

ABSTINENCE EDUCATION

A BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL FAN FICTION STORY
BY MADAME MANGA



ARTWORK COPYRIGHT BY HIROAKI SAMURA AND KODANSHA LTD.

VOLUME ONE : PARTS 1-10

DISCLAIMERS AND SO ON:

Please direct all questions, feedback, criticism, etc., regarding “Abstinence Education” to **MmeManga@ aol.com**. I welcome and solicit all forms of response to my fan fiction.

This story is not-for-profit fan fiction. The characters and universe of Blade of the Immortal/*Mugen no Junin* are copyright by Hiroaki Samura and do not belong to me. Not one *sen* will come into my hands in consequence of this story. Please do not sell or print for sale. Do not archive without the author’s specific written permission. Permission is granted to print for personal use, and to distribute this PDF document in electronic form, without charge, without alteration, and with this disclaimer and the author’s name attached.

The text and all original characters are copyright 2005, 2006 by Madame Manga. Originally posted in serial form on:

http://www.livejournal.com/users/madame_manga/
<http://anime.adultfanfiction.net/authors.php?no=1296781809>
http://www.mediaminer.org/user_info.php/85967#fics

This PDF edition is revised and corrected from the original posted chapters.

This story is for adults only. It contains explicit language and descriptions. Warnings for sex in various forms, including quasi-incestuous themes and a sixteen-year-old female paired with an adult male. Violence and dismemberment are legally required in any BotI fic, so be prepared.

Author’s note: If you are not a regular reader of Blade of the Immortal/*Mugen no Junin*, the manga’s unusual contrast of period setting and semi-modern sensibilities may strike you as strange. Much of the manga’s dialog is written in 21st-century street-smart Tokyo dialect, and the English-translated version published by Dark Horse renders that in American slang to keep a similar flavor. So the numerous anachronistic expressions in this story should be taken as intended in the spirit of the original.

A glossary of Japanese terms and Blade of the Immortal characters resides at the end of this document. For additional information, check the overall glossary on my Livejournal, plus the various posts and discussions there.

<http://madame-manga.livejournal.com/62557.html>

ABSTINENCE EDUCATION

PART ONE

"Gosh," said Rin. "I'm so happy to be home." On a joyful impulse she laughed out loud, her braids swinging across her shoulders as she threw her arms wide. "Back home... with *you*!"

The man who slouched next to her scraped the last few morsels of grilled fish from the charred stick between his teeth. "How do ya figure?"

"Well, here. You know." Rin gave herself a quick squeeze around the upper arms and subsided. She delicately dabbed her lips with her fingers and then with the corner of her long sleeve to remove any trace of her supper. "I guess I actually haven't lived here very much with all the traveling that we've done. But it's your place, Manji-san, and you're my bodyguard, so that makes it..."

"It ain't actually mine, if you get down to it." Manji shied the stick towards the pond; it didn't make it all the way down the bank. With a brief survey he seemed to dismiss the whole place: pond, hill, sunset, the rough board porch where they sat, and the bare dirt patches and irregular paths their feet scuffed deeper into the ground with every passing day. "It's just a shack, anyhow." His one-eyed glance passed over all and finally came to rest on Rin as she poked apart the cooking fire with a long split of kindling.

"Oh, Manji, honestly..." Rin shook her head at her companion with affectionate indulgence. She dragged the unburned pieces of firewood from the *hibachi* to save the fuel and scraped ashes over the coals to bank them until morning. "I found you here, you stay here when you're not doing anything else. What would you call it but home?"

"Whatever, girl." Manji grunted and leaned back against the wall, hands behind his head. The breeze still blew hot, since the sun hadn't yet declined below the treetops. He turned for a moment and squinted out towards the road and rice paddies; the sunset light moved across his face. No one there: neither workers in the fields nor evening travelers taking the narrow byway between rural villages.

The shogun's great castle city of Edo lay only half a morning's walk to the east, crowded with more than a million people, but Rin couldn't remember the last time she'd seen anyone on this track other than locals. Those peasants generally gave the two of them a wide berth, probably preferring not to encounter a two-sworded outlaw. Rin didn't think there could be much to worry about here, but Manji seemed more than usually watchful since they'd returned from Kaga and taken up residence again.

Back under the overhang of the porch as he settled into a comfortable slouch again. Rin couldn't decide if the warm cast of the sky softened the aspect of Manji's hard, scarred features or just made him look overheated. Right now he wore his usual lazy air of half-amusement or boredom, scratching the back of his head around the tie of his spiky topknot and resting one leg over the other.

"Aren't *you* glad to be here?"

Another grunt was all she received for answer. He was in after-dinner relaxation mode; with the weather this warm he might well take a nap if she left him alone. Or even if she didn't. Rin rolled her eyes with a smile, tied back her sleeves and her dangling braids and busied herself with cleaning up.

She didn't have very much to do, since this wasn't exactly a tidy kitchen or a mat-floored room for fine dining. Only a flimsy roofed porch attached to the back of a one-room hut, a little *hibachi* grill and a stack of firewood. When he gutted the fish he caught from the pond Manji usually left the piles of innards for the crows, and tonight was no exception; the mess had already begun to smell. Rin wrinkled her nose, plucked a few of the turning leaves from the big maple to the north side of the hut and scraped the ground clean.

Crouching on her wooden *geta*, she collected gnawed fish skeletons, a few other small bits of trash and debris and heaped them on the leaves in preparation to take them behind the bushes. Over the last week they had accumulated a good pile of floor sweepings, corn cobs and the mortal remains of fish and frogs; that might start attracting more than crows. She'd have to ask Manji to dig a pit for the garbage if they meant to stay here long. Rin shuffled a little way further from the porch without standing up and leaned over to sweep up everything within reach.

Behind her, Manji let out a muffled sigh: a somewhat unaccustomed note. Tired? He hadn't given Rin much sword training today. Even under the shade of the forest, after mid-morning the air had grown too sultry for exertion. Though Manji had fished down by the pond in a half-doze for most of the afternoon and

made a fair catch for dinner, they hadn't stirred to cook anything until less than an hour ago.

Rin sat back to watch the sun fade into the forest beyond the ripening rice paddies. There weren't any clouds abroad to make the sunset particularly pretty, so after a minute she returned to her work while she still had the light. When she had collected everything she could and the area looked tidy, Rin bundled her pickings, brushed her damp, trailing bangs from her face and turned around.

Manji was watching her.

Not lazily, as if she were the only moving object in sight and he might as well have let his gaze follow a random bird or squirrel that crossed his field of view. Nothing like that. He held his head on one side; he frowned slightly and his heavy brows had a speculative tilt.

"Manji-san?"

"Hnn?" He blinked and straightened up as if she had caught him by surprise.

"Um..." Rin peered at Manji; he looked flushed again, particularly across the cheekbones. "Something?"

He yawned and stretched instead of replying: a slow upward arch of his spine while he raised his arms and pulled his elbows back. Through the gaping overlap of his black and white *kōsōde*, the long scars that crossed his upper chest displayed their full spread from collarbone to nipples, and his ribs and lean midsection lay exposed to the waist. Rin wondered why he didn't just pull down his sleeves and bare his torso to cool off. Unless he'd been wounded, she hardly ever saw him strip that far.

Still, Rin thought Manji looked much more comfortable than she felt right now. Her housekeeping tasks had provoked enough perspiration to dampen her throat and upper lip as well as her covered parts; she wished she could loosen her clothes for ventilation like a man. Not as wide open as his, of course, but would Manji remark it if she lowered her collar just a bit?

Rin put a couple of fingers in the firmly wrapped overlap of her inner robe and *furisōde* and gently tugged them away from her body. A breath of warm air entered.

She glanced up at Manji at the same time his eye fell on her. Only a brief jolt of contact; almost immediately he broke the look and reached for his tobacco pouch.

Her stomach pulled in as if she hadn't eaten for days. Why did he look at her that way? He hadn't changed at all during their separation — Manji never changed — but this wasn't the first time she'd caught him with a wary, unsettled quality in his eye, almost mistrustful. As if she were no longer the same girl who had left him behind weeks before. To follow her enemy alone, to find him even if the quest killed her. It didn't matter how subtle the changes or whether she knew them herself; even after ten days' reunion, Manji didn't quite recognize her.

That could only be her fault, not his. Manji packed his pipe and lit it with a coal, ignoring her. Rin re-adjusted her collar, got up and went to dump the trash.

When she came back, Manji was lying flat on the porch with his head pillowed on his forearms, eye closed and knees bent upwards. She picked up the old bamboo-leaf fan they used for fire-starting and sat near her bodyguard's feet. No point in going indoors yet; it would be just as warm in there, if not warmer from the sun beating on the thin shingles all day. The mosquitoes would chase her under shelter soon enough, though right now the smoke from the grilling fire lingered to keep them at bay.

Rin briskly fanned herself from various angles until she felt a little cooler. A quiet life at the moment, which suited her very well. She'd walked too many *ri* and seen far too much in the last month... it was time to rest and recover.

Though Manji didn't let her rest much unless the weather forced him. He insisted on training with practice swords every day, pushing her as hard as he could in every element of her barely-tried fighting technique. Her uneven progress frustrated her; her *sensei* demanded that she run over her *kata* again and again under his unforgiving eye and face up to him in mock bouts that he made harsher and trickier every time, and every day he had some new criticism to throw at her along with her bruises. Too slow, too hasty, too sloppy, too formal. Just plain bad — Anotsu Kagehisa's greenest Ittō-ryū recruit would take her apart without even breaking stride, he'd seen better form watching an old woman beat laundry on a board. He was never satisfied.

Manji muttered something and turned over in his sleep. He pushed his nose into his bent arm and settled down again. Rin kept slowly fanning under her chin and observed the last light of the sky shimmering across the pond. The swollen moon slowly ascended in the east. Much prettier than the nondescript sunset: the full

moon would shine with glittering radiance on this warm autumn night, without even a haze in the sky.

A fish jumped far out in the middle of the pond with a soft splash and plop; the bugs must be stirring from their own midday naps. At least some creatures didn't mind clouds of mosquitoes singing for dinner over their heads. She watched one insect land on her thigh and hunt for a spot to bite through her clothing. Stealthily Rin raised her hand. Tiny blood-thief... under sentence of death.

Manji murmured again and she stayed the impending execution, not wanting to disturb him with a loud smack. He stirred and shifted; Rin flicked the mosquito away and turned to look at him in case he was waking.

His stomach muscles tightened and relaxed a few times, unconcealed by his open clothing. Then Manji arched his back slightly, his hips tilting and then rising. Rin watched, oddly mesmerized. A slow, repeated wave rolled through his body: back, down and arcing up again, while he made a soft gravelly sound in the back of his throat. In time with his movements, he smiled and grimaced alternately, his face only half revealed by the crook of his arm. What could he be dreaming about? Not the sword-strokes of a duel?

Peering more closely at Manji's expression, Rin put a hand to her mouth. Not a duel, exactly...

He let out a harder pant and jolted. Rin jumped, but Manji didn't wake up. Instead he relaxed and let his hand fall to his thigh, just at its junction with his hip. For a moment his clothing pulled taut across his lower body.

Rin drew in a sharp little breath of her own when she glimpsed an outcropping at the base of Manji's belly; almost immediately she looked away. Her face felt hot.

A moment later she glanced back at him with shy hesitation. She was only checking once more to see if he were waking — it was pure chance that her gaze touched first below Manji's belt rather than on his face. He'd slightly shifted his hand and the folds of his clothing now fell loose; she couldn't detect any sign of that mysterious protrusion, though she examined him carefully in the dimming light just to make sure. Rin fanned herself again and tried to take interest in the ascending moon.

She'd noticed that part stirring before, once in a while; not that she had ever seen her *yōjimbō* naked, nor indeed any man. Though she had a vague idea what went

on under his concealing clothing, Rin didn't quite understand why that object would assert itself and then retreat, apparently at random. Didn't Manji have control over his body? She'd heard proverbs which implied that a man's desire often triumphed over his reason, but of course those didn't apply to someone like Manji... at least when he was awake.

After all, for months this man had lived and traveled with a sixteen-year-old female entirely unrelated to him, slept side by side with her in rented rooms and this small hut and still been able to treat her almost as chastely as a sister — almost. Though he'd provoked Rin more than once with indecent jokes, Manji avoided outright offense to her modesty. He often turned his back or left the room before she even asked for privacy, and she'd never suspected him of peeking where he shouldn't. He was just as careful with his own state of dress; Rin had caught her bodyguard stripped to his *fundoshi* only a couple of times, and then he'd instantly put something on and yelled at her for creeping around as quietly as a mouse. Even when he needled her about sex, he laughed uproariously if she took his sly jibes at face value, and left her feeling oddly reassured rather than threatened.

Still, she reserved the right to clout him over the head every so often when he decided to act like an insufferable jerk. Not as if she could hurt her *yōjimbō* in the least, no matter what weapons she chose nor how hard she hit — all she could inflict were minor chastisements, and his healing abilities erased even mortal wounds in minutes. By now Rin took Manji's peculiar immortality almost for granted.

Manji made a sound and rolled over again; he seemed very restless even allowing for the heat. When he let out a low, warm groan and showed his teeth, Rin slowly scooted backwards along the porch, hoping to retreat without disturbing him. She wasn't spying on his private thoughts, of course, nor trying to learn anything she didn't need to know. But maybe she ought to leave him alone for courtesy's sake. At least before he dove all the way into another dream like the last one...

Manji's eye opened. Unguarded with dissipating sleep, his expression was easy to read in the bright moonlight and last remnants of sunset. He still had the ghost of a lascivious smile. Then his lips opened at the sight of Rin and his cheek twitched. Nearly guilty, as if she had caught him out again. If she had screeched with indignation and thrown chunks of firewood at his head, he might have accepted his punishment as deserved.

Only for a dream? Rin looked at him with wide eyes.

Manji knuckled his eye and swung his legs off the porch. Without a word he rounded the corner of the hut and headed down the hill in the general direction of the latrine. He had an air of meaning not to return for a while; more than once this week he'd taken long walks after dusk, circumnavigating the pond and the forest's fringes as if beating the boundaries for intruders. He never wanted her to come with him.

Rin sat for a few moments with her hand over her mouth. She didn't want to think any more about the changes in the atmosphere since she'd returned; it seemed dangerous to recall too many details at once. Despite the sun's departure, she felt very sweaty again...

So while Manji was gone, maybe she ought to seize the opportunity for a private wash. Rin had sponged herself down earlier after they had knocked off training for the day, but that refreshment was long forgotten. She glanced in the direction of the pond and the cool moonlight on the still surface. She'd grab a pail of water, a basin and towel and a moment to get free of her confining clothing. Rin got up and peeked down the dusky hill; her *yōjimbō* was nowhere in sight.

She hastened to fetch the pail and the towel, lugged the water up to the hut and squatted on the ground near the *hibachi*'s fading smoke trail. Stripping only down to her waist, of course — she wouldn't take more than a few minutes at the task, especially because of the mosquitoes.

Rin emptied the pail into the basin, worked her sleeves off her shoulders and sighed with pleasure when the cool water touched her hot skin. Sluice her itchy arms, splash her nape — she wriggled when a trickle ran down her spine and into her lowered collar — and stroke her wet hands over her chest. Her breasts weren't very large and they stood away from her ribs, but between them and in the creases underneath, her skin felt positively sticky. Rin leaned over the wide basin and scooped up water in both palms to let it flow down her front. She closed her eyes.

Manji's hands... tracing the same soft curves. Just touching her, only a cool caress, gently cupped in his calloused palms. A liquid, swirling sensation spread from the core of her belly. Like the water that circulated in the basin, stirred into motion by her own hands.

Lost in a delicate trance of imagination, Rin kept her eyes shut so the feeling wouldn't escape too soon. She sighed again and kept rinsing away the sweat. No hurry, was there? She would have liked to stay here dabbling in the water until the stars came out. Only dreaming...

Behind her Manji's slow footfalls approached around the corner of the hut, as if her wandering thoughts had lured him from cover. Rin didn't screech or grab for her towel; she paused with one hand in the water and the other laid over her breasts. For a moment her own breathing and the random songs of insects were all she could hear. Her bodyguard stood behind her, from his utter silence perhaps not breathing at all.

