

# Trust Me

By Robert Denton III

*Late Summer, Sagisōmine Shrine in Crab Lands*

The week since Tadaka's last visit had not changed Azusa much. Her broom-sweeps were a little slower, her careful walk a little weaker, her complexion slightly more pale from the time spent indoors. But her brown eyes still sparkled, and she still hummed like a bush warbler. The same dog greeted Tadaka, a massive puffy bean of white with stick legs, bouncing around Azusa's every step. And her smile was the same, the one unchanging detail throughout his visits in the past few weeks.

He startled her with a bare footstep into the shrine's foyer. Then her eyes lit up. "Tadaka-sama!" she chimed, instantly aglow with new energy. "You are early. I expected you tomorrow." She bowed deep as the dog barked happily in an excited circle, bounding snout-first into Tadaka's shins.

"Happy greetings, Priest Azusa," he replied, offering her a bow. "You are looking better since last time."

The young woman's smile grew wry against her pallid face and sunken cheeks. "Liar," she joked.

Azusa's hand shook as she scooped her ladle into the tea powder. The dog hovered over the kettle, taking occasional nips at the rising steam. Tadaka tried not to notice the overwhelming light, dozens of melting pale sticks spreading wax roots across the shrine floor, a virtual ring of flame.

"Forgive all the candles," Azusa said. "My sight has been darker lately." Hands shaking, she tried again with the ladle.

"When did that begin?"

"Just a few days," she admitted.

Not good. "I should start visiting daily."

"No! Don't trouble yourself on my account!" Her braids danced as she shook her head. "I can manage! I am getting better, I think. I hardly have any nightmares anymore. And it's been days since—"

A hand spasm. An echoing clatter. Powder scattered across the floor.

"Damn," she cursed.

Tadaka took the dropped ladle. "Let me."

Azusa rubbed her wrist and stared into a candle flame as he prepared the tea. The whites of her eyes were like aging paper, yellowing and spotted.



“Where are all the attendants?” he asked.

“They didn’t want to get sick,” she replied. She must have noticed his mouth twitch into a frown, because she hastily said through a smile, “Don’t be mad at them. I told them to go. There is no reason we should all get sick!”

His stomach churned with the boiling water in the kettle, his face hot like the glowing coals. His task would be easier now that Azusa was alone, but even so, it wasn’t fair. Hadn’t she been like a mother to them all?

“Is this normal?” she asked, rubbing her wrist. “The locking joints...”

“Are you drinking cold liquids?”

“No!” she insisted. “Just hot tea. Like you said.”

“No cold liquids,” he repeated. He kept his voice flat, matter-of-fact. “The disease will attack your joints. Your bowels. You will get weaker.” He hesitated. “I suspect it will get worse before it gets better.”

A technical truth. But not the whole one.

“Do you think I can do it?” She was staring deeply into that dancing petal of flame. “Or do you think it would be better...?”

To get it over with. To end it.

Tadaka thought for a long time.

“I remember a shrine keeper who never fled,” he finally said. “Just fifteen, facing down an angry *goryō* without flinching!”

Her pallid face flushed and smiled. “I merely stood behind you, and held your ofuda.”

Her shy, admiring eyes brought heat to his face. And shame. Such thoughtless trust...

Loud barking. The dog hunched facing the far corner, growling, unleashing harsh shrieks again and again.

“Tazu! Stop that!”

The dog obeyed Azusa’s admonishment, pulling away, but Tadaka’s gaze lingered there.

“Are you taking your medicine?” he asked. “Is it working?”

The light recoiled from that dark corner, where the dust and cobwebs gathered thickly, coating the walls, the ceiling...

She nodded. “It helps me sleep. But it is a dreamless sleep.”

“Sometimes that is better,” he murmured.





“Bad luck out,” Tadaka whispered, sweeping another dust cloud out of the shrine. He hadn’t done this since he was a boy, but his bones remembered the proper way. He found that he enjoyed it now that he was older. Something simple to clean, for once. Immediate, obvious results.

Methodically he swept the shrine, floors and ceiling both. But he didn’t sweep the dark corner. That he left grey and furry, dust motes suspended in the crack, like spores...

When he finished, he returned to Azusa’s flat mattress and the smell of burning sage and incense. Tazu hadn’t left her side. Her hand rested on his head, occasionally scritchng his white fur.

“It is finished,” he told her.

