



The Klamath Writers' Guild is pleased to present Autumn, the final season in:

## **Delicate Blush of the Geisha**

by Shirley Leggett

### **Autumn**

#### **Visions of Earth and Heaven**

Kenji stood with Shinobu watching the archery practice. He had done his run and his servant held his bow and arrows. Luckily there was no strong wind this morning. Everyone was shooting well. The one strange note was the sergeant jogging along with the young boys out into the field beyond the targets to gather spent arrows.

"Shinobu, do you know why the sergeant is retrieving arrows?"

"No, My Lord. I've never seen him do it before."

In the afternoon, while all the men were practicing fighting, Kenji saw the sergeant help carry equipment. Then, when they all went to bathe, the sergeant carried buckets and towels and scrubbed backs. Some of the younger men fussed at him, but the sergeant insisted he be allowed to help them. The older men merely gave him reassuring looks and let him continue.

Kenji approached his father outside the bathhouse. "Please, Father, what is the sergeant doing acting like a servant?"

"Sometimes, Kenji, small disciplines must be made. It is nothing for you to be concerned with."

"It seems too stringent for a man of his rank. . . ."

"Kenji, are you arguing with me?"

"No, Father, of course not. . . I, mm, no. Certainly not."

"Excellent. We'll talk again tomorrow."

Kenji went back into the bathhouse and called Shinobu to him. "I want you to be generally useful to the men as they dress and spend their evening. I want to know how they feel about the situation with the

General and this discipline that has been meted out to the sergeant. If Father is stirring up a storm among the men, I want to know. And try to find out why he is angry with the sergeant. He won't tell me."

"As you say, Young Master."

Late in the evening, Shinobu came into Kenji's room.

"Did you find out what all this is about?"

"Yes, My Lord. Your father is holding the sergeant responsible for the intrusions of the ninjas and the all the deaths they caused."

"Ultimately that lays at Oigimi's feet."

"The younger men, Toru in particular, are so angry at Mitsuo for challenging General Mihashi, they burn like fire against him. They seem to believe he is involved in the humiliation of the sergeant, too. Nobuyuki and the older men have tried to calm them down.

"Some say they would rather die than follow Mitsuo into battle. Others say to live and die samurai is the goal and who gives the orders is of no consequence. Most of all, no one feels the sergeant deserves such a humiliation."

Kenji glanced out the doorway and slid the shoji closed. "They are right, Shinobu. Father is making a mistake. He is dividing his own troops. I will try to explain it to him tomorrow."

"Oh, my Young Master, I would ask you not to do that. I have talked with Koi and Miko and your father is in a very vulnerable frame of mind just now. Please leave things as they lie my Lord."

Shinobu looked at him with such earnestness, he felt compelled to comply. "I suppose I could wait to bring up the subject. Perhaps things will calm with time."

"Thank you, My Lord."

Mitsuo was also aware of the split in the ranks. Because of his conflict with General Mihashi, some would rather kill him than follow him. The men all knew Mitsuo was not samurai by birth or training and felt they had a right to disagree with Lord Tansho - in theory, anyway. None would have said such a thing to his face.

Despite Lord Tansho's instruction, Mitsuo was certain he did not want to lead such a conflicted group of warriors into battle. What if someone withheld a vital piece of information? Or plotted a counter strategy behind his back? Or made up false information altogether? No, there had to be an alternative answer.

He decided to let tomorrow care for tomorrow and went to bed. He

woke in the morning with a plan in mind, as though it had formed itself in the night. He gathered the equipment he would need and went to see Kenji. He sent a maid to fetch Nobuyuki from his house to meet with them.

Kenji met him at the doorway and made no move to let him in.

Mitsuo bowed and said, "I am glad to see you looking so well, My Lord."

"You flatter me. Surely my father is your only Lord."

"If that is how you see it, then, as you say. Nevertheless, I am glad you are well."

"I'm surprised. Considering the fact that you must at least have known, if not planned, what happened to Yoshiko, I would think you'd prefer me mad with grief. So much more believable that way."

"I apologize sincerely for that. I had no idea Lady Kiyomizu meant to keep the secret from you. I would not have chosen to do so, but once she did, it was not my place to do otherwise."

"Well, now that I can look forward to being with Yoshiko again, I feel generous enough to disregard what's over and done with. Just what is it you want of me this early in the morning?"

"I have sent for Nobuyuki to join us here. Perhaps we could wait and I could present my proposal to you both at once."

Kenji motioned Mitsuo to come inside and left the door open. They sat down to take in the view of the kitchen gardens. Kenji pointed out the cabbages, "The kitchen boy lavishes his time on the plants here.

The rows of plants were lush and green, ankle and knee high with vegetables, but never a weed. Mitsuo smiled, "Even those industrious little birds are hard put to find a breakfast bug, he keeps the rows so clean." Footsteps sounded on the walkway and the little birds flew up to perch on the roof edges nearby. "Nobuyuki is here."

Kenji invited him in to join them and closed the door. "Evidently Mitsuo has a proposal for us. Do explain it to us, please."

"The Great Lord called me to him to say that in the General's absence, I am to lead the charge at the battle with Hirayama. We all know that the men despise me."

Nobuyuki cleared his throat, "I feel that is perhaps too strong. They are of two minds. You are a good leader and they respect what you have taught to them about empty-handed combat. The disagreement between you and the General has left them fatherless and torn at their hearts. They

are hurt, but most of them do not hate you.”

“Thank you. That is a comfort. But what I would like is if you two would do whatever you can to accentuate their division. Nobuyuki, if you could focus on the younger, more impulsive men and unify them behind you. Kenji, I'm sure you'll have no problem unifying the older men who retain a strong loyalty to your father. When we ride to fight Hirayama's men, if you two will lead the men, I will be free to move through the conflict and into the castle.

“I will need one man, though, so you two will need to survey your groups and find one I can trust to fight alongside me. Do you think you can do it?”

Nobuyuki spoke first, “What about the sergeant?”

“With the way our Lord is treating him now, there's no way to know whether he will be going with us or not. If he goes, I would assume he would be on Kenji's side, but you two will just have to find out for yourselves. I will have to be neutral. It won't work if anyone thinks I know what's happening.”

Kenji was very quiet, but finally added, “I don't believe there's any other way to deal with this. The men will fight poorly and scatter without a leader of some kind. Better two than none.

“Above all, if you get inside that castle and get Etsu out, Father will be eternally grateful. There might even be some land and the rank of commander in it for you. Who can tell?”

“Who knows,” Mitsuo echoed. *No point in telling them everything that went on during the talk with the Great Lord. Even if I free Etsu and present him with Hirayama's head in a box, his mind won't change and I've given my word.*

The next morning following the lotus viewing, the Tansho army moved out toward the west and Hirayama's province. They filled the road leading down the hill from the castle for nearly an hour. The officers led out on horseback with the banner carriers. Next came cavalry with spears and short bows, the regular archers on foot behind them. Spearmen, armor bearers, and servants followed. Last of all came supplies. There were large, wooden boxes carried on poles between two men or huge, cloth bundles on the bent backs of servants, bundles secured only by forehead bands. With a group that size there was no chance for a surprise

attack, but Lord Tansho hoped their sheer magnitude might set the enemy trembling.

While Tansho's cavalcade was moving westward, another army was moving north. When Lord Yuasa's monks read his fortune and calculated which days were best for travel and new ventures, they were exactly right. They moved in on the Tansho castle at its most vulnerable. Lord Tansho had been gone for only a week and would not begin the return trip for two weeks.

Lord Yuasa, unaware of this fortuitous advantage, chose a campsite carefully tucked in the hills, but less than a day's march from his goal. He sent spies ahead to gauge Tansho's strength and was delighted with their report. Not only was Lady Kiyomizu essentially alone, but most of the guards now at the castle were villagers and other professional retainers - not samurai. From that point on, it was too simple. Just before dawn, they drew up very close to the castle and set fire to the village. The people on guard at the wall left their posts and went to fight it.

Lady Kiyomizu was waked by the servants as soon as the first of Yuasa's men breached the wall. "Hurry, my Lady, we're under attack!" Kiko pulled her from bed and threw a cloak around her shoulders. They left the women's wing in a cloud of identical-looking ladies, all cloaked to protect their mistress.

She was rushed to the central building. Her nine personal guards were there, but that was all. They nearly carried her up the stairs. Her ladies were left down in the area that had housed the on-duty samurai. All the doors were locked but the one they were using. There was a scream and that last door was pressed shut and barred.

Lady Kiyomizu went to look through the split bamboo hanging over the windows. One of her ladies lay struck down near the barred door, but it was too late for any assertive action. Lord Yuasa's men were filling the courtyard and checking the buildings one at a time.

Shoda approached her with insistence, "You must come with me, My Lady. Now." He led her into Yoshiko's old room and he closed the door. She and Kiko were alone. Shoda and her other guards would protect her as long as possible from Mitsuo's room, but she was not one comfortable with waiting.

"Kiko, come with me." She opened a door that hid stairs going both

up and down. She led the way up and Kiko followed. A niche at the top of the stairs held materials to light a lamp.

“Where are we, my Lady?”

“This top floor is the family treasury. These shelves along this wall hold the boxes for sending heads to the Shogun, if he ever commands that our Lord or some other here commit seppuku. The other shelves hold precious things handed down from the family ancestors. We need to go to that little room at the far end of the aisle.”

The door was swollen a little and took a moment to loosen.

“Generally only the men of the family can come here, but since they are all out on other business, this is left to us. Hand me that small, folded cloth, Kiko.”

Lady Kiyomizu took the cloth and entered the room and opened the only chest in the room. It contained few items: an iron fan, a banner, a sword pin. Kiko reached in.

“No, Kiko. Women don't touch these. They are the awards given to Lord Tansho's ancestors by their Shoguns for exemplary duty.” She reached in herself for a beautifully inlaid lacquer box of medium size. “This is what we are here for.”

She wrapped the box in the cloth and led Kiko back downstairs to Yoshiko's room. The clash of swords was loud and the fighting clearly advancing up the armory staircase to the hall outside their rooms. She left the lamp from the treasury burning in the room. “Here, take the box Go on down the stairs. I'll be right behind you.”

Kiko headed down while Lady Kiyomizu closed the door that hid the stairs. They descended in silence and darkness to an earthen room beneath the castle. There Lady Kiyomizu located a tinderbox and a lamp. With the lamp lit, they continued through the tunnel that went toward the back of the castle grounds, under Lord Tansho's rooms and, veering to the right, opened into a square, underground room.

It was bare of furniture, held two large, lacquer chests, and had a ladder on one wall. “There should be supplies in the chests, Kiko. We will wait here until it is safe to escape. You come sit down.” Lady Kiyomizu took the cloth off the box and laid it out on the dirt floor near a wall.

“Oh, My Lady, the baby isn't due for two months. Don't fuss over me.”

“Do as I ask. We will have plenty of exercise later. Now is the time

to rest.”

“Yes, My Lady,” Kiko settled herself as well as she could and then addressed her swollen belly, “Time for a nap for you, too, Little One. Whatever Lady Kiyomizu says, we must do.”

Lady Kiyomizu smiled to herself. Kiko had such a clear and simple mind. It was a good thing she was a servant; she could never survive the castle politics without help. As it was, neither of them might survive this bout of politics. Luckily, her Great Lord was a man who prepared for every contingency.

She froze in place. “Did you hear that, Kiko?”

“I heard nothing, My Lady.”

“I thought I heard the warning bells from the floor outside Mitsuo and Yoshiko’s rooms.”

“Surely not, My Lady. We are so far underground, the buildings are no longer above our heads.”

“That is so. I'm sorry I startled you. Rest, Kiko, while you can.”

Lady Kiyomizu tried to calm herself and focus on what must be done next. She opened the nearest chest. There was not as much food as she expected: a bundle of dried, salted fish and a jar of bitter, peasant beer. There were stacks of folded cloth: kimonos, in colors only peasants wore - enough for twenty people. She lifted out four. Beneath the clothes, lay ten knives and ten short-swords. A knife could be hidden, but a sword marked a samurai and she did not want to spoil their peasant costumes. She took out a knife for herself. In the end, she decided the fish and beer would be a help, too, so she laid them with the kimonos.

She closed the chest and began to scoot it across the room. Kiko roused a little, “What are you doing, My Lady?”

“I'm just blocking the tunnel from the staircase. We have to wait here until it gets dark and someone might stumble onto the passage while checking for other things. No reason to just let them walk right in, hm?”

“No, My Lady,” Kiko lay back down.

Lady Kiyomizu moved to open the second chest. A feeling of desperation wafted over her. She took a deep breath and held it a moment before slowly letting it out.

*I have to maintain control. If I break down here, Kiko and I will pay for it with our lives. It is enough that the rest of the families and servants filling the compound are giving their lives for us. We must survive until my Lord returns. Then there will be ample time to win his favor again.*

Lifting the lid disclosed long swords and a plain suit of Lord Tansho's armor. Her fingers slipped along the smooth, dark breastplate. Her breath caught in her throat.

