

The Weeping Empress

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I would like to thank Sophie, Kimiko, and Saul, who distracted me, exponentially increasing the time taken to write this book, but without whom it wouldn't have been as much fun.

Chapter 1

*The ocean rocks in solitude
To soothe its aching heart
For far away its lover roams
A storm front in the dark*

Chiyo opened her eyes and looked up at the crisp blue sky. There was a fluttering in front of it as the leaves of a sparsely foliated tree waved lazily. The wispy tendril of a cirrus cloud floated into the periphery of her vision and then disappeared and was forgotten. It was beautiful, the type of view that children cherish and adults forget. *When was the last time I laid in the grass and just looked at the sky?* Chiyo wondered. *Life is so busy. Who has the time?* She appreciated the one small moment as her head began to clear, bringing with it a dull ache.

She felt hungover and rubbed her eyes groggily. Her head was foggy, and her limbs were heavy. She felt bad enough to believe she had been out the night before, but try as she might, she couldn't remember anything more raucous than drinking a glass of wine as she loaded the dishwasher.

"Ugh," she moaned.

Her hand rose to her aching forehead, but it provided little relief. She rolled over and replaced the peaceful blue of the sky above with the spiked greenery of grass below. A wave of nausea swept over her, and for a moment she saw nothing as she closed her eyes and waited for it to pass. She faltered in her attempt to stand up. She clenched her fingers in the brittle greenery and thought of her plush cream bedroom carpet at home. *Where am I?* she asked herself.

Bringing herself as far as her knees, she started as an unknown man grabbed her arm and jerked her roughly. She wasn't able to correct her balance and stumbled. He dragged her two or

three feet, scraping her knees painfully across the rough ground. When she had been lying on it, she had only noticed the grass, but now her knees told her unequivocally that there was all manner of stone present as the land scraped the skin from her kneecaps.

“Get up, you useless sack of shit!” he snarled. “I won’t tell you again.”

His grip tightened, and he pulled her the rest of the way to her feet. She clawed at the fist clenched firmly around her upper arm. Blood beaded weakly across the back of the hand, but it didn’t loosen its hold at all. Confusion and disbelief dulled her senses, and fear slowly crept through her body.

“This is just too ridiculous,” he spat as he gave her another jarring jerk. “So much trouble for nothing. Honestly, how far did you think you could get? Did you really think you could escape? Did you?”

In her already perplexed state, she wasn’t able to comprehend the situation, but she was forced to shift her mental state from pained and confused to scared and endangered. She looked at the man shoving her along. He was only a little taller than she was and dark-complected with oily black hair.

In his right hand was a thin curved sword like Chiyo had seen in innumerable movies and museums. Unlike those shiny, clean swords, his was brown with the stains of congealing blood. It terrified her. She had never been so close to a killing implement before. She instinctively tried again to free herself but still wasn’t able to dislodge her arm. He gripped it so tightly that it began to ache. He wrenched her arm viciously, moving her another foot or two. She dug her heels in, leaned back, and tried again but to no avail.

“Let go! Let go of me,” she shouted as she kicked at him. “Help! Help me! Someone help me!”

She looked around for someone to help her, but when she glanced over his shoulder, all she saw was a scene of horror. The tanned britches and green surcoat on the man holding her hostage made up a uniform, and she saw a dozen more men dressed just like him, trying to regain control of a mare’s nest of lost order. There was a wagon to which these uniformed men had chained a number of people but it seemed as though some had resisted. Apparently there was no patience left for those rebels.

She watched as an elderly woman, panting and hobbling as quickly as her stiff, arthritic joints would allow was savagely attacked from behind. A younger and far quicker youth in uniform caught her easily and kicked her in the small of the back.

“Oh no you don’t, you old bag,” he snapped.

The woman grimaced as she fell. She reached out to Chiyo for help Chiyo couldn’t give. The youth stepped on her neck and stabbed her to death. Chiyo was close enough to feel the warm spray of arterial blood and hear the sickening sound of flesh separating and the knocking of the death rattle as loose fluid accumulated in the back of her throat.

Chiyo screamed and renewed her struggles as she began to panic. She felt her loose fitting pants go warm as she wet herself, and her fight-or-flight reaction finally kicked in. She didn’t have the time to analyze or even come to terms with her inexplicable situation.

“No!” she screamed as loudly as she could.

It came out scared and guttural; a far cry from the polite shout she and her Women’s Defense classmates had presented to their perpetually frustrated instructor. She stomped on her assailant’s toes while simultaneously elbowing him in the diaphragm. He grunted and released her amidst a spew of profanity.

She ran like hell.

Now that she was really looking she could see no means of escape. She didn’t recognize anything; not the surroundings, not the squat-terraced building behind her, not the strange dress of the people she ran through and from, and certainly not the fighting and death. Death was something that came quietly to hospital beds, preventably to careless drivers, maybe even violently to some unknown alley in the ghetto, but not to her safe, structured world.

