

## Keroppi and the Missing Drum on Parade Night

The evening air over Donut Pond felt busy in the gentlest way, like a whole town whispering, hurrying, and smiling at the same time. Lanterns were being hung along the boardwalk, little paper flags fluttered from string to string, and the warm smell of rice balls drifted from Keroma's restaurant near the water. Keroppi stood on a small wooden crate so he could reach the knot of a ribbon, tugging it tight with serious concentration. He wanted everything to be perfect. Parade Night mattered. It was the one night each year when everyone walked together around Donut Pond, carrying lanterns and following music that bounced across the water like happy skipping stones. Keroleen arrived first, stepping carefully so she would not splash her polka-dot outfit. - "Keroppi! I brought extra ribbons. If any lanterns look sleepy, we wake them up with color!" Keroppi's cheeks lifted in a grin. - "You always make the lanterns look like they are smiling. Thank you, Keroleen." Behind her, Ganta stomped up with a bundle of wooden poles over his shoulder, acting as if they weighed nothing at all. - "Where do you want these? I can carry twice as many if you want!" - "Ganta, those are already twice as many," Keroleen teased, laughing. Noberun followed, hugging a notebook to his chest, eyes shining with plans. - "I prepared a timing chart for the drumbeats. If we keep the rhythm steady, the lantern line will move smoothly, like a perfectly measured wave." Kyorosuke surfaced near the dock with a splash, water sparkling on his head. - "I tested the route underwater. No surprises. Also, I found a lost button. I do not know whose, but it felt lonely." Den Den slid along behind everyone, leaving a tiny glistening trail. - "I am here," Den Den said calmly. - "I am slightly behind, but I am fully committed." Keroppi laughed, then looked toward the small stage at the center of the boardwalk. On the stage sat the parade drum, big enough to make a proud sound, with a strap that let someone carry it at the front of the line. Keroppi's heart squeezed with excitement and nervousness. Tonight, the honor of carrying the drum was his. Keroppa, Keroppi's father, walked by with a gentle, confident smile, checking the lantern strings like a doctor checking a heartbeat. - "Deep breaths, Keroppi. A parade is like helping someone feel better. You do your best, and your kindness does the rest." Keroppi nodded quickly. - "I will do my best. I do not want to mess up the rhythm." Keroma waved from the restaurant window, her apron dusted with flour. - "If you feel wobbly, come eat. A strong stomach makes a steady drummer." Keroppi gave a thumbs-up, and for a moment, everything felt easy. Then Pikki and Koroppi appeared together, as they often did, looking so similar that even close friends sometimes blinked twice. - "We are here to help!" Pikki announced, beaming. - "And to make sure Keroppi does not get too serious," Koroppi added, trying to sound wise and failing because his smile kept escaping. Keroppi pointed toward the stage. - "Actually, you can help me the most by not touching the drum." Koroppi's eyes widened in exaggerated innocence. - "Me? Touch the drum? I would never." Pikki giggled. - "He might touch it with his eyes." Keroppi rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. The group kept decorating, tightening knots, straightening lanterns, and making sure every corner of the boardwalk looked like a warm invitation. At last, the sky turned deep blue, and the first stars started blinking awake. The town gathered. Lanterns glowed. The parade leader announced the start. Keroppi hopped up onto the stage, ready to lift the strap of the drum. But the drum was not there. Keroppi froze so suddenly that even his blink felt delayed. He stared at the empty spot where the drum had been resting. The strap was gone. The drumsticks too. His mouth opened, but no sound came out. Keroleen noticed first. - "Keroppi... where is it?" Ganta looked around, shoulders

