

ABSTINENCE EDUCATION

A BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL FAN FICTION STORY
BY MADAME MANGA



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VOLUME TWO : PARTS 11-18

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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.

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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 ELEVEN

Rin woke when Manji yanked his arm from under her shoulders and sat up. It was fully morning; judging from the light, the hour was much later than they usually rose. She blinked her eyes open all the way; Manji stared down at her with dawning consternation. He jerked his head up and sniffed the air. For what? Their sweaty bodies had their own odor, but the odd sharp scent of Manji's spilled seed remained strong.

His lips formed unvoiced words. "*Oh... shit.*" Suddenly he seemed to register that neither of them wore any clothes at all, and grabbed for his *kōsōde*, which lay in a crumpled heap beside the bed.

"Manji-san?" Rin rolled over. "Is there something wrong?"

He darted a glare at her with a bloodshot eye. "Come on, girl! What the hell could be *wrong*?" He lunged to his feet and hastily dressed. Rin gaped at him, still a little fuzzy from sleep. Manji snarled at the *saké* pitcher and gave it a kick, spinning it across the room. "How damn drunk did I get last night?"

"Uh... pretty drunk."

"And I — oh frigging hell — " He tied his *obi*, leaned against the wall and wiped his hands over his face. "What can I say? It's done."

Rin sighed; she realized she should have expected a bad reaction in the morning. "It's all right, Manji-san. I said yes."

Manji's face contorted. "What the hell does that have to do with it? I wasn't gonna touch you again — I made a hard-and-fast decision — and then I wake up

in my worst nightmare." He rammed a fist backwards against the wall, making the whole hut shake. "*Fuck!* Why didn't you give me a swift kick in the balls?"

She jumped in startlement. "I was supposed to tell you no? You're the one who seduced me!"

"Rin — " His voice cracked. "Little sister, I promised to protect you. I promised not to hurt you. And now look at what I've done! What you LET me do — all freakin' night long!"

"You JERK!" Rin slammed a hand to the floor. "This is all about you? What YOU think you should have done? What about MY feelings?"

He stared at her.

"I didn't want to sleep by myself." She raised her head and looked straight at him. "I only wanted to be with you. I told you that."

Manji didn't reply; Rin went on. "It's impossible for me to know what to do about this, because it's obvious you don't know what to do either! If you're not angry and pretending I don't exist, you grab me without any warning and scare me to death. So when you comforted me... and asked me nicely... and kissed me..." Her lips trembled.

Manji made a pained grimace. "Because I was drunk out of my skull, that's why!"

"I know! It took pitchers of *saké* for you to even want to talk to me!" Tears ran down her face. "I'm nothing but a... a torment to you. That's why I wanted to leave in the first place." Rin sat up with the quilt over her shoulders and wrapped her knees with her arms. "All right, maybe I see what you're talking about. I guess I took advantage of you..."

"Don't be an idiot. That's MY stinking karma — my little sister counts on me to take care of her, and she ends up — " Manji abruptly slid down the wall and sat on the ground. "Dead, fucked... it's all the same." He hid his face in his hands and drew in a deep shaking breath.

A prickle ran over Rin's back at the tone of his voice. "Dead?"

"I failed Machi-*chan*, and now I've failed you. Me and my pitiful excuse for good intentions. What the hell use am I?"

"Oh, no..."

"Sometimes I wish I could just cut my belly. But then I'd have to figure out how to saw through my own neck!" He made a slashing move across his throat with one thumb.

"Manji-san! You don't mean that!"

"No, I can't do that. Can't die until my task is finished, no matter how hard I try." He looked at the window and set his jaw. "It's my *Mugen Jigoku*, my everlasting hell. Even though it hurts like demons chewing on my bones... I got to keep on my path."

"...Did Yaobikuni tell you that?"

"That old bitch. First she forces me to live forever, and to fight forever... and then she lumbers me with a sixteen-year-old walking obligation."

"Because... she sent me to you." Rin shivered. Had she been chosen as one of Manji's redemptions, or simply as another ordeal? The pain she had caused him now appeared in a ghastly light. Physical suffering wasn't enough: the repeated wounds that healed only so that his flesh could be torn again and again. She had to torture him in mind and spirit as well...

"Hey, I walked into it with my eyes wide open... so to speak." He blinked, frowned and knuckled his blind eye. "I'm the last guy on this earth who can escape his obligations."

"I guess not." Rin quivered. "So... you made a decision not to touch me again. And you even went to a brothel."

He threw his head back and chuckled darkly. "Fat lot of good that did me. Wish I had my money back!"

"All right. I've made a decision too."

"Huh?"

"It's OK; you're not going to make me cry." She covered her mouth for a moment. "Even though we might have been intended to learn from our companionship, we could never be happy trying to find pleasure with each other. Desire only leads to suffering..."

Manji looked at her in blank astonishment. "What the hell?"

"I know, you probably thought I'd be all clingy and weepy." She raised her chin and gave him a proud smile. "I used to have some silly dreams... and last night I pretended for a little while that they were real. But no more romantic illusions. I'm not a girl any more — I'm an adult."

"Damn straight you're not a girl any more." He got up on his haunches and leaned forward. "Rin... you gotta face facts. Preach all you want, but there's nothing we can do now to make this go away."

"What? Why not?"

"You're... well, whether I like it or not, now you're... mine." Manji forced the word out as if it had a sour taste.

"Mine? I mean... yours?"

"Yeah." He spread his hands. "Not that you weren't before, kind of. What I'm saying is... now you're really my woman."

Wondering at this, Rin studied Manji's face. He didn't look ardent or earnest; he mostly looked hung over and morose. "Just like that? Don't I get a say?"

"Yeah, just like that, unless you can go back to last night and kick me in the balls when you should have! Give me a break!" He took a deep breath and scratched a hand through his messy hair. After a moment's silence, he blew out a windy sigh. "Well, I hope it didn't hurt too much."

"You didn't hurt me at all, Manji!" Rin parted her legs as she moved and a sudden burn erupted. She clapped her hand between her thighs. "Oh, ouch..."

"Oh, great."

Rin gingerly explored the stinging area with the quilt as cover. "I'm just sort of chafed, I think. Don't worry — it'll feel better in a little while."

He shook his head. "No, you're not listening to me. Could be weeks before we find out for sure, and until then... we have to assume the worst."

She blinked at him in confusion.

Manji chuckled sardonically. "So it didn't hurt? Maybe that toy of yours

stretched you out some — small blessings.” He made a face and stared over her head. “Did you end up liking it any?”

Rin blushed, seeming to feel his marauding touch again. She shouldn’t dwell on the memories of the night; it wasn’t wise to recall the blissful weight of Manji’s body on hers, the possessive strength of his arms and the taste of his skin. Or the sound of his voice in her ear: whispering shameless intimacies, groaning in enjoyment, growling and shouting out his release. Though he had vowed he could never be her lover, he had certainly been able to pull off an excellent imitation while his head was full of *saké*.

At her silence, his shoulders slumped. “That bad, huh? Well, no man’s at his best when he’s drunk.”

“No — I didn’t say that! You did get a little, um, aggressive... but yes, I guess I liked it.”

“OK, good.” Manji chuckled again with a little more mirth. “I wasn’t sure if I wished I remembered doing it, or if that was another blessing in disguise.”

“You don’t... remember?” She raised a brow at him.

“It’s pretty fuzzy, but some of it’s coming back. Yeah... I seem to recall you going there at least once.” He grinned in a way that struck her as particularly male.

“You sure let me know it when you’re having fun, don’t you?”

“Well... maybe I did. Um, it’s getting late — shouldn’t we get up and have breakfast?” Rin rose to her knees, modestly concealing her breasts and groin with her hands, and looked around for her clothes. “We’ll get behind on training.”

“Screw training,” said Manji. He lunged at her, pushed her shoulders down on the bed and kissed her soundly on the mouth.

“Manji-san!” Rin wrenched her lips from his and hit him on the chest. “What are you doing?”

“Aw, girl, let’s make the best of it. Might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb!”

“What?” Her eyes popped wide open as realization burst upon her. “Um — were you thinking that we had — ”

“Guess I get to teach you a few things after all.” Face flushed, he got on top of

her and kissed her again. With his tongue in her mouth, he pressed a thigh between her legs.

"Is this... supposed to be educational?" gasped Rin when Manji came up for air. "I know it's not romantic, but..."

"Yeah, I said that." He lowered his head and kissed her throat. "Meant it, too. But I guess I upped the ante for you last night. That was pretty shitty of me... unless I agree to meet you halfway."

"But — "

"No, hear me out." He looked her in the eyes and cupped her face in his palms. "I got an obligation to fulfill, and that hasn't changed. Maybe... this is how I was fated to do it all along." He stopped, flushing red. "Like I said, I can't marry you. We'll have to keep on like we have been, only we'll define things a little differently, see?" Manji seemed embarrassed and very ill at ease, but he forged on. "I never thought I'd be looking after a woman of my own and... maybe some kids. Not my style. But there's some things a man just has to do if he's a man."

Rin's mouth dropped open.

"I know, that sounds pretty funny coming from me. I'm serious, Rin — this ain't a joke." Manji rested his forehead against hers. "I'm no good at saying things the way a woman wants to hear them, but you get my drift, right?"

Her head spun. He couldn't still be drunk! "Manji-san — why do you think you need to say this?"

"Even if you're not pregnant now, you sure as hell will be in another month or so, judging by how bad I seem to be at keeping my paws off you." He grunted and gave her a soft kiss between the eyes, his hair tickling her face. "Hey, you'll probably end up teaching me a few things too, huh? Guess it won't kill me to learn how to make you happy."

Rin's lips trembled; a few days ago, she would have been overwhelmed with joy to hear these words. But now?

"I... I thought there was only one way that a woman could have babies..."

"Yeah, that's right." He grinned at her, captured her hands in his and made a slow seductive roll of the hips. "Want to do it again? Don't worry, it doesn't hurt the kid."

She studied the warming passion on his face and swallowed hard. "Big brother, last night... we didn't really do a whole lot more than what we did in the woods."

"What?"

"Well, you kissed my, um, chest a lot." Rin blushed and shyly hunched her shoulders since she couldn't cover her bare breasts with her imprisoned hands. "But I think I'm still a virgin. Fingers don't count, do they?"

Manji went pale. He abruptly released her, sat up and scooted away on his rear end. "That was it?"

"Yes, pretty much."

He looked at his right hand and flexed the fingers. It was difficult to read the rapid flashes of opposing expression on his face: mixed relief, chagrin, perhaps returning memory. Even disappointment, if she wasn't mistaken. He had wanted to make love to her only because he thought he already had? "Pretty much? Think about it, Rin — did I put it in you or not?"

"Your, um...? No, you didn't... you promised you wouldn't."

He slumped against the wall, relief now paramount in his manner. "Thank GOD!"

"Didn't you think you'd keep your promise?" Rin smiled at him. "I trusted you."

"Oh, yeah? Thought I told you better than that." Manji slowly wiped his face once more and blew hard through his fingers. "OK, breakfast. I'm friggin' starving."

PART TWELVE

"Oh, that was so much fun!" Rin smiled up at Manji and brushed her shoulder against his arm. The covered basket of purchases that hung from a cord on her wrist bumped the twin scabbards projecting from Manji's left hip. "Thank you for taking me. It seems like it's been a long time since I was at a festival..."

He switched his pipe from one side of his mouth to the other and returned the smile. "Aw, I needed to buy some tobacco and stuff anyway. Glad you had a good time."

"Of course I did." She briefly laid her cheek against his sleeve. Other festival-goers were on the street with them, or she might have given him a hug. Around them thronged villagers, merchants, groups of samurai strutting with splendidly fitted swords on display, and a fair number of gaily dressed and heavily made-up prostitutes parading for the crowd. However, Rin noticed them only as backdrop; her attention was devoted to her companion. She let her eyes linger on the side of Manji's face; she liked his well-marked profile and the way his jaw came to an incisive angle just below the ear. With his disfigured right eye turned away from her, he looked friendlier and less intimidating. An interesting mixed tingle of unsettling desire and comfortable affection for him stirred in the pit of her belly. Even the spiky black bristles of his carelessly combed hair struck her as endearing. "I always enjoy being with my big brother."

Manji tilted his head back and smiled in a somewhat rueful manner. "Sorry I didn't take you with me yesterday. Might have kept me out of trouble."

"Oh, Manji-san, that's all right. I forgave you, and you didn't do anything really awful anyway." Her gaze fell on a pair of young courtesans-in-training teetering along on high *geta*, servants holding painted parasols above their elaborate coiffures. "I should have expected it, I guess..."

It was hard not to wonder about the prostitute Manji had paid to pillow with him. Maybe they had even seen her promenading in the streets today. Was she very beautiful, or especially accomplished in bed? Rin squelched down the

ground-swell of instinctive jealousy that rose within her breast. No matter who that unknown woman was, she hadn't been enough for Manji...

He reached down and gave her hand an unobtrusive squeeze; the shopping basket bumped his swords again. "Thanks. Wish I deserved that."

"What?"

"Aw, nothing. Here, gimme that." He grabbed for the basket with an air of mild annoyance.

Rin slipped the cord off her wrist and tried to transfer it to the other hand. "Sorry... I'll get it out of your way."

Manji reached over and hooked the cord with one finger. "I guess you blew most of your cash on sweets and stuff?"

"No, I didn't. I was very practical this time — no, don't peek!" Rin clapped the lid on the basket when Manji tried to pry it up. She had bought a new red silk underskirt to replace a torn one, some skin cream guaranteed to keep the complexion smooth and pale, a tiny pot of lip rouge and a charm against female troubles. "It's personal things. Women need some privacy, you know!"

He grinned, dangled the basket out of her reach and slung it over his far shoulder. "Whatever. I saw you gobbling all that water candy when you thought I wasn't looking. But you could use some more padding on those skinny bones, so I'm not objecting."

"Man-ji!" Rin glanced around to see if anyone had heard. A married couple passed them, their manservant carrying an enormous stack of baskets and boxes.

"Well, you've had your play time, and the day's not over yet. Want to work up a sweat when we get back home?" He winked at her.

Did that mean what it sounded like? Rin looked up at Manji with wide eyes. This was the first time he had brought up the subject since they had gotten out of bed. Their mid-day at the festival had been spent companionably eating, shopping and watching street entertainers, and Manji's manner with her had eased into something like relaxed familiarity again.

