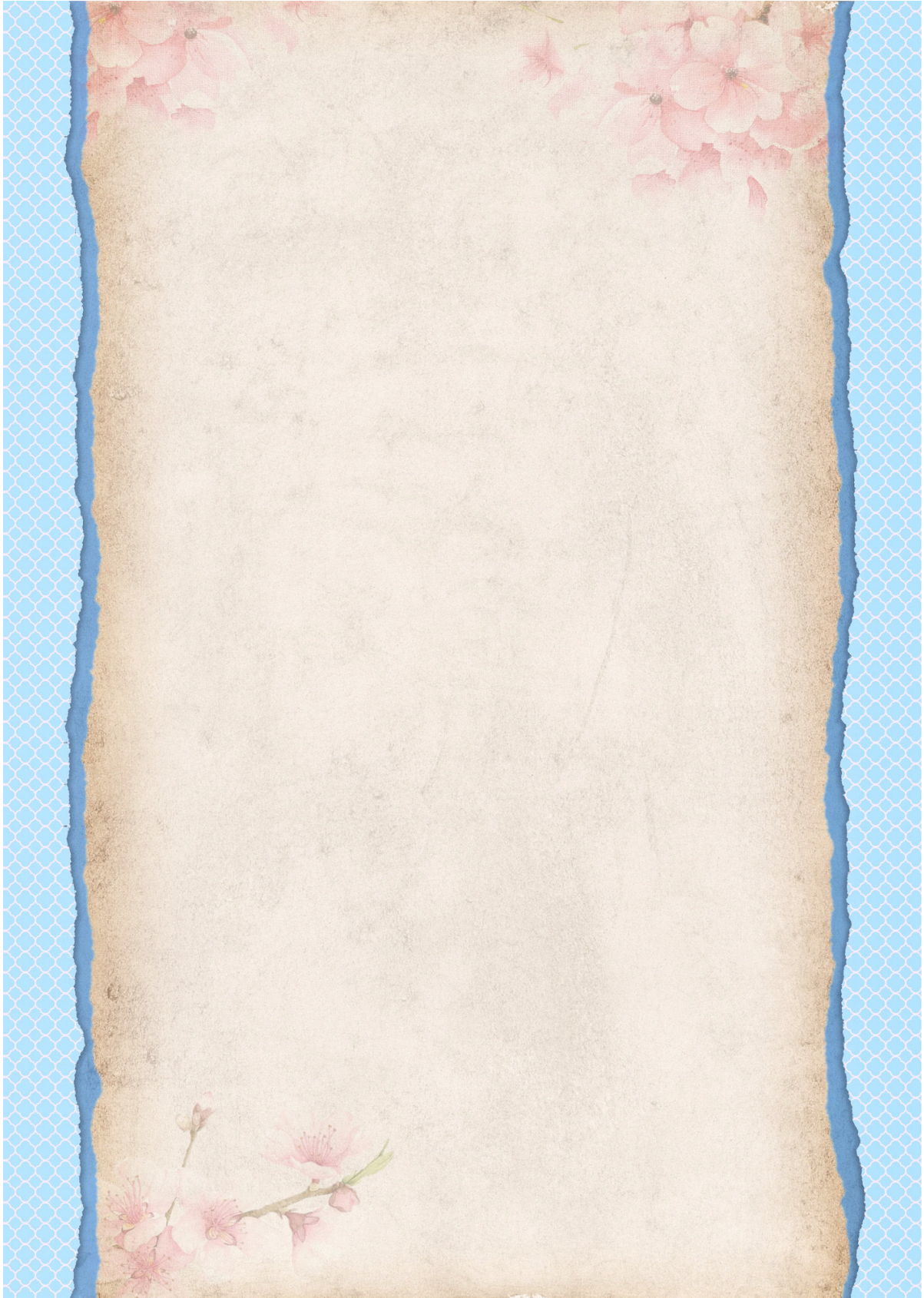


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# The Secret of Bamboo

Kakita Kaori

Dōji Shigenobu ran his hand through his thinning hair, wiping the sweat away from his forehead. *I really ought to shave it*, he thought idly, then frowned, jerking his hand away. *Rude*. He thought he had better discipline than that.

Not that anyone was watching him.

Below, the shoreline was a buzz of activity. A row of akekobune were lined up along the shoreline, and ashigaru trotted back and forth from the boats and down the path beyond the first screen of bamboo to where the town would be prepared once it had been properly laid out. Shigenobu marked one of the boats empty, and the hour it was finished, on the waxed tablet he carried. He would update the primary ledger in the evening for his report to General Ota.

Behind Shigenobu came the sounds of axes and saws, the rhythmic songs of the workers, and the prayers of the shugenja as they sought to appease the spirits of the great bamboo. The glory of this new land the Crane had found.

"Quite a scene of industry, Shigenobu."

Shigenobu startled again, this time at the deep voice of the woman behind him. He whirled, and they quickly bowed deeply, averting his eyes. General Ota patrolled the expanding settlement of the Crane daily, if only to personally assure herself that everything was going according to the meticulously-made plan in the large house that was serving as a Kyuden until something more permanent could be prepared.

