

ABSTINENCE EDUCATION

A BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL FAN FICTION STORY

BY MADAME MANGA



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VOLUME THREE : PARTS 19-20

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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.

ABSTINENCE EDUCATION

PART NINETEEN

"Well, shit." Manji tossed his fishing pole against the wall of the hut and sat down hard on the porch.

"They're still not biting. I noticed." Rin chewed on a piece of roasted sweet potato. "Never mind, big brother. It's a beautiful day. Eat something!"

He growled at his untouched portion. "I hate that crap. Farmer's food."

"I was glad to get it while I was traveling in the mountains. You know they call it 'typhoon insurance'!" She leaned out of the shade of the overhang, shut her eyes and let the sunlight bathe her face. "Gosh, it's so nice today. I could almost forget all that stupid rain!"

Manji tried to fill his pipe from his empty tobacco pouch for the fifth or sixth time and put it away with a grimace. "Traveling? With Anotsu, you mean."

"Yes, of course."

"So he was sick as a dog the whole time, hey?" Manji picked up his potato and sniffed it. "Never tried to do anything to you?"

Rin's back straightened. "Such as?"

"You know what I'm talkin' about. Just answer the question."

"Um... no, he didn't. I told you — he has a sense of honor. It was so strange for me on that journey, Manji-san... I think I had an idea that Anotsu was almost supernatural, like a demon or an ogre, and then to see him being so human and showing weaknesses, and strengths too — "

"Yeah, yeah. He probably likes boys better anyhow." Manji tore open the potato and ate a few particles off his fingers. "Ugh, this stuff is just as bad as I

remember.” He took a larger bite and chewed with an air of resignation.

Rin was a little unwilling to drop the subject, but decided not to persist. “Um, while you were waiting for the fish to bite, I went down the road...”

“Hnn?”

“Everything to the east is still mostly under water and it’s all muddy and smells awful even though I guess it’s not very deep.” She shuddered a little — she was nearly certain she had seen one or two bloated animal carcasses floating in the filth. Perhaps warm sunshine’s effects were not all desirable ones? “It would be really hard to reach the village... if anyone is even still there.”

“So we won’t go to the village.”

“But this is all we have to eat.” She flushed and toyed with her meal, not liking to give the impression that Manji was an inadequate provider. “You said crows were no good and I’ve never seen any rabbits, so...”

“I got everything I need to put in my mouth right here.” He reached over and cupped a hand between her thighs. “Don’t even have to build a fire to get it hot.”

“Man-jii!” Rin crossed her legs and groaned while he snickered and picked a bit of potato skin from his back teeth. “I’m serious — what are we going to do about food?”

“I dunno... unless you’d like some grubs to roast. If you bust apart a damp rotten log, you’ll generally find a bunch of fat juicy — ” He laughed at Rin’s disgusted expression. “Don’t look that way, little sister; I ain’t makin’ you eat fish bait. Pack up anything you don’t want stolen. We’re taking a trip.” He tossed her the rest of his potato and got up.

“Where are we going?”

“If it was just me, I’d stick it out for a few days and do some foraging. I’ve got you to take care of, though, and it ain’t like you’ve got baby fat to spare.”

“You don’t mean you want to try to get to town, do you?”

“Naw, sounds like we’d have to go the long way around. So we’ll walk into the hills and put up at an inn until this district dries out.” He jingled coins in his sleeve. “Don’t worry about running up the room bill. It’s my treat.”

“Oh! Thank you, Manji-san – that will be nice. I haven’t slept on a real *futon* for weeks!”

He pulled in his chin and looked a little affronted. “What, you’re not comfortable?”

“I’m not complaining.” Rin blushed and smiled from behind her fingers. “I’m always warm when you’re holding me.” She glanced up to see Manji smiling back with more than a hint of satisfaction in his pleasure.

“We’d better get moving so we can stop somewhere before dark. Too bad, because...” He took her hands and pulled her up to stand, then slid his arms around her. “Because I’m real tempted to spend another day doing nothing but keeping you warm.”

Rin raised her face to accept the kiss he offered, which felt softer than usual though it lacked nothing in sensuality. His lips lingered on hers and he lightly cupped his hands under her bottom. She had an impression that he wanted to show off some aspect of his behavior to her, but before she was certain of his meaning he broke the embrace.

“OK, enough of that. Get your sword.” She thought he looked a little flushed, but he gave her a jovial slap on the flank and turned away.

Rin hastily bundled up her clothing and belongings and stowed them in her shoulder bag while Manji gathered his heavy clutch of weapons. He had left most of them in the corner of the hut for the last few days, sheathed and wrapped to keep them from the damp but otherwise neglected. Rin glanced over while coiling her braids into a bun.

Frowning at almost invisible spots of rust on the polished steel, Manji wiped down the blades with an oiled cloth, re-sheathed them and slung them around his body. Other than his weapons and honing tools, he took very little luggage other than his one spare *yūkata* and what he wore on his back. He tied everything in a *furoshiki*, wrapped a cord around it and slung it over his shoulder.

They walked uphill in the opposite direction from the village; soon the little hut was lost to view. Rin gloried in the outdoors after three straight days of rainy captivity and skipped along at Manji’s side with a smile. The maple leaves had started to turn and rustling reds and golds mixed with the lingering green of summer. Even though the path was muddy and rain had cut deep ruts in many slopes, they made good progress. Manji helped Rin over a few of the rougher spots, but otherwise did not slacken his pace. She had to scramble sometimes to

keep up with his long stride.

Before they stopped to rest, they reached a junction with a larger road and met a number of other travelers going in the same direction. Most of them carried bulky bundles or drove ox carts loaded with rice and baskets of vegetables. Many children trudged behind their parents, even the small ones balancing loads on poles. Obviously whole villages were evacuating the flooded area.

A quartet of mounted samurai trotted through the parting groups of foot-travelers, giving skeptical looks to Manji but passing on. Porters followed them with large chests. Half-naked bearers jogged by with enclosed palanquins swinging between them, their rapidly moving feet splashing in the puddles. Rin's *tabi* socks and sandals soaked through in the churned-up mud.

The day had grown almost steamy and Rin begged for a brief halt. It wasn't easy to find a spot to sit out of the dirt, but eventually Manji spotted a large tree with spreading roots and a shelving base to the trunk and they stopped by the road to share a water container. Rin loosened her collar to allow the sweat to evaporate and tried to scrape some of the caked clay from her sandals with a stick.

A merchant on horseback paused by the same tree. His mount carried bulging panniers as well as his master. Behind the horse walked a weary-looking woman, obviously the merchant's wife, also loaded down so heavily that her back was bent. A teenage apprentice who bore the largest burden of all accompanied the couple; they seemed to be carrying the stock of an entire shop with them. Rin gave the group a welcoming smile; the woman glanced at Manji's scars and twin swords and tentatively touched her husband's bridle as if to suggest they move on. He didn't seem to take any notice of her, but also looked speculatively at Manji from his perch and bent down to whisper something to his apprentice.

Manji became aware that he was being sized up and made a face. "Sit down, you idiots." He pointed with his chin. "Nobody owns the goddamn shade."

The woman and boy smiled with slightly nervous gratitude and bowed. The merchant slipped his feet from the stirrups and stepped into his wife's clasped hands as he dismounted. "Fine day, samurai-san." The merchant bowed again and gave the reins to the apprentice. "Fine day. What a storm we've had this week — the sun's a pleasant sight, isn't she?"

Manji grunted, got out his pipe and frowned at it.

"How far have you come, sir?" asked Rin politely.

The merchant seemed a little surprised that she had addressed him, but glanced her way. "Seems like twenty *ri*, young mistress... but I suppose it's more like five." He took off the kerchief tied around his forehead and mopped the sweat from his face. His wife and apprentice carefully lowered their baskets and poles in the driest-looking spot. "I couldn't leave my goods to be soaked or stolen, so I've brought them with me. How exhausted I am! No bearers or carts to be had at any price, alas! Everyone's heading for higher ground with all they can carry — see, there's been a dreadful flood over in the valley east of here, round about — "

"Yeah, we know," put in Manji. "We came from there."

"Ah, is that so, samurai-san?" The merchant's wife brought out a basket of small rice cakes and silently handed it to her husband, then sat back with modestly lowered gaze. "Then you've heard all our news, no doubt." He held out the basket with an ingratiating smile. "Poor fare and unworthy of your notice, but please accept a morsel." The horse cropped some grass a little farther under the trees.

