

Micah Sheffield

Brave Soul

I always wanted to be brave. Growing up, my mother told me story after story about courageous heroes setting out into the world and defeating evil, returning to their joyful and relieved people in triumph. They were men and women of extraordinary bravery and ability, able to overcome obstacles that any mere mortal would quake at. From a raging monster tearing apart whole cities, to a gluttonous Oni lurking in the mountains demanding tribute. From a dishonorable soldier on the verge of atrocity, to an evil emperor consumed by greed. From the demons lurking in their loved ones, to the ones in their own hearts, nothing was impossible for the hero to beat. I wanted to be just like them, and my mother always laughed.

“Yes, Temiro,” my mother would say. “You can be one too. Even the most humble of origins is never beneath a hero in making.”

She never scolded me for my childish dream, never crushed it beneath the weight of the world’s truth. She would only smile or laugh when she caught me dueling invisible phantoms with a broom handle, or practicing my “combat rolls” if you could call them that. Since she humored my fantasy, I found it only fair and natural that I abide by her rules as well (not that I had much of a choice anyway, being a young child, but it helped that I saw things that way). My “sword” would fall to the ground at her call and with it the phantoms would vanish back into my mind. But they were never gone, and as I approached puberty I began to contemplate them as an adult.

I had never handled a real weapon. The closest I ever came was with the pitchforks we used to shovel hay around (though this did not exempt them from being

reimagined as deadly spears piercing through my fated foe). There was hardly anyone who could be called a soldier in our small village. All we had was a barebones police force to uphold the law, though it wasn't like we were big enough for rampant crime, and I could forget about getting my hands on one of their swords. My father had nothing but kitchen knives to offer, and they weren't really offered, rather I asked once and was very quickly denied. At thirteen I asked myself the question that every aspiring hero asked themselves, did I want to join the military?

No, I truly didn't. Not for lack of faith in my dream, or myself, but for a lack of belief in what a soldier was and could be. A rank and file troop was never the hero of the story. In fact, such anonymous warriors were often among the first to die or fail in the stories I loved. I would not be one of them. Nor could I work my way up to being a general, for it was never the might of the military that overcame the monsters. Many real-life soldiers were honored as heroes to the people, but the youthful me did not care for them. For if I found myself looking around and seeing hundreds, thousands of others that all looked like me and were all "heroes"...well the word lost meaning. Call it for the vanity it was, but I wanted to stand out. I wanted mothers to tell their children the tale of Temiro the Brave. But I had no idea how to get there.

Had my situation been any different, had fate ignored me and my village, perhaps I would have simply remained that way. Longing for something that I would truly never achieve. I feel as though, like many people, I would have been stuck on the fact that I didn't know the next step, and thus since I did not know it I could not possibly take it. Such a fallacy is common, and difficult to overcome, and I do not consider myself any different from anyone else in that regard. I might have found a wife, settled down, started

a family. Been just like my parents. Maybe I would have been able to embrace such a life and find happiness. Were it not for one man, that could have been my fate.

It began shortly after my fourteenth birthday. It was a hot day in the fields, but there was work to be done, seeds to be planted. I swung my hoe alongside my father, the wooden handle somehow managing to be both slick and rough beneath my sweaty fingers. I found the rhythmic **thap** of the tip of my tool as it chipped away at the loamy soil relaxing, even if my body was anything but relaxed. While my body toiled, my mind wandered into yet another fictional universe, one of my own creation. A powerful samurai came to the defense of a princess as an assassin broke into her palace. Their weapons clashed and clanged, steel on steel, until eventually the samurai landed a decisive hit. The assassin cried out in pain, the mental imagery was so real to me that I could hear his wail.

Except I *was* hearing a wail, from the direction of my village, and it snapped me back to reality. A quick look to my father told me that I wasn't imagining any longer, and his own concerned face told me that we would be investigating. We hurried back in from the fields, chasing the sound. It wasn't hard to find, as most of the village fostered the same curiosity. As we approached the huddled ring of villagers, the wails became clearer.

