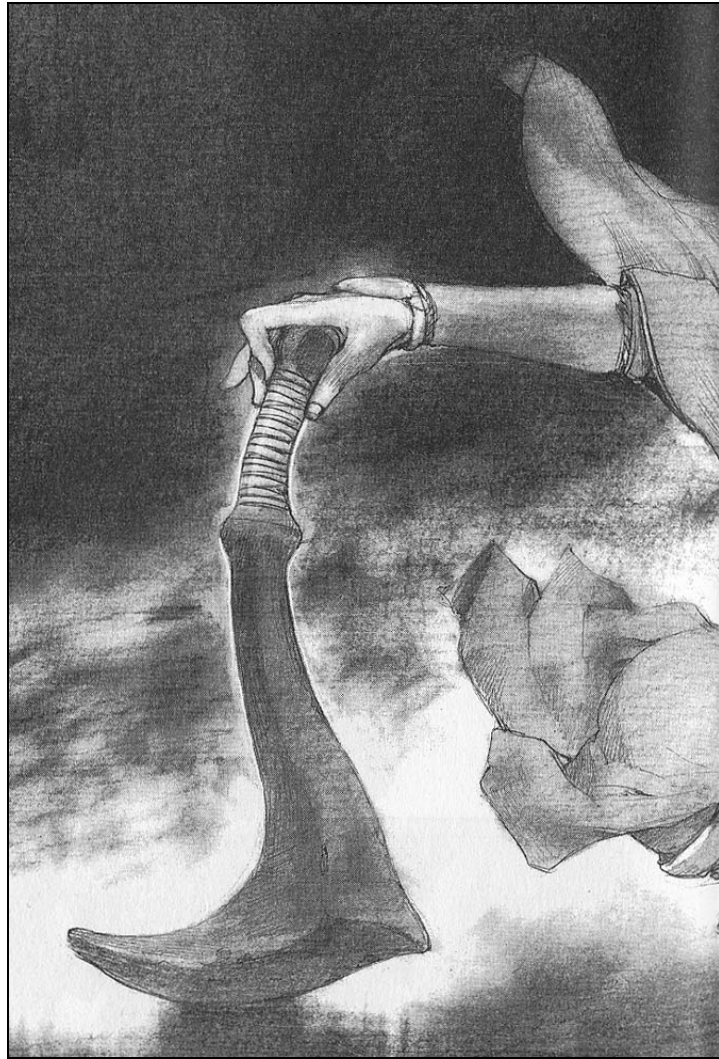


ABSTINENCE EDUCATION

A BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL FAN FICTION STORY

BY MADAME MANGA



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VOLUME SEVEN : PARTS 37-40

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

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

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

Author’s note: If you are not a regular reader of Blade of the Immortal/*Mugen no 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-SEVEN

"Danna!" Magatsu rose to his feet. *"We're too late!"*

Anotsu Kagehisa's head-scarf fell back with a brush of his hand, fully revealing his face. His beauty, like the flash of a drawn blade. Rin gripped her sword so tightly it shook, though she tried to suppress her trembles. A month ago, Anotsu had looked clammy and frail, his voice reduced to a creaking whisper. Now his color was healthy and his posture upright, though lines of fatigue drew around his mouth. She'd saved her enemy's life, probably, and had pitied his human weakness. Here he stood restored to strength, a double-edged reward for her pains.

He didn't do more than glance at Hebi's body, to which Magatsu pointed an accusing finger. His eyes turned to Rin again, a crease pulling between his brows. *"Too late?"*

"Hebi's dead! That bastard killed him!" Magatsu followed Manji, who stalked past Rin and aimed straight at Anotsu. His *shido* dripped with the dismembered bandit's blood. *"Watch it — he's gone fucking nuts — "*

"What happened?" Still Anotsu looked only at Rin, his voice as clear as his eyes. *"Will you tell me?"*

Rin bolted. She dashed for her advancing bodyguard and shoved her shoulder against his breastbone, keeping hold of her sword. The outcome of a single combat seemed all too obvious — Anotsu might feel a little weary after his hasty ride from the town, but even Manji's immortal body could have almost nothing left to give. Anotsu's ax still sat casually on his right shoulder, the wide blade

also streaked with the bandit's blood. Rin pushed Manji to a halt and braced her feet.

From a few paces' distance, the two men measured each other over Rin's head. Anotsu with a slight frown, scanning Manji's bloodied nudity: Manji with eye burning and teeth set in an aggressive grin. His fist whitened on the *shido's* hilt. Rin took her sword in both hands and turned to put her back against Manji's chest, staying in the middle of the confrontation. Though she brandished it in his face, Anotsu didn't seem to take much account of her weapon. Neither did Manji — he elbowed her aside as if breaking through the forest undergrowth and circled to the left.

Anotsu tilted his head back and shifted the ax on his shoulder to follow Manji's movement. She had seen the terror that ax wielded in his hands. Might he deflect a blow and back off, like Magatsu? No — if Manji started this fight, Anotsu would probably accept it as a challenge to the death.

Rin dropped her sword on the ground, ran to Manji again and embraced him in desperation. He let out a grunt at the impact of her body against his.

"You — you'll have to kill b-both of us..." She quavered to a stop, realizing how absurd that sounded. No one paid any attention.

Long, tense moments while Manji stood still in Rin's embrace and held Anotsu's gaze. He briefly smirked at Magatsu, who also stood ready with sword in hand. Then Manji glanced down at Rin. He didn't seem to accuse her, though he probed for confirmation of some idea or suspicion. She pressed her cheek to his chest, her lips trembling; he raised his brows and turned to Anotsu once more. His lips curled back, broadening his grin. He slowly shook his head.

Rin felt a vibration in his body, which grew to a quake; he began to laugh.

Everyone stared at him. Manji threw his head back and let out short, ragged guffaws. An absurd karma — ridiculous for all its inevitability. Rin gasped when he freed himself from her arms. He shook his head again and pivoted with his blade swinging out to the side. For a blow? To put it away? He seemed to be heading for the side of the path, perhaps to sit, but he had barely taken a step when he stumbled and dropped the *shido*.

Rin tried to support Manji from behind as he went down. His weight slipped from her grasping hands. Anotsu again let his ax fall and darted forward. He caught Manji's shoulders in time to keep him from smashing his face into the dirt,

but Rin's bodyguard still measured his length on the ground. Anotsu guided him to lie on his back and stood up, dusting his hands.

Rin cried out and dropped to her knees beside Manji. His eye remained open, but unfocused and vacant; Rin cradled his head and lifted it to her lap. She stroked his face with shaking fingers, weeping too hard to speak. Relief, in a way, and gratitude — he'd given everything he had to her defense, mistaken or not. But sorrow for his agony overwhelmed every other emotion.

Anotsu hunkered down opposite her. Rin's falling tears splattered cleaner spots on Manji's dirty, bloody cheek; his eye closed and he turned his face into her stomach with a slight moan. Hissing on an intake of breath, Anotsu passed a hand above Manji's mutilated arm and examined the wounds. He frowned at Magatsu over Rin's shoulder.

Magatsu spread his hands in an exasperated shrug. "Don't look at me. He was like that when I got here."

"He's killed Hebi?"

"Stabbed him right in front of me, *danna!* I guess he thought they were all in it together." Magatsu slammed his sword into the scabbard and turned away. "Ask the damn sailor — I think he's still alive."

Anotsu gave a careful look to the sobbing Rin and stood up. "Mado-san?"

"*Toshu.*" Mado sat by the dead Hebi's side, sounding subdued. "Sorry... if I don't get up."

"How badly are you injured?"

Mado grimaced and held his midsection. "Damn good question... hey!" He surged to his feet, dashed into the woods and dragged out the kicking and yelping bandit's boy by the collar. "Where you think yer goin', ya little turd?"

The boy twisted and fought, but couldn't slip out of his jacket nor break Mado's hold. He snatched his knife from one hand to the other and made a frantic backward stab. Mado casually caught his wrist in midair. Then he flicked his own clasp knife open and made a quick horizontal gesture. Rin looked around in time to see the boy's body collapse in a spray of blood, his beardless throat slashed to the spine. She shuddered when his head lolled at an unnatural angle and his face turned towards her, eyes and mouth wide open. So young to die that way — any way at all.

Mado shoved the corpse off the path with one foot, closed his knife in his fist and dropped it into his sleeve. "Worms make weevils," he said to no one in particular. He took a backward step and sat down hard on a log. "How bad? Well..." Pain distorted his face for a moment. Anotsu looked inquiringly at him, but Mado waved away concern.

Anotsu turned and gestured at Manji's wounds. "Who tortured him like this? Not the young *hatamoto*?"

Mado slowly nodded. "Yep, he's the one who made that hash... friggin' amateur. Then... his woman took over."

"His *woman*?" Anotsu seemed almost amused. "A runaway courtesan?"

Mado grinned slightly and indicated Rin. "She wanted us to gang-bang the kid in front of the bodyguard. Then she made like to geld him, but she settled for shuttin' him up permanent instead. That is... she ripped out his insultin' tongue."

"You're joking. "

"Take a look for yerself. Sure holds a grudge... that little lady does." Mado laughed and felt the shallow slice on the side of his neck. He half-crawled back to Hebi's side, eased the scarf from the dead man's throat and wrapped it around his own to keep the wide flap of skin in place. The shoulder wound that Manji had inflicted hampered his movements.

Anotsu stared down at Rin, his eyes widening; he looked far less amused now. "You were ordered to assault...?"

"Th' other three were willin' and able... an' she didn't give up the notion real quick, let me tell you. We got the kid out of there soon as we could." Mado sighed and eased himself down to lie on the ground. "Mission accomplished... *Toshu*." He made an odd gesture, touching the edge of his flatted hand to his forehead and snapping it a short distance outwards.

"You have not been touched?" Anotsu hunkered down again to meet Rin's gaze. "My men preserved you from violation?"

"*Your* men?" Rin flushed hot and glared at him while cradling the semi-conscious Manji. "You! You... *planned* this?"

The corner of Anotsu's mouth quirked. "You believe I was behind the ambush?"

She quivered and clenched her lips. "You seem to know an awful lot about it!"

"Yes... and so does every tavern-goer in the town from which we set out."

"Hah?"

"The fugitive Tsukue Ryonosuke spent hours yesterday attempting to hire followers. He was not discreet."

"...Oh."

"By evening, he was an almost universal laughingstock — though no one doubted that he had grounds for his grievances. Your bodyguard... was not entirely discreet either."

Rin stared at him. Anotsu's face crinkled slightly around the eyes; he dipped his head, letting his long unbound forelock brush over his brow, then glanced up at her again with his lips curved in a smile. Did he only mean Manji's loud displays of public drunkenness and conspicuous overprotection? What had Makie told him? Or anyone else who had seen them together yesterday, for that matter? Tremors jerked through her. What was Anotsu going to do with her helpless bodyguard? With *her*?

"Are you afraid of me?" His voice was soft, not quite mocking. Rin gulped hard, then tightened her jaw.

"Should I be?"

He looked at her for a moment, the expression of his eyes opaque though oddly penetrating. "That wasn't my intention. Are you all right?"

"I... I wasn't hurt. Not really." Rin clutched Manji's head to her breasts and bowed over him, unable to meet Anotsu's gaze any longer. "Just... just Manji-san..."

"I understand. Excuse me." He rose and approached Mado. While Anotsu spoke to the foreigner, Magatsu took Hebi's vest and covered the corpse's face. He looked around for the dead man's severed arm, fetched it from where it had fallen and laid it in the pool of blood by his side in roughly the correct position. Then he stomped off into the woods with his broadsword, where Rin heard him chopping at something and cursing in a low, harsh voice.

What was she going to do now? With Manji so weak, Anotsu held both of them entirely in his power. If he had heard of the plot and sent Mado and Hebi as infiltrators... and then ridden on ahead with his companion... Her mind whirled. Makie's intimation of his intentions towards her... confirmed? But if he'd wanted Manji out of his way, how better to do it than let someone else take care of the job? Anotsu couldn't have meant to aid them out of the goodness of his heart!

Rin's breath came in irregular pants. She longed to flee, to lose her enemy in the dark woods, and somehow escape the situation that pursued her like an army of ravishers, but Manji's dead weight in her arms anchored her to the spot.

Manji moaned again, ruffling her clothing over her stomach; his lips looked cracked and dry. She had to get him some nourishment, if he could manage to swallow it. He'd never heal without food and water, even if he regained his missing body parts. How were they going to return to the clearing to find those? They had run so far! The sun would set completely in no more than an hour, and even if Anotsu let them go free, she couldn't possibly drag Manji all that way by herself. Could she even locate the place again in the deepening twilight? In the dark?

Until she tried, she wouldn't know. First, to do what she could for him. At least she had a few supplies with her, if they'd survived the trip. Rin raised her head and scanned up and down the path. She didn't see her bag where the boy had dropped it — where had it gone? Something intruded at the corner of her vision and she glanced over. Anotsu held her bag by the strap; he set it on the ground where she could reach it without getting up. "Will his injuries heal? I don't know the extent of his abilities."

"Uh... maybe. If he gets back his hand and, er... "

"His hand? Where did that fall?" Anotsu scanned the path and looked up the slope.

"N-no, it wasn't anywhere near..." Rin didn't meet Anotsu's eyes when he looked back at her, but rummaged in her bag with her free hand. Her water container was nowhere to be found; she reached deeper into the bag and bumped against the *harigata's* carved wooden box. Rin blanched and grabbed the squashed packet that held the remains of her long-ago lunch. Some pickles and cold dumplings: she hoped Manji could get them down. When she unwrapped them they looked battered and tough.

"Manji?" She softly patted his forehead. "Manji-san? Can you hear me?" He muttered and shifted his head. Rin swallowed a hard lump that choked her. "I

have a little food — you must be so hungry! Could you eat anything with that wound?” Her own stomach rumbled loudly. His lips moved slowly, then repeated the silent word. “Water? You want water? Uh... I’ll have to find some, I’ve lost mine.” She started to lift his head from her lap, but another object moved into her field of view. A bamboo canteen, in Anotsu’s hand. Rin stared at it.

“I have more, if you need it.” He set the canteen on the ground next to her bag. “I’ll, ah, loan him a garment — I have some spare clothing.” Anotsu turned towards his horse.

“But — I didn’t ask you for — ” Anotsu looked at her; she found it difficult to control her fear and anger. “Why are you offering me charity?”

“I won’t force it on you.” He glanced down at Manji. “Do you refuse on your bodyguard’s behalf as well as your own?”

Manji moaned. Rin bit her lips and looked at Anotsu’s canteen.

“I hold an obligation towards you, Asano Rin-*dono*.” Anotsu slightly inclined his head to her; Rin’s skin prickled at his respectful yet almost intimate tone. “In the mountains of Kaga, you aided me of your own free will, although you could have left me to live or die as fate determined. Will you allow me to repay some part of the honor you showed me?”

“Uh...” Put like that? Rin flushed and slowly picked up the canteen. She tried to prop Manji up a little and worked the stopper out of the spout with her thumb. After a moment, Anotsu walked to his horse and unstrapped a saddlebag.

From what she could tell when Manji opened his mouth to drink, about half of his tongue was gone — O-Hama hadn’t ripped it out by the roots, only cut off the end at a shallow angle. But that big raw wound must hurt him terribly! An acid sensation of nausea stung inside her cheeks. Manji coughed and choked, barely able to swallow. Rin realized he couldn’t lick his lips, and rolled a fingertip on her own tongue to gather saliva. She patted the moisture over Manji’s cracked lips, smoothing the contours of his wounded mouth. The mouth she had dreamed of kissing... that he’d so often used for her pleasure and his.

A slow quiver of fury crawled over her body and ground in her belly; she gritted her teeth and tenderly wiped Manji’s face with her sleeve when water dribbled down his cheek. If she’d had that vicious woman and her idiot boyfriend at her mercy just then, Rin could have returned injury for injury without a thought.

Anotsu returned with a stack of clothing and towels, unrolled a reed mat and set everything down. "I'll assist him."

"Assist him? What with?" Rin looked blankly at Anotsu; he knelt and pulled a folded length of fabric from the pile he'd brought. A clean *fundoshi*. Involuntarily her gaze dropped to Manji's bloodstained loincloth, his sole remaining garment.

"With washing and dressing, of course." He gently motioned Rin away, as if she must be too innocent to realize that a man's body differed from her own. "It's hardly a job for a young woman."

"But... but I should... *you*?" Rin held Manji closer, almost guarding him. "He needs me!"

"As I also needed your help, not so long ago... yes?"

Rin felt a jolt in Manji's body. His teeth rattled on the spout of Anotsu's canteen and his eye half opened. Anotsu glanced down at him with a raised brow. "I — I never did anything like — !"

"No." Again Anotsu gave her that half-secret smile, as if they shared a confidence. "As far as I'm aware, you did not." He seemed to anticipate more reaction from Manji, but though his lip drew back in a snarl, Manji sagged again into Rin's lap and closed his eye.

Rin's cheeks flamed. She meant to insist again on nursing Manji herself, then caught a strange glance from Magatsu as he emerged from the trees. Of course she would have given Manji's cruelly battered body all the care and tenderness she could if they had been alone — but under the eyes of other men? "Why do *you* want to give him a bath?"

Anotsu slightly wrinkled his nostrils; Rin registered Manji's powerful stench of blood and sweat. "The sooner, the better, I think. Please, allow me."

In silence she helped Anotsu shift Manji onto the reed mat, then laid his head down and stroked his hair out of his face. Anotsu's eyes followed the motion. Rin pulled her hand away and shuffled backwards in a crouch. Before she rose and turned her back, she saw Anotsu dampen a towel and wipe through the grimy crust on Manji's bare chest with careful efficiency, holding his mutilated right arm out of the way.

"*Danna*." Magatsu approached, thrusting a slender secondary blade back into the hilt of his broadsword. He carried a roughly whittled piece of wood under his

arm. He nodded in the direction of the sun, which had descended below the treetops. The path lay in shadow now; the air had grown cooler. "We hanging out here till dark, or what?"

"We'll remain here until I'm satisfied with the outcome." Anotsu spoke with a hint of forced patience as he worked over Manji; Rin had the impression that the two had already argued this point to exhaustion. He gestured with his chin at Magatsu's wooden tool. "A shovel?"

"Least I can do is bury the poor bastard. Hebi was... a nice guy." Magatsu's sharp jaw knotted. "Not the brightest lantern on the street, maybe, but..."

"He was a good swordsman, and a loyal follower." Anotsu bowed his head, then returned to his task. Magatsu chose a spot of soft earth near the path, cleared it of leaves with a few sweeps of his sandal and began to dig.

At loose ends now that Anotsu had shooed her away, Rin took a few steps down the path. Mado lay near her; he looked at her from under his hand. Rin stared back for a moment; his freckled face resembled a sheet of white paper made with bits of red-brown bark for contrast, and the lightness of his eyes unsettled her. She clasped her hands in front of her, self-consciously pulling at her fingers. Knowing what she did now and thinking over her captors' actions, she wasn't sure yet whether to feel angry or grateful for what they had done. She ventured a look at the silent, lanky body to Mado's left and recalled the way Hebi had smiled at her. At least he had tried to offer a little comfort. "Um... I'm sorry about your friend..."

Mado vented a snort, reminiscent of Manji in a cynical mood. "Them's the breaks."

"Manji-san didn't realize that you — what WERE you doing, anyway?" Rin's voice rose despite an attempt to control it; her throat felt tight. "What did your boss tell you?"

Mado glanced at Anotsu's bent back. The leader of the Ittō-ryū finished scrubbing his patient's left leg, discarded a filthy towel and wet down another. He seemed oddly comfortable with the job; there was something almost womanish in the care he took to wipe away every trace of dirt. Manji muttered with a sour, resentful expression, though his eye remained closed and he let Anotsu roll him over to wash his back. "What do you figure, kid?"

"To... to go hire on with Ryonosuke... and try to keep me safe? Why didn't you just take care of him and the others, if you were so worried about my... my..."

"Stab 'em in the back before they got the chance, ya mean?" Mado ran his tongue over his teeth, leaving them filmed with a pink stain.

"Uh... well..."

"We're Ittō-ryū, not a bunch of frickin' highwaymen. We weren't even sure the *hatamoto* kid had enough of a sack to get it up for the ambush." Mado chuckled. "Now his little lady, on the other hand..."

"I thought you said you weren't even really a member!"

He raised his brows at her. "I stick out in a crowd... even when we're talkin' a motley crew like this one. So I gotta fade into the background a lot of the time — not like we ever stood regular watches."

"But you follow Anotsu's orders?"

"Kid, you can run an' hide, you can wish all you want that you were anywhere but where you are, like a snug berth on a homeward voyage. But wishes ain't horses... or ships. You can mourn for yer dead an' for what you've lost, or you can thank God there's one guy who'll at least make use of yer particular talents." Mado grinned. "A man's got to have his work, or life ain't nothin' but scroungin' the next meal."

"Why *him*?"

