

## “Mononoke of Another Country”

by Jacob Milnestein

“Faithful friends who were dear to us, will be near to us no more.”

- *Hugh Martin,*
- *'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas'*



The dim fires still burnt upon the hilltops, though with only a fraction of the intensity with which they had once shone when first the small band of friends entered into the world.

The falling snow smothered everything, choking all life beneath a blanket of white. In the towns and in the woods, ash and ice intermingled, bound together within the cycle of the changing seasons.

Within the line etched in red soil and filthy dirt by the old Roman wall, the snow had been cleared out from the damp streets, shovelled into ditches and gutters by labouring *snønisser*, yet to the north, beyond Swiss Cottage and Hampstead, the snow had been allowed to settle. Far from the commerce and labour within the old wall and the markets and coffee shops of Covent Garden, there was little to encourage the presiding royalty to reclaim the northern wasteland.

Thus, everything further than Tyburn and the parish of Mary-le-bone, had been allowed to fall into chaos and disrepair. East from Harrow and into the depths of Hertfordshire lay feudalism and misrule.

Yet regardless of the decline of the world, music still emanated from behind closed doors, windows still shone with the warmth of fires burning brightly upon the hearth. Those who dwelt *in* the world remained safe and secluded.

Twitching his rounded ears with distaste, Neues rose up upon his hind-legs and glanced over the endless snow that covered both withered grass and cracked stone alike. His fur, once a ruddy red like the soil of the city in which he found himself, now a faded grey and soft white, was likewise damp with the falling snow.

Despite the cold, his eyes remained sharp and focused, dark beacons burning within the fur of his face .

When first he had been born, he had not asked why, in the heat of Avīci, his fur was red and brown whilst, amidst the frozen ice flows of Mahāpadma, his fur turned white. Yet as the season had shifting in the aged city, falling autumnal leaves replaced by winter snow, he had gathered that the genus of his species, or rather the *guise* of his soul, likewise changed colour in its native environment.

In summer, they called the form he had assumed a *stoat*, yet in winter, he was named *ermine*.

Newes did not challenge the vocabulary by which he was named. It was enough to have a form. There were a multitude of unlucky souls in the Narakas who were not bound to a physical form. Those ethereal spirits such as Pecke-in-the-Crowne and Griez Zell Greedigutt, were denied a physical presence not only in their native realms, but also within the human world, making it harder for them to hold any influence or sway amongst the courts of both men and spirits.

They were, however, able to pass freely between the Narakas and the cities without being impeded by the matter of the flesh. It was due to this that Neues had as of late come to envy them.

Of the company of others that had arrived amidst the cities and fields of the human world, only Neues and four others had found the doors locked to them following the festivities.

The small ermine could not claim that they were entirely blameless for this. The end of summer was the only time when the gates between the Narakas and the city were thrown wide open and the others were allowed into the human world without need of disguise or artifice. There were parades and carnivals in the street and, all the while, men and women masked themselves as others so that one might not know who they spoke to until the festival was over.

It was a time of celebration and festivity. Any inhabitant of the alternate ice plains and infernos of the Narakas would have been mad to refuse the chance of respite from such a world. More importantly though, it was a time when others were treated as equal with humans.

Yet after the parties and carnivals, when the gates had been drawn shut once more and the labours of winter had begun, Newes had discovered that the human world was not so enjoyable after all.

In the falling snow, he heard the approach of another, a non-human like himself and allowed his tense muscles to relax slightly, glancing over his shoulder at the dark shape as it moved swiftly through the snow.

"*Hwæt*," the other announced, its long, *Leporidaen* ears upright and, like Newes' own, listening intently for the sound of human interlopers on the horizon.

The stout ermine sighed audibly

"*Hwæt*, friend," he answered with a heavy heart.

The rabbit glanced out at the remainder of the bent iron fence before them, the opposing red brick homes and the curve of the snow-covered road.

"No sign of a door, I take it?" he asked, lifting his nose to the air and casting senses and whiskers out into the wind, struggling to find a sign of the path that would lead them back to the Narakas.

Newes shook his head.

"None that I can sense," he answered and then, with a tone that suggested defeat, added, "nor are there any signs of others. Only the smell of drunken men and harping women, their overfed infants bawling at all hours of the day."

He shook his head slowly from side to side, dislodging the snow from his scalp.

"We're not going home any time soon, friend Sacke & Sugar."

The rabbit twitched its whiskers, its small tongue protruding from its lips as if it were tasting the air.

"No summoner calls us either, no *noaide* to ask favours of us in recompense for a safe passage home."