"My brother! My Genki!" the voice of a young man cried over and over, his words choked by sobs.

I gently nudged my way through the crowd to get a better look, but I wasn't prepared for what I saw. I knew the young man that knelt in the dirt, he was Benki, one half of a pair of twins. Though we were not close, I had played with him and his brother Genki when we were younger. The two were slightly older than me and loved to explore, often

disappearing out into the woods for hours at a time, but they always returned safely.

Except for now, it seemed.

Benki's body was hunched all the way over, his head nearly touching the ground. The area around him was stained with his tears. No, there was much too much, the dark stain that spread around him couldn't have been just because of him. I nudged a little closer and saw that one of the villagers was trying to rouse Benki, asking him what was wrong and what had happened. Benki suddenly flung his head back and screamed to the sky, revealing what he had clutched to his breast. I felt bile rise in my throat at what I saw.

The severed arm of a young man was clenched tightly in Benki's hands. Blood still oozed from the elbow, flowing down Benki's clothes, staining him and the earth around him. It was a nightmare come true for one with siblings. I had no doubt that it was Genki's arm, but what in Heaven's name had happened to him? Benki was despondent, only able to cry his brother's name. Eventually there was another commotion from the other side of the crowd, and Benki's mother and father burst through. They fell upon him, asking the same questions while trying to hold him. I watched as his mother accidentally touched the blood pooling in Benki's lap. I will never forget her expression as she stared at her hand, covered in her own son's blood. I still wanted to vomit.

The presence of his family seemed to focus Benki, but did nothing to calm him. Perhaps it was the instinct of the child to respond to the parent, but at their questioning he was finally able to speak coherently.

“We were out exploring near the cliffs,” Benki said through choked sobs. “We found a cave. It felt wrong, I didn’t want to go in, but Genki did. He convinced me that we would be quick, and not go deep. I should have dragged him away.”

It was the first I had heard about a cave near our village. There were tall cliffs to the North amidst the forest, tempting for adventurers or those with wanderlust. Finding a cave out there seemed likely, once I thought about it.

“W-We walked for a few minutes,” Benki said, a notably shift in his voice. “I wanted to turn back but Genki just laughed. He was having fun. We found something down there, it looked almost like a grave.”

A grave? Hidden away in a mountain cave? Through my horror, curiosity peeked through. I struggled to listen more closely.

“I begged him not to disturb it,” Benki said, his body starting to tremble. “The more I looked at it the more afraid I became. It was wrong. Genki h-he was fascinated. He touched it.”

I saw something leave Benki’s eyes in that moment. A light went out, as though the very act of calling upon the next memory was too much for him to bear. His body stopped shaking, even his tears ceased. There was nothing but fear, for in his mind he was back in the cave.

“It just appeared,” Benki said. “I blinked and it was there. I-I-It didn’t have a head, how could it see us? Why did it have a weapon? It grabbed Genki before we could react.”

I noticed Benki’s fingers digging into the flesh of his brother’s forearm.

“He reached out for me,” Benki said, clenching the arm until he broke the skin. “I took his hand, tried to pull him away. I didn’t even see its sword move.”

The crowd was enraptured, as was I. Nothing like this had ever happened to our village.

“I froze, I didn’t know what to do,” Benki said. “Then it...then it...it was...” His breath came faster and faster, until he was nearly hyperventilating. His eyes were that of a wild beast, desperately fleeing a predator.

“I ran,” he said, his voice becoming more hysterical. “I ran and ran and ran, I left him there.”

Benki’s eyes fell to the remnant of his brother. He seemed to truly see it for the first time, and he let loose a wail so pained that most of the crowd looked away. His parents flung their arms around him and they wept together. At this, most of the gathered villagers began to disperse. To witness such grief felt wrong, or at least awkward. I just stood there, paralyzed by the sight of Genki’s arm. A strange sensation tugged at me, as though to tell me that something had been introduced into my environment. Something that would change everything should I follow it.

