

A Fire Within

By Abigail Burrows

Michio trotted through the forest, holding his fresh kill high. The stupid bird had sat a little too long, pecking at the ground. It had only taken a few seconds to secure his prey. Michio was eager to gift the bird to his withered master. With his bad leg, it was rare the elderly man could afford meat.

Reaching the door, Michio carefully set down the bird then began meowing to be let in. “Nyao! Nyao!” Met with silence, Michio held his head high and meowed vigorously, eager for his owner to praise him for his kill. Swears and the sound of a bowl clattering to the floor sent Michio’s ears flat against his head. The screen door screeched open as Yotta Otoko fumbled and leaned heavily against the door. Michio’s nose scrunched at the scent of rotten rice. Yotta Otoko had been drinking that foul rice water again. “Damn cat...what do you want.” The man leaned forward, leering at the small cat. Michio gulped and slowly picked up the bird, placing it between his master’s feet. “Nyao..!”

Yotta Otoko glared at the bird and huffed, picking it up. “Pathetic songbird. Worthless.” He flicked the bird away, kicking Michio out of the way as he started stumbling towards the town. “Why do I keep you around? You rarely keep mice from my house! I thought getting two cats would get rid of twice the mice! I was wrong!” Michio cowered, watching his owner stumble away. He didn’t understand why Yotta Otoko was upset.

Later that night, when the moon was high in the sky, Michio and his sister Hibiki were jolted awake as Yotta Otoko yanked them up by their scruffs. They yowled in protest but were silenced when their master shook them. “Shut up! And get out! This is my house, and until ya get all the mice killed, you’re sleepin’ outside!” He tossed them out, slamming the door shut. Michio and Hibiki whimpered, standing up. Both cats shook off the dirt and their hurt pride.

“Hibiki, are you alright, sister?” Michio mewed, butting his head gently against her side.

“Yes, little Michio, are you?” Hibiki began to groom him. The smaller cat nodded, purring slightly.

“Hibiki. Why does he hate us? We catch mice for him. It helps keep his house full of food. We catch birds for him to eat, yet he tosses them aside. Mother said humans reward cats that do those things. Mother said humans show their appreciation by giving them fish or loving pats. Yotta Otoko does nothing but kick and hit us. Does he even care for us?”

Hibiki paused. “Brother,” Looking him in the eyes, she gave a little sigh, “he will treat us worse if we don’t catch mice and birds for him. Therefore, we must continue as if he gives us little treats or loving pats.” Michio waited for his sister to answer his last question, but Hibiki pawed at the ground instead.

“That’s not fair!” Michio yowled. A cup burst through the paper screen door, rolling up to the small cat’s paw.

“Shut up!”

“Michio, life isn’t fair. But the gods have looked after us through each other. We care for one another. Isn’t that enough?”

“It would be if Yotta Otoko treated us well. He is worthless. Not us. All he does is drink that foul water and meet other humans who do the same. Humans are worthless. They are mean, ugly and-”

“Michio!” Hibiki growled, “Stop spouting nonsense.”

“Yotta Otoko should die for what he does to us!”

“Michio!” Hibiki boxed her brother’s ears. “Enough! He feeds us!”

“He doesn’t! I do! I hunt those birds that he throws to the side. We eat those! Maybe I should hunt *him* next.” Michio snapped. He glared at his sister. “What do you think. Are you with me?” Hibiki backed up, terrified of the glint in her brother’s eyes.

“Michio...you can’t be serious.”

“What if I am?” Her brother’s sudden grin terrified her more.

“M-Michio...I can’t...I can’t let you do that!”

“If you stand by him, you will regret it, sister.” Michio inched toward Hibiki. “I shall give you one more chance. Do you stand with me or with Yotta Otoko, who has done nothing but kick, hit, beat and abuse us?”

“To kill a human...” Hibiki sobbed, “I cannot, brother!”

“Fine! Die defending him then!” Michio lunged at his sister, latching onto her neck. Hibiki yowled in pain, trying desperately to kick her brother off. Michio bit harder, feeling nothing except betrayal and hatred. Despite her frenzied attempts, Michio held fast until Hibiki’s struggles became weak convulsions. He did not let go until she was finally at rest. Michio took a step back. His sister’s blood pooled into the dirt, her eyes glossed over. He bowed his head, paying respects.

“Now. To avenge my sister’s suffering.” Michio glared at the house, creeping forward. He leapt through the small hole made by the cup thrown, landing onto the floor with barely a sound. As the small cat expected, Yotta Otoko was fast asleep by the fire, the smell of foul water permeating the old man’s breath. Michio leapt onto the back of the chair the man slept in, taking care not to make any noise. With a silent snarl, the cat clawed the old man’s throat, right where the blood pulsed against the skin.

Yotta Otoko woke with a yelp, collapsing to the floor. He grasped his neck and looked up to see Michio’s cold glare and eager grin. Yotta Otoko gurgled curses, trying to stop the bleeding. The cat gleefully watched until the withered man’s final breath was taken. Michio looked around and spotted a candle. “I shall become one of the creatures humans fear.” He swatted the candle over onto a small book, watching it catch. With a flick of a splitting tail, the

cat leapt out of the hole he came in. He didn't look back as he strolled into the forest, the miserable life of little Michio going up in flames. "I shall be Kaen, the nekomata who will free all creatures from humankind."

I, Abigail Burrows, allow Professor Jennifer Wolfley to display my story, A Fire Within, on her website for non-profit entertainment purposes.