



Mother Shinobi

By James O'Rell

Tsuyomi glanced back just in time to see a throwing weapon streak past her head. She slid her hand up her back, over two large lumps hanging in a sling, to ensure no blade breached their wool protectors. Her hand returned to her pouch, brushing against the vial of tranquilizer inside.

“I hope it wasn’t too strong,” she murmured. She took another look back at the two parcels hanging motionless from her back.

Another blade flew toward Tsuyomi from an invisible source. She deftly removed her single, short, curved blade from its casing and deflected the attack, which did not even seem to be on target. The throwing weapon spun through the air like a New Year’s firework, letting off fragments of light in every direction.

Tsuyomi pivoted on her right leg and pushed off the snow-covered ground with her left, which resulted in a dive for the throwing knife. As the blade spun toward the ground, she grasped the handle and used her right leg to propel herself into a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree spin. She threw the dagger back with as much force as she could muster at where she assumed its source was. No audible sound followed, which told Tsuyomi that her throw was either caught by the owner of the dagger or fell harmlessly in the snow.

Once she had both feet on the ground, she made another one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn and pushed her feet against the ground, creating heavy crunching noises in the snow. She leaped off that position like a leopard, picking up as much speed as she could, fighting the snow as she slid her blade back into its case.

“I’m sorry, sweethearts,” she said to the bundles that weighed down her back. “I don’t mean to jar you around so much. If we survive, I will tell you the story one day, and you will understand.”

Tsuyomi quickly glanced to her right and left. Shadows danced on the surrounding trees, created by the moonlight that shone down from above with no cloud in sight to hide it away. The sight of the shadows made Tsuyomi shudder. Her eyes glanced down toward the snow; her lips pushed together tight as her teeth contacted each other. A lone tear found its way from her right eye to her cheek. She quickly removed it with a stroke of her gloved hand.

Tsuyomi searched ahead and saw the town of Hansthlm, in the country of Denmark, peeking out from outside what seemed like an infinite row of trees. She could see the mast of a ship off in the distance, standing above the small rooftops of quaint homesteads. She squeezed her gloved hand as her eyes opened wider and pushed herself to run even faster.

As her stride hastened, the shadows on her left and right began to outpace her. In one brief moment, they changed direction and dashed out in front of her, their speed almost overtaking her own.

As the figures came together in front of her, Tsuyomi poured on one more ounce of speed, managing to slide right inside the gap before her that was rapidly shrinking. She threw out a high kick with her left leg to her right, hitting one opponent square in the chest while cocking back and letting loose a punch that rattled the jaw of the man coming in on her left. Both men spun like rolling pins in mid-air and fell into the snow.

“Tsuyomi... wait!” a familiar voice beckoned from behind as she continued her unwavering path to the town, eyes locked on the mast that stood in the distance.

“I’ll get us there, I promise,” she said, glancing back at her twin bundles. “He won’t stop me, even if I must cut through the entire clan. I won’t allow him to harm us.”

Tsuyomi looked forward just in time to see the two men standing in her way, only a few yards ahead. She slid to a stop just outside the grasp of the two men and leaped as high as she could. She latched onto a thick tree limb and rocked back as the two men hurtled after her. She propelled herself forward with both legs pointed ahead and slamming one into each man’s chest, sending all three of them plummeting to the ground. She landed on top of them, one foot on each man’s chest, propelled herself off them, and broke out into another dash. She could feel the men catching up from behind, helping their comrades off the ground as they wheezed and coughed from the blow.

Tsuyomi raised an eyebrow when she heard her pursuers stop to help their comrades.

“Something doesn’t make sense,” she said to herself. “They should be more hostile than this.”

She peered up and saw piercing blue eyes reflecting moonlight, glaring at her from ahead. Other eyes, none quite as radiant, beamed out at her from behind those intimidating blue eyes. She knelt on one leg and slid to a halt, creating a small pile of snow that crept up her leg.

She took another glance at the mast, which was now more visible than ever over the rooftops of the town harbor that lay even closer in the distance. She pulled her eyes down slightly, still keeping the mast in her sight but enough to glare at the man with the sharp blue eyes. Tsuyomi slowly lifted her weapon out of its casing and held it sideways in front of her.

As the moment passed, a deadly silence filled the air, and she took in the moonlight reflecting off those powerful eyes. Tsuyomi’s labored breath felt as loud to her as cannon

fire in the stillness this moment exuded. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the man with those haunting eyes opened his mouth ever so slightly.

“Sheath your blade, my daughter; you are among members of the clan. No one is here to harm you,” he said.

She momentarily pulled her eyes off the mast and let them fully meet his. “But... I...” she stammered as she slowly lowered her blade and placed it snugly into its case. She stood up to her full height, standing at least two hands higher than even the tallest man in the group.

“I owe you all an apology,” he said. “I had not told Tsuyomi that we would be coming to retrieve her, and she must have mistaken us for the enemy. I give my sincerest apologies to you all.”

“I don’t understand...” she stuttered.

