

# ~ Avenging Angel ~

by Aurelia

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**VIOLENCE DISCLAIMER:** People playing with sharp swords. Yes, there's a little violence.

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**FEEDBACK:** Your comments encourage me to keep writing, so let me know what you think at: [aurelia\\_fan@yahoo.com.au](mailto:aurelia_fan@yahoo.com.au)

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## Chapter 1

I am so glad to be out of the compound. I have been hidden away for the last two weeks, those around me fearful for my safety in this new environment. I have just arrived from England and since then, my senses have been assaulted by the sights, sounds and smells of this foreign land. The aroma of orange blossom is on the warm summer air as I begin my first journey without my father by my side. But I am by no means travelling alone. My maid is acting as interpreter and there is a personal guard of about a dozen men. I am safe, in spite of myself.

I walk down the dusty street, absorbing the culture surrounding me. This is life as I have never seen it before. People are bustling around, carrying on business like they have any other day. Street performers draw the attention of small children and old women, amazing them with a show of manual dexterity. Porters carry goods slung on long poles, trotting in between worshippers making their way to the local temple. Vendors try selling their wares as we pass, the hustle and bustle of commerce ebbing and flowing with the tide of humanity. Yes, this is life at its basest level - the common people.

I struggle to make headway down the street, my crinoline taking up the width between the stalls. I look to my young maid and silently wish I could wear what she is dressed in. European dress is certainly not made for oriental living.

We finally arrive at our destination. I have come to watch my first piece of local theatre, the *bunraku*. I am seated in a roped off area, away from the masses present, and I can feel those curious eyes watching me. Perhaps it is my blonde hair and fair skin, or perhaps it is the fact that I am British that is drawing their interest. Whatever the reason, I may as well have been painted blue for the amount of attention I am receiving.

The show begins and I get lost in the artistry of the puppets. The beautifully hand-painted faces of those life-like creatures pull me in as the play tells a wonderfully elegant folk tale involving dragons and heroes and villains. I turn to watch the audience, children and adults alike, their child-like glee making me smile. These people have simple tastes and enjoy what life has to offer them. Back home... well, back home life is too complicated even for the common man.

The time has flown too quickly and the show is finished, which means I have to return to my prison. I am not ready to go back, and I look enthusiastically to the captain of my guard in the hope that we can explore some more. I think he has taken pity on me because we turn away from the Embassy towards the centre of the city.

As we wander along the many stalls, Yasuki explains to me the various delicacies that I see. Some, I crinkle my nose at, now knowing what they are, and I shiver at the suggestion of actually eating such things. No thank you. My stomach turns at the thought of eating seaweed, sea slugs and fungus. I will take my meat and vegies any day. Yasuki laughs gently at my expression, feeling the same way about what we eat back at the house. To each her own, I suppose.

"Miss?" I look to my captain. He points back towards the compound and I sigh heavily at the thought of having to return. Reluctantly, I turn to head home, opening my umbrella as the sun beats down on top of me.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Miss Hughes."

"How long have you been here at the Embassy?" I study the young man, estimating his age to be only fractionally older than myself, perhaps his mid-twenties at most, his face barely old enough to grow a beard. So young for such a responsible position.

"About six weeks, miss."

"Six weeks? And a Captain?"

"Yes, miss. All the men in my family come from the military." Ah, a position given, not earned.

"And how are you enjoying your first post?"

"Very much miss, although it has been pretty quiet so far."

"More a baby-sitting job, Captain?" He blushes that I have read him so easily. "Never mind, I am sure you will see action soon enough." He smiles at the thought, leaving me to the company of my Japanese maid.

"Yasuki?"

"Yes, mistress?"

"Can we go out again tomorrow? I want to learn more."

"Anything you wish, mistress."

"Yes, I'd like that." I move closer to her. "Do you think I can try on something like what you are wearing?" She looks mildly surprised at my request, but nods silently. "What is that called?"

"It's called a *kimono*, mistress."

"K.. ki.. *kimono*. Beautiful."

My compliment brings a smile to her youthful face. I rather like the idea of my body having that amount freedom within a garment. I look down at my own dress and realize that it really is not suited for life in Japan. There is barely enough room to move without the added impediment of hoops and petticoats. I can just see my father's horrified face. Yes, I'd like to see that...

I do not notice the street empty as I consider my little bit of rebellion. The guards go on alert, removing their rifles from their shoulders and cocking them. Into the open square step six burly men, dressed in nondescript kimonos. I look to my maid and she backs away.

"Who are they?"

"*Samurai*." That is all she says, as if I am supposed to know what that means. She does not stay, quickly escaping through one of the narrow passageways between the buildings.

Long blades are drawn from lacquered scabbards as the men approach, swiftly closing in on their opposition. My guards struggle to raise their guns as the barrels are batted aside, now forcing them to use them as clubs in their own defence. Sharp steel slices through the air, cutting through wood and flesh like a hot knife through butter.

My ears ring with the screams of dying men, their broken bodies torn under the onslaught of the sword wielders, their lifeblood ebbing away into huge pools on the dusty ground. The scene plays out in front of me in slow motion, faces contorted in both rage and pain are etched in my tortured brain. I close my eyes to shut out the horror, but the images are burned onto the insides of my eyelids, dying screams adding fuel to my fevered imagination.

My young captain manages to shoot one of his attackers with his pistol before he is cornered. Drawing his ceremonial sword, it is quickly apparent that neither he nor his sword are a match

for these formidable warriors. He does not have to wait long for his death, the razor-sharp steel separating his head from his shoulders in one swift movement. My eyes are rivetted to the stricken captain, shocked into immobility at the sight of his lifeless body. I had only spoken to him moments before...

With all opposition now gone, they turn their attention to me. I back away as my maid has done, looking for somewhere to hide. *Damn this dress!* I am bound to stay because of the hooped skirt. Two of the samurai approach me, roughly grabbing my arms and pulling me towards the rest of the group.

Before I have a chance to scream, I am bound and have a sack placed over my head. I am disorientated and terrified. I am now a hostage.

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Time has lost all meaning for me as I am pushed and prodded in a direction that I cannot see. I have given up talking, because each time I have said something I have received a buffet on the shoulder for my trouble. I estimate that we are near the docks for I can smell the sea. A fresh breeze flutters the bag over my head and I am glad for a little fresh air in the confined space.

I am pulled up short and shoved to one side. Again, angry words are exchanged and there is a whisper of drawn swords. I dare not move. A step in any direction could put me in the path of an errant swipe. The clang of metal on metal is harsh and quick, each time becoming a little less noisy, until there appears to be only two combatants. A groan meets my ears and I am fearful as to whose clutches I am now in. Large hands surround my arms, pulling me towards him.

"Come." I blindly look up at the source of the voice. This is the first word that has been spoken to me since my capture. Is this one of those thugs who took me in the square or is this someone else? The grasp is firm but not harsh, giving me hope that this may be my saviour. I am led away, the rough cloth bag still in place over my head, travelling down some narrow side streets by the feel of my dress hitting the walls of the buildings.

Some time later, I am gently guided up some steps and pulled through a door. Moments pass and I nervously await the outcome. The bag is finally removed from my head and my eyes protest at the bright light of day. Instinctively, I close them, giving myself moments before slowly opening them again. I am looking at a wall, solid but fragile. I have never seen a house like this before. Delicate like a butterfly wing but strong enough to stand the elements. Strange.

My hands are finally free and I step away from the body behind me. I swivel to face my captor, having to look up to see the face. Long fingers reach up to remove the woven hat, exposing the face underneath. Time stands still as we look at one another. I cannot breathe. It is a woman. My saviour is a European woman.

I quickly study her face and I see her squirm under my regard. My eyes slip down the long body,

unaware that I am giving her a frank perusal. Her long dark hair is tied back in the style that some Japanese men wear, and her chest appears to be bound, giving her the look of a male.

She turns away and removes her sword, placing it reverently on a nearby stand. She kneels and bows, murmuring some sort of prayer that I cannot hear. Once her supplication is complete, she turns her attention to me.

"What is your name?" That voice is low and raspy and hits a chord within me, the likes of which I have never felt before.

I have to think for a moment because I cannot remember my name. "Clarissa. Clarissa Hughes."

"Well, Clarissa Hughes, you will be here for a little while. It is not yet safe for you to return home."

"What about my father?"

"I am sorry, he will have to fret for a little while longer."

"Am I prisoner here?"

"No, but I would strongly advise that you do not leave."

"Why?"

"Because those *shishi* were hired to capture you, possibly for ransom. You are safe here."

"Shishi?"

"*Samurai*." This woman uses few words.

"Who are you?"

"A friend." That deep, dark voice hints of danger. The energy emanating from her skitters across my skin, making the fine hairs stand up on end. I look up into those pale blue pools that are her eyes and see no malice towards me there. In fact, there seems to be confusion. She abruptly turns away. "Are you hungry?"

"In fact, I am."

"Good. Wait here." She is putting a lot of trust in me that I won't just walk out the front door. The thought crosses my mind for a moment and just as quickly dissipates. I am intrigued by this woman. Who is she?

\* \* \* \* \*

I am bored. The room is sparse and I have investigated everything ten times over, except the sword. Somehow I feel that there will be trouble if I touch it. I spare some moments for my fallen companions, and feel a sad loss at such a waste of human life. Those *shishi*, as my rescuer calls them, did not even ask for me, but killed all who stood in their way and took me. Those poor souls' fates were sealed by being with me, and I know I will feel that guilt for a long time to come.

I go in search of my saviour, tracing her steps through the corridors towards the back of the house where I find her kneeling, her eyes closed as if she is sleeping. A small pot is boiling on an open fire, rice cooking in its murky depths.

"Um, what am I to do now?"

Her pale eyes slowly open and she slowly exhales. Her head swivels to me and she studies me without a word. Finally, that alto voice speaks, vibrating low in my ear. "Well, Clarissa Hughes, the rice will take as long as it takes rice to cook. Do not be in such a hurry."

"Who are you?" I need a name.

"You can call me Etsuko."

"Etsuko?"

"My adopted name."

"And what is your European name?"

"I was born in America." That is what is different. I can tell there is something more to that accent.

"And, Etsuko, how did you come to Japan?" Her lips purse at the question but she remains silent. "Sorry, just making conversation."

She looks over to the food and makes the final preparations to the meal. She hands over a bowl and promptly uses her fingers to remove the food from her own bowl. I know I have a look of incredulity on my face because I can feel my facial muscles tighten in response. She lifts her hand and wiggles her fingers, slipping them into the bowl to fetch a piece of fish and pop it in her mouth.

I sit down as best I can, the crinoline puffing up around me like a cloud. My lace pantaloons peek out under the dress, and I try vainly to tuck my legs under cover. A shy smile touches her features, taking away the frown that adds lines of age and experience to her young face. I cannot help but smile in response. "This is certainly not the best thing to be sitting on the floor in."

"Perhaps I can help later."

Help? My body tingles at the thought. I barely keep my balance as I eat, the hoops continually trying to push me over. I look up from my meal, my fingers dabbling in the rice. "How long am I going to be here?"

"That depends."

"Depends on what?"

"Whether it is safe for you to return or not." She is not going to give me a straight answer. I am going to have to trust a perfect stranger with my life.

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## Chapter 2

Despite my best efforts, this tall woman refuses to be drawn into any deep conversation. She is polite to me, but aloof, content to remain on the edge of my friendship. I have been observing her throughout our meal and she has been studiously avoiding eye contact with me. What have I done to offend her?

She stands, extending a hand down to help me to my feet. "Follow me." What else is there to do? I follow. She leads me towards the front of the house again, this time entering a room off the entrance, which appears to be the bedroom. She moves over to a low box, extracting a bright red kimono and handing it to me. "You can sleep in this."

I look up into those azure eyes, watching as they skitter away from my gaze. I don't understand it. Am I that ugly to look at? Perhaps she senses my hurt, because a large hand comes up to my chin and captures it, bringing her eyes once more in contact with mine for a moment, before she turns away and leaves me to wrestle myself out of all the frills and flounces I am wrapped in.

It is so much easier to have a maid help you out of this dress and I am tempted to call for help. She is a woman, after all, and this cannot be all that foreign to her. Now, what was her name? "Excuse me." There is a moment's silence before I hear the whisper of the door sliding open. "Can you help me?" I smile in memory of those same words from her lips only an hour ago.

