



The Klamath Writers' Guild is pleased to present the next season in:

Delicate Blush of the Geisha

by Shirley Leggett

Spring Loyal and Disloyal

Spring came and brought Kenji with it. Much to Yoshiko's surprise and Kenji's chagrin, Oigimi came with him. Evidently, until Kenji inherited his father's estate, his wife would not be formally bound to life in Edo.

This turn of events was also a very unpleasant shock to the Tansho household. The gentle and gracious bride they met at the wedding was nowhere to be seen. She had been replaced by the self-centered, obnoxious child who was Oigimi in her natural state.

At their arrival, Akihiro's old room and the ones nearest it were provided to Kenji and his wife. Akihiro was given a room near Mihashi while Oigimi's maids were given Kenji's old rooms next door to Yoshiko. These were appropriate accommodations; spaces according to ranks and Oigimi was pleased. That is, until she found out the size of the rooms occupied by Lady Kiyomizu. In the evening after dinner, she decided to approach her husband.

"Dear Husband?" She said it with the melodic lilt she believed to be persuasive.

Something's coming. That singsong in her voice is like the south wind. No matter how gently it begins, there is always some god-awful storm behind it.

"Do you believe a man's wife ranks higher than a concubine?" She straightened the sleeve of his kimono.

"Yes, certainly. Why?" He felt the muscles tighten in his jaw. *She couldn't possibly have any complaints about Yoshiko, could she? We've only been back at the castle for three days and I haven't even seen*

Yoshiko, yet, let alone shown her any favoritism.

"Am I not your true wife?"

"Of course you are! What is it you have heard?"

"Nothing. It's just that I visited the lovely garden by Lady Kiyomizu's rooms this morning."

"It was a pleasant visit, I hope."

"Oh, yes . . . I noticed her rooms are quite spacious and besides having her own garden, she has adjoining rooms for her maids . . . My, my! What a convenience it must be to have all her ladies close at hand that way!"

So that's it. She wants larger accommodations. "If you'll notice, Wife, these rooms we have were especially prepared for us and once I've left for China, all this space will be yours alone."

"That isn't the point," she began to sound petulant, "Everyone can see that the mere concubine of Lord Tansho is favored over his only son's true wife! I want you to find us larger rooms." She made a sign with her fingers and her maid brought a cloth and dabbed at her eyes as though she had shed tears.

"Lady Kiyomizu has been with my father for many years and has earned her place in his esteem. This is his house and he arranges it as it pleases him."

"Oh?" Her voice rose to an accusing pitch, "So you agree with him that a party girl should be afforded more honor than your wife! What kind of family is this? Do you have some reason to be on her side?"

Against his will, irritation was becoming clear in his voice, "Just what do you mean?"

"You and he haven't been sharing her, have you?"

Kenji was appalled. "Lady Kiyomizu has been a wonderful second mother to me," he cursed at Oigimi! Anger burned in his voice, "You are an ungrateful wretch; you would never dare ask that question of my father; you'd never live to see the following day!"

"Perhaps," she shouted, "I should speak to your father!"

"You have my permission to go right ahead!" he shouted back, "but don't you dare bring this up to me again, or I'll send you back to your own father!"

Oigimi did the appropriate thing when Kenji said that. She covered

her face with her hands, bowed her head, and cried, "Oh, no, no, My Husband!"

"Get out of my sight!"

She left the room, sobbing audibly. It meant only that she had got what she wanted. He knew it meant nothing else. He had pulled her hands away from her face more than once and found dry eyes and a smile.

He stared at the silk scroll hanging on the back wall. Seven virtues of a samurai: courage, humility, justice, chivalry, honesty, loyalty, prestige. *How in the name of all the gods am I supposed to nurture those qualities in myself while I'm married to that pretentious bitch?*

Shinobu came in and offered him some tea.

"I think we need something stronger, Friend."

Shinobu smiled knowingly, "I'll see what I can find in the kitchen."

"Meet me in the Zen garden with your plunder." Kenji wandered slowly to the island garden watching the bushes filled with blossoms sway in the evening breeze. The moonlight was plenty to see by tonight, so he didn't bother with a lamp. He sat himself on the rim of the sand garden with his feet in the white grit, ruining several waves of the sandy 'sea'. The stone islands were black as coal against the sand. His breathing slowed perceptibly. The air here was fresh and his head was clearing, but his heart remained clouded.

Shinobu finally arrived with a pitcher of beer and two cups. He sat on one of the small islands. He had tiptoed out to it and hardly ruined anything. Kenji wasn't so lucky when he came to claim his cup. It made him laugh, "We're gods, Shinobu, just floating over the ocean as we travel."

"I've had all the travel I want for a while, Young Master. Edo was quite enough for me."

"How did you like working in Mother's house?"

"With all the help she has, there was very little for me to do. Koi saw to your father. Most of the time, I just took care of his clothes."

"I know Oigimi is pretty awful now, but did you at least have a few exciting nights of honeymoon at first?"

"No, her mother had told her she would hate sex and she did what her mother told her. But she is useless at everything else, too. Six months

I've lived with that woman. She orders servants around. That's her one skill." He emptied his cup and Shinobu refilled it. He edged his way to the big island and relaxed against it.

"She cannot carry on a conversation about anything, even though she says she studied music and religion and history. As to ordinary feminine skills, she says she can weave, embroider, arrange flowers, and cook - but she won't.

"Being from a samurai family seems to mean nothing to her: she hasn't got even the simplest knife skills and will not wear her kaiken. She used to ride at home, but now she refuses to travel except by palanquin - says horses are 'dirty'.

"She only wears her hair up when she goes out. In the house, she wears it in a style worn by a 400 year old empress - she keeps a painting of her in her room. The hair hangs straight to the backs of her knees. She crooks her finger and the little maid she keeps at her side sweeps it back over her shoulders out of her way.

"The biggest shock came after a couple of months. She went to a seamstress and spent nearly a year's income on having three kimonos made . . . t-h-r-e-e kimonos! By all the gods, you'd think she was the Emperor's consort. And Father said nothing. I could not believe it."

Shinobu refilled their cups. "Didn't she need something beautiful to wear to attend the Shogun?"

"She was never invited. I was only summoned once and that was just to accompany Father."

Akihiro walked up. "Is this a private party, or can anybody join in?"

Kenji straightened up and tiptoed to the rim of the sand sea, grabbed Akihiro's sleeve, and dragged him across to the big island. "Here's what we're using to re-hydrate this dried out old sea," he poured beer into his own cup and gave it to his friend. "We'll have to share. Shinobu only brought two cups."

"It doesn't bother me. We've shared a lot of things over the years."

"Most recently that girl in Edo when Oigimi refused me because of those damned kimonos. By the gods, I have never seen any clothing so expensive or so ugly."

"She was a cute girl. I miss her."

"You should've brought her along back here."

"And have my feet held to the fire by the General? No thank you! I might not be the smartest man ever created, but I'm not that crazy." He emptied the cup and Kenji poured in the last of the beer.

"Shinobu? . . . Shinobu! . . . Where in damnation has he gone? Probably had to take a piss. Shinobu!"

"You need not raise your voice, Young Master, I am nearby. I only went for another cup and more beer."

"Good Man."

"Excellent Man!"

"Thank you, Gentlemen." He refilled their cups and then his own.

"Don't get too drunk, Shinobu. Remember, you have to help us get back to our rooms."

"As you say, Young master, as you say." But he drained his cup again anyway.

"Come, let me show you a samurai dance I learned in Edo," Akihiro coaxed.

Kenji joined him and by the end of an hour and two more pitchers of beer, they had disrupted all the currents on the sandy sea.

"I'm a little tired, maybe we ought to go to bed."

Kenji sat down on the edge of the sea. "Well, I'm a lot tired, but I'll walk you to your room first . . . Shinobu? Give us a hand, here."

