



The Klamath Writers' Guild is pleased to present the end of Spring in:

Delicate Blush of the Geisha

by Shirley Leggett

Spring

Treasure Hunters and True Samurai

There were no convenient bathhouses anywhere for Kenji and his father. He and the other officers were on horseback, of course, but the archers and swordsmen and spearmen were on foot. The frequent rains of spring were cold and the back roads muddy - where there were any roads at all. They had to avoid the most traveled roadways to avoid the attention of the Shogun.

In a confrontation with the Shogun, even if only a political one, Lord Tansho could lose everything, but he was convinced that "the greater the risk; the greater the gain", so the success of this venture was a foregone conclusion in his mind.

Twice, bad storms stopped their progress, but even at that, he expected to arrive in Yatsushiro in about thirty days. The bay there was terrifying to navigate, but Nagasaki, though it was a large, safe port, was out of the question. It was swarming with the Shogun's constables. No one thought that Yatsushiro needed guards. They assumed that anyone trying to smuggle goods there would be dealt with by the sea herself. They had not counted on a man like Lord Tansho.

Just after crossing to the southern island of Kyushu, a messenger was brought to Lord Tansho.

"Oh Great Lord, I have a message from my Lord Yuasa."

"Say on."

"Lord Tansho, powerful friend and ally, brother by marriage, A fortuitous happenstance has come about. A ship caught in heavy seas on its return from the China coast has wrecked itself upon my own coast.

We have the lone survivor held here for you to question. We are sure this will be an advantage to you. Please make a detour and visit my province seat before proceeding to your planned point of debarkation. With many thanks and great anticipation for your arrival.”

“How many days since the capture of the ship?”

“Only one, my Lord.”

He dismissed the messenger and turned to Kenji, “What do you think?”

“I’m not sure. The man they have may be a help if he is the captain or the navigator, but if he is not, we will lose time finding out that he knows no more than we do.”

“What about you, Mihashi?”

“I’m against it. The time loss would be small, but the risk of being seen and reported by someone at the province seat is too great to take. Any delay is too much.”

“All right, then. We’ll turn south directly and meet with Lord Yuasa and this sailor. It may prove a small delay, but it will get us out of the rain for a little while and get us a hot bath - well, some of us anyway. Send Nobuyuki on to the coast with most of the men. We will meet up with him later, after we have met this sailor. Bring your best men with Kenji and me and we’ll keep our numbers small in the province seat.”

“As you say, My Lord.”

Mihashi and Kenji walked off to carry the information to Nobuyuki and the rest of the men.

“Please, Sensei, why offer your opinions when he disregards everything you say?”

“Your father doesn’t consult with me for advice. He believes he is the greatest strategist in all Nippon and it is a gift for me to be able to hear his plans. Besides, he does take what I say into account. He decided to split our forces because of what I said. I don’t expect him to acknowledge it, but it’s true.”

After only one extra day’s travel, they were lodged with Lord Yuasa. All his household was familiar with the story of the capture of the water-logged sailors and a Ryu Kyu Islander with astonishing talents. He not only financed the raid, but insisted on accompanying it as well. Rumor among the servants said it took seven men to subdue him initially and another three to contain him after he awoke in his cell at the castle.

Kenji couldn’t get any of Yuasa’s household guard to discuss it, but

the servants in the bathhouse had plenty of details. The towel boy was the most talkative.

"Don't you think the guards had a hard time explaining to my Lord just how they got so beat up by an unarmed, half-drowned piece of flotsam!"

"What was their excuse?"

"They said he was not unarmed - he had an oar!" At this, the boy laughed so hard, he slipped on the wet floor boards and had to be helped up. "By the time they got close enough to him to knock him out, he had injured all seven of them and killed two. One had a crushed throat and the other had his eye jammed into his head."

After the bath, Kenji took up the subject with Mihashi. "No, that's what he said. 'Killed two and injured five with an oar' What do you think? "

"I think it's more possible than what I heard. Seems once they got him into a cell here, one guard took him a drink of water. Fatal mistake. The Islander killed him before his partners could get to him at the sound of the scuffle. And for this fight, he used nothing but hands and feet!"

"What a legend we have found! Where do they get these tales?" Kenji chuckled.

"Don't laugh too soon, he might be demon possessed. That would explain it. They tend to believe that Ryu Kyu Islanders are either monkeys or demons around here."

Lord Tansho came into the room, "Well, we're going to find out which. Yuasa has sent for him to be cleaned up and brought for us to talk with."

Five guards approached the cell containing the Island Monkey and unbarred the door. Two opened the door and three stood by with short swords drawn.

"The daimyos wish to question you. Lord Yuasa and Lord Tansho are waiting for you."

The prisoner walked quietly along with the guards to a room where he was bathed and dressed in serviceable clothes. One guard put away his sword. "Don't do that!" said another, "He's likely to press the advantage."

"What advantage? He's obviously weakened and he's coming along

like some aged philosopher. Whatever fight he had is all gone out of him.”

The guards brought him to a large building with wide steps. There was a generous walkway that lead into a beautiful hallway. He was brought there to wait with his guards outside the doors to Lord Yuasa's receiving room. The guards who still had swords drawn, positioned themselves on either side of the doors. Just opposite the doors was a low, wide shelf inset into the wall where flowers and a painting were displayed.

The Islander concentrated on this display to calm himself. *If I can just talk to these Lords, there might still be a way to rescue whatever cargo has survived the storm. If it does not make me rich, I might at least salvage a living.*

Just to the left of center, a globe-shaped vase hung from the ceiling of the inset. There were long vines of deep purple Wisteria trailing from it. Centered on the floor of the inset was a bamboo tube, wide enough and tall enough to hold five sheer, lavender irises as harmonious counterpoint to the Wisteria. On the wall behind the flowers hung a long, silk panel painted with Fujiyama and a poem. *If my plan does not work, this could be the last glimpse of beauty I have before my death.*

The doors to the receiving room slid open and he was ushered in to kneel before Lord Yuasa and Lord Tansho. A small collection of guards and retainers were seated on either side of the room. The Lords themselves were seated on cushions at the far end of the room, with only one guard apiece positioned nearby.

Lord Yuasa spoke first, “Give your name, Sailor.”

The Islander placed his hands on his thighs and bowed deeply. “I am Kawabata-The-Merchant’s son, Mitsuo, Lord Yuasa, sir.”

“Well, Mitsuo Kawabata, this is my guest, Lord Tansho and we would be very interested in hearing all you can tell us of your adventurous trip to China.”

“I hope my Lords find the story diverting, though it is a plain tale of a simple man. I am only the humble, fourth and last son of a Ryu Kyu Island merchant. Our revered father gave each of my brothers and me a sum of money to invest. My brothers bought land, while I bought a trip to China to purchase silks and other odds and ends.

“As luck would have it, we landed at several rich coastal towns overflowing with merchandise to sell. They say it has been a great hardship

on them since the Shogun declared an end to imports into Nippon. They were glad to sell us anything we wanted.

"On our return trip, I fear we were too heavily laden. A terrible storm drove us off course and right into the Kyushu coast. My ship was horribly damaged and, except for the help of Lord Yuasa's men, my cargo of silks and other precious things would have been a total loss to me."

"What of your attack on Lord Yuasa's men on the shore?"

"Oh, Lord Tansho, that is a matter of great embarrassment to me. I was rather dazed from the accident and the beach was foggy. I thought I heard my sailors cry out one by one along the beach and when I saw Lord Yuasa's men approaching through the fog, I thought . . .

