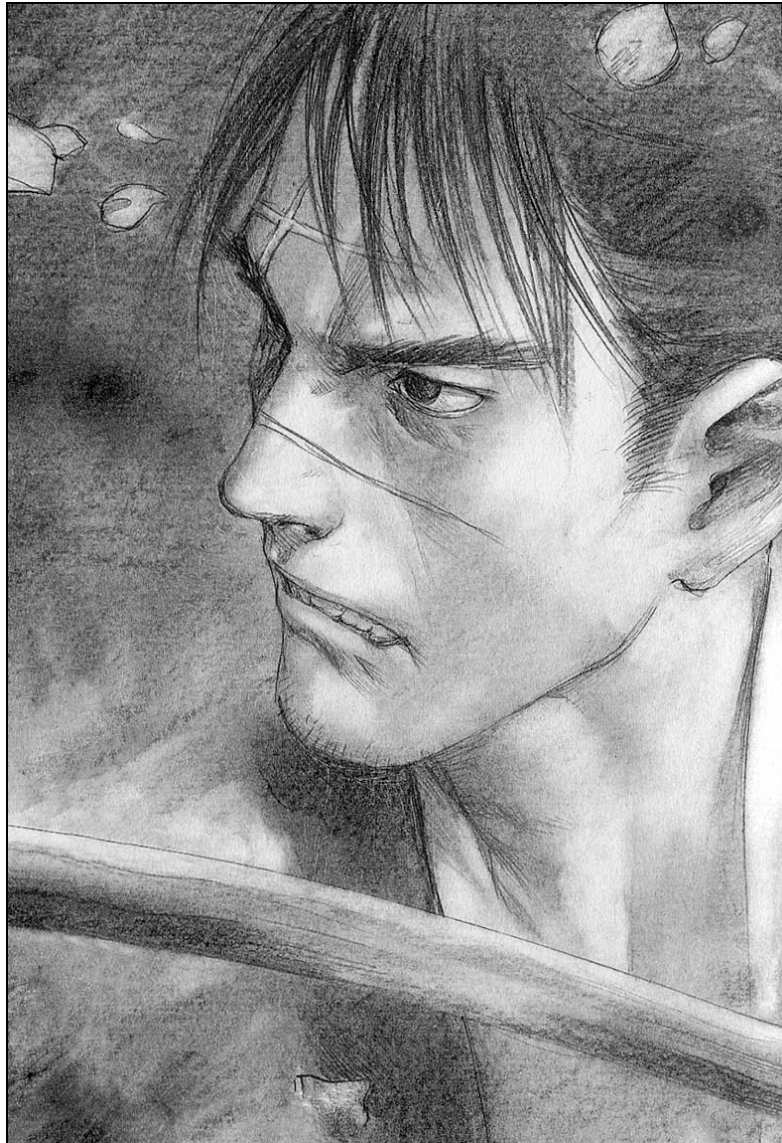


ABSTINENCE EDUCATION

A BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL FAN FICTION STORY

BY MADAME MANGA



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

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

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

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

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

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

ABSTINENCE EDUCATION

PART TWENTY-EIGHT

"My little girl's a bride today. Look how pretty she is in her wedding clothes."

Rin looks down at herself; she's wearing a plain white *kōsode* as if dressed for a funeral. "But..."

"It's all right, dear. I know you thought you needed the money." Mother adjusts her gilded hairpins while peering into the small round mirror on the stand.

"I'm sorry, Mama." Rin kneels and hangs her head. "I shouldn't have sold your best *uchikake* to pay off my bodyguard. Even if it did have a lot of gold thread on it and I got a good price. I shouldn't have."

"I said it was all right, dear. It's not as if I was going to have another occasion to put it on." She laughs with a sweet sound, like little bells, and opens her cosmetics case. "There, it's your turn."

"But..." Rin is silenced when Mother places the mirror in front of her and begins to paint her lips. A little pot, a brush, a gently circling touch. Her lips part; she stares at the mirror.

"The marriage is still a marriage, even if you can't wear your mother's wedding clothes." Father comes in and shuts the *shoji* against the summer sun; the room falls dim. He's just been to the barber to be shaved, and tiny spots of half-dry blood stand out on his jaw. "Your husband won't mind. He's not marrying a fancy outfit."

"Who is he, Daddy? Who's my husband?" She sees a shadowy painted mask in the mirror, her face powdered white and delicate pink, with blood-red lips and brows feathered like the antennae of a moth.

Her parents chuckle and nod at each other, but don't answer. Rin knows they won't tell her; it's that kind of dream. She asks again anyway.

"Did you arrange the marriage? Is he someone you know...or someone I know?" She rises and goes to the *tokonoma*. There stands an arrangement of chrysanthemums in a tall white vase and the memorial tablets of her grandfather, father and mother.

"I met your father only once before the wedding, dear." Mother smiles at him. "I fell in love the moment I saw him, and I think he'd say the same. Fate and our parents chose very well for us."

"I know. You always said that. You wanted me to look forward to being a bride..." She bursts into tears and sinks to her knees in front of the memorial tablets. "You'll never see me grown up. You'll never be at my wedding, or know your grandchildren. Never..."

"Of course not, dear. Now don't cry — you'll spoil your makeup."

Father gets up to open the door for the bridegroom, though there hasn't been a sound from outside. He's dressed in black like any other bridegroom, but he's wearing a broad basket hat that conceals his face. He gives Father and Mother a brief nod, as if he knows they're only ghosts and don't need much acknowledgement.

Behind him are two women who have guided him to the house. They bow and sit by the wall. Both wear their hair chopped short; one carries a *samisen*, and the other a pair of blood-streaked *shido*. Rin knows the first, but who is the other? The stranger looks at her for a moment and it's like looking in the mirror again, slightly distorted. She's a ghost with a white face; she is the little sister her bodyguard couldn't defend.

The bridegroom sits and bows to Rin, hands on the mat on each side of him. She waits for him to raise his head and show his face, but he stays where he is so that all she can see is the top of the hat. What do his hands look like? Fine-wristed and long-fingered, with hard calluses on the palms? Or sun-bronzed and scarred, with a surprising subtlety of gesture? She can't focus on them; her eyes won't stay where she wants them to look, or the objects skitter away at the periphery of her vision.

"I don't like this dream," she says to the bridegroom. "I won't make you a good wife."

"I know," he replies, and his voice sounds like nothing. "You have blood on your hands."

"My... revenge?"

"You've killed a lot of men one way or another, and more will die before you're finished. Lovemaking's too much like mortal combat, and the woman carries more weapons. How do I know you won't kill me too some day?"

"Then why do you want to marry me?"

He doesn't answer.

"You didn't have to say yes. You could have said you'd rather marry another girl."

"There wasn't a choice. It had to be you." He bows a little lower. "Asano Rin *no* Takayoshi."

"What's your name?"

"The name you will choose for me."

She looks at her parents; they are fading into the walls, but still smiling at her. "We know you'll do the right thing," they whisper, and they're gone. The women are gone too; they only needed to bring him here and go their ways.

"That doesn't help," she says to the void, and then turns to the bridegroom. "Please... show me your face."

"You'll love it and hate it. No matter who it belongs to."

"Why?"

"If it's the one, you'll hate me instantly. If it's the other, you'll hate me eventually. Love is only the other side of the page."

"What?"

"It's fate." He stands and extends a hand to her. "It's time."

"Where are we going?"

"The place where I live." Under the hat she sees only shadows.

"Show me your face first."

"It's not my face that matters."

"Won't I see it when... when you take me for your wife?"

"Then I'll take you now, since we're married."

Rin lies on the *futon* in her white garments and folds her hands over her breasts. The bridegroom removes his clothes; she can't see his body as anything but a man's. He's laid the hat aside but all that he shows of his face with his head bowed is black hair falling forward. As if to brush it back he passes his hand over his face while he raises his head, and as he does so his features vanish. No brows, no eyes, no nose, no mouth. Smooth and white as a ghost. He kneels by the *futon* and leans down as if to kiss her with that mouthless face and all she hears is a tearing roar in her ears, and the sound of her own horrified screams...

Manji's snore broke off in mid-breath, but he didn't wake up all the way; he must have known even in sleep that she was safe in his bed no matter how she cried out. He grumbled and rolled onto his back, then snugged his arm around her and drew her head to his shoulder. After a few moments the snoring started up again louder than ever, right under her ear.

Rin didn't care. The last thing she wanted to do right now was fall asleep and dream some more. The horror faded quickly along with the details of the dream, but her eyes remained wide open. She felt her bodyguard's bare chest slowly rise and fall in time with his long rumbling breaths. Someone was out on the street below; she heard voices and laughter and a woman's high titter. A teahouse hostess bidding customers good night. So it was either very late or very early. After the customers left and their conversation faded down the street, she heard an odd intermittent thumping somewhere outside; a big moth was beating itself to death against a paper lantern...

Approaching dawn, with the sky just beginning to lighten. She woke from a half-doze to the sound of two sets of hoofbeats coming down the street, fast and faster. Horses hired from the stable at the other end of town, probably. Perhaps the ford could be crossed now and someone had urgent business in town. A man yelled at the riders for nearly running him over; they didn't reply.

Manji sprawled on his back beside her, arm flung out and quilts kicked aside. He was almost nude, retaining only his half-tied loincloth. Rin sat up and gazed at

him. In the dimness he looked young and unscarred and softer, nearly handsome. She smiled at the illusion at the same time her heart went out to him. This was still her Manji, after all. Not a man other people would call attractive, and neither romantic nor tactful, nor with any prospects. Just real. Just the man by whose side she would always long to walk.

She ventured a hand towards his, but didn't touch him. She wouldn't know until the sun came up just how great were the implications of the mistake they had made last night. It was impossible to think of it as anything but a mistake; she had known from the moment he entered her that they had gone too far. That hadn't mattered to either of them.

For a few seconds she prayed he wouldn't remember the details, though she knew he hadn't been drunk enough for that. He was going to come back to consciousness with an exact recollection of what he had done to her.

No — what they had done together, with her encouragement. Rin shifted uncomfortably on her backside; it didn't quite hurt, but it definitely felt peculiar. She couldn't escape any of the blame; no matter how upset, she'd been far more in her right mind than he had been. She sighed — Manji certainly liked to get amorous when he was drunk, even though he usually seemed to get drunk in an attempt to drown desire. Maybe she'd taken advantage of him again. Knowing him, he'd be furious with her for a few minutes, then heap coals of fire on his own head and try to dictate terms. She had no desire to listen to him shout right now.

Rin got up and quietly collected the scattered contents of her shoulder bag. She avoided stepping in the smear of sooty sand on the scorched mat, and ignored the empty pot of cream. After dressing, she looked at Manji again before she opened the *shoji* to go out. A pang struck her at the way he lay now, resting on his side with his arm curved over the empty space where she had been. He didn't look happy, exactly, but there was a set to his jaw even in sleep that said he had arrived at a destination and meant to stay there.

Of course, she had thought he looked that way last night too. He'd made a considered decision to end their arrangement and told her his reasons, and still he had defeated himself so utterly that it was almost impossible not to realize just where his tormented mind had finally come to rest. Rin's stomach cramped. No, he'd prefer her not to be in this room when he woke up; he'd be grateful for just a few minutes alone before he had to face her. She wondered if she even wanted to be in the same town, but rejected the idea at once. Flight wasn't any solution for either of them. She took her grandfather's ornate Chinese sword from her bag and carefully laid it by the bed. Manji would see it when he woke

and know she meant to come back. This wasn't a morning to anger or upset him, even for a moment. If he'd tracked her down under impossible circumstances as her bodyguard, he'd be ten times more determined as —

She shut the door and went to the bathhouse.

Chilly water took some of the fuzziness from her head, though it didn't soothe the headache she'd woken with. Probably only sleep would do that, and she wouldn't sleep again until nightfall. Possibly not even then. If the river could be crossed and they got an early start, they'd be home before sunset.

Manji's home — where a man unused to comfort could live alone on the gleanings of pond and woods and a few windfalls of cash, soon gone. Rin carefully bathed her woman's parts and her bottom and sat on a cold cloth for a while. Maybe he'd been happy there, or at least able to exclude himself from the rest of humanity, of which he could speak in only the bitterest of terms. Alone, until she'd come to him and begged for his help, and somehow gained it against his will. She had always undermined his intentions in mysterious ways no matter how confidently he tried to assert them.

What had she done to him by tolerating his crude manners and his scars and ignoring his obvious wish to detach himself from the world in every possible sense? She'd stripped away his armor and left him bare and weaponless, reaching out for another body in the darkness. Joy or poison: she didn't know which she'd offered him now.

Out in the garden on the way back to the room, the sun a few minutes above the horizon, she heard laughter and girls singing an *otedama* juggling song. The three sat in a group under a tree, tossing colorful little beanbags in the air and applauding each other's dexterity. Rin softly joined in the song as she dawdled on the veranda. The eldest girl looked up and smiled. She looked only one or two years younger than Rin.

"Will you play? Show us how good you are!"

Rin slipped on her *geta* and came down the steps to join the game. She started with the simplest figures so as not to show off, but soon she was juggling three beanbags in one hand, her braids bouncing as she jerked her arm rapidly back and forth to catch and throw. The other players giggled and clapped. Rin finally missed a catch and halted, breathless with laughter and singing.

When she leaned over to pick up the fallen bag, she caught a glimpse of Manji out of the corner of her eye. He stood on the veranda with his pipe in his mouth

and a slip of paper in his hand, leaning against a house post and watching her.

Before she fully turned to look at him, she caught a fleeting impression. Half a smile, as if he were amused to see her playing *otedama* like a child, and half a strange resigned sadness. Not at what he saw, but at what he expected would come to pass.

As if he knew that her youth would grow all too soon to maturity and old age, and that he was fated to watch her slip inexorably away from him. Perhaps he would be able to hold her a little longer, but not forever. They would not complete their lives as companions no matter what they did. As she made her own journey through the future this man would remain exactly what he was, frozen in time and aspect, growing ever more detached from the cycle of life and the changing seasons. She might be his last true link to the human experience of mortality.

At that moment she had little doubt that Manji would outlive her for decades or centuries to come; he was a warrior who harbored no illusions about the rest of the human race. Ahead of him yawned the long march of years, an endless walk into the solitary unknown. Would he ever again open his heart once his 'little sister' had passed out of his life? The tragedy of it struck her with a force that silenced her laughter.

"M-Manji-san?" She passed the beanbags to another girl and started to get up.

His eye glinted a reflection at her from the darkness under the eaves and then he looked down to tuck the slip of paper in his sleeve. "Nothing. Go on and have a little fun — I'll order up some grub for the road." He turned to go and spoke over his shoulder. "Porters say the river's going down fast. Ferries started running at first light."

With the tiny glow of his pipe accompanying him, he moved down the corridor into shadow.

PART TWENTY-NINE

The ferryboat landing crowded thick with anxious passengers, and the boatmen were charging double on the pretext that the river was still dangerous. Rin heard a number of heated arguments over fares while she and Manji waited for a seat on one of the boats. She put her hand in her bag and counted the strings of coppers by touch for the fourth or fifth time, though she already knew exactly how much money they had between them. After they had packed up, Manji had dug into his sleeves and handed her all the cash he was carrying so she could pay the inn bill.

The landlord was snapping at everyone and looked morose; she gathered that Makie had left the inn early that morning, apparently unaccompanied. He hadn't been inclined to overlook the ruined *tatami* and insisted on what Rin considered an inflated price for their food, but she managed to cajole the total low enough not to bankrupt them. They had enough cash to get home with a few coppers left over, and that was all.

Rin looked sideways at her bodyguard, sitting on a log next to her with his arms folded inside his *kōsōde*, and wondered just how he had managed to spend ten *ryō* in a little over two weeks. Maybe he'd been gambling, though she had never known him to give a dice game a second glance. A lot of it must have gone for *saké*, but how much could he have paid at the brothel? O-Hama's rates were obviously much higher than Manji thought reasonable, but she was a fixture in an outlying village rather than in an exclusive pleasure district in town. He'd said he could tell she disliked him, but apparently she didn't have the right to turn down customers. So even though she was beloved of a *hatamoto*'s son, she was nowhere near the top of the official courtesan's hierarchy and couldn't account for a great deal of the total.

Rin silenced a sigh. No matter how, Manji's burn rate was apparently just as high as he'd told her. The next time he got his hands on some money, she was going to insist on holding it for him and doling it out in reasonable amounts. An odd little quiver went through her at the thought. That was how a wife would manage the household accounts for her husband; samurai in particular usually scorned to count their money like merchants and needed to be kept on a strict budget.

"Um, Manji-san?"

He grunted.

"Did you want your change back? I'm afraid there isn't much left... but I'll pay the boat fare. Since I said that there was no way we were crossing at the ford ourselves." Even if the water had receded to ankle-depth, she was never again going to be ported across a river if she could possibly help it.

He made a slight face. "Nah, you keep it."

"Well, OK, if you want... I'll keep track of whose is whose."

Manji looked away and didn't reply, though his nose twitched. Rin bit her lips and closed her bag. The awkwardness she'd envisioned hadn't materialized, at least not in a form she would have expected. Her bodyguard wasn't saying much, but not from shame nor anger. There had been no recriminations; he hadn't mentioned either the act or his earlier attempt to declare a separation. Rin would rather have been trampled by wild horses than bring those subjects up herself, though she knew it couldn't be avoided for long. There was no privacy at hand anyway.