Someone grabbed her again, pulling her hair painfully. She spun around, coming face to face with her previous oily-haired captor. By instinct she punched him as hard as she could. She felt the bones in his nose crumble in a surprisingly satisfactory fashion. He stumbled backward, and she pulled herself free, leaving him with a handful of hair. She had never hit anyone before. She cradled her right hand, feeling the dull ache of bruises developing along her knuckles.

She chanced a glance behind her and found he wasn’t following her. He was still cupping the bleeding remains of his broken nose. He wasn’t the only one bloody. There seemed to be

blood everywhere. It painted the world red, and Chiyo's mind couldn't make sense of it. Her head whipped from side to side from the sky to the irrationally colored grasses. Her lack of focus made her head spin, and she grasped at her temples pitifully. She was crying, and the tears blurred her vision further. The filth from her hands left muddied streaks as she tried to wipe them away.

It's not real, she repeated to herself. *It's not real. It's not real.* Over and over in her head she said, forcing concentration onto something not red.

Her foot was tangled in the stinking, nodular lengths of someone's large intestines. She fell, coming face to face with the graying remains of their owner. She gasped, gagging on the smell. She tried to get up, slipped, and fell again onto the corpse. His eyes had been blue once, but now they were milky with death. Chiyo threw herself backward, landed on her backside, and crab-walked away from the body.

She couldn't breathe. Her breath came in sharp uncontrollable gasps. She was afraid she might faint. Panicking and uncertain of what to do or where to go, she backed up to the wall closest to her. She tried to gather her thoughts and make sense of the mayhem around her. It was like some demented slasher movie entitled *Tag, You're Dead*.

There were people scattered everywhere, some living but many more dead or dying. There seemed to be two main groups: a group of variously dressed individuals with no apparent association and a group of uniformed men wearing brown leather pants with a sleeveless green tunic. The uniformed men were trying to herd the others into order and cutting down those who were particularly uncooperative. Chiyo noted the resistance centered around two main people.

Although the chaos was generally spread out, these two figures created an epicenter for the fighting. A large contingent of uniforms was fully occupied in trying to suppress them, and they were failing miserably. The two rebels ducked and wove in and out of each other's shadows, swords flashing red and blue. Each movement found a mark, and there was a swath of destruction around them. They were mesmerizing, and for a moment the sight even cut through Chiyo's fear and revulsion, allowing her to release the breath she was holding.

In a gaping manner she observed the two men working in a tightly choreographed manner. They fought around each other effortlessly. Her husband, whose boyhood love of samurai and adult appreciation of all things Kurosawa, would have been awed. Even Chiyo had to admit there was a deadly beauty to their movements.

Chiyo's humorless contemplation was disturbed by the approach of another uniformed individual. She noticed he was favoring his right leg and the left was bleeding profusely. He left smudged red footprints in his wake.

If she had been watching the scene from afar, she could have detached as though on a giant film screen, but faced with it up close, fear gripped her again. Chiyo backed further into the wall. She shook her head and wished fervently to be somewhere else.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What do you want? Can't you please just leave me alone?"

She heard the panic in her own voice. It was pitched and ugly, but she couldn't do anything about it. If ever there was a moment for panic, this was probably it. Her aggressor was unaffected by her plea. His pain made him deaf, and his disdain made him uncomprehending. He held out his left hand to her as if to support her arm.

"Come on now," he urged. "Let's go easy. Don't want no more trouble."

He sounded reasonable enough, but Chiyo remembered the old woman who had reached out for help and the cold efficient way in which she had been killed. Chiyo remembered the field in which others were dying and noticed the firm grip he had on his sword and the number of uniformed dead on the ground. She didn't imagine he was feeling very reasonable.

She shook her head. She told herself that there was no way he was going to touch her. As unreal as the situation appeared, she was going to protect herself, especially when no one was coming to her rescue. She feigned to the right and kicked him in his injured leg when he stepped forward to intercept her. He roared in pain, surprise, and indignation. She felt the swipe of the sword pass her as she escaped its reach.

"What the hell is going on?" he bellowed, echoing her sentiments.

She ran toward the two mystery men, dodging two further soldiers. Even though she didn't know which side had been the aggressor and had no idea who her enemy was or if she had any allies, she knew she didn't want to end up in the group of apprehended individuals. They were obviously at the mercy of the uniformed men. Given her recent introduction to these men's treatment of their charges, she wasn't inclined to be in their care. The two rebels seemed to agree and were the most likely avenue for escape. She avoided another uniform and, out of desperation, grabbed a discarded sword. It was lighter than she expected, and its hilt was sticky. She quelled the urge to drop it in disgust because she needed it to make sure no one touched her.

Positioning herself on the outskirts of the duo's killing field, she swung and hacked at anyone who came near her. She kept the two men behind her, feeling it was as secure as fighting with a wall at her back. She prayed that her utter lack of skill would make her unpredictable and her determination intimidating.