There were many hushed, fervent meetings in the days that followed. Should the cave be investigated? Should it be left alone? What to do about the monster? Would it leave the cave? Few slept soundly in the weeks after Genki’s death, but it soon became apparent that whatever it was, it wasn’t exiting its “home”. So life returned to normal, or as normal as one could consider life after such an event. Yet my people never forgot that which lurked so close to our homes. I know that I certainly didn’t. The sight of Benki and his brother’s arm replayed in my nightmares. The image haunted me when I worked the

fields. Though I pretended to fight phantoms much less at that age, my imaginary battles ground to a halt, for every time I tried to picture a foe all I could see was a headless creature reaching for me.

For a time I deluded myself into thinking that things truly would return to normal, if we waited long enough. However, just a month after Genki's death was when we began to notice a horrible phenomenon. Our crops began to wither, the stalks blackening and dying. People started to fall ill, notably the elderly and the very young. 'Cursed' was moaned in the streets daily, and through it all there was no doubt from anyone as to the cause. For the afflictions and the afflicted were concentrated on the end of the village that faced the forest, in the direction the twins had fled from. Something had to be done.

We were a farming village; we had nothing and no one to deal with evil spirits and monsters. A messenger was dispatched to the nearest city, with a desperate plea for aid. I was frustrated greatly, for I still harbored my heroic desire. Yet I was young, weak, and scared, and I hated myself for it. I knew of nothing I could do, and that feeling of utter powerlessness drove me to angst and melancholy. I became distant with my parents, I lashed when they pressured me to talk. How could I tell them that it wasn't my fear of the monster that affected me so? Not fear, but my weakness. My mother would look at me, and sometimes I thought she knew. But I couldn't do it to her, I couldn't tell her and make her worry. More weakness. More self-derision.

Eventually, he arrived at our village.

I was standing on the outskirts, on the far side away from the spreading corruption. I wished I could face it head on, but I knew that I could not. Even knowing that I would die if I tried, my mind called me a coward. Yet I could not stop peering at

the woods, which I could just barely see the beginnings of from where I stood. Though I did not know where the cave was, I swear that my eyes were drawn to it, that I was looking right at the unholy mouth where that beast dwelt.

“Do not stare too long,” A man’s voice said from behind me. “Or it may stare back.”

I spun around rapidly at the unfamiliar voice and was met with the fascinating sight of a stranger. He was unlike anything I had ever seen, as though a hero from my beloved stories had stepped from my imagination and into reality. He was tall and clearly muscular beneath his robes, but he was not bulky. His face was sharp and angular, with gruff stubble poking through his cheeks and chin. His hair somehow managed to emulate his face, as it was tied back in a spiky knot. He had various pouches and pockets on his clothing, and a small pack on his back. My eyes were immediately drawn to the katana strapped to his waist, the black sheath almost shining in the sun. I simply stared in awe, unable to speak, so he spoke instead.

“Young man, where is your village’s elder?” he said, his voice deep and smooth. “I have come from the capital to deal with your monster issue.”

He spoke of it so casually, like it was no big deal, that I was stunned for a moment. After a pause I gestured for him to follow me and began to lead him to our elder’s home. As we traveled, other villagers stopped to stare at the mysterious looking stranger with the same kind of curious awe that no doubt had adorned my face as well. I felt an odd sense of grandeur at the fact that I was the one showing him to our leader, that I had been the first to meet him. This meager pride bolstered me briefly, giving me the courage to ask him questions. I started with who he was.

“My name is Hakin,” he said. “I am a wandering Mystic, I deal with problems of the occult kind.” He looked down at me, his face stoic. “Fortunately, I was passing through the capital as your messenger arrived.”

