

A DARK FANTASY FROM 13TH CENTURY JAPAN

DAUGHTERS *of* AMATERASU

RIVER DEMON



MAKI MORRIS

Daughters of Amaterasu
Book One: River Demon
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Chapter 1

I was being boiled to death.

Dark and murky water bubbled all around me, releasing acid vapors into the air with each eruption. My limbs hung loosely by my sides. I tried to cry out, but my voice failed me.

No, not again! My mind screamed with indignation.

It was too late. I was dripping with sweat like some common field worker. A person of noble lineage like me does not sweat—perspire maybe—but definitely not sweat!

Then it hit me: how could I be sweating if I am in the water? Better yet, if I was in the water, why should I care if I was sweating—I mean, perspiring?

While my brain tried to solve this conundrum, I woke, my heart pounding in my chest like a wild beast trying to break free from my rib cage.

But this day, unlike other days, I was roused from my recurring dream by the sound of hurried footsteps coming toward me.

In a dusky morning light, I bolted upright in a state of panic and seized one of my garments from on top of my bed. I balled it up to wipe my face, neck, and underarms to remove all evidence of perspiration. I quickly ran my fingers through my hair and straightened my nightclothes. The rapidity in which I was able to restore order and assume composure amazed me, but wasn't it a well-known adage that practice leads to perfection?

When I heard the gentle knocks at my door, I shoved the soiled garment beneath my bedding. I looked around to make certain that all signs of disarray were made right, then I lay back down on the bed and schooled my facial features to solemnity.

"Please pardon our intrusion, Princess. May we enter?" requested a hushed voice from behind the closed panel.

"You may."

The panel slid open to reveal Senza, my maid, accompanied by two female attendants.

I held my head still and moved only my eyes toward Senza. "Is it time to wake already? I think not even a sparrow is up so early in the morning."

After placing the lantern gently on the floor, Senza knelt at the threshold with her head bowed low. "Yes, Princess, our apologies for disturbing you so early, however your presence is urgently wanted."

I studied my maid's face, which I have come to know so well. She was from the country, and many ladies at court thought she looked unrefined, but I thought she was beautiful in her own unique way. Her full moon-shaped face was warm and friendly, and her eyes revealed uncommon intelligence.

When Senza raised her eyes to meet mine, I knew instantly something was wrong. I took a deep breath and quelled the rising dread. "Have I been found out, Senza? Am I in trouble with Master Chen again?"

"No, no, Princess." Senza's voice was a mere whisper.

I rose to a sitting position as gracefully as I could manage and surveyed the three women before me. The two female attendants' heads remained bowed to the floor. Senza's lips moved, but no sound came out.

"What is it, Senza? Where am I summoned to at such an odd hour of the morning?"

Senza's eyes were fixed on some invisible spot on the floor. "Princess Mayu, you are most urgently wanted in the... Empress's bedchamber."

I could not hold back my impertinence when the words just spilled out of my mouth like marbles. “Senza, I am sure you are mistaken. Why would my mother wish to see me in her bedchamber of all places?”

Senza heaved a deep ragged breath and when our eyes met again, hers were brimming with tears.

I wanted most desperately for us to be friends, but I knew that could never be. Since the imperial blood did not flow through her veins as it did in mine, I live in the clouds while she lives on land. The distance that separated us could never be bridged.

I was the youngest daughter of the Emperor of Japan’s first wife. I was fifteen, and my duty in life was to be useful in my father’s quest to remain the Emperor of Japan. My sister, Misaki, was sixteen years old, and she will be married off to the house of Minamoto within a month as a token to strengthen their allegiance to my father.

“I am ready to be dressed,” I commanded.

Senza and the attendants moved toward me like synchronized dancers. While one attendant peeled back my bed coverings, the other fetched the layers of kimono I would wear.

Being that it was the summer season, the colors of kimono selected for me were white, pale pink, pink, pale green, and dark green. For a brief moment, I hesitated upon the choice of the pale green garment in particular. Was it light enough in shade to complement the other colors, or was it too blue in hue to throw off the entire presentation?

The art of proper color assemblage revealed everything about a person. I even heard of a court official who had lost his position over his unwise color choices; therefore the last thing I would wish to do was to disgrace my parents by making an appearance in a mismatched color scheme.

In the end, it was too early in the morning for my hazy brain to embark upon the fine art of proper color selection. Consequently, I decided to trust Senza’s administration after all.

Senza was the only one who was allowed to touch me, as she helped me with the wide red pants first, then the layers of kimono on top.

When I was fully dressed, I sat in front of the looking glass and watched Senza run the ivory comb through my long hair. Since I had already run my fingers through my hair prior to her arrival, Senza’s effort this morning did not require the usual forceful strokes to remove the bird nest-like knots that often formed in the back of my head.

Once this task was done, Senza placed the comb on the tray and gave me a brief final inspection. With a quick exchange of glances between us, I was ready to leave my bedchamber. As I rose from in front of the looking glass, two attendants rushed forward to slide open the panels for me.

I headed toward my mother’s room, while Senza walked in front of me with the lantern held aloft to light my way.

It was the summer of 1274, yet even at that early hour of the morning, I could smell the heat in the air charged with oppressive energy like a warning of a coming storm.

Chapter 2

As I made my way to my mother's room, I encountered a corridor full of people.

