



Delicate Blush of a Geisha

by Shirley Leggett

Winter Karma and Dharma

Yoshiko heard Momma call her. She was sitting near a glossy-leaved bush in the lee of a dune. Every day or so, she came by to see if any of the berries on it were red yet. There were only three today, so she popped them into her mouth. When there were many, she would bring a square of cloth and pick them to take home. She stood up and walked to the little creek that wound its way round the dunes and down to the ocean. There were clumps of cress in spots she knew and now she pulled out a large handful to take home. She tucked it into her homespun kimono and dutifully turned toward the village.

Momma would walk to the edge of the village and call out to her when she wanted her. Unless the wind was blowing terribly, her voice carried. Yoshiko never wandered too far. It was probably that she must watch the baby. It seemed much like any other baby to her, but Momma and Papa insisted she refer to him as 'First Brother' rather than just 'the baby'. The family had waited eagerly for a boy and Yoshiko had helped care for four baby sisters during the wait. Jade and Fragrant Flower had not lived very long, so Yoshiko sang them lullabies at O Bon when the family remembered their ancestors. Kiki and Rei were strong girls and continued to grow.

She climbed a dune spotted with clumps of hurricane grass. From the top, her house was visible in the distance; one among many poor fishermen's houses standing on their short pole legs above the sandy ground. There seemed to be something happening at the far edge of the village where it met the main road. There was a man on horseback followed by a horse-drawn cart. It might be a salesman or a traveler with stories to tell. She ran down the dune to her house and dashed up the ladder to the open door.

"Momma, guess what I saw!"

Kiki grabbed her by the hand and told her, "Sit down and wait here. Momma is out calling and looking for you. She said we must stay in the house. There is danger in the street."

They went inside and sat on the floor near First Brother's quilt. He was sleeping quietly. Rei had snuggled up next to him and was also asleep. There was the sound of hurried footsteps and Momma came in the door. She grasped the door post for balance as her belly was huge with another baby and usually she moved more slowly.

"Oh, Yoshiko, I am so glad you are safe inside. The Great Lord has sent his man to gather up little girls again."

"I thought that only happened on holidays," Kiki frowned.

"Well, his servant is outside the village now, and I want you inside until he is gone."

"Yes, Momma," the girls answered together.

The afternoon passed slowly. Yoshiko swept the sand on the floor to one side and watched it sift down between the boards. Then she played with the baby. Kiki had her hands full trying to keep their sister Rei from slipping out the door. Momma sat or lay quietly most of the time when she wasn't nursing the baby. Yoshiko sang a little song and tickled Rei's toes to make her laugh.

As evening came, Momma cooked a watery rice soup for everyone. It looked more substantial with the cress floating in it. Cress didn't seem to make the soup more filling, though. When Papa came home, he would bring a fish, but until then, there was very little food. It was the same for the whole village. The storms had spoiled the fishing for the last two seasons and nearly wiped out the fruit and vegetables. There was rice if you had money, but without fish . . .

Papa at last came home, but Momma was not as happy as she usually was when he arrived, He did bring a fish and Momma cooked it, setting a portion aside for First Brother for when he woke up.

"What took you so long to get home? I worried about you."

"I stopped and talked to Lord Tansho's servant for a little while."

Momma shrieked, "What have you done?"

"Be calm, Woman, you'll bring the baby too soon. I did nothing. I wanted to tell you about what he is offering, first. He is looking for workers to plant rice. Girls ten years old and older can work in the fields and their families will be paid in rice. An allotment of rice every year until they are fifteen. Then they will be given a dowry and a husband

within their class."

"Yoshiko is not ten until next year."

"No, Momma. I am already ten. I have not planted rice, but I have sorted fish and scaled them. I am a good worker. Papa said so."

"Hush, my Peach, you don't understand. How can I part with you, my Good Girl, my Best helper?"

"Think of the rice, Momma. How can we feed the little ones and the new baby without rice? And you, Momma, you need to eat to make milk."

Papa smiled and put his hand on her head. "See what a sensible girl she has grown into? She can earn rice for the family while I fish."

That was how Yoshiko found herself indentured to Lord Tansho, the province daimyo. Momma spent the next week alternately crying and then trying to tell her everything she might need to know to live peacefully among Tansho's servants: do not question, do not argue, never speak with an insolent tone. Do what you are told quickly and pay careful attention to exactly how it is done. Above all, she must stay away from any samurai.

"They are a fierce breed and might cut you to ribbons as easy as look at you. This I know from experience, my Peach. Dear Grandfather and his brother are with the ancestors for the reason that they disagreed in public with Lord Tansho's samurai captain. There was no time to explain or apologize; it was over in seconds and they were gone."

Yoshiko kept that in mind, but when Momma went into labor and delivered a new little brother, she felt it was even more urgent that she get rice. Little boys needed lots of rice to grow up strong and healthy. She insisted that Papa take her to the castle right away. A neighbor lady promised to care for Momma and the little ones, and Yoshiko and Papa traveled inland alone.

Papa had packed two bundles with items they would need. Yoshiko carried her blanket and clothes and a container of cooked rice. Papa carried a pot to boil water in and a teapot, a jar of salted cabbage, a box of herbs for tea, and a tinder box for starting a fire. There were two pieces of dried fish, but they took two fresh fish for the first day. Since it was early spring, they expected to find eggs in any birds' nests they found along the way and Yoshiko had seen big boys from the village throw stones and kill birds. She thought she might surprise Papa with a bird to eat if she could hit one.

Yoshiko was excited to start this adventure and she hurried to say goodbye to her sisters and the babies. Mama hugged her close. She was sure she would miss Mama, but this morning she was in too much of a rush to think about it. Papa was slow as a turtle when he said goodbye to Mama. He placed her hand on his cheek and kissed the palm, then folded her fingers closed over it. He whispered in her ear and then kissed her forehead. When at long last he patted the sisters on their heads and came out the door, Yoshiko was ready to run up the path to the road. She did not, of course. She waited for Papa to lead and followed carefully behind him. It would not do for the village to think she was a little child, too young to go to work. As they neared the road, Yasunari's grandfather stepped up to Papa and spoke to him.

"We will miss your eldest daughter, she is a good helper. Please take this with you for the trip." He handed Papa a bundle of dried seaweed.

Papa took the bundle with both hands and bowed his head. "Thank you so much. If you need help with anything when I return, remember to ask me."

The old man turned to Yoshiko, "By you, Lord Tansho will know that our village produces good workers, loyal and honorable. Remember that, Child."

"I shall, Honored Grandfather. Thank you."

Their first day of walking seemed to pass quickly. When they stopped along the road to eat at midday, Yoshiko nibbled at a strip of seaweed while they waited for the water to heat for their tea. They ate some rice while the tea steeped. Finally they took turns drinking from the tiny spout of the traveler's teapot. While papa put things back into bundles, Yoshiko tried her hand at killing a bird.

She saw a dusky bird hiding beneath a low bush, leaned over and picked up a stone, and tried to sneak toward it. The bird fluttered out of the bush and tried to fly up, but it only managed to hop badly around. She stepped closer and the bird flew right at her with a screech. She dropped the rock and dashed back to the road.

Papa turned to look at her. "What is the matter, my Peach?"

She brushed a tear from her eye, "Nothing, Papa. I was just trying to get a bird for dinner, but it screeched and flew into my face."

"Ah, it is lucky that you didn't kill that bird after all. The soup from a screeching bird tastes bad, you know."

"Mama never told me that."

"I never brought her any screeching birds to cook," Papa smiled. He helped Yoshiko load her bundle on her back and situate the strap across her forehead, then he put on his own bundle and began to walk. By evening, they came to the end of the coastal flat and began to climb some gentle hills.

At the crest of one, there were three scrub pines. Papa built a fire and boiled some water. He cooked the two fresh fish over the coals, steeped their tea, and reheated their rice. It was a filling dinner and they might have slept very well, except that the wind came up and blew all night long. The poor little trees were not much protection.

When the wind finally stopped, the fog settled on them. Yoshiko was chilled through. This was more of an adventure than she had planned on. She was very glad when Papa got the fire going in the morning and boiled up their breakfast broth of seaweed and rice.

By the end of their second day of walking, they seemed to be in a different type of land. The ground was not all sandy anymore and low, grassy hills nestled one against the other along a narrow river. Everything around them seemed to be one shade or another of green and there was a small inn where the road they were traveling joined a broader road. A cold drizzle began to fall.

