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AYO

THE
HELLMAKER

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To my family, because damn.

*And to you who picked this up – thank
you, and I hope this en is a good one.*



文化特別
保護地域
鵜国

HARBOURLAKES
SUPERVISOR'S
COURT

TO
OCCUPIED UKOKU

大橋
GREAT BRIDGE

NAKANOKAMINO
中神野

HIKARAKU

飛歌寮

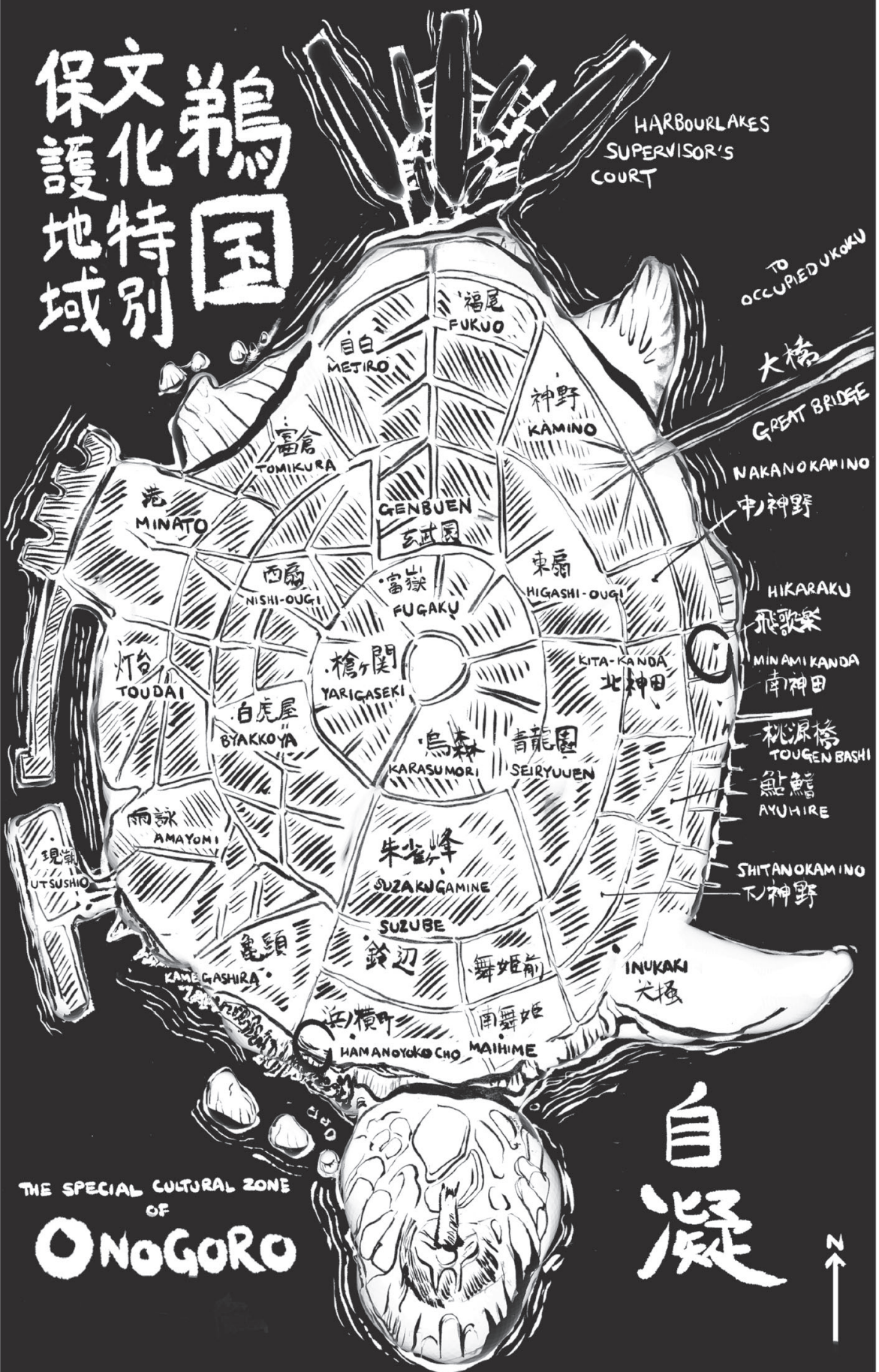
MINAMI KANDA
南神田

桃源橋
TOUGEN BASHI

魚鱈
AYUHIRE

SHITANOKAMINO
下神野

INUKAKI
犬塚



THE SPECIAL CULTURAL ZONE
OF
ONOGORO

自凝





*Hakai Family Hellmakers, Est. Taiwa 734
Purveyors of Artisan Hells & Unlucky Days
to Inflict Upon Your Enemies
We Will Make It Personal
Prices Upon Consultation*

“Hellmakers, eh?” said the demon, who was following the scroll’s cursive script with the Hakai family business card. “Is this story literally true, or a mythical retelling?”

Hakai Hyo, Thirty-Third Hellmaker, like all Hakais before her, knew the Record in the demon’s claws by heart, and she knew that the story was true enough to matter.

Hyo said nothing. The shock of finding a demon just seconds ago – *the* demon, the very one who had caged

her village in endless loops of cruel winters – in her own study, at her own desk, had killed her words. The demons of stories were man-eating monsters, mad from the bottomless hunger that was their price for eating the hitodenashi fruit. They weren't supposed to be quietly leafing through the Hakai family archives and fluent in ancient scripts.

Hyo took the demon in – her eyes, teeth, her lithe movements, the inhuman shine of her hair. Had something changed? What fresh hell had Hyo to fear?

“The gods of fortune punished the First of Us for killing the gods of sickness, poverty and rot – of misfortune,” the demon read aloud. *“She learnt too late that fortune cannot exist without misfortune. In killing the gods of misfortune, she'd threatened the lives of the gods of fortune too. Fortune cursed her to be the First of Us – to be a source of misfortune in the place of the gods she destroyed. Her daughters would inherit her curse. Her sons would inherit her weapons. Daughters and sons together, the Hakai family is never to be free of her crime and must bear its memory with the duty of guilt.”* The demon looked up from the scroll. “Making a family business of this supposed curse doesn't seem especially penitent to me.”

“There's nothing 'supposed' about it.” Hyo found her voice at last.

The demon regarded her coolly. “All the power of the

old gods of misfortune sealed in you – yet you haven't used any of that power against me.”

“Hellmaking doesn't work like that.”