squaring.- "Who moved it? Tell me. I will ask the drum to come back."Noberun's notebook dipped as his voice sharpened with concern.- "This changes everything. The tempo, the spacing, the-"Kyorosuke climbed onto the dock, water dripping, eyes wide.- "Maybe it rolled? Drums do not usually roll, but I have seen strange things."Den Den stared at the stage with slow, careful seriousness.- "A drum cannot vanish on its own," Den Den said. - "Someone carried it. Someone with purpose."Keroppi's chest tightened. The parade crowd was waiting. The lanterns were ready. The music was missing, like a smile without teeth.Keroppi swallowed hard.- "This is my responsibility," he whispered. - "I promised I would lead the rhythm."Keroppi stepped closer, voice calm but firm.- "Responsibilities are heavy, Keroppi. That is why friends help carry them."Keroma came running from the restaurant, wiping her hands.- "Tell me what happened."Keroppi tried to speak, but his eyes prickled. He hated that feeling, the feeling of letting everyone down before he even started.Keroleen placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.- "Hey. Look at me."Keroppi looked.- "We are not letting you face this alone," Keroleen said. - "We find the drum. Then we start the parade. Simple."Ganta cracked his knuckles like he was about to wrestle the whole moon.- "I will check every corner. No drum can hide from me."Noberun flipped to a clean page.- "We need clues. Where was the last confirmed drum sighting?"Kyorosuke pointed a wet finger toward the waterline.- "I swam past earlier and it was there. The drum was watching the lanterns like everyone else."Pikki lifted her chin.- "Then it disappeared after that. So it is nearby."Keroppi shifted his feet, suddenly quiet, eyes flicking away.Keroppi noticed, but his worry was louder than his thoughts.Teruteru arrived at that moment, bobbing slightly in the air as if carried by the mood of the crowd. Teruteru was always around when the weather mattered, as if the sky itself had sent a helper.- "The wind is soft tonight," Teruteru said. - "No storm, no surprise rain. The night wants the parade to happen."Keroppi squeezed his eyes shut for a second.- "Then we have to make it happen."Keroppi raised a hand to the waiting crowd, speaking with a reassuring smile.- "A small delay, everyone. Please enjoy the lanterns and snacks while we fix a little problem."The crowd murmured kindly. Nobody looked angry. That almost made Keroppi feel worse, because kindness made him want to succeed even more.Keroleen leaned in.- "Search teams. Ganta with Kyorosuke along the docks. Noberun with Den Den near the stage and behind the shops. Pikki, Koroppi, you come with Keroppi and me. We check the restaurant and the back walkway."Ganta nodded, already marching.- "Come on, swimmer. If the drum tried to escape by boat, we catch it."Kyorosuke saluted.- "If it went near water, I will hear the splash of its guilt."Noberun adjusted his grip on the notebook.- "Den Den, you are slow but observant. Watch for unusual tracks, scuffs, or strap marks."Den Den's voice stayed calm as ever.- "I was born for noticing what others ignore."Keroppi hopped fast beside Keroleen, Pikki, and Koroppi. As they passed the restaurant, Keroma pushed open the back door.- "No drum inside," Keroma called. - "Only food and worry."They checked behind baskets, under the counter, beside stacked lantern boxes. Nothing. Keroppi's throat felt tighter with every empty corner.Pikki tried to sound cheerful, but her eyes were worried too.- "Maybe someone moved it to keep it safe."Keroleen nodded.- "That is possible. People do protective things when they feel nervous."Keroppi flinched at the word nervous.Keroppi stopped, turning to him.- "Keroppi... are you okay?"Keroppi forced a laugh that sounded like it had tripped.- "Me? I am perfect. I am... extremely perfect."Keroleen tilted her head.- "That is not a normal sentence."Keroppi's cheeks puffed, then deflated. He looked at the lanterns, at the crowd, at the stage in the distance, and his voice got smaller.- "I did not want you to be scared, Keroppi."Keroppi blinked.- "What do you mean?"Keroppi's hands twisted together.- "I heard you practicing earlier. You were so serious. So I thought... maybe

you would feel better if you knew you could do it."Pikki's eyes widened.- "Koroppi..."Keroppi's stomach sank.- "Where is the drum?"Koroppi squeezed his eyes shut, as if bracing for a splash of disappointment.- "I borrowed it. Just for a minute. I wanted to practice carrying it, so I could teach you a trick to keep the strap from sliding."Keroppi stared at him, a hot rush of panic and relief mixing into something confusing.- "You moved it?"Koroppi nodded quickly, words tumbling.- "I did not take it far. I went to the old boathouse by the small bridge. I tried the strap. It was heavier than I expected. Then I heard people coming, and I panicked, so I hid it behind the stacked oars. But the strap snagged, and the drum tipped, and it rolled into the boathouse corner where the door sticks. I tried to pull it out and the door slammed and-"He swallowed, eyes shiny.- "I got stuck inside. I was banging softly, but the parade noise outside was loud, and I did not want to scream because I thought you would hate me."Keroppi's heart thudded hard. He was angry for half a second, then scared for Koroppi, then relieved the drum was real, then sad that Koroppi had felt so alone. Feelings collided like bumping boats.Keroleen spoke first, voice steady.- "We are going to the boathouse. Right now."Pikki grabbed Koroppi's hand.- "You should have told us. We would have helped."Koroppi's voice cracked.- "I wanted to be helpful, not a problem."Keroppi took a deep breath, remembering his father's words about heavy responsibilities.- "You are my brother," Keroppi said. - "You are allowed to make mistakes near me. Come on."They ran.The old boathouse sat near the small bridge, built of weathered wood that smelled like pond water and summer days. The door was half crooked, just as Koroppi described.From inside, a faint tapping came, hopeful and tired.Keroppi pressed his face close.- "Koroppi, are you in there?"A voice, small and shaky, answered from within.- "Yes. I am in here with the drum. The drum is very unhappy with me."Pikki sighed with relief.- "Hold on!"Ganta and Kyorosuke arrived at a sprint, followed by Noberun and Den Den, who somehow looked both slow and perfectly on time.Ganta planted his feet.- "Step aside. Doors and I have a history."Keroleen raised a finger.- "Be gentle. That door is old."Ganta softened his posture and pulled carefully, muscles tightening, face determined. The door creaked, resisted, then opened with a tired groan.Inside, Koroppi stood in the corner beside the large drum, looking guilty enough to apologize to the ceiling.Keroppi hopped in first.- "Are you hurt?"Koroppi shook his head fast.- "Only my pride."Den Den slid forward, examining the strap.- "The snag is here. If you twist the loop, it sits flatter. Koroppi was not wrong about the strap sliding."Noberun scribbled quickly.- "Excellent. A practical improvement discovered through chaos."Kyorosuke tapped the drum lightly and listened.- "It still sounds proud."Ganta lifted it with a grunt.- "Okay. This is heavier than it looks. Keroppi, you are strong."Keroppi swallowed, eyes stinging again, but this time with gratitude.- "We have to hurry."Keroleen looked at Koroppi, voice warm but serious.- "You will apologize to the crowd later. First, you walk with us. You do not hide."Koroppi nodded, trembling a little.- "I will not hide. I promise."They rushed back toward the boardwalk together, lanterns glowing brighter as they approached, as if the town could sense the rhythm returning. Keroppi climbed onto the stage with the drum at last. The strap felt firm on his shoulder, flatter, steadier, just as Den Den had noticed.Keroppa stood nearby, calm eyes watching.- "Ready?" he asked.Keroppi looked at his friends lined up below, at his mother smiling even through worry, at Keroleen holding a ribbon like a small flag, at Ganta nodding, at Noberun watching the timing, at Kyorosuke dripping happily, at Den Den quietly proud, at Pikki squeezing Koroppi's hand, and at Koroppi himself, eyes watery but brave.Keroppi raised the drumsticks.- "I am ready," he said softly. Then, louder: - "Everyone, thank you for waiting. Parade Night begins now!"He struck the drum.Boom.The sound rolled across Donut Pond, deep and steady, bouncing off water and lantern light. The crowd cheered, not because the