*No! No! I can't think about him. I would give anything to have him here close with me, to lie in his arms and rest, but I won't give up Kiko and Nobuyuki's baby. If the tears come now, all will be lost.*

She pushed at the chest, but it didn't budge. She decided to empty it so it could be stacked on the other one in the passageway. She removed ten long swords and all the pieces of Lord Tansho's armor. In the bottom corner of the chest was a leather, drawstring bag. When she lifted it, it felt heavy. She hoped it contained money, but when she peeked in, it was only candles and a tinderbox.

Even empty, this chest was still heavier than the first had been, but she managed to wrestle it into its place atop the other. When that was done, she put the swords and armor back inside it. Still puzzling over the weight of the bag, she glanced at Kiko, who continued to sleep. There was plenty of time, so she opened the bag again. She removed five, short candles and the tinderbox. She could feel something silken in the bottom of the bag. She took it out and found it was another bag. This one was padded, blue silk embroidered with black dragons. It felt like it was filled with smooth stones from a river. She lifted out several of the 'stones'. They were dull yellow in the lamp light; smooth, oblong lumps of gold, about the size of her thumb. Each one was deeply impressed with the letters spelling 'Tansho' on one side and the symbol of the Tansho house on the other. This was infinitely better than Imperial coin. Once she replaced the ingots in their bag and hid them again beneath the candles, she placed the leather bag on the floor near the Tansho family box.

She tried to make herself comfortable on the floor, but wondered at the quiet. It began to weigh on her. There hadn't been any more sounds from the tunnel or from overhead. Now she wondered how Kiko could have slept through the noise of moving and stacking the chests. Fear sneaked up her spine. Women had been known to just die while they were pregnant for no reason. She reached over and gently shook Kiko's shoulder.

"Is it dark enough to leave?"

"No. I found some food and thought we had better eat while we have opportunity." She unwrapped the dried fish and opened the jug of beer.

When they had eaten what they could manage and washed it down, Kiko offered to stay awake and listen so Lady Kiyomizu could try to sleep.

Lady Kiyomizu lay down and put her head on Kiko's lap. She felt too edgy to sleep, but Kiko began to tell the story of her childhood in great detail. She stopped now and then to hum snatches of songs she knew. There was surely nothing Kiko did better than talk, so Lady Kiyomizu did finally fall asleep.

She woke with a start. She heard the sound of approaching men and the tinkling bells ringing in her ears. . . . but, no, it was silent. It must have been a dream.

The air was very stale with the smoke from the lamp. The two of them decided it was worth the risk to open the escape door just enough to bring in a little fresh air. Kiko started for the ladder.

"Oh, no," Lady Kiyomizu called her back, "Don't even consider that. I will climb up. It will be enough risk that you have to climb it once," She took a candle from the leather bag and cut it in two. Then she climbed the ladder. She placed her hands above her head and pushed at the door, but it didn't move. She then pushed particularly on each corner until one began to give way a little. "Kiko, hand me the knife. . . . Thank you."

Kiko watched as she slid the knife around the edge of the door to cut a slit in the sod. Tiny, black crumbs of dirt rained down on Lady Kiyomizu's arms, but when she pressed again on the door, it opened just a little. Just enough to let in some clean air and a little daylight. "Hand me the candle pieces I cut." When she had them, she propped the corners up. It was only two or three inches, but it was enough. As she came down the ladder, she missed the last rung and fell against Kiko.

"What's wrong, My Lady?"

"Nothing, really. The light from outside is so bright; I was not able to see in here. It will wear off in a moment."

"The breeze is hot."

"That's just August reminding us who he is. But the air is not smoky, anyway."

"Yes, My Lady. And at least it is not raining. There is that to be thankful for." Kiko smiled as she held her hands on her belly, "The baby is glad, too."

They still had hours to wait and the time passed slowly, but Lady

Kiyomizu did her best to review what little information she had about the tunnel they must use to escape. She wanted Kiko to know it as well as she did, just in case they got separated. It did not seem a far distance, but being nearby did not necessarily make it safe.

“When Nyosan and I stood in my garden beneath the plum trees, she told me how to find the tunnel: First, find the elm tree among the pines - that’s the one tree the leaves fall off in the winter.” She had Kiko repeat what she said. “Next: you’ll find the cave mouth on a straight line between the elm and the wall.” It wasn't exactly a cave. It was a volcanic tube that led down to a shelf near the base of the cliff that made up the back of the hill the castle was built on. She had Kiko call it a cave anyway. “And once we are out of the cave, we will be near the road that leads to the second Lady Tansho's property. The house is very large and sits back from the road a little way, but it will be easy to see. If the gate keeper does not recognize us, we will show him the family box. He must not touch it - just look”

Kiko learned the directions, but she could not imagine any situation where she would have to go to Lady Tansho's property on her own. Once Lady Kiyomizu was satisfied that she knew the directions, Kiko began to tell old stories she knew. When the baby kicked, she encouraged her Lady to put her hand there. She hoped it would help Lady Kiyomizu to relax.

Finally, the light from outside began to dim. Lady Kiyomizu climbed up to peek out the door and find where they must go while there was still some light. She looked for a long time.

*There is the elm; it is egg-shaped and less dense than the pines. The undergrowth is thick, though, and I cannot see any pathway. If we go into that undergrowth in the dark, we will surely be lost. How can we get to the wall if we cannot see it?*

“Kiko, I fear I must go out and hunt for the cave entrance. I can see the elm tree, but not a thing beyond it. Help me into the peasant kimono.”

She untied her obi and slipped out of her beautiful, flowery silk kimono. Kiko handed her the plain, peasant-colored kimono. She pulled it on over her white kimono; the one that showed her allegiance to the samurai lifestyle. Once her hair was twisted into a servant-style bun, she climbed the ladder again and lifted the door partway to listen. There was the buzzing of flies and the repeated call of an evening bird, but no steps

or voices. The sun was nearly down. Everything looked pale gray. She looked in all directions she could, but it felt like being a squirrel behind a wall. She supported the door with one hand while gazing uphill to find the dark blot behind the trees where they must go. It must be overgrown.

There was no one to hear the pounding of her heart or see the panic in her eyes as she crawled out and put down the door. She walked calmly as any servant might toward the trees along the back of the property.

*Yuasa and his men must be having a wonderful time ransacking the castle. I can just see them gloating over the beautiful silks and the painted screens.*

Unluckily for her, Yuasa's men had immediately gone to posts along the wall that surrounded the castle and they were alert to the smallest movements - even birds and squirrels. The passage of a peasant woman on the grounds was duly noted and - thanks to an excellent archer - quickly eliminated.

Kiko had put on her peasant colors, too and folded the beautiful clothes they had removed. After what seemed a long time, she was sure she heard men's voices. She climbed the ladder to listen. She could hear them walking, but it was too dark for her to see her lady's body being lifted or the black cascade of hair that had come undone, sweeping along the grassy stubble and brush.

One voice said, ". . . right out here crossing the field. Maybe she hoped to hide in the trees."

"No," said another voice, "she must surely have wanted to die as all the other servants had. Why else come out in the open under the enemy's nose?"

"I don't know. There's samurai clothing underneath the peasant kimono. She might have been trying to sneak over the wall to get away."

"Have you looked over that wall? There's nothing but a sheer drop over there. Besides, if she'd been samurai, really, she would have ended her own life when the castle was taken."

"Maybe you're right . . . well, she'll never tell us now."

Kiko shuddered and tears rolled down her cheeks. She hugged her seven-month belly and whispered, "We are almost all we have left, Little One. Once we get to Lady Tansho's, we'll have real protection and a safe place to wait for your daddy."

She climbed down and tied up all the things Lady Kiyomizu had set out. She even included the beautiful kimonos they had taken off. There

was no thought in her mind as to what would be needed or not. She just packed the things her Lady laid out, as she always had. She only stopped long enough to eat a little fish and drink some of the beer. Then she added the rest of the food to the bundle.

"Here we go, Little One. It's now or never. . . But there's no harm in asking for help." she smiled to herself and clapped her hands quietly together to Jizo, god of pregnant women, children, and those in need. "Oh, Jizo, please help us journey to Lady Tansho's in safety. I am pregnant and have no helper or provider. If you help, I will offer twenty sticks of incense and all the coins I have saved up and bring you flowers every year on my baby's birthday."

"That should do it, Little One."

She picked up the bundle and climbed the ladder. At the top, she went through the list of directions again, took a deep breath, and opened the door. It was very dark and very quiet. Kiko was sure someone would hear her, but she tried not to think about that, and decided to run for it. She climbed out, closed the door and looked quickly for the elm. When she spotted it, she bolted for it. She kept up her speed until she reached the foot of the elm, but being pregnant and loaded down with a bundle, she ran rather awkwardly and landed poorly; more on top of the bundle than the other way around.

*Oh, Little One, my ribs hurt. I'm going to need to stop here for a minute to catch my breath. The bushes are so thick between here and the wall, I still can't see any cave. No wonder my Lady wanted to look while there was still some light. She looked to the sky. Even the moon shields her face from us behind the clouds tonight.*

Hunger nagged at her and she wondered if she ought to try and find the fish in the bundle. It felt like it would take more patience than she had. The breeze freshened and she listened to the hard little leaves on the crowded bushes clicking together, giving the Wind a voice. Then she noticed how clearly she could distinguish each leaf. Only a moment before, she hadn't even been able to see the leaves beyond her arm's reach. Looking up, she saw that the breeze had blown the clouds farther across the sky, and the full moon was showing her beautiful face. Now Kiko could see all the way to the wall, except for one dark splotch where the bushes looked funny.

*I see the cave, Little One.*

She pulled the bundle up onto her shoulder and moved as quickly as

she could toward the opening. Unhappily, that was not very fast. Even with fear for their lives nipping at her heels, she could not stop the bushes from snagging at her kimono or the soft dirt from clinging to her clogs, but the cave was right there, just two feet from the wall.

*This is a narrow door, Little One, hold your breath.*

Determination drove her through as she pushed the bundle in and followed it crawling on hands and knees. The tunnel widened gradually and she wondered about stopping to light a candle. A gust of wind made up her mind for her and she continued on in the dark.

A little farther along, she was able to walk, but with her head bowed for the low ceiling. Finally the tunnel veered to the left: and she was able to stand upright. She could not touch the walls any more, even with both her arms extended to the sides. The draft had lessened, too. Since all this time she had heard no noises that said anyone was following or hunting her, she sat down to search by touch through the bundle for the candles.

When she found them, she, too, was intrigued by the heavy, silk bag beneath them. She lit two candles and propped them up. Then she made herself busy.

*Oh, Little One, nine is such a lucky number, we will put nine little gold pieces in the Tansho family box. The Great Lord would surely want that. We will put one into my tabi to give to Jizo at the temple the next time we go there. The other fifteen will go back into the pretty pouch and we will use them to buy whatever you need. They should last a long, long time.*

Kiko loosened her obi and her kimono just enough. Then she tucked the silk dragon bag beneath her bosom and above her satiny belly and snugged it in place with her obi. Lady Tansho would not know that her belly had grown an inch or two during the night. She put out the candles and gathered up the bundle. When she arrived at the house of Lord Tansho's second wife, there was no gatekeeper. She was greeted by Lady Tansho herself. Hospitality was lavished on Kiko and she was implored to stay and be cared for here.

When her whole story was told, she turned the family box over to Lady Tansho. "This is all my Lady Kiyomizu was able to save from the invaders. She said that only in such an emergency as this were women allowed to even touch the box. I have no idea what it contains. We wrapped it up and came away with great haste."

"Thank you, Kiko. What a treasured servant you are to go through

all this. Do you know where your baby's father is?"

"He went with our Great Lord to fight Lord Hirayama. They will return in a few weeks to find our home has been taken over by Lord Yuasa. What an awful fight there will be then. We all thought Lord Yuasa was our friend and brother."

"Fighting inside families is often the most terrifying. Some things can give you nightmares the rest of your life."

Kiko's baby was born strong and healthy in October; a boy. This small Tansho household, never having produced a male child of its own, celebrated for three days and spoiled him shamelessly as he grew, for Nobuyuki never returned to retrieve his only living heir. Nobuyuki never lived to know that Yuasa had slaughtered his other family - wife and children all – and there was no one left alive to avenge them.

### **Strategy and Battle**

Kenji, Nobuyuki, and Mitsuo squatted in a circle with Lord Tansho just to one side of their campfire. The Lord drew three circles in a triangle arrangement in the dirt. "These are the hills we will come to in the morning. Here is where Hirayama's compound is, on the tallest hill. It was never really built for defense the way ours is. There's a five-foot tall openwork wall around it, but that leaves it vulnerable from the sky. These two hills on either side are crowned with trees. The road leading to his house goes through the valley between those two hills. Set your archers among the trees before dawn so we have possession of both high points before he knows we are here. That will provide our advantage. When the battle actually starts, we will rain down a storm of arrows before they can even get to their posts.

"But to begin things, I will advance with you at my side. When Hirayama comes out, I will state my demands and the challenge will be set. Be sure that you have a good marksman ready to play the "inexperienced, excitable youth" who fires by "accident" at his nearest bodyguard as we withdraw if any of his men make any unexpected moves - giving a command to fire, for instance." He laughed with satisfaction, "This will be too easy. I have my three undefeated lieutenants, and Mitsuo here, is a friend of Hachiman himself. The world

will soon know what happens to anyone who smears the reputation of a Tansho.”

