

THE LAST KIRIN

BY MIYA HIKARI

Kiyo, the daughter of the emperor, discovers the gate into the great forest closed one morning as she strolls through the palace woods. Her father explains that a kirin has wandered in from the great forest, and that its horn possesses power to heal and bestow long life. He intends to hunt the kirin for its horn and commands Kiyo never to open the gate or the kirin will escape. Upset by her father's plan, Kiyo is distracted at school, where she is mostly lonely, until she meets a boy, Tekeshi, who also regrets that the kirin will be hunted. After school, Kiyo goes into the woods and calls to the kirin to warn it. The kirin comes to her, attracted by the pure tone of her voice, which it says is rare and found mostly among children. Kiyo rides the kirin through the woods, where it walks magically upon a pond. The kirin tells her that it had known one other human, a boy, who had the quality of her voice, but who later lost it when he was sent to war and was injured. The kirin explains that it is the last of its kind, and that it will live forever, unless killed. Kiyo walks home with a fire in her eyes, determined to find a way to free the kirin without disobeying her father's command.

EVERY DAY, KIYO ran to the palace woods with a new plan. Perhaps they could dig a tunnel? Climb the wall? Pay someone else to open the gate? Each time the kirin shook its head, and Kiyo began again.

“What if we disguised you as a horse?” Kiyo asked.

The kirin flashed its horn at her. This time Kiyo shook her head and sighed. A kirin would look like a horse when the heavens fell. There was no hiding its horn. Which reminded her . . .

“Kirin,” Kiyo said hesitantly, “does your horn really have healing powers?”

“No.”

“Grant long life?”

“No.”

Kiyo stared in amazement. “Well, what does it do then?” she demanded.

The kirin shrugged its massive shoulders. “Light the way when it’s dark. Sometimes, when I have charged it up enough, I can blind someone temporarily. But healing? Long life? No.” An amused expression flitted across its face. “Why? Is that what your stories say?”

Kiyo blushed. “Yes.”

“You humans, so blind you can’t see what is ever before you,” the kirin murmured. Raising its voice, it gazed intensely at Kiyo with vivid green eyes. “Listen closely, little one, for what I am about to share with you is vital. Life and death are in the tongue. There is great power in *words*.” At Kiyo’s startled expression, the kirin nodded. “Yes,

words. The same things you humans throw about so flippantly, maiming and destroying with every breath. Choking the life out of yourselves, even while you strive to prolong it by every other possible means.” The kirin drew back its lips in a snarl, and a deep growl issued from its throat.

Face pale and mouth dry, Kiyō whispered, “I don’t understand. How . . . how can we do such a thing?”

“The life power in the voice was a *gift*, given at the Creation. The kirin also possess it, in fact all life does, but never with the strength and vitality of your kind. For example, when you sing to the flowers, what do you feel?”

“I feel . . .,” Kiyō said slowly, “I feel as if they’re listening, and it makes them happy. I do it because mother always told me it helps them grow stronger.”

Gold and green mingled in the kirin’s eyes. “That is because it does. You are pouring life out to them like water, and they drink in every drop of it for they know that the life a man or woman gives is the finest of all. In the beginning, we all sang one song, and life flourished in abundance untold.”

“What was that one song?” Kiyō asked, breathless with curiosity.



“Close your eyes and I will sing it for you.”

Kiyō complied, and shivered with delighted expectancy. She had supposed the kirin’s singing would be a deep rumbling, but the first note that cut the air was as high as a bird’s, and the ones following even higher. The notes swirled around and caught her up in their wordless melody. The beauty of it ached. She became aware of voices other than the kirin’s, all in perfect harmony. The feeling grew until the notes seemed to pierce her soul, and suddenly she sensed a discord within. Then the music faded, and she opened her eyes to find the kirin standing over her.

Kiyō tried to speak but was overwhelmed by the sudden arising of the ache again and fell to weeping. Between her sobs, she asked, “What was that? And why am I crying?”

“That was the song of utter adoration, the song of worship. And you are mourning for what is lost.”

Kiyo put her face to the ground again as more tears overflowed. The kirin waited patiently beside her, for it was a long time before her eyes were dried.

A MONTH PASSED, and planting season began. The world was green and bright, and Kiyo’s planning for the kirin’s escape was almost forgotten in the glory of spring. She went for rides with the kirin every day while it told her the tales of the beginning, and she learned the reason why she had mourned. But it was impossible to be downcast for long. For the first time in her life since her mother died, Kiyo had a friend. As for the kirin, if it

had not been caught by the hunters yet, why should it ever be?

At the usual time, Kiyo skipped lightly to the clearing with one of the first cherry blossoms of the spring in her hand. She had found it on her desk that morning and wanted to show it to the kirin. When she reached the clearing, she noticed the kirin standing with its head pressed against the trunk of a tree. She was instantly struck by how thin it had become. Its ribs were more pronounced, and its coat had lost its luster.

