Sword and battle are not the only ways wars are fought. Misdirection, espionage and trickery play a role in victory. The Right Eye of the Dragon knows this. And to secure his Lord's position in the Land of the Rising Sun he hires one of the shinobi.
Chapter 1

After the conquest of Oshu by the One-Eyed Dragon, the completion of the dreams of a drifter, Kojuro, the Right Eye of the Dragon felt uneasy. One thing was war and conquest. Other was keeping the peace within Date's lands and prepare for the wars to come while keeping the people protected and fed. The army was not enough, his strategic mind could fail to grasp all the details so easily if the information was withheld or tainted. The answer was simple and one other generals employed. A shinobi.

The farming grounds were the Right Eye's sanctuary and place where the results of his efforts would be apparent in the end of the season. It was the place where he could be found when away from Masamune-sama. It was midmorning, a few days after he had made the request to the winds, when a kunoichi arrived, appearing seemingly out of the shadows, waiting silently by the path, near the wooden fences. The farming grounds were neatly divided and cultivated, surrounding the army's main housing and training areas adding to the prosperity of the land, growing steadily, the workers taking pride in their jobs, in the fact that the Right Eye joined them in something most warriors and warlords would consider beneath them.

Kojuro paused his work, appraising her from a distance cautiously. He approached slowly, discarding the farm tools in the nearest worker's house, rubbing his hands together to get rid of vestiges of dirt, dust and wood. The ninja was small and delicate-looking, pale skinned, like most women of the land of the rising sun, hair black as coal firmly pulled back and braided down her back, the tip reaching her waist, waving slightly in the breeze. She wore simple clothes in tones of black and grey; pants, flexible tabi and a silk vest with silvery sakura flowers embroidered, an obi sash around her hips and waist. The arms were protected by a leather strap wrapped from knuckles to mid-arm.

Then his attention shifted towards the weapons she carried. An unusual thing. Metal claws, curved, covered each finger, articulate platting protecting the whole of her hand and wrist. Longer, broader and sturdier than neko-te. Those were combat tools not the slender trappings of an assassin.

The woman had a pretty face, slightly round, almond-shaped eyes framed by dark eyelashes that highlighted the grey that matched the dark steel of a fine katana under slanted eyebrows. The nose was quite common as faces went and all the attention of a man would focus on those lush lips, upper one curved like a composite bow, the lower plump and marred by a slight scar on the left side, a triangular nick that could only have come from a kunai. Training accident or an actual memento from a lost battle?

"Katakura-dono." Her voice was slightly lower than most women but not unpleasant, her stare even and serene. "I was sent to answer you request. My name is Saki." She bowed respectfully. The Right Eye of the Dragon nodded in acknowledgement, signalling her to follow. He hadn't expected a woman but skill was skill and if she passed his tests and requests Kojuro would have no problems with the arrangement.

Oshu seemed, by all reports and by her own estimates, as she travelled towards her new potential master, quite peaceful and happy for a recently conquered area. The heart of the country around Date's bukeyashiki was composed of a small city and farms, cradled amongst the mountainous terrain.

Prosperous and capable of withstanding all but the most brutal of campaigns.
Saki watched life move on around them attentively as the Right Eye guided her through the paths between the fields. It wasn't far but he was taking his time, most likely appraising her reaction, looking for signs of impatience or other hints of discontent. Either could lead to failure or betrayal, both particularly damning in his eyes. There were none to be found but such actions were in accordance with her earlier findings.

Katakura Kojuro. Strategist. A leash on the Dragon's brashness. A man for war and peace. Strong. Values honour and integrity. Even in peasant clothes there was no doubt about who he was. Power shone clearly through. He was older, mid twenties, his face revealed by his slicked back hair and the fabric that held the hair away, the clear eyes still and calm, the side of his visage marked by a darker scar slashing the left side.

Some of Date's warrior looked up from guard duty, downtime, eating, gambling or taking care of their weapons. Rogues, ruffians and rebels under the command of a similar being that was born as a samurai-lord. Loyal to a fault and as rowdy as the pirate gang of the Demon of the Seas. Unique in their looks despite the blue of their armours. Their eyes followed the second-in-command and focused with suspicion on her, the activity ceasing for a few moments. None had noticed her on arrival but that had been her goal. Shameful if they had, but if she was accepted it was something to mention to Katakura-dono.

They needed to be able to spot a hidden threat if one slipped her vigil.

In the outer grounds of the bukeyashiki they found the One-Eyed Dragon honing swordsmanship with one of his famed claws, the blade whispering through the air, followed by the energy of the lightning that seemed to sustain his skills, born of sheer willpower. Young... Saki though, observing blade and warrior, taking note of his movements, analysing the style. Not much older than her actually. All of her hoarded information made note of that. She had been sent because of such detail. Sensei and clan believed her fighting style and personality a good match to Date Masamune's army.

The One-Eyed Dragon. Cocky, brash, strong warrior, dreams of conquest. Still unnoticed or mostly dismissed by the most powerful lords. Whispers of worry linger on the background though.

The walled precinct seemed simple, the paths made of stone, soft dirt around them, punctuated by some trees and bushes, leading to the gates and the main house, the farms clearly visible and accessible. It was a plain structure, the angles sharp and military, as one would expect of a place made for war and men.

A small hidden smile curved her lips as she knelt in front of the young lord on the stone, claws placed in front of her, head lowered as protocol ordered. Handsome too even if at first glance the eye patch seemed a bit daunting even if only a hint peeked from beneath the strands of dark brown hair falling over his face. Guarding eye-candy was an enjoyable way to work. It made a nice change of pace from the short term contracts with old men she had been forced to take as part of her training and final kakan.

Most of them made her sit a bit behind them, exposed, showing her off like some sort of art piece or clan artefact in the meeting rooms. Hiring a ninja shouldn't be that openly displayed. Shinobi thrived in secrecy. Or, if they had to announce their presence, their reputation should be legendary and deadly.

Bored and miffed Saki had felt an unbelievable temptation to leave them to die at the hands of the other hired killers or dispose of them herself. But the Three Oaths ruled her so she fulfilled her task and disappeared once more.
Date was wearing the simple house-clothes, white and blue, and a plain sword sheath instead of the blue and black armour and the six claws. Not formal but no less imposing than any of the older lords, the ones whose names echoed in awe throughout the land. He just had the presence of a truly strong samurai.

"Masamune-sama" Katakura-dono began, his sure and smooth voice cutting the quiet air as the blade whistled in an upper slash, the man sparing only a quick glance from his one icy grey-blue eye as the movements flowed, the forms uninterrupted. "This is Saki, the kunoichi I sent for."

"Why would I need another member of my army Kojuro?" His words, deep and downy, filled the space as he stopped, adopting a neutral stance. The sword was sheathed slowly and he turned, blind side first. Arrogant gestures to match the inflection of his voice. She noticed a bit of strain both in his tone, well hidden beneath the words, and subtly placed in Katakura-sama's posture, as if it was an old argument and neither was sure of who was ahead.

"May I answer that, Date-sama?" Saki whispered looking up, straightening, keeping her inflection sweetly mild. A smirk parted his lips at her boldness. A bit of the icy disdain was dispelled. She caught Katakura-dono's guarded expression but he seemed pleased too. A nod gave her permission brusquely. "You need more than the strategic brilliance of your Right Eye and an army under your command. A spy net, a way to gather hidden information, to outplay your opponents. And someone to protect you from the shadows. A dagger in the back is often the easiest solution for those who lack honour. Or the guts to face you in battle."

Date observed her for a moment his interest captured by the steel claws. He thought of his uncle, Mogami, and all the possible threats that the old dandy could pose, of the surrounding enemies and the war brewing. Then he allowed his eye to roam over the rest of the new asset of Oshu, taking a slight interest in the woman, mostly moved by curiosity. The last remark was clear flattery with a bit of a sting. He quite enjoyed both.

Kojuro had never wavered in his loyalty and most of the times when he had given some advice Date hadn't particularly cared for the Right Eye had always been proven right. If a chance was all she was asking a chance would be given. Prove your usefulness or fall in disgrace.

