# The Gargoyle

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Extract

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# XVII.

Long ago in old Japan, a girl named Sei was born to a glassblower named Yakichi. At first her father was disappointed that she was not a son, but his disappointment ended the second that he held her. From that moment on he was devoted to her, and she to him.

Yakichi watched with proud eyes as Sei grew from a spirited child into an intelligent young lady. That she was beautiful was beyond question and, in her fine features, Yakichi could see his late wife's eyelids and cheekbones. The mother died when Sei was just a child and this made the father and daughter hold each other all the tighter.

On the verge of adulthood, Sei decided to follow in her father's footsteps. Yakichi felt great joy in her decision and his happiness was now complete: his knowledge wouldn't die with him, after all. Sei adopted the title of Glassblower's Apprentice and showed remarkable potential and quick progress. She had a delicate touch and, more important, she could envision the object before it was blown. Technique can always be learned, Yakichi knew, but Sei was born with the gift of vision. She could see beauty where others saw only empty air.

Sei studied well under her father's tutelage, learning just how hot to stoke the fire and just how forcefully to blow. She learned to read the bright glow of the heated glass. She worked diligently to develop

her understanding of breath; for she knew that with breath she could create a world. She imagined herself breathing life into the glass and, with every week that passed, Sei came closer to realizing the loveliness of the objects that she could picture in her imagination.

Yakichi began to bring Sei to the local weekend market, where he maintained a stand to sell their wares. Men started to come in swarms. They claimed they wanted to look at the glasswork but really, of course, they came to look at the captivating young woman. "How like glass you yourself are," one old man couldn't help but say, scuttling away like a crab across a beach when he realized that the words had actually slipped aloud from his claws.

Soon, their table was selling out before lunchtime. Almost all the pieces were purchased by men—even as gifts for their own wives—simply because they wanted to own a container of Sei's breath.

Yakichi was pleased. Business was stronger than ever, finances were good, and Sei was becoming a fine glassblower. But for all their success, Yakichi wished a husband for his daughter. Though he was a protective father, he wanted her to experience all that life had to offer and, he thought, a "beneficial" marriage would better their family line.

So Yakichi took stock of the men who frequented the stand. There were artisans, landowners, fishermen and farmers, soldiers and samurai. Certainly, he mused with a smile, there would be no shortage of suitors. After all, Sei had beauty, skill, health, a pleasing personality, and loyalty. She would be a fine wife and good mother, anyone could see that, and it would be easy to arrange an advantageous marriage.

When Yakichi approached his daughter to suggest this, she was quite shocked. "I know this is the tradition," she cried, "but I never thought that you would ask it of me. I will marry for love, and love alone."

The force of his daughter's conviction surprised Yakichi, for she had never before gone against his wishes. Marriage was for improving one's family position, the old man thought; marriage was not

something to be undertaken for love. And yet Sei insisted and, because Yakichi adored her, he acquiesced. Still he worried, because there was no one in his daughter's heart.

But, as is often the case in these matters, Sei soon met a young man, and she did fall quite completely in love with him. At first, Yakichi was displeased because Sei had chosen Heisaku, a simple farm boy with neither money nor prospects. However, the boy had a pure, good heart. So, maybe . . .

Yakichi remembered his own departed wife. Although theirs had been an arranged marriage, they had been lucky and Sei had been conceived in love. Buoyed by the memory of his own good fortune, Yakichi decided that he could hope for nothing less for his daughter. He gave his blessings to Sei and Heisaku.

It was about this time that one of Sei's more inspired pieces—a glass flower—was given to a daimyo, a local feudal lord, by one of his servants. This daimyo was despised and feared for his brutal temper. He had no time for glass flowers and angrily asked the meaning of the trivial thing.

The servant, always looking for special favor, said, "I thought you might like to know, my lord, that this glass flower was created by the most beautiful girl in all the land." The daimyo's ears pricked up and the servant quickly added, "And she is unmarried." The servant, you see, had recently overheard the daimyo talking about his desire to start producing children, saying that only the most beautiful and skilled woman would suffice.

