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A Tale of Two Stones

Kazuki loved travelling down this path during this time of the year, when the cherry blossoms were in full bloom. This path was a quiet one off the main trail. Eventually it led back to the main route but this way had villages that hugged the banks of the river. Kazuki always enjoyed watching the petals fall and drift in the water. A calming sight while he rested from his travels. Kazuki was a merchant and because of this he always had the ability to stop when he wanted and pick up when necessary. So was the beauty of freedom and doing what you loved. This day, however, would allow for a different freedom. Kazuki was taking his normal route towards the southern village of Kaien where he noticed an old man resting at the waystone. The old man didn't look ill but Kazuki was curious as no one ever rested at this point given there was a village down the road. Kazuki stepped beside the man and noticed he had a cart on the other side of the waystone. Ahh, Kazuki said to himself, his cart is broken. Kazuki tapped the old man sleeping and spoke

“Excuse me, sir, excuse me...” the old man stirred, finally opening his eyes but not showing any signs of worry

“Oh my, it seems I drifted off while waiting for someone,” the old man took a closer look. “Thank you young man, I would've been here all day if you hadn't awoken me.”

The old man rose slowly, Kazuki held out his arm for support but the old man waved him away

“I may look old but these bones still have some strength left in them”.

Kazuki waited and finally spoke “You know, if you need help I can strap your cart to mine. Kitakaze here could haul a boulder across the entire country of Filu.” The old man looked at the horse and the horse looked back at him. For a second the old man swore he could feel the horse smiling.

The old man spoke, reluctantly agreeing, “Well, if you insist, it has been a while since I have had a travelling companion.” Kazuki smiled, grabbed rope from his own cart, tied it to his and continued his journey along the road.

Kaze plodded along the dirt road for sometime before either spoke, common amongst these parts of the land. Reverence for the river flowing was customary when travelling. It was a way to give respect to Innare, the Goddess of Time.

Fukurō broke the silence “So, tell me young man, what brings you along this path? Most take the main route as it's faster.”

Kazuki was silent for a moment then spoke “It’s Kazuki, old man, and for no particular reason. I like the silence and seclusion from everything. There’s something special about the tranquility of it all”

Fukurō chuckled “What an unexpected answer from such a young man. The youth always seem to amaze me. Tell me about yourself, young Master Kazuki” chuckling again to himself, Fukurō settled back for the ride, propping his feet up next to the reins.

Kazuki looked back to his wares and then back to the road “I sell odds and ends along the way. Most of the items I buy are in the villages along the road. There is always someone who has something odd and useful” Kazuki looked towards the river and started speaking again “Plus, I get to do what I want when I want. Everything is pretty good by my standards.”

Kazuki went silent again and started watching the goah fish. Tiny fish that could flap their wings in the air to catch the flying bugs above the river and hover for a time. The old man poked his head up, curious as to why Kazuki stopped speaking. Fukurō himself enjoyed watching the peculiar fish. Kazuki didn’t look away from the river and asked the old man where he was going.

The old man replied “Kaiei, I have business there I need to complete.”

Kazuki and Fukurō arrived at Kunmura, a small fishing village right before the town of Kaiei. The two of them looked around and took pleasure in seeing the commotion of it all. For such a small village, no person was idle. Kazuki stepped down from the cart but before he could get settled a young woman called out his name “Kazuki!”

Kazuki turned towards that direction, smiling “Hinari, I didn’t think you would be here. I thought you would be in Okami by now.” Kazuki started searching through his cart “Here, take these furs. I remember your parents saying they needed these before I left. I was able to trade for these at the village of Kigimura.” Kazuki found the pelts and handed them over and Fukurō noticed how bright the young lady was beaming at Kazuki. The two shared a moment before Kazuki realized the old man in the cart “I’m sorry Hinari but this old man right here is Fukurō, I came across him and his broken cart while on the way here. We’re travelling to Kaiei.”

Hinari bowed “It’s nice to meet you Fukurō. Well I better get going. I have more work to do here before I head back north. See you soon, Kazuki.” Hinari hugged Kazuki and bowed again to Fukurō before parting.

Fukurō couldn’t help but smile “What a fine young lady you have there, Kazuki. When do you plan on marrying her?”

