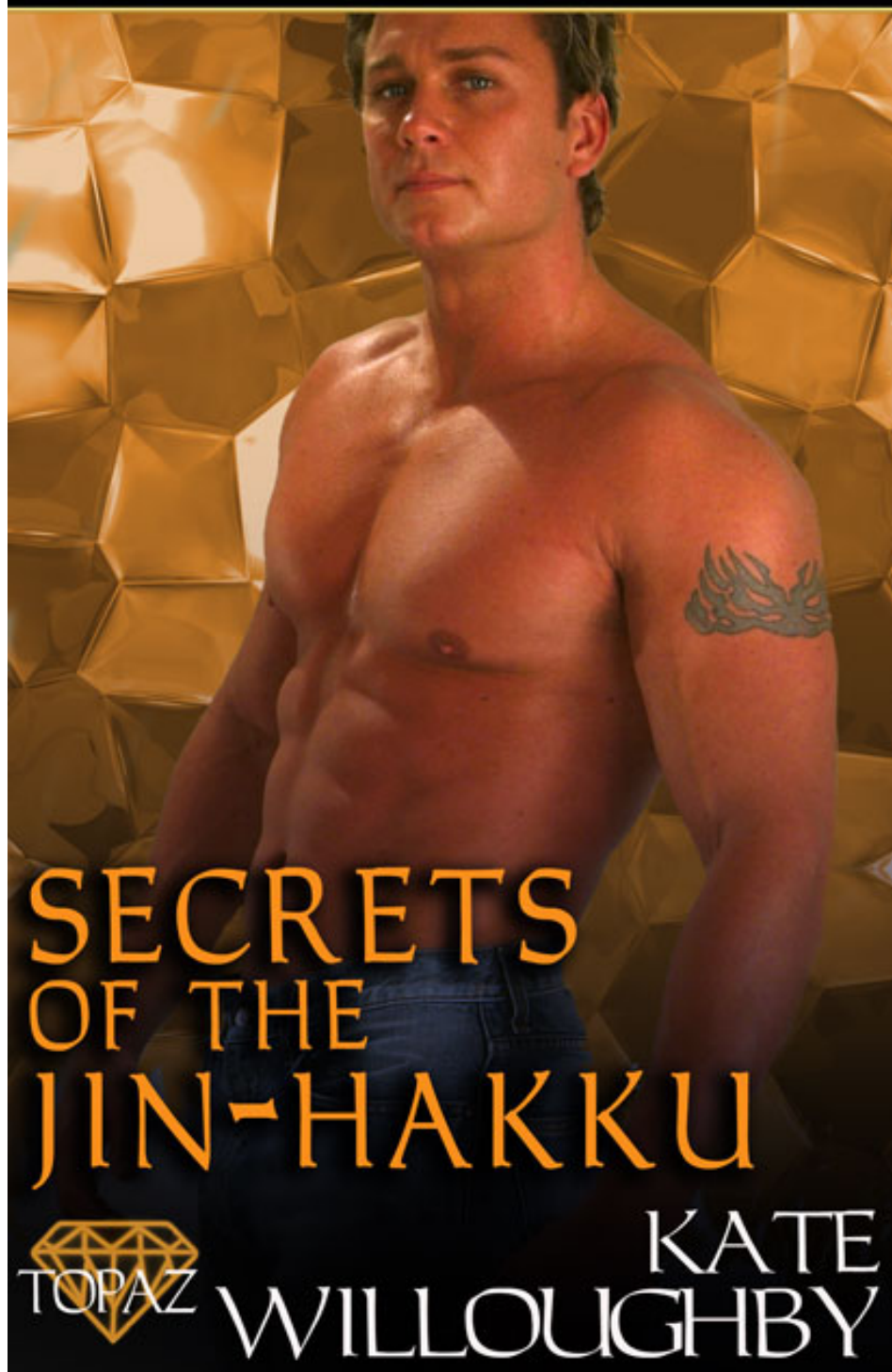


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



SECRETS OF THE JIN-HAKKU



KATE
WILLOUGHBY

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Secrets of the Jin-Hakku

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SECRETS OF THE JIN-HAKKU

Kate Willoughby

Chapter One

"Stop that," Joran said, looking up from his book. "You're driving me crazy." He'd been trying to read the same page for the last ten minutes, but Kai was performing his formal *budo* exercises, as if training for battle, which he was not.

Kai shook his shaven head, continuing to execute the forms. "If I sit down—*ha!*—like you—*ha!*—then I'll go crazy."

It had been almost three weeks since Hana, their mate, had been awake, and as her conjugal pair, the two men were anxious for her to regain consciousness. When a Shinwa woman failed to become pregnant, she periodically entered *sakei*, a few hours of very deep sleep. However, the longer a woman went without giving birth, the longer and more drastic these intervals became. Hana was now thirty-three. Her sleep had given way to a hibernation-like state—*sakei-ma*—in which her body shut down almost completely, subsisting on stores of body fat. Each interval lasted a little longer than the previous one but Kai and Joran could estimate when she would come out of it, give or take a few hours, and predictably, just a little while ago, her heartbeat had begun to rise, as had her body temperature.

As usual, her favorite food and drink had been prepared, for she was always famished when she awoke. Scented candles bathed the bedchamber in a soft glow. And of course, Kai and Joran paid special attention to their grooming.

Normal male attire consisted of formfitting tunics and trousers, and much of the time that was what they wore. However, all three of them had an eccentric penchant for days gone by, when men and women alike wore a variety of *yumata* robes. Depending upon the activity, people had worn particular fabrics or colors and even knotted their sashes with symbolic knots. So, when at home, they often dressed in this fashion.

Tonight they both wore new *yumata*. Joran's was navy with a repeating white peacock feather design, while Kai's was the reverse, white with navy.

Unfortunately, the *yumata* was interfering with Kai's ability to execute his *budo* forms. He was about to strip it off when Hana stirred. Both men hurried to the bed.

"Hana," Kai said, taking her hand. It was cool to the touch, but much warmer than it had been only half an hour ago. Joran took her other hand.

"We're here, *suki*," he said, "Come back to us."

Hana's eyes slowly opened, and as she focused on their faces, she smiled slowly. Even after having been unconscious for so long, she looked serenely beautiful. Her straight black hair she kept fairly short, the ends rarely going farther than her jawline. Tiny freckles dusted her nose and cheeks and she had a mole above her right eyebrow that Kai, big brute that he was, made a habit of kissing at least once a day.

"How long?" she asked in a whisper.

Joran held a cup of water to her lips and she drank deeply.

"Eighteen days," Kai replied.

"How do you feel?" Joran asked. "Are you hungry? There is honey-crusted chicken for you, and gingered carrots."

"Spicy rice and apple cake too," Kai added. Apple cake was her favorite.

Hana smiled again. "I am more hungry for your touch than I am for food."

But Joran shook his head. After a *sakei-ma* of this length, no matter how hard it was to resist an invitation to please her, the men stood firm. The amount of weight she'd put on prior to this interval hadn't been nearly enough in their opinion.

"Food first. Love later," Joran said firmly. Kai nodded, his arms crossed over his broad chest.

As Joran helped her into a sitting position and Kai fetched a tray piled with food and placed it on her lap, Hana gazed at them, still struck by how lucky she was to have them as mates. They were so beautiful, the two of them.

As so often happened in their society, her men were opposites. Kai had chocolate skin and a brawny build. To the world he was the epitome of strength and ferocity as one of the heroes of the last war, but he did have a tender side and was often silly.

Then there was Joran, the scholar, the philosopher, the historian. Where Kai relished physical exertion, Joran preferred intellectual pursuits. He liked nothing more than to spend the entire day in the library, investigating this or that, researching, studying. His coloring was very different from Kai's as well. Joran's skin was golden, a striking contrast to Kai's ebony complexion. While Kai had a bald pate, Joran's black hair fell in thick waves to his shoulders, and his body was leaner though still muscular.

Although she wanted very much to join with her mates, she did feel rather weak, so she dutifully ate as much as she could, and it did help, thank the gods. She despised how pathetic she'd become. It wasn't fair. If only she could conceive a child, then these dreaded *sakei-ma* would be a thing of the past. But nothing they did seemed to work. They had sex morning, noon and night in all the positions rumored to aid fertility, all to no avail. She'd undertaken numerous diets with no results, save aggravating the kitchen staff. So now her despair had driven her to even more improbable remedies.

Before this last *sakei-ma*, she'd asked Joran to find her a topaz, an extremely rare and expensive gemstone reputed to bolster a woman's ability to conceive. Granted, this fact remained to be proven, having only been mentioned in a children's fairy tale, but at this point, Hana was willing to try anything.

She pushed the tray away, her appetite sated. "I couldn't eat another bite."

"Then it's off to the bath with you," Joran said as Kai lifted her in his arms.

She wrapped her arms around Kai's neck and murmured, "There's only one thing I'd like better. Maybe two things."

Kai chuckled, catching her double-entendre. "'Patience breeds contentment'," he quoted.

"Not as much as sex does," she replied.

Kai and Joran brought her to their favorite bathing chamber. It contained many of the usual appointments. There were slatted benches upon which they sat to wash, ornately carved cabinets for towels and robes and a vast selection of soaps, oils and lotions. However, the Matakura estate had been built around natural hot springs, and an ingenious engineer had devised a way to pipe it directly into their dwelling, a rare luxury. Steam kept the room and their rinsing water at the perfect temperature. Their *omaka*, a tub used only for soaking, was outside, so the three of them used this indoor/outdoor bath almost exclusively.

After they had all disrobed, Joran hung their garments on the ornate wall hooks. Hana lay on the bench as they gently washed and massaged her body. Kai rubbed her neck, arms and shoulders, while Joran put his knowledge of acupressure to good use and worked on her lower body, especially her feet. Their firm hands both relaxed and invigorated her. Muscle by muscle, she rejoined the living and became aroused in the process. The sight of their beautiful hard cocks filled her with desire. The head of Kai's black penis glistened with moisture and she couldn't wait to feel it push inside her.

Joran's hands slid along her thighs to their apex. He groaned when he felt how ready she was. Eyes closed, mouth slightly open, she guided his hand so that his fingers slid inside the slick folds of her *kachi*. An even rougher groan escaped her dark-haired mate.

Kai, never content to observe for long, leaned down and covered her lips with his own. His kisses were soft, yet thorough. His tongue explored her, tasted her until she moaned softly into his mouth. At the same time, Joran continued to pleasure her with his hand. Gently, rhythmically, he thrust his fingers in and out. Her body thrummed with need. Her nipples tightened and she couldn't wait to feel their mouths on them, sucking and licking. But surprisingly, Kai chose that moment to break the kiss.

"By the gods," he said, breathing hard, "I don't think I can wait, Joran."

Which was fine with Hana. Usually after she awakened, they didn't indulge in sex until they had gone outside to the *omaka*. The exquisite gardens, the view of the lake,

and the soft *chong* of the silver wind chimes provided such a serene setting. But then again, it wouldn't be the first time they'd had sex in the bathing chamber.

Hana smiled in recollection. Once after being away from home for a few days, Kai had returned unexpectedly early, coming upon her in this very bathing chamber just as she was about to disrobe. She remembered well how he'd approached swiftly from behind, startling her as he wrapped one brawny arm around her waist...

"Hana," he'd said hoarsely in her ear, "I need you, *suki*. I need you now."

His voice had been so gruff, his hands so greedy as they clutched her breasts, that she'd become instantly wet.

"We didn't expect you until tomorrow."

"I rode hard." His big body had curled around hers. She felt his desperation so keenly. "Is it all right?" he begged. "Can we...?"

Gasping and on fire for him, she had nodded. It didn't matter that he was dusty from his ride, or that he smelled like horses. She had missed him and he needed her.

"Yes, Kai, yes."

He shucked his clothes as quickly as possible. "I missed you so much," he gasped.

She turned around and shed her robe. It slipped to the floor in a discarded heap. Backing her against the wall, Kai bent and took her mouth roughly. As his tongue thrust inside, he plunged a hand down, probing her *kachi* and finding it already drenched with moisture. A tortured sound escaped his throat as he ripped his mouth away and grabbed hold of her legs. One heave and she was off the floor, supported by his arms. Then, with unerring accuracy, he lowered her right onto his rigid cock.

Hana arched her body at the surge of pleasure. He'd positioned her at the perfect level, his hands splayed on either side of her body. Again and again he entered her. His hard urgent thrusts echoed the grunts he made as he fucked her standing up.

Over Kai's shoulder, she noticed Joran watching. As their eyes met, he smiled, slowly stroking himself. Kai was oblivious, intent on driving into her and gaining a much-needed release. She could tell he was very close, and a moment later, he came. He exploded with such force she felt the powerful spurts. His sweat-slick body leaned against hers heavily as he gasped for breath.

"I'm sorry, Hana, I couldn't hold back. It's been so long."

For Kai, three days was an eternity. Although thirty-six, he still had the sexual appetite of an adolescent. He often sheepishly asked for Hana's favors several times a day.

"Don't be sorry, beloved. You needed that."

Kai kissed her neck, still trying to catch his breath. "But you didn't..."

"I'll take care of her," Joran said, making his presence known by clapping a hand on Kai's shoulder.

"Joran!" Kai exclaimed in surprise. "Thank the gods. Take her."

Gently lowering her to the ground, Kai withdrew from Hana's body. He took a soft cloth and gently wiped away some of the seed spilling from her *kachi*. Kai had expelled a copious amount. He always did.

As Kai cleaned her, Joran came behind and kissed her neck, cupped her swollen breasts. Still eager for more, Hana rubbed her bottom against his hot shaft. Before she knew it, Kai had stepped away and Joran was entering her. He grasped her hips and moved slowly, sheathing himself inside her then withdrawing almost completely. Back and forth in a lazy rhythm he moved, a sharp contrast to the frantic coupling that had just occurred with Kai.

