



The Klamath Writers' Guild is pleased to present the end of Winter as *Delicate Blush of The Geisha* continues. (The beginning of Winter can be found in the [July LS](#))

## **Delicate Blush of the Geisha**

by Shirley Leggett

### **Winter**

### **Secrets Made; Secrets Kept**

Dawn was long past when Lord Tansho awoke. His manservant sat in silence across the room near the door. The extra screens he had placed on the sunny side of the room did not manage to darken the room as much as he hoped they might.

"Koi! You idiot, you've rattled around so much you've waked me from a beautiful dream. What's the matter with you?" He threw off his quilt and sat up cross-legged on his sleeping mat.

"I am so sorry, My Lord. I am just a clumsy animal. Have been all my life. Even my mother said so when I was little. I am very sorry."

Tansho gingerly walked his fingertips through his hair, then massaged his temples with his thumbs. "Well, get me something to eat and heat the water for tea."

"Here is the tea already made, My Lord." He brought a cup. "And would you like some herbs for your headache or stomach?"

"Why would I need such a thing? Have I complained?" He stood and belted his kimono loosely.

"No, My Lord. You never complain. But considering how much sake . . . I mean the negotiations ran very long last night. You stayed up late. I just wondered."

"Speaking of last night, where did you stash that runaway rabbit

when you found her last night?"

"I have more ointment for your knees, My Lord." Koi tried to avoid Tansho's gaze. "That was a nasty fall you took on the garden steps."

The look on Tansho's face did not bode well. His voice became deeper and more distinct. "To what hutch have you taken my little rabbit?"

Koi stepped back a little, "It went to ground, My Lord."

Silence pounded in his ears. His master pulled himself up a little straighter and planted his feet. Koi prepared himself for the blow that was coming.

The words exploded, "You LOST her?"

Koi crumpled to the ground and into his lowest bow, barely avoiding the deadly backhand his master had aimed at his head. The cup and tea splattered across the tatami.

"Get OUT! You find her before noon or I'll feed you to those fish in that pond out there!"

Koi ducked out the door. He heard Tansho continue shouting, "Miko! Miko! Get in here, girl, and fetch me some herbs for my head. I feel like I'm standing inside the bell at Nara while those idiot monks strike it."

Koi began a thorough search of the castle grounds. "Feeding Koi to the koi" started out as a party joke Tansho used to set a roomful of drunks laughing. Now he used it as a private threat. It may have been a literal impossibility, but every man and woman who served Tansho knew his intent was real enough. No servant in the household wanted to trade places with Koi no matter how many privileges came with being the master's body servant. Closer to the Master was closer to the Shark's teeth.

He checked all the gardens - nothing; examined the teahouse, bathhouse, and stables - nothing. It was getting close to noon and he decided to stop at the kitchen before he searched the castle proper.

"Cook, give me something to eat."

"Nothing is finished cooking, yet."

"Well, give me something uncooked. This is likely to be my last meal."

"Again? What have you done now?"

Koi sat on the floor near one of the fire pits. "What smells so good? Smoked fish? And steamed buns. Oh, please, I'm starving. I've covered all the outside grounds and have all inside the house yet to search. Master's party tidbit last night decided she didn't want to be a tidbit and ran off. He fell during the chase and I stopped to take care of him. She got away and by now, if she's smart, she will have walked all the way back to the thatched hut she was born in. Give me something, please."

"You ate enough last night for three people. Besides, if Ozu finds anyone chewing even a dried plum between meals he scolds me for days. Go get yourself a piece of fresh fruit from the pantry."

"Ha! You know very well Ozu has those counted from the moment they arrive on the backs of the carriers 'til they are placed on my Lord's table. Trying to get me skewered by Ozu before I'm decapitated by the Master? What have I done to you?"

"Go finish your search and come to eat when everyone else does. No party tidbit has come to hide in here. Get out."

He left and looked slowly around. He dreaded starting a room-by-room search in the house. There would have to be some innocent excuse to give the guests as to why he was looking for her, but most would know he was lying. He didn't want to stir up any curiosity. Maybe he should start with the children's rooms; less explanation needed there.

Satoshi, the kitchen boy, caught up with him and handed him a steamed bun.

"Ah, what a good little fellow you are! Thank you."

Satoshi pulled Koi's arm toward the covered walk of the wing of rooms nearest the kitchen. "Come sit down here and talk a minute."

"I really must hurry. Lord Tansho will be angry."

"Cook says if you don't sit to eat, you get indigestion. Sit while you eat and then I will help you search."

Koi felt like Satoshi was doing this with some intention, but he

didn't know what. "All right. I'm sitting and eating. What are you planning?"

"Nothing, nothing. Just don't want you to get ill."

"How thoughtful," he stuffed the last of the bun in his mouth, "Let's go search. You start here and I'll start down there."

They worked from opposite ends of the wing arriving at Kenji's room together. Satoshi jumped in front of Koi. "I'll do this one. Surely you must be tired."

"Just what are you doing?"

"Being polite and helpful to my elders. Cook talks to me often about that."

Koi put on the adult face of disapproval and looked directly at the boy. Poor Satoshi could not tolerate that and stepped away.

Koi tapped on the shoji and asked entrance. Shinobu slid the shoji aside. He was alone.

"Good morning, Koi."

"Good morning. Have you seen a young girl out by herself this morning? We are afraid she has become lost."

"What does she look like?"

"She is wearing a bright blue kimono and a silver comb in her hair."

"I'm sorry, I have not seen a girl dressed like that this morning." He had, as a matter of fact, fetched her a fresh kimono; a pink one with orange flowers. The comb, he had wrapped in a cloth for safekeeping, since it was too fancy to wear in the daytime.

"Thank you anyway," said Koi. The shoji slid closed and he turned to question Satoshi. "What were you trying to hide from me when you blocked the entrance?"

"Nothing."

"Perhaps I should have a talk with Cook and tell him a disrespectful and ungrateful boy works for him. Who would want such an embarrassment in the house?"

Satoshi crumbled. "No, no! Please! I'll tell you, but don't tell Cook. He told me not to repeat this to anyone!"

"All right," Koi made himself comfortable on the edge of the walkway, "sit in the shade and tell me."

Satoshi sat down and explained as well as he could. "The Young Master sent a message this morning to the kitchen to have his breakfast brought to his room. I carried the tray with his rice and broth and a piece of fruit, but when I got there, he was still in his quilts and behind a screen.

"I spoke politely and he asked to be served behind the screen. I was afraid he might be sick and I looked around for Shinobu, but I didn't see him or Akihiro, either. So, I pulled the screen a little way aside and a girl squeaked and tried to cover herself!"

"How was the girl dressed? What did she look like?"

"Well, she wasn't! I mean, she was still in his bed, and, um . . . she looked like a girl!"

"No doubt! Well, it's no wonder Cook didn't want you to tell this story around. He likes to spread the best gossip himself. Come with me, Satoshi, you are about to save me from being fed to the fishes!"

Koi hurried along the pathways back to Lord Tansho's rooms with Satoshi close behind. When they arrived, the daimyo was being served his meal by Miko. Lord Tansho waved Miko away and she scuttled into the farthest corner she could reach.

"Where is the girl?"

"Oh, My Lord, she has been gathered into another man's hutch. Satoshi, here, is my witness. Tell him, Child."

Satoshi hesitated. He could not imagine that hutch Koi was talking about.

"Say on, Boy," Tansho urged, "Where is the girl?"

"The Young Lord asked for his breakfast in his room this morning and when I arrived, he had a girl in his bed with him."

"One of the house maids?"

"No, My Lord. The dancer, Yoshiko."

"Were their quilts side by side?"

"When I moved the screen aside a bit, she cried out and he laid his

kimono across her for a cover. That was all I saw. I put the tray down behind the screen and left."

"Does anyone else know about this?"

"I told Cook when I got back to the kitchen. He said not to tell anyone."

