

# *The Cherry Blossom Girl and the Ancient Tree*

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桜の女の子 および 古代木

“おかあさん(Mom), why do I have to go this summer? Naoki isn't going!”

“You know very well why, dear. Naoki is on a semester abroad, otherwise he would be going with you and your brothers.”

“But I just finished 9<sup>th</sup> grade! This is the last summer I can spend with my friends from ちゅうがこう (middle school)!”

“You are over reacting dear. You'll still be able to spend time with them once you are in High School. And anyway, your little brothers are excited! You should be too!”

My family was the story telling type – rather implausible tales in fact – that they shoved down the children's throats from the day we were born. I never believed in these stories; fairy tale lands, dragons, demons, and magic were all mythical in my mind. However, no amount of protest would keep my grandmother from her 'story time'. My mother was like me; she believed that these stories were simply legends from ancient Japanese tradition. This disbelief in fairy tales caused my mother to defy tradition and relocate from the family home in upper Hokkaido to Nagasaki in lower Kyūshū. This relocation was quite a scandal at the time; moving a full island away from where my ancestors had lived for centuries resembled blasphemy for most Japanese. A compromise was made, though – my brothers and I “vacation” at the family home every summer. Or rather were held captive and forced to participate in the very traditions my mother ran away from.

As a young girl I enjoyed these adventures, for my imagination was always in use when around my grandmother; however, as I aged my amusement disappeared. I would much rather have been spending my summer with my friends at home than isolated an island away in a small, ancient town called 木のより大きい (city of the trees). My grandmother never understood. I had been going to the family home since I was a young child, so I had friends there, yet I always seemed so somber.

“まごむすめ (*Granddaughter*), why do you not seem to enjoy your summers here anymore?” She once asked.

“It is not that I don't enjoy it here; I simply miss my friends.”

“You have friends here, though. Yet you do not go out and play with them.”

“Grandmother, I only see them once a year! I hardly know them. If I were home, my friends and I would go swimming, to the movies, and act like normal teenagers. Here I am like royalty; they let me win games, they do anything I ask. It just isn't fun.” My grandmother was silent and motionless for a moment, she nodded and walked away without uttering another word.

It was also the first year without my eldest brother – Naoki – who was taking a semester abroad in Korea. Tamotsu, Mikio, and the youngest Masaki were jumping up and down with excitement over getting to Grandmother's house. The boys were younger and still shared the ‘imagination adventure’ with my grandmother. However, this began as my least favorite summer to attend my grandparent's exile.

“Konichiwa!!” The staff shouted as my brothers and I arrived.

“Come, come, I will show you to your room.” A maid took my bags and dragged me along, separating me from the boys. The house was big enough for each of us to have our own room – far different than what our home was like. “I will be happy to attend to anything you need.”

After getting settled in our rooms, the boys went off to play in the courtyard and I decided to sit out and draw. The house was beautiful, displaying a traditional Japanese castle style. The gigantic building was square-shaped with the center cut out forming a large courtyard area. The outside of the house was fortress-like, with stone walls acting as a guard around the grounds and the town sitting right outside the outer doors. Right in the middle of the courtyard was a great, awe-inspiring tree which was centuries old. The entire town had many trees such as this; however, this was the most grand of them all. It was draped with traditional spiritual items such as wishing cards and tokens to keep demons away. Despite my dislike of the meaning of these decorations, I adored the beautiful atmosphere they created.

My grandfather was entertaining the children in the yard, playing a fun game of hide-and-seek. I found this childish, but it kept my brothers out of my hair so I sat contently, drawing away. When I was putting on the finishing touches, my grandmother sat down next to me.

"You're becoming an amazing artist, Sakura," she commented.

"Arigato gozaimasu, obaasan." It was the polite way to thank my grandmother, though very proper. I had always been taught to use proper Japanese towards her, and for a teenager it was tedious and mind numbing using everything in a proper manner.

"Sakura, you are fifteen now, you may drop the formality if you would like."

"Hai, arigato (*yes, thank you*). I have been practicing my artistry in school; my art teacher says I'm one of the best." I continued to work as I spoke, looking down at my paper.

She smiled, "That is wonderful Sakura. I'm proud of you." We sat awkwardly next to each other, grandmother staring over my shoulder. The second my last mark was done I grabbed my papers and hurried away, avoiding her the rest of the day.

The next few days at my grandparent's house followed in the same sort of awkwardness. My little brother's were normally out playing, either with maids or my grandfather while I would tend to myself. Sometimes I would go into town to see my friends from previous summers, and then other times I would stay home and draw different views of the courtyard. Every night after dinner, however, we followed the family tradition.

"Off to the main room young ones!" Grandmother commanded.

"Story time! Story time!" Masaki would yell as he skipped away with Mikio. Tamotsu would walk with me, fighting hard to keep his grin down. He aspired to be an 'adult' but still hung on to his childish traditions. The dragons attacking, demons spurting from the ground, and always the brave hero to save the day, it was all the same as before – except for that one story.

I had heard it a million times before; a priestess saves the day by killing all the demons in a town. Yet, for some uncanny reason, this story would resonate in my ears and I would catch myself repeating it over and

over in my head. When my grandmother would tell it, I seemed to throw myself into the story – images of what was occurring would flash through my mind. This was all strange to me, but I pushed it aside labeling it as the little imagination I still used emerging.

One night, after the stories were all done and my grandmother was sending the boys to bed, she pulled me aside.

“I must show you something, Sakura.”

“Hai,” I nodded politely, wishing she would leave me in peace. All I wanted was the finish the summer and be back with my friends. However, tonight I would get the treat of a lifetime – something I could never have imagined. She took me to a part of the house I had rarely seen inside. It had been labeled off limits all throughout my childhood. I had always thought this was because of the dangerous samurai swords and all the artifacts were easily destroyable.