Even as she fought, there was a battle waging inside of her as she took in the bloody world of war. The smell of blood and damp soil was nauseating. She wanted to fall on her knees and vomit until her stomach was empty. The feel of her sword hacking through the flesh of another living being disgusted her as well. It reminded her of watching her grandmother dismember a chicken. The quick abortive chop that was necessary to sever joints always had disturbed her, and the loud *thunk* of the knife hitting the cutting board had frightened her, but this was so much worse. This wasn't the plucked dead remains of a farm-raised fowl. These were people, real, live, still breathing humans.

She forced herself to not dwell on it. She imagined it was all make-believe. Again and again she told herself it was just special effects—synthetic blood or even tomato catsup—until she stopped thinking of it and her actions became those of a third person, distant and distinct from herself. Her fear, her anger, her disgust, all became something she looked at without feeling until eventually she stood, sword raised awkwardly, with no opponent at hand.

Panting, she let its tip sink to the ground. Her arms and hands ached. *How can my hands hurt so much?* The last of the uniforms were retreating behind the gate of the strange squat buildings. She

looked around and met the eyes of the leaner of the two fighters. He stood as if he might have been at Carnival, relaxed and unconcerned. He looked at her for another moment and turned away, sheathing his sword.

His slender frame and slightly too long arms gave him the appearance of height. He was ill kempt, but his features were exquisite. They were Junoesque. They drew in your eyes, caused your breath to catch, and reduced you to staring. His skin was fair and contained a slight pink flush that was probably from exhilaration rather than his natural hue. His hair was straight and dark brown and looked as if he had cut it with the very sword he had been swinging. It was shaggy, uneven, and hanging in his eyes, but those eyes were startling and frightening. Even from her distance Chiyo could tell that they were light in color. Unlike the joyous expression on his companion's face, nothing reflected from behind them. He could have been walking down the street instead of calmly killing.

Chiyo trembled. He was the most frighteningly beautiful thing she had ever seen. Surely Death himself would wear such a face to tempt his next victim. Chiyo sank to her knees. Those eyes had seemed to peel her layers away one at a time, leaving her bare and exposed. She wrapped her arms around herself, trying to hold it together. She wasn't allowed more than a moment's reprieve however.

"Let's go if you're coming," the second man announced loudly to the remaining individuals.

Chiyo looked him over. As similar and practiced as their swordplay had been, the two men were dissimilar in appearance. The second was a good three inches taller and beefier than his companion was. There was a thick, bearlike quality to him, and he was broad in the back and shoulders. Strength was bulging and apparent in his extremities. His skin was tanned and obviously accustomed to seeing the sun. The shoulder-length hair flying around his face was black and wavy, escaping from the thong tied around it. Utterly incongruous with the situation was the wide genuine smile cracking across his face. It was charming in its deceptive innocence.

His words roused the group of dazed and confused people. They stepped over or around their fallen companions and gathered

quickly. They headed across a field toward the sparse forest. Chiyo observed that no one noticed her. The invitation—or had it been an order?—hadn't been directed to anyone in particular, simply the group as a whole. With nowhere else to go and afraid of the soldiers' return, Chiyo hurried to catch up.

As the group stepped up and down and through the regular sinusoidal furrows of a recently plowed field, she chanced a glance behind her. The killing field was still. She could hear shouts and curses from the other side of the wall, but nothing moved between her and it. She remembered the scattered and disbelieving uniformed soldiers, the fleeing of what she assumed were civilians, the thin covering of a young forest behind them, and the utter lack of anything she might consider generically “modern.” She'd seen swords, knives, spears, and people throwing rocks and wielding large sticks but no guns. She saw people being loaded into a cart, but no buses or trucks. She saw people wearing tunics, robes, leather sandals, and even loincloths but no blue jeans, sneakers, or T-shirts.

She considered the possibility that she was in a foreign country but quickly discarded it. She was pretty sure even starving Ethiopians were wearing secondhand Nikes these days. It was a manga come to life. Chiyo laughed. She knew it wasn't a very smart or appropriate thing to do, but how could she not? She wanted to ask, “What would Kagome Higurashi do?” but there was no one who knew who Kagome Higurashi was or who could spare her a moment for conversation.

She shivered and moved herself toward the middle of the group, trying to look inconspicuous. It wasn't easy. She counted twenty people, plus the two swordsmen. She was a few inches taller than any woman in the group and inappropriately attired.

For the first time she had reason (and time) to take note of her own state. What she saw disturbed her: She was spattered in mud and gore—shocking in its own right—but what surprised her most was that she was still in her pajamas. They were jersey and had been pastel pink with lace trim. Now they were of an indistinguishable color, covered as they were with dirt, grass stains, and body fluids.

