

PROLOGUE

On a clear, cold morning in early spring, Masaru rode through the cedar and maple woods alongside his father, Daimyo Kotoheisei Nobutaka. Behind the two and outside their ring of bodyguards marched three samurai leading enough men to form an entrapping ring around the village when they arrived. Beside Father rode his standard bearer, carrying the warlord's personal mon: a black flag emblazoned with the white outline of a coiled centipede. An odd choice for a personal crest. Masaru had only learned the significance of it a few months ago.

Next to him rode another bearer carrying a pair of lacquered black boxes hanging from a pole slung across his shoulders.

"Something bothers you, my son," Father said, peering at Masaru with his good eye. He'd covered the damaged left orb with a black patch bearing a miniature of the centipede mon.

"No, Father. I am fine."

"I can see it on your face."

"It is not my place to question my Lord's actions. Only to obey as a dutiful son."

"You are upset over what is to come." Father sighed. "You have inherited your mother's compassion. You think I am a monster."

"I do not think that."

Father looked ahead, as if he could already see the village. "Our land is a body, Masaru. Traitors are an infection that must be cut out if the flesh is to survive."

"I understand." Masaru said. "But must we punish *all* of these villagers? Could we not just execute the headman and his conspirators?"

"You must dig out all of the infection," Father said, "down to even the tiniest sliver of corrupted flesh. If any remains—any at all—it will become a gangrene that will rot the entire body from within.

"Compassion is an admirable and beautiful trait in a woman, Masaru. When I was captive as a boy at Lord Ichimaru's castle, there were many times when your mother's love was the only thing that kept me alive. But compassion is not an emotion a man can afford. Especially not the ruler of a land like ours. To rule

well, you must be level and objective. You must look at each man, woman and child in your domain only as the collection of their abilities. If they are not useful, or if they are detrimental to the workings of our land, they must be removed. ”

He put his right hand on Masaru’s shoulder. His missing first and second fingers made the grip odd. “My son, I know it is hard. I see how it pains you. But you will have to master your emotions if you are to see the Kotoheisei clan prosper when I am gone.”

Masaru looked back at the end of the line, where a small, unconscious woman was slung over the back of a horse. “But why must we use this Batsu-no-Kaji? How could she possibly help us?”

The Batsu-no-Kaji did not look formidable. She was small, girlish. Masaru could have encircled her wrist with just his thumb and forefinger. Her face suggested that she was still in early womanhood, perhaps eighteen years or so. Her burnt, ragged clothing hinted at her supernatural nature. Or rather, the supernatural nature of the creature that Father had imprisoned within her.

“It,” Father said, emphasizing the word, “is merely a vessel. It is what lies inside that vessel that shall give me an edge over the other daimyo, that will allow me to take their lands and put them to good use. When I am gone you will use it to continue expanding in the name of our clan.” *Until you challenge the shogun himself.* His father did not speak it, but Masaru knew that was the ultimate goal.

“Someday,” his father continued, “I will teach you the secrets I used to create the Batsu-no-Kaji.”

Masaru continued to stare at the little woman. He was not very familiar with his father’s experiments, but he did know that the slip of ofuda paper affixed to her forehead was some sort of seal keeping her asleep and, more importantly, keeping the being within her locked away. He did not recognize the kanji characters Father had painted on the charm. They looked vaguely familiar, but were studded with barbs and hooks that perverted the natural elegance of the brushstrokes. Before the ofuda had been applied, the woman had been kept docile with mind-numbing drugs and constant beatings.

Beside the Batsu-no-Kaji walked her guardian priestess. A giant she was, towering at least a full two heads over even the

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largest of the soldiers. So tall, in fact, that she had to duck to avoid the lower-hanging branches. Masaru wondered if she had the blood of an oni in her. She walked with bowed head and hands clasped shyly before her red skirt-like hakama and white blouse, her face half hidden by her dark red hair. In the band of her hakama she carried a wand of folded zigzag gohei paper, and on her back a large box full of stones. He did not know what part she played in all of this, but he would soon find out. For today was the first test of the Batsu-no-Kaji's power.

No one knew what she was supposed to do, exactly. Except for Father's senior samurai, Mogojiro, perhaps. Father always shared everything with him. Even things he hadn't shared with Masaru himself.

A mounted scout came galloping down the path. "My Lord Kotoheisei," he said, "we are almost to the village."

Father brought his men to a halt. "Fan out and enclose them. Start from the edge of the rice paddies and push them in. Wake up anyone still sleeping. Let no one escape."

A long silence followed as the two men waited for the soldiers to move into position. Masaru's throat was too taut and dry for him to speak. He looked back at the priestess standing next to her charge. Her head was down, staring at the ground. In sadness? Shame? Or simple fatigue?

At last the samurai returned and joined Father's retinue as they stepped out of the woods. The paddies were still as dawn. Masaru caught the fresh smell of running water over the tang of tilled earth and manure. To his left was the river that irrigated the fields. It was swift and swollen with melting snow from the mountains, so much so that it had spilled over its bank, creating a marsh spongy and green with young reeds. Tiny brown frogs, each no bigger than a thumb, plinked into the water at the riders' approach.

Masaru saw the bodies then. Eight, ten, twelve corpses lay amid the furrows of half-ploughed dirt. All of them clustered near the woods. They must have tried to run away when they found out who was coming, only to be impaled by the hidden soldiers so they couldn't scream a warning.

The priestess gasped and clapped a hand to her mouth.

They entered the village, rounding a tall clump of bamboo, to find the remaining farmers huddled together in a circle of armed

soldiers. A child started to cry but his mother hushed him quickly. The peasants threw themselves to the ground when they saw their lord. None spoke.

Mogojiro Honda, Father's senior-most samurai and closest advisor, urged his mount forward. Like waves on the open the sea, the cerulean lamellae of his armor shone in the morning light. The crest on his helmet, sculpted to resemble the horns of a rhinoceros beetle, was a dragon breaching those deep, dark waters. "There are traitors in this village," Mogojiro said. "You cannot deny it, for we have obtained full confessions from four of them."

The bearer holding the lacquered boxes knelt and lowered them to the earth. Mogojiro opened one and pulled out three slabs of gray, butchered meat. He threw them towards the villagers, who stared at them, uncomprehending. Suddenly there was a sharp intake of breath as one of them noticed the human nose sticking out of a slab, or perhaps the ear, the teeth, the glazed white eye, the tuft of short black hair. Mogojiro opened the other box and flung out more slabs with more sets of eyes, ears and noses. A single finger rolled from the pile and lay curled in the dirt like a grub. No one dared to speak, but a young woman sobbed quietly, muttering a man's name.

"A traitor's death is not quick," Mogojiro said. Only Masaru saw the sour grimace flicker across his face. "They said that this village was making plans to defect to Daimyo Ichimaru Saburo. That you were dissatisfied with the taxes levied by Lord Kotoheisei and that Ichimaru would make you pay less. That your men would even fight in Ichimaru's army against Lord Kotoheisei, if it came to that."

"Per...permission to speak, my Lord," said the headman.

"Granted," said Mogojiro.

"My Lord, we had no idea there were such traitors among us. If we had known, we would have brought them to you ourselves for punishment."

Father spoke up. "When there is one rat in the storehouse, there are a dozen more. And if we have already caught four rats, how many more remain?"

"Your Lord demands that one family step forward," said Mogojiro. "A father, mother, one child at least. Though we would prefer more. You may choose amongst yourselves."

"What for, my Lord?" the headman asked.

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“Choose.”

The villagers fought, pushing and screaming. Finally a young girl was thrown out before the warlord's party. Her mother ran out and scooped her up, but could not get back into the tight ball of bodies that closed behind her.

“Please, Lord,” she begged, throwing herself on the ground. “Have mercy on my child!”

“Who is this woman's husband?” Mogojiro asked. “Who is this child's father?”

