

BEDTIME STORIES

WRITTEN BY SEAN FISK

EDITED BY JEFFREY MEYER

Otosan Uichi

Shibatsu woke, as he had so many nights before, to the sounds of crashing thunder. He slowly raised his head from the mat, sitting up to look at the room around him, grasping for a familiar sight to calm the beating of his rabbit heart. The room came into focus as he blinked what was left of sleep out of his eyes, the fine wood furnishings of the functionary chambers putting him somewhat at ease. He rubbed the corners of his eyes vigorously with his fists, as though his mind would clear of nightmares as easily as his eyes would of mucus. When his vision was clearer, he looked again, and his heart jumped to see a figure standing by his window. He quickly took stock of the situation, his eyes rapidly adjusting to the dim light.

The figure, silhouetted by the night lanterns, was facing away from his bed, staring out at the city covered by pouring rain. Though the outline was vaguely of feminine form, the intruder did not resemble any of Shibatsu's paramores. She had the bearing of a warrior, proud shoulders set against the chill wind, standing lightly on the balls of her feet as though ready to lunge at any moment. The more details Shibatsu took note of, the colder his blood ran. On the back of her simple robes was the mon of the Spider, and he knew all of the members of his tiny family personally. As he did not know this woman, one possibility sprang to the forefront of his mind.

"Have you come to kill me?" inquired Shibatsu, careful to keep any quaver out of his voice. "If you have, might I get dressed first? It is terribly unbecoming to be murdered in one's nightclothes." His flippancy helped to shield the terror he felt, wrapping himself in familiar layers of regal disinterest.

"Kill you?" The stranger chuckled softly, the reason for her muffled voice becoming clear as she turned from the window. Her voice was not her most intriguing aspect however, as the thick cloth that covered her mouth and forehead did nothing to conceal her eyes. Shibatsu was immediately struck by her odd irises, just a shade or two shy of pure white, with pupils of jet. "Perhaps when I was younger, more impulsive, I would have wanted such a thing. Now I can appreciate the gift you gave me as a child."

"I live to serve, of course," Shibatsu replied, drawing his nightclothes tightly around himself as he rose from his bed. It did not take him long, even with sleep-addled mind, to put two and two together. The identity of his visitor was no great challenge. "How are you called, if I might inquire?"

"You might," his visitor answered, wry humour creeping into her voice. "I am called Haihime. You know who I am?"

"I do."

"Good. I will require a servant," Haihime said, turning back to the window. "I will need them to deliver my meals, and make sure I am undisturbed in the dojo."

"You will be staying then," Shibatsu stated, entirely unsurprised. "You will need lodging of course. You may take any room in the palace."

“My thanks, but unnecessary. I brought little with me, and have already unpacked my belongings,” Haihime replied casually, removing her attention from the rainy city as she made for the door. “I will however require lessons in courtliness. You will of course, assist in this?”

“Of course, and...”

“Excellent,” she interrupted. “You may call on me at the dojo when you are ready to begin teaching. You may send my handservant to the Imperial chambers where I will be staying. You should get some sleep. We’ve a long year ahead of us.”

Shibatsu rubbed his eyes again as Haihime exited his chambers, as if to banish the possibility that he dreamed the whole encounter. Though he was certainly tired, he dismissed the notion almost immediately. For a moment he thought to make some arrangements before returning to slumber, but his body cried out for him to take his erstwhile pupil’s advice, and so back to bed he went. As slumber rose to claim him once more, his unconsciousness blazed with the possibilities his encounter foretold. He sailed away on a tide of dreams, a small grin firmly upon his sleeping face.

A Dreamscape

“Have you thought this through fully?” The monk enquired, floating cross-legged among the clouds of the night sky.

“Of course I have!” retorted the small girl, irritably kicking aside a star that floated too close. “I am paying back my debt. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Really now?” challenged the monk, slowly spinning in the air until he floated upside-down. “That is all?”

“I said so, didn’t I?” the wild-eyed young man replied, scratching at the crooks of his elbows as he did.

“It seems to me,” the monk proposed, looking quite ridiculous as he stroked his beard upwards. “That one without the proper, divine perspective might get the wrong idea.”

“The wrong...” the painter sputtered, looking up from her sloppy cloud-portrait of the floating monk. “And what false impression, pray tell, do you think that I am giving people?”

“Perhaps,” the monk proposed, pushing lightly off of the moon to right himself. “That you are playing a game?”

“A GAME!?!?!?” The stones scattered across the sky, falling to the distant world below in a black-and-white rain as the *go* board was upended in fury. “This is no game! This is serious business! Life and death! The Empire is at stake!”

"I fully agree," the monk said, nodding.

"Although," said the man at the *shogi* table thoughtfully as he regarded the horrendously stacked scenario, with one side possessing almost double the pieces of the other. "Purely hypothetically, if it were a game, they wouldn't be doing very well, would they?"

"Statements like that," the monk responded, uncoiling from his seat to stretch his legs, "Are why such misconceptions could take place."

