

“Yumiko!”

The young girl looked up from the doll she was playing with to see who had entered the garden. The late afternoon sun slanted lazily through the foliage. “Mama!”, she exclaimed with a delighted smile. Her mother, still young, was very pretty.

Lady Daisuke looked a bit less delighted than the girl. “What have you done to your hair?” the noblewoman demanded.

Yumiko’s little hand shot up to touch her head and she frowned. “Oh, it was that Kenta! He stole Miki and I had to chase him through the bushes to get her back! He’s a mean little goblin, and I told him so! I’m glad his father left and took him home. I hope he stays away for good.”

The woman broke through the patter with practiced firmness, “Turn around and let me get those twigs out your hair. You are lucky you did not rip your clothing.”

As she kneeled to tend to her daughter, she folded the fan she carried and set it on the flat rocks at the edge of the pool. A comb was extracted from her sash and she set about picking out the leaves and twigs and combing Yumiko’s hair while the girl continued her stream of words.

“Kenta said he would always be Daisuke, but I would be married off some day and I would no longer be Daisuke. I told him he was a big, fat, mean liar. I’ll always be Daisuke, won’t I, Mother? Ow!”

“Stop squirming.”, her mother shot back. “Well, one day you will marry and then you will belong to the clan of your husband.”, she continued.

Yumiko pouted, “But-“

“But,” her mother continued, “If you were to marry Kenta someday, you would still be Daisuke.”, she finished with an unconcealed smirk.

“Ewwwww!” ,exclaimed the girl.

Lady Daisuke laughed, “Perhaps you will not always feel that way. Your father used to steal my dolls and pull my hair. I thought he was pretty awful.”

The girl’s eyes went wide, “But father loves you!”

“He loves us both. Very much”, her mother replied with a tender smile. “It is a little early to be thinking of who you will marry just yet, but whoever you marry, our greatest wish it that it is someone who will protect and take care of you, just like your daddy does.” She replaced the comb behind her sash and caressed the little girl’s cheek. “There, you look much better now. ”

Lady Daisuke looked toward the house. “Speaking of the man who protects and cares for us both, I believe he should be headed this way shortly, now that he is done receiving reports from the commanders. Would you like to play a little trick on him?” she asked with a mischievous grin.

Yumiko giggled, “Yes! Yes! What do we do?”

“You’ve heard it said that many people think our voices sound much alike. Why don’t we use that for a little amusement?”, her mother replied. “Go over behind that cherry tree and when your father comes into the garden, call out to him to come over and play with you. I will hide behind the bamboo. When he starts for you, I will call out the same. When he starts for me, run behind another plant – stay hidden - and call out to him again. We will keep that up until he finds one of us. We will have him very confused if he cannot tell our voices apart!”, her mother responded.

Yumiko giggled again, “Yes! That will be great fun!” Both of them took their places and did not have to wait long.

Lord Daisuke strode into the garden and looked around. He was tall and and gave the impression of strict control, but there was a gentleness in his eyes. Just before he could shout for his daughter, a call came from behind the cherry tree, “Daddy! Come and play with me!” The man grinned and headed towards the cherry tree, but a voice rang out from the bamboo. “Daddy! Where are you going? I want to play!” His head whipped around and he muttered, “Hmm.” He turned and walked towards the stand of bamboo. Something stirred behind him. Then, from behind an azalea bush, “Daddy? Don’t you want to play? Over here!”. He turned again and headed for the azaleas, but the voice chimed out from a willow tree, “Daddy! Why do you not come to play?” His brow furrowed, he growled with amused determination and then suddenly dashed under the branches of the willow and grabbed what he expected to be a little girl. “Whaaa?? Azumi!” Peals of laughter burst from his wife, which he echoed.

“Yumiko, we fooled him! Come and join us.”, said Lady Daisuke as her husband helped her out from the hanging branches.

Grinning, the spritely figure dashed directly for her father, “Daddy!”.

With his right arm around his wife’s waist, he deftly scooped up Yumiko in his left and hoisted her to look him face-to-face. “You’re little rascals, both of you! You sound just alike. I was completely fooled.”

Yumiko put her arms around her daddy’s neck, “Does that upset you, daddy?”

“No,” he said as he gave both of them a gentle squeeze, “Both of your voices are happy music to me. It is a sound I treasure.”

The warm peace of the familial embrace was ripped away by a panicked cry from the house, “Lord Daisuke! We are atta---ack!”.

The nobleman turned just in time to see one of the servants, running down the stairs, impaled from behind. Lord Daisuke dropped Yumiko to her feet and pushed her against her mother.

“Azumi, take Yumiko and run. Run all the way to the sea if you must, but keep the both of you safe!”

