

Ikiryo

Liz Williams

The author's poignant new story is set in the same universe as her novel, *Banner of Souls*, which was published by Bantam Spectra in 2004.

Every evening, the kappa would lead the child down the steps of the water-temple to the edges of the lake. The child seemed to like it there, although since she so rarely spoke, it was difficult to tell. But it was one of the few times that the child went with the kappa willingly, without the fits of silent shaking, or whimpering hysteria, and the kappa took this for a good sign.

On the final step, where the water lapped against the worn stone, the child would stand staring across the lake until the kappa gently drew her down to sit on what remained of the wall. Then they would both watch the slow ripple of the water, disturbed only by the wake left by carp, or one of the big turtles that lived in the depths and only occasionally surfaced. Legend said that they could speak. Sometimes the kappa thought that she detected the glitter of intelligence in a turtle's ebony eye, behind the sour-plum bloom, and she wondered where they had come from, whether they had always been here in the lake, indigenous beasts from early times, or whether they resulted from some later experimentation and had been introduced. If the kappa had been here alone, she might have tried to capture one of the turtles, but she had her hands full enough with the child, the *ikiryo*.

Now, she looked at the child. The *ikiryo* sat very still, face set and closed as though a shadow had fallen across it. She looked like any other human child, the kappa thought: fine brows over dark, slanted eyes, a straight fall of black hair. It was hard to assess her age: perhaps seven or eight, but her growth had probably been hotheaded.

When the palace women had brought the child to the kappa, all these questions had been asked, but the kappa had received no satisfactory answers.

"Does she have a name?" the kappa had asked the women. One had merely stared, face flat and blank, suggesting concentration upon some inner programming rather than the scene before her. The other woman, the kappa thought, had a touch of the tiger: a yellow sunlit gaze, unnatural height, a faint stripe to the skin. A typical bodyguard. The kappa took care to keep her manner appropriately subservient.

"She has no name." the tiger-woman said. "She is *ikiryo*." The word was a growl.

"I am afraid I am very stupid," the kappa said humbly. "I do not know what that means."

"It does not matter," the tiger-woman said. "Look after her, as best you can. You will be paid. You used to be a guardian of children, did you not?"

"Yes, for the one who was—" the kappa hesitated.

"The goddess before I-Nami," the tiger-woman said. "It is all right. You may speak her name. She died in honor."

"I was the court nurse," the kappa said, eyes downward. She did not want the tiger-woman to glimpse the thought like a carp in a pool: *yes, if honor requires that someone should have you poisoned*. "I took care of the growing bags for the goddess Than Geng."

"And one of the goddess Than Geng's children was, of course, I-Nami. Now, the goddess remembers you, and is grateful."

She had me sent here, in the purge after Than Geng's death. I was lucky she did not have me killed. Why then is she asking me to guard her own child?" the kappa wondered, but did not say.

"And this child *is* the goddess I-Nami's?" she queried, just to make sure.

"She is *ikiryoh*," the tiger-woman said. Faced with such truculent conversational circularity, the kappa asked no more questions.

In the days that followed it was impossible not to see that the child was disturbed. Silent for much of the time, the *ikiryoh* was prone to fits, unlike anything the kappa had seen: back-arching episodes in which the child would shout fragmented streams of invective, curses relating to disease and disfigurement, the worst words of all. At other times, she would crouch shuddering in a corner of the temple, eyes wide with horror, staring at nothing. The kappa had learned that attempts at reassurance only made matters worse, resulting in bites and scratches that left little impression upon the kappa's thick skin, but a substantial impression upon her mind. Now, she left the child alone when the fits came and only watched from a dismayed distance, to make sure no lasting harm befell her.

The sun had sunk down behind the creeper trees, but the air was still warm, heavy and humid following the afternoon downpour. Mosquitoes hummed across the water and the kappa's long tongue flickered out to spear them before they could alight on the child's delicate skin. The kappa rose and her reflection shimmered in the green water, a squat toad-being. Obediently, the child rose, too, and reached out to clasp the kappa's webbed hand awkwardly in her own. Together, they climbed the steps to the water-temple.

Next morning, the child was inconsolable. Ignoring the bed of matting and soft woven blankets, she lay on the floor with her face turned to the wall, her mouth open in a soundless wail. The kappa watched, concerned. Experience had taught her not to interfere, but the child remained in this position for so long, quite rigid, that at last the kappa grew alarmed and switched on the antiscibe to speak to the palace.

It was not the tiger-woman who answered, but the other one, the modified person. The kappa told her what was happening.

"You have no reason to concern yourself," the woman said, serene. "This is to be expected."

"But the child is in grave distress. If there's something that can be done?" The kappa wrung her thick fingers.

