Sweetbread for Peach Girl

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On a dry day in 1667, a peasant tending to one of the rice patties spread around the city of Edo felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck as he worked, fitting the torn rice stalks back into the knee-deep in water. His neck and shoulders were burnt from weeks of fierce sun, and his body was streaked with the chalky mud that nurtured the budding plants. A breeze blew behind him, heavy with the scent of lightning, and he stood sharply, his arms covered in mud to the elbow from guiding the stalks into the soft earth. A samurai stood above him on the high road to Edo, silent as Mount Fuji, as if he too had always been there. His hair was pulled back into a knot at the back of his head, and his face was still. A long, elegant sword hung in its sheath at the right side of his belt, the dark blue cloth of his kimono broken by a pattern of delicate white cherry blossoms.

“Bakemono,” the peasant whispered, feeling old and stiff as a cool wind blew across his bare shoulders. He had heard of this samurai, stories whispered in the depth of night as the wind howled and spit against the paper walls in his son’s house.

In the season of the baiu, when the rains mix with dust and soil and the murky water runs through the streets of Edo like the blood of the earth, the warrior who wears his sword on the wrong side is gone. He wanders, calling no place home in the way of his brethren, the samurai who have dedicated their life to the purification and isolation of the mind. They wear no armor; goodwill and righteousness are their armor. They have no enemy but incautiousness, no body but fortitude, no power but honesty and simplicity. Lightning flashes against the steely sky, and it is his eyes. The thick, heavy air is his breath, as steady and spontaneous as the thunder that rolls across the earth.

The peasants who live and work around the town call him bakemono, the phantom, the monster. When he comes to Edo in the spring, walking steadily across the high roads in his wooden sandals, they make the sign to ward off bad spirits and huddle to-
gether, whispering long into the night with the comfort of firelight reflected in their eyes. He is tall like a demon and makes no more noise than the rustle of a cool summer breeze on paper walls. He is there and he is not there, but always, before the season of the taifu, he returns to Edo.

This year the samurai’s movements are stiff. The wind works its way through the thick folds of his kimono and deep into his bones, awaking old aches that have lain dormant for seasons under scarred skin. He stands on the high road and looks out at the massive expanse of Edo, the largest city in Japan. It has lost something of the brightness that he remembers from his youth. The embers of passion within him glow dimly, remnants of the fire he once stoked in the forge of his heart.

With a dry wind pushing at his back, he stands firm on the high road and rubs the palm of his right hand with pale fingers.

“Hey, Tora!” gale-force winds whipped the words at him from down the street, twisting the sentences apart into fragments that were carried up into the fierce sunlight like so many strips of paper. “Waiting…” the wind brought nothing more to him and he ran to catch up, knowing that Tomo was waiting for him, always waiting at the corner three long blocks from the schoolhouse where the smells from the bakery wafted so enticingly out into the dry air. The wind stole each breath from his lips as he tried to inhale, and he was panting by the time he reached the corner. An especially powerful gust lashed his face and arms with dust and grit from the wide road. Tomo’s laugh was stolen away too quickly, and all he saw through squinted eyes were the remnants of a passing grin.

“What took you so long?” Tora shrugged and fell into step with his tall friend, nearly taking two steps for each one of Tomo’s. He was unusually short for his age. It seemed like every week his father berated him for being so small, but each night before she tucked him into bed his mother reassured him that he would grow, whispering so as not to wake his tall brothers snoring in the next room.

“Soon they’re going to need two blankets instead of one,” she laughed, her lilting voice rocking him to sleep like the gentle
lull of the ocean, teasing him with his blanket as she smoothed it neatly across his chest. “Their toes stick out of these ones.” He knew he should laugh, but jealousy coiled around his throat. It poked at the wound in his self-confidence that Tomo was tall, too. His father loved Tomo and always praised him for how much he had grown, how he would be a good, proud man some day. Tora stayed in the background as much as possible, preferring not to be noticed so that he could slip into the kitchen to help his mother prepare the evening meal. There was peace in the crisp thunk that the knife made each time it sliced through a ripe vegetable.

“The air tastes like thunder,” said Tomo, rolling the words around on his tongue like they had a taste too. Everything was new to him. Tora felt the brightness in things just like he did, but they were so much harder for him to express—the words welled up in his throat all at once and never came out in the right order.

“I guess so. Do you think it’s going to rain?”

“Maybe.” Tomo turned his face upwards, squinting as if he could see around the sun to the clouds that poured over the distant mountains like the thick steam of rice left to boil for too long.

Tora eyed his schoolbag enviously. His family did not have enough money to send him to school. Instead, he worked as an apprentice in the blacksmith’s shop. While Tomo finished each day bursting to tell him about the new things they had learned or the new kanji he could write, Tora was just tired and sore, his hands stained from working in the smoky forge. The one good thing about working for the blacksmith was that he earned a small allowance, something that even Tomo could not boast about. It was not much, but he managed to save up enough each year to buy a birthday present for his little sister, Yuki.