The daimyo quickly decided on a plan of action. He sent out a message that he had in mind a commission for a great glass statue, and that he'd heard Sei and her father were the most skilled glassblowers in all of Japan. For this reason, the message claimed, he was summoning them.

The daimyo had no more interest in commissioning a glass statue than he had in commissioning a ladder to the moon. He was interested in owning land and castles and cattle and rice fields. And a beautiful woman. Yes, that interested him very much. But Sei and Yakichi

knew nothing of this, and were only excited. They imagined that this might be the first of many noble commissions—in short, the realization of their dreams. So the father and daughter loaded up their little cart and set off for the daimyo's castle.

They were admitted into the main court, where the daimyo was waiting, and his eyebrows went up at the sight of Sei. His gaze followed her around the room; to Sei, it felt like cockroaches upon her skin. She could tell immediately that this was not a good man, as he sat there turning one of her glass flowers over and over in his grubby fingers. But this was not about her feelings, she told herself, and all she could do was give the best presentation possible.

Sei and her father showed the daimyo their finest works and described them in detail. She showed crystal cranes and glass-bubble blowfish with translucent skin. She displayed tinted sake glasses and heavy goblets. She exhibited plates and toy horses and wind chimes that produced pure notes in the slightest breeze. When father and daughter were finished, a rainbow of glass lay before the daimyo.

The daimyo was impressed, sure enough, but by the artist, not the art. Sei was the most enticing girl that he'd ever seen. He clapped as Sei and Yakichi bowed deeply. "I have made my decision," he announced.

The father and daughter held their breath, which was highly uncommon for glassblowers. They waited hopefully but the words were not at all what they expected. As he fingered the glass flower, the daimyo said, "Sei is fit to be my wife and bear my children. She should be overjoyed with her good fortune."

Sei knew that this was a very powerful man and that to oppose him would be very difficult. Nonetheless, she could not stop herself. "But I love another."

Yakichi immediately begged pardon for his daughter's abruptness. When pressed, however, he did confirm the truth of her statement. The daimyo was livid and the glass flower snapped in the involuntary fist that he made. Who could compete with a lord? He demanded to know who this "other" was.

Sei spoke up. "He's only a farm boy, but my love for him is true."

The daimyo asked, "What is his name?"

Sei feared that if she told, Heisaku would be hunted down and killed. She looked at her feet for a moment and then lifted her head to meet the daimyo's gaze. "The name of a simple farm boy should be of no consequence to a lord."

The daimyo was shocked by the girl's audacity. Then he laughed, too loudly, too spitefully. "A farm boy? You dare to choose a farm boy over me? You dare to withhold his name?" The daimyo looked down at his hand and saw that he was bleeding where the broken glass flower had cut him. The blood calmed him because it reminded him who he was.

"You will not marry this farm boy," he stated with certainty, "and you should thank me now for the life that I have saved you from. You will marry me."

Sei spoke with equal certainty. "I will not marry you. I will marry the farm boy or I will marry no one."

The daimyo's counterargument was swift and merciless. "Very well. Marry, then. Marry this farm boy and I will execute your father. But marry me and your father shall live."

Sei stood dumbstruck, for never could she have imagined herself in such a position. Never could she have imagined a man such as this. The daimyo continued, "In one week, you will return to this court and speak a single word. 'Yes' means you will marry me and your father will live. 'No' means you refuse me and your father will die. A single word. Think well, Sei." With this, the daimyo threw the shards of flower at her feet and swept out of the courtyard.

Father and daughter were released from the castle to ponder their answer. There was nowhere they could hide; they could not just pack up and move, as they would be found wherever they went. Yakichi pleaded with Sei to say no. He was an old man with only a few more years to live, he argued, but she had her entire life ahead of her. The father was willing to die so that the daughter was not condemned to a lifetime of unhappiness.

