

Part One: The Day It All Began

CHAPTER 1

Norika Suzuki knelt by the trickling koi pond in the family garden. The wisteria tree loomed overhead, enveloping her in a pastel purple and white dome. A delicate speckled flower drifted lazily into the pond, and a fiery orange fish started gently nibbling on it. Suddenly she heard the clonking of boots against the stone pathway, rushing towards her. Norika glanced up into the unsettled face of her husband, Yoshimi Suzuki.

“Dragons, Norika! Dragons! *Enormous* black beasts *billowing* smoke! They’re by the shore, swimming closer to us every minute!”

Norika searched his face for any signs of a suppressed smile, or a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. Yoshimi was known for pranking and joking, and was less respected than the other men his age. However, this time his jaw was set firmly, and his dark eyes were fixed on Norika grimly.

“How... how many?” she stuttered.

“Four. Come see for yourself!” informed Yoshimi.

Norika leaped up, and together they fled to the shoreline. Despite how quickly Norika and Yoshimi were running, Norika smiled at the sight of their beautiful village. The tall stocks of green bamboo swayed around them, on the two sides of the golden, dirt road. Norika’s feet tapped against the faded red bridge, its bold color now washed out to that of a ripe *sukia*. (*Sukia*, Norika’s favorite fruit, was a delicious Japanese watermelon). As the *sukia* colored bridge loomed upward in a magnificent mountain-like curve, Yoshimi tossed some crumbled grainy bread to the Japanese cranes wading gracefully in the mirror like pond under the bridge. These majestic puffs were a mother and young baby to be exact. Their long, slender necks twisted and tilted to catch the breadcrumbs. The mother’s snowy white feathers (and black tail ones, as if someone had spilled ink on a bleached white kimono) ruffled angrily if the young pom-pom tried to catch what she thought belonged to her.

“Yoshimi you shouldn’t keep food in your pockets!” snapped Norika, “You’ll catch mice, and that’s Kiki’s job!”

Before Yoshimi could make a joke about the old, scrawny cat who had treated her last mouse like a little kitten, the two had padded onto the floury sand of the shore, at the beginning of its arch.

Norika gasped and clasped a hand to her mouth.

* * *

Four massive, smoking beasts lurched and churned through the waves out at sea, black as a moonless midnight. Long, rusty tubes made eerie rows on either side of the beasts. Sharp stingers, much like a wasp's, pierced the sky behind the dragons. A striped red, blue, and white flag fluttered in front of the beast's head. The flag had a blue box in the corner filled with white stars. The shouting of men could be heard from the dragons.

"They're *eating* men, and we are next!" cried a little girl with her hair tied up in a bun, and her pastel pink kimono decorated with cherry blossoms. Norika knew she was just a child, but couldn't help considering the idea.

As the monstrous dragons chugged boldly forward, Norika wanted to rush back to her cottage and hide, but her curiosity held her there, shivering as the dragons got closer and closer.

CHAPTER 2

A polished black boot stomped onto the soft sand, sending up swirling beige clouds. Then another. Above the boots was a pair of tightly stretched, dull brown pants, and above the pants, a matching coat, the fabric stressed and the buttons ready to pop off. Above the boring outfit was a matching boring face, and a fluffy hairdo. This large man's mouth was set in a lazy, sleepy frown, and his tiny piggish eyes scanned the shore, taking in the villagers' curious, startled faces.

"I," announced the pompous stranger, "am General Matthew Perry."

Once again he scanned the crowd, as if waiting for a welcome, but received only blinks. Norika wasn't sure what these strange words meant, but they had obviously missed a cue.

General Perry smiled greedily at them. "So this is the mysterious island kingdom," he mused.

Norika Suzuki turned her attention to the bobbing dragons, which had been anchored farther away by the portly man.. Looking at them from up close, Norika decided they weren't dragons, they were... well, she wasn't sure *what* they were, exactly. Only a few yards from shore they made no move to attack, or bother them. However, they weren't shy either. Closer to

shore were little round boats with big paddles, carrying men dressed similarly to the portly man. The black things simply bobbed and swayed. A tall man rowed to shore and stepped off the small boat, and stepped on shore. He smiled at crowd, and spoke to them in a way that Norika could understand.

“Hello, this is Commodore Matthew Perry,” he said, gesturing to the large man. “It is important that he speak with the emissaries of your emperor.”

He turned to Matthew Perry, and said something to him in their peculiar language. Norika suspected he was repeating to him what he had just told them.

“Only the highest emissaries!” bellowed Matthew. “I will speak with no one else, and will wait here *with* my weapons until my order is carried through.” With a conquering grin, he gestured to the long, rusted, dangerous looking tubes on either side of the four black ships. Norika shuddered. The other man translated what he had said.

Norika and Yoshimi’s neighbors stepped up, and smiled politely at the strangers. “Welcome, it’s...nice to meet you.” They told them. Others started to follow their lead. Yoshimi shuffled over to Norika.

“I think that this matter is between the visitors, and the emperor’s emissaries now. Perhaps we should head home.”

“All right, I’ll take the long way home, through the wisterias.”

Yoshimi nodded, and quietly peeled away from the others.

* * *

Norika got distracted, as she often did. Instead of going to the palace to see if Commodore Perry had gone there to talk with an emissary, she was sprawled out under a looming tree, with its soft, purple flowers in a wreath on her head. Although a woman, she had the heart of a young girl. She had closed her eyes to the peaceful rustling of the wind in her tree, and had fallen asleep. Norika’s eyes popped open. How long had it been? An hour?

Yoshimi must be worried about her! She got up and brushed the grass from her skirt, then remembered the palace and Commodore Perry.

“Maybe just quickly...” she murmured to herself, and fled up the golden dirt road. The bamboo thickened into a dense forest. Colorful birds warbled.

Norika found herself in front of swirling, curving red gates with gold details. They were partially shrouding a huge palace, with several stories, each smaller than the others towards the top. It was a similar case with the roofs, curled upwards at the ends like a snail’s shell. A triangular window topped

the palace like the star on a giant Christmas tree, covered on both sides with a little roof of its own.

Golden dragons wrapped around the two red pillars on either side of the grand doorway. It was probably the most beautiful thing Norika had ever seen...but the windows were about ten feet high. Suddenly, she could hear heavy footsteps slowly approaching from behind the palace. *A guard!* She thought. *Great.*

Norika folded her arms, leaned against the building, and thought of how she would ever get up there. It was then that she noticed the water-colored green shoots bordering the ends of her sleeves. Her mouth curled upward in a mischievous grin.

Norika wobbled next to the window. Her knees were wrapped around several bamboo stalks, and her hands gripped them so tightly that her knuckles turned completely white. The room she spied on was even more magnificent than the outside of the palace. More dragon sculptures. More gold. Massive fountains with plummeting waters. Leafy plants. Just then the wind swayed the bamboo, and Norika swung dangerously close to the window, but stuck her hands out just in time, before her face could hit the glass. Now she was stuck. A man with a thin, thorn shaped beard curved upward at the end, and a royal-blue kimono with dangling sleeves shuffled quickly into the throne room and bowed.

“Your highness,” he addressed in a nasally voice, “a letter from a Commodore Matthew Perry.”

Still bowing, he extended a hand towards the emperor, a scroll placed inside it, which the emperor reluctantly took and unraveled. “Hmm...” murmured the emperor as he read. “THIS FOOL ASKS FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE!!” he bellowed. “No.”

“Your Highness, he h-has weapons and massive black creatures. The Commodore w-will *not* leave until he speaks to an emissary first.”

The emperor’s eyes fell upon the servant who gulped. “How nice of you to volunteer, however...”

“Y-your majesty, I didn’t exactly mean...”

“And I suppose I *should* think over my answer. I can’t have him sitting there frightening children.”

“May-may I ask what the Commodore requests? Y-your Majesty?”

The emperor lowered his voice, and Norika strained to listen, but heard only a murmur. The emissary’s eyes widened as the Emperor spoke to him.

The emissary wheezed long and sharply, then flopped to the floor in a heap of blue, silky fabric.

Norika gasped very loudly, and immediately clasped her hands to her mouth, which was a bad idea because the next minute there was an even louder bang, and the emperor swiftly turned in her direction. He looked more surprised than angry. The glass window was cold and hard on her face, and she let out a short screamed before toppling out of the bamboo. Landing on her side with a thud, Norika could hear a gruff voice bark, “What was that?” Picking up her skirt, she ran as fast as she could.

