

Rain began pouring from the skies just as a rickety ship docked at Pier #1 in Kugane, as if the weather anticipated the coming arrivals. The passengers slowly disembarked, their clothes worn and tattered, exhaustion visible on their features. Yet from the departing crowd, a few stepped away, an Auri Raen couple with their young daughter.

"We've made it, my dear," a soft, clearly masculine voice announced. Said voice belonged to Raiden Sui, a Doman textile merchant. The stoic look on the man's face had long since faded, replaced with one of soft reassurance. Though attempting to keep the look of a devoted husband and father, his brown eyes betrayed his true feelings, that of exhaustion and hunger, and moreso, worry. The downpour grew heavier as Raiden knelt, bringing himself face to face with his daughter as he reached into his bag.

"Here, Kazuko," The Auri male offered, wrapping a thick blanket around the shivering girl. "This will keep you warm." In response, Kazuko whimpered, clinging tighter to her mother.

"Raiden, we have to hurry," A feminine voice insisted, laced with grave concern. "You noticed how pale she has grown on the last leg of the trip..." Tears welled up in her turquoise eyes, threatening to spill over and mix with the raindrops.

"Kazuko is a strong one, Makoto," Raiden reassured his distressed wife. "She's made it this far, after all." A choked-back sob interrupted their conversation, prompting Makoto to also kneel down to her daughter's height.

"I know, sweetie," Comforting platitudes met with a brief rubbing of horns between mother and daughter. "Not much longer, okay?"

"Mhm..." was the only reply from Kazuko, her voice barely more than a whisper. A few tears fell from her eyes, which Raiden wiped away before standing back up.

"Take Kazuko and search for food and shelter," Raiden suggested. "I will be doing the same, though my priority is to secure medical care for the three of us. Our daughter's condition has worsened severely. This pilgrimage has not been kind to her, nor to us." A brief kiss on the lips, and a stroke of his wife's long, brown hair before Raiden walked off.

“Hold onto my arm, Kazuko,” Makoto stated, feeling her daughter’s frail form hold onto and lean against her. “If you start feeling faint, tug on my sleeve, okay?” A slight nod was the response Makoto got as the two began to slowly walk.

The mother and daughter pair barely made it to Rakusui Gardens when something forcefully pushed them both against the nearby stone wall. A knife flashed in the dark and was held to Makoto’s throat. Kazuko lost her balance, falling to the ground.

“Listen here, little girl,” The raspy voice of the Hyur mugger pierced through the sound of the rain. “Bring me anything of value either of you are carrying, or I will slit your mother’s throat. Keep in mind, one wrong move from you mommy, and your daughter will get it too!”

Those words caused Makoto’s brow to furrow in anger. An attempt on her own life was one thing, but Kami forbid her daughter come to harm! Hearing and seeing this caused Kazuko to cry out, barely able to form coherent words in her distress.

A gentle whisper answered in Kazuko’s metaphorical ears, “Close your eyes, little one.”

The frightened child did what the voice commanded and closed her eyes. A sudden *whoosh* came nearby, followed by two squelches and a husky gargled cry. Light footsteps approached and the soft arms of her mother wrapped around Kazuko.

Having looked away from the scene shortly after the sudden *whoosh*, Makoto almost shakily glanced up, to see if it was safe for her, or more importantly, safe for Kazuko.

“Lord Himura!” Heavier feet rushed toward the group. “We heard your sword an-”

“See to it that this refuse is removed right away,” a stern voice ordered.

There was a sound of dragging before Makoto let go of her daughter. A pair of strong hands gently grasped the young girl's shoulders as their owner knelt down to face Kazuko. The man's face was stern, yet kind. His hair was pulled back into a high ponytail and was clearly graying. He wore the samurai garb of a Sekiseigumi.

"It's alright now," he said in a soft voice. "That man can't hurt you or anyone else anymore. My name is Gouken Himura, I am a kind of guard here in Kugane. What is your name, young one?"

