



The Klamath Writers' Guild is pleased to present Summer in:

Delicate Blush of the Geisha

by Shirley Leggett

Summer Guards on the Edge

Oigimi's funeral procession traveled south. Katsushiro, the lead guard, was suspicious from the day they left, that they might be followed. By the fourth day of travel, he was certain of it. The group settled themselves for a rest at the edge of a woods overlooking the meadow before them. Even Cho, the last of Oigimi's maids left alive, had noticed the brown cloaked figure keeping measured distance behind them.

"It must surely be my mistress' ghost. She will follow the ashes we carry until we get home. Then she will feel free to begin her journey to the heavens."

Katsushiro was of a different opinion. "Akira," his second in command stood up, "put the men on alert, I'm going back to have a look at our attendant spy."

"Or assassin," Akira responded, "Be careful."

Katsushiro made his way in through the woods they had just left. He kept the afternoon sun at his back and silently approached the edge where the broad-leafed trees thinned out to bushes and grass.

Their follower was no ghost, since he also was resting himself. He lay next to a small pack and a walking stick and snored quietly. Katsushiro came up to his side, squatted down and held his knife to the fellow's throat. When he didn't wake, he placed his other hand on his chest.

The follower's eyelids squeezed tighter shut.

"You'd better open those eyes or you'll never know who killed you."

"Oh, I know. You're Katsushiro of the Tansho household guard."

"Ah, then I was right. You are a spy."

"No, no!" his eyes popped open, "I am only Satoshi, the kitchen boy. I brought you breakfast after your morning training."

"Who sent you after us?"

"No one, I swear!"

"Then why are you following us?"

"So as not to lose my way. I must get to Lord Yuasa and I don't know how to get there except to follow you."

"Why must you see him? Is it not enough that his daughter is dead? Are you sent to kill him, too?"

"No, of course not. I only carry a message. It must get to Lord Yuasa."

Katsushiro sheathed his knife and sat back on his heels. "Who is the message from?"

"I can't tell."

"Well, then tell me the message and I will make sure he gets it."

"No. You are very kind, but I cannot do that. I can only speak to Lord Yuasa himself. No one else."

"All right, but you must travel with us. At least that way, you won't keep wasting your time dodging behind trees, and I won't be wasting mine keeping track of you."

"Thank you, thank you!" Satoshi replied and gathered up his belongings. He joined the group in the late afternoon and they continued on to the next inn where they stayed the night. Satoshi chatted amiably after they ate, but steadfastly refused to give even the smallest hint about his message.

It took twenty-five days of travel for them to reach the boundaries of Lord Yuasa's province. At each province line they were required to show identification and explain the purpose of the trip. There had never been any delays until now. Cho explained to Satoshi that the officials here would want to send a runner to the castle to notify them that the funeral procession had arrived.

"You see, there are preparations to be made. We must burn incense at the family shrine for eighteen more days to complete Oigimi's forty days of passage into the spirit world."

"Lord Yuasa must hear my message immediately. It cannot wait even eighteen more days."

"We will see. Katsushiro and I will discuss it."

Nyosan's instinct were right. Mitsuo's unstable behavior was due to his unbalanced status: instructor on the one hand - servant on the other; dominant first, subservient second. She made a point of suggesting once or twice in conversation that all people living on the hill were servants of Lord Tansho. Everyone had two roles to play. The result was what she hoped for: Mitsuo was able to be a caring servant to Yoshiko and still maintain discipline among the samurai he was training.

Mitsuo never discussed the classes with Yoshiko, but Kiko brought bits of information along with her embroidery. "I have to say, I expected more resistance among the guards to Mitsuo's classes. The way they talked before hand, it sounded like they would not even attend."

"That would have been a mistake."

"I think you are right. One or two of the fellows talked really hateful about him and I was afraid they would start something and get in trouble, but he sparred with them himself. That seemed to be the end of it." Kiko put a new length of thread in her needle.

"That's all it took?"

"Well, one evening Donkai tried to attack the Sensei unawares, but he put out his hand and stopped him."

"He did not strike him?"

"They had a hard time explaining, but I think he could not breathe and passed out." Yoshiko touched her fingers to her own throat. "He was not hurt and he woke up in only a moment. I tried to ask Donkai, but he will not talk about it. He does not say the hateful things anymore, though."

When Yoshiko was "able", she did accompany Mitsuo to the classes again and observe. The rhythm of the exercises was pleasant and the repetition was calming. As time went on, she was able to identify the true Mitsuo beneath the warrior. She made a mental game of labeling the comments he made to students as being either the warrior or the man speaking. It occupied her time, if nothing else. The man seemed pleasant and encouraging; the warrior, strict and unrelenting.

The more she watched Mitsuo, the more her eyes tired. Whatever the cause, by the end of each class, she saw a fuzzy edge around him. She did not understand why it only showed around him and not his students, but she decided she ought to speak to Nyosan about it. Perhaps she had been drinking one too many herbal teas.

When class finished, she asked Mitsuo to walk her to the women's wing to see Nyosan. The ladies were just sitting down to breakfast, but Nyosan was nowhere to be seen.

Lady Kiyomizu explained, "We did not wake her in hopes that her recent irritability might be helped with some extra sleep."

Yoshiko went to Nyosan's room and let herself in. Shortly she came back out with a folded paper in her hand. Approaching Lady Kiyomizu, she knelt and said, "I bring bad news, My Lady. Honored Grandmother Nyosan is on her journey to the ancestors." She placed the paper in Lady Kiyomizu's hands, "I found this near her."

A hand sign from the Lady sent several waiting maids away from the breakfast table to fetch appropriate assistance. An unnatural silence crept across the communal room as the information about Nyosan was passed from maid to maid. Lady Kiyomizu noticed as the silence was overtaken by sighs and soft whimpering and quiet crying, but there was no time to attend to emotions now. Decisions had to be made. She looked at the note and asked Mitsuo to speak privately with her. Yoshiko lay on a cushion by Nyosan's door and sobbed into Miko's arms. Mitsuo followed lady Kiyomizu into a small room with storage cabinets on every wall.

"Listen to this:" she unfolded the note and read, *"Oh, Young Master, my husband, this servant in your father's house carried lies to you that kindled your anger towards me. I was innocent, but she was not and she has paid for it. One more who was involved in this unjust assault on my reputation will also pay. You, in your youth and innocence, were tricked by these manipulators, but when you return from China, the house will be purified and we will be happy again. Your devoted Wife."*

Mitsuo looked puzzled, "Who has done this?"

"Kenji's wife hired a ninja family to kill Yoshiko. That we knew. That is why you are here. But I had no expectation that anyone else was threatened."

"Nyosan suspected it herself. She mentioned it to me when I arrived, but I thought the young Lady Tansho was dead."

"She is. There was a monk in the house who did her bidding. The money was paid out for the killings before she became ill. The seal on this note is hers, there is no question. I suppose now we have to return Yoshiko to the country house for her protection."

"Wait, if you please, My Lady. I have carefully chosen the rooms

we occupy and can use some of the guards who have done well under my instruction. If you will let me use your carpenters, in a day or two, I can have a fortress within the fortress."

Lady Kiyomizu agreed and Mitsuo spent the evening drawing plans for several mechanisms he would need. He sent a maid to get them something to eat, as they had worked through dinner and into the night. When they had eaten, Yoshiko approached him and began to ask questions, but he would only say that if the carpenters were fast, in two days' time she would be completely safe.

Then it was his turn to ask a question, "Isn't Lady Kiyomizu a trained samurai?"

"Yes, she is."

Mitsuo quickly took out his writing materials and prepared a message. He summoned the maid to carry it to Lady Kiyomizu.

As he was rinsing his brush to put it away, Yoshiko rolled up the paper and placed it in his cupboard. "May I ask what your note is about?"

"It is merely a request."

"May I ask what for?"

"No."

It seemed judicious to leave him alone. She went to her room and began to remove the combs and ribbons she had used to tie up her hair. She was combing it out for the night when the maid returned with the response to Mitsuo's note. He was satisfied with the answer and once the maid was gone, he explained it to Yoshiko.

"Tomorrow you will spend the day with Lady Kiyomizu herself. She has consented to teach you how to use the naginata. We might not have a lot of time for such training, but whatever you can learn should help."

"I have no right to such training. There are no samurai in my family and my station in this household does not warrant it. Lady Kiyomizu could be putting more than her reputation in danger by breaking this law!"

"She and I are both aware of the potential problems. Your training will be kept as secret as possible with this many people around." He walked over and sat down on the floor next to her, "Don't worry, we're doing the right thing. Trust me." He looked deep into her eyes.

She wanted to avoid his gaze, but she felt drawn to him like iron to a lodestone. It took every ounce of her strength to take her leave of him

and go to bed. Even then, she stammered like a shy child.

The next two days, while the carpenters cut and pounded and generally raised a furious ruckus, Yoshiko was in the silent sanctuary of the private rooms of Lady Kiyomizu. Yoshiko was kept very busy herself. Lady Kiyomizu was an exacting instructor, but also a kind friend. They talked of many things after the lessons were practiced: poetry and dance, philosophy and politics. The last two topics were far from the genteel subjects women were supposed to know about, but Lady Kiyomizu had a very broad education and was willing to share it. These talks made the lessons much more palatable to Yoshiko, as her skill with the naginata was dismal.

One afternoon the topic turned to Mitsuo. "I find him confusing. I can't seem to bring myself to trust him, but I think he is the type of protection I need if the ninjas try to get to me again. Having him so close by makes me miss Kenji terribly."

"When Kenji comes back, you will be glad you had this bodyguard to protect you."

"On top of everything else, I think my eyes are going bad. That's what I wanted to talk to Nyosan about."

"What is it that's wrong?"

"I think maybe the tea Nyosan gave me did some damage. I see a fuzzy edge around things sometimes."

"I know about the tea you were given and it would not have done anything like that. When do you see this fuzzy edge?"

"Usually after watching the training class for the guards. I thought maybe it was from delaying breakfast, but now I see it at other times of the day."

"What things do you see it on?"

"Oh, well, only Mitsuo."

"When did it start?"

"Not right away, but after a few classes. It used to be just during class, but now it shows up beforehand, during meditation, and takes an hour or more to fade afterwards. Yesterday I even saw it in the evening while he meditated in his room before bedtime."

Lady Kiyomizu was silent for some time. Yoshiko waited patiently for her to speak. "There is a possibility that this Islander of yours has considerably more status than he is admitting. Have you heard the stories of gods and goddesses masquerading as humans?" Yoshiko nodded. "He

is not my idea of a god, but he might be a Bodhisattva. My instructor in religion once described how you might recognize one. In addition to a very pious life, some radiate energy from their bodies and some can levitate themselves, and some appear and disappear at will. Whether Mitsuo is one or not, I am sure Lord Tansho's karma and his are intertwined and we are as safe in his hands as we are on our own Lord's."

"Perhaps you are right, but remember yesterday when we were talking about how men of high station decide whom to befriend and how much to trust them? With both Lords Tansho gone, Shouldn't we be careful about trusting a stranger like Mitsuo? I am certain his life is not pious enough to be Bodhisattva."

"No, I am sure I am right, Yoshiko. Kenji chose this man and Lord Tansho has hired him. I am sure we are correct to trust him."

"As you say, My Lady." But Yoshiko was sorry now that she had told Lady Kiyomizu about what she saw. When she went back to her room in the evening, she decided to give herself a lecture like Nyosan would have.

"You are making all this up, you know. Good girls do not make up such stories. What would your family think? You must stop this immediately!"

She decided not to see the edge anymore; if she refused to see it, it would have to disappear. While Mitsuo meditated that evening, she glanced his way very seldom and when the image appeared anyway, she pressed on her eyelids. That helped a little, so by the time he was finished meditating, the fuzzy edge was gone. How pleased she was!

However . . . when she closed her eyes to sleep, she remembered for a moment how Mitsuo had sat in front of the picture of the Buddha. To her shock and aggravation, the "radiation" from him in her memory was so strong that it extended two feet instead of two inches. That was when the dam broke! Now every mental picture of him that she could recall included the light colored fog, at least to some extent.

She frustratedly rubbed at her eyes over and over, trying to dispel the image. When she opened them again to blow out her lamp, there sat Mitsuo on his heels not more than a foot from her side. She was startled and voiced a short scream.

"I'm so sorry," she apologized quickly, "I thought you were an enemy. I didn't hear you approach."

"What is it that is making you rub your eyes? I can get more tea like

Nyosan gave me for you."

"No, thank you. It isn't anything."

"Tell me," he insisted.

He had not raised his voice, but his demeanor was too serious and she did not want to risk his anger. She liked being able to breathe freely. And who could know? He might find it amusing.

"All right. I have been seeing a fuzzy edge around certain things and rubbing my eyes eased it for a few moments, but it doesn't seem to be working, now."

"Let me send for Lady Kiyomizu."

"No, please. I have already spoken with her about it."

"What did she say?"

"Only that saintly or holy things may have such a fuzzy edge around them; sort of like a personal fog."

"Do you see this often?"

"Just on one particular item."

"Then it must not be anything wrong with your eyes at all."

"I suppose you are right."

"What item is it?"

"That is unimportant."

"Tell me."

Again he did not raise his voice, but she felt a strong inclination to tell him. She wondered if he was imposing it on her. "I would rather not say."

Mitsuo sat down cross-legged, resting his elbows on his knees, and opened his hands pleadingly to Yoshiku, "When will you begin to trust me?" His face had gone sweetly gentle and his eyes were liquid and hypnotic. "I care about you. Nothing you could tell me would ever be used against you. Now answer my question, please."

He often wore only a short, unbelted kimono over his fundoshi at night. Sitting so close and in this position, the kimono fell widely open, exposing his chest and legs completely. Oh, how she wanted to touch him. She had to force her eyes away from him and look at the tatami, "You."

"Anyone else?"

"No."

He smiled and got that twinkle in his eye. Then he laughed a warm, friendly laugh. "The 'fog' as you refer to it, is merely my ki. My

instructor at home taught exercises to increase one's ki. When it is strengthened to a certain point, it can be visible to some people, but the important thing is, it adds energy to one's fighting ability. Don't let it worry you. I would be pleased if you would tell me if you ever start seeing it on anyone else, though."

"Certainly. Your explanation is a comfort to me. Thank you."

"Please don't discuss this with anyone, even Lady Kiyomizu."

"Oh, but I must! She believes you are a Bodhisattva. She can't go on believing that forever."

"She won't," he assured her, "but I forbid you to speak to anyone about what I just told you."

"All right."

"You'd better go to sleep now. Morning comes early and I want to show you how I've provided for your safety." He blew out her lamp for her and went to lie on his own quilts outside her door.

Before she fell asleep, Yoshiko whispered a short prayer to Benten. *"Please protect me from my own desire. When he is open and sincere I want to hold him close. Help me wait for Kenji to come home to me."*

Following breakfast, Mitsuo took Yoshiko out to the hallway to show her what the carpenters had created from his drawings and instructions.

"Listen carefully as you step down. Do you hear them?" Yoshiko stepped lightly and heard a scratchy tinkle. Mitsuo smiled.

"What is that?"

"The flooring boards have little bells hanging under them so that any weight more than a cat will warn of an intruder."

"Now here at the staircase you have to wait for me to go down first. I can lock the blades so they don't flash out. But if someone comes up the stairs in the night and steps on one particular stair, the blades will slice him in half - if he's tall. If he's short, it merely decapitates."

Yoshiko shuddered. *He's turning the castle into a slaughterhouse.*

"The hall that goes down to the audience chamber will have silk threads at night across the floor. If someone trips one, it will drop little eight-pointed spikes from the ceiling. Not much by themselves, but coated with poison, one scratch will be deadly. They won't be set up until tonight. Come along to the reception room."

Mitsuo walked on ahead, but Yoshiko walked warily after him. *How strange that the floor and ceiling will soon be dangerous.*

The chamber was large and empty and seemed harmless. The wood floor shone warm and clean. The dais at the far end of the room had surely seen many impressive Lords.

"You see the paper wall behind the dais? It hides a recess large enough for servants or soldiers to be at hand to the daimyo. I have devised a rack of bows which can be triggered by one man and shoot through the paper into anyone who is still standing when the signal to bow to the floor is given."

"Heaven help the servant who only bows at the waist," Yoshiko smiled.

"True, but those serving in this room will be warned to stay on their knees. There will be extra guards around this floor at night: two at each staircase and one at the corner of the hallway. I have carefully chosen these men and I am sure they can be trusted."

"Lady Kiyomizu said she would send a guard of her own."

"Yes. The sergeant of the guard is to be stationed outside my door. I tried to dissuade her, but she is adamant."

Yoshiko gazed at the scene of Fujiyama in all its glory painted on the paper wall behind the dais. "You have continued to let her believe you are a Bodhisattva, haven't you. It would be risking her soul to let a saint be harmed in her house. I have heard the servants refer to you as the hoshi. When did you study to be a monk?"

"Nevermind. I will explain when it is convenient to me."

"As you say. I do want you to know that I am overwhelmed by the work you have done to protect me. You are more skilled than anyone could imagine. I doubt even the Great Lord himself knows what a treasure he has taken into his service."

When they walked down to the main floor and were out of sight of everyone, Mitsuo got that twinkle in his eye. He knelt at her feet and bowed his head to the floor and spoke formally, as though she were the Empress herself.

"Honorable Lady, please accept these humble preparations from the lowest of your servants and know that I would do a thousand times this much for you, if you but asked." Then he turned his head and peeked up at her as a small child might.

Yoshiko panicked. What if someone saw this! She knelt and took his hands in hers to make him stand up, but he raised his head and his smile was so gentle, she felt her heart melt. She leaned in to whisper in

his ear as she did with Kenji and then realized what was happening. Immediately, she stood up, moved to one side of the hall and bowed. Mitsuo stood and walked past to go out the nearest door ahead of her into the morning sunlight.

The courtyard looked just as it always did and so did Mitsuo. Composed and stern as though nothing had happened, he walked along with Yoshiku walking dutifully behind.

She scolded Benten, "*Why did you not help me? How can I be expected to protect myself from all three of the Mitsuos living in that body? The man, I might be able to defend against. But the mischievous child already has its tiny arms around my heart, and the warrior, I think I will never trust. He is so frightening. Where are you, Benten?*"

Snares are Tripped

Today's naginata lessons were like her dance lessons had been when she was little. Her mind could not concentrate or remember, and all she could think of was Mitsuo.

Lady Kiyomizu gave her a serious look and a frown, "Where has your mind gone, Girl? Has the thought of those ninjas been terrorizing you? You've mentioned Mitsuo so often it's like his name is your mantra. You must not let the fear distract you so badly. It is not on your shoulders alone, you know. We are all doing our best to protect you."