An elderly peasant accompanied by an equally elderly woman and a string of children stumped up to the ferryboat landing and stopped near their seat. He let out a loud exclamation and banged his walking stick on the ground when he saw the size of the crowd.

"Eh-yah! We won't be over the water 'til noon. My old bones are goddamn tired already." He glanced around at Rin and Manji as the children straggled up. Three girls and three boys, none of them older than ten. The smallest girl, about four years old, held the hand of a boy who looked the same age — they must have been twins. The eldest girl carried a bare-bottomed infant boy in a sling on her back. Rin got up to offer the old man her seat on the log.

"Young lady, that's most kind and polite of ya, but I'll not displace my betters, no ma'am." He gave a low bow to Manji. "And a good morning to you, soldier." Manji nodded at him with a mixture of his usual unconcern and an automatic respect for gray hairs, even a farmer's.

Rin looked at the children who crowded around the old couple, clinging to their baggy jackets. They must be grandchildren, but all of them wore mud-stained clothes and had dull, sad faces. Only the infant burred and cooed at her when she smiled; the rest stared back and bowed, or were made to by the old woman.

"Hello." She wished she could cheer them somehow, they looked so despondent. "What are your names, and how old are you? Mine's Rin, and I'm sixteen." She heard a small shy chorus of voices, but didn't catch much individual information. Digging in her shoulder bag, she came up with a handful of little sugar candies and held them out. "Would you like some sweets?"

There was a spark of interest in the dull faces; she handed the candy around. Each child accepted with a low bow of thanks, but only the little twins ate theirs immediately. The elder girls examined the candy as if they had rarely seen such delicacies and carefully put it away in their sleeves.

"Most kind to take such notice of us humble folk, young lady." The old couple bowed to Rin. "You'll have great rewards in paradise."

"Oh, it's nothing at all... um, is everything all right?" She looked at the children, who still seemed glum.

"Well, since yer askin', their folks're dead these three days past, I'm sorry to say. These are my second son's kids." The old man leaned on his stick and sighed. "All but the eldest — he's buried under the house with his pa and ma." The old woman cleared her throat and the man shrugged at her. "Eh, she's wantin' to know, ain't she? But it ain't fittin' to inflict our troubles on others."

"Buried?" Rin opened her mouth in shock. "Oh, what happened?"

"It were a damn big landslide, you see?" He made a wide gesture and a rumbling noise. "Three of my sons lost their houses, but us oldsters and everyone else got out in time. Ruined the whole friggin' rice harvest and filled the paddies with rocks and crap, more's the pity. They'll be diggin' out all winter."

"Oh... that's terrible!" Instinctively Rin reached out for the infant when he waved his little hands at her. The girl immediately slipped her sling from her shoulders and handed her brother over. "I'm so sorry. Where are you taking them, grandfather?" She settled the baby on her lap and cuddled him, her throat clenching in sympathy. To lose their parents so young...

"Ah, we've got cousins just over the river. Some of 'em can take us an' the boys, I've no doubt. The girls, well..." He shook his head. "It's too bad, that's what I say. Wish I could live long enough to see 'em with husbands instead..."

The old woman clucked her tongue. "How you go on about that, you old fart! They'll get fed and clothed better'n us, so why mourn over 'em?"

"Eh-yah..." The old man scratched his sparse cropped hair. "Wish our village head had got some family to make a bit of room."

"Idiot! Who kin afford to feed someone else's girl-brats for years just to marry 'em off? The cash'll buy a proper funeral and a tombstone, so don't sneeze at that neither." She smoothed the hair of the eldest girl with a gnarled hand. "Wash that face in the river, child. You need to look your prettiest for the *zegen*."

"Just worthless females, I know. It sticks in my craw anyhow." He sighed again and spat on the mucky ground. "Damn, my old bones still ache with all that rain."

Manji got up as if to stretch his legs and pointed at his seat. "Plant your ass, Gramps. I'll tell you when I want it back."

The old man looked at him in some surprise and gave him another bow. "If you like, soldier. If you like." He heaved himself down next to Rin and the baby and nodded to her. "You'd be going into town, I guess."

"Not quite that far, grandfather. Just to my — um, his house." The twin boy and girl ventured a little closer to her and huddled together, arms around each other.

He nodded and cracked a half-toothless smile. "Ah, that does my sad old heart good. A gentleman and his young lady gettin' ready to raise their family." He tickled the baby under the chin. "A man likes to spoil his daughters when he can, but he's got to count on his sons for what's important. So be sure you give this husband of yours plenty of strong boys." He winked at the old woman. "My old bat had some secret, I think. Six sons and only one girl to marry off."

"Sure weren't yer skinny ol' *daikon* that done it!" She cackled at him in what seemed to be a private joke.

He waved a hand at her. "Shut up, woman. Have some respect."

Manji stood only a short distance away, but was apparently pretending deafness. Rin blushed and held the baby out at arm's length for a moment to let him make water on the ground instead of on her lap. The old man moved his feet to avoid the splatter and chuckled.

"She looks healthy, soldier. Got a good hand with the youngsters. She'll pop 'em out one after another, mark my words. You want my advice?"

Manji rubbed his nose.

"I hear you samurai go in for boys an' whores more than yer wives sometimes. Well, swear off 'em for a while now that you're married. Stay home with yer pretty little woman. Eh?"

Manji scratched the back of his head and looked off into the distance at the opposite bank of the river.

"See, you're lookin' sour, soldier. Screwin' the same woman for years to come might sound like a punishment. But enjoy her while she's still flexible, see? This dried-up crone of mine was once a rosy-cheeked maiden, if you can believe it." He let out a raucous laugh. "And did we have a fine time in the sack when we were kids? I'll tell you — "

"You're ramblin', you limp-dicked old fart," his wife snapped. "Shut yer hole — the samurai-*san* don't want to hear how many times you could go in a night."

"He ain't sayin' nothing, woman. Guess he can shut me up on his own." They both looked at Manji, who remained silent. "No, he don't look like a man who tolerates talk he don't like. Eh, young lady? How've you found your married life so far? What's this husband of yours do when he's in the mood for the pillow?"

"Uh..." Rin cradled the baby and put her cheek to the top of his half-shaven head. "Well, um..."

"Ah, a blind man could see you're a new bride." He grinned at her embarrassment. "Then just answer me yes or no, if you would, Miss Modesty — d'you look forward to lyin' down at night?"

She took a quick glance at the back of Manji's head. "...Y-yes, grandfather. Very... much."

"Good for you, soldier!" The old man clapped his hands. "Keep that pecker up for her!"

Manji mumbled something under his breath, cleared his throat and glanced around at Rin. She'd expected irritation or a sarcastic jibe, but he gave her a searching look, his lips slightly parted and his brows creased. Some quality in it multiplied her embarrassment tenfold; she averted her eyes and pried the baby's fingers from one of her hair rings. He began to fuss and reached for her braids to pull them; she leaned back to avoid his grasp, wondering what to do.

"Young man, you better take an old man's word for it, since he's got one eye on the next life already. Yer woman oughta expect a little preview of paradise while you're spreadin' her legs. The more she wants it, the more you'll want to stick it in her. The more seed you leave in her, the more descendants you'll have. That's how a man knows he'll live forever — when he's got grandchildren." He lifted the baby from Rin's lap and bounced him on his knee. "So go fuck yourself up some immortality, soldier. No man's gotta fear old age and death when he's got a woman to bear him sons."

Cringing and trying not to laugh at the same time, Rin glanced up at Manji. He looked over the river again, but his lips were tight and his gaze unfocused. Her heart gave a thump — what on earth could he be thinking? — but then he smiled a crooked, mocking smile and she relaxed.

"Good luck, Gramps. Sorry to hear about the rocks. That rainstorm sure washed a lot of things loose." Manji reached down to grab his bundle by the cord. "C'mon, woman. There's a boat just pulled in."

Rin picked up her shoulder bag, nodded at the old man and woman and trotted off after Manji. She gave the group of somber children one more smile and reminded herself that karma was karma. Parents died, brothers lost their sisters, girls were sold from necessity and wasted away in the brothels. What could anyone do?

Manji and Rin secured a seat in the middle of the boat and it embarked from the landing filled to capacity. Here the water was calm and broad and brown; the trip would take a peaceful half hour or more. The boatmen stood in the stern working their long oar back and forth in a steady motion. Some of the passengers settled down to take naps, and several men and women brought out pipes. A couple of them were carrying pierced metal charcoal holders. Manji accepted an offered light, passed it on and put his tobacco pouch away.

His hand came out of his sleeve with a slip of paper in it. He glanced at it and unfolded it. Obviously he'd already read what was written there, but he looked it over again and frowned.

"What is that note, Manji-san?"

He passed it to her. "It was in the door when I opened it this morning. Thought for a second you'd left it for me, but I guess not."

A swiftly brushed line of elegant calligraphy. "'Enemies may lie in wait. Do not relax your vigilance.'" Rin read it aloud and looked at Manji. "Huh?"

"Hell if I know what it means. Looks like a woman's hand to me."

"Yes, it does." She creased her forehead. "It's not much of a warning — 'may lie in wait'? She wasn't sure if someone meant to do something or not? Who?"

"There's only one broad in town who could've written that, you realize." Manji puffed on his pipe. "Though why she'd tell us that ol' Anotsu had something up his sleeve I can't figure."

"Um... Anotsu?" Her stomach jumped — she hadn't been able to tell Manji last night, and she couldn't do it now in the middle of a crowded boat. "It says 'enemies', not just one. She wouldn't call *him* that, anyway... I don't think."

Manji shrugged. "Enemies? So what else is new?"

"That's true." Rin folded up the note and stowed it in her bag.

Until the boat docked on the far side of the river, there was little conversation. The two boatmen exchanged a long anecdote about an early-morning would-be passenger who had tried to insist on taking a horse across in a ferryboat since there were no rafts at the crossing large enough for livestock. They traded witticisms about this particular bit of upper-class idiocy until most of the passengers in the stern were listening with grins on their faces. The boatmen described the object of their humor as a swaggering samurai who dressed richly but went on foot, as did his four hired *kenshi*. The horse was for the benefit of a sullen youth who rode while the samurai led the mount himself like a servant. His companions had finally prevailed on him to go several *ri* down the river and cross at the ford, but not before he had blustered himself into a frenzy and challenged several people to duels. It wasn't clear why his business was so urgent, but apparently he planned to meet someone on his way and wanted to get there well ahead of time.

Manji finished his pipe and idly pared his fingernails with a small knife. Rin leaned on the gunwale of the boat and dipped her hand in and out of the murky water. She watched the little droplets she flung from her fingertips make brief rings on the surface and vanish. Manji's state of mind was at least calm, even if she couldn't make out exactly what was going on underneath. Could he have decided they should just continue as they had been, as if last night had never happened? Or...

Rin studied the distorted reflection of her face in the river. It looked back at her in a way that unsettled her, though she couldn't remember quite why. Manji

really had meant to break off the relationship last night. He hadn't been testing her, even though her reaction, or lack of it, had apparently taken him by surprise. He kept reminding her that he didn't have a future, at least not one that could ever resemble a normal life, and he had disparaged his own feelings and hers over and over.

Maybe she should wake up and listen to what he said. He'd always emphasized that her duty to her parents came first, above any personal misgivings she might conceive. Whenever she raised a question, he invariably urged her to stick to her original purpose. Perhaps... *if* Manji could get used to the idea of Anotsu as a possible suitor for her hand, which was a big *if*... her filial duty would even serve as a way for both of them to back out and still save some face. After the supremely reckless abandon of last night...

The heat of that bed seemed to have burned all trace of Anotsu from her mind for a while. Maybe that was what she had been asking for. Rin tightened and released the muscles she sat on, as she had been doing since she woke up. In a day or two she might not feel these odd twinges — she certainly hoped not. At the same time, the sensation so acutely recalled the memory of Manji's *henoko* plunging into her body that she flushed and trembled.

Was she normal, to have enjoyed that embrace so much? Manji hadn't believed she would, even if he managed to avoid making it hurt. He hadn't actually hurt her, but he had certainly left a mark. He had taken her body, possessed her — there were no two ways about that. Even though he hadn't done it in the proper fashion and his limited definition of virginity hadn't been violated, taking him inside her had subtly changed everything, at least from a woman's point of view.

Rin propped her chin on her hands and rested her elbows on the gunwale to avoid looking in Manji's direction. A man couldn't have felt that strangely compelling mixture of submission and power, that sense of welcomed invasion, especially not when he was doing the invading. It was silly to imagine that the act could ever affect him anything like the way it had affected her.

Anyway, Manji seemed far too quiet this morning for that. She stole a glance at him. He gazed abstractedly upriver and occasionally lifted a brow and nodded to himself; he seemed to be calculating or considering. For a moment he caught Rin's gaze, looked at her without apparent concern and went back to his pondering.

Rin sighed. Manji was right; it was stupid to change their minds when important realities stood in the way on both sides. She would have to treasure the memory of a few days of closeness, and of some moments when she'd really thought she

believed in happiness. She put her forehead on her knees and hugged them.

Did she love him? Of course she did. She'd loved him almost from the day they had met. But the other kind of love, the towering and tragic passions of romances? Love for which people did brave and foolish and wonderful things, and sometimes great evil as well? Maybe the young man who'd gained a disinheritance and a scar on his nose for his wild ways could claim to have experienced such emotions. In a way Rin hoped that Tsukue Ryonosuke had at least that compensation for his ruin. For even a moment to have opened his entire heart and body and mind to another without the smallest reservation, and thus to the gods and a glimpse of paradise. What must that feel like?

The boat docked with a bump and she raised her head as the boatmen tied up. Manji gave her a hand up from her seat, pushed through the crowd of passengers and led her to the correct road, since tracks ran off in several directions from the landing.

This route didn't retrace the one they had taken on the outward journey, since they had traveled far down the river from their original destination, and the sights weren't familiar. The sun grew hotter as it climbed the sky and she had to pause at every spring to drink.

As noon approached Rin was tired out and dragging. Manji looked sweaty, but his strides didn't slacken at all unless she begged for a stop. While she held her bamboo-section canteen under the trickle of water from a temple spring by the road, Manji poured a dipperful over his hair. He thoroughly wet it down and rinsed the dust from his face, then wiped his forehead on his sleeve. He dropped the dipper into the stone basin and stepped back to let other waiting travelers drink and refresh themselves.

A couple of them jostled Rin as she plugged her water container. She stumbled and nearly dropped it. Manji caught her and looked hard at the jostlers, who quickly apologized.

Although they moved out to the road to resume their journey, Manji didn't let go of her immediately. With an arm around Rin's shoulders, he pulled her towards him until he could put his face in her hair. He drew in a deep savoring breath, let it out with a blast of warm air to her scalp and released her. Then he took up a swift pace that kept him a step ahead of her so that she couldn't see his expression.

Rin wearily jogged along after him for a few minutes, grimacing at the ache in her bottom. Men were lucky — they didn't have to carry around such awkward

reminders. “Manji-san? Aren’t we going to stop and eat something?”

“This early? We’re not halfway there, woman.”

“But I’m so tired... I didn’t get much sleep at all after — ” She gulped.

Manji stopped in the middle of the road. For the moment no one else was in sight; he turned around and looked at her. Rin felt like running at the first glimpse of his face. He wasn’t angry, but she’d rarely seen such heat behind that narrowed eye.

He raised his chin and slowly examined her from *tabi* to braids, as if he’d never met her before but knew her by reputation. “After — I screwed your brains out?”

“Manji!” She clapped her hand over her mouth.

He gave her a slightly mocking, lascivious smile. “Yeah?”

“Um... uh... I thought we should discuss that... sooner or later...”

“Sure. Any time you like.” His eye flicked below her *obi*. “Feeling OK?”

“I’m... fine.”

“Great. Then after we get home tonight we can do it again.” He chuckled at her horrified squeak. “Nah, don’t worry. I’ll wait ‘til you ask me.”

Rin stared at him, eyes wide. What on earth was this?

“OK, you want to stop for a while, we’ll stop.” He beckoned her over to the side of the road and walked under the shade of the trees. A little way from the road was another spring, this one with no basin or dipper. Manji sat on a boulder; Rin chose another one a couple of paces away and opened her bag. He waved a hand to decline when she brought out wrapped rice balls.

“Nope, I’m not hungry... yet.” Again he gave her that look of barely veiled heat. Rin quivered. Suddenly she no longer felt like eating anything; she put the food back into her bag.

“Manji-san.” She took a deep breath and folded her hands in her lap. “I would like to tell you something, please.”

He cocked a brow at her, apparently amused at her formal manner. “Hnn?”

"It's about what Makie-san said to me when we were having tea yesterday evening." Rin swallowed hard.

Manji nodded as if to encourage her to go on, but his amusement had vanished.

"She... she said to you... that she wanted to talk to me about Anotsu Kagehisa... and you thought she wasn't telling the whole truth. Well..."