“You have done well in retrieving these children, Tsuyomi, and I owe you an apology as well,” he said, arms now wide open. “I encouraged Cho to play a game with you and toss a few kunai since it was obvious you mistook us for enemies. Sometimes, I take my games too far, and I apologize. Those newborns hanging on your back could have been harmed in the crossfire.”

One of the men looked up and smiled quickly, “I should not have let old man Krojo trick me into such foolishness; I am sorry, Tsuyomi.”

Tsuyomi said nothing but shook her head in reply.

“I see my daughter is still a bit shaken from the shock of the chase. Please leave us so she can calm down, and we will be right behind you, all four of us,” Krojo said.

As the men passed Tsuyomi, their simple garb came into view. Disguised as a European commoner, each man wore clothes made of thick wool, which seemed to be layered on by the ton. The colors were all shades of brown and gray. Most of their faces were hidden in hoods and scarves, partly to keep them warm and partly to conceal their Japanese nationality from prying eyes.

As soon as the men were out of earshot, the man with the piercing eyes moved toward Tsuyomi slowly. As he came into view, Tsuyomi released a slight gasp, barely audible. He limped on one leg and held a wooden walking stick in the corresponding hand. It had been unapparent before, but his breathing was extremely labored. He was obviously trying to conceal this.

“Why did you disregard your orders?” he said.

“Age has not treated you well,” she said. She glanced up at the mast and let her eyes wander back down to her father’s. She retrieved her blade from its sheath and made for a quick slash at her father’s chest.

He held his cane out in front of him to block the blow and said, “Forget my hardships. Why didn’t you kill your target?” The blade collided with the bamboo, resulting in a loud thud. Tsuyomi could not help but think that the sound the blade made when colliding with the bamboo did not sound right.

“He’s dead now,” she replied, placing the thoughts of the odd-sounding bamboo out of her mind as she attacked with a quick sweep under the legs. “His boat was lost at sea.”

“Why didn’t *you* kill him?” Krojo said as he sprang back with what seemed like cat-like reflexes.

“Our intelligence was wrong. He was not a weapons merchant but a simple shipmaster. There would have been no honor in killing him,” she said as she brought her small blade down on her shorter father with both hands.

“Honor is for samurai!” he said. “We cannot afford honor,” he brought his staff up to block her two-handed strike. There again was the strange sound of the bamboo striking the blade. It did not sound normal to Tsuyomi. Something was rattling inside the cane.

“It was simply wrong,” she said. She clenched her teeth together as she pressed down with all her might on her father’s cane.

“I see, and whoring yourself out to him was right,” he said as he glanced at the twin bundles on her back as they fought for leverage.

“I did no such thing. I married him first!” she shot back as she found some reserve strength, pushing her father down a bit farther.

Krojo mustered enough strength and pushed his daughter off his cane. She stumbled backward, nearly walking into a tree. She stopped herself by spinning around and slamming her hands up against the tree. With Tsuyomi’s back turned, Krojo stood up to full height for the first time and cracked his neck left and right. He resumed his hunched position; weight still being held on his bamboo walking stick.

Krojo said with labored breath, “Look here, I have an offer for you. Take it or leave it. We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

“What’s that, father? Kill my children as custom demands and execute me for treason? That’s not much of a deal!” she said as she prepared to strike.

“No, I would not allow such a thing,” he said. She backed off her predestined strike.

“What is it then?” she asked as she stood up straight. She glanced back at her children and then at the mast in the distance.

“I am aware of what custom says, but we can just pretend the children are not yours, as I told the men. You may continue doing your duties as a shinobi, and your children will live a protected existence within the clan,” he said.

“Do my duties as a shinobi? What is that supposed to mean? In other words, will someone else raise them? I will not allow some stranger to raise my children!” She clenched her jaw together and prepared for another attack.

“No stranger will raise your children,” he said, holding both hands on the top of his straight bamboo cane.

“So, who will raise my children?” she said as she cut her attack short once again.

“I think you know the answer to that question,” he said while straightening his simple European commoner disguise.

“I will never allow my children to have another childhood like mine!” she said as she took her small blade and brought it down on her father with both hands.

Krojo slowly lifted his cane to block and then muscled her blade off it once again as he said, “You and I both know that you could never raise children! You could never sit at home. You belong in the night. You are our clan’s mistress of death! You will never be anything else!”

“I am what I choose to be, Father!” she said as she staggered back.

“Fine, say I find a way for you to raise your children within the clan without the clan losing faith in my leadership. Say I somehow get the clan to accept your children who were begotten from a forsaken union. Let’s say I do this. How would it be fair to those babes to worry about their mother when she goes out for weeks on assignment or does not return at all?”

“I get it now, Father,” she glared at him. “You want me to come back and pretend my babies are not mine. You want to raise them without the knowledge that I am their mother. That is unacceptable; no child deserves that. No child of mine will be raised with lies!” She spun around, bringing her leg down to the ground.

Krojo hopped back but stumbled slightly on his seemingly bad leg and fell to the ground after his daughter's sweep attack. Snow flew up from the ground from the impact of Krojo's body as Tsuyomi took two giant steps around her fallen father and was off sprinting.

