

ABSTINENCE EDUCATION

A BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL FAN FICTION STORY

BY MADAME MANGA



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VOLUME FOUR : PARTS 21-27

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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>

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PART TWENTY-ONE

"Back to civilization at last! I'm SO hungry..." Rin put a hand over her stomach and gave Manji a beseeching look. "Let's eat, please. At the first noodle vendor's cart we see!"

"First things first." He frowned and peered over the heads of the throngs in the street. "We'd better find a place to stay before all the damn inns fill up again."

"I do want a bath. And to get my clothes washed, and my hair combed, and... oh, big brother, I don't ever want to spend a night outdoors again!"

"No 'livin' free in the woods'?" Manji chortled. "C'mon, I got you dried out and comfortable, didn't I?"

Rin picked at a bit of pitch in her hair; after driving out the river's chill by the fire Manji had built, they had bedded down on a heap of green pine boughs and fallen into exhausted sleep almost immediately. "Yes, thank you. I'm glad you know how to manage it so well — compared to how I've had to camp sometimes, last night was paradise."

He grunted. "So Anotsu don't know how to find dry wood after a rain, eh?"

"What?" Rin followed close behind as Manji cleared a path through the crowd with the aid of his jutting twin scabbards. "Oh, no — we couldn't have a fire because there were people after us. They would have seen the smoke."

"Uh-huh. Or maybe he figured you could keep him warm instead?"

Rin felt a twinge of irritation; ever since he had joked about the notion of Anotsu marrying her, Manji seemed to have framed it as grounds for suspicion.

"Honestly, Manji-san! If you're going to tease me, feed me first." Her stomach growled with wrenching insistence. "I'm SO hungry..."

"Yeah, I think I got the picture. Hey, let's hit that one." Manji strode right past a food stall while heading for an inn sign.

"Fine, you ask for a room while I buy a meal!" She broke away from him and slipped between pedestrians to reach the stall.

"Hey!"

"I'll be right here when you come back. I'll get you something too, don't worry!" Rin joined the line at the busy counter and dug into her bag for cash. Manji forced his way to her, shoved aside a man who stepped in front of him and took her by the shoulder.

"We'll get some food sent up to the room. Come with me, dammit."

"That'll take too long! I'm hungry now." She glanced up into his face; her eyes dilated.

Her bodyguard's gaze was fixed on her; he looked flushed and avid. "Woman... indoors." He tried to put his arm around her waist.

"Hey!" She pushed his hand away, blushing, and spoke in a loud whisper. "Can't you wait half an hour?"

Manji gave her a tight grin. "I'm hungry now."

The people packed around them obviously caught the gist of the exchange. Most of them politely pretended not to listen, assuming heaven knew what, but a couple of young women tittered into their sleeves. Rin drew herself up and treated Manji to a disdainful look. "I prefer not to be spoken to that way in public, Manji-san. I am going to buy a meal. Then I suppose I will come with you. If I must."

He scowled and narrowed his eye at her, but looked to the side and took note of their audience. "I'll be back in five minutes, max. Eat fast." He turned and stalked away towards the inn. If there hadn't been people watching, Rin had an impression that he might have picked her up and carried her with him no matter how much she protested.

She felt a number of gazes on her and flushed, but held her head high. It didn't matter what anyone thought; she knew who she was and what she was doing. Mostly...

Waking under a roof of branches at sunrise with her smoky-smelling clothes tucked over her like a blanket, she had sensed a fresh dawn of emotion for the man snoring into her hair. The campfire outside the cozy shelter still smoldered. Though it usually came out as big-brotherly condescension, Manji did his best to care for her in every respect. He needed to feel like the guardian and rescuer no matter who had rescued whom: how endearingly male of him.

Rin eased her half-unraveled braids from under Manji's cheek and turned over to look at him. His arm curved over her hip in an unconscious caress. She smiled at the hint of vulnerability that crept into his face when he slept: his lips parted, his heavy brows relaxed. She had always had plenty of opportunity to contemplate his quieter aspect, since he dozed every afternoon when there was nothing to demand his attention. But he was like a soldier fighting an unending battle who had to snatch every bit of rest he could. For as long as she remained his responsibility, she would be able to count on her bodyguard's tireless vigilance.

Right then, while he still slumbered and she watched him with tender gaze, she had wondered if their physical relationship was drawing to its inevitable conclusion. He had stopped her when she offered to relieve him in the woods; only a few days before she couldn't have imagined him having the strength to refuse.

Rin felt a queer stab of pain as she snuggled a little closer to his warmth. She was grateful that he could keep his desire on a short leash, but she realized that she had almost wished he would lose control. A stupid fantasy — Manji declaring that he couldn't resist her womanly allure any longer and carrying her off to make her entirely his...

A warm liquid shudder moved through her from breasts to groin. No matter how stupid, that longing's source sprang deep within her body and she couldn't stop it up. She'd never let Manji know; he would think she hadn't listened to his warnings at all. He had tried his best to teach her caution, and Rin was determined to be a dutiful student. Perhaps her *sensei* could look at the situation with a cooler head now that he had sated some of his needs. He might be planning to pull back while the original arrangement remained clear-cut.

Certainly the lessons ought to have a definite time limit, and not a distant one. Delaying opened doors to all sorts of complications...

Rin crossed her arms with an unsettling quiver in her stomach and stared at the fir-cone patterned *obi* of the woman ahead of her in line at the counter. She had been wrong; Manji wasn't pulling back at all.

On a sweet impulse that morning she had woken him with a kiss: a delicate brush of her lips on his, waiting for him to stir and stretch and smile at her. Instead she felt a powerful arm clamp around her shoulders and Manji's mouth capture hers in a response that left her fighting for breath. Then he rolled her over, pinned her to the bed of pine boughs and started to ravage her with a vigor that signaled a long and strenuous bout ahead. He was never inclined to release her until he was sure he had worn her out with pleasure.

Only her repeated protests had stopped him. A branch was digging into her back, the pine needles felt prickly on her bare skin and she hadn't eaten since the afternoon before — couldn't they hike to a village and secure food and lodging before he settled down to the day's activities? She didn't want sunset to find them again still on the road.

He grudgingly consented to move along, though not before caressing her as much as she would allow. The process of getting dressed was a slow one since Manji's helping hands strayed often. Between her legs she felt lingering stickiness; she hadn't escaped without going there while restrained on his lap, his fingertips teasing through her maidenhair. He didn't take his own pleasure; all he seemed to need right then was hers. She had assumed that in pillowing a man preferred a woman to focus only on him, but Manji always seemed to like it best when she let slip how much she enjoyed his touch. Maybe something about urging her to let go made him feel in better command of himself...

"Order?"

"Yes, it sort of has to do with the order of the world as he sees it..."

"What, miss?"

Rin looked up at the girl behind the counter. "Oh! Um..."

"Order? Plain, pickles, fish or bean paste?"

"Oh, uh... two fish, two pickles, two plain. To go, please." She put down the coins and waited while the cook wrapped the rice balls. Manji hadn't come out of the inn yet; she might have a moment to relax before he whisked her away. She chose a seat on a bench next to a large and boisterous family, divided the meal into two portions and daintily picked up a fish-stuffed ball, reminding herself to take small bites no matter how hungry she was. Manji didn't care about table manners, but her mother had. Not just in honor of her memory, Rin preferred to maintain some polite standards even in a noisy public food stall. Her mouth

watered at the smell of fresh rice.

Someone stepped in front of her and she glanced up. A stranger, a conservatively dressed man with a shaved forelock and pomaded topknot. He wore a single short sword in his *obi*. Rin met his eyes for a moment, not sure why he wasn't moving on, and looked back down at her food.

"Not going to eat all that yourself, are you?"

Rin stopped on the point of a mouthful and gave the man another wary look.

"Ah, just wondering. A young lady like you wouldn't have so big an appetite, generally." He twitched his brows and smiled; she wondered if he meant to make a joke. "Were you expecting someone to join you?"

"My, uh, *yōjimbō*. He'll be here in another moment or two." She nudged her bag into the empty space next to her to discourage any attempt to sit.

"Will he? All right, I'll wait." The man eased himself down, shifting her bag with his hip.

Rin scooted a little away from him and bumped into the broad back of a woman nursing an infant on the other side of the bench. "Um... for what?"

"Well... let's just say I'd like to discuss something with him." He made a subtle but unmistakable once-over of her wrinkled, mud-stained clothes. "Lost your home in the floods, have you?"

"No, not really." Did he think she was destitute, and if so, did he assume she was willing to do something in exchange for money? Rin narrowed her eyes at him.

"How old are you, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Sixteen. And a half." She sat up straight and squared her shoulders. Before speaking too sharply she wanted to be sure of his intentions, but what they were she couldn't quite tell yet. He certainly wasn't a gambler or a procurer; he could have been a schoolmaster. Even solid citizens had their commonplace vices!

"That young?" He raised his brows. "You must be new in town — I'd have remembered you if I'd seen you, I'm sure. Who are your parents?"

"My parents are both dead, and I'm just passing through. *With* my bodyguard. Look, um, mister, I think you might have made a little mistake — "

"A mistake?" He frowned and examined Rin's sword, which he had apparently just noticed. "That's a handsome weapon. Are you taking care of it for your, *ahem*, bodyguard?"

"No, he's got plenty of blades of his own. This one is mine, and I do know how to use it."

"Ah, is that so? Young lady — I'll just ask you flat out..."

Rin turned red and stared at him.

"My wife and I were passing by, and we saw how that scruffy-looking fellow was handling you — it was hard to miss." He gave her a concerned and kindly look. "I can tell you're accustomed to much better treatment. I promised her I'd investigate."

Was he a policeman? Rin clapped a hand over her mouth, her heart pounding. She couldn't see a *jitte* sword-catcher in his belt, but one might be hidden under his coat.

"If you have no family, I can understand why you accepted a man's protection, even his. I'm sure you didn't realize his true intentions at first." He shook his head, obviously disturbed. "This is such a cruel world for a young woman all on her own."

"Uh... I guess it could be..."

He glanced across the street; Rin noticed a tidily dressed matron about her mother's age discreetly observing them from under the eaves of a tea shop. "My wife is very anxious for you — please come and speak to her. We have two little daughters, and if anything happened to us, I'd pray for someone to help my precious girls out of trouble. Will you trust me enough to let me do that?"

"Help... me? That's OK, thanks." She smiled in some relief — if he wasn't an official, he wouldn't try to haul Manji in for questioning. She wouldn't have liked to see the man lose a limb or be run through; although he wasn't samurai, his bearing reminded her a little of her own father. "Really, I'm perfectly all right, and you probably ought to get back to your wife to tell her so."

She made a quick check over her shoulder. If Manji noticed this would-be benefactor paying her such close attention, he was liable to ask questions last...

"You can escape him. Even if he has, ah, injured your honor." The man gently urged her with a touch on her arm. "Don't put stock in any threats he's made. I'll inform the authorities of the situation and put you up for as long as you need. Please, my dear, come home with me."

"No, but thank you." Again she nervously glanced around, but the crowd was too thick for her to spot anything from her seat. "Mister, you'd better not sit here any longer — "

He tapped his sword guard. "Don't worry, I can handle him."

Rin's jaw dropped. "Uh... you did say you saw him?" She bobbed her head in the direction of the inn where Manji had gone. "The samurai with a scarred face?"

"Yes, I did, and from the look of him I can imagine he's capable of anything. Damn it, some of those filthy renegades make common bandits seem like honorable men. There's no scum worse than samurai scum!"

"Shh!" She flapped a hand at the level of the bench. "If he heard you say something like — "

"Get your fucking mitts off my woman."

Right behind her — Rin jumped. The helpful man's gaze lifted to a point above her head and stopped there, obviously having encountered Manji's one-eyed glare. His face went slack and pale; he jerked his hand away from Rin's arm.

"What's this asshole got to say, huh? Besides the 'filthy renegade' crack..."

"It wasn't anything important, big brother! Here, would you like something to eat?" She offered the packet of rice balls.

Manji brushed her aside and came around the end of the bench. "No thanks, little sister. I'm busy." The helpful man stumbled to his feet and backed away, one hand up. Manji beckoned to him. "You can handle me, dude? Come on, don't be shy — you looked bold as brass a minute ago."

"Um — did you get a room?" Rin grabbed Manji's sleeve and yanked hard. "Let's go, OK? I thought you were, uh, hungry?" She tilted her head and tried out a playful smile.

Manji glanced down with an expression that made her flinch. "I didn't get a

room. The old biddy didn't want to rent me one, that is. You could say I'm a little pissed off right now." He directed a snarl at the helpful man, who raised both hands as if in prayer. People turned around to watch.

"If you charged in looking like *that*, I can see why you scared the innkeeper! Don't hurt that poor man — he and his wife were just making sure I was OK." The woman across the street looked ready to faint.

"Aw, bullshit! He offers you a bed outta the goodness of his heart?"

"Like there aren't any good people in the world? Listen to me for once — "

"I humbly apologize for my offense, sir..." The man offered a low bow with trembling dignity. "I had sincere concerns for the young lady's welfare, which I see were perhaps unwarranted — "

"*Welfare?* You son of a bitch." Manji snapped his side-hooked knife into his grip. The spectators gasped and a few women shrieked. "There ain't any man on earth who can take better care of her than me!"

"Stop that!" Rin seized his elbow in both hands. "You wouldn't!"

"Samurai scum's capable of anything." He grinned at the man, who looked like he wanted to cry, or possibly throw up.

"Oh, let it drop! This isn't like you!" She kept hold of Manji's arm and jerked her chin at the man, who took the hint and left the stall in haste to comfort his hysterical wife. "Gee, Manji! That was totally uncalled for. Now he's probably going to report you to the police for threatening him." People murmured and stared.

"Screw the police — aw, crap." He replaced his knife in his sleeve and puffed out a long breath with a hand to his forehead. "He really wasn't hitting on you? Dammit, woman, you looked scared — "

"Because I knew he was courting death, with the mood you're in! What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing getting a room won't fix." He hooked her under the arm and pulled her with him. The crowd parted like water. Rin barely had time to grab the food before he dragged her out of the stall and down the street. She stowed the packet of rice balls in her bag and licked a few grains from her fingers. That was all she'd managed to eat yet; she felt a little dizzy from hunger.

"Slow down, please. My ankle's still sore!"

He shortened his strides. "Aw, you won't need to stand up much longer." The fire in his glance sent a shock through her; he seemed nearly wild with impatience. "'Cause the moment we get behind a *shoji* you're gonna be on your back... or on top of me." Manji gave her an almost shaky grin. "Damn, woman... what the hell are you doing to me?"

"I... I don't know." She stared at him with wide eyes. "Are you feeling all right? You almost look like you could have a fever..."

"Never felt better." He took her into a large inn a little farther down the street and looked around the ground floor. Oddly, no one was waiting to welcome guests, though there seemed to be plenty of people in the teahouse adjoining the entrance area. Rin heard a murmur of voices and the clink of cups, and then a woman began to sing to the accompaniment of a *samisen*. All conversation stopped and a hush fell over the crowd.

"What the hell? Everybody run off somewhere?" Manji thumped on a post and called. "Hey! Customer!"

"Shh!" Rin touched his chest and moved closer to the teahouse door. "Oh, listen..."

"The autumn wind chills my bones
as cold as the one I hope for
in the dark, night after night.

"When in sleep —
is only what we see then to be called a dream?
This fleeting world, too,
I cannot see as reality.
Was I lost in thoughts of love
when I closed my eyes? My love appeared;
had I but known it for a dream,
I would never have awakened..."

She didn't know the song, but it was a haunting *nagauta* tune, the words lovely and longing. The singer's clarity and aching emotion sent shivers through her; it was like hearing the lament of a wandering spirit who had suffered every wound of fate.

"Aching with love
in the depths of sleep
I trod to my love a straight dream road:
If only it had been real!
More than my life
what I most regret
is a dream left unfinished
as my eyes open.

"From now on
coldly, autumn winds will blow.
How can I bear to sleep the long night through?"

After a pause as the musician drew the last few notes from her instrument, an admiring hum grew. The audience crowded too thick for Rin to see her, though she craned to look. She heard the chink of coins; the singer had earned some monetary appreciation as well, and no wonder.

"Gosh, that's incredible..." Rin smiled and wiped tears from her eyes. "I've never heard a voice like that. She cuts right through you, doesn't she?"

"Uh... right. Real nice." Manji hadn't said a word since Rin had shushed him; she had been so entranced she had almost forgotten his presence. He seemed a little subdued now and frowned at the backs of the spectators. "Can we get some service out here?"

The innkeeper bowed his way out of the teahouse, shooed the maids along and begged their honorable pardon for the delay. Rin lingered in the entry hoping to hear the singer again, but she had ceased for the time being and Manji urged her to follow the maid to their room.

She slowly trailed down the corridors behind him and sat on the *tatami*. The maid laid out *yūkata* and informed them that the fire had just been lit and the inn's *ofuro* would soon be hot. Rin sighed — she really did need a wash, and a warm soak would do wonders for her aches and strained muscles. Manji wouldn't want to let her out of the room for a while, and it might be best to humor him...

"Here, let's eat." Manji gestured at her bag. Rin brought out the rice balls in some surprise; she had expected him to unroll a *futon* as soon as the maid left. "Go ahead and hit the bath when you're done."

"Really?"

"Hey, I'm paying for the hot water." He scratched under one arm. "You might as well use it."

"Um... what about you?"

"Hnn? I had a bath only yesterday. Got dunked twice, matter of fact." He continued a trail of vigorous scratching up to the crown of his head and checked his grimy fingernails.

Rin wrinkled her nose. "You mean you fell in a cold, muddy river with all your clothes on? That doesn't count."

"Who's counting?"

"Don't you even *like* a hot bath?"

"Eh... maybe if I don't got to share." Manji chuckled, wiped his hand on his chest and reached for a rice ball. "I don't like crowds, especially when I'm bare-assed."

He ate quickly, stripped down and put on a *yūkata*. Rin followed suit and collected their dirty clothes for the maids to launder and mend.

"I won't take long, Manji-san, I promise." She undid her braids and set her hair rings next to the pile he had made of his weapons.

"I got to grease down all my blades anyhow. Take your time." Rin gave him a startled look. "Go on... before I change my mind." Manji reached for a jar of oil and a rag and glanced up from under his brows with a brief hot spark in his eye. She took the hint and quickly closed the *shoji* behind her.

An elderly grandmother tending a little boy was already soaking in the large communal tub. A stocky younger woman fastened up her just-washed hair before climbing in, her front decorously shielded by her towel. Rin undressed, dipped up a bucketful of hot water and scrubbed with a few handfuls of fine sand until her body glowed. She chose a spot between the two women and eased into the steaming water with a grateful sigh.

Here was a chance to catch her breath for a few minutes and think. The little boy giggled and splashed, gently reproved by his grandmother. She lifted him out to let him run on the slatted wooden floor. Leaving a trail of tiny wet footprints, he squeezed around the end of the shoulder-high partition that marked the division

between the men's and women's sides of the bathhouse. This early in the day, no men were bathing; Manji could have enjoyed all the privacy he liked if he'd come along.

