

THE LAST KIRIN

BY MIYA HIKARI

IN A TIME long past, when the world was young and legendary creatures still walked the land, there was a girl named Kiyo, the daughter of the emperor. Every morning, as soon as the sun had risen, Kiyo would go strolling in the palace woods, singing to the flowers and breathing in the fresh scent of morning dew on the grass. Among the animals, she had many friends, including a bushy-tailed *tanuki* named Ringo and a red-crowned crane named Nami. Whenever Kiyo needed someone to talk to, Nami listened, her eyes peaceful and wise, while Ringo pretended to listen, though he was actually picking Kiyo's pockets for apple slices.

One day, after her walk, Kiyo came to her father at breakfast with confusion on her face.

"Father," she said. "Why was the gate that leads to the great forest closed this morning? It is usually open."

The Emperor sighed, he did not want to make his favorite daughter sad, but neither would he keep a secret from her.

"Last night a kirin was seen wandering in from the forest. I was told and ordered the gates to be shut behind it." The emperor fell silent.

"But . . . you are going to let it go, right, father?" Kiyo asked timidly.

"No, Kiyo." He looked away.

"What are you going to do to it?" Kiyo's voice trembled as fear crept into her heart.

Her father got up and paced slowly around the table. "The kirin's horn is said to possess great power to heal and bestow long life." He came to stand before Kiyo and put his hands on her shoulders. "I shall go and hunt for it tomorrow's morn. Stay inside, Kiyo. I would not wish for you to be hurt. Do you understand?"

Kiyo realized her father meant to kill the kirin. "I understand, father."

"Good." The emperor patted her on the head and turned to leave the room. At the door, he looked back. "And Kiyo?" he said. "Do not open the gate."

"Yes, father," said Kiyo. Then he was gone, and Kiyo alone saw the tears that trickled down her cheeks fall silently to the floor.

KIYO'S HEART FELT very heavy as she went to school. The teacher called on her several times, but that day Kiyo did not know the answers. When school was let out, Kiyo was asked to stay behind.

"Is something wrong, Kiyo?" the teacher asked kindly. "You do not seem to be yourself today."

THE **TANUKI**, ALSO KNOWN AS A JAPANESE RACCOON DOG, IS A POPULAR CHARACTER IN FOLKLORE.



OF COURSE YOU ARE, CUTIE PIE!



“No, Maiya-sensei,” said Kiyo. “Nothing is wrong. I just feel a little sad and . . . lonely.”

“Perhaps you should try to make more friends, Kiyo. You are a very sweet girl, and I’m sure the others would love to get to know you more.”

Kiyo shook her head. She knew the other children thought she was too quiet. And for her part, their raucous chatter and lively ways were much too disorderly. No, things were best the way they were.

As soon as Maiya-sensei let her go, Kiyo rushed to the heart of the woods in search of the kirin.

“Kirin!” she called. “Oh, Kirin! Please come! I have something important to tell you!”

She called and called, and soon Ringo came at the sound of her familiar voice. She called again, and soon Nami joined them. But no kirin came.

Kiyo grew breathless and hoarse after what seemed hours of shouting. She was

SENSEI MEANS TEACHER.
MAIYA IS THE TEACHER'S
SURNAME.



... RAUCOUS MEANS
NOISY AND ROWDY.
(BLOODOT!)

about to go home discouraged when she felt a strong gust of wind behind her. And there, skidding to a stop but leaving no marks on the lush, green turf, was the kirin.

It looked much like a deer, only its long fur was a pearly white with tufts around its legs, neck, and tail. And, of course, it had a curved, translucent horn that refracted the sunlight like glass. Kiyō thought it was the most beautiful creature she had ever seen.

“Greetings, little one,” the kirin rumbled in a very deep voice. “It has been many ages since a call as clear as yours has reached my ears. May I ask your name?”

Kiyō smiled nervously. The kirin was much larger than she thought it would be, almost as large as her father’s prize stallion. “My name is Kiyō.”

“Kiyō. A very fitting name. I am honored to meet you, Kiyō.” Here the kirin bowed by bending one foreleg and lowering its head. “I am known as Sanyu, but you may simply call me Kirin.” It blinked its soft, blue eyes at her. “Now, I believe you called for a reason?”

“Yes, my father means to hunt you for your horn.” Kiyō paused in surprise as a dazzling light flashed from the very horn she had been speaking of.