"«All right»...Saki" He turned his back on them, walking away, into the house. Kojuro and Saki exchanged a glance and a small smirk appeared on the kunoichi's lips as she stood.

"All right then..." She murmured, a bit puzzled by the abrupt departure, turning towards the second-in-command. "Orders?"

Building a spy and information net wasn't easy, especially when duelling against threads laid by other shinobi in service of other warlords. A wrong pluck, an unworthy informant, a misstep could make the information void or lead to discovery, could have disastrous consequences not only to her, to Oshu but also to those she used to gather the news.

But such was the game she had been raised to play.

Katakura-dono already had a solid base in place, mostly involving military advances and some whispers about the rivals, but with a little effort she was able to buffer and enhance it to reach the other areas a ninja would consider vital. Some parts of the land were too deep into war, rendering such efforts meaningless. Others were so closed within themselves that the infiltration and mining of information had to be gradual, so no suspicion was raised.

The small room she had been given in the house soon became crowded with maps of the land, the
provinces, with rolls of information about the general, armies and lords, with symbols, mementos and trinkets for and from an infiltration ploy, with small and great secrets concealed within simple things, to be used when the time and war called for them.

Weeks had passed since her arrival and she had been accepted within the army, one of the guys as it were. It had been a gradual thing starting with a duel with Katakura-dono in the dusk of her arrival. That wasn't required of the men since they were trained with, by or under the supervision of Katakura-dono and he knew what they were capable of.

Saki was an unknown.

Everyone in the army, the ones that weren't deployed to the borders or villages, had come to watch, placing bets, cheering for their comrade. It was her formal introduction. She was expected to prove her mettle, display her plain combat skills.

Saki appraised the enemy once more. She knew what she knew and couldn't get much more information about him for now.

Katakura unsheathed his sword, assuming position quietly and deliberately.

Left handed, complementing Date's blind spot and throwing off most adversaries. Fighting a mirrored sword style could be hard. A sudden change in grip gave her the first warning of the incoming attack. Her demeanour shifted, mind battling briefly with the styles she had learned from the moment she could walk.

Saki avoided the blade, evading his attack, circling the Right Eye, stepping lightly and fast, giving him her back as momentum moved his body forward, stepping back, watching as he regained his balance and footing, turning to face her.

There was a sudden silence among the men. Surprise. Ignore them for now. They are no threats and they are not usable. Focus only on the adversary.

The first test had been made, its effects informing both sides of something. His slash had been quick and diagonal. It was his favoured form of attack it seemed. Speed, surety and a hint of lighting. She cringed inwardly. There was no way she was going to escape unscathed but she wasn't going to give up either. At least not without some solid blows. Saki refused to be the only one sore in the next dawn.

He attacked again. This time she didn't dodge, stopping the blade with the back of her right claws, the force dragging her backwards as she fought to balance it. More murmurs of awe and disbelief as she dug her heels into the ground. As soon as the stalemate was reached she shifted her weight, her left claws slashing forward, right hand pushing the sword upward.

Katakura narrowed his eyes, the unbalance opening his guard a bit. Enough. Her open palm, claws curled backward so they wouldn't slash or pierce, hit him squarely on the stomach, missing the solar plexus by inches, the impact slightly absorbed by the armour, flowing to a kick as he reeled, searching for the same place, her aim accurate that time. The Right Eye grunted, but training could avoid the paralyzing reel of a gut hit. It took a massive amount of skill and will but he seemed to be able to do it. The second kick, as she spun over herself, seeking to press her advantage, was dodged as his blade sought her vulnerable side in an upward slash.

Saki jumped back, using the shadow step. Before the jutsu was completed the blind curve of the blade hit her on the side, the blow making her gasp in pain as the shadows carried and protected
her. Katakura allowed himself a grimace as she vanished from sight, quivering, a bit unbalanced by
the loss of air and the strain of resisting a blackout.

The men were whispering, their eyes having perceived a missed blow from the second in command
and a hit from the new arrival. Shadow step, shadow jump were well known ninja vanishing and
escaping techniques. Shadowing was perhaps one of the first and most perfected skills a shinobi
should have, in parallel with one's unique elemental affinity.

She appeared again in the edge of the ring allotted for their fight, controlling her own scowl of
agony, breathing deeply despite it, readying her body for true speed.

Katakura steadied his blade, lowered it and charged forward. She moved forward too, blurred by
velocity and shadowing before the blow, reappearing on his back, kicking the base of his spine.
Twilight helped a ninja's skills in that particular technique, the shadows more pliable to the call.
The Right Eye shouted, turning on bent knee, the blade slashing downward. Saki slapped it away
once, twice, as many times as he swung, their movements becoming frantic slashing, metal
singing, lightning starting to build within him. He was keeping it in check as much as she was
keeping the most underhanded techniques under wraps.

Combat was combat.

Her breath was becoming shallow and painful as the pressure of keeping the speed while in pain
began to burn her energy faster than usual. A few more blows connected on both sides. The
kunoichi jumped away without any aid from the shadows, landing on all fours hissing, just
disengaging, seeking a breather. She tossed the braid over her back, standing slowly. This time she
was unable to stop the instinctive gesture of protecting her ribs, knees wobbling, clenching her
teeth.

The Right Eye's blade slashed downwards, seizing his advantage.

Saki stopped it, intertwining her claws, keeping it above her head. Wisps of shadow flowed gently
through her metal claws, coming from within, revealing the nature of her own element. Her
strength wavered. She wasn't build for head on combat although she could withstand it if such a
thing was called. Usually she preferred to dispatch her opponents in less than three blows. His
shadow whispered under her feet and she refrained herself from capturing it. It was a basic
paralyzing technique that had no place in his request.

She tried to disengage. It was a successful movement but the adversary had already perceived it
when her block had lessened. Katakura-dono did not waste the opportunity blade pressing against
her throat as the kunoichi was almost bended backwards in mid escape, his free hand capturing one
of her arms, breaking her balance, keeping her on the verge of falling.

Saki looked up, catching the eyes of her adversary. His neck was bruised. His stomach would be
marred in blue and purple also. She had refrained from groin and eye shots and any of the ninja
skills that would be considered deadly or special. Even so her fighting style was tailored to attack
the vitals with precision and accuracy and even in a friendly match it would sting.

Katakura-dono nodded, ending the match, pulling her upward.

There was an awed silence in the garden.

The Dragon smirked.

"That was quite a «party»."
"Yeah a riot." Saki growled slowly. "Now if you'll excuse me I'll be over there vomiting my guts out." She more or less stumbled away, kneeling in the dirt in the edge of the circle, gasping, a hand on her abdomen as she tried to level her breathing pattern and calm the pain.

"She is quite good." Katakura appraised. "I meant to test her combat skills and that was all she showed. Saki." She scowled, letting them know she was listening. Some of the men were exchanging looks of awe or suspicion. A pair had approached, one of them patting her shoulder a bit awkwardly, the other flitting around her as if he didn't know how to interact. "How would you have killed me?"

"Not in combat." She turned around slowly, minding her budding bruises, facing the centre of the circle, folding her legs underneath her body with a mischievous tilt of her lips. "Most would use poison before engaging. Me? Wait till darkness falls, after a gruelling battle, when the edge is lost by exhaustion, celebration and planning, when the mind wants nothing more than sleep. Then I'd slash you throat quickly and quietly and disappear before your body touched the ground."

"And in combat?" Date asked in the silence and shocked glances from his troops. The death of any of them seemed to be a harsh issue to be broached.

"I'd die against him. Or I might be quick enough to flash away. Depends on luck sometimes. But before either I'd make sure to puncture the vein that runs underneath the wrists. In battle it would lose blood slowly enough to be mistaken for fatigue, a wound small enough to be neglected. But by the end of the battle it would be too late to stem the blood and save his life." She sighed. "I prefer to slash a throat and move on though. I'm not one on one combat material." She stood slowly, stretching, making a show of resolve and strength. She wasn't feeling either. Her abdomen hurt, her shoulder felt stiff and swollen and her legs were on the verge of refusing their support. "Just a frail little girl after all..." She murmured to the darkening sky.