Mitsuo sat up late. He studied the stars and looked for his favorites. They would be shining on long after he had ridden to his ‘glorious’ death. One or two young, untested warriors came by where he sat and he chatted with them until their fears abated. He would miss the clean scented woods when his body was reduced to ashes.

In the pre-dawn hours, Nobuyuki and Kenji took their archers and silently placed them among the trees, as ordered. Mitsuo could see the Hirayama mansion in the moon light. A mansion was what it truly was, a one story, rambling, manor house, never fortified for war. Even with a huge army, a man would be hard put to defend such a compound. Its only asset was its position on the high ground, but amidst the rolling, tree-covered hills, that seemed to Mitsuo to be a very limited help.

When the sun rose, Lord Tansho took his three lieutenants and a bodyguard of twelve, all on horseback, into the valley road. They did not rush, but walked toward Hirayama’s hill with battle flags flying. Once they reached the latticework gates, Kenji addressed the guards.

“My Lord Tansho wishes to speak with your Lord Hirayama. Tell him we are here.” It was curt and rude, but it was intentionally so.

They had to wait a while. Mitsuo expected that. When Lord Hirayama arrived, he was immaculately turned out in a very dark blue kimono and at first glance seemed to be unarmed. He stood on his veranda and bid the guards open the gates. Lord Tansho and the lieutenants rode inside the gates and up to the veranda. The bodyguards formed two lines, effectively holding the gates open, and stopped just inside the courtyard.

Now that they were closer, Mitsuo could see that Lord Hirayama did wear his knife, well hidden in the left side of his obi, and an iron fan, barely visible above the obi on the right. His eyes were narrowed and his stance firm, so he was not nearly as relaxed and unprepared as he hoped to seem. His personal guard filed onto the veranda behind him and the household guard continued to move to selected posts even while Lord Tansho recited his lineage. With that complete, he moved on to his personal history with Hirayama. That was followed by all the favors he believed his family had done for the Hirayama family, but at last, he came to the insult that had been done to the Tansho family in the instance of the beautiful emissary, Etsu, who in her simple honesty, had done

nothing more that to carry a soothing message of neighborliness for her Lord and Lady.

Lord Hirayama spoke at last with a gentle and calm demeanor. "I believe, then we are well matched. I also am sprung from generations of samurai, treasured by their emperors and followed by devoted armies. I, too, am aware of the good relationship between our families, until you destroyed it all. The damage to my good reputation by the instance of the cherry blossom child and the smear you continue to this day at every opportunity."

Lord Tansho very civilly called Lord Hirayama a liar and the insults from that point on were all extremely polite.

Mitsuo could see that some of Lord Hirayama's men were not taking the insults well, but he could also see that Lord Tansho's eyes held the sparkle of delight they always held when he was able to stir a sign of irritation in someone. Lord Hirayama continued to be calm and straight-faced. Kenji's face had a slight blush, since he remembered the incident of the cherry blossom child so well.

Shortly it was agreed they would meet in battle tomorrow. Tansho and his lieutenants turned to ride out and their guards formed up behind them as they passed through the gates. Mitsuo braced himself for anything unusual. An honorable daimyo would never allow his men to shoot as his peer withdrew, but he reminded himself of Lord Tansho's instructions about having a marksman at the ready. Clearly he did not believe Lord Hirayama would let him leave unmolested, even if by "accident". And he had been right. Stationing their archers in the hills had been more than good idea. Mitsuo glanced to the side as they turned to leave and saw the Hirayama captain of the household guard flash an "at rest" signal with his fingers and a man standing behind the gate returned to his earlier position.

The Tansho archers camped on the hills that night. Lord Tansho took his sergeant with him to a treeless area atop the southern hill. There he would be able to watch and direct the battle. It had a view of the road below in the little valley and two of the entrances to the valley. His archers in the trees below him could watch the third entrance if need be, but he did not expect the side entrances to count for much in the main of things. He anticipated Hirayama's desire to hold his higher ground and protect his mansion and he had watched the guard form up in the courtyard when they approached. It was a common defense.

The lieutenants talked some, but not a great deal. Nobuyuki stirred the fire. "They don't seem to have a large army."

Kenji looked up, "There can be a lot of fight in a few men if their cause is righteous. I could hardly believe that Hirayama took such offense over the cherry blossom child. That was years ago . . . and it meant nothing. At least he never mentioned it. No wonder Father was so upset over the gossip Satoshi carried to Yuasa. Years from now we could find ourselves in a battle over that. I never realized."

Mitsuo agreed, "Yes, here are all these men facing death over a fisherman's daughter." Kenji bristled. Mitsuo quickly apologized. "I did not mean to offend. She is a wondrous pearl rescued from among the oysters and a great credit to the Tansho house."

Kenji reminded them, "What we are truly here for is because Hirayama killed Etsu, samurai by birth and a woman of pure reputation. Yoshiko is merely his excuse."

"As you say," both the others replied.

That ended the conversation. Their dinner was quiet and they camped in silence once dark fell.

At sunrise, Kenji and Nobuyuki were at the heads of their swordsmen aside from the mouth of the valley, when Tansho signaled the first shower of arrows into Hirayama's courtyard. One or two of the household guard were wounded. So were several servants who had expected a more orderly, conventional beginning to the conflict and were caught unawares between buildings.

Tansho signaled a second volley and wondered at not seeing the scramble of warriors on the manor grounds that he was sure should have followed this unannounced beginning. He turned to the sergeant, who stood at his side, "Do you see any movement around the manor itself?"

"No, My Lord, nothing."

"The soldiers' quarters?"

"Nothing, My Lord."

"I can't have caught them all asleep. Signal the lieutenants to move forward."

The signals went to the officers and their men formed up in the mouth of the valley. Still there was no reaction from Hirayama.

"It's as though they have no men standing watch at all. You don't suppose they have run away - just evacuated in the night?"

The sergeant made no answer. He was familiar with the basic plan:

their men were supposed to move far enough into the valley to elicit a response from Hirayama's men, but hang back far enough that they would need to march down the manor hill into the valley to fight. When the Hirayama soldiers were situated beneath Tansho's position - actually placed between the opposing hills - The Great Lord would signal his archers hidden in the tree lines and death would rain down on their heads. Then his swordsmen would be at their throats in the next breath.

The manor hill was bare. The sergeant scanned the proposed battlefield. It stood empty and Hirayama still had not fired a single arrow. Nothing was this easy. A trap must be waiting. All the Great Lord's planning gone to nothing . . .

Tansho raised his war fan to halt the advance. The sergeant came to his side and was given new orders for the lieutenants. The sergeant had plans of his own to execute this morning, but any errands he might do for Lord Tansho must needs come first. Today's battle had to be at its height before his plans could be put to their fullest advantage.

Nobuyuki, Mitsuo, and Kenji closed their horses around the sergeant to listen.

"Lord Tansho says to separate off an advance party to storm the mansion gate and see where the trap is set to snap."

Kenji opened one hand and gave a questioning glance to the others. Mitsuo raised one eyebrow and bowed slightly to the others. Thus they agreed in spirit to initiate what they had decided to do days ago in Kenji's rooms.

Mitsuo turned his horse and reined up in front of several companies of samurai. He raised his arm high and several riders came to him. Nobuyuki and Kenji had been able to find five men who would ride under his direct command. They formed up behind him - Toru, Donkai, Akira, Katsushiro, and Kin - and they rode off together at the gallop. Into the teeth of death they sped, up the road and across the front gate in one leap apiece. But death refused to greet them.

When Lord Tansho saw that no one of consequence was in the area of the compound, he ordered the men on the valley floor to gather in a circle, spearmen at the ready on the circumference, and send out riders in all directions to find which quarter secreted Hirayama's army.

The circle was not yet assembled when a volley of arrows was finally loosed by the enemy. Tansho looked across the valley.

"There, to the right, My Lord."

“By the gods, they came around behind us in the night. How did he muffle all his men and horses?”

The sergeant watched in dismay. Kenji turned his men to face the enemy and fired a volley of arrows, but they were at a disadvantage if they could not draw the enemy out into the valley and force them to fight hand-to-hand. Hirayama’s men were his regular archers, each carrying many arrows; Tansho’s archers were on the hillsides and each horseman in the valley carried only six arrows, while the foot soldiers carried none.

Tansho signaled a charge. Kenji and his men were quick to obey. As they moved into the face of the enemy, a volley of arrows fell over what was now the right rear side of Tansho’s army. They turned to look and saw another group of Hirayama’s men entering the valley from the ravine separating the manor hill from the one opposite Tansho’s hill. Tansho’s nearest archers responded and came partway down their hill without a signal and Nobuyuki’s men fell in behind them.

Tansho’s army was now split in two, fighting on opposite sides of the valley. This was the thick part of the battle that the sergeant was waiting for. Everything was moving so quickly that no one was watching his Lord too closely. He had always been loyal to his Lord, even to the point of worship when he was younger.

It had been terrifically painful to watch his Lord lower himself over the years . . . becoming more soiled with money and self-indulgence as time went on. Since his return from China, the castle was no longer the austere, honorable home of a great samurai family. It was, instead, no different from the houses of mere merchants - a storehouse of goods and products.

The final embarrassment which Lord Tansho had personally delivered upon the sergeant was the last strike he could bear. Not only had he been reprimanded and punished publicly and his good reputation ruined, but now he was to be denied the privilege of dying gloriously in battle today with his men. He intended to intervene.

Lord Tansho was seated on a stool overlooking the hillside and so absorbed in the battle, he didn’t see the sergeant leave his side and go back to the horses tethered in the trees. The Lord was wearing his old, favored sword, but had brought his new one to wear when he took over Hirayama’s mansion.

The sergeant removed it from his horse and withdrew it from the sheath. He took a moment to admire its excellence and then taking a cord

from around his waist, he wrapped it in a figure-eight under his arms and around his shoulders. Tied in this way, the cord kept his sleeves up and out of the way. He did not want to soil them. Blood was so hard to wash out.

Then he walked quietly up behind Lord Tansho and slit his throat. The sergeant eased his Lord to the ground and felt the shadow of death fall over his own head and shoulders like a cloak. His mind seemed separate from his body as he watched his finely trained foot step to one side and his arm and wrist snap into an extension that slung the excess blood from the blade. Automatically, he slid the back of the blade through the thumb and finger of his opposite hand to clean as much as possible of the remaining blood from it. His knees bent into a squat to allow him to wipe his hand and fingers on the dry grasses of August.

How he would miss the simple grasses of this Earth.

He took his last survey of the battle as it continued. The sun was higher now and the field of vision much expanded. Far to his right, he could see the first of Hirayama's battle groups making a slaughter of Kenji's group. All the horses were down and the few conflicts still going on were one-on-one sword fights on foot.

Across the valley, Nobuyuki's men were making a good showing. They still had most of their spearmen and horses and all of their foot soldiers. Far to his left, the sun glinted off metal and caught his attention. From where he stood, he could see that Hirayama had yet another battle group waiting, coming from behind the manor hill where even the archers on this hill wouldn't be able to see them until they had entered and closed off the last opening of the valley. The sergeant calmly did what was required. He gave orders to the archers below him to station themselves near the ravine entering the valley from the left and fill it with arrows. Surely what was left of the warriors in the valley would join with those archers when the battle became obvious to them. He had done all he could.

The sergeant returned then to Lord Tansho's body and took his own life: without witness and without ceremony . . . but not without honor.

Mitsuo and his men dismounted in the courtyard and entered the manor. "Search every room," he ordered.

They split up and moved through the house from front to back.

Akira cried out, but it was only a pair of servants hiding behind a cupboard. Akira did not strike. Mitsuo tossed over several large storage baskets in the kitchen and found only a toddler crouched next to a sleeping baby beneath one. In the pantry, he found the nursemaid and the cook. There was another cry. Mitsuo ran toward it, but the conflict was over when he arrived. An elderly retainer had jumped out at Toru and knifed him; Katsushiro had already killed the assailant.

Mitsuo and the four remaining men entered the final wing of the manor together. This wing held the family storeroom and the hallway contained six servants, each with a club or knife. When these were dead, a pair of samurai came out of the storeroom entrance. Now the real conflict began. The four Tansho men against the two Hirayama men made a terrible fight. Mitsuo had seldom seen such fighters. They each took one of his men with them in death - Kin and Akira.

He stepped forward and flung open the doors to the family storeroom. They stood aghast.

"The shelves are empty . . ."

"They must have carried everything out with them last night," Mitsuo lifted a cloth covering a mound in the corner. A lady stood up.

"Etsu!" the men chorused. Katsushiro reached out to touch her shoulder, "Are you all right? We thought he had killed you."

Donkai lifted her long, plaited hair. "He sent us your hair."

She smiled, "He had a servant and had her hair dressed like mine, using my ribbons. Hers was the hair sent to you. We are merely interchangeable pieces on our Lords' game board."

Mitsuo took her hand, "Come, we must find a way to get you out of here safely. You must be returned to the Tansho side of the board." He told Donkai to go ahead of them to check the hallways and lead them out the back of the house.

They came out through the door that opened into the back garden. Etsu was quick to provide what information she had. "The soldiers left last night through the wall out past the teahouse. A piece of it can be removed. The joints are covered by shrubbery."

