

Kiko: Beyond the Mountains

Three weeks had passed since Baba's visit, and life in Hoshinomura had settled into a comfortable rhythm.

Each morning, Kiko walked beneath the cherry blossom trees towards Wakaki Senshi Warrior School. Sakura usually followed her as far as the little wooden bridge before becoming distracted by something far more important — a butterfly, a beetle or, on one memorable morning, a leaf that had apparently offended her.

Kiko was changing too.

She could now cross the balance beam without falling off.

Usually.

She remembered to bow before entering the dojo.

Mostly.

And she had finally learned that gripping a wooden sword as tightly as possible did not make her look powerful. It simply made her hands hurt.

Kiko was still a beginner, but every day she was becoming a little less of one.

That morning, however, something felt different.

Master Hiro stood silently at the front of the training hall. Beside him were several large travelling bags, rolled blankets and a wooden map of the mountains surrounding Hoshinomura.

The pupils immediately began whispering.

"Are we going somewhere?" Emi asked excitedly.

Master Hiro raised one eyebrow.

The room became silent.

"A warrior who only understands their own village," he began, "understands very little of the world."

He pointed towards the map.

"Tomorrow morning, we leave Hoshinomura."

Kiko's eyes widened.

Master Hiro explained that the class would travel through the mountains to a distant village called Mizunoki. They would be away for several days, sleeping beneath the stars and learning how to navigate without relying on familiar paths.

Kiko could barely contain her excitement.

Finally.

A proper warrior adventure.

The following morning, Kiko stood outside her house wearing a small travelling pack.

Mum checked it for what seemed like the hundredth time.

"Warm clothes?"

"Yes."

"Water?"

"Yes."

"Rice cakes?"

"Yes!"

Dad smiled.

"Patience?"

Kiko stared at him.

"I don't think Mum packed that."

Dad laughed.

"Then perhaps you'll have to find some along the way."

Sakura sat beside Kiko's feet, staring suspiciously at the travelling bag.

"Sorry," Kiko said, crouching down. "You have to stay here."

Sakura meowed loudly.

"Don't look at me like that."

Another meow.

Kiko hugged her.

"I'll be back soon."

As Kiko hurried towards Wakaki Senshi, Sakura remained at the gate watching her disappear along the path.

By midday, Hoshinomura was far behind them.

The familiar cherry blossom trees had been replaced by towering pines, steep rocky slopes and enormous mountains that seemed to touch the clouds.

Kiko loved every second.

She walked near the front beside Emi, listening carefully as Master Hiro showed them how to recognise trail markings carved into wooden posts.

Behind them walked a boy named Ren.

Ren was quiet and thoughtful. He was excellent at remembering instructions but seemed to do everything slowly.

Very slowly.

Whenever the group stopped, Ren inspected the plants beside the path.

He examined unusual stones.

He watched birds flying between the trees.

And every few minutes...

"Wait!"

Everyone stopped again.

Kiko sighed.

Ren hurried towards them.

"I thought I saw something."

"You've *always* seen something," Kiko muttered.

Emi nudged her.

"Be nice."

"I am being nice," Kiko whispered. "I'm just being nice impatiently."

Emi tried not to laugh.

As afternoon approached, thick grey clouds gathered above the mountains.

Master Hiro stopped beside a wooden signpost.

Two narrow paths stretched ahead.

One climbed steeply between enormous rocks.

The other disappeared into a dense forest.

Master Hiro studied the map.

"The forest path," he announced.

The pupils followed.

Kiko marched confidently onwards.

She imagined arriving at Mizunoki before sunset. Perhaps the villagers would be waiting for them. Perhaps there would be some sort of ceremony.

Perhaps Master Hiro would tell everyone how brilliantly she had—

"Stop!"

Ren's voice echoed through the trees.

Kiko groaned.

"What now?"

Ren wasn't looking at a plant.

He wasn't looking at a bird.

He was staring at the ground.

"These footprints," he said.

Master Hiro walked over.

Several marks were pressed into the soft mud.

"What about them?" Kiko asked.

"They're ours."

Kiko frowned.

"Of course they're ours."

Ren shook his head.

"No. They're pointing the other way."

Everyone became quiet.

Kiko looked more carefully.

Ren was right.

There, clearly visible in the mud, were the marks from Emi's boots.

Beside them was the unusual triangular pattern from the bottom of Kiko's shoe.

They had already walked along this path.

"We've been going in a circle," Emi whispered.

Master Hiro looked at Ren.

"How long have you suspected this?"

"Since we passed the tree with the broken branch for the second time."

Kiko stared at him.

"You noticed a broken branch?"

Ren shrugged.

"I notice things."

Master Hiro smiled.

"A useful habit."

The group returned to the signpost.

This time, Master Hiro asked Ren to examine it.

Ren brushed away some moss growing across the bottom.

Hidden underneath was a small arrow carved into the wood.

It pointed towards the rocky path.

"The sign must have twisted in the wind," Emi said.