There was a collective laugh in response of that comment that made her feel welcomed. Katakura-sama nodded at her, approving the answer, sitting down with his own expression of veiled pain as her personal reward.

Then there had been the drinking binge they had more or less forced on her after the first skirmish Saki had been part of. It was a celebration of victory and she had seen no reason nor threat that kept her from accepting the challenge.

A bandit in the border problem, something that was to be expected with the recent unrest in the provinces and other lands were going through, a simple plan to execute, using a small force. Date himself, because he was "bored", Katakura and the main four guys, Yoshinao, Bunshichi, Samenosuke and Magobei. If anything wasn't according to plan they could use the soldiers stationed nearby to keep the peace, the ones who had asked for a stronger intervention.

Saki scouted the camp from the trees and shadows without interfering, reporting the finds, outlining the simplest plan and routes on entrance and evacuation as she had been taught. It was mountainous terrain and they were holed up in a rather defensible position amongst the rock, the peaks and the slender dark and resilient mountain trees. Men with stolen, improvised or poor quality weapons, little to no armour, disorganized, greedy and unawares, despite the good choice of camp and the way they had been hitting the villages and travellers. A small measure of pride echoed within her when Katakura-dono approved of her plan. It was the simplest solution to the current situation, the number of adversaries and the terrain. And it was another step though in proving herself useful to an already successful army.

The fight was also an opportunity to watch the dynamic between the Dragon and his Right Eye.
Back to back when the problem was at his peak. She blended into the rhythm softly, testing the waters at first, moving from adversary to adversary, killing the ones that advanced when a blind spot revealed itself in the pair, taking the place of either one when the other was forced apart, paralyzing them enough time for a strike to end their lives.

The battle, if it could be called that, was soon over, the bandits more bold than skilled.

Saki wiped the blood away from her claws slowly while the guys moved around, trying to identify the bandits and taking the things they had stolen. Most would be given to the army. Some would be returned to their owners, too personal to be of use. In the end the people of Oshu would beneficiate from either.

They had camped after the fight, unwilling to ride through the night. It was just a fire and some sleeping mats, near the road. Saki was perched on a tree branch, laying down on it like a napping cat, eyes closed, one hand dangling, the claws shimmering against the fire's glow twitching from time to time. She opened her eyes lazily as one of the guys approached. Yoshinao with his boxy face, darker skin and quite unique flamboyant hairstyle and quasi permanent chin stubble. He was louder and more outspoken than the other three, the expressions often exaggerated by the bushier brows and small eyes.

"It was a good fight today." He announced, flexing. Saki pulled her hand up and sat, tilting her head. "You should come down, celebrate with us." The kunoichi made a small sound, letting herself fall backward, hanging from the tree, secured by her bended knees. The tip of her braid almost touched the ground. She chuckled when her eyes caught the man trying to hide the fact that he had all but assumed the position to catch her.

"That's a nice offer." She smiled for him before letting go, twisting in mid air, landing on her hands and feet before straightening. "I thank you but..." He planted a palm on her back, slapping it with enough force to make her take a few steps forward and miss a couple of breaths.

"You're part of the army Saki-chan."

Saki chuckled bitterly.

"It is your opinion Yoshinao-san. Although I am grateful for it I know most of you believe I will simple plant a kaiken into Date-dono's back and leave without punishment." The retainer's hand suddenly closed over her left arm, squeezing eagerly, forcefully, as if desperately trying to make a point. It was a quick thing, just a remainder of pain. He let go almost immediately, the arm draping itself over her shoulders, guiding her towards the fire.

"I saw you stand your ground so the Captain and Katakura-dono wasn't overwhelmed when a ninja's style is to disappear and avoid combat. Soon they will have no reason to believe in such nonsense." He smiled for her too. Saki hid her surprise. True, she did that but she thought she had been fast enough in her defence and concealment that no one had noticed. And if Yoshinao knew he would already have shared. "I found her!" He shouted to the other, making a show of her entrance into the light.

Saki smirked seeing no reason not to humour them.

The retainers had broken out the sake. She couldn't recall much of the night after that. A haze of song, talk, jokes and moving shapes.

Then she awoke in the morning with just a headache. It wasn't a serious pain, mercifully, a side effect of her training. Her body was used to filter toxic substances. Still there was a limit to such a
tolerance as the pounding inside her head was keen to remind her. She was sitting in front of Katakura-dono's horse, while they rode back to Oshu. Saki groaned. While waking up with a handsome man was a pleasant thing that whole situation was quite a bit unprofessional.

"The guys got me drunk." She grunted slowly, looking for confirmation. There was no mistaking the amusement in his demeanour even if his face was stoic.

"Indeed. You are quite a tight lipped but friendly drunk."

"How badly did I disgrace myself Katakura-dono?" So he had interrogated her while intoxicated. Good to know her training still held true even if her mind wasn't quite itself. The First Oath should not be broken. She would have done the same if their positions had been inverted. Who knew what kinds of secrets one hid... What did he mean by friendly though?

"Think of it as a passage rite." He added. Saki shook her head, accepting the graceful option, smiling, straightening, looking around quietly, appraising the terrain and the perches she could take.

"Thank you then." She shadowed, jumping ahead to do her job.

The third event that solidified her position as the Dragon's Shadow was a blade in the dark. And it wasn't meant to be divulged. But men not raised within the shinobi clans were not good at keeping secrets. Even less so when they were bonded into an army of warring brothers.

Saki was moving in the cover of darkness, taking the hardest paths, sharpening her skills. There was no dojo or training camp fit for her kind of talents so improvisation was needed, using the houses and terrain of Oshu as playground. As she was walking on the thin ledge of the roof there was a slight disturbance in the ground. The kunoichi stilled, crouching, searching for the movements that had caught her attention. There was a man sneaking into the inner garden. She would care about the guards' fate later. As soon as the intruder came into the open terrain her actions were silent and swift.

She jumped onto the garden and captured his shadow, stepping onto it. It was a small flickering thing created by the tiny lights she had put in place as a trap, a web of seemingly decorative lanterns. They were a useful trick when no moonlight escaped the clouds or when natural light wasn't cooperating. The man was suddenly paralyzed, the fear in his eyes plain and stark. She advanced, keeping him pinned. A punch into his gut made him cough out the poison capsule that would have allowed him to escape without punishment, without revealing his purpose or hirer. Saki picked it up between two sharp tips and crushed it, the powder falling into the ground. There was a dry odour to it... Purple Jade... Messy and painful. No care for the caught. She grimaced, placing her claws against his neck. The man was unable to squirm but his eyes were wide, the whites showing. He could have screamed... Shadow skills, unless it was the master tier of techniques, or a very specific jutsu, didn't paralyze inside the body. Maybe he was just too terrified to try it.

"Who sent you?" She whispered against his hear. His scent carried the smell of dirt and smoke. Nothing about him screamed training. The clothes were common, like any peasant would wear in the day-to-day chores. A would be killer with some natural skill for stealth but no shinobi. His resolve had wavered as soon as he felt his own blood, brought forth by her claws as a warning.

"Mogami-sama" His voice rasped in the dark, barely above a whisper, eyes darting around, as if afraid that any louder sound would seal his fate. A fate already sealed.
"How many of you are there?" Amateurs did not work alone. Even the beginners of an honourable and time-tested shinobi clan would work in pairs until the kakan. He hesitated. She sunk the claw deeper into his neck, drawing blood from non-vital spots.

A smidge of respect for his slight hesitation in denouncing his partners shimmered within her. It didn't last long. She slashed his throat as soon as an answer was given, freeing his shadow, pushing him forward to keep the blood from staining more than her weapons.

Saki stepped away, listening to any odd sounds. She looked back and walked towards Date's room, sliding open the shoji silently, slipping into the darkened space. It didn't have much in the way of furniture which made it quite easy to sneak in. The floor was sturdy and didn't creak under the tatami. The sleeping arrangements were in the centre of the area, like an offering. She made a disgruntled face. Even though the claws were laid next to him, three in each side, it didn't make him less of a target. Her steps stilled a few feet away from the edge of the covers. A silent sigh escaped her lips when she was close enough to see the gentle movement of his breathing. Still alive then.