The next day was Sunday. Norika woke to gentle sunlight filtering through the bamboo stalks outside her window, and the hollow, warbling voices of the cranes. Norika brushed her long, silky hair behind her ear, and padded over to the window. A fuzzy red panda scurried up a tall green stalk, and disappeared into the sunlight. The sense of peace that came to Norika every morning soon swept over her. Until she remembered the strange man from yesterday. She remembered the way he’d stared greedily at them, and gestured to the long tubes with a pleased grin, like he had them cornered. She shook off the memory and proceeded to drape herself in her favorite sky blue fabric, decorated with swaying bamboo, over a pastel purple skirt. Norika finished the outfit by fastening a wide, gold-colored cloth around her waist. She pulled the puffy, quilted comforter back up her mattress, which served as a bed. She lifted her sandals from the several bamboo mats covering the dark, wooden floor. Norika pushed herself up using the clean, white wall that bordered the same dark wood as the floor, and glided through the archway leading out of her room, past many fragrant, twisting flowers.

Quietly padding along into the kitchen, Norika laid out a saucer of milk for Kiki, and a bowl of rice porridge, a pickled plum, and a cup of green tea for herself. She knelt in front of her low table and soon her long, thin cat waddled in to join her.

“Good morning, Kiki,” she said. “Do you think Yoshimi will pick up any news about the stranger and his friends today?”

“Mew.”

“Yes, Haruki might be able to provide news. I suppose it benefits having a member of the emperor’s staff as a friend.”

“Mew.”

“I have a bad feeling about all this, Kiki. I’ve never seen a man like that before. His clothes were so dull and colorless, nothing like kimonos. It was like he was a weed in a flowerbed. And I’ve never heard anyone talk the way he did. He had a greedy, unpleasant way about him, Kiki. I know for

sure he'll do whatever it takes to get whatever it is he wants," Norika informed her, taking a bite of her plum. Despite what she'd heard at the emperor's palace, she still didn't know much about the mysterious Commodore's request.

"Mew."

Kiki finished her milk, and leapt down from the table. Norika finished her tea, and set off to do some of her own work.

Norika sat in the garden on a stone bench, when Yoshimi came to join her. "Haruki tells me that after we left the shore yesterday, Commodore Perry continued to demand that he speak to the emperor," informed Yoshimi. "He had a letter for him."

"About...?"

"Well, I'm not sure. Haruki wouldn't tell me. He couldn't. Although he did inform me of one small detail."

Norika nodded encouragingly.

"It was a crazy request."

"What for?"

"He didn't say. Only that it could change the fate of Japan."

Norika gazed into the distance lost in her thoughts. What was this request? Was it the whole reason why Commodore Perry came? What were those black giants Perry brought? Why come *here* of all places? Why a quiet village in *Edo*?

Yoshimi smiled sympathetically at her. "I know this whole thing is confusing, and somewhat overwhelming. I also know that we're both too curious to stop here. Would you like me to ask Haruki for some more news tomorrow?"

Despite her baffled, worried feelings, it was true. Norika had to have answers, and she had to find them as soon as possible.

CHAPTER 3

Over the days, Yoshimi and Norika Suzuki fell into a routine. Norika would clean the house, boil rice for dinner along with bowls of Udon, (large noodles topped with fried tofu, shrimp tempura, and fresh vegetables.) wash her kimonos and Yoshimi's, feed the coy, water the proud sunset pink camellias garnishing the tunnel walkway of woven bamboo. Then she'd plop onto her clean white, flat mattress on the floor, which was covered in yellow rugs made of dried bamboo. There Norika would practice her Ikebana, the

art of flower and plant arranging with clippings from the Suzuki garden, and paint with ink on a canvas. However, instead of painting bamboo, mountains, red pandas and cranes, she would paint four enormous black dragons puffing steam and lumbering through the waves. Norika would try to entertain herself while she impatiently waited for Yoshimi to return home with news of Commodore Perry's mysterious request. From his greedy, bossy, persistent nature that day at the shore, Norika had a feeling that the "request" was more of a "demand."

One particular day, Yoshimi came home with a look of confusion, regret, and cautiousness on his face. However, there was a spark of excitement in his eyes.

"Norika, do you know what I've heard?!"

"Yoshimi, how should I know?"

"Today, on my way to Haruki's house, I realized that I didn't need to ask him more about the request or the emperor's decision."

"What? Why?"

"Everyone was already talking about it! The emperor has revealed that Commodore Perry has come to persuade us to open our ports to the country he comes from, America. He wants us to 'open our doors.'"

A wave of fear washed over Norika. Long ago, her country had decided to keep to themselves and have nothing to do with other countries. Norika had never seen anyone from one of these countries before seeing the Commodore, and had definitely never visited one. Now they were being asked to open up to them? Impossible!

Norika took a shaky breath. "W...what is the emperor's opinion?" she asked.

Yoshimi smiled, and his face crinkled around his eyes. "The emperor won't have it. He's asked the Commodore and his friends to return to their country. Nothing to worry about."

Norika sighed with relief, realizing that she'd been holding her breath, and sank down into the grass.

What Norika didn't know was that Yoshimi was wrong. This wasn't over. Not yet.

* * *

A couple years had passed since the Commodore had come to Japan with his unthinkable request, yet the memory was always fresh in Norika's mind. An unsettled feeling fluttered in her stomach every time she passed the docks where he had stomped towards them, and acted as if he himself

were the emperor. *He's not here now, Norika*, she reminded herself. *He isn't coming back. He has respected your emperor's decision and turned his black beasts around. He is gone now. Yes, he has been trying to persuade the emperor, but do not worry. The answer has always been NO. Most likely, this whole thing is over.* She was wrong. That first, fateful day was only the beginning.

It was true: Commodore Perry had been coming back every now and then, trying to sway the emperor. Some villagers had gone to meet him at all of his arrivals. Norika, despite her adventurous spirit, convinced Yoshimi that staying home was the right decision. No way was she going back to encounter giant black beasts and evil greedy men who wanted something from her country. As the visits continued, the beasts always armed with the giant tubes, Norika considered the fact that maybe, just maybe, the emperor would give in some day.

* * *

Norika raced through town, buying as many sukias as she could stuff in her woven basket. Sukia season was her favorite time of year. However, it was also the warmest, and most irritating. By the time she had finished shopping at the market, it was dark outside, having been late afternoon when she arrived. Icy shadows moved across the cool, hard road. A set of luminescent eyes starred at Norika, blinked, and vanished. A chill went down Norika's spine. In an attempt to lighten the mood of the cold night, Norika whistled one of her favorite songs, commonly played on the koto, a 6 foot long, guitar like slab of dark wood with many strings. Then she froze. *If you whistle at night, a snake will answer.* She frantically reminded herself. She twisted her head both ways, and, breathing heavily, raced to her cottage. A few paces away from the chrysanthemum-covered archway leading through her garden, she heard a rustle in the bushes, and saw a shimmering black tail disappear into the brush. She knew that was a sign of bad things to come. This time, she was right.

CHAPTER 4

“Norika, look! An invitation. How thoughtful!”

“Who's it from? Perhaps they'll serve sukia.”

“You've had enough of that, dear.”

“I've never had enough of that. Please, open it!”

“It’s from...”

“Who!?”

“ From...”

“Honestly, that’s not funny.”

“...the Emperor?”

“What?!?”

Yoshimi stared down at the slightly tea-stained paper in his hands. It was, indeed, from their emperor. Norika grinned excitedly and snatched the paper out of Yoshimi’s hands. She set it on the table and began to read silently to herself waving Yoshimi over. Once they had finished, their jaws dropped. Yoshimi and Norika glanced up at each other, eyes wide in disbelief.

“A feast.” Read Norika. “For... the Commodore.”

“M-Matthew Perry?”

Norika nodded solemnly, and folded the letter in her lap.

“It’s just as we feared,” she whispered, more to herself than to Yoshimi. “The Commodore has won.”

* * *

Norika stepped up to the palace gates, her arm looped under Yoshimi’s. This time, they swung open easily. Norika hesitated before stepping inside them. What if the emperor recognized her? She and Yoshimi hurried up to the looming, dragon- incusted doors to the palace.

“Why are you glancing around like that?”

“Like what? Glancing? Me? I’m not glancing.”