Donkai moved ahead to the teahouse, but as he passed it, he was struck with a spear. He staggered forward and a second cry was heard. Mitsuo left Etsu with Katsushiro and went carefully across the garden to check Donkai. The scene was silent. Two targets had been struck. Donkai had sliced his assailant in half with his last effort. As Mitsuo

squatted near his head, Donkai moaned and lashed out with an empty hand to grab Mitsuo's ankle. He sat down and cradled Donkai's head. "Hush, Donkai, it's me."

Mitsuo pressed the point over the artery in his neck and in a few moments, Donkai fainted. Then he drew out his sword a little way; far enough to remove his sword pin. He used the razor end of it to cut the artery in Donkai's foot.

Mitsuo turned and signaled Katsushiro to bring Etsu up to the side of the teahouse. In a quickly whispered discussion, they decided to boost each other over the wall rather than try to remove the wall section themselves.

Luck was with them. The slope down the back of the hill was gradual and the trees were sparse, so they had no trouble walking down. The sound of fighting could be heard clearly to their left. They continued to move away from it one rocky outcropping at a time and from one bush to the next. When they were about 300 yards away from the wall, they could see a main road another 100 yards away down the gentle grade. The ground along the road, however, had been deforested and scraped smooth. There was no cover. They would just have to make a run for it.

Their luck was ended. An archer at the back of Hirayama's third battle group turned and saw them. He shot several arrows; hit and missed; hit and missed. Then he turned back to the battle at hand, never realizing he had shot his Lord's precious Etsu and one of her rescuers. It wasn't Mitsuo who was shot, but he only realized he was alone when he rolled over on his side to get his face out of the dirt where he had fallen. He looked uphill and to his left. The two had been running behind him. They had surely caught bolts that would have killed him if they had not been there. He didn't want to think about that, but it was undeniable. He turned back over and looked up to his right. What lay that direction was escape and he wouldn't be safe here much longer, he was sure. Creeping carefully on his belly, he eased over to a large bush that would block the vision of any samurai still near the back of the manor hill – he hoped. He untied his armor piece by piece and piled it together. It made an awfully large pile. He wished there was some way he could leave it behind, but he would need to sell it when he got to Edo to buy himself a way home.

There was no memory in his head to tell him when he had made that decision. It seemed to have entered his mind full blown and complete. When his logical mind found no major flaws in the idea, that settled it.

He tried to make the bundle look fairly inconspicuous, like any peasant's burden being carried along the road. He looked up at the sun. *Two hours before noon and the sun is already very hot. If I go only in my fundoshi, as peasants do in summer, I can use my shitagi and hakama to wrap the armor. I may get sunburned, but better a little burn than to be identified as a Tansho man in Hirayama territory.* He took off his clothes and wrapped the armor, put the bundle on his back and trotted off down the road.

By the end of the day, he had a bad burn on his arms and part of his back. He found a field of berry bushes in the evening. Most of them were still green, but some were coming ripe. He ate what ripe ones he could find and mashed a few on the burns in hopes of protecting them tomorrow. He even put a little on his cheeks and nose.

The second day, he had to walk slower. He found no food or water and wondered if he would make it to Edo after all. By day's end the burns on his neck and one shoulder were blistered. He felt sick and when he came onto a grassy area with small bushes for shade, he lay down and slept.

He woke early the next morning. He was hardly hungry at all, but terribly thirsty. He tried to gather the dew from the grass with his hands and lick it off, but it didn't really work. The skin on his burns felt like painful leather. He lay back on the cool grass in hopes it would ease the pain of his burns. When he woke again, the sun was bright. It was still early, but he heard the creaking of a wagon. He sat up and saw an approaching bullock. The wagon it pulled was so full; the driver had to walk alongside to drive the animal. The man's wife also walked. Two young children were perched among the bundles and bits of furniture.

"Stop! Stop!" the wife called over the back of the bullock to her husband. He spoke to the animal and it came to a standstill only a few feet from Mitsuo's grassy patch. The woman stepped forward and rushed at him with words, "We are from a valley five days from here. We are going to my sister's house in Edo. Where are you from, what is your master's name, how did you come to be in this pitiful condition?"

The husband quietly helped Mitsuo to stand and seat himself on the back edge of the cart. Then he hefted the bundle onto a stool in the cart and instructed the two children to hold onto it so it would not fall off.

Mitsuo's voice did not carry well, but he was able to ask if they had water to share. The man put a hand on Mitsuo's unburned shoulder and

quietly responded, "No, I'm sorry, we don't," he looked carefully at Mitsuo's face, then took one of his hands and studied the fingernails, "But there will be water very soon . . . sir."

Mitsuo looked earnestly into the man's eyes and shook his head, "Please, no."

"As you say," he bowed a little, then raised his voice to make sure his wife heard, "There is water along the road after a while. Just hold on and we will get you there."

The wife continued to ask her questions, while Mitsuo continued to say nothing. Eventually she settled on the possibility that he had been on an errand for his master and been set on by thieves along the road, beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Mitsuo's lack of confirmation seemed to be silent agreement to her and she happily took her supposition for truth.

The cart bumped ruggedly along and little clouds of dust rose up from the wheels. His legs hung down from the back of the cart pallet and Mitsuo watched the dust float up and settle on his bare legs and feet. It was hypnotic . . . and it kept him from having to think about anything . . . anyone . . . he nearly fell asleep. He was very glad he was no longer walking since the trees alongside the road seemed to be keeping all their shade to themselves. Kwannon would not be happy with them.

The sun was directly overhead when they arrived at a creek bordered by small shade trees. Mitsuo was helped down and brought to the edge of the water where he drank his fill. The wife brought him rice and fruit and a piece of dried fish. The husband dipped rags into the creek and laid cold compresses on the worst areas of the sunburn.

Once food and water were provided, Mitsuo began to note his surroundings again. He took one of the rags and washed his legs and feet. The two children, little boys, chased butterflies and frogs, grasshoppers and each other to near exhaustion. The sound of the creek was like music after the hollow cries and gurgles of the battlefield. For a moment, his mind was back in the garden behind Hirayama's mansion. He was sitting on the grass holding the head of Donkai, the spear protruding from his gut.

"Sensei, it burns, it burns." His eyes begged his teacher for a solution.

"Let me press a point for you. It will stop the pain."

"Blessings on you, Sensei"

Mitsuo wanted to scream or cry, *Blessings? Blessings!?* But he dare not. His training overrode the impulse and he pressed the artery in Donkai's neck until he became unconscious. He took his sheathed sword partway out from his obi and removed the small pin from the sheath. He used its razor tip to slice the artery in the man's foot, wiped the pin clean and replaced it. Momentarily he watched Donkai's blood gush from the wound. Splotches and sprinkles of Donkai's life bathed his foot and flew across the yellow, August grass. Mitsuo wondered fleetingly if there would be any such mercy for himself when Tansho found he had not died here as he had sworn to. Of course not.

His mind returned to the flowing water of the creek. He watched some yellow-winged birds. They danced their homely dances for him as they bobbed and weaved and stabbed their little beaks into the water to drink. Then they fanned their wings and hopped and splattered droplets everywhere to cool themselves.

He carefully began an inventory of the damage the sun had done: nasty blisters on the back of his neck and arms, one shoulder blade very red (the other had been protected by the bundle), the backs of both legs from thigh to heel and the front of his thighs and tops of his feet all also quite red.

The husband spoke to his wife. She went to the wagon and returned with a jar of ointment then she built a small fire to heat water for some medicinal herbs. As the husband applied the ointment, his question came, quietly.

“What brought you to this condition?”

“I must go to Edo to retrieve my master's concubine. We hid her there to save her life. The conflict has ended and I must take her home.”

The wife brought her tea-soaked cloths and cooled them, then placed them over the blistered areas. While Mitsuo sat very still, she went back to the wagon to find a clean kimono for him to wear. She checked Mitsuo's bundle and called her husband over to see it.

He approached her, “What is the matter?”

“O, Husband, I fear we have befriended a man without honor. See here, his burden is samurai armor. He must surely have been beaten and banished for some shameful act. A man who would not end his own life in the face of such shame is disgusting,” she spat in the dust, “and dangerous. What if we are found assisting him?”

“Calm yourself, Wife, he is an honorable man and we are right to

help him.”

“How can you say that after what I have shown you? What is your explanation for this? Use your head! Put the visible facts together.”

“I don't need an explanation. I know what I know. Trust me - you'll see.”

Mitsuo walked over to see what was going on. "Is there some problem?"

“Oh no, Sir. My husband only bids me trust a blind man to lead me!” She left abruptly and went to lay out lunch for the children.

“Please accept my apology for the behavior of my worthless wife. I hope she has not damaged your belongings by her careless rummaging. She was looking for clean clothing to cover your burns. I have an extra kimono you are welcome to borrow. Your skin should not be exposed to the sun any more at all.”

“I would be in your debt for the use of your kimono, since I did not bring one with me.”

The next two days were filled with the bumpy cart ride and ointment and medicinal tea, but Mitsuo's skin began to heal nicely. There was very little conversation. The wife clucked and fussed at her husband once or twice a day, but she was polite to Mitsuo and kept her children far from him.

The night before they entered Edo, Mitsuo and the man talked past sunset. Finally, the wife could no longer keep her eyes open. Pulling a blanket around her shoulders, she lay down near the fire and slept.

Mitsuo asked the husband, “What was it you did before you decided to come to Edo?”

“I was body servant to a samurai. He was very old and when he died, there was no place for me in the household. I was given some money and sent off. I married and started a family, but I seem to have little talent for raising rice. We hope things will be better in Edo. What about you? What is your history?”

Mitsuo obliged with his entire tale, beginning with his childhood in the Ryu Kyus and on to the present.

The man was amazed. He had heard such tales only as myths told by monks and nuns about Bodhisattvas. Never would he have believed a person could launch such a quest for revenge and achieve it, or beyond that, survive to return home.

## New Family - New Freedom

Kenji opened his eyes just a slit. The sun was bright. He shut them again. He tried to sit up . . . not possible. Where was he? His body felt jammed into someplace holding him trapped. Then his mind went blank.

Someone took his hand. They pulled at his rings. One came off, but another was stuck. He felt a sharp edge on his finger. "Shinobu? Shinobu! What . . ." was all he said. Then he heard a shout and voices saying, "Get away! Get away! "

He tried to raise his head. It rang like the bell at Nara. He lay very still until the pain and dizziness passed. Finally, he opened his eyes a little and began to feel his surroundings by patting at the walls that had him trapped. It felt like stone. That was it, he was lying on his side between two boulders. Last he remembered, he was on horseback and . . . urgently he pushed against the rocks to get a view of where he was. Last he remembered, he was on the battlefield. . . .

And that's still where he was: in the rocky outcropping where he had been slammed as he was rammed off his horse. The battle was very much over. The sun was showing late afternoon and the local villagers were moving slowly among the dead bodies, taking things that could be used or sold. Kenji looked at his hand. The small gold ring his mother had given him was gone. The large, engraved silver one, gift from Akihiro, now had a mark from the knife that had nearly cut into his finger. A knife wielded by a villager like these he was watching.

He stood up carefully and began to walk across the field, ostensibly to see whether he recognized any of the dead, but mostly to be sure that he could still move. He did not want to be mistaken for dead again. A fog followed his vision when he looked across the distance, but he felt sure it would clear given time. The air felt hot and muggy. The villagers scattered at his approach like clouds of flies on the dead, rising and clearing the way before him as he walked past, only to close in behind him like a swarm and settle back to their scavenging, unperturbed. When he crossed the road and was nearly at the far side of the valley, he thought he heard his name called out. His left hand instinctively went to his waist to feel the surety of his swords in place while he turned to look. There were two men partially hidden in some bushes and bamboo, motioning for him to approach. As he came near, one of them cried out, "No, My Lord, please . . ." and ducked down and away.

Kenji recognized Botan and Minoru, young samurai who had fought by Nobuyuki; then realized he had begun to draw his sword. He pressed the sword back into place.

"Why do you hide here?"

"We were afraid Hirayama's archers would come out again and shoot us."

"Ha! It is Hirayama who had better hide from our archers, surely."

Their faces dropped and Botan said, "None of our archers is left alive. We would have joined all of these in death by now, except that Nobuyuki charged us to return your body to your father."

"We could not find you," continued Minoru, "and feared the villagers had already hauled your body to the large mound they have beyond the hill."

"Has Nobuyuki taken his own life already?"

"No, My Lord, he was struck down within our sight and gave us these orders with his dying breath."

Kenji stepped back and took a second survey of the devastation that was the battlefield. The bodies of Hirayama's men had already been collected, so there were a few clearings, but the rest of the valley was littered with bodies. He began to be able to pick out armor lacing colors and helmets he recognized. Some were fairly new to the group, but most were ones he had trained with for years. "They were the finest . . ." he said aloud, "Finest in all the nation . . ." just as his father had always said.