Her situation was already untenable. The addition of being publicly seen in her sleepwear threw her into another spiral of

panic. She was fully covered, but she still felt exposed. She tugged her sleeves further over her wrists, patted down her windswept hair, and wrapped her arms across her chest. A small involuntary whimper escaped her. In the silence of the group, it echoed like a horse shout. A number of watery eyes turned her way, but they saw no cause for her embarrassment. Her lace edging brought no scintillating temptations as Chiyo had imagined since they knew nothing of clothing worn only in the private chamber. They saw only one more frightened face.

Regaining her composure was a monumental task, but she succeeded eventually. Lightly tapping the shoulder of an elderly woman near her, Chiyo paused, “Um, hello..., ah—” She wasn’t sure where to begin. “Uhm—”

“Andela,” the old lady replied. “My name is Andela. What can I do for you?”

“Um, Andela, what’s going on?” Chiyo finally managed to ask.

The woman looked at her as if perhaps she had gone soft in the head.

“Why, dearie, we’ve just been rescued.”

Embarrassed, Chiyo ducked her head and said, “Well, yes, I can see that.”

Though, in actuality, she couldn’t. She didn’t know the circumstances of the mayhem they’d just left. That had been why she was asking. She paused, again uncertain how to continue.

“But from what?” she prompted.

The woman stopped and looked at Chiyo, causing the person behind her to bump and grumble. She quickly picked up her pace again.

“From the emperor’s workhouse. Those villages that can’t fulfill the grain rations are required to send people as substitute work instead. We were that tribute. How do you not know that?”

Chiyo ignored the question and asked another of her own, “And who are they?”

Lifting her chin toward the front of the line, Chiyo indicated the two men. It was almost a whisper. Her throat had closed on the words. She remembered the way the slender one had looked at her, like he could see all of her but also as though he hadn’t seen her at all. He acknowledged her in the same way he took in the bodies on the ground or the hue of the trees—as part of the environment. The

old woman looked toward the head of the line, where the strangers were.

“I don’t question the hand of providence, my dear.”

It was obvious that she knew; of course, she knew. She had looked at Chiyo’s strange blood-spattered clothing and thought better of disclosing too much. Chiyo couldn’t blame her and didn’t see much chance for further information.

They walked late into the night before stopping. No one else had spoken to her. She didn’t mind. She took the opportunity to rub her sore feet and reflect on her situation. She couldn’t make sense of it. No matter how hard she tried, all she could recall was going to bed the night before, just like any other night.

She went over every detail in her mind. She thought about their dinner conversation, doing the dishes, bathing, and a last glass of wine before bed, but nothing made her situation any clearer. She thought of her daughter, Hannah, sleeping peacefully as she and her husband, Michael, made love in the expert manner of two people familiar with each other’s bodies and the desperate, hurried fashion familiar to all new parents who pray silently that the baby stays asleep. She remembered that then, sated and relaxed, she lay comfortably in the crook of his arm and thought about the next day’s agenda.

She had planned on swinging by the farmer’s market in the morning and cooking fish with dill sauce for dinner. She had reminded herself to call her friend Mary because it was her birthday and to pick up the dry cleaning because it closed at noon. Michael had been snoring softly beside her, and it had made her giggle.

It had all been blissfully mundane and had reminded her again of her own happiness. She loved her life, and such days had seemed endless. She had seen them stretching out before her, and she had thought she must be the luckiest woman alive. She wanted nothing more in life—well, maybe a sibling for little Hannah one day but nothing more.

There had been nothing in the poignant memory to explain her current predicament. In fact, it seemed almost too pure, as if it had been scripted as the perfect ending. It hurt her to remember it because it came with a dark, ominous companion. *If I have been whisked from the comfort of my own bed, could the same thing have happened to Michael and Hannah?*

She was certain there had been no one with her when she had awakened. Amidst the horror and confusion, the one thing she would have noticed and clung to was familiarity. Her family hadn't been among those left behind. Although this calmed her minimally, it didn't mean that they weren't out there somewhere, and she remained afraid.

She had been barely staving off hysteria. The only thing that had held it at bay was basic self-preservation. She instinctively placed continued survival over the comforting luxury of a complete mental breakdown or thoughts for others, but it had been a number of hours since her initial shock. The fear-induced adrenaline rush had worn off, and the more she sat thinking about her situation, the harder it was becoming to maintain her calm façade.

She thought of her bonny baby girl, and from dark emotional crevices she saw Hannah look out at her. She had the lost, pleading eyes of an abandoned child. In her mind Chiyo struggled to reach out to her, reassure her, and give her the safe, secure arms of her mother. The idea that Hannah might think that Chiyo had willingly left her broke Chiyo's heart and strained her mind.

"Chu, Chu, Chu, sweetie. Mommy's here. Dry your eyes. You're safe. I won't let anyone hurt you. Please don't cry," she tried to say, but there was no voice in her throat. The words hung unspoken and painful. Chiyo watched as Hannah continued to cry for her mother, her red, swollen, tearful eyes desperate for any sign. The image stayed with Chiyo. She lay confused and hurt, thinking of home. She had to get back. She had to find a way to return to them no matter what.

