

ABSTINENCE EDUCATION

A BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL FAN FICTION STORY

BY MADAME MANGA



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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 Jūnin*, 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 THIRTY-FOUR

"Listen..."

His voice might have been cut out of him with a broken blade. Rin shut her eyes so hard that they hurt.

"Listen, girl... listen to me..."

What could he possibly have to say? What could a murderer say to anyone, especially to the daughter of a man he'd killed with his own hands? Rin's throat tightened; her stomach clenched with nausea.

"I'm sorry."

Rin's eyes flew open. O-Hama lowered her head so that she hid her face, and wrapped her body in her long sleeves as if for protection.

"I did it — it was me. I killed your daddy. I cut up your big brother. I don't think I remember it... but it was me." Manji took short, painful drags of breath. "I'm sorry. I know that don't mean a particle of shit. But I got to tell you anyway. I'm sor — "

"Be silent... scum!" Ryonosuke staggered up to the tree where Manji stood bound and swung his arm. His palm hit Manji's jaw with a smack; Manji grimaced and tilted his head back when the young man wound up for another blow. "Foul abuser! You... will not... address my lady!" He struck his captive in the face again, then shook his hand and wrung it in the other, mouthing an expression of pain.

"What the hell do you want?" Ryonosuke flinched at Manji's harsh rasp. "I was supposed to know? She's a whore, she's open for business, I needed to stick it in a woman even worse than you need a brain and a pair of balls! So I paid my money and I screwed her!"

Ryonosuke put a hand to his mouth and took a backwards step. Manji showed his teeth in a caricature of a grin, as if he comprehended a cosmic joke at his own expense. "Oh, I could tell she didn't like how I tasted. Pissed me off when I couldn't convince her otherwise." He shook his head, still displaying the sharp edges of his teeth. "But fuck me ragged, I don't figure any woman in that position was going to tell me the real problem! What the hell can I do now but say I'm sorry?"

"Then... then, my demands — "

"Yeah, dickless, I'm apologizing!" Manji barked a laugh. "To HER. I'll sprawl on my knees — to a whore. I'll grind my goddamn samurai forehead in the dirt and tell her I'm sorry, because I am sorry." He stopped and took a hard swallow. "When I did in all those officers... I was a beast. I was a frickin' blood-crazed animal... who'd forgotten everything but killing." Again he stopped and pulled his jaw tight. "Nothing I can do... will make up for even one of those deaths, see? But I got mine. Yeah — I got mine..."

Manji's gaze moved down and to the side, and then, as if impelled, in Rin's direction. He didn't meet her eyes; he seemed to fight his own throat's tension as he opened his lips to speak again.

"You acknowledge your fault?" Ryonosuke interrupted in a high, querulous tone. "You beg my — "

"*You*, little boy?" Manji's eye flared; his head snapped around. "*You* want an apology from me? For callin' you a few choice names and giving you what you deserved?"

"I... I... "

Manji noisily gathered saliva in his mouth and spat right between Ryonosuke's eyebrows. The gob splattered the bandage on his nose. "You can kiss — my hairy — ass."

Ryonosuke's face blotched red and white. He didn't strike again, however; his raised arm trembled in midair under the pressure of Manji's glare. He wiped his

defiled face on his brocade overcoat and retreated to O-Hama's side, looking utterly cowed.

"You should have taken my head for that, kid." Manji made a contemptuous sniff. "Yeah — and I should have cut your fucking chicken throat instead of clipping your beak. Guess samurai ain't all it's cracked up to be, hey?"

The young man seemed ready to cry. Manji curled his lips in a vicious smirk. Rin's heart beat fast. Again, though tied to a tree and weak from loss of blood, her outnumbered bodyguard commanded the situation. Perhaps he really could save her from these men, even now?

"Sorry, girl... I was going to tell you something else." Manji's expression changed when he looked at O-Hama. She gave no sign that she heard him address her. Manji's features worked and he took a few deep breaths.

"Listen. The last cop I killed was... my own sister's husband. In front of her, on the first pass — he took my right eye, the top of his skull hit the ground and — " Manji stared at his own feet. "She woke up believing she was three years old again... and that she could trust her big brother to keep her safe." He gave a dry chuckle. "That's how I knew for sure... that she'd lost her frickin' mind."

The hirelings all peered curiously at Rin as if expecting her to babble like an infant.

"I tried to give up the sword. I tried to confess my goddamn sins. You know what that got me? My crazy little sister, who I was trying to take care of, was cut to pieces in front of me." His chest heaved. "Payback."

Rin had never heard him say so much about Machi. Yaobikuni had recounted the story, by way of persuading her to search out that murdered girl's brother and hire him as her *yōjimbō*. Yes, dear, he killed a hundred officers, the ancient nun had told her... and lost the last person he had to love.

"I didn't go crazy... maybe. I just took up the sword again... and kept on killing." Manji raised his head. "You see that girl there? She got sent to me... so I could try again."

He shook, his teeth gritting; Rin saw torment flare in his expression. "She knows... better than anybody... how bad I screwed that up too. Yeah, Rin-chan?"

Rin's eyes opened wide. Why would he ask *her* forgiveness? "Manji-san?"

He didn't reply, but fixed his gaze on O-Hama again. "Lady, I reckon you want to take something out of me in exchange for a life and a couple of limbs. I did the crime. But this girl — " He nodded at Rin. "There's nothing you want from her. She's nothing to do with what I was then — I never met her until six months ago. Just tell your man to let her go, see? Then I'll — "

"How d-dare you!" spluttered Ryonosuke.

"Shut up, little boy. I'm talkin' to the lady, not you!" After a few moments of silence, Manji quirked his mouth. "Sorry, ma'am. I'm just saying he'd set her free... if *you* asked him." The hirelings muttered and grumbled, but didn't speak out loud.

Again O-Hama gave no sign that she had heard. Manji grimaced slightly. "You say you were born samurai, and you talk like you know what that means." His chest expanded with a deep breath. "She's samurai herself — she's the daughter of Asano Takayoshi, Mutenichi-ryū. That ought to say something, hey?"

Rin bit her lips. Maybe by humbling himself he could gain a little mercy for her, even though he'd insulted O-Hama's lover to the greatest possible degree. What about his own case?

"She's only a kid. She's in kind of the same... well, it's never the same, but you two girls got a bit in common. She tried to do what you did — something like it, anyhow — and she meant it for her family's honor. But — " Manji hesitated; it seemed he had second thoughts about this line of appeal. "But I wouldn't... " His words fell to a whisper. "I wouldn't let her..."

Manji's voice failed him; his mouth opened and he stared over O-Hama's head. The blue sky's reflection filmed the dark iris of his good eye. Some vital quality in him seemed to go blind; his focus turned inward.

The air felt heavy and tense, like the harbinger of a thunderstorm. No one spoke, as if Manji's silence dictated to them. Rin strained to read her bodyguard's dark and working face. What was he talking about? Like what O-Hama had done?

Sell her body, he meant. To buy revenge. Cold fingers crawled over her skin. Manji hadn't allowed her to prostitute herself to him; he'd reproved her like a big brother and then taken up his sword for her, as if he'd always meant to agree. He had never told her why his answer had so abruptly changed...

Manji made a grimace tinged with despair, as if disgusted at what he saw in his own mind, and closed his eye.

"Manji-san! You haven't done anything wrong — uh, I mean..." Rin glanced at the spectators with trepidation. "You're... you only let yourself be human!"

"Human? My ass." He shook his head. "What kind of *bushi* am I? I had a man's job to do... and I blew it."

"What? Oh, no, Manji-san, I was the one who never should have — "

Manji opened his eye and gave her a level glare. "I ran off and left you on your own. Because of nothing I should have given one warm shit about. I knew my duty and I knew what I had to do to honor it, and all I could think about was a goddamn female."

Rin's mouth dropped open.

Manji let out a deprecating snort. "Aw, not like it's a woman's fault, what she does to a guy — a cat scratches because it's a cat. It's a man's business to keep his hands off the pretty pussy in the first place." He laughed with a coarse rasp. "Nope, I'm the one that went soft in the head! If I'd kept you three paces behind me — or even let you walk right where you belonged... well, look at me now. Tied to a fucking tree and begging pardon from a whore!"

Quivering, Rin lowered her head. Honor... and duty? If he had persuaded her to abandon her own duty in his arms, maybe he'd accuse himself with the same regrets now...

"Samurai." Manji's voice cracked on a chuckle, still hoarse and rough. "Yeah, that's what we were born to be... the whole goddamn bunch of us." He looked back at O-Hama. "Doesn't matter if you've lost caste, lady — I'll credit you anyhow. You want to show me... how much samurai you got?"

At last, she raised her face and met his gaze. Her beautiful features might have been fired of white porcelain.

Manji's crooked smile gradually faded as he looked into O-Hama's unblinking eyes; he set his jaw and drew his brows together.

"Uh... wh-what..." Ryonosuke stuck out his lower lip and spoke in a tone that might have sounded pugnacious without the pronounced stammer. "*What* shall I... How do you w-wish me to punish him, my lady?"

O-Hama's whisper was barely audible. "Punish... him?"

"Yes, punish him! I... I meant to bring him in alive, but I had no idea of the depths of his iniquity until now! Declare your verdict — your word is my law! Sh-shall I execute him on the spot?" He looked around for his dropped sword and gestured to the gaping boy, who scuffed in the grass and brought the weapon to him.

O-Hama averted her face and made a small gesture. "No... he will live."

Rin let out a long breath she wasn't aware she had been holding. Manji only compressed his lips a little more tightly, as if he knew he hadn't heard the whole of his sentence.

"V-very well." Ryonosuke bowed. "But, please, O-Hama-*dono*, allow me to act on your behalf in some way, before I deliver this foul beast to Edo. Shall he be beaten? Yes?" His eyes brightened and he swished the long *tachi* through the air as if it were a rattan cane. "My men will beat him severely, like a dog or a commoner!"

O-Hama made a slight sound that might have been a suppressed laugh.

"My lady?"

She looked towards Manji, though not into his face. His bloody clothes bunched around his hips, his outstretched arms lashed to branches like a crucified prisoner's. Her gaze paused on the slowly fading flushed splotch below his collarbone, the only trace remaining of the bullet wound.

"So long." Her soft voice sounded clearer; she had mastered her tears. "Three years and more. So often I imagined... what I would do at a moment like this. I knew that the author of my family's woe would never come under my hand... but he has."

O-Hama's pink lips parted; her head tilted back. For a moment she looked almost ecstatic, her body shaking with sharp little trembles. "Revenge. I dreamed so long... of revenge."

Rin struggled to hold back her own tears. Manji was right — she and O-Hama had many sorrows in common. Like two sides of the same page...

"I thought of taxing the murderer with his crimes when I confronted him. I thought he would deny his guilt. I pictured him blustering, threatening, cursing..." She touched her mouth with the back of her hand. "My brother said

that such hardened criminals often had to be tortured before they would confess. I imagined the murderer as a craven coward, begging for mercy at the first pangs..."

Manji watched O-Hama with an uneasy frown. For an instant, her pearly teeth showed between her lips, but she kept her dreamy expression. "My brother often describes the agonies he would inflict on his crippler. He speaks of execution by flaying, or by burning alive. And after a death long in coming... he dwells on the torments of *Mugen Jigoku*... the everlasting hell."

Rin's ears prickled as the skin tightened on the back of her neck. Although she pitied his condition, she didn't much like how O-Hama described her brother; she had a sense that even his sister's natural affection had undergone some severe tests.

"I did not enjoy talk of such horrors. I believed that human beings should not be made to suffer the tortures of the hells, fit only to transform damned souls into demons. Even such a man as the killer of a hundred..."

"Allow me, O-Hama-dono! I will give him what his arrogance deserves!"

"My lord, his mind is not at all as I imagined it." O-Hama meditatively shook her head. "He admits what he has done, and he is remorseful. The only mercy he begs is for another. What can I say to him now?"

Rin knew how it felt to discover that her hated enemy might not be the demon she had believed him; she swallowed a lump in her throat. O-Hama seemed to be taking it more gracefully than she had...

"Remorseful? He is feigning!"

"Feigning?" O-Hama gave a high trilling laugh, startling Rin. For the first time she sounded like a professional. "No, my lord — not so. I know too well 'the taste of a courtesan's tears.'" The young man's face fell in confusion.