There was more shoving and the crush of villagers disgorged a skinny, bald man half again the woman's age. He tried to scamper away, but a soldier caught him by the arm.

“Please, Lord,” he squawked, flailing like a stuck bird, “please! I don't know this woman! Don't take me! The child is not mine!”

“Woman,” Father said, “is this man your husband and the father of your child?”

“He is, Lord.”

“I am not! I swear, I am not!” The man struggled out of the soldier's grasp and flung himself down, pressing his head into the road over and over until his face was caked with dust. “Tetsuya is the child's father! You can clearly see it, Lord! She has his eyes and mouth! I barely even know this woman. I—”

Father motioned and Mogojiro sliced the squawking man's throat, cutting off his last words in a gurgle of blood.

“Bring forth this Tetsuya,” the warlord said.

Another, even older man stepped out of the crowd. He was bald too, with a potbelly, but he did not squirm or cower as he bowed to the ground.

“You are the father of this child?” Father asked.

“I may be, Lord. I cannot say for certain.”

“Would you have taken care of this woman and her child, if you had been her rightful husband?”

“I would have, Lord.”

“Woman, do you believe this man's words to be true?”

“Y-yes, Lord.” She hushed her sniffing daughter. “Tetsuya has treated me far better than Ito ever did.”

“Then,” he addressed the bald man, “you will marry this woman and have many more children with her.”

“I will, Lord?”

“You will raise your children to be strong and healthy, and you will tell them of what you will see here today. You will let them know that their Lord, Kotoheisei Nobutaka is just, but that he deals with disobedience sharp and quick. You will tell them that Lord Kotoheisei’s high taxes are to feed his army so that they may protect his lands and people against threats like Lord Ichimaru, who would tax his people just as high, but throw it all away on entertainments for himself and his samurai.”

“We understand, Lord,” said the headman. “And we will make sure all our children know for generations to come.”

“They will,” said Father, pointing to the man, woman and child. “*You* will not. You will ensure that others know what happens to traitors.” He looked to another of his samurai. “Take this couple to safety in the woods. Make sure they can see the village.” To his men he said: “hold the rest here until I unleash the Batsu-no-Kaji, then fall back to the fields. Let no one through.”

The villagers erupted with pitiful cries. Most dropped pleading to the ground, crying for mercy with their faces pressed to the dirt. Some, realizing they had nothing to lose, swore and spat at the daimyo. He ignored them as his party returned to the grove of bamboo. Mogojiro slid the small woman from the back of her horse and bound her wrists to one of the stalks. She hung limp, her legs scrapping doll-like against the ground, her head lulling to one side. Half of her face was a purple, swollen mess from the beating Father had given her when he forced the ofuda onto her forehead this morning. A rope of drool hung from the corner of her slack mouth.

Masaru looked away in shame. He tried to remind himself that his father had specific reasons for choosing this woman to be the subject of his experiments, that the end results were for the good of the domain and the Kotoheisei clan. She was just a tool. A weapon. He didn’t even know her name. Just the title his father had invented to describe her. And even if he couldn’t completely forget that she was human, she was just a petty maid. If he’d run across her in the street he could have cut her down without penalty to test the sharpness of his sword. She was Father’s property to do with as he pleased.

And yet Masaru could not chase the sight of her battered face from his mind. Nor the sound of her agonized screams, echoing from deep within the castle keep.

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He did not want this weapon when he inherited the domain. His battles would be won by men, not spirits and demons. It was strange that his father, so obsessed with rules and order and hierarchy, would utilize such an uncontrollable, unpredictable force of nature.

"I will watch from up there," Lord Kotoheisei said to the priestess, pointing to a nearby hill. "Release the fire god when I signal, subdue it when I signal again. As we practiced."

"Yes, Lord." She dumped the stones from her box onto the path and filled the container with muddy water from the rice paddy, never once lifting her gaze from the ground.

The shouting behind them grew louder. Some of the village men were fighting back, though their sickles and rice threshers were little good against trained warriors armed with swords.

Lord Kotoheisei ignored the commotion as he led his group toward the hill.

"Father," Masaru said, "may I ask a question?"

"You may."

"Forgive my impudence, but I must know: why did you have that man slain and another put in his place? Did you not just tell me that I must consider each person solely based on the sum of their abilities?"

"You think, then, that I had him killed because I found his cowardice repugnant?"

"I cannot think of any other reason."

"That is because you personally found him distasteful. I felt nothing. The behavior he displayed is to be expected of a peasant. I killed him because I knew that he was the sort of man who would not properly care for his wife and children. Who would not teach them to fear and obey me. Who would waste his money on food, entertainments and whores, and in the end be unable to pay the taxes that fund my army, much less provide for his family. Compounded over time, he would have left a dangerous deficiency in my defenses. He could not have been allowed to continue. You will learn to recognize such people, and I hope that by then you will see the necessity of removing them."

As they crested the hill, Masaru could see the whole village and all of its fields. The river was significantly larger and faster than he had first realized. Rapids crested white like sunlit clouds. A

fourth of the village men were dead already, though they had managed to take down four soldiers.

Masaru had no taste for this slaughter. Were he in charge he would have simply executed the captured traitors and perhaps the headman, and left the rest of the villagers alone. Part of him thought it foolish to wipe out such a large source of income just to eliminate a few traitors, but the rest of him was horrified at such impudent thoughts.

Father raised a war fan painted with the centipede mon. The priestess pulled the ofuda from the Batsu-no-Kaji's forehead.

It began as a trickle of gray smoke issuing from the small woman's back. She shook her head and looked around groggily.

Suddenly a plume of fire burst from her spine. She screamed and yanked at her bonds. The priestess cradled her head and caressed her hair, but the little woman continued to struggle.

A black-armored fist erupted between the Batsu-no-Kaji's shoulder blades. It did not tear her skin, instead emerging as if rising from a pool of water. The hand was followed by an arm, then a horned helmet and an armored torso, until an obsidian samurai stood upon the dirt path. The joints of his armor glowed red like lava. Blue lightning crackled from his eyes. He scooped up the stones that the priestess had dumped and stuffed them into his maw, growing taller with each rock consumed, until he towered over the houses.

The priestess stumbled backwards into the stagnant paddy water, her eyes white with fear. The little woman wedged herself as far as she could between the bamboo stalks.

Father's soldiers had circled the village, trapping the terrified peasants in a corral of blades with the fiery monster blocking the only exit. Even from here, Masaru could see the terror on the men's faces. It took all his might to keep his own fear from rising to the surface. This was madness! Men should enforce Father's rule. His own loyal, mortal servants, not this uncontrolled abomination dredged up from the deepest Hells. There was no honor in this!

The fire god seized a thatched roof and shoved the whole mass down his distending throat. Again he grew until he was like a thundercloud looming over the houses. A grainy gray sludge leaked from gill-like vents in his back. He unsheathed the katana at his side and the blade glowed white-hot against the smoke.

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His sword whistled through the air, cleaving houses and people like blades of grass. Thick, oily smoke billowed from his mouth, obscuring the village from sight. It spread over the paddies, forcing the terrified soldiers even farther away. Two broke and ran into the woods.

"Find out who those deserters are," Father said to Mogojiro. "Bring their families to my castle and send out word that all of them will be executed if those two do not turn themselves in."

"Yes, Lord."

A ball of burning debris burst from the cloud and flew at the hill. The horses screamed and darted aside, but two of Father's bodyguards were not quick enough as the fireball came crashing to earth. Masaru's horse tumbled and would have crushed him had he not leapt away. The smoke enveloped him, stinging his eyes and burning his lungs.

"Father?" he shouted. "Father!"

"Here!"

Masaru crawled towards the voice until he found Father lying on the ground with his leg twisted at a sickening angle.

The fire creature roared in pain.

"No!" Father cried.

"What is happening?"

"The priestess is moving the Batsu-no-Kaji away! The fire god cannot stay in this world unless it is close to him!"

