Sleep With Me

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In a small village off the main trade route rumors spread of a hidden room inside the inn. In the stillness of the night, when even the rats and mice rested, scratching emanated from the halls. Slow, melodious it moved from one end to the other, then fell silent.

For many, it went unnoticed. For those who did, most shrugged it off as a fox or other small creature. The very few who believed that it was unnatural sought out the innkeeper's wife for answers. She graced each with a bright and sunny smile as she told them that as long as they remained in their rooms there was nothing to fear. No one questioned the wife a second time.

Late into the night a young member of the Lion Clan, Akodo Kinoshita, banged on the door to the inn. He had traveled far and was desperate for a place to rest before he returned to the Capital.

Quietly the innkeeper's wife escorted him to the only room unoccupied for the night; the fourth room on the second floor. He thanked her before settling in.

A few hours later the scratching began. Kinoshita lifted himself. His hand pressed against the straw of the mat. Eyes closed, he focused, ears straining to understand. It didn't move as an animal would. It was slow as if something heavy was being dragged across the wooden floors. In darkness, he waited for the noise to pass his room.

He could feel his heartbeat as it rose to his throat. The grinding paused in front of the door. It shifted then vanished. Shaken but worn from his long journey, Kinoshita returned to sleep.

As with all the others, the innkeeper's wife laughed as Kinoshita explained the noise to her.

Kinoshita couldn't let it rest. He paused his travels and remained at the inn for another night. This time, he held a vigil. His sword rested against his chest. A small unlit candle sat at his side along with a fresh match. If it came again, he would be ready.

In the dead of night, it came once more. Kinoshita lit the small candle and placed it in the hall near the door. Bright enough to illuminate the crack under the door, he would see its approach then cut down whatever was haunting the inn.

Tucked out of sight in his room Kinoshita waited. Just as the night before, it paused outside his room. The shadow cast through the crack of the door showed the outline of someone draped in cloth. The image only lasted a moment before the candle went out.

The door to his room opened. With a readied blade Kinoshita shouted for the creature to show themselves. The shadow moved with a jagged tick. It stared at him through nothingness. He fell to the floor with the clatter of his sword. Terror pooled in him unlike anything he had felt before. "Ki-no-shi-ta?" the shadow beckoned.

Despite his fears, he crawled toward it. Its hand was gentle and soft as it clasped onto his chin. He stared into the darkness unable to turn away. With little force it pulled him to his feet.

The fear in him waned as he regained control of his body. He reached into the shadow. His hand graced the cheek of a young woman. "What is your name?" he asked as if she were real.

She did not answer. To his disappointment, she vanished.

Determined to find out the origin of the young woman, Kinoshita searched the inn. Nothing was out of place. No one answered any of his inquiries. Led by frustration, Kinoshita remained one final night.

As with the previous nights, the scratching began as soon as the night settled. Kinoshita did not wait in his room. Guarded, he stepped out of his room and faced the long hall. The scratching paused as the shadow turned the corner to face him. He sucked in a breath as it resumed. With each of its flickering movements it scratched at the floor.

It met Kinoshita at his door then enveloped him in its darkness. He pawed through, grasping at nothingness. Desperate, he longed to find the woman from the previous night. No matter how much he reached, his hands

remained empty. She was there. In deep recesses of his mind, he knew it.

All the while, the shadow continued its march.

Backed to the wall, it pressed against him. Pressure built until Kinoshita stumbled back. No longer in the hall. As he worked to regain his footing, his heel kicked something on the ground. Without the moonlight to aid him, he reached out to it. His fingers traced the cracks and bumps. His thumbs slipped into the eye sockets. From behind him, the woman's voice, "Ki-no-shi-ta, sleep with me."

The shadow embraced him. Air withdrawn from his lungs silenced his screams. Long fingers pulled his skin, ripping it from him as if it were cloth. The muscle underneath parted as the shadow feasted on the warm and tender innards of his torso. Fingers twirled under the ribs, pulling until they cracked from the sternum. Elation filled him as teeth gripped into his heart.