Manji put his tobacco-less pipe in his mouth and declined the offer with a shake of the head; Rin took a cake and bowed in thanks. "What news?" she asked. "We got stuck indoors because of the rain and haven't talked to anyone in days."

"Well, young mistress, they didn't catch the *hatamoto's* son yet... but his father's formally disinherited him and will be going into town to have him declared an outlaw. What a shame for the family, eh?" The merchant clucked his tongue and stuffed a cake into his mouth.

"Which family? What did the son do?"

"Oh, you've not heard the story?" The man brightened; apparently he relished a chance to pass gossip. "It's the fourth son of Lord Tsukue I mean. He's barely a man, yet he's always been a sad trial to his parents. But outlawed — well! Maybe that'll teach him a lesson, if he ever turns up." Again he gave a speculative glance to Manji.

"Lord Tsukue?" Rin exchanged looks with Manji. "You couldn't mean... Tsukue Ryonosuke?"

"The very one! Then you know of him, young mistress?"

"Yes, I met him once..." Rin turned and spoke low behind her hand. "Gee, Manji-san, I didn't realize his family was so high-ranking! I wonder what they said when he came home with..." She touched the end of her nose and made a

grimace. Being so close to the shogun, Ryonosuke's family must be particularly sensitive to any hint of impropriety or scandal. Fighting for the honor of a prostitute qualified as unseemly by any standard.

The merchant moved away a by a few steps, turned his back and urinated against a nearby tree with a long sigh of relief.

"*Hatamoto?* That figures." Manji snorted. "Takes a scumbag born into a good family to royally fuck himself up." The merchant visibly eavesdropped on their exchange as he made himself presentable again, and Manji scowled at him. "Yeah?"

"There might be something in what you say, sir," said the man without a hint of embarrassment. "His parents ought to have married him off long before this, that's what I say myself. It'll straighten out the wildest young wastrel when he's got a household and a wife to look after." The merchant nodded in Rin's direction while he held out his hands; his wife fetched a water container and carefully washed and dried them for him. "Speaking of which, you're only lately married yourself, I'll wager? That's a lovely little bride you have there, *samurai-san*, if you don't mind my saying so."

Rin blushed and put a hand to her cheek. Manji made an annoyed growl.

"Ah... no offense, sir? I just naturally assumed..." He dipped his head, but there was a rumor-monger's gleam in his eye.

"I'm her bodyguard." Manji rolled his shoulders and glared at the merchant. "Not her husband."

"Then the young lady is a relative of your master's? He must have unusual confidence in you, sir, to allow you to escort a lone woman of his household." He glanced at Manji's unkempt hair and bi-colored clothing, which was unlike anything an employed samurai would wear. "Or perhaps her honored parent or companion has just retired into the woods to, ah, refresh herself?" With a broad wink, he seemed to imply that he was in on the joke and that 'bodyguard' must have all too literal a meaning.

Manji flushed and seemed to be about to say something intemperate; Rin put a restraining hand on his arm and spoke with careful formality. "I have no parents or female companion, sir. My late honored father Asano Takayoshi was the head of the Mutenichi-ryū *dojo*, and I am his only daughter and heir. My *yōjimbō* aids me in my *ada-uchi* vendetta to avenge the foul murders of my honored parents. I have entrusted him with my life and welfare, and he has shown himself amply

worthy of the charge.”

“Shee-it,” muttered Manji.

“Beg pardon, beg pardon!” The merchant smirked at his apprentice, who rolled his eyes, obviously embarrassed at his master’s insinuating manner. “That does put a different complexion on the matter, sir. *Ada-uchi* – my word, what a determined young lady. Naturally you’re a man worthy of trust; who could think otherwise? And the lady might need guarding, no mistake. What with this business of kidnapping girls, some scoundrel might take a notion to do the same, so you’ll do well to keep your, ah, eye on your young mistress.”

“Kidnapping girls?” Rin’s eyes went wide.

“Oh, let me tell you the story! I’d quite forgotten what I was saying.”

“Sure ya had...” Manji yawned. He leaned back against the tree, put his hands behind his head and closed his eye.

“Well, this was three days ago, if what I hear is correct. While the rain was falling fast and the streams were rising some folk decided to move out before the situation got too bad, which you must admit was the wisest course after all! I wish I’d had the foresight myself, since a cart might have come cheaper at the time, but with my shop to worry about... well, you want to hear the news, I imagine.” The merchant cleared his throat. “There was a brothel keeper in a village not so far from the Tsukue estate who took all his property down river. He was loading his girls into a ferryboat when up charges this young fellow on horseback, this fourth son. And do you know what he had with him?”

“A busted sword?” Manji chuckled without opening his eye.

“He had himself a firearm! A matchlock *teppo*!”

“What?” Rin’s mouth dropped open and even Manji looked slightly startled. “Where on earth did he get THAT?”

“Word is he lifted it from the family armory. He threatened the brothel keeper and his servants!”

“No shit?” Manji now seemed honestly interested in the tale.

“Indeed! Swore he’d shoot someone dead!”

Manji shook his head. "In that rainstorm? Even if he could get the match lit, he'd never keep his powder dry. So who arrested the little twerp?"

"No one did, samurai-san. He stole one of the girls and took her away with him!"

"Stole a girl? Who was she?" Rin felt a prickle of fascinated horror, though she was sure she knew the answer.

"Seems this was a girl he'd visited several times and had a fancy for. She was weeping and pleading with him, but he would put her up behind him and ride off, and that he did."

"Oh, shit..." Manji burst out in a roar of laughter and clapped a hand to his forehead. "This is friggin' priceless!"

"Weeping?" Rin put her fingertips to her lips. "Oh, my goodness..."

"Ah, she must have realized the trouble that young man was in now, if she cared a little for him. And even if she didn't, she knew she was in for some trouble too! The brothel keeper's going about telling everyone she had a secret stash of money that she'd hid from him, so she must have been planning to run away all along. When they find that pair, she'll be whipped at the very least."

"At least?"

"Oh, young mistress, don't you know how they treat a runaway? There's all sorts of ordeals they'd put that poor girl through — tie her upside down and duck her in water, and beat her with... but you wouldn't want to hear about that, I suppose..." The merchant trailed off when Manji narrowed his eye at him. "No offense, samurai-san? Just making conversation..."

"But where could they be hiding? Would they have gone into town?"

"Oh, not likely. The police spies will be on the lookout for them. I'd say they'd want to leave the district and hole up in an inn somewhere else...say, these hills. Word is, that young man had a mark on his face, so he'd be easy to spot now, wouldn't he?" The merchant looked sideways at Manji. "That's what it says on the notice I read, at any rate. Young samurai with a big scar on his nose, and a very young lady what was wearing a red *furisōde*. Now, I don't mean to pry, but..."

How silly could the man be? Rin spluttered into her red silk sleeve. Manji stared for a moment, and then made a loud sigh. "Crap, he's got us dead to rights!"

Damn, woman, where'd I put that horse and musket?" He slapped his leg and made a show of searching his sleeves and under his collar, then held his ribs and guffawed until his face turned purple.

The merchant's wife caught Rin's eye and made an almost imperceptible movement of the brows that might have been either an apology for her husband or a signal of shared amusement. The apprentice was not as discreet; he snorted and choked with his hand over his mouth.

The merchant seemed unfazed, but rubbed his chin and wrinkled his brow. "Ah... well, now that I think about it, the notice said he wasn't but nineteen, and had his forelock shaved. And the young lady did her hair with gold pins and was a rare beauty... oh, begging your pardon, young mistress."

Rin graciously dismissed the comment, but couldn't stop giggling. The man must see fugitives under every bush! The merchant soon mounted his horse again with many bows and smiles and the patient assistance of his wife; the woman and apprentice trotted after him with their burdens. Manji rose and beckoned to Rin with a jerk of the head.

She followed and trailed him by a few steps instead of walking at his side as usual, imagining that they actually were a married couple instead of bodyguard and employer or foster brother and sister. Her own mother had enjoyed a happy marriage; Rin's father would never have used his wife as a footstool nor kept her on such a tight leash that she wouldn't even speak before strangers. Still, Rin's parents had never presumed to stray outside the proper bounds of behavior. O-Toki had always stayed three steps behind her husband, waited on him like a mother caring for a child and treated him with sweet and willing deference. Rin tried to picture herself doing the same with Manji and hunched her shoulders to help suppress a sudden squeal of laughter.