Another flaming missile flew from the cloud, arcing towards them. Masaru darted for his father, but the debris exploded on impact, throwing him down the hill. He tumbled over rocks and bushes, down beneath the cloud of smoke, until he struck a root and came to a stop in a tangle of scrub.

There was a splash and another roar. A flash of red silk in the distance. Masaru glimpsed the priestess running towards the river, cradling the Batsu-no-Kaji in her arms. The soldiers must have fled, for no one opposed her as she jumped into the rapids and vanished. The fire god was nowhere to be found.

"My son! Are you alive?"

"I am here," he called.

Mogojiro emerged from the smoke, carrying the limping daimyo on his shoulder. Father fell to his knees and threw his arms around Masaru. "I was afraid you were dead! Are you hurt?"

John Meszaros

“I am all right,” he said, returning Father’s embrace.

Mogojiro scanned the village. “The Batsu-no-Kaji is gone.”

“The priestess must have freed it. Masaru, did you see them?”

“No.”

CHAPTER 1

Fumito opened his story-scroll and spread it out on the low table before him to show the waitress a scene from the Onin War done up in lurid, gory detail.

"And so," he explained, adjusting his cross-folded legs on the tatami mat, "Daimyo Yoshimasa put the torch to his brother's mansion." He unrolled the scroll farther, beginning at the far right and progressing left, to reveal the aristocrat's house enveloped in flames. "And as his wife, children and household staff ran screaming from the flames, Yoshimasa's men disemboweled them and staked the severed heads along the castle's walls." He unrolled it farther to show people tumbling and stomping over each other in their panic, only to be hewn to pieces by the waiting samurai. Blood sprayed in delicate arcs. Entrails unspooled on the ground. Severed limbs contorted in the air like strange birds.

The waitress clapped a hand to her mouth. "That's hideous!"

"Would you like to see more, Akiko-chan?"

"Yes, please." It had been a slow day at the saké shop and Fumito was currently the only guest save for an old drunk dozing in the corner.

He leaned towards her and whispered. "Now don't tell anybody I'm showing this to you. I'm making everyone else wait until my show this afternoon." He grinned as Akiko bent closer to peer wide-eyed at his illustrations.

"Almost like you're there, isn't it?" he said.

She nodded. No doubt it was his superb talent with a brush that brought the images to life in her head. Though he had to admit the ink's supernatural ability to create mental hallucinations probably helped just a tiny bit. It was rather irritating, though, that the most vivid scenes always had to have flames in them. A requirement of the ink's power, so the old man had told him.

Fumito felt eyes upon him and glanced at the street outside. A boy stared at him through the bustling crowd. He pretended not to notice and continued chatting with Akiko until the boy was just outside the doorway.

“Say, Aki-chan,” Fumito said, “why don’t you invite my young guest over there to come inside.”

“You like saké?” he called to the boy. “Of course you do. Another bottle for us to share, please. And two drinking saucers. And two of those onigiri with the salmon paste inside.”

“But I wanna see more!” Akiko whined.

“Later.” He winked, rolling up the scroll. “Maybe if you do a good job, I’ll even put you in my next story. Want to be a princess?”

“Can I be an oni?”

“I can do that too.”

She bowed and trotted over to fill his order.

The boy stopped just inside the door. He seemed to be in his late teens, though his chin was free of even the faintest stubble. His face was round and smooth like an otter’s, the long, narrow eyes, small nose, and bristly black hair cropped close to his head only adding further to the resemblance. A circular farmer’s hat hung from a string around his neck. He was almost comically short, probably coming no higher than Fumito’s chest.

The boy came over with what he clearly thought was an aggressive swagger. An effect ruined somewhat by his slim, girlish arms and legs. “How do you know I came here for you?” His voice was soft, not yet solidified into a man’s bellow, yet scratchy as if he had a sore throat.

“I saw you in the audience today,” Fumito replied. “Came to hear more of my stories, neh?” He squinted. Up close, there was something odd about this boy.

“I could have just been coming in for a drink by myself.” He sat down on the floor opposite Fumito, tucking his legs to one side at first before quickly switching to a cross-legged position.

“But you accepted my invitation. Which means you were coming for me after all. As it happens, you’re in luck. I normally don’t display my work in between shows but since I was already showing Akiko I guess you can peek too. Now, I’d just gotten to the part where lord Yoshimasa murders his brother’s entire family and—”

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"I'm not here for your stories. I want to know about the ink."

Fumito paused. "My ink?" After all these long months, was this finally the one he'd been looking for? But this boy wasn't at all what his uncle had described.

Unless...

The waitress started back towards them with a tray. "Here now," Fumito said, "poor Aki-chan's been working so hard today. Why don't you give her a hand?"

The boy crossed his arms. "Isn't it *her* job to bring the sake to *us*?"

"But she's so tired."

"I'm quite fine," Akiko said.

"Nonsense." He flicked his hand in her direction. "Go help her out and I'll tell you more about my ink, since you're so intrigued."

The boy rolled his eyes, but rose to his feet. Fumito watched closely, paying particular attention to his hips and backside as he went over and took the tray.

"Here," the boy said, slamming down the thin white bottle and red saucers.

"I don't believe I've gotten your name yet," Fumito said, "though I'm sure you know mine quite well."

The boy sat again, and again almost tucked his legs to the side again before switching to cross-legged. "Tetsuro. Now, what about the ink, old man?"

Fumito raised an eyebrow. "Old man? Boy, I'm twenty-two years old. I mean, I did go completely gray when I was twelve. But look at this face." He turned so Tetsuro could admire his profile.

"The ink. Where'd you get it?"

"Now that's an interesting story." Fumito leaned close and whispered: "But first, why don't you tell me why you need it so badly *and* why you're dressed up like a boy?"

His grin widened as Tetsuro's mouth fell open. She flushed red, whether in anger or embarrassment he couldn't tell.

"I think we could use a private place to discuss matters, neh?" he continued. "Akiko-chan, may we use the storage room in back for a bit?" He pulled a coin out of the wooden inro hanging around his shoulder and flipped it to her. She caught it midair and

stuffed it down the front of her yukata.

“All yours until my father wakes up.”

Fumito slung his wooden box of scrolls over his shoulder and headed for the back room without bothering to see if Tetsuro was following.

“First,” he said once they were inside out of Akiko’s hearing, “may I know your real name?”

She sighed. “Sakura.” Her voice rose an octave, though it was still deep for a woman’s, especially one of her size. And it still maintained that strange, raspy quality. “How’d you know I was a woman?”

“Little things. Your eyelashes are too long for a man’s. Your lips are too full. Your hands are too small and delicate. Things an accomplished artist such as myself would notice.” He puffed his chest. “Also, when you walk your hips and buttocks roll up and down. A man’s hardly move at all. Not to mention you started to sit like a woman twice before you corrected yourself.”

“Have to remember that,” she grumbled. “Now will you tell me about your ink?”

“Fair enough. I purchased it from an old monk who really liked my shows.” That was true for the most part. Technically, Uncle Kotoheisei had given him the first batch of ink as a birthday present. But when the supply had run out, Uncle had directed him to old Izo’s swamp shack to obtain more. There was one little lie. Izo hated his story-scrolls, calling them “deviant rubbish”.

“Your turn again, Sakura-chan: why do you want it?” He already knew full well why, but he wanted to hear it from her just to make sure he actually had the Batsu-no-Kaji. If he was going to sentence his family to death, he damn well wanted to make sure he had the right person.

“I don’t want the ink itself, just the location of that monk you bought it from.”

“Why?”

“I need to get rid of a curse.”

“A curse? What sort of curse?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Well then, I guess you don’t need to know exactly where you can find this old man, do you? Or what his name is, either.” He moved to open the sliding shoji door.

“You’re probably just making it up, anyway,” she said.

