

Origami

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Dan walked up the creaky wooden steps and gazed at the old house. It looked neglected, almost abandoned. He had been gone for too long.

It was springtime in Sapporo again. The air was full of a fragrant essence; cherry blossoms strewn all over the hills. A cold breeze swept down throughout the foot of Mount Teine. Dan breathed in a lungful of air and then watched as his own breath turned into nothing more than little wisps of cloud.

He smiled and stood in front of the door for a moment, searching his pockets. He found his ever peculiar-looking key and inserted into the padlock. A click and a moment later, he was pushing the door panes open, letting fresh air and the warm light of mid-morning enter.

He didn't bother with the suitcase or any of the other stuff lying around the house. There were motes of dust twirling wildly above the various packages, and an awful lot of it on the floor as well.

Dan cared little for any of those packaged household items, with one notable exception. With mischievous sparkling eyes, he picked one out of the rest with all the joy

and mirth of a kid handed a chocolate bar: the small box was labeled “Tea Kit”. Two minutes later, he was boiling water in a small kettle on top of a small gas stove. He took a moment to gaze around the large hall: a soothing feeling washed over him in the knowledge that everything was just the way he had left it.

Once the tea was ready, he poured himself a cup of and sat down on the wooden floor. For a few moments, he kept his eyes shut and simply let the aroma of green tea waft into his nostrils. It was to be expected that the tea would be stale, but he had hoped the smell would be less disenchanting. Still, it made him feel homely, attached. Such fleeting moments of peace were more than he had ever hoped for.

He couldn’t resist running his hands on the old cedar planks on the floor. They were filled with deep, rugged pores, jumbled cracks and woodwater that managed to seem almost deliberately engraved - unnatural yet familiar. The floor felt far too old to his touch, yet warm and endearing - it made Dan feel like he had grown up in this house. But that was not true.

He took a sip of tea and reminded himself this was the house where Shimaki Kensaku had been born.. At the back of his mind, he never really wanted to actually live in it. He had always thought it should belong to noone in particular. Perhaps he should have turned it into some kind of museum. Maybe next year. Or the year after that. Not yet, at any rate.

The sun was slowly dimming away behind the mountain, yet some wild sunrays bounced off the glimmering sea like flecks of sprinkled gold across his eyes. He squinted for a moment, and looked away.

Dan blinked furiously until his vision readjusted and once he could see clearly once more he was startled by the figure of a wrinkled old man in a tweed suit, grinning widely with

his hands glued to the sides.

Dan was surprised; he wasn't expecting anyone. There wasn't much of a neighborhood to speak of either. The old man didn't even let him ponder about all that; he bowed smartly. The overall effect of a courteous fellow was only slightly marred by his japanese accent. It was english though, still:

“Good evening, Mr. Teanbet. My name is Jun Kurawa. How do you do?”

He offered a handshake, all the while grinning profusely. The man struck Dan as vaguely familiar, in the way that most men his age looked about the same. He gave him a nod instead and motioned with his hand for the man to sit down, waving the handshake away with his implant.

Dan pointed at the kettle and his cup of tea; the spare cup in the tea kit had proven useful more than once. The gentleman in the proverbially out-of-fashion tweed suit accepted happily. He bowed more deeply, sat down with graceful ease and took the cup of tea in both hands. He sipped politely but didn't seem to enjoy the aroma.

“Thank you, Mr. Teanbet. I am honored to set foot in this house. If I would be so bold, I need to ask of you a small favor.”

That was a first in Dan's four years of living in Japan. A complete stranger asking him for a favor without a hint of shame, barely moments after introducing himself. It genuinely aroused his interest.

“Well, I'm all ears. It's just that I've been away for six months, and suddenly..”

Dan didn't have a chance to finish: the nice gentleman interrupted him with a reassuring smile, followed by another sip of tea. He spoke with an assurance stemming from God

knows where.

“We know, Mr. Teanbet. We know. Good tea. We’ve been expecting you.”

