

Kiko: The Black Tower
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Several days had passed since Kiko returned from the Forest of Echoes.

Although life in Hoshinomura seemed normal, Kiko could not forget the image she had seen within the stone mirror.

A snow-covered mountain.

A black tower.

Dark storm clouds swirling around its peak.

Every time she closed her eyes, the vision returned.

One evening, as the sun disappeared behind the mountains, Kiko visited Master Hiro.

"I keep seeing the tower," she admitted.

Master Hiro nodded slowly.

"I feared that might happen."

"You know what it is?" Kiko asked.

"The Tower of Kageyama," he replied.

Kiko had never heard the name before.

Master Hiro gazed towards the distant northern peaks.

"Long ago, it guarded another sacred place. A crystal known as the Heart of the Mountain."

"What happened to it?" asked Kiko.

"No one knows," said Master Hiro. "The tower was abandoned many years ago."

His expression grew serious.

"But if it appeared in the mirror, something has awakened there."

The following morning, Kiko packed her travelling bag once again.

Her grandfather sighed as she prepared to leave.

"I suppose I cannot stop you."

Kiko smiled.

"Probably not."

Her grandfather laughed softly.

"Then at least promise you'll be careful."

"I promise."

As dawn broke across the mountains, Kiko began her journey.

The path north was far harsher than any she had travelled before.

The air grew colder with every step.

By midday, snow covered the ground.

By evening, icy winds howled through the valleys.

The mountain seemed determined to turn her back.

But Kiko continued climbing.

On the second day, she reached the lower slopes of the frozen peak.

That was when she noticed something strange.

Large footprints crossed the snow ahead.

They were far too large to belong to any person.

Kiko followed them cautiously.

The trail led to a narrow canyon hidden between towering cliffs.

Suddenly, a loud crack echoed above her.

Kiko looked up.

Snow tumbled down the mountainside.

An avalanche.

She ran.

Snow crashed behind her as she sprinted through the canyon.

The ground shook violently.

For a moment, it seemed impossible to escape.

Then she spotted a small cave.

Kiko dived inside just as the avalanche thundered past.

The roar lasted only seconds.

Then silence returned.

Breathing heavily, Kiko stepped back outside.

The canyon had vanished beneath a wall of snow.

She stared at the mountain.

It felt as though the peak itself was testing her.
Late that afternoon, she finally saw it.
The Black Tower.
It rose from the summit like a giant shadow against the sky.
Storm clouds circled above it endlessly.
Lightning flashed between the clouds.
Kiko's stomach tightened.
Yet she kept moving.
As darkness approached, she reached the tower gates.
The enormous doors stood slightly open.
Inside, a spiral staircase wound upwards into darkness.
Kiko lit her lantern.
Then she entered.
The tower was silent.
Too silent.
Dust covered the stone floor.
Ancient banners hung from the walls.
As Kiko climbed higher, she noticed strange cracks spreading through the stone.
Blue light leaked from them.
The same colour she had seen at Dragon Blue.
At last, she reached the highest chamber.
There, resting upon a stone pedestal, sat a glowing crystal.
The Heart of the Mountain.
But something was wrong.
Dark shadows swirled around it like smoke.
The crystal's light flickered weakly.
Suddenly, a deep voice echoed through the chamber.
"Leave."
Kiko spun around.

A huge figure emerged from the darkness.

It stood twice as tall as any human.

Its body appeared to be carved from ice and stone.

Bright blue eyes glowed beneath its frozen brow.

"Who are you?" Kiko asked.

"The Guardian of the Heart."

The giant looked towards the crystal.

"For many years I protected it."

"What happened?" Kiko asked.

The guardian lowered its head.

"I failed."

The shadows surrounding the crystal pulsed.

"The fear trapped within the Forest of Echoes spread here. It poisoned the Heart."

Kiko remembered the shadows she had faced in the temple.

"They're connected?"

The guardian nodded.

"The sacred places are linked."

A bolt of lightning struck outside.

The tower trembled.

"The corruption grows stronger," said the guardian.

"If the Heart breaks, the storm will never end."

Kiko looked at the crystal.

Then she stepped forward.

"What can I do?"

The guardian studied her carefully.

"You cannot defeat this with strength."

Kiko remembered Dragon Blue.

Then the Forest of Echoes.

Neither challenge had been solved by fighting.

"Then what do I do?"

The guardian pointed towards the crystal.

"Listen."

Kiko approached cautiously.

At first, she heard only the storm.

Then something else.

A voice.

Weak.

Afraid.

The Heart was frightened.

It had been alone for years.

Abandoned.

Forgotten.

Kiko placed both hands gently upon the crystal.

"You are not alone," she whispered.

For several moments, nothing happened.

Then the crystal began to glow.

The shadows recoiled immediately.

The blue light grew brighter.

Warmer.

Stronger.

The dark smoke dissolved into the air.

Outside, the storm clouds began to break apart.

Moonlight streamed through the tower windows.

The guardian smiled for the first time.

"The Heart remembers."

The crystal now shone brighter than ever before.

Its light spread across the chamber and out into the mountains beyond.

Kiko felt warmth fill her chest.

Not power.

Not strength.

Hope.

The guardian bowed respectfully.

"You have restored what was nearly lost."

Kiko smiled.

"I only listened."

"That," said the guardian, "is sometimes the greatest wisdom of all."

The next morning, Kiko began the journey home.

Far behind her, the Black Tower stood peacefully beneath a clear blue sky.

And although one mystery had been solved, Kiko knew another still remained.

For deep within the Heart of the Mountain, she had seen a final vision.

A golden doorway hidden beneath the earth.

Waiting.

For someone to find it.

Comprehension Questions

1. Why does Master Hiro become concerned when Kiko tells him she keeps seeing the Black Tower?

- A) He recognises that the tower is connected to an ancient sacred place
- B) He believes she is having nightmares caused by the cold weather
- C) He thinks Kiko wants to leave the village permanently
- D) He believes someone is trying to trick her

2. What does the avalanche mainly reveal about Kiko's journey?

- A) The mountain is protecting hidden treasure
- B) Kiko should have stayed in the village
- C) The journey contains dangers beyond her control
- D) The Guardian is testing her strength

3. What does the phrase:

"The mountain seemed determined to turn her back"
most likely suggest?

- A) The mountain is alive and angry with Kiko
- B) The journey feels increasingly difficult and challenging
- C) Kiko is travelling in the wrong direction
- D) The weather will improve soon

4. Which word best describes the atmosphere when Kiko first reaches the Black Tower?

- A) Welcoming
- B) Peaceful
- C) Mysterious
- D) Joyful

5. What can we infer about the Guardian of the Heart?

- A) He deliberately caused the corruption of the crystal
- B) He abandoned the tower many years ago
- C) He wants Kiko to leave so he can keep the crystal
- D) He feels responsible for failing to protect the Heart

6. Why is Kiko able to restore the Heart of the Mountain?

- A) She uses a powerful weapon against the shadows
- B) She understands that the Heart needs compassion rather than force
- C) The Guardian gives her magical powers
- D) She breaks the crystal to release the corruption

7. Which theme is most important in this story?

- A) Physical strength is the answer to every challenge
- B) Ancient places should be left alone
- C) Wisdom and understanding can be more powerful than fighting
- D) Adventures always lead to treasure

8. What does the final vision of the golden doorway most strongly suggest?

- A) The Heart of the Mountain is still corrupted
- B) A new mystery and future adventure await Kiko
- C) The Black Tower will soon disappear
- D) Kiko should return to Dragon Blue immediately

Answers

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