Hana sighed, raising her arms and caressing Joran's face as he fucked her slowly. The long deep strokes suffused her with pleasure. She moaned softly, then – *ahh* – Kai's mouth was on her breast. He circled his tongue around her nipple, sucking and pulling on it in time to Joran's thrusts.

By the gods, she loved her men. She loved how they worked in such easy tandem to give her pleasure. They knew her body so well, masters at drawing the climaxes from her. That day, Kai sucked harder and harder as Joran's pace increased. Kai's blunt fingers delved between her legs to rub the sides of her clit, and all of a sudden she came in long shuddering waves. For an endless moment they had kept her on that plateau. When it was over, they'd pushed her again, this time with Kai kissing her hard, sandwiching her between their hard muscular bodies. It wasn't until her third climax that Joran joined her, flooding her with even more male seed, seed that unfortunately never took root.

Tonight, though, something was going on, something besides their need to join with her.

Joran frowned at Kai. "We've already discussed this. You know she's not strong enough to start tonight."

"Start what?" she asked. With a great effort she sat up straighter, suddenly realizing. "It has to do with the topaz, doesn't it? What did you find out?"

"Suki, there is so much to tell, it's best if we explain outside where we can be comfortable," Joran said.

She agreed, and after rinsing her with warm water, Kai swept her up into his arms again and took her to the *omaka*, just outside the bathing chamber. Softly glowing lamps lit the smooth wooden deck surrounding the tub. Crickets chirped and the tree branches rustled above.

Joran entered the deep bath first then turned and held his arms out for Hana. With little effort the transfer was made, and Hana sighed as she sank into the hot water. The oversized tub had been built of the finest heartwood cedar, chosen for the lemony aroma it lent to the bath water. The three of them soaked in the open air often twice a day, even in winter. In the Shinwa culture, bathing was essential to one's physical and

spiritual balance. If one was troubled, the remedy most often sought was a thorough wash and then a long soak.

"Now tell me," Hana said, submerged to her neck in the fragrant water. "Everything."

Kai took Hana's hand. "I found a topaz."

"Don't be so modest," Joran scoffed. "He makes it sound as if he saw one lying in the street. The man moved the mountains to obtain one of the proper quality and size."

"I may even have broken a few laws," Kai admitted.

"That's wonderful," Hana said. Then she smiled. "Not the law-breaking part, of course."

Kai chuckled. "Of course. But listen to this. Joran found a *Jin-Hakku* reference that actually links the topaz to fertility."

"What?" Hana said with a frown. "I've read the *Jin-Hakku* from cover to cover several times and I don't remember anything about that."

"That's because most people are only familiar with the volumes that contain the thousand practices," Joran said.

"Those are the fun ones, after all," Kai remarked with a wry grin.

"What do you mean *volumes*?" Hana said. "There are more than one?"

"Yes," Joran said. "There are actually seven. Five contain the one thousand practices of love, but a few hundred years ago, they began binding only those five together for convenience. The other two volumes are filled with baffling dissertations so vague and convoluted in structure that no one was ever sure the translations were accurate. I don't believe they're even printed anymore. People are only ever interested in 'the fun ones' after all."

"But Joran found copies in the Imperial Library," Kai said. "He's been poring over them for months."

"Months!" Hana exclaimed.

Joran caressed her face. "When you mentioned your great grandmother's story, I vaguely remembered a reference to topazes, but I didn't want to get your hopes up."

"Well, my hopes are up now," she said. "You found something."

"Yes, but like I said, the translations contradict each other. It's difficult to glean what is truth and what isn't."

The elaborate reproductive systems of Shinwa women confused many, but Joran explained how he'd come to believe that not only were their breeding cycles out of alignment, but the special duct that safely guided semen from her rear passage into the womb needed to be strengthened. So again, working from the *Jin-Hakku*, he'd devised with a treatment he believed had a good chance of working. It required an elixir, an ointment and incense, all made with powdered, high-quality topaz, which he'd prepared during her *sakei-ma*. In addition, however, they also had to complete an uncompromising sexual regimen that took three nights to perform. When Joran outlined what they would have to do, Hana quailed. Essentially, during the three nights, Kai and Joran would have to coax as many climaxes from her as they possibly could, but without coming themselves.

It was a mark of how much they loved her that they took her suggestion about the topaz seriously. She herself hadn't put much stock in something intended for children's entertainment, and yet Kai and Joran had gone to great lengths to prove its validity.

"So we've been patiently waiting for your approval," Joran finished.

"Speak for yourself," Kai said. "I have been decidedly less than patient."

Hana smiled indulgently at her dark warrior.

"*Suki*, please," Joran said. "It feels so right. Three states—liquid, solid, gas..."

"The three nights..." Kai said.

"And the three of us," Hana finished. "It does feel right," she agreed.

And yet, she was apprehensive. So much rode on Joran's experimental treatment, and although her part would be minor in comparison, she worried about how hard this would be on her men.

"But we won't be starting tonight," Joran said, directing a pointed stare at Kai. "You need at least day to recover your strength."

She must have looked disappointed because Kai leaned over and kissed her warmly. "Don't worry," he said. "We will pleasure you if you like, but nothing vigorous, of course."

"And no release for either of us," Joran said.

"What?" Hana glanced sharply at Joran. "I thought that would start tomorrow."

Kai shook his head. "No, we both think our chances will be better if we concentrate the seed we have built up."

"Built up?"

"We haven't climaxed since you entered *sakei-ma*," Kai explained.

Hana shook her head in disbelief. In the fourteen years since they'd become a triad, her mates had never gone so long without release.

"Then I won't either," she declared. "I'll suffer with you, at least for tonight."

Kai and Joran answered as one, "No." Joran even said it again, more emphatically, "No."

"Do you think we're so selfish that if we can't climax, we would deny you the pleasure?" Kai asked, a little angrily, his brows drawing together in a frown. "We love you, Hana. Your happiness is our life's priority."

"Just as yours is mine," she protested.

"And it will make us happy, *suki*, to give you pleasure tonight." Joran lifted his chin, a sure sign he wasn't going to back down.

It was no use arguing with them when they were in this type of mood, so Hana thought about the many practices from the *Jin-Hakku*. Tonight she needed something gentle, luxurious and self-indulgent. Her men would accept nothing less.

“What about a Breeze-Upon-the-Field?” she asked.

The two males smiled at each other, and Joran nodded at Kai. “You want bottom or top?”

“Top.”

Joran sounded the small gong that hung next to the *omaka*. A servant came and bowed.

“Please prepare the Willow Room.”

* * * * *

The Willow Room was an intimate chamber perfectly furnished for Breeze-Upon-the-Field. A terraced fountain gurgled against one wall. Potted plants and flowers flourished, and a small aviary housed a half-dozen brightly plumed birds. The staff, well accustomed to the carnal habits of their lords and lady, had lit candles and set out refreshments, oils and linens. Someone had even draped a thick fur over the oversized velvet divan.

Shedding his *yumata*, Joran sat on the divan so that his back was supported by the slanted arm and beckoned to his woman. With an appreciative smile, Hana settled herself between his legs, her back to his front. Joran sighed with contentment. The eighteen days had felt like a lifetime and he had missed holding her in his arms. As he brushed his lips against the nape of her neck, Hana rewarded him with a shiver and a soft sound of pleasure.

Kai discarded his own robe and surveyed the selection of oils. “Lemon grass, jasmine or star amber?”

“Star amber,” Joran said between neck kisses. He held out a hand and Kai poured some of the fragrant oil onto his palm. Deftly, he warmed the oil between his hands

before lightly cupping Hana's breasts. Her skin was silk. Her nipples hardened as he kneaded the plump globes. Kai knelt between Hana's legs and applied the oil to her stomach, hips and legs. When she was slick all over, they began.

Breeze-Upon-the-Field was about a light touch, warm breath, softness and patience. They skimmed their hands over her body, barely touching her. Joran took advantage of his position by whispering words of love and desire into her ear as he caressed her breasts. Kai drew lazy designs on her belly with his tongue and occasionally flicked a nipple when Joran offered one up to him. Eventually, Kai nudged her legs farther apart and blew gently on her sex.

"Mmm," Hana murmured, reaching out to rub Kai's smooth, dark pate.

Running his fingertips up and down Hana's sides, Joran watched as Kai, his big hands splayed over her inner thighs, nuzzled her mound and then slowly, lingeringly opened her. Gods above, how he wished he'd taken top position. It was difficult to watch Kai's tongue take that long, unhurried journey along her wet slit. Even more torturous were the seemingly endless minutes that followed as Kai plundered the creamy folds of her *kachi*, softly slurping and sucking. Hana purred in contentment, the sound at once arousing and frustrating to Joran. He concentrated on breathing deeply in an effort to dampen his lust.

Although he longed to plunge his cock into Hana's sweet body, he had to focus on her pleasure. Breeze-Upon-the-Field limited his movements, but he knew from past experience that Hana enjoyed the sound of his voice as much as the pleasure Kai gave with his hungry mouth.

"Hana," he said, "look at Kai lapping at your honey. I know how good it tastes. It's killing me to watch."

In response, she reached down, dipped her fingers between her legs and brought them up to Joran's mouth. His nostrils flared at the deliciously agonizing scent. One by one, he licked her fingers clean, swirling his tongue around as Kai continued to pleasure her below.

"Tomorrow night can't come soon enough," Joran said roughly. He thumbed her nipples as he spoke. "We will take you over and over..."

Her breath quickened and Kai grunted – he was listening.

"One in each of your passages," Joran added. "Sliding in and out. Filling you. Stretching you."

"I love that," Hana gasped, shifting her hips against Kai's thick, questing tongue.

"You love it hard. You love both our cocks inside you."

"Gods, I do." Hana gripped Joran's knees as she writhed in his arms. The friction against his cock was excruciatingly good. Too good. He was going to go insane if Kai didn't end it soon.

"Gods, don't stop, Kai – right there, right there – *don't stop*."

She was so close. The wet sounds coming from below got louder.

"You know he won't." Joran clutched her breasts and plucked at her nipples. "Kai won't stop until you come," he gasped, panting himself. "All over his face. Bucking in my arms from –"

Hana cried out, arching up sharply. Joran groaned. He closed his eyes and tried to ignore his naked woman twisting, rubbing against him as she convulsed with pleasure. He had no idea what Kai was doing at the moment, but the lucky son of a goat was probably squeezing his cock to stave off his own climax. Unfortunately, in his current position, Joran couldn't reach his.

Her orgasm lasted a long time. Kai was skilled with his lips and tongue and he knew how to prolong Hana's pleasure and then ease her down gradually until she relaxed, sated and exhausted. With a happy sigh, she let go of Joran's knees. Her fingernails had dug into the skin, and he would have crescent-shaped marks there for the next day or so, not for the first time.

As was Shinwa custom, they offered a post-coital prayer to the gods in thanks for all they had been given. Joran went through the motions because it pleased Hana, but

he was a man who leaned more toward science than to religion. He didn't hold much stock in divine intervention. The gods had not seen fit to grant them a child after many years of prayer and devotion and he didn't see them changing their minds any time soon.

Chapter Two

The next day, Kai attempted to leave Hana to her rest, but he couldn't. The circles under her eyes concerned him. She was too thin. Much longer spent in *sakei-ma* and her ribs would have started to show. As a result, he spent a good deal of time going back and forth from the kitchen to wherever she was to bring her tidbits to eat.

"How much longer for the cinnamon custard?" he asked Naka, the cook. It had been only an hour since luncheon, but he thought Hana might want something sweet by now.

Naka gave him a look. "It must cool, my lord, at least another hour. Perhaps a trip to the stable would be beneficial. I recall hearing that your stallion needs exercise."

Kai brightened. "Excellent idea, Naka."

Fifty-nine minutes later, he reappeared in the kitchens. A delicate crystal bowl of chilled custard sat on a bed of ice. The custard itself was dusted with cinnamon and adorned with a sugar cookie and candied flower. Nodding his approval, he thanked Naka vociferously but the cook blocked him from taking the tray.

"You smell," she said, "of manure. You will not sully the taste of my custard with your stench."

"But the ice will melt," he protested.

"I'll get more. Go."

So he bathed. And shaved. And his manservant tended his fingernails and toenails to ensure that tonight he did not inadvertently scratch Hana's flawless ivory skin. By the time he finally returned to the kitchen, it was time for tea.

Joran declined to join them. He wanted to review the preparations for the coming evening, so Kai and Hana took their repast without him. They sat on the second-story

veranda of the south wing. From here they had a spectacular view of Shatsuma Lake and many of the terraced farms that supported the estate.

"This custard is delicious," she commented as she fed him a spoonful. "You always know exactly what I'm craving."

"You know what they say, 'One bond, one mind'," he replied. "How do you feel?"

She looked better than this morning. Her cheeks were pinker, her eyes less tired. The food must have done the trick. He congratulated himself on a job well done.

"Good," she said, but then sighed. "No, that's not true. A letter came today from Suri-bei."

Kai frowned. Hana's cousin Suri-bei was a competitive harridan who liked nothing more than to rub Hana's face in the fact that she and her mates had produced four healthy children. Her letters were always filled with detailed descriptions of what her offspring were up to and, while friendly on the surface, always carried a malicious undertone of one-upmanship.

The one-sided rivalry had started when they were just entering society. Initially, Hana had lacked suitors because she would not participate in the premarital bed play that had become commonplace at the grand society balls. Other girls eagerly tested the skills of their suitors in the many private alcoves of the assembly halls. Bad enough to be saddled with one poor bedmate, but two? No woman wanted that.

And the males were always eager to demonstrate their prowess. A prime source of entertainment consisted of finding a compatible male partner and then competing against other pairs to see who could complete the more difficult *Jin-Hakku* maneuvers, like Stampeding-Herd or Upright-Blades-of-Grass.