“You have? That’s gyoukuro, by the way,” said Dan pointing at Mr. Kurawa’s cup. He was frowning when he offered somewhat apologetically:

“Might be a bit stale after all these months. And who are you be representing then, exactly, Mr. Kurawa? I’ve only been here five minutes and you’re knocking on my door.”

Mr. Kurawa cleared his throat before announcing in what must have been his best effort at an officious tone:

“The Kaisei elementary school. We were hoping you might allow our students to visit.”

Dan planted his palms on the floor and laid back for a moment. All of a sudden he was having second thoughts about his hearing implants. He repeated himself rather lamely:

“Visit? From the students? I’m sorry, but what for?”

Mr. Kurawa furrowed his brow, finally showing a bit of discomfort. Or perhaps he simply found the question ignorant, considering the owner of the House of the Blossom should know that.

“Well, this is the birthplace of Shimaki Kensaku. It is a great landmark, a piece of Sapporo history, still standing. Children at least should have the opportunity to visit. Touch. See. Smell.”

Dan gave it a moment’s thought. It was pretty much along what he had been thinking - like a museum of sorts. He couldn’t for the life of him understand what schoolchildren could find interesting or exciting about it though. He remembered endlessly boring schooltrips. He smiled thinly: he felt he had found his own spot in the never-ending circle of irony. He pointed at a heap of packages, still shrink-wrapped airtight

and said to Mr. Kurawa, leaning slightly in front:

“Well, I can see the value in it. Why not? Let’s talk about a schedule or something after I -”

“Thank you, Mr. Teanbet!” the old man exclaimed with a burning smile across his face. Then he said something in Japanese that to Dan sounded more like a growling series of curse-words. He hadn’t really managed to keep up with the language. While he was trying to sort out what the venerable teacher had said, he was staring at what was probably the whole class of children. Uniformed, standing upright, tightly and neatly arranged in rows and columns like toy soldiers, they looked like they had been drilled to death just for this day. Then he heard thin, child-like voices shouting on the top of their lungs:

“Doumo arigatou gozaimashita!”

Dan knew then they were thanking him. He just didn’t know the real reason why.

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The drive up to the house was a quick ten-minute ride, most of it a series of turns. Springtime had set in fully by now; every tree was in full bloom and the harsh sunrays were mellow and warm. Dan was sitting behind the wheels, and felt he could actually taste the sun. That’s why he kept trying to catch the rays with an open mouth, laughing all by himself.

It was a Monday. One of those Mondays when you just look at the world outside your window and instantly become enthralled; when you just take off, and go fishing. When you just feel like ten years old, sitting on a bench having ice-cream, bathing in the sun like school’s out and is never in session, ever again. The kind of day the world could burn for all you care.

When he arrived at the house, he noticed a school van parked outside. They were at it again; he really wasn't bothered, he'd told Mr. Kurawa. But he had insisted he would allow the kids to bother him, asking all sorts of questions. That was a teacher's job, he had said proudly.

He admired that in the Japanese; not their multiple forms and ways of being polite, or their cherished, twisted form of samurai pride in a world wholly alien to noble notions. He admired their dependable character.

They came in the morning school hours. He'd given Mr. Kurawa the keys, and would ring him whenever he'd be out for more than a couple of hours. Nothing ever went missing, and everything was always in place. For all he knew, they hadn't even stepped one foot inside.

He parked the sportster right beside the van, and gazed at the house. A canvas of sunlight graced the front porch; the gently swaying trees cast small patterns of soft shadow. When the kids left, Dan thought to himself, he'd have some tea outside. Maybe this time Mr. Kurawa could be persuaded to join.

As he walked up the stairs, he was a bit surprised to see all the windows were closed shut, the inside of the house filled with shadows. Motes of dust tumbled lazily in front of the open door. It was as if the house was empty; as if it had been boarded up and left to rot for days. A strong, uneven smell of sweetness assaulted him suddenly. It reminded him of sugar burning in a pan. Cooking? That would be a first, Dan thought.

He took a few more steps and stood right under the doorway. He was barely able to make the outline of the staircase leading to the upper floor. What on earth were they doing? Film screening? And where was everyone? These thoughts

kept going around in circles, as the smell grew stronger and pungent. It wasn't like caramel anymore; it reminded him of vomit.

