

Shunga Chronicles

PIRTICE and the ASSASSIN



Cizzie Cynn Lee

Changeling Press

Shunga Chronicles: Prince and the Assassin
by Lizzie Lynn Lee

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Shunga Chronicles: Prince and the Assassin

Lizzie Lynn Lee

Call me Midori.

I'm the last of my kin and bearer of the *kitsune-bi*, fox-fire eyes. As bearer of the mark, I was born to kill. In fact, I'm so good at killing, my overlord Buntaro entrusts me to spy and eliminate all his enemies. But all that changes when my master orders me to kill a man I nicknamed Gorgeous Cock. His irresistible charm causes me some wanton aches between my thighs, making it difficult for me to execute my duties.

It's hard to kill your enemy when you fall in love with him...

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Chapter One

He mistook me for a spirit when he first laid eyes on me.

How could he not? I was in the middle of my bath, naked, with my long hair down, and plumes of the hot spring's mist swathing me like a deity's gossamer robe. My pale skin, which is one of my best attributes, glistened from the droplets of water, and was tempered with the soft glow from the moonlight. Or perhaps it was my eyes that made him think I was a mischievous spirit who'd come to seduce him.

As the last of my kin, I possess the rare *kitsune-bi*, fox-fire eyes. My irises change color according to my mood; red when I'm angered, blue when I'm sad, fathomless black when I'm in a killing rage, and silver when I'm aroused.

And tonight, I'm aroused.

I've been told when my eyes turn silver I exude a raw charm that makes me look like a *yokai*, a spirit. But only a few have vouched for this, as most of my lovers were busy with their cocks when I was in this state.

"Are you real?" the stranger asked. His voice sounded cultured and profound. His speech proved him a highborn, with a hint of the Autumner accent.

I smiled coquettishly, turning forward to show him my other best attributes. "Real enough, if you would like to come closer," I teased.

The stranger was a striking man in his early thirties, garbed in a simple cotton kimono and straw sandals. His unbound hair spilled behind his shoulders like curtains of

black silk. He had his traveling bundle slung behind his back, and a battered *katana* sheathed in his sash. I gauged he was a warrior, or a scholar who disguised himself as a warrior. Although, in my opinion, he was too refined for a warrior from the way he carried himself.

He stared at my full breasts; my nipples stood erect like ripe berries ready to be plucked. Then his gaze moved down to my mons, which was without body hair. As bearer of the *kitsune-bi*, I inherited distinct traits from my ancestors, and one of them was the absence of hair on my sex. Men found this fascinating.

The stranger also found my hairless sex fascinating at first, but then his expression turned guarded. He frowned, eyeing me with suspicion. Judging from the look in his eyes, he dismissed me as non-human. "What are you doing here?"

"Why, sire," I splashed water on my bare body, inviting him to join me in the water, "I'm just a wanton girl who came to seduce and debauch you."

He narrowed his eyes, instantly grabbing the hilt of his *katana*.

I was alarmed. "Don't even try, unless you know how to use it." He stood a good distance from me, and my pile of clothes and weapons were within my reach. I could outrun and kill him should he decide to use his sword on me.

He noticed my clothes, and the long black *nagato* that lay atop. He relaxed. Everybody knew spirits never lounged around with weapons. He laughed. "For a second, I thought you were a spirit."

"If I were a spirit, your sword would be useless to wield against me. Don't you know that?"

He shrugged. "You never know. I've never met one." He pulled his *katana* from his sash and placed it carefully on the ground, along with his traveling bundle. He started to disrobe.

"What are you doing?"

"You invited me to join you. Don't you remember?"

"That was before you were thinking of killing me. I rescind my invitation. Put your clothes back on."

He smiled. "Too bad. I'm in dire need of a bath."

I started to open my mouth to protest, but stopped when he pulled off his loincloth. Damnation! A fluttery feeling singed my loins at the sight of his maleness. He was fully aroused, and his cock was as refined as the rest of him. Come to think about it, I'd never seen such a beautiful cock. It was impossibly thick and long, and curved upward like the Emperor's precious ivory. I changed my mind about sending him away. "Is that real?"

"Real enough, if you'd like to come closer." His smile widened, dimples adorning each cheek.

"You love to jest, I see."

"I also love pillowing." He dove into the pond. The water splashed everywhere. Before I knew it, he'd grabbed my waist and pulled me into his welcoming arms. He ran his hands over my body, my hair, the juncture of my thighs, the back of my knees, touching everything as if he wanted to make sure I wasn't a spirit. "You're real enough. And too beautiful to be real..." he murmured, his voice dark and husky.

I wasn't paying attention to what he said. My eyes were transfixed on his cock. It swayed as he was busy feeling me. I touched it experimentally and it stirred with anticipation. Ah, he liked me...

"What's your name, pretty one?"

"Uhm?" I stroked his cock. It became incredibly hard in my palm. A soft groan of pleasure came from him. "I'm nobody, thus my name is unimportant. What's yours?"

"Mine is also unimportant." He studied my face, looking enthralled by what he saw. Perhaps he'd never seen a woman with changeling eyes before. "I shall call you Silver Eyes since yours are very unusual."

"And I shall call you Gorgeous Cock since yours is grandly befitting for a man," I blurted out without thinking.

The stranger burst out laughing. He stopped groping me, letting me explore his gorgeousness. He shuddered in pleasure when I stroked his cock with light squeezes. "May I?"

"By all means, Silver Eyes, I'm yours to command."

Feeling victorious, I pushed him to sit on the flat surface of a rock. Up close, he looked so much younger than I'd first thought. In fact, we could be the same age. His features were classic Ojoh-noen, with a perfectly curved nose and slanted eyes. His lips were full, laced with the perpetual haughtiness that usually marked a highborn. His shoulders were broad and strong, splendidly chiseled with high pectorals. His coppery-colored nipples were as taut as mine, so hard and pouting, glazed with streamlets of water, making him so tantalizing to lick.

He smelled of sweat from the baking sun, dust from the long travel, and the musk of his desire. A signature male scent. His cock rose from the thick, curly dark nest, waiting for my ministrations. I stroked him again, lowered my head, and licked him. He twitched when my tongue brushed the plum-shaped head. It dewed with the thick pearly liquid of his desire. Like his scent, he also tasted pure male. It reminded me of sea bream mixed with the exotic spices from the Western traders that Lord Buntaro once had me sample.

He sighed when I lapped the head gently. He groaned when I ran my tongue over the length of him. He howled when I took him as far as my mouth would allow and sucked him as if I were going to harvest his soul from it. His hips jerked upward, muscles corded, flesh taut with an indecent blush of heat, and the scent of his musk cloyed like overripe persimmons in the winter. "God, Silver Eyes." He hissed, his fingers buried in my hair, his nails scraping my scalp. "It feels so good. I never thought you would have such a wicked mouth..."

He gathered my hair at the back of my head so he could see what I was doing. His breath labored, and low primal growls escaped from his throat each time I gave him a hard suck. A burst of salty cream swam in my mouth. I knew he was close to his completion. I stroked him once, twice, while I kept half of his length in my mouth. He grunted hard, trying to prevent himself from coming. I wouldn't let that happen. I wanted my reward, and so I was frenzied with my suckling. Suddenly, he snagged my face and pulled me upward.

I protested. "I'm not finished."

"I know. I don't wish to come yet, though it's very tempting." His eyes flickered toward my sex. "Come, ride me. Let me feel this sweet cunt of yours."

He slipped a finger into my heated core. And then another. I gasped. Soon, the two large fingers invaded my cunt, rubbing, stretching me open and lubricating me with my own juice. He pressed his palm on my pubis to prevent me from slipping away, his thumb circling against my hardened clitoris. "Oh." I trembled. He certainly knew what he was doing. Didn't he say he loved pillowing?

His lips found mine, and he forced his tongue into my mouth with the same urgency as his fingers stretched me open. I shivered with pleasure.

"You're so dainty. I don't think you can take me. I'll split you asunder..."

"Don't flatter yourself," I replied thickly, holding onto him. "You're not the first well-endowed cock I've mounted."

"You think so?" His voice was laced with amusement. "Well, come here and take me. Don't ever say that you weren't warned beforehand."

"Hah." I was very happy to take his challenge.

He pulled his fingers from my sex and licked them clean. His eyes were half-closed as he savored the remnants of my liquid lust. "Delicious, just as I suspected. How was I?"

"I don't know. You wouldn't let me finish..."

He grinned, baring two rows of pearly white teeth. He pulled me closer, hands firmly anchored on my buttocks. His cock pulsed, feeling so hot on my belly. Our skin grazed, slicked, and simmered with the heat of our lust. I could hear

his heart pounding harder than mine. "Come, do your worst, temptress," he whispered, his voice thick with longing.

I smiled triumphantly and took his shaft with both hands. I gave him a few more strokes and slowly poised the head at my entrance. He was lavishly proportioned and I wasn't fully ready. That part of my body resisted his intrusion when I eased myself onto him. I halted, and then pushed harder. He slipped in, but only slightly. He groaned with impatience, anchoring my buttocks to push himself all the way in.

"W-Wait." I breathed out, laughing nervously. "I think I can manage..."

His face contorted with impatience. "Be quick, I can't hold it much longer..." He bent forward to lick my neck and slid down to suck my nipple.

I yelped when he bit me, and he used the distraction to sheathe himself all the way in. Our pubic bones slammed together, pain and pleasure bursting like wildfire. I cursed him for his trickery. I felt so full, so profoundly stretched, so sinfully good ... "W-Wait—" I stopped him as he was ready to move. I tried to accustom myself to his girth, and my attempt made the muscles of my sex contract. Each spasm invoked a series of delicious throes of pleasure that rendered me hotter and wetter. Suddenly, I forgot how to breathe.

The stranger cooed to me softly. "Take a deep breath, Silver Eyes. Slowly, yes, like that. I won't hurt you..."

I mumbled inarticulately, letting myself be mastered. He anchored his hands on my waist, trapping my body completely. I held on to him, resting my head on his sweat-laden chest. He started to move, slowly at first. My toes

curled from the sweet feeling. I could feel him throbbing in my depths, hot and slick from my own liquid lust. He knew just how to move himself to invoke all my pleasure nerves. His veined shaft stroked me in such a way that I soon teetered at the precipice of my climax.

"Good?" he inquired through gritted teeth. From the look in his eyes, it seemed he couldn't continue to be gentle any longer.

I couldn't answer him; the pleasure thickened, and the scent of his potent musk made me heady.

His hips moved urgently and his breath labored. "Forgive me, Silver Eyes, but I must—" He growled, pummeling in short, rapid strokes, and rutting like a feral animal. His mouth slid onto my breast again and sucked my unbitten nipple. I cried with delight as his teeth coarsely grazed my nipple, and felt the frenzied jerking motions of his hips. He pounded me harder, faster and deeper. I soon could feel only fire. I cried out, clawing his chest with my nails, trying to hold on to the last strand of my sanity as a violent release swept me in its tide. I exploded. His face blurred in front of me, replaced by silver-red lights as the paralyzing ecstasy consumed me fully. He came hard, a hair's-breadth after me. His cock juddered inside me, each spasm filling me with his hot seed. I was lightheaded as I floated back to reality.

He whispered sweet endearments when his rapture was over. He wrapped me in his arms, holding me as if I were his long-lost precious lover. I clung to him long after our glorious climax was over. We intertwined, limb to limb, listening to our beating hearts amidst the plumes of the hot spring and the

shower of ethereal moonlight. He caressed my hair, kissing me until all the bones in my body were melting and new delicious tingles pricked my skin, kindling another fire inside me. I wanted to lie with him for hours, savoring his lust till morning. The night was too beautiful to end so soon. But then I remembered I had duties waiting.

When I shifted away from his embrace, he was startled and snatched my arm. "Where are you going?"

"Forgive me. I have to go. My master expects me."

"So, that's it? You're just going to leave?"

"What do you expect? Go home with you as your plaything?"

"That wouldn't be a bad idea."

I shook my head. "I have a master to serve and tasks to fulfill."

His face darkened with disappointment. "When can I see you again?"

"I don't live around here."

"Neither do I. I'm heading to the Festival of Fertility in Jonen. Do you think I can see you there?"

"Perhaps."

His smile disappeared. His demeanor suddenly changed, turning haughty. He drew himself up to full height, looking agitated. "You must know something. By my noble birth, I have the right to claim you. No one can challenge me if I decide to take you with me."

So, he was indeed a highborn, or one of the princelings of the Imperial. By law, they could take any women they desired without suffering persecution like the commoners.

I sighed regrettably. Because of my *giri*, obligation, to Lord Buntaro, I can't take a husband or a long-term lover, even though I've long yearned for it. All of my time is devoted to serve only my master. As a spy and assassin for Lord Buntaro Soseki of Nightfall, I would live and die by his command. "I'm afraid I'm untouchable."

"Are you married?" His voice sounded desperate.

"I wish I were." I caressed his unshaven chin. Truthfully, I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay here until morning and enjoy his warmth and his passionate pillowing. For a strange reason, I found myself smitten with this stranger whose name was unknown to me. But it was better this way. Knowing him personally would distract my mind from my duties. "Listen, I'll try to make it to the festival. Where can I find you in Jonen?"

"In Tagata Inn." His grip on my arms tightened. "Promise me you'll come."

I kissed him amorously so I wouldn't have to promise. Because of who I am, I wasn't at liberty to give away promises. "Goodbye."

"What's your real name? Who is your master?" he demanded. "I simply must know."

"I'm sorry..." I slipped away from his grip. He tried to catch me, but to no avail. No mortal could ever catch me if I didn't allow it. His hands splashed the water as he caught an empty space. I jumped to the embankment and grabbed my things in a flash. "Thank you for the lovely evening. Until then..."

I left.

He shouted my name, the name he'd bestowed upon me, as I ran to where I had left my horse. I found the steed still tethered by a willow branch, and my sleepy ward lay nearby. Kenji opened his eyes when I arrived, stretching his legs luxuriously. I got busy dressing.

"How was it?" he asked between his yawns.

"How was what?"

Kenji chuckled. "Gorgeous Cock."

"You spied on us?"

He rolled his eyes. "How could I resist the temptation? The noise you both made could be heard all the way to Mount Hiei."

I grinned, fastening my cloak and securing the tie of the wide-brimmed hat on my chin. I saddled my horse and swung up to mount. My tender sex throbbed against the hard surface of the saddle. I bit my lip, hoping my ward wouldn't notice me wincing. "Let's depart; we're running late. If we hasten, we might be able to reach Yamagata by morrow eve."

"Midori-sensei, if you weren't dallying in the pond, we wouldn't be late. I thought you were just going to have a quick bath, not pillow a stray man," Kenji grumbled, rolling his blanket and securing his bundle to the saddle. His white mare whinnied softly as he mounted.

"How could I resist the temptation? He has a gorgeous cock."

Kenji snorted hard. I laughed all the way to Yamagata.

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Chapter Two

We reached the stronghold of the Autumn faction before the sun was completely swallowed by the horizon. The sky bled in the color of precious jacinth, tinged with a deep hue of scarlet. No clouds were in sight, but I knew thunderstorms would ravage this land tonight, just as my rune stone had predicted. The timing couldn't have been more perfect, because the task my master had entrusted me with required a great deal of stealth.