Once we were inside, she pulled me down onto a large couch seated in front of a cozy fire. While I was taking in my surroundings, she went over to a desk and came back with a small box in her hand. The thought quickly flashed through my mind – A present! Awesome! But the look on grandmother’s face spoke towards different circumstances. She sat down next to me, putting her hand on my knee, and spoke in a feeble voice.

“Sakura, you have reached the age where you are becoming a young woman. With the privileges attached to this, there are also responsibilities. Our family is very special; we are graced with a responsibility few others possess or even know about. You have listened to my stories while you have grown up, and I’m sure you refuse to accept them like your mother. But what would you say if I told you some of those were true?”

I looked at her with a smirk on my face, “You’re kidding right? Obaasan, those stories are fairy tales. They were made up in ancient times to explain the unexplainable.”

She took a deep sigh. “I see. You are just like your mother, like I feared. I think it might be better if I showed you instead of telling you.” She opened the box in her hand, revealing a stunning silver locket in the

shape of a blossom. In the center was a ruby surrounded by little diamonds which created the inner circle of the flower. Outside of it, the golden petals fluttered in the fire light. They had tips laced in crimson red which spiraled in small lines up the petal to the center, as though the ruby was sending out pigments of itself. She handed it to me and I began to turn it over in my hands, examining every millimeter.

“Look inside, Sakura,” my grandmother instructed. When I opened it, there were no pictures but rather an engraving. It read - 少数の道は最も大きい報酬を持って来るけれども最も移動しにくい。

*(The path of the few is the hardest to travel, though it brings the greatest rewards.)*

I looked at her dumbfounded. “Obaasan, wakarimasen (*Grandmother, I do not understand*). What are you trying to tell me?”

“Eeto... Sakura, there is a story I have told you about a priestess and a city of trees. Do you remember? Ayumi, the priestess, was traveling with her younger sister, Hikiri, killing demons that threatened the humble villagers. After a long battle with a wolf demon, she was mortally wounded. Ayumi was incapable of going any further so her sister was forced to leave her under the shade of a tree while she searched for someone to help. Ayumi had lost a great deal of blood and was slipping in and out of consciousness. She went to sleep finally, thinking she would never awake again. However, when her sister found her, the wounds on her body were healed. She had not a scratch on her with the help of the tree – an ancient, powerful tree. From that day on, Ayumi swore to honor and protect this tree which had saved her life. Sakura, that tree in the story is the very one sitting in our courtyard. And Ayumi, she is your great, great, great, great grandmother.”

I was speechless, twirling the necklace mindlessly in my hands. Thoughts were flowing through my head rapidly, each conflicting each other. On one hand, the practical side of me knew there were no such things as ‘dog demons’, and even more, trees did not have magical healing powers! How could they, they were just plants in the ground! And yet, there was the resounding feeling in my...well, my soul. This story was the only one which had always seemed to stick out to me, it was always so lifelike. It seemed a part of me even if it was so outrageous. My head began to spin – if it was true... I suddenly blurted out, “Obaasan... That

was in the 1600s, why does this matter to me?” A twinkle in my grandmother’s eye lit up. I had just given her the answer she so desperately wanted – I was letting the implausible permeate my existence.

“Well, you see, the demons of those times are still around today, only now we have found a way to keep their world separate from ours. But there are always the few that find their way into our world, and those are the ones our family has been honored with the job of taking care of. This necklace is no ordinary necklace; it lets you travel into the world of the demons as well as allowing us to see the ones who have escaped into our world.”

“Obaasan...iie! How am I supposed to control these demons? I have no special powers; I can hardly even lift my school books!”

Her smile widened, “Sakura, with your fifteenth birthday comes the beginning of a whole new life for you! You will gradually begin to get – some would call them powers – which will help you take care of these demons. It is a gift from the gods, with our family’s special god being the tree in our courtyard. It is what grants us these powers, and it is what watches over our family to keep us from harm. When Ayumi woke up, her priestess powers had tripled, her strength doubled. Priestesses of that time were powerful yet she was much more. This power was from the tree, and the tree was her savior. While before she was simply of average magical strength, she now was すべてにきょうりょく (*all powerful*) – one of the strongest priests in all of 日本 (*Japan*).”

“Well... are there any others like us?” My imagination was running without restraint. I would never have imagined any of this could be happening, and partially believed I was in a dream. With every bit of knowledge that Obaasan continued to give me, my heart began to pound faster and faster. The rational part of me was screaming none of this could be true, yet my body would not listen and continued on. I wanted more and more of the puzzle, and I ate it up as fast as I was fed it.

“They are few and far between, but yes. Sakura, there are so many things to tell you! First, you must remember this, not all demons are evil. Stories betray them all to be cruel souls, yet you must be aware that there are kind ones scattered about. Secondly, this locket’s power will only extend to select people – the

power is all in the touch. Third, and most important, this power is one to cherish. It is rare, and skips a generation. Your mother, though I love her, would never believe either of us if she ever were to find out. You must tell no one of this gift – your mother especially. Sakura, this all is coming very fast, maybe too fast. Perhaps I should let you think it over and we can talk again later. I don't want to rush you into anything.”

My heart stopped for a moment. My mother! Fairy Tales! It was all hitting me. How could I believe such an outlandish story? These were the very stories that caused my mother to move far away! Yet still my heart raced at the thoughts of this all being reality, and deep down I knew my grandmother was telling the honest truth. I took a deep breath, smiled at my grandmother, then with three words plugged my life into a whole new spectrum of existence which I had never in my wildest dreams imagined I would live.

“Obaasan, I am ready.”