Then Manji retreated, though not in great haste, as if he took backwards steps instead of turning around. She heard him brush around the corner again, slump against the hut's end wall and then ease down to sit on the ground. "Sorry."

"Uh... that's OK." All that he could have seen in the warm moonlight was the white skin of her shoulders and nape, but a ripple of goosebumps ran up Rin's back like the stroke of a cool hand.

Manji sounded as much out of wind as if he'd run all the way up the hill. "Gotta... warn me, kid."

"I'm almost finished." She splashed her breasts once more and let the water drip back into the basin while she reached for the towel. "How would I warn you, anyway? Hang out a sign? Eh heh heh..."

Manji didn't reply; he remained so still that she couldn't help but imagine that he must be listening for something.

A last droplet collected on one crinkled nipple and plinked into the basin. Manji's back shifted against the boards of the hut, like a slight tensing of his shoulder muscles. In the shimmering silence she heard him swallow hard: a tight, liquid sound as if his throat had nearly closed. Rin patted her chest with the towel and pressed it to her skin to absorb the film of water.

A sandal scuffed the ground, and then the back of Manji's skull bumped the wall hard. Twice. Perhaps his legs urged him to rise, but his head refused to let them move.

"Is there something you... what is it, Manji-san?"

"Kuso." A short, explosive obscenity through his teeth. Not really meant for her.

By now Rin was trembling, but she tried to keep her tone casual. "Um... I was wondering..."

"Ahhn?" He might have had a hand over his mouth.

"You said today that a woman... had to use some different approaches in combat, since she's got to make up for lacking a man's strength. Speed and leverage... like Makie-san."

"Yeah."

"So she would be someone for me to try to emulate?" Rin shrugged her sleeves back on. "Maybe not her technique, but more like her attitude? Or..."

Manji chuckled, his voice easing slightly. "Well... that lady's got a gift."

"That's for sure. Gosh, even Anotsu was so impressed! He told me to watch her – not that I could avoid seeing it. She was like..."

Actually, while the matchless swordswoman Otonotachibana Makie slew eight armed men in Anotsu Kagehisa's defense, Rin had mostly watched the look on Anotsu's face while he watched Makie. She fiercely longed to put that same look on his face some day... just before she struck off his head.

"I didn't hang around for the show. Guess it was just as well."

"She really did almost kill you that other time, didn't she? When she pretended to be a streetwalker to get you alone? She's so graceful, but she's deadly too. I wish I..."

"Fine, you work on that." He sounded a little too sarcastic. "Got your duds on yet?"

"Uh-huh, I'm all dressed." Rin hastily tucked together the overlaps of her clothing. "You can sit back here now... um." She swallowed hard. "Manji-san, if you felt like – if you wanted to... er, to talk to me – ?"

"I'm turnin' in." He rose and went around to the hut's door without returning to the porch. Rin sat outside until the smoke thinned to nothing and the mosquitoes began to sing in her ears. Still a faint glow in the west, and the moon drowned out the rest of the stars.

Indoors it was nearly black, the blanket that hung over the door blocking the moonlight along with the bugs and the breeze. She couldn't see at first except for vague shapes, but she knew the hut's interior well. There wasn't much furniture to trip her up in any case. Just two heaps of straw at opposite ends, a couple of old reed mats and a number of battered wooden boxes filled with assorted junk

and pushed against the walls. Rin navigated around the unlit lantern, turned left and felt with her toes for her straw pile.

Manji snored on his own pile; she smelled *saké*. He must have kept back some of that jug he'd bought a few days ago. It seemed like he had been drinking a great deal lately, especially considering how little cash they had. She'd assumed it was because of the weather, or simply boredom.

Rin untied her *obi* and folded her *furisōde* as neatly as she could in the darkness. Wearing her thin inner robe, she lay down on the straw, trying not to let her rude mattress crackle too loudly, and settled herself for sleep. Manji growled and turned over with a prolonged series of rustling noises, then kicked his legs a couple of times.

"Manji?" she whispered, not sure if he were entirely awake or not.

"Hanh?"

Rin flinched at his harsh grunt, but it shattered the quiet and emboldened her a little. "Uh... would you be angry if I asked you a question about something, *sensei*? I'm sorry... it's sort of, um, personal, and I don't want to sound as if I — "

"Just ask it, wouldya? It's quicker."

Rin paused and swallowed hard. "What's the last time you... well, pillowed with a woman?" The straw crackled violently. "Was it... Makie?"

"...No."

"But, then... " She blinked. "Don't you ever... think about it?"

"NO."

"But I thought...err, I heard that a man gets unhealthy if he doesn't... you know."

"I ain't dead yet." He sounded as if he were in pain. "You don't like me buying whores anyhow, so what's the goddamn point of *thinking* about it?"

"I said it was okay if you did. I just didn't want to know — "

"Then I won't tell you." Manji rolled over again and swept a hand beside his bed. A few scant drops rattled when he shook the *saké* jug; Manji tossed it against the wall. "Aw, *fuck* it..."

Rin sat upright and felt for her quilt. Despite the night's warmth, she pulled it over her lap. Manji heaved to his feet and took a couple of steps in her direction. Paused.

She waited, heart thumping, but he did nothing more than look at her in the darkness. A faint hint of moonlight intruded through the cracks in the walls, so that her increasing vision gradually gave his dim outline some form. Hands at his sides, curled in fists, head lowered halfway below the tight line of his shoulders. She heard his breathing, both sharp and shaky. How stupid of a tender girl to ask a grown man such a question, especially when despite her ignorance she had already learned the answer.

"M-Manji — "

"Woman — don't you ever quit asking?"

He stalked to the door, swept the blanket aside and went out. Rin huddled under the stifling quilt. Behind the hut the grill rattled; he was fanning up the coals. In a while she smelled tobacco.

Manji still hadn't come back into the hut by the time Rin finally fell asleep. She was glad of that, since she wasn't sure she would have been able to hide her sobs. All her fault, all her heedless, stupid, yearning dreams. She didn't want to cause her beloved Manji-san any more torment than she already had, particularly on the last night she would ever spend in this place, or sleep by his side.

PART TWO

“What the hell were you doing without me?”

He couldn't have seen her yet. Rin stopped just before turning the corner of the hut; acrid smoke from Manji's cooking fire stung her nostrils. She'd realized that he'd be at least a little angry to find her gone when he woke up, even though she'd written a note before leaving. She'd planned to say something clever and calming when she got back. Before she had to tell him something else which he'd probably like even less...

“Err...”

Rin heard her bodyguard slide forward and slowly stand up; the scabbards of his twin swords dragged along the porch with a hollow sound. “I thought I told you — don't go into the marketplace by yourself. Those Ittō-ryū bastards can pop up anywhere.”

Even though Manji was her bodyguard, he didn't often admit to being worried; that almost warmed her along with a pang of guilt. But his sharp tone worried Rin in turn; Manji probably guessed her morning's absence had something to do with the previous night's tensions. Perhaps he felt ashamed and wanted cover; perhaps he even blamed her. Heart beating fast, Rin closed her eyes and stayed where she was. “M-Manji-san, I wasn't... I only wanted to...”

“Look, you idiot kid — Anotsu's probably told 'em to keep an eye peeled for you, and they've got plenty of reasons to grab you as a hostage. For starters!” Manji's voice cracked a little; Rin blinked at his vehemence.

An awkwardly extended pause, as if Manji realized he'd run ahead of himself. But in a few moments he spoke again, familiar sarcasm buttressing his voice. “Nobody bothered today, I guess. But If I have to come looking for you again after dragging my ass all the way to Kaga and back, I'm gonna get severely pissed.”

“Hostage? Oh, please! You mean because it's really *you* they're after.” Rin walked around the corner of the hut to the porch, folded her arms and glared at Manji. He glared back.

"Naw, they'd just knock you on the head, 'cause it's too damn tricky to keep an eye on you, ya slippery little — !" Manji vented a groan and looked out over the pond. "Do you even hear what I'm saying, or am I just breaking wind?"

"I brought my sword along." Rin glanced down at the long Chinese blade she carried slung through the straps of her shoulder bag. "I could have used it."

Manji rolled his eye and snorted ungraciously. "You ain't half ready to take on one of those guys. Now a couple of scummy bandits hunting for girls to sell — maybe you could scare 'em off if you bawled loud enough."

"We've been training a whole lot! Don't you think I've learned anything yet?"

"Gimme a break — you don't block hard enough three times out of ten." He pointed at two ears of roasted corn he had laid out on the green husks. "Eat yer goddamn breakfast."

Rin pouted. She briefly considered turning around and leaving again without another word. But she was hungry, not having touched food since she rose, so she sat down, delicately took one ear and started to gnaw off the kernels. This late in the season, the corn was tough and starchy, and even chewier after sitting for a couple of hours. Manji watched her for a few moments, then leaned against a roof post with his arms folded.

"So what was so important you had to sneak off before dawn? Blowing your cash on sweets and crap?"

Rin took several mouthfuls and licked her fingers before answering. "I didn't go to the marketplace. I went to a kimono merchant's." Manji raised a brow. "I had to... sell something."

"Didn't know you had any spare duds to get rid of."

"I went to the house to look through what I have stored there. I found a few odds and ends I didn't mind parting with." Rin rolled the corncob in her fingers; all that she had been able to sell was her mother's best gold-embroidered *uchikake* robe, and she felt a little ashamed of having done so. But she'd needed the money...

"The *dojo*? What?" Manji's forehead creased; he straightened up. "You haven't been back there since you and me..."

"I lived there alone for two years! What could be different now?"

"Well... nothing, I guess." He grimaced and scratched his scalp. "Too many ghosts in that place."

"I know." It took her an effort to smile. "I made some offerings to my parents' spirits at a shrine, but there was plenty of money left." Rin finished her ear of corn, reached into her sleeve and took out a heavy little package. She set it on the edge of the porch: ten gold *kōban*, done up in paper with the value written on the outside. "This is... for you."

Rin turned her palms up and set her fingertips against the package to slide it slightly towards Manji. She bowed, then sat back and picked up the second ear of corn. Maybe she appeared calm and sure of herself now...

"Hnn?" Manji stooped to take the package from the porch and weighed it in his hand. "What for?"

"Your salary."

"My salary?" He fingered the strokes of the writing with an air of confused annoyance and then held out the package at arm's length with his chin drawn in, as if he thought it smelled bad. "We never arranged it like this. You just paid for the inns and gave me some drinking money. What's with the big payoff?"

"That's... more or less what it is. Your payoff."

He shot a look at her, his brows going down.

"I'm giving you severance pay." Rin briefly closed her eyes. "I'm not employing you as my *yōjimbō* any more."

The package dropped from Manji's extended hand and broke open, spilling the big oval coins into the dirt. "The HELL?" Manji's face changed color and his eye glared wide. "You can't fire me!"

"Why not? If I could hire you, then — "

"Hire me?"

"You need to live your own life. You're a man... with a man's needs. I know you've been pretty, um, bored lately just training me, and you don't want to have to babysit any longer. We can go our separate ways, and you can do

whatever you want." Rin smiled all the way through her well-rehearsed speech, her heart pounding, and stared into the distance to avoid looking at Manji's expression.

"Hell no, woman — it don't work that way! I've paid for you, remember? Don't try to buy me off."

Rin's head snapped around. "I'm not!"

"Then what's all the cold cash for, hah? I've put a hell of a lot of work in you — you ain't going to risk my investment on yer own again."

"YOUR investment? I've taken care of myself before — "

"You little idiot!" Manji seized her by the shoulders and shook her; the half-eaten corn flew out of her hand. "You'd be dead in a week! If Anotsu's guys hear you don't even have a bodyguard — "

"Th-th-the Ittō-ryū 's concerned with a lot more than just m-m-me!" Rin chattered through the shaking. "Anotsu's in some kind of trouble with the *bakūfū* — "

"So what? Come on — "

"So Anotsu probably doesn't have me on his mind at all, and even if he did, he wouldn't do anything about it!" Rin wriggled from Manji's grasp and retreated to the far corner of the porch to get a little distance. He moved towards her and she circled out into the yard, around the *hibachi* and back to the other end of the porch, Manji turning on his heel and tracking her every step of the way.

"Looked like he had you pretty firmly on his mind, last I saw of him. You claimed you'd keep your eye on him until it was time to kill him. Why wouldn't he decide to take care of you for good?" Manji's chest gave a heave.

"I was with him for days, remember? I saw how he thinks — Manji-san, it might be strange to say it, but he's got a sense of honor. Maybe even... too much of one. That's just not the way he operates."

"Maybe so." Manji's mouth twitched in a fleeting grimace. "If he didn't when he had you alone... okay." He looked away and his stance changed, a just-perceptible slump of the shoulders. "Might make some kind of sense."

"Thank you." Rin patted her collar straight. "You know, I have to start building my life too."

"Build your life? Like how?"

Rin took a deep breath and fingered one braid ring. "I'll go live at the *dojo* again. I have some acquaintances in the neighborhood... I need to visit and re-introduce myself. I haven't been part of my family's society in years, but I am still Asano Takayoshi's daughter." She raised her chin and looked Manji straight in the face. "I can make a place for myself with some effort, and that's what I should do."

Manji's expression struck her oddly; he let out a short hard breath and went pale. "Okay, I got you."

"What do you mean?"

"Make a place for yourself... fine, you do that." He pointed to his chest. "No place for an outlaw. Right?"

"Manji-san?"

"Aw, don't get coy. You know what I'm sayin'." He laughed unpleasantly. "You'd scandalize your nice neighbors, bringing along your low-life bodyguard to their damn tea parties. Ol' Manji would just be a turd in yer rice bowl!"

Rin's mouth dropped open. "No... that's not what I..."

"But that's what it adds up to, don't it? The hell with it." He turned his back and stalked a few paces away, out from under the shade of the porch roof. "So I ain't too hot with proper social etiquette..."

Rin stared at the back of his head for a few flabbergasted moments, hardly able to get her breath; she'd never realized that he'd see it this way, and she had no defense prepared. Blinking rapidly to ward off tears, she scanned the ground and her gaze fell on the broken packet of gold. "Um... your money...?" Her voice trembled, so she only pointed at the coins when Manji glanced at her. He looked dark and sullen; could she actually have hurt his feelings?

"Shit... can't go forgetting money." Manji stooped and grabbed a coin, then tossed it in the air and snatched it again with a motion so quick Rin barely followed it. "Guess I can buy all the whores I want now, can't I?" He bit down on the edge of the coin with his side teeth and left a deep mark in the gold.

Rin gulped and shivered; why in heaven's name had she asked him about that last night? "It's your b-b-business... Manji, don't you know I wouldn't tell you this because of who you are? If... if you think about it, you'll see that it's... just better, okay?"

"Better?" He squatted on his haunches and glared up at her. "So buying whores and getting drunk is how you figure I want to spend *my* life? Which if you recall is likely to be a damn long one."

Rin flushed. "You'd rather be fighting, I guess..."

"Fighting the right guys, sure. Barring that — " He blew out through his teeth and collected the rest of the coins, some of which remained in the broken paper.

"It's not like my vendetta is the only way to find evil men to kill." Rin looked down at Manji's spiky topknot, which cast irregular slashes of shadow on the back of his neck. She moved aside when he reached for a coin she had stepped on.

"You think that's why I've been doing this?" Manji rose to his feet and dumped the coins and wrapper into his left sleeve, dirt and all. "Month after month, and it's all about killing off the bad guys for little Rin's revenge?"

"That's why you agreed to do it in the first place... right?"

"In the first place, maybe." Manji glanced at her with creased brows while he shrugged the collar of his *kōsōde* a little further closed. He folded his arms into his sleeves and looked out along the road. "Gotta admit it's turned out kinda... interesting."