We entered the city through the north entrance, and avoided the main road as soon as the fortified walls of the Autumn Lord's castle were visible. We went into the woodland near the castle's moat, and made a makeshift tent. Kenji tethered our horses by a narrow stream and gave them water. He then gave them fodder, and bustled to make us some *cha*. I was busy studying the Autumn Lord's castle perimeter through my spyglass when Kenji called, telling me the *cha* was ready.

I folded my spyglass and jumped down from the highest branch of the tree. The ground beneath me whispered from the impact, as if a wisp of a breeze just blew gently. Our kin didn't leave tracks, nor make sounds when we walked. We were silent-footed.

Kenji looked at me. "Did you see him?"

"Yes. He's still alive, but not for long."

Kenji handed me an earthenware cup brimming with hot *cha*. I sipped it with delight. We'd been riding since nightfall

from Tosuga, and had not rested at all. Our horses were at the edge of exhaustion. Luckily, we reached Yamagata at the time we had planned.

We drank in silence. I drowned in my own thoughts on how to pass the guards while Kenji ... well, I didn't know what he was thinking. Probably one of his phases. It would be a waxing moon in a few days, when he usually desired to switch. Kenji was a *futanari*—a newhalf—as he was born with two sexes, both male and female. Most of the time, Kenji carried out his persona as a man, except for a few times during the year when he switched into a female role and rampaged the town, seducing men for companionship.

"How are we going to pass the guards? The usual?"

I nodded. "I'd wager there won't be many guards dispatched in the perimeter with the thunderstorm coming tonight. Have you prepared the grapples?"

"They're in my bundle. So how are we going to do it? Head or whole?"

In my trade, "head" means we kill the subject and collect the head to bring home, while "whole" means we retrieve the subject to safety. "Judging from his condition, more likely we'll take the head."

Kenji sighed. "Lady Fujiko will mourn. I pity that woman."

I finished my *cha* without comment. Konuke Ike, the heir of a minor lord of Nightfall, had been taken hostage by Lord Autumn when he was only seventeen years old. After the great battle of Katai, our realm, Three Lands, divided into three factions: Nightfall, Twilight and Autumn. The Emperor then chose my overlord as *Sessho*, regent of the realm, to

assist His Majesty to govern the nation. Our Emperor was a slothful man and had no other interests besides gluttony and sexual indulgences. He didn't want to be troubled with politics and commerce, and therefore he practically let Lord Buntaro rule the realm. As long as my overlord generated exorbitant revenues to the Imperial's coffer, the Emperor cared for nothing else.

Lord of Autumn, Konoe Nariakira, was jealous of my lord's power and wealth. As *Sessho*, Lord Buntaro's wish was his underlings' command, and each word spoken from his mouth was a law we all had to obey. Four years ago, Lord Konoe launched an attack on Nightfall to protest laws Lord Buntaro had made over the years. Konoe's army killed several of our generals and captured Lord Ike in the battlefield. Ike was brought to Autumn and held hostage. Since the Konoe han was a prominent family in Nightfall, and Ike was their only heir, Lord Buntaro had to amend his decisions regarding the Three Lands policies that Lord Konoe deemed unfair.

A few days ago, a tiding came to us bearing the terrible news that Ike had been involved in a brawl with Lord Konoe's only son. Unfortunately, Ike maimed the Konoe's lordling quite horribly. As retribution, Lord Konoe tortured Ike, and punished him by depriving him of his right to die as a warrior.

In our realm, to die in such a manner is considered the greatest humiliation a man can endure. Therefore, Lord Buntaro ordered me to give Ike the death he well deserved. Before my departure from Nightfall, Lady Fujiko approached me and asked if I would be able to recover her only son to safety. I promised her nothing. It depended on Ike's

condition. It's impossible to carry a wounded man across the great land without the risk of being discovered by the Autumner soldiers. And besides, my overlord desired Ike's death, for then he would no longer be the puppet of Lord Konoe's frivolous demands.

"Would you like more *cha*? I'm starving. I think we still have some rice cake somewhere in my bundle."

"No, I'm fine." I had no desire to eat before my killing. It was just a habit. I got up, snatching my spyglass. "I'll go look around some more. Get ready when you finish eating."

Kenji nodded with a mouthful of *cha*.

I climbed up one of the tallest trees, studying the castle we were about to infiltrate. The air was thick, humid with moisture, the sky rapidly darkening. Before long, clouds unfolded across the sky like a malignant plague; black and pregnant with water.

The downpour came all at once.

I folded my spyglass and stowed it in my pocket. I jumped down and returned to our makeshift camp. We cleaned our camp, and changed into dark clothing. An hour later, we stealthily climbed the fortified walls and crawled onto one of the turret's roofs, waiting.

Above us, the thunderstorm raged like a scorned woman. We made ourselves flat against the roof. Hours went by. We waited.

The bells chimed, announcing the hour of the hare; midnight. We didn't make our move yet. According to my experience, men were most tired and unguarded between midnight and dawn. At midnight, men usually indulged

themselves with wine to dispel the cold chill, and the guards were no exception.

It wasn't long before somnolence and fatigue plagued them, and that was when we made our move.

I signaled Kenji to follow me. We flashed from one roof to another, approaching the castle square. Konuke Ike had been crucified on one of the crosses. The perimeter was without guards, and only a few dogs were chained at the foot of the cross. Kenji would see to them. He would also silence the guards in a nearby turret, so they wouldn't bother us while I executed my master's task.

I waited for the bell to chime the advancing hour of the tiger. It never came. I suppose even the bell master had dozed off. I nodded to Kenji, and he disappeared into the blackness of the early morning.

My acute hearing caught the soft whisper of the *shuriken*, then the whimpers of the sentry dogs. I looked at the turret and saw a black shadow flashing in between the posts. A few moments later, a red silk kerchief flew from the turret's window, signaling that Kenji had done his job. It was time for me to move.

I jumped down from the edge of the water spout and sprinted toward the cross. Ike's eyes were shut, his breathing shallow. With my spikes, I climbed the cross until I was level with him. "Lord Konuke," I whispered.

Ike stirred, his swollen mouth worked out a murmur. "Who are you?"

"Lord Buntaro sent me. Forgive me, but what I'm about to do will cause you great pain."

His mouth contorted into a snarl. "I can't think of much greater pain than being deviled like this. Do your job."

Kenji sneaked toward us with light steps. I nodded at him to get ready. With my pliers, I pulled the nails from Ike's hands. He jerked in agony, but didn't make any noise. He slumped forward when both of his hands were free. I anchored him as Kenji pulled the nails from his feet. We hoisted Ike onto the ground.

The rain fell hard and thunder shrieked across the heavens like gods in wrath. I wiped Ike's face. His eyes flickered open. He was too weak, and death enshrouded him in its firm grip.

"You'll grant me an honorable death?"

"Lord, do you have any message for your family?"

Ike coughed. Blood spurted from his mouth. "No. But I'm sorry to disappoint Lord Buntaro. I wish to be in peace now..."

"Very well." I unsheathed my *nagato*, and with one slash I gave him the honorable death. Kenji caught Ike's head and wrapped it in a thick muslin cloth. From my bundle, I unwrapped a *katana* and a *tanto*, both crested with Nightfall's symbol, and laid them on top of Ike's chest with his hands wrapped around the scabbards. I stuck three unlit incenses in between his battered fingers as our way of saying he departed in peace. Kenji and I murmured a death prayer so Ike's spirit would ascend to Heaven honorably and grandly, as any warrior who'd died in battle.

Then we left.

Before the dawning sun arrived, we had left Yamagata far behind.

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Chapter Three

The Master of Rites shouted my name as I entered the Grand Hall holding a tray of *bundori*, a trophy of victory. The audience stayed silent, watching me present the tray to my overlord. My court kimono swept the floor behind me and the long sleeves made a whispering sound as I bowed.

"My Lord." I made a deep obeisance. "The task you entrusted me has been fulfilled. I beg of you to examine the fruit of my labor."

Lord Buntaro gave me permission to rise and show the audience the *bundori*. I removed the muslin cloth and shifted the tray aside so everyone could see it. A series of collective breaths stirred from the audience. Somewhere among them, I heard faint sobs too. The head of Konuke Ike, prominently displayed on the tray, had been cleansed ritualistically by a priest, and perfumed with incenses and imported myrrh from Koryo.

"Well done, Midori." Lord Buntaro sounded pleased. With a wave of his hand, I was relieved and allowed to take my position. I retreated and sat near the dais, a place reserved for his personal retainers. A white-clad priest came and took away the *bundori* tray.

I folded my hands on my lap, casting my eyes on the floor while Lord Buntaro made a speech about his decision on sending me to Yamagata. He eloquently explained Lord of Autumn's corruption, and the way it had to end. Ike's death was a justification as it was an unavoidable, and a well

thought decision he had to take for the benefit of the faction. Lord Buntaro also promised he would take the necessary actions to put the Lord of Autumn in his place.

Everyone's faces shrouded in uncertainty when Lord Buntaro finished his speech. Our overlord had just announced his indirect intention to start a war with the Autumner.

Lord Buntaro dismissed the meeting, thanking the audiences for their time. The Master of Rites shouted, announcing that Lord Buntaro proceeded to leave the hall. We all bowed until our overlord was out of sight.

A runner boy whispered in my ear that Lord Buntaro wished to see me in privacy. I withdrew as soon as the elders of the *han* exited the Grand Hall.

I followed the boy through the maze of hallways leading to Lord Buntaro's Room of Assignments. In here, our overlord received his underlings for reports, and assigned them tasks.

"My Lord." I sank into a deep obeisance. We exchanged greetings as the boy closed the *shoji* door behind me.

"I'm pleased with the way you handled this matter, Midori. Does Fujiko trouble you?"

"No, sire. I haven't met the lady since I returned from Yamagata."

"But Fujiko approached you before you left?"

"The lady asked me to bring Lord Konuke home, alive and safe."

"Was it possible?"

"No, sire, he was dying. The wounds he'd suffered were too great to bear. Lord Konuke wanted a clean death when I

brought him down from the cross. What is the matter, sire? Does Lady Fujiko hold resentment against me?"

Lord Buntaro waved dismissively. "Nothing you should be concerned about. I gave you a task and you performed it well." He unrolled a scroll from his desk and had me read it. It was a detailed report from our spies in Yamagata, summarizing Lord of Autumn Konoe Nariakira's activities. Lord Konoe asked the Imperial Heir to forge an alliance in order to vanquish Lord Buntaro's position as *Sessho*.

"Does the Heir agree with Lord Konoe's proposal?" I returned the scroll to his desk. Recently, a rumor had spread across the realm that our Emperor's health had diminished, and a succession would take place soon. Unlike the Emperor, the Heir Apparent was keen on politics, and desired to rule the realm firsthand without any help from my overlord. The Heir had a plan of banishing the *Sessho's* title and office from the royal court, to maintain absolute power in his hands. Lord Buntaro's position was at stake.

"I don't know that yet, but Konoe has arranged a secret meeting in Jonen, at the time of the Festival of Fertility. I want you to observe that meeting, Midori."

"But, sire, even if Lord Konoe acquires the Heir's support, they couldn't just banish your position. Your appointment as *Sessho* was the Emperor's decree. As my memory serves, an Imperial decree can't be annulled if the new successor doesn't approve it."

"It's not Konoe's alliance that worries me, Midori. I'm concerned about the impending war. I know my position can't be banished at the whim of the new successor, but if the war

is happening, it would change everything. I would rather avoid war if it were possible. It took me years to rebuild our realm from our past turmoils, and now, when our nation has begun to flourish, that warmonger Konoe wants to start a new one."

"Would he dare to start the war, sire? We have the Twilight and the Imperial on our side, and Lord Konoe doesn't possess an army to match ours."

"If the Heir agrees, the Imperial would then join forces with the Autumn. The war is inevitable. I would very much like to prevent it from happening."

I quieted, digesting my overlord's concern.

Our nation was a nation of warfare. The overlords in Three Lands had been constantly feuding among themselves, and the Imperial hadn't been able to take control of the situation and restore peace to the land until Lord Buntaro's reign. Many people might not agree with the way he governed the realm, but under him, Three Lands was in a much better state than before.

"And this Jonen meeting, sire, you'd like me to go there and prevent it from happening?" I knew where this conversation was going. Lord Buntaro wouldn't summon me and discuss such important matters if he didn't have an assignment for me to do. And to be honest, I was quite excited about this assignment. Suddenly, the thought of the stranger I had pillowed in the hot spring of Tosuga came into my mind. What a wonderful coincidence.

"No, Midori. The meeting must commence. It's important I know what Konoe is intending to do. I know you just returned

from a long journey, but you're the only one who is fit for this task."

I blushed from his praise. As the last of my kin, Lord Buntaro treated me rather specially. Because of the constant warfare, my kin's existence had been wiped clean from the face of the realm. Legend said that my *han*—fox people—descended from the misbegotten child of a *kyubi no kitsune*—a nine-tailed fox spirit—who seduced a Shinto priest. The *kitsune* gave birth to a boy-infant who later founded our *han*. Having a *yokai* as our ancestor, we were blessed with acute hearing, sharp eyes, silent-footedness, and many other favorable distinct traits making us different from common people. Because of our gifts, the overlords recruited many of our kin as spies or assassins during the Age of Wars. Twenty years ago, the great Nightfall overlord Toriden Kyoden decided to annihilate our *han*, so no one could ever recruit our kin. Toriden harbored hatred against us because one of our kinsmen assassinated his only heir.

Lord Buntaro was Toriden's general at the time, the one who was given the task of my *han's* genocide. Lord Buntaro hunted and killed our kin as he burned and pillaged our villages. Every man, woman, and child was put to death, and my family was no exception. As the Toriden army slaughtered my family, Lord Buntaro found me standing by the carnage pit, and he halted his intention of killing me. Fascinated by the color of my eyes, he asked me if I wanted to live. If so, I must forever serve him, faithfully and without question. I was only seven years old and I chose to live.

Lord Buntaro brought me to Okamoto and raised me in secrecy. He taught me the Way of the Sword, and trained me in the art of spycraft. When Toriden's rogue vassal murdered his own liege lord, Lord Buntaro took over the faction and became the overlord of Nightfall. And so, I became his spy, assassin and his elite retainer. I didn't always agree with my overlord's decisions, but he was my liege lord to whom I swore a sacred oath of loyalty, and I'm indebted in eternal obligation.

Lord Buntaro took a piece of paper and wrote his order. When he was done, he pushed the paper over for me to sign. He unsheathed a *tanto*, exposing the sharp blade. I pressed my thumb against the blade until a droplet of blood blossomed from the cut, and signed the order with my bloody thumb. Lord Buntaro whisked off the order, and read it one more time before burning it in the brazier, sending it to the Celestial Heavens.

An order sealed and sacred. And I must fulfill it as my assassin creed dictated or die trying. I sucked my bloody thumb dry. "With your permission, I'll get ready for Jonen, sire."

Lord Buntaro nodded his approval. "You'll take Kenji with you?" His voice was laced with amusement.

"It's almost waxing moon, and the festival is the perfect place for him to wander instead of our town. Last time he switched, he caused quite a nuisance among the unattached men. Many thought they'd been seduced by a siren."