They all stumbled together toward Akihiro's room. Shinobu only made it as far as the walkway outside it, but Kenji and Akihiro made it all the way inside. They grabbed pillows and lay down without quilts, as they always did when they drank. As Kenji drifted off to sleep, he listened to Akihiro's nasal breathing and felt him warm at his back. "Damn! It's good to be home."

Morning brought sun too bright for comfort and practice with the household guard, then breakfast. The rest of the day passed without incident and without a glimpse of Yoshiko. Dinner was another exercise in anger and indigestion. Finally, he went to the bathhouse to think. He had hoped the return to the provinces would be so different. He wanted time to be alone with Yoshiko as there had been last Fall, but with that hope dashed, he at least had hoped that Oigimi would go back to being the gentle girl he'd met at the wedding. Now that hope was ground into the gravel under her stamping foot.

The last breath of light from the dying sun still lay on the evening's horizon, so he decided to go for a walk. Perhaps he could meditate in the island garden. He tried hard to remember the logical reasons his father had quoted so often as to why he should marry before the trip to the China coast. None of them seemed to be working out very well right now. The only one that was still a possibility was the alliance with Lord Yuasa and that would be gone if he sent Oigimi home in disgrace.

He walked more slowly, breathed deeply, and felt the tension drain out of him. The scent of Honeysuckle drifted on the warm air. The moon was full and had risen to sit just above the hills on the horizon. A woman was standing in the distance silhouetted against it. He remembered childhood stories about the Moon Maiden visiting Earth and being very beautiful and very good. This must be how such stories were thought up. He could tell one now about a young man who would refuse to marry until he could marry the Moon Maiden - journey to China or no! Well . . . it was too late now; he'd already got stuck with a demon from the underworld.

He stared, unseeing, at the moon. He didn't notice the silhouette moving closer to him until she was quite near. With the moon at her back, the shadow of night fell across her face, preserving her fantasy disguise as the Moon maiden.

Until she spoke his name.

He felt like he'd been doused with cold water and then hot. His skin tingled from head to foot. How he wanted to hold her! Joy welled up in him. He had only wished on the moon and the Moon Maiden had heard him and sent him Yoshiko!

"Greetings. my Little Dancer," was all he could say.

"Would you like some tea and rice cakes?" she asked.

It was last Fall again. They both laughed and ran to Yoshiko's room. The evening was happily spent, but Kenji left her eventually and went back to the rooms he shared with his wife.

The rooms looked so alike, the tatami, the lacquer table, the niche in the back wall, but Yoshiko's room always held peace in its walls, serenity in its folded screens. Any rooms, no matter where, that were shared with his wife only held adversity and chaos. He dreaded going in. Oigimi was

asleep when he arrived. He lay down at a distance from her to avoid waking her. In the morning however, as she served him breakfast, the questioning began.

"You were out so late, My Husband; I was unable to stay awake to care for you when you came in, as a good wife should."

"Yes. Well, I guess you see I got to bed all right without any help." He looked at the food. It was scrambled egg and radish, her favorite. He preferred seaweed broth and steamed bun, but she never remembered.

"Were you drinking with Akihiro? The kitchen boy said he and some friends had a really great party last night."

"Yes and my head is very uncomfortable this morning. Please, let's not talk."

Oigimi's voice rose to the pitch that made his teeth ache. "You were not with Akihiro last night! He was with me examining Lady Kiyomizu's rooms so directions can be given to the carpenters."

How this woman can take my own words and weave so many kinds of fish traps, I'll never understand. All I do know is that I'm always the fish she catches. God, I wish I could see them coming.

"So tell me whose perfume is on the clothes you wore last night? If she is still inside this castle, I'll have the kitchen boy poison her!" She dragged over the kimono he wore last night and held it under his nose.

She's right; I can smell the incense Yoshiko burns in her room. This cursed room profanes that sacred scent.

His voice was still calm. "Where I was last night is none of your concern. You don't seem interested in sharing my bed, anyway."

"That may be, but I won't have you producing bastards all over the province before I give you a legitimate heir!"

"You don't spend enough time with me to produce anything legitimate. Now what directions were you planning for which carpenters?"

"The ones who are going to build me a wing of rooms to exceed Lady Kiyomizu's."

"Who gave you permission for this project?"

"Lord Tansho."

"How dare you ask such a thing of him! Not in his house a week yet and already rebuilding it to suit yourself! Have you no shred of manners

at all?"

"Oh, My Husband," that sing-song was in her voice again, "you sent me to your father yourself, don't you remember?"

She is twisting my words again. I get so angry when she does that . . . he breathed in and let his breath go slowly out to calm his churning stomach . . . I'd better change the subject a little or I'll choke her to death right now.

Externally, he was calm as stone. "How long till all this is done?"

"My maids and I will be able to move into our rooms by summer."

"Why not now?"

"You wouldn't expect me to share rooms with a concubine, would you? How degrading! Who knows what kind of riff-raff she allows into that wing. She probably wears a suit of armor to make herself attractive to the household guard."

"Stop talking about Lady Kiyomizu in that tone. She is an honorable lady samurai with excellent training in yari and kaiken. You should remember her rank when you speak of her," he was no longer able to keep the irritated edge out of his voice, "By the way, did you think to make space for me in your personal wing?"

"Well, you are so satisfied with these sad, little rooms," she took down the calligraphy he had painted that hung next to the shrine, "and, as you pointed out, you won't be here much longer. I don't see any reason to move all your things, only to pack them again for the trip. And think how comfortable you will be, having all this to yourself." She tossed the strip of silk onto the mound of his discarded kimono.

She had finally managed to completely shatter the peace he'd felt this morning. "I did not marry to live alone! If that is your idea of how to be a wife, your ideal shall be fulfilled."

He stood up and summoned Shinobu. "Fetch Oigimi's other two maids."

"As you say."

Kenji went into the next room and grabbed her hair girl out by the arm and threw her at Oigimi's feet. "Tie back your mistress' hair, she is going to be traveling."

"Yes, My Lord," she approached Oigimi, who shoved her away. She approached again, "Please, My Lady," and she began to tie ribbons

around the mass of Oigimi's tresses to contain them.

Shinobu returned with the other maids. Oigimi began to relax as her hair was dressed.

Kenji directed the servants, "Bundle up my wife's belongings. All of them."

As the servants went about gathering her clothes and wrapping her belongings, emptying cabinets and shelves, Oigimi began to come to herself again.

"Just what do you think you are doing?"

He walked over to Oigimi. Her maid ducked and dodged out of his way. "I'm packing you off to the women's wing where you can practice being a lady, instead of this pretend imperial princess you seem to think you are."

"I won't go. I won't be housed with your father's pillow girl and her street urchin servants."

He snapped a light slap to her cheek with the back of his hand. "You will go. You keep saying what a good wife you are, so here is your opportunity to show it. Stop insulting Lady Kiyomizu and do as your husband tells you."

Oigimi was so shocked, she forgot to cover her face and cry to elicit his pity. She only stared and her face flushed red. Her eyes glared and her whole being filled the room with hatred.

"Leave my rooms now," he ordered.

His deadly calm had returned. He bent to the rack on the floor behind him and took up his swords. He placed them into his obi as he did every morning before practice.

When he turned back, she was still standing her ground. The servants had withdrawn to the hallway.

He took a firm stance and placed his right hand on the hilt of his long sword and his left hand on its sheath. (ichi)

Shinobu whispered, "Please, My Lord . . ."

Oigimi hadn't moved. Her hair girl dashed in to tug at her sleeve, but she didn't waiver.

He withdrew the sword two or three inches from the sheath. (ni)

Her eyes grew very large and her face blanched. She quickly turned and left. The poor hair maid fainted and Shinobu stepped in to gather her

up.

