



Overconfidence

Glen Goerwell

Her fingers dug into his wrists as she futilely tried to pry them off of her neck. He felt her nails scratch away his skin. The impacts of her legs as they broke his ribs. But more than anything else, as he looked into his wife's eyes, he felt satisfaction. This had been the only way, the only way...

Yogo's eyes flashed open, and he rubbed his face in the dim moonlight. The faint smell of the swamp wafted through the open window. His gaze turned to the side to see his second wife. She was not Asako. She could never be Asako, Terumi was a good woman. Well as good a woman as the Scorpion allowed her to be. She had married him without complaint knowing that he would never love her. She had borne him three daughters.

His hand reached out and stroked her long black hair. So different from Asako's preference for short neat hair that wouldn't get in the way. No, Yogo did not love her. But perhaps in another life he could have. If he had stayed a simple wandering doctor and never met...

What ifs were useless. Terumi shifted and turned to look at him, her brown eyes only barely seen in the dark. "Honoured Husband?"

Yogo offered a smile. "Just a whim. Go back to sleep, Honoured Wife," he said as he got up.

"Another nightmare then," Terumi guessed.

That was one thing both of his wives shared, perceptive wisdom that never let him hide anything. Maybe that was just how marriage was supposed to be?

Yogo stopped mid-stride out of the room. "Hai, it is that time of year again."

Terumi sat up from the futon and nodded as she looked at him. Sadness flickered across her features, though not for him. "They will not understand."

Yogo turned away. "They do not need to understand. So long as their mother loves them they will not turn out so badly. My legacy will be secured."

The younger woman tilted her head. "If that is your will, Honoured Husband. They will be told that it is time for your retreat."

Every year, around the time of his departure from the Phoenix, Yogo would leave the slowly-growing castle for the mountains. There, he would mourn all he had lost, mourn his Asako and his son. Sagoten must be married now to that Isawa he had always fancied...but Yogo would never know. He forbade all news from the Phoenix to be spoken to him.

The knowledge that even in his desperate attempt to save Asako, he had wounded her was too painful for a remainder. Still, while his legacy may have become a betrayer. At least that terrible dream had never come to pass.

"Tell Ayeka that she will be called to account for her stewardship when I return," Yogo said simply.

The lady of the castle stood up, her lips in a thin line. "You know Yoshimi will not take that well, Honoured Husband."

Yogo felt his lips curl under the veil of his mask. "It matters not, Yoshimi is not ready to guide the castle. Whatever her talent with the kami, that does not make her fit to rule."

Ayeka, Jumi and Yoshimi his three daughters. All of them lacked not for talent in their own ways. That didn't make them equal though. He was not the father they wanted, nor did he desire to be. He would never betray Sagoten by letting another take his place in Yogo's heart.

Terumi nodded slowly. "Allowing her to go to the Isawa to learn what that man Soshi refused to teach was a mistake."

"A mistake we couldn't have known," Yogo answered. "I will return in a week."

His wife bowed. "Safe journey, Honoured Husband."

No, there was no love between them. But Yogo was aware enough to admit that she was a better wife than a man like him probably deserved.

There was a beauty about Shiro Yogo that was hard to explain. The castle towers stood out of the marshland, jagged and defiant even if they were the fifth set of towers to be built on the site. But it was not the towers that made the castle beautiful; rather it was the floating gardens built above the swamp. They served as a testament to the stubborn will of those who had come to follow the cursed Phoenix into these lands.

Yogo had expected to die here, alone and unloved, after the war was over. But Bayushi, the scheming bastard, had felt that it was a waste to let that happen. So the Scorpion leader had gathered other outcasts, haunted and hunted, yet who had nonetheless managed to resist Fu Leng's power and flee. He sent them here to become his vassals.

The green-eyed cad had known that Yogo would feel responsible for them, and he had known that he would do something about it. So now the Yogo family was a prosperous, if small, batch of people on the edge of the world.

Honestly Bayushi had been right. Yogo did hate him.

Still, as he walked into the castle, it felt strange. So isolated, there was not really a need for a true full guard, but usually Old Banri stood watch just to warn people if some idiot had ended up here. Yogo didn't see him though. Instead, he saw the streets were deserted. Even Red Eye Futaba hadn't yelled at him for being gone. *Where was everyone?* Yogo shifted his travel cloak. He did not like this at all. Something in the air hung foul. For once, it wasn't the stench of the mire.

