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Opening extract from

Shadows on the Moon

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One

On my fourteenth birthday, when the *sakura* was in full bloom, the men came to kill us. We saw them come, Aimi and me. We were excited, because we did not know how to be frightened. We had never seen soldiers before.

Aside from the anticipation of gifts and special food later on, the morning began just as a thousand others had. Aimi woke me, burrowing under the covers to poke me in the ribs when I refused to leave the warm futon. After I had done shrieking and laughing, we helped each other dress, Aimi sighing as always over my badly folded obi. I slipped my favourite *kanzashi* pin, with its carved bone flowers, into her hair, because I knew she loved it.

We breakfasted with Father, who was smiling and mysterious when I teased him about what presents I might open that night.

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"A poor father you must think me, to spoil your fun so early, Little Sparrow," he teased back. And then his smile turned down at the corners as he said, "Your mother will be upset that she has not got home in time."

"Maybe she will arrive today, Oji-san," Aimi said, trying to comfort.

I slurped a mouthful of miso soup, and said nothing. I missed Mother too – it was weeks since she had travelled to comfort my great aunt over the death of her husband – only I could not help but feel it would be a more relaxed birthday without her scolding me for doing all the things that made such times fun, like trying to guess what my presents were, and eating too much, and wearing my formal *furisode* that Mother said must be kept for best.

When breakfast was done I went to my room and took out my three-stringed shamisen. I put the little cloth cover on my hand and picked up the tortoiseshell plectrum, handling each item with respect. My instrument was not a fine one. I knew its sound was not very good. Still, it gave me pleasure to play and sing. Since it was one of the few ladylike pursuits I would sit still for, I had been allowed to continue, so long as I did not disturb the family. But I was restless that day. After two songs and a little more than half an hour, I put my instrument away and went to look for Aimi.

The serving girl told me that my cousin was outside,

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but I did not find her in the formal garden that ringed the house. I knew what that meant. I sighed and went to search the orchards. They were much larger than the garden and sloped all the way down to the road that separated Father's land from the forest. The translucent pink cherry blossoms and the white apple blossoms were just starting to fall, and the scent of them was wild and sweet. I trailed my fingers carefully over the black and silvery-grey bark as I walked through the trees.

I found my cousin at the farthest tip of the orchards, overlooking the place where the road emerged from the woods. There was a little bench there, concealed by the foliage, so that you could look down on passers-by without being seen. Not that many interesting people passed on this quiet country thoroughfare – but if they did, we would be in the right place to see them.

I sat down beside Aimi on the bench and watched the empty road for a few moments before speaking. "Did Father's talk about Mother at breakfast upset you?"

"Oh no. Of course not." She took my hand and patted it but did not look at me. I waited.

She sighed. "It is silly to feel sad, when I have been so lucky."

"It is not," I said firmly. Aimi was a year older than me, and so lovely that next to her I felt like a squashy brown toadstool. But she was gentle and sensitive and she needed someone to look after her. "How could anyone

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feel lucky in your position? You have a right to mourn."

"Oba-san would say I was being sullen."

"Mother says a great many things I do not agree with—" I broke off and giggled. "I sounded like her then, didn't I?"

"A little," Aimi said, with a watery smile.

"Well, do not worry. *I* will not give you indecipherable instructions to pass on to the cook, or send you to find a book that does not exist, or ask you to unravel all the threads in the embroidery box. I think that Mother is sharp with you because you remind her of herself. Father said it devastated her when her own parents died. She has never forgotten. But that is not your fault."

"Sometimes I wonder…" she whispered.

"Wonder what?"

"Why I lived, when everyone – Mother and Father, even the baby – died of the fever. Why I lived to come here, and annoy Oba-san, and be a burden to Oji-san."

I pressed my lips together to hold in the angry denial that wanted to escape. Instead I put my arm around her, and hugged her fiercely.

"Perhaps," I said, when I had control of myself. "Perhaps the Moon took pity on me…"

"What do you mean?" she asked, surprised.

"I was so lonely before you came. I used to pray for a brother or sister – someone to talk to and play with. Most especially I prayed for a sister: a kind, beautiful sister.

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Perhaps the Moon heard my pleas and spared you when my aunt and uncle died, not for your own sake but for mine. If so, I cannot be sorry. Though *you* might be, to have such a sister forced on you, and *such* a mother as mine."

"Suzume!" she said, a little amused and a little shocked. "What would your father say?"

"Oh, he never says anything. That is part of what makes Mother so cross all the time. Father knows that if he scolds me I argue, and arguments are so noisy, and—"

"'A quiet house is a happy house,'" she chorused with me.

She was smiling now, the sweet, happy smile that I loved to see. I congratulated myself, though I had said nothing but the truth. I was about to suggest that we walk back to the house, when I heard hoof-beats on the road. Lots of them. Travelling at a gallop.

