Appeasement

by Gloria Oliver

"Asaka-sama, we have been beset by the foulest of demons and nothing we do will rid us of it." The prostrated villager quivered from head to foot on the tatami floor. "Please, we are unworthy but would beg for your help!"

Ietsugu's heart raced at the statement, though he maintained his features as schooled as possible. He threw a glance at his father, the lord of the area, to see how he took the entreaty. The lined, square face appeared as calm and impassive as ever. Ietsugu hoped one day he too could keep his emotions so well hidden. Though he practiced, he still found the skill difficult to master.

The dire words hung in the air making a strange contrast with the warm sunlight and the soft morning breeze coming through the open sliding doors. Charms hanging from the rafters outside clinked occasionally, adding to the diversity.

After several long moments, Ietsugu's father finally spoke. "What do you think, my son?"

Ietsugu frowned down at the villager, though inside his pulse raced faster still. "Send me to investigate this for you, Father." He tried to sound sure and commanding, as a strong vassal should. "I will assess whether there's truly a need and correct it. Or, if the villagers are only making excuses not to pay their tribute, take steps." In the few years he'd studied at his father's side, this wouldn't be the first time a village tried to weasel out of their obligations.

The villager clapped his hands together in supplication. "Truly, lords, our trouble is real!"

Copyright © 2012 Gloria Oliver. All rights reserved.

"So we've heard." His father turned toward him. "Go and seek the truth, my son. Take Mitsuo-san with you and whatever provisions you think you might need. I will also have some ofuda prepared in case the supernatural is truly involved."

Ietsugu bowed, hidden excitement rising in his chest. "Thank you, father."

#

"You won't regret this, young lord. The village will be very grateful for your help." The villager named Taka flashed him a smile, urging his mare to move forward.

Their destination lay nestled in the mountains two days ride from Lord Asaka's seat. As a man of sixteen, this would be Ietsugu's first foray in service to his father. Something he hoped to be able to do frequently. While the intricacies or rule fascinated him, he also wanted to get to know the land he would oversee one day as well.

He refused to look behind him as they left the small city, not wanting to mar the excitement of his leave taking with a flood of wistful emotion.

Taka turned out to be a knowledgeable guide, chattering about plants, the best waterfall views, and the local deities. Time passed quickly.

"How much farther, Taka-san?" Ietsugu said.

"We will be there by nightfall, Asaka-sama." Taka tried to bow though he was seated on the old mare.

The side of the mountain was steep, but zigzagging paths of steps made with dirt and logs made the way easy enough for men and horses.

At random spots, Ietsugu spotted rock statues or small shrines erected for the worship of the local kami, or spirits. Moss made a carpet of green and red across the land and rocks, with maples and oaks providing welcomed shade. The shrill sound of cicadas and the chirping of birds kept them company.

As the sun lit the horizon in flaming colors, the path widened and opened to a cleared area. A covered well sat in the middle, surrounded by twelve family homes with thatched roofs.

Beyond the small village, Ietsugu caught a glimpse of a cultivated mountainside, terraced with rice fields. The maturing shoots waved in the breeze.

A high squeal from a naked four year old trumpeted their arrival. Surprised faces peeked out of doorways, some pale with fear.

Upon seeing Taka astride the mare, the villagers brightened and flooded out to greet them. Almost as one, they bowed low as soon as they spotted Ietsugu and his teacher.

A stocky man with gray in his black hair stepped forward wearing a fudoshi and haramaki to cover his privates and midriff, a simple brown linen short coat draped on his shoulders.

Taka dropped from his horse and bowing to Ietsugu hurried to make introductions. "Asaka-sama, this is our village leader, Gendou-san."

"We are so pleased to see you here, sir."

Ietsugu dismounted and nodded, following it with the slightest of bows. "I only hope to serve." He turned eagerly toward his companion. "This is Mitsuo-san, my father's vassal and my teacher. He speaks with my voice."

Everyone bowed again as Mitsuo came forward, his misshapen, stooped form making him appear short and weak -- an assumption far from the mark.

"Please accept the humble hospitality of my family," Gendou said, bowing again. "You and your companion can rest in my unworthy home for the length of your stay. You shall have total privacy. Please make your needs known and they will be seen to immediately." The older man turned and shooed the villagers from before him to open a path back toward his home. Several of the men were instructed to take responsibility for the horses and supplies.

Whispers, stares, and nods trickled after them as Ietsugu, Mitsuo, and Taka followed.

The chief's home resembled the others except for a broad porch in front proceeded by a set of steps. The interior of the house was a single, wide room with a square hole in the center, housing a fire pit. Rolled up blankets took up one corner, along with built-in shelves and boxes.