"Hello? Mr. Kurawa? Are you here? What's going on?" Dan said, loud enough to be heard on the other floor as well. No answer came back. No sound other than the whistling of the trees. The wind was picking up outside.

Dan took two steps inside. Instinct and a rising sense of worry turned his every step in a complicated matter; as if his legs were made of stone and he had just learned to walk. He hadn't felt this silly since high-school, but something in the back of his mind told him this really wasn't just a prank kids would pull. Dependable, Japanese school-children didn't do pranks. Not of this sort. He shouted once more:

"Hey, Mr. Kurawa. Just, show up. Light on now, OK?"

Again, no answer. No movement, no light. The darkness in front of him was so total, the sun seemed to shy away from it right at the door. As if it could go no more. Then Dan heard the creaking of the door and a swooshing sound as it closed shut right behind him. He turned around instinctively and almost lost his footing. He fumbled for the door handle, trying to pull it open again.

As did most Japanese, Dan prided himself a peaceful man. Despite that half-truth, and despite his past experiences, he felt the anger inside him gorge suddenly, with only that slight provocation. This game, or prank, it really shouldn't get him going like that. He should deal with it, he thought, like a responsible adult of a certain education and character:

"Fuck me! What the hell, Kurawa? Son of a bitch, this is my house dammit!"

Strangely enough, as he stood there facing the closed door, he felt the an ice-cold rush of air tingle the hair on his

back, as if he was stark naked. And a sound like rocks tumbling down into a frothing river started to echo distantly. He slowly turned around and still saw nothing. For a moment he was about to erupt into a frenzy, running wild inside the house, just to feel the walls on each end.

Then a man not very much unlike Mr. Kurawa showed up, appearing from the shadows as if an invisible source of light shone at his face, which was in fact covered by a mask. Dan was startled and involuntarily took a step back. The mask seemed familiar; it was one of those used in the Kabuki theater. *This is going too far*, he thought. *The man's probably gone senile for real.*

Have I, son of the Oni?

Dan heard those words in his mind. After only a second's pause, he wished he had just *thought* he'd heard these words. The man in the mask, perhaps hopefully Mr. Kurawa and not some other nut, hadn't taken it off. He hadn't moved an inch, neither lips or limbs.

It's a recording, that's what it is. The thought sprung up inside his mind to the rescue of his sanity. Any hope of that being the truth was promptly shot down when he heard once more, in crystal clarity and with all the harmony and honey-laden softness of a fairy-tale troubadour:

Come now, Dan. I'm no recording. You're not crazy. At least, not right now.

Dan went wide-eyed and instinctively pushed the man in the mask. His hands went right through where his torso might have been. A second, flurried attempt at the man's head was equally, if not more so, disturbing. A moment of freezing terror was quickly followed by the last chance of a human mind to comprehend; a hologram. Maybe this was all weird and fucked up, but it was still, just a hologram. And that

voice? That voice's just-

That is the voice of the Origami. I'm real, Dan. As real as it gets.

And then the entire house shone brilliantly and suddenly without a flash, as if it had been so all along; like an impossible cover was pulled aside.

What Dan saw, or at least hoped he thought he was seeing in some drug-induced haze, or some virtual hypnoprospection, drove him almost past the edge of sanity into a nightmarish land he had never thought the mind was capable of dreaming up.

He saw the man in the mask, wearing Mr. Kurawa's tweed clothes, his veined and wrinkled old hands crossing each other, palms facing opposite walls. And on each wall, the heads of the children. Pale, lacking expression, as if sleeping solemnly. Trails of dark blood ran down the white walls like withered, bony branches of dead trees.

The flow of blood led to the small-framed bodies of the children still in their school uniforms; dismembered, broken, cut up like disused dolls. They had been gutted, their entrails laid out in a straight line. Like spokes in a wheel, they led to a bloody mess of a pile in the very center of the room. A pile of hearts, still beating.

His would've pulled his own eyes out if he wasn't frozen still in sheer, unthinkable horror.