“But, Hirotake -“

“GO!”

With a look of fear and concern, Azumi grabbed Yumiko’s arm, turned, and ran toward the back of the garden and the forest beyond.

Lord Daisuke reached down to his waist. “Huh? My sword! Where...?” After a panicked look around, he saw that the sword had fallen out under the willow. He swooped down, grabbed it, and turned just in time to face the soldier who had killed the servant. The nobleman parried with ease and sliced the soldier open. Looking down at the dying man caused him to freeze. *Wataro armor? But the Wataro clan are our allies!*, he thought. Not hesitating to think on it longer, he ran to defend the household.

He never made it. By no means a small man himself, the lord was overshadowed by the imposing figure blocking his way.

“Well, Lord Daisuke, in a hurry to die?”, sneered General Nataku.

“We are allies! Why are you attacking us?”

Nataku’s sneer turned into a scowl as he swung his sword heavily at his opponent.

Overpowered, the defender grunted from the impact and staggered, but managed to block the blow even though he felt the shock down his arm bones all the way to his back. The General’s sneer returned, “Because we can, weakling.”

As the larger man drew back for a slashing attack, Lord Daisuke flipped his grip around and, dodging under the opposing blade, charged forward with the blade between, and parallel to, himself and his opponent. He was hoping to slash Nataku’s side as he dashed past, but the general’s size belied his swiftness, and the larger man sidestepped with ease. The general

reversed his swing to bring the butt of his sword hilt down on the back of the Daisuke lord's neck.

A sickening crack sounded as Hirotake Daisuke's neck snapped. He fell to the cold stone and gasped to find breath that would not come. As darkness overwhelmed him, he expelled his last breath, "Azumi..."

Contemptuously, General Nataka flung his opponents' corpse over his massive shoulders and with a grin declared, "Don't worry, dog, I'll send her to you soon enough." He set his stride in the direction of the garden as flames climbed the walls of the house behind him.

While her husband fought, Lady Daisuke ran blindly. Her only thought was to put as much distance as possible between the invading soldiers and her child. She didn't even realize that she was headed down the path to the tea house until it was too late.

Yumiko struggled to keep up on her little legs. When her mother suddenly stopped, she plowed right into the woman's legs. "Ooof!", she exhaled. "Mother--"

"Hush."

The reply was so edged with panic that the girl, uncharacteristically, stayed silent.

Looking around, Azumi began to realize the impact of her folly. Ahead was the tea house, a small, wooden structure with a few high, paper-covered windows and an entrance that was not much more than a crawlspace. A wide rock garden surrounded the building, in turn almost entirely encircled by an ancient, densely packed stand of bamboo that continued down the path. There was no way an adult could squeeze past the bamboo - at least, not without cutting a very obvious path for pursuers to follow.

She started to turn back to find another path, but the sound of boots approaching on the gravel told her that avenue was cut off. "Quickly, into the tea house, dearest." They climbed in through the crawl-door and shut it behind them. Azumi looked about desperately for anything to block it. Grabbing a plain stand for art objects, she jammed it against the door and then pushed a small table against that. She prayed it would be enough, as she ran to the small kitchen in the back and made sure the door there was locked. Her heart raced as she pushed the kitchen table against it, worried they could break the larger door in.

Nataka strode confidently up the path, still bearing his grisly trophy over his right shoulder. As he neared the tea house, two soldiers greeted him.

"General," the closest man said, "Lady Daisuke ran in here. We were about to try to break in the doors."

Frowning, the large man regarded the small structure. “Hmm,” the frown reversed into an evil grin, “Don’t bother, it’s not worth the effort. Get me a torch, quickly.”

The order was given sharply, and the soldier, knowing better than to hesitate on a direct order from the general, acknowledged the order and fled swiftly back down the path.

*Now,* thought Nataka, *I think I will I have a little fun with the scared rabbit before we finish this.* “Lady Daisuke!” the general cried out, “I have most generously brought your husband to you!” Hoisting his package high, he forced the head and shoulders of the dead man through one of the small windows near the top of the front wall.

The shout got Azumi’s attention. Her head swung toward the front wall. The drum-like sound of the stiff paper on the window being punched through caused her to look up. The dead eyes of the man she loved met hers. It was more than she could bear.

“NOOOOOO!”, she shouted as she hit her knees, eyes clouded with tears.

“Mama?”

Yumiko was still in the kitchen. A small part of Azumi’s maternal instinct shouted, *My child! She must NOT see this!*

Shooting to her feet, she ran towards the back of the tea house. “Yumiko! Stay back here!”

Grabbing the child’s arm, she spun her about in the doorway, but Yumiko still caught a glimpse of the gory scene before it could be prevented. “Daddy?”, she choked.