O-Hama straightened and moved towards Manji, taking slow steps but not faltering. She stopped a pace's distance from the tree and extended one hand, her nails groomed into fine points. She reached up to just below Manji's collarbone. With her fingertip she followed the outline of the healed wound, almost but not quite touching his skin. "This was not feigned, because it happened before my eyes." Her lips parted as she examined Manji's lean chest, her eyes scanning its many scars. "This man gave his body to the bullet. He fell at the feet of this girl,

his heart's blood pouring from his breast." She took a deep breath. "I believed him dead."

Manji's face twitched, a tight muscle pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"I rejoiced in his death. But how strange, I thought... that this vile criminal, who thought nothing of taking so many men's lives... should have laid down his own life for a woman."

Manji's body gave a half-suppressed jolt. Rin tried to hide her burning blush against her shoulder. O-Hama had listened to everything they said, and even if Ryonosuke couldn't make out the truth, an experienced courtesan of obvious intelligence could probably take it in at a glance. She was their ultimate judge, as Manji had immediately understood; everything might ride on how one wronged woman weighed their characters and deeds.

"Girl. Who are you?"

Her? Rin flinched.

"My lord maintained that you were brother and sister. This man says his sister is dead, and that you were sent to him in her stead. What does he mean?" O-Hama left Manji and moved towards Rin's tree. The two of them seemed to stand almost the same height, though Rin had lost her *geta* in the forest. Under the oversized men's clothing, O-Hama looked more filled out and nubile than Rin. "Who is this man to you?"

"Uhm..." Rin choked and then cleared her throat. "He... he's my bodyguard! Like he said?"

O-Hama tilted her head and lifted a brow. "He called you... Rin?" Rin nodded. "O-Rin-san, how old are you?"

Rin's eyes opened wider at the calm courtesy of O-Hama's address. "Ah... I'm sixteen."

"I've just turned eighteen." She smiled slightly; Rin cringed a little at her beauty, which struck her as even more perfect at close range. "Yes, he is your *yōjimbō* – he's amply proved that. But he also spoke as if he wished to claim you, as your lover."

“Err...” Rin flushed dark and looked away, cursing Manji’s unguarded talk. They could suffer far more than embarrassment, if O-Hama took that the wrong way... or even if she didn’t.

“Perhaps he also meant to prove that claim?”

“Uh... I... I guess you’d have to ask HIM that, wouldn’t you?” Rin involuntarily glanced at Manji. He stared at her and gave a brief, tense shake of the head. Not to answer, or to deny what he’d said? Rin creased her brows, and then realized: O-Hama wouldn’t accept any other testimony, especially Manji’s. It was all up to her.

So far, Rin had no idea which way the verdict might turn. At least O-Hama was asking questions first...

“You were sent to him?”

“Well, yes — by an old nun I met, who knew him and — ”

“To have him protect you? To let him atone in part for his sins, perhaps?”

“Yes!” Rin blazed up. “He’s done so much to keep me safe — he’s killed — uh, I mean...” She gulped and started again. “He’s been hurt so many times, defending me! And he went all the way to Kaga just to find me — ”

“He has spared no effort for you?” An almost imperceptible edge in O-Hama’s soft voice. “Acted righteously even at cost to himself?”

“Of course he has! He’s a... he’s like... a... a big brother!”

“What a comfort that must be to your loyal protector — when his ghosts throng around him.” A flicker behind her long lashes. “O-Rin-san, are you a virgin?”

Rin gasped. Straight to the point!

“Six months. Has he taken you in his pillow yet?”

Manji’s teeth clicked together and sweat glittered on his forehead. The question horrified him — why? Not because he feared exposure, Rin thought — he’d exposed himself quite enough already! In confusion, she didn’t reply.

O-Hama prompted her. “Has this man had you?”

“Errm...” Rin hastily glanced around at the spectators. The bandit and ronin listened with obviously prurient interest. She couldn’t explain fine distinctions in front of these disgusting men! She wished she could read Manji’s thoughts more clearly, but he wouldn’t even meet her eyes. All up to her! Rin clenched her jaw and lifted her chin. “Why... why do you want to know that?”

O-Hama arched a feathery eyebrow. “A virgin, he said to me in scorn. A skinny virgin could have satisfied him where I did not.” She examined Rin’s figure as if assessing her sale price. “I didn’t realize his words might have a meaning beyond insult...”

Rin puffed with indignation. “Manji-*san* hasn’t done anything wrong! I — I AM a virgin!”

“Ah?” O-Hama blinked as if a little startled at Rin’s heat. “I’m inclined to believe you.”

“Uh... you are?”

“Yes, you may well be telling the literal truth. And yet... he calls you his woman and declares that no other man will have you.” O-Hama looked towards Manji. “If the killer of a hundred were to take advantage of his power over a friendless girl... how would that reflect on the remorse he feels for his murders? On his possibility of redemption?”

“Men aren’t all the same! Some of them aren’t anything like — ” Rin cast an angry glance at the leering bandit. “Manji-*san* wouldn’t ever...”

Her face flamed and her voice failed.

“Wouldn’t he?” Sarcasm lightly tinted O-Hama’s tone. “Your trustworthy bodyguard treated me exactly as many men have. More so, if anything.”

“More so?”

“The evening he visited me, seven days ago, he possessed me twice in half an hour’s space. He placed me as he wished and entered me forcefully — ”

“My lady!” Ryonosuke clenched his teeth and put his fingers in his ears. Manji made an irritated, half-embarrassed grimace at the snickering spectators; O-Hama probably wasn’t exaggerating.

"Men are indeed all the same, girl. They think they can purchase absolute claim to a woman's body, whether they pay in gold or in blood. I was afraid my father's murderer meant to hold me captive all night, since release did not sate him. I didn't think I could keep from betraying myself... if he took me again with such... vehemence." A peculiar suppressed shiver rippled through her; she shook out a little laugh. "I had to demand more money and make a scene before that animal would let me go!"

O-Hama's throat rippled with a tight swallow. She took a deep breath, observed Rin's anguished blushes, then leaned a little closer. That indescribable hardness again froze over her beauty.

"Yes, you are skinny. But at sixteen, you rapidly approach womanhood... and you must have changed greatly in half a year. If the killer of a hundred hasn't taken you yet... little sister... it's not because he isn't hungry for a woman. Nor because it's never occurred to him that you are his any time he wants you." A cynical sneer worthy of Manji lifted the side of her pretty mouth. "It's because it doesn't suit his greater purposes to steal your maidenhead. That's all." She turned and paced towards Manji again.

Rin cringed. No, O-Hama wasn't nearly as easy to fool as her lover...

"So you are a cleft stick he has cut for himself." O-Hama circled behind Manji's tree and faced round to him. She scanned his features, two fingers delicately poised over her lips. "To claim your body, though he has purchased you with his blood, is to destroy all his illusions of accomplishment. He couldn't take the virgin for whom he burns... so in her stead, he chose a whore."

Manji made a low sound in his throat, though he stared resolutely ahead.

"Perhaps, after he encountered me, it seemed that no woman could give him ease. Only the girl he could not have." Her cheeks moved under her concealing hand as if she smiled. "What torments he must have suffered..."

Rin hyperventilated, her lungs constricted. Each breath pained her. All her fault, no matter what Manji said — her own heedless, selfish impulses. She closed her eyes in despair. If she had never asked her bodyguard for a kiss, never given him too much money, never even dreamed of him...

"Thus, when he flung himself between you and the gun, it was for his hopeless love as well as for his duty." A soft, almost dreamy sigh. "For that sacrifice alone... I could have forgiven him... everything."

“What?” Rin’s eyes flew open. Manji looked stunned, though not less uneasy.

“Would you not pay homage even to your greatest enemy for such an end?” O-Hama raised her hands to Manji, then clasped them before her. “Faced with the possibility of dishonor, instead he welcomed a valiant death!”

“Uh... b-because he...?” Rin could barely speak for the lift of her heart. This woman might know something about hopeless love herself...

O-Hama nodded gravely, a faraway look in her eyes. She examined the periphery of Manji’s face, avoiding his gaze. “The moment he fell, I realized his motives must be greater than I had assumed. More human... perhaps even noble. With the gush of his blood, I meant to wash out every mark he had left...”

“You did?” Rin exchanged a look with Manji, flushed with hope. To her shock, his lips peeled back and he ground his teeth. What was wrong? Everything O-Hama said accorded with *bushido*. Death was a samurai’s focus: his only honorable object in life was to die well. Bravely sacrificing himself in the performance of a duty —

Manji couldn’t die. Even if he wanted to.

Rin felt a slow, dreadful, downward pull to her vitals. As if in response, O-Hama’s brows tightened; her eyelids lowered to slits.

“I recalled every detail of his flesh... the scars upon scars that crossed his limbs. He... he had kissed me with that hard mouth...” O-Hama raised her little chin and skimmed a soft gesture over Manji’s face, again not quite touching him. He stood like stone, his eye locked to her. Her gaze moved no higher than his lips. “Perhaps he didn’t mean to treat me ungently, but the marks of his hands remained on my skin...”

A shiver of emotion distorted her features; she wiped one hand down her upper arm. “I could not blot out the memory of how my father’s murderer had used me. Though he had left my bed, he still would not let me go.” She hid her eyes with her sleeve. “I often thought... if I took myself from this life, I would not have to remember this man’s body any longer...”

“My darling!” Ryonosuke reached out, but O-Hama didn’t turn to him. She held out a hand to ward him off and kept her face concealed.

“Now he lay dead before me. I wanted to remember nothing about him. Except his death.” She gave a shuddering gasp and remained silent for a few moments.

When she lifted her head, she didn't immediately open her eyes. "I looked only at the great wound that had killed him. I felt, for the first time since my father died... something approaching peace."

Manji sagged a little in his bonds. O-Hama tilted her head up and met his gaze. "I never took my eyes from that ghastly cavity. I meant to memorize it forever." She stared directly at him without a quiver. "For a little while, nothing changed. Then, beneath the blood and blackened ruin, I saw his torn flesh, his blasted organs... draw together again."

The hirelings listened with rapt attention.

"The wound wove itself through with thickening strands, a translucent web of flesh. His shattered ribs extended and joined like the rafters of a house. Under the spreading membranes, shapes writhed and expanded like a mound of hellish insects. They emerged from seeming death, but they were alive..." O-Hama's mouth distorted for a moment. "Alive! I wondered — was I losing my mind?"

She trilled her startling, flirtatious laugh. "Do you remember the taste of a woman's madness so well, 'elder brother'?" Ryonosuke watched in obvious consternation. "Tell me, killer of a hundred! Had I taken leave of my senses?"

Manji looked at her for long moments, then slowly shook his head once, as if it were almost too heavy to move.

"Th-that's not possible!" Ryonosuke pointed at Mado. "The *gaijin* says the bullet only grazed him!"

"Look at him, my lord!" O-Hama indicated Manji's stoic expression. "He is well aware of his nature."

Hebi wagged a triumphant finger at Mado, who waved it away with a grunt. The bandit's knees knocked and he put his hands together in prayer as if to ward off an evil spirit. Ryonosuke expostulated.

"You are weary from the journey — you've had no refreshment for hours — my lady, please don't speak as if this insanity were true! You distress me greatly!"

"Then watch, if you still doubt." She raised her right hand. Her slim white fingers curled into claws, and she raked her pointed nails across the tender new skin of Manji's just-healed wound.

He let a sharp grunt through his teeth, but did not move. Blood pearled in the furrows she tore through his flesh. The separate drops ran together and coalesced; warm red trickled down Manji's chest. O-Hama watched with deadly calm. Manji blinked away sweat that ran into his eye and kept it closed.

"He suffers pain and lust like any man. But when he used his body to shield his woman, he knew that he would not die. What can pain and sacrifice mean, if a warrior cannot give up his life in service to his duty? What can love mean?"

A chilly, buzzing whine in Rin's ears.

"A man's sacrifice means all the world. An honorable death, bravely welcomed, may redeem him from the most dreadful iniquity. But — this is not a man." She took a cloth from her sleeve, wet it with a water container she carried at her belt and wiped Manji's chest. "You see?"

Of course, there was nothing to see. The deep scratches that O-Hama had inflicted were gone. Only the still-descending drops of fresh blood striped Manji's abdomen.

A collective indrawn breath from the spectators: a muttered curse or two. Rin had taken the bloodworms for granted for a long time; whether Manji had been half-gutted or merely grazed was all one to his immortal flesh. She had never before shuddered while watching his wounds disappear, as if by reasonless sorcery...

"This, my lord... is a demon."