"Give up, father," she hollered as she glared back at him, scrambling to his feet. "My children will be raised by their mother, and you can do nothing about it. Even when your legs functioned correctly, you could not catch me in a sprint, and you will not do it with a crippled leg!"

Tsuyomi dashed as fast as she could, stepping lightly on the snow. The tree branches were motionless in the deep winter, and heavy snow and ice inhibited the movement that the gentle breeze typically caused. The bleak landscape seemed to snuff out any sound that usually would have been present in a living forest at night. The surrounding area lacked the nightly calls of owls. No crickets were about to stir up the deadly silence that embodied the forest this evening. The winter killed all the noise, except for the trees creaking due to the stress of all the excess snow that burdened their branches. Complete silence was the forest's anthem, strictly enforced by winter's grasp.

Even though the forest exuded complete silence, Tsuyomi felt like there was an explosion of sound around her. Her labored breath was again nearly deafening, and every step she took felt like a landmine exploding underfoot. She felt as if her ears were going to bleed from the small noises that her terrified mind amplified to the extreme.

Tsuyomi jerked her head back but quickly faced forward. She could feel her father catching up to her at what felt like an uncanny rate. She again turned back to look, and this time accomplished that small objective. There ran Krojo, still a good thirty paces behind her. Tsuyomi looked down at her sleeping children, and her eyes grew narrow. She again faced forward and pushed herself into a burst of speed.

Tsuyomi glanced upward and saw the mast, which was getting larger and larger as she pushed herself harder and harder. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Tsuyomi opened her eyes when she felt the terrain abruptly change underfoot. What was once a foot of snow underfoot was a hard brick street in the center of the town. Tsuyomi turned once again and looked back. Her father was still thirty paces or more behind her.

"Father, this is the last time I will grace my eyes on you. Goodbye," she said to herself.

She took longer strides now that she was on the brick path, careful not to step on a loose brick. People standing around the town stared at her as she dashed past and took another curious look at the man who followed. Most of the people just shrugged their shoulders

and went about their business, while others marveled at the sheer speed at which the two strangers conducted their chase.

The ringing of a bell shocked the night air as a man yelled, "All aboard!" Tsuyomi gritted her teeth and continued. She turned her head partially to look back but remembered what she had said to herself earlier and placed her eyes squarely on the ship's mast at the harbor. She could not help but feel that her father was gaining on her unusually quickly.

The pair of shinobi turned the corner onto the dock and continued their chase. Tsuyomi saw the ship leaving port. The color drained out of her face. Then, she replaced her stark face with a slight smile. She continued at this breakneck speed, paying no heed to those she nearly knocked down as she traveled down the dock. As the pier ended, she bent her knees and went into a medium, moving crouch. As she pushed off the dock, her ears detected the sound of a blade coming free of a scabbard. She could hear and feel the air move as a blade just barely missing her high upper back, right where the neck connects to the back. At this moment, she felt lighter than ever as she sailed through the air, as the audible thud of her father hitting the hard wooden surface of the dock radiated into the night.

As Tsuyomi landed on the ship's deck, her mouth gaped wide open, and her eyes did the same. "I can't believe he tried to kill me..." she muttered to herself.

She examined her surroundings and saw the very typical crew of this very typical boat on which she had arranged passage. The men stared at her as she stood before them, still crouching, hands on the floor from landing on the deck. She stood up and examined the boat. Its age was apparent, with the warping of the deck's floor and several patched holes in the sail.

"You, Mary?" the captain said, not even looking up from his work behind a mahogany desk, which was oddly on the boat's main deck and not in some lower chamber of the ship.

"Yeah, that's me," she said with labored breath.

"This boat should serve our purposes just fine," she said quietly to herself as she looked back. The color drained from her face. Her wool satchel, her precious cargo, was gone.

Tsuyomi turned her eyes and searched the harbor, which was rapidly disappearing in the night. On the edge of the dock, Krojo was still on the ground from his dive, her wool bundle in hand, with the strap sliced clean. Her saucer-shaped eyes watched him as he stood up, put the babies on the ground, and picked up a sword with a bamboo handle from the ground. He turned and bent over and found the bamboo casing that was the sword's home. He kneeled down gently and picked up the bundle, fastening it around his back. Krojo

turned away from the dock and tapped his bamboo staff-sword on his right shoulder. Tsuyomi could hear him whistling a tune as he walked away briskly, standing at full height, no longer holding all of his weight on the staff and no longer favoring one of his legs.

Tsuyomi's teeth bit into her lip; blood rushed to her face as she screamed, "William, Daniel!" She prepared to dive into the water. Before she made more than a step, arms came from behind and held her back.

"Miss, you'll kill yourself jumping into that water! You'll never last the swim!" a male voice warned.

Tsuyomi watched helplessly as her father disappeared into the night with her children in tow. Her knees slammed into the deck of the ship with a loud thwack as tears streamed from both eyes while the boat pulled away from the harbor.

"You bastard!" she howled into the frozen night.

Krojo closed his eyes tightly as he strolled off with his grandchildren in tow. A small tear escaped from one of his eyes as he took a deep breath.