"Some skippers I've sailed with couldn't navigate their way out've a tart's petticoats. This guy..." He pointed at Anotsu. "This guy could track a gray-painted ship in a pea-soup fog on a moonless night, and board and scuttle her alone with a dull handspike an' a coil of moldy rope. When a guy like that says he's got a cause an' needs a crew? You sign on, that's what you do."

"Anotsu's... made use of you? Do you mean your weapon?"

Mado hawked and spat, then wiped a trickle of blood from his mouth. "You ever wondered about the outside, girlie? Like, what's over the sea from this little string of shitball islands you ain't never gonna leave?"

"Over the sea? There's the mainland... China and Korea..."

He sneered at her. "That's about as far as you've ever heard of, I reckon. The rest's all that big gray fogbank, hey?" He pointed at Anotsu again. "This here's a

seein' man. He wants to know, which ain't much like a Jappo. He ain't satisfied with what he's handed an' how things always got done before. He don't settle for less than he wants, an' he gets it any way that works."

"I suppose he does — like murdering innocent people!"

"Hah?"

"M-my parents! Anotsu Kagehisa had both my parents killed — and my mother raped next to my father's dead body! Is that a guy you respect? A guy you follow?"

Mado frowned and looked across the path at Magatsu, who had paused in his digging for a moment. Magatsu shrugged, then attacked the dirt again. Mado pursed his lips and echoed the shrug. "Never known him to waste an effort for nothin'."

"That's easy for you to say!"

"Not as easy as..." A rictus of agony stiffened Mado's blunt features, dreadful to watch in the shadowy light. He clutched his abdomen and half reared up, gasping.

"Oh!" Rin's surge of concern disconcerted her. "Are... are you OK?"

"Better... dig that hole big enough... for two, Magatsu-san..." Mado sank back and let out a groaning chuckle; Magatsu stopped work again and turned to stare at him.

"Mado-san?" Anotsu glanced up from tying Manji's loincloth for him. Rin put her hands to her mouth. Another death on the toll of this terrible day? How many more?

"Hey... them's the breaks..."

Anotsu got up, brushed Rin aside and went to Mado. She backed away towards Manji, who was now clean and covered with a dark-indigo *kōsōde* as a blanket. Anotsu leaned over and parted the foreigner's bloody clothing. Rin heard an intake of breath from Anotsu, and Mado grunted in pain. "God! Why didn't you say...?"

"Aw... nothin' to do about it anyhow. Fuck it, *Toshu* — I'm killed by a damn Jappo!"

"I'm sorry." Anotsu carefully wrapped Mado's jacket again.

"Tell me about it..."

Anotsu sat down by him, his brows creased; he looked sincerely regretful, even stricken. "I... I wish I'd heard more of your tales of the oceans, and of your native land..."

"Don't remind me. Seen the freakin' world from a whaler's deck... but I never even once hauled my ass around Kapa-Kodo to look at Boso-ton." Mado gave a low laugh, punctuated by another groan of pain. "Much good may that do yer crowd of little yellow bastards... when fuckin' King Joji the Third shows up in Edo harbor with his whole fuckin' navy. Shit... wish I could be here to see it!"

Anotsu smiled and shook his head. "So you've often told me."

On the mat next to Manji, Anotsu had left another canteen and a packet of food. Manji's face twitched; he opened his eye and blinked at Rin as she knelt by him again. Washed, he looked much better, though still pale and moving weakly. She helped him sit up part way with her thighs as a prop.

Magatsu flung dirt to the sides of the enlarging grave and bared his teeth at Manji and Rin. "We were damn short-handed already, *danna* – and now he's killed both of 'em? *Both?*"

"Wasn't the bodyguard... not that he didn't try. It was that *rōnin* bastard took me through the belly, right when the fight started..." Mado choked and retched up a dark mouthful of blood. "Well... I served him..." Magatsu didn't seem to hear him, though Anotsu nodded. Rin ignored Anotsu's food and tried to coax Manji into eating some of hers. He wrinkled his nose at the salty pickles, which she realized would probably hurt his wound, and labored to get down a cold dumpling.

After he had spat out the third mouthful in a row, Rin finally ventured a look at the packet. Fresh steamed buns and ripe persimmons, looking far more appetizing than the remains of her lunch, not to mention easier to get down. She stared at Anotsu's food for a few moments, her jaw clenched. She felt as if he had personally orchestrated every detail of this situation just to triumph over her in the smallest ways as well as more obvious ones. Though it seemed now that he'd had little hand in it. Just as Mado had claimed, this wasn't Anotsu's deal. Other than taking extreme pains to ensure that she suffered no harm... and suffering his own losses. She located a little knife in her bag and peeled a persimmon.

Manji had to take small bites and struggled to swallow, but as Rin fed him, his color slowly began to return. Mado grew paler still, visibly sinking. Anotsu stayed at his side and kept talking, as if to distract him from his pain. A lump grew in Rin's throat. Why did dying have to be so hard?

"You and Hebi trusted your bravery and service to the Ittō-ryū cause..." Anotsu sighed. "You've succeeded in the task I asked of you... and paid the ultimate price for victory. I apologize for my miscalculations."

"Naw, ain't your fault, *Toshu*. That would be me."

"What?"

"The *hatamoto* kid couldn't get anybody to sign on... till he thought of offerin' the girl as pay. Don't reckon that was his idea... hell, the whole damn business wasn't his idea. I shoulda twigged... the whore had to be behind it."

The driving force — O-Hama. One woman's grief and rage. Even if she hadn't foreseen the violence of her longed-for revenge, her hatred had brought them to this pass, and destroyed so many lives.

Rin shuddered. Only one woman's?

"I admit I don't understand. Why would an escaped courtesan plot to capture an outlaw?"

"One of his hundred... was her daddy."

"Ah." Anotsu's voice was neutral.

Mado forced up another clot of blood and cleared his throat. "Look, uh, *Toshu*, you say we succeeded, and I reckon we did, technically speakin', but there's somethin' you maybe oughta hear — " He glanced at Rin and spoke from the side of his mouth.

"Yes?"

Mado paused and blew out a long breath. "You ain't said much about why you sent us on this job. I gather there's a stake in it somewhere —" Anotsu didn't reply. "Uh... I ain't sayin' I hanker to poke my long nose in where it don't belong. Nor do I like t' pass tales. 'Specially when they might, er, reflect, on a young lady's, er..."

Rin's spine stiffened. The foreigner's booming voice had diminished to a whisper, but her own hearing seemed to sharpen in response. Manji didn't show any obvious reaction to the quiet conversation a few steps behind them, though he seemed a little more vigorous now; he swallowed what he was chewing and grunted when Rin hesitated before continuing to feed him. She tore off a chunk of steamed bun and stuffed it between his lips.

"I beg your pardon?" Cold, formal: Rin shivered a little.

Mado put up both hands. "Hell, *Toshu*... she's just a wee girl, an' I'd figure it's all on his side anyhow... but I don't want to go to my Maker thinkin' that I neglected to give you a heads-up. Even when I ain't so sure of yer personal interest in the business..."

"You have something to say? Then say it."

"Well... I dunno how to put this..." Mado drew a deep breath that caught in his chest; he coughed for a moment before speaking. "Ah... we were all set up in plenty of time. Point of fact, it was gettin' pretty late before we spotted 'em — we were a mite concerned that they'd stopped, or taken another way. But coming towards us... the bodyguard was stalkin' along by himself with a face like a thunderhead. The girl didn't come into view for a while after that, an' she was chasin' to catch him up. He wasn't lettin' her."

"What?" Anotsu's obvious astonishment made his voice carry; Manji's eye opened.

"Yep, an' she looked madder'n a wet kitten. It beat the pants off me why her own bodyguard would want to lose her on the road... but hell, it was an openin', and he was handin' to us free of charge. So we took it."

Manji clenched his lips. Rin shook her head at him, tears welling in her eyes. Perhaps he'd allowed anger to make him reckless, but how could she lay any blame on him now? His wounds spoke for him. Nothing she could give him for his pain seemed too much. Nothing at all...

"He didn't defend her? Then how — "

"Didn't *defend* her?" Mado's chuckle sounded spotty and frail. "He came at us like a crazy man. We had to stop an' fight when he caught up, and it all snowballed from there. But, see, about that..." He had to master another coughing fit.

"You fought?" Anotsu stooped lower to hear the foreigner's response, which wasn't audible to Rin. They spoke for a little while while she caught only a word here and there, punctuated by coughs. Mado was either weakening rapidly, or had belatedly realized that she could hear him.

"Eh? Said *what*?" Anotsu's voice rose again. He listened in silence for several moments, then let out a hard breath. "Are you certain?"

Rin strained to detect Mado's mumble. "...no mistake there. The whore figgered it the same... an' whatever else she might be, she ain't dumb. Wonder what's become of that pair..."

"That's why she gave the men that order in his hearing?"

"Right you are. He practically tore the freakin' tree in half."

"Mado-san, before you speak another word..."

"Hah?"

"Please be utterly clear on this point. You say Rin-dono was not harmed today — but that her treasure may already have been... claimed?" Rin could hear him a little more distinctly on the last phrase, as if he had turned his head over his shoulder to look in her direction. Or at Manji. His voice had gone cold again.

She huddled over her bodyguard, her heart beating fast. Manji looked up at her, his expression nearly blank. They were still at Anotsu's mercy, both of them, no matter how solicitous he might have meant to be. If she'd feared O-Hama's wrath...

"Naw, naw... nothin' doin'!" Mado sounded as if he saw something startling in Anotsu's face. "You shoulda seen her! She got free a little after that, and the first thing she did? Grabbed a blade and held the bastards at bay, then got ready to throw herself on it." Anotsu drew a sharp intake of breath. "Well, me an' Hebi headed her off... as ya can see."

"She would have carried it through?"

"Aw, ya could read it like print in her little face — she'd rather have died."

Anotsu was silent for some time, as if the picture touched him in some way. She hoped he felt a flicker of guilt, or at least the prodding of a memory. "Then her own actions prove her honor..."

"You might say. That's why their little tiff on the road — I'm figgerin'."

"This very day... ah." Anotsu sounded positively gratified, and fingered his chin in thought. "How... suggestive."

Mado snickered softly. "One an' one make two all round the world..."

Manji shook his head, gave Rin an unfathomable look and closed his eye.

"Say, yer musician lady... I know she said they dueled over him callin' her names, but he was drunk, for crap's sake. She tell you any more about that business in the garden? Like after we left?"

"...I thought you said you didn't put your nose where it didn't belong?"

"Right you are, *Go-Toshu-sama*." Rin had the sense that they smiled at each other. "Damn, that's a load off my mind at least... but I swear, I actually started feelin' sorry for the bastard."

"Hmm?"

"I dunno, all else aside... that immortality shit, that's gotta be hell." Mado laughed painfully. "I can see the use of it — lyin' here with my belly full of blood — but damned if I'd want to get killed a hundred times over in one lifetime. Anyhow... I'm goin' home at last..."

"Do you need something? A drink?"

"Naw... unless yer carryin' a keg of *shōchū* on that horse. Which you ain't a tippler, worse luck for me." Mado shifted position and sighed. Anotsu rose after a moment and turned to Rin.

"The day grows short — you will have to hurry."

"Wh-what?"

"Didn't you say your bodyguard needed his severed hand back to heal properly?"

“Um... but I don’t think he can walk yet...” Anotsu moved past her. Rin watched him take a folding wood-framed lantern from behind his saddle. He flipped open the lid of a charcoal holder, blew lightly on the coals to check that they were still live, and closed the holder again. Then he took a paper-wrapped bundle of candles from his saddlebag. “What are you doing?”

“Magatsu can watch over the wounded while we’re gone. Yes?” He directed the question at Magatsu’s bent back and got a grunt for an answer. “Do you recall any landmarks that can point back to the spot?”

“I didn’t ask *you* to come with me!”

Anotsu slung a few more items into a *furoshiki* and tied it over his shoulder. “Manji-san is in no shape to move, as you say. You can’t head off into the woods by yourself — you’ll lose your way at nightfall, if not sooner. Unless I accompany you now, I’ll have to search for you in the dark instead.” He looked straight at her. “If you wish to restore him to health, I have to lend you some assistance.”

Rin huffed and turned her gaze away; did he have to keep being right? Anotsu passed her again, carrying the lantern in one hand. He stooped over Mado. “Can you tell me where to find the place Manji-san was tortured?”

Mado opened his eyes and blinked at Anotsu, his features slack. “Uh? Where?”

“How far? In what direction?”

“Bear south... and by west. Twenty *cho*, give or take.” He slowly licked his dry lips.

“Are there markers, or any beaten path?”

“Nope... follow the busted branches, I guess. There’s a few... here and there.”

Anotsu pulled in his lips and looked up the embankment with a slight frown. “No other guides?”

“Sorry... look, *Toshu*... beggin’ yer pardon...”

“What is it?”

“I took His name in vain every goddamn day of my life... but my old mam whupped the fear of the Lord into me. I’m lookin’ Eternity in the face now, with

all my sins weighin' heavy. The last words... that He hears from my lips... ain't gonna be this blasted weasel-tongued, inside-out, mincin' prancin' sodomitical heathen jabber." Mado managed a faint grin.

Anotsu looked down at him with an air of familiar indulgence, as if he'd often heard this string of insults to *Nihongo*; perhaps he'd had a hand in teaching Mado to speak it well enough to tell him of the world. "Then I'll bid you farewell, faithful comrade." Mado raised a hand to him, then folded his arms over his chest. Anotsu turned to Rin and nodded.

Gently she lifted Manji's head from her lap and laid him down on the reed mat. He seemed at least half asleep; she put the remaining food and water in his reach and touched his shoulder. "Manji-san... I have to go for a little while. To find what you lost. I'll be back soon, promise. Are you going to be all right?"

"He'll come to no more harm tonight — don't worry." Anotsu approached and offered her a hand up. Rin avoided him and stood by herself, then picked up her bag and hunted for her sword and scabbard where they had separately fallen. "Will you need to bring your weapon?"

She glared at him, sheathed the blade and settled the strap on her shoulder. Passing Mado, she stopped at his feet and gazed in silence at his ugly freckled face. His lips moved slightly. When he opened one eye and looked at her, she put her palms together before her chest, made a deep obeisance to Hebi's still body and held the pose for several heartbeats. She turned a little and honored Mado with the same gesture. The foreigner gave her a solemn nod and closed his eyes again.

Anotsu watched her with a thoughtful expression. Rin moved down the path the way the party and their pursuers had come, past the scattered chunks of the bandit, past Magatsu's growing pile of grave-dirt, past the pitiful sprawled body of the throat-slit boy. She turned and started up the embankment, Anotsu following a few paces behind her with the lantern, as yet unlit.

As she parted the rustling ferns at the top of the slope, Rin looked back at Manji, who hadn't moved. Mado slowly chanted in guttural syllables: his own peculiar language. "Yei, do ai woku suru da bari ofu da shiado ofu defu, ai wiru firu no iibiru: fuo dou aruto wido mii; dai rado ando shita fu, dei komafuruto mii..."

She hoped, with an awkward heaviness weighting her breast, that the foreigner's gods could hear a prayer spoken so far from home, on the other side of the vast and mysterious world.

PART THIRTY-EIGHT

Rin slowly rubbed her upper arms and hunched her shoulders; the breeze had grown cold at sunset. The dark columns of trees swayed against the dimming sky when she looked up, the branches whispering and embracing each other. Dry twigs crushed under her feet like sparrows' bones. Usually Rin didn't dwell on the thought of spirits very much; she'd lived with ghosts too long already. But as the twilight faded, every step through this forest seemed to drag her deeper into a realm of elusive fears. She was starting to glimpse half-formed shapes in every shadow.

Her steps faltered, their direction grew uncertain. Had she already missed the place she searched for? For at least ten minutes she'd been walking in gradually widening back-and-forth arcs to cover more ground; maybe she wasn't even heading the right way... and her feet were getting sore. Since Rin had lost her *geta* soon after Mado and Hebi had grabbed her on the road, she still wore only thin cloth *tabi*. She stopped, leaned against a boulder and massaged each toe in turn.

Halting only increased her apprehensions. She heard no human footfalls; for the moment at least, she was alone. The forest's whispers and rustles seemed to congregate and draw closer, following her scent-trail. What was a little girl doing here, they seemed to ask each other. Wandering the wild without her well-armed bodyguard at her side? Could they hope to feed on such a tempting windfall?

Rin abruptly stood upright and stared down the phantoms. There wasn't anything there, of course: nothing but bushes that resembled crouching beasts, trees that stood like men holding upright swords in their hands. "Oh... don't be *stupid*..." She was tired, to say the least, but even to allow such ideas into her head, like a child afraid of the dark... She rubbed her bleary eyes with the heels of her hands.

A patch of lighter ground showed through the trees to the right when Rin raised her head, and she walked towards it, picking her way to spare her feet but still stubbing a toe every few steps. The biggest clearing yet. Clumped shrubs and arching roots of the forest floor gave way to a wide stretch of grass. Gray in the twilight: the light was too dim now to make out many details. What was that smell?

“This looks like a possibility, from your description.” Her companion’s voice — Rin jumped, though he spoke in a low, even tone as he approached along the edge of the clearing.

“M-maybe... probably. We’ve certainly walked far enough now — but everything looks so different in the dark!”

Anotsu Kagehisa passed her with a few strides and bent to set his lantern in the trampled grass. He untied his bundle and touched the wick of a candle to the glowing coals in the charcoal holder.

In the flare of the flame, glints of steely light struck back in a near-circle around them. Manji’s abandoned weapons. Sprawled in the grass, stuck upright in the earth. The hooked knife lay against a tree root, blade and handle both clotted dark. Rin heard a sharp little growl and saw a couple of pairs of reflective eyes shifting low to the ground under that same tree. The animal’s bodies were shrouded in darkness, but they might have been facing off over something that both of them wanted.

“Oh!” At Rin’s gasp, both animals blinked at her and retreated into the woods with a soft skitter of paws. “Are those foxes?”

Anotsu glanced over his shoulder and shut the paper-screened door of the lantern. “Where?”

“They’re gone now...” Rin ventured towards the tree. The thick stink of spilled blood rose like a miasma. Festoons of frayed rope, one splintered branch. What was that sodden heap at the base of the trunk? Rin peered at it. Manji’s torn *kōsōde*, entirely soaked in blood.

She stopped short, her stomach tightening with a cramp. That — that sight was no phantom conjured from childish fears. Real fury and cruelty loomed before her, an almost palpable presence. Manji could take pain, and he’d lost limbs before... though usually not by gradual whittling. But his freedom, his strength, his samurai’s pride? Rin held down the threat of a sob. Between them, those two

young lovers had stripped away almost everything her bodyguard possessed. Maybe for a little while, when she held a sword to her own breast, he'd even lost hope. Rin stared at Manji's ruined clothes, the low light merging dark-dyed white and rusty black into one murky shade. All she'd misplaced today? A pair of *geta*...

Anotsu stood up behind her and held the lantern at shoulder level. The light rose over the ground and tree, interrupted by the wavering outline of her shadow. Details sprang out at her like a pack of lurking creatures; the relative blackness surrounding the scene underscored it with a final appalling stroke. Rin put her hand to her mouth, fighting both panic and nausea.

"I see... that this is undoubtedly the place." Anotsu glanced around, his voice still even. Rin swallowed hard and looked at the sky for a moment; she felt both irritated at his calm and ashamed of her own disturbance. It wasn't as if anything dangerous remained here now — nothing stirred in the clearing but herself and her companion. The light moved as he peered at the ground near his feet. "Hah? Whose is this?"

"What?" Rin startled and looked back at him.

"Your bodyguard is missing neither of his ears, so I presume this must belong to one of the dead men." Anotsu smiled briefly and approached her with the lantern.

She'd nearly forgotten. "Oh... yeah! Manji-*san* took some chunks off them before they captured him." The memory heartened her; she returned the smile. "Gosh, I wish I could have helped him do it — those disgusting jerks!" Rin slapped the hilt of her sword and rolled her shoulders.

"Then it's fortunate that Mado had already secured you out of harm's way." Anotsu pursed his lips as if suppressing amusement.

"Oh, you think so? Manji's been teaching me a lot!"

"I don't doubt it." His tone was dry. Rin's face flushed hot; of course, weapons training hadn't been on the agenda for days. An uncomfortable twinge tightened her groin and she let her gaze drop.

Anotsu's expression warmed a little more, or maybe that was the light of the lantern touching the smooth planes of his face. Not just amusement: some element of his interest in her safety made her shiver again. As if she had a specific value in his mind, like gold secured in a strongbox. She still didn't have

good evidence to prove to herself why he was here at all, or why he seemed so determined to help her find her way that he would hike so far after a tiring ride. Maybe he thought it was his opportunity to search out a key to that lock...

Even though they'd taken parallel paths within the sound of a hail rather than staying close together, walking with Anotsu again hadn't turned her thoughts in welcome directions. Rin didn't want to consider exactly why. The experiences that she and Anotsu had gone through together in the Kaga mountains still seemed to surround them, a strange bond of grim toil and unwilling dependence. Far more than that: awareness of his humanity where he'd once seemed to fit her idea of ultimate evil; reluctant respect for his endurance and unblinking clarity of mind; even more reluctant realization of his larger motives. Before they had parted, those new perceptions had already worked on her with great consequences. Unable to kill her greatest enemy when he lay sick and helpless? Anotsu himself had wondered why she hadn't acted, and all she had been able to tell him was that this wasn't the time.