His head hurt. His eyes blurred. Again he walked among the dead . . .  
*. Perhaps Father's ego designed them all; sculpted from winter fog,  
ready to dissipate with the first rays of Ameratsu's glance - perhaps . . .  
No, he was sure they were real. This one has a wife and five children.  
That one always needed correction on the angle of his blade when  
guarding his head. He must have learned the lesson: his death wound  
was not to the head or shoulders. Over there is one who fights like a  
tiger, even just at practices.*

"Today, truly, the finest men in all Nippon are on the other side with the ancestors." He felt a strong impulse to join them, but he still had to locate his father. Roused from his musings with that thought, he spoke to Minoru, "Have you found my father, yet?"

"No, My Lord, we were looking for you, first."

"Perhaps we could climb his hill in safety, now," said Botan,

glancing furtively around.

“Go ahead, Minoru.”

They were all aware of what they might find. Although, they might find nothing. If Tansho had seen the opportunity, he might very well have taken his horse and servant and gone home - not the classical samurai thing to do, but Kenji didn't think his father would do the appropriate thing unless captured or in imminent danger of being killed by the enemy. Therefore, what he did not expect to find - but the others did - was his father's body prostrate, dead at his own hand, beheaded by a loyal retainer, who in turn had killed himself.

As they crested the hill, they could see the horses still tethered in the trees. And, yes, there was the retainer, dead by his own hand. It was the sergeant.

Then the thought crossed Kenji's mind perhaps his father was samurai at the core after all . . . perhaps he hadn't given him enough credit . . . perhaps all these years . . .

No.

There lay his father's body. Nude. The looters had been here already. One of his fingers was severed. Some peasant now owned a great treasure he would have to hide for the rest of his life. Kenji remembered it as a beautiful ring . . . evidently a close fit, however. The poor man's family would be cursed for generations if it brought him the type of luck it had brought his father.

There was a puzzle, though, as Kenji looked at it all. His father's throat was slit. That was a ninja trick for the dead of night, not an honest daylight battle. Something untoward had happened, but he wasn't going to delve into it. That his father was dead in battle was enough for him.

He went into the trees to retrieve the horses and as he returned, two carrion birds swooped down to keep the body company. He gave a signal to Botan who brandished a dead tree limb he found nearby. The birds scattered, but not before one had disfigured an eyelid. It made it look as though one eye was partly open and watching them. Kenji was afraid he was going to be ill. He managed to avoid it, but Minoru didn't.

All that was four days ago. It had been a long walk. His father's body and that of the sergeant were on one horse and their personal belongings were on the other. The war banner was folded away and none wore obvious signs of affiliation so as to travel as inconspicuously as possible. Their camp tonight was very close to home. Before noon

tomorrow they would be soaking in their own bathhouse, but now they sat staring into the campfire daydreaming.

“What do you want to do first?” Botan asked.

Minoru grinned, “Grab a kitchen girl and go to bed for a week.”

“They wouldn't have anything to do with you before, what makes you think now will be any different?” Botan teased.

“Don't you worry about me. I do just fine with the girls from the kitchen. It's Lady Kiyomizu's maids I can't seem to impress.”

Botan glanced across at Kenji. “Who is going to tell Lady Kiyomizu about the Great Lord?”

Kenji breathed deeply, “I will. The servant gossip will probably deliver the message before I get to her. It generally does. I will need her beside me at first to keep things together until Yoshiko and I can marry.”

“Your mother is not likely to be pleased about that. She never liked the idea of you having a concubine - making her your wife is liable to start a conflagration in the women's quarters.”

Botan put a stick on the fire.

“It won't be the first time. Mother was not pleased about Lady Kiyomizu, either, but she is able to be polite when the situation calls for it. I might have to recognize Lady Kiyomizu as a true third wife, but that can be done. We'll find a ‘hidden’ paper and a well-paid monk who will attest to the marriage - if we need to. I will not have her thrown out into the street. There are a number of options.

“As soon as we get home, I will need to send a messenger to Mother and some token of Father's. I'm not sure what, though. His rings were all stolen - and his swords.” Kenji became quiet and was drifting into a light sleep, still sitting at the fireside with his chin resting on his hand. A disturbing sound came to him and he woke, somewhat startled. He thought he heard the sound of beating wings and imagined the carrion birds were here, but when he woke to see nothing but his friends around the fire, he supposed he must have dreamed it.

Minoru and Botan stood up. There was a sound after all. The grasses were rustling along the roadside. Someone was approaching their camp. Botan raised a torch high over his head to light the area. Within the circle of light stood two merchants and their servants.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“We are from the nearby village. Are you Lord Tansho's army beginning to return?”

“Why do you need to know?” asked Minoru.

“We have important information for Lord Tansho.”

As they approached, Botan stood to one side and Kenji stood up, “Here is Lord Tansho. What is your message?”

The visitors all bowed to the ground before Kenji and then sat up to explain what had happened.

“He set fire to the village and occupied the castle. There was no one there to fight back. The Lady's guards did their best, but all were wiped out. Even the servants were killed.

“Please, My Lord, do not go up to the castle. Go to Edo and plead your case to the Shogun. Surely he will force Lord Yuasa out and restore these lands to your benevolent care.”

“Wait while I talk with my men for a moment.” Kenji took Botan and Minoru to one side and discussed what could be done with the bodies.

When they returned to the fireside, he asked their servants to go back to the road. Then he sat down with them very informally while Botan and Minoru stood back and to his sides at guard.

“We have the bodies of my father, the Great Lord Tansho, and his loyal sergeant of all his army. Killed in battle, they deserve full funerals and great mourning. We do not feel that Lord Yuasa will allow that. We - I - will be very much in your debt if you will each take one and declare that some distant relative of your families has died in the battle and prepare an appropriate funeral for them. Remember to pass down secretly in your families their true identities so that their memories do not pass into oblivion. When I am restored to my land, I will make known your loyalty and you will earn many accolades. Will you do this?”

Both the merchants agreed immediately. If they did not, of course, they would be dead in a moment, so they had no choice. They were truly loyal to the house of Tansho, even so.

“I will gladly supply the means for these funerals,” and he handed each of them a little bar of gold with the Tansho seal on it. “I am asking you, also, to tell everyone you have heard that I died alongside my father. That will provide the time we need to contact the Shogun.”

“As you say, My Lord,” they both replied.

The merchants gladly supplied Kenji with food and another horse, so Minoru and Botan could both ride with him to Edo. Once they were gone, Minoru asked, “Do you think that will be enough of a ruse to keep

Yuasa from coming after your head?"

"I think he will find he has his hands full once the Shogun is informed about all this. I doubt he'll have time to chase after me. Besides, I might just go to Edo and stay. Yoshiko is there and I could use some time to be happy. Mother's house is mine now, so we will have shelter, and there is gold enough to keep us all well for quite a while."

"Do you think it will take long to gather enough men to chase Yuasa back to his own province?"

"I hope the Shogun will do that for us. All I would have to do then is hire a manager to organize the rice planting. I can't let the peasants all starve or it will take years to get up and running again, so there has to be a regular harvest next season. Botan, maybe you could get together enough men to collect the harvest taxes next summer from the outlying villages. It does not take many and you have gone on that task before."

Minoru grinned and poked Botan, "Look at you! High chief tax collector."

Botan patted himself on the chest, "My first field promotion."

Kenji laughed a sad laugh, "You two will have to be the entire Tansho army for a while."

Minoru became serious, "I think the first men you need to hire will be body guards. Botan and I can't watch you twenty-four hours a day and get anything else done. It might even be wise to set a comptroller over your mother's household. It's hard to tell how well she will be able to manage once she gets the news about your father."

"That's certainly something I hadn't considered." He stood up and turned his back to the fire, then walked a short distance away. Tears came to his eyes. He could hardly wait to be with Yoshiko. She would make all this devastation bearable.

Yoshiko's trip to Edo was uneventful. She rather enjoyed the inns where they stopped in the evenings. The travel money that was provided for them was generous, so the sleeping spaces were generous and there was sometimes someone to play music for them. She was treated as a great lady might be, not like someone else's tag-along.

It reminded her of the way she felt when she was little and hunting clams or berries on the seashore: as though she belonged all to herself. Her work was her own choice and whether she went home right now or

later was her own choice, too. Having all this money made her feel in charge of her own fate. It had been a lot of years since she felt like this.

When they finally arrived in Edo, her driver presented Lady Kiyomizu's letter of introduction to the cousins. The man was a round-faced fellow, quick to take charge, with excellent manners and a good education, since he did not need help reading the letter. Yoshiko was surprised at the house, though, since it was nothing more than a shop with living space upstairs. The wife was tall, and wrinkled; her movements quick and nervous. They were introduced to her as Mr. Yamashita and his wife Hisoka, while Yoshiko went by Miss Iwasaki.

The upstairs area was divided into two large rooms, one where the Yamashitas lived and the other where Mr. Yamashita had his work area. The work area was the smaller of the two, so Hisoka explained that they would be glad to move their belongings to the smaller area so she could live in the larger room.

Yoshiko declined. "I would never consider putting you to such an inconvenience. All I need is to move this large screen to about here," she indicated a lovely folding divider that already stood in the work area, "where I will have about half the room for my things."

Hisoka agreed after the appropriate token disagreement and fuss. She was relieved, but decided Miss Iwasaki was girl of weak character. Mr. Yamashita moved the screen and wondered if he would be able to get any work done while she was visiting. Yoshiko was pleased because the space for her included a large window with wooden slats to let in the breezes off the bay. She could also look down onto the street without being seen. When her bundles were all situated in the space she would occupy, she looked through her things to find the package Lady Kiyomizu had sent for Mr. Yamashita. It contained remuneration for their expenses.

The next day, Mr. Yamashita wrote a letter to Lady Kiyomizu. It said that Miss Iwasaki had arrived and thanked her for the expense money. Yoshiko watched carefully as he summoned a messenger from the GO parlor next door to deliver it.

Yoshiko took a few days to become familiar with the rhythms of the Yamashita household. After breakfast, Hisoka would sweep their front walkway, leave open the door to their shop, and then go to the market. Mr. Yamashita would listen for customers while he drew on his wood blocks and used a number of special chisels to carve them. Eventually,

when one was completed, he would rub ink over it and make a printed picture. This left black outlines of the same picture each time he pressed the block to a new piece of paper.

If a client came to the shop, he would leave everything and go downstairs to see if he could interest them in purchasing a completed print. There were many steps to making a completed print. Besides the blocks and the ink outlines, he had colored inks that he thinned until they were nearly clear. These he would brush into the outlines on the prints so the clothing and quilts looked like real clothing and quilts one might find anywhere. Once they were dry, some might be sold as single pictures, but most were sewn into small books. Only the very wealthy could afford them, but some gentlemen liked to own more than one. Mr. Yamashita said there was a living to be made.

Yoshiko decided to write to Kiko.

*Life here is quiet. You would not expect it, since the city is so large, but it is a pleasant neighborhood of shops on the edge of the Yoshiwara district and once dinner is over, everything is very sedate. Lady Kiyomizu's cousins live above their own tasteful shop where Mr. Yamashita sells portraits of lovely ladies. One portrait in particular sells more copies than any other. It is of a beautiful lady sealing a letter she has written and pressing her lips to it. The book of this lady's portraits is in great demand. I think it would be a delightful thing to be so beautiful. I can watch from my window as the daytime crowds pass by. In the morning, mothers with babies on their backs and an extra child or two walking alongside will walk empty-handed to the market place and return with packets of fish and each child carrying a peach or a melon.*

*The main difference from home I suppose is that the shop next door is a GO parlor. Old gentlemen patronize it all day long. Some stay too many hours and must be helped to get home. Mr. Yamashita says the beer there is very good. I have seen bald-headed monks collecting alms. They often have one or two yellow-robed apprentices along with them waiting for food to be placed in their begging bowls. Mrs. Yamashita does not give anything to the monks. I guess she does not feel she needs any more blessings than she has already. At night when all the shops are closed, I can see the lights of the houseboats anchored on the bay shore. It is only a few blocks away. That is where Mr. Yamashita goes to draw his portraits. He stays late into the night drawing sketches. It is very*

*hard work. He comes home exhausted. The prints are worth it, though. They are just lovely. He says the beautiful ladies spend their time entertaining wealthy gentlemen, it is like a party. The ladies dance and sing and play music. The gentlemen drink saki and make jokes and relax. All this while Mr. Yamashita draws his sketches. Sometimes the Yoshiwara district is called the "floating world". Partly, I suppose, because it takes place on many bathhouses, but mostly because when the sun burns off the fog in the morning, it is gone, just as though it was all a dream floating by in the night. The books of portraits are called ukiyo-e and Mrs. Yamashita says they have even given one as a gift to the Shogun. Not directly, of course, but to one of his servants to take to him. They have promised to take me to see the Shogun's palace one day while I am here. Please send me a message as soon as you hear anything about the conflict with Lord Hirayama. I had to wait so long for Kenji to return from the South and then for Mitsuo to return from his raid. Now I am a quaking rabbit hoping that both of them will survive this great attack. Try not to worry yourself. You do not want the baby to be born already a worrier.*

Yoshiko folded the message and sealed it with her wax. She summoned a messenger from the GO parlor and gave him the message with some coins and told him where it needed to be delivered.

Today, Mr. Yamashita was painting in the colored inks on some dried prints. Yoshiko sat nearby and lent him a hand when she could. It was another portrait of the beautiful lady she had written Kiko about, but in this one there was a lustful-looking gentleman seated next to her on her quilts as she lay sleeping.