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"You mean about the bald old Buddhist monk with the head shaped like a gourd and the birthmark shaped like a hand on his left wrist? The one who constantly counts his ojuzu beads when he gets nervous?"

"I've never met him. For all I know, you're just making all of that up, too."

"Well, then, I guess you can't trust me at all, can you?" He started to open the door again. "Good luck with your curse, miss."

"Wait."

He smiled over his shoulder. "Yes?"

She puffed out her cheeks in exasperation. "You want to know? Fine." She gulped, inhaled, then exhaled. "Lord Kotoheisei put a monster inside me." She hunched her shoulders. "Tattooed it on me with this strange ink. Like the stuff you've got." She started to tremble. "Every twenty-one days this... *thing* rips out of me. It burns everything in sight and there's nothing I can do to stop it."

"I see." Fumito rubbed his short beard. "And I suppose you've run away from Lord Kotoheisei to get rid of this monster. May I ask why he hasn't been able to recapture you, yet?" Again he knew why, but he thought he would look suspicious and a bit stupid if he didn't ask the obvious question.

"Because the monster also emerges when I get angry or scared. It's already killed fifty of the men he sent after me."

"Really!" He clapped his hands to his cheeks. "That's terrible!" He bent down to peer into her face. "May I see it? The tattoo, I mean."

"No."

"Oh, come now. We're friends now, aren't we?"

"No!"

He shrugged and started to open the shoji again.

"Wait." Sakura grimaced, then scooted around on her knees and undid the sash at her waist, letting the shirt fall away from her back. A samurai clad in black armor and wreathed in orange flames was drawn on her skin. Now there was no doubt in Fumito's mind, for that most certainly was the image of the fire god.

"I see," he said again, peering closer. He frowned when he saw the tremble in her shoulders and heard the fear in the tiny, quivering breaths that hissed from her lips. "You can put your shirt back on," he said, feeling oddly ashamed of himself.

She quickly pulled her garment back on and let out her breath in a single great whoosh. “I knew your ink must’ve come from the same stock as this thing. I’ve seen a lot of storytellers, but nobody’s like you. It was like the soldiers were marching right in front of me.”

“You flatter me.”

“I flatter nobody. It’s the ink’s power. It has to be. It makes drawings come to life. Though with you, its power must be so watered down that it can only make people see stuff in their heads.”

“Well, yes, that’s true.” He shrugged. “But you could have at least let me pretend.”

“I did what you wanted. Now just tell me how to get to this old man so I can get out of here before this thing comes out again.”

“I’ll do you one better than that. I’ll take you there myself.”

“What? Why?”

“Well, first of all, I’m traveling in that direction anyway. Second, wouldn’t you feel so much safer having a man to protect you on these dangerous roads? Clearly you’re afraid. That’s why you dress up as a boy, isn’t it?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I’ve got all the protection I need.”

“You just said you can’t control the fire god.”

“I didn’t mean him.”

“Then maybe *I* could use *your* protection. I tend to carry a lot of money with me.”

“Can you please just give me directions?” She took out a necklace of zeni coins from her shirt. “I can pay you.”

“No need for that.” This woman was going to be difficult. He fought down the urge to smack her over the head and just drag her there on his own. “You want directions? This old man—his name is Izo, by the way—lives in a little run-down shack in a bog outside a flyspeck of a village called Sazekono. It’s about a week’s journey from here, heading northeast. To get there you’ll have to pass through the foothills, three other villages and a small city. I’d highly recommend the roads because the woods are thick and tangled and full of bandits.”

He held up a hand before she could protest. “Now, you *can* go by yourself, but let me ask you: how much exploration did

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you do before your escape from Lord Kotoheisei?"

"I... never left the castle."

"So tell me, then: how have you enjoyed stumbling around completely lost in the rain and the nettles and the icy wind and the edible berries that look exactly like the ones that give you violent diarrhea?"

"There are edible ones?"

"Now," he continued. "I have been up and down this land since I was ten. I know much more about it than you do and I'm heading in the direction you want to go. So since I'm so generously offering to show you the way, you might as well let me tag along. Besides," He held up one of his scrolls, "I could use a fresh story. And it looks like you'd be the best person to give me one."

She crossed her arms. "You aren't fooling me, you know. I can tell you've got some other reason you're not saying."

There went that idea. "Very well, miss. I suppose there isn't much point in trying to hide it." He sucked in a breath and let it out slow. "The truth is, I've been looking for you for a while."

She jumped to her feet.

"Wait," he grabbed her sleeve. "Let me explain. As you've probably guessed, the old man who sold me this ink also gave some to Lord Kotoheisei and who knows how many others. I'm still a little hazy on all the details, but it seems that when you escaped, our Lord tracked down the other people who had the ink. He asked if I'd seen you, assuming, correctly, that you'd be attracted to the ink's power. I told him no, but he offered me a reward if I found you and brought you back to him."

"No, no!" He caught her again before she could get all the way up. "Let me finish. See, I'm not going to take you to him. I have about as much love for him as you do, and I'd prefer if you didn't end up in his clutches."

"Why?"

He scowled. "Because he killed my father and my mother and my older brother and my three baby sisters. That's why." He put a hand to his forehead. "I guess our village did something to anger him. Who in all the Hells knows what? You can never tell with him. He picked out my family and made an Example of them."

"Why didn't he kill you?"

He had to swallow to keep from shouting. "Because I was

out of town at the time.” He took another deep breath to calm down. “As you can probably guess, I’m not too inclined to help our Lord. On the contrary, I’d be quite glad to hinder him as much as possible.”

“Now,” he snapped, “is *that* a good enough explanation for you?”

She hunched up like a scolded child. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Well, now you do.” He plastered on a smile. “So, if it’s not too much trouble, miss, may I please escort you to your destination?”

“All right.” She reverted to her unpleasant voice. “But don’t try—”

“Don’t try anything stupid or I’ll regret it. I suppose you’re probably a lot tougher than you look. Or were you planning on using the fire god against me? Either way, thank you for condescending to let this poor wanderer follow you.” He hauled the scroll box onto his shoulders. “You ready?”

They went out and Fumito settled his tab with Akiko, who was busy nudging the old drunk awake.

“Aki-chan, I have to leave before the next show. Would you please tell anyone who drops by that I’ll be back in a few weeks?”

“Aw,” she pouted, “but it was just getting good!”

“I know, I know. Important business came up.”

“Well, hurry back!”

He shrugged his shoulders helplessly as he and Sakura stepped out into the street.

“Don’t you need to get your belongings?” the little woman asked.

“Everything I need is in this box. I keep my money and extra clothes folded away on the bottom.” He started towards the northeast end of the city, but Sakura headed south.

“This way,” he called.

“Have to get my friend first.”

Now that he thought about it, Uncle *bad* mentioned another woman traveling with the Batsu-no-Kaji. A priestess, if he recalled right. Well, more company never hurt. He turned to follow Sakura, noting with no small amusement how she clenched her buttocks to keep them from rolling up and down when she walked.

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The city gave abruptly onto rocky, pine-covered hills. She walked until the buildings were swallowed from sight by shrubs and conifers.

"Was it really necessary for her to stay out here?" he griped as he stumbled over the broken ground. "Couldn't you have just rented a room in town? I know Lord Kotoheisei has put out word about you two, but surely your disguises would be enough to fool most people. I mean, I only knew because of my masterful artist's eye."

"Ikuko is a bit difficult to disguise."

He started to ask what she meant, but Sakura's traveling companion answered that question as she rose up from where she'd been sitting behind a fallen tree.

She was not exactly what he'd expected.

To call her tall would have been an understatement. Comparison to a small tree would have been more appropriate. Her arms were as big around as one of his thighs, and her own thighs would have fit that "small tree" description well. Her maroon hair framed a face that was gentle and soft. Pretty, even. Though far from delicate. He'd been right about her vocation, evident by her white and red clothes.