Sei wouldn't hear of this. She refused to make a decision that would kill her father. And yet, she knew the unhappy waste that her life would become with the brutal daimyo.

That night, Sei was unable to sleep. She tossed in her bed, considering the problem from all sides, but there seemed to be no way out. Then, shortly before dawn, inspiration came and she knew what she must do. When Yakichi awoke, he found his daughter gone and, in her place, a note stating that she would be back in a week to face the daimyo.

First, Sei went to her farm boy and explained the situation. She told Heisaku that he was her one true love but that she would never be able to speak to him again. The last words she said to him were "If you listen to the wind very carefully, you'll be able to hear me whisper my love for you." Then she disappeared.

Days passed, and Yakichi began to think that his daughter must have run away. Though it saddened him that he would be unable to say goodbye, he was reassured that she would live. When a week had gone by, the father appeared before the daimyo to say that Sei had disappeared and that he was pleased to forfeit his life in her stead.

The daimyo was about to order the father's execution when two women, clothed in simple robes and with shaved heads, entered the courtyard. It took even Yakichi a moment to realize that the younger woman was Sei. He broke into tears now that Sei had reappeared to marry this awful man.

"What is this?" the daimyo demanded. "Why have you shaved your head? Who is this woman with you?"

But neither Sei nor the older woman spoke.

The daimyo raged, "What is this insolence? I command you to speak!"

Still, Sei and the older woman remained silent.

"What is your answer? Will you be my wife, and save your father's life? Or shall I kill him because of your selfishness? Answer my question—yes or no, will you marry me?"

And still, neither Sei nor the older woman responded.

The daimyo spat on the ground. "Execute the old man!" he commanded. But Sei raised her hand to stop the two soldiers who stepped forward to take her father. She approached the daimyo and held out a sheet.

He gestured to one of the others in the court to take the note, as if it were beneath him to handle it personally, and growled, "Read it aloud, so that everyone can hear the words of this most disrespectful girl!"

The courtier glanced over the note and cleared his throat. He did not want to read what it said. But he had no choice:

> One week ago, you asked me to be your wife. The word yes would seal our engagement, and the word no would ensure my father's death. I will speak no words, for I am now *mugon no gyo no ama-san*.

The final words got caught in the courtier's throat. He knew how this would displease the lord, as *mugon no gyo* meant "the discipline of not talking" and *ama-san* meant "nun."

The courtier cleared his throat again and continued to read:

> I have taken vows of silence and poverty, and I have shaved my head to show my dedication. I have moved to the temple on the highest mountain of the region. It is here that we feel closest to Buddha. I cannot marry you because I am already wed to the Universe. I cannot speak the answer to your question, because my vows will not allow it. Therefore, with no answer, you must release my father and I will return to the mountain temple to spend my life in devotion.

The daimyo was stunned. Though powerful, he knew better than

to contradict the Great Buddha. He thought for a few moments and then made his response.

"I must commend you for your commitment," he said. "I would not think to stop you from returning to the temple. Please do so."

Sei bowed her head to hide the smile that might betray her sense of victory.

"But before I let you go," the daimyo continued, "I require that you confirm, yet again, your promise of eternal silence."

Sei bowed once more to indicate that she did. "Good," continued the daimyo, "for if you *ever* speak again, I promise you this: your father's life will be forfeit, and you will become my wife. And if your farm boy *ever* visits you at the temple, I will kill both him and your father and make you my wife. Is this clear?"

The daimyo let the proclamation sink in for a moment. "Do I have your word, your Holy Promise, that you shall never speak, nor ever see your farm boy, again?"

Sei stood silent for a moment, then nodded. The daimyo declared, "I am satisfied."

On her way out of the castle, Sei saw Heisaku hidden in the wooden rafters. How much he loved her, to risk such a foolhardy gesture. Heisaku looked down with the saddest of eyes, for now he truly understood the gravity of the situation. Sei looked up at him and silently mouthed the phrase *Aishiteru,* "I love you." Her glassblower's breath carried these words to the farm boy's ears, and it was just as Sei had promised: if he listened very hard, he could hear her whispers upon the wind.