"Well, the children of the Ryu Kyus are raised on stories of the wild men that live on the Nippon coast. It is said their magic can wreck ships and they are cannibals.

"Once I realized this was a richly cultured province of well-trained samurai and educated nobles, I was assured of your benevolence and that my merchandise would be well cared for."

Lord Yuasa responded, "I am glad you came to realize the truth of your situation. Be assured that, as my guest, you need only ask and all your needs will be met. Tomorrow we hope to speak with you about a business arrangement, but for today, please rest from your arduous experience in the rooms I've had prepared." He spoke to the guard at the door, "Show this gentleman to his rooms."

Mitsuo was shown to a very nice apartment. Tatami on every bit of floor, highly polished wood on the cabinets. Two beautiful silk screens and an enamel table inlaid with mother-of-pearl. There were several lamps and a shrine to the Seven Immortals. The room also came with a very pleasing serving girl who laid out quilts and a pillow thicker than any he had ever seen, let alone used. It would be a dream come true to live in quarters like these forever, but he could only be certain that this would last until tomorrow. He was glad not to be returning to the cell where he had been held until now. The two sailors he was brought in with had died there.

He believed the Lords were only partly convinced and needed time to consider their actions. Thinking back, he worried about the plausibility of his story. *The original story was better, but the shipwreck made that one useless. I didn't really have enough time to think through the new*

one. If they decide to disbelieve the story, I will be executed tomorrow, just as surely as my sailors were the day we landed. Not that it came as any surprise. We all knew the price meted out to aliens on Nippon shores since the Shogun's edict enforcing isolation.

It's just lucky for me the captain of the guards has a little merchant blood in his veins. His eyes lit up like torches when I offered him part of the goods from the ship. Too bad he took everything, but if the gods of luck are still with me and I can coax Hotei, god of prosperity, to smile on me, I'll get Lord Yuasa to get my goods back for me.

Mitsuo was right. The daimyos were evaluating his story. Lord Yuasa felt it was a story too loosely woven, "I'm not sure what to make of him. He's either very brave or very stupid, and either way, he's not all that clever."

"Well, yes. Everyone knows of the Shogun's edict on trade. With the Ryu Kyu Islands the only place where Chinese trade goods are allowed to come into Nippon, why should he be interested in wasting his money on a ship to the China coast? He could invest in such goods in the safety of his own home."

"You are right, My Brother, he is only hoping to avoid telling us what he was really doing with that ship. Another discrepancy in his story is his tale of all his goods being salvaged. My men reported that the ship was nearly empty. Only a few precious things were brought in to me."

"Since he seems to have no information or sailing skills I can use for my campaign, perhaps we could see a display of his fighting prowess before his end comes, hmm? What entertainment is planned for dinner tonight?"

That evening, Mitsuo was seated with the Lords and their retinues. He felt truly honored and began to feel confident that things would go well. Conversation did not turn to the 'business' that Lord Yuasa had mentioned, but returned often to descriptions of items he had purchased.

"I'll do my best to describe what I can, but many of the items were only distinguished from what is commonly seen in Nippon by the quality of workmanship. There were bamboo copies of books by Confucius and Sun Tzu, statues of gods and goddesses carved from ivory and jade and rich woods inlaid with gold; the craftsmanship was astonishing. There were silver fans and the finest mirrors ever seen. Indeed, there was

intricately patterned, double damask, silk cloth in several colors that would have only been suitable for the Emperor and his family, they were of such quality.”

“How did you expect to sell these easily identifiable goods?” Lord Tansho asked.

“Gradually and quietly to people who come to the Ryu Kyus. I had no intention of breaking the Shogun's restrictions. I seek only to deal in the most excellent merchandise, not to make money quickly. A reputation for quality lasts longer.”

No one at any other tables was following this conversation, so it was a surprise to Mitsuo when a servant approached their table, as they finished eating, carrying a bronze Ameratsu figure, not large, but exquisite. He sat it next to his Lord's cup.

Lord Yuasa stood and called for the captain of the guard that Mitsuo recognized from the beach encounter. He stood before his Lord but his eyes rested on the statue.

“I am told a silver mirror, some silk damask, and a jade box were found in your belongings along with this graceful Ameratsu. We all understand the significance of these things, so I need not explain why I shall require your life of you tonight, is that so?”

“That is so, My Lord.” He bowed deeply and, at a hand sign from Yuasa, stepped back a short way, knelt with one knee raised, and awaited further direction.

“Mitsuo,” Yuasa turned to him, “I offer you the opportunity to regain your cargo. Fight my captain for it. You will surely win, for I am given to understand that you find my samurai easy prey.”

“Thank you, Lord Yuasa, you are generous to a fault.” He surreptitiously laid several grains of rice at the feet of the bronze lady. *Smile on me, I pray, My Lady, for this Lord has decided I shall die so that he may have my cargo. If this captain fights well and wins, he will obediently commit seppuku to pay for his love of you. Help me fight well so as to provide worthy entertainment, at least.*

This time of year, it was still light after dinner, so everyone retired to a field to the west of the castle to watch the spectacle. The captain removed his long sword and each man was given a naginata to use.

They began to circle, but the captain was anxious to make a good show of it and lunged first. They seemed to be pretty well matched: for every lunge there was a parry; for every strike there was a block. This

might go on for a long time. Mitsuo studied his every move . . . waiting. Then he noticed the captain was more at ease when they were at a distance from each other as was commonly kept by sword fighters. He tended to lose his rhythm when Mitsuo moved in close.

That was his cue; he struck sideways with his spear handle. The captain used a vertical block and Mitsuo stepped directly into him, slipped his spear handle between the captain's wrists and twisted hard to the left. The captain was disarmed and had a long gash on the side of his face from Mitsuo's blade.

In the same instant he was disarmed, the captain grabbed the end of Mitsuo's spear handle and thrust upward. He pulled the center toward himself and turned sharply, winding the spear around his waist, so to speak, and Mitsuo was disarmed.

The naginata snapped in two under the stress so the captain threw it down. Blood was streaming down the left side of his face and into his eye. He had not noticed until now, so when he wiped his face with his sleeve and saw blood, he looked surprised. Mitsuo took this few seconds' delay to remove his obi and hold it looped loosely in his right hand.

The captain's surprise hardened to resolve as he drew his knife and slashed at Mitsuo. He quickly maneuvered so as to place himself between Mitsuo and the discarded naginata pieces on the ground. He was tiring of this exercise and decided to end it now. He attacked with ferocity, but Mitsuo held back, playing defense, maintaining his composure, and waiting for the blood to blind his opponent again. Two lunges. Three, and the blood was dripping into his eye again. The captain blinked hard and Mitsuo swung his obi toward the man's midsection. The captain tilted his head down slightly and more blood ran into his eye. Mitsuo took his opportunity and flung his obi, letting loose the end. It slapped across the captain's other eye and he drew back, slightly off balance. Mitsuo stepped right in behind his knife hand, grasped the wrist and elbow, and wrenched the arm until he heard it grind and pop.

The captain crumpled to the ground, the pain of the useless arm left him momentarily immobile. Mitsuo retrieved the knife that had dropped during the struggle, straddled the captain, and dispatched him with one stroke.

An "ahh" of affirmation went through the crowd. Everyone strolled back toward the common room, but Lord Yuasa directed the men on farther to the building where his samurai practiced in inclement weather.

He ordered the lamps lit and approached Mitsuo.