“Do not mind me,” the kirin said gently. “Pray continue.”

“He comes tomorrow morning, and I fear it will not end well with you.”

The kirin stood so still that Kiyō dared not say more. Finally, it raised its head and Kiyō noticed its eyes had turned gray, like a stormy sky. “I dreaded it might be so when

the gate was shut behind me. Can you not open it for me, little one?”

Kiyō lowered her gaze in shame. “I cannot. My father commanded me not to.”

The kirin made a low moaning sound and swayed its sleek head back and forth in anguish.

Kiyō felt so sorry for it that she said impulsively, “I cannot open the gate for you, but if I ever find a way to help you escape without disobeying my father, I will!”

“Thank you, little one,” the kirin said quietly. “I must go now to lay false trails for the hunters, but when you call I will come.”

“How will you know it is me?” Kiyō asked.

The kirin threw back its head and laughed, a rich, echoing laugh that sounded like the rustling of leaves, the splashing of a brook, and the whistling of the wind all rolled into one. When it looked at Kiyō again, its eyes were gold, the color of autumn leaves. “Forgive me, I was not laughing at you,” the kirin said smiling. “But most human voices sound like the scraping of metal, while yours is the pure chiming of a little bell. I would not mistake it though a thousand years were to pass.” Bending down to touch Kiyō’s forehead with its nose, the kirin said, “I go. Farewell, and thank you for the warning. May the grass be ever green beneath your feet.” With that, the kirin bounded away in flying leaps that soon carried it far into the thick trees.

DURING THE NIGHT, Kiyō dreamed of riding the white, silver-speckled kirin,

TRANSLUCENT MEANS
GLOWING WITH LIGHT.



REFRACTED MEANS THAT LIGHT RAYS
SCATTER AND SPARKLE, LIKE WHEN THEY
PASS THROUGH A DIAMOND.



pursued by howling shadows. No matter which direction they ran, they were always confronted with the locked gate looming before them and had to turn around and try another path. When Kiyō woke the next morning to the blaring of hunting horns and the baying of hounds, she wondered if her meeting with the kirin had only been part of the dream.

On her way to school, Kiyō caught a glimpse of the hunting procession thundering down an avenue leading to the woods. The

hounds ran leaping in front, followed by the emperor and his men on horseback grasping long spears and horse bows. Long cloaks billowed behind them, for the day was chilly. Kiyō pulled her own cloak closer about her and hurried on, fervently hoping the kirin would escape unharmed.

After school ended, Kiyō raced out the door to discover how the hunting party had fared. A shout behind her halted her steps.

“Kiyō!” A boy about her own age ran

toward her, waving a piece of parchment in his hand. “This fell out of your bag!” He drew even with her and handed her the paper.

“Thank you,” Kiyō said as she took it. It was a sketch of a golden-eyed kirin dancing in a meadow that she had drawn during recess.

“That’s a really nice picture. A kirin, isn’t it? Like the one your father is hunting? Shame, that,” said the boy, shaking his head. “By the way, I’m Tekeshi.”

“I’m Kiyō, but you already seem to know my name.” She tucked the drawing back in her bag.

“Everyone knows who you are. You’re the



top student in class besides being the—” Tekeshi smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand and groaned. “Oh, I forgot to call you *Princess* Kiyō. Please, forgive me for my transgression, Your Highness. I fear I am a very backward subject,” he said, bobbing his head.

For the first time that day, Kiyō laughed. “You don’t have to call me princess or your highness. I’m just Kiyō. And there’s no need to bow either.” She couldn’t help thinking how much Tekeshi looked like a stork when he bowed, and she burst out in another fit of laughter.

Soon Tekeshi was laughing right along with her. “It was fun talking to you,” he said after their amusement subsided. “But I have to hurry home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Kiyō said goodbye and headed for home, too. A gatekeeper informed her that the hunters had returned a little less than an hour ago, rather disappointed and saddlesore. The kirin had eluded every effort to track it, and not one of the hunters had managed to see hide nor hair of it. Kiyō thanked the gatekeeper and skipped lightheartedly through the trees to the place where she believed she had met the kirin yesterday.

“Oh, Kirin!” Kiyō called, hoping that it had not all been just a dream.

“I’m right here, little one,” a voice said directly above her.

