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# A Moth Follows Her Light

*A Halloween L5R Fan Fiction*

*By Robert Denton III*



Kaikoga Ayumi flinched at a crunching sound just outside her tent, causing her to spill a single droplet of the blessed wax onto her sleeve, staining the emblem of the Moth Clan.

*Clumsy ox*, she chided. It was a summer's worth of hoarded wax, but she still couldn't afford to waste a single drop. The candle she was making might need to burn long into the twilight hours of the morning, although she dearly hoped it wouldn't. That would depend on two things: whether or not the sage of the Tonbo family had told her true, and if she made the candle exactly as her grandmother had shown her.

A fearful part of her, the part that had been with her the longest, tugged at her with invisible strings to go outside, to seek what had made that sound. Or better yet, to abandon this errand altogether, and return to the Moth embassy at Kyuden Tonbo. Surely her absence had been noticed by now. She was already on thin ice with the Lamplighter Master, leader of their delegation.

But the younger part, the rational part, dismissively cut those strings. The sound was merely walnuts falling from lanky trees, or one of the blessed deer known to roam the Plains of the Dragonfly. There would be no intruders out here, not with all the rumors. Phantoms drifted over these weeds, confused ghosts wandering out from the borders of the Realm of Waiting. And perhaps other realms. So she hoped. On these plains, a traveler had even claimed to encounter a vision of his future self, a vision of madness inflicted by the Kannazuki moon, in the month where there were no gods. At least, that's what the old sage of the Tonbo had said. After a few drinks.

But so what? Ghosts had no feet, so they couldn't make any crunching sounds with their steps, and neither could visions of the future. *Probably just a deer*, she reasoned as she lifted the shears to a lock of her hair.

*Soon Yua*, she thought as she cut. *Just a little longer, and all will be right again.*

Smoke coiled through the opening in the ceiling of the tent. A night sky was the only witness. It was time. First, a prayer to the kami for resolve and to calm her rapid heart. Then she took the severed strands of her hair, and as the blessed wax melted, began to weave.

*Did you smash the berries of the wax tree yourself? Her grandmother's voice tremored in her mind. Did you take them only from the sumac of the silkweb shrine? Did you leave proper offerings to the caterpillars living on that sumac? Did you fold the necessary spices into the wax?*

"Yes Grandmother," she said to no one. The pale wax resembled a melting cocoon, filling the pan in slow motion. Her nose pricked at the sour smell. She felt nine years old again, transfixed on her grandmother's gnarled fingers as they painted a blessing



onto crisp paper. It looked so similar to the paper talisman Grandmother had made for Ayumi's father, the one that stripped away the spiritual stain from eating red meat, so that he could freely consume all of the venison he wanted.

*This candle is not like the others, grandmother had said. For this candle to work, we must give the kami something other than our songs. My little caterpillar, what do you think they want?*

Ayumi's guess was that they wanted to burn. They were candle-kami, weren't they? But that had not been correct. Her grandmother's patient smile was the color of molding wax.

*These kami wish to know who we are.*

*Do you remember the three sins?*

Fear. Desire. Regret.

Three locks of hair, braided together.

As she dipped the braid in wax to make the wick, she offered her Fear.

Fear was the easiest memory to conjure, for it was always within her reach, especially when she'd had too much to drink. She was nine when she'd stolen the candle from her grandmother's room, waiting until after dark to sneak out to the grounds of the family shrine. She thought the candle might reveal her mother's face, perhaps even give them the chance to speak. It was a dream-candle after all, and if the strange woman appearing in her dreams over the last few months wasn't her mother... well, then who was she?

Hugging her stolen gains, Ayumi crept into the dilapidated instruction hall, into the crawlspace that was its attic. The wick took the flame eagerly, encapsulating her hunched form in a bubble of light. The world beyond seemed to vanish, and she was crouched at the center of a glowing orb that floated in voidlike nothing.

She shivered there for hours, afraid to leave the light of the candle, afraid of the scratches and moans assailing her ears, of the wind battering the side of the ancient building, of every shake and crumble. She pictured the walls crunching around her like wadded paper until her bones finally broke. She heard a stranger's voice distantly calling her grandmother's name, but she didn't move. Fear soaked her in icy sweat, and she hugged her knees and rocked on the floor, silently begging for it all to stop.

Then the woman stepped out of the darkness. Ayumi spun to face her, raking her eyes up and down the stranger's lanky body and pale features, long black hair whipping around as if thrown by winds Ayumi did not feel. The woman was frozen just within the reach of the bubble, the light passing through her, her lower body fading into nothing. She stared wide-eyed into the bubble, mouth agape, as if she were looking into an egg's shell.