Gendou's wife, three daughters, and young son bowed as they entered, their gaze firmly planted on the ground.

"Please sit, Asaka-sama. Though we are unworthy, allow us to extend our hospitality to you and yours." Gendou pointed toward the place of honor.

Ietsugu sat with folded legs on the wooden floor, Mitsuo settling a pace or two behind him as was his want.

Gendou's wife took command at that point and plied them all with tea, rice, and small pieces of meat, probably deer or boar, wrapped in leaves.

Once they were served, she sat at the corner of the room, observing the men and rising when needed to refill cups or bowls.

Though the fare was simple, Ietsugu was glad for the food. The sounds of night rose around them, the deepening gloom kept away by the light of a short tallow candle. The quiet company, the warm tea, and the meal, seemed to bid as a good portent for the coming enterprise. Wallowing in the sensations a moment longer, he then set his empty dish back on the floor and made eye contact with his host.

"My father has sent me to help your village as requested. Taka-san spoke of evil demons and other troubles. What more can you tell me? Has a priest been called as well?"

Gendou bowed to the floor. Taka almost immediately followed suit. Ietsugu couldn't be sure, but he thought the peasant looked afraid. "I wouldn't dare pile more upon your shoulders when you've only so recently arrived, young lord." Gendou sounded nervous. "It is late, very late, and I couldn't possibly impose upon you until you've rested. Please, relax, take your ease until morning. Then all will be revealed as much as you wish."

Ietsugu's brow rose. Were they that frightened of speaking of demons and spirits in the dark? Surely they didn't believe they'd be overheard. He decided not to be rude and force the issue despite the obvious evasion to his questions. It had been a long ride after all; the rest would be welcome. "Till morning then."

Gendou's wife gathered the dishes, the atmosphere around them easing. Taka got up, bowed, and left in an obvious hurry, as if unsure the samurai wouldn't change his mind. The sounds of packages being placed on the porch rang loud in the evening air. Moments later two of the daughters returned and stood meekly to the side. Gendou rose. "My daughters will turn down the bedding for you, Asaka-sama. If you have any wish for warmth, they would be happy to accommodate in that as well."

The leader pushed his two daughters forward to where they could be clearly seen in the light. Both held their heads bowed, their hands gripped before them.

"The nights at this time of year are comfortable enough. Thank you all the same." Though to take one was within his rights, the fear pouring like water from the two girls didn't warm Ietsugu to the prospect.

"As you wish." The two girls unrolled several sets of bedding then escaped in prompt order.

"I will be in the house to the left. If you need anything at all..."

"Yes, thank you." Ietsugu still hadn't moved from his sitting position.

Gendou's wife joined him at the door and both bowed before leaving. Her expression seemed to be carved in stone and hadn't changed all evening.

"Lord." Mitsuo's deep slow tones bid for Ietsugu's attention. "I will sleep outside and guard the door."

"Sensei, I doubt it's necessary."

The old samurai creaked to his feet. "Nevertheless."

Ietsugu nodded, knowing better than to argue with his stubborn teacher. In some things, the old man couldn't be budged. He took his role as samurai and vassal even more seriously than his father. "Good night, Mitsuo-san."

"Good night."

Once the sliding door had closed, Ietsugu removed his swords and set them above the wooden pillow. Next he removed his outer coat and then the kimono underneath. Folding both and setting them to the side, he blew out the candle and by the light from the coals in the fire pit, settled under the bedding.

#

Ietsugu shivered, his first thought as he awoke was that it was terribly cold. A great weight pressed against him from above, making it hard to breathe. His eyes snapped open.

It was still night. He lay in the same place as where he fell asleep. Yet through what little light seeped from the window behind him, he saw his breath turn white as he exhaled. The weight upon his chest increased, becoming painful. But he could see nothing there. Fear nipped at him.

He bid his arm to move, to reach behind him for his katana, but it would not. He couldn't move at all. How could this be? An act of treachery from the peasants? The food must have been poisoned. But what had they to gain from such a maneuver?

His breath coalesced before him as he breathed out again.

No. This must be something else. The cold was real and not a part of him.

That's when he heard it -- the barest of whispers. Yet, it seemed to come from right in front of him, from where he felt the weight, from where there was nothing.

"Leave this place..."

His pulse sped faster. And though he tried, he couldn't speak. But he dared not let his fear show. He schooled his face into an impassive mask, the one that was a samurai's alone.

"You are not of the village. You must leave this place..."

A mist spread above his blankets. It floated upwards toward the ceiling, like strokes of a brush creating a painting. It formed before him into the shape of a beautiful young woman.