I look over my shoulder at her and those eyes widen, panic set in those features as she prepares to run. "Please..." That one word pins her in place, awaiting my next command. "I can't reach the buttons. Are you able to help me?" Turning away, I present my back to her in invitation.

Nervous fingers find the buttons and struggle to feed them through the eyelets. I can feel her shaking vibrate through the material, and I cannot help but look over my shoulder at her again. Our eyes meet and I am so close that I can see something in those depths, but I am not sure what I see. She is scared, but of what? Of me? She is my saviour, so what have I done to terrify her like this?

I say the only thing I can think of to appease her. "I'm sorry." She looks up, her brow wrinkles in apprehension. "I don't know what I've done to upset you, but forgive me."

"You've done nothing wrong." Despite what she says, I know that I am the source of her distress. She continues silently until all the buttons are undone. "There."

"You're not staying?" She gives me a look that answers my question. "What if I need help with this?" I hold up the kimono, trying in vain to get her to stay. Why do I want her with me?

"Call me when you have the garment on." The room is so empty without her, and I am loathe to examine that thought. I have known her only a matter of a few hours and I already think of her more than a casual acquaintance.

My mind turns to her as I strip off my clothes, consciously unaware of my body's reaction. The layers slowly come off but I feel no cooler. Finally, I am down to the corset and begin unlacing it slowly, expanding my chest as the lace loosens. I cast the garment aside, resting there in just my bloomers and breathe deeply, enjoying the air on my skin. So rarely do I get the chance to just stand there unfettered that I do not notice a groan escaping my lips. My samurai rushes into the room, ready for danger, and is met with a half-naked woman. Mutely, we stand there looking at each other, she ogling my breasts and me watching her watching me.

Precious moments go by in silence, neither of us wanting to be the first to move. Estuko raises her eyes to mine. We are both clearly perplexed about this and I break the deadlock by putting on the kimono, letting the crisp cotton slide over my skin. A small gasp escapes my lips as the material skims my nipples, and my eyes close in reaction. I pull the garment around me and seconds pass before I can face her.

I am greeted by those sapphire eyes, now hooded and darkened, studying me with deliberation. What is going on here? I have never felt anything like what I feel now. There is a gentle tugging inside me that is pulling me towards her, and I don't know why. Perhaps she is feeling the same. Should I be worried? Should she?

Estuko approaches me, holding a sash, and closes the garment, wrapping it carefully around my body and tying it off neatly with the sash. "Obi" she whispers.

"Sorry?"

"The sash is called an *obi*."

I could not have cared less. Her arms slide away from me and I feel a great loss, my emotions are careening wildly with her so close. I step away, letting the space between us act as a barrier to her magnetism, drawing me into her orbit. She is a fascinating woman, and I want to know more.

My tall warrior carries my clothes and deposits them in a corner, leaving momentarily to return with rolled up mats. She lays them out carefully on the floor, finding coverings to complete the

ensemble. She points to the floor and I look at her in disbelief. "You don't expect me to sleep there, do you?" She merely nods.

Where is my four-poster bed and fluffy mattress? I watch as she crawls into bed, mimicking her actions as I take my place beside her. We are facing one another, listening to the creak of the beams overhead as the house cools in the evening air.

"Good night, Clarissa Hughes." I grab her hand as she prepares to turn away from me. Her eyes follow my hand, and I see that startled look again. Perhaps she feels something too. She certainly seems scared of me being so near.

"What is going to happen to me?"

"You will be returned to your father when I think it is safe to do so."

"You keep saying that. When?"

"Are you in such a hurry to put yourself in danger again?"

"Of course not. But I will be safe once I am home." Her silence is not comforting and I wish to question her on it.

"What makes you think that the danger is not within your own home?"

I am struck dumb. Danger within the Embassy itself?

"Why do you say that?"

"The *shishi* would have just killed you, not taken you ransom. Someone hired them."

"Who are these *shishi*?"

"They are *samurai* who have pledged themselves to restoring Japan to the old ways, ridding this land of foreigners. You, Clarissa, are their next target."

"And what are *samurai*?"

"For want of a better term, they are warriors, bound in the beginning of their existence to serve the Emperor in his army. Over time their service to the royal house moved to his representatives, the *daimyo*, and they became the ruling class on their own. The purity of their beliefs slowly degraded over time, pledging loyalty to the local warlord, the *shogun*, until some are as you see now, nothing more than hired assassins. They have disgraced their *bushido*."

"*Bushido*?" All this talk has made me realize that I am a novice in this country, barely able to crawl, let alone walk, in the understanding of the history of this complex nation.

"It is the unwritten code of the *samurai*. It is a way of life and a way of honour."

"And you... you still hold your *bushido* in your heart?" That dark head nods gently, her conviction shining in her lapis eyes. My hand reaches up and cups her face, a touch that she surprisingly does not back away from. Her emotions run deep in this matter, and I sense she is a woman of great honour. I will have to bow to her greater experience concerning my protection.

"How do you say 'thank you'?"

"*Arigatou*."

"*Arigatou*, Etsuko." She smiles at my sad attempt to please her. But I have made the effort and that seems to have counted for something.

"You are welcome, Clarissa Hughes."

I give her a smile of my own, letting my emotion show in my own pale green eyes. We lie facing one another for long moments, absorbing the emotion flowing between us without the interference of communication. Our eyes express themselves better than either of us can verbally. In the silence of the paper house, we fall asleep as we were awake, our hands bound together.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Chapter 3

Morning arrives and my muscles scream at me in protest. She can have this sleeping on the floor. I'll take my nice soft bed anytime. I look to the empty space beside me and I miss her presence. It takes me a few moments to get my aching body into motion, pain lancing through my stiff back as I attempt to rise.

It takes a complete search of the tiny house to find my samurai woman, the back door finally revealing a tiny garden, sparse but elegant in its simplicity. To one side is a small pond with a number of large fish in it, a long piece of hollow wood slowly rocking back and forth as water pours into it, much like a tiny waterfall. The sound of the running water is peaceful and nice, and appeals to my unsettled soul. Hanging from the corner of the roof is a small birdcage, a tiny buttercup canary whistling its tune to the sky. Near the back door is a set of wooden chimes, the gentle breeze stirring a soft lullaby from their touch.

My gaze finds her in a flurry of motion in the center of the small patch of ground. In her hands is another piece of the hollowed wood, which she uses as a sword of sorts. As I watch, she swings the piece in a series of arcs and slices, imitating the actions of the samurai yesterday. Sitting on the step leading to the back of the house I observe her, her body moving efficiently and swiftly in an economy of motion. It is like watching a ballet, swaying back and forth as the shift of battle twists and turns.

She is so intent on her exercise that she is not aware I am there, and I am quite content just to watch. What am I to do? I cannot seem to take my eyes off her. Her mere presence has my senses in turmoil.

Watching her in her early morning ritual, I know that she is alone. She is bound to her code of *bushido*, which will not allow any distraction in her attainment of spiritual enlightenment. Will she accept me as her friend?

The wooden sword has been placed on the ground, and she is sitting cross-legged, her hands resting together and eyes closed, as she wills her restless spirit to calm. I cannot help but admire that powerful body, explosive in its nature only moments before, now elegantly at rest while she meditates.

She finishes her routine and opens her eyes, finally sensing my presence. Her eyes are vibrant and intense from the physical exertion. Approaching me, I can now see uncertainty in her eyes, perhaps stirred up with the rise in her pulse rate, and she sees the answering call in mine.

"I will be back in a moment after I clean up, and then we will eat." Her voice is rough and deep, her emotions let free to roam. I cannot answer her and merely nod, letting her disappear back into the house. I cast one last glance at the serenity of the garden before entering the house and the turmoil that resides there.

I follow her to the bedroom, detouring to the main room while she washes up. I look at the thin wall and can see her in silhouette, kneeling in front of a bowl on the floor. Her body, now free of clothes, is in outline and it stirs something deep within me. I carefully watch as she runs a sponge down herself, starting at her neck and slowly dragging it over sweat-soaked skin to her lap. But I cannot turn away, my eyes rivetted to the play acting out in front of me through the wall. What is happening to me?

\* \* \* \* \*

The morning meal has me sitting subdued, mulling over my feelings of the last day. I don't like feeling this way, disoriented and out of my depth. But that is all I have felt since I have met Etsuko.

"So, am I returning home today?" I fervently hope not.

"We will go and see. If it is safe, then yes you will."

"And if it not safe?"

"Then we will try again another day." I silently pray that the courtyard is filled to the brim with thugs, demons and samurais. "But you cannot return in your own clothes. Stealth will be needed to approach the Embassy."

"Why?"

"Because I think these men will be waiting for your return. It would be so easy to snatch you as you approach the front gates."

"Do you have a plan?"

An elegant eyebrow rises, as if I had said something insulting. A slow smile crosses her lips, the smile deepening as she reads me like an open book, and I sheepishly shrug in answer to that look. A long finger touches my nose in amusement.

"Come. Let us get you dressed for your journey home."

I blindly follow her back to the bedroom to see what she has in mind. Out of the low locker she pulls a number of items. "Take that off." She smiles at my reaction to such a statement.

She holds up another kimono, this one in a more subdued colour, one I suspect that will allow me to blend in with the crowd. I strip off the kimono and the bloomers, standing there stark naked. With shaking hands, she slips the material over me, reaching around with the *obi* and tying it in place. She steps back quickly, as if burnt, trying to calm her raging spirit. Unsteadily, she speaks, "Why did you take those off?" She points to the discarded bloomers.

"Because they will peek out the bottom of the kimono." I point to my feet but I can see she is not looking there. She seems as distracted as I am, so perhaps I am not alone in this.

"Sit." Seated, I watch as she puts socks on my feet, feeding the toes into the little pockets. I look up amused and she holds a finger up. Helping me to my feet, she places a strange pair of shoes on the floor. I slip my feet into them and the rope slides between my toes, feeling very strange indeed. I look up at her in concern.

"How on earth do you walk in these?"

"Very slowly." Her smile extends to her eyes, taking delight in my discomfort.

"What about my hair? That is going to be obvious, isn't it?"

She steps behind me and grabs my golden locks, twisting them into a topknot and tying them in place with some cord. "Here." She holds up the woven hat she had worn yesterday. "Put this on and keep your head down. Do not look up. Just follow my feet."

I stand by as she changes again, strapping down her chest, slipping on another manly kimono and tying her own hair into the hairstyle she had worn yesterday. She is becoming a samurai again for this journey and perhaps it is the safest option for us both. She detours to the main room and prostrates herself on the floor in front of the sword, silently whispering a prayer, before rising.

As she grabs the weapon, I ask, "May I see it?"

Her face hardens at the request but she complies, handing over the lacquered scabbard and its contents to me with a certain amount of trepidation and cultural tradition. I slide out the blade, but she stops me before I have removed it fully. The dark head sways from side to side. "Why?"

"It is considered an insult to remove the blade fully from the *saya*. Please, honour me by not doing so." I quickly return the blade to its former place, hearing the bare whisper of it sliding back in. It is a beautiful piece of metal that is for sure. It is razor-sharp and brilliant in its sheen, engraved with intricate designs barely visible to the eye. This is a family heirloom if ever there was one.

This woman has obviously been held in high esteem by the Japanese family who had taken her in. I know enough of this country to know that this kind of gift would not have been given away so easily. She would have had to have earned it.

"I would never dishonour you, Etsuko, you know that." I reverently hand over the weapon to her and watch as she grips it in one large fist.

She grabs my hand. "Let us go." Leading me through to the garden at the back, she picks up a bundle of long sticks, sliding her sword into the middle of them, and slinging the package over her shoulders. Sliding another wicker hat in place, she looks very much like a poor Japanese man going about his business.

Those pale eyes look at me for a long time, as if memorizing me, before dropping to the ground. "Time to go home..."

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## Chapter 4

My previous opinion on the kimono is rapidly changing as we slowly make our way towards the Embassy. Between the sandals on my feet and the narrowness of the kimono, I am barely able to take more than a step of a few inches at a time. I look at the other women around me, taking in the short shuffling steps they take as they go about their daily business. I soon appreciate that each type of clothing has its advantages and disadvantages. While my hooped dress is wide and cumbersome, I can walk unhampered. The kimono allows me to go without the crinoline and lace, but I am hobbled by the restriction around my ankles and feet.

