

Kiko: The Gift of Sakura

Kiko stepped through the front door and carefully placed her satchel on the floor. Although she was pleased to be home, the excitement she had felt that morning had vanished.

Her mum noticed straight away.

"Tough day?" she asked gently.

Kiko nodded. "I thought I'd be good at everything, but I wasn't."

Dad smiled kindly. "The first day is often the hardest."

"I fell off the balance beam twice," Kiko admitted. "I forgot to bow before entering the dojo, and my hands hurt from holding the practice sword."

Her parents listened without interrupting.

When Kiko had finished, Mum placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"We're proud of you."

Kiko looked surprised.

"But I made so many mistakes."

"And you kept going," Dad replied. "That's what matters."

Mum exchanged a glance with Dad before smiling.

"We have something we'd like to show you."

Curious, Kiko followed them into the garden.

Beside the old cherry blossom tree sat a small woven basket with a bright red ribbon tied around it.

The basket wriggled.

Kiko blinked.

"Did... did it just move?"

Before anyone could answer, a tiny calico kitten poked her head over the edge. She had soft patches of white, orange and black fur, bright green eyes and a little red collar with a golden bell that jingled as she climbed out.

The kitten stretched, yawned, then trotted confidently towards Kiko.

Without hesitation, she leapt into Kiko's arms.

"Oh!" Kiko laughed as the kitten rubbed her face against her cheek with a loud purr.

"She's beautiful!" whispered Kiko.

"Her name is Sakura," Mum said.

"We thought she might remind you that even on difficult days, there is always something wonderful waiting around the corner," Dad added.

Sakura reached up with one tiny paw and gently tapped Kiko's nose.

Everyone laughed.

For the rest of the afternoon, Sakura followed Kiko everywhere.

When Kiko sat beneath the cherry blossom tree, Sakura curled up beside her.

When Kiko stood up, Sakura tried to copy her every step, although her little legs were much shorter.

At one point, Sakura attempted to chase a drifting blossom petal. She pounced with great determination...

...and landed straight inside an empty watering can.

Only her fluffy tail could be seen sticking out.

Kiko giggled so much that tears filled her eyes.

"I think she meant to do that," Dad joked.

"I'm not so sure," Kiko replied, lifting the slightly embarrassed kitten out.

Later that evening, Kiko filled a small bowl with fresh water before carefully brushing Sakura's soft fur.

"You'll need to look after her every day," Mum explained.

"She'll need feeding, brushing and lots of love."

Kiko nodded seriously.

"I will."

Sakura purred happily as if she understood every word.

Just then, there was a gentle knock at the front door.

Dad opened it with a broad smile.

Standing outside was an elderly lady with silver hair tied neatly into a bun. She carried a walking stick carved with tiny cherry blossoms and wore a warm smile that reached her kind eyes.

"Baba!" Kiko exclaimed, running to hug her grandmother.

"My goodness," Baba laughed. "You've grown taller already!"

"I only saw you last month!"

"Exactly," Baba replied with a wink.

Then she spotted the kitten peeking around Kiko's legs.

"Ah," she said knowingly. "So this must be Sakura."

The kitten wandered over without the slightest hint of shyness and rubbed against Baba's feet.

"I had a feeling we'd become friends."

That evening, as they all shared dinner together, Baba listened carefully while Kiko described her first day at Wakaki Senshi.

When she had finished, Baba smiled.

"You know," she said, "every warrior remembers their first difficult day."

"They do?"

"Oh yes."

"Even the best ones?"

"Especially the best ones."

Kiko looked down at Sakura, who was now fast asleep on her lap.

She stroked the kitten gently.

Perhaps today hadn't been a failure after all.

Perhaps it had simply been the beginning.

As the moon rose above Hoshinomura, Baba looked thoughtfully towards the distant mountains.

"Tomorrow," she said quietly, "I have somewhere very special I'd like you and Sakura to visit with me..."

Kiko's eyes sparkled with curiosity.

"What is it?"

Baba smiled.

"You'll find out in the morning."

Comprehension Questions

1. What first suggested to Kiko that something unusual was inside the basket?
 - A. She heard a loud meow.
 - B. The ribbon came undone.
 - C. The basket began to wriggle.
 - D. Sakura jumped onto her shoulder.

2. What does the word *hesitation* most nearly mean in the sentence, "Without hesitation, she leapt into Kiko's arms"?
 - A. Fear
 - B. Delay
 - C. Excitement
 - D. Confidence

3. Why did Kiko seem surprised when her parents said they were proud of her?
 - A. She thought they expected her to leave school.
 - B. She believed making mistakes meant she had failed.
 - C. She hadn't told them about her day.
 - D. She thought they had forgotten about Wakaki Senshi.

4. Which word best describes Sakura?
 - A. Timid
 - B. Stubborn
 - C. Mischievous
 - D. Affectionate

5. Why do Kiko's parents give her Sakura?
 - A. To remind her that difficult days can still lead to wonderful things.
 - B. To help her train as a warrior.
 - C. Because Baba asked them to.
 - D. To protect the family home.

6. What can the reader infer about Baba from the story?

- A. She has never visited Wakaki Senshi.
- B. She dislikes animals.
- C. She is wise and enjoys teaching through stories and traditions.
- D. She plans to stay for only a few minutes.

7. Which sentence best hints at the events of the next story?

- A. Sakura purred happily as if she understood every word.
- B. Dad opened the front door with a broad smile.
- C. Kiko stroked the kitten gently.
- D. "Tomorrow," she said quietly, "I have somewhere very special I'd like you and Sakura to visit with me..."

8. Which theme is developed most strongly in this story?

- A. Success comes without hard work.
- B. Love and encouragement can help us overcome disappointment.
- C. Pets should always stay indoors.
- D. Being independent is more important than family.

Answers

1. C
2. B
3. B
4. D
5. A
6. C
7. D
8. B