Kenji took a deep breath and forced himself to relax. He went to the dojo to meditate. Then he went to his old rooms near Yoshiko. He ousted Oigimi's maids and had the servants move his belongings in. There were only four weeks left before he and his father left for the coast and he didn't intend to be apart from Yoshiko and put up with Oigimi just for pretense. He refused to ruin what little time there was left

Nyosan looked up toward the doorway. There was an odd noise in the hall. Yoshiko continued to read aloud to Lady Kiyomizu and her maids, but Lady Kiyomizu caught Nyosan's alerted awareness and glanced around the room. Then came sounds of scraping and thumping.

Kiko went to the door and opened it to see that was going on. With the shoji open, all that could be seen in the hallway were neat stacks of cloth bundles. Off to one side came Oigimi, trying to avoid being seen. Kiko stepped into the hall and closed the door part way behind her.

"Can I be of help, Madam?" Kiko ventured.

Oigimi walked past Kiko and pushed the door open. Nyosan thought she looked like she had seen a ghost, but the tone of her voice was the same arrogant, commanding tone she always took. "Yes. Take my things inside. Tell Lady Kiyomizu that I'll be staying here to be near the carpenters and watch how work progresses. I'm going out for a walk, now. Heat some water for tea while I'm gone."

Kiko bowed and Oigimi continued down the hallway to a door that led outside. Obediently, the maid picked up a bundle and re-entered Lady Kiyomizu's common room.

"What was that?" Lady Kiyomizu asked.

"It is Oigimi Tansho. She has had all her belongings brought here. Her message is that she'll be staying here to keep an eye on the carpenters and she wants tea when she gets back from her walk."

"Don't let her presume on your good graces, Lady Kiyomizu! What an imposition! How can she imagine that this is an appropriate thing to do?" This tirade came from Nyosan, of all people. "This is the thanks we get for that alliance with Yuasa: life with his spoiled brat!"

"Calm yourself, Nyosan, please," answered Lady Kiyomizu, "You must remember, she is our master's daughter-in-law. I cannot turn her

away. She might be hard to tolerate, but for now, she is essential.

"Bring in the bundles, Kiko, and put the water on to boil, Yoshiko."

Nyosan bowed, "If you'll excuse me, My Lady, I'd like to go lie down."

"Certainly, Nyosan," she smiled kindly, "Perhaps a short rest will relieve your short temper."

Nyosan did go to her sleeping room, but she slipped out into the garden and went directly to the field where Mihashi and the samurai were practicing.

Mihashi approached her on his horse, "What do you want, Old Woman?"

"I wish for you to send Kenji to see me, if you please."

"If you find him first, you can send him to me! He did not come to meditation or practice this morning."

Mihashi's horse pranced nervously and he turned sharply to ride back to the group of horsemen he had left.

Nyosan went next to Oigimi's and Kenji's old rooms, but found only Oigimi's maids. None of them could say more than that Kenji had ordered them there.

At her wit's end, she went to see Lord Tansho, but along the way, she met Kenji. He had evidently just left an audience with his father.

"Ah-ha! Here you are, Young Truant! Mihashi is looking for you."

"I don't doubt it. I'll be back to training this afternoon."

"I'll have to let you tell him that yourself. I must return with your answer to Lady Kiyomizu."

"What is her request?"

"We have an unexpected visitor to the women's wing. Lady Kiyomizu thought you might tell us what type of reception was appropriate. Do you have any suggestion? Or, perhaps, you'll come fetch her back?" The last question was asked in a hopeful tone.

"Absolutely not!" He quieted himself a moment, "Please ask the gentle Lady's indulgence and offer her my sincere apology for the inconvenience this will cause. I only hope that if Oigimi can spend some time with Lady Kiyomizu, she'll begin to understand honor and loyalty."

Nyosan returned to Lady Kiyomizu with the message and her own conclusion. "The carpenter story is a concoction to save face. Her

husband has banished her until she learns loyalty and manners."

She assumed Nyosan's conclusion was accurate, so Lady Kiyomizu was kind and thoughtful to Oigimi. Hoping to influence her without embarrassing her, she chose a story about a selfish wife for Yoshiko to read the next day. The moral concluded that a wife who is generous toward her husband will be loved and kindly cared for.

Kenji headed through the garden beyond his father's rooms. He walked out to the cherry orchard and leaned against one of the innermost trees. Akihiro's voice called after him, but he didn't respond.

Akihiro's steps could easily be heard as he strode decidedly through the garden and on into the orchard. When he arrived, he squatted beneath a tree a yard or so from Kenji and waited quietly.

Kenji spoke first, "Sorry I left you without a practice partner this morning."

"It must surely have been something important."

"I went to speak with Father, to petition his intervention with Oigimi. Her behaviors are such an embarrassment; I feel I could melt into the Earth."

"What did he say?"

"Because of her strategic importance to the China raid, I am to ignore everything. 'Give her anything she wants.' is his only solution. But there is no hiding anything. All my friends and acquaintances see everything she does. The gods themselves must be chuckling behind their fans, taking bets on how long before I kill myself. How could Father do this to me? I'm his only son. He is supposed to care about me. I swear, no matter what political goals I have, I will never do such a thing to any child of mine - if I ever get one!"

"It's only a few weeks till we leave. We'll drink late and you can slip into her bed while she sleeps. Stop her mouth with kisses in the night and be gone before morning so you don't have to hear her complaints over breakfast. A few nights like that and you'll have your heir. After we get back, she'll be so busy with the baby; she won't have time to make trouble. You'll see."

"Ah, but you forget . . . for the rest of my life, I'll have to live with her in Edo every other year."

"Or . . . for the rest of her life . . . , yes? . . . Look, Kenji, I'm getting hungry. Let's go get something to eat. Lunch must be ready by now."

When they arrived, Cook was very busy and Yoshiko was arranging a variety of small dishes on a tray. "We're hungry, why is lunch not finished?"

"It is," Cook replied. "There is plenty on the table for you two and the rest of us. Go help yourselves."

Kenji approached the fire and looked into the wok. "What is the special occasion? These are my favorite vegetables; may we have some of these?"

"There is only enough for one serving. Sorry."

"What about these other dishes on this counter: fragrant rice, spicy pork, sweet duck, pickled ginger?"

"No, not those either. Sorry."

"Whose lunch is this? Is there a guest I don't know about?"

Akihiro handed him a bowl, "Come on. Let's dish up what's over there for us."

Kenji looked at Cook. He continued to stir the vegetables. Yoshiko looked down at her tray and moved the dishes around. Satoshi went to the far corner of the kitchen and gazed out the window. Kenji looked at Akihiro. Akihiro turned his back and went to talk quietly with Satoshi. Kenji gently laid his hand on Cook's arm to stop the stirring.

"Whose lunch is this?"

"It is for the Lady Tansho, your wife."

"How did this happen?"

"The request came from the women's wing and I am cooking what was asked for."

"Yoshiko?" Her face flushed. He turned his head to look directly at her. "Tell me."

"When lunch arrived, Lady Tansho said she felt better foods should be offered to someone of her elevated rank. Lady Kiyomizu said nothing. Her position is awkward in such an instance, as you can imagine."

"Oh, Yoshiko, I am so sorry. I never imagined Oigimi would be so terrible to someone so good to her." He sat on a bench by the doorway. "Satoshi, get me paper and ink. I have an idea. Cook, go ahead and dish up the food as you intended to. Yoshiko and I will carry the tray. Satoshi

will carry the note."

"What are you up to?" Akihiro asked.

"Never mind. It's private."

"Of course."

When the tray was ready, Akihiro stayed to eat in the kitchen with Cook. Yoshiko carried the tray and followed Kenji. Satoshi walked alongside. Shortly, they came to the walkway that led to the women's wing. Kenji steered Satoshi toward the entrance as he and Yoshiko continued on. Satoshi balked.

"My Lord, are you not bringing the food?"

"No."

"Oh, My Lord, one does not go into the tiger's den without food. Surely I will be killed."

Kenji smiled. "It is the warrior who goes into battle expecting to die who comes out alive. Embrace your fate and Hachiman will smile on you."

Yoshiko gave him a quizzical look and Kenji laughed. Satoshi put on a brave face and walked toward the woman's wing.