"Well, it was good to tell me, but just don't talk about this among the house guests. Run along back to your work, Satoshi, is it? Tell Cook if anything like this happens, I want to know. Don't keep it from me. Understand?"

"Yes, My Lord." Satoshi bowed. Miko quickly moved up to open the shoji for Satoshi as he left.

"Thank the gods none of the house guests saw him capture her. Now there will be no need for any cumbersome explanations. Cook will spread the news in the house as gossip and I can deny or approve privately as I will.

"Just think, Koi, I nearly adopted one of my nephews while I was waiting for Kenji. Good thing I didn't. Not one of my brother's sons was this precocious! This young stallion might catch up to the old war horse some day," he laughed with honest happiness and his eyes sparkled with delight, "What a MALE I have spawned!"

Yoshiko lay naked among the quilts with tears streaking her sleepy face. "Please, Young Lord, may I dress now?"

"Of course . . . Shinobu! Go fetch the little dancer something to wear."

"As you say." He stepped behind the screen and handed Yoshiko a hot, wet washcloth, then quietly absented himself.

Her tears began again as she washed her face and hands and removed the beautiful comb from her hair. She placed her hands in his and bowed her head. "Here I am, My Lord, do as you will."

"Oh, Yoshiko, you misunderstand. I do not want a pillow girl. I am training to be a samurai and much of the power I need would be lost if I were not sexually continent. Letting Satoshi find us was a play of

shadow puppets so he would carry the news to my father that you are mine."

"Which lord is your father?"

"The lord of the house here. Tansho."

Her face blanched and a look of terror filled her eyes.

"Please, please! Calm yourself. I can keep you safe, I swear. Once everyone knows that we have been found together, I will petition my father for you to become my concubine. I promise never to ask you to do anything you don't want to do and you will be able to live here with my full protection."

"Surely, Young Lord, if your father is not pleased, he will kill me whether I belong to you or not."

"Yoshiko, I am still 'Kenji' to you no matter who my father is and, believe me, my father will be pleased. On this point I know him very well."

The sliding of the shoji announced the return of Shinobu. She gladly took the clothes from him and dressed.

Kenji took her hand and pressed it between both of his. "Hurry to the women's wing, now. Stay near Lady Kiyomizu until I send for you, but do not tell anyone I did not touch you. They all must think I did. I have to find Akihiro and take him with me to the General before all this gets spread around the household." He picked up his bowl of broth to drink it and handed Yoshiko the plum from his tray. "Eat this on the way. Get going."

She slipped the plum into the sleeve of her kimono and went out immediately. She tried to move quickly along the pathways, but she was a little dizzy. She felt as if she had been crashed against the cliffs by ocean breakers - half-drowned and dazed. In a small way, she still wanted to go home; but this inexperienced boy, by his few clever moves, was locking her into a place in his household and tying her directly to him - Lord Tansho's son! How did her simple life suddenly become so complicated? This couldn't possibly be her karma, it must be someone else's.

General Mihashi's personal quarters were austere compared to the rest of the household. The only room with less furniture and decoration was the dojo itself. He brought the boys in here to talk since they insisted their message was urgent and involved Lord Tansho. No one would hear them here or interrupt them. They sat on the wood floor around the brazier.

"What is it you came to tell me?"

Kenji's plan felt like he'd woven it of swan's down now that he faced the General. Akihiro saw him waiver and began the explanation himself.

"We have a secret you must know, but it can never be told, even to the Great Lord Tansho himself."

Kenji took over, "You are aware, I know, of Father's weaknesses. Last night he planned to take one of the child dancers to his bed, but she escaped. I found her wandering, cold and frightened in the trees and took her to my room to warm herself. Shinobu gave her tea and made her a bed. She slept alone all night. Akihiro is my witness.

"However, just at dawn, . . ." He looked at Mihashi's face. It had not changed at all, but there was a tension in the woven fingers of his hands that Kenji recognized as a mark of his teacher's disapproval. "At dawn I moved my mat next to hers and covered us both with my quilt. Then I sent Shinobu to Cook with a message that my breakfast was to be brought to my room. The kitchen boy arrived and Shinobu and Akihiro slipped behind my Chinese cabinet so it would look as if I was alone with Yoshiko. She was still asleep. I laid the blankets off her and told the kitchen boy to serve me behind the screen. When he moved the screen, she woke and I covered her."

"What did you hope to achieve with this ruse?"

"When Father hears of it, he will not take her back. She will be safe. I can ask for her to be given to me permanently and he will be happy. I have told her I will not touch her, and I won't, but the household - and most of all, My Lord Father - must think I have."

Mihashi unfolded his hands and relaxed his shoulders. "Do you expect me to lie to your father?"

"No, Sensei, of course not. Just do not volunteer the information I have given you. Once the household believes I am no longer celibate, I think Father will accept it. It is you alone who must know that I have not left my training. I could not include you in the farce."

"Thank you. This will be a hard thing for you to do. It must be convincing to everyone."

"Yes, Sensei, of course."

"If you had truly done this thing, you know you would lose all status in your class."

Akihiro interrupted, "Surely, Sensei, he could avoid that somehow."

"No, Akihiro, that would spoil the impression," Kenji said quietly.

"But you have worked so hard to keep your place in training. Donkai will be first place if you are dropped back to lowest place. You know how he will brag and gloat and he is not a good leader . . . and I will not be able to practice with you."

Mihashi turned his hands over as if offering a gift, "I could drop you back, too. Perhaps for helping Kenji capture the girl."

Akihiro looked shocked. Then he looked at Kenji. "Yes, Sensei. Drop me back, too."

Mihashi stood and said, "We will not speak of this again. Go into the dojo and wipe down the floor and get the room ready for morning meditation. Move!"

The boys jumped up to do what he had bid.

The entire class had to endure a repeat of the General's lectures on the uselessness of women. "A true samurai takes a wife to provide heirs for himself. They will be the ones to keep your memory alive when you have died. This is the way to live forever. However, the man who wastes his time in the company of women and seeks pleasure in their use has an unforgivable character flaw. The purest affection and the strongest bond a man can have is with the partner who fights alongside him in battle."

It produced a great deal of laughter and many bad jokes at mealtimes and after classes once it was known why the two were demoted. Akihiro had been right: Donkai was insufferable. He made

special efforts to work the boys to exhaustion and humiliate them whenever possible. The rest of their classmates were divided. Some were clearly disappointed in them, while others were impressed or envious. Mihashi let things run their course. It took several months, but they eventually earned their places in class again.

Yoshiko's lot was different, but not much easier, as Nyosan took her in hand personally.

"Each change in your life or living arrangements must be permitted by me, so remember to tell me everything. It would do no good for the reputation of the household for you to attend the Young Lord at some formal function and be at a loss or act inappropriately. I will help you with all the details. You are no longer just a fisherman's daughter working here. You now have a place in the household that is yours until the Young Master takes it away from you."

"Oh, Nyosan, do you think he will?"

"Not if you are a good girl and memorize the sanju and live by it."

"What is sanju about?"

"It is the three-fold duty of a woman: First, submission to her husband's parents. Then submission to her husband. And third, submission to her adult sons."

"Kenji is not my husband."

"Nevertheless, he stands in place of a husband for you as long as he cares to and you must have no other. If you are found with any other man, you will be killed and no one will shed a tear. Remember that."

"Yes, Nyosan."

One evening as she made tea for Kenji, she told him about the instruction Nyosan repeated regarding sanju.

"I think she knows I have a hard time picturing such a life, because she makes me recite the rules over and over. My Momma always helped Papa when he brought in the boat and so did I. I sorted and Momma cleaned and Papa sold the fish. And I cannot imagine Momma in submission to First Brother or the baby."

"You don't need to worry about that. You already live the sanju."

Don't you always obey Lady Kiyomizu when she asks you to do something? And won't you pour me more tea when I ask?"

"Yes, of course, but . . ."