PART THIRTY-FIVE

"Cut off both his hands...?" Ryonosuke echoed O-Hama. He looked at his *tachi* as if she'd demanded that he use a priceless porcelain vase to bail out a sewer. The blade shone with a silky gleam; although it was a deadly weapon, probably it had never touched anything harsher than a polishing puff. The expression on his lover's beautiful face resembled that sword in a way, thought Rin. "And his legs as well? But... even if his wounds heal so quickly..."

"My word is your law?" she snapped.

"Uh... yes, of course." Ryonosuke bowed to her and gripped his gilt-ornamented ivory hilt. "I shall carry out your just verdict, O-Hama-dono..."

Manji grimaced, but Rin sensed a flicker of amusement. Lose some limbs? What else was new? He straightened and raised his chin. "So, little boy... you have some plan for delivering me to Edo Castle when I've got no legs to walk there?"

O-Hama and Ryonosuke looked at each other.

"Glad to see you've considered all the details, idiot. I'd suggest the horse, but..." Manji jerked his head at their mount. The horse stretched its neck down towards the grass, but Ryonosuke had not allowed enough slack in the reins for it to graze. "Just for your information, hauling in a prisoner you've chopped to bits is not going to score you points with the *banshu*, no matter why they want my carcass. I was a cop once myself... there are rules about shit like that. Even for torturing out confessions!"

"Foul fiend — so you beg for mercy after all?" O-Hama made a sniff of contempt.

Manji snorted back at her and twitched his nose. "Look, lady, it's not like I'm gonna give you an argument. Demon?" He let out a mirthless laugh. "Go ahead. Cut 'em all off, and you can stick the pieces back on when you're finished! How

fucking human is that?" He gave a sour glance to Ryonosuke and looked back at her. "Where I come up short is letting HIM carry out the verdict!"

O-Hama stood silent, her lips tense.

"I've wronged you... to the death. Nobody with your claims has to accept an apology. You want to walk over here and make me regret I was ever born, that's your right." Manji showed his teeth. "Not that spoiled brat of a *hatamoto*! You were samurai, girl — hold the blade in your own hands. I killed your daddy. I cut pieces off your big brother — so freakin' take your revenge!"

O-Hama turned her back on him. Rin glimpsed her face in profile; for an instant cold rage contorted through her outward composure.

"OK, we'll leave you two lovebirds with yer toy." Mado laughed and strode past Ryonosuke. The big foreigner had to make a detour to avoid bumping against the wide shoulder shields of his colorful antique armor. The young man looked up from his sword, startled.

"Where are you going?"

"Boss, this is fascinatin' stuff and all, but you don't need five of us just to torture this guy to death. Have fun." He beckoned to Hebi with a quick motion of his head and approached Rin's tree.

"But I am not going to kill — "

"You touch her — " Manji raised a glare when Mado put a hand on the trunk near Rin's shoulder.

"Chill, dude." Hebi sidled over and picked up Rin's bag and sword. "We're not the guys you should worry about..."

"Hey!" The bandit flushed dark; he and the boy converged on Rin as well. "You assholes quit trying to swipe my deal!"

Mado ignored him and reached behind the tree. Rin felt a light tug on the doubled cords around her waist and upper arms, and instantly the loops released and fell to the ground. He'd used some sort of trick knot? Her wrists were still tied in front of her, and Mado's hand emerged with the cord. "Let's get going, sweetheart." He took a few turns of the tether around his own wrist and pulled Rin towards him. She tried to yank away, sending a look of frantic appeal to Manji.

He clenched his fists and flexed his elbows against the ropes on his arms; the knots creaked. "You aren't taking her out of my sight, dammit!"

"Relax. Our buyer prefers his girls unbusted, so she's keeping it as far as I'm concerned." Mado shrugged. "Guess I'll allow ya the benefit of the doubt on that one, *yōjimbō*. Uh, where was it you said you'd jammed yer fool head?" He guffawed; Manji snarled at him.

The threadbare *ronin* strode towards them, pointing at Rin. "That is not your decision to make, *gaijin*. I am not interested in filthy cash!"

"So I gather, ya Jappo flower-plucker." The big foreigner sneered. "Personally, me and my buddy here ain't interested in wastin' a good commodity. With what we'll get for this little virgin, we can buy us enough women to last a month. *And* the drink to go with them." Mado tapped his forehead and towed Rin towards the trees, roughly northward. "You damn samurai ought to grow some business sense."

Although she'd lost her bearings while being carried to this spot, Rin didn't think the road lay in this direction. Then where did he mean to take her? Rin leaned backwards and tried to dig in her heels, but Mado easily dragged her with him. Hebi took up the rear. The bandit broke into a jog to cut them off, his paunch bouncing. The pimply boy slunk behind him.

"No!" Ryonosuke made a plaintive gesture with his sword, looking even younger than his nineteen years. "I — you can't leave yet — we need you to help us take our prisoner to Edo!"

"Sonny, you ain't gonna have a prisoner after your lady there starts layin' down the law." Mado and Manji exchanged a hard look from a distance, almost sharing a conclusion. Manji's lip curled up and he switched the look to O-Hama. "I don't care if he knows how to grow a new head — every man's got his limits, and she'll find 'em. Just by way of warning." He waved in dismissal.

"You two jokers!" The bandit swerved in to seize Rin's tether and stopped Mado. "You horn in at the last minute, you don't make a move when this one-eyed asshole is pinking us right and left, and you won't even take advantage of the benefits!" He peevishly indicated the clumsy bandage where his ear had been. "What's your damn game?"

"No game, dude! We just ain't as impatient as you." Hebi thumped the bandit on the back with a convivial grin, as if calculating how to slip a knife between his

ribs. “We didn’t say we were squeezin’ you out of the purse. Come on along and meet our buyer — great guy! Wait till you get your cut.” He threw a broad wink at Mado, who rolled his eyes.

The *ronin* grasped the hilt of his sword. “The maiden stays here, or there will be blood shed!”

“Crap, you want blood? Hang around, if you like, and watch these crazy kids peel chunks off ol’ Manji-san. They’ll be at it a good long while.” Mado pointed his chin at the declining sun. “There’s three hours of daylight left, give or take. Just about enough time to hand off our little prize and hit a decent inn with the proceeds, if we hustle now!”

Caught in the middle of the knot of arguing men, Rin twisted and shrank away from them. At close range, the bandit’s breath and his greasy mustache smelled so foul that her stomach turned over. Mado yanked her tether out of his hand and the bandit tried to grab it back. “M-Manji-san!”

Her bodyguard still worked at his bonds, his teeth clenched and the tendons pulling in his neck. He threw himself from side to side, and the stout tree gave out a strained groan.

“Um — hear me, my men! We will not delay you long.” Ryonosuke gave Manji’s struggles an apprehensive glance and appealed to the *ronin*. “Please stop them, Fujikata-san! You pledged me your faithful service, on your honor as a samurai!”

“Yes, lord. I shall not allow anyone to leave until you order it!” The *ronin* bowed, and then slipped a look at Rin that disgusted her even more than the bandit’s stench.

Hebi shoved the bandit aside; he and Mado headed towards the woods again. The bandit and Fujikata stood together to block their path; both hirelings threatened moves towards their weapons when the *Ittō-ryū* men tried to sidestep them.

Mado drew Rin behind him and ground his jaw. Hebi made a soft hiss past pursed lips. They halted, apparently unwilling to fight their way through.

Rin looked at Hebi’s tattooed chest looming behind her, almost like a shield. The *Ittō-ryū* men’s motives perplexed her just as much as they did the bandit. They didn’t want to draw now and strike down a couple of inferior swordsmen they intended to kill anyway? Her safety in the middle of an all-out battle seemed to

concern them excessively, even if they were mostly interested in keeping her intact to sell for a higher price.

Hebi gave Rin a brief, unaccountable smirk when he noticed her scrutiny, then turned to watch their rear and backed up against her. The bandit's boy circled them with his sling in hand. The two fighters stood in an immobile huddle, with Rin squeezed between them like the filling in a rice ball.

Ryonosuke sighed in relief and turned to O-Hama. Manji also looked slightly relieved, obviously for different reasons. His face and bare chest ran with sweat.

"I... I will sever his right hand to pay for the one your brother lost, O-Hama-dono." Ryonosuke brandished his sword. "Yes? Then we can have my men take him to the authorities and let them deal with him, demon or not."

O-Hama shook her head. A stray lock of hair fell over her high forehead, giving her an unbalanced air. "No... that is not enough!"

"My lady — I cannot keep them much longer!" He pointed at the standoff. "Please... if they abandon us — "

She seemed about to vent another outburst, then gestured in frustration. "Very well. One hand!"

"Will you men remain at least until that's finished? Please!"

"Shit, like we got a choice..." grumbled Mado. He and Hebi gradually stood at ease and gave Rin a little room. "Get it over with!"

"Come on, little boy." Manji grinned at Ryonosuke and rolled his shoulders. Though the sailor's hitches held fast, Manji's exertions had slightly stretched the ropes and gained him some freedom of movement. Raw welts faded from his biceps and forearms as Rin watched from under Hebi's arm. "Let's see you try it!"

Ryonosuke lifted the gleaming *tachi* high over his head and advanced, keeping a wary eye on Manji's unbound legs. The weapon's reach was probably long enough to allow him to strike at Manji's arm without venturing within kicking distance, but Rin wondered how much sword skill he could have gained since losing the duel with her. He halted a couple of generous paces from Manji's tree and settled his stance, self-consciously shuffling his feet into position. Squinting along the blade, he took an over-careful measure of his stroke. Manji gripped the

branches to which his arms were lashed and slightly bent his knees as if preparing to push off from the ground.

“Wait, my lord!” O-Hama interrupted when Ryonosuke straightened up to swing.

“What?”

“Even though his wounds will seal themselves, the pain may cloud his mind.” She put a hand to her lips, her eyes scanning back and forth. “No... not yet!”

Ryonosuke lowered the sword with a puff of breath and an unmistakable look of relief. “What do you wish me to do, then?”

O-Hama didn’t reply. She focused on Manji for a few moments: revulsion filled her expression, mixed with an odd note of fascination. Rin drew a breath through closed teeth. Her impression of O-Hama had changed from her first impulse of outraged sympathy, but she still felt sorrow for her ordeals. How dreadful to have to flatter a man who disgusted you, and try to persuade him that you enjoyed his touch!

Rin couldn’t imagine how a pleasure woman submitted to such indignities even in ordinary circumstances. She shivered and blushed; her bodyguard had taken her in ways she’d had no idea existed, and although she had opened her arms to him with eagerness, sometimes fear or pain almost overcame her desire. Maybe you just got used to it, one way or another...

Manji and O-Hama engaged in a staring match; he seemed determined to search further into her mind if he could, and she both resisted his advance and seemed unable to break eye contact. An intuition brushed Rin’s mind as she examined the queer look on the other woman’s face. O-Hama had said she remembered every detail of Manji’s body, and of what he had done with hers. She longed to blot out the memory, even with her own death.

Years of obsessive fantasies centered on her phantom enemy — and then to recognize him only at the moment he possessed her? Rin bit her lips.

O-Hama might have feared Manji would kill her if she let slip that she knew who he was. But he wouldn’t have treated O-Hama brutally, even if he was used to relaxing his restraints with experienced women. He’d tried to make her like it to the best of his ability, and he wasn’t unskilled in the pillow.

Rin creased her brows and looked at each of them in turn. Had Manji really

failed as completely as he'd thought?

She seemed to open her eyes to a memory so clear it hurt: to confront the face of the only person who would stop to give her water. His sharp, smooth features; his graceful economy of movement. Every detail of his body. She had known him instantly with only the barest of glimpses from a distance, even disguised and hampered as he must have been. Rin shuddered as if insects crawled over her skin. What had Manji said about what a woman could do with hate?

Her face went cold. A woman who had so much reason to despise and fear a man, and who had no other knowledge of him at all? Her hate might have multiplied a thousandfold if he gave her even the briefest moment of pleasure...

O-Hama abruptly turned away from Manji; her eyes met Rin's. Both women stared at each other for a moment of overlapping, transparent thoughts. O-Hama's eyes dilated wide, as if her own ideas startled her. For an instant Rin saw only an angry, wounded girl. Desperate for justice and her family's honor, or for simple revenge — at any cost, to anyone. All on fire, untempered and unquenched. A girl who didn't think twice before offering her innocence as a killer's wages, but who had never yet seen the blood of a human being she called an enemy. Rin's knees wobbled and her mouth opened in appeal.

"O-Hama-*dono*? What is your desire?"

O-Hama broke eye contact, looked down at Rin's body and compressed her lips to white lines. Pain and violence trembled in her clenched hands.