"Sakura-san," the tall woman began, "you've been gone so long. I was getting worried. I thought perhaps—" she froze at the sight of him.

"It's okay, Ikuko," the smaller woman said. "He's harmless."

"Oh." She clasped her hands and bowed. "It's a pleasure to meet you." Her voice was deep like a man's. She glanced at him through downturned lashes.

"And I you, Ikuko-san," he said, bowing back. "Looks like I'm going to be your guide on this adventure."

"He knows where the old man is," Sakura explained.

Ikuko bit her lip. "Is that wise, Sakura-san? Bringing him along?"

She huffed. "He wants revenge on Lord Kotoheisei."

Fumito explained his situation. "And anyway," he added, "I don't imagine I'd pose much of a threat to you, my dear."

Ikuko blushed and hunched her shoulders as if she were trying to shrink down to a more normal size. "I still don't know..."

"I'll tell you what," he said, taking off his scroll-box and

holding it out to her. “You can hang onto these. They’re my most precious possessions. If you think I’m up to no good, you can threaten to burn them.” He was a bit startled to see her bicep visibly bulge as she took the box and hefted it onto her back.

“That’s exactly the kind of ploy a spy would use to put us off guard,” Sakura said.

“I guess you’ll have to trust me, then. Or would you like to go around in circles a few more times?” He headed to the northeast again, not waiting for a reply. “Don’t take too long deciding,” he called.

It wasn’t long before he heard the crunch of feet behind him. He was amazed that the big woman hadn’t been caught yet. She sounded like a drunken bear tromping through a field of kindling.

Before they left, Fumito helped the women perfect their disguises. Sakura’s Tetsuro persona worked well enough, though he gave her a few lessons on accentuating her masculine behavior and toning down the feminine mannerisms that still showed through.

Ikuko hadn’t actually developed a disguise so he went back into the city and purchased a bolt of cheap cloth that he had her wrap around her chest, stomach and hips to hide her curves and significantly increase her girth. He also purchased her the widest hat he could find and bent it forward in the front to hide her face.

“We’ll have to make you look more like a man,” he said, “since a woman of your height will still attract too much attention even if you no longer look exactly like yourself.”

“Won’t my height attract attention regardless of what I look like?”

“Yes, but an unusually tall man is merely odd. An unusually tall woman is...uhm...”

“A monster?” Ikuko said.

“Well, I wouldn’t use such an unpleasant word. ‘Startling’ perhaps.”

“But I like monsters. My sisters are monsters. And so were most of my father’s friends.”

“If your sisters are anything like you, I’m sure they’re delightful.” He helped Ikuko tuck her long hair into a bun under the hat then gave her a few lessons in walking and carrying herself with a masculine gait.

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“Now we just have to do something about me,” he said, taking an ink stick out of his box. Not his special ink, of course. Just some old garbage he hadn't used in months. Wetting the stick in a puddle, he rubbed a black smear into his ink stone and used two fingers to work it into his hair until no gray was left. Following that, he took out a razor and a little pot of oil and shaved off his short beard.

“Perfect,” he said. “Shall we be off, ladies?”

The women stayed behind him for a bit, whispering to each other. Clearly unaware that he could hear them perfectly well. Ikuko was still uneasy about his company. Sakura didn't like it much either, but acknowledged that he was the only lead they'd had in the last four months. Besides, she said, they did have his scrolls hostage. She suggested burning one of them anyway, just to show him they wouldn't hesitate with the rest of them. But the big woman said that would be cruel.

“Ladies,” he called, “I'm sensing a bit of tension. How about a little story to lighten the mood? You two ever hear how the god Susano acquired the sword Kusanagi in a bloody forty-day battle with an eight-headed dragon?”

CHAPTER 2

The other palace women had long ago gone to bed when Yoko slipped out of her private chambers to visit her father, carrying her carving tools tied with a silk ribbon around her thigh. She knew she shouldn't be doing this. A lady wasn't supposed to mingle with the commoners who worked in the castle's walls.

Of course, she'd really only been a lady for the past five months, in contrast to the other seventeen years of her life she'd spent as a "dirty commoner". Really, the only reason she and her family were even here at all was because her mother happened to be Daimyo Kotoheisei's sister. Although Mother herself had never bothered to mention this kinship until Uncle had come riding in to whisk them all away.

Yoko crept along the wall surrounding the palace, keeping to the shadows to avoid the sentries who walked by periodically.

Above the palace, the keep loomed like a watching black beast. Its windows were dark save for a single orange light in the third story, just under the roof. Uncle Kotoheisei was up late again. Probably with Mother. Doing their strange experiments.

He'd been keeping her up there longer and longer lately. Sometimes she wouldn't return to the palace for nearly a week. She never spoke of what they did up there, but would remain jumpy for days, starting at the slightest footfall and eyeing the shadows in the corners. She'd often sleep the entire day away. A strange, death-like sleep that no one could wake her from. And sometimes she'd talk in her sleep with voices that weren't her own.

Mother seemed a little better when her maid, Shiro, was around to comfort her. But Shiro was gone more often than not. Off doing who knew what. Yoko had a strong suspicion she was Uncle's concubine since he was the only other person she'd ever seen Shiro with.

Yoko turned away from the keep's orange eye to focus on her journey. The gates of each courtyard were guarded but she'd

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found plenty of ways to get around them. A little ways away from the palace was an old storage shed up against the wall of the yard with a space between just barely big enough for her to squeeze into. Tucking her kimono around her thighs, she shimmied up the side and pulled herself onto the roof of the wall. From there she crept on hands and knees to a gnarled persimmon leaning over the edge. The next yard was devoid of buildings and trees, but one wall facing onto the exterior of the castle had scaffolding for harquebusiers to stand on. Up she went, pausing a moment to look out at the surrounding land. The castle sat atop an earthen mound edged with high, steep walls of fitted stone. A small forest of pines encircled it on all sides, giving the illusion that there was naught but wilderness out there, though Yoko knew that just a short walk beyond the trees the town of Taikocho sprawled on all sides.

From up here she had a good view of the castle layout: courtyard after courtyard spiraling out like the chambers in a snail's shell. Great, empty expanses holding only raked sand, a few small outbuildings or the occasional tree. Behind her, the labyrinthine palace lay in the shell's eye, snug within its cocoon of cultivated gardens and reflecting pools.

As she crawled along, she took a moment to admire the night. This was always her favorite time, especially now with the moon half full. The courtyard garden, captured in its light, seemed suspended in a moment of time like a mote of dust on a spider's web. The crickets were singing in earnest, as if making up for lost time over the winter. A flock of crows nestled in a nearby tree, heads tucked into their back feathers.

From trees to walls to scaffolding she went, making her way through the grounds. Ever since Uncle had brought them all here she, her mother and her sister Nanami had been confined to the palace grounds while Father was forced to stay in one of the far courtyards.

"Your father is undertaking an important job for me," uncle Kotoheisei had explained to her once. "I know well his mastery of carpentry and have given him a full crew to reinforce the walls of my castle against invasion. It is intense, exhausting work which leaves him little time for leisure."

When she asked him why she couldn't leave the palace to visit him, he'd replied, "I do not wish to disturb his work. Besides, it is unsafe for you to leave these protected grounds. Please

understand, my niece, you, your mother and your sister are my most precious treasures. I could not bear the thought that harm should come to any of you. Do not worry. You will see him eventually.”

But eventually was too far away for her liking.

She entered the courtyard that housed the Black Bell. The thing was three times as tall as she was, and made of dark, rough iron. It hung from a wooden scaffolding in the center of the yard all by itself. Strange creatures decorated its sides. Blobby, big-headed tadpole-things with stubby arms and legs. Some looked like infants.

She couldn't imagine what it was for. It looked like a bell from a Buddhist temple, but there were no other holy articles nearby. Once she'd spied Uncle studying it intently in the middle of the night. Mother and Shiro had been with him then, reading together from a folding book. Yoko had wanted to get closer to see what they were up to, but there'd been no place for her to hide.