This ghost was not her mother, nor the woman from her dream. Had she been the one to call her grandmother's name? Ayumi forced small words out of a tightening throat.

"Who are you?"

How wide the woman's eyes grew then, how she trembled and shook. Her eyes filled with an intense sorrow. Or hatred. Her shoulders slumped. She looked like the death of hope.



Looking into the ghost's eyes felt like drowning in icy water. It felt like plunging into an endless well. Ayumi screamed her question again. Over and over, in waves of ice. "Who are you?! Who are you!?"

Then a mangled hand reached from behind the ghost woman and tore out her throat.

Ayumi screamed and leapt back. Her elbow struck the candle. It tipped over. The bubble burst. She blinked and her world was aflame, her forehead soaked with sweat, throat raw with smoke. Pale wax spread across the floor, reaching for the collapsed doorway with distended fingers. And although the light was everywhere, her world seemed only to grow darker.

Ayumi exhaled until the scars on her arms no longer burned. The memory, the nightmares, were fuzzy and distant, but her rapid heart felt just as it had on that day. It was why she let the shrine maidens light the incense during prayers, why her hand shook whenever she lit a candle.

Now those hands rolled a paper talisman, an *ofuda*, into a hollow tube. She strung the wick through the tube, then gently stuffed the cavity with dried rush leaves. As her fingers snaked inside, she closed her eyes and offered her Desire.

The first time she saw Yua, Ayumi assumed she was one of the Kaito shrine keepers accompanying the shipment of blessed sake. She was dressed like them, in bright red alongside their Isawa masters, unlike the plain brown robes of the hapless brewmaster they'd escorted. It was scandalous enough that the Kaikoga family did not make its own blessed sake for offerings, but her father couldn't do much about that, not after the famine. Yua was sitting atop the massive barrel, bare feet swinging like the *shimenawa* ropes encircling the case, drumming the side with her palms as an Isawa passed over the cask with a cypress branch. Ayumi found that she could not look away, not even as the High Lamplighter argued with the brewmaster, and the Isawa took offense. Then Yua laughed, to the confusion of everyone else there, and that ended the confrontation. *Now that's the strangest shrine keeper I've ever seen*, Ayumi thought.

She would learn how absurd the notion was that Yua had anything to do with folk of the priory that very night, when the two of them snuck into the stores together to "test the purity of the blessed sake." Which they enthusiastically did for about five hours, their giggles and laughter echoing through the warehouse rafters. Yua, as it turned out, was the brewer's daughter. She knew everything about sake, especially how to drink it. She knew about a lot of things Ayumi had never heard of, things that made her pulse race and set her cheeks ablaze. To one resigned to the shackles of obligation, Yua represented heart-pounding excitement. And Ayumi's heart did pound, hard, every time she beheld the dark-eyed trickster.

Although she wouldn't confess for years later, Ayumi fell in love with Yua that very first night.

And thankfully, they saw each other often, more and more as the years passed, and the family shrine became increasingly dependent on the patronage of the Isawa. Even after they were finally discovered together amidst a pile of empty jugs, and the sake shipments were quietly rearranged, and Ayumi was sent away to finish her studies in *yumeji* and the Way of the Kami, they still found their ways into one-another's lives. And bedrooms, if there was time. It was easier after Yua's father died,



and as the new brewmaster appointed in his place, Yua suddenly had far more freedom. And Ayumi, having taken her grandmother's name and now a shugenja of the Moth Clan, could do whatever she pleased.

Well, sort of. Eyes still followed and tongues still wagged. Ayumi's friends warned her how dangerous it was to be so "intimately involved" with someone of the merchant class, someone who readily handled money. To them, Yua may as well have handled dung – money was tainting, yet another link to chain the lesser ones weaved in life, a chain that held fast to the material world. Shugenja were priests; they were supposed to be above that sort of thing. Many times Ayumi's friends arranged for her to "accidentally" cross paths with this young lady or that young man, each hand-picked for her assumed tastes. But Ayumi cared for them even less than the marriage candidates her clan had proposed for her. She held them off, biding her time. When she eventually became High Lamplighter herself, she would have the power to arrange her own marriage. She and Yua needed only to wait until then.

Would the rumormongers talk? Ayumi didn't care. That merchant girl had coaxed her from her shy cocoon. Yua was the only light that never burned her. A moth always sought her light, no matter how far and determined she had to fly.