That was the first one sent. She turned, prepared to leave. Had to hunt down the others before...

"Saki." She stopped when his voice rose from behind her. She looked around, trying to pinpoint what had given her away. The moon... A thin sliver of fading moonlight had peeked from behind the clouds cutting a swat towards the futon. Date was sitting, slowly, a hand touching one of his claws. Sleepy but aware enough. She hissed, stopping. "What is the meaning of this?"

"When an assassin is skulking near your door you tend to assume the worst." She glanced over her shoulder slowly. He was on his feet now, chest bared, the expression tranquil and pensive. "I apologise for waking you but I forgot to take the moon into account."

He was standing next to her now, looking at the inner garden. Saki eyed him appreciatively for a moment, appraising the muscled physique usually hidden by the armour. Not as bulky as some but defined enough. Pity he was sleeping with some loose pants on because the path from his neck, down to his abs and waistline was quite cut and defined. The cold had stiffened the flat nipples too. Surprisingly his skin was as tanned there as were his hands and face. She smiled a bit smugly, slightly distracted, happy with the results despite the mistake that had given her away before glancing at her handiwork, her mind snapping back to the work demands.

Date hid his surprise when his glance found the slumped body of an attacker. Her claws were stained with blood. She killed a man so close to his door, to Kojuro's door without either of them awakening... Then she came into his sanctuary to make sure he was still alive and but for a single stray beam of moonlight he wouldn't have known. A grin parted his lips as he assessed the small female standing next to him as the moonlight faded once more, leaving only the shimmer of colourful lanterns.

"Worried about me little shadow?" He needled, keeping his voice low. She scoffed tartly at his comment, lips twisting into an amused grin.

"My life is bound to yours." Saki moved away, shrugging. "I like living. Go back to sleep Boss." She vanished suddenly, leaving him alone in the night.

Masamune shook his head. He remembered her grey eyes lost in drunken revelry, shining, alight with amusement as she leaned against him, comfortably fitting against his side, in his arm, singing off-key with his men, accepting the sake, the companionship and making light of the compliments, dodging Kojuro's questions easily despite the drowsiness induced by the booze. Not the same icy eyes that reflected the moon as she stared at him, looking for signs of life or the cold detached
regard she had glanced towards the corpse of the assassin.

Kojuro was surveying the preparations for the northern campaign in his usual serious demeanour, steering and issuing orders, making sure the plans outlined during the last war summit were implemented, when Masamune joined him, fully equipped, his expression thoughtful. The soldiers were running around, preparing the horses, the supplies, and the weapons but there were no rumours of deaths or assassins. That made him suspicious. Saki was also nowhere to be found. Usually, by the time the sun had risen and completed a bit of its celestial progression she would already have reported to him or Kojuro. Not a whisper in that morning. The assassin's corpse from the night before was also gone when the One-Eyed Dragon had left his room. Not even the scent of blood lingered.

"Masamune-Sama?" Kojuro caught his mood, turning. "We will be ready to depart after noon." He assumed the campaign was the main issue in his mind, as it was something that had been in the works for a while and was a more of great importance for Oshu. The time seemed right to begin expanding the One-Eyed Dragon's influence.

"Have you heard anything last night?" Date crossed his arms, straightening, his expression calculating, keeping his voice low, watching the tumult. The men were in high spirits, eager for combat, fulfilling their assigned tasks, talking, planning, hoping.

"No, I have not." There were few reasons for such a question. None of them boded well.

"Saki killed a man in the inner garden. Somehow he dodged the guards." Date said calmly, appraising his second in command reactions.

Kojuro's eyes narrowed slightly, a bit thrown. He had assumed she had reported to Masamune-sama that morning and retired to sleep before scouting ahead, as agreed.

The One-Eyed Dragon turned his back on him walking towards the room given to the kunoichi, curiosity, duty and worry mingling in an odd way. Kojuro followed him. She was their ninja. If she had died defending Oshu and its Head they should know.

Date opened the shoji a bit more forcefully than needed, making the frame hiss and found himself unable to move. His eye roamed around the room, in a quick sweep, trying to understand what was happening, finding his and Kojuro's shadows captured by one of her hands, de-clawed and slender, splayed on top of the dark forms, extending from the futon, emerging from beneath the covers. Between dark loose tresses one of her grey eyes peeked, steeled in aggression, ready for battle. She tskd then, when recognition shone through, liberating them suddenly, hand lifting, sitting slowly, her loose dark hair framing the grumpiest expression any of them had ever found in a woman.

"Don't ever do that." She whispered, almost to herself, sliding the blinding bangs away revealing a crisscrossing net of bloody scratches covering the left side of her face and part of the neck, exposed by the thin loose shirt she wore to sleep. She knelt formally on the shikibuton, glancing to the glow of morning outside, still frowning. "I... seem to have overslept." Her tone was slightly aghast now.

Kojuro took over, ignoring the defensive reaction that had imprisoned them, demanding a report in his usual composed and controlled way. Saki threw an amused expression Date's way as if accusing him of blabbing, like a child, before focusing on the Right Eye with a serene demeanour, like the ninja that came to the war meetings and sat behind them with her maps, information and whispered cynicism.

"There was an assassination attempt last night. Three men. One was killed in the inner garden. Had
considerable talent for the stealthy arts." She was giving the guys that had been tasked to guard the house a suitable excuse for missing an assassin. Most of them had scoffed at her idea of learning how to protect from shadowed threats. Date hid a grin. Foolish of them not to listen. "The other was a bandit, waiting to attack like a crazed person, invading the house, slaughtering his way through. Most likely a decoy, a sacrifice, so the third would succeed. That one was smart and had some training. I'm willing to believe him a renegade from one of the ninja clans, one that didn't learn much." There was no mistaking the scorn in her tone when mentioning the last man. "Determined little bugger, trying to double back to the house..." She smirked as if amused at the tactic. "They have been dealt with and their corpses returned with a warning." Saki bowed her head slightly, black strands slipping forward once more. "I hadn't planned on sleeping this long though. Please forgive my mistake."

"So you caught them all." Date said, approaching, crouching, tilting her head up, appraising the scratches.

"Yes." She looked at Kojuro, moving away from his touch, as if he was blocking her view. "I made sure that there was no one else. Not one carried a symbol but all appointed Mogami Yoshiaki as their instigator." Saki hid a yawn suddenly, struggling to keep her face composed seemingly unbothered by the proximity of her captain and current state of undress.

"What are these?" Date captured her face again, tracing the red welts. She grimaced.

"I had to hide in a thorny bramble to get the last man. It's not as serious as it looks." She smiled and leaned back, escaping his fingers once more. "I'll be out and scouting in a few minutes." Saki murmured, standing, showing her legs, bared and trim, moving towards her clothes and claws. There was a tanto peeking underneath the covers, placed next to where her sleeping hand would have been and half a dozen kunai near the headrest. She glanced over to them, a slight playful glare in her gaze before picking up her belongings and leaving them for the bathing chambers.

Kojuro closed the shoji slowly, as she walked away, exchanging a look with his leader.

"Masamune-sama..." He began, his voice thick with planning.

Date nodded slowly, agreeing with the unspoken sentiment.

Saki heard the horses, a clamouring through the night, approaching, accompanied by the echoes of voices and cheers, and stood on her perch, slowly, watching the road, catching the flicker of the torches carried by the warriors. When the army came she jumped forth, landing on Date's horse lightly, leaning against his back, smiling for Katakura-dono.

"Evening Boss. Katakura-dono. Guys." She waved to the rest of the army, crossing her legs, unbothered by the undulating of the horse underneath her, lolling her head back, avoiding the crescent moon of the helmet while resting against his shoulder. It had been a long night to add to the others. Ninja were trained to work with as little sleep as possible but her limit was fast approaching.