Kazuki went hot as pot but put on a good performance by hiding it “She is just a friend I happened to meet when travelling. Ever since I met her we always seemed to be at the same place whenever I happened to stop and trade.”

Fukurō pondered on that for a second, knowing better and said “Ahh I see,” not very convinced “Well I guess that means we should be off to Kaiei” Kazuki looked up and nodded in agreement.

About half way to Kaien, Kaze decided to stop. Kazuki realized where he was and knew this was Kaze's favorite feeding plot. The lion daisies were plentiful here and these flower heads were Kaze's favorite. Kazuki decided to step down and lay under a tree. The sun was starting to inch its way down towards the horizon but there was still time to spare. Fukurō shuffled his way over, laying down close by with his hat covering his face.

Kazuki was about to doze off just when Fukurō started speaking "You know, this country always fascinated me. It is the only place in all the world that has undergone great peace without a single war in a thousand years. I wonder what makes the land so peaceful here."

What a strange comment, Kazuki thought, but was curious and questioned by saying "No war here for a thousand years you say? What about the land disputes of the feudal lords? That has led to bloodshed."

The old man removed his hat and had a look of great sadness in his eyes "You see young man, those types of things will always be around. No matter what. But the interesting thing is, there has never been a full scale war. If you were to see the Revolt of Keldeena or the Genocide of Darath-Mai than you would understand why I say the things I say." Kazuki had no idea what the old man was talking about but he could hear the pain in his voice

Kazuki spoke and asked a question "So why don't you just stay here, on this island, where it is peaceful?"

Fukurō paused and looked pensive, then responded "I have a lot of responsibilities to take care of. Unfortunately I am too busy of a person to afford such peace." Kazuki could see that the old man wasn't too interested in speaking so he rested for a while longer before they started travelling again.

Kazuki stirred and awoke, seeing Kaze standing over him, pleasantly chewing on some grass while the rest fell onto his face. Kazuki dusted himself off and turned to see the old man was packing. *Guess Kaze woke him up too.* After squaring everything away, Kazuki and Fukurō took their seats in the wagon and went on their way.

After roughly two hours of travelling, the two finally reached the town of Kaien, a lively place which was the marriage between the ports to the south and the resource rich lands to the north. Kazuki loved travelling here. The town was surrounded by beauty everywhere. The road from Kaien to Kigimura, laid on a thin elevated plateau. Fortunately, the way from Kaien to Mizushi, the capital, sloped downward, giving way to different scenic parts of the island. Kazuki, sat there, taking the entire scene in. To the south you could see the coast, Mizushi was terraced along the beach and was painted in enchanting pastel colors. To the south east, you had the Veiled Lake. It was said an ancient spirit protected the lake and because of this the people of the Isle only visited to pay their respects. But from a distance, it was magnificent. The fog slightly hovered over the lake and the trees, giving a majestic and mysterious veil, hence its name. Kazuki could see Fukurō unhitching his cart and walked over to help.

Kazuki secured all the belongings onto Fukurō's cart and walked over to where Fukurō was finishing securing a room for the night

"Thank you very much for your service. There you are Kazuki! I want to thank you for helping me along the way. Without you who knows when I would've received a helping hand. Not that I mind napping all day." Fukurō chuckled to himself then continued "So where are you off to next?"

Kazuki looked to the south and said "Anytime Fukurō, it was a pleasure travelling with you. I think ol' Kitakaze and I are heading to Mizushi, the capital. This time of year is warm and usually the trade picks up. Hopefully I can grab something valuable but only Innare can tell what the future holds for us." shrugging.

Fukurō spoke before Kazuki turned away "Before you go, Kazuki. Would you mind delivering something to me at The Shrine of Tokisama? I will pay you for the help and for the delivery."

Kazuki agreed but rejected the payment. Confused, Fukurō offered again but Kazuki said "I didn't do that for payment old man, I just was bored and wanted someone to join me for the trip. I don't mind at all. What do you need me to deliver?"

