

“The Samurai’s Daughter” - anonymous

Japanese Folktale – This story is set in feudal Japan around the year 1300. The samurai were the “knights” of the feudal Japan.

Many years ago in Japan, there lived a samurai named Oribe Shima. By some misfortune, Oribe Shima had offended the emperor and been banished to one of the Oki Islands, off the west coast of Japan.

Oribe had a beautiful daughter, eighteen years old, named Tokoyo. When Oribe was sent away, Tokoyo wept from morning till night, and sometimes from night till morning. At last, unable to stand the separation any longer, she decided to try to reach her father or else die in the attempt, for she was a brave girl.

Tokoyo sold everything she owned and set off for the province closest to the Oki Islands. She tried to persuade the local fishermen to take her to the islands, but no one was allowed to land there.

The fishermen laughed at Tokoyo and told her to go home. But the brave girl was not to be put off. She went down the beach, found an abandoned boat, and pushed it into the water. Then she started rowing. After several hours, Tokoyo reached the Islands. Cold and exhausted, she stumbled ashore and lay down to sleep.

In the morning, she began asking if anyone knew of her father’s whereabouts. The first person she asked was a fisherman.

“I have never heard of your father,” he said, “and you should not ask for him if he has been banished, for it may lead you to trouble and him to death!”

Poor Tokoyo wandered from one place to another, asking about her father but never hearing any news of him. One evening she came to a little shrine near the edge of the ocean. After bowing before a statue of Buddha and imploring his help, Tokoyo lay down, intending to pass the night there, for it was peaceful and sheltered from the winds.

She was awakened by the sound of a girl wailing. As she looked up, she saw a young girl sobbing bitterly. Beside the girl stood the priest who kept the shrine. He was clapping his hands and mumbling a prayer. Both the man and the girl were dressed in white. When the prayer was over, the priest led the girl to the edge of the rocks and was about to push her into the sea, when Tokoyo ran and caught the girl’s arm in a nick of time. The old priest looked surprised, but not angry.

“You must be a stranger to our island,” said the priest. “Or you would know that this business is not at all to my liking. We are cursed with an evil god called Yofuné-Nishi. He lives at the bottom of the sea, and demands, once a year, the sacrifice of a girl. If we do not do this, Yofuné-Nishi causes great storms that drown many of our fishermen.”

Tokoyo said, “Holy priest, let this girl go, for I will willingly take her place. I am the sorrowing daughter of Oribe Shima, a samurai of high rank, who has been exiled to this island. I came here to find my father, but I cannot even find out where he has been hidden. My heart is broken, and I have no desire to go on living.”

Saying this, Tokoyo took the white robe off the girl and put it on her own body. She knelt before the figure of Buddha and prayed. Then she drew a small dagger, which had belonged to one of her ancestors, and, holding it between her teeth, she dove into the roaring sea.

When she was young, Tokoyo had spent many days diving with the women in her village to look for pearls. Because of this, she was a perfect swimmer. She swam down, down, down, until at last she reached the bottom, where she found an underwater cave. As Tokoyo peeped in, she thought she saw a man seated in the cave. Fearing nothing, willing to fight and die, she approached, holding her dagger ready. Tokoyo took the man for the evil god Yofuné-Nishi. However, she soon saw that it was not a god, but only a statue of the emperor, the man who had exiled her father.

Tokoyo took hold of the statue and was about to lift it when a horrible creature appeared. It was pale and scaly and shaped like a snake, but with a head and claws like a dragon. It was twenty feet long, and its eyes burned with hatred.

Tokoyo gripped her dagger, feeling sure that this was Yofuné-Nishi. No doubt Yofuné-Nishi took Tokoyo for the girl that was sacrificed to him each year.

When the creature was within six feet of her, Tokoyo ducked sideways and slashed his right eye. Now the monster was half blind, so Tokoyo was able to strike him again, this time near the heart. Yofuné-Nishi gave a hideous gurgling shriek and sank lifeless on the ocean floor. Tokoyo placed her dagger between her teeth, took the monster in one hand and the statue in the other, and swam up towards the surface.

Meanwhile the priest and the girl were still gazing into the water where Tokoyo had disappeared. Suddenly they noticed a struggling body rising towards the surface.

When the priest realized it was Tokoyo, he climbed down the cliff to help her. He helped lug the monster onto the shore and place the carved image of the emperor on a rock. Soon other people arrived, and everyone was talking about the brave girl who had killed Yofuné-Nishi.

The priest told the story to the lord who ruled the island, and he reported the matter to the emperor. The emperor had been suffering from a strange disease that his doctors could not cure, but as soon as the statue of him was recovered, he got better. Then it was clear to him that he had been under the curse of someone he had banished to the Oki Islands – someone who had carved a statue of him, put a curse on the statue, and sunk it in the sea. Now the curse had been broken. On hearing that the girl who had recovered the statue was the daughter of Oribe Shima, the emperor ordered the noble samurai released from prison.

Now the islanders were no longer afraid of storms, and no more girls were thrown into the sea. Tokoyo and her father returned to their homeland, where they lived out their lives happily.

RFQs

1. What does Tokoyo's despair at her father's imprisonment tell you about their relationship?
2. Why does Tokoyo feel that she should trade places with the girl that is going to be sacrificed to Yofuné-Nishi?
3. Why does the emperor feel obliged to release Tokoyo's father?