"Well, there just isn't much for you to do any more. I'll be living quietly and training... you'd be bored out of your skull." Rin spread her hands and tried to sound confident and mature, though it was difficult to suppress her trembles. Manji's reaction had been the only part of the break she truly feared, far more than the dangers her enemies posed; she knew he was a stubborn man, but perhaps he would just have to accept their parting if she didn't let her determination falter. "It could be years before I need to look up Anotsu Kagehisa again, and by then... I'll find some way to face him by myself."

"Not without me you won't." Manji didn't look at her, but his tone was both quiet and oddly ominous. He slowly scratched his elbows inside his sleeves; Rin glimpsed the hilt cap of a hidden sword, one among many.

"It's not your business any more. I just... laid you off, remember?"

Manji's features tightened, the white scars standing out against his flushed skin. With deliberation he withdrew one hand from his clothing, exactly like his gesture in pulling out a weapon, and held up his pointing finger. When Rin's eyes went to it, he poked the finger at the air to punctuate his words, ending on a downward jab with his lips peeled back from his teeth. "No. Freaking. WAY."

His face, his voice... not a trace of a smile. A peculiar prickle crawled up the back of her scalp; this wasn't a mood she knew at all. In haste Rin shouldered her bag and straightened the sword. "You... you can't tell me what to do! I... I'm leaving now — please don't follow me."

"Big bad samurai begging after a little girl? Shit, that'd look pathetic!" Now Manji laughed, though not in a way that relieved her. "Nah, that ain't happening... because you ain't leaving." He spat on the ground and squared his shoulders towards her.

Rin flinched at Manji's expression. Her sense of an unfamiliar threat solidified and grew, even more unsettling that it had felt in the dark hut the night before. Her eyes dilated and she backed up as he approached. "Manji-san, p-please... don't be so mad..."

"Mad?" He stopped and made a face, as if he'd overstepped again. "Ah... naw, what would anybody get mad for?" Looking into the sky, he scratched the back of his head and mocked her tone. "Please take a hike, Manji-san! I got no use for a bodyguard, so who needs ya anyhow? Just don't get *angry* or nothing... 'cause no matter what you say to -- " Abruptly Manji turned around and put a few strides between himself and Rin. He lowered his head, rubbed his chin and covered his mouth as if to enforce silence.

"I'm only trying to do what's best for both of us! I... I thought you'd be... relieved."

"Hah?" Manji raised his head, obviously startled. His expression softened slightly as he looked around at Rin. "Relieved to get shot of you? You ain't making sense, girl."

"Well... uh, I've noticed..." Rin bit her lips and clasped her hands in front of her, quivering with embarrassment. On the way into town and back, she had worked out this conversation in detail and designed her arguments and strategic evasions, but logic and calm threatened to desert her now. Speaking these things

to Manji's face was vastly different from having an ideal exchange with the air. Especially when he reacted so unpredictably!

"Um, last night..." Rin put the back of one hand to her perspiring forehead and began again. "I'm s-sorry, of course I couldn't *help* but notice, and I guess you realized that I..."

"Notice what?" Manji folded his arms into his sleeves again. Rin blinked at him.

"What? That you were feeling — err, well, very uneasy around me, and — "

"Me, uneasy? Gimme a break."

Her mouth opened in surprise. "Manji-san, you yelled at me! Okay, not yelled exactly, but I thought that — "

"What, you were buggin' me with dumb questions... like a mosquito whining in my ear?" He scratched under his chin with pointed unconcern. "So? All of a sudden me getting a little pissed is a big deal?"

"But... because it was — oh, honestly! You know what it was!" She hid her mouth with her sleeve.

"How the hell do I know what yer dreamin' up, kid?"

Utterly confused, Rin dropped her hands to her sides and took a step backwards. Had her memory failed her? She'd gotten the wrong idea entirely? No — she couldn't have mistaken it. The sound of his breathing in the dark...

So now he was joking with her, was he? Rin gave Manji a disgusted grimace and put her hands on her hips. "Ohh, I don't *believe* you sometimes! How can you pretend that never happened?"

"What, something happened?" He smirked and lifted a brow. "Can't say I noticed... but then I did have a drop at bedtime."

"Oooh!" Rin darted at Manji and smacked him on the arm with her open palm. Then she turned around and put her face in her hands.

"Aw, crap... quit snivelin'. Go get your goddamn *bokuto* and take it out of me if you're that pissy." Manji snapped his fingers at her. "Who knows, if you try harder this time you might get in a lick or two."

Rin's shoulders heaved, but she swallowed her tears. She took a few deep steadying breaths, then looked up. "No, Manji-san. I'm going now."

"Like hell you are. I already told you why not — so you listen to — "

"No, you listen to ME!" Rin stamped her foot. "I... I can't stay here with you... because... because..." To her mortification, her voice faltered and trailed off.

"I'm listening, but I ain't hearing a thing." Manji turned up his palms and raised his brows. "If there's something you just gotta say — "

"Y-you... you..." she croaked. He circled a finger in the air as if to pull out the next word. "You wanted to — you're dreaming about — you want..." Rin squeezed her eyes shut. "Last night... I was sure you wanted *me*."

The silence roared.

So she'd pulled out the guts of the matter at last — and she wished she had left it entirely alone, or buried it as deep as the garbage pile. Anything but drag it into the hot and unforgiving sun... Rin ventured a look at Manji and cringed.

He stared at her with mixed incredulity and actual pain. "The fuck — the *hell*? What in the shit did you think I was gonna DO to you, kid?" He pointed at the hut and let out a hissing pant as if she had kicked him. Almost too horrified even to be angry. "Strip you and throw you on the straw? Holy freakin' *shit*!"

Rin's lips trembled and opened — what had she done? Really hurt him, that was what. He turned away from her, his fists clenching. "Manji-san... I'm sorry — I didn't mean it like that... I'm sorry!" He made a wide swatting gesture as if to chase her away, then put his head down and shook it hard, as if trying to dislodge an image from his mind.

Rin flung her bag to the porch. She ran at Manji and embraced him from behind, digging her face into his side. Manji flinched and seemed about to wrest himself from her arms. "Please, *sensei*, you've got to forgive me... I'm so stupid!" She burst into anguished tears. "Oh... no..."

Manji groaned and slumped. He extracted his arm from between them, slowly raised it and put his hand on her head. He patted her hair once, then let his hand fall. "Kid..."

"I... I... w-wouldn't ever think... M-Manji... ohh..." She blubbered into his clothes, gulping and sniffing. "Please... it's not your fault... I... oh, God..."

"Okay already! You're gettin' me all wet." Manji put his hands on Rin's shoulders and moved her away from him. He shook his head at her, frowning deeply. "You didn't mean it like that? So how did you mean it? Crap on a stick!"

"I meant... that it's all MY fault..." Rin raised her face to Manji, her tears almost unrelieved. "Not yours! That if I wasn't... if I just hadn't... I'm sorry." She bowed her head and wiped her nose with the back of her hand, then dabbed at her eyes. "I... I should have realized..."

"Hah?" He let go of her shoulders. "Still not making sense."

Rin gulped and dried her face as well as she could. "I mean, not that anyone can actually read what's in another person's mind, but... I guess I can't keep from showing it to you, what I'm thinking, and so I shouldn't have been thinking about it in the first place even if I wasn't totally sure how much I was..."

"What the...?" Manji blew out an uncomprehending snort. "Since when do I give a crap what anybody's *thinking*?"

"But I know I've made you unhappy." Rin looked at her toes, scuffed her *geta* in the dirt and tried to swallow a choking lump. "It all comes out wr-wrong when I try to... I only made it worse for you instead of better — "

"Anything YOU could do? Come spit in the freakin' ocean." He laughed shortly. "Hell, cut the explanations — I don't care. You're staying, end of story. We can still get in a few *kata* before noon."

"No, Manji, I need to tell you. Now."

An odd flash of apprehension when Manji glanced at her: then he swatted the air again. "Naah... it ain't important."

"Yes, it is! There's nothing more important I could ever say to you..." Yearning expanded within her and pressed for release; Rin's heart seemed to sink and rise at the same time. She looked up at Manji; the high sun struck across his features. His hard, scarred, dear face. "Ohh..."

"Eh?" His brows tilted. Rin clasped her hands just under her throat and let her emotions suffuse her. Her lips parted; her eyelids fluttered and her breast heaved. She managed a tender, trembling smile, hoping to infuse it with infinite meaning.

Her bodyguard answered it with an expression draining of everything but shock – a different sort of shock entirely. He retreated a step. “What the fu – ?”

“Manji, I...” she breathed.

“No, you don’t.” He set his teeth and firmly shook his head. Rin extended her arms to him and he recoiled. “Hey! Keep yer hands to yourself!”

“But I... I think I just realized how much... but I’ve always dreamed – ”

Manji stopped her with a loud spluttering snort. Then he threw back his head and laughed. Full-throated and heartless, his stomach shaking with mirth. “Aw, stop it – you’re killin’ me!” Rin laid her hands over her heart, lifted her chin and waited, cheeks burning.

Eventually Manji’s hilarity sputtered away into light chortling; he rubbed his eye with the heel of his hand. “C’mon, ya idiot kid.” He took a deep breath and blew it out. “You? Throw an itch on *me*? Yer dreamin’, all right – get serious.”

“I AM serious.”

“Yeah, sure. Not a clue, little girl!”

“Why shouldn’t I know how I feel? I’m old enough to – ”

“To get yourself in deep shit? Now that I can agree with.” He made a disgusted huff. “Look, just forget about it. There’s not a chance in hell.”

“I can’t forget it, Manji! So I thought leaving was best... but maybe that was the wrong idea.” She looked over his head with a drawn-out sigh, then into his face. “I shouldn’t be a coward and try to evade the question. It doesn’t matter what kind of trouble... uh, what kind did you mean, exactly?”

“If you don’t know that, I sure ain’t telling you!”

“You’re talking about... how you felt last night?”

Manji cast up his gaze and made a face. Although Rin thought his expression smacked of a guilty conscience, he only shook his head. “Nothing went on last night, and it ain’t going to, and it’s all your goddamn imagination anyhow. I said forget it.”

Rin folded her arms and narrowed her eyes. “My imagination, huh?”

"Ahh, yer head's full of goddamn stars 'n' flowers and pretty poetry, ain't that so? Little virgin like you." He gave a derisive groan. "I'm a guy, see? You ought to be a lot more careful, girl, because a grown man's a whole different story."

"Well, I realize there must be some differences... but if there's something I need to know about men, I can learn! What's so dangerous about that?"

"Shitfire..." Manji made vague gestures in the air. "Look, most guys would grab a crazy hint like that with both hands, even though you're just a kid, and then... aw, crap..." He rolled his head back and forth. "God! Just take my word for it!"

"I don't believe you."

"Hah?"

"Why should I take your word for it? You're always teasing me! Trying to scare me about things I know I can handle perfectly well!" Rin set her shoulders and put her fists on her hips. "Manji-san, you're so... full of it!"

He goggled at her. "Why, you little — "

"Oh, make up your mind! Is there nothing to it, or is it going to get me in trouble if I don't watch out? It can't be both at once."

Manji seemed at a loss. He chewed his jaw and looked away. "Well... y'see... lots of other guys..."

"I don't see anyone here but us."

"I know that." He pulled his lips tight over his teeth. "Look, this just don't need explaining — a man's what he is, and a woman..."

"A woman is what?"

"...Is a woman." He made another vague gesture, his palms outlining a slim shape in the air and then closing down on it, curved in front of him. Rin opened her eyes a little wider, but Manji showed no sign that he meant anything by it; in the next moment he spread his arms and let the phantom go. "I can't put it any more plain than that. So drop it... *now*. Or somebody's gonna regret it."

"Oh yeah? Prove it."

“Prove it?”

“If it’s so totally obvious the way you keep claiming? That ought to be easy.”

“No... it ain’t.” Manji closed his eye and gave a helpless snort. “Why put words to what everybody knows? Everybody who’s not a nutty little virgin who could use a few hard lessons, that would be...”

“Then don’t put words to it.” Rin smiled and put her head on one side when he looked at her. “Show me.”

Manji’s wry expression went a little slack. “Show...?”

“Like you do when we’re training. You don’t *talk* about draws and blocks and guarding your off side all that much — you demonstrate so I can get the idea quicker and start following along. So if you went ahead and — ”

Manji put up a hand. “Whoa there. Slow down!”

“What?”

“Demonstration — what are you *thinking*, woman? Don’t even go near that.”

“Why not?”

“Why NOT?” His color changed. “If you had any idea how a guy feels when he’s good and worked up...”

“Worked up?”

“Worked up! Hot! Raring to go — ” He glanced down her body, then away.

“Ahh, what’m I saying? Damn skinny kid... I must not be gettin’ enough sleep...”

“Well, what makes a man feel like that in the first place? It doesn’t come out of nowhere, does it?”

“...Seems like that sometimes.” Manji shook his head. “Just plain... outta nowhere.”

“Doesn’t it have anything to do with the woman?” Rin put a fingernail to her mouth and looked up at him through her eyelashes. “Doesn’t he have to... um, you know, really like her?”

"Shit, no!" He chuckled darkly. "Not to get into details..."

"Hah?" Rin blinked at him, shocked. "Doesn't she even need to be... well, pretty?"

"Gimme a break. You've seen the poxy whores who stroll after nightfall?" Manji chuckled again. "There's good reason why they usually operate in the dark and don't charge high — but they make their living anyhow."

Rin dropped her gaze to the ground, deeply chagrined. "Oh... ugh." Then she had done Manji yet another injustice; he'd always said she was a gawky kid, and apparently hadn't changed his mind in the least. "Men like, um, *that*, enough that it doesn't even matter who the woman is?" What silly assumptions on which to build a fantastic edifice...

"You got it." He seemed on surer ground now that she looked so deflated, and grinned. "Your average guy between fifteen and thirty? He could just hear a woman's voice say his name... and instantly spring to attention."

"Manji...?" The undertone of that grin seemed to put a sly connotation on his literal meaning. Rin tilted her head skeptically at him. Maybe he was teasing her again, though it didn't read exactly like that. "That's all it takes for him to... to get interested in a woman?"

"Maybe — or he feels her touch his sleeve... or he smells her when she's been bustling around and working up some sweat..." Manji grimaced and shrugged, then abruptly walked past Rin and out to one of the big maples near the hut. He paused in the shade and leaned one palm on a trunk, stiff-armed.

"Little things like that? Really?"

Manji didn't answer. Rin watched him with interest while he slowly wiped his averted face with his other hand. He seemed to want to wash away his expression and leave his features unreadable. For the first time she was directly reminded of his odd behavior the previous night, when he'd seen her bathing and taken a few moments to retreat. He was hiding something...

"Uh... I thought you were going to tell me about this, Manji-san?"

"...Tell you what?" He massaged the back of his neck.

"About a man reacting to a woman... no matter who she is. I don't see how that could work — it's not like I'd ever think that way about just any man."

"Why would you? You're a kid." His voice sounded distant, as if directed to the tree or the pond. "But even when he knows damn well she's not for... a guy doesn't forget for a second that a woman's a woman."

Manji had said almost the same thing a minute before, but now he seemed to refer to himself rather than the entire male sex. Within her a responding note vibrated softly, like a stringed instrument barely brushed by a finger. "So... then what?"

"Hell, it's stupid — he tells himself every day he ain't got a grain of sense and he'd better think about his duty..." Manji hardly seemed to be speaking to her at all, though he might have felt half-relieved to vent a long-bound tension, or even unearth a buried resentment. "Like... she'll smile at him like a flower turning its face to the sun, and open those big eyes real wide when she's got a question, and blush pink when he talks rough, and give him a good thump when he deserves it... and then when he gets a glimpse at a sweet bit of girl-flesh he wasn't expecting to see... he might even go sort of... crazy." Manji pushed his hair out of his face and muttered a curse.

Rin put a couple of fingertips to her lips; Manji didn't look at her as she slowly approached and tried to see his face. Any sign that he was stringing her along? Knowing him, he might say almost anything just to tease out a reaction. "Doesn't a man enjoy that feeling? You almost make it sound like it... hurts."

