

Seasons of the Sword #1

リス子

Risuko

A Kunoichi Tale

by

David Kudler



Stillpoint/Atalanta

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Advance Review Copy

For Sashako and Jujuchan

—

兵士転落

白と緋の戦争

地上の花

Provinces of Japan during Risuko



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Risuko

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Prologue – Serenity

My name is Kano Murasaki, but everyone calls me *Risuko*. Squirrel.
I am from Serenity Province, though I was not born there.

My nation has been at war for a hundred years, Serenity is under attack and the Kano family is in disgrace, but some people think that I can bring victory. That I can be *a very special kind of woman*.

All I want to do is climb.

My name is Kano Murasaki, but everyone calls me Squirrel.
Risuko.

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1 — The Left-Hand Path

*Serenity Province, Land of the Rising Sun, The Month of Leaves
in the First Year of the Rule of Genki
(Totomi, Japan, late autumn, 1570 A.D.)*

Spying on the lord of the province was risky. That's why I didn't see what was coming. I knew it was a bad idea, but something about being there, high up in that pine, made me feel free.

I watched where Lord Imagawa stood in his castle with a samurai, pointing at a piece of paper. Paper covered with splashes of color. Green, mostly. Blue and red marking the edges.

It was a hundred paces away or more. I must have been squinting hard, trying to make out what they were pointing at. That's the only way to explain how I didn't notice the palanquin until it had almost reached my tree.

Below, two hulking men carried the shiny black box by the heavy bar between them. The thing scuttled like a beetle through the slanting morning shadows that darkened the woods. It was coming from the direction of the village.

Seeing it startled me — made my chest tight and my hands colder even than they already were.

I scooted to the top of the pine, hands chilled and sticky.

Half-way up the pine tree though I was, I had the urge to stomp on the dark, gleaming thing. Only nobles traveled by palanquin. And when had nobles ever done my family any favors?

I sensed danger in the steady, silent approach. Had they seen me spying on the castle?

"Risuko!" My sister called up to me. I could not even see the top of her head.

The black box crept closer, into the clearing below me. Then the palanquin stopped.

I scrambled to hide myself. The cold sap smelled sharp and raw as I pressed my nose to the bark. I gave a bird whistle—a warbler call, the one that I'd told Usako I'd use if she needed to hide.

I had actually been looking for birds' eggs, though it was the wrong season for it. Hunger and the desire to do something, as well as my own pleasure in climbing, had driven me up the tree. Mother had not fed us that morning. Once the weather turned cold, she could not always provide us with more than even a small bowl of rice a day. Also, the castle had been bustling like an ants' nest that's been prodded with a stick, and I had been curious....

Someone below me began talking. An old woman, I thought, her voice high and birdlike, though, again, I couldn't make out the words. Usako—my sister—stepped forward into view. I could see her head bowed, like a frightened rabbit. The old woman spoke again. After a pause, Usako—*chan's* face, open and small, turned toward my hiding place. She pointed up at me.

"*Risuko*," the old woman said, "come down now."

She and her men were at the bottom of the tree. I considered leaping across to one of the other pines, but there weren't any close enough and big enough to jump to. And I was worried that my hands were too cold to keep hold.

Usako scurried off on the trail toward home. *Thanks, sister*, I thought. *I'll get you for that later*. I wish that she had turned and waved. I wish that I had called out a good-bye.

If I was going to be grabbed at the bottom, I decided that I might as well come down with a flourish. I dropped from limb to limb, bark, needles, and sap flying from the branches as my hands and feet slapped at them, barely breaking my speed. Perhaps if I came down faster than they expected, I could make a run for it once I reached the ground.

My bare feet had no sooner hit the needles beneath the tree, however, than a large hand came to rest on my shoulder. The two huge servants had managed to place themselves exactly where I would land.

"What an interesting young girl you are," the grey-haired noblewoman said.

Somehow I didn't want to interest her. The two men stepped back at the wave of her hand. She stood there, still in her elegant robes, her wooden sandals barely sinking into the mud. "Do you climb things other than trees?" she asked, her deeply lined face bent in an icy smile, her eyes lacquer-black against her white-painted skin.

I nodded, testing my balance in this uncertain conversation. “That’s why my mother calls me Squirrel. I’m always climbing—our house, rocks, trees...” Her eyes brightened, cold as they were, and I started to let go and brag. “There’s a cliff below the castle up there.” I pointed to where Lord Imagawa’s stone castle stood on the hill at the edge of the woods.

“Ah?” she said, looking pleased.

“I like to climb up the cliff.”

“Oh?” she sniffed, “but certainly a skinny little girl like you couldn’t get terribly far.”

That stung. “Oh, yes, I’ve climbed all the way to the top of the cliff bunches of times, and up the walls too, to look in at the windows and see the beautiful clothes...”

I clamped my mouth shut and blushed. Noble as she clearly was, she could have had me flogged or beheaded for daring to do such a thing. I tensed.

But this odd old woman didn’t have her enormous litter-carriers beat me with the wooden swords they carried in their belts. Instead, she truly smiled, and that terrifying smile was what let me know that my fate was sealed, that I couldn’t run. “Yes,” she said. “Very interesting. Risuko.”

She motioned for the men to bring her palanquin. It was decorated, as were the coats of the men, with the lady’s mon, her house’s symbol: a ten-petaled lotus blossom.

They placed the box beside her, and she eased into it, barely seeming to move. “Come, walk beside me, Squirrel. I have some more questions to ask you.” Then she snapped, “Little Brother!”

“Yes, Lady!” called the servant who stood at the front of the palanquin, the larger of the two men. He gave a quiet sort of grunt and then, in perfect unison with his partner, lifted the box and began to march forward.

“Stay with me, girl!” the old lady ordered, and I scurried to keep up. I was surprised by the strength of the two men—they hardly seemed to notice the weight that they carried—but their speed was what took my breath away. As I scrambled to keep up, the mistress began to bark at me again. “What did I hear about your father? He taught you to write?”

How did she know my father? “Yes, he was a scribe.” I wanted to add, but did not, And a samurai too.

“He can’t have been much of a scribe,” she sniffed. “No apprentice, so he teaches his daughter to use a brush? What a waste. And the rags you wear?”

“He... died. Mother has struggled...” I panted. “He was a good scribe... But there wasn’t much... need for one here... What do farmers need with contracts or letters?”

We moved quickly, speeding right past the path that led back to my home. Ah, well, I thought, we'll join up with the main road and come into the village the long way.

"Yes," she said, looking pleased with herself, "I suppose Lord Imagawa would be about the only client worth having around here in this wilderness. Don't fall behind, child."

I was beginning to sweat, in spite of the cold. The smell of approaching snow was sour in the air.

The rear servant—the one who wasn't quite as enormous as the one the lady had called Little Brother—pulled even with me. Without turning his head, the man gave a low bark. Imperceptibly, the two men slowed to a pace that I could match. Grateful, I looked over toward the servant in the rear. I wasn't sure, but I could have sworn that he winked.

I could see the bulk of Lord Imagawa's castle though the open shutters of the palanquin. Banners flew from the roof that I'd never seen there before—blue and red. The old lady followed my gaze up the hill. "Yes, depressing old pile of rock, isn't it?"

I couldn't think of any way to answer that. I wasn't sure that she expected me too answer.

"You really climbed all the way up to the windows?" She was looking at me closely. I nodded. "Yes, very interesting." She clicked her tongue. "And today? I don't suppose you could have seen anything of interest today."

"Lord Imagawa," I panted. "Soldier. Pointing at... drawing."

Now her eyes widened. "You could see that from such a distance? Could you see what the drawing looked like?"

Green squares, surrounded by smaller squares of red and blue. What looked like little pine trees sticking out of the squares. I nodded.

Now the lady smiled, looking like an old mother pig when it's found a nice puddle to wallow in. Somehow the smile was even more frightening.

At that moment, we met up with the main road. I was certain that we would turn right, back toward the village, to my house, my mother, and that some explanation for this peculiar line of questions would present itself.

Instead, the palanquin turned smoothly left.

Confused, I stopped in my tracks.

"Stop!" the lady yelled. Little Brother and the winking one came to a halt. "Come along, girl!"

"But...?"

"I told you to keep up with me, child." She wasn't even looking at me.

“But... the village is...?” I pointed back down the road I had been walking most of my life, to the bridge I could see just behind the spur of trees that led to my house.

“Silly Squirrel. *Down!*” The two men lowered her to the crossroad. Now she looked at me. “You are not going back there. Your mother sold you to me this morning.” She leaned out the window and barked at the carriers, “*Go!*”

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2—Putting on the Lotus

I began to back away. I was thinking—if I was thinking—that I could get underneath the bridge, in among the tangled beams where I had hidden so often before. No one had ever been able to find me there. Except, of course, my father.

Before I had managed even to stagger back to the small road leading to the bridge and to my home, a hand as big as a melon closed around my wrist. The giant called Little Brother's expression was hardly threatening, but far from friendly. With his free hand he untied the belt at his waist, which turned out to be a thick length of smooth cord. He let his polished wooden sword fall to the road. Turning back to the palanquin, he grunted. "Wrists?"

"That depends," said the old woman. She smirked at me. "We can do this any one of a number of ways, Risuko. You may come as my guest, in which case he will simply tie the rope around your waist so that you don't... get lost. You may come as my prisoner, in which case he will bind your hands to keep you from escaping too easily. Or you may come as my possession, in which case he will hog-tie you and carry you on the bar to my palanquin here. Now. Which shall it be?" Her face seemed almost kindly despite the obvious threat, and yet I felt her eyes boring into me. "Well?"

I looked up at the two men, whose faces were stone, and glanced desperately down the path to the village. Little Brother's hand remained on my wrist, and I knew that I could not possibly have escaped his grasp. My throat was thick, but a kind of awful, resigned relief settled on me. I looked to the lady again, whose made-up face seemed hardly to have moved, and then, finally back up into the warm, boulder-like face of Little Brother. I slumped. "Guest."

“Excellent,” said the lady, as Little Brother tied one end of the long cord around my waist, picked up his sword, and handed the other end of the leash to his fellow, who favored me with a grimace that may have been another smile. “Enough of these delays,” barked the noblewoman. “We have a delivery to make. *Go!*”

Down the path to Pineford and away from my home they went, and I stumbled along behind them, down into the valley, watching the clouds thickening the sky above us, blotting out the thin midday sun.

I couldn't feel my feet, and it was not because of the cold—or not only because of the cold. Mother had sold me. I would never see her or Usako again. As I stumbled beside the palanquin, my shock began to turn to cold rage, and then to fear. Who was this lady who now owned me?

An Imagawa rider galloped by us in the opposite direction, splattering slushy mud onto my already cold, already filthy legs.

My stomach rumbled against the rope bound around my waist. Between climbing and walking I was tired and even hungrier than I had been.

We walked along the main street in Pineshore some time later, I saw some boys a little older than me carrying baskets of dried fish up the road. They stopped and bowed as we walked past them, and the look in their eyes was one of pure awe. For a moment I woke to myself, and thought what a remarkable picture we made: the two enormous servants carrying the elegant lady in the box, with the ragged, skinny girl shuffling along behind them at the end of a rope like a goat.

A gang of anxious-looking soldiers paid us no notice at all.

We approached an inn near the center of town. Two young women with the emblem of a ten-petaled lotus on their winter robes stepped out into the street and escorted us into the courtyard.

“Lady Chiyome,” said the finer-featured of the two maids. “Welcome back. I see you have hunted well.”

“Yes,” said the lady, as Little Brother helped her out of the box, “I've managed to bag myself a squirrel.”

The maids gazed at me as if I were indeed a trophy from some exotic hunt.

“Her name's Risuko,” the lady laughed, hollowly. “Little Brother, you can untie her. I'm sure that our guest won't bolt.”

The smaller carrier walked over to me and undid the knotted cord around my waist. Now he favored me with what was clearly a smile.

The courtyard walls were tall, but timbered; if I had been alone, I could have gotten to the roof, but—

“I want to get out of here. The Imagawa are nervous. We’re leaving immediately, as soon as I have had a bit to eat. Mieko, give her something more presentable to wear than those rags, then take her to the others and feed her.”

Food.

The maid nodded, and then Lady Chiyome looked at me, impaling me with that cold, level stare that I had encountered in the woods. “Don’t be boring and decide to behave like a possession rather than a guest. Tonight, once we reach our destination, Mieko here will bring you to me, and we will see how fine a prize you actually are.”

I bowed and began to back away, but her voice stopped me. “Kano Murasaki, you may not realize it, but I have done you a great favor. I have it in my power to give you a gift that you don’t even realize you desire. Make yourself worth my trouble, and you will be glad of it. Disappoint me, and you will be very, very sorry.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. To be honest, I was stunned that she had used my full, true name. No one had called me that since Father went away. I looked up into her face, but it was as empty and without answers as a blank-faced Jizo statue’s. “Kuniko, I want a bath,” she snapped. Then she turned and walked into the inn, followed by one of her maids.

“Come, Risuko-*chan*,” Mieko said, “follow me.” She turned smoothly around and began to walk across the courtyard, her tall wooden sandals clapping on the stones like horse hooves, a sound made hollow by the snowfall.

As I stumbled behind her, my body came back to me and I began to shiver—huge, uncontrollable vibrations. Tears began to roll down my face. At last.

She led me through the coin-sized flakes of snow. Though it must have been midday, the storm made it dark, and her form seemed to fade into the falling feathers of the crystal flakes. I danced across the cold stones, my bare feet fleeing from freezing earth to freezing air and back again, leaving me hopping like a mating crane next to Mieko’s smooth stride. “We will get you changed and fed before we go,” she said.

