



Autumn, with its gift of crisp evenings and red maple leaves, was not yet here, but Kanezaka's week-long eponymous End of Summer Festival heralded its arrival. The festival's grand finale, a display of dazzling fireworks that had been consistently spectacular for hundreds of years, always made Kiriko Kamori a little wistful. As her mother had taught the sons of clan leader Sojiro Shimada the Art of the Sword, and Kiriko's father had forged those blades himself, Kiriko had been a not-infrequent visitor at Shimada Castle. She had spent many years of her childhood staring in awe at the near-magical explosions of color from the castle's balcony. And standing by her side had been Shimada's sons: Hanzo, looking ever forward into a future filled with duty; and Genji, who often filched sweets for her when the Shimada's many servants weren't looking. "The finest view in the city," the eldest Shimada had once stated, and it was no exaggeration.

But that was a long time ago. The Shimada were some ten years gone now, and their castle had a new occupant.

"I always wish these fireworks weren't the last of the year," Kiriko admitted as she, Ryōta, Nobuto, and Sakura joined the crowd heading back to town.

“Who knows? Maybe they aren’t,” Ryōta said, smirking. Ryōta was a busboy at Gozan Ramen. It wasn’t the best job, but it helped him listen in on some interesting conversations. All the information he gleaned was being put to good (if slightly illegal) use by Ryōta and his friends, who had decided to push back against the criminal organization that had terrorized Kanazaka ever since the Shimada fell from power.

It hadn’t taken long for the Hashimoto to swoop in and fill the power vacuum that the Shimada left behind. In the decade since, their stranglehold on the region had only continued to grow.

The Hashimoto’s yen was as dirty as it got, obtained from dealing in contraband and other even more unsavory things. The hospital always had several patients who’d “fallen” after crossing paths with them. Tourists were told that the town closed up early because of tradition. In reality, it wasn’t safe after dark in Kanazaka, not since the Hashimoto had moved in.

Ryōta and his friends could barely consider themselves more than vandals, but Kiriko knew their hearts—and their anger—were in the right place. The smaller gang had sprayed graffiti, broken windows at Hashimoto strongholds, and once, when they had felt very daring, robbed Tora no Sumika, the Hashimoto bar, a not-so-secret black market stop the Hashimoto had appropriated for their own use from a local family.

One of these days, Ryōta vowed, he and his friends would strike. Hard.

Kiriko believed him. All they needed was the chance, and it came sooner than Kiriko imagined.

Ryōta had learned from Nobuto that a weapons shipment was coming into the nearest port in two days. Sakura informed the gang that she had just visited her uncle, who unloaded cargo at the warehouses, and had pretended to avert her eyes when he’d entered the code for the main gates. The weapons shipment would stay overnight and be out of their reach in the morning. They only had one shot.

Kiriko, Ryōta, Nobuto, and Sakura snuck up to the gates of the yard unchallenged, though Kiriko kept a sharp eye out. The code worked like a charm, but as the gates opened, the moonless night was abruptly flooded with harsh, bright light.

“Which bay is the target in?” Kiriko asked.

“Number six-seven-five,” said Ryōta. “Sakura has a code for it too. But first we have to kill these lights.”

“Or get rid of the cameras.” Kiriko lifted a pair of kunai and twirled them about casually, then pointed one at the top of a building.

The gang exchanged relieved smiles. They knew what she could do.

“Perfect,” Ryōta said. “Take them out, Kiriko. We’ll head for the bay and have it open when you return.”

The group split up, moving quickly but being wise enough to seek what shadows they could. Kiriko closed her eyes and focused.

*Fox Spirit, guide me.*

She sensed warmth and affection, soft as the brush of a tail, and an image formed in her mind. She opened her eyes.

The Fox Spirit had answered.

Ethereal, softly radiant, the glowing figure stood atop the nearest building, beautiful as moonlight, bowing to Kiriko and inviting her to play.

Kiriko grinned and bowed in turn. She leaped at the wall, climbing with grace and speed to discover the spirit was already bounding along the roof. Kiriko followed, her gaze flitting about for security cameras, her hands reaching for her kunai, throwing with speed and precision. One camera sputtered, crackled, flashed, and went dark. The Fox Spirit sprang off the building, floating down gently, while Kiriko teleported two meters ahead of where the spirit would land.

The race was on. They ran between the outbuildings, Kiriko whipping blade after blade at the cameras until none were left. The spirit turned a corner, and Kiriko felt her energy change.

The Fox Spirit no longer appeared as a playful kit but something otherworldly, impossible, yet terrifyingly real. A trio of Hashimoto guards stood beside a door to the warehouse. Kiriko put her mother’s training to work, taking on two of the Hashimoto guards. She knocked one out with the hilt of her kunai and the second by a precise, well-timed elbow to the temple. When she struck the third’s weapon from his hand, he surprised her by standing his ground and attempting to grab her. Kiriko seized his outstretched arm and yanked him forward, ducking and slamming his midsection with her shoulder, and finally flinging him to the pavement. He was out cold.

Kiriko dragged them inside the warehouse and locked them in a custodian’s closet, then teleported to the roof of the nearest building, scanning the area for other threats. Below, her friends had almost reached the bay, but Kiriko could see what they couldn’t: another Hashimoto guard, headed in their direction.

Kiriko dashed lightly toward them as Sakura opened the door to the cargo bay they were after. Pleased with herself, the teenager stepped back.

Kiriko delivered well-placed blows to the pursuing guard's stomach and then neck, knocking him out. He fell to the ground with a thud, inches from her friend.

"Perfect timing," Nobuto told Kiriko.