I wanted to ask him so much more. I wanted stories of his adventures, of the things he had faced and overcome, or what all the supernatural beings looked like. However, we arrived at the elder’s home shortly after, and for once I cursed how accessible he was. Why couldn’t he be aloof and busy, just this once? Elder Toma immediately knew who had arrived upon opening his door, and he quickly ushered Hakin inside, past his hunched old frame. He moved to turn me away and though I wished to stay I was already of the mind to leave, for I knew my place, but Hakin spoke over his shoulder.

“Let the boy in too,” he said before walking further inside.

I looked expectantly at Toma, whose face wrinkled in confusion before he beckoned me. The three of us made our way to the small table in Toma’s kitchen area. Toma said he would make tea, and not a word was spoken while he did so. In the presence of the elder I did not wish to seem like a pestering child, and so I continued to hold back the myriad of questions that sprung up in my mind. Hakin was silent, and while I did not wish to be impolite by staring at him, I could feel his eyes on me when I wasn’t looking.

Even once the tea was brewed the silence persisted for another minute. I looked to Toma, who was looking anxiously at Hakin, who was looking into his cup as though there was an amusing play being performed in the still liquid. Finally, Hakin looked up, locked eyes with Toma and spoke, his questions sharp and succinct.

“Where is the creature?” Hakin asked.

“In a cave to the North, towards the cliffs past the forest,” Toma said, the mere mention of that place enough to bring fear to his eyes.

“Has anyone entered it since the first incident?” Hakin asked, sipping his tea.

“Not that I am aware of,” Toma said. “No one who knows what is inside, anyway.”

Hakin gently lowered his cup to the table before leaning forward, his posture giving an air of severity to his next question.

“Describe it to me,” he said. “As best you can, including what it did to the boy. Spare no detail.”

Toma shuffled uncomfortably in his seat, withering under the gaze of the Mystic, before retelling at length the fate of Genki. At times the elder visibly struggled to properly recount the grisly event. I too found myself feeling nauseous as my imagination ran rampant, unable to resist the tantalizing lure of fabricated pain and terror. Through it all, Hakin was silent and expressionless. How he could listen to such a tale and not even twitch an eyebrow was baffling, even frustrating, but at the same time I felt myself even further enamored with his presence.

Toma concluded the retelling with a formal request.

“Please, oh Mystic, save our village,” he said. “We will reward you as best we can. We do not have much gold, but surely we have something that could work as-“

Hakin raised a hand and Toma fell silent. All my life, Toma had been the highest authority I knew. To see him acquiesce so easily, even to someone I had already categorized as a hero, was oddly disturbing to me.

“Don’t worry about payment,” Hakin said. “All I need is shelter for the night, for I will be departing in the morning.”

Toma quickly bowed his head and praised Hakin, calling him gracious and kind and of course we had a place to lodge him for the night. While this was happening I finally mustered up the courage to look at Hakin with intent. He almost immediately shifted his eyes to meet mine, causing me to flinch, but I did not look away. His expression was still as unreadable as when he first arrived. After a moment, the Mystic tilted his head and spoke.

“You’ve been wanting to ask me something for a while now,” Hakin said, taking another sip from his cup. “Go on, boy. What is your question?”

I wanted to ask them all, of course. Down to the tiniest detail, I wanted to know everything about this Mystic. About *being* a Mystic. My chance was right in front of me, but when I went to speak the words I found something else bubbling up inside me, and what came out surprised even myself.

“Will you take me with you?” I asked. Silence hung in the air. “When you go to the cave, that is,” I continued, suddenly sheepish on top of my nervousness. However, I somehow managed to hold Hakin’s gaze, even through the discomfort spreading through me. I felt like I had to keep still. Don’t fidget. Don’t squirm. Don’t look away. His eyes seemed to tell me that if I couldn’t even hold against him, then I would never be able to face anything, much less a monster. What must have been seconds felt like hours, but finally I saw a slight smile curl the corner of Hakin’s mouth.

“I would not deny a young man such an earnest wish,” he said. His smile suddenly evaporated as quickly as it had appeared. “However, I would also not deny a parent the life of their child. Ask your folks first.”