Rin propped her foot on the plank seat and massaged her sore ankle under the water. It wasn't that she dreaded returning to the room, or that Manji's mood actually frightened her. He might be testy and antsy and horny, but he hadn't gone insane. Perhaps he hadn't slept as well as she had. Considering his usual habits, he probably wanted a drink and a full pipe as soon as he could get them.

Two men entered from the other side, undressed and splashed water on themselves. The little boy clambered into the men's end of the bath along with them and walked along the seating plank to the partition, which came down to a handspan above the surface of the water. Frustrated, he banged his hands on it and cried until his grandmother reached underneath and helped him duck under and come through. She sat him on her lap and cooed and soothed him. Soon he was splashing and giggling again. The stocky woman seemed somewhat put out at the commotion, but said nothing. Rin smiled at the child, who looked at her with wide eyes and fell silent.

The bath attendant's voice rose from behind the curtain that covered the entranceway. "Excuse me, sir... if you would like me to take a message to your young mistress — no, please don't go in there — "

The curtain swept open. "Hey, Rin! You about finished? Do I got to cool my heels in the waiting room all day?"

Rin clapped a hand over her mouth and stared down into the water. That hadn't taken him long...

"Sir, that's the women's section! Please close that and use the men's side."

"Ah, whatever..." She heard Manji's footsteps on the other side of the partition and the thump of a sheathed sword dropped into a clothing basket. "Fine. If you ain't coming out, I'll join you."

He couldn't possibly mean that the way it sounded. "Um... Manji-san..."

"Hah? Speak up." He was undoing knots and pulling the ends through.

Rin scooted over to the partition and spoke low again. "I only need to wash my hair, OK? I'll be just a — "

His *obi* slithered free and dropped into the basket, quickly followed by the louder rustle of his *yūkata*. “Nah, I decided to take a dip. Sit tight, I’ll be right with ya.”

Rin jumped out of the bath and fetched a bucket. If she moved fast enough, maybe he wouldn’t be so boorish as to invade the women’s bath, but as far as she knew he was perfectly capable of committing that particular offense. She heard his last piece of clothing hit the pile and a large splash as he vaulted into the men’s end of the bath without washing first. A wave propagated into the women’s end and sloshed over the sides. Both female occupants studiously avoided looking in Rin’s direction. She flushed and dipped up a bucketful of water.

“Hey, you don’t like it, you can clear out.” Manji spoke to the other men, who had obviously given him dirty looks. He blew his nose with a loud honk and gave an aggressive sniff. Water dripped as the men hastily climbed out and dried off. The grandmother followed suit, looking scandalized. She lifted out her grandson and dressed him. Rin shivered on a stool with her comb in hand, wondering what was next. When the curtain swished shut behind the old woman and boy, Manji rapped on the partition.

“Everybody left yet? Here I come.”

“Big brother, no!”

He ducked under the partition and came up on the women’s side, stark naked and with no towel to shield his groin. “There you are, little sister.” The stocky bather let out a loud huff and crossed her arms over her chest. Manji glanced at her and took a seat on the other side of the bath. He beckoned to Rin in a proprietary way. “Come on in... plenty of room.”

Cringing, Rin complied and sat some distance away from him. He slid a little closer, but when the stocky woman cleared her throat in a warning manner, he stopped, yanked out his hair tie and dunked his head in the water, another breach of bathing etiquette. When he surfaced, he shook himself and showered the whole room.

The woman flicked droplets from her nose, folded her arms and narrowed her eyes; she seemed to dare him to dislodge her from her place. Manji raised a brow at the ceiling. Rin sighed to herself, hoping he would give up and just take a bath, even if in the wrong end. The stocky woman smirked, and then Manji screwed up his face, leaned a little to one side and broke wind.

The woman leaped from the bath, dressed and stormed out. Her expostulations

to the bath attendant were loud and indignant until the sound of her clacking *geta* receded down the steps. Manji chuckled in satisfaction and sat back.

"Well, that was really disgusting." Rin rolled her eyes and fanned the air. "Why didn't you just yell, 'Beat it, folks. I prefer the place all to myself!'"

"But this way's more fun." Manji grinned, ducked under the water again and came up between her knees.

"Hey!" Rin clutched her towel to her front and tried to climb out. He wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her throat.

"Where are you going, little sister?"

"To finish washing my hair. It's too warm in here."

"Says who?" His lips wandered across her face and he circled a nipple with one wet thumb.

She pushed Manji away before he could kiss her on the mouth. "Stop that! The attendant's probably going to come in and — "

"Then he'll leave quick, won't he?"

Rin struggled out of his grasp, jumped from the bath and stuck out her tongue at him. "Honestly! Wait until I'm clean!"

"Clean, dirty... who cares?" He watched with one elbow propped on the edge of the bath as she worked the snarls out of her hair and slowly poured a bucket of hot water over her head. "Damn, you're pretty."

He spoke with surprising fervor. Rin blinked water out of her eyes. "Big brother?"

"I can't believe it sometimes — you cuddle up in my arms, all warm and sweet, and I can't believe I ever got this lucky. I try to stay awake just to watch you sleepin' so peaceful..." Manji dunked his head again.

Rin sat with a hand over her lips and her heart throbbing. She didn't think she would be able to meet his gaze when he turned to her, but he stayed underwater for so long she began to wonder if he was all right. When he emerged he took a deep breath and looked a little desperate, as if he had been trying to resolve a dilemma before his air ran out.

"Rin... uh..."

"M-Manji-san?"

"I'm tryin', OK? It ain't so easy."

"What's not easy?"

"Uh... keeping a handle on it. You know... the insatiable thing."

Rin hid her breasts with her towel and huddled up her body. Ever since she had told him why she wouldn't want him as a lover, she had sensed something unusual in his manner. Attempting the impossible: to mend his ways a little for her. He'd never succeed, but that he had even made the effort kicked the breath from her lungs.

"I feel, I feel kind of... I swear, you look prettier every time I turn around, and I just can't stop thinking about it. About you. Sorry." Once more he vanished under the surface, though only for a moment. Was he trying to hide his obvious flush in the heat?

"I... I don't mind..." Rin rubbed chilling water from her skin and shivered. He wanted to get as much as he could out of the arrangement before it ended, of course. No wonder he felt edgy after more than a day's deprivation. There probably wasn't much time left before they would have to make the decision, and from the way he spoke he was just as aware of that as she was. She was glad that he still meant to consider her feelings. "Oh, Manji — I wish — you always make me feel so wonderful..."

"Yeah? You like sharing my pillow?" He partly rose from the bath. A strange expression moved over his features: half hopeful, half apprehensive.

"D-didn't you know?"

His face transformed to commanding ardor; he wouldn't wait a moment longer. Rin gave way to emotion and hid her face in her hands. She heard a surging rush and felt warm spattering as Manji heaved all the way out of the bath and streamed water on the floor. Immediately his arms circled her. He knelt by her stool, plastered her body against his naked wetness and kissed her.

Rin felt inundated with need, as if Manji's spilled-over desire washed through her as well. His touch burned and flowed on her skin and the beat of his heart

pounded through her whole body. Did she feel this because he felt it too? Did embracing her seem like the only thing he wanted any more? He kissed her cheeks and eyelids and returned to her mouth, blazing hot and cold with some great awareness. He fought it still: he clenched his jaw and dug his fingers into her flesh before helplessly pressing his lips to hers again, softening, opening.

Manji suddenly yanked her to her feet, grabbed her *yūkata* and dressed her with shaking hands. He almost left the bathhouse naked, but retrieved his own clothing, wrapped it around himself in haste and hurried her back to their room. Dizzy, Rin sank to the floor and watched him lay out a *futon*. Squatting by the bed, he put a hand over his face and groaned as if he were in pain.

Rin shuffled over to him on her knees. “Manji-san? Are you sure you’re feeling all right?”

He made an inclination of the head and put an arm around her when she embraced him. “Kiss me, huh?” She raised her face and pressed her lips to his jaw, then to his mouth. Expecting to be smothered with kisses again and wrestled flat, she was surprised to feel only a slight response. Rin pulled back and looked at Manji; his eye was closed and his brows raised as if he asked a question of an inner voice.

“What is it?”

“Aw, nothing. Just listening... for once.” He patted her back, eased her robe off her shoulders and lowered her to the bed. “Rin-chan, you want me?”

Rin’s heart quaked at the endearment. “I... I always have.”

Manji smiled and closed her mouth with his.

She’d never felt so lost in the turbulent flow of sex. Learning how her body responded hadn’t allowed her to stand apart from desire and keep control. She had only made it far easier for desire to overwhelm her...

Manji’s body was blood-warm, softened from the bath like hers. Their damp skin clung and sealed to skin, and every parting hurt like a flaying. When the lightest touch was agony she couldn’t bear to avoid the deepest of contacts any more. He hadn’t said that much, had he? It was enough. Weeks ago Rin had believed her feelings were too huge to express, and she had learned nothing about real longing then. Did it multiply forever with every fresh piece of knowledge? Already she wondered if it would tear her apart.

She hungered for definition and finality and an end to wondering; all caution had to perish or this enormous question would turn to lies. The ink-black of his hair drew lines across her flesh like writing she could not yet read. If he meant to answer her now, she would listen...

Rin pulled Manji up to her and parted her legs around his body. His stiff *henoko* measured the distance between them. He dug his face into her shoulder and groaned; did he think she was teasing when she felt so deadly serious? With a hand wrapped around his hips she arched up to meet him, wishing in her delirium that he would close the gap forever.

"I do want you. I do..." She whispered in his ear and stroked his head; he panted against her breasts and ground his teeth. "Please..."

Arms scooped under her. Manji rolled over and seated her straddling his thighs. Did he want to make certain she was choosing her own course? He lay back and didn't move, his erection rising just in front of her groin. Rin licked her fingers and moistened the smooth head as she'd seen done in illustrations. Manji's chest heaved and his eye squeezed shut. His hands curved around her bare bottom and urged her for a moment, then released their grip as if forced open.

Rin moved forward on hands and knees, not sure how to proceed. Why wasn't he showing her what to do, or even taking over? He knew exactly what she wanted. The realization vibrated in him bone-deep; he looked almost sick with it, his face sweating and pale.

There she paused, trembling all over. Surely it wouldn't hurt very much? Manji's fingers and the *harigata* toy had already explored past the barrier of her maidenhead. So there might only be a brief pain, a thin streak of blood to commemorate the death of her virginity. What greater pain might swiftly follow, she couldn't say...

Rin clamped her lip in her teeth and tried to force all thought beneath the surface. Concentrating her resolve, she drew her spine into a tense arc and felt every sinew tighten like a strung instrument. Tears flew from her lashes and dripped on Manji's chest. She grabbed his *henoko* with shaking hands and awkwardly maneuvered her hips into position.

Manji grasped her shoulders, laid her down beside him and pulled her into his arms. Although he was breathing so hard her ears roared, he didn't make any move to continue what she had tried to start. He only stroked her back and rocked her slightly in a soothing way. "Naw... naw."

Rin sobbed and pressed her knuckles against her mouth. She felt both ashamed and enormously relieved. Of course Manji wouldn't allow her to come to harm in any way, even from herself — after all, he was her bodyguard. Now that he'd pulled her back from the brink, he'd let her know just how stupid she had been...

He touched her under the chin and looked into her face with a quizzical expression. "What's the matter, Rin-*chan*?"

"I... I don't know." She hid against his chest, trembling with humiliation. "M-Manji-*san*, I'm sorry!"

"What for?" He ruffled her hair; under her cheek she felt his heart beating in deep rapid strokes.

"You should be yelling your head off at me, because I deserve it." She sniffled. "I'm such an idiot — you must be really angry..."

Manji laughed out loud. "Damn, woman! *Angry?*"

"You've told me over and over... and I just didn't care... I was really going to do it, and that was so *incredibly* dumb and it's all my fault, and now — "

He rolled her over and pinned her hands down. "Aw, shut up." His kiss felt like he was claiming a prize; he was bursting with ill-constrained exultation. "Oh, girl, I'm gonna take my slow sweet time getting you there. And once you are — you're staying."

—

"Hungry yet?"

"Mmm? Not really." Rin stirred and stretched luxuriously in the crook of Manji's arm. "Are you?"

"Naw... just thought you might — " He kissed her. "Thanks."

Rin stroked his cheek when he raised his head. "You're welcome. For what?"

Manji grinned. "Being an idiot."

She blushed with lowered gaze. "But you didn't take me up on it..."

“Not like I don’t appreciate the thought.” He kissed her again more thoroughly. Her lips felt soft and bruised and her whole body ripe, like an autumn fruit ready to be gathered. When Rin began to respond, Manji pulled back. “Um... you hungry?”

“What is it, Manji-san?”

He sat up naked in her arms. “Just thought we’d go out for a little while.”

“Go out?” Her eyes went wide. “What for?”

“Take a walk, eat a bite. We’ll be here for a few days — might as well check out the town.” He glanced at the walls and ceiling with a faintly oppressed air. “Anyway...I gotta look around.”

“Why is that?”

He cast another glance at the folding screen that stood in front of the window to block the sun. It threw a long cool shadow over the *futon* where they had spent the past few hours. “I got a feeling there’s something here we ought to watch out for.”

“Watch out for? What?”

“Dunno. The moment we walked into this joint my hackles went up.” He rubbed his chin. “It’s nothing I can put a finger on yet... and I pretty much forgot about it until now.” Smiling, he ran a hand along her bare thigh and squeezed.

“Oh, Manji-san...” Rin sat up and put her arms around his neck.

“How you feeling? A little better?”

“Yes. Very... happy. How about you?”

“Happy? Could be.” He cradled her head against his shoulder. “Feels kinda strange, anyhow.”

She giggled and kissed the curve of his throat. “I guess it might.”

“So I’ll sit easier if I can sniff around a bit and put this notion of mine to rest. I don’t want any more distractions.”

The maid had brought back their clean clothes and left them folded outside the *shoji*. They dressed, Rin braided her hair, and Manji slung his weapons under his *kōsōde*. She rose and turned to him; he looked at her with a crease between his brows.

“Manji-san?”

“Here, let me check something. Stand up straight.” Manji put his hand on her head and moved behind her. He flattened his palm, slid it over the top of her skull and measured it against his chest. “Well... damn.”

“What is it?”

“You’re reaching higher than you were a few months ago. By about a *sun*, give or take a few *bu*.” He marked off on his right thumb and showed her. “How tall was your mother?”

“Um...” She indicated a point slightly above her head.

“Yeah, you’ll hit that in another year or so. But you’ve got a little way to go.” Manji made a grimace. “I gotta feed you better.”

Outside the afternoon sun had started to lose some of its heat and a breeze had come up. Rin smelled mountain pines and cooking fires and a tinge of autumn. It was the harvest season, and it was the doorway to winter, but winter seemed remote on a warm day with such clear skies. She detected another odor that piqued her attention and turned her head.

“Oh, it’s a sweet-noodle vendor. Those look awfully good...”

“Hungry after all... at least when it’s dessert?” Manji shook his head with an indulgent smile. “Whatever; I’ll treat you to a bowl.”

“Don’t you want anything?”

“Since when have I had a sweet tooth? Hey...” He stopped short and looked at a shop sign in the shape of an oversized tobacco pipe. “That’s a sight for sore eyes! How long has it been since I had a smoke?”

Rin laughed. “You might not like dessert, Manji-san, but don’t say I’m the only one of us who enjoys treats!”

He cocked his head and laughed with her. “There’s one we can agree on, yeah.”

A flick of the brow changed that to a less innocent remark, and Rin blushed in nervous pleasure. Manji had said nothing very definite, nor done anything yet that would leave a mark on her. A tacit understanding seemed to hold them, something delicate and finely wound. Rin didn't want to disturb the smallest strand of that fragile web of anticipation. She sensed that the next few days, or even hours, might dictate a direction for the rest of her life.

Rin ordered a bowl of translucent noodles in cool syrup and found a bench to sit on while she ate. Although Manji had said he wanted to buy tobacco, he lingered next to her, scanning the passersby. One thumb absently tapped a hilt cap.

"Have you figured out what was bothering you?" Rin slurped a long noodle and looked up at Manji.

"Naw... I'm probably imagining things." He probed one ear with his little finger. "Hearing things, anyway."

"You did seem out of sorts earlier... like when I went to get the food."

"Yeah, sorry. I've been kinda jumpy all day, but I guess I popped off a little." He sat down, raised one knee and gave her a half-grin. "Eh... I don't like getting taken for a scumbag of a *ronin*."

"I'm sorry he said that. He seemed nice... but he must really hate that sort of criminal." Rin blinked in comprehension. "I bet someone in his family was attacked by *ronin*, and he holds a grudge!"

"Could be. There's plenty of guys carrying two swords who use them for what they shouldn't." Manji puffed out his cheeks. "Hey, I could've ended up a highway robber, or just gone around challenging everybody who bumped my scabbard in the street."

"Of course you wouldn't have. You're not that kind of man!"

He chewed his jaw back and forth and propped a forearm on his raised knee. "Rin... you know what they call me."

Her face felt a little cold; she knew.

"The 'hundred-man murderer'. That was me... just two years ago."

"It's not what you are now!"

"Yeah?" Manji looked at her. "That guy was dead on the mark, in a manner of speaking — a hundred cops ended up on the point of my blade. How is that not me?"

"Well... well, because you just aren't." She swallowed against a tightness in her throat. "You take such good care of me..."

"Do I? Am I really thinkin' about what's good for you right now?" His jaw muscles knotted. "If taking care of you is the only thing that keeps me from being just what that guy called me... then I damn well got to do it right, don't I?"

Rin stared into her bowl, her eyes brimming.

"Rin-chan..." Manji covered both his mismatched eyelids for a moment. "It ain't easy. It's never easy. That's how you know when you're facing facts, because it's so damn hard. When it seems plain and clear and you got all the answers... that's when karma turns around and takes a big bleeding chunk out of your backside." He put a hand on his ribcage and moved it a little higher.

"Isn't there anything... that tells you how to act? Like following your duty?"

"If my duty's putting a sword through the right necks, I can do my duty. I got the tools, see?" Slowly he turned his head towards her. "I know how my cock's telling me to act — he don't change his tune. Maybe I know something about what you want to tell me. You're a kid. In another five years — hell, in another two — you're not gonna be a kid any more, and you won't be thinking anything like you do now or wanting anything like you do now. You get my drift?"

She nodded, blinking back tears. "I understand, Manji... but you haven't said what you want to tell yourself."

His eye closed and he looked pained. "I'm tryin' to face facts, that's what. About you. About me... and how I feel when I think about where duty's likely to take me. It ain't a happy thought, that's for sure."

"Couldn't you let yourself be happy? For a little while, at least?"

"God..." He lowered his head and clenched his hands on his knees. "God, woman, I wish... so goddamn much sometimes..."

"Manji... I don't think it's wrong to want that. I don't think it's wrong to do some things in your life just to be happy. Life is so short — " She stopped, gulping. "Or... or it's longer than you ever imagined, and wouldn't it be terrible

if your whole life long you couldn't ever be happy again? Or if you didn't even have a memory... of a time when you just let yourself be human."

Manji raised his head. Again the fire in his expression shocked her, but this was the light of another blaze entirely. Lit from the same source but burning deeper, clear through the grimes and the stinks and the heaviness of flesh. This wasn't a fire to be quenched in the mingling of sweat or the flooding of seed. All their bodies could be was fuel...