There was no one between me the inn-yard entrance. I thought of bolting. But *food*...

We reached a wide door that looked like the entry to a stable. Mieko opened it and beckoned me in. “Come, Risuko.”

I entered behind her and peered into the gloom. As my eyes adjusted, I could make out five figures, all seated around a tiny fire.

The room looked as if it were indeed intended to be a stable, but had been transformed into a sort of servant dormitory. Low, age-darkened beams

crisscrossed, holding up the roof. Bedrolls lined one wall and a small, smoky fire-pit warmed the center of the space—almost.

The five figures stood and turned toward me. I felt the urge to climb up into the low rafters, just to get away. Too late to fly away, I realized.

I recognized the two bulkiest figures as Lady Chiyome's carriers. They glanced at me, bowed their heads, and then turned back to the fire, stirring rice in a pot.

The other three figures came toward me. As they stepped away from the fire, their black silhouettes softened and I could make out their features. They were older than me, but definitely children. The biggest was a boy, with a doughy, smiling face. The middle one had a smile too, but it wasn't a friendly one at all. And the smallest one, who was just a little bigger than me, wore the most ridiculous frown on her face that I've ever seen.

"Children," said Mieko, a hand resting gently on my shoulder, "come and introduce yourselves to our newest companion."

"So," spat the middle girl, "you're the reason we've been waiting here."

I tried to step back, but Mieko's gentle grip held me in place.

The boy spoke as if the girl hadn't said a thing. "I'm Aimar. And this is Emi." He gestured to the sad-faced girl.

"Hello," she said. Her voice was pleasant, but the scowl didn't break at all.

The boy was about to introduce the other girl, but she slapped away his hand. "I'm me," she said. "I don't care if you know who I am or not, but I want to know who you are, and why the lady was looking for a scrawny mouse like you."

"She's not a mouse, Toumi," said the frowning girl. "She's too big." I couldn't tell if she was joking, or just hadn't understood.

The girl called Toumi gave a dismissive snort and walked back to the tiny fire.

"There's food," said Aimar. "Come."

"What's your name?" asked Emi.

I shuffled. I've never liked Mama's nickname for me, but that was how everyone seemed to know me there. "I'm called Risuko," I muttered, looking down.

"A squirrel's sort of like a mouse," said Emi, her face still twisted in a severe pout.

Is she simple? I wondered. Is she making fun of me? I somehow couldn't believe that either was true.

"Come, Risuko," said Mieko. "We can get you some clean things to wear and then you may eat."

The building was in fact a stable. Mieko grabbed some items from one of the bundles by the fire and led me into one of the empty stalls where I couldn't see the others. She gave a perfect, crescent-moon smile and held out her hand. "Come, give me your clothes."

Her polished sweetness was as impossible to disobey as Lady Chiyome's commands. Shaking uncontrollably, I pulled off my thin, wet jacket and trousers. I held them out to her, dripping on the straw-strewn floor.

Her smile froze on her face as she took the clothes by her fingertips. Holding them at arms' length, she draped them over the wall of the next stall. I never saw them again.

Then she handed me clean clothes: trousers and a jacket, both blue. On the back of the jacket was Lady Chiyome's ten-petaled lotus.

Mieko led me, newly branded, over to the fire, where there was a large pot of rice and a small platter with some slices of fish.

"I must go help pack up the lady's things," Mieko said quietly to me. Turning to the others, she said, "We will be leaving as soon as the lady has eaten. She wishes us to speed our mission and leave Imagawa territory as soon as possible. Please make sure that you are ready to go immediately."

The two large men nodded simply. Aimiru bobbed his head and Emi just stared. Toumi gave a snort.

With that, Mieko turned and glided out of the stable.

Aimiru and Emi picked up their half-finished meals. Toumi was wedged between the two carriers and the wall. She was mashing the fish into the rice with her fingers—but her eyes were still on me, glistening in the firelight. The big one whom Lady Chiyome had called Little Brother passed me a serving of rice and fish in a wooden bowl with a pair of battered chopsticks. I sat in the straw and started to eat.

Mother hadn't had food for us that morning, and I'd had a long, cold walk—not to mention the promise of more walking soon—so I was starving. I began to shovel rice and thin slices of fish into my mouth with the chopsticks. They might not have been clean, but I wasn't going to complain.

As I gulped down the food, barely tasting it but savoring it even so, the others began to gather up their belongings in preparation to leave.

I wasn't concerned; I had nothing to pack. I finished the last grain of rice, rinsed the bowl out with water from a bucket, the rest of which the younger of the carriers poured onto the dying embers of the fire.

"Does the meal meet with Lady Mouse's approval?" sneered Toumi from the wall.

“Don’t be mean, Toumi,” said Aimiru. “It’s not her fault we had to wait here—”

“For three days!” snapped Toumi. “What are you? A real prize? Something special?” Her face darkened in the firelight.

I could feel the blood pounding in my ears. My fingertips were buzzing. Food and warmth had returned feeling to my limbs and to my soul. “I don’t know! I don’t know what she wants with me! She bought me off of my mother this morning.” All of the rest of them—even the carriers, even Toumi—gaped at me. “One moment I’m climbing trees with my sister and the next moment I’m being marched off without even a chance to say goodbye to anyone!”

“You’ve got a mother,” said Emi. “You’ve got a sister.”

I gawped at her, her down-turned mouth looking even sadder than it had. I tried to talk but the miserable expression seemed so extreme—like my own sister’s when her straw dollies would break, or she stubbed her toes, or after Father went away—that it struck me dumb.

Aimiru put his hand very softly on my arm. I realized I was gripping my chopsticks like a dagger. He said, in that same even voice of his, “It’s not your fault that the rest of us are orphans.”

“Orphans?” I responded.

Emi and Aimiru both nodded, solemnly. Aimiru said, “The lady found each of us. I grew up at a temple, I was left there with the monks when I was an infant. And Emi...”

“I lived in the Kyoto streets,” said Emi. “I only remember my mother a little.”

Toumi snorted again.

“Orphans?” I repeated. I could feel my eyes beginning to tear up, my throat filling. Why was I crying?

“Well, say what you want, my family’s dead but I’m no orphan,” snarled Toumi. “I am my family. And no one would ever have been able to sell me like trash to a rag-picker.”

3 — Flying

I have no clear memory of what happened next, or why. I don't think I'd ever in my life tried to hit anyone before, not even my sister. Though I must admit I had considered it from time to time.

But something about Toumi's sneer—her brittle anger, even more than her insult—pricked me to action. She hadn't even turned away from me when my open hand caught her cheek. We both stood there, frozen in shock. It must have lasted less than a heartbeat's time, but it felt as if a tree might have sprouted, grown, and fallen in the moment that we stood there, staring at each other.

The print of a red hand that matched the shape of my own began to darken against her pale skin. My palm burned.

In the same tree-slow time, I watched her eyes narrow with rage and knew that she now wanted to kill me—actually to kill me. And I knew that she was capable of it. She began to lean forward and I knew that she was getting ready to drive her hand into me.

Again, I have no idea how things happened next. I leaped backward and bounced against the wall. The boards had loose grooves that led straight up to the cat's-cradle of overhanging beams. I could see that the door was now open on the other side of the stable and that, if I got up into the rafters, I could climb over Toumi's head and escape out into the snow.

Toumi surged after me, snarling like a wild dog.

My arms and legs began to move without any conscious direction from me.

Before she could reach me, Toumi's charge was snapped short. Little Brother's enormous hand had fastened itself to the collar of her jacket and stopped her as surely as an iron chain. He held her at arm's length, her feet dangling. He turned his round tiger face up to me.

Somehow, without even being aware of it, I had carried out the first part of my plan. I was in the rafters, well above Little Brother's head, poised for escape.

Little Brother's face was, as always, blank and unreadable. So was his companion's, staring up at me from just inside the door, which he was blocking. I wouldn't have been able to get out that way after all.

"Come down," Little Brother said. His voice was as deep, slow earthquake rumble. "No one will be hurting anyone here today."

He gently placed Toumi back by the fire.

I dropped out of the rafters onto the straw-strewn dirt floor.

"Listen to me, both of you." He turned to the others, sitting around the fire. "All of you, listen to me. We face dangers enough. Do not add to them. You children are here out of Lady Chiyome's kindness, out of her greatness of heart. All of you belong to the lady. You are her guests—" He looked at me. "—but you are also her possessions. If you wish Lady Chiyome's kindness to continue, you are to treat all of her possessions respectfully." His calm gaze caught Toumi as her face contorted in a look of poisonous hatred, a look that was aimed at me. "If you feel the need to fight, to hit, you are to hit me. But if you hit me, expect to be hit back."

Toumi blinked, blinked again, and then turned away and strode out of the stable and into the snow.

Little Brother and his fellow giant stood, unmoving, not acknowledging her exit. I walked toward the fire, sat and tried to breathe. Their eyes followed me—the stares weren't threatening, but I felt unnerved, even so. I was ashamed to have given way to anger, to have struck another in spite of everything that my father had always taught. No harm.

Finally, their eyes let go of me, and they went outside—no doubt to search for Toumi.

Now I was aware that Emi and Aimaru were looking at me.

I was still feeling as if I were about to be attacked. "What?" I grumbled at them.

"You are a squirrel," said Emi.

"How did you do that?" said Aimaru, his face now looking more astonished than blissful.

"Do what?" I asked. Suddenly I felt hungry again.

"You climbed right up that wall like a spider," said Aimaru.

"Like a squirrel," corrected Emi.

"I've never seen a person climb like that," Aimaru continued.

“I... I don’t know,” I muttered. “I guess I’ve always been able to climb really well.”

They both nodded, but I wasn’t sure that they believed me.

“You know,” I said, because I just felt as if I had to say something, “my name isn’t really Risuko.”

Aimaru raised both hands and smiled. Clearly it was all the same to him. His smile probably would have been just as Buddha-like if I’d said I was actually a *kitsune*, a fox-spirit who had come to steal all his food.

Emi, however, pouted at me and asked, “What is your name, then?”

“Oh,” I said, because, even though that was the logical question to ask after what I’d said, I hadn’t expected her to ask it. “It’s... It’s Murasaki.”

Her sad face twisted into a confused smirk. “Isn’t that a girl from some story? Some old story?”

“Yes,” I said, “*The Tales of Genji*. The name of the writer, too. It’s an old love story. It was my father’s favorite.”

Her mouth bowed even further down, and her eyes began to moisten. “Back when my mother was alive... She used to tell me stories from it.”

I simply nodded that I understood, and watched as first Emi and then Aimaru shuffled away from the fire toward the door, bedrolls in their hands.

“They’ll expect us to be ready to go,” Aimaru apologetically.

I looked around to see if there was anything for me to bring, but of course, there wasn’t anything. I was just considering hiding there in the stable, waiting for them all to go away, when I sensed a large, quiet presence behind me. I was not surprised to see Little Brother and his companion standing behind me like stone pillars.

I tried smiling at them. The younger one smiled back. “Please, sirs, I... What do I call you?”

“Little Brother,” they both said, in unison.

The younger one, the one who had winked at me, now smiled fully. “It amuses the lady to call us that. All of her followers—the teachers and students at Mochizuki”—*Full Moon*—“know us as the Little Brothers.”

Teachers? Mochizuki? Is there a school on the full moon? I wondered in my bewilderment.

The larger one didn’t seem to share his companion’s amusement. “Lady Chiyome has informed us that we will be leaving immediately.”

Advance Review Copy

4 — The Edge of the World

Around me, everyone was rushing around the courtyard, loading supplies on the two packhorses, putting on extra layers of clothing.

When I reached them, Emi smiled, a small grin, and handed me a warmer coat, and then a sleeping mat. “That’s for tonight. Put it with ours on the white horse.”

I was so surprised at the tiny smile that it took me a moment to accept the bundle from her.

When I had stowed my bedroll with everyone else’s and pulled the padded jacket over the thin blue one, the younger Little Brother handed each of us a lumpy coat made of straw and a pair of straw boots. “We’re going to be walking through snow,” he said, placidly. “We can’t afford to have you freeze your feet.”

We each stepped into the boots, which gave me the unstable feeling of walking on a particularly scratchy pine branch. Then we pulled on the thick, long coats of woven straw. Emi and Aimaru started to snicker. I looked up; they looked like large, walking haystacks. Even Toumi gave a thin, embarrassed smile. That made me think of Usako, my little sister, and my heart twisted.

The entrance to the inn yard was once again unguarded. But in those boots...

Toumi batted at the straw hood and cloak that covered her body. “You look,” she muttered, “like a bunch of cows in their winter coats.”

“What does she think *she* looks like?” whispered Emi.

As the Little Brothers brought the beetle-black palanquin out of the stable where the horses had been kept, Lady Chiyome and Mieko stepped out of the inn. Kuniko, the maid with a face like a block of granite, followed the Little Brothers, holding what looked like a short sword attached to a pole as tall as

she was. It was a weapon that I would later learn was called a glaive. I couldn't think what Kuniko was doing with it, nor why it fit so comfortably in her grip. I assumed that it was for one of the carriers.

The old noblewoman was dressed just as she had been earlier that day, in her dark, layered winter kimono. I had expected the maids to be in their elegant silk robes, but they too were dressed warmly in subdued blue winter robes bearing the ten-petaled lotus mon. The Little Brothers set the palanquin immediately in front of Lady Chiyome, and once again she knelt into the box with that subtle movement that seemed to be no movement at all.

I waited for the two maids to get in with her. I hoped, I suppose, that their weight might slow down the speeding Little Brothers a bit.