For a few moments her mind went blank. What was she going to say? The whole truth, of course, but perhaps a little softened. How could she soften it? Manji would see straight through any attempt at dissembling. He wasn't drunk now; he looked alert and very much on guard. At her hesitation, he raised a questioning brow.

"Well... it turned out... that's just what she did want to do. She wanted to know what I — um, what I'd seen in him while we were traveling together. In his mind, I mean. Manji... do you remember what you said to me about him...?"

His face made a slight twitch. Of course he remembered; his air of jealousy had materialized immediately afterwards.

"That if he'd asked my father for my hand in marriage instead of killing him, he could have healed the rift in the Mutenichi-ryū. Makie-san... thinks so too. Remember, she said her family had been part of the school once, and maybe she knows — "

Manji frowned. "So? It ain't that much of a stretch. What the hell could he do about it now, anyway?"

"Well... uh... she thinks that Anotsu-san now believes it wasn't honorable to take my family away from me, because I was an innocent. That maybe he means to try to make amends to my father's and mother's ghosts... and to me."

"Anotsu-SAN?" He gave a sarcastic emphasis to the honorific. "So he's going to walk right up to us and let me run him through, is that it?"

"Uh — Makie said that I shouldn't think any more about him paying with his death. Life... he needs to pay with his life instead..." Her voice shook; she dug her nails into her palms.

"The hell?"

"To give the souls of my parents their rest... and... and honor m-me as their daughter... he needs... to... to have the Asano bloodline continue through... through him. To unite the families... to give my parents... grandchildren."

She raised her eyes to Manji's face, praying he would understand. It was filial duty — it was the great goal that had formed her life for more than two years. He understood family honor and family blood, didn't he? The only things worth dying for...

Manji understood, all right. He slowly rose from his seat as if lifted by the sheer force of comprehension, but he said nothing.

Rin lifted her hands to him in an attitude of pleading. "Big brother, he's the last man I'd ever want to marry! You know I don't want him for a husband — and it's not like he's said it to me himself, it's only what Makie-san believes he might — but until I know for sure, I owe it to my parents... at least to leave the possibility open." She took a huge sobbing breath and held it. "He might be killed tomorrow. He might never come to me after all. But if it comes down to making this choice, then my decision — "

Manji's fingers curled into fists. "Not... a... chance."

"Don't you see? The grandchildren they should have had..." A tear ran down her cheek; she knew more would follow. "The whole reason we are — the only reason I searched all over Edo to find you was because I wanted to honor my parents the way I had to. I'm their only child. I can't just forget — "

He took her by the shoulders and pulled her upright. "He's too late. You're mine."

A hot rush surged through her entire body, making her knees sag like melting candles. "Manji-san?"

"It's done, Rin. You're mine now. My woman."

"Wh-what? I never — I never said that!"

"Are you fucking kidding me? After what we did last night?" His face tilted; his eye narrowed.

"But that wasn't — that didn't count!"

"Didn't *count*?" Manji pulled her to him and pressed his mouth hard to hers,

catching her upper lip against her teeth.

Rin flinched and turned her head away. “You — you never even *asked* me!”

“Come on, you little idiot! You’ve already told me yes — over and over.”

She tried to break his grip and put a hand over her stinging lips. “But I... *no!*”

“I never forced you.” Manji kept firm hold of her upper arms and gave her a shake. “You shared my pillow all on your own, dammit! What the hell did you think that meant?”

Rin gasped. “You said it wasn’t going to m-mean anything! You even made me promise!”

He threw his head back and laughed as if she had cracked a joke. “Shit, is that all that’s bugging you? Sure, let’s clear that up right now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I get it, OK? You just want me to prove it to you.” He threw one arm around her waist and dragged her deeper into the woods. “I said some stuff you didn’t like, so now I gotta crawl and beg a little before I get forgiven. Fine, I cry ‘uncle’. But first — ”

Rin stumbled along beside him. “Manji-san — what — ”

Manji shoved through the underbrush with her in tow until he reached a small open area where the sun struck through the branches. He put Rin’s shoulders against a thick maple, reached into the overlap of her *furisōde* and yanked it open below the waist. “First — let’s get over this damn female second-guessing.”

PART THIRTY

“Manji! What are you *doing*?”

“What’s it look like?” He bent and lifted one of her knees, parting her legs.

“That’s *not* funny! If you’re trying to scare — ”

“Scared of what?” Manji leaned in and pressed her to the tree with his body. “I’d have been happy to do it this morning in the inn. Or on a heap of straw in my grimy little hut — hell, anywhere you asked me.” He kissed the curve of her jaw. “I kinda wanted to get up something special for the occasion, so I wasn’t gonna push you... at least for another day or so. But I guess this’ll have to do.”

Breathing noisily in her ear, he slid his free hand into the waistband of her long underskirt.

“But this isn’t — *Manji!*” Rin jumped when he clasped her *bobo*. He pressed his fingers into her cleft and stroked her with seductive urgency. She cried out, her hips making an involuntary shudder against his hand.

Manji chuckled and plunged one finger into her. He thrust it in and out a few times and withdrew it with a wet sound. Then he pulled his hand out of her skirt, licked his fingers and yanked at his own clothes. His bared thigh pressed between her legs and his sword hilts poked her in the ribs. Rin squirmed away. Manji moved her back into position and tried to free his *henoko* from his loincloth. He breathed even harder now, his face flushed. She thrashed the leg he held and thumped her foot into his buttocks, still confused but growing genuinely frightened. “That’s enough! You’ve made your point!”

“Not hardly.” Manji ground his pelvis into her with a dry laugh.

“You wouldn’t really... do it *HERE*? You said it wasn’t safe — ”

He put his hand into the top of her clothing and loosened her inner robe. “I don’t care... I can’t wait. Guess I shouldn’t have waited even this long.” He exposed one of her breasts and dipped his head to take it into his mouth. His tongue felt burning hot and his damp hair left cold traces on her skin.

Rin froze in place, her chest heaving with rapid breaths. This was no joke! Manji licked her breast, suckled for a few moments and then blew on the wet nipple. Shivers went through her as it stiffened. "M-Manji-san... this isn't fair... you told me — we agreed — you can't just change the rules when you feel like it!"

"Give me a break, woman." Manji uncovered her other breast and squeezed it. "Rules?"

"Yes! You promised!" She crossed her arms and punched him in the collarbone.

He dropped her leg and removed his hand from her breasts. Then he planted his palms on either side of her head and wedged her thighs between his knees, fencing her in against the tree trunk. "Look at me, Rin-chan."

His expression wasn't soft or seductive; his eye looked glittering bright, his lips set in a thin line. She'd seen him like this in the middle of combat when battered and tiring, digging down into his deepest energies to come roaring back like a demon. "You think I'm just gonna resign? Because I kinda miscalculated a while back? Yeah, I was wrong — but I don't care." Manji grinned at her. "No man with a pair of balls between his legs would hold that against himself. After how you let me do you last night... oh, damn..." He put his nose in her hair; his sensual groan tickled her ear. "You're gonna like it even better the regular way. It might smart for a moment at first... but then it's all sweet."

Rin gazed past his head, speechless.

"You haven't tasted even half of me yet." He started to caress her bared breasts again. "Sweet, pretty, hot little lady... I'm going to give you everything I got. Everything I've wanted to give you since the first time I kissed you." He flicked his thumbs over her nipples and nuzzled under her jaw. "There — that romantic enough for ya?"

"Wh-what?" Waves of heat and cold racked her body.

"There's no way in hell... that I'm gonna believe you don't want — " Manji stroked her face, guided her mouth to his and gave her a slow, deep kiss. Rin did nothing either to prevent him or to respond, feeling as limp as a wet towel. He slightly backed off the kiss after several long moments and spoke against her lips. "After you've kept me warm so many times... and after how you've made me feel... I know how you must feel too." He raised his head and cupped her cheek in one hand to look at her. "Tell me, sweetheart. I want to hear it."

Rin stared at him, her heart weighted with iron.

A sudden smile lit up Manji's face. He looked almost boyish, brimming over with liberated expectation. "Come on, you can tell me." He softly kissed her eyelid, then her cheekbone. "I won't laugh."

She squeezed her eyes shut while the whole world revolved and lurched. Tears forced their way between her lashes and down her cheeks.

"Aw, little woman... ain't nothin' to cry about." He blotted away a tear-track with one thumb and bent down. Rin turned her head to avoid him and took deep panting breaths, fighting her dizziness. "Sweetheart?"

"Ma-Manji — *now*? You're s-saying this *now*?"

"Can you think of some other time to do it?" Manji held her chin and took her lips with his. It was all Rin could manage to keep her teeth closed against his coaxing tongue. "Aw, what's this? Open up for me, Rin-*chan*..." He bent his knees and rolled his hips, pressing his erect *henoko* into the thin silk of her underskirt and directly against the mound of her pubis.

Rin shuddered. The taste of Manji's mouth, the feel of his body, and above all, his rough, caressing voice twisted her belly with terrible longing. So easy to imagine giving in to him. Her lost maidenhead would be all his fault — he'd gladly accept the blame. And then soothe her in his arms, and kiss her tears away, and make her his again...

"Not — it won't — I *can't*! D-don't you understand? It's impossible!"

He let out a short laugh. "Impossible, huh? Watch me." He stroked her breasts and eased her collar farther down her arms, then kissed her throat. "C'mon. Please. Tell me — "

"Manji-san — if you'd asked me this yesterday... or a-a couple of weeks ago — oh, God, forgive me..." She shoved against his chest with all the force she had left and shied away as he tried to grab her thigh. "Please — please, it's all wrong — there's nothing I can tell you, not now — "

"It's all about the timing, hey? Fine, just gimme two minutes." Manji made a sharp pelvic thrust against her stomach and grinned. "After I'm good and settled in... then maybe you'll have a little more to say to me."

"No!" Rin flailed his hands away when he reached down to hoist her underskirt. "Don't touch me!"

"Oh, bullshit." He gave an impatient groan and tried to kiss her on the mouth. Rin thrashed her head from side to side and pushed on his jaw. Manji thrust a knee against her thigh and opened her legs again. "Calm down, willya? You can wiggle all you like while I'm — "

"N-no — stop! Listen to me — " She tried to catch her breath, panic stiffening her spine. If he ignored her protests just a little longer?

"Sure. Tell me the truth."

"Stop it *now!*"

He shook his head in disgust, crouched lower and yanked her skirt upwards. Rin let him uncover her to the waist and braced her thigh against his. When her legs were freed, she took a deep breath and held it. She shot the other knee up into his groin.

At the impact, Manji stopped dead. He looked startled, but nothing more. Had she missed her target? He leaned forward slightly, his eye glazing over, and in desperation Rin head-butted him in the face with a teeth-rattling crack. He let out a strangled yell, dropped to his knees, clutched his testicles and jammed his forehead to the ground.

Rin scrambled backwards and tried to pull the loosened flaps of her inner robe over her bare breasts. "Are y-you listening to me now?"

She heard nothing but violent groans as he rocked back and forth; she must have connected pretty well after all. Manji fell over and collapsed on his side, hands still cupping his male parts and his knees drawn up. His lip had split from the impact of her skull and blood was splotted on his chin. "Ohh... shiit...!"

Although she'd had no alternative, the sight of her bodyguard writhing on the ground gave Rin a terrible pang. This wasn't like stomping on his toes or clouting him over the head when they had a domestic spat. In duels he'd taken severed limbs, gut punctures, hideous wounds that made him scream in agony, but this was the first time a blow of hers had seemed to inflict even more pain than a sword.

"Manji-san!" Having rearranged her clothing, she came a little closer and crouched down. "Oh, big brother... are you OK?"

Manji opened his eye after venting a few more groans, looking sick and white by

contrast with the bright red smear on his face. "I'll... survive." He put a hand to his mouth and inspected his fingers. "Holy shit, woman, you pack a wallop."

"I'm sorry — but you said I ought to kick you there!"

"Great." He rolled to sit upright and pushed back his hair with his bloody hand, then wiped his lips and chin. "Seems like I always tell you how to hit me right where I live..."

"I didn't want to hurt you! You wouldn't believe me!"

"Believe you?" Manji gave her a hard look from under his brows, though he still looked pale and pressed a hand to his lower abdomen. "I try to give you what you've been begging for all along, and you do your best to put me out of commission? Is this a joke?"

"I'm serious." Rin backed away again. "I can't pillow with you any more. Don't kiss me. Don't even put your hands on me. It's over!"

His face went darker. "Oh, yeah?"

"Because of what I just told you — Manji, you have to understand — "

"I don't understand shit. You didn't tell me this as soon as you say you knew it? You just let me ass-fuck you instead? Why the hell — "

"I did try to tell you! Why did you tell *me* it was over and break my heart and then grab me like you wanted to eat me alive? Were YOU thinking straight either?"

Manji grimaced and looked away.

"But you were right anyway. We should have stopped this days ago. We shouldn't have started at all!"

"Should have, shouldn't have — " He got to his feet and jabbed a finger at her. "It doesn't work like that, woman. You can't just order me to keep my hands off you."

"Why can't I?"

"You're *mine* — I'm your man!" Manji thumped a fist on his chest. "As long as I'm living, I'm the only guy who touches you. Hell, I'm the only guy who *looks* at

you!"

"You don't get to decide that!"

"Wanna bet?" He locked gazes with her and gripped a sword hilt.

Rin's eyes dilated; she moved backwards and stopped against a bush. Manji stalked towards her. "I don't care who it is — I'll string his goddamn guts from the trees! Anybody who gets in my way — "

"You can't! I won't let you!"

With a couple of swift strides he came right up to her and seized her wrist. "Like you could do a damn thing to stop me?"

Her face went cold. "Oh, you're the boss now? What do you think you're going to do if I won't agree — rape me?"

He jerked in manifest shock and loosened his grip. "What the — ?"

"If you want to have your own way that badly, I guess there's nothing I *could* do about it! You won't let me take you by surprise again. You could just hold me down and — "

"How big an asshole do you think I am?" Manji let go of her wrist, but almost immediately grasped her by the shoulders. "Rin-*chan* — sweetheart — what's with you?"

"Don't start!" She struck his hands away, tears suddenly welling in her eyes again. He looked stunned, lost, even pleading. "No... stop it..."

"But... I *want* you, dammit! *Why?* Would you just tell me what the hell I've done?"

She turned away and covered her face to shut him out. Aggression and roughness she was used to, but his anguish was more than she could bear. "Please don't... don't be..."

For a brief while there was only silence between them. Rin heard nothing but the soft rustles of leaves and a scramble of small animals in the underbrush. A hawk screeched overhead; a captured bird cried and fluttered in its death throes. Her ears pounded with her heartbeat. Could Manji really have said such things to her? Really dragged her into the woods to take her? She looked up, almost wondering

if this were a dream.

Manji was leaning back against the tree he had tried to use as a support, his eye closed and his head in his hand. He breathed hard but silently, his shoulders heaving. Although she couldn't see much of his face, his posture and the way he ground his jaw told her that he was fighting for control. Against a greater outburst? She looked around the little clearing for an escape.

Manji uncovered his face and met her gaze. He looked pale, his voice unsteady.

"Look... I'm sorry I tried to manhandle you. I got a little carried away. But you can't be serious."

"I... I'm sorry too..."

"Rin, this is fucked up beyond all imagination. You want it so bad you make me crazy, and now you say I'd have to force you? Because you're saving yourself for... that son of a bitch?" His voice cracked. "This just ain't possible."

"I'm sorry..." She shook her head over and over and looked at the ground. "I'm sorry..."

"Why the hell are you payin' any attention to what that broad says? That nutty whore? You don't know the half of it where she's concerned."

"But... I think she was telling the truth..."

"You'd actually marry that guy if he asked? The guy you wanted to kill with your own little hands? Why the hell is he even alive?"

Rin pressed the back of her hand to her face. "I told you he was helpless — "

"You think he gives a shit about *helpless*? A guy who sicced those bastards on your mother? Since you want to talk about rape."

She stared at him with her mouth open.

Manji set his teeth on edge and made a harsh gesture. "At least your daddy died with a sword in his hand. He went out like a samurai. Your mama was samurai too, and it's nobody but that guy's fault she didn't get to die the same way. You'd climb in the pillow with *him*?" His voice grew louder; fury surged in his expression. "You'd spread your legs and let him do what I've done — hell, give it all to him and get big with his spew? What the fuck is goin' on here?"

“Manji!”

“Grandchildren? Your family blood? Like hell!”

“That’s what Makie — ”

“Honor, bullshit. That guy’s a sneaky little weasel first and last — he’s no samurai. Skulking around behind my back like a thief — you saw him there at the inn. Didn’t you?”

“No...” Rin felt her face change color; Manji’s eye narrowed. “I didn’t talk to him!”

Manji let out a warning growl. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m — n-not lying!”

“Then what’s with this frickin’ fairy tale? You gussied up that little idea of mine and served it back to me? What did those two really have to say to you?”

“I told you! I mean... Anotsu wasn’t there, but M-Makie — ”

Manji’s chest expanded with an aggressive breath. He stared at her in open accusation; Rin realized with a deep shiver that concealing even the smallest part of the truth from him had been a serious mistake.

“Uh... I... might have seen Anotsu... in the garden... I didn’t see his face. There was someone all wrapped up like an invalid — ”

“Oh, now you did see him.” He sneered at her.