"And when you are old, and I am with the ancestors, won't you go to live with our sons when they ask you to?"

"I suppose so. But Nyosan says you may send me away anytime you like, as though I were any one of the housemaids."

"Would you feel better if I treated you more like a wife?"

"Perhaps."

"I will instruct Shinobu to obey you as he would me and I will instruct Ozu to provide you a little personal money. How would that be?"

That surprised Yoshiko, but it did make her feel more secure. She smiled sincerely. "That would be wonderful."

Later, when she went to her bed in the women's wing with the maids, she recounted their conversation to Nyosan. "You have done well, Child." was her response. But the next day brought a lecture on the care of a husband's money. Also the care and training of a good servant.

## **Kata and Kumite**

The next several years brought a great many lectures, but Yoshiko memorized them all. There also came tutors in many subjects, so that she and Kenji were able to share drawings and poems and beautiful music. But the year that Kenji and Akihiro turned seventeen and Yoshiko turned fourteen brought the most vehement lectures from all sides.

Lord Tansho explained his idea to the General. "I've decided to launch a campaign. Not to fight the neighbors, but to make a raid on the China coast. Men are making fortunes doing that and where fortunes are being made, I want to be.

"Since the Tokugawa government outlawed commerce with any other countries, Chinese goods in Edo markets bring ten times what they used to. Getting them into the country is the main problem, and I have the perfect solution for that."

Mihashi listened, but he was not happy. The General made many lectures to the warriors and guards on the evils of handling money and the horrible results of mingling low class merchant blood with pure samurai bloodlines. "Any men found dissipating their energy with village girls will be punished or sent home."

Nyosan was prepared to help restrain unwanted social interaction, too. "Servant girls and housemaids to Lady Kiyomizu are not allowed to speak with visitors. No gossiping; no flirting. These men are here to be trained, not entertained."

Allied lords sent men to Tansho for coordinated training and hope of a portion of the spoils from the raid. Kenji and Akihiro, now full-fledged warriors, each put a group of allied men through their paces. Those who were especially good were kept, and thus the Tansho household army gradually expanded, quietly in the countryside, far from Edo and the Shogun.

Yoshiko was now accomplished at reading, ladies' writing, music, dance and a number of household skills. Nyosan made sure she was a credit to the household and Kenji's father showed his approval by making a gift to her of Miko, his maid.

Yoshiko and Miko decided to cut a basket of flowers from the garden this morning.

"Miko, did you find out what Kenji will be assigned to do today? Lady Kiyomizu won't need me, so I have all day to myself."

"It's archery and field maneuvers this morning, Miss, and sword training this afternoon. Shall I ask Cook to pack us a lunch?"

"No. We won't be going out to the practice field. Nyosan would never permit it."

"Nyosan need not know everything, Miss."

Miko often said such things and Yoshiko supposed she probably reported her answers to Lord Tansho. "I would know, Miko. Besides, we can watch from the back corner of the meditation garden."

When they finished cutting the flowers, Yoshiko tied the stems together in a bundle and hung them top down inside the well to keep

them cool. She let Kiko know they were ready for Lady Kiyomizu to arrange whenever she wanted to. Miko went indoors and took out a box of needlework and the girls made their way into the Zen garden and onto a pair of stairs in the sunshine.

"We can see to embroider here and still see across the field to watch the archery practice." Yoshiko chose the best vantage point. "Do you have someone in particular you like to watch?"

"No, Miss, I saw some men come in yesterday from Lord Hirayama's province. There were several very handsome ones in that group. But there were just as many good looking ones in the group that arrived last week. There are just too many to choose out one."

"Ah, there is Akihiro standing with that small group of men. They must be shooting for distance toward those far markers."

"He is certainly the best to help them with distance shooting, Miss. I saw him practice last month and no one's arrows flew as high and as far as his."

"That's true. Have you seen him bare-chested? He has muscles like rocks on his shoulders and arms. When I first met him, he had perfect skin, but his arms looked like noodles," she chuckled. "Of course, some things never change. He's still Kenji's shadow. Look for one, you find both."

"And there comes the Young Lord himself."

"Where?"

"Coming from the stables leading his horse."

"Those men behind him with their horses, aren't some of them our own household guard?"

Miko looked hard into the distance, "Yes, I think so. I wonder how well they will do next to Kenji? He is very good when he shoots through the rings from horseback at a gallop."

"It's a complicated skill. I'm glad it's not one I must learn."

They watched as each man rode past the rings and shot his arrows through them. Most of them got one ring. Some got two out of three, but only one shot all three. They did the exercise several more times and the

same man centered all the rings each time.

"Who is that man, Miko? Can you tell?"

"That is Nobuyuki, one of our guards."

Eventually, Kenji led the riders farther away and each one had his horse practice several maneuvers. Then they did some exercises that included all the riders at once. Finally, Kenji began to talk to them as a group.

Yoshiko put away her sewing. "Come on, Miko. Let's go in."

"Are they finished? Can't we watch them ride back?"

"I like to see them ride out in their armor, because they look so impressive and handsome, but they look different when they come in. Fearful somehow. Like the South wind that brings storms. I don't want to see Kenji like that."

Miko smiled, "I've thought of a treat. Why don't we go talk to Cook and see if he will let us eat early in the kitchen and then we can go to the bathhouse and have it quiet and to ourselves while everyone else eats lunch."

Yoshiko agreed; it was a treat.

The afternoon sun cast the shadow of the torii gate across the dojo practice courtyard. Yoshiko stood inside the doorway to the Shinto shrine to the Tansho ancestors. From here she could watch the weapons practice. Sometimes it was naginata, or iron fan, but today it was swords. Miko knelt at the narrow wooden bench in front of the shrine. Once her petition was made, she poured a few drops of sake into the dishes in front of the remembrances for each of the ancestors.

"What is your reason for coming here, Miss? You can't see their faces while they practice. And they can't see us. Kenji doesn't even know you're here."

"The exercises are beautiful, like the dance. They all move together like flowing water. Sensei calls a count and they all obey . . . see, they are beginning.

"Ichi!"

"See how they all brace their stance and pay attention?"

"Ni!"

"There," Yoshiko pointed, "hands to the sword and draw it out a little from the sheath."

"San!"

"Draw the sword and strike out and down."

"Shi!"

"Put the sword back in the sheath. Isn't it graceful and calming to watch?"

"I feel differently, Miss."

"Tell me, then."

The General was calling the numbers again. "Ichi!"

"Hatred shows in their eyes, Miss."

"Ni!"

"When the samurai grasp their sword, someone is about to die."

"San!"

"The head is gone or the body is cleaved in two."

"Shi!"

"They hold their fingers just so to wipe the blood from the blade as it goes back into the sheath so as not to soil it. That is not calming to me, Miss."

Yoshiko decided to change the subject. "What do you pray for when you come here, Miko?"

"A short, happy life, Miss. Not the long and suffering one the Buddhists aim for. And not the long and boring one the Taoists want."

The next exercise was no longer just a dance. Miko had changed that. On the first count, all drew swords and slashed the air and on the second count, they turned completely around, held their swords like bars over their heads and then swept the swords across in front of themselves. She could imagine a battle field, now. At the first count, beheading an enemy in front of them. Turning around and at the second count preventing a sword from coming down on their heads, swinging their sword to cut off the sword hand of the enemy and then slash across his

mid-section.

"What do you know about the General, Miko? I've never seen him in his armor and he seems pretty ordinary except for the little scar on his cheek. He dresses all in black, so except for the little netsuke of Hotei he wears on his obi strings, he might be a monk."

"Well, he doesn't insist any maids sleep with him. I did see him in full armor once and it was awful. His helmet is shiny black, has two big horns, and an orange face guard. Any enemy would have to be made of stone not to run away immediately if they saw him. The guards say he is so fierce even the Emperor didn't want him in his army, but I don't know what that comes from. He never seems to talk about himself. I hope I never marry a general, though. You know, if they lose a battle, they have to kill themselves, and the winner can kill their wife and children, too."