Yoshimi raised an eyebrow, but before he could comment any further, those doors burst open as well. The palace looked even more exquisite from the inside, golden pillars entwined with billowing, layered flowers. The stone fountains let out ribbons of twisting, clear water. In the center of the room were several long slabs of table decorated with vibrant red cloth. The room buzzed with talk and laughter as guests picked at many fragrant, gourmet dishes. At the head of one table loomed the old, fat Commodore, struggling with his chopsticks. All around him, Norika recognized the same men who had been aboard the black beasts the first day she’d encountered the commodore. On the other side of the table sat the emperor on a large, golden pillow. Yoshimi found a seat next to Haruki. Norika plopped down beside him. Displayed against the wall was a large scroll. At one point during the meal, the Emperor read allowed the new rules listed on the scroll, identifying it as a treaty. There were four new rules:

1. There would be peace and friendship between the US and Japan
 2. Two ports would be opened to American ships at Shimoda and Hakodate
 3. American ships wrecked on the Japanese coast would receive help, and protection would be provided for shipwrecked persons
 4. Americans had permission to purchase supplies, coal, water, or other needed items in Japanese ports
- “I suppose things will be very different around here, now,” muttered Norika once the emperor had finished, and she was right.

Part 2: Never The Same Again

Miu breathed heavily as she rushed through the bustling town, pushing past carts and wagons, causing mules to bray loudly. She was late for school again. Curving up a winding path through the bamboo forest, Miu found herself standing before a small, western-style house. It was painted white with small windows and a triangular roof. Quietly pushing open the door, Miu tiptoed to a small table to drop off her lunch. The table was in a crammed coatroom, off to the side of the thin hallway that came right before her classroom, out of sight from her teacher. Shuffling behind numerous coats, Miu inched carefully towards her wooden desk in the back of the room. Her head down, she could hear the single toned, monotonous voice of her teacher, and the giggles and whispers of her classmates. Just as she silently pulled her chair out to sit down, an angry voice exclaimed: “Miu! Late again!” The hairs on the back of her neck prickled.

“Well...?” demanded her teacher, Ms. Kimura, now looming over her.

“Sorry,” mumbled Miu, slouching into her seat.

“If I catch you late to class once more, I’ll have you stay after school to do some chores for me. And I wouldn’t want to have to assign you *extra* assignments if you had to stay after school...do you understand?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Now, class, open your textbooks to page 283.”

Miu patted the heavy book in her lap. She flipped through the pages until she came upon page 283. More arithmetic. Great.

“Your homework will be about this page’s fascinating content, so I expect you to pay close attention.”

Homework. Miu had never remembered so much homework. Her grandmother had told her that they hadn’t given so much when

she was in school. She'd also said that perhaps Miu's education would be better than her own. Miu frowned at the thought. She doubted it.

Her best friend, Reika, sat in the desk in front of her. Miu noticed a folded piece of paper come sliding across the floor from under Reika's desk to under her own. Making sure Ms. Kimura wasn't watching, Miu bent down, and caught the paper with two fingers. It read:

*"Miu,
Can you meet me after school today by the
coy pond? You know, the one hidden in the
wisterias. We can talk, and play with my origami
set before we do our homework.
-Reika"*

Miu waited until Ms. Kimura's back was turned to reply:

*"Reika,
Yes, I will try to meet you there, but I
can't stay for long. My Sobo wants me for chores
after school today. Yours probably does too, you know.
-Miu"*

* * *

The gentle breeze rustled the girls' hair as they knelt facing each other by the water's edge, carefully folding their floral paper. Miu hummed her favorite tune, trying to copy the steady rhythm of the koto, which her Sobo often played for her. Cranes waddled nearby, stretching in the sun. Reika nibbled on a piece of a mixed rice bar, and offered some to Miu. Taking a bite of her own, she tossed a few crumbs to the lazy coy floating just below the surface.

"What are you humming?" asked Reika.

"Oh, just an old song my Sobo plays for me," replied Miu.

"It's very pretty."

"Yes, it's my favorite," admitted Miu. She hadn't been sure if Reika would like such an old song, but was glad that she did.

They were a silent for a moment, enjoying the nature around them, and each other's company.

"My Sobo says everything is changing," shared Reika.

"Like what?" Miu asked breezily, laying back against a wisteria trunk, and running her hand through the dangling strings of blossoms.

"Well, like school," offered Reika, "Sobo says there are more of them, and more homework."

"My Sobo said that, too. About the homework."

"She also said the textbooks were different, and the school buildings."

"I wonder what they were like before," considered Miu.

"Maybe like the older buildings here. You know, like the palace."

"I really don't think school was like a palace, but you might be on to something."

Miu held up her lopsided, dropping paper crane for Reika to see.

"Do you like him? His name is Haru."

Rekia put her hand to her mouth. Miu noticed her eyes crinkle.

"Hey! I tried my best!" Retorted Miu, her face turning pink.

"Reika! Miu! *Just* who I wanted to see!"

Both girls smiled at the familiar voice. "Feel like hearing a story today?" Asked the old man standing before them. However, just as he started to sit down, he slapped his forehead with his hand.

"Oh, that's right! Your girls need to come home and start your chores, if you want time to finish your homework. Things are never fun around here anymore. Aw, don't worry girls, I've got a good tale for tomorrow."

He reached down a hand to each girl, and helped them to their feet. "Thank you, Sofu," said Miu. "Good-bye Reika! Same spot tomorrow?"

Reika grinned. "I'll be there." She offered a slight bow to Miu's Sofu, and trotted down a stone path, winding through the swaying bamboo forest. Miu fell into pace with her Sofu, and together they headed towards the big red bridge that loomed ahead. Cherry

blossoms floated lazily above their heads. Miu reached up for one, and patted it down behind her ear.

“Was it a good day at school?” Asked her Sofu, thoughtfully.

Miu shrugged, and looked down at her feet.

“Late again?”

She nodded.

“Well, just keep trying. Stand tall like the cranes of sukia bridge.”

Miu straightened her back as they descended down the massive curve.

* * *

“Late again?!?”

“Maybe...”

“Young lady, I expect better from you!”

“I realized.”

“Are you being wise with me?”

“No...”

“Oh, come now!” cut in Sobo. “If I’d been perfect when I was young, would I have seen through the window of the emperor’s palace when my husband thought I was at home?”

Sofu’s eye twitched.

Mother!” groaned Miu’s mother.

“Then again, I *did* fall from some very high stalks of bamboo, so you should try to follow the rules *sometimes*.” Sobo added somewhat helpfully.

Miu and her family knelt around a table of light, polished wood. Bowls of steaming rice and miso soup were passed around, along with a flat, rectangular plate of pink fish. Through the steam, Miu could just barely see her mother sitting beside her, and her Sobo and Sofu seated on the other side of the table. Delicate Ikebana (in this case, pink and yellow flowers arranged just so) flourished along the walls of their small house. The baize mat of dried bamboo was rough against Miu’s legs.

“We’ll discuss this later,” suggested Sofu, “In the meantime, how about a story?”

There were a few mumbles from Sobo and her mother, but Miu nodded vigorously.

Sofu cleared his throat. "Once, in a time long ago, there lived a fat, cranky man and his many friends. These men lived in a far away place called America."

"I know where that is!" Piped up Miu.

"One day, the big, cranky man decided that he would make a trip. A very long trip. A trip to exactly where we live now."

"Yoshimi, maybe we should hear a *different* story tonight..." Suggested Sobo.

"But the man wanted something. A very large, life changing request. Now, back then, Japan kept to themselves. We wanted no conflicts with other lands, and had no interest in friendships. However, this was the day everything would begin to change. You see, the cranky man lurched over the seas towards our shores with his terrible black dragons decked in equally terrible weapons."

"Yoshimi..."

"Father..."

"Once onshore, the big man faced a colorful crowd of Japanese subjects. Grinning greedily, he addressed us as the "mysterious island kingdom." Now, one of his strange friends could speak two languages. The Americans' and our own. He told us what the bigger man had said in a way we could understand."

"Time for bed, Miu..."

"Soon, after years of demanding, this man recieved exactly what he desired. Can you guess what that might have been, Miu?"

Miu looked up at the ceiling, trying to remember. She recalled hearing a little bit of this story in her history class back at school. However, Ms. Kimura had told the story much differently. She remembered this man's name, and that Ms. Kimura had praised him for introducing Japan to so many new things. Sofu clearly had a different opinion.