When would that time ever come?

With every thought of Anotsu and her duty to her parents, Rin's hard-won awareness of him rose up to confuse her instincts, like an aura of human scent on a garment borrowed and returned. It made her restless and self-conscious; it irritated her when she couldn't banish it by will. So she had tried to hold her breath against it instead. How long could anyone live without drawing air into her lungs?

Makie's speculations weren't the least of the forebodings that surrounded her. These last few days with Manji had to be her best defense against all such threats; Rin hugged herself around the chest and closed her eyes. Her naïve pleasure in his male flesh...

Though her thoughts of Manji's caresses warmed her from the inside, his rough-edged, grudging tenderness shamed her. Her *yōjimbō* had tried so hard to shield her, especially from his own longings. A hundred impressions of Manji's struggles piled up as a shifting muddle in her head, like a bulwark of flood-wrack. Familiar ideas and actions looked so different when torn from their foundations and broken apart...

Rin drew a breath that caught on an obstruction deep in her throat. What exactly had Manji smelled on her when he got her back? She'd put down his uneasy mood to protectiveness and natural vigilance against an enemy. But protective instinct didn't invade a man's dreams while a young woman slept a step or two

away. It didn't prompt him to push her limits when she asked for a simple kiss... nor to follow her into the woods with conflicting intentions.

Had suggesting to Manji that he turn lust into instruction only steered them more quickly along their dangerous course? She'd been so sure that her trusted bodyguard could help her wash away the least trace that Anotsu had left. She was the one at risk in these treacherous waters, not he. Her 'big brother' had told her so himself, and like an idiot she believed him. So she'd let him drown instead...

Rin trembled, trying to dam her tears.

"Are you cold, Rin-dono?" Anotsu offered her the lantern. She took it in confusion, and he slipped off the knee-length padded coat he wore. "Take this, please." He held it out to her.

"Oh!" Rin blushed as if he had offered to strip to the waist. "No, that's — uh, aren't you...?"

"I feel quite warm after our walk." He laid the coat over her arm and took the lantern again. "It's mostly for appearances, anyway."

"I thought all those Shingyōtō-ryū guys were dead or crippled. So what's the disguise for?" She dangled the coat from two fingers, but Anotsu made no move to accept it back. His slim figure looked a little incongruous in the long, loud-patterned *kōsōde*, very different from his usual half-feminine elegance of dress. He'd even left his long hair unbound and removed the two gold rings from his right ear. "Who's looking for you now, hnn? Didn't the *bakūfū* get mentioned somewhere?"

Anotsu gave her a sharp glance; his smile had vanished. "Never mind, girl." He pulled up his scarf to cover his throat to the chin. Rin felt better; she much preferred his annoyance to his courtesy. She dropped Anotsu's coat on the grass and picked up one of Manji's fallen weapons.

It was the *shido* that Hebi had taken away from her. Rin's chest tightened at the heavy feel of the hilt in her hand, but she lugged it to the middle of the clearing and started pulling the standing fence of swords from the earth where Manji had planted them. They rang dully against the ground and loudly against each other; they'd make a weighty bundle all together.

Anotsu held up the lantern and inspected the ropes hanging from the tree and the cut strands scattered on the ground. Rin wondered again how Manji had

freed himself. There wasn't any sign of Ryonosuke or O-Hama or their horse. Had they just fled after their hirelings had abandoned them to run after her and the Ittō-ryū men? Surely THEY hadn't cut their prisoner loose! She glanced at the hooked knife on the ground; the blade O-Hama had used against its owner. Rin unconsciously pressed her tongue against the roof of her mouth and made a slow, painful swallow. Even though it was the lightest weapon Manji routinely used, she would have to brace herself to pick up that one...

Anotsu stooped low and examined the ground directly under the splintered branch. "Hah..."

"What?" Rin looked up.

"I'm afraid that we won't be able to collect every piece of flesh that your bodyguard must have lost."

Rin clapped her hand over her mouth, then mumbled through her fingers. "The... foxes...?"

"The smell of blood attracts all kinds of interest." Anotsu hung the lantern from a broken-ended branch, then shook out a square of cloth and laid it on a bare patch of ground. "Perhaps what remains will be sufficient?" Rin gulped hard, but resolutely walked over to the tree to look. Anotsu made way for her.

It took her a moment to register what she was seeing. Tattered flesh, gnawed reddish bones — that had been a hand? Incongruously, several of the fingernails remained in place. Rin dropped to her knees, palms over her pounding heart. "Oh, *no!*"

"The last two fingers are partly missing." Anotsu hunkered down by her side and pointed. "But they seem to have been disjointed by a blade, not by the animals' teeth."

"Y-yeah — I know." Rin put the back of her hand to her face.

"What? Was that... a *deliberate* act?"

"Manji-san told him his aim was terrible..." Rin giggled with an edge of hysteria, then caught her breath with an effort. Don't cry, don't cry, it already happened and his pain is past —

Not too convincing a thought, even to herself. Rin trembled with a great wave of emotion. She wanted to escape this horrible place, now, and flee through the

forest. Straight back to her beloved Manji, whom she'd left behind with a corpse, a dying man and a gravedigger. She longed to embrace his tortured body and weep out all her sorrow and sympathy on his breast, as if she could somehow pay him for his pain with her tears. Her dry mouth tasted bitter.

"Simple incompetence?" Anotsu stood up and let out a gusty breath, as if somewhat shocked himself. "Tsukue Ryonosuke could hardly have done worse by design."

"Worse? O-Hama was a lot better at it than he was." Rin pressed her fist to her lips so hard that they throbbed. A fox spirit could take the shape of a beautiful, dangerously seductive woman, at least in stories. And then return in her animal guise to finish the job she had started? "Oh... *stop* it..." She pinched her cheek to chide her wandering imagination.

"Excuse me?"

"Uh... nothing." This was ridiculous; she'd seen dismemberments before! Rin steeled herself, leaned forward on her knees and parted the blood-dappled grass to search for scattered pieces of her bodyguard.

In a few moments she located Manji's smallest finger, curled up like a boiled shrimp. Partly defleshed by small sharp teeth, it harbored a swarm of inquisitive ants. Her throat closed, but she reached out a shaking hand. It took a couple of false attempts before she could touch it, but she picked up the finger with the tips of her nails, shook and blew the insects away and dropped it on the spread cloth.

Anotsu watched her with his arms akimbo and one brow raised. Manji's hand itself she could hardly bear to look at again; Rin shielded her face with one sleeve and reached out for the unrecognizable member. How could this awful scavenging operation even help? She imagined Manji's reaction when she presented him with a half-eaten ruin to add to the stump of his mangled arm; would he be crippled for life because he'd turned back to defend one stupid girl? Stupid, thoughtless, ungrateful...

Cruel. Heartless. Irrational guilt sickened her. If she hadn't refused Manji's embraces — declared that he could never touch her again — then this never would have happened. They would have been walking as a couple rather than barely in sight of each other. They would have turned aside from the path hours before to find a place to sleep — to make love. Rin's thighs shivered.

Her wavering fingertips brushed the sharp edges of chipped bones. Rin got up, staggered to a spot behind the tree, sank to all fours and vomited. There wasn't much in her stomach to lose, but she felt as if she had consumed Manji's torn flesh herself. At least O-Hama had attacked openly, fully intending to inflict extraordinary revenge on her father's killer. What on earth had she, Rin, intended? It didn't matter, because the whole result was all her fault anyway.

While she gasped and retched, dizzy with self-disgust, Anotsu unhooked the lantern from the branch. "Obviously this isn't a task that calls for a woman's touch." He cleared his throat with a suggestion of sarcasm, though he spoke with perfect courtesy. "Allow me to spare you the rest of it, Rin-dono."

Rin's eyes flew open. So she was a silly, squeamish girl? A surge of anger pushed her to her feet, though she swayed and had to lean against the tree. Anotsu had no business sneering at her, even if he didn't give a damn if Manji could ever hold a weapon again. Hadn't he ever seen a loved one suffer? Rin almost laughed. Him, love anyone? Him, want to soothe another person's pain? He couldn't possibly realize how she felt right now. *No* one could!

"Take this with you while you collect the weapons," said Anotsu with an air of slightly impatient command. "I have plenty of candles."

"Okay... fine..." Rin wiped her mouth, grabbed the offered lantern and made a wide circle around the tree on her way back into the clearing. At least it was a job to do...

It didn't take much searching to find the rest of the blades, though she had to proceed slowly and hold the light near the ground. The chained sickles hung half-wrapped around the tree where the horse had been tethered. Ryonosuke's discarded helmet remained on the ground, as did the expensive men's clothes that O-Hama had removed while trying to seduce Mado. Rin stared at the crumpled *hakama* and silk coat as she walked back and forth to pick up each blade in turn. The lovers had left in haste, then. Frightened of something?

Unwilling even to touch them, Rin left the couple's possessions where they lay and lined up the weapons to make a count. Eight, nine, ten, plus the single *shido* that Manji had taken with him, and that hooked blade... hadn't he been carrying a small knife, too? And where were his treasured pipe and his tobacco? She found the pipe at the spot he had fallen when shot. The damp earth stank; how much ground had her bodyguard's blood drenched? He might have lost every drop of what had been in his body that morning. Rin sighed with worry. Would Manji even be conscious when she returned? She doubted that Magatsu meant to see to his comfort.

Anotsu paced back and forth in an expanding area near the broken-branched tree, bent almost double. He held a lit candle at an angle and shaded the flame from his eyes with his free hand, closely examining the ground and the tussocks of grass. A couple of times he stopped and picked something up.

Manji's pouch had been shredded; the tobacco remaining inside wasn't fit for use. He'd have to go without again — oh, how he hated an empty pipe! It was easier to concentrate on minor losses than greater ones; remembering how Manji had grumped and growled when he had nothing to smoke, Rin smiled to herself and bit her lips. Carefully avoiding the little blade under the bowl, she cleaned the pipe and put it in her shoulder bag.

Anotsu stood up and wiped his hands. "That's everything the animals left, I think." He glanced down at the spread cloth, where he had laid out the fragments as he located them. "All that's completely missing is the last joint of the second finger."

Losing even one fingertip might cripple a swordsman like Manji. Fighting two-handed with dazzling dexterity was his best advantage, especially against multiple opponents. Rin's heart sank; her lips quivered. But she realized that the loss wasn't Anotsu's fault; of all people, once he had taken on the task he would have done his punctilious best to find everything he could. No point in betraying her disappointment; he'd probably take it as more proof of feminine fragility. "Uhm... I give you thanks for your honorable assistance," she said with stiff formality. Anotsu gave her an opaque look and knelt down again.

She watched him tie up the corners of the cloth to make a small, neat packet. Then he gestured as if to offer it to her. Rin blanched, but approached and took the packet from him. Relieved that her hands didn't shake too much, she stowed it in her bag next to Manji's pipe.

"I should mention," said Anotsu with an air of choosing his terms, "that I have not yet seen a sign of the other loss he suffered." He sat back on his heels and tapped his hands on his thighs.

"The other loss...?"

He raised a brow at her. "His tongue."

Her knees almost gave way. The sight of Manji's half-eaten hand had pushed away some even more unwelcome concerns for his health. "His — oh, my God!"

"Rin-dono?" Anotsu hastily got up and offered his arm. She whirled away from him, her stomach quaking. "Are you still feeling ill?"

"The... the... what if the, the animals..." She couldn't go on.

"I won't mince words — they seem to have eaten or carried off almost all of the smaller morsels of flesh. Probably they left the hand for last, being mostly bone and sinew... or we wouldn't have found it at all. So a severed tongue — " Rin let out an agonized squeak, and Anotsu gave her an odd look. "You are concerned that your bodyguard may permanently lose his power of speech?"

"Uh... yeah... speech..." Rin flushed hot all over. O-Hama had actually meant to show her enemy a little mercy. She'd thought that removing a man's tongue wasn't as dreadful an act as emasculating him — and Manji probably would have agreed, if he'd been able to express an opinion. Thinking otherwise for even a moment was pure selfishness, not to mention pretty icky —

"Uh... I don't know if he can regenerate something like that. Maybe he can grow back what the foxes chewed off his hand, but... oh, gosh, he's the only person who could heal from this even part way, so I don't know why I'm so..." She laughed tremulously. No, Manji wouldn't have traded for an instant, no matter how much he liked to taste a woman. That wasn't what Makie had assured her was a man's most powerful urge... nor what Manji had once spoken of as a dream of pleasure.

Last night also seemed like a strange dream — but she remembered perfectly how he'd loved being inside her, more than anything else their bodies were capable of doing. And they hadn't even done it in the way he liked best. Rin flushed from nipples to hairline. The way he'd tried to show her today, the same thing to him as giving her his promise... and she'd shoved a knee into his most valuable organs.

"Yes, I've heard. Restoring severed limbs... surviving wounds that would have killed any normal man." Anotsu made a low sound in his throat and shook his head.

"What?"

"How strange it must be, living by such means." He looked at his own hand. "A man would scarcely feel that he inhabited human flesh."

"Well, uh... he deals with it." Manji was as human as anyone! And twice as much of a man as — was that *really* why she'd told him it was impossible?

"I suppose he hasn't much choice." Anotsu smiled at her. "You've had reason to be thankful for his unusual talents."

"Th-*thankful*?" Rin drew her lips back from her teeth. "Not thankful enough!" Anotsu seemed about to speak again; Rin jabbed a finger at the frayed ropes and bloody clothes. "You couldn't possibly realize half of what he's suffered for me, only today! S-suffered... FROM me!"

Anotsu's eyes widened; the concern in his frown agitated her even more. She wasn't coming unhinged — she had a right to feel this way! "Rin-*dono*? Are you sure that you — "

"I owe him — I n-never paid him enough — all the money I could scrape together in a lifetime wouldn't — " She put her face in her hands and dragged in a deep sob. "Oh... Manji-*san*!"

"Ah... your bodyguard is an experienced fighter... and an outlaw, of course." Anotsu raised his brows and puffed out a breath. "He must have realized that backing your cause involved some risks, even with his abilities."

Caught in the middle of another moan, Rin parted her fingers to blink at him.

"Battle seems to be... his true vocation." He slightly tilted his head as if calling up all the reports he had heard of Manji's doings. "I doubt he'd choose to avoid any honorable duel, even if he hadn't been born to the sword. In any case, this... " Anotsu pointed his chin at the tree. "The true root of this incident was Manji-*san*'s alone. Not yours."

She deflated a little and rubbed her upper arms. Well, he actually had a pretty good point there...

"Though perhaps, after this day..." Anotsu lifted his head and scanned the clearing from side to side. "This may not be the last time the shadow of his old crimes draws an innocent into danger."

"Err..."

"Your womanly sympathy and natural loyalties — take some thought to what cause you should devote them. To honor your father's lineage — "

Rin's fists closed and her face flamed. "Don't you dare lecture me! You think I need YOUR advice? Or your — *protection*?"

Anotsu looked at her in startlement. She put her shoulders back and glared at him. "So you decided to help me today. Big deal! That doesn't mean I'm going to follow wherever you lead! Whatever you've done, you did for your own reasons. You think I'm a stupid little girl who'll fall for anything?"

Anotsu's eyes veiled over. "Hardly."

Rin quivered and closed her mouth. Mado had already put him on alert; Anotsu wouldn't miss the smallest hints. He looked for nothing so obvious as a key to her mind — he sought to place each piece of her situation in a logical pattern, like stones that surrounded a position on a game board. He wouldn't lose a single fragment once he had grasped it.

Anotsu took the lantern from her and walked away. She almost called out to him, panicked at the idea that he might abandon her in this place, but he only circled the clearing, looking at the ground. He paused for a while by the tree where the horse had stood tethered, then crossed the grass a couple of times with the lantern held low.

Obviously he was looking at the tracks, though what he could tell at night Rin wasn't sure. She'd probably spoiled most of the traces already. She busied herself with laying out Manji's reeking, blood-stiffened clothes.

"What is that?" Anotsu returned and stood above her with the light. "You've stained your hands."

Sticky dark smears covered her palms. "It's what Manji-san was wearing. When he took a bullet that would have killed me. Did Mado tell you that?"

"...It was mentioned."

In the lantern light she could see the damage better. A huge irregular hole obliterated the upper half of the *manji* symbol on the back, and the front collar on each side looked ragged where it had overlapped on the owner's chest. Rin paused while folding the garment lengthwise. Had that bullet really gone straight through his heart?

"You'll never get that clean again, and it smells like an execution ground." Anotsu picked up his coat from the grass and put it back on. "Why salvage it?"

"Because it's his and I'm bringing back everything that belongs to him. If you don't want to help me find any more dirty, smelly things of his, that's OK — I'll do it myself. Can I have that lantern for a minute?"

He looked skeptical, but gave it to her. "Where do you intend to look?"

"I had an idea just now." Rin searched on the ground until she found a small flat stone, then walked right up to the spot where O-Hama had stood while she cut out Manji's tongue. The tree loomed before her, its rough bark streaked with bloodstains. Rin took a deep breath, blew it out slowly and set the lantern down. "Okay... she was just my height."

Manji was about this much taller — she raised her hand well above her head. He'd been slumped and unconscious — she lowered her hand again. Then they'd propped his head up with a stick between his jaws. She had to make her best guess, considering that she had been hanging over Mado's shoulder at the time, but she covered her hand with her sleeve as O-Hama had done, held the stone at the approximate level, reared back and flung out her arm as if horrified by what she held. "She threw it away right after she... There." Rin pointed; the stone swished through the leaves of a group of shrubs four or five strides to the left and behind the tree. It trickled through the branches to land softly on the ground.

Anotsu's head turned to follow the motion. "A... good thought."

"Gee, thanks. But I've still got to look all through there, and I don't know what I'll find. If anything." Rin picked up the lantern. "At least I know the animals left one other bit of flesh alone, all by itself — that damn bandit's ear! So just maybe..."

Anotsu let out a quiet sigh and approached her as she moved over to the clump of shrubs. "Asano Rin-dono. If I have offended you, I apologize."

"Hah?"

He gave her a small, stiff nod. "Of course you are loyal to the man who has protected you. It's to your credit that you spend your pains to make him whole again when he has suffered so much in your service. A samurai woman could do no less."

Rin looked at him with wide, wary eyes.

"Mado told me that you intended to die rather than submit to the hands of the hired men. You hold your woman's honor so highly?"

"Just my *honor*?" She clenched her lips. "I've got some idea how that sort of thing goes for real, Anotsu Kagehisa. Remember?"

"Yes." His gaze didn't waver. "Rin-*dono*, care for a good name is only natural for the daughter of Asano Takayoshi. No one should dissuade you from defending it. But please, consider this. Honor can be mended, or avenged... but life never returns once it's lost. Above all — don't throw away life."

"That's not what a samurai would say. He'd say death wipes out all stains."

"No. To live stained is still to live. And eventually to prevail... perhaps even over death." He gave her another small nod. "Allow me to assist you again." When she didn't reply, he knelt to crawl under the bushes where the stone had fallen.

Her father's lineage? He meant samurai lineage, the status his grandfather had lost. Probably Makie had also told him that she had learned her mother's lessons. She wasn't sure if she felt insulted or flattered that Anotsu Kagehisa credited her with her breeding and complimented her on fidelity to its strictures. It was like being set up on a family altar beside her father and mother. A living memorial tablet...

Rin leaned over the bushes with the lantern, but the dense leaves blocked almost all light. Anotsu was going to have to search by feel alone. The leaves shook and rustled as he pushed into the thicket's narrow spaces.

"Hm."

"What? Anything?" She crouched down, trying to see through the thick shadows.

"Not yet — ah? — *ughh!*"

Rin jumped backwards, her heart pounding. "What is it? What did you find?"

Anotsu's head broke through the leaves a little distance from her and he stood upright with strands of dusty cobwebs snagged in his hair. He looked shaken, but grimaced at her. "Er... nothing."

"Eh? Then why...?"

He turned away and furtively scrubbed one palm with a handful of leaves. "Snails." He actually shuddered.

"Snails?" Rin stared at him, then yielded to a snort of surprised laughter. "Oh, uh, sorry..."

He brushed the debris from his hair and sent her a narrow-eyed look from under his brows, almost a warning; Rin received it as a challenge. "Gee... it IS pretty gross when you accidentally squish one with your bare hands and the shell goes *crunch* and it bubbles up and squirms... don't you just hate that?" Anotsu looked down at the bushes, which surrounded him on all sides and rose to his groin. "Wow, there must be a whole lot of them sliming around in the damp under there... they always come out in hordes after sunset, don't they?"

"...Yes." Anotsu folded his arms, one eyelid twitching.