"Well then, Kenji and Akihiro better be as fierce as they can be with their swords and iron fans so they never take the chance of losing their favorite teacher." Yoshiko smiled. "They admire him immensely. If they had to choose, I think they might even follow him over Kenji's father. He seems to live the perfect samurai lifestyle. It makes me wonder if he was ever a child, or if he had a wife and children of his own."

"I've never heard anyone say, Miss. I don't suppose anyone in the household would know except for Lord Tansho, and I have no interest in asking him."

"And I would not suggest it."

One evening in the heat of summer, Yoshiko watched the samurai ride in from their practice. She stood in the side courtyard against the wall, not far from the gate that brought them in from the fields. Kenji saw her and steered his horse in her direction. He dismounted.

"Here," he handed her the reins, "take him to the stable and see that he is cared for."

She was a little startled. There were grooms for this, but he seemed upset. "As you say, of course." She began to step away, but he grabbed her shoulder.

Anger burned in his eyes and his voice was hoarse, "After dinner tonight, don't go back to the women's wing. Do you hear me? Don't leave me tonight!"

"Exactly as you say, Young Lord. Whatever pleases you." She had managed to say those words, but she was terrified as she walked into the stable.

A groom met her at the door, "Please, Miss, let me take him. You might accidentally ruin your pretty shoes if you come all the way in."

She handed over the reins. "How kind of you. Have you seen Akihiro? Can you tell him I need to speak to him?"

"Certainly, Miss. Just let me put the Young Lord's horse in his stall first."

She stepped outside to wait in the shade of the eaves. In a few moments, Akihiro came out.

"Please, tell me what happened today! Kenji is angry and has told me I must stay with him tonight. What has come over him?"

But it was not the outgoing boy she had met four years ago who looked down into her face. She was looking up at a stranger who only shared a name with that friendly boy. "It is not my place to say anything. You must wait for him to tell you. And how he deals with it is his choice. I won't hide you from him. He has a right to whatever comfort he can find."

"I . . . I wouldn't ask you to. Do you think General Mihashi could tell me what has happened?"

"It is not his place to speak of it, either, but he might. I would avoid him myself, though. He also received the back of Lord Tansho's hand today and he is bound to be unpredictable. He might cut you down before he thought to ask why you came." He laughed an unpleasant laugh and strode away toward the bathhouse.

*There was time, while the men bathed, for her to talk to Nyosan, but that would do no good. She had not been in on the secret and besides, her mantra would surely be "sanju, sanju". Even Lady Kiyomizu could not intervene: by sanju, she was in a position of submission to Kenji*

*herself - he was certainly no longer a child. If he decided to quit the life of abstinence they had maintained for so long, there would be no dissuading him. She might, perhaps, postpone his advances by saying her bleeding time was upon her. It was not true, but it might be a good enough ruse to give her time to plan alternatives - if she wanted alternatives. She wasn't sure she did. She just couldn't imagine anything that could shake his dedication to Mihashi and she wanted to hear what Kenji had to say before she did anything rash.*

Dinner was grueling. She tried to make polite conversation, but he only snapped or made stifled grunts in response. His anger was palpable. The delicious food and the passing of time seemed only to aggravate it. At last she gathered up the empty dishes and put them on the tray she would take back to the kitchen. Kenji fixed her with a heated glare.

"Speak to no one as you go and return, is that clear? And return to me immediately."

"I will."

He grabbed her wrist so tight she thought it would be crushed.

"Swear!"

"I swear it." He began to turn her wrist . . . "On my life! I swear it!"

He let her go. She nearly dropped the tray for the pain in her wrist, but she made it out the door before the tears came. *What a trap she was in! Any way out was blocked, either by sanju or by samurai loyalty unto death or by Lord Tansho himself.* That thought brought her up short. *Anything was better than finding herself in the hands of Lord Tansho ever again - even death at the hands of Kenji.*

She stopped at her room only long enough to get her koto - Kenji loved her playing. If music did not help, she reasoned she might use it as a shield. When she slid open the door to Kenji's rooms, he was pacing wildly. Poor Shinobu was scuttling after him worsening his agitation rather than calming it. When Kenji saw that she had returned, he growled at Shinobu in such terms that the old man trembled like a winter leaf.

"Now leave us here alone!" Shinobu went into the next room and slid the shoji shut. "And don't stay in there to eavesdrop!" he shouted.

There was the sound of a second door sliding open and closed. Silence hung thick in the air. Then he turned on Yoshiko, "Why did you bring that instrument?" He quieted a little, but could still be heard well beyond the walls, "Did I tell you to bring it? Planning to soothe my nerves, were you? Well, I'm not interested in plucking strings tonight!"

He strode toward her and from her already kneeling position, she bowed and flattened herself completely onto the floor.

"Oh please, Kenji, my own Little Bear, please believe me! I brought it with no motive. It is only a common pastime after dinner. I thought only to bring you enjoyment!"

For several moments she could hear nothing but her own breath whispering into the tatami. Then there was the sound of his voice, quiet and cracking: "I know that. You have never displeased me. But this," his voice began to climb in volume again, "What they have done to me is IMPOSSIBLE!"

She heard the twang of strings and tearing of the shoji as Kenji sent her koto crashing through the wall to land outside with a crunching, discordant jangle on the ground near the trees.

There was quiet again. She lifted her eyes. Kenji was kneeling, staring at the floor. He looked like an abandoned child.

She walked over to him and knelt beside him. He looked at her. Tears were streaming down his face. She wrapped her arms around him and pressed his head to her. "Oh, my poor Little Bear. What has happened to you?"

At last he spoke, "I am to be married this fall and spend the winter in Edo with a wife," he was nearly whispering now, "All my training with Mihashi is wasted. How can Father do this to me?"

He seemed drained of everything: hate, anger, frustration, all emotion. She slipped away to lay out his quilts and he merely sat where she left him, staring dazedly at the Chinese cabinet. Even when she got him undressed and into bed, he continued to stare, empty-eyed.

She thought of how one comforted children by offering the closeness of being carried on one's back. When she took off her clothes

and sat down next to him, she spoke to him with the childhood word for this comfort. He seemed totally unaware of anything until, at the sound of that word, he opened his arms. She lay down and he hugged her back to his chest, lay his cheek on the nape of her neck, and fell asleep.

Yoshiko slept for a while, too. When she woke, her mind began to wander. It felt like the tide of circumstance was about to wash over her again. Who could know what shore she might be washed up onto this time?

Lying here with Kenji breathing warmly on her back as he slept seemed to create a tiny world of privacy no one else could touch. His body was aware of her lying so close to him, she could feel it respond to her. She nestled in closer and his body responded again. Oh, how she wanted this closeness to be as complete as possible. He would soon be taken away from her and be given to a true wife. Why should she not be his true concubine, at least for tonight?

She turned toward him and woke him with whispers and caresses. He lit the candle and she could see that his eyes were no longer glazed, but were deep, warm, and aware. She reached out to touch him and he needed no other encouragement.

The morning sun was bright when she woke and Kenji was gone. She went to the bathhouse, hoping all the way that it would be empty this time of the morning. It was not her lucky day, however. Kiko was there, and as usual, she was bursting with the latest household gossip.

"What a stroke of luck to meet you here! The little fire brand in person," she smiled and poured her bucket of rinse water over herself. She stepped down into the bath while Yoshiko began to suds herself.

"Is there something you mean to say, Kiko?"

"You know I've always thought of us as friends and I wouldn't want it said I would let the household talk about any friend of mine behind her back. I mean, I would tell her right away, wouldn't you? How lucky that no one else is here so I can talk freely."

"It does seem to be what you do best." Yoshiko warily took the bait, "So just what is it I have done that anyone would talk about?"