Yakichi and Sei were taken by armed escort to the mountain temple. Her father said goodbye, but Sei, of course, could say nothing. She cried silent tears and Yakichi promised to send her a gift as soon as he could. And then he was gone.

Soon the present arrived: a full set of glassblowing tools. The other *ama-san* were happy to allow her this luxury, as they were deeply devoted to beauty and saw Sei's art as yet another way to serve Buddha. Besides, the objects would provide a source of income

to help meet their modest needs. Even nuns know that while poverty is a virtue, it is terribly inconvenient.

Sei was allowed to convert an empty room of the temple, and every day she worked to create all manner of objects, from dinnerware to artwork. The days became weeks and the weeks became months. Her work grew increasingly beautiful, as she perfected her techniques. And all the while, she was slowly crafting a statue in the likeness of Heisaku.

Sei would work on the statue each time she felt the need to speak, as a way to articulate her love. This meant that she worked on it daily. She created it lovingly, one minuscule section at a time. It began with the ball of his right foot. It expanded to the heel. Then, the toes. With each addition—ankle, lower shin, upper shin, knee—she would whisper while blowing the section. *Aishiteru.* The word was captured in the glass bubble. *Aishiteru.* "I love you."

Miles away, Heisaku would feel the words in his ears. They would travel his spine and into his heart. He'd stop his plow and turn his eyes towards the distant mountain. And so it continued for years. Each time Sei felt the need to speak her love, she would blow a section of the statue, encasing her whispered breath in Heisaku's hipbone, his finger, his shoulder, his ear . . . *Aishiteru, aishiteru, aishiteru.*

When the statue of the farm boy was completed, her love was not. So she started to create surroundings for him, beginning with a field of glass lilies in which he could stand. Later, when the lilies were completed, she would have to find something else. *Perhaps,* she thought, *I will make a tree for my beloved to stand under. . . . Creating the leaves alone would provide enough work to make my life bearable.*

And so her life went until one morning, like any other, when Sei was cleaning herself in the mountain stream. The cold water felt good on her skin but as she washed out her hair, she felt a sharp quick pain in her neck. Before she could even react, her arms and legs began to stiffen.

Sei had been bitten by insects many times, but this was the first time she had been stung by this particular species of wasp and, as fate

would have it, she suffered a severe allergic reaction. Her throat tightened, her body would not respond, and she became unable to move. Her paralyzed body was washed down the stream until it became caught upon a rock. For two hours she lay there, as the intense cold of the stream seeped into every corner of her flesh.

Eventually, another *ama-san* found Sei and dragged her out of the water. Sei's eyes were unresponsive and the cold water had dropped her pulse so low as to be undetectable. More *ama-san* were called but none could find any sign of life and, despite their vows of silence, a chorus of tears broke the still mountain air that morning.

Sei's paralysis was total, but she could see everything, right up until the moment the nuns respectfully closed her eyelids, believing her to be dead. Even when she had warmed slightly, the venom still immobilized her. For three days, the *ama-san* prayed silently over her. Yakichi was alerted and came to bury the daughter who had sacrificed her life so that he might live.

The daimyo also came, to ensure that this was no hoax. He had heard that Sei was to be buried, which made him suspicious as it was a well-known fact that Buddhists were cremated so the flames would purify the soul. If flesh remained, the soul would still long for its existence on Earth and feel uneasy in Heaven. However it was Sei's own written request that she be buried, because she wanted to exist forever as a part of the earth that Heisaku would continue to till.

Yakichi had brought Heisaku with him, but introduced him as a new glassblowing apprentice. Fear of the daimyo made this lie necessary. Who knew what he might do if he realized that this was the youth who had bested him for Sei's affections?