"We... I will strip him of his last redemption..."

"My lady?"

"This girl!" She aimed a finger at Rin, but looked away.

"What?" Ryonosuke looked shocked, and Manji stopped yanking against the ropes to listen.

"As you know, my lord, I can retrieve some gold I saved over the past few months. I will promise it all to these men as compensation for lost value."

"What? But that's all the money we — "

She beckoned to the *Ittō-ryū* fighters. "The money is hidden a few hours' journey from here. Fifteen *ryō*! More than sufficient, since she wouldn't bring more than thirty, even with her *mizuage*."

"Hey, hey!" The bandit rubbed his hands. "Who wouldn't stick around for that?" Mado and Hebi shifted stance; although they didn't confer, clearly neither entertained any interest in the offer.

"But... but what do you mean to pay for, my lady?" Ryonosuke's face screwed up as if he didn't want to hear the answer. Manji looked as if he knew it already.

"Pain will not daunt him, nor even mutilation. He has felt them too often to fear them now." Manji's mouth twitched at that. "But the killer of a hundred can still suffer every agony of failure." O-Hama let out a shaky laugh. "Her violation is his violation!"

Ryonosuke's jaw fell slack. Manji's teeth snapped together.

"He took my father's life. He took my brother's limbs. His 'little sister' — his precious woman — will lose what *I* have lost." O-Hama wept in painful rage. "Chastity and honor! Shame them both together! A woman he has protected, whose body he thinks he owns — These men will strip her naked, and he will witness her defilement. Here! *Now!*"

For a moment, silence that hammered the senses. Rin could not draw breath; her legs sagged and Hebi supported her before she fell. He and Mado muttered a quick exchange she could make no sense of; they might have been debating whether to make a run for it.

A rising rumble penetrated her ears — not from her own pounding heart. Both of Manji's eyes seemed to bulge and his face grew fiery red. His mouth stretched to a demon's mask and his voice swelled to an incoherent roar. He thrashed and arched his whole body against the shaking tree. Dry leaves dislodged and fell around him in a shower. He sounded like a wild bear fighting a pack of hunting dogs. Across the clearing, the tethered horse tossed its head and rolled frightened eyes.

"O-Hama-*dono!*" The young man took a backwards step. He stared at his lover as if she had sprouted fangs like a flesh-eating ogress. "Holy name of *Amida Butsu*
— "

O-Hama cried out over Manji's furious yells. "If you love me, my lord, give me my revenge! What else have I lived for?" She tore the tie from her long hair and shook it forward to hide her face.

With a sharp report, the branch that held Manji's right arm cracked and split several ways down the middle. It didn't break away from the tree, but when the splintered sections shifted and collapsed inwards, the double hitch on Manji's wrist went slack.

He worked his hand out through the loop and yanked it down the branch. The other hitches sagged loose. Ryonosuke yelled in alarm and dashed at him, then realized his danger and skidded to a stop.

Manji dragged his arm free of the ropes. He lunged and caught the projecting edge of Ryonosuke's shoulder shield as he tried to retreat. Ryonosuke lurched forward, off balance and pinwheeling his arms. Manji seized him by the throat.

O-Hama shrieked. Ryonosuke struggled and thumped Manji on the head with the pommel of his *tachi*; the blade was too long to stab him at such close range. When Manji tried to catch the hilt in his jaws, the young man had a sudden attack of common sense, and flung the sword out of his adversary's reach.

Choking and convulsing, he clutched Manji's wrist with both hands and tried to break his grip. Manji's arm flexed, his lean muscles knotting across his chest. He had left swatches of skin on the tree's rough bark and ripped the back of his hand against the splinters. Blood stained the bright silk braid of the armor. Ryonosuke rose up on his toes, lifted by one hand. He let out a strangled cry; his face turned dark purple. Manji grinned like a wolf.

Hebi darted past the startled bandit and the boy while Rin watched in amazed excitement. He leaped and seized Manji's right wrist. Manji roared again and kicked Hebi's feet from under him before he could latch on with both hands.

Hebi twisted his body and landed on his upper back, as nimbly as if he had meant to take the dive. He rolled behind the tree and flipped upright. Then he ducked under the split branch and came at Manji again from behind. Rin yelped in warning.

Braced against the bole of the tree, Manji aimed a kick at Hebi's knee. Hebi jumped in the air, caught a branch and swung from it. Before Manji could pull back, he gripped the outflung leg between his thighs. He locked one foot behind his other knee to keep Manji trapped and pulled himself higher into the tree. Off

balance, Manji grimaced and jerked his body, trying to free his leg and keep control of the thrashing Ryonosuke.

Hebi leaped from his height and seized Manji's choking arm on the way down. Manji swung Ryonosuke into him, never letting go of the young man's throat. Hebi took Ryonosuke's flailing feet in the shins and his metal-edged shoulder shield in the mouth. He jerked backwards, slipped and lost his lock on Manji's leg. Manji kicked him off. Hebi rolled away in a cloud of dirt, spitting out blood from a cut lip.

Mado dropped Rin's tether, moved in on Manji's left and shot a heavy fist at his stomach. Manji blocked the blow with an abruptly raised knee, then planted his heel in Mado's groin with a side kick.

It was a quick, awkward move without much force behind it, but Mado doubled over. The big foreigner staggered backwards, clutching his crotch and groaning. Hebi bounced up again and wrapped his hands around Manji's right wrist. He struggled to pry his grip off Ryonosuke's throat while warding off a flurry of kicks.

Mado threw up his head, scowling. An angry flush showed under his scraggly beard. "Jappo asshole!"

Instead of punching again or trying to drag Ryonosuke free, he lunged straight for Manji. He slammed his chest into Manji's left side and threw a thick arm around his neck as if to throttle him. Manji growled and snapped at Mado's biceps. Mado shifted his grip lower, grabbed the back of Manji's neck and jammed the heel of his other hand to the side of his skull. He bore down from his superior height, forcing Manji's head sideways towards his shoulder. Under the weight and assault of three men, Manji's knees started to buckle. He yelled in pain when Mado jerked on his neck.

Rin belatedly realized she was free. Except for her bound wrists, nothing restrained her, and the hirelings were watching the struggle around Manji. She glanced around at the trees and deep underbrush, but instead of fleeing into the forest, she made a dash for the center of the clearing. There stood five of Manji's naked blades, still planted in a fence. They cast their variously-shaped shadows over the trampled grass, their honed angles gleaming.

Fujikata yelped and ran after her, closely followed by the bandit. Rin scraped one wrist on the razor edge of the *shido's* fork while cutting her bonds. She grabbed the weapon by the cord-wrapped hilt and yanked it from the earth just as her pursuers reached her. It weighed down her arm — she should have chosen a

lighter blade. Too late now to change her mind! She spun around and whirled the *shido* in a wide arc. The men jumped backwards.

Hebi bent his knees and rammed his shoulder up under Manji's right armpit. He locked one hand around Manji's forearm and applied all his force to twisting it so that the elbow pointed downwards. Manji's arm began to tremble, but he still held fast to the fading Ryonosuke. Hebi grunted, grabbed his own wrist to reinforce his grip and straightened his knees. With a sharp pull, he forced Manji's arm to bend the wrong way, with his shoulder as fulcrum. The elbow snapped with an audible pop and Manji lost his hold on Ryonosuke. He let out an agonized scream; a crunching sound accompanied another downwards push on his head from the bulky foreigner.

Ryonosuke tumbled to the ground in a gasping heap, seemingly only half-conscious. O-Hama flew to him.

Mado let go of Manji's head, then grabbed a cord from his jacket. With Hebi's help he pulled Manji's sickeningly contorted right arm straight again and re-lashed it to the cracked branch. This time he double-knotted each turn of the rope. For good measure, they pulled his legs up against the tree trunk and got out more cords.

Manji groaned. Obviously badly hurt, with his limbs dangling limp, he tried to roll his head upright on his sharply angled neck. He spotted Rin holding off the two men with his *shido* and his mouth opened. He looked gray and utterly drained, as if his brief, ferocious effort had squandered the last resources of his already-sapped strength.

Fujikata and the bandit flanked Rin, weapons out. Every move she made, they matched. She couldn't get past them in any direction. The *shido* felt like a stone; her shoulders already ached. The men stood back and watched her point droop lower as she tried to keep up her guard. Both of them smiled, as if the spectacle amused them: only the beginning of the entertainment they intended at her expense! Rin hyperventilated. Their greedy eyes scanning her — they would move in and disarm her in a few more moments unless she acted.

Oddly, she felt less concerned for herself than she did for her bodyguard. Allow these men to ravish her in front of Manji? She could hardly imagine any ordeal more cruel to his feelings, even if she could have endured the nightmare in the first place. Her mother's endless, heart-tearing screams, and the jeers of her tormentors...

Rin clenched her trembling jaw. Brave enough to take the escape her mother had been denied? Wasn't there any other choice left?

Not for her, there wasn't. At least, like her father, she still held a sword in her hand.

Manji's gaze was riveted to her across the clearing, his body sagging and still except for his heaving chest. Rin gasped at the fear in his wide-open eye; he had read her train of thought as it formed.

Manji's expression cracked and fell apart with grief. His naked agony cut through Rin with an edge like steel. "Oh... Manji-san..." She whimpered and almost dropped the *shido*.

Manji forcibly set his lips together and averted his eye. He might have a small measure of strength left, if only enough to master himself...

As Rin watched, Manji's features went dark and still, like a shuttered window. He straightened his neck and breathed evenly. Only a slight tremor in his limbs betrayed him when he looked at her again.

A formal bow of his disheveled head: apology and farewell. His hair fell back when he raised his face, and she saw every detail of his meaning. A self-indulgent display of emotion could do nothing but sabotage her resolve. He knew her imperative as well as she did; he was samurai too...

Her guard down, Fujikata made a grab for her. Rin shied away. She reversed the *shido*, pulled it towards herself and aimed the point at her breastbone.

"Aw, *crap!*" The bandit yelled and tried to seize the weapon, but Rin ducked to avoid him and scrambled to get some distance. In a crouch, she backed up to a clump of brush, and jammed the ringed end of the *shido*'s hilt into the grassy earth. Fall forward, and her own weight would do the work... probably.

The hirelings flinched away when she threw up her chin in warning. With one hand she adjusted the point's lie between her breasts, trying to locate the vital spot.

On their knees, the Ittō-ryū men turned their attention from securing Manji's ankles and craned to see what was happening. Rin took a deep breath in preparation and looked around Fujikata's worn-out *hakama* to find Manji's eye again. Should she try to give her bodyguard one last comfort, or would that only inflict a greater cruelty?

He had never taken his gaze from her. Despite his grim and frozen expression, Rin caught a glimpse behind the shutters he had drawn. One warm glow: a small bright presence that still lit a single room in a charnel house.

Rin's lips quivered. If she perished here, she snatched that light and hope from him forever. In stoic silence he'd watch her kill herself, helpless to save her from outrage and dishonor in any other way. Then somehow, he'd find his chance and take them all down with him, into the darkest circles of hell...

"No, maiden – stop!" Perhaps to his credit, Fujikata looked deeply distressed. He thrust his sword back into the scabbard as Rin hesitated. "Please, don't end your life!"

"Wh-why shouldn't I? I won't submit to – !"

She heard a loud exclamation in a strange language; Mado stood up, looking towards her. The *ronin* knelt in front of her and clasped his hands. His stringy hair and hollow cheeks gave him a superficial air of a pious ascetic, though probably he only lacked the cash for regular meals. "I beg you... I could never approach an innocent girl with needless violence. I mean to cherish you as the precious flower you are!"

"I ain't such a nasty guy, honest." The bandit offered a yellow-toothed grin and an open gesture of both hands. Rin's eyes followed the dark crescents of his filthy fingernails. "I know better than to treat a broad *real* bad. Getting carried away with the fun wouldn't hike your price any – uh, that is – "

Rin gripped the *shido* harder to steady it and half-closed her eyes. This was her failure too, not just Manji's. Her parents would remain unavenged. Mourning spirits drifting into oblivion, with no living descendants to remember them. She might go out like a samurai, but in the same act she abandoned her beloved father and mother. Tears ran down her cheeks and she tensed her muscles for the thrust.

"Asano Rin-san!" yelled Hebi. "Ho-hold on there!" He raced Mado across the clearing and crowded Fujikata aside. Rin looked up in startlement. "God, no! If you even got scratched, we'd so get the living shit kicked – ow!"