"I suppose," the little girl said, pouting as the ground rushed up to meet them. "But it's no fun otherwise. They just go and make mistakes, and then do things wrong."

"It is their right," the monk replied, either not noticing or not caring that the sky was falling, and them along with it. "To err is human."

"Well it shouldn't be," said the many-armed demon. "If they would just do things the right way the first time, then maybe I wouldn't have to fix it!"

"And you would like that," the monk asked, his foot hardly making an indent as it landed on the sands of the *go*-stone littered beach. "Not having the errors of humanity to occupy your time?"

"Oh Kami no," the dog barked, rolling on its back to sun its belly. "They are all the entertainment I can get these days."

"Whatever do you mean?" the monk said, going through the motions of a moving meditation.

"Have you ever tried to hold a conversation with the Fortunes?" The monkey rolled up out of the sand to stand on its tail. "One track minds, the lot of them. If it's not about their purview, they either shrug it off as unimportant or tell you to go bother someone else. Stupid fixed points, not willing to give even their betters the time of day."

"What about your siblings?" the monk bubbled out as the tide swept over his tattooed pate.

"Even worse!" complained the shark, lashing its tail in agitation. "They think they are getting involved, but the moment they actually get around to making an avatar, they just talk some mortal into acting as their agent in their stead, then go sleep in some lake rather than do anything. And when big brother's avatar got destroyed, all he did was throw a fit and convince everyone to go home!"

"Is it so bad, your home?" the monk asked, stepping out of a wave and onto the surface of the water.

"Awful," said the scholar, wringing out her scrolls as she too rose from the depths. "Everyone expects you to do as the Universe commands. Do the right thing. Be a good little toy. Toe the line, do battle with the Darkness, and remember that everyone else knows better than you. That everyone else is better than you."

“Seems like a statement that could be applied elsewhere, no?” the monk said, plucking a floating *go* piece from the water. He flipped it back and forth between its two faces, then offered it to the enraged dragon.

“That’s not the same!” The dragon roared, madness in his eyes. “I actually do know better! Humans are nothing more than worms to such as I!”

“And how might your elders view you, hmm?” the monk said, still proffering the stone.

“You overstep your bounds, monk,” The dragon hissed, threat in his voice as his eyes narrowed.

“As do you, dragon,” The monk replied. “Tell me, did you take the time to explain to your Oracle exactly what your favor would entail?”

“Point taken,” the little girl snapped as she snatched the stone from the monk’s palm. “And rudely at that. Are you sure you’re not Togashi in disguise? It’s always so hard to tell with you monks.”

“I am flattered,” the monk said with a gentle smile. “But do you not think that would be a better question to ask him yourself?”

“And miss out on all the fun?” the drunk grumbled, throwing his sake cup over his shoulder. “You lot have made a royal mess of things. The least you can do is let me watch your scramble to not make it worse in person.”

“No, I think it is time that you went home,” the monk replied, stretching out the sunlit mountain ledge. “After all, you and your youngest sister are the last. And she is returning soon.”

The heron was quiet, contemplative. It kicked a pebble off the mountainside, listening to it clatter as it tumbled. It finally craned its neck, turning its head to the reclining monk, and trilled, “I did it again, didn’t I? I tried to fix it and just broke it worse.”

“I’m afraid so,” The monk responded, watching the boulder crash through the forest below. “I suppose it’s time to go then,” sighed the glowing point of light. “It’s up to you now. Promise me at least that you will make it entertaining.”

“Of that,” the monk told the dragon as it retreated into the starry sky, “You can be sure.”

Shiro Mirumoto

Iweko Seiken, Emperor of Rokugan, and up unto this point, Oracle of Madness, woke gasping, clutching at his throat. Beside him, Ayameko stirred, her slumber disturbed by her husband’s violent awakening. Mumbling, she reached over to the bedside table, claiming her patch and covering her scarred eye before rolling over to regard Seiken.

“Husband,” she murmured, looking at him with her bleary eye. “What is the matter?”

“I think,” Seiken said, coughing, “That there has been a terrible mistake.” He looked into her face, his horror only growing at the confusion in her expression.

“What do you mean?” she asked, unsure of how to deal with the latest of the Emperor’s unpredictable moods.

“I.. I..” I do not remember marrying you. I cannot recall the year. I have lived for what seems like an eternity blindly looking out of my own eyes as someone else spoke with my voice. I do not even recall what has happened to my siblings. “...Only a nightmare. I am sorry for waking you.”

“Alright,” Ayameko replied uncertainly. “Try to get some rest. You have court in the morning.” With that, she rolled over and started snoring softly, not even bothering to remove her patch.

For his part, Seiken simply laid back down. He pulled his night robe close around himself, as if to hold himself together. He pulled the covers of the unfamiliar bed over his shoulders, and glanced briefly at the woman he did not know. He lay in bed, staring wide eyed at the ceiling, and waited for sleep that would not come.