Instead, however, the two young women came to us, Mieko with her unreal glide and Kuniko with her solid gait. Kuniko addressed us, gruff and direct, her glaive planted solidly beside her. "We will be walking for the next ten days, if the weather permits. Keep up. Do not whine." From the palanquin, Lady Chiyome's voice snapped, "*Go!*" The two Little Brothers picked up the box and, just as they had the night before, sped away, leading us out of the inn yard.

Kuniko strode forward behind them, leading the horses by their reins with one hand, swinging the glaive like a walking stick in the other, and we stumbled behind her. Mieko brought up the rear.

I have wondered, since, what would have happened if I simply hadn't followed—if, say, I had run into the streets of Pineshore and hidden in the woods behind the town. It didn't even occur to me in the moment to do anything other than fall into line and try as hard as I could to keep up.

As we headed north out of the inn along the main highway out of Pineshore, one of the horsemen circled behind us to serve as a rearguard. We walked quickly through the blizzard-barren streets of the town. A few shopkeepers and rag-pickers looked up, startled, as we passed.

A horse galloped past us, also heading north. It splashed mud—this time on our haystack coats—and disappeared ahead. I wondered if it were the same rider.

Watching the charger, I barely had the time to register the moment when I went further from home than I had ever been—past the shop of the rice merchant for whom Father had written a contract for his marriage with Jiro-san's daughter Kana.

We walked steadily. Just beyond the edge of town, a bridge arced across the old, wide Weatherbank River. A clump of Lord Imagawa's soldiers stood guard, peering away from us, toward the north. The only one who was actually facing the town barely looked at us and waved us through.

Our pack horses' hooves rang hollowly against the wooden planks of the bridge. The river was much deeper and slower there than it was near our village, and I marched along near the side of the bridge, watching the dark green water swirl around the pilings, wishing it were summer and now the impulse to escape came, simply to leap the side of the bridge and swim back up to where the river passed near our house. However, the Little Brothers kept their quick, steady pace, taking us back onto solid ground and out into the open world along the Great Ocean Road, leaving my little world of pine, oak, and hemlock, creek and castle behind us.

The highway was wide, flat and very bare. Most of the time, we traveled just inland of the shore, where what trees there were had a twisted, wind-stunted shape. Even when we were traveling near to woods, the trees seemed to have been cleared back.

"Probably to keep travelers safe from bandits," suggested Aimaru when I pointed it out to him during a rare stop.

A group of Imagawa cavalry clattered past us, also heading north. The steam from the horses' nostrils flowed behind them like hair, like a single ghostly, white tail.

"Also," mumbled Emi, "makes it easier for us to stay out of the way of the troops."

I nodded, but mostly I didn't like it. My whole life had been spent surrounded by trees. Out there on the wide, flat road, I felt... naked.

As the sun began to dip toward the distant mountains, we discovered that sometimes even a highway isn't always wide enough to allow us to stay out of the way of troops.

As we approached a crossroads, we saw that the main road was blocked by what looked like a thicket of armed men—more Imagawa soldiers. Not on guard, these, with many of them lying down. Many bandaged. Many bleeding.

A samurai in battered armor stood as we approached him, one hand out and signaling us to stop, the other on his sword.

Kuniko released the reins of the pack animals and held her glaive in both hands—the point still up, not threatening, but ready.

Lady Chiyome leaned out of her palanquin. "What is it? Why are we slowing down?"

"Can't go this way, lady," said the samurai.

We all gathered behind Kuniko and the palanquin. Mieko stepped in front of Toumi, Emi and me.

“We need to head up this highway if we’re to get past the fighting,” the old lady grumbled.

The samurai gave a laugh that seemed totally without humor. “Not *this* way you won’t,” he said, pointing behind him with a jerk of his thumb. “Only way you’ll get past the fighting down this highway is through the gate to the next world.”

I shivered.

“There’s a village a ways up that road,” the samurai said, pointing to the smaller road that led inland. “Least, it was there a couple of days ago. You can spend the night there, then follow the road up the Little Nephew into Quick River Province. Don’t think there’s *too* much fighting up that way.”

“But we have to—!”

“Lady, try to go down this highway and I’ll kill you all myself. No civilians.” He glanced at Kuniko. “Or... whatever.”

“Bah!” Chiyome-*sama* slammed her window shut, which the Little Brothers took for a signal to head along the smaller road. As we began to march behind them, I could hear her growl from inside her box, “Ruffian!”

By the time we reached the village, it was nearly dark. Kuniko moved up to talk to the old noblewoman. I could hear the shrill sound of Chiyome-*sama*’s raised voice answering in anger, but I couldn’t hear what she was saying.

The armed maid looked back at us, her jaw tight. I couldn’t quite hear what she said to the lady, but I could make out the words danger and enemy.

On the other hand, when Chiyome-*sama* stuck her head out of the window, I could clearly hear her response, a disgusted snort. “Kuniko!” she hollered at her armed maid, who was still only an arm’s-length away, and pointed at the only building in the village that had a sign. “Go see if that’s an inn and get them to start the water boiling. I want a bath.” And with that, she snapped the screen shut.

Making a show of maintaining her dignity, Kuniko handed the reins of the packhorses to one of the Little Brothers and sauntered off toward the building.

Mieko was standing right behind me. I turned to her and whispered, “Why was Lady Chiyome so upset?”

Mieko tilted her head to one side and asked, very quietly, “What did you see on the road during our walk today?”

I frowned for a moment. “Horsemen, riding back and forth.”

“How many?”

“Um.” I frowned again. Toumi scowled at me from under her straw hood. “One this morning, riding to the castle? Another as we were crossing the bridge out of Pineshore... and... a bunch when we stopped?”

Mieko raised an eyebrow and turned to Emi. “How many, Emi-*chan*?”

“Nine,” answered Emi.

“Very good,” Mieko said. She looked back to me. “A small group of cavalry like that is called a *squadron*. Why do you think there has been so much—?”

Toumi interrupted, “Cause there’s a damn battle going on, like that soldier said!”

Mieko’s posture didn’t change and her smile remained, but a hardness told us very clearly that she hadn’t appreciated Toumi’s interruption. After a moment she said, her eyes still on me, “Precisely. Back in Pineshore, there were rumors of a battle that might be taking place near here. Some of Lord Imagawa’s men had set out to attack an outpost of... of Lord Takeda’s. Chiyome-*sama* wanted to get past the danger before we stopped for the night.”

“She expected us to get *further* than this?” I heard Emi mutter. For once, even Toumi had nothing to say. Looking at their faces, I could see that they were as exhausted and as cold as I was.

I shivered, thinking about something quite separate from my cold-parched lips and sore legs: those soldiers at the crossroad, so many of them wounded. A battle? It suddenly occurred to me that I was safer traveling with this peculiar band than if I were off on my own.

When Kuniko came back, she informed Lady Chiyome through the screen that the house was indeed an inn, that they were pleased to be honored by the lady’s patronage, and that a bath was being prepared.

As we walked slowly down the street toward the inn, I saw a few faces peering out at us from behind curtains and doors. Several of the buildings’ roofs had clearly been scorched—there was a layer of fire-blackened thatch beneath bright, new straw. Two houses were nothing but black skeletons.

The sign of the inn, too, was blackened, though it was hard to tell whether by dirt and age or by flame and soot. It carried a barely visible image of a cat with a raised paw.

We entered slowly. As unimposing as the inn that we had stayed at in Pineshore had been, this place looked as though a good wind could blow it down. There was a wasp nest under the eaves in the entryway, but even it looked ramshackle, as if the wasps had given it up for a lost cause.

“Welcome to the Mount Fuji Inn!” a dry voice warbled cheerfully. An old woman in a tatty kimono that had been elegant when her grandmother had worn it shuffled out of the front door and into the courtyard.

“Mount Fuji?” said Chiyome-*sama* as she stepped out of the palanquin. “We’re two days travel from the mountain,” she sniffed.

“Ah!” said the innkeeper, offering a stiff, deep bow, “but if the weather is clear tomorrow, you will be able to make out the holy mountain in the north.” She looked around, pinkened, and added, “It is a bit distant, it’s true, but you can make it out. On a clear day.”

She clapped her hands together. “Well, honored lady, we will be happy to serve you and your party. I will lead you to your room. My husband will see to the horses.” An old man, even more threadbare and tired-looking than his wife, stumbled forward, took the reins of the packhorses and led them into the inn’s lone stable. Kuniko followed him.

“Room?” Lady Chiyome asked, looking for once more amused than imperious.

“Honored lady,” said the innkeeper, “there have been very few visitors of late. It is the wrong season. And all the fighting. . . We have just one chamber available, on the ground floor.”

“Ground floor!” said Lady Chiyome. “That will do for my servants,” and she indicated us all with a negligent backhanded wave, “But I prefer something on the second floor.”

The old woman hissed in apology. “*Eee*, so sorry, honored lady, the upper floor to our inn is. . . has been. . .” She looked at Lady Chiyome uncertainly. “You have noticed that the town has been ravaged by fire. The Takeda nearly burned the town to the ground last month before they were driven back by Lord Imagawa’s men.”

Both of the carriers straightened up, and Mieko raised a thin eyebrow, asking a question of the lady without speaking it. Clearly they were worried about being so close to all of the fighting that was going on in this district; it certainly frightened me. Lady Chiyome held her hand up to silence their unvoiced concern. “We will stay,” she said, firmly. “The servants will sleep in the stable, or in the dining room.”

The old innkeeper bowed rustily. “Yes, honorable lady.”

Kuniko, who had just come back from stabling the horses, leaned in to whisper to Lady Chiyome. She smirked and said, “My maid informs me that the stables are barely habitable for the horses. My servants will stay in the dining room.”

“Yes, honorable lady.”

5 — The Mt. Fuji Inn

There were three rooms downstairs besides the dining room and kitchen, but the two closest to the front door were both closed off. The doors were edged with black soot. Lady Chiyome had the Little Brothers carry her chest to the rear room.

Mieko and Kuniko led Toumi, Emi and me to the dining room. I was surprised that Mieko left her own bedroll there in the room with us; I had expected her to spend the night with the lady, but she stayed with us and quietly took charge of the servants' quarters.

Once we had arranged our sleeping mats on one side of the large space, we filed over to the low tables on the other side. The tables seemed to have been made of fine wood, once upon a time, and what remained of the tapestries that hung on the walls showed that they had been lovely. Now, however, they were dingy and moth-eaten.

Dinner was a greasy stew of some sort of meat and a portion of rice that seemed as if it been cooked too quickly—one half was raw and the other half burnt. Yet we all ate it—even Lady Chiyome. We were starving after our long march. As we finished up, the old couple shuffled out to take our bowls, but Lady Chiyome held up her tiny, regal hand. "My servants will clean."

For a moment I was caught thinking what a kind, surprising gesture that was, when it suddenly occurred to me that I was one of the servants that Chiyome-sama expected to do the work. I looked around, and noticed that Aimaru and Emi had already stood and were beginning to gather bowls and chopsticks, and that even Toumi had begun to get up and clear the table with a look of angry determination.

I took my bowl and those of the Little Brothers, who were sitting to one side of me. Balancing them carefully, I joined the other girls and Aimaru

carrying them toward the kitchen. The old woman waved her hands to stop us from going in. “Eeee, there is no need...”

“It is our pleasure,” said Aimaru, with a quick bow of his head, and we walked through the patched curtain into the tiny kitchen.

There we found stacks of chipped and shattered bowls on cobwebbed shelves. The fire was smoldering, fading as we watched. The remains of the wood seemed clearly to have been shards of fine old furniture, and some unburned wisps of decorated fabric remained; a scrap of tapestry had clearly been used to start the flame. They had literally used their last resource to prepare our meal: the inn itself.

Emi grabbed a bucket and went outside to draw some water from the town well.

We began to clear away the cooking implements—a battered black wok, a frayed wooden spoon and an extremely fragile-looking rice pot. “Pathetic,” Toumi grumbled.

“Did any of us come from better circumstances?” Aimaru asked placidly.

Toumi bit her lip, and then muttered, “Maybe not, but better birthright.” Then she set aggressively to scraping the food scraps from our bowls in the pot.

Emi came back. “At least the water’s clean,” she chirped, with a cheerfulness that as usual wasn’t reflected in her face.

With a snort, Toumi picked up the pot full of burnt rice and small bones, to carry it out to the offal pit. “Unlike some of you, I wasn’t born to this kind of filth.”

“What do you know about what the rest of us were born to?” I said. Without thinking about it, I had stepped right behind her. She whirled around, and for an eye’s-blink I was convinced that she was going to attack me with the spot. My hands rose to my face.

Very deliberately, with a knife-thin smile, Toumi lifted the pot over my head and emptied the greasy contents on me. I shrieked and was about to sink my nails into Toumi’s face—which was probably what she wanted me to do—when I heard Mieko’s quiet, calm voice from the doorway: “Clean it up. All four of you. Now.”

Toumi and I locked eyes for a moment, each waiting for the other to start first. In that moment, I was beyond caring about anything that *Oto-san* had taught us about *doing no harm*; I wanted to kill. I could see shoyu-soaked rice dripping from my bangs. It was fortunate that the innkeepers were poor, and we were hungry: there had been little left in the pot.

Slowly, we each bent to clean the mess. Emi and Aimaru helped clean away the last of the dinner. Later, I washed my head in what was left of the

clean water, relieved that my new clothing had not been noticeably stained. I was sure Lady Chiyome would not have approved.