Once, long before, they had been as one with a summoner, a girl whose heart had been hard to read, her expression difficult to understand. They had remained with her six months before she had cast them out, sending them away without an explanation of why they were no longer needed.

In truth, there was no reason why she should have offered them any such justification for their retirement, yet it was a common courtesy between summoners and others that some sort of explanation was offered. This, however, they had been denied, turned away from the hearth when they had at last been settling into life in the old city.

It had been Newes who had discovered the answer, skulking about by the window of his former mistress, watching her tearfully write letters and gladly accept the company of a gentleman caller.

Within a year, the mistress had been betrothed and her former familiars forgotten, their role buried along with the secrets of her past. Each of their names had been struck from the book of her heart.

The years since had offered each of the five very different experiences yet, through all of it, and through the nullified contract made by she who had first united them, they had remained together.

Some time after the event, Sacke & Sugar had said that he had seen their former mistress, and her gentleman beau, up on the fourth layer of the burning Naraka, running wildly about upon the scorching earth and crying out repentance yet Newes suspect his friend was simply trying to comfort them. It was a strange sort of comfort, but that was what Newes believed it to be; the rabbit had wished to show them, through the telling of his tale, that they were each important and that someone who could cast them away so easily would, in time, find herself likewise disposed of.

For this little lie, Newes felt a deep sensation of love and admiration for his friend. It was not that he believed it, but simply that he appreciated that Sacke & Sugar, in his own way, wanted to tell them that were still important.

"We don't need a summoner," Newes said, knowing that such comments would please his friend and make him feel that his lie had been worth telling.

The black rabbit nodded his head.

"You're right, not after last time."

Newes smiled inwardly. Despite the hurtfulness of their former mistress and of the other and all their varying natures, the small ermine could not think of four better comrades than those with whom his own fate had been entwined. In this at least, the nature of the human world had done him no wrong.

Yet the fear persisted. If no one was there to open the door for them, then would they be capable of finding the entrance by themselves... or would they be forced to wait until next year when the gates were thrown open during harvest festival once more?

He shuddered despite himself, not from the cold, but from the notion of spending an entire year in the human world.

"We have to leave," he said, voicing his inner fears, "and soon too."

From above them, they heard the plaintive mewl of a passing *magcat* and instinctively Sacke & Sugar's posture straightened, his expression betraying the fear he felt.

"Don't panic," a third voice hissed sharply from amongst the snowfall.

Newes felt a thrill of fear, his hair stranding on end as he felt the presence of Jarmara at his side, whose fur trailing in the snow, covered the absence of both his legs and the supernatural method by which he achieved movement.

"You scared the life out of me, Jarmara," the small ermine hissed sharply at his Spaniel companion.

"Keep looking ahead," the dog ordered, glancing over his shoulder at the black rabbit. "You too, Sacke & Sugar. You'd both do well to learn the signs of their passing."

A second howl filled the skies, a screech of indignation as a winged creature, its features that of a bloodied crow and its body that of a man, hurtled up from the forest snatching the *magcat* from the grasp of the heavens. Its wicked beak tore into the flesh of the feline before it sank back down beneath the horizon of the trees in a shower of blood and fur.

"*Karura*," Newes spat, "even here, they're..."

Jarmara hissed sharply and the small ermine fell into a disgruntled silence.

The flight of the magcat and the sudden attack of the karura had excited attention from more than the small gathering of lost creatures shivering beneath the fall of snow and the shadow of the iron railings.

“Human interlopers,” the Spaniel whispered, his tone low and suddenly full of anxiety. “Where are Holt and Tom?”

Beyond the railings, the shape of three humans became visible, men in the thirtieth year of their lives, weapons cocked over the crook of the arm and eyes hidden by the brim of flat caps.

“They went into the town,” Newes whispered in return, “to search for food.”

Slowly, Sacke & Sugar slunk over to them, his ears flat and his dark fur smeared with falling snow.

“Holt said that she would be able to disguise herself better than we could, she said she'd fit in more and that, because her fur was white, people wouldn't notice her in all the snow anyhow.”

“And what about Tom?” Jarmara complained, his tone surly as his dark eyes tracked the motion of the three, armed men as they walked slowly along the divide between the pavement and the railings. “How did Tom plan to disguise himself?”

“I don't think he did,” Sacke & Sugar continued, “he's strong-willed. He doesn't like to pretend to be any less than what he is.”

“It's not as if any of us like it,” Newes snarled. “We all know what we are, we all know we're not natives here, and we all know that we don't belong.”

The words hung between the group of three friends like an accusation, a condemnation of deviant behaviour. The blame for their situation was universal, they had each had their own motives for not going back within the specified time limit in which the gates between the Narakas and the human world remained open.