General Nataka was still chuckling when the soldier returned with a burning branch. “Ah, well...it has been amusing, but I think we will relieve Lady Daisuke’s grief now. Burn it down!”, he ordered with a sweep of his arm. The soldier swiftly stepped up to the small building and set it ablaze in each corner. The tea house was a simple, unpolished wood and paper structure and the flames spread fast, casting gruesome light on Nataka’s widening grin.

Lady Daisuke was kneeling to hold her daughter close and comfort her when she smelled the smoke. *NO! They can’t!*, she shouted in her head. But she knew the truth of the matter.

Grasping Yumiko by the shoulders, she forced the child to look her in the eyes. “Yumiko, I am going to lift you up. You must escape out of the window, run across the garden, and through the bamboo. You are small enough to squeeze through. Run through the woods until you find safety.”

“You are coming with me aren’t you, Mama?”, pleaded the girl.

“I cannot. I will not fit. But you must. You must run! You must survive. For our clan, for your father and myself.”

“But –“

“Do not argue! The smoke should shield you from their eyes.”, Lady Daisuke said, as she prayed there were no soldiers guarding the back of the building. “Up you go.” She lifted her daughter up to the small slit of a window near the top of the kitchen wall. “Push through it!”

“Uhhh!” Yumiko punched hard and ruptured the paper covering of the window. She looked back and could see flames licking up the walls in the front room beyond the door and in the corner where the kitchen door stood. She looked at her mother’s eyes, so full of desperation and sadness.

Her mother gave her one final push as she imparted her last instruction, “Move on. Stay alive.”

Yumiko slid out of the window and tumbled hard to the ground. She got up and looked across the rock garden to the safety of the bamboo. It never seemed so far before. The smoke was already obscuring the tea house and spreading out to the garden. She started her dash, and wound up barking her right shin on a rock. “Ahh!”, she cried, stumbling to her knees and momentarily too stunned from the shock to move. As she tried to stand, she made the mistake of turning around. The tea house was fully aflame now. She opened her mouth to shout “Mama!”, but all that came out was a scream, a scream matched by the one coming from the interior of the building as her mother burned. She could not stop screaming, and suddenly she could not tell if the voice screaming was hers or her mother’s.

“What an unearthly sound. It is as if she has one voice and two throats.”, one of the soldiers said with a grimace.

“Bah,”, responded the general, with an offhand gesture, “Daisuke bitch. Let her howl her agony to the winds. The flames will silence her shortly.” His face glowed with satisfaction as he led the two soldiers back down the path to check on the rest of the battle.

Part of the roof of the tea house collapsed with a crash. Yumiko gasped and realized that the only sounds were the flames and distant clashes of battle. She coughed from the smoke, and what small area of her mind was not paralyzed by fear whispered, *Move!* She recovered her feet and made it to the bamboo. Pressing her body between the thick bamboo, she made it to the woods beyond. She ran, but it seemed she had not gotten far when the burning in her lungs and sheer exhaustion overtook her. She spotted a boulder ahead and to her right, and she struggled to make it to the meager shelter it offered. Once there, she collapsed into unconsciousness.

“Yumiko?”

*“Mama?” The girl turned to face a light coming from behind her. Her mother stood there; covered in flames, skin blacked, eyes blistered. Yumiko opened her mouth at the same time as the horrible figure did. A scream exploded, seeming to come from a space between them. As the visage of burning death that had once been her mother advanced, the scream came closer, though it remained between them. Yumiko could not move, transfixed in horror. The specter wrapped the girl in a fiery embrace and seemed to melt into her. The screams were now entirely hers.*

Yumiko woke with a gasp, sweating from fear. Warmth and light emanated from something behind her. She whirled about to find it was only a reflection of morning light on the boulder. She shivered, though it was not from cold. Her skin, hair, and clothing were covered in ash and soaked with dew and it felt as if the smoke in her throat had turned into a coating of mud. She coughed and raised her bruised body up. Her right shin throbbed. It was eerily silent.

Yumiko climbed up and peered over the boulder. She was not as far from the village as she thought. Black smoke was rising from the charred remains of the houses. There was no sign of anyone stirring. She knew she was told to run away, but the forest was deep and foreboding, even in the morning sun, and the village was the only place she had ever known. Without thinking, as if compelled by the Kami, she walked back to where her home once stood.