Fukurō looked at the coin purse and nodded, placing it back in his coat then lifted his head "I need you to deliver this stone to the shrine. At the shrine there will be another stone identical to this one. All you have to do is place it in the same spot as the other stone and you're done." Kazuki took the stone that Fukurō fished out of his pocket and examined it. It was a polished cube but outside of that, it looked like it was made with ordinary stone. Kazuki placed it in his pocket and Fukurō spoke one last time

"Thank you, Kazuki. Hopefully, we meet again one day and I can treat you to some nice desserts. They have the most delicious treats here in Kaien. Safe travels and Innare be with you." The two exchanged their goodbyes and went on their way.

Upon leaving Kaien, Mt. Twilight shined in the distance, visible from everywhere on the island. A reassuring sight everyone on the island thanked Innare for. *Well, it has been a long day. Once I finish delivering this stone I'll rest at the shrine and make my way down to Mizushi.*

Kaze and Kazuki arrived at the shrine. As was customary, incense were lit every time they entered a shrine of Innare. Kazuki grabbed the perry flower and placed it in the embers. Then Kazuki placed his right hand on his heart, his left arm behind his back and spoke a small prayer of thanks for travelling safely today. Kazuki saw the stairs and made his way up the temple. Once on the platform, he could see the small enclosure where the other stone was being housed. Kazuki walked up and wrestled in his bag for the stone. Kaze was left behind at the bottom of the stairs and nayed and whinnied. He hated being alone. Kazuki placed the stone at the little altar. As he was about to turn away the two stones started to vibrate, float and then spin slowly in a circle. The action was so strange Kazuki couldn't help but stare. Placed in such a trance that Kazuki didn't even realize an owl was perched right above the shrine. *Strange,*

Kazuki thought, *that wasn't there a moment ago*. Kazuki then looked around and noticed a priest who was standing nearby lighting incense himself judging by the smoke rising from his silhouette.

Kazuki called out "Excuse me!" *no answer*. Kazuki walked over and tapped the man on the shoulder "Excuse me," Kazuki said once more. Before he could utter his next words Kazuki couldn't believe his eyes.

Fukurō stood there with a wide grin, clearly amused at the shock on Kazuki's face. Fukurō looked more youthful and laughed like a wicked child.

Finally settling down, Fukurō spoke "I am sorry to have spooked you, Kazuki. Maybe you have picked up on this by now but I am no ordinary old man." he paused, allowing Kazuki a moment to breathe "Come, humor an old man. I will explain a few things."

Kazuki sat on the cart while Fukurō spoiled Kitakaze. For some reason Kaze seemed to take a real liking to the old man, then he saw the snacks from his pocket. *Carrots. Was he an old man?* Kazuki thought, *how did he get here so fast?*

Kazuki broke from his thoughts and started listening to Fukurō "...So I have an offer for you, Kazuki. I need to repay you for the kindness you have shown me but first I will have you know, I am not an old man, well not in the physical sense you might be thinking. In fact, I am far older than you could ever imagine. In the past two centuries I can only count on one hand the people who were kind enough to give me the time that you did and the banter we exchanged." Kazuki was waiting for what Fukurō had to say next.

Fukurō continued "If you could have anything in the world, anything. A palace, all the riches in the world, anything." *Anything in the world?* Kazuki couldn't believe what he was being offered. *Anything?* Kazuki had never thought about that. Everything he ever wanted he already had. Freedom, his work was his pride and joy, and Kitakaze along for the ride. Then it hit him.

After a long pause, Kazuki asked what he wanted "I want Kitakaze to live as long as I do." Fukurō ruminated on the idea "Nothing else? You just want your horse to live with you forever" Kazuki nodded. "You seem to be stranger than I thought but it warms me to know where your heart is. Then it is done. I can see why you would want this old soul to live with you. You'd be surprised who this was in a past life. I have a feeling we will meet again one day under different circumstances. So long, Kazuki. Thank you again."

After a bright flash, Kazuki and Kaze stood there but Fukurō was nowhere in sight. Kazuki noticed the owl flying away and wondered if that might be the old man. Kazuki looked to his friend and noticed there was a life in his eyes he hadn't seen in a long time. *I guess the old man was true to his word. Life was now truly complete.* Kazuki and Kaze set up camp for the next day to live another day of fulfillment and joy.