“Lord Tansho and I were intrigued by the reports we heard saying you are a very capable fighter, even if unarmed. I would like to make this area available to you for a demonstration of this ability of yours. Please, don't refuse my humble invitation.”

Mitsuo was well aware this was no invitation, but a politely couched order which could not be refused. He entered the dojo and removed his clothing down to his fundoshi and lit the incense in the small shrine to Hachiman, god of war.

Lord Yuasa chose three of his men to fight: two wrestlers and a talented knife fighter. They, too, wore only fundoshi and were unarmed. The dinner party seated themselves along the walls to observe the demonstration.

The combatants went to the center of the room, but Mitsuo merely stood waiting. Lord Yuasa, puzzled at his hesitation, asked what else might be needed.

"Nothing more is needed. I have been taught to defend myself. To attack first is forbidden to me.”

“Ah, certainly,” he gave a hand signal and his men began the attack. He whispered an aside to Tansho, “Sounds like they forgot the fun half of his training! Those Ryu Kyu senseis must be a queer lot.”

The first wrestler took two leaps toward him and launched his body at Mitsuo. It was simple to divert; he side-stepped and deflected the lunge with a moderate outward pressure along the man's side. The wrestler ended up sprawled face down on the smooth wooden floor. The second, came up behind Mitsuo and pinned his arms down with a bear hug. Mitsuo dropped into a low crouch while thrusting his arms upward. This loosened the wrestler's grip and Mitsuo turned directly around and drove his elbow deep in to the man's ribs. There was a satisfying ‘crack’ and he sank back a little. The first wrestler was up from the floor now, and towering over Mitsuo. Staying low, Mitsuo blocked with one arm the hands that reached down for his head and with the other, he punched up hard into the man's groin.

That move effectively eliminated that opponent, but he barely missed being crushed by the third fighter who was looking all this time for an opening and finally found it. Mitsuo felt the floor slip from beneath his feet as he was picked up and held in a bear hug with his legs dangling. It looked like he might be beaten to death in that position,

judging by the look on the face of the wrestler with the sore ribs who quickly approached.

Trying to disregard his own ribs, he braced himself and snapped a front kick to the wrestler's jaw. It hit and the man staggered back a step or two. Meanwhile, Mitsuo tried to kick backwards to the knee of the man holding him. It didn't disable him, but it made him angry enough to raise Mitsuo up and throw him down. He hit the floor rolling and came up into a squat.

The man he had kicked in the jaw, swung a kick at his belly, but ended up at on the floor when Mitsuo grabbed his leg and stood up. His head hit hard and he stayed down. The last man came at him with punches to the head and stomach, but Mitsuo had a block for each one.

His attacker became angry when he couldn't seem to touch Mitsuo and in desperation, he lunged with all his energy. Mitsuo placed a knife-hand thrust under his sternum and the man dropped to the floor.

The spectators reacted favorably with "oohs" and "ahhs" of satisfaction. Some began preparing to leave, assuming the demonstration was over.

Lord Tansho sent in two more men. Lord Yuasa followed his lead and signaled in two more of his men. The spectators seemed surprised. They settled themselves for another bout, but there was murmuring in the crowd that indicated this extension of the exercise was in questionable taste.

The new fighters encircled Mitsuo at a wary distance. They did come unarmed, but they did not disrobe. As Tansho's first man attacked him head on, he could sense another man coming at his back. He grabbed Tansho's man by his clothes and turned quickly, using the attacker's own momentum to launch him into the man who had been behind him. The blow the rear attacker meant for him, struck Tansho's man instead, and the momentum of the move tumbled the two attackers together onto the floor. Mitsuo backed quickly across the room so as to keep all his assailants in sight.

Tansho's second man was approaching from his left as the others watched. He began to rain blows down on Mitsuo that met only with blocks, while Mitsuo's shutos and punches found the man's face, neck, and stomach. Finally, he could see the other three men moving in on him, so he blocked the incoming punch, swept the man's forward leg to the side with his own foot, and punched straight into the assailant's face.

That man was down. Yuasa's two came at him together from the right. He blocked the punch of the nearer man and launched a steel-toed kick to the solar plexus of the farther. That made two down.

The nearer Yuasa man grabbed him with a choke hold, fully intending that Mitsuo breathe his last in that instant. Mitsuo slammed his heel into the man's nearest arch with a crunch while both his hands went up between the arms at his throat and broke their grip. He then grasped the man's head and pulled down with all his might as he brought one knee up sharply. This crushed the face of Yuasa's second man, leaving him bloody and dying on the floor.

Tansho's last man got an arm around his neck from behind. Mitsuo grabbed the man's arm above the elbow and pinched the nerve, loosening the vice around his throat. Pulling that arm away, he aimed a solid sidekick at the man's knee. Mitsuo emitted a shout that mingled with the crack of bone and shriek of pain from Tansho's man.

None of his assailants approached him again. The crowd rose and many came out to congratulate him, some even just to touch him for luck. He impressed them with his skill, but he also had a charisma they responded to.

After a few moments, he turned away from them and advanced to the platform where the Lords were seated. They had truly wanted him dead, but he had conquered seven samurai and seven was such a favorable number, that to send in an eighth against him might turn the good favor of the ancestors against the Lords themselves.

"I hope the demonstration pleased you, my Lords."

"Thank you for your indulgence, Mitsuo. Your fighting style is truly intriguing," said Lord Yuasa, "I appreciate the demonstration very much."

"Will you do me the honor of having tea with me tomorrow afternoon?" asked Lord Tansho.

"Yes, certainly. It would be my great pleasure." *Yes, yes, yes! Surely I have won. I have wrested something important from him, and tomorrow will tell what it is!*

Mitsuo woke late the next morning. The serving girl made him something to eat, then he went down to the ocean where his ship was beached. He examined the wreck and was glad to find it repairable. He took his time and arrived back at the castle just in time to get ready for the tea ceremony.

When he was prepared, he went into Lord Yuasa's tea garden. There were several large beds of chrysanthemums, white and yellow, just coming into bloom. He was shown to the guest waiting room, a small building next to the teahouse. Three samurai were already there, two lieutenants and a general. They made polite conversation, complimenting him on the demonstration and asking a few tactful questions. Mitsuo felt very relaxed and content. He answered briefly but honestly and spoke, perhaps, a bit too freely.

It was not a long wait. A servant came to take them to the teahouse. They followed him, left their swords outside with him, and entered as friends, totally unarmed. Lord Tansho was seated near a brazier with the tea making utensils arranged on a cloth beside him. There was a single flower in a rustic vase, carefully positioned in an alcove to their left, and that was all. No furniture, no screens, no decorations; only the simplicity and space in which to calm one's mind and spirit. They knelt in a half-circle around Lord Tansho and he introduced Mitsuo to the others. The lieutenants were Kenji and Akihiro; the general was Mihashi.

From the mixing of the frothy green tea at the beginning, to the prescribed conversation at the end, the tea ceremony went perfectly. Lord Tansho had studied with a highly renowned tea master and had been an excellent student. No business was discussed until afterward when they all went into the garden for a walk. Mihashi walked on ahead with Mitsuo discussing unarmed combat in general and certain points of training in particular. Akihiro and Kenji hung back somewhat with Lord Tansho.

"What do you think of him?" asked Lord Tansho.

"He's an impressive fighter, I'll give him that," answered Akihiro.

"You don't sound like you care to even say that much for him."

"Well, . . . he speaks well, but sometimes almost too well. He makes me edgy."

"I've considered asking him to sail with us to China."