His casual words at the end threw me off, causing me to wrinkle my brow. Hakin laughed at my confusion before rising from the table and asking that Toma show him to his lodgings. I walked out with the pair, but before we split off Hakin spoke once more.

“If you are granted permission, meet me on the road towards the forest at sunrise,” he said, before turning away and waving over his shoulder.

I watched his retreating back until he and Toma were out of view before I began the slow trek home. I mulled over what I would say to convince my parents to let me accompany Hakin. There wasn't a single logical reason I could fathom. My pace slowed and slowed, until I was all but inching homeward. I had to come up with a reason, anything that made sense. I couldn't lie to them. Not only would they see through me, for I had never been good at lying, but I also simply could not bring myself to. We may have been poor farmers, but they had done their best raising me. I lacked the rebellious fire that burned in most youths my age. No, I had a different fire within me, something equally as inexplicable as the pang and angst of adolescence.

I reached my home, but not an answer to the problem I had. The squat, small wooden shack that I had lived in since my birth suddenly seemed like a cage. Thus, the adequate analogy would be to call my parents jailers. Such a thought didn't seem fair, and yet there it floated in my head as I pushed open the door. I found them both inside, and the moment they saw me I knew that *they* knew something was on my mind. Parents may sometimes struggle to understand their children's hearts, but somehow they rarely

overlook when something is amiss. Once more I opened my mouth intending to say one thing, and yet something else came out.

“A mystic is here,” I said. “He is going to defeat the monster and...I want to go with him.”

For the second time that day I found myself swimming in thick silence. My father’s wrinkled brow collapsed in on itself even further, transforming his face into a canvas of rolling hills. My mother’s lips parted, ever so slightly, and I saw the moment that her mind registered my words in her pained eyes. My mother looked to my father, who nodded his head towards me. Then my mother spoke.

“Come, Temi,” she said, using my childhood nickname to test my heart. “Give us details first.”

Her voice was as gentle as ever, and I felt the throbbing in my chest slow. I took a deep breath and explained it all to them, making sure to emphasize how Hakin had agreed to let me accompany him so long as I had their blessing. Once I finished I held the air in my lungs, waiting for their answer. I long suspected my parents of possessing telepathic powers, because my mother simply looked to my father, who barely moved his chin down and then up, before turning back to me.

“How could I refuse you?” My mother said. “After all, it was me that filled your head with those stories. Me, who said you could be a hero. No matter how much it hurts my heart, I am to blame for this. So you may go.”

That’s wrong, mother. Not like that, it can’t be like that. I felt my face grow hot, and before I knew it I had flung myself into my mother’s arms.

“You weren’t wrong to tell me stories,” I said, pressing my head into her shoulder. “Please don’t think that way. It’s because of those stories that I know how I want to move forward. You showed me something I want to walk towards.”

I felt warmth on my neck, and I quickly realized it was my mother’s tears. She spoke in my ear, her voice quiet and choked, telling me to come home safely. I promised her that I would.

Night came quickly, though sleep did not. A monsoon of emotion raged inside my chest, and nothing my brain did could quell it. I listened to the silence of the night, and stared into the blackness of my eyelids. Eventually I felt myself drifting into slumber, but before I fell unconscious I couldn’t help but think of the creeping curse and how it felt as though something was staring at me from the forest.

I awoke well before the sun rose, but this came as no surprise. My body was electrified, my extremities vibrating with anxiety and fear, but there was something else underneath. Anticipation. I found my parents waiting for me at the door. They both embraced me silently, their faces solemn. I admired their ability to suppress their emotions, though I could feel the terror that must have been coursing through them. Not a word was spoken as I departed.

I found Hakin exactly where he said he would be, on the outskirts of the village facing the forest. The sun had just crested the horizon as I approached him. He did not turn as I arrived, but somehow he knew I was there.