When he arrived at the door of the common room, it was partly open already. He could see that the ladies were all eating, except for Lady Tansho, who was pacing in agitation. As soon as she saw him standing in the hall, she made an announcement to the group:

"Now you will see a real lunch; one fit for a Lady of high birth."

Satoshi handed her the note. She read it and her face went red. A shriek tore the air and she threw the note onto the floor! Satoshi cringed and shrank back from the doorway. Oigimi ground the note into the tatami with her foot and tears rolled down her cheeks.

Kiko approached her and offered to share the generous lunch that had already been sent for them.

"I wouldn't touch it if that were all the food between me and death!" and she spat at Kiko.

Kiko turned calmly and directed Satoshi to remove their lunch dishes. When Oigimi saw him retreating with the tray, she called out to him, but in his shock and fear at her behavior, he broke into a run. She returned to the room crying and stamping her feet. Finally, she withdrew to a side room and cried herself to sleep.

Lady Kiyomizu announced she was going to the bathhouse. All the ladies prepared to attend her. A young maid asked Nyosan whether she might stay behind.

“No, when Lady Tansho awakes it will fare better for everyone if she is alone.”

“But we already took a bath.”

“Never mind.”

Lady Kiyomizu and Nyosan were the first into the steaming water. They said very little. It was as if Oigimi’s tirade had spewed enough words for the time being.

The rest of the maids seemed to have plenty to chatter about. Each girl said something to another and it was followed by a flurry of giggles. When they came into the water, Nyosan asked what the joke was. The maids all went silent.

Lady Kiyomizu cleared her throat and looked accusingly at them. She spoke to the one who looked the most guilty. “I would like an explanation from you.”

“Well, . . . mm . . . while everyone was getting their things together for the bath house, I . . . mm . . . took a short look at Lady Tansho’s note.”

Lady Kiyomizu looked stern and said, “That was a serious invasion of Lady Tansho’s privacy!”

The girl lowered her eyes and looked about to cry.

“Now, . . you must tell us all exactly what you read so we may know just how serious an invasion it was.” The girl looked puzzled and Lady Kiyomizu smiled just a little.

Her face brightened as she got the point and she gaily recited the contents of Kenji’s note to Oigimi:

My Dear Wife,

*Thank you for the wonderful lunch you ordered for me.
I am pleased that you are already learning from Lady Kiyomizu
the proper respect for your husband. Now you need only come
obediently to my bed and we will be happy again.*

Kenji

The sun was low on the horizon as Mihashi gathered together the warriors for a final comment on the day's training. "Remember to keep yourselves centered on the Seven Virtues.

Keep your minds focused. And do not discuss strategy in the hearing of anyone who is not a warrior." Then he dismissed them all except Kenji.

"I'm certain you have an explanation about this morning, but I'm also certain it stems from the awful weakness for women you inherited from your father. You must learn to put them aside; disregard them. Women are dangerous to a samurai. When you deal with them, it divides your mind and a divided mind in combat will cost you your life."

"Yes, Sensei, as you say. Please may I tell you what I discussed with Father?"

"Go ahead."

"Oigimi is selfishly demanding special treatment in the household. It was bad enough in Edo when she began to refuse my advances and taunt me about my devotion to my training, but that, at least, was private. These incidents at Father's manor are practically public! It surely won't be long before someone from the household goes to the village market and lets the stories out."

"She is becoming a shame to you?"

"Yes."

"Kill her."

"I nearly have, more than once. Father forbids it. He says we still need Lord Yuasa's favor on our campaign this summer."

"He is right. All that is left to you is to beat her. It is a little late. You should have done it in the beginning; while it was still private. Nevertheless, it might help . . . and now that it isn't so private, you truly have no choice."

"Thank you, Sensei." Kenji bowed and left.

He went to the bathhouse and soaked a long time. He talked with others who came and went. They talked and joked about everything but wives. He had a feeling they were saving those jokes until he left.

When he got back to his rooms, Yoshiko had his dinner waiting. He sent her off to her room and asked Shinobu to serve. As he ate, he discussed his problem with Shinobu. "I must discipline a servant and I am unused to such things."

“Is it me, Young Master?”

“No. Not you. It is a woman. I need a correction cane, but not a short one like we use in the dojo. Can you find me one, Shinobu?”

“Yes, My Lord. One must be careful disciplining a female, though, in case they are growing the seed of a child,”

“Thank you, I will keep that in mind. I find I am no longer so angry as I was at first. I’m not sure how to go about it.”

“Perhaps if the Young Lord thought back to the situation that caused the embarrassment, he might be able to stir his temper to discipline.”

“Perhaps. The General feels I spend too much time with women. Tell Yoshiko I will be drinking with Akihiro tonight and she is to sleep with Miko.”

“Certainly, My Lord.”

Akihiro was pleased to see him and as the evening became late, the conversation returned to how to produce an heir with an uncooperative wife. Kenji was finally talked into trying Akihiro's plan.

They managed to walk quietly down the hallway to the women's wing, but Kiko met them at the door and would only let Kenji in. She took him to where Oigimi slept and quietly withdrew. Eventually, Kenji left her room and went back toward the doorway to the hall. Kiko helped him straighten his clothing and find his way out.

While they were walking back to Akihiro's building, he asked, “How did it all go?”

“She must’ve been dreaming when I first went in. She called me some other name. When she knew what I wanted, she just lay completely still. Afterwards, though, she gouged her nails across my chest and I slapped her hand away. Then she laughed.”

“Maybe she's gone crazy.”

“Maybe.”

From this point on, Kenji encased himself in a tight routine of meditation and training. He wanted to wall himself off from conflict with his wife and become single-minded again.

Yoshiko continued to see to her regular duties, but she wondered what it was she had done to offend Kenji. He had walled her out as he had Oigimi. He gave her no indication of what the offense might be, but his

affectionate self was gone and in its place was an empty shell, which came and went and looked like Kenji.

She tried to reach out to him with special attention to detail and other things she knew he liked, extra flower arrangements in the rooms, his favorite foods, a short poem on his quilt, and she offered to meet him at the bathhouse every day and bathe him herself. The flower arrangements were sent to his wife, his favorite food was eaten without comment as any other, a bit of paper on the edge of the brazier was all that was left of the poem, and her offer about the baths was met with definite irritation and a verbal reprimand!

Now she was sure she had done something, but on the tenth night since his return, her worst fears came to life. She went to the kitchen for his food, as always, and when she brought it back, there he was with a four-foot cane. He was striking its full length along the floor mats repeatedly, producing a resounding thwack.

Making no comment, he sat down to eat, but the cane was within reach. She said nothing at all for fear of saying the wrong thing. Over her years in the Tansho household, she had seen Lords who kept such a cane near at all times to discipline servants and horses.

Nyosan came by after dinner and insisted on speaking to Kenji alone. He sent Yoshiko to the kitchen with his dishes and when she returned, they were both gone. She went to the small shrine in the back of the room to offer a prayer. Then she made herself a cup of tea and waited for Kenji to come back to her.

Nyosan watched Yoshiko carry out the dirty dishes on a tray and slid the shoji closed.

“Today, the young Lady Tansho declared to the household ladies that she would write her father. She said it would be a list of the many abuses she has suffered since her marriage.”

“What news is there in that? Her complaints are in the millions and they repeat themselves like echoes in a cave. Father has said she must be allowed to do anything she cares to do. I see no way to stop her from writing her father.”

“Please, please, you do not grasp the treachery she intends. Lady Kiyomizu sent me to you as soon as she realized your wife's goal. I do not believe your wife yet knows the letter is missing, but once she does, the world may come to an end. If her father were to receive the letter all would be lost, but even if it becomes public knowledge here in the household, the damage would be irreparable.”

“Well, let me read it.”

She handed it over and he began to read:

Oh My Father, may you live forever!