"B-big brother?"

"Let's get back to our room now." He sounded thick and hoarse. "OK, little sister?"

Rin nodded, her chin trembling. She started to rise, but he made a gesture at her nearly full bowl. "I'll buy that tobacco. You go on and finish your treat — I'll be right back."

"Yes." He stood up, took a few steps and looked around at her, and Rin echoed herself. "Yes, Manji. Yes."

She thought, at the moment he turned to go across the street, that she would remember the look in his face for the rest of her life, and be able to take that with her to the other side of the river.

Rin watched until Manji disappeared into the tobacconist's shop, then addressed her noodles. The sweetness seemed childish and cloying now, and she lowered her chopsticks. Hearing things? What had it been about that teahouse song that so riveted her attention? It hadn't been the words or music alone, but the haunting ache in the singer's voice. Emotion, sad or happy, was universally understood. It didn't have to be spoken to be an unbreakable bond between human beings...

Manji came out of the tobacconist's with his lit pipe in his teeth and tucked his pouch into the front of his *kōsōde*. He glanced down into his palm and seemed to be counting his change.

"Hello, Rin."

A woman's voice, low and melodious. Rin looked around in startlement. The person who stood beside her had a beautiful face, and the saddest eyes she had ever seen. The short ragged haircut was an odd contrast with ivory skin and perfect lips —

Otonotachibana Makie. The deadliest fighter she had ever imagined.

Rin gasped; her bowl dropped from her hands and broke. Manji's head jerked up at the smash. His pipe and money bounced to the ground. He shouldered through a group of pedestrians to reach her, knocking one man on his backside, and lashed an arm across his body to seize the hilt of a sword.

"Rin! What the — "

Half-drawn: and then he recognized Makie too and let the blade drop back into the scabbard as if his fingers had lost their strength. He took an unsteady breath, flexed his hands and kept his eye fixed on the *samisen* Makie carried. It served as concealment for her lethal three-part pike, but she made no move to open it yet.

"Makie-san?" Rin fell to her knees on the ground and grabbed Manji around the thighs. Her heart pounded like thunder. His skills and the bloodworms could delay the inevitable, but if Manji drew a weapon against her, Makie would show no mercy. She could sever a limb or strike off a head with the unconcerned precision of a dancer wielding a fan. "P-please — why are you here?"

"Leggo of me!" Manji shook Rin off and took a step forward to shield her with his body. "Rin, run like hell."

"Wh-what?"

"Don't stop for anything." He glanced over his shoulder, his expression again strangely alight. Even glad. "If the lady's in a genuine killing mood today...I might be able to buy you ten minutes."

PART TWENTY-TWO

The desire Rin had seen in Manji's face a few minutes before seemed to pass over him and fade into memory. He had never looked at her the way he was looking at Makie.

Rin felt an echo of a previous meeting, when she had thought Manji wanted to buy Makie's body for his satisfaction. She had realized by envious comparison how young and awkward her own body still remained. Over these last few weeks she'd gained new confidence in her ripening sexuality, but when struck against Makie's mature beauty at a moment like this, all her illusions of adulthood seemed to shatter. She was an angry little girl again, eating herself heartsick on sweets.

Rin trembled and bit her lips. Maybe Manji had meant it when he said she was pretty and that he felt lucky to hold her. At least at the moment he had said it, he might not have exaggerated; why would he? He knew he could coax her to bed without sweet talk, and Manji wasn't the kind of man to say things he didn't believe just to make a girl feel a little more grown up.

He looked at a grown woman now. His equal or his better in many ways: in age, in warrior's skill and cunning. Probably Manji had never met anyone like Makie, nor even imagined before their blades had clashed that a mere female could come so close to relieving him of his curse. She would have killed him at that fateful meeting — she nearly had, and at her hands he had been willing to accept death. With admiration warming his scarred face as he lay in a pool of his own blood and looked up at that angelic figure. Hovering on fast-whirring wings of bright steel, an ultimate release from pain.

Jealousy sickened Rin. Why couldn't she be the one to ease his suffering?

The appraisal had turned into a staring match. Manji's smile broadened; Makie sighed and lowered her lids before gazing off into the distance. Rin noted a faint flush on her cheeks.

"I am disarmed by your potency, Manji-san."

He chuckled. "Sure you are, ma'am." He looked at her a moment longer, then gave her a nod like a respectful challenge and pointed his chin at a nearby alleyway. "Let's get out of the street and take care of business."

Makie smiled without glancing back at him and briefly closed her eyes. "Do you hope to die for your charge today?"

Manji gripped the top of his scabbard and pushed a thumb against the sword guard to break the blade's seal to the mouth. A soft, deliberate click that reverberated through Rin like a blow; she snapped her head around to see Makie's reaction.

Cold as new snow: she had seen that expression before. With a storm of blood raging around her, Makie rose above it untouched. Pure, in a strange way: a clean swift death, even for an immortal. Rin choked. Manji laid hold of his sword hilt, steady and balanced as he had never seemed when he clutched his 'little sister' in his arms.

"No, please! Big brother — " She tried to grab his wrist.

He pivoted to avoid her, staying focused on Makie. "I thought I told you to run."

"She'll kill you!"

"Don't be so fucking sure about that." He grinned at Makie; his muscles tensed in a slight crouch. "I'll give you a minute to unlimber that pike, ma'am. Then all bets are off."

"You haven't even asked her why — "

"I will not draw first, Manji-san." Makie sat on the bench Rin had vacated and put down her *samisen*. "I do not intend violence."

"Do tell." Manji's shoulders twitched; he didn't relax. "So where's your man waiting? Maybe I oughta go inquire about *his* intentions."

"Ah." Her delicate brows arched. "You assume I'm here under instructions from Anotsu Kagehisa-sama?"

"You're back in the Itto-ryū. That's good enough for me."

She slightly shook her head. "I am my own master."

"Yeah? Then you taking a stroll up this street just now makes for one hell of a coincidence, lady."

"I have not sought you out by design in this town." Makie let her gaze drift

across the sky and the buildings; a knot of curious spectators had formed across the street, probably wondering why a swordsman was challenging a seemingly unarmed woman. "After all, your home is a day's journey to the east... or so I am informed."

The Itto-ryū had tracked down the location of Manji's hut? Rin clapped a hand over her mouth. Manji's face didn't change, but he looked at Makie's *samisen*.

She drew a whisper of a touch across the strings. "Perhaps we are here for similar reasons, driven by the caprice of heaven. Weather brings us together now... or fate."

"No bullshit, ma'am. If ya don't mind."

"I beg your pardon?"

Manji checked the street in both directions without turning away from Makie. "Maybe you had to stop here because the bridge is out. Fair enough — this town's cram-full of travelers waiting for the rivers to go down. But don't tell me ya spotted an old acquaintance and fancied a pleasant chat." He glanced over his shoulder again.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. I do have something to say... and to ask."

Manji looked back at her in surprise. "You? Ask me what?"

"It is not you I would speak with, Manji-san."

"Haah?"

Makie bowed in Rin's direction. Rin jumped; Manji gave her an incredulous, almost suspicious stare. She shook her head, bewildered.

"Anotsu-sama is well and able to walk again, though he has not recovered his full strength. He has regained the power of speech, and has been eating heartily." Makie seemed to expect a response.

"Uh, that's nice... um, I mean..." Rin caught a flare in Manji's eye and stammered to a halt. Expressing interest in Anotsu's health seemed only polite under the circumstances. Polite? Wasn't he her worst enemy? She lowered her gaze to the shattered bowl and the splash of sweet noodles on the ground beside her.

"Will you allow us privacy for a few moments?" Makie addressed Manji, who frowned. Her tone grew light and disarming. "A talk between women. Nothing to concern a man of the sword."

"Think I'll be the judge of that." He snorted, but finally let go of his hilt. "There's no weapon deadlier than a woman's tongue."

"You... you must have nursed him, right?" Rin blurted it out and flinched at another bristle from Manji. "So you heard what happened. In the mountains?"

"I know that you and Anotsu-*sama* traveled together for several days, and allied against a common enemy." Makie gave Rin another graceful bow from her seat. "Thank you, Rin, for saving his life."

"Uh..." Rin blanched and scooted backwards. "Well, I guess you could sort of put it that way... but..."

"The *fuck*?" Manji turned on her. "Is she crazy, or dreamin'?"

She shook her head, unable to meet his gaze.

"Then how the hell — "

"I tried to tell you — you didn't want to hear about it!"

Makie alternately watched the two of them, brows raised.

Manji snarled. "'He was being so human'? All that crap?"

"It's not crap! It's how I felt — what kind of person would leave a helpless man to die? He was so sick..." Rin started to cry.

"Just like a goddamn *woman*!" Manji's face turned red. "You talk yourself hoarse about this pretty-ass son of a whore, you even ditch me to run after him, and then — "

"I beg your indulgence, Manji-san." Both of them looked at Makie. Startled out of her tears, Rin wiped her face on her sleeve. "You are her valiant guardian, and of course you are anxious for her welfare. But I intend no harm, and none will come to her while she accompanies me. No one lies in wait, and I will pledge myself to return her safely to you before nightfall."

Manji breathed hard for a moment, then made a stiff nod of acknowledgement.

"I guess you're no liar, ma'am."

She gave him a charming, almost seductive smile. "You have divined that Anotsu Kagehisa-*sama* is a great concern of mine. I crave the smallest scraps of news about his doings and the state of his thoughts... such as only another woman would notice." Makie held out her hand. "Will you come with me, Rin?"

Manji took Rin by the shoulder and kept her from rising. "Anywhere she goes..."

"Women may find it difficult to speak freely in the presence of a man, even on subjects of no importance." Again Makie's tone was sweet, but with an underlying hardness.

"Lady, you ain't the kind for girl gossip." They locked gazes. A couple of street urchins sidled over with grins and bows and offered Manji his dropped pipe and cash. He released Rin to claim his possessions and flipped a few small coins in the air. The ragged children scrabbled for the money and ran off.

"Um... Manji-*san*? It's all right, I'm not scared to go alone." Rin got up and dusted her clothes.

"Like you got any idea what you can handle, you little idiot?" He shook his head. "You don't even know what this is really about."

"So I'll talk to her and find out. What's so — ?"

"I got a feeling you don't need to know."

"Why wouldn't I? Anyway, I can take care of — "

"When the hell have you ever taken care of yourself, kid? Who's the damn *yōjimbō* around here?"

Rin's mouth dropped open. "I'm not a baby! I walked all the way to — "

"Gimme a break." Manji took her wrist and nodded at Makie. "Pleasant day, ma'am. Tell your *danna* we're sorry we missed him." He yanked Rin closer and got an arm around her waist; though his hold was firm and he wore a cynical smile, the core of his body quivered. Angry? Manji turned to propel her down the street in the direction of their inn.

"Let go, you jerk!" Rin struggled to break his grip, but he only hardened it. "I don't need you to protect me!"

Manji went pale and released her. "Hah?"

"Uh... I meant, not this much... just wait here for me, OK?" She put out a hand, but withdrew it before she touched him. "Don't be so worried. Gosh, what could — "

His mouth twitched to show his teeth; with shock she saw unmasked fear. He wasn't simply trying to enforce his will or scoff at her bravado — he was terrified of something he couldn't voice. Unfamiliar, insidious, subtle. Even if Makie hadn't been listening, he might not have been able to give form to this menace. "Rin-chan — "

Rin blushed; the naked entreaty in his voice embarrassed her even more than the public reminder of their afternoon's pillowing. "Please, Manji-san! I'll tell you what's going on when I get back. Just a little while..."

Manji compressed his lips until they went white. His shoulders rolled and his hands flexed as if he wanted to seize weapons, but he obviously had none that could defend against his fears. Maybe he also saw cherished illusions thrown into the dirt. What was his phantom rival? He looked at her with fists clenched and his mouth pulled into a downward curve. Something he had fought to gain and jealously protect, slipping from his grasp. His throat tightened as he swallowed, but he said nothing.

Makie rose and took Rin's hand. "Thank you."

"Um..." Rin felt the prickle of tears and wished for a moment that she could take back her resolution. "It's OK."

Guided by Makie, Rin moved down the street with her eyes fixed on her abandoned bodyguard. The old noodle vendor bobbed around Manji's unmoving feet as she picked up the pieces of the broken bowl and tossed them clattering into a rubbish basket. He took no notice, standing with arms folded and head lowered. The man he had knocked down on his way across the street approached to remonstrate. Manji whipped a glare at him and replied; Rin caught the tone but not the words. The complainer backed up and scurried away. Manji sat heavily on the bench and took out his tobacco pouch.

Before Makie directed her around a corner and she lost sight of him, Manji lay half-reclined on one elbow, a thin trail of smoke wandering from his pipe and his face tilted up to the aching blue of the sky.

PART TWENTY-THREE

"My hospitality must be only that of a public teahouse, I'm afraid, but I hope it is agreeable to your taste." Makie put her *samisen* on the snowy *tatami* and indicated that Rin should take a seat.

"Uh... sure. I mean, of course, Makie-san." Rin looked at the delicate, misty landscape painted on the paper walls of the private room and wondered how expensive this entertainment was going to prove. She knelt on a brocade cushion next to the *tokonoma*, which held a tall arrangement of chrysanthemums in a flaring vase.

Makie knelt on the cushion opposite Rin and smoothed her gown. Rin had never seen a woman wear such short sleeves, but for a fighter they were obviously practical. She was glad she had just had her own clothes cleaned, though her bright *furisōde* looked girlish next to Makie's dark-blue elegance. She carefully folded her hands in her lap and looked out into the teahouse garden through the open *shoji*. An artificial brook tinkled over rounded stones at the edge of the broad veranda and into a pond bordered with carefully pruned shrubs. Ornamental carp occasionally disturbed the sun-reflecting surface, sending circles of glittering ripples across the water. Chatter and laughter penetrated from the adjacent rooms; the evening *geisha* parties were getting an early start.

"I'm afraid I interrupted your meal. Allow me to provide you with some refreshments."

"Oh, that was just a snack — I'm not really hungry." Rin smiled a little nervously and gave Makie a bow. "Please don't go to any trouble."

Makie spoke to the waiting serving maid. "Shizuoka tea, please, and a dish of sweetmeats. Do you have any of the tiny pink cakes decorated with flowers?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am! They're our house specialty. My master says he's honored to serve you anything you wish."

"A selection of those, then." Makie turned to Rin. "Forgive my presumption in choosing for you. The cakes are exquisite... but you shall judge for yourself."

"Please, not on my account." Rin bowed again. "I'm used to very plain food..."

"You're my guest, and I wish to honor you with the best I can provide." Makie also bowed. "I know that my appearance was unwelcome, and although a cup of tea can't make up for my inconsiderate intrusion on your time, at least you can moisten your throat while we talk."

Rin was surprised how quickly her mother's polite phrases re-formed on her tongue. "It's kind of you to think of this humble person's comfort. Anything you approve must be the finest quality, Makie-san."

Makie nodded at the maid. "Right away, ma'am." The maid backed up on her knees, bowed and rose to move down the outside walkway.

Rin blushed and fiddled with her fingernails. She felt like a little girl playing at sophisticated social chatter; Makie must be laughing behind that smooth manner. Rin glanced up at her and met her sad, thoughtful gaze.

"You would do honor to the coarsest fare or the rarest delicacies, child. Though you have lived in hard circumstances, anyone would know you for a woman of gentle birth."

"Oh? Uh, my mother..." She swallowed hard. "My mother was a good teacher."

Makie was silent for a few moments, her long lashes veiling her eyes. Then she sighed: a note of nostalgia mixed with sorrow. "Yes, O-Toki-san's manners were faultless. She was kind and courteous to everyone, even the youngest members of the household."

Rin stared; she felt her pulse throb under her jaw. "You knew my mother?"

"When I was a girl." Makie's gaze searched Rin's face. "You resemble her more and more, although I see your father in you as well. His perserverance and regard for duty is his legacy."

"My parents? But... how?"

Makie smiled slightly. "My family was once connected to the Mutenichi-ryū. I won't bore you with histories, but we lived at the *dōjō* until I was ten. The room at the west end of the garden, near the well."

Rin's mouth hung open. "Wh-why don't I know about this? I never even heard of your family!"

"They left the school because of... a tragedy." Makie's lips quivered; she looked

at her own hands and clasped them on her slim bare forearms. "I'm not surprised that the name of Harukawa wasn't spoken aloud in the Asano family — they had far too much concern for face and propriety."

A strong tinge of bitterness in that low, musical voice; Rin flinched. Makie tightened her lips and glanced at her, then spoke less harshly. "No, stories of that sort have never been thought fit for the ears of a girl, even one of samurai birth. After all... until he came to exact his revenge against the Mutenichi-ryū for the repose of his grandfather's spirit, you had never heard of Anotsu Kagehisa."

Shivering, Rin shrank into herself and clutched her shoulders. This was the last thing she had ever expected to learn...

"I've frightened you again. I apologize." Makie leaned forward and touched the cushion near Rin's knee. "I meant to tell you that I also mourn your late honored parents, though I hadn't seen them in many years. My childhood was dark to me for a long time — the life I led was designed for forgetfulness. I didn't learn of their deaths... or the terrible manner of them... until a few months ago."

"When *he* told you he'd killed them, you mean?" Rin covered her mouth.

Makie was silent for a few moments. "You're speaking of Kagehisa-*sama*, of course."

"Well, it was Kuroi Sabato who actually murdered my father and mother — but Anotsu told him to do it!"

"I know, Rin." Makie's beautiful eyes clouded.

Two serving maids knelt at the open *shoji* with trays in hand, bowed and came in to arrange the tea and cakes. Rin sniffled and hung her head. One maid set down a jug of hot water and sat back on her heels. "Ma'am? My master begs to know if you will sing this evening. He would like to invite some important friends to hear you, but he doesn't mean to delay you on your journey."

Makie made a slight bow. "The ferries are not yet able to run the rapids, I understand."

"No, ma'am — they say the river's still so rough because the storm's up in the mountains now. Some people are taking the road to the sea coast and crossing there, then coming back up on the other side."

"Mm — a long and arduous route." Makie glanced out into the garden, where

lacy maple leaves fluttered in the long stripes of late-afternoon sunshine that penetrated the taller pines. She didn't seem to mean that the journey would be too much for her own strength. "I will wait for the river to grow calmer."

"I'll tell him you're staying another night or two, then? Master says it's perfectly all right with him to have an inn full of guests who won't leave, as long as we don't run out of tea and *saké*! Would you like anything else, ma'am?" Makie shook her head; the maids bowed and departed.

With grace obviously born of long practice, Makie brewed and served tea and offered Rin a cake. She silently accepted, feeling shaken and a little disoriented. Though Manji's presence might not have fit the occasion, she longed for him. With her bodyguard beside her, solid and cynical, it was hard to be afraid of anything. Her mood lightened somewhat; it was a great comfort to think of her safe haven in his arms. When she got back he'd swear and sulk for a while, silently relieved to see that she was all right but ashamed of having shown his fears. A smile twitched the corners of her mouth; she looked forward to soothing Manji out of his worry.

"Rin?" Makie sounded solicitous. "Are you feeling better? I'm so sorry to upset you... but I must mention some important matters. You are nearly of age, and... May I continue?"

