

Taro Remembers Heaven

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Submitted: October 30, 2005

Updated: November 19, 2005

Taro, the leader of the Hyrosanryu group of ninjas, tells his story about a little girl who he considers the Heaven on this Earth.

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1 - Birth of Heaven

1 Birth of Heaven

The eleven year-old Taro was running quickly, in search of his next obligation. He frowned, he needed to get to Renjiro Kazuo, and fast. The Leader had a very urgent message for him to deliver. Dodging stealthily past the halls, he halted to a stop when he saw them.

He then noticed the room that they recently vacated. There were some people about, all of them standing before the front door. He noticed Renjiro in the middle, with two men and a woman who was smiling immensely. He straightened and cleared his throat.

One of the men turned to him, "Yes?"

He could now clearly notice Kazuo Renjiro. He was holding a bundle enclosed in sheets, and his eyes, a deep green that was usually so intense, were at the moment gentle as he tenderly held the object closer. He had a smile on his face, and the way he carried the bundle was so affectionate, it was as if it was the most precious thing in the world. It was a striking picture, a man made soft and sentimental by a little something, his face alighted a kind glow by the candles. Taro was almost distracted by the warmth in his features.

"A call for Renjiro-san from the Leader, sir. It is of very high priority."

The man nodded and turned to Renjiro, "Kazuo, an important message for you." The woman bowed and entered into the room they were standing in front of.

The man immediately looked concerned as he approached Taro, but he still hadn't released the object in his hands. That was when Taro noticed a face peeking from underneath. A baby... Renjiro-san's baby. He was shocked, but he didn't show anything of that sort.

He cleared his throat and said in a concise manner, "Yes, sir. The Leader seeks to speak with you as soon as possible about the operation to be held at Edo tonight."

A serious, yet hesitant look flashed across Renjiro's face. "I understand. Come now, Yamaguchi, we must not waste time." The other two men nodded as he continued. "Thank you, young man. We better leave. If you would be so kind as to bring her inside and tell her mother about this."

Taro looked confused, until Renjiro gingerly placed his baby in his hands. "I hesitate leaving her, but please take care of her."

He only had a second to nod, too startled, before Renjiro-san left with the others. When they were gone,

he nervously looked at the baby in his arms.

And then his breath was taken away.

Azure eyes stared widely at him from underneath the sheets. Eyes that were too bright, and not entirely blue... they had a different shade, a unique one that seemed to shine blue-green instead. Her eyes reminded him of the river.

And then the child's face broke into a grin. She just stared at him, as he clumsily moved her closer to examine her. And then there was silence, with only the soft sounds from her curious mouth interrupting every now and then.

"Your eyes are so innocent," he whispered finally. He was reminded of the bitter events in his life that caused him to grow and get accustomed to battles so quickly. Yet all those times, never had he once seen such boundless purity. And it was found in her small eyes. "You trust everyone, and you are vulnerable. Renjiro-san would have a hard time wanting you to be protected, especially when he is not around."

The baby blinked at him. Despite the agitation he felt about holding a child for the first time in his life just a few seconds earlier, grudging, too quick affection surged within him. It was unexplainable. All of his thoughts were centered on her eyes, those that looked up at him adoringly - never had he been looked at that way before. 'Like a river... or an endless ocean, with so many sparkles -- stars reflect you.'

"You are so rare, tiny blue-green eyed chan. I'm going to have to protect you for a little while. Trust me." He found himself whispering. Oh, he was so like a child again at the moment, left defenseless from the charms of an infant.

And without another word, he knocked on the sliding door, all the while watching with childish fascination the various ways she moved, or how her hands tried to raise, or how she would slightly smile...

Then the door opened, and the woman he had earlier seen was surprised to see him. "Oh, Mika-chan!" she exclaimed, glancing at Taro. Mika, chastity... fidelity, how fitting. "Thank you very much. Let me take her to her mother. Come in."

