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### **The Rainbow Umbrella**

“Akane!”

The mature voice of her mother’s soprano found it’s way to the lazing girl in the meadow. The day was a day meant for dreaming. The sky was a merry blue, the rice a lush green swaying in a light breeze. Spring had descended on their little valley sheltered between the mountains with their caps of snow. Their small island, Shikoku, was a beautiful place to live. Akane lifted herself up off her elbows where she had been watching the clouds form dragons and samurai chase each other around in endless patterns. She stretched her hands over her head and let out a small yawn, the type even her mother couldn’t find un-lady like.

“Akane!” The voice was closer, coming from the direction of their small two rooms home. She must of started inside behind the rice paper and exited out to see if she couldn’t scare her. Her mother must have stopped making onigiri and the lunchboxes she was supposed to take to her grandmother. Had the time passed so swiftly under the morning sun?

Akane stood, swiftly brushing her hands down the front of her kimono and the obi that held it closed. She adjusted the hair sticks that kept her long, black hair piled into a proper style- or should, if she had remembered not to lay back so fully into the grass. Akane gave a rueful smile and finished pulling them out, letting her hair tumble down her shoulders and over her obi. She started walking slow and careful toward their house up the small path between the rice fields. “Okaa-san! I’m coming!”

“Akane-chan!” said her Okaa-san as she approached. Her tone spoke of her displeasure at both Akane’s tardiness and her appearance. Her mother stood at the sliding door of their house

framed by the house and the forest beyond. “I’ve been calling for you for ten minutes! I thought for sure some Kitzune had stolen you away to go play near the river.”

“No fox demon would ever bother with me, ‘Kaa-san’ Akane said, purposefully dropping the honorific in front of her mother’s name. A bit childish, but she was still smarting after the last scolding on her family’s honor. “Is the onigiri done? I am starving!” Akane breezed passed her mother and into the small room that served as both kitchen and meeting room.

“Akane-Chan...” her mother sighed as she followed her daughter. “If you paid half as much attention to cooking as you do daydreaming you’d be a fine cook and a fine wife.” Her mother moved over to the counter, smacking the hands that were reaching for the completed rice balls sitting on the counter. “You may eat when you reach your Obaa-san’s home. She insists today you learn the lessons about becoming a proper wife. I have packed your bento,” she said, motioning to the lunchbox sitting on the small table in the middle of the room. “There is enough in there for you and your Obaa-san. Father’s mother is very anxious you are there in time to learn how to properly eat and start learning the tea ceremony. Akane!”

Akane had been able to listen to about half of the lecture. The idea of going to her grandmother’s house and learning lessons from her about becoming a proper life made her want that previously mentioned fox-demon to come sweep her off her feet and into a world of trickery and interest. Her stomach gave a rumble and it drew her back into reality and into the face of her fusterated mother. “Sorry Okaa-san...”

“Listen to me,” Okaa-san said. She moved to the table, picking up the bento boxes and taking them to the doorway. She picked up her favorite umbrella, the one that was patched with every color of the rainbow. “This is for you. It is a hot day and a long walk up the mountain to get to your Obaa-san’s house. “Do not go through the bamboo forest. Do not stray from the path.

Do not pick up pretty flowers or stones. And above all, carry this rainbow umbrella with you everywhere you go. It may be quite warm, and then again it may rain.”

Akane stepped forward, kissing her mother on the cheek and taking the lunchbox and the umbrella from her. “Arigato, Okaa-san. I will be back in time for dinner!” Akane gave her mother an impish grin and started off up the path that would lead her to her grandmother’s house. Her mother watched from the doorway until Akane couldn’t be seen from the bend on the road. Then she went back inside.

Akane opened her rainbow umbrella as she walked. It didn’t take her long to get hot and sticky with sweat as the sun beat down on her. She stopped on the road, opening the umbrella. The rainbow umbrella did very little to make her feel more cool. Akane huffed, and looked back down the road toward her home. Going all the way to her grandmother’s house for advice seemed very silly.