Kazuko could hear Gouken's voice, could see his face, but the words weren't initially connecting in her hunger-addled mind, the clarity coming with fear-induced adrenaline wearing off. The child Au Ra merely blinked, her gaze staring off into space.

"Thank....you..." the sickly girl finally responded, reaching out to Makoto. "I'm...I'm Kazuko." Despite the fact that the danger was now gone, tears began to flow from her eyes.

"I heard a commotion! Is everything alright!?" Another voice rang out as Raiden practically dashed towards Gouken, Makoto, and Kazuko. The tall man knelt down, both to catch his breath and to more easily make eye contact with not just his wife and child, but their savior as well.

"Everything is alright now," Makoto insisted, gently taking Kazuko's hand. "This gentleman saved us from an attempt- " Her face drained of all color as she felt a weak tug upon her sleeve. Makoto immediately whirled around, kneeling next to a trembling, unsteady Kazuko.

"Kazuko? Are you okay?" Makoto asked, softly at first, yet her voice grew more panicked. "Kazuko!? Kazuko!!!!!!?? Kazuko, please, say something!" The exceedingly worried mother turned towards her husband. "Raiden, she's declining fast! Did you find a healer, an alchemist, anyone who can help her!?"

"Unfortunately, I did not," Raiden replied, his voice starting to waver with worry. "Sir, I must request your aid once more, and urgently!" The Hyur man nodded in understanding.

“Kazuko, please. Talk to me,” Gouken insisted. “Are you hurt? Are you ill? Is there anything I can do to help you?”

It was just then that the Seikiseigumi noticed the sickly pallor of the girl's skin, sunken cheeks and glassy eyes. The child was naught more than skin and bones. Her trembling form from more than fear and cold, was not helped by the rain that poured down in sheets. Kazuko's legs then gave out, sending her toppling to the ground. Gouken caught the young Au Ra in his arms. She was light, too light to be healthy. The sickly child laid completely still in the man's arms.

“Kami be good, she fainted,” Gouken swore. He looked at the girl's parents, knowing the concern they felt, and made a decision. “Quickly, to my residence! My wife is a healer. We'll do all we can.”

Gouken wrapped the girl in his cloak and ran. His speed was incredible for his stature, for he ran at a pace that would rival a Manderville. The rest of the Seikiseigumi gestured at Makoto and Raiden to follow.

“Lord Himura is one of our strongest,” one said. “None of us could catch up to him. But follow us, we will lead you to his home, and to his wife.”

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Both of Kazuko's parents followed the Seikiseigumi, Raiden quietly comforting a sobbing Makoto. He himself had difficulty maintaining a neutral face in these circumstances himself. It was their own daughter who, Kami forbid, was fighting for her life at this very moment, after all.

There had to have been some way to prevent this! Raiden thought. Some way we could have more easily sustained ourselves, if not just Kazuko, through this entire pilgrimage. And now I pay the price for my short-sightedness with my daughter's life...

The Au Ra man's thoughts were interrupted when their destination was reached. Gently squeezing his wife's hand, the two stepped through the door.

“Welcome to my home,” Gouken said to the couple kindly. “Your daughter is in my son’s room, resting. My wife is currently with her.”

“Please, show us to her!” Makoto exclaimed, through tears. Raiden gently stroked Makoto’s hair as a gesture of comfort.

“Please, lead the way,” he added, still worried.

Gouken nodded. “Of course, please follow me.”

Gouken’s son’s room was rather spartan, having little in the way of aesthetics. There were wooden bokken displayed on top of his dresser that looked used, and a mounted striking pad on the wall. The bed looked comfy enough though, as Kaz was peacefully asleep in it. A conjurer stood over the bed with their arms outstretched, using healing magic upon the young Au Ra.

Once Makoto and Raiden reached Gouken’s son’s room, and spotted where the bed was, and Kazuko in it, both of them rushed to her bedside, kneeling down next to her.

“How is she?” Makoto asked, having calmed herself enough knowing that Kazuko was still alive.

“She’s alive, and we’ll be thankful for that,” Lady Himura said as she walked in the room. “I did what I could for her, then my sister took over. Your daughter is frail, and it’s a Gods-loving miracle that she’s gotten this far.”