"Saki." Kojuro acknowledged her softly. Her presence marked the last dwindling miles before the camp, as planned. "We should halt the army and send you to mount Saijo once again. I sense trouble. It is as if they are waiting for us." His horse approached, ready to question her about the latest developments in the battlefield and warn their leader about any misgivings. Saki straightened, her eyes narrowing, paying attention to the situation.

"They are." She said softly. Both Sarutobi and Kasuga were ghosting around hours before. There
was a good chance they had seen Oshu's force. Maybe they had even seen her. Saki felt confident in her still shadowed presence in the One-Eyed Dragon's army though. None of the rumours her net picked up mentioned her by name at all.

Date's chuckle snapped on her back and he looked over his shoulder.

"Perfect." He murmured arrogantly, amused.

Kojuro frowned. "But then it wouldn't be a surprise attack." He mentioned, calculating. A deviation from a plan always demanded careful consideration and the surprise was the main advantage in the campaign.

"No Problem» Let's go Kojuro, Saki." He shouted, rearing the horse, clamouring for speed, his men imitating his ardour. Kojuro closed his eyes, shaking his head with a small smile of pride and the amusement of a parent with a brilliant but rambunctious child. Saki chuckled to herself, jumping off the horse, using the trees for transport, running alongside the army.

The camp of Echigo's War God was empty when they arrived, darkness beneath the trees in the path they had emerged from, some torches still sunk into the ground in the slope that led to the river, casting a flickering light over some patches of terrain. Saki jumped from the tree, standing next to Katakura-dono's horse. Not even the reflex of a fire in the distance. So Kasuga had indeed spotted their forces. Saki lips thinned when thinking of the deserter. Not as dim as her former actions and current outfit made her seem. She approached one of the ash pits as the army gathered, quieting down, the horses panting, the harnesses clinking. Still warm but the embers were dying, suffocating under the sooth and dirt. Moisture was gathering on the base of the hoof prints made by hundreds of horses.

"Looks like we made it just after he left to face off with Takeda." The kunoichi reported, crossing her arms by the wrists, flexing her fingers with a sigh, stretching afterwards. "How bothersome."

"Or it could be a trap." Kojuro rebutted, moving his horse on a tight circle, watching the empty camp site once again.

"Doesn't look like it." Saki mentioned casually, lowering her arms. Still...

Date made a slight hiss of displeasure, turning around, to his troops.

"Are you ready guys?!"" the deafening sound of screaming men filled the air, accompanying his voice. "Put ya guns on!" He finished his battle cry raising his arm. Saki rolled her eyes.

"You sound ridiculous Boss." She muttered in a dry tone. Date Masamune levelled her with a slight glare. The shinobi shrugged. "Just saying..." He chuckled before inciting his horse to dash. As loyal as she had proven herself to be sardonic was her way to behave. After a few days the red welts left by the thorns had faded, leaving her once more with a decidedly unthreatening visage.

The whinny of another group of horses stopped their march, the echoes of their arrival muffled by their own army. Saki, left behind by his jump, was suddenly by his side. A small contingent led by young men clad in red crossed their path, effectively cutting it. The leader seemed to recognize them and quite frankly who wouldn't now? Date was distinctive in looks and the army had no concept of blending in. Subtle you are not Boss. He almost heard her voice saying that, a soft jab she playfully tossed his way, usually exchanging a suffering glance with Kojuro.

Sanada Genjiro Yukimura was loud, brash and quite full of himself. Saki almost regretted having joined the Dragon in the front of the army as she was quite sure even the guys that were still atop
the hill could hear his screams of challenge. That seemed to amuse Date and prod him into his own brand of cockiness. Saki sighed knowing the games boys played. Being with the army made her want to bang her head against the nearest solid object when the bragging competitions began.

The One-Eyed Dragon had dismounted, advancing towards his adversary, a claw bared. Neither she or Katakura-dono followed, although the Right Eye had dismounted, standing next to the Shadow.

"I'm going to charge Kawanakajima in pursuit of Uesugi. Will you turn back or will you hold me off here? Either way it's obvious Date will end up being the sole victor."

"Digressing." Saki grumbled. Katakura-dono patted her shoulder amiably, hiding a smile. Date on the other hand was fully launched into bragging mode.

"It just means the One-Eyed Dragon isn't all for show «you see»"

Saki hissed and crossed her arms again. Kojuro placed his hand on one of his swords, standing perfectly straight.

"Kojuro, Saki." They looked up, towards the soon to be battlefield. "Don't let anyone interfere." Kojuro nodded solemnly. Saki smirked and tilted her head, amused.

The combat started suddenly and sharply, their screams and blades singing in the air, crossing. Saki scoffed, observing them move, their respective auras flaring to life. The Dragon was getting heated in battle in a way she had yet to see and the other man had a temper that seemed to always be on fire. Their blows buzzed with energy and the very earth and air seemed to be reacting to their ferocity.

"He's enjoying himself isn't he?" She whispered into the air with a bit of pride and awe as Date dodged the blows with ease, his army chanting for his victory rowdily or commenting in disbelief. Not all shinobi served men they could admire or agree with. She had come to think herself lucky to serve the One-Eyed Dragon.

Saki cringed a bit when one of the spears scuffed the Dragon's helmet. His counterattack was quick and sure, taking advantage of the smug pause his adversary had taken. Metal and wood sang again.

"It's not often Masamune-sama finds someone that challenges his skills in such a way." Katakura-dono agreed as Date unsheathed all his claws, calling lightning through his will, fighting the cub's fire.

"I'm liking the show too." She chuckled. "It's unusual for one such as me to be able to appreciate two men in battle without worrying about the blade that's about to sink into my back." She winked playfully. "Such a handsome pair. Would like to see some clothing being ripped off though."

Kojuro shook his head placidly. A deadly ninja Saki might be but outside of battle she adopted a laid back personality anyone could appreciate. She also liked to bait then into reacting. And managed to do so without loosing any of her edge. Competent but not submissive. If he ever was incapacitated he knew that he could trust her to take care of their lord.

"They seem to be evenly matched for now." He noticed as the ground shook with the force of their blows. She grunted in agreement, keeping her balance, shifting her weight carefully.

"If any slips they might end up severely wounded." She added, the strategist peeking behind her smile as someone in their ranks gasped about Sanada's ability to stop the death claw blow. "The sun is coming up..." She mentioned looking at the pink tinge that bled over the horizon.
Kojuro was going to answer, to ask her to scout ahead, to find out how the battle between the Tiger of Kai and Echigo's War God was proceeding when her eyes narrowed and her body tensed. One moment she was there and then she was gone.

Date and Sanada had jumped away from each other, readying themselves for another round but before either could move a shinobi appear in the empty middle ground. Suddenly Saki was there too, a bit diagonally from the newcomer, right in the path he would have to take to reach Masamune. All deadly business now, Kojuro noticed, claws tensed lips thinned into an aggressive line.

"Hold. Won't you leave it at that One-Eyed Dragon-danna?" Saki narrowed her eyes and relaxed a fraction, taking a step back, placing the claws on her hips. Sanada looked from ninja to ninja, confused, glaring then at his adversary. "I am from the Takeda's Sanada Ninja Troop, Sarutobi Sasuke." The Dragon's Shadow scowled. "Saki?"

"Sarutobi." He blinked but didn't miss a beat. The kunoichi smiled then, shaking her head.

"I'm not one to be a downer..." She mouthed asince when to the skies that made Date smirk as Kojuro approached, frowning, his mind at work. "but Uesugi and our main forces are about to surround this area. If it was a three way fight, that would be one thing, but the odds are not in your favour when two forces come at you together."

Saki looked up, closing her eyes, opening her senses, trusting her allies. She didn't hear a thing which meant that he was most likely deceiving them. An army composed by two of the greatest forces on the land was not exactly calm and silent. Still it was a good way to bow out gracefully.

"Don't try to bluff me." Date's voice made her open her eyes, perceiving conflict, and glance towards Katakura-dono, searching for less subjective orders. He nodded, gesturing her away. She bowed her head and walked away from the conflict, approaching the horses. "Who the hell trusts the word of an enemy's ninja?" He was likely to attack both the interloper and his challenger. So it was time for a cool calculated voice to overcome his enthusiasm.