"Hurts?" Manji rolled his head back and laughed in a constrained, ironic way. "Like an arrow he can't pull from his flesh. Starts to fester..." He paused, his expression closely veiled, and his voice dropped lower. "Funny, when it's done for effect it's nothing much, like a whore's come-ons for coppers... and when it's just how she is and she couldn't fake it for the world — it only makes it worse."

Now he had run far ahead of her understanding; Rin's brows creased in some suspicion. "Worse? How bad do you mean?"

"Like sitting in hell-fire. Demons clamping iron tongs on his... nose." Manji laughed again.

"Oh, come on!" He WAS teasing her, the jerk! "Looking at him? Smiling? That would go on all the time if they lived in the same house. And if nothing happens even so, then you — er, he... couldn't be feeling too — "

Manji squeezed his features tight and clenched his teeth. "No... yer not gettin' me."

Rin folded her arms and tapped her fingers on her elbow. "Then explain it better."

Manji held up both palms, almost touching. "Just THAT much. That much keeping me from..." He threw his arms wide and appealed to the heavens. "If I'm going to hell already, just hurry up and send me there!"

"Are you interested in giving me serious answers or not? Because if you won't even do that, I'm guess I'm going to have to leave after all." Rin waited a few moments for a reply, and receiving none, she headed for the porch to get her bag.

"Hey! Goddammit!" Manji strode after her and grabbed her arm. "Cut that out!"

"Cut what out?"

"Gallivanting off all by your little self! You've pulled that on me too many times already — if I've got one word to say about it, you're never causing me that much trouble again." He pointed at his chest. "I'm your damn bodyguard, I'm your *sensei* — "

"If it's that hard to explain something you claim to know everything about — something about *yourself*, for heaven's sake — then what do you think you can teach me? Eh?" Rin attempted to free her arm and slapped Manji's wrist.

"Shit!" Manji let go of her and made a furious gesture. "What the hell do you think I'm supposed to — ?"

"I don't know, because you won't tell me. I'm trying to tell you honestly how I feel, and all you can do is get mad and laugh at me and refuse to explain anything except with weird jokes!" Rin sniffled and wiped her nose. "Why should I stay? I'm a lot more confused than YOU ever could be!"

"Aw... crap." He dropped his face into one hand. "Fine. Ask!"

"Err... I think I forgot the question." They looked in opposite directions for a few moments, both of them breathing irregularly. "Well, um... *sensei*..."

"... Go on."

"You must be exaggerating! I mean, only smelling a woman can make a man feel like demons are torturing him? That's *weird*."

"Never said it wasn't..."

"Wouldn't you be seeing men following women around... like dogs?"

"Ya think that doesn't happen? Some guys, sniffing the hem of an underskirt..."
Manji snorted. "Mostly, though, broads come when you call."

"I know that — but if women could have that kind of power, then why do men run everything?"

Manji gave her an off-center grin. "Fair question... and there's your answer." He slightly cocked his hips forward and rapped his sword hilts. "If a guy keeps his mind on his own strength instead of what a woman can do to it, he's gonna knuckle under to no one." His grin grew wider, but then he glanced away and muttered. "Takes practice, though... or he's gonna start slipping."

"You're really strong, Manji-san, so I don't see why you'd even worry!"

"Who's worried?" He gazed off over her head.

"Well..." Rin chewed her lip. This still didn't follow, to her mind — first he spoke as if being near her tormented him, exactly the way she thought she'd observed last night, and then he dismissed such emotion as trivial or even unmanly. He had to be either kidding her or trying to figure it out himself — and Manji always had things figured out. Uncertainty was no part of his makeup. Neither did he ever dwell on his own discomforts. Nothing could damage him permanently; nothing ever left a trace on him, body or mind. She should realize that by now...

Rin raised her brows and sighed. "Can I ask you something else?" Manji made a negligent wave of the hand. "I still think you've got to be exaggerating about the little everyday stuff. So what would be some of the, um, bigger things that make a man feel like that about a woman? Short of... well... *that*." She blushed. "Th-the next step after seeing her smile... or whatever. What's in between?"

"Uh..." Manji's face twitched. "Well..."

"Like holding hands?" Rin prompted. She knew more about this than he thought she did, apparently, though he obviously didn't like the question. "Or, er, hugging?"

"Yeah, that." He seemed faintly relieved that she had mentioned it first. "And kissing — well, that's about as far as it *could* go without, uh..."

“Okay. That sounds a little more believable.”

Manji rolled his eye. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“So why don’t you just kiss me?” She held up her arms. “Go on.”

Manji’s eye went wide, his face went pale, and then he flushed dark red. “*Haah?*”

“There’s no harm in that, is there? A kiss... or two... and then maybe I’ll have a better idea of what you’re talking about.” Rin smiled; the proposal struck her as both tidy and clever. She’d get a little closer to him, find out how it felt... and perhaps he’d even admit out loud that he did like her.

“B-b-better idea?”

“Of how a man feels around a woman. Remember, you said I had no idea because I was a girl! So you should teach me about it, if you think I need to know.”

“I said — it was dangerous. Didn’t I?”

“But it’s not dangerous if it’s YOU! I totally trust you, Manji-san — you’re my *yōjimbō*. I know you’d never do anything bad to me! See? I didn’t mean it like that at all.” Rin opened her arms and gave him a warm smile.

“...And you think... that offerin’ to let me molest you... is gonna prove that.” Manji clapped a palm to his forehead and dragged it down to cover his face. “Holy... freakin’...” He half turned and almost staggered away. “You don’t have to fire me. I’ll just turn in my resignation... and run like hell!”

“I said ‘kiss’! What’s wrong?”

Manji faced the hut wall and propped himself up with one hand, his shoulders heaving. She wasn’t sure if he were laughing or trying not to weep. “What did I do to deserve... sixteen-year-old logic?”

“You’re being really strange about this, Manji, you know that?” Rin waggled a finger at him. “Maybe you do deserve it, for all the times you’ve made fun of me that way!”

He slumped a little further. “Yeah, I did... didn’t I?”

"Ha! See? You're the one who brought it up first, and I never would have said a thing this time without you acting so funny! So you owe me!"

"This is... freakin' *blackmail*." Manji clenched a fist against his forehead. "Am I gonna get outta this mess... any other way?"

"But... wouldn't you like it at all?" He groaned but didn't answer. "You — *you're* not afraid?"

Manji's spine snapped straight. "Hah?"

"Are you afraid... OF liking it?"

Manji smacked the boards so hard that Rin jumped. "Okay. That does it."

He whipped around and came right up to her; Rin's eyes went wide at the aggressive glitter in his eye. Manji didn't seize her and crush her to him, however; he grasped her by the shoulders and held her off a little way, glaring as if he'd rather swat her than embrace her. His expression gradually changed to a speculative frown; he examined her face and chewed his jaw. He might have been weighing one certain chance of painful death against another. Rin didn't dare venture a word.

With a couple of slow reverse steps, Manji drew her with him until he encountered the hut's side wall again. Then he slid one hand around Rin's back and put the other at her waist. A gradual tightening of his arms until she stood almost between his thighs. He reclined his shoulders against the boards so that she leaned with him; Rin had to let her face tilt up or else bump her nose into Manji's chest. Before she could bring up her hands to support herself, her breasts pushed slightly into his ribs and flattened against his body. Rin leaned back to break the contact, her heart beating quickly.

Manji might have been studying his own reactions as well as hers; he made no move other than a slight flexing of his fingertips against her shoulder blade, and didn't close down his open grip. Watching her closely, but with thoughts turned inwards. Rin saw his face darken with a gradual flush, and the quality of his gaze altered as it descended from her eyes.

Fixed on her lips: his expression both warmed and tightened. His own mouth hardened, as if against an urge to open wider, and he spoke with brittle constraint. "A kiss, huh?"

"Um... yes?"

"You ain't talking... on the *mouth*?" Tongue-tip along his teeth, so quick she barely saw it.

"Good grief, of COURSE not! Just on my cheek or something!" Rin blushed at the continued intensity of Manji's gaze and put up a hand to hide her lips. "Gosh, a man kissing a woman on the mouth is practically the same as... well, YOU know!" She spluttered and giggled through her fingers.

Manji said nothing, but he gave a suppressed shudder.

"So, um... go ahead." Rin laced her hands in front of her and smiled at him. "I'm all ready."

Manji returned the smile, much diluted. With deliberation, he put a hand on her jaw and tilted her face to the side as he leaned forward again. He rubbed his nose along her cheekbone without letting his lips touch her skin, then breathed out in a warm gust and drew a deep draft of air through his nose while nuzzling her hairline.

Rin sighed and smiled; it felt very pleasant just to be so near her *yōjimbō*, to enjoy his touch and to feel like he might enjoy it too. He seemed to think she smelled nice, at any rate. His own scent warmed her nostrils, an element of his masculinity she had not thought about very much before now. Probably he'd washed his body the night before while absent from the hut, at about the same time she had, but she detected a higher note in his sweat reminiscent of working out with their practice swords in the heat. It didn't strike her as unpleasant or strong, but it was so distinctly his that she could feel it strike responses in the deep fibers of her body. Memories crowded on her, both vague and acute, each adding its vibrations to remind her just why she had told him how she felt...

Before she could register any more impressions, Manji straightened up, puffed out his cheeks and looked over her head. He pulled a noncommittal face, raising his brows as his gaze scanned from side to side.

"Manji?"

"Still want me to do it? Kiss you?"

"Yes... please." Rin blushed and shyly glanced down, then up at him again.

"...Your funeral." Manji gave an odd one-sided smirk. He bent down again as if to continue, but looked straight at Rin's mouth once more. Then he turned his

face and brushed his open lips against her jawline. Rin closed her eyes and cooed a tiny, savoring sigh in the back of her throat.

Manji jolted as if she had planted an elbow in his stomach. His hands clenched for a moment on her upper arms, though he didn't stop nor push her away. Breathing hard, he abruptly pressed a full kiss to the soft flesh of her cheek. The tip of his tongue flickered out to taste her skin, and then he kissed the delicate area by Rin's closed left eye, touched her temple in passing and encountered her ear. Warm stirrings twirled in her middle; her pulse beat rapidly but lightly under her jaw. Rin leaned in against Manji's body and slipped one hand around his waist.

The sword hilts on his left hip poked her ribs; Rin nudged them aside with her elbow so she could press even closer to him. Then she ventured up to grasp Manji's open collar, and as she rolled her fingers in the worn and softened fabric of his clothes, the side of her thumb touched his chest through the gap of his *kōsōde*. The morning wasn't yet very hot, but his skin felt moist with sweat.

He really did like this, she was sure, he wanted to hold her and touch her — Rin's breathing quickened. Maybe he wouldn't mind if she returned the favor? She pursed her lips and applied a little peck to the end of his chin.

Manji stilled completely. His grip on her arms fell open, his limbs seemed to hang suspended in air. Only his shoulders moved up and down as he breathed.

Rin kissed his chin again. Sparse beard bristles prickled her lips, as did the coarse hairs at the angle of his jaw. Eyes closed, she sought out a smoother part of Manji's face.

He quivered low in his body while maintaining his odd stillness. Perhaps he was trying to suppress all urge to move; she might have been a little wild creature that would flee in fear if he startled her. Like watching a songbird that trilled oblivious on a nearby branch... or stalking a plump quail for the spit? Just as Rin pursed her lips again to drop a kiss on the front part of his cheek, Manji slightly jerked his head to the side.

Their lips brushed. Rin delivered her intended innocent caress to the corner of Manji's parted mouth.

His whole body stiffened and his neck snapped back. Rin's cheeks flushed eye-stingingly hot and she dipped her head and stood away from him, meaning to stammer an apology or at least a disclaimer — she hadn't meant it THAT way, of course — he mustn't think —

Manji clapped a hand to the back of her skull, pulled her in and touched his lips to hers. Mouth closed and dry, but Rin squeaked in as great a shock as if he had groped her between the legs. She tried to turn her face; Manji laid strong fingers along her jaw and prevented her. Again he kissed her on the mouth, harder this time.

And yet again. His lips parted as he lingered over the kiss. Rin trembled all over, unable to move a step — what way did HE mean this? From the rapid little ticks in his breathing, he could have been snickering at her surprise. But in a moment he inhaled more deeply; his mouth softened against hers and his muscles relaxed. The kiss grew wetter.

Manji groaned faintly. His body seemed to press on hers with increasing weight. Rin's knees nearly buckled; she had to grab his shoulders to avoid slipping downwards. He put a thumb on her chin to tilt her head further back, moaned again and forced his lips against hers. One of Manji's hands clutched the small of Rin's back, his fingers digging into the cushion of her *obi* bow, and the other tightly cradled her head. As if he didn't mean to hold back in the least, as if the little songbird were a fluttering prisoner in his grasp, as if he could prove anything he liked — or as if he couldn't help himself. Stinging from the avaricious pressure of his kisses, Rin's lips yielded and opened. Manji invaded her mouth with his tongue and thrust it under hers.

If she'd ever been able to imagine her *yōjimbō's* embrace in any detail, she hadn't accounted for the strength of her own intoxication. Rin's brain whirled in a disorienting spiral although neither of them moved except to strain closer to each other. Manji's warm tongue pushed deep into her mouth; their saliva freely mingled, which struck her as shockingly intimate. This wasn't exactly what she'd dreamed about — not even to a stronger degree, now that some element of her fantasies seemed to be coming true. She hadn't realized that people could touch each other so carnally with their clothes still on, nor that it could feel this way when they did. No wonder a mouth kiss was considered nearly equivalent to making love... though she had never gained a very clear picture of that act either.

Rin mimicked Manji's voracious caresses as well as she could, having no other idea how to respond. Not that she had any urge to reject him. She stood on tiptoe, slipped her hands up around his neck and hesitatingly put her tongue between his lips, then sank back to her heels. She tugged Manji's head down with her, but her mouth parted from his for a moment and their tongues untangled.

Manji groaned and staggered a step forward. With an impact that flexed her neck backwards, he crushed his face to Rin's again and groped for her lips. His hand stroked down from the small of her back to the slope of her haunches. The thick protective folds of Rin's *obi* gave way to the doubled pleat of her robe below her sash, then to the thinner layers of clothing covering her bottom. Underskirt, *yūkata*, *furisōde* all intervened — but she seemed to feel the heat of Manji's palm directly against her flesh.

Rin wriggled her hips in her bodyguard's grasp, responding to a hot, liquid tickle that crept between her legs and heated her lower belly. Manji swayed on his feet, as if all his equilibrium were spent in keeping his mouth sealed to hers. His chest pumped, his ribs pushing against her breasts in a broken rhythm like sobbing for breath. If he'd taken her by surprise in responding so aggressively to an accidental touch... then how surprised was he?

Abruptly he shoved her away, gasping. "No. Stop it!"

Rin stumbled and sat down in the dirt. Manji turned his back on her and slumped against the wall of the hut, his palm cupped over his mouth. Stop her, or himself? Both of them panted hard for several moments.

"M-Manji-san?" Rin struggled to stand, her legs still unsteady. "Are you..."

He whipped his head around and glared at her with an extraordinary expression: incredulous, almost appalled, and even accusing. "Fuck me — you'd do it, wouldn't you?"

"Wh-what?"

"If I asked you to let me spread your legs right now... you'd say yes!"

Rin's heartbeat accelerated even further, though that scarcely seemed possible. Spots danced in front of her eyes; she reached blindly for something to support her and found one of the shade trees. "Are... are you asking me?" She pressed her cheek to the rough bark, her gasping breaths scalding her heart.

"Hell no, you little fool!" Manji shrugged his shoulders upright and gave a contemptuous snort. "Got yer proof?"

Rin's face went cold. Then he'd faked it. Even that kiss — and she'd fallen for it so easily!

"Hah! Let that be a lesson to you." Manji adjusted the loosened overlap of his *kōsōde* and dusted his hands on his sleeves. "Never trust a man on that score. Not even me!"

She trembled in humiliation and tears blurred her eyes. "F-fine. I won't."

"Aw, kid, don't take it so hard. You asked for it, sure, but... maybe I carried it a little far." He wiped his lips and raked a hand through his hair, then chuckled thinly. "Didn't think it'd be quite *that* dangerous."