The shock made Dan release his bowels involuntarily. The man in the mask threw his head backwards in a fit of audible laughter. Dan was trembling visibly, but somehow his knees didn't give way. His spine felt chilled to the bone, and all colour had left his face. He looked more like a corpse than a man. His mind raced with just one crude, repetitive thought: "Oh, fuck. Jesus. Fuck!"

The man in the mask spoke then, not with that sweet-timbred voice in Dan's head, but with Mr. Kurawa's crude accent:

"Magnificent, isn't it Mr. Teanbet? Thanks to you, of course. The Oni is pleased."

Dan's heart was near stopping, while his instinct of fleeing had chipped away like frail paint in stormy wind. He sat frozen, limp and unable to do anything else other than breathe in a shallow fashion. Cold perspiration ran down his forehead and back, but he didn't register it. Kurawa, or whatever it was that called itself the Origami, went on:

"You see, Mr. Teanbet, you have been chosen. Your life's work, your past, your.." The man seemed to struggle with the word: "..experiences. It all leads to this moment. This wonderful moment."

The man's mask smiled in a deathly grin, revealing two sets of kid's teeth, half-formed and somewhat crooked, as if someone had strung them together in a necklace. Dan bent slightly forward and retched. The spasms and the cramped stomach muscles connected him to the sick reality around him.

He was looking at his feet, a small pool of vomit like a blotch of ink staining the old wooden floor. That was his bloodied vomit on the floor, but it didn't look like blood at all. It was a pitch black ooze, sticky like tar, its surface shining with a glistening iridescence like oil. Dan didn't feel as shocked as before. Instead, he spent a few moments simply gazing at what had come out of his stomach. He felt curious, whereas he knew he should've felt deathly sick, or gone instantly mad.

The thought of a species of sand-lizard that could voluntarily stop its heart came uninvited to his mind; a part of him

wished he could do that just now. Another part of him felt intrigued that he would be contemplating suicide, *right about when things were starting to become interesting.*

That's not me, a naked thought rang through his mind. *Oh, but it is you. It's the new you, my son.* That voice in his mind again; only much more different. Radiant warmth seemed to embrace every word. A feeling of knowing that voice came to settle in his mind. It was someone he knew, someone he trusted. Someone he loved.

His body slackened, and he fell on his knees with a thud. The Origami stepped aside almost on cue, as if ushering Dan inside a holy house. Tears ran down Dan's chin, as the pile of hearts began to pulsate with a sickening violet light. The Origami began chanting on the top of his lungs, in a strange language full of vowels and throat sounds.

The pile of hearts turned into a mass of flesh, the aortas turning into gaping mouths for just moments, tissue folding inside out and fusing together, as if trying to remember. Remember a shape.

The chanting grew louder; it was because Dan was chanting along. His mouth moved of its own volition, spewing forth nonsense that somehow meant something to him. It was madness, he knew; a fleeting part of his sane mind told him so in writhing agony.

It was pure madness; with any luck, none of it had happened: He was still in that veteran's hospital, plugged in a nightmare of his own creation, a tailored poisonous concoction running through his veins. He'd done that before, he might've done it again. He might've just imagined being released, and all the years in between. Just as long as this wasn't happening, as this wasn't real.

It's real, my son. All this, and the last war. The draught

and the famine, the killings and the plague that followed. You, in that deep, fathomless basement. Trying to find a way to cure humanity of all its ills.

The experiments? How did the voice know? The chanting buzzed through his head like a power-drill right on his eardrum. He couldn't think, he just chanted along with an alien fervor he had never thought himself capable of.

It was as if he had been locked outside his own mind and someone had thrown away the keys, small glimpses of the past and the present mingled together, seen through a red-misted slit. In front of him, the mass of flesh took further shape; muscles and formed into back-jointed legs, the bulbous mass in the center slowly but clearly extending two fibrous webs. Wings.

The voice in his mind came as a welcome, soothing sensation. Its absence, Dan could now tell, hurt with each passing moment:

You're old self is fading away, yet you still do not recognise me. You cling on to your genetic past, while I offer your kind immortality past the flesh. It matters no more, Dan. Humanity will be no more, but it is saved. Such a small price, really.