He hurried into the central keep. The Tenshukaku in the Crab tradition, and Yogo could now hear the noise that came from behind it. A throng of voices even as one rose above them all.

"I CHALLENGE YOU TO A TARYU-JIAI!" Yoshimi's voice rang loud and clear.

What was his youngest doing? Yogo dropped his bag and ran as fast as his old bones allowed. He was going to castigate her until her ears couldn't hear anything else!

As Yogo turned the corner around the building, he came upon a crowd that surrounded the training field. A glare from him was enough to cause it to part. Too slow though. Too slow as Ayumi, with all her dignity, walked away from Yoshimi. She would not dignify her youngest sister with a response.

Yoshimi roared, summoning the earth to strike her down — infuriated at her sister for ignoring her, for ignoring her power.

The stone pillar launched itself towards Ayumi as she turned, too slow to stop it, even as Yogo desperately prayed to his own kami to react in time. *Shiro Yogo must not become a place of kinslaying.*

Jumi, sweet Jumi, threw herself in the way. Ayumi and Yoshimi both stared in abject horror as the stone pillar smashed into their beloved sister's back. A second too late, Yogo's own invocation completed, a small wall erupted from the ground and snapped the pillar in two.

Yogo pushed through the crowd over to Jumi, who laid face down. Familiar movements, his hands checking over her. "Jumi, speak to me."

A tired and pained voice answered. "...Hello Father..."

He clicked his tongue against his teeth as he ran his fingers over Jumi's spine...it would paralyze her if anyone less skilled than himself was here. But Yogo was here, and the long painful memories of days when he healed people came back with ease. The kami coiled around him as he began to change her chi.

"This is going to hurt," He said bluntly.

With that, Yogo pushed down on his daughter's spine. The short-haired girl screamed in pain. He pulled back and

waited for Jumi to speak.

"...Father is still gifted at understatement." Jumi's voice was raw.

Yogo shrugged. "Try to stand. Better a little pain now then losing your ability to walk for a lifetime."

Gingerly, Jumi stood up. "Thank you, Father."

"It was only right," Yogo waved off her thanks. "Now...about your..."

He turned to see Yoshimi, collapsed on her knees, tears streaming down her face. Ayumi was rooted in place too. Both of them had barely breathed since he arrived.

"Both of you, come here and explain this," Yogo barked.

That seemed to break them out of their reverie. They scrambled to kneel in front of him.

"Father I told her that it was her turn to cleanse the bells and she..."

"Father, I was so angry that she'd give me that over the wards that..."

Yogo was glad for the mask that covered his lower face, if only so they did not see the grimace he made. "You are both grown women, who should be acting like adults!" he barked.

Ayumi nodded. "Yes, Father. Sorry, Father."

"I..." Yoshimi stopped herself from complaining. "Yes, Father. I am sorry."

He was tempted to bury her to let her know what exactly made him so feared. But Yogo restrained himself.

"Ayumi, you should know better than to give an order that will incite disorder."

Slim and pretty, Ayumi looked straight ahead, her shoulders squared. "It was not a lesser task, I did not intend it that way"

"Even so, you know how Yoshimi despises them."

Unspoken was that her reluctance to do unpleasant things was one of the reasons why she would not become his heir. She never would. They all knew, save Yoshimi.

"Understood, Father. If I am again given responsibility to oversee the castle, I will give her duties suited to her talents." Ayumi looked over at Jumi. "I am glad that Jumi is healthy."

Yogo tilted his head. "Tell me, why did you both stand there like gawking children when your sister was hurt?"

"...I was in shock," Ayumi admitted. "I never thought that Yoshimi would do such a thing. I did not think she held me in such contempt."

Yoshimi shivered under his gaze. "I...I was overwhelmed. When I hit Jumi, I...lost her. She will never trust me again. I lost her love because I gave into my anger, and it was...it was something that broke me."

Jumi blinked. "...you aren't wrong. You're my sister but so is Ayumi, and I love you both so much. But Ayumi never did anything to try and hurt you like that Yoshimi. You were wrong. You're not the sister I knew from before you went away."

Yogo blinked. Jumi wasn't usually so quick to admit her feelings. She always served as the peacemaker between her cold, dutiful, but stubborn older sister and her hot-headed and passionate, but wilful, younger sister. She had loved them both and often hid her frustrations, knowing that their mother could not take sides. And he didn't care.