"I'm so sorry, My Lady, but many things weigh on my mind. The loneliness I feel for Kenji is a great burden and saddens my spirit. Mitsuo seems like my only connection to Kenji and he makes me feel safe."

Lady Kiyomizu put her arm around Yoshiko's shoulders and took her naginata. "Be careful that he does not become a complete substitute for Kenji. An indiscretion with a man like Mitsuo could cost your life and his, too. There are only five weeks until the return of our Lords and you had better be untouched. Have I made myself understood?"

"Yes, My Lady." Yoshiko bowed and a household guard walked her the long way through the hallways from Lady Kiyomizu's rooms, through the women's wing, and past Lord Tansho's and Kenji's rooms to avoid her being outside in plain sight along the pathways and courtyards. From the end of the Lords' wing, there was a short walk across the front courtyard to the central building entrance. Once inside, she assumed he would leave her, but he was conscientious and took her all the way up

the staircase and into her own room.

Just now there was no one on their floor - the extra guards were for nighttime - and the men on the ground floor were busy doing what soldiers do when waiting to be summoned to their work. A small cluster were playing Go, while some were cleaning armor. One pair was playing Sho Gi, while another one or two looked on and advised. It was nearly an hour before lunch and Yoshiku didn't feel like lying down. She had done plenty of that before Nyosan died.

There were very few windows on this floor, but it was going to be a long wait and she wanted at least to be able to see outside even if she couldn't be outside. She thought wistfully of the days she and Miko would sit by the hour outdoors mending or doing embroidery. Once those ninjas were stopped, she would go wherever she pleased. Being a cricket in a cage was frustrating. The next floor up was not one where she was expected to go, but if she stayed out of the storerooms and only walked in the halls, there were many windows she could take advantage of. She dashed up the stairs, feeling very wicked!

To her right at the top of the stairs was a bank of windows that ran the length of the building. They looked out onto the dojo courtyard and part of the front courtyard. The samurai were doing a kata she had seen so often, she was sure she could do it herself.

But here I am stuck inside, wasting all that beautiful sunshine, while any lowly housemaid can wander wherever she wants. What sensible ninja would show himself in broad daylight, anyway? Nobody is shooting arrows at that girl below, there, carrying water to . . .

She hurried downstairs to the maid's room and took a plain workday kimono out of the cupboard and a fan to cover her face. The beautiful brocade ribbon in her hair had to go. She bound up her hair with a cloth as she saw the maids do when they cleaned. Once she had changed all her clothes, it began to feel like a child's game. There was a tense excitement as she thought about whether the guards would know who it was when she walked past.

She looked carefully around before she went down the stairs to the ground floor. Half a dozen guards had begun gambling and the pair playing Sho Gi were still concentrating on their strategy. Because the weather was warm, all four sides of the room were open, which left the armories and guards' sleeping rooms standing like pillars supporting the building. As she walked past the men, one made a lewd remark and she

was glad to have the fan to cover most of her face. The remarks would no doubt have multiplied had they seen her crimson blush.

Quickly she crossed the courtyard and walked beneath the torii to the dojo courtyard. No one said anything as she stood quietly on the path where she could watch Mitsuo teach. She was careful to keep the fan in front of her face, for many of these men would recognize her easily, and the masquerade was too fun to give up this soon.

Mitsuo had his back to her at first, so she felt free to observe him. He moved among the soldiers correcting positions and body angles, but speaking very little. The cloud of his ki was much expanded today. Some of it followed after him like a trail of smoke and even draped the feet of the students. Yoshiku watched until she began to tire. Mitsuo now stood sideways to her, only a couple of feet away, but he still had not recognized her. She decided to go into the Shinto garden behind her. She turned her foot to go and he spoke out, "Stay, please, Yoshiko."

How did he know what I intended to do? I haven't even moved and he hasn't glanced at me once. Well, the cage door has snapped shut, and I am a cricket dressed like a housemaid. Benten has abandoned me again.

He instructed the class to pair up and practice a kumite, then turned to her. She kept the fan high, but lowered her eyes in humiliation. He moved close enough to her so they would not be overheard.

"What are you doing here?" His voice was low, but angry.

She felt tears stinging her eyes at his displeasure, but she'd already planned what to say and it was too late to think of something else.

"The Lady of the Manor has come to supervise the lowliest of her servants," gracefully she brought attention to the kimono she wore, "incognito."

When she brought her eyes up to glance at his face, he wore no anger, but had the beginning of a smile and the twinkle in his eye.

"It was dangerous for you to go out unguarded."

"Can't you just wrap me in your misty cloak, oh Hoshi? I bet arrows bounce right off it."

"Don't speak of that! How did you sneak away from Lady Kiyomizu? Surely this outfit didn't fool her."

"No, she delivered me to my room earlier than usual and I began to feel trapped. I dressed in the maid's clothes to get out into the fresh air and sunshine."

"What about your guards?"

"Some were eating lunch. The men downstairs were gaming and saw me pass, but didn't recognize me. Even the men in the class here wouldn't have known it was me if you hadn't called me by name."

"That may be true, but just because your guards don't know you personally is no reason not to cooperate with them. You may not want to live, but our Lords Tansho are insisting on it."

Yoshiko folded her fan and gave up the attempt at hiding her face. "They are so far away and have been gone for so long, that it becomes hard to remember what they want . . . especially when what I want is here . . ." She distractedly reached out and brushed an invisible piece of lint from the breast of his shitagi.

The shock on his face told her she had gone too far. He looked as though he might explode.

"You are not taking your situation seriously. Death is not something to flirt with." A single syllable from his throat brought a student to his side in seconds. "Take this housemaid to the kitchen to eat with the cook and the kitchen boy. Don't let her out of your sight. Then take her to Yoshiko's rooms in the central building and stay with her there until I come to you myself."

"I warn you, she is a brazen little thing! You might find yourself fighting to protect your own virtue rather than hers." He laughed, but then his face went serious again. "Keep in mind that if she has done anything other than what I have told you, I will require your life."

"Hai." was all the student replied and took Yoshiko, blushing and humiliated, off to the kitchen. Mitsuo dismissed the class with a harsh lecture on the fact that guard duties inside the castle were just as strategic as battles outside it. Then he headed out to find the sergeant of the guard for a long talk.

When Yoshiko and the student finished eating in the kitchen, they went back to her floor of the central building.

"Here is the room." He directed her to the small maid's room.

"My room is at the other end of the hallway."

"You will wait here, nevertheless."

"I need to change into my clothes and they are in my own room."

"You, Miss, are a housemaid as long as Sensei says you are a housemaid. I have staked my life on that. If you want to argue the relative rank of a concubine to a housemaid, you may indulge yourself

and see how far you get once Sensei has come to get you. I, on the other hand, never intend to take up the subject with him if I can help it. And I certainly will not take it up with you."

Not only was that his last word on that subject, it was his last word for the day. The afternoon passed slowly. The actual housemaid came and brought her a change of clothes from her room, but they ate dinner with the guards on the ground floor and still Yoshiko was not allowed into her own room. When Mitsuo finally arrived, he commended the student and sent him on his way. He sat with Yoshiko in his room while he explained how he had passed the afternoon.

"I ate with the sergeant of the guard and he agreed to my suggestions. All the posts will be manned twenty-four hours a day and the ones on the gates and wall will be doubled. No one may come or go to the village without permission and no monks may come at all. He was insistent about that and I couldn't see any problems with it, do you?"

Yoshiko said nothing. She was angry with Mitsuo and angry with herself and especially angry with Benten.

"I can see you are still embarrassed. Go on into your room and I will send for Kiko. Perhaps she can console you."

Kiko came and brought a bundle of mending. They talked about how she was feeling and all the advice she was getting. "Everyone on earth has THE perfect way to breeze right through a pregnancy and the minute you get pregnant, you have to listen dutifully to each and every one!" she complained.

"All the attention must be nice, though."

"Well, yes. Two of the girls are making clothes already and Lady Kiyomizu is embroidering a blanket for it herself. I'm making little quilts. It'll be born in October, but winter won't be far off then.

"Oh, I know someone else who'll be pregnant soon if she doesn't get control of herself."

"Who?"

"That little maid who waits on you here."

Yoshiko's thread missed the eye of the needle - twice. "Whatever makes you say that? She isn't engaged or anything."

"She ought to be! Donkai said she came down to the training class and spoke to Mitsuo this morning. He wasn't close enough to hear what went on, but one of the men who was, said she gave him a very blunt invitation.

"You know, you'd think Mitsuo was a holy man or something. He called her a brazen tramp and had her hauled away by one of his best students!"

"How did Donkai know it was my maid?"

"Cook saw her carried into this building throwing a fit. You know, if she's going to be throwing herself at men like that, maybe you and Lady Kiyomizu had better get together and find her a husband - soon."

Kiko laughed.

Yoshiko only smiled politely - and pricked her thumb through her mending. *Kiko will believe anything and she's glad to tell the world about it. But as much of a gossip as Cook is, at least he was kind enough not to give away my disguise. Having got around to Kiko today, this little tale will surely be all over the castle by tomorrow and when it gets 'round to Mitsuo . . . that's not something I'm looking forward to.*

"Why so quiet tonight?"

"I miss Nyosan a great deal."

"Don't we all. I dread what will happen when Lord Tansho gets home and finds out she's gone, though. No one will want to be near him then. I hoped Lady Kiyomizu would send a messenger to tell him before he got here, but she says it's better for him and the China raid not to know any sooner than he has to."

"What is worrying her?"

"Nyosan is very dear to Lord Tansho."

"I know they used to be close, years ago when they were young."

"Heavens! Haven't you been paying attention to what goes on around you?"

"Well, I've had my own problems to attend to, " she sucked the tip of her thumb where it bled. "Please hand me that little lump of beeswax, I don't want to bleed on the mending."

"Yes, of course, sorry." Kiko tossed her the beeswax and continued her chatting as Yoshiko rubbed it into her thumb. "Let me tell you something that happened the week before Kenji made the tea ceremony for his wife. I was sent to carry a message to Lord Tansho. He was in his garden near the pond. I could see he had a girl with him, so I waited at some distance. He is often with one girl or another, so I knew it would not be a long wait. But this was different. There were no bad jokes or rough laughter. He was not pulling her clothing askew.

"I came closer, trying to see who the woman was, but she was in his

shadow. It was like she was delicate somehow. He held her gently and kissed her lightly. They sat next to the pond and fed the fishes. Then he put his mouth to the soft place on her neck and she lay so limp in his arms, I thought she had fainted.

"Finally, she made a soft moan in her throat and he stopped. They got up and started to walk toward his rooms, but then I stepped out and gave the message to Lord Tansho."

"So, who was the woman?"

"Nyosan."

"And this was just before the China raid?"

"Yes."

Yoshiko chuckled, "I think I'll take another trip to the country."

"Even that would not be far enough away."

"All right, Kiko, why not?"

"Because of the scandal between Nyosan and the second wife over Nyosan's child."

"You told me Nyosan was barren."

"That is the story we tell curious children. The Great Lord's second wife had born Seiji when Nyosan discovered she was pregnant. Lord Tansho was delighted, but she was sick and he brought a physician from Edo for her. When the child was born, it was a boy, but it was small. He seemed to be doing fairly well, but he was not robust. At that time the second Lady Tansho lived in a grand house on the far side of the village and the whole family lived there, too, servants and all."

"You mean she and Nyosan were in the same house?"

"Yes. And all the children. One day while Lord Tansho was overseeing the count of the taxes owed by each village, it happened. He was on the hill where we are now with his samurai and she was at the house with the children. She sent Nyosan into the village to shop and when Nyosan returned, the child was dead. The physician and the midwife and everyone we could find who might know, all said it happens once in a while. When a baby is small, sometimes their little spirit just slips away.

"But everyone knew Lady Tansho was so jealous, she was prepared to do anything to make sure her children were not superceded by Nyosan's son. There was no proof she did anything at all, but the Great Lord was crushed. He moved all the household to this hill where his samurai could watch over them and built these buildings and gardens. He

built the country house for his wife and put her there with her girls, and that's where she has stayed.”

“Why is there no grand house by the village?”

“He burned it to the ground. Every last stick. There is just no telling what he might do when he finds out Nyosan is gone.”

“That is awful. But that explains some of her instructions to me.”

Tears trickled down her cheeks. Kiko hugged her.

“Would you like me to make you some tea?”

“No, thank you. Could you just go for tonight?”

“Of course. Sleep should help.” Kiko gathered up the mending and wrapped it into a bundle cloth. She took a wide strip of cloth and used it to fasten the bundle at the back of her waist and tied the strip in the front.

“I hope so. This has been an exhausting day.”

Yoshiko was relieved to see her go. By the time she had laid out her quilts and pillow, she could hardly keep her eyes open. She decided to petition Kwannon. Benten was just no help, lately.

Oh, goddess of compassion, look at me in my misery. My life has been too full of extremes. Please, Kwannon, bring me balance, I beg you.

She felt peaceful at last and drifted off to sleep.

Late in the night, Mitsuo quietly woke her. There was the pale light of one tiny candle and the warmth of his body near hers beneath her quilts. She was only a little surprised. Mostly, she was still sleepy. He traced her eyes and ears and lips lightly with his finger. It only enhanced the sleepy feeling. By the time she consciously realized that he was progressing much farther with his tracings, it was long past the time to send him away. Whether her mind was awake or not, her body had yielded completely. They were both happily spent and sleeping soundly when a terrible clap of wood on wood resounded through the building!

Mitsuo was awake and armed in seconds! However, even as he stepped into the hall, he was no longer needed. The assassin was already dead. The flashing daggers at the head of the stairs had done their job.

The nearest guards began to remove the ninja's body from the blades. Two men pulled on the body while the sergeant pushed the row of spear points back into the recess at the top of the stairs. When they hauled the body away, Mitsuo took the sergeant aside.

“Check all the guard posts along the wall. I don't expect another attempt tonight, but we need to find out how this man got in.”

“Well, he had perfect timing; dark of the moon and an hour before

dawn - pitch black."

The sergeant took six men with lanterns and started his inspection with the front gate. Mitsuo went downstairs to talk with any men who had been on the main floor when the ninja got in. As he got to the bottom of the stairs, a young guard ran up to him in an excited state.

"Sensei, just at the back of the building, under the staircase. It's the door guard. He's dead."

The young man was visibly shaken. Mitsuo instructed an older guard to keep track of the fellow and help him settle down while he went to have a look at the dead guard. Apparently he had been killed at his post and then tucked in under the stairs, since they were close by.

Very professional job; nice and clean. Nobody seemed to hear anything - not unexpected. The next attempt will use more ninjas, which means Tansho will lose more guards. I wonder how many men he's willing to lose for a fisherman's daughter?

Just before sunrise, the sergeant reported back to Mitsuo.

"We found where the wall was breached. The two men at the nearest post were killed with throwing knives."

"Stay with Yoshiko, Sergeant. I'm going to the Shinto shrine."

He went to the garden and sat down to watch the sunrise. Here he could have time alone to plan. He said a prayer to Ameratsu, goddess of the sun, for strength to conquer the enemy, then began a meditation exercise.

This morning's incident had set his senses on their keenest edge; he became aware of someone approaching as soon as they walked under the torii. Their steps were unhurried and without hesitation, but without energy. It was obviously no enemy, but a petitioner of some kind.

Mitsuo turned sideways and saw Botan, the excitable young samurai who found the body under the stairs. He motioned to him to sit down beside him.

"Isn't the sunrise glorious?"

"Yes, Sensei, truly."

"What did you come to ask?"

"I came only to apologize for my behavior earlier. I fear I have not yet steeled myself against death."

"Death is not something to be walled out or steeled against. It is something to be accepted as one accepts sleep. It is natural to us and merely a ripple in the stream as it flows around a stone. I want you to fast

today. Go meditate at the spring in the woods by the teahouse and come to me at sunset."

"But, Sensei, I . . ."

Mitsuo stopped him with a small, graceful hand signal and calmly repeated himself,

"Come to me at sunset."

Botan bowed and left for the teahouse woods.

Mitsuo looked out across the dojo courtyard. Men were arriving in small groups for class. He got up and walked over to start them on their morning exercises. He discovered he was no longer attempting to teach just a household guard. The deaths of their friends had tempered their determination. Every eye was on his every move; they breathed when he breathed. The power in their moves was a steel blade in his hand. He found himself putting the fine edge on true samurai; heading a small, but dedicated army.

Flight of the Cherished Bird

To the South, Lord Yuasa was preparing for the return of the Tansho ships. He called his accountant, Roku, to him to discuss his anticipation.

"How long now till Lord Tansho returns. Roku?"

"Perhaps a week or so, My Lord."

"What do you suppose they've been able to buy?"

"No doubt all the things you had on your list, and no one can know what they might have been able to capture besides. If they ran onto a ship like the Kawabata merchant ship and captured it, there might be more gold pieces and chains for the temple, too."

"Well, I think the amount of gold leaf they will be able to make from what we gave them already ought to be enough to cover the Buddha twice over, don't you?"

"Perhaps, My Lord, perhaps."

"What did the repairs on the Kawabata ship come to, Roku?"

"Oh, a pittance, My Lord. There was plenty left over. And the gifts you gave your retainers . . ."

"Yes, that was a wonderful luxury. The looks on their faces at the presentations; there is nothing like it. And Lady Yuasa is still cooing over those jewelry boxes."

"Of course, there is still some work to be finished on the shrine for

Oigimi. That may take a while to complete. The workers are expert craftsmen and the results are excellent, but it is all time consuming.”

“How is Satoshi doing in his training?”

“I have not heard, My Lord. Shall I ask the Captain of the Guard?”

“Yes. Come back to me when you have his report.” The accountant bowed out.

Only two weeks ago Lord Yuasa had been happier than he had been in his whole life. The future looked so promising. Then the funeral procession arrived with Satoshi in tow. What a shock that was. He could recall it as though he had it memorized.

“Pardon, My Lord, there is a young boy to see you.”

“Who is he?”

“He says he bears a message he will repeat to you and the only name he gives is Satoshi.”

“All right, bring him in. Perhaps it will be something to cheer me.”

The guard bowed out and returned with a boy about twelve. Satoshi knelt and waited for Lord Yuasa to speak.

“Who are you, Boy?”

“I am Satoshi, oh Honorable Lord.”

“Where do you come from?”

“From the North. I followed your daughter's entourage from Lord Tansho's province.”

“Why would you come such a long way to see me? Didn't you realize that when they arrived, I would go into mourning and have no taste for entertaining visitors?”

“I am not here to be entertained. I am here on business.”

“Just what business might you have?”

“I want a place among your men who are training as samurai.”

“Have you begun training somewhere else?”

“No, Honorable Lord. ”

“Is your family samurai?”

“Yes, but they are dead and I have been working to support myself.”

“What work do you do?”

“I can do any task you set for me, but up until now I have been working in Lord Tansho's kitchen.”