So the great Anotsu Kagehisa was disgusted by snails... did he shudder at clams and oysters, too? And he really didn't seem to like the smell of spilled blood. Why did that particular set of phobias strike her as so unspeakably funny? Rin coughed into her hand to keep from snickering out loud at the sight of him, stranded in the middle of a dense thicket hiding little slippery things. The horror! "Aww, you think maybe... this calls for a *woman's* touch instead?"

With an air of stoic resignation, Anotsu carefully picked his way out of the bushes, lifting his scabbard free of the entangling branches, and took the lantern.

No more than two or three minutes passed before she found what she sought. Not on the ground after all — it had caught in the fork of a high twig. Rin moved the branch aside as she knelt in the shrubs, and something disengaged and dropped. It brushed her wrist on the way down: not a slimy snail, but it gave in an odd, fleshy way. Almost instantly she realized what it was, and dove to catch it. "Oh!"

It wasn't as dreadful an object to her as the gnawed hand, merely an amorphous lump of flesh, but Rin had to hold her breathing steady as she cradled Manji's severed tongue in her palm. Anotsu helped her wash it and wrap it. She tucked it into her bag, giving silent but extravagant thanks to the gods that it had landed in a spot out of the reach of hungry foxes.

Anotsu took a couple of cords and squatted by the pile of Manji's blades to sort them into two bundles. Rin finished folding the bloody *kōsōde* into a square, the half-vanished symbol uppermost. What a hideous load she had to carry through this dark forest! "Uhm... thanks for taking the heavy stuff. I've never really figured out how he manages all those weapons..."

"Mm." Anotsu turned the sharp edges inwards and tied them in place, yanking on the cord. "Would it be correct to say that his blades are all your bodyguard owns in this world?"

"Not really, no... well..."

"It had struck me... perhaps because he wears the divine *manji*... that he lives rather like a wandering monk."

"A *monk*?" Rin scoffed. "He's a swordsman!"

"An acolyte of the sword, then. Bearing the vestments and talismans of his peculiar sect." He laughed softly.

"Hnn?"

With the lantern behind him, Rin could see only Anotsu's outline against the light. "My friend Magatsu Taito had a good opportunity to make Manji-san's acquaintance, some weeks ago."

"Magatsu Taito?" She'd heard only a brief account from Manji; he'd told her that their old enemy Shira had attacked him on the road and eventually met his end, though she gathered that he and Magatsu had started the journey to Kaga together. Hadn't they parted as somewhat-friends? "What did *he* tell you?"

"Essentially, that Manji-san's every action was ultimately coupled to a single overriding goal. Though he also devoted considerable effort to irritating his traveling companion." Anotsu chuckled and knotted his *furoshiki* between the two weapon bundles as a carrying strap. "But I can only speculate why this goal should be so important to him..."

Obviously he wanted her to respond to such a leading comment, and probably hoped that she would let something slip for the benefit of his calculations. Whatever they might be: she didn't yet consider Makie's advice either confirmed or disproved. Rin turned her head away and showed her teeth to the night.

What could Anotsu Kagehisa ever really know about the truth of Manji's feelings? She read them herself too clearly by now, written on her *yōjimbō*'s face as plainly as his scars. Just before he crossed the road to buy tobacco for his empty pipe; when he listened to an old man tell him to cherish his young woman; when he tried to drive down all emotion to let her do what she must in the face of a woman's ultimate nightmare. He'd worked so hard to escape his bonds and save her himself! Rin's heart and spine seemed to heat and soften within her like wax.

She'd reward his devotion and satisfy his longing, every last measure of it. She'd tell him yes, for life: yes, Manji...

"Speculate, hnn?" Rin touched her cheek, though she knew the darkness hid her warm blushes. Let Anotsu try to pry open a human heart! Chilly, loveless man... "What goal do you m-mean?"

Anotsu paused before replying, though his answer was firm. "Atonement."

Her body went cold from throat to groin.

"Samurai or not, most men count their own survival highest. Your bodyguard has no need to take his life into account. In effect, he is a dead man still occupying the earth. He wishes above all to cross the river to rest, but until he can lay down the weight of his crimes, he cannot shed the flesh which continues to give him so much pain. And so... a monk, who must look beyond temptations that can only chain him to the agony of this life. He seeks the great sacrifice alone... the key that will unlock his mortal bonds."

Anotsu stood and slung Manji's weapons over his shoulder, balancing them with a grunt of effort. "...As I say, a strange existence."

He picked up the lantern and led her into the woods.

PART THIRTY-NINE

"Are we lost?"

Anotsu slightly turned his head, but didn't stop. "Why would you say that?"

"Oh... I don't know."

So he'd realized it too. Rin rubbed her lips and tried to distinguish the stars through the black cage of crisscrossing branches overhead. Only a slice of the waxing moon shed a little light tonight, and it had sunk so low she could no longer tell where it was. Even if she could have seen much of the sky, she had no idea how to take precise bearings, but she thought that they had veered to the east and gone too far downhill.

Still, losing their direction didn't disturb Rin as much as she thought it ought to. As long as they kept walking, she wouldn't arrive at her destination. She wouldn't have to face Manji. Maybe she would have wandered all night, half-consciously steering away from the place where he waited for her, while assuring herself she was still searching for him.

To put off the inevitable. Or make it no longer a necessity. She ought to disappear from Manji's life as cleanly as possible. Not a sister, not a lover: not even a charge to protect. All she could be to him now was a pair of shackles... so she should free him. Cut herself off from him forever —

Just like cutting off his head.

Rin's stomach trembled and tightened. Somewhere in this forest Manji lay helpless, maimed, with no one but her willing to aid him. Before any other

consideration, she had to bring him back what he had lost — her arm hugged her bag closer to her side with its grisly cargo. That task she couldn't possibly sidestep, and she almost looked forward to it. A peculiar ache softened her tension for a moment — Manji needed her. She could cradle her *yōjimbō's* wounded body again, tenderly minister to his needs and do her best to restore him to health.

If he healed at all, he'd be back to normal in a few days, no more. After that?

Nothing. She couldn't offer him any other payment for his suffering, especially not the one she had longed so much to give him. Rin's pulse thumped under her jaw. She had learned how to tend to her *sensei's* pleasure with her hands and her mouth and her closed thighs, but the elaborate routes they had skirted around the most prominent matter of all seemed almost ridiculous now. Even what she and Manji had done yesterday was partly a charade, a way to dodge their real destination. With the best of intentions, maybe. Honor be damned when all the rules could change in one night's bed...

Rin struggled to hold her sobs in her throat and keep them silent. She wouldn't give Anotsu the satisfaction — he must know exactly how she felt right now, anyway. Didn't he? But Anotsu, of all people — could he really have peered through the muddle of a young woman's mind when she could barely discern its mysteries herself? Maybe from an outside view, the darkness seemed less obscure...

Then someone else had advised him where to look. Whispered all her confided secrets into his ear. Rin set her teeth on edge. Who had said she could trust the motives of a woman like Makie, anyway?

Rin hastily jogged to catch up with Anotsu and the small glow of the lantern as he continued ahead. He wasn't walking fast, however; he shifted his burden from one shoulder to the other, as he had done three or four times already. A dense copse of shrubs interrupted their path, and he paused in apparent indecision. He raised the lantern and looked from side to side; the light fell on his face in profile. He seemed on the edge of exhaustion, the lines around his eyes deeper and his color drained. Rin's flagging energies revived somewhat at the sight, as if his weakness fed her strength.

"Are those weapons getting heavy?" She gestured at the bundles slung over Anotsu's shoulder. "Do you want me to take some of — "

"No. Thank you." He turned to the right to avoid the copse and stalked on as if offended by the suggestion. Rin followed, listening to his labored breathing in

the darkness. In the Kaga mountains, he had refused to let her carry his heavy ax even when he couldn't stand under his own power. She wondered if it shamed him ever to have depended on a woman.

"So... um, where is Makie-san?"

Anotsu didn't reply for so long that she wondered if she should repeat the question. "Makie-san," he eventually murmured, almost to himself.

"I thought she was traveling with you. You know, staying in the same inn? Gee, that landlord sure seems to have fallen head over heels – "

He took a deep breath and let it out. "Makie has her own destinations to reach."

"Then who's been with you on the way home from Kaga? Just Magatsu? I thought Makie might be protecting you... since she's a lot more than just a wonderful singer. And, uh, a poet and really beautiful... but you knew that. Right?"

"Protecting me?" He emitted a short laugh. "Do you think I need a bodyguard?"

"Well... you know. You were wounded. On top of it all." Rin made a speculative grimace behind his back. How deep did Anotsu's own feelings run? This felt like the right direction, but he'd show her no signposts. "I thought you might still be, uh, recovering... it hasn't been that long, not really."

"Hmn." She couldn't tell if her concern displeased him or not.

"I thought you might have asked her anyway, even if you didn't think you needed help. To come with you, I mean."

"Eh?"

"Well, Makie-san would have agreed to come with you to Edo if you asked her, wouldn't she?" Rin chewed on a fingernail, a little wary of venturing too far but deciding to persist at least until he cut her off. "Or she would have just come even if you hadn't asked, because she... er, she seems to be concerned about you, you know, like following you to where all those guys caught us and turning them into one big heap of body parts in maybe five minutes flat. I guess you're, uh, *really* good friends?"

Anotsu gave a slow sigh. "Makie is my kinswoman. My grandfather's sister's grand-daughter."

"Oh! Uh?" Rin felt a peculiar shock. Had she been thinking of Makie as an honorary relative because of her connection to the Mutenichi-ryū? What did that make Anotsu?

"If you think you've noted some marks of particular regard between us, our family ties must account for... most of that."

"But..." Could that be true? He and Makie saw each other as brother and sister? Rin blew out a breath and shook her head. Their kinship wasn't nearly that close, only second cousins, and from what hints she could sort out, they hadn't grown up together. He was just trying to deflect her, because she was hitting some kind of target after all. Rin smiled and rolled her eyes. "Well, come on — what she told me — the way she looked — I mean, aren't you and she in... err..."

"Told you something?" Anotsu looked over his shoulder with a raised brow. "On what occasion could you have spoken with her?"

Rin smacked her fingers to her lips, silently cursing her own stupidity. She shouldn't assume anything about what Makie had told him!

"Ah... you must mean when she dueled with your bodyguard on your behalf." He nodded and looked away again.

"Wh-WHAT?" The skin tightened on the back of Rin's neck. "Me? Uh, but, didn't she say it was about insults in public — "

"Makie told me in confidence that she saw you assisting Manji-san to walk while he was drunk, and that in the dark she mistook it for an improper familiarity on his part." Anotsu massaged his shoulder and rolled it back and forth as if he felt a cramp. "She didn't want to say as much in front of my men. Out of concern for your reputation, naturally."

"Oh." Rin bit down on the end of her tongue as she walked, trying to calm her pounding heart. Makie had attacked Manji with terrifying fury — after witnessing, beyond any possible doubt or darkness, a guardian forcing a kiss on the girl he was supposed to protect. "My... *reputation*, huh? What's that to you?" Her voice cracked.

"I beg your pardon, Rin-dono. I don't mean to give offense... especially since I know that you are capable of taking every possible measure to preserve your honor." Anotsu shifted his load again, sighing. "Your bodyguard is a man like

most other men. Well, perhaps not just *any* other... aheh... but who could fault him simply for experiencing a man's natural urges?"

"Haah?"

"His manner with you in recent days — well, no need to repeat townsmen's gossip. Manji-*san* may not bother to veil his impulses before the world, but Makie assured me that he would never stoop to offer you deliberate harm. Though Mado's report gave me an, *ahem*, much stronger impression — "

Rin stumbled and stopped dead. Panic pressed the air out of her lungs.

Anotsu took another step or two and paused in front of her. Had he only put off dealing with Manji until he could remove her from the scene? Maybe Anotsu was only pretending to wander out of his reckoning so they wouldn't get back before — oh, God, did Magatsu have secret orders to let his *danna* keep his own hands clean? She wheezed loudly, fighting the crushing sensation in her chest. Anotsu turned and looked at her with apparent concern. "What's wrong?"

With a heroic effort and a few thumps from her fist, Rin regained something resembling normal breathing. She waved a hand at him since she still couldn't speak.

"I apologize, Rin-*dono*." Anotsu made a slight grimace, as if he had spilt an inkblot while copying out a letter. "I should remember that a young woman isn't used to discussing... such an indelicate subject. I don't wonder that your ordeal has left you feeling vulnerable. But I only meant to reassure you."

Her mouth dropped open. Reassure — *what*?

"As I was saying — a foreigner could never fully grasp a *bushi*'s motives... even when observing such a seemingly straightforward man as your *yōjimbō*." Anotsu held up a palm and looked a little contrite. "I'm sorry I took that report at face value, even for a moment, because that frightened you. On longer reflection... if an outlaw with a price on his head had been able to propose honorable marriage, I suppose he might have done so. Lacking that... well..."

Rin remained silent, staring at Anotsu's feet. Then he knew. Or did he?

"Was Manji-*san* very angry? When he left you behind on the road this afternoon?"

Her face blazed. "Wh... what... well, he — ah..."

"I think I understand. To have disappointed his impossible hopes, as you must, and then to see him turn back to defend you anyway? Who would not be moved by such loyalty? It's no sin to return that... with compassion."

"You... *understand*?"

Anotsu shook his head with an almost indulgent air. "I don't attach undue importance to such matters — that would be foolish. Perhaps I couldn't say that regarding all girls of sixteen." He nodded to her and smiled with a condescension that suddenly infuriated her. "But to lose great aims for trifles accomplishes nothing." He moved forward again, Rin in pursuit.

"...What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Even the most sincere emotions are formed from drifting sand. They must collapse under the burden of any profound choice." Anotsu sounded quiet and meditative; Rin had to strain a little to make out his deep voice over the scrape and crackle of their footfalls, though she had never been so conscious of the measured rhythms of his words. "Duty and principle — those alone are wrought in stone, and can build the foundations of a life. Most women aren't capable of weighing their true importance... but you are not an ordinary woman, Rin-dono. Even at so young an age, you demonstrate your duty to family at every test. Do not doubt your own strength... even when it causes you pain."

Nothing of undue importance... like all emotions. His own, everyone else's — did he have *any* idea what love was? Rin almost felt sorry for the patronizing jerk, though her brain whirled and sweat soaked her inner clothing. If he had realized how far she and Manji had actually carried their involvement, would he have felt so magnanimous? But then why should he care about a girlish flirtation or even another man's unconsummated lust, if he never intended to base any choice in life on human feelings? If so, perhaps his was the best way to think about it after all...

Rin put a hand over her mouth and breathed steadily through her fingers until her mind settled a little. All right, so Anotsu Kagehisa was pretty damn good at putting two and two together. She had expected that. But even if he'd suspected a little more than he could prove, he'd probably still have arrived at the same conclusion. Because he'd forgotten something even more important than all his information and analysis, if he'd ever realized it at all; a woman — a girl — could feel passion too.

The hell with Anotsu. The hell with his calculations, his plans and his foresight and his stupid stiff-necked ideas. A samurai woman's chastity and honor! That was hers to decide, not for him to decree. Rin stuck out her jaw and screwed up her defiance. He couldn't take that decision away from her with all his insinuations, not unless she let him lead her around like a kitten on a string. Manji's intentions should count much more than Anotsu's, anyway.

Rin aimed a hostile glare at Anotsu's back. Manji was her only real ally, as far as that went... and wasn't she his? Without each other, who else did they have in the world? Even if they couldn't continue to sleep together, she hadn't abandoned her vendetta, no matter if things might appear otherwise right now. Once Manji was strong enough to make his wishes known — and for the moment she hoped, pushing away all other concerns, that he meant to insist she at least remain under his protection — then they'd see about that!

Wouldn't they, though? Rin smiled and sighed to herself in anticipation of a fervent demonstration of feeling on both sides, and as if stricken by her triumph, Anotsu hooked a toe in a root and staggered. "Uhhh..."

"Hey!" Rin ran forward and grabbed the lantern before he could drop it. "Are you OK?"

"I — uh, let's stop here. Take our bearings." He groped his way to a tree and leaned on it, propping his head on his forearm. She wondered for a moment if he was about to faint. "I think... we may have veered... from our direction."

Rin set the lantern on a boulder and hunkered down beside it. "Oh... no kidding?"

"We should have crossed the path some time ago." He dabbed his face with his scarf and let his shoulders slump against the tree. "I might have chosen the downhill turns too often..."

"So now what?" The lantern flickered, and Rin glanced at it. "Oh — quick, give me another candle! This is about to go out again."

Anotsu eased Manji's weapons to the ground with a groan of relief. He untied his bundle and handed Rin the candle. "There's only one more left, by the way."

Rin made a face and slid up the lantern's panel. "I guess we used them up kind of fast."

"This has gone dead. Guard the flame, or else we'll have no light at all." Anotsu dumped the ashes from his charcoal holder.

The flame guttered in a pool of melted wax; the wind nearly extinguished it before she could shield it with her hand. Rin gingerly waved the new wick above the old, trying to warm it before she touched it directly to the weakening flame. Just as the lantern's candle sputtered out, she caught the last of its life on the one she held. She fervently hoped they wouldn't have to make camp until daylight, and not just because she hated sleeping outdoors. How long could Manji wait for his missing pieces to be restored, especially with the chewed fragments of his right hand in such a miserable state? She thought of him weak and in pain, huddled on the cold ground without a fire or even a blanket, and her chin trembled.

Before the smoulder moved down the twist of paper wick and began to draw on the melting wax, she sensed another light rising in the darkness. It touched the high treetops above and grew brighter. The moon had already set. Not an approaching lantern? Rin quickly set the burning candle in place, closed the lantern and stood up to look for the source of the new light. In the sky to her left hung an orange glow that had nothing to do with the long-vanished sunset. She frowned and climbed up on the boulder for a better view.

Anotsu opened his eyes and looked up at her. "What is it?"

Rin pointed, and he straightened and raised his head. "It sort of looks like a big fire... but I don't think the trees themselves are burning."

Anotsu's lips parted and he stood away from the trunk that supported him. "A signal!"

"You think that's for us? It could just be a woodcutter's camp... or bandits." She shivered. "Maybe we shouldn't go anywhere near it!"

"An ordinary campfire wouldn't be a twentieth that size. Why else use up so much fuel at once?" Anotsu seemed to have received a new charge of vigor; he hoisted the weapons again and headed uphill towards the light. Rin snatched up the lantern and followed. The direction struck her as roughly correct, or at least not obviously wrong. They worked their way through a thickly wooded gulch where they lost sight of the fire, then emerged onto a rough, hummocky slope strewn with boulders and loose rounded rocks. The light glowed near the top of the steep hill, and they aimed straight for it. Rin struggled with the uncertain footing; she had to pick her way with the aid of the lantern and kept bruising her lightly shod soles on rocks. From what she could see by starlight, they were

climbing up the jumble left by a long, wide-spread landslide that had torn away the whole side of the hill. The slide was only a few years old, judging from the small size of the spindly trees dotting it here and there. She peered up at the bright beacon.

"Magatsu Taito must have thought you were a little late getting back?"

"Undoubtedly." Anotsu panted and paused often for breath as they approached the fire's position. He had to go on all fours sometimes to keep his balance on the steeper stretches, but he sounded much less tired than he had twenty minutes before. "You're right — his help has been indispensable to me. I realize that you may not have good impressions of him — "

Rin shrugged and grimaced. "Gee, I dunno. He threw my mother a dagger and told her to kill herself over my father's dead body. Then he took my grandfather's sword for a trophy and left. Why wouldn't I have a 'good impression'?" She gripped the hilt of that re-won sword, now riding in the sling of her shoulder bag. "Though he did help out Manji a couple of times... I guess."

Anotsu chuckled. "He can throw harder than anyone I know. A gold coin as a missile?" He climbed an abrupt vertical bank and knelt at the top to offer her a hand up.

"Yeah, Magatsu 'paid' Manji back, didn't he?" Rin accepted the hand since she was encumbered with the lantern, scrambled up the bank and dusted her knees. Anotsu laughed more heartily than the quip deserved. "Then can you tell me why he's so angry at him now? I mean, other than because Manji didn't need to kill Hebi, and I guess he liked Hebi?" Anotsu turned to head up the hill towards the fire, which she could now see a little distance above them. Rin followed. "Or... is it really that he's mad at — "

Anotsu stopped with a sudden warning gesture. "Wait."

"What?" Rin halted behind the barrier he made of his arm and looked around his shoulder. "Is it bandits after all?" In the crack of a huge split boulder, a tall pyramid of uncut logs fed flames that rose in a high, twisting column. No, Anotsu had to be right — that couldn't be anything but a signal. Too hot for a campfire, and built on stony open ground where no one could have found a place to sleep in any sort of comfort. Dry dead trees leaned here and there or lay flat, their roots exposed by the landslide, and fresh rain-cut gullies slashed the raw earth.

"I don't see Magatsu watching for us." He glanced from side to side and began a more cautious approach, paralleling the deepest gully. "That fire was lit less than half an hour ago. So where is...?"

"Getting more wood?"

"The bigger logs have barely caught yet. And..." He shifted his load as if preparing to drop it. His voice hardened.

