

Excerpt from *The Forest of the Dead*

It was raining over Kanagawa Prefecture when I entered Aokigahara Forest. The storm had broken in the northwest and moved south over the trees, and over Mount Fuji, and settled above the quiet streets of Kamakura. There it rained on the happy and the sad, the rich and the poor, the young and the old. It rained on the mangy dog outside of the butcher shop, and on the weary vendors of the fish market, and on a husband and wife and their young son who ran together, laughing. The rain fell on the living in Kamakura, but all was quiet for the dead of Aokigahara Forest, save for the sound of lonely drops, which formed and fell from black boughs.

So it was when I entered the forest, intent on ending my life. What better place to die than the forest of the dead, where men and women came from all over Japan to slip silently away and to rest eternal? The world was lit by a gentle gray light which danced its way through dark trees and gathered in pools on the ground.

I stared up through the trees at the empty sky and breathed in the nothingness, and my lungs filled with quiet. It sat there and I listened. I ventured forward into the wood, in search of the perfect tree.

The ground was soft, with a rich dark soil, and a bed of leaves that dampened the sound of my foot-falls. No sound seemed to pass in Aokigahara Forest. It died there, as did everything else.

The trees were bent, tired things. They twisted around each other, embracing one another, and formed small, circular glades, where tiny, white flowers grew. I got lost in those many glades, walking the circles, and reaching out for meaning. I felt that I had entered a dream, and all the world became a fog, and all the trees the same tree, and all the flowers the same flowers.

It was in this dream that I heard the faint sound of music in the distance. It was quiet at first, faint, like the murmuring of the heart. But I walked toward the sound, and it grew louder.

I came upon a glade of particular size. Here the flowers were denser, the trees more straight and tall. I saw at the far end the source of the sound. A woman sat in the boughs of a large tree and on a violin played a sweet, sad song. It sounded to me like the song of life, and I sat on a fallen log to listen.

“Your playing is lovely,” I said. She looked down at me from her perch. She ceased her playing, but the song continued.

“Thank you,” she said. “I love to play more than anything in the world.”

I nodded and was quiet. “How did you die?” I asked.

She closed her eyes. “I hanged myself here, in this very tree. They found me, and buried me in a cemetery in Yokohama.”

“Hmm,” I said. “Why did you do it?”

She was quiet for a moment. She looked away from me.

“When I was young, I fell in love with the violin. I wished only to play, and I practiced always, and I grew very skilled and was happy. I became the youngest member of the New Japan Philharmonic Orchestra and felt the world was full of love.”

“As I grew older, my hands began to shake. I was sick, you see. My grandfather had been sick, as had his grandfather. They all died to that disease, which made them stutter when they spoke, and sent tremors through their bodies so they couldn’t eat or drink without aid.

For some time still I tried to play, but I knew that my time was short. When I could no longer play, I came here to die.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay,” she replied. “Now I play every day, and do nothing else.” She closed her eyes, and began to play again.