But Hana subscribed to bygone mating rituals that no one followed anymore. With casual suitors, she would not allow penetration of any sort, except a tongue in her mouth, if that. So, when male pairs approached her seeking a tryst and she allowed only Hummingbirds-Sipping-Nectar, they reacted negatively, with laughter, anger,

scorn or any combination thereof. Once this became known, only a few ever deigned to dance with her.

Suri-bei had been quite pleased with the social ineptitude of her cousin. But then Kai and Joran arrived in the capital city, both celebrated as war heroes by the emperor himself, Kai for his leadership in battle, and Joran for his diplomacy after the empire had won. Wanting to settle down after their adventures, they had their pick of the eligible ladies. Unfortunately, most of them played spiteful games, pitting pairs of men against each other and then comparing notes on their performance. Kai and Joran had no interest in that type of girl. They wanted a woman of substance, someone with whom they could share their lives, and they were rapidly coming to the conclusion that such a woman could not be found in the capital city. Then one evening, someone laughingly suggested they talk to The Clam.

"The Clam?" Joran had asked.

The insipid maid gestured toward Hana sitting alone on a divan. "She's also called Miss No-No-Never, Haughty Hana, and my personal favorite, Her Highness, Princess of Desiccation."

"Princess of Desiccation," Kai repeated, frowning.

"That girl is as dry as dirt," the maid explained. "She never fucks anyone, ever. I really don't know why she comes to assemblies at all. I mean, what's the point?"

Intrigued, Kai and Joran had approached Hana. She was reserved, at first, and somewhat defensive, but they persevered, mainly because they were stubborn and relished a challenge. When she accepted their invitations to dance and conversed with them at length, they considered it a victory. Eventually, Joran realized she shared their interest in the customs of days gone by, so he and Kai composed a formal, written poem requesting the favor of a kiss. To everyone's great surprise, she granted their request.

Except for the orchestra, the entire room went silent when Hana took them into one of the curtained alcoves. Secluded from the prying eyes, if not intensely curious ears, Hana allowed them each one kiss—one deep, prolonged and very provocative kiss—

after which Kai and Joran respectfully retreated, leaving the entire assembly to draw their own conclusions about what had occurred.

Suri-bei fumed. Despite utilizing every feminine wile she had in her arsenal, she'd been unable to gain the attention of Kai and Joran. She'd even brazenly offered them Fledgling-Exposed, to no avail. The two men ignored her, preferring to court Hana instead.

For five long weeks, Kai and Joran subsisted only on kisses, one each, every night, but through these devastatingly irresistible kisses, they discovered the truth. Hana wasn't frigid at all, just incredibly picky, not to mention, amazingly sensual, despite her reputation. She also shared a good number of their interests—history, poetry, riding and botany—and their conversations were filled with equal measures of laughter, serious thought and wit.

At last, as spring drew to a close, she finally agreed to a *Jin-Hakku* encounter—Storm-Tossed-Vessel, Prolonged. While most men might have quailed at the prospect of such a grueling practice, Joran and Kai relished the challenge. They alone had been honored with a premarital request and they were determined to prove themselves worthy of the honor. The resulting union exceeded their expectations. Their encounter lasted hours and hours and had been so supremely satisfying that as the sun rose the next morning Kai and Joran declared their love and proposed marriage, which Hana, of course, accepted.

That had been fourteen years ago. Suri-bei hated the fact that her pretentious cousin had caught the most sought-after pair in the empire, and now exacted her revenge with her insidious letters and occasional visits.

Kai scanned this most recent letter and his frown deepened. "I'm going to give orders that the next time one of these letters arrives, it's to be burned."

Hana shook her head. "Don't be silly."

"She's jealous of us."

"As I am of her."

"We have love, Hana. I hear that her men are alone most nights. She seldom joins them."

"But she has *children*."

To his horror, tears gathered in Hana's eyes. Kai felt a deep pain in his chest.

"We will have children, too, *suki*," he said, pulling her close. He kissed the mole over her eyebrow. "I believe that."

"I'm not so sure." Each episode of *sakei-ma* confirmed her growing belief that it would take a bona fide miracle for her to conceive. The love she shared with Kai and Joran was a miracle in and of itself, and how many miracles could one woman reasonably expect to receive?

Resting her cheek against his muscled chest, Hana sighed. More tears threatened as she softly voiced one of her deepest fears. "What if what they say is true? That I brought this on myself?"

"Ha! I *don't* believe *that*," he said firmly. "Early celibacy does not cause infertility. That's an old wives' tale. Trust Joran. Trust in what we're going to do tonight."

She sniffled and nodded. "No, I do. I-I have to."

"Are you absolutely sure you're up to it?" Kai asked gently.

"Kai," she said, leaning back to look him in the eye, "I should be asking you the same question. You and Joran will be doing all the work."

"Don't worry about us. We're fine. You are the one who's been half dead for three weeks. I wish we could postpone this, but Joran is convinced that this is the optimum time to align our cycles."

"No, I agree," she said vehemently. "I don't want to wait any longer."

* * * * *

The time had come. The evening meal had been superb. The staff had outdone themselves. Dish after gourmet dish came out of Naka's kitchens—skewered lamb, quail's egg and leek soup, braised root vegetables with lemon butter, honey and orange

ices. How she managed to cook so much while being hounded by Kai all day long was a mystery. She'd even managed to dig up a wine from the cellar of the same vintage that was served at the birth of the Imperial triad's firstborn.

After the evening meal, Kai, Joran and Hana went to a bedchamber that they had been told to avoid for the day. Hana's family prided themselves on the loyalty of their servants, dedicated to the Matakura line, even to the death. A group of them had asked to contribute by preparing the room to be used. Touched, Kai, Joran and Hana had of course agreed, and when they opened the double doors, they stood, amazed.

The room had been transformed. A beautiful marble statue of Momoko, the rounded goddess of fertility, stood at the foot of the bed in her traditional stance, cupping her bountiful breasts, her head thrown back in both the ecstasy of conception and the pain of labor. The servants had somehow secretly moved the statue from the gardens to this room. But that was not the only surprise. Everything was red, the color associated with passion, but also of birth. The candles were red, the brocade bedcovers, the flowers and the wine, all red. Kai understood now why his manservant and Joran's had insisted on dressing them in carmine *yumata*. And yet, Hana, on the other hand, wore a pink robe with an apple blossom design to symbolize spring and rebirth.

Kai cleared his throat. "As much as I appreciate their concern and the effort the staff has gone to, I am suddenly even more anxious."

Joran nodded. "I'd needle you about your virility, if I wasn't in the same boat." He turned to the other two. "Did you know that every man, woman and child on this estate is going to the temple sometime tonight, tomorrow night and the night after to pray for us? They're taking turns so that no moment passes by without someone beseeching the gods for help."

Quietly, they all absorbed that news.

Kai broke out a cold sweat. "I wish you hadn't told me that."

By the gods, he hated the feelings coursing over him right now. He wanted nothing more than to run from this room, and he never ran away. Not when he was a lad who

had stupidly tripped another boy twice his size so he fell in pig shit. Not during his first battle when he'd been challenged by two enemies at once and his shield was in danger of breaking. Not even when that boar had charged him in the forest during the hunt two autumns ago. And yet, tonight the prospect of making love to his woman without coming made him want to flee.

Hana turned and closed the doors decisively. "Well, I think it's wonderful. Prayers can only help. What do we do first?" she asked Joran.

"First, we drink."

An ornate table held everything they needed for tonight. There, they each picked up a small serving of the topaz elixir. It shone like sunlight in a glass.

Kai expected the tonic to be horrible, but he was pleasantly surprised by the sweet taste of orange and anise. When they had all downed their drinks, Joran then used a candle to light the topaz-infused incense. It was potent, musky and dark, peppery even. And the smoke had a golden tint to it. Finally, Joran opened a jar of black glass. Inside was the creamy ointment. It had a similar aroma, but sweeter.

"Do we rub it all over?" Hana asked, eyeing the smallish jar dubiously.

Joran shook his head. "It goes on our cocks and is transferred to you during the act. From what I can gather, we must wait fifteen minutes for the elixir to take effect. After that we'll have to take turns. You must be internally stimulated for at least an hour, both passages."

"Do we apply the ointment now or after the fifteen minutes?" Kai asked.

"There's a possibility of some slight discomfort, so I think we should wait." Joran placed the black jar next to the bed. "In the meanwhile, let's spend the time as pleurably as we can."

The three of them disrobed and lay on the bed, Hana in the middle. Predictably, Joran latched on to her creamy breast, cupping it in his hand and kissing the hardening peak. Joran always gravitated to those plump globes first, so Kai took her mouth. He

could taste spicy elixir on her tongue as they kissed. She responded to him, moaning in her throat, and Kai was relieved to feel his cock begin to thicken and grow.

Hana put a hand on his head and applied a gentle pressure. Knowing what she wanted, he shifted lower and paid homage to her other breast. With teasing circles of his tongue, he licked her, flicking the sensitive tip over and over until she panted. Her soft little huffs and moans inflamed him even more. She adored having both of them at her breasts, sucking and teasing her until she writhed with desire.

Before Kai knew it, Joran was announcing that the fifteen minutes had passed. Kai lifted his head from Hana's nipple. It was wet and red from his sucking. She was breathing heavily and obviously ready for the next step.

Kai applied oil to one of their many *konsu*, instruments designed to stretch and prepare her for anal sex. The one he'd chosen for tonight was made of highly polished pink marble. Gently, he inserted it into Hana's rear passage. Once the tip penetrated the tight circle, the rest glided in with only a little resistance, leaving only the flat disc that served as both handle and base.

"Great Nabba's stones," Joran swore with a tight grimace.

While Kai had been readying Hana, Joran had dipped his fingers into the jar and rubbed the ointment on his penis.

"What's wrong?" Hana asked.

"My cock feels like it's going to catch fire." Stroking the shaft in jerky motions, Joran inhaled hard, exhaled harder. He was visibly sweating and his face was flushed.

Hana sat up, angry. "That's it then. We're stopping. Kai, get water so he can wash it off." She started to scramble off the bed to ring the gong.

"No!" Joran said, grabbing her. They struggled briefly, but she was no match for his superior strength. Joran easily pinned her with his body and pried her legs apart with his knee.

"We will not quit," he said, reaching between them to clutch his reddened cock and guide it to her entrance. "I'll be all right. I just need to be inside you *right now*. Please, Hana!"

She hesitated only briefly before nodding. The moment she did so, he shoved. Hana cried out as he drove into her hard.

"I'm sorry, *suki*," he gasped, thrusting his hips as if he had no control.

"No, no, it's all right," she assured him. "Do whatever you have to."

Kai watched as Joran fucked her at a frantic pace. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the sight of Joran's cock plunging in and out of Hana's velvety sex. Very soon he would be entering her himself. As soon as Joran gave him the signal, he would push inside her anus to stimulate her other passage. They had to be quick, though, like runners in a relay race. Joran had warned that they could not afford too long a lapse between. Her internal stimulation had to be as close to constant as they could manage.

Hana stroked Joran's back, emitting soft, urgent cries of pleasure as their bodies slapped together.

"Joran," she gasped. "I'm going to—I'm going to—" Her words dissolved into a little shriek.

"Ah, gods, Kai, get ready," Joran groaned, squeezing his eyes shut. "She's climaxing." Then he uttered several curses that Kai had never heard come out of his mouth before, some of them in foreign languages.

Kai quickly applied the ointment. Almost at once he got a pins-and-needles feeling along the entire shaft. Blood surged into his cock as it rose almost regally from his groin. But his exultation was short-lived. Joran had told the truth—his penis burned. It burned with the need to be engulfed by something tight and wet. Already, the urge to shove himself into Hana grew so strong he shook with it. Kai gripped himself hard, unable to resist pumping his hand in an effort to gain some relief.

"Are you ready?" Joran asked, still thrusting.

"Yes."

Joran pulled out and moved aside. Kai grabbed Hana's ankles and yanked her to the foot of the bed.

"On your knees, Hana. Quickly."

She obeyed, her face against the bed, presenting her bottom to him at just the right angle. With a groan, Kai withdrew the *konsu*, and then with his penis in a merciless grip, he found her rear entrance and steadily pushed past the resistant ring of her anus. Although the ointment doubled as a lubricant, easing his way, she was so snug he was afraid he was hurting her. Yet he couldn't help himself. His cursed cock seemed to have taken control. It was all he could do to not start fucking her like an animal.

Thankfully, Hana moaned in pleasure. He sent a prayer of gratitude to the gods and began thrusting faster and deeper. It wasn't long before, incredibly, she came again. He hadn't even been inside her a minute, but he clearly felt her body shuddering in climax. Her skin flushed pink and she gathered handfuls of the bedcovers in her fists. At once, he realized why Joran had sworn so vehemently before. Hana's orgasm intensified his own need to come. His testicles tightened and his heartbeat thundered in his head.

"She's peaking again," Joran said, unnecessarily. "Do you want me to take over?"

Kai was busy fighting a war with his own body and couldn't utter a reply. Instead, he jerked his head in the affirmative and withdrew quickly. His breath blasted in and out of his nostrils as Joran took his place and shoved himself back into Hana's swollen *kachi*.

And so it went. The two of them took turns, switching when the urge to come became too great. Kai lost track of time. When he wasn't watching Joran, burning with the need to be inside her, he was plunging in and out of Hana's ass, fighting his orgasm. It took all the self-control he had to force the pleasure back into a corner of his mind and do what he had to do.

As for Hana, she just kept coming, over and over. Her back arched. She cried out, moaned, dug her nails into whichever male was servicing her at the time. The two of

them fucked her without rest, without pause, their cocks on fire, their swollen sacs primed to explode.

Finally, while Kai was mentally somewhere else, moving by instinct, he dimly registered a long drawn out shriek and then Joran's voice calling as if from a far distance.

"Kai, stop. Stop!"

Kai shook his head, blinked hard. "Is it over?" he rasped, disoriented. His voice sounded like he had sand in his throat. "Are we done?"