Lord Buntaro allowed himself to smile. As *Sessho*, and the most powerful man in our realm, he had to keep a sedate

demeanor at all times. Only a few people had actually witnessed him smiling. "Very well, Midori. You may leave and commence your task. The festival isn't for another week. In the meantime, you might as well have some leisure and observe the festivities." Lord Buntaro handed me a heavy pouch of golden *ryo* as my reward. The coins inside jiggled merrily.

"You honor me greatly, sire."

"I know you won't disappoint me, Midori." Lord Buntaro's eyes were distant. "Sometimes, I wish you were my son..."

I didn't know what to answer to this, though I felt pity for him. I bowed deeply and withdrew from his presence.

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Chapter Four

"We're going to Jonen?" Kenji's eyes widened with excitement. "You jest."

"No, I'm not jesting. I have a new assignment. Lord Buntaro wants me to observe an important meeting." I stared at my choice of kimonos, not knowing which one to pick. I would like to go to Jonen disguised as a noble woman so I could get a decent inn. At this time of the year, it was impossible to get a good room in Jonen, unless you were one of the exalted people. But to go as a noble woman required plenty of luggage, and I preferred to travel light.

"That blue one looks splendid on you," Kenji pointed out. "Or perhaps that pink one. Or you can buy a kimono in Jonen, so you don't need to carry too much baggage."

"I think you're right." I decided to travel light.

"Then can I borrow that blue one?" Kenji grinned from ear to ear.

"You trickster." I cuffed his ear. "You can borrow my kimono, but stay away from my perfume. It's rare—"

Our conversation halted as the door of my room slid open. I thought it would be a maid and was ready to chastise the insolent girl, but instead, Toshio, Lord Buntaro's only son, emerged from the door. He looked disheveled and his eyes were red. He usually wasn't this rude, but when I smelled *sake* on his breath, I knew he was deeply inebriated.

"Get out," he ordered Kenji. "I need to have a word with Midori." Kenji stared at him with great dislike. He refused to go, standing still. "Are you deaf, urchin? I told you to scram!"

Kenji's jaws stiffened. His hand hovered by his belt, eager to snatch the *tanto* stowed in his sash. Unusual as he was, Kenji was a highborn, unlike me. He was a son of a minor lord in Nightfall, who had been brought into Okamoto to learn the art of spycraft under my tutelage.

"Kenji—go." I pushed my ward toward the door. I didn't want the tension between them sparking any trouble. "I'll summon you when we finish."

"But, *sensei*—"

"Go!"

Kenji shot a hateful glare at the drunken Toshio and padded away. He left the door wide open as a reminder that Toshio's visitation was improper. Toshio whirled to the door and slammed it hard. His rough handling tore the paper linings.

I inclined my head. "To what do I owe this honorable visit, sire?"

Toshio snatched my arm and pushed me down to the floor. He had wanted me for a long time, but I never obliged him. I have my own rules. First, you don't dally with your overlord's only son. And second, Toshio is a slothful, conniving and vindictive creature. Sometimes, it's hard to believe he is the fruit of Lord Buntaro's loins.

"Show me your silver eyes, Midori," he slurred. His breath reeked of *sake* and it seemed he hadn't bathed in days. His face was only a hair's-breadth away from mine, laden with

lust. "You never show me your silver eyes. They're all telling me you're most lustful when your eyes turn silver."

I shoved him hard. He tumbled backward. "I think you'd better leave."

Toshio snarled and grabbed my neck. He wrestled me on the floor. "You were promised to me, Midori, should you forget that. I can treat you at my whim."

"My lord has never promised me to anyone. My service only belongs to him."

Toshio roared. "My father won't live forever. Sooner or later, he'll die. And when it happens, you will be mine, little assassin, and I intend to use your service wisely. Such a waste all these years, letting you be untouched." He groped me, running his hand all over my body. I recoiled in disgust. "Akh!" He cursed, noticing my eyes. "Red! Always red!" He pulled my hair and shook me hard. "The day you become mine, Midori, you will honor me with your silver eyes. Do you hear me?"

Oh, how I ached to slice my *nagato* across his throat.

He tried to kiss me. I evaded him. I was torn between teaching him a lesson and just incapacitating him. I could render him asleep simply by pressing the pressure point on his neck. Or I could break some of his bones as a warning for the future.

The door slid open and Soma, my overlord's chief retainer, gasped, aghast. Kenji stood behind the old warrior. My young ward looked utterly disgusted.

"Lord Toshio!" Soma pulled Toshio off me. "You're drunk!"

Toshio cursed and flailed, and only quieted when Soma administered a pinch to the pressure point on his neck. Toshio slackened and went unconscious.

Soma looked at me. "Forgive me, Lady Midori. Lord Toshio was drunk and didn't know what he was doing."

Why, of course. Toshio was known for having half a brain in his head. "No offense taken."

"I would appreciate it if my lady doesn't report this incident to Lord Buntaro."

"What incident?" I played along with Soma's game. "I came here only to find him sleeping on my pallet."

Soma looked relieved. "Thank you kindly, Lady Midori." He hoisted Toshio on his shoulder and hauled the drunken lord out of my room.

Kenji bristled as soon as Soma and Toshio were out of sight. "Why do you not report Toshio's behavior to Lord Buntaro? This has been going on long enough. Toshio has gotten bolder each time. Next time, he'll rape you."

I sighed. "Lord Buntaro knows."

"And he does nothing about it?"

"Sadly, our lord thinks I might like Toshio too. Maybe not now, but in the long run, perhaps." I got up from the floor, combing my hair with my fingers, fixing my stray strands. "Let's pack and depart as soon as possible. I don't want to be here when Toshio wakes up."

* * * *

It took us a day and a half to reach Jonen. The weather favored us, so we were ahead of our schedule. The sun was

high when our horses trotted into the bustling road of Jonen. As the city that hosted the grandest Goddess of Fertility temple in the realm, Jonen was bathed in a vermilion color as a tribute to the Goddess. It reminded me of a red poppy field in full bloom, with the red banners, flags and offerings making the city vivid and bright. The street was filled with vendors hawking their goods, selling wooden phalluses, clay vaginas, and lewd-looking trinkets as offerings to the Goddess. The air was redolent with the thick smell of garlic, fried tofu, sweet buns and many unidentified wonderful aromas, making my stomach suddenly growl.

"Hungry?" Kenji smiled. He'd heard my stomach growling.

"Aren't you? When was the last time we ate?"

"Yesterday, I think. Do you want to look for an inn first or shall we go to a teashop for lunch?"

"Why don't you find us an inn while I go look around? I need to find my contact." I dismounted from my horse and gave the reins to Kenji. "I'll meet you in that teahouse in an hour." I pointed to a fancy teashop in front of us.

I wandered through the busy streets, and treaded my way into the shrine district. Although the festival wasn't going to commence for another three days, many worshippers had already crowded the shrines to pay homage to the Goddess with their offerings. I went directly into a small shrine at the end of the street. As I got to its steps, a priest clad in red came and greeted me.

"Esteemed One, I have committed sins and long for my salvation. Do you think you can help me?" I kneeled in front of him.

"Certainly, child. Please, come with me."

He ushered me into the back of the shrine and into a private room. He lit a candle and basked me with the smoke from a fragrant *ko*, an iron urn. We sat on the floor cushions, knees to knees. "What is your sin, child?"

"My sins are uncountable and unsalvageable. I'm afraid I'm doomed to consort with the devil when I die."

The priest laughed. "Lady Midori, it's nice to see you. How is Lord Buntaro?"

"My master is in excellent health, thank you. I'm sure you know the purpose of my visit?"

The priest bowed his head. "The meeting you must observe will be held at the time of the celebration. From what I have heard, it will commence in the main Goddess shrine, behind the procession hall. The Autumner agents have been swarming the place for the last couple of days. You must take extra precautions, Lady. So far, Lord Konoe's agents have executed two innocent people simply because they acted too suspiciously."

"How many men are guarding the place?"

"My last count is twenty, but don't take my word for it. It will be more when the meeting commences."

I nodded, digesting this information.

"And the Heir?"

"Prince Akatagawa Fukuda?" The priest furrowed his eyebrows. "He'll come incognito. No guards. Quite foolish if you ask me."

"I suppose because no one will suspect it."

"From what I've heard, the Heir is also adept with the Way of the Sword. He is a very competent swordsman, that's why he dares travel alone. There's one more thing you should know, Lady: a representative from Twilight will also attend the meeting. His name is Ise Shigeki. Lord of Twilight has personally authorized his faction to attend this meeting."

"Twilight? Are you sure?" I furrowed my eyebrows this time. The Twilight faction was known for its long-standing alliance with Nightfall. Could it be the Twilighter had a plan to betray my overlord and switch alliance? Since the death of the previous Lord of Twilight, Mushashibo Tojo, who happened to be Lord Buntaro's closest friend, the Twilight faction had turned against us under the new reign of Mushashibo's son. Lord Buntaro had voiced his concern that he could no longer control the tax levy in Twilight regions, and this had caused us a deficit in balance. I wouldn't be surprised if the new Lord of Twilight was skimming tax money to build his own army in order to topple Lord Buntaro.

The priest nodded his assurance. "Lady, my source is very trustworthy."

I thanked him for the information and left the shrine with trouble inside my chest. The overlords of two factions were plotting my lord's downfall, along with the Heir of the Imperial. The war wasn't just brewing. It was boiling.

All these years we hadn't had to worry about the threat of separation because Lord Buntaro possessed an army far superior to the Autumner or Twilighter. But, by joining their forces together, along with the Imperial army, we wouldn't stand a chance against them. And Lord Buntaro wasn't the

kind of man who had a habit of surrendering in any form. Three Lands would be shattered with the bloodiest war in history.

I was so busy thinking that I didn't realize my feet were carrying me to the inner compound of the city. The sight of a particular inn stole my attention. The name "Tagata Inn" was on the plaque. I remembered my handsome stranger said he would stay at this inn.

A moment later, I halted my breath in surprise. *Uwasa o sureba kage*, speak of the devil, just when I was thinking about him, he emerged from the inn's door. My stranger dressed in different *yukata* and a pair of fresh *hakama* this time. His clothes looked new but simple, as if he didn't wish to publicize his exalted status. His hair bound neatly, and his jaws cleanly shaven, he carried a bundle wrapped in red cloth as an offering for the Goddess, and made his way among the crowd. He looked as striking as the night I left him. My heart thundered and wanton aches stirred in my loins. Suddenly, I forgot all my troubles for the moment.

Perhaps I would give him a little visit tonight.

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Chapter Five

The stranger's name was Ryu Araki, according to the inn records. He was from Negei, a northern Twilight territory; he'd come to Jonen to worship and to conclude business dealings. I'd bribed the innkeeper handsomely for such information, and paid him extra to keep what he'd just told me a secret. The innkeeper seemed no stranger to this kind of dealings. He bowed to me as thanks and told me not to worry, as his establishment was famous for keeping an affair a discreet matter.

I couldn't give my stranger a visit until two days later, as I was busy spying on Konoe's minions. On the third night, I slipped into my stranger's room after midnight. I climbed down from the window silently. He was still awake. I found him sitting by a writing desk with his head tilted forward and a quill in his hand, poring over a thick ledger. He didn't hear me when I sneaked behind him, but when I touched his cheek he bolted from his seat and seized my hand. A heartbeat later, he was on top of me with a blade poised against my throat.

"You!" He looked both surprised and relieved.

"A knife? Does this mean you aren't in the mood for pillowing?" I teased.

The blade vanished and his lips crushed mine. He kissed me greedily as if we were a pair of soul mates about to part forever. I almost couldn't breathe; he suffocated me with his kisses.

"Silver Eyes," he murmured, cupping my face. "I ... I thought you wouldn't come. I thought I'd lost you forever..."

"I'm here now."

He kissed me again, and this time he didn't hurry. He was an ardent kisser, just as I remembered. Passionate and demanding. My heart beat faster as the stroke of his tongue kindled my lust ablaze. I couldn't remember the last time a man was able to render me powerless simply with a kiss, and yet, at the same time, masterfully stir a wildfire inside me.

He parted our lips, noticing my pretty, new kimono. He seemed delighted at what he saw. He ran his hand on my overcoat, a finger unhooking the tie loose. "You look so beautiful in this kimono, but I like you without it at all."

"By all means, Gorgeous Cock, I'm yours to command."

"My name is Fukuda. Address me properly from now on."

"I thought your name was Araki?"

"Have you been spying on me?"

I shrugged. "I bribed the clerk to tell me which room was yours. I told him I was your consort and wanted to surprise you with a late night visit."

"Consort?" A smile spread on his face. "I like it. Maybe you'd better get used to it, beauty, because I want you to come home with me."

"I already told you—"

"Not now. No argument." He pushed me down and anchored me with his body weight. He drew a deep breath. His eyes burned with longing. Any fool could see he wanted me in the worst way a man wanted to mate. "You shouldn't

have left me there. You don't know half the woe you caused me..."

"Woe? What have I ever done to you?"

"You bewitched me, Silver Eyes, and I'm forever under your spell." He leaned down to kiss me again, but stopped at the very last second as if he just remembered to get a hold of himself. His lips grazed mine, causing a dark thrill to creep from the base of my spine. He drew himself up slightly, examining me with full intensity. "I need you to answer some questions. First, what is your real name?"

I didn't answer right away. I wasn't in the habit of giving away my name to men I had pillowed. But when I saw the enamored expression on his face, I didn't have the heart to deny him. What harm could it do? And besides, my name was quite common. Quietly, I told Fukuda my name.

"Midori." He repeated it as if my name was an important verse of a sutra. "Who do you serve? Who is your master?"

"Forgive me, but that knowledge is mine to keep."

"But I must know ... I just want to compensate your binding price to your master. You're coming home with me, Midori."

"My binding price can't be compensated with money. I owe my master a life, and with my life, I should pay him back."

"I'm sure we can work out an agreement. I'll grant anything he asks. I'm sure your master won't be so hasty to refuse if I offer him a handsome compensation."

"Sire," I said tiredly. "If you keep insisting on knowing my origin and my master, I think I'd better leave—"

"No!" He became furious. "You don't understand. I'm losing my mind because of you. I—" He swallowed his frustration. "I'll just have to make you understand then."

Fukuda undressed me with great haste, practically ripping my clothes apart. I wanted to tell him that my kimono was new, and costly too, but after a brief consideration, I decided I'd better not. It seemed he wouldn't let anything get in the way of having me. He unbound my hair, fisting a handful of it and inhaling my scent deeply into his lungs.

He kissed me everywhere, fervently, with his teeth marking me as his, branding me with nips, bites and mauls. I had to clench my jaws to prevent myself from shouting. Pleasure and pain burst out one after another; wanton heat spiraled to where he had marked me. I shuddered when his head shifted to the juncture of my thighs, doubting if I could take being marked down there.

He paused, spreading my thighs wide apart. His hot breath singed my yearning cunt, and a light flick from his tongue almost made me come at once. I bit my lower lip as his mouth enveloped me, his tongue lancing into my very core, so deep, so sinfully good. He paused every so often, watching my reaction. He took his time as if I were a delight that must be savored slowly.

I writhed, the pleasure so intense I thought I was dying. He gripped me hard, his nails digging into my flesh, anchoring me to stay still. I heard him grunt, then his tongue flicked upward, lashing on my tender clitoris. I came hard and unbelievably long. My body raked with pleasure so intense, it wiped my mind blank. The color of the world faded fleetingly

and only a gray abyss cloaked my vision. I was lost. Entrapped. I couldn't do anything but surrender to the mind-shattering ecstasy.