As she approached, the kirin turned to look at her with glazed eyes. Kiyo froze, speechless.

In a hoarse voice the kirin said, “As the bird who cannot fly, and the fish who cannot swim, so will the kirin who cannot roam . . .



die. I am running out of time, little one. If I do not gain my freedom, I will fall to the hounds within the week. If you are going to save me, I kindly ask that it be soon.” The kirin moaned, lowered its head again, and hit it against the trunk of the tree.

Brown leaves fluttered to the ground, and Kiyo glanced up to find the tree turning black and withering with every moan from the kirin’s mouth and every blow from its head. Fear clawing at her heart, Kiyo turned and ran blindly away. On the way to wherever her frightened instincts were taking her, she bumped into another person and fell. Without stopping to see who it was, Kiyo mumbled an apology and started to move on when a hand closed around her arm.

“Wait a minute, Kiyo. Are you all right?”

It was Tekeshi. Kiyo blinked her tears away and muttered, “I’m fine.” She tried to yank her arm away, but he wouldn’t let go.

“No, you’re not. Calm down and tell me what’s wrong,” Tekeshi said.

Kiyo drew herself up and tried to use her best princess voice. “Take your hands off my royal person, peasant. I command you—”

Unfortunately, her voice cracked and the tears spilled over again.

Helping her to a nearby bench, Tekeshi said, “I’ll forgive you that insult if you just tell me why you’re so upset.”

Kiyo tried to still her shuddering breaths. What would happen if she told Tekeshi about the kirin? Wouldn’t he want to hurt it, too? All of a sudden she heard his voice echoing in her mind: *“A kirin isn’t it?”*

Like the one your father is hunting? Shame, that . . .” Her eyes snapped open. Tekeshi wouldn’t let any harm come to the kirin, she was sure of it.

Taking a deep breath and steeling herself for his reaction, Kiyo said, “I found the kirin . . . and it’s dying.”

“I know,” Tekeshi said.

“You know?” Kiyo said, incredulously. “But how?”

“Well, I knew you found it,” Tekeshi answered with a sheepish grin. “You rode by one day while I was searching for some herbs. I was crouching in the grass, so you must not have seen me. I didn’t know the kirin was dying though.”

“It says if it doesn’t get free soon, it will.” Kiyo held out her hands helplessly. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Can’t we just open the gate? I can do it.”

“No.” Kiyo shook her head. “We can’t. The kirin and I discussed this. My father would find out and punish the person who did it, maybe even execute him. We agreed the cost is too high.”

Tekeshi stroked his chin thoughtfully. “If only we could get your father to open the gate.”

Tekeshi’s words clicked in her mind in an instant. But Kiyo only muttered softly to herself. “No. No, I can’t. I just can’t.”

“Can’t what?” Tekeshi asked.

“Go to my father,” Kiyo whispered. “I can’t go to my father and ask him to release the kirin. As emperor, he would be furious and severely punish my impertinence.”

Tekeshi's eyes almost popped out of his head. "Of course, you can't! Whoever suggested a crazy idea like that?"

But now Kiyō knew it was the right thing to do. "I have to," she said, her voice growing firmer. "I'm going to. It's the only way."

Tekeshi jumped off the bench and stood over her, his brow darkening. "You can't! I won't let you!"

Kiyō met his gaze and said quietly, "What other choice do we have?"

Tekeshi's shoulders heaved for a minute as he thought, then finally sagged. "Fine," he grumbled. "But I'm going with you."

"No, you're not," Kiyō answered in the same quiet, yet firm, voice.

Surprised at her resolve, Tekeshi offered no resistance. "When are you going?" he asked.

"Now," Kiyō responded, rising from her seat.

Kiyō left Tekeshi in the hall leading to her father's chambers. "If I never return," she announced dramatically, "you are to tell the kirin that I perished in an attempt to gain its freedom."

Tekeshi nodded his consent and courteously opened the door for Kiyō when her knock was greeted with a summons. With blind courage and trembling steps, she entered the dragon's lair.

The emperor was alone, seated at his desk with piles of scrolls scattered across its surface. Kiyō bowed and drew closer when her father beckoned to her. He placed her on his knee and stroked her smooth black hair.

"What brings my favorite daughter to come visit me?" he asked. "A desire for a new dress? Perhaps four new dresses?" He smiled at her blushing. "Nay, I know the hearts of women, young one. They only come uninvited when there is a request to be granted. Ask, my daughter, and if it is within my power, I will give it."

The stars seemed to have aligned in her favor, but Kiyō knew how quickly her father's mood could change. With downcast eyes, she stammered, "My father, I . . . I came to ask if you would . . . free the kirin."

The hand stroking her hair stopped. Afraid to look up, Kiyō stared fixedly at the gray streaks in her father's beard.

Then, in a flat voice, the emperor said, "What makes you ask for this?"