It occurred to her as well that they might be wondering other unknown lands, or she could find them over the next hill or around the next bend. Chiyo forced herself to discard those ideas and believe that she alone was lost. It was comforting to think that they were safe even though her absence from them pained her. Conversely, the thought that her beautiful Hannah could be endangered was one too many fears. She convinced herself that her family was safe and waiting for her and left it at that.

She shifted her focus, concentrating on listening to the hushed conversation to her right. Even though their voices were low, it wasn't difficult to follow because the camp was so quiet.

Three men sat with their heads lowered and close together for conversation. Their skin was tanned to the point of appearing leathered, and they all had the sinewed look of someone used to manual labor. They appeared comfortable in their environment, and Chiyo envied them for that.

“Muhjah says they’ll take us as far as the next town before leaving us to our own fates,” the first said.

“Hmph, our fates? That’s one way to put it I guess. I rather thought mine was going to be behind the walls of the Danbire Workhouse,” the second quipped acerbically.

He was ignored as the third nodded and noted, “Devi, I’ve been there. Big enough to get lost in.”

“And we all had better get lost. I’m as glad as the next man to miss out on conscripted service, but if we get caught, we might have been better off to just suffer through it,” said the first.

“Oh, come off it! How many people have ever come back to your village after service? In mine, I can think of one, and he wasn’t worth much after that. Why do you think villages send old women like Andela there? They’re no use to anyone anymore anyway,” snapped the second.

Chiyo followed his gaze as he indicated the woman she had spoken to earlier in the evening. The speaker flinched as a harmless clod of dirt hit him in the side of the head, and Andela made a withering face at him. Chiyo thought that Andela had been surprisingly quick for someone looking so frail. The man simply brushed it from his hair and continued.

“Me, I’m glad to be taking my chances out here. That said, I’ll be glad to part company with them.”

He looked over his shoulder as if by having spoken of Muhjah and his partner, they might suddenly materialize out of the night. There was a general agreement among the group. More than one shuddered.

Casting another furtive look over his shoulder the old man continued again, “They say he never should have been born at all, and if you ask me, that’s the same as being dead.”

“Well, no one asked you,” Andela interjected. “You should just shut up. There’s no cause for such ridiculous tales tonight.”

The men grumbled, but Chiyo noticed that there was no more talk. The men hunkered into themselves. Their fear was almost

palpable. She heard similar stories around her and always the names Muhjah and Senka were mentioned. These, she supposed, were their two intrepid rescuers.

She was unaccustomed to camping in the open, on the ground, and with the bugs. She was still scared so, unlike those snoring softly around her, sleep evaded her. She rose as quietly as she could and approached the edge of the group. She looked up at the star-studded sky. It was foreign to her. There was no Big Dipper, Orion, or Gemini. She didn't know much about astronomy and couldn't recognize many constellations. She suspected that even if she could, she wouldn't find them here.

Suddenly, her fear was renewed. The tsunami of emotions came crashing in on her under the one small word that couldn't contain all of what she felt: confusion, rage, disbelief, awe, and grief. The list went on and on. They swirled around her, engulfing her, drowning her. She couldn't breathe through them. She sank to her knees, pressing the back of her balled fist to her mouth in an attempt to stifle the sob.

"Please, oh God, please I just want to go home. Michael, where are you? I'm ready to come home. The joke's over. It's not funny anymore."

She curled her arms around herself and rocked back and forth; her head almost touched the soft moss in her violent pendulous swing. She couldn't stop herself. Sobs wracked her body and caught her breath. She prayed for safety as a sailor, lost in a tumultuous sea, might pray for land.

Unseen, Muhjah watched her resolve crumble. Where there had been a strong, if confused, woman of unprecedented doughtiness, there now sat a meek, lost child. Her pain was unaffected and poignant. It was blatantly obvious that she was far from home, outside her element, and very scared. He felt an unexpected surge of sympathy toward her.

He had never been one affected by the tears of women. Though stimulating, he had only found the doe eyes and wet briny tracks cutting through the supple, rounded cheeks to be a precursor

to feminine guile. It was only in very small children that he observed weeping as a mere release of sorrow with no mealy-mouthed expectation.

He hated to interrupt this moment. He knew such lamentations weren't meant for the eyes of outsiders, and he sensed that she would be embarrassed by his presence. Unfortunately, however, time was of the essence.

A firm hand fell on her shoulder, and instinctually she balled her fists to fight. Adrenaline coursed through her, causing her heart to pound and pupils to dilate, but before she was able to respond, the fingers had slid down the length of her arm and held her hand firmly. The face, dark eyed and strong, lowered itself to eye level. He held a finger to his lips. He drew a short blade and pressed it into her hand before motioning for her to remain still, and she knew her breakdown would have to wait.