When I was able to gather my thoughts into one, I found him looming over me haughtily, thrilled to see me climax hard. With an arrogant smile, Fukuda showed me what he had in his hand: a bundle of *koshi-himo*, the tie cords of his kimono. "Uhm, I think not."

"Oh, it is for sure. You're mine, Midori, and I won't let you slip from my sight ever again."

"You're going to tie me up with that?"

My tone must have sounded so condescending Fukuda thought I needed to be reminded of my place. He whipped the *koshi-himo* on my chest. The cotton-braided ties lashed across my breasts, stinging me. I whimpered. Flash fire kissed my nipples, and delicious ecstasy ebbed from where he had punished me.

"I'll show you who is your real master, Midori—me." He whipped the cords on my belly. I yelped—the pain so exquisitely good, I lubricated luxuriously from his punishment. He lowered his head and whispered, "You should submit to no one else but me. Your master might be able to bind you with *giri*, duty, but I will possess you with an even greater force than *giri*. I think you knew it from the first time we met. We are bound by destiny, Midori. Are you still going to deny it?" The huskiness of his whisper sounded dangerous.

"I—"

"Sssh." Fukuda pressed a finger on my lips to silence my objection. He produced a thin sash from his kimono, and with

it, he gagged me unmercifully. His movement was fast and adept, and I could barely protest when he secured the tie behind my head. The gag muffled my objections.

"What is that? You want your hands to be bound too?" Fukuda grinned wickedly. "Worry not, beloved. I would be happy to oblige your wish."

I protested, but the only sounds that came from my mouth were muffled. Fukuda pinned both my hands on the floor when I tried to move. He wrestled me with brute force, as if he wanted to make a point that he was the master of my body. I let him win. He kissed behind my ear as he tied my wrists with his *koshi-himo*. I shivered. I could feel his erection pressed hard against my yearning body. Delicious shivers crawled along my spine when he nuzzled and licked me as if I were a delectable sweet. My objections were soon forgotten. The pleasure had lulled me from my dissent. I found myself completely under his mercy. He tied my arms behind my back so tightly, it would take me hours to undo the knots. He knew the Way of the Ropes so damnably well.

Fukuda watched me, looking pleased at his handiwork. He traced my lower lip with his fingers, tested my gag, and gave me a quick lick, a featherlight kiss. I groaned, wanting him to kiss me longer.

He laughed. "Greedy, aren't you?"

I begged him through my gag.

"Patience, beauty..." He palmed my breasts and squeezed me hard. I writhed with pleasure. His rough hands felt so welcome on my bare skin. He drew a sharp breath through his clenched teeth, as if he were at the edge of his

forbearance. With one hand, he undid the tie of his *hakama*, and then yanked off his loincloth impatiently. His cock bobbed free. It was rock-hard, angry-looking, and as impatient as its master.

A sudden warmth stirred from between my thighs at the sight of his cock. I remembered only too well the last time he'd ravished me. A dark craving ebbed from my very core. I ached for this man so much that every fiber of my being screamed for him. If he said he was under my spell, then what I felt for him would be an understatement. His brands on my body had awakened a sudden realization; I had finally found my other half.

My soul mate. I closed my eyes and willed myself to deny it.

Moments later, my eyes flew open when I felt soft, slicked flesh brushing my bare chest. Fukuda had his cock between my twin mounds, gliding in my cleavage, teasing me. He cupped my breasts and pressed them together, squeezing his rock-hard erection. I cried through my gag. His veined shaft felt as if it had scorched my skin. Hot. Red. Sinfully good. The friction he deliberately incited rendered me crazy. He'd tied me well so he could taunt me, knowing I couldn't deny my feelings of wanting him too. I cried again.

"Like it?" Fukuda's grin widened. He let go of my breasts and stroked his cock in front of my face. His tip leaked and a drop of his pearly essence hit the corner of my lips. I tried to catch his precious cream with my tongue, but the damned gag prevented me from doing so. I became frustrated. He teased me further by pressing his tip on my lips. Oh, how I

longed to worship him, taste his virility and reap the reward of his male elixir.

He shook his head. "Not tonight, beauty. After what you've put me through, I don't think you deserve this. Yet." He whipped his cock away from me.

I growled, mad. He laughed again.

With my assassin training, I could loop his neck with my free legs and incapacitate him in seconds. I became impatient with his cruel teasing. While I was still dallying with the idea, Fukuda wrenched my ankles upward and sheathed himself into me in one long, ferocious stroke.

I screamed. My sex was on fire. My mind muddled to nowhere.

I gasped. I writhed. Pleasure had me firm in its grip; the only thing I could do was surrender. Surrender to him, surrender to his mastering.

He rammed me with short, urgent strokes, and then suddenly he pushed my thighs on my belly, anchoring them to seek a deeper penetration. I was out of breath. The air around me thinned. I felt lightheaded. And I loved every second of it.

In my helplessness, I could only accept his voracious thrusts. I swam in pure ecstasy. I climbed higher and higher, and when I was about to reach my peak, he abruptly stopped.

I protested.

He grimaced. His breath was heavy, and perspiration beaded his temples. He let go his hold on my legs and shrugged off his *yukata*. I wanted to touch him, feel his flesh grate against my own skin. He denied me that privilege,

however. He hadn't forgiven me for leaving him cold in Tosuga.

He ran his hands over the curve of my hips, and then rested his palms on our joined flesh. He spread my nether lips open while he took me slowly, in short, shallow strokes. His eyes closed as if he was savoring his claiming. One of his fingers found my clitoris and played with it. I grunted through my gag. He made me feel so good, but it wasn't enough. I needed him to take me hard as he had before. He heard my impatient growls and opened his eyes.

"Since you left me there, many nights I lay alone wondering if I'd made the biggest mistake in my life for letting you slip away from me," he told me in a solemn voice. "You don't know what it's like to realize I might not be able to see you again. All those nights I blamed myself, thinking our encounter was a mere nuisance coupling, and realized later that you are the only one who ever made me whole. How can I make you understand what I feel for you, Midori?"

I was quite baffled with his declaration, but pleasure fogged my mind again as he sped up his thrusts.

"I want you—" he thrust harder, "so damn bad. How can I make you feel what I feel?"

If only he would remove my gag, I could answer him properly. But I didn't think he wanted to hear my answer. He was punishing me for what I did. Despite the exquisite pleasure he was giving me, my heart sank when he reached for the candle and held it over my helpless body.

The drips of hot wax hit my bare skin. I cried hard.

"It hurts," he told me vehemently. "It hurts so damn much. All those nights of wanting you, but I couldn't. I kept telling myself I had pillowed a spirit so I wouldn't fool myself with high hopes. I didn't even know your real name." He dripped more hot wax on my chest. "Can you feel what I feel, Midori? Can you?"

The melting hot wax burned me like the scorching kiss of a fire serpent. He gyrated his hips as he dripped more hot wax on my breasts. Exquisite pain and immense pleasure danced together in a forbidden symphony. Suddenly, rapture ambushed me in its path.

I screamed through my gag as I came. I was dying. I had never experienced such rapture. When the pleasure faded, I felt I was an empty shell. The only thing I could feel was my sex clenching his erection like a vise, contracting in small waves of the aftermath.

Fukuda stopped dripping the hot wax on me. "Can you feel my pain, Midori?"

I answered him with a weak, exhausted nod.

He looked satisfied with my answer and wrenched my leg to the side, taking me harder than before until he reached his completion. He roared as he came, his face a mask of sweet rapture. I could see the beast within him. The muscles beneath his flesh corded tautly as his seed flooded my cunt. He then collapsed next to me, spent.

We lay for hours in silence. Later, he took off my gag and kissed me until all my bones turned to water. For some strange reason he kept me tied, no matter how much I begged him to release me.

"And let you slip away from me again?" Fukuda cast me his signature smile. "I think not, Midori. I'll keep you in these ropes for a while."

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Chapter Six

The noise marking the beginning of the festival started at the crack of dawn. Prayer chants filled the air like the hum of a million honeybees. Bells tolled incessantly. As the day grew brighter, thousands of worshippers poured into the streets with their festive clothes and ceremonial robes. The air was thick with the smell of incense and myrrh, and drums of *sake* were distributed freely among the worshippers as homage to the Goddess.

When the clock struck the hour of the serpent, the procession began. The worshippers jammed the street as the main *mikosi*, portable shrine of the Fertility Goddess, in the form of a giant wooden phallus, paraded from Oku toward the Goddess' temple. Twelve men in white ceremonial robes carried the giant wooden phallus by a long pole on their shoulders, flanked by the priests, palanquin maidens and a long row of people who yearned to be bestowed with offspring this year.

I slipped among the crowd, making my way into the main Goddess temple. This morning, as soon as Fukuda had left his room in Tagata Inn to do his errands, I undid his bindings, and headed back to my inn to change clothes for my mission. I felt exhausted and longed for a proper bath and nap, but my mission didn't allow me that luxury. I was back on the street a few minutes later.

I went directly to the main Goddess temple, and slipped into the back courtyard. When nobody was looking, I

snatched one of the passing acolytes from her line and rendered her unconscious. I tied and hid her body, and then I borrowed her clothes. I disguised myself as an acolyte. When I came out from my hiding, blending in with the other acolytes, no one suspected a thing. As everyone was busy with the celebration, I sneaked deeper into the heart of the temple.

Oben-o, the spy-priest whom I'd consulted a few days earlier, had told me the meeting would commence as soon as the giant wooden phallus entered the temple, and it would be over after the final prayers were chanted. Lord Konoe had carefully planned for this meeting, and arranged it in such a way it wouldn't arouse people's attention.

I helped myself to a stack of cushioned mats, and headed toward the praying room. With the tight security measures employed by Lord Konoe's minions, the only way to enter the room without arousing their suspicion was with subtlety. I pretended I was an acolyte given a task to prepare the room for worship. The priest who guarded the door frowned at me as I schooled my face to look bored and grumpy, then he barked at me to get on with my job quickly.

I saw more priests and acolytes inside, all busy with the preparation for the worship. From their awkward gestures and suspicious eyes, I could see some of the acolytes were actually Lord Konoe's agents in disguise. I made myself look busy, and when everyone's attention was somewhere else, I slipped behind the main Goddess *mikosi*, hiding inside it. What I did was an absolute desecration, but sometimes, desperate times called for desperate measures. I arranged

my body to fit in the impossibly tight space. The Goddess *mikosi*, veiled with thick red curtains, stood at the center of attention in the praying room. All I had to do was stay still and listen.

The great bells chimed and drums pounded. I heard people start pouring into the prayer room. I waited patiently. The prayers began.

I shut my eyes, concentrating on my hearing sense since the curtain veiled my view. I took a deep breath, listening. After a brief concentration, I could almost hear every noise in the room, distinguishing one from another. I heard their breaths, the cadence of their heartbeats, every sound that came from their mouths. I listened and counted, nothing escaped me undetected. About sixty-nine people were in the prayer room. No one betrayed their purpose until the loud noises of a mob echoed from the Grand Hall. I took that as the great wooden phallus *mikosi* arriving at the gate of the temple.

I heard someone move from his seat, shifting to face the audience and asking for their attention. I recognized it as Lord of Autumn Konoe Nariakira's voice. "My esteemed kinsmen," he began, "welcome."

Lord Konoe opened the meeting by thanking the audience for their time and support, and then he jumped directly into the purpose of this meeting. Unlike Lord Buntaro, who loved using allusion to convey his intention, Lord Konoe was to the point. His speech was eloquent and inflammatory. He harshly criticized the way my overlord governed the realm riddled

with corruption, and said it was now time for them to unite and end my overlord's tyrannical reign.

"We should be governed under our real ruler; our High Emperor. All these years we have been subjugated by a peasant who turned lord, a man whose birth has no right to be seated in such an exalted position, let alone ruling this great nation of ours. My kinsmen, I beg of you to pay homage to our true ruler, Prince Akatagawa. With your support, the prince and I will fight for our freedom and end the corrupt reign of Buntaro Soseki."

As the audience applauded, another man rose from his seat. He thanked Lord Konoe for such honor and made a speech about his political views. I froze when I recognized the owner of that voice. Only last night the same voice had cajoled me with intimate endearments and pledges of love. And now, that same voice belittled my master's deeds. Curious, I shifted myself a little, trying to catch a glimpse of him. I lifted the veil a little, peeking. What I saw made my heart stop beating. It was no mistake; the stranger I'd been seeing was none other than the Imperial Heir Prince Akatagawa Fukuda.

I pinched myself, not wanting to believe it. The man I'd grown fond of, if not fallen in love with, was my master's number one enemy. The Heir's name was Fukuda, and he was traveling alone as common folk. My lover's name was Fukuda and he was a highborn too. I cursed myself for not seeing this before. I usually wasn't this dull-witted. But again, it isn't every day a common-born like me has a chance to pillow a prince.

Fukuda's voice seeped through where I hid, saying that he endorsed Lord Konoe's campaign. Konoe had his blessings and the Imperial army support.

The meeting closed with applause. The Heir Apparent had given his support to Lord Konoe, and agreed to join forces with the Autumn and Twilight to oust Lord Buntaro as *Sessho*. A civil war was inevitable.

I had unpleasant news to report to my master. And a tempest in my heart.

* * * *

When I returned to the inn, I told Kenji everything, including my affair with Prince Fukuda. Though Kenji was my ward, we were very close. He was the only person I could confide my deepest secrets to.

Kenji listened to my story with his mouth wide open, shocked to know the stranger I'd been seeing was the Imperial's Heir Apparent. He was in the middle of grooming himself as a woman, donning my kimono and using my makeup without permission. I'd caught Kenji red-handed this time, but I didn't really care. Prince Fukuda's revelation occupied my mind.

"What will you do? Will you report this to Lord Buntaro?"

"That I pillowed the Heir by accident?" He raised his eyebrows. I shook my head, faltering. "I don't know. I'm sort of ... I've taken a liking to him."

Kenji watched me with great concern. "You can't continue your illicit affair, Midori-sensei. The Heir just confirmed his

support to Lord Konoe. It makes him our master's enemy, which means—"

"I'm not stupid, Kenji."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Nothing. I'll only report this meeting to Lord Buntaro, but before we go home, I need to see him one more time."

"Him? You mean Prince Akatagawa? If you want to heed my advice, don't see him. You're about to violate one of our most important creeds: never consort with thy enemy."

"I know, I taught you that creed." I sighed. "But I need to see him. One more meeting won't hurt."

My ward regarded me with doubt. For once, his pretty, youthful face looked so mature. "If you say so, sensei. But mark my words, if you keep seeing him, sooner or later the prince will break your heart."

* * * *

Fukuda was furious when I slipped into his room the next night. Unlike the last time, he appeared to be expecting my late night visit. As soon as he saw me slip through the window, he grabbed and shook me as if I were a misbehaving child. "How did you escape my bonds? Did someone help you?"

I schooled my face to look innocent. "Ah, your knots were ... loose?"

"That is impossible. I—" His rage suddenly vanished when he saw my pretty smile. He pulled me close and kissed me covetously. I returned his kiss with the same heat, letting

myself melt with each stroke of his tongue. He was a passionate man, kindling my desire like a firebrand.