Tears covered her face. Her clothes were entirely white. Wisps of light floated around her head.

Ietsugu had heard too many stories not to know what she was - yurei - a ghost.

"You will leave this place...or die!" Her face came close, the features changing as they rushed near. Full and lovely cheeks shrunk, thinned and hung as if there were no meat behind the loose skin. Her dark hair rose around her, spiking in every direction. Sad tearful eyes turned to burning coals of hatred.

Cold pierced his soul as she shot through and past him. Then she was gone.

Ietsugu leapt to his feet, no longer weighed down, his limbs his own once more. His skin broke out in goose bumps, the previously muted

sounds of the night now overtly loud. The warm night sucked away the cold as if it had never been.

The door slid open behind him, and at the sound Ietsugu whipped around with a gasp.

"Asaka-sama! Is all well?" Mitsuo knelt at the entrance, his gaze piercing every corner of the room, his hand on the hilt of his katana.

"Yes. Nothing to be alarmed about." Ietsugu hoped his teacher couldn't hear the harsh galloping of his heart. Pretending a calm he didn't feel, he sat down on his bedding, all thoughts of sleep fled. "The village indeed has a problem."

#

With the first hint of dawn, Ietsugu stepped out to the well, waiting for the peasants to awaken. He stood with one hand on his sword, the other on his hip, a blank expression on his face. He had to fight the urge to pace.

As soon as one of the villagers peered out their door and spotted him, they sent sleepy children running in several directions, including the house where the chief and his family slept.

Within a minute Gendou rushed from the house, hair in disarray, and prostrated himself before Ietsugu's unhappy gaze. "Asaka-sama, is something the matter? Have we somehow displeased you?"

The rest of the village poured out to find out about the trouble, but all kept their distance from Ietsugu's dangerous expression.

"It is morning. I wish to have the meeting...now." He raked the entirety of the village with his gaze. "Do not make me wait."

He strode back to the chief's house and entered it without once looking back.

He'd barely seated himself, arranging his swords so they wouldn't hinder him, Mitsuo moving to stand at the back wall on his right, when Gendou entered.

Taka wasn't far behind him, helping an older man up the steps. One other, whom Ietsugu hadn't met before, brought up the rear. The samurai said nothing as he waited for them all to be seated.

Gendou's wife came in with a tray of rice cakes and tea, but Ietsugu waved her away. He didn't even give the new men time to introduce themselves.

"Tell me about the ghost."

The four men stared at one another in confusion. "Ghost? Asaka-sama, many apologies, but there is no ghost. Our troubles come from a demon," Gendou said.

"Several people have seen it," Taka added. "They all described it as a monster."

The oldest of the four leaned forward. "All the signs are there, great lord. It began months ago with many bouts of lighting and horrid storms. We tried to appease the demon as our ancestors did in ages past, but it didn't work. People have been attacked in their sleep." The old man's voice shook. "Our livestock have been hurt or killed. The walls holding the water for our crops were damaged so we very nearly lost everything. It is why Taka was sent to seek your help. We are most desperate." He bowed to the floor, his hands clasped together in supplication.

Ietsugu stared from one to the other. Could it be they truly didn't know? Isolated as they were, might it be possible? "The actual harm to the village, when -"

A piercing scream cut off his words. As one, they rushed outside.

A young man in traveling clothes stood in open-faced shock, a woman unconscious at his feet. Several men of the village rushed him and grappled him to the ground.

"Do not hurt him!" Ietsugu took the lead, the crowding villagers parting at his approach. "We need to ascertain what has occurred here first."

A heavily bent old woman pushed through the crowd from the side, poking stomachs and elbows with her gnarled staff. She knelt beside the fallen woman. "She still breathes. It looks as if she may have only fainted." She cackled with harsh humor.

Ietsugu couldn't fathom what she could possibly find amusing about the situation. There was a puzzle here and it would be unraveled. "Stand him up."

The men holding the newcomer jerked him to his feet. The young traveler's eyes went wide when they settled on Ietsugu's swords.

"Who are you?" the samurai said.

"My, my name is Daisuke, sir."

Ietsugu nodded. "Tell me what occurred here."

The young man opened his mouth but no words came out. He swallowed hard and tried again. "I just came into the village, sir, and

called out a greeting to Izumi-san. But when she saw me, she screamed and fell dead away to the ground. I don't understand it."

"So you have been to this village before? You are known here?" Ietsugu felt a tendril of dread as a dark suspicion itched for his attention.

"Yes, sir."

Gendou bowed his way forward. "That is correct, Asaka-sama. He spent a short time with us during the winter before last."