Kiko chuckled, "You must have been making offerings to Hachiman. Kenji has gone to battle for you. Just what did you do to him last night? Lots of us girls would like to light a fire like that under our men. I think he is out to marry you."

Yoshiko rinsed herself off and let herself down into the steaming water. "Don't be idiotic, Kiko. He could only marry a girl like, say, Etsu. Someone born to a samurai family. His bloodline can't be mixed with an ordinary girl to produce his legal heirs. You know that."

"But does he? He was wild this morning."

"Who told you such things?"

"I saw him myself making offerings to his ancestors and then he had Etsu cast the sticks for him and read his fortune."

"That is not uncommon, Kiko."

"After that, while I was waiting in Lord Tansho's garden for Ozu to finish a meeting with the Lord, he was put out into the garden to wait. Ozu said Kenji had shown up at the door demanding a conversation and had entered his father's sleeping room wearing his long sword. You know, if he had called for his guards, they could have killed him for that alone."

"I did not send him to his father for any reason."

"The reason was clear enough. The whole house could hear them. The Young Master wants the fall wedding called off. So . . . what's your secret, Yoshiko? Four years of noontime pillow talk and then an all nighter?" Is that what did it?"

Yoshiko was glad she was already in the bath since it reddened her skin all over and Kiko would never know how angry she was with her. She tried to smile what she hoped was a knowing smile so Kiko would keep talking and she would have time to think up an answer.

"Anyway, he left there and went to Mihashi. They spoke so low no one could hear, but after that he left and went to Akihiro to eat breakfast. The kitchen boy said he was very cheerful."

"Where do you get these stories?"

"Shinobu was with the Young Lord on his way to Mihashi and

heard some of the conversation - his requests, anyway. The General's answers were too quiet for the old man to understand. After breakfast, he sent Shinobu to the women's wing to gather up your belongings and take them to his rooms. He has moved you in with him."

"Oh, I see," was all she could manage to say. Her heart was too glad to pick out careful words for the ears and flapping mouth of the household chatterbox.

"You know, whenever you are ready to tell your secret, Dear, there will be lots of us who will want to hear it. Remember, though, men are not able to stay loyal to a woman very long. Ask him for whatever gifts you can think of while he is still dazzled by you. It wears off quickly."

Kiko finally left the bath and Yoshiko was never so glad to see anyone leave. It would be a relief to retire to Kenji's rooms tonight and avoid the nest of curious females in the maids' quarters. Kiko's interpretation of their warm, private world as an "all nighter" was distasteful to Yoshiko and she had no desire to hear more comments like that.

When she left the bathhouse, Miko was waiting for her on the walkway outside Kenji's rooms. "Shinobu brought me here along with your clothes. He says you must say whether I sleep here or in the women's wing, but he says, where will he sleep if I move in here?"

"Oh, Miko, there is plenty of room here. Come in and look at the size of our common room. It is larger than the whole house my parents live in. This room off to the side is where Kenji sleeps. I will sleep here, too. My belongings can stay in that other room Shinobu has put them in and there will still be lots of room for you to sleep in there. Shinobu will keep his sleeping room and never notice you and I are here."

## **Balance and Bells**

By afternoon, Nyosan had arrived to instruct her.

"Haven't I heard every instruction you know, yet?" Yoshiko teased.

"The time to say something is when it is needed. Now this lesson is

needed." She turned to Miko, "I believe Lady Kiyomizu was asking for your help. You can go to her now."

Yoshiko put cushions on the floor. "Please, sit here, Nyosan, so you can be comfortable."

"Thank you. I believe we have talked before about a woman seeking power and how much of a mistake that is. The most common way of seeking power is to bear your lord a son. Then you not only have influence during the life of your lord, but also through the lifetime of your son - if he is the heir. That can be a terrible lure to the power hungry.

"A concubine who bears the firstborn children of her master is at a great disadvantage all her life. A future wife will be jealous and may even go so far as to have the concubine's children killed so hers will be certain to inherit. She must constantly be on guard for herself and her children. The wise concubine bears no child until after the wife bears one - preferably a son. So, I have brought you an herb powder which will prevent a child, but you must make a tea of it and drink it every morning." She presented her with a sealed box. "There are other things to keep in mind when you live with a man - if you want to stay a long time. One is: the woman who becomes a financial or emotional strain is cast off young. Two is: be truthful in all things. Never do anything you could not tell your master. In many situations, a lie told or a truth withheld can end up being paid for with your life. Three is the last and what I have told you before: a woman who uses her femininity or her children for leverage to gain power will die young or be cast off in her old age. Keep in mind the Great Lord's second wife."

"What do you mean?"

"His first wife gave him only daughters and so did the second wife, but she wanted security, she said, for her girls. So, she pleaded again and again for her girls to be given expensive belongings and land. He gave her what she wanted, but he returned to his first wife and that was when Kenji was conceived. If she had not been so demanding, she might have been the one to bear him a son. As it is, she has her girls and her house

and their property, but she does not have her husband. He never goes to her or sees her children."

"I will remember. This morning I was talking with Kiko in the bathhouse. "

"How ever did you get in a word?"

Yoshiko laughed, "She does stop to breathe now and then. She said the whole house was talking about me and that I should make sure to ask Kenji for many expensive things while he is still interested in me, since he will surely lose interest quickly."

Angrily, Nyosan spat! "Kiko is a stupid girl who will never be better off than she is now. She will always be a waiting maid. You are much different than Kiko. You have a special karma to live with."

Yoshiko recited her lesson back to Nyosan rather hurriedly, but she remembered it all and made no mistakes. "I want to meet Kenji at the gate where he brings in his horse. I like leading it to the stable." She did not add that she liked the chance to be near him when he wore his armor. She wanted to save that as a special memory that she did not have to share with the household.

She and Kenji were very aware that they would have only a few precious weeks before the marriage. They spent every waking moment that he was not either on horseback or sword-in-hand together enjoying one another.

After the first week or so, Mihashi intervened with instruction for Kenji on the proper samurai approach to the physical side of a relationship with a woman. He did not want him squandering his energy in the way his father did. Kenji took it very much to heart and they spent two weeks trying to have sex without pleasure in "true samurai" style before they abandoned the idea. They had spent four years as friends and companions; they knew each other so well that they provided each other pleasure even when they didn't intend to.

Kenji brought Yoshiko little gifts nearly every day. Some gifts were not so little, though. He had her koto replaced with one made of beautiful woods and delicate inlay. He obtained a whole bolt of heavy, deep purple

silk from China, and two intricately carved, ivory combs for her hair. Kiko was duly impressed and was sure her advice had been heeded.

When the fall festival arrived, they wrote wonderful poems to the chestnut moon and many, many poems to each other. While everyone else got drunk, they were still eating rice cakes and debating how the rabbit in the moon stayed alive.

"Surely he must eat moonbeams and drink a brew distilled from starlight," Kenji suggested.

"Oh, but everyone says the moon itself is a rice cake that he nibbles away each month."

"Ah, but how does it reappear then, full and round every month? No, I think I am right."

Such thoughts made Yoshiko giggle. And Kenji did delight in making her giggle.

Finally, one day very late in fall, they woke to find hoar frost on everything. Kenji wouldn't allow Yoshiko to even go get breakfast from the kitchen. He sent Shinobu. Then he took the boiling water from the brazier himself and made them both tea. As they sat huddled around the brazier, wrapped in quilts and sipping their tea, Yoshiko could hear the ocean breakers washing toward her. She quickly tucked this moment of brisk air, warm quilts, and hot tea into her heart. She felt the end coming.

Kenji reached across the rising heat of the brazier to touch his fingertips to her lips for a moment. "I love you, you know. You are my whole heart and all my breath."

"So are you to me," she said, hoping he would not hear any hesitation in her voice. He was wonderful to her and she did care a great deal about what happened to him, but Nyosan had provided no lecture on 'love'.