And Mika was taken from his arms. He soon realized that he didn't want to let her go. But the baby wasn't his, and it seemed just as eager to be in her mother's arms again.

So he followed her inside.

2 - 2 Eyes of Heaven

2 Eyes of Heaven

"Come, young man."

Taro froze still as he heard Renjiro-san's voice calling out to him. But wait -- surely he hadn't detected him. He was, after all, a good distance away, hidden behind the wall. But if Renjiro-san *had* seen him, would he be upset?

"Now, young man! There's no use hiding it! I've seen you doing it before, although I have a faint idea why you keep on sneaking up on whoever happens to be holding Mika."

His mouth dropped open.

It was nearly night time, and he had wanted to see the baby again. He was planning on finally asking her mother to let him hold her, even if just for once. After all, he *had* promised to protect the child - though the reason was still unknown. Unfortunately, Mika had been taken outside by her father, so he had decided on postponing his request and just following them. All he wanted was a glimpse, a rare glance at the child who had quickly caught his fascination.

And now here he was, outside the house which held the Renjiro family, hiding behind a shed. And of all things, he had been seen - all those times! And he so prided himself for being one of the best trackers of the Hyrusanryu, and exceptionally the youngest at that - as his trainer had quoted. But now, he knew he was in trouble.

Finding no way out, he then slowly looked through the corner...

And found Renjiro-san staring fully at him. He nearly yelped with surprise. There *was* no use hiding anymore, so he boldly revealed himself and gathered his wits about him. He stood up straight and announced in a clear voice, "I wanted to see her."

"And protect her?" Taro was surprised by the gently placed question, but slowly admitted, "Yes."

The way he was shocked earlier was nothing to his reaction when he saw how Renjiro-san's face immediately broke into a knowing grin. This was Renjiro! Intense, disciplined, Renjiro-san -- smiling!

But Kazuo Renjiro ignored his stunned face and patted the space beside him on the toolshed that served as a bench. "Don't hesitate, sit."

He could have been reluctant, but at Renjiro-san's suddenly kind eyes, he slowly walked over beside

him and sat down the proffered seat. His searching eyes beseeched the man as Renjiro faced his daughter again. When Taro finally turned his eyes to Mika, Renjiro-san lifted her and placed her in his arms. "Here, you can look at her now."

The baby, seemingly pleased to feel him again, gave a distinctive sound, one that sounded like a small, cheerful laugh. It reminded him of the wind chimes on the door of the main building in the Lotus Empire. Momentarily forgetting Renjiro-san, he was jolted when he suddenly spoke.

"You're the one who sent me the Leader's message a week ago, aren't you?"

His eyes widened, and his hands froze, but he relaxed at Renjiro's prodding look and nodded silently.

That was when Mika chose to fuss. She started making sounds of discomfort and was turning about. Taro didn't know what to do all of a sudden, and was frantically wondering if he had hurt her. He was about to panic when Mika started a small cry, and his bewilderment left him helpless. "What--" he couldn't bring himself to ask.

And out of nowhere, Renjiro-san's larger hand took his and drew out his small finger. Taro gave him a confused look, but did not say anything as the older man showed his finger to Mika and used it to rub her chin. The baby's cries were stopped, and another laugh escaped her tiny mouth. Then he moved Taro's hand to her small fist, and Taro's eyes looked on with wonder as her hand enveloped the finger.

"She likes you." Renjiro-san hushed, grinning proudly. "And she likes your pinky finger. Don't worry, you didn't hurt her, she just needed to be comforted and held."

Taro slowly nodded, and stared on as Mika tried to move his finger. His eyes brightened.

"She is beautiful," her father said after several seconds.

"Yes," he whispered as an answer, fully involved in watching as Mika rubbed his finger against her cheek.

"Do you know why you want to protect her?" he suddenly asked, out of the blue.

Taro stopped his ministrations and hesitated a few seconds of thought before answering, "No, I'm not sure, sir."

