

THE GREAT WHITE TERROR

A Story of Yazu Village



Dan Hooper

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In a modest hut near the village square, the back door slowly opened, then silently closed. The waist-high grass waved in the morning breeze and parted as some unseen thing passed through below.

Six-year-old Mariki, a small, snow-white ball of fur known to be absolutely irresistible, wanted nothing more than another adventure. Preferably one that didn't involve cheek pinching, head scratches, tail petting, or that horrible word—cute.

“I'm gonna gnaw off the next hand extended in my direction following the phrase, well aren't you just the cutest thing,” she growled.

She had learned to look before venturing out. There could be anyone waiting to pounce on her. Friends—they're not too bad. Relatives—a bit worse. Or worst of all, a grandmother—even one not her own.

Today's the day, she thought. I'm going to find that one brave thing that only I can do. That will erase that evil moniker.

* * *

Oyuki walked into the cozy kitchen, stretching and yawning.

“Mariki.”

She looked under the table, inside the cabinets, and even inside the waste bin. With this kid, you never know. She wasn't in her room, but bedclothes were on the floor and the outfit she had laid out the night before was gone.

“Koma! She's out again!”

Koma rolled over and covered his head with the pillow. The third time this week.

“Koma. You better not still be in that bed when I get in there.”

He knew if he didn't get up now, the rest of his day would not be pleasant.

“I'm up. Any screams outside yet? Have you checked the yard?”

“She never stops at the yard. She got out the back. I see a trail through the grass. Didn't you double-lock the back door?”

Koma entered, still hiking up his trousers. “I did. She's smart for a six-year-old.”

“There's something else that's going to smart when I catch up with her this time.”

“What did you expect? When you mix a lynx with a tiger-wolf, you're just asking for trouble.”

“Oh, come on, don't tell me you didn't sneak out when you were a kid?” asked Koma.

“Yeah, when I was eleven.”

“It's still early. She can't have gone far.”

“I don't know. At this pace, she's probably bridled a horse and ridden off to Halfway.”

“Don't you dare give her the idea. I'll check the square, you check the... stables.”

* * *

The coast seemed clear.

She ran just as fast as her tiny feet could carry her to the one person who treated her like a normal kid.

Lisa had barely sat down to enjoy her first cup of coffee when there was a soft knock at the door.

This early? she thought.

She got up and peeked through the window of the door and saw... no one.

She turned back to her desk. Now I'm hearing things.

Knock, knock, knock.

Back to the door again. This time she opened it.

“Good morning, little miss. How are you this lovely day?”

“Morning, Miss Lisa. May I come in?”

“Sure. I'm here to help all fursons. That's my job. Hiding out again?”

“Yup. You don't see my parents, do you?”

“Not yet, but they won't be far behind, you know.”

Mariki sat on the chair in front of the Human Relations Officer, barely able to see over the top of the desk.

“So, what's on the agenda today? Mild arson against your grandfather's statue, stink bomb in the latrine, oh, I know—how about greasing the Temple steps again?”

“No, being bad doesn't work. Maybe being good might. I want to do something really brave.”

“That's commendable, but I think trying to be a model citizen is better at your age.”

Mariki pouted in her chair, thinking Lisa wasn't helping.

Then there was another knock at the door, an urgent knock.

“Come in,” said Lisa.

The door opened and a human message rider walked in.

“Ambassador, I have an urgent request from North Human Town.”

“Mariki, I think you'd better leave. Take the back door if you like.”

“Yes, Miss Lisa. Thank you for listening. Bye.”

Mariki ran to the back door, opened and closed it, but remained inside. She wanted to hear what was so important.

“There's been an outbreak of some kind, and we need a large amount of mushrooms to make a treatment.”

“We have some stores here, but I can't leave the villagers defenseless. We'll have to gather more immediately. I'll request volunteers right away. Tell Leader Bently I'll send them as soon as they're gathered.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

No one noticed the quiet exit of a girl now on a mission.

Mariki knew the mushrooms could be found in the one place she was expressly forbidden to go. And she was headed there now, only stopping to grab a basket.

Maybe if I can bring back a basket full, I can save someone. And prove how brave I really am by going into the Forbidden Forest alone.

She procured a basket apparently abandoned by a vendor's cart. Mariki could hear her name being called repeatedly. She

recognized her father and mother's voices.

Not Happening.

There was now a well-worn path to the forest, as the villagers often went to collect the very item she now sought. Although visits were less frequent due to the mushroom farm near the game field, she had heard her mother say the new crop would not be ready for another month.

The trees seemed to grow to immense heights as she approached. She paused to calculate her odds of success.

Not too bad, she thought. Even if I ran into a problem, the villagers should soon be coming behind.

As she entered, the pleasant morning sunlight dimmed, and strange new sounds began to reach her small ears as they twitched side-to-side, trying to identify their direction. An owl made its presence known as it screeched nearby, greeting the day. That bristled her tail.