Her name meant snow, but Tora called her Momoko instead. Peach child. Her birthday was the first of March, when the snow had long since melted from everywhere but the old, wizened cap of Mount Fuji. March was the month of peaches, when their living room was full of the proud hina-ningyo display, the special dolls that families set out for their daughters during the Peach Festival.

“I’ve got to go,” Tora said, bowing slightly to his friend and
waving at the bakery where he always bought Yuki’s present, one of the dorayaki she loved so much. The thin cakes were sweetened with honey and filled with warm bean paste. The inside of the bakery smelled delicious, and it was hard for Tora not to spend all of the coins that jingled heavily in his pocket on the sweet cakes and candies displayed around the shop. They were a luxury that he could not often afford for himself. Clenching his jaw against the desire that welled within him, Tora marched up to the counter and bowed to the baker, a balding man with a wide smile.

“Two dorayaki, please. They’re for my sister,” the baker’s smile stretched into his eyes and he went into the back of the shop. Tora felt a burning need to confide in the baker. He had the kind of genuine, inviting smile that pulled the truth out from between your eyes and left you reeling. Tora felt that he had given the man a small part of him, a tiny piece of the brotherly love that filled his young heart. When he returned, the baker handed Tora a bag beautifully wrapped in thin paper. With a deep bow, he paid for the dorayaki and rushed out of the bakery, eager to get the warm cakes to his sister.

She was already waiting when he rounded the corner, her elbows propped on the gate to their small yard. It was a sanctuary meant to separate the house from the noise and bustle of the city, a natural boundary like the thick fabric curtain that hung in his kitchen. Their mother had braided Yuki’s hair, and it was tied with a red ribbon between her shoulder blades. She wore a simple kimono patterned with peach blossoms, the thick band wrapped tight around her tiny waist.

They ate the dorayaki together on a flat rock under a momiji tree, the elegant maple whose leaves radiated lucky reds and oranges in the fall. The branches bent gracefully like the thin arms of geisha, always angled just out of reach, and the wind whipped the green spring leaves into their laps. Yuki dipped her feet into the small pond as they ate, laughing at the fish that nibbled her toes, scattering when a falling leaf broke the surface of the water.

“Happy birthday,” he said, and she rested her head on his shoulder, licking the last of the sticky bean paste from her palm. This is peace, he thought, and closed his eyes against the prickling
wind. His young heart fluttered in his chest, and the pain of work forced upon too young a spirit eased quietly from his aching hands. Up above, the wind drove the clouds quickly across the sky, rushing away the carefree days of his youth.

The next morning, Tora awoke to darkness and heard the happy crackling of a fire. He was at the thin door that separated his room from the long hallway in an instant, afraid that his mother had started cooking breakfast without him.

“Haha,” he called to her, stepping lightly to keep the cold from seeping up through his feet, “wait for me!”

The sliding door was warm to the touch, and the thick, milky paper all but crumbled beneath his fingers. The hallway gaped red and orange, the giant, hungry maw of a demon come to swallow his family whole. The kitchen was already in flame, and the thick smoke that poured at him from his parents’ room filled his lungs with burning blackness.

“Haha! Chichi!” he called out to them, but his voice was thin and the fire burned his throat. Coughing and narrowing his eyes against the lantern brightness of the flames, he stretched his arms in front of him and fumbled down the hallway, inching closer to the fire. His parents’ room was a furnace. It was too close to the center of the fire, and he shielded his eyes from the intense heat that lapped at him below the low-hanging smoke. His brothers were still asleep, though the smoke curled around their feet and snaked up toward their faces, slowly encasing their bodies. His cries woke them, and they flailed to keep the burning ash from their eyes and mouths. A sudden pang of fear gripped his pounding heart as he remembered his sister, still sleeping alone in her bedroom. She was so small and fragile, he was afraid that the fire would melt her gentle heart like so much snow.

The hallway was warmer now, and the flames lapped more confidently, strengthened by the wood and paper they had already devoured.

“Momo!” he called, shielding his eyes from the heat as he ran through the house, racing against the voracious flames. Half of the ceiling had collapsed, and he dug frantically
through the smoldering rubble to get to her, burning his hands on the hot, ashen wood. It crumbled away and left sharp blackness under his fingernails. Above him, what was left of the ceiling groaned. The whole house was in pain, devoured from the inside by the searing flames that lapped at its wooden skeleton. With a dull crack like the sound of a knife against a cutting board, the beam above Tora finally gave way. It pinned his right hand to the pile of rubble that separated him from Yuki and burrowed thick splinters deep into his arms.