“I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have to do that. It’s beneath you.”

“There is no priest-work that is beneath me.” Tadaka leaned in so she could see his smiling eyes. “I enjoy it.”

“You’re still wearing that cloth,” she observed.

He pulled back, fingers absently touching the sash concealing his lower face.

“Is that the new fashion?” she asked without guile. She chuckled. “It makes me think you’re hiding something.”

“I will make your medicine now,” Tadaka said.

The rice paper stuck to the fog-root as he unwrapped it. The dog sniffed it once, then drew back, gagging. Slowly Tadaka ground a piece into an acrid paste, nose wrinkling at the smell, then carefully measured a portion to stir into Azusa’s hot tea.

“Can we add a little more?” she asked. Her eyes were unfocused, dull.

Tadaka frowned and wrapped up the remaining root. “We must be careful with this. The right amount will dull the pain and help you sleep. Too much...”

She sighed. “Right.”

Too much would kill her. She knew that already. It was Azusa who had taught Tadaka this, shown him where to find it, back when he was just an apprentice, and she just a shrine keeper under his sensei’s Kaiu friend.

“It’s just that the nightmares have come back,” she said.

Tadaka stirred her tea.

“When I dream,” she told him, “I forget my entire waking life. I don’t remember anything while I am sleeping. It is as if the dream is all I’ve ever known. Until I awaken, and then I remember. That’s right, I am the priest Azusa.” She paused a long time. “If I die during a nightmare, it would be as if the nightmare were my entire life. I would die without remembering my actual life, the people, or the things that brought me joy. It would be as if all I ever knew were terror.”

Black cobwebs in the filthy corner.

“That won’t happen,” Tadaka said, setting the cup beside her. “Trust me.”

Azusa sat up as he tucked the root away. In her open palm stood a tiny origami dog. Tadaka’s gaze flicked between Tazu and the paper figure. The resemblance was uncanny; she’d even captured the way his tail flopped when he was pleased.

“This is for you,” she said.

The weight of her kindness pushed him down, buckling his legs and twisting his stomach. The guilt was cold, like the wet smack of a crashing wave. It was all he could do to remain standing. “I cannot accept this,” he began.

“Why? I made it to thank you.”

“Obligation warrants no thanks,” Tadaka said. He winced. It was his sensei’s favorite saying. He used to hate it. How easily it came to him now.

“Even so, this is specifically for you.”

“I do not suit it,” he said, realizing too late that she might interpret his words to mean that she didn’t know him well enough to craft a suitable gift.

If she did, she didn’t show it. “Then you should give it to *her*.”

To Tsukune.

Azusa’s eyes were without guile. Without judgment. “She must be worried about you. When was the last time you wrote her?”

Weeks. Ages. Letters came for him, but he didn’t reply. He’d wanted to, but it never seemed right. She’d only worry about him. She had enough to worry about now.

Again he regarded the origami. It was the sort of thing she would like. But it was barbed kindness, wasn’t it? His eyes went to the dark corner, where the dust motes stirred.

“I’m sorry,” Azusa said. “I didn’t mean—”

“She would love it,” Tadaka said, accepting the gift. It felt heavy somehow in his calloused hands.

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It was curious how the filth never spread from the corner. It was a thick cocoon now, grey stuffing and fuzzy threads, a gradation of light into coal-shade. Just the sight of it made Tadaka long for a bath. But it never reached too far beyond. It clung to the crack. As if tepid. Cautious. Waiting.

“Tadaka-sama?”

Azusa’s voice was a mere whisper. She couldn’t see except for right before her. There was dust on her sheet and mattress. She stank of unwashed skin.

“I am still here,” Tadaka said, setting her new dose of medicine beside her.

“Have you seen Tazu?” Concern flickered across her face. “He’s normally begging for food by now.”

Tadaka lifted his gaze down the hall, out the open door of the shrine, to rest on the unmoving slumped pile of white fur there, dry lips pulled back from canine teeth amid the buzzing of flies.

“I am sure he is fine,” he replied. “Dogs know how to survive.”

“The root isn’t working,” she said suddenly. “The nightmares are back. Every night.” She paused. “Tadaka, do me a favor. See to the village’s late harvest festival? They have no one else to do it.”



Tadaka set the unwrapped fog-root by her bedside and leaned in. "Azusa-san, listen to me. You are in the worst of it now. But if you endure it, you will get better. Do you understand?"