Joran's reply was gruff. "Yes. Thank the gods."

Hana slowly slumped onto the bed causing Kai's cock to come out of her anus. The cool air felt like heaven. After they took care of Hana, he intended to send for ice. Lots of ice.

"She's all right, isn't she?" Kai asked, concerned. He knelt on the bed so he could see her face. "Hana?"

"I'm fine," she said so softly he could barely hear her. "I just need to...rest."

"Anything you want, *suki*," Joran said.

Ignoring their still rigid and aching cocks, they recited the prayer of gratitude and laid the coverlet over her.

"I think it's working," she murmured. "I feel opened up inside."

With that, she fell asleep, her features relaxed, sated.

Chapter Three

Hana awoke many hours later, shortly before dawn. Joran's concoctions had done their job well. Already she felt different. A moment after she'd swallowed the potion, warmth had spread through her. It started in the pit of her stomach and spread throughout her lower body, and after the incense had been burning for a few minutes, she felt a little giddy too, as if she'd drunk too much wine. By the time they laid her on the bed and began making love to her, she was abnormally aroused. When Joran had wrapped his lips around one breast, the wet suction sent a wave of intense pleasure through her. Then Kai joined him and sucked gently on the other. She reveled in the sensation of both their mouths on her, two hot tongues on her nipples. Their big hands caressed her flesh. They threw their legs over hers possessively, and all she had to do was lie back and enjoy.

But after they'd applied the ointment, everything had changed. With a wild expression on his face, Joran became desperate to fuck her. Without any preamble, he held her hips still and drove into her, ramming her with hard, deep strokes that slapped her clit over and over. Under the influence of the topaz, she peaked almost immediately, but even as that first orgasm engulfed her, she noticed Joran's agonized expression.

Moments later, he pulled out and Kai penetrated her from behind, none too gently, but as gently as she knew he could manage under the circumstances. Although she'd consciously relaxed, he still met with resistance, but once breached, her anal passage opened. Inch by inexorable inch, his thick penis filled her, resistance be damned.

When she came again almost immediately, it became clear that her pleasure made it worse for them. Yet, she had no control over the relentless siege of orgasms. It was impossible for her not to exult in the joy of being taken by her mates. The two men

fucked her one after the other, in and out of both her passages. In the end, she became delirious. She found herself trapped in a world where nothing existed except the relentless thrust and withdrawal of their cocks. At last, one particularly intense orgasm made her scream. The muscles in her belly and lower back contracted sharply. Time froze and it felt as if all her bodily functions stopped for one long moment, every vein and artery expanded and stretched. Then, abruptly, she could breathe again and the feeling disappeared. Whatever was supposed to happen had happened and they stopped.

A sleepy voice brought her back to the present.

"Suki."

It was Joran. He was awake. His tired smile warmed her heart.

"Beloved," she replied just as softly. She brushed her lips against his. "How are you faring?"

"I have the same question for you."

"Don't be difficult." She gave him a look and he chuckled. "Shhh! And don't wake Kai."

"A war wouldn't wake Kai," he said.

This time, *she* laughed. Then she touched his cheek. "Seriously, are you well? I was very worried for both of you."

Joran's reply was a while in coming. "A day's rest and we'll be ready. Now let me sleep or my performance next time will be a disgrace and Kai will never let me live it down."

Too tired herself to argue, she snuggled close to him and slept, but later that morning, she was horrified at how haggard they looked when they finally awakened only an hour before noon. The two of them were usually so robust, it terrified her to see them move so slowly. Food helped. But after she'd gotten them to eat, they still seemed sluggish. At a loss, she hoped a long soak in the *omaka* would do them even more good.

In the washing chamber she tended to them herself. Ignoring their grumbles and waving their hands away, she carefully inspected their genitals. Despite her hope that her body was responding to the mystical treatments, she was more than willing to sacrifice any progress they'd made in exchange for their continued good health. Fortunately, nothing looked amiss. In fact, their penises had thickened in response to her examinations. Kai's came to full attention.

"You see?" Kai scoffed. "Eager to resume where it left off." With raised brows, he elbowed Joran in the ribs.

Hana could not believe it.

"Are you insane?" she asked, suddenly enraged. Grabbing her *yumata*, she thrust her arms into the long, loose sleeves and belted it. "We are not having sex now! I'm not entirely sure we should go through with it tonight!"

"Hana..." Joran started to say, but she would have none of it. The anxiety she'd felt all morning finally boiled over and to her dismay, she burst into tears.

"Wonderful!" She wiped her cheeks and stared with exasperation at her wet fingers. "Now look what you've done!" she cried and left the room for the solace of the garden.

Of course, they quickly followed, knotting the sashes of their robes as they hobbled after her. She had only gone as far as the bench near the white rose bushes. Kai knelt in the grass at her feet.

"I was joking back there, *suki*," Kai said, a pained expression on his face. "I don't want to have sex with you now at all!"

That earned him a glare.

Kai grimaced. "Gods, you know what I mean! Please stop crying."

By then Joran had joined them. He sat next to her on the bench.

"I can't help it," she said. "I'm scared to death for both of you." She felt their faces. "See? You're both still feverish. You ate almost nothing —"

"I ate enough for a regiment!" Kai insisted.

"And you should see the black circles under your eyes. You look like...like raccoons!" she finished, incensed.

Joran looked apologetic even though he hadn't done anything, but Kai scrunched up his rugged warrior's face and wiggled his nose like a rodent. Hana couldn't help but laugh.

"Stop it," she said, frowning. "I'm not in the mood for laughing."

But his silliness had done its job. The anger that had risen so unexpectedly had vanished.

Kai saw it and pulled her into his embrace. "I'm sorry, Hana, but we're one third through this ordeal. If we stop now just because of a little fever and fatigue, we'll have wasted what we accomplished last night."

"Think about what this could mean," Joran said softly. "A tiny little Hana toddling around, demanding apple cake."

"And probably getting it," Kai said.

"You're missing the point," she said. "I love you, both of you, more than I can say. Do you understand how hard it was for me last night, overcome with pleasure, while both of you were in pain? That was impossible. And what if there are side effects from the treatment we don't know about? Did you think about that? Did you? I couldn't bear it if something happened to you, all because of me. Don't you understand?"

"No," Joran said, his face reddening. "I don't. And I don't think that *you* understand either."

"Joran..." Kai said in a warning tone.

"No!" Joran rose and so did his voice. "It's time we talked about this. I'm tired of tiptoeing around the fact that she could *die*."

Kai gritted his teeth and turned his head aside. Hana's jaw dropped. It was the forbidden topic. They never ever discussed the possible fate of childless women. In dire

cases, sometimes a Shinwa woman simply never woke up from *sakei-ma*. Instead, her body entered the state of *sakei-ma-sah*, wasting away over the course of months, sometimes as long as a year, before she finally died, a withered husk. Hana herself tried not to think about it, even though she knew she would be oblivious if it ever happened to her.

"I couldn't bear it if you entered *sakei-ma-sah*," Joran said. "I couldn't watch you day after day, night after night, hoping that you would wake up but knowing you wouldn't." His shoulders slumped and his voice lowered to a whisper. "I'd rather kill myself than suffer that."

"I as well," Kai said just as softly. "Actually, we've discussed that, Hana."

Surely he couldn't mean...

"No," she said, shaking her head in denial, but Kai went on.

"If one of your intervals ever goes longer than four months, we've agreed we would end it."

Hana gasped. They were talking about the ritual double-suicide of a conjugal male pair in which each slit the other's throat.

"No! I absolutely forbid it!" Hana shook her head again, violently, as if by doing so she could banish the image in her mind of Kai and Joran, dead by their own hands.

"You have no choice in the matter, *suki*," Joran said, calmer now, but stonily resolute.

"Yes, I do!" she insisted. "I'll make it my dying wish, my last request. You wouldn't be able to deny me a last request would you? Not if you loved me."

Hana stared at Joran, challenging him to refuse, but his face had hardened even more. So instead she turned to Kai who rose to sit beside her on the bench. He would listen. If she made Kai understand, then he could work on Joran.

But when she opened her mouth to speak, Kai shook his head. "Hana, listen to me. I love you. We both love you. But..." Kai took a deep breath. "To hold that love over our heads like this is the act of a selfish woman."

She stared at him a moment as his words sunk in, fury rising inside her. But then she realized that he was right. Gods above, he was right.

Tears of shame spilled down her cheeks. How convenient it had been for her to forget the anguish they must feel every time she entered *sakei-ma*, wondering if it would develop into *sakei-ma-sah*. Yes, it had been difficult for her to watch them in such torment, but that was one night. One night! They'd been stoically enduring much worse for years.

And just now she'd virtually demanded that they condemn themselves to the prolonged agony of watching her slowly die.

"Suki, don't cry," Kai said, pulling her roughly into his strong arms.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I had no right to ask you...no right at all."

"Shh," he murmured into her ear. "Think no more about it. It's forgotten."

Kai held her until she quieted. A breeze rustled through the trees, and birds chirped to each other, oblivious to the emotional scene that had just occurred. Comforted by the strength of Kai's embrace, Hana drew back.

"I'm sorry," she said again, sniffing. "I was wrong to even suggest that we not continue with the treatment." She summoned a watery smile. "Because we're going to succeed. It's going to work."

"That's right," Kai said with a smile of his own. "This time next year, there will be no peace around here because we'll have a squalling infant demanding our attention."

He kissed her softly then nodded his head meaningfully toward Joran, who stood a short distance away, his back turned.

She stood up and approached him hesitantly. "Joran?"

With a sigh, he turned and took her into his arms. She laid her head against his muscular chest.

"I'm sorry, *suki*," he said, holding her close. "I shouldn't have shouted at you. This is a strain on all of us."

"No, I deserved it. I didn't take into account what you've been going through all this time. But no longer." She took one step away, her shoulders back, head high. "Tonight, I'll do my part with no complaints. We'll all of us do our parts so that we get no peace a year from now."

Kai came over to them. "No peace. I like the sound of that." He clapped a hand on Joran's shoulder.

"No peace," Joran agreed.

* * * * *

Later that night, an owl hooted as Joran walked along the garden path toward the family temple a short distance from the main house. The moon hid behind some clouds, so he carried a small lantern to light his way. Gooseflesh rose on his arms but he was still running a fever from the fertility treatment, so the chill felt refreshing.

He'd left Kai and Hana asleep in bed. They'd followed the second round of treatment in much the same way as they had before, stimulating both of Hana's passages, switching places when the urge to come became unbearable. The agony of feeling her climax over and over had been grueling, yet they'd persevered.

That is, until Hana fainted.

Joran had been at it for quite a few minutes and Hana appeared to be building up to a stunning climax. Her cries had become urgently strident, and she was pounding Joran's back demanding that he fuck her harder. Then, suddenly, she stiffened and shrieked, scoring him with her fingernails. Her body went rigid and her eyes rolled back into her head. A moment later she collapsed, her arms and legs falling to the bed. Joran stopped immediately, alarmed. He reared back, pulled out.

"Hana!" Kai exclaimed.

Joran slapped her softly on the cheek. "Hana! Wake up! Kai, get water."

Kai scrambled off the bed and lurched for the decanter of water. Joran pried open her eyelids just as she regained consciousness. She jerked her head away, frowning.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "What happened?"

"You fainted."

"I did? I never faint."

Kai returned to the bed so quickly, he sloshed the water on the floor in his haste. "You did tonight."

"Was it time enough?" she asked, rising up on her shoulders.

Although they had come short by only a few minutes, Joran was willing to bet they'd stimulated her for long enough.

Still, as he continued on his way to the temple, he worried.

Inside the octagonal building, Xi, an elderly servant, knelt at the altar, his gnarled hands flat on his thighs. Xi tended the fish pond and aviaries. In fact, one of his small pets perched on his shoulder, its tufted head tucked under a wing.

"My lord," the man exclaimed in surprise when Joran entered. The bird woke with a flutter of its green wings.

"No need to stay any longer, Xi. I'll remain here in your place." Joran helped him to his feet. "Go to your bed and rest."

Clearly relieved, Xi acquiesced. "As you wish, my lord. Thank you, my lord. To tell the truth, these bones of mine were beginning to protest."

After the old man shuffled off around a bend, Joran sighed and turned toward the altar. It had been many years since he'd entered a temple. At the university, his belief in religion had slowly been replaced by a preference for the sciences. Science was concrete. Concepts could be proven, resulting in predictable, reliable outcomes. The gods, on the

other hand, were capricious, bestowing favor and disfavor upon the Shinwa on a whim. He'd never seen evidence that prayer to the various deities did any good at all.

And yet, here he was.

As was custom, he first alerted the gods to his presence. Chimes of various sizes hung around the temple's perimeter and Joran walked the circle, brushing his index finger across them. The soft music swirled in the small chamber. He'd forgotten how soothing and harmonious the sound was. The gentle notes seemed to pass through his body, relaxing him as they went.

Breathing deeply, he eyed the floor upon which he was supposed to kneel. The stone was worn smooth from the endless hours supplicants had spent in prayer. The temptation to forgo this uncomfortable step was great, but he had decided earlier that he would not deviate at all from the ancient rites. If he could not commit himself completely to this, then how could he expect the gods to pay attention? One had to respect in order to be respected.

He knelt. Surprisingly, the stone was still warm. Head bowed, he prayed earnestly to Momoko for success, for strength, for mercy, but mostly for Hana. As much as he hated to admit it, Hana had lost much of her sparkle. Once upon a time she had found such joy in children. Nothing had made her happier than to find out one of their servants was expecting a baby. She used to spend so much time playing with the little ones on the estate that they called her Auntie Hana. But in recent years, things gradually changed. She began to make excuses and keep her distance from the children, especially the newborns, and it broke his heart. The three of them had hoped for a big family, ideally five boys and two girls. He'd even drafted plans for a large family *omaka*, the kind with shelves they could attach for the littler ones to sit on. He'd imagined all of them together, laughing and splashing. Kai would initiate breath-holding contests and Hana would protest.