“What kind of battles might I win if I used kitchen boys as my warriors?” Yuasa laughed.

“I have valuable information to trade for my place among your

men.”

“Perhaps you had better give me this information and let me decide how valuable it is before I lose my sense of humor.”

“I know how your daughter died.”

“Oh, do you?” The Lord left his dais and sat down facing the boy, only a short distance away. The ears of servants were always too near to suit him. “I have already heard one tale. Let's hear yours.”

“The Lady Oigimi had become an embarrassment to Lord Kenji, so he beat her. Everyone in the castle knew about that. While she was recuperating, he seemed to care so much about her, that all the castle was impressed with his devotion. After he made the tea ceremony for her, his efforts seemed redoubled.”

“He made the tea ceremony for her? I am pleased. But you say, ‘seemed to care’?”

“Mixed in with the medicine he gave her was some kind of poison.”

“How could you have discovered such a thing?”

“I caught a bird for a pet. Everyone was so impressed with Lord Kenji’s care and they said the tea he made must have some magical healing properties. I thought if it was so good, why not give some to my bird? Maybe it would grow beautiful feathers, or something. From only the few drops left in the bottom of her cup, it tottered over and fell dead!”

He sent the boy off with the servants to await his answer. Of course, the boy could have made up the story, but it had the ring of truth to it. He was not blind or deaf; he knew what his daughter was like. There were several times he could remember, right in this room, having nearly silenced her permanently himself. The reality of being married to her for the rest of one’s life would surely lead any sane man to consider killing her.

Now that the story was here, he would have to take some appropriate action or lose face. If he planned it carefully, there would be no need to lose the friendship of Lord Tansho before he collected the gifts he had been promised for the use of his province coastline and the procuring of the ships.

The reception he planned for Tansho and his men would have to be modified somewhat because of the mourning. What poor timing - Oigimi always was able to throw a pall over a party! He laughed on and off to himself over that joke until one of the servants began to look askance at him.

Akihiro stepped off the ship onto blessed solid ground. Katsushiro and Akira had come from Lord Yuasa's castle to meet the ships.

"We've been camped here three days. What slowed you up?" Akira ran up and threw his arms around Akihiro and clapped him on the back. Katsushiro approached and Akihiro bowed to the captain.

"Kenji is wounded and we did the best we could, but the little gales, one after the other, made finding our way back into this bay more treacherous than we expected."

Akira ran on to the ship to find Kenji and see for himself the severity of his wound.

Akihiro continued his report to Katsushiro.

"Kenji caught an arrow in the shoulder; not deep, but infected. It's a good thing Lord Yuasa has said we can stay with him to nurse our wounded. There are a number of others with small wounds. We only lost eight: two washed overboard and the rest with severe wounds. We took a prodigious galley on the way to China and had no casualties but Kenji's shoulder. Our foray onto the coast was well rewarded, but we were riding low in the water on the way back and looked too ripe a plum not to be picked. We fought two pirate ships on the way back and that is where our injuries happened. Then the seas beat us all till we threw up our rations. We probably saved a lot of food that way, since so few of us could eat on the way back."

"What of our Great Lord?"

"He has charmed the gods of the seas. He never took sick the whole time and his investments brought enormous return. One would think he had spent this entire trip in Nirvana seated at the feet of the Buddha."

"Where is his ship?"

"It will be here very soon. It was sailing alongside the second ship, rather than behind it. If the wind is kind, they can't be more than an hour behind us."

Four men carrying a litter disembarked with Akira at their side. They stopped next to Katsushiro and he dropped to his knees beside Kenji.

"Oh, My Lord, how are you feeling?"

"Feverish and dizzy, but otherwise glad to be back on dry ground."

"Lord Yuasa's physician will settle this out in no time, My Lord."

He stood and made a sign to the carriers, "Get moving and don't stop along the way for anything."

"We should have taken an herbalist with us, but Lord Tansho, thought the trip would be so short that would be unneeded. When he saw Kenji wounded, that was a different tune, but it was too late then."

Akihiro sat on the rocks and watched the men pour off the ship with packs and bundles. Several made their own short reports to Katsushiro as Akihiro had. All were glad to be back in one piece.

When all three ships had arrived and unloaded, they left a handful of men to watch the ships and traveled to the castle. Once Lord Tansho paid Lord Yuasa the agreed upon fees, he generously added the specialty items Yuasa had asked for - and refused any repayment for them.

"We are brothers. I am glad to bring gifts to my family."

Lord Yuasa stepped closer to Lord Tansho. He did not want to announce his next comment to the crowd of Tansho men filling his reception room. "I have received sad news from the North while you were gone. My daughter became ill and did not recover. Her ashes arrived only last week with an entourage from your house. I wished to speak with you first so that you could break the news to your son yourself."

"This is horrible! You must think we did not know how to care for her. Surely her maids told you how well she was cared for. We made her completely welcome. She was as comfortable with us as in her own home."

"No, no, I have been assured that she had the best of care from the most devoted servants. I am certain she was well cared for. But she was a delicate flower raised in the South. Some plants cannot survive transplanting. The travel and change were apparently too much for her."

"A delicate flower is exactly what she was; a wonderful girl. The perfect wife and daughter-in-law. She made herself completely at home with us and was a dear sister to my own daughters. Kenji will be crushed."

"Before we received the awful news, I had a huge banquet planned for you and your men's return celebration. I'm afraid it will have to be modified because the house is in mourning, but I want you to understand how glad I am for your safe return and I want all your men to come with you tomorrow night for a celebration dinner."

"I will be glad to be there. Now I must go to Kenji and see how he

fares. I noticed when I saw him this morning he looks much improved even in the short time your physician has been caring for him. I am very pleased."

Lord Tansho left the reception room and once the lesser gifts had been disbursed, his men followed. They were allotted rooms in the guest housing rather than the soldiers' quarters, so their rooms were luxurious. The food was quite good, too, which pleased Kenji especially. While his shoulder worsened, so had his appetite. Now that he had ingested healing tea and received treatment for his wound, his appetite was returning.

Kenji, Akihiro, and Akira were finishing their lunch when Lord Tansho came into the room. He greeted them formally and then dismissed Akihiro and Akira. Kenji was sorry he had eaten so well. His father's countenance was grim.

He sat down at the table next to his son, "I have heard sad news from home. Your wife is dead. What did you do to her?"

"Nothing, my Father."

"I told you to leave her alone. Do nothing. You have jeopardized the relationship I have with Lord Yuasa. What did you do to her?"

"I did nothing to her. I did exactly as you said; I gave her anything she wanted and left her alone."

Lord Tansho laid his hand on Kenji's neck and placed his thumb over his son's windpipe.

"You are lying to me. If news of her death had arrived one day earlier, Yuasa might have met us on the shore with archers and swordsmen," he pressed in slightly with his thumb, "so tell me what you did to her."

"Nothing, My Lord Father. I swear on our ancestors."

His father stood and began to pace. "Well, that little bit of 'nothing' you did to her, came dangerously close to ruining my plans. Don't ever cross my plans again. Heir or not, you won't live to do it a third time!"

Kenji left the table and lay down on a nest of quilts and pillows. He closed his eyes and said, "I assure you, Father, I did nothing at all. Oigimi was merely frail and did not quite recover from the discipline she brought on herself."

"I agree that was unavoidable, but I still have the niggling feeling that you intervened somehow beyond the caning. When I saw her, she was spouting her usual venom and recovering very well . . . Pay attention to what I've said, Kenji."

“Certainly, oh Lord, My Father.”

Lord Tansho left and Akihiro came back into the room to sit next to Kenji’s pile of quilts.

“What did your father have to say?”

“The same thing Akira told us: Oigimi died. He thinks I ‘intervened’ to make it happen.”

“But you did . . .”

“Akihiro! I did not.”

“Kenji, no one could imagine a woman would survive the beating you gave her. They are fragile things, Little Bear, you must treat them gently, particularly if you wish them to reproduce.”

“Well, I just want to go home to Yoshiko. Any children she might give me would be welcome. I could never imagine a sweet or manageable child coming from Oigimi, could you?”

“You do have a point there. Often the mother taints the children to an objectionable degree.” He drew a quilt across Kenji’s legs and feet. “You rest. All this talk of reproduction makes me think of that little pillow girl they sent to us last night, you know, the one with the sky-blue kimono and the yellow fan.”

“Go look for her. And if you find her, see if her friend with the tiny ears can come with her. She was very pleasant.”

“That won’t get you any rest.”

“I beg to disagree, my friend,” Kenji smiled and Akihiro left the room.

Nearly two weeks had passed since the return of the ships. Akihiro was walking through the grounds with his favorite pillow girl. The heat of the day was past and the sun hung orange and pink just above the horizon. The angle taken by the wispy strands of hair around her face escaping the combs and ribbons that held back the bulk of her hair, told Akihiro the direction the puffs of breeze took on their evening race inland. He was very glad to be on solid ground, but the trip on the ocean had left him more aware of wind and stars than he had ever imagined a person would need to be. It might be a pleasant occupation to direct men on land with the surety of a ship’s navigator.

The girl found a place under a shade tree with broad, shiny leaves and tugged at his sleeve till he sat next to her. “What are you thinking

about? You look like you are far away.”

“I was just thinking about navigating by the stars.”

“But, I am here to hold. You should be thinking about me.”

“Oh, I was, I was. I was thinking how to get those stars and hang them sparkling in your hair.”

The girl giggled and covered her mouth with her fingers. “Let’s go back to your room. Or I know a place lovers go along the river shore. Let me show you.”

“Wait until the first star comes out. I want to see if it is near the moon tonight.”

“Oh. You begin to tire of me. I was told it could happen. Too much love, too often . . . then weakness comes. Lack of interest. No more strength or endurance.” She made a comical sad face, “poor soldier, all used up.”

“I’ll show you strength and endurance . . .” He picked her up and carried her as he jogged toward the river.

Late that night when Akihiro returned to their room, he recounted the conversation to Kenji. “Do you worry about that? I mean using up all your essence and then dying?”

“Has Mihashi died?”

“No one has proof he actually sleeps with the girl they send him. Perhaps he teaches her meditation.”

Kenji laughed. “There are some Taoist arts he might be teaching her, but I doubt he lets her sit alone all night. What about my father? If you could come to the end of your essence by having too many women, how do you explain how Father is still alive?”

“That I cannot guess.”

“What I would rather know is why so many of the girls have all had the same idea today. I have heard it from several myself just in passing and a couple of fellows have told me just what you have. Perhaps we are being fattened for butcher, or weakened for it. What do you think?”

“I think we ought to ask Mihashi.”

When morning came, their breakfast trays were brought into their room by a kitchen girl accompanied by Satoshi. He asked to speak with Kenji outside.

There was a bench nearby where he waited. When Kenji finished eating, he walked along the lane of stepping stones to the viewpoint where Satoshi sat. He was gazing across the river valley toward the

mountains dressed in their blue-grey haze of morning mist.

Satoshi bowed at his approach, "Good morning, My Lord."

"Hello, Satoshi. What are you doing here?"

"I came with your wife's funeral cortege."

"Have you been well treated?"

"Oh, yes, My Lord. As a matter of fact, I have been offered a position here, which I have accepted. But I don't want to spoil your schedule with my idle chit-chat. I have an important question to ask."

"Do ask it, then."

"When you were attending so carefully to your wife while she was ill, all the household staff wondered what the herbs were that you used for her medicinal tea. I, too, would like to know the recipe. It might come in handy some day when I have a wife of my own."

Kenji was not sure how to answer. "I'm sure the herbalists here have their own mixtures. You will not need anything else."

"Please, My Lord. There must have been something special you did or perhaps there were special words to be said that I did not know. I gave a few drops to my little pet bird and it died."

"Oh, well, I was assured by our herbalist that it was an extremely strong mixture. For your little bird, you would surely have needed to water it down by as much as ten times the amount of tea. I don't know exactly what was in the mixture, though. Our herbalist is the only one who could tell you that. I'm sorry your pet died."

"Thank you, My Lord. I grieve with you, too, over the loss of your wife."

"Thank you, Satoshi, I hope life treats you well here." He returned to his room.

Akihiro was ready to leave, so they walked to the separate little guest house that had been assigned to the General. It had three steps up to its own little veranda, well protected from the rains by a heavy thatch roof. They tapped on the polished wooden door and announced themselves. A house girl slid open the door and directed them to a place to sit in the receiving room. She then went toward the back of the house to tell the General they had arrived. The room was well appointed. There was a low table of glossy maple and a niche holding a beautiful vase of golden chrysanthemums. There as a small stack of padded mats in one corner if guests cared to kneel in particular comfort. There were four windows, all open in hopes of catching a breeze, but it was cooler inside

by several degrees than it was outdoors because of the thick roof.

The General came in shortly. The house girl followed him in and he asked her to go out into the garden to wait. Mihashi and the young men exchanged bows and he opened the conversation.

“Do you have something to report?”

“Perhaps, but it may be more like something to ask,” Akihiro began, “We both were told something by the pillow girls yesterday and we wondered if it meant anything.”

“Yes,” Kenji continued, “They were saying that too much sexual indulgence can lead to the defeat of an armed force. Not that it isn't true, but it seems too coincidental that they were all saying it the same day.”

“Do you think we have worn out our welcome? Or is Lord Yuasa planning a move against us?” Mihashi smiled, “How is your shoulder feeling, Kenji?”

“Much improved. It only pulls a little when I extend my arm completely to the side while holding the sword. But there is something else, Sensei. Satoshi is here. He came to speak with me this morning about Oigimi. He has decided to stay on with Lord Yuasa.”

“Surely that can do no harm . . . can it?” He looked pointedly at Kenji, “Does he have information we would not want Lord Yuasa to have?”

“He was only the kitchen boy, but I liked him very much.”

Mihashi reached out to touch Kenji's shoulder, “What does he know about your wife that we would not want her father to know?”

“Nothing, Sensei, nothing.”

He cocked an eyebrow, but only said, “May it be as you say, Young Lord. It might be wise to suggest to the men that they begin preparations to travel North in a few days, anyway. I will go speak with your father.”

Kenji and Akihiro left. As Mihashi went to tell the house girl she could come back inside, he clearly caught a glimpse of Satoshi following the young lieutenants at a distance as they crossed the compound. Was it a coincidence, or was the child spying on them? Mihashi didn't believe in coincidence.

The General went directly to Lord Tansho's quarters and was let in by the house girl. He strode to the back where the sleeping room was. In his haste, he announced himself and slid open the shoji in nearly the same moment.

A pillow came flying past his head. "I'm busy!"

He stepped outside and closed the door. In a few moments, when he heard the familiar sounds of conclusion, he let himself back into the room.

A luxurious cascade of tangled, black hair and a yellow, silk kimono lay languorously across Tansho's body. "What could possibly be so urgent?" he growled.

"A spy is in our midst."

Tansho carefully rolled the girl off him onto the quilts, stood up, and tied on his fundoshi. He pulled on a kimono and sent the house girl to bring some beer. Then he and his general went into the next room and began to discuss Satoshi.

Late in the afternoon, while Kenji watched Akihiro and Akira practicing with their swords, a housemaid brought a message to Kenji.

"Your father wishes you to come to him at the ford of the river. I can take you there if you don't know the way."

"I know the way, thank you."

Akira stopped his exercise. "What do you suppose he wants?"

"Nothing. Just to discuss organizing the men for the move, I'd guess. Don't look so fretful."

"But he almost never wants to talk to you without someone else there. And he didn't ask for Akihiro or Mihashi or even Katsushiro."

"Akihiro, calm this fellow, he's a quivering dog." Kenji smiled and walked off toward the river.

Akihiro put his arm around Akira's shoulders. "Have I got a girl for you . . ."

At the ford, the river looked more like an expansive, muddy plain after a heavy rain than a river. The trees that lined the banks were tall and spindly, but bushy at their tops, so it was cool and shady. As he walked through the waist-high grass, clouds of insects flew up around him.

He walked down to meet his father who was seated on the one large, dry stone available. Since there was no other place to sit, Kenji squatted with his back against a tree trunk that was arm's length from his father.

The Lord set his eyes on his son. "Mihashi tells me that Satoshi is here and plans to stay."

"Yes, Father."

"Satoshi spoke to you of Oigimi?"

“Yes, Father.” *By all the gods! Is that woman's ghost going to plague me forever?*

“What does he know that you have not told me?”

“Nothing, Father.” *I am certain Satoshi had no idea Nyosan was helping me.*

“He has been seen in the training class for Yuasa’s young samurai. I will not ask you again. What could he have traded for such a position?”

“Nothing that I am aware of, Father.”

Lord Tansho reached down and caught a cricket. He crushed one of its legs and then tossed it into the shallow river water. A turtle raised its head and snapped up the bait. “A man with a liability is easy prey, Kenji.”

“Yes, Father, that is true.”

“I will never be that man. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father, that is as it always has been.”

“Come to my room to eat dinner with me tonight.” Tansho stood.

“As you say, Father.” Kenji got up and walked back toward the guest compound.

The Lord picked up a few pebbles and began to toss them one by one into the water. *Why does the boy continue to lie to me? Haven't I been good to him? No father has ever been more generous to his son. I don't understand it.*

When Kenji entered his room, Akihiro was there, but Akira was gone.

“What did your father want?”

“He asked me to come eat dinner with him tonight.”

“Did he say anything about heading home?”

“No.”

“Something odd is going on and I want to leave tonight.”

“Shall I ask Father for you?”

“By all the gods, no! I was just saying how I feel. Let's not bring your father into this.”

Kenji laughed and gave Akihiro a hug. “Everything will be fine in the morning. You’ll see.” He changed out of his practice clothes into his formal clothes, dinnertime was not far away.

His father's guest house looked similar to Kenji's, hut he did not have to share it with anyone. The flower arrangements were more elaborate, though. His house girl must be more experienced. There was a

screen at one end of the common room that he really admired. It showed a deer in the woods. The design was laid on in gold leaf. A room or two away, someone was playing the samisen. Altogether, it made a very nice atmosphere.

The meal went well. It was delicious. Afterward Lord Tansho laid out his plans for their travel northward. He expected to leave in two days. Just as Kenji was preparing to take his leave, there was a knock at the door and there stood Satoshi with a housemaid at his side. She carried a tray with a teapot and two cups. Satoshi carried a note. The maid put the tray on the table and Kenji took the note from Satoshi.

When they had gone, Kenji read the note. Lord Tansho poured the tea into the cups. Kenji grabbed the tray from in front of his father, went to an open window, and flung the tray out, teapot, cups, and all.

Lord Tansho retrieved the note:

Dear Friends,

I have been given to understand that you have extensive knowledge of special tea blends. I have chosen this blend especially for you two. Please enjoy it with my blessing.