"Here, Yoshiko, go stand at the side of the inn under the eaves. I will speak with someone and see what we can do."

Papa went to the back entrance of the inn and stood in the spattering rain while he spoke to someone inside. When he came back, he led her up onto the raised walkway at the side of the inn. "The cook gave us permission to stay the night on the walkway out of the rain. Perhaps this will pass and we can build a fire after all." But when the drizzle began to pour, he seemed resigned and opened their packs. "We'll have to eat a cold dinner tonight."

"That's alright, Papa. At least we're out of the wind." Yoshiko stood up and walked toward the kitchen door.

"Where are you going, my Peach?"

"I want to talk to the little serving girl I saw peek out the door while you were talking."

"Don't get her in trouble by taking her away from her work. They will make us leave."

"I won't, Papa."

She returned after a short time and sat down to her cold rice and pickled cabbage. When they finished eating, they wrapped up in their blankets, but Yoshiko didn't lay down. She put some of their dried herbs into the teapot and waited.

It gradually became very dark. Because of the rain clouds, there were no stars or moon to see by and when the last lights in the inn went out, Yoshiko could barely see her hand in front of her face. At last above the sound of the falling rain, she heard the kitchen door slide open and then shut. The little serving girl came up to her with a large pot. It held hot water. She filled their little teapot and then wet two cloths. Yoshiko thanked her profusely. The girl then continued on her way to the bath house.

Yoshiko rocked her father's shoulder. "Wake up."

"What is it?"

"Wash before tea," she giggled. "See what the little serving girl brought us?"

Papa took the hot cloth and pressed it to his face. "How kind of her."

By the time they had washed their hands and faces, the tea was steeped enough to be drinkable. Yoshiko let Papa drink first.

"See, Papa, Momma was too worried. People outside our village are nice."

"No, Little Peach, your Momma was telling the truth. There are people in the world who are not kind. Momma and I will pray to the ancestors to watch out for you."

Yoshiko woke first in the morning and was pleasantly surprised. There was a little cloth bundle on the edge of the walkway. "Papa, look," she held the bundle open for him to see the two rolls it contained. "She brought us soft buns for breakfast. They must have been left over from the inn's dinner last night."

They ate and then drew water from the inn's well to refill their waning supply. She expected to leave right away, but Papa began wandering in the empty field across the road from the inn. He picked a long blade of grass and two yellow wildflowers, tied them together with another blade of grass, and laid them atop the folded napkin which had held the buns. Then they left.

The day was clear and sunny and more people were on the road. Each green, rolling hill they climbed seemed to bring a new crossroad and a new traveler or two. When they stopped at midday to eat, a pair of

girls approached them and asked for a drink of water. One was small and had naturally wavy hair cut with bangs and about shoulder length, similar to Yoshiko's. The other had evidently started letting her hair grow long as older girls did. It was tied back, but fell to her waist, straight and black. They, too, wore homespun kimonos and went barefoot, carrying their blanket bundles on their backs.

As they drank, the taller of the two said, "I'm Sei and this is my sister, Momo. She's nine and I'm eleven and Momma sent us to Lord Tansho's castle. She says he will trade rice for us and feed us himself."

"Our house is full of girls and girls are a plague," Momo supplied unbidden.

"When did you eat last?" Papa asked.

"We don't live far from here. We ate yesterday at midday before we started out."

Yoshiko dug into one of their bundles and brought out two extra pieces of dried fish and some seaweed. Both girls were grateful. From there they continued on together and by evening, they were within sight of the castle. It stood atop the next rolling hill and beyond that was a wide, flat valley laid with green plants thick as rabbit fur.

"Let's camp here and build a little fire," Papa suggested.

So the girls all went in search of twigs to burn while Papa took out the water and herbs and the last of the cooked rice.

Yoshiko found a little creek dashing itself down a rocky crevice. She had Sei and Momo help her gather bunches of cress and wild lettuce growing on its banks. She took off her belt and tied it around all the sticks they had collected so she could carry them bundled on her back. It freed her hands and those of the other girls to carry the food to Papa.

He was very pleased. He, too, had found spring food nearby: several tiny, wild onions and four bird eggs. As soon as the water boiled, he cracked the eggs into it. The eggs were small and not very new. Each contained an almost-bird rolled in a tiny ball. Once they were cooked, Papa put in the onions and greens. He divided the rice into their bowls and poured the hot soup onto it. The tiny birds were chewy, but tasted good. With the cress and onions, it smelled very much like dinner at home. They shared the hot tea when they were done eating. By the time they laid out their blankets and wrapped themselves up for sleep, the sun was setting and the castle looked like a shadow cast against a pink and orange sky.

Morning brought the sounds of travelers along the road and Papa's seaweed broth for breakfast. Yoshiko looked down into the valley and onto the roofs of the village houses. It was a larger village than her own, probably three times as big, but the thatch roofs were familiar, along with the morning sounds of birds and crying babies. One branch of the road they were on passed through the village and led up the hill to the home of Lord Tansho.

Papa stood next to her. "See those fields out past the village? That is where you will work along with other girls and tend Lord Tansho's rice."

"Will I sleep in the household behind the wall on the hill?"

"No, surely not. That is where the Great Lord and his retainers and all his servants and their families live. I imagine there will be a house in the village where you will live with someone to watch out for you. Only if there were a war where the village was in danger, then all the villagers would go up to the courtyard behind the wall for safety."

"Even the butcher and the tanner?"

"Well, perhaps not them. But you would go, of course, you and your new friends. You will be valuable. The daimyo must have good caretakers for his rice."

When they had all gathered their bundles, they made their way along the road to the fields, past the village. Once there, a woman met them and gave Papa a ceramic chit for each of the girls and sent him to a man who would give him the rice.

Papa patted each of the girls on the head and gave them a hug goodbye. Sei and Momo told him where he could find their house so he could take some rice to their mother. The woman led them to the overseer and had them sit on the ground.

"I have brought more girls. They are young, but they look strong enough."

"I told you no more girls. We have more than we need already."

"We have paid for them. You must take them."

He raised his voice, "I must take them? Why did you not ask me before you paid for them? You take them!"

"It's done now. What do you expect me to do with them?"

"Go take them to Nyosan. She'll find something to do with them."

The three girls followed the woman as she trudged up a small hill and along the edge of the village. Yoshiko noticed the grasses and ferns and budding berry brambles that grew along the pathway. If anyone

asked for berries, she would know where to come and pick them this summer. Shortly, they arrived at a pathway that was paved with smooth stones. It was very wide. It did not go straight on as Yoshiko felt most roads should. It seemed to wander from side to side, back and forth along the gentle hillside approaching the Tansho castle at its top. After the second turn, there were fat, stone walls along the sides of the road. They started out only shoulder height to Yoshiko, but gradually became taller until they were far above the woman's head.

When they reached the top, the tall walls joined a broad wall of stone and dirt. It was just as tall, but wide enough for guards to stand upon it and walk around, half hidden by a parapet. There the stone road came to a rise and turned into an arching bridge. Wide as they started across, it became very narrow at the center and Yoshiko looked over the railing onto a beautiful little lake. There were geese and ducks nesting in the nearby grass and an edging of iris where the bridge widened again and opened onto a large courtyard. The woman had them sit down at the foot of the bridge to wait while she went to get Nyosan.

Yoshiko could not take it all in. She nudged Sei, "Did you ever see a building like that?" She pointed to the tall, central building. "It looks like four huge houses stacked one on top of another. Our whole village could fit in the one on the bottom."

"Look at the clothes the guards wear. They all have the same design as the carved doors on that building."

Momo pouted, "I wonder when they eat?"

Sei patted her, "They will feed us. Momma said so."

"What if they decide we can't stay? I'm hungry now."

Yoshiko glanced at the grasses growing along the lake's bank. There was one she recognized as something that could be picked for soup as long as the top had not bloomed, yet. She got up and picked the swollen buds from a dozen or so of the grasses and brought them to Momo and Sei. "Here. These can be eaten. They are a bit crunchy, but they are good for you. The outside is a little stringy, so tear it away and eat the inside."

"Thank you," Sei said and poked Momo.

"Momo shoved a bud in her mouth, "Yes, thank you." A drop of green leaked out of the corner of her mouth and she wiped it on her sleeve.