Given that, then how did Yoshimi experience that?

Something niggled in the back of his mind. 'You will betray what you love most.' Those were the words of the curse that damnable oni had wrought. Yogo remembered the shuddering revulsion that had clung to his body.

The brutal cold logic that he had to kill himself so that he could protect his first wife and son, not from another beast of the Shadowed Realms, but from himself.

He remembered how Bayushi had swindled him out of that death. He remembered how he had broken Asako anyway with his abandonment. Yogo could not explain that, if he had not abandoned her, she would have followed him. She told him she didn't care. He had found out shortly before his marriage to Terumi.

Yogo hated himself in those months, but as he guiltily punished himself through endless work and vicious internal self-flagellation, he had taken comfort that he had at least fulfilled the curse, so it would not pass on to his heirs.

"Tell me, Yoshimi, who did you love the most?"

Yoshimi shrank down. "I...I love Jumi the most. I love Mother and you as well, Father. Just, my sister was always there for me."

Jumi softened slightly. "Yoshimi, if you felt that way, then why didn't you listen to me? Why did you never try to get along with Ayumi?"

Yogo couldn't hear the rest of what was said. He felt his blood pound in his ears. His left arm went numb as he tasted copper.

No, no, no, no, no, no

The words rammed themselves in his mind as the realization shattered through him. He couldn't breathe. *He was wrong, he was wrong, he was wrong...*

The world went black.

The Oni sat on a throne of jade, the holy green radiance turned a sickly yellow in the darkness. Three faces merged into one abomination: a spider, a goat, and a human. Two arms covered in black chitin hung across the back of the throne, while two more held up a man in front of the monster. Thick claws dug into the man's skull slowly.

"My my my, that did take a while."

His, Her? Its voice slithered into Yogo's ear, drilled through his skull like a nail.

"What...I betrayed her, I betrayed the woman I love most in all the world."

One arm cracked a skull as the Oni consumed the flesh that pulped out. "That wasn't the curse, was it Yogo-kun? The curse was that you would betray whatever you loved the most. Not a person, per se. Although I did imply that, did I not?"

"You monster! I killed you!" Yogo snarled. Jade erupted out of the ground and slammed into the throne.

The jade wall severed the oni in two, but instead of dying like it had so many years before, the oni simply split itself in half. Now two voices spoke. "You cannot kill me, mortal. But it was painful. While I waited, however, I could... observe. Watching you marinate in your self-confidence? That was bliss."

A dream, Yogo realized. The oni had found his dreams. "Were you why I kept dreaming of killing her? Of killing Asako?"

"It wasn't hard." The oni smiled despite not having lips. "You really did love her...just not as much as you believed."

Yogo stared at the demon. He had loved Asako with all his heart and soul. His body. He had dedicated himself to protecting her, no matter the cost.

And yet...and yet...the Oni was right. A terrible clarity clawed at Yogo even now. His curse had passed on to his family. The very thing he had worked so hard to prevent had come to pass. All of that effort, all the years he had refused to allow himself to love Terumi as she deserved, his daughters, because he thought that by staying true it meant the curse would never return.

It had never left.

Until now.

"You know what amuses me? If you had died without siring them, you would have defeated the curse," the Oni drawled. "But you know you always wanted to leave a legacy. I wished for the same. Now we both leave our mark upon the future."

The Oni laughed.

And Yogo woke.

He was still on the training field. Sweat poured down his daughters' faces as they worked to revive him. No, he didn't want to come back, he didn't want to see them. He had to...he had to...

What was the point?

Ayumi gave a sigh of relief. "He's back...thank you Yoshimi. Father, can you hear me?"

Yogo tried to speak, tried to say something, but only a slurred sound. "Grhaaaaiiiiiii" came out.

"What's wrong with him?" Jumi asked. "I thought you said we got him back."

Ayumi checked his pulses again with tears in her eyes. "I...we did but...we were too slow. I was too slow. It was in his medical texts — how without air, the fire in the mind cools rapidly. I thought...Father don't worry, we'll fix this. I promise."

Yogo wanted to scream at her for being a dutiful daughter, scream that she should let him die and then kill herself to save the rest of the Yogo.

But the only one sound emerges from his lips as tears stream from his eyes. "Grhaiiii."