The pain was hotter, sharper than the flames and it shot from his fingers to his wrist, burning white against the flickering darkness of his tightly shut eyelids. With his good arm, Tora tugged at the thick timber, the pain in his hand swallowing all other pain as he ripped and tore and pushed against the beam with desperate strength. His hand pulled free and the momentum carried him through to the other side of the room in one awkward motion. The first clear thought that forced through the throbbing, burning pain eating away at his mind was how cold Yuki felt in his arms. The soot from his hands left dark streaks on her skin.

“Yuki,” he whispered her name as a prayer, hoping that the heat radiating from his palms would wake her. A mantra welled up from the inky depths of his stomach and bubbled like tar from his dry, burning lips.

“Please don't be dead.”

He thought of his family as he held her to his chest and scrabbled over the rubble, pushing them both through a charred hole in the wall at the end of the hallway. His heart leapt as his feet left the ground. There was bound to be help outside, someone who could revive his sister and reassure him that everything was going to be alright. His feet folded beneath him and he rolled, the dust from the road crowding his mouth and eyes and mixing like ink with the soot-black sweat that rolled down his body.

“Please don't be dead.”

He sat up slowly, still cradling Yuki in his arms, and the red glow of the monster was all around him, filling his eyes with its insatiable hunger. People ran screaming through the streets, their ash-filled lungs burning until all their breath had burnt away. As
far as he could see, orange flames broke through the smoke that poured around him.

    Edo was burning.

    A passing monk came out of the smoke, his umber robes stained black. He heard Tora’s anguished cries and took Yuki from his arms, cradling her to his body with the same love and respect that the young boy had done. One of her arms flopped out of the monk’s embrace and for a moment Tora saw the scrap of thin, delicate paper still clenched in her tiny fist.

    “Wait,” Tora called as the monk turned from him, “Is she dead?”

    The monk did not hear, and he was swallowed up in the crowd that filled the streets. All that Tora saw was the reflection of the flames in the sweat on his bald crown. Desperately, he ran to catch up, using his elbows to squeeze through throngs of wailing people whose identities had been stolen by the clouds of ash that blackened their faces. He alone followed the ghost monk through waves of walking dead, their hearts eaten away by the flames that had devoured their homes and families.

    Then Tora ran. The heat gave new life to his muscles and he pushed them harder than he had ever done before, pumping with the newfound strength of a quiet child who has never run with sun on his face and the wind at his back. He ran for his sister and his mother and even for his father, for his brothers who now walked among the husks of people traipsing from the city. He ran past buildings that had been completely consumed by the fire and now lay moldering in charred heaps. He ran past the elementary school he had never gone to and the forge where he had worked to earn money for his family, now dark and empty, the fire at its heart raging wild through the city. He ran until his thin legs burned and his right hand throbbed, ran until the heavy smell of smoke and death no longer filled his nostrils. Then he collapsed onto the road, and his last thought before the fingers of sweet blackness crept across his mind was how cool and peaceful the dirt felt under his broken body.

    Tora awoke slowly, dazed, the sunlight creeping dark red under his swollen eyelids. He was in the outskirts of the city, where
the houses and buildings gradually gave way to yellow fields. It was a hot morning and the air was dry with the ash that had blown from the city. Tora sat with his hand in his lap, cradling the swollen, burnt skin gently against the cool dirt between his legs. He could not feel his fingers. Behind him, Edo was still burning, and the smoke masked the smell of the sweet dry grass that lay to either side of the road. Up above, the wind drove the clouds quickly across the sky, rushing into a dark and uncertain future.

An old man came up the road behind him, carrying a heavy reed basket across his wide shoulders.

“So,” he said, his sigh like a gentle breeze despite the strong wind that blew against them. “Edo burns again.” He extended a hand and pulled the small boy to his feet, sweeping cloudy eyes over the sweat and soot that stained his nightclothes. Tora cried for a long time into the coarse fabric of the man’s cheap kimono. It was old and torn from traveling, and the life that it carried gave Tora some comfort against the hollow tides of darkness that threatened to wash him away. The old man lifted him gently, supporting the boy’s head in the crook of his arm as he had done with his own children years before.

“Come on,” he murmured, “let’s find you something to eat.” Tora felt the vibrations of the man’s deep voice in his chest, but he was safe and sleep had already begun to reclaim his throbbing body. He eased quickly into peace.

The samurai walks slowly into town, measuring the paces that still rest deep within his heart. Edo is always growing, but he knows where to go. Deep in the center, the shops and buildings have resisted change, tied to the land itself by the force of his memories. He turns a corner and smells the warm bakery before he sees it. The kind baker looks up from his work and a wide smile spreads across his aging features. He hands the samurai a bag wrapped in delicate paper and bows, the weight of truth resting heavy on his old heart. The samurai eats his dorayaki on a flat rock past the outskirts of the city, and the red bean paste tastes bittersweet. The wind drives the clouds quickly across the sky, dragging his heavy heart further from the memories that anchor him to Edo.