“Are you ready, Temiro?” he asked, still unmoving.

I was awed by this man’s ability to only show emotion when he chose to. Had I not already seen his smile, heard his laugh, I would have thought he was devoid of

feeling. Instead, I knew that he could place a mask over his face, only removing it if he felt like it. Was this a necessity of being a Mystic? I voiced my confirmation, but also asked what it was that he needed me to do.

“Need?” he asked before allowing me a glimpse beneath his mask with a laugh. “I don’t need you to do anything, but I *will* give you a task.”

Hakin reached inside his robes and pulled out what looked to be a ceremonial knife sheath. It was pure white, with various strange symbols adorning it that I could not decipher. I did not know it at the time, but they were mystical seals carved onto the sheath. I saw the handle of a blade sticking out from the top. Hakin gently gripped this handle and slowly pulled the knife from its sheath. I remember to this day how stricken I was with how beautiful it was. The metal of the blade matched its sheath, an astonishing pure white. What metal or process that could produce such a thing was well beyond my understanding, but it shone in the morning light. Past its beauty, there was something else about the knife that impacted me. It felt similar to the sensation of the monster’s presence coming from the cave, but I felt no malice. Although I couldn't explain why, that knife felt benevolent.

Hakin held both the knife and the sheath out to me, and I took them in unsteady hands. I gazed at the weapon in awe, but still had no idea what he expected.

“Here is the plan.” Hakin said, wasting no breath. “I will engage the evil spirit, while you standby with this knife. When it comes time to strike the final blow, I will retrieve it from you. All you have to do is hand me the blade. Are we clear?”

I nodded my understanding, but something inside me stirred. Discontent? But what did I expect? I was but a child, barely a man at all, did I expect him to ask me to

fight alongside him? Why did such a notion make my heart leap? I pondered these strange feelings as the two of us trudged through the woods towards the cliffs. It was soon into our trip, however, that I noted something odd. The forest was completely silent, even this close to our village. The only sound was the crunch of our footsteps, or my footsteps at least. It took me a little to notice, but Hakin's movements made no noise.

As the cliffs loomed ever larger, I saw the dreadful effects of the spirit's blight at their worst. The foliage around us steadily became brown, then black, until finally we were surrounded by dead trees and bushes at the foot of the cliffs. It was easy to tell that we had arrived at the right cave, for everything around the entrance was completely dead. Like a great dark maw, the cave rose up before us. That faint, malicious presence that I had felt the night before was stronger than ever. It felt like something was muttering curses right against my body, and my skin crawled beneath that hatred. Hakin was unfazed, though at this point I expected his stoicism. As though able to read my mind and the question on my lips, Hakin spoke.

"Simply follow me," he said, already stepping forward. "I will not let any harm befall you, so long as you stand your ground. You know what to do."

I said nothing, only moving to follow him. Even if I had wanted to speak, once I passed the cave entrance I found myself unable to. Much like outside, the inside of the cave was soundless, but that wasn't the issue. It was like I had stepped into a completely different atmosphere. I could hardly breathe, all the hairs on my body stood on end, and it felt as though there was ice in my heart. Everything within me didn't just scream for me to escape, it begged and pleaded. Something wrong was here, something that I needed to get away from. For a split second I hesitated, and I noticed that Hakin's pace stuttered in

time with my own. He was waiting to see if I ran. However, the sight of his strong back somehow loosened my limbs and I kept walking.

We did not have to walk long. A pale shape came into view in the darkness, and I felt my heart rate skyrocket. Hakin raised his hand to halt me, and I imagined myself to be a tree, spreading roots into the cave floor. I would not budge, not from this spot. I held the sheathed knife in front of me, ready to perform my duty when the time came. The shape reacted to my movement, as though it could feel the weapon I held, and it shifted suddenly. I barely suppressed a gasp as I saw it properly for the first time.