Mado slapped him on the ear to silence him. "Put that damn thing down, kid. Nothing's gonna happen to you, understand? You're coming out of this in one piece... honor and all."

Rin threw him a disbelieving glare.

He raised a brow and put a hand to his heart. "As the good Lord's my witness. Uh, the buyer's gonna, uh, he's gonna keep you on ice even after he gets you — uh, that little lady could tell you how it works at the expensive joints, but I suppose she ain't liable to say." He cocked his head at the seething O-Hama. Ryonosuke had revived enough to sit up and hold his injured throat.

"Oh, really? Prove it!"

Mado guilelessly spread his hands. "You got a suggestion?"

"Cut Manji-*san* loose!" She darted an eager look at her bodyguard. He grimaced and worked the rest of the crick out of his neck.

"Well... hell, kid, he'd pick up his slicers and rip us all to shreds." Mado shrugged and toyed with the brass whistle that hung around his neck. "You gotta admit, that ain't much of a — "

"Cut him loose this instant, or I'll — !" She poked her chest a little too hard with the *shido* while making her point, and squeaked in discomfort.

"He ain't in real great shape, y'know," offered Hebi. He dropped to one knee near Rin, about where Fujikata had supplicated her a few moments before. "That bullet, an' busting trees with muscle? He's a stud, sure, but he's about wasted. Maybe if he promises he'll leave his hardware and split?"

"Well... OK." Mado scratched his hairy chin and quirked his mouth at his companion. "I guess I can live with that."

"Fine by me." Hebi nodded back and slightly shifted his weight.

"Traitors!" spluttered Fujikata.

"What are you doing?" O-Hama sounded shrill. "Stop!"

"Hold your damn horses, lady. This here is a delicate ongoin' negotiation." Mado moved away towards Manji's tree as if to speak to him. Rin unconsciously relaxed her grip on the *shido*, and Hebi sprang.

"Noo!" She wrestled with him for the weapon and tried to stab him. He wrapped both of her wrists in his long-fingered hand, flicked the *shido* away and tossed it over his shoulder.

The bandit lurched aside to avoid it and it plunged into the ground several paces distant. "Hey, watch it, dickhead!"

Rin struggled and sank her teeth into Hebi's tattooed forearm, but he pulled her to her feet and lightly twisted her arm to hold her still. "Ohh!" She burst into furious tears.

Manji closed his eye while Mado pulled Rin's hands behind her. He made her fold her arms over the small of her back so he could tie her wrists, then wrapped the rope over her shoulders and under her breasts a couple of times, weaving the turns together in back like a policeman trussing a prisoner. Again, he had not tightened the cords to the point of cruelty, but she could not even shift her arms now. Escape seemed more remote than ever.

The big foreigner tied the last knot and clapped her on the shoulder. "Aw, good try, kid. You got spunk." He stooped and spoke lower. "I ain't blowin' smoke, so buck up." Rin sniffled and glared at him in hostile confusion. His ugly freckled face stretched in a smile and he held the rope end close to the knot so that she had to stand right by him. Sullenly, she hung her head.

"Stalwart foreigner," said O-Hama in a sweet singsong. All of the men looked at her as if impelled, even Manji. She touched her lips and gazed only at Mado. "Will you satisfy me on a point of curiosity?"

"Hah? Me?"

"Have you any taste for the women of this country? Or are those of your own race more beautiful in your eyes?" She turned her flank towards him and examined him along the line of her shoulder. "Are they as tall and strong as you?"

Mado snorted. "Hey, I'm a sailor. A woman's a woman."

"Then you prefer to take the pillow with females? Not with youths?"

He flushed and looked uncomfortable. "If I had ten coppers for every time somebody's offered me a boy without blinkin' an eye — shit, the girls and the bawdy houses is about the only thing they do right in this heathen craphole... assumin' I'm flush enough to afford the good places."

O-Hama pushed her hair out of her face, then shed her short *haori* coat. With tantalizing care, she unwound the knotted straps of her *hakama*.

Mado gave her an uncertain eye. O-Hama stepped out of her oversized pants when they slipped to the ground. In a man's plain dark silk *kōsōde* that fell to her ankles, her figure appeared lithe and feminine. Mado's jaw fell a little slack; he didn't seem to be able to look away.

"Yeah, uh... maybe someday before I catch my death from the goddamn everlastin' bathtubs... uh... I might just decide to waste a whole month's take on a woman like — "

Manji chuckled with a harsh note. "Get a clue, *gaijin*... what was it you said about her finding any man's limits?"

O-Hama gracefully shifted her collar to dip lower in the back and adjusted her *obi* to lie higher. She moved closer to Mado with a dainty, sidewise shuffle. With a demure smile, she glanced at both the *Ittō-ryū* men, fingers to her pink lips. Her lashes fluttered down to hide her eyes for a moment. Then she looked up again with a dewy, fawn-like glimmer.

Mado cleared his throat. Hebi gulped hard. Even Rin took a deep breath; O-Hama's expert seductiveness daunted her. Without flaunting her body like a streetwalker, she suggested a mysterious sensuality that lent even greater allure to her delicate beauty. For a man she meant to impress, she might form an almost irresistible temptation.

"Well, shit..." muttered Manji. "I waste the cash for nothin', and now the little bitch hands out the good stuff for free?" He raised his voice. "Oh, yeah — I was gonna take back the part about the apology!"

O-Hama ignored him. "You will not accept gold? Then will you take instead... whatever you desire?"

"Whoa..." Mado's big body shivered.

"Leave this girl to the others, and I will show you all the delights of *Nihon-onna*." She included Hebi in the offer with a flick of her lashes and a smile. "You have only to turn your back..." She did just that, running her fingers through her night-black hair. She smoothed its luxurious length and draped it forward to display her curved white nape, then glanced an enticement over her shoulder. "I promise you, the first moments in my arms will dispel all thought of that skinny virgin..."

She caught Rin's cold glare out of the corner of her eye as she turned again, and flinched almost imperceptibly.

"Lady," said Mado in a strangled tone, "I hate to say no to any gal with moves like yours, but..."

O-Hama put a hand on his chest. She now stood almost side to side with Rin, an arm's length from her. Mado drew a deep breath through his nose; a whiff of gardenia-scented hair oil floated in the air. Rin's face screwed up in disgusted recognition.

"Oh... sweet God." Mado loosened his grasp on Rin's tether; the flush across his cheekbones deepened its heat. Hebi's jaw hung slack. She'd seen for herself how little a man in the grip of desire might consider the aftermath —

Rin slowly raised one *tabi*-shod foot; she wished she still had her wooden *geta*, but even her tough bodyguard could go down with one well-placed blow. The element of surprise was key, but the choice of target even more so.

She wiggled her raised leg from side to side to make a little room in her narrow skirts, leaned against Mado's side to brace herself, and kicked O-Hama in the right kneecap as hard as she could.

"Oh!" The girl staggered backwards, fell and rolled in the dirt. Her hair spilled over her face. "*Ohhh!*"

"*Ow!*" Rin took a couple of hops for balance, grimacing over her stubbed toes.

O-Hama whipped her head around while lying in a sprawl. She crouched and bared her teeth as if she meant to spring at Rin's throat.

"You!" Rin planted her feet, leaned forward and jutted her jaw. "You take your stupid prostitute stuff out of here, you — you rotten *cunt!*"

O-Hama sat up, her mouth wide open.

"How DARE you! Ordering them to do awful things to me — gosh, if it would make you feel so much better to have some other girl suffer like you did — they killed *both* my parents! They raped my *mother* in front of me! At least you still have a family — but who needs a brother that damn stupid? Couldn't suck it up and act like a man, instead of lying around drinking you out of house and home! What a LOSER!"

Rin paused for breath, shaking with excited anger, and swept a challenging glance around the clearing.

No one looked like he wanted to laugh at her. Fujikata and the bandit exchanged glances while the boy goggled. The *Ittō-ryū* men coughed and shrugged their shoulders, avoiding her eyes.

Manji gazed straight at her; a crooked grin lit his face. Rin couldn't quite return the grin, but tried to let her eyes speak for her. Manji closed his, still smiling, and slightly shook his head with a silent chuckle. O-Hama still sat in the dirt, breathing hard and staring at the ground.

"I... I mean, you think you're special? That nobody's pain matters but yours? You think you're the only girl who ever had to pillow with a man she — " Rin choked. "At least... at least you knew that when he finished... he'd go away and never come back..." Rin bit back tears and looked down, her throat tight. She began to tremble all over in the ebb tide of her anger.

O-Hama slowly rose to her feet and brushed off her dusty clothes. Leaves hung in her tangled hair. She picked them out and wiped her hands. The look she threw Rin felt poisonous. When she approached Mado again from a safer angle and tried to compose her face into a smile, Hebi leaned over and punched him hard in the upper back. Mado jerked and whirled on his companion. He snapped up a fist as if to give him a blow, then slowly opened the hand and made a conciliatory gesture. He had the grace to look a little ashamed of himself.

"Sorry, ma'am... we got obligations." He looked over O-Hama's head. "Keep it for your boyfriend — uh, he's just about shitting his pants, by the way."

He was right; Ryonosuke glared at them all, simmering red. He gripped his sword, strode right up to Manji and swung it high. The blade flashed down; Rin squeezed her eyes shut and turned her face away.

Steel grated against bone. Manji muffled a grunt, and blood gushed and pattered on the fallen leaves. Rin opened her eyes, expecting to see his hand lying severed on the ground, though she hadn't heard it fall.

Ryonosuke struggled to free his blade, which had lodged in Manji's wrist. He had cut only a little way through the joint. Blood sprayed from the wound and stained the front of his coat, though he tried in vain to avoid the spatter. "Oh... damn..."

"Use the tip of the blade, genius. No leverage with the hilt end." Manji made a face half sarcastic, half in pain. Ryonosuke pried at the sword and finally managed to free it. He moved a little farther off and took his stance.

"Come on, boy, put some back into it! You ain't got enough muscle to snap a reed with a freakin' wood ax." Manji managed a chuckle.

Hot-faced, Ryonosuke struck again with the tip of his sword. This time the cut went deeper, but still didn't sever both arm bones, since it hit a handspan lower than the first wound.

"Crap... he's got shitty aim too." Manji shook his head in a jocular way, though his forehead perspired. "Third try's the charm?"

Mado and Hebi restrained laughs; she felt their stomachs shaking. The bandit wasn't as discreet — he snorted out loud and slapped his leg.

Chunk! Again the blade bit through flesh, striking in between the first two wounds and stopping on the bone. Manji let out a louder grunt, then a forced laugh. "That ain't a cucumber you're slicing for pickles! Make a freakin' clean cut if you can manage it, and let's move on to the next trick." Blood poured down his arm and dripped from the bend of his broken elbow. "Think you can finish this... while it's still light enough to see what you're swingin' at?"

"You...you taunt me..." panted Ryonosuke, already out of breath. "But I shall wipe out those disrespectful words!"

Rin shut her eyes again, clenching her jaw to hold back sympathetic agony. She would only shame Manji's bravery if she showed too much concern.

Ryonosuke struck again and again, each time more weakly, hacking Manji's forearm and sending shreds of meat flying. The beautiful *tachi* dulled and chipped on Manji's defleshed bones. The edge began to catch and tear the muscle instead of cut it. His wrist tendons slowly snapped, blow after blow.

Eventually the hirelings stopped laughing, even the bandit. Hebi gritted his teeth and rubbed the back of his neck; the *ronin* sighed. O-Hama watched with a hand over her mouth, twitching a little at each strike.

Two fingers lost joints from a particularly badly directed swing. Every awkward scrape and slice brought a fresh flow of blood. How much more could Manji's immortal body provide? The dead leaves glistened red in a wide radius under

the branch. Manji had long since fallen silent except for involuntary, nearly inaudible sighs through his teeth. He examined the ruins with a dulling eye.

"Stop!" Rin screamed, at last unable to bear the sight any longer. "Stop it, please... oh, Manji-san!"

Manji growled at her. "Shut... the fuck... up..."

Ryonosuke looked nearly as pale and faint as his victim. He wiped his sweating face on his armored sleeve and kept chopping, tears streaming from his eyes. By using the notched sword like a saw, he finally severed the hand. It dangled from the destroyed arm, held only by the damaged rope and a single tattered strand of tough ligament. Manji rolled his head back against the tree. He hardly seemed to see the evening sunlight that shone in his face.

