



Waters of Masuiensou

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*"Blessings to Seven Fortunes,
Their generosity sprung,
Kichiro once impoverished,
Now jingles with coins he's won!"*

The proprietor of the "Ember's Warmth" *onsen*, known as Kichiro, merrily sang to himself as he navigated a path through the halls.

Born as a *heimin*, there was little to be expected of him. Ever disturbed by the imposed restrictions of tradition and yearning for more, when Kichiro came of age, he ran away from the rustic village of his birth in order to claim his fortune. The years would bear witness to his sordid attempts to succeed within life. Yet, all of these attempts ended in failure, for within the old Empire, Kichiro was always a stranger to prosperity. Thus, when the day came that the Crab sought out *heimin* for an expedition, Kichiro, with nothing to lose, readily agreed.

After the arduous voyage which crossed an expansive sea and some time after the Crabs had erected their settlement of *First Stone* beneath the looming shadow of *Masuiensou*, Kichiro became acquainted with fortune. Within the bleak and hellish landscapes which surrounded the wrathful mountain, only the Kaiu family could see the beneficial possibilities which lay within. Well, the Kaiu family and opportunists, for, as if by overnight, a myriad of forges and *onsen* sprang into existence. They brought to the denizens of *First Stone* immeasurable volumes of tools and crafts forged by metal. Forge fires were the first gift of the mountain, hot, mineral-rich baths were the second.

Kichiro had seized an opportunity and for this he had—at long last—become acquainted with riches.

Hastily he approached the entrance which led to the northwesternmost pool. He brushed aside the brightly colored banner which read "Private," and gently rapped upon the wooden frame. Nothing occurred. Kichiro committed to a few more soft raps, and suddenly the door slid aside, and a young lady, adorned in exquisite kimono and resplendent accouterments, stepped out. Kichiro offered a smile and a nod of his head to Sakurako-san. Sakurako was a woman who, due to her ambitious desires and indomitable personality, had become a close confidant of Kichiro over the years. Indeed, their relationship, initially born out of convenience, had developed over the years to a bond like that of siblings.

Sakurako pulled the paper door closed behind her and turned to face Kichiro. Sakurako still possessed the beauty of one within the passionate grace of youth, but her gaze, steely and cold, spoke of someone who had experienced many trials within her short existence.

"So, how is our illustrious guest?" Kichiro softly asked. He glanced at the door, as if hoping his sight could pierce through to bear witness to the mood of the samurai.

"Guest?" Sakurako remarked quizzically. "Has wealth dulled your senses and made you dimwitted? Or do you now consider yourself so important that you've forgotten how to count, Kichi-chan? You are mistaken. There are two guests," Sakurako retorted.

Kichiro rubbed his chin in surprise. "Two? Hmm... odd. Shin-san had mentioned that a samurai was requesting accommodations. Only one."

"Pfft... That antiquated fool!," Sakurako responded bluntly. Kichiro had hired Shin as a greeting host for the Ember's Warmth. Shin-san was past his prime, yet he was amicable and approachable. He was also great at entertaining guests in a pinch with an anecdote or two. Sakurako's accusation didn't sit well with Kichiro. No, they should not discredit Shin-san due to his age. Kichiro would have to investigate, but chances are it was simply miscommunication from the samurai. Most Crab samurai visited the senses-dulling saké houses prior to finding their way to a bathhouse. It wasn't unheard of for one to misinterpret the words or intentions of an inebriated samurai.

"Yes, Kichi-chan, there are two. One, a drunken Hida lout, and the other, a gangly and pale-looking wretch." Sakurako-san pouted as she spoke. Something had displeased her about her encounter. "At first, I thought it was just the Hida and I alone. As it should have been! Yet, as I went to gather some *yu-su-ru*, I noticed another person

with us. I tell you, Kichi-chan, the bastard spooked me! Almost made me drop the bottle!

"He stood at the far end of the pool where the mists were thick. I called out to him, but he remained rooted where he stood. I turned to the Hida and asked about his friend, but the burly lout was so far gone in his drunken stupor he wouldn't be able to recognize an Imperial from a boar's ass. Anyway, trying to be hospitable, I beckoned the pale bastard to come and join his companion in the relaxing waters of the pool. I even offered some of that shochū, you know, the strong stuff you brought from the Empire, to calm his nerves. And do you want to know what he did to me!?" Sakurako-san paused. She appeared annoyed and crossed. She folded her arms over her chest and glared angrily at Kichiro - as if he were to blame.