"He wanted... Japan to open up to... other countries. Right?"

"That's right. And it was never the same again. The outside world greatly influenced out country, but remember Miu. No matter how much things change, remember your heritage."

Sofu had started telling more and more stories of the past. They were interesting enough, but not like his others tales. Miu missed Sofu's stories of heroes and dragons and curious young girls like herself.

"Time for bed Miu," repeated her mother. Gently pushing her towards the round, old-fashioned opening leading to her small room, filled with plants and flowers.

* * *

Warm sunlight glittered, and flooded down upon Miu, who stretched out on her soft bed and yawned. Rubbing her eyes and smoothing down her hair, she rolled over to look out the window. The sun was high in the sky. Too high. *I must have slept late*, realized Miu with a gasp. She flung her thick cover off of her body. As she raced out the door, she scooped her schoolbooks off her shelf. Miu, standing in the doorway to the kitchen, grabbed the first thing she could see for breakfast: a sukia slice. Eating as she fled through the village, Miu arrived at the little white building just as Ms. Kimura was instructing her students to take their seats. Miu hurried over to hers just as Ms. Kimura turned around to address the class. Miu was safe for the day.

Chapter 5

Reika grinned before unlatching the old, dusty trunk before her. Then, thrusting it open, she pulled out fistfuls of colorful silk bundles, and tossed one to Miu. Coughing from the explosion of dust, Miu carefully unfolded the silk in her lap. It was a soft, blue kimono painted with stretching cranes. She lifted it by the sleeves and tilted her head for a better look. Meanwhile, Reika had unfolded her own silk bundle: a gentle pink kimono decorated with cherry blossoms. The streaming sunlight illuminated her the trunk and the silks with a golden glow, making them seem even more beautiful.

“Well...?” pried Reika, leaning towards her friend.

The two girls were kneeling on the faded floor of Reika’s family’s attic. The only light came from a circular, rippling window. After school that day, Reika had grabbed Miu’s wrist and whisked her to where they were now, insisting that she had to show Miu something she’d discovered that morning.

“They’re so...old.”

Reika folded her arms over her chest.

“But they’re really pretty!” Miu added quickly.

Reika grinned again. “Want to try them on? Just for a quick minute...”

Miu tried to think of something responsible to say, but she couldn’t resist trying on the kimonos. It would be so much fun to flounce around, trailing silk behind her...

“Maybe just for a minute,” she replied, smiling.

The next thing Miu knew she was fastening a gold cloth tightly around her waist to hold the kimono together. She twirled around, billowing blue silk. Reika tripped over her pink kimono, and fell in a heap to the floor. However, she did look beautiful in the kimono. She'd tied it with a purple waistband, and had pinned her hair back into a loose bun. Miu shuffled over to help her friend up, her drooping sleeves extended. Just as she offered her hardly visible hand, her foot snagged her long skirt, and she toppled onto Reika. Soon both of them had rolled over laughing.

Miu's laughter quickly turned to a frightened gasp. The clicking of shoes could clearly be heard growing louder and louder. Reika looked around frantically. Then tugged on Miu's sleeve and pointed into the chest. Miu drew back, and raised an eyebrow. *I do not want to get in that dusty old chest*, she thought. Reika frowned sternly, and pointed more and more rapidly towards the chest, lifting the lid. Miu rolled her eyes, shook her head slightly, but piled in. Reika dashed the into another trunk on the other side of the room.

Huddling down into the many silks, Miu shut her eyes, and tried her hardest not to make any sounds. "Reika? Time for dinner! Why don't you ask Miu if she'd like to stay and eat with us. Reika? Reika!?"

To Miu's horror, the clicking continued to grow louder, until she could hear Reika's mother mutter: "*This* old thing? I haven't opened it in years! I'm so glad I found it! Sobo's old kimonos should be in here..." The lock shifted, and Miu hurriedly buried herself deeper under the silks.

"Oh, they *are* here!" cried Reika's mother with delight, fingering the silks. "Reika! Miu! Come see this!" Miu felt her hand graze the sleeve of her kimono and her face grew hot, but she didn't dare move.

"Old memories," Reika's mother sighed contentedly, and the lid shut with a loud: thunk! Miu sighed with relief as darkness surrounded her once again, and rolled over onto her back. Soon the trunk opened again, but this time it was just Reika, smiling down at her apologetically.

Reika looked down at her kimono. "Maybe we should..."

"YES." Replied Miu from the trunk. "Can I, um... come out now?"

"Oh! Yes, of course!" answered Reika, remembering that Miu was still inside the trunk. She reached down a hand to her friend, and hoisted her up. "So. Do you want to stay for dinner?"

"Believe me, I do, but I have to go soon.

"Well, okay. Let's get out of these."

Miu sighed and gazed wistfully at the comfortable, rippling blue surrounding her. Reluctantly, she started to unfasten the gold around her waist, revealing her plain, sunshine yellow dress.

* * *

Miu trotted through woven the archway, entwined with bamboo, to her cottage. She sat down on her green, quilted mattress, and tried her best to pick the dust out of her hair. Suddenly, the mattress plumed upward, raising Miu up with it, before she sunk back down. Glancing over her shoulder, Miu found herself gazing up at a thin girl with long, wisps of black hair cascading over her shoulders. Her almond-shaped eyes sparkled as she beamed down at Miu. “Hi, Little sister.”

“Where did you...?” Miu looked around for openings into her room, but could only find a shut window and the archway right in front of her. She shook her head, and focused on her older sister. “That was a short trip.”

The sparkle faded from Satoko’s eyes. She twisted a curl around her finger. “I’m just going to...um...help. In the kitchen.” She stood up, and slunk away like a cat. Miu shrugged, and soon headed towards the kitchen herself. The dinner was the same as always, except this time Miu could see her sister’s sparkling eyes through the fragrant steam.

“So...” Pried her mother, eagerly. “How was the trip...?”

“We discovered a little more about the Western culture,” informed Satoko. “Guess what? A popular hairstyle right now are braids. When you twist three strands of hair around each other, you get these beautiful ropes. They’re very popular. Also, a popular food in America right now would be a hot dog. It’s not actually dog, but it’s a tube of meat on a slice of bread. Interesting, huh? Oh, one more thing! This is just a fact, but there are these big, fat trees with pointy leaves called oak trees in America. They grow in a lot of places. I saw some, actually. With the trying to be like America, it looks we’ll be wearing braids and eating hotdogs pretty soon. I wonder how similar to America we’ll get?”

As curious as she was about America, Miu now found herself more curious about her past. If Japan was going to change in all these ways, she wanted to know what it was like before. Would she discover more wonderful surprises, like Kimonos? The time her Sobo and Sofu often spoke of, with less homework and studies. Even more so, she wanted to bring that past back to the present, despite the little knowledge she had of it. The silk kimonos

were so much more comfortable than the itchy dresses, and she liked her food much better than the sound of *hot dogs*. Was the food even *better* back then? The answer was simple: bring back the past.

And... pried the annoying little voice in Miu's head.

And pay attention in history class, yeah, I know. Miu thought back, grudgingly.

* * *

"I don't know about this..." said Reika, as she cautiously opened the old lid a crack. "How are we going to get through the village wearing *these*?"

"I...It'll be fine," replied Miu, her hands shaking slightly as she grasped the blue silk in her hands.

"And *this* is supposed to get your point across," Reika summed up doubtfully.

"Just put it on," instructed Miu, tossing her friend the pink silk.

Reika glided through the doorway in one fluid motion, pressing herself flat against the wall. Miu followed carefully behind her, trying her best to be as stealthy as her friend. She flattened herself as Reika had done, but to her dismay, heard a squelching sound coming from her satchel. Remembering that her sister had packed her dumplings for a lunch. She silently punished herself for not waking up before her sister, and packing accordingly to her plan. Slinking outside, the girls found themselves facing their bustling village. An old lady waddled slowly past them. However, before they could duck out of view, her twinkling eyes caught Reika's and Miu's. The woman gasped slightly, and hobbled off.

Reika frowned down at her kimono. "Is it not my color or something?"

"No, no," reassured Miu, "but I think we should head through the wisterias instead. We don't want these getting spoiled, and..." Miu didn't admit her other reason out loud. The truth was, she had a feeling that something was wrong. Suddenly, she didn't want to be seen in the kimono. She wanted to hide.