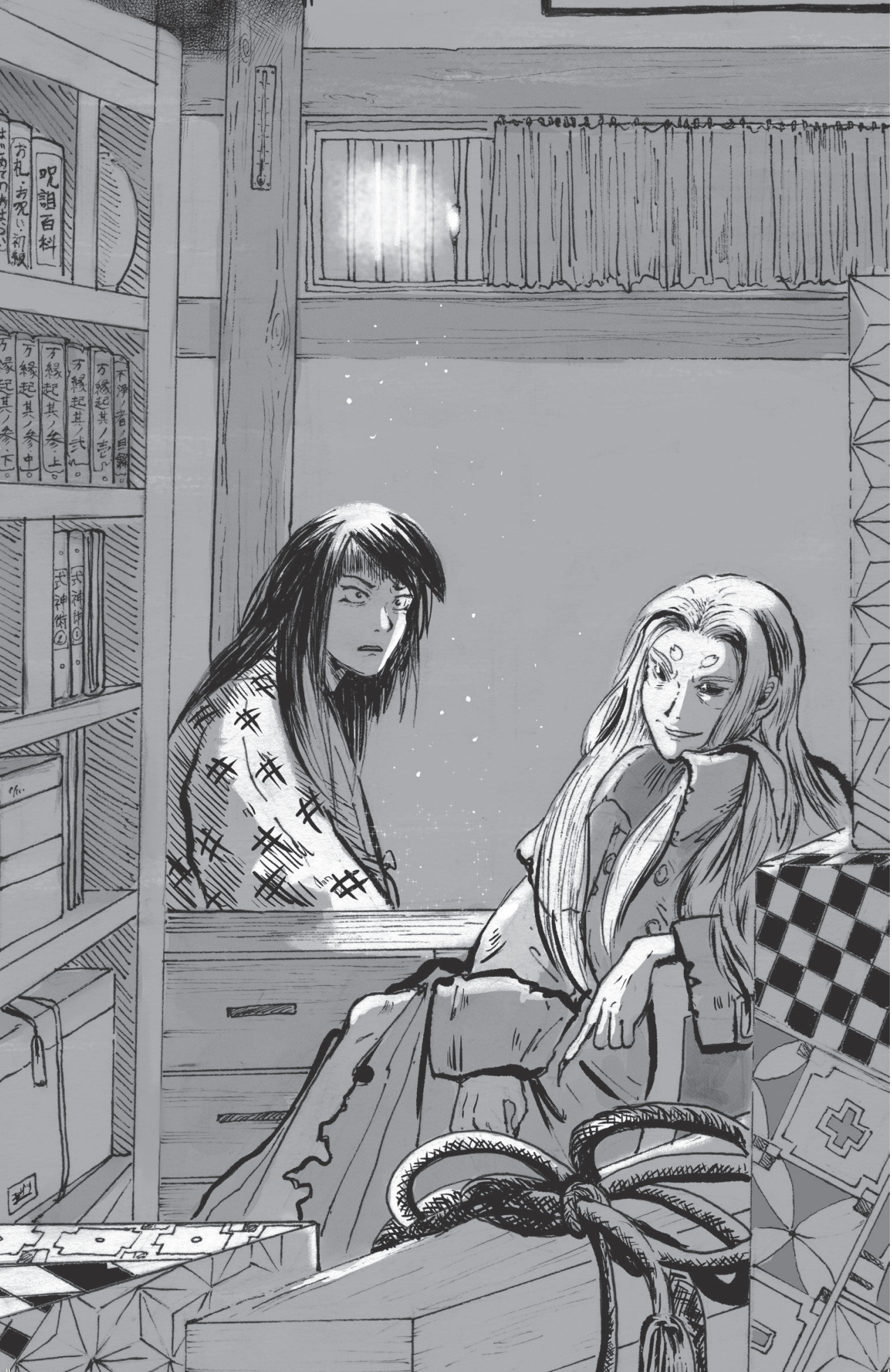
“No. I guess it wouldn't be a *curse* if it was that convenient.” The demon placed the scroll in its box. Curdled smells of old blood and rotting blossom wafted from her shimmering hair, and Hyo bottled down the urge to run. “A shame your neighbours don't remember what's about to happen to them. Otherwise, they could've commissioned you to avenge them on their behalf by now, hmm?”

Outside, the villagers were breaking ice, winching open frozen shutters and greeting each other with the dawn. No one knew that they'd lived this day before, that Hyo could predict every snapping icicle, every turn of the crows in the skies – that she knew what each of them looked like in their moment of death.

The demon cocked her head. “How many winters has it been now, Hakai Hyo, that I've turned this village of yours into my orchard? That you've watched your people suffer by the hitodenashi curse? Five winters? Six?”

Eight. “Shut it.”

“You know, I've never killed your villagers. Not one. In any of these winters.” The demon picked up a brush and played with its end. “Hitodenashi pear is a parasitic curse. It *wants* to keep its human hosts alive, to feed off the curses in their hearts. My sowing the seeds, to turn



your friends into my hitodenashi trees, gave them eternal life. Burning those trees to the ground, that's what kills your villagers each time – and that's all yours and your brother's doing. Not me.”