Rin realized that what she had glimpsed of her parents' obvious love for each other had grown in her memory to almost eclipse any other aspect of their relationship. Certainly her mother had tried to bring her up as a modest young lady suitable for a middle-ranking samurai's wife and constantly admonished her to temper her high spirits and extravagant imagination. If that gentle guidance had lasted a few years longer, Rin wondered if she ever would have tried to avenge her parents on her own. Two and a half years of living accountable to no one but herself had left their mark.

She looked up at the Buddhist *manji* blazoned on the back of her bodyguard's *kōsōde*, its angled black and white slashes in stark opposition to each other. Any version of permanent attachment might change everything about her

relationship to Manji, even though they couldn't legally wed. Just as she had told him, it was hard to imagine that he wouldn't be an overbearing and difficult husband.

Rin smiled and shook her head; that was the last thing she had to worry about, especially from Manji's point of view! Marriage was far in her future and she didn't have to rush to that momentous decision. Though she still dreamed of a real romance someday, her present freedom would last as long as she wanted to keep it.

Rin quickened her pace and caught up to walk in step with Manji. The traffic had thinned out for the moment and she felt the delight of the open road again. She sighed and looked at the bright blue sky.

"Hnn?"

"Oh... just thinking. About Ryonosuke and O-Hama."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

Rin sighed again. "He must love her very much... to defy everything to be with her."

"You mean get himself in deep shit for nothing? Yeah, sounds like love to me." Manji made a derisive sound.

"What do you mean, nothing?"

"The idiot's ruined himself. He's got no family, no status, no inheritance. He's an outlaw — he's not even human any more."

Like Manji himself? Rin opened her mouth for a moment. "But... he has her, doesn't he?"

"A woman? So what? How the hell long does that last?"

Rin's face went cold. "Maybe their whole lives!"

"What's a couple of lives? Mud on the highway." Manji kicked a stone into a puddle. "A samurai can't think about his goddamn life. All he gets to choose is how to die."

"What? Ryonosuke wouldn't think that way. He's a *hatamoto*'s son. He hasn't

exactly been serving in a household retinue!"

"Hell no, the little twerp doesn't think that way, or he never would have gone down that path in the first place. I told you he didn't have a lick of martial training. Gotta blame his daddy for not teaching him his duty right."

She swallowed against a tightness in her throat. "I didn't think you thought that way either..." Where had this harsh mood come from, under such a sunny sky?

"I ain't talking about dying for your goddamn lord and master, kid. I'm talking about family." He looked down at her with the edge of his teeth showing. "Family and family blood. That's what lasts past death. That's the only thing anyone should ever die for."

"I thought you said nothing was worth dying for, if you had something to live for."

"Lose your family and you've got nothing to live for. Nothing at all. You know that as well as I do... daughter of the late honored Asano Takayoshi."

"You're talking about my parents? Giving up my life to avenge their murders?"

"Why else would a kid like you ever hang out with a guy like me? Like you said, you're samurai. You've got a duty to fulfill." His smile looked grim. "That's all that matters. Let anything get in the way of your duty and you'll regret it for the rest of your life." He slapped his sword hilts and folded his arms.

"The rest... of your life?" Rin wondered what obstacle to duty he meant. "Are you thinking about... your sister Machi?"

His expression went blank. "What about her?"

"Manji-san... you were the only one left to take care of her. So she was the last of your family, wasn't she?"

He was silent.

"When she died, you were the only one who could avenge her. After you killed her murderers... you couldn't even follow her to the other side." Her hand ventured towards him. "You knew you couldn't be with your family again for a long time. Maybe not ever..."

His mouth opened and tensed downwards, like a mask of grief. In the next

moment he compressed his lips and lowered his brows. "Some sins you'll never be able to apologize for except in the next world. You'll start counting the days until you can get there."

Rin reached out and took Manji's elbow. "You... you've got lots of things to live for! I think you do, anyway."

"Yeah, sometimes I think I do. Sometimes I even imagine I'm still a human being." He seemed to stare into a place very different from the sunlit road. "Then I remember just why I'm still alive to keep fooling myself, and it all falls back into place again."

She clung to him, feeling the pulse in his veins and the hard lines of bones and tendons through the flesh. "Big brother! I know all about the bloodworms and I'd never say you weren't human. How could anyone think that?"

Dimly she realized that some of his awakened desire for her probably had nothing to do with her new maturity; when could a man feel more alive than when he embraced another human body? He scoffed at love, but he had spent two whole days demonstrating how much he needed to lose himself in someone else.

Manji looked down at her hand on his arm and took a deep breath. His expression cleared slightly.

"What sins are you talking about, anyway? You've been hurt so many times already — you've shed so much blood for me. Doesn't that count against everything bad you've done?"

His lips flattened against his teeth. "Ain't finished yet. Not by a long chalk."

Rin reached around Manji's waist to hold him more closely and heard a dull clank of steel from the array of deadly blades he carried. Before she had invited him to touch her, when had he come closest to the pulse of his life? Perhaps only when he dealt out death in the service of his duty...

"Naw, it doesn't matter how many bastards I kill. A thousand sent to hell don't equal one innocent life. There's a lot else I'll have to do before I rest, and I'm damned if I know what it has to be. That's why the old bitch won't let me die. She's going to wait until I teach myself the answer."

"How long will that be? Hundreds of years, like Eiku Shizuma?"

"Naw, I doubt it. Hey, it ain't like I'm indestructible." He chuckled in morbid amusement. "Even if nobody whacks my head off in a duel, I could get smashed under a pile of rocks in an earthquake, or drowned, or burned up in a fire. Wonder what's the best way to croak when you can't hope for the point of a sword?" He cocked a brow. "Maybe drowning — at least that's liable to go quick."

"Oh, yuck! What an awful idea!" Rin waved a hand to chase away the image and hid her face against his sleeve. "Big brother, please promise not to talk about things like that. You'll give me nightmares!"

"Whatever you say... little sister." Manji gave her a slight but affectionate smile and pressed her hand to his side.

They walked arm in arm for some minutes, not speaking but linked together. A farmer's family lugging rice bales came up a side path that met the road ahead and Rin reluctantly let go of Manji. He reached into his left sleeve and absently took out his pipe, then sighed and replaced it.

"Crap, I need a smoke. Wish that son of a bitch had offered a pinch of tobacco — I'd have taken him up on that in a second." Manji scratched the back of his neck. "No matter how smarmy he talked."

"Oh, him!" Rin stuck out her tongue. "You didn't like him very much, did you? Even though his news was interesting."

Manji held up finger and thumb a fraction apart. "He was this close to callin' you a slut and me a kidnapper."

"Maybe he was, but blowing up at him wouldn't have helped! I was afraid you might cut him down for showing disrespect to a samurai." Rin poked his shoulder with a giggle.

"Come on. I never did that in my life."

"He was only fishing, anyway. And he didn't catch a single tadpole for all his trouble."

"No, you cut off his line nice and sharp. Guess there's a use for fancy language once in a while." Manji chuckled.

"Of course! Let me take care of people like that."

"Frickin' greasy coin-shaver. Probably carries tales about everyone who walks past his goddamn shop door."

As Manji and Rin passed the farmers, they looked up from under their burdens and stared. Rin flushed under their scrutiny. "Well... that's what I meant about my reputation, Manji. Most people must wonder what two people like us are doing together... and assuming it can't be anything good."

"Bullshit, Rin! Nobody with a grain of sense would take you for my — uh... anyway, what the hell do you care what people think? They're all idiots. Money-grubbing fools who can't see past the ends of their own... noses." He jingled the coins in his sleeve. "Not that having a little cash once in a while don't come in handy. Wish I held on to it better than I do."

"You've spent it on things you don't think you should have?"

"Hell, yes. I know I'll regret it later, and that never stops me. But I draw the line at getting shaken down by a whore."

"...O-Hama?"

"Yeah, real interesting news. So that's why that broad wanted her goddamn tip so bad. Saving up her cash to run away." He shook his head with a sardonic chuckle. "Should've figured it for something like that."