"A messenger arrived yesterday to announce the arrival next week of Oigimi Yuasa. We are to be married and start immediately for Edo. We'll need to be quick to avoid the winter snowstorms." Yoshiko started to say something, but Kenji reached across to touch her cheek and gently hushed her. "I did ask Father if I could marry you, but you can imagine

his response. I'd be surprised if the servants in the next wing couldn't recount the exchange word for word.

"He says I must marry Oigimi so that we have an ally in Kyushu who will help us launch our ship without the Shogun's knowledge. Spending the winter in Edo should guarantee me an heir. At least that's what Father hopes, since he wants me to go along on the ship he is taking to China next summer.

"I was afraid that being in Edo so long away from Mihashi would spoil my skill, but he told me to take Akihiro as my personal bodyguard and two other classmates as guards to my household. That way, we can continue to train together through the winter and be prepared to travel as soon as we return in spring.

"Everything is working out perfectly . . . except that I must leave you," he looked away and lowered his voice, "and Father is sending you to stay with his second wife in the plains to the southwest. You really can't be here when Oigimi arrives . . . and . . . during the wedding, of course."

Yoshiko was afraid he was going to cry again. Quickly, she said, "The plain will be lovely this time of year. It will be nice to have a change of scenery."

Kenji looked pleasantly surprised. "I was afraid you'd take it badly; make a scene or yell. Instead, you are wonderful!" He smiled contentedly, "I promise to write at mid-winter and tell you what Edo is like. Tell me what you'd like from the city and I will send it to you. Anything."

"I've heard they make strings of tiny, tinkling bells. If you could find some of them for me, I would hang them on the shrine roof. Then my prayers for your safety and prosperity would ring in the ears of the ancestors whenever the wind blows, day or night."

"I will send them, I promise."

When Shinobu brought the breakfast tray, they ate and decided to spend the whole day inside. They talked and laughed and hugged and made promises and told lies and sent away all the messengers who came

to fetch them. Finally, the household got the point and left them alone. It was a delicious day.

Kenji woke in the wee hours of the morning and gazed at Yoshiko sleeping next to him. He thought back to when he had received the news that he would be married. His stomach burned with gall at the bitter memory.

All the samurai were on horseback in the field going through field maneuvers the whole day. A small pavilion was set up for his father's comfort and a spearman summoned him to that tent late in the afternoon. He stood outside for a moment to wipe the sweat off his face and attempt to beat some of the accumulated dust off his leather armor. When he entered he saw his father, impressive in full armor, seated on a camp stool and General Mihashi, sans helmet and long sword, standing to his left. Akihiro and perhaps a dozen other high-ranking warriors were seated in ranks on the floor. It looked like a formal meeting - odd for a day of field maneuvers.

His father beckoned and he came forward, removed his long sword, and placed it on the ground at his side as he knelt center front of the group.

"This, Gentlemen, is my only son. Child of my heart, he is grown into a man of admirable virtue, a samurai among samurai. His teacher and training partner are here to attest to that. And you, Gentlemen, who have associated with him, know of what value he is to our fighting team. Such a fierce fighter with such excellent skills would be a credit to the Shogun himself.

"So, as each of you gentlemen has, I am asking that Kenji take the oath of fealty. This, so you all know that I would have him at my side even if he were not my son. It is not just family ties that make him valuable to me."

He administered the oath and Kenji pledged himself and any men who ever followed him as retainers to his father until he died and to his household after that. Mihashi handed the contract to his father, who

handed it on to Kenji. He bowed to the ground and tucked the paper into his shitagi. He saw Mihashi kneel and wondered for a moment why, but there was no time to wonder, his father was continuing:

"Now I have an assignment for my newest retainer, dear to my heart as he is, I am setting him a task that is the key to all my plans for the coming year. I have an ally to the south of us who controls a port that opens to the China Sea, Lord Yuasa. He is willing that we should use his port for our trip to obtain trade goods from China. The restriction on the use of the port is that it be family only. So, we have agreed that an acceptable political arrangement could be made by bonding our families together. Does that seem acceptable to you?"

Kenji knew of a number of ways families could be bound legally into a political unit; very common was adoption. "Yes, My Lord Father."

"Be assured, it will not threaten your position as my heir, but strengthen it."

Mihashi dropped his gaze from Kenji down to his own empty hands.

"I will send a message to Lord Yuasa that we are pleased to accept his offer of his daughter, Oigimi, to your wife. She will come to us in the autumn and the wedding will be just before you and she go to Edo for the winter.

"Nothing could make me happier, my Son. May Kwannon bring you peace." Lord Tansho stood and dismissed the group.

Kenji continued to sit. He felt frozen to the spot. Everyone left the pavilion but Mihashi. He came and stood next to where Kenji knelt. Quietly he said, "Take up your weapon and come along. Don't give him the satisfaction of seeing your pain. He is already aware of mine. Let that be enough."

Kenji carefully relaxed the muscles in his face so as not to show the anger that he felt rising. He stood and put his sword back into his obi. They walked together out toward the tethered horses.

"Please, Sensei, tell me. Did you know of this?"

"No, not until he began explaining it in there. I knew he was hatching something, but he knows very well how I feel about this topic.

He certainly did not want to discuss it with me beforehand. Besides, he prefers to wound by surprise. Are you going to be all right, now?"

"I think so, Sensei. Is there anything you can do to counter what he has done?"

"No. This alters our relationship, too, you see. Your father knew he was binding my hands and your soul by administering the fealty oath to you. I now have no authority over you. You are your own man and your master's. It saddens me that you have to see this side of your father used against you. I suppose he feared you favored me over him." Mihashi turned toward his horse and untied it.

Akihiro was already mounted, as were several others. Kenji mounted and headed his horse to follow the others into the plain. Akihiro turned away and rode at a gallop into the nearby hills. Kenji pulled up short and turned sharply to follow him.

When he caught up to him, he was standing at a wide stance staring down into the little gurgling creek that wound in and out of the hills. Kenji called to him, but Akihiro didn't respond. He tethered his horse to a bush and approached from the only angle left to him between the rocky hillside and the horses along the bank - Akihiro's back.

He was about three paces from him and no words had yet been spoken. Akihiro whirled to face him with sword drawn! Kenji pulled in his chest and stomach and hopped backward several inches to avoid being eviscerated by the blade's sweep.

"I won't draw against you," he said, showing his empty hands.

"I do not want to harm you, but I will not let the sun set without Tansho blood on this blade! Lord Tansho is without honor and I have the remedy for that."

"You are right about my father, but calm yourself. Don't waste your energy trying to kill him. You will only be cut down in return. You are my only friend, but if the blade must taste Tansho blood before sunset, I have the remedy for that." He reached out his left hand and pressed his thumb to the blade. A drop of blood oozed onto it and traced a jagged, red trail as it ran down the silvery shaft to drip onto the ground.

Akihiro's eyes widened as shock shattered his anger. "Kwannon be merciful! I didn't mean you!" His hands trembled as he wiped Kenji's blood from his sword and resheathed it. "I'm so sorry. I swore against your father and you not only help me save face, but preserve my life as well. I am humiliated." He turned back toward the stream.

Kenji pressed his thumb and forefinger together to stop the bleeding. "Do not be. There is no one here to see any humiliation and I don't see any, either." He stepped forward to put an arm around his friend. Tears were on Akihiro's cheeks and he hugged him tight. Then he took him by the shoulders and pressed him into a straight stance. He took one finger, wiped it beneath his friend's eye, and put it in his mouth, "Hm . . . doesn't taste like sweat," all emotion immediately left Akihiro's face, "Perhaps . . . sake . . . no . . . beer. Definitely beer."

Akihiro began to laugh. Kenji tried to look stern, but it was useless. They laughed and laughed until they had to sit down on the mossy bank.

When the laughter had drained away their emotions, the silence was deep.

They stared a while at the creek burbling over its collection of rocks, then Kenji stirred and stood up. "What is it that's bothering you so much about this? We both knew we'd have to marry some day."