She knew what the mushrooms looked like because she was required to consume them at least three times a week. That was fine by her, as she liked the slightly nutty taste. Sniffing, she could not detect any nearby. Mariki didn't know fresh-growing mushrooms smelled far different from the cooked variety.

This is not too bad, she thought. I wonder why they named it Forbidden?

* * *

“Where could she have gotten off to?”

“She's getting much better at hiding. We could normally rout her out by now.”

“I’m beginning to worry, Koma. Maybe she’s hurt somewhere?”

“She would have called out if that was the case. Stop and think like her. Where would you go, knowing her nature?”

“Surely not to Grandma at the Temple. She’s the queen of cheek pinching. If there’s one person she might seek shelter with, it would be Lisa.”

“Right. Next stop, Human Relations Office.”

When they arrived, there were several fursons already occupying the small office.

Lisa spotted them and waved them forward.

“Koma, just in time. Could you run up and see if Kitaro would lend me some students? North Human Town is in dire need of Forbidden Forest mushrooms.”

“I will tell him, but right now, have you seen Mariki?”

“She was here earlier, but things just got hectic. I thought she’d get back to you when she got hungry.”

“No, we haven’t found her. It’s never taken us this long. Someone usually shows up with her in tow. Did she say anything peculiar this morning?”

“She mentioned something about being brave. Oh no, she may have overheard about the mushrooms.”

“The Forbidden Forest? She wouldn’t go there. She’s not that brave... wait... of course she would. Tell your harvesters to be on the lookout. I’ll tell Kitaro and Mizuki. Come on, Oyuki.”

* * *

Mariki had followed the well-worn path, searching left and right for the elusive fungus.

I think I remember Dad said those grow on trees.

Then she heard the snapping of branches and thought the search party had caught up with her. She turned to say hello and froze as a tall, furry being she had never seen before stood there growling.

“Hello, what are you?” she asked.

The bear opened its mouth.

My, that's a lot of teeth.

That was enough.

Mariki turned and ran. She remembered a fallen tree, a place that had looked like a fun place to explore. Now she needed shelter.

The bear was in pursuit, but only slowly, hunting through the brush for the small white morsel.

Suddenly, the large, unintelligent face appeared through the tall brush not far behind.

The bear jumped.

So did Mariki, and she slipped directly into the narrow opening of the log.

Her size had saved her.

* * *

The worried parents were breathing hard as they topped the Temple steps. Then they sprinted for the Temple Master's study.

“Dad! Dad, Mariki's run off into the Forbidden Forest.”

Kitaro had been going over the next batch of applicants when his attention snapped to the two figures rushing in and the word Mariki.

“When did this happen?”

“Just now.”

“Come, tell me on the way. Master Jo, ring the alarm bell, now!”

Koma told his father everything that had happened that morning, including the need for mushroom gatherers.

“The Temple will surely help with the needs of our friends in the north, but more pressing is the lost child.”

“I didn't say she was currently lost.”

“I know that forest. If she's not lost now, she soon will be.”

With the Temple bell ringing continuously in the background, students and masters gathered in the central courtyard.

“Attention, we have a lost child in the Forbidden Forest. Please form up search groups and proceed there now. Also mark the location of any mushrooms you see. There is an urgent medical need.”

Mizuki showed up beside them.

“A lost child? How did that happen?”

“It's our granddaughter. That should be explanation enough.”

* * *

After trying to reach inside and roll the log over to no avail, the bear finally left.

Mariki was relieved. The rolling motion had stopped and the growling sounds of the frustrated bear had faded away. The current threat was over, but her situation was not. Her fear was slowly replaced by growing hunger and thirst.

What is happening to me? I'm smarter than this. Stuck in a log with an empty food basket, no water, and no help. This was my worst idea ever.

She examined her cramped surroundings, and then she saw them.

Mushrooms.

She picked one and gave it a sniff.

This doesn't smell like the ones at home.

She bit off a small piece.

Yep, that's the nutty taste I remembered.

She gathered what she could reach, filling half the basket.

With the edge taken off her hunger, she needed water. Her mouth felt dry as sand. She listened outside for any sound of the foraging bear. The forest had returned to its quiet, benign self.

Then she heard it—a distant call of her name.

But she did not run out immediately. She had learned caution during her time in her private wooden sanctuary.

* * *

Oyuki was still worried, even with half the village out there looking for her wayward daughter.

“When we find Mariki, after I hug her, I'm going to make sure she can't sit for a week.”

“We tried that. You can see the results all around us. I think her fluffy little butt is a good defense against the furbrush attack. Maybe we should try something else. What do you think about enrolling her in the Temple?”

“She's too young. The minimum age for application is eight. We need to find a two-year stopgap.”

“I think if we asked, Mom and Dad would make an exception.”

“Great plan, but we need to find her first.”

“OVER HERE!”

At the sound, everyone converged toward the speaker.

“These are bear tracks. There hasn't been a bear sighting in over three years. I thought they were extinct,” said Master Kitano.

“Quiet, everyone. Listen.”

“A bear makes considerable noise moving through the woods. Our large group probably scared it off. All right, one loud shout of Mariki on three. One, two...”