delay was forgiven, but because the togetherness was the point all along. Keroppi kept the rhythm: boom-boom, boom-boom, steady as footsteps. Lanterns swayed, children giggled, and the parade moved like a glowing ribbon around the pond. As they walked, Koroppi edged closer to Keroppi, voice barely loud enough to reach him over the drum. - "I am sorry," Koroppi said. - "I was trying to help, but I made you scared." Keroppi did not stop drumming. He breathed with the beat, letting the sound carry his feelings into something clear. - "You did scare me," Keroppi admitted. - "But I am more glad you are safe than upset about the drum." Koroppi's eyes filled. - "I will ask before I borrow things. Always." Keroppi nodded. - "And I will tell you when I am nervous, instead of pretending I am not." Keroleen leaned in from the side, walking in step. - "Look at you two," she whispered. - "Growing up right in the middle of lantern light." Pikki smiled, squeezing both brothers' hands one after the other. - "Next year, we practice together. No secrets." Noberun lifted his notebook like a tiny trophy. - "I will design a rehearsal schedule. It will include snacks, because Keroma is correct about steady stomachs." Keroma laughed from the food table as the parade passed. - "I heard that!" she called. - "Rice balls for everyone after the final drumbeat!" Ganta raised his arms. - "I will eat enough for three frogs!" Kyorosuke hopped excitedly. - "I will eat enough for a frog and a fish!" Den Den, still steady, added his own promise. - "I will eat one rice ball, slowly, with complete appreciation." The parade looped back to the stage at last. Keroppi struck the final beat, and the sound settled into the night like a warm blanket being pulled up to the chin. The lanterns glowed a little longer, as if they did not want to stop smiling. Later, back at the big house by the edge of Donut Pond, Keroppi lay in bed, the happy tiredness of a completed night in his bones. Koroppi sat on the floor beside the bed, looking like he still had a few apologies left inside him. Keroppi's father stood at the door, voice gentle. - "Good night, Keroppi. You kept the rhythm even when your heart was noisy." Keroppi smiled into his pillow. - "I could not have done it without everyone." Koroppi cleared his throat, eyes hopeful. - "Tomorrow... will you teach me your drumming pattern? The real one." Keroppi turned his head, meeting his brother's gaze. - "Yes," he said. - "And you teach me the strap trick. The one you discovered the hard way." Koroppi's shoulders relaxed like a knot finally untied. - "Deal." Keroleen's voice drifted in from outside, where she was saying good night to Keroma. - "Sleep well, drummer!" Pikki called too, bright and affectionate. - "Sleep well, both of you!" Keroppi closed his eyes. He could still hear the drumbeat in his memory, steady and safe, surrounded by friends, lanterns, and the comforting truth that mistakes did not end a night when love was holding the line. And with that warm rhythm inside him, Keroppi fell asleep smiling.

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