He shifted his weight to relieve the pressure on his knees. If only that vision could become reality. So often he'd imagined Hana's belly round with child and how

miraculous it would be to feel it kicking inside her womb. Her breasts would grow even bigger and, he'd heard, more sensitive.

Joran smiled. He adored her breasts. The sight of her erect nipples never failed to excite him and there was little he liked better than to practice Twofold-Moons. Whenever he loved those soft, plump globes with his hands and lips and tongue, she would clutch his head, moaning as he sucked on the taut peaks. Sometimes, if he stimulated her deftly enough, he could make her climax with only –

“Going monk on me?”

Joran started as Kai entered the temple.

“No more than you, my friend,” Joran replied as Kai made his slow circuit to sound the chimes.

“I don't know about that,” Kai said with a wry grin. “You've got quite a prayer erection going there.”

Joran scowled. “Great Nabba's stones! This is *not* a prayer erection. I was thinking of Hana.”

Dressed in loose trousers and tunic, Kai knelt beside him. “Of course you were.”

“I was thinking about what her breasts will look like when she gets with child.”

“Oh.” Kai gave a groaning sigh. “Don't start or I'll get hard too. And besides, we're supposed to be praying.”

Chastised, Joran nodded and bowed his head. Silence fell except for the crickets and that owl he'd heard before. He actually succeeded in praying for about ten minutes before Kai whispered, “Do you think she'll have wavy hair like you?”

“Who?” Joran asked.

“Our daughter,” Kai replied.

“Better wavy hair than no hair. Ow.” Kai had given him a solid, but good-natured punch.

“Seriously,” Kai said, “have you thought about what our daughters might look like? Because I have. I’m afraid they’ll end up with a face like mine. That would be disastrous. No one will want to marry them. We’ll have to offer enormous dowries.”

Joran suppressed his laughter. Kai had a well-deserved reputation for being strong and decisive in battle, but Joran knew that beneath the armor and fierce countenance, Kai was a secret worrier. It was a mark of their bond that Kai trusted Joran enough to share those worries.

“One step at a time, Kai, all right? Let’s get her with child before we worry about dowries.”

Kai nodded sheepishly. His rough features relaxed. “You’re right.”

“Besides,” Joran said, “Your face isn’t that bad. But if you tell anyone I said that, I’ll deny it.”

Kai laughed and the two of them prayed in companionable silence until the sun came up.

Chapter Four

Hana's body had hummed with anticipation all day. It was going to happen, she could feel it. Tonight they would finally conceive a child—a tiny person, resulting from the great love they shared. And tonight they would finally take her together, finally be allowed to climax with her, albeit after the designated time had passed. It was going to be glorious, a night she would cherish forever.

And yet when she entered the bedchamber, Kai close on her heels, Joran was scowling. He stood at the table where the elixir, incense and ointment had been set out. A manservant huddled on the ground, prostrate at Joran's feet. It was Wen, a competent young man who served in many capacities inside the household.

"What's wrong?" Kai asked.

Joran gestured sharply toward Wen. "That's what I'm trying to find out. Tell me what happened. Why is the level of elixir so much lower?"

Wen cowered on the floor, speechless.

"Why is the level so low?" Joran roared.

"Stop it, Joran," she exclaimed. "You're scaring the poor man half to death!"

Joran turned to her, enraged. "And it's *your* death on his hands if you go into *sakei-ma-sah!*"

Shocked, Hana stepped back, pulling her robe tightly closed. She had never seen Joran so angry.

Kai pulled Wen to his feet like he weighed nothing. "What did you do?" he demanded.

His face white with fear, Wen babbled, "I-I knocked over one of the glasses when I was pouring, my lord! I-I'm sorry, my lord! A thousand times sorry!"

He fell to his knees again, his arms thrown over his head as if to ward off any blows that might be forthcoming.

Joran spun away, a stream of curses flowing from his mouth. Kai stood like a pillar of stone, yet vibrating with fury. His nostrils flared. Veins stood out in relief on his neck.

Alarmed, Hana took matters into her own hands. She knelt and put an arm around Wen. "It's all right," she said in a low voice. "Everything will be all right. It was an accident."

Kai scoffed but didn't move or say anything more. Joran was running his hands through his hair as he paced by the table, muttering to himself. Taking advantage of relative calm, she coaxed Wen to his feet again and herded him toward the door. About a dozen servants hovered in the hallway, drawn no doubt by the commotion.

"Give him some wine," she told them. "I think he needs it."

As the group hurried down the hall, Hana closed the doors once again.

"What are we going to do?" Kai was asking. "Do you have any more?"

Joran stood, his hands braced on the table, his head down. "No. We'll have to make do with what's left. It looks like one full measure was wasted, so we will all be getting one third less of the elixir."

"Will it still work?" Hana asked, her voice soft.

After the briefest of pauses, Joran turned to them with a tense expression. "Of course it will," he said as he handed them each their portions. "I overreacted before. This will make little difference. After thinking about this, I believe the previous doses have built up a cumulative effect, and this third lesser dose can ride on that wave."

With that, they drank and Joran lit the incense, but Hana couldn't stop thinking about what had happened. They'd lost one third of the elixir. Any cook would tell you that type of reduction could ruin a recipe. Even though Joran had said otherwise, she feared that everything they'd been through had come to naught.

But Kai gave her a reassuring smile as he cupped the back of her neck and kissed her. His lips were warm as they caressed hers. His tongue made teasing forays into her mouth, and yet she felt little pleasure.

"Hana, love, relax," Kai murmured.

"I'm trying."

Sliding his hands inside her *yumata*, Kai caressed her bottom. His large body pressed against hers as he kissed her face and lips. *Breathe*, she told herself. *Enjoy the loving attention of your men.*

She inhaled deeply as Kai pressed the rounded tip of the *konsu* against her anus. It was already lubricated with oil to prepare her for his much thicker rod.

"Here we go, beloved," he said, pushing it with some difficulty into her.

Once the *konsu* was in place, Joran took advantage of her open robe. Standing behind her, he skimmed his fingertips lightly over her bare skin—Moths-in-Darkness. Shivers of awareness swept over her. Kai palmed her mound, pushing gently and rhythmically as Joran continued to play with her breasts, teasing the sides, underneath, around. When at last he advanced into Moths-at-the-Flame, stroking and pulling at her nipples, she sighed with frustration. Usually she'd be writhing with desire, but tonight she couldn't surrender her mind.

"Just relax," Kai murmured, sensing her unease. "All will be well."

"Kai is right," Joran said. "No peace, remember?"

"I remember," she said, but her muscles remained taut even though Kai continued to press soft moist kisses against her cheeks and neck.

"Focus on this," Kai said, kneeling before her and kissing her belly. "Your womb is going to welcome our seed tonight. Together we will flood your body with it. And this time next year, we will have a baby to love."

"But the elixir..."

"Will work," Joran said. He stepped away and applied the ointment to his penis. "But even if it doesn't, we'll try again. And again. Kai will get another topaz. I'll recalculate. We'll scour those *Jin-Hakku* volumes for more information. We'll stop at nothing. We won't let you die."

With a deep breath, Hana raised her eyes. Although obviously inflamed with the topaz-enhanced desire, Joran gazed at her, fiercely resolute, and Kai, solid and proud, stood beside him. Looking at the men she loved, both so strong, so steadfast, made all her doubts melt away. Joran was right. Failure tonight would not signify the end of hope. The great philosopher, Gonaga, said it did not matter how slowly one went, so long as one did not stop. She knew Kai and Joran would never give up, and so neither could she.

With conscious effort, she pushed aside her fears and worries. All thoughts of *sakei-ma-sah* were banished. She mentally ripped up Suri-bei's letter and burned every single malicious word. And when her mind was empty, she filled it with love instead, the great life-sustaining love she shared with Kai and Joran. She committed herself body and soul to the coming night. Each moment of pleasure they gave her would be a testament to that love and to the future they promised her when they formed their triad fourteen years ago.

Her determination must have appeared on her face, because Joran raised his brow. With a slow smile, she shrugged one shoulder and then the other and her robe slid down her body. Kai's eyes widened in appreciation and Joran sucked in a breath as he swept his gaze over her naked body. Hana allowed herself the same pleasure. Joran's reddened cock stood erect from the nest of dark hair. It was so beautiful, especially grasped in his hand. Long and thick, it curved slightly upward and she longed to take it into her mouth and feel the power of it between her lips, thrusting. But she could see the ointment glistening on its length, and his breathing was harsh as he fought the topaz-enhanced lust. Her desire to pleasure him orally would have to wait because he couldn't.

She positioned herself on the bed, gazed up at him and parted her legs. Joran moved swiftly. Hana felt the head of his cock at her entrance, then he was pushing inside, thrusting deeply. She shuddered at the sudden and intense pleasure. Again, the ointment worked its magic. Only three or four long hard strokes and she was coming. She heard Joran's groan of frustration as he pulled out.

Moments later, Kai was pushing her knees to her shoulders and settling his thighs against her flanks. His grimace showed how much he needed to be inside her, so she didn't argue when he removed the *konsu* and entered her more quickly than she usually liked. Hissing, she arched her back as inch after hard inch filled her back passage. Almost at once he began moving in and out in a demanding rhythm. It both burned and aroused.

"Hana, love, you feel so good," he gasped.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Joran. He knelt beside them, holding the head of his cock in a tight grip, ready to take over for Kai. It didn't take longer than a minute before Hana was again overcome. She bit her lower lip as her body spasmed. Kai continued thrusting as Joran came closer. Before she was done coming, Kai had withdrawn and Joran was driving into her. The smooth turnover prolonged her climax—even brought on another right on the heels of the one before. She howled as Joran fucked her right through it. His cock, and the authority with which he used it, intensified her pleasure.

Each orgasm opened her more fully. Kai and Joran kept her on an impossibly high plateau of almost constant fulfillment. The sounds of their animalistic sex filled the room—grunts, gasps, their flesh slapping together, Hana's keening cries as she came again and again. As before, the two men didn't stop. For what seemed like an eternity, they pounded her, somehow managing to hold back, yielding to the other when the pressure had built too much.

At last, in a hoarse voice, Joran announced the time had arrived. In just a moment, they would penetrate her together and fuck her with both cocks at once. Hana was

straddling Joran, her hair wet with perspiration. While Joran lay still, deeply embedded, Kai took his position behind her. She felt the broad head of his penis as he found her anus and slid inside.

When they joined together like this, the three of them, Hana felt so much love it overwhelmed her, and the connection was even more intense tonight. She moaned as Kai and Joran deftly synced their thrusts and tears gathered in her eyes. Joran reached up and cupped her face in his hands.

"Don't cry, *suki*," he mouthed. "I love you."

She nodded with a tremulous smile and pressed her lips to his.

"Joran," Kai gasped. He was hunched over her back, his hips pistoning. "Please tell me it's almost time."

Joran nodded at her. "Hana...?"

"Yes, the next one," she confirmed. As before, her sensations were still painfully acute, but less urgent now. Her body had settled into a state of readiness, gathering itself for the last cataclysmic explosion.

"Talk to us, *suki*," Joran panted as they redoubled their efforts. "We need to come together."

"Almost," she said, gritting her teeth.

Desperation twisted Joran's face, and even though she couldn't see Kai, she knew the strain on him was just as great.

"Come, Hana," Kai demanded between harsh breaths. "Come for us."

Eyes narrowing, Joran upped the pace and Kai followed his lead. Hana didn't move. She couldn't. They kept her body canted at just the right angle, Joran holding her hips, Kai's hands on her shoulder and waist. In and out, faster, harder, they impaled her with their rock-hard cocks. Hana's world was reduced to nothing but the frenzied thrusting of her men and the orgasm building in her belly.

"Hana..." Kai said, with a catch in his voice.

"Almost," she gasped. Joran's hands tightened painfully on her hips.

"Don't stop!" she said again. "Don't...don't—"

Suddenly, she was there. The orgasm seized her.

"Now!" she shrieked, convulsing in helpless pleasure.

Hana shuddered as wave after wave of joy buffeted her. Her entire body hummed and sang with it and at long last, Kai and Joran came too. Beneath her, Joran's face twisted into a mask of ecstasy, his teeth bared, eyes squeezed shut, and behind, Kai ground his pelvis against her. His groan was long and protracted and it sounded as if he might be crying.

It was a long while before they were done. Their seed, carefully hoarded for so long, shot out of them in a hot rush. She pictured it erupting from their cocks in powerful surges, bathing her insides in a deluge, and with all her heart, she prayed her body would welcome it and draw it deeply inside to her womb where it would hopefully find fertile ground. Mindful of how much they deserved this, she held still until the last throbbing pulses had waned.

Kai laid his chin on her shoulder and gasped for breath, his barrel chest heaving. When she reached back and caressed his sweaty face, she felt him smile.

Joran finally let go of her hips. His long hair was also dripping with perspiration. His face gleamed with it as he smiled up at her wearily. "I'm empty," he rasped. "Completely and utterly empty."

"I think I lost a quart of liquid," Kai said, kissing her nape. "Maybe two."

"But it was glorious," Joran said with a low chuckle. He pulled her head down for a kiss. "Glorious beyond measure, *suki*."

Sandwiched between their muscular bodies, more replete than she'd ever been in her entire life, Hana had to agree.

* * * * *

Not surprisingly, Kai and Joran slept a long time. Hana left orders that they were not to be disturbed for any reason. Her men needed rest after three such emotionally and physically grueling days and nights. She did, too, but she also craved solitude, so she retreated to her private rooms with not even her maid to attend her.

When she woke, the sun slanted through the drapes at an angle that suggested late afternoon. She had many hours yet before any darkening of her nipples would be noticeable. That was one of the first signs of pregnancy among the Shinwa. But she couldn't wait.