I am writing to tell you how your obedient daughter is being shamefully treated, here so far from your loving protection. It is so distressing being married to this child! Seventeen years old, no real experience in love or war, a complete isolate. Imagine being in Edo where there are so many important people and inviting no one to dinner or even to tea. He waited on the Shogun when he was summoned and came home to talk and practice with the samurai who came with us from the Tansho household; that was all.

I know that the duty of a wife is to submit to the demands of her husband, but this weakling makes no demands. He merely requests compliance; he asks how I feel about what he wants me to do! But most embarrassing of all: he has come to me with gifts bought from some smuggler, as though he could buy my adoration; as if I were a peasant girl who would be impressed by something expensive.

Lord and Lady Tansho were polite to me and rather nice, but they seldom invited us to their residence. They wanted Kenji to concentrate his energy toward producing an heir. Needless to say, there is no child on the way and it is no fault of mine. I have been cooperative.

If he doesn't become a real husband soon, I'll give him an heir all right, but it will likely resemble the leather worker who comes to repair the armor. It would serve Kenji right to have the offspring of an untouchable to raise!

I wouldn't be surprised if that was how Lord Tansho happened to produce Kenji. They are so different from each other. Lord Tansho is decisive and commanding. He could inspire adoration in any

woman. And he certainly demands obedience from everyone around him. Even Lady Tansho, who doesn't like him much, is proud to be his wife, and obeys him without question!

Here at the province manor, things are even worse, if you can imagine. Kenji has housed my maids and me with Lady Kiyomizu, Lord Tansho's concubine! Kenji asks me to study her behavior - it's like being asked to mimic the village whores!

It is degrading that I, who have had the best possible upbringing and such a sophisticated outlook, must be saddled with a juvenile and helpless husband! "

Kenji was quiet. As a matter of fact, he was hardly breathing. He carefully folded the letter and placed it inside his shitagi, next to his heart. Nyosan feared for a few moments that he would do nothing. Then she saw that his eyes had turned to black lacquer. He rose, put on his swords, and took the cane with him as he went into the hallway, "Attend me."

Nyosan knew what was coming. She tried quickly to think of a way to avoid having everyone, Oigimi in particular, know that she was the one who had carried the damning information to Kenji.

"Please, I have another errand . . ."

"No."

There was no help for it, then, she was bound to be seen as she opened the door of the common room for Kenji. Oigimi would never let her association with this incident go without retribution; that was a certainty. When they arrived at the fateful doorway, she knelt and slid the shoji aside for him. The ladies were all together, filling the common room with gay colors like a summer flower garden. She caught Oigimi's eye for a moment and then saw her face fill with apprehension as she beheld Kenji.

He stood on the threshold, the cane in his hand as one might hold a walking staff. His gaze located Oigimi among the roomful of women.

"My dear Wife, come out with me a while." Though the words were civil, his face was stone and his voice a monotone.

"I have a lap full of sewing, My Husband," came her lilting reply, "Come keep me company here, my Sweet."

“We have something to discuss.”

“These ladies and I are dear sisters. We may speak in their presence.” The cane had not been missed by Oigimi’s alert eye and its presence was made all the more ominous by Kenji’s lack of emotion. She was hoping to divert his intent by maintaining a public status for the conversation. Since Kenji already considered the letter a public action, he was prepared to make a public response.

“Very well.” He drew out the folded paper. “I have a letter with me. Did you write this?”

Lady Kiyomizu withdrew to her room. All the ladies took their cue from her and gradually left the common room. Oigimi’s personal maid fetched the letter to her mistress and then left. Nyosan turned her back on the scene, afraid to stay, but more afraid to stand or try to leave - Kenji was still within easy reach of her with cane and sword both.

Oigimi opened the paper. Her face flushed when she saw what it was. She vowed she’d get Nyosan if it took her last breath! Her voice, when she finally spoke, was that of a pitiful supplicant: “Oh, please, My Husband, don't think I would ever have sent such a thing to my father!”

“Did you write it?” The intensity in his voice gave indication of the force that was being restrained in his body, but he spoke quietly.

Oigimi put the sewing out of her lap and rose to walk toward him. She dropped to her knees in the center of the room, “Dearest Husband, it is my letter, but I am such a weak woman and I was so distraught when I wrote this that you cannot consider it to have any validity or truth to it.” She put her hands over her face and began to cry her ‘tears’.

Her mocking ‘tears’ were only another brand on the fire to Kenji and more than he could tolerate. “Who were you expecting when I came to your room in the night?”

“You! Only you, my Sweet. ”

"It was not my name you called."

“I was dreaming. You are my only lover. You know that!”

“I know you are a liar and a traitor!” He took three strides into the room and took a stance to one side of her, raised the cane and struck down across her upper back.

She screamed, and then yelled, “How dare you!” On her feet in only a second, she leapt for his face. He blocked her with his forearm so that

her inch-long fingernails only scraped down his neck instead of gouging out his eyes. The automatic response of his right arm was to wedge the cane between her ankles, which sent her sprawling face down onto the tatami.

He struck her a blow across the shoulder blades before she could rise up and she stayed down. The rod fell on her repeatedly: across and across her back; across and across her legs; again and again until his anger ebbed and a strike on the bottom of her feet brought almost no response.

Nyosan watched him leave by the garden exit, then she ran to Oigimi. She still breathed a little. "Kiko! Fetch the herbalist. Now!"

Walking back to his rooms seemed strange to Kenji. There was no feeling in his body except the sensations through the bottoms of his feet: shifting rounded pebbles on the pathway; the smooth stability of the polished wooden walkways; and last, the gentle give of the woven grass tatami in his own common room.

He saw Yoshiko sitting having tea near the brazier. She bowed, but immediately began to chatter. "Why have you been sparring at this hour? I can get a comb for you. Heavens! You're bleeding!" She wetted a cloth and stood up to wipe his neck. He was reaching down to place his swords on the rack as she reached out with the cloth toward his throat. He shoved her - hard - down to the floor. She raised herself up to a kneeling position, "What have I done to displease..."

"SHUT UP!"

He stood in a braced stance near the brazier, but he had her in full view, not more than two strides distant. Her hands went to her face and she began to cry quietly.

"Not again! Are all women such mockers?" He strode forward the short distance and struck out with the cane. It landed across her right thigh. She shrieked and threw herself prostrate onto the floor as any obedient servant did when beaten by their master. She continued to cry for some time, but waited in vain for a second blow.

Kenji withdrew to consider this experience.

He sat lotus before the shrine at the back of the room. The graceful statue of Kwannon, Iron Bodhisattva of Compassion, looked back at him

with its calm serenity. *Always I have known in my head how different Yoshiko is from Oigimi, but now I know in my heart. Oigimi tried to kill me, while Yoshiko merely accepted my cruelty. I had to beat Oigimi - she is making me lose face and she hates me . . . but oh, Kwannon, tell me why I would strike Yoshiko like that. She is my own heart. . .*

He lit an incense stick and meditated for a few minutes.

The answer came to him: tonight he had experienced true bushido or samurai lifestyle. No individuals meant anything special to him. Only the completion of his intended action was important; allowing no one to come between himself and his goal. It was a new experience, but he felt it could be useful.

He turned and looked across the room. Yoshiko still lay prostrate, sobbing into the tatami. Looking at her now did not bring the warm feelings it usually did, only pity. He looked around for the damp cloth she had offered him and picked it up.

Carefully lifting her head, he wiped her tear-reddened face. She hugged his neck and he was able to help her sit up. Then he laid out their quilts and pillows. He carried her over to the quilts and laid her on them. As he removed her kimono, he saw the long, red welt on her thigh and placed the wet cloth over it. That he had marred her perfect skin bothered him. She certainly didn't deserve it, but still he was not able to feel true sorrow; only the pity. He drew his finger along her jaw line and down her neck; strange that her beauty did not stir him right now. He covered her with the quilt and told her to go to sleep.

He made himself some tea and looked around for something to do. When his eyes rested on the cane, he was decided. He took a small knife and cut a length from it to carve into a flute. He laid the completed flute by Yoshiko's kimono and lay down next to her to sleep.