"And it's faster that way," she added instead. There wasn't time to rush back inside and change, so they'd have to bear with it. Unfortunately, the trip through the dangling branches and over twisted roots was not an easy one. The girls fell against the sturdy trunks several times, scarping their

arms and legs. As sunlight glittered through the leaves, casting green and yellow patterns, Reika leaned heavily against a tree trunk. Her arms and face were brushed with dirt.

“Miu, can’t we stop to rest? I’m so tired...just look at us!”

“Oh please, Reika, we’re almost there. We’ll make it.”

Reika slid herself back down the trunk, and landed curled up in the grass, hugging her knees. Miu rolled her eyes. Reika *was* her best friend, but she was stubborn. If she didn’t want to do something, she wouldn’t do it--- unless she was bribed.

Miu pulled the small sack of snow-white dumplings from her satchel. She made a big show of slowly peeling open a corner of the cloth they were wrapped inside. She slipped one of them out into the palm of her hand. She tossed and bounced it around a bit. Soon, a savory sent wafted through the air, up to the canopy of the trees.

“Reika, if you *come to school* you can have one of these.”

Reika grumbled, but rose to her feet, and trudged onward.

CHAPTER 6

Blinks. Stares. Open mouths. Reika and Miu received all these unnerving reactions from their classmates and teacher as they swept into the classroom. They stepped closer together as Ms. Kimura’s glassy green eyes narrowed. Miu figured it would probably be best to address her classmates as if nothing was different.

“Hi Fumi. Hi Ikue. Hi everybody. Look at what Reika and I found! Aren’t they pretty? This is what people *used* to wear before we started trying to be like those hot-dog-swallowing, itchy-dress-wearing Americans, and...”

Ms. Kimura snapped her long fingers, and everyone focused their attention on her instead of the girls. “Let’s open our textbooks, shall we? Page 124. Now! Everything is under control. Those girls just haven’t learned. Luckily, that’s what I’m here for.”

She marched over to Reika and Miu, glaring at them like a hawk at its prey. “Don’t you know your breaking the law?” she hissed. “Don’t you know these were banned?” She grabbed a fist of silk in her hands and let it slip through her fingers.

Miu starred wide-eyed at Ms. Kimura. How could the kimonos be banned? Surely the scratchy, hot dresses weren’t preferred over them? What about the past? Miu’s sofū had always told her to be her own person, and to be proud of her heritage. You should never try to be exactly like someone else. Sofū was so wise --- so why was her country doing the opposite of what he thought right? Miu narrowed her own eyes.

“Well my Sofu says...”

“Well *I* say you are to take those off at once!”

Neither girl made a move to follow their instructions.

“Oh, don’t tell me you don’t...” They nodded. Ms. Kimura put a hand to forehead. “Then just leave. If the press finds out what you’ve done, think of what could happen to the school. I’m not losing my job because of you two brats. Now leave. Out. Shoo!”

* * *

The two friends were silent as they embarked on the long journey home through the wisterias. Reika knew she had been right: this had most certainly *not* been a good idea, but now wasn’t the time to remind her friend. So, instead, she tried her best to lighten the mood.

“So, um, no school for the rest of the day. Want to come over to my house? We’d have to tell my mom, but she’d know we meant well. I think.”

“No thanks. Once I get home, I have a feeling I won’t be going anywhere anytime soon—except school. If we’re even allowed back.”

“Well, you have to change, don’t you? You left your clothes at my house. Also, we need to put the kimonos back and...”

“I have other clothes. I’ll give the kimono back to you tomorrow, okay?”

“Well, uh, okay. Sure.” Reika glanced up at her unhappy friend, and sighed. “Don’t blame yourself. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know, just...I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

With that Miu raced through the curtains of purple flowers, leaving Reika framed against them.

Once Miu spotted the flowered archway leading to her home, a wave of panic came over her. What would she do? Would she hide, or tell the truth? The truth. She couldn’t afford to get herself into more of a mess than she already would be, once she admitted her mistake. But who would she go to? Who would understand, and, well, take her side? As she approached the archway, she saw just who that would be.

“Sofu! I’m home, and I have something I really need to tell you!”

“My! So early! Is everything all right?”

“No!”

“Wait, Miu, what are you wearing? How did you get that?”

“It’s Reika’s, and I’ll give it back later, but please listen to me!”

“Miu, I know I should have told you earlier, but I suppose I just couldn’t face the fact. Did you know, Miu, wearing those kimonos is not allowed anymore!”

“Yes, I did know! About twenty minutes ago!”

“Oh, I see now.”

Miu nodded grimly.

“Let’s come inside. I’ll help you explain what happened today to your mother. Together, we can make things work out.”

“I don’t know if I can go to school anymore, Sofu.”

“Oh, of course you can. You didn’t know.”

Miu followed her Sofu through the archway. She loved the rippling patterns that the sunlight cast through the flowers, and with her Sofu beside her, she started to feel much better. Until she heard her mother’s voice.

“Miu, is that you? Why aren’t you at school?”

Once Miu had finished the story, a hush came over her family. “I think we know just how Miu feels,” Sobo commented to her husband.

“Oh, Miu. Why didn’t we tell you sooner?” Sighed her mother.

“Your teacher sounds pretty bad,” commented Satoko.

“Satoko, she broke the law.”

Miu winced. This day just wasn’t turning out right.

“Go take that off now, and help me set the table for lunch,” instructed her mother. As Miu trudged down the hallway, she felt defeated. However, she knew she couldn’t give up. There had to be another way to get what she wanted. She just had to figure out what.

When Miu’s mother woke that morning, and padded into the kitchen, she found her daughter leaning slightly over the table towards her with her hands folded. Miu’s mother yawned and rubbed her eyes with her wrist.

“What are you doing up so early?” She asked drowsily.

“I just finished getting ready for school,” replied Miu. “I’m not going to be late after what happened yesterday. Can I have some breakfast?”

Her mother frowned slightly and ran a hand through her hair. “Yes, but about school. Ms. Kimura...she thinks it’s best that you and Reika stay home for the day to ‘learn your lesson.’ Fumi will deliver your assignments.”

“Ugh. Fine.”

“You have to try and understand Miu. Things aren’t going to go back to the way they used to be so long ago.”

Miu gazed up at her mother.

“H-how did you know that’s what I wanted?”

“Your very similar to my parents, Miu. They feel the same way you do about changes. They miss the way things used to be, and you’re curious of your past and proud of your heritage. And don’t worry, I understand. Some American ways don’t appeal to me either.”

“Sofu tells me never to try and be exactly like someone else. You should be proud of who you are. So why are we trying to be like other people? Why can’t we just be ourselves? I want to live in a country all it’s own, and unique from others.”

“There are lots of people who feel differently, Miu. Change is thrilling to them. Ms. Kimura is one of those people.”

“Hey, what are you two doing up so early?” Satoko leaned against the wall, her dark hair strangled in a messy bun. Her glittering smile was spread across her face, and her eyes were sparkling. How was she so awake so early? “Can I have some breakfast?”

Miu’s mother laughed lightly. “It looks like Sofu and Sobo aren’t the only ones your similar to, Miu.”

Satoko’s smile widened.

Miu glanced doubtfully at her beautiful, perfect, adventurous sister. Satoko never made mistakes. Mother was always so happy to see her, and she never made mistakes. She focused on the table once again. How could they be similar.

Soon they were both sitting side by side, their hands cupped around bowls of miso soup for warmth. “This breakfast is one tradition we’ve kept, Miu,” informed her mother. “I thought you might enjoy it.”

Miu watched the mushrooms float daintily around the steaming soup. She breathed in the savory scent. “I do,” she replied.

“Me too! Why don’t I make you some for breakfast tomorrow? We could even make it together.”

Satoko put a thin arm around Miu’s shoulders. Miu tensed, but tried to force a smile. “You two are so sweet,” sighed her mother. “I…think I need to go over to Reika’s right now, mom. I just want to clear things up.” She pushed Satoko’s arm off of her, and trotted out the door.

CHAPTER 7

“So, let me get this straight,” said Reika. “You want us to *sneak* into my Sobo and Sofu’s house and rummage through their belongings? Why can’t we just ask to see them?”

“Haven’t you been listening to me? Your grandparents might feel the same way Ms. Kimura does, and you remember how *that* turned out for us.”