"You're talking about... teaching me some things?"

"Yeah, we lost some time screwing around. Too bad. Though I'll say you've

improved a little since we started." He nodded sagely.

Rin blushed and looked down. "I have? There are so many things I still don't know..."

"We're taking it all in stages, so don't get too impatient with yourself. I'll tell you when you're ready to move on to something new. Matter of fact, today might be a good time for that."

"Today...?" She gulped, hot and cold flashes rolling through her body. To her relief, the crowd thinned considerably as they left the outskirts of the village. Not so many people would be watching and wondering what this very embarrassing public conversation could be about. "I mean... yes, *sensei*."

Manji glanced down at her with a grin and a raised brow. "Don't worry; I'll still keep my sword in the scabbard."

"Well... yes, of course."

"When you feel like you've got the courage to handle a naked blade, speak up. I'll be happy to accommodate you."

"Manji-san!" Rin jumped away from him and clapped her hands to her mouth.

"What's the matter? Thought you were working on learning everything you could."

"Y-yes... but you... this morning..." She couldn't go on; her throat went dry and her cheeks flamed.

"You won't be a real *kenshi* until you can face a sharp weapon edge without flinching. So sooner or later, that's what you're going to have to — " He broke off and smiled mischievously at the look on her face. "Hey, what did you think I was talking about?"

"You creep!" Rin swatted at Manji, but couldn't help laughing with him at the same time. She waited for a family with children to move out of earshot. "All right, let's do some sword training when we get back. But could you please tell me...?"

"Tell you what's up? Maybe I should." Manji rolled his shoulders inside his *kōsōde* and massaged the back of his neck for a moment. They moved into a tree-shaded lane off the main road.

"If it's not impolite to ask, *sensei*... but I think not talking causes problems."

"Yeah, you're right. I can't just leave the fire burning until the lid blows off the teakettle." He sighed and swung her basket by the cord as they walked. "Half-measures are the only ones we can take, just like I've said. I think I've got no choice but to use 'em, for all kinds of reasons."

"You mean it's best to, um, prop the lid open to let the steam out? Because we've had some misunderstandings..."

"Something like that. With reservations." He held up a hand. "Educating you is the best idea we've had so far, though that ain't saying much. That still what you want to do?" She nodded. "OK, I figured that. I need to think about it for a little while to get all the ground rules in hand. You know the most important one already — I'm not doing anything that could put a brat of mine in your belly, so you're staying a virgin. Outside of that, it's not so clear yet."

"Um... OK." Rin felt a sneaking prickle of resentment; after all, this was her body they were talking about. Manji wouldn't be directly affected by anything they did, so why should he be the one to have the final say?

Because he was also the only one of them with experience. Rin conceded that to herself and listened when he spoke again.

"I need a promise from you too, speaking of misunderstandings. I think you may have got the picture by now, but as long as we're laying it out straight, let's not leave a shadow of a doubt."

"A promise?"

Manji took a deep breath and blew it out. "No expectations."

"Expectations...? Oh." Rin nodded.

"I'm not the guy who's going to make your dreams come true. Looking at me for that kind of crap makes no sense at all. Especially for someone like you, Asano Rin." Manji's gaze skimmed her from head to foot and fixed on her face. "Your whole life's ahead of you. Assuming that at least a little of what I've been teaching you gets through your head." With his free hand he made a gesture like a sword blocking another blade.

"Absolutely. I understand." She laced her fingers together and looked down for a

moment. "I think I can make that promise."

"Good, I'll consider it made."

"There's something I should probably tell you first, though." She tilted her head and glanced up.

"What's that?" He spun the basket in a circle.

"I love you, Manji-san."

The basket went flying. Manji tripped on his sandals and stopped short in the middle of the road. "HAAH?"

"I always have. In all kinds of ways. Didn't you know that already, big brother?" She smiled at him and patted his arm. "That's different from being in love with you, though."

"It is? I mean... fine." Manji clutched his belly with a queasy air. "That's, uh, good to know."

"If I've learned even a little over the last week, it's realizing that there's a distinction. A silly crush on someone shouldn't be grounds for upsetting your whole life and making the other person unhappy. I know that we're together for some important reasons and I mustn't let anything get in the way of that. So... no expectations."

"That's... real grown up of you." He looked at her with a sense of trepidation and blew out a long sagging breath.

"You didn't think I would look at it that way, Manji-sensei? See, I have gotten some of your teaching through my head." Rin smiled, retrieved her basket and moved on down the road.

He didn't stir until she was a little distance ahead of him; she glanced back and was surprised to see him standing still, staring out over the rice paddies and meandering levees with an unfathomable expression. Below the surface, something might have been rising, disturbing his features like ripples in dark water. Since from this angle she could see only his blind eye, it was hard to make out. Even the scarred white blankness was shadowed by the falling strands of his hair.

"Manji-san?"

Turning abruptly, Manji met her gaze. Was he angry, or just preoccupied? He forced down the disturbance and set his jaw. With a few rapid strides he caught up to Rin and took her arm.

For the rest of the way home, he kept her hand tight against his side and refused to talk about anything other than the weather.

PART THIRTEEN

"OK, this is about it for the warm-up routines. We'll do it twice more. Once at half speed, then go for it as fast as you can strike." Manji held up his wooden *bokuto* and beckoned to her. "Neck, torso, leg, torso. Go!"

Rin swung and met his blocks, her *bokuto* moving with graceful flicks, arcing smoothly from one attack to the next.

"Good. Again!"

This time she swung with all her might, rapping her weapon against his with loud cracks. Again he blocked her strikes with lightning moves, but at the last she fainted to the head and threw in another lunge straight to the belly. Manji's sword thwacked her hard across the back, but he let out a grunt and stood up smiling.

"Nice shot." He rubbed the side of his ribcage. "I felt that."

"I got you?" Rin laughed and clapped her hands. "I got you!"

"Sort of — you scraped a little skin off me and got your spine split in return. Remember you have to defend your openings all the way through the pass." He demonstrated, crouching low and tapping her solar plexus with the end of the *bokuto*. "Don't get yourself over-extended with nowhere to go from there. Of course, that's easier when you're fighting two-handed... and that's what we're going to introduce today." Manji straightened up and made a gesture; one of his forked *shido* slid from his sleeve and impaled itself point-first in the ground. He picked it up and brandished it, then tossed the wooden sword aside and drew his *katana* left-handed.

"How do you do that, anyway? I've always wondered where you keep all those big sharp things..."

"It's a gift." Manji grinned at her and spun the *shido* on his forefinger. "Now, the

ways I use this to back up the long blade – ”

“Manji-san, who’s that?” Rin pointed over his shoulder, and he turned to see. A young samurai in crisp formal *hakama* came striding up from the road with a belligerent air, aiming right for them. He came to a halt a little distance away, puffing as if he had run the entire distance from the village.

“You!” said the samurai in the rudest possible sense, and pointed straight at Manji. “You’re the scum I’m looking for!”

“Hah? What’s up your crack?”

“I am Tsukue Ryonosuke!” He tapped two fingers on the hilts of his twin swords. “You will speak respectfully to me, or suffer the consequences!” He looked no more than twenty years old, his face smooth and boyish.

“You started it, asshole. Don’t whine when you get it right back.” Manji winked at Rin, who suppressed a laugh. Who was this idiot to shake his swords at Manji? Judging by his expensive clothes and pampered appearance, he might be a son of one of the richer samurai whose country estates ringed the village.

“You upset my O-Hama! My favorite girl! Last night when I arrived to see her, the whole house was still in uproar. The mama-san told me she was insulted by an unkempt customer with one eye and a *manji* symbol on his back. Can you deny that you are the miscreant responsible?”

Manji had made a disturbance at the brothel? Rin covered her mouth to try to hide her astonishment. He had hinted at some kind of trouble...

“What the hell’s the matter with you, boy? You go on errands for whores as a general thing? Get outta my face.” Manji hawked and spat on the ground right between the intruder’s sandals.

He took a step backwards. “I promised her I’d punish you for what you said to her! I spent hours drying her tears, and bought new hair ornaments at the festival to console her.”

“Oh, I see. Plays you like a bamboo flute, doesn’t she? Wise up, dumbass.” Manji laughed.

“How dare you characterize our love that way?”

This young samurai loved a brothel girl? She’d heard accounts of such

mismatches, which usually ended badly, at least in plays. Arranged marriages without love naturally led to love without marriage, but Ryonosuke's passionate anger struck Rin as far out of proportion. This was a man who didn't regulate himself and his emotions as a warrior should.

"Love?" Manji made an obscene gesture out of sticking his *shido* in the ground again. "Not worth the expense, boy. Let me give you a clue. Blow your cash on *saké* instead of women — hell, gamble it all and you'll come out way ahead."

"I'd do anything for my sweet O-Hama! I'd even perform *seppuku* if — "

"Big brother, what is he talking about? *Seppuku*?"

"I dunno, little sister." Manji raised a brow. "I think he likes sappy *bunraku* shows a little too much."

"I'm talking about how you insulted my O-Hama! You called her a — "

"I called her a greedy little bitch because she got pissy when I didn't fork over a big tip. I did ask for the best girl in the house, but that broad thinks she's a first-rank *oiran* or something." Manji snorted.

"She's the highest-ranking courtesan in the entire district! And... and you not only called her greedy, you said flat out in front of everyone that a... a skinny *virgin* could have satisfied you better! How DARE you?"

Rin looked wide-eyed at Manji; his mouth opened and closed and he self-consciously scratched his jaw. "Well... yeah, maybe I mentioned something on that order."

"O-Hama is the most beautiful woman of my acquaintance, and skilled in every art of love! She sends me to heaven every night I can see her!" Rin wondered if Ryonosuke was going to cry. "And you tell her that a raw girl — "

"Crap, I should have just picked up a *yōtaka*! Way cheaper, and probably a hell of a lot more fun than your finicky bitch. Well, excuse me — I thought the girls would be cleaner at a house." He looked the young man up and down. "But if she sleeps with *you*, she's probably got every pox known to man or dog." With a careless motion, he thrust his *katana* back into his scabbard as if Ryonosuke were unworthy of notice. He picked up his *shido* and started to put it away.

"You... you dare compare her to a streetwalker? Call her diseased? That's unforgivable! I demand satisfaction!"

Rin backed cautiously away; this wasn't so funny any more. The exchange had become overheated and outright ugly. Manji still had a naked weapon in hand, Ryonosuke was almost certainly going to draw, and she didn't want to be in the way of either of them when the fight began.

"Demand whatever the hell you want, because you won't get it. Then go home and buy your raddled twat some more cheap trinkets, you cunt-licker. The greedy little bitch is only angling you for presents, but I guess you're too damp behind the ears to figure that out." Manji reached in his sleeve and flipped something at Ryonosuke; it arced through the air, hit him in the chest and landed at his feet. Rin looked and saw that it was a single copper *sen*. "There, you can give her my freakin' tip too, because that's at least double what she was worth in the sack."

Red-faced and spluttering, the young samurai whipped out his *katana* and charged. With a negligent swipe of his *shido*, Manji disarmed him and spun the sword several yards away. Rin avoided the flying blade and retrieved her own sword from the porch. Of course Manji didn't need help against such a weak opponent, but she had a bad feeling about this Ryonosuke, and especially about the wild look in his eye.

"I said, go home. You won't get another warning." Manji turned his back. Ryonosuke drew his shorter *wakizashi*, but instead of attacking Manji again, he darted past him and attempted to grab Rin by the hair. She dodged him and shed the sheath from her sword. Manji looked around, but he didn't move; he watched with an alert expression and a ready stance, as if waiting for her to deal with the problem herself before he took action.

"Apologize or your little sister pays for my O-Hama's humiliation!" Ryonosuke apparently took Manji's lack of reaction for paralyzed fear. He waved his *wakizashi* at Rin with a theatrical gesture. "She's at my mercy!"

"Oh, yeah? This I'd like to see." Manji stuck his *shido* under his arm and took out his pipe. "Guess you prefer fighting women, little boy. Let's see if you get anywhere." He nodded to Rin in an encouraging way.

Rin swallowed hard and held up her sword in a defensive pose, starting to circle her antagonist. He made a scornful face and a pass with the short sword; she parried and returned to her defensive stance.

Manji laughed. "Go on, 'sister' — it's OK. Scratch his pretty face and he'll run bawling home to his mama."

She gritted her teeth, cursed Manji under her breath and lashed out with her sword. The longer reach of the Chinese blade kept Ryonosuke at a distance, so there she had an advantage. But he blocked her strike and side-stepped, then lunged. Rin evaded him. Her heart raced, though the blow hadn't come very close; they reversed positions and struck simultaneously.

Her blade lodged against Ryonosuke's; he pinned her in place. This was a dangerous spot — he could take control if she let him make it a struggle of muscle versus muscle. She broke the block and skipped backwards; he followed. Rin changed directions and scrambled around a tree, panting. "Manji!"

"Come on, he's leaving his left side wide open, and he's got no follow-up. You can take him easy. Skewer the little bastard, and let's get on with what we were doing." Manji stooped over the *hibachi* and lit his pipe.

"I was trained by a great master, you scum!" Ryonosuke turned to shout at Manji, and Rin scored the tip of her sword across his hip. He yelled and grabbed for his *hakama*; she had cut the ties at the waist, and the wide pants fell to his knees. Tripped up in the voluminous folds of cloth, he stumbled, and Rin made a backhand cut that caught him across the cheekbone. She moved backwards, meaning to let him reconsider now that she had drawn blood.

Instead, Ryonosuke dropped his short sword and scooped his *katana* from the dirt. He yanked his pants up and knocked the sword from her hand. Rin gasped — she was defenseless!

An elongated blur hurtled towards her and she instinctively grabbed it by the hilt. Manji's *shido*. It was very heavy and felt somewhat unbalanced, but she whirled it over her head on the backswing of the catch and brought it down on the blade of Ryonosuke's *katana*. He kept hold of the hilt, but Rin's blow forced the blade into the ground. The tip hit a rock and snapped off a good hands-length from the end.

"My sword! I paid a hundred and fifty *ryō* for this sword!" Ryonosuke flung it down and looked for his *wakizashi*. Rin chased him away from it with the *shido* and backed him up to a tree. She brandished the point in his face.

