

Letting Go

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Matsu Makoto sat at a small table in her new home. The Lion samurai-ko was modest as ever, and chose not to seek fame or fortune, not to brag about her exploits during the siege of the city. No. That would not be the appropriate way to honor the deaths of those who defended the city. Shuffling a small stack of paper beside her, hand crafted for just this purpose, she reached for a calligraphy brush and began to write.

Morito Sakura-san,

It has been some time since we last spoke, Sakura-san. I hope this letter finds you well. I wished to write about what has happened in Kaeru Toshi to keep you informed, as I do not know how far news has traveled regarding recent events. While it ends well, there are some ill portions.

The Dark Oracle of Water and his Yobanjin had besieged the city. The defenders managed to repel the siege and we were able to defeat the Dark Oracle here in the city. Our friend, Ujina Genji-san, was among the men and women who died in the defense. Kaeru Toshi itself is on a speedy path to recovery, however. I can only hope it will be restored what glory it once had.

Matsu Makoto

Pain flared through the Matsu's arm as she put her name on the letter, forcing her to set the brush down and grit her teeth. The injury had healed in the weeks since the siege, but occasionally it still bothered her. As she withstood the pain, the sound of laughter rose to her ears, followed by a crashing sound from the small garden behind her home. A sigh escaped her, knowing that she would have to clean the mess that was no doubt waiting for her.

Minori-kun,

Dearest brother, how have you been? Far too much time has passed since we spoke last. I wonder how you are doing sometimes. I still have not settled down properly, but you should be pleased to know that you are now an uncle. I have adopted four children, orphans that I discovered here in the city. One of them is to be trained as a Shugenja. Some day I should like for you to meet them so they may know their uncle. Please write to me when you are able.

Makoto

She looked to the waning daylight pouring in through the door as she tidied up the table. The sun sank in the sky over the roof of the building behind her little plot of land. As the room grew darker, the woman's mood dimmed as well. The siege had hardened her in ways she could not have anticipated. So much death, so much destruction... Makoto was no stranger to conflict, but never had she seen it on such a scale. Pain wracked her again, forcing her to grip her arm. Her letters were not so strenuous to write. Surely they could not be the cause.

Matsu Haruko-shiryo,

Mother, when I look at the samurai of Kaeru Toshi all I see is greatness among them. I see your reflection everywhere I go, pressing me to stand straighter and walk with surety. I have found some security in this, that I am reminded of you with the faces of each of my comrades. I know that I can trust each of them to stand beside me at the end of the day and do what needs to be done. I hope each day that I have lived up to your name, that each of them has that same modicum of trust in my abilities. Thank you, mother, for all you have done for me.

Matsu Makoto

Realizing that the daylight was rapidly fading now, Makoto called for her children to come inside so they might eat before preparing the four of them for bed. After cleaning up from the meal, she urged the four of them to get ready to sleep. “Okaa-sama?”

She paused, glancing down at the child, “Yes, Jun-kun?”

“Thank you for coming back for us,” the young boy beamed up to her.

“Hai. It was the right thing to do,” Makoto ruffled his hair, then gave him a gentle pat. “Off to bed now, little one. We have much work to do tomorrow and you will need rest,” The bushi followed her child to his room, ensuring that all four of them were tucked in before returning to her table.

Matsu Kao Shiri-shiryo,

It was good to have met you again, sensei. The skills I learned from you have served me well, keeping me alive in many situations that one would find hopeless. It is my hope that you stand proudly with your ancestors. Until we meet again, I will try to pass on your instructions to the next generation.

Matsu Makoto

With the last vestiges of the sun having disappeared, Makoto was forced to light a candle at her table. As she retrieved the candle, her hand brushed against a letter she had neglected to put away in its proper location. She lit the candle and read over the letter for what must have been the hundredth time since she received it...

Matsu Makoto-san,

I have received your requests and I have decided to allow you to stay in Toshi sano Kanemochi Kaeru for the time being. Reports of your work with the magistrate's office there are pleasing to me. I have also had much deliberation with my advisors regarding the four children you happened upon after the siege of the city. It has been decided to allow you to adopt them and prepare them for their coming gempukku ceremonies. I am confident that you will have them ready in time.

Matsu Takashi

The Matsu felt the corners of her mouth turn up slightly as she read the letter again before folding it neatly. She moved to the bookshelf, running her hands over the spines of the books before finding her journal. Pulling the loosely-bound book from the shelf, she opened it to the next blank page and placed the letter inside. Once more she returned to the table, journal and candle in hand, and sat to write one final letter.