"What?"

"We're nowhere near the horses."

A chill disturbed her, though she could feel the fire's heat even from here. A trap, baited by the firelight? Rin felt for the hilt of her sword again. Weren't there people looking for her disguised companion? What could she do to convince a *bakūfū* spy that she wasn't actually with Anotsu... other than trying to stab him in the back right now? That didn't seem like the brightest idea she'd had today —

A dark figure vaulted from the gully beside them. Rin yelped and shrank towards Anotsu. He grasped her arm, knocked the lantern from her hand and shed the weapon bundle with a rattling crash of steel. Just as he laid hold of his sword, the man side-stepped him and grabbed for Rin. He seized her wrist and jerked her towards him.

She stumbled in a half-circle and opened her mouth to scream again, but the ambusher's silhouette loomed black between her and the firelight. Broader shoulders than Anotsu's — a well-marked profile — a spiky topknot.

"Manji-san!" She opened her arms and flew to him, sobbing in relief. "Oh... you frightened me!"

He smelled of smoke and pitch, and against her cheek his chest felt firm. He'd thrust his lone *shido* through his belt; the sleeve of the indigo *kōsōde* Anotsu had lent him covered the stump of his right arm. "Are you feeling better? Did you eat some more food? We found your — well, most of it — "

A backlit aura of fire partly illuminated Manji's face, but his expression was dark. He looked straight at Anotsu over Rin's head. Taking her arm above the elbow with his good hand, he detached her hold, set her aside and took a deep raspy breath. She tried to embrace him again, but he turned to avoid her and held up his palm. He wanted to be ready to draw? No — Anotsu had recognized Manji even before Rin had, and his sword had never left the scabbard.

He turned his back on them and stooped, busying himself with the fallen lantern. Maybe he meant to give them a little privacy. Once more Rin grasped her bodyguard by the front of his clothing and buried her face in his chest. “Manji — b-big brother — ”

He shoved her away with a growl.

Rin’s face flamed; a burning prickle of near-nausea rushed up from her stomach to her throat, and the back of her mouth seemed bathed in acid. Manji didn’t want her to touch him? He didn’t want *her*? She stood back and stared at the dark ground, too stunned to think.

“Rin-dono is carrying what we could recover of your hand, and your severed tongue.” Anotsu made to lift the dropped weapons. “We’ve also brought — ” Manji elbowed him aside. He extracted his sheathed *katana* and *wakizashi* from the bundles and immediately thrust the *dai-sho* pair side by side into his belt. With only one hand, he couldn’t tie the scabbard cords very well, but he set the hilts at an aggressive angle and rolled his shoulders back. “I see that you are glad to, ah, fully arm yourself again.”

Manji grinned at Anotsu with his head cocked a little on one side and patted the hilts, as if acknowledging thanks for returning his possessions, but also emphasizing his ownership and the *būshi*’s distinction of twin swords. Then he bent and hoisted the remaining weapons without a sign of effort, slung them carelessly around his neck and pointed past the fire with an unintelligible sound. Out of Rin’s mazy shock and hurt, angry petulance crashed through. What was the big jerk doing, already recovering so much of his strength by himself? No tender nursing for HIM!

“That’s the way back to the others? Is Mado...?”

Manji gave a short grunt at Anotsu’s question, then drew a thumb across his throat and made a gesture like throwing a shovelful of dirt on a pile. “I... see.” Anotsu let out a tired sigh. Manji shrugged. He beckoned with his head and led them around the fire, down a short slope and back to the path.

“Hah!” Magatsu heaved Mado’s harpoon high over his head. With a hard thrust, he planted it deep into the earth at the side of the double grave, a pace to the left of Hebi’s sword. He tapped it to check if it would fall, and when it didn’t he dusted his hands and went to the tethered horses to rummage in the saddlebags.

Rin stared at the tidy pile of dirt for a few moments, whispered “*Namu...*” and glanced back at Manji.

Her bodyguard sat on a log with two fingers of his left hand stuck halfway down his throat; his bandage-wrapped right hand hung immobile in a sling over his chest. Rin cringed a little, remembering the look of disgust he’d given her when she showed him what she’d brought back from the clearing. All of them had participated in the complicated repair job. Anotsu had accomplished most of the actual re-assembly and bandaging, joint by joint, while Rin sat a few paces away, tearing long strips from a towel and handing Anotsu the wooden splints that Magatsu whittled at his direction. Manji himself supported the whole scaffolding with his good hand and raised and tilted it as necessary. She supposed nothing more could be done to encourage his healing, if that was going to happen at all.

Now Manji withdrew his hand from his mouth and experimentally stuck out his grafted tongue. It moved sluggishly from side to side and didn’t protrude very far. Manji creased his brows and closed his lips. Rin hugged her knees and huddled up in as small a ball as she could manage while sitting on the ground. The night air was growing colder, though no one else seemed to notice.

Anotsu half-reclined on the mat, eyes shut. Although he’d been resting since they finished the splinting operation, he looked drawn and pale. Magatsu offered him a canteen for the third or fourth time and he shook his head to decline. He took a deep breath, opened his eyes and sat up with what seemed like a considerable effort. “Manji-*san*? Are you able to speak yet?”

“Rhhow...” said Manji, then made a face. “Hrr yrrh.”

“That’s perfect,” said Magatsu with deadpan sincerity. “Keep it just like that.”

“Fuuh uu, puh.” Manji replied with an obscene finger and a dry chuckle.

“At least it’s not as disabling as it might have been.” Anotsu smiled slightly and leaned back on his elbow again. Manji lifted a brow. “Ah, yes, you were unconscious at the time.” Anotsu’s smile grew a little broader, though he dropped his gaze. “According to Mado, your tongue was not the courtesan’s original target, but she apparently... reconsidered.” Manji looked perplexed for a moment, then opened his eye wide.

“Holy shit — she was going to chop THAT off?” Magatsu grinned with a queasy edge. “Pretty harsh! What could the poor little thing ever have done to her?”

Manji threw Magatsu a just-try-me glare, then brought his gaze around to Rin. His brows creased with a query. She gave a small, reluctant nod and swallowed hard. The corners of Manji's mouth pulled back: part relief, part a shiver of disgust. He started to shift his seat to cross his legs, thought better of it and straightened his back. He reached for his dirty, bloodied weapons and yanked out a sword at random, whipped it a couple of times through the air, then propped it against his knee and grimly wiped it down with a remnant of bandage rag.

"I meant to tell you... that your escaped tormentors are riding double. They won't have gone very fast or far, especially not at night." Manji gave an impatient shake of the head as if to say he knew that already. "However, Mado reported to me that they asked him what to do in case of serious trouble, and he advised them to aim for the border and leave Edo *han*. That's their only chance now, I imagine."

Manji showed his teeth and scraped another blade clean. A thrill tightened Rin's muscles, almost in bloodlust: to see those two brought to ground and punished as they deserved. To let them escape seemed like the worst injustice of all.

"I doubt they will consider fleeing into the city or throwing themselves on the mercy of the authorities. There's a huge reward posted for the return of the courtesan to her master, and Lord Tsukue is said to be almost crazed with fury. This matter has reached the ears of the Shogun. If the father wishes to retain his household and name — perhaps even his head — his errant son must not be allowed to escape punishment."

"Um... what will they do to him if they catch him?"

"For such a conspicuous disgrace to his illustrious family? They will crucify him, Rin-dono. He'll be slowly speared to death by *eta* and his body buried in a dunghill. Like a dog, not a samurai." Anotsu didn't seem either perturbed or pleased at the grisly prospect. "The only way for him to avoid public execution is to carry out *seppuku*... and neither his father nor the authorities are likely to allow him such an honor."

Manji let out a rough, contemptuous laugh. Tsukue Ryonosuke finding the courage to cut his belly, even faced with far worse a death? Rin rolled her eyes. "What about... her?"

"Hnn?"

"O-Hama... the courtesan." Rin involuntarily glanced at Manji as she said the name, and wished she hadn't. The ugly distortion of his expression made her a little sick, even though she felt a similar anger on his behalf. "What will happen to her if she's caught?"

Anotsu yawned, as if a woman's fate concerned him even less. "Oh, nothing much beyond the punishments of the brothel. A beating or two. They'll add the costs of the reward to her purchase debt, and she'll warm men's beds until her youth is gone... or she dies. What else awaits any woman of pleasure?"

"That's *all*?" Even as Rin scoffed with indignation, shame edged into her mind. She had reason to want to see that woman suffer, didn't she? Of course she did, but revenge was only revenge, no matter how great the provocation... such as one woman demanding another's violation. She clenched her lips together.

Anotsu addressed Manji again. "They will need to get back over the river again if they want to bypass the border checkpoints to the north. So for greatest speed, I'd say they'll retreat along their original route and stay on the road for some distance before they strike into the woods. Perhaps five or six *ri*, if sunrise doesn't catch them."

Manji lifted a brow and slid his chained sickles into his sleeve.

"But it's possible that they'll want to stop to rest long before that... if they aren't afraid of immediate pursuit. Do you think that they will believe themselves safe enough to halt tonight?" Manji slowly shook his head while chipping the crusted blood from his hooked knife with one thumbnail. "Ah... I see."

"Speaking of which, we oughta go bed down, *danna*. It's near midnight." Magatsu rolled up a mat and packed a few items into the saddlebags. "I've fed the horses, but down here you've got to drop a bucket from the bridge to get at the stream. I gave them a little drink, but it'll be easier to water them at the spring up top."

"Yes, of course." Anotsu began to get to his feet, and Magatsu quickly put an arm around him to help. His solicitousness struck Rin; the lantern light was dim and shadowy, but the expression on Magatsu's face looked nearly tender. Anotsu leaned on him and addressed Manji. "The temple at the top of this hill is abandoned, but the buildings are still roofed. There's plenty of room for all... if you choose to spend the night and take up your pursuit in the morning." He paused when Manji gave him a narrow look. "It's possible that your quarry may escape, of course. If they know that you are alive and able to chase them... they may stop for nothing."

Manji rolled his head back, scanned the sky as if checking the weather, then sprang to his feet. He had stowed all his weapons under the borrowed *kōsōde*, and he snapped his fingers at Rin. She had dropped into a half-doze, but awkwardly rubbed her eyes and got up. “Manji-san?”

He headed down the path away from the bridge and *tori* gate with a rapid stride, not even taking a lantern with him. Rin gasped and ran a few steps after him, then stopped and called. “Manji-san! Please — couldn’t we — ”

He stamped a foot and turned around to glare at her. “Hoh.”

“No? But... oh, God, I’m so tired...” She sagged and hung her head, unhappily close to tears. “Please?”

“Fuukii shii, uumaah!” She flinched at his half-articulate impatience. Manji snarled and spat in obvious frustration. “Hrow!”

Rin followed him, trembling and stumbling in her tattered *tabi*. What did he think he was going to do? How far did he think they’d be able to go like this? Was he really as healed as he made out, after having lost all that blood? He’d eaten and drunk, he’d rested a while — but she knew that his resources couldn’t be deep. And his right hand was still useless!

Behind her, Anotsu spoke low to Magatsu, who responded in a discontented tone. Both men untied their horses and mounted, still talking. Rin rounded a curve in the path, practically feeling her way with her now exquisitely sore feet. She could hear Manji’s footsteps ahead of her, but he was invisible.

Slow hoofbeats moved up behind her; one rider had followed. Rin stopped and turned in the path, seeing only the glow of a lantern at first. She didn’t have to wonder which man it was. When Anotsu drew closer, he leaned from the saddle to hand her the lantern. She accepted it, not able to speak in thanks.

Manji came stalking back into the circle of light, giving Anotsu an irritated snort and not sparing Rin. “Cuum hohh!”

“I understand that this touches your honor.” Anotsu swung his leg over the back of the saddle and dismounted. “In your place, perhaps I wouldn’t delay either... so if you insist on pursuing them now, please accept one more loan.” He held out the braided reins.

“Haah?” Manji shot Anotsu an incredulous frown.

"I'm not going much farther tonight, so I don't need to ride." Anotsu offered the reins again. "Mounted, you'll find them that much sooner."

Manji stared at him a moment longer, then eyed the horse. He seemed uneasy, though whether at the loan or the idea of riding wasn't entirely clear. He scratched the back of his head and made a face.

"Oh! Manji-san, doesn't that make sense?" Rin held out her hands in entreaty. "You'll be much better off riding! Please say yes!"

An odd twinge disturbed Manji's features when he looked at her, the first time he'd given her any impression of personal emotion since her return. Before she could read anything into it, his face hardened again.

Magatsu rode up and dismounted as well. "No, *danna*, give him my horse instead. I can walk — but *you're* riding." He bunched up his reins, stuck them in Manji's hand without waiting for an answer and helped Anotsu to climb back into his own saddle.

Manji shrugged, wrapped the reins around his wrist and took hold of the horse's bridle when it tossed its head, then looked sideways at Anotsu. He chewed his jaw back and forth for a moment. "Rhhdurr?"

"How shall you return the horse? You'll probably catch your quarry before they reach the river, and..." Anotsu smiled faintly while Magatsu redistributed the contents of the saddlebags. With a motion of the head, he indicated that one or two of the bundles should remain with the loaned horse, and Magatsu obeyed the unspoken command. "Leave the animal with the monks at the Hasu-*ji*. That should be on your way."

Manji adjusted his swords and tucked the hem of his *kōsōde* into his belt. He put a foot in the steel stirrup cup and swung himself into the saddle, favoring his bad arm. The horse stepped back and forth and tossed its head again while he settled his weight. Rin stood back; she was a little afraid of horses, never having had much to do with them. Her father hadn't owned one because of the expense. Manji seemed to know what he was doing in the saddle, though he'd said he disliked riding drills. He tightened the reins when the horse kept making skittish movements, and glanced Rin's way when the animal stood still.

"Uh... what do I do?"

He pointed at his foot in the near stirrup, then at the horse's hindquarters behind the saddle's high wooden cantle. He wrapped the reins around his right elbow and held out his left hand. Rin took a deep breath and slung her bag and sword across her back. Manji pointed at the lantern; she found a strap and secured it to the wide stirrup flap in front of his leg. Then she reached up, preparing to step on his foot and make the leap. The horse's hip rose higher than her shoulder and she had to clear the bulky saddlebags as well — this might not be easy. Maybe she ought to hitch up her clothing and ride astride like Manji instead of sitting sidesaddle? She felt shy of doing that in front of the other men.

Before her fingers touched Manji's, Anotsu spoke again. "Riding single would be much less hazardous, as well as faster... and I will pledge myself for her safety."

Magatsu drew a hissing breath and locked his gaze on the ground. Rin goggled at Anotsu open-mouthed, then gazed up at Manji in half-frightened anticipation. He'd be absolutely furious, wouldn't he? At the mere suggestion! He'd seize her and throw her across the saddle like a sack, and gallop off into the night —

To her astonishment, Manji didn't immediately refuse the offer. His lips compressed and he looked down the dark path; his shoulders rose and fell with a slow, hard breath. He chewed his jaw a few times, back and forth. Then he glanced down at Rin, who returned the look with wide, stunned eyes. Manji's expression softened again; he seemed to apologize a little, as if he conceded that he'd demanded too much of her. His vengeful imperative might not brook more delay, but her welfare was still his responsibility. He looked around at Anotsu and slowly back at Rin. A tilt of the head and a twitch of both brows: he was asking her what she wanted to do.

He would trust Anotsu with her? After all his suspicions, his possessiveness and jealousy? Rin's stomach turned over — he didn't even mean to fight to keep her? Anotsu waited with an air of strategic patience; he wasn't going to press the point. But no matter if it made common sense for her to stay behind while Manji carried out his task: she would still prove to everyone present — to the world — that she had renounced her bodyguard's protection for that of another man. For Anotsu Kagehisa!

Maybe, if she gave in to fatigue and convenience, Manji would consider that her final answer. She was only a irritant and a burden to him at this point; his whole manner made that plain. So he might even feel relief that she had given him so clear a directive...

Rin's lips quivered; she lowered her head to avoid meeting the three men's scrutiny, afraid she would lose control of her tears. She'd wanted to make her

own choices, hadn't she? The others at least allowed her that much credit, as a woman able to decide for herself rather than a child to be led. So she had better live up to those adult expectations, and not break down like a baby.

Manji kept his gaze on her but remained silent, probably unwilling to try to make himself understood. Anotsu sat relaxed on his mount, eyes politely lowered, but with one finger tapping his knuckles as he kept his hands folded on the pommel before him.

Magatsu Taito stood a few paces behind her, his fist clamped on the hilt of his broadsword. Through the air or the earth, Rin sensed the irregular tremors in his body. Whatever for? Ever since he'd arrived, Magatsu had behaved as if he despised this whole enterprise. Still, he'd done everything his *danna* required of him. Even if he grudged Manji and Rin every moment of attention or assistance, Anotsu's proposal hadn't actually surprised him. Involuntarily drawn as if by his nervous fire, Rin turned her head and tentatively met Magatsu's eyes.

The lantern he held shone full on his face. Until today she'd seen him only briefly without his black mask, and now she had some idea why he liked to cover his expression. He was younger than she'd realized, even younger than Anotsu, with a spare and open clarity to his features that betrayed his feelings too well. Samurai stoicism wasn't his birthright nor his aspiration — he'd taken up the sword for different reasons entirely. The undisguised contempt in Magatsu's face stiffened Rin's spine.

Her, Asano Rin. Her presence angered him even more than his friend's death at Manji's hands. She was her parents' child, heir to a samurai house — he hated what she stood for, he hated that Anotsu took trouble for her safety. Maybe he thought it would have been better just to throw her a dagger! Rin raised her chin and tried to stare him down.

Magatsu's narrow lips parted and drew back from his teeth. Another color than caste resentment tinged his dislike, something murkier and more personal that she couldn't entirely make out. He could do nothing about it, perhaps didn't even want to make it out himself. But she threatened his most precious and guarded treasures, and he would wish her dead before he would admit exactly how she blocked his path.

Both Manji and Anotsu shifted their seats as they took notice of the silent confrontation. Rin's heart took a deep lurch; her balance felt precarious. Though Magatsu showed emotion too, more weighed on the scales here than her feelings or anyone else's. In that sense, Anotsu did know what he was talking about...

Manji looked away from the group; the horse he sat began to paw the earth and toss its head again as if it sensed the disturbance in the air.

"Rii," he said. Even on so short an utterance, his voice cracked. "I odda..." He grimaced and worked his mouth for a moment, then spat over the horse's neck and spoke again. "I... godda... go."

"Do you... *want* me to come with you, Manji-san?"

At the innocently enticing sound of her own voice, Rin shuddered. Magatsu's head jerked at Anotsu. His eyes were wide, but Anotsu was the only one who kept his own counsel. Manji's cool reserve melted, replaced by confusion. A flash of something like fear crossed his face. He didn't want to answer any such question, but he'd tried too hard to hold himself back, and he'd lost his over-tight grip on his emotions. For a moment Rin saw almost everything she could have wanted in Manji's face, and she wished she had never asked for anything at all.

She'd heard Anotsu's quiet, reasonable words in her ear all along the forest paths, persuading her she could only do her beloved Manji irrecoverable harm. What whispers had Manji heard while he lay mute in the dark? While he fretted over her long absence, then restlessly dragged logs over stones and built his beacon fire? No voice other than his own.

Rin took a backwards step, almost frightened at the struggle he fought to conceal. Even if Manji's wounded tongue had been able to form around his thoughts, he was a man and a samurai, taught from childhood to keep himself above and apart from temptation. He never wanted to speak his guilty desires aloud again. Never lay hands again on what he shouldn't have tried to take.

So she shouldn't force herself on him either? Didn't that solve so many problems on both sides? How simple, how straightforward, to divide all entangling knots with one cruel stroke...

Manji's expression closed down as he watched her face. Rin flushed and dropped her gaze, then realized what message she had just conveyed and frantically tried to catch his eye again. Too late...

"Gonna... hol ya t' tha, Anotsu." Manji wheeled his horse around with an abrupt tug on the reins and pointed with his chin. "Shee ya."

"Manji-san!" He ignored her. Anotsu bowed in farewell; he turned his head away from Rin, but she caught the smooth curve of his cheek stretching in a closed-lipped smile. Yes, he'd take perfect care of her. As if she were his own.

Rin sagged and covered her eyes; she couldn't watch Manji leave. He took so much of her with him: perhaps never to return. Of course his quarry posed no real threat, even crippled as he was, but maybe she was going to start blubbering after all...

Someone jostled her so hard that she stumbled; her eyes popped open. Magatsu! He shoved Rin out of his way and jumped to catch Manji's bridle just as the horse started forward.

"Hey! Idiot!" Manji rocked in the saddle and braced his forearm on the horse's neck. "Whadda hehl?"

"What the hell are YOU doing, man? You can't leave your little girlie here!"

"Her safety — " cut in Anotsu.

"You're nuts!" Beads of sweat ran down Magatsu's heated face. "*Safe?* Don't you remember?"

Manji scowled and jerked his head back, fighting the horse. "Hah?"