She wasn’t a wicked girl, but when she saw the bamboo forest with its dark, pooling shadows she couldn’t help the impulsive urges that made her mother worry so much. She left the path and entered the forest. The bamboo towered over her, and like little sentries seemed to guard her from harm. The sunlight that flickered between the leaves made the forest much cooler to walk in than the road.

Akane kept a careful eye on the road, making sure she was closed to it still as she walked. It wasn’t long that she heard her tummy rumble again. She was very hungry. She was about to give into temptation to raid the bento-boxes for a rice ball when she saw the most extraordinary flower.

It moved in a breeze, fluttering back and forth. Its petals were like the sunrise, black, blue, pink and orange. What a flower! It stood out amongst its brothers and sisters in the small

wildflower patch that had found enough sunlight to grow in the forest. Surely her honorable grandmother would forgive her one rice ball if she brought her such a flower! Akane stepped forward, intent on plucking the flower from its stem.

“Stop! Do not touch me!” The flower turned up its face up to her. “I am no earthly bud. No blossom of the mud. I am here. I am there. I am the empress of the air! Foolish child use your eyes. I am Kumo. The butterfly.” The flower-turned butterfly rose in the air on her own power and glared down at the girl.

“Oh!” said Akane. She bowed very deeply to the butterfly empress. “I beg your pardon, Empress Kumo-sama. Please forgive me. I am confused by the shadows of this forest and blinded by your beauty. Please excuse this unworthy one.” Akane trembled; forest spirits were known to be as kind or as evil as any man or woman. She was scared, but at the same time, awed by the wonderful beauty in the butterfly. More so then she had been of the flower.

Kumo looked a bit stunned, if a butterfly could be such a thing. She hovered there a moment. “Very well. Never confuse me or mine for a flower again! I am late for an appointment with the Sakura blossoms. Let me pass child. So you may once again look upon my Splendor.” Kumo hovered a moment before swirling around Akane’s head and heading up the mountain.

Akane folded her umbrella to her side, staring after the butterfly. “Oh.. my.. well that was a close call.” She said as she gave herself a little shake. “No time to dream, and no time to stop for a onigiri now...” Akane sighed and rubbed her tummy. “I wonder what Okaa-san put in the onigiri.” Akane pouted, and started walking again. She resolved to put the idea of food out of her mind.

The bamboo forest was getting a bit cooler now as she traveled further up the mountain. There were fewer flowers scattered over the floor of the forest. Akane kept her eyes on her feet,

careful not to step on any flowers that might, in fact be butterflies. She didn't want to encourage the wrath of Kumo. One lesson her grandmother didn't have to teach her!

So absorbed in her thoughts, Akane lost her footing and fell over a stone. "Ow!" She sat up slowly, making sure she hadn't done more than trip. A small rip was over her knee and there was a small scratch. Her grandmother was sure to notice her further unkept appearance. Akane sighed and stretched out her fingers to figure out what tripped her.

"I don't need my eyes to tell me. My fingers know what this horrid object that tripped me is... but perhaps this is in fact, a lucky stone. A lucky stone to give to grandmother and distract her from my appearance!" Akane gleefully moved to place her other hand around the fist-sized rock she had fallen over.

"Whoa..." A slow, deep voice rose from the rock. It dragged out the words as if every word was thought about, and carefully studied before it was uttered. "Who is this? Tugging on my shell?" The rock gained a head that moved as slowly as it had spoke. It curled out from one part of the shell and blinked two, round black eyes up at Akane.

"Oh! I thought you were a stone!" said Akane. She dropped her hands away from the stone. She got on all fours and peered at it until they were nose-to-nose.