"Kazuo-san," Renjiro reprimanded. Taro stood still again, then simply nodded.

"You are not used to showing your emotions. Do you know why I called you a young man instead of a boy?"

Taro took in his observations and had to comprehend them before he gave a gradual nod.

"What is your name?"

"Shinomori Taro."

"Well, now, Taro. The answer is, it's because of the way you hardly speak, and of course, your eyes."

He froze again. "A typical reaction." Kazuo-san smirked, but then he moved nearer and lifted Mika from his protesting hands to elaborate. "Look into her eyes, Taro. What do you see?"

Taro recalled the very first time he had seen her and nodded as his reaction returned to his thoughts. He immediately knew the answer, and found it once more as he stared into her eyes again. "Innocence."

Kazuo-san smiled. "Yes, innocence. But for me, it's more than that."

Taro looked at him, a silent question in his eyes. Kazuo smiled, then continued, "For me, it is heaven in her eyes."

"... Heaven?"

"Yes, heaven." The older man nodded. "Innocence, purity that goes beyond the violence we experience today. In her eyes, I see a nature that trusts completely, a love so fulfilling and so complete, it wouldn't give you uncertainty. In her vision, I see the future. I see a spark... a place filled with the innocence and love in her eyes, so full of it that happiness would brim. I see heaven."

He had now taken the baby from Taro and was looking at her eyes as he had. His voice was full of meaning and affection, a rich, caring quality that delved Taro's mind as he listened. "Whenever I fight, I know that I take lives. Is doing that wrong? I am never sure, but I would do everything to protect my ideals, even killing to resolve the differences. I can't do anything about it, you see. I *have* to kill to defend my beliefs. But either way, I still end up doing a lot of damage - I have taken lives and destroyed the dreams and families of others, no matter how much I was the one provoked to do it."

He sighed. "It disappoints me, all the bloodshed that I cause. But when I arrive home, when I finally see her eyes, all of my pain would disappear. Somehow, they make up for all my sins - because, in her, I see what I sought to protect. I see the reason in my life, and my dream. I would know that all I do won't be in vain.

"This is the reason my life, the purpose in all my fights and undertakings - the heaven in her eyes. I know that you would understand. Now, young man, give meaning to your life - and live it. In the end, truly you would be great, if not in public, it will be in the eyes of those you have affected. You will be pleased and will receive true joy, joy in your heart and contentment in your soul."

He then faced Taro himself, placing a lesson in soul. "Set a reason in your life, Taro. And choose the right purpose. Mine is to set the heaven in her eyes to everybody, to see her grow with it and live in it. This is all that I need.

"Warriors without a purpose have no use, they will be nothing - truly useless, a waste of teaching. People with evil purposes, on the other hand, might achieve what they want, but will never succeed. There will never be true joy in their hearts - only madness and confusion, a soul broken by desire."

He pointed to Taro's chest. "But you, on the other hand, still have a choice. Make your life a reason,

Taro, and use it to live and give you direction. Truly, you would become a good fighter, one with determination, and one with the will to live. As long as you are willing to live so that you can defend this reason, you will never die - not in vain."

He then turned to Mika. "I have always loved my purpose, and I found it in her eyes. And I will live! Live and die for heaven."

Taro looked into Mika's eyes once more, and saw the virtue her father had spoken about: the aspect that had enraptured him. It was the very same purity that made her smile at him with such love, the very same affection that caught him. Her innocence, her heaven. What a wonderful place life could be, if heaven was on earth.

"Do you see a purpose in her eyes?"

He nodded solemnly, the will to survive and fight for this simple flit of a baby, to defend the virtues in her eyes, all of them empowering his words. And then fate bestowed a star on him, giving him the center that would soon make him one of the greatest fighters and the leader of the Hyrusanryuu. "I see Heaven in her eyes, Kazuo-san."