"Uh... or maybe to buy out her contract so she could have her freedom? Don't some women do that?"

"Come on, that'd take her years! You know how much the brothel keeper probably had to pay for her? And now she's trained and in demand — she's worth a lot of dough."

"But what if she was saving anyway? It's not like it would have been impossible to get enough, especially if she was so popular."

Manji shrugged.

"Ryonosuke was probably too impatient to wait that long. I guess he couldn't have gotten so much money from his father, not for freeing his lover, so he couldn't help her. Maybe he thought stealing her was the only way." Rin looked into the green forest glades that they passed, the plots of romantic stories running through her head. "And now they're on the run. Hunted and outcast, but living free in the woods together — "

"Ha!" Manji gave a harsh laugh. "He's screwed things damn good for her no matter what she might have been saving for. Hell..." His voice fell lower. "Serves her right, anyhow."

"Big brother, do you have something against O-Hama? Other than her boyfriend, that is." Manji didn't reply. Rin examined his profile. "Are you just mad that you wasted your money on her? Or..."

"Why the hell does a girl like you want to know about a whore? You're not looking for a reason to get sulky on me, are you?"

"I just want to know what she's like." Rin felt an odd kinship with the runaway girl; being mistaken for her even momentarily had set off various trains of thought. "Won't you tell me a little about her? I'm not jealous or anything... I mean, I guess she didn't please you anyway!"

"More like... I didn't please her."

"What?"

"I ain't talking about my pillowing technique, woman." He lifted his lip and looked away.

"Manji-san... what's wrong?"

He didn't answer, but made a swipe at his face. Rin couldn't figure out what he meant until he slashed a thumb down over his blind eye.

"She didn't like the way you look? Your scars?"

"Guess she prefers 'em pretty. Even when they're paying through the nose."

"The *nose*..." Rin's mouth dropped open. "Manji!"

"Huh?"

"Is that why you cut Ryonosuke's nose? Her boyfriend's nose?" She stopped in the middle of the road and put her fists on her hips. "You even told me to aim for his face!"

"Uh... didn't think about it that way." Manji chewed his jaw back and forth for a moment and looked vaguely guilty. "I was mad, OK? You ain't telling me he

didn't deserve it."

"I guess he did. But I never knew you got upset about how people react to your looks!"

He made an impatient gesture. "Why the hell would I care whether a broad likes my mug? You never minded it."

"Of course not — it's yours! But I'm sure she wouldn't have looked shocked or said anything when she saw you. She's a high-ranking courtesan — she's trained to flatter her customers."

"...Yeah."

"Then how did you get the idea she didn't like you?"

Manji rolled his shoulders. "Gimme some goddamn credit, Rin."

"What?"

He wrinkled his nose in a snarl. "No matter how loud she's singing my praises and begging for more, you think I can't tell when a woman's having a rough time keeping up appearances? Who the hell wants to feel like he's the last guy she'd prefer in that position?"

"Oh..." A shudder went through her. No wonder he had come home in such a sullen mood that evening and gotten so drunk. "But Manji-san... she's in love with someone else, and she was waiting for him to arrive. It wasn't you. She would have treated any man the same."

"Give me a break! If their highest-priced tart made a regular habit of that, they'd kick her out of that joint in half a week."

"Oh... well, maybe not." Rin creased her forehead. Could a woman really find Manji so unattractive? "Oh... did you say something rude to her?"

"Not until she put the screws on me for a tip."

"Is that so?" She raised her brows and hid a smile. "You were flawlessly courteous and paid attention to proper etiquette and sat down to drink tea and make polite conversation?"

"At that price?" Manji gave a pained groan. "Why the hell should I put on the

dog for a whore?"

"For the best girl in the fanciest house in the district? She must have some very wealthy customers, and she has a boyfriend who brings her lots of presents and thinks she's the most wonderful woman in the world."

"Yeah, and kidnaps her with a musket in hand when Daddy cuts off his allowance."

"Oh, Manji-san, don't you see? I know you and I'm used to your manners... if you can call them that!" Rin giggled. "So I don't mind so much. But I bet you didn't treat O-Hama anything like the way she's used to being treated."

Manji grumbled and growled to himself for a few moments.

"I appreciate that you wanted to go somewhere... clean. But you keep complaining about how much it cost! I'm sure there were less expensive places open. Maybe you overdid it a little?"

"Yeah, fine. All I deserve is some poxy old bitch who turns tricks on a rubbish dump." He folded his arms and strode ahead.

"Oh, good grief, don't take it that way!" Rin jogged to catch up and slipped her hand under his elbow. "I'm only teasing, big brother... I think you deserve the best of everything. But you don't need to waste any more money on *that*, do you?"

"Hm." Manji looked down his cheekbone at her. "So you don't mind my manners."

"Up to a point! I hate it when you're all grouchy — you always take it out on me."

"Sorry. Anything else about me bug you?"

"No, not really." She laid her cheek against his sleeve. "When you're in a good mood... I'm happy."

"That's all it takes, eh? That and a few desserts after dinner." Manji chuckled.

"Well... when I was a kid, candy was the same as paradise." Rin laughed and glanced up at him through her lashes. "There's an even better way to feel good that I only just learned about! Thank you for teaching me, Manji-san."

"No problem." He grinned and slid an arm around her waist, though other travelers were in sight. "Hey, I could use a little pick-me-up right now. C'mon."

Rin gasped, but Manji pulled her to the side of the road by a small Jizo shrine. "Hey! We're in public!" He propelled her into the damp woods behind the shrine and around the trunk of a large tree, where he embraced her and grabbed a breast. "Manji!" She crossed her arms over her chest.

"There, no audience — now I can do whatever the hell I want." His mouth came down on hers and stopped her protests, but after a moment he straightened up and let go of her, looking unsettled. "Sorry... I didn't mean it that way."

"Then why did you say that?"

"Rin... uh..." He pushed a hand through his hair and swallowed hard. "Damn, I haven't been able to touch you for hours! I'm going kinda batshit..."

Rin studied the half-ashamed yearning in his expression with wide eyes while he refused to meet her gaze. She gradually uncrossed her arms and laced her fingers together, wondering how to respond. "You really want to do something... here?"

Manji glanced in the direction of the nearby road. "Yeah, I know. Sorry." He brushed his lips with his thumb and covered a sigh. "Come on, we'll keep walking. I can wait till we find an inn."

"No, it's all right." Rin blushed and lowered her hands. "Just don't take my clothes off here, please, but you can kiss me if you like."

"No... if you like." He looked down at her. "You want it?"

"Of course I do."

"I mean, do you want... me?" He rubbed his forehead, hiding his scars.

Wondering again, Rin examined what she could see of Manji's face. He'd suffered a blow to his pride, and recalling it had irritated the smart again. What did he really need? Just a little consolation, some assurance that he wasn't repulsive, at least to his 'little sister'? Men could be so easily wounded in some ways, and so easily healed in others.

"Yes, big brother... I want you. Only you." Rin opened her arms with a welcoming smile. "Please kiss me and make me feel good."

Manji's chest expanded with a deep breath and his gaze lingered on her face while he exhaled, but he didn't move.

"What is it?"

"I, uh— say it again." His mouth worked oddly. "Tell me, Rin."

"I... I want you?"

"Then you can have me, little sister." Manji leaned over her and planted his hands on the tree behind her. "I'm all yours."

Rin's arms closed around his neck and he took her mouth with his.

There was an edge in his kisses she had not noticed before. Not violent, but possessive and even a little unhinged: making an attempt at gentleness yet always threatening to break through his self-imposed boundaries. He trembled on the steep brink of inclination, close to losing his balance as she swayed in his arms; she could almost feel the lightning leap and flicker of his thoughts while he held her so close and stole his breath from her lips.

Yielding to an impulse she couldn't name, Rin slipped a hand inside Manji's clothing and stroked the front of his loincloth. He seemed hard already, but when she touched him his *henoko* pulsed and swelled further. He grunted and his hips gave a sudden pump against her stomach. She broke the kiss and gazed into his face. Desire was written all over his expression, but so was that threatened loss of balance.

Rin dropped her shoulder bag to the ground in front of Manji and knelt on it, then dug her hand underneath his *fundoshi* and eased his erection free. She kissed the warm, fragrant head and lapped at a sticky streak of moisture at the tip.