The Origami began dancing in a swirling pattern around the bodies of the children. He swayed his hands this way and that, the mockery of a graceful ballerina; a devilish clown in a mask.

Echoes from the walls magnified the rhythmic chanting, reverberating, repeating and adding to the sound like hundreds of majestic voices singing at the wall between this world and the other, wishing for it to crumble down forever.

Dan had a sudden revelation; what little remained of his own self in that body knew know who that voice was. As the

mass of flesh took the form of a winged demon, a monstrous dragon-like head appeared, eerily familiar. It was grinning impossibly wide, as if its face barely held together.

Shimaki Kensaku. It was him; he couldn't tell why or how he knew, but it was really him. Even after death, it was him. Just when the demon was fully formed in the flesh, the chanting stopped abruptly and the light in the room was extinguished as if the flame on a candle had been suddenly blown. In the darkness, Dan heard the deep voice of his lost friend and esteemed colleague, Shimaki Kensaku. It had a serrated quality about it, like a saw grinding on stone:

"It was just a name. Good as any, Dan. Remember the acceptance speech at the Swedish Academy? It was all lies of course. But you Dan, my gratitude was as real as it gets to one of your kind. I sincerely believe this wouldn't work without you. But it did."

For a precious few moments, Dan felt himself regain control of his body. He instinctively felt like running, running harder and faster than ever before. But it wouldn't do, he knew it didn't matter. He remembered the joy and awesome marvel that had been finding the mythical elixir of life - relieving humankind of the Primordial Sin. A new society, a bright, unending future. Then he remembered Kensaku's death; a gleaming fireball in the clear Parisian night. A sub-orbital reentry accident.

He wept then; not because of the memories, or the tragic truth that was revealed in front of him in such a horrific way. Because of what that implied for their work - for the species. How else did Shimaki exhibit that intuitive grasp of cell mechanics? Those papers on mitochondrial regeneration, free root consolidation, flexible protein assembly and energy-free transcriptions?

Like they had been handed down from up above, almost overnight, the two of them offer a greedy mankind with the ultimate hassle-free solution: a life never-ending. And it worked too. He saw it worked. Everyone saw it worked. That's why every living soul on the planet had their genes fixed.

"But it does, Dan. It really does. Only it comes with a price," said the demon as his large reptile eyes shone with a dazzling ruby-red intensity. Dan's head was throbbing from the pain; he knew he just had a few more moments before his personality was utterly discarded, erased like a blackboard. His last words, he found them quite fitting:

"Go ahead and kill me, you sick fuck."

"Kill you?" said the demon in a quizzical fashion. The Origami then appeared in front of Dan, holding a small circlet; it was made of thistle and barb wire.

"I want you to rule in my name, Dan. Forever," the demon said with finality, a gray putrid tendril shooting from within its maw and crowning Dan with the circlet. The Origami took off its mask then; all that Dan could see was a cold, hard slit of a jet black eye staring back at him, boring through his soul, eating it away.

His last sense was a far-away beeping sound, that seemed to grow, and grow, and grow..

* * *

"Dan? You didn't go home? Hard night then? Oh, the sample's ready."

The beeping sound stopped. Dan opened his eyes and saw Shimaki press a button on the sequencer. The smell of green tea broke through the thin aromatic barrier of medical alcohol and cheap odor spray. Half his face, the part resting

uncomfortably on his notepad was swollen from the sleep; Shimaki looked at him, smiled and rolled his eyes.

Dan asked with a raspy, almost sore voice:

“Bad hair day?”

Shimaki simply nodded and sipped at his cup of tea before peering through another simulation log. He was preoccupied with something that seemed out of place. He was about to show it to Dan, when he heard him yawn. Some of Dan’s bones made a crackling sound when he stretched. He said then, as if to noone in particular:

“You know, I had this weird dream.”

Shimaki turned and faced him, asked him with a rather conspicuous look:

“What was it about?”

Dan yawned once more, stretched and headed for the lab’s toilet. His voice was muffled, distant:

“Can’t remember. Hey, what’s an Origami?”