Throwing back the coverlet, she lurched out of bed and stumbled. By the gods. She actually stumbled! Disorientation and clumsiness were also early indicators of conception. Her heart beating very fast now, she made it to the window without further mishap and yanked open the curtains. The sudden bright light made her squint as she stared down at her breasts, trying to judge whether the nipples were darker. She thought they were but she couldn't be sure.

Closing her robe, she tried to decide what to do. She was tempted to remain in seclusion until she could be certain one way or the other. That way, if she wasn't pregnant, she wouldn't have to face anyone. She could slide a note under the door to announce the bad news and then cry to her heart's content. But she decided that was cowardly. Kai and Joran had done the lion's share of the work these past three nights and deserved to find out at the same time she did.

But she needed to distract herself. Would anything take her mind off this?

* * * * *

Three hours later, she returned from a twilight ride and was met at the stables by her two very angry lords. Joran reached for her mare's bridle while Kai swung her out of the saddle. The dark-skinned warrior looked as if he was torn between shaking her and hugging her, but ended up doing neither.

"Where have you been?" Kai demanded.

"I—"

Joran flung the reins to a stable boy. "Do you know what time it is?"

"You should have taken a servant with you."

"What if you'd been thrown?"

"If you ever do something like this again..."

"Hush!" she finally exclaimed. "I'm perfectly fine. I rode—at a walk—around the lake."

"The *whole* lake?" Kai asked.

She nodded. "It was better than sitting around staring at my chest for four hours."

There was a pause, and then realization dawned and they both looked at her breasts. She would have laughed if she wasn't so anxious.

"Are they...?" Joran asked, gesturing vaguely in that general direction.

She hugged herself. "I don't know."

Kai glanced around. The sun was setting even now. "We need light."

"And privacy," Joran added.

Hana set off toward the house, her men close on her heels. At one point in the path, there was a short flight of stone stairs. As Hana mounted the steps, she lost her balance. Kai, with his battle-honed reflexes, leapt forward and caught her by the elbow before she could fall.

"Hana, are you all right?" Kai asked.

"I'm fine. I just got a little dizzy."

"You're dizzy?" Kai's eyes got huge. "She's dizzy!"

"She's dizzy," Joran repeated, dumbfounded. "She's dizzy."

Kai waved his arm at Joran. "Get her other elbow. We'll take her to the library. It's the closest room with a lot of lamps."

Joran nodded and the two men lifted her off her feet and hustled her toward the house. The news that something was going on spread quickly. By the time they arrived at the library, they'd gathered quite an entourage. However, the servants respectfully remained outside in the hall while Joran and Kai escorted Hana inside.

"Light, light," Kai said, closing the door.

But Joran was already tending to every lamp in the room. Hana stood nervously where they had left her, near one of Joran's map tables.

"Hana!" Kai exclaimed.

She started.

"What are you doing standing?" he cried. "Sit down!"

She hurried to the nearest chair.

"Not there!" Joran said, clutching an armful of unlit candles. "There by the desk where I put the lamps."

Half irritated, half amused, she did as she was told while the men scrambled about. When they were done, they had enough light to sort sand. Joran and Kai knelt in front of her, their faces expectant.

"How will we really know if they're darker?" she asked. "I looked before but I couldn't tell."

"Are you joking? I'll be able to tell," Joran assured her. "I *know* your breasts."

Kai nodded sagely. "He knows."

"Your nipples," Joran said, "are the exact color of my tea when it has steeped for just the right amount of time."

"What if it's still too early to tell?" she asked, still unconvinced.

"Then we'll sit here all night," Kai declared, crossing his arms.

At the comical image that appeared in her head, Hana giggled.

"What's so funny?" Joran asked, frowning.

"You," she said, "wanting to hold a nipple vigil."

Joran blinked, then his stern expression relaxed and he and Kai both laughed.

"But I was serious, Hana," Kai insisted.

"Seriously silly," she said, rolling her eyes. "I will not sit here all night with you two staring at my naked chest."

"Then let's look now," Joran said a little more soberly. "It's been time enough, I think."

Kai nodded.

"All right," Hana agreed.

But inside, she quailed. What if her nipples were the same light brown color they always were and her stumbling was not due to pregnancy? Just thinking about that possibility made her throat close up and her eyes smart.

With a deep breath, she unfastened the frogs on her tunic. She hoped the men didn't notice how much her hands were shaking. Then, closing her eyes, and with a silent prayer, she slowly bared her breasts.

Kai's whoop scared her half to death. "We did it!" he roared. "By the grace of all the gods in the pantheon, we did it!"

Hana opened her eyes to see Kai pull Joran into a rough hug. They clapped each other on the back, laughing. Wanting to confirm things herself, she glanced down and couldn't believe what she saw. Her mouth suddenly dry, she lifted her breasts and looked again. This time there was no doubt. Her nipples were the dark rich color of cloves.

By this time, Kai had run across the room, flung open the door and announced the news. A great cheer rose up in the hallway. Joran stood with his shoulders hunched, his face in his hands. They had done it.

She was going to have a baby.

Chapter Five

Three months later

Soft footsteps on the path signaled Kai and Joran's arrival. Hana's heartbeat quickened and she touched her elaborate upswept coiffure. Tonight was a night of dual celebration, and yet Hana was the only one who knew what they were celebrating.

It had all begun shortly after her pregnancy had been confirmed. Though she hadn't written in her journal for years, she had suddenly felt a renewed desire to resume recording the events of her life. Her inability to conceive had preyed so heavily on her mind for so long that writing about it seemed redundant and pointless, but everything was different now. She was finally going to have a child and she wanted to be able to remember every single moment when she was old and decrepit.

However, her life wasn't all flower petals and sunshine. From the day they'd discovered she had indeed conceived, Kai and Joran had treated her like an invalid. If she let them have their way, she'd be riding in a palanquin just to go to breakfast. She tried to be understanding, knowing this overprotectiveness was only one of the ways they demonstrated their great love for her, and truthfully, she was much more cautious as well. But she needed something to do or she'd go mad.

It took her a while to locate her wayward journal, but when she found it, she'd quickly become engrossed with her accounts of Kai and Joran's courtship, one night in particular. Reading the thoughts and feelings she'd had so many years ago had created such a wellspring of nostalgia that it sparked an idea. That idea brought on another, and another until she had to get paper to write everything down. Several hours later, she not only had a plan for a marvelous surprise, she now had a project to occupy her time. Completion would require several weeks of intense work, a large amount of money and materials and teams of artisans, but she was confident it could be done.

Thus the “secret” renovation of one of the more remote and seldom-used outdoor pavilions began. From the beginning, the project was hidden from view by high canvas partitions, and Kai and Joran had been expressly forbidden to even go near the site. This of course only served to intensify Kai’s curiosity, and her dark-skinned warrior had been hard-pressed to keep his promise. He’d quickly made a hobby out of pestering the workers about what they were doing. Hana, however, had anticipated this and promised them all a very healthy bonus if they kept quiet.

Joran, on the other hand, made no effort to do any outward investigation, but Hana knew he was aware of all the materials being carted to the site, the tools being used, and the occupations of the men and women working on the project. Every once in a while he would make comments like, “Black and gold paint. Hardly appropriate colors for a temple,” or “Don’t you think this is a bit far from the house to have a nursery?” hoping she’d remark upon it, but she’d resisted rising to the bait and now, finally, the moment of truth had arrived.

Smiling at her men, she slid open the rice screen door. “Welcome to the Dragon Pavilion, my loves.”

Kai whistled in appreciation as he mounted the three shallow steps to enter. Not long ago this had been a neglected outbuilding, empty except for dead leaves and some abandoned brewing equipment. Now, it was an intimate retreat, perfect for the night of sexual celebration she had planned. Above in the rafters hung a variety of red tasseled lanterns and elaborate three-dimensional paper cuttings in the shape of dragons. The black, lacquered floor was decorated with more dragons, golden and in the ancient two-dimensional style. Throughout the room, candles were arranged in clusters on shoulder-high stands. Their dragonberry scent infused the air and lent additional heat. It was a chilly night, and Hana didn’t plan on them being clothed for very long.

Joran went to the bed, a masterpiece in and of itself. Large enough for three, of course, it too bore its share of dragons in the carvings of the base, the pillows and the

red brocade sheets and coverlet. At its base sat a small varnished trunk filled with an assortment of *konsu* and other sexual accessories.

Joran kissed her on the mouth in greeting. "You have outdone yourself, Hana. I can already foresee spending many pleasurable hours here. Indeed, I think I may prefer this to the Chamber of the Moon."

"And what are these?" Kai asked, gesturing to two packages that sat on the bed.

"A hint as to what we're celebrating tonight," she answered.

"Candied *tingtze* berries!" Kai exclaimed upon opening his box. He popped two into his mouth.

"The *tingtze* are of particular significance," Hana said, "as is the entire theme of the pavilion."

"Hmm..." Joran's brow wrinkled in thought. Her scholarly mate clasped his hands behind his back and wandered slowly around the room.

After a few moments, he said, "I believe I might know what it is." Slowly, he turned to Hana, a smile curving his lips. "We call them *tingtze* berries for a reason."

Hana smiled back. "Yes, we do."

"Ha!" Kai almost choked on one of the berries. "I know too! *Tingtze*—'fire kiss'," he exclaimed. "We're celebrating the very first time we kissed, aren't we?"

Hana smiled. "Yes."

Kai's elation at having figured out the surprise suddenly softened into an expression of tenderness, and Joran said, "I remember that night. It is well worthy of celebration."

She nodded, suddenly feeling teary. Both men simultaneously stepped closer, enfolding her between their hard, warm bodies. Clearly they were as sentimental about that night as she was.

It had been a costume ball. As was Shinwa custom, in addition to their themed attire, the guests had all had their faces painted to further disguise themselves. Kai and

Joran had come as Qu and Chu, the black and golden twin dragons from the myth of creation. They'd been magnificent. Wearing ferocious headdresses, leather claw-tipped gloves, and wicked spiked wings, their commanding presence had awed all who attended. Hana had come as the proud Empress Gaichi, who had reigned one thousand years before. They'd found each other almost immediately, despite their costumes, and spent an hour or so immersed in their roles, engaging in witty banter and sly, flirtatious jokes, but after a time, everything they said seemed steeped in innuendo. Each word they spoke was a caress, an invitation, a plea, and then just when she didn't think she could endure any more, Joran withdrew a small scroll from a hidden pocket.

"What's this?" she asked, pulling on the narrow ribbon and unrolling it.

"A humble request, Daughter of Heaven."

Your lips whisper, come.

Longing to obey their call

We await your whim.

That was the moment she fell in love with them. They understood her so well that they realized what it would mean to her if they courted her using the formal customs of ancient times.

Attempting to maintain her role as the Empress, she nodded mutely. Joran swept into a bow with Kai following only a moment later, and together they made their way to one of the alcoves. Many openly watched their progress. For weeks the gossips had talked of little else but what went on between the three of them. That they were finally retiring to a private room was an astonishing turn of events. Unfortunately for the crowd, Kai faced the assembly and jerked the curtains closed.

Once inside the niche, Hana realized she might have overestimated her ability to handle the situation. The space was much smaller than the grand assembly hall and the two men had such presence that it suddenly seemed as if the room had less air than it should. She felt like a child next to them, especially Kai, and their fierce costumes did little to calm her. She hoped her face paint masked her anxiety.

“Who will be first to taste your lips, Imperial Highness?” Kai asked, his eyes smoldering with frank desire. His costume consisted of the black dragon wings, headdress, and tight-fitting trousers, leaving his battle-scarred torso bare, except for the straps for his wings. This had caused quite a stir among the female guests, Hana included. While she shuddered to think about the horrific wounds that had caused them, his scars honed his masculinity to a keen edge.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I can choose,” she answered honestly.

“Let us choose then,” Joran said in a silky voice. “Close your eyes, *suki*. We’ll kiss you one at a time and when we’re finished, you tell us who went first.”

With a deep breath, Hana let her eyes fall shut. “Very well.”

There was rustling as they shifted positions and gently spun her around to disorient her. When at last they all stood still, her entire body hummed with anticipation. The music and chatter from outside in the grand ballroom seemed muted as she waited breathlessly for the first touch of someone’s mouth. But instead, the first thing she felt was a warm hand on her cheek, a thumb stroking softly, like a brush of a flower petal. She sighed. Someone moved behind her. She could feel his body heat through the fabric of her gown. He stood close, but not close enough to touch. Yet.

The man in front of her cupped both cheeks and stroked her lips with his thumbs, outlined her mouth. Expectation gripped her so completely she felt as if her life had come to a halt and that nothing could happen to her until he kissed her.

She smelled cinnamon on his breath as he brought his face closer and whispered, “Do you know how long we’ve wanted to do this?”

“No,” she breathed.

"Since we first met," came the reply. "Not a night goes by that we are not hard from thinking about you."

Their soft, growling whispers were impossible to recognize.

"You inhabit our dreams," said the one behind her, "always out of reach." Warm breath tickled the hairs on her neck. She felt something brush against her bottom, then her breasts, but so lightly she might have imagined it.

"But no matter how many times we find our relief without you, we are never satisfied."

Hana took in a ragged breath, picturing that in her mind – the two of them, holding their erect cocks in their hands, stroking as they fantasized about her, groaning in frustration even as they climaxed.

Her breath came faster.

"Then end it. Kiss me now," she said, hoping her voice didn't give away her desperation.

Neither of them spoke. Hana trembled, waiting for a warm mouth to descend...

"*Suki*." Kai's voice snapped her out of her trance.

Hana blinked.

"Where were you?" Joran asked. "Kai just asked you something, but you didn't hear him."

She smiled sheepishly. "I was remembering that night. Those kisses."

Kai groaned as he pulled her close, resting his cheek on her head. "That kiss just about killed me."