"Masamune-sama." Kojuro's voice cut through the haze of battle efficiently. "I believe we should fall back for now." At Date's conflicted expression he used his leverage. "Even if we were able to beat them we'd take casualties." The One-Eyed Dragon relented with a muted curse.

They returned to their horses slowly, measuring each step.

Saki looked down, watching the young tiger touch his chest, his expression dumbfounded.

"He was lying." She said softly to both men, still looking at the base of mount Saijo.

"I suspect so." Katakura-dono agreed.

Date just looked tempestuous, mounting, darting away.

Even though the mood was festive down at the base of the hill under the sakura tree with the blossoms of spring flying through the gentle breeze there was a pondering demeanour on the top of it. Saki had found herself a sturdy branch to lounge on observing the One-Eyed Dragon quietly. The helmet was on the ground, still scuffed by the earlier battle, a sort of a memento to a moment of vulnerability, but the armour was still in place. He seemed torn between the disappointment of a failed plan and the excitement of having a true adversary. He hadn't spoken more than a few words since dawn and the day had been spent in a wild ride. Or so the guys had said. Saki had asked Katakura-dono for details when she returned from the scouting endeavours. His opinion didn't
The news were not encouraging... She shifted a bit blowing a petal away from her face, watching it fall into Date's sake as Katakura-dono returned from his inspection. No casualties, wounds and aches healing nicely, the horses were fed, the army was fed, there was shelter and warmth and the spirits were high. It wasn't hard to surmise that from the summit but Katakura-dono preferred to make sure of such things in person. Date did the same most of the times but as anyone could see he just wasn't in such a mood that night.

"I wasn't able to fight Echigo's War God or Kai's Tiger." Date finally spoke. Katakura-dono said nothing, waiting, sitting. Saki arched her back, adjusting her position slowly with a huff, closing her eyes for a moment. He didn't sound worried or angry. It was a simple fact that the Dragon stated with just a hint of disappointment. "We got nothing of what we came here for."

"You say such things yet you don't sound very disappointed." Katakura-dono voiced her opinion calmly.

"Then why did you stop me? Did you think I would lose?"

"Not lose. Just get injured, incapacitated, unconscious... those might have been some of the reasons... or you might have killed the boy and then the old Tiger would be growling at Oshu..." Date looked up. She just smiled down. He tskd.

"I took into account the potential outcome if what Takeda's ninja said was true." Katakura-dono said cautiously, serving more sake. "Even though both Saki and I were sure it was just a way to break the fight... if you had continued the combat you or perhaps both would have been..." The Right Eye hesitated a bit then relented. "Saki already explained a bit more bluntly than I would."

Date Masamune smirked at his drink, head lowering slightly.

"I got a little too heated. I need to stay cool."

Saki chuckled again, keeping an actual laugh in.

"Heated." The kunoichi murmured softly. "Oh Boss... you were spewing lightning like a wild storm. Everyone within miles must have noticed the commotion... Cocky Dragon."

Katakura-dono took a moment to school his face into a serene mask while Date and Saki tried to stare each other down. She gave up with a smile, closing her eyes, silent laughter shaking her shoulders as she shook some of the thinner branches, showering them with sakura petals, peppering Date's hair.

"Shall we head to Oshu tomorrow?"

"No. We didn't drift down here to the land of Musashi to go sightseeing." Date said softly, swirling his cup.

"Then as soon as the scouts I sent out return let us hold a war council." Saki moved, reacting to the plan. The men had been dispatched to appraise the battlefield and secure the campsite. She had made her rounds but the threat of weapons was more... forceful than her shadowy walks. "Saki?"

"Hmmm... Imagawa is raising an army." She answered softly.

"It is about time they started to, given all this pressure from neighbouring states." Katakura-dono considered, serving some of the drink into his own cup.
"Isei was invaded by Oda..." Saki continued, slipping another bit of information, adding to the warring picture.

Date seemed satisfied.

"You get me." He said smugly to his Right Eye.

"Takeda intends to reach them first, though." Kojuro accepted the compliment with the ease forged by years of true companionship. He glanced at Saki who nodded. That was the information she had quickly relayed after watching the retreat of the Tiger of Kai's army and witnessing Sarutobi's dance and weave of information.

"Takeda just fought Uesugi." Date said thoughtfully.

Before Saki could talk Katakura-dono continued.

"They probably didn't cross blades at Kawanakajima. I'm sure the generals on both sides chose to fight another day when they found out about our surprise attack."

Saki agreed with a hum. She'd seen the untouched battle grounds, seen the unscathed armies walk in opposite directions. Kasuga had reported them to Echigo's War God and Sarutobi had mentioned their presence to the Tiger. One left early for the battlefield, the other sent a small troop to cut their charge. It was a satisfying thing to have thrown Sarutobi Sasuke off with her presence. Take that intricate web of information. It didn't know about her allegiance until the moment of her choice.

"There are also rumours of a truce between Kai and Echigo." She mentioned then.

Date's hand gripped his cup a bit more forcefully.

"Son of a bitch..." He murmured between clenched teeth. Katakura-dono made a benevolent face, shaking his head. Saki chuckled, letting one hand fall from the branch, flexing her claws, catching one petal in her palm, playing with it as the plan unfolded.

"It might be amusing to take Imagawa before the Tiger of Kai." Amusing. The old man would be livid and his cub would most likely start another shouting competition. She smiled, delighted. A nice fight-gift for the One-Eyed Dragon, an apology for the earlier interruption.

"How?" Date's mind was already on strategy.

"We will imitate Takeda himself. If I were to name it...Woodpecker strategy." A flowery name did not change the nature of one's attack but still...

Saki moved a bit, groaning. She hadn't thoroughly surveyed Sunpu, Imagawa Yoshimoto, Odawara... but there was something she knew about it, that all shinobi should know as the information referred to a legend in the ninja clans. Fuma Kotaro was there, at the service of the Hojo clan. And he was the reason why there had been no great army in the province. Not that the warlords needed to be informed of that... unless it was crucial for their campaign...

"Sound like fun. I'm in." The One-Eyed Dragon toasted, raising his sake slightly to the dark night sky before drinking it, petal and all.

Make some noise and make them chase you. Simple orders and easy enough to follow for an army of rowdy warriors. Don't fight, just ride. Lead them to the Tiger's troops. Saki had been tailing the Tiger of Kai, waiting for the moment their armies would cross, keeping a careful eye out for
Sakuribayashi's shadow. So far it had been easy enough to avoid him which made a bit wary. The walk alongside the army of Kai had also given her another opportunity to appraise the young challenger from the combat at Saijo.

Didn't seem that heated or annoyingly loud as he rode alongside the massive form of Takeda Shingen. But there was an unmistakable air of energy and impatience about him that couldn't be attributed only to youth or inexperience. Sanada Yukimura. It wasn't much but for the time she had for research it was passable. Takeda Shingen's devoted ward. Hot-blooded, battle crazy, general-in-the-making youth. Protected by Sarutobi Sasuke though he is not his main charge. If she had to conjecture Saki would toss a guess at genuine care from Takeda's shinobi toward the boy. Boy... didn't that make her feel old... They were roughly the same age, give or take a few months...

She jumped to another branch silently, stopping, hearing the commotion of hooves and hoots. They were coming.

Saki couldn't fault Sasuke's interest though. The kunoichi stood, observing as Kai's troops were stopped on the path, allowing the guys to jump down, riding on. Just look at that wide-eyed innocent face... A prime target for teasing, no doubt.

Date and Katakura-dono finally crossed the path, the last ones before their persecutors, the One-Eyed Dragon not resisting a taunting glance back and a challenging exclamation while riding forth. Of course that prompted a screaming challenge, Date's name echoing in the walled path as Hojo's troops stopped their horses, staring at the new development. Take the bait... She urged silently, claws pricking the bark under them in anticipation. The army captain reared his horse, raising his voice into the air, announcing to his men that the Dragon of Oshu and the Tiger of Kai had formed an alliance against Hojo. His orders were swift. "Kill them all".