"He ignored me! ME! All of his attention was on the Hida! Aren't I beautiful? Of course I am." Sakurako's expression soured further as she doubted herself.

"Maybe, maybe what it is... is that HE just has unrequited desires for his companion. Yes, that must be it!"

Sakurako lowered her arms as she appeared momentarily defeated, but her vanity wouldn't allow her to submit.

"Pfft... I am beautiful! I have had many samurai chase after me! Some... no! Most...no! *All* of them offer to abandon their fealty to their lords to be with me! He does not get to ignore me! I ignore him! ME! I DO NOT GET IGNORED!" Sakurako shouted in frustration. Her anger had gotten the best of her.

Startled, Kichiro waved his hands at Sakurako-san to try to calm her. He attempted to draw her attention to the fact that others could hear her rambling. In the years he spent in the company of Sakurako-san, he learned that she was quick to wrath. He also was well aware of how difficult it was to quell that anger once it was unleashed. But, Kichiro also learned one important truth about Sakurako-san; she was proud of her craft, and often worried about sullyng her reputation. He quickly motioned to the door as if to hint at the very real possibility that the samurai could have overheard her outburst. Hopefully that would give her pause. Sakurako-san stumbled in her words and fell silent, her ire set to simmer. A moment passed in awkward silence as they awaited a response from the other side of the shoji. None came.

Kichiro shot her a disapproving glance.

"What?" an annoyed Sakurako-san shot through gritted teeth. "That spooky bastard started it! Pfft..." It took much of her to maintain her composure and the volume of her voice.

"Disappointments are the pebbles which line the path to life," Kichiro offered.

Sakurako sniffed peevishly. "I don't remember that from the Tao."

"It's not. It's mine. I have been composing some 'wisdoms'. You know, preparing for the time when I retire. I would one day like my life to be immortalized by some scholar or a poet," Kichiro replied.

Sakurako rolled her eyes.

Kichiro offered a smile to Sakurako's reaction and then turned his attention back to the door which stood between him and his guests. "Sakurako-chan, take some time to gather yourself. I shall tend to the guests and sort out this mistake. Once this nasty business is resolved, you may return to woo the Hida." Kichiro turned to face Sakurako.

Sakurako offered Kichiro a contemptuous stare. She wanted to say something, allow her annoyance to manifest freely, yet she stopped herself. "Fine, Kichi-chan," she offered with poor grace as she folded her arms. "Fine."

Kichiro turned his attention once more towards the door. "Good... Now, I wonder if our guests would enjoy some exotic fruits?" he asked no one in particular. Sakurako took her cue, pivoted, and retreated down the hall.

Kichiro stepped through the door, bearing two kidney-shaped fruits which were tinted in various hues ranging from green to red to orange. He noted the coloration when he initially selected the pair and had hoped that their fruits were at their most delectable. At the moment he held the fruit, he could feel the soft and sensitive skin and praised his fortunes. The fruits were ripe.

Our guests shall thoroughly enjoy them, I am certain! They shall not be able to resist.

The onsen was, as Sakurako had described, choked with great plumes of steam which rose from the bubbling pools. Vision was impeded, but it was not impossible to navigate the area. The steam did not choke out sight completely like a wayward fog, but rather twirled in ever-dancing columns which rose to the heavens.

"Honored guests," Kichiro called out. With his presence announced, he sidled down the path towards the onsen. "I, Kichiro, do not wish to disturb you. Yet, I come bearing exotic delicacies..."

Kichiro stopped. Stifled breathing, wails of overwhelming pain, and the disturbing, sickly sound of flesh being sliced became audible. As if to grant him audience, the thick plumes parted, whirling away, to reveal the scene.

He gasped in sheer horror.

A spray of dark blood splashed across the misted room as bodies thrashed in the volcano-heated hot spring. The waters of the onsen churned with each frantic attempt the Hida made to escape the pool. But he was skewered with a straight-edged blade just below the heart; there was little hope he could elude his assailant. The wielder of the blade was none other than "the pale-looking wretch" Sakurako had mentioned, who stood over the samurai.

The agitated waters within the pool were swiftly becoming stained a morbid red.