Rin took a bite of sweet cake and nodded. Makie took a deep breath and clasped her hands in front of her. "I heard some details of your journey from Kagehisasama. I was surprised that you had shown him such compassion. Even more, I was surprised at how highly he praised your courage."

"He did?" Rin coughed on a crumb and took a quick sip of tea.

"Indeed. He's not given to such words... especially in regard to women."

"I guess he was still pretty sick, huh? Maybe he was kind of light-headed when he said that." Rin rolled her eyes.

"Perhaps." Makie gave a small smile. "Rin, I am aware you have great cause to think badly of him. No one could blame you. What I meant to ask... was if your idea of him has changed since the first time we met."

Since the first time she and Makie had met, Anotsu had twice crossed her path at close range. Each encounter had changed Rin's idea of him by tremendous extents; it was Manji who had always insisted she continue on an unswerving path of revenge when she tried to tell him how she thought her ideas had

evolved. Though he scoffed at her passion and her tears, he seemed to think that her doubts were even more foolish than a rash quest for what she had once believed with all her heart and mind was justice. To him, every dispute by far was best settled with the sword.

"Um... yes." Rin set down her empty teacup and watched Makie refill the pot with hot water. "It has."

"I thought that might be so. Would you tell me how you and Anotsu-*sama* encountered each other in Kaga?"

"He didn't tell you?"

"In a few words. I would like to hear your account. At our mutual meeting, I seemed to see in both of you – " Makie stopped and poured Rin's tea. "I should say, the change in you impressed me as well."

"Me?"

"When you flung yourself in front of your guardian to save him from my blade, you struck me as courageous, of course. But then you were a brave, heedless child. I wondered if you had any idea of the nature of your task. When I heard you call out to Anotsu-*sama* with all of us as witnesses, I saw a young woman's strength. A woman who had come to regard her life's mission with growing wisdom and foresight."

Rin blushed. "Um, thank you, I guess..."

"It's your own doing." Makie dipped her head with an eloquent gesture. "What I heard over the succeeding days only confirmed the impression."

"From Anotsu?"

"Yes, I know how he felt at your parting. Your meeting, however..."

"Oh, I fell down in the road. I hadn't had anything to eat for days." Rin grimaced. "Which was my own dumb fault, because I left all my money out in the open when I went to take a bath. I hope I'll never be that stupid again!"

"I think you can be assured of that, Rin. Anotsu-*sama* found you there?"

"Yes... I lay there for a long time because I was too weak to get up. People passed me and didn't help because they thought it might be a trick. Nobody cared... I

was just a filthy stranger. I could have been dead, and no one even stopped to check..." She gulped and rubbed her nose. "Finally someone walked up to me and knelt down. I figured he was probably looking to see if I had something worth stealing, but I couldn't do a thing to stop him anyway. Then he picked me up out of the dirt... and cradled me in his arms... and gave me a drink of water. I felt so happy." Her voice shook. "I felt so grateful that some good person had taken pity on me, and that I wasn't going to die there after all. He touched my face and spoke to me. Then I opened my eyes... and saw who it was."

Rin couldn't keep from crying, though she covered her mouth with one sleeve. "The one person on that road who wasn't afraid to help... why? Why did it have to be him?"

Makie reached out and took her hand. She said nothing for a minute or two until Rin's tears began to subside. "Child... such a meeting must have been fated by the gods. Of course it shocked you to discover that the man who had your beloved parents killed could be kind to a girl in trouble. But how else could you have ever known?"

"I didn't want to know!" Rin pulled her hand out of Makie's. "I walked all that way to find him and I failed! I wish I'd never known anything about him. I wish I could have been just like my bodyguard and never asked him a single question! That's what Manji's always telling me — that the only thing I should ever think about is carrying out my duty, and I know Manji-san never — Why couldn't I be strong like him?"

"Oh, Rin..." Makie closed her eyes and let out a quick sobbing breath. "You have great strength of your own. A woman's strength, not a man's. Never let that go. Never let your duty falter. Your parents' spirits... cry out to you to find their rest in paradise."

"Wh-what?" Rin bumped her teacup with her knee and clutched it before it could spill. "Why are YOU telling me that?"

Makie put a hand over her face. "If you knew how much I have thought of revenge and family duty... but I won't burden you with that tale. A parent cruelly wronged... to the death..."

"I... I said I'd kill him. When I knew what he was — when I really knew, and not before that." She breathed too rapidly, her vision beginning to gray and spin. "You know what he is!"

"To my unending sorrow..."

"You love him!" The words spilled out into the garden like a clatter of breaking crockery; the conversation in the next room stopped for a moment, then resumed in a murmur of laughter. "You want me to kill the man you – "

Makie flung her head up. "What is love, Rin? In that respect at least, you are still a child."

"Uh..."

"Is love knowledge? Can one only love what one comprehends and approves in every detail? Not so – the mother loves the wailing child at the breast, the samurai loves his duty to the hardest master. If a woman is fated to love a man, she can no more withdraw that love than she can bring the dead to life again. Nothing can break it... nothing short of death itself, and in the next life, the karma of love unfulfilled will doom her again and again."

Rin sat trembling, a hand over her lips. Makie looked at the ceiling and drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry – I've made you confront too much already. There is more...but not now." She gave Rin a gracious smile. "I am a poor hostess. Will you have another cake?"

They finished the sweets and Makie sent for more along with another pot of tea. With polished expertise she guided the conversation into easier channels and Rin gradually relaxed. The sun sank lower, the air grew cool and refreshing. Lights glowed through the paper screens of the buildings across the garden. A maid set candles in the garden lanterns and the fish began to strike at insects on the surface of the water. Before she knew it, Rin was giggling at her hostess's wit and volunteering small confidences as if she and Makie were friends. Almost certainly Makie must have trained as a *geisha*. Her musical skill and her poise, not to mention her beauty, must have made her sought after. Why had she left that gentle profession to become a *kenshi*?

"Makie-san..." They had been talking of marriage; Makie had told a funny story about a lazy bride and a stern mother-in-law who softened into a doting grandmother when the girl presented her with a grandson. "Could you answer a question if I asked?"

"Certainly, if I hear what it is." Makie nibbled a sweetmeat and crinkled the corners of her eyes.

"Well, it's a little bit, um, improper." Rin blushed and turned her teacup in her hands. "I just can't think of anyone else I'd be able to ask, and..."

"I'm not easy to shock, Rin."

"I guess not... uh... it's about, um, having babies?" Makie raised a brow but looked receptive, so Rin took courage.

"I know lots of girls get married when they're younger than I am, so I guess it must be all right for someone my age. I just wondered...if it was better to wait a while... somehow." Rin put her hand over her abdomen, thinking of the scar she had allowed to be put there. The girl she had impersonated had nearly died delivering twins at fourteen; after Manji had wisely averted the disaster she invited a few hours before, all her fears of pregnancy had returned in multiples. "I thought maybe that, um, friends of yours might have had babies, and that you might know something about it." She blushed. Maybe this was too personal?

Makie looked away and sighed. "I've watched a few women go through difficult childbirths. Some of them were young girls, some older. Perhaps it was their karma, as it is women's lot to suffer."

Rin made a face and pressed her abdomen a little harder. "Maybe."

"I've also assisted women who had easy deliveries and suffered not at all. It's hard to know ahead of time. Even a slender girl like you might already carry a child without trouble. One thing I will warn you against, however..."

"What's that?"

"Though delivering a child can be painful, attempting to stop it from growing in the womb is very dangerous. I have mourned many who bled to death or lingered for days of agony." Makie looked down and spoke softly. "Women of the pleasure quarters do not often live long..."

Rin's stomach turned over. "Oh... I didn't mean to... forgive me!"

"My past is my past, Rin. Not speaking of it doesn't erase it." Makie gave her a reassuring look, not quite a smile. "You're not thinking of marrying yet, surely?"

"Oh, no!"

"Good. Your duty to your parents comes first."

"Of course it does." Rin shifted restlessly on her cushion. "Everything I've meant to do since they died was because of my duty to them."

"I can see that." Makie dipped her head as if to apologize for any implication of neglect, then smiled. "I imagine your stalwart guardian has so far kept even the most hopeful young men at more than sword's length."

The blood drained from Rin's cheeks. Makie couldn't have guessed, could she? Maybe it hadn't been very wise to ask about this! "Oh, no one's tried to — I was just speaking theoretically, of course!" Rin waved her hands and felt her face turn hot. "I mean, there's absolutely no reason I'd need to know about anything like that for a really long time, right? So just forget I said anything... OK?" She cursed herself and covered her blushes. A bird called from the tall pines, sounding uncannily like a mocking voice.

"No, these are good things for you to learn." When she glanced up, Makie looked serious rather than suspicious. "You are sixteen. How long have you had your moonrises?"

"Hmm? I was, um, almost fourteen — but really, I shouldn't have asked and I'm sorry — "

"I'm glad you brought this up, Rin. It has some bearing on what I must ask you."

"What?"

"In a moment. First I think I should answer some more questions you may hesitate to ask in your innocence." The corners of Makie's eyes crinkled again.

"Uh... like what?" Rin looked warily out at the garden as if someone might be eavesdropping.

"It may be our lot to suffer, but if we can aid each other in any way, we should. Any young woman, married or not, should know that she has some control over the number of children she bears."

Rin blushed even hotter. "You mean if a woman is, uh, with a man?"

"Of course — the risk of children is small when a woman has relations with another woman." Makie quirked her lips.

"Women...?" She stared. "Really, Makie-san?"

"Never underestimate the inventiveness of human beings in the pillow, Rin." She smiled with a hint of her playful entertainer's wit. "It's not as simple a matter as

it may seem to the inexperienced."

Rin could have agreed with that observation in detail, but only nodded.

"There are herbal preparations and charms to avoid conception, of course, but not all of them seem to be useful. I have heard that observing the moon cycle and the stars and avoiding relations on certain days may reduce the chances. However, every doctor and astrologer seems to have a different theory on what days to avoid." Makie slightly rolled her eyes. "Courtesans use a wad of strong bamboo-fiber paper inserted deep into the *bobo* to shield the mouth of the womb from the seed. In my experience, that method has some benefit, though I can't say it's a comfortable one. Of course it has to be prepared ahead of time, and if the man's *henoko* rubs against the paper it may annoy him." She glanced up at Rin. "I'm not embarrassing you too much, am I?"

"No," said Rin, her cheeks burning like flame. "Uh, it's very interesting, thank you."

"Do you know much about the nature of the *henoko*? That a man's organ enlarges and becomes firm when he engages in relations?"

Rin made a small squeak and put a hand over her mouth. Makie nodded sympathetically. "I know this may sound strange to you, and even frightening. Men are only men, not demons or monsters. Women and men have enjoyed each other since Izanagi and Izanami lay together to create the world."

Thinking about the brother and sister *kami* who had become husband and wife didn't calm Rin's nerves in the least. "Oh, of course."

"Ah, I should go back and explain the act in more detail. Your mother should have been the one to tell you about marriage when you were pledged to your future husband. May I stand in her place for a few minutes?"

"All right..."

"Let me see." Makie creased her brows and pondered for a moment. "Simply put, the man's strongest urge in pillowing is to thrust his *henoko* into the woman's *bobo*. His entry to the enclosure of her body gives him great pleasure when repeated again and again. You may have heard that it can be painful for a bride at first, but she will quickly become used to accommodating her husband's needs and may even come to welcome them. A thoughtful man is gentle with his wife and takes care not to hurt her even at the height of his pleasure. You understand?"

"Y-yes..."

"After the man enters the woman, he'll usually maintain these thrusting movements for several minutes before his peak of enjoyment arrives and his seed emerges. With practice, a man can stay in the enlarged state for a long time and give the woman pleasure as well."

Rin could not manage a response. Makie gave her sleeve a light touch. "Don't worry — it all becomes clear when the time comes. Most men have had some experience before they marry, and can teach their wives how to please them."

Rin felt a hysterical giggle rising in her chest and clamped a hand at the base of her throat to suppress it. "That sounds, um... nice."

"So, to complete my first point, these are the two best methods I know. Special instruments of leather or tortoiseshell are made to fit over the male part and prevent the seed from spilling into the womb. This is very effective, but not many men will use one, since it takes away much of the pleasure of the act. Most people who want to avoid children practice withdrawal instead. The man must keep enough control over his actions to pull out at the last moment and spend his seed outside the woman's body."

"Oh! Wow, I had no idea. That sounds like it might work pretty well, huh?"

"It's a common method among ordinary people, as I say, but it has to be practiced diligently. Most ordinary people have many children in the course of life, if their bodies are healthy. One mistake is enough." Makie shrugged.

Rin tried to imagine Manji keeping enough control over his actions not to make a mistake and wrinkled her nose. "So are you saying that there isn't any totally reliable way to guarantee that a woman won't get pregnant and still let the man enjoy it? It sounds like all you can really do is not have quite as many children, if you're lucky."

"Yes, that's right."

"But what about... just not doing that one thing?"

Makie seemed surprised at the suggestion. "Well... if the man could entirely refrain from the act and confine himself to lesser pleasures, then the woman wouldn't conceive. I don't think it's likely that he could deny himself for long once he had the privilege of sharing her pillow in the first place."

“Uh... really?” A prickle went over Rin’s arms and breasts. “Even if he’d definitely decided not to do it?”

“Men aren’t made that way, child.” Makie gave a soft laugh. “As I say, the desire to enter a woman is the strongest urge a man has. With the best of intentions it would be very difficult for him not to carry out the act eventually, unless he was a eunuch or very old.”

Rin put a hand to her pounding heart and tightly pressed her thighs together.

“No, don’t be frightened of men’s desires — they are not usually violent. The thoughtful sort of husband of whom I speak would never force himself on a virgin, even though he had the rights of marriage.”

“What’s the real definition of — ” Rin spoke without thinking and clapped her hand back over her mouth. Of course she was still a virgin — hadn’t Manji said so?

“Of the virgin state? Never having known a man, of course.” Makie looked a little puzzled.

“Yes, but... what if a girl hadn’t actually, um, done that, but she had been in the same room with, uh, a man, maybe overnight, more than once, and it looked like things could be different than they really were, and other people might be thinking...”

“Ah, I understand.” Makie shook her head. “No, merely being alone with a man doesn’t mean a girl has lost her virginity. That’s a very innocent question, Rin-chan.”

Rin mumbled something and tried to cool her cheeks with her hands. The sun had just set and the room dimmed in the twilight.

“So when you marry, your husband will do well to have compassion for your inexperience and perhaps leave you intact for a while after the wedding. He will approach you gradually and show you kindness and patience, and when you are ready, you will be able to submit to him with willing obedience instead of fear. I know he will never be harsh...”

Rin blinked. “Makie-san? Wh-what are you telling me?”

Makie drew a deep breath and let out a sigh. “I’m approaching my subject

gradually, because I fear its effect on you.”

Rin stared at her, wide-eyed.

“I knew, the moment I realized the truth... that it would be essential to prepare you somehow. I’m glad I happened on you today, because although I have some idea where you and your guardian live and meant to seek you out, I might not have found you before...” She broke off and caught her lower lip in her teeth. “I have asked you about your journey and how its events affected you. I have asked Anotsu-*sama* many of the same questions. His answers were less forthcoming, and he was weak — I did not press him.”

Rin felt a great cloud loom over her mind and body, a weight of roiling darkness. Did Makie mean to lift it from her, or crush her underneath its confusion? Her breaths came faster.

“I can read the shadows and the pain in his mind, though he tries to hide them. From me he can conceal almost nothing. He realizes, dear child, that he did you a great injury. That haunts him now as it never did before — he has changed more than he knows. One day... perhaps soon... he will make his resolution to atone.”

“Atone?” Rin leaped to her feet and knocked against the floral arrangement. White chrysanthemum petals scattered to the *tatami*. “How? By cutting his belly at my father’s grave?”

“Child, think not of atonement by death. His death cannot bring your parents back to you.”

“I — I don’t care — ” She crushed petals under her bare feet, staining the mats.

“You will never cause his death. You know that now. You cannot take his life in a duel, and you will not take it by stealth or with an unfair advantage.”

“No... that’s not true...” Of course it was. Even Manji would be risking death against Anotsu’s axe. To carry out her revenge as she had intended, she would have to become a different person. Not a stronger one. The only fighter Rin knew who surpassed Anotsu’s deadly skill, slim and half-feminine as he seemed, was Makie herself. To kill him with her own hands, she’d have to become the sort of person who could slit a sick man’s throat...

She looked out into the garden, seeing only the guttering candles in the stone lanterns and the stirring surface of the pond that threw back the pale light of the sky. “Not... by death?”

"Kagehisa-*sama* took life, and he must repay in kind. He deprived you of your childhood and the love of your family. He had little enough of that when he was young... but I do not excuse him. He does not excuse himself. He must and will make what amends he can for injustice to an innocent." Makie looked up, tears standing in her eyes. "Child, I beg you to let him try. When he comes to you and asks leave to speak, I entreat you, by the souls of your father and mother... do not refuse to hear him."

Rin dropped to her knees again, trembling like a shaken flower. "Refuse... him?"

"I know his mind and the bent of his thoughts. I know his honor. Perhaps he hasn't fully formed this intention yet, but he surely will. He has seen your strength and seen the woman you will become. You repaid him a thousandfold for that single drink of water."

Rin's mouth felt dry and bitter, her tongue swollen; she could not have swallowed a sip.

"He can only offer, of course — he can't force you to accept. Please believe that this will be no hollow gesture, and not a penance he inflicts on himself. I can assure you that if he speaks, he will do it with sincerity and respect for you." Makie closed her eyes, the tears cutting pale reflective streaks down her face. "For the repose of your honored parents, for the sake of your family blood, realize that he longs to make peace. He will never let the cycle of revenge continue through the generations if he can do the slightest thing to avert it." She seemed to suppress a sob. "If there could be peace at last, after fifty years of hatred and... and tragedy..."

"My family... blood?"

"You are the last heir of Asano. Your family's blood lives in you — a woman. Only as a woman can you restore it to life again."

"But — but he's *married*! He has a wife in Kaga!"

Makie slowly nodded. "Yes, he married a woman of the Shingyoto-*ryū* in order to seal the merger of that school with his own. She is dead by her own hand."

"D-dead?"

Makie bowed her head and put her palms together. "She would not have lived long in any case, since her health was poor. After her foster father performed

seppuku, she chose to join him in death. She must have been an exceptional woman. Her soul is surely in paradise.”

Up until that moment it had been a nightmare delusion, completely impossible. Rin gulped throat-searing breaths. It could never happen — but Anotsu had no wife now, and he was a man of strict, even antique honor. If he resolved to make a final peace with the dead, there was nothing else he would do.

Offer his hand and his body to the daughter of Asano Takayoshi. Take her to wife, lie with her as her husband and sire her children. They would emerge from her womb as living symbols of reconciliation, and grow up to tend the graves and memorial tablets of a united lineage. Her parents’ ghosts would rejoice in such grandchildren, who should have been born while they still lived. Rin choked on a dry sob; her tears were spent.

What of their mother, who would also have to offer her body — her whole life — on the altar of peace?

She was samurai. She knew her duty...

“Makie-san... but you...” Rin’s whisper barely escaped her hot, constricted throat.