Lord Yuasa

Lord Tansho's face went crimson. When Kenji turned back from the window, he saw that he had no father. It was his master before him, and he was the retainer with the liability. He realized that though he had taken off his swords as one did for dinner, his father had not. And that brought to mind that the white kimono worn beneath his formal clothing was the symbol of a samurai's willingness to die any time at the command of his master.

"Kneel."

Kenji went carefully down to his knees.

"You have lied to me."

"Yes, My Lord."

"Will you tell me now what you would not tell me at the riverside?"

"No, My Lord."

Both Lord Tansho's hands went to his long sword. "You have made a grave mistake. By morning it will be corrected. Is that clear?"

"Yes, My Lord."

Lord Tansho turned his back on his son.

That was blatant dismissal. Kenji stumbled as he rose. His legs had gone to water. He went out on the veranda, put on his sandals, and gathered up his swords.

At four in the morning, General Mihashi waked all his lieutenants and gave them orders to have the men pack. They were leaving at dawn. Lord Tansho spent one final few minutes with his 'yellow silk' girl, then left to select a nice variety of gifts from the booty they had captured from the ship they had pirated. He intended that Lord Yuasa's favor be well paid for. It was much more than he intended to offer in the beginning, but there was the matter of the incipient scandal to quash. By no means did he intend to leave an enemy of this magnitude unassuaged at his back.

Kenji, Akihiro, and Akira rode side by side at a comfortable pace. There had been only a thin line of pale sky along the hills ahead when they started out, but now, the sky was an early morning white against the black and grey of the rest of their surroundings. They had no need of cloaks. The air was perfectly comfortable. In the afternoon, they would face the heat of the sun and the horses, but Kenji was trying very hard to stay 'in the moment' and enjoy the ride while he could.

Akira spoke up, "Kenji, my pillow girl told me Satoshi went missing last night. Do you know where he is? Did he decide to come back home with us?"

"He might have, I suppose. But there are a lot of men with us. I'm not interested in looking for him."

Akihiro brought his horse closer to Kenji's, "You didn't do anything with him, did you?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"I saw him go to your father's guest house while you were there."

"He was carrying a message, that's all."

"Good."

They rode all day, stopping only long enough to rest and water the horses. When they finally made evening camp, everyone was hot, tired, and dusty. General Mihashi approached Kenji as he groomed his horse.

"How are you feeling?"

"A little out of shape. I don't think we traveled as far today as we might have. The time at Lord Yuasa's estate was good for my shoulder, but maybe not so good for other muscles. I will be glad for sleep

tonight.”

Mihashi called a servant to him. “Finish grooming the lieutenant's horse. Kenji come with me, please, I have something to give you.” They walked quite a distance from the camp before the general stopped and leaned against a tree. “The Great Lord tells me he sent you out last night to solve a problem. Tell me how that went.”

“It went well. I paid a lot of money to guarantee Satoshi’s silence.”

“Silence about what?”

“I will not say.”

“Why not? We have shared secrets before.”

“There is someone I must protect and I am no longer a child.”

“Is it another servant like Satoshi?”

“No.”

“Family?”

“I will not discuss it. Father is merciless.”

The general handed Kenji a cloth tied into a bundle. “Sometimes you have to be.”

Mihashi walked away and left Kenji opening the bundle. In it were the two long chains of pure gold links he had given Satoshi the night before in exchange for his oath that he would make no more trouble.

Stroke of Revenge

Lady Kiyomizu could not miss the signs of a new attraction in Yoshiko. There was a new lilt in her voice and her eyes lit up whenever the conversation turned to talk of Mitsuo. She remembered feeling that way herself now and again; heart palpitating at just the thought of the lover; feeling faint at the actual sight of him. She supposed she was a little jealous. Thinking about the evil delights of a forbidden bed sent chills up her spine even now. But if this pairing were more than Yoshiko's imagining - if it were reciprocated - they were both tiptoeing along the sharp edge of Kenji's sword. There were a hundred fishermen's daughters where that one came from, but a fighter and a holy man like Mitsuo was irreplaceable.

There were just too many things going on at once. Kiko and the maids were talking about organizing an engagement for one of the girls. As if that was all there was to do! She yearned for the day when once again that was all she would need to bother herself with, but with the

Great Lord gone, that day was far away.

Shoda requested entrance. Even though, as a women's wing guard, he could have come directly into the room to ask to speak with her, he was always extremely polite. Lady Kiyomizu opened the doorway to her garden just enough so that there was a view of the Wisteria trellis that was in bloom.

"Come sit with me and enjoy the picture of the summer garden."

"Thank you, My Lady." He knelt a little to one side of her and waited for her to invite him to speak.

"What is it you wanted to talk with me about?"

"Your garden is very beautiful. It offers a fresh perspective on the world when everyday situations begin to tarnish and wear thin."

"The allotment of clothing for winter will not be given out until after the harvest in several months. Is the house girl not tending to your clothes? Do your tabi need mending?"

"No, My Lady. It is not a personal need I am reporting. If the Master were here, he would surely see what is happening, but you do not go down to the barracks and you do not see it."

"That is why it is important that my faithful, personal guards report irregularities to me. Isn't that right, Shoda?"

"Yes, My Lady. Now I told myself that everyone is tense because of the ninjas who have broken into the grounds, but the sergeant has been worse than tense. It seems he is very unhappy with the orders that Mitsuo has given and is downright surly."

"Does he understand that I gave Mitsuo charge over security?"

"Yes, but he is offended. Mitsuo is a foreigner."

Lady Kiyomizu was torn. The sergeant had been with the Tansho household long before she had been brought in and had worked diligently to earn his place leading the Guards. She carefully weighed each word, "The Sergeant is indispensable to the Tansho household. It would have been ground out of existence without his guidance for our Guards. But this is an emergency situation and Mitsuo is a specially skilled worker that our master has sent to help us. We must use all the skills he has. The Great Lord has ordered it."

Shoda bowed his agreement. "As you say, My Lady."

"Go, now, and tell the Sergeant what I have said. If he does not understand, he can come to me himself, but I will not remove Mitsuo or restrain him in any way. Make that clear."

“Yes, My Lady.” Shoda bowed again and let himself out.

Carefully, she slid the shoji closed and went to her desk. She unrolled the message that was brought in yesterday from the Western border of the province and read it again. Not only were Hirayama troops holding several small border villages that stood in historically disputed territory, but they had sent their constables to collect from nearby farms which had never been in disputed territory.

I will not have my Lord come home to a province with bits missing. If nothing else gets done, I will clear Hirayama off Tansho land before my Lord returns.

The first thing to do is send an envoy. Not a soldier; I do not want it to look aggressive. Not a personal meeting; that would make us too vulnerable. Not just an empty-headed messenger; it should be someone used to thinking about political tactics. Samurai would be best. That means Etsu. She is an intelligent woman that I've always been able to trust.

She found a maid in the hallway and sent her to fetch Etsu. She arrived carrying a retainer's fussy baby.

“Whose child is this?”

“Just one of the guards. His mother came here to consult with the herbalist and he is teething, poor thing. So Kiko brought him to us and we were all taking turns trying to soothe him. When he took a liking to me, I was afraid to put him down for fear he would start to howl again.”

“May I?” Lady Kiyomizu scooped him into her arms and began to sway and hum a tune.

“Just look at his eyes. If he wasn't so miserable, the poor little fellow would surely drop right to sleep.” She walked across the room to a red lacquer cabinet a head taller than she was. The door was inlaid with mother of pearl to show plum branches covered in blossoms. When she opened it, the middle shelf held a variety of bottles and a selection of cups. “Etsu, are you familiar with the tension between us and Hirayama recently?” She set out a saucer-shaped cup and removed the stopper from a slender, white bottle.

“I've heard one thing and another. Nothing to go to war over. ”

“Exactly. I want you to take a message to him for me. We need to cut back this sapling before it grows badly.” She poured a little sake into the cup and dabbled her finger in it, then slipped it into the baby's mouth. He fussed, but alternately suckled and gummed her fingertip. She

repeated the treatment twice more. She drank the few drops left in the cup before closing the cabinet and returning to her swaying and humming.

Etsu went to another cupboard and removed a quilt that she laid on the tatami. "What exactly do you intend to ask of him?"

"I think I might prefer to engage him in conversation over several visits. The first message will be as agreeable as I can manage. Then we'll see how he responds. If he seems demanding, we'll send soldiers next, but if he is cooperative, you may be the only envoy we'll need. He might just be testing to see if we'll respond at all. I have no intention of curling up in a corner to wait for my Lord to return."

"No, certainly not. I agree completely." She looked at the face of the little fighter on Lady Kiyomizu's shoulder. "I think he's finally asleep, My Lady."

Lady Kiyomizu laid the baby on the quilt and went to sit at her desk. Etsu sat down to one side and took up an ink stick and a stone to grind ink.

"You don't need to do that."

"Oh, I enjoy it. Please, let me help you."

"You are a delightful friend, Etsu. Thank you."

"How did all this get started, My Lady? I thought Lord Hirayama was a tolerably good neighbor."

"Oh, he is - when our Lord is here. I'm not sure why he has bothered himself to be irritable this year. Perhaps he wanted to be involved in the China raid proceeds, but I know he was asked and declined. I sent a constable out three weeks ago to look into the border problem as soon as it came up, but his report shows things have become worse. He was wounded in a confrontation. I had hoped he would recover and be here to report in person by now, so we would have the specifics."

Etsu put a little water on the stone and began to grind the ink stick. "Can this be delayed for a while?"

"I have delayed as long as I feel I can. Right now, all we are discussing is a property line, but in five weeks, with the end of August, harvest will begin. Then we will be fighting over possession of the harvest itself and that will mean bloodshed for sure. With our constables and his both trying to collect taxes from the same villagers, no words will be enough to calm things down. That will bring the Shogun down on us both. Kwannon be merciful! I have no desire to enter my next life so

soon.”

“Nor do I. I will do my best to soothe Lord Hirayama and calm the situation. We can always hope he has a small problem that can quickly be settled.”

Lord Hirayama was in the shade of a maple tree enjoying the breeze. He was seated near the fence that closed off his garden from the steep slope at the back of his manor house hill. He loved the view of the rolling hills. Green and voluptuous, they belonged to him, from his house to the sea.

The front of the manor house faced a barrier, however. There was a line of little villages that marked the end of his province and beginning of the Tansho property. The distance from his home made no difference. He had always felt his province should go as far in that direction as it did in the other. It was a quiet concept that nagged at the edge of his mind constantly.

He sent for General Sani-iro, his right hand man.

“Tell me, General, has there been a response from Tansho, yet?”

“No, my Lord. There has not been enough time.”

“I wonder if I will need to have our constables rouse the villages again? I thought surely Lady Kiyomizu would have sent a letter by now.”

“Perhaps she is preparing soldiers, instead.”

“There is no doubt she has the fire to make war, if it suits her, but she likes to talk too much. She will send a letter first. Besides, where would she get the men? Tansho has taken all his best with him South on his merchant's endeavor. What a childish game he plays – gathering trinkets while his real wealth lies here unprotected.

“I will be glad, you know, Sani-iro, to capture his province, but I will be very sorry to put Lady Kiyomizu to the sword. You have met her - all woman.”

“A classic beauty.” The general plucked a leaf from the maple and studied it. “How Tansho can keep her, I don't know.”

“She has strength of spirit. Her loyalty to Tansho could match any man he has. Even if I captured her, she would never join us willingly. Tansho doesn't deserve such a woman.”

“Have you not thought to leave him alone for her sake?”

“This trip South is the first weakening there has ever been in his defenses and, by the gods, I'll not pass it over. He plays out his sly

schemes year after year, using me to influence others to support him. I never come out ahead, but just barely behind him. Never enough to be embarrassed, but always a little bit of a joke. I have had enough.”

Hirayama stood and walked energetically out into the sunlight and back into the shade. “Remember the Cherry Blossom Festival celebration he had five years ago? The one where he started that rumor about me being a drunk? That's where the patient bag strings broke!”

“And I still hear comments about it once in a while when we go to Edo.”

“What did it take - two years to get the whole story out of them?”

The general dropped the leaf and watched it drift to the ground.

“Yes. About two and a half. When we were invited for the winter Snow Viewing and I got Koi to talk. He was getting tired of being badgered and bruised and was glad for a sympathetic ear.”

“Hm. Amazing he's still alive. Tansho must never have found out he told. But imagine . . . a man of that rank lowering himself to slip me a sleeping potion and then let the household say I was passed out drunk. And what did he get? A girl for his bed. With a woman like Kiyomizu in his house and he goes chasing little girls. What an idiot.”

Sani-iro chuckled. “I heard later that he never even got her. After all that plotting, his son snatched the girl out from under his nose and never gave her back.”

“Serves him right, the bastard.”

A servant approached and asked to speak.

“Yes, what is it?”

“An envoy has arrived from Lady Kiyomizu-Tansho.”

“How many soldiers?”

“Only four . . . and a beautiful Lady.”

Lady Kiyomizu laid aside her brushes. The deliberate ordinariness of writing poetry was settling. She found herself consciously grasping at such quiet moments in near desperation. These last weeks had been a terrific strain.

Shoda requested entrance and told her of the arrival of the constable she had been waiting for. “He is waiting at the large reception room.”

“I will see him directly. Go tell Yoshiko not to come here for her class this morning. I expect to be occupied a considerable time with this

report. Make sure the Sergeant and Mitsuo are told."

"Yes, My Lady. They have already been summoned. I will go to Yoshiku immediately."

"How do I look, Miko?"

"You look wonderful, My Lady."

She didn't feel wonderful, but her samurai training always stood her in good stead. Miko handed her a mirror. She felt like a fish being sucked into a whirlpool, but her reflection showed no flaws.

"This is when I miss my Lord the most. He always asks questions that cut right to the core of a situation. I fear I will be at a disadvantage."

"Oh, My Lady, do not fret. Once you have the whole story, you always make the most sensible solution. We all trust your judgment."

"Thank you, Miko. What a wonderful help you are."

She arrived at the central building, climbed the stairs to the first floor, and made her way to the reception hall. Most of the household guard who were not on duty, were already seated in rows along either side of the room. The Sergeant and Mitsuo sat at the front. Lady Kiyomizu seated herself on the dais and Shoda sat on her left.

She gave the command and the constable was brought in. He looked haggard. One foot was still bandaged and he could not kneel correctly.

"I see it is your injuries that have kept you from coming to me more quickly. Please tell me how you came to be injured. I was under the impression that the conflict was a small one."

"It happened in a small place and the number of men was small, but there was no interest in negotiation. They intended to see me and my men all dead. Without the help of our loyal villagers, I would not have lived to bring you any information."

"Please, then, tell me all the details you can."

"As you say, My Lady. . ."

There came the sound of an explosion. It seemed to come from outside, toward the back of the estate. Mitsuo and the Sergeant rose immediately and Lady Kiyomizu signaled to them to go see what had happened. She nodded to the constable to continue.

"We traveled to the villages and found them patrolled by Hirayama constables . . ."

The doors to the room opened and two men entered with swords drawn. They were not her own men, however, so Lady Kiyomizu quickly bowed at to the floor. Everyone else had to bow, since she had, and the

man secreted in the wall behind the dais took his cue. A flight of arrows shot out from behind the painted paper at the back of the dais.

Lady Kiyomizu raised her head. The two intruders lay dead. A line of arrows stuck out from the wall on either side of the doorway at chest height. The bells in the hallway outside Yoshiko's room chimed frantically and the Lady dispatched five guards directly.

Yoshiko, also warned by the bells in the hall, dropped her sewing and went to her naginata near the wall. At first, she took it up almost helplessly, as one might stand behind a broom. But then she heard someone actually in Mitsuo's room, outside her door. She adopted the proper fighting stance. If this was a test, she did not want to be caught in poor form.

This was no test. The samurai who entered her room with drawn sword was wearing a Tansho crest, but there were dark marks covering his forearms.

“You do not belong to our house. Who are you?”

Rather than respond, the man advanced toward her and raised his sword to cleave the shaft of her spear. She stepped back and to one side as she had been taught. Then made a stroke with her naginata to deflect his sword. He advanced again to strike at the spear shaft, but she withdrew and he missed again. Her follow-up stroke grazed his right hand and he dropped the sword. When he reached for it with his left hand, she made a circular motion with her blade near his face. He drew his head back and she swept her blade across the floor to send his sword sliding far out of his reach.

Now more wary, he seemed undaunted by being unarmed. She lunged forward to skewer him, but he dove beneath the spear and stood up behind her. She tried to turn and swing the spear around, but he grabbed the shaft below the blade and at her elbow. This pinned her between him and the spear. The shaft snapped and left him with a shorter, more convenient bar which he slid up to her throat.

It was this choke-hold he had her in when Lady Kiyomizu's guards arrived. He threw her body at the group of guards and retrieved his sword. It was no contest. Before he could even stand up, a spear had pierced his rib cage. This was followed by two sword strikes and another spear.

The guards reported back to Lady Kiyomizu. But before she could ask for details, her maids came running in to her in tears, their clothes

soiled and tattered.

“An explosion, My Lady! There is fire in your rooms and the women’s wing will surely burn! ” ,

“Is anyone hurt?”

“We don’t know. We tried to put out the fire at first, but when Mitsuo and the Sergeant arrived, they sent us here to you.”

Lady Kiyomizu immediately sent all the guards in the room to fight the fire, except for Shoda and the constable who armed themselves and guarded the doors. The maids set about cleaning themselves up and calming down. Lady Kiyomizu went to look at the men shot by the arrow-ambush. They wore her household guards’ clothing, but she did not know them. She opened their clothing at the chest and found the markings she suspected she would find. They belonged to the same ninja family as the previous intruder.

“Well, Shoda, the new restrictions on who comes onto our grounds were too late. Either that, or someone in the household has been cooperating all along by telling them where Yoshiko is and what her schedule is through the day. She was supposed to be with me in my rooms at this hour of the day. They must only have decided to check this building because we were all here.”

“Or just to be thorough, My Lady.”

“Yes. That they missed her more than once must surely be an embarrassment. ”

Yoshiko woke a little. Her mouth was dry, but she was too exhausted to do anything about it. She drifted back to sleep.

She woke later just long enough to open her eyes. Kiko and the other women were there. Her mouth moved to say something, but no sound came out. It felt like there was something important to say, but her mouth was still too, too dry. She heard a voice give an order to wake Mitsuo. Her head hurt - oops, she moved it - that hurt lots more. Very still was evidently the best thing to be.

Kiko brought her something to drink. *Wonderful!* Kiko tipped it up to her lips. *NOT wonderful - bitter medicinal tea!*

She could hardly swallow. A cough ripped through her throat and her body shook a little. *I must be bruised all over! But my throat - she touched her neck. The fingers and arm moved at her command - it feels*

bruised, but all in one piece.

Mitsuo knelt at her side and put his hand over hers at her throat.

“Hurt much?”

“Thirsty,” she whispered.