"Part is the way your father trapped you. It was dishon . . . not the right thing to do. But mostly, I just thought it would be later; that we'd have some glorious battles first. Then we'd be married at the same time. This way, you'll be gone to Edo and I'll be alone all the time . . ."

Kenji gave him a pat on his back and Akihiro stood up. "You never seem to mind the time I spend with Yoshiko and we've been together for years."

"Believe me, a wife will be a different thing - you'll see - I've talked to some of the married men. With a wife, even when you're not in Edo, there will be social obligations and children . . . and we won't be best friends ever again."

"Oh, Akihiro, we'll be best friends always. A wife won't change that. Nothing can change that."

After breakfast the next morning, Yoshiko went looking for Miko. She wanted her to help decide what she needed to pack for the trip to the other house. She sent Shinobu first, but he returned to her to say he was unable to locate the girl. After checking the kitchen and the bathhouse, she went to the women's wing to see where she was hiding out.

Lady Kiyomizu and her maids were busying themselves making perfume, but they were sure they had not seen Miko since breakfast. She walked out into the flower garden and glanced around. There seemed to be someone out among the plum trees. Yoshiko ducked under a low-hanging branch and walked quickly along beneath the trees.

Evidently some man was in the garden, leaning against one of the trees. He had his back to her, but when she came within a yard or two, he stepped away from the tree trunk. It was Lord Tansho - and there was Miko, between him and the tree.

He spoke first, "Hello, Yoshiko. Did you want something?"

"I've been looking for Miko. I need her to help me pack."

He withdrew his hand from inside Miko's kimono. "Well, here she is, take her with you."

She began to straighten her clothes, but he grabbed her collar and pulled it off her shoulder, exposing her small, unblemished breast. He leaned close and bit her shoulder, leaving a red mark. Then he shoved her toward Yoshiko.

"When you get inside, tell your mistress I got tired of waiting."

"As you say, My Lord."

It was a pleasant trip to the house on the plain and rather short. The second wife and her daughters had a lovely, spacious, country home, but they made no pretense to courtliness. They were all practical and treated Yoshiko kindly. Her visit was seen as a welcome break in routine, but she was soon invited to join the household activities as a member of the family.

Autumn brought with it cleaning and reorganizing of storerooms to

make room for harvest's plenty. Lady Tansho was supervising in the kitchen while Yoshiko and the girls, Seiji and Sakura, cleared and cleaned shelves. Late autumn was still hot this year and evidently, tempers were beginning to match it. A sharply raised voice carried across the small courtyard between storerooms.

"Well, perhaps Mother would not, but it would be her right!"

"Not by any means! The father has the last word in all cases."

Yoshiko laid a long strip of newly washed cloth across some small bushes to dry. "What on earth are you two arguing about, now? Sisters are supposed to get along, not fuss at every opportunity. I had several sisters and we all got along."

"They were not as old and strong-headed as Seiji," Sakura responded.

"Seiji is only twenty-two. That is hardly one of the Ancients."

"Mother says she could have been married last year, if she was not so choosy."

"Stop and think, Sakura, many girls your age are married, too. Twenty is full grown." Yoshiko took one end of a cloth while Sakura took the other. They smoothed it carefully and laid it to dry.

Seiji came out of the storehouse, broom in hand, "Come inside, you two, and help wipe down the shelves. If we don't get everything fitted in here better, there will never be room enough for the new jars of plums Mother and Cook are pickling. I've never seen a year with so many plums."

"You said that last year about the peaches."

"Well, I was right."

"You always think you're right. Let's ask Yoshiko; she'll say who's right."

They all went into the storeroom and sat on a bench. Yoshiko began, "What was the initial argument about?"

"The rights of a wife. If the husband has illegitimate children, what can the wife do to insure that her children inherit? The man Seiji might have married already had several children, but was never married."

Yoshiko considered for a moment all the things Nyosan had told her, but nothing quite fitted this scenario. "The wife has nothing to worry about as long as the extra children are girls. If a boy is born, she might persuade her husband to bring it into his household to be raised by his wife. He might have to pay a large sum of money to the mother's family to get her to give up the child, though. Surely he would not bother with that if his own wife gave him sons."

"Can't the wife have the extra children suffocated? I'm sure I've heard of that." Sakura removed a small, hard candy from her sleeve and popped it into her mouth.

"And I'm sure she cannot do that," Seiji sounded irritated again.

"Seiji is right. Any child acknowledged by the father is his property. Any child not acknowledged belongs to the mother and her family, if they will have it. In that case the mother or her father might suffocate it at birth - not likely if it is a boy - but the wife has no right to do anything. Such children are not her property. Besides, even a male would not inherit over a legitimate son unless the father made him his legal heir.

"But surely you were not considering such behavior, were you, Seiji?"

"No. But over the years we have heard many stories about why Mother and our Lord Father came to live separately. One particularly gruesome tale involves an illegitimate boy baby borne by a house maid."

"A Lady of rank," Sakura corrected. "Supposedly, Mother was furious when she heard it was a boy and, in her shock, threatened to drown it.

"That is not at all like Mother. What we have come to believe is that Mother asked Father to settle property on us, which he did. But when she asked for this, his favorite farm, he felt she'd asked too much. He gave it to her, but in a fit of pique, he moved us all here and never visited again. That sounds every bit like Father."

"How have you come to know him? You must've been just toddlers when it all happened."

"Yes, but he invites us to the house on the hill now and then. We

went quite often when we were small. We played with the maids and Lady Kiyomizu taught us many useful skills and Auntie Nyosan and Cousin Etsu escorted us anywhere we wanted to go." Seiji absently dusted the shelf near her. "I miss Etsu in particular."

Once Kenji got old enough to interest Father, we got put into storage. He calls us to attend him once or twice a year for show, but he has never seriously tried to find husbands for us, for fear of having to produce a dowry."

"Sakura! How dare you say such a thing! Yoshiko will think we are ungrateful!"

"I am not ungrateful, Seiji, just tired of waiting."

Seiji threw her dust cloth at Sakura, "Then dust while you wait!"

Sakura returned the volley and the war of the storeroom was on: cloths and drapes, pillows and paper lanterns.

Yoshiko ducked and dashed out the door. *Let them settle their own differences. I don't want to have to clean up that mess.* She went off to the kitchen to help Cook with the pickling.

The three weeks went by like a cool breeze in the heat of summer - gone before it can be appreciated. The wagon she rode in seemed close and dusty and the return trip felt sad. When she had put her things in her room, she did not want to stay indoors. The space felt too empty.

Shinobu said Kenji had left with his wife the morning before. "I'm supposed to attend the Great Lord when he leaves in the morning, but Miko will be here with you."

"Yes, of course." She went out to walk a little while. They had traveled all afternoon and she wanted to exercise her legs. It was early, but the days were shorter and the sun would set fairly soon. There was a favorite vantage point from which to watch it. She and Kenji had gone there now and then. She walked across the dojo courtyard and on toward the surrounding wall. There were few traces that there had been a festival here just a day or two before. As she approached the viewing point, she saw a couple silhouetted against the evening sky.

She could see that it was Lord Tansho sweetly taking leave of his

Lady. He was kind and gentle with her, A hug and a tender caress. Yoshiko turned and walked back so as not to disturb them. She wandered between the buildings and off toward the bathhouse. There she met Lady Kiyomizu and Kiko. While they all soaked, she tried not to wonder whom Lord Tansho was bidding farewell to. She was too tall to be Miko, and - no! She was sure she did not want to know who it was.

She tried to listen to Kiko, who was chattering on about the decorations she had helped hang for the festivities. "You certainly missed a beautiful sight. The trees all had wishes for good fortune tied on the branches with red ribbons. Towards evening there were lanterns everywhere, it was gorgeous! And the bride ... "

Lady Kiyomizu splashed Kiko a little, "Oh, sorry. I thought I saw a fly."