Now the wax was ready. Painstakingly she rotated the tube in the pale pool, growing it layer by paper-thin layer. Oh how slowly the silkworm weaved its cocoon.

And as the candle grew, Ayumi offered her regret.

The Bon Festival at Nikesake was the last time she saw Yua alive.

They'd gone the entire first day without acknowledging the other. Bystanders would have never connected them, a shugenja of the kami overseeing the shrine maiden *Bon Odori* dance, and the brewmaster directing the workers who stacked offering barrels before the ancestral shrine. Only once had they met eyes, when Yua brushed past her, their hands grazing oh-so-slightly, and she flashed an over-the-shoulder apology with that lopsided grin that always made the heat rise into Ayumi's face.

On the third evening, after she'd conceded the remaining rituals to the elder shugenja, Ayumi finally snuck away. Paper lanterns bobbed in clusters along the surface of the creek that wound into the Drowned Merchant River, like a cloud of fireflies dancing along the water. All eyes would be there, and not at the old brewery, where the sly brewmaster on the sturdy roof had already heated a ceramic bottle and prepared two cups.

They were giggling teenagers again. They caught up quickly and got to the important stuff. Moonlight across the gentle waters painted Yua's stocky silhouette as she sipped from her dish. Years of hammering casks and hoisting full barrels had broadened her shoulders and thickened her arms. She grinned, red-cheeked and drunk, a smudge of sticky *takoyaki* sauce glistening on her cheek. The most beautiful woman in Rokugan.

The hours raced past. Soon arose the sound of distant drums. The creek became crowded with lanterns, so many that the entire stream seemed like a glowing serpent.

"I wonder if that actually works," Yua muttered.

Ayumi's sake hovered before her lips. Each lantern represented a spirit that had come to visit their loved ones. The lights would guide the dead back to the sea, back to the underworld. Yua had never expressed doubt over the tradition before.



"*Obon* is my favorite," Ayumi shifted the subject. "I look forward to communing with grandmother." Her voice trembled, but she wasn't sad. "Perhaps I will see her this year."

"Will you light her a candle after?" Yua asked. "Or would she be stuck here forever?"

Ayumi paused again. Her hand rubbed the scarred flesh of her forearm. Her tongue felt dry; she tasted smoke.

"Maybe you'll see that ghost woman instead."

Ayumi's sake dish shattered on the hard ground below.

Horror flickered over Yua's features. She apologized; she'd spoken without thinking. She was just tired, she hadn't meant it. She was sorry. Couldn't Ayumi forget about it? Yua wanted tonight to be special. Who knew the next time they would see each other?

But Ayumi couldn't let it go. How could she say something so hurtful? *Obon* was a joyous time, a time when one's ancestors returned to them, and families were again made whole.

"Joyous for *you*," Yua finally snapped. "But what do peasants like me have be joyous about?"

The sake had finally grown cold. Yua dumped it. "Ayumi, if your grandmother came back, an honored ancestor, she'd hug you, fuss over how thin you were, and tell you who to marry, or reveal the recipe for those bean cakes she used to make for you." Yua hugged her legs and peered over her knees. "But peasants don't become blessed ancestors, do we?"

Ayumi's heart tightened into a small ball.

Yua's eyes shone like the surface of two frozen ponds. "No, we become ghosts. Hungry, lonely ghosts wandering the gray mists of the Realm of Waiting. There are no peasants in the golden realm. If my grandmother returned, it would only be because I didn't appease her. Because I lived the life I wanted to, not the one she wanted for me. It would be to drag me into hell." There was steel in her gaze when she flicked it towards Ayumi. "Isn't that what your scrolls say? Isn't that the word of the great sage Gōban?"

"The great sages don't know everything," Ayumi replied.

Yua smiled wryly. "Your own master once said those of my profession were dirty, right? That we wouldn't even be accepted into the Realm of Waiting. When I die, what will I become?"

Gaki. A hungry ghost. Punishment for a life wasted on greed, fixated on earthly pleasures. Forever starving, desperate only to consume, even the flesh of the living. That was the fate that awaited those embroiled in professions of pleasure, of those who drank too deeply of the god's wine. So said the great sage Gōban.

Ayumi spat. "Gōban was a moron who drank marsh water and died on the toilet. Disregard his teachings."

There was quiet for a long time.

"Ayumi," Yua finally said, "You realize this cannot work, right?"

Ayumi felt as though she were on fire.