Rin looked up, startled. Manji shrugged in annoyance, as if regretting that he'd spoken, and started to turn away. Rin rubbed the tears out of her vision. "You mean... it really did make you feel that way?"

Manji missed a step and halted. For a moment he didn't reply, and then he grabbed the back of his neck and growled. "Don't get yer hopes up — men are all pigs. Which is my whole point, see?"

Rin's heart gave a bold thump. "But if I'm enough of a woman to make you, err, really react like a man... then maybe I'm enough of a woman to handle it. Um, the dangerous part." She drew herself up straight and tried to look as womanly as possible.

Manji turned around and stared at her in naked disbelief. When she bravely held his gaze with her shaking chin pulled into her chest, he laughed with an edge of despair and sat down hard on the porch, head in his hands. "Nope. Not a chance."

"Girls my age get married all the time."

"Married? Yeah, and they grow round bellies, too. Or didn't you know that it leads to brats?"

"Uh... I guess so... but not always, right? Especially when you're young."

"I wouldn't count on that, kid!" Manji abruptly raised his head and made a question mark at her with one brow. "Nice respectable samurai family with only one little girl-child? Exactly how much DO you know about... er, pillowing?"

"Well... I've seen dogs mating in the street... and it must be something like that, except that people usually do it indoors." Rin blushed and shrugged. "I guess men have something like, uh, that thing... that gets bigger... and then they put it, uh, between a woman's legs... and it's what husbands and wives do, and my

mother's friends used to gossip about it and say that men get more out of it than a woman does, which is maybe why they like to pay for it in a brothel so they can do it more often, but I also heard that it makes a woman like a man more when she's done that with him. And that a woman can reach the Clouds and Rain the way a man does if he knows how to do it well, or if his, um, thing is the right size for her, and especially if she already likes him."

Manji listened to this speech in obvious astonishment, pressing his lips together as if manfully holding back a laugh. "If she... if she likes him? Holy... shit."

"Uh... is that not true?"

He got up and slapped his thighs. "I'm going into town, and I'm going to visit a bookseller's. You can come with me if you like — yeah, better tag along. We can pick out one or two that seem to be about your level."

"One or two what?"

"*Shunpon*. Pillow books. Like what your parents would have given you for a wedding present. Basic operating instructions, you got it?" At the look on Rin's face he burst out into a hearty guffaw. "I have a feeling that seeing actual pictures of people getting it on is going to give you second thoughts like nothing else. And all the better. Come on, I'll buy ya some noodles for lunch." Still laughing, he strode away.

PART THREE

"Uh... that looks kinda uncomfortable." Rin put a hand over her mouth and stared at a woodcut illustration in the book that sat open on her lap. A man and woman lay among tangled clothing and quilts, their limbs equally tangled and their sexual parts highlighted in sharp detail. "He really has to put it... um, his *henoko*... all the way inside her *bobo*?"

"Yeah, that's the general idea." Manji snorted and puffed out a cloud of tobacco smoke. "Though I gotta admit the pictures make a dick look a lot bigger than it is."

"Oh. That's good." She gulped and turned the page. More acrobatic positions, more sweaty, transported faces with open mouths. "Is the woman supposed to be enjoying herself?"

"...Yep."

"It doesn't hurt? She likes it when he's inside there?"

"Maybe she does. Doesn't much matter to a man — it feels the same to him either way."

Rin looked up from where she sat on the ground at the back of the little hut. Manji lounged on the porch above her with his back against the wall, his legs crossed one over the other. He had his head tilted upwards with his pipe in his mouth and an abstracted look on his face. "Just the same? Doesn't a man care if a woman likes it?"

"Depends on the man."

"But... you would care, wouldn't you?"

He snorted again. "Maybe, if I wasn't too drunk. But if I buy a woman, she's there to make me happy, not the other way around. Some guys preen themselves on making whores moan — like working girls are hard to please, or something."

"Didn't you ever pillow with a woman who wasn't a, um, professional?"

"Sure, housemaids and so on. I'd slip 'em some cash, though. It's understood."

"Then... you were never with a woman just because you wanted to please her...?"

"Nope." He snapped it out short and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"Oh."

"Look, I was never married, or even promised. There ain't no point in taking pains with a serving girl, and a samurai woman doesn't do it before her wedding night. You know that." He smirked at her while tamping in a fresh pinch of tobacco. "And even if I'd been hitched, there's not too many guys who put a high priority on making their wives feel good in the *futon*. Get her screwed, get her pregnant, let her raise the brats and continue your family name. That's what marriage is all about, darlin'." He re-lit his pipe with a coal. "The only gals who can demand satisfaction are high-class courtesans and *geisha*, and you've got to be rolling in *kōban* to afford one of those for a lover."

Rin's illusions began to crumple like wetted paper. "But my father and mother... They loved each other so much. Don't you think my father would have...?"

"Hey, I never knew your folks, so that's hard to say. Though I guess..." Manji looked down at her. "They raised *you*, after all. They sure didn't give you much of a clue about the dirty details, but if you believe in true love and all that shi — uh... maybe it's because you saw it right in front of you." He briefly put a hand on her shoulder, got up and walked off a little distance, smoking.

Rin shut the pillow book and wiped her eyes, which were filling with tears. Manji leaned against one of the trees near the cabin with his back to her and finished his pipe.

After a while she approached him again and sat on the ground next to the tree, studying the book again but asking no questions. Manji put his pipe away and watched the sun decline in the sky. "Well... it's about time to try some fishing." He folded his arms and didn't move. Rin looked up.

"So... you don't think I ought to do things like this before I'm married." Rin indicated the book.

"Nope, I don't. That's just my opinion. Like... what your big brother would tell you, if you had a big brother." Manji rubbed his nose. "Can't say it ain't your decision, though — I guess you're old enough to make up your own mind."

"So my big brother would say I ought to think about my... reputation? Because I'm from a samurai family?"

He laughed slightly and shook his head. "If you want to. Not what I'd call the main objection in your case, though."

"Well, if I shouldn't do it with a man unless I'm married, maybe I could marry... you."

Manji suppressed a sigh, scratching his ribcage under his clothing; obviously he had been expecting this. "There's no way on earth you can marry an outlaw, Rin. He ain't allowed to get hitched, and he'd be arrested just for filling out the paperwork for the license. But what I was talkin' about is the basic problem with having a husband in the first place — that is, rug rats."

"Children? Oh..."

"Cramp your style as a *kenshi*, wouldn't they?" He chuckled.

"Yes, I guess that would mean the end of my vendetta." Rin bit her lips and looked away. "OK, I get your point."

"Sorry."

"No, don't be. You're only telling me the truth. I wasn't thinking this through... I guess I am just an idiot."

"Naw, little sister, you're no dummy. You got it quick." Manji tapped her head in a reassuring way. "You just need the facts, and you put two and two together."

"So I'll have to stay a virgin until Anotsu Kagehisa is dead."

He flinched slightly and rubbed his neck to cover it. "Uh... that's one way to put it."

"Yes, but..." Rin flipped to a page in the pillow book that had intrigued yet confused her and handed it up to Manji. "Look at this picture."

"Huh?" He took the book and squinted at it. "What about it?"

"What's she supposed to be doing? She's got the same look on her face as all the

other women in the book, but there's no man with her. What are those things she has all over the floor, and that one in her hand?"

Manji laughed out loud, though with an underlying sense of embarrassment. "Uh... those are... ahem... *harigata*."

"What are they for?"

"Just like you see." He made a vague gesture. "She's more or less doing a demonstration."

"You mean... it's supposed to be a substitute for a man?"

"Yep." He cleared his throat again and chuckled. "Maybe an improvement on a man, all things considered. It never stays out too late drinking or upchucks on the *tatami*!"

"But does that feel good? When it's just a tube made out of tortoise shell?"

"How the hell would I know? At least it's always stiff." Manji raised a brow. "Frankly, this looks like an ad for the whole line of toys that place sells..." He turned the book sideways and whistled. "Now why didn't I think of that?"

"Think of what?" Their eyes met; she knew perfectly well that they were thinking along exactly the same lines. "You mean I should try one of *those* if I'm curious to know what a man feels like?"

"Up to you." He tossed the book back to her. "Far as I know, lots of women use *harigata*."

"That does seem sensible, since it can't make you pregnant." She tilted her head. "But it can't hold you or kiss you, either..."

Manji made a choking sound, bolted to the hut to retrieve his fishing pole and jogged down the hill to his favorite spot by the pond.

PART FOUR

"This feels... weird," muttered Rin.

In a little nook between the arching roots of three huge pines she had found a cozy nest padded with fallen needles. It was quiet and secure, hidden from the eyes of any passersby unless they happened to come quite close. Here she had spread out a quilt. The *harigata* she had bought that morning was a slim, smooth one, especially picked out for her by the solicitous shop proprietor, and she had been assured that it would fit her *bobo* very well.

After she warmed it in her hands and applied a little oil as instructed, it did slide comfortably into her virgin cleft. But the feeling of penetration wasn't quite what she had expected, and certainly not much like the dreams she had been having lately. After all, though they were vague and cloudy on physical details, they invariably included Manji, and Manji was nowhere around at the moment.

Maybe if she thought of Manji? Imagined it was he who touched her? But she had no frame of reference for her fantasies, nothing to relate this odd feeling of fullness to the feeling of being near him. She could think of kissing him, but if this instrument inside her had been his *henoko*, he would have had to be lying right on top of her, and he would have been warm and heavy, and he would have smelled like himself...

Rin's breathing accelerated. Imitating one of the pictures she had studied, she stroked the top of her cleft with one hand and moved the *harigata* in and out with the other. That felt nicer. Still, her sensations showed little sign of building to a peak. Reaching the sexual crisis wasn't always easy for young girls, the shop proprietor had cautioned her. It might take some practice before she could manage. After a few minutes of play Rin slowed her movements and finally withdrew the *harigata* from herself. She cleaned it and stowed it in its nicely carved wooden box. After re-arranging her clothing she sat with her arms folded on her drawn-up knees and pondered.

Maybe sex was just over-rated. Did women actually need it the way men seemed to? Even a man could apparently set it aside for more important things, the way Manji had.

He wasn't really interested in her as a woman; he truly did see himself as her big brother and was determined to keep it that way. He'd sternly warned her not to pursue a man, nor take anything a man did or said under the influence of sex as evidence of real affection, and he ought to know. So perhaps she should forget the whole thing for now.

Yes, that was best. Why go to all this trouble for something that caused a lot of trouble on its own?

Rin nodded, glad to have made a clear and mature decision, and folded up the quilt to take it back to the hut. The *harigata* she tucked deep in the straw mattress.

It stayed hidden for no more than a day and a half. Although by itself it wasn't such an attractive object, her longings hadn't changed with a little bodily stimulation. The idea of Manji doing that thing to her provoked entire complicated trains of thought, and she found herself sneaking peeks at the *shunpon* whenever she could.

Lots of flowing juices, huge veined organs, ample pink *bobos* on every page like so much artfully arranged *sashimi*. She could see by comparison with the illustrations that her body was perfectly well developed, for although her breasts were rather small, she had dark hair on her pubis and under her arms. She'd been menstruating for nearly three years and knew how to deal with it without fuss. That meant she was a woman and certainly marriageable. Possibly if her parents had still been alive, she would already have left their house to enter her husband's.

Of course she couldn't consider Manji as a husband, and not even in fantasy did she dwell on that idea. But she had read romances about beautiful court ladies receiving tokens from handsome lovers and making stealthy rendezvous in moonlit gardens as they composed spontaneous poetry inspired by their high-flown passions. That didn't fit Manji at all — he was the direct opposite of a gallant swain and she never expected to hear him recite poetry as long as he lived, but the remembered descriptions of stolen assignations, rumpled bedclothes and amorously tangled hair struck a new chord within her. Over and over she found herself gazing dreamily into space or at the back of Manji's head, imagining him taking her into his arms again.

Ladies in romances always sat and sighed for the man to make a move, of course. But she might wait a very long time for any move from Manji, so her fantasies gradually mutated from passive dalliances to definite actions. She might surprise him by turning around in his arms when he stood behind her to direct her sword, or by giving him passionate glances and fluttering her eyelashes when

they sat next to each other at meals, or by letting her bed robe slip off one white shoulder when she lay down opposite him...

"Hey!" Manji spat out a bone with a peevish grunt. He took another large bite of broiled mudfish and chewed with his mouth open. Rin startled back to the present moment and attended to her own lunch. "You got a question about something, or what? Don't stare right through me that way — yer givin' me the creeps."

"Oh... sorry." She gave him a mysterious little smile and finished eating. "What are we doing this afternoon?"

"I dunno — it's already too hot for training in this damn sun." He licked his fingers and tossed away the stick that had impaled the unfortunate fish over the coals. "Gonna get hotter, too... some fall season this is. Wonder when the weather's gonna change."

"Then I guess we could do things indoors..." Rin began that sentence with largely innocent intentions, but her words trailed away. That only underscored their suggestiveness; Manji's posture tensed. He got to his feet and stalked off without a word. In a few moments she heard the heavy sounds of an axe chopping wood. Rin decided to go for a walk in the forest by herself.

When she got back, carrying a little bouquet she had picked in the shady dells, Manji was nowhere to be seen. Usually he would have been napping under the shade of the porch at this time of day, but apparently he had gone on an errand. Rin found an old teacup and put her flowers in water. She had no materials for proper *ikebana*, but the little arrangement gave a pretty touch to the raw interior of the hut. They had hardly ever stayed here long enough for her to think about making it into a more comfortable home. Maybe she could put a hanging or two on the walls and mats on the packed dirt floor. Manji shouldn't object to a few simple items of furniture.

While tidying their beds she frowned at the heaps of straw, which were collecting dust and starting to disintegrate into small scratchy bits. Nothing to be done about that right now, but once they had a real floor and *tatami*, she might be able to get some proper *futon*, and then...

Her hand bumped against the hidden box of the *harigata*. Rin drew it out and peeked inside. Maybe that had been the problem — that she had done it out in the forest rather than in this familiar room. She glanced over at Manji's pile of straw and his folded quilt on top, then moved over to it with the *harigata* still in her hand. Yes, his quilt smelled like him: a little sweaty and musky, but not at all

unpleasant. Rin half-unfolded the quilt and lay on it, taking deep breaths. She smiled and untied her *obi*.

This time her arousal was stronger, the images of Manji that she could conjure much more potent. She lay on her back and closed her eyes, whispering to her unseen lover. In her imagination he was silent, lying over her with his hands stroking her body while his *henoko* moved slowly in and out. She encouraged him with delicate sighs and coyly invited him to touch her anywhere he wanted. Her own hands weren't a very good substitute for Manji's hard sword-calloused paws, but when she heard a sound right outside the hut she was deep in a dreamy fantasy of his caresses.

Rin's eyes flew open. Just as she withdrew the *harigata* from herself, the blanket that covered the door of the hut was swept aside. A broad shaft of sunlight fell full on her exposed body and Manji stepped inside with a large bundle of fresh straw. Against the bright outdoor glare he was only a silhouette, but she saw his stance suddenly change and his head snap around. He dropped the straw and jerked upright so that he looked straight at her in the light; the next instant the blanket fell back into place and the hut darkened again.

"Oh, crap. Sorry." Manji spun around and made for the door.

"M-Manji-san... it's all right." She sat up and yanked the quilt over herself. "I was just stopping anyway. Um..."

His shoulders heaved and he rested his hand on the top of the door. "That working OK for you?"

"I don't know. I think I'm just not experienced enough. I really don't have any idea what to do to, um, make myself go all the way there." She saw Manji's jaw muscles clench and bulge from behind, but he said nothing. "I was wondering... if maybe you could help me."

"Help... you?" He slightly turned his head and immediately jerked it back.

"Tell me what a man would do to help a woman enjoy herself. I see some things in that book, but the explanations aren't very specific."

"Uh... that so?"

"Oh, there's pictures where the man has his hand on the woman's *bobo*, and he's doing something with his fingers, and then there was one where he was kissing her there — I was wondering if that was real. You said the pictures sometimes

exaggerate.”