"Surrender and beg for your life!" she shouted.

"What for?" Manji shook his head. "You're letting him off lightly."

"Well, I... do you surrender?" She had to brace the weighty weapon with both

hands, but held it steady at the base of his throat.

"I... I surrender." Ryonosuke clenched his jaw and looked down, sweating. Blood trickled from the shallow cut on his face. "I beg you... don't kill me."

"Then go, and don't bother us any more." Rin lowered the *shido* and wiped her perspiring palms on her clothing. Ryonosuke slowly picked up his swords and replaced them in their sheaths. He found the broken tip of his *katana* and flung it away in disgust.

"You clumsy peasant — " he began. Manji whacked his pipe against the edge of the porch and let it drop.

The next instant, Ryonosuke sprawled prone with Manji's foot grinding his face into the dirt. Manji thumped a knee between his shoulder blades, grabbed him by the topknot to pull his head back, then pressed his side-hooked knife to Ryonosuke's throat. It bit into the flesh and opened a small wound. The young man screamed in terror and Rin started forward at the murderous look in Manji's eye.

"No — I said I'd spare his life!"

"Squeamish, huh? About time you got over that."

"No! Please! Let him learn from his mistakes — he's so young..." Rin clapped her hands to her mouth.

"Aw, crap. You're not gonna cry, are you?"

"P-p-please don't kill me," blubbered Ryonosuke. "I apologize! I — "

"No..." Tears welled up in her eyes. "Big brother, please!"

Manji leaned down and spoke in his ear. "OK, I'll teach you what happens when you insult MY little sister. You're damn lucky she's here, asshole, because if she hadn't been, I'd have done a lot more than — "

He thrust the wicked hooked blade upwards and yanked it to the side; Ryonosuke screamed again, his voice cracking high. Blood spewed from his nose, or what was left of it. Manji had slashed off the tip from below and left it hanging by a thin strip of skin.

"Get out of here, you whore's pussy." He stood up and the young man writhed

on the ground with his hands clamped to his face. "Pathetic. Don't even breathe the air in my vicinity again, or I'll finish the job no matter what she says."

Rin reclaimed her sword and stood ready, but Ryonosuke stumbled to his feet, keeping his pants up with one hand and holding on his severed nose with the other. Even after he disappeared around the bend in the road, they could hear him crying.

"Eh, not too bad." Manji clapped Rin on the back. "Kinda sloppy for a real duel, but passable."

"What do you think he's going to do?" Rin looked apprehensively at the road. "He might come back with some friends..." Shaking all over from ebbing adrenaline, she buried her face in the front of Manji's *kōsōde*.

"Oh, *now* you worry about that? Ahh, forget about him." He gave her a brotherly squeeze around the shoulders. "You think even that poor excuse for a samurai is going to complain to a bunch of men about getting his sword busted by a *woman*? He'll be laid up for a month before he can show his face in public, anyway." Manji laughed uproariously and moved away to pull up a tuft of dry grass.

"Can a doctor sew a nose back on?"

"Beats me." He kept laughing and wiped his blood-streaked knife. "Think I'd like to be a fly on the wall when he tries it, though!"

"Eww..." Rin stuck out her tongue and gingerly cleaned the blood from her own sword.

PART FOURTEEN

"Yeah... like that. Open your mouth a little wider, and breathe through your nose." Manji rolled his hips and stretched out on his bed with a sigh. "Yeah..."

"Ooh, it's kind of hard not to choke..." Rin raised her head and gasped for air. "Do you like it? How I'm doing it, I mean?"

"You're doing fine." He spat on one hand and smoothed the moisture over the shaft of his *henoko*. "There, that should help. Lets it slide easier."

Rin kissed the head of his organ and softly licked it up and down. Manji seemed to know just how this act ought to be performed, but she had no idea how to become accustomed to the feeling of an object in her throat. And what was she going to do when his seed spurted?

"Don't worry about swallowing it this soon." Manji stroked her hair and twisted a lock of it around his fingers. "Doesn't taste as sweet as you do. So just let it go and we'll work on that later. You'll get used to it."

"Really? You've tasted it?" Rin glanced up; Manji grimaced.

"Never mind asking questions right now. You need your mouth for what you're doing."

"Why did you call that man a 'cunt-licker'? If it's an insult... well, you do it too."

He groaned. "It's not something a guy likes to admit to another guy, OK?"

Rin crossed her legs and rocked her hips slightly, smiling at him. Maybe Manji would want to do that again if she satisfied him first; she enjoyed cradling his head between her thighs more than anything else they had done in pillowing. "Why not? It feels really good."

"Glad you think so. Now there's something else that feels good that you ought to

be practicing, right?" He pointed indignantly to his neglected *henoko*.

"Oh... sorry, *sensei*." Rin giggled and took him between her lips.

No matter how hard she concentrated, she couldn't keep from gagging and pulling back whenever Manji's organ penetrated much more than head-deep into her mouth. It was frustrating; she wasn't sure why this was happening. The idea of putting her tongue on his male parts didn't disgust her at all — he'd washed, and his body smelled clean. Was her taste anything like the sweet-salt richness of his skin?

She loved to play with his *henoko*. It was a fascinating object to her: strange and wonderful to feel it stir and harden in her hand, the silk-like skin stretching taut over the swollen veins. Rin ran her tongue up and over the head, tasting a clear drop of salty liquid seeping from the tip. She took a deep breath, swallowed in preparation and lowered her wide-open mouth over him. Allowing Manji's body to enter hers in this way wasn't something she had thought about before, but especially when he displayed an obvious reaction, it felt exciting.

Rin managed to get him in about halfway before she had to pause and let her lips close around his shaft. Manji groaned, his clenched fists restrained at his sides. She felt his stomach muscles quake and a deep shiver ripple through his body. Half sitting up, he suddenly clamped his hands on her head and urged her to him, plunging almost the whole length of his *henoko* into her mouth.

"God... damn..." he moaned. "Oh, girl..."

Desperately Rin tried to keep from choking, her throat rebelling against the invasion. Her whole body heaved and she retched violently with tears running down her face. Obviously she wasn't quite getting the hang of this...

Manji pushed her away with an agonized grunt. "That's enough!"

"But..." Rin had to gulp and breathe hard for a few moments to be able to speak. "I want to..." She reached for Manji again, but he rolled away and pulled his clothes back together. "I want to please you, Manji-*sensei*. You've made me feel so — "

"That ain't the point! I'm supposed to be teaching you, not using you..."

"Um... using me? What do you mean?"

"What do I...? Aw, crap." He clenched his teeth and put a hand over his

sweating face. "I ain't touching that one!"

"Sensei?" Rin sat back, wondering what was wrong. The tightness of the knots in Manji's jaw told her she shouldn't persist in asking for an explanation. "Well, we could try it again later, I guess..."

"I don't think so." Gradually his flushed color receded; he rose to one knee and gave her a glare as if she were entirely to blame for his momentary loss of self-control. "Look, you got the basic idea, and that's all you need to know."

"You don't want me to do that any more? I thought you liked it..."

"Oh, hell, you think it's any fun for me watching you work so goddamn hard? If it hurts that bad, don't do it!" Manji got up and took a drink of water from the bucket and dipper by the door.

Rin knelt on the straw, wiping her cheeks and feeling dejected. She might have done well with her sword today, but in the arts of love she was still a stumbling novice. "I'm sorry, *sensei*."

"You think anybody does it like an expert on the first try? Give me a break." He moved the blanket aside from the door to let in the light.

"But you're disappointed."

"Life is one big frickin' disappointment." Manji scratched under his ear while examining the late-afternoon sky. "Speaking of which... I guess I'll try some fishing. The pesky little buggers may be biting by now."

"All right... I'm not very hungry, though, so if you don't catch anything, that's OK." She took a drink as well, got up and stood beside him.

"You're not hungry?" He chuckled in disbelief. "You're kidding me."

"No... maybe I ate too much at the festival." She grimaced and stopped herself from putting a hand over her stomach. Her feelings of nausea weren't going away for some reason, but she wasn't about to let Manji know that.

"Wouldn't surprise me." Manji glanced over at her. "What's with the long face?"

"I... I don't know." Rin looked down and picked at her fingernails. "I keep thinking about Tsukue Ryonosuke."

"Hey, you shamed that that little twerp just like he deserved! I knew even you could kick his ass, so I figured I'd better let you." He reached over and tapped a finger on her head in a cajoling way. "I thought you'd be jumping for joy."

"There was just something about him. He said he loved her..."

"What the hell do you care?" Manji made a derisive sound. "He's nuts to wear his heart on his sleeve for a cheap trick like that."

"I don't know why it's getting to me." Rin touched her forehead; her own voice echoed oddly in her ears. "Oh, Manji..."

"I can tell that kid's had no real martial training at all." Manji folded his arms and leaned a shoulder against the wall. "He picked up a move or two somewhere, but he hasn't got a clue on thinking like a *bushi*."

"I guess not... he seemed so emotional, didn't he?"

"Any samurai worth his rice ration knows he shouldn't get that attached to a woman. Women make a man soft... and that kid was as soft as they come."

"Make him soft?" She looked at Manji in surprise.

"You ever heard the *sutra* verses they quote in military households? Women are filth. Their bodies are full of piss and shit. They bleed every month because they're the source of pollution and evil. That's why men have to rule over 'em, because they're not fit for anything but childbearing. A warrior needs to save his loyalties for his fellow samurai and his lord, not for some damn female, and getting stuck on a whore is just about grounds for ordering him to cut his belly." Manji chuckled. "If a woman was supposed to be any good at all, she'd be born as a man instead!"

"Wh-what?"

"Yeah, that's how it goes — they sure pounded that into my head when I was the same age. A true *bushi* scorns the whole idea of women. He's got a man's job to do."

Rin recoiled, her lips open in shock and her head whirling.

"And just look at me now, would you? A man's job? I hang out teaching a girl to fight... and then let myself get suckered into THIS crap on top of it all." He jerked his head at the bed with a cynical laugh. "Gritting my teeth and trying my

damndest not to do the one thing a man ever needs to do with a woman! Yeah, I'm a cunt-licker, all right. How the hell did I end up like this?"

Speechless, she backed away and ran for the woods. So this was his answer...

In her little nest in the pines, Rin lay curled up and sobbing. She had known Manji wasn't exactly infatuated with her — she could never have expected that, and it was probably just as well that he didn't feel that way. But that he had only contempt for her entire sex? That all he really wanted from her was the one thing she couldn't give him? She cried until her eyes burned. Rocking from side to side with her face in the bed of pine needles, she finally subsided to dry coughing sometime around sunset.

Shadows crept through the trees and grew deeper. A chilly wind blew up, rattling the branches over her head, and Rin heard a shower of rain patter on leaves and needles. Before night fell or the weather got any wetter, she knew she had to find her way out of the woods, but she could not muster the will to get up. Her muscles trembled and she succumbed to a fit of violent shivering. Even her eyes didn't seem to be working right, since everything rotated around her in a sickening way. Maybe she was dying out here all alone in the cold. Hands over her aching head, Rin lay panting, wishing she could gracefully expire at that very moment.

Someone was calling her name from what seemed a great distance away. Perhaps this was her final summons. Ascending to nirvana on a lotus, she would watch Manji search for her and find only her pitiful corpse. Rin sniffled and moaned. She would no longer suffer pain when she had departed from him forever, but perhaps then he would realize how he had hurt her...

"Rin?" Manji climbed over the arching roots of the pines and gathered her into his embrace. She had neither tears nor strength left, so she submitted to being cradled on his lap, her head clasped to his chest. "Little sister... aw, little sister..."

He rose and lifted her. Rin huddled in his arms, conscious mostly of a seasick swaying motion but clinging to his warmth. Manji carried her all the way over the narrow paths through the rice paddies to the hut. There he put her down on her own bed and covered her with her quilt, as she was shivering uncontrollably again. He laid the back of his hand on her burning forehead and frowned. In her vision, his face wavered and blurred. "Here, you better have some water." Manji propped her up and offered her the dipper. "Damn, I should've looked for you sooner..."

She sipped a little, but irritably turned her head when he urged her to take more. Then she pushed him away, leaned over and vomited on the ground.

"Oh, boy." Manji held her braids out of the way and made her rinse out her mouth, then mopped up the mess with handfuls of straw. Rin fell back on the bed and closed her eyes.

When she woke, the light was gray through a steady drizzle and the wind whistled over the roof. The high thin notes had a raspy, rhythmic accompaniment. Extended into the periphery of her vision was one of Manji's bare feet. She rolled over and looked at him, sitting against the wall next to her bed and snoring with his head drooping on his chest. He was fast asleep, but he had obviously sat up with her for most of the night. She had a dim recollection of being sick again and again with Manji supporting her racked body. Each time her stomach ceased its convulsions, she collapsed against his chest and gulped the water that he held to her lips.

Manji stirred at her movement and rubbed his good eye. "Rin? You need a drink?"

"No...I feel better now. You ought to go to bed..." She was wearing only her light inner robe and her braids had been undone; her red *furisōde* was folded beside the bed.

He knelt beside her and laid his fingers to her cheek. "You're still feverish. Could be all the junk you ate yesterday, and maybe you got a chill out in the woods too."

Rin turned her face away to avoid his touch. Manji groaned. "Oh, right, you're mad at me."

"I don't know..."

"For crying out loud, kid, I didn't mean it like you took it. I was ragging on myself, yeah, but all that crap about women?"

"Wh-what about it?" Her throat contracted; she wondered if she was going to throw up again, though her insides felt like an echoing void.

"Give me a break! You think that's what crosses my mind when I look at you?"

"It doesn't?"

"It's *būshidō*, that's what it is. Bunch of overcompensating bullshit. That's what the old farts say to get the young samurai's minds off girls while they're training."

"Get their... minds off girls?" Wasn't that exactly what Manji had been trying to do for himself?

"Yeah, that's young guys for ya — always thinking about their dicks and where they'd like to stick them. Training ain't really about swordwork. It's about making you one of the boys, and women only get in the way of that."

"You were... part of your lord's retinue, weren't you? So weren't you... one of the boys?"

Something odd passed over Manji's face, like an unwelcome memory. "For a while."

"And you said they pounded that into your head. That women corrupted a man. That they were... filth." Rin's lips trembled.