By the time they had finished eating the buds and had a sip of water from the lake, the woman who had brought them up the hill came toward

them from across the courtyard accompanied by another woman.

Sei stared and then turned to whisper to Yoshiko, "Look at her kimono. How beautiful. Have you ever seen anything like that?"

"Sometimes the sunset paints the sky that color."

"She must be Lady Tansho herself."

Yoshiko looked at herself and her friends. How awful they must seem in their knee-length homespun, like little dolls made from the autumn grasses. Now she missed Papa and Momma and the babies and wished she were home.

She heard the woman speaking as they approached, "They are young and strong and they'll be pretty when they are washed and dressed. The overseer selected them out especially for you. Stand up, Girls, and let her look at you."

They stood and bowed at the waist. Yoshiko had never felt ragged before, but this woman's comments made her feel like she was half untouchable. But that was not who she was. Her Papa was no leather worker! He and Momma were full-blooded Nipponese and so was she.

Yoshiko bit her lip to help keep her emotions quiet. This was a samurai household and she knew all samurai children were brought up to show no emotion in front of others. She was not about to show such a fault and be sent back home. That would bring shame to her family and the village. Then how would they be able to feed the new brothers? The boy babies made Momma and Papa so happy, she did not want them to go quickly to the ancestors as so many babies did.

The lady in the pale orange kimono said, "I think the overseer has a good eye, although the small one has wavy hair."

"Surely that is out-weighted by the perfect roundness of her face and the small features." The woman took Momo by the chin, turned her face sideways, and swept the offending hair away from her cheek and ear on that side. "Wavy hair can be straightened."

"Yes, I see it. I'll keep them all."

"Thank you, Madam." The woman from the rice fields bowed and went back over the bridge. The girls looked to their bundles and prepared to follow the new lady.

"Tell me your names, please, Girls." Each answered; then she responded, "My name is Nyosan. I oversee Lady Kiyomizu's household. Follow me and we'll find you a place for your belongings and get you fed. We can't have you munching randomly on the flowers we pass, can

we?" Yoshiko and Sei blushed and looked down at the ground. Nyosan smiled, "As we go, do not speak unless someone asks you a direct question. There will be time to talk later. Do you understand?"

Sei and Yoshiko said, "Yes, Nyosan, and Momo nodded.

Nyosan's right hand made a quick flicker, "No, Momo. When an answer is required, you must speak it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Nyosan."

The girls walked behind Nyosan past the tall, central building and toward the buildings beyond it. Eventually, she led them into a large room with a polished, wooden floor and a wall of cabinets on one end. She slid open the front of a large cabinet and helped the girls put away their things. From a second cabinet, she took a stack of folded clothes.

"Come, Girls." The statement was accompanied by a different hand sign.

They left the first building and walked along a path lined with low bushes that took them to a building whose roof was ceramic, like a temple roof. There was a chimney at one end billowing grey smoke and a tall girl at the doorway wearing a light brown kimono.

Nyosan spoke to her, "Bathe these girls, Kyoko, and dress them in these. Then take them to the kitchen for some food. If we make them wait for supper, we shall no doubt have gaping holes in the landscaping."

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Kenji, heir apparent of the Tansho line, sat on the tatami floor of his room with his open ink box to one side and several sheets of paper in front of him. Brush in hand, he was practicing the stroke for the perfect bamboo leaf.

A servant quietly entered and stood awaiting acknowledgment. It was Koi, his father's body servant. That would surely mean no more drawing for today. He carefully put away his brushes and ink stick. He rinsed his ink stone and dried it. His servant would have done these things if he merely left them where they were, but his teacher had explained that respect for your tools would show itself in the quality of your lines, so he never left them to a servant if he could help it.

Eventually, he stood up and looked at Koi. "Have you brought a message from my father?"

"Yes, Young Master. My Lord Tansho says a boy of thirteen should be at his father's side learning about life, not drawing pictures all afternoon like some monk with nothing better to do."

"Where shall I meet him?"

"He is at the shrine of the ancestors, Young Master."

"I spend all day, beginning at sunrise, learning about samurai life from General Mihashi. Shouldn't some bit of the afternoons be my own?"

They left his room and stood for a moment on the stone and moss walkway that led to the shrine.

"I would not say that to your father unless you intend to inflame his anger, and that is not something a wise man would ever want to do."

"Yes, Koi, I know. My mother has warned me endlessly. But I have never seen him angry. I begin to think it is a ploy to make me obedient."

"It is no empty warning, Kenji, be assured of that. The only men who have purposely stirred your father's anger are foolish and dead."

"I will remember that."

Kenji went on to the shrine and Koi went back to his afternoon chores.

Lord Tansho was seated on a narrow bench that faced toward the family shrine. "Koi certainly took his time bringing you. I shall have to speak to him about it."

"He came directly to me, My Father, I just had to clean my brushes before I could leave my room." Kenji knelt on the ground facing his father, bowed his head, and said, "What does My Father wish?"

"First, don't make excuses for servants."

"As you say."

"Now, what do you know about this shrine?"

Ah, Father has called me to recite.

"It is the shrine to our ancestors who procured this land and Tanshos have held it for Four generations." He got up and went into the shrine. Stopping to stand in front of an elevated sword stand, he lit the incense sticks in front of it. "These two swords, given to Great-Great Grandfather by his Emperor were used to take this province from the control of an out-of-favor cousin . . ."

". . . corrupt . . ." the Lord corrected.

"from the control of a corrupt distant cousin of the Emperor." He moved to the next memorial display, "Great Grandfather Tansho led his retainers on many campaigns carrying this battle flag with our family crest. The Emperor himself presented him with this iron fan, a sign of his excellent service." The next display was inlaid lacquer chopsticks and a gold bowl for the offerings. Above hung a silk panel example of his

grandfather's best calligraphy. "Grandfather Tansho studied at the temple and pursued the Way of the Bodhisattva all his days. This poem was written to Kwannon the morning of your birth." Kenji came out from the shrine and stood waiting for his father's comment.

"The one thing you left out was that the gold of that bowl was mined here in our own province. The vein ran out, but it provided for us while my father was off at the temple."

"I'm sorry. I did not know."

"Well, now you do. You're not a child anymore and I want you to take note: our ancestors were warriors. My father may have wasted his life grinding ink and chanting the namebutsu, but it was samurai prowess that provided him the place and the safety in which to do it. I have come back to true Tansho form. I've studied strategy and bushido all my life. I've fought off encroaching neighbors and bands of ronin. Now that I must live in Edo alternate years, the opportunity for mischief here while I am gone is wide open. It is true, I have Mihashi to lead and train my guards and retainers, but he will not live forever. It is time that you begin to see how this province is run. One day you will have to do it yourself. Time to put down the ink stick and pick up the sword."

"Yes, My Father."

Tansho stood. "Come."

The two walked to the Lord's formal reception room. Ozu, Tansho's household overseer had made the room ready by posting a couple of servants there and several of the household guards. Once his father had settled himself in the dais at the end of the room, with Kenji to his left, two guards moved, one to either side down in front of the pair.

They sat in silence for a few minutes and then came the sound of people walking in the hallway. Tansho signed to the door guard to let them in. Ozu came in first and led two townspeople. The first was a middle-aged man with greying hair. When he knelt and bowed, Kenji could read the word "sword maker" marked on the back of his plain, dark kimono. The second was a young man whose marking was "apprentice". The apprentice carried a very long, narrow box.

The visitors both came to the center of the room, knelt again, and bowed. The sword maker and Lord Tansho exchanged greetings. Then he asked permission for his apprentice to approach with the box. The guards rose up on one knee and Lord Tansho signaled him to bring the box to the dais.

He brought it forward, opened it, and lifted out a long sword in its scabbard. He held it in both hands, bowed forward and offered it up to Tansho. "My Lord."

Tansho accepted it. The apprentice retreated and the sword maker approached.

"This is the sword you requested, my Lord. More flexible than any before it, but able to keep a keener edge."

Tansho signaled for Kenji to come close. He withdrew the sword from the scabbard. Kenji's breath was taken away. The finish shone like a mirror and the gentle waves of color and shadow along the sharpened edge were strikingly beautiful.

"Father, there is engraving near the hilt ..."

"It is a prayer. What is important to recognize is balance. That tells you whether you can control it and how long you can fight without tiring. Here," he handed the sword to Kenji, "see how this feels? It has perfect balance."