“Kagehisa-sama will never be mine, and never could have been. This makes no difference at all — it is our karma.” Her face glowing faintly in the twilight, Makie looked as beautiful as an angel.

“You love him...”

“Love solves nothing by itself, dear Rin-chan. Sometimes it can keep two fates more separate than if there never had been love between them. The world takes little account of love, and duty none at all.” Rin looked into Makie’s eyes, which were huge dim pools. “You need not fear that you will inflict pain on any person by accepting him. There is no more pain that can be felt.”

Pain? How much pain could one man bear in an endless lifetime? Rin bent double and covered her head with her long sleeves. She bit down on a thick fold of silk, muffling the moans she could not stop. “Oh, big brother. Big brother...”

She sank to the mats, and darkness received her.

PART TWENTY-FOUR

"Are you sure you're feeling well now, my dear?"

Rin stepped down from the polished wooden floor of the corridor leading to the private rooms and slipped her feet into her *geta*.

"You still look quite pale..." Makie touched Rin's hair away from her forehead and peered solicitously into her face.

"I'm... I'm OK. It's all right." Rin rubbed her lips with the back of her hand, moved out into the open public section of the teahouse and bumped into the corner of a table. Cups and bottles rattled and the *saké* drinkers threw her annoyed looks. "Sorry..."

Makie shook her head. "Perhaps you'd like to rest for a while in my room before we go in search of your guardian."

"No... it's been ages since I left him..." Rin wobbled and clutched a hand over her stomach; Makie put an arm around her. "I'm sorry..."

"I'm the one who should apologize, child."

"Makie-sensei, you're not leaving so early?" The inn landlord shoved through a group of chattering customers and bowed his way towards Makie, fawning and smiling. "You will come back again? I long to hear you just once more!"

"Yes, Takanaga-san, you will hear me sing tonight." Makie returned the bow with professional grace. "I have an errand, but I will return soon."

"Your view of the garden is satisfactory? May I send up a dish of our persimmons with your evening meal? They are at their perfect peak of ripeness now, and you must sample them before you go." The man's admiring gaze lingered on Makie's bosom. "Perhaps you will wish to return to taste them again next year?"

"Thank you, Takanaga-san. You are very kind." She bowed again and discreetly glanced towards the exit.

"Of course, of course, my humble pleasure — I beg you, don't let me detain

you." He grinned and bobbed up and down as they moved away. Makie guided Rin through the busy room again, slowly working her way around the crowded tables.

"Rin-*chan*... when we locate your guardian, what do you intend to tell him?"

The question seemed to be meant as a discreet warning. Rin grimaced and shrugged her shoulders; she hardly needed reminding that Manji disliked all mention of Anotsu. "I don't know yet."

"Of course this news has disoriented you somewhat. It may take some time before you regain a calm mind and can weigh your alternatives."

"Yes..." Anotsu. Anotsu Kagehisa was her alternative. Rin cast her eyes from side to side so as not to look straight ahead. She had a heavy, obsessive sense of her enemy, of his cool girlish face and the hard shock of his narrow-eyed gaze. His slim hands reaching out for hers... She tucked them deep inside her sleeves.

"If I may offer a small word of advice...? Don't feel compelled to open your heart to anyone yet, and don't force yourself to conclusions. Perhaps a week or two of quiet meditation, or prayer — "

"Hey, lady! You lookin' to return something of mine?"

Rin's spine stiffened. No more than a couple of tables away... She stopped short and lurched against Makie, who steadied her.

"Manji-*san*." The swordswoman shifted her clasp on Rin and bowed in greeting.

"So — what was that about gettin' her back to me before nightfall?"

"I humbly beg your pardon. Our talk took longer than I had anticipated."

"Oh, no shit? I was about ready to start cuttin' holes in the walls."

Rough and sarcastic, with a careless slur to his voice. Rin found it difficult to breathe for a moment; the memory of their passionate afternoon pressed on her chest like a stone. She'd longed to bring some happiness into his life; now she dreaded even seeing his face. She dragged in a deep gulp of air to steady herself and turned around.

Her bodyguard looked red-faced and a little sweaty; he didn't meet her gaze right away, but glared at Makie instead. He banged his cup down, kicked back

his bench and rose. Six or seven *saké* bottles littered the table in front of him — had he finished them all? Jolted, the other drinkers at the table looked up.

“I apologize if I caused you any worry, though I see you have already tracked down your charge’s whereabouts.” Makie spoke soothingly, but with a bantering smile.

“Ya think I wouldn’t?”

Makie inclined her head. “You have saved us the trouble of seeking you out, at least.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Manji pulled one hand from the overlap of his *kōsōde* and beckoned across the table. “Gimme.”

“Manji... are you drunk?” Rin burst out.

“Am I *drunk*?” He gave her an incredulous stare and stabbed a finger at the bottles. “I’d frickin’ well *better* be drunk, after how much I’ve been payin’ for this frickin’ watered-down horse piss! What’cha askin’ stupid questions for?”

“Oh... big brother!” She put a hand to her burning cheek and looked away. “Please don’t talk so loud...”

She felt a slight hesitation in the supporting arc of Makie’s arm, as if before handing Rin over she wondered about Manji’s fitness to receive again what he had so grudgingly let go. To whom did the daughter of Asano Takayoshi belong? Right now she didn’t seem to own herself; her whole life was a promise made to ghosts...

Manji moved around the table and approached with a swaggering, lurching gait; Rin quivered and Makie again steadied her. The figures of swordsman and swordswoman seemed to close her in. Like tall dark spirits looming in her blurred vision: Rin tried to hide her rising distress.

“C’mon, woman.” Manji strode right up to them and grabbed Rin under the armpit. “Let’s get the hell out of this dump — it’s yer bedtime.”

Her mouth dropped open — was he drunk enough to announce his intentions to the whole teahouse? Heads seemed to turn towards them from all directions.

Makie gave a nearly inaudible sigh, released Rin and gave her a gentle touch on the shoulder. “My blessings go with you, child.”

Rin looked back at her, pulse throbbing in her throat and her stomach cramping. Makie had cradled her for a long time after she had collapsed in the private room, stroking her hair and humming until she felt well enough to sit up. Her mind had wandered in a queer dream of infancy: a tiny girl carried on a bigger girl's back and softly jiggled to sleep. For a wrenching moment she wanted only to retreat to that dream again, be soothed and cuddled and told that everything would be all right. No conflicts, no responsibilities, no sense of the future. Nothing she tried to do ever turned out right anyway, because she was only a silly little girl with an exaggerated idea of her own maturity. She almost hoped that tomorrow she might wake to the sunrise and discover that she had never left her bodyguard's all-enveloping embrace...

Manji yanked her to him and locked her to his side with one arm, squeezing the air from her lungs. "Do I get to know what th' hell this was about?" He might have addressed either or both of them, but he looked at Makie.

"It is not my place to say, I think." Makie's bow seemed perfunctory. "She is safely returned to you, as I promised – "

"What, you want thanks? She ain't gettin' out of my sight again. No matter what she says – or you!"

Makie moved her head back and blinked in the blast of Manji's alcohol-laden spittle. "...You are her *yōjimbō*."

"Damn straight I am!" Manji's face turned even redder and he pointed at his chest. "So you're gonna tell me just why you and yer goddamn boss are sneakin' around my – "

"I spoke to Rin-*chan* on my own initiative, Manji-san, as I told you." Makie's voice sounded colder though still polite. "No other person joined our conversation."

"She's telling the truth, Manji-san..." Rin tugged on the front of Manji's clothing; she felt a crackle in the air between the swordsman and swordswoman. The landlord peered at the three of them from across the noisy room; he beckoned to a thick-necked young man in a server's apron and pointed at Manji. "Please, let's just go back to our room and – "

"Whatever she's tellin', Anotsu's near. I swear, I can almost smell the bastard." Manji wrinkled his nose and lifted his lip from his teeth.

"Indeed? You claim a special intuition?" Makie might still have been bantering with him, except for a thin tense line that appeared low on her forehead.

"Don't take any sixth sense to figure you ain't givin' up the whole story." He aimed a finger straight at Makie's face. "It's in the eyes."

Her brows twitched slightly, but then she gave a musical laugh. "Your senses are obviously dulled, bodyguard, and you would do better not to put too much trust in your current powers of reasoning... if any remain to you."

Manji flushed. "You think a few drinks are gonna blunt my sword? Take another guess, lady." He seemed to register that he was holding Rin both too tightly and too intimately for a public place, and awkwardly released her.

Makie smiled at Rin and slightly rolled her eyes. Rin halfheartedly returned the smile, and Makie's broadened. "This is a familiar state of affairs, child?"

"Well... um, yes, I guess so..."

Manji made a growling sound in his throat and folded his arms. Rin recalled the last time he had drunk a lot of *saké*, blushed hot and looked at the ground in confusion. How could she think clearly about her situation if he insisted on having her again tonight? Unmistakably her bodyguard wanted to reassert his claim on her. Her heartbeat accelerating, Rin wondered if the limits he had set for himself still had any force. Nothing could repair a broken promise...

Makie raised her brows in sympathetic inquiry; Rin threw her an involuntary look of appeal, though of course Makie couldn't possibly help. "I'm sorry he's acting like this," she said in a low voice. "He can be awfully rude to people sometimes... even if..."

"Whatcha talkin' about me right under my nose? You want rude? I'll give you —"

"So I see. May I ask if he's given to snoring in his cups?" Makie seemed to suppress a laugh.

"Um, yes... pretty loud."

Makie touched Rin's arm. "Then if you would prefer to sleep undisturbed tonight —"

"HEY!" Manji shoved himself in front of Rin before she could reply. He made an

aggressive gesture as if to give Makie the back of his hand. "Get yer claws OFF MY WOMAN!"

All through the teahouse, cups stopped halfway and conversations cut off in mid-sentence. Makie took a step backwards and stared at Rin in startlement. Rin covered her mouth, trying to hide her panic. How much more obvious could he make himself?

"Um — of course I'll stay under your protection, Manji-san!" She nervously patted his shoulder. "Please don't shout, big brother. I always feel s-safe when you're near..."

He reached out to pull her to him again, pressed her face to the side of his chest and took a few deep breaths of gradually diminishing force. "You got that right, little sister." He ruffled her hair, then glared at Makie. The landlord approached with an officious air and his bouncer in tow.

"Let's leave now, please? I'm really tired." Rin gave Makie as much of a bow as she could manage while Manji held her. There didn't seem to be any way to avoid going back to the room without both arousing Manji's anger and suggesting his true motives to Makie. Tension whined in her ears. "Good night, Makie-san."

Makie quirked her lips and searched Rin's face. "If you are fully satisfied that your bodyguard is capable of carrying out his duty..."

"Still singin' that tune, huh?"

Makie raised her chin, her expression cool. "Then I will bid you good night too, child."

"I'm still right here, you — " Manji bared his teeth.

"But if you change your mind at any time, you need only ask the maids to direct you to my room. No harm will come to you — you have my solemn word."

Rin gave her an awkward grimace of acknowledgement and tried to urge Manji towards the exit, but he planted his feet and shouted at Makie again.

"Aw, whatta steaming load of bullshit! Don't gimme that goddamn innocent face, you fucking two-bit ass peddler!"

"You! Fellow!" The landlord shook his finger at Manji. Makie's cheeks paled and

her hand tightened on the neck of her *samisen*, like an unthinking reflex.

"Yeah, that's more like it, whore." Manji grinned at Makie and raised his left arm, his hand curled in preparation to receive a weapon. "Now we're talkin' the same language!"

Rin gasped. "Manji-san – no!"

The landlord broke in again. "This behavior... this profanity..."

"Ahh, stuff it up your – "

The landlord huffed and blew, his cheeks expanding. "Vile insults to a person of such talent! Kindly take your possessions and leave my establishment." He gestured dramatically at the exit. "No, I'll have them fetched – I want you outside my doors this moment!"

"Screw you." Manji swiveled to face the thick-necked young man, who was maneuvering to approach him from behind. "Keep sneakin' around, jackass – " He reached into his sleeve.

"Manji! Stop it *now*!" Rin clamped her toes around the thong of one *geta* and stomped on his sandaled foot as hard as she could.

"Ow! Shit!" He let go of the knife hilt he had touched and grabbed his big toe. "What's the matter with you, ya crazy kid?"

She aimed a kick at his shins. "Oh, be quiet, you unbelievable *jerk*! I've had it up to here with you!"

"Hey!" Manji tried to avoid Rin while hopping on one foot; she stomped his other big toe. "OW! She's cripplin' me!"

"Manji-san." Makie approached, gave the landlord a dazzling smile and extended a hand to Manji. "I'm afraid that drink has gained the better of you this evening, my friend. Please allow me and Rin-chan to put you to bed."

Manji broke off a yelp of pain, leaned against a table with one foot in his hand and stared at her.

Makie turned and bowed to the landlord. "I'm so sorry, Takanaga-san... this young lady is the granddaughter of my father's former *sensei*, and this man is her bodyguard. He's a brave and loyal samurai of good family, but as you can see, he

is indisposed."

"What the hell?" Manji massaged his foot and snarled. "Keep yer goddamn brown-nose out of my business, woman!"

Rin looked at Makie with wide eyes, as did the landlord. "You know this man?"

"Takanaga-san, he usually conducts himself in a manner beyond reproach. So overindulgence must explain and excuse him tonight. I take no offense at anything he says, so please do not worry yourself on my behalf."

"OK, what's your game?"

"But Makie-sensei... it's not just when he's been drinking. I've been told he's drawn weapons in public and behaved like an animal in my bathhouse!" The landlord mopped his sweating face with a cloth. "I'm very sorry that I must inconvenience your friends, but this is the last straw. My guests have been complaining ever since this barbarian arrived!"

"They can kiss my ass..." Manji swayed and looked around for a seat.

"His profession is a hard one, Takanaga-san." Makie spoke in a sweet and melancholy tone. "If he drowns his sorrows — his pain — in drink, how can we find fault? He has done great and terrible things in service of his duty, and his wounds penetrate far deeper than his visible scars... disfiguring as they are."

"The *fuck*?" muttered Manji.

The landlord gazed at Makie with confused adoration. She smiled sadly and touched her breast. "What can we, whose lives are untroubled and comfortable, know of such a man's trials? His sword must be kept ready, his guardian vigilance remain ever alert..."

"I don't need your goddamn character references!" Manji's feet tangled with a stool and with a grunt he sat hard on the floor. Rin knelt beside him and seized his arm, intending to keep him down rather than help him up.

"Makie-sensei, your appeal strikes me to the quick... but he's caused so much disturbance already... and he only arrived at noon today!" The landlord's chin wobbled. "If I could be assured that he won't annoy anyone else — but look at him!"

"Then think of the young lady, sir. She is innocent of blame. She cannot sleep in

the forest without shelter tonight. Nor can she remain here without her protector, for she has... powerful enemies. For her sake, Takanaga-san?"

"I don't know..." He scratched the back of his head. "What if the police come to arrest him? Such a scandal... and who knows what else he'll do?"

"I will be responsible for him. If he causes any trouble, I will take care of the problem myself. Please don't hesitate to summon me."

Manji struggled to rise as Rin clung to him. "What are you, my goddamn nursemaid?"

"You...?" The landlord looked at Makie's slim arms and delicate figure, then back at Manji grumbling on the floor. "You have some influence over this fellow?"

She smiled and brushed the strings of her *samisen*. "When given space to exert it."

Manji's nose twitched and he narrowed his eyes.

"Well... well, if anyone else were to say so... but I must believe you." The landlord waved off the bouncer and gestured to Makie. "Please, get him out of here quickly. Tell him to stay in his room!"

"With pleasure, Takanaga-san." Makie picked up the stool Manji had tripped over and gave a meaningful look to Rin. She took the hint and scrambled to her feet, then offered both hands to Manji. He stared blearily at both women for a few moments, then got up with the aid of the stool.

"Aww, fuck it. I got drunk so I could push this useless crap off my mind in th' first place." He rolled his shoulders and gave a one-sided grin to Makie. "Yeah, I gotcha. You want to keep tabs on us, an' that's gonna be hard to do if we get tossed out of this dump. Where's my goddamn sword?"

He wandered towards the exit with Makie, Rin and the landlord right behind him and took his *katana* from a rack on the wall. He thrust the weapon back into his *obi* with a automatic gesture, but fumbled with the scabbard cords. He made a face at the clumsy knot and tucked the ends away. "Shit. That horse piss mighta went to my head a little..."

"Do you refer to my *saké*?"

"No, I'm talkin' about warm piss in a bottle at twenty *mon* a pop." Manji made a

contemptuous gesture in the landlord's direction. "I drank enough of it — I oughta know."

"Did your mistress pick you up from a dunghill?" The landlord stuck out his jaw and turned red. "Without Makie-sensei vouching for you, I'd have taken you for some uncouth farmer! How can you call yourself a samurai?"

"Beats me." He pointed at Makie. "But I guess she's the goddamn authority on that, because no one gives a crap what I say. So now I'm wounded and troubled and drownin' my sorrows. How freakin' poetic." He gave a harsh laugh. "God, I hate that shit."

"I can't say that I'm surprised!"

"Yeah, it's all lies and word games and beatin' around the bush — hey, wait a minute. I remember one *haiku* I ran across somewhere that kinda struck a nerve." Manji tapped his forehead with a sly grin. "Gosh, maybe I learned me some culture after all."

"Ha! I'll believe that when I see — "

"Then shuddup and listen."

Haiku? Rin put a hand over her mouth. Manji cleared his throat.

"Laying a fart —
no humor in it
when you live alone."

He guffawed, gave the landlord an obscene finger and left the teahouse.

PART TWENTY-FIVE

"See, I told you this wasn't the way to our room, Manji-san. Why don't we — no, not *that* way!"

Manji turned and lurched towards the edge of the inn's high veranda. Rin pursued him and grabbed for a handhold. A fold of his clothing slipped through her fingers and he took a long stride out into the unsupported air. She squeezed her eyes shut, covered her head and cringed at the sound of the crash.

"Oww! Shit!"

Rin knew he couldn't be seriously hurt, but still she felt a shock. She dropped to her knees and looked for her bodyguard. On the dark hillside below she spotted a white patch; Manji had landed on his face in a shrub. He swore and thrashed to the accompaniment of snapping twigs.

"Good grief! Can you make a little more noise?" Rin scooted along the edge, looking for a safe place to get down. Manji rolled over, sat up and crawled out of the crushed remains of the shrub, his face and arms streaked with bleeding scratches.

Rin took the shoulder-high jump from the veranda, assisted him to stand and brushed leaves off his clothes. He looked around in obvious confusion, swaying slightly. "Where's the steps? Somebody move 'em?"

She pointed. "They're right where they were before. Just walk towards the garden path and — "

Manji muttered something and moved away from her. Immediately he tripped over and broke a small stone lantern, slid downhill and stumbled knee-deep into the *koi* pond. "Hey! What's this damn puddle doin' here?"

"Oh, big brother!" Rin clapped her hands to her cheeks. "You're wrecking all the landscaping — and scaring the fish!"

"Well, shit, it's awful dark." He splashed across the pond like a water buffalo and clambered out on the far side. "Can't see where I'm goin'."