A bitter fear claimed Kichiro's heart. He wanted to flee. He had to run. But, in his frightened stupor, Kichiro's body failed him. Hesitant and reluctant to yield to his command, his body gave way, and poor Kichiro clumsily fell upon the wooden deck which led to the bath.

In a last ditch effort of perseverance, the Hida grasped at the hilt hand of his opponent and dragged the stranger down closer to himself. In doing so the sword bit deeper into the Hida, but the Hida's only response was a toothy grimace of rage. As the stranger was bent closer to the Crab, the samurai began to fling his meaty fist at his opponent's head. Each of the samurai's strikes landed unimpeded and unavoids by his foe.

The disturbing noise of flesh being pulverized and of bones being broken reverberated throughout the onsen.

This stranger... This stranger is no man... No! This is inhuman! The words echoed within Kichiro as he watched.

Kichiro had witnessed many fights. In his youth the man had been the cause of a few himself. Yet, this... this was different. The samurai's opponent didn't flinch or stir. He didn't demonstrate any pain, anguish, or fear. Only rage. As blow after blow connected, Kichiro hoped to witness the stranger crumble and submit to the Hida's barrage. Yet, the stranger never did.

The Hida's movements began to weaken. Suffering from a mortal wound and the loss of so much blood, not even a Crab samurai could keep the intensity of his assault for long. The mighty blows turned to half-spirited swipes until the Crab could barely lift his hand. He went limp, unable to do little else but glare spitefully at his murderer.

It was then that the wretch pitched his head back, its face twisted and contorted as unbridled wrath consumed it. It let out such a horrific shrill that it pained Kichiro, who hurriedly grasped his troubled ears.

Then it went silent.

The wretch slowly drew forth the blade from the Crab's body. As it did so, it hissed two syllables which strung together to form a word. Kichiro did not understand nor could he translate what was being spoken, but he felt the intense hatred which resonated within the voice.

With the utterance of the word, the wretch fell upon the Hida. It was a rabid predator that had downed his fallen prey, but far, far more brutal. Even beasts claimed some modicum of compassion. Here, there was none. The wretch furiously and without pause stabbed, bit, clawed and tore at what just moments before had been a man. It did not seek to consume, just destroy. Pieces of the corpse began to rain down around Kichiro. What once had been a Hida littered the ground and floated within the pool.

Sheer terror gripped Kichiro's heart. Helpless, he could only witness this display of unfettered savagery. He could not even turn his eyes away. His heart thundered with such force it felt as though it would burst through his chest. He struggled to breathe. His body stiffened and his extremities felt bitterly cold.

The wind shifted, and a column of steam rose between himself and the monster, obscuring the view. It was a blessed reprieve from the ghastly scene, if even for a moment. Yet it brought little comfort to Kichiro, for there, through the dense mist, Kichiro saw two red pinpoints which pierced with baleful ire. He felt his heart sink when these pinpoints turned in his direction...

"Oi, Kichi-chan." Sakurako's whispered voice carried from the door. "Have you sorted things out?"

Sakurako's words broke the panicked fear which had gripped Kichiro. He turned his head towards her direction and let out a frightened plea for help. He heard the door being thrust violently open and the wooden clamor of Sakurako's geta sandals.

Sakurako ran towards Kichiro, but halted as she approached. Her expression of concern and worry melted to one of pure terror. Her mouth opened, and she spoke words, but Kichiro couldn't understand.

All he could do was witness Sakurako turn to escape.

He wanted to go with her. He wanted to leave. The urge to flee swelled to breaking.

Yes. Yes I can do this. I can run to the door. I can make my way through the Ember's Warmth and into First Stone. I can locate magistrates, and report this incident. Then, I'll punish Sakurako-san with kitchen duties for leaving me behind. Yes.

As Kichiro pulled himself to his feet, he felt hope spring within him. He could make it out alive. He could...

The shrill unearthly voice issued forth once more. It had moved closer.

Two syllables. spoken in such a way that suggested their speaker could barely form them. But it wasn't just that. The ghastly voice bore such a deep unrelenting pain that Kichiro could not ignore. It was a hurt which ran deep, the type of hurt which at first knows the hopelessness of despair, and eventually turns to destructive wrath.

Kichiro glanced at the door and his freedom. He couldn't understand the intent of the wretch, nor why this had all occurred. Yet, he wouldn't have the time to do so. For the voice spoke once more...

A hushed whisper, malevolent and cruel, issued from right behind Kichiro's own head.