"Think I..." he gasped out through gritted teeth, "...I might've already mentioned a guy I knew once... who liked to play this kind of shit. Frankly, I'd rather he was hacking on me than you." The frayed rope broke and the remains of Manji's hand fell to the ground, splattering blood. "I got... a feeling... he would've been a little more... *efficient* about it..."

Manji's shoulders slumped, and his head fell forward on his chest. His mangled stump slipped from its unraveled restraints and hung down. O-Hama vibrated with anger. She stalked up to Manji and slapped his face.

No reaction: he had passed out cold. Rin cursed the heavens for such belated mercy.

"Disgusting beast..." O-Hama gave a contemptuous glance to the mangled hand at her feet. "This is all? This is my satisfaction?"

"Shit, woman, what do ya want?" said Hebi, looking revolted. "This show over yet?"

"N-no... no more!" Ryonosuke stumbled and sat on the ground. He put his head in his hands and sobbed.

O-Hama's lips drew back. She glanced around at all the men. "Will you aid me, then?"

"What with?" The bandit looked at her with a hint of trepidation. "I guess we could load his carcass on the horse for ya or something..."

She dismissed him and looked around again. Her glance stopped on Manji's scattered weapons. With decisive strides O-Hama moved to pick up his hooked knife. She tested the edge with a thumbnail and approached Manji's unconscious body.

An ugly presentiment startled Rin to alertness. She blinked tears from her eyes and tried to wipe her face on her shoulder to clear them.

O-Hama looked at the crossed scars on Manji's chest, and lower. She extended a hand towards his bunched-up, bloody *kōsōde*. Gingerly, she felt through the folds for the belt that held it around his waist, then pulled it taut and slashed it. The men stared at her.

Manji's clothes fell open and exposed his hips and thighs. His skin and his *fundoshi* had soaked up a watery reddish stain from the blood seeping through his outer clothing. O-Hama hesitated, then gripped the knife and reached for the twist of Manji's loincloth.

Rin screamed in horrified realization, and O-Hama halted. Every man in the clearing cursed or shielded his eyes, except for the oblivious Ryonosuke.

O-Hama gave an uneasy glance to the knife she held, seeming to register the true gravity of what she was about to do. Perhaps she also disliked the idea of touching Manji's naked body, even to wreak such a decisive revenge. She pulled back her hand as if she felt a burn and retreated.

"Holy fuckin' shit... I ain't letting *that* gal anywhere near my family inheritance..." muttered Hebi. The others nodded in profound agreement and wiped cold sweat from their faces, as if they had all been reprieved from execution. Mado looked particularly green.

O-Hama stood with her back to Manji, her shoulders heaving with tension. After a few moments, she looked around on the ground near the tree. Unmanning him had balked her, but now? Rin watched her, her mind racing. O-Hama picked up a stout fallen branch and struggled to break it under her foot. Ryonosuke looked up, his face red and tear-streaked.

"My... lady?"

With the aid of the knife O-Hama cut a straight stick about the length of a sword hilt, a thick finger-width through the middle. She stood up. "I would like a moment's help. Can you do that much for me, my lord?" She did not hide the sarcasm in her words; Rin thought she seemed almost as spent as her lover,

though she showed it less. "Here, take this." She pointed at Manji with the stick she had cut and tossed it to Ryonosuke. "Hold his head."

Blank and obedient, Ryonosuke took the stick and rose. Manji still hung limp from the tree, though Rin saw some signs of returning consciousness. His mangled arm didn't look much better than it had when Ryonosuke had stopped chopping at it. The young man took hold of Manji's topknot and raised his head. He groaned faintly.

"Foul, arrogant beast — you'll regret your vile speech! Where are your taunts now?" O-Hama spat in Manji's face. He pulled a slight grimace and his lips moved without making a sound.

Mado tugged at Rin's tether and whispered to her. "Come on, kid. No point in you goggling at this crap any more."

"But, but Manji-san —"

"He's a goner, hey? Give him up." She resisted, and he scooped an arm around her and pushed her in front of him. "Get moving, or I'll have to carry you. Don't think you'd like that." Rin took a few unwilling steps towards the trees and looked back.

Ryonosuke had wedged the stick between Manji's teeth like a horse's bit, and pulled his head back so that his jaw hung open. O-Hama pulled at her left sleeve and peered up at Manji's opened mouth. Mado grabbed Rin by the waist, swung her into his arms and jogged into the forest. Hebi fell in close behind them. For the moment, the hirelings watched O-Hama and didn't notice their departure.

"Put me down!" Rin kicked and struggled. "Manji — Manji-san!" She managed to crane around Mado's shoulder to see. "Oh, God!"

O-Hama reached up into Manji's mouth with a fold of fabric covering her hand. She grasped at his tongue and pulled it under the stick that Ryonosuke held. Shaking back the sleeve on her right arm, she raised the knife. His *tongue*?

"MAANJII! NOO!"

The boy looked around at Rin's scream. He spotted the Ittō-ryū men escaping with her and shouted to the others.

"Shit!" Mado broke into a run and shoved Rin's head under his smelly jacket. "I told you not to look, kid!"

Years before, she had felt much the same horror in the sound of a beloved voice. Deep in his throat, wordless, agonized —

O-Hama cried out, her scream mixing with Manji's in a hair-raising dissonance. Mado stumbled on a fallen log and his grip slipped before he recovered. He heaved Rin up and threw her head-first over his shoulder. Upside down, she strained to catch a glimpse of O-Hama dropping the knife and flinging something else into the bushes. Frantically wiping her bloodied face and hands as if she had been poisoned.

So she'd finally sickened herself with her own cruelty? Ryonosuke tried to take her in his arms, but she threw herself back and forth in hysterics and collapsed to the ground, sobbing.

Manji gurgled and choked, his head lolling back. His throat worked; gouts of red spouted from his mouth. Between the crashes of Mado's and Hebi's rapid footfalls, and the angry calls of the pursuing hirelings, Rin caught the rasp of an escaping, dying bubble of breath: Manji, drowning in his own blood.

PART THIRTY-SIX

“Now?”

“Not yet, dammit!” Mado’s rapid jog jolted Rin so hard she could barely breathe. She hung over his shoulder, her arms trussed behind her. His long sheathed harpoon repeatedly slapped the side of her face as he vaulted over high roots and rocks. At least ten minutes since they had left the clearing behind, and Manji helpless in the hands of his two torturers. “If we get there quick enough – ”

“If we don’t?” Hebi pushed at the bushes ahead of them, breaking trail as rapidly as he could. In pursuit, the hirelings yelled and cursed. “We got a decent start, but – ”

“Then I’ll think about it!” A stone whizzed past Mado’s ear. “Crap – that brat with the sling!” He changed course to put a copse of small trees between them and the pursuers.

“Where’s the frickin’ path? Shouldn’t we have gotten to the path yet?”

“Bear five points to the east! Just a little beyond that big mossy tree!” Mado let go of one of Rin’s legs to point. Another sling stone flew over his head and rebounded from a nearby trunk. “Crap!”

“Put me down!” gasped Rin. “Put me... down!” Mado didn’t answer. “I’ll... I’ll come with you!”

“Hah?”

“I’ll come with you! Just let me... walk!”

He halted, heaved her from his shoulder and deposited her on her feet. "Don't walk. Run!" Mado shoved her ahead of him. Rin started ahead on wobbling legs. The feeling came back into them after a few strides and she quickened her pace. Then her foot hooked a root and she lurched forward, unable to regain her balance with her arms bound.

"Aw, fuck it!" Mado grabbed the ropes at the small of her back and prevented her fall. She heard a metallic click and felt a few swift tugs, and suddenly the ropes slackened. Her bonds tumbled to the ground, slashed through. "Run towards that big tree, see it? We'll be right behind you." Mado shut his clasp knife in his fist and thrust it back into his sleeve.

Rin ran, panting and wiping tears from her face. "Manji... oh, Manji-san..." Fallen limbs, clumps of shrubs, rocks and animal's burrows impeded her path, but all she could see in her mind's eye was her bodyguard's helpless agony. Could a cut tongue kill him? What were Ryonosuke and O-Hama doing to him now? She could see no way to turn back and find out, so she kept going. Falling into their pursuers' hands would be a fate worse than nightmares, and her only protectors were the two *Itto-ryu* men.

Protectors? Realization jolted through her whole body. These men meant to shield her, Asano Rin, from any serious harm. That was what they had been doing all along, in their rough fashion. Though they had chased and captured her on the road and tried to shake her bodyguard's pursuit through the forest, they had from the first attempted to keep her out of the clutches of Ryonosuke's hirelings.

They had never really been working for him at all? Only for themselves? That much seemed obvious...

She reached the tree and ran on, guided by Hebi's pointing arm over her shoulder. Mado had fallen back by a few strides and drawn his harpoon from its sheath.

"Almost to the path, Rin-san. There's an old temple — maybe half a *ri* — where we can, uh, hole up." She glanced over her shoulder at Hebi, who carried her bag and sword with him.

He grinned at her. "Those scumbags ain't going to grab you, kid. Not least 'cause we got our own sorry hides ridin' on — "

"Shut UP!" yelled Mado from behind them. "Wish that bitch had ripped out *your* fucking tongue, I swear!"

Rin began to cry again, still running. "Manji-san..." Her eyes blurred and she blundered into a boulder wedged in the roots of a tree.

"Aw, man..." Hebi put a long arm around her shoulders and assisted her. "Hey, that immortal bastard's got himself cut to bits before this, and he's still kicking... well..." He made a face. "Look, if anybody can take care of — "

"How?" Rin shrieked in grief and anger. "How is he going to take care of himself like *that*?"

Hebi said nothing.

They reached the top of a slight rise and broke through thick clumps of tall ferns. Below them lay a narrow track, uneven and a little overgrown. Rin and Hebi slid down the steep embankment and landed on the path; Mado leaped down behind them a few moments later. The pursuers sounded very close now.

Mado grabbed Rin's arm and pointed along the track to the east. "That way. Keep going, understand? We'll cover you." Hebi drew his twin swords and wiped sweat from his brow with his forearm.

Rin stared at the big foreigner, his implication startling her. Let her escape on her own? Didn't they mean to sell her? Go whoring and drinking on the proceeds?

"You ain't deaf, are you?" Mado turned at a crashing in the bracken above them and raised his black harpoon. Hebi took a stance behind him.

The paunchy bandit broke through the underbrush and halted at the top of the embankment, sword in hand. Mado hurled the harpoon; the bandit leaped backwards into concealment with a yelp and the wide barbed head of the weapon struck the earth where he had stood. Mado retrieved it with a yank on a thin rawhide cord knotted through the iron loop at the base. He caught it by the shaft and yelled over his shoulder at Rin. "Kid — move!"

Rin moved. She could run much faster on the beaten track, though tree roots curled up from the earth here and there and made the going hazardous in spots. A mossy marker stone nestled in the forest litter by the path, the carved writing so worn she couldn't read it as she flashed by. She hitched her *furisōde* up to her knees and tried not to stub her unshod toes on the stones. The *Itto-ryu* men

separated again; Hebi followed several strides after her, while Mado moved a little more slowly, keeping watch on the path behind him.

For several minutes, Rin saw and heard no sign of the pursuers. Had they outpaced them? Was this old temple ahead a good place to stand and fight, or would she have to keep running until the hirelings gave up? She doubted they would drop out of the chase any time soon.

Out of breath, she had to slow to a rapid walk. Around a bend in the track ahead lay a steep-sided ravine that cut deep into the hillside; the path crossed it on a rough wooden bridge with low railings. The roar of the rushing stream over the rocks below grew louder as she approached the bridge; the water must be running high from the storm.

Just audible over the roar of water, a dry stick cracked. Behind her? Rin turned to look over her shoulder.

A stone whizzed from the top of the embankment and struck Hebi in the back of his shaven skull. His eyes bulged; he gasped and staggered. As he spun around to look for the assailant, another stone hit him in the temple. He fell to one knee and clutched his head. Rin darted behind a tree and crouched for shelter, trying to spot the slinger.

There he was! The shifty-eyed boy reloaded from his pouch and rounded a tree out of sight.

Mado hove into sight and rounded the bend at a fast clip; the bandit and Fujikata followed in hot pursuit. Both had drawn. At a wide spot in the path, Mado whirled and poised his harpoon. Just as he made to hurl it at the bandit, a stone struck him square between the shoulderblades. The weapon sped out of his hand, but fell wide of his target. Mado bent over, groaning. The bandit stepped on the shaft of the harpoon before he could retrieve it, and Fujikata charged him.