"Oh... holy... fuck..." He half turned and slumped to the side, his hands supporting him against the tree. "Rin, what the hell are you doing?"

"Hush..." She reached under his *kōsode* and around his hips to put her hands on his buttocks. Tremors went through Manji's thighs. He moaned and flung his head back; his skull met the bark with a dull thud. Rin cradled his upright *henoko* between her lips and soothed its heat with her tongue. She felt his fingers cup the back of her head, pause there and then slide down to her shoulders. With a gentle but steady push he guided her away from him.

"Goddammit, not here — you're not a freakin' streetwalker." He shielded himself with his hand and she looked up into his flushed and sweating face. "I'll get us a good room when we reach the town. Only a few more *ri* to go."

"But it's all right, Manji-san..."

"No. No, it ain't." He squeezed his eye shut and panted for a moment. "I shouldn't have dragged you out here and... My mistake, OK? A guy shouldn't treat his own woman like that..."

At Rin's startled intake of breath his lid jerked open. He made a quick grimace and gave her a slightly embarrassed smile. "Because I'm your bodyguard, see? It ain't safe carrying on in a place like this." Manji pulled his clothes back together, hoisted her to her feet and picked up her bag by the strap. "I know better, woman, and you're my responsibility. Suppose a few scumbags were to come along right in the middle of it and I wasn't paying attention? That'd land us in a nice pickle."

"Oh, I see." Rin flushed and slung her bag over her shoulder. Manji chuckled and she looked up to see him with a wide grin.

"Not like I don't appreciate the thought." He drew her close with one arm and kissed her soundly, his free hand stroking her cheek and hair. "I'm gonna return the favor in spades tonight, little sister. Just you wait."

With an air of proprietary anticipation, he led her out to the road again.

Late in the afternoon they reached the river town Manji had named as their destination. Every refugee from the floods had halted here, judging from the throngs of people in the streets. The road was impassable over the river since the underpinnings of the wooden bridge had given way at the height of the flood. Thick mats of debris pressed against the upstream sides of the remaining pilings. No boats would venture across the torrent, for here the river ran very swift and rough in a gorge, the cresting waves swirling with mud and still carrying an occasional uprooted tree that could easily sink any craft it struck.

Every inn was crammed, from the most expensive to the ugliest hovel, and the overflow crowds were camping on the edges of the forest. Manji refused to stop and do likewise, citing his promise to find Rin a comfortable room.

After gulping an overpriced meal at a crowded stall, they headed out of town again with a trickle of other travelers. An easier crossing reportedly lay some distance upstream, which turned out to be a longer walk than they had

anticipated. With the sun fast declining, at last they reached a spot where the hills retreated and the water spread out in a broad sheet. Here the river seemed shallow and slower moving, having had room to overflow its banks and fill the rice paddies. The tops of the dikes between the fields were still visible. Farther out, a line of laboring figures dotted the rippling expanse of muddy water.

River porters waded in both directions, hunched under bundles and passengers. Bamboo stakes marked their route. A group of them lounged around a fire they had built on a low bluff on the near side, drying their scanty garments and warming their backsides. As Rin watched, a traveler climbed on a wooden platform; four of the porters lifted it by its carrying poles and jogged into the water. Several other men straddled porters' backs to make the trip sitting on their shoulders.

When the group they had walked with from the town headed towards the waiting porters, Rin began to follow them. Manji hung back and shook his head.

"Nah, we can find another place to cross. Not worth bothering with those guys."

"But the sun's going to set in about half an hour. If we don't get over the river now, we'll have to stop wherever we are and camp for the night. What's wrong with getting carried? I guess that works just like a ferry!" Rin ran along a paddy dike to join the other travelers.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Manji stayed where he was and made a dismissive gesture when she glanced back. "They're gonna try to take you for all the cash you got, kid."

Several of the porters greeted Rin with smiles and bows as she approached. They were rough-looking, sun-tanned men wearing very little other than loincloths. A portly official who seemed to be their supervisor snoozed under a driftwood shelter near the fire. A low-ranking *ashigaru* in a short coat and leggings leaned on his spear nearby. "Howdy there, ma'am. You looking for a trip across?"

"Yes, we are. How much is it?" She gestured and called to Manji, who was now trudging along the dike after her with a slightly disgruntled air. "Come on, big brother!"

"Oh, is that guy with ya?" The porters seemed a little less enthusiastic, but the biggest one spoke up.

"Aw, a cute little lady like you can go for free, far as I'm concerned." He winked at the others, who laughed and nodded. "Yer big brother looks kinda heavy,

though, so we might have to charge him a bit extra.”

“I guess that’s fair... you’d really carry me across for free?”

“Sure, why not?” The big porter stooped down and indicated that she should climb on his back. “Come on, I’ll get you where you’re going in a jiffy.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind.” She settled her shoulder bag and decorously hiked her *furisōde* up to her knees.

“No problem, little lady.” Again several of the porters laughed.

“Here, madame, allow me to lend you my assistance in gettin’ on.” Another porter took her under the arm and a third stepped up with a grin, obviously intending to give his aid as well. Rin looked up with a little sense of alarm, but they were smiling and apparently only wanted to be helpful, if a little forward.

“Hey, no dawdling!” They boosted her to the big porter’s shoulders; she flinched when three or four hands gave an unnecessary push to her bottom. The porter seized her ankles and straightened with only a hint of effort. Rin grabbed his head for stability and he set off with rapid strides down the gentle slope towards the water. From the vicinity of the fire she heard a sudden eruption of shouts and curses, but she couldn’t look around to see what the fuss was about. The porter had barely stepped into the river when he halted and swore in surprise.

Manji stood right in front of him, blocking his way. “Put her down.”

“Huh?” The porter affected an air of injured innocence and tried to sidestep him. “We was just helpin’ the little lady – ”

“I said put her down, river worm.” Manji didn’t touch his sword hilts, but he turned so that his long projecting scabbards crossed the porter’s path. He glared at him with narrowed eye. The man bristled, but stooped and unceremoniously dumped Rin from his shoulders. Manji caught her before she fell and set her upright in the ankle-deep water.

Several men came pounding down the slope, looking belligerent. A couple of them bore the marks of a fist; apparently Manji had fought his way through them in pursuit of her. “Hey, samurai-san, what’s the big deal?” The muscular porters ringed them, haranguing all at once. “Screwin’ us out of our passengers? This is our living!”

“Um... Manji-san, they said they’d take me across for free...” Rin blushed with

embarrassment and stepped away from him. "Sorry — he's my *yōjimbō* — he gets a little overprotective — "

"Offered to take you across for free? I'll just bet they did." Manji took her by the arm and gestured with his chin. "I'll carry you if anybody's going to. Come on."

"We staked this crossing, samurai-san. Nobody uses it except by paying his fare and riding with us! That's our right, see? You want us to starve?"

"You asking me?" Manji took a step towards the big porter, who backed away. A group of other men reached the bank from the far side, dumped their loads and headed over to reinforce their colleagues. The muttering among them began to sound unsafe. Manji twitched one shoulder and looked around. The official waved his arms at the *ashigaru* and pointed at the altercation.

"You makin' threats, samurai-san? You can't go slicin' us up for nothing — we're here on official permission. Ferries all got busted or washed downstream. We're doing a public service, get it?"

"Yeah? Maybe I'll perform a little public service too." Manji's hand strayed towards the hilt of his *katana* and a hiss went up from the group. The spearman approached with his weapon in a ready stance and his two-sworded boss right behind him; the ring of men expanded and thinned as they retreated a few steps. Some of them brandished long staves.

"M-Manji-san... you can't!" Rin yanked at his sleeve. "They haven't done anything!"

He gave a low snarl, shoved through the circle and towed Rin along the riverbank with a firm grip on her wrist, heading downstream. No one followed.

"Gosh, what did you have to act like that for?" Rin shook off his hold and ran to keep up with his rapid strides. "That was awfully rude."

"I should've ignored a bunch of *hadaka-mushi* getting their dirty paws all over you? Give me a fucking break."

"Don't tell me you were *jealous*!"

"I'm your freakin' bodyguard, that's what I am. Shit, kid — I haul you out of a nasty scrape and this is the thanks I get?" He spat into the river.

"Huh? What was so bad about — "

"You never crossed a river with porters before, eh?"