Newes liked to tell himself it was because he lost track of time, because he wasn't paying attention, but in truth it was because he wanted, on some level, to stay within the human world – to fit in like he never would. He wanted to be a part of the kind of life their former summoner now possessed.

“I'm not saying we don't,” Jarmara retorted, voice raised. “I'm just saying that *some* of us--”

A shot rang out, a thud amidst the snow and Newes felt his heart freeze, panic coursing through his veins.

From beyond the railings came shouting and the sound of heavy boots moving swiftly through the falling snow.

“The humans!” Sacke & Sugar hissed. “They know we're here!”

“We have to fight them,” Jarama snarled, casting a disparaging glance at Newes. “Now that you've told them where we are, we have to fight them.”

“We should flee,” Sacke & Sugar protested in panic. “Melek Taus preserve us, we should flee!”

Another bullet passed by and the black rabbit cried out, his leg twitching as a trickle of dark blood stained the snow, the hot metal passing down into the hardened soil.

Jarama barred his teeth in a snarl, his eyes fixed on the approaching humans as they readied their guns again.

“Did they hit you?” Newes asked of the rabbit anxiously.

Shaken, Sacke & Sugar shook his head from side to side.

“It didn't hit... almost, but it just caught me as it passed by.”

Shouts and footfalls grew louder, the looming shape of the three men with the weapons raised and fired a third shot, going wild of the mark yet still hitting the snow directly before Jarmara.

“This is it,” the Spaniel growled, “this is *it!*”

A final shot fired and a mass of light and words converged in the air before the gathered others, a shield of luminance compiled from the letters of an ancient alphabet and the symbols of a dead civilisation.

“A gate!” Newes cried with jubilant surprise. “A gate to the Narakas!”

He leant forward, the illumination casting ancient patterns across his fur and, all of a sudden, was bowled sideways over, knocked flying by the collision of another animal crashing into his side.

His dark eyes swam in and out of focus and with a frown, he lashed out to find himself pinned down by the weight of another only marginally larger than him.

“It's not a gate home,” the voice hissed sharply, feminine and contrary. “Can't you read? It's a gate to the Pure Abodes! If we go there we'll be stuck amongst the Anāgāmī, or worse still, destroyed by the Śuddhāvāsa devas! We'll never go home!”

Newes blinked slowly and, eventually, was able to make out the shape of the white kitten towering above him, her ears flat against her head as the words upon the gate rotated languidly around the outside of the circular portal.

“It's a trap, Newes!” the kitten spat, her sharp teeth visible in the darkness of her mouth.

“Who would open a door to the Suddhāvāsa...” Newes began and, at once, fell silent as the skies exploded with vibrant light, a thousand sunrises flooding the heavens.

Below the illumination, man and other cried out in pain as, amidst the waves of light upon a backdrop of distant stars, a being in flowing robes emerged. From the furnace, s/he held aloft a sword glistening with flame and etched with runes whilst all about hir, the trees blistered with fire.

The small ermine's eyes widened with fear and terror, his body struggling beneath the weight of the kitten as instinct urged him to flee.

“Jabrilæ!” he spat in horror. “Jabrilæ is here!”

It took a full moment for him to register the presence of the karura from earlier, poised midway between the trees and the heavens, its wings beating slowly and its poise uncertain.

The deva Jabrilæ turned slowly from the skies, regarding the scene below with a serene expression, hir dark eyes drinking in the events of the real world as if they were but a diorama, before finally settling on the bloody karura.

Shots echoed up into the skies, the three humans and their pointless weapons firing wildly at both karura and deva and hitting neither target. Still, the feathered features of the karura remained aloft, its eyes meeting Jabrilæ's gaze unflinchingly.

"We need to find Tom," Newes murmured, still struggling between the snow and the kitten's claws.

The deva lowered hir sword, pointing directly down towards the karura who, in return, opened its gore stained beak wider, fire igniting in the back of its throat as the feathers of its neck and head rustled with warning of the approaching confrontation.

"This is bad," Sacke & Sugar moaned, skipping nervously over to where Holt still held Newes pinned to the ground. "What can we do against a deva like Jabrilæ? We're not from the Pratāpana Naraka, we can't fight hir!"

"We don't need to *fight* hir," Holt snapped, "we just need to find Vinegar Tom and get out of here. Leave the karura to fight Jabrilæ, that's what he's here for anyhow."

From beyond the railings, in the direction where the agitated humans had first appeared, came a sudden, loud lowing, a mournful cry to the heavens.

Newes felt his blood freeze, Holt leaping off his chest in surprise, her fangs barred and her tail rigid.