"All the way to Uenohara, you stupid bastard! Why did you bitch and moan until I wanted to crack your skull? Because your woman ran off without you. Why did you hustle us so goddamn fast and never take a rest? So you could find her and get her back safe. Well, you got her now, man. *Take her!*" He gave a tense force to the word that left no doubt what he meant; Manji's frown deepened and Anotsu's shoulders went stiff. Rin's heart gave a great thump and she hid her flushed cheeks. "You're both samurai, right? You fucking *deserve* each other!"

Anotsu's lips whitened. He struck his hip and leaned forward in the saddle. "Taito — !"

"Fuck it." Magatsu let go of Manji's bridle, spun around and seized Rin by the elbows. She gasped when he yanked her to him, sprawling against his tough, wiry body. He gripped her around the waist, bent his knees and heaved. Rin flew upwards and landed hard on the horse's hindquarters, panting with surprise.

Manji automatically reached out to steady her, then wrenched his arm from her grasp so he could control the reins. The startled horse side-skipped and stung Rin's face with a swish of its tail. The saddlebags and the fringed harness around the horse's broad hindquarters saved her from tumbling off, but just barely. So high above the ground! A fall would surely break her neck! Anotsu's horse caught the other's agitation and reared; he had to turn his attention to calming his mount.

In panic, Rin threw her arms around Manji's waist. She got her knee wedged behind the saddle and her bottom planted square, arresting her slide. Manji lurched a little from her shifting weight, but she felt his legs clamp hard around the horse's barrel like a mounted archer's on the battlefield. Rin's bag and sword twisted awkwardly and poked her in the stomach. She crouched lower to help Manji keep his balance and shoved at the sword to work it out from between their bodies. The tip of her scabbard swung around and jabbed into the horse's underbelly; the end of her long sleeve slipped free and fluttered out.

The horse gave a frightened snort, rolled its eyes and plunged forward. Magatsu whooped and chased it for a few strides as if to encourage it to keep going. Manji yelled and hauled on the reins until his half-healed voice choked on curses, but the horse galloped down the path in full bolt. Anotsu's mount tried to follow, whinnying to its companion, but he spoke harshly to it and held it back.

Terrified and roughly jolted, sure that they would be thrown at any second, Rin squeezed her eyes shut and clung to her bodyguard, trying to lean and roll to stay with him and the horse. Encumbered with her and one-handed, Manji could do little more than hang on. Carried away with him into the darkness, Rin pressed her sweating face against Manji's ribs as he labored to pull the wild ride back under his control, and tried in vain to count the hammering beats of his heart.

PART FORTY

"I think they're catching up with us."

Rin turned to face forward again when the two horsemen appeared around a curve in the road. In the sodden gray mist of pre-dawn twilight, the riders were mostly outlines, but recognizably the same outlines that had been shadowing Manji's horse for the last quarter of an hour. Rin gripped the high cantle of Manji's saddle with one hand and adjusted her sword in the sling of her shoulder bag.

Manji grunted and thumped his heels into the tired horse's sides. It picked up its feet for a few moments and gradually fell back into its stubborn walk. She couldn't blame it for laziness; it had been a long night's ride. Though rain wasn't falling, damp filmed the dark ground and the long needles of the single pines that lined the road. As the light slowly gained on the lingering night, a fine clouding of mist droplets drifted over Rin's clothes and settled on the tendrils of her untidy braids like a beading of cold steam. She felt chilly and stiff from hours on the road; the horse's hindquarters were warm but bony and its monotonous lurching sway forced her to work to keep her seat.

Manji sat the saddle in an off-center slouch, leaning a little away from his slinged and bandaged right arm. She could hear nothing but the lagging thump of their horse's hooves on the sandy road and occasionally a squawk from crows stirring in the trees. An angular dark shape launched from a branch and winged across the road ahead with slow flaps, as if weighted by the thickness of the mist.

With surreptitious half-glances over her shoulder, Rin kept watch on the horsemen. The gnarled silhouettes of the scrubby pines faded gradually in and out to vanishing as Manji's horse approached and passed them in the mist, but as

the travelers drew closer their persistent outlines gained solidity and detail. Big horses that they sat with confidence, their tack and equipment creaking and jingling with sturdy, well-worn leather and metal. The sheathed head of a spear stood above one man's shoulder, darker gray against the shifting gray of the sky; Rin couldn't tell how the other was armed. She could guess that he didn't lack for weapons.

"They're closer now, Manji-san..."

Manji groaned, with a sense of slightly irritated acceptance of the inevitable, but said nothing. She had not heard an intelligible word from him for all the hours since they had left Anotsu Kagehisa and Magatsu Taito behind.

"Who do you think they are?" Rin insisted in a whisper. "Bounty hunters? The notices said the reward for bringing O-Hama back to her master was thirty *ryō*! They don't think that WE could possibly be...?"

He slowly shook his head.

"But remember that merchant? Who thought we looked like, um, them? Now we're even riding a horse double, like the notices — "

"Early mornin', traveler." The riders had suddenly trotted within speaking distance. "Where you folks heading?"

The spearman. A thick, false-jovial voice with a rural accent, not from Edo. Rin longed to put her arms around Manji's waist for reassurance, but settled for scooting up a little closer behind the saddle. At this sluggish pace she couldn't pretend to hold on for security, and her *yōjimbō* might resent encumbrance, in a number of senses. She lightly brushed her cheek against his shoulder blade and felt a degree of tension across his back, though he breathed evenly and looked straight ahead.

"Been riding all night? That horse looks knackered, mate." The other man spoke with an even broader dialect, like someone from the southern islands. "There's a choice little inn back a ways — yeh just passed th' fork, wouldn't take five minutes to turn around. Not hard on the purse, neither. Be glad t' point the way." Still Manji didn't reply. "Yer woman looks kinda worn out too. Well... not like that, y'know." The man winked at Rin, who quickly averted her eyes. "She's a young 'un, ain't she?" The two horsemen nearly flanked them now.

Manji's body a tight wall against her cheek, his ribcage swelling, then he let out a long forcible breath. "Not stopping." The sound of his voice startled her.

"Suit yehself, mate." The southerner shrugged and shot a gob of spit to the left side of the road. "Me an' my associate here, we might be going the same way. Maybe we'll come along with yeh."

"Maybe not." Manji didn't even look around.

"Unfriendly, hah?"

Manji made a near-silent snort in his throat.

"Those're some scars you got there, buddy." The spearman eyed Manji from his separate vantage point to their right. "Straight down the face — shee-it. Can't see out've that eye at all, I'd reckon."

Manji turned his head and spoke low and venomously. "I can tell when some asshole's sneaking up on that side, if he cuts off my light. You want a demonstration?"

"Sheesh, easy. Take it easy." The spearman made a conciliatory gesture and nodded at his companion. "Good mornin', folks, sorry to bother you." Both men urged their mounts and loped on ahead.

When they had disappeared into the mist, Manji reined back and stopped the horse in the middle of the road. Rin let out a long sigh of relief. Manji snarled, though not directly at her. "Shitfire."

"What's the matter, Manji-san? He saw that we weren't them."

Manji slipped his right hand from his sling. "Untie it."

She blinked at his back, then reached up to pull out the sling's knot at his nape. Manji felt in his right sleeve with his good hand and drew out a *shido*. He placed the hilt in his bandaged palm and frowned in concentration; one or two of the fingers twitched, but he could not grasp the weapon. He held out the wounded arm to Rin, the *shido's* hilt still crossing his palm. "Lash it there. Good and tight."

The horse meandered to the side of the road and nosed the grass. Rin used her knees as a support for Manji's arm while they still sat mounted; she crossed and re-crossed the sling's long strip of cloth over the hilt and around his wrist and hand, knotting it several times. "Tighter."

She pulled hard. "That tight?"

"It's pretty much numb anyhow." He made a grimace.

Manji could rotate his wrist now, which heartened Rin a little — at least the joint had fused and some of the damage to his tendons and muscles must have healed. Apparently his immortal body was able to rebuild missing flesh and bone from scratch, though she worried at how slowly the healing progressed. He'd lost so much blood, and perhaps spilled with his vital fluid the greater part of the mysterious creatures that swam within. The bloodworms might have to regenerate their own supply along with their host's body. But even with what he'd regained, the weapon couldn't function as much more than an extension of his arm. She watched him swing the *shido* in experimental arcs over the horse's head. "Uh... Manji-san? Maybe we should just turn around and go back to that inn?"

He scribed sharp figures in the air to right and left, then paused to massage his biceps.

"Will we really find them going this way? Anotsu thought they'd head straight back for the river..." Rin hadn't dared to ask for explanations during the night while Manji chose his directions in silence. His voice still sounded clumsy. He didn't dignify any of her questions with an answer; he kicked the horse until it started walking.

They didn't see the two riders again for so long that Rin wondered if her *yōjimbō's* instincts had fired prematurely. The mist began to thin when the sun rose, though the light remained weak and watery. Then one rider loomed before them just as they passed into a stretch of road that fell between small steep hills. His spear point drew a long hard line over his shoulder, still in the sheath. The other man walked his mount across the way behind them. Manji stopped the horse and turned it halfway, his armed right hand laid across his lap.

"I'm flattered all to hell," he said. "Now buzz off."

The riders paused in the road before and behind, and the spearman replied. "Naw, sorry. We ain't passing up that big a reward."

"What about the whore and the *hatamoto*?" Manji pointed his chin up the road past the spearman. "Isn't that why a couple of professionals came this way in the first place?"

"We got a tip, yeah, but they'll keep. The whore ain't worth half of you, buddy, even if there's only half o' you left anyhow."

Manji glanced down at his arm. "You recollect what they call me, pro?"

"When yeh had two eyes and two hands, that's what yeh were called. Now it's just two on one, Hundred-Man-Murderer." The southerner laughed. "Brand new call, straight from the Castle, and they want you bad."

"So I hear." Manji looked from one man to the other. "So what's the reward on Anotsu Kagehisa?" Rin gasped. Manji twitched a shoulder back as if to shush her, and she slapped a palm over her mouth. "Hey, pros like you know all about that guy."

"The Ittō-ryū? We ain't looking to get bisected, buddy."

"Oh, now I'm easy pickings." Manji snorted. "Fine, then I don't have to share info."

"Anotsu? What the hell would you — "

"Where he slept. Who he's with, how he's disguised, and what shape he's in." Manji shifted his seat.

"You're shittin' us."

"Try me."

The spearman leaned forward in his saddle. "Say there, bitty gal. You see Anotsu Kagehisa-san too, or has One-Eye been drinkin' and swinging at ghosts all night?"

Rin stared at Manji in horror when he glanced at her with a prompting air.

"What? Why... I can't tell them — "

His eye flicked up the road and back, keeping both men in his line of sight. "You promised to keep his secrets?"

"Um... not exactly, but he — Manji-san, he loaned us the horse, and..." She put her hand back over her mouth.

"Wouldn't want you to break your solemn word of honor or anything." Manji raised a brow. "Not just 'cause someone asked you a simple question, like yes or no."

"Yes or no, he says? That's a woman yer talkin' to, not a pair of dice." The hunters chuckled. Rin flushed and hid her face, and the southerner put an inquiring leer into his words. "Ridin' Anotsu's horse? This is soundin' a wee bit complicated, mate. What's the tale on the pair of yeh, anyhow? Thought I heard yer little sister got killed."

Manji's right arm stiffened. "Take it or leave it, you clowns."

"Yeah? Why didn't you take him yourself, outlaw?"

Manji stabbed a finger ahead. "Because right now, it's the bitch I want. And I don't need anybody tagging along when I find her. You turn around and go back the way you came, pro. *This* road is mine."

"Well, I guess you ain't just haulin' that story outta yer ass... but a bird in the hand, y'know." Both men nodded; the spearman reached back and yanked the sheath from his point. "By the way, ya can poke as many holes in him as ya like. I hear he won't mind it too much."

"Gotcha, mate."

Manji shrugged off Rin's grasp when she clutched him in panic. "Outta my way." She slid from the horse, stumbled when she hit the ground and scrambled for the side of the road. Manji looped the reins halfway around his neck and laid his left hand on the hilt of his *katana*.

The spearman hauled out his weapon, tucked the shaft into the crook of his elbow and spurred his mount. Rin found a pine and hugged the trunk, crouching in the roots. Manji seized the reins in his teeth, yanked his head to the side and managed to pivot his horse. The long-bladed spear aimed straight for Manji's chest. He caught the point in the fork of the *shido* lashed to his right hand and deflected it up and over his shoulder. At the same moment, Manji's *katana* tore a high arc over his horse's head and plunged downwards.

The wheeling horses blocked Rin's view, but Manji apparently missed his left-handed stroke. The spearman pulled at his weapon and freed it from the *shido's* lock, then slashed it sideways. Manji ducked against the horse's neck to avoid it; the spear whizzed over his head and clipped a tuft from the horse's mane.

The frightened animal side-skipped and turned; Manji brought his *katana* up again and reared back in the saddle, but he was out of position and overextended on his hasty attack. The spearman swung and stopped him, steel to steel; the sword flew from Manji's hand. The spear head launched at him. Manji twisted

and arched his spine; at the apex of the thrust, the point emerged behind his back.

For an awful moment, Rin was sure he had taken the spear square through the ribcage. She bruised her fingers gripping the pine's rough bark.

Then Manji stood up in his stirrups, and she realized he wasn't hurt. He'd let the spear slide under his arm and trapped it against his side. His fist clamped down on the shaft, he yanked the spearman sprawling halfway from the saddle. His right shoulder punched forward. The man screamed and jerked his body, then slithered limp from the horse and hit the ground head first.

Manji's right arm yanked downwards to follow his opponent's fall, nearly pulling him from his own horse. Leaning far over, he had to grab the horse's mane for stability. He heaved and grunted, trying to work the stuck *shido's* point out of the spearman's breastbone.

A hard, thrumming twang. Manji yelled; he sounded both pained and affronted, and took his own header from the saddle.

He landed on the spearman's body, hung up in the reins and still struggling with the blade lashed to his arm. With a couple of hard kicks to the corpse's face and chest, he yanked the point free. The southerner worked a lever on his strange short bow and nocked another bolt, but the two agitated and riderless horses intervened. Manji was dragged a short distance before he could slip the reins from under his arm. He rolled to avoid the trampling hooves, got up on one leg with the *shido* as an aid and staggered to the pine where Rin crouched.

The gnarled tree wasn't much shelter, especially not for someone Manji's size. He dropped prone behind Rin, panting, and crawled into a small hollow in the sandy soil. "Oh! Are you wounded?"

He gritted his teeth at her. "Arrow. Pull it out, goddammit." She leaned away from the tree trunk and gingerly ran her hand across Manji's shoulders and sides, searching for the shaft. A dark sweat stain spread down his spine and under his arms, but she couldn't see blood on his clothing. "Not — there. Farther... down." He jerked his chin and craned over his shoulder. Rin glanced at the small of his back and touched his belt knot. "Keep going!"

The ends of the bloody fletches hit the side of her hand. They protruded a little way through a hole in the cloth over the fleshy part of Manji's left buttock; the short bolt had buried nearly all of its length in his backside. Rin couldn't get a

very good grip on the stub, so she tried to work it farther out by rocking it side to side. "Fuckfuckfuckit! *Ouch!*"

"I'm s-sorry, Manji-san — it's gone really deep..." Rin wiped slippery blood from her fingers and prepared to pull again.

"Freakin' crossbow. Maybe I'm lucky it didn't poke all the way through to — YEOWW!" His face glistened with sweat. The southerner sidled down the road with his loaded bow, his horse apparently unwilling to approach the dead body in the middle of the way. He became an outline in the mist again. The spearman's mount and Anotsu's horse untangled themselves; both took off up the road with empty saddles. "Shit. There goes our transportation."

Rin found a coil of fishing line in her bag and got a secure knot tied under the fletches. She looped the line over a low branch, held her breath and threw her weight into the pull. Manji balled his fists and wedged his forehead against the ground, his toes digging into the sand. When Manji's gasps turned raw with agony and his whole body quivered, Rin desisted. She dabbed sweat and tears from her own eyes with the end of her sleeve. "It must be stuck in the bone... uh, I guess we could try cutting it out somehow?"

"Man, that sounds like fun." The startling thrum of the crossbow sounded again and the bolt tore a swatch of bark from the pine just above Rin's head. "Crap!" Rin retreated behind the trunk and Manji groped for a dagger. He heaved up on one knee, his limbs still trembling a little, and scanned for his target. Just as his arm drew back, the crossbow twanged.

The dagger fell and Manji hit the dirt again, hugging his arm to his body. He curled around it, his chest heaving in short constrained grunts. When he opened his mouth for a deeper gulp of air and relaxed his arm, Rin saw a bolt protruding almost all the way through the base of his thumb and out the back of his hand. She hissed in distress. Manji gripped the shaft in his teeth and pulled it the rest of the way through. After a few moments he picked up the bolt and showed her the eight-barbed head with a sardonic smile. "Reloads fast, don't he?"

Rin made a face at the hideous thing; how were they ever going to extract that arrow? "The point's drugged, too." Manji flung the bloody bolt aside. "My whole side is buzzing like a wasp sting. That'll pass, but you don't want to get even nicked by one of these. You'd fold up in a little heap and not twitch for hours."

"Wh-what should we do?"

"I can't move my leg with this thing planted in my ass. Not yet, anyhow. You're the one who's going to have to do something." Manji rolled halfway over to lie on his side and stabbed the straight blade of the hooked knife into the sand by her knee. "Cut that string off me."

Rin tied the fishing line around the knife's handle as he directed her, then left him and her bag and sword and crawled up the slope on her face. There was cover if she kept down in the undergrowth and beneath the lower branches of the scattered pines, but she was glad of the lingering mist. When she had worked her way a little distance back down the road from Manji's position, Rin stood up, threw the tethered knife high into one of the larger pines and backed up the slope, paying out the line. She crouched by another tree and yanked the line in an irregular rhythm to shake the branches, as if someone were climbing. All Manji needed was a moment without that crossbow trained on him...

Rin glimpsed the horse and rider still sidling along the road. The mist was rapidly thinning and lifting from the ground; the hunter would be able to tell soon that no one was in the tree and that Manji hadn't moved. The shaft of the hunter's crossbow changed angle; he pointed it at the tree she was shaking, but didn't fire. Then he switched his aim again, tracing a line downwards, and bent low to peer through the trees. Rin froze; he had spotted her red *furisōde*. The hunter paused with his bolt targeted straight at her.

Something streaked through the air from up the road. Rin heard a scream: not a man's. The horse reared and flung its head into a spraying fountain of blood, crying out in a shrill whinny. The hunter swung around and pressed his trigger, but had to leap from the saddle when the horse's front legs buckled. His bolt ripped into the trees.

Manji lunged into the road, his right arm and *shido* braced around his extended folding spear like a crutch. His left arm whipped out as he hurled another blade. The southerner's crossbow skidded away. Growling, he attempted to pull Manji's dagger from his upper arm, then gave it up and clumsily drew a short sword. With a curse he charged at the still-crippled Manji. The horse moaned and quivered in its dying throes.

Manji switched his spear to his left hand, took a long swinging stride with the shaft as a pivot and slammed a foot into the oncoming man's abdomen. The southerner sprawled on his back. Manji lost his balance and went down with him; the struggle kicked up a cloud of sand and dust.

Rin bit her fingernails through a few moments of uncertainty, then Manji wrestled free and rose to his knees. The southerner lay flat, breathing hard with

the *shido* thrust through his upper chest. Manji used the edge of his broad spear point to free his bandaged arm from the lashings and stood up.

"Sorry about that."

"Sorry?" The wounded man looked bemused. "Fer what?"

"Didn't mean to kill him." He leaned painfully on the spear and cast a look at Rin when she slid down the slope and into the road. "My mistake."

"Aw, that's decent of yeh — he were a good bloke, my mate there."

"What are you babbling about, asshole? Your damn friend? My horse ran off, his horse ran off, and then I had to go and cut the throat of the only one left! Smart move." Manji braced his stance and raised the spear; Rin hid her eyes before he brought it down again.

She huddled by the side of the road after retrieving her bag, trying to avoid taking another look at the hunters' bloody corpses, and especially at the dead horse. The animal lay with its eyes open and its tongue lolling into a dark pool, its long mane clotted with blood. A bold pair of carrion crows loitered nearby, calling in raucous voices to others who sat attentive in the trees. Manji propped himself on the horse's broad hip, favoring his left side. "Oh, God, the poor thing... wh-why did you have to kill it?"

"Sheesh, kid, I said I missed my aim." Manji rummaged the bounty hunter's saddle bags and tossed a few items to the ground.

"It... it was in pain. It didn't have any idea what was happening — just that it hurt..." Her eyes filmed with tears.

Manji bent over a little farther to retrieve the other saddle bag and winced, clapping a hand to his backside. "Next time I'll make sure I'm the only one who gets nailed."

"Why don't we just turn around and go home? Before something worse happens?" Rin sniffled and wiped her nose.