When we were done, we put out our bedrolls in the dining room with the other servants. I wanted to talk to Emi, to ask her so many questions. But she was snoring before I had even climbed beneath my covers.

I had to fight to keep silent, because I was weeping. Thinking of Usako and Mother. Of *Oka-san* having sold me. Of Usako wandering around in the woods without me.

Of the fact that, even were I to slip away that night, I wasn't altogether certain that I could find my way home, nor whether I would be welcome if I did.

Before I was able to even try to calm myself enough to sleep, I heard a steady step coming across the *tatami*. "Kano Murasaki." It was Kuniko, her voice low. "Come now. The lady wishes to see you."

I stumbled out of my bedroll, suddenly very aware of how sore and tired my legs were, and how sticky my hair still was.

Kuniko led me from the dark dining room where we were all sleeping in to the cramped chamber where the lady was waiting.

She was seated on a cushion, her robes draped elegantly around her. The two Little Brothers stood behind either shoulder, massive and silent, and Mieko stood in the shadows to one side. In front of her was a low table, on which stood several objects, including sheets of fine rice paper, a bowl with the smoothest, blackest ink I'd ever seen, a box with six different colors of ink sticks, each in its own compartment, and a fine, sleek, red-handled brush.

Kuniko tapped me on the shoulder. I knelt and bowed.

"Come, Risuko," said Lady Chiyome, indicating with a small, pale hand that I should sit on the other side of the table from her.

I shuffled across the floor on my knees, feeling the rough *tatami* catching on the cloth of my new pants. In the end, I reached the table, still kneeling, still looking down.

"What *have* you done with your hair, child?"

I winced, still focusing on the mat and the table legs. "There was... an accident in the kitchen."

Lady Chiyome gave a husky sigh. "I suppose when I pluck urchins from treetops in the morning, it's too much to expect them to be ladies in the evening."

One of the Little Brothers gave a grunt that might have been a chuckle.

"Look up, child." The lady was either scowling at me, or smirking. She wiggled a thin finger at the writing implements before her.

The bowl that held the ink was eggshell thin, glazed a rich, deep blue that seemed to soak in the flickering light of the small fire and the candles that lit the room. A worn black ink stone lay beside it.

“I would like to see how well your father taught you, Risuko.” She cocked her head to one side, like someone who was trying to look sly. “Write something.”

Still barely lifting my head, I reached out and took a sheet of the rice paper. It was so thin I could barely feel it between my fingers. As I placed it before me, I imagined I could almost see the grain of the table through the paper.

“What should I write?” I asked.

“Whatever you like,” she answered, dismissively waving her hand.

I chewed on the inside of my bottom lip for a second. I couldn’t think of a thing. Then I remembered sitting next to Father, copying one of his poems, trying to match his flowing brushstrokes.

I reached out to pick up the brush, but my fingers were shaking. “The ink is really good.”

Her nostrils flared. “Of course.” She clearly thought it was the stupidest thing she had heard me say.

I took a deep breath, trying to gain time and steady my hand. I tried to visualize the words flowing from our father’s brush, the three lines of *Oto-san*’s favorite poem. Without even realizing that I had done it, I picked up the brush, wetted it in the ink, and let the tip flow black over the ice-white paper.

Soldiers falling fast
 Battle of white and scarlet
 Blossoms on the ground

Again, Lady Chiyome smirked, looking down at my calligraphy. This time, however, the smirk was definitely not disgust, but what I was beginning to recognize as the lady’s sour amusement.

“Very nice,” she said, eyebrows arched.

It was. Father would have been proud. It wasn’t as good as his, but the lines flowed cleanly, evenly and easily.

“It’s one of my father’s poems.”

“Yes,” she said, “I know.”

I was about to ask how she could possibly know that, but she held up a small, thin finger. Her face was still on the surface, but looked as if it were

twisting underneath. “Poetry is very nice, but anyone can learn a bag full of haiku before breakfast. Show me something longer. Show me some prose.”

I took a deep breath, and I immediately thought of that passage that *Otosan* used to have us practice night after night. Again, I took out a clean sheet and picked up the brush. This time, I was calmer. With my left hand, I held back the cuff of my right sleeve.

“Keep your tongue in your mouth, child,” tisked Lady Chiyome.

I sucked my tongue in. I hadn’t even noticed that I was sticking it out. I could feel my fingers begin to shake again.

I took another deep breath, carefully wetted the brush once more, and began to write.

In the reign of a certain emperor there was a certain lady of the lower ranks whom the emperor loved more than any of the others. The great, ambitious ladies gazed on her resentfully. Because of this..

My concentration was broken by an odd sound—a wheezing, rolling, rasping sound. Alarmed, I looked up.

Lady Chiyome looked furious—her white-painted face was darkening and twisted. Then she let out the sound again, fuller and deeper, and I realized that she was laughing. Tears began to stream from her eyes and she was weeping, screaming, howling with laughter.

I knelt there, ink drying on my brush, afraid to move. I had no idea why she was laughing, and was afraid that anything I might do could turn her frightening good humor to anger.

She reached a hand out to Mieko, and from the look on the maid’s face I realized that she was as shocked as I was. Mieko’s perfect black eyebrows were arched so high they looked as if they might snap.

Lady Chiyome took a silk handkerchief from Mieko’s sleeve, and began to wipe her eyes. I noticed that even the two bodyguards seemed astonished.

“Well, Mieko,” the lady said to her maid, “there you are. I look up at the top of the most forsaken pine tree in forsaken Serenity Province, and I find the last great enthusiast of *The Tales of Genji*.” She gave another rumbling laugh, and Mieko smiled, at least in sympathy if not in understanding. The old woman turned her streaked face to me again. “So, my little romance novelist. Your father did indeed teach you well.” She blew her nose loudly.

“Here, Kuniko.” She handed the wet silk rag to the other maid, whose face was a mask, and then turned back to me. “Now let me see how you can read.”

Smoothly and so quickly that I didn’t even see it happening, she plucked the brush from my hand. Holding it like a knife between her middle finger and thumb, she picked up fresh ink and poised to write on yet another sheet of beautiful, clean rice paper. She looked up, catching me with her gaze, as if to say, *Are you watching carefully?*

Like me, she pulled her sleeve back, but where my action had been a simple grab to keep my sleeve from trawling through the ink, hers was precise and elegant, like the motion of a dancer.

Her hand barely moved, but the brush slashed a character onto the paper—the phonetic hiragana, *ku* (く). Then came a sinuous curve—the phonetic katakana, *no* (ノ). Finally, another, horizontal slash—the Chinese kanji ideogram *ichi* (一).

She placed the brush down with the same deadly elegance, and looked up at me again. “Well?” she asked, indicating what she had written.

I was perplexed. I understood all of the pieces, but they made no sense. *Oto-san* said you weren’t ever supposed to write katakana, hiragana and kanji in a single word. I turned my head, thinking perhaps that if I looked at it upside down I might understand it.

“Well,” I said, “the first mark is *ku*, which means *nine*. And then there’s *no*, which is... *of?* Or *on*, or sometimes *from*. And then that line looks like the kanji character meaning *one*.” Then I sat back a bit, and the word came into focus, like an offshore island appearing through clearing fog. “But the whole thing... If you put the three strokes together it could be the Chinese character for woman (女).”

Lady Chiyome smiled again, the frightening smile. “Yes, my squirrel, yes. A *kunoichi* is a very special kind of woman indeed.” She looked to her two maids, and then back at me. “Perhaps, if you are fortunate, you will be such a woman yourself some day.”

I stared at her.

“I have one last question for you, child.”

“Yes, my lady?”

She picked up the brush and swirled it in a small bowl of water to clean it. Taking out yet another sheet of paper she said, “This morning, you told me that you could see the paper that Lord Imagawa and his commander were looking at.”

I nodded.

She fixed me with a skeptical stare. “To have seen it from that distance, you’d have had to be a falcon, not a squirrel.”

“But... I saw it, my lady.”

“Hmmp. So you say. Do you think you could reproduce what you saw?”

Now it was my turn to frown once more. In my mind’s eye the image was clear — the large blocks of green, with the smaller blocks of red and blue surrounding them. Lines like arrows sticking out of them. I nodded again.

She pushed the box of colored inks toward me and held out the brush once more. “Keep your tongue in, this time.”

I sucked my tongue in. “Yes, Chiyome-*sama*.” Then I reproduced the drawing I had seen as best I could.

When I looked up, Lady Chiyome’s eyes were wide. “Are you sure this is what you saw?”

“Yes, my lady.”

She grunted and turned to Kuniko. “We’ll need to get out of here as quickly as possible tomorrow, Kuniko.” Then she waved a hand at me. “Go to bed, girl. We will be traveling again in the morning.” She favored me with a grin in which there was very little of lightness. “Pleasant dreams. Risuko.”

My dreams that night were anything but.

Advance Review

Advance Review Copy

6—Tea and Cakes

A rumble woke us all the next morning. It sounded like a peal of distant thunder. But Mieko and Kuniko were already on their feet before I could sit up and wipe the sleep from my eyes.

“What is it?” I asked Emi, who was rubbing her eyes next to me. “It’s awfully cold for thunder and lightening, isn’t it? And it doesn’t feel like an earthquake...”

Emi shook her head and scowled. We both listened carefully as we pulled on our clothes—mine still slightly damp from the night before, smelling faintly of stale soy sauce and burnt rice.

Another low rumble shook the morning silence. From where I had been sleeping near the kitchen, I could see a grey, thin light leaking beneath the outer kitchen door.

We began to fold away our bedding with a sense of uncertain urgency. I was about to ask again what that rumble might have been, when a new sound broke the silence and explained everything. It was a sharp, high crack. Musket fire. And not very far away, from the sound of it.

My legs went cold and I dropped my bedroll.

The battle had come to us.

Kuniko appeared at the front door, her face as stony as ever. To the younger Little Brother, she barked, “Go guard the rear gate.” To the older one, she said, “Come with me to guard the lady.” Then she and Mieko exchanged a look. It said: the lady’s maid and the four children would have to fend for ourselves.

I caught Emi’s eye, and I could see she shared the dry panic that was squeezing the breath out of me. Even Toumi looked pale and shaken.

There were several more gunshots, and the deep rumble sounded again—cannon fire.

Mieko turned to us, standing there in her thin robe as if she were waiting to sit for a portrait and not waiting for a battle. “Aimaru,” she said, a hoarseness to her voice the only sign that she was nervous, “Aimaru, you take these young ladies to the kitchen. I will guard this door. You should be safe enough in there.”

We all began to stumble toward the kitchen doorway.

“Aimaru!” Mieko called, her voice betraying more emotion than I had ever yet heard, “they are your responsibility, do you understand?”

He snapped a stiff, almost soldier-like bow, and led us into the kitchen.

There was another rumbling sound in the distance, longer and higher than the cannon’s thunder. Horses were galloping in our direction.

Aimaru grabbed a curved chef’s knife from the shelf next to the pots we had cleaned the night before. Its edge was nicked and scarred, but its point still looked lethal. He gave it a practice slash or two, and then looked up at the three of us. I realized that he was as terrified as we were. “There’s a small pantry there. Can you three fit in it?”

I started to object, but he cut me off with uncharacteristic impatience. “Have you been trained to fight?” We all stood, silent. “Can you face a grown soldier?” Our shoulders sagged. He opened the door and pushed us in.

“Does he know how to fight?” Toumi muttered. Her shoulder pressed against my nose. I couldn’t breathe.

The pantry was tiny. The shelves were bare except for a few cobwebs that fluttered as we squirmed to stay quiet.

Emi grunted and turned her head to try to get it away from Toumi’s hair. “I was there when Lady Chiyome picked him up on Mount Hiei, rock-head. He was training to be a warrior-monk.”

Toumi looked as though she might bite Emi, but a loud yell from the front of the inn snapped her to attention. “Who was that?”

There was an answering shout—“Get away from here!”—from a voice that I thought I recognized as Kuniko’s.

“I think that’s coming from the front gate,” I whispered. I could hear our horses braying loudly. Then there was an explosion of noise: the shouting of many more voices, the sharp ring of steel meeting steel, and a wrenching snap that made the whole rickety inn tremble.

I heard the Little Brother outside the back door yell, “Come here, come here! It is a good day to die!” Several angry voices answered his.

There was no escape from the inn.

Now I was panicked—furious—at being trapped in the airless closet. If I could only climb to the roof, I thought, I might jump to the next building. . . Desperate to find some way out, I looked up.

Above, a crescent-moon sliver of light shone through the thatch roof. Before I had even considered, I had used Toumi's shoulder to push me up onto the flimsy shelves.

"Hey!" barked Toumi.

"Murasaki," Emi hissed, "come back down!"

"I just want to see," I whispered back, feeling a twinge of guilt at leaving them behind. "I'll be right back."

I could feel the brisk morning air blowing in through the sliver of space between the wall and the singed thatch, could smell the smoke of a thousand meals that had been cooked in the kitchen below. I pushed up, widening the opening by pressing between the straw and the wall.

As I squeezed up into the smoke hole, I heard Aimaru gasp below. "What are you doing?"

"Uh, just taking a look."

"Get down!"

"I will, I..." I didn't want to abandon him or Emi—it didn't seem fair. But I couldn't just sit there, locked up. I wriggled against the wall, pushing up into the smoke hole.

Looking up, all that I could see was the charred roof that covered the chimney, keeping rain out. Like all else in the inn, the cover had a moth-eaten look. The supports were charred and spindly, and it looked as if a stiff breeze might have blown it away like the ash from the previous night's fire.