"A stone?" The words dragged forth, as if slowing the very time around them. The bamboo forest, while quiet, seemed to be quite still as Akane strained to hear the low, rumbling voice that spoke. "I am..." Akane scooted back a bit, her feet were cramping as she tried to wait for the stone to speak. "Kame...a... turtle." As if to prove his point, four limbs with little claws slid out from the stone and lifted the stone from the ground. "I am not... a stone..." He slowly turned around. "A stone... is no one..." one foot, then another moved him by centimeters forward. "I am Kame... the slow one."

Akane stood up. "...What an odd forest this is. A flower that is a butterfly, a stone that is a turtle." She picked up her umbrella and the lunch box with the onigiri. "I think I better find the road again.." She started back toward the road, or where she thought the road was. It didn't take her long to realize two things. The first, she was lost.

The second was that the bushes to the right seemed to be moving in time with her movements when she was not near them. Akane opened her umbrella just as a black and orange body rushed out of the bamboo. "Oh!" Akane squeaked and trembled behind her rainbow umbrella. "OH! You look like--! Oh!"

The orange and black striped body sat back on its haunches, puzzled by the girl behind the rainbow umbrella. "What do I look like, my little tidbit?" The voice that the beast gave was a low, rumbling purr that matched in rhythm with the tail that swished at it's feet.

"You look like a Tiger. You sound like a tiger. You move like a tiger... but I know you simply can not be a Tiger." Akane said. She grew brave enough to peek over the rainbow umbrella. The Tiger's yellow eyes gleamed with amusement and met her brown ones with interest.

"You're a confusing little tidbit. Why can't I be a Tiger? Do I not have stripes?" The Tiger fluffed up its fur and stretched its neck out to show it's proud black and orange stripes.

"Because."

"Because... why?"

"Because I think you're a tiger." Akane said with a new sure note in her voice. "And that means you can't possibility be real tiger. Today I met a flower that was a butterfly empress and a stone that was really a turtle." Akane straightened up behind her rainbow umbrella and folded it down to rest against her hip. "Now, listen carefully, if I think you're a tiger then you are surely

something else entirely. Perhaps a bug, or some sort of tree?”

The Tiger watched her with interest. “I am confused, what am I then?”

“Hmm.. You have Orange and black stripes. You must be...” Akane stopped to think of everything she could that had orange stripes. “Ah! I know! A Clownfish!” Akane beamed proudly at the Tiger. “Nice to meet you, Clownfish. I shall tell my Grandmother all about you.”

Now, the tiger was not as confused as it let on. He was Tora, the cleverest of all the tigers on their island. A grandmother, old and frail and this silly child would make a very good dinner for the Tiger. Tora licked its lips at the very thought of two such tender meals. “Of course,” he purred, lowering his body to move closer to Akane. Akane stood without fear before the approaching tiger. “Of course I am a clownfish,” said Tora. How silly of me to think I could fool you, clever, wise child. Take me home to your Obaa-san. I will become her pet and keep her company when you are not there.”

Akane thought about this for a moment then nodded. “Hai. It would be very sweet of you to come with me to my grandmother’s house. Do you know how to get back to the road?”

“Of course, my sweet tidbit...” Tora lead her out of the forest and back onto the road. They were nearing the house when Tora finally had a plan. “Ah! Sweet, wise tidbit, is that a boy I see, over near the edge of the forest looking lost? Perhaps you should go and fetch him out. We can share the bento with him.”

“Hai!” Akane, who had been once again lost in her own daydreams bounced merrily toward the tree line never noticing there was no boy in sight.

Tora sprang into action. In five bounding leaps he had made it into the hut that housed the wise old grandmother. Akane’s grandmother was a crafty woman and she ran out of the house the second she saw the stripes of the tiger. She ran as fast as she could. Tora, torn between

following the grandmother and making sure Akane didn't lose herself in the forest- decided one tidbit in the hand was better than two in the forest. He settled down into the futon the grandmother slept on and covered himself with a blanket. "Now, to bait my trap." Tora said. He then pitched his voice to a higher range and said "Akane-chan! Akane-chan! Where is my foolish granddaughter!"