The animal call sounded again and even the deva and karura foe seemed to turn their attention from their impending confrontation.

Swiftly, the ermine pulled himself up from the snow and dirt and lifted his head, his heart pounding in his ears as he saw the sight of Vinegar Tom amidst the falling snow, standing defiant in the road and calling out in a loud, sorrowful summons to all who gathered upon the empty land beyond the railings.

"What is that idiot doing?" Jarmara hissed, his body leaving no footprints as his fur dragged through the snow beneath him.

Like Jarmara, it was impossible to mistake Vinegar Tom for anything other than what he was. His skin was a jaundice yellow, covered by a pale covering of grey fur like frost. His body was thin and malnourished, like that of a starved greyhound, yet his head was that on an ox.

He was entirely unique, a pure creation of the Narakas, unseen upon human ground save for the times surrounding the harvest festival or when specifically summoned.

Vinegar Tom, more so than any of the others, looked like a devil.

"No," Sacke & Sugar whispered in a trembling voice. "No, this is not good!"

With a cry of horror and frustration, one of the three men levelled his gun once more, this time turning in the direction of the mournful cries of Vinegar Tom.

Newes felt his blood run cold.

He had seen this before, the fear of humanity calcified into action when confronted by something different from what they expected.

The bullet exploded from the gun, tearing through the air towards Vinegar Tom and Newes felt a screech of frustration rising in him, his tiny body thrown forward by emotion as he raced against the momentum of the tiny fragment of metal.

A wind stirred his fur, all but bowling him over and the ermine stumbled, his heart freezing as the deva appeared before Vinegar Tom, hir flaming blade held up like a shield, deflecting the bullet.

Behind him, of the three human interlopers, the one who had fired his weapon grunted and dropped down to the snow, unmoving.

Newes found himself face to face with the deva, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"W-Why?" he stammered.

From behind there came a sudden sound of excitement, fear, terror and the guttural cries of men unexpectedly meeting their end before their time was due.

The small ermine turned away swiftly and caught sight of the karura on the other side of the open gate, blood running freely down its bare chest and through the snow, the felled bodies of the remaining men contorted upon the ground at its feet.

Again, Newes turned to face the deva, to question what had happened and gasped in surprise as he found the creature within close proximity to him, the heat of hir sword all but scorching the ermine's soft, winter coat.

"Why did you protect us?" he called out to the passing deva, flinching at the incandescence of the robes s/he wore.

Without answering, the celestial being lifted hir sword and thrust it forward into the gate, twisting it like a key as the flames intermingled with the alphabet of the sigil and slowly the light changed from a soft blue to a vibrant red.

"You may return," s/he announced, without turning to look at Newes, instead keeping her eyes trained on the karura. "There is no place for you in the realm of men."

"Why did you save us?" Newes asked again.

"Shut up, you stupid rodent!" Holt hissed in anger, drawing close and flexing her claws.

"When the humans attacked, why did you save us?" Newes continued, ignorant of his companion's complaints.

"Because on this plain, even the messenger must not work against the principality of the air without grace to thus do so," announced Vinegar Tom as he lumbered slowly over, his hooves leaving deep marks in the snow.

With doleful dark eyes he looked from his friends – Holt, the kittling; Jarmara, the fat Spaniel; Sacke & Sugar, the black rabbit and, Newes, the ermine – and then back to the deva who stood with hir back to them.

"You're not supposed to be here either, are you?" Vinegar Tom continued. "In your own way, you too are lost."

"I am a messenger," Jabrilæ answered flatly, "I deliver that with which I am charged."

"And what if the message is not to your liking?" Vinegar Tom continued, pushing the issue despite the deva's

resistance.

Jabrilæ faltered.

“I am a messenger,” s/he stated once more.

“What is the message?” Holt called out, her own voice defiant and loud in the sullen silence left by Jabrilæ's reluctance. “What is it that you've been told to convey that you don't like?”

There was a moment of silence and then, unseen by the others, Jabrilæ's expression contorted with disgust.

“Peace on earth, and mercy mild,” s/he snapped angrily. “God and sinners reconciled.”

“What's so bad about that?” Newes cried out with surprise. “Surely this is *good* news, an end to conflict!”

Sorrowfully, Vinegar Tom shook his head.

“No, dear friend Newes, not an end to conflict, but an end to this world. Jabrilæ wishes to delay hir deliverance of the message, to avoid blowing hir horn as to do so means that once again God and sinners will be joined... and in this act, so too will the world fall to dust.

“The prince of the air will be dethroned, the animals of the field will be embalmed in holy light and the devilish creator will take back unto His breast what rough materials He used to fashion this existence.