Lady Himura’s sister spoke next. “The girl was damn near death when she got here. She looks as if she hasn’t eaten in several turns of the sun. That’s not surprising, considering you were running from the battles. But I’d count your lucky stars Gouken got her here when he did. She needs to eat, sister.”

Lady Himura turned back to the door. “Yes, she does. Well, if I’m not a damn good healer, I’m a damn good cook. Oh and I suppose I should introduce myself, my name is Juni Himura and my sister is Nika Housina. I’ll fix up a meal for the lot of you. Of course the little one will have to have something more on the light side, but I have just the stew recipe for her.”

Juni walked right past Gouken and down the stairs to the kitchen. The Lord of the house simply smiled at his wife and turned back to the family.

"No one is using this room right now, so feel free to rest. I'll bring some tatami mats for you," he announced before he and Nika left the room.

Both man and woman sat, the latter weeping with the former comforting her while mentally kicking himself.

"Damn it....damn it all!" Raiden exclaimed, his voice and the sound of fist meeting palm breaking the near-silence. The gentle Au Ra man hardly lost his temper, nor shed a tear of sorrow, lest the one thing he gravely fears stared him down. That fear in particular being the loss of either his wife or his daughter, the only family he has left.

"Honey..." Makoto trailed off, her voice wavering through shed and unshed tears. The smaller of the two adult Au Ra embraced her husband. "It's like you said earlier, Kazuko is strong...she has your strength...our strength."

"And your kind heart," Raiden added, letting go of his wife before brushing a stray hair out of their unconscious daughter's face. The doting father gently laid two fingers against Kazuko's neck, the grim look on his face fading when he still felt a pulse.

"Nika wouldn't have left the room if she and Juni thought Kazuko wasn't stable," Makoto reassured, wiping tears of sorrow-turned-relief from the man's face. "But you are only partially right. She has your kind heart too, and it's those traits that have seen her....us....through this until the end." A brief smile returned to Raiden's features, a small flicker of hope for the distraught Raen. He moved his hand slightly to Kazuko's shoulder.

"She still draws breath," the larger Au Ra remarked, though mostly to himself. "Yet this is the beginning of a tumultuous journey for her. One we will be with her on every step of the way, no matter what it takes."

"We have to explain everything to them, Raiden," Makoto insisted. "The reason we fled here differs from most others, and if Kazuko is to have a chance at recovery, these people...our saviors... need to be aware of her illness. They might even point the way to answers!"

"I am in full agreement, my love," Raiden replied. "The more we say now, the better a chance the three of us have to build a new life here-and the better prepared they are for Kazuko's recovery."

Gouken returned shortly with the promised tatami mats, placing one next to Raiden, and another next to Makoto.

"Is there anything else you need?" he asked.

"My wife and I are in agreement that we should explain our situation in full," Raiden replied. "Please. Let us speak."

"Our daughter has always been in poor health," Makoto explained, gently stroking Kazuko's cheek. "She was always hungry, even with the most nutritious meals we could procure, and was only growing thinner and thinner over time. We traveled far and wide to get her what she needs, before settling in a village in Doma. The local healer there was so good with her. While he, too, was baffled as to the exact cause, the care this man provided allowed Kazuko to thrive. Advised that we increase her food intake, showed us herbs chock full of nutrients and aether, many things." Makoto hung her head, having trouble getting the next words out.

"Yet all good things come to an end," Raiden continued. "The Empire descended upon our small village. All were expected to show for their arrival, for they were searching for able bodied individuals to conscript. The Kami were looking out for us in one way then, as our entire family was passed over. Yet our dear friend, the village healer, was selected. The man had no choice, he had to go, lest any retaliation hurt an innocent."

"We couldn't remain there, as not only was Kazuko without any form of medical care, there was additional risk of conscription, or worse, getting caught up in any retaliation courtesy of the formation of a resistance movement," Makoto found the strength of heart to continue the story. "We made the difficult decision to flee our home, to search for somewhere better. We took everything we could with us, from possessions to provisions, and joined with others on a boat across the Ruby Sea."