Before sunrise, Kenji awoke with desire burning in him. He was disgusted! Why, when he thought he had finally settled things in his life around these women, did he find himself needing one? He decided not to think at all tonight. He woke Yoshiko and drew her to him, relieved his desire, and turned away. He felt better, as always, but he didn't feel so tied to her as he usually did. Bushido did have its advantages.

Yoshiko got up at dawn and made tea. She had very little idea of what had gone on the night before, only that Kenji had accused her of mocking him. That made no sense. She honored him in all ways. It was as though he had tried to make up with her, but his love for her had ended. Even when he had sex with her, it was like he was a puppet going through the motions, but just pretending.

There was the flute, though. He had carved it for her himself. Surely that meant the old Kenji was still around somewhere, even if that wasn't him lying there in her bed. She said a prayer to the ancestors to send him back into his body. It was too frightening to live with only an empty shell of him.

A light tapping came at the door. "Yoshiko," a woman whispered. She hurried to open the shoji, "Be very quiet, he's still asleep. I'm so glad to see you, Nyosan. I haven't had a soul to talk to for a week but Kwannon, and she's not helping me any."

They huddled around the brazier and kept their voices low. "Where is Miko?"

"The Great Lord often calls for her and after last night, she vanished completely."

"I don't blame her. The dread and confusion in the women's wing is thick enough to cut with a knife. No one has ever seen such violence from Kenji. Lady Kiyomizu is sure it is a one-time thing, but I begin to wonder if his father's influence is coming to full bloom. How have you been? Do you feel safe?"

She lay her robe open to show the remains of the welt on her leg. "Shinobu told me Kenji had beaten his wife, but why he hit me, I have no idea. What is going on? It's like Kenji is gone and a stranger has taken his place."

"Oigimi prepared to betray him in a number of ways and had written a letter to Lord Yuasa that would have at the least, ruined the China raid plans and at the worst, would have started a huge war. The Shogun would have intervened and all of us would have died. Lady Kiyomizu's intelligent handling of it all and Kenji's decisiveness have prevented that. But so long as Oigimi continues in this household, we are all at risk.

"What happened to you was not intentional, I'm sure. All these

years, you have known Kenji-the-man. Now you have met Kenji-the-warrior. Each time you meet the warrior, you need only obey him strictly and you should be all right. When Kenji-the-man returns, he is the one you can love and care for.”

“How will I know if he has returned?”

“His eyes will see you again.”

“I hope he returns soon.”

“Yoshiko!” Kenji was awake. “Who are you gossiping with over the brazier? Bring me some tea, Girl!”

Nyosan poured tea into a cup and handed it to Yoshiko, “Tell him I have a message.”

She went to his sleeping area and slipped behind the screen to offer the tea. “Nyosan has come to talk with you.”

He dressed without haste and sipped his tea. He had Yoshiko comb his hair and bind it correctly, then he took several moments to prepare himself mentally. Only then did he go out and seat himself across from Nyosan at the brazier. He looked at her, “Tell me,” he commanded.

Nyosan looked into his eyes. They seemed to be made of black glass. “Oigimi is still alive . . . barely. Lady Kiyomizu said you must be the one to decide what is done with this.” She pulled the letter from her kimono sleeve and handed it to him.

He held it over the brazier and watched as it scorched and puffed to flame. As it burned, he asked, “What will it take for her to heal?”

“Constant care, medicinal teas, mild food and warmth.”

“What about prayers? Shouldn't constant prayers be offered? I think I shall have a monk brought from the temple to read sutras and chant prayers each hour and keep her company. What do you think?”

“You are a generous young man. She does not deserve such a husband.”

He turned to Yoshiko, “And you? What do you think?”

“I think any man would do as much for the woman he loved.”

Nyosan blanched as her eyes widened in shock. Her fingers flew unbidden to their old instructional signal: mistake! Mistake!

Kenji bristled. He glared at Yoshiko.

“Please, Young Master,” Nyosan spoke, “I must return to my Lady. She is expecting me.”

He waved her away with one hand and she hurried out.

“Just what did your reply mean?”

“Only that Oigimi is lucky to have you be so kind to her when all she has offered you is hatred.” Then she nearly whispered, “I might be able to muster a little hate for you myself, if it would yield such care.”

He stood and walked over to her, dropped to one knee, and took her chin to raise her face to look at his. His voice had its quiet, deadly edge, “I could send for another cane . . .”

Yoshiko bowed her forehead to the floor and began to tremble. Kenji gently touched her cheek. She raised her head and he caressed her neck. Finally, he sat down and held her close. “I’ll have that monk read ten sutras to you for every one he reads to Oigimi. How would that be?”

She relaxed against him and laughed a little laugh. Then she looked up into his eyes and he saw her. Kenji was back.

Gentle Ministrations of Husband and Wife

The next three weeks were bliss for Kenji and his Little Dancer. They took pleasure in everything in existence at every possible moment.

A monk did come and chant prayers and sutras. Morning and night for Yoshiko and all day long for Oigimi. Kenji inquired after his wife's health every day, but would neither see nor speak to her. By the second week, he knew she was recovering because she began to refuse the herb teas and complain about the strong odor of the ointment.

After a few more days, Nyosan came in the afternoon to speak with Kenji alone again. He sent Yoshiko and Shinobu to meditate in the island garden.

Kenji was puzzled and curious, “What can have happened so quickly? I had a report from Kiko just this morning and Oigimi was doing well.”

“That gossiping monk has opened his mouth once too often! Evidently no one ever explained to Oigimi that you have a concubine. Her father must not have felt it was important information for a young bride to have about her future husband. Lady Kiyomizu and I supposed you had told her yourself and she had taken it in stride. We should have known better than that. Now this outsider! This big-mouthed monk! He

has not only broken the news, but identified Yoshiko as well!”

“Why are you so distraught? I suppose every wife must learn to accept such things at some time in her marriage.”

“Oh my Young Lord, it is not that simple - nothing is that simple with Oigimi - she has sworn to kill Yoshiko and has secretly tried to enlist the help of the kitchen boy.”

Kenji gripped the jade netsuke of Hachiman he wore to secure his obi. “Satoshi is a good little fellow; he would never do such a thing.”

“You are right. He told the whole plan to Cook as soon as she suggested it to him.”

“Thank you for warning me, Nyosan. Go get Yoshiko now and bring her to Akihiro’s rooms. I’ll meet you there. Hurry!”

Once they were all with Akihiro, Kenji gave directions: “Yoshiko, you must have Miko take over all your duties for Lady Kiyomizu so you never go into the women’s wing at all anymore. Akihiro, work out a schedule with Nyosan so that one of you is always with Yoshiko when I cannot be.”

Yoshiko smiled, “But surely you can be with me all the time, now.”

Kenji looked sad. “As much as possible for the next two days, of course, but Father has decided that on the third day I must make the tea ceremony for Oigimi and make formal peace with her. That will mean a few more opportunities in the week before we leave to produce a child.”

“Will this torment never end?” Akihiro stamped a challenging foot forward.

Kenji looked into Akihiro’s eyes, “Father has decided.”

“As you say.”

Yoshiko put her hand on Akihiro’s arm and he placed his hand over it protectively. “Nyosan will have full charge once we have left for the South. When we come to Lord Yuasa’s manor, I will send a man with news of our safe arrival. He will become your personal bodyguard until we come back from the trip.”

Yoshiko nodded her assent.

She did not feel in any danger and preferred to center her thoughts on the time left to her with Kenji. For their last night, she put into action the plans she had made months before: she wore her most flattering kimono, the deep blue one with white cranes. She prepared Kenji’s

favorite dinner, broth with greens and mushrooms and small deer parts. Cook made fried eel and steamed fish with noodles. There was pickled ginger and salted plums and steamed buns with sweet bean filling. After they ate, she sent for a musician and danced for him while he sipped sake.