"There is nothing. It is normal. She is *ikiryoh*."

"But what should I do?"

"Ignore it." The woman glanced over her shoulder at a sudden commotion. The kappa heard explosions.

"Dear heaven. What's happening?"

The woman looked at her as though the kappa were mad. "Just firecrackers. It's the first day of the new moon."

Out at the water-temple, the kappa often did not bother to keep track of the time, and so she had forgotten that they had now passed into Rain Month and the festival to commemorate I-Nami's

Ascension into goddess-hood. Today would be the first day of the festival: it was due to last another three.

"I have matters to attend to," the woman said. "I suggest you do the same."

The screen of the antiscibe faded to black. The kappa went in search of the child and to her immense relief, found her sitting up against the wall, hugging her knees to her chest.

"Are you feeling better?" the kappa asked.

"I'm bored!"

Like any young child. Bored was good, the kappa decided.

"Let's make noodles," she said, and then, because the *ikiryoh's* face was still shadowed, "And then maybe we will go to the festival. How would you like that?"

The kappa was supposed to be confined to the water-temple, but there were no guards or fences, and she was aware of a sudden longing for a change of scene. There would be so many people in the city, and a child and a kappa were so commonplace as to be invisible. They could hitch a ride on a farm cart.

The child's face lit up. "I would like that! When can we go?"

"First, we will have something to eat," the kappa said.

They reached the city toward late afternoon, bouncing in on the back of a truck with great round wheels. The child's eyes grew wide when she saw it.

"That is a strange thing!" she said.

"Surely you have seen such vehicles before?" the kappa asked, puzzled. After all, the child had presumably grown up in the palace, and she had been brought to the water-temple in one of I-Nami's skimmers. A vegetable truck seemed ordinary enough.

The child's face crumpled. "I can't remember."

"Well, don't worry about it," the kappa said quickly, not wanting to disquiet her. She held tightly to the child's hand and peered over the tops of the boxes, filled with melons and radishes and peppers, with which they were surrounded. The road was a congested mass of hooting trucks, crammed with people, and the occasional private vehicle. The hot air was thick with a gritty dust and the kappa was thankful for the wide hat that she wore, which kept the worst of the heat from her sparsely-haired head. The child sneezed.

"Is it much further?"

"I hope not." But they were turning into Sui-Pla Street now, not too far from the center. The kappa could hear the snap of firecrackers and the rhythmic beat of ceremonial drums, churning out prayers in praise of the goddess.

Goddess, indeed, the kappa thought. *She is only a woman, grown in a bag like everyone else.* These deified elevations did little good in the end: at first, after each new coup, the folk all believed, not so much from credulity as weariness, the hope that now things might finally become better. But each time it was the same: the woman behind the mask would begin to show through, the feet turn to clay, and the masses would grow angry as yet another ruler succumbed to self-indulgence, or apathy, or cruelty. Than Geng

had been one of the former sort, and had at least retained the status quo. The kappa knew little about I-Nami, what manner of ruler she had become. She knew better than to ask, because that might betray her as someone who doubted, and for some rulers, that was enough.

Certainly, the people were putting on a good show. Still clasping the *ikiryoh's* hand, the kappa stepped down from the back of the truck and into the crowd.

"Hold tight," she told the child. "Don't let go. I don't want to lose you among all these people."

They watched as a long dragon pranced by, followed by lions made from red-and-gold sparkles. Slipped feet showed beneath. As the sky darkened into aquamarine, fireworks were let off, exploding like stars against the deep-water color of the heavens. The kappa and the child walked past stalls selling all manner of things: candy and circuit components and dried fruit and flowers. The kappa bought a small, sticky box of candy for the child, who ate it in pleasurable silence. It was good, the kappa thought, to see her behaving so normally, like an ordinary little girl. She pulled gently at the *ikiryoh's* hand.

"Is everything all right?"

The child nodded, then frowned. "What's that?"

The firecracker explosions were doubling in intensity. There was a sudden cacophony of sound. A squadron of tiger-women raced around the corner, wearing ceremonial harness, heads adorned with tall golden hats. They carried pikes, with which they pretended to attack the crowd. The child let out a short, sharp shriek.

"Hush," the kappa said, her heart sinking. "See? It's only a game."

The child shrank back against her skirts, hand hovering near her mouth. "I don't like them. They are so big."

"It means the goddess is coming," a young woman standing next to the kappa said. She sounded superior: a city girl enlightening the ignorant peasants. "The procession has already begun up in the main square" "from there, it will come down here and into Nang Ong."

"Do you hear that?" the kappa said, tightening her grip a little on the child's hand. "You're going to see the goddess." She bent to whisper into the child's ear. "Do you remember her?"