Hyo bunched her hands. Her nails sank into her palms. “What did *we* ever do to you to deserve this?”

“I asked the same thing eighty years ago, back in the Hell-on-Earth War. What did I ever do that meant no one thought my human life was worth just ... leaving alone?” She scratched her head, then shrugged. “Sit, Hakai Hyo. I've a proposal for you.”

“Will you let the villagers live?”

“Too late for that – they die in one loop, they're dead for good. But you and your brother...” The demon's black and gold eyes were unblinking. “Every loop I've tried to infect you both with hitodenashi and it's never taken root. The irony of it, really. I came all this way to see the two of you learn how hitodenashi's eternal suffering feels, and it's the two of you who are immune to it. Ha!”

“You came here for me and Mansaku?” Hyo couldn't hold back her laughter. “I don't understand you.”

“Call it a blood feud.” The demon nudged the chair opposite her. “Didn't I tell you to sit down?”

“Or?”

“Or I'll go and find Mansaku to rip off his jaw. See if that gives me the satisfaction you've denied me. I won't know till I try.”

Hyo sat.

The demon smiled, baring golden fangs. “What do you know of the island of Onogoro?”

“It’s a Special Cultural Zone of Ukoku.” Hyo wrung her mind for everything she could recall. “Ukoku’s gods of fortune retreated there during the Hell-on-Earth War, taking enough of us Ujin to survive. The gods haven’t left it since and Onogoro-Ujin can’t leave the zone unless on approved Cultural Expeditions.”

“And what’s Onogoro renowned for?”

Hyo’s heart thudded in her ears. “They make shinshu – hitodenashi’s only known cure.”

Onogoro’s prized pitch-black rice wine, shinshu, was medicine for the hitodenashi-infected, weedkiller for its sprouts, and poison for the demons born from the humans who ate its fruits. As far as the world knew, it could only be made on Onogoro. Nowhere else had succeeded.

That was why everyone said that, after the Hell-on-Earth War, shinshu had bought Onogoro’s freedom. The whole world was dependent on Onogoro’s shinshu to keep the hitodenashi curse at bay. Ukoku was officially under Harbournakes’ occupation, but Onogoro alone had been able to negotiate special privileges, using the threat of stopping shinshu production in exchange for near self-rule.

Onogoro had its own assembly. They had banned foreign gods. They refused to teach in four languages

as the rest of Ukoku did. They isolated themselves to “preserve their endangered culture and protect their gods” – which had been permitted, because Onogoro’s official story was that Ukoku’s gods were essential for shinshu. Only *these* gods, they said, could make the blessed rain that was shinshu’s key ingredient, and the rest of the world hadn’t yet proved them wrong.

Hence Onogoro, the Special Cultural Zone, was born.

“Here’s my proposal, Hyo. I can’t get on to Onogoro. Wards prevent demons from even setting foot in the gateway. I’ll set you and your brother free of my winter.” The demon pointed a claw at Hyo. “And in exchange, you two will go to Onogoro for me.”

Light caught on the tip of the claw. “To do what?”

“I heard that someone’s growing hitodenashi pear there – an orchard all to themselves.”

Hyo stared. “On Onogoro?”

“You don’t believe it?”

Hitodenashi needed humans to grow on – to make an orchard of it, to even wish to do so! And for Onogoro to do it! “Why would they do that?”

“Because it’s been long enough since the Hell-on-Earth War that someone’s forgotten why they shouldn’t.” The demon let out a bubbling laugh. “You’re wondering what this has to do with you. Very well. You could say that we ... share an inheritance, and what that means is that you’ve a duty of guilt, as you called it. It has to

be you to find the hitodenashi on Onogoro, Hyo the hellmaker, and then, when you do, you can do as you were cursed to.”

She pointed a claw at Hyo. “You’re going to make hell on Onogoro for me.”