"The trip was long and arduous," Raiden added, sighing in a mix of exhaustion and sadness. "The food supply we had was not enough, we had to stretch it. I knew all too well what I had to do to help make sure my wife and child survived this trip. Yet... Kazuko, my dear, selfless daughter... she started sobbing uncontrollably unless all three of us had something to eat." The large Au Ra man gently laid a massive hand atop one of Kazuko's tiny ones. "Yet even had I gone without on occasion, we would likely still be in this same situation. Despite us giving Kazuko larger shares of our stores, she still grew weaker by the moment. Over time, especially closer to our destination, she would do almost nothing but sleep... and we feared she would not wake up again. Yet she still pulled through." Raiden paused speaking to comfort Makoto, who silently wept at recalling the trek so soon.

"Our supplies ran out about a turn of the sun prior to the fateful incident that led to you saving my family," Raiden continued. "Makoto advised us to save our strength. I was in complete agreement. Kazuko barely had any strength of her own left at this point herself. If she wasn't asleep or unconscious, she would cry. At that moment, I began to falter. Despite feeling like I've failed her, I knew that the both of us had to push forward. It was then we arrived in this place, where I left to search for someone who could aid us. We reunited when I heard many footsteps, and I followed the sound to your peers." With their story told, Raiden felt a weight was lifted from his shoulders.

"Even before we settled into our old home, Kazuko has never been this ill," Makoto lamented. "We only ask for two things. That my dear daughter recovers, and if we can remain here until she does."

Gouken nodded in understanding. He turned and stopped at the doorway. "Rest here for now. We'll let you know when dinner is ready."

"Thank you for hearing our tale," Raiden gratefully stated. Once Gouken had left the room, the man turned to Makoto.

"We shall rest in shifts, like we used to do when Kazuko was unwell."

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A very faint twitch of Kazuko's fingers jolted Raiden out of his thoughts, prompting the worried father to glance over towards her. Upon noticing slight

facial movements from the supposedly slumbering Au Ra, Raiden laid a hand on his sleeping wife's shoulder, gently shaking her.

"Makoto, my dear, wake up. Kazuko stirred. She may be coming around!" Those words from Raiden brought his beloved back to the waking world.

"Kazuko?" Makoto also noticed her daughter slowly coming to.

Kazuko's eyes opened slightly, but her surroundings were a blur. All she could really make out was two figures nearby.

"Iza...nami..." she rasped, readily certain that the goddess of life and death had come to usher her to her soul's next destination, and she had a friend to accompany her on the journey. Upon hearing that name, Makoto gasped in shock.

"By the Kami, no..."

"Mommy...? Daddy..." Kazuko's voice grew increasingly distressed as she weakly called out.

"We're here, sweetie," Makoto reassured, brushing a few stray hairs out of the young Au Ra's face.

"It's safe now," Raiden added, smiling. Yet despite any reassurances, Kazuko couldn't help but choke out a few gasping sobs. What little energy remained in her body was all but spent at this point, leading her to feel absolutely horrible. Makoto wrapped her arms around her crying daughter, quietly comforting her.

"It's okay, Kaz. Not much longer now, I promise," Makoto soothed, rubbing Kazuko's back, Raiden shortly after doing the same.

"Dinner's ready!" Gouken announced as he entered the room. The samurai knelt down next to Kazuko. "Can you walk, little one? Or, perhaps you need a horse ride down?"

"We've had to aid her with walking for over a fortnight," Makoto explained, letting go of Kazuko, the relief on her face clearly visible.

“Either I carried her, or she held onto my wife’s arm,” Raiden added. He, too, seemed as if an even larger weight was lifted off his shoulders.

“I...” Kazuko trailed off, sniffing a bit. “I need help...please...”

“Then it’s help you shall get,” Gouken smiled softly. “It takes strength to ask for help when you need it. I think you’ll grow to be a strong woman in the future.”