“No... not an exaggeration.” He wiped a hand over his averted face as if it were sweating. “Rin... uh... maybe I’m not the one to ask about this stuff.”

Her heart sank at the tension in his voice — that sounded like irritation so extreme he was actually making an effort to hold it in check. “I... I’m sorry, big brother. But Manji, who else could I ask?”

He gave a strangled chuckle. “Yeah, got a point.”

“Do you not want to talk about it any more? Because if you’d rather — ”

“Little sister — it’s not a question of not wanting to.” He swiveled to look at her. Rin’s eyes dilated; Manji was flushed, his nostrils flaring and his lips compressed. “You talk like the innocent kid you are, you ask me your little questions about men pleasing women, and it’s taking just about everything I got not to come straight over there and show you exactly what you want to know. And then some.”

“...Oh.”

“Now if you don’t mind, I gotta take care of some business. I’ll be back in ten or fifteen.” Manji ducked through the door and vanished.

He wanted to show her things? Rin’s eyes went as wide as they could go. Itching with curiosity, she quickly dressed and followed Manji as quietly as she could, keeping some distance behind. She found him right away; he was just inside the edge of the forest with his back to a tree, his *kōsōde* yanked open below the waist and his hand inside his *fundoshi*. Rin slipped behind another tree and peeked out through the lower branches.

“God... Rin...” she heard him groan. “You’re drivin’ me batshit, girl...” He pulled out his *henoko* and squeezed it, then began to yank and jerk it so roughly she wondered if he would hurt himself. He said nothing more that made sense, but moaned and yelled with his hand ramming up and down his shaft. Was he coming to the crisis so quickly? Rin put her hand to her mouth and watched, mesmerized. He was right, the pictures were exaggerations, but his organ grew bigger and redder until she was sure it would burst.

Suddenly, it seemed to do just that. She saw liquid spurt from the tip as Manji gave his loudest yell yet and collapsed against the tree. But he wasn’t in pain. He braced his legs and stayed upright, panting as if he had been running for many

ri. His face didn't show much pleasure, though his expression looked slightly less tense than it had been. Eye tightly shut, he smiled a little as if chiding himself and muttered something. Rin strained to hear.

"Little sister... your big brother would like to teach you a hell of a lot. And he's probably going to end up doing it no matter how well he knows he shouldn't." He grimaced at his now-limp organ, concealed it in his *fundoshi* again and wiped his hands. "Yep, that's doin' the thinking for both of us right now. Watch out, darlin'; this is the deadliest weapon I've got hiding in here."

He straightened and began to pull his clothing back together, but Rin was already running back to the hut, suddenly breathless with fear.

PART FIVE

For several straight days this time, Rin left the *harigata* secreted in its box and tried even more desperately not to think about anything to do with sex. Perhaps if she didn't betray her own preoccupation with the subject, Manji would be able to forget about it too. And then their life would go back to normal. As if she were still a child instead of a budding woman...

Not a single idea purged from her mind. Images roiled and fermented there, stimulated by Manji's disquieting presence until she had no idea which thoughts were hers and which she had caught from him, like an infection. His mind wasn't difficult to read right now. It seemed as if every time she glanced up he was watching her with a furtive, half-hostile glower. Even so, he rarely met her eyes. He studiously avoided touching her while they continued their weapons training, and every now and then he bit her head off for nothing in particular.

Manji acting snappish wasn't so strange in itself, but usually after one of these episodes when he thought her attention was elsewhere, he would head off to the woods and reappear in a little while looking marginally relieved. That never lasted long.

She volunteered to do their shopping just to find an opportunity to get out of his way for a little while, but Manji angrily refused; she was sure to encounter bandits on the road, he claimed, and bandits liked to maltreat girls before they sold them to whorehouses. She would have to stay near the relative safety of the hut. That warning was enough to keep her from wandering far. Rin had never told Manji the entire story of her mother's rape, but she knew he had some idea what had happened that terrible night two and a half years ago. Whether he meant to play on her personal fears or had simply forgotten the details she didn't know.

Every time he returned from the market, he brought a large *saké* jug and showed signs of having been drinking while he was gone. He would polish off the entire contents of the jug after their evening meal and pass out on the straw. Rin regretted having given him so much money all at once, but she could hardly ask for it back. Usually Manji was a relaxed and jovial drunk, but now he was silent and purposeful as he threw back cup after cup of alcohol. He never got sick, though his eye generally looked bloodshot in the mornings and he often acted as

if his head hurt.

The tense atmosphere and Manji's general foul mood were dreadful to Rin's feelings. Unhappiness drifted around her like a constant fog. Did he blame her for bringing up the question in the first place? Had she only precipitated the crisis by trying to avoid it? Maybe she should just pack up and go, the way she had meant to in the beginning. But how could she leave? Manji had warning now; he might be watching her partly to make sure she didn't bolt. She had a sense that he would pursue her anywhere she went, just as he had followed her to Kaga and doggedly tracked her to the remote village where they had been reunited.

She had no doubt he would find her again.

Maybe not to claim her or take her, but certainly to fulfill what he saw as his obligation — to keep her under his protective wing as long as he thought necessary whether she wanted it or not. She almost hoped that he would make a move to clarify the situation, though she certainly didn't want to be forced into anything. He seemed to have resolved to do nothing at all, though he grasped at any straw that would make the task of restraint a little easier, like incapacitating himself with drink. Neither did she dare to say a word herself; she was sure she would only make it worse somehow. Uncertainty tormented her in every waking hour and disturbed her sleep all night long.

Sleep? It was almost impossible as long as Manji was in the room with her and rasping away like a carpenter's saw. She couldn't very well ask him to sleep outdoors, so she caught naps in the cool forest during the heat of the day when Manji snoozed on the porch. One afternoon Rin watched until he was sound asleep and snoring, then quietly went into the hut and retrieved the carved box from where she had hidden it in her straw pile. She headed off to the woods and her private nook in the pines.

She didn't have much confidence that she would be able to achieve her goal and relieve her tension, but she couldn't keep from trying anyway. Perhaps it would at least make her feel a little better for a while, the way it seemed to do for Manji.

On the quilt beside her she placed her hair rings and then undid her braids. "Manji-san..." she whispered, caressing her own breasts as she partially undressed. "I'm sorry... I didn't mean to make you feel bad." She breathed on the *harigata* to warm it and cupped it in one hand while testing the degree of the moisture between her legs. Soaking wet and a little swollen: she was almost constantly in this state now, as if her body prepared itself for what it craved even while her mind was in turmoil. "Could I... help you feel better?"

She smiled to imagine Manji smiling again. She missed his jokes and his cynical grin, the casual way he would slouch against a tree with his pipe while he watched her practice her sword strokes. He was usually so confident in his own body. He knew it and what it could do, and how it could serve him. Even though he had been invaded by the strange bloodworms that held him together like the strands of a spider's web, they would preserve him as he knew himself now until some possibly great distance in the future. He was never going to have to think about the changes of time, nor wake up one day to realize he was a different person than he had been in his youth. His body would be familiar to him until the day he died...

"Please, Manji. Don't be too rough, OK?" Rin laughed softly and started to insert the *harigata*. "I want to make you happy, but I *am* a virgin, you know. Not a serving girl who has to do things with all the men in the house if they want it. That's not my fault, since I'm young... but I'm growing up." She closed her eyes and sighed. "Oh, big brother... please let me kiss you again, even if it's just for a little while. I don't think a little girl could want you this much..."

Suddenly Rin felt a disturbance in the air, the nearby movements of someone else, and froze in shock. Intruders so near the hut? She had been caught! She drew a deep, terrified breath and screamed. "Manji! Help — bandits! Manjiii!"

A heavy footfall on the pine needles that lined her bower — Manji sat behind her, stretched out his legs to lie down and threw one arm around her waist.

PART SIX

“AHH!” Rin screamed again in even greater terror. She tried to wriggle out of Manji’s embrace and cover her nudity at the same time, but he only pulled her closer. Something about the way he held her seemed meant to be reassuring, as if he wanted to soothe rather than subdue her. She felt his lips on the back of her neck, and he reached over her hip and took hold of the hand that still held the *harigata*.

“Wh-what are you doing?” Rin squeezed her eyes shut and prayed. Not Manji — not her friend and protector — who had warned her never to trust a man where sex was concerned. Not even him!

“I won’t hurt you, little sister.” He spoke into her loosened hair and kissed the back of her neck again, his hot breath burning her skin. “So you want to make me feel good, huh? I’m not waiting for any more invitations.”

“You... please... you aren’t going to...?” Rin twisted her head around to look at him.

“You mean, am I gonna act like a bandit?” He got up on one elbow and quirked a brow at her. “Sorry; guess I kinda surprised you.”

“Yeah...” She gave a shaky laugh. “I — I didn’t expect — ”

“No? God, girl, when I heard you talking that way...” Manji took a deep breath through his mouth. He curled his warm fingers around her wrist, making the *harigata* twitch inside her. To her shock, she realized Manji’s belt was loose and his clothing slipping open. “Didn’t you figure I was behind that tree?”

“No!” Rin’s mouth dropped open.

“Oh.” Manji’s avid expression fell slightly, but he didn’t withdraw from her. His gaze fell to her exposed breasts and his own hand holding hers. Entwined together, their fingers almost touched her maidenhair. Manji’s ribcage expanded against her back; she felt a tremor in his breathing. He half sat up and bent forward.

“Err...” Rin blinked up at him with huge eyes as his face came closer to hers and his weight on her torso pressed her into the bed of pine needles. “Th-then... what are you...?”

Manji’s nose twitched. Maybe her frightened reaction had deflected the full force of his intentions, but he seemed to know neither what he meant to do, nor how to stop himself from doing it. He clenched his jaw, met her gaze for a moment, then darted his head down and abruptly kissed her on the mouth.

Rin arched her neck and made a muffled sound of surprise. Days of frustration seemed to fuel that kiss, as if Manji expected that she would shove him away in another moment and he had to grasp what little he could before she escaped him. Rin’s own pent-up arousal rose to a boil. Her *yōjimbō* wanted her beyond all doubt; his body felt hot and tense in contact with hers. Her limbs seemed lax and heavy by contrast, as if she moved in a dream. She moaned in her throat and let her lips open for him; Manji hesitated for an instant, then plunged his tongue deep into her mouth.

For a minute or two, all Rin could hear over the thump of her heart and Manji’s harsh breathing was the sharp, liquid sounds of his thirsty kisses, like drops of water shattering on stone. Though her fear and resistance had almost dissolved, she still felt disoriented. What on earth could happen now?

When Manji raised his head and opened his eye, he seemed to have conceived some fresh idea. His face flushed, he slid his fingers along Rin’s hand until he could take hold of the *harigata*.

“Here, let me take over with that.” He smiled at her. “You just lie back and enjoy.”

Trembling, Rin obeyed and let go. Manji grasped the *harigata*, gradually pushed it in and made a few shallow thrusts. Rin’s stomach quaked, her breathing coming in broken little sobs. This was a ferociously different experience from doing it herself — Manji was virtually possessing her body, if only by proxy, and her responses frightened her. But his movements were slow and smooth with his lips nuzzling her ear, and in a few moments she calmed down. Almost involuntarily her hips began to sway in rhythm.

“Yeah... there we go...” Manji whispered in her ear, his voice husky. “Like it?”

“Ohh...”

“Or... should I try something else?” He licked her ear. “Plenty of options...”

“Ohh... I mean... oh, Manji-san... could you, um, keep doing that...?”

“Sure thing.” He pushed the *harigata* slightly inside her, then suddenly drove it deeper until she gasped. His mouth came down on hers again for a moment and he threw one leg between her thighs. “Yeah. Make some noise for me...”

He thrust hard and fast, kissing her nape. She had never tried such vigorous stimulation before, and the effect made her cry out in astonished pleasure. But the closeness of Manji’s body, his smell and warmth... those were the real sources of her excitement. Rin arched her head against his shoulder, rubbing her skull back and forth over the hard prominence of his collarbone. Her vision whirled; she bucked her pelvis to meet his moving hand and the penetrating instrument. Her bottom pressed into Manji’s groin and he gave an answering rock of the hips. Against her flesh she felt something hard, cushioned by a few layers of cloth between them.

Manji shifted again, rolled her partly on top of him and placed two fingers in her cleft, still thrusting with the other hand. “You know what gets you there yet? Tell me if there’s something you want.”

“N... no... I don’t know.”

“OK, we’ll figure it out. Can’t neglect that part of your education, little sister.”

Manji stroked her, his calloused fingers rubbing the most sensitive parts of her *bobo*. Rin whimpered, thrashing in his arms and arching her back. Then suddenly he dumped her off, pulled out the *harigata* and tossed it aside. She tried to protest, but he knelt between her thighs and yanked his *kōsōde* off his shoulders to bare his torso. Then he pushed her knees up, lay down and put his face in her groin.

When his hot tongue surged along her cleft, Rin jerked, screamed and threw her head back. “Manji! What are you — ?”

He engulfed her again with even greater appetite, sucking and swallowing and growling against her tender, swollen parts. His fingers dug into her buttocks and he clamped her pelvis to his mouth while she rolled and bucked, trying to get away from the overwhelming sensations. Then his stabbing tongue softened and he lapped more gently, with a sliding, liquid warmth. Rin relaxed in relief and he tickled the firm little bean at the top of her cleft with the tip of his tongue.

The noises she was making surprised her. Strange low-pitched moans and

grunts, coupled with high squeals through her nose. She sounded like some sort of animal, and maybe that was what she was at the moment. A feeling, desiring young female animal, craving and shying away at the same time, locked in a kind of combat with the importunate, hungry male. Rin's feet kicked at Manji's naked shoulders and back, hard blows as if she meant it. Ignoring the battering she was giving him, he settled down to a strong, rolling rhythm of lips and tongue. He rocked her pelvis up and back and wedged his hands under her ribcage to keep her in position.

A peculiar feeling crept over her: oddly distant, as if she were hovering above her own body and watching Manji devour her like a starving man who had stolen a feast. She heard herself groaning, the world tumbled into chaos, and she came back to consciousness with her hands twisted in Manji's rough hair and every muscle jerking and relaxing.

He raised his head and grinned at her, not without a definite air of self-satisfaction. "Yeah? How'd you like it?"

"W-w-was that it?"

"Sure sounded like it to me." He kissed the inside of her thigh. "First time? I'm honored."

"Oh... that was... just..." She smiled dazedly at him. "What were you doing?"

"Going down on you." He took a deep sniff of her soaking hair. "Damn, your little cunt's even sweeter than I thought it would be..."

Rin giggled and tried to clamp her legs together, but Manji held them open and kissed her *bobo* again. "Sweet? Like candy?"

"Mmm... not exactly." His voice was muffled. "I ain't into candy myself..."

"But you like, uh, this?"

He greedily slurped the length of her cleft, making her jerk and gasp. "Oh! Manji, I'm still all tingly..."

"Just the way I want it," was all he said.

PART SEVEN

"Oh... oh... Manji, stop! Please — stop now!" Rin's body felt so limp from what seemed like hours of intense stimulation that she could barely speak. "I can't... stand it any more..."

"OK, I'll let you take a little break." Manji gave her a crooked smile over her bare stomach. His whole lower face looked damp. "But I'm not letting you off the hook yet." He wiped his mouth and licked his fingers. "Don't get too comfortable."

Rin closed her eyes and panted for several moments. Gradually the burning sensation in her groin subsided, but Manji remained where he was, his shoulders wedging her legs apart and his bristly chin resting on her hipbone. He began to kiss her stomach and she wriggled.

"Manji-san... I thought you didn't want... to ask me to pillow with you. Why did you follow me out here and...?"

"Cause of what I saw by accident the other day, of course."

"The *harigata*?" She blushed and glanced over to where it lay on the ground, almost forgotten.

"Nope, not at all. It was you."

"Me?"

Manji looked up with a dark glint in his eye. "Your pretty cunt, if you want the truth."

"Just because you saw me sort of naked?"

"Yeah, I saw you've got plenty of hair down here." He blew hard, ruffling the black triangle.

Rin yelped and braced her hands against his forehead. "Why would *that* matter?"