Saki moved a bit, sharpening her hearing as the battle began, as swords were crossed, as Hojo's soldiers poured into the path to engage the men from Kai, preventing them from advancing towards their shared target. Dust clouded the road and the shrill sound of steel made it hard to catch any words other than taunts, threats or dying screams. It put a strain of her head too, threatening to bring forth an ache.

"Date, that little bastard, used us in his trap." Takeda Shingen, his booming voice still quite distinct amongst the cacophony of combat, talking directly to Sanada, ordering him to give chase while managing his men. Saki smiled. Perfect. She shadow jumped away from the battle and moved alongside the young cub.

A bit more of delay from his part would be appreciated... He had dodged the combatants handily with his troops, screaming against Date still. The guys had a massive head start but it was her job to do anything to help the One-Eyed Dragon's army.

A swift jump brought her to the road, right in the young warrior's path, placing herself in such a way that the horse couldn't skirt her without harm. As expected surprise and a conscience made him stop before the hard hooves of his brown steed made contact with her rather small frame. Actually he stopped way sooner than she had anticipated.

Saki smiled looking up. He hesitated, the horse dancing beneath him, reacting to his impatience, to his turmoil of emotions.

"You're... Date Masamune's... shinobi" The surprise passed quickly as soon as recognition sunk. "Get out of the way." His order was forceful but there wasn't much power behind it.
Saki smiled and winked. He grew flustered, gripping the spears a bit harder, trying to intimidate her with the horse's advance. She stepped back quickly, clawed hands performing the nine symbols in quick succession, creating the Seal.

It was a higher technique and one whose motions took her a couple of years to perfect, considering the implements with which she fought. Sometimes her hand gestures would sway towards sloppy when in a hurry but they still did the job. The Shadow Cage would imprison one person for five hours. But when used on multiples the time shattered and split... As the jutsu was completed the troop Sanada led was frozen in place by their own shadows.

She turned her back on them and started to run after a quick appraisal of their faces frozen in expressions of fear or rage. Or a slight blush in a confused and slightly aggravated frown in Sanada's case.

Shadows wouldn't answer to her call for a few minutes after a Seal but speed would be enough to catch Date's army. A Shadow Element was a tricky thing to manage despite most of her clan being adept at it. Not as blunt as Light and Darkness, drawing from both, adept at neither. So the kunoichi ran.

---

**Bukeyashiki** – 武家屋敷 – Old Samurai Residences;

**Chan** – ちゃん – is a diminutive suffix; it expresses that the speaker finds a person endearing; In general, chan is used, but is not limited to, babies, young children, grandparents and teenage girls. It may also be used towards cute animals, lovers, close friends, any youthful woman, or even between friends. It can be used for males in some circumstances, but in general this use is rather condescending or intimate;

**Danna** – 主人 – Master;

**Dono** – 殿 – roughly means "lord" or "master". It does not equate noble status; rather it is a term akin to "milord", a bit under the sama in terms of respect;

**Futon** – 布団 or 蒲団 – traditional style of Japanese bedding consisting of padded mattresses and quilts pliable enough to be folded and stored away during the day, consisting of a shikibuton (敷き布団 bottom mattress) and a kakebuton (掛け布団 thick quilted bedcover)

**Jutsu** – 術 – Technique, method, spell, skill or trick;

**Kaiken** – 懐剣 – Small unadorned dagger;

**Kakan** – 加冠 – Coming of Age Ceremony (This didn't give a gender specific ceremony in the translation so it will be used in this fanfic as the "final test" for a ninja, the last challenge to prove he or she is ready to serve the clan);

**Katana** – 刀 – traditional samurai sword, said to contain the warrior's soul;

**Kunai** – 苦無 – In the folk lore of ninja, the kunai is commonly portrayed to be a Japanese knife that is used for throwing as well as stabbing;

**Kunoichi** – くノ一 – Female ninja;

**Neko-te** – 猫手 – Neko-te (cat paw or cat claw) is a name given to several contraptions fitted in or over the hand, with sharp blades or pins sticking out. Some of the original neko-te that were shaped
like metal gloves had pins standing up from the metal plate covering the back of the hand, designed to trap other weapons and leave minor damage when required, while the long claw-like tips of the fingers were used to stab at arteries and other vital areas, and to scratch through exposed skin;

**Ninja** – Spy, assassin, saboteur etc…;

**Sake** – Rice wine, alcoholic beverage;

**Sakura** – Cherry blossoms;

**Sama** – It is used mainly to refer to people much higher in rank than oneself, toward one's customers, and sometimes toward people one greatly admires.

**Shinobi** – Spy, assassin, saboteur etc…;

**Shoji** – In traditional Japanese architecture, a shoji is a door, window or room divider consisting of translucent paper over a frame of wood which holds together a lattice of wood or bamboo; (Fusuma – are their wooden opaque and often painted counterparts); Both *fusuma* and *shoji* run on wooden rails at the top and bottom. The upper rail is called a *kamoi* – and the lower is called a *shikii* –;

**Tabi** – Traditional Japanese socks, usually ankle-high and with a separation between the big toe and other, worn with traditional thonged footwear;

**Tanto** – A Japanese dagger. The blade is single or double edged with a length between 15 and 30 cm; mainly for piercing and slashing;

**Tatami** – Rice straw mat used as flooring;
"«Are you ready guys?»" Date's voice cut through the battlefield with sharp enthusiastic clarity, overlapping with the echo of hundreds of hooves in gallop, the occasional neigh of the horses, the metal and leather of the straps and harnesses clinking in time with the weaponry and the booming call of the battle horn. The guys answered readily, voices echoing in the valley finally announcing their presence as loudly as possible, fuelling their leader's charge, raising swords into the wind. "«Here we go!»" Date's horse charged ahead as if proud of his owner, breaking away from the main force, fast and furious, sure-stepped as only a mountain horse could be.

The line of Imagawa's army was moving alongside the river, marching towards their own battlefield, slowly, the soldiers stopping when they saw and heard the first hints of their sneak attack, looking, staring sluggishly at first, the situation slowly dawning on them. They were confused and without any order or notion of what to do. Their general was hidden away in a litter apparently ignoring his second-in-command distressed pleas and the importance of the situation.

Dust rose as Date's army rode forth, the horses moving quickly and surely like a solid formation, breaking the hastily formed defence ranks, disorienting and slaying the spear carriers. Taking down a military force was easier the more disheartened and disorganized it became.

Kojuro gestured quickly, breaking the main force of the wedge the horses rode in as both he and the One-Eyed Dragon cut a path through the terrified men of Imagawa. The guys moved on, enveloping the enemy in dust, splitting them, circling some of the groups, preventing them from helping their commander as Date razed soldiers to the ground, abandoning his mount for a greater mobility, slashing through arrows and destroying their formations, a single claw charged and bared, making himself the single most dangerous target in the battlefield, a fact quickly noted by Imagawa Yoshimoto as he frantically screamed for protection, to be surrounded and defended or for them to eliminate the threat as quickly as possible, promising rewards to the man that landed the killing blow.

Date unleashed the lightning in a devastating furious strike, wind blowing around sharply, slashing as harshly as the blade itself, obscuring his body as soldiers fell around him, screaming in pain and fear. The battle slowed a bit, his own guys staring in shock, the fear dulling their enemies' movements, making them hesitant to strike.

Yoshinao gasped, pulling the reigns of his horse, stopping it. "The Boss is showing no mercy." He said in a clipped tone as the fog of war settled and Date was left alone before a fallen Yoshimoto.

Saki appeared next to the horses, walking slowly, coming from the path, a bit out of breath, looking towards the battle grounds. It was clear that her faction had the advantage. The battle was close to over, even if some groups fought hard of their own volition, immune to the terror of their leader or at least mindful of their own lives. Fight or flight wasn't it… They would lose heart as soon as their leader was dead and Date announced his victory and claimed Imagawa's territory. Rarely an army fought on without their Head.

