

# Awa Maru

*Titanic of Japan*



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## **AWA MARU - TITANIC OF JAPAN**

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## I.

In the dim hospital room reeking of antiseptic and impending death, Kyoko Tanaka sat sobbing silently into the tiny white face towel she had brought to wipe the sweat off her mother's brow. Her mounting fears had just been confirmed by the impersonal white gowned doctor merely by a flick of his clip board and the solemn announcement that Chieko was dying.

Although she had been expecting it for days as her mother's condition worsened, when she was actually confronted with the news of Chieko's impending death, Kyoko could not accept it and she clutched at the doctor's arm and implored, "But this is 1970, we have advanced medical treatment, surely something can be done to save my mother! She is only 60 years old!"

Dr Hayashi shook his head, the first flicker of emotion showing in his cool medical face. He gave an inward sigh, this was the third death sentence he had pronounced to grieving families that day and it was emotionally draining even for a seasoned doctor like him. He hoped there would be no more at least for the rest of the day.

Aloud he said, "Yes, of course there are new treatments but your mother's cancer was detected too late and she is not responding to any of our procedures. I am really sorry that there's nothing more we can do."

Kyoko nodded silently, not trusting herself to speak.

A slight movement from the bed behind her interrupted the silence that followed and a hoarse but surprisingly clear voice said, "Kyoko, can I speak with you alone?"

"Yes, of course, Mother," Kyoko replied tearfully. She went over to where her husband, Masao, was sitting with their daughter, Mayumi and whispered, "Masao, can you take Mayumi chan to the candy bar in the cafeteria downstairs? I think my mother wants to talk to me alone."

Masao nodded and scooped up the squirming little girl beside him. "Come on, Mayumi chan. Your mother says you can have a candy bar so let's get going before she changes her mind!"

Kyoko waited for the door to close on Masao and Mayumi before hurrying over to her mother's bed, her heart contracting painfully at the sight of Chieko's pasty white face and the dry, cracked lips that were

trying very hard to speak.

“I know I don’t have much time left and if I don’t speak now, this secret will die with me. Forgive me, my child, but I have kept you from knowing the truth about yourself all these years. I’ve been selfish and wrong.”

The effort of speaking was too much for the dying woman on the white hospital bed and she fell back on the pillows, breathing heavily.

“Water,” she whispered. “Give me water.”

As Kyoko held a tumbler of water to her mother’s lips, her heart was pumping furiously with deep fear. She could feel the weight of the secret Chieko was struggling to disclose even in her dying moments and was deeply worried that the effort of speaking might kill her mother.

“Please, Mama, don’t do this to yourself,” she begged. “Whatever secret you think you kept from me, it really doesn’t matter. You have to stop talking and rest.”

But Chieko shook her head with surprising energy and continued, “No, its time you know the truth. I should have been honest with you from the start but I was afraid that if you found out, you would love me less and then the years went by and it became harder and harder to tell you.”

For the second time, Chieko fell back on the pillows, gasping for air, her face now a bluish mask with the shadows of death etched on every line. Holding back her tears, Kyoko stroked her mother’s hand tenderly and pleaded with her to stop.

“No,” she whispered. “Let me finish.”

Her voice barely audible now, Chieko continued, “Behind the picture of Emperor Hirohito in my room, there is a secret compartment. You will find a tin box there ... That box contains your history and a piece of the life that I stole from you, Kyoko chan, and I am returning it to you.”

Kyoko felt a slight pressure on her hand as her mother battled death to utter her last words, “Promise me you will go and look for the box when I am gone. There is so much I want to tell you but I’m afraid it’s too late...”

The tears were pouring down Kyoko’s face as her mother’s voice trailed off and her thin blue veined eyelids fluttered and then closed. The nurse who had been hovering discreetly outside the room appeared to take Chieko’s pulse and confirm that she had slipped into a coma.

Kyoko could not believe that her mother was almost gone and she

would never see the laughter and twinkle of those expressive eyes again. All through the night she sat with the dying woman torn by the sound of her shallow breathing and her struggle to stay alive. Twice she saw Chieko's dry cracked lips moving but nothing came out, she could no longer speak. Only the tiny tear that oozed out of her tightly closed left eye showed the excruciating pain of some unfinished business that would not let Chieko die in peace. Kyoko started to cry helplessly because she did not know what was tormenting her mother and she could do nothing to ease her suffering.

To stay calm she distracted herself by thinking of the tin box behind the picture of Emperor Hirohito that her mother had mentioned. After they got married, Kyoko and Masao had moved in with Chieko as the house was too big for her to stay alone and the young couple could not afford their own home in any case. Masao had been intrigued by the ostentatious gold framed picture of Emperor Hirohito in Chieko's room but Kyoko herself had grown up with that picture frowning down on her so she never thought anything much of it. Chieko too had never shown any particular interest or paid any special attention to Emperor Hirohito's image so her daughter was surprised at this sudden, almost urgent reference to it now. Disorientated thoughts flitted in and out of her exhausted mind throughout the night and just before dawn, unable to stay awake any more, she slumped over her mother's bed in exhaustion and passed out.