"I guess I was assuming you were all bare like a little girl. I thought you still *were* a little girl, so it wasn't too hard to keep a cork in it. And then it turned out you weren't so little after all. Once I knew that..." He sighed irritably and rose up over her on hands and knees. "Guess I've been a grouch."

"Yes, you have! But I didn't mean to make you feel bad..." She spread her hands over his chest and felt his weight bear down; Manji lowered himself to rest on his elbows, his still-clothed hips pressing between her legs.

"Aw, I wasn't mad at you. Just me arguing with my own balls." He kissed her under the jaw and sniffed behind her ear. "Damn, you smell good..."

Rin squirmed from the tickling sensation and hunched her shoulders. "So who won the argument?"

Manji gave a low, meaning laugh in her ear. "Both, I think."

"What?"

He licked her earlobe and his left hand ventured downwards to clasp her bare knee. "Hey, you wanted to know the facts of life, so it's lesson time." Insinuating his hips from side to side and fully parting her thighs, he moved his pelvis against hers. "You're warmed up now... so let me get settled, and you can make up for all the aggravation." His right hand went to the knot at the small of his back; his weight came down on her lower body and she felt a firm ridge dig into her abdomen.

"Oh? What...?" Rin's stomach jumped and her muscles tightened, her breathing rapid and nervous. She pushed against Manji's shoulders with fluttering hands, but he untied his *obi* and yanked the front of his *kōsōde* from between their bodies so that his groin was covered only by his brief loincloth. Then he opened his lips against her throat and scooped both hands under her bottom to raise her hips.

"Oh, yeah..." he murmured under her chin. "Yeah, I've been waiting for this...."

He was about to do something? In the next moment she realized what it was.

"Manji-san..." Rin's voice was a thin, shaky whisper. "Please get off me, OK?"

Manji's movements stilled and his body went taut. "What?"

"P-please... don't...."

Frustration mixed with self-reproach in his expression; he gritted his teeth, rolled to the side and sat up. "Shit." He clenched a fist against his forehead. "Yeah, you're still a virgin."

"You... you already warned me about babies and stuff..."

"Guess I did, didn't I?" Manji let out a deep hiss. "Thanks for the reminder!" He didn't sound particularly grateful.

"Oh, but I did like... what you were doing before. I don't mean I don't want you to kiss me, and things." She patted his knee. "That was really nice."

"Aw, *shit*."

"What's wrong?"

He stiffened his spine and smacked his hands on his thighs. "Oh, she likes to *snuggle*, does she? Kissing and things? I ain't a moony kid, Rin; I'm a man. All that crap is for getting a woman where I want her — and dammit, I want you!"

Rin hastily wrapped her clothing around herself and scooted a little distance away. "But... but... you can't..."

"Don't you think I know that? A lot better than you do, little sister." Manji glared at her while jamming his arms back into his sleeves. "But the cat's out of the bag, and even though I'm the only one I can blame for that, you started it, goddammit. So now you tell me: what the hell am I supposed to do?"

PART EIGHT

"Manji, I..." Rin began to cry.

Manji growled and surged to his feet. "OK, I take it back. You ARE a little girl. Grow up, kid — when a woman can stir the shit that well, she'd better realize it's gonna make a stink!"

"But I... but I..." She couldn't speak for sobbing. Manji leaned against a pine and groaned, then turned his back on her in obvious despair.

A long, miserable silence while Manji muttered and Rin's wet face alternately flushed and paled. If he hadn't been angry with her before, he certainly was now. But that wasn't fair. She clamped her lips together and dried her eyes. What *could* they do? He knew much more about these things than she did, and he saw only obstacles. How could she find the answer to such a complicated question from her position of ignorance?

Maybe that was the key...

"M-Manji-san, you're my *sensei*. Couldn't you think of it that way? As education?"

"Hahn?" he barked.

"Well, you've been teaching me about swordwork, and I've learned a lot even if I don't know a fraction of the things you do. You know...? We started at the beginning."

Manji looked over his shoulder at her, but said nothing.

She twisted her hands together. "You told me we weren't going to move really fast because nobody could learn to be a master in a day, and so we've been taking it step by step and only using wooden swords and sheathed weapons, and not trying anything too complicated yet. What if you did something like that... for these things too?"

He lifted a brow.

"Big brother... I guess you might be feeling... impatient, but wouldn't that help at all? Isn't that sort of how you were thinking of it anyway? You already got me a book so I'd have some information, and you did talk about giving me lessons and showing me things..."

"Yeah... like a figure of speech." Manji shook his head. "I dunno, Rin — there's a big difference between drilling you on weapons technique so you can defend yourself, and teaching you how to suck my — " He cleared his throat and shrugged. "Look, forget it. The whole thing, I mean. I'm... sorry."

"What? Forget about it?"

"Like I said, feeling horny won't exactly kill me, even if it's not too pleasant sitting on my hands." He looked at the ground and folded his arms. "There's other ways to deal with it than turning my little sister into my... housemaid."

"But if you did teach me, then when I knew more about it, maybe then we could, um... do some more things than just kissing, and you'd be happy."

He closed his eye and sighed. "Aw, kid... well, thanks for making the effort. You haven't got a friggin' clue, but nice try."

"Why wouldn't that help?"

"I promised I wouldn't hurt you. So to be honest, I got no choice but to keep my sword in the scabbard." Slowly Manji pulled his clothes back together and tied his *obi*, then sifted a hand through his hair and removed a few pine needles.

Rin blinked. "You mean you think your *henoko* would hurt me? But it's not *that* big!"

"Ouch." Manji made a face. "Hey, wait a minute... how the hell would you even know what size — "

"Uh... Manji-san, I really do want to learn... if you want to help me. Is it really a choice between nothing at all and everything?"

"Maybe it's not." Manji stuck his tongue in his cheek and seemed to consider the question. "You really think I'm the guy to teach you this?"

"Who else could I learn it from?" She gave him a tentative smile.

"I guess you're right." Suddenly he grinned satirically. "Hey, this could be important stuff for you to know. Men are gonna be paying plenty of attention to you in a little while, and most of 'em are raunchy scumbags at best. A good grounding in the basics ain't something to scoff at. Might even save your life someday."

Rin laughed in relief at his mock-sententious tone. "Save my *life*?"

"Yeah, how's that for self-justification?" Manji rolled his eye, but a load seemed to have lifted from his mind, for his posture relaxed. "Ahh, what a gigantic pain in the ass this is going to be. Gonna have to draw some strict limits and stick to 'em. But hey, I guess there'll be a few compensations. At least I can get my paws all over your sweet little bod." He chuckled with a salacious edge and sat down next to her, then ran his hand under the hem of her *furisōde*. He gave her thigh a quick playful squeeze with a grip just a little too hard.

Rin tried not to yelp and gave him a smile. "OK. That sounds fine."

"Yeah? Mostly sounds like bullshit to me... but we're all hypocrites in this freakin' world." He reached upward and parted her loose robe over her stomach. "What's the scar, by the way? That looks fresh."

"It is. I had to let a woman cut me to get through the *sekisho*."

"Hah?"

She told him the whole story in brief: how she had impersonated a young wife who had once undergone a difficult birth, and how the *o-bugyo* at the checkpoint had nearly ferreted out the imposture until she displayed the faked surgery scar.

"Man, this kid had twins at fourteen? Well, there's a caution for you." He traced the pink line of the scar. "That should fade pretty soon, at least. You had to strip in front of three guys? Sheee-it."

"It was kind of scary, yes... but I knew I had to carry it through to the end or lose the whole game. I'm still a little amazed at how bold I could be in a situation like that..."

He looked at her for a minute, a half-smile playing on his lips. "I'm not. At least, not after what you said to me last week."

Rin giggled and bit her fingernail. "Maybe you aren't."

“‘Kiss me, Manji’, she says, right out of the blue. Nothing’s ever gonna surprise me again.”

“Really?”

“OK, surprise me.” He turned up his palms with an inviting air. “Knock my socks off.”

“Well... you’ve seen my, um, woman’s parts without anything covering them. Can I see what you look like too?”

Manji stared at her. “What?”

“I want to see you. A real man, not just those pictures.” She let her gaze drop to the area of interest. He shifted uneasily and crossed his legs.

“Well... uh... I told you they exaggerate. You might be disappointed.”

“I don’t think so. After all... it’s you.” She tilted her head and smiled at him.

Manji’s throat betrayed a gulp. “All right. Educational, that’s it.” Reluctantly, he extended his legs and began to pull his *kōsōde* open below the waist.

“Did I surprise you?”

“Uh... yeah, guess you did.” With an embarrassed air, he loosened his *fundoshi*, clasped his organ with a smoothing-back motion and took away his concealing hand. “Here I am, in all my glory.”

Rin’s eyes went wide. This was a much better view than what she had glimpsed from behind a tree. Surrounded by his black groin hair, Manji’s *henoko* looked something like a sword hilt buried in his body. Copper-brown, capped with a swelling head and wrapped by indigo veins like silk cords, it filled and rose as she watched. In a few moments it stood up at a high curving angle above the soft sack that nestled between his muscular thighs. “Can I... can I touch it?”

“Uh... yeah, I guess. Help yourself.” Manji made a slight sound and leaned back on his hands. “Don’t squeeze my balls too hard, but my cock likes that just fine.” When her fingers brushed him, he let out a long breath he had been holding.

“Does that feel good?”

“...Uh-huh.”

"What did you do?" She curiously stroked the silky folds of skin right behind the head. "None of the pictures showed that hood thing."

"That's the foreskin. You don't want to leave that hanging down or you look like a dog."

She giggled and dipped her chin. "You don't look anything like a dog!"

"Of course I don't. Some guys tie it back with a thread, but you can just push it up like a sleeve." Manji shifted and made another low sound.

"What do you like to call it? Your man's part, I mean?"

"Uh... I just call it my cock, but I guess that's a little raw... like saying 'cunt'." He fingered a lock of her hair as she bent over him. "You mind me using words like that?"

"No, not really. I want to know how men talk about things." Rin felt a pleasant stirring in her belly and a burgeoning thrill in the air between them. Manji stroked her cheek and touched her lips. She gave a little warm shiver and an experimental grip to his hard organ. "Is it, um, standing up because of me?"

He cracked a smile and eased himself down to lie propped on his elbows. "Yep."

"Do you... want to do something? I mean, so you can go there too? I think I see why people like to feel that way."

Manji's face twitched. "Hell, yes, I want to do something. But I — OK, just keep that there." His hand closed over hers and pressed it around his *henoko*. "That'll do..." His hips gave a heave.

"Just my hand? Isn't there anything else?"

Manji showed his teeth with his eye shut. "Not right now, there isn't. So don't go making suggestions." He opened his eye. "Well... I guess there's you using your mouth on me... but that's kinda advanced. Here, undress a little more and gimme both your hands." Rin pushed her *furisōde* off her shoulders and offered her hands to Manji. He curled them together and inserted himself in the space between her palms. "Just hold on. I'll do the moving."

He nearly sprained her wrists with the violence of his thrusting, but Rin tenaciously held on and watched his face when she could, quivering at the

proximity of the tempest. So this was what he had meant about hurting her. No wonder he had had second thoughts — she was sure her tender parts would have been battered and torn by the time he was finished. Manji grabbed her by the hair and yanked her head down to kiss her; she complied and opened her lips to his tongue. His *henoko* felt like a living weapon in her grasp, furiously hard and throbbing.

“Aw... man...” He seized one of her breasts and dug his fingers into the soft flesh. Rin suppressed a gasp of pain and pressed her face against his pulsing throat. “I’m... going. Hang on...!”

Manji’s whole body sprang and released like a bow; he arched his back and shouted. Hot fluid landed on the backs of her hands. He collapsed flat and groaned. Rin let go of his rapidly softening organ and lay on his chest, panting as hard as he. His ribcage expanded as he gulped air and gradually quieted. A hand stroked her hair.

“Good girl. Stuck it out all the way.” He gave one last long pant and breathed normally. “Thought I might scare you a little.”

If she hadn’t already seen him do this to himself, she might well have been too frightened to continue. “No... I wasn’t scared. But are you always that, um, forceful?”

“Well... maybe I am. Guess I never had to worry about that before... heh.” Manji rolled her over to lie beside him and settled her head on his shoulder. “But don’t you worry about it either. I promised not to hurt you, and I won’t.” His skin was sweaty, his heart still going fast, and he kissed her forehead.

“Is that what you meant by drawing limits?”

He nodded slowly. “As long as I don’t get you knocked up, no harm done. Anything we do has to be only for your benefit — it sure isn’t for my personal amusement. So I’m not going to take your virginity no matter what. There are lots of other ways to get my rocks off.”

“Am I... still a virgin? After doing all those things with you?”

“Yeah, I’d say so.” He tucked his chin into his chest to look at her. “In the important respect, which is all that counts.”

Rin tried to wipe the thick clots of Manji’s seed from her hands and discovered that they were very sticky. “Counts for what, *sensei*?” Perhaps he only meant the

possibility of pregnancy, but that wasn't exactly how it sounded. She managed to clean up by scrubbing with dry pine needles.

He let out an impatient grunt. "Look, if my cock doesn't go into your cunt, then you're a virgin. You want some dinner?"

"Uh-huh... I kind of worked up an appetite." She sighed and snuggled closer.

"Oh, Manji... I feel so — "

"Hey, watch it." Manji shrugged her off and sat up. "Don't get all starry-eyed on me."

"What? Oh..." Rin flushed and covered her mouth.

"That's right." He jabbed a finger at her. "We ain't married now, or anything like that. So no teenage mushpot crap."

Rin swallowed hard, then nodded and got up. "Yes, *sensei*. Thank you for a most informative lesson." She gave him a formal bow, just a little too low, and glanced up with what she hoped was a jaunty, teasing air.

Manji gave her a tight smile and nodded in return. "That's the ticket. So... frogs or roasted corn?"

PART NINE

What had Hyakurin once told her — that she would suffer for years if she fell for a guy like Manji? Rin sat under the overhang of the porch to escape a drizzle of rain and wondered for the hundredth time exactly what that had been supposed to mean. The Mugai-ryū assassin had only met Manji that day, but had immediately stuck him into a category of men she didn't care for. Samurai? Swordsmen in general? Well, she must have known more than a little about what Shira was like...

And Manji was nothing like Shira, if arguably only as a matter of degree. Just for example, he didn't hurt women for fun. Rin grimaced and shuddered simultaneously and looked for a knife. She whittled wood chips into a little pile for tinder, then stacked split sticks in the *hibachi*. Striking sparks with Manji's flint and steel, she started the fire and used the old bamboo-leaf fan to shield the small flames from the gusting wind. Venturing slowly around the edges of the chips, they seemed reluctant to catch hold. Perhaps the wood was a little damp. She coughed as the smoke swirled into her eyes and turned her face away. Through the dispersing rain clouds she could see the angle of the declining sun. Manji had gone on his errand to the market quite some time ago, but he'd surely be back before dark. Perhaps he had taken shelter from the rain.

The weather seemed to be changing at last; this had been a chilly shower rather than a summer steambath. They might have to burn a brazier in the hut to stay warm when winter arrived... or sleep like farmer's families did, all in the same *futon*.

The thought of sleeping in Manji's arms brought a smile to her face, but it quickly faded. He probably wouldn't want to do that. That would be too much like lovers, and he'd made it very plain that they weren't going to be lovers. As a matter of fact, before he had left he had practically given her the cold shoulder. Not in quite the same way he had done while struggling against the urge to touch her, but with a terse formality she had hardly ever seen from him.

The foundation of their life together was different now, she understood, as if an earthquake had shifted the rocks beneath their feet and passed on. Superficially nothing had actually changed — they still were teacher and pupil, bodyguard

and defended, brother and sister in some sense. And grown man and budding woman, just as they had been when they had first met. Somehow she had always known the possibility was there, and so had Manji; he had both rejected and played with the idea from the beginning, never letting it go even while he scoffed at her for taking any such suggestion seriously.