"Like having a pair of balls makes me smell any sweeter?" He gave a contemptuous laugh.

"What?"

Manji touched his chest and leaned forward with a serious look. "We're all filth, Rin. Every one of us. Piss, shit, jism, puke and blood: that's what the whole damn human race is made of. No one gets off clean."

"Oh." Maybe universal cynicism could pass for an impartial outlook...

"Anyway, if spilling blood is what makes pollution, I've done a hell of a lot more of that than any woman ever could." He gave her a one-sided smile. "Which reminds me — is the moon about to rise?"

Rin's fever seemed to have returned full force; her face burned. "What?"

"My sister used to get kind of pissy around that time, so I was figuring that might have had something to do with you taking that wrong." Manji shrugged. "But then you never came out of the damn woods, so..."

"Your sister? But how would you have known... I mean, a woman doesn't talk about that!"

"She couldn't take care of it herself any more, that's how."

"*You* had to help her?" Rin's eyes dilated. She could barely imagine a man willing to do such a thing, even for a sister whose shattered mind he blamed on himself.

"Naw... well, once or twice, I guess." He scratched his head and looked sheepish. "I ended up finding her a room above a shop. The woman that ran the place did that kind of stuff for her. So, is it?"

"Um... no. It's not due for a couple of weeks." It occurred to her that Manji might want to know about her monthly cycle for reasons other than her moods, and her embarrassment changed nature. "But it's not always on time..."

"OK, then. I'm gonna go fix breakfast, and I'll feed you some if you can keep it down. Stay in bed." He got up and left the hut. In a little while she smelled a fire and the aroma of roasting corn. Rin smiled and curled up, hugging her quilt.

Rain came down in heavy sheets soon afterwards and persisted all day. It pounded on the shingles and poured from the eaves with a loud splashing sound right by her ear. A leak started in one corner of the roof, but Manji soon took care of that with a few wood chips forced into the crack. Then he stripped to his loincloth, picked up a hoe and went outdoors to dig drain trenches around the hut and prevent water from running under the walls.

After finishing the job and putting on his dry clothes again, he stayed indoors with Rin, smoking and telling her stories while she was awake and napping while she rested. She ate a little and drank plenty of water, but her stomach still couldn't handle a solid meal and she abruptly lost her first attempt at breakfast. When she tried to stand, she staggered with dizziness. Instead of letting her go out in the blowing wet to the latrine, Manji insisted on finding a bucket for her to use, and emptied and washed it after retreating to the covered porch to give her privacy.

When the rain eased a little in the early afternoon, Manji got out a straw cape and hat and went on a brief errand to the village. He returned dripping with water, his sandals soaked and squelching; he told her that the roads were flooding in the low spots and that he had waded part of the way home.

After hanging up the cape to dry under the eaves, Manji unrolled the bundle he had brought and laid out some steamed buns and rice balls for her. Those went down much more smoothly than the tough and fibrous corn, and by evening Rin

felt stronger.

Thunder rolled and grumbled in the distance while Rin sat up in bed and ate rice balls for dinner. She arranged the quilt around herself to cover her stomach; after being so unpleasantly sick, she didn't want to risk another chill. Manji pulled up the corner of the damp blanket and peered out into the growing darkness.

"Damn, the road's starting to look like a river. Hear that gravel rattling down the slope?"

"The road's washing away?" She looked up in some alarm.

"Naw, just developing some good ruts. But the water's probably overflowing the paddies by now. I wouldn't be surprised if it's waist deep or more at the bottom of the hill." He let the blanket fall and quirked a brow at her in the lamplight. "So I guess we won't be able to get to the village until this lets up. Sorry; no more treats for a few days."

"That's all right." Rin finished her meal and licked a few particles from her fingers. "My stomach's settled down a lot since morning."

"Eh, I sure hope I don't run out of tobacco. At least you quit upchucking — I was getting damn tired of cleaning up puke. Not sure what I'd've done if you'd gotten really sick."

Rin smiled at Manji; if he was complaining, it was because he had been worried about her. "You've taken good care of me, big brother."

"What the hell else was I going to do?" He squatted on his haunches next to her, grinned and ruffled her loose hair. "Now that's a bed head."

"Oh, is it really messy? I should tidy up." She felt around for her comb, but Manji's fingers touched her jaw to turn her face towards him. Rin looked up and he held her gaze.

"Feeling better, little sister?"

"Yes..." Her skin tingled and her heart beat faster. What did she see in the guarded thoughts behind that single eye? "Much better."

"OK, I think I'll turn in. It's getting cold, and I'm gonna try some early-morning fishing." He leaned over and brushed his lips on her forehead, and then started to get up. "Sleep tight and stay warm."

"I will." Rin put a hand on his arm and spoke softly. "Especially if my big brother will too."

"Hnn?"

"Will you sleep next to me tonight? Only if you would like..."

Manji looked at her for a few moments, his expression quizzical. She moved closer and laid her head on his chest, rubbing her cheek against the crisscross scar just below his collarbone. He dropped one knee to the ground, patted her hair and remained silent. She had an idea of thanking him for his kindness, or showing that she pardoned him for his crude talk: more than that, perhaps, but not a gratitude she could speak aloud. Was he considering how to refuse, or how to accept? Deep heartbeats reverberated in her skull, echoing the low rumbles of the distant thunder.

With an arm around her shoulders Manji drew her down to the bed; he covered both of them with the same quilt, and then blew out the lantern.

PART FIFTEEN

"Big brother, please come in out of the rain!" Rin cupped her hands around her mouth and called down to the pond from her shelter under the porch. "Don't you have enough yet?"

"Wooh-hoo!" Manji whooped and pulled yet another silvery fish from the gray, rain-speckled waters. He unhooked it, threw it in his leaf-lined creel and baited the hook again. Rin thought he looked wet and chilly despite his straw rain gear, but he was laughing and in high spirits. "This has to be the best fishing day of my life! I'm not going to be ungrateful when the water *kami* are feeling so generous."

"You must have caught ten at least! How can we eat that many at once?" Rin warmed her hands over the fire she had built in the *hibachi* and adjusted her broad-brimmed rain hat. "Don't you want to have breakfast?"

"Sure I do." He held up the creel and beckoned with his head. "Come and get 'em!"

Rin slid down the hill and took the basket, which shook with its load of flopping fish. Water ran down Manji's face from the holes in his old hat. "You're so wet! You'll catch a chill or something and then I'll have to nurse you instead, and you'd be the worst patient in the world."

"Naah, don't worry." Manji reached up and patted her bottom, then stroked it in a proprietary manner. "I think I can get warmed up pretty easy." He grinned at her.

Rin blinked at him, a little surprised at his lusty cheerfulness, but scrambled up the hill again with the heavy creel. She selected three of the largest fish and cleaned and split them for the grill. By the time they were hot and sizzling, Manji had hooked five or six more and strung them on a cord of twisted reeds. He stumped up the hill with his catch and shook himself, shedding a shower of droplets everywhere. As they hit the fire they evaporated in tiny bursts of steam.

Accepting a skewered fish from Rin, he tore into it without waiting for it to cool. "Damn, that's good," he said, blowing through a hot mouthful. He fumbled with the ties at the throat and dumped the rain cloak on the ground; it had soaked through and the shoulders and back of his *kōsode* were wet. He sat cross-legged on the porch and ate with loud smacking noises. "Crap, I think I burned my tongue..."

Rin consumed her own breakfast with a little more delicacy and reached across the grill to fetch Manji another fish when he had devoured the first. He intercepted her and gave her a quick kiss on the side of the neck. "Nothing like a meal fresh-caught in your own back yard. And I got just the right spice for my food, too. Eh?"

"What?" She blushed, putting a hand to the place his lips had touched.

"Eat up, woman. We're gonna go to school today."

They cleaned the rest of the fish and packed them between wet leaves in the creel to keep them cool. Inside the hut, Manji shed his soggy clothes and indicated that Rin should help him dry off. She rubbed a cotton towel over his back and hair and then turned to hang his things on the wall. Manji put an arm around her waist, chuckling, and pulled her backwards into his embrace. He felt cold and damp, but with a glow under his naked skin.

"Not getting shy, are you?"

"Um..." Rin closed her eyes and trembled while Manji stroked her abdomen in slow circles. "No, not really, but...."

"Good." He slid a hand above her wide *obi* and brushed a thumb over the nipple of one breast. "'Cause I should warn you, I ain't feeling bashful in the least."

Rin's breathing deepened; the backs of her arms rubbed Manji's bare stomach. No consideration could take the allure from his touch, it seemed. Even though she wondered where the stopping point of their physical relationship ought to lie and what might happen before they came to that end, the nearness of his body was enough to send shivers through her nerves from knees to ribcage. Warm moisture tickled between her legs. So if she ever meant to bring up one pressing issue, she had better do it now...

"Manji-sensei, you said you were gritting your teeth..." Rin bit her lips and waited for a sarcastic snarl.

He said nothing for a long moment, and then gently cupped and squeezed the breast. "Yeah, I know."

"Then...?"

"I've had a couple days to rethink how I put that." He sighed in her ear. "Look, there's no point pretending otherwise — I want you any way I can have you."

Questions? They seemed to puff into vapor and vanish in the heat of her longing.

"So since this is for you... I'd better let you have your say on what you want from me and make the most of it. No use belly-aching about what we can't change. I promise you won't hear another word on that subject."

One unhappy shadow lifted from Rin's mind; she let her body relax against his.

What was happening to her? The awkward yearnings and vague fantasies of her vanished ignorance were no more. Knowing exactly how it felt to embrace a man had not sated her curiosity in the least and had magnified her desires to an unrecognizable degree. Even though Manji had claimed she was still technically a virgin, her response to him was undergoing a change to a woman's passion. No longer did it savor much of a girl's innocent explorations.

"Oh... Manji..."

"Yeah?" He eased her *furisōde* off one shoulder and nuzzled along her upper back and the nape of her neck. "I'd sure like to make you feel good..."

"Yes... um..." Rin shivered at the touch of his cold nose on her newly bared skin. "Do you mean lessons, or...?"

"Nobody's gonna come along that road for days, and we're not leaving either unless we want to swim. So we stock up on food, we tuck ourselves into bed... and pretend there ain't anything else to think about in the whole damn world. Until the rain stops, that is." Manji turned her in his arms. "Sound like a plan?"

Rin looked him in the face, wondering. If he meant he wanted to avoid boredom while they waited out the storm, that was probably as good a way as any...

"Couple of days, maybe three." He stepped back a little and cupped her elbows in his hands. "It's typhoon season, but I doubt this one's a real dam-buster. Think you can stand being cooped up with me until it blows itself out?" A coaxing tone crept into his voice, though he smiled at her and suggestively raised his brows.

"I think I might be able to." Rin returned the smile and moved to put her arms around his neck. Manji lowered his head and paused; she turned her face to meet his and eagerly kissed him on the mouth. His arms wrapped around her, his lips parted; he didn't feel cold for long.

There seemed to be a change in Manji as well; his obvious signs of desire had greatly increased since the last time he had touched her. Perhaps she was getting better at arousing him? That was a gratifying thought. Rin smiled and squirmed under Manji's weight as he lay naked over her and pressed her to the bed. He pinned her hands above her head and wrapped his legs around hers. Rin's clothes were flung open to expose the front of her body, the ends of her sash draped over the bed where Manji had tossed them as he yanked at the knot; he hadn't even bothered to remove it all the way. Engulfing a breast in his mouth, he ran his tongue in a wide circle. Her long underskirt crumpled above her knees but still hid the joining of her legs.

Stretched under him, secured by his grasp and the entwining of their bodies: Rin felt a little vulnerable and at the same time impatient to know what sensations lay in store for her. Manji's hair tickled under her chin as he nuzzled her breasts, alternating his attentions from one to the other. When he sucked too hard on her tender flesh, she gasped and wriggled. He stopped for a moment to lick the pinkened spot, then resumed again more gently, making an evident effort at restraint.

She had not thought of that area as a source of great enjoyment, since her young bosom had barely ripened yet and she was still a little unfamiliar with the adult equilibrium of her body. But the repeated pressure and movement of Manji's warm wet mouth and tongue over her nipples coaxed a sweet arching languor through her. Tantalizing twinges in her groin answered his every caress. Rin rolled her head from side to side, pushed up a knee to rub against Manji's thigh and sighed in pleasure. Every time they did this, it felt nicer...

"Aw, you taste good," he muttered with his face buried in her breasts. "Nothing better to put in my mouth than a woman..." He released one of her wrists and stroked her cheek, then moved upwards and kissed her.

His lips felt soft on hers at first, then tightened and took her mouth with urgent intention. With a sudden turn of his head, he pressed her lips open and plunged his tongue against hers. Both of his hands cradled her head now, his heartbeat thumping like blows of a fist to her ribs.

Rin lifted her arms to circle his shoulders and raised her chin to return the kiss.

Along her cheek Manji's breath shuddered and blasted from his nostrils; he groaned into her mouth and let her search between his lips. Her tongue slid over and around his. Rin explored his naked back with her hands. The raised and intersecting marks of long-healed wounds met her fingertips; she skimmed over them and ventured lower. She liked the way his body began to move when he became thoroughly excited; his chest expanded, his hips rolled in shallow exploratory thrusts, his buttocks flexed and relaxed under the influence of some unrelenting inner rhythm he could no longer resist.

Manji took over the kiss again and forced her head deep into the mattress with his vigor. She sighed under his possessive mouth, reveling in her effect on him. Returning to his shoulders, she stroked them and slipped her hands between their bodies to touch his chest. The air was still cold and damp, but Manji was right about warming up this way; he felt as hot now as if he stood in front of a fire.

Manji rolled over, taking her with him, and grabbed her around the waist to lift her and seat her on his pelvis. Her braid rings bounced on her shoulders. Though his stiff *henoko* nudged her bottom, her underskirt prevented skin-to-skin contact. The thin silk bunched at the joints of her hips and rode up over her stomach. Manji shoved it out of the way and thrust his hand between her spread legs and underneath. He drew two fingers along her opened cleft, back to front.