"Why is this man in her sleeping area?"

"Surely you are not that new to the world? He is her patron and can come to her private quarters when it pleases him." He rinsed out a blue ink brush and picked up a tiny brush with red on it to paint her lips.

"Who assigns him to her?"

"She chooses a patron herself. Sometimes with the help of an older lady like Madam Narita."

Yoshiko poured some fresh rinse water for the brushes. "I have seen that people here in Edo seem to make their own choices in their lives. Some train in the temples, some marry and have families, some choose careers in the floating world. I have never chosen anything for myself.

My father chose to send me to work for Lord Tansho. My Lord Kenji took me as his concubine and it was his choice that I have instruction in music and calligraphy or I would be like Kiko with no education at all. Mitsuo took me on as a job of body guarding. Lady Kiyomizu took me as a student and I am in your house as her protected possession.”

“That is the fate of a woman, is it not?”

“What of the lady in the prints?”

“It takes years of training and the help of a woman like Madam Narita to rise to the place where she can choose some of her own life to live. This lady is the most famous in all of Edo and Madam Narita is why. Just as you are where you are from the help of others, so this beautiful lady is at the top of her profession just now. One day another will rise to take her place. That is how things work.” He laid the colored print on the drying table and took up another with only lines.

“I would like some day to be the most famous lady in Edo.”

“Making your own choices can be a dangerous thing.”

“Surely it must be exciting.”

The next day after Hisoka opened the shop, the artist said to his wife, “Please take Miss Iwasaki with you to the market place. She wishes some excitement in her life.” He smiled at Yoshiko and Hisoka took her along.

The crowds in the street were thick, even this early in the day. The jostling made Yoshiko feel nervous, but Hisoka just shouldered her way toward her goal. The market place was large and there were many different foods for sale. The variety of fish alone was amazing. Hisoka filled two bags with vegetables and had Yoshiko carry one for her. Before they left, Yoshiko found a seller of sweets and bought herself some rice candy. The next section they went to was one with live animals. They bought a chicken there and went on to the noodle makers’. Watching them stretch the noodles through their fingers reminded her of her mother. On Papa’s birthday, she would let Yoshiko break the egg into the center of the mound of flour. Then Yoshiko watched as Mama made his favorite noodles. A tear came into her eye. “After all these years, I still miss Papa.”

“Was he a noodle maker?” Hisoka asked.

Yoshiko laughed, “No, he was a fisherman.”

Hisoka looked confused and shook her head. “Maybe we had better head home, now.”

They bought some noodles and began their trek back to the print shop. On their way, they fell in behind a woman with very expensive clothing and lacquered hair piled high on her head.

“What is a lady of such wealth doing in the merchant district?” she wondered aloud.

“She is a geisha. Real ladies wouldn’t be caught dead associating with a geisha. She is on her way to Yoshiwara. My husband has drawn her portrait. Her beauty sells prints, but the talent she sells makes her no lady. She is employed by Michiko Narita.”

“What do you suppose her family thinks about her work?”

“They may have nothing to do with her. Or she may have no family at all.”

“I often feel I have no family. Not that Lady Kiyomizu is not kind, she is, but her life would be no different if I were not there. If I made some change in my life, no one else would notice, I’m sure.”

Hisoka did not know what to say to that. The girl might be right.

About a week later, the artist came in very late in the night with an armful of sketches and woke Yoshiko. He tripped over her as she slept on the floor of his workroom. He apologized and made his excuses. “The girls will not sit and talk to me unless I have at least a glass of beer . . . and they keep filling it up again . . . Sorry, sorry,” he tripped over her again as he tried to get to the other side of the room.

Yoshiko sat up and pulled on a kimono. “Let me make you some tea,” and she stood to go into the other room.

But he took her by the shoulder and steered her away from the doorway, “No, no, we don’t want to wake Hisoka. She does not like it when I’ve had a night of sketching,” he seemed suddenly on the verge of tears, “Nope, no tea for me. No, not anymore.” The mention of tea seemed to unstop a flood of words. He sat down and leaned against the wall. “I might not look like much now, but there was a time, young lady, when the most beautiful geisha there were deemed it a privilege to serve me tea. And when they spoke to me, ‘Honorable Mr. Yamashita, Sir’ is what I was called. They flocked around me.

“Not more than a scant five years ago, I was the right hand of the Shogun! We were as one man. He gave direction and I gave power. I carried his generous gift to one man and his swift justice to the next. It

was glorious.

“Then came a rebellion far to the north. We rode together at the head of his finest samurai. The rebellion was easily squelched. Those people to the north are so simple that the sight alone of our force sent most of them running for cover. The few real warriors they did have, fought well, but lost. The training available in the northern provinces can’t compare to what’s available here in Edo.

“One man though, fought valiantly and killed three of our best men. I was sent personally to dispatch him, which I did, but he wounded me in the fight. Here, let me show you.” He pulled his right sleeve up and bared his arm to the shoulder. There was a wide, jagged scar along his bicep. “The healers did as good a job as they could and although my skill was not diminished, my reach was permanently hampered.

“As soon as I realized that extra practice would not improve it, I spoke to the Shogun and offered to do whatever he suggested. He told me to choose my replacement and my place of retirement.

“There is no doubt that he has treated me like a family member. He bought me this shop and he sends me money every year - just like his poor relatives.

“Well, I have no room to complain. I could have died in battle and lived forever! As it is, I have my little pleasures.”

She felt he had revealed his soul with that last statement and his bitterness was profound. He was, however, beginning to doze off and she wanted to get him into his own room before he passed out completely. He was very cooperative and she steadied him and helped him into the next room. Hisoka woke and took over the chore. She spoke kindly to him until Yoshiko left the room and then began to berate him for his lack of control.

“You’re supposed to be sketching them, not carousing with them.”

From then on, Yoshiko studied his prints more carefully. If he participated in all the scenes he drew, he had a variety of tastes in ‘little pleasures’. She found the thought rather embarrassing, but fascinating, nonetheless.

In the next day or so, after the house got back to its regular routine, Hisoka decided Miss Iwasaki’s visit to Edo would not be complete without a visit to a Buddhist temple. There were many beautiful statues of the Buddha, some gold and some blue. It was a close and crowded temple and the odor of incense was thick, but it was surrounded by a

large garden area. They sat on a bench for a few minutes. Hisoka stopped a passing monk and asked if they might have a lesson on the origin of all the worlds. He led them to a room on one end of the wing of rooms where the monks lived. It was dark at first, but as their eyes became used to it, they could see there was an elderly monk seated in the center of the room.

They went in and seated themselves facing him. Very quietly and slowly he began to speak:

"The Lotus Sutra shows us a beautiful picture of the origin of everything. The Goddess lies sleeping. From the navel of the sleeping Goddess springs a lotus. On the lotus sits the Buddha surrounded by a thousand petals. Each petal has a thousand worlds, each with its own Buddha seated on a lotus of one thousand petals. Every petal has one thousand worlds, each with its own Buddha. . . and on. . . and on. . .

"And all is only a dream of the sleeping Goddess."

The monk looked serene and calm. Hisoka smiled, "Isn't that beautiful?"

Yoshiko smiled, too. Mr. Yamashita said, "What if the Goddess should wake?"

"Then all would disappear," the old monk responded.

"I would be sad to disappear so quickly," the artist stood to go.

The monk continued to look serene.

Yoshiko decided the Goddess would never notice whether she lived on this side of the bay or the other side. And if she could sleep through all the daytime market noise and the nighttime floating world revelry, nothing Yoshiko could do would ever bother the Goddess.

The monk who had brought them in, stood at the door as they left. Yoshiko put three coins in the bowl he held.

On the way home, they stopped at a food vendor and bought bowls of noodle soup for lunch. Yoshiko got shrimp and onions. Mr. Yamashita got tiny whole fishes with his shrimp and Hisoka got radish and greens with hers.

When they finished and started toward the shop again, Hisoka asked, "Miss, you have been very quiet today. Are you all right?"

"I have been thinking about the sleeping Goddess. I think that Kenji and Mitsuo are both busy with their own lives and will not care what I do with my life any more than the Goddess. She will continue to sleep whether I go back quietly to Tansho castle or not."

“What did you have in mind, Miss?”

“I think I will need to follow my own fortune, not theirs.”

In the morning, after Hisoka had gone off to the marketplace, Yoshiko spoke to the artist.

“I believe I should like to take up ink and brushes for myself. I want to draw my own ukiyo-e. They will be my portraits of the floating world for me to live in. Please take me to meet Madam Narita. I want to become the most famous geisha in all Edo.”

### **To Die Gloriously and Live Forever**

Mitsuo had been dozing in the cart long enough. He stirred himself and jumped down to the road from his seat. The bullock never walked too fast for him to be in danger doing that and he wanted to loosen up his legs. Riding was a weakening thing to do. The sunburn was healing, but the nausea and headache still came if he exercised too much at once. After about an hour, they came to a wide place in the road and stopped to eat lunch. An old tree hung far over the road there and provided them shade.

It was on the crest of a rise where they could see the edges of Edo and a glint of the bay on the horizon. There was a sheer drop off on one side of the road, so everyone looked carefully after the two boys. Mitsuo tried to busy them pulling grasses to feed the bullock, but it did not keep their attention long. He found some wild lettuce in the ditch where spring rains ran and the animal was glad to eat them. The smell and touch of this great hulking animal made Mitsuo miss home. His people were not farmers, but they kept draft animals for their wagons. Hauling goods to sell could hardly be done on the backs of a wife and two children - not if one wanted to make any profit.

Once they finished eating, Mitsuo took his bundle down from the wagon. He changed into his own clothes. It was not too bad until he put on the armor. The pain was severe when he moved, but it could not be helped. He did have some money with him, which would be useful, but rank was what counted. No one in the city knew him, so this would be his only identification.

He stood up in the back of the cart so he could give the peasant directions. At first, there was just the one main road into the city. The first habitations they came to were nothing more than thatch huts put up

by remnants of the countryside who came to Edo in search of work. There were lots of them. Eventually the houses began to be sturdy and not so makeshift. Finally, they came to the residential area just above the Yoshiwara district. The peasant's wife covered her face; she was so embarrassed to be passing through the 'entertainment district'. Mitsuo was unhappy to distress her, but he had to get to Yoshiko. The peasant drove his bullock down the streets Mitsuo indicated until they came to a shop not far from the harbor and next door to a 'GO' parlor. It was not upper class, but nothing for the wife to fear. Mitsuo believed she rather liked to play at being more sensitive than she actually was.

He got down from the cart and thanked the man. "I am indebted to you and your wife for your care and concern. I am sorry to have imposed so much on your kindness."

"It is nothing, really. We were coming this way anyway. Do not concern yourself. You were no bother at all."

Mitsuo handed the man back the kimono that he had loaned him to wear. Knowing the man was too honorable to accept money for a kindness freely extended, he had folded some coins into the sleeve of the kimono he returned. It would not be found until later and should pay them back for their medicines and food.

Mrs. Yamashita was sweeping the walkway in front of the shop door. When Mitsuo approached, she gladly greeted him and brought him inside to begin the social amenities. Her mind filled with hopes of a sale. She went up stairs to make tea and send her husband down to deal with him.

"Ah, Kawabata, Sir, is that correct? My useless wife is no good with names."

"No, that's correct. I just came into Edo, sent by Lord Tansho."

Hisoka set out a platter of little cakes and poured tea. They ate calmly while she wondered how to ask how the conflict had gone. Mitsuo's mind was on seeing Yoshiko and teasing her to make her blush. At last Mr. Yamashita broached the important matters.

"Can you tell us why Lord Tansho sent you here?"

"Certainly. Now that it is safe, I am to return Lady Iwasaki to the Tansho province."

"Safe?"

"Yes. You remember. Lady Iwasaki. Yoshiko. Lady Kiyomizu's cousin."

The Yamashitas looked sadly at one another. "We fear the Tansho province is not a safe place just now. We tried to send a message to our cousin and the messenger returned saying the castle was overrun by a Lord Yuasa from the south. He said Lady Kiyomizu was nowhere to be found."

"Be that as it may," Mitsuo focused on his goal, "Where is the Lady Iwasaki, the concubine of young Lord Tansho?"

Hisoka's breath caught in her throat, "W-we were told sh-she was my cousin's waiting maid. Sh-surely she doesn't **belong** to the young Lord?"

Mitsuo's eyes narrowed. He sat stock-still and silent.

Mr. Yamashita waved a hand and his wife left the room instantly.

"Now that we are alone, please let me explain."

Mitsuo nodded, "Tell me."

"The life of an artist such as myself floats on the waves of fashion like foam on the ocean I must search diligently for subjects and inspiration and even then, the tide of public opinion is unpredictable. Sales vary widely from season to season. We were doing well when I agreed to care for Miss Iwasaki and by the time she arrived, we had little to share. Our cousin was generous, but funds ran out. That was when we sent the messenger to the castle to contact her and obtain more money. When the messenger returned and there was no more money, we were left without options.

"It all worked out well in the end, however, because a kind and generous neighbor, Michiko Narita, offered to care for her and protect her until her family came for her."