"Of course it's dark out here — it's night! Will you please stop wandering around before you fall into anything else?" Rin worked her way down the hillside and around the pond, snagging her clothes on the bushes. Away from the warm glow of the inn windows, the only lights were a few flickering candles in the stone lanterns. It was the dark of the moon; the stars cast a faint radiance. "Here, hold my hand. Follow me this time, OK? Be careful on those stepping stones!"

"Yeah, whatever..." Manji submitted to being led, but stopped and circled her with one arm when they reached the paved path that led up to the veranda. "Hey, what's the rush?"

"I need to put you to bed so you can sleep it off, remember?" She wished that Manji had let her accept Makie's offer of help with her intoxicated companion, but he had left Makie standing outside the teahouse and towed Rin with him. "If only I had a lantern... but it serves you right if you trip over everything!" Rin tried to free herself from his tightening embrace.

"Aahn? What'd I do?"

"Oh, nothing much." Rin made a grimace at him, though he probably couldn't see her expression. "You just made a spectacle of yourself, insulted Makie-san and tried to start a fight over absolutely nothing. You almost got us thrown out of the inn!"

"Nothin'? Yeah, we'll see about that." His voice harshened and he pulled her closer. In the darkness his features were just discernible. "You still ain't told me why she wanted to talk to ya."

"This isn't the time, Manji-san. You're drunk and we're in public!"

"I gotta be sober and no one else around to hear this? Sounds like a doozy."

"Nothing like that! It's just... personal." Rin turned her face aside when he bent down, her heart thumping.

"What was that crap about her daddy's *sensei*? Blowin' smoke?"

"Uh... her family had something to do with the Mutenichi-ryū. She even lived at the *dōjō*." Rin swallowed hard. "Uh — that's mostly what we talked about."

"Hanh?"

"She... Makie said she knew my mother and father when she was a girl, and that she mourns them too..."

"What the hell?"

"It's true. She said my mother was really nice to her... and that my father was dedicated to his duty." Rin sniffled and tried to wipe a sudden blurring from her eyes, but Manji's embrace restricted her arms.

"Well, I'll be dipped in shit." He straightened and let out a skeptical grunt. "You sure? That wasn't somethin' she cooked up to get under your skin?"

"I don't think so." Rin rested her forehead against the front of Manji's *kōsōde* and bit her lips. "You said yourself that she wasn't a liar."

"Guess not. So it took that long for her to tell you a little story about your own folks?" He sounded somewhat less drunk now, as if his questions lent him focus. "What else?"

"Well... uh... we had tea... and, uh..." The guilty manner she couldn't hide would probably have told him volumes if he hadn't been quite so intoxicated, and if there had been light enough to reveal her burning cheeks. Maybe she could put him off now, but he'd have sharper questions in the morning. If he woke up with much memory of what he'd said and done in the dark of night...

"Come on! I guess you girls got to spout all yer polite crap and gobble platefuls of sweets to get the conversation goin', but shit, woman — I was dyin' out there waiting for you to show." Manji heaved a sigh. "I got too good an imagination."

"Oh, big brother... you were worried about me?" She snuggled her cheek into his warmth; his embrace relaxed a little and he nuzzled the top of her head.

"Maybe that bastard ain't out to hurt you — it don't quite feel that way. But he sure as hell wants somethin'... and I ain't givin' it up without a fight." Manji tilted her face and pressed his lips to hers.

Rin responded for a moment, her heart and stomach roiling, then pulled back. "I did mention we were in public!"

"Rin, it's dark as hell." He kissed her again, and this time Rin let herself relax into his arms. If he was thinking about her body, at least he wasn't asking questions...

Manji's hands stroked down her flanks and met behind her; he grasped Rin's bottom, massaged it and pulled her in towards him. His kisses seemed more energetic than seductive, although he seemed to want to impress her with his ardor. He flexed his hips and ground his groin into her stomach. His hot breath raked her cheek while he plunged his tongue into her mouth; she heard an aggressive note in the rhythm of his deep intakes of air. If she managed to get Manji back to the room, there wasn't a chance he would pass out on the *futon* and snore like a thunderstorm until morning. Take some time to consider her decision? Tonight he could strip away all the time she had left.

Why not let him?

Rin felt a deep chill. Desire and impatience multiplied by drunkenness and jealousy — if Manji kept his head it would be a miracle. Even if she confessed everything, possessive fury at Anotsu's presumption might overwhelm his remaining scruples. The strength of her own temptation appalled her.

Whose fault was this loss of balance? Which of them had led the other over the edge?

Rin broke the kiss and dug her chin into her chest, panting. Manji tried to meet her lips again, but she kept her face averted and pushed her hands against his ribs.

"Aw, little sister — kiss me nice." He laughed in a coaxing, sensual way, but with an underlying command. "You know you want it."

"What?"

"I can smell it all over you. Your little heart's flutterin' like a sparrow in a trap." He licked her ear and nuzzled behind it. "God, you taste good..."

"But — but, Manji-san — "

"I said, kiss me." He wound his hand into her hair, tipped her head back and took her mouth with his. His other hand pressed at her waist, fingers digging into her flesh. Rin struggled a little, but his hold was firm. Manji lifted his head, breathing hard. The dim whites of his two eyes gleamed at her, the blind and the seeing almost indistinguishable. "So which way to that damn room of ours?"

Makie's mention of shelter — could she go back to beg for it now? Not unless she could run faster than her bodyguard. Maybe he'd trip again and she could elude him, but he seemed able to shake off some of the effects of alcohol when it suited

him. Rin felt a stabbing flash of premonition, of their half-clothed bodies entwined and heaving, of her own mouth stretching wide in ecstasy or pain. She twisted in Manji's arms and managed to loosen his grip for a moment, then turned to look up at the inn and mark her direction of flight. It would take her a minute or two to reach the steps, and then maybe she could hide —

Silhouetted against the glow of lamplit *shoji* and looking directly at them stood a tall woman with short ragged hair. Rin's face went cold.

Without a word Makie moved her arm to the side, displaying the *samisen* she held, and flicked a catch on the side of the sound box. The divided halves of the instrument fell with an ugly chord from the jarred strings. Manji's head jerked around.

The swordswoman gripped an instrument of another purpose now. With a sharp gesture she raised it above her head and pulled it straight: three-sectioned, steel-barbed.

Manji's whole body felt hard against Rin's; his chest tensed and his shoulders hunched over taut arms. He reached into his *kōsōde* and yanked something out with a rattle of chain, then elbowed Rin in the side. She stumbled off the path and fell to a sitting position on the ground. How much had Makie seen or heard? Did it really matter? Any obstacle that stood in Anotsu's way —

Makie took a running stride forward and darted the points of her pike out and down. They struck wood; she propelled herself into a high arcing vault off the edge of the veranda. The pike pulled free on the downswing and Makie alighted on the path, facing Manji but still some distance away.

Manji yanked the chain to extend it from the handles of the sickles he had drawn. Before he could raise the weapons, Makie sped straight at him with the continued momentum of her vault. Again she brandished her weapon two-handed above her head, twisting it into an accelerating spin. The long barbed blades sang a high note.

Rin scrambled backwards into the landscaping and bumped against the trunk of a manicured pine. This wasn't a cold-blooded attack to gain a calculated goal. Rin couldn't read her face, but Makie's whole body screamed of rage. Rin shrank against the tree and sobbed in terror.

Manji dived low and Makie's blades sliced the air right above his head. He launched from his crouch, swinging one sickle on the lengthened chain. Rin caught the glitter of starlight off the curved edge of the blade; the combatants

were dark forms against the lighter background.

Manji missed striking Makie at the knees, for she planted the point of her pike again and soared above him. He nearly fell on his face — even deadly necessity couldn't cure drunkenness. Rin cried out. He recovered with an effort and spun around, whipping the chain with him.

Makie deflected the weapon when it arced at her head. The chain and sickle took a couple of loops around the barbed blade of her pike and hooked there. Rin heard a clang and rattle — Manji had thrown down the other sickle. He yanked on the chain, stepped on it to pin it to the ground and drew one forked *shido*. His speed blurred the flash of steel, but Rin realized with horror that he was moving a little more slowly than usual. Makie struck at him with the free end of her pike. Manji blocked the blow and trapped the blade in the fork with a twist of his arm.

For the moment he'd immobilized both ends of Makie's weapon. She gasped and tried to work the pike loose from the *shido*, her slim arms trembling with effort. Manji held it fast; Rin saw the white of his teeth as he grinned. He gestured and slid a new blade into his free hand.

Again Makie was too quick. She arched her back to avoid the slash of the hooked knife and stabbed the chain-wrapped end of the pike into the ground. Using it as a staff, she leaped and kicked Manji square in the face. He staggered and lost his lock with the *shido*. The chain relaxed when his foot slipped; he had to jump backwards to dodge the singing blades.

To Rin's surprise, Makie didn't immediately follow up while Manji was off balance. She swung the pike to encircle herself with the three sections, gripped both blades and aimed them at him like an accusation.

"Beast!"

"Hah?" He wiped blood from his nose and spat something on the ground. Then his arm whipped back and forward; Makie knocked the thrown knife out of the air. Manji drew his *katana*.

"How — how can you be — I couldn't believe... my own suspicions — "

Both swordsman and swordswoman were panting. Manji shrugged and took a defensive stance with sword and *shido*. "You askin' me... a question?"

Makie gasped and caught her breath. "An innocent girl... under your protection! Your honor — your duty — " She lunged at him again. Manji threw up both

weapons to shield himself; the pinwheeling blades rang a rapid staccato.

"No — Makie-san — he's not — " Rin strangled on her own shriek.

"Who's mixing it up out there?" Half a dozen people holding *saké* cups had emerged onto the veranda, obviously having heard the clash of weapons. They peered into the darkness. "Funny place for a duel, man."

"How dare you touch her!" Steel rang again and again. Makie drove Manji down the path. "Beast! Monster!"

"Fighting over a broad?" called a man from the veranda. "It ain't worth it, buddy!" The others around him laughed and jeered. "Hey, anybody want to make book?"

"On what? Can't see shit. Who's fighting?"

"It's that one-eyed asshole, isn't it? The drunk *ronin*?"

"Yeah — maybe he bumped into a wall on his blind side and challenged himself to a duel."

Splutters of laughter. "I'll lay money on that — any takers?"

Rin got up and followed the battle away from the inn, hyperventilating. How could the two people she most admired in the world be fighting over her? She made out Manji's silhouette against a candle-lit lantern as he dodged and blocked, his opponent nearly invisible from her point of view. He didn't seem to be attacking any more; it was all he could do to defend himself. Makie pressed him hard and he visibly weakened. After several passes, his movements grew wilder, even sloppy; when Makie thrust her pike at his legs, he tripped while avoiding the strike and went down on one knee.

Rin gasped when the blades flashed towards him. He'd be cut in half! Manji howled in pain. But he got to his feet again and staggered backwards, his right arm hanging at an odd angle with the hand empty. Makie followed, outlined now against the faint light.

"Do you yield?"

"You fucking kidding me?"

"You can barely keep your feet." Makie had regained a little control; her voice

was icy. "Surrender is your only option."

"No shit?"

She took a deep huffing breath. "I prefer not to kill... when my opponent is at such a disadvantage."

"Crap, lady, don't tell me you're cuttin' me any slack!" Manji lashed out with his remaining sword. She knocked it from his hand, cornered him against a hedge and pointed a blade at his face. "So kill me. I won't hold it against you."

"Even a monster like you... once had some honor!"

"Coulda fooled me. What'cha waiting for?"

Makie glanced down the path in Rin's direction. "I'll spare your life... if you give the child up to me immediately."

"Ah, there's the *real* point of this whole fuckin' exercise — "

She brandished the blade. "If you're still here in the morning, or if you ever approach her again... I will challenge you, and you will die. Immortal or not."

"Lady, ain't you figured that one yet?" Manji hawked and spat. "Tell yer boss he can screw himself, because he's never gettin' hold of that girl — except over my cold, dead body." He pointed at his neck. "Remember, it's the head."

Again to Rin's surprise, Makie trembled and partly lowered the blade. Now it aimed at Manji's heart. "I... I don't want to kill a drunken man — "

"Sorry, I ain't lettin' you off that easy." Manji snorted and supported his wounded arm. "Thought I was a monster, anyhow."

"A-aren't you?"

"Depends. You wanna list the charges?"

"During my conversation with Rin-*chan*..." Makie paused for a moment, her voice shaking. "I... I told her about the requirements of marriage. She blushed to hear me describe what men desire of women. I thought she had confirmed her virgin innocence... but did she have another reason for shame?"

"Hanh?"

"You can't deny that you touched her! You kissed her out here in the open — on the mouth!" It was a near-hysterical cry. "What have you stolen from her?"

"Stolen?" Manji took a hissing breath, then began to chuckle. The sound sent prickles down Rin's back; it was like a blade rasping on bone. "What? You mean like her daddy and her mama?"

Makie started, and was silent.

"I'm no freakin' angel. I'll be the first to tell you that. But I ain't never had a little girl's daddy cut to bits in front of her for doin' his duty defending his family. I ain't never told a bunch of dirty bastards to get their jollies on her nice mama while the kid's gotta listen to the screams. Even if I'd laid that girl down every night for half a year, how the hell could I have made it any worse than it was already?"

Rin shuddered. Sick and dizzy, she sank to her knees beside a stone bench and leaned on it.

The swordswoman slowly lowered her pike and let her head droop on her slender neck. Manji chuckled again, then picked up his sword, sheathed it and sat on an ornamental boulder. "Sounds like we better straighten out this little dispute before somebody gets hurt." He massaged his wounded arm. "Just lay off calling me bad names, lady. I got that covered."

Makie raised her head again and shook it. "What...what Anotsu Kagehisa-*sama* may have done... for his own reasons... doesn't excuse your misdeeds." She put a hand to her face. "Tell me the truth!"

"The truth? I ain't busted her, and you can be damn sure nobody else has." Makie didn't reply, and he stretched out his arm with a grunt and flexed the hand. "Hell, gimme some credit! You think I'm hankerin' to put a round belly on that skinny kid? I like a woman with some natural cushioning."

Rin's mouth dropped open, then she closed it again. Perhaps Manji thought he needed to underscore his point. But did he have to sound quite so dismissive?

"I'll admit it, though — " He shook his head. "When she asked me for help, she tried to get me to sign on by takin' her clothes off. What a joke, huh? I smacked that idea outta her fast... but I guess she got me anyhow."

"What?"

He scratched his chest under his clothing, sounding weary. "Ahh, who knows what kinda romantic bullshit's been going through the kid's head. She sure ain't going to get what she's lookin' for when she aims it at a scumbag like me."

"Romantic?"

"Yeah, she cooked up a notion that I must be sufferin' for lack of female companionship, and a little while ago she pretty much threw herself at me. Beggin' for kisses and shit." Manji turned up his palms. "What's a guy gonna do?"

Makie tilted her head back and looked at him.

"I told her no dice, but she was damn persistent, and hell..." Manji rubbed the back of his neck. "I laid a good one on her just to shut her up. I guess that might not have been the brightest idea I ever had, 'cause now she's wanting to snuggle up all the time and she keeps pesterin' me with questions that'd curl your fucking hair."

Rin huddled beside the bench, pressing her hands over her ears until they throbbed. Needles seemed to pierce her thighs and breasts. Manji's callous tone was only part of the act. He couldn't mean what he said —

"I'm not saying there ain't some payback — hey, I got a pair of balls — but *sheesh!* Like I want to hook up with some raw kid who can't tell her ass from her elbow? If I liked the idea of starting a woman from scratch, I'd've stuck with my goddamn boss and asked him to fix me up with a matchmaker! And I ain't the marrying kind, you got me? Gimme an enthusiastic whore any time." He scanned Makie up and down and made a lusty sound in his throat. "I gather you ain't acceptin' new customers, pretty lady, but that day you first walked up to me in the street, I could've shown you more than a few good reasons to get back in the game."

Makie turned away without responding and looked straight at Rin. "Child? Is this true?"

Rin hesitated a long moment. She shuffled forward on her knees, got up and bowed. "Yes, Makie-san."

"Your guardian has not betrayed his trust, and you are still a virgin?"

"Y-yes..." She smeared angry tears from her cheeks. Manji remained sitting

where he was, his head down and his hands braced on his knees. "He hasn't done anything... that I didn't ask him to."

Makie digested that for a moment, then let out a long quiet breath. "I see."

Manji's shoulders looked tight though his posture was casual; Rin had a sense that he was steeling himself against something. He slowly scratched the back of his lowered head. She looked around and spotted a gleam under a bush. It was his *shido*, the hilt bindings sticky; she picked it up and brought it to him. Manji accepted it with a grunt, stood up and sheathed it under his clothing. His right sleeve was sodden with blood.

"Hey, did I miss something?" In the silence Rin heard several of the louder voices among the gradually dispersing spectators. "Anybody get killed?"

"Nope, don't think so. Sounds like they gave it up."

"Aw, that bastard got his ass kicked. He's begging for mercy."

"Who from?"

Manji's hand came down on Rin's shoulder, making her jump. "We're gonna blow this joint first thing in the morning, so we'd better get some shut-eye." She trembled under his touch, her throat clogged. He squeezed her shoulder slightly and let go. "It's OK, kid — it's all over now. Nobody's hurt... at least, any way that counts." She couldn't speak, nor take a step to follow him when he moved up the path. He found the rest of his dropped weapons by scuffing in the dirt, picked each one up and put them away. "You coming?"

When she didn't answer, Manji returned and tapped her lightly on the back. "Hey, little sister." Rin looked up, and he put an arm around her shoulders. She buried her face in his sweaty throat, pressed her fists against his chest and gave way to anguished sobs.

Manji stood still, ruffling her hair with awkward patience. After observing them in silence for a minute or two, Makie folded her pike and came a little closer.

"Manji-san."

"Yeah?" He dropped an absent kiss on Rin's forehead, then straightened with a slight startle as if for a moment he had forgotten where he was.

"May I offer you... a word?"

“...I’m listening.”

“She is blossoming, Manji-san. Like a flower in the sunlight...” Makie paused with a slow, melancholy sigh. “You must take care... not to cast too long a shadow.”

“Thanks.” Manji’s voice remained neutral, though Rin felt a suppressed jolt deep inside his body. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Rin looked up to see Makie leave. Most of the spectators had gone back indoors, but a few lingered. The odd dress of one figure drew her eye. Someone swaddled in heavy clothing with a scarf tied over the head, like a frail old man afraid of the cold. The frame wasn’t meager or sagging, though, but straight and slender under the bulky coat and cloak. Man or woman? She couldn’t quite tell.

The figure turned and vanished around the corner of the veranda before Makie reached the steps. Rin’s eyes opened wide, the veil of tears clearing. She knew the sleek, calculated economy of that movement. Not exactly the same as she remembered: a little restricted as if by bindings of bandages or a still-painful wound. Familiar even so...

Rin rubbed her stinging eyes. Perhaps she would always see her enemy watching... even in her dreams.

“Bitch.”

She glanced up at Manji, whose gaze followed Makie as she picked up the halves of her *samisen* and rounded the opposite corner of the building. He hardened his grip around Rin’s shoulders and took them towards the waiting inn.

PART TWENTY-SIX

Why would he be here at all?