A weak smile spread on her slight face. "Yes, Tadaka-sama. I trust you."

When Tadaka turned away, he left the fog-root behind.

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Azusa stirred awake near the Hour of the Ox. Tadaka could tell from how her breathing changed, from the soft sobs escaping her lips. He remained still, but in the dark and with her failing sight, there was no chance that she would see him. He sat silent and watched. Waiting.

Slowly her shaking hand slid from under the sheet, grasping the sticky fog-root. Tadaka watched as she brought it to her lips. Even in the dark, he could see the glittering of her tears.

She bit into it. Tore chunks away and swallowed. Again and again.

Until it dropped from numb fingers, and her body thrashed beneath the sheet, her head striking the wood floor with a bone-cracking thump, over and over, pale froth pouring from her mute, screaming mouth. She vomited on her face. Then, it was blood.

And then, with a final shudder, she was still. Her skin tightened around her lips, curling back from her red-specked teeth.

Tadaka waited.

The darkness in the corner stirred. The dust fell away, spreading its filth in a cloud. A thin segmented leg dangled from the darkness of the ceiling. Then, fell. A heavy thud struck the wood beside Azusa's still body. Clawed hands scraped her cheek. The shaft of moonlight through the window glistened wetly off its extending tongue, a red strap of bloated flesh, barbed with curled teeth. With a wet slap, the tongue dropped into the pooling blood beneath Azusa's head, curling to lap it up.

Tadaka stood.

Pale orbs shot open. A razor maw parted in surprise.

"Accept this offering," Tadaka said, and he let the jade light pour from his hands.

The shrieks echoed across the empty plains. Beneath them throbbed a woman's sobs.

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Tadaka slowly turned the fragile origami dog. The paper was dirty, the corners wrinkled and bent. It was intact, but it seemed ruined to him now. Again he repeated his prayer, that Azusa's soul might know peace. He could barely hear his own whispers above the shrine's cracking wood and flames, an impromptu pyre blotting out the stars.

"You are wasting your time," Kuni Yori said. "She'll never find peace. Not now."

Tadaka turned, swallowing the lump in his throat. Yori's Kabuki-painted face was lit in bronze hues. Carefully he rolled the barbed tongue into a tight coil, folded it in leather, then tucked it into his satchel.

“You did well,” the Kuni said. “From this tongue, I can make protective talismans for eight, perhaps nine Crab warriors. You did a great service to the Crab, and therefore the Empire.”

“She didn’t have to die like that,” Tadaka started.

“Then we wouldn’t have the tongue.” Yori patted his satchel. “A peasant’s life for such a prize is a fair trade.”

“I could have banished it instead,” Tadaka insisted. “At any time, I could have—”

“Yes, and it would have just gone somewhere else. It could reappear anywhere in the Empire. A family’s den. A child’s bedroom.” A knowing pause. “The quarters of the Phoenix Clan Champion.”

Tadaka’s blood soured.

“It can only be truly killed while it feeds,” Yori concluded. “This woman was a hermit. A peasant. No family. No standing. Better her than another, yes?”

His words made Tadaka gag. As a shugenja, as an Isawa of the Phoenix, he found the notion revolting. A person’s value was more than who they knew, or whether they had children, or their possessions, or status, or fame. Azusa hadn’t deserved to be bait, her pain and confusion in her final moments all but ensuring that she’d awaken in Gaki-dō, the Realm of Hungry Ghosts, a damned soul. At the very least, she’d deserved a peaceful end.

But there was another voice, pragmatic and deeply buried, that agreed with Yori. Nine Crab warriors could be protected now. A monster was gone. Better one woman than dozens of others. Better a peasant than someone important.

*“There is darkness in your heart.”*

He thought he might throw up.

“I did not think a Phoenix would have the stomach for this work,” Yori said. It was meant to be a compliment. “You have proven me wrong, Master of Earth. Tomorrow, I take you to Hiruma lands. I will teach you what I know.”



The heat left Tadaka as he followed. This wouldn’t be the last distasteful thing he would have to do. But the Kuni did these things regularly, and they were the only ones who knew how to push back the darkness. For the good of the Empire, Tadaka had to learn. He had to bring their ways back to the Phoenix. No matter what.

Tadaka tucked the origami away. *It will be worth the cost, he thought. Do not worry, Tsukune.*

*You can trust me.*