Startled, Kiyō whirled around to find the kirin’s chest in her face. She stepped back to look the kirin in the eye. “How did you get here so fast?” she asked.

The kirin blew air out of its nostrils. “I heard you laughing and knew you were coming. Would you like to go for a ride today?”

Kiyō’s eyes widened in surprise. “Really?”

In response, the kirin knelt down on its front legs and tossed its head. “Climb on.”

Kiyō swung her right leg over the kirin’s back and grasped its horn with her hands. She had ridden horses before, but never without a saddle, so she slipped to the side slightly when the kirin stood back up.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Wherever the wind takes us,” the kirin answered, laughing. There was a wild note in its voice that frightened Kiyō a little. She looked down to see how far away the ground was if she were to slide off. It was too far. She gripped the horn tighter in her hands as the kirin began walking. Soon it broke into a run, and the forest slid by like a minnow through a stream. Branches from the trees parted before them, and the kirin’s gait was so smooth, Kiyō felt as if she were flying.

All too soon the kirin slowed and stopped at the edge of a still, clear pond. It stooped to drink, and when it straightened, Kiyō asked the question she had been thinking of for a while.

“Kirin? What makes my voice different from everyone else’s?”

The kirin didn’t answer right away but cocked its head as if it were listening to something. Then it stepped out onto the water. Kiyō held her breath as the kirin walked on the surface of the pond, small ripples forming and spreading where its hooves touched





the water. She was so intent on looking at the kirin's feet that it surprised her when it spoke.

"It is the state of a person's heart that determines the clarity of their voice. Most of the clearest voices belong to young children, and as they grow older become harsher and rough. Some voices remain somewhat pleasant

to the ear, but very few retain their beautiful tones throughout an entire life."

For a moment, the only sound was the soft splash of the kirin's hooves on the water.

"I once met a young man who could hear the voices' tones as I could," the kirin said softly. "We were great friends and taught

each other many things. I told him the secrets of nature, and he shared with me the gift of song. We watched the stars in their dance many a night together.”

“What happened to him? The young man?” Kiyō asked.

The kirin sighed. “His land went to war, and he was called upon to serve. I left for a more peaceful place, and it was many years before the war ended and I returned to find him.”

The kirin stopped and stood still on the glassy water as a fish swam beneath its feet. Suddenly a drop of water hit the surface of the pond. Kiyō looked up to see great tears trickling from the kirin’s gray eyes and running down its snout.

“He had left his old home near the woods, and it took me many moons to find him. I came to him in the dead of night where he lived among many other humans. He was outside. Not gazing at the stars, as he had been so fond of doing, but staring at the ground. He had lost his arm,” the kirin said sorrowfully. “More than that he had lost the gift. Anger and bitterness had so filled his heart that he could no longer hear the tones . . . or me.”

The tears grew hot in Kiyō’s eyes, and she hugged her arms around the kirin’s neck. “What do you mean he couldn’t hear you?” she whispered.

“Not everyone can, little one.” The kirin sighed again. “Not everyone can.”

The walk back to the clearing was a silent one, the kirin lost in old memories, and Kiyō remaining quiet out of respect for its sorrow. When she slid off its back, its eyes were still gray.

“I’m sorry about your friend, Kirin.”

“What is done, is done, little one.”

The kirin still knelt in the grass, and Kiyō was able to look deep into its eyes. “Do you have other friends? Surely there are more kirin.”

“All have passed on. Yours is the first pure voice I have heard in fourscore and ten years. And I am the last kirin.”

Kiyō gasped. “But that can’t be true! There have to be more kirin out there somewhere. You live forever, don’t you?”

The kirin nodded its head slowly. “Yes, but not if we are killed. Our numbers have dwindled over the ages. We meet at a place called the Gathering Glade every century. The last meeting was twelve . . . no . . . thirteen years ago. I waited the whole year out. No one else came.”

Kiyō shuddered. What must it be like to be all alone in the world? And to know you will most likely stay alone until the end of days?

“I’ll be your friend, Kirin,” Kiyō whispered in the night air. She thought about the promise she had made in the height of passion; now she knew the cost if she failed. The last kirin would die. “And I’ll never let them kill you.”

The kirin looked at her once more, its eyes lightening to blue with the promise of hope, before slipping away. While Kiyō walked home, she set herself to finding a way to free the kirin, and anyone who had seen her would not have recognized her for the fire in her eyes.

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