Master Hiro nodded.

"So which path should we trust?"

"The arrow," Ren replied.

Master Hiro turned towards the class.

"And what have we learned?"

Kiko knew exactly what she had learned.

She looked at Ren.

"I suppose going quickly isn't much use if you're going quickly in the wrong direction."

Ren smiled.

"Exactly."

"And..."

Kiko hesitated.

"I'm sorry."

Ren looked surprised.

"I was getting annoyed because you kept stopping."

"I noticed."

Kiko laughed awkwardly.

"But if you hadn't stopped to look at things, we'd probably still be walking around that forest."

Ren grinned.

"Probably."

Emi leaned towards Kiko.

"Very nice."

Kiko rolled her eyes.

They continued along the rocky trail.

This time, Kiko didn't rush ahead.

She walked beside Ren.

He showed her how moss grew more thickly on some trees than others. He pointed out tiny animal tracks in the mud and explained how clouds gathering around the highest mountain could mean rain was coming.

Kiko was amazed.

"How do you know all this?"

"My grandfather takes me walking," Ren explained. "He says the world is always telling you things. You just have to slow down enough to notice."

Kiko thought about Baba.

She would have liked that.

As evening approached, the group finally reached the top of the mountain pass.

Kiko stopped.

For a moment, she forgot to breathe.

Below them stretched an enormous valley filled with forests, rivers and tiny villages. Mountains continued far into the distance, their peaks glowing orange beneath the setting sun.

Hoshinomura was somewhere behind them.

For the first time, Kiko understood just how small her village really was.

Master Hiro stood beside her.

"The world looks different from up here, doesn't it?"

Kiko nodded.

"It's huge."

Master Hiro smiled.

"And we have barely begun."

Far below, nestled beside a winding blue river, Kiko could just make out the rooftops of a village she had never seen before.

Mizunoki.

Tomorrow, they would reach it.

Kiko tightened the straps of her travelling pack and smiled.

Her first few weeks at Wakaki Senshi had taught her that becoming a warrior would take time. Baba had taught her that some things simply couldn't be hurried.

But today, Kiko had learned something new.

Sometimes, the person at the back notices something the person at the front has missed.

She looked across the enormous valley.

Beyond the mountains were new places.

New people.

New lessons.

And, Kiko suspected...

a great many new adventures.

Comprehension Questions

1. How can the reader tell that Kiko has improved since she first started at Wakaki Senshi?

- A. She has become the best pupil in the school.
- B. She can now perform some of the skills she previously struggled with.
- C. Master Hiro allows her to teach the other pupils.
- D. She has stopped making mistakes completely.

2. What does the word navigate most nearly mean when Master Hiro says the pupils will learn how to navigate?

- A. Find their way from one place to another.
- B. Survive without eating any food.
- C. Climb the highest mountain.
- D. Travel as quickly as possible.

3. Why does Dad ask Kiko whether she has packed "patience"?

- A. He genuinely thinks patience is something she can put in her bag.
- B. He is warning her that the journey will be dangerous.
- C. He is joking while reminding her that patience may be important on her journey.
- D. He thinks Kiko has forgotten something from Master Hiro's list.

4. Why does Kiko initially become frustrated with Ren?

- A. He keeps stopping to examine things along the path.
- B. He refuses to speak to her and Emi.
- C. He keeps walking ahead of the group.
- D. He disagrees with everything Master Hiro says.

5. What allows Ren to realise that the group has been walking in a circle?

- A. He recognises the mountains in the distance.
- B. He notices their footprints and remembers a broken branch.
- C. He finds another map hidden in the forest.
- D. He follows some animal tracks back to the signpost.

6. What can the reader infer about Ren's personality?

- A. He is impatient and competitive.
- B. He is frightened of exploring unfamiliar places.
- C. He is observant and pays attention to small details.
- D. He enjoys showing everyone that he is cleverer than them.

7. Why does Kiko apologise to Ren?

- A. She accidentally damages something belonging to him.
- B. She realises she judged his slow and careful behaviour unfairly.
- C. Master Hiro orders her to apologise.
- D. Emi tells her that Ren is upset.

8. What does Ren's grandfather mean when he says, "The world is always telling you things. You just have to slow down enough to notice"?

- A. Nature can give us useful information if we pay careful attention.
- B. People should never travel quickly through the mountains.
- C. Animals can speak if people listen carefully enough.
- D. It is impossible to understand the natural world.

9. Why is seeing the enormous valley important for Kiko?

- A. She realises that she would rather stay in the mountains.
- B. She finally understands why Master Hiro dislikes Hoshinomura.
- C. She realises how much bigger the world is than the village she knows.
- D. She decides that becoming a warrior is too difficult.

10. Which statement best expresses the main message of the story?

- A. The quickest person in a group should always lead.
- B. Travelling is more important than learning at school.
- C. Different people have different strengths, and taking time to notice things can be valuable.
- D. Warriors should always trust maps rather than other people.

Answers

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