We exchanged interested looks. Mother? No – why would she be in such a hurry so close to home? Besides, we could not afford so many outriders.

As I leaned forward to look down at the road, the troop of riders broke out of the forest. Aimi made a sound of wonder. There were an even dozen of them, and they wore black lacquered armour and rode dark horses. The spring sunlight gleamed on the horses' gear and on the silver edges of the armour. They made a glorious picture.

I expected them to carry on along the road, but

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instead the leader, who had a crest of white feathers on his helmet, pointed, and they wheeled their horses and turned on to our little road. The thunder of hooves shook the ground as they rode under the ranks of blooming trees, and pink and white petals showered down, catching in the dark flowing manes and tails of the horses. They looked like an illustration from one of Father's books.

Yet, as the leader passed us in our hidden place, a cold finger touched my back and I shivered. I did not like the feeling. Sometimes it came when we were about to get bad news.

"They are from Tsuki no Ouji-sama," Aimi said, awed, once the horses had galloped past. "Only his men may wear such black armour."

"Oh," I said, relieved. If something had happened to my mother, the Moon Prince would hardly send his men to tell us. My mother was not even in the city, let alone at the Moon Court.

"They say the Moon Prince comes of age soon, and he will hold his first Kage no Iwai, to choose a favoured companion," Aimi said dreamily. "Do you think…?"

I clucked my tongue. "Why would Tsuki no Ouji-sama invite *us* to his Shadow Ball? The Shadow Bride is always a rich daughter of some high-up nobleman, just as the Moon Prince always has to marry someone who is a princess herself."

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"Then what about Kano Akira-sama?" Aimi said challengingly.

"Oh, you and that fairy tale!"

"It isn't a fairy tale. It is a true story and it only happened ten years ago. I think it's beautiful."

"Of course you do, Little Dancer," I said, and Aimi blushed. Mother had caught her dancing in our room recently and scolded her, telling her that only nasty, common women moved their bodies like that. But Kano Akira-sama had danced at the Shadow Ball and won the old prince's heart with her beauty, even though she had had nothing but the clothes on her back. The old prince had chosen her as the Shadow Bride, the highest-ranking woman at court, save the Moon Princess herself. So dancing could not be that bad.

"And anyway," I went on, "this new prince has never seen either of us. He doesn't know the Hoshima family from … from … the cleaners that sweep his path."

"Well, why have they come, then?"

"Perhaps the prince has seen some of Father's poetry, and has found it so beautiful that he intends to invite him to court," I said, not really believing it.

"That would please Oba-san!" Aimi said with a laugh.

"But not Father. Mother says he is the least ambitious person she knows." And whenever she said it she made a face like a woman who has bitten into a sweet dumpling and found fish-guts inside.

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"Well, there's only one way to find out for sure." I jumped to my feet. "Come on!"

I caught her hand and when she rose I began to run, forcing her to trot after me. She protested breathlessly, laughing as she tried to pick up the hem of her kimono.

"Suzume! I'll rip something. I'll fall."

"Run faster then, *baka*," I said.

But I was much more used to running than Aimi was. I was punished for it all the time.

A thrush sang in the trees above us, and I slowed to a walk as I listened, letting Aimi get her breath back.

I opened my mouth to make some comment about the bird – and heard a scream.

We jerked to a halt, Aimi catching her balance on one of the trees. The screaming voice was cut off as suddenly as it had started, but I had already recognized it. It was the little serving girl Chou. The iciness touched my back again, colder and more insistent this time. I looked up through the dancing leaves and flowers at the blue sky, as if there might be reassurance there.

A cold voice spoke inside me: *Something is wrong…*

"An accident?" Aimi asked. Her fingers tightened on mine.

"I don't know. Come on."

We ran properly now, our hands still clasped. The thrush was still singing, but now there were other noises. Noises that made my mouth dry.

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Metal clashing. Horses screaming. People crying out.

My father's voice, raised in anger.

I ran faster, almost towing Aimi along, but she held me back when I would have burst out of the trees on to the open area of moss and flat stepping stones before the house.

"Let go—" I began angrily, but Aimi pressed her clammy fingers over my mouth and shook her head, eyes wide. She put her face close to mine and whispered, "We mustn't make a sound."

I took a deep breath and nodded. She took her hand away from my lips, and together we crept around the edge of the orchard, keeping behind the thick tree-trunks.

Our few servants were nowhere to be seen and the human screaming had stopped. I could still hear, distantly, the sound of whinnying and kicking from the stables. Someone was hurting the horses. Why?

So we cannot get away, said the cold voice. My stomach turned.

We stopped dead when we saw the black-clad soldiers ranged by the side of the house. Their horses were tethered at one of the long stone garden basins.

Aimi made another shushing gesture, and I nodded. I could not have spoken now if I had wanted to. Where was my father?