The samurai picked up the little Au Ra and carried her in his strong arms. They made their way down the staircase and to the kitchen, where he placed the child in a tall chair. Gouken then pushed the chair gently into place in front of a hearty bowl of thick soup.

“Eat your fill, small one,” Juni said gently. “It’s thick, but light on the stomach.”

“Thank you...” Kazuko weakly trailed off, half-slumped against the table. The child Au Ra glanced around, relieved when she saw multiple bowls of soup, enough for everybody present. The fact that not just she, but her parents were finally getting a good meal put Kazuko so at ease that she completely overlooked any size differences between the bowls.

Makoto and Raiden had followed Gouken to the kitchen shortly after, taking their own seats as well. Kazuko was the first to begin eating, albeit with Makoto’s aid to start. Both of her parents followed shortly, after they were sure their daughter suffered no ill effects from reintroducing her to a normal meal. Seeing the sickly Raen able to hold her head up, and the trembling in her hands stop, lightened the weight on the couple’s shoulders just as much as the warm meal did.

“Raiden, Makoto,” Gouken started firmly. “We have decided that your family is to stay with us for a while.”

“Your daughter needs to get better, and it would not suit us well to send you back out there with next to nothing,” Juni spoke with authority.

“Now, it will not be a free ride,” the samurai continued. “You will be expected to work. Not like a slave or anything so barbaric, but help around the house. You will even join us and learn how to survive here in Kugane.”

“Do you have any skills we should know of?” Juni asked.

“The two of us ran a tailor shop prior to our evacuation,” Makoto stated.

“Raiden was often out front, speaking to prospective customers, while I worked in the back, repairing clothing and creating new.”

“This trek has given me much to think about,” Raiden added. “While I would be glad to help out, I have but one simple request. Should, Kami forbid, we have to move once more, I wish to learn how I can better provide for Makoto and Kazuko during our travels. It was my lack of such skills that caused her decline in health, and I wish to prevent this from ever happening again.”

Gouken’s eyes narrowed. “If you continue to blame yourself, you will only look to the mirror for answers. You will find nothing but self pity while she dies. Stop it. Instead of self loathing, look instead to solutions in the world. We shall seek those out together.”

Raiden remained silent through Gouken’s entire lecture, seemingly taking the words to heart.

Yet Makoto was the one to speak afterwards. “You have said what I couldn’t bear to say. He was admittedly the same way when Kazuko first started showing symptoms all that time ago.”

“Dwelling on the past will accomplish nothing. I have friends that can perhaps help with her ailment, if not, allow her to get stronger and ease the issue temporarily. I believe it’s called ‘giving a fighting chance’,” Juni said with cause.

“...Thank you,” Was Raiden’s sole response. “My wife and daughter are everything to me. I couldn’t bear to lose either one of them.”

“It is a relief to know that Kazuko will be in good hands,” Makoto added. “We’ve kept notes on everything so far.” Before the relieved mother could continue speaking, a whimper from Kazuko caught her attention. The young Au Ra had practically licked her entire bowl clean, and was now rubbing her belly.

“Kazuko?” Makoto asked quietly. “Are you okay?”

"Tummy hurts a bit..." Kazuko trailed off, closing her eyes as Makoto put a hand on her shoulder.

"Maybe a little gas from eating fast?" Juni giggled.

"Perhaps," Gouken smiled. "Tonight, you will have to make do with a make-shift futon, while the girl can use my son's bed. Tomorrow, we'll convert my study to a bedroom, and find something to make my son's room more appealing to your daughter. He won't be using the room any time soon."

"On behalf of all three of us, thank you," Raiden gratefully stated. "As long as we have the basic necessities, we will be fine."

"Where is your son currently?" Makoto asked, rubbing Kazuko's arm as a gesture of comfort, before turning to her. "Remember to eat slowly next time, sweetie."

"My son..." Gouken started in a deep voice. Juni's hand came to rest on the broad man's shoulder.

"*Our* son," she corrected.