Mitsuo relaxed a little. "Thank you for finding someplace safe for her. Now please bring her to me."

"Certainly, Sir. Let me get a guide for you and you can be with her in a matter of minutes."

Mr. Yamashita went to the 'GO' parlor next door and brought out a young boy. "This is the best guide in the city. He can take you anywhere."

Mitsuo stood. He rested one hand on the hilt of his dirk and one on his sword. He was sure something was wrong here, but he could not tell what. No one flinched and no one ran, so he had to follow this artist's suggestion. "I only wish to see Lady Iwasaki, thank you."

"And you shall. Boy! Take this gentleman to Madam Narita at

once.”

The boy jumped into the street and Mitsuo had to quickly follow. This alert and carefully schooled child wove in and around the crowds that filled the streets now. But Yamashita had been right; four turns - only a matter of minutes - and the boy stopped. It was a very nice house with a beautiful, ornately carved fence and gate. The boy led him into a small courtyard where, it seemed, a large chunk of nature had been sculpted into this patch of city space. The boy rang a short string of bells and left Mitsuo standing alone in the garden. The door of the house slid open and he stepped out of his sandals and into the room, past the bowed servant who had opened it.

The house spoke of old wealth; comfortable with itself and its station in life. Light gleamed across the highly polished wooden floors in the reception area. The servant showed him to a seat and offered him tea. He declined the offer, but later wondered if he should have. The wait was nearly an hour. At last a pleasant-faced woman entered and introduced herself as Madam Narita. She was middle aged, but still very handsome and graceful.

After the introductions and socially required statements had been uttered, Mitsuo finally asked to see Yoshiko.

Madam Narita smiled and reached for a small book. “Ah, the gentle Miss Iwasaki is truly a wonderful addition to our family. Be assured that all my ladies are of highest quality; well trained, companionable, from excellent backgrounds, and beautiful besides, but Miss Iwasaki is only an apprentice and is not yet allowed individual requests for her company.” She handed him the book of portraits, “Please feel free to request one of the full fledged geisha for this evening and Miss Iwasaki will be available at a later date.”

Mitsuo sighed and the heat and exhaustion of the last week settled on his shoulders like a life-long burden. *That's what Yamashita's speech about fashion and money was about. A cover for the fact that as soon as they knew Lady Kiyomizu had been deposed, they put Yoshiko out to work to support herself. A relative without power need not be catered to.*

He tossed the book of prints aside, “I believe you have misunderstood. I am the representative of Miss Iwasaki’s family and am the person sent to reclaim her from Mr. Yamashita's care. He told me the circumstance that led him to place her into your care; he did not tell me she was in your employ.” He let a flash of anger flare in his eyes and he

slapped the shining floor, "Where can I find her?"

Madam Narita was as calm as ever. Dealing with powerful people all the time had made her completely imperturbable. "My houseboy will take you directly to her, of course. I had no idea who you were, since Mr. Yamashita had never mentioned you by name. Please accept my deepest apology for my misunderstanding."

Shortly Mitsuo found himself eating lunch with Yoshiko and the other apprentices at the most exclusive geisha house in Edo. Yoshiko was happy and cheerful, more so than Mitsuo had ever seen her.

"You look well."

"It is very pleasant here. We help at parties in the evenings, but the mornings are our own. If we ask the housemother, we can go to shop or visit until three or four in the afternoon. Then we have to come back and help get ready for parties."

"We need to have a talk in privacy."

"We could go for a walk. Would you like that?"

Yoshiko was given permission and they went out to walk together. The city gossip had brought the news to Madam Narita's about Lord Hirayama's successful defense of his home.

"What if Lord Tansho was killed?" Yoshiko wandered toward a temple courtyard.

"That surely did not happen. He was above the battlefield and would have left as soon as he saw Hirayama had won. Kenji and Nobuyuki could not have been that lucky. I barely escaped; the arrows missing me only by the thickness of a silk breath. They are dead, if not by the enemy, then by their own hands."

"What of the soldiers left alive?" Yoshiko found a bench and perched on the edge of it. Mitsuo joined her. A nearby tree provided shade from the afternoon sun and a slight breeze to relieve the August heat.

"They can find a new lord or study with a teacher who will take them on as students or hire out, you know, become ronin. That is what would be available to me if I didn't have a home elsewhere."

"Won't Lord Tansho gather soldiers to fight the lord who has taken his castle? You could go help him with that."

"Yes, but that will take time. Tansho has lost many excellent fighters and Lord Yuasa has all his army with him."

"I must find a place to stay here while I look for a boat to buy. I want to go home." A novice monk all in yellow stopped a short distance away, stepping into Yoshiko's line of sight. She tapped Mitsuo and pointed to the novice. He took out a coin and put it in his bowl. The novice bowed and walked away.

A tear ran down Yoshiko's cheek, "I cannot picture the castle overrun by strangers. It was my home for so long. My real brothers and sisters would be grown now and not even know me. I don't remember people in the village I came from. The Tansho household was my family. It feels like my karma has taken me around a corner into a different life. All I have left of the old life is you." She pressed her hand into his. "Let me take you to a place where I saw some houses for rent."

When they found one he liked, he rented it and they went out to buy something for his dinner. They found some vegetables and a fish. Then she showed him where to buy a good brand of sake.

"There is not enough here for the two of us."

"I have to go eat with the other girls at Madam Narita's house."

Once back at the bungalow, Yoshiko got busy arranging things to suit herself. When she had everything the way she liked it, she prepared to leave. They were kneeling near the door and she reached out and slid open the shoji. Just outside in the entry, their shoes sat side by side. Mitsuo put out a hand to stop her from going through the doorway. "Beautiful view, don't you think?"

Yoshiko blushed. "This view is very dear to my heart."

"Oh, Honorable Lady, please stay with me. You are all there is left of my life and I don't want to lose it now." He took the edge of her sleeve and pressed it to his cheek.

Instantly, she remembered the time in the guardroom where he had teased her and called her Honorable Lady. Her heart soared. Who could tell if this face of Mitsuo would show itself again? This was the one she adored. "How could I ever leave you?"

She began to remove his clothes and hers. She fell on his neck with hugs and tears and held him to her for fear he might disappear if she let go.

He slid the shoji closed. For an hour, there was only the two of them. At last, she had to become the apprentice again and he was left alone. When he woke, he missed her terribly. He lay still for a while, planning what he might do. The only option was to buy her contract from

Madam Narita and take her home to the Ryu Kyu Islands. There they would marry and raise a family. That would be perfect.

He went to the nearby bathhouse and cooked himself some dinner when he came back. He went over and over his plans as he lay down to sleep. His mind escaped into a floating world of dreams as Yoshiko entered the 'floating world' of entertainment in the Yoshiwara district.

In the morning, he woke to the smell of tea and Yoshiko. Her perfume was familiar, but seemed to have a new enchantment when mixed with the mosaic of odors in the early morning city.

She knelt near the brazier in a blue kimono. As she stirred the coals, she scolded the little pot, "Shame on you, you are such a dawdler! Boil, now; quickly!"

Mitsuo got up and walked over behind her. He squatted down and wrapped his arms around her, hugging her close.

She addressed the pot a second time, "How embarrassing! You have not boiled the water and your lord has already risen."

"I certainly have."

She giggled and squealed.

He whispered something into the shiny black hair hanging over her ear.

"Mmmm. Let's!"

When the water filling the little pot had nearly boiled dry, they sat down to breakfast.

"I see you brought a bundle with you. What have you been up to?"

"I only brought you some clothes. Two changes. And the breakfast, with some extra for later. "

"We need to talk about some serious things, Yoshiko. Mr. Yamashita signed a contract with Madam Narita that says you work for her. It is an apprenticeship that lays obligations on you toward Madam Narita."

"Well, yes, there are obligations, but it is a wonderful opportunity and it is like a school. I get lots of training."

Mitsuo drank some of his soup, "Name me the obligations."

"Well, there's the price of the clothes I bought you, my room and board for the time I've been staying at the geisha house, I have to pay for the makeup I'm learning to use, she's had beautiful kimonos made for me, there are special pins and combs for my hair, and the price of my training."

Mitsuo choked a little on a piece of seaweed, "There you mention training again. Surely you can't owe her for any training! You told me Kenji had allowed you teachers for everything. You sing and play like an angel, you dance and make tea ceremony better than the best, you arrange flowers, you read and write, your poetry is music and your manners are impeccable! What else could they possibly train you in? Oh, darling, let me buy your contract. I can pay her off for you."

Yoshiko lowered her eyes. There was some intimate training she had not yet received and it was an art she hoped to excel at. She quoted him the price required to free an apprentice. It was actually the price for a fully trained geisha, but she wanted the amount to stagger him, so he would give up this idea.

He stared at the screen dividing the room while he mentally juggled some numbers. "Don't you worry about anything. I can work this out for us. Either I give Madam Narita the money I have and we travel on foot to the south where I left my ship, or I buy a boat and provisions with the money have and we set sail as soon as possible.

"I would prefer to just leave since Lord Yuasa might not care to part with my ship and I would still need to find a crew, but don't worry. I'll let you know when I get everything set.

"Life will be wonderful for us when we get back to the Ryu Kyu Islands and my father. We'll have a big wedding and then we'll begin to fill my father's house with children. He will be happy again and you and I will be happy."

*"This is all such a new idea. I always imagined you would stay in Edo with me." Besides, I never considered marriage. I could never marry someone who was not Nipponese. Maybe to be a concubine, but an official wife? Never! Any rank or status I might have now would disappear like the morning fog. Madam Narita says I am sure to be well liked and very popular. The court-style training in childhood and the education Kenji provided make me 'a delight to be prized.' Someday will surely be the most famous geisha in Edo and a wealthy patron will fund everything I want. If I do well, I might even take over after Madam Narita retires. That would be perfect.*

*This has to be my true karma. This is exactly what all the years of lessons have prepared me for. If I gave up my true karma to marry Mitsuo, I could do nothing but bring him bad luck and we would both be miserable. I want him as my lover and patron (if he can afford it) but*

*here in Edo, not off on some primitive island.*

What she actually said was, “Madam Narita has been very kind to me. I don’t think I could just run away. All I want is to be with you forever. You and I are one. We belong together.” That settled it in her mind. She was sure she had made herself quite clear.

That settled things in Mitsuo’s mind, too. *She said she wants to be with me forever. I’m sure she will get over leaving Madam Narita abruptly. It will be done and we will be gone. She will be so happy.*

When Yoshiko went back to the geisha house after breakfast, Mitsuo went down to the harbor to see about purchasing a boat. He never seriously considered trying to get his ship back from Yuasa’s ‘safekeeping’. That was likely to take bloodshed and he had seen enough of that recently to satisfy him for a lifetime. All he could think of now was going home and taking Yoshiko with him.

When Kenji arrived in Edo, they all removed their Tansho emblems. Botan and Minoru also removed their swords, covered their heads, and posed as his body servants. Eventually they found their way to his mother’s house. She was shocked but happy.

Once they were all seated, her questions began. “I heard of the loss at Hirayama’s and was sure I would hear from your father, as I always have. Then when the rumor came that all were lost, I thought you were dead alongside him. What happened?”

“We don’t exactly know. Father took the sergeant with him on a hill overlooking the battle. When we came there afterwards, the sergeant was dead at his own hand, but Father had a slice on one side of his neck . . . no other wounds. He did not kill himself.”

“No, of course not,” she turned to her maid, “Namiko, bring me my breathing tincture,” and turned back to Kenji, “I don’t believe your father was capable of that. He had his limitations.”

Botan and Minoru looked embarrassed, but it was Kenji’s turn to be shocked, “Mother, how can you say that? How dare you?”

“He is dead, isn’t he, so he’s not going to kill me for it.” She looked seriously at her son and at his left hand bracing his swords, “Are you?” Kenji noticed his hand and removed it from the swords, placing it softly in his lap, “No, Mother . . . I could never do that.”

Namiko arrived with Lady Tansho’s medication. She took the

tincture with a little water and sent Namiko to heat the bathhouse fires, "You see, my dear, there are some things that even you won't do and it is merely truthful to say so. But I have to pray that the Shogun never asks you to take your own life, because you would do it, and this is something I have always known about you. You have an inner strength that your father never did."

"It is liable to take all that strength and more to reclaim our land from Lord Yuasa. What resources do you have here?"

"I have enough set by to run this house for about two years, but your father's income was from the land where he lived. I have no other income and only the four servants. He always sent whatever I needed and often brought extra when he came here to stay during his service to the Shogun. What are you talking about that involves Lord Yuasa?"

"Oigimi's father came and overran the castle while we were in Hirayama's province. We do not know what happened to Lady Kiyomizu or to the country house and second wife. We have not heard anything, but when we go to the Shogun, he may already have news."

"Are you sure you want to go to the Shogun yourself? It might be safer to hide for a while until he acts on his own. Once we see how he treats Yuasa, then we would know what you should do. You know, he might hold you accountable for your father's actions. If he did, you and I and your half-sisters, too - if they are still alive - would all be killed. If he holds Yuasa accountable for the attack, then you could show yourself and claim your inheritance."

Botan interrupted, "Please, My Lady, where could we safely hide?"