As the first light of morning started to stream into the room, Kyoko woke up and realized with great consternation that she had fallen asleep somewhere in the course of the night. How could she have slept so soundly while her mother lay dying? She gazed at Chieko's smooth silent face, wiped clean of all the cares and worries of life and realized with a sinking heart that her mother was dead. Kyoko could not believe that she had slept through Chieko's dying moments and not been there for her as she drew her last breath.

Sobbing inconsolably, Kyoko rushed out of the room to break the news to Masao who was sitting on the visitors' sofa outside, his head buried in his arms. Mayumi lay on a blanket beside him, her little chest heaving in deep sleep, a picture of youth and life.

"Masao," she wailed. "I fell asleep so I didn't get to say Goodbye to Mama! What kind of daughter am I? I couldn't even stay up to be with her in her final moments! Maybe there was something she wanted

me to do, maybe she wanted me to hold her in those last terrifying moments.....”

Masao shot up, rubbed the sleep vigorously from his eyes and said, “But that is what your mother would have wanted, to slip away silently and unobtrusively, causing as little trouble to anyone in death as she did in life.”

Kyoko nodded and went back to the room without another word, there didn't seem anything else to say. Even as she stood looking down at her mother's shadowed face, weeping silently, Kyoko realized with a heavy heart that Chieko had always kept a part of herself from her daughter. No matter how good a mother she was, there was always a part of her Kyoko could not reach. It was on her deathbed that she had tried to let Kyoko into that secret part of herself at last but it was too late, she had died before her daughter could enter.

Chieko's mouth was slightly ajar as if she had tried to say something before she drew her last breath and Kyoko bent over and gently closed it for her mother.

“Be at peace, Mama,” she whispered. “I promise I will look for the tin box.”

All through the funeral preparations, her mother's last words haunted Kyoko reminding her of the tin box she had mentioned with her dying breath. The force of those words grew stronger each day as if Chieko was there beside her, urging her not to wait but to go and look for it immediately.

Chieko had left instructions that she was to be cremated, not buried and as the simple oak coffin was pushed into the furnace, Kyoko had to stuff a handkerchief into her mouth to stop her cries of anguish and denial as the flames leapt and crackled to finally reduce her mother's body into a pile of ashes. Unable to bear the sight any longer, she slipped out of the funeral hall and ran all the way home, not stopping till she reached the beautiful wood paneled front door Chieko had been so proud of.

The airy 8 mat tatami room that her mother had slept in for the last thirty years looked exactly the same as she had left it, the futons neatly folded and piled up in the closet and her favorite yukata still hanging in its usual place behind the narrow standing mirror.

Kyoko had never really attached much importance to the picture of the emperor in its thick gold frame occupying pride of place above the

small rosewood dressing table in her mother's room. She saw it now as if for the first time and noticed how unapproachable the bespectacled emperor looked, as if he were guarding a deep mysterious secret. If Chieko did in fact have a secret she wanted to hide, she had indeed chosen a good guardian for it. The Emperor's stern face certainly did not invite any unwelcome intruders.

Reluctant to invade the sanctuary guarded by the stern emperor, Kyoko stood, hesitating, in the middle of the room for a long moment but her mother's persistent presence pushed her on. She told herself that it would turn out to be nothing but her poor mother's delirious deathbed ramblings as she rushed across the room and lifted the heavy picture from its place before she could change her mind.

Kyoko's hands started to tremble violently as a deep, dark, roughly cut hole appeared before her just as her mother had said there would be. There was a crash and she realized that in the shock of her discovery, she had dropped the picture and it lay now at her foot in a glistening cluster of broken glass and splintered gold painted wood. A piece of glass had sliced deeply into her right forefinger and the blood gushed out from the open wound and fell on the tatami in a tiny red pool but she did not feel any pain. It was as if shock had anaesthetized her whole body.

Mesmerized, Kyoko reached into the gaping hole and her hand came into contact with something cold, hard and metal. It was the old tin box her mother had urged her to find, covered in dust and rusting at the edges. She stared at it for a long time willing herself to shove it back into the hole and walk away. Her life was peaceful and orderly and she didn't need any old family secrets or skeletons to mess it up.

But her fingers would not do her bidding and Kyoko knew that for better and for worse, her mother had drawn her into this secret and she could not escape. The tin had been tightly closed and left untouched for so many years that it did not open easily and it was only after a broken nail, more blood oozing out of her cut finger and several attempts with a pair of scissors that it finally flew open in a flurry of dust.

Inside the tin was a small bundle of papers tied together with a faded red string. Hardly able to contain herself now, Kyoko untied the red string that held the sheaf of old yellowing papers together and spread them on the floor. There was a letter which she placed aside to read later but it was the identity card with an old faded picture of her mother

that caught her attention at once. She could not understand it but the ID card was issued in a place called Singapore in the year 1942, where was Singapore and what had her mother been doing there? Why had she never mentioned this place Singapore or spoken of having been there to her or anyone else before?