Mado met him with a shoulder block; his clasp knife appeared in his hand. He scored a cut down Fujikata's arm, but the point of the *ronin's* sword emerged from the back of his jacket, streaked with blood. Mado yelled in pain. He'd been wounded, perhaps badly!

Rin's heart gave a thump. If both her defenders fell — and if she had no blade... Should she try to retreat through the woods, or stay with them? She bit her lips and looked over her shoulder. The forested slope steepened behind her towards a rocky drop-off. The ground lay deep with loose debris and dry leaves; a fall meant injuries, maybe broken bones. In the direction of the temple, the ravine

and stream blocked all passage except over the bridge, and venturing onto the bridge offered the slinger a perfect opportunity.

Cornered.

Hebi staggered to his feet and yelled, hand to his bleeding face. "Now?"

"Shitfire!" Mado kicked Fujikata away and backpedaled on the path. The harpoon cord paid out from a coil at his belt. The bandit lunged forward to try to cut it, and Mado yanked hard on the cord. The harpoon flew past the bandit, the barbed head slashing his baggy pants at the knee. The bandit howled and grabbed his leg.

Mado hauled in the harpoon hand over hand, still retreating, and seized the shaft. He raised the weapon high in a warning stance and backed a little way off the path.

The pursuers halted and conferred. Mado leaned against the big tree that sheltered him and yanked out the chain of his brass whistle with his free hand. He put its narrow mouthpiece to his lips.

Its piercing call rose and fell, trilling a dissonant tune that hurt Rin's ears. He'd used that whistle before, just after tying her to the tree in the clearing. But at that point he'd sounded only one loud note. This signal seemed to convey more meaning than his location alone. To whom?

Rin glanced up the path with a sudden intake of breath. Through the trees in the distance, she thought she spotted a moldering wooden *tori* gate that marked the precincts of a shrine. The path rose abruptly beyond the gate to climb a steep slope. The main temple buildings probably sat at the top of that hill and offered a view of the surrounding countryside. And the sharp sound of that whistle must carry a long way, even in the forest...

Right now this looked like a standoff; both Mado and Hebi had found protected positions to avoid the boy's sling. The bandit and Fujikata hesitated at the threat of the harpoon. But Hebi looked half dazed, and Mado bled freely from under his jacket, a dark stain creeping down the leggings on his right thigh. That sword thrust might only have scraped his side, or it could have pierced his belly; he didn't betray any sign of pain now, so it was hard to tell.

Hebi worked the strap of Rin's bag off his shoulder. Was it encumbering him? Surely he didn't mean to make a dash for it — neither he nor his companion

looked fit to run far. Rin looked longingly at her sword. Hebi glanced over, swung the bag by the strap and threw it towards her.

The scabbard clattered against a stone when the bag landed a couple of arm's lengths from her hiding place. Rin blinked at it, and then at Hebi. Now he was giving her a weapon? Was he suffering from that blow to the head? Hebi pointed his chin and turned back to face the bandit and *ronin*.

Rin stared at her sword a moment longer, then rose from her crouch and scanned the embankment. She took a step from behind the tree and reached for the bag.

A stone crashed into the earth a finger's-length from her outstretched hand. Rin skidded back behind the tree, panting. How could any of them take out the slinger? At the moment, that dreadful boy threatened them almost more than the swordsmen. If only she'd had her Golden Wasps! Rin hugged the tree and gritted her teeth.

Fujikata made a charge at Mado. His sword rang against the iron shaft when Mado blocked with the harpoon; he quickly retreated. Mado's whole right leg had soaked dark with blood; how much longer could he hold out?

As she crouched on hands and knees, Rin detected a slight vibration in the ground. A small earthquake? Those were common enough, but the vibration continued at a steady rate. Though it felt much lighter than a movement of the earth, its amplitude increased moment by moment. Rin put both hands flat on the ground and creased her brows, trying to feel out the source.

A cry startled her. The boy with the sling skidded down the embankment, yelling. Rin gasped; he looked like he'd seen a bear. He ran straight for her hiding place. Rin darted out and got hold of the strap of her bag just as the boy crashed into her.

They tumbled to the ground together and down the slight slope. The boy's knee struck her in the mouth; Rin felt her lip split and tasted blood. They rolled over, the boy on top. He wrestled with her for the sword, his pimpled face sweating.

Someone else shouted: the bandit? Hebi gave a surprised yelp at almost the same time. "Holy shit — how the — "

Rin struggled and fought with the boy on the ground. Both of them gripped her sword by the scabbard, their hands alternating. Although he wasn't much bigger than she was, he had more muscle; he twisted the weapon and forced one of her

hands off the end. Rin kicked at him and reached for the hilt. The boy grabbed for her wrist. Rin bit his forefinger and he let go of her.

But now he grasped her sword in both hands; he wrenched it away and jumped to his feet.

“Stop!” she yelled. “Give that back — it’s *mine!*”

“Make me!” He sneered at her and tauntingly held the sword high over his head.

Rin glared at him, circling to block him from the path. Out in the open, more shouting and the clash of blades — it sounded as if the all-out battle had begun in earnest.

Make him give it to her? He seemed to scare easily... but how could she startle him enough to make him drop a weapon?

She knew how. Almost before the idea formed, Rin yanked down the shoulders of her *furisōde*, shrugged out of them and opened her inner robe. Her heart pounded so hard she thought its strokes showed through her skin. The boy’s eyes dilated.

Rin shed both sets of sleeves and pulled her clothes down to the waist, her upper body fully exposed. She’d have only a few moments before he came to his senses, so she had better make the most of them!

The boy’s face flushed pink; his mouth sagged. He lowered the sword and let it dangle from his hand. Rin moved forward, holding his gaze with her best approximation of a seductive smile. The boy reached for her with one hand. Just as his fingers brushed her skin, Rin leaned forward and seized the sword’s hilt. She jumped backwards and yanked the blade from the scabbard, evading his grasp at her breasts.

The boy threw down her bag and scabbard and dashed for the path, the half-naked Rin in pursuit. They emerged into the open air and nearly collided with the fleeing bandit. At the sight of him, Rin almost screamed.

Though he still had his sword, the bandit had suffered a hideous slash across the middle of his face. His nose and half his mustache were cut away, and his lower lip hung in a drooling flap, exposing broken and bloody teeth. The boy screeched and turned to run after him, and Rin gripped her sword and looked back.

Far down the path, Mado crouched on his knees, propping himself up with the shaft of his harpoon. A little closer, Hebi desperately battled with someone, his back to her. His twin swords flashed and blocked the spiraling strikes of a blade that moved so fast it blurred. Who was that — not Fujikata? The dueling opponents turned sideways, and Rin's vision gave a dizzy lurch.

Her bodyguard.

Manji — or his animated corpse. Nearly naked in his loincloth, his death-pale body smeared from ears to soles with half-dry blood. His mutilated right arm hung at his side, useless. But he pressed Hebi hard with his *shido* spinning in his left hand, his teeth set in a terrible grimace.

How in the name of all hells had he escaped? Rin cried out and ran towards the duelers. “Manji-san! Manji-san!”

Manji turned his head and his eye opened wide. His flash of relief at the sight of her darkened almost instantly to black fury. His face contorted, and he swung at Hebi with a blow so vicious that the tattooed fighter's right-hand sword shattered against the *shido*'s stout blade.

Hebi gaped at the useless hilt and dropped it. Before he could bring up his other sword to block Manji's strike, the *shido* whirled down again.

Hebi's right arm flopped to the path, amputated above the elbow. Blood spouted from the angled stump. He staggered backwards with a howl of agony, Manji in pursuit. Rin screamed.

“No — oh, no!” He wasn't the one who should die!

Behind her, a pounding clatter of horse's hooves on the bridge. The vibration she had felt! Rin whirled, trying to look in two directions at once. She scrambled up the rocky embankment to avoid the horse when it galloped straight for her with no sign of slowing. The rider gave a hard, clumsy yank to the reins, as if he had only a rough idea of how to control his mount. The horse reared back a little; before it had entirely stopped, the rider vaulted from the saddle and landed with his broadsword already clear of the scabbard.

A young man, thick coarse hair pulled back, wearing a striped *yūkata*. Rin quickly gathered her hanging clothing over her breasts, blushing. He gave her a hurried glance and dashed down the path towards the battle. She glimpsed his sharp profile and a healing cut on his upper cheek as he passed. His clothes and the way he wore his hair weren't familiar, but —

“Ma...” Her mouth dropped open. “Magatsu... Tai.. to?”

“Hey! Hebi? Where the hell is — ” Magatsu halted at the sight of the ghastly Manji, who stalked Hebi up the embankment. “Holy crap! Manji? What happened to — ?”

“Hey, man — get him the hell off me! Tell him — ” Hebi stumbled, the bleeding stump of his arm flung out in a vain attempt at breaking his fall. Manji lunged at him. “Gaah!”

“Manji-san!” screamed Magatsu. He sprang up the slope, sword held out. “Don’t kill him! Goddammit, he’s — ”

The *shido* impaled Hebi just below the ribcage; he cried out and tried to double up on the ground. Manji kicked him in the back. Just before Magatsu reached the two, he stamped on Hebi’s shoulder and aimed the *shido* at his chest.

“Stop!” Magatsu slammed Manji’s blade aside with his own sword.

Hebi let out a choked groan and sagged limp. Manji whirled on Magatsu. His eye bulged and his teeth ground with rage; he might almost have turned into the demon O-Hama thought him.

“Stop it!” Magatsu blocked Manji’s strike and backed down the slope again. “Manji! It’s me, Magatsu! I’m not fighting you!” He had to deflect another furious blow, but didn’t follow up with an attack. “What the hell’s going on?”

“Manji-san!” Rin called out to him, appalled at this turn of events. Her bodyguard didn’t even look at her — he seemed possessed by a berserker frenzy. How to persuade him to stand down?

Someone grabbed her from behind before she could draw breath. Her assailant clapped his hand over her mouth and twisted her sword out of her hand. Fujikata! He seized her around the waist and dragged her off the path and into the woods.

Rin kicked and thrashed, trying to break his hold. His hands felt soft, but strong and clinging, almost sticky. Her clothes fell to her waist again. Fujikata chuckled and whispered something in her ear that she didn’t want to understand. Out on the path, she heard Manji’s *shido* crash against Magatsu’s broadsword.

Fujikata shifted his grip on Rin, trying to grope her bare breasts. His tongue slid along her cheek and he breathed hard in her ear. Rin defended herself with her elbows, so frightened she thought she might vomit, or even let go her bowels. She screamed under his gagging hand and made only a muffled squeaking noise.

Manji hadn't seen them in his blind rage? Was one of these horrible ravishers going to make away with her after all? She jabbed an elbow into his stomach as hard as she could and Fujikata grunted angrily. He tried to seize her by the hair and force her head back. Rin shook and tossed her head to flail her braid rings in his face. His hand slipped from her mouth and she screamed out loud.

"Let her go, flower-plucker!"

Mado! His heavy footfalls crashed after them. Fujikata hesitated, then shoved Rin to the ground. Her breath knocked out, she lay sprawled and still for a few moments. Fujikata stood over her and drew his *katana*. "Stand off, barbarian!"

"Or what?" Mado halted some distance away. Rin pulled her face out of the forest litter, spat out bits of leaf and tried to get up; Fujikata planted a foot between her shoulderblades and kept her down. "You gonna slice her if I don't blow off?" He laughed. "You like 'em *that* helpless?"

The big foreigner looked much the worse for wear, his clothes soaked in blood below the waist and down the front. A wide flap of skin hung from the side of his neck, exposing the tendons. A glancing blow from Manji's blade? He gripped his harpoon in both hands, low in front of him.

"Throw down your weapon and depart!" Rin stealthily reached for the cord of Fujikata's sandal, hoping to trip him. Then she felt a cold touch on the side of her face: the point of the *ronin's* sword. She froze in place. "Or I'll remove an ear... to begin with."

Mado grimaced. "Now hold on there. No need to —"

"Ha! Such concern for a woman no relation of yours! You're no common bandit, are you?"

"Who said I was?"

"No, neither you nor your tattooed friend! Who so persuasively insisted that you must aid our enterprise... and then sabotaged it from within!" The flat of the sword point slapped Rin's cheek as Fujikata shouted; she dug her fingers into the forest litter and gritted her teeth. "Who is your real employer, *gaijin*?"

"If you don't count a shipowner's company on the other side of the world..." Mado pulled a face and briefly touched his neck wound; he looked pale under his freckles. "Hey, Jappo... why don't we duel for her? *Bushido* and all that."