Yumiko barely recognized where she walked. Her toes hit something hard on the ground in front of her. It took her a moment to realize that beneath the layer of ashes lay the rocks rimming the edge of the pond in the garden behind her home, and the pond itself. She became aware that she was very thirsty. *Maybe if I gently push the ashes aside, the water beneath will still be clean enough.*, she thought. She reached out her tiny hands carefully and moved the ashes floating on the water aside. A flash of pale orange in the water caught her eye. Startled, she looked up, thinking that the color was the reflection of flame. But, no, the fires were now just smoke. She looked into the pond again and reached for the color. She drew out a wood and silk fan, emblazoned with the distinctive Daisuke dragon crest. It was sodden, but still intact. Forgetting her thirst, she began to cry without a sound. Tears streaked her ash-covered face as she clutched the fan tight to her chest.

“Mama-”, she said, but when she spoke, she could barely hear the word. What Yumiko heard were the screams. She hurriedly shut her mouth, her eyes wide in horror, and the screams stopped. She stood, shaking, tears streaming down her face silently.

Suddenly a shadow loomed over her, although no sound had alerted her to anyone approaching. The girl whirled about, eyes wide. Before her stood a woman; young, but tall. She was wearing

dark-colored garb and a mask that covered the lower half of her face. But the most remarkable thing was her hair; it shone like the noon sun, as if her hair was woven sunlight. Yumiko had never seen anything so remarkable. Hiding the fan behind her, she prepared herself to try to run past the woman. But the stranger seemed more curious or amused, and perhaps a little sad, than threatening.

“Hello,” the blonde stranger said, “You seem to be in much better shape than anyone else here. What’s your name?”

Yumiko just shook her head. She knew if she spoke, the screams would return.

“Hmm, I can’t tell if you are being shy or stubborn.”, mused the stranger. “I’m called Suzuka. What have you got there?” She tried to reach for the fan, but Yumiko glared at her and blocked the slender woman’s hand. “Hmmm,” said the stranger approvingly, “I think stubborn - and protective, perhaps. We can work with that.”

“Suzuka, have you found anything?”, a husky voice called.

“I think something of interest, Lady Kuma.”, was the reply.

Another figure approached and Yumiko’s expression changed to astonishment. Striding towards them was the most muscular, broad-chested woman she had ever seen. The woman’s hair was white and her eyes showed age, but, for all that, she looked like she could break either of the other two in half with little effort. She was dressed much like the younger woman, if somewhat more conservatively. As she came to stand next to Suzuka, it became apparent she was a full head shorter than the younger women. However, this did not diminish her impressiveness in the least.

“Ahh,” said the well-muscled woman as she squatted down to look the girl in the eye, “you seem to be alone here, little one. Do you have a name, or will you make me give you one? I warn you, you may not like what I choose.” Her eyes narrowed fiercely at Yumiko with that last sentence.

Yumiko involuntarily stepped back a little and hit her heel on a flat rock rimming the pool. She looked down and got an idea. She bent over and wrote her name in the ashes.

“Yumiko Daisuke?”, said the woman with unexpected warmth and sadness, but her gruffness returned quickly, “Well, at least we know you’re literate.”

“Lady Kuma, she seems to me to have qualities we can work with.”, volunteered the blonde.



“Perhaps”, said the older woman as she took in the steady glare from the young girl, “If they are not overdone.” Lady Kuma stood up and addressed the girl again, “Yumiko Daisuke, you have no clan left here. You may stay here, but it would be certain death to do so. It would be your choice, of course, but you may accompany us back to our clan.”

Yumiko looked around. All she had known had been here. But, after all, it was all gone. She reached down to write in the ashes again. *Will you take care of me?*

“Hrumph.”, snorted the short, powerful woman, “We have not the time or patience to coddle anyone. You will be taught to take care of yourself.”

Yumiko bit her bottom lip. *Move on. Stay alive.*, she thought. Her grip on the fan tightened slightly.

“Well?”, demanded the elder. Yumiko stepped towards the woman and bowed her assent.

“Good. Suzuka, you are now old enough, and skilled enough, to take on the training of another. Yumiko is now your charge.”

The blonde smiled beneath her mask, “Yes, Lady Kuma.”, she said with a bow.

The older woman turned heel. As she walked away, she shot back, “I expect a full report, with progress noted, by sundown of the fifth day from today.”

Suzuka’s grin turned to a thoughtful frown. “Hmm, come on, Yumiko, we’ve got work to do. Best not delay.” She turned and gestured for the girl to follow.

Yumiko did so, following both women into the woods where horses waited. “Up you get, then.”, said Suzuka, hoisting Yumiko up roughly. The blonde then mounted the horse and spurred it to a walk, moving through the brush carefully.

Yumiko turned to look back at her village one more time, but Suzuka’s hand firmly pushed her head back to face forward. “No use in that, now. You leave it behind. Look to the future.”

*She’s right.*, thought Yumiko. But she knew it would be a future wreathed in silence, not speaking, to shut out the screams that would always be hers.