Perhaps because Anotsu Kagehisa wasn't Manji. He couldn't heal a serious wound in the space of ten breaths, and he couldn't recover in just a few days from illness and exhaustion that had nearly killed him. As little as Rin liked to think of him that way, he was a human being. She grimaced at her rice bowl.

Manji made an inquiring grunt; Rin jumped.

"Oh — uh, nothing. I have a little stomach ache..." She massaged her belly.

So Anotsu was probably still somewhat weak and needed escort on the road from a willing and vigilant friend. Rin realized he might not have set out to return to Edo until five or ten days ago, around the time she and Manji had started to —

She shouldn't think about him any more. During the whole meal her bodyguard had been sitting across from her drinking potfuls of hot tea and examining her as closely as if he wanted to read her thoughts. Rin didn't want him even to guess at what was in her mind right now. She picked up her bowl of rice and slowly pushed some into her mouth.

Maybe her overexcited imagination had conjured her enemy among the spectators on the inn veranda. She hadn't seen his face nor even his outline; all she had to go on was a fleeting impression from a distance. Still, his presence remained so clear in her mind that she believed she could have recognized him in any disguise. Revenge against Anotsu had been the focal point of her life ever since the deaths of her parents, and now that she was no longer completely sure of her hatred, the way she had formed her young mind around her one great goal might be changing as well.

The rice tasted sour in her mouth; she swallowed with difficulty.

Strange how a slim and smooth-featured young man could project such an aura of power, like a deadly blade in beautiful fittings. A queer twinge rippled through Rin's chest and stomach and she slowly lowered her bowl, her appetite gone. No, Anotsu was nothing at all like her rough, straightforward, dearly beloved Manji. Acid pooled in the corners of her mouth and seemed to drip

straight into her heart. Even if Makie was right and he would treat her with respect and kindness...

She shouldn't think about him. Ever.

Manji grunted at her again; she looked down and realized he was tapping his empty teacup. She poured for him, wiped the spout of the pot and carefully set it down.

"Manji-san?"

"Hnn?"

"Um, would you mind if I, uh, went to the bathhouse for a while?"

He lifted a brow at her over the rim of his cup.

"I know, I had a bath already today, but, uh, I got very sweaty..." She flushed and poked at her rice with her *hashi*. "So I thought I'd feel better if I at least rinsed off a little before, um, bedtime..."

Manji said nothing, but sniffed meditatively. When Rin pushed aside her unfinished meal and rose, he glanced up at her. He seemed to have gotten over the worst of his drunkenness, though he still had a slightly flushed face and an air of deliberation, as if he had to concentrate not to knock over his table or drop food. Still, there were grains of rice stuck to the front of his chest and he had spilled some tea in his pickles.

Rin wrinkled her nose and sighed. At least he wasn't as drunk as he had made himself after coming back from the brothel. She gulped at the memory of that night and broke eye contact.

"G'wan, get your wash." Manji stabbed a slice of cucumber with the end of one *hashi* and stuck it in his mouth. "You ain't gotta keep an eye on me. I'm not goin' past that door again."

Rin nodded and turned the bow of her wide *obi* to the front to untie it. She folded her *furisōde* neatly along the seams and set it on the floor. Her inner robe still felt damp — she had better strip down all the way and change into fresh clothes for the bath. She reached for the knot of the sash that held it closed.

Manji made another low sound in his throat and she glanced up. With the end of the *hashi* still in his mouth, he looked at her hand on the knot, his expression

controlled but curiously intent. Rin paused; he dropped the *hashi* on the little table, swallowed once and turned his back.

Rin cringed in embarrassment. Manji didn't think she wanted him to guard her modesty after everything they had done together, did he? She felt more exposed than if he had been staring straight at her naked body and smiling with obvious plans in mind. She wrapped herself in her *furisode* again, grabbed her towel and clean *yūkata* and left the room in haste.

The evening crowd in the bathhouse comforted Rin in a cozy, domestic way. Though she had to crouch against the wall to wash for lack of bath stools, the chatter and polite chaos of women and small children felt like an easier human closeness. No tensions, no decisions to ponder.

While rinsing her body, she found a sticky streak of something under one breast, and more of it on the backs of her thighs. When she realized what it was, she hurriedly scrubbed it away, flushing hot. Manji's seed, still clinging to her sweaty skin. She was always finding that substance in odd places after thinking she had wiped herself scrupulously clean. Had anyone noticed?

No one was looking at her. The women kept on forcibly washing their squalling children, combing out their long hair and gossiping. They'd been girls themselves, and they'd become adults as a matter of course. What a female experienced while pillowing with a man was commonplace to them, with no mysteries left.

A heavily pregnant mother came in with a baby on her hip and a toddler in tow. Rin furtively examined the woman's swollen belly as she undressed. She put a hand on her own slender abdomen and barely padded hipbones and wondered why Makie had volunteered so much about avoiding childbearing. Not that she wasn't glad to know...

Just in case Manji had already gone to bed, when Rin returned from the bathhouse she opened the *shoji* as gently as she could and peeked inside.

He was sitting on a made-up *futon*; she saw the back of his spiky topknot and smelled tobacco. Manji didn't look up or reply to her greeting, but scooped a hand into his tobacco pouch and re-tamped his pipe.

Obviously the maid had been here, since the remains of the meal were gone and the bed was tidily laid out. Beside the *futon* was a smoking set on a tray with an ash container. A small brazier held a few pieces of smoldering charcoal bedded on sand. Most of them had gone out.

Rin knelt and pulled her braids out of her bun cover. She looked in her shoulder bag, found her little pot of face cream, and patted a dainty fingertipful into her cheeks and throat to soothe her skin, still warm from the bath.

When she glanced up, Manji was watching her, his eye following the movements of her hand. He grunted and looked away.

Rin blushed and draped her damp towel over her lap, then took out her hair rings. She stole a glance at Manji while she undid her braids and combed out her hair. He had pulled down the sleeves of the *yūkata* he wore, and his skin looked flushed across the chest, though the room wasn't hot. What should she say to start the conversation? It was nearly bedtime, and before she settled down in her bodyguard's encircling arms, they had to work out the answers to several pressing questions.

He knew that too, of course. She wasn't sure exactly what Manji had been silently pondering all through dinner, but he certainly seemed to have something on his mind. Not as if he was trying to come to a decision — more like considering how to carry out a settled plan of action. Rin felt both curious and a little frightened. Would he want her to let him broach the subject first?

Then she spotted a jug and a cup behind the smoking set, and her hand sagged to her lap, still holding the comb. No wonder Manji looked warm — he had gotten himself drunk all over again. He didn't want to talk to her at all.

Rin started combing her hair again with quick angry strokes; she ripped through a tangle with a series of tiny snaps.

Fine, then. She wouldn't tell him. Everything Makie had said was conjecture anyway. She'd admitted as much, hadn't she? Makie loved Anotsu, and she must have an exaggerated idea of his honorable intentions. He wasn't that devoted to making amends — he couldn't be.

She bit her lips. What if Manji found out later that she had kept such an important piece of news from him? His dark speculations had struck her as not much more than overprotective paranoia, but Anotsu could have actual plans that might put one or both of them in danger. Maybe it was better to talk about this now while Manji's restraints were loosened and he would say more than usual. Rin put her comb away and looked at him.

Drunk as he must be, Manji's mouth was firmly compressed, his movements measured and his eye narrowed, as if he had summoned deeper resources of

self-control. Of course he'd be furious at Anotsu when he learned the truth, but maybe he wouldn't lose his head after all. He finished his pipeful and reached for his tobacco pouch again. All other considerations aside, he was her bodyguard — he needed to know.

Rin took a deep breath and pulled in her lips. "Manji-san..."

He gave no sign that he had heard, though he paused in his task and stared into space with his unlit pipe in his fingers.

"If you don't want to talk right now, I'm sorry, but there's something important I need to tell you." She swallowed hard. "Especially after today... and what you said while we — "

"Just forget it."

Rin gripped her *yūkata* together over her breasts. "Forget what?"

"All of it. I was drunk... I am drunk." He rubbed his eyes with the heel of one hand, rolled over and held his pipe to the last live bit of charcoal in the brazier. He drew on the mouthpiece and reclined with a stack of folded spare bedding as a back support. "I think I might have woke up drunk..."

"Oh, that's all right, big brother. I don't think Makie is going to hold a grudge, so I — "

"I ain't talkin' about what went down tonight. I'm talking about all of it."

Rin's skin prickled. "All of it?"

"I was kinda horny, OK? I guess I w-went kinda nuts." He coughed and cleared his throat, then shifted to lie on his side, his back to her.

"You were... horny?"

"That's what I said, kid. I was rarin' to get laid, 'cause I hadn't gotten laid for — what, two whole days?" He snorted.

"Er..."

"I thought you were tryin' to get out of it, maybe, so I said some stuff I probably... shouldn't have. Ahh, I'm just a guy." He scratched his groin and blew a cloud of smoke from his nostrils. "All the blood goes straight to one place, and

the rest gets a little crazy.”

He was embarrassed by how much affection he’d shown her, or by how much he had seemed to need her? Rin hid a smile and looked into her lap. “I know all about men and sex, big brother. I don’t mind.”

“You know *what*?” He sounded utterly disgusted.

“Yes, I do!” Rin made a face at his back.

“Aw, like hell.”

“You’ve taught me lots of things! You said it was important, and — ”

“Kid, I taught you to drop your duds, spread yer pretty legs and let me spoil my appetite.” Manji made a contemptuous snarl. “Ain’t you figured that out by now?”

“What?”

“Important, my eye. All m-men... are pigs...” He lowered his head and ran a hand over his untidy hair. She could still see traces of blood under his fingernails.

“Big brother...?”

“So it’s just as well that it was always gonna be temporary. Better cut our losses... before anything else happens.”

Her mouth dropped open.

“School’s out, Rin. No more *sensei* bullshit.”

“Manji!”

“I’m not kiddin’. I’ve made a b-big enough asshole of myself already.” He sat up and rapped his pipe on the edge of the ash container. The entire metal-lined bottom was already heaped with gray pellets. “I’m callin’ it quits, right now.”

“Is... is this because of what Makie — ”

He smashed a fist to the floor so hard that the smoking tray jumped in the air. Rin squeaked and flinched. “Let’s get one thing straight.” Manji twisted so that she saw his blind eye and spoke through his teeth. “What I say — what I do —

has shit all to do with that broad. Or her goddamn boyfriend. You understand me?"

"Uh..." She backed away and took refuge in the window seat. The cool night air raised the hairs on her arms.

"Even if I've been exercisin' my cock a lot more than my thinking head, I guess I got enough brain left to make my own fuckin' decisions!" He pointed at his skull. "I don't ask permission from a whore with a pigsticker. Whose personal business it ain't. Didn't you hear what *I* said to *her*?"

"What you said? But you... didn't mean it...?"

"You little idiot! You think I make up bullshit just to flap my gums?"

Manji's brutal tone struck her like a blow across the face. Rin sank back and blinked at him, her eyes huge.

"Well... that's how I *ought* to have been thinkin' about it, goddammit!" He grabbed the back of his neck and squeezed it as if it ached. "It's way past time I yanked my head outta my own crotch."

Rin huddled up on the seat and hugged her knees, her heart seeming to drain of blood. Manji kept a tight clutch on his neck for a few moments, then rolled to his feet and paced away from the window. He touched the finger hole as if to open the *shoji*, but only took a deep breath and paused there. A peculiar expression crossed his face when he turned again.

"Uh... Rin... it ain't your fault." He came back across the room on a meandering path, halted in front of her and folded his arms over his bared chest. "I guess that was kinda harsh. S-sorry."

Rin watched the prominence in his throat move as he swallowed, and wondered why his voice kept catching when he sounded so definite. Manji looked at her as if expecting a reply, and when she said nothing, his cheeks flushed.

"Maybe you thought... y'know... that I'd changed my mind. About, uh — about what I was tellin' you when this all got started. Well, that would've been a damn stupid thing to do. Y'know?" He stopped again and waited, his face twitching, then kept on as if he didn't like the silence. "See, if I was lookin' at it straight then, it's not any less true now. I'm not the guy who can... y'know... and that's never gonna change."

No, he would never change. Her eyes moved over him, the lean scarred body she had thought she knew so well. Her vision seemed abnormally sharp, her mind as clear as an empty room.

He grimaced and shifted posture. "So... this shouldn't be such a big surprise, huh? Hey, c'mon — you wouldn't fall for that. From *me*?" Manji's forced chuckle died quickly, but sent a cold shiver through her.

How could she reply? Confess the pretty fable she had spun in the air today? Between the two of them, Makie and Manji had just butchered it beyond repair; she could recall only a few bright shreds, like scattered sparks in the darkness.

"Like... you weren't rememberin' the way you wanted to hook up before we agreed on lessons, were you?" Underneath his derisive manner Manji sounded oddly hopeful. "Maybe you were thinkin' about you being my, uh... my woman, and me..." He went a little pale and looked over her head. "Sure, you know we can't get married anyhow. But I guess there's still one w-way clear to makin' it as good as official..."

Why did he have to taunt her with her own childish dreams? Was he just running off his mouth in an alcoholic haze? She had a feeling that he knew exactly what he was saying. Rin gave Manji a hurt, resentful glare, and he flushed dark.

"Yeah, just one way. Which is a damn good reason why we haven't — " He rubbed a hand over his mouth, his eye moving from side to side.

Rin frowned in confusion. Maybe he'd let something slip that he hadn't meant to. But of course, he was drunk...

"OK, look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't go tryin' to pretend I can't see what's right in front of me." Manji turned away and folded his arms again. "I know... that I'm the one to blame for lettin' you believe that, even for a minute." His lips opened slightly; he compressed them again. "Even though it was just for a little while... even if you ain't n-never going to think that way about me again. My fault."

Rin let her gaze wander outside to avoid seeing his face. It reminded her far too much of how she had felt in his arms today, in this room, and she didn't want to feel anything right now.

"So I ain't gonna hold you to anything you mighta said either... or done." He sounded painfully thick and reluctant, as if every word was a pulled tooth. "Maybe now I got a b-better idea what you — anyhow, I appreciate the thought,

but.... Y'know?"

So her feelings for him flattered him a little, but once it sank in how far she was willing to take them, he had realized she believed he suffered from the same weakness. Rin briefly closed her eyes.

"I ain't tryin' to be nasty, woman. You got that?" Manji moved to take the other end of the window seat; he leaned over in an attempt to catch her eye. Rin avoided him and his voice took on an impatient edge. "I'm tryin' to do what's right, which has been in kinda short supply lately."

"I don't think you've done anything wrong..."

Manji showed his teeth, but seemed relieved that she had finally spoken. "There's only one thing I've done right by you." He thrust a forefinger downwards. "One damn thing. Ain't a hell of a lot to be p-proud of."

"You... really mean this."

"Yeah, it's over." He got up again as if to emphasize the point. "Whatever the hell it was. I'm your bodyguard, and I'm gonna do my damn job the way I oughta do it. My job — and nothin' else."

Rin folded her hands on her lap, so stunned that she could barely register emotion. She felt utterly bereft and blank, as if she had been swaddled in thick quilts and was unable to see or breathe.

"Uh... I won't get pissed if you gotta do some cryin', or whatever. Go ahead — it's OK." He rubbed the back of his neck again and turned away.

Consciousness trickled in through the smallest of crevices, though she tried to smother herself against it. Manji didn't want her. He had never dreamed of making her his hope of happiness; he didn't think about her that way at all even when enjoying her body in bed.

Then all her distress and conflict...? Although her *yōjimbō* might consider Anotsu a threat and suspect his motives, losing her to another man would injure nothing but his pride. Rin shuddered with cold.

Had she believed in some hidden chamber of her heart that Manji's jealousy would save her from making any decision at all? Her duty to her parents would remain forever unattainable once he had claimed her and his lust had quickened her womb, and then she could blame her failure not on her own cowardice, but

on fate, and a man's ungovernable desire. What an idiot...to flatter herself so much.

Her eyes began to lose focus; the room wavered. She wouldn't cry; maybe Manji thought she would blubber like a baby so he could taunt her with that weakness too. She didn't think she was going to faint, but other than that, she had no idea what was going to happen.

"Rin?"

"...Yes?" Her own voice echoed in the hollow places of her skull.

"Uh... you hearin' me?" He squatted in front of her and peered into her face.

"Yes, Manji. I heard." Rin spoke quietly and automatically. He seemed shadowy, barely present. The walls faded away, the streets and forests went down into blackness. All she knew was the night outside.

Rin tilted her head back and looked into the sky. The glittering stars, scattered in uncountable droves. She searched for the ones she knew and named them to herself, her lips moving silently.

She grasped for the details of an old story as she traced the invisible lines of the constellations. Of two celestial beings who fell in love and were banished to opposite sides of the River of Heaven for neglecting their duties in their rapture. She'd begged her grandfather to tell that one over and over again.

There they were, those two bright stars separated by a broad silvery band. The Weaver and the Herdsman wept when they were allowed to meet, only once a year: soft rains on the seventh day of the seventh month were their tears of joy, and a downpour their tears of sorrow when they were forced to part again.

Tears could not prevail. Duty and karma and the vast, inscrutable motions of the universe ruled all, even the stars. They couldn't escape their fates, but they still had the right to mourn them. Rin smiled, closed her eyes and slowly shook her head. A beautiful, sad story... a child's fairy tale, like every other story of love she knew.

"R-Rin-chan?"

She heard Manji's voice through a rushing sound like water, but she couldn't find the will to return from the darkness.

"Kid, I said it was OK if you wanted to bawl... I thought you'd be mad at me." He might have been speaking a thousand miles away for all the impression his words made, though she dimly registered his agitation. "Call me all the n-names you want — it ain't like I don't deserve 'em."

She didn't answer — she had no desire to call him anything at all.

"Goddammit, woman — I'm talkin' to you!" His voice cracked slightly. "So look at me!"

Rin obediently opened her eyes and turned her head.

"You listening to what I'm saying?"

She nodded.

"OK, then, if you ain't in the mood for yelling... go on and kick me in the balls. Clock me with a jug." Manji jerked his head at the bundle of weapons leaning against the wall. "You lost all your little knives, right? Take your pick, and I'll take my medicine." He looked at her with an open appeal. "Hell, you got the right to cut my fucking liver out if... I mean, you told me straight h-how you felt about it, and I still went ahead and got my — "

"No... it's all right."

"Hanh?" Manji's face fell; he looked almost comically disconcerted. "What the hell's the m-matter?"

"Nothing's the matter, Manji-san."

He sat back, white-faced. "Well... screw me."

Rin didn't reply, and after a minute Manji moved over to the *futon* on his knees and picked up his pipe from the smoking tray. Her eyes idly followed him, her mind still blank and calm. Over his shoulder he gave her a sudden narrow-eyed glance as if he expected to catch her unawares; she smiled vaguely and looked at the stars again.

Manji packed his pipe with tobacco, his hands shaking, and put it between his lips. Rin heard his teeth rattle against the mouthpiece and felt mild curiosity at the unaccustomed sound. He tried to light the pipe and bumped the little brazier, scattering sand and charcoal ash in the smoking tray. Some of it spilled on the *tatami*.

"Aw, shit..."