I keep my eyes to the ground, following intently the long legs in front of me. I look up from time to time, watching the gentle sway of her hips as she walks. Neither of us talk on the journey, after all she is the master of the household, and I, the dutiful wife, following a step behind. I try to memorize the path we take, in case I need to find her, but soon one street seems pretty much like another, and I cannot help but panic at the thought of being left at home. If she leaves for good I cannot find her. I will be alone.

The narrow streets are crowded and the heat becomes oppressive. Etsuko's bundle of sticks is getting knocked around and she is having difficulty keeping them in one piece. She grabs my arm and pulls me into a narrow walkway between two buildings, leaning the parcel against the wall and putting her hands on her hips in aggravation. I look up to see a frown cross her face.

"What are we going to do?"

She remains quiet for a moment and I can see her mind working. I keep silent, sitting down on a nearby step, allowing her time to consider our next move. The aimless chatter surrounding us is getting on her nerves, and I pull her down to sit next to me, holding her hand in comfort. "Calm down."

Calm down? My heart is beating like a brass band with the thought of leaving her and I can barely hear myself over the din. We sit quietly for a while, floating in a gentle haze of each other's company, and allowing the flow of human traffic to dissipate. This separation is going to be hard for me. I silently pray it will be hard for her too, because I am not ready to end this yet.

We re-start our journey, stepping back into the flow of humanity and heading slowly but surely towards our final destination. Each step I take towards home is another step away from her, and it's scaring me.

We finally reach where we want to go, turning off a couple of streets beforehand. She leads me along narrow walkways until she finds access to a roof. I wait patiently while she investigates, and long moments pass before her return.

"Up there."

I look dubiously down at my kimono, then the high roof and then back to her. My expression says it all, and she cannot help but smile at my predicament. She loops her hands together, giving me a hoist up to the rafter. As I hang there, I feel her large hands on my backside, pushing me up further so that I can hook a foot up and help myself up onto the flat roof. Moments later she is beside me. Why I am not surprised by her show of strength? She is a walking contradiction to me; her strength and softness is a lethal combination, especially for my senses.

From our vantage point on the roof, we overlook the compound that is the Embassy. Despite my kidnapping yesterday, it is surprisingly quiet. Etsuko removes a small spyglass, extending it to its full length and looking into the distance. She nudges me and hands over the telescope, pointing to a first-floor window.

It takes me a moment to adjust to the change in perspective, but I see where she is pointing. A sob escapes my lips as I see my father, frantically pacing back and forth in his office, talking to someone I cannot see. Long fingers gently rub my back in consolation as I watch his agitated state. I can take it no longer and hand the glass back to my warrior, giving her the opportunity to study the surrounding area for danger.

I sit back, taking long breaths, in the hope of stopping the tears. My dilemma is now brought into

sharp relief. I must choose between my family and my heart. There is no good choice in this, so I make none. I want someone else to make the choice for me for I cannot.

"Clarissa, please wait here." The voice is so low that it is barely a rumble in my ears. In the blink of an eye she disappears, the only evidence left of her is a fading shadow. My eyes return to the Embassy and what I am coming home to. What had started out as a pleasant diversion, this trip has potentially become something much, much more. I watch the Embassy guards and there seems to be nothing amiss, except for my disappearance, of course.

I note there are a few more locals within the walls, and I suspect this is a precaution by the Ambassador's Japanese liaison. Their bearing and actions seem familiar to me, but I cannot place where I have seen it. My skin prickles as I watch, and I take an instant dislike to them.

"What?" I nearly jump out of my skin at the low rumble. She has snuck up behind me and I did not even notice. So much for being on guard. I point to the compound and the extra personnel. Her lips purse and a gathering storm cloud wrinkles her flawless features.

"Should I be worried?" Her eyes narrow in suspiciousness. *Should I?* She observes their interaction with the European guards and there seems to be no conflict. Perhaps it is just a precaution on the part of those in charge.

"You will be going home, Clarissa Hughes." Those words cut through me because I know it means that she will leave me. Even if words to the contrary come out of her mouth, her eyes show me the finality of it all. Words escape me and all I can do is nod in affirmation. She has torn the heart out of me and I can do nothing to mend the open wound.

She helps me to my feet and we slowly make our way down from the roof. As she gathers her sticks, she murmurs, "When we walk past the gates, I will continue on and you will enter. Take this." My tall warrior hands me a small, ornate dagger, encased in an embroidered leather sheath. I look up expectantly, confusion written on my features. "Just in case. Keep it hidden." Her hand comes up to my face, "Goodbye, Clarissa."

I know there are tears in my eyes because her image is a blur. My emotions have robbed me of speech, so I duck my head instead. "Let us go," I mumble.

We shuffle out of the laneway onto the main road, joining the long line of common folk passing by the gates. I feel like a condemned woman, walking those last few steps to her execution. I look up as we approach the gates, and I see Etsuko look over her shoulder in one final glance. She continues on her way while I stop at the entrance.

"You there! Move along!" The two outer guards approach me, preparing to give me a shove if I don't move. "Go on, old woman. You cannot stop here." I remove the wicker hat and hear the gasps of recognition. "Miss! But how...?"

"Send word to Sir Reginald, please," cries one of the soldiers. Suddenly, there are guards all around me, some facing the crowd and protecting me, others trying to comfort me and even more

just wanting to take a look. I feel positively naked under their scrutiny, and wish for the silence of my own room so that I can mourn in solitude. I care not for their concern, their incredulity at my escape or their joy. I just want to be alone to wallow in my own sadness.

"Clarissa!" That voice cuts through the cacophony of sound, and at any other time I would have welcomed my father. Now it is only a reminder of the decision that we have made together. I am back in my own world, just as she has returned to hers. "Thank God, you are safe." *Yes, thank God.*

"How... how did you survive? Yasuki returned and told us of your fate." So, Yasuki survived. I know I should feel joy that she escaped, but I feel nothing but emptiness. Before I have a chance to answer his question, I am bundled indoors into the sitting room and fussed over, finding a hot cup of tea placed into my lifeless hands.

My father takes his place in a large armchair across from me, his portly frame spreading out to fill the ample space of the seat. I watch his walrus moustache bobble up and down as he speaks animatedly. "So, tell me, what happened? I have been worried sick about you." There are tears in his eyes that threaten to overflow, barely kept in check by his stalwart British stubbornness.

"We were returning from the show yesterday when these men stepped out, slaughtered all between me and them and took me hostage." Was it only yesterday? Funny, it seems longer. I can see the surprise in his eyes as I speak of it as if retelling some distant tale, not an event that I had been involved in. He is right. I should feel... more. Perhaps it is my way of coping with all the death and destruction, or perhaps more important matters entered my life, shifting those horrible images to the recesses of my memory.

He sees that I will not elaborate on that one statement. "And then what happened?"

"I had a bag over my head, so I could not see where we were going. Down near the docks, I think. I could smell the sea. Someone rescued me. I can only assume he killed all those who held me captive. He took me to his home and brought me back today." He? I cannot help but protect her.

"Did you see who this saviour of yours was?" For some reason, I look over to the Japanese liaison, Kitami, standing quietly in the corner to see his reaction.

"Yes, I did. He was very kind to me, father. Please, he just wants to be left alone."

Kitami speaks for the first time since my arrival home. "What did he look like?" *Why is that so important to you?*

"Average. Slim build, middle aged and about my height."

"Where does he live?" That feeling of unease skitters down my spine again at the question.

"I have no idea. I had a bag over my head for each journey. He wants to keep his identity

secret..." I pointedly look over to my father, "... and I think we should respect his wishes."

"He didn't... touch you, did he?"

"Father! How could you ask such a thing?" How can he even suspect her, or even me, of such behaviour? But... she touched me alright, but not in the way my father means.

"I'm sorry my dear, but I have to ask."

I sigh deeply, with a tinge of sadness, that he does not trust me. "No, he did not touch me. I am just as I was yesterday." *Well... nearly the same.*

I watch as pale hazel eyes shift over to the man standing in the corner, and I wonder what is going on that I am not privy to. "Father, he said goodbye. I do not think I will see him again."

"Perhaps."

"What is going on?"

"We received a ransom demand for you only this morning."

"But, as you can see, I have been safely returned."

"Perhaps this is all part of a plan to get into our good graces, as a prelude to something bigger."

"Who told you all this?" Those eyes shift again to the corner. "He did nothing but help me, father. I think you are mistaken. Perhaps those that tried to kidnap me are seeing if they can get recompense even without me." I have absolutely no idea what is going on, but my eyes will not travel too far from this liaison to the Embassy, Kitami.

\* \* \* \* \*

Finally, I take refuge in my room, collapsing clumsily onto the soft bed and letting myself sink into it. This is one thing I would keep... My thoughts return to my saviour, my Etsuko, and I cannot help but let the tears run free. She is gone...

I sink into a quiet depression, my heart aching for her return, letting the afternoon sun crawl across the sky without so much as shifting on the bed. Yasuki attends to me, but I send her away. I am not up to making polite conversation at this time.

Dinner comes and goes, but I find I have lost my appetite. I wander to the large window in my bedroom, looking out over Edo and the multitude of hanging lanterns lighting up the city. Somewhere out there is my heart, wandering aimlessly looking for her, willing her to find me.

As I stand there leaning against the window frame, Kitami leaves the confines of the Embassy, slipping through the gates with practiced ease. He certainly does not move like a politician, more like a warrior. A warrior... *Clarissa, stop this. She is gone.*

A new flood of tears trails down my cheeks at my loss. I cannot help it. It is done, I know that, but my heart refuses to give up just yet. The tall, broad Japanese liaison turns to the left to head back into the centre of the city, and for a moment I see a shadow that looks like my Etsuko. No, it couldn't be, could it? Could she be still looking out for me?

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 5

The morning has turned out to be bright and sunny, and I have found myself outside in the courtyard, as is my habit, looking for some much needed warmth and fresh air. Taking a seat under the blooming cherry blossom, I pick up my embroidery, but my eyes cannot help but shift to the front gate, watching the crowd walk by. No, looking for her. I want confirmation that she has not forgotten me. As I watch, there is movement at the entrance, and my heart skips a beat at the thought.

Disappointed, I see that it is only Kitami and two of his guards. He makes his way towards the front door, apparently studiously ignoring me. At the last moment, he changes direction and stops in front of me, looking down at me with disdain.

"Miss Hughes." *Why does he say it like it was poison?*

"Mr. Kitami," I reply. My gaze flickers over the two men behind him, and their dress is oddly familiar. My mind flashes back to the events of two days ago, and I cannot help but let a gasp escape me.

"What is it, miss?" His eyes narrow in suspicion.

Do I tell him? Or is revealing the fact going to get me into trouble? "The clothes your guards are wearing."

"Yes?" His demeanor is more of one of mild interest than deep worry.

"It is similar to what my attackers were wearing."

"Is that so?" His relative calm is really starting to annoy me.

"In fact, nearly identical. Except for that large symbol there." I point to the badge sewn on the shirt.

"That is the clan badge. Most samurais are in the service of a family house."

"These men who attacked me had none. Perhaps they were hiding who they worked for?" His eyes widen, and I know he is thinking that perhaps I am too clever for my own good.

"And what badge did your rescuer have?"

"None that I could see."

"Ah, a *ronin*." He spat the name out with venom.

"*Ronin*?"

"A samurai who has no such allegiance. A vagabond and a wanderer. A samurai with no honour."

I bite my tongue from answering. No honour? If my instincts are correct, and I think they are as far as she is concerned, she has more honour than the three men standing in front of me.

"Be that as it may, he treated me with kindness and respect. I have reservations calling him by that name." Kitami has been prodding me for information since I arrived home. "You seem more interested in finding him than finding my attackers. Why is that?" If I was his wife, I think I would have just got a beating for being so insolent.

His fists are shaking at his sides, trying to keep his temper under control. Despite being the liaison, I have the uneasy feeling that he is the enemy Etsuko spoke of. In the depths of his eyes I can see the anger and hate. But is it hate for being a woman or hate for being a foreigner? I know that a lot of Japanese still believe in their insular lifestyle and are intent on driving us out.