I felt giddy when we broke our kiss. We sat, our limbs tangled in a tight embrace with his face at the crook of my nape. I heard him draw a heavy sigh, twirling my hair and murmuring softly in my ear. "I've never wanted anything in life like I want you. I've failed to entice you with my wealth, or my noble birth, and I can't even keep you by force. What does a man have to do to possess you? After what we've been through, I don't wish to part from you."

I wrapped my arms about his neck, looking straight into his eyes. "Beloved, I come here to say goodbye. This will be the last time I can see you. Can we spend our last night as a—"

"You can't be serious. No. I won't have it."

"This is not a matter of discussion. If I keep seeing you, I'll place you and myself at great risk, and I can't—"

"But it would be worth the risk." He palmed my face.

"Don't you want me, Midori? What we have is worthy of our sacrifices. And it's certainly worth the risk."

I sighed. How could I make this man understand when he refused to listen? "We aren't meant to be together."

"We are meant to be together." Fukuda took my hand and pressed it against his heart. "I never thought it possible for me to feel such pain from losing you, but I did, I am, and I don't wish to endure it ever again. It hurts, Midori. What should I do for us to be together? Tell me!"

I couldn't answer him. Kenji was right; if I kept seeing the prince, eventually he would break my heart. I rued the irony

of having finally found my other half and having it turn out to be forbidden love. I had to end this before it got out of control.

I broke out of his embrace and willed myself to say goodbye. He refused to let me go at first until I jerked my hands away from him. "I think I'd better leave. I treasure you, beloved, but forgive me, we aren't meant to be together."

I will never forget his stricken face when I said that.

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Chapter Seven

The ride back home was a fast one. Kenji knew I was in turmoil, so he left me alone with my thoughts. He discarded his feminine persona and turned back into a man. He never engaged in a conversation unless it was absolutely necessary. We camped in the woodland at night, sleeping on cold ground with the grass as our pillows. The night was thick with the scent of summer blossoms and the riotous symphony of the cicadas. The heavens above twinkled with stars and a moon shone down, so peaceful and serene, unlike my heart. I tossed and turned when Kenji doused the fire.

I couldn't sleep at all. For the first time in my life, I was torn between the oath I'd sworn and a desire of my own. All these years, I had obeyed Lord Buntaro loyally, and in return I'd been bestowed with privileges far above a common-born like me ever deserved. I could never betray him. When he learned the news the Heir supported Lord Konoe, opposing his reign, Lord Buntaro would have to protect his position as *Sessho*. He could order me to render the Heir crippled so Fukuda wouldn't meddle in politics anymore, or worse ... Lord Buntaro could order me to kill the Heir.

My blood ran cold at the very thought.

* * * *

When I reported the result of the meeting to Lord Buntaro, he reacted as if he had expected the bad news.

We sat in the Room of Assignments with three of his generals, the chief retainers and, for a strange reason, Toshio was also present. I could feel Kenji bristling at the sight of Toshio. My ward still couldn't forget what Toshio had tried to do to me the last time we met.

"So." Lord Buntaro sighed. "I never thought I'd see the day Mushashibo's ungrateful whelp would turn against me. Our closest ally becomes foe. I must think what is best for our realm, and so my decision should be weighed carefully." He caught his son's eyes and waved his hand dismissively. "Enough of this for now. I have important news to announce."

We all watched him in wonder.

"Midori-no-Murakami, my son desires you as wife, and I couldn't think of anyone else better suited for him than you. Therefore, I have decided you two should wed."

The announcement struck me blind. I lost my voice for a long moment. I turned to Toshio without thinking and saw him snarl at me in triumph. I tore my gaze away from him and stared at the floor. I didn't want everyone to see the gathering rage in my eyes. "Lord, I'm not worthy of this honor. I'm only a lowborn, and Lord Toshio is—"

"Nonsense!" Lord Buntaro interjected. "I could have wed Toshio to one of my vassals' daughters, but none of them is the bearer of the *kitsune-bi*. I feel the importance that our *han* is strengthened with a talent like yours, Midori. You and my son are a perfect match. Don't you all agree?"

The men chorused their agreement to the lord's decision; only Kenji kept his silence. I stole a glimpse in Kenji's direction; his fist was curled into a ball. I closed my eyes and

fought hard to keep my voice steady. "Is your decision amendable, sire?"

"No, Midori. My decision is final."

I bowed my head low. "Lord, this honor is too great for me to bear. My heart weeps with a thousand joys. Please allow me to retire to my room so I don't make a fool of myself in front of your august presence." I forced myself to smile prettily and kept my gaze on the floor, hoping no one would see the color of my eyes. I'd failed to control my emotions, now I was sure everyone could see what I truly felt.

"I'm not finished with you, Midori." He ordered everyone to clear the room except me. Feet shuffled and the *shoji* closed with a whisper. "I'm not punishing you with this marriage arrangement."

"Lord, why would you suggest such a thing? You bestow me with great honor with this arrangement. My humble self just doesn't know how to take this news—"

Lord Buntaro snorted. "You don't need to bask me with this unnecessary flattery. I know my son is a repulsive creature, spoiled, and the most ungrateful man who ever existed on the face of the realm. But he is my son, my only heir who will carry on my name long after I'm gone..." He paused, exhaling a deep breath. "I have my own reasons in granting this marriage arrangement."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My face must have shown such incredulity that Lord Buntaro allowed himself a wan smile.

"Do you think I'm blind? I know what kind of man Toshio has become, and mostly it was my fault. I taught him nothing

and spoiled him rotten. With a war on the way, I need someone to protect Toshio, and you are the only one I can trust. Toshio has a weak character. I can't let anything happen to him, Midori. You must protect him any way you can. If it ever comes to the moment our *han* faces destruction, I want you to spirit Toshio somewhere remote and keep him safe."

"Lord, why would you think Lord Toshio would agree to exile if the worst should happen?"

"He'll listen to you. Do you realize he has been enamored with you since he knew how to use his prick other than to piss?"

I went from anger to pity, and honestly, I didn't know what to feel right then.

"Go, and think over what I've told you, Midori. It pains me to burden you with more responsibility, but I'm desperate. I'm only seeking what is best for our *han* and our faction."

I left the Room of Assignment incredibly confused. I wandered through the courtyard and finally sought refuge on one of the highest watchtowers. The young guard on watch duty recognized me and left me alone in my reverie. I curled up on the ledge of the turret, watching the sky above me, the moon, full, bright and eerie. I didn't know how long I stayed there.

I started when Kenji came with a blanket, draping it on my shivering body. "I'm sorry, Midori-sensei."

I sighed deeply. "Me too, Kenji."

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Chapter Eight

That night, Toshio came to my room uninvited.

He wasn't drunk, but I knew he'd consumed a fair amount of *sake*. His eyes were glazed and his face was red. He didn't say anything when he closed my door, only proceeding to disrobe himself. He snatched my arm and pushed me to the futon as if I were his paid wanton for the evening.

He leered when I didn't try to evade him like I normally did. With this marriage arrangement, I had no right to refuse Toshio. I could no longer be free to take lovers at my whim. I must preserve myself only for him. I closed my eyes, trying to picture Prince Fukuda in my mind. Maybe I could do this ... to obey my master's command. But I recoiled in disgust when Toshio touched me between my legs.

"Don't tell me you're frightened with a little pillow trick." He gripped my chin, forcing me to open my eyes. "You've pillowed more men than I've pillowed whores in this town. Now, look at me!"

I opened my eyes. My fingers jerked involuntarily, wanting to gouge out my own eyes so I didn't have to witness this repugnant sight of him.

"Blue!" Toshio exclaimed in triumph. "Are you sad, Midori? Does my little trick frighten you?" He ripped my sleeping kimono open and lay on top of me with all his weight, trying to pry my legs open with his knee. When I resisted him, he grunted and slammed a fist under my spleen.

Then I was lost.

My training made me react fast toward hostility, and before I knew it, Toshio crumpled next to me. For a moment, panic seized me. I was afraid I had accidentally killed him. But when I looked closer, I'd only rendered him unconscious.

An immense relief washed over me, only briefly. Seconds later, I felt disgusted—to see him sprawled naked, to see me half-clothed, and to realize I'd almost surrendered myself to him. I gathered my sleeping kimono, tied it half-decent, and dashed out of my room.

I ran to the cistern by the courtyard. I poured bucket upon bucket of water over me, but I still felt dirty. His touches felt like poison to me. Some servants noticed my pathetic endeavor and tried to help, asking me if I desired a bath. I refused their offer. I needed more than water to wash away Toshio's unwelcome touches.

I bolted to the stable and mounted my unsaddled horse. The gate guards looked bewildered when I shouted, "I'm on an important errand."

I rode as fast as I could, as if a wraith were on my tail. My horse galloped through the valley behind the castle and into the forest. I knew a place about twenty *ri* from Lord Buntaro's castle, a secret hiding place I used to come to whenever I felt gloomy. The place had a small waterfall, and its stream ran through the village next to the Buntaro castle.

I discarded my clothes as soon as I dismounted from my horse, half running toward the waterfall. I carefully treaded on slippery rocks, and stood under the cascade of water. It enveloped me like a long lost lover. I shivered from the cold water and my teeth chattered loudly. I didn't mind the cold as

long as I had plenty of water to wash my body clean. I scrubbed my skin hard, particularly on the area where he had despoiled me with his hand. My skin turned raw, and yet I still felt dirty.

How was I going to endure this? I was trained to kill, not surrender my body to an unwanted man and pretend to enjoy it like a whore. It was hard being obedient to my master. How could I make this marriage work when I couldn't stand the way Toshio touched me...

I scrubbed harder.

"Please, stop..." said a voice.

I startled. I was so consumed in my own self-pity, I hadn't noticed someone was approaching me. Prince Fukuda. "How did you get in here?" I demanded. He didn't answer, only pulling me out from under the waterfall and carrying me onto the embankment. I couldn't resist wrapping my arms about his neck and hugging him as tight as I could muster, never to let him go.

It was heaven having him in my arms. He cradled me with the same gentleness as he had when we first met. His breath singed my neck, hot with lust and unfulfilled longing, and yet, so comforting at the same time. The sound of his heartbeat calmed me like an unsung melody from a long lost, forgotten song. Slowly, he warmed me with his touches, his love. I no longer shivered. I shut my eyes, clinging on to him tightly. I wished I could stop time and freeze this moment forever.

"Midori-no-Murakami, if you're willing to come home with me, I promise no one will hurt you ever again."

"How do you know my name?"

"Why do you think you can hide your true identity forever? There is only one girl in this realm with changeling eyes, and she belongs to Lord Buntaro Soseki. I vowed to you before, no matter where you go, I will find you..." He stopped speaking, momentarily transfixed with the color of my eyes. "They are blue," he marveled, "so beautiful, like the color of the ocean..."

"Your Highness—"

"Please, don't call me that. I'm not your prince."

"You know who I am and you surely know the reason why we can't be together."

"Why would you stay with a man who treated you like this?"

I shook my head. "This is not Lord Buntaro's doing."

"Then who was it?" He touched the bruise on my belly, the tender gift from Toshio. I flinched. "What did you do to deserve this kind of maltreatment?"

"I deserve this ... fairly..." I looked away. All of a sudden, I couldn't face him anymore. "He wanted me ... I-I refused to serve him ... He—" I swallowed hard. "My betrothed, Buntaro Toshio. My lord decided to give me to his son as his wife. I can't refuse the arrangement ... you surely understand why..."

My prince looked stricken. "Did he arrange this marriage long before we met?"

"No. I just found out about it today."

"Did he send you to spy on me?"

"No, and yes."

"When we first met?"

"I was your Silver Eyes, sire, nothing more. Our first meeting was nothing but a twist of fate."

He stared at me without a word while the trees around us rustled, whispering the lament on the wind. "What are you willing to sacrifice if I sacrifice something of mine? I'll do anything if it can make us whole."

"Are you willing to retract your alliance with Lord Konoe?"

"Will it make you leave your master?"

I sighed. I couldn't leave my master no matter what. "Sire, there is nothing to bargain about. The next time we meet, it will be on the battlefield as enemies. We all have duties, and surely you aren't going to forsake your obligation for a love we can't have..."

"But it would be worth it."

"I'm indebted to my lord. I can't forsake my oath."

He palmed my chin carefully as if I were a fragile porcelain doll. "Find a way to relinquish that *giri*..."

"I don't see how it is possible—"

"Find—a—way," he insisted. "I don't wish to wait until the next life for us to be together."

"You're out of your mind."

"If you won't do it, then I'll just have to march to Nightfall with my army and kill your overlord and claim you from him."

"You know I can't let that happen. My honor wouldn't allow you to harm my master. You will have to do it over my dead body."

He watched me with mounting desperation. "All I want is you, Midori. Is it too much for me to ask?"

"No." I took a deep breath. "It's just that we aren't meant to be together, My Prince. Maybe in our next life, if heaven above favors our fortune."

"No. I don't want to wait. I can't wait. Don't ever suggest such things again. I'll find a way to make us whole, even if I must turn Three Lands upside down." Prince Fukuda tilted my chin up. "You should know one thing, if the war does happen, it's not because I condone Konoe's ambition to oust your master as *Sessho*. I'll go to war because of you, Midori, and I'll claim you from your master's hand."

"You can't be serious."

He smiled sadly. "Sometimes, a man in love can't think rationally, and if my decision turns out to be the biggest mistake I ever commit in my life, I won't regret it. You are worthy to fight for, and the love we have is worthy of all my sacrifices. Please keep that in your mind."

I could only stare at him, watching his face, adamant with fortitude.

"Come," he said, tugging my hand up.

"I can't go with you." Prince Fukuda whisked me up from the ground, lifting me in his strong arms. "Where are you taking me?"

"To a more comfortable place so I can love you properly."

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Chapter Nine

Prince Fukuda carried me toward his horse. The moon shone bright above us as he laid me on the dew-covered grass.

He undressed, deliberate and unhurried. I spread my legs open for him as he stroked his cock. There was no need for a prelude game as both of us were more than ready. He shifted on top of me, poised his tip to my entrance, and with one thrust he entered me until I could feel him deep inside. I whimpered, instinctively wrapping my legs around his waist, trapping him.

My prince stilled, halting his breath at the sinful sensation we both felt. He licked my lips as he rocked me gently. His tongue brushed the cavern of my mouth, while his hips made a gyrating motion, penetrating me deeper and deeper. I moaned, marveling at the pleasure he gave me. My body tingled as his thick pubic hair ground my sensitive clitoris. I ached for him, hungry for him. My cunt tightened around his lavish cock, gripping desperately as he slipped in and out with the lewd noise of our unsated flesh. He knew my body well, as I knew his. His cock moved with slow but precise strokes as if we had all the time in the world.

He paused after spearing me so impossibly deep, his cock juddering in my depths, so hot, so wickedly good. "Imagine this..." His gaze pierced mine. "This is what we would have every day for the rest of our lives if you were mine, Midori.

Imagine this ... the pleasure we will share every night, every waking moment when we desire it. Don't you want it, Midori?"

I wanted to answer him, but my voice stuck in my throat. I nodded fervently instead.

Prince Fukuda hissed. "How far are you willing to go to make it a reality, Midori?"

What do you mean? I mouthed. The pleasure was so intense, I'd temporarily lost my voice. He pulled out from me. Under the moonlight, his cock glistened from our elixir of lust. My cunt protested its loss. The absence of his cock left me feeling empty. "Please," I begged him, "don't leave me like this."