There was no doubt, it felt like a dream floating in his hands. *Father is right. This is much more exhilarating than calligraphy and chanting!*

Tansho took back the sword, returned it to the scabbard, and spoke to the sword maker, "Shall we test it?"

"All has been made ready, My Lord, just out in the courtyard by the stables."

The apprentice again carried the sword while Ozu and two guards accompanied them. In the stable yard was a cart and an untouchable to handle the animal carcass needed for the test.

Tansho addressed the sword maker, "Do you think there is any true comparison between an animal carcass and a human one? Might not animal bones mar the blade or dull the edge?"

The untouchable pulled harder on the rope that suspended the bull carcass from a stable beam and turned his face away from Kenji's curious gaze.

The sword maker assured him, "Each sword I have made is stronger and more perfected than the last. You need not worry. Test it, My Lord."

"Have you made many swords?" Kenji asked.

"A limited number, surely. It takes six months or more to make one. I must begin as soon as I return home on the one the Shogun has requested, so there will be time to have it done by New Year's."

Lord Tansho slipped the scabbard into his obi and drew, slicing the

carcass in half with one smooth, even strike.

"There seems to be a slight lag in response, a little drag, perhaps."

"Once you are used to it, My Lord, that will surely disappear."

"Excellent. I am very pleased. Payment, Ozu."

A small bag heavy with gold was handed to the sword maker who passed it to his apprentice.

"My Lord Tansho is a very generous man. Thank you many times. Please know I am glad to serve you again any time."

He and his apprentice bowed several times as they backed away and finally turned to leave. Once his back was turned away completely, Tansho strode determinedly forward, swung up and reached out with the blade. It separated head from neck with no hesitation. Then, before the body could fall, he sliced down from shoulder blade to opposite hip - a classic cut. Kenji had learned that exercise in sword practice.

"Not one bit of drag. My instincts are always right. Animals make no real comparison."

The apprentice shrieked and ran away full speed. The untouchable huddled behind the cart. Ozu and the guards turned blandly away and Lord Tansho turned toward Kenji. There was a glow of joy and satisfaction in his father's face he had never seen before.

"What is wrong, Kenji? I know you've seen death before. By all the gods, sit down before you fall down." Kenji sat. His father's face went stern. The joy vanished. "Do not vomit!"

Kenji's eyes widened and he swallowed hard. His father squatted in front of him and lightly dragged his first finger down the center of Kenji's chest, stopping midway between his heart and his bellybutton. As he held it there, Kenji's stomach lowered itself out of his throat and back into his belly.

"What - what did he do to anger you, My Lord?"

"Not a thing, Child. I am not angry."

"Surely, My Father, there must have been something."

"Try to understand. This was to prevent a future I do not want. Did you not hear him yourself say his next creation would be given to the Shogun? I may be in a position to become Shogun someday. It would never do for him to have a sword like mine, or perhaps better. That possibility had to be prevented."

"As you say. But what of the sword maker's family? What will happen to his apprentice?"

"The carcass handler will take him home to them. There is enough gold in that bag to care for them for a long, long time and the apprentice will contract with a less famous sword maker. Everything will be fine."

Tansho went into the stable to dip water from the trough and clean the sword. Once it was clean and dried, he put it in the scabbard. He signaled Kenji to join him.

"Take a cloth and wipe down your horse while I do the same for mine. They've smelled the blood and there's no point in them getting stirred up for nothing."

Kenji did as he was bid while he listened to his father cluck reassuringly to the horses. He began to feel himself relax as he groomed the horse. He wanted to extend this feeling, so he moved on to groom another horse after his. It also gave him an acceptable reason to move away from his father and toward the door. The beheading of the renowned and gifted craftsman flashed through his memory. Tears filled the corners of his eyes and spilt over. He wiped them away the second they dared to slip onto his cheeks.

Tansho finished his own horse and spoke to the stable boy, "Calm the rest of these horses and clean the bedding again. The smell of piss hangs in the air here." He walked over to Kenji, took him by the chin, and looked at his face, "Have you been crying?"

"No! No, My Lord."

"Your face is wet."

"It is sweat. I suppose, like the horses, this has all been a little too exciting for one afternoon, and I broke out into a sweat."

Tansho swept one finger along the cheek beneath Kenji's eye and licked the finger. "Doesn't taste like sweat ..."

"It must be sweat, My Lord Father, since samurai children don't cry and there is no more pure-bred samurai child in all Nippon than your son." He put on his best social smile and his father's features softened a degree or two.

"Go to Mihashi and tell him to watch you meditate for half an hour."

"Yes, My Father. But I believe there is water practice today ..."

"An hour."

"As you say."

"By the gods, **exactly** as I say."

Kenji bowed deeply, then turned to go, but kept his father in sight just as a precaution. He made his escape as carefully as he could. He

needed to look determined to go where he was told without seeming to rush, so as to avoid bringing unwanted attention to himself. If his legs did not feel so weak, he would have run all the way back to Edo and the quiet temple there. Walking mindfully, he made it as far as his own room.

His training mate, Akihiro, was there practicing his fan throw.

"What on earth happened to you? You look awful!"

"I have to change clothes and go to the dojo. I have to meditate supervised by Mihashi."

"You don't need anyone to watch you meditate any more."

"Father has sent me."

"What about water practice?"

"I have to forget water practice. Father has sent me to meditate."

"Let me walk over with you."

Both boys changed clothes and followed the pathways between the buildings to the dojo. No one was there. They brought out two cushions onto the polished wood floor and each sat cross-legged. They folded their hands and chanted a few repetitions. Then they tried to be quiet.

Akihiro couldn't. He whispered, "Why did your father send you to meditate? What did you do?"

"Nothing. I did nothing."

"No, really, tell me."

"Nothing. Really. I hear someone. Be quiet."

The door slid open and Mihashi entered. "You two don't look dressed for water practice. What are you doing here?"

Kenji bowed, "My father has sent me with an order."

"Yes?"

"He said you are to watch me at my meditation for an hour."

"Did he say anything else?"

"Exactly an hour."

"Then exactly an hour it shall be." He walked across the room to a stand in the back corner that held several bowls of water at differing heights. He removed a stopper from the side of one and it began to drip into a larger bowl below it.

Mihashi set out a cushion for himself and took up a correction stick. Over the course of the hour, Akihiro needed one or two small corrections, but Kenji needed none. When the last drop of water had drained into the lower bowl, Mihashi finally asked Kenji why his father

had sent him.

"I was in the stables with Father rubbing down the horses. Tears came to my eyes unbidden. I wiped them away, but he knew. He did not strike me, but sent me here."

"I understand a sword was delivered to your father today. Were you there?"

"Yes."

"Were you well-behaved?"

"Yes, Sensei."

"What are your father's plans for the sword?"

"He hopes to win the Shogunate."

"As much as I hope he succeeds, I doubt that could bring you to tears."

"No, Sensei."

"What, then?"

"It is an embarrassment."

"Let's put that aside then and talk about the time spent with your father. I know he wants you to learn more about the property and how it functions. We need to purchase swords sometimes, if a man is promoted and the like. Did this sword maker produce a sword of high enough quality that we might consider purchasing again from him?"

"I don't know."

"You did see the sword ...?"

"Yes, Sensei. It was extraordinary. Beautiful and blessed. Father said it had perfect balance. He let me hold it and feel the balance."

"Perhaps he might make swords for you when the time comes." Akihiro suggested.

"No, Akihiro. Never for me. Father has seen to that. No one in this world will ever have a sword the like of the one brought to Father."

"What an odd thing to say," Akihiro draped an arm comfortingly over his friend's shoulder, "Are you addled? Were you out in the sun too long?"

"Maybe that's it. I did get a very sick feeling when Father cut him down. Too much sun. All that blood spraying everything. Then, just think of the karma! The man had done nothing to Father. Nothing. Father wasn't even angry. He was just too selfish to share the sword maker with the Shogun. He will be working off the karma of this for millions of lifetimes. Why he did not think before he killed him, I'll never

understand!"