I change the subject. "Mr. Kitami, what is that? A dagger?" I point to the second, smaller sword sitting next to the large, ornate sword sitting in the waistband of the guards.

"It is called a *wakizashi*, a samurai's 'honour blade'."

"An 'honour blade'? Tell me more."

"Miss, it is not a nice subject. Perhaps we should speak of it no more."

"No, sir. I want to know. Tell me, please."

He takes a deep breath, torn between keeping silent and telling me what I want to know. A small, evil smile crosses his lips. "Part of the code of the samurai is to win or die trying. Should he be captured, he must commit *seppuku* to regain his honour, for it is no honour to be captured in battle."

"*Seppuku*?" That cannot be good. A samurai with no honour and a weapon?

"Ritual suicide." He looks for a reaction from me and is disappointed to find I give him none.

"The warrior slices himself open, so..." he makes a swift jabbing motion across his stomach, "... then contemplates his unworthy life as his insides slowly slide to the ground. Another samurai, a companion, will end his suffering with a swift slice to the neck, separating his head from his shoulders. This is the only way he can re-gain his honour." A slow smile spreads across his lips, triumph in his eyes, as he shocks my sensibilities.

"Thank you, Mr. Kitami. Very interesting indeed." I plaster a smile on my face, as if I just heard that Lady Dorchester just received some new furniture for her country home. *Damn him!*

"And your samurai, did he not have such a weapon?" He is still trying to get information out of me.

"None that I saw, no. But then again, I didn't ransack the abode either."

"If he were a true samurai, Miss Hughes, it would never have left his side." His look of satisfaction is sickening, and I bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from responding. He is baiting me, I know, and I am hard pressed not to defend her.

My father emerges from the front door, the buttons on his stretched waistcoat creaking under the strain of his expanding waistline. "Ah, Mr. Kitami, there you are. I had been informed of your arrival, but I can see that my daughter has waylaid you."

"Good morning, father." I look up into those benevolent grey eyes, the only reminder I have of my recently deceased mother. She had similarly coloured eyes, which was a constant source of jibing, since my own eyes are the colour of a meadow. The local milkman, was always the joke. He delivered fresh milk every day to the house and was the obvious culprit. Father always knew it wasn't true; his own mother had green eyes, as did the odd spattering of dead ancestors. A lone guard approaches from the gate, carrying a large bundle. It takes me a few moments to recognise my dress from the rescue. I look up expectantly towards the gate. Perhaps she is watching me from a rooftop, so I give her my best warm smile, expressing myself as best I can in that one look.

"What is this?" My father can be so dense sometimes.

"These are the clothes that I wore when I was kidnapped." Kitami's eyes widen and he sends his two warriors out into the street. *Leave her alone, dammit!*

"And this?" He holds up a small birdcage, containing a golden canary.

"I have no idea. May I keep it?"

"Surely, my dear." He hands over the small wooden cage, the bird inside chirping away. Kitami's fingers twitch, and I know he wants to rip my belongings away from me, intent on finding some hidden message buried within. It is my message, and I will not give it up to him.

"Where did you find this?" I am beginning to wonder who is actually running the Embassy, my

father or Kitami.

"It was resting in a pile against the outside wall, sir." The guard addresses my father, even though it is the liaison who asks the question.

"You did not see anyone?"

"There was no one around. Just the normal traffic of the locals."

"Thank you." I can see my father bristle at the obvious control of the situation Kitami has, but he holds his tongue. He backs down again.

"So, father. What is happening today? Am I stuck in here?"

"Clarissa, it's too dangerous out there for you, you know that. The Ambassador is travelling to Kyoto to start negotiations with the Emperor later today, and half the Embassy guard will be going with him. We do not have the manpower to escort you at the moment. I am sorry, my dear, but you are stuck here for a little while until the Ambassador returns."

I could not help but look over to Kitami as my father spoke. He was nearly salivating at the thought of the Embassy being undermanned for the next few days.

"But isn't that dangerous for all of us, father?"

"There are more than enough guards to protect us, Clarissa. You will be safe behind these walls." But for how long?

"Mr. Kitami, would you please join me? We have work to do." My father leaves, and the Japanese liaison gives me one last venomous look before he follows behind, his long flowing kimono billowing out behind him in animation.

I am itching to find out if this is from Etsuko, but I resist the urge to look, feeling unseen eyes watching my every move. I feign disinterest, and place the tiny cage on the ground next to my discarded dress, and look out to enjoy the sun and the cool breeze. They can all wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

By mid-morning, the sun has risen high enough to warrant an umbrella. Yasuki brings me a cup of tea before removing the recovered clothes and returning to the house, while I continue to lazily watch the world go by, my embroidery held in my limp hands. I cannot help but look out for a familiar tall body, or a mop of long charcoal hair. I want to believe that she is out there, somewhere nearby, watching out for me.

Why is that? Why is she filling my every thought? There is a gentle ache around my heart and I am trying to convince myself that it is because I miss her company. I so much want to see her again, not necessarily to talk to her because I know she speaks little, but to just be in her

presence. Her deep voice has found its home deep within me and her vibrant eyes speak so much more than her voice ever could.

As I sit and contemplate life, the Ambassador and his entourage leave for Kyoto, leaving a skeleton guard behind to protect who would see to the day-to-day running of this small piece of the British Empire in a hostile land. I pick up my little birdcage and retire to my bedroom to change my clothes.

As soon as the door is closed, I eagerly check the pile of clothes before turning my attention to the cage, looking for something... anything, to tell me that it is from her. I am just about to give upon finding any kind of message, when I notice some scratching on the base of the inside of the cage, barely visible to the naked eye. The writing is crude, and it takes me some time to decipher what is written:

*In times of trouble, set me free and I will find my angel.*

An angel, eh? And if something happens to me, will she be my avenging angel? My heart takes flight at the message. She will come if I call. I find Etsuko's dagger and scratch at the message, removing the broken letters from any prying eyes. *Your secret is safe with me, my warrior.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Chapter 6**

Night is nearly upon us, the sun's fiery orb finally sinking below the outskirts of the city. Twilight is approaching and the night air is beginning to cool. Kitami has been suspiciously absent since the Ambassador's party left for Kyoto. The dinner bell goes and I am reluctant to leave my post by the window. I desperately want to see her again. Just a glimpse.

There is a faint knock on my door, the heavy hinges creaking under the weight of the shifting wood. "Clarissa, my dear, are you coming down for dinner?" The room is in semi-darkness, mirroring my heart, and my father moves to light the lamps scattered around. "You must eat something. It is over now... you are safe."

Safe? Safe is a relative term and I have an uneasy feeling that our safety will be tested very soon indeed. "Not now, father. Can you send something up?"

"Very well, my dear. I will stop in on you later."

"Thank you, father." I return to my vigil at the window, watching the moon slowly rise from its sleeping place, casting an eerie glow across my floor to the far wall. I move to the chest at the foot of my bed and remove the kimono she has given me. I can smell the scent of the water she bathes in and something else. I know that everyone has a scent. My mother used to smell of lavender water and another scent that I could never guess. Now I know. It was her own distinctive smell. I breathe in the softly smelling aroma permeating the material. This is Etsuko.

I cannot help myself as I disrobe and slide the material over my body, feeling it warm my skin and release the trapped aroma. I close my eyes and I can nearly feel her there, standing so close behind me. I return to the window, watching the myriad of lights, like a swarm of fireflies flying across the landscape.

There is movement near the gate and it peaks my interest. Is it her? The movement turns into a scuffle and I see the guards fall to the ground. A small group of men open the gates and stride through, drawn weapons visible in the flickering light, heading in the direction of the house. The leader turns, and I can see that it is Kitami.

I rush to my door, flinging it open. "Guards, enemies at the gate!" I yell as loud as I can and there is a mad scramble as people jump up from their evening meal to counter the attack. I run back into my room, finding my little gilded canary, releasing it out the window to find my angel.

A shiver runs through my body. If Kitami is in charge of this attack, I am certain to be an early victim. He will seek me out. But I refuse to be found cowering under the bed. I retrieve the one thing of sentimental value to me - a locket with portraits of my parents inside. Armed with Etsuko's dagger hidden in my robe, I open the door, heading down the long flight of stairs to the ground floor.

Yasuki is shaking in the corner. I approach, but she is paralysed with fear. "Yasuki!" Dark eyes look at me, but I can see she does not hear me. I resort to slapping her in the face. "Yasuki! Look at me!" She is shocked, perhaps as much from the slap I have given her as anything else. "You need to get out of here any way you can. Get a message to the Ambassador's party quickly. Impress on them the need to return home."

Midnight hair, the colour of Etsuko's, nods as she tries to gather her scattered wits. She makes a move towards the back door. "Don't get caught. We are all relying on you." As she turns to leave, "And tell them it was Kitami."

The shocked look on her face will be the exact reaction the Ambassador will have. This is our most trusted diplomat and he has turned out to be a viper in our midst. If I am to die at his hands, I want justice. He will try to feign his innocence in this and I cannot stand the thought of all these lives being sacrificed without retribution.

A scuffle has broken out inside the house and I know that the perimeter has been compromised. The guards are valiantly trying to stave off the far superior enemy. Samurai. Kitami is using his own samurai for this slaughter. I skirt around the edge of the fighting and manage to get out the front door.

As my eyesight becomes accustomed to the dark, I am met with a horrifying sight. My father falls to his knees in slow motion, his hands clutching his midsection as a gaping hole has appeared in his stomach. Kitami looks up from his handiwork, a broad grin plastered across his darkened face. My poor father hovers on his knees, slowly looking down in astonishment as he tries to hold in his intestines, massive bleeding making it nearly impossible to see where the hole

finishes and his hands begin.

I close my eyes at the sight, feeling the contents of my stomach trying to escape me. I look down at my father struggling to cling to life, my eyes blurred with tears and a sob escaping my lips. Kitami has gutted me as well by this action, and my lifeblood is seeping away on my tears.

"Ah, Clarissa." I bristle at the liaison using my first name. "Here is what *sepukku* looks like, but as your kind have no honour, he does not deserve an honourable death." His fevered eyes turn back to his victim, who looks up in pain and confusion.

"What..." my father is barely able to speak, blood covering his lips as he whispers. "What have we done to hurt you?"

"What? By coming to this land, you signed your own death warrant, *Sir* Reginald. Sir..." Kitami spits on the ground at my father's knees. "You are a scourge on this earth, you and your British Empire. And such a disease needs to be destroyed."

Despite putting myself within reach of this madman, I rush to my father's side. Tears block my sight, and perhaps that is for the best. He sinks into my lap, barely breathing as his lifeblood ebbs away, an ever-widening pool of blood forming around his weakening body. I dare not look at the wound, for I know I will be sick if I do.

"Father," I whisper. What can I say about a lifetime with a man who raised me, loved me and guided me? The last couple of years had been hard after mother passed away, but he did what he could, not passing me off to a nanny or a companion if he could do it himself. He is an exceptional man and does not deserve to die this way.

I lift a shaking hand to his face, brushing my fingers over his slowly fading pallor. He looks into my moist eyes, his last image in this life is of his dutiful daughter. I just hold him as he fades away, his shallow breathing stopping in mid gasp. Vacant eyes stare into space, no longer capable of seeing everything that he holds dear. I close them with my fingers, not wanting those grey orbs to witness any more death and destruction.

I look up at his murderer and he absorbs my suffering with great relish. Pleadingly, I look to the gates, willing Etsuko to hurry before it is too late. Kitami moves towards me, and I know that my time has run out.

"Why? Why me?" I do not understand what is going on. What have I done to offend this man?

"You are merely a pawn, Clarissa, nothing more." He continues to be informal, using my name as if he were my husband.

"I do not understand."

"No, I suppose you do not and, as a woman, the matter does not concern you, but I will indulge your curiosity this once." He pauses, giving me a look as if I were some pathetic dog he was

throwing a bone to. "While the Ambassador is the head of the Embassy, your father is in charge of all British goods coming and leaving the port." I am no clearer on what he speaks but, then again, my father never spoke of his work. Kitami sighs, looking at me like some ignorant child. "Weapons. Your father was in charge of the import of rifles, Clarissa. Your kind has changed the rules of warfare, and if the samurai are to survive, we have to adapt. We kidnapped you to force him to hand over the weapons."