His fingertips slipped between the tender folds; Rin moaned and instinctively ground her bottom in a circle. Rising and falling on her knees, she slid her *bobo* against Manji's moving hand. Up and down, back and forth: both helping him to stroke her and pressing his erection between their bodies. Quickly she teased herself into a heated whirl of arousal. Manji reached up to pinch and roll her nipples with his other hand. Through half-closed lids and the screen of her lashes, she saw him watching her with open mouth and narrowed eye. Lacking sight in the one, he seemed to concentrate all the power of his gaze into the other, its dilated pupil open on intense blackness. Rin tried to focus on that seeming void, to shed some sort of light into its depths by sheer force of will, but the pleasure seized her body and her mind sank to oblivion under its breathless weight.

Manji continued his caresses while she rode out her spasms and folded her in his arms when she sank down to recline on his chest. She shook with her heartbeat, gasping against his throat. Manji sniffed his hand and then touched her nose. "Here, lick it."

"Wh... what?" She smelled her own lingering moisture.

He stroked her lips and opened them; Rin let the tip of her tongue touch his

index finger. She detected a subtle flavor a little like the liquor of fresh oysters, but warmer and earthier. She licked his finger again and gently sucked the tip. Manji chuckled and patted her face. "Good girl."

"That was a lesson, *sensei*?"

Manji rolled her to the side and got up on one elbow. "Kind of. Just wanted to give you a taste of my favorite food."

She laughed and hid her face, blushing. "Food?"

"That's right. Let me fill myself up... and I'll keep coming back for more." He thrust a hand between Rin's legs and parted them, and then cupped her bottom with his forearm pressing her thighs open. "Yeah, that looks like a banquet to me."

"Then come and eat, because I'm feeling very generous today." Uncovering her face, she smiled in invitation. Manji crouched and shifted, keeping his hand where it was. He lay down again on his other side, his hips at the level of her head and his cheek resting on her inner thigh. Why was he taking this position? Rin wondered what advantage it had over lying between her legs, and then realized that his *henoko* was now within her reach. She immediately clasped it in her hand.

Manji chuckled low in his throat and hitched a little closer to her. "Good: you're taking the initiative."

"Thank you, *sensei*."

He examined her *bobo* with a hungry look, and then sighed. "You know, I did burn my tongue pretty badly on that fish."

"What? Hasn't it healed yet?"

"Yeah, it has." Manji grinned at her upside down. "Hey, you sound kinda worried for my health... at least when it concerns that part of me."

"Oh, you!" Rin giggled and tried to knee him in the jaw, but he hooked her thigh in one arm and ostentatiously licked his lips.

"Even if my little friends hadn't already taken care of it, here's the cure for everything that ails me." He drew her hips in to meet him, and Rin cried out, sated with happiness.

PART SIXTEEN

“Aw, girl...” Manji arched his back and groaned loudly. “Holy shit, I think you got the knack now... aw!” His hips jumped when she plunged his *henoko* all the way into her mouth and the head nudged the back of her throat. “Damn, woman, you’re killing me!”

Rin giggled with her lips embracing the base of Manji’s straining organ and tickled the delicate skin behind his sack to make him buck again. Could he still not make up his mind whether she was girl or woman?

At this moment, she felt as womanly as she had ever been. Perhaps that was a result of learning to wield the power a woman could have over a man’s body. Though she was also starting to realize why men were afraid of that power. Even Manji?

Now his mood had lost all hint of his former irritation and volatility. He reveled wholeheartedly in the pleasures of her bed as if the curtain of rain had indeed shut out the rest of the world. Perhaps Manji was still ashamed of venting against women — Rin didn’t entirely believe he had meant nothing by that — and was trying to show her an opposite attitude, but that might not be the whole story.

Rin opened her eyes and peered up along Manji’s quivering stomach and chest to his face, which was perspiring and open-mouthed, heated with pleasure. Right now he moaned in ecstasy at the same act he had previously been so uneasy about enjoying. He didn’t hold himself back until he exploded; he seemed to express each feeling as it came and offer it to her without embarrassment.

Was this the difference between using her and meeting her halfway?

Rin wondered what difficulties Manji had stripped away, what self-made obstacles he had fought through to come to this simple point. To be just a man enjoying a woman...

She had to withdraw a little way to breathe. Manji moaned and shoved his tense fingers into her hair, yanking a few strands from her scalp. "Aw fuck, please... almost there!" His knees bent upwards and his toes clenched with a crackle of straw; she sensed a tremor in his thighs as they clamped her shoulders. She filled her lungs with air and worked him deep again. His fingers relaxed.

"Oh yeah... what a sweet little mouth you got. So hot." He sounded remote and dreamy, and then his voice grated more loudly. "Damn, do it to me!" He grabbed one of her hands and placed it on his sack. Rin squeezed it with experimental gentleness and massaged the resilient *kindama* within the soft wrinkled skin. She kept up her steady sucking rhythm though her lips and cheek muscles were tiring. Manji pulled on her hand and forced her fingers downwards while the heel of her palm pressed into his balls. She encountered the sweaty, hair-roughened cleft of his buttocks.

Manji's breathing accelerated. He kept urging her hand down; Rin ventured a little farther and found an indentation tightly ridged like the petals of a chrysanthemum. It clenched against her fingertip. Manji groaned in obvious gratification and raised his hips, but Rin jerked in shock and almost let his *henoko* slip out of her mouth. He wanted her to touch him *there*?

"Yeah, right there!" He grabbed her shoulder and wrenched her wrist a little pushing her hand inwards. Maybe this was something men liked? She gingerly circled the rim of his hole. "Harder!"

She tried to comply, wondering if he meant this to hurt, but Manji stiffened and clamped down with both hands, his fingertips digging into her flesh. "Gaahh!"

His first spurt of seed shot far enough down her throat that she could not spit it out, so she swallowed and choked. He freed himself from her mouth, seized his *henoko* and forced out the rest of his release. The transformation of Manji's face was enough to erase all of Rin's minor discomforts. She watched him with open lips, mesmerized. So different from his usual air of cynical self-sufficiency, like seeing a garment torn away to expose his naked instincts.

Gradually he composed his features again as his breathing slowed. Rin rested her cheek on his thigh and kissed his relaxed *henoko*. Strange how this one part could flare up above all the rest of him, rule head and heart and belly like a god and then fade into slumber once more. It seemed almost pathetic this way, a half-melted candle, but she knew its peaceful interval would be brief. Rekindled, it sought only to snuff out its own flame again, over and over...

Manji patted her head and made a sound somewhere between a gasp and a

chuckle. "Sorry."

"Um..." Rin would have suffered ten times the inconvenience to see him like that again. She smiled, but coughed against a sticky clot in her throat. "It's OK."

"Here, have a drink." Manji rolled over and picked up the dipper. Rin rinsed out her mouth, crawled up and snuggled beside him; he took a drink himself and wiped his stomach with a paper tissue. He lay down again, gave her a forceful squeeze around the shoulders and kissed the top of her head. "Holy shit, that was great — I think you drained me down to the bottom of the keg with that one. Feels like I've gotten rid of a lot of... heh." He laughed silently. "Thanks."

"Was something bothering you, big brother?" Rin pressed her nose into the side of Manji's sweaty chest, smelling his high aroused odor.

"Sure isn't bothering me now. Forget it." He felt for her jaw and lifted her face to kiss her on the mouth. "Mmm... damn, you turn me on. You want some attention?" One hand slid down to brush her groin hair.

"Again? I'm getting a little tired..."

"Yeah, I guess you might be." He gave her *bobo* an affectionate pat and licked her under the ear. "OK, you rest up and get your energy back." A low, dangerous chuckle. "You're going to need it..."

"Sensei, how much do you think we ought to practice this? You said I had the knack now... did you mean it?"

"Uh... yeah." He pulled back to look her in the face, his expression a little disconcerted. "Wouldn't have said it otherwise."

"Thank you, sensei." She smiled at him. "Then I'm not such a bad student? You seem to be enjoying teaching me today."

"Well, uh... I thought we'd approach it a little... differently."

"Oh? Like how?"

Manji's mouth twitched and his gaze moved from side to side. "Like what we've been doing since breakfast?"

"We've been... pillowing?"

"Well, yeah." He raised his brows at her as if expecting her to fill in a blank. Rin looked inquiringly at him. After waiting a few moments, he picked up a thick lock of her hair and absently stroked it with his thumb. "Little sister... uh... I guess you still want me to be your teacher."

"What else would you call it? You've shown me how everything works and answered my questions."

His cheeks flushed slightly and he looked away for a moment. "Sure I did — you wanted to know. But I couldn't do it cold, see?"

"Cold?"

Manji abruptly sat up. "I'm getting hungry. Guess I'll go start a fire." He retrieved his half-dry clothes from where they hung on the wall and wound his *fundoshi* between his legs.

"Manji-san?" Rin also sat up and drew her *furisōde* around her body. Her loose hair fell forward into the collar as she untangled her *obi* from the straw. "Just a moment — I'll get dressed too."

"Dressed?" He slid his gaze over her, grinned and shook his head. "Naw, no way. Stay right there and take it easy." Manji shoved his toes in his sandals, grabbed a rain hat and ducked through the door; his footsteps splashed in the puddles as he headed around to the covered porch.

She wondered again, watching the blanket sway back into place. The grill rattled outside and a few sticks broke with sharp pops. Rin pulled up the quilt to preserve the lingering warmth of their two bodies until Manji should come back. A crack of flint and steel sounded several times from the back of the hut, accompanied by random humming like a half-forgotten tune.

Something had certainly changed, and obviously for the better from Manji's point of view. After days of anxiety and unhappiness Rin was all too ready to welcome a relief, especially when gratifying attentions from her *sensei* accompanied his improved mood. Perhaps it was best not to inquire too closely if it would only make him uneasy again. On her wrist and shoulder the marks of his fingers began to throb. She dampened a cloth and laid it on the sore spots.

Parting her robe, Rin inspected a scatter of small round bruises on her thighs and one long scratch from an uneven fingernail. Manji always apologized for the damage he did and she always forgave him immediately. But knowing that his passion could injure her no longer held him back. In the slight chill of his absence

she realized that his abandonment of what had been a powerful restraint probably meant, given time, that all of his reservations would burn away. The dampest kindling could not withstand a flame repeatedly applied.

Rin wrapped herself in the quilt and listened to the hiss and snap of Manji's fire outside; his unmusical voice underlined the sounds of the mounting blaze with the bawdy lyrics of a tavern love song she didn't know.

PART SEVENTEEN

Rin rubbed her aching neck and amused herself by bundling and wrapping a few straws to make a little skirted doll. By the time the blanket was pushed aside from the door, she had almost managed to dismiss her more troubling thoughts. After nearly six months of companionship, she ought to know that she was in the safest hands. Her 'big brother' had spilled his blood for her protection again and again. How could he lightly set aside a cause for which he had so painfully labored?

In any case, Manji-sensei was probably going to tell her in a little while that she had learned enough and they should end the lessons. Though he obviously liked the sport for now and might let himself relax with her, he surely wouldn't go beyond a certain point. This wasn't an affair, Rin reminded herself; Manji wasn't her lover. Even less was he the kind of man who changed his mind on truly essential matters. How powerful a torrent would it require to tear him adrift from his foundations? She made a few more little dolls and attempted to stand them up side by side, but they kept falling over and unraveling. Manji came in with his basketwork hat turned upside down as a platter, lined with leaves and heaped full of steaming fish.

"Here, I grilled 'em all at once." Manji laid down a big leaf as a plate for her and took a large bite of the fish he was eating. "What the heck is that, kid? You still playing with toys?"

"Oh, nothing." Rin pulled the dolls apart into their constituent straws and picked up her food. "Are we that low on firewood?"

"Hnn? Ah, no — I'm just feeling lazy." Manji sat down next to her to finish his own lunch. "Cooking takes too damn much time out of the day. Hope you don't mind a few cold meals."

"No, I don't mind." She peeled the burned skin from the flesh of her fish and set it aside; whether eaten hot or cold, Manji's cooking was usually slapdash. "When do you think the rain's going to stop?"

"Dunno. I took a hike down the road a little ways — it looks like the low ground's all flooded." Manji chuckled with his mouth full. "The village must be sitting in a few *shaku* of water."

"Oh, no!" Rin swallowed a mouthful and gasped. "That's awful!"

"Aw, I doubt anybody's drowned other than chickens. No more'n waist deep, and the stream didn't rise that fast anyway."

"But... but still, there's going to be so much damage..."

"I guess there could be some landslides farther up in the hills. Usually every year a few farmhouses out here get buried in mud." He belched and licked his fingers. "Man, I remember this friggin' huge pile of rocks that took out one whole end of a village up in — "

"Oh, gosh... and we've been lazing away in bed!" She jumped up and pulled the blanket aside to look outside.

"Hey, it's as safe here as anywhere. High enough not to flood, and no hillside above us." Manji got out his tobacco pouch and filled his pipe. "Like I said, we just have to wait it out."

"I suppose you're right." Rin stared into the gray monotony of rain and the swaying crests of windblown trees silhouetted against the gloomy sky. "But I hope the sun comes out soon..."

Manji was silent for a moment. "Getting sick of the inside of this old shack, huh?" It sounded as if he meant it as a joke, but his laugh lacked conviction. "Maybe I'll have to think up some more interesting stuff to teach you."

Rin giggled and looked around. "Such as?"

His eye glinted at her. "Aw, I don't want to throw anything at you that you couldn't handle."

"What couldn't I handle?" She put her arms akimbo, letting her unbound clothing part in front. Manji quirked a brow and puffed out a large cloud of smoke, obviously enjoying the view. "Come on, Manji-*sensei*! I'm not a baby, you know."

"Sure, sure." He looked around and lifted a basket to check underneath.

"Where'd you put that book I got you?"

"The *shunpon*?"

"Yeah, the dirty pictures. Take another look now that you know a little more — they'll probably strike you kinda different." He found it and tossed it at her. "Any questions you got, I'm yours."

Rin knelt down and flipped through the illustrations, which were mostly of men and women engaging in intercourse. Contorted sex positions seemed to be the artist's main preoccupation. The whole business did seem less alien to her now, though of course she and Manji were avoiding penetration so as not to risk pregnancy. Perhaps for more reasons than simple caution: she had an intuition that Manji regarded her virginity as a symbolic state, a ritual barrier rather than a truly physical one. Why else would he be willing to abstain when he wanted her body as much as he did? She felt as if they had done everything possible short of the ultimate act.