It resembled a man, that much was certain. Its skin was pale white, its body bloated but its limbs sickeningly thin. All that covered its saggy flesh was a loincloth tied around its waist. Those were the aspects of the creature that I could identify as “something I had seen before”. It had no head. Where a head should have been there was simply a gaping hole that stretched all the way to its shoulders. I could just barely see *something* moving around the rim of that hole. That alone was enough to horrify me, but I also saw something gripped in its slender hand. A massive sword, coated in a dim purple light and wickedly sharp. I did not know what to think, what to feel, or what to do. Fortunately, this worked to my advantage.

With a click, Hakin pushed his katana from its sheath with his thumb before slowly drawing it. It looked like a regular sword for the most part, except it also had sigils carved into it like the knife I held. Time seemed to grind to a halt as the Mystic stared down the evil spirit. Then, without any hesitation, the two figures lunged.

If I couldn't believe my eyes upon seeing the headless spirit, then I certainly felt like I was living in a fantasy as I watched the duel. Hakin's sword flashed through the air

at impossible speeds, deflecting blow after blow from the monster's massive weapon. I couldn't fathom how he had the strength to parry such an enormous hunk of metal. Though it couldn't match Hakin's speed, the spirit's own strength and swiftness were definitively inhuman. More often than not I couldn't even see the movements of their weapons. There was a blur, then the clang of metal colliding with metal, and suddenly their swords were crossed in a different position. Terror mixed with rapture as I witnessed the kind of battle that I had only dreamed of until this moment.

At first the two seemed evenly matched, but slowly even I began to be able to tell that Hakin was landing blows and the spirit was not. Suddenly the monster wound back and slapped at Hakin with the flat of its sword. The Mystic blocked the attack, sending him skidding towards me. The spirit wasted no time and lunged to impale Hakin. For a split second I panicked, certain he would be skewered. The attack was too fast, he was off balance, it was over! Hakin's body was a blur as his leg rose and fell like a bolt of lightning from the heavens, stomping the headless monster's blade into the dirt. With the creature bent over from this counter, I finally saw what was twitching around the monster's neck hole. It was rows and rows of pointed teeth, spiraling into the black pit of the creature's gut. At this point I couldn't be shaken any further.

I saw Hakin's hand reach back to me, beckoning for his knife. This was the critical moment, I had to move quickly! I unsheathed the blade and moved to hand it over. However, as I gazed into that razor-filled maw I felt something come over me. I thought of the terror and pain that this monster had brought to my village. I thought of my parents, their hard work transformed into withered crops. I thought of Benki, heard his wail of grief, and saw his parent's sorrow. I thought of Genki, dead because of a curious

heart. In that instant, I was not afraid. In that instant, I did not even hate the spirit. In that instant, I acknowledged that it had to be destroyed.

And that I had to do it.

Silently, I stepped forward and plunged my arm into the toothed abyss. The maw contracted as I did so, and I felt a thousand needles rip into my arm, but the blade sank into something within the monster. White light began to push its way out of the creature, tearing holes in its bloated torso until finally, unable to contain the power, it exploded into a black mist that quickly evaporated. The knife clattered to the ground and my bloodied arm fell to my side. To my relief it was still attached, and through the adrenaline I barely felt any pain. All was silent as the pressure in the air faded away.

I looked to Hakin and awaited his anger, sure that my disobedience would come with a swift retribution. He turned to me, as unreadable as the moment I met him...and smiled. The Mystic knelt down and picked the knife off the ground, before presenting it to me with a bowed head.

“You passed, Temiro,” he said. “My hunch was right, well done. I just have one more question for you.”

Bewildered, I asked him what it was.

“Would you care to become my disciple?” he asked. “Would you like to follow the path of the Mystic?”

I didn't need to think about it. Nothing felt real as I opened my mouth. My life, my journey, was about to truly begin. For the sake of those I cared for I would be brave.

“Yes.”

(Totally aware of how abrupt this ending is but look at this page count, jeez.

Thoughts on what could be cut?)

Micah Sheffield