Following the line of his gaze, she saw a blur of darkness against the night and then nothing for a long time. She strained her ears to hear any clue of what they might be waiting for. There was nothing and then faintly she began to differentiate grunts and groans from the small sounds of nature. There were men out there in the dark, and they were dying.

She glanced behind her and saw the rough mounds of her sleeping companions still silhouetted against the dying firelight. She shook. *I could just sneak away*, she thought. *They are all distracted, and no one really cares if I am here. No one would notice.*

It was a tempting thought, but unrealistic at the moment. With the possibility of surprise gone, the uniformed guards, who had regrouped and followed them, charged. As they approached, the man beside her leaped into their ranks without hesitation. He was so quick that she almost missed the motion as he simply no longer filled the space next to her.

She gripped the short blade he had given her and raised it toward a surprised assailant. He didn't know how to respond to a strangely clad woman, brandishing a sword. Chiyo used this momentary uncertainty and attacked.

The battle was over before all of the escapees even had time to realize they were in danger again. Their attackers had been a small, hastily gathered party, and Senka had already culled their ranks. Chiyo stood among the remains, looking at them in wonder. *How am I here?*

“For some death is an art,” a voice behind her said. “For others it is merely an inevitability.”

Chiyo looked over to find Andela standing beside her. She looked tired but otherwise unaffected by it all. Chiyo wished she could sink into Andela’s withered bosom like a child into a mother’s arms, but Andela was looking at her hard, trying to read something on her blank, blood-spattered face. Andela sighed.

“That’s Muhjah’s *wakizashi* you have there,” she said.

“Is that his name? I’m still piecing it all together.”

“That’s his name, and he’ll want that back.”

Chiyo looked down at the foreign object in her hand and nodded.

“And what’s your name?” Andela asked.

“Chiyo,” she replied. “Chiyo Alglæca.”

The old woman reached up and patted Chiyo’s cheek.

“That’s a nice name. Try to get some sleep. The young never get enough sleep.”

Chiyo watched Andela walk away. *I could leave, just slip away into the night. No one would come after me. No one would even notice.* She shivered as she thought about being alone in this awful place. She didn’t think what was left of her sanity could take that. She stood for a moment, watching Andela. The older woman stopped once and looked back at Chiyo before disappearing from view. Chiyo was envious that Andela had no fear of being on her own.

Chiyo went to rejoin the group as they settled back down. She noticed that people had made an effort to sleep on the far side of the fire and away from the dead, but no one had suggested moving on before morning.

The rest of the night passed without incident, and despite her doubts, Chiyo did sleep a little. She dreamt of home and sorrowfully woke with the first light of dawn to find many already up and about. The small, smokeless fires had been relit, and miraculously, someone had made a thin gruel that was being

passed around. It tasted fresh and wild, with a slight hint of musk that Chiyo told herself she would be better off not knowing the origin of. Still, she'd never been so happy for a meal in her life.

Muhjah's short sword was still slung over her shoulder, and more than one person had given her a wide berth after catching sight of it. She was anxious to give it back to him, but hadn't been able to find him. She tried to convince herself that if she hadn't found him by the time the group was ready to move out, she would ask Senka. But the thought of walking up and speaking to him and giving him cause to turn those pale eyes on her scared her as much as any of the uniforms had.

Muhjah soon returned and gathered everyone around. He accepted a large leaf folded intricately into a passable cup and drank deeply. He nodded appreciatively to the young hunched woman who had given it to him, and she looked away too quickly.

"I've scouted ahead. The road to Devi is impassible," he said with a smile. "The local ruler, the *nyim*, must be pretty pissed off. His will is the will of the emperor, whose will should be that of the people. His word, our deed. We've acted contrary to that will, which shouldn't be possible and can't be allowed. We'll head west through the hills. It's not going to be easy though. You're all criminals now, and we'll be hunted every step of the way. Anyone who wishes to go on his or her own is welcome to leave anytime. It is possible that your insubordination will be taken out on your villages. We will finish what we have started here and will help those who wish to reach Albesq. What you do after that is none of our concern."

She watched him confer with his partner afterward. He looked very serious and spoke firmly. The situation must be dire, but Senka appeared unruffled by Muhjah's stern demeanor. He simply nodded his ascent and was gone without a backward glance.

"How strange he is," Chiyo said, putting on a false bravado that she hoped Muhjah wouldn't see right through.

"So says the fighting foreigner," Muhjah teased, laughing at her braggadocio.

She blushed in spite of herself. Holding the sword gingerly in her hands, she extended it out to him. He didn't look at it but looked at a nearby group of people instead.

“It isn’t done, you know? They farm. We fight. One doesn’t do both. It isn’t the way. Don’t get me wrong. They aren’t lambs. If their village is attacked, they might resist, throw a few stones, swing a scythe, etc. We all play the roles to which we were born, but battles are our forte, and it isn’t a realm women enter often.”