"We had fun," Yua continued. "And I love you. But I know you're sabotaging marriage requests because of me. Stop that. You are destined for great things, Ayumi. You're even going to a better afterlife than the one I'll get. But I'm—"

"Shut up." Ayumi grabbed her hands. Wrapped her arms around her. She wanted to drag Yua back to the temple's visitor's quarters, to stow her away in the carts bound for home. Dig a secret room below her quarters and hide her there. She wanted them to be together. And she could do it, right? She was a shugenja, a priestess! She'd be High Lamplighter one day. Who would deny her?

Instead, she held up her sleeve, and the emblem of the moth caught the light. "I know *yumeji*, Yua. My grandmother's secrets. You're not ever going to the Realm of Waiting. I have the power to make a light to guide you to me. I'll be that light for you, just like you are mine. Promise me you'll follow it. Promise me."

*I should have just taken her with me.*

Ayumi cut the top of the candle flat. It was tall and thin, like a shinbone. She drew a hairpin from her sleeve — Yua's hairpin — and scratched her name into the surface, trying to ignore how the metal warped and flaked where it had become scorched black.

No one told her how the fire started. Governors pointed fingers at one-another, and she was certain that she'd never know the truth. And everyone wanted her to just move on, to act like Yua had never existed. But it was the comment from her newest suitor, the Sparrow dullard, that had relit the fire within her. In the kindest voice, he said that as a brewer and handler of money, surely Yua would have awakened in *gaki-do* as a hungry ghost.

Ayumi rubbed her knuckles. She'd sworn pacifist vows as a shugenja. But it had felt good to punch him in his stupid mouth and shut him up good.

No. That was not the fate of her beloved. Ayumi was a Moth. A master of her grandmother's *yumeji*. She could do this.

She could find her light, if only to guide her to a better afterlife, to bypass the judgement of the Fortune of Death to a perfect dream they could create together. To give her a better future. Only then would she ever say goodbye.

The moon was a silent witness as Ayumi stalked the plains of the Tonbo, hugging the candle close. These haunted fields, where the realms folded together, was a plateau overlooking the Realm of Waiting. She stopped by a tall tree. Yua would see the light from here.

The tinderbox shook in her hands. *It's just fire. You can do this.*

She brought the flame to the candle and whispered a prayer. *I love you, Yua.*

*Please come back to me.*

The flame jumped to the candle wick.

The world vanished. Ayumi blinked in the bubble of light. Wind howled beyond, but she didn't feel anything at all. Just the fragile heat of the candle flame.

"Yua?" she called. "Yua?"

Nothing rose above the ceaseless wind.

And then, a speck of light in the distance. Like a lantern floating alone on a tiny stream.



Without thinking, Ayumi pushed through the bubble, darting for it. The brittle grass of the Tonbo plains crunched beneath her feet, the wind suddenly tossing her sleeves and collar.

"It's me!" she shouted. "Ayumi! It's Ayumi!"

Each step, each pounding heartbeat, brought her closer, closing the gap with rolling breaths. And there, another bubble of light, and someone stirring within. She blinked away hot tears. Within that light was her beloved! She would find Yua there! Thank the Fortunes! A moth always finds—

A gasp died on her lips.

Within the bubble, a small child spun towards her, away from a candle that flickered behind. She was kneeling on wooden floorboards, dust motes floating inside the light, her entire form shimmering, the light passing through. She was donned in kimonos Ayumi had long outgrown, but immediately recognized.

"Who are you?" the child asked.

The wind shook the thin grass. It cut through her, right to the bone, just as sharp and merciless as the child's question. As *her* question. A question that, even now, she could not answer.

The child shouted. Over and over. Painted in sweat. Shrill with fear. "Who are you!? Who are you!?"

Ayumi didn't reply. What would be the point? She could never escape this. Her fate was cast from that moment in the crawlspace, when her world burned to ash. There had never been a world she could change. Only shadows against a wall. Just a moron who embraced a lie.

And she hated the one who had misled her. Herself.

Her shoulders fell limp. Her lungs emptied. She could never have saved Yua. She was just a fool who believed that there would be some justice. But why did she expect fairness in death when there was no fairness in life? Why had she believed in a just world? Why did she believe in anything?

It all meant nothing. So she did nothing.

Even when she felt the presence behind her, summoning goose-pimples across the back of her neck. Even as the wind tore invisible fingers through her hair. Even as the clawed and mangled hand, a hand that once belonged to a sakebrewer's daughter, reached hungry from behind her.

Yua must be starving.

The little girl screamed.

It didn't matter. Ayumi wanted her to see.

*Look closely, little idiot.*

Claws dug trenches in her throat.

*A moth is always eaten by her light.*