"Perhaps I can explain something to you two." Mihashi helped them put away their cushions and opened a cabinet that held saki bottles and cups. "A samurai seeks balance in all things. He takes time to be boisterous with friends and time to be quiet and alone. He connects himself to the earth and to the Universe. He often ends lives, but he takes a wife and begins lives, too. He thinks of himself and he thinks of others; he metes out justice, but he learns when to be merciful. The difficulty is that no man achieves this all at once. He spends much time being very off balance and doing the things that are expedient until he learns to wait and see what the Tao brings to him.

"Our Great Lord Tansho has weaknesses he has not yet conquered - lust and money come to mind - but he has strengths, too. His bushido skills are keen and his battle plans are formidable." Mihashi handed each boy a tiny cup and took one for himself. He poured them all a few drops of saki. "To our Great Lord Tansho and his search for balance," they all drank their wine and he poured more, "and to the maker of beautiful, blessed swords. May he assist us to attain enlightenment, too." They were quiet for a moment and then drank.

"That was what brought the tears, Sensei. It was knowing the beauty that man was capable of creating is gone forever from our world. Father snuffed it out like the flame of a lamp."

"And the suffering he will have to endure for doing it," Akihiro added. "That saddens me."

The General poured them all one last cup and when he raised his for the salute, Kenji saw the glint of tears in Mihashi's eyes.

The Cherry Blossom Child

Yoshiko's new world was one of rules and instructions: say this, don't say that (mostly "don't say") go here, don't go there; stand and bow deeply, kneel and bow your head or bow to the floor. Being of such low status, the girls were expected to let everyone else go first, do whatever they were told, and never question. Yoshiko missed the freedom of home. Though she had not had a great deal of it, there had been a little time each day she could do what she chose.

At night in the large room they shared, while they were trying to fall asleep in the appropriate sleeping position for girls, Yoshiko would turn

her head to the side and whisper to Sei. "I miss hearing the ocean at night and the screeching sea birds in the morning. What do you miss?"

"I miss climbing our tree to gather ripe pears. They smelled so good."

"I miss sleeping with my sisters next to me in the blankets. Sleeping alone in my own blanket like this is cold."

"At least I still have Momo, even if we can't share our blankets. I miss Momma telling us a story to help us sleep."

"I could tell you something. I used to go down to the beach to watch Yasunari draw. I crawled up onto the big rock behind where he sat and I could watch over his shoulder. There was almost no breeze and the sea was sliding onto the sand in thin, foamy layers. The fishing boats were all anchored and the nets were laid out to dry.

"He'd say, 'Hello, Sea Urchin', and I'd say, 'Hello, Old Blue Crab' and he'd laugh. That day I asked why he was painting things that weren't there. In his picture, the fishermen were just hauling the boats up on shore and their wives had the cleaning tables set up and the picture was full of the energy of the people.

"The real boats are empty and the women are gone and the tables put away," I said.

"That's what I like about painting. I can put people on the boats any time I want. They smile if I want them to, and they frown when I decide they should. If a boat is old and listing to one side, I can paint it as it looked when it was quite new. It is a powerful thing. I can even paint colors between the ink lines and make the world look however I like: green sky and blue grass, if I want!"

"Yasunari could always make me laugh. I miss him. D'you think when we get grown up we will get to make things the way we want them to be, Sei?"

"I don't know. What if you made up something and then didn't like it?"

"I'd get new paper and paint it over."

Sei yawned, "I guess it'd be all right if the green sky didn't rain green raindrops. It might stain our kimonos. Thanks for the story."

In the morning when all the blankets were folded and stored in the cabinets, the girls had breakfast together. Once that was done, the dance instructor arrived. Each girl had a place to stand and knew her beginning stance. As the instructor clapped his hands, they progressed through a

series of steps and poses. Each row of girls moved together and must end in an exact position. It was not that most of the moves were hard, but on the first day, any precision was only a dream lost in a fog and after a week, the instructor began to despair. After another week, he spoke to Nyosan. The girls were seated across the room and could not hear their discussion, but his animated gestures were clear enough.

Yoshiko longed to be out in the garden. Any garden would do today. There were five in all. The older girls played a game of "sneak" during the afternoon sleep time while the younger ones actually slept. Each would take a turn to leave and see where she could get to without being caught. Then she would tell the other girls all about it when she got back.

Sei had been to Lady Kiyomizu's personal quarters for a look around. Someone else had gone to the dojo, the samurai training area. Yoshiko always went to a garden. There were the Shinto shrine and the squat stone lanterns for snow viewing near the dojo. Off the women's wing there was a garden that belonged to Lady Kiyomizu. It had plum trees and every flower worth arranging. Just behind the kitchen and before the bath house was a courtyard for the servants and its border was an expanse of herbs and vegetables. There was a Buddhist sand garden with its sea raked daily into new currents around three large, stone islands; very restful. Largest and most meticulously cared for was the gently graduated slope rising from Lord Tansho's courtyard to the wall at the far back of the property. That is where she sneaked off to today.

It had everything any garden might need. The smoothed stone courtyard had areas for formal viewing. The buildings behind it were common rooms, an informal receiving room, and Lord Tansho's personal quarters. A winding, stone pathway would lead a guest up and around a small hillock to a pond. It had irises planted at one end and water lilies at the opposite end and along one bank. There was a narrow wooden bridge that arched across the center, but if she knelt on the bank and splashed the water with her fingertips, the beautiful, golden koi would swim up to be fed and stroked. She had learned about that from watching the gardener.

Oops! Here he comes. She silently backed deep into the stand of bamboo and held her breath as he walked past her and on toward the chrysanthemum bed. He bent over to check for any little green leaves that might need to be plucked. The yellow and white flowers would not

bloom until fall, but the green sprouts of stems must show no wilt. Yoshiko relaxed a little. He continued up the path to the wisteria arbor and on even higher to the cherry trees. The orchard had been carefully groomed and prepared, since the Cherry Blossom Festival and Lord Tansho's private Viewing Party were only a week away. Everything must be perfect and the gardener was constantly vigilant. One mistake could cost him a great deal.

The lacy pink buds of the cherry trees were swollen and seemed ready to burst. She could see them from her hiding place. When the breeze was just right, for a brief gust, she could smell their delicate scent.

The gardener turned and came back down the path. He stopped next to the bamboo and bent down to pick up a withered leaf from the stones on the path. As he bent - and without looking at her - he spoke to Yoshiko.

"Hello, Little One. Are you hiding from your nurse?"

"I am too old to need a nurse!" she replied.

He stood up and looked her over carefully. "Oh, well, so you are. My eyes are old and weak."

"You seem still able to care very well for Lord Tansho's garden."

"Thank you, but it takes many of us working together. I see you have come to view your cherry blossoms."

"Mine? I don't think so . . ."

"Oh, of course," he squatted down and pointed into the orchard, "See, in each cluster of flower buds is a bloom or two that could not wait for the festival. They have opened up just to please you."

Yoshiko blushed and laughed. "No, no. I come to look for deer."

"Are you a hunter?"

She giggled behind her hand. "I wonder if there are deer in the pines at the top of the garden. I have a friend named Yasunari who paints pictures. In one of them there is a sunrise about there," she pointed to a space between two trees on the horizon along the wall of the garden, "and in among those trees over there," she pointed again, "are a doe and two fauns grazing in the shade. I never get the chance to see if my friend's deer are really there because someone always comes to find me before I get that far."

"My goodness, you're right," said the old man with a twinkle in his eye, "And it's happened again. Here comes Nyosan."

Yoshiko stepped out from the bamboo grove and walked down the

path to meet Nyosan.

"It is time to practice the dance. We are going to the kitchen courtyard to practice with the musicians today. You are making me late."

"I am very sorry, Nyosan." Even though they hurried, everyone was already dressed and ready. The instructor lectured her in front of the group while other girls stared quietly at the floor. When he was quiet, she bowed low and said, "I am so sorry, Honored Kyo Oshi, and I also apologize to my classmates. It will not happen again."

She picked up her ivory fan and took her place in line, but the entire practice seemed to be one embarrassment after another for her. The fan must be held just so for each step of the dance and Yoshiko had a terrible time concentrating. The instructor seemed to know the second her mind wandered home to her Papa, or to the pond of the golden fish, or just to the kindness of the gardener. *Oops! There it was: Kyo Oshi's voice.*

"Yoshiko!"

The koto, shamisen, and shakuhachi fell silent again. Nyosan repeated her instruction, "Hold your positions, Girls." They all stood like statues while Kyo Oshi came toward Yoshiko and corrected the angle of her arms or hands or head.