He poured water into a little travel teapot. Gently, he slid his hand under her head to turn it toward him. Then he put the spout of the pot to her lips and slowly tipped water into her mouth. “We wondered when you'd get around to waking up from your nap,” he smiled, but still looked worried. “Of course, two days is a little longer than the average nap. How does your throat feel?”

“Swollen.”

“No doubt. The guards came in and caught that ninja choking you with your own spear handle.”

A tear came to her eye. *What a waste of lessons. Just handed my spear to the nearest attacker and let him kill me - almost. Useless girl.*

Lady Kiyomizu dried the tear. “Kiko, bring the little blue bottle. She's in pain.”

The pain medicine tasted bitter, too, but once it went to work, she didn't feel so useless anymore. Her memory of the attack came back with a dream-like quality, and she remembered she had disarmed the man. That was not so bad for a beginner.

Over the course of the next two days, she woke often and Mitsuo finally had everyone leave them alone so he could explain what all had happened.

“What have the ladies told you about the attack?”

“Not much. I didn't want to ask. I understand there was a fire in the women's wing. Lady Kiyomizu and her maids have been sleeping down the hall in the reception room until their rooms are repaired. No one leaves this floor. The household guards even get us water and food because they don't want us outside at all.”

“Yes, all that is true. What started it all was a bomb thrown into Lady Kiyomizu's rooms. The Ninjas thought you would be there with her.”

“How would they know where I might be?”

“That is the problem. Information must be going to the ninjas from someone in the household.”

“Who would do such a thing?”

“We don't know, but if you died, they would pass on that

information and the attacks would stop.”

“Must I be killed? I don't think I could kill myself.”

“You must stay hidden. The household is all in mourning.”

“I noticed that. Is Etsu dead? I have not seen her among the ladies.”

“No, you are. Etsu is carrying a message to Lord Hirayama. The household is mourning you. So, you will stay hidden until you are well enough to travel to Edo. The funeral should convince the ninjas that you are dead and the attacks should stop. You will be safe in Edo with Lady Kiyomizu's cousin.”

“The idea makes me feel sick.”

“You do not want to protect the rest of the household?”

“I mean sick at what bad luck it is to see your own funeral. I feel like a whirlpool is sucking me down to drown me. I don't have a life with karma, it's more like a tsunami with undertow.”

Lady Kiyomizu let herself into the room and sat nearby. “Pardon the interruption, Mitsuo, but I've had a more complete report from the constable. I want Yoshiko to know what is going on so she can see that all this chaos is not just over her. She is being used as a cover for a much older conflict.

“There is another branch of the ninja family Oigimi hired that lives on Hirayama land just at our borders. Evidently they want to have a village of their own to provide them extra income. One of our villages is so close by; they dressed as Hirayama constables and entered the village demanding money and goods. They are still holding the village.

“Mitsuo will lead our guards to take the village back, but he can only do that if you are safely in Edo.”

“Yes, My Lady, Mitsuo was just telling me about your cousin in Edo.”

Mitsuo stood to leave. “I do not think Hirayama is as innocent as this report makes him sound. Now that you have come, I will go make arrangements for Yoshiko to leave.”

But before he could cross the room, a servant came to the door with a pair of guards. “A package has arrived for you from Lord Hirayama, My Lady.”

She took the package and opened it. It was a box that contained a coil of sleek, black hair. The beautiful ribbons that tied it belonged to Etsu. Lady Kiyomizu closed the box and pushed it away from her. She covered her face with her sleeves.

Mitsuo opened it and lifted the shining memorial from the box. "Evidently even a beautiful; samurai emissary is not enough to calm the turbulent waters between Tansho and Hirayama."

Yoshiko vomited and the servant hurried to care for her.

Mitsuo addressed the servant, "Who brought this?"

"He has left already."

"Was it a servant or a soldier?"

"A samurai, Hoshi."

Mitsuo led Lady Kiyomizu off into the reception room to carry the information to the rest of the household.

Two more days passed. Yoshiko asked Kiko to help her pack so she could leave in the morning. Kiko was helping bundle clothes and belongings. Dinner had been a hurried affair. All Lady Kiyomizu's maids and servants ate together in the reception room. Then Yoshiko was excused to pack.

Mitsuo came into the room. Kiko was chattering on, ". . . and it's just awful! My favorite perfume, too. I was nauseous for an hour."

Yoshiko patted Kiko's hand, "Perhaps if you chew a bit of ginger root - that's supposed to help."

Mitsuo cleared his throat. The conversation stopped. He dismissed Kiko and slid the door closed behind her.

"I see you are still packing."

"Yes. I didn't realize I had so many things, but since I won't be coming back, I want to make sure I have everything."

"Who said any such thing? Of course you'll be coming back. Once all this chaos settles down, the Young Master will surely send for you. You might need to take a new name, but everything else will go back to normal."

"Nothing can ever be the way it used to be now that I belong to you. I have never felt for anyone the way I feel for you. How will my breath know when to breathe, if you are not there to breathe with me?" Tears began to flow down her cheeks.

"Oh, my Little Bird, you know you cannot belong to me as long as Kenji lives. And since I am retainer to his father, I dare not raise a hand against him. If we were both free, nothing would ever part us, but we are both bound by life and loyalty to the same masters. From now on, we must be like brother and sister."

Yoshiko cried out and fell prostrate on the tatami. "What if you are

wounded or die in the conflict with Hirayama?" She sobbed on her folded arms.

The Sergeant of the Guard called through the door, "Sensei, is something wrong?"

"She is just upset, Sergeant. She will calm herself momentarily."

Mitsuo knelt next to her and removed the combs and ribbons from her hair. "When we go to reclaim the village, we will only be fighting a few constables, not all his army." He spread the ebony cascade down her back. Then he turned her over so that her head lay in his lap and he wiped the tears from her cheeks with his sleeve. "You know my heart beats here in your chest next to your own and it will be so forever." He placed a kiss in the palm of his hand and lay his hand between her breasts. "So I want you to take this and keep it with you," he took a netsuke from his belt and showed it to her. It was a jade Hotei. "My father and mother had a matching pair. See? He carved his emblem on the bottom. Hers was stolen. This was his; it is all I have left of him. You keep it and think of me. It will not be long before we see one another again."

Yoshiko took the Hotei and kissed it. Then she raised up. She opened Mitsuo's kimono and covered his chest and belly with kisses until he finally lay back for her. More clothing was untied and pushed aside as she straddled him. The next outcry the Sergeant politely disregarded was Mitsuo's, followed shortly by a matching sound from Yoshiko.

They dozed a short while, but when Yoshiko made her way toward the lamp, to extinguish it, Mitsuo stopped her with a word.

"If you are finished packing, find your heavy cloak and a comfortable cushion and come with me."

She could see he must have waked before her, since he was dressed and presentable already. When she was dressed and had her cloak and cushion, he walked her down to the main floor where a palanquin waited. She climbed in and he handed her a letter. It would introduce her to Lady Kiyomizu's cousin as Lady Iwasaki. All she knew about the cousin was that he was an artist in Edo and there was money with the letter to pay her expenses. She felt like chaff being blown away by the wind, but Mitsuo had promised to come to Edo to see her after the confrontation with Hirayama was over. That was the only hope she had to cling to.

Uninvited Guests

What a relief to have Yoshiko out of harm's way. Now I can get down to business. When I get done, that ninja family will never again take the chance of bringing my revenge down on themselves. The mere whisper of my name will freeze them in their tracks. Now my plan is set except for the Sergeant. He must be approached next.

At dawn, Mitsuo went directly to the sergeant's room and asked to speak with him.

"Would you like to walk with me out to the teahouse woods?"

"A morning walk is always pleasant," Mitsuo replied.

They walked out of the sergeant's barrack room and onto the soldiers' courtyard. They passed the walkway at the East end of Lord Tansho's rooms and out into a grassy field. There was no exact pathway across it to the woods, just some trampled areas leading rather generally toward the maple grove. It was intended to be primitive and simple to help a person feel the true spirit of the tea ceremony.

The two warriors stopped near the spring and the sergeant pointed out the wide shafts of light from the sunrise streaming through the grove between the trunks of the trees. "The arms of Ameratsu extend to warm our bodies and place courage into our hearts."

Mitsuo cupped a plant in the undergrowth that held a bead of water. He tilted it and it glinted in the light. "She carves a landscape out of jade and sets it with sparkling gems to lure us into her morning bed." He turned and the two sat down not far from the spring. They were quiet for a moment, then Mitsuo spoke again. "Sergeant, I am being sent to reclaim the village that Hirayama's men have taken. I hope to lead side by side with you. You are the central figure in my plans."

"How many men do you expect to take?"

"Every man possible! We can leave a few to guard the household itself and enough to man the walls. We'll be gone maybe two weeks at the most. It will be glorious!"

"There is a good possibility Hirayama will attack here soon. What would you do to provide for that circumstance?"

"Well, Lady Kiyomizu is a trained samurai. We'll leave her Shoda, but she can pretty well take care of herself. Besides, there wouldn't be anyone important left in the house - just servants."

"Also wives and children of our Lord's retainers. . . might you not

be risking all the property of our Lord just to regain one village?"

"Lord Tansho is a gambler himself or he wouldn't have taken the risk of the China trip. He surely would not take Hirayama's affront to his honor without retaliation if he were here!"

"That is something else to consider. What is so important about going now, when our master himself will return soon?"

"This is the time they will least expect an attack. They believe we are still in mourning for Yoshiko. Our opportunity will be gone by the time Lord Tansho returns."

"That may be true, but I think you risk too much! I have sworn to my master that in his absence, I will protect Lady Kiyomizu and this establishment with my life. He made no mention of border disputes, and I can't let you strip all the protection from these things just for your own satisfaction."

"Does that mean you won't go with me? I need you! You are my key man! My plan counts on two independent leaders. Who else could I trust?"

"Perhaps you need to rethink the whole idea. There may be other ways to settle this border problem."

"Well, you might be right. I suppose I could talk with Lady Kiyomizu and see what she suggests. I am terribly sorry you don't feel you could do it. It would have been glorious."

The sergeant stood up. "Glory isn't everything. You'll have lots of time for glory, young hoshi."

Mitsuo followed him over to the spring and they both got drinks before walking back toward the kitchen to get breakfast. After breakfast, Mitsuo went in to talk with Lady Kiyomizu. She was not ready to receive visitors, so he waited several minutes in the hallway.

His mind wandered and went over his plans again: *It's a good thing the Sergeant refused to cooperate. What a mess I would have had if he'd agreed! This way, at least he thinks I respect and trust him. If he believes he knows my plan and my motivation, he should be somewhat sympathetic about it all. If I'd just marched in and demanded his men to lead into battle, I would surely have met with his sword.*

A maid opened the door and led him in. Lady Kiyomizu was seated behind a screen for privacy. Her ladies and maids were still all together in the reception room with her, but were at a distance so that she might discuss business without the household eavesdropper - whoever it might

be - gaining information.

Once Mitsuo joined her behind the screen, it was a short discussion.

Lady Kiyomizu laid down her fan. "My Lord will be home soon and I want this mess with Hirayama cleared up immediately. I cannot believe what he has done! Beautiful, precious Etsu, dead because she carried a message. How long before you can put this plan in motion?"

"It should take about three days to get everything together."

"If anyone is uncooperative, they'll answer to me."

"What makes you think anyone would not cooperate?"

"Rumors get to me now and then, you know."

"I think I will have plenty of help, thank you. I don't expect any problems."

"Good. Get busy."

"As you say."

Mitsuo wanted nine men who would follow him easily, so he tried to avoid any who had a strong bond to Donkai. Nine felt like a good number - few enough to move easily, but enough to take out a large house full of fighters if they moved quickly. He chose Toru and Kin for their skills and quick minds. Lady Kiyomizu's man, Shoda, asked to come for his own reasons. Mitsuo did not ask, but he had the feeling he looked on this mission the way some people looked on a religious pilgrimage. Shoda seemed to share their Lady's devotion and conviction that he was a holy man.

By the third day of his preparations, he had eight men chosen. That was when Donkai approached him and asked to be included. He wasn't sure how to respond. Donkai was an excellent swordsman, but had been quick to stir up dissent among the guards when he first arrived and began to teach. Mitsuo had nearly had to choke him to death to make him stop. Since then he had been quick to respond and was obedient, but he was not sure that some resentment did not linger. Finally, he decided to take Isas, a fellow newly promoted that Donkai had been practicing with. He would be less likely to try anything with Isas along and Mitsuo hated to turn down a volunteer.

The men rode out with great confidence and anticipation. In the beginning, their spirits were high and evenings in camp were spent making light-hearted jokes and doing a little half-serious gambling. By

the end of the journey, they were settling down. The last night before the attack, they made camp in a woods of oaks and pines halfway up a mountain. They were a little pensive and Donkai began to discuss what masters they had trained under and what campaigns they had been involved in.

Most had been on one or more skirmishes with neighboring daimyos. A few had gone on a campaign Tansho made into Korea which actually failed, but had been touted as a victory. None had ever been to the Ryu Kyu Islands.

An older man commented, "Most men who go there, set up residence. Only someone with a peculiar ability or influence can come back now days. The Shogun considers them a foreign influence, you know."

Mitsuo did his very best to be calm and seem to have only passing interest when he asked the group, "Any of you know anyone who's actually been there?"

"My cousin is there now," said one.

"There's a fellow I grew up with who got in a fight with someone who had political connections. In only a few weeks he was mysteriously 'transferred' to a post in the Ryu Kyus."

Finally, another of the older men spoke up. "I heard Lord Tansho tell once how he came to take on the General." Everyone's ears pricked up at that, so he continued, "Evidently Mihashi had a terrible time getting along with the natives of the Ryu Kyus. His superiors were losing patience. A friend of Lord Tansho's wrote him about Mihashi's exploits and how close he was to execution.

"You know how our Lord prides himself on having the fiercest warriors. Well, he made 'gifts' to the appropriate people and Mihashi still has his head on his shoulders."

Another man chimed in, "And he doesn't let him gather any dust, either. Mihashi has been in every battle and skirmish the Master has organized since he arrived."

"The General may have an impressive history, but we will have a great new story to tell when this little foray is over."

At dawn they began to ride up the sloping roadway, moving from the dappled light of the oak woods to a gently darkening hallway over-arched by the stretching arms of the pines. They eventually topped the mountain that overlooked the valley of the disputed village. The pines

there were tall and old and Mitsuo decided they should leave the road for the cover of the broad branches and relative quiet of the pine needle mulch. At one point they disturbed the hunting of a hawk and he screeched to scold them, but bits of the sky were too scarce here for them to see him above them.

Mitsuo hoped to be at the town they sought by noon, but there were small delays. Isas, being lowest rank, was the camp cook, so he stopped whenever he ran onto a patch of mushrooms or wild onions and gathered a bagful. When the trek began again, Donkai would take the lead and the rest would make two or three general lines behind him, stretched out and spaced apart across the hillside. Most of the time the only sound was the soft crackle of pine needles under the horses' hooves and the occasional yip of a distant fox to her kits. The flourish of birdsong that came with the sunrise had hushed and left the day to the sounds of men.

There was little or no underbrush here. The peasants in the valley for generations had scoured these surroundings for firewood, so any dead fall was cleaned up and it was too shaded for most seedlings to take hold. They traveled on at an easy pace for a time, until a whistle signaled someone had come onto a problem. Everyone halted and Mitsuo rode directly toward the sound. It was Shoda who had whistled. The ground ahead of him was leveled off and mushy.

Mitsuo signaled him to dismount with him and walk forward to see what they had come upon. A group of trees encircled a marshy meadow. Their roots were ropy and covered with mosses and ferns. There was very little light seeping in through the crowd of trees, but in time they discovered a bubbling spring feeding the soggy grasses.

Mitsuo passed the order to gather and all the men brought their horses to water them and take a rest. Toru said he saw a small clearing far from the road where they could camp on the way back that evening. Mitsuo assumed it would take very little time for them to reach the valley from here. Gazing downhill, he could see where the broadleaf trees began shouldering out the pines. Surely it would not be long now.

After about half an hour of riding, the underbrush thickened considerably. The pines were gone and beeches stood in their place. What had been dark, spacious riding areas between trees were now sun-dappled and carpeted thickly with thorny berry bushes. They back-tracked to the clearing Toru had seen and left the horses there. Isas was left to guard them. He was very young and nervous and so did not seem

too let down that he was to be left out of the fighting. Everyone else went back on foot to skirt the edge of the bramble. This path took them far out of their way as to finding the town, but directly to the goal they intended to reach.

At the far end of the bramble, shaded by a pair of beech trees, was a stony promontory jutting out of the mountainside. Donkai walked to it and lay himself down. He slid on his belly out onto the stone outcropping. Most of the bramble ended at the top edge of a sheer slope of weathered rock crumbles. The promontory had an overview of the valley. Immediately below the sheer slope was a manor house. Its walls and gates and double doors all carried the crest of the ninja family they sought. Donkai immediately slid back into the cover of the trees and went to Mitsuo to tell him of the find.

"There's a manor house below the point. Its gates have the ninja crest."

"Well, we didn't have to hunt for it all day after all." Mitsuo smiled. He went to the edge of the trees and scooted on his belly out to the end of the point to see for himself.

Immediately below the point, straight down about 40 feet, was a stable with pasture on three sides. To right was a rise where the house had been built. The courtyard and back gate were easily visible. Off to the left he could see the road. It wound its way past some terraced fields and then toward town. It was bordered by a few trees and bushy hedges that separated it from the muddy terraces. He could see the roofs of the houses in town. One or two had red tile roofs, but most were only thatch.

Beyond that stretched the expanse of the fertile valley. It was still an unripe color; not yet the full cream of harvest, but well worth disputing over if you had the men to fight for it while the owner was somewhere in China. Of course, just quietly sliding in and taking over would save effort and manpower.

Mitsuo slid back from his vantage point and returned to the men in the shade of the woods. "Shoda, watch the house for movement. There seems to be too little activity and it feels odd."

Toru asked, "May I go down the road a little, where I can watch the town? Just to make sure everything looks calm?"

"All right, but don't get too close. The rest of you find a place to settle and be quiet for a while. I don't want to move in until I know what's wrong at that house."

They all did as they were told. The shade was cool, but not completely comfortable, as they had to share it with a cloud of mosquitoes. Finally a breeze came up and floated them away. Two of the men asked to go pick what ripe wineberries they could find.

Mitsuo gave permission, "But don't get out where you can be seen or get yourselves trapped in that bramble."

Some short time passed when a high-pitched snarl was heard. The two soldiers came slowly backing down the hillside, out of the bramble, and a deeper growl was heard. They hurriedly returned to their places near the others.

Mitsuo looked up with the question on his face.

"That berry patch is already taken," answered one.

One of the older men asked, "What happened? Run into a couple of the Shogun's men?"