"I have a familial connection to the Emperor. No one in Edo has seen Kenji since he was very young attending on the monks at our temple. In those days his head was completely shaved. With all the hair he wears now, I can hardly recognize him myself. He might even let the hair above his forehead grow back in."

"Now, Mother, that is a little too much to ask," Kenji smiled, "but I can see how it might work. I think we could pass for wealthy cousins of the Emperor on a visit to relatives. What do you think, Minoru?"

Minoru yawned widely and stretched. "I think if the bathhouse has warmed up, I'm ready to go there and leave the strategy meeting until after we are clean and have eaten."

Lady Tansho chuckled. "Minoru is a practical man and sounds the voice of reason, since I agree that the air of travel hangs rather heavily

about you all. There will be plenty to eat when you are clean and dry.”

The men bowed and left.

“Namiko, fetch Daiki for me.”

“He is just here, My Lady.”

A middle aged, broad-shouldered man entered the room. He wore a very nice kimono, surpassing most servants, and his age had not damaged his good looks.

“Daiki, have you seen Kenji?”

“Yes, he's grown up well. I brought your writing desk in case you wanted to send messages to friends.”

“Just put it here,” she indicated the nearby table, “I'll need to think about what to say. We are considering calling him a cousin until the Shogun takes the land grabbing Yuasa in hand himself.

“You know it's a good thing our Young Lord doesn't have your face, but I am pleased that he seems to have your musculature. What a handsome creature he has grown into.”

“I think I am glad he did not take to the temple as a career. He will give us beautiful grandchildren.”

“Not until we find him a suitable wife. That is going to be a time-consuming project.”

“I have a project of my own in mind,” he drew her into his arms, “I could show you the designs in my room.”

She laughed, “I bet I've seen those designs before. I think they have something to do with laying hands on my assets.”

“What more could a comptroller want?” They both laughed.

At dinner, the conversation finally left the lighthearted memories of Kenji's childhood spent in this house with his mother, and turned to the plans for his future and reclaiming his inheritance.

“Your plan for us to be distant cousins is charming, but I think I cannot go through with it. If we go quickly to the Shogun and explain that all this has come about through nothing more than defending our rightful border, he will surely help us. We have done nothing but support the Shogun's laws and obey his regulations all my life. It's Hirayama and Yuasa who have overstepped their bounds, defying the Shogun's directives.”

Lady Tansho acquiesced, “As you say, my dear. I would like to suggest that you speak with Daiki before you go to the Shogun. Your father had on-going disagreements with certain people here in Edo. Daiki

can explain the fine points of those relationships much better than I can. I hope you will be patient for a little while.”

“I think I can do that for you, Mother. I have some errands to do here before I see the Shogun, and I must have some clothes made. Everything I own is in Yuasa’s possession.”

Kenji and Botan and Minoru strode broadly through the streets ostensibly looking for Yoshiko, only to be distracted by establishments that sold sake. Having been watched and directed all his life by one person of authority or another, being unsupervised all day every day until dinnertime was a new experience. With Botan and Minoru along, it tended to be a rather inebriating experience.

He actually knew the name of the painter of ukiyo-e, but had not found the shop, yet. Finally, Minoru suggested they go to the Yoshiwara district itself. Perhaps they might run into the fellow at his work. This seemed like a fine idea, so they started off.

The streets of the district were crowded when they arrived and the crowds were well-behaved. They followed one street away from the bay to see where it ended, but as they walked along there were fewer and fewer lamps. Women sat on stools or stood in doorways and blatantly invited them in. Kenji led his little group back to the well-lit streets and into a beer parlor. They sat at the bar. He spoke to the bar tender, “Do you know a man named Yamashita?”

“Sure, I know a lot of Yamashitas. There’s a whole flock of them live not far from the Shinto temple across from the Shogun’s castle. I just trot myself over there every third afternoon and have tea with them. Who do you think I am?” He sat down their cups of beer.

“All right, I just need to find somebody.”

“You’re in the right district for that, Young Fellow. Drink your beer, first, though. Don’t let it go to waste.”

“He means someone specific,” Botan interjected, “Yamashita the painter of ukiyo-e.”

“You can’t just walk in anywhere an’ get those kinda pictures, you know. And they’re real expensive. Pro’bly a whole month of your pay for one. But if you dress up in your best an’ go to a real high class geisha house, you could present yourself as a maybe customer an’ get ‘em to show you their book.” He went to the end of the bar and continued the

conversation he had interrupted to serve them. They drank their beers and left.

They wandered around all evening, but they had to buy a drink before anyone would give them information in the bars. Minoru liked the game rooms. They did not insist on them buying drinks, but did expect them to lay bets. They found that if they bet on a board game, they had to drink while they waited to see who won, but if they just bet on cricket fights, they could get by without the beers.

Kenji finally did approach one of the geisha parties located in a large houseboat. The sides of the house were all open and it was very well-lit. He thought for a moment he saw Yoshiko, but when he stepped up on the walkway leading to the houseboat, a broad shouldered, heavily muscled man came out to meet him and ask him to leave. He was given a piece of paper with a name on it - Madam Narita - so he could make an appointment for a later date. Kenji crumpled it and dropped it into the water as he left.

As the evening wore on, they began to tire and get more than a little drunk. Finally they found a tree-sided shelter, beautifully decorated around the eaves, that housed a marigold bed. Kenji tried to think of something well educated to say. "These plain green plants will draw crowds of admirers in a week or two."

Minoru tried to join him, "Their blossoms will open like a sea of white clouds."

"Or gold coins," Botan added petulantly. He pointed a finger at Minoru, "You know we would have had a lot more coins left if you had not kept betting on crickets. By the gods, crickets! What contest is there in crickets? No little brains to think of strategy, just bug against bug."

"Just like samurai," said Kenji morosely, "Take twenty bugs in this box and twenty bugs in that box and dump them into the road between two hills and watch them kill each other. Where were you, Hachiman?"

"No, Kenji, don't challenge Hachiman. We are not bugs. Don't say that, please."

"I'm sorry, Minoru. I'm sure Hachiman had no choice." He looked out into the crowd milling about them and saw a familiar face. "Look over there, isn't that Mitsuo?"

"Mitsuo! Mitsuo!" Botan called out. He stood up on the wooden walkway and waved over the heads of the people nearby, "Over here! Come sit with us."

"Must you speak to that Ryu Kyu traitor?" asked Minoru.

"He is our Sensei, how could I not speak to him?" Botan's voice rose in anger.

Minoru stood up quickly to answer angrily, but his face turned from red to white and he staggered and doubled up, vomiting into the flowerbed.

Kenji wondered fleetingly whether those particular flowers would bloom at all this year and then turned to console Botan, "Mitsuo's in the same boat we are now. No harm in being polite."

Mitsuo made his way through the crowd to the place where they sat.

"My Lord Tansho, how good to see you alive and unharmed. I would have expected you and your father to be at home by now."

"I got nothing but a roaring crash on the head and a cut on my hand. Father, however, has gone on to the ancestors and we are left to try and retrieve our property. So far, just the three of us."

"Come to petition the Shogun for his help?"

"Absolutely. What happened to Etsu? Did you find her?"

"No, it was all a ruse. Hirayama had left a few elderly servants and some children in the house. Otherwise, it was empty."

"That's sad. Listen, once we get re-established in our province castle, come out and I will assign a permanent position to you. You could be a great help."

"I appreciate the offer, but I have purchased a boat and expect to leave for home soon."

Botan and Minoru both relaxed. They were relieved to know that Kenji's promise would never have to be carried through. Daily living with Mitsuo would be a constant reminder of their General Mihashi and neither of them relished that idea.

Kenji finally asked about what his heart was truly focused on.

"Have you been able to find Yoshiko?" The crowds in the street were becoming more rowdy and the noise level rose.

"Pardon?"

"I said, 'Did you find Yoshiko'? We've been looking all over for that artist cousin of Lady Kiyomizu and we've had no luck."

A fight broke out in front of a gaming parlor and the crowd was coming toward them. They all stood up and walked away to a calmer side street.

Mitsuo tried to smooth the wrinkles out of his clothes. "It wouldn't

do you any good anyway.”

“What do you mean?” asked Botan.

“The artist sold her.”

“Explain yourself,” shouted Kenji.

“Don't shout at me,” answered Mitsuo, “I don't like it either. He must've been hard pressed for money, because he spent what Lady Kiyomizu sent him for Yoshiko's care and when he found she'd been ousted from the castle, he sold Yoshiko into Madam Narita's employ.”

“Madam Narita?”

“Owns a very up-scale geisha house here in town. She's only an apprentice there, but she's obligated to Narita for an amount only the Shogun himself could afford.”

“I can't believe it! How could he possibly do that to her? Doesn't he understand duty? Has he no shame?” Kenji's tirade exploded, “It's impossible for me to imagine! My wonderful Yoshiko lowered to such a state - servant to geisha. I can't allow it!

“Where does Yamashita live? I'll settle with him first, then I'll go get Yoshiko. Answer me!” he grabbed Mitsuo's collar, “Where do I find Yamashita?”

Mitsuo answered. Kenji and his two companions left immediately to find the artist. Mitsuo, on the other hand, went straight to Madam Narita's geisha house. He asked for Yoshiko and was told she was with a client. She was only helping several girls who were working alongside the geisha, though, so in a few minutes, she came to speak with him.

He took her hand. “You must come with me now,” he told her.

“What's wrong? What are you talking about?”

“I have bought the boat and you must come with me now, before something else happens.”

“What ‘something else’?”

“I ran into Kenji and two others across town. He wants to kill Yamashita and come get you. If you don't hurry, he'll be here and we'll never get away.”

“Mitsuo, I can't go with you. You are wonderful, but how will you make a living in the Ryu Kyus? Stay in Edo and we'll go on just as we have been this past week. It'll be just the two of us.”

He let go her hand. “What about Kenji?”

“He might have the money to become my patron,” she smiled warmly.

“No. . . Come with me and we’ll have a real family and a house of our own. A real life, not something balancing on the edge between evening and night. This ‘floating world’ makes only half a life!”

“You don’t seem to be listening, Mitsuo. I don’t want to marry and have a quiet family life. I like it here. Come back to me whenever you can, but I am not leaving.”

She started to wrap her arms around him to give him a hug, but he pulled her arms methodically away from him. Her words had become clear at last.

He left, walking very fast through the drunken, dancing crowds, down to his boat to await the outgoing tide. He didn't want to run and draw attention to himself, but he wanted to get away from her. His eyes stung with tears ready to fall and, in the dark on the boat, they fell in torrents. He fell asleep and dreamed that he and Donkai were walking on a battlefield, wading in blood to their ankles. A cry rang out and he woke to the sound of the lapping water. He tried to go back to sleep, but when he could not, he at last took up the anchor and made his way out of the bay. Back to his father and the familiarity of home, his karma was following its course.

Kenji's karma had been completely fulfilled, however. The Honorable Mr. Yamashita, former powerful right hand of the Shogun himself, now humble painter of beautiful ladies, was more than a match for a drunken youth and his two equally drunken friends. Whether he was a better fighter or just luckier made no difference, the result was the same.

So, while Yoshiko was riding a swell of karma that would not crest and break for many years; Lady Tansho, having received the news of her son’s death, was feeling the tide of her karma engulf her and the undertow pull her down . . .

## Epilogue

*The old woman in her white makeup and wrinkled, red bow mouth, lay staring at the ceiling. People came and went. Dreams came and went. Sometimes someone would come and sit with her for a long time. She could seldom understand them if they spoke to her. Their words*

*alternately stretched out and squeezed together like a fan opening and closing.*

*Shadows slowly shifted along the walls and intertwined themselves on the ceiling. It was lovely to watch. She no longer felt hungry and her head seldom hurt anymore. She did have an irresistible desire to dance with the shadows along the walls.*

*Someone came to the side of her bed. The headdress showed he must be a priest. What a comfort that was to her. Surely he would clear the room of the evil spirits that held her immobile in her bed. He began to chant and she felt very peaceful. The shadows on the ceiling smiled with peaceful faces. Two or three even had beautiful bodies with shining clothes. How she wished she could dance with them. She was sure she would be able to if she just weren't trapped on this bed.*

*Ahh . . . one of the lovely creatures was descending and reaching his hand out to her. She squinted her eyes to try and see his face, but it kept blurring together. When his fingers finally touched hers, her sight seemed to clear. It was Mitsuo, his familiar personal fog drifted around his hair and shoulders and twined around his feet.*

*Her gaze lifted and she saw that the other two creatures were identical to those she often saw on the ceiling of the temple she attended. Her personal donations had paid for their gilding. When they all joined hands, she felt light and as though they were drifting.*

*She looked down. They weren't in her room anymore. They weren't even inside her house. All she could see were white clouds passing over a long chain of green islands and a blue expanse all around her.*

No material published in Literally Speaking may be reprinted or posted without the consent of the author. Unauthorized use is a copyright infringement.

If you have a short story or novel, you'd like serialized in Literally Speaking please contact the Guild at —

**Klamath Writers' Guild**  
**P.O. Box 8113**  
**Klamath Falls, OR 97601**

Or email us at: [klamathwritersguild@hotmail.com](mailto:klamathwritersguild@hotmail.com)