But the sky beyond was blue—the bright, silver-blue of early morning—and I could just smell the distant tang of the sea through the thick odor of stale smoke. As I pushed up through the chimney, I was so feverish with relief at my soon-to-be-certain escape that I almost missed another scent, one that made the hair on my forearms stand up.

Gunpowder. Close by.

As soon as I raised my head through the smoke hole in the thatch, a thunderstorm of sounds burst over my ears. Gun shots. The *ping* of steel on steel. Screams.

As I peered around, looking for a nearby roof that I could escape to, I could see knots of dust, with occasional silver flashes. I tried to see any of our party, but the chimney was on the far side of the roof from the inn yard. I could hear the younger of the Little Brothers howling like an angry bear, but I could not see him; he must have been just out of sight, hidden by the edge of the roof. *Which way to go?* I wondered.

A puff of hay suddenly flew into my face. I couldn't imagine why—it wasn't windy, and so there was no reason for the roof to be blowing apart, ramshackle as it was.

I turned toward where the thatch had come from and saw a bright flash of red from the dust-filled street.

I did not hear the gunshot until the bullet had splintered the smoke-lathed support a hand's width from my ear. The support gave way, and the roof above me squealed as it began to lean and fall.

As I scampered back down into the pantry with a squeak, I could see relief and concern on Aimaru's round face.

"Well?" snapped Toumi.

"I... couldn't see anything," I murmured as I stood once again between them, trying not to tremble.

There was noise now in the corridor of the inn. The older Little Brother must have been fighting like a demon to protect Chiyome-*sama*.

I thought with terror of poor Mieko, standing frail and alone out in the dining room. Why hadn't she come back into the kitchen with us, or gone off with Kuniko? She had made a dreadful sacrifice for us, I thought, and had made it with the quiet dignity of a samurai woman, just as our father had always hoped that my sister and I would conduct ourselves. I was ready to call out to Mieko, to tell her to come in and hide with us, when I heard, through the clamor, two men entering the dining room.

Through the thin wall behind me, I heard one say, "Hey, Juro, look what we've found!"

"The pretty lady from the group at the crossroads, yesterday. Hey, pretty lady. Give a soldier a kiss?" I thought I recognized the voice of the samurai who had stopped us the previous evening.

I heard Mieko say, with that same polite tone that she seemed to use no matter what the occasion, "Please, gentlemen, go elsewhere. I do not wish to harm you."

I do not wish to harm you?

The two soldiers laughed grimly and we could hear the sound of tables being knocked aside. One thumped into the wall against which my back was pressed. I could feel Toumi, Emi and myself all try to take a sympathetic gasp of terror for Mieko, but the space was too confined—we simply pressed up against each other even more tightly.

From the dining hall, we heard the sound of a high shriek, and then what sounded like a sigh. There were two thuds, and then the room beyond the wall was silent.

Battle raged elsewhere. Grunts, shouts, the clang of metal—it was too much sound to give me a picture of what was going on outside.

Then a new sound drowned out all the others. It roared like a huge wave breaking on the shore, but instead of crashing and retreating, it kept thundering toward us from the same direction that the cannon fire had come from.

It was the sound of hundreds of galloping horses.

Oto-san told me once—only once—about witnessing the charge of the Takeda cavalry at Midriver Island. He said the thunder of their hooves was both the most beautiful and most terrifying thing he had ever witnessed—except for the births of my sister and me.

The sounds of fighting around us gave way to panicked shouts and the sounds of running feet.

There was more shouting, and then the roar of the horses' hooves came to a halt.

There was quiet for a few long moments, and then Emi gasped when the latch on the closet was raised. The door was flung open, and bright light blinded us. We all three—Emi, Toumi and myself—stiffened, ready to run, to fight for our lives if need be.

Aimaru stood in the door, his face as tense as ours must have been. "Good morning," he said.

From the back door, the Little Brother entered, looking much less good-humored than he usually did. His bald head had a large bleeding gash on it. "*Ssh!*" he ordered. "We don't know who those horsemen were." He looked at all of us. "Where is *Mieko-san*?"

Each of us gave a gasp—in our relief, we had forgotten what had happened to poor *Mieko*. We burst through the doorway back into the dining area to see if we could help her.

Mieko knelt, her hair loose around her lovely, sad face. She was wiping a long, thin blade with a rust-brown kerchief. Before her lay two soldiers whose armor bore the emblem of Lord *Imagawa*. The smaller was indeed the samurai who had ordered us up the side road the day before. Both were lifeless, their faces frozen in shock.

Her knife clean, *Mieko* slipped the blade into a small, flat sheath. With her left hand, she gathered her hair into a bun at the back of her head and then with her right slid the covered blade in so that it neatly held her tresses in place.

She did all of this with the modesty and ritual decorum of a shrine maiden preparing tea and cakes for the gods.

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7 - Wind

Mieko stood calmly and bowed to us.

From a small curtain at the end of the hall opposite the kitchen, we heard a whimper. Aimaru sprinted toward it, his battered knife still in his hand. With a yell, he yanked down the curtain, and revealed the old innkeepers, huddled on the floor of their small room.

After a moment of shocked silence, Aimaru bowed to them. "Pardon me for intruding," he said, as if he had merely turned in at the wrong door.

The old couple seemed barely to recognize that he was there.

We all stumbled out of the dining hall into the corridor. Two more Imagawa soldiers lay dead there, and the elder Little Brother was standing impassive above them. Emi and I started to run toward the front door to see who our rescuers might have been, but Lady Chiyome called out sharply, "Stay here, young idiots! We don't know who those horsemen are!"

Shamed, we shrunk back toward the back of the corridor, stopping just shy of the dead soldiers who had been piled at the bottom of the staircase.

The two Little Brothers lumbered up toward the front of the hall, blades at the ready. The door was hanging from a single hinge, and a shard of sunlight thrust against the corridor wall. The younger Little Brother, his head still bleeding, crept up to the door and peeked through.

"It's all right!" he shouted, "It's the Takeda cavalry."

I gasped at that: that our saviors should be the force that had been the nightmare of my father's warrior career, and the enemy of his second patron, once he became a scribe. What have I gotten into? I wondered.

With Lady Chiyome herding us from behind, we all began to make our way toward the exit. I was more than a little terrified. Father had said that the Takeda cavalry were the wind, a mighty tempest that swept away everything in its path. Toumi pushed at my back, or I would have been frozen to the spot.

When we were all in place, the elder Little Brother reached out to open the door, but before he could, the remaining hinge pulled out of the wall with a squeal, and the door slammed to the floor.

I let out a yelp, but then pulled my mouth shut, so that the teeth clicked.

A cold, nightmarish scene met us in the warm light of the new morning. In front of the stable, three Imagawa soldiers lay motionless on the ground in their own gore. In their midst lay the still form of Kuniko, her blood-streaked glaive still clutched in one hand. A sword was planted in her chest. Mieko and the two Little Brothers ran to her.

Lady Chiyome gave a low, growling curse.

At the entrance to the inn's yard, four cavalymen sat gleaming on their black stallions. Each had a red flag on his back bearing a four-diamond insignia. The Takeda.

The foremost of the samurai, whose helmet was decorated with antlers, leapt from his horse and strode fiercely toward us.

Aimaru lifted his battered blade, but Chiyome-*sama* shouted again, "Put that down, boy. You'll get hurt."

The Takeda samurai knelt directly in front of Lady Chiyome and bowed deeply. "Chiyome-*sama*," he said, his voice respectfully low, "it is an honor to see you again. We were sent to find you. I didn't expect it to be so easy."

The old woman looked amused at his show of respect. "Easy indeed, Lieutenant Masugu. I had been told the Takeda army would be leaving Serenity Province to Lord Matsudaira's troops." She arched an eyebrow. "Who are, I believe, attacking from the other side of the province."

The samurai removed his helmet, revealing a sweat-stained cap and a sharp, wry face. He looked around at all of us. "The Imagawa seem finally to have realized that they were stuck between a pair of jaws, and they've started wriggling quite a bit." He gestured to the dead men on the ground. "They attacked our camp last night. When we scattered their charge, they ran back here, more interested in looting their own villages than defending their province."

Lady Chiyome looked down at the corpses with a look of utter contempt. "Ruffians," she said, and her tone made it clear that this was the lowest term she could have used.

Then she glanced over toward the stable door. Mieko sat, still cradling stony-faced Kuniko's head in her lap; she was not crying, but her face was blank with grief. The larger of the Younger Brothers shook his head, and Lady Chiyome gave something halfway between a grunt and a sigh.

Staring at the tableau, Lieutenant Masugu's mouth opened and closed. "Poor... I'm sorry." He turned back to Chiyome. "She... died well."

"She did."

What had Kuniko been doing out there? What had she been doing arming herself with the long glaive? Fighting well, clearly. Dying well.

Masugu gave an embarrassed wince and looked around at all of us. His eyes lit on Aimiru, Emi, Toumi and me standing there, still dressed for bed. "What are these?" he asked, a look of curiosity sharpening his frank gaze. "New shrine maidens?"

"Of course, Masugu," said Chiyome-*sama*. "The gods must be honored even in such times as these."

I blinked. *Shrine maidens?*

Chiyome-*sama* got a sly look on her face. "Lieutenant Masugu, let me introduce three young samurai maidens: Tarugu Toumi, Hanichi Emi, and Kano Murasaki." A little confused to hear my rank and formal name, I bowed politely, if stiffly. I could see the others do the same to my left.

"Kano...?" Masugu looked at us as if he were trying to think where he'd met us before. Then his brows sprang up, and he gave a sharp whistle of surprise. "Quite a pack!" he said. Then he jerked his thumb toward Aimiru. "Who's he? Go-Daigo's heir, come to life again?"

Lady Chiyome gave her thin smile. "No, he's just a spare." She glanced over toward Mieko continued to rock Kuniko's head in her lap, while the two Little Brothers stood, looking impassive as statues. "Much needed spare, it seems," she sighed.

The Takeda samurai rubbed the top of his head through the cap, and looked around at us. "Chiyome-*sama*," he said, "we've come from the Mountain to bring you and your, um, cargo back to Mochizuki. Would you do us the honor of allowing us to escort you out of the battle zone?"

Lady Chiyome peered around at the scene, her acid gaze washing over the inn, now even more sad than it had been the day before, and our company, none of us even dressed for the day yet. "We will leave as soon as I am changed and packed," she proclaimed. Then she strode back toward the inn and her room. Mieko fell in silently behind her, and we all prepared to leave.

As quickly as our hands and feet could manage it, we were back in the courtyard. Lieutenant Masugu's troops now flooded out the inn-yard gate, an ocean of them, all on sleek black stallions, all with red Takeda flags on

their backs. The horses' steaming breath was a glowing fog in the now-bright morning light.

The Imagawa corpses were all piled to one side of the courtyard.

In front of them, on a rough wooden platform, Kuniko's body lay wrapped in a dirty white shroud.

It felt odd. I had barely met the woman, had only known her for a day. I hadn't liked her very much. And yet I mourned her death far more than those of the pile of dead soldiers.

Lady Chiyome stood before the old couple that owned the inn. She handed the woman a small, heavy bag. "Let the proper rites be said for my woman." Then she looked to the broken door and sniffed. "And use what is left—what is *left*, mind you—to clean this place up."

The old couple muttered their thanks and promises, and touched their grey heads to the dirt.

Then Lady Chiyome turned and slid into her waiting palanquin. Next to me, Lieutenant Masugu extended his hand toward Mieko, offering to let her ride with him. But she stepped by without acknowledging his gesture. After the briefest expression of shock flickered across his face, Masugu turned and extended his hand toward me.

8 — The Mountain

For three days, we rode quickly, without speaking until the mirror of the sun passed behind the mountains. On the first two days, we passed large groups of soldiers bearing the Takeda four-diamond banner marching toward the battles we had just left behind. By the third day, we might as well have been the only people in all of Worth Province—in all of Japan. We passed no one. Even the villages seemed empty.

Every night, the soldiers would make camp—in dry rice paddies or on the edges of fields. They would start preparing a simple meal, which Emi, Toumi, Aamaru and I would help clean up. The men would start talking to each other, and to the Little Brothers, occasionally. They would speak respectfully to Lady Chiyome occasionally, and even tease Aamaru and us three girls a bit.

None of them ever spoke to Mieko-san, though the lieutenant seemed always to know where she was.

Riding a horse turned out to be much more exhausting work than I would have expected, even if one was, as I was, merely a passenger.

I found to my surprise and dismay that I, who could climb the tallest tree or building without fear, felt profoundly unsteady on horseback. Every day, Masugu-san would very gently help me up onto his stallion, and each morning I had to work not to tear the poor creature's mane out in my terror. It felt to me as if I were sitting on the back of nothing less than an earthquake at rest.

The only consolation that I had was that Toumi seemed to hate it even more than I did.

At the end of the third long day, Masugu helped me down off of his horse, and I thanked him, embarrassed not to be able to manage it on my own. He smiled at me and shrugged.

Lady Chiyome was climbing out of her palanquin, muttering and grumbling as she always did. Steam rose from the Little Brothers, who didn't grumble at all.

The soldiers set up camp in the long-drained rice fields beside a lazy river.

As I had every evening, I looked south, seeing nothing homeward but mist.

For the first time, I turned to the north. The distant sight of a high peak struck me—a perfect, snow-capped cone, like the sand mountains that Usako and I had made when our mother brought us to the beach. Like the endless sketches our father had drawn on scraps of used paper or in the dust.

Mount Fuji.

“The Mountain,” I whispered in awe.