Makoto retrieved a new well of ink and a new paper from the pile next to her. She found a new brush, one she knew she would only use once, and dipped it into the fresh well of white ink. With as much care as she could muster, she began to write on the black paper.

All of her training had not prepared her for the intensity of what she felt with each stroke of the brush. It was a pain unlike any that Makoto had felt before, radiating down into her fingertips and up through her shoulder with each beat of her heart. Even the initial injury had been easier to bear than this. Still, she pressed on despite the difficulty.

It took her some time to finish the body of the letter, the exhaustion washing over her from the effort she felt she had to put forth. Dipping her brush into the ink again, she set back to the center of the page with a haiku and then added her name. She read the message four or five times, clutching the upper portion of her right arm with white knuckles.

Once the pain subsided again, she stood. Makoto gathered two letters along with her candle and took them outside. Her pace was slow as she strode through the garden, the gathering darkness cut by the small, flickering light she held in her palm. She followed a small stone path that led to the center of her garden, stopping at the edge of a small circular clearing.

The shadows cast by the glimmering light of her candle played over a small cabinet standing in the center of the clearing, allowing her to make out the silhouette of the structure. Makoto approached the small shrine and knelt before it, setting the light down next to her. She unlatched the two doors protecting the shrine from the elements and opened it to the night air. Moving the candle to the base of the ancestor shrine, she stared for a moment.

Holding the two letters between her and the candle in her left hand, she looked each one over again, her mother's first and then her sensei's. Satisfied, Makoto carefully set the corners of them to the flame. The licking tongue of the candle caught the paper swiftly, ashes rising up past her hand into the night sky. She released them at the last moment before the flame burned her hand, watching as they floated away to join the stars.

She gazed up into the sky, having lost track of the last ash that left her grip, and simply stared. It seemed forever ago to her that she arrived in Kaeru Toshi, looking up at the same stars she saw now, her soul filled with wonder and curiosity. Now it was filled with a sense of familiarity with the place. This was *home* to her now.

The pain in her arm pulsed, bringing her back to from her reverie. She removed her candle and closed the shrine, making certain that it was well protected before going inside. Closing the screen behind her, she prepared herself for one more journey before she could rest. She took the last letter she had written and carefully folded it, placing it in the pages of her journal. The samurai-ko then collected her daisho, placed the small candle in a lantern, and left her home.

Her destination was not far. In fact, the journey would be rather short, but it seemed to her excruciatingly long. Every step worked against her, even as she told herself that she was almost to her destination. Makoto knew the source of her trouble, and the illusory weight of the journal she clutched in her right hand only served to confirm her suspicion.

The hill loomed in front of her as she willed her body to continue the journey. Each step along her path brought back a flood of memories of her time in the city. Flashbacks from her first excursion with the magistrate's office to the final confrontation with the Dark Oracle. Each one had something in common. One thread connecting them all. The reason she had made this journey.

Makoto could not contain a soft chuckle as she stood under the tree atop Benten's Hill. She had wished to visit more often, but she never thought it would be for these reasons. Pain flared to the forefront of her mind again and she was forced to sit at the base of the tree. She took a gasping breath, reminded that her intent had not yet been fulfilled.

Shakily, she removed the candle from the lantern, setting the paper globe to her side and the candle on the ground before her. It took her a moment to steady her hands long enough to open her journal, but the shaking returned the moment she pulled the black paper from it. Carefully, she unfolded the page and held it out over the candle. Her hand hovered there, breath labored as if a great weight were on her chest.

The small light played along the paper, its soft flicker inviting her to finish the work that made her so tired. She grappled with the pain as she held the page aloft, fighting this one last act. Finally, the weight on her arm seemed too much and the black paper dipped into the fire. It began to burn and she read it over one final time, the white words searing themselves into her mind.

As the words on the page were consumed by the flame, a gentle breeze caressed her cheek. The ashes of the page flittered away from it and the weight on her body began to ease, as though it was swept away with them. With the blaze nearing her hand, she released the last remnant of the letter. The ash scattered on the tail of the breeze, taking her torment with it as she finally let go.

Ujina Genji-kun,

I had not wished to write this letter to you in such a way. Of all the things I had wanted to build for my future, I caught a brief glimpse of something else in you. Had I not been so naive, perhaps you would still be here. Perhaps... Had there simply been more time. However, I cannot dwell on the past. If I am to perform my duty effectively, I must find a way to move on. This is our life, is it not? I hope you find the end that you deserve, Genji-kun.

*Lion roars, bereft
Mourning two beginnings lost,
Snared by Winter's grasp*

Matsu Makoto