"I would hesitate to do that, My Lord!"

"Yes, Father, I agree. From one or two small things he said while we talked and waited, I got a vague feeling about his sailing days . . . he might be a pirate. He is a Ryu Kyu Islander, remember, no matter how well he fights."

"That is true," laughed Lord Tansho, "He probably would spend the whole trip seasick! I don't believe any of those Islanders has the brains to

be a pirate, though. What I know he can do is fight, and I want to own the best fighters in all Nippon. If he doesn't swear allegiance to me, nobody in the country will get him!"

"Let me make a suggestion," Kenji interjected quickly, "We need to send a messenger to the sergeant of the household guard at the province house, anyway. Why not put this Islander to use that way?"

"I'll think about it. Bring him to me over near the shrine."

"As you say."

Kenji and Akihiro walked a little faster to catch up with the others and Lord Tansho situated himself on a wooden platform near the Shinto shrine in Yuasa's garden. The others gathered there and Lord Tansho offered Mitsuo the opportunity to teach unarmed combat to his samurai. Mitsuo could hardly refuse.

"I would be honored and gladly agree, however, I have a question."

"Ask."

"What shall I do with my ship? It needs repairs before it can sail again."

"I suggest that you take only a few personal items you feel are essential. It may well take most of the money from your cargo to pay for the repairs and Lord Yuasa is well able to see to that. It would be respectful to offer him anything left over to cover storage and docking fees. You will be traveling north by land at any rate, and will not need the ship. As soon as you join my household, I have a task I would like you to do."

Mitsuo happily swore fealty to Lord Tansho. *He has made it clear my ship is a complete loss to me, but I never imagined I could make my way into the ranks of Tansho retainers with such speed and ease! Hachiman is surely with me.*

"Very well, what I need is for you to carry a letter to the sergeant of my household guard. Once that is done, you will begin the training of the contingent still at my castle."

"Yes, My Lord. As you say."

All the details were quickly worked out and early the next morning, Mitsuo was provisioned and readied to leave. Kenji took him aside to speak with him.

"I have an additional duty to assign you."

"Yes, My Lord."

He handed him a small packet. "I have this message for you to

deliver secretly. Find Nyosan and give it to her. Then find my concubine, Yoshiko. She has an enemy I want you to protect her from. Even though the enemy may be dead, the threat may well be very alive. Protect Yoshiko at all costs! Once we come back from this campaign we are on, your duty regarding her might end, but until I personally tell you otherwise, you are to protect her with your life.”

“I understand completely. It shall be done.”

Mitsuo traveled north more quickly than Lord Tansho had traveled south. He had no compunction about using the main roads and wasted no time on creature comforts. Along the way he came upon a Shinto temple. There he lit incense and prayed to his father and mother and sisters. *“I am halfway to my goal. I fought my way into the ranks of Lord Tansho's retainers. They tried to kill me, but I used your training to win over many opponents. The soldiers here are over-fed and under-trained. An army of twelve-year-olds from our home could beat them all. The “exalted Lords” are petted and curried and you were right about how duplicitous they are. Once I arrive at the Tansho holdings, I will dispatch the man I am hunting and return home straight away. Then you all will be avenged and I can live in peace.”*

Finding the province manor was not hard and it was exhilarating to feel he had reached his goal. He met with Nyosan and the sergeant of the household guard to deliver their letters.

Nyosan explained it would take at least a week to prepare rooms. Mitsuo was pleased to look forward to a rest in the country house before dealing with the formality of the castle. By the time he traveled to the country house, the exhilaration had worn itself down to plain tired.

Iron Breath of the Islands

It was late when he arrived at Lady Tansho’s farm. A servant met him at the gate and took his horse. Lady Tansho was enjoying the sunset and met him in the front courtyard herself.

“We’ve been expecting you. Come in and let us get you something to eat.” Her daughters were trailing after her, “These are my daughters. Seiji, go find Yoshiko and tell her that her messenger has arrived. Sakura, tell cook to bring food and send the kitchen boy to build up the fire in the bathhouse. This man’s had a long trip and will want to relax after he eats.”

"Yes, Mother," the girls chimed together and then hurried off.

She led Mitsuo into the house and the dining area. A servant brought him a warm, wet cloth to wash his hands and face. Then tea was set out for them. They both took a drink or two and when she saw he was beginning to relax a little, she asked the question that was important to her.

"How is my husband and how are his men?"

"Your husband is very well, My Lady. I met his son and his general, who are both fine. The larger contingent of his men was not with him when we met. I'm sure they are well, though, or I would have heard something."

"We've had some sadness here and it is a comfort to know that all is going well with them. A lady took ill and died recently. We only just completed the funeral." Yoshiko came into the room. "Here is the lady you carry a message for. Yoshiko, this is Mitsuo."

He bowed, then made a mental assessment of his new charge: doesn't dress like a courtesan; prim, dark lavender kimono; practical hair dressing - nothing fussy; had her sleeves rolled up before she came in - not afraid to join in and help; if she is biddable, this should be an easy task.

The servants brought his food. "Shall I leave you two to discuss your business?"

"Please," Mitsuo replied.

Yoshiko poured herself some tea and sipped in silence as Mitsuo began to eat. Once he had eaten enough to curb his hunger pangs, he brought out Kenji's letter for her and continued to eat while she read. He tried not to stare, but it was difficult, especially when she smiled.

Kwannon have mercy! she is beautiful. No wonder the young Tansho wants her guarded. If there were no death threat, he would still have to protect her from half the province.

She read the missive quickly and then re-read it slowly. She tried to watch Mitsuo unobtrusively over the top of the letter to see what Kenji had seen in him. The letter described him as 'astonishing' in fighting skills. All Yoshiko could see was a man of average height, dressed in the same costume as all Lord Tansho's personal guards. What she saw above all, was a live symbol of Kenji's concern for her welfare.

"I have been sworn to protect you with my life, and I shall. I may only be released from this oath by Kenji himself. Here you may go about

your daily duties as you have before, unless I see a danger. Then you must follow my instructions.”

“Just before he left me, he assigned people to watch over me, so I am used to it. I will be as careful as I can. Once we return to the castle, Nyosan should be able to help again.”

“I don't think so. Nyosan told me she also may be in danger. She must stay away from you. Besides, you will have to go with me during the hours I teach unarmed combat to the guards.”

“That will be very hard. Nyosan is my dearest friend.”

“Being hunted is a hard life.”

Seiji and Sakura found Mitsuo fascinating. Yoshiko watched as they showered their attentions on him at every free moment. Lady Tansho kept them as busy as she possibly could, but short of putting them in the storeroom and barring the door, she couldn't keep them out of his way every minute.

Mitsuo seemed to exist in his own space wherever he happened to be. He never acknowledged the sisters unless they spoke to him directly, never truly encouraged them, but never actually discouraged them, either. Yoshiko imagined he stood just a fraction straighter when they came around. Perhaps his demeanor was the slightest degree more military, but it was only an impression and she couldn't be sure.

In the heat of the afternoon, as she sat in the shade of the trees, she and Mitsuo chatted in a very general way about what brought them both here.

“In the beginning, I suppose it was the storms that destroyed my home village, but now, to bring me to the country house, it was a secret kept from Oigimi, Kenji's wife. When she found it out, she swore revenge.”

“Revenge. I suppose that is involved in my travels here, too. If my parents had not died and left me, I would not have become a fighter. Every time I win a fight, I take my revenge on Death. He took my parents too soon. I won't let him have me,” he smiled warmly and a twinkle came into his eyes, “and I won't let him have you, either.”