"Saki-chan" The retainer whispered noticing her presence, welcoming her back with a wave. Some of the guys, the ones closest to them did the same. There was a lull in the battle now, enough for a breather. The kunoichi nodded in recognition, sparing them a glance before running once more, crossing the field quickly and quietly. They had time to look around. She had a job to do while...
everyone's attention was in the battle and in Date.

"D-Don't come any closer!" The painted man was trying to crawl away, his voice high pitched and shrill with panic, the clothes getting in the way. "Who do you think I am?" The general was taking refuge in the position that had always kept him safe. It was a flimsy, futile strategy, the recourse of a weak male. Date adjusted his stance, eye darkened by shadow and disgust, expression still thunderous.

"The geezer Imagawa." His answer was cold and measured. The sword was parallel to the ground as he began to walk, the tip grazing it lightly, carelessly. "I'm the Head of Oshu, Date Masamune. Sorry but I'm going to take your life."

The man screamed, standing, fear giving him a jolt, enough for him to dash towards his own men, ordering them to attack, to protect him, to strike Date down, his voice lacking every ounce of command, heart and strength that created a truly strong general.

Saki gave a half grin when she noticed the terrified expression of the men in question, her steps now leading her quietly past the One-Eyed Dragon. Also the general ran like a chicken whose neck had just been slashed. But her worry was still overriding everything else. The Dragon should hurry and eliminate the annoying man.

"If you're a general, come at me!" Date challenged, still giving him a chance to redeem his honour.

The man was hiding in his litter now, shaking, surrounded by his soldiers, none of which seemed willing to fight the devastating force they had witnessed in action moments ago. Imagawa didn't answer, cowering further into the box as the One-Eyed Dragon approached, whimpering.

The sudden neigh of a horse interrupted, echoing on the camp, diverting the Dragon's attention sharply, towards the back of the battle, beyond his men, towards the path.

Date stilled, looking over his shoulder, expression stony, his grip on the sword tightening.

Katakura-dono looked too, halting his own combat, the attempt to keep Imagawa's forces contained.

Saki grimaced.

Strong headed boy... Less than a quarter of his force and himself had been freed from their shadows but it was still disappointing to see a higher tier jutsu broken in a matter of minutes. Maybe her motions had been off... Or maybe it was just too many people to contain and he had been better prepared to resist ninja skills. Who knew what training Sanada Yukimura might have had.

"Stop" Sanada was yelling, standing on his horse as it sped through the field, dodging combating clusters, spears raised for combat, his entrance dramatic and disrupting. He jumped forth, clearing the army easily, landing a few feet away from Date's back, readying in challenge, the wind picking up, making the red ribbon float. His horse stayed back, hooves pounding the ground before it reared with another sharp neigh, calming, lowering its neck, walking slowly around, what little men he had brought clashing with both Date's and Imagawa's men behind it.

"So he came..." Date whispered gruffly, straightening nonchalantly.

"Suruga is an important stepping stone for Oyakata-sama to reach Kyoto!" Sanada extended a spear, pointing menacingly at the Dragon, the authority and intensity he had been lacking when shouting at Saki now emerging. "I cannot allow you to take Imagawa!"
Date turned. "Well done, pursuing me while your allies are in danger after Hojo struck from the side." It was an easy jab. Sanada clenched his teeth, moving a bit forth, growling low in his throat. He took the bait too easily, flustered by the whisper of betrayal in Date's words.

"Takeda will not be shaken!" He screamed passionately, a shake of his head dispelling the words, his loyalty clearly displayed, brushing aside any doubt, steeling himself with the knowledge that it had been the Tiger of Kai's order that had sent him to that field.

A scoff was Date Masamune's answer, the claw sheathed as he turned slowly. "But eventually I'll even take the Tiger of Kai's head «you see?»" That did not sit well with the already enraged cub.

"No matter who his opponent is Oyakata-sama will not loose!" The young tiger slashed his spears downward. "And I Sanada Genjiro Yukimura have no intention of falling in battle with my ambitions unfulfilled!"

A smirk was now Date Masamune's expression. It was not hard to guess what would come next.

Saki looked away, towards Imagawa Yoshimoto whose eyes were darting from challenger to challenger, trembling, producing little high pitched sounds of terror.

"«All right» Then let's fight for Imagawa's head, Sanada Yukimura."

Sanada gripped his spears harder.

"I was about to challenge you myself!" He announced, fury and determination flooding his face.

"Kojuro." The right Eye looked over his shoulder. "You know what to do, right?"

"Of course. We will not lift a finger." The Right Eye nodded, a sweeping look crossing the battlefield. The battle had stilled, the changes too fast for the unorganized forces of Imagawa to keep up.

Saki walked away, gently, unassumingly towards the enemy, the fear in the soldier's gaze so deeply set and focused on the two samurai that no one seemed to notice the shinobi walking amongst their ranks.

Date glanced again towards his adversary, scowling, hands reaching for the swords, adopting a battle stance.

"Don't make a habit out of this." The fight started brutally, the six claws drawn at once, lightning following, Sanada's spears flaming as he raised them, their elements and auras flaring abruptly, the shouts filling the fields, drowning the echoes of the world as they charged.

Saki caught them on her peripheral vision, noticing how much more intense the combat was when compared to the former one, the first blow deadly if neither had blocked, her attention centred on the cowardly general who hid, screaming at his men, fear consuming each of his actions, trying to understand how the new arrival could work in his favour.

Something was not right and the nagging feeling inside her chest, growing darker by the hour, didn't seem to relent. She glanced up at the storm clouds that had been rolling in, brought by the brisk winds. Maybe it was the weather...

She watched as the general tried to order a sneak attack into the duel, failing to do so when the strikes grew heavy enough to disturb the air, and as he prepared his body doubles, although she could have done without that part. Seeing flabby males changing into ugly orange clothes and
painting their faces like cheap courtesans was not her idea of entertainment. She surveyed the preparations of the carriages and slid closer to the one where the real Imagawa hid.

The rain had begun to fall, thunder echoing in the distance, mirrored by the strikes of the two rivals. She shook her head as her clothes began to soak, seeing the preparations of the Imagawa army almost complete.

"Katakura-dono" She called suddenly, drawing attention to her presence from both armies, pointing at the decoys. Some of the enemy men jumped away, convinced she had just appeared and would play the part of the executioner. Others lowered and readied their weapons, prepared to eliminate the new threat as quickly as possible. Both reactions were led by fear. Saki ignored their perpetrators, keeping her attention where it was needed.

Imagawa's decoys... they were meant to be seen but there was nothing to stop them from leaving as soon as the reins were in place. The Right Eye stopped in his tracks, knowing she wouldn't interrupt a battle on a whim. His eyes widened in worry, the plan shifting in his head, adjusting to the new development.

"Masamune-sama!" His voice carried more weight than hers when it came to stopping the Dragon. That was why she chose to warn the Right Eye first.

Date and Sanada had reached a stalemate once more, six blades engaged against twin spears, their breaths hanging heavily in the air, a satisfied, if slightly too wide smile on the Dragon's lips, Sanada with a fierce, focused expression.

Date's reaction, as soon as his attention was given was clear and concise.

"«Shit...»" He growled, disengaging, turning around.

Sanada had a bit more of a shock, his innocent face opening in an unguarded expression, the rage melting away, eyes wide, mouth opening, spears lowering towards the ground.

"There are three Imagawas!?" He gasped, stunned.

"Kojuro!" Date ordered, running for his horse as the carriages departed hastily, their purpose fulfilled.

Sanada did the same, his own steed too far to reach with ease, choosing the easiest route, tackling Samenosuke to the ground, surprising the warriors, stealing his horse, the combat forgotten.

The retainer shouted, adjusting his glasses, outraged, cursing in the mud.

"Understood." Katakura-dono shouted, raising an arm. "I'll leave the rest to you." Date's army shouted their approval as the order was issued and pressed their advantage, obeying the orders with glee.

Imagawa's army was fighting once more, the hope for his leader escape fuelling an attempt on victory.

Saki moved fast, mounting behind Date, leaning forward against his scrapped helmet, embracing his waist for security. She would ride with him until the carriage was close enough to sabotage. Or as soon as she