Probably he was still wrestling with those possibilities now, though he had an available safeguard in the idea of teaching her. Rin had longed very much to accompany him to the market, clasp his arm and talk with him on the way. She sensed that they needed to become re-acquainted, or at least begin to feel their way around the newly drawn margins of their relationship. But put off by his manner and realizing he wanted some time by himself, she hadn't suggested it. She could only hope that he wouldn't change his mind somewhere on the road.

But whether or not he returned with his purposes settled, so much for all her rosy imaginings. She sighed and put a few larger pieces of wood on the fire as the kindling caught. Romance? That might happen sometime in the future, in different circumstances and with a different man. With her gruff *yōjimbō*, all such ideas were cleanly lopped off as if with one of his sharpest blades. Rin's mind still held a few remnants of the fantasies she had cherished, like flowers with broken stems kept in water, but she knew they would soon wither and be forgotten, a passing dream.

She did love Manji. If he had really been her elder brother, she could not have been more devoted to him; most brothers would never have the opportunity to show their sisters the kind of concern he had demonstrated for her.

He wasn't her brother, though. He was a man who could arouse all her womanly passions no matter how little he flattered her girlish longings. That was the seed of their predicament: that she could show him her love in any of a number of ways, and that one of them in particular had the potential to blot out all other loves, whether they wanted it to or not.

So what did he want from her?

Certainly Manji cared about her in a protective light; he had gone through hell for her sake, or for the painful memory of his real sister. There was an element of atonement in the blood he had shed for her safety, something that might have nothing to do with her personally. No wonder he didn't want to think of using her body for his pleasure. In looking at her as an object of desire, he might almost have been violating a vow, or endangering a cherished sense of higher purpose. Wasn't that why the old nun had infested him with the *kessen-chu* in the first place? So he could find that purpose and pay with undying labor for the many

lives that weighed on his soul?

Rin swallowed hard and warmed her hands at the now-blazing fire. She had a dim and apprehensive consciousness of encirclement by far greater forces than the fickle attractions of men and women. One small jolt, and the delicate balance of the universe threatened to topple...

"Hey." Manji dropped something to the ground with a thud. Rin looked up and saw that it was an entire small straw-wrapped keg of *saké*. On top of it he tossed a net bag full of corncobs in the husk. "Would you get that cooked? I'm hungry." He turned his back and disappeared into the hut.

PART TEN

With chilled and clumsy fingers, Rin husked the corn and prepared a dinner for which she had little appetite. Manji came out of the hut when she called and brought a pitcher with him, which he filled from the cask. He put a cup on the porch between them and she poured for politeness' sake, her heart low. She sat beside the fire with him until after dark, watching him pound down the whole pitcherful cup by cup and fill it again, silent and relentless as had become his habit. Conversation was sparse and concerned only with the business of the meal.

Hardly knowing what to make of this, she went into the hut early, got ready for bed and sat up waiting for him to come in. The night grew cold and still he didn't appear. The lantern burned steadily, illuminating the empty pile of straw opposite her. Rin listened for footsteps and chewed her kiss-bruised lips. Finally she snuffed the light and lay down.

When Manji eventually pushed the blanket aside, he was reeling drunk and guzzling one last cupful; he dropped an object on the floor that rattled like the empty pitcher and sat down hard on his pile of straw, sloshing *saké* over the front of his clothes.

Should she ignore him and just go to sleep? That wasn't possible; her body quivered with silent sobs as she huddled under her quilt.

"Awww... shit," she heard Manji say in a thick, slurred voice. He jostled the lantern and nearly knocked it over. "Whoops."

"M-Manji-san?"

"Hahn? Did I wake ya up?"

"What's wrong?" Tears ran down her face, but she kept her voice reasonably steady. "Why are you drunk again?"

He laughed sloppily in the dark. "Washin' my cares away." He drained the cup and threw it over his shoulder.

“Why?”

“Aw, crap. Can’t forget it anyway...” He fell back on the straw with his arms flung out and took a few deep breaths. “Rin... I shouldn’t’a done what I did today. It was crazy. I was just feelin’ too goddamn horny to live.”

“You don’t think you should be my *sensei* for that, you mean?”

“Come on, that was bullshit. I just wanted to fuck you... well, at least I didn’t fuck you.” He laughed again. “Maybe I’m only halfway crazy yet.”

“Why couldn’t we talk about it, then?”

“‘Cause that’d sound like... crap. I’m yer bodyguard. What the hell am I doing?” He sat up with a rustle of straw. “I got smashed so I wouldn’t do it again. Because usually a man can’t get it up if he’s drunk enough. I dunno if that works any more. Maybe it’s the freakin’ worms drinking the stuff for me...”

“Oh.”

“You got the wrong idea, anyway. Girls always do — it’s never just screwing. Gotta be a freakin’ love affair. Poetry and shit, and lots of crying. Makes me wanna hurl.” He belched; Rin detected an aroma of stale *saké*. “That’s why we ain’t doing it again.”

“But I understand that. I want to learn — I... I won’t get the wrong idea.”

“Whatcha cryin’ for, then?”

“Because I thought you were angry with me.”

“With *you*? Awww, I’m the one who needs a good ass-kicking. Ain’t blaming you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.” He made a wide gesture. “C’mon over here.”

She shuffled over on her knees and put her arms around him. Manji embraced her and patted the top of her head. “See? I’m not mad.” She shivered, partly from emotion and partly because the night air struck through her thin *yūkata*. “Hey, you cold?”

"A... a little." He smelled slightly peculiar; the odor of liquor was powerful and familiar, but she detected a faint undertone of something else that she couldn't quite place.

"Here, climb in and get warm." Manji held up a corner of his quilt. "No reason to waste it, huh? I'll light the lantern — that'll warm the place up again." Rin submitted to being tucked into Manji's bed, and lay down with her mind slightly more at peace. He stumbled outside to fetch a coal and rekindled the wick with exaggerated care. "No use starting a fire in here, hey? We'd have to sleep in the woods, and it's getting chilly out." Without undressing, he slid under the quilt with her.

Rin startled, but there was plenty of room for both of them and he had left a judicious space between their bodies. Then Manji shifted; his arm ventured over her and drew her closer.

"Any warmer now?"

"Uh... yeah." She stared at the opposite wall, her heart racing.

"So'm I." He nuzzled her hair and scooted his hips near to hers. "Heh..."

"M-Manji-san... what's that smell on you? It's like incense or..." Rin stopped short. It was a woman's gardenia-scented hair oil. "Oh, my God."

"Huh? Aw... crap."

She twisted around and glared at Manji; he looked shamefaced, but seemed to be searching for words. "How *could* you?" She struggled out of his arms and rolled from under the quilt. "How disgusting could you be? After everything we did — and you used MY money!"

"I thought maybe I could get it outta my system." He sighed and raised the quilt again in invitation. "Look, it was only one little whore, OK? I took a bath and everything. Come back to bed."

"I don't even want to touch you! You stink!"

"Aw, the smell's gotta be in my clothes." Manji sat up and stripped to his *fundoshi*, his fingers fumbling with the knots, and threw everything aside. "There, I don't stink now." He lay down and beckoned to her. "Come on, little sister. I just wanna keep ya warm."

"Did you kiss her on her *bobo* too?" Rin folded her arms and stuck out her lower lip.

"Nope. You gotta pay extra for that kinda stuff."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry. I apoler — apol — sorry. Won't do it again. I promise." Manji beckoned to her again. "C'mon, please."

Rin hesitated, but she was already shivering again, and Manji looked both contrite and unusually affectionate as well as unreservedly drunk. So she slipped back under the quilt and let him pull it around her. Again he embraced her after a moment and put his nose to the junction of her neck and shoulder.

"Mmm..." He inhaled. "Sure is nice havin' a woman to hold in bed...even if she is my little sister."

An odd twinge went through her; that was said almost as an endearment. "Well, I guess I don't mind being held by my... big brother."

He let out a low, purring growl and gave a lick to the skin he was sniffing. "You got it."

"Manji-san, you're really drunk."

"You betcha."

"Is that why you're talking to me this way and being nice? Just because of the *saké*?"

He said nothing, but sniffed her again.

"Because if it's only because you're drunk... then I don't want you to talk that way." Rin crossed her arms over her breasts and moved her face away from Manji's. "I wish you'd been willing to pay some attention to me when you could still think straight. Because I don't know what to think right now. Or what you think."

"What I think?"

"Am I just a kid you need to take care of so you can feel like you're doing something decent? Or do you really want me to be around you? I don't mean in a

brotherly sort of way... though I guess you do have those sorts of feelings too and it's not impossible it could be both kinds together, especially since I'm not really your sister. And if you do like me as a woman... which, um, I guess probably has to be true because of everything we did today, not to mention various stuff before that, is it because you like *me*, or only because I'm a woman and you like women?"

"...Yeah, I like women." He sounded vague and puzzled, obviously having lost track of the question. "Whatcha makin' it so complicated for?"

Rin sighed; she hadn't expected much from him in this state, if he even knew the answer. Probably by morning he would have forgotten this whole conversation. "Oh, Manji..."

"Aw, don't feel bad." He wrapped his arms around her and rocked her back and forth. "Shh, settle down. Go to sleep. No more cryin'."

The blurry tenderness in his voice brought tears to her eyes. Rin swallowed against a lump in her throat and tried to suppress a sob.

"Hey, little sister, yer big brother's here. Can he do anything to make ya feel better?" He stroked the hair from her face and kissed her temple. He had had a shave as well as a bath, she noted, and his jaw felt uncharacteristically smooth.

"Manji-san... do you think I'm pretty?"

Manji chortled. "What do you think?"

"You didn't used to think so."

"That was months ago." He tucked her bottom more deeply into the niche of his hips. "Now you're kinda... different."

"Really?" She whispered it, rolling her pelvis against his to detect the inexorable swell of his *henoko*. It felt so warm, even through her clothing...

"Sure. You grew up some, I guess... and you've been through a lot. Kind of gives you more of a woman's air." His voice was going husky. "Damn... you're turning me on."

"Sorry."

"Naw, don't be." Manji rolled her towards him and placed her on her back.

“Want to do something? Might help you sleep...” His head descended. Lips caressing the pit of her throat, hand moving up her thigh: Rin felt another twinge, far stronger.

“Manji-san...?” This seemed somehow different from their unsettling encounter in the woods. His body was relaxed, his expression warm and sensual. Maybe it was the *saké*... but she hadn’t drunk a thing herself, and warmth surged through her as well.

Did it matter if a dream lasted only a little while?

“...Why do you want me, big brother?”

He got up on his elbows and grinned down at her. “Well, I could tell ya a simple reason.”

“A simple reason?” Rin glimpsed Manji’s bare chest and torso, felt his warm vital skin on hers. He began to kiss her neck again. Her chin slowly fell back, her eyelids became heavy.

“‘Cause your pretty cunt feels so soft and slick... and tastes so good. I could lick you all night long, little sister.”

Hot little shivers went through her at his words. He did mean something different from what they had already done: in a way more intimate. What exactly he intended still eluded her, but this warm bed had a far sweeter fragrance than a pile of pine needles. Manji rubbed his cheek against hers and kissed her on the lips; she responded with passion, though he tasted strongly of alcohol. She felt open, welcoming, melting.

Let him, her body urged. Anything he asks for... and he’ll like it so much better than with that other girl, won’t he? He won’t need a substitute, because he’ll be having exactly what he wanted all along...

Manji’s hand slid through the overlap of her *yūkata* and cupped one small breast. “We kinda skipped the preliminaries this afternoon. Let me show you how I’d start out, if I was doing it properly.”

“Yes, big brother.” She clasped her hands around his neck and arched her body for him. “Show your little sister...”

END OF VOLUME ONE
CONTINUED IN VOLUME TWO...

GLOSSARY

Anotsu Kagehisa

The young and dynamic head of the *Ittō-ryū*. Instigator of the murder of Rin's parents, and the focus of her revenge quest.

bakūfū

"Tent government"; the usual term for the shogun's military government, going back to medieval times. "Shogunate" is an English coinage that refers to the same thing.

bobo

A woman's vagina and vulval area.

fundoshi

Loincloth worn by men. There are several different styles, from ample flaps that provide a lot of coverage to the equivalent of skimpy thong underwear.

furisōde

"Swinging sleeves"; a young unmarried woman's garment, usually brightly colored and decorated with pretty florals.

geta

Wood-soled sandals with blocks on the bottom to raise the wearer up out of the mud.

harigata

A dildo or other sex toy. Usually made of tortoiseshell, horn, leather or some other moldable material. They came in a great number of varieties in the Edo period, and illustrations of them can be found in erotic *shunga* prints. Their use was not morally condemned, since most people considered *harigata* a practical way for a woman to gain physical relief without violating her chastity.

henoko

Penis.

hibachi

Small grill for cooking.

Hyakurin

Co-leader of the Mugai-ryū, a mysterious group of assassins charged with killing Itto-ryū members.

Ittō-ryū

Anotsu Kagehisa's group of unusual fighters.

kenshi

Swordsman, possibly a samurai but not necessarily. Classes other than samurai were allowed to carry swords for defense, but the length of the blade was strictly regulated. Obviously the Itto-ryū pays little attention to the weapons laws.

kessen-chu

Holy bloodworms; the source of Manji's healing ability and immortality.

kissing

The common idea that kissing is a Western practice introduced into Japan is not correct; many erotic *shunga* prints depict mouth-to-mouth kissing as a sexual act. However, the idea of a kiss as a token of romantic love or as a public act is definitely not traditional. The Blade of the Immortal world is not wholly traditional either, of course, and the manga has several times shown couples kissing in the modern sense of the gesture.

kōban

Gold coin worth about one *koku*, or the amount of rice one person is presumed to eat in a year.

kōsōde

“Small sleeves”: A basic garment worn by both men and women either as an underlayer or on its own. *Kōsōde* might be made of silk, hemp or cotton, but are heavier than a *yūkata* and usually have a lining.

Manji

Renegade samurai who assassinated his feudal lord for corruption. The manhunt that followed cost the lives of one hundred policemen and officers who tried to take Manji into custody. The last policeman Manji killed was his own sister’s husband, in her presence. The sight drove her insane, and Manji took responsibility for her care.

At some point after this, an ancient nun named Yaobikuni infested Manji’s body with holy bloodworms, which make him functionally immortal by healing all damage and preventing aging. This is a double-edged gift, since he feels all the pain of his wounds yet cannot die. He must work to atone for the deaths on his conscience until he has killed one thousand evil men.

After his sister’s murder by gang members intent on revenge for Manji’s killing of one of their own, Manji retired to a small hut in the country outside Edo. There he encountered Rin, whose vendetta against the *Itto-ryū* Manji agreed to aid as her bodyguard.

Otonotachibana Makie

A beautiful, melancholy musician and sometime prostitute who is the most powerful fighter in the manga. Anotsu’s second cousin, and hopelessly in love with him, but has not joined his cause. She uses a three-part spear that she conceals in her *samisen*. She once defeated Manji in battle and would have killed him if not for Rin’s intervention.

Rin (Asano Rin)

Sixteen years old, Rin has been alone in the world since the murder of her parents on her fourteenth birthday. She vowed to avenge them, and with

Manji's help has caused the deaths of about twenty Itto-ryū members to date. Her fighting skills are not high, but are increasing with training and experience. She and Manji have forged a close but not easily definable relationship in the six months they have been together.

ryō

Unit of currency. One *kōban* coin is equivalent to about one *ryō*. These values fluctuated over time and from place to place. In the world of Blade of the Immortal, a *ryō* seems to be worth in the neighborhood of \$1000.

saké

A liquor brewed from rice. Technically a beer, but usually containing about the same alcohol percentage as wine or sherry.

sensei

Teacher, skilled person. May be used of any person of talent, such as an artist or musician.

uchikake

An elaborately decorated outer robe, long enough to drag on the floor. Worn by courtiers and brides, and often passed down as family heirlooms because of their value.

yōjimbō

Usually translated as "bodyguard". This term has the connotation not only of a personal guard, but of a mercenary soldier or weapons specialist hired to carry out particular tasks.

yūkata

A lightweight cotton garment worn by both sexes. Functions as undergarments or by itself as nightclothes, bathrobe or casual summer wear.