“But Miu, they don’t.”

“I don’t want to take any chances, okay?”

“I’ll help you one more time just because I’m your friend. Then I’m out of this.”

“Thank you.”

The two friends walked side by side through the shimmering morning light. Their short dresses felt cool on their skin, and the grass bordering the sandy street was peppered with dew. A cool breeze swept past them. “How much further is it, Reika?”

“Just around this bend, I think,” She replied, pointing out ahead of her. As they walked, they fell into a peaceful silence. It was a strange time of day, but Miu always treasured it. A time without the bustling wagons, shouts, and laughter. Cherry blossoms floated around them as they came past the grove where they had made origami a few days ago.

Reika tensed a bit, and said shakily, “Well, there it is. Do you really think we should be doing this? I-I, mean they could catch us. We aren’t showing the least bit of respect! What about the part of your plan where we ‘borrow?’”

“We’ll just leave a note. I really think it’ll be fine.”

“Miu, they can’t read. Or write. Back when they were young, hardly anybody regular people could. See how changing can benefit us?”

Miu stopped mid-step, and gazed at her friend. “What are you saying?” she asked, startled.

“I’ve actually been thinking about the changes for a while now, Miu. While we were separate from the world, we didn’t have the benefits that other countries do. Why stay that way?”

“Because,” replied Miu, her voice raising slightly, “we’re trying to be just like another country! I want to be unique, but if you want to rush around trying to throw away your past, then you don’t *have* to help me.”

Reika stopped, too. “I’m helping you because I’m your friend. Do I always have to agree with you, now? Besides, it’s not like you’ll make a difference.”

Miu felt her face get hot. “Your just as bad as Ms. Kimura! Why don’t you just go home? I don’t need your help.”

With that, Miu stomped off into the morning mist.

The cottage was small and white, with peeling paint, but had the traditional, Japanese peaked roof, layered in flat, brown shingles. Miu crept

around outside, peeking shyly through each window. The only one open was at the top of the house. *That must be the attic, thought Miu. Just where I need to be. I mean, that's where old things are usually kept, aren't they? If only I could find a way up there. I can't be dangling out in the open. What would Sobo or Sofu do?*

Then she spotted some familiar green stalks. She grinned slyly, and dashed into the bamboo. Miu shook each stalk one by one, trying to tell which one was the strongest, and most stable. From above, she thought she must have looked like a shiny, black mushroom bobbing up and down, parting the green swaying stalks. Finally, she found the perfect one. Gripping it firmly, she hoisted herself upwards. Her foot slipped a couple of times, causing her to flop against the bamboo stalk, clinging on as best as she could. Miu wasn't the best at climbing, and she knew it. *Satoko would be at the top already*, she reminded herself, solemnly. Soon, she could feel the warm sun on her back, and she shivered contentedly, having just been enveloped in cool, morning mist. Below her, she could see the little walking dolls that were her neighbors. Her stomach dropped, and her hair prickled. Suddenly, she wanted nothing more than to slide down...but she couldn't.

Finally, Miu peeked over the top of the bamboo forest. Long, stiff leaves tickled her sides, and she swayed back and forth, clinging onto her sturdy stock. However, there was one problem. How would she get to the window. It was far out in front of her, and a bit lower, too. Gulping, Miu realized her only option. Carefully, she swung around so that her weight was on the side of the bamboo that faced the window. Slowly, with a whining creak, she was lowered down towards the window. Dangling a few feet away from her only entrance, The bamboo sluggishly clicked to a stop. *Oh, wonderful*, thought Miu. *Now I'm stuck here*. She sighed as she thought to herself, *If I hadn't sent Reika home, there would be enough weight for the bamboo to lean all the way over. Then we could both stand on the window ledge, and look inside*.

Miu flicked herself back into the present. Extending a short leg, she attempted to touch the window ledge. Skimming it slightly, she decided to try again. This time, she thrust her foot violently onto the ledge with a loud thwack. Stiffening, she heard muffled voices inside the house.

“D-did you hear that?” It was the quiet voice of an old woman.

“No, no, it must have just been your imagination,” replied the scratchy voice of an old man.

“Well, all right, but I'm awfully sure I heard a pounding upstairs,” added the woman.

“Check, if you'd like. I'm going to make some green tea.”

“Well, maybe I’ll stay for a cup, first.”

Miu slapped her hand to her forehead. Now she only had so much time before the woman would come upstairs. She had to be quick. Fortunately, her foot was firmly planted on the window ledge, and she was able to swing her other one into the same place. Balancing above her town, she slid her fingers under the slightly opened window, and quietly pushed it further up, just enough for her to slide in.

She knelt on the attic floor, and let out a long sigh, realizing she’d been holding her breath. Grateful for a floor under her feet, she smiled widely.

“I think I’ll go check on that noise now.” It was the woman again. Miu could hear her place a clay cup on what was most likely a table, with a small thunk. Miu looked around frantically, trying to find someplace to hide. Soon, small, dainty footsteps could be heard padding up the stairs. She dashed back outside the window, and shut it. *What is it with hiding and attics, now?* Miu wondered. She curled herself around the perimeter of the window, where it was embedded into the house, forming an edge just big enough for a small girl to sit in, but she knew that she wouldn’t be able to stay there long. Her hands were sweaty, and she was losing her grip. A bent-over figure was framed inside the doorway, her hair painted with long, thick, gray streaks. She wore a sky-blue dress garnished with a white apron. She scanned the room slowly, her gaze landing on the window. Miu could clearly see her eyebrows raise, and her mouth open. The woman waddled quickly to the window, thrust it open, and grabbed Miu inside just before she slipped and fell.

Laying sprawled out on the floor, Miu took some deep breaths, and stared at the woman, who’s little mouth broke into a warm smile. “Why, it’s a young girl! What are you doing here child? And how did you get up here without us seeing, dear?”

“I-I...,” Miu stuttered. She had been caught, but the woman didn’t seem angry. Just...confused. Or was she?

“I’m Reika’s friend. Can I...um...” How would she ask the question? *Hi, um, I don’t suppose I could look through your things and take some of them?*

“I haven’t been up here in a while,” sighed the woman dreamily. She gazed around the dimly lit room, caked with dust, and decked with cobwebs. “Would you like to see some of my old things?” Miu stared at the woman for a long time, and blinked. *Well, that was easy,* she thought. The woman shook her head and smiled sadly. “That’s all right, dear. You young people aren’t very interested in that sort of thing anymore, are you?”

Miu widened her eyes, and shook her head violently. “No, no! Not at all! I mean, I’m not uninterested! Please show me!” Miu clarified quickly.

The woman seemed a bit startled, but shuffled over to the other side of the dark room, and started rummaging through loud, clanking objects. Miu felt a pang of guilt, as the old woman waddled toward her, her arms brimming with carefully painted sculptures, and more objects that Miu couldn’t see very well. How was she going to borrow some of those pieces of the past without telling the woman? She was such a nice lady...plus, Reika was right, Miu had no respect. The thought just made her feel more guilty. However, in a way it would be worse to ask to borrow the items. If they were taken away from her, and she couldn’t return them, how would the woman feel? Heartbroken. There was only one way, it seemed, to spare the her feelings. As the pile was set in front of Miu, she began to pat her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Just loudly enough for her host to hear, Miu muttered about how thirsty she was.

Acting as if she hadn’t heard, Reika’s grandmother asked Miu if she’d like some green tea. Miu glanced around innocently, “Well, if you don’t mind...”

The old lady smiled warmly, and shuffled to the kitchen, downstairs.

* * *

Miu poked her head around the doorway to make sure she was gone, and knelt in front of the pile. The items were amazing! There was a familiar silk garment, painted with sleepy-looking coy, small bowls, etched with pictures of bamboo. There was even a dusty scroll that, once unraveled, turned out to be a painting of purple-gray mountains, peaked with snow, and flourishing, emerald-green trees. Miu also came across a dusty schoolbook. Written inside were the basic lessons one would learn in a grade lower than her own, but the book turned out to be for a grade higher. The book must have belonged to friends of Reika’s grandparents, because Miu knew they couldn’t read or write. The last treasure was a clay doll with a cracked, pale face. Decked in a red and gold kimono, she smiled up at Miu. The doll’s hair was pinned fashionably on top of her head. She recognized the doll from an annual tradition that Miu and Reika had always enjoyed. The doll ceremony was held every year, when all the girls would arrange their prettiest dolls in the windows of their houses. All the girls in the village would race from house to house, complimenting and looking at each other’s hand-me-down dolls. In fact, Miu recognized the clay figure as one of the dolls Reika had proudly displayed last year. Her name was Kaya.