"Yeah," came the standard answer from one, "I didn't like the company."

The other added, "There was a baby bear and I didn't want to take his lunch. Poor skinny little fellow."

After perhaps an hour, Shoda reported that Toru was returning.

Mitsuo stationed himself in the trees at the promontory to wait.

Toru came to Mitsuo and smiled, "Hachiman loves us."

"How did you come to that conclusion?"

"There is a parade marching in the streets and the town is all decorated. Today is their town matsuri!"

"Hachiman must be laughing with delight! To arrive on their founder's day festival is a miracle that we must take advantage of. We will wait till nightfall when the beer and sake have flowed and the people are so sound asleep, thunder and lightning wouldn't wake them." He clapped his shoulder, "We will owe Hachiman many offerings for this favor!" Toru turned to go, but Mitsuo took his arm, "I have an idea. Since we will be here till evening anyway, we might as well make use of the time. Ask the men if any has been here before. If there is someone who knows his way around, I might very well have a task for him."

"Certainly, Sensei."

After the deaths of a few more mosquitoes and the passing of a swarm of flies, Toru returned accompanied. "Here is Kin. He traveled with our constables last year to collect taxes."

"Excellent," he addressed Kin, "In the confusion of a matsuri, surely

one more peasant on the edges of the celebration will never be noticed. I would like you to go down and find out whether the villagers are supportive of Hirayama or the ninja family. If they are, we will merely have our revenge on the ninja household and go home. But if we can count on their support, I am certain we can regain control of the village altogether."

Kin looked thoughtful, "I know where the headman of the stonemason's guild lives. I should be able to get some information there."

"Be back just before sundown, so we can talk before we move on to the ninja's house."

The men spent nearly an hour making Kin into a suitable-looking farmer. What took the longest was finding a way to disguise his shaved head. One of the older samurai found some tall grass and quickly wove him a passable hat, but it was nearly six in the evening when he left for town.

He did return just before dusk, but his pace was considerably slower than it was when he left. "Everywhere I went, someone handed me a beer. They are a friendly town." Mitsuo smiled, but urged him to tell what he had discovered. "The villagers are loyal to our Lord Tansho, but are too afraid to take any action against the Hirayama constables because the ninjas are working with them. They will not interfere with us or protect the interlopers, but they will not fight alongside us, either."

Mitsuo was pleased. "That is good enough."

"A helpful thing is that Hirayama is so confident of the village, that he has left only three constables here. The maid at the stonemasons says they will be having dinner and spending the night at their house tonight."

"Excellent." Mitsuo beamed.

At dusk, the men all spread out along the edge of the manor property, using the undergrowth and garden trees as cover. One man stayed and watched at the gate, but the rest headed for the sleeping wing of the manor. Quietly they waited for the last lamp to be put out. Then in the moonlight, they silently entered the dark house. In short order, every life in the house was extinguished.

Mitsuo himself did the final sweep of the manor looking for anyone they missed. He went on to meet the men at the road into town.

"Toru, take Donkai and go back to where we left the horses. Bring them here." Toru and Donkai left. Mitsuo pensively cleaned his sword. When he finished, he sheathed it and addressed the group, "Did any of

you find ninjas to kill in the manor?" Only two men spoke up. "We will need to be especially careful on the way into town. Since all there seems to have been at the house was women and servants, the men are most likely in town. I would rather not surprise them returning."

Donkai came running down the hill to Mitsuo. "Sensei, Isas is dead and the horses stolen."

Toru arrived and added, "It looked to me like the horses scattered during the fight."

Mitsuo had the men come near. "Kin, you take the lead and keep a special watch for the ninjas coming home. Tom, you stay close to me and we will watch for whomever it is who knows we are here. If they check the manor, they may come down on us from behind. The rest of you stay close together and near the trees. If anyone gives a signal, get off the road and into the hedges."

They stayed alert, but only one or two people passed them on the road. Since they were not wearing Tansho livery, no one paid them any attention, even as they entered the town.

Samurai were a common sight and the matsuri was everyone's focus for the evening. They left the main road and settled into a residential side road that was nearly abandoned, to wait while Kin went back to the stonecutter's.

Toru seemed anxious. "Sensei, where do you think the ninjas are? Do you suppose they are attacking our castle while we are here?"

"No, I don't. They might be on a mission, but they might just as easily be out hunting. They have to supply food for their house just as everyone else does, and they don't seem to be farming."

"No, Sensei."

Kin didn't take long to come back and report. "They are having dinner together as I was told. The housemaid will let us in from the back where we can march in and declare ourselves."

They all followed Kin along the back streets. There they met only a few people minding their own business and a flock of domestic ducks chasing grasshoppers. When they arrived at the stonecutter's, they gathered at the back of the house. Kin went around to the front and asked permission to enter. The maid let him in and led him to the room where the guests were dining.

She bowed and addressed the host. "Master, there is a messenger here. He asks to speak to you urgently."

The host rose and excused himself from the guests. In the hall, he spoke to Kin, "What is this urgent message?" Kin and the maid encouraged him to come with them toward the cooking area. Once there, the maid opened a doorway into a storeroom. "I have come from our Lord Tansho to assist you and the other villagers. We have evicted the ninja family and would like to invite Lord Hirayama's constables to join them or to voluntarily leave Lord Tansho's province."

The host stepped back away from Kin, "What do you want me to do?"

"If you would please stand to one side," he indicated the storeroom, "with your housemaid, so you don't get hurt. . ."

The host was more than happy to comply. "Do be careful. There are several ninjas in there with the constables."

"I appreciate the warning. Now if you will just step inside," the host complied and Kin slid the shoji closed. Then he let Mitsuo and the others in from the back door. "There are ninjas and constables both in the banquet room."

"How many?"

"I don't know."

"Wait, then. Let me talk with the maid."

He quickly instructed her what to do and took the men outside. He stationed them in the bushes on the three sides of the room that opened to the gardens for viewing parties. Then he whistled the call of the green crow.

Laughter billowed out into the hallway. The maid went in and interrupted the party.

"Please, gentlemen, the moon has risen and we thought you might like to see her lovely face." Then she rolled up the bamboo shades that stood for walls in the summer and the room was merely an open platform with posts where walls should be. She quickly exited the room on the pretense of fetching their host and Mitsuo signaled his men to the kill. Rising from the cover of the bushes, they caught most of the company still seated on the floor around the table.

It was easy to distinguish the constables from the ninjas. The constables still wore their Hirayama colors, while the ninjas had made no effort to cover the designs inked onto their chests and arms. The constables were unarmed and were therefore quickly dispatched. The ninjas, though they had politely removed their large weapons, each had

one or two small weapons with them even at a party like this.

Drunk as they were, their fighting skills were still formidable. Mitsuo put down his sword completely and fought hand to hand. The older men kept to the swords, but Kin, Toru, and Donkai switched to their short swords since the space was limited. Even though they were outnumbered, the ninjas fought to the last man. That man was able to keep three of the samurai at bay until he slipped in the blood of a constable and gave Donkai his opportunity.

At last the room was quiet except for the sound of swords being wiped and resheathed.

The host stepped out from the store room into the hallway, approached Mitsuo, and made a deep bow. "Honored Sir, we have rooms at the far end of the house. You are welcome to spend the rest of the night here with us and I offer you the hospitality of the village. We would welcome the opportunity to show our gratitude for being reunited with our true Lord. Tomorrow we will have a feast day in your name."

Mitsuo responded with a small bow of his own. "That is very generous, but we must go. We will make sure Lord Tansho knows of your loyalty to him. We will need to take the horses your visitors arrived on, since ours were stolen."

"Certainly. I'll fetch them for you myself."

The men were quiet and wary on the way back to the camp. Mitsuo decided not to stay where they had planned since Isas had been killed there. He looked carefully at the body before they wrapped it up to take home. He was sure it was the mother bear's revenge and no human thief. It was no wonder the horses had run for their lives.

They rode a little farther and found a small clearing they expanded by cutting back the underbrush. Toru made a fire and boiled some herbs to make a restorative tonic commonly drunk on missions. Everyone was given something to eat from the generous packs the stonemason had provided.

The group murmured among themselves as they made camp. Mitsuo intended to question them in the morning, but no one was able to sleep. They just stayed huddled around the fire. Once the herbs were consumed and the tension began to dissipate, he listened to their comments from a distance.

"Imagine spending your life doing that!"

"Not me! I say, be in league with an honorable Lord or none at all!"

“Disgusting! Wasn’t like real battle at all. Slitting throats in the black of night . . . cutting down men too drunk to notice.”

“I’ve known one or two who went into battle that way,” a laugh rippled through the group, “hard telling how many drunks one’s actually killed.”

“Be that as it may, they know what they’re facing and at least are prepared to fight.”

“True, true, it is kind of sad to know they only expected to greet the summer tonight and greeted death instead.”

“That’s the way death is for ordinary people. It should be different for samurai. Did you see how that last man fought? And he was nothing but a dirty ninja. That’s how it should be for samurai. A noble death in the heat of battle!”

“I was offered the chance to train in ninja art at one time. Now I’m glad I refused.”

Mitsuo decided he had a question he needed to ask. He cleared his throat and they realized he had been listening. “Does this mean you believe me to be dishonorable?”

The group went silent as stones. The tiny hand-warming fire flickered and a man leaned forward to put on a few twigs. Toru finally spoke up, “We know, Sensei, that what was at stake was the honor of the Tansho name. Each of us would gladly die to protect that. This mission is right and we are proud to fight side by side with you. For us, it is merely the sly style of revenge which doesn’t sit well. But knowing we were fighting against ninja makes even this distasteful style understandable. I mean, they all sat armed at their host’s table. How rude - no manners at all.”

The other men stared at the ground while Toru spoke. Now a few looked up, hopeful, to see understanding or forgiveness in Mitsuo’s face. He was too practiced in masking his feelings and showed nothing; he merely turned slowly away to check on the horses. Then he lay down again to try and sleep.

Everything was back to normal in the morning. It was as though the night’s conversation never happened. The only difference was a hair’s breadth of distance between Mitsuo and his men. But not so much that anyone but Mitsuo would notice.

“Well, My Lady, the return trip was uneventful.” Mitsuo poured more tea into Lady Kiyomizu’s cup. “The horses we have in trade for those that were scattered are in good condition and well trained. I have no complaints.”

“Tell me again how Hachiman intervened for you. Did you pray to him or plead for his mercy?” She leaned forward in her excitement.

“No, he seems to have stepped in only because it pleased him to do so. Please, My Lady, it was not beautiful or exciting and the only colors I want to remember were the lamps and flags that decorated the houses and shops for the matsuri. It is a friendly town and you can be glad they are so loyal to our Great Lord.”

“Even though you may not feel it was impressive, I think it was. I believe I will give a donation to the temple priests to dedicate a shrine to Hachiman. Surely he has favored us over Hirayama and we shall come out ahead in this conflict.” She went to the teahouse window to gaze at the view for a moment. “I can barely wait for my Lord and Kenji to return. It will be so wonderful to be able to tell them the progress we have made on this problem. They might be home as soon as this coming week.”

“It is good to see you so happy, My Lady.” When they get back, my time here will be nearly over. I can confront Mihashi and find out if he is truly the man who killed my mother and sisters. If he is, I will kill him and be on my way. I will pass through Edo to get Yoshiko and take her home with me to the Ryu Kyus. That's when I will have my chance to be happy.

Honor Retrieved

Juro loved being the Tansho household overseer except on days like today. Not only was early fruit harvest being brought in, but the messenger arrived at dawn saying the Great Lord was arriving from the China excursion today. When the guard at the front gate could see the riders appear on the nearby hill, he would signal the house so all the occupants could gather at the gate to welcome their Lord home. As important as it was for them to show their devotion and loyalty and happiness at his arrival, it threw the whole day out of organization. Then, too, if celebrations started right away, it could take as much as a week before things got back to a normal daily routine. A week like that could

put Juro very much out of sorts.

Nevertheless, he was delighted to see Lord Tansho and Kenji ride in the gate with all their men and horses. Juro stood at the head of all the household staff and Lord Tansho greeted him very briefly, "I'll speak with you later. Tomorrow I will want you to begin the inventory of what I have brought, so be ready." He walked on toward the stables and stopped only to speak with the sergeant of the guard just as briefly.

Juro carried on a mental count of the horses as they came in the gate. A few came in riderless, but not many. The greater number of men were on foot. Juro tried to get a look at their footwear and decided it would be wise to issue new as soon as possible. Following the cavalcade and the columns of foot soldiers were many servants carrying bundles on their backs of varying size. Some were very large and Juro's hands were tingling to open them. He was glad to leave the small things to Lord Tansho's personal servant under the Lord's direction. His mind was busy trying to imagine where this volume of goods could be stored. There was no question but that it would be sorted in the receiving rooms. The Lord's personal receiving room was smaller, of course, but without the space of the women's wing, there were few options. The only other large open space was the dojo and Juro would never consider profaning that area with merchandise. The General was not someone Juro was willing to irritate even the slightest bit and his attitude toward samurai who became merchants was well known. It might even be described as bitter.

Juro was too distracted to notice where Kenji went after he led his horse to the stables. As exhausted as he was, he headed directly for his rooms, seeking Yoshiko. Her things were not there, so he assumed she had moved back to the women's wing while he was gone. A ten minute walk took him to his father's rooms and the gardens at the back of the property, but the women's wing was hardly recognizable.

The end that housed Nyosan's room and the hallway that connected to his own childhood room were still standing, but not far away was a huge, messy pile of charred beams and thatch. He could recognize a corner of a tatami jammed sideways into the pile. The part of the building that had been the common room and Lady Kiyomizu's rooms was now an openwork of new beams and floorboards without walls or roof. No one was there to explain, since all were gathered by the front gate, so he went in search of Lady Kiyomizu.

Kenji headed to the kitchen to ask Cook where she might be, but

before he could go inside, the lady herself met him. "Come with me, please. I am so glad to see you home and well. How is your father?" She led him past his father's rooms and on toward her gardens. They sat on a long bench, cooled by the shade of a plum tree.

"He is excellent. Everything went as he hoped."

"I am so glad. He had such high hopes for this trip." She fanned herself a little.

"What is the matter? You look distressed and you are not telling me what happened to your rooms. Were the servants inattentive to the incense? How did all this happen?"

A gardener passed by and she waited to speak until he went to busy himself in the chrysanthemum bed. "Oigimi's ninjas set off an explosion in my rooms. Mitsuo just returned from a retaliatory attack that wiped them out."

"That's wonderful. Now Yoshiko will be safe. Where can I find her?"

Lady Kiyomizu looked up into the plum branches, heavy with green fruits. "Kenji, since your trip, two people have left us, Nyosan and Yoshiko."

"Tell me where they are. I'll go and bring them back here myself. What a surprise that will be."

Lady Kiyomizu knelt in front of Kenji. She placed her hands over his and bowed her head. "Yoshiko is gone so far, she is beyond even your reach. Only the ancestors speak with her now. Her ashes are in the temple graveyard; her memorial in the shrine. Go and see." She called the gardener to walk with him.

Kenji felt like all his blood had drained into his feet. He felt light headed and his hearing seemed to have shut off. *I can see that she is talking, but there is only a buzzing jumble of words in my head. I'm sure there were birds chirping a minute ago and the poor gardener . . . he is trying to tell me something, but there are no sounds coming out of his mouth. Well, we are headed somewhere, but I can't remember where . . . maybe if I sat down for a minute,* he began to bend his knees, but the gardener held him up and kept him walking toward the shrine. *Feels like the time we took that eight-hour forced march - my legs are numb and wobbly, but they keep on walking, step after step. I wonder if the gardeners go on forced marches?*

The gardener stood Kenji inside the shrine in front of Yoshiko's

memorial. There was new incense in front of it and the gardener lit it. Kenji watched the thin line of smoke gently curl upward until a breeze caught it and it dissipated completely. There was a little bowl of rice nearby that was still fresh. He looked down and focused on the shelf below. Her koto lay there, his beautiful gift to her, and her silver combs. Next stood a slender vase containing two leaves of grass and a pretty wildflower.

His hearing began gradually to return. *It is so quiet here - and these things are laid out so prettily, Yoshiko might have laid them out herself.* A tear came to his eye and he looked again at the combs and incense. *Surely, my darling Dancer, you cannot truly be with the ancestors . . . ?* but the wind began to blow and her one hundred strings of bells began to ring . . . *No! No! My head is going to explode!* He covered his ears with his hands. *Make them stop! I can still hear them!* He began to yell to block out the sound of the bells. Lady Kiyomizu's voice buzzed some and the gardener tried to lead him out of the shrine. *At last, there are others to help me drown out the sound of the bells.*

Lady Kiyomizu had him taken to a room far from the shrine with instructions that his father be sent for. Then she ordered the gardener to take down Yoshiko's bells and dispose of them.

Once in the room, Kenji sat to meditate in front of the display of a Chinese scroll hung on the wall. He had brought this scroll with him when he came here from his mother's house. It was a copy of The Vinegar Tasters. Its calm familiarity was a comfort to his soul and he was glad for the quiet this room afforded.

After a short while, he heard a low rumbling sound behind him. He turned and saw that his father had come into the room. Kenji stood and bowed to his father. They sat down together and his father began to speak. Unhappily, it was the gardener all over again. His mouth was moving, but Kenji could not hear anything. He paid close attention in hopes he could guess what he wanted. Finally, his father stopped talking and raised an eyebrow. Kenji looked down at the floor in embarrassment; since he did not know what his father wanted him to say. His father spoke again, kindly tilted his head, and waited. Kenji decided he had better say something, so he stood and opened the shoji part way, "Have you seen the view from this angle, Father? It is quite beautiful."

His father left rather abruptly.

Servants came in with food and tea, but he was not hungry or

thirsty. Later, they laid out his quilts, but he was not tired. He only wanted them to go out so he could enjoy the quiet without distraction, but he didn't want to be impolite, so he said nothing.

He waited.

They finally left.

Lord Tansho sat at the edge of his pond. He splashed two fingers in the water to call the fish and stroked their sides when they arrived. It was soothing and it brought Nyosan to mind. He called his servant to him.

"Koi, go find Nyosan and tell her I'd like to see her this afternoon before dinner."

"My Lord? I've been given to understand that she is dead."

"Not so. I saw her herding a group of housemaids through to the bathhouse this morning. You are so gullible, Koi, you believe everything anybody says. Now do as you're told."

"Certainly, My Lord." Koi followed the path that led from Tansho's garden, past the workmen laboring over the repair of the women's wing, and on to the Shinto shrine. He went inside and lit a stick of incense in front of Nyosan's memorial. There had been considerable discussion over whether her keepsakes should be included with those of the family and relatives, but Lady Kiyomizu had insisted.

Koi clapped his hands and prayed.