The hum of their hushed conversations hung in the air like a cloud of flies, but as soon as they saw me, a ripple of silence spread through the assemblage. I felt all eyes on me, their gazes heavy with odd looks I could not figure out. Senza swiftly placed herself in front of me as if to protect me from the crowd, which consisted mostly of nobles and government officials.

For a brief moment, the scene before me froze in time as no one moved. Then the crowd gradually began to retreat to both sides of the walls, creating an open passage for us to traverse. As I continued forward, heads bowed low to the ground in displays of obeisance.

Senza knelt on the floor and announced me at the sliding panels.

My mother's maid, Haruka, opened the panel and motioned us inside.

Once I stepped inside my mother's room, I found more people there. The lack of lighting in the room and the eeriness in the air reminded me of a wake I had attended for one of my father's wives who had passed from this life to the next when she was the same age as me.

When my eyes finally adjusted to the dimness of the room, the sight of my mother and father at once seized my notice. They lay side by side in a tent made of netting to keep the mosquitoes out. Their eyes were closed as they lay there disturbingly still, like two stone figures.

I instantly averted my eyes out of embarrassment. I had never witnessed my mother and father in such an intimate position. Though they were merely lying next to each other, somehow it felt wrong for all of us to be in the room.

I noticed that the court physician, Doctor Henshu, was speaking in an animated manner with the Grand Council of State, Takamitsu, in the farthest corner of the room.

Why were my parents still asleep? Did they not hear the noise? What was wrong with them? I had to know.

I began to move toward Doctor Henshu and Grand Council Takamitsu, when Senza gently placed her hand on my sleeve. I could see in her eyes that I was doing it again, being impertinent. Women must not be bold, they must be demure and silent. Would I ever learn to conform to these rules?

With rising dread, my eyes darted from one recess of the room to another.

In one corner of the room, I saw the court officials speaking to one another with grave expressions on their faces. Though their words were exchanged in a mere whisper, I distinctly heard mentions of succession and abdication.

In the other corner of the room, my father's wives sat in a row with blank looks; all the while, my mother's ladies in waiting sobbed quietly.

With horror in my heart, I concluded that my parents were dead, murdered! What else could this be?

I felt anxious and frightened. I quelled the need to scream. *Without the protection of my parents, what is to become of me?*

Senza came and took hold of my hand. Sobs threatened to erupt, and my knees grew weak as if I was about to get ill. I repeated a personal mantra to myself: "I will not get sick, I will not get sick."

To divert my attention away from my stomach, I searched Senza's eyes for strength and guidance, but her eyes were downcast as she quietly led me to a cushion and motioned me to sit upon it.

My body moved as if I was trapped in tree sap. My head felt as if it was in fog. I had

difficulty executing the simplest of tasks. Finally, with great will and concentration, I sat on the cushion where Senza had indicated.

I realized then that I was sitting next to my sister, Misaki. I snatched my hand out of Senza's hands and grasped my sister's sleeve.

"Misaki, what has happened to my mother and father?" My voice came out rather loudly, but I did not care. My exclamation caused the conversations in the room to halt and all eyes to turn toward me.

My sister's snow-white hand rose and she brushed my hand from her sleeve as if my hand was dirt that had soiled her fine garment. Her eyes did not meet mine when she said, "Mayu, you are making a spectacle of yourself. You must remember your station."

The serenity in her face and cold reserve in her tone was not an unfamiliar response from my sister, yet her erect posture and the way she held her head so high made me want to shout at her. My sister sat next to me as a perfect and impenetrable presence, like a statue, her expression devoid of all emotions, a veil of nonentity.

I had tried to stop it, but it was too late. Tears fell from my eyes one after another, like monsoon rains in June. I suddenly felt so alone.

Misaki turned to me just then and looked at me through her narrowed eyes. "You disgrace your parents with your weakness." Those words were said to me in a near inaudible whisper, but it struck me deep like a thousand arrows to my heart.

Senza slid a small piece of cloth to me from where she sat behind me. I took it and pressed it to my cheeks and under my nose as gracefully as I could to remove the tears and mucus from my face.

I took a deep breath and focused on clearing all thoughts from my mind.

But it was no use.

When I saw my parents lying there so still, no amount of desire to be obedient and respectful could stop my tears from flowing.

It was an eternity before the royal physician finally came to speak with my sister and me. He knelt before us and bowed. When he rose from his bow, his eyes were cast in shadows of turmoil and his deep sonorous voice made my stomach turn.

"Princess Misaki and Princess Mayu, I lack the words to convey my deepest sympathy for the present circumstance of your honored parents—" began Doctor Henshu.

At that moment, I lost all attempt for self-control. I interrupted the royal physician in mid-sentence and launched my burning questions at him in quick succession. "How could this have happened? Were they poisoned? Have you any idea who could have murdered the Emperor and Empress?"

As soon as my questions were hurled at the physician, everyone in the room took a simultaneous breath of censure. I felt as though they had sucked the air completely out of the room to punish me for my heedless behavior.

"Murder?" inquired Henshu.

"Yes, do you know who had murdered my parents? Where were the guards?" The thought of never seeing my mother and father alive again threw me into ungovernable rage. I knew I had no power within me to do anything about it, but I had to know who was responsible for this cowardly act and what was going to be done about it.

Doctor Henshu studied me for a moment and said, "Princess, the Emperor and Empress are not dead, but they are not alive either."