"It about killed all of us," Joran agreed. He pressed his hardening cock against Hana's backside, nestling it between her cheeks. "Thankfully now we can do more than kiss."

He started gathering up handfuls of her *yumata*, but she batted at his hands.

"Stop that. I have a plan."

"If it involves only one kiss and then a dip in the lake, I am not in favor," Kai said, crossing his arms.

Joran laughed.

"No, nothing like that," she chided. "Do you think I want to go unsatisfied any more than you do?"

Kai chuckled. "Perish the thought. No one is as greedy for orgasms as you are. And I say that with love," he quickly added, but Hana had already smacked him in the chest.

"No. I thought that perhaps we could play that guessing game again, but with a small wager attached to it." She pulled a cloth from her pocket to be used as a blindfold.

"Now *that* sounds interesting," Joran said.

"So, you kiss me one at a time and if I guess correctly, you two have to relax your vigilance."

"What do you mean?" Kai asked.

"If I'm in the library reading, it would be pleasant if you trusted me enough to not injure myself turning a page."

Kai scoffed at her exaggeration and Joran crossed his arms.

Hana continued. "I'm not joking. It's been three months and I am well past the clumsy stage. Even Samataki says so."

Eighty-year-old Samataki was the resident midwife.

"So what I want is to walk the grounds without attendants dogging my every step. I want to get out of bed, leave the dining table, and go to the necessary room without a servant leaping forward to help me. I want to eat what I want, not what you think I should eat, because if I lay eyes on another bowl of nutritious *gupoo* noodles I will vomit."

The two men stared at her, aghast.

"I'm not joking."

"You said that already," Kai pointed out.

"Well?"

Kai and Joran looked at each other then sighed simultaneously.

"It's a fair request," Joran conceded.

"What happens if you guess wrong?" Kai wanted to know.

"I'll tell you a secret."

Kai's eyes glittered. "I love secrets." He glanced at Joran.

"Give us a moment," Joran said.

The two men went aside and held a whispered conference, looking from time to time at Hana. No doubt they were concocting what they thought was a devious plan. She just as deviously sabotaged them by backing up a few steps and slowly letting her *yumata* slip off her body.

She was rewarded with a double take and then swift intake of breath from Joran and a growl of appreciation from Kai. She'd spent the entire afternoon having her body painted by a team of artists from the city. Using vibrant, long-lasting dyes, they had decorated her naked skin with the image of Qu and Chu, entwined. Qu's tail began at her neck, Chu's near her right ankle. Their sinuous bodies curled all over and around her body with their magnificent frilled heads ending up in evocative places. Chu had his tongue curled around her nipple while Qu seemed ready to explore her nether regions.

"Great Nabba's stones," Kai breathed. "You are a vision. I'm glad you're the one being blindfolded."

As she turned slowly so they could see the entire design, Joran agreed. "You are more beautiful than when we met and that's saying quite a lot." His eyes dropped to her breasts, as they often did. They were fuller now, which delighted Joran to no end. She felt her clove-brown nipples tightening into points and his gaze grew hungry.

"We have a few additional conditions," he said as he tied the blindfold around her head. "Fourteen years have passed since that first kiss and you know us far too well now. So, tonight you must guess two out of three."

"Very well."

"Nor can you touch us. Kai's scars and stone-smooth head make it too easy."

"Ah. I hadn't thought of that. Agreed."

"And just to make sure," he added, "we're going to tie your hands."

"What?" she said again, more forcefully this time.

"Good idea!" piped in Kai. "Here's her sash."

"Hold your hands out in front of you like a good little girl," Joran said.

With a wry smile, she did as she was told and Joran doubled the sash and then tied it around her wrists.

"Now turn about again so we can look at you."

Hana obeyed, slowly, trying to keep track of which of her men was where, but they fell silent. She heard them shuffle about, then two hands cupped her face and a thumb brushed over her lips. A mouth descended. It rubbed against hers gently before a tongue traced the crease. Her breath came a little faster. She hadn't an inkling as to who it was. She opened her mouth as the kiss deepened and she thought it might be Joran. He liked to stroke deeply with his tongue as if it were his cock entering her *kachi*, but she couldn't be sure...

The kiss ended and they switched places, but this time she knew it was Kai. She tasted the tingtze berry he'd eaten a little while ago. Congratulating herself on her cleverness, she abandoned herself to the pleasure of Kai's mouth on hers, the slide of his lips, the teasing flicks of his tongue.

When he pulled away, she frowned as if uncertain. "I...I think that was Kai."

Kai made a sound of frustration. "Yes. It was me."

Hana allowed herself a small smile. She lifted her face for the next kiss, but heard them whispering. "What's going on?"

"Just adjusting our strategy," Kai replied. "We warriors like to do that once in a while."

"But this isn't war," she muttered, wondering what they were up to.

A moment later, the whispering stopped. Someone approached and stood in front of her. She tried to get a sense of the bulk of whoever it was because Kai was more massive than Joran, but it was impossible.

A warm hand closed over her breast, catching the nipple between the fingers and tugging on it. The surprise of it only added to the jolt of pleasure.

"What about the kiss? The second – ohhh..."

Lips had closed around her nipple. A tongue flicked, moved in a slow, wet circle, then as quickly as it had come, the mouth was gone.

The contact was so fleeting that she made a noise of disappointment and someone snickered to her right. *Aha*. They'd thought themselves so clever because she'd never actually said the kisses had to be on her mouth, but if she didn't miss her guess, the mystery snickerer was Joran, which meant it had been Kai's mouth just now.

Again, there was movement. A moment later someone blew on that wet nipple. She shivered at the sharp chill, then moaned when that same someone then opened his mouth and sucked on her. Once...*oh yes...twice...mmm...and done*. Damn them!

Aroused and frustrated, she said, "That was Kai first, then Joran."

"Blast! You *had* to chuckle, didn't you," Kai complained.

Her hands still tied, Hana pulled the blindfold off. "I won?"

Kai was pouting. "Yes, you won."

She glanced at Joran, who nodded.

"Yes!" Hana beamed, triumphant.

She'd won! No more "guardians". No more compulsory meals. She was again an independent woman.

"I'm going to have rice cakes with berry syrup and spicy pork sausages for breakfast," she declared. "I'm going to prune the roses by the temple after that. And then," she said with a sly smile, "I think I'll see how Siu Chow is doing with the treehouse he's been building. Maybe I'll even give him a hand."

Kai stared at her in horror.

"You certainly will not!" Joran shouted. "Do you have any idea how high that treehouse is off the ground? I forbid it!"

Hana pointed her index fingers at them and laughed. "Oh, I got you! I got you! I was only joking!" she exclaimed. "I have no intention of doing something as dangerous as that. I only wanted to get you back a little for treating me like a child these past months."

Her ironically childish delight met with stony faces. Perhaps she shouldn't have taunted them, because Kai and Joran exchanged an exasperated glance and then a few more whispered words.

Uh oh.

"Hana, Hana, Hana," Joran said, shaking his head. "That wasn't very nice."

"And after we kissed you so pleasingly," Kai added.

"It was only a joke." She held her hands out in supplication, but they would have none of it. Joran took the blindfold from her and tied around her head again.

"I'm afraid we're not going to untie you now."

"What *are* you going to do?"

Joran leaned and whispered into her ear, "Terrible, terrible things."

Kai gazed at Hana, blindfolded and bound, her naked skin an artist's canvas, and his half-hard cock grew thicker, longer. Because of the way her wrists were tied, her breasts were pushed together enticingly.

He and Joran had agreed that her little joke, while harmless and amusing—now—had earned her some erotic punishment. A lesson needed to be taught, and while she might protest, she enjoyed submitting to them from time to time. One of the things they loved about Hana was her willingness to engage in a wide variety of sexual games.

But Joran and Kai disagreed on what game they should play tonight, until Joran, ever the diplomat, pointed out that they could each get their way by taking turns. One could direct the action while the other took the role of participant, and then, in what seemed to be the theme of the evening, they would trade places.

So, placing a finger under Hana's chin and lifting it up slightly, Joran said mockingly, "You know, my lord Kai, I think this little *tama-gi* wants to be fucked."

Hana gasped, then her head dropped in deference. "Yes, my lord. She does indeed."

Joran had just called her a prostitute, albeit a high-class one, and Hana had correctly interpreted that to mean they were now playing the brothel game. The brothel game had many variations. He and Joran sometimes pretended to be bored nobles, inexperienced lads, thieves on the run. Hana could be the jaded madam, the new girl, the cheap slut, or like tonight, the guild-approved *tama-gi* who charged exorbitant prices for total subservience.

"On your knees then, girl, and open your mouth."

Gracefully, like a dancer, she knelt. Kai rubbed her cheek with his thumb. His cock thrust upward, rock hard as she parted her lips and her tongue snaked out to lick at the head.

"Ahh," Kai groaned. "I like that."

He stared as she swirled that tongue around until the crown was wet with saliva. When she took him inside, he groaned again. Wet heat engulfed him as she sucked

gently, rhythmically. Gods above, there were few things he liked better than to have Hana's beautiful mouth on him. He pulled out and rubbed against her lips again, enjoying how she chased his cock with her tongue as if she didn't want to let him escape.

He was about to take hold of her head and push inside deeper when Joran said, "And what have we here?"

The chest at the foot of the bed was open. Inside was an impressive assortment of erotic accessories, including several *konsu*, four or five quirts, scented oils, and the flexible, but prickly stem from a *sanzou* flower.

"What?" Hana asked, lifting her head slightly.

Joran scoffed. "Do you think we're paying you to ask questions, *tama-gi*?"

"No, my lord."

"Then get on the bed, on your knees again, legs spread."

While Joran untied her wrists, Kai chose a *konsu* with a knobby texture and some scented oil from the trunk.

As Hana got into position, Kai lubricated the instrument and put it aside. Then, as he poured more oil into his palm and rubbed his hands together to warm it, he let his eyes drink in the sight of her open and vulnerable. Those plump nether lips beckoned his tongue to delve between, to drink from her as if her honey sustained him, which in some ways, it did. Placing his hands on her round cheeks, he kissed the sensitive spot right above her anus. Hana sighed and arched her back. He continued kissing her as he spread the oil about, kneading her buttocks, her thighs, everywhere he could reach.

"Would you like to get fucked now?" Joran asked. "Lord Kai would be happy to oblige."

Ridding himself of his robes, Kai rose up on his knees and rubbed his cock against that wet slit, gritting his teeth against the urge to thrust himself inside her.

"Or would you prefer the *konsu*?" he asked, handing it to Kai.

Kai then toyed with her tight little anus using the polished stone instrument.

Leaning forward on her elbows, Hana practically purred. "That is your decision, my lord. Not mine."

"Excellent answer," Kai said, then smiling, he made his choice.

As slowly as he could manage, he entered her *kachi*. The velvet grip of her body suffused him with an exquisite pleasure. She moaned and stretched her arms in front of her, raising her bottom, intensifying the sensations with the acuteness of the angle. Kai withdrew and thrust forward again, aware that by now, Joran had shed his *yumata* and was stroking himself as he watched.

"Now touch yourself, little *tama-gi*. I want to see you touch yourself."

Sighing, Hana did as she was told, but Kai knew she wouldn't last much longer. Since completing the topaz treatment, she'd become unusually adept at coming, not that that bothered either of them. On the contrary, her enjoyment only added to theirs. As Kai continued to rock against her, his pace increasing gradually, Hana pushed back with each thrust. He saw a light sheen of perspiration appear on her skin. Her breathing became more audible and she began making the urgent sounds in her throat that never failed to arouse him. Before long, his hips were slapping against her. He began sweating too. His balls tightened.

Then, with a gasping shriek, she came. A flush spread over her back as she went rigid. He closed his eyes against the rhythmic pulses of her orgasm. He thought he could ride it through, but at the last minute he pulled out and grabbed his shaft tightly to stave off his imminent climax. Then abruptly he changed his mind and rammed himself back inside. Hana cried out again. Two, three hard thrusts and he was coming. So was she. Powerful bursts of pleasure buffeted him and every muscle in his body contracted. He took hold of her waist and pumped some more, pulling her, grinding his pelvis against her.

At last, when he could breathe again, he sighed. He was reluctant to leave the comfort of Hana's wet warmth, but it was Joran's turn, and judging from his rigid expression, the man was more than ready.

As Kai used a soft cloth to wipe away his seed, Joran poured himself a small cordial and tried to calm his body. Watching Kai and Hana had been almost unbearably arousing. Throughout, everything within him wanted to join them, to participate, if only to give her one kiss, but he and Kai had made a deal, and he had faithfully kept up his role as facilitator, directing the action from the side, part of it, and yet not.

But now it was his turn.

At Joran's nod, Kai removed Hana's blindfold and said, "If you think you're done, girl, you're sadly mistaken."

"No, my lord," she said, as Kai lashed her wrists together again. "This humble but satisfied girl hoped that was the case."

Kai patted her flank and chuckled. "Then come. We want you on your feet again."

Joran beckoned to her and she obediently went to him, her posture and movements the very picture of humility. As she waited for further instruction, he tied the free end of her sash to his to double the length, then looped it all over a convenient hook embedded in the large wooden post in the center of the room. Hana had no doubt installed that hook with something like this in mind.

"I'll take that now," Kai said, taking the sash from Joran.

As Kai took up some of the slack, Joran pawed through the trunk and was pleased to see a dragon's tongue quirt. The business end had a stack of flat straps which he tested on his thigh. A delightfully loud smacking sound made Hana jump. *Perfect.*

"Look alert now, girl," Kai said. "I have a potential buyer coming in a few moments."

Again, Hana started slightly in surprise at this turn of events but recovered quickly. The slave market game was another of their favorites. Joran wondered which persona she would take on tonight.

"I told you before," she said, lifting her chin imperiously. "I'm not for sale. You are making a grave mistake."

Joran smiled as he handed Kai the quirt. He might have known she'd choose the furious princess after having just played the wholly subservient prostitute.

"My father will have you flayed alive when he discovers what has happened."

"You have no idea how many others have claimed the very same thing," Kai said. "It's never true. Now listen carefully. This buyer has paid for a *privileged* assessment. Do you know what that means?"

Hana spat forcefully in Kai's general direction. Chuckling silently, Kai leapt out of the way and exchanged a look of amusement with Joran before clucking his tongue and giving her rump a sharp taste of the lash.

"Ow!"

"Behave or you'll get worse than that. Now hold still while I put this in you. He might want to explore your back passage."

Hana hissed as Kai inserted the oiled *konsu*, giving it a slight tug to make sure it was set in place.

"There we go. Just in time," Kai said. "Here he comes."

That was Joran's cue. Assuming an arrogant expression, he took her chin in his hands. Hana flinched, her nostrils flaring, but she said nothing. The reddened mark on her rear explained why.

"She's a beauty, is she not?" Kai said. "Feast your eyes on this unusual adornment, how the dragons are poised to devour her."

Joran grunted noncommittally. Grasping her throat with one hand, he took hold of her breast with the other. He squeezed it, hefted it in his palm. Hana turned her face

aside, but submitted. Her nipples were hard. He flicked one of them with his index finger.

"Those luscious melons are as responsive as any you've tried before. I've had a turn at them myself." Kai poked her with the handle of the quirt. "Arch your back, girl. Let him get his mouth on you."

With a falsely apathetic sigh, Joran lowered his head and took a sweet, sweet peak into his mouth. Hana made a muffled sound as he sucked. Again and again he swirled his tongue around, teasing with nips of his teeth, pulling with his lips. When he finally let go with a smacking sound, her nipple was swollen and red and she was panting, but trying not to show it.

"What did I tell you, my lord? If you think that was something, wait until you fuck that tight, juicy *kachi*." Kai applied the whip lightly to her thigh. "Spread your legs, now, and be quick about it. His lordship doesn't have all day."

Hana obediently widened her stance and Joran thrust a hand between her legs. His cock pulsed when he encountered the slippery evidence of her earlier coupling with Kai. Some men disliked going second because it made them feel inferior, but Joran and Kai had a different philosophy. They valued Hana above all else, and the fact that they were willing to share her with each other and follow the other's sexual claim only strengthened their male bond.

Hana scoffed as he withdrew his fingers. "I'm sure his lordship doesn't need all day," she snapped. "In fact, he most likely only needs a few moments."

Swiftly, Kai pulled on the sash, hand over hand, until her arms were raised above her head, then *smack* went the quirt. "Watch your mouth, girl."

"Sharp-tongued vixen, she is," Joran remarked as without ceremony he lifted one of her legs. Probing briefly, he found her entrance with his cock. "I'll show her 'a few moments'." Then, grunting, he shoved himself inside.

Gods above, her *kachi* was a wet paradise. Staring into her defiant eyes, Joran thrust into her again. And again.

"Feels good, doesn't it, girl, to have a fat cock stuffing your hole?" Kai taunted.

Grinning at Hana's snarl, Joran tangled a fist in her hair and pulled as he took her mouth roughly with his own. She resisted his efforts to get her lips apart, struggling now with her whole body, but a sharp crack startled her. Kai had struck the side of the post with the whip, right above her head. With a swift inhalation, she opened her mouth.

Joran grunted with satisfaction as he took command of the kiss. His tongue demanded a response from her that she refused to give, even though she was backed up against the wooden post, completely helpless to stop him. Part of the appeal of the slave market game was proving she liked it, getting her to surrender.

So he changed tactics. He slowed down. Patience governed his movements. Each long, deliberate stroke drew out the pleasure while promising much, much more. While her resistance was evident in the tightness of her jaw, the gruff exhalations she made from her nose, he continued. He fucked her for a long time. One of the candles sputtered out and still he pumped. His body had entered a state of relaxed anticipation, aroused, eager, yet content to wait until the right time. He conserved his energy, immersing himself in the moment, not the goal.

"You like it," Kai whispered in her ear.

"No, I don't," she insisted, her beautiful face flushed. "I feel nothing."

"Liar," Kai scoffed. "I see your hips moving."

It was true. She'd begun to yield. Little by little, the fierce tension was leaving her muscles. His own body responded. Joran felt a need to increase the pace, the intensity, the depth of his strokes. Eventually, her mute defiance gave way to soft sighs of pleasure. The leg he'd held aloft wrapped around his hips, pulling at him.

"That's it, my lord," Kai urged. "Make her come."

Joran intended to. Drawing on a reserve of energy, he used his thighs to put more power behind his thrusts, each one making a wet smacking sound. He ravished her neck with raw, mindless lust, dragging his lips across her throat, along her jaw, only to

capture her mouth again. She kissed him back now. Where before she'd refused his attention, putting up all her defenses, now she greedily demanded more of him. He gave it to her. His groin slapped her clit over and over. Their bodies strained against each other, both of them desperate by now for the imminent explosion of orgasm.

Joran sensed it was near. After so many years with her, he knew the signs. He pushed himself even harder. No mercy. No restraint. Nothing held back. He was an animal with one primal need.

Suddenly, with a jerk of her body, she went rigid. Joran raised her other leg, didn't stop fucking. His cock continued to plow into her as she convulsed with pleasure. Her gasping cries filled the room. He did his best to shut out the provocative sound and to ignore the pulsing grip of her tight *kachi* on his shaft.

Sweating, he caught Kai's gaze, nodded. The bigger man let go of the sash as Joran pulled out. Working together, they unbound her wrists, took off the blindfold. Hana was dazed. Kai turned her to face him, then his face tight with lust, he lifted her, adjusted, then lowered her right onto his rigid cock. Hana's head fell back and she cried out as Kai took over. His extraordinary upper body strength enabled him to move her up and down as if she weighed nothing. Hana braced herself on his shoulders, giving herself over to the ride.

"More," she gasped. "I want more."

"And you shall have it," Joran said, taking hold of the *konsu*.

Her back arched as he started to pull it out. Kai assisted him by holding Hana still and thrusting up instead. Little by little the knobby instrument emerged from her anus. Joran twisted and pushed and pulled as he removed it, just the way she liked it, and she came again as Kai continued pumping. When the *konsu* was free, he tossed it onto the bed. Its job was done.

Cock in hand, Joran approached Hana from behind. Kai was already adjusting his stance again so that Joran could more easily enter her. The man knew what he was about—Joran had no trouble finding his place. Looking into each other's eyes, Kai and

Hana both held still as Joran eased inside. It seemed to take forever. Although stretched from the *konsu*, Hana's body closed in on him. It was a while before he was completely sheathed, his groin pressed up against her bottom.

"I live for this," Joran groaned, slowly making his way out now.

"As do I," she murmured.

Though Kai stood mute, it was understood he mirrored their feelings. His mouth and Hana's merged as the two men found a rhythm. Serene and well controlled, they rocked against her, their cocks sliding in and out of her with no noise except their soft grunts of contentment. The moon rose, the stars shone down and outside the pavilion, the creatures of the night went about their business, unaware of the relaxed coupling occurring within.

It was times like this that Hana pitied other women. Surely there did not exist a triad so sexually tuned to each other, so deeply in love that they enjoyed many nights such as this. The bliss she felt when her men both took her at once transcended all else.

In front of her, his black skin gleaming with sweat, Kai supported her effortlessly. She splayed her hands over his smooth, black head and pressed her mouth to his. So much was exchanged with that kiss—hunger and contentment, appreciation, admiration, and of course, love.

Meanwhile, Joran's lips roved over her shoulder, sending hot chills over her body. Since Kai was taking all of her weight on himself, Joran was free to caress her at will. As expected, he had his masterful hands on her breasts. With a soothing touch, he massaged and squeezed. He played with her nipples, alternately rubbing, tweaking, pinching, scratching. Then, she felt something prickly. Sometime when she wasn't looking he'd taken up the *sanzou* stem and was now dragging it across her breasts, tapping those spikes against the tips.

She hissed at the sharp pleasure and he chuckled.

"Like that, do you?"

"You know I do," she answered, leaning her head back.

"And this?" Joran asked, sawing the stem across one sensitive nipple.

She shuddered in response. "Yes. Don't stop, please don't stop."

Kai smiled. "I believe the lady wants the pleasure of Provoking-Abrasion."

"On top of the Suspended-Treasure, Concurrent she's already getting," Joran remarked.

"She's going to get spoiled," said Kai.

"Clearly," said Joran.

And yet, they obliged. With increased vigor, they continued to fuck her. Their large cocks stretched and filled, taunted and possessed. The feelings built inside, layer upon layer, as their thrusts came faster, harder. Kai had her by the waist now to counter the force of their thrusts. Joran raked the *sanzou* stem across her nipples relentlessly, sometimes working a few of the barbs briefly into her skin. The exquisite sting excited her even more.

"That's it, Joran," Kai said, panting. "She's going to come."

"No, actually, she *is* coming," Joran gasped.

It was true. Hana arched as the orgasm hit. She shuddered with profound satisfaction and as often happened, her climax ignited theirs. Kai gave a hoarse shout as he came. His hands tightened painfully on her waist. She felt his powerful thighs shaking as he emptied himself deep inside her body for the second time that night. Joran lasted only moments longer. Burying his face into her neck, he tossed aside the *sanzou* stem and ground himself hard against her bottom. She felt the strong pulses of his cock as his hot seed flooded her other passage.

They stood connected like that for a long while, their skin slick with sweat, the combined sound of their panting loud in the candlelit pavilion. Kai found Hana's mouth, claimed it with his own. His words of love caressed her lips as Joran whispered his own heartfelt declaration against her shoulder.

At last via an unspoken signal, Joran carefully took Hana's weight upon himself and Kai withdrew. As Joran pulled out as well and set her on her feet, Kai held his arms out to steady her. With a sigh of contentment, she leaned into his embrace. She didn't trust her unsteady limbs to carry her to the bed just yet. But after they murmured their post-coital prayer of gratitude, the three of them found the energy to collapse onto the mattress in a sweaty tangle.

"My loves, I am constantly surprised by your ability to satisfy me. I believe I will sleep in before having my delicious rice cake breakfast."

"A most excellent plan," Joran said, absentmindedly caressing her breast. "The evening was perfect. Exhausting, but perfect."

Hana waited for Kai to make a similar remark, but when he said nothing, she turned on her side to see him looking positively despondent.

"What's wrong, my love?" she asked. "What could possibly have you looking so sad?"

And her fierce warrior, looking surprisingly boyish, lifted one shoulder and said, "The secret."

Hana should have known that he would not have forgotten about that. Kai did so love finding out secrets.

"Oh, Kai. I always intended on telling you the secret."

"Really?" He brightened.

Joran chuckled as he rubbed his leg against hers.

"Yes, silly."

Smiling, she rolled onto her back, took their hands and placed them on her slightly rounded belly. Then, with a deep breath, she said, "We're having a boy."

"What?" Kai sat up.

"We're having a boy, and another boy, then a girl, and another boy."

Joran's finger traced around her navel. "And how do you know this?"

"I dreamt it. Three nights ago. I dreamt we were on the north terrace. Joran, you and I were sitting in the shade and Kai was playing with the two eldest boys. Our daughter was doing something by herself and I don't remember much about the third boy, but I know he was there."

"Not the most compelling evidence," Joran said with an indulgent smile.

"No, I know, but this dream was so real. I feel so strongly that the dream will come to pass. Two boys, a girl and then another boy. Mark my words."

"I believe you, *suki*," Kai declared, lying down again beside her. The warm weight of his hand on her stomach was comforting. "And I know the perfect name for him. Zao, because he is the first. The first of many."

Hana was about to agree. Shinwa babies often bore names that were also numbers to indicate their placement in the birth order, and Zao, "one", was a popular name because it also meant "strong".

But Joran said softly, "If you have your heart set on a numeric name, what about Po?"

"A thousand?" Hana said, confused. "I don't understand."

"Me neither," said Kai.

Joran tweaked Hana's nipple. "Po, because he was conceived from the book of a thousand pleasures."

"Ah." Hana showed her approval of the idea by kissing him. Their tongues met briefly as Kai said, "Po. I like it. I like it very much."

Hana smiled, marking this moment in her memory so that she could record it later in her journal. The *Jin-Hakku* was indisputably the book of a thousand pleasures, and as Joran had proven, it was also a source of secrets. But the journal of Hana Akemi Tomomoko Matakura would be different because should someone pick up it up a century from now and read it, they would find a book of *ten* thousand pleasures—a hundred thousand—all of them everyday demonstrations of the love that she shared

with Joran and Kai. It was no secret that what they had was a rare and precious gift from the gods, a gift she would never take for granted, especially when six months from now the three of them gazed upon the face of their newborn son.

Kai and Joran began discussing possibilities for Po's second and third names, their fatigue apparently forgotten, and nestled between her strong and loving men, Hana rubbed her belly and smiled. It occurred to her that Chun Fu, "heavenly miracle", would be a fitting second name, very fitting indeed, for she knew from personal experience that miracles happened. Sometimes more than once.

About the Author

Kate Willoughby got hooked on romance in the late seventies when she read *Sweet Savage Love* by Rosemary Rogers. Inspired, she and her best friend wrote a contemporary love story involving a multi-millionaire playboy and the restaurant hostess determined to cure his drinking problem. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you look at it), that manuscript has been lost forever.

Fast forward to college, where she took a creative writing course. Kate still wanted to write love stories, but everyone else in class was composing Important Literature and Thought-Provoking Poetry. A few devastating critiques later, she gave up, discouraged and embarrassed. Eventually, her muse got over the trauma and pestered her to try her hand at writing again.

Kate resides in Los Angeles with her husband of fifteen years and their two sons. When the testosterone in the house builds up to unbearable levels, she escapes by reading, cooking, and scrapbooking with friends.

Kate welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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