The daimyo was the one who shut the lid to the coffin after ensuring that Sei was truly inside. Unable to move, Sei lay there listening to his horrible voice, "Yes, I am satisfied. She really is dead." Sei was thankful that her eyelids had been drawn shut, for how awful it would have been if her last sight had been this loathsome man's face.

Sei heard the sound of the stretching ropes as her coffin was low-

ered into the ground and her body given to the earth. Yakichi threw the first shovelful of dirt into the grave and Heisaku threw the next. All the while, Sei listened as the dirt thudded against the lid of her coffin.

And then there was a miracle. She felt the poison in her veins wear thin and her body begin to loosen. She was able to open her eyes but saw only darkness. She could wiggle her fingers and toes but was not yet recovered enough to lift her arms or legs, so she could not bang on the lid. But she knew that if she yelled, those above would be able to hear her. She could feel the ability creeping back into her throat, and felt elation that she would not die after all. All she had to do was yell. . . .

Then Sei remembered her promise. She would become the wife of the daimyo if she spoke even a word to save herself. Her father would be executed, and Heisaku as well. The daimyo was right there with them, so there could be no denying that she had broken her word. There could be no denying that Heisaku had visited the temple.

And so, Sei shut her mouth and allowed herself to be buried alive. She listened to the dirt being thrown into her grave, with the sound becoming more muffled as every shovelful piled up above her. When the sound stopped altogether, she knew that the hole had been filled and that she was sealed into the earth.

Above the ground, Yakichi and Heisaku cried at the unfairness of Sei's life. She had given up so much to protect the ones she loved, and this was her reward. As for the daimyo, he cared nothing about the woman who had been buried before him; he was simply satisfied to know that she had not tricked him once again.

As he'd never been to the temple before and it was unlikely he would ever return, the daimyo decided to explore the grounds before returning to his castle. The *ama-san* tried to prompt him along a path that would keep him away from Sei's workshop but they were unsuccessful. When he pushed his way into the shop, he was astonished to see the glass likeness of Yakichi's new "apprentice" standing there in

a half-finished field of lilies. The daimyo was no fool: he immediately understood that this was a statue of the farm boy whom Sei had loved so well, and thus he also knew that the boy pretending to be the apprentice was Sei's great love.

Light poured in through the temple windows and lit the statue. The very beauty of it, the care and detail, mocked the daimyo. He picked up a wooden rod that lay upon the workbench and swore that he would destroy the statue first, and then destroy the real boy. The daimyo lunged forward, swinging the rod like a scythe to cut through the glass lilies that surrounded the statue. The swipe was mighty, and broke through dozens in a single stroke.

There was an enormous blast as glass petals and stems erupted everywhere, riding a massive wave of sound. All the whispers of love that Sei had encased in her lilies came rushing forth simultaneously. Their force was so great that the glass shards traveled outward as if on the wind of a hurricane. They cut the daimyo completely, disfiguring him beyond recognition. The sound was so thunderous that he was deafened and all his hair turned instantly white.

The noise exited the workshop and spread out across the sky over Japan. People in every corner of the country could hear it, and later all agreed that it was the most beautiful thing they'd ever heard. It sounded like pure love.

The daimyo lived, but as a hobbled little half-man, scarred and beaten. His own anger and jealousy had done him in. He no longer had the spirit for intimidation and never again attempted to harm Heisaku or Yakichi.

Heisaku and Yakichi, for their part, loaded the glass statue into a cart and took it back to their village. Heisaku moved into the old man's house as the son he never had, and they grew to be great friends. After all, they were bound by the love of the woman that they had both lost.

For the rest of their years, the glass statue sat in the middle of their house. It made Heisaku feel somewhat awkward to see his likeness every day, but it served a great purpose. When their grief for

Sei's loss became overpowering, Heisaku or Yakichi would break off a small section of the statue—a fingertip, a lock of hair, the petal of a remaining lily.

*Aishiteru, aishiteru, aishiteru.* From each broken pocket of glass, Sei's voice would whisper out to ease their sorrow.