“I’m not sure if I d-did or not!”

“What else are you not sure about? I’ll get to the bottom of this, woman. You know I will.”

“But I — ”

“Tell me the truth. *Now*. Why would you think you’ve got to blow me off for Anotsu Kagehisa?”

“Because of my parents — ”

"Your parents?" He pushed himself away from the tree. "You were all on fire when you came to me. You'd have done anything to see him dead. *Anything*, remember?"

"Yes..." Her fingers sought out the flame design on her sleeve.

"You sure surprised the hell out of me. Sweet little virgin like you." Manji looked her up and down. "I thought you'd run away bawling and let me fish in peace. But nope, it didn't take you ten seconds to start whippin' the clothes off, even for a scumbag like me. 'Cause it was all to nail the guy who killed Dad and Mom."

Rin flushed; the reprimand he'd given her still seemed to burn on her cheek. "Yes, it was!"

Manji grinned out of the side of his mouth. "Yep, no hesitation. Never a doubt... until the first time you ran into him in the forest."

She flushed deeper and looked down.

"You never told me much about that, y'know. Didn't tell me at all for days."

"I'm sorry... it was hard even to think about..."

"Yeah? I couldn't figure out what was going on with you. Moping around, sneakin' out to cry at night so I wouldn't hear — " Manji took a hard swallow and his cheek twitched; something unsettling had crossed his mind. His voice lost some of its harshness. "OK, tell me what happened. All of it."

"Um... A-Anotsu... told me why he was killing off the sword schools, and that I wasn't really one of them because I used a weapon the Mutenichi-ryū would have forbidden. That's really all he — "

"You mean your little knives? You tried to stick him with those, huh? Probably just made him mad."

"Yes, I tried to kill him by myself — which I realize was, uh, kind of stupid — "

"Yep, I can see it now — wasted all your ammo, panicked and tried to book it out of there." Manji raised a brow and Rin grimaced in confirmation. "So then... he must have got his hands on you. If you listened to him long enough for him to explain all that, he had you pinned somehow."

"Uh..." He had knocked her down with the blunt end of his axe and secured her to a post, and she had demanded to know if he meant to rape her. A shiver went through her. Manji couldn't be thinking —

"No, you couldn't have gotten away from a *kengo* like Anotsu once you showed yourself. Did he figure out who you were, or did you tell him?"

"He recognized me..."

"More'n two years after the fact? Now ain't that interesting."

Rin had no answer.

"So Anotsu's got you down and disarmed. He knows you're the daughter of Asano Takayoshi." Manji pointed at her. "He knows you want to kill him to avenge your parents, and you've just tried to do it. I know what most *kenshi* would have done with a girl like you. He didn't kill you or slice your nose and ears off." He rubbed the long white scar on his own nose. "So what *did* he do?"

Rin stared at him, aghast.

"And then... he let you go. 'Cause he was thinking you might make him a good wife in another year or two?" Manji gave a cynical laugh, but he seemed to be trying to cover another emotion. "Yeah, right! Bullshit from beginning to end."

"But it's exactly the sort of thing he would believe was — "

"Would he? What's this guy like, huh?"

"He's honorable! Makie said he would never be harsh to me, and he was kind and gave me water — "

"And he's a goddamn pretty son of a whore to boot. Right?" Manji showed his teeth.

She clapped her hands to her mouth, trembling all over. She'd walked straight into that one...

"Talk to me, Rin." Manji's voice was low and barely steady.

"There's nothing more to tell!"

"You sure about that? Like not seeing him at the inn? Just a little detail that

might've slipped your mind?"

"Wh-what d-do you mean?"

Manji kept his expression locked into a cynical smile, but his features quivered. "Like maybe... he let you go alive... because he figured busting a virgin was enough fun for one day."

Rin's chest swelled with indignation and she threw up her chin. "I would have bitten off my tongue and choked to death first!"

"That's a lot harder than you think it is, kid. If he decided to teach you a lesson..." His lips curled back from his teeth again and he spoke with aching sarcasm. "There wouldn't have been a damn thing you could do."

She stumbled away from him and seized a tree branch for support, hyperventilating. He had guessed the truth, in a way — anyone other than Anotsu Kagehisa would almost certainly have done exactly what Manji suggested now. She'd escaped violation and a cruel death only because of her enemy's honorable restraint...

"Can't trust a woman to stick to a purpose, can ya? Not even what she swears up and down is the most important thing in her life. There she is, second-guessing everything in sight and gettin' lost in the woods... so to speak."

Rin covered her eyes. She tried to push away the image of that smooth, narrow-eyed face. It haunted her like a living ghost, never to be exorcised, not by time nor death. Not even flying to refuge in the arms of her beloved protector could let her permanently escape the long shadow of her enemy.

How many people vainly longed for Anotsu's cool beauty alone? Who didn't even know his grace and strange nobility? She'd never wanted to know those at all...

Manji was silent for a few moments while Rin shook and heaved. He was wrong — she wasn't lying about Makie's message — Anotsu had never touched her. Manji was striking at phantoms. He was only being jealous and bull-headed. Stupid! Everything he thought about this was totally wrong! She startled at the gravelly sound of his voice.

"Yeah... she's still so hung up on the son of a bitch that she's gotta follow him to the ends of the earth... she just don't want him dead any more. Like there's unfinished business between 'em. Something she's got to *talk* to him about. Am I

gettin' warmer?"

"No...!"

"She's not getting big with a brat... yet. So maybe... she's decided she's got to marry the guy who took it — so she can have her goddamn *honor* back." Manji drew a deep breath. "Did that bastard have you, Rin?" Rin opened her mouth to deny it, but he didn't wait for an answer. "Did he even need to hold you down for very long?"

"STOP SAYING THAT!" Rin whirled on him. "You... you *horny jerk*! You just want to be the first one, don't you? Men pay a lot of money for — "

Manji's jaw muscles bulged. "Listen to me, you little cunt — if somebody else had already broken you in, I wouldn't be having this problem!"

Rin gasped.

"Fine, don't tell me what he's done. Don't tell me anything at all." He thrust his fingers into his hair and moved away from her. "Guess this is only what I deserve... for trying not to be a complete asshole!"

"But... oh, Manji-san, I'm sorry, I know you're not like that — "

"I should've pronged you the first chance I got." He gave her a strange, painful glare from under his clenched hand. "Yeah, you'd have hated my guts... for a little while, anyway. Funny how a woman can turn that around into... something else."

Rin reached out to him. "I do hate Anotsu! I don't want him at all — I want — "

"Me?" His mouth contorted. "The guy you just told to get lost and never touch you again? I think I can figure out right where I stand." She tried to embrace him and he flung her off. "Keep yer hands to yourself!"

Rin began to cry. "Big brother... please..."

"Don't call me that."

"Wh-what?"

"I ain't your brother." He gave a shattering laugh that sounded as if it hurt his throat. "Hell no, I'm not!"

“But — ”

Manji’s head tilted back; he looked at the bright autumn sky through the leaves as if it were black midnight. “I had a sister. She’s dead.”

Stricken, Rin stood still. Manji turned away from her and strode into the trees. The thick underbrush closed behind him; he vanished from her sight as completely as if he’d plunged into deep water.

PART THIRTY-ONE

“Shoo! Shoo!”

Rin picked up a stick and hurled it at the crows robbing her shoulder bag. They rose into the air with hoarse croaks and a rattle of black wings. Still squabbling over the remains of the rice balls she had packed for the journey, they settled down again a little distance away. Rin scooped up the bag and retrieved several other items the birds had scattered. A tear splashed on the ground as she leaned over to pick up her comb. She swiped her sore and stinging eyes with her sleeve. It was time to stop crying.

Perhaps most of an hour had passed since Manji had left her in the woods. She couldn't lie on the ground and blubber until dark — she needed to think about what she was going to do. Rin cast a look around at the spring and the boulders, her vision wavering. Her head ached from weeping. She wiped her eyes again and put her face in her hands.

“Why did you have to be so awful about this? Why couldn't you understand how I feel?” She cried out loud, but barely startled the quarreling crows. “Makie was right about how men are, wasn't she — and so were *you!*” Rin clenched her fists and pounded them in the air. “*Trust* you? You weren't worried even a little bit about making me pregnant, you jerk! When I find you, I'll — ”

She choked on that thought. If her bodyguard had meant to return any time soon, he would have been here already. He might have meant to abandon her for good.

Rin raised her head and pulled in a cold, trembling breath. A terrible payback, the worst she could have imagined. Never see him again? Ever? Her legs wobbled; she bent and braced a hand on a boulder. She took deep sobbing gulps through a burning sensation in her chest. Maybe he'd been angry enough for that. But Manji's eruptions didn't always last very long. He'd cool down eventually and reconsider... wouldn't he?

This hadn't been one of their ordinary arguments or upsets, to put it mildly.

Rin sank down to sit and put her head on her knees. She bit her lips hard to ward off another crying fit. Without her tagging along at his side, Manji would keep up a much faster pace on the road. He might go twenty *ri* on that big a load of

rage and disappointment...

In which direction? For home? Getting drunk or finding a brothel might be higher on his list right now, so he could have doubled back to the last village or gone off on a side road.

However, she was still carrying all his money, whether he had remembered that or not. Rin burst out in hysterical giggles. Poor Manji!

She calmed herself with an effort, got up and splashed her hot, tear-stained face in the spring. Wandering around looking for him made no sense; she would only lose her direction. If Manji wanted to find her again, he'd find her; she'd do nothing to avoid him. Perhaps he was waiting for her right now around the next bend in the road, tapping his foot and grumbling at the delay.

That thought lent her a little focus. She stuffed her braids into her bun cover to keep them off her sweaty neck, settled the strap of her bag on her shoulder and took the short path out to the road again.

A brush-cutter ambled past with a huge load of sticks on his bent back, but Rin saw no one else in any direction. The road ran straight up a slight hill and vanished over the crest several *cho* distant, utterly empty.

"Excuse me, please..."

The brush-cutter halted and looked up from under his burden. "Fine afternoon, missy."

"Yes... um, I'm sorry to bother you, but could you tell me if you've passed someone on the road? A samurai with one eye? He was wearing a black and white *kôsode*..."

The brush-cutter raised his brows. "Yer dad, is he?"

"Um, no... he's not thirty yet. He's my, uh, *yōjimbō*."

"No kiddin'?" He looked left and right with a skeptical air, as if he couldn't imagine what dire threat had inspired her to hire protection. "What's he doin' walkin' around without ye, then?"

Rin flushed very hot and looked down. "Have you seen him, please?"

"No, missy, I ain't." The brush-cutter slowly shook his head. "But I been workin'

a ways back in the woods, y’see, so I wouldn’t have seen nobody on the road anyhow. Skipped off with yer valuables, has he? Look up the magistrate in Kana village and swear out a complaint.” The brush-cutter nodded back along the way she and Manji had come. “I’m headin’ that way myself, so yer welcome to tag along.”

“Oh — no, that’s all right! He didn’t take anything from — uh... we just got, um... separated.”

“A growed man that gets lost that easy?” The brush-cutter chuckled. “Sounds like he ain’t worth what yer payin’ him, missy.”

“I... um — thank you very much for the information. I’m so sorry to have interrupted your work.” She gave him a quick bow and turned to walk up the road.

She’d traveled many *ri* without a companion before. If Manji thought he could scare her by disappearing for a while, he had another think coming. Rin tried to work up a little righteous indignation, but dropped her shoulders and sighed. Manji wasn’t like that. He might tease her sometimes, but he didn’t play spiteful tricks.

Rin sniffled and wiped her nose. No, she hadn’t paid much attention to Manji’s struggles while she blundered a wide and careless track through his intentions. He’d tried to break off again and again, and each time he came back to her with redoubled passion. For all his experience, in some ways Manji seemed as ignorant as a child. Rin looked up at the sky, where a few wisps of cloud drifted now. How strange that he had revealed such longings to her; he must hardly have known that he could feel them at all. It couldn’t be her doing. She had only disturbed his surface composure. It was Manji himself who had stirred up this mystery from the depths...

For a couple of hours Rin plodded doggedly along in the dust, her mood volatile and her stomach growling. The crows hadn’t spared anything edible from her bag. She stopped at a farmhouse to buy something for a late lunch and ask directions, and the farmwife told her that the road forked in another half *ri*. The right-hand way would meet the main highway into Edo itself, and the left-hand way would put her on the road to the village near Manji’s hut. Had she seen a one-eyed samurai? No, she hadn’t. Rin thanked her and went on.

No one she asked remembered noticing Manji, though there weren’t many travelers at this time of day on this lonely stretch of road. With his scars and intimidating air he stood out even in a crowd. Had he come this way at all? It

occurred to Rin that he might have kept walking through the dense forest instead of taking the beaten track, but why make it so hard on himself?

To make doubly sure he wouldn't meet her, of course — and he might have preferred to shield his emotions from public view. Rin gulped hard and stopped in the road for a moment, her sore eyes burning. How could a little fool like her have done this to him?

Then perhaps he didn't mean to return home for a while, in case she followed him there. Maybe she should take the Edo road to her family's *dōjō* compound in town. Ghost-ridden, echoing, and every squeak of the floorboards called up bad memories, but at least it was hers...

At the fork she halted to survey the diverging ways. After the right-hand road curved away from higher ground on the left, rice paddies filled the low marshland on both sides for as far as Rin could see. Only a few scraggly pine trees protected travelers from the hot sun, and the mosquitoes probably buzzed thickly down there. She waved away whining insects that congregated around her head.

The left-hand road ran up a wooded slope and looked dim and shady. A more comfortable walk, though also less safe — bandits might use the dark forest for cover even in daylight. None of these considerations could make her decision for her: only her ultimate goal. Different houses at the end of each journey.

Rin looked up at the wooded path to the left.

Return to the hut? Sweep the dirt floor and tidy the straw pile and watch with anxious patience for the master of the house to arrive. Run out to greet him, kneel and touch her forehead to the ground. Beg Manji-san for his forgiveness and offer to prove her sincerity in any way he asked.

She couldn't imagine that he'd hold out against his own desires for more than a day or two, though it might take much longer than that for him to forget *this* day. Such a blow to a samurai's pride had to be revenged somehow, even on a woman.

Only his woman now. Her *danna* would possess her every time he felt like it, and every time she took the weight of his body on hers and surrendered to his kisses, she'd realize that she had done this to herself.

Rin shuddered and clamped her lips together. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and turned to the right and the Edo road. For a moment after her lids

opened the bright sun on the white dust dazzled her.

Then make a clean break instead. Forget about him and hope he could forget about her?

She'd never forget Manji. Not even if another man came to her and respectfully begged for her consideration...

His power over her was already vast, because ever since that night he'd been her reason for living. He was subtle, clever, forceful; once she had allowed him to approach and make his suit, surrendering to him might soon seem almost natural. Never to grasp quite how the unimaginable had taken form beside her in the darkness...

Rin shook and gripped her roiling belly.

Endless days and uneasy nights in that man's company, the immediate fear of death pursuing them both like a spear at their backs. His wrist locked in her grip to keep his arm slung over her shoulder, his slight hard body a dragging weight on her strength. Watching him fight his illness hand to hand and prevail far longer than she had believed possible, wondering why she admired that hopeless fortitude. Hatred and confused fascination and contempt for her own weakness: his clear pale features outlined in gray morning light like an engraving in ivory. She'd kicked him in the face, hard —

These were her only alternatives? That couldn't be true — it wasn't fair. Life couldn't be like that! One man's bed or the other, and nothing in between? Nothing for herself?

Who did she think she was? What girl could choose between husbands, or even decide for herself whether or not to marry? Even though her parents were dead, the choices they would have made for her should be much more important than her own...whatever any of those really were or would have been.

Rin moaned out loud and held her hands over her ears. She couldn't bear this. Imagining the worst of all possible futures and fretting herself into a state wouldn't solve anything — think of something else for a while! Think of comfort...

Rin felt dim and unsteady under a crushing weight.

"I love you." She repeated it several times in a gradually strengthening whisper. "That's what you wanted me to say to you, wasn't it? I tried to tell you before

and you didn't want to listen. When did you know... that you wished you could hear it again?"

She closed her burning eyes. She felt Manji's presence so clearly that he might have been watching her at that moment. In her imagination he struck a familiar stance: weight on one leg, arms folded, head tilted back. Looking down at her with a quirk to his brow, as if he'd just asked her a question and expected a reply...

Rin held out her hands and smiled. A connection seemed to touch her, if only from the vision. Her Manji wasn't the bitter stranger who'd turned his back on her. This was her dear friend and companion. This was how she'd think of him forever after. She gave a tender snuffle. In her lonely, yearning dreams she'd think of him, tossing and turning in some cold moonlit room far from her lost and lamented lover... well, almost-lover... it had always been difficult to pin down exactly what he was to her. A single tear bedewed Rin's cheek and she clasped her hands to her heart.

"Manji-san, I love you so much. I always have. Don't you know that? Sharing your pillow wasn't why I love you, even though you made that so wonderful for me. You're my big brother and my *yōjimbō* and my *sensei* and... and I guess trying to teach me made you think you'd learned something too. I wonder what you would have said to me..."