"Why not just take them?"

"Because we needed time to learn how to use them. Taking them would have alerted your army and we would have been hunted down. Your father could lose the weapons in the paperwork until we were ready."

"Then I would have become a useless bargaining tool." His silence told me all I needed to know. I was only useful for as long as it got him the weapons.

"So why this?" I wave my hand at the reckless death and destruction surrounding us.

"Your kidnapping failed. Without you, I have no control over Sir Reginald." "But you could have tried again."

"You had already begun to put the pieces together. It was only a matter of time before you revealed what you had learned to your father. You are too smart for your own good, Clarissa." He insists on addressing me such, perhaps using it like a verbal slap in the face.

"But all you needed to do was wait for things to die down and I went out amongst the people again."

"But the Ambassador arranged a meeting with the Emperor to secure a treaty allowing more foreigners into this country. I cannot allow that. I have sworn an oath to defend this land from foreigners. This is my land, not yours. This attack will destroy any treaty plans your Government may have to secure a foothold here."

"And the guns?"

"Our war with you would have been on a level playing field. Those guns will give us a chance to rid the land of all of you."

"So, you are *shishi*."

"As I said, you are too smart for your own good, too smart to stay alive."

"What have I done to offend you, sir?" His look of disdain tells me much.

"No Japanese woman would have talked to me the way that you do, Clarissa. She would know her place."

"And that place is subservient to you?"

"That is the woman's position, to serve men. No other. Why do you keep trying to elevate yourself so?"

"Because I want more, Kitami. I want to be my own person, not the property of some man."

"Well, while you are in this country, Clarissa, you shall learn to respect men and your place in their household. Did your father not teach you that?"

"My father taught me that all life is precious, and while society in London is still male dominated, in our household I was always encouraged to speak my mind."

"How foolish of him. Give a woman an independent mind and soon you lose control over her." I slap him hard when he approaches me, seeing a glint in his eye that sends shivers down my spine. His demeanor turns hostile. "Now, little miss smart one. You need to learn some respect."

A slap to the face sends me sprawling to the ground, but I will not give him the satisfaction of crying out, despite the ache in my jaw. While I lie there, he gives me a swift kick to the stomach, forcing the air out of my lips with a grunt. I look up into a face contorted in rage and a little bit of madness. He reaches for me, pulling me roughly to my feet by my hair, and preparing to hit me again.

"You touch her again, and I will kill you." A deep, dark voice, full of deadly intent, echoes across the courtyard. Kitami swivels to face the owner of the voice, holding me in front of him as a human shield. Those eyes search me out, pinning me with their intensity. I know my expression is the same, pinning her in place with my own.

What a sight to behold. Etsuko stands before me in full battle mode. She is wearing large billowing pants and a tight shirt. She has bound herself, so her gender is not clearly apparent. Her midnight-black mane is tied back in samurai style, the charcoal tips flying around her head like a dark halo. In one large hand, extended out to the side and facing downwards, is her sword, her *katana*. In the dark light of the flicking flames it glows, as if imbued with her own internal fire, and ready for battle. Her face is covered with a kabuki-style mask, but her eyes are clearly visible as glittering blue shards of light. Here is my avenging angel in all her glory. My heart rate picks up at the sight of her, larger than life and prepared to die in my defence.

Kitami watches our interaction and smiles wickedly. "Ah, so this is the *ronin*. You are not worthy of a fight... a warrior in love, how pathetic."

In love? We look at each other, stunned. Love?

"Walk away now, or I will have to kill both of you. For now, she is mine."

The revelation galvanises her and she makes her stand. "You are a disgrace to your *bushido*,

Kitami." He looks at her. "Yes, I know who you are, you coward."

Angrily, he yells at her in Japanese, his voice becoming more and more frantic with each syllable. His *wakizashi* appears in his hand in a flash and is poised at my throat. Etsuko makes a move to drop her weapon and his grasp on my neck lessens. I pull out the hidden dagger, plunging it into his thigh, and pushing myself away from his grasp.

"Arrggh!" He was certainly not expecting that move from me, and he staggers back, his hand wrapped around the knife sticking out of his leg. I move around behind Etsuko, keeping well out of the way of the ensuing fight. Kitami growls as the knife comes free, sending a slow trickle of blood flowing down his kimono. "You will pay for that! But first, you can watch me cut up your sweetheart here. Samurai? You are nothing but a *ronin*. You have no right to that title."

Etsuko mutters to him in Japanese and I can see his anger rising. She must be insulting his parentage. He draws his own *katana*, another weapon of perfection, and they begin the slow ritual of the fight. I only hope that my samurai comes out of it intact. We need to talk.

\* \* \* \* \*

This fight is a game of patience, studying your opponent, awaiting his move so you can make your own. Etsuko plants her feet on the cobblestones, shifting until she finds that perfect balance. Her weapon, an extension of her resolve and honour, hovers next to her shoulder, both hands gripping the hilt firmly in anticipation of an attack. This is the heart of her - her training, her skill and her upbringing. Slowly, they turn around one another, neither making any sudden movements, as they twist and turn in a dance hundreds of years in the making.

I cannot stay where I am. Trying to shift with her will become more difficult when blows are traded. While Etsuko truly believes in the credo of her *bushido* and will fight according to the rules, Kitami will not. He has used me once against her and I have no doubt that he will do so again if the chance presents itself. I remove myself, moving into the shadows of the Embassy, to watch at a safe distance.

"So, *samurai*..." Kitami sneers as he says the word, as if it is a bitter taste in his mouth, "... what is she like? You cannot tell me that nothing happened while she was with you."

A deep growl rumbles through her chest at the insult. "Ignore him. He is trying to make you mad." As the words come out of my mouth, she moves, swinging her sword in a wide arc. He ducks underneath it and brings his own weapon around in a sweep, cutting her across her ribcage. She staggers under the cut, shifting away quickly before he can move in for another swipe. Her free hand comes up to cup her side, coming away covered in blood. "Oh God!" I cannot help but respond to her pain.

"Amateur!" Kitami grins at drawing first blood. "Clarissa, this should be over momentarily and we will finish our lesson before I send you to join your father."

Etsuko's shoulders roll, allowing her body to relax, as she focuses herself once more on the man in front of her. Kitami's confidence is high and he executes a series of quick moves. My dark avenger is hard pressed to defend them all. He is very skilled indeed and it is going to take all her concentration and skill to win this.

I want so desperately to help her, but anything I do will only put us both in danger. The best I can do is nothing at all. My warrior is risking everything because she loves me. Love? Is that what I feel? Is that why my heart has been so empty since she left me? My eyes watch her and I feel a little flutter in the pit of my stomach as she executes an attack of her own, her blade singing in the night air, shafts of reflected light glinting in the night. My Etsuko...

They separate, again stalking one another. I can help her. I can tell her what she needs to hear. If we are to die here, then she should know that she is not alone in this. "I... I love you too." My voice can barely hold any volume as I speak those words to her, but I know she hears them. A gentle smile touches her lips before disappearing under a grim line of determination. Now she has even more to live for.

Kitami's grin of triumph slips as he observes the change in his opponent. He can see it in her posture, her face, her very movements. In the low light, her pale eyes shine like diamonds, glittering with an edgy hardness, as she observes her hated enemy, the one who will separate her from me. This has been what she needed, the knowledge that she has a chance of a happy life. I have given her that, a chance to live.

Defence has now become offence and she seeks him out, shifting around him like a hungry lion sizing up its prey. Her sword flies through the air, forcing him to take several steps back. A low, silky voice cuts through the air, "And I love you, my Clarissa." Using his earlier words, she adds, "This won't take long and I'll take you home."

Home. There is nothing left for me here now. I look over to my fallen father, glad that he now has the chance to be reunited with his beloved Margaret. Consciously, I reach for the locket around my neck, and touching it brings me some comfort at the loss of both parents. This woman fighting for my life is my home now.

"I would like that, my warrior." Again, a touch of a smile on those soft lips at my possessive tone. Kitami is disgusted with the exchange, and charges at her, his sword poised to cut the heart out of her. At the last moment, she flips over him, swinging her sword in a tight arc as she flies overhead, opening up a gash across the top of his shoulder.

As she lands, she backsweeps her weapon, putting a crease in his back. He staggers, his hand consciously reaching for the bleeding wound. His pale kimono is slowly staining, tainted with his own blood.

"She is mine," she barely whispers, verbally stabbing him in the heart. "You can never have her."

"Arrgghh. And neither will you." Kitami moves in quickly, wanting to end the battle once and for all. He jabs the point at my warrior, forcing her to sweep the sword away, putting herself in

direct line with his *wakizashi* that has materialised in his hand. Honour blade? Every move this man makes is a mockery of his order. Such a noble spirit resides in Etsuko, and yet it is totally absent in Kitami. How could such an honorable enterprise become so corrupted?

She shifts, but not before he slices her thigh, starting another line of red running down her trousers. Hopping back out of range, the loss of blood is telling on her reserves. She needs to end this soon before her stamina gives out. Kitami stands in front of her, his own energy reserves low with multiple gashes of his own liberally bleeding over his kimono.

"Let's finish this." Etsuko has had enough, and so have I. I have been sitting in the shadows, bleeding every drop of blood along with hers. Too much has happened in so short a time and I just want to go home.

She draws her blade up to face him, standing silently, focusing her energy for the final thrust. In an exaggerated motion, Etsuko removes the mask, revealing herself to her opponent. Kitami snarls at the deception, his face wrinkling into a mask of hate. He lets out a low growl and runs at her, his *katana* shifting slowly into position as he approaches. She does not move and I do not want to watch. And still he comes, his growl now a wild yell, the lethal metal closing in on her unprotected neck.

I watch it in slow motion, my brain perversely taking in the movement in agonising detail. When I think he is about to make contact with her, she steps back, allowing his swing to follow through. She moves with him, her own weapon swinging down on him. Her anger, her nobility, her honour and her strength drive the sword across the back of his neck, slicing through skin, bone and muscle to separate his head from his shoulders, the offending body part bouncing across the cobblestone courtyard.

For a moment, the headless body hangs suspended like some demented puppet. The legs finally give way, allowing the corpse to hit the ground with a thud. I look to Etsuko, seeing exhaustion cross her taught features. Leaving my safe haven, I run to her, slipping an arm around her waist as her legs begin to give way. "Let's get you home."

I grab her weapon, wiping the bloody sword on Kitami's clothes as a final insult, slipping back into its scabbard with barely a sound. I grab her again, guiding her out of the courtyard into the street. I close the gates, mimicking the closure of that part of my life, to stop looters.

"You are going to have to show me." She points from time to time to guide me down the labyrinth of streets, her limp becoming more pronounced the closer we get to home. I can feel her sigh in relief as we reach the paper house, and it is a sight for sore eyes. The loss of blood is quite pronounced, her clothes are nearly soaked in it.

She tries to disengage herself from me as we pass through the door. "No, now it is my turn to look after you."

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 7

Etsuko stands before me, swaying slightly from exhaustion and loss of blood. I steer her out to the back garden to avoid her dripping blood all over the rush floor. Scrambling around her house, I find the small bowl she uses to wash, a sponge and some clean water. She has not moved one step in the minutes it has taken me to find these few precious objects.

I approach her slowly, waiting for her eyes to track to me, but she is barely cognizant of my presence, her eyes fluttering open only when I touch her. "Here, let me," I whisper, as I start to remove her blood-soaked clothes. She does not fight me on this, allowing me to undo the belt and buckles to get to her skin. Painstakingly, I strip away the wet shirt, revealing the damage underneath.

I am not even aware of the tears in my eyes as I look at the nasty gash across her ribs. I track up to her dull eyes, and she is looking back at me for a reaction. My hand comes up to her face, my thumb caressing the cooling skin in sympathy. "Ouch..." A gentle smile crosses her lips at my jibe, but it hurts me just to look at it. Blood is still slowly flowing freely, leaving a bloody trail down her abdomen.

Quickly, I strip off the pants to reveal her other injury and it is in a similar state. I gather the sponge and wash her down, wiping away sweat and dirt from her body before wrapping her in her linen towel. "Do you have anything to treat this?"

"In the kitchen. Small metal box... bring it here." She is struggling to say what she wants to tell me. Grabbing her discarded clothes, I find clean patches on it to hold against the gaping holes in her skin.