"Well, no, but – "

"Those scum get their jollies manhandling the passengers. Especially pretty girls – get the picture?" He swung around to look at her.

"...Oh."

Manji pointed at the expanse of water. "So they'd have whisked you out to midstream and kept me on the bank haggling over my fare, and then you'd be at their mercy. If you object to being groped, they demand a big tip before they'll stop. Or they just toss you in the deep water and let you swim for it."

"What? Really?"

"Lucky for them they didn't get the chance." His face darkened; he snapped his arm out and a sickle with a long chain attached rattled from his sleeve. "'Cause then you'd get a real good look at just how fucking *overprotective* I can be."

Rin put her hand to her mouth. "I wasn't thinking..."

"No, you weren't." Manji swung the sickle in an arc with a sharp whirring sound, caught it by the handle and put it away. "Never get in a situation like that if you can help it."

"I'm sorry, Manji-san... but what do you mean by that kind of situation?"

"When you put anyone in a position to really screw you over! You go trusting to someone's good intentions when you've left your ass hanging out in the air that way and you'll get what you deserve. Everyone turns on you like a pack of dogs when you're down. So always make sure you can backtrack or take another route."

Manji stopped on the riverbank a good distance downstream from the porters' crossing, picked up a sizable rock in both hands and tossed it far out into the water. He listened to the sound it made when it splashed and nodded. "Not too deep." He untied his scabbard cords and slid his swords from his sash, tucked his *kōsōde* between his legs and stooped down just as the porter had done. "Climb on. I'll keep you dry."

"I don't mind getting a little wet! Anyway, what about not depending on

someone else? Does that not apply to me and you?" Rin crossed her arms and pouted.

"No, it don't." Manji gave her a glare. "Having a load on my back makes it easier to keep my footing in the current."

"It'll help you cross if you carry me?"

"Hell of a lot more than if you fall in and I have to fish you out! You don't weigh a whole lot anyhow. So get on and hang on!" He handed her his swords and bundle and hoisted her to his shoulders.

The water barely came up to the middle of Manji's thighs, and although the swirling current was so muddy the bottom was invisible, he strode confidently along. Rin felt a little silly for having objected to the ride; she wound the straps of her bag around his swords and laid her cheek to the top of his head. Manji settled her thighs more securely on his shoulders and patted one of her bared calves.

"See, no problem. Who needs those bums?" He glanced upstream at the staked crossing. "It's all a scam to make you shell out your cash for what you could have done by yourself."

At midstream they approached a faster-running stretch with a series of standing waves. "Okay, hold on. The bottom's gonna be bumpy here." Manji began to feel his way more carefully, extending each foot in turn before putting his weight on it. Rin pulled in her lips in some apprehension, but he moved steadily forward, steering around unseen obstacles but never stumbling even when the water rose to submerge him to the waist. The river glittered with the light of the setting sun, dazzling Rin's eyes. Far upstream, the porters still trudged back and forth with their burdens, barely visible among the dancing reflections. At this pace, she and Manji should be out of the water a little before darkness fell.

As they neared the opposite bank, Rin saw that it was piled high with uprooted trees and what seemed to be the broken remains of shutters and squared beams. The mounds of flood-borne debris extended almost as far as she could see in each direction. "Oh, gosh — that's what's left of people's houses!" She spotted a drowned dog caught in the roots of a tree and long strands of muddied indigo and white that must be tattered clothing. "Eww...I hope no one was wearing that..."

"Yeah, looks like a mess." Manji let out a slightly weary pant and straightened his back under her weight. "We'll have to climb over that, so be careful how you

step. Almost there.”

Rin breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness. I’ll be happy to get out of this river!”

“All that crap washed up here... so there’s probably a drop-off near the bank. I’ll keep you out of the water if I can, but we might have to swim the last bit.” Manji stopped to evaluate his route, bracing his legs and swaying in the pull of the current. “If I slip, grab something quick as you can. At least there’s a lot of stuff to hang on to.”

Rin looked up at the tangled heap and the spreading claws of branches that extended nearly over their heads. A single one of those precariously balanced trees could crush a house. “That looks kind of dangerous...”

“I got you safe. Don’t worry.” He let go of one of her legs to grasp a long branch that projected far out from the bank. A flash of color wedged in a crevice caught Rin’s eye; she peered at it in the deepening twilight and realized it was a child’s rag doll. It had lost its head but retained its bright clothing, probably made with scraps of silk from a mother’s worn *kimono*. With a lump in her throat, she looked away.

In the shadows under the driftwood piles some distance upstream, she noticed a movement; perhaps it was branches moving in the current? The motion spread and grew oddly larger. For a moment Rin could not figure out what she was seeing. Then a huge tangled mass of logs easily twice the size of their little hut rotated slowly out from the bank and moved downstream.

“M-Manji-san!” She gestured and grabbed his hair with the other hand. “Watch out!”

“Huh?” Immersed to his lower chest and inching forward with the branch as support, he looked where she pointed.

The mass of driftwood rotated into the bank again and lost some of its members, but tore new ones free and dragged them out in a widening arc. Perhaps the great size of the raft made it seem to move at a leisurely pace, but it plowed inexorably downstream with the rushing current. Backtracking the way they had come would be no escape; half the wide river now jostled thick with waterlogged wood, and all of it was coming straight for them.

“Oh... shit.” Manji almost whispered.

He suddenly plunged forward into the deep water, soaking Rin to the knees. She shrieked and grabbed for broken twigs overhead, cutting her hands. She had to free him from her weight and let him save himself! Thick branches splintered and snapped with loud reports as the mass of driftwood scraped the bank a little way upstream. Rin prayed it would catch and stop there, but with ponderous deliberation it turned and propelled itself along.

Manji was now up to his chin in muddy water. He pushed off from the bottom with a yell of effort, kicked upwards and propelled Rin higher to let her reach a better handhold. She seized a branch and unwrapped her legs from his neck. He dropped back into the water and went under, but surfaced in a moment, flung his wet hair out of his face and swam for shore.

With her cut hands stinging but a good grip now, Rin swung her legs up, found some footing and climbed along the branches of a huge recumbent tree that had fallen from the undermined bank. She reached a safe perch where she could look out and checked the progress of the driftwood.

From her high point of view, she saw the silhouettes of several men standing and lounging on the log pile upstream. She recognized the river porters by their muscular outlines and the staves they held. Would they lend a hand if she shouted for help?

They spotted her and pointed in her direction, but made no move other than to slap each other on the back and laugh. Suddenly she realized how they had just used their long staves and their strong backs; the driftwood had not broken loose by accident. This was the porters' revenge! Fury pounded in her head; she looked down through the branches to call out to Manji.

He had crossed the deep water and had a firm hold on a tightly wedged branch, but only his head and one hand were visible. Though he struggled to pull himself up, his clothes seemed to be snagged under the water. Probably the heavy weapons tied to his body didn't make it any easier for him to climb out. A broken log sideswiped him with a jarring thud, making him grunt and nearly lose his handhold. Rin gasped.

Manji hung on by his fingertips and regained his grip. The blow had apparently freed him from the snag and he could now reach farther upwards. He lunged for another hold and pulled himself halfway out. The flotilla of driftwood was drawing level with his position, though the bulk of the raft now spiraled out from the bank and might clear him.

Suddenly it seemed to run aground; its progress halted and the current began to

undermine it and pull it apart. Logs from the top of the pile dislodged and rolled down, hitting the water with tremendous splashes. A litter of tattered paper screens and splintered pieces of lumber sloshed between the giant trunks. A wave of water and debris surged over Manji's head and washed him back into the river.

He emerged with a bleeding cut on his face, kicked away a jagged chunk of lumber that threatened to scalp him and shielded his head from the next tsunami-like splash. Again he emerged when the water subsided and gained another handhold. The big logs turned in the current and aimed downstream.

Manji couldn't knock aside a tree nearly half as thick as he was tall! Rin cried out and scrambled down through the branches again with no thought to how she could possibly help. What if he were crushed or caught and dragged away?

"Maaanjii!"

Oncoming boards pummeled him, but he heaved most of the way out of the water and got one knee braced. He glanced upwards with his dripping hair plastered over his face and met her terrified gaze. Seemed to be about to speak, to warn her out of danger and chide her for worrying about her own bodyguard.