"Troublesome, isn't it? Wanting something you can't have?"

I breathed out. "You've made your point. Please, I need you..."

"How much do you really want me?"

"More than anything in this world."

"More than anything ... You're willing to forsake your oath to your master?"

"I wish I could."

"The question is, if you would."

I clamped my mouth shut. I couldn't believe he blackmailed me with a coupling. He beat me there. I should rise and leave. But I couldn't. I wanted him. I wanted this man more than anything in the world.

I shook my head and willed myself to end this where it should be. I had to, for the sake of my oath and honor. For the sake of his well-being.

"Midori!"

"I'm sorry." All of a sudden I was aware of the chilling temperature. The heat he had kindled in me had gone without a trace. I shivered from the cold.

"No." Prince Fukuda mumbled his disbelief when I pushed him aside. "Don't do this to me, Midori."

"I have no choice."

"Everyone has a choice. The question is whether you're willing to choose."

"I don't know. I need to think."

"Wait." He rose and grabbed my arm. "Forgive me, please, don't leave..."

"I can't think when you're near me."

"Midori."

"Goodbye for now. And please, don't follow me. I need to be alone. I need to think."

I left him dumbstruck and made my way back to where I'd left my horse. I donned my kimono and rode without direction until the dawn came and painted the horizon scarlet. I was lost in my own thoughts. A war raged inside my head.

My horse whinnied when I realized we treaded near a cliff. I patted my horse's mane and pulled the reins up, heading back toward the Buntaro castle.

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Chapter Ten

The state of my clothing piqued people's attentions as my horse galloped to the front gate of the castle. The guards refused my admittance at first, until they recognized me. I was only clothed in a sleeping kimono, with my hair down, and feeling haggard from the long riding.

Kenji spotted me as I gave the stable boy my horse's reins. My ward tailed me as I strode to my room. "Where have you been all night?"

"Riding in the woods."

"Lord Buntaro asked for you."

"Toshio?"

"Lord Soseki, of course. He requires your presence in the Room of Assignments."

"Tell the lord that I'm in dire need of restoring myself to decency. I'll present myself to him as soon as I'm fit. Tell him I'm sorry to make him wait, but I'm in no condition to see him right now." I stopped abruptly. "Toshio isn't in my room, is he?"

"No. The maids found him in your room last night. Lady Ochiba ordered him to be removed to his own quarters under the doctor's supervision. She panicked when Toshio wouldn't wake up."

"What's wrong with him?"

Kenji snickered. "You administered the Five Fingers Trap too hard. Worry not, that slothful frog is fine. He'll probably wake up in a few hours."

I breathed out a sigh of relief.

"What did he do to you?" I parted my kimono and showed him the big, ugly bruise on my stomach. Kenji bristled instantly. "The gall of that man!"

"Sssh, keep your voice down." I squeezed his hand. "Tell my lord I will be late. I need a bath first."

Kenji nodded. "I'll guard your door while you're restoring yourself, Midori-sensei, just in case that frog barges in to disrupt your peace."

"Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you."

* * * *

Lord Buntaro received me in the Room of Assignments in the evening, after I'd fixed myself decently. He didn't ask me questions about Toshio or why I was late. His face was grave as he explained why he needed me.

"This morning I received a representative of the Twilight faction. Lord Mushashibo Shigenobu is now withdrawing their pact and denouncing their allegiance to us. The Twilight has joined the Autumn to impeach my position as *Sessho*." Lord Buntaro cast me a bitter smile. Suddenly, he looked much older, as if the news had robbed him of his vigor. "They gave me an ultimatum that I must relinquish my title, my army, and my fiefdom in exchange for the life of my family and my vassals. I was ordered to commit *seppuku* within thirty days, and if I refuse, Twilight and Autumn's joined forces, enforced by the Imperial Army, will annihilate Nightfall."

I went silent, digesting this bad news. "What is my lord's plan?"

"The key to our problem lies in the hands of the Heir. Without his support and the Imperial Army, Twilight and Autumn can't defeat us. Hence, I summon you for your next assignment: the Heir must be eliminated."

Chills overcame me when Lord Buntaro asked me to kill the man I loved. I felt numb all over. "Lord, it's not my intention to challenge your wise decisions, but forgive me for asking, won't it stir wrath from the Crown if the Heir is assassinated?"

"Midori, sometimes a sacrifice must be made if it benefits the sake of many. Our realm will cease to exist if this civil war erupts. The life of thousands will be spared from prolonged wars and bloodshed. Without the Heir's support, Twilight and Autumn will hesitate in launching an attack on our land."

I bowed my head, accepting his decision. It wasn't my place to challenge his decisions, as my oath dictated I must serve him obediently, loyally, and without question. At this moment, I wished I had died in that killing pit without a burden of *giri*. All the time I was allowed to live and serve him felt like time borrowed from the devil.

Lord Buntaro wrote his order on a piece of paper. We performed the ritual. I sucked my bloody thumb as he dropped the order into the brazier. The acrid smell of burning paper filled the room.

"I realize this will be your most challenging task, Midori. You have twenty days to complete it. The fate of our faction depends on your success."

"Yes, sire."

"And one more thing, Midori. Since the war is approaching, I decided the wedding will commence as soon as you return home from your mission."

"Lord?"

He regarded me gravely. "I'd like to secure your position into my *han* in case the worst is unavoidable. Whether you are successful with this task or not, I want you to come home safe for the wedding, Midori."

I bowed. "Thank you, sire."

"It is I who must thank you, Midori. Your service and loyalties are most valuable to me."

"You are too kind, sire."

I left the Room of Assignments brooding more than ever. My stomach knotted so hard, I felt hot coals had replaced my innards. What I feared most had become a reality—my master had authorized my secret lover's death warrant.

Could I do this? Would I do this?

I didn't think I would be able to kill Prince Fukuda, not ever. It was only last night that we'd shared an intimate night under the moonlight.

I was deep in thought and failed to realize someone had come behind me until he pulled my hair with all his might.

"Little harlot!" Toshio slammed me against the wall. "I must teach you a lesson so you respect me." He dragged me to the courtyard under the bewildered eyes of the servants, maids and guards.

Soma, the chief retainer, ran at us the moment Toshio dragged me into the courtyard. My genteel betrothed intended to flog me on the whipping post as punishment for

denying him last night. "Lord!" Soma was breathless. "Cease this foolishness, you'll only invoke your father's wrath."

"Silence!" Toshio brandished a *wakizaki* at him. "I need to teach her a lesson. If I don't teach her to respect me, how will she respect me when we're married?"

"Please, Lord. Lady Midori is your father's esteemed protégé—"

"Silence!" Toshio hit the chief retainer with his *wakizaki*.

I kneeled on the ground while Toshio brayed like an ass. I'd never been humiliated like this in my life. From the corner of my eye, I saw Lady Ochiba, Toshio's mother, watching the whole commotion with a satisfied smirk on her face. I had no doubt she was the one who'd planned this incident, sowing the idea in her son's thick skull.

The argument between Toshio and Soma ended when Toshio threatened to take Soma's head if he refused to yield. Soma, as a seasoned warrior, didn't take that kind of threat lightly. He vowed he would rather lose his head than let his young master commit such an atrocious embarrassment.

Then my master arrived. Apparently, Kenji had reported the incident to him.

Lord Buntaro stepped into the middle of the argument, ordering Toshio to release me. As usual, Toshio whined and ranted at how I'd mistreated him last night by denying his right to pillow me. I thought my master would take my side and order Toshio to leave me alone, but his reply made my blood boil.

"Son, Midori is still in my service. I have not yet given her to you. When you two marry, you may exercise your manly

whim each time she displeases you. For now, you may only lash her twice for such an offense, and then let her go to run my errands."

I felt cheated. My lord knew how I loathed his son, and yet he allowed him to humiliate me in front of the whole castle.

And at that very moment, I made my decision.

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Chapter Eleven

The first clash erupted in Ozuke, marking the beginning of the civil war in Three Lands.

Kenji and I happened to be there as we were on our way to Mishuma, the border town where Twilight and Autumn forces were amassing. We heard the news while we rested in a local inn for the night. We didn't expect the war to start this soon.

The next day, Nightfall's army heavily blockaded the roads, and so we decided to take a scenic route to Mishuma. We didn't want to blow our cover even though we had the authorization from Lord Buntaro to go anywhere we needed to be. We rode through the hills, valleys, meadows and woodland for the next three days.

On the fourth day, I called Kenji and explained my secret plan. "I'm going to be a turncoat. For years, I've taught you about the loyalty, obedience and self-sacrifice of our creed, but now, I'm ashamed to say I'm going to do the exact opposite." I placed a hand on his chest. "Lord Shima Kenji of Chikuzen, from this moment on you're no longer my ward, nor are you under my tutelage. You're free to pursue other teachers to master the craft." I made a sign, the symbol of banishing our relationship as a guardian and ward. Our bond sacredly severed. "Forgive me for setting a bad example, and I hope you won't tread the path I take. There is one thing I beg you to consider, for my sake and yours: please don't return to Nightfall until the war is over."

Kenji looked at me calmly. "Somehow, this doesn't surprise me at all." He folded his arms across his chest. "Are you going to him and join their factions?"

"No. Not in one way."

"Are you still going to kill him?"

"In a way."

"And how will this render you a turncoat? You still commit to Lord Buntaro's order even though he'll reward you with nothing but misery? Have you forgotten what he said in the courtyard? Do you really want to marry that imbecile bastard?"

"Of course not." That memory was still fresh in my mind, making my skin crawl. The two lashes I'd received from Toshio still burned on my back, mostly due to the humiliation I'd endured. I was a fast healer but the scar from the humiliation would stay with me for a long time.

I explained my plan to Kenji.

"Very clever." Kenji looked impressed. "But you need my help for your plan to succeed."

"I'm not going to implicate you in this treachery. I severed our bonds so you won't be prosecuted for the crime I'll commit."

"My pledge of allegiance is to you, Midori-sensei, should you forget it," Kenji retorted with the same heat. "My father sent me to Nightfall to study under you, not to serve as Lord Buntaro's errand boy. I have never pledged my allegiance to Lord Buntaro, which makes me free to pursue my own choice."

"Your father is Lord Buntaro's vassal, which is where your allegiance belongs. If Nightfall were to lose this war, your father and your family would certainly suffer from the faction's downfall. Your *han* will lose their titles, holdings and lands. Their lives could be forfeited too. Don't you realize it?"

Kenji straightened himself stiffly. "My father disowned me for what I am. In his eyes, I was dead as soon as I was born. I stopped caring about my *han* years ago. And so should you." We stood glaring at each other for a long moment. "I'm not leaving you. You'll have to kill me first."

I gave up. Sometimes, Kenji could be more stubborn than an ass. "Fine. But don't blame me if things don't turn out as we want. I warn you; you are in great peril if you keep following me."

"What could possibly go wrong?"

"A lot of things could go wrong. Nightfall might win this war and I could be declared a traitor. If that happens, you will succumb to the path of *Meifumado*, the Dark Realm of Hell, with me."

Kenji dismissed my notion with a roll of his eyes.

Yes, many things could go wrong. For instance, that night, we had to kill a stray messenger who foolishly plowed into our camp. When we searched his baggage, it turned out he was a messenger from Prince Yosai, Prince Fukuda's younger brother and second in line to the throne. He was out to deliver a message to Lord Konoe. I became numb when I successfully deciphered the message. Prince Yosai had arranged a scheme whereby Prince Fukuda's army would be

trapped between the Nightfall flanks and isolated from the coalition.

Then, by delaying help, Prince Fukuda's army would be decimated by the Nightfall legions that currently advanced toward Iyko. I felt shocked to find that Prince Yosai meant to kill my prince in order to gain succession to the throne. And what made my blood run cold was the message also mentioned Toshio's agreement to usurp his father's position, providing that Toshio and his fiefdom would be left unmolested after the war.

"Well, well. What do you know?" Kenji looked more amused than shocked. "We don't need to do anything after all. Just sit here and wait until they finish killing each other. Except that we have to warn Prince Fukuda first, naturally."

"I can't. My order was sealed. It's sacred. Don't you remember our creed?"

Kenji pouted. "How can I forget? You made me recite it a thousand times before bed for the last seven years."

* * * *

We couldn't reach Prince Fukuda's encampment in time to warn him about his brother's treachery. Several skirmishes broke out in our path that caused us terrible delays. We couldn't plow through battles without being attacked from both opposing factions, and so we had to wait. By the time we reached Mishuma, Prince Fukuda's army had been reduced to almost nothing. And now, he was besieged by the Nightfall army. Rumors said that Prince Fukuda waited on reinforcement from his brother Prince Yosai, but we knew that

help would never come. My prince had been betrayed and left stranded to die.

We decided to make ourselves known to Nightfall's army, and demanded an audience with the general. I happened to know the imposing general too.

"Lady Midori." General Takeo inclined his head, looking surprised to see me. "I'm glad to see you here. I have a message from Lord Buntaro. You are expected to return home as soon as possible for your wedding. You are one week behind your schedule."

Behind the general, I noticed that three of his captains failed to cover their expressions of disgust. Who could think of wedding celebrations at a time like this?

"I was delayed by unseen obstacles. Thus, I can't return home just yet. Can you explain our latest situation? I'm looking to gain an entrance into Prince Fukuda's camp."

General Takeo looked perplexed. "I don't think it's necessary, my lady. We'll crush those Imperial curs sooner or later. We cornered them by the pass, and there is nowhere for them to run. Their food supply will diminish in a week, and soon they will be forced to surrender."

"Wouldn't it be easier if I commence my task and make them surrender by tomorrow? Without the prince's command, the Imperial soldiers will lose their morale." I schooled a perfect evil smile. "And besides, my order is a contract, General. An assassin's contract is as sacred as sutras of the Goddess' teaching."

General Takeo yielded. "Very well, my lady. If you wish, I'll show you how to gain entrance to the Imperial encampment."

"Excellent. Your willingness for cooperation is most admirable, General. I'll make sure that Lord Buntaro hears all about it." I beamed. "Now, if you would be so kind, I need fresh horses and some supplies for my mission."

* * * *

Kenji and I rode toward the Aigoro pass by midnight, and stowed our horses one *ri* before the siege camp. We blended into the night and slipped past the Imperial soldier on watch, looking for Prince Fukuda's tent.

We crouched behind a pile of firewood, studying the encampment around us. What I saw was the harsh reality of defeat. Many wounded soldiers lay under a large tent, attended by a doctor and his aide. And by the fire, some able-bodied men gathered and exchanged stories with weary looks on their faces.

A little farther behind the camp, I saw several farmhouses nestled by the clearing. I could tell my prince would be accommodated in one of those houses. It would give him better protection than staying in the tents.

I signaled Kenji to search the farmhouses for Fukuda. Kenji nodded and followed my lead. It didn't take long to find my prince. We climbed up the largest house and poked a hole through the thick straw tile. I saw him sitting near the brazier with his commanders. Kenji crawled next to me, and then left when he knew I had found my prince. My ward climbed to the top of the roof, serving as a lookout.

I waited until the conversations died out.