He shifted to sit behind her, put an arm around her waist as he smoked and tucked her bottom against his left hip. She paused in her page-turning and he leaned forward to peer over her shoulder.

"That's a good one, huh? She looks like she's getting into it... you think?"

Rin pursed her lips. "It also looks like she could have dislocated something twisting around that way! Maybe she's screaming in pain and he's trying to pop the joint back in the socket before she cracks that iron teakettle over his head."

Her back pressing to his chest, she felt his stomach shake as he laughed. "Hey, I was kinda hoping that book was gonna get you warmed up again. You've had your rest, right?"

"It's just pictures, big brother! Most of them look a little silly."

"Meaning... you prefer looking at a real guy?" His hand wandered upwards and inside her loose clothing. "I think I know one who'd be happy to oblige you." His warm body cradled hers, his chin hooked her shoulder. She felt a smoky exhalation in her ear when he took the pipe out of his mouth and let it dangle from his other hand.

Rin took a deep breath when his fingers closed over her breast. "Manji-san..."

He nuzzled the side of her cheek and angled his head to bring his lips closer to

hers. "What, little sister?"

"...You're about to burn a hole in my clothes."

"Whoops." He sat back and tapped out the glowing pellet of ash from his pipe.

"Not on the floor, OK?" She nodded at a cracked saucer she had set out as an ashtray. Manji grunted and stuck the pipe back in his mouth unlit.

Rin smiled and searched for a picture that had just gained some added interest. "Um... I do have a question."

"Heh... you're blushing." He reclined on one elbow behind her and grinned around the stem of his pipe. "She can take anything, eh?"

"Well, you thought I could, *sensei!*"

"Hah?"

"I'm talking about what you wanted me to do while I was... um..." She nodded at the bed. "You grabbed my hand and put it in, you know, *that* place... right before you went there." His brows went up and she blushed hotter. "What was that about?"

"It feels good, that's what it's about. Why, you want to try it?" Manji waggled his eyebrows.

"Um... do you want that to be the new lesson, *sensei?*"

He broke eye contact for a moment with a hint of annoyance. "Rin... you don't have to call me that all the time."

"You don't like it when I call you *sensei?*"

"Ah, never mind." He extended one hand palm down and beckoned to her. "Yeah, that's something you ought to learn, now that I think about it. But I'll warn you, it could take a little while. Takes some getting used to, and you've got to start slow."

"Start slow? Right now?"

He turned the gesture into a shrug. "Still tired, huh?"

"Sort of... we've done an awful lot today, haven't we?"

"Well, we wouldn't want to wear you out permanently, kid." Manji lay back on the mat with his hands under his head and his knees bent. "Just for your information, I've taken it damn easy on you so far."

Rin glanced at the rising bruises on her wrist. "Compared to what?"

"That's why I got you to tickle me just then." He looked up in the rafters with a significant smile. "I could have stuck it out for days just to stay in your sweet little mouth, but I thought I'd better go there quick to give you a break. If I was really working you over nice and methodical, you'd be begging for mercy."

A slight shudder went through Rin; Manji had claimed he would be too much for her more than once, but she had not had the slightest idea what he meant until now. Occasional glimpses of his unleashed intensity seemed to prove that he was indeed holding back far more than he let out. He chuckled and turned his head towards her.

"Getting scared yet?"

"Of course not!"

"Good girl." He rolled to his side, got up on one knee and seemed to be about to reach for her. "Then come over here and — "

"I've got another question." Rin quickly flipped through the book and found the illustration she was looking for.

He let out a short breath and leaned his forearms on his thigh. "What'cha got there?"

"This one." Rin held up the book so Manji could see it and pointed. "With the two men. What are they supposed to be doing?"

To her surprise, he threw her a quick perturbed glance. "Damn, I must have missed that page."

"So this is something men like?"

"You sure you want to know the whole story on that?" He looked away and scratched the back of his head.

"Why wouldn't I?" She examined the picture again. "I know there are boys in brothels, just like the girls. I'm not completely ignorant."

"No shit."

"I just don't know what that picture means. You said it feels good to be touched there, so I suppose it's got something to do with that. But it looks like the older man is... inside him, somehow." She shook her head. "I don't get it."

"So what?" Manji grabbed the book and tossed it away. "Obviously it ain't got anything to do with females, right? Come on, back under the covers. I'm getting chilly hanging out here in the draft." He discarded his pipe, pulled down the sleeves of his *kōsōde* and rolled her into bed with a flourish.

"Manji-san?"

Settling on his back, he embraced her and pulled her on top of him. "Kiss me, huh?"

Rin leaned down to fulfill the request and slipped her tongue into his mouth when he urged her with open lips. Manji sighed deeply into the kiss, slowly stroking her flanks and back. When she raised her head he was smiling with his eye closed and his lips parted.

She ran her hands over his naked chest, admiring him. He had a swordsman's fluidly-muscled body, straight and long-limbed but not over-tall: a good combination of reach and control. Though Manji's flesh was networked with the evidence of his profession and his face had been hacked about, his scars were comfortably familiar to her and somehow reassuring, looked for like landmarks along a favorite route.

His left eye opened, following the path her hand traced on his lean arm and shoulder, and he gave her a lascivious grin that tingled all through her body.

"You like what you see?"

"Uh-huh."

"Yeah, I like what I'm seeing too." He reached up to fondle her breasts. "Damn, Rin, you look awful pretty this way..."

"Please, Manji-san. I really do want to know about that picture, just for education. Won't you tell me?"

A frown warped the smile from his face. "Boy, you sure know how to kill a mood."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He sat up and put her aside. "Aw, hell. It's just ass-fucking."

"What?"

"Fucking in the asshole, kiddo." He enunciated the words with a raised brow.

Rin's mouth dropped open. "People can DO that?"

"It's a hole, just like a cunt or a mouth. And if it's a hole, somebody's figured out how to fuck it." He groaned irritably and reached for the water dipper.

"But that must be... *awful!* Doesn't it hurt?"

Manji drank deep and wiped his lips. "Naw, not when it's done right. Plenty of oil, that's the ticket."

"You mean... *you've* done it?"

He scratched his head and remained silent. Rin wrinkled her brows and wondered what she had stumbled on--hadn't he been eager to teach her about this part of the body? "Uh... I'm sorry, *sensei*... I mean, um... I shouldn't ask personal questions like -- "

"Nah, nah." He dismissed her concern with a wave of his hand. "Heh... I dunno. I just wasn't thinking you needed to know all about that kind of stuff."

"That kind of stuff?"

"I'm your bodyguard, right? Feels like I ought to be keeping the rest of the world well away from a kid like you... not dumping it on you in the first place." He puffed his cheeks and blew out a noisy gust of air. "What's the big rush? It'll happen soon enough."

"M-Manji-san, you said it might save my life someday." She gave him a tentative smile. "I know you were joking, but..."

"Aw, crap." He dropped his forehead into one palm.

"So if I'll have to know about these things sooner or later... I'd rather hear them from you."

A peculiar expression of pain crossed his face. "From me."

"Of course! Big brother, can you at least give me a little idea before someone else... dumps it on me?"

Manji made a resigned groan. "Like you keep saying... who else could you ask?"

"Yes." She smiled encouragingly and touched his knee. "So, um, what is it that men might like about doing... that thing?"

"Because it's fucking." He turned up his palms with an air of exaggerated patience. "Guys like fucking, period. Believe me."

"But why would they do it with other men instead of with a woman?"

"Plenty of reasons. Like, they ain't got a woman."

"But there are brothels everywhere! And streetwalkers and inn waitresses and... I don't understand."

"Everywhere? There ain't a lot of broads open for business in a military household."

"Oh... you said that men in training weren't supposed to go with prostitutes."

"Yep, and you won't get permission to get married until years after that. So when you live in a barracks, like a castle garrison or a *daimyo's* bodyguard... well, guys will be guys."

Rin frowned in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Everybody's got an asshole, kid."

"You mean they all do it... to each OTHER?" Her eyes dilated. "Samurai?"

"DO they?" Manji laughed out loud. "They're freakin' notorious for it, some places. Bad as monasteries. But of course... it's the good-looking kids who get most of the attention." He shrugged and took another drink of water as if to wash out his mouth.

Rin looked at Manji's face, at the hard masculine angles under the scars that she thought of almost as natural features like his nose and mouth, and tried to picture him as a youth. Softer skin free of marks, finer brows and no beard bristles: a pair of clear eyes instead of a sunken clouded cornea. She bit her lips.

"I... I never heard about this kind of thing before."

Manji snorted. "Oh, I don't think your daddy would have casually brought it up over dinner, but his students would've had a good pecking order established. You know that bunch of *dōjō* clowns who caught you out in the mountains? Definitely nailing each other." He got back under the quilt and rearranged her legs to spoon her body with his.

"Really?"

"Hell, yes. It's like part of their training. You get yourself a mentor, and you want to make sure he's willing to do his best for you, so..." He made a gesture. "Didn't I tell you that?"

"Manji-san... Um, how old were you when you joined your lord's retinue?"

He looked at her with opaque amusement. "Thirteen."

She clapped a hand over her mouth.

"What's the big shock, kid? It's the same all over. When you're one of the little boys, you suck up to the big boys, and once you've taken it long enough, you get to be one of the big boys yourself. What goes around, comes around."

"B-but... oh, Manji!"

"Hey, it ain't only about getting your rocks off. 'Course not." His voice harshened in derision. "It's *būshidō*, you gotta understand. Passin' down the glorious martial traditions. There ain't no other way to teach the young 'uns how to be real samurai — and this is what it boils down to, see? If women make you weak, then sleeping with a guy makes you strong. So you hear piles of beautiful speeches about lifelong devotion to your comrade, inspiring sacrifices on the battlefield, dying bravely for the one you love — complete friggin' bullshit, in other words."

She shifted around to face him as he spoke, watching the half-controlled movement of expression across his features. "Why do you say that?"

"Nothing's worth dying for... if you got something to live for, that is. Hell, I should talk." He gave a sarcastic chuckle.

Her throat tight, Rin put her head on Manji's chest and her arms around his neck. "Big brother... please forgive your little sister."

"For askin' her little questions? Naw, nothing doing." He briefly patted her hair.

"Then — um — maybe you prefer to do that... thing... with a woman?"

"Hell no. If I've got a woman, I just plain fuck her." He caught Rin's eye and made a face. "Assuming she's open for business, that is." She was reminded again that Manji had probably never before thought about sex as anything other than a transaction. No wonder at all...

"But... I guess you couldn't get pregnant from that thing, huh? If a man's seed goes into a woman's, um, bottom, instead of her *bobo*, there can't be a baby."

"Yeah, that's right." His body tensed. She could not tell whether he was disturbed at the idea or actually giving it consideration: perhaps some of each.

"So, that wouldn't count... would it?"

Manji's eye dilated and his face reddened. For a moment Rin sensed the rising swell of an answering temptation, a half-seen motive swimming under his shadowed surface. He let out a sharp pant as if to frighten it back to the depths. "What the *hell*?"

"Uh... just asking. I'm not saying we ought to — "

"Damn straight we're not going to do that, girl!" Manji sat upright out of her embrace. "That would be a hell of a lot more than YOU could take!"

"What? Why?"

"Come on!" He gave a snort. "Ain't you the one that thought it had to be awful?"

"You said it wasn't if it was done right... and I guess you know how to do it right. Right?"

"Rin — kid — !" He stared at her in disbelief, something like the way he had reacted to her first request to see him naked.

"Heh... I guess I surprised you again." She smiled and lightly stroked the hair on his leg. "Wouldn't it be sort of... educational?"

"That ain't at all what I had in mind for you." Manji slowly shook his head. "Like I say, it's a man's game. I've never done it to a woman... even when I didn't have to pay extra for special requests."

"But you said everyone has a — "

"I say too damn much, that's what I say! Look, take my word for it and let's drop the whole freakin' subject." He wiped a hand over his sweaty face.

"All right, if you want." She chewed her lip in thought. "Then... would you tell me something about, um... the regular way?"

"About plain old fucking?" Manji chuckled and looked relieved. "Sure, what do you want to know?"

"Why you... uh, why men like to do it."

He laughed more heartily. "Why *wouldn't* men like to do it?"

"Oh, I've got some idea by now, but it's only speculation and I guess that can go astray. Could you give me some specifics? Of what you feel like when you're doing it."

"Aw... kind of hard to put it in words."

"But since we're not going to do it, that's the only way I'll know." Rin propped her chin on her hands and looked inquiringly at him.

"Yeah, yeah..." He scratched his head. "Fine, I'll give it a shot." He was silent for a minute, flickers of expression twitching his brows. Obviously he was calling up past experiences, some more pleasurable than others.

"What are you thinking, Manji-san?"

"About a woman's cunt..."

"What about it?"

"It's... soft. But strong, too. It can fool you, just how strong it pulls you in. It's cushy like a thick *futon*. Feels like you're dreaming, sometimes..." He closed his

eye and smiled. "Just rockin' on the water, slow and easy... or like a mountain river, fast and powerful. It'll carry you away..."

"That sounds nice."

"Yeah, it is." He opened his eye and gave a rueful smirk. "Even when it ain't so great, fucking is still damn good. But being inside a woman who really wants me there..." Manji trailed off; his gaze brushed her body and returned to her face. Rin saw his lips compress and his jaw clench as if he silenced an unfinished thought. When she raised her brows in question he looked away and cleared his throat.

"That's really nice for a man?" Stirred by his reflective tone and wishing he would say more, Rin reached out and stroked his palm. "Then what's it like for the woman?"

His expression closed down; he pulled back and made a fist. "You're asking me?"

Belatedly she realized Manji had not actually said he knew this experience first hand. "Oh... well... didn't you ever ask a woman how she liked it with you? I mean, other than me..."

"I never had a broad turn down the cash, if that's what you're talking about." He came as close to snarling at her as he had in several days.

Rin covered herself. "Big brother..."

"Sorry." He slumped forward, head between his knees.

"You can't be saying that women didn't enjoy being with you. I'm never going to believe that, even if you did feel obligated to give them money!"

He slumped a little further, then sat up and rubbed his upper lip. "Well... thanks. I guess."

"I mean it." Rin got up on her knees and pressed her cheek to his hard shoulder blade. She put her arms around his body. "You've made me feel wonderful. Every time you touch me. Haven't I told you?"