She hurried from that courtyard and dropped quietly from the wall behind the carpenter's dormitory. Her father was waiting on the veranda, carving something under the light of an oil lamp. Like her, he loved the night-time.

He looked up and smiled as she approached. “Koko-chan, you shouldn't be up so late. It's dangerous.”

“I know.” She shrugged and took a little wooden netsuke of a cricket out of her sleeve. “I carved this this morning before the other girls woke up.”

Father examined it closely, turning it in his hand to admire her attention to detail. “I see you've even put veins in the wings, and the tube at the end of the abdomen for laying eggs. Every day, Koko-chan, you get better and better.”

“I copied from life,” she said, smiling and twirling a bit of her prematurely gray hair around her finger. “Just like you said. As close to real as I could get.” The best carvers, so he'd taught her, always knew their subjects down to the smallest hair. Even when carving gods or spirits or fanciful beasts, the artist used the closest living equivalent and copied it down to the tiniest detail. Embellishments, though, were another matter entirely.

She looked closer at his carving, which seemed like nothing more than a knot of wood. “What's that?” she asked.

“A maple gall. The grain twists all over so it's a bit more

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difficult to carve than ordinary wood. But it's well worth the effort when you're done." He held his carving in the lamp light and now she realized that it was the beginning of a figure sitting cross-legged on a lotus blossom holding a branch in one hand and a jar in the other.

"It's Kannon," he said. The Goddess of Mercy. He smiled. "I'm asking her to keep you and your mother and siblings safe while I'm away."

He took three more galls out of the wooden inro around his shoulder and passed them to her. "Here. Give them a try."

She sat down next to him and dug into the one of the galls with her own knife.

"How are you and Nanami?" he asked. "Are they treating you well?"

"Very well," she said. "Lady Tsuru is teaching us the tea ceremony and flower arranging."

"And your brother?"

"I haven't seen Fumito in almost a month, now."

Apparently Uncle wasn't that concerned about *all* of his family, since he let his nephew roam wherever he wished across the land. Fumito had always traveled far and wide to sell his violent, pornographic stories, but at least in the days before they'd come to the palace he'd had the courtesy to stop home every few days. Now it seemed he couldn't be bothered to show up more than one day a month.

"And your mother?"

"She's... all right."

"I worry about her." He looked up at the keep and its single light.

"Don't worry," Yoko said, "I take good care of her."

She sat carving with him late into the night, well past the setting of the moon. The gall was an odd mixture of brittle and teeth-gritting tough. At times it crumbled into slivers beneath her blade, at others she had to push until her fingers hurt just to cleave off even a little flake. She kept at it though. If Father could do it, then she would too. She'd decided to go with a simple sitting bird for her first attempt. Though it was turning out more like a fat, misshapen pinecone.

Eventually she started to get the hang of it, learning to feel where the brittle portions lay, and the knots. When to tighten her

grip and when to let the knife glide on its own.

"I'd better go," she said as her eyes began to blur with sleep. "Lady Tsuru is an early riser."

"Wait." He went into the carpenter's shack and returned with three netsuke. "These are for you, your mother and your sister." He'd carved them into the three women's favorite animals: for Yoko a crow holding a twisted ribbon in its beak, for Nanami a sleeping white crane with its head tucked into its back feathers, and for mother a feathery-legged house centipede.

"Thank you, father," she said, bowing. "Good night."

"Sleep well, Koko-chan."

The eastern sky was showing the faintest blue as Yoko made her way back. A few of the crows had woken already and were cawing back and forth from the trees and the roof. She quietly imitated their croaking "wa-ha" under her breath as she went. As before, she kept to the shadows, stopping when sentries passed by. She had just reached the palace and was tiptoeing around the veranda when a voice shattered the stillness.

"Yoko?"

She froze dead and turned slowly. Uncle emerged from a doorway in his black kimono with the centipede-woman mon. His left eye was covered with a strip of black silk. "My little Snow-Petal, what are you doing out here so early?"

She bowed deep, tucking the netsuke, carving knife and maple galls into the obi sash of her kimono. "I don't sleep very well sometimes, Uncle. I was just admiring the dawn."

"You should not be going out alone. These soldiers and servants are crude and unscrupulous, hard as I try to make sure I am served only by men of good character. I would be devastated if anything happened to you, my little Snow-Petal. Please, next time have a maid accompany you."

"I will, my Lord Uncle. Thank you for your concern."

"Will you permit me to escort you back to your rooms?"

"Of course, my Lord Uncle." She kept a respectable distance behind him as he led her back to the women's quarters. "If it is not too forward, Uncle, may I ask what is keeping you up so late?"

"Research, my dear. Your mother was helping me. I had just led her back to the women's quarters when I saw you."

"It is a beautiful morning," he added, inhaling the crisp,

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cold air. "I am not skilled in the proper vocabulary and poetic wit to convey its splendor. Perhaps you can better explain what is so wonderful about it? Your mother and Lady Tsuru have taught you well, I am sure."

"It's the stillness, Uncle," she said, thawing to him a little. "As if the world has been frozen in an instant, like a flower suspended in ice."

"I see."

He stopped at the sliding shoji leading to the women's rooms and stood aside for her. "You have your mother's eyes," he said, smiling. "And her mouth. It is strange that I see nothing of her in your older sister."

"Nanami is the child of my father's first wife. She died before he met my mother."

"Ah. So your sister is not of the Kotoheisei line?"

"Well, no."

"I see."

There was a whirring rasp against the inside of the rice-paper door. Uncle slid the panel open and peered in. He stooped and picked something off the floor. "Look, Niece. A summer beetle already." He opened his left palm to show her a little insect, hard and shiny and brown like a nut. It trundled up and down the furrows of his hand, over and under his three remaining fingers and the severed stumps of his smallest two.

"Come, Yui. Let us put him back in his home." She followed him over to a small magnolia tree, where he held his hand to a branch and gently nudged the beetle onto it. She was too shy to tell him he'd mispronounced her name.

They returned to the women's quarters where he bid her good night. She bowed one last time before quietly slipping into the darkness.

A woman stood in the hallway, dressed in red evening robes, long hair hanging in her face.

"Oh, Mother," Yoko said, putting a hand to her heart. "You startled me. I'm so glad Uncle let you come home for a bit. Did the work go all right?"

Mother did not respond. Her eyes were bleary and blood-shot. Her breath whistled loudly through her nose, fuming as if in barely-suppressed anger. Shiro, as usual, was nowhere to be found.

"I...I'm sorry," Yoko said hesitantly, "I didn't wake you

up, did I?”

Mother began to walk, her gaze fixed straight ahead. She would've trampled right over Yoko had she not moved aside at the last second. Mother continued down the hall and turned into the maids' sleeping quarters. Yoko stayed in the corridor, unsure whether to follow.

A man's voice emerged from the maid's room. "Fujiko, wake up! Where did your mother hide it?" The hair stood up on the back of Yoko's neck. *Not again.*

There came a groggy reply. "Mhmmph, what? Father?" A sudden gasp. "Lady Ayumu! What?"

"Fujiko," the voice repeated, "where did that sow hide it?"

Yoko entered the room to find Mother standing over a young woman who stared at her with wide, terrified eyes.

"Answer me, you stupid, dirty little pig!" came the man's voice issuing from Mother's mouth. "Where did your sow mother hide my money?"

"No!" The girl scrunched into a ball. "No! I saw Mako cut your head off! Leave me alone, you son of a bitch!"

Yoko dashed in and seized her mother's shoulder. Mother whirled and slapped her.

"Don't touch me!" growled the man's voice.

"That's enough," Yoko said. "Let's let this poor girl sleep now."

"Where is my money!"