Yoshiko smiled back. It was very reassuring to have him nearby. The memory of the two maids dead in their sleep came to her often in the night. Some nights she woke and had to go look in on Seiji and Sakura to make sure they were breathing before she could go back to sleep. She thought at first that Mitsuo slept undisturbed when she did this, but then

she realized his eyes were watching, he was just lying very still.

Five days had passed since Mitsuo's arrival and Yoshiko was feeling comfortable around him, but so apparently were Seiji and Sakura. After lunch, Yoshiko went for a walk in the garden. Mitsuo followed at a short distance and the young ladies followed after him. They gazed and giggled and made comments behind their fans just loud enough for Mitsuo to hear. When they arrived at the benches beneath the trees, Sakura began asking Mitsuo personal questions. When he tried evasive answers, Seiji would press. Yoshiko found the situation too embarrassing to bear.

She turned to Mitsuo, "Go into the house, please."

He turned, looked straight into her eyes and did not move. She had never seen a servant stand stock still when dismissed. She repeated herself. "Go, now, please and leave us alone."

A black intensity burned from his eyes into hers and she felt her breath stop in her throat. Her thoughts raced: *I said something wrong. . . what was it? . . . What did I say? He looks furious! . . . I only dismissed him as I would any household servant. . . Oh, that must be what gave offense.*

"I only wish to speak to these errant girls," she tried to explain. Her eyes were still wide with shock; she couldn't move them away from his gaze. She prayed he would understand, because he seemed capable of violence at this point.

He said nothing, but began to withdraw slowly, still watching her eyes. She bowed very low as he left, hoping he would believe she hadn't intended to offend him. The oppression in her throat didn't end until he turned his back to enter the house.

Once he left, Sakura turned to Yoshiko, "What was that about?"

"Nothing to bother yourself about. Now tell me why you two are acting so brazen around this poor fellow?"

Seiji started, "We have a small wager."

"Why on earth . . .?"

Sakura added, "He is sort of handsome, in an ordinary way, and we get so little entertainment here. Seiji suggested we see if we could make him blush. Whoever gets him to blush wins a new jacket. We have been unable to get a reaction of any kind, though, so I suggested we settle for a measure or two of ribbon for whoever gets him to pay them the smallest attention at all."

“What do you get for the look he just gave me?”

Both girls were quiet.

Seiji finally answered, “We didn’t expect that. He looked so hateful at you. Perhaps he wouldn’t like our game.”

“Remember, swords or no swords, he is a warrior, not a harmless house pet you can tease. You need to find some other kind of entertainment.”

Yoshiko left the girls in the garden and went into the house to find Mitsuo. She laughed at herself, thinking how much she sounded like Nyosan. She found him in his room packing his clothes and armor and sobered quickly. “Excuse me,” she said.

He slid the door farther open.

“I want you to know I did not mean any offense in the garden. If you were insulted, I apologize.”

“It is no shame for a warrior of my ability to take such a lowly job as bodyguard to a fisherman’s daughter, since I am new to my Lord’s employ and must do all that he asks with a willing heart. However, I will not be ordered around by her as though I were the kitchen boy. You are in my charge, remember, so prepare to leave. We must go on to the castle, now.”

“Of course,” she answered, bowing out.

She went to tell Lady Tansho they were leaving.

“What happened? Seiji told me your bodyguard was upset with you.”

“I inadvertently offended him.”

“Will he harm you? I can stay with you, if you like.”

“He still sounds angry, but he is not threatening me. In the garden, I thought I was going to choke just from him looking at me, but that passed. Please warn your daughters that he is terrifically dangerous and not to be toyed with. I don’t know whether they believed me.”

“I will keep them away from him.”

“I certainly miss Kenji.”

“I don’t blame you. Make sure you go to the kitchen and pick up the food I’ll have Cook pack for you. It may not be a long trip, but it is better when you take a little food along.”

“Thank you, Lady Tansho, you are very kind.”

Dinner that evening was quiet and strained. Yoshiko and Lady Tansho tried to keep up pleasant conversation, but Seiji and Sakura were

uncomfortable and excused themselves early. Mitsuo only drank tea and then stood guard across the room from them with his back against an inner wall while they ate.

They loaded a wagon at sunrise and left soon after. By midday, it was hot and humid. Clouds were greying a little and Mitsuo suggested it might rain. He found a clump of trees and pulled the wagon beneath them. The donkey nibbled grass while they sat in the shade and brought out the food Lady Tansho's cook had packed. There were smoked fish and steamed buns, cooked greens and rice balls coated in sesame seeds. Yoshiko was delighted to see short strips of seaweed and she popped one into her mouth while she continued to unpack. Last in the bundle was a small blue jar. She broke the seal on it and pulled out the wide cork.

Mitsuo bent close, "What is in that?"

She pulled out a sheer slice of pink vegetable. "Pickled ginger. Want a piece?"

He took the slice carefully - it was dripping - and ate it.

She shook her fingers, "I forgot to get a cloth to wipe them off."

Mitsuo found a cloth in the bundle, "Here, let me," and took her hand as though to wipe it, but kissed the drop away first, as one might with a toddler. Then he wiped her fingers with the cloth.

Yoshiko was startled. She snatched her hand back and sat the jar of ginger slices down in the middle of the ground cloth he had laid. She handed him a pair of chopsticks and poured him some water from a large jar in the wagon. In an attempt to make conversation, she asked if he had children.

"Thought I might get a wife first," he smiled. "No, my brothers have enough children to suit me. Three boys and lots of little girls."

"All of my brothers and sisters are younger than me, so none of them are married, yet. It is hard for me to imagine them as grown as they must be. I haven't seen them in five years."

"When they come back from their trip, maybe Lord Tansho will allow you to go home for a visit. It might be safer than it is here."

"I will ask him."

Once they finished eating, they reloaded the wagon and went back to the road. They had started out so early, they were back to the castle long before dark. Mitsuo began immediately locating a room that would be easily defensible. While he was busy, Yoshiko went to the bathhouse with Miko.

“I don't know how to feel about all this fuss. I don't want anyone to get hurt because of me, but I'm awfully tired of being watched so closely.

Miko smiled, “I'm glad you are back. Now you can help me catch up on the embroidery. Lady Kiyomizu keeps me so busy, I never get to sew.”

“I'm not so sure anything will change. The bodyguard tells me I will have to be with him all day, and he will be teaching part of the time.”

“It will be good to be able to see you again, anyway.”

They returned to the women's wing and dressed. The atmosphere seemed subdued, but Yoshiko didn't have time to think about it. Mitsuo took her to the room he had chosen. It was near the back of the fortress, or central building of the castle compound. The main floor held the soldiers' dormitory and the armory. The upper two floors were large enough to hold all the residents of the household in an emergency and were easy to defend.

They climbed the stairs to the second floor. “This is your room.”

“It has only one door. How shall I have a breeze in the heat?”

“I will sleep outside your door so no enemy can enter in the night. You will come with me to the dojo when I teach and if you need to go somewhere in the castle, I will accompany you. And don't eat anything before I check it for you.”

“I will do my best to comply.”

After the first week, Yoshiko began to feel like a captured cricket in its tiny bamboo cage. Mitsuo agreed to let Kiko visit in the evenings for company. She was the perfect choice, since she brought all the castle news and could sit and gossip a whole evening away.