The End

Characters:

Kazuki 和輝 — Peace / Brightness, hope

Fukurō 梟 — Owl

Hinari 陽成 — Bright light or Sunlight

Places:

Kaien 海遠 — New Beginning

Mount Hakumei 薄明 — Twilight

Creatures:

Horse: Kitakaze - Northwind - 北風 - Kaze for short

Goah Fish - Little fish that can flap their fins for 30 seconds and hover above the river/stream.

Useful for grabbing prey(bugs) out of the air.

Eccletian Dregr - A floating octopus like creature that feeds of the large mushrooms of the land of Eccletia - Not in this story

Countries - Not all included in drawings:

Cydris Kal

Badishav Imperium

Federated Fiefdoms of Bären

Free Island States

Filu - Next to Ine

Ine

Telu - Where the question mark was

Darath Mai

Eccletia

Tyranniel - The story of a Tragic King who became a tyrant and broke the world.

BT - Before Tyranniel

AT - After Tyranniel

My drawing

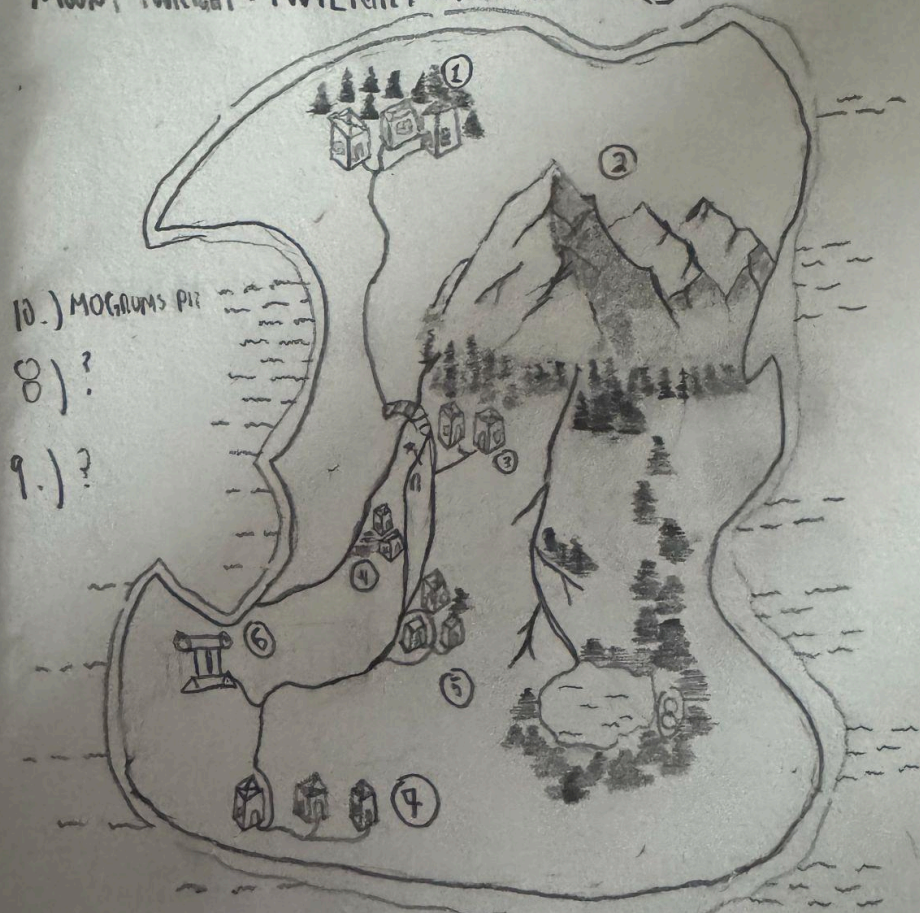
★X - STARTS HERE

1 - WASHING -

1.) ŌKAMI MURA - 狼村 - WOLF VILLAGE

2.) HAYUMEI YAMA - 薄明山

MOUNT TWILIGHT • TWILIGHT MOUNTAIN



3.) KIGIMURA - 木々村 - VILLAGE OF TREES

4.) KUNMURA - 中村 - MIDDLE VILLAGE

5.) KAIEN - 海遠 - NEW BEGINNINGS

6.) TOKI SAMA - 時様 - TIME GOD - INNARD