"The goddess?" the child whispered. "What is that?"

The kappa frowned. The tiger-woman had specifically said that the child had come from I-Nami. Maybe the *ikiryoh* simply did not remember. But it raised further questions about her upbringing and age. "You will soon see," the kappa said, feeling inadequate.

Through the taller humans, the kappa could get a glimpse of the start of the procession: a lion-dog, prancing. At first she thought the *kylin* was composed of another set of costumed people, but then she realized that it was real. Its eyes rolled golden, the red tongue lolled. The child's grip on the kappa's hand became painful.

"Don't worry," the kappa said. "See" "it is on its lead." The *kylin's* handlers strained behind it, laughing and shouting out to one another as it tossed its magnificent mane. Behind it came a litter, borne on the shoulders of four beings that were a little like kappa, but larger and more imposing. Heavy, glossy shells covered their backs. They lumbered along, smiling beneath their load. All of these beings" "the turtle bearers, the *kylin*, the tiger-women" "all were the genetic property of the palace itself. No one else could breed or own such folk, unlike the commonplace kappa, who had been bred so long ago for

menial work in the factories and paddy fields of Malay. The kappa remembered people like this from her own days in the palace; remembered, too, what was said to have taken place behind closed doors for the amusement of the goddess Than Geng and her guests. The kappa had not mourned Than Geng in the slightest, but the rumors were that I-Nami was worse.

"Our goddess is coming," someone said softly behind her. There were murmurs of approval and excitement. *If only they knew*, thought the kappa. But it had always been the way of things. She looked up at the litter, which was drawing close. The curtains were drawn, and now I-Nami herself was leaning out, waving to the crowd. Her oval face had been painted in the traditional manner: bands of iridescent color gliding across her skin. Her great dark eyes glowed, outlined in gold. The very air around her seemed perfumed and sparkling. Surprised, the kappa took a step back. Illusion and holographics, nothing more, and yet she had never seen anyone who so resembled a goddess.

"She is so beautiful!" a woman said beside the kappa, clapping her hands in excitement.

"Yes, she is," the kappa said, frowning.

"And she has been so good to us."

"Really?" The kappa turned, seeking the knowing smile, the cynical turn of the mouth, but the woman seemed quite sincere.

"Of course! Now, it is safe to walk the streets at night. She came to my tenement building and walked up the stairs to see it for herself, then ordered the canal to be cleaned. Now we have fresh water and power again. And there is food distribution on every corner for the poor, from subsidized farms. Things are so much better now."

There were murmurs of agreement from the crowd. Startled, the kappa looked down at the child. "Did you hear that?"

But the child's face was a mask of fainting horror. Her eyes had disappeared, rolling back into her head until only a blue-white line was showing, and a thin line of spittle hung from her mouth. She sagged in the kappa's grip. Without hesitating, the kappa picked her up and shoved through the crowd to an empty bench. She laid the child along it. The *ikiryoh* seemed barely conscious, muttering and cursing beneath her breath.

"What's wrong?" the kappa cried, but the child did not reply. The kappa shuffled back to the crowd as fast as she could and tapped a woman on the shoulder. "I need a healer, a doctor—someone!"

The woman turned. "Why, what is wrong?"

"My ward is ill. Maybe the heat—" "I don't know."

"There is a clinic around the corner in Geng Street, but I should think they'll all be out watching the procession," the woman said.

The kappa thought so too, but she had little choice. What if the child was dying? She picked the *ikiryoh* up and carried her through a gap in the buildings to Geng Street, which was little more than a collection of shacks. I-Nami's benign influence had clearly not penetrated here—or perhaps it had, because the street pump was working and when the kappa touched the button, a stream of clear water gushed out. She wetted the corner of her skirt and dabbed at the child's face, then carried her on to the blue star that signified the clinic.

At first, she thought that the woman had been right and there was no one there. But as she stood peering

through the door, she saw a figure in the back regions. She rapped on the glass. A stout woman in red-patterned cloth came forward. Her face soured as she set eyes on the kappa.

"We're closed!"

"Please!" the kappa cried. She gestured to the child in her arms. Muttering, the woman unlocked the door.

"You'd better bring her in. Put her there, on the couch. You're lucky I was here. I forgot my flower petals, to throw. What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know. She suffers from these fits" "I don't know what they are."

"You're her nurse?"

"Yes."

"She's very pale," the woman said. "Poor little thing. The healer's out" "we have three here, all of them are traditional practitioners. I'll try and call them." She pressed her earlobe between finger and thumb. The kappa saw the gleam of green. "Ma Shen Shi? It's me, I'm at the clinic. There's a little girl who fainted. Can you come?"