"Yeah, fine. Everything's hunky-dory back at the ol' shack." Manji didn't look at her. "We'll put all this shit behind us and pick up where we left off on weapons training." He hurled a bundle of dirty clothes all the way across the road.

"Um..."

"Dammit, don't these assholes eat?" He dug out and inspected a paper packet, then offered it with a grunt.

"Their food? While they're lying there d-d-dead?"

Manji rolled his eye and dropped the packet on the dead horse's belly. "Suit yourself." He munched on dried rice and reached for another handful. His gaze fell on the crossbow; he hooked it with his spear, pulled it closer and methodically stabbed at it like a cook slicing a fish. When he had reduced the bow to a pile of splinters and bent and broken mechanisms, he looked up. "Let's get on with it."

"On with it? How?"

Manji struggled to stand. "Take a crazy guess."

"But you can't walk!"

"No problem." He moved up the road with a heavy, lopsided gait. "Sitting a saddle right now wouldn't be so freakin' comfy anyhow..."

"Please, let's find a place where we can take care of that arrow and you can finish healing your arm, and get some sleep!" Rin rose and extended her arms to Manji. "Even if we don't want to go back to... it's not like we have a sign from the gods! We don't have to do this."

"Yes. We do."

"Oh, Manji! I know you're really angry with them — but you can't catch them now, not without a horse, and even though I guess it's an honor thing for a man, especially when she threatened to, uhh... but she *didn't* end up doing that to you, not exactly, and — "

"What the hell difference does that make?"

"Please! I'm asking — I'm begging!"

He looked at her from a distance. "Quit, hah? I guess you might recollect how that always seems to pan out." Rin bit her lips and dropped her head. "I got no other plans today, anyhow." Manji sneered to himself and turned away.

Rin dragged after her bodyguard, blotting his footprints with her own. When they'd ridden through a sleeping village in last night's darkness she had scavenged a pair of old straw sandals to wear, but her feet still ached. She couldn't understand this grim, dogged vengefulness. It didn't seem like Manji to hunt an enemy so far. At least, he wouldn't have tracked someone like an *Ittō-ryū* fighter while still suffering from such wounds, not even Anotsu himself. Even when Manji repeatedly urged Rin not to give up her quest, he also counseled patience and a practical approach. He wasn't the kind to take personal offense at an adversary, especially not when his body could heal nearly any insult. What made him so eager to punish this one?

This woman. Rin didn't want to think too far along those lines. But what else could he do, really?

Drop the chase now, and another adversary still waited for them. Like a hunter watching for an ambush, sooner or later to close the trap. In any unguarded moment, any almost-innocent remark or meeting of the eyes. He couldn't bribe it into retreat or throw it off the trail, because it was part of him. Cut deep or wait for it to work itself through and scar over: only pain awaited. No wonder Manji would rather put off the confrontation as long as possible. She wasn't in any state to deal with it herself, to be honest.

Rin raised her eyes and watched Manji's back while he took his awkward gait in the lead. Anotsu's borrowed *kōsōde* was tailored a little too narrow for him, and the close-woven hemp pulled tight across the muscles of his shoulders. Plain dark indigo, giving his well-known body a different surface. "Manji..."

"Hnn?"

"Err... nothing."

He slanted a brow at her, then gestured at the trampled road. "Looks like the horses might've finally slowed down about here."

"They're a long way away by now, I guess." She hoped for any neutral topic, just so he would keep speaking to her.

"If they know what's good for 'em." Manji stepped over a fresh deposit of green droppings. "Spooky goddamn nags..."

"You don't much like horses, do you?"

"Eh. They've got their uses."

"But tell me why?" Rin gave him a tentative smile, longing for a hint of answering warmth. "I don't know — I like to hear you complain about that sort of thing..."

"Hnnh..." Manji gave a hard, contemptuous sniff. "I swear, they start plotting their tricks the moment you plant your ass in the saddle. Can't let your guard down for a frickin' heartbeat. Or you'll end up with a colossal whack in the nuts right when you thought you had it all figured out." He limped up a hill ahead of her.

Rin flushed, but swallowed the ache in her breast. Manji plodded in silence for some time, then halted at the crest of another hill. She saw his head snap up and his shoulders straighten in surprise, but he seemed gratified too. "Well — screw me."

"What is it?" Rin climbed up beside him and peered down the road into a muddy lowland. At first she saw nothing out of the way, but she followed Manji's pointing finger up the valley. "Oh!" Reins dangling, the runaways drank side by side from a stream. "Gosh... it could almost be a sign..."

Manji grinned with all his teeth showing.

"You never told me why we went this way. Instead of what Anotsu suggested...?"

Manji twitched the lead rope that tethered her mount to his and stepped up the pace downhill. The bounty hunter's big horse moved with a long easy stride under his direction, towing along Anotsu's horse with Rin clinging to its back. She held the saddle bow and made no attempt to guide the animal, letting Manji determine their route and speed. "Anotsu don't know everything."

"Well, of course not, but..."

"You recollect the money that bitch claimed she had? Saved it up from spreading her legs?" Manji seemed much more willing to talk now that they had separate mounts and were moving quickly, though he sounded less cheerful than simply determined. Rin creased her brow, and Manji glanced briefly over his shoulder. "Fifteen *ryō* in gold."

That gold. Gold that O-Hama had offered to the bandits if they would assault Rin where her *yōjimbō* had to watch. Rin's face flashed hot. If Manji had only said

it straight out, she might have felt a little less shame at the memory. Nothing but an unfulfilled threat, but somehow a taint lingered around her. Body and spirit smirched by such a close brush with a woman's worst possible dishonor, though she remained untouched... sort of. She remembered Manji's queer look when she had admitted stripping to distract the bandit's boy and take back her sword. Rin hugged a forearm over her breasts and hunched her shoulders.

"See, I figure she's too sharp to leave that much cash behind. No way she wouldn't tell her boy-toy they had to go pick it up before they blew the *han*." Rin tightened her grip on the saddle, growing queasy from the rapid trot. "She'd stashed it a few hours' journey from that clearing, she said, and you might also recollect that she had it with her when the little creep grabbed her from her owner."

"That gossip merchant? Didn't he say so?"

"Bingo." Manji raised himself a little in his saddle and re-adjusted the bloodstained pad of old clothes he sat on. "Which means she hid it somewhere along their route before they got to the same damn town we did. Good reason not to carry it with them, if they were planning to cut deals with scumbags like those. They'd have got their throats cut instead."

"Okay, I guess that makes sense... but then they were going to take you back to Edo afterwards?"

"Yeah, I guess the little twerp actually meant to turn me in... maybe in a barrel, if he'd finished hacking me up like his lady wanted." Manji's quick meal off the hunter's supplies seemed to have done his body some good; his right arm had full play now and he could use his hand to help control the reins, though his grip was still too weak to allow him to wield a weapon. "So they had to figure they were going to pass that way again soon, but she hadn't picked up the money on the journey out that morning. That narrows it way down."

"Oh, my goodness — that's right!" Rin put a hand to her stomach. So Manji hadn't let his thoughts fall into a muddle like hers, nor dwelt all this time on irrelevancies. Even through the pain he still suffered, he'd kept his mind in focus and trained on their real goal. "You f-figured out where it was?"

"I don't need to know where it was, though I'd wager it was a temple. All I need to know is that they had to strike back east a ways before they could head northwest to the border." Manji pointed to his right, then ahead. "So I draw the third side of the triangle north, and then follow the riverbank. Naturally most of the best fords have at least a few teahouses nearby, if not a whole village. The

river's gone down some. Even so, it's still running high enough that they'll be skulking the banks for a good while before they find a spot to cross unobserved. Fifty-fifty at least, we'll get there first." His air of cool analysis gave way. "Just wait... till I observe 'em."

Rin gave him a smile tinged both with anticipation and a touch of fear.

They left the road for the forest as the sun rose higher. The sky remained hazy, filtering the sunlight as if through a thin cloth, but Rin could see no individual clouds. The forest was sandy-floored and a little sparse, dotted with more scrawny pines in between thicker clumps of maples and chestnuts that still retained their turning leaves. The air felt quiet yet oddly itchy, with autumn cicadas droning and the smells of smoke and pine pitch saturating the faint breeze. This far from Edo the villages were scarce, and the mushroom-gatherers and charcoal-burners gave Manji and Rin wary looks as they rode by. The river glinted through the trees a bowshot's distance to the left and a little below them. Every so often they had to skirt around stream heads recently flooded and still deep in muck and debris.

"Shh." Manji turned in the saddle and held up a hand. Rin's horse followed his along the top of a small forested bluff; Manji took in an arm's length of the lead rope and leaned closer to her. A horse was moving along the riverbank below; its footfalls and the clink of its tack sounded slow and irregular. Someone spoke in a high-pitched voice, just discernible over the sound of water. Another voice replied, and Rin suppressed a gasp. Manji twitched his mouth. "Was I right or was I right?" She nodded with fingers over her lips. "Stay here. I'll be back." Manji untied the rope and handed her the end.

"Stay? Why?"

He threw her a sideways glance. "Thought you were feeling squeamish today."

Rin pulled in her lips and felt her nostrils flare. "...No."

Manji tied the lead rope to his saddle again and urged his horse. Rin's horse trotted obediently behind. Manji shaded his vision with one hand as they approached the edge of the bluff. The sun was at their backs, still hovering midway in the eastern sky short of noon, but the contrast of open sky with forest shade was enough to make them blink. Rin shaded her eyes as well and followed Manji's gaze. Below, she saw two people mounted on one horse, apparently testing the depth at the river's brink. The rider in the saddle, not tall and oddly square in outline, pointed over the water. Sitting sidesaddle behind him, an even smaller figure in loose men's clothing.

At the closer bank the water looked quiet and dark past a shallow shelving. A stretch of rapids reached from midstream to the opposite shore, the river running fast over cobbles. Rin took it all in at a glance and stared only at the riders, her heart beating like a war drum. Sunlight danced on the flashing ripples with incongruous gaiety.

Below Manji's horse's front hooves, the loose sandy slope of the bluff descended by three times a man's height. Clumps of rushes grew on the soggy and ponded flats between the bluff and the river, straggled with water weed. Distinct lines of flood deposit between the clumps marked the water's gradual retreat. Rin smelled damp earth and rotting vegetation steaming in the sun.

"Well, it ain't exactly Ichi-no-Tani," muttered Manji. "But I'm gonna head straight down, so hang on."

Manji began to pull out a *shido* with his left hand, then seemed to reconsider. He replaced the weapon and drew his *katana* instead. That was his longest blade, and the one he kept in best polish. The hazy sun struck the flat at an angle and reflected into Rin's eyes, tracing blurring spots across her vision. Manji slapped the reins on his horse's neck and spurred its sides with his heels. The big horse willingly started down, but Rin's pulled at the lead rope and locked its legs. Without looking behind him, Manji spun the sword and slashed the rope. His mount gave a great bound and charged down the slope towards the river.

Rin tried to urge her horse to follow, but it shied and backed away from the edge. Obviously it knew perfectly well that she had no idea how to control it. She lost sight of Manji and bounced up and down the saddle with frustration. She was going to miss everything!

Out by the river, a woman screamed. Just once. Gibbering and whimpering: a boy's pathetic cries rose and continued. Ryonosuke sounded nearly unhinged with terror. Nothing else over the water's noise except for the muffled smack of galloping hooves.

Rin slid from her recalcitrant horse, yanked it over to a tree to tether it and ran out to the edge of the bluff again. A big splash in the shallows beyond the flats—Ryonosuke had fallen off the horse and taken O-Hama with him. They floundered in the river, making smaller splashes. Manji's mount tore into the water, flinging brownish waves to each side. O-Hama got up first, her long loose hair streaming wet, and tried to catch Ryonosuke's horse. Manji headed straight for her, his *katana* spiraling high.

Was he just going to behead her on the run? Rin gasped — he'd said nothing about what happened after they caught the fugitives. Instant death the only penalty he had ever considered? O-Hama let go of the horse's bridle and darted around the animal's body to avoid Manji's charge. She struggled upstream, the muddy river bottom and her clinging wet clothes hampering her. Although Manji's weapon couldn't have touched her yet, she went down again, perhaps tripped or bumped by the horse. The *katana* flashed; Ryonosuke's horse reared with a loud neigh and plunged past the prone girl into the deep water. It swam for midstream taking Ryonosuke's musket and long *tachi* with it, both sheathed behind its saddle.

Manji turned his mount towards O-Hama. Before he completed the move, Ryonosuke heaved partway out of the water, coughing and spluttering. He still had on his old-fashioned silk-laced armor; with its cords soaked, it must have weighed nearly as much as the wearer. He half-swam to O-Hama's side on all fours and flung out his arms in a meager shield. Manji threw back his head, his guttural laughter clearly audible through the river's low roar.

Rin scurried back to her own horse to retrieve her sword. She worked her way backwards down the crumbling bluff and looked for the combatants again. Could you describe a hunter taking his prey as a combat?

O-Hama thrashed her way to dry land while Ryonosuke headed off Manji's horse. She paused with her back to Rin and drew a small dagger from her sash. Manji dismounted, left his horse standing in the river and splashed towards Ryonosuke in the calf-deep water, sword held low. O-Hama's shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath. She braced the dagger against her chest and ran at Manji from behind.

Rin shouted in warning. Swinging her sword, she galloped through the rushes. Manji looked around and brought up the *katana's* point at O-Hama. At the same moment, Ryonosuke somehow mastered the burdened armor he wore and heaved all the way to his feet. Again he flung himself between Manji and his lover. Probably mostly by accident, he grazed Manji's sword with his chest and pushed it aside. It wasn't likely that he'd been hurt, not while wearing full armor, but he yelped and backed up towards O-Hama, yanking out his short *wakizashi*.

Manji stalked limping towards both of them while Rin ran across the flats from the opposite direction, jumping puddles and dodging stands of rushes. She would reach their quarry a little after he did, and by then, it might all be over. Ryonosuke screamed and struck out at Manji; Rin could barely follow the swift upward flick of Manji's sword, but the *wakizashi* flew over Ryonosuke's head. It

arced towards Rin and landed in a puddle, point first and quivering. Ryonosuke turned and grabbed O-Hama in both his arms, either to shield her again or to prevent her from attacking Manji directly. Rin was very close to them now, too close to see the endpoint of Manji's lunge. A dull, grating impact of steel cleaving flesh and bone; her bodyguard's blade spun a red streak into the sunlight. Ryonosuke screamed again, and the young couple collapsed almost at Rin's feet.

For a moment she thought that Manji had run them both through as they stood embraced. A fitting end to this?

Rin skidded to a halt, holding her sword out in front of her in barked disappointment. Nothing for her to do? At least she had wanted to tell them off! Show them what it was like to be in someone else's power, to be hunted and attacked and captive and maybe a little bit abused — she wasn't sure what would have come next. At least they had suffered a good shock when Manji so unexpectedly attacked. What a nightmare vision her *yōjimbō* must have looked to the guilty fugitives: mounted and dark-clad with the sun at his back, an immortal avenger in unfailing pursuit!

Then she realized that both of the lovers were still breathing. Blood spurted and stained the damp earth. Trying to single out its source, Rin spotted a foot in *tabi* and a sandal. It was still attached to a length of shin, but it lay at a peculiar angle and too far away. Rin stared at the leg. Slim, small footed — but a man's, not a woman's. Had Manji missed his aim again?

O-Hama struggled out from under Ryonosuke, who lay retching and gray-faced. She still had her dagger in hand, and tried to lunge at Manji from her knees. He held his weapon out to the side and kicked her in the jaw. She fell into the mud and dropped her dagger. Manji hooked it with the point of his *katana* and flung it away.

O-Hama clutched her throat and rolled over, her eyes staring wide and filled with tears of pain. Manji stood over her, Ryonosuke's blood staining her wet clothes, and tapped her under the chin with the flat of his blade.

Rin looked into Manji's face while he looked into O-Hama's. His expression was almost neutral, but a sickening association rose to distort her vision, like steam wavering from dark earth. The assassin Shira, mutilating a prostitute on the road outside Naito Shinjuku. The memory was almost too awful to call up; Rin had lived through even worse sights, but only just. The woman's foot slashed off, her hands pinned with a knife, her breast sawed deep — and Shira had meant to keep going. Rin had realized in magnifying horror that he had indulged this hideous taste many times before. His greatest pleasure was inflicting pain, even

when the person he tormented had done him no harm. Manji had stopped him that time — but what did Manji mean to do now?

'I know what most kenshi would have done to a girl like you...'

Even farther into the past, as Manji's expression hardened. A young outlaw with a cruel and desperate look, a murderer who hesitated at nothing. Who wore a web of scars that flaunted his ferocity, a garment he would never cast off as long as he lived. Frozen in time and in aspect, detached from humanity itself. Would anyone ever believe that he could long to redeem so many deaths? Why should they?

Manji pulled a slow, triumphant grin that could have been prelude to almost anything. "Thought you'd shake me, bitch?" His captive met his gaze, lying flat with her breast heaving. "Heh, heh. Bet you didn't realize you'd as good as drawn me a map."

"Killer... of a hundred." O-Hama stared at him, looming over her like a temple carving depicting the horrors of damnation. Her voice broke. "Demon... in a man's shape..."

"Works for me." He stepped back a pace and looked up. "Okay, Rin. Got her for ya."

"Eh?"

Manji gave O-Hama a sour glance, whirled his *katana* to reverse the point and sheathed the sword on his left hip. "I wish every crazy whore could use a blade like that other crazy whore of my acquaintance, because then we might be able to keep this nice and simple. No such luck."

"Manji-san...?"

"Bandits, hunters, little twerps who think they're samurai; big deal." He vented a disgusted sigh and kicked Ryonosuke's severed leg out of his way. "What am I going to do with a damn broad? Don't think it'd be a real hot idea to try to collect on the reward!" Ryonosuke moaned; O-Hama slowly sat up and looked at him, then at Manji. "G'wan, slut, fix up your boyfriend if you want. Makes no difference to me." Her eyes dilated.

"B-b-but I thought you wanted revenge on her! Because she tortured you! Cut out your tongue!"

"Revenge?" Manji looked at his bandaged arm. "I had that coming."

"You had it... *coming*?"

"Weren't you paying attention? Who did I leave behind that tavern three years ago?"

"Uh... well, yes..."

"That's family business. Family duty. It don't come any more serious than a father and an elder brother. So even if she'd sliced off my parts and made me swallow 'em raw..." Manji gave Rin a dark smirk and flicked a thumb along the long hilt of his sword. "Well, shit. Could have done me a sort of favor, hey?"

Rin bent over with a hand to her mouth, the other clutching her roiling stomach. O-Hama finished tying a sash around the stump of Ryonosuke's severed leg. She laid a slender hand on his forehead and smoothed the hair back from his temples while he shivered and moaned. His topknot had come undone; with his hair loose across her lap, he looked very young even though his pate was fully shaved. Probably he'd had his boyhood forelock cut only a year or so ago.

"Shee-it. Thought you knew better than that. I did the crime and I said I'd take my punishment. As long as she was the one to dish it out, I didn't have any reason to call it unfair." He grinned at Ryonosuke and held up his right hand again. "Quit crying, you little shit-drip. I took your leg a hell of a lot quicker than I should have... but I'm kinda soft-hearted that way."

Rin struggled for breath. "Sh-she planned the whole attack! You suffered so much — and you don't hold it against her? I don't *believe* it!"

"Come on, it's the principle of the thing. She's got her just rights, but using an innocent to punish the guilty party crossed the line. Even if she had still believed you were my little sister." He gave a satiric chuckle. "The whole family pays for the crimes of one, but she ain't the *bakūfū*."

Rin put a hand to her breast. "You kept going — you rode all night, you swore you'd never quit — and now you've been wounded again! Just to get revenge for *me*?"

"Hell, woman, it's my job." Manji curled his lip. "*Yōjimbō*."

She met his level gaze; he meant this just how it sounded. Duty, personal honor, a limb for a limb — but who would carry out this revenge he had pursued so

hard? "I've done what I came for. Now, she's got it coming to *her*." Manji drew a thumb across the base of his throat.

"You aren't telling me — that *I* ought to k-ki-kill — " Rin pointed a shaking finger.

Manji's face darkened further. "She told five dirty bastards to strip you in front of me, and it wasn't any fault of hers that they didn't go through with it." He folded his arms; she recognized the hard glitter in his eye. "I seem to recall the bitch working her assets pretty hard to persuade Anotsu's guys, and they almost fell for it. You're samurai, and she knew damn well what that meant when she pulled her shit. You tell me — what the fuck do *you* think you should do?"

Sharp prickles weakened Rin's thighs. If O-Hama had succeeded? Rin's imagination could barely encompass the scene, or its aftermath. Indelible images of her mother's violation supplied more genuine horror than she could have invented. Would she just have begged Manji to kill her when those men had finally thrown her ruined body aside? Would he have been glad to oblige?

"My lady..." Ryonosuke's voice was barely audible, high and thin. "Give him... the money! The gold — beg for our — for your life!" O-Hama didn't reply.