"Yes!" Daisuke nodded quickly. "I'd meant to come back much sooner -- just as I'd promised. But a long illness befell me and only recently was I well enough to travel again." The young man gazed at the gathered faces around him. "Where is Haruka-chan?"

The crone patted the face of the unconscious woman, her other hand holding tiny leaves to Izumi's nose. She cackled again. Everyone grew strangely silent their gaze anywhere but on the young man or the samurai. The men holding onto Daisuke's arms released him.

"Asaka-sama, I'm sure this is all a misunderstanding -- nothing to concern yourself about. We will take care of it." Gendou placed himself between Ietsugu and the traveler. "Why don't we go inside so we can continue with our meeting?"

Ietsugu stiffened, his previous sense of dread growing. He sensed Mitsuo doing the same. Something wasn't right here. "I haven't finished, Gendou-san." He put as much disapproval into his tone as he could.

Gendou instantly bowed and stepped aside, his face hidden.

"She's coming around now." The crone helped prop Izumi against the side of the well.

The woman moaned, her hand rising to cradle her head. Then she snapped up straight and her gaze locked with Daisuke's. Her face paled and tears sprang to her eyes. "Oh ohhhhhh."

"Izumi-san?" Daisuke pushed forward and knelt beside her. "Are you not well? And where is Haruka-chan?"

Izumi would no longer look at him, turning her face away and hiding it behind her sleeves.

Looking baffled, the traveler rose to his feet and stared about him as if never having seen any of them before. "Where is Haruka-chan?"

"She's dead." Gasps rang all around as Ietsugu answered his question.

"What? How can that be?" Daisuke turned to face the samurai.

"That is something the village will need to answer. All I know is that I have seen her angry ghost with my own eyes. She is now an onryo."

Several villagers fell to their knees, groans echoing around them. Daisuke's face paled, even as he stared at Ietsugu with incomprehension. "A vengeful spirit? Why would she be a vengeful spirit?" He turned on the villagers. "What have you people done?"

Ietsugu turned merciless eyes in Gendou's direction. "Yes, Gendou-san, tell us what was done."

The village leader groveled on the ground, his face in the dirt. "This cannot be. It cannot be." He shook his head. "You must believe us. We saw the signs! An offering had to be made."

"What did you do?" Daisuke shook where he stood, obviously fighting for control.

The answer didn't come from the leader, but from Izumi. Her low voice sounded lifeless. "You hadn't returned. We didn't believe you would. And she was the loveliest and most pleasing... The one most likely to satisfy the demon and therefore save the village."

"No. No, no, no no no. Haruka!" Daisuke slumped to the ground and covered his face with his hands.

"Ignorant peasants."

Ietsugu didn't acknowledge Mitsuo's soft voiced comment though at the moment he totally agreed. "What was actually done with the girl? How was she offered to your imagined demon?" He held back none of the disgust he felt from showing in his voice.

The adults cringed. Several small children cried out, sensing the distress of their parents.

The older of the four men who'd come to hold council that morning, crawled forward. "There, there is a cave on a cliff not too far from here. It is where our ancestors left offerings in the past."

"You will take us there. Now."

#

High on an exposed side of the mountain, the cave appeared as nothing more than a dark depression in the wall. A narrow ledge offered a ready grip for a grapple and rope.

Of the villagers, only Gendou and Taka were allowed to come and show the way. The rest were to wait at the village. Diasuke trailed behind them, looking lost and numb.

The basket procured from behind a set of bushes, contained a rope ladder. After several halfhearted attempts, the two villagers secured it to the ledge.

"The two of you will remain here." Ietsugu said. Mitsuo watched them coldly, his hand resting on the pummel of his sword, making a promise of what would be their reward if they decided to disobey the order. Both men stared only at the ground.

Ietsugu took hold of the ladder, and after testing it, climbed up. Mitsuo and Daisuke followed.

Sunlight only penetrated a foot or so into the cave. Cold air emanated from the interior. Mitsuo lit a lamp and handed it over to Ietsugu. Making sure the sacred papers his father had obtained for him before his journey were still safely tucked within his sleeve, Ietsugu held the lamp before him and turning sideways, shuffled inside.

Daisuke followed him, with Mitsuo remaining to guard the entrance outside.

The cave was narrow for several arm lengths then widened. The cold rose in intensity and the stench of rotting flesh grew cloyingly close.

The diffused light parted the darkness. An ancient shrine sat on the left, hasty repairs and more recent offerings of food and incense evident.