"Dearest Lady Nyosan, first love and true heart of this house, the Great Lord sends me to summon you to him. He wishes to spend time with you this afternoon before dinner." Then he bowed and left the shrine.

Lord Tansho walked slowly along the pathway to the teahouse spring. The water there was sweet and healing. The sun was gently warming in the dappled shade of the leafy trees and he sat on one of several stones arranged there for that purpose. He watched a mother bird stuffing a dragonfly into the gaping beak of a baby bird nearly as large as she was.

Raising a child is a terrible responsibility. If that bird doesn't learn to fly and feed himself soon, his mother will drop dead trying to care for him.

He glanced over in time to see Nyosan coming out of the teahouse

woods, strolling through the field of grass and wildflowers toward him. She knelt between his feet and looked up at him. She put her arms around his waist and hugged him as she often did when they had a moment of privacy.

He returned her hug, "You feel chilly. How long have you been waiting?"

"Seems like eternity," she smiled.

"Here, sit on the stone with the most sun. You need to warm up." She took his suggestion and moved to the seat he indicated. "I want to discuss Kenji. He's in terrible condition and I don't know what remedy there is for it."

A servant came into Mitsuo's room. "There will be a celebration dinner tonight and Lady Kiyomizu wishes you to be there."

"Will Kenji come?"

"The Young Lord is still indisposed."

"Thank you. I shall be there." *I just cannot believe she didn't let Kenji in on the fact that Yoshiko is still alive. What was she thinking? Perhaps she intended to tell him the truth later, but who can tell how long it might be before he is aware enough to understand anything now? Well, nobody could have guessed he would take it like this, that is certain. As it is, all this chaos will delay any reports I might make to either of the Lords. I think that will give me time to seek out proof of what I suspect about the General. He looked toward the ceiling. Father, I might have found the man who killed Mother and crushed your spirit. Please, protect me while I look for proof.*

Those thoughts were the spice for Mitsuo's dinner that night, and he ate with an absolute relish. After dinner, while everyone was pleasantly drunk, he slipped outside. He took a small lamp with him, unlit, and headed to General Mihashi's room. Once inside, he lit the lamp, but kept it nearby so he could blow it out quickly, if needed. He opened the nearest cabinet, it contained only quilts and clothes. The next one had several shelves and boxes of a small belongings, fans, netsukes, and such. He hurried past those and chose to check briefly through the bundles that were still unpacked from the trip. Nothing there seemed useful, so he took another look at the boxes of small items. Among the fans was one that seemed familiar. When open, it showed the crane and

pine, symbols of long life. There was nothing indicating it might have been made elsewhere and it was a very common pattern. In the netsukes there was one of a jade Hotei. It seemed very unlikely, but he looked at it anyway. There on the bottom was his father's mark carved into the stone. The mate to the one he had given Yoshiko, it was his mother's netsuke.

His hand trembled as he reached out to replace it and close the box. Steps sounded on the walkway outside. He blew out his little lamp and stepped back against the wall. The door opened and General Mihashi's manservant walked in carrying his own small lamp. He had come to lay out the sleeping quilts and while his back was turned, Mitsuo stepped silently out into the circle of light cast by the lamp.

The servant caught his breath and bowed quickly, "May I be of service, Honorable Mitsuo?"

"Give the General a message for me. Tell him his souvenir from the Ryu Kyu Islands rightfully belongs to me and I intend to settle accounts with him."

"Certainly, Sir." Mitsuo walked toward the door. "Wait just a moment, Sir, and I'll walk with you. We can share the lamp light." He turned to pick up his lamp and when he turned back, Mitsuo had already gone.

The servant practically ran to the General, who took him aside from the crowd. Their serious looks set them in stark contrast to the people dancing joyously in the courtyard.

"What is it that has you so distraught?"

"Master, I have seen a spirit and it gave me a message for you!"

"What spirit?"

"It looked like Mitsuo."

"Calm down. He is here at the castle with us. What makes you think it was his spirit?"

"I entered your rooms and he appeared beside me out of nowhere. Then when I turned to go out the door with him, he disappeared into thin air!"

"All right. Don't be so excitable. Just tell me the message."

"He said that your souvenir from the Ryu Kyu Islands belongs to him and he's going to have it!"

"Just relax. Everything will be fine. I'll see him tomorrow and clear all this up."

Morning got a late start at the castle for everyone except General Mihashi. He was up at sunrise as usual. When Mitsuo arrived to meditate with him, he found he was expected. Once they finished their quiet contemplation, the General handed him a small package wrapped in red brocade, as one might wrap a New Year's gift.

"My servant said he received a message last night from your ghost. I assume these are what you referred to."

When Mitsuo opened the package, there was a small bag that held his mother's netsuke and a black lacquer comb inlaid with mother-of-pearl. His heart came up into his throat and tears rose to his eyes. The sting of the tears sparked a flame of rage through his entire body. It took every ounce of effort he could muster to keep from leaping on Mihashi right there and strangling the breath out of him!

I must wait, though. There must be witnesses. Everyone must know the circumstances, so I won't be accused of murder and the General will. "Thank you for returning my property."

Mihashi turned to look into Mitsuo's face, "Is this all you came for?"

"No," he answered, allowing a little of the hate to show in his eyes.

"All right. When do you want to meet?"

"In three hours' time at the front gate courtyard."

"Agreed."

Mitsuo left to prepare himself, as did the General. Mitsuo took a purifying bath, then made a shrine in his room with the objects from the bag. He prayed that his ancestors would be with him as he avenged the deaths of his mother and sisters. Then he sent a servant to notify Lord Tansho.

When the servant arrived to tell him, Lord Tansho was busily showing Lady Kiyomizu the items he had brought from China. Bundles were open all over the floor of the small receiving room just off his rooms. They walked from one to the other as he told her how he obtained this or that statue or piece of jewelry and whose loyalty he hoped to secure with it. Much of it he intended to quietly sell. He expected to be wonderfully rich once all this sold. He was elated.

"Excuse me, My Lord, I bring a message."

"From whom?"

"Mitsuo Kawabata, the hoshi."

Tansho turned to Lady Kiyomizu, "Hoshi? Don't tell me you've got

the whole household putting rice in his bowl. He's a fighting animal, nothing more. What has possessed you? Surely the Ryu Kyu Islands could never produce a holy man that was anything but a fake."

"By Yoshiko's own admission he is radiant when he meditates. I don't believe a person could fake that. She saw it with her own eyes. And Hachiman has smiled on our house since he arrived."

He turned back to the servant, "Who told you he was a monk?"

"It just became common knowledge, My Lord. General Mihashi's body servant saw him only yesterday appear and disappear out of thin air. A number of the household guards have seen him levitate during his meditations."

"What does he have to say about it?"

"No one ever asked him that I know of, My Lord."

"Well, what is his message?"

"He asks that you meet him and General Mihashi at the front gate courtyard in two hours. They have a point of honor to settle between them."

"Tell him I'll be there." The servant left and Lord Tansho sat down on the dais. He squinted his eyes a little at Lady Kiyomizu, "Now we'll have the opportunity to see whether this Island fighter is holy or not. The General will settle all this for us. When Mitsuo's blood soaks the sand, you'll see he's no holy man."

"As you say, My Lord."

"Besides, that raid he made on the ninjas without my permission shows he's too impulsive to be trusted. And with Yoshiko gone, we don't need his services as a bodyguard anymore. This contest will provide us a real service." He got up and walked around restlessly. "I think I'll go see Kenji. He's got to get over that girl in a hurry. It's hard telling how soon Hirayama will move against us and I'll need him in fighting trim for that."

Kenji watched his father enter his room and bowed with respect. They exchanged their usual greetings.

"It's good to see you. You look better than yesterday," he glanced around the room, "but you don't seem to have eaten breakfast - it's still on the tray."

"I was meditating when it was brought and by the time I finished, it

was cold."

"Well, here, let me get you some hot tea." He went to the brazier and proceeded to make two cups of tea. He was well aware that Kenji could not refuse tea he had made himself, and he didn't believe the story about the cold breakfast for a second.

As Kenji choked down small sips of the tea, his father tried to gauge his true status. "Have you been able to sleep?"

"Some, yes." *Perhaps an hour. The stars were so beautiful . . . but the Moon Maiden never came.*

Lord Tansho extended his hand to Kenji. "Here take my hand with your sword hand. Now pull back as hard as you can." Kenji complied. "Feels like your shoulder has healed itself completely."

"Yes, Father."

"How's your heart?"

"Still very sad."

"Here's a piece of news that might help lighten things a bit. Mihashi is having a contest with Mitsuo today in a little while. Now won't that be something to see? Seems there's been a clash between them over a point of honor, and what better way to settle things out, hm?"

"Yes, Father, as you say."

"I need you to strengthen yourself. You need to eat what is brought to you. We will be fighting Hirayama no doubt very soon and I want you at my side. Mihashi is right, you know. This weakness for women can be nearly disabling to a fighting man. Stop and think: what was Yoshiko, anyway? A pretty dance, a pleasurable night, a sweet perfume . . . nothing but . . . waste . . .distrac . . .

Kenji noticed his hearing was fading again. When his father was only moving his lips and making no sound, he got up and walked over to the door. *There is no point listening when Father is making no sound. If I open the door, perhaps I can hear the birds singing . . . no . . . but aren't those Yoshiko's bells ringing in the distance? I want to touch them . . .* He stepped out the door, but his tabi snagged on the threshold. He tripped, sprawling headlong across the walkway onto the grass. A servant ran to help him up and his father stormed out past him.

"He's ruined!" he shouted to no one in particular. *Why was I saddled with such a weakling for a son? Who could have known he would let a mere woman get such a hold on his soul? It could be years before he can fight again. Is this how Hachiman smiles on our house?*

When it was time for the clash between Mihashi and Mitsuo, Lord Tansho did his best to put his worries about Kenji out of his mind. *I still have my General. What a perfect choice Mihashi was. The men will follow him anywhere and fight like tigers. Hirayama won't have a breath of a chance.*

Mitsuo walked calmly around the corner of the central building and passed by the assembled crowd to the center of the courtyard. Nearly every one of Tansho's men was waiting for the two combatants. *This is just as I pictured it. The right people are here. The light is perfect - not a cloud in the sky. There is no question of his guilt and very soon I will have my revenge. Then I can return to my father with the good news.*

Time passed. Mitsuo became apprehensive, the crowd became somewhat restless, and Lord Tansho looked bored.

Lady Kiyomizu whispered to Lord Tansho, "If Mitsuo really did appear and disappear; it could mean he is at least a Zen master, if not a Bodhisattva. Perhaps the General has qualms about killing a holy man and has decided not to accept the challenge."

Anger flushed at his temples and he clapped his hands for a servant. One appeared immediately. "Go get General Mihashi. Let's get this started."

Lady Kiyomizu sensed his irritation and decided to stop talking to him. Sometimes she felt she tended to say more than he could deal with.

Momentarily, the servant reappeared and whispered into Lord Tansho's ear. Lord Tansho and Lady Kiyomizu rose from their seats on the steps of the central building and went inside. The servant then went to speak with Mitsuo. He also went into the central building and upstairs.

As Mitsuo went up to the private audience with Lord Tansho, the crowd quietly dispersed. Most were already aware of what must have happened, considering the circumstances, but most hoped beyond hope that it wasn't true.

Mitsuo stopped to take a breath and collect himself before he entered the reception room. *If Mihashi has begged a delay because his fortune is not good for today, it will make no difference to me. He cannot shake my resolve with such tactics.* He bowed, then, and entered the room, bowed again and knelt on the tatami in front of the dais.

Lord Tansho waited a moment or two and then spoke:

"I'm sorry that the contest between you and General Mihashi cannot go on. However, you have surely secured your revenge."

Mitsuo would not be deterred, "Perhaps his loss of face for not coming to fight me would be enough in some situations, but not this one. He caused my family too much pain and disgrace. I swore I would not rest until he lay dead."

Lady Kiyomizu lifted an eyebrow, but it was Lord Tansho who spoke:

"Rest then."

Lord Tansho turned his attention to his Lady and they left the room without further comment.

Mitsuo was stunned! *Where is my retribution? Mihashi has snatched it out of my hands and disappeared. He has admitted his guilt with seppuku, but he has avoided the risk of losing to me. His honor is intact and his fighting reputation unmarred. And I have sand trickling through my fingers . . .*

He went down stairs to the samurai quarters to find Nobuyuki. The men were standing in small groups talking quietly - no one gambling or looking relaxed. Each group hushed as he walked up to it and when he started talking to Nobuyuki, someone politely interrupted saying his wife was ill and he must attend her immediately. Nobuyuki excused himself and left. Everyone else in the room seemed to look away. Mitsuo was as isolated as if he were alone in the woods.

Dreams of the Spirit World

Lord Tansho woke early the next morning and threw off his quilt. The dream of unseen terror blurred away to reality. He wiped sweat from his forehead and shivered as a drop ran down his spine. "Miko! Come here!"

Koi came into his room instead, "How may I help you, My Lord?"

"Where is that damnedable Miko?"

"She just this minute went off to the bathhouse."

"Get her back here now - dripping wet, if you have to."

"As you say." Koi rushed out the door. If he could not locate the girl, he did not want to stay around and be forced to fill in for her. Luckily, he found her before she had got halfway to her goal. "Master wants you. Now. He's in distress this morning."

"Isn't he always."

She arrived at his room in a plain kimono. Her hair was tied back, but uncombed. Lord Tansho had put on a kimono and was rummaging through the little shelves over his desk when Miko came in. He stood and took a moment to look her up and down.

"You look awful. When you get your hair combed, I want you to go find Nyosan and tell her to come eat breakfast with me. Then go tell Cook to send breakfast for two here to my room."

"As you say."

But as she turned to leave, Lord Tansho put an arm around her waist to stop her. "Before you go, there is something else that needs your urgent attention." He took her hand and pressed it below the belt of his kimono. "It won't take long."

Later, after she had changed clothes and combed her hair, Miko found Koi and questioned him. "The Master sent me to find Nyosan and tell Cook to make breakfast for two! What should I do?"

"Go ahead. Tell Cook first, then ask Nyosan to visit him at breakfast. If she eats the food - okay. If she doesn't - pretend she did. Better to have the Master quietly crazy, but still functioning, than completely scrambled like Kenji."

"But where do I find her?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I went to the family shrine."

Miko took his advice. First she fetched the trays of food for Lord Tansho and his guest. She saw no sign of Nyosan or anyone else; Lord Tansho was being barbered by Koi. She quietly laid out the breakfast for two. Then she went to the shrine as Koi had. She spoke to the ceiling of the shrine and then to the morning breeze in hopes Nyosan would hear her, but she saw no evidence one way or another.

Lord Tansho sat beside his table and sipped tea while he waited. Finally, the shoji that opened onto the inner hallway slid aside.

"Ah, there you are, Precious. Come sit down."

Nyosan came in wearing a bright orange kimono with large, pink flowers on it and sat down.

"I haven't seen you wear that in years. I always did like you best in bright colors." He poured her some tea. "Have you visited Kenji?"

"I went, but the servants asked me not to go in. He had just fallen

asleep after being awake all night and I agreed it was best to let him sleep."

Akihiro sat in the dojo and tears streamed silently down his face. One day feasting and happiness and the next day he's dead over a point of honor. Today is as hollow as an empty reed. My spirit carries a gash from the sword of the god of death, but my body is still breathing. I have to see Kenji. I have to.

He found the room where Kenji was. Shinobu was taking in the morning sun on the walkway. He stood up when Akihiro approached, "Oh, it is good to see you here at last. Where have you been? The young Lord needs you. He can't seem to find his center. Maybe you are the answer."

"I have no answers, Shinobu. I am a basket of questions. If he needs me, I am glad, because I need him." Then he let himself into Kenji's room.

Kenji looked up at Akihiro and his eyes brightened. He stood up and they embraced for a long moment. Then they sat down side by side. Kenji placed one hand on Akihiro's knee and looked earnestly into his face, "Have you heard about Yoshiko?" He made fists of his hands, "She's dead, you know. Murdered by those horrible ninjas."

"Yes, I heard. This is all so awful. Did they tell you that Mitsuo took a squad out and attacked the ninja headquarters?"

"Someone mentioned it; I can't remember who. Do you remember the night I found her hiding in the woods and brought her in? Remember how scared we were to face Mihashi?"

"Please listen, Kenji, that's why I came to see you. Mihashi committed seppuku yesterday morning. What are we going to do?"

"Mihashi dead?"

"Yes."

"What battle? Has the reserve guard been armed and sent on the march? You and I will follow, surely?"

"Seppuku! . . . Seppuku, Kenji! Mitsuo challenged him about some embarrassment from his past and he refused to fight, but committed seppuku instead!"

Kenji stood and paced feverishly, repeating to himself, "Not Sensei! Not Sensei!" over and over. Finally, he collapsed and tore at the tatami

until his fingers bled; the tears and sobs flooding over him. Akihiro left him, a heap on the floor convulsed with tears, and found a servant to care for him.

Well, there was no support or comfort to be had from Kenji. Akihiro felt totally alone . . . isolated . . . actually afraid. There was no family for him to turn to. He had been brought from another province to be with Kenji and then train with Mihashi. There had not even been letters sent or visits made to his natural family for years. The people inside these walls were his only family now, and all of them seemed very distant, each experiencing his or her own grief alone.

He went to the shrine to offer a prayer, but his mind wandered. *If something is too hard to bear, there is always a ready solution. Mihashi knew that. It's logical. Looking back, everything I've learned to do was demonstrated by Sensei first. Sensei is a consistent and trustworthy example. He always has been.*

Certainly.

A servant discovered him in the shrine only moments after the act. Lord Tansho was notified immediately. Kenji was questioned to discover whether Akihiro had voiced his intention. Everyone knew what had happened within an hour or so and the Sergeant of the Guard requested an audience with Lord Tansho.

Lord Tansho put him off until afternoon. He wanted to look in on Kenji himself. He was hoping desperately for improvement and Akihiro's death might be the turning point one way or another. If it still looked really bad, he might send him to the country house and his second wife. That would provide a change of scene and yet keep him close by.

At Kenji's room, he stopped outside to talk with Shinobu. "Is he any better?"

"His mind has settled a little. We had the physician in. He still refuses food and water. Lack of appetite is understandable, but three days is too long. He is gentle, but won't take a bite. If his body weakens more, his soul may slip away for lack of something to hang onto. Please, my Lord, we don't know what else to do."

"Don't you worry. I'll take him in hand. You just get the kitchen boy to bring whatever there is for lunch. I'll cook here for the two of us."

"As you say, my Lord." Shinobu left immediately and Lord Tansho

went in to Kenji.

He sat with his back to the door. His father cleared his throat. Kenji turned. "Greetings, Father."

Lord Tansho startled. *He looks like something left too long near the fire. Maybe if I can get him out in the fresh air. . .* He took a minute to light the brazier and put the tea water on to boil. "Come along, Boy."