“Well, you know,” she continued, (she seemed always in continuance) “Oigimi never did quite regain her strength after Kenji . . . well, um . . . made up with her. And Nyosan was so-o-o careful for her, too. Why, she stayed in to nurse her day and night. Much good it did. She died only about a week before you came back with this bodyguard.

“It was a pretty nice funeral, but half the household didn't want to attend. I mean, it's not like she went out of her way to make friends, but Lady Kiyomizu said everyone would go, so everyone did. There wasn't time to notify any of her family. Her maids left with her guards to carry the ashes home. You two only missed meeting them on the road by a few hours.

“I envy you. I could sure use a month's rest in the country. Here, it's

just been one thing after another until the whole place is so tense, they jump when you walk in the room!

“Lord Hirayama, daimyo of the province just north of us, sent word that the Tansho constables are sneaking plots of his farmland onto our registry so they can collect taxes on his land, too. He is very angry, but it’s not true, of course. Lady Kiyomizu wrote him to say so, and he answered that it wasn’t her fault. He said he knows she is of good reputation - not like that perverted untouchable, Tansho! And that’s really what he called Lord Tansho!

“Nyosan says he could only say such a thing because he knows our Lord is with Lord Yuasa in the south. I am sure she’s right. If he were here, Hirayama would pay dearly for such a remark!

“Oooh, here’s some delicious news. I’m expecting!”

“When will the marriage take place?” Yoshiko finally got a word in edgewise.

“There can’t be one. The father is Nobuyuki Otomo. It’s not that he’s not a great samurai and a wonderful man, but he is already married and can’t afford a second wife.”

“What will become of the child?”

“Well . . . Nobuyuki already has several children, three of which are sons, so he won’t officially recognize it, whatever it is. But, if it’s a boy, Lady Kiyomizu wants to adopt it, since she has no children of her own. And Nyosan says, if it’s a girl, she can make an arrangement with the midwife - for a price - to get rid of it. So, however it turns out, everything will be taken care of.

“Oh, speaking of boys, the kitchen boy disappeared today. They think he might have run away. Cook has been awfully hard on him lately. I hope his replacement is as nice as he was. He was very friendly.” Kiko looked out of the corner of her eye and smiled slyly.

“Not to change the subject, but just how tough is that bodyguard of yours? He’s going to have his work cut out for him, trying to teach our samurai anything about fighting! They are second only to the Shogun’s own, you know.” She leaned over and whispered to Yoshiko, “Besides, I heard several of the household guard discussing it after your man had been down to talk with them. They said they wouldn’t take instruction from a Ryu Kyu Islander if he were the Buddha himself.”

“I think you’d better warn them. He’s not someone you trifle with.”

“Oh, you’ve seen him fight, then?”

“No, but . . . you know how General Mihashi seems to be wearing armor even when he’s not? Well, Mitsuo carries a drawn sword even when he’s unarmed. That’s what I have seen.”

“Now really, Yoshiko, are you so tired you’re seeing things? He’s no samurai. He has no swords.”

“Nevertheless, Kiko, I’m right.”

“All right, I’ll pass on your information, but I won’t guarantee it’ll do any good. I’d better go - it’s getting late. I’ll come and see you again tomorrow night. Sleep well, Yoshiko.”

“You too, Kiko. Goodnight.” She walked Kiko past Mitsuo who was seated outside her room door, out to the door that opened onto the hallway.

When Kiko was gone, Mitsuo got up and walked around a little. “Make me some tea, Yoshiko.”

“Certainly.”

“I begin teaching tomorrow. You will have to go with me to be safe.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“What were you and that woman whispering about? If she’s going to carry secrets, she won’t be allowed to visit.”

“It was just that she didn’t want to offend you. She’s afraid there may be some opposition to your instruction.”

“Even if I happened to be Buddha himself?”

“You were eavesdropping.”

“Yes,” he smiled and a mischievous twinkle came into his eye.

“How could you hear us from such a distance?” She handed him his tea.

“Oh, I have an interesting talent or two.” He smiled again and looked at her with warm, friendly eyes.

She felt herself blush and fumbled mentally for words.

“No doubt you do,” was all she could come up with. She tried to make it sound cold, but it only came out sounding impressed.

She said nothing more and neither did he. As soon as it was possible, without being rude, she went to bed. *She lay there rehashing what had happened to the conversation. Just yesterday he made it stingingly clear we are in far from the same class; yet now, with no one around, he is almost charming!* She blushed again, remembering how he looked at her.

Enough is enough! She told herself, mentally shouting as frightfully as she could. *He said nothing and you're blowing it all out of proportion because you miss Kenji so much! You just wait and see; tomorrow there will be no encouragement from him. You have made it all up.*

She smiled to herself: she even sounded like Nyosan when she was reprimanding herself. She got up and tried to pray at the shrine in her room, but all she could think of was the twinkle in his eye when he smiled at her. She went back to bed, but lay awake a long time before sleep came.

Then . . . awake again!

She opened her eyes . . . lamplight . . . and Mitsuo standing over her. She thought she was dreaming. Bitterly, she realized this was real life when she heard the anger in his voice.

"Get up you lazy good-for-nothing house girl! The day is half gone and you are still asleep!" He pushed at her with his foot, "You barely have time to dress before we must be at the dojo to begin my class."

A lady-in-waiting to Lady Kiyomizu - which she was - was considerably different from a house girl - which she certainly was not! But she felt now was not the judicious time to initiate such a discussion; not if she valued her neck. So, she pulled on her clothes as quickly as possible. Mitsuo shoved her through the doorway to the hall and she waited at the top of the staircase for him to go down ahead of her. When they finally arrived at the door to the outside, she saw that the sun was just beginning to come up and there was barely enough light to see where they were going. She followed dutifully along, but it was hard for her to keep up because he was striding so quickly forward.

When they arrived at the dojo, there were only five guards waiting. Mitsuo looked them over, carefully inspecting their appearance. They exchanged the ritual greeting of teacher and students and he had them seat themselves in the Zen meditation position. Then he glanced at Yoshiko and went out the door. She dashed to catch up.

Zen meditation is not new, perhaps he truly has nothing to teach our guards after all. Where on earth is he going? Momentarily she realized he was going to the guards' quarters. I wonder if he intends to kick them all out of bed the way he did me? What a picture that makes!

When they were a yard or so from the guards' sleeping room, he had Yoshiko stand still and he went on ahead. She watched, but wondered if her hearing was gone; his movement made no sound. And where was the

“chush” when he slid back the door to enter the room? He walked to the sword rack and removed a long sword from it. Then he walked to the side of the sleeping sergeant.

The sergeant of the guard woke to see the edge of a sword poised above his face and the light too poor to be sure who held it. When the sword did not drop, he spoke, “What is it you want?”

“I think there may be one or two skills lacking among your men, Sergeant. I had no trouble entering here. I could have killed you and all your men without alarming anyone in the castle.”

“Our security is set against danger from outside the walls.”

“Danger has now arrived within your walls, Sergeant. Rouse your men and bring them to the dojo courtyard.”

Mitsuo drew back the sword as though he intended to pierce the man's heart. The sergeant continued to look at Mitsuo, disregarding the threat. Mitsuo sheathed the sword and left the room. When he met Yoshiko on the walkway, he handed the sword to her to carry as they returned to the dojo.

When they went inside the dojo, she placed the sword on a rack while Mitsuo examined the positions of the meditating samurai and made what corrections were needed. The sound of shuffling arose in the courtyard. Mitsuo had the five men stand and gave them each a short bamboo correction rod. He positioned himself in the open doorway to view the rows of samurai assembled in the courtyard. Their sergeant stood at the front and Mitsuo addressed him.