"Obaa-sama!" Akane's voice came a few minutes later as she crossed the threshold into the one room hut. The fire-pit in the center was only glowing, glimmering coals providing most of the light in the room. The shutters of the hut mostly closed from the cool mountain air kept the majority of the sunlight outside. "Obaa-sama! I am so sorry I'm late, I found you a clownfish but he got away. I thought to bring you a flower, a lucky stone and a husband also! They too, got away." Akane knelt near the door, bowing formally to her grandmother, her black hair swishing on the floor. She waited a moment then peeked up from under her hair. "Obaa-sama... did you swallow a hairball?"

"No No," said the clever tiger, trying to remove the purr of excitement from his voice. "I think I ate a butterfly. Come. Closer to me so that I may see your face."

Akane sat up, but stayed where she was by the door. "Grandmother, I will run to the ninja. I know he trains up here this time of year. He will know what to do to make you feel better." She started to rise from her kneeling position.

"No! no!" Tora said again. "I will be fine if you stay near me. Come. Stand by my futon, granddaughter."

"Alright..." Akane crinkled her nose. She didn't want to offend her Honorable grandmother, but she was looking a bit different, even under the blanket. Perhaps her honorable grandmother needed to get out more. She almost had triangular ears under the blanket. "Why,

Obaa-sama... what oddly shaped ears you have.”

“The better to hear you with, my dear.” Tora couldn’t help but purr and shift under the blanket.

Akane slowly got to her feet. “ And.. What sharp, yellow eyes you have..”

“All the better to see you with, my dear” Tora stared back at her, watching her every movement with a small twitch of his tail.

“Grandmother! What a tail you have!” Akane blinked then pointed the rainbow umbrella, closed at Tora’s blanketed form. “Grandmother’s don’t have tails! You’re the clownfish! What have you done with my Obaa-sama?! Help! Someone! Help!”

“Two bites you’ll make!” Tora crouched low in the blanket.

Akane was scared, but she held the umbrella out like a sword. Prepared to defend herself if no one else arrived in time. Fate, and a wise old grandmother, however had other things in mind. Near Grandmother’s house there was a training grounds sought after for their hot springs. A ninja had been staying there and was on good terms with Akane’s real Grandmother. It was the Ninja who showed up behind Akane and moved her aside. Two throwing stars thudded into the hard packed dirt floor before Tora’s paws.

“Get back Tiger! Or I shall chop off your tail and turn you into a fur coat!” The Ninja pulled out a katana. The katanas blade glowed a silver-blue in the faint light of the room. Akane and her rainbow umbrella felt very safe with the ninja’s arrival.

“Tiger?” Tora shivered, sitting back on his haunches and trying to look as meek as possible. He too, knew what swords could do. “ I am not a Tiger. Surely you are mistaken! Tell him, Akane! I am a clownfish! Not a tiger!”

“You are Tora! Scourge of the forest! You can not fool me even under that blanket!” The

ninja stepped forward a pace, the katana unwavering in his hands.

“Please! Please! Mercy!” The Tiger scrambled backwards, away from the incoming Ninja.

“There is no honor in killing a coward.” The Ninja’s face was hidden but the words were distasteful and dripped through the room. “Leave, before I remember I was cold last night!”

Tora didn’t pause he ran out of the hut so fast, he went through the back wall, out the rice paper door and the shudders leaving a tiger-sized hole in the wall. The Ninja put away his Katana. The ninja’s eyes never left where the tiger exited. He stood there, silently for two minutes before walking out with the intent of turning the Tiger’s moves and story into a new attack. He didn’t even bother saying good-bye to Akane.

Akane stood at the doorway until her Obaa-san came back down the mountain. Her adventures on the mountain to get to her grandmother’s house were never forgotten. She never again went deep into the bamboo forest. Never again did she chase butterflies or pick up cool stones for her grandmother’s garden- lucky or not. And she always remembered the difference between a tiger and a clownish.