They walked in the woods later, listening to the crickets and looking at the stars and moon. A very tender night followed.

At daybreak, she was up writing a poem to Kenji which she left next to his clothes. She packed her things and was moved across the practice yard into the room next to Akihiro's before Kenji awoke. Akihiro had no wife or concubine and, of course, was highly prized by Mihashi as a model student. She hoped that their enforced association for the next week would not compromise his standing in the Sensei's eyes.

This day, for Kenji, was the longest he had ever experienced. Yoshiko's absence left him feeling empty, but her poem eased that. The worst was the anticipation of a reconciliation with Oigimi. His stomach roiled as he gathered his tea utensils and sent Shinobu to make sure the teahouse was in perfect order. Having threatened Yoshiko's life made her his sworn enemy. He made a firm decision, but living with it might be impossible. Every act and thought for him was in slow motion today. Every strand of hair in its perfect place; every pleat of his hakama exactly flat; off with the Hachiman netsuke and on with the Kwannon, goddess of compassion.

Oigimi was in her glory! When Shinobu delivered the invitation from Kenji that she comes to the teahouse tomorrow, she felt victory was hers. Yes, her father-in-law had arranged it all, but he was obviously on her side. He was bringing his son in line for her, and she was delighted.

She spent the day choosing what to wear and having her hair washed and perfumed. She sent for Etsu to count the sticks and read her fortune.

"I want to know how our lives will go after the tea ceremony. Tell me that Etsu."

She lit incense and they both said a short prayer. Then Etsu laid out the counting cloth and picked up her yarrow sticks. She counted and recounted until she had the hexagram.

“It is ‘Abysmal Water’; let me read it to you: ‘Warning of danger. Guard against trickery.

The situation is out of hand. If you are involved with evil people or bad lifestyle, you will soon suffer the consequences. Many hardships. In marriage: not an ideal match - trouble on both sides makes success difficult - the male is not of one mind about his love. In health: very serious - death is possible. In travel: do not travel.” Etsu closed her scroll, “It doesn't sound good at all.”

"That is not my fortune. You have done it wrong. Who were you with just before you came to me?"

“I was with Akihiro.”

"You mean Yoshiko, don't you? I am aware of what goes on in this household; don't think I'm not. You have not cleared her thoughts from your sticks. That is her fortune you were reading."

"Let me clear them and start again." She took one of the incense sticks and held it so that the smoke trailed along the yarrow sticks. She turned and twisted the bundle so that all the sticks were smudged. Then she replaced the incense and divided the bundle to begin counting them out again.

“Why do you count the sticks? You should shake the sticks out of a jar the way they do at the temple in Edo. It's faster.”

“This is the way I learned from my grandmother. It may take a little longer, but the answers from the I-Ching are more accurate. Here is your trigram: Ch'ien. You need the colors white and gold, and chrysanthemums and tiger for luck. It says, ‘Focus your energies and you can achieve your ambition.’” She began counting and recounting again.

Oigimi fidgeted. She reached for a carved jade box and took out a piece of candied ginger to eat while she waited. She signaled with her fingers and her little hair maid approached. She fed her a piece of ginger and patted her face, then shooed her off again. Out of hearing range – she hoped.

At last the hexagram was completed: “‘Waiting’ is the name of it. ‘Do not be extreme in actions. Not the time to force issues. Rest and relax - meditate for inner wisdom. Do not covet petty advantage or you will suffer failure. Listen to advice from sincere friends. It may be beneficial to cross water. In love: impulsiveness leads to failure. In

health: illness long and protracted - digestive ailments. In travel: there will be a delay before you can begin.' That is certainly better, don't you think? Just be careful what you eat, Madam."

"Is there nothing else? That does not seem to say anything about the future. 'Do nothing. Be careful what you eat?'"

"There is one changing line, Madam. Let me see what its portent might be." Etsu rolled her scroll far toward the end. "'Completion' it is called. 'Man and woman are in their proper places. Now is the time for success and fame. Carefree, flourishing fortunes for a short time, so don't be arrogant or negligent. Put everything in order. Keep your goals reasonable. You'll lose everything if you behave stupidly. In love: smooth success. In health: beware of relapse of disease of abdominal region. In travel: you'll arrive safely, but be careful on the way.' Surely this pleases you, Madam?"

"Yes, Etsu. That is wonderful. You are a gem. Here, take this for your trouble," she handed her the jade box of candied ginger.

Etsu gathered up her scroll and tools and walked to the door.

"Thank you, Madam."

Oigimi still felt fidgety. She drove Cook and Satoshi to distraction with her demands and insisted the musicians play that night until she fell asleep.

The next morning came and at the appointed time, Kenji performed the rituals of purification to begin the tea ceremony. Finally, he took a dipper of water from the fountain basin and dripped water onto the stepping-stones that led to the teahouse, to hallow their path. Then he left his weapons in the anteroom, went inside the simple teahouse, and waited for Oigimi to arrive.

The door to the anteroom opened and he saw her ornately coifed head lower to enter the intentionally short doorway. When she entered and he saw what she wore, his first inclination was to throw her out and cancel the entire fiasco. She had chosen the gold kimono she had bought in Edo, the one with the white tiger and dragon on it. She had also worn her kaiken. It was probably only the third time he had ever seen her do that. The thought flickered through his mind that she might intend to kill him. He almost laughed. But she removed the kaiken, as custom required, and also removed the flamboyant kimono. Beneath it, she wore

a simple, appropriately plain one of dove grey.

Once she entered and was settled, his mind and body relaxed as he moved through the familiar actions he had practiced for so many years. He uncapped the bamboo cylinder that contained the tea. He dipped in the tiny scoop and measured out the precise amount of green powder into each cup. Taking up the cloth, he wiped the scoop clean, placed it aside, and folded the cloth.

The monks were right: being in the moment brings peace. *But I miss the atmosphere of the temple and my gentle tea master.*

He took the iron teapot from the brazier and poured exactly the right amount of hot water into Oigimi's cup. He took up the whisk, stirred the tea to a green froth, tapped the whisk on the edge of the cup and sat it down.

Again he lifted the iron teapot and poured the perfect amount of water into a cup - his. As he whisked it, his mind drifted: *Great Grandfather built this teahouse. Grandfather made these cups. I made these bamboo utensils myself. Where does Father fit into this? Ah, yes . . . he put Oigimi on the other side of this table from me. I don't think it is Father who is following true Tansho form. I think I am.*

He took the cloth and wiped Oigimi's cup and handed it to her. She turned the cup and studied its shape and glaze while he wiped his own cup.

She said, "It is a simple and serene cup. It seems to carry the spirit of its maker."

"Yes. As different as these cups look from one another, they have that in common – a peaceful spirit. Will you come back to me so that we can share a peaceful spirit?"

"I know it is the Great Lord, your father, who wants this, but is it what you want?"

Winning is never enough for this woman. She has to bring the salt to pour into my cuts. . . He put his hands on her arms and gazed deeply into her eyes, "Yes, with all my heart. This is what I want. Life has not been the same without my Princess."

Oigimi smiled, "Whatever my lord wishes is my wish, also."

She took her cup and drank the tea, as did Kenji.

Well, since she went to the trouble to put on her best humility and

submission, I suppose it is only fair that I brought out my best lies and mask of sincerity. Noh of the highest form, certainly, but do we ever get to leave the stage?

At the conclusion, they retired to his rooms and consummated their re-established relationship.

She fell asleep, but he dressed and paced the room. To see Oigimi lying asleep where Yoshiko belonged was . . . it reminded him of the day he saw the sword maker killed. He felt like he had been forced by his father again to take part in something . . . unclean. He left to find Yoshiko; he felt he had to see her. Nyosan had been at her duties, however, and her instruction to Yoshiko had been firm. Once the tea ceremony was complete, she was to have nothing to do with Kenji. That was why, when he saw her in Lady Kiyomizu's garden, she turned her back on him and walked into the women's wing. He knew she had seen him. He also knew he was now invisible to her.