"It's not here. And you don't need it anymore. Now let your daughter rest." She dragged her mother into the hall, kicking and struggling and spitting obscenities. Where was Shiro?

"Mother," Yoko said, slapping her across the face, "wake up!"

"I said don't touch me, you piggy little whore!"

Yoko slapped her again. Mother gasped and looked around in surprise. When she spoke this time, it was with her own voice. "Yoko? What? What am I doing here?"

"Uncle brought you back home."

"Nobutaka did? But I..." She rubbed her reddened cheek.

"I'm sorry, Mother. It was the only way to wake you. Someone was inside your head again."

"Oh." Mother ran her fingers through her hair. "Th- thank you, dear."

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“Mother, these episodes are getting worse.”

“I know.” She bit her knuckle. “It is your uncle’s research, he...” She hugged Yoko. “I am so sorry.”

“It’s okay, Mother.” She’d gotten used to this routine by now. “Come, let’s get you back to bed. You need rest.” She helped Mother back to her room and tucked her into her futon.

“I do not mean to leave you for so long,” Mother continued, “you know that, don’t you? You and Nanami mean everything to me.”

“Yes, Mother, I know.”

“I love you, Yoko.”

“I love you too, Mother. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Yoko slid the shoji closed and stumbled back to her own room, careful not to trip over her maid sleeping just inside the doorway.

CHAPTER 3

Only two days and already Sakura's patience with Fumito was wearing thin. From the moment they'd left the city he hadn't shut up. Even when he started to run out of those stupid stories, he just switched to badgering her and Ikuko about their personal histories. Sakura refused to say anything but her companion, for some odd reason, seemed to have warmed to him and was much more forthcoming. It soon came out, much to Fumito's delight, that Ikuko's parents had been yokai-hunters.

"Not exactly hunters," she'd explained. "Really they were more like ambassadors between the yokai and mundane worlds, who occasionally had to put down creatures from the other realm when they got too aggressive."

"Good enough for me," Fumito had said.

Her sudden turnaround confused Sakura. The priestess had started off painfully shy. Partially because she didn't trust this stranger, but also because she wasn't used to men. And yet now it seemed as if she was actually beginning to enjoy Fumito's company. She kept asking him for more stories, gasping at the dangerous parts and laughing at the (supposedly) humorous bits.

"Why are you doing that?" Sakura asked her when they were out of Fumito's earshot.

"Because he likes it."

"Don't get too comfortable. We still can't trust him."

Sakura was starting to get a little jealous of the attention Ikuko paid him. She'd been much happier when it was just the two of them.

"He's harmless enough. Besides, I've got his scrolls."

Ikuko shook the box hanging off her shoulder. "And, don't forget: I can break him in half if he tries anything."

Sakura sighed. Poor, naïve Ikuko. For all her physical strength, imposing size and spiritual prowess, the priestess desperately needed Sakura's protection against this dangerous world. Not that Sakura minded. She loved Ikuko more than she'd

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ever loved anyone else. More than the few shallow friends she'd had at the castle. More than the men and women she'd used to relieve her tension in the empty corridors behind the kitchen. Certainly more than her own whore of a step-mother. Not one of them had done as much for her as Ikuko had. Sakura was happy to protect her as best she could.

But regardless of the priestess' feelings, Sakura refused to trust Fumito. At first his story about Lord Kotoheisei killing his family had struck a chord with her. But now she was beginning to doubt whether that was even real. He seemed a bit too goofy and carefree for someone who'd suffered such a devastating loss.

"So, tell me," Fumito said to Ikuko, continuing a conversation they'd been having off and on all morning, "once your father freed this oni from the hold of the pirates' ship, what did they do to escape?"

"I don't remember too clearly," she replied, "The story changed every time he told it. I think he got help from a lady pirate who'd fallen for him. Or maybe the oni summoned a sea monster?"

"Why don't we combine the two? Let's say your father was rescued from certain death by the captain's female first mate that had fallen passionately in love with him. But even their combined swords couldn't hold off all the other pirates. So the oni summoned a serpent from the depths of the sea."

"Well why didn't he just do that in the first place before the pirates captured him," Sakura grumbled.

"Is it too much to ask," Fumito said, "that you show just a little good humor today? Don't forget that I paid for your meal and lodgings last night. Must have been a considerable step up from bowel-emptying berries and wet, cold dirt, neh?"

Sakura hunched her shoulders. "Yes. Thank you." She did have to give him grudging gratitude. The inn *had* been warm and dry, and the food delicious compared to the bitter seeds, leaves and bony fish she and Ikuko had been subsisting on for the previous two months. And the disguises he'd created for them were good enough to get them past the inn staff without a second glance.

"Thank you too, Sakura-san," he replied, "your appreciation is always appreciated. But you have raised a good point: why didn't the oni summon a sea monster right away?" He snapped his fingers. "I know! Let's say the pirate captain had a

magical bronze mirror that nullified his powers, until Ikuko's father threw it overboard."

"I don't know if that's exactly how it happened," the priestess said.

"It'll work for now. So, after the serpent destroyed the pirate ship, how did..." He trailed off. Sakura followed his gaze to Ikuko's face, which was focused on something in the path ahead. There was nothing there that she could see but dirt and rocks. The priestess' head flicked back and forth, as if the unseen something was darting across the road, in and out of the trees.

The hairs prickled on the back of Sakura's neck. "Is that... them?"

Ikuko nodded. Her gaze moved to a footpath leading into the woods to their left. "There's another one. And another. And another. I've never seen so many all at once." She took off up the trail without waiting for the others.

"What was that about?" Fumito asked.

Sakura swallowed. Her throat had gone dry. "Ghosts."

"Really?" He raised an eyebrow. "How do you know?"

"It's happened before."

"Should we wait for her here?"

"Yes."

Cold, unseen fingers jerked the sleeve of Sakura's shirt. She jumped and took off for the pathway.

"Onsecondthoughtshemightneedourhelp-COMEON!"

The trees were a solid canopy overhead, their branches interlocking like fingers, letting down only a dappled, green twilight. The air shimmered in places like rising heat, though it was cool here in the shade. She did not pause in her rush, not even when a thorn bush gashed her arm. The only thought in her head was getting to Ikuko as fast as possible.

At last the trees parted, revealing a small village. The place had clearly been abandoned for some time, for the thatch roofs had rotted away and the rice fields had grown thick with rushes and slime. In the middle, though, was one house that looked as if it had only been built yesterday. It's walls shown bright with fresh white stucco and new thatch had been woven into the roof. Ikuko stood in the middle of the village, looking all about.

"I don't suppose she could find some way to let me see these ghosts?" said Fumito, grinning like a monkey as he emerging

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from the trees behind Sakura. "I'd love to see one for real. It would add—" He saw the village and his face went as pale as a drowned corpse.

"Oh no," he whispered. "No no no no no."

"What's wrong?" Sakura asked.

We need to leave here. *Now.*"

"Why?"

He swallowed, but did not respond.

Ikuko was already at the door to the new-looking building. As Sakura approached, she caught the sweet, rotting smell clinging to the house and had to clap her hand over her mouth to keep from vomiting. She peered inside. Flies swarmed over the walls like spots of mold. Upon the floor were rows upon rows of black lacquered chests. Several had been torn apart by animals, their contents completely devoured. Dark puddles stained the floor around them. The only other decoration was a rusty sword hanging from one of the rafters.

"Are those..." Ikuko whispered.

"Yes," Fumito said, coming up next to her. His breath was short, ragged, as if his throat were squeezing shut around each one, trying to keep them from coming out. His gaze went to the sword. "Lord Kotoheisei's men used those to do it."

Icy water trickled down Sakura's spine. Tears of fright welled in her eyes.

"Why?" she whispered, "why does he do this?"

"It's an Example. He wants people to see what happens to those who plot treachery against him."

Ikuko clapped both hands over her mouth. Her eyes continued to trace unseen movements in the air.