“Everything that once was will soon be no more.”

“Oh,” the ermine murmured in a small voice, unable to say anything more.

“A-And the Narakas? What of our home?” Sacke & Sugar piped up in an equally anxious voice.

“Filled to the brim with human detritus,” Vinegar Tom answered. “There will be no respite from suffering, not for them, nor for us. For all eternity, they will cry out for punishment and for all eternity, we shall be called on to oblige them or suffer with them.

“All we have known will crumble.”

Angrily, Jabrilæ twisted the sword in the gate open and the flames burnt brighter, flowing into the doorway and wrenching open a hole in the world.

“Go,” the deva hissed, “go now and return to your home. Prepare your people for their guests, prepare for those in whose world you have wondered, lost and alone, to so find themselves amongst the lands you have always known.

“Prepare for the final judgement.”

Without question, Vinegar Tom inclined his head and lumbered forward, passing through the fire and disappearing down into the depths of the Narakas from where he had originated.

Holt and Jamara marched after him, both full of pride and defiance, refusing to question despite their lack of complete understanding. Sacke & Sugar waited for a moment and then nervously he left, skipping forward, ducking beneath the deva's sword and vanishing within.

Only Newes remained, still standing amidst the snow before the deva and the bloodstained karura.

“Why do you hesitate?” Jabrilæ asked at last.

It took the ermine a moment to formulate the words, the concepts seeming too big for him to articulate.

“W-Will good people... I mean, will noble people – knights and saints, mothers and friends – will they be made to suffer in the Narakas too? I-I mean... will people who have done no wrong... will we be obliged to hurt them too?”

Jabrilæ nodded.

“Such is the will of the creator.”

“Then I won't go,” the ermine said with defiance. “I won't punish people who don't deserve it.”

“You have no choice. It is your function. This is what you were made for.”

“I won't follow such a rule,” the ermine countered fiercely.

Slowly, a smile spread upon Jabrilæ's perfect lips.

“I have been waiting for one such as you, Newes of the Narakas,” s/he said quietly, lifting the sword out from the blazing doorway.

Trembling, the ermine retreated in the snow as Jabrilæ advanced towards him.

“One who will not punish, despite the very instinct of his nature. One who will not return, despite the longing for his homelands. Don't you want to go home, Newes of the Narakas?”

“O-Of course I do!” the ermine stammered. “Of course I want to go home!”

The deva's smile widened.

“Then so shall I send you,” s/he announced, aiming the tip of the sword at the cowering animal, “but not in this form.”

From the blade, the flames leapt contagiously falling upon the ermine, engulfing him, searing away his fur and igniting the flesh of his writhing body until nothing remained but a furnace in the endless snow.

There was a moment in which nothing happened, the flames burning brighter and brighter and then, at last, they dimmed and a feminine shape arose from the inferno, a thousand arms stretching out from hir being.

“Awaken once more, Guanshi'yin of the expedient means, Perceiver of the World's Sounds, Goddess of Mercy and Compassion, return to that world in which you were born to redeem and make a paradise of the pit. Invert the will of the creator and bring peace to waters once hostile.

“Return home to the Narakas and bring your tranquillity to troubled hearts.”

The incarnate goddess stared down at the palms of hir thousand hands in confusion.

“I remember being of the other,” s/he whispered softly, “and yet at the same time, I remember amidst the highest of the Pure Abodes as readily as I also remember being a dharmapāla in the monastery of the mountains of Songshan. I remember... I remember...”

“All and nothing,” Jabrilæ announced, “yet in time, recollection will come to you. You are both Newes of the Narakas

and Guanshi'yin, now, other and deva united in one form.”

“And through this power,” the newly incarnated deva nodded with slow understanding, hir eyes lit with excitement, “through these blessings, I can heal the wounds of the suffering and restore wholeness to the broken.”

Jabrilæ nodded.

“And make of hell a paradise once more,” s/he concluded.

Folding hir myriad arms behind hir back, Guanshi'yin nodded in agreement and took a step towards the gate.

“I will not forget your kindness, Jabrilæ,” s/he paused, drawing close to the other deva's ear. “When time has slowed and you are harnessed to the throne of the creator, so shall I return to redeem you, to bring peace not only to the worlds below but to those above.”

Jabrilæ bowed hir head and lowered hir knee, genuflecting before the passing deva.

“And I shall await your arrival with patience and respect.”

Behind hir, the flames of the gate rushed up to meet the goddess, wrapping about her form and inverting as the door closed and the world paled into a picture of humbled deva, stained karura and fallen men.

In the heavens above, the stars shone angrily, yet in the world below, there was peace.