

What Cost a Dream

By D.G. Laderoute

"I dreamed," Doji Toin said, clutching his bamboo flute, "that I have a son."

Yūgure's head, silhouetted against the crackling bonfire, tilted slowly to one side. "And do you do *not* have a son, Toin-san?"

"No. I have two lovely daughters, but no son. I always thought I—" He shook his head. "No, I have no son."

He felt Yūgure's gaze on him, a keen awareness emanating from the deep shadow beneath a broad, conical hat.

"Why did you come here, Toin-san?"

"You know—" Toin began, then looked down to the damp soil upon which he and Yūgure sat cross-legged. Although he couldn't, for some reason, clearly remember *how* he'd come to be here, he knew *why* he had. He looked back up at the unseen face, framed by the inconstant glare of the bonfire beyond. "You know why I am here."

Again, slowly, Yūgure tilted his head, this time the other way. "Do I?"

"Yes, I...I want you to teach me music. Music as good as that which you taught me last time. Better, even."

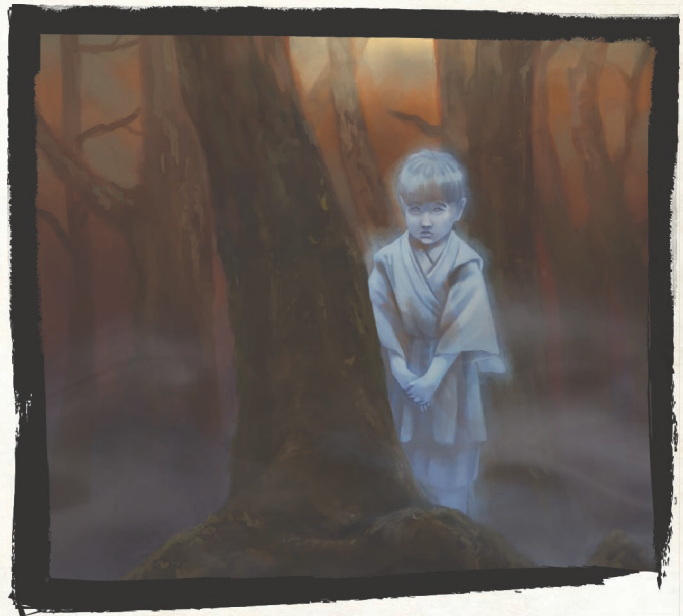
The *jingasa* lifted slightly, and Toin could see Yūgure's mouth—thin, pale, lifted in an even thinner smile. "Well, then, *better* it shall be."

Yūgure took the flute from Toin, raised it to his lips, and began to play.

His first note was the wind across the Doji Plains.

Now it was Doji Toin who slowly tilted his head, as the music unfolded from that first, pure note. Sweeping away from the Doji Plains, Yūgure crafted the ocean, beating upon the shores of Rokugan...thunder, grumbling along the desolate peaks of the Spine of the World Mountains... water, plinking softly into hidden, mossy pools deep in the Shinomen Mori. Toin could only marvel at the richness of tonal colors Yūgure coaxed from the flute, rendering its simple handful of notes into an endless spectrum of sound—

But.



But, just on the edge of hearing, Toin thought he heard something else. Something...formless, cacophonous, a blur of discordant, shrieking notes, an arrhythmic pounding of drums—

“Toin-san?”

Toin blinked. “I...I thought I heard—” His voice caught on the word *music*. Whatever he had heard—if he’d actually heard anything at all—it hadn’t been music but, somehow, it also had.

The thin lips beneath the jingasa smiled once more. “Would you like me to play the piece for you again?”

Toin stared for a moment, then shook his head. Just like last time, he remembered every movement of Yūgure’s fingers, every nuance of breath, as though he’d just played the piece himself. As though he’d known it all his life. “No, that will not be necessary.”

Yūgure bowed and offered the flute back to Toin, who rose, suddenly anxious to leave...to be anywhere else. He nonetheless paused to offer a bow in return.

“I...appreciate this, Yūgure-san.”