The weight seemed to lift a little; she could breathe more easily now. A confession she wasn't free to make, but she'd released it into the air like an exorcised spirit. Her sight cleared. Rin drew herself up straight; she looked between the two ways once more, tried to swallow the lump in her throat and started down the right-hand fork towards Edo.

She'd just reached the flat where the road divided the rice paddies when a movement flickered at the periphery of her vision. She turned her head to look at the trees. Halfway up the slope, just abreast of her. Something neither wholly light nor dark. At a point high in a sturdy oak, it seemed to drop about a man's height from one branch to another and slip behind the trunk. When she shaded her eyes and looked harder, she could see nothing but the quivering branch, which quickly stilled. She creased her forehead — probably just an animal.

What kind of animal? Squirrels couldn't shake stout branches, and monkeys always moved around in noisy groups, not as stealthy loners.

The warning note suddenly came to mind. Lying in wait?

Rin gripped the scabbard of her sword and tested the seal of the blade to the mouth. If attackers lurked in the woods that lay between the roads, they'd have a good view in both directions and could move to intercept a traveler who went either way.

Then she'd better stay on the open road where she could see them coming, shouldn't she? Or resort to the forest where she'd be able to hide from them herself? Rin made an uneasy face and looked all around her as she walked. If only Manji had been here!

Manji...?

Some unexplainable intuition slowed her steps. She glanced at the silent slope again and decided to backtrack to the fork. In a few more minutes she was climbing the left-hand way and passing under the trees.

When she had reached the first bend in the road, she caught a glimpse of the watcher.

He emerged from under the dark eaves of the forest at the very top of the slope, as if he had been following the ridgeline to reach the road. The bright sky behind him flattened him to a silhouette and he was far enough away to be out of earshot. He moved quickly down the other side of the hill, but before he vanished Rin spotted twin swords and a spiky topknot.

Warmth and chill surged together in her breast. She involuntarily quickened her pace. It *was* Manji! Manji had stopped here and kept a lookout to see which way she would go! He was only a few minutes ahead of her now.

But he hadn't waited for her to catch up, even though he must have chosen his road based on her decision. Then he still meant to avoid her company for a while?

When she gained the top of the first slope, there he was again, just reaching the crest of the next hill. His black and white clothing was plain when he passed through a sunlit spot, though she couldn't quite make out the *manji* on his back. Rin paused while he disappeared once more. He wasn't watching for her; he never slowed down nor looked back.

They walked in this peculiar separate fashion for at least an hour, Manji staying well out of hailing distance. Rin had few sustained glimpses of him on this hilly and winding track.

As the afternoon wore on, Manji's pace slacked off and she saw him more often

at slightly closer hand. He walked with a stiff hunch in his shoulders, his head down. In the shadiest parts of the road, the larger trees inclined towards each other and interlaced their branches in dark vaults pierced here and there by sunlight. Their great twisting roots invaded the path from the sides, half concealed under heaps of fallen leaves and pine needles. Manji apparently wasn't paying much attention to where his feet were going, since he blundered into the roots more than once. When he tripped and recovered she could almost hear him swear.

At one particularly violent toe-stubbing, Manji stopped and grabbed his injured foot. After a moment he dropped it, straightened and folded his arms. He tilted his face up and down again, then pressed a hand to his forehead. He might have been trying to quench an unexpected flare of emotion or memory.

Rin advanced on him, her heart rising a little as she drew nearer. Did he mean to let her walk with him now? Talk to him again, explain, apologize, reconcile?

Manji shook himself and started moving again after a minute or two. He didn't really look like he was anticipating conversation, at least from the back. His gait had a miserable, footsore quality; dust puffed up from his dragging sandals. He raised a hand and gripped the back of his neck as if it ached, then let his arm fall and dangle at his side again. Even without knowing what had happened, she could have read every aspect of his mood. But she'd never seen him look so aimless. As if he had no destination in mind even though he was pointed for home. No one waiting for his return...

With a surge of sympathy Rin realized that Manji was probably very hungry on top of it all, which never improved his disposition. She had wrapped up half of the food she'd bought at the farmhouse, thinking she would eat it later. Surely Manji would accept the offer of a meal. Then she might sit with him while he ate and fetch him some water and ask if she could rub his tired feet...

Somehow could she soothe away just a little of the pain she'd caused? This was all her fault and she'd gladly tell him so. Why had she been so willing to believe he was impervious? Even though Manji had refused to admit that he should guard himself as least as much as he tried to guard her, she had already dimly guessed what he risked.

Rin walked faster, longing to meet him but with her heart palpitating. Her sandal struck a stone in the road and it bounced into another. Manji turned his head at the sound. She was close enough now to see his expression clearly.

Both of them halted. Rin clutched her hands over her fluttering stomach. Manji

shook as if he'd suffered a blow to the chest. He gaped at her in surprise and almost-fear. As if he saw not a young woman he knew, but a malicious fox-spirit in female shape.

He'd had no idea she was following him. Rin felt sick. How stupid could she have been? He'd seen her take the road towards town at first, and so had chosen the other route. He'd meant to take his final leave of her. No wonder he'd never looked back.

They stared at each other for a few tense seconds. Unguarded, Manji's expression contorted as if he held back a groan of pain. He closed his eye and gritted his teeth. After several moments he clamped his lips together, took a deep breath and looked straight at her with studied coldness. He seemed determined to discipline himself, somehow freeze out her influence until the sight of her was as indifferent to him as that of any other object in the road. Still, that look was clearly meant for her and he wanted to see her reaction; if he convinced her that he could extinguish all his warmth for her, perhaps he could convince himself as well.

Rin's throat felt so tight she couldn't speak; she sent him a longing, plaintive look, reached out her hands and moved towards him.

Manji's brows went down. He rolled his shoulders, showed her an ugly scowl and made a jerk of the chin, obviously meant to warn her off. She took a few more steps and with a glare even more savage he abruptly raised an open hand; if she came much closer he would strike her. Rin stopped where she was, her heart pounding. Manji grimaced and tried to recompose his features, but calm utterly eluded him now. He squeezed his eye shut with an expression of helpless frustration, turned and stalked away.

Rin began to sob out loud. In a few moments she felt a shiver that stopped her tears. Where could she go now?

She put her knuckles to her mouth. She couldn't double back to the fork and try to get to town this late in the afternoon. Dusk would find her unprotected on an unfamiliar road. She'd been very lucky to lose only her cash on her journey to Kaga; there were far greater numbers of bandits and other unscrupulous armed men in the countryside around Edo than on the less-traveled mountain byways. Hadn't Manji always warned her about them?

"M-Manji-san..." He was still in earshot if she called out. "I — I have your money in my bag — don't you want — "

He made a gesture like swatting an annoying insect and kept going.

“Manji-san! Let me just follow behind you until — please, I’m frightened out here all by myself!”

Manji’s shoulders tensed and his head half turned. Then he grabbed the back of his neck again and retreated even faster.

He didn’t care. Rin’s mouth dropped open. Her bodyguard had quit his job for good; to hell with his duty and with her. If she disappeared into these dark woods he’d count it for nothing — he’d already consigned her to the demons.

And for what? Because she wouldn’t submit to his dictatorship? As long as he’d assumed he could eventually claim what he wanted, he’d been willing to put up with female annoyances and restrain his lust for a while. She wasn’t worth the trouble to him now. He’d shown exactly what kind of reward he expected for protecting her.

Rin angrily wiped her wet face with the back of her arm. So now Manji would go home by himself, the way he liked it. He’d smoke his stinky pipe whenever he could scrounge a pinch of stale tobacco, and waste the whole day fishing and snoozing behind his dirty shack, and eat those nauseating grilled frogs that he always managed to burn, and find bugs and mice nesting in the bedding and neglect the sweeping up anyway, and never, ever take another bath as long as he lived, even if it were a thousand years. Fine. Let him! She didn’t need his help and she didn’t need him. If he was going to be like this because she insisted on holding him to his promises, then he’d revealed the true lowness of his character!

“You are such a creep!” she shouted, hoping Manji could still hear. “It’s a good thing I never had any brothers, if they would have been anything like you! Jerk! Dirty-minded old grouch — I’m glad it hurt when I kicked you and I’d do it again! Damn you!”

Rin slumped and gave a dejected snuffle. She felt no better for venting.

To her disgust, she now had no choice. For safety’s sake, she’d have to stay on this path until she reached a place she knew. She’d stop well short of Manji’s hut and find some hidden spot to sleep tonight, like her cozy nook among the high-rooted pines. She gulped — no, not that one, but some place like it. It didn’t look like rain, but she could improvise a shelter if the weather grew wet. She would only have to camp there until morning, and then she could head into town. She’d turn her back on that place forever.

Manji hadn't quite advanced out of sight yet. She clenched her jaw and walked defiantly fast, though she hadn't had a rest in hours and her legs ached. This was ridiculous — how dare he treat her like a leper? Maybe she'd made mistakes, but only because she hadn't learned any better. Manji was the one who had claimed he could handle the situation, and then gotten them in so deep even though he kept reversing direction. The big idiot! Especially after how he'd behaved today, how could he throw all the blame on her? She was going to catch up to him again, and this time she wouldn't let him intimidate her by making faces. He was going to get a well-pointed piece of her mind!

Rehearsing his dressing-down with energy, Rin managed to shake off most of her fatigue, but Manji was moving very rapidly indeed; he drew ahead and steadily widened the gap between them. Within a quarter of an hour she lost sight of him again except from the hills. This was a long straight stretch over a series of low ridges, and he was a small figure far ahead on the flat when she reached a higher point. He didn't look back.

Breathing hard and muttering creative insults to herself, Rin at first didn't pay much attention to a peculiar smell that mingled with the scents of dust and pine. Its unpleasant quality echoed her state of mind; she might almost have conjured it herself. Then a sudden strong waft in the face made her cough; she slowed her steps, raised her head and looked around.

Sharp, chemical, incendiary. The slow match of a *teppo* musket. Was someone hunting out here? She hadn't seen pheasants in these woods —

A deafening roar staggered her. Rin screamed and clapped her hands to her ears. The surface of the road a few strides ahead erupted like a small volcano and dirt showered her clothes. In the thundering echoes of the gunshot she heard a loud voice.

"Stop right there, girl!"

Rin bolted and ran without an instant's hesitation. A matchlock took a long time to reload, and bandits probably had only one gun between them. Curses and yells exploded from the trees on each side of the road.

"Shit! She don't scare so easy — "

"Idiot! Grab her quick — he's heard the shot!"

Someone swung down from a high branch and tumbled into the road behind Rin. He scrambled up and pursued her, closely followed by another man who burst

from the bushes opposite him. Rin had a start on them and a downslope to help her speed, but another little hill rose in front of her. Gasping, she fled up to the crest and spotted Manji again.

He had turned his head in the direction of the gun's report and slowed down, though he hadn't come to a full stop yet. When he saw her running so hard he jerked and moved his arms away from his sides. The bandits topped the rise in pursuit.

Manji nearly took flight. He acted too quickly for Rin to see much more than a blur of black and white, but he seemed to kick off backwards and lunge around in mid-air to reverse his heading. He landed with a skidding spray of gravel, sprang forward and sprinted back down the road towards her.

The bandits pounded up right behind Rin. One grabbed at the flying sleeve of her *furisōde*. Rin flailed her arms and the silk slipped through his fingers. He overextended and stumbled, tripping up the other man before they could avoid each other. She gained a little distance, but in a moment they recovered and chased after her again. She didn't have a prayer of surpassing their speed —

Manji covered the ground like a war horse at full gallop; she'd never seen him move so fast. It was no good — he was much too far away. The bandits would reach her long before he could. Rin saw a steely flash of reflected sunlight arc across Manji's torso; he had swung out a blade as he ran.

A hand seized her elbow. The bandit yanked her hard against his chest. All the air expelled from her lungs and her shrieks broke off into struggles for breath. Her vision shattered into whirling black and bright spots. A ghost of Manji's voice reached her ears, growing louder with every passing instant; he was howling like a wounded animal. As if he'd lost a limb...

Another arm whipped around her waist and swung her off her feet. The second man seized her flailing legs and pinned them under his arms.

"Fuck it, he's gonna dice us into snakebait! Move your ass!" He ran for the forest with the first man jogging in the rear, Rin suspended and jolting between them.

Though she fought and thrashed in their unyielding grip, the bandits bore her away into the darkness under the trees.

PART THIRTY-TWO

Crashing, scratching, clawing — branches slapped Rin in the face and whipped her arms and legs. She still couldn't get a deep breath. Her chest hurt and her vision scattered. Her captors scrambled through the forest for some distance, then dove into the underbrush and crawled rapidly along the dank forest floor.

They took a zigzagging path around trees and the trunks of shrubs until Rin lost all sense of direction. Half dragging, half pushing her, thorns tearing at her hair and clothing. Even when she could focus, she could make out almost nothing in the weird greenish shadows. In her half-conscious state this was like a nightmare that wouldn't end. Pain and darkness were the road, and at its destination —

After what seemed an eternity of torment, Rin wheezed and finally filled her lungs all the way. She gasped and breathed, awareness flooding her like cold water. Her first clear thought was of Manji.

Following? Where? How far had her captors taken her, and in what direction? Was Manji all right? Had someone reloaded that gun? She got out one shaky cry before a sweaty hand clamped over her lower face and cut off her voice.

She smelled rank body odor and heard heavy breathing. The bandits kept down, moving branches out of the way rather than breaking them and squirming along on their bellies like snakes. In a more open spot, they jumped to their feet and ran with her.

Her power of movement seemed to revive in the sunlight. Rin kicked and bit down on the hand that gagged her. The bandit's flesh tasted salty and foul, but she kept her jaws together and tried to force the points of her teeth into his skin.

"Crap, girlie, knock that off!" He twisted his arm at the elbow and pressed the heel of his hand into her chin.

"Keep it shut, idiot!" the other hissed low.

"Ah, he's lost the trail — " Rin heard shouts somewhere off to the left and not very near. "There, see?"

"You better fucking hope he has, because if he catches up, you can take him first." The bandit in the lead dropped Rin's legs when they came to another thick wall of brush. "I'll make way — you bring her along."

Rin flailed and threw her head from side to side, still biting at the hand. "Man, you're not the one she's gnawin' on — hey, there ain't no call for that!" The bandit flinched and the taste of blood entered her mouth. Rin freed her head for a moment and shrieked again.

"Manji-san! Manji-san!" She heard an answering call just before the bandit stuffed the end of his scarf into her mouth and clamped his hand over her face again.

Again they crawled under the bushes, the lead man's tall, broad body forcing a tunnel through which the other could drag her. Rin squeezed her eyes shut to protect them, though her captor seemed to be trying to shield her head and deflect the stabbing twigs from her face. Over the two men's panting and her own pounding heartbeat, she detected a call again, much nearer now.

"Goddammit — *Rin!*" A blade whined through the air and ripped the brush; Manji was hacking a shortcut towards her. "Sing out, dammit!"

The dirty scarf stuck to her tongue and made her choke; she couldn't get out a sound, but she dragged her feet and clutched at branches. Struggling, she impeded the bandits' progress as much as she could. They cursed and pulled at her. She managed to slow them down, but her strength was giving out — she couldn't keep this up long. Something tore off her bun cover and let her braids spill free.

Behind them and rapidly closing the distance, Manji crashed down the undergrowth with his blade chopping him a path. Rin heard him grunting as he swung. He wasn't far behind them now.

"Aw, shit — we ain't gonna make it!" said her captor.

"Nope, we ain't." They broke through into another open area, wide and grassy but shadowed by tall trees. "Gimme her and draw!"

The lead man grabbed Rin and half carried her to a stand of thick-trunked oaks. The gag fell from her mouth and she tried to moisten her dry throat.

The bandit pushed her against a tree and yanked a length of cord from around his waist. Rin gained her voice and screamed, but he made no move to silence

her now. Instead he pulled her hands in front of her, lapped the cord around her wrists and swiftly knotted it. The other end of the cord he used to lash her to the tree, reaching around the back of the trunk and catching a few large looping hitches over her arms and torso. His hands moved in a blur, but he secured her bonds without making them cruelly tight. Something about his face struck her oddly, but she had no time to register what it was.

The second man drew two swords, faced around and moved back across the clearing. Manji burst from the bushes with the swing of a *shido*. Locks of loosened hair fell over his face and his clothes had been yanked askew in every direction. Shredded leaves flew as he drew his *katana* and charged with a yell.

A few strides into the clearing, he met the bandit. Manji's weapons crashed into his opponent's crossed swords with an air-shocking impact. The man took two backward steps and whipped out with a kick to Manji's knee. Manji took the shot and staggered, but didn't fall; he recovered his balance and pressed the attack again with fierce blows. The bandit parried and sidestepped.

The lead man pulled out a chain that hung around his neck and blew a couple of piercing blasts on a brass whistle. Rin paid little attention to him, her eyes fixed on the duel.

The two men circled and made sudden sideways lunges, the bandit always heading Manji away from Rin. Manji's chest heaved with deep pants and his expression looked wild. He seemed to fight on instinct, swinging with furious strength and not much finesse. His face was distorted almost to unrecognizability, but to Rin he was the most wonderful sight in the world. He was defending her — he had run to her rescue without a thought — everything was all right again!