He chuckled silently, shook his head and patted her hands as they clasped together over his stomach. "All right, I got it."

"You seem to know exactly what to do with every single part of me. So I can't be the only woman who's ever said that, can I?"

Manji let out a long breath with a hint of a groan in it. "Rin... don't take this wrong. But whores say whatever the hell they think will get 'em a few more coppers."

She held him even more tightly. "I... I guess I understand."

"Yeah, like that slut the other day — " He broke off. "...Aw, shit."

"You mean... O-Hama? Ryonosuke's girl?"

"Forget I mentioned her, OK? If I never have another lay like that one, it'll be too soon." He gritted his teeth, looped an arm around her neck and pulled her down with him. "Now stay in bed, dammit. I still got a few more surprises up my sleeve."

Rin smiled up at him as he loomed over her and swept her robe aside to expose her breasts. "Oh, is that where you keep them all?"

"You got it. Right next to the weapons collection." A dark grin crossed his face and his weight crushed down on her body.

PART EIGHTEEN

“So what is it about going all the way that you think would be bad? I mean... besides the baby part.”

Manji’s freshly filled pipe slipped out of his fingers and fell to his lap. Rin looked at him in some surprise; Manji had a swordsman’s dexterity and she couldn’t remember ever seeing him accidentally drop something.

With a quick motion Manji scooped up the pipe and replaced the spilled pinch of tobacco in the tiny bowl. “Ain’t that enough?” Turning away from her, he slid up the paper shade and lit his pipe from the lantern. “Shit, that’s all I need — a passel of snotty brats biting my ankles!”

“Of course it’s enough!” Rin’s face heated in embarrassment and she busied herself with clearing up the remains of their dinner. Soft rain pattered the shingles over their heads.

“Dang, I don’t have too many smokes left.” He tucked away his slender tobacco pouch and looked over his shoulder. “Finished already? Isn’t there anything else to eat?”

Rin sat back on her heels. “Yes, we have some sweet potatoes. Are you still hungry?”

“None of those grilled fish left? I thought I made a pretty big catch.”

“You did. But that was yesterday, and you’ve been eating a lot, big brother!” Rin wrapped a pile of well-cleaned fish skeletons in the leaves they had used for plates.

“You kept giving ‘em to me.” Manji made a grimace. “Why didn’t you warn me to save a few for later?”

“Would that have stopped you?” Rin smiled at him and rolled her eyes.

Considering his exertions over the past two days, no wonder he had been hungry. "How long did you expect them to keep without spoiling, anyway? It's a little chilly, but it's not like it's winter yet."

"Eh." Manji muttered to himself for a few moments and chewed on the stem of his pipe. "Guess I'll have to get up early. Or I could go out now, but I never have any luck after sunset." His gaze fell on the untidy pile of straw. "Maybe it'll still be raining in the morning..."

"Do fish bite best in the rain?"

"Hah?" He turned his head. "Uh, yeah, a lot of the time they do."

"Then you ought to have tried while it was still light out." Rin shook her head and collected a few stray bones from the mats. She wondered not for the first time if the *kessen-chu* had anything to do with Manji's tireless sexual vigor, though his interest in her body seemed to increase hourly rather than return to a fixed level. Lacking a basis for comparison, she thought it possible that any man of reasonable youth and virility closeted with a willing new partner would have been just as indefatigable. "Did you really plan for us to end up spending the entire day in bed again? I thought after yesterday that you would have had enough of that for a while."

"Enough? Hell no, woman." Creases deepened on his forehead. "You telling me to lay off you?"

Rin dipped her head to hide her pleasure at the implied compliment. "No... I didn't say that."

"OK, then." His expression lightened and he beckoned her over with a jerk of his chin. "Come keep me company. You're too pretty to go wanderin' off on your own."

"Just a moment — you haven't given me a chance to do any housework since we woke up!" She picked up a twig broom and swept the bare dirt sections of the floor. "Would you fix the mattress, please? It's spread all over."

"Sure thing." Manji chuckled, got up on his haunches and pushed the disarrayed bedding back into a compact mound. "Can't imagine how it got that way... heh, heh."

Rin blushed again. "The roof's leaking some more. Would you?"

“Yeah, sure.” He turned a box over and stood on it to look for cracks between the shingles.

Rin searched the corners of the hut with her broom, trying to think of a subtle approach to the question she had just tried to raise. Although she believed herself open to almost any experience, she had spooked Manji more than once with her naïve boldness. Probably no prudent woman dropped unvarnished sexual proposals; she let a man think it had been his idea and pretended to be surprised when he made advances. Rin smiled at what seemed like a revelation of secret feminine wisdom.

She stole a glance at Manji; he had stuck a handful of straw in his belt and was methodically caulking leaks. Upraised, his arms were half-bared with his sleeves fallen back to his elbows. Rin felt a stir in her belly. Manji’s looks weren’t exactly refined, but his body fascinated her in its coordinated strength and spare lines. Knowing his flesh as intimately as she did now added greater dimensions to her original dreams of provoking his masculine interest. So far nothing had daunted her about sex other than the prospect of pregnancy. She wanted her *yōjimbō* to see her as an adult and a woman, not as a girl he still had to shelter. She longed to test the utmost capacity of her courage and her ability to please him.

Her cheeks warmed. If a softer emotion seemed to lurk behind her determination to give him as much as he would accept, she would have to suppress every sign. Any suspicion on Manji’s part that she still harbored tender feelings towards him would surely bring down the entire arrangement with a crash. It wasn’t romance she wanted, Rin reasoned; it was only a rite of passage.

“Um... Manji-san...?”

“Hnn?”

“It was just a feeling I had... but I wondered about some of what you said the morning we woke up together... the first morning.”

Manji’s hand checked in mid-motion and the clump of straw he had been holding scattered to the floor. Rin paused in her sweeping and waited for him to volunteer something, but he grabbed another clump from his belt and returned his focus to his work. “Remember? You thought you had broken your promise, and you told me – ”

“Forget that.” He stuffed straw into cracks with a bit of split shingle. “I hadn’t done it, so it doesn’t matter a damn.”

"No, but you believed you had, and you seemed to think that created an obligation you couldn't refuse."

Manji swatted roof drips away from the bridge of his nose and didn't reply.

Rin sighed to herself and pressed her cheek to the handle of her broom, remembering the way he had looked when he had vowed he would try to make her happy. "It's not that I don't appreciate you saying that you would be responsible for whatever happened, and I guess you said it because you're my bodyguard and you want to be sure I'll be taken care of... in every way. So... thank you, Manji." Her lips trembled, so she pulled them inwards.

He grunted and twitched one shoulder.

She wiped away a wistful snuffle and began sweeping briskly; reading too much into gestures he had made only from a sense of duty was no way to project clear-eyed maturity. "But I want us to talk these things over and be totally plain about what each of us is thinking and not make assumptions. When people have discussions often enough, they can't possibly get the wrong impression or miss important things, can they?"

"Sure... whatever."

Rin was positive he was only half listening at best, but she was determined not to be discouraged. "So... um, I thought I should tell you something."

He made a long-suffering sigh. "Then I guess you're gonna do it."

"Well... uh... if I was going to be married to a respectable man someday, of course I would need to be very careful about my, um, chastity. But even though I made all that noise about going home and re-establishing myself in society, I know that's not ever going to be possible."

"Hah?"

"I think I was only trying to make it sound better to you when I meant to leave." Rin tried to laugh and finished sweeping up bits of straw. "Frankly, Manji, I don't have a reputation to lose!"

Manji lost hold of the bit of shingle; it ricocheted off the box at his feet and bounced into a corner of the hut. "What the fuck?" He got down with a loud thump.

“Without my parents to watch over me for the last two years, how could anyone consider me a respectable girl any more? I’ve been living and traveling with you for a long time, anyway. Even though nothing happened until two weeks ago and I’m still a virgin... sort of... that’s trivial now.” She dropped her head and took a deep breath. “No one would believe you’ve treated me like a sister. People have been making assumptions ever since the first night I slept here.”

When she glanced up, Manji regarded her with an intent and narrowed eye. “And that adds up to... what?”

“I never would have made any demands on you. I just wanted you to know that.”

“Demands?”

“If we really had done it and if you had asked me if I wanted you to be my — well, my *danna* — I would have said no, it wasn’t necessary. Not if you meant it as compensation, because obviously that would be way too big a sacrifice for you. I guess if I turned up pregnant, I wouldn’t have had a choice! But as long as I did have a choice — ”

“You would have said no?” His brows creased.

“Manji-san, I’m trying to say I don’t think the same way I did two weeks ago. I was being very childish and I had a lot of silly illusions. Those are completely gone!” She flicked the sweepings outdoors with the broom.

“Oh... no shit.”

“I thought you realized that, big brother. Why else would you have decided it was all right to teach me and let yourself enjoy it?”

An odd ironic tone flattened his voice. “Yeah, why else?” He squatted on the mat and re-lit his pipe.

“I’m learning to view things more like a man does, you see. I don’t want to be weak or think like a sentimental girl. That almost got me in some of the worst trouble I’ve been in! I need to treat sex the way you do.”

“The way *I* do?” Manji made a deeply skeptical face and scratched his head.

“Well, maybe I shouldn’t let it make me take risks I wouldn’t have otherwise... but you treat it like pleasure instead of promises and you don’t load it down

with complications. No illusions and no expectations!" Rin put the broom away and wiped her hands. "Why don't more people learn that lesson? Sex seems so simple when you think about it like that."

"Yeah, sure... plain as black and white." Puffs of smoke issued from Manji's pipe in time with his dry chuckle.

"Big brother... you sound like you think this is a joke!" Rin knelt in front of him and peered earnestly into his face. "Haven't I shown you that I can do all sorts of things in pillowing and not imagine any of them is a big deal? I know you don't want to keep this up forever, because that's not the point. When you've finished teaching me, then we can stop no matter what we might have done together. I promise I won't get upset at all. I'm serious!"

He finished his pipe in several long draws before he spoke again; after looking around for the cracked saucer, he tapped out his ashes precisely in the center of the dish. "I guess you are, little sister."

"And...?"

He smiled with unambiguous irony and shook his head. "We'll find that out when the time comes."

"I thought you'd be proud of me!" She chewed her lips in frustration. "Manji, there's something else I should tell you."

"Eh?"

"About one of the things that Hyakurin said to me that night we spent at the Mugai-ryū's bathhouse."

"Hyakurin." He made a half-contemptuous grunt and turned to put his pipe away.

"She was one of the people who thought we must be together. I told her we weren't, and she said that was good, because if I fell for a man like you... it would only cause me pain."

Manji's fist closed on his pipe in a sudden convulsive movement; he cut his palm on the small sharp blade under the bowl. "Ow!"

Rin flinched in startlement. He showed his teeth, looked at the blood pooling in his hand and closed his lips.

“Oh, Manji! Gosh, you’re awfully clumsy this evening!” She reached for a cloth and tried to take his hand, but he shook off the blood as if from the tip of a sword and folded his arms inside his *kōsōde*. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’d been drinking up the rest of that keg of *saké* you bought.”

“Haven’t touched a drop, girl. It only gets me into trouble.”

“Well... uh... but doesn’t that reassure you? I guess I didn’t know what Hyakurin meant then, but I do now.” She smiled and tilted her head. “And I’ve taken it to heart, really. Of course I’ll always be grateful for how you’ve helped me, big brother, and I’ve told you how much I care about you. But to be honest, I don’t think I could stand having you as my *danna*!”

Manji flushed across the cheekbones. “What?”

“Well, gosh, you’re not exactly romantic!” She giggled at his obvious discomfiture. “And you’re so rough you bruise me, and you tease me like a little sister, and as far as I can tell you’re totally insatiable in pillowing. And you said you were taking it easy on me!” Manji suddenly got up and moved to the door. “If I was your woman — if you could treat me any way you felt like — you’d probably be ten times worse!”

He turned and shot a look at her, one hand gripping the edge of the doorway. Though his lips looked taut and he was frowning, he didn’t seem precisely angry. “Worse, huh?”

Rin covered her mouth and laughed. “Oh, you don’t think you could be any worse? Maybe you’re right — you’re pretty awful already!”

Manji stared at her a moment longer, then smiled faintly and tilted his head back. “Yeah, I’m just about intolerable.”

“See, if I was all mushy on you, I could never tell you that. I’d say you were wonderful, even if you weren’t! And I’d be cuddling up to you all the time and fussing with your clothes and nagging you for compliments, and worrying when you were gone and telling you to get a haircut and not to drink too much or be with other women. You’d hate that!”

The distant, abstracted look on Manji’s face didn’t tell her much. “Oh, you know just what it’d be like, huh? Got me in the bag already?” He spoke softly, but with an undertone that prickled at the back of her neck.

"Manji-san? Um... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to insult you. I thought I was just telling the truth..."

"Naw, sounds about right. Guess I need reminding." He gave her a half-smile and pushed the blanket aside. "Weather's changing." A gust swirled through the door and lifted the edge of a mat. Another chill ran over Rin's scalp and made her hunch her shoulders. "Rain might not last too much longer... but it's gonna be windy tonight."

"That's OK — you can keep me warm."

Manji turned his head halfway, showing his blind eye. "If you want me to."

"Of course I do... why wouldn't I?" She rose and came to him.

"Dunno." He looked away again. "Maybe I'm too damn rough. Bruises and all that."

"Gosh, that's no worse than sword training! Well... it's much nicer in some ways." Rin laid her cheek against Manji's shoulder. "And I guess I am learning a lot, because I certainly feel more confident now. Do you think I've gotten the basic idea?"

Manji grunted and stared out at the dark gray sky.

"You can tell me — be honest. Not that you wouldn't be anyway!"

He raised his arm and rubbed his neck, dislodging her. "Yeah, I'd say you're getting the idea. At least... about the parts you need to know."

"Oh, good. But does that mean there are some parts you haven't been telling me about?"

He didn't immediately reply, but drew a slow harsh breath and let it go.

"Manji-san... I did say something to offend you, didn't I?"

"Woman..." He showed his teeth again and Rin jumped.

"Wh-what?"

"Woman — shut up." Manji turned, seized her chin in one hand and kissed her so hard the joints of her jaw popped. His other arm lashed around her waist. She

couldn't move; his muscles felt like binding ropes and his mouth persuaded her with far more emphasis than necessary. Though Manji's ferocity took her breath away, the last thing she wanted was to refuse him.