“Hello, Kaya,” Miu whispered, patting the dolls head and placing her gently on the floor.

Then the hard part came: what would Miu take? She could already smell the sweet aroma of green tea wafting into the room, and her old friend calling softly, “Young girl? I have your tea! Now, about those delightful little treasures...I’d like to first show you an honored painting from when I was a child. Would that be all right? Dear?”

Her footsteps grew louder and louder. Miu had become more used to this sort of situation from the last time she’d experienced it, and tried her best to stay calm, she randomly snatched a few items, and crawled carefully out the window once more, just as the old lady entered. She felt so sorry, she wanted to cry, but instead she reached for her now bent stalk of bamboo with her one free hand. With that, she leaped forward, and, as the bamboo tilted over, was lowered into the bamboo forest. She squatted there, gazing up at the attic window. Miu could hear the startled and somewhat hurt calls of: “Dear girl? My friend? Where are you? I have your tea! I finally had someone to share my memories with, too.” She sighed loudly, and Miu scampered away, biting her lower lip to keep from yelling at herself.

As she ran, she could hear cries of: “Sofu’s painting! My cups! My-my...memories! Thief!”

CHAPTER 8

Miu tried to comfort herself as she ran. First of all, the woman didn’t know her name or where she lived. She didn’t know who her relatives were, or where she went to school. Good. Less chance of getting caught. But she had told her that she was Reika’s friend. Would Reika...would she give her away? It was obvious she was upset...

Miu turned her attention to her arms, where the scroll, the cups, the schoolbooks and Kaya all rested. Miu gasped to herself. She hadn’t meant to take so much! Her stomach felt unsettled. Eventually she slowed her run to a quick walk, spotting her house up ahead. Once inside, her mother rushed over to her. “Miu, it’s already lunch time! Where have you been? What are those you’re carrying with you...?”

“Reika’s grandmother, she gave them to me. As a gift.” Miu felt her face flush pink. Great. Now she was lying. She also noticed Kaya catch her mother’s eye.

“But isn’t that Reika’s doll from the ceremony last year?”

“No, I think you’re confusing it with another one.”

“Oh, well, perhaps I am...”

Her mother shook her head, then focused once again on Miu.

“While I was out at the market buying some vegetables and fish for lunch, today, I ran into Ms. Kimura. She said class had been dismissed early, and Fumi was just heading home to her parents before dropping off your assignments. It looks like you’ll be staying here a while.”

“Okay, but can I have some lunch?”

“Miu, you can make your own lunch.”

“Please?”

“Oh, all right.”

Miu crept to her room, and dumped the treasures out on her mattress, trying to arrange them in a way that might interest Fumi. Then she paced around her room, waiting as patiently as she could. Just then, Satoko poked her head into the room. “Hey, I shouldn’t have done this, but I have something for you,” she whispered. “I told mom I’d make lunch, so don’t worry about her finding out.”

Satoko glided into the room, and placed a clay plate in Miu’s hands. Miu gasped. On the plate, was a disgusting red tube in a sliced piece of bread. She, put the plate down, and slowly backed away. “Wow, thanks Satoko, but I’m really not that hungry.”

“Oh, come on. Won’t you just try it? I love these things.”

Miu glanced suspiciously at the hot dog. She didn’t like trying new things. She didn’t like new things at all. However, Satoko had obviously broken the rules to get this for her, and it was clear she considered it a treat. She broke off a tiny bite and placed it on her tongue. It was warm, and savory. Even a little salty. She took another bite, then gobbled down the whole thing.

“Are there...any more?” Asked Miu. Satoko grinned.

“I knew you’d like it. Sorry, I only brought two, and I just ate mine.”

“Oh. That’s okay. Thanks.”

Okay, so maybe hotdogs weren’t as bad as she’d thought. However, she still had a goal to achieve.

“Satoko, what’s the next holiday coming up?”

“You don’t know? It’s the doll festival. You love that holiday so much. I’d thought you would have know that it’s tomorrow.”

Tomorrow! How could she have forgotten? Just then there was a faint knock on the door. “Mrs. Suzuki? Is Miu home? It’s me, Fumi!” Came a little voice. Miu rushed to the door, and flung it open. A short, thin figure was standing in the doorway. She flipped one of her long braids. “This is an American hairstyle,” she bragged. “Do you like it?” Fumi had a sea-foam green dress with puffy sleeves on, and polished black shoes. Who wore

shoes in the springtime? “Yes, it’s really great Fumi, but look at what I have!” She grabbed the startled girl by her wrist and whisked her into her room. Satoko was still there, but once she saw Fumi she became her shy, quiet self. Smiling and waving slightly, she left the room silently.

“Was that your--”

“My sister, yes, now look.”

Miu spread her arms out wide, presenting her display of old treasures to Fumi. Fumi walked slowly over, and studied each one carefully. She looked for a moment like she recognized Kaya, but shook her head and moved on. Miu was glad that her friend seemed interested. Maybe she’d want to help Miu with her cause.

“So, Fumi,” Miu began, trying to sound carefree and breezy, “These are from many years ago, before we started...”

“Yes, I know, you said the same thing in class the other day.”

Miu blushed and laughed shakily. “Yes, well, don’t you think these things are pretty?”

Fumi shrugged.

“Imagine if Japan could be filled with these sorts of beautiful things again. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

Fumi started backing towards the door. “My mom says not to hang around you too much. You broke the law and have crazy ideas.”

Miu felt a rush of emotions, anger, fear, sadness, shame. *I’m just trying to do what’s right*, she reminded herself.

“No, no, I just...”

“Bye, Miu.” Fumi waved timidly, and back-stepped briskly out of the room.

CHAPTER 9

The next day was the doll ceremony, but it was a much different experience for her this time. Instead of running through the village laughing, her arms looped under Reika and Fumi’s, she shyly walked from window to window, her arms clutched thoughtfully behind her back. It felt as if everyone had turned against her. She had no one to explore with, and no one to greet. She was avoiding Reika’s grandmother, Ms. Kimura, Reika herself, and Fumi. The doll ceremony had lost all its fun and joy.

Once Reika had shown Miu the kimonos and suggested they wear them to school, she’d thought Reika was on her side. Now she realized it had all been for fun...but Miu didn’t have time for fun! She had personally assigned herself a job to do. However, there was one more thing that

confused her. Why hadn't Reika thrown Kaya in the river like all the other girls were supposed to, once the dolls had collected all of the girls' misfortune? She shrugged, then winced as her heavy satchel shifted heavily on her small back.

"Stand up straight," hissed her mother from behind her. "Why are you carrying that anyway? Poor thing. It looks as if Mineyo didn't remove *all* of your misfortune." Her mother gently lifted the satchel from Miu's back, and hoisted it onto her own. For a moment Miu sighed with relief, then her eyes snapped open and she grabbed for her satchel, but it was too late.

Her mother grunted slightly under the heavy weight. "Miu, what do you *have* in here?"

"Just some...uh...extra hair ribbons. My brush. I want to look my best for today."

Her mother raised an eyebrow. "You've an awfully heavy brush, young lady," she commented suspiciously.

"And an extra dress..." Miu added half-heartedly. Her mother started walking

Just then she noticed Reika, running arm in arm with Fumi. Miu shook her head, and wandered around on her own through the looming wisterias, covered in dew. She had some time to spare, and decided to look at the dolls in a nearby house. While wandering through the dewy trees, she found herself clicking up a stone pathway, leading to an old, peeling white and black house. In the cracked window was a gorgeous display of dolls, decked in in peach blossom branches. The dolls' ruby-red smiles glittered in the sun, and their dark eyes were carefully painted. Their hair was twisted into old-fashioned styles that still fascinated Miu. It was then that she noticed a doll with hair pinned to the top of her head. Where had she seen that hairdo before? Miu's eyes widened, and she reached into her satchel. She pulled out Kaya, and held her up to the window. She was a perfect match. But these dolls were so old. Shouldn't they have been thrown in the river long ago? Miu shook her head, and began to lower Kaya into her satchel.