His stringy, agile opponent moved in a sinuous flicker, dodging Manji's lashing blades, then darting closer in another attempt to trip him. Under his skimpy clothing, a tattooed design of flames and giant snakes crawled along the bandit's arms and back. The pictures rippled over his muscles, giving an eerie impression of life.

"Hebi-kun!" The leader opened his jacket and pulled a sheaf of folded lines from his belt. "Stand off! I'm ready."

The tattooed man began to reply, then hissed in pain. The tip of Manji's long sword arced off his shoulder; blood streamed from a half-circle cut and spiraled down his arm. He deflected another slash and scrambled away.

“Shit, dude, chill out!” he protested. “We ain’t here to — ”

“Shut it, dipshit!” The leader stepped away from the bound Rin and circled to the left. “Now get outta my way!”

He raised one hand, the lines dangling from it, and Rin noticed that small round weights were knotted into the ends. Hebi skipped aside. Now the bandits flanked Rin; Manji had an opening. He dashed straight for her.

The leader spun his arm and let the lines and weights fly. Rin wondered what he could be doing — that thing wasn’t any sort of weapon, was it? Then the whirling tangle intercepted Manji at the knees; the weights whipped around and around of their own momentum and tightened the lines.

Manji crashed headfirst into the ground, his legs trussed from hips to ankles. Sword and *shido* flew from his grip and bounced out of his reach. He skidded a little way on his face and lay limp and groaning, obviously stunned.

In an instant the big leader followed up his snare. Rin screamed when he knelt on Manji’s shoulders and reached into his jacket again. Was he going to draw a knife and slash his throat? The man took out yet another cord and pulled Manji’s right arm behind him.

Manji’s hooked knife appeared in his left hand. He twisted, partly dislodging the bandit, and stabbed backwards. The straight point of the knife dug into the bandit’s thigh, ripping his leggings and scoring his hairy flesh.

Manji yanked the blade free and sliced upwards. The bandit dropped the cord and rolled off him. The strike missed, but Manji flipped himself over and sat upright. He slashed at the lines binding his legs and kicked free.

“Damn it!” The leader stumbled and clutched his bloodied leg.

His long braid fell over his shoulder when he bent forward. Rin suddenly noticed that his hair was strangely light-colored and curled at the ends. He looked up at her when she gasped, and the sight of his pale round eyes and long freckled nose struck her with horror. She shrieked. He wasn’t Japanese nor even an Ezo tribesman — he was —

“What in the fuck... are *you*?” Manji sounded almost as taken aback as Rin. He spat out some grass, pulled his other *shido* from his *kōsōde* and heaved to his feet.

“Oh, Manji-san!” Rin trembled and stared. “Is that really a *foreigner*?”

"Ho-lee shit." Manji wiped blood and dirt from his mouth and nose with the back of his wrist. He examined the man with astonished curiosity, cocking his head from side to side. "*Komo*, right? Damn, their hair really IS red!"

The bandit grinned, showing several missing teeth in the midst of his scraggly copper-colored beard. He took a dirty rag from his jacket and bound it over his wound. "Naw... I'm no Dutchman. I'm from — " He slurred a long word that sounded something like 'Masa-shu-setsu'.

"Haah?" Manji broke eye contact and cast a quick glance at Hebi. The tattooed bandit now guarded Rin, but made no move to attack. "Where the hell's that?"

"Long way from here."

"Must be." Manji's brows creased; he took another look at Hebi's intricate tattoos and narrowed his eye at the foreigner. His unthinking rage had expended itself, replaced by wariness. "Now how the hell did a barbarian learn to talk *Nihongo*?"

"I've been rottin' here four years, big guy. An' some old shipmates of mine were castaway Jappos. Couldn't go home again, or..." He drew a thumb across his throat and made a slicing sound. "That's how the *bakufu* bastards served the rest of my crew, anyway."

"Yeah? Why ain't anybody cut *your* ugly head off?"

The foreigner reached over his shoulder and drew a long weapon from a sheath strapped down his back. Crude black iron, with a strong shaft and a wicked barbed head the size of a man's hand. He hefted it and displayed it to Manji with an air of pride. "That's why."

"No shit." Manji eyed the honed point. "You can hit something with that?"

"I was chief harpooneer on a whaler out of Nu-beda-fo." Rin couldn't parse that name either — he might as well have said he was from the moon. "Three years' worth of oil in the hold, and we split our hull in a typhoon off the Bonins and washed up in this godforsaken head-chopping, pickle-eating, floor-squatting misbegotten yellow heathen bunghole of a country." He gave a formal bow. "Pleased to meet ya, samurai-san."

Manji laughed. Not at the foreigner's oddly accented sarcasm, which made Rin boggle, but apparently at a thought of his own. It wasn't a merry thought; she

remembered how he had laughed when Makie asked him what he had stolen from an innocent girl.

To Rin's surprise, Manji turned and looked straight at her, showing his teeth. He seemed both dangerously angry and oddly amused. At himself?

"Yeah, woman, I'm a sucker. You know that better than anybody. But you ain't screwin' me twice in one day!"

"Manji-san?"

"This pair of jokers is supposed to take me down?" Manji made a wide gesture with his *shido*. "Guess again."

"Guess... what?"

"You really think I'm that soft in the head?" His voice rose to a roar. "Itto-ryū!"

Rin's mouth dropped open.

"Come on, look at 'em! Who else but that bunch of freakjobs is gonna hang out with a blue-eyed devil?"

He was right. He had to be right. Rin's head spun and her vision blurred. Anotsu? Why?

"This all got arranged yesterday at the inn. Bait the hook and pull in a big fat — "

"Manji!"

"I ain't playin' yer little game any more." He pointed the knife at her. "Gimme one reason I shouldn't walk right out of here!"

Rin spluttered and stamped her feet. "You... you... That's so *stupid*! You're such an *idiot*!"

"Damn straight I am!" Manji laughed again. "If I hadn't left my fool head jammed so far up between your legs, I'd've figured the real deal the second these two clowns pranced over the hill!"

The bandits looked at each other. The foreigner raised a brow; Hebi gave a clueless shrug. Manji whipped around to glare at them. "Just one thing I want to know. When does Anotsu show up to fetch her?"

"Uh... it's really not like — " began Hebi.

"Keep it shut, idiot!" His companion snarled at him.

"Itto-ryū. So... you know *me*, don't you?" Manji pointed at his own face.

The foreigner's long nose twitched, then he shrugged as if Manji's deduction made no difference. "Heard some rumors."

"Do tell."

"Some kind of bullshit about immortality." He sneered and propped his harpoon on his shoulder. "I ain't no superstitious Jappo."

"Yeah... bullshit." Manji grinned with a glint in his eye. "Man, I always wonder how that one got started."

"But Mado, this guy picked up his own arm and stuck it back on! You gotta ask Magatsu — " Hebi flinched when his companion shook his weapon at him.

"I swear, you babble like a tipsy whore! So he was too tough for a few of the *Toshu*'s best buds? I ain't real worried."

"Then let's go for it, *gaijin*." Manji stalked forward. "I'd hate to have Anotsu think I'd lost my touch!"

"Hey, hey!" Mado raised the black harpoon. "Look, Manji, you got this all wrong."

"No kiddin'?"

"Just for one, I ain't even really a member... well, I resigned when we were gonna go legit. I kept in touch, that's all."

"Yeah? What about Snakeboy here?" Manji nodded at Hebi.

"Well, he's in good standing, but see, this ain't a job we're doin' for the *Toshu*. It was never his deal at all."

"Hanh?"

"I'm tellin' you, this ain't Itto-ryū business!" Mado sounded guileless and matter-of-fact. "We're working for another guy — we hired on as freelance."

"Whatta coincidence, then." Manji spat on the ground again, obviously not believing a word. "Doesn't matter anyhow, 'cause I'm feeling pissed enough to butcher a whole army of barbarians toting fish-skewers. Come and get it, ugly!"

"Honest, man, I ain't shittin' you. We got to make a living like anybody else, right?" Mado's head turned at a sound from the forest. "Here they come. Crap, took you long enough!"

"Bullshit. You were running out on us, you stinking *gaijin*!" A coarse voice answered him from the trees, and the speaker came striding into the clearing. He exactly resembled Rin's idea of a bandit; he was paunchy and pock-marked, with an oily mustache and flashy, food-stained clothing. At his side swung a single short sword. A pimply, shifty-eyed boy of about fifteen slunk along behind him, similarly dressed.

"Don't even talk to me, asshole. I can smell your breath from here."

"Fuck you!"

"Both of you talk like you were shoveling a dungheap," said another voice. A hollow-cheeked *ronin* dressed in threadbare household livery emerged from the forest right behind the paunchy man and the boy. He gave Rin a covert look. "There is a young woman present."

None of the new arrivals looked anything like Itto-ryū fighters. Manji grimaced and scanned the men who faced him; he seemed less sure of himself than he had been a few moments before, though that could have been because the odds had just more than doubled against him.

Another sound made Rin start; a louder crashing in the undergrowth. It heralded the approach of a creature much larger than a man. Manji turned his head. Rin heard the jingle of a bridle and a whoosh of breath through a horse's nostrils.

These men would have had to travel fast to set up their ambush. With a good start, a healthy man on foot could have beaten his quarry to this spot. But a weakened man still recovering from a wound?

Rin squeezed her eyes shut and turned her face to her shoulder, knowing to the pit of her roiling stomach who must be riding that horse. She would never have thought him capable of this crude and thuggish attack. Though he haunted her

nightmares and ruined her peace of mind, how could he have stooped to kidnapping her? She could think of only one reason why, and acid rose in her throat. She couldn't look at him, couldn't meet those cool narrow eyes. Not in front of Manji!

"The... fuck?" muttered Manji. Rin's lids snapped up.

A figure walked from the shadows under the trees. It seemed to be a man, but built oddly wide and square. When he emerged into the sunlight, his sharp, bright-colored angles suddenly leaped into clarity. Rin stared in disbelief. A samurai, in full antique armor!

He might have been costumed to play a legendary hero on the stage, in an elaborately decorated and silk-laced *o-yoroi* topped with a brocade coat. His old-fashioned rivet-studded helmet carried an enormous spreading neck guard and gilded horns. To complete the faintly ridiculous picture, suspended at his side he wore a *tachi* cavalry sword about as long as Rin was tall. He had to hitch it up with one hand to keep it from dragging on the ground.

Right behind him ambled the horse he led. A slight figure sat astride the saddle. He was dressed like a young nobleman, his expensive clothing looking like it belonged to an elder brother. He seemed to be unarmed; he rode awkwardly in his oversized *hakama*, gripping the pommel with his head down and his face concealed by a wide basket hat. He looked more frightened than dangerous.

But the samurai? If he knew how to use that *tachi*, Manji was now outnumbered six to one. Manji retreated a few steps to reduce his exposure from behind, his head turning quickly from side to side like a hawk's.

Quivering in fear, Rin tried to catch his eye. He shifted his grip on his *shido* and didn't return her look. Instead he fixed his gaze on the armored samurai with an incredulous frown.

The big boxy figure tied the horse to a tree at the edge of the forest and briefly spoke to the young rider. Then he faced Manji and swaggered forward, his thigh guards flapping with his strides. The lower half of his face was hidden by an iron mask and its bristling horsehair mustache. Only his eyes and brows were visible. He put his arms akimbo with a dramatic swoop of his huge shoulder shields and seemed to be about to make a declaration.

Before the samurai could speak a word, Manji began to laugh again. Not in the grim way that made Rin shiver, but with genuine amusement. The laugh rapidly

grew to a belly-shaking guffaw. Rin looked at Manji in surprise when he bent over and slapped his thigh, wheezing. He gave a loud whoop and grinned at her.

"Know him yet, Rin?" She looked blank, and he pointed. "He's got a good reason to wear that stupid mask!"

Her eyes opened wide.

"Smart idea recruiting all these cheap goons, you little twerp." He turned back to the samurai, still laughing. "Because maybe... if you run fast enough... I'll have to waste enough time gutting them for you to save your own ass. Take my advice — dump the clown suit before you split!"

The gilded horns quivered with the samurai's wrath. He raised a fist and shook it at Manji. "You'll regret those words, miscreant!" His muffled voice reverberated from the mouth-slot of the mask. "I shall make you suffer great humiliations for your crimes!"

"You know what, dickwad? Thanks for showing up just now. I mean that sincerely, because I was kinda losin' sight of what I ought to have been doing. Got a little sidetracked." He pointed his hooked knife straight at the samurai's face. "Take off that mask or I rip it off. Along with the rest of your face. I want to see how much it hurts when I slice open *your* soft little belly."

The samurai fumbled with the fancy double knot tied under the iron mask's projecting chin. "I am not afraid to face you, scum! You shall know my vengeance is swift and sure!" Unable to negotiate the knot with gloves on, he took a manicure knife from his scabbard and pried at the thick cord to loosen it.

"Hey, take your time." Manji chuckled. "This is gonna be over way too quickly for my taste anyhow."

The man tore off the mask and helmet together and threw them on the ground. Red-faced, panting, with a large bandage on his nose and his topknot dragging stray hairs over his shaven pate. His head looked very small projecting from the wide shoulders of the armor.

"I am Tsukue Ryonosuke! You will not speak to me in that — "

"I know who you are, you little dipshit. You know who I am?"

"Indeed I do! You are not only a crude and barbarous misfit, you are a notorious outlaw! I will take you to Edo in bonds and win great acclaim for your ignominious defeat! Even my father will – "

"Missin' Daddy's money that bad already?" Manji rolled his eye. "I ain't defeated yet, 'case you hadn't noticed."

"Ah, but your little sister is in my power!" Ryonosuke swept an arm to point at Rin. "Every man has his weakness, and I have captured yours!"

"Weakness?" Manji's glance met Rin's. Cool, impenetrable, but with a faint smile. "What, now I piss myself and surrender?"

"Well – um..."

"Fine, little Ryo, you got my attention now." Manji made a flippant gesture. "You don't need her any more, so I'll just cut her loose and you and me can take care of business." He began to walk towards Rin; the paunchy man and the *ronin* barred his way with hands gripping their sword hilts. "Move aside, greaseball, or – "

"You ain't forgetting, are you?" The paunchy man addressed Ryonosuke. "No pay, no deal!"

"Of course... of course! I will make good on all my promises."

"Assuming you're alive to settle accounts." Manji smirked at Ryonosuke. "How many coppers did you have to drop in the taverns to scrounge up this attractive bunch?"

"This is not a cash arrangement," said the threadbare *ronin* with an air of affronted rectitude. "It would be beneath my dignity as a samurai to accept – "

"We get the girl, asshole," said the paunchy man. He flashed yellow-stained teeth. "This fine young fella here couldn't show us any gold for our trouble, but he did drop a few enticin' remarks about your feisty little sister. Couldn't pass that up – I gotta admit, I never mind takin' it out in trade."

Manji looked as still as a rooted oak. Rin thrashed against her bonds; her breath seemed to clog her lungs and throat.

"She looks somewhat more mature than I had anticipated." The *ronin* gave a philosophical sigh and shake of the head. "However, I am resigned to the blows of fate."

The paunchy man cuffed the pimpled boy on the side of the head. "Gotta make this little shit into a man someday, hah? Tell you what, kid — draw some blood in the fight, and you get second dibs."

"They have pledged to preserve her life — " began Ryonosuke, almost apologetically.

"Do you know who I am?" Manji's tone had lost all sense of humor.

Rin felt a sizzle down her spine. The *ronin* and the paunchy man each took a step backwards. Even the *Itto-ryū* men flinched. The boy seemed confused.

Ryonosuke gulped. "Y-yes, I know — "

"No. You don't." Manji cast a look at Rin, too quickly for her to read his face, and turned back to Ryonosuke. "That girl there? You callin' me her big brother?"

"You are her brother!"

"You ain't got a clue, you snot-dribblin' brat. For all you know, she sleeps in my *futon* and last night I nailed her until she screamed my name!"

"Your own... *sister*?" Ryonosuke's mouth gaped open and shut like a fish's.

"Idiot." Manji dismissed him and spun around to include the whole circle of armed men. "Before you monkeys decide to draw in this fight, get one thing straight — no man on earth's gonna even *think* about putting a finger on that little woman." He showed his teeth. "Except me."

The *Itto-ryū* men stared at him in open consternation.

"Whoa there," said the paunchy man, looking slightly ill. "I mean, god knows I'm no *bodhisattva* myself, but bro, that's really gross."

Ryonosuke stammered. "You d-despicable felon! You f-foul, depraved animal!"

"Animal, hey? I'm as human as any of you bastards. Which I admit ain't saying a whole hell of a lot..." Manji took a deep breath and dropped the knife and *shido* to stick upright in the ground. With a sweep of his arm he sent three additional

blades to join them, their points driving deep into the soft earth. He made one more rapid draw and shook out the chain from his linked sickles. "So who am I?"

The bandit pulled out his short sword; the *ronin* loosened his *katana* in its scabbard. Manji looked up and grinned.

"Yeah, I'm that guy who killed a hundred officers singlehanded. Not to mention, I'm also the softest-headed idiot ever born... because I thought no woman could sucker me. Even that little gal over there — the one with the braids and the big brown eyes." He swung one sickle in an arc and began to spin it over his head, fast and faster. "Makes no difference now — never should have. You want to know who I really am?"