The smile widened. “I know you do, Toin-san.”

Toin turned and hurried from the clearing, from the fire, from the enigmatic man he knew only as Yūgure, and that wild, atonal music that he might, or might not, have even heard at all.

Toin opened his eyes, blinking, gasping. Sitting up, he flung his gaze around, seeing only darkness—

“Toin-kun?”

He turned to the voice. “Rina?”

His wife smiled through the wan moonlight filtering in from the terrace. “Who else would it be, here in your bed?”

Toin stared into his wife’s question until her smile began to fade. He forced a smile of his own. “I was...dreaming.”

“I know. You called out a name—Yuma, your grandmother. You were dreaming of her...?”

Toin shook his head. “No. I dreamed...that we had a daughter, who we had named Yuma, *after* my grandmother.”

Rina looked down at the futon. “You dreamed first of having a son, and now, a second daughter.” She smiled again, but now it was wistful and sad. “Had we, I would have been pleased to name her Yuma.”

Toin just nodded. Rina patted his arm.

“You were too good at tonight’s recital,” she said. “So much effusive praise has unsettled you.”

“Next time, I will try to be less good.”

“Well, it will certainly be difficult to play something *better* than you did tonight.” She patted his arm again. “Now, though, it is time to sleep.”

They settled back onto the futon, but Toin could only stare into the darkness.



Rina was wrong. It would not be difficult for him to play his flute better than he had at tonight's recital.

It would be impossible.

As before, Toin couldn't quite remember how he had come to be here, in this gloomy clearing where the bonfire flared and snapped. What he did know, though, was that he needed Yūgure to play another tune for him, one with which he could entertain the court of Kyūden Doji. His last performance had raised expectations for his next one to new heights; there had been a hint that he might even play before the Clan Champion.

Yūgure smiled through the dim night-glow. "So, you seek music that is even better *still*, Toin-san."

Toin nodded. "Please," he said, handing over the flute.

Yūgure raised the instrument, and began to play.

The piece was...beyond beautiful. Tears rolled down Toin's cheeks, despite the skirling dissonance that so clearly wafted in from beyond the firelight...despite the hints and glimpses of liquid movement in the darkness that accompanied it.

Toin held his wife's hand as they passed through the gate of Kyūden Doji. The castle's wall had been hung with a multitude of silver and gold lanterns, pushing back the warm softness of the summer night.

"So, you are to perform for none other than the Clan Champion," Rina said, squeezing Toin's hand. "I am so proud of you, Toin-kun."

Toin nodded, but said nothing. After a moment of walking among the cherry trees that lined the road to the castle gate, he felt Rina's smile darken into a frown.

"Does something trouble you, my husband? Your performance tonight moved, well, virtually *everyone* to tears. And now, you are not only to perform for our esteemed Champion, you may even be selected to play for the Imperial Court itself."

Toin took a deep breath, tasting the fragrance of azaleas and hibiscus on the warm night-air. Another shakuhachi performer, a Kakita, had played tonight immediately following Toin. He had found his own eyes stinging, brimming with tears as she had played, so intense was the desolate passion woven through her performance. But only one of them would be endorsed by the Champion to perform at the Imperial Court in Otosan Uchi—and Toin could not deny the Kakita's formidable talent. It went far beyond mere technical mastery of the shakuhachi; the Kakita had been no mere artisan, but a true artist.

She had, in fact, been as good as he was, and perhaps better.

Stopping on a bridge vaulting over a placid stream, Toin turned to his wife, intending to say these things to her...to tell her of his doubts, and seek the reassurance she invariably managed



to make sound convincing. He'd even formulated the words, but when he began to speak, something altogether different came out of his mouth.

"Rina, why did we never have children?"

She blinked, apparently just as taken aback by the question as he was. "You had your music, and I had my art."

He looked down into the water, painted with moonlight and the glow of lanterns from the castle. "I dreamed that we had a daughter."

"And a son. Yes, you told me of this."

He looked at her. "No. A *second* daughter."

Rina looked into the night, and said nothing for a moment. Finally, she turned back, her eyes bleak. "Perhaps you are coming to regret the choices you have made in life."