"*Bushido*?" Fujikata gave a contemptuous laugh. "From a barbarian, with that crude weapon?"

Mado shrugged. "You already pinked me once, I guess." He glanced down at his bloody clothes. "So kick my ass for good an' all, samurai. If you think you can!"

Fujikata took the bait; he lifted his foot from Rin's back and moved to the side. She tried to rise and he kicked her hard in the stomach. She crumpled up, gasping. Fujikata faced Mado and poised his sword high in both hands. "Then, *gaijin*, prepare yourself for death."

"Sure, samurai-san. All according to the rules, right?" Keeping his harpoon laid across his thighs, Mado gave him a formal bow.

Fujikata charged while the foreigner's head still bent low. Mado sprang from his crouch and collided with him in mid-stroke. The *ronin* spun around from the force of the impact; Mado stepped past him and backed up.

Fujikata stood with one hand clutching the black iron shaft protruding from his abdomen. He looked at Mado with an expression of surprised pain.

"Aw." Mado shook his head in mock remorse. "Damn crude of me."

Rin gulped air and pushed up on one hand. Her tender nipples stung from the twigs and sharp-edged leaves; she fumbled her clothes over her breasts again, trying to slip her arm into the sleeve of her inner robe.

Fujikata staggered forward with his sword in hand. Mado took a couple of steps backward and yanked on the cord attached to the harpoon shaft.

The wide barbed head ripped out of Fujikata's flesh, and with it emerged what looked like most of his intestines. The veined loops spilled from a huge hole torn below his navel.

Rin forgot her clothes and clapped both hands to her mouth, bile surging in her throat. Fujikata looked down. Another slippery spill, like the pinkened tentacles of a cooked octopus. Fujikata fell to his knees in the midst of the tangle and dropped his sword.

"Fascinatin', what's inside of a man when you cut him open." Mado casually wiped the harpoon on one of the few dry parts of his jacket front. "That why you samurai do that belly-rippin' thing?"

Fujikata's hands trembled. "I... I had written a death poem to recite at this moment..." He let out a cry of agony.

Mado rolled his eyes and sheathed his weapon. "Keep it short, Jappo." He turned to look at Rin, as if to satisfy himself that she was uninjured, then raised a brow at her state of undress and quickly changed his gaze to the trees over her head.

"I can't remember... the words." Fujikata spit up blood. "At the end of a man's life... all is... uncertain."

"That's for damn – *aiigh!*" Mado's pale eyes opened wide. He flung his hands out and lurched to the side. Rin flinched with a shocked yelp.

So Manji had noticed her disappearance at last! His *shido* pulled a curving spray of blood with it on the backswing and arced back for another thrust that Mado barely evaded. Manji growled like an animal and circled him.

"Oh, *no!*" Rin scrambled backwards on hands and knees. "Please, Manji – !"

"Shit!" The big foreigner clutched his shoulder; a deep slash spurted blood between his fingers. The harpoon's leather sheath showed an angled cut on that side, but the iron shaft had deflected the *shido's* point and saved his spine from splitting in two. "You fuckwit Jappo – "

Magatsu ran after Manji, panting, and pointed his broadsword at him. "Will you listen to reason, you crazy fuck? Talk to me! You didn't need to do that!"

Manji snarled at him and aimed at Mado again. Fujikata's moans increased; he knelt with his arms wrapping his stomach and his face nearly on the ground. Mado's wounded shoulder prevented him from drawing his harpoon. He backed away and tangled his feet with the *ronin's* fallen sword. Manji dove for him.

"Oh, crap!" Mado flung up an arm to defend himself. Magatsu scrambled to his aid; his strike turned aside the *shido's* point just in time. Both blades barely missed the sprawling Mado.

“MANJI-SAN!” screamed Rin. “STOP!” Why was his rage so deaf to entreaty? Her eyes opened wide and she glanced down at her chafed and reddened breasts. “No — he didn’t do anything to me! Please don’t kill him!”

Finally her bodyguard seemed to hear her; he arrested his next swing and turned in her direction. Rin held out her hands to him. “The foreigner didn’t hurt me — neither of them...” Mado rolled over with obvious difficulty and crawled out of reach.

“Talk to me, you son of a bitch!” Magatsu sounded furious, almost to the point of tears. “What’s the matter with you? Just SAY something!”

“He... he can’t.” Rin wrapped her arms around her chest. Manji dropped to his knees beside her and let his *shido* fall to the ground. “He... she cut out his tongue...”

“Cut out his... *huh?*” Magatsu’s eyes dilated. “Who did? Why?”

“Well... sometimes there’s a factor ya didn’t take into account...” Mado slumped to sit against a tree, holding his wounded shoulder. “Funny how often... that turns out to be a woman.”

Manji extended his left hand to Rin, his face working. She took it; his fingers closed hard on hers. His mouth opened in a tense downward curve. He scanned her, his eye moving quickly down and up again. A flash of anguish contorted his face and he pulled her to him.

Rin embraced him and pressed her face to his chest, moaning dry sobs. Manji patted her head; he stank of sweat and drying blood, bitter and metallic. He made as if to kiss her on the temple, but halted before his lips touched her face. His fingers clenched in her hair and his chest heaved.

“Manji-san... it’s all right... Mado and Hebi protected me...”

Manji looked into her face, obviously confused, and tried to speak. Only low rasps emerged from his throat. He stared at her half-naked body again in an unvoiceable question, his forehead knotting. With an open-handed gesture, he indicated her swollen lip and gently brushed his thumb across the corner of her mouth.

Rin hastily pulled her *furisōde* up over her shoulders. “No — no one tore my clothes off! I — um, I did that... to get my sword.”

Manji's brows went up. Rin flushed, though she didn't know why she should feel embarrassed. She'd only used every means at her disposal to defend herself... nearly all of which he had taught her himself.

"It's true. I haven't been raped. Anyway, the ones who meant to were only him — " She tried not to look directly at Fujikata, still weltering in his bloody mess and letting out piteous groans. "Him... and that awful man with the mustache, and that nasty boy — I guess they've escaped. But none of them could really hurt me..." She burst into tears. "Because of the... the *Ittō-ryū*!"

Manji pulled a brief grimace at Mado that could have been construed as apologetic. Rin laughed through her tears and reached up to stroke his cheek. "Oh, Manji... you're alive!" He flinched when she touched him and closed his lips. "Oh, no... your tongue! You had to leave it behind...?"

He shrugged and showed her his handless stump. The bloodworms had begun to knit together the damage, but it was still in terrible shape, the flesh whittled from the chipped bones. Rin longed to kiss his wounds and cry over them, but knew she would only cause him fresh pain. They had to go back and find all the pieces he'd lost, or he might never heal properly!

Magatsu approached Mado. "Uh... you all right, *gaijin*?"

"Just dandy, Magatsu-san." Mado raised his sweating face. "Will somebody finish off that gut-draggin' joker? All that screamin'... is getting on my nerves."

Magatsu rolled his eyes, stepped over to Fujikata and struck off his head with one sharp blow. The howls abruptly ceased. The *ronin*'s body fell sideways and his head rolled to rest face upwards, eyes closed. Somehow his expression, though still agonized, suggested a philosophical resignation to fate.

"Hebi-kun?" Mado directed the question at Magatsu, who grimaced.

"Dead. Mostly dead — I don't know. We'd better go check." He wiped his blade on Fujikata's *hakama* and threw Manji and Rin a look of angry disgust. "Fuck this. Fuck *them*." Magatsu jammed his sword into the scabbard and stalked off towards the path. Mado pulled himself to his feet, clutching the tree in order to stand, and followed. He pressed his hand to his midsection now rather than to his shoulder wound.

Manji tucked his *shido* hilt-foremost under his handless right arm, lifted Rin to her feet and took her out of the trees as well. She felt bursting tension in his shoulders and chest, though his body probably hung on the edge of failure. Once

he could no longer hold on to his vengeful energy, the full effect of the torture would drag him down. Sweat stood on his pale brow and his eye looked glassy.

Rin put an arm around her bodyguard's torso and tried to support him; he straightened up and stiffened his spine. Sweat stood on his pale brow and his eye looked glassy.

Magatsu stooped over the dying Hebi, attempting to tie off his bleeding stump with a rag. Mado sat on the ground nearby, forehead resting on his upraised knees. Rin gave the group a hurried glance and put both arms around Manji's waist to halt his advance.

"Manji-san... how did you escape them? Did you, um, kill...?"

He shook his head and lifted his lip to show his teeth. Then he pointed at his mutilated arm with his chin and made a slight thrusting or sawing motion, as if the missing hand held a knife to cut his bonds. Rin creased her brows.

Running footfalls pounded on the bridge, accompanied by high-pitched yelps. Manji's eye flared; he turned around. Magatsu looked up from Hebi and reached for his weapon. The wounded bandit had returned! He'd lost his short sword, and his right hand along with it. He clutched his bloody wrist in his left hand. The boy ran with him, apparently uninjured but white with fear.

What, or who, had frightened them so much that they would flee straight back into the wild bear's jaws? Manji took his *shido* from under his arm and put Rin behind him.

Another rider appeared up the path, moving more slowly than Magatsu had, but trotting close on the heels of the fleeing pair. The reddening light of the evening sun shone full on him. His shadow dragged over the uneven ground; the long ragged strip of darkness fell into the ravine as he crossed the bridge, and rose again as he came closer. Closer yet...

Rin stared at the rider with open lips. Manji's protective stance and his weapon blurred before her; all she could focus on was the man who approached.

Manji stalked forward as the bandit neared. Seeing him, the man skidded to a stop and looked back at the approaching rider. He let go his hold on the stump of his right arm, and jittered back and forth for a moment as if he could not decide which adversary posed the greater danger. Then he turned to the side and took a running leap up the embankment, his mutilated nose and mouth bubbling with his terrified gasps. He fumbled for a dagger with his left hand.

Manji intercepted the bandit halfway up the slope and swept the *shido* in a wide arc. He spun the forked blade from the ring at the base so swiftly that it looked like a pinwheel in a gale. A whirlwind of steel...

Manji's victim seemed to explode at the seams. His arms flew upwards, separated at elbows and shoulders; each leg departed his body in similar sections; his torso fell in halves and then into quarters. Split through the eye sockets and with the lower jaw sliced away, the pieces of the bandit's head arced through the air, hit the slope and bounced down to the path. His left hand, still clutching the dagger, landed at Rin's feet.

The boy jumped to avoid the flying dissections and skidded backwards. He crouched on the path and drew a knife, his mouth open and panting.

With a jerk of his arm, Manji lashed blood and shreds of clothing from his blade. He stepped over the still-palpating assortment of body parts and approached the boy, aggressively rolling his shoulders.

From his station by Hebi's side, Magatsu raised his hand in greeting to the rider, whose thick head-scarf obscured his face. He sat the saddle like a skilled horseman, though the slope of his shoulders betrayed fatigue. Across the front of his saddle he balanced an unsheathed blade; Rin spotted a dull glint of iron, its reddish tint only partly a reflection of the sun. Tearing free from her transfixion, she ran to pick up her sword.

Protection – from *him*? Fear flared in her belly and scorched down the insides of her thighs.

The rider reined in at a judicious distance, let down the weapon with a heavy thump on the far side of the horse, and dismounted with deliberate care. He wore a bulky padded winter coat over a bold-printed *kōsōde* and knee-high travel gaiters. He had tucked the garment up between his thighs to allow for straddling his horse. As he bent to retrieve his blade, between the horse's legs Rin saw a slim-wristed hand clasp its hilt.

He swung the curving battle-ax to his shoulder with a clean motion, raised his head and looked directly at her. Under the dark overhang of the scarf: the narrow eyes of Anotsu Kagehisa.

END OF VOLUME SIX

CONTINUED IN VOLUME SEVEN...

- GLOSSARY -

Amida Butsu: An incarnation of the Buddha. His name is invoked as a promise of salvation, and popularly as a charm against evil.

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 liaison 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.

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.

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.

futon: 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.

hakama: Pleated pants or skirt worn over a *kōsōde*.

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.

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

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

even in English dialog.

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

-sama: A respectful term, a degree stronger than *-san*.

-dono: An archaic term used for high officials and important people, or to convey great respect.

-chan: A diminutive with a cute connotation, used for children, intimate friends and lovers, and among women. "Sweetie" might be an English equivalent.

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

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

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

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

katana: The longer of the two swords 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 *Ittō-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 *oku*, 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.

mizuage: The sale of a new courtesan’s virginity to the highest bidder.

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.

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: 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, “elder”. 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. *Fusuma* 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.

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.