“Except that I’ve never done either. I wasn’t born into any of this.”

With her temper rising unexpectedly, Chiyo swept her arm wide to encompass their surroundings.

“I don’t need a lecture on proper deportment,” she said. “What I need is to know where the hell I am, how I got here, and how the hell I can get home. Can you answer that? Can you tell me if my family is alright? Or are they here, lost and confused, too? Can you tell me that? If not, don’t pretend you know me or anything about me.”

Her voice was a little too loud. The people closest to them moved discretely away. A new and alien rage was waking in Chiyo. She gripped Muhjah’s beautifully sculpted and utterly foreign wakizashi as if she might crush it to dust. Her knuckles were white, her body tensed, and her face took on a faint bluish tint.

Muhjah saw her change in disposition. He recognized it for the beast that it was and was well aware that that type of ire could be dangerous.

“Calm down, ...” he said, but he had no name to personalize the soothing words and let the sentence hang unfinished.

“Chiyo,” she growled, unreasonably insulted.

“Yes,” he responded. “Calm down, Chiyo. I really have no desire to kill you, but if you should be foolish enough to raise my own blade against me, I will have no choice or regret in the matter.”

His straight statement of facts made her shiver. She took a deep breath, exhaling tersely. She knew it probably wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t fair to take it out on him, and even though she wasn’t familiar enough with him to know if he was a safe sounding board, she sensed he wasn’t.

“I just feel so damn helpless,” she finally admitted.

The whole scene embarrassed her, and she wanted to crawl under a rock somewhere. Instead she brusquely returned his sword

to him and walked away. There was little left to be said because he couldn't answer her burning questions. She could feel his eyes on the back of her head as she retreated and sat among the group of waiting farmers before turning himself.

The party moved out shortly thereafter. Chiyo watched as Senka took position at the front of the group, often sprinting out of sight unexpectedly and returning moments later. Muhjah took the rear, often sending a runner to report to Senka. They continued on like this for hours. Chiyo and the farmers walked in practical silence, but handfuls of dried meat were shared among them. Chiyo never could decide where it came from. It just seemed to magically appear in a tentative sharing hand.

Eventually, Senka signaled a stop. Muhjah's runner came forward for an update. There were men ahead, hiding in the underbrush. The nyim, broadening his net, had sent out a warrant and hired them.

The group huddled close and waited. Chiyo sat among them and watched the two men creep forward like two lions in the bush. She sat; she watched; she waited—until she couldn't stand it anymore. She sneaked out of the group and, as stealthily as she was able, followed. What she saw was like a well-rehearsed recital. Neither man looked for the other, but they remained close at each other's backs. They formed an all-but-impenetrable shield of blade and body. Hard-rippled muscles showed through thin, silken fabrics. The sun shown on Muhjah's radiant, childlike joy and Senka's placid, deceptive innocence. The appeal of such undeniable masculinity was primal and terrifying. She found herself swaying to the hypnotic and powerful rhythm of it.

But Chiyo didn't have their stealth or their environmental awareness and was caught by surprise when a rough hand grabbed her from behind, pulled her viciously from the ground, and spun her around to face its owner. He was thirty-ish. His face no longer held the taut firmness of youth, but even though he carried a few light scars, he was not wrinkled and aged. He was missing two teeth, leaving his grimace off-kilter.

She wrenched her arm back, trying to break his viselike grip, but his fingers dug painfully into her upper arm. She could feel the deep purple bruises springing to life unseen beneath his hand. It was no use. She was caught. The sword in his other hand rose

ominously, and Chiyo froze, panic and fear coursing uselessly through her body. Then he grunted, and the hand on her arm tensed and then relaxed. Blood welled heavily along his lower lashes, like crimson teardrops, and she discovered a hiltless knife protruding prodigiously from where his left eye had been. Shocked, she spun around to find Senka looking right at *her* and not the surroundings, including her. Chiyo wasn't able to read anything in his expression, but she guessed it was probably annoyance. Suddenly, Muhjah's words came back to her.

"They farm. We fight."

"Like hell," she responded to herself.

Chiyo had to stomp with her bare feet on the fingers of the dead man to release his sword, but eventually she was able to take it and the smaller knife from his belt and throw herself headlong into what was left of the fight. *I'm not going to sit and do nothing*, she thought. She awakened the hatchling savage within her and fed it its fill of loss, fear, and anger. She gave it a target and let it carry her where she had not been before. She knew she was a hindrance to the other two's fluid grace, but Muhjah and Senka closed ranks around her. They allowed her full participation while ensuring that she wasn't cut down in the fray.

What am I doing? This can't be real, she thought and then chided herself, *There isn't any time to think about that. Just focus.*

When his sword was given the opportunity to drench itself in the blood of the last fallen man, Senka wiped his blade on the frock of a corpse and turned his flat eyes onto Chiyo.