He bowed. "Thank you, General."

Ota moved on. The afternoon was growing hazy with the heat, warmer than the lands he was used to. Shigenobu's head began to nod, and it was an effort to jerk it upright. *Stay awake. What would Ota do if she came back and found you sleeping?*

Scanning the droning village, he caught a glimpse of a flash of familiar orange among the bamboo, a flower...an uncommon one. The orange hibiscus curved in a flash of color among the shady green shoots and towering stems of the bamboo. He'd not seen anything like it before on Sanctuary, but it was well familiar to him.

*"You like this flower, Shigenobu-kun?" Her laughter was like bells. "Then I will plant it in every garden I create, and you will remember me."*

*Tsutsumi.*

The familiar stab of pain and memory enfolded Shigenobu's heart. Tsutsumi hadn't planted this flower. The gardens she had planted on the mainland were tended by others now, and had been for two years. No child would wander these gardens. Shigenobu pushed the memory down.

*Shigenobu.*

His name was almost a whisper on the wind, a breeze rustling through the bamboo, but he heard her in it. An orange blossom nodded deeper in the green shadows

*Shigenobu.*

The overseer glanced over towards Ota's broad shoulders as she headed down into the village, and scanned the workers. No one was looking towards him, and all seemed diligent about their work. It would not be amiss for him to see if there were more of these flowers, just for a little ways. He could transplant them into a garden to honor her...

Shigenobu stepped into the cool shadows of the bamboo grove.

The velvet depths drew him in. He reached the second orange blossom, then the third. The wind rustled, whispering his name, and the Dōji followed, heart aching for memories of a home that was lost forever.

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Shigenobu did not know how long he had been walking in the green shadows before he reached the sunlit clearing, but the light had changed. The bamboo, row on silent row, lay behind him, all trace of the people of Rokugan lost except the dim orange nodding flowers he had followed. But the ground had risen to a small hill, and, enjoying the patch of sunlight that surrounded it, a beautiful sakura tree bloomed in full springtime majesty. Pink and white blossoms swayed in the breeze of early evening, and the gnarled roots were scattered with fallen petals. Its trunk was bent like a perfect bonsai. The sweet perfume pervaded the more earthy tones of the bamboo, drawing him nearer.

And under the shadow of the branches, a woman was kneeling, clipping away a stray shoot.

"Tsutsumi-chan...my love. It is you," Shigenobu breathed.

She turned and stood. She was as slender as he remembered, the same gray strands caught in her long black hair. Her eyes held the warmth he remembered as she smiled. "Oh, Shigenobu-kun, my husband. I have hoped for so long that you would come."

"How are you here?" He took a step forward towards her, trying to nurse suspicion, but it was hard in the presence of his lost wife. "I held your hand as you died."

Tsutsumi smiled. "I know. We were snowbound, and there was no shugenja that could come to treat my illness and the doctor's herbs would not suffice." She shook her head. "I do not know how I came to be here, except that I knew I would find you, and I had to come. Please stay with me, just for a little while, so we can share this precious moment together under the cherry tree."

*If it wasn't her, how did she know? How could she know?* "I should have left the moment we knew you were sick. I shouldn't have trusted the medicine. There were Asahina at Kyuden Dōji. I could have persuaded one of them to return with me."

Tsutsumi stepped towards him, reaching out a hand towards his cheek. "Do not regret. I don't. I forgave you so long ago. Come, let us sit. I want to know everything that has happened to you that brought you here. We can speak of the past, of the times we shared. Let's not linger on death. I don't know how much time we have together, but I thank the Fortunes that we have this moment."

It was just like her, like everything Shigenobu had hoped to hear. Even if it was all just a dream, it was a dream he didn't want to awaken from. He followed her to sit near the roots of the nodding cherry tree.

They spoke of the past, of their walks along the shoreline, and the rice fields in spring. They spoke of the gardens Tsutsumi had created and Shigenobu's hopeless attempts at poetry. They spoke of the children they never had. He spoke of how he missed her. She promised him she would never leave him again...

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"WAKE UP." The voice was deep, the grinding of stone on stone, and it startled Shigenobu as he jerked and his eyes opened. Starlight filled the sky above, and his body felt numb from lying on the ground. Over him leaned a terrifying visage: a giant made of stone, green moss collected on his arms and shoulders, long trails of lichen forming a beard and ivy where his hair would hang back. The creature reached down to grab Shigenobu's waist. The courtier could do nothing to stop him, but a small scream escaped his lips as the giant lifted him into the air.

There was a faint tearing sensation as Shigenobu was pulled free of the ground. He tried to glance around, looking for Tsutsumi, but he didn't see her, only the gently swaying branches of the cherry tree. But then, in the moonlight, he caught sight of his arm as he tried to lift it. His kimono was torn with gashes, and blood was flowing from a dozen cuts. He felt nothing. Fear now rose in his throat, strangling him.

"Too long. The Yomi-Zakura has grown large over the centuries," the creature rumbled. "A small thing once, small enough to hold within your hands. Now its hunger for what was lost turns into craving that only death will satisfy. When you return, tell your people to leave it alone."