Rin glanced around and sighed a little at his drunken carelessness. Well, he'd gotten into this messy state all by himself, so he could clean it up by himself too...

Manji groped for a live coal with a pair of metal *hashi*, held it to the pipe and tried to blow on it to encourage the fading smolder. His breathing had become irregular and choppy. His hands trembled even more badly and he dropped pipe, coal and *hashi* with a clatter.

Rin raised her gaze from the spilled sand. Manji stared unmoving at the thread of smoke rising from the mat in front of him. A faint smell of scorching straw grew stronger.

"Um... Manji-san?" He didn't reply. "The mat's catching on fire — "

"So what?"

Rin gasped, waking from her indifference. "Do something!"

He shrugged.

"Manji!"

He threw his head up and glared at her. His eye looked bloodshot, his mouth distorted. "Far as I'm concerned, this whole fucking dump can burn to the ground."

Rin jumped down from the window seat, scooped up the hot coal with the ash container and poured the rest of the sand onto the scorched spot to smother the sparks. For good measure she grabbed Manji's *saké* jug, dumped the remaining contents over the sand and stirred it until she was sure the fire was dead. She sat back on her heels, wiped aromatic mud from her fingers and gave Manji a reproving glance.

"What are you lookin' at?"

She flinched at his ugly tone. "Um... nothing."

"Nothin'? What am I, week-old *sushi*?"

"Well, what was *that* about? Why would you want the inn to burn down, for

heaven's sake?"

He growled and turned away. "This ain't been a real eventful day. Thought we could use a little excitement before bedtime."

Rin flushed and looked at the spoiled mat. Manji picked up his pipe and flicked damp sand from the bamboo stem with his thumbnail.

"Well, speaking of which... I'm tired. I guess I should go to bed now — go to sleep." She swallowed against a lump in her throat and fought down a dreadful sense of awakening loss; she'd mourn for what had never existed only when she was certain he wouldn't hear. "M-maybe you shouldn't be smoking when you've been drinking."

Manji grunted, still fiddling with his pipe. Again his back rested against the stack of spare bedding. He had apparently decided that they should stop sharing a pillow even before they had reached their room — why hadn't he told the maid to lay out two beds instead of one? That might have been a gentler way to break the news. Rin hesitated, then slowly shuffled past Manji on her knees and reached for the bedding.

He twitched his shoulders when she eased a folded quilt from behind him. "What do you think you're doin'?"

"Um, I just wanted to make up my *futon*..."

His head whipped around; he'd gone white again. For a moment she saw his features wrench, then anger returned and his face reddened. "Don't need me to keep you warm any more, huh?"

She recoiled and stared at him with the quilt draped over her arms. "But Manji-san... you said..."

He hurled his pipe across the room. It punched a hole in the *shoji* and hit the floor. "I know damn well what I said, you two-faced little cunt!"

"Wh-why are you saying such awful things? What did I do?" Tears welled in Rin's eyes.

"Shut the — shut the hell up..." He covered his face with his hands and crouched over with his head between his knees.

"I promised not to get upset when it ended! I never meant to hurt your feelings..."

I... I tried so hard to please you..." She burst out in frantic, gulping sobs.

Manji's shoulders heaved and he let out a dry rattle of a moan, muffled by his hands.

"Please! What did I do w-wrong?"

"Nothing." He clenched his fists against his eye sockets. "Just taught me... a lesson..."

"You?"

He laughed without a grain of mirth; his voice crept to the edge of breaking. "Oh, little sister, I got mine. I sure got mine."

"Big brother..." Rin reached out and put a hand on Manji's hunched back.

"Please... please don't be sad..." She embraced him, though he shielded his face. Ear, jaw, nape — she covered him with kisses in every place her lips could reach.

He turned, took her in his arms and pressed her to the floor.

PART TWENTY-SEVEN

Dark: nothing but heat and darkness and the demands of her body. The light seemed to flee the room though the lantern still burned. She wanted to know everything now without a single place left to hide the truth. He had to search it out in her, leave nothing unquenched, or her secrets would consume her like a hidden smolder along her foundations. She whispered in his ears, clutching his head and clawing his back. Use her like he'd once threatened, show her exactly what marks he could inflict in the mercilessness of passion. He stripped her stark naked and tried to oblige, forcing her legs open with his and thrusting stiffened fingers deep into her. It wasn't enough — not half enough.

"More... harder... please..."

She wouldn't invite him to claim her virginity again; it had been unspeakably cruel of her to let him know so clearly that she would forget everything for him if he in turn forgot his honor. He couldn't have longed in his most hidden heart to let tears and pleas persuade him, could he?

Rin jerked and writhed against Manji's probing hand, desperately kissing him with her arms locked around his neck. His rigid *henoko* dug into her thigh almost to the point of pain, but he didn't move much. He wouldn't let her touch him yet, keeping himself shrouded in his clothing. All he seemed to want was absolute proof of her response. With every kiss he returned, every rolling clench of his muscles, he seemed to exult in her frantic desire. Still, she couldn't bring herself to the peak no matter how she guided his hands.

He licked and sucked her breasts, her navel, and then the top of her weeping cleft. Even his teeth lightly scraped against the shuddering little nub couldn't push her all the way there. He groaned, pulled his fingers from her and took her whole into his mouth. With his wet hand he stroked downwards and circled the tightly furled ridges of her chrysanthemum-flower. The opening contracted and relaxed, taking in the slick tip of his middle finger.

She screamed encouragement and tugged on his hair. Manji flexed the finger, then slowly pushed it in to the knuckle. Rin cried out, sharp pulses vibrating through her body. She hadn't thought she really liked this the first time he had demonstrated, but then found herself asking for it again just to make sure. So intense, even the gentlest entry to her most delicate and well-guarded passage. Feeling good wasn't the point — she longed to be filled and overwhelmed with

that intensity until she forgot everything else. Though it still reached only a little way inside her skin, she was coming closer. She spread her legs wide and arched her back, pressing her *bobo* against his mouth.

Suddenly Manji abandoned her and sat up. Rin whined, but he looked around and seized her shoulder bag. Upending it and shaking it out on the floor, he searched among the scattering articles and grabbed an oblong wooden box.

Rin's eyes grew wide. Manji tossed the halves of the box over his shoulder and put the slender tortoiseshell *harigata* between his lips. He scrabbled among her belongings again and popped the lid off her pot of face cream. While he warmed the instrument in his mouth, he scooped out a thick blob of cream and massaged her opening.

He worked steadily inward, spreading her wider with every stroke of his fingers. Then he reversed the *harigata* to hold it in his teeth, coated it with another scoop of her cream and guided it slowly inside her. He knelt between her thighs and began to lick her *bobo* again, timing the strokes of his tongue with the penetration of the instrument.

Rin rolled her head in circles, lost in a dark dream of arousal. Why hadn't he ever done anything like this before? The *harigata* wasn't that much larger than Manji's finger, but it probed deeper and more smoothly. She remembered exactly how it had felt to have him take her with this proxy, the first time he had shown her how to go there in his arms. It wasn't the penetration alone, but the hand and the desire behind it that she wanted so much. Another person's will and warmth, pulling her along with him. Was that why both of them had dived so deep into the pleasures of her body?

The pleasure was almost nothing by itself — it was a connection, a river of feeling that flowed from one human being to another and back again. She wasn't a weak and frightened child, she was a woman, and she longed to give him all the proof of her strength he could take. She had to be brave enough to open herself as a conduit of passion.

"More," she whispered, tugging on his hair. "More."

He raised his head, his flushed face questioning.

"Big brother... I want to please you."

Manji narrowed his eye and quirked the corners of his mouth.

“More than this — as much as you’ll let... ohh!” Rin bucked and let out a high moan when he flicked at her little bean with the tip of his tongue and rotated the *harigata* inside her. “Tell me... what I — ”

At the same time Manji raised his head again, she remembered just what she could do. He looked down at his hand on the penetrating instrument and slowly pulled back his lips from his teeth; immediately she realized he’d probably thought of it long before she had. Although he’d already done a great deal that could prepare her for the act, whether he had ever meant to urge her all the way was less clear.

Their gazes met for a moment. Manji’s eye dilated. Before he looked away in half-shamed, half-proud evasiveness, he betrayed a flash of painful hunger that gripped her vitals.

Rin blushed like fire and rolled a little to the side. She took Manji’s other hand and put it on her lower back, then hid her face.

Manji rose up on his knees and leaned forward, his body arching over hers. “*Rin-chan*, I told you — ”

“It’s not more than I can take. I can, *Manji-sensei*...” His thighs tightened; she felt rather than heard him take a shuddering breath. “Because you know how to do it right.” She took her hands from her face and gazed up at him. “Right?”

He squeezed his eye shut and fought to hold back something almost feral from his expression. Then he opened his mouth and looked at her from under his brows, his nostrils expanding with a sharp inhalation. “Yeah. I do.”

Rin’s pulse began to pound at the base of her throat. He’d once threatened to make her beg for mercy... and promised that he would never hurt her. Her bodyguard would surely do everything to keep her safe no matter how treacherous the path he led her down, and so she couldn’t be afraid. It still wasn’t that one forbidden thing, she reminded herself. Not quite that, and so there was no line for them to cross...

Manji stayed where he was for a few moments, gazing at her and stroking her bottom. He gently squeezed and handled her flesh until her first flush of nervousness began to fade. Then he rolled to the side and sank down to lie behind her. Rin felt his lips on the back of her neck and quivered all over. Like how he had held her on a bed of pine needles, such a short eternity ago...

He didn’t move the *harigata* now, but left it still within her while he parted his

clothing and loosened his *fundoshi*. His erection rose and lay in the cleft between her buttocks. He reached over her hip and began to stroke her *bobo*, using a quick, firm touch that made her arch her back and moan. So close now, just from asking him to take her with him.

Manji kissed and licked her ear and cheek, then turned her face slightly upwards and pressed his lips to hers. She was gasping now, her hips rocking against his hand. When she reached her peak, he breathed in her cries and shifted to oil himself with the rest of the cream. He was shaking, but suppressing it. The empty pot rolled across the floor and turned over.

"You trust... me? Little sister?" He began to withdraw the *harigata* with care.

"I... trust you." She whispered it, so limp that she could barely make a sound.

Manji grunted. "Don't take it too far."

"What...?"

"I'll be as careful as I remember to, but it's your little *ketsu*." The instrument left her and he tossed it aside. When he kissed her cheek again, his breath made a sharp rasp across her ear. "Now's the time to change your mind – "

Rin twisted to look at him with a hint of defiance. "I'm not going to."

Manji gave her a slow, hot grin and gripped the back of her upper thigh to open her.

The blunt head of Manji's rampant *henoko* was larger than the slim *harigata*, and despite his preparation and the smooth slip of the cream, her small entrance resisted him for a few moments. A sharp sensation prickled her. This part of her was coy and reluctant and needed careful coaxing. She couldn't consciously open herself; she had to give in and let her body do what it wanted. All of her muscles had relaxed with her release, however, and just when the pressure crossed the edge into a smart and then outright pain, she felt a sudden yielding. Rin moaned as her body accepted him and drew him in.

Manji's hands clamped on her thighs. He echoed her moan, exhaling into her hair. "Ohh, fuck..."

A wave of weakness shivered through her, like bubbles rising in a pot coming to the boil. She could hardly distinguish between the shock to her delicate parts and the shock to her mind and nerves. Manji had put his *henoko* inside her.

He hadn't gone very deep yet, but his invading organ forced her narrow opening to widen and spread around it. For a few moments Rin could hardly bear the ragged edge of sensation. She bit down on her lower lip to keep silent, tears stinging her eyes. This was too much — he'd been right the first time — she was going to have to beg him to stop if he did anything at all.

Manji kissed her shoulders and neck and massaged her thighs. He breathed with a heavy rasping sound, but he didn't move, just waited. In stages her body relaxed again, her jangled nerves quieting. The raw sharpness ebbed enough to let her discover another feeling that lurked underneath the sheer strangeness of this penetration. Rin took deep breaths to let it seep through her body. Every pore in her skin seemed to dilate, every limb prickled. Not numb and asleep, but awakening...

When she began to roll her hips against him, Manji covered her body with his. Hands slid down her arms and clasped her wrists; his chest heaved against her back. Her passage embraced him, yielding to his shaft as he pressed deeper, and deeper still. Extraordinary dark pleasure crept through her like the circulation of her blood, and her voice crooned enticements without words.

She felt helpless, possessed, and yet immensely powerful. This was what she had wanted, in every detail. Now she was able to match him, to take him as he took her. Though the flesh of her thighs and buttocks felt all on fire, for the first time her body felt as strong in its own way as his. Manji had told her this was a man's act, but even as a woman she could withstand as much.

She could even draw pleasure from it, which she had only partly suspected. Rin gave a voluptuous sigh and rolled her head backwards. Her hair brushed Manji's face and he buried his nose in it. Though he was obviously aroused, his manner seemed controlled, even a little tense.

"Ma... Manji... is it — do you like it? With... me?"

He laughed and quivered at the same time; she felt his heartbeat and hers mingling at the root of her spine. "God."

Manji braced a hand on her stomach and nuzzled the side of her neck. Rin turned her head and he kissed her on the mouth. Not in triumph, exactly, but with focused will. He reached lower and massaged her *bobo*. "You... OK? Going real easy..."

"Uh-huh."

Hips moving back now, his hard oiled shaft withdrawing a little way. She felt him tremble, as if the effort of restraint were almost too much to bear, and he pressed back in. He seemed to be concentrating on the mechanics of penetration, lightly nipping the nape of her neck to hold her in place and easing himself deeper. The burning in her thighs spread and softened. She felt incapable of resistance; there was no pain at all now, only an overwhelming heated languor. Manji murmured half-coherently in her ear, something about warning him if anything hurt.

In reply she only groaned. Deep silky twinges unfolded through her abdomen. Her stomach cramped and released, each spasm robbing her of tension. Her head fell limp against Manji's shoulder. He rolled her partly under him, one hand pressed into the crease of her thigh and the fingertips slowly working in the wet recesses of her cleft. He couldn't go any deeper, could he? One more slow thrust and she felt him come to rest; he let out a low sigh that seemed to betray every nuance of his feelings.

For several minutes he again moved very little except to rotate his pelvis in a slow circle. Manji nuzzled Rin's jaw and seemed to be listening to her moans with close attention. Then he wrapped his arms around her waist, pressed his chest to her back and rolled upright with her. She ended up sitting in his lap while he knelt, his weight entirely off her but his arms supporting her. The position kept him from too deep a penetration but accentuated the fullness inside her; she let out a high soft cry, braced her hands on his knees and began to move.

He only guided her, leaning back on his heels and letting her determine the speed of thrusting. When her movements grew wild, he restrained her with a grip on her thighs. One hand delved between her legs again. His skin felt damp with sweat. Rin clutched his forearm across her stomach.

"Big... brother... please... tell me how much you..."

He moaned, squeezed a breast with his free hand and kissed her nape through her loose hair. "Sweet little... woman. So fucking good..."

"Tell me..."

"Hard to believe, Rin-chan – but I got my cock in you... all the way – " His hips suddenly bucked under her.

"Oh!"

"S-sorry... that hurt?"

"No... it's just — " Rin pressed his hand to her *bobo* and let out a piercing wail.
"Manjiii!"

He moved faster at her urging, rubbing her cleft in circles while he plunged in and out in short strokes. Rin felt a seed of fire center itself in her pelvis. It bloomed into a pulse of tremendous heat, a lightless inferno. In his arms she'd felt many forms of pleasure, but now her whole body seemed consumed in flame. The heat surged through her over and over as if it would never stop coming. A series of choked screams erupted from her contracting throat and she sagged against Manji's chest.

He coaxed out her last tremors with his fingers and made a breathy growl in her ear. She knew that sound very well — he probably needed only a few more moments to go there. But as her body cooled, his fully swollen hardness inside her began to feel like an intrusion. She stiffened slightly, determined not to betray any discomfort no matter what he had said.

Manji wrapped his arms around her waist again, lunged forward and laid her face down on the *futon*. With her bottom in the air and her head resting on her arms, his *henoko* seemed to slide more easily in her narrow passage. Warm droplets hit her back as Manji pumped his hips, sweat pouring down his torso. He pressed deeper than ever with accelerating strokes and she gasped.

"Dammit..." He groaned and slowed down, going a little shallower. "What... th' hell am I doin'?"

"M-Manji?"

"I'm... an idiot, woman. Gone just plain crazy..." He gave a helpless moan.

Rin quivered all over, heat kindling again in the core of her body. She wished she could see his face.

"You really... want it? Want... me?"

"Yes... please."

"God... so damn hot... Rin-chan — " He spoke in gasps. Rin arched her back, moving with him and feeling as lost as he sounded. "You... fucking you. I'm... inside you... beautiful... hot little — " He let out a sudden loud grunt, then howled and drilled his fingers into the tender flesh of her thighs. "Fuck, yeah!"

Thrusting hard and fast, he rammed his hips against her bottom until Rin whimpered at the friction and violent shaking. How was this going to feel in the morning? As Manji spent his seed in her body, she regained enough clarity of mind to suffer a quick flare of awareness.

In the morning?

Manji's sweaty weight knocked Rin flat to the mattress. Her body quickly expelled his shrinking organ, but he remained where he was for several minutes, lying over her and muttering inaudible endearments into her hair. When she stirred he roused himself slightly, rolled over and reclined next to her, the curve of his body wrapped around hers.

Sweat and seed grew cold on her skin and on the *futon* cover where she huddled; Rin shivered. Manji's arm swooped down over her. He pulled her against his torso and cupped one hand to make a cradle for a breast. He let her reach for some paper tissues, but kept her close and covered while she cleaned herself. Then he wound a long muscular leg between hers and locked their bodies together.

Rin felt warmer now, but also half crushed. For some reason Manji's body seemed heavier than usual, his grip stronger. She wriggled to take some of his weight off her lungs and he reluctantly gave her a little room. Fading rapidly, she let her head droop against his arm, but tried to fight her exhaustion. "Manji-san... what did we just — what does — "

"Go to sleep, woman." He snuffed the lantern and spoke once more in the darkness, his voice soft and raw. "It's been one long fucking day."

END OF VOLUME FOUR

CONTINUED IN VOLUME FIVE...

~ GLOSSARY ~

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

Asano Takayoshi: Rin's murdered father, the head of the Mutenichi-ryū.

bobo: A woman's vagina and vulval area.

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.

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

henoko: Penis.

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 age and 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. "Sweetie" might be an English equivalent.

-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.

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 (*dai-sho*) 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.

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.

ketsu: Colloquial term for buttocks; “ass”.

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 *Ittō-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.

obi: Fabric belt or sash, worn by both men and women to hold their garments closed. Women's *obi* are much wider and stiffer than men's.

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.

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.

ronin: "Wave man", an unemployed samurai. Masses of disgruntled armed men were a serious social problem in the Edo period.

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.

samisen or shamisen: Banjo-like instrument often used to accompany singing and dancing.

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 vary according to the time period and what is being measured, but is usually about twelve inches/30 cm.

sun: Unit of length, one-tenth of a *shaku*. Slightly over one inch/3 cm. A *bu* is one-tenth of a *sun*, or a little more than one-tenth of an inch/3 mm.

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.