None of the bandits made a sound.

"I got a message for you jokers. Tell those one hundred hungry ghosts... plus a few dozen extra... who are gonna welcome you to hell with open arms — "

Blade whirring high and a fence of steel before him: for a moment Manji seemed to loom like a tree in a forest of saplings. He smiled.

"Tell them for me... that I'm her fucking *bodyguard*."

PART THIRTY-THREE

Six men against one?

Rin had seen Manji attack against worse odds. Such as a few weeks ago, when he had found her in the hands of an entire sword school. However, she didn't think bandits were going to worry about fighting according to *būshidō*...

The paunchy bandit and the boy seemed to be gauging their distance as Manji's whirling sickle tore the air on the end of its chain. The threadbare *ronin* circled, looking for an opportunity. Tsukue Ryonosuke carefully drew his long *tachi* and struck a martial pose near the tethered horse. The small rider kept his seat, shivering slightly with his head lowered.

The two *Itto-ryū* men who had captured Rin stood shoulder to shoulder a little distance in front of the tree where she was tied, watching the opening maneuvers of the fight. She'd seen Hebi's sword work already, but what kind of fighter was Mado? Rin looked at the big blocky outline of the red-haired foreigner's shoulder muscles. The barbed head of his iron harpoon protruded behind him, the shaft resting at the base of his neck. If he could drive that ugly weapon into the heart of a giant whale, what kind of damage could it inflict on a man?

Although the harpoon looked heavy enough to strike past the shield Manji had made of his moving chain, Mado didn't raise his weapon to throw. He looked from side to side at the other fighters and then glanced back at Rin. He spoke low to his companion; Hebi nodded and moved to the right. Blotches of late-afternoon sunlight ventured through the oak leaves and crawled over the snake tattoos on his arms. Mado followed suit to the left.

The *ronin* cautiously approached Manji from behind, sword held out in an attack stance. Manji didn't seem to be watching him, but when the man kept coming he abruptly released a loop of the chain. The sickle leaped outwards. The *ronin* jumped back to avoid losing his head; the blade skimmed his hairline. In silence, he clapped a hand to his face and quickly retreated. Blood welled from a long cut on his scalp and stained his fingers. Manji chuckled.

Opposite the *ronin*, the paunchy bandit crouched low. Behind him, the boy whirled a leather sling, yelled loudly and shot a stone at Manji. At the same moment, the bandit charged.

Manji's head whipped around at the shout. He ducked the missile, then cocked his wrist and changed the sickle's angle of rotation. Grass flew, sliced off at the ground, but with the aid of the boy's distraction the bandit had already slipped under Manji's guard. He lunged with his short sword, his yellowed teeth clenched.

Manji ran a few steps backwards, grabbed the chain with his left hand and yanked the blade at his attacker from behind. Rin heard a hoarse scream.

The sickle sailed on and snapped into another trajectory when Manji yanked on it again. Something that had snagged on its point flew free. It flopped into the grass near Hebi's foot. He glanced down and moved a step away. Curious, Rin craned forward to see.

Most of a hairy ear and a long strip of unshaven flesh, the skin sliced clean away from the side of the skull and jaw. "Eww..." She clenched her teeth and turned her head, both disgusted and exulting in her *yōjimbō's* prowess.

The bandit howled and stumbled away from Manji, bleeding like an overturned jug. The boy gaped, then frantically tried to stanch the flow with the bandit's grubby vest while the man yelped and gobbled and waved his arms. The *ronin* cleared blood from his eyes and kept his distance. Manji turned away from them and glared at the Itto-ryū men. Still holding their stations near Rin, Hebi and Mado stood ready but made no move.

"Any takers? C'mon, little Ryo. Want to give yer roasting spit a try?" Manji continued his turn, now swinging the sickle in a smaller tilted arc. It sang a low, sibilant note through the air. Ryonosuke paled and switched to a different stance with the *tachi*.

Manji smirked at the enormous sword. "That thing don't impress me, little boy. Too damn long for anything but swinging from horseback... and don't get me started on the subject of riding. Anyone with a brain prefers to keep his feet on the ground!"

"Ha! You've probably never even sat a horse, you m-miserable beggar!"

"Sorry, No Nose, you got that one wrong." Manji whistled tunelessly and swung the sickle in a double-looping path, then reversed its direction and made another figure in the air. Ryonosuke's eyes followed it; sweat ran down his forehead.

Manji kept talking in a jocular tone. “God, I hated riding drills — saddles give me almost as big a pain in the ass as you do. Stick to two legs and you’ll get a lot farther.” He grinned. “Not that you’ll need that advice where you’re heading to, you little prick!”

The sickle shot straight at Ryonosuke. He dove to the ground with a cry and covered his head. The weapon flew over him and hit the tree where the horse stood tethered. It fell to the ground with a noisy clatter of chain.

The animal whinnied and reared in fright. It yanked the reins from the branch where Ryonosuke had draped them and broke free. The youth in the saddle cried out and slid sideways as the horse backed into the forest and wheeled around. Rin caught a glimpse of a white face and open mouth under the basket hat.

Ryonosuke struggled to his feet, hampered by his heavy armor, and left his sword lying where he had dropped it. He dashed to the horse’s side, heedless of its plunges. With a leap he caught it by the bridle, just avoiding its flying hoofs as it shied again. Rin’s eyes opened wider; he might be braver than she had thought. While the young man tried to quiet the horse and steady the panicked rider, the *ronin* called out.

“The outlaw! He’s escaped!”

Rin looked back into the clearing and gasped. Manji had vanished. The only trace of him was the abandoned sickle and the row of weapons still stuck points-down in the earth. The bandit spluttered, his neck and chest soaked with blood from his severed ear. He shook his sword at the *Itto-ryū* men while the boy bound his head in a cloth.

“You *gaijin* asshole! You let the bastard get away! Didn’t you have your eye on him?”

Mado snarled at the bandit. “Right up until he pulled that stunt, just like the rest of us! C’mon, idiot, he’s not gone far.” He turned and peered into the open glade of oaks behind Rin. “Sure as hell he hasn’t run!”

Of course Manji hadn’t run — he meant to take full advantage of the available cover. What was he going to do? Rin bit her lips in feverish excitement. Her heart beat so hard that the men’s voices seemed muffled.

Her shoulder bag and sword lay on the ground a little way from her tree, beyond reach of her outstretched foot. If only she could have drawn her blade and fought beside her *yōjimbō*! Rin clenched her fists and yanked at her securely knotted

bonds. She'd like to have a chance to duel with Ryonosuke again, and this time she wouldn't spare him for any pleading!

A bush shook at the far end of the clearing. The boy shouted and slung a stone. It disappeared into the undergrowth; he reloaded his sling from a pouch at his waist and let fly.

He reached into the pouch again, but before he could fire off a third missile, a glint streaked into the sunlight. Rin glimpsed a flash of black and white as Manji slipped deeper into the forest. The dagger he had thrown impaled the boy's upraised hand; he shrieked and dropped his sling. Then a stone zipped from somewhere in the trees farther to the left and struck the approaching *ronin* in the eye. He let out a cry and bent double.

The earless bandit yelled, turning from side to side. "Ahhgh! Shit! Which way was that? Where is the bastard?"

Ryonosuke jittered at the edge of the clearing, holding the horse's head. The youth half fell from the saddle, crawled away from the horse and huddled on the ground as if his big hat could conceal him. Mado and Hebi still looked alert and focused. Each looked closely at the trees and thick brush around the clearing and kept checking the open grove, keeping on opposite sides of Rin.

"Hey, you idiots, don't group up!" Hebi pointed at the other three hirelings, who had drawn together near the center of the clearing to get away from the trees. "You'll just make a bigger — " Another stone cracked the earless bandit on the chin.

"OWW! Get him!" The man practically wept in fury, holding his arm over his bandaged head. "Get him, you useless pieces of crap!"

The boy tried to pull the dagger from his palm, weeping in pain. The *ronin's* injured eye rapidly swelled and purpled, but he drew himself up straight and firmly gripped his sword. He shouted to the *Itto-ryū* men.

"Do you see any sign of him? The smallest indication — "

A sudden noise in the bushes to the right made the *ronin* spin around to look. Disturbed leaves were still shaking. "Come! Let's attack him together!" He gestured and made a dash into the trees. The wounded bandit followed with unsteady gait; the *Itto-ryū* men kept their stations. The *ronin* led with his sword and stabbed his way into the bushes. The bandit jogged into the forest to join him

and vanished behind the brush. Almost immediately Rin heard a loud cry. Someone had been wounded, but who?

That question was almost immediately answered by the reappearance of the *ronin*. He stumbled into the clearing, bleeding from a slash across the shoulders. "Imbecile!"

The bandit emerged, looking glassy-eyed and woozy. "Uh... sorry about — "

"He tricked us — he threw a branch into the woods!" The *ronin* arched his back and tried to examine his wound. "Aid me, fool!"

The bandit gaped at his accidental victim and yelled at the *Itto-ryū* men. "Oh, you're such hot shit? You claimed we'd never get it done without you? Then DO something!" The wounded hirelings all seemed shaken and disorganized, almost as if they were the ones badly outnumbered. Rin hunched her shoulders to avoid laughing out loud.

"Take it easy," replied Mado. "There's still only one of him!"

Rin sensed a movement off to her left and quickly closed her eyes to avoid giving Manji's position away. Her bodyguard was making a wide circle of the clearing under cover of the commotion, crouching low in the bushes. What did he mean to do? Free her as soon as he saw a chance, probably, and then guard her retreat. She'd have to be prepared to make a dash for it when he appeared to cut her bonds. She opened one eye to check, but he had vanished again.

No one else seemed to have spotted him. Strange glee bubbled up in her chest. Who did these idiots think they were, trying to take on her Manji? He'd toyed with them a little just to demonstrate who was boss, and once he had rescued her he'd show no mercy. These men were doomed!

Ryonosuke, panting, managed to coax the horse over to a tree again and tied it securely. He fumbled something out of a saddlebag, and dropped it on the ground. When he bent to retrieve it, the youth crawled over to help him. They crouched together near the horse; Ryonosuke flipped open the lid of a charcoal holder and blew into it to revive the glow.

Rin's skin suddenly prickled. Surely he didn't mean to smoke his pipe in the middle of a —

She noticed for the first time that behind the horse's saddle was strapped a long gun sheath, empty. She smelled a familiar chemical stench.

Ryonosuke stood up, wound the free end of the lit slow match around the stock of the reloaded *teppo* and raised the musket to his cheek. He advanced into the clearing, his bold swagger returning.

“Outlaw!” He spun around in a movement reminiscent of Manji’s, the trail of smoke from the smoldering match following him in a rising spiral. “You cannot escape!”

His hirelings looked at each other, then ducked when he swept the muzzle of the gun in their direction. “Hey! Watch where you’re pointing that damn thing!”

“Show yourself, miscreant, or I shoot!”

“Shoot at... what?” muttered the *ronin*, nursing his black eye.

Ryonosuke looked blank for a moment, then his young face darkened. He completed his turn and sighted down the long barrel, ostentatiously curled his finger over the trigger and leveled the musket directly at Rin’s chest. He stood no more than ten paces away from her; the worst marksman in the world couldn’t miss. A horrible coldness buzzed through her and her ears began to ring.

“Surrender! Or your little sister pays the price!”

“Hey! That’s our salary!”

“Shit – ” Mado and Hebi moved in closer, keeping out of the line of fire, and Mado held up his hand. “Boss, watch it there! This ain’t what you were – ”

“Show yourself!” screamed Ryonosuke. His finger jumped on the trigger, and Rin distantly wondered if she were going to faint. The glow of the burning match, in the grip of the brass serpentine, hovered over the gunpowder-filled priming pan like a little golden snake with a red eye. “Show yourself and give up your weapons! Now!”

“Manji-san... oh, God, please, no...” She turned her face away and cringed down as small as she could, shrinking away from the *teppo*. What could even Manji do against a bullet? Was she going to die?

“Hey, you little prick!”

Rin startled upright. Manji sounded furious, with a raw edge of fear in his voice.

“Naw, that gun’s what you got instead of a prick — hey, point it at a man for a change, dickwad! I already know you like fighting little girls, but I sure as hell won’t stop at busting your freakin’ sword!”

Ryonosuke went red. His aim wavered, sweeping over the trees behind Rin, then snapped back to her. Mado ran farther to the left to get out of range. “S-surrender!”

“Man, you’re just stupid enough to pull that trigger, aren’t you?”

The young man’s jaw quivered with fury. “Have you any idea what a musket ball does to the human body, outlaw? Show yourself!”

Rin heard Manji stalk into the open grove of oaks right behind her, his footfalls heavy on the dead leaves. “Here I am, you little piece of shit.” He stopped after a few paces; she couldn’t see him yet, though she craned around the tree trunk as far as she could. “Go on, fire it at me. It’ll take you a frickin’ week to reload, and in two seconds, your head will be bouncing in the dirt!”

“Lay down your weapons!” Still Ryonosuke’s aim wavered, the muzzle swinging through irregular arcs.

“What if I don’t want to? Better shoot me right now — you ain’t getting another chance.” Manji’s footfalls approached again and he walked up abreast of Rin, several strides to her left. He drew his split-bladed short sword and beckoned. Mado moved stealthily towards him, though he had put his harpoon back into its sheath. Manji threw him a glare and he stopped, warily dangling a looped cord from his hand. “Hey, you can’t miss from here. Show me what you got, tough guy!”

Ryonosuke swung his aim to Rin once more, then back to Manji. “Drop... *your... weapons!*”

Manji grinned and sprang at Ryonosuke.

The youth in the hat screamed with a shrill girlish note. Ryonosuke gasped as he stumbled backwards, his grip convulsing on the wobbling musket. Mado dropped to the ground and lay flat with his hands shielding his ears. The little snake struck. Powder flashed. In the instant before the main charge ignited in the barrel, Manji flung himself violently to the right.

So close to her, the roar of the gun blotted out the world. Sound, light, feeling — Rin felt deaf and numb for long moments. Hit? Her heart still pounded, pumping blood hard enough to choke her. She must be alive...

“Manji-san?” she whispered. The clearing seemed utterly silent, as if the noise of the shot had blown away all other sounds. “Manji-san?” Smoke stung her nostrils.

After a second or two she heard panting, and the sound of someone sitting hard on the ground. The hirelings cursed in low voices and began to gather at her end of the clearing.

“Wow,” said someone, perhaps the boy. “Uh... wow, that’s sick.”

Rin opened her eyes, which focused only gradually. What was that warmish wetness partly soaking through her clothes? Someone’s movements blurred the cloud of white smoke that obscured her vision — Hebi. He knelt down and examined something with his tattooed back to her. The snakes seemed to coil and squirm in the clearing smoke.

“Whoa... I never saw what a gunshot looked like. ”

“I have,” said Mado, who had risen and moved to Rin’s tree. “Plenty.”

“Man. So why’s it so damn big?” Hebi sounded like a child with a fascinating new toy he wasn’t quite sure how to use.

“The lead splatters when it hits, see? Like a ripe plum against a brick wall... only what it hits takes most of the grief.” He examined Rin’s face, quickly ran his hands along her arms and legs, let out a long sigh of apparent relief and leaned against the tree. “She ain’t hurt, no thanks to this fine young gentleman...”

Rin tried to peer around his arm to see what Hebi was looking at. Mado grimaced and moved in front of her, entirely blocking her view. “Kid... you don’t want to see.”

“See... what? Manji?” She looked down at her damp-feeling *furisōde* and almost screamed. Dark and wet from knees to breast, and spattered with grayish-pink clumps and sharp splinters of white. “Where is Manji-san?”

Hebi rose and shook his head, then poked at something on the ground with the toe of his sandal.

"He's... he's...?" Ryonosuke sounded ill, but struggled to his feet using the gun as a stick. "He's not... dead?"

"Hell, boss, there he is... and there's a pretty good chunk of his innards, if you add up all the bits." Hebi gestured and nudged another object with his foot. "Don't seem too likely he's breathing, 'cause he sure ain't got much left to do it with."

Rin's eyes dilated. "Let... let me see him! Please!" Mado ignored her.

"Oh... *no!* The *banshu* wanted him alive!" Ryonosuke dropped the gun and put a hand to his mouth. "I told you specifically — we had to bring him in alive!"

"Don't look at us, boss — you're the one who shot him." Mado rolled his pale eyes and turned around, still standing in front of Rin.

"I... I... he startled me! I only touched the trigger to show that I meant what I said, and... and..."

"And the gun ended up aimin' straight at the girl when it went off, so he took the bullet. Bodyguard? Heh — try 'dumbshit'." Mado chuckled. "Nice reflexes, though."

Rin breathed faster, her heart racing. For all the duels she'd witnessed, she had never seen a gunshot wound before either. From the sound of it, the *kessen-chu* would be hard pressed at the least. Could they even repair that sort of damage...?

"M... my... my father! He said last week that the shogun's *bangashira* wanted to interrogate the k-killer of a hundred! No one had been able to arrest the man in f-four years, but his description... I knew who he was and where he had g-gone! I wanted to accomplish that mission and bring him in... then my father would allow me to rejoin the family and even p-p-pay for..." Ryonosuke sobbed like an infant. "Everything's — *ruined!*"

"Well, shit... *we* still get paid, don't we?"