3 - 3 Tears of Heaven

3 Tears of Heaven

The only thing that lit the sitting room was a small lamp, and everything was deathly quiet. Taro looked away when he heard the door slide open. Akio froze from beside him.

Mika stood, walking slowly into the room, her eyes frighteningly hopeful. "Is Father home? Will he make it in time for my birthday next week?"

No one answered. The other people in the room were silent, while Omasu started weeping.

Mika worriedly turned to her, "What's wrong, Omasu-chan? You shouldn't cry, you should be happy. I'll be turning eight years old on Wednesday, and Father is coming home! He promised."

She then noticed the new people in the room. "Who are they?"

"They are onmitsu ninjas from Edo, Mika." Juro calmly explained.

"What are they doing here? And why are they all lined up beside you? Is there anything you're hiding behind you? Is it a surprise?" Mika asked, turning to jump. Naoko shut his eyes, and Taro could barely make out a faint sparkle of tears welling from within.

"Mika," Juro began as he knelt before her, "Your Father's back."

"Really?" Mika squealed. "I can't wait to see him. I thought he would not reach my birthday! It has been a month already."

Juro took a deep sigh, "But Mika... he won't be here for your birthday."

Mika looked hurt. "Why? He's here, right? So why couldn't he..." she trailed off.

Juro couldn't answer.

Mika looked at the solemn faces before her. "What... what's wrong, Jiya?"

Juro choked. "Your father fought bravely two days ago, did you know that?"

Mika nodded slowly, growing anxious. "Father is always brave. He's the best father in the world," she said, repeating her most famous words.

From beside Juro, Omasu started to sob.

"What's wrong, Jiya?" Mika asked, her eyes widening with fear. "Why is everyone sad? Why isn't Father here?"

Then she looked behind Juro's shoulder.

From behind the line of fighters, there lay a man on the floor, his body carefully dressed, others parts wrapped in bandages. She then noticed the ruby ring on his hand. "Father?"

Juro trembled. "Yes."

Mika smiled. "Then why is he asleep? Is he tired from the big battle two days ago? Is he?"

Once again, nobody replied to her question.

Mika gasped worriedly, a thought wanting to spring on her mind. But she refused to accept it. She immediately ran to her father. "He must be tired from the journey. Quick, Jiya, let's take him to his room so that he could sleep well."

"Mika..."

She knelt before her father, and then she observed the large bandage on his lower-left abdomen. There was some blood in it. She shook her head, and tears started forming in her eyes. "Quick, Jiya, quick! We have to take care of his big wound so that he won't feel hurt. Right Father?"

When she did not get a reply, she slowly shook her father, "Right, Father?"

The body remained lifeless. She shook him harder, "Please, Father, answer Jiya so that we can help you. Please?"

There was still no answer.

She trembled, "Father, I know you're tired. But we have to heal you, Your clothes will get stained. Please? Please?"

Juro turned to place a hand on her shoulder. "Mika--"

"NO!" Mika screamed, pushing him away. "He promised, HE PROMISED! You have to believe in me, he never breaks his promises!" She smiled shakily, with wavering confidence, then placed her hands on his shoulders and pushed him, "Wake up, Father, open your eyes! We still have to prepare for my party!"

Juro sighed, and tears threatened his eyes. "Mika-chan, he won't be... able to --"

"PLEASE, Father?" Her voice raised a notch as she placed another smile on her face, "Please?"

Kazuo Renjiro did not move.

"Father, wake UP!" Mika shrieked as she held his face. "You can't leave me! Not when you promised."

Please, Father... wake up."

The lamplight flickered.

"Wake up! Wake up..." she urged, her voice faltering. "Wake up for me Father, open your eyes."

And when nothing happened, her mouth fell open, and she slowly withdrew her hands as she stared at her father. She then turned hopeful eyes to them. "We must wait for him to wake up. We'll all watch here the whole night. Right?"