* * *

Mariki listened hard but heard only silence for a while.

Then came a loud, clear call of “Mariki!”

She wiggled out of her protection, grabbed her basket, and ran toward the sound.

As she got closer, she yelled, “I'm here! I'm here!”

The call went out. “We found her! We found her!”

She was surrounded and hugged by many, even those she didn't know. Then her mom and dad appeared, and she was

smothered.

“What do you think you are doing out here?” asked Koma.

She proudly held up her basket.

“Helping.”

Things calmed down. The search parties gathered the needed mushrooms, and they were sent north. The family got back to normal. Mariki had been admonished and thanked for her part, and Tamotsu had been summoned to track and eliminate the bear threat.

After a bit of negotiation, it was decided it would be in everyone's best interest if Mariki entered the Temple on a trial basis.

“Now, you listen to everything Grandma Mizuki tells you.”

“I will, Mom.”

“All right, here's what you should do first.” Koma whispered some parting words to his daughter.

Then she was off, happy as can be, taking the Temple steps two at a time.

“What did you tell her, dear?”

Koma whispered in his wife's ear.

“You didn't.”

Mariki arrived outside her grandmother's study and saw a small, worn sign on the bench. She brushed off the dust and dirt and read, Reserved for Kitaro. Why would this bench be reserved for Grandpa? she wondered.

She shrugged her shoulders and sat down on the bench, her feet not quite reaching the ground. She was happy, humming

and swinging her legs back and forth. But Mariki didn't know the full purpose of this bench. This was where students with accumulated demerits would wait for the second bell, some more than once.

Then a single bell sounded, the second of the day.

The door opened.

Mariki jumped up. "Hi, Grandma."

Mizuki stood there like a statue and motioned.

"Inside."

Mariki had been here before. She knew the musty smell and the various odds and ends accumulated when Great Uncle Ito occupied this study.

"Please stand right there on that line."

Mariki stood.

Mizuki sat.

"In this office, you will address me as Master Mizuki or Sensei. Let me explain a few things. Here in the Temple, there are rules. And as a student, you are to follow these rules."

Mariki had never seen this side of her grandmother.

"Being here in my study at the second bell is not the goal of any student."

"Let me explain the demerit system, old and new. When Master Ito held this position, he believed that a firm hand should apply discipline as required, and the demerit system was born."

"See that bin over there."

Mariki looked. The indicated bin contained several lengths and sizes of bamboo.

“Those are canes. You are familiar with the furbrush as it applies to discipline.”

“Yes, very familiar.”

Mizuki corrected her. “Yes, Master.”

“Yes, Master, very familiar.”

“The cane is used in the same way. Only five times more effective.”

“Before we get to your antics of the past days, let's discuss this morning.”

“One demerit for not bowing in respect. One demerit for an improper greeting. And before you speak, I want you to know there is one demerit for the use of the word but in this room.”

“I, on the other hand, rely on my own method of corrective action. Make the punishment fit the crime, as they say. But the old ways remain for those wanting to push the limit. Are you one of those?”

“No, Master.”

“Good. But I still think a demonstration is in order. Did you think of asking someone before running off to the forest for your little adventure?”

“No, Master.”

Mizuki stood and walked around the room as she continued.

“Did your parents forbid you to enter the Forbidden Forest?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Did you listen to a conversation that wasn't meant for you after being asked to leave?”

Mizuki paused at the bin and withdrew the smallest of the canes.

“Yes, Master.”

“And last, do you think some form of punishment should apply for these indiscretions?”

Mariki was now watching Master Mizuki with great interest.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Yes, Master, but...”

“Mariki, are you that forgetful? You are new here, so you are forgiven the slip. A single demerit remains. Hands on the desk... Tail in the air.”

A passing student may have heard a whoosh and a thwack followed by “OW!”

“And that ends today's discussion on demerits, and I believe you will remember it.”

“Yes, Master.”

“You are dismissed.”

Mariki, her paw rubbing the newly sore spot, remembered to bow respectfully while saying, “Thank you, Master.”

Mariki planned to never sit on that bench again. A plan doomed to fail for the little adventurer.

Mariki had finally rid herself of the name cute.

Her plan had succeeded in an embarrassingly painful way.

* * *

Later that day, Mariki recounted her first day at the Temple.

“That was a mean trick Dad. You knew about the bench.”

“Of course I did, I spent some time there myself, although not as much as your grandfather. So how many demerits did you receive?”

“Only one, and that was enough. I did see the sign. He must have been special to earn such an honor.”

“Yes, he was special all right. But that was one honor he would have been happy not to have earned.”

Mizuki stopped by later after dinner and after the little one had gone off to bed, there was a quiet conversation.

“Mariki tells us you swatted her today?”

“A small demonstration, at half speed. I may also have mentioned that parents can assign demerits too.”

“That's not true.”

“Maybe I stretched that a little. Use it how you see fit.”

“I can see how that might be a helpful tool.”

The adults had a good laugh over Mizuki's inventive word play.