“Yes,” said Masugu from behind me. It was the first time he had spoken to me about something other than to tell me how to sit steady or when to get down since that horrible morning. We stood for a time, watching the sunlight disappear from the peak. “Do you know what our battle flag means—the four diamonds of Takeda?” Masugu asked.

I shook my head, still staring at the mountain, its white peak turning pink.

“It's the clan motto: Be swift as the wind, silent as the forest, fierce as fire, steady as a mountain. My lancers and the other companies like us are the wind, sweeping all enemies ahead of us. The infantry are the forest, impenetrable and overwhelming. And the heavy cavalry are the fire, consuming any obstacles an enemy might try to put in our way.” He told it as if it were a bedtime story.

“And the mountain?” I asked.

“The mountain is Takeda Shingen himself. Like Fuji-san—” Masugu pointed at the peak. “—he is unmovable, untoppable. He has nerves stronger than any sword, and a mind as sharp. He can out-think any general.” His voice was surprisingly soft, gentle.

As we watched the light fade from the distant mountaintop, I found myself thinking how strange it was that I had spent days riding in front of this stranger, this Takeda warrior, unable to see any part of him but his gauntleted hands, neither one of us speaking. And yet I found that I hoped for the first time that I would ride with him again the next day.



That night, we ate sitting around a campfire, watching the sparks float up to join the stars. The meal was mostly rice and pickled radish, but in that moment it tasted as good as any food I had ever had.

Masugu spent a long time speaking to Lady Chiyome, both of them very serious. Mieko seemed to be listening intently to them, but when Masugu glanced up at her, she looked away.

“Mieko-san?” I asked when a soldier who was carrying wood to the fire crossed to the other side of the circle before putting his logs down.

“Hmm?” She stared up into the night sky.

“Mieko-san, why don’t the soldiers talk to you?” Then I considered. “Is it because of Kun—?”

Her finger sealed my lips gently but without compromise. “Do not use her name.”

“Oh. Of course not.” Mother had taught us that one should not use the name of the dead for forty-nine days after their departure, so that you don’t call their spirit back from the journey to the next life. “I am sorry, Mieko-san.”

Mieko gave me a sad smile. “No apology is needed, Risuko.” She stroked my cheek gently, which made me feel the night’s cold for some reason. “And Lieutenant Masugu’s soldiers have been avoiding speaking to me since long before this ride.” Saying no more, she rose and walked to Lady Chiyome’s tent.

As she disappeared into the shadows, Emi took her place. “I can’t decide if she is really nice, or kind of scary.”

“Both,” I sighed, and Emi nodded. We both turned away from the dark and warmed ourselves in the fire’s light.

As the night closed in around us, we huddled closer together.

It rained as we climbed out of Worth Province, and I spent the next days with a rough blanket wrapped over my head to keep dry. At inns and villages, the people treated our party with great respect. I thought back to the way that the people in our village used to tease Lord Imagawa’s soldiers. Clearly, in Lord Takeda’s domain, his servants were treated with more deference—and fear.

As the days passed, my own awe began to lessen, and I began to talk with Lieutenant Masugu as we rode. We discussed the countryside, we discussed some of the books and poems *Oto-san* had made me try to read. I sang some of my mother’s favorite songs. He told me stories about his cousins, and sailing boats, and chasing his father’s horse when he was a boy. Often we would simply ride in a damp, thoughtful silence.

One misty morning after we had just begun riding, as we were just on the outskirts of the village we had stayed in, and the weather had trapped the smell of wet smoke close to the ground, curiosity overcame my awe. “Masugu-san?”

He grunted in response.

“What is this... Mochizuki?” I felt sure that we could not actually be traveling to the moon—though it felt as if we had been climbing enough mountains to lead us to the heavens. “The school?”

“You don’t know?”

“No.” I was sorry now to have said anything.

“Oh” He was silent for a bit. I could hear him scratch his chin. “Yes. Chiyome-*sama*’s school for *miko*. That’s where you’re going.” He cleared his throat. “I am so sorry. I assumed you knew.”

I shook my head.

“Ah!” Masugu said, and cleared his throat again. “Yes. We are taking you to the school at Mochizuki. It is the great mission of Lady Chiyome’s life since her husband died. There you will be trained to be a shrine attendant...and you will learn a few other skills, as well.”

I absorbed this. “But why did she have to wander over half the country, through all the fighting and robbers and such, just to find girls to be *miko*? Aren’t there enough unmarried girls near her home?”

“I guess not,” Masugu mumbled.

A *miko*?

I was silent for some time, but my mind was racing, reliving the conversations I’d had with Lady Chiyome and her servants. Had it been my imagination that I had been purchased away from my family for some purpose much more important than merely to be attendant at some local shrine? All this—sneaking about, taking me away from my home, marching across battle zones and snowy desolation—was so that I (and Emi and Toumi) could be trained to wear red and white robes, to learn sing and dance at weddings and festivals, and to serve tea and rice wine to the old forest gods?

That night I asked Emi and Aimiru about it. They were surprised, not by the news but by my reaction—like the lieutenant, they had assumed that I already knew.

A *miko*? It seemed... odd. But if that was what she had purchased me for, well, it wasn’t the worst thing I could have been forced to do.

9 — Worth

Up and up we rode, around a beautiful lake, and toward the mountain peaks.

A warbler sang from one of the trees and I whistled back. It was a funny time of year for the bird to be here.

“You do bird sounds?” Masugu asked.

I nodded.

“Can you do a loon?” We’d heard one that morning on the lake.

I grinned. That was one of my favorites. I raised my fingers to my hands and gave the loon’s long, sad call.

“Well done!” Masugu laughed. “And how about... a nightingale?”

I turned around to look at him for a moment.

He laughed again. “Fine, fine, I was kidding.” He stared down at me. “How about an owl. Can you hoot three times like an owl?”

“You’re kidding again, right? That one’s *easy*.” To prove my point, I raised my hands to my mouth again and gave three long hoots: one as a wood owl, one as a snowy owl and one as a Scops owl.

He whistled—not a bird sound for him, just a single note to let me know he was impressed. “Well, Murasaki-*san*, if you ever decide to give up being an, um, shrine maiden, you’ve got a future in the Takeda scouts.” When I gawked him he said, “Well, that’s one of the ways the scouts communicate. There’s a whole bunch of codes. The loon call means *All clear*. But the three owl hoots mean *Danger—there’s about to be an attack!*”

“Really?”

“Well,” he said, “think about it. We’re usually fighting in daylight. How often do you hear an owl hooting like that during the day?”

I nodded. It made sense to use that as a warning signal.

“Mind,” chuckled Masugu, “I don’t know what it would mean if the call were given by three *different* owls.”

We both laughed and rode on into the mountains, the rest of the party trailing behind us.

As we climbed the winding, narrow road up toward the pass, the air grew steadily colder, and the bare-limbed trees grew sparser and shorter. I didn’t notice, however. With Masugu’s bulk blocking the chill wind, and the stallion warming me, I was chattering on about how scary I had thought he was when I first saw him ride into the inn yard. “Of course,” I said, “samurai are always sort of scary. That’s why I’m glad my father stopped being one, because I wouldn’t have wanted him to be scary.”

After a moment of silence, Masugu leaned close to my ear, “Murasaki-san, do you know... why you father ‘stopped being a samurai’?”

We were crossing a stream and I remember the slosh of hooves in water as I paused to answer. I knew what my father had told us: that he hadn’t wanted to kill any more. But I shook my head.

The lieutenant gave a deep sigh. “I am not sure that I am the one to tell you this,” he said, “but you should know. Your father was one of Lord Oda’s warriors. One of his greatest. When I was a boy, I saw him fight. Kano Kazuo was famous for his skill with a sword, as well as for being a great poet and courtier. Oda Nobunga ordered him on a mission—what it was, no one but Lord Oda knows, though it must have had something to do with the Imagawa—but he refused. The two samurai who were supposed to go with your father refused as well. So Lord Oda gave the three of them the choice: they could commit ritual suicide, or they could present themselves to Lord Imagawa as common servants. The other two warriors killed themselves rather than face such dishonor; your father became a poor scribe.”

I was stunned. And yet it seemed oddly familiar and true. Mother never told me what happened to him, that day when he walked off to answer Lord Imagawa’s summons. She never told me about any of it. To be honest, she hardly ever spoke of Father, unless she was sad or angry, and so Usako and I had learned never to mention him. Before Masugu had spoken it, I hadn’t heard my father’s name in two years. I had known that *Oto-san* was a samurai, known that he had seen battles, but the thought of him drawing his swords to fight, to kill... And the thought of what kind of mission could possibly have forced him to refuse...

“The other two,” I asked, trying not to let my voice dissolve entirely, “the ones who killed themselves, who were they?”

“Yes,” grunted Masugu-san, acknowledging that I had asked the proper question. “Hanichi Benjiro and Tarugu Makoto,” he said gruffly. “Emi and Toumi’s fathers.”

I peered around Masugu to where the others were riding. Emi was, naturally, frowning. Toumi looked like a knife looking for a place to plant itself.

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10 — Dark Letter

We spent the night at a small Takeda fort guarding a rocky, barren place called, for some reason, Rice-Paddy Pass, which marked the border between Worth and Dark Letter Provinces. We were so high that there weren't any trees. I felt naked. The air was dry and cold, we were exhausted, and the soldiers manning the garrison were edgy, as if waiting for an attack, though how — or why — an army would march so far and high I couldn't imagine. Perhaps they were frightened of ogres.

The next morning, everybody—even Mieko—looked as grumpy as I felt.

Lady Chiyome shouted to rouse us. "Let's go! I want to be back at the Full Moon by mid-day so that I can take a real bath and eat real food."

As it turned out, Mochizuki was down in the valley below Rice-Paddy Pass. We began to descend, and for the first time in days I grasped the mane of Inazuna, Masugu's stallion.

"Easy," murmured Masugu—I think more for the horse's sake than mine. To me, he said, "I thought you liked heights?"

"Do," I answered through clenched teeth. It felt as if a stumble would be all that it would take to send the horse falling down into the valley, and us with it.

"Ah. Perhaps being on horseback makes it harder?"

I nodded, ashamed. Here, Masugu-*san* thought of me as a great samurai's daughter; how could I behave so disgracefully?

"No problem, Murasaki-*san*," he said, his kind voice cutting deeper than Toumi's sneering might have done. "We're going to be travelling pretty slowly. Do you think it would help if you were on foot?"

I nodded again, a bit less tremulously.

Masugu called out a halt, there at what felt like the roof of the world.

From the back of the line I heard Chiyome-*sama* bark, "What's the hold up? I'm sick of being squashed in this box like a ten-month pregnancy!"

“Murasaki-san has expressed the desire to travel on foot for a while, and I thought a few of the other passengers might enjoy the lovely walk.”

As I slid back off of the horse onto the narrow mountain road just one other person took the opportunity to get back on solid ground with me: Toumi, who hated every moment of being on horseback.

She and I looked at each other, each unhappy with the other's company, but with no option. From above us, Mieko asked, “Would you like me to join you, Toumi, Risuko?”

We both shook our heads.

She peered at us, then nodded. “Please stay together. And please don't get separated from the rest of us.”

“Yes, Mieko-san,” Toumi and I said together.

As the horses began once more to walk, Toumi spat on the ground, then walked as quickly away from me as she could.

“Hey!” I called to her. “We're supposed to stay together!”

As we began to descend down into the valley, Toumi and I played what, under better circumstances, would have been a game of something like Tag, in and around the horses. I was annoyed; it wasn't as if I wanted to be near her either, but Mieko-san had said...

After a while, I chased Toumi just for the pleasure of annoying her.

The road was making a long series of switchbacks down the steep mountainside. It meant that we had to walk quite a distance just to get a little further down the hill. We could see the road beneath us, winding back and forth, and I will admit, as lovely as the view was, the walk was getting a bit tedious.

At least we were back among the trees.

Just as the sun began to come up over the mountain behind us, Toumi stopped, staring down.

“What are you looking at?”

The Little Brothers rumbled by us; we were now the last in line.

“Why go back and forth?” Toumi muttered.

“Huh?”

She looked up at me as if she had forgotten I was there. “Going back and forth, it's stupid.”

“The horses can't go straight down the hill.”

“Well, I'm not a damned horse,” Toumi snarled. “I'm just going to go straight down and meet up with the rest of them at the next switchback down.” She started to step off the road.

“We’re not supposed to!”

She turned around, one foot in the mulchy soil of the slope, the other still on the road. She grinned at me. “Scared?”

“No, but...!”

Not waiting any more, Toumi walked down off the road and into the bank of thick juniper.

“Come back!” I looked down at her, then the retreating backs of our party. *Well*, I thought, *Mieko said to stay together*. And so I plunged down the hill after Toumi.

In retrospect, what I *should* have done was to go and alert Mieko, Masugu, or the Little Brothers. But I didn’t want to look like a coward or a telltale, and of course, the prospect of getting to climb won me over, even if it were just climbing down a rocky, scrub-clogged hillside.

I went barreling down after Toumi, sure that I would catch up with her before she reached the trees. But Toumi had longer legs than I, and she had been raised on the streets of the capital city, so that she could move very quickly.

The juniper there were much bigger than any I’d seen near home, easily three times a man’s height, but they were still juniper, thick and tangled. As soon as we entered the trees, I lost sight of Toumi. I had to listen for the sound of her feet slipping down the slope, of breaking branches, and of her occasional swearing. “Hold up!” I called. “Wait for me! We’ll get lost!”

“How can we get lost, *Mouse*? Just go downhill, or are you too frightened even to do that?”

That got me seeing red. *Scared?* I’d show her. I decided that from that point it was a race to the bottom—and I was going to win.