Someone groaned softly. The earless bandit looked down and blinked his glassy eyes. The groan repeated; Rin's hyperventilations stopped as she forcibly held her breath.

"What the... fuck...?" Hebi looked down as well and took a step backwards. Mado suddenly moved forward and away from Rin.

“Holy shit!”

“Incredible!” The *ronin* stooped. “He... he has a pulse!”

“What?” Ryonosuke seemed dazed. Rin sagged a little and drew in a deep sigh of relief.

“Ugh!” said the boy. “That’s sick — he’s *moving*!”

Mado bent over and lifted a limp hand from the ground. The fingers twitched slightly. With nothing blocking her view now, Rin spotted the top of Manji’s head, and then his outflung arms; he lay sprawled in the long grass in front of her. Nearly all the white of his clothing had turned red. “Well, blow me down! Must’ve just grazed him.”

“Grazed him? I saw daylight through his frickin’ ribcage!” Hebi sounded almost triumphant. “See, that wasn’t no fairy tale — he’s really, honest to hell — ”

“Shut the fuck up, Hebi.” Mado stripped down the sleeves of Manji’s tattered, blood-soaked *kōsōde*, checked him all over and relieved him of his remaining weapons: his folding spear, his *wakizashi* and a small knife. He put Manji’s bared arm over his shoulders and heaved. “Gimme a hand. He’s coming to.”

“How the hell can he be alive?” gasped the earless bandit. His face turned so white that his pockmarks stood out like red beans in rice. “That’s fucking *nuts*! The bullet hit him square!” He pointed frantically around on the ground and at Rin’s clothes. “Look at all the meat!”

“Use your own nut, you dumb Jappo.” Mado dragged Rin’s limp, half-naked bodyguard to a tree near her. Hebi helped lean him up against the bole and held his arms to outstretched branches; Mado got out cords and started to bind him in place with expert haste, taking a few large, rapid hitches along the branches. “If he’d been hit square, he’d be dead. He ain’t dead, so it just grazed him! You see any daylight there?”

He slapped Manji’s chest, made a double hitch to secure the end of a cord at his wrist and looked at the murmuring hirelings with raised brows. “Simple logic, right?” The *ronin* shook his head and seemed perplexed, but didn’t offer a rebuttal.

Manji grunted and slowly raised his head, then made a feeble attempt to struggle. Both arms were already secured, as if he stood lashed to a crosstrees for execution. Mado took a few turns around his waist and knotted the cord. He

squatted and tried to tie Manji's legs to the tree as well, but a knee thrust to his head landed him on his backside. Hebi grabbed Manji's left ankle and the two men threw a loop over it. Manji growled and kicked harder, bloodying Hebi's nose.

"Get... the hell off me...!"

"Tie him! Hand and foot! Make him secure!"

The Itto-ryū men jumped back to avoid another kick. "That's as good as it gets, boss. All yours now." Hebi wiped his face.

Ryonosuke ventured closer, staring. "Really... alive?"

"Fucking little prick..." Manji hawked and spat blood at him. He yanked at his bonds, making the branches creak slightly. Ryonosuke flinched.

An irregular pinkish splotch centered on Manji's upper chest, obviously just healed over. Blood dried on his stomach and arms. Rin stared at him, immeasurably grateful that he had revived from such a destructive wound, but with fear surging over her relief. Manji was captured!

He turned his head and gave a half-grin at the sight of her bloodied clothes and his own bone and lung tissue scattered over them. "Hey there, woman." He looked pale and his voice seemed faded, as if he were still slowly healing. How much blood and flesh had he lost? "Sorry 'bout the mess..."

"Oh, Manji-san!" Tears ran down her cheeks. "You s-saved my life!"

He shrugged slightly, all he could manage while bound, and looked away. "I was only tryin' to knock the barrel aside, if you want to know. "

"Are you all right? Don't you dare hurt him, you dirty cowards!"

Manji clenched his jaw; a shadow passed over his face. Catching Rin's gaze again, he jerked his chin at their captors, then set his mouth and shook his head. He seemed to mean that he would never let them harm her, no matter what their situation. Rin's tears renewed.

Manji took a deep breath and looked at Ryonosuke, who had regained a semblance of poise and stood with fists on his hips and shoulder shields sticking almost straight out. "You got something to say, dickless?"

"Uh... you are under arrest! Consider yourself apprehended for the crime of murder! I will deliver you to the authorities in Edo... but first, there is a question of honor between us."

"Oh... that." Manji yawned.

"You... you spoke disrespectfully to me... and spitefully injured me!" Ryonosuke gestured at his bandaged nose. "Such an insult to a samurai cannot go unpunished, you dog!" He puffed out his chest. "You... will... *apologize!*"

"Hanh?"

"You will humble yourself before me, and beg my pardon on your knees!" He pointed dramatically at the ground.

Manji rolled his eye. "I'm tied to a tree, idiot. How am I supposed to knock my forehead, even if I gave a shit?"

"Miscreant! Th-that is not the end of your foul crimes! You insulted a woman under my protection, and called her by — "

"You mean the greedy little bitch?" Manji laughed. "Samurai cuts both ways, pissant. You think I'm gonna ask your pardon for dissing a whore?"

"No, you will ask HER pardon!" Ryonosuke turned and beckoned to the youth with the large hat. "Please, my lady, come forward. Rejoice in his humiliation!"

The girl in man's clothes, as Rin finally realized she was, ventured a trembling step in Manji's direction. She moved no farther. Ryonosuke immediately went to her and took her hand. "I am at your side, my lady. You are safe." Gently he urged her forward.

"Oh, yeah — that's right!" Manji displayed a scornful grin, though the girl still hid her face under her hat and wouldn't look at him. "You kidnapped your bitch with that frickin' gun! So you think Daddy's gonna reimburse her owner if you haul me in?" He laughed. "Won't put him much out of purse if he does — she ain't worth more than what I'm carrying in my sleeve right now. Worst lay I ever had in my goddamn life!"

Ryonosuke advanced and struck him across the face. Manji didn't even blink or move his head; he grinned wider. "You got nothin', boy. Guess you two are a match made in heaven."

The girl's head jerked up. Rin saw a pale, delicate face with flushed cheeks. Her pink lips trembled, not wholly with fear. Her eyes flashed and dilated.

"How dare you, scum! Hold your foul tongue!" Ryonosuke returned to his lover's side. "You may accuse him now, if you wish. I will humble him before you, O-Hama-dono!"

With shaking hands, the girl untied the chin strap of her hat. Slowly she removed it, and her long hair slipped down her back.

Rin stared. O-Hama's beauty was like that of a perfect cherry blossom, though slightly marred at this moment with a drawn look around the mouth. She had a lovely oval contour to her cheeks and little chin, and shy, soft eyes like a fawn's. Tied in a simple tail, her hair shone, falling well below her waist. No wonder she had been the most expensive courtesan in the village's best brothel. An unbidden mental image of Manji making love to this beautiful girl, not much older than herself but exquisite in her youth, put a sour lump in Rin's throat. She recalled his dismissive words and swallowed the tightness away.

"Damn," said the bandit in a low voice. "That's what she had hidin' under the hat? Crap, wish I'd seen that before we set off on this freakin' enterprise." He gingerly fingered the bruise on his chin and poked the *ronin* in the ribs with a suggestive leer. "Might've saved ourselves the walk, hey?"

"A pleasure woman?" The *ronin* sniffed and folded his arms. "I prefer to savor the fleeting fragrance of the unplucked flower." He glanced at Rin from under his brows.

O-Hama dropped the hat and half turned away. Ryonosuke guided her a little closer to Manji. "You see? He is bound and disarmed. He cannot possibly harm you, my lady."

She was still trembling when she finally looked Manji in the face. He made a mocking grimace at her. She cried out in terror and hid her eyes.

"My lady, have courage – "

"Sheesh, what's this kid's problem?" Manji sneered. "Harm? All I did was buy her for a poke, and my money's good! What's a few discourtesies to a damn whore?"

O-Hama suddenly took her hands from her face. "You..." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "You're the one-hundred-man murderer!"

"Didn't we cover that already?"

"She was the person who deduced your identity, miscreant! What do you say to that, eh?" Ryonosuke shook a triumphant finger in Manji's face.

"So freakin' what?" Manji looked annoyed. "I never sliced up a whore in my life — unlike one sadistic asshole I used to know. All I ever whacked were cops and *kenshi* — and one stinkin' *hatamoto*." His gaze switched to Ryonosuke. "Oh, that's it? You got a grudge against the guy who offed one of yours? Horii was your third cousin once removed on your mama's side?"

"Lord Horii Shigenobu was no relation of mine, assassin. My lady's grievances against you are of a more intimate — "

"Shit! Now I gotta stand here with an audience and listen to a broad criticize my performance? Look, you puny cunt kisser — "

"You murdered my father," O-Hama whispered. "He and my eldest brother were Edo constables... who tried to arrest you."

The girl's soft, high-pitched words fell through the suddenly quiet clearing like a handful of dropped bullets.

Rin's heart seemed to plunge into her belly. Manji said nothing, but his scornful expression sagged away.

Ryonosuke looked greatly startled. "My lady — ?"

"They encountered you behind a tavern in Shiba-machi, on a rainy night in the sixth month of the tenth year of An'ei. You stabbed my father through the body. You hacked off my brother's leg and right hand and left him for dead." The girl wept out loud.

Her insides twisting, Rin looked at Manji. He stared at the girl, though he didn't seem to see her; his mind had traveled to much darker places. His unfocused gaze scanned back and forth as if he tried to search out a memory.

"For more than three years my honored brother has lain crippled in bed, unable to perform his duties or do any other work. His family... my family..." She broke down completely and buried her face in her sleeve.

Manji's lips worked; his color changed from pale to almost gray.

"My beautiful darling! Please... this vile felon is not worthy to receive the precious jewels of your tears!"

The girl breathed hard and composed herself with an obvious effort, then uncovered her face.

"My brother's pain drove him to drink and opium. All the compensation money was spent... our furniture and clothing sold... there was nothing for us to live on but my brother's stipend, and all of that and more went into his cup and his pipe." O-Hama's soft voice strengthened a little with a suppressed throb of anger. "Of course, my brother had no right to dispose of me without my consent. Instead he suggested... again and again... that I had the ability to help my mother and redeem his debts. So... one year and three months ago... I sold myself to a *zegen*."

Manji's bound fists clenched; he lowered his head.

"O-Hama-*dono*! Why did you never speak of this?"

"I am a samurai's daughter, my lord! I do not bewail my fate — I resolved to uphold my family's honor with my silence while I remained a courtesan. Even if that should be the rest of my life!"

"Of course... forgive me." Ryonosuke bowed. "Your honor shall be duly avenged — "

O-Hama looked back at Manji; an indescribable hardness faintly skinned her beautiful features. "I knew that my face and feminine accomplishments were valuable. I negotiated a good sum to be paid to my mother. My patrons were generous, and I sent all the money I could to my family. I knew they were free from want, and that made me happy. I had become reconciled to the life of the floating world... I had done my duty as a daughter and as a sister. I felt humble gratitude for the vow of love my lord Tsukue-*dono* pledged to me. I didn't care that I had surrendered my chastity and was obliged to yield my body... to many men..." Again she broke down in sobs.

Rin bit down on her lips to keep from crying as well; she struggled not to picture what might come next. Her valiant bodyguard — her beloved Manji — had committed scores of killings. She had always known that. Into her mind stabbed a glimpse of the true depths of his punishments, and why he almost seemed to welcome their agonies...

The girl's tone sharpened when she spoke again, though her voice still quivered. "My honored brother talks constantly of the criminal who robbed him of his health and ended our beloved father's life. The man he describes didn't have a disfigured face or a blinded eye. But he says that the murderer was a young man... no more than five and twenty... with a cruel and desperate look. Lean and strong and heavy-browed. Who moved... like a whirlwind of steel... wielding strange weapons in both hands."

Manji tilted his head back as if to let O-Hama see his face. The bleakness of his expression told Rin little more than she already realized.

"When my maid brought you to my chamber, seven days ago... I didn't know you immediately. I felt an odd instinct when I saw you, but I concealed my shrinking and tried to behave as I should. You were impatient and brusque... you seemed tormented by some guilty thought."

Manji closed his eye for a moment and set his teeth on edge.

"Because I wanted you to finish your pillowing and leave quickly, I gladly dispensed with formalities. I loosed my hair and untied my *obi*. I reclined... and invited you to take me..." O-Hama took a gasping breath. "My brother speaks... of a mark on the murderer's breast. One slash crossed over the other — so." She gestured at Manji's bared chest, then at his scattered weapons.

"You opened your clothing... you showed me the scars over your heart... and before you drove your weapon into my body, you placed beside my *futon*... twelve strange and hideous blades."

END OF VOLUME FIVE

CONTINUED IN VOLUME SIX...

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.

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

banshu: The garrison of a castle and bodyguard to its lord. In this case, the shogun's personal military guard in Edo Castle.

bangashira: Head of the *banshu*. In this case, Habaki Kagimura, who has been seen as the government's liason with the Itto-ryū, and also as the man who orchestrated the attack on their leaders at a banquet.

bobo: A woman's vagina and vulval area.

bodhisattva: A Buddhist saint.

Bonin Islands: A group of volcanic islands about 2200 miles/1000 km south of Japan, in the Pacific Ocean. American and British whaling ships began to round the Horn to exploit the South Pacific sperm whale fishery in the late 18th century. They eventually set up whaling stations in the Bonin Islands, which at the time were uninhabited.

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

cho: Cho = 109 meters/358 feet.

daikon: A giant Japanese radish. Often used as a slang synonym for 'penis'.

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

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.

fūton: Japanese mattress about two to four inches thick, filled with silk waste or cotton wadding. Usually kept rolled up in a closet during the day and spread out at night. The traditional pillow is made of wood or ceramic, or at best is a firm, small cushion that supports the neck. Soft pillows were considered unhealthy.

gaijin: “Outside person”; a foreigner. Can be used with a derogatory connotation, but is otherwise a neutral term. It does not mean “barbarian”.

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.

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

henoko: Penis.

hibachi: Small grill for cooking.

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

Ittō-ryū: Anotsu Kagehisa’s group of unusual fighters.

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

kengo: An expert in the martial arts.

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

kessen-chu: Holy bloodworms; the source of Manji's healing ability and immortality.

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

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

komo: "Red Hair"; an old Japanese term for the Dutch.

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

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

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

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

Nihongo: The Japanese language.

Nihon-onna: Japanese woman or women.

obi: Cloth belt or sash, worn by both men and women to hold their garments closed.

otedama: A beanbag juggling game with accompanying songs, played by girls. It has nearly died out now.

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

o-yoroi: "Great armor": Antique style of armor, made from small metal or leather scales laced together with silk cord or leather thongs. All of its parts are large and square, giving the wearer an imposing look.

ri: Ri = 36 cho/4 km/2.5 miles, or about one hour's walk at a moderate pace.

Rin (Asano Rin): Sixteen years old, Rin has been alone in the world since the murder of her parents on her fourteenth birthday. She vowed to avenge them, and with Manji's help has caused the deaths of about twenty *Itto-ryū* members to date. Her fighting skills are not high, but are increasing with training and experience. She and Manji have forged a close but not easily definable relationship in the six months they have been together.

ronin: "Wave man"; masterless samurai. The peaceful Edo period and the fall of daimyo threw many samurai out of work, and masses of disgruntled armed men soon became a serious social problem.

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:** A banjo-like instrument often used to accompany singing or dancing.

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

shido: Fictional forked sword. Manji has a pair, and uses them frequently. They resemble the weapons that killed his sister; he apparently appropriated them from her murderer.

shoji: Wooden-framed sliding paper screens used as walls and doors in a traditional Japanese building. *Fusama* are heavier sliding doors made of solid wood.

tachi: Long sword, originally meant for use by a mounted warrior. *Tachi* blades vary in length, from similar to a *katana* to monsters four feet long or more.

tatami: Floor mats used in traditional Japanese houses. Usually made of straw with a smooth woven reed outer covering and bound at the edges with cloth.

teppo: A matchlock musket. Guns were introduced into Japan by the Portuguese in the 1540s, and Japanese smiths quickly learned to make them. Because the bakufu did not encourage weapons innovations for fear of rebellion, Japanese firearms technology did not improve much until the nineteenth century. The matchlock was completely obsolete in Europe at the time of Blade of the Immortal.

The matchlock uses a slow match, which is a cord soaked in a nitrate solution and dried so it will burn slowly and evenly. The lit end of the cord is held in a spring-mounted clamp, the “serpentine”. When the trigger is pulled, the lit end of the cord moves down and ignites a small panful of gunpowder at the touchhole, which sets off the main charge of powder in the barrel and propels the bullet from the muzzle after a momentary delay.

The caliber of a typical *teppo* was a little under 16 mm, but could vary considerably up or down. The solid lead ball is very soft and expands to many times its width on impact. The exit wound from such a bullet can be truly enormous.

tokonoma: A niche in a room that holds display items, art or religious objects.

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

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

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

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

zegen: A licensed procurer who buys children and youths from impoverished families and re-sells them into the sex trade.