It didn't do any good. Kiko went on and on and Yoshiko tried not to listen.

Lord Tansho left just in time. A large snowstorm brought winter in with a vengeance. Yoshiko and Miko still had Kenji's rooms, but now they seemed much too large. She did not dare go to the maids' rooms, though. They had a long list of topics to discuss - all from the wedding: what the bride wore, the food at the feast, the contents of Oigimi's dowry, how lovely the decorations had been, and how beautiful the bride was. She tried to distract herself with household duties, but when the night of snow viewing arrived and she had no one to share her warm sake with, she truly began to miss Kenji.

Nyosan came to talk with her as a friend rather than a teacher. "Oh, Little Dancer, I have felt just as you do now. Tonight will pass and tomorrow take comfort in the knowledge that you are first in Kenji's heart and always will be. Now is the time to plan for his return, not to mourn his absence."

"Everyone says such wonderful things about Oigimi. She must be very beautiful. Perhaps she will fill his heart too full to leave room for me."

"People here talk because there is nothing else to do in winter. Don't

listen to it. Oigimi is five years older than Kenji and rather plain. The Lord Yuasa was quite relieved to receive an offer of marriage for her. He'd nearly given up hope of her marrying at all."

"How did you ever come by such information, Nyosan?"

"Oh, I have my ways." A smile and a dreamy look momentarily crossed her face, but then she said, "Now tell us a pretty poem about the snow and go to bed. You wouldn't want to catch a chill and be in ill health when Kenji returns."

Yoshiko took her advice and began to plan. It made time pass quickly. Mid-winter arrived and brought with it the promised letter and one hundred strings of bells.

*My Delicate Cherry Blossom,*

*The house here in Edo never gets as cold as Father's province manor. That is partly because more people live in less space and partly because the servants are more diligent. But I miss the cold mornings huddled in the quilts with you waiting for the room to warm.*

*Oigimi was happier when we first arrived and Mother took her around to visit and meet her friends. Now that she has met them and decided they are all too old and dusty to socialize with, she sits home and complains that my friends never come to visit.*

*Most of the fellows I knew when I lived here either became monks or got married off and are now living in their home provinces. Many of the daimyos prefer to bring their wives and small children here. They leave their older sons in the countryside to handle province issues while they are gone. I don't know that the Shogun will allow that practice to go on.*

*Since Father and Mother are here, Oigimi and I have not been invited to attend the Shogun; it is Father who receives the summons. Father says any serious meetings of all the daimyos with the Shogun may wait until after New Year's, but he has been called to attend the Shogun twice since we arrived.*

*Oigimi puts up fusses at least once or twice a day. It gets tiring. Father hounds me about an heir whenever I see him, but Oigimi is often indisposed for one or another reason. We're seldom alone together more*

*than once a week and a 'true samurai' relationship is evidently what she expected, because that is all she seems willing to participate in. I have no desire to force her, but by all the gods, I miss you.*

*I thought maybe it was just that she didn't know me and so I tried to warm her feelings with beautiful gifts, but she refused them outright. So, I spend most of my mornings at practice with Akihiro and the guards. Afternoons, I go to the temple to pray and meditate.*

*My wife does not seem much interested in the loom or embroidery or other feminine pursuits. She and her maids entertain themselves most of the time with card games that include gambling. I miss the beautiful flower arrangements you always brought to my rooms.*

*I have sent the bells you asked for and have hung a matching set here. When they ring, I think of you and know you are thinking of me.*

*Kenji*

Yoshiko's spirits soared! She and Miko gathered up the bells and cajoled the old gardener into helping them hang the strings along the eaves of the family shrine.

"I do not know what the Great Lord will have to say about this when he sees it."

Yoshiko put her arm around the old man's fragile shoulders, "When we explain it is a tribute to his son, he surely will not mind. Besides, it is bound to bring blessings to the China raid, showing our constant devotion to the ancestors, don't you think?"

"One hopes so, Miss. Mid-winter is an odd time to do it, though."

A chill breeze blew and Miko danced around the old man in her delight at the sound of the bells. "It is the perfect time. In the depth of winter, are we not supposed to be looking toward the birth of spring? The bells sound to me like the chirps of baby birds in the nest."

"Well, I hope the Great Lord sees it that way when he returns."

"Come, let's go to the kitchen and get Cook to share the warmth of his work space and maybe a little tea with us," Yoshiko invited.

"He cannot stop us from sharing the warmth, but I would not count

on the tea at this hour," the gardener grumbled.

"Oh, I will make the tea, if he does not want to. I am too happy for his miserly ways to affect me today."

When they entered the kitchen, Cook was nowhere to be seen. Satoshi was keeping the fire going just enough to keep a pot of water hot. He was glad to make them tea and Yoshiko shared them each a hard candy.

"Where did you get these?" Miko asked.

"Sakura gave me a bag of them to bring with me when I came back from the second Lady Tansho's house. Their cook makes some every year after harvest is done. I've saved some back for Kenji. I want to give him a special dinner when he comes home. All the things he likes best."

"Since he won't be back till spring, that gives you lots of time to plan," Miko pointed out.

"I know it's a long time, but I don't intend to be idle. Remember that beautiful, heavy silk he gave me? I'm going to make a pair of hakama for him."

"That won't take long."

"No, but the embroidery will. I'm going to put on snow leopards and sun bears. I think they will look striking against the dark material."

"That will be a wonderful gift, Miss. The Young Lord will be very happy to have them."

When they finished drinking their tea and warming themselves, they each went off to their work. Yoshiko and Miko walked along toward Lady Kiyomizu's rooms to see if she had any tasks for them.

"I have one other plan, Miko. If Kenji's wife is expecting by spring, I intend to stop drinking the tea Nyosan gave me. Then if something happens to Kenji on the China raid, I might have his child to console me."

"I will pray to Jizo for you, Miss. He will surely take pity on you; you are so pure of spirit."

"Thank you, Miko, I would appreciate that."

## Glossary for Delicate Blush of the Geisha

**Bodhisattva:** A Buddhist who has reached enlightenment and returned to Earth to assist others

**Fundoshi:** a long, narrow cloth wrapped around the groin; men's undergarment

**Hakama:** a wide-legged men's pant reaching to the ankle or floor

**Hokku:** the earliest poetic predecessor to haiku, not as structured or refined

**Hoshi:** colloquial name for a holy man

**Kaiken:** the samurai women's dirk, worn at all times as the men wore their swords and used for suicide when called for

**Ki:** natural body energy which can be developed to add to one's fighting skill

**Kimono:** a long robe worn by women at all times and by men when not wearing work clothes

**Koto:** a rectangular, arched, stringed instrument, plucked for tone.

**Naginata:** a spear with a slightly curved blade

**Netsuke:** tiny figurines used as decorative ends for strings that tied the wide obi on a kimono or the strings that closed a drawstring bag

**Obi:** a belt; wider on formal wear, narrower on utilitarian clothing

**Sensei:** teacher

**Shakuhachi:** a bamboo flute played by monks and samurai

**Shitagi:** men's tunic worn beneath other clothing

**Shoji:** partitions made of many panes filled with rice paper

**Tabi:** socks with a separate large toe, worn with thong-like sandals

**Tatami:** traditional flooring; thickly woven grass mats bound with a cloth edge

**Torii:** the gateway arch to a Shinto shrine

**Yari:** a spear with a narrow, straight blade; weapon of choice for trained women; kept at the bedside for home defense

Please join us at one of our open meetings this fall—September 14 and 28, October 5 and 19. The Guild meets at the Community Meeting Room, 133 N. 4<sup>th</sup> Street (the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Pine). Meetings begin at 6:30 PM.

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Look for more of —*Delicate Blush of a Geisha* and *The Daily Slap* — in upcoming editions of *Literally Speaking*.

Available this fall, Lisa Davis’ colorful picture book, *Boompa Rabbit and the Woolly Worm*. Illustrations and story by Lisa Davis.