"Do remember, there are only a few days left before the festival and you do not want to be an embarrassment in front of Lord Tansho's important guests. All of you must concentrate."

By the end of practice, Yoshiko felt as though she should wilt into the ground and disappear. Her energy came back when Lady Kiyomizu herself stopped in and danced along with them. Yoshiko was astounded by her grace and precision. At the end of the dance when they had been dismissed, she approached Lady Kiyomizu. She bowed and was silent until the lady acknowledged her.

"You have something to say, Little One?"

"Please, My Lady, what is your secret to the dance? You move like a bird gliding on the pond."

"Thank you, but there is no secret. You need only listen to the music. When you become one with the music, it will carry you from move to move as the water carries the bird."

"Thank you, My Lady."

Late that night while the ladies and their maids were cooling themselves and chatting in the garden of the plum trees, Yoshiko and Sei laid out the sleeping mats and neck rolls and discussed what Lady

Kiyomizu had said.

"How do you become one with the music?"

"I don't know. She didn't explain that part. Here, put your mat next to mine."

"No, Nyosan says I must sleep over here next to the door. She thinks we talk too much."

"When I was home, I used to sit on the beach waiting for Papa to come in with the fishing boats. I could watch the waves until it felt like I was the breath moving the tide in and out. Sometimes I pretended to be the birds soaring on the wind. Maybe that's what she meant."

"Maybe. I sure would like to be able to dance like her."

"Me, too."

After Nyosan and Kiko, her helper, were asleep and all the other girls were, too, Yoshiko was still awake and dancing in her head. Her mind played the koto music over and over and she tried to remember which steps and poses went with each musical phrase. She pictured herself with the grace and composure of Lady Kiyomizu and that finally helped her drift toward sleep. For a moment she thought she heard someone stirring in the room, but it just became part of her dream.

Nyosan and Kiko woke them in the morning and took them to have breakfast in the servant's courtyard with the housemaids and waiting maids.

"Today, Girls, you will have no other duties except to practice the dance."

Yoshiko was delighted. Now she could try to truly become the music. She looked around to find Sei, but she evidently hadn't come to breakfast.

"Please, Nyosan, where is Sei? I didn't see her this morning at all."

Nyosan looked down for a moment, then took a sip from her bowl. "Too much curiosity is a bad trait in a young girl. Be sure you do not ask about things that don't concern you."

"Remember that story Kiko read us the other evening? Maybe Sei has been abducted by her lover in the night," one maid chimed in.

Nyosan nearly choked on a bite of rice and all the girls giggled together.

Yoshiko disregarded that idea as a story meant to hush any speculations, since all of them were too young to have lovers. She had used the same tactic herself when she lived at home to quiet her little

sisters' constant questions.

Practice today did not go as well as she had hoped. Each time she felt her concentration unify with the notes of the koto, her spirit floating on the tone of the shakuhachi, there would come a pose or turn that aimed her view at the space where Sei was dancing yesterday. Then when she had mentally reprimanded herself for that lapse, her mind would go home to her sisters and brothers. She wondered if they missed her stories as much as she missed their little questions.

After what seemed like an eternity, Kyo Oshi silenced the musicians and dismissed the girls to go eat and go to bed. They had been denied lunch in the vain hope that hunger would sharpen their focus. In Yoshiko's case, it merely heightened her frustration with herself.

She did not feel sleepy after her meal and went to walk in the ladies' flower garden. She walked to the farthest corner and sat down to breathe in the gentle scents of the flowers. A sound caught her attention. She watched as a servant entered their sleeping room and came out in a few moments with one of the little dancers. Maybe it was Momo . . . it was getting too shadowy to be sure. She decided to follow along and see where they were going. She kept herself at a distance and found that they left Lady Kiyomizu's garden and crossed into Lord Tansho's beautiful garden of the pond.

Yoshiko was able to slide herself quietly into her favorite hiding place in the bamboo grove. From there she could see nearly all the garden and easily view the servant. When her breathing hushed itself, she listened, but it was just the crickets who chatted to one another.

The servant led the girl into Lord Tansho's rooms. In the lamplight, Yoshiko could see that it was Momo after all. The servant sat Momo down to wait and went out to the courtyard, sliding the door closed behind him. Next, he opened the door to the common room and spoke to someone inside. In a moment or two, Lord Tansho came through the opened door. He was very unsteady on his feet and stumbled awkwardly as he headed to his rooms. He talked loudly to the servant each time he tried to steady the daimyo. He dramatically quoted a piece of poetry before he entered his rooms and closed the door. It had been something about budding flowers that burst into bloom overnight.

Yoshiko had seen men in her village act like that when they had had too many cups of beer. Often it led to an embarrassing scene that left them miserable and apologetic in the morning. She decided it would be

best to go back and try to sleep. She crept quietly in among the sleeping girls and maids. She tried to lull herself to sleep by remembering the stories her mother told her when she couldn't sleep at home. There was one about the fisherman who caught a magic fish that granted him wishes and the one about the girl in the moon who came down to live with a childless couple.

Then she remembered a story Yasunari had told her about a samurai who thought he was so strong he could control anything. *"The warrior was so daring, he brought a snow leopard into his house to live with him. It was a cub and very tractable. His friends and advisors warned him against it, but he wouldn't listen. In the end, the leopard grew up and the samurai grew old. The leopard saw his advantage and threatened to kill the old man unless he was fed a special diet. So the leopard was fed the children of the house, one by one. When it came to his own grandson, though, the samurai fought the leopard. The cat was slain, but the old man committed seppuku to save face."*

Yoshiko fell asleep and dreamed all night of running through the gardens to escape a snow leopard. Toward morning, she awoke with a shriek that waked all the ladies. Nyosan came to her and when Yoshiko described the dream, she took the information directly to Lady Kiyomizu. A priest was sent for immediately. Lady Etsu was called to cast the sticks for the household in general and for the Lord and Lady in particular. No hint of bad luck could be allowed in the house now. Lord Tansho's guests at the festival would be the other province lords he intended to make alliances with. Once the Cherry Blossom Festival came to a successful conclusion, he would be the strongest and most influential of all the Shogun's lords and that was very much what he wanted.

The priest arrived and Lady Kiyomizu gave instruction: "Continue chants and offerings through all the day. I will make a special offering here in the women's wing shrine. Yoshiko, go to the Zen garden after you eat and meditate until you feel centered again. You must have your inner balance to dance, too, you know."

Once she arrived at the garden and sat for a few minutes, she began to feel better. There was a bird who was scratching for grit among the sand currents near the largest stone island. Several friends joined him until a small noise alerted them and Yoshiko that someone had entered the garden. The birds flew up into a nearby tree, but Yoshiko lowered her gaze from the stone island to the sandy sea, then slowly looked sideways

just far enough to view the intruder. Opening her fan, she covered most of her face and turned her head slightly. This way she could look him over carefully without offering the offense of direct eye contact. It was a boy not much older than herself. He approached her and sat down a short distance away.

"Hello. Who are you? This garden is usually empty this time of the morning."

"I am Yoshiko." She put her fan into her lap. "I serve Lady Kiyomizu. What brings you here so early?"

"My father brought me here a few weeks ago to study the war arts with General Mihashi, but I'm not so sure I want to be a warrior after all. Father says the General is the best samurai there is, but I am beginning to find the practices . . . tiresome, so when my servant went to fetch me a drink, I slipped in here. He'll find me pretty soon, but maybe I can remember exactly what this garden looks like and draw it when I go inside for lunch."

"You like to draw?"

"Oh, yes. My mother sent me to study with the Buddhist monks at our temple last winter. I'm beginning to wonder if I should dedicate my life to the worship of the Buddha as they do. I learned how to draw and paint and carve and meditate and, except for how cold the temple gets, it was great."

"I know an artist . . ." but she was cut off by an old man who came into the garden looking serious and very upset.

"Kenji! This is not where you belong. Come along now."

The boy gave Yoshiko a smile and a look of resignation as he followed his servant back to his training. She had wanted to think about Yasunari, but she was reminded that dance practice was where she ought to be. She did not want to be an embarrassment when the girls danced for Lord Tansho and his guests.

When she arrived, she found that beautiful blue kimonos had been brought and the other girls already had theirs on. She changed quickly and began to practice, meditating on the sounds of the music. Scanning the rows of girls, she could see that Momo was not here. Even though her mind was trying to puzzle out the reason for her friends' disappearances, her body seemed to remember the dance by itself. The dance went smoothly, without corrections from Kyo Oshi. The girls moved as one. It was beautiful.