"Hold this against the wounds till I get back. Anything I can use for bandages?"

Her breathing is shallow. "Box in bedroom."

"Lean against this..." I move her against the frame of the house, because if she sits down I will never get her back up. She is a big girl and I am not that strong. Besides, such a move would open the wounds even more, causing her more pain. I am barely keeping myself together to help her, and if she is in any more pain I am likely to crumble.

While I am searching for the metal box, I put on the pot to boil water. Whenever a woman had a baby in the neighbourhood they would boil water, so I think it must be some medical reason for doing so. Either that, or I have a nice cup of herbal tea when I am finished.

I rush back to find her leaning heavily against the house, the wooden beam creaking under the pressure. Dropping everything, I grab her, pulling her on top of me. My legs feel like jelly under her considerable weight and I struggle to get her inside to her bed. I need about ten hands to hold everything, shift her, get the bed ready, find something for her to sleep and leak blood on, and hold my head in confusion. Finally, she is settled and comfortable and I must now do what I am dreading... fix her. She is broken and somehow I have to mend her.

"Etsuko..." I call her name but she barely hears me, so I try another word that might get a reaction. "My angel..." Eyelids flicker as pale blue eyes struggle to meet mine. "What do I do?"

She smacks her lips as if trying to make them work. "Box." I open the metal box and find a number of packets inside, each labelled with a Japanese symbol. I hold them up one at a time for her reaction. She draws my attention to three, using "bleeding", "infection" and "fever" to tell me what I need to know. But how do I use them? I again hold up the packets, one at a time, and she elaborates "drink", "compress" and "drink".

First things first. I take the packet for infection and go in search of my heated water. I add what I hope is enough of the herb to the water, allowing it to infuse. Carefully, I bathe her, making sure to get enough of the herb into the wounds to help fight the infection that is to come. This is the beginning, I know, and things will probably get worse before they get better, but I am going to fight every step of the way for her.

I steep some of the leaves for bleeding and struggle to lift her enough to pour a little of the potion into her mouth. She is barely swallowing and nearly unconscious. I need to ask more, but I may have to discover the rest on my own. While I have absolutely no idea what I am doing, I am all she has. The large cuts are still leaking and somehow I have to close them.

I do a thorough search of her meagre belongings, making me realize how wealthy my family really is. I have more possessions than her at the Embassy, and I am only visiting for a while. If I stay with her, this is what my life will be like, sparse and rudimentary, but her love will make up for a lot of what I will be missing. My skin prickles when I find needle and thread. Can I do this? Do I want to? Not really, but she needs for me to do it.

I return to my warrior, who is resting peacefully unconscious, and I know at least one of us will not feel this. I soak the needle and thread in the antiseptic solution and I take a deep breath to galvanize myself for what I must do. As I approach her thigh, I can see that my hands are shaking. My eyes close for a moment as I focus myself for this unsavoury task.

That first prick of the needle nearly sends me outside to lose the contents of my stomach. It is breaking my heart to do this to her, each stitch is one more prick in my own skin, my nerve endings twitching in sympathy. Beads of sweat roll down my face as I concentrate hard on finishing what I have started.

That was the easy one. Now I have to stitch the other one situated right under her breast... her naked breast. I am glad she is unconscious for this, otherwise it would be a very awkward moment indeed. My slight tremor has become a definite shake, approaching something as intimate as this part of her anatomy. I narrow my field of vision down to the wound, forcing myself to continue until I have finished.

Finally, both wounds are closed, and only time will tell how her body reacts to this. I sit back for a moment, pleased that I have overcome my reticence to stitch her wounds. Now my tending to her is done, my eyes, with a mind of their own, flow over her skin, free to look without objection

by her. Before I can stop myself, my hand brushes over the soft flesh and feel her for the first time. There is a steely strength residing just under the fine layer of velvety skin, I can feel that, attesting to her dedication to her life. I limit myself to only touching her stomach, feeling that any more is a violation of her trust.

My fingers lighten their touch, and the pads barely touch her, feeling the fine hairs waver as I pass over them. She is so soft, so beautiful, so... Since we have acknowledged what is between us, my body is seeking out hers. Despite the sadness and danger, I am a lot happier in her company, and I am finding out very quickly that I need her like I need air.

Before I lose my resolve to be good, I cover her with a loose sheet and her bedding. I have done all I can do for now and leave her to sleep, while I go about cleaning up the trail of destruction I have left since I have arrived.

\* \* \* \* \*

Some time later I come to bed, exhausted myself with the events of the last few hours. So much destruction and waste, and yet so much I have gained as well. She loves me, and I have returned the sentiment.

Mechanically I prepare the bedroll, extinguishing most of the candles around the house, leaving one or two alight in case I need to help her during the night. While my body seeks rest, my mind is in turmoil. A single tear rolls down my cheek in memory of my father, his life remembered in the service of others - his country, his wife and his child. *I wish you well, father. Give my love to mother.*

I turn my head to look over to the person who will take his place in my life. Life, it appears, is a matter of give and take. While my father has been taken away from me, I have been given Etsuko. What is the saying? When God closes a door, he opens a window.

The strong lines of her jaw draw me, and I observe her without her apprehension. I raise a finger and draw it down her profile, tracing the long aquiline nose and stopping at her full red lips. My fingers turn over, rubbing the back of them over her high cheekbone, its softness cushioning my strokes. I study her with rapt attention, taking in every small detail of the face that has haunted me since we first met. This, I realize, is what has been missing in my life - someone to share my feelings, my thoughts, my joys, my sadness... someone to share all that is me.

I lie there on my side, reaching for her hand, and drifting off to sleep as we had that first night, our hands entwined.

\* \* \* \* \*

A gentle tugging brings me slowly to awareness, but I struggle to move. The bed has given me another backache, and the blows from Kitami are also making themselves known. My eyes open to see cornflower blue eyes staring back at me. I look down to see that our fingers are still

entwined, and she has not bothered to separate them, which I find most promising indeed.

"Good morning," I whisper.

"Hmmm..." She makes a move to rise.

"No, you stay right there. I don't want to have to stitch you up again." She looks down to my handiwork, her well-defined eyebrows rising in question. "I learned needlework as a young woman, thank you very much." Her eyebrows rise even further, looking again to see if I stitched her in herringbone.

"How are you feeling this morning?"

"Better than I should expect." She is still not happy, and I suspect she is going to be a grumpy patient.

My hand rises to her cheek, the pads of my fingers rubbing gently over her skin. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For coming when I called. My protector... my angel." A blush travels up her cheeks at the name, instantly regretting having used the term on the birdcage. "You arrived quickly, and that probably saved my life. How did you manage it?"

"I was on the rooftop and saw the bird leave your window." That explains a lot. She was there for me all along. Etsuko looks up at me shyly. "Did you mean it?" I am confused. Mean what... oh. I nod silently in answer to her question. Her eyes soften as they regard me, studying me as I did her last night, and I let her look without interference. Her eyes dip as I watch her, embarrassed at being caught staring.

"Let me look." She is confused at the statement, then embarrassment at having to reveal herself to me. The sheet is slightly damp from perspiration and a little bit of blood. The stitches seem to be holding the wounds closed, but the colour is a little pink, and I am worried that this could lead to more serious things.

I struggle to get up from the floor, and my agonised expression does not go unnoticed. "What happened to you?"

"Don't worry about me. You are the one in trouble here."

"Show me."

"No. Don't be silly. I'm fine." "Clarissa, SHOW ME!" Her voice drops and hardens, letting me know she will brook no argument. I sigh, reaching for the *obi* and opening my kimono. I can feel those eyes sliding over my skin as she discovers my secret. I follow her vision downwards, knowing what I will find there, a massive bruise from where Kitami had kicked me in the

stomach the night before.

She looks up at me with tears in her eyes. "Don't be upset, Etsuko. You saved my life. What is a little bruise here and there?" But I can read the guilt in her eyes, despite my words to the contrary.

"Clarissa, can you get me the metal box from the kitchen, please." I do as she asks, curious as to why she wants it. I bring out the packets inside and she grabs one, handing it to me. "Put some of these into a bowl with a little warm water. Spread it onto a piece of cloth and hold it against your stomach. It should draw out the bruise."

"The other herbs you picked out last night." She looks at me in confusion, probably unaware she had done such a thing. I go to the kitchen, returning with the packets in question, holding them up for her inspection. "What is this one?"

"Agrimony. It helps to slow the bleeding down." I hold up the next packet. "That one is called Arnica and is used to clean wounds." And the third. "Cassandra is used to treat fevers." If the herb she has given to me can draw the bruise out, can the Arnica do the same for her infection?

I fetch a bowl with some warm water and open the packet, placing a handful into it to become soft and malleable, spreading it on some dry cloth and placing one on each of the wounds. A sly smile crosses her lips. "I learn quickly."

She fumbles around in the tin, struggling to find the packet she wants by feel. Finally, she holds up another packet and hands it to me. "This is ginseng, and is a good herb to promote wellbeing in the body. Can you please make me some tea?" Please? She has but to ask and I will fly across the sky for her.

I disappear to make the tea, thinking about our interaction with each other. While there is a little shyness, there is no awkwardness or tension. Now that the words are out, perhaps there can be more. But what? I have no idea, except the unbearable urge to touch her, to be so close that I can feel her breathe. She is occupying my every thought and I know that I dream about her, but I can never seem to remember the details of what the dream is about, only that she is the heart of it.

I return with the tea, stopping at the door to watch her lying quietly on the floor. Her eyes are closed in rest, but her body still holds a little tension, her warrior upbringing preparing her to be ready for battle at all times. She must sense me because those exotically beautiful eyes open and turn to watch me, our eyes locking for a moment suspended in time.

I approach, putting the tea down. Kneeling down behind her, I lift her so she is leaning against me, her back resting against my breasts. That tension is still present, and I suspect it has more to do with feeling me in her back... and perhaps a little pain... but she finally relaxes and enjoys the warm tea in peace and quiet.

I cannot help myself. As if an outside force is moving my limbs, one arm slides around her waist, careful to avoid the stitches. There is a momentary stiffening of her muscles, but she relaxes

under my gentle caress. My cheek slides against her dark hair and I am in heaven.

"Clarissa..."

"Hmmm?"

"I... I'm sorry about your father. I wish I had arrived sooner."

"Do not play that game, Etsuko. I could also say that I should have warned my father sooner. I suspected Kitami, but said nothing. Neither of us can change the outcome. Kitami was to blame and he has paid. We just move forward from here."

"And where do we go from here?"

Ahhh. The crux of this conversation. What is our future? "Well, first of all, we get you better."

"And then?" I can hear the uncertainty in her voice... or is it possibly terror? I place her hand in my palm, waiting to see what she does. It rests there for a moment before the long fingers curl through mine and grab my hand.

"And then... "

"Are you going to leave me?"

"I will stay with you for as long as you want me to." Is that non-committal enough? I would stay with her for eternity, but will she want me that long? I know she said she loved me, and I did the same, but do we understand all that entails? Her dark mane shifts, her soft face tipping up to look at me and I am mesmerised by it.

Slowly, the distance between our lips shortens, inch by precious inch disappears as we look into each other's eyes for confirmation of our commitment to one another. The air crackles around us as I move those last few inches, lightly pressing my lips against hers for the first time, feeling softness whispering against me in gentle invitation.

I pull away momentarily, looking into those darkened depths to see her reaction. A gentle smile plays around the corners of those full rose lips, giving me the answer that I need. Her hand reaches up to curl around behind my neck, tugging me back for another taste. I feel my own lips tip into a smile at her encouragement.

This longer contact allows us to become accustomed to this new sensation. We shift and sway as we learn every nuance of this kiss. Etsuko gasps for air and I feel her breath in my mouth, sending a jolt right through me. Unconsciously, my mouth opens as I touch her lips, my tongue sliding along them slowly as I paint her skin.

A whimper, barely heard over the rustle of clothes, escapes her as I continue my exploration. Her fingers tighten in my hair in reaction, her own lips parting under my assault. I pull back and look

at her, her lips moist and her eyes wide in confusion. A smile crosses her features, sending laugh lines skittering across her face, in reaction to my own stunned look.