I could barely hear Toumi rustling through the trees over my own heavy breathing, but I knew that I was gaining on her, more comfortable in the grove’s close quarters. I angled toward what looked like a clearing, hoping to get past her without her knowing. In my mind, I imagined sitting on the road, cleaning my nails as she stumbled out onto the switchback.

Caught up in my own exhilaration and my rage, I burst out into the clearing without looking what I was running into—another mistake.

The clearing had been created by the fall of a large cedar. At one end, another cedar grew up from the old tree’s rotted trunk, smaller than its parent but much taller than the tangled juniper that surrounded it. In its lower branches stood a man in a brown cloak peering down toward where the road was. At the cedar’s base stood two other men, also in brown, with bows. Alerted by my noisy arrival, they were both staring at me. One of them raised

his bow to shoot at me, and I tried to turn back up the hill, only to slip on the mulch of the fallen tree and tumble right at his feet.

At the same moment, a loud shout above me announced that Toumi had fallen into the clearing as well. With a thud and a grunt, she too fell to the ground, just where the other man could step over, grab her by the neck of her jacket, pull her up, and shove her against the cedar.

Trying to reach my feet, I stumbled against the man above me, sending his arrow flitting off harmlessly into the trees. Without a sound, the man clamped his hand over my mouth and pushed me against the rough bark of the cedar. I heard the hiss of a blade being drawn and screamed into the man's hand.

"Don't kill 'em yet," came a loud whisper from the man above. *"Even if we can't get anything off of this bunch, we can still sell these two."*

"You sure, boss?" The man's face was masked with a strip of cloth, so that I could only see his eyes squinting at me. "This one's awful scrawny."

"Shut up," hissed the man above. "They're probably reaching the switch-back soon. I need to get down to the look-out. Tie these two up. Gag 'em. Me and Sanjiro are going down by the road to signal the others. Kawaii, you guard these runts and get the horses ready." With that, he leapt from the branch he was standing on down into the juniper behind us.

I heard a smack and a grunt, and felt a weight slam against my shoulder.

The man raised his knife, and I screamed again into his hand, but he was lifting it to Toumi's throat. She started to snarl at him, but stopped suddenly with a gulp as the blade bit into her flesh. *"Tie 'em up,"* the man says," he muttered, followed by a string of words that I had never heard, not even after nearly seven days of traveling with soldiers. He leaned his body heavily against me, so that I couldn't move—I could barely breathe—yanked the cloth mask from his face, balled it up and shoved it in my mouth. Pushing back his leather helmet, he pulled of the greasy cap beneath and did the same to Toumi. When she tried to fight, he growled, "I'd be just as happy to kill you both, girl. We ain't here for no slaves. But if Tanaka says to keep you, I'll keep you. Now shut up and stay still."

Putting down his bow, but with his knife still at Toumi's throat, he pulled a length of thin cord from beneath his cloak and tied it quickly around first my wrists and then Toumi's. Squinting at us and then up at the tree, he spied the thick lower branches of the cedar. The cord went sailing over the branch and he caught it, then quickly pulled at it, so that our wrists were yanked in the air.

Toumi was standing on tiptoe; I, being shorter, was actually dangling by my wrists, which were burning as the cord cut into them.

“There,” grunted the squinty man with satisfaction. “That ought to hold you two.” Keeping the tension on our arms, he ran the cord over to one of the juniper trees and tied it off. Then he came back, picked up his bow, looked at us once more, and grimaced. “Look after the horses,’ right.” He gave a nasty laugh. “Damn Tanaka to seven damned hells. Well, you squirts aren’t going anywhere.” He started toward the uphill edge of the clearing, and then turned. “Don’t you get any ideas!” Almost without aiming he sent an arrow at us that missed my elbow by a hand’s breadth.

As soon as he was gone, we started to try to get loose. I was desperately trying to scramble up the bark behind me to take the pressure off, but the more I struggled the tighter the cord was. My hands and wrists were on fire; I could feel blood dribbling down my arms.

I looked at Toumi, who was crying, for which I didn’t blame her at all. Blinking at me, she tried to shove the gag out of her mouth. When that failed, she howled in frustration, but began lifting up with her chin and looking upward, as if she were trying to tell me to climb.

Climb? Climb what? I looked up; the branch wasn’t that far overhead, but there was no way to climb to it—

Toumi kicked me, then lifted her chin again, first up, and then to the side. When I didn’t respond, she growled and did it again. *CLIMB ME!*

Ah! I threw my legs around her waist as if she were herself a small pine and shimmied up. Immediately, the pressure on my wrists lessened, and I almost passed out from the relief, sliding back down so that cords began to bite back into my flesh.

Toumi growled, waking me to my purpose again, and, using my legs and—once I’d worked my way up just a bit—grabbing on to the cord itself, I climbed until the cord looped around my wrists fell away and I dropped to the ground.

The relief was so intense that for a second I couldn’t stand, but Toumi started kicking dirt on me. I yanked the gag from my mouth. “I’ll untie it from the other end. I can’t cut it from—”

She shook her head emphatically, screaming through the rag stuffed in her mouth, then threw her legs up over my shoulders. Realizing what she was trying to do, I did my best to lift her until at last she was able to work her wrists free—releasing Toumi’s full weight onto me. I collapsed to the ground beneath her.

We rolled apart, gasping for breath and shaking the blood and feeling back into our hands.

A shadow blocked the sun shining on my sweat-slick face, and I gasped, sure that the bandit had come back to kill us in spite of the ringleader Tanaka's orders.

"Well done, Risuko-*chan*, Toumi-*chan*," said a warm, hushed voice.

Mieko-*san* stood above us, her dagger in her hand, a twig in her hair the only other sign that the situation was at all unusual.

"But... but..." spluttered Toumi. "I saw you riding away with the others!"

"Did you?" Mieko smiled mildly. "Come, girls. We must hurry."

"The man," I gasped, standing and brushing myself off. "The one who tied us up—"

"—is not likely to bother us."

"Really?" asked Toumi, eyes fierce, staring at Mieko's knife.

"I cut loose the horses," said Mieko, pursing her lips. "When I last saw him, he was trying to chase them down, and that should take some time."

"Oh," muttered Toumi.

"But we need to warn the others. They'll have just started back this way from the switchback. If we can warn them..." Mieko frowned. "But I don't want to risk exposing you to these bandits, or..." Her eyes swept around the clearing, ending on the cedar to which we'd been tied. Her eyes narrowed and she walked toward the tree, plucking the arrow that had nearly pierced my arm from the bark. She turned. "Risuko," she said, her voice suddenly low, "do you think it would be quicker for you to scurry through this bramble, or to climb over the top?"

I blinked. "Um. Through the canopy?"

She nodded and pointed to the right of the tree. "Go. Now. That way. Warn Masugu and the rest that there's an ambush."

Not waiting for another word, I sprinted to the edge of the clearing and clambered to the matted top of the juniper. Glancing back, I saw Mieko hauling Toumi into hiding in the brush.

The juniper branches were thick and springy. As I burst up through the top layer, I could hear the muted sound of our company. They had just turned at the switchback; squinting, I could just make out Masugu's tall stallion, where I should have been riding.

I set out at a sprint, running along one bouncy juniper limb, crossing to the next where they crossed. The branches were so thickly overlapping that, while the going was slower than it would have been on open ground, I was moving much faster than I would have through the underbrush below, and

with a much clearer sense of where I was going. I zigged and zagged along the treetops for a few heartbeats. . .

When I heard a clatter behind me.

Glancing back I saw no one. I ran along a few more steps.

Another clatter. I turned around again. Nothing.

Then, from out of the trees downhill on the opposite side of the road, I saw a grey speck lancing toward me. Not pausing to think, I ducked.

The arrow hissed over my head like an angry snake.

I dropped down into the juniper.

I heard another arrow thud into a branch just ahead of me.

Crouching just below the top layer of branches, I tried to think. I needed to warn Masugu-*san* and the rest of the party. But I was too far away to shout, and if I tried to climb above the canopy again, the archers would be looking for me. I could try to make my way back on the ground, but the going would be slow, and—not going straight downhill, as I had before getting caught earlier—I would have a hard time keeping my sense of direction.

I could just hear the clatter of our party's hooves on the stony road, and knew that they would be in the bandits' range soon. Still, I had to be closer to Masugu and the rest than the bandits were. If only I could scout out a direct—

I gasped, stunned that it had taken me so long to remember. Placing my hands in front of my mouth—holding on to the branch with my knees, I let out three owl hoots—not caring what kind of owl this time, just making sure that they were as loud as I could make them.

I listened. The hoof beats continued.

Hoo! Hoo! Hooooo!

I thought I heard Masugu's voice, but it sounded as if the horses were still clopping toward the bandits' trap.

I breathed deep, squeezed hard with my knees, and hooted louder than any owl could have.

I heard the lieutenant's voice again, shouting this time. "Attack! We're under attack! Form up!"

Then there was yelling and shouting, and the clash of swords, and horses and men screaming, just as there had been at the Mt. Fuji Inn.

Only this time, I had absolutely no intention of sticking my head out where it might get shot.

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To be Continued in

Bright Eyes
Seasons of the Sword #2

Coming Soon!

Find out more on Risuko.Net

Advance

Glossary

-chan — Child

-ko — Ending meaning that the word is a girl's name

-sama — My lady or lord (honorific)

-san — Sir or ma'am (honorific)

-senpai — Senior student (honorific)

Baka-yarou — Complete idiot (offensive)

Daikon — A large, white, mild radish

Dozo — (You're) welcome

Go — A Chinese game of strategy

Hai — Yes

Hanyak — (Korean) Herbal medicine

Ichi — The number one

Katana — A samurai's long, curved sword

Kimchee — (Korean) Pickled cabbage, often spicy

Kitsune — A mischievous, nine-tailed fox spirit

Ku or *kyu* — The number nine

Kumiho — (Korean) Mischievous fox spirit (similar to a kitsune)

Kunoichi — “Nine in one”; a special kind of woman

Kwan-um — (Korean) The Buddhist saint (*bodhisatva*) of mercy and beauty; called *Kwan-yin* in China and *Kannon* in Japan

Miko — Shrine maidens; young women who assist at Shinto festivals and ceremonies

Mochizuki — The full moon

Mogusa — Mugwort; formed into pellets, burned (with the lit end away from the flesh) as a stimulant and as a way to celebrate childrens’ aging during the New Year festival

Mukashi, mukashi — “Long, long ago” (traditional beginning to Japanese folktales, similar to “Once upon a time”)

No — Of or from

Oto-san — Father

Oka-san — Mother

Risuko — Squirrel (a girl’s name or nickname)

Samisen — A long-necked, five-stringed instrument, similar to a guitar or banjo

Sensei or *-sensei* — Teacher (honorific)

Shakuhachi — A long flute carved from bamboo

Tatami — A straw mat that is traditionally used to cover floors in Japan

Torī — A large arch or gateway usually found at Shinto shrines or temples

Wakazashi — A samurai’s short sword; traditionally used for defense and for committing hara-kiri

Wihayeo — (Korean) Cheers!

Yang — (Chinese) The male force.

Yin — (Chinese) Female energy

Characters

Note: In Japan, as through most of East Asia, tradition places the family name before the given name. For example, in Kano Murasaki, Risuko's proper name, Kano is her family's name and Murasaki her given name—what English speakers would call her first name.

Residents of Mochizuki:

Risuko—Proper name: Kano Murasaki. Called “Squirrel” and “Bright-eyes.” Novice.

Lady Mochizuki Chiyome—Mistress of Mochizuki.

Mieko—Lady Chiyome's maid. *Kunoichi*-teacher. *miko*-dance master.

Kuniko—Lady Chiyome's maid.

Tarugu Toumi—Called “Falcon.” Novice.

Hanichi Emi—Called “Smiley.” Novice.

Aimaru—Servant.

Little Brothers—Servants.

Lieutenant Musugu—Takeda samurai.

Sachi—Called “Flower.” *Kunoichi*.

Fuyudori—Called “Ghostie.” Head initiate.

Mai—One of the “Horseradish Sisters.” Junior initiate.

Shino— One of the “Horseradish Sisters.” Junior initiate.

Kee Sun—Cook. Korean.

People in Risuko’s hometown:

Oka-san—Risuko’s mother. Proper name: Kano Chojo.

Usako—Risuko’s sister. Proper name: Kano Daini.

Oto-san—Risuko’s late father. Former samurai, turned scribe.
Proper name: Kano Kazuo.

Naru—Pig-keeper.

Karoku—Woodgatherer.

Kenji—Boy. Played with Risuko and Usako.

Irochi—Egg-man

Major Historical Characters:

Takeda Shingen—Lord of the Takeda clan of Worth (*Kai*) Province. Called “The Mountain” and “The Tiger of Kai.”
Allied with the Oda and the Matsudaira

Oda Nabunga—Warlord (*shōgun*) of Japan. Head of the Oda clan of Rising Tail (*Owari*) Province. Allied with the Takeda and the Matsudaira.

Matsudaira Motoyasu—Lord of the Matsudaira clan of Three Rivers (*Mikawa*) Province.

Imagawa Ujizane—Lord of the Imagawa clan of Serenity (*Totomi*) Province

Place Names

I have translated most of the place names in the book; after all, the names aren't exotic to a speaker of Japanese! The translations are my own, and sometimes aim more at a poetic than a literal translation of the name.

There is in fact a town called Mochizuki in Nagano (what used to be Shinano or Dark Letter Province). It is not very far from Midriver Island (Kawanakajima), the site of several of the greatest battles of Japan's Civil War era. I couldn't help but set the estate of the Mochizuki family there. The estate itself, however, is entirely of my own imagining.