No word passed his lips; he froze for an instant that seemed minutes long. A huge rotating spread of tangled tree roots that extended high above the surface struck him broadside, rolled him underwater like a churning millwheel and bore on down river. The sun slipped below the horizon. She could see nothing where Manji had been but the muddy wrack of ruined houses.

Rin swung out from the branch she held, took a deep breath and let go.

PART TWENTY

Rin plummeted towards the dark river. The drop seemed longer than it had looked when she let go, but she hit the big pile of driftwood feet-first with only a jarring shock. She slipped off the log on which she had landed and her right ankle bent and twisted under her. She didn't care about the pain. Where was Manji?

She scanned downstream; the wheel of tree roots that had taken him underwater was dragging against the bank and turning in the current. He might be lodged in that, he might be floating free, injured or not — but would he float at all with the weight of his weapons pulling him down?

"Manji-san!" she yelled. "Manjiii!"

From this distance in the twilight she could see nothing the size of a man; she had to get closer. Rin dragged and heaved a large flat piece of broken house shutter free from the woodpile. There was an even bigger piece floating nearby that she could lay this on, and that might make enough of a raft to hold her weight. Now for a paddle —

The driftwood heaved under her feet as she climbed over a big trunk; she nearly fell through the yawning pit underneath. This temporary island was disintegrating by the moment. She got the piece of shutter down to the water and anchored the big one with her foot. Every couple of seconds she scanned the river again, hoping to catch sight of some human form: an arm above the water, a head bobbing up for a breath. Though the sun had just set, there would be enough light to search by for a little while longer. After that much time passed it might not matter whether or not she found him...

Rin forced down the thought, grabbed a split board and carefully stepped to her improvised raft. It lurched and nearly threw her into the water. Immediately she knelt, crouched low for stability and shoved with the board to free the raft from the surrounding wrack.

She stayed as close to shore as she could as she floated towards the tree that had hit Manji, trying to steer but contending with random eddies that rotated her flimsy craft. With every spare breath she screamed his name, but there was no response.

How long had it been since he went under? Four minutes, five? How quickly *did* a man drown? Rin fought back tears; crying wouldn't help and would only blur her vision. With growing desperation she called out and paddled towards her goal, working hard not to drift out into the middle of the river.

The little raft bumped against the huge tree; Rin reached out to stop her progress. Nothing to grab — her fingers slipped on wet barkless wood. The river's muscle far surpassed hers. Though Rin desperately clawed for a handhold, the raft spun away and out towards the faster-running midstream.

How could she get back to look for Manji? She still had her bag and the additional burden of Manji's bundle and twin swords. Discarding all the luggage and swimming for it might be her only option, though the current looked pretty strong right here. Rin slipped the strap of her bag from her shoulder, rose from her knees and prepared to jump into the water.

The raft jarred against a submerged object. Rin fell hard on her backside. "Ow!"

Again her craft drifted further into midstream, dragging the obstacle underneath itself. Rin found her paddle, leaned over and jabbed at the thing. It yielded slowly and slid from under the raft. Now she could steer!

When she turned to put her paddle in the water and get out of the fast-running section, she sensed something odd out of the corner of her eye and turned her head.

What was the thing she had hit? It drifted alongside the raft just under the surface of the muddy water, its details obscure. Like a waterlogged stump, it neither floated nor entirely sank. Again she poked it with the paddle, making it break the surface for a moment. In the near-darkness she caught a dim flash of white on black.

"Manji-san!" She threw herself flat, nearly capsizing her raft, and tried to grab a handful of his clothing.

Floating face down just beyond her reach, he slipped away. She screamed and lunged forward until she was half on, half off the raft. At the extremity of her fingertips, she managed to seize him by the tie that held his hair and get a grip on his topknot. Soaked and lacking any stable platform, Rin gasped and spluttered.

She tried to back up onto the raft again and pull Manji with her, but his much greater weight overbalanced her. The raft tilted, Manji's hair tie parted and Rin

slid into the cold river with a splash and a shriek.

She came up again gasping and grabbed Manji's collar before he could sink again. His limbs swayed in the water, his only sign of movement. The raft had spun a little distance away, drifting downstream with her bag still sitting in the middle. Rin kicked and paddled with her free hand while towing Manji and managed to grasp the raft's edge. Climbing back on board seemed out of the question — she would have to let go of Manji to do it, and the whole thing would tilt up again and probably flip over.

With a tremendous effort, using one arm and both feet, she managed to roll Manji's body and raise his face just above water. She nearly cried out again. In the side of his forehead above his blind eye was an ugly gash and a deep depression four fingers wide. No wonder he was unconscious!

What other injuries might he have? She couldn't see whether the bloodworms were active within the wound. Manji probably hadn't taken a single breath since she had seen him go under. Could the *kessen-chu* go to work when their host had no air in his lungs?

Only one way to know: she had to get him breathing again. How to do that wasn't clear. As it was she could barely keep her own head above water and cling to both Manji and the raft. He slowly sank as her strength waned.

They were almost in the middle of the river, moving at a fair clip past the dark wooded banks. Navigating to shore with her awkward burden would be impossible, and she couldn't see where she was going anyway.

Waves splashed her in the face and filled her nostrils with water; she choked and snorted to clear them only to swallow a mouthful with the next wave. Manji's head lolled forward and his face submerged. Rin felt a steady downward pull like a huge cold hand that gripped her legs, and overwhelming weariness washed through her.

She was drowning...

Rin cast her eyes up to the sky, where no stars were yet visible, and uttered a prayer.

With a crunch, the raft struck a floating log. A whole pack of them rose above the surface of the water. The leading edge of the raft became wedged and the other side tilted upwards from the pressure of the current. Rin gasped and tried to keep her hold, but the edge yanked itself from her hand and rose above her reach.

Without anything to support her, Manji's weight dragged her down. Just before her head went under, she took a huge gulp of air and held it.

Though she tried to kick to the surface, he continued to sink and yanked her deeper underwater. She seized the front of his clothes in both hands and heaved, but instead of raising him she only brought herself down into the suspended circle of his limp arms. She could see nothing now, feel nothing but the water's increasing pressure and her grip on her bodyguard. Was he dead already? Inevitably dying?

With terrible clarity, Rin realized both of them were certainly doomed unless she let go of Manji. Probably even if she abandoned him, she was going to drown, and then she would have to face death all alone...

One of Manji's cold hands brushed her face, like a caress from a ghost.

Her air running out, Rin felt crushing pain in her chest. He would have told her to leave him to the river, wouldn't he? Of course he would have — and that was an order she could not bear to obey.

With the last of her strength she drew Manji's body into her arms and pressed her face to his. Roaring filled her ears; strange lights coruscated before her.

Papa... Mama... I'm coming home...

Big brother... what will you say to me when we reach the other side together? You'll tell me I'm an idiot and ruffle up my hair and light your pipe and go find a pond where the fish never stop biting...

You'll like my parents. I hope they'll understand why I've come to meet them so soon...

Rin felt a jarring bump and their downward drift halted. Her dimming senses barely registered that Manji's body had caught on something. A groaning, creaking surge: the world seemed to roll over and pull them with it. The river released its grip; Rin had a brief hallucinatory flash of wood and water contending like playful children throwing a ball back and forth in a game.

Rin emerged wheezing and blinking into the air. She still clung to Manji, whose body had lodged in the crevices of another huge wheel of tree roots. His hair and clothes streamed like a collection of small waterfalls. For a few moments she did nothing but take deep breaths and let her mind clear. When she raised her head,

she saw that they had surfaced within the pack of logs her little raft had hit. It was still wedged fast exactly where it had been.

With an incoherent yell, she scrambled up to sit and clutched the rough bark under her hands. She was alive! Happiness flooded through her; the darkness seemed to give way to dawn. Then she looked down at the man next to her.

Manji lay still partly submerged with closed eye and open mouth, his inert body wallowing and rolling. His unbound hair straggled around his head, his face dead white in the twilight. Jagged ends of bone protruded from a wound in his unnaturally angled right forearm; it was badly broken in at least one place. Rin felt sick at the sight. The current caught Manji's legs and began to slide him away.

Rin grabbed him under the arms and tried to get him to a secure spot. Especially out of the water, he was far too heavy for her to move. The wheel of roots began to roll again; in panic, Rin seized him around the waist.