"Miu! What are you doing all by yourself?" I tall girl with large, deep eyes smiled shyly at her. Her long hair was pinned up on one side of her head with a peach blossom twig, the other side hanging down like a curtain.

"Oh, hi, Ikue." Miu replied, a bit startled.

"Want to explore with me? Nobody should have to be by themselves during the doll ceremony."

Miu considered asking Ikue why *she* was by *herself*, but thought it was probably best not to. Ikue had always been very shy, and didn't have many friends. She didn't want to hurt her feelings.

Miu smiled, looped her arm through Ikue's, and together they ran off.

"So, what were you looking at over there, if you don't mind me asking?" Questioned Ikue. The girls had slowed to a walk, and were thoughtfully gazing through polished windows.

Miu considered the question, her head slightly tilted. "I don't really know. It was a house I know I've never seen before, that's for sure." Ikue shrugged, then grinned and pointed at a wooden cart. "Look, Miu! Peaches!"

The girls rushed towards the cart. An old woman smiled up at them, but they could only see her mouth under the wide-brimmed hat she was wearing. Ikue fished around in *her* satchel for something to pay with, put the old woman put a frail hand on her arm. "They're free for the doll ceremony, dear." She picked out two ripe, fuzzy fruits, and placed one in each girl's palm. The woman had a quiet, familiar voice. Miu opened her mouth to thank her, but suddenly closed it just as quickly. She didn't want the old lady to recognize her voice. It didn't seem like she could see them well under the hat, which was just fine with Miu.

"Let's go," she whispered to Ikue. The two girls bowed slightly to the woman before rushing off.

"Do you...know her?" asked Ikue carefully.

"Yeah, it's Reika's grandmother, I think," replied Miu tightly.

"Are you not friends with her?"

"It's...complicated," Miu summed up.

Desperate to change the subject, Miu told Ikue that they should probably get their dolls to throw in the river. Ikue nodded, and un-looped her arm from Miu's. The friends smiled at each other, waved, and were gone. A hollow feeling settled in Miu's stomach. She felt lonely again now that Ikue was gone. She fingered her hair, which Ikue had styled like her own while they had eaten their peaches under a wisteria. She strolled along, her hands folded behind her back once again. Soon her familiar archway was visible, and Miu rushed to her room. Grabbing her three dolls, which she'd arranged carefully in her window, Miu thought about how sad she'd always felt as she watched her dolls float lazily down the river. Miu sat on her doorstep, and stroked each dolls hair in turn. When she came to her favorite, Mineyo, Miu

gave her a hug, then scooped up the others, and trotted to join Ikue by the river.

“Bye bye!” sang a little girl, as she watched her dolls float away on the river’s current. She skipped around in a circle, flaunting her pretty hair, braided with peach blossoms. “I can’t wait to get more next year!” she exclaimed to her weary-looking mother. “Yes, more...” she replied in a slight groan. “More indeed.”

Miu scowled at the girl as she skipped off, trailing her mother. How could she be so greedy? How could she let go of things so...easily, carelessly!?!”

Miu hugged Mineyo to her chest, and felt a warm hand on her back. “It’s tradition Miu,” came her mother’s kind voice. Sometimes you need to let things go.”

Miu set her doll carefully into the warm water, and watched as she bobbed away, her shimmering eyes just above the surface. Suddenly she heard the crinkle of a dress as someone knelt next to her. “Hi, Miu.”

“Reika?” She hadn’t spoke to Reika in what felt like forever. It was nice to have her by her side, but Miu knew she still had to set things straight. “Reika, I’m sorry about what I said earlier. I had no reason to treat you the way I did, and I hope you can forgive me.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry too, but I have something to show you.”

She grabbed Miu’s wrist, and pulled her off the soft mattress of green grass. They wove through the colorful crowd, occasionally stumbling over their own feet. Soon Miu found herself on a familiar stone path leading to a familiar cracked window. Inside were familiar old dolls with familiar glittering lips and familiar painted eyes. Reika let her hand slip from Miu’s and leaned against a rotting door. It opened with a slow, whining creak, tearing cobwebs as it went. “Come inside. Really, you won’t regret it.” Miu hesitated before carefully stepping inside the old house. Soon she stood facing the cracked window, the dolls’ backs facing her.

“These,” announced Reika, “are my very old, very special friends.”

She gestured to the dolls with a grand flourish.

“Reika, this isn’t your house,” Miu stated.

“Of course it isn’t. It’s not anybody’s house. Perfect hiding place, huh?”

“You mean, you don’t put your dolls in the river?”

“Who wants to?” replied Reika. Miu shrugged. She had a good point.

“There are other people like us, Miu, who hold on to the past in our own special ways. Sometimes it’s best to just stay quiet about it, so you don’t get in trouble.”

Miu stared at her friend. That made sense. But what about passing on the idea? How could she make a difference if nobody agreed with her? As if reading her mind, Reika put a hand on Miu's shoulder.

"Sometimes you can't change the way everyone thinks Miu, and you have to except that. When we first found the kimonos, I felt the same way you did. The past was so beautiful, so unique. I wanted to encourage people to help us bring it back. Then, after what Ms. Kimura told us, I realized that you can't always change people's minds. So, knowing things wouldn't change, I tried to look on the bright side about the changes that were being made. However, that upset you, because you were more determined than I was. A good quality, mostly. And Miu, I didn't give up. Not completely. Once everything started changing so rapidly, my grandmother and I decided we would use this house to store our dolls from the doll ceremony. That way, once new ones started being made, ones like the Americans', we could still look back on the old ones. I could show them to my children and grandchildren. That way, I would be spreading the word about the past to the future generations making a difference for them, and I would keep the happy memories. Japan won't stop changing Miu, and we can't stop that, but we can still pass on our messages in ways that won't get us in trouble."

Reika folded her hands, to show that she had finished. Miu gaped at her. Reika was so wise. Miu could already tell that she would become greatly honored in their village as she grew older.

The girls could hear excited murmurs from the villagers as the special sushi saved for the doll ceremony was passed around. "Let's go have some, Reika," suggested Miu. Her friend nodded and they walked together toward the fishy aroma.

* * *

That night Miu tossed and turned on her mattress. A pale sliver of moon glowed through her window, and a soft breeze rustled her hair. It was a comfortable night, but Miu's mind was not at rest. She'd gone through so much trouble for nothing! However, Reika had helped her face reality. Maybe there were things she couldn't control. Maybe her ideas *were* different from other people's, even though Miu was positive that one shouldn't try to be exactly like others. She decided Reika had taken the right approach. Miu decided that she would follow her friend's lead.

She snuggled under her mattress, and drifted into a sleep as cozy as the night itself.

As the morning sun filtered through her window, Miu stretched and yawned. She heard her mother laughing with Satoko in the kitchen, and then the sound of their shoes against the floor, as they stood.

“I’ll miss you so much, Satoko,” her mother sighed sadly. “Come back soon, okay?”

“I will, mom,” promised Satoko. “I love you.”

Miu threw off her covers and fled down the hallway, her bare feet cold against the wooden floor. *Satoko may be annoyingly perfect*, thought Miu, *but she’s my sister*. Miu threw her arms around her Satoko, who seemed surprised to see her.

“Miu, you’re up early!”

“I couldn’t miss you leaving, could I?”

Satoko sighed. “These vacations don’t last long. School wants me back to America, so I can collect more information. Not sure when I’ll be back.”

Miu suddenly felt a rush of guilt. She remembered back to the times when she was little, and she and Satoko were so close. Her jealousy had only started last year, and her relationship with her sister had never been the same. Satoko had reached out to her several times during her visit, and Miu had just pushed her away.

“Satoko, I’m sorry about everything. It’s just that you’re so pretty and never make mistakes. After the whole situation with Ms. Kimura and everything that’s happened, I’ve just kept thinking about how many mistakes *I’ve* made. I could never be like you.”

Satoko’s mouth was drawn in a line, and her eyes sparkled piercingly. Miu had never seen her look so serious.

“Miu, you *are* like me, and I’m *not* perfect. If I’d known you’d felt this way, I could have helped. The reason I do many things right is because I’ve made so many mistakes in the past, and I’ve learned from them. Also, look at yourself! Your long silky hair, and deep, bright eyes? You’re *so* pretty, and you know it.”

“Thanks. I’ll miss you, Satoko.”

“I’ll miss you two, little sister.”

The End