Serenity Province—Totomi

Pineshore—Hamamatsu-shi, Totomi Province

Three Rivers Province—Mikawa

Quick River Province—Suruga

Worth Province—Kai

Dark Letter Province—Shinano

Full Moon—Mochizuki, Shinano Province

Midriver Island—Kawanakajima, Shinano Province

Great Eastern Sea Road—Tokkaido

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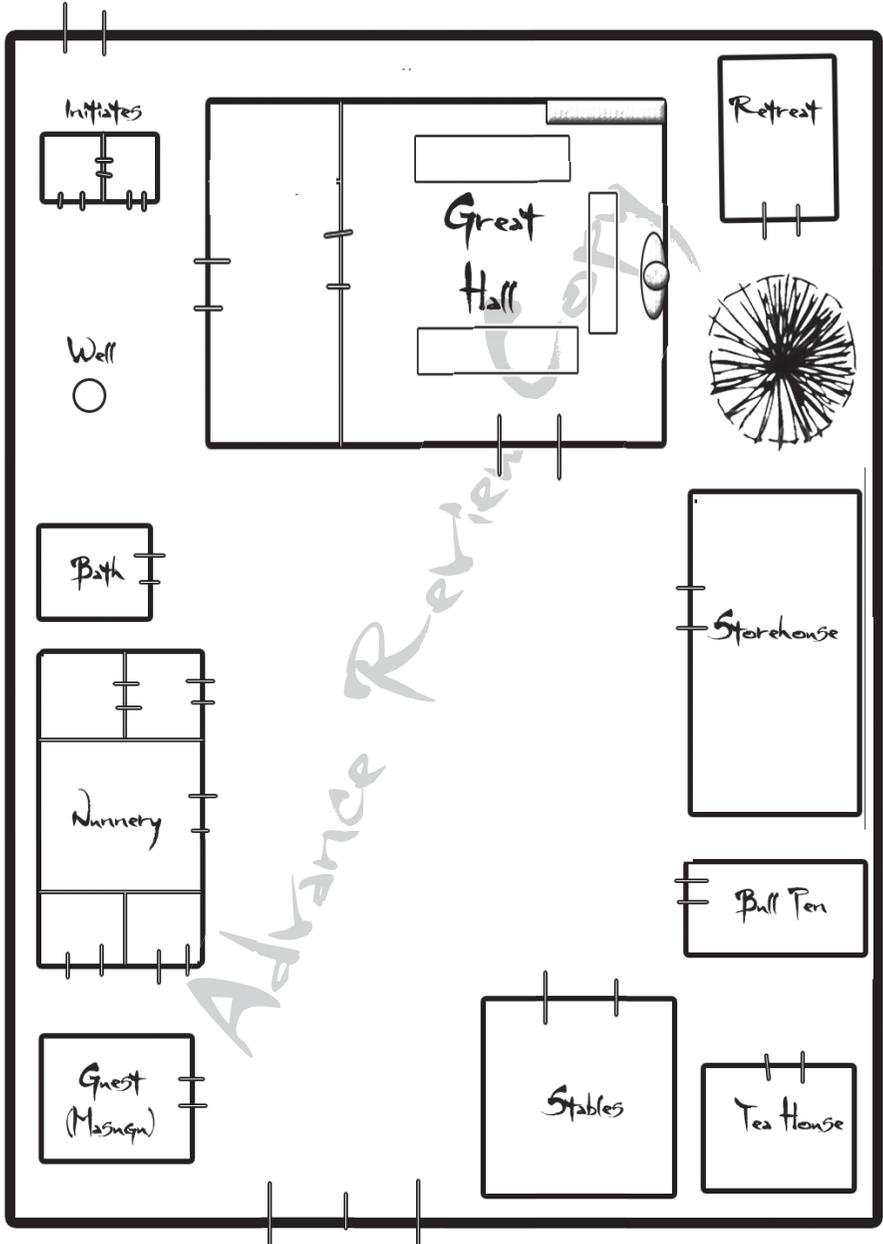
From Serenity to the Full Moon

Provinces of Japan during Risuko



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Mochizuki



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Risuko's World

Did *kunoichi* really exist?

That is a very interesting question, and one that might be answered in a number of ways:

Yes. No. Maybe.

For myself, the answer is *perhaps, and if not, they should have.*

Mukashi, mukashi — some years ago, I was leafing through an old magazine of my daughters' and came across an article titled "Killer Accessories."¹ It briefly told the story of a Japanese noblewoman, a war widow by the name of Mochizuki Chiyome, who had trained a group of women called *kunoichi* during the period in Japanese history known as *Sengoku Jidai*—the Civil War era that lasted from 1467 to 1603 A.D. (by the Western calendar).

The article described how, under the pretense of running a school for shrine maidens, Lady Chiyome built a small army of "dangerous flowers"—*kunoichi*. It showed an assortment of the *kunoichi*'s specialized weapons—fans with knife blades, fake fingernails with poisoned tips, reinforced parasols that could be used as shields—and finally said that Lady Chiyome's army had faded into obscurity after the death of their patron, Takeda Shingen.²

Well, I thought, there's a story that has to be written! And I started to do research, and I started to think about how to bring this story—and the amazing, awful period during which it took place—to life.

¹ Bridget Montana. "Killer Accessories," *New Moon Magazine*, March/April, 2002. Forgive the footnotes — it seems like the best way to get you the information.

² It also cited a source, a wonderfully entertaining, educational book titled *Uppity Women of Medieval Times* by Vicki León (Berkeley, California: Conari Press, 1997). Chiyome-*sama*'s tale is right up front, on pages 8–9.

Serious academics have not had much to say on the subject of the *kunoichi*. In popular culture—in anime, manga, and video games—the *kunoichi* appear all over the place, most often as female ninja: robed in black, disappearing at will, and possessed of the supernatural skills of the Shadow Warriors of folktales.

That image didn't strike me as having anything to do with Chiyome-sama's school. It seemed far less compelling—to me—than the idea of real girls learning real skills to fight in a real war.

One afternoon, as I was watching my youngest daughter in a playground, the image of a girl up at the top of a tree came to me—I wasn't sure why she was there, or even who she was, but I was very interested in finding out. I started writing, I read more books, I watched movies, I wrote some more....

And at a certain point, not quite halfway through the book,³ I got stuck. I knew where the story needed to end up, but I wasn't sure how to get there. I spent months thinking and rethinking the plot, but couldn't see how to move forward. Other projects demanded my attention, and Risuko and her story were quietly put aside.

But never forgotten.

Nearly four years later, I had just finished a major book project, found myself watching an old samurai movie that my father had loved, and for whatever reason, I suddenly knew to how to get Risuko from where she was to where she needed to be (back up a tree, of course!), and I began writing again.

I've always been fascinated by the Sengoku Era, and I'm not alone. There's a reason that there are so many movies and books set during this period. It occupies a similar spot in Japan's imagination that the Old West does in America—a time when life was horrifically hard, but anything was possible. Before that time, Japan had been run more or less smoothly by a series of warlords (*shōgun*) since the twelfth century (the time of the original Lady Murasaki, author of what has been called the world's first true novel, *The Tale of Genji*). The warlord ruled the nation on behalf of the emperor, often from the imperial city, Kyōto, but sometimes from other cities, such as Kamakura.

Now, a teacher of mine liked to point out that good marriages make bad stories. I think you could say that peaceful times make boring history—not a bad thing for the people living through them, but much less interesting for those of us looking back. It's a good thing, then, for people like me that in

³ Actually, novels writing themselves the way that they do (where the author writes ten pages and ends up cutting six—if she or he is lucky), the point in the book where I hit the proverbial wall is now well before the half-way point.

the late fifteenth century, a series of natural disasters (earthquakes, famine, etc.), combined with weak leadership by the Ashikaga shoguns, led the lords of Japan's provinces to rebel.

For the next a hundred years and more—starting at around the same time as the English Wars of the Roses and ending just before the establishment of the Jamestown colony in Virginia—groups of Japanese lords fought to unite the nation behind one or another of their number. Whenever one of the alliances seemed poised to bring the empire under its control, one or more of the allies would split off, unite with lords from the opposition, and the cycle of violence would start again. A map of the country would indeed have looked very much like Lady Chiyome's: a war of swirling colors marking shifting allegiances.

During the time in which this book is set, an alliance led by Oda Nobunga had come close to achieving unification of the country. Takeda Shingen and Matsudaira Motoyasu (who would later be known by quite a different name) were among his chief allies. We have records of huge battles involving tens of thousands of soldiers. We know there were spies and assassins.

Doesn't it seem likely that at least some of those involved were female?

Today, most countries have women serving proudly in their military forces. History is full of stories of women who have served—and served well—as soldiers, either disguised as men, or, rarely, in the open. When I was young, I loved the ancient Greek tales of the legendary Amazons, the fiercest of the foes, but not all of the stories are myths. Boudica, a British queen, led troops against the Roman legions, while Joan of Arc led a French army against the English during the Hundred Years War. During the American Civil War, we have records of hundreds of women soldiers serving (and dying) in the armies of both the Union and the Confederacy.⁴ Wars affected women as much as men; it makes sense that women would seek to participate, to help determine their outcome. In most cultures, however, women were seen as weaker and gentler; they were forbidden from dressing as men (on pain of death in many countries—Japan among them), and they were forbidden from fighting openly.

It makes perfect sense that a widow like Mochizuki Chiyome would have sought a way to help end the chaos and bloodshed that had gripped Japan for over a century by using the tools that she had at hand. It makes sense that she would see in the girls orphaned by a century of war the opportunity to build

⁴ DeAnne Blanton, "Women Soldiers of the Civil War," *Prologue*, Vol. 25, No. 1. (Washington, DC: US National Archives, 1993).

Acknowledgements

There were many, many people who helped me as I wrote this book. It may take a village to raise a child, but it seems to take an army to write a historical novel.

First, I must thank Julia Nations and her students, who were the first test audience for this book as I was first writing it. Their thoughtful questions and their persistent requests over subsequent years to know *what happened next* were a wonderful inspiration to finish the story.

Sarah Jae-Jones was kind enough to try to help me understand how a Korean accent might sound to the Japanese. Don't blame her for the way Kee Sun talks, however. That's all from my odd imagination.

Dr. Diane Monteil shared her wisdom in the use (and abuse) of traditional herbal medicines. She was both patient and good-humored in the face of all of my odd questions about poisons (as well as their antidotes), about traditional treatments for premenstrual syndrome, and about the concept of the five elements, the five flavors, and the five colors.

Brenda and Donal Brown read the book long before it was finished and provided both their wisdom and their apparently bottomless enthusiasm, which sustained me through many of the darkest passages in my journey to complete Risuko's tale. They also introduced my book to Danielle Svetcov (see below), for which alone they deserve literary Elysium—if they hadn't already earned it in a thousand other ways.

Kristine Ball and Amy and Ansel Burke also provided invaluable early input.

Once I had completed the first drafts of the manuscript, my Beta Bunch provided incredible feedback, spotting inconsistencies, narrative dead ends, and typos, poking me when I needed it, but also telling me what worked, which I sometimes couldn't see. This book would not be as readable as it is

without the assistance of Ken Schneyer, Victory Davidsmeier, Ruth Epstein, Stephen Gerringer, Diana Lee, Gianni Smith, Ania Bedawi-Mieszkowska, Alison Coulthard, Ryan Blood, Alithea Howes, Sherry Baisden, Mary (St. Margarets), Rebecca (BeccaFran), Sarah Grant, Laurie Lockman, Liz Ottosson, and, most especially, Aleta Johansen. Each of these folks is a wonderful writer in his or her own right; I'm honored to have benefitted from their thoughts on my own prose.

Danielle Svetcov, my agent, took my book on and promptly did what every author needs but no author wants: she showed me where the story lagged, and how to make it much, much better. Her insightful and incisive critiques showed me that I needed to cut a major-but-distracting secondary character, as well as a needless prologue and epilogue. (Once I had made these as well as a number of the other excellent cuts and changes that she suggested, I had managed to add four thousand words. I'm still not sure how that happened!)

The Tuesday Night Mill Valley Library Authors Group, led by the wonderful Caitlin Myer, helped me think through some of those changes. The book in your hands — particularly the prologue and the section about Risuko and Toumi's escapade on the switchback — are there because of their input.

I must of course thank my middle school English teacher, who happens also to be my mother, Jackie Kudler. She read more drafts of *Risuko* than anyone (well, almost anyone—see below). Her fine eye for detail and narrative through-line was as helpful now as it was when I was thirteen—and much more welcome.

My wife Maura Vaughn was on a literary quest of her own through much of the time that I was writing this novel; her book on text analysis for actors, *The Anatomy of a Choice*. Nonetheless, she read every rewrite of each chapter, providing her thoughtful insight, her patience and her astonishing sense of story to the task, day after day. Joseph Campbell says in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that each would-be hero has the assistance of magical helpers as he or she wanders the indescribably difficult path of adventure. I know who my magical helper was and is, and I am honored and blessed to have her for a partner.

Last and greatest is my debt to my own two daughters, Sasha and Julia. They were my inspiration; they were also my first audience. When I began writing *Risuko*, they were young—in Julia's case, too young to read the book on her own. Nonetheless, I read new chapters to each of them, even once they had grown well past the age when they needed to be read to. They are

now both young women, wonders in their own rights, with amazing futures before them. I hope that I have captured half of their spirit in Murasaki and her friends.

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THANK YOU FOR READING *Risuko!*

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