Toin quickly shook his head and squeezed *her* hand. "No, no, of course not. I regret none of my choices." He offered her the most sincere smile he could. "*None* of them."

She smiled back and they resumed walking, but neither of them spoke any further along the way back to their guest house.

"Ah, then you will need something most special to perform for your Champion," Yūgure said.

Toin gave a slow nod, and thought of the Kakita and her splendid music. "Yes," he said. "Special. It must be the best performance I have ever given."

Yūgure reached for the shakuhachi flute. "Then let us give you such a piece, suited for such an auspicious occasion."



The wild, dissonant blare and pound of shrill notes and harsh drums almost, but didn't quite drown out the breathtaking splendor of Yūgure's music. Indeed, despite its mad discordance, it somehow managed to thread its way seamlessly among Yūgure's clear notes, as though rhythm and discord each teetered on the verge of becoming the other. Even the random crack and spark of the bonfire seemed to meld itself into the sound, weaving a magnificent whole. It was as though the untamed cacophony was the raw stuff of music, the

primal source from which all of it was ultimately woven. And now Toin saw there was, indeed, movement all around them, half-seen dancers flinging themselves wildly through the darkness.



And then it was done, leaving only silence and the crackle of the fire. Yūgure offered the flute back to Toin with a bow. The Doji, sobbing, had to wipe brimming tears from his eyes before he could accept it.

Toin stopped on the bridge vaulting the placid stream, and stared along the watercourse. Lantern-light reflected from the looming walls of Doji Castle, glowing brightly from the mirror-still water, edging lotus and water lilies with soft highlights. He liked this little bridge, especially on such a gentle summer night as this, and often came here after a performance in the court to stand quietly, and simply breathe.

It was a moment of both placid tranquility, and great triumph. He could still hear the Clan Champion's words that had echoed through the court.

"You shall play for the Imperial Court in Ootosan Uchi, Doji Toin-san. Bring to that esteemed place the beauty of your music, that all might enjoy what is, I dare say, as near to perfection as any I have ever heard performed."

The Champion had even wiped at an eye, once. The Kakita, meanwhile, had made a particular point of coming to him and offering a deep bow of congratulations.

A great triumph indeed.

But Toin had no one with whom he could share this triumph. He had given his life wholly to his music, having never taken a wife, or raised a family, and that tempered his joy with wistful sadness. He had only ever dreamed of such things.

"You seem hesitant, Toin-san," Yūgure said. "Surely you wish to play music fit for the Imperial Court...for the Son of Heaven himself."

He nodded. "I do, but..."

The jingasa tilted against the blaze of firelight. "But?"

"But...I dream of...of a wife. Of a family I never had." He looked into the night. "Just dreams, though. At least, I *think* they are dreams—"

"But you have almost gained that which you sought, Toin-san, when you first came to me."

"I do not...remember that," Toin replied. "I do not remember seeking you at all—"

"Oh, but you did," Yūgure replied. "You sought perfection in your music. It is all that has ever truly mattered to you. And now, you have almost achieved your goal." The smile widened, loomed closer. "You stand within reach of the very perfection you so crave. Having come so far, will you truly falter now?"

Toin looked at his flute, the bamboo polished smooth by years of handling, of playing. The firelight gleamed against its barrel, making it glow as though with intense heat.

"No," he finally said. "I have given..." He took a breath. "I have given my life for this." He looked back up, at Yūgure. "My performance for the Imperial Court...it must be perfect."



“And so it shall be, Toin-san.”

He offered over the flute, but Yūgure shook his head.

“You do not need me to teach you,” the smiling mouth said. “You already know what you must play.”

He hesitated, frowning. But...he did. He *did* know. Lifting the flute to his mouth, he blew, sounding a note. Another. A third.

Then more, the notes smearing into a discordant, atonal skirl, a rhythmless succession of disconnected tones, rising to a piercing shriek, plunging deep into a basal abyss. What he played was chaos, utterly formless, and utterly perfect for it.