What had they done to him?

As if in answer, I heard his voice again. He was shouting. He never shouted.

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"This is ludicrous!"

Two soldiers dragged him into view. They held his arms bent painfully behind his back; his tall, lean frame and pale grey kimono made him look weak and vulnerable between the black-clad men. My heart seemed to struggle in my chest, fighting against my ribs just as Father fought against their hold.

The leader of the troop, with his white-feathered helmet, made a movement with his hand, and the two men forced Father down to his knees and held him there.

"You are Hoshima Daisuke-san?" the leader said, formally, emotionlessly.

"You know who I am." Father bit the words out, his eyes burning like coals in his white face. "I want to know exactly what I have been accused of and who has laid the charges, so that I may defend myself. I am innocent, and I intend to prove it."

"You have been found guilty." The leader's voice was final. He nodded at the men holding Father, and they released his shoulders. Father sprang to his feet.

The leader unwrapped a bundle in his hands and held it out to Father. Father recoiled as if the man had offered him a hissing snake.

I bit deeply into my lip, whimpering. It was Father's katana. I recognized the green wrapping on the hilt. They wanted him to kill himself, to commit seppuku with his own sword.

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That was the way a man died when he had been utterly dishonoured. When he had forsaken his house. When the only way to regain his honour was to destroy himself.

It was a traitor's death.

They were accusing Father of plotting against the Moon Prince.

"Oji-san," Aimi whispered, her voice breaking.

"I refuse," said Father, proudly. "I am innocent."

"Very well." The leader dropped Father's sword as if it were trash.

One of the men unsheathed his own sword. Sunlight gleamed on the blade as he lifted it. Father did not see. He was still staring at the leader.

I wrenched my hand away from Aimi's and stumbled forward, screaming, "Father! Look out!"

He turned as he heard me, his face filling with relief. His lips moved as if to speak my name.

The sword behind him flashed out. I screamed again, a cry of horror, as Father crumpled to the ground.

"Get the girl," the leader ordered.

The soldier who had killed my father took a step towards me, bloodied blade still drawn.

"Run!" Aimi reached out from behind the tree and grabbed my hand, crushing my fingers with the urgency of her grip. "They're going to kill us. Run, Suzume!"

She dragged me with her, running under the cover

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of the trees. After a few faltering steps my legs began to work and I caught up with her.

"Father … Father…" I sobbed. I turned my head, stray strands of hair whipping across my face. The black-armoured soldiers were coming after us, spreading through the trees like monstrous shadows, petals scattering across their path.

"Don't look," Aimi panted. "Don't look—"

There was a low whistling noise, and something flashed past my face.

Aimi grunted. Her fingers spasmed around mine, then slipped away as she sagged down on to the grass.

A black fletched arrow protruded from her back.

She did not move. Her hand lay in the grass like the brittle white branch of a dead tree. She did not move. There was another whistle. An arrow thudded into the tree-trunk next to my head. I did not blink. I could not look away from my cousin, my sister, my friend.

Something shifted inside me. It was like a candle flickering to life. Suddenly I was very hot, and the sunlight was very bright, and everything was slow, as if the world had stiffened. I turned to look at the soldiers, and they seemed frozen in that bright, hard light, like insects trapped in amber.

Heat thrummed under my skin, pulsing, demanding to be let out, making me twist and bend with the strength of it.

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"Run!" Aimi had said. *"Run, Suzume!"*

I must run.

As if a star had exploded in my mind, I knew it. I pulled the heat and the brightness out, drew it around me like a cloak. It surrounded me and I felt as though I changed: became small and fleet. My clothes seemed to fall away. My feet were silent on the grass. I was like a hare.

Run, little white hare. Run and run, and no one will catch you.

The trees towered around me. Leaf-shadows dappled my naked back. The only sound was the soft hum of my own heart. Black shapes moved around me, but they did not see me. They were too slow.

I ran.

Soon I was out of the trees again and by the squat, brick-built kitchen. It was set a little way from the house. My house.

As I saw it I seemed to burst upwards, out of the small, silent place, and suddenly there was noise again, and fear. Men shouted behind me. My breath rasped. I was shaking, exhausted, as if I had run a hundred miles, and my mind was fogged with grief.

All I knew was that I had to hide.

I went through the open doors of the kitchen. The interior was dark and deserted. The fires had gone out. The massive, low stove, built of stones and clay, sat in the centre of the room.

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I went down on my knees, the packed earth floor ripping away skin as I scrambled into the biggest hearth. I burrowed into the ashes. Sparks glowed around me like dying orange suns. They burned and stung my hands, my arms, my back, my belly. Black debris rose around me like a pall of smoke.

The space inside the fireplace was just big enough to hold me, if I curled up tight: pressing legs tightly to my torso, burying my face in my knees.

I closed my eyes, and waited.

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