How can I stay in a world that forces such hypocrisy on lovers? Oh how I hate Oigimi! Beginning tomorrow, we will be acting in a new play because I have decided.

In the morning, Kenji got up and made tea for Oigimi and himself. He put the medicinal herbs into hers and, though she protested mildly, he saw to it that she drank it all. He decided his devotion to her would be unquestionable and unrelenting.

After breakfast, he took her for a walk through the garden. Her ladies accompanied them and they walked very slowly so as not to overtire Oigimi. He made her rest until lunchtime and after lunch, he read from a book of poems to the ladies. The monk was called in then to chant prayers. Finally, at dinnertime, they went to see Lord Tansho and show him that they had officially made up. He seemed very pleased, and as a reward to his son, the Lord told them he had ordered brand new armor made for him.

Once they returned to their rooms, her tirade started. "New armor! What a waste. For the money he'll pay for that, I could have hired two more carpenters and had new clothes besides!"

Kenji left the room so she could complain to her ladies. At least they cared what she thought. He gritted his teeth. He could still hear her through the sheer walls.

"Of course, with shining new armor, perhaps he will stand out and make a better target. Who knows? I might soon be a rich widow," she laughed. "Once they've left on that idiotic raid, I'll have more freedom. Yoshiko will be gone and I think I will use her room for the monk. He should be with the household on a permanent basis. He is a useful fellow."

Each day of the rest of the week began with the medicinal tea and a walk after breakfast and lots of rest. Oigimi's ladies were becoming restless and by the end of the week she talked Kenji into permission for an outing to the village marketplace. It proved to be too exhausting for Oigimi and when they returned, Kenji put her to bed himself and gave her more tea. Even with his gentle ministrations, she wasn't able to get up the next day and see the men off.

At dawn, Kenji went to the women's wing dressed in full armor. He made a very impressive sight and he hoped, in vain, to see Yoshiko. All he could do was speak to Nyosan.

"I want you to keep this bag of herb powder and make sure Oigimi has this in her tea morning and night every day. Don't let her only drink part. She must have it all exactly as I have said."

"Certainly, Young Master. I will do everything you said, diligently."

"Swear."

"What do you mean?"

"Swear on your life that you will do this."

"Of course, I swear." She took his hand and placed it on the hilt of his short sword, "Kill me now if you do not believe me."

He placed a kiss on her forehead. "Pray for my safe return."

Then Kenji took his leave and curiosity being what it is, Nyosan began to examine the powder carefully for the reason he was so adamant. Eventually she found a bud not quite ground up enough to avoid identification. It was a terribly dangerous bud, generally used in tiny amounts. Assassins could be hired to poison anyone you wanted with it. Now that she understood the healthful effects of this tea, she found she was more than glad to continue Oigimi's treatments.

Yoshiko dressed in a plain brown kimono and slipped into the back of the crowd of household servants gathered to see their Lord off on his

campaign. Kenji was easy to identify in his new armor, but she was careful to avoid being seen by him. Nyosan's instruction had been firm. She tried to memorize every tiny bit of how he looked, so she could hold the picture in her heart to comfort her while he was gone. He looked invincible. Every inch of him was covered with armor. Surely he could ride into a cloud of arrows and never be touched. His helmet was covered with deep, green enamel; there were deer antlers attached to the top; the cheek plates were gold; the faceplate was a black grimace - no enemy would dare to fight him. The lacing holding together all the armor plates was dark green, while the knotted tassels were gold.

Yoshiko reached for the corner of the stable to steady herself. Seeing him like this made her heart leap inside her chest. That fearsome, powerful warrior was her lover. She was afraid she might faint. She had to look at the ground as they rode away.

She felt as lonely today as the day she had first come to this province castle. She was sure she didn't want to sleep alone tonight, so she asked Kiko if she might sleep in the women's wing.

"Of course. Oigimi is in Kenji's rooms, so there should be no problems. Everyone will be happy to have you back with us."

But when Lady Kiyomizu heard of it, she was not so sure. "There was not room for all of Oigimi's maids in Kenji's rooms. Two of them are still here. I think it would be judicious to move them into the room next to Akihiro's for the time being. Please, Kiko, bring Yoshiko's belongings from that room and have that pair of maids moved into it. They may not be much of a risk, but any risk is too much right now."

Everything was settled by the time Yoshiko came in that evening, and they all were glad to have her. They sang and played at shells and gossiped and altogether made an event of it. It felt comfortable to Yoshiko to be back in the women's wing. The familiar competition was still there between Lady Kiyomizu and Etsu when they played One Hundred Poems, since both had all one hundred memorized. And Kiko still tended to lose when they played Wag the Pig's Tail. She was just not quick enough to see the cards that matched. All the excitement did what it was supposed to; it kept the Little Dancer from being lonely through the night.

The next morning, Oigimi's maids were late for breakfast. Lady

Kiyomizu sent her youngest maid to fetch them. "Tell them they must hurry. The broth is getting cold." In only a few moments, she came racing back, wailing, and stammering too badly to be understood.

Lady Kiyomizu took her in hand. "Kiko, come over here and care for this child. Nyosan, come with me. We'll see what all this is about. Don't anyone else leave this room, do you hear me? I want all of you here when I get back."

They moved quickly toward Akihiro's rooms, but did not run. In the hallway a short distance from the room, hung a heavy scent.

Nyosan slowed her pace, "What is that smell?"

"It is the smell of bad memories. Let me open the door."

Nyosan hung back and let her mistress go ahead of her. Lady Kiyomizu drew her kaiken. She gradually opened the shoji and looked over the room.

"There is no one here. But there has been."

Nyosan looked in. The two maids had not left their quilts. Blood saturated the blankets and surrounding tatami. "Oigimi was serious about killing Yoshiko, wasn't she?"

"Get the captain of the household guard. We need to know how they got in. Bring him to me in Lord Tansho's private receiving room."

"Yes, My Lady."

She sheathed her knife, "We'll have answers or I'll know the reason why!"

It took almost no time for Lady Kiyomizu to listen to what little information the captain had. No sounds were heard and only one man had been seen running away. He was caught at about the same time she found the bodies.

"He is being held now. Shall I bring the intruder to you for interrogation?"

"Do it."

The captain went out, but came back almost immediately. "I'm so sorry, My Lady. We are left with nothing but his body. Poison, we think. The insignia tattooed on his belly belongs to a ninja family often used hereabouts."

"Bring me Yoshiko immediately, but you stay here. I want to talk with you."

The captain sent three guards to fetch Yoshiko. In the mean time, Lady Kiyomizu laid out her plan for Yoshiko's protection.

After a little while, the guards returned with her. Lady Kiyomizu brought her close and sat near so they could talk quietly.

“You are in serious danger, now. Oigimi’s maids were killed because they were in the room where you were expected to sleep. Ninjas won't stop until they succeed. You are a danger to the rest of the household, too. I am sending you away. I won't even tell you where, though, so the information doesn't slip out by accident. Be ready to leave after lunch. And don't eat anything from a dish someone else hasn't tried first. We don't know how thorough the ninja was. He might have managed to visit the kitchen before he found the room.

“We all care a great deal for you, but all my precautions will be useless if you aren't especially careful yourself.”

“Thank you, My Lady. I shall be.”

Yoshiko packed everything and after an uneventful lunch, began her journey. They tried to make an inconspicuous group. There was only one wagon and driver and two guards dressed as farmers. They started out due east, but once they crossed the eastern hills, they circled back around and ended up in a plain somewhere northwest of the castle - all this to make sure they were not followed.

When she got out of the wagon, she found herself again at the house of Lord Tansho's second wife. She was completely surprised. Her first visit here took only an afternoon's travel, not the two full days she had just spent packed in between her bundles of belongings in that old wagon! Seiji and Sakura ran out to meet her and rushed her off to the bathhouse.

"We'll wait to put you to work till tomorrow," they laughed.