"Why are you still alive?" he asked wearily. His voice was crisp and fluid, like cold water flowing over rounded rocks.

"Well—why shouldn't I be?" She wanted to say something brave and challenging but couldn't manage it under that disconcerting stare. She fidgeted uncomfortably.

"You have no skill. You hold the sword too tightly. Your stance is ineffectual. Your body is too tense, and you are unaware of what's happening around you. These men, the nyim's men, they're poorly trained and uninterested in much beyond their pay, but even they are better than that."

She narrowed her eyes. "Are you suggesting something?"

Muhjah approached and leaned comfortably on Senka's shoulder.

“Those are more words than he’s strung together all year. Relax. If he really thought you were a spy, you’d already be dead.”

“Really? That’s comforting.”

“He’s right though. You seem to have the luck of the goddess on your side. You should have been dead a few times over already.”

“Again. So comforting.”

She didn’t know where to look. It wasn’t as if they had offered protection. She chose to stare at her feet as she said, “I don’t know about gods, but I do have you two.”

Muhjah laughed heartily, and even Senka seemed to smile a little.

“Well, there is that,” the bigger man said as he held a long sword out toward her. “Here, bandits, mercenaries, or whatever these guys were sometimes manage to steal an item or two of value. This one is better than that worthless slab of metal you have there. If you’re gonna insist on getting in the way, you might as well do it with something that’ll hold an edge.”

She took it. There was a flock of small birds etched into the guard. Looking at it intently, she found such a domestic scene on a tool of death strangely beautiful. She wanted desperately to laugh but didn’t have it in her.

“It’s a family sword of some sort. There’s no maker’s mark that I can see and of midlevel craftsmanship at best, but it’s well cared for, which means this lot must not have had it very long. It’ll do until you get your head cut off,” Muhjah continued.

“Really comforting,” she responded, but she did smile. His upbeat, jocose manner had a contagious, calming effect.

He slapped Senka on the back.

“Come on then. Let’s get this over with. I’m tired of walking.”

The two men returned to the waiting farmers. Chiyo looked at the dead around her before following them. The corpses looked like fallen trees that were a part of the scenery. She wondered whose family heirloom she was taking, but then she decided she didn’t really care. That was when the smell hit her. She had heard of the stench of battle, but she had never expected to understand or experience its sharp and pungent aroma. She wrinkled her nose and felt her stomach churn unpleasantly. Sighing, she followed Muhjah

and Senka back to the group and fell in line. It was a long time until sundown and rest.

Chiyo experimented with different ways to carry her new weapon. She tried wedging it into her waistband as Senka and Muhjah did, but this put it uncomfortably inside her pants and in time it slipped out anyway. In the end she simply tied the cord, *sageo* (Muhjah had corrected her), around her waist and let the sword hang. It still wasn't comfortable, tapping her leg with each step in an irritating manner, but it worked. She moved to the front of the line to look at how Senka wore his—low on the hips and tucked tightly away—but it didn't help much. He had a large sash of some sort with a *sageo* intertwined somehow. She was dismayed by the daunting task of learning something so foreign.

She shook her head, amazed at herself. *Am I already resigning myself to this place? I don't need to understand all of it, only enough to keep myself alive until I can get home.* The idea of home made her want to cry, and the delicate shell of denial that was keeping her steady wavered. She pushed the thought aside with some difficulty as though she had to physically shove an immense weight instead of simply removing a memory from the forefront of her mind. It exhausted her already weary body.

She forced her attention back to Senka and his accoutrements. As she watched him, she realized the complicated attachment wasn't the only reason that his sword didn't slip. He walked with such an ethereal grace that nothing about him—not even his shaggy hair that hung in his eyes—swayed or jostled. He seemed to glide. Every muscle worked together to form a smooth synthesis of motion. She felt like an oaf, plodding along clumsily. *So much for all of those dance classes I had as a child.* She tried to loosen her body like his to allow her limbs and torso to coexist without pulling against each other, but she almost tripped over herself. She sighed and relaxed back into her ogreish lumber.

When the group finally stopped for the night, she was taken quickly by sleep. It didn't matter that she was uncomfortable in the open, itchy from the grass, or filthy from too long in the elements without bathing. She slept, but it wasn't a restful sleep and did little for her overtaxed mind. Although it did allow her body a reprieve from the unaccustomed activity, dreams settled upon her like a *mara* intent on riding her half to death. They were dark,

blood-stained, horrible dreams that quickened her breath and parched her mouth.

She tossed, turned, and thrashed about both in reality and in the murky surrealism of her dreamscape. All around her people were dying. They were calling out to her, begging for a savior who wouldn't come. There was nothing she could do. She was one of them. She, too, stretched herself out, grasping for safety. She reached and reached until she thought her arms would dislocate. She ran, stumbled, picked herself up, and threw herself forward again, but she was never able to get away. She was never able to find the way out. She was never able to escape. She was trapped.