"*Our* son," Gouken repeated. "...is a wild boy. He has a good heart, and is very protective of others. However, he lacks discipline and... the ability to hold back. The son of a noble decided to come down on a weaker child and make their life miserable. My son took exception to that."

The samurai's eyes moistened with a show of emotion, even when his face contorted with shame and frustration. "Thus, he challenged the young noble. Unfortunately, he did not realize that those who feel they are born on high do not feel the need to honour our rules. My son was surrounded, with many of the other children being bigger than he. The boy-

"Our son has a name," Juni cut in, correcting her husband once again. "His name is Jubei. While there is a lot of his father in him, there is also a lot of his Uncle as well. We should have realized that earlier."

“Yes,” Gouken nodded, his face grim. “Jubei went wild in a fury. Every boy that came at him left that battleground in the care of a surgeon. No one escaped his wrath. The young noble was beaten less than the others, but his greatest injury was that of the mind. Apparently, watching my son’s anger broke the boy. However, it wasn’t until the investigation was over that I found out what he said to the boy...

‘If I ever find you making other people miserable again, I’ll come back. I will give you a life of pain.’”

Juni sighed. “After that, he renounced the Lords of Kugane and left with my brother, Cain. Jubei is training with the Monks in the west to help him with his anger, and hopefully focus on protecting life.”

“I wish there was something I could say to both of you, other than I’m sorry,” Makoto’s response broke through the silence, met with a nod from Raiden.

“Do not be sorry,” Juni smiled. “He has a good heart. Even though he went wild, he protected a child who could not protect himself. I have faith he will find a good role model and become a good man like his father.”

“I may not know your son, but I too share the same faith,” Raiden replied. “Many in this world need protecting, and many would be willing to mentor someone such as him.”

“Despite his methods being...brutal, I can clearly tell, Jubei has taken after both of you,” Makoto added. All the while, Kazuko had been listening in on the conversation during the times she wasn’t practically dozing off at the table, the exhaustion that came with both an arduous journey and her prior starvation beginning to take its toll, even overtaking the pain in her belly.

Gouken chuckled. “I have friends at Rhalgr’s Reach, and they report that the boy is taking to his instruction well. He may mellow out yet.”

“In any case,” Juni spoke up. “It has been a long day for your family. May I suggest you get settled and rest. Tomorrow, we will acquire provisions and clothing. Gouken will take Raiden around Kugane and introduce him to potential contacts.”

"I would appreciate that, thank you," Raiden stated, before moving over to the chair Kazuko was sitting at, gently picking up the now-asleep child. "Again, on behalf of all three of us, thank you. Nothing in this world could ever repay your kindness." The man then paused, realizing something. "Makoto. It has been many moons since we left Sui-No-Sato. The time has come to shed our old names, and begin anew."

"I am in complete agreement, Raiden," Makoto replied. "But before we handle that matter...Juni. Is there anything you advise to aid in Kazuko's recovery?"

The Ala Mhigan woman pondered for a moment before answering. "We can take her to see the surgeons in the city. Perhaps a trip to a conjurer would also help. I hear they come to Kugane every so often."

"Again, thank you," Makoto replied. "If she wakes either of you in any way, shape, or form, please let either of us know. I'm uncertain if she'll sleep through the night."

While Juni and Makoto spoke in hushed tones regarding Kazuko's health, Gouken turned to Raiden. "Might I ask what you meant by your previous statement?"

"While our family lived in Doma for only a brief time, we are originally from Sui-No-Sato. We left when Kazuko became increasingly unwell, as there was nothing that could be done to help her if we remained there," Raiden explained. "While we have not been banished by formality, we have by circumstance, and thus must choose a new last name. With the kindness you and your wife have shown us, it would be an honor if we were to adopt that of your family's."

"It would be my honor to welcome your family as part of ours," Gouken responded with a smile and a bow. A smile beamed brightly on Raiden's face for the first time in several moons, yet ways on how to repay Nika flowed through his mind. Likewise, his slumbering daughter, now informally christened as Kazuko Himura, had a soft smile on her own face, the ever familiar visage of agony having long since faded.