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Rashomon (Translated)

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One evening, a servant was waiting out the rain under the Rashomon gate. Beneath the wide gate, there was no one else. Only a single cricket was clinging onto one of the large pillars, its red paint peeling away. Because that Rashomon was on Suzaku Avenue, you'd expect at least a few of other people, maybe with straw hats or eboshi caps, waiting for the rain to end. But tonight, he was completely alone.

Recently, Kyoto had been struck by disaster after disaster from earthquakes, storms, and fires, to famine. The whole city had decayed. People were so desperate they destroyed Buddhist statues and temple objects, selling pieces with red paint or gold leaf for firewood on the side of the road. The city had fallen to such ruin that no one bothered to repair Rashomon. Wild animals and thieves had made homes there. And finally, the gate became a place where people dumped unclaimed bodies. After sunset, no one would come close to the gate because of how ominous it was.

Instead of people, crows came. During the day, they circled above, cawing as they flew around the gate's tall roof. When the sky turned red at sunset, you could see them clearly, scattered like black sesame seeds. The crows came to peck at the corpses of the dead. But tonight, maybe because it was so late, not a single crow was in sight. Only their droppings could be seen on the stone steps, white specks stuck to the weeds that grew between the cracks.

The servant sat on top of the steps, his blue cloak wrapped around him, staring at the rain while touching the large pimple on his right cheek. I said earlier that he was waiting for the rain to stop, however, he had nowhere to go even if it did. Normally, he would've gone back to his master's house, but his master had let him go a few days ago. His dismissal was just one of the aftereffects of the decline of Kyoto. So instead of "waiting for the rain to stop," it would be more accurate to say he was "trapped by the rain, with no idea what to do next."

The gloomy sky didn't help his mood. The rain, which had started around 4, showed no signs of letting up. He sat there, lost in thought, trying to figure out how he'd get through tomorrow. The sound of rain filled the air around Rashomon, seeming to get closer and closer.

As it got deeper into the night, the sky lowered, almost close enough to press down on the gate's roof. He knew that if he wanted to survive, he couldn't be picky about how he'd do it. Being choosy meant starving to death, ending up as just another abandoned body left for the crows. He had no choice but to turn to crime. But, as much as he tried to justify it, he couldn't quite bring himself to accept it.

With a loud sneeze, he stood up, shivering. Kyoto's night air was freezing, and he could've used a fire. The wind blew right through the gate's pillars, making it even colder. The cricket that was clinging to the red pillar earlier had vanished.

The servant hunched his shoulders, pulling his cloak over his head as he looked around, hoping to find a dry spot, away from the rain and the eyes of others. He spotted a broad, red ladder leading to the second level of the gate. Up there, he thought, the only company would be the corpses. Careful not to make his sword rattle, he put his foot on the first step of the ladder.

A few moments later, he was halfway up, holding his breath as he tried to look upward. A faint light was glowing at the top, illuminating his cheek, where the large pimple was swollen under his patchy beard. He'd assumed he'd only find corpses up there, but now he saw someone moving a flickering light around the upper level.

Flattening himself against the floor, he crept closer, holding his breath. When he peeked into the room, he found several bodies lying around just as he'd heard in the rumors. He couldn't see exactly how many there were since the light didn't reach far, but he could make out some were clothed, some naked, both men and women. They sprawled on the floor with mouths open and limbs twisted, like old clay dolls, barely recognizable as human.

The smell was horrible, but suddenly, a powerful feeling took over him, numbing his senses. Then he saw it, a figure crouching low among the corpses. It was an old woman in a worn, brown robe. She held a burning piece of wood, leaning over one of the corpses, which appeared to be a woman, judging by the long hair.

The servant was frozen by a mix of fear and curiosity. As one writer put it, "the hairs on his head stood on end." The old woman put the torch on the floor and reached out with both hands, taking hold of the corpse's long hair and plucking it strand by strand, like a monkey picking fleas.

With every hair she pulled, his fear faded, and anger grew. Why was she doing this?

The servant, driven by rage, stepped forward and made his way across the creaky floorboards toward her. The old woman looked up, her bony hands frozen in midair as she was holding the corpse's hair, a startled expression on her face.

"What are you doing?" he demanded. The old woman looked up at him without any fear or shame, with her small, dark eyes looking through the dim light. In a low, raspy voice, she replied, "I'm pulling her hair to make a wig. It's how I survive."

For a moment, his anger suddenly mixed with a strange pity. This woman, so thin and frail, robbing the dead just to survive. The cruelty of survival had worn down not only his soul but hers as well.

The woman continued, "This woman here... she used to sell snake meat as dried fish, lying to sick people, telling them it was medicine. If I'm robbing her now, it's only fair. In life, she cheated others. In death, I take what I need."

The servant felt a chill. Everyone was desperate, scraping by however they could. He'd thought about becoming a thief himself, hadn't he? Was he any different from this woman, taking from the dead to keep living?

For a moment, he didn't respond. The rain poured on the roof, the wind whistling through cracks in the gate. Then, almost laughing, he realized something had changed in him. The pity faded, and a quiet, unsettling courage took its place.

With a sneer, he grabbed the woman by her collar. "Then you won't mind if I take from you. After all, I must survive, too."

In one swift motion, he tore her clothes from her bony shoulders. She clung to his legs, but he shoved her aside, letting her collapse over the bodies. Holding the clothes under his arm, he hurried down the ladder, disappearing into the dark, rainy night.

The old woman lay motionless for a long time, sprawled among the dead. Eventually, she stirred, crawling slowly towards the ladder. With her short, white hair hanging, she looked out into the pitch-black night below the gate. Outside, there was only darkness, endless and empty.

No one knows where the servant went.