“Are these all the household guard?”

“All but the two at the front gate,” came the answer.

Mitsuo cast an empty gaze across the courtyard, “Why won’t you answer me, Sergeant? Perhaps I need to reword the question. Are there any of your guards who aren’t gathered here?”

“The two men on guard at the front gate.”

Mitsuo turned dramatically toward the five men behind him and spoke loudly enough that all might hear him, “Have you not, all of you, sworn fealty to Lord Tansho?”

“Yes, Sensei,” the five answered.

“Has your Lord not given his command by letter that you should all receive instruction from me, also his sworn retainer?”

“Yes, Sensei.”

“Then why does your sergeant refuse to answer my question?”

“But, Sensei, I heard him answer. He said we are all here but two.”

“You are mistaken. You did not hear an answer any more than I, did you?” Mitsuo’s smooth, deliberate demeanor, paired with his cold glare as he turned to face the man who had spoken, elicited the desired response, “No, Sensei.”

The sergeant weighed his options and decided not to press his luck. “I beg your pardon, Sensei Kawabata, I fear I did not speak distinctly enough. All of my men are here but for the two guarding the gate.”

“You speak very well, Sergeant. It must have been the noise of that useless girl fumbling around in the room behind me that prevented my hearing your response.”

He turned again to the men behind him and said, “Two of you replace the men at the gate and send them here,” - two left immediately - “and the other three of you will supervise these men at their meditation.”

Mitsuo knelt and the class knelt. He detained one of the three and spoke quietly to him. He, in turn, entered the dojo and spoke to Yoshiko who brought out the sword she had carried from the guards’ quarters. Mitsuo then sent the man to bring forward the samurai who wore no long sword this morning.

He signed to Yoshiko and she gave the man his sword. He then spoke quietly with the samurai, explaining he must take the lowest place in the class since he had allowed his sword to be stolen. The samurai did not question, but took the low position in the lines immediately.

Following meditation, Mitsuo directed breathing exercises. He placed the three remaining of the early students at the front of the class, so they ranked, for the moment, even above their sergeant. Finally, he introduced a few of the beginning moves of the martial art he had mastered.

Yoshiko waited inside. Seated on a meditation cushion, she had considerable time to think. *What use to be protected from death, if the rest of my life is spent trapped inside one room or another? Perhaps all this is merely avoiding my karma. Possibly I am intended to die young.* Tears welled up in her eyes. She pushed the air out of her lungs and held it out until her body forced her to draw in more. Then she watched the men moving in unison, hypnotic and calming. Kenji. How deeply she missed him.

Eventually she looked up and saw Mitsuo watching her from the doorway. He seemed relaxed and comfortable.

"How long has it been?" she asked.

"Three hours."

"You look refreshed." She tried to stand up and her legs would not cooperate. Mitsuo approached her and she shied away, "I'll be able to get up in a minute. My feet are just numb. Striking me will not hurry their recovery."

"I would never hit you," he reached down to her to help her up. His eyes showed caring and concern, "Is my Little Bird over-tired? Come, let's get her something to eat and return her to her warm room."

He was not being sarcastic, and he was right. Her hands and feet were blue with cold.

"Been thinking deep thoughts?" he asked as they walked to the door.

"No, I've been watching the class."

He looked down into her face and smiled, "Now, Little Bird, you must not try to deceive me. I can see that you are troubled. I am willing to listen."

Tears and sadness clouded her heart. She quickly turned her face away from his gaze. They walked to the kitchen and got some food to cook in their rooms; her favorite fish and seaweed. When they arrived at their hideaway in the heart of the fortress, Mitsuo took charge. He brought out quilts to wrap Yoshiko and cooked the food and tea himself at the brazier in his room. Yoshiko was amazed and relieved to feel cared for again, but it made her loneliness for Kenji all the more intense.

After they ate, she fell asleep for perhaps an hour. She dreamed that Kenji returned and lay asleep next to her. When she woke and saw a man lying next to her, she touched his hair and whispered, "Kenji." The man who turned gently to her, though, was an evil stranger and she jumped and pulled back sharply from him as she woke completely.

"Sorry I startled you!" he said angrily as he got up and poured himself some tea. Yoshiko got up and put the quilts away. She poured tea for herself and went to her own room to work on the embroidery Kiko had brought her. The door between their rooms stood open, as it commonly did. She could see him as he set up his lap desk to write. She was not sure what had frightened her about him when she first woke. He looked like any other man in a fundoshi. He must be young, though. His hair was shining and black as a lacquer box. His skin lay smooth and even over the muscles in his arms and legs. With an ink stone in one

hand and a stick of ink in the other, he did not look the least bit frightening now.

Mitsuo went and sat before the painting of the Amida Buddha that hung in his room. He bowed and lit incense. The smoke rose and carried his thoughts with it: *Oh, Buddha, how long until my mission is achieved? I do not wish to be here. The Nipponese are a strange race, taking lives for no reason, raising this fisherman's daughter out of her rightful place and making her a temptation and obstruction to me. When I saw her come in from the bathhouse yesterday. . . the gracefully bowed legs, the small, slender feet. . . I can't get that vision out of my head. I have the right to avenge my family, but I feel becalmed in a sea of honey. Help me find a way to use this girl's connections to advance my mission.*
OnameAmidabutsu, O nameAmidabutsu, O nameAmidabutsu.

Yoshiko's nerves were not calm enough to embroider. She got a knot in her thread, then just when she had that repaired; she pricked her finger and nearly bled on the cloth. The bad luck that would bring was not worth the risk! She put away the needle and threads and folded up the length of cloth.

Kiko had brought her a new collection of very short poems by different authors, something they called hokku. She had not heard of it, but Kiko assured her it was the newest interest in Edo. Impromptu introductions to poems one had prepared to recite after dinner, each person tried to link something in his hokku to that of the person before them, while still being appropriate for his own poem.

Some were pretty:

A fluttering swarm
Pursuing them, the storm!

While others were just silly. Yoshiko decided they probably made better sense if you had been at the dinner.

But none were engaging enough to clear her mind of its confusion. *If I could just have Etsu count the yarrow sticks for me, it would surely help, but Mitsuo said only one visitor and I chose Kiko. Of course, there is Nyosan. I can trust her and she cares for the sick. . .*

Yoshiko stepped through from her room into Mitsuo's. He was

contemplating a painting of the Amida Buddha that hung on the far side of his room. She walked over and knelt without speaking so as not to disturb him unnecessarily. It was a beautiful painting showing the Amida dressed in bright red with his halo in gold leaf. There was the lotus in bright blue and his face showed great peace. After several minutes, Mitsuo turned and acknowledged her presence.

"What do you want?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt your meditation. I would like to have Nyosan visit me."

"Is Kiko not good company? One companion should be sufficient."

"Nyosan is the revered grandmother in the women's wing. She would do me no harm."

"Who knows what mischief an old woman might do? Her own bad luck might follow her here."

"Well, I hadn't told you, but," here came her strongest argument - if he sensed she was lying about this, she was out of luck - "she is also an herbalist, and I have been unwell."

"You look fine to me."

"It's not something you would notice," she lowered her voice, "It's a woman's problem."

He had lived alone with his father for many years. This sort of thing was more than he wanted to think about. "Could you possibly be any more trouble?! Summon her at once."