Kenji followed his father out and around the building to the stables. They found their horses, side by side as they always were. Lord Tansho handed Kenji a cloth and he began to rub down his horse with the distracted action that comes out of habit.

"I'm glad we're home. The grooms here are so good to my horse and he's protected from the storms."

"He is a beautiful animal. Would you like to go riding with me later?"

"Akihiro and I used to go riding together every day we could. Who will use his horse, now? I wonder, could it be sent to his family - would that be acceptable, Father?"

"I'll think about it. How are you feeling today?"

"Better, thank you. When I was told about Akihiro, I thought: he did the only right thing. He was so distraught and this will provide him peace. He did so want to be with Mihashi and I think of Yoshiko there making tea or dancing for them."

Lord Tansho placed his hand over Kenji's, "Don't let dreams of the spirit world lure you away from this world, yet. Surely your friends have gone on to new lives of their own, and I need you to fight beside me when we go up against Hirayama. He's bound to make a move soon and how could I ride to such a glorious victory without my son at my side?"

Kenji's eyes began to wander and his father led him toward the stable door, "Come. I don't want to tire you, now. Let's go have some lunch."

"Oh, I had a large breakfast, Father. I'm not hungry, yet. Perhaps later."

He led Kenji into his room. The kitchen boy had already laid out a large tray of fish and vegetables. Smaller trays were prepared with bowls and chopsticks for them to eat from. A large container of rice had been brought from the kitchen, but Lord Tansho knelt by the brazier and cooked the fish and vegetables himself. *Certainly the boy cannot refuse food I have cooked for him myself.* Kenji did eat, but he felt Mihashi and

Akihiro very close by.

"Let's take that ride together," he offered when Kenji had eaten.

"No, please, Father. I'm very tired. The food has made me sleepy. Let me take a nap and we'll go riding in a couple of hours."

"All right, I'll be back in two hours."

He and the kitchen boy left, but the kitchen boy ran back to get something he had forgotten Lord Tansho ran back when he heard the boy yelling! What he saw was the boy holding desperately to Kenji's arm to keep him from stabbing himself with his shortsword.

Lord Tansho disarmed him and took everything sharp from the room. He collected Shinobu and all the other servants he could find in the general vicinity. "You will all be responsible for Kenji staying alive. If he so much as pricks himself on a thorn and loses one drop of blood, one of you will breathe your last. I will not lose one more samurai in my household to the spirit world in this way."

"As you say, My Lord." They all bowed together.

Once Kenji was calmed and his room filled with servants, Lord Tansho went to his appointment with the sergeant. His personal receiving room was cleared of the bundles of China goods, now, and there was space again for meeting people. He noticed that Lady Kiyomizu had put fresh flowers in the space at the back of the dais. She was exactly what a man needed to come home to.

The sergeant approached, knelt before him, and bowed briefly.

"What is it you have to report?"

"A guard was found dead today on the wall."

"Why didn't you report to me at sunrise, as soon as he was found?"

"It didn't happen early, My Lord. I did report as soon as he was found. He was killed in broad daylight. It was a message. A letter was attached to the body with the sword pin of a Hirayama man."

"Where is the letter?"

"Here, My Lord." He handed over a paper packet, a splotch of sealing wax unbroken on the front, a sticky bloodstain on the back.

Lord Tansho gently peeled up the seal, preserving it whole, but still attached to one side of the packet. *Ah, this is what I've been waiting for. This must be Hirayama's final challenge. A surge of excitement warmed his whole body. Possessing Hirayama's entire province would be wonderful. The regular reapportionment will happen again in only two years, so since there are no heirs to contest it, the Shogun might not even*

send investigators or soldiers. Realistically, his men are spread so thin trying to enforce all the new regulations, one daimyo quietly overtaking another might hardly be noticed. Two years extra income would be very welcome and in that amount of time, I might even be able to put a puppet ruler in position to take over after the reapportionment. That is a pretty extreme idea, but surely ideas can do no harm. I think I'd prefer to read this in private. He laid the packet aside.

“Do you have anything else to report, Sergeant?”

“Yes, My Lord. I fear the morale of the men is too poor for repairing.”

“What would you like me to do about it?”

“I believe the men need to be here with their families for a while. They have been gone so long already. I know they want to go to Mihashi and Akihiro's funerals. Perhaps if there is a formal observation of the forty-nine day journey of their friends' souls to the spirit world, the men will find peace and be able to return with vigor to their soldiering.”

“I will give consideration to your recommendation, Sergeant. Send Mitsuo to me.”

“Yes, My Lord.” The sergeant bowed and left.

Lord Tansho picked up the packet and opened it. His grip on the paper tightened to a deathgrip as he read:

To my Dear and Loyal Friend, Lord Tansho;

I wish to thank you for restoring my village to me. I am grateful that your men destroyed the wasps' nest of ninjas that had settled outside it. My constables are now free to live unmolested and enforce my laws there.

Secondly, I am truly enjoying Etsu. The gift your Lady made to me of this girl will surely be remembered if you should need any favors in the future. She is a first rate girl.

Finally, I wanted you to know that my constables will be collecting taxes this year from all the farms in alignment with the village you returned to me for the full length of our mutual border. I'm certain you won't mind, since this was our border in antiquity and surely must be honored.

All this drivel was planned to be a challenge without looking like one. Lord Tansho was at once furious beyond reason, yet intellectually

stimulated to find himself pitted against a truly clever opponent. He preferred to use a more direct approach himself, but admired people who came up with the subtle maneuvers. Not that he considered such things more effective, but he had an educated man's appreciation for art.

A sound at the door reminded him he had sent for Mitsuo. *Ah . . . this will provide me some satisfaction now . . . and I will get to Hirayama later.*

Mitsuo opened the door and bowed, walked to the front of the room below the dais, bowed again and knelt. Lord Tansho savored the silence and hoped to set Mitsuo's nerves on edge a little with it. Mitsuo tolerated it very well, though, and when Lord Tansho realized it, he gave up and spoke.

"The Sergeant came to me and said that morale is very bad among the men. What do you think about that?"

"He is correct, My Lord."

"Lady Kiyomizu believes you are a holy man. Are you?"

"I have certain skills, but I have never taken vows to any religion, My Lord."

"You are not merely a shipwrecked merchant's son."

"No, My Lord."

"I believe your actions ultimately resulted in this morale problem."

"It was my karma to avenge the death of my mother and the disgrace of my father."

"You completed the task I set for you, but you failed the task set for you by Kenji. His pretty dancer is dead."

"She is safe, my Lord."

"Safe from all but death, of course."

"No, My Lord, she is safe with a cousin of Lady Kiyomizu's in Edo. They know her as Lady Iwasaki."

"Why was Kenji told she was dead?"

"I don't know, My Lord."

"When you swore fealty to me, you swore your life."

"Yes, My Lord."

"You have failed me and I require it of you. " He drew his short sword and extended the hilt to Mitsuo.

Mitsuo felt nothing. He was willing to end his life now. Having accomplished what he had spent over half his life preparing to do, there seemed to be nothing left . . . and the men he had taught and led and

fought beside . . . had shunned him.

He pulled open his kimono and reached out for his Lord's weapon. When his hand was on the hilt, Lord Tansho told him to wait.

"I see you are loyal to me and I have thought of one last way for you to be of use to me."

He put away his sword and handed the missive from Hirayama to Mitsuo. "This was delivered today, skewered to the chest of one of our guards." Mitsuo began to read. "That village he refers to has belonged to the Tansho province since 'antiquity'. And the whole elaborate farce about Etsu being dead was so that we would send news to her family that she had died an honorable death. Then later, he could let it be known that she was his pillow girl and I would lose face as a protector and a man who honors his obligations. Her family may be very distant cousins to the Emperor and have no money, but they still have influence. They are well-liked."

"He seems to have chosen words a person would use when speaking to a servant, My Lord."

"Oh, yes. He wants it to be blatantly insulting so that I cannot brush it off as a drunken mistake. And I don't intend to.

"Here is where you can work for me. I need the men to be ready to move out as soon as possible. They must be organized immediately. They have fought with you before and you led them to victory. They will follow you again. We must mount an assault on Hirayama's castle and get Etsu back.

"If we can capture Hirayama as well, we will occupy all his lands and force his men to swear allegiance to me by making him order them to do so. He has no heirs, so later I will kill him and place Kenji over his province. It will be a glorious victory!

"You will lead my men and accomplish my goals — and then you will yield up your life to me during the Hirayama battle. You must fight there until you die, else when it is over, I will kill you myself. Swear that you will do this."

"I swear by all the gods that I shall die for you on the Hirayama battle field. If this is not true, may I never achieve nirvana."

"Now go and tell the sergeant to have every man exercise his horse tonight. Tomorrow morning will be archery practice and the afternoon will be spent having the guards you trained while I was gone, give pointers to the men who went with me."

“Yes, my Lord.” Mitsuo bowed out and went to deliver the message to the sergeant.

Lord Tansho went to check on Kenji and found him sleeping. He decided to give his approach one more try and told the servants he would be back to eat with him at dinner time.

Next, he went to find Lady Kiyomizu. He found her in the women’s garden and walked her to his rooms where Koi made them tea.

Lady Kiyomizu placed her hands on Lord Tansho’s hands. “I’m glad we finally have an opportunity to talk. I’ve missed you, My Lord.”

Koi made himself scarce.

“A message has come from Hirayama and I must take my army to recapture Etsu.”

“He has Etsu alive?”

“Yes. He’s planned to do this from the beginning. That’s not the worst of it, though. I need Kenji now! He’s the only commander I have that I can trust completely.” He reached over and placed his hand familiarly on the back of her neck — the beginning of his usual foreplay. “I believe it was your idea to arrange the fake death of Yoshiko. Is that right?”

“Well,” she loosened the collar of her kimono, “Mitsuo thought of it and I gave my permission and wrote letters of introduction for her to my cousin in Edo.”

“I spoke to Mitsuo and it doesn’t appear to have been him who kept Kenji in the dark about the imitation death.”

“Actually, I thought it would be all the more convincing if he mourned for her, and it was the perfect way to rid our household of that little fisherman’s daughter. Given enough time, Kenji was bound to get children by her. Why allow such dilution of your true samurai blood? Your line should be pure, my Darling.”

She looked up into his face and he slid his fingers up the back of her neck into her hair.

“Perhaps you should have realized how important the girl was to him,” he clenched his fingers into a fist that clamped and twisted her hair so he could turn her head by jerking sharply, “You have no idea how much damage you have done! He was my good right arm in battle and you have crippled it!”

He could see pleading fear on her face. His fingers clenched tighter and he saw tears fill her eyes, but true to her samurai up-bringing, she

uttered no sound. He shoved her away from him, jostling the table and spilling the teacups. Venom filled his voice. "I'd kill you if I didn't need you to stay and hold the castle. I won't be leaving the sergeant this time. You'll have to manage with only your personal guards and what townspeople you can find.

"And Great Goddess Ameratsu! What am I supposed to do about the mess you've made of Kenji? Hachiman himself couldn't turn him back into a warrior! Maybe you and your religious people can get Buddha's golden ear listening! But you'd better be persuasive, because if he can't ride and fight in three days' time, your blood shall surely soak these tatami!"

He took a breath and calmed himself, "I'm going to eat with Kenji again and I intend to spend the evening with him. Go straighten your hair."

"Yes, My Lord," was all she answered and left silently.

He focused on the flower arrangement and breathed deeply for a few moments. *If people just do what I tell them, things generally turn out fine. If one person turns against me, though, it could all be ruined. I'll just have to make sure no one makes any more mistakes. And that brings to mind household security and that sergeant. He's been unsupervised for too long.*

When the sergeant arrived, he had no idea what to expect. He hoped it was a strategy consultation such as Lord Tansho had often held previously with General Mihashi.

It wasn't.

"Sergeant, I understand that ninjas repeatedly breached our walls attempting to kill Yoshiko."

"Yes, My Lord, but we killed them."

"Only some of them. I also understand several of my men were murdered when these ninjas gained entry."

"Yes, My Lord, but we doubled the guard and tightened work schedules and ended the losses."

"What about the man you lost for me today in broad daylight?"

Lord Tansho was very casual, but the sergeant felt a sword at his throat at each mention of a failure. He knew Lord Tansho tended to disregard mistakes in many areas of life, but a military mistake was unforgivable and his Lord had mentioned three. He had no hope of a future.

“You have allowed the household guard to become lazy and careless. They need an object lesson to remind them how important it is to be vigilant.”

The sergeant knew what the object lesson would be. It was common to behead someone who had made a mistake, as an example to others. One was expected to look on this as a small sacrifice for the good of the group. He tried to adjust his thoughts to this attitude and accept his oncoming fate.

“Therefore, you shall bring the horses to the men from the stables and fetch back the arrows the men have shot on the archery range. You will carry equipment from the armory to the dojo courtyard and bring water when they call for it. When they see you being conscientious about these small things, they will know how important it is to be careful about greater duties.”

The sergeant was appalled! To be treated in this manner was humiliating beyond bearing! It was the worst possible thing Lord Tansho could have done and the sergeant was sure he knew it. Fury burned in his belly and the flame of rage rose to his throat, but he choked it down until he could answer quite naturally:

“As you wish, My Lord.”

Lord Tansho dismissed him with a wave of his hand. *How disappointing not to see any rage in his eyes. And no sound of humiliation in his voice, either. I remember when Kenji was young and easily provoked. What a delight that was. These older men provide no satisfaction.*

Though, perhaps he may break tomorrow when he starts his new duties. That would be pleasant to see.

While her Lord was with the sergeant, Lady Kiyomizu attended to her appearance, of course, but she also attended to what repair she felt she could make to her mistake. She went to Kenji’s room and sent all the servants out. Then she asked Kenji to pray with her to the Buddha for resilience and strength.

“What I am about to tell you must be kept a profound secret. You cannot even tell Shinobu or Koi or any of the servants. No one must know. Do you understand?”

“Oh yes, dear lady. I can keep your secret very well. I will keep it forever.”

“Yoshiko’s death and funeral were an act put on for the sake of the

ninjas - to make them stop hunting her and attacking the household. She is in Edo with . . .”

The sound of a deep voice quizzing the servants warned of Lord Tansho's approach. Lady Kiyomizu ran out the back way as though the god of fire himself pursued her!

Lord Tansho entered the room and sat near the brazier. “How have you been dealing with the heat in the afternoons? I know Koi has been fussy about running errands after midday.”

“I slept through most of it today, Father. The physician brought me something that made me very tired.”

“Sleep is often healing. It is very cool in the mornings. Lady Kiyomizu and I are viewing the lotuses on the courtyard lake in the morning two days hence. There will be chilled sake and the most beautiful view in all the northern provinces. I would truly be glad to have you join us.”

Kenji had never seen his father so solicitous. He could not by any means refuse.

“Certainly. I'd love it.” *What brought this on? He's treating me like a visiting daimyo. Maybe our time together on the China raid had something to do with it. And thinking of the raid . . .*

"How are preparations coming for the assault on Hirayama?"

Lord Tansho was surprised, but pleased, to hear Kenji sounding so much like himself.

“The men are exercising their horses tonight and practicing archery and fighting tomorrow.”

"Let me join with my horse tonight, Father."

“Are you sure you have the strength?"

“Absolutely!"

“All right. We'll go as soon as we're finished eating." He smiled a broad smile. *I was right all along about spending this extra time on the boy. The overpowering influence of my samurai character has affected him. I have reinforced his strength with my own.*

Lord Tansho evaluated the night sky the same way he did the condition of the rock wall protecting his property. Every star was in its correct place as each stone was. It provided him great satisfaction to walk from guard post to guard post and see everything exactly where it belonged.

They were leaving in the morning for the confrontation with Hirayama and it was important to know that what he left behind was safe.

He stopped and spoke with the guards at the post on the wall behind the dojo. They were alert and glad for the news of Kenji's recovery. When Lord Tansho turned away and started to walk to the next post, he noticed Nyosan sitting on the steps to the veranda on the dojo. He approached her and she smiled, but he was not so pleased.

"What are you doing out this late, and alone?"

"I wanted to see my Hun and have him to myself for a few minutes." She stood up, took his hand, lay her head on his shoulder, and hugged his arm. They began to walk hand in hand.

"Did you hear about Kenji?"

"I did. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yes. And having him beside me when we go to end this property dispute - what could be better?"

"Oh . . . when you come to me afterward. That will be better."

"Yes, yes. You always say that." He chuckled and put his arm around her waist, "Mmmm. . . that will be nice. But right now I have to finish checking the guards. And you - Little Temptation - you'd better get to bed."

The morning broke clear and crisp. A light breeze riffled the long grass and stirred the water of the lake. It made the lotus pads float up and down like boats at their moorings. The greatest point of beauty as the lotus opened in response to the ascending sun was the visual contrast. The rippled water was indigo, the pads were a brilliant green, and the white flower petals shown in their purity like freshly fallen snow. The people gathered there held their sake cups. When the flowers were fully opened, and they could see the brilliant yellow tribute to Ameratsu in the centers, then they drank.

Lord Tansho gazed at Nyosan across the pond from him. At all public activities, he had instructed her to sit across from him in this fashion. Always in his direct line of sight, so he could look at her whenever he wanted and no one could tell. It was something they'd quietly shared through all the years and still did. He smiled to himself and Nyosan smiled in response. Today, in this light, she looked just the way she had when they first met. Joy filled his heart.

It was a relaxed and beautiful beginning to a very strenuous day for the samurai. It was also a day in which Kenji was glad to be alive. His spirit danced and sang with the soaring birds, for Yoshiko was alive and he would see her again!

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Look for Autumn, the final season of Shirley Leggett's novel, [Delicate Blush of the Geisha](#), in the January 2016 issue of Literally Speaking.



At this time, the Klamath Writers' Guild will continue to meet in the Community Meeting Room on the corner of 4th and Pine Streets. The county is now charging a \$10 fee per use, for meetings under 4 hours. It is also looking to sell the building, which is why we are looking for a more stable location for our meetings.

The open meetings for January 2016 are on the 11th and the 25th. Guests are welcome to attend any open meeting. Meetings begin at 6:30 PM and normally end at 9:00 PM or sooner depending on the number of writers offering work for critique.

The first two meetings are free and if you decide to continue, we ask you to join our diverse mix of writers. Any person at least 18 years of age expressing an interest in the Literary Arts shall be eligible for membership. (Persons under the age of 18 may request membership in the Guild. Each request will be considered on an individual basis.) No one will be denied membership in the KWG because of race, creed, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Annual membership dues of \$30.00 will be assessed all members of the KWG. Dues will be prorated throughout the fiscal year, which begins April 1.

For a complete list of meeting dates, please visit our [Calendar](#). For more information about the Guild visit: www.klamathwritersguild.org