The log made a quarter turn and stopped. Manji ended up head downwards with his hands dangling. Rin tilted one of his shoulders up and pounded him on the back, hoping she was doing the right thing. Hadn't she once seen a child pulled out of a canal and revived?

No response from Manji. Was the coldness of his skin only from the river? Some people who almost drowned were never able to walk or speak again. Sobs breaking through her rapid pants, Rin rubbed his back in hard upward strokes and pushed on his ribcage, then pounded him again. "Please! Big brother — please breathe!"

Manji's body shook. He retched and spewed out a stream of dirty water. Rin gasped in joyful startlement. He vomited up more river mud as if in answer. She leaned over him, tenderly wiped his face with her sleeve and pressed her ear to his chest.

A weak, irregular heartbeat, but no sign of breathing. Could she force some air into him? Rin took a deep breath, sealed her mouth to his and blew as hard as she could. Manji's chest expanded and fell; she took another gulp of air and tried again. His next breath was his own; he filled his lungs and had a coughing fit. Rin put a hand to his throat and felt a stronger pulse and a little warmth returning to his skin.

Tiny ripples slithered and whispered around the edges of the wound in his forehead; it gradually closed and shrank. Were the *kessen-chu* also healing his broken arm? She reached over and tried to lift it, but desisted when the sharp

exposed bones cut into his flesh. Unless it was straightened, he might come out a little crooked this time...

"Aaggh!" Manji gritted his teeth and blinked his eye, but seemed only half conscious. "Ugh..."

"Manji-san! Wake up!" Rin patted his face.

"Hnn?" He opened his eye, looking dazed. The depression in his forehead hadn't entirely filled out yet.

"Manji! You have a broken arm! How do I set it?"

He stirred and shifted his head, moaning. "Aw... crap... ow..."

"Please wake up!"

Some focus returned to his gaze. "What... the hell?" Upside down, he stared at the water below. "Where...?"

"We're in the river, Manji-san. You were pulled in — you're injured."

"Cold... dammit... Rin?"

"Yes, I'm here. Can you move at all?"

"Hurt...?" For a moment she thought he was confirming his own injuries, then realized he meant to ask her if she was all right.

"No, I'm fine. You're the one who needs help!"

Manji abruptly pulled himself to sit upright. He tried to brush his hair back with his right hand, grunted in pain and looked at the protruding bones in his forearm. "Aw, shit."

"Oh, gosh, that must hurt! What can I do?"

"Eh..." He blinked a few times at the dark-blue sky and the first emerging stars. "Damn, we lost all our stuff?" He felt under his clothes and pulled out a weapon halfway. "Ah, at least I still got some blades..."

"No, I kept hold of everything. I'll be right back!" She gingerly climbed down from their perch and scooted along the log to reach a spot from which she could

jump to the raft.

When she brought her overloaded bag, Manji took it from her and examined the contents. He extracted the sash of her *yukata*. "Here, double this up and tie it around my wrist. Good and tight." He directed her to loop the other end around a root stub.

"OK, move back. I need a little room." She shifted and watched him brace his feet. "Lock your hands around my chest. When I give the word, pull hard as you can."

Rin followed his instructions and threw her weight backwards with him. His arm straightened with the sash securing his wrist; the broken bones sliced under the skin and grated into place. "Arrrgh!" Manji leaned forward again to release the traction and clutched his arm.

Rin embraced him and pressed her face to his shoulder. "Oh, big brother — thank goodness you're all right!"

"Yeah, guess I am." He cast off the knotted sash. "There it goes... damn, Rin, what happened? You fell in and I went after you?"

"No... um, sort of the other way around." Breathlessly she told him about the driftwood and the malicious porters. "This enormous tree hit you! You don't remember?"

"Not really." He touched the mark on his temple that had now almost vanished. "Guess I got a conk on the head, huh?"

"Big brother, your skull was caved in! I was so frightened!" Rin threw her arms around his neck and sobbed. "I was almost sure you were dead — you were sinking and I held on to you and I thought I was going to drown, but at least I knew you'd be with me — oh, God, Manji, I wanted so much to tell you that I —"

"Oh, come on. Calm down already." Manji ruffled her hair. "Couldn't have been that bad."

"What?"

"Don't get hysterical, kiddo. I'm fine, you're fine, no harm done, other than gettin' wet. I guess you must've been a little nervous if I was woozy for a minute, but I've got a pretty hard noggin."

Rin's mouth dropped open. "You were totally unconscious and... and *drowning*! If I hadn't jumped in after you and saved you, you'd be DEAD!"

"Me? Don't be an idiot." He laughed and showed her his perfectly healed arm, then raised a brow. "What do you mean, jumped in? You fell in, right?"

"I saw you disappear!" She pointed at her raft with a shaking finger. "I... I paddled after you and couldn't f-find you until I ran into you! Then I couldn't get you on b-b-board and we sank under the w-w-water and..." Her lips trembled.

"Tried to rescue me? Ya crazy kid!" Manji sighed and shook his head. "See, if you get all excited and overreact, it ends up complicating the whole freakin' situation. It's only dumb luck I didn't end up having to fish you out too."

He rubbed his chin and looked at the dark riverbanks slipping by. "Though I still have to get us to shore somehow, and I doubt a little girl like you can swim it under her own power. Well, I'll take care of ya." He slapped his thighs with a businesslike air and climbed down through the tangled roots to stand on the bole of the tree. "Careful moving around on these damn logs. Need a hand?"

Speechless, Rin stared at Manji. He worked water out of one ear with the end of his little finger and glanced up at her. "What?"

"Ohhh... *you*!" She kicked him in the chest and hid her face in her hands.

"Hey!" Manji waved his arms, lost his balance and fell backwards off the log. Rin ducked to avoid the giant splash. In a moment he bobbed up with an insulted expression; he hauled himself out of the water, shook himself like a dog and glared at her. "Crap, woman! What the hell was that for?"

Rin gave way to violent giggling. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she flung her arms wide to the starlit sky.

"Females." Manji let go a long-suffering groan.

END OF VOLUME THREE

CONTINUED IN VOLUME FOUR...

- 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 unrevengeed 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.

furoshiki: A square of cloth used for many purposes, such as a scarf or for wrapping and carrying burdens.

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.

Honorifics: Honorific suffixes are extremely important when addressing any person in Japanese. Which ones you use are determined by your relationship to the person and his or her status relative to you. They are not used between family members, with the exception of *-chan*.

Honorifics are often omitted in translation, but may be hinted at in English by varying the degree of respect one person uses towards another. However, they convey shades of meaning that aren't readily translatable and can be very useful even in English dialog.

-san: The most common suffix. It's the equivalent of Mister or Ms. Not used to close friends, since it would come across as stuffy and standoffish, but proper for most adults.

-sama: A respectful term, a degree stronger than *-san*. Makie refers to Anotsu as *-sama*.

-dono: An archaic term used for high officials and important people, or to convey great respect. The doctors carrying out the experiments usually call each other *-dono*. Modern usage is always sarcastic, like calling someone "your highness".

-chan: Certain people such as Hyakurin address Rin as *-chan*. It's a diminutive with a cute connotation, used for children, intimate friends and lovers, and among women.

-kun: Used by a senior male towards a junior or between friends. If used to an equal who is not an intimate, *-kun* is condescending, like calling someone "boy". Otherwise it's a little like addressing a buddy as "hey, dude". The executioner Asaemon refers to nearly everyone as *-kun*, including Manji and Habaki.

O-: Women are often addressed with O- in front of their names, such as O-Ren. This is polite, but a less exalted term than *-san*, and therefore appropriate for females.

In the Japanese version of Blade of the Immortal, Rin never omits to call her bodyguard "Manji-*san*". Even though she is his employer, this is proper, since he is a man and much older than she is.

Even Shira addresses Manji as *-san*; anything else would be an egregious insult, so apparently Shira thinks of Manji as a worthy opponent. Magatsu sometimes goes so far as to think of Manji (though not directly address him) as Manji-sensei.

Manji rarely uses honorifics, if ever, which conveys his extreme disregard for

social niceties. He prefers rude nicknames such as "Goat-Face" for Habaki Kagimura.

sensei: Teacher, skilled person. May be used of any person of talent, such as an artist or musician. "Master" Sori the artist is addressed as Sori-*sensei*.

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.