Yoshiko was relieved and sent a maid for Nyosan right away. It was good to know that Mitsuo was not as perceptive as he wanted her to believe he was. He could not really read her thoughts or tell when she lied, she just had to control her behavior very carefully.

When Nyosan arrived, Mitsuo checked her thoroughly to see that she carried no weapon and then took her into Yoshiko's room. Nyosan erected a screen as far from the door as possible so they could talk in private. Yoshiko spoke very quietly and Nyosan took that as her cue, so the conversation was held in near whispers.

"What is this about women's troubles? Did you stop using the tea I gave you? Are you expecting a child?"

"Not unless I could 'catch' it from being around Kiko." She smiled, but she couldn't muster a laugh, even at her own joke. "No, I lied so Mitsuo would let me see you. I needed to talk to you about what's been happening."

She went on to describe how Mitsuo treated her and how confused she was. "He is charming, then cruel; unresponsive, then over-sensitive. I don't understand."

"When does his behavior change?"

"Only when we are alone. Then I am his 'Little Bird'. His eyes smile and he speaks quietly. But the way he treated me this morning when he woke me was so extreme and startling that I am left exhausted trying to tell what he expects of me."

"Try to remember, it is Mitsuo who should be wondering what is expected of him. He was sent here as your servant, not your master. As to his changing behavior, perhaps he is attracted to you and is fighting it. He would not want to compromise his position by starting an affair with his Lord's son's concubine. He would be risking his life."

"I hope it's that simple. I was beginning to worry that he was sent here to kill me himself."

"No, I'm certain it's not that. Listen, do exactly as I tell you. Go to bed right now and don't get up until day after tomorrow. That should give him time to remember who is the servant and who is the mistress here. I'll talk with him before I go."

"Alright, Nyosan, but I hope this works."

Yoshiko watched with apprehension as Nyosan set the screen aside and went out to the brazier in Mitsuo's room. She went about making some tea. Yoshiko whispered a prayer to Benten, goddess of the sea, feminine deportment, and most important to this little deception, one of the seven gods of luck!

Nyosan brought the tea to Yoshiko and when she went out again, Mitsuo asked what she had discovered. She slowly made herself comfortable near the brazier across from where Mitsuo sat.

"I have found that you are a poor servant to our master." Mitsuo placed his hands on his knees, looked at the floor and listened attentively. "You have mistreated his possession. The very possession he sent you to care for. This will certainly be reported to him on his return."

He bowed and spoke in his most contrite voice. "Oh, Honored Grandmother, do not judge too soon. If you will only tell me what care is needed, I will make sure she has anything you say. I have no desire to harm her. It is just that I must care first for her life, and only then can I consider her comfort."

"That may be, but she must keep her mind alive and her heart filled

with beauty. She must have entertaining company and walks in the garden as soon as she is able.”

“What am I to do with her while I oversee the training classes for the guards?”

“When she is well enough, she can accompany you again; but until then, I see no reason why Kiko can't stay with her. Lady Kiyomizu will surely allow it.”

She then gave him instructions regarding medicinal herbs she would bring to him. These were to be administered on a strict schedule for a week. Nyosan had assured Yoshiko this would instill the proper attitude in Mitsuo, since Kiko would not be available all the time and he would often have to see to these things himself.

After Nyosan left to fetch the herbs, he came in and sat on his heels at the foot of Yoshiko's quilts. He was so quiet, she couldn't be sure he was even clear inside her room, but she was trying to look asleep. Eventually, she opened her eyes and was surprised he was so close by.

“You move more quietly than a deer in the woods.”

“I told you I had many talents. Now, it seems, I'll need my talent as an herbalist.”

“You are an herbalist,” she said, not quite sarcastically, but without belief.

“Well,” he smiled just a little, “an herbalist's assistant . . . starting today.”

There was that twinkle in his eye again! She couldn't bear it; she turned her face away. He stayed, not moving a muscle, until Nyosan returned. She showed him how to make a decoction of some of the herbs and a tea of the others. He was never more than three or four feet away from Yoshiko the rest of the day. She got the distinct feeling he thought she was going to die.

The evening dragged on as Yoshiko listened to the sounds of the soldiers downstairs dwindle away and watched the light of her candle gutter out in its shallow bowl. She imagined the ocean waves and the stars of the fishing village she hardly remembered, until at last she fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, she woke and looked around the room. It should be pitch black, but filtered candlelight came in through the doorway from Mitsuo's room. She could see the shape of Mitsuo lying soot-black against the grey-black of her floor. She cleared her throat. He

rose up on one elbow.

“You do know that women seldom die from such ailments as these, don't you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then why all this exaggerated devotion?”

He was quiet a long time. Finally he said, “I'll tell you something true, if you promise never to repeat it.”

“I promise.”

“When I was very young, the Ryu Kyus were occupied by Nipponese soldiers, the Emperor's samurai. I did not understand why people hated the occupation. I was used to it. But one day, my father said I was old enough to go on my first buying trip with him. We were gone only two days, but when we returned, my mother and sisters had been assaulted by a Nipponese samurai. My sisters were dead. My mother lingered for a few days. My father never left her for a moment. Once she was gone, my father became ill and nearly died. I spent three weeks alternately praying and making soup for my father. His body recovered, but it was his heart that was broken.”

“How awful for you. And what about your brothers?”

“I have no brothers. I am the only one who can avenge my family. The samurai responsible lives on this hill.”

“He is a sad man, surely. Look what karma he has brought on himself. He will never be able to counter such a thing in this life. He is bound to spend many lives as rats or newts.”

“Karma is not enough. I must have him dead by my hand in this life to restore the honor of my family. But you are in my care; you will not die. I will not allow it.”

“At least for you, the pathway is clear. My karma is always changing and clouded. When I was little, I was sure I would marry a fisherman and raise my children along the ocean. Then, when I came here, I was sure I would be planting rice and earning rice for years and years. When Kenji rescued me, everything changed again and now my life is like stepping from stone to stone crossing a raging river. Perhaps I was three people in my last life and I am living out all their karmic lives at once this time.”

Mitsuo got up and went to the doorway. “Whatever life this is, you need sleep. I'll put out my light. You rest.”

Morning brought unexplainable exhaustion to Mitsuo and he was

reluctant to leave Yoshiko. He repeated his instructions to Kiko twice and checked on Yoshiko three times. During the class, he was so distracted, they did one exercise five times and the next only three. This after he told them how important it was to practice exercises evenly, since each one developed different muscles and the goal was equal development of all muscles. Luckily, the student who brought it to his attention believed it was a test to see who had been listening to the sensei.

Mitsuo assured him that was true and he was advancing beyond his classmates. When he returned to his room, he sat near the door and pulled on a pair of tabi. Yoshiko was playing her koto in the next room and Kiko was singing. It was a familiar folk song and it made him feel homesick and comforted at the same time. He sat very still and felt his breath softly come and go.

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Below is the 2016 open meeting schedule for the Klamath Writers' Guild. All meetings are from 6:30 to 9:00 PM. Currently we meet in the Community Meeting Room on the corner of 4th & Pine Street. For more information visit: <http://klamathwritersguild.org/Calendar.html>

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|------------------|-----------|---|
| January | 11 | 25 |
| February | 8 | 22 |
| March | 7 | 21 |
| April | 4 | 18 |
| May | 9 | 23 |
| June | 6 | 20 |
| July | 11 | 25 |
| August | 8 | 22 |
| September | 12 | 26 |
| October | 10 | 24 |
| November | 7 | 21 |
| December | 5 | 19th is a members only meeting. |