The back of the cave went deep. Yellowed, brittle bones and bone dust covered the floor there like a bed. Nestled in the middle of it lay the decomposing body of a young woman. Bindings were tied around her ankles and wrists, dried blood staining them from her struggles to get loose. A gag was set firmly in her mouth.

Ietsugu frowned, knowing this to have been a dishonorable and agonizing death. Worse, it was done to her by her own people. The anger he'd been holding back so fiercely glowed a little brighter. His knuckles turned white on the hilt of his sword.

"Haruka!" Daisuke lunged past him to fall on his knees beside the decaying body. "Oh, my beloved Haruka!"

The already low temperature plunged. Their breaths frosted before them.

"Daisuke..."

A cloud of mist formed above him, taking on the shape of the dead woman on the floor.

"Haruka-chan!" Daisuke's gasp was filled with both exhilaration and horror.

Moving incredibly slowly so as to not attract attention, Ietsugu set the lamp on the ground behind him.

"Beloved... You've finally come for me." Her ghostly arms extended toward the young man. "I've waited so long." Her face peeled back

into rows of jagged teeth. "You've come just in time to join me in death!"

Daisuke screamed as he was bodily picked up off the floor and flung the length of the cave. Ietsugu rushed forward and slashed at the apparition with his sword to no effect. The blade slid cleanly through Haruka's floating body, not slowing her in the least.

"Come, Daisuke, prove your love to me. Give me your life." She glided forward affection and hate warring over her features.

The traveler struggled to stand, holding his right arm tight to his body.

"Stop! He is not the one who did this to you!" Ietsugu tried to get between them.

With only a flick of her wrist, Haruka sent him flying back onto the bed of bones. Something sharp and hot pierced Ietsugu's hip, making him grimace with pain. The scent of blood wafted around him.

"Beloved. Please!"

The ghost enveloped Daisuke. His eyes bulged, his left hand rising to his throat.

Ietsugu used his sword to pull himself up to his knees. He reached inside his sleeve for one of the folded papers with the almost unintelligible cursive script.

As if sensing the item in his hands, a shrieking wind swirled in the space with brutal torrential force, pushing Ietsugu to the floor and sliding him back toward the entrance.

Flailing for purchase, he stabbed his katana into the ground to keep from being pushed away farther. With gritted teeth, he removed his wakisashi, keeping the ofuda pressed tightly between his hand and the short sword's hilt.

Struggling against the wind, and grimacing at the use he was putting his swords to, Ietsugu used the blades to drive them ahead of him into the dirt and loose shale to pull himself back toward the dead woman's body.

Risking a glance in the ghost's direction, her entire attention appeared to be riveted on her strangling lover. Ietsugu pushed to move faster, knowing she wouldn't be diverted forever.

By the time he made it to the corpse's side, his arms and body shook from the strain of fighting the wind.

Sending a prayer to Buddha and Amaterasu, he let go of the wakisashi and slapped the blessed papers onto the forehead of Haruka's physical body.

Her ghost form screamed as the two made contact, light flashing from the corpse. Her keening wail forced Ietsugu to cover his ears in pain.

Haruka's form expanded and expanded until she seemed to fill every nook and cranny of the cave. With a final shriek, there was a sudden release of pressure, and she was gone.

Daisuke dropped to the ground, coughing. As Ietsugu labored to stand upright, Daisuke seemed to realize the ghost was truly gone. His face scrunched up in pain and unashamed tears poured down his cheeks. "Beloved!"

"Asaka-sama!" Mitsuo squeezed into the room, his sword drawn. Spotting him, the weeping Daisuke, and no one else, he hurried to his master's side confusion warring with the need to make sure his young charge was well.

"I'm all right." Ietsugu waved him off. "We should leave this evil place."

#

Ietsugu stared at where the cave entrance had once stood, full of satisfaction. For four days the villagers were pressed into service to mine rock from the mountain so the cave could be filled and then sealed.

Taka had been sent back to the city with a note to summon a priest and monk. For the last day, the Shinto monk and Buddhist priest had done their best to lay those within to their proper rest and also make sure no demons or spirits were still tied to the place.

Every villager would go through rituals of purification and pay penance through prayer for their part in the misdeed and also help build a proper shrine and housing for a monk. The errors of the past would not be repeated.

Ietsugu removed his gaze from the thick woven rope and lightning shaped papers draped about the closed entrance and stared with some pity at Daisuke. The young man no longer looked quite the same. Lines of sadness and of the things he saw marked him.

The samurai had already decided the young man would go back with them. The sooner he left this place, the faster he might become himself again. Perhaps one day Daisuke might even forget Haruka and the betrayal perpetrated on her by her own people.

The End