A faded photograph from the bundle of papers stared up at Kyoko, it was a picture of two couples posing with a little girl and an older boy smiling expectantly into the camera. When Kyoko held it to the light and peered closely at the picture, she realized with great shock that one of the couples were her parents. She had never met her father but she recognized that familiar face immediately because Chieko had shown her pictures of him and on a small table beside her futon, there was a tiny portrait of her father in a silver photo frame. Kyoko had gazed so often at the man in that framed picture that she had his face imprinted in her mind. The little girl looked vaguely familiar but she could not place her and it was obvious even from the faded print of the old photograph how close the two couples and the children were. Kyoko's head was buzzing with disturbing questions, who were the people in the photograph with her parents? If they were so close, why hadn't her mother mention anything to her? Where were they now and why had Chieko led her to these people only as she lay dying? What secret stories lay behind the six smiling faces in the photograph?

There were some tiny letters in a corner of the picture but they had been blurred and almost blotted out by a long forgotten drop of water and were difficult to read. After several attempts, Kyoko finally made out the words.

"Singapore March 27th 1945 The Day Before Departure," she read slowly squinting at the water stained characters. They told her nothing except that on the 27th of March 1945, her parents had posed with these people in the picture before they left for a journey either together or separately.

The mystery was deepening and Kyoko was disturbed by it. She wanted to run to her mother for answers to the questions that were slowly unsettling her world but Chieko had become nothing more than a pile of ashes in a marble urn, silenced forever. Kyoko realized with a heavy heart that it was up to her now to put together the enormous puzzle of her life that her mother had started the night she died. She didn't know where they would lead her and how it would end but she

could not refuse to fulfill her mother's last wish.

## II.

Shige Sawada leaned against the railings of the Hokoku Maru which had set sail for Singapore from Yokohama just two days ago. He gazed into the endless horizon, eyes narrowed against the strong sunshine and his mind strayed back to the last time, years ago, that he had stood on the deck of a ship awed by the immensity of the vast ocean stretching endlessly before him. On that last ocean voyage, he had been sailing back to Japan from the United States armed with a degree in English from one of California's best colleges and three years of cherished memories and experiences of his life in America.

Shige's father had wanted him to follow the family tradition and become an engineer but had relented when Shige showed a clear and unusual flair for languages. His investment into a top linguistics college for his son had paid off when Shige was selected for a prestigious scholarship to the United States for a degree in English Language and Literature.

He was thinking now of that other voyage and his mixed feelings of joy to be returning home and sadness of leaving a way of life he had become accustomed to as he watched the San Francisco harbor receding into the distance and disappear. His mind wandered to a forbidden zone, Sayako, the lovely American Japanese girl he had fallen in love with and their painful parting when at the end of three years, his scholarship had required that he return to Japan to serve the government and Sayako had been too afraid to leave the United States and her affluent family to go with him. He had written faithfully to her until one day a letter came from her father returning his letters with a curt note informing him of Sayako's impending marriage to a Japanese American doctor. After Shige lost his love to the vast ocean that separated them, he threw himself relentlessly into his work and it wasn't long before he became one of the top English speaking intelligence officers in the Foreign Ministry.

Even after he met and married Masako, Shige knew he would never forget Sayako and the three years they had shared in another

land, another time, he kept it locked away in a corner of his heart. He was thinking of her now and how she had made his heart glow with the incongruity of her sweet Japanese face and American voice and views. He remembered his second month in San Francisco and the sexy American drawl that had intrigued him in a college cafeteria when he turned round and discovered that the voice belonged to a sweet Japanese face. It was Shige's first initiation into the Japanese American culture and society and it left a lasting fascination of the intriguing incongruity of American lifestyles and mindsets in the Asian faces of the emerging Asian American youth of that time. How he had missed Sayako and the fascinating cultural melting pot that was America when he returned to his homogenous homeland.

A splash and the leaping of a shoal of fish brought him back from the past to the *Hokoku Maru*, and his pregnant wife, Masako who was walking across the deck towards him with their son Hiro in tow. Shige shoved his brief longing for Sayako and his life in America to the place in his heart that no one could reach and swung Hiro onto his shoulders, taking comfort in the child's delighted shrieks. Japan was almost at war with America and he needed to focus and remember that he was now an intelligence officer on a mission for his country.

Shige had been working in the Foreign Ministry as a liaison officer when the war broke out and he was transferred to the military department because his English speaking skills became an asset to the Japanese military especially in their overseas operations. To his consternation, he was given the sinister designation of "intelligence officer" and in 1941, he was ordered to leave for Singapore, a tiny island south of the Malay Peninsula which the Japanese troops had just seized from the British. It was wartime and the sailing would be dangerous but Shige had vowed never to leave his family behind. The last time he had set sail from San Francisco leaving the woman he loved behind, he had lost her so he was determined that this time it would not happen. Although Masako was pregnant, Shige was assured that the Japanese military hospitals in Singapore were well staffed and equipped and there was no cause to worry.

Masako's family, however, objected strongly to her leaving Japan in the uncertain and dangerous circumstances of war and in her delicate condition.

"Masako will deliver her baby without us around to help her and