Everyone's attention turned to the cargo. The crates were easy to locate—marked with the same stylized tiger-head emblem as the Hashimoto-controlled bar—but the shipment was also heavy and awkward. Still, the group managed, and Ryōta, who had come up with this plan, was given the honor of opening the first crate. As expected, it was packed with guns, and everyone gazed solemnly at the array of weapons.

Kiriko moved to push a crate toward the bay. The Hashimoto would be unlikely to search for them beneath the murky waters.

Ryōta grabbed her forearm. "Hang on. I said you'd see more fireworks this year." He opened his backpack.

Kiriko stared at its contents.

"So you did," she said quietly.

"We've been stockpiling fireworks all summer, waiting for a chance like this. I've made timers for them too, so no risk. Can you *imagine* the blast? This'll show those bastards who they're messing with!"

"Yes," Kiriko said. "It will."

At the coldness in her voice, Ryōta's smile faded. "What's wrong?"

"Listen, before we do this, I want to tell you a story I heard from Sojiro Shimada himself; he told it to me and his sons, Hanzo and Genji, one night after the End of Summer Festival."

Ryōta, Nobuto, and Sakura were younger than her, too young to remember the centuries-old bond the Shimada clan had formed with the people of Kanazaka. Centuries ago, the villagers supplied Shimada soldiers with the rice that kept them fighting and grew the famous Shimada peach, a source of pride for the clan. The Shimada understood how their strength came from the close relationship they had with the people of Kanazaka. They took from their people, yes, but the Shimada had learned a lesson the Hashimoto had not: as the rice fields and peach trees needed care to flourish, so would the clan flourish by caring for Kanazaka.

Sakura frowned. "Is now really the time—?"

"Yes."

Kiriko could see that this fledgling gang was poised to take the first step down a dark path, and she

knew she had to stop them. Now. And, possibly, give them a different road to walk.

“A long time ago, Kanazaka was preparing to hold the End of Summer Festival. Each night, nearly everyone would leave their homes to watch the grand display of fireworks by the river on the outskirts of the village.

“A rival clan in the area knew this. And one summer, they came to end the Shimada’s rule in Kanazaka . . . and to reduce the city to ash.”

Ryōta looked away, as if he knew which way her story was going.

“With everyone distracted, the fires they set would burn unchecked. So the clan torched the peach orchard. Set homes aflame. They even tried to destroy the Fox Shrine. And in a last, despicable gesture, they murdered the guards protecting the huge fireworks and ignited the building.

“It’s said the explosion was at once the most beautiful and the most horrifying thing that anyone had ever seen. Smoke and fire, colors and sparks—*everywhere*.”

“But . . . why?” asked Sakura. “Just to get at the Shimada?”

Kiriko nodded. “They knew the Shimada were the only ones powerful enough to stand against them, and they wanted to take everything their rival had: their organization, their castle, and Kanazaka itself. The attack was meant to weaken and demoralize the Shimada. The townspeople were just collateral damage to them.”

The friends all stared at the ground.

*Good.* This was something they needed to understand if they were to achieve their goal the right way.

“The clan assumed the Shimada thought like they did. There was nothing in Kanazaka that was of real value—no artwork or rare goods, just people. They figured the Shimada would send some wagons from the castle to extinguish the fires in the orchards or fields. The crops were important, but those who tended them? Replaceable. The rival clan hid their warriors in the orchards, ready to attack the unsuspecting Shimada.

“*That* was their mistake. Because the Shimada did not think like they did. The Shimada arrived in Kanazaka with *twenty wagons* of huge water jars, food from their own storage, medical supplies, and doctors. Shimada’s heirs were even sent to coordinate the effort. When the people were tended to, the Shimada warriors and townspeople went to the orchards together, where their united numbers far outstripped the other clan’s. They quickly extinguished the fires and made easy work of the intruders.”

Kiriko remembered Sojiro speaking to his own children in his calm, serious voice. *This is the lesson. This is what a Shimada does. We take care of our people, because they take care of us. When they are*

*hungry, we feed them. When they are hurt, we heal them. And when their city is burning about them, we quench the flames. A leader must be responsible, or else he is nothing more than a parasite.*

She turned to Ryōta. “The Hashimoto’s idea of how to run Kanezaka is the same. In the past, the Shimada’s rivals used our festival and our fireworks—something we were known for, were proud of . . . something we still love to this day—to show how little we mattered and how powerful they were. Now? The Hashimoto beat up our families, they control our shops, they own our streets.”

She regarded Ryōta with compassion. “A blast like this will destroy more than the Hashimoto’s guns. You could easily ignite this place, the whole city even. People—our neighbors, our friends—could *die*.”

Ryōta gnawed on his lower lip as he mulled over her words.

“I won’t say the Shimada were perfect, especially at the end. But you need to ask yourself what this”—she indicated the bag Ryōta held—“is going to tell the world about who *we* really are.”

Ryōta finally met her eyes. “It’ll tell them that we’re strong . . . but also that we’re no better than the Hashimoto.”

Kiriko nodded. “We shouldn’t give the people of Kanezaka more reasons to be afraid. But that doesn’t mean we can’t frighten the Hashimoto. And I can’t think of anything more terrifying than a force that strikes from the shadows, a force with no face, one they can’t explain—”

“Like ghosts—Yōkai,” Ryōta finished.

The mood shifted in the group, and Kiriko even saw some smiles. In her heart, she sensed the Fox Spirit’s approval.

“But for now,” Sakura said tentatively, “maybe we take the guns and throw them in the bay?”

Ryōta nodded to his backpack full of pyrotechnics. “What should we do with these?”

Kiriko smiled. “We use them to celebrate our victory.”