My fingers come up to her cheek, reverently touching the fine skin in response to my emotions. My heart wants to burst out of my chest with what I feel for this woman. "I love you." The whisper has barely carried over the silence of the room. My warrior pulls me in again to touch my lips, this time she initiates the contact with her tongue, touching my lips with gentle strokes and setting my nerve endings alight.

I pull away from the contact and her brow furrows. "You are not well enough to continue any further."

"Continue?"

"Could you not feel that you wanted more?" She nods timidly. "I could as well, but you are not well enough. Let us take this slowly. I am not going anywhere."

"No?"

"In answer to your question... no, I will not leave you." That beautiful face breaks into a breathtaking smile, my answer obviously what she needs to hear. "Now, let us get some breakfast."

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 8

Standing at the door to the kitchen, I look in with trepidation. I have absolutely no idea what to do. Who would think that having servants in your household would be a disadvantage? Needlework was considered a maidenly thing to learn, but to cook? That's what the servants were for. Not anymore. For better or worse, I am going to have to learn to cook.

My independent mind does not object to learning such a menial task, because I hate admitting defeat in something that should not be that hard. I am stubborn that way. But like any project, it is a daunting prospect at the beginning. Gathering my resolve, I step into the room, preparing for the worst. Poking around tentatively in the small number of pots, there seems to be a number of dry ingredients, the smell of which just about turns my stomach. What is she eating? Do I really want to know? Because, ultimately, I will be eating it too. My mind drifts back to that conversation with Yasuki not so long ago about seaweed, sea slugs and fungus, and the irony of the situation is not lost upon me. I will be eating my mental comments soon... literally.

I manage to scrape together a few items already cooked or raw that would get us through breakfast. Boiled rice and plums, an unlikely combination, but it will do. I carry the meagre offering back to my patient who is resting peacefully on her sleeping mat. I wonder if I can convince her to get a proper mattress, even if it is on the floor. My back is never going to survive all this sleeping on the hard surface.

How easily my mind has accepted that this is my life now. I am already thinking of long-term sleeping arrangements. I wonder if she will allow me to sleep with her? I have a burning need to feel her heart beating next to mine, to have her scent floating around me as I drift off to sleep, to have her skin shifting under my fingertips. My heart beats a little faster at the thought of having her so close to me, to know that I am loved and that I love in return.

As I approach she stirs, a light sheen covering her skin. My hand touches her brow and feels a slight fever. "Some of those herbs, I think." She does not argue, ready to accept her medicine graciously. I disappear back to the kitchen to prepare the herbal mixture for her to drink, returning a few minutes later to see her struggling to sit up. "And just what do you think you are doing?" She jumps in surprise, her face grimacing in pain at the sudden movement. "Sorry," I murmur.

I shift behind her, helping her into a semi-seated position against me. She downs the medicine in a couple of gulps, a tiny twitch the only reaction she has to the evil smelling potion. In the quiet of the room, we eat the food I have brought, finishing the fare in a few minutes. I cuddle her, gently wrapping my arms around her sweat-slicked body, my head resting on her damp hair.

"I think I need to get more food."

"Hmmm. I had meant to do that yesterday, but I was busy."

"Rescuing me, if I remember."

"Well, it was more important."

"I'm not complaining. But I don't know if I can do this, not being able to speak the language and all."

"In the bottom of the box over there is some parchment and ink. If you bring it over I can write a shopping list. If you feel around in there, there is a small sack which has coins in it." I do as she asks, finding the items in question, and returning to her side. Taking up my position behind her, I support her as she writes, beautiful strokes of the brush crossing the paper boldly, expressing her soul in depth and clarity within the printed symbols.

"Make sure there are things on that list that I can cook."

"I'll do the cooking."

"You'll do no such thing. You are sick. I'll manage."

"**I'll** do the cooking." Etsuko's voice drops to a low register and it touches something deep in me. My breathing catches as those simmering blue pools look at me, slowly darkening as they watch. She puts down her writing utensils and twists. "Don't do that, you'll hurt yourself." My whisper is lost as she pulls me in, her arms cradling me like a tiny child. Despite my protests, her lips

descend to mine, taking control of me.

"What are you doing?" I qualify that question with a smile, not wanting her to feel embarrassed by such a bold move.

"Trying to kiss you into silence." My skin is on fire as her eyes skim over me.

"Fine by me..." I grab her neck and pull her slowly towards me. This kiss is not so much about commitment and love, but about something different, something more basic. My fingers shift through her hair restlessly, echoing my body and my soul. Maybe her fever is catching, for that is what I feel... her fever.

Emboldened by my acceptance of her actions so far, she deepens the kiss, actively seeking me out in my mouth. I am surprised at first, but my body answers her call, shifting in her lap trying to make more contact. This is as much about instinct and nature as it is about the intellectual. Without conscious thought, we are discovering one another, our senses teaching us what we need to know.

Etsuko tries to shift me to the bed, eliciting a painful grunt from her. It is like a bucket of cold water on me, her pain snaps me out of the haze I am in. I reach for her side, looking at the stitches. While still intact, the skin is darkening as the infection is taking hold.

"I'll be back." I disappear to the kitchen to prepare another poultice. I return with the compresses, binding them in place. "Can you add this herb to that shopping list, or is there something better?" Her hand skims over the page, the ink dancing across the page in pictorial splendour. She hands me the list and I hesitate.

"What?" Her brow wrinkles.

"I... What if I get lost?" The thought hits me like a tornado. "What if I can't get home?" Her eyes soften. What did I say? Home. I said home. We look at one another... home.

She grabs the shopping list, turning it over, and allowing her brush to flow over the clean parchment. A few moments later she has drawn me a map, complete with an address. If I get lost, all I have to do is ask.

"Will you be fine while I do this?"

"Just go. Come back quickly."

"I'll hurry." I am loathe to leave her while she is sick, but slowly starving to death is probably not going to help either of us, but if I am cooking, and I suspect I will while she has a fever, starving may be the better option.

\* \* \* \* \*

I am decidedly nervous about leaving the house. Being in a foreign land is one thing, but to have the added impediment of no language or homing skills has put me at a great disadvantage indeed. With the wicker hat in place and basket in hand, I set off on my journey of discovery. If I can do this, well... well, I can do anything. This is as much a matter of overcoming my fear as it is about doing the shopping.

I follow the map she has given me to the market, the sights and smells swamping my senses as I step into the square. Picking a likely target, I approach, handing over the list to the wizened old crone standing behind the table. She chatters at me and I point to my throat and shaking my head, feigning loss of voice. I point to the list and she collects some of the items, still chattering away. I suppose she thinks my voice may not be working but my ears are. My eyes shift over the people surrounding me and they seem to ignore me.

For the moment, I keep my identity a secret. I will do nothing to jeopardize us until Etsuko is well enough to study the situation more closely. A European in a local market is like a wolf in a pack of sheep, and I do nothing to draw attention to myself. I shuffle between the various stalls, finally getting what I hope is everything. I have no idea. The last two vendors shake their heads at me, so I assume that I have everything. However, I find a few extra items that I add to the pile of fresh produce. Emergency rations on my part should I fail abysmally at cooking.

I take a deep breath. My heart pounds violently as I try to retrace my steps to her. A fine film of sweat crosses my brow, nervously trying to follow the map she has provided. Desperately, I look around for familiar landmarks, tentatively making my way back home. I have a moment of panic when I lose my way, but I do as she says, stopping to show the map to a young woman, who kindly points me in the right direction.

Each step is like an eternity. Is it one more step to her or one more step away? My mind cannot help but ponder these questions, doubling my anxiety at being in a situation I can barely control. Any confidence I possessed when I left the house has flown, replaced with apprehension and doubt. I had always thought of myself as a reasonably capable woman, but being stranded in such a dilemma has rocked my foundations. It has made me question the very fabric of myself.

I am about to fall apart emotionally when I round a corner and see the familiar framework of her house. I look up and down the path, studying her neighbours. Each house looks the same and yet I would know her house anywhere. Perhaps it is my heart that has recognised the location, not my eyes, for it knows she is inside. My feet quicken, trying to shorten the time I am out in this hostile world, wanting to be tucked safely inside our own little world within these paper walls.

I have not forgotten to leave my slippers at the door as I enter, adjusting quickly to the little rituals of this land. I know she would say to the contrary, but I suspect she is touched by my efforts to comply. I walk through to the kitchen to deposit the basket, my legs like jelly with the rush of adrenaline flowing through me. I did it. Not confidently or even well, but I did it, and I take some solace from the fact that I can do it again if I have to.

\* \* \* \* \*

I look in on my patient to find her peacefully asleep. At present, sleep is her friend, and I leave her be. I return to the kitchen, preparing a cup of herbal tea, and taking a seat outside in her tiny garden. The gentle gurgling from the little wooden structure in the pond soothes my nerves. As I absorb the peace and quiet, a far-off chirping draws my attention. Sitting on the edge of the roof is the little buttercup canary.

"Hello there. Thank you for finding my angel." The bird chatters enthusiastically. "You're welcome."

"Who are you talking to?"

The cup bounces in my hand as a tremor passes through my body. "Don't do that!" My heart is thudding heavily and I can feel it in my throat.

"Sorry." The quiet murmur has a hint of hurt.

"No. You just startled me, that is all. What are you doing up?"

"I came to find you."

"Me? Why?"

"I... I missed you."

"You did?" That heart that had been beating so wildly now warms to the compliment.

"How did the shopping go?"

"Fine." Those azure eyes bore into mine to learn the truth.

"But..."

"But... nothing. It went fine. I am back."

Her lips purse and she knows the truth. She makes a move towards me. "No, don't you sit down. It will stretch the stitches."

"Then you will have to come to me."

I raise my head as she hovers overhead. "You should be back in bed." I can see the pleading look in her eyes, but not a word passes her lips. I stand, slipping my arm under her shoulder and supporting her waist, guiding her back inside to her bed. While she is standing, I change the drenched sheet, finding a clean one in her locker. I strip off the kimono she has thrown on, washing down her sweaty skin, and applying new poultices to the wounds. They seem no worse to when I had left her that morning, so I hope that her body is fighting this.

I am about to leave her when a lost voice drifts in the air. "Don't leave me." I look over my shoulder to see the unspoken question. She reaches out for me. What am I supposed to do? She does not want me to leave and I do not want to go. Crawling into bed next to her, I open my arms to her and she gingerly settles herself next to me, her head resting on my shoulder, one long arm curling around my waist in gentle possession.

A number of hours later, I wake in that same position, my back screaming in protest. Her head has slipped down to my breast and her slow breathing blows across my chest. My body is reacting to this subtle teasing and I find my fingers are flexing in time to her exhale. There is a gentle tickling in the pit of my stomach, stirring urges within me that I am not sure I should have.

I look down to the mane of charcoal hair, a slight smile crossing my lips at the sight of her wrapped around me. Feelings that had been awakened in me earlier return even stronger, and I am hard pressed not to act on them. She moves, nuzzling my breast, causing a gasp to escape my lips. I close my eyes, trying to calm myself, and open them to find electric blue orbs watching me.

"Well, hello there."

"What's wrong?"

What do I say? Your breath on my breast is teasing me? Do I want to know where that will lead to? Perhaps I do, but maybe she does not. I am facing a dilemma here. My body is demanding me to go in a direction I have not been before, and it is becoming increasingly harder to ignore it.

"Nothing." She knows differently, and to prove her point she returns her head to its previous position and breathes again. This time, I cannot help but react. That dark head looks at me again, an impish smile crossing her face. "You scamp." Even white teeth appear through full, luscious lips, as she shows me her playful nature. "Feeling better, are we?" I reach for her forehead, feeling the cool sweaty skin under my fingertips. Her fever has broken.

"How about some ginseng tea?" We both recognise my withdrawal for what it is. She hesitates, refusing to release her hold on me, and I think she is going to press her advantage. Her large hand comes up to touch my cheek and our eyes speak to one another. Soon, very soon.

I stand, adjusting my askew kimono. She is watching intently, not missing one subtle movement of my hands, so I undo the sash, opening my kimono in a show of straightening my clothes. Those eyes rise to mine for a moment, before returning to my body, taking in every line and curve of me. Maybe even sooner. I re-do the *obi* and turn to leave the room. A deep sigh escapes her, mirroring my own thoughts. *Get well soon, angel...*

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 9

It has been utter torture the last week. She has been healing at a steady pace, and the stitches

came out a couple of days ago. At night we have slept together, waking in each other's arms, and separating with a great deal of difficulty. She is nearly at full recovery and I am tired of waiting.