At noon the girls were given a light lunch, sent to bathe, and then to lie down. Dinner would be a late afternoon picnic in the large garden under the cherry trees, but they would not be dancing until evening; they needed to be fresh and rested. The beautiful kimonos were put aside for plain ones.

The girls arrived at the bathhouse just as Lady Kiyomizu and her personal maids were leaving, but other maids and household servants were there. It was impolite to gaze at others in the bathhouse - one must keep oneself to oneself - still Yoshiko was glad that she had lived here long enough, now, to know everyone here. It felt more like the bath in her own village, comforting and communal. There were the kitchen boy and one of the grounds keepers and Lord Tansho's housemaid. She glanced around unobtrusively. Off to one side was Etsu, Lady Kiyomizu's soothsayer. It was said among the maids that her family had been wealthy at one time, but she was the last of several daughters and all that was left to her was a noble name. Kenji and one of his classmates were stepping into the bath as Lady Kiyomizu's last maid was stepping out.

Yoshiko and the young dancers each took a small, wooden bucket, filled it with water, and squatted on the floor to wash. She sudsed her cloth and scrubbed herself everywhere she could reach. The girl next to her scrubbed her back and she traded the favor. Then it was time for the rinse and the buckets came into play. She watched the water flush the soap off her body and out through the spaces in the boards of the bathhouse floor. When they were shining clean, they joined the current segment of the castle community in the hot water to soak and talk.

Yoshiko stepped into the water and tried to submerge herself to the neck smoothly and without hesitation. It was correct form, but hard for her to do. Her skin burned and prickled every day when she bathed. Her mother had told her she would get used to it and someday it would become enjoyable. So far, she always felt like a boiled plum; puffy and about to burst. The feeling didn't stop until she was outside going back to her room. The cool air made her feel like a person again, as light as a hopping bird.

The conversation in the bath was about the poems each one had written to the cherry blossoms. Everyone tried to compose something, but some were better than others, of course.

Kenji turned to Yoshiko and asked, "What have you written for the

blossom viewing?"

She was glad her face was already red from the heat of the bath. She felt so embarrassed, she wished she could disappear. "The dance practices take all the day and I have no chance to write." She was surprised that she did not want him to know that she had never made up a poem, let alone written one down.

"Ahh, but dance is surely a poem for the eyes. All of you will be presenting the most beautiful poem of the whole festival," he smiled at all the girls. They in turn covered their mouths and giggled. His classmate spoke next and the conversation moved away from the girls.

Yoshiko pondered their short exchange. He evidently assumed her education had been similar to that of the children raised here and she preferred it that way. She supposed that when the dance for the festival was completed, the girls would be put to work as house or kitchen maids and she wondered how much time she would have to herself then. There would have to be enough time to learn to write.

Kyoko gathered the girls together when they were finished and walked them back to their room. As they settled down to rest, Yoshiko asked where Nyosan was.

"She has gone to the women's wing to dress. She will be serving Lord Tansho's dinner herself as she does whenever the province lords come."

"Why Nyosan?"

Kyoko just breathed for a moment and Yoshiko wondered if she had heard her question. "Nyosan and Lord Tansho once were . . . Well, Lady Kiyomizu does not . . . Lord Tansho asks for her. That should be sufficient." Kyoko had turned all red and was rolling the edge of her sleeve between her fingers. "Ask Kiko if you want to know more. She loves telling such tales." Kyoko turned and trotted quickly back up the pathway to the bathhouse. Yoshiko slid the door closed.

Kiko did arrive momentarily and Yoshiko recounted her conversation with Kyoko.

"Kyoko is being silly. It is nothing unusual. Nyosan and Lord Tansho grew up together. Her situation is similar to Etsu's. They adored one another, but when it was discovered that she could not bear children, The Great Lord would not allow them to marry. But he has two wives, now. The first Lady Tansho bore him three girls, so in hopes of a son, he married again. The second wife also produced girls, two of them, and he

approached his brother about adopting one of his nephews. Then, at last, the first wife had Kenji.

"When the Shogun made it a law that a Lord's family must reside in Edo for their protection, Lord Tansho placed Lady Kiyomizu at the head of the house here. She is only a concubine, legally though, and it would not be appropriate for her to take his wife's place when he entertains the province lords here. It saves face for Kenji's mother. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes, but I have another."

"Go ahead and ask."

"I want to learn to write poems. Who would have time to teach me?"

"Nyosan might have time after the blossom viewing, but Etsu would probably be a better one to ask. She is younger and has more patience with children. If you are a good student, you might be able to write something nice for the chestnut moon in autumn. Now go rest and in a little while I will have something very pretty for you."

Eventually Etsu came in and handed Kiko a bulky, satin envelope. Together they woke the girls and helped them dress. At last each of the girls came to Etsu to have her hair arranged just so and Kiko reached into the envelope for a silver comb to place in her hair. From every comb hung five strands of fine chain, each set with three silver cherry blossoms. Etsu held a mirror up for each girl to see herself.

Yoshiko was astonished. The silver flowers sparkled like dew drops in the morning sun against her shining black hair.

"What do you think?" Etsu asked her.

"I think the heart of the Empress herself could not hold more joy. Thank you, thank you."

"Everything here is a gift from Lady Kiyomizu. It is to her you owe thanks."

"I will tell her as soon as I see her."

"That will not be for several days, but we can send a message to her from you girls."

"Yes, yes, please do," they all said.

Kiko opened the door to the garden. "Come out quietly, Girls, and find a place to sit under the plum trees."

The afternoon sun shone brightly and they could see across the distance to the gentle slope of Lord Tansho's garden with the cherry trees. It was as though a fluffy, sweet-scented cloud hung over the

garden. Beautiful cloths had been laid on the ground and each visiting daimyo and his family had their own particular place situated at least partly, if not completely, beneath the canopy of blossoms. In addition to the kitchen servants bringing out every delicacy available, each family was assigned a serving girl to make diverting conversation and keep the saki flowing. It was a wonderful thing to see.

Satoshi, the kitchen boy, brought out food for the girls. There were no delicacies for them, but there was more than enough and that alone was another wonder to Yoshiko. Kiko promised they would have sweet, festival rice cakes and tea after they danced.

The only topic of conversation among the girls was the beautiful clothing the lords and their ladies wore. It seemed that each kimono they saw was more colorful and more intricately patterned than the last. Even the children were dressed like bright, forest birds. Yoshiko turned to Etsu, "When I am grown and leave here, may I have a piece of cloth to take to my Momma? My papa would have to work for a year to buy such a cloth as the daimyos are seated on."

"These all belong to the Tansho household, but Lady Kiyomizu will choose a number of suitable things for your dowry. Do not worry about that now. It is a long way away. She did tell me that the silver comb you wear tonight will go with you when you wed."

Satoshi ran up to sit near Yoshiko. "I will marry you! Just let me keep the comb in a safe place for you while we wait to marry," he teased. He pretended to reach for the comb and she pushed his hand away.

"Get away you greedy boy!" she responded, and all the girls laughed together as Satoshi pretended to look crushed.

The families finally began to finish their food and each lord in turn offered a poem he had composed in praise of the cherry blossoms. Most made some reference to the fact that such perfection was short-lived, but produced great beauty and sweet fruit. When the poems were finished, the crowd began to leave. The ladies and children went one direction and the lords another.

"Where are they all going? Won't they see us dance?" Yoshiko asked.

"The sun is getting lower and the ladies will take the children to their rooms with them to rest. The daimyos will go to Lord Tansho's common room for more saki and negotiations," Etsu answered.

Kiko chuckled, "Around here, negotiations is another word for bad

jokes and more saki."

"That may be," Etsu frowned, "but he manages to make enough alliances to keep neighboring warriors away from our walls and keep us safe inside them. Remember what Lady Kiyomizu says: 'His security is our security.'"

"Yes, Etsu, but these festivals are a tremendous expense."

"Who did you hear that from - Ozu?"

"What if I did?"

"I told you to stay away from him. He's married."

"We just talk."

"If you can't keep away from him, I'll have to mention it to Nyosan. A man of his rank is not allowed a second wife and he can't afford a concubine."