"How do you know this?" Sakura asked.

He picked up a wooden plaque that had fallen to the floor beside the door. Scenes were printed on it, showing precisely how Lord Kotoheisei punished traitors. The last panel was free of horror, showing instead a village of happy farmers working in their fields while the daimyo's centipede mon flapped in the wind over their heads. There was writing next to everything, but Sakura couldn't read. She hissed a breath between her teeth as she recognized the artist's unmistakable style.

Fumito looked down at the floor and bit his lower lip. "He made me watch the first time."

“You worked for him?” she asked. Anger welled up inside her.

“I didn’t know,” he replied, “I swear! He hired me to do a painting for him. I had no idea what it was going to be.” He swallowed, “I tried to get away when his men started cutting, but... but he wouldn’t let me go!” He threw the plaque away. “I didn’t want to make that drawing.”

Sakura’s pulse roared in her ears. She grasped Ikuko’s hand, held it tight. The big priestess pulled her close.

“Why didn’t you tell us you worked for him?” Sakura said.

“Would you have let me follow you if I had?” He pointed to the boxes. “*This* is why I don’t want you to fall back into his hands.”

Sakura laid her head against Ikuko’s bosom, hoping that the priestess’ warm, soft skin and the gentle, comforting strength of her big frame would chase away the horror. But her own fear only increased when she heard Ikuko’s heart thundering like a drum against her big chest.

“What did these people do?” the priestess whispered.

Fumito threw up his hands. “Who knows? Maybe they were traitors, or maybe only one of them was. Or maybe no one was and Lord Kotoheisei just thought they were.”

Something caught Sakura’s eye. There was a single box that was smaller than the others, no bigger than a human head. It sat atop one of the regular sized ones. She pointed. “Why is that one different?”

“The one below it was a pregnant woman,” Fumito replied. “Please. Can we go now?”

“Yes,” Ikuko said, holding Sakura tight as all three of them backed out of the door. She yelped suddenly and clapped a hand to her forearm.

Sakura jumped. “What? What happened?”

“I’m all right.” Four red lines appeared on the skin of Ikuko’s arm. “They just want attention.” She looked around again at the rotting houses and the empty air. “I’m sorry,” she said to no one that Sakura could see. “I want to help you, but I don’t have the tools I need. I promise I’ll come back someday.”

“Yes, someday,” Fumito echoed, tugging on her sleeve. “But for now, we need to go.”

The women hurried with him down the path, back onto

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the road where the sky was open and well-lit.

Fumito couldn't sleep. It had been many hours since they'd left the dead village, but he could not shake the memory of it.

They'd stopped for the night in a simple but comfortable roadside inn. He'd paid for two rooms. One for himself and one for the women. The bedding was little more than rice straw sewn into a few large sacks with some thin blankets on top, and headrests were nonexistent. Fumito had his own, of course, but he'd given it to Ikuko as a little thank-you for enjoying his stories. At least the walls had no cracks to let in the chill night air. Really, the place was pretty cozy compared to some of the holes he'd stayed in.

But he could not stop thinking about that village. He lay in the dark, staring up at the cracks in the ceiling, listening to the women's low breathing through the wall. How many more were out there? Little clusters of houses, slowly being swallowed up by the woods? Empty except for those black boxes? Surely his uncle couldn't have destroyed too many villages? He'd have to be an idiot to kill off half of his subjects.

An idiot or insane and paranoid.

The screams began to echo in his head as they had every night for many months. Screams of women and children held down by grown men and sliced to pieces. Screams of men forced to watch before they too were made into Examples. He squeezed his eyes shut, concentrating on the night sounds until the screams went away.

He thought about Sakura. If his uncle ever reclaimed the Batsu-no-Kaji's power, he would be unstoppable. Eventually he'd challenge the shogun and, with Sakura's power, he *would* win; there was no "might" about that. Surely then his punishments would become less severe, wouldn't they? He couldn't last long as a ruler if everyone hated and feared him, right?

Right?

But Fumito had seen firsthand how loyal Lord Kotoheisei's own army was. The daimyo paid his men well and treated them with respect as long as they proved themselves skilled

enough, or willing to become skilled enough, to deserve it. They admired him, loved him even. He was more than just their employer, he was their Lord. Their benefactor. They would do anything he asked. No matter how many commoners hated him, his men would always stand by his side. He hadn't filled that village with black boxes all by himself.

Fumito rose and opened his scroll-box. He pushed the papers aside and pulled up a hidden door in the false bottom. Within was a little blade two finger-lengths long. The shogun had made it illegal for civilians to carry weapons, but Fumito needed a way to protect himself on the long roads.

Tucking the knife into his waistband, he slipped into the hallway and crept to the other room. The women slept in the corner, illuminated by soft blue moonlight filtering through a translucent rice-paper window. Sakura lay in the curve of Ikuko's body, the big woman's arm wrapped protectively around her, pulling her close.

In sleep the lines of tension and anger left Sakura's face. She looked innocent, almost frail. She was even younger than he'd first thought. Probably not much older than his little sister Yoko.

He paused a moment, uncertain of how to do this. If he didn't kill her immediately, she might get away and eventually fall into Uncle's hands after all. Maybe if he plunged it into her heart? But he didn't think he had the strength to drive it all the way through her ribs. Cut her throat? He wasn't sure he could do it deep and fast enough. Through her eye, then. Straight into her skull. He'd heard that killed quickly.

Whatever he did, he was certain Ikuko would wake up and snap his neck. That didn't matter, though, as long as there was no Batsu-no-Kaji for his uncle to wield. It would actually be a relief. A fitting punishment for what he'd done to his family. And for the betrayal of his uncle's trust; regardless of the horrors the daimyo had committed, he was still Fumito's respected elder.

He slid the blade from his waistband and held it over Sakura, trying not to look at her face. He nearly dropped the blade when Ikuko shifted in her sleep.

He hesitated.

And hesitated and hesitated and hesitated.

He put the knife in his waistband and crawled back to his room. He couldn't do this. It wasn't her fault. She hadn't asked for

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this to happen to her.

His father was dead whether or not she lived. And his older sister too, once Uncle found out about her heritage. Fumito knew he was just as much their murderer as Uncle Kotoheisei. But in some way that he didn't fully understand, he believed he was doing some tiny bit of good by helping Sakura to escape.

He lay down on the straw matting and cried into his hands.

Ikuko sighed with relief. She had slept lightly these last two days, unsure of Fumito's intentions. It was easy to see through his good-humored, clownish mask, though she suspected Sakura didn't even realize there was a mask; the poor girl was so naïve. Initially she'd assumed he was yet another of Lord Kotoheisei's agents, and so she'd been planning ways to ditch or incapacitate him. But gradually she'd seen what really lay beneath the mask. The hurt and fear and anguish. Despite his smile, he was ready to collapse at any moment. It made her heart ache. Clearly he wasn't telling them the whole truth about what had happened to his family, but she didn't doubt the depth of his loss. Yet that made him potentially even more dangerous, since there was no telling what he might do in a fit of despair or desperation. But her conscience wouldn't let her chase him away. So she'd waited, keeping a keen eye out.

She'd heard him coming as soon as he stepped out of his room and had pretended to sleep, watching him through slitted eyes when he'd come over to watch them. How long had he knelt there, staring at Sakura? He'd looked so sad. Tears had welled at the corners of her eyes.

Then he'd pulled out the knife. Her whole body had tensed. He'd raised it above his head. He'd frozen. She'd braced her feet against the floor, ready to spring up and throw him across the room. But he hadn't moved.

Then, finally, he'd put the blade away and gone back to his room. The tension had poured out of her like sweat. As she'd told Sakura, it would have been no effort at all to break every bone in his body before he even finished his swing. She'd done it before. But she really hadn't wanted to do that to Fumito. She was starting to like him.

Although she'd have to do something about that knife.

John Meszaros