But this last week has not been a total loss either. Growing intimacy and trust has been developing between us in those long, frustrating nights together, our minds and hearts learning trust, acceptance and finally love as we bind ourselves together closer than skin will allow. While we are novices in this game of love, we are enthusiastic players and wish to learn the rules. It is only a matter of time before we continue what we had started a week before, and I have to admit that my mind has thought of nothing else. My soul burns for her, not aware of what is calling me to her, but that I have to find out.

I know exactly where she is and what she is doing, and perhaps this is a good starting point for us both. I approach the bedroom, the whisper of the sliding door sounding like a roll of thunder in the silence of the house. Those eyes that know the very heart of me shift over her shoulder to find me, their blueness pinning me to where I stand. I close the door. I do not know why. We are the only two people in the house, so there is really no need. Maybe it is a physical reaction to what I am about to instigate.

My mind has played tug-of-war since my decision to approach her, one side encouraging me to continue while the other advising caution. I cannot continue living this way. My body is restless and edgy. I am not sleeping well, despite my human pillow, and my dreams have become more frequent. Despite being so close to me, or perhaps because she is so close, I cannot get any peace.

There is a steady drip of water as she holds her sponge in one hand, immobile as I approach her. I kneel behind her, my hand slipping over her shoulder. "Here, let me help you." Cautiously, she hands over the material, waiting to see what I am going to do. My fingers slide over her back, the sponge following close behind, as I wash her, slowly massaging soft skin until she relaxes under my attention. When her head drops, my lips touch her, softly and slowly sliding along, kissing a fiery path along her moist back.

Her head jerks up, her eyes swivelling over her shoulder to look at me. I move closer to her face, looking up from my work but not stopping my touch. Our eyes meet, and I can see her eyes widen in reaction to my own expression.

I have again caught her fever and I know that the very nature of me will teach me all I need to know. My hands move of their own volition, learning every inch of her and leaving an indelible imprint on my brain. Muscles shift and bunch as I discover new territory, her own breathing steadily increasing under my curious hands.

Wetness sits on my lips and I cannot resist the temptation to taste it. There is the scented water that she has bathed in, but there is a hint of something else. It is a flavour that I can only identify as her. It is Etsuko, the essence of her skin.

Pulling gently, I help her to her feet, placing her hands on my waist. Her brow wrinkles in

confusion and I shift her fingers to the sash, holding them there for a moment before removing my own. Her head dips at the thought of what she is about to do, her crystal eyes shyly peeking through her charcoal fringe. A gentle tug undoes the cloth and it slowly unravels from around my waist, falling to the floor around my feet. The kimono hangs open and I can feel her heated gaze travel from the top of my head to the tip of my toes. She is gaining confidence from my silent encouragement of her.

Warm hands brush the material from my shoulders, returning to my skin in a slow exploration. Perhaps this will not be as awkward as I had first anticipated. Her curiosity is overshadowing her inexperience and I am being drawn in to her in more ways than a simple request. The distance between us disappears as we kiss, our passion slowly rising with our confidence of one another. Lips dip and taste, moving from lips to neck, feeling the pounding pulse just under the velvet skin. I encourage her to remove my bloomers, feeling hands not my own caressing skin that had been forbidden to all but myself. Our bodies touch from shoulder to hip for the first time, fitting together perfectly.

Idle hands effortlessly glide over soft skin, drawing whispered pants from both of us. I feel like her pet canary, finally given my freedom to soar in the heavens. It is glorious.

My legs quiver and I push her to the mat before I fall down. My body covers hers, skin sliding against skin and igniting nerve endings in anticipation of the pleasure to come. Our voyage of discovery is not out of control, but more a slow, easy acceptance of our hearts, minds and bodies. As much as both of us want to escalate this, we both realize that we have to be comfortable with who we are and with each other before we can move on.

When I feel she is ready, my lips wander, slowly covering her damp neck in soft kisses, moving from droplet to droplet with agonizing slowness. Her hands wind themselves into my hair, flexing and stretching against my scalp as I touch her.

I am at her breast and I am not sure what to do. Perhaps I will be lucky and she will react to me touching her as before. I close my eyes, using my sense of touch to know her, to feel the change in texture as I slowly approach an erect nipple. She is becoming impatient with me, her hands now grabbing fists full of hair and pulling me to where she wants me. I willingly comply with her silent request, allowing my hand to tease and taunt her, feeling its weight and softness resting in my palm.

I look up from my ministrations to watch her face and I am spellbound. A look of utter joy and wonderment has crossed her features, leaving me to feel a quiet contentment in my heart. I am nearly in tears at the revelation that I am her first and her only, just as she is mine.

My mouth covers hers as I move to her other breast, giving it loving attention as I had its twin. She is squirming beneath me and I am not sure what more I can do for her. Her thighs open and my body drops between them. I cannot help but gasp at the sensation of feeling her intimately against my stomach. *What the...?*

Raising myself on my hands, I look up into her crystal eyes. Maybe she can read my indecision

in my own, because I feel her body sway against me, subtly hinting where she wants contact. Can I do this? I am moving into unknown territory if I progress any further, but how can I not give her what she so desperately wants?

My large samurai is openly whimpering at the lost contact, her eyes pleading with me to continue. So far, my instincts have not let me down, so I continue in the direction she is urging me, sliding a shaking hand down her long body, studying the terrain and learning its secrets. Why had we been so afraid of this? Every move I make draws a positive response from her and, in turn, draws me further into the upward spiralling passion that is sweeping us both away.

Fingertips explore, running lightly over the ridges of her muscled abdomen, feeling the sheer power and strength locked inside this woman. She is a dangerous and powerful woman, but in my hands she is a delicate flower, slowing coming into full bloom under my care. I am both terrified and in awe of the huge responsibility I have, ensuring that her fragile emotions are not shattered by what is happening between us.

I continue down her long body, teasing, touching and tormenting her. She is not sure what she feels, but only knows that she wants more. Her hands are restless on my back, shifting randomly as her mind tries to make sense of what her body is feeling. I look up into shimmering blue pools, their depths filled with an emotion she is just starting to comprehend.

I move to rest beside her, allowing my hand free reign to explore. A soft moan escapes her lips and I am sure she is not even aware that she is doing so, so focused is she on her body's reaction to me. A gentle smile crosses those curvaceous lips, expressing so elegantly the emotion in her heart. I cannot help but reciprocate her smile with one of my own, watching as her blue luminous pools track to mine, shining in the reflected candlelight. She is so beautiful and so vulnerable and I am struck by the trust she has put in me.

I lean in and touch her lips once more, not tiring of the sensation or her reaction to me. I feel ten feet tall as she sighs and whimpers as my fingers discover her secret places. I had feared that I would fail at one more thing, but it seems I have excelled, balancing all other failures on the scales of life. This one, above all others, is the one talent I did not want to fail... to disappoint her. Perhaps it was not possible to. If this was meant to be, then to stumble here would have been a cruel twist of fate that is for sure.

Tentatively, I trace down the gentle slope of her stomach, stopping before reaching my ultimate goal. Her eyes widen when she realizes where I am headed and I look to her for permission. "Do you want me to stop?" My voice breaks the silence of the room, but I need to know. "What do you want, Etsuko? Show me." My breath flows over her, raising goosebumps on her pale skin.

Will she be bold enough to help me find her pleasure? I give her a smile in encouragement, holding her hand in mine and moving back to my previous position. Leaning in, I place a small kiss on that soft cheek, "Please, show me," I repeat. My hand slides in underneath hers, leading it around soft skin in gentle discovery, letting her feel what I feel. I whisper to her, expressing what is locked up in my heart. "You are so beautiful, Etsuko."

"Elizabeth," she whispers. A gentle smile breaks those full lips as we look at each other. I suspect that that name has not been uttered for many years.

"Elizabeth... sweet Elizabeth." My lips lower to hers, barely touching the softness there. I know she is watching me intently because I can feel the heat of her gaze on my hand hovering over her. Is it curiosity or is it a stirring within her that draws her to watch? Either way, I will please her any way I can to brand her as my own. From the first moment I saw her, I knew that I was lost. It has just taken a little while for my head to catch up to my heart.

I return my attention to the strong body lying next to me, watching her face as my hand slowly approaches the centre of her. I know where she wants me, because I can feel myself twitching in sympathy. Oh yes, now I know. With increasing confidence, I finally touch her, looking up to see her look of startlement, then increasing excitement.

Our fingers slide along her skin, now slick with her arousal, finding the tiny pearl that is the heart of her. Her fevered eyes look up into mine, pleading me to find her salvation. Our eyes lock, expressing emotions so deep that only our hearts can encompass all that needs to be said. I barely disturb the air around us as I whisper, "I love you," but her eyes soften at the declaration, finally understanding the depth of what I feel for her.

Her hand leaves mine as I stroke her inner fire, her fingers wrapping around my neck as she pulls me in for a kiss. I can smell her. It is musky and raw and reaches to my very soul, drawing a response from me that floods my senses. My own excitement rises with her, watching her experience this roller coaster of excitement for the first time, my hand never wavering from its chosen path as she is slowly consumed by her passion, until finally she shudders against me in release. A soft moan escapes her lips, echoing in my mind, as she convulses against my fingers.

That was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. That first look of completion, with a touch of wonder and absolute joy, is something that will stay with me for the rest of my days. She has given me the gift of her innocence and I will cherish it forever. Vibrant eyes, still held in passion's embrace, look up at me, begging for a closeness only I can give her. I open my arms, allowing her to crawl inside me and reside in my heart.

We lay there for some time, enjoying the silence and each other. I am in no hurry for reciprocation. It will happen, I know that, but this is her time and I will not spoil it by seeking my own satisfaction. When she is ready she will seek me out, I have no doubt of that. For now, making her happy has made me happy.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Epilogue**

Two weeks have passed since the attack on the Embassy, and a week since we finally crossed that final barrier between us. As predicted, she sought me out and I had felt her for the first time, the heavens passing behind my eyelids as she brought me to completion. This is where my heart

resides now, inside one large woman with an equally large heart.

On this particular day, she invites me for a walk. Dressed in our "street" clothes, she takes my hand as we move out into the sea of humanity. I have no idea of our destination, but simply enjoy the feel of my hand in hers. She leads me along, "Come, Takara." A smile tugs at her lips as I respond to the name.

"Takara?"

"That is what I will call you."

"What does it mean?"

"Treasure. For that is what you are to me." *Awww*. My heart melts at the romantic declaration.

"Well, *Elizabeth*, Takara it is."

Preoccupied with thoughts of my new name and all that it implies, I am not aware of where she is leading me. I look up to see the distant walls of the Embassy, and give her a look of inquiry. As we get closer, there is a large poster on the wall, and I look to Etsuko to translate for me. "They are looking for you. It is asking for help to find a European woman." Those pale eyes look at me expectantly. "It is your choice."

I thought I had made my choice, but she still needs to know that I willingly choose her. We walk slowly by the gates and I cannot help but look inside. All evidence of the slaughter has been removed, save the British flag flying at half-mast. Nothing. My father's life is gone and there is nothing to mark his passing.

Vigilant guards make a move in our direction as we hesitate in front of the gates. Etsuko looks over her shoulder, sadness filling those pale blue orbs. She continues on, her hand slipping from mine as she thinks I have made my decision. For an instant, I wonder what my life would be like without her, and it is empty. I would return to a vacant house back in England, occasionally visited by distant relatives pretending to care for my well being but secretly coveting my wealth.

I look ahead as she slowly shuffles away, her posture slumped in weary defeat. There is my wealth and I could ask for no more. She is my treasure - her company, her love, a strong hand to guide me and help me when I stumble and someone who knows all of me.

I continue on. "Wait." She stops, not willing to look back in case I voice what she does not want to hear. I stand next to her, reaching for her long fingers. "Let us go."

"Clarissa? What about them?" He head nods towards the large brick building.

"Takara. We will tackle that problem later... together. For now, let us go home."

THE END

Please feel free to let me know what you think at [aurelia\\_fan@yahoo.com.au](mailto:aurelia_fan@yahoo.com.au).

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