"You and Nyosan are two of a kind. You both delight in spoiling my pastimes."

"Well, come line up the girls. The musicians have gone into the common room."

"Let's go, Girls."

Kiko tactfully brought the girls into the common room and put them in their places for their dance. Lord Tansho seemed to have forgotten they were waiting to perform, but he took the reminder without the slightest hesitation. He introduced the entertainment while the musicians prepared themselves.

"These little girls, though they are only adopted, are the only daughters I have who have brought me pleasure, and I'm sure they will bring pleasure to you, too, my generous neighbors and great allies!"

Yoshiko expected to be nervous to dance before such important men, but they did not seem so special anymore. The saki had reddened their faces and slowed their movements. They looked a little ridiculous to her, just as the fishermen did when they drank. Even the poem that was being recited while the girls were lining up, was an impolite one she had overheard once at the seaside where some fishermen were repairing nets. The laughter of those fishermen hadn't sounded any different then, than the laughter of these lords did now. She was not only not nervous, she was very relaxed. This would be the last time she would have to dance these steps. She felt her spirit was totally unfettered as the music began. Tonight she was the bird gliding on the water.

When the dance was finished, much praise was forthcoming. Lord

Tansho was praised for his good taste in entertainment and for having in his employ not only the best of samurai, but the best dance teachers, finest musicians and cooks, and the most excellent saki brewers in all Nippon. Good manners insisted he deny it all, but he took mental note of those who praised him the most convincingly. They would likely be the ones who would follow his lead politically in Edo next year.

The young girls were taken into the next room where they relaxed with sweet rice cakes and tea. A servant came to the doorway and spoke for a moment with Kiko. She, in turn, explained to the girls that they were being asked to take the lords on a tour of the castle gardens. Each girl was told the name of the lord she would accompany. Yoshiko was to go with Lord Hirayama.

Every few minutes the servant would arrive at the door to take a girl out to the appropriate lord. Yoshiko was getting tired and no servant had come for her, yet. She lay sleepily against Kiko when Lord Tansho himself came to the door. He indicated that she should accompany him, as Lord Hirayama was too tired for a walk through the gardens. She was very relieved. As tired as she was, her imagination had begun to wander and she feared the servant would take her to a leopard hidden somewhere that ate little girls one at a time.

She followed Lord Tansho out through the common room and saw that Lord Hirayama truly was too tired for the garden tour. He was snoring loudly, his head on the table with his cheek in a pool of spilled saki.

When they entered the garden, Lord Tansho stumbled heavily and put his hand on her shoulder to steady himself. He then slipped his fingers inside the collar of her kimono to caress the back of her neck. Yoshiko shuddered and drew back. She noticed they were walking toward the Lord's own rooms rather than toward the garden pathway. He stroked her hair and, in an attempt to calm her, bent down and spoke to her as one might to a fretful baby: "Don't be frightened. I won't hurt you. Here, let me tell you a pretty poem . . ." but he proceeded to quote the poem she had heard him recite to Momo about blossoms blooming overnight!

She bolted and ran as fast as she could across the bridge and over the pond, into the stand of bamboo, and uphill to the wisteria arbor. Here she stopped to glance back. The shadows in the garden were deep now, but she could see the lord's outline as he crossed the bridge. She fled

through the cherry trees and up the gentle slopes beyond, into the pines along the garden wall. From the elevation of the hillocks, she could see Lord Tansho unsteadily attempting to follow her. He stumbled and fell hard on some shallow stairs in the walkway. He cursed loudly, calling for his pet fish. Instead, his servant came and helped him to his rooms.

She felt safer now, but still frightened. Following the garden wall, she came to a bench where she sat for a few minutes. The only light came from the lamps in Lord Tansho's rooms and she did not want to move again until they were blown out. They finally flickered out. Without that glow through the rice paper walls, the night was quite dark. Finding places in the daylight was easy, but she wanted to get as far from here as possible and doing it in the dark was more than she was prepared to do. His servant would surely find her as soon as the sun was up and take her back to meet her fate. She would rather walk back home, even facing all the shame that would bring on her family and village. There were some servants' quarters near the front gate. If she could get that far, she would sleep in the hallway until dawn, when she would be able to see to find her way out.

It seemed like she had walked for an hour. She hadn't realized the size of the estate and certainly had never tried to walk its perimeter as she was doing now. Thoroughly exhausted and starting to chill, the only thing she was sure of was that she was far away from Lord Tansho's rooms. Shortly, she picked out the glimmer of a light through the trees and walked toward it.

It was not a building as she had hoped, but someone out walking with a lantern. Her first thought was that it might be Lord Tansho's servant searching for her. She began to move from pine tree to pine tree, hiding for a moment beside each one, trying to get close enough to see for sure who it was before revealing herself.

Closer . . . a little closer . . . now she could see it was merely a child - the kitchen boy, perhaps - and she began to run through the trees. The boy raised his lantern to see who was coming and the light fell on his own face. She could see that it was Kenji and was relieved. The gods must surely be watching out for her! Ever since they had spoken in the bathhouse, she had felt sure she could trust him.

"What are you doing out here like this, Little Dancer?"

"I've decided to go home."

"It's too late at night to travel and you are not dressed for the chill

night air."

"I will leave at dawn. I was only looking for a place to sleep a while when I followed your light."

"Don't you have a room with Lady Kiyomizu's maids? Why not sleep there?"

"I can never go back there!" A horrified look crossed her face, "That's the first place Lord Tansho's servant will look for me."

"My rooms are close by, then. Come rest there until dawn, no one will look for you there."

Yoshiko followed Kenji and his lantern eagerly. She was sure he was right. No one would think to look for her in a roomful of schoolboy samurai trainees. The room he led her to was very spacious, but it contained only one boy and an old manservant, both asleep. She didn't have the time or energy to think over this odd circumstance, before Kenji woke the old man and bade him make tea for them all. His roommate awakened and Kenji introduced him to her.

"This is Akihiro, my best friend and training partner."

Yoshiko apologized for disturbing their sleep.

"Oh, well," Akihiro answered, "nothing makes one sleep better than some warm tea at bedtime. Come sit with us." He belted his kimono around him and walked toward a beautiful, black lacquer table.

The three knelt at the table and the old man served the tea. "Please, Miss, what has brought you out wandering on this holiday night? Shouldn't you be full of rice cakes and tucked in bed by now?"

"Don't rush her, Shinobu, you just worry about the tea. We'll hear her story when she is ready to tell it."

"As you say, Akihiro."

She began by telling about being in the room with all the other girls eating rice cakes and drinking tea. "When it was my turn to walk in the garden, Lord Tansho was the one who came for me. He said he wouldn't hurt me, but I got really frightened when we walked toward his rooms."

Shinobu put his hand on Kenji's shoulder and looked seriously at him. "Shall I go get Koi?"

"No. Absolutely not."

Yoshiko felt like she needed to explain better, but she couldn't think how, so she told them about the leopard. "I guess I was afraid he was taking me to feed to his pet leopard."

Akihiro laughed out loud, but Kenji said kindly, "We'll get this all

straightened out in the morning. Don't worry for now. We won't let anyone hurt you."

Shinobu looked distressed as he laid out a quilt and neck roll for Yoshiko. He fetched a screen to afford her some privacy. When she finished the tea, she excused herself and curled up in her quilt behind the screen. Her hand lay on the tatami and she realized this was the first room she had been in where the entire floor was covered with the fragrant mats. Even the screen was not simple or plain. There was a picture of golden cranes standing among cattails. She found she was not as sleepy as she had expected and lay listening to the cryptic conversation between the boys and the old man.

"Oh, Young Master, this may not be advantageous to you. What shall I say when Koi comes searching? We don't want to anger anyone, do we? Surely to tell them sooner would be better, yes?"

"No. Nothing will happen to me and mine while the house is full of guests. It is my command that you tell no one anything. I will take care of it all. Do you understand? Tell no one. Now go to sleep."

"I understand. As you say, Young Master,"

Once the old man was in his quilt, Kenji turned to Akihiro. I have an idea that will assuage my father, but you will have to be my witness to the General."

"Oh, gods above, what are you planning? You know that if you get on the wrong side of Mihashi there is no coming back."

"Will you be my witness?"

"Of course. But what am I to witness to?"

"I'll explain." But he waited until he was sure Yoshiko and the old man were asleep before he said a word.

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