It seemed the answer was positive. "Sit down," the woman said. "He'll be here in a bit."

The kappa waited, watching the child. She was whimpering and moaning, fists tightly clenched.

"Has she ever been this bad before?" the woman asked.

"No. She has" "episodes." The kappa glanced up as the door opened. A small, elderly man came in, wearing the healer's red, with a cigarette in his mouth.

"Go and throw flower petals," he said to the woman. "And you, kappa" "do something useful with yourself. Make tea. I will examine her."

The woman melted into the warm darkness outside. Reluctantly, the kappa found a kettle behind the reception desk and switched it on, then put balls of tea into three cups, watching the healer as she did so. He examined the child's eyes and ears, stretched out her tongue, knocked sharply on her knees and elbows and checked her pulse. Then he simply sat, with eyes closed and one hand stretched out over the child's prone form. The kappa longed to ask what he was doing, but did not dare interrupt. The child began to pant, a terrible dog-like rasping. Then she howled, until it became a fading wail. The healer opened his eyes.

"What is wrong with her?" the kappa whispered. "Do you know?"

"I know exactly what is wrong with her," the healer said. He came over to the desk and sipped at the tea. "If you can put it like that. She is *ikiriyoh*. A fine specimen of the art, too."

The kappa stared at him. "That's what they told me, when they brought her to me. But what is an *ikiriyoh*?"

"An *ikiriyoh* is something from legend, from the old stories they used to tell in the Nippon archipelago. It is a spirit."

"That little girl is no spirit. She's flesh and blood. She bleeds, she pees, she breathes."

"I am not saying that the legends are literally true," the healer said. "I have only ever seen one *ikiryoh* before, and that was male. In the old tales, they were formed from malice, from ill-will—the projected darkness of the unconscious."

"And now?"

"And now they are children grown to take on the worst aspects of someone—a clone, to carry the dark elements of the self. Emotions, concepts, feelings are extracted from the original and inserted into a blank host. That little girl is the worst of someone else. Do you have any idea who?"

The kappa hesitated. She knew very well who had done such a thing: I-Nami, the glowing, golden goddess, who had sent her small fractured self to live in the swamp. Then she thought of the woman in the crowd: of the clean canal, the tenement with lights and fresh water. It was enough to make her say, slowly, "No. I do not know."

"Well. It must be someone very wealthy—perhaps they had it done for a favored child. I've heard of such things. The kid gets into drugs or drink, or there's some genetic damage psychologically, so they have a clone grown to take on that part of the child and send it away. It costs a fortune. It would have been called black magic, once. Now it is black science."

"But what is happening to her now?"

"My guess is that she came close to the original, whose feelings she hosts, and that it's put her under strain. I don't understand quite how these things work—it's very advanced neuro-psychiatry, and as I say, it's rare."

"And the future?"

"I can't tell you that it's a happy one. She is all damage, you see. She has no real emotions of her own, little free will, probably not a great deal of intelligence. You are looking at a person who will grow up to be immensely troubled, who may even harbor appetites and desires that will prove destructive to others."

"And what would happen if the *ikiryoh* died?"

"I'm not sure," the healer said, "but in the legends, if anything happens to the *ikiryoh*, the stored emotions pass back to the person who once possessed them."

"Even if the person does not know that the *ikiryoh* is dead?"

"Even then."

He and the kappa stared at one another.

"I think," the kappa said at last, "That I had better take her home."

Next day, toward evening, the kappa once more sat on the steps of the water-temple. The child was sleeping within. It was very quiet, with only the hum of cicadas in the leaves and the ripple of fish or turtle. The kappa tried to grasp the future: the long years of fits and nightmares, the daily anguish. And once the *ikiryoh* reached puberty, what then? The kappa had seen too much of a goddess's dark desires, back at the temple: desires that seemed to embody a taste for the pain of others. How different had Than Geng been from I-Nami? And yet, I-Nami now was restoring the fortunes of her people: thousands of them...

The kappa looked up at a sudden sound. The child was making her way down the steps to the water.

For a moment, the kappa thought: *it would be easy, if I must*. The child's frail limbs, powerless against the thick-muscled arms of the kappa; a few minutes to hold her under the water ... It would be quick. And better do it now, while the *ikiryoh* was still a child, than face a struggle with an angry, vicious human adult. But what if the *ikiryoh* had a chance after all, could be remade, not through the aid of an arcane science, but simply through the love of the only family she had?

The kappa stared at the child and thought of murder, and of the goddess's glowing face, and then she sighed.

"Come," she said. "Sit by me," and together in stillness they watched the shadowy golden carp, half-seen beneath the surface of the lake.

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