He pulled Rin over to the bed, deposited her on it and dropped to his knees beside her. Not waiting for a response, he shoved her clothing into a bundle at her waist. With quick yanks he untied his *obi* and loincloth. He grabbed her knees, parted them and pushed back on her thighs to elevate her pelvis.

Then he paused, slid his hands down to her ankles and caressed the insteps of her bare feet with his thumbs while he stared at her nakedness in the lamplight. The passion seething on his face fascinated Rin; she had not seen this reckless quality in him since the day he had ambushed her in the woods. But she had little time to speculate on how she had struck such a nerve, for Manji crouched over and put his mouth between her legs and the only thing she could remember how to do was cry out his name.

Maybe a woman's body was the sole relief for his kind of hunger. At first he licked her in long ravenous strokes, scooping his tongue around her soft prominences as if to gather all the flavor of her into his mouth. Then he lodged his nose at the top of her cleft and pushed his stiffened tongue-tip as deep as it would go into her *bobo*. While he penetrated her and rubbed his face into her most sensitive spots he used his fingers to stroke the opening of her bottom, making her writhe and heave. He kept firm hold of one ankle and pressed her leg up and back until it hit her chest. With the juices and saliva that trickled down her cleft, he moistened his hand and worked the wetness deeper in slow circles that sent her into helpless dizzy moans.

Just as Manji's slick fingertip began to ease into the tight closure, Rin seized him by the ears and let out a long ululating scream. He didn't wait for her to recover, but lunged upwards and slammed his body between her legs. His naked groin ground against hers. The hot shaft of his *henoko* slid up along her cleft and into her dampened hair; the weeping head dug a slippery groove into her stomach. He grabbed her hips; Rin moaned and arched against him. Manji kissed her neck and shoulder, bit her ear, ran his tongue across her cheek and plunged it into her mouth.

With trembling arms she circled his sweating torso under his clothing. Impossible to think, to wonder what he meant to show her now. She wasn't going to ask; there was no patience in him to explain or answer. There was only his body and hers like the convergence of two swift rivers, their united forces mounting each other in waves until all bounds overflowed. Like the first kiss he had given her at her request: a challenge that turned on the challengers...

Manji's body made a sudden heave and the head of his organ sprang out and down to lodge against the slick swollen flesh of her aroused woman's parts. Right in front of her eyes his throat contracted as he swallowed hard; his jaw quivered.

"Rin," he whispered near her ear. "Oh fuck, Rin..."

He seemed to want to tell her much more, make some sharp and ultimate reply to all her chatter: or to let his body say it for him without any further exchange of words. All of her body's openings seemed to contract and tense — his desire felt palpable, like a weapon poised to strike. Surely she hadn't told him by implication that he could take whatever he wanted?

Maybe she had. Rin clamped her lower lip in her teeth, squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head to the side. Manji's loud and shaky breaths blasted in her face, but he was already pulling back. With an obvious effort he shifted one leg over hers and muffled his rampant *henoko* against her thigh.

Then he rose up on his hands, kissed the base of her throat and burrowed his face into her chest. Hot breaths penetrated the thin silk of her inner robe. She helped him untie and unwrap and present her flesh to him. Manji scattered bites and nibbles over her breasts; Rin dug her short fingernails into his scalp and yelped. He almost seemed to be doing this to cool off a little — his body lifted from hers and his breathing gradually slowed. Then he urged her to lie on her side with her thighs together and got in position facing her. This was a familiar act, though she could not recall Manji trembling like this; he hastily moistened his erection with saliva and slipped it into the niche just below her *bobo*. He pulled her into his arms, put a knee on top of hers and drove between her legs.

Though he had grumbled about her lack of padding the first time they tried this, Manji never seemed to let that stop him from doing it again. With a hand braced to her bottom, he pumped his hips against her and pushed his stiff *henoko* back and forth in the enclosure of her inner thighs. His movements stroked her sensitive parts with tantalizing pressure, but what Rin savored most in this position was the suggestion that he was in some way possessing her. She held him tightly and rippled her body against his. Manji's muscles knotted and flexed, his breathing gusting in time with his thrusts. Their bare stomachs sealed together with sweat; he moaned and thrust faster. Maybe to him this felt a little like the real act? She hoped so.

Rin shut her eyes and pressed her ear to Manji's chest. The rapidity of his heartbeat implied that he would go there soon, but she didn't want this to stop.

Disorienting emotion surfaced in her with every movement and she clung to him to keep afloat. Eyes still shut, she sought out Manji's face and mouth and kissed him. He accepted her caresses and returned them, drinking in her exploring tongue and sliding his open lips over hers until the kiss and the rolling surge of their bodies seemed to fuse them into one flow of breath and wetness and human heat. How could they have constrained the unrestrainable into a schedule of lessons, an inventory of limitations? How could she have told him he had no place in her dreams?

A hoarse cry escaped from Manji's throat and Rin's eyes opened to watch him. His face crumpled into painful ecstasy and he departed from her for a few moments; perhaps it was because she saw him from such a distance that she seemed to take in all of him at once. She felt his *henoko* pulse against her woman's parts; his warm seed streaked her thighs. Manji slumped over her with an expiring groan.

It was a long time before she wanted to move again. In silence she stroked his rough hair and cradled his head between her breasts. He breathed peacefully, serene now but fully awake; she saw the movement of his eye flicker over the walls and rafters. Finally he cupped one breast in his hand and kissed it, pressing it to his lips.

"Big brother... um... what are you thinking?"

He gave a weary chuckle. "Thought you told me that already."

"Yes..."

"Don't seem like it ought to be me in bed with you. It ought to be some other guy. But here I am..." He kissed her breast again.

"Some other man? Like who?"

"I dunno... your husband, anyway." He moved a little to the side and glanced up at her. "Look, Rin... if you think there's no chance you'll get married just because you've been hanging out with me, you're wrong. Maybe he won't be a rich *daimyo's* son or anything, but — "

"A *daimyo's* son? Don't be silly!" She giggled and rolled her eyes. "Marrying the daughter of a *dōjō* master?"

"Joke... joke." Manji gave her a taut smile. "Anyway... not a guy like me."

"Well... if my parents had arranged my marriage, it would probably have been another sword school instructor like Father. Or they could have adopted one of his students into the family to marry me and inherit our name and the Mutenichi-ryū."

"Yeah, you'd need a man to run the place." He laughed suddenly.

"Hmm?"

"Occurs to me... kind of out of the blue... that if Anotsu Kagehisa had wanted to do things peacefully and still settle his grand-dad's beef with your Mutenichi-ryū... he should've sent a matchmaker to your daddy and opened negotiations."

"WHAT? Me — marry HIM?" She scrambled to a sitting position and gaped at Manji.

"Assuming he hadn't gone on any killing sprees yet, naturally." Manji propped himself on his elbows and quirked a brow at her. "But that would've settled it just fine, see? Old Anotsu should have had the headship of the school if justice had been done, and you're the only heir to the damn thing. So there you go." He rolled over and lay back with his hands under his head.

"Wh-wh-what...?" Rin sputtered and stammered. But she realized Manji was correct; a marriage between her and the man who had become her worst enemy could have been a solution to a longstanding feud. If her father was agreeable to the match, that was: now an unanswerable question. Anotsu's family had been disgraced when his grandfather was expelled from the Mutenichi-ryū, but Asano Takayoshi might have welcomed the opportunity to heal a festering injury. And then her parents would still be alive...

Rin gulped and suppressed a sob.

She thought she could have suffered almost anything to save her family, even Anotsu Kagehisa's name and bed, but still she shivered. To be married to that cold, fanatical young man? Just because he had legitimately claimed the Mutenichi-ryū didn't mean he would have given up his quest to bring all the sword schools under his banner. He was on a crusade, and a wife would be little part of that. She might have become another sad young woman like the one Anotsu had actually married: Hisoka, whom she had glimpsed at the mountain *dōjō*.

And in that case she would never have met Manji. Slowly her gaze returned to him; he lay bare-chested on the straw, his hair shadowing his ruined eye.

"What made you think of that? It's too weird."

"Aw... well, at least you'd have a good-looking husband... huh?" Manji glanced at her sideways with a slight grin.

Rin jumped. "Eww! Good-looking?" She stopped and considered. "Well... uh... I suppose *some* girls might think..."

"He kinda looked like shit when I saw him, but he must be something else when he's healthy." He gave her a knowing look. "I don't think our Makie-san would have gone for him if he was just a weedy guy with long hair."

"Makie...? Oh... yes." Rin recalled the swordswoman's tender care of the ill and wounded Anotsu after she had gracefully slaughtered his pursuers to a man. "I guess she must be fond of him."

"Probably a little more than fond, kiddo." Manji scooped an arm around her and pulled her over to recline on his shoulder. "If I know the signs."

"Really?" She wanted to ask what signs he meant, but she couldn't see his face; he kept her head pressed to his chest and reached to place her hand on his stomach.

"So... you'd have turned Anotsu down?"

"If my father had told me I should consent for the sake of the family? Of course not, Manji-san – I'm samurai. I know my duty."

He ruffled her hair. "Yeah. But even a guy like him might enjoy having a gal like you to come home to."

Rin grumbled and dug her nose into Manji's neck. "Why? I'd just be some kid he had to marry even though there was a beautiful woman in love with him. And he'd run off to do his fighting and stuff whenever he wanted, and I'd be sitting alone."

"Mmm... before the wedding he might think like that." He rested his chin on the top of her skull. "Maybe he'd find himself stickin' around the house a little more than he ever figured he would."

"What are you talking about, big brother?" She impatiently jerked her head to free a strand of her hair from under Manji's arm. He reached up to help her. Rin

settled down with her cheek on his chest and took a deep contented breath.
"There, I'm comfy now."

"...Glad to hear it, little sister." He spoke with self-mocking tenderness and dropped a light kiss on her hair. "So stay right where you are, and go to sleep."

Rin yawned. "G'night, Manji." Exhausted from their day of bed-sport, she was already half dozing. "Sweet dreams..."

She felt his soft chuckle under her ear. "Oh... damn sweet."

END OF VOLUME TWO

CONTINUED IN VOLUME THREE...

- GLOSSARY -

ada-uchi

Legal vendetta against a person who has offended or murdered a family member. The revenger has to obtain a pardon in advance and carry out the killing properly. Even so, he or she may still be arrested and executed for murder. However, letting an offense go unrevenged may lead to the family name being struck from the records and loss of samurai status because of lack of proper honor.

Even though she applied for permission, Rin has not obtained proper paperwork for her ada-uchi vendetta against the Itto-ryu, possibly because of political machinations within the government.

Anotsu Kagehisa

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

ashigaru

Low-ranking samurai, usually with limited education and skills.

Asano Takayoshi

Rin's murdered father, the head of the Mutenichi-ryu.

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.

bokuto

Wooden practice sword.

bunraku

Plays enacted by puppeteers using large, elaborately detailed marionettes. Edo-period drama came in a number of forms, and bunraku plays are among the most poetic and literate of them. The plots are often tragic, and make use of actual events.

bushi

"Warrior"; i.e., samurai.

bushido

"The way of the warrior"; the unyielding, death-centered samurai honor code.

danna

"Master", a general term. In this historical period, a commoner would use "danna" to address a man of higher rank, a courtesan or geisha would use it to address her principal patron, and a wife would use it to address her husband.

dōjō

Training hall and residence for a sword school.

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.

hadaka-mushi

River porters who carried passengers and cargo across fords without bridges. They were essential for travel, since Japan has lots of rivers, but had a bad reputation for extortion and molesting passengers.

hakama

Wide pleated pants or skirt worn over a *kōsode*.

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.

hatamoto

The most trusted retainers of the Tokugawa shoguns held the hereditary rank of hatamoto or “standard bearer”. Manji’s former lord, whom he assassinated for corruption, was hatamoto.

henoko

Penis.

hibachi

Small grill for cooking.

Ittō-ryū

Anotsu Kagehisa's group of unusual fighters.

katana

The longer of the two swords samurai were entitled to wear. The length varied according to the height and the means of the wearer, but could be anywhere from about two to three feet.

kami

Spirit of the native Shinto religion. Can be used of powerful deities or of minor spirits of trees, waterfalls and other natural features.

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.

kindama

"Golden balls"; a euphemism for the testicles.

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.

manji symbol

"Whirlwind"; a symbol of Buddhism. The manji as a spiritual symbol is complex and multi-faceted, with a long history. It often represents a balance of opposites, yin and yang, heaven and earth, intellect and love, and the energy created by their interaction. Manji's black and white badge split down the middle seems to emphasize those aspects of his chosen name.

Otonotachibana Makie

A beautiful, melancholy musician and sometime prostitute who is the most powerful fighter in the manga. Makie is 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.

Mutenichi-ryū

The defunct sword school headed by Rin's father, Asano Takayoshi.

oiran

The highest rank of licensed prostitute, a sophisticated, highly trained entertainer and courtesan. Proverbially, a night with an *oiran* cost the price of a castle. Only the wealthiest and most extravagantly devoted of men could hope to become an *oiran's* lover; the highest echelons of prostitution conveyed a status something like that of a modern movie star.

ri

4 kilometers/2.5 miles, or about one hour's walk at a moderate pace.

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.

seppuku

"Self-killing"; i.e., suicide, especially when carried out by cutting the belly. With the characters written in reverse order, it is pronounced "hara-kiri".

sen

The smallest denomination of copper coin.

sensei

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

shaku

A unit of length. Its exact dimensions varies according to the time period and what is being measured, but is usually about twelve inches.

sutra

Buddhist scripture.

teppo

A matchlock musket. Guns were introduced into Japan by the Portuguese in the 1540s, and Japanese smiths quickly learned to make them.

Wealthy men might own a few beautifully decorated fowling pieces, but the manufacture of firearms was strictly regulated. Because the bakufu did not encourage weapons innovations for fear of rebellion, Japanese firearms technology did not improve much until the nineteenth century. The matchlock was completely obsolete in Europe at the time of Blade of the Immortal.

wakizashi

The shorter of the two swords samurai were entitled to wear. Usually twelve to eighteen inches long.

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.

yōtaka

"Nighthawk"; a streetwalker. The lowest ranks of licensed prostitutes.

yūkata

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