Juro watched helplessly. And Taro finally took it upon himself to tell her. "Mika-chan, your father couldn't stay. He'd been... hit on his side during the battle. We can't wake him up anymore. He has to go to heaven now."

He moved around the body and sat down with Mika. "We have to let--"

Mika shook her head as she faced him, her eyes pleading. "I thought he said heaven was in my eyes! He said that! That means he couldn't leave, not now, not ever. He's going to stay forever with me. He can't go, because I've got heaven in me, Taro-sama!"

She turned to her father, "You can't go, Father, please tell me you won't be leaving. See," she whispered uncontrollably, motioning to her face. "I've got heaven here, you don't have to leave..."

Someone from the ninjas announced, "It's time. We can't leave him here now, he'll fall apart." Juro knew they were mentioning Renjiro's body, so he nodded, hating every moment of it.

"No, you can't take him away!" Mika yelled as she grabbed on to her father, ignoring the faint smell that seeped to her nose. "He will stay! He will stay with me!"

The men looked on sympathetically, unaware of what they should do. Taro took a deep sigh as he slowly disentangled Mika from her father. "Mika, you have to let go, or your father's body will separate," he had to tell her when she wouldn't let go. She only shook her head and held on tighter.

"Taro," Juro said. He nodded, and quickly tore her grasp from her father. Mika yelped, kicked and screamed, but Taro held her to him and motioned to the others. They nodded dutifully and went to take him away.

"No! Where are they taking him?! Where! He's tired, can't they see?" Mika cried out while tears flowed in her eyes. "I have to be with him."

And they all watched with pained eyes when Mika grabbed on to her father's small finger, not wanting to release him. "No..."

Juro shook his head. "Mika, your father has to be buried to have proper death rites."

"Buried? They are going to put him underground? No, please don't make them do that, Jiya. Don't let them take my Father away from me, please Jiya! Please!" Mika pleaded as she frantically tried to free

herself off Taro.

"I'm sorry, Mika."

But Mika kicked harder, "Taro-sama, please!"

Taro couldn't bring himself to look at her eyes.

"Then take me to him! He would get lonely underground! He'll be sad because it's so dark, just like the well. I have to be there to hug him and tell him that everything would be all right. Everybody, please! I'll sleep beside him too, anything -- just so he won't be alone down there!"

She saw the tears in their eyes. Even Akio had them. She released her breath. "Anyone, please... please... I beg of you, please bury me too, don't let him leave me. I can't just leave him underground -- he needs me a lot, you see? He said so. So that we can be together, forever."

But the men shook their heads to each other, and then they moved away. Mika had to hold on to her Father's small finger. "No..."

And then it was yanked from her hand. "NO! NO, NO, NO!" she screeched.

Taro then hugged her with crushing force, "You have to let him go, Mika-chan."

"I can't... I can't..." the girl chanted.

And the night was filled with a child's sobs, whispering about broken promises, begging a soul that had permanently left to come back again. Cries of disbelief and misunderstanding ensued, and all of them weren't surprised when the lamp's light flickered out.

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It was a Monday, and she was supposed to be sleeping already, but she kept asking Taro some questions.

"Will you protect me, Taro-sama?"

"Yes, Mika-chan, yes."

"Will you teach me how to do kenpo just like you?"

"Yes, Mika-chan, when you grow older."

"Will I be a good person when I grow older?"

A sigh. "Yes, you will. I'll make sure of that."

"When I have problems, will you help me?"

"Of course."

She urged. "When you have problems, will you come to me?"

A smile, "Yes, I will. You comfort me."

Later still, "Do you believe that I have heaven in my eyes, just like Father?"

A pause. "Yes, I do."

"Will you never forget that? Never ever?"

"I'll never forget, Mika-chan."

"One day, when you feel lost, will you look for heaven in me? It's very special, and I'm going to give it to you."

He hugged her, "Yes, yes, yes. Now Mika, go to sleep."

"But do you promise?"

He sighed, but gave a smile. "Promise."