The creature walked through the darkened bamboo forest, carrying the courtier in its hand and murmuring softly

to itself. Finally, familiarity, if not exactly great courage, was sufficient for Shigenobu to find his voice again. His arms and legs began to tingle, then sting with pain as sensation returned to them. He thrashed weakly in the creature's grip. It came to a halt, setting him gently on the ground and stepping back most courteously..

Shigenobu felt further reassured by the creature's actions. He tried to pull himself to his feet to bow, but his legs still did not seem to be working correctly, so he gave a crooked bow from sitting position, the best he could manage. *At least I tried.* "My name is Dōji Shigenobu. What...who...are you, if I may ask?"

The creature returned the bow, its stone-like skin glistening in the darkness. "You may call me Bashō. Are you a son of the Empire of the Five Rivers?" Bashō hesitated, studying Shigenobu carefully with those chestnut eyes. "No. Your name is Dōji. Are you one of her children then, returning to this place?"

Shigenobu gave a careful nod. "The Lady Dōji, daughter of Heaven, was the founder of my clan. We serve the Emerald Empire, and the young Empress."

Bashō settled on his haunches. "Time. So much time has passed. I forget how hard it is for you to remember. Perhaps it has been many thousand passages of the sun after all. Still, the land waits, and is prepared, though it too has forgotten much. You must go tell your people that the land has forgotten. Be gentle with it."

Shigenobu tried again to stand. His legs and arms were returning feeling, and with feeling, pain. "What about Tsutsumi? What happened to me?"

Bashō's knuckles rested on the ground. "The tree is Yomi-Zakura. It was her own, long ago. It was small, a little tree she tended as she wept for those she had lost. To remember. Now she is gone, and it has grown too large for tears to sustain it. So it uses memory to draw tears and more to its side. It would have consumed you. But it was her own, and its memories linger."

"Her? Tsutsumi? How?"

"No. Hers. The Daughter of Heaven. You call her Dōji."

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"You can't do this, Mother!" The workers ignored the young man's cries as they piled dry wood around the sakura tree. Its ethereal blossoms, ever blooming, drifted lightly on the breeze, heedless of the tree's own coming fate.

Daidōji Ota looked stone-faced at her son, her lips narrowed. "Are you questioning my authority?"

Daidōji Akikore backed down, but reluctantly. "No, Mother. But I don't understand. You know how devastated Father is. If what Shigenobu said was true, this tree grew from a bonsai trained by the Lady Dōji herself. It holds her last memories from the dawn of the Empire."

Ota scowled. "It is a threat. It is my duty to destroy any threat that brings harm to my people. And it is yours. You will learn that quickly or you will fail. I do not have time to listen to you whining about it." She turned away.

"But..." Akikore's voice caught as he watched the workers her mother commanded stacking the last cut brush near the trunk. It was true that Shigenobu had been in bad shape when he returned in the night, his arms and legs torn as though roots had pushed their way into his very flesh before he had been yanked free.

But this sakura was the only one he had seen so far on these islands. It seemed more than a waste to destroy it, like destroying some piece of history even older than the Empire.

"What about this Bashō? Won't he be angry if we do this?" Akikore protested. "He could be a danger to the village."

Ota looked at him again. "The shugenja have already offered an appeasement to the earth kami. It will have to be satisfied with that. And if it is not, we will do what needs to be done." She raised a hand to the workers. "Light it!" she commanded.



One of the workers came with a torch, and lowered it to touch the dry brush and tinder. The flames set quickly, consuming the kindling in moments before reaching the heavier timber around the trunk. The sakura branches thrashed as if in an unseen breeze, and Akikore heard a creaking groan as though the tree cried out in pain. It sounded like an old, old woman moaning in grief.

Akikore could not bear to watch it burn. He stalked away.

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Carefully, Ienori brought the knife down on the branch of the bonsai he was preparing, its fine blade cutting deep into the trunk of the tiny tree. There were not many he had managed to bring across the waters from Rokugan — this was his largest, rooted in a broad, shallow bowl and over a hundred years old. It had been passed to him from his father, and to him from his mother before that, through the Dōji family, and it was his when he married into the Daidōji with his wedding to General Ota. Ienori's lips narrowed with concentration.

Cutting the last of the branch free, he set it aside. Then he took up a paintbrush and dipped it in the mixture he had prepared, a white paste with a recipe that had been passed down in his family much as the bonsai had. He painted the fresh wound he had cut in the bonsai with the brush, cleaning and preparing it. Ienori set down the brush.

Finally, he picked up the fresh graft from the bowl of water in which it rested. It was not yet a perfect fit, but he pared off a little more of the small branch with his knife to make it fit tightly into the wedge he had cut in the trunk of his bonsai. He pushed it into place, and then, with strips of white cloth, he bound the branch and tree together tightly, completing the graft.

Three white petals, tinged with pink, fell from the branch, but it still bloomed.

Ienori offered his prayers to the kami to bless the graft, and the small bonsai.

He could not fight his wife. She was his superior, and she had her duty.

But he would not let the past die if he could prevent it.