"C'mon, woman." Manji flipped the hook-bladed knife into his hand. "There ain't no point in thinkin' it over too much." He offered the knife to Rin; they looked at each other for a long moment. "It's your deal all the way, but I'm still your bodyguard. I can back you up any way you like." He nodded at Ryonosuke. "He won't interfere."

"No... no!" shrieked Ryonosuke in a whisper. He tried to embrace O-Hama around the waist. "How can you be so cruel — even you! To strip my lady of all remaining honor... you're a monster! Even if she were still a courtesan — "

"Haah?" Manji glared down at Ryonosuke, first in annoyance, then with a sudden rictus of fury. "You little *fuckhole*!" Rin jumped and squeaked; Ryonosuke shrank into his oversized armor. "Shut your motherfucking face! I wouldn't ream that bitch's reeking cunt with a — " Manji glanced at Rin and stopped, his face pale. Then he flushed red and thrust the knife at her, handle foremost. Her fingers closed on it in automatic obedience. "Goddammit, get this shit over with!"

She wanted to run. Let them escape punishment, cross the border, get away completely free — as long as she escaped this herself. Manji would never let her go. He'd make her face her duty to cleanse her own honor, just as he had never

let her falter in her duty to her parents. This was family duty, for the injury of one was the injury of all.

The knife's plain wooden hilt was warm in her hand and still darkly stained with Manji's own blood. So much blood on this weapon, and on so many others. She tried to control her ragged breathing and closed her eyes to gather her thoughts. She wasn't up to this. She was going to cry and argue and fall apart, and then Manji would take back his weapon and do what he saw as his own duty. His job, which he could never quit.

"P-please, Manji-san — I... I just can't — "

"I would have done you a favor, killer of a hundred?" Rin looked at O-Hama in startlement when she spoke. She laid Ryonosuke's head on a pad of rushes, smiling in an abstracted way. When she knelt and pushed her damp hair out of her face, the length of it nearly brushed the ground. "A strange favor, to cut out the root of a man's desire... but I think I grasp your meaning."

Manji remained silent for a moment. Then he cracked a grimace without turning his head. "Clever girl."

"I wonder... if my fate might also be an ultimate favor."

"Hah?"

"What great punishment can a woman inflict on another of her sex, if she is unwilling to kill? Or to use a man as proxy? I realize this girl would never order you to do what I threatened to have done to her. Even if she did give such an order, I know that you would never obey." O-Hama's great dark eyes veiled over; she smiled like a fox's mask. "But she will realize her alternative... without a doubt. What else does a woman set beside life and honor?"

To her own horror, Rin could not keep the suggestion from taking form. Her gaze fell on Ryonosuke's bandaged nose, then slowly, reluctantly, on O-Hama's cherry-blossom cheeks. Such a beautiful girl...

"You see?" O-Hama sounded almost triumphant. "A woman knows a woman's instincts." In consternation, Rin let the knife drop at her feet.

"What's the matter, kid?" Manji's brows twitched in a faint smile as he watched her. "Straight from the horse's mouth — as you might say."

Her own mouth fell open. He thought that would be justice? Could he be right?

"To steal my beauty with that blade... before time would have destroyed it anyway." O-Hama dabbed light touches on the skin of her bruised jaw, fingertip by fingertip. "My lord wears his wounds with courage... and I curse my mirror daily."

"What?" Rin boggled at her. Wouldn't any woman dream of a face like that?

"You've seen the notices. Didn't you wonder why my former master is willing to pay so much to have me back?"

"I thought because you made him lots of money?"

O-Hama floated a light, contemptuous laugh. "Perhaps you are as innocent as you look..."

When Rin appealed to him in confusion, Manji abruptly bent to retrieve the knife and scratched the back of his neck. Ryonosuke hid his face and sobbed. "Ehrr... your master...? Oh." Rin flushed; she could hardly claim such ignorance now. "Is that why you ran away?"

Ryonosuke struggled to raise himself on one elbow. "That vile panderer... he meant to part us forever! He forbade me to cross his threshold again! I could not go on living without the heavenly embraces of my lady..." Rin felt a sudden pang.

"Didn't like you screwing with his property, hah?" Manji laughed harshly, then almost snarled. "But he sure didn't mind making a packet off guys like me. You really must have pissed him all to shit, *hatamoto!*"

"My master is a foolish, jealous man." O-Hama faintly wrinkled her nose, as if smelling something unpleasant. "He could not stomach it when my lord declared his love."

"Jealous of a *whore*?" Manji sneered. "Come on — a guy who owned your contract could've nailed you any day of the week. Don't fucking flatter yourself."

"Don't display your ignorance, outlaw!" O-Hama narrowed her eyes at Manji. He snickered at her vehemence, but she raised her voice. "From the moment he saw my face, this man could not conceal his lust for me. He nearly bankrupted himself to outdo all offers from the best establishments. He failed to put my maidenhead up for bid, though he could have named his price. He shamelessly took me long before my official apprenticeship ended, and made no secret of his

transgressions. And so he threw away all prospect of fees and gifts that I would have received on the occasion of my *mizuage*, and deprived me of a great opportunity to gain fame and rise in the courtesan's ranks. I could have been the toast of the Yoshiwara — but this besotted man ruined me! If his wife had allowed it, he would even have shut me up as his private concubine. He calls it love — he begs me to reward his worship with the smallest of tokens. I despise such *flattery*!" O-Hama hid her lips with her sleeve and breathed hard.

Manji had no immediate reply to this tirade. He didn't look away, but he chewed his jaw and frowned.

O-Hama lowered her hand to her throat. "The good sense of my master's honored wife is the only reason he can stay ahead of his creditors. She insisted that I take paying clients like the other girls and strictly limited his visits, for which I will always be grateful. I know she resented his attentions to me... but she never blamed me for her husband's lack of wisdom."

"Her kindness is without bounds, my lady! She brought us together... she urged me to speak my heart to you. I repaid her poorly by stealing you!"

"My lord, you cannot blame yourself for a desperate act. The fault lies entirely at another's feet." Both of them looked at Manji.

"Gimme a break!" He seemed taken aback, practically defensive. "How the hell is THAT my doing?"

O-Hama no longer betrayed any fear of her captor; she flung her bitterness at him like arrows. "You gave him a cruel wound he couldn't conceal! You spitefully broke his sword! Everyone knew he had fought a duel for my honor — his father Tsukue-*sama* withdrew his allowance and reprimanded him for creating a scandal. My master was furious at such proof of my lord's devotion. He seized the excuse and banned him from the house. We could not meet at all except by the good graces of my master's honored wife. We were forced to speak through the screens under cover of night, weeping for each other like the rain that soaked us in its merciless torrents! And now for his love's sake, my lord is an outlaw. Like you!"

"Aw, ya poor kids." Manji spat on the ground. "Breaks my fucking heart."

"Oh, why didn't you let me die with you, my lady? When we still owned our fates?" Ryonosuke dissolved in sobs again. O-Hama looked away.

Manji snorted. "Love suicide? Now if there ever were two ideas that go together like maggots on a dead horse..."

"He asked her to carry out a *shinju*?" Rin gasped. "Oh, my goodness!"

"Heh — I bet he planned to drown himself in the well and poison the water. Like some pissy girl getting back at her slave-driving mother-in-law." Manji guffawed. "Priceless! Couldn't even go through with a coward's death?"

"My lord is no — *coward*!" O-Hama paled. She seemed to struggle with herself, as if true dignity resided in silence now that she had poured out her heart. "I... I persuaded him that he should not give up all idea of revenge so quickly. There would be another opportunity..." She lowered her face, her shoulders heaving.

"You told him who Manji really was." Rin bit her lips as her mind churned. What was she going to do now? Cry for someone who had done them so much harm? Destroy a woman whose right to a just revenge was as good as her own? How could she satisfy her grievances, and Manji's too, without crossing the line? Even an enemy could show a captive honorable restraint... like Anotsu had.

"I told him only... that my foul-mouthed client was the killer of a hundred." O-Hama showed her face, but closed her eyes. "I thought my lord might challenge him again immediately if he learned my whole story, and then..." O-Hama reached down and touched Ryonosuke's hand. "He is so young..."

"So you waited your time, and you got your chance. Hope it was worth it, samurai's daughter." Manji tossed the hooked knife high and caught it again. "C'mon, Rin. Make yer call."

A glimpse of clarity. The mud settling at last in such troubled waters? "All right," said Rin. "I will."

O-Hama knelt with her palms on her thighs, staring straight ahead. Rin took a deep breath. "You... you were samurai. Before you, uh, sold yourself." O-Hama's smooth brow tightened. "You told us your feminine accomplishments brought a good price — I guess you mean tea ceremony and playing the *koto*, and writing *tanka* in nice calligraphy, and stuff like that. But how about samurai accomplishments?" O-Hama didn't reply, and Rin prompted her. "My father headed a sword school. Yours was an Edo officer. I learned how to use a sword. I bet you did too."

Manji's expression changed. "Now wait a second — "

“Manji-san! You just said it was up to me.”

“Well... yeah, but — ”

“It’s MY honor we’re talking about, right? So I’m going to settle it the way it should be settled — between samurai.” Rin gestured at O-Hama. “Give her a weapon.”

Obviously he understood this not at all. “A... *weapon*?” He lowered the knife.

“I will not cut a helpless person’s throat. I will not do what she did to you, even if she deserves it, and I don’t think *anyone* deserves what you went through.”

He rolled his eye. “Don’t be so goddamn sure about that — ”

“Look, Manji! Maybe you didn’t know — you’d fainted already — but when she cut out your tongue, she fell apart crying. It was too horrible even for her.” O-Hama’s expression remained frozen. “Maybe yesterday, right when it was happening, I might have tried to do the same to her. I’m glad this isn’t then. She hasn’t got a weapon, so loan her one of yours. Please.”

Manji stared at her for so long she almost repeated the request. “...You think she’s gonna go for it, do you?”

“I can’t challenge her until we both have swords in hand.”

“Naked blades? You realize somebody could get hurt. Like, permanently.”

“Of course! Otherwise it wouldn’t mean anything!” Rin stopped at the quirk of Manji’s lips. “Um... that is...” He dismissed it with a gesture, but gave a strange mocking look to O-Hama. “Okay, maybe that’s stupid! Maybe it’s samurai idiocy! But M-Manji-san... you made me fight once before. You said I had to learn to face a real blade before I could call myself a *kenshi*. That was only a little while ago — what could be so different now?”

Manji took his pipe from his sleeve and put it between his lips unlit, biting on the bamboo stem. Ryonosuke’s horse had made it across to the opposite bank of the river and stopped to nose the dry grass. The horse Manji had been riding stood in the shallow water by the near bank, drinking in deep gulps. It tossed its head and snorted water out of its nose. After some moments in silence, Manji took the pipe from his lips again and let the mouthpiece rest on his chin. “I got a bad feeling about this, Rin.” His voice sounded tense and clear, as if he shaped each word with care before it left his mouth. “It won’t end well.”

"I want to do my duty, Manji-san. What you've always told me I have to do, no matter about anything else. How it ends... or how it may hurt me... isn't the point." Manji looked back at her. "It hasn't ever been the point, has it? I've made some pretty stupid decisions, but that's the price you pay for making decisions at all. If I only thought about my own safety, I never would have left my family's *dojo*. I never would have had the courage to look for you... or to risk asking for an outlaw's help." She lowered her gaze for a moment, then returned to him with an almost detached feeling of calm. Because she'd found the right path, or because she shared his presentiment and accepted it? "When you told me to prove that I meant to avenge my parents — really *prove* it... I would just have run away bawling... and left you to fish in peace."

Manji's body jolted slightly, as if from an internal blow. The immobile lid of his blind eye stayed half open while his other eye clenched shut. She had a sense of a sleepless sight in that blank orb, distinguishing only shadows in its eternal watch. How much pain such awareness must cost him...

"Manji?"

"Okay, okay... you got it." Manji took a deep breath and searched under his clothing. Slowly he extracted a sheathed short sword. "Here, this one's lightweight enough for a broad." He gave the sword a careless toss; it landed in front of O-Hama, exactly perpendicular to her bent knees. O-Hama didn't stir a hair. "What's the matter, bitch? Smells of me?"

"Manji-san, please..."

Manji held up a hand and shut his mouth on his pipe.

Rin held up her own sword. "I... I challenge you, Hama-san. For threatening me — for hurting Manji-san. He might not say so himself, but you had no right to do that to... to MY *yōjimbō*." She glanced at Manji, whose gaze had returned to the far side of the river. Her hands were sweating, so she shifted her grip on the hilt and stiffened her voice. "I am Asano Rin *no* Takayoshi, heir to the Mutenichi-ryū! You've insulted me, my household and my family's honor beyond bearing. Pick up that sword and face me!"

"I refuse." O-Hama's hands clenched on her thighs.

"...What?"

"A female of good family should not wield a sword in anger, except in the final defense of her household. It's improper, unwomanly and disgraces her father's name. I will not take up such a challenge."

"You can't refuse! If you don't fight me, I'll... uh..."

"What will you do, girl?" O-Hama's pretty mouth stretched over her teeth. "You haven't the stomach to exact a real revenge. Order your bodyguard to behead your prisoners and have done. I defy you, samurai's daughter."

"My lady! My beautiful darling! Beg her forgiveness — knock your forehead! Please — think of your — of our — "

"My lord! Would you have me grovel before them?" O-Hama snapped her attention back to Rin. "There's no shame for me in death. Why should I make such an exhibition?"

"Why? Because if you don't, I'll cut off your... your *hair*!" Rin stamped her foot.

O-Hama's mouth opened; she barely stopped herself from protectively grasping at a lock. Ryonosuke let out a plaintive wail. "No! Oh, no!"

Rin brandished her sword. "Yeah, I'll chop it all off right down to the scalp so you're totally bald! That would be just a little bit humiliating for a girl as proud as you, wouldn't it? I could cut off your clothes, too, and then make you walk along the road all naked with people watching, and — " Manji was laughing with his teeth firmly clamped on his pipe stem, making a strangled sound. "How's that for shame, *samurai's daughter*?"

O-Hama made a gesture at Manji's short sword before her, but stopped again. Her hand trembled in the air and her cheeks blotched pink.

"Oh yeah — I meant to tell you something! Manji-san cut your boyfriend's nose for acting like a jerk. But he didn't break his sword, or even duel him in the first place. That was ME!"

O-Hama's eyes blazed. She swept up the sword and clapped it to her left side, gripping the scabbard just below the *tsuba* guard. "I accept your challenge!"

"An honor duel. With girls." Manji spread his hands and reproached the heavens.

"And if I'm victorious?" O-Hama rose and drew in one motion. She whipped the blade over her head, then performed a fast, smooth short-sword *kata*. Head, torso, knee, throat. Rin's eyes followed her, wide open. O-Hama thrust and cut from side to side in precise, showy flourishes. She spun on the ball of her foot and lowered the point to aim it at Manji. He pursed his lips, but showed no other sign of reaction. "What then, killer of a hundred? If I draw first blood? If she surrenders and begs for her life? Do my lord and I go free?"

She flicked her wrists and switched to a guard position, the bright blade laid across her body. "Or... do we continue this to the death?"

"You want promises? See if you can even lay a mark on her, bitch." Manji hawked and spat on the ground once more. "I trained her, see, and she might've learned one or two of her lessons." He looked at Rin narrow-eyed. Unsmiling now, though his nose twitched. He could not quite hide a deep simmer of emotion under the cool nonchalance of a *sensei's* pride. Rin wondered how far he could bear to stand back from such a sharp test of her irregular education. Her own heart beat high, as if she already labored to block the strokes of a swiftly wielded sword. "But I can tell... I'm gonna have to let *her* give you all the proof you can take."

END OF VOLUME SEVEN

CONTINUED IN VOLUME EIGHT...

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.

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

būshi: 'Warrior'; i.e., a samurai.

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.

dai-sho: 'Long and short', the pair of matched swords samurai males were entitled to wear as the badge of their caste.

eta: Loaded term for certain outcaste groups, meaning 'filth'. In the Edo period, *eta* were designated to carry out distasteful and defiling tasks, such as sewage disposal, leather tanning, execution of common criminals and handling of dead bodies. These groups are ethnically indistinguishable from other Japanese, but their descendants are still discriminated against and are disproportionately poor and under-educated. The modern term is *burakumin*, meaning 'village dweller'.

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.

furoshiki: Multi-purpose large square of cloth, often used as a scarf or for carrying items.

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

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*.

han: Each *daimyo* lord reigned over his own domain, or *han*, as a virtual petty king. Laws were specific to each domain and outlaws from one area could often find refuge in another, though all *daimyo* and their holdings were ultimately subject to the military government in Edo.

harigata: A dildo or other sex toy. Usually made of tortoiseshell, horn, leather or some other moldable material. *Harigata* 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 a grown man '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.

Ji: Temple; 'Hasu-ji' means 'Lotus Temple'. At this time, Japanese Shinto and Buddhist temples and clergy were often integrated and almost indistinguishable from each other. Only a few shrines were solely dedicated to one tradition. Shinto and Buddhism were forcibly separated by law at the Meiji Restoration, since the Buddhist establishment was regarded as a tool of the old Tokugawa regime and State Shinto was promoted as mythological justification for the emperor's absolute rule and the unique position of Japan as the realm of the sun goddess's descendants.

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.

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 *koku*, or the amount of rice one person is presumed to eat in a year.

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

koto: Stringed instrument played with plectrums.

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.

samurai: The highest of the four official social castes of Tokugawa period Japan, comprising 7-10% of the total population, and the only caste entitled to serve as

soldiers. Others could bear arms for self-defense, but only samurai were allowed to wear the matched *dai-sho* pair of swords.

Although theoretically a household could only inherit samurai status and a family name, in actual practice those could be awarded for distinction in any calling or art, or even purchased. During the long peace of this era, samurai became administrators and bureaucrats rather than active warriors. Most nominal samurai were neither wealthy nor high-ranking, and those without official posts and stipends often had to turn to teaching, handicrafts or even farming in order to make a living.

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

seppuku: 'Self-killing', usually applied to the ritual suicide method of cutting open the belly to spill the intestines, reserved for samurai males. The same *kanji* written in opposite order are pronounced *hara-kiri*, meaning 'belly-cutting' in a more vulgar sense.

In traditional Japanese philosophy, the spirit resides in the abdomen, and cutting it open both releases the spirit from the body and divulges a person's essential inner qualities and sincerity in the most direct possible way. The self-discipline, pain tolerance and physical bravery required to open one's own belly is the essence of *būshidō*. The original medieval version of *seppuku* required a horizontal cut from left to right across the belly, then a second crossing cut upwards to the breastbone. The subject would then die unassisted from blood loss, though not quickly. This elaborate and almost unimaginably painful operation is called the 'figure ten', since the crossing cuts resemble the *kanji* for the numeral 10. The version usually employed in later centuries required only the horizontal cut and allowed for beheading afterwards. However, a few samurai intent on their posthumous reputations still carried out the 'figure ten', in one case as late as 1912. In all cases, the subject took care to die in a crouching or face-down position rather than fall backwards.

Usually the subject would request a sword-wielding second, or *kaishakunin*, to behead him and prevent or cut short any shameful public display of agony or clumsiness. Depending on instructions or the subject's performance, the second might carry out the beheading at the first cut into the abdomen, wait until the entire belly had been opened and the subject gave the signal by leaning forward for the sword stroke, or he might strike at the moment the subject reached out for a blade or closed fan laid before him. It was a dubious honor to act as a second, since a poorly done beheading would shame the swordsman and embarrass the witnesses, and a good performance would go without remark. An aura of bad

luck might cling to the second and to any weapon he used. Usually the blade used for the belly-cutting was discarded afterwards, and so it was stripped of its valuable hilt and guard and handled instead with a thick wad of paper.

A samurai woman invariably performed *seppuku* by cutting her own throat, never by opening the belly. Usually she would tie her knees together to avoid lapsing into an undignified or exposed position in death.

During the Edo period, an order for a samurai to carry out *seppuku* was a face-saving method of official execution. Simple beheading was humiliating and dishonoring by contrast, and crucifixion was the usual execution method for commoners and therefore a tremendous disgrace for a warrior. A well-performed *seppuku* could expiate most crimes and mistakes, and could also be used as an unanswerable reproach or appeal to a superior.

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.

shinju: A double suicide or murder-suicide of lovers or would-be lovers. The term doesn't distinguish between mutually agreed-on deaths and those carried out by unwelcome suitors. In plays and novels of the time, shinju was commonly romanticized, to the point that the government forbade its mention in any

shōchū: A Japanese distilled liquor of about 50-60 proof, fermented from sweet potatoes or grain.

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.

tabi: Fabric or leather slipper-socks worn by themselves indoors and with sandals or *geta* outdoors. The big toe is made separate to allow the thong of the sandal to pass through.

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.

tanka: A traditional form of Japanese poetry written with five lines of counted syllables.

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 bakūfū 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.

tsuba: The small, pierced iron guard installed at the base of the hilt when a Japanese blade is furnished. *Tsuba* come in a variety of shapes, frequently round or oval, and are often highly decorated and inlaid with precious metals.

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.