"I have seen the kirin," Kiyō responded hesitantly. "It is dying . . ." Gaining courage, she looked up into her father's eyes and burst out, "Oh, Father! It can't heal you! Its horn holds no magical properties, and it is the last of its kind! If you love me at all as you say, please, spare its life!" Amazed at her own impudence, Kiyō hastily covered her face in her hands, while her father stared at her, speechless.

To think that his quiet daughter possessed such fire in her spirit! For the first time, he wondered what kind of empress the girl would make. Yet, he was reluctant to give up his prize for her.

"I am getting older, my child," he said slowly. "I will not hide from you the fact that I believe I am not yet fit to die. I need to live longer to better prepare myself."





“My father,” said Kiyoko, still covering her face. “If you have not fit yourself for death already, how will more time and the slaying of the last kirin make you worthier? Is it not best to use wisely the time you have?”

The emperor could not deny the simple truth in his daughter’s words, but sent out one last feeble excuse. “There would be great honor and respect given to the possessor of such a beast or its horn. It would bring pride to our family.”

Kiyoko’s head flew up and her eyes blazed. “For shame, father! To think of such shallow things over a creature’s life! I would be ashamed, not proud!”

The emperor stared at his daughter again, quite subdued. The change that had come over her must have been the work of the kirin. In which case, might not a similar change be worked for him?

“I will open the gate myself, if only to catch sight of this creature which has instilled such spirit in you.”

“Your word, Father. You give your word that you will not harm it?” Kiyoko asked soberly.

“I give you my word.”

The two left the room together, and Kiyoko awoke a slumbering Tekeshi in the hall.

“He’s going to open the gate,” Kiyoko said, her face shining.

FEEBLE MEANS
WEAK.



HERE, SUBDUED MEANS
QUIET AND THOUGHTFUL.

"I always knew you could do it," Tekeshi answered with a sly grin.

IT HAD BEEN dusk when they entered the palace, now it was night with crickets chirping and a full moon lighting the way. Kiyō walked beside her father, marveling at her success. The emperor still wore his magnificent, golden robes and strode with a regal bearing, yet Kiyō found her fear of him had left her. A realization had swept that fear away: the emperor feared death. If he had fears as well as she, what really separated them?

"Nothing," Kiyō whispered into the night air. She'd feared her father because of a title and what his people said about him, when really, if she'd listened to her own heart, she'd have known that fear to be unfounded. He was imposing, but an emperor had to have authority. She'd known him to be selfish, but never cruel. And he'd agreed to free the kirin for her sake.

Glancing back at Tekeshi, Kiyō noticed the forgotten cherry blossoms cradled gently in his hands. With a flash of insight, she realized how brave and kind he was. As she'd feared her father for his title, the other children at the school must fear her for hers. She never approached them because it wasn't in her nature to take the first step toward the unfamiliar. They must have avoided her because they feared her as Princess Kiyō.

"Everyone has fears," Kiyō whispered to herself, too quietly for her father or Tekeshi to hear. "When those fears are removed, barriers come crashing down." She looked to the gate

as they drew near and at Tekeshi as he walked closer to her side. "Even gates that trap kirin and walls that prevent friendships." And Kiyō knew that her fears were never as awful as she'd made them seem.

Once they reached the gate, Kiyō called for the kirin to come. It was a long while before it came limping up the path. Kiyō ran to help it and steadied it with a hand on its side. Tekeshi and the emperor gazed sorrowfully upon the thin creature when it finally reached the gate. Wordlessly, the emperor took a key out of his sleeve, unlocked the gate, and pushed it open.

Kiyō watched as some of the light came back into the dull eyes. "You're free now, Kirin," she whispered. "I'm sorry I took so long." She reached out to place her hand on its head. "Thank you for teaching me how to be brave."

"I did very little," the kirin rumbled. "Bravery was always inside of you, waiting to be awoken." A tear spilled from its eye. "I'm proud of you, little one." The kirin pressed its nose against her forehead, and when it drew back, its eyes were gold. "Farewell, Kiyō of the Pure Voice, rule your people well, and grow in grace and valor. We will meet again one day, beyond the Eternal Shores."

"Where do you go, Kirin?" Kiyō asked.

"To the Gathering Glade, there to await the last day's dawn. I will walk among man no longer." The kirin let Kiyō hug it once more, before heading toward the gate. It bowed its head as it passed Tekeshi and the emperor, and received their bows in return. Nodding at

Tekeshi, the kirin said to Kiyo, “He has a good voice, I heard it the day he made you laugh. Joy will always be his.” The kirin then turned its gaze to Kiyo’s father. “Tell him he will live many years longer if he mends his ways and is gracious and kind to all.”

Kiyo repeated the kirin’s words then asked, “How do you know these things? Can you see the future?”

The kirin laughed. “No, little one. This is what it means to speak life!” Throwing up its head with renewed strength, the kirin raced out the gate into the night beyond, while the three humans watched from inside. The final glimpse Kiyo caught was a white flash in the distance.

Thus did the last kirin pass forever from the sight of man. 🐉

