons and a devout follower of the Ascended One. But after young Inosuke’s death, she was never quite the same... Hatred and grief twisted her soul until she...”

“Hatred alone is not enough to turn a human into a yokai.” Temujin corrects. “There are *other* factors.”

“Is that so? I suppose yokai are well within the purview of a yin-yang master; former or otherwise. In that case, may I be so bold as to make a request?”

“That depends.”

“Ours was always a peaceful village. Until Lady Kōdai’s descent into darkness, we knew neither war nor strife. And thus far, we’ve been fortunate enough to avoid the rebellion which has sprung up around the country. But this incident has taught us the value of being well-prepared. We can use a man of your particular talents to help secure the village’s continued existence. You can live with us in the temple.”

“While I appreciate the offer, I must decline.”

“Really? But our temple receives countless donations from neighboring towns and villages. Once they hear of Kōdai’s spirit being laid to rest, they’ll come flocking to Kamado Village again... As will their coin.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way but... I just don’t like monks.” Temujin admits. “My experiences with worshippers of the Ascended One typically end in misfortune. So if you don’t mind, I’d rather stay as far away as possible from any temple. It’s better for everyone that way.”

“I see... That is a shame.”

Temujin, not wanting to sour a perfectly good business relationship in lieu of the fact that they *actually* paid well, reaches into his waist pouch a final time and removes from it an oddly shaped slip of paper with an orange hue. He then hands it over to the elderly monk.

“What *is* this?”

“If ever you have trouble that requires the services of a professional, place that tag on the ground and call out my name five times in a row. The spell written on there will notify me. I will then come to your aid shortly after.”

“Fascinating.” The monk smirks with amusement. “It never ceases to amaze me what wondrous new spells you onmyōji come up with. Fare well for now then, wanderer.”

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