Finally, my prince ordered his commanders to rest. Some of them left the farmhouse, but a couple stayed inside to guard him. I slipped inside the house through the roof, threading my way on a rafter. I watched my targets below, waiting. When the last man closed the door, I took out my poisoned needles and aimed at the prince's guards. The first man fell with a dull thump, and the second was about to snatch his *katana* when my needle struck his neck. He slumped like his friend; my poison was potent. It would render them asleep until tomorrow, or perhaps the day after tomorrow.

I expected my prince to shout for guards when he saw his retainers fall down. He didn't, however, as if he'd expected this to happen. He didn't even try to grab a weapon to defend himself.

My prince sat on the *tatami*, waiting stoically with his arms folded about his chest. His face didn't show any expression, but his eyes brightened when he saw me jump down from the rafter. He was happy to see me, and yet rage and anguish were burning within him.

"Midori," he whispered, rising from his seat.

I went to him half-running, and wrapped my arms around his broad shoulders. It felt so wonderful to have him in my arms again. His scent filled my lungs, comforting, and yet, making my heart ache at the same time. I'd missed him to the point of agony.

"You don't know how happy I am to see you." He tightened his embrace, locking me in his hug.

"Sire, I..."

"Came to kill me?" He guessed it right away. "Lord Buntaro has ordered you to assassinate me."

I answered him with a small nod.

"Killing me won't end this war, Midori. The alliance and my brother's army will soon come to our aid."

I tried to break free from his tight embrace, but he refused to let me go. He kissed me, making my mind muddy. He then gazed at me with sad eyes. "I love you," he murmured, and then kissed me some more.

When he finally let me go to catch a breath, I found myself standing shakily. All I wanted was to lie with him and savor his love, without thinking of the cruelty of the world. It took me a while to restore my mind. He pulled me into his lap and bestowed me with more mind-muddying kisses as I tried to get a hold of myself.

I halted him. "The reinforcement won't come." I told him the whole story about intercepting Prince Yosai's message to Lord Konoe, and how he, Fukuda, was to be sacrificed so Yosai could ascend the throne. He listened without interrupting, and his face showed no sign if he was angered.

"Is it true? Yosai was scheming for my death..."

"As true as my love for you, beloved."

He smiled bitterly. "My own brother has plotted for my death. My allies have deserted me, and my foe is within my threshold. What choice do I have? Wait until they march in to finish me, or to die by your hand."

"But by my hand it would be a painless death." I plucked a small vial from under my sash. "All you need is one drop. It will make you sleep."

"You won't even allow me to have an honorable death?"

"You promised me a boon, and now I come to collect it. Please, take this Dreamless Sleep. I can't shed a drop of your blood, not after everything we've shared."

He looked at me with disappointment in his eyes.

"Beloved," I urged, "you promised me you would do anything for me. Please ... We aren't meant to be together in this mortal life. After I settle my *giri* with Lord Buntaro, I'll also take this Dreamless Sleep. I'll come and find you, and we'll be together forever."

"You promise?"

"With all my heart. Lord Buntaro has ordered me to wed Toshio as soon as I have fulfilled my task. I have sworn that I'll never give myself to anyone else besides you. I'd rather die than surrender myself to him. Please understand, I'm not afforded the luxury of choices, and this Dreamless Sleep is the only way for us to be together."

He watched me a long time before he worked out an answer. "How can I refuse such a request from a beautiful woman like you?"

Tears welled up in my eyes, but I fought hard not to cry in front of him. "Thank you."

He took the vial from my palm. "I do have one more request before I take this Dreamless Sleep."

"Yes?"

Prince Fukuda tugged my hand and led me to the farthest corner of the farmhouse. "Let me love you one more time before the dreamless journey, to hold me over until we meet again in the afterlife."

How could I refuse such a request from the love of my life?

We sat down together, his lips found mine, and his hands undid the tie on my sash. He kissed me hard, an exasperated kind of kiss for a love we couldn't possess. I kissed him back with the same greed; we tasted each other's lust, and drank from our forbidden love.

He pushed me onto the floor and pulled my trousers down just enough so he could slip his hand on my burning cunt. He felt me with impatience, stretching me open. I gasped. The way he claimed me felt so welcoming. He made me burn with desire so that every nerve in my body quaked with lust, yearning for him. His mouth muffled my moans as he pushed my trousers lower.

I slid my hand onto his bulging trousers and squeezed his erection. Suddenly, I just had to have him. Now. I broke the kiss to undo the lacings. His rock-hard cock sprang free. I wanted to touch him, but he beat me first by grabbing my hips and slamming his pubis onto mine, grazing his ready cock against my cunt. I creamed luxuriously. He wrenched my legs up to my stomach and drove his cock into me.

I stifled a cry when he mounted me. He felt so right, and yet, I felt so wrong for deceiving him. I willed myself to commit to my plan. It was for the best.

I clawed his broad shoulders as he loved me hard. I cried, digging my nails into his fabric-covered flesh. His cock swelled inside me, making a bolt of lust seize me without mercy. I broke from his kiss, and licked the curve of his throat. I scraped him with my teeth, bit his exposed neck, wanting so badly to leave my mark on him. *He's mine as I'm his.* My

gasps turned into silent wails as he pounded harder and faster. I writhed, exasperated, wanting him to take me deeper.

He grew urgent, lashing stroke upon stroke of fiery slams into me. I met his thrusts eagerly. We were meant to be together, meant to be one. The pleasure thickened. I felt only fire where our flesh joined. Then, a blinding ecstasy caught me in a jealous grip. I exploded. He came hard. Tears spilled down my cheeks as the magnificent, long-denied pleasure consumed me whole. He drained his soul into me, long spasms, one after another, of hot seed flooding inside me. I felt thoroughly loved. Our bodies writhed, tangled in a lovers' lock long after the pleasure subsided.

He withdrew from within me, and we lay for some time. He cradled me like always, loving me with such tenderness. And then he shifted and kissed me one more time. He had the vial in his hand. "I'll see you again very soon, Midori."

I was busy fixing my clothes when he shrugged on his kimono and then opened the vial. He drank the whole vial in one gulp before I could stop him. He was supposed to taste only one drop. He cringed from the taste of the poison.

He smiled, tugging me into his arms. I rested my head on his chest. His eyes fluttered closed, and a second later, he passed out. I heard his heartbeat slowing, and then it stopped.

I quickly dressed him up decently to avoid people's suspicion that he'd been with someone intimately before his death. I dragged him toward his retainers and stuck an

unpoisoned needle in his neck, to make him look as if he'd been struck dead by it.

I slipped out of the farmhouse to find Kenji. "Ready with your part?"

"Yes."

"Make sure no one attempts to give him an honorable death. Switch his body as soon as his death is known to all his men."

"Worry not, sensei. I won't let you down."

I left Kenji to tie the loose ends while I slipped out from the encampment and retrieved our horses from where we'd stowed them. I rode back to General Takeo's camp.

* * * *

"Well?" General Takeo greeted me with impatience.

"The deed is done." I dismounted and gave Kenji's horse's reins to one of his soldiers. "Wait until morning, and then you can attack them."

General Takeo noticed Kenji was missing. "Where is your ward?"

"Sorry, he didn't make it. We encountered unseen predicaments."

The general looked somber. "I'm sorry for your loss, my lady."

"Me too." I pretended to look like I grieved. "Could you give me another fresh horse and supplies? I need to ride home as soon as possible to report to our lord."

"Don't you want to rest first? You look exhausted."

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"I am, but time is of the essence. Lord Buntaro needs to know the fruits of my labor firsthand."

"Very well, my lady. I understand."

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Chapter Twelve

The ride home took longer than I'd predicted. The main roads were blocked because of the skirmishes erupting between Nightfall and the Alliance, and I had to take the long way home through mountains and wilderness, driving my horse to the edge of death. I changed my mount once in the small city of Hazu, paying for an overly priced mare from a rice merchant. On the ninth day of my ride, I finally reached Okamoto.

Lord Buntaro's castle was flooded with soldiers, horses and a long line of supply wagons. It appeared my arrival was highly regarded because General Tsuruki, Lord Buntaro's main vassal and second-in-command, came to get me himself.

"Lady Midori." He bowed his head. "We've all been waiting for you. We have bad news."

The bad news was that Toshio had killed his own father in an attempt to usurp the position as *Sessho* of Three Lands. Toshio didn't reign long as Lord Buntaro's death was immediately avenged by his faithful retainers. Soma Ito, the chief retainer, and twelve of his men committed *seppuku* after they'd slaughtered Toshio and his men. Lady Ochiba, who tried to shield her son from Soma's revenge, was also killed in the commotion. Two of Lord Buntaro's official consorts and all seven daughters were put under arrest until official investigations could clear them from the suspicion of

conspiracy. General Tsuruki had seized temporary power until he could restore peace in Nightfall.

The Buntaro castle, usually so peaceful and grand, now looked dysphoric, with white mourning banners hung everywhere, and people bustling around with the funeral preparations. The priests filled the somber air with their prayers, bells and laments. In the courtyard, servants had constructed a huge pyre.

I'd come home just in time for the funerals.

The emergency council had been assembled right after the carnage; it consisted of Lord Buntaro's advisors and generals, led by General Tsuruki himself. I was due to report to the council. Sitting in the Grand Hall, clustered with warlords and elders of Nightfall, I summarized my mission. They were well informed of what had happened in Mishuma, as the news of Prince Fukuda's death had already reached their ears.

"Lady Midori, we have reached an agreement with the Alliance to end this war. The unexpected deaths of our lords have taken us by surprise, and our army wouldn't be victorious if we continue fighting the Alliance. Their combined forces were far superior to ours." General Tsuruki paused, examining my reaction.

I gave nothing away.

He continued, "One clause of our peace treaty is that we are to give up Prince Fukuda's killer to them. At first we refused, but there is no other choice than to fulfill it. Without the treaty, the Alliance will launch their biggest attack until we are no more. With our deepest regrets, my lady, we are obliged to surrender you to the Alliance. Prince Yosai has

asked for you to be delivered to his presence, alive and unmolested. Hence, you aren't allowed to commit *seppuku*."

I glared at them. "Is this my reward after everything I have done for my master and the faction?" I pretended to be outraged at this decision, though secretly, I wasn't. I had expected this scenario since the day I'd intercepted Prince Yosai's messenger. If Toshio successfully usurped Lord Buntaro's position and Fukuda was killed, Yosai would need a scapegoat to cover up his treachery. Since my prince hadn't died by the hands of Nightfall's soldiers, Yosai needed someone from our faction to take the blame, and that would be me; Prince Fukuda's assassin. But I wasn't afraid, because I held the most important key in this war.

General Tsuruki wallowed in discomfiture. "A thousand regrets, Lady Midori. I wish there was another way. We wouldn't force you to yield, but for the sake of our faction and the lives of thousands of our men, I beg of you to consider it."

I let out a long breath of suffering, acting as if I reluctantly agreed with the council's decision. "At least, please allow me to pay tribute to my master first. Afterward, you can deliver me to Prince Yosai yourself, General."

All nine men before me bowed their head in respect. "Thank you greatly, my lady. You honor us and save our face from the Alliance," General Tsuruki said.

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Chapter Thirteen

The parley between Nightfall and the Alliance was held in Mishuma a week after the funerals. We departed from Okamoto in full force, with more than twenty thousand soldiers in our tow. During the journey, General Tsuruki treated me as if I were a princess, not a condemned assassin. He had me sit in a luxurious palanquin that used to belong to Lady Ochiba. I didn't need to endure the hardship of the long travel, I was pampered by servants and maids ready at my disposal. It wasn't clear what General Tsuruki's motivation behind this treatment was. Maybe it was guilt, or maybe he was naturally grateful for my sacrifice and wanted to make sure that I enjoyed the good life before Prince Yosai executed me. In any case, the treatment suited me well, and I wasn't going to complain.

General Tsuruki instructed me to dress in lavish attire before I presented myself in front of the Alliance's overlords. He sent me a stunning kimono with long sleeves and a magnificent gold-trimmed obi. The servant arranged my hair in an intricate coiffure, and adorned me with expensive jewelry. When I bowed to the Alliance's overlords, I heard collective breaths and murmurs of appreciation from men around me.

A gruff-looking man clad in Imperial armor barked at General Tsuruki, asking him not to play games and surrender Prince Fukuda's real killer at once.

Undisturbed with his rudeness, General Tsuruki elegantly replied, "This is Lady Midori-no-Murakami, the last of the fox people and bearer of the *kitsune-bi*. She was the one entrusted with the order from Lord Buntaro."

The gruff man eyed me with disbelief. "She can't be the killer ... just look at her!"

"General Toda," Lord of Autumn Konoe Nariakira interjected, his lips thinned into a cruel smile, "she is the assassin. I've met Midori before, though Buntaro never dressed her this pretty."

I bowed to them again with exaggeration as if I were one of those expensive Willow World's courtesans. "I'm not worthy of your compliments, lords."

"Now that we have delivered Prince Fukuda's assassin to you, are you going to honor our bargain?" General Tsuruki challenged.

Lord Konoe exchanged glances with a man swathed in a surcoat of celestial dragon embroidery, marking him as the Imperial's prince. The man signaled his approval, and Lord Konoe replied to General Tsuruki, "We shall go forth with the treaty."

The overlords commenced the signing of the treaty while I remained still. I stared at Prince Yosai the whole time, measuring his evilness. Prince Yosai took notice of this, and regarded my contempt with amusement. That arrogant smirk wouldn't last long when I revealed my tricks to him later.

Two Imperial guards took me into a large white tent and searched me for concealed weapons, but they found nothing. In there, I sat on the divan for hours without food or drink,

under the stern gaze of a mean-looking brute in Imperial armor.

"Would you quit looking at me?" I snapped at him, feeling vexed with his incessant stares.

He didn't answer me, only snarling a wolfish smile. He did jump nervously when I made a sudden move as if I were about to attack him. I laughed with gusto at him falling for my trick. The brute growled, balling his fist, ready to strike me just as Prince Yosai entered the tent.

"Goemon!" The brute quickly retreated, bowing. "Leave us." Prince Yosai gestured impatiently. The brute scrambled out at once. Yosai paced around me like a vulture circling its prey, and his royal *sensu*, folding fan, flamboyantly fanned his sly face. "Midori-no-Murakami." Yosai sneered. "So, you're the one who killed my brother."

I arched an eyebrow as a yes.

He stopped in front of me and leaned forward, snarling a lecherous smile. "I've executed many assassins before, but never one this pretty. Do you have any idea what kind of punishment will befall you, Heir Slayer?"

I shrugged lazily.

His fan snapped closed in a flash, and then he jabbed me in the chest with it. "I might fancy pillowing you before I give you to my executioner. Are you a screamer, Midori? I'll wager you are. Maybe after I finish with you, I'll have all my soldiers take turns with you, and if you're still able to walk, perhaps I'll give you to the Autumner and the Twilighter as well."

I held up my fingers, pretending to count. "That will give us roughly about fifty-sixty thousand men, I suppose?" I

laughed wantonly. "I usually pillow half of that before breakfast."

Yosai seized my kimono and shook me. "Enough of these meandering talks! Where did you hide his body, assassin? Surrender him, or I'll make every waking moment of your life nothing but agony."

"Why are you fussing about his corpse? Prince Fukuda is dead. Carrion eaters might have ravaged him, or he might be accidentally buried in a pit somewhere."

"Don't play games with me! His body was stolen before my men were able to give him an honorable death. We found the man garbed in Fukuda's clothes, but he wasn't my brother. I'll have my executioner spike you alive if you don't start talking."

"On the contrary, Your Highness," I countered sweetly, "you will give me ten thousand *ryo* and a fresh mount, and let me depart with tears of joy because your betrayal won't be discovered. If you kill me, or so much as lay a hand on me, my friends in the capital will deliver a package containing the proof of your treachery to the Emperor himself and your august Uncle Kokan. I'm sure they won't be pleased to find out that you schemed to have the Heir murdered."

Instantaneously, his face turned pale. Yosai stared at me in pure shock.

I flicked his grip away from my kimono and put on my triumphant smile. "I have already imagined what the Emperor would do to you. Your execution—there is no doubt; your title, wealth and lands would be forfeited; your wife, consorts and all your offspring would be put to death with their

immediate families, and all your vassals and their families, and then all of your conspirators and their families. There would be so many heads on spikes in the capital square, it would be the bloodbath of the century. Lovely, don't you think so?"

"Y-you're the one who killed my messenger..."

"Oh, you found him?"

He shot me a glare of pure venom. I couldn't blame him. Kenji had hung the messenger's corpse on a tree to taunt the Imperial Army's wrath. It was a common practice between the warring clans in the Age of Wars to show prowess against the enemies. I dismissed his mortification with a wave of my hand. "I can't believe you would employ a simpleton to deliver such an important message. If I were you, I would have broken the message into three and sent them with at least a flank of different messengers. If the worst thing happens, my enemy wouldn't be able to decipher my evil plots. Doesn't anyone teach you the art of war?"

Yosai was taken aback. He numbly retreated to a nearby chair and sank on it. His arrogance diminished.

I yawned languorously, stretching my arms out. "Let me know when you have made your decision. I fancy a nap for an hour or two. All this blackmailing is making me tired." I lounged on a divan and feigned sleep.

Prince Yosai didn't say anything; all I heard was his panicking heavy breathing. He stumbled out from the tent moments later.

* * * *

Some hours later, in the evening, Prince Yosai dragged me out from the tent and announced I was his to own because he was delighted by my prettiness, and nobody could lay a hand on me. I guessed this was his tactic to save face from his colleagues and underlings. He had me sit on his lap and fed me a scrap of fish during dinner, parading me as if I were his newest plaything. Swallowing my amusement, I played along with him.

The next day, the Imperial Army started to withdraw, returning to the capital. Prince Yosai put a collar with a tether on my neck and had me ride next to him. Most of his generals looked displeased to see him sparing my life, and the rest pitied me in secret. This prince was known for his cruelty and torrid perversion in his sexual indulgences. One night, he'd asked me to scream like hell while he beat the floor cushions with his whip. This pretend domination amused me greatly.

On the eighth day, Prince Yosai told me he had made his decision, providing I would keep my mouth shut forever. A horse and two pack mules carrying ten thousand gold *ryo* waited for me somewhere at the foot of the mountain. With this, Prince Yosai screamed like a demented man as he dragged me out from the tent, shouting so his men could see I was no longer pleasing him. Unceremoniously, he flung me down the cliff.

I cursed him for this, for I was unprepared. It was a long fall down, but I had been highly trained for this kind of exploit. I fell into the great river and let myself be dragged by its current until no one above was able to see me. I swam ashore, dried my clothes, and went to find the horse and gold

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Yosai had promised. About three *ri* from where Yosai had thrown me, I found my blackmailed hoard.

I mounted the horse and pulled the reins of the pack mules, and rode east to meet my destiny.

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Chapter Fourteen

The old village of the fox people had burned down when I'd made a pact with Lord Buntaro about twenty years before. Several years ago, I learned some people had moved to Murakami Hill, and had started rebuilding the village. It was no surprise because the old village sat on fertile land surrounded by ancient woods that flourished with all kinds of rare herbs, poisonous plants and mushrooms. Many who moved there were herb masters, healers and hermits seeking a peaceful and secluded place to live. Because of my trade, I'd become well acquainted with a famous herb master who supplied me with rare poisons and antidotes.

Master Guang Ling, my herb master who originally came from China, welcomed me with his toothy grin when I showed up at his front steps. He gave me a half kowtow as I reined my horse to a stop. "Lady Midori, we thought you would never arrive. His Highness has been most impatient."

I dismounted and a youth came and took my reins. He frowned when he saw the heavily laden mules. "Don't worry about that. Master Ling will see to this personally."

The herb master widened his eyes. "Is that—"

"Yes. See that you store this carefully. Where is he?"

"In his room. My wife is just serving His Highness afternoon tea."

"And Kenji?"

"Your ward has been on a hunting trip since yesterday. We are in need of blood fowls for His Highness's medicine. He should be back by tomorrow morning."

I beamed. "Good. I will see my prince now."

"This way, my lady." Master Ling ushered me forward.

"How is he?"

"He's fine, although it will take several months to purge the poison completely from his bloodstream. You should have given him only a drop, not the whole vial."

"He's the one who got carried away, not me."

Master Ling slid open the *shoji*, beaming at my prince.

"Look who has come, Your Highness."

I was transfixed by the sight of my beloved. Oh yes, I should have given him only a drop of the Dreamless Sleep.

Prince Fukuda, my prince and the love of my life, stood near the window when I came in. The Dreamless Sleep had changed the color of his hair. The potent poison of fugu fish, white sea anemone and spotted skullcap fungi had bleached his raven hair into the color of pure tempered platinum, shimmering the color of the starlight. And so was the color of his eyebrows and eyelashes. At a glance, he exuded ethereality as if he were a celestial being.

He swept me off the floor, embracing me. I simmered in delight. Master Ling shot me a smile and retreated in silence.

"Kenji said you would be here weeks ago, Midori."

"I met some unexpected predicaments."

"What happened?"

I tugged his hand and we both sat on the veranda. Beyond us was a vast meadow of lush greenery that shimmered with

morning dew. The sunrays were shyly radiating through the dense trees. I had forgotten how tranquil it was here, just like I remembered from my childhood. I felt at home. I was home. And now it would be forever.

"My master is dead, murdered by Toshio." My prince furrowed his eyebrows. I told him the rest of the story, including the treaty between the Alliance and Nightfall, and the way I'd blackmailed his brother Prince Yosai. He found Yosai's willingness to pay me ten thousand *ryo* to keep me quiet highly amusing.

"That craven," he spat. "I should've suspected that when he offered me help in this war. Yosai isn't known as a fighter. He prefers indulging his loins to wielding his sword. I let him act as my second because I thought we were finally getting along as brothers. I never thought he would betray me like this."

"It's not too late to return to the capital and expose his treachery." I squeezed his hand. "That was my original intention, actually."

As an assassin, I was bound to honor my obligations as our creed dictated. I could be a turncoat against my master, but I couldn't betray my sacred assassin contract. Like I always said, an assassin contract was as sacred as the sutra of the Goddess' teaching. So when Lord Buntaro issued me an order to assassinate Prince Fukuda, I was bound to fulfill that contract or die trying. I did kill my prince, and so I had successfully fulfilled the contract to my master. And if my prince sprang back to life, that wasn't my fault, but thanks to Master Ling's awesome concoction. Dreamless Sleep is a rare

poison that will render someone dead, and then spring that person back to life some hours later.

After the death of Prince Fukuda became known, I planned to report to my master, settle the order and fake my own death so I could be with my prince forever. Yes, I went turncoat, something I wasn't proud of, but at least my sacred order was fulfilled. I didn't expect Toshio would murder my master while I was on the road home. And of course, I didn't expect my prince would be betrayed by his own brother. Sometimes, even the best plans could go awry so easily.

My prince shook his head. "This is my other life, Midori. I have been reborn. If I were the Heir, I would be bound by obligations, bound to take a wife I don't desire, bound to sire children from women I don't love. And now I'm a free man, I can live my life the way I want it." He smiled, kissing the tip of my nose. "And spend the rest of my life with the one woman I love most."

"But our realm needs you. You can't let Prince Yosai take your place. I can't imagine what will happen if he rules the lands the same way he plots his treacheries. We would all be doomed."

"Oh, he won't. Yosai was mothered by a minor consort; he isn't my mother's son. Since I have no siblings, Yosai was elected as Heir Presumptive. But he doesn't know my mother is recently with child again, and this time she is carrying twins. Yosai isn't going to take my place as long as my siblings live."

I laughed with delight. "Is that so? I'd like to see his face when he learns the news. Serves him right. But what if Yosai

schemes to have your unborn siblings murdered the way he plotted your death?"

He dismissed me lightly. "I have written a long letter of explanation to my uncle to protect my mother and her unborn twins. Kenji has delivered the letter for me just recently. I can imagine the look on my uncle's face when he received it."

"What? You revealed to your uncle that you're still alive?"

"Oh, no. My uncle will come to get me if I do that. I told him if I died during the battle, it would be Yosai's doing. My uncle would figure out the rest and launch an investigation. My cursed brother would be under scrutiny. He might not be welcomed as a hero when he returns to the capital with his army."

"How ingenious," I marveled.

"I think what you did was ingenious. You didn't break your vow, and your contract to your master is fulfilled. How come I didn't think of it?"

"Well." I flung my arms about his neck. "You told me to find a way to relinquish my *giri*. And I did."

"Yes, you did." My prince pointed at a clearing about thirty *cho* from where we sat. "Master Ling told me your family used to live there." I nodded. He pulled me closer into his embrace. "Then we should build our house there too, Midori. I found some good trees yesterday that would give us a strong house. Two stories, with plenty of room for our children."

"Children?" I couldn't help grinning. I'd never thought of having children of my own because of who I am. But now it seemed a very good idea.

"Yes, children. What's the matter? You don't wish to have the fruits of our union?"

"I ... just never thought about it. Well, if you must insist, beloved, your wish is my command."

My prince kissed me. Blood stirred in my loins as our lips hungrily mashed each other's. How long had we been separated? Three weeks? One month? Two months? It felt like forever. Our kiss became urgent and our hands were busy undressing each other. He found my wet cunt, and his erection in my hand became harder than stone. When I caught a glimpse of his cock, I became fascinated by the color of his pubic hair. It had also bleached like the twinkle of starlight.

"Oh," I mumbled. Maybe I liked him better this way. My prince was one splendid testament of what ethereal gorgeousness is all about. "May I?" I ventured, asking his permission.

His smile widened. "By all means, Midori, I'm yours to command."

Mine to command.

I took him with both hands and swallowed his length in one smooth swoop, loving him with all my heart. His cock quivered in my mouth. He gushed his lust and the flavor of the sea filled my mouth. I loved his taste, the spicy, salty flavor of his cum, and all mine. He groaned hard from my ministrations. His hands were on my hair, digging his nails into my scalp. I eased my breath and took him on an angle. He slid farther, deeper, past my throat. His groan turned into a strangled cry. I sucked him slowly, savoring him. He

panted. His body trembled and his cock became rigid, pulsing with need.

Suddenly, he wrenched my hair up, and eased himself out of my mouth. "Turn around. On your knees. On all fours."

He swept me up effortlessly when I didn't move fast enough for his liking. He upturned my buttocks and arranged me in the position he wanted. I smelled the scent of wood as my head and elbows pressed against the floorboards. Cool air caressed my overheated sex. I leaked. He noticed it and gave me a welcoming lick. I whimpered. The effect devastated me.

I mumbled, begging him to take me. I heard him laughing. Of course, he wouldn't give me what I wanted right away.

"Did you miss me, Midori?"

"Yes." My answer sounded like a breathless gasp.

"Hmm. Your body doesn't tell lies." He flicked my clitoris with the tips of his fingers, sending a delicious shiver up my spine. I leaked again, and this time, my prince decided to dry me more thoroughly. His mouth covered my sex and his tongue speared my cunt. I whimpered, biting my lips and marveling at the sinful pleasure he gave me. He licked me deeper and deeper until a maddening frustration burned within me. I needed his cock inside me.

When I voiced my want, he answered me with a slap on my buttocks. I cried, closing my eyes. The pain felt so good, burning my backside with thousands of hot tingles. "I missed you," he growled between his licks. "I'm going to take you at my leisure. Don't fret."

"Please?" I begged, half urging, half moaning.

"Stubborn, are you?"

"I need you inside me, now."

I heard him grumbling. "Like this?" He mashed two fingers into my aching cunt. They slipped deep, rammed me in short strokes, oiling me with my own juices. I cursed. He knew just how to tease me.

"Your cock!"

He slapped me again for my impertinence. I whimpered again, savoring the tingling pain. The spank made me wetter; my juice dripped to my thigh. "Ah, Midori." I heard him sigh. "How can I be so inconsiderate? It's been too long since I saw you. I just want to savor you leisurely, unlike the last time, but I guess we now have all the time in the world." I supposed he changed his mind when he saw my burning arousal.

I felt him shift, then the slick, blunt tip of his cockhead nudged my cunt. I almost couldn't breathe when he pushed in, his glorious girth and length slipping into me, deep, pulsing, and filling me full. Oh, I felt lightheaded all of a sudden. I clawed the floorboards when he started to move; my nails made a screeching sound, but the sound of his groan drowned it out.

He plunged deeply into me until his balls grazed my clit. I bit my lip from the dizzying sensation. His hand squeezed my ass cheek and slid to my mons, finding my erect nubbin. I jerked involuntarily when he captured my clitoris and twisted it cruelly. New pleasure shot deep through my cunt. He stroked me as his cock pummeled in and out with the same urgency.

"Don't move!" he chastised me when I reared to meet his slam. But I couldn't help it. I just had to.

My prince let go of my clit and seized my hips, anchoring me with both hands. He didn't want me to move even a bit. He wanted me to surrender to his mastering. I lay still, accepting his ferocious thrusts, each one harder than the one before. My breaths came in short gasps. I braced myself against the floorboards, closing my eyes and relishing the fire. Pleasure thickened like an impending storm. I lost myself in it. He went wild, driving my body against the floor, not taking any notice that my head was thumping against the railings.

I wailed in ecstasy, not caring that people might hear. He rode me wildly, and I ached with need while I drowned in a sweet delirium. Then the storm crashed upon us. I yelled with my climax as he slammed into me, impossibly rough. I felt I had been punched from the inside. I came so hard the world disappeared from me for a second.

I slumped, exhausted, when the last tide of pleasure ebbed away. He collapsed on top of me as his cock grew soft inside my well-abused cunt. Later, when we were able to recollect ourselves again, he shifted beside me and pulled me into his arms.

We laughed to see how flushed we were, and realized that Master Ling's neighbors had seen us making love in the open veranda. I didn't care, and neither did he.

He kissed me deeply, a salty-tasting kiss. I curled in his arms, contented, losing myself in his mind-muddying kisses. I'd never felt so peaceful in my life as I did now. No more

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master to obey. No more men to kill. No contract to fulfill.
Only him, the love of my life, to spend the rest of my days
with.

My prince.

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Lizzie Lynn Lee was a guitarist, receptionist, executive assistant, tarot reader, boutique owner and graphic artist before she discovered that writing is her dream job. The advantage being she can do it in her pajamas and socks. She's an incurable chatterbox, heavy metal aficionado, bookworm and a night owl, since most of her stories were done in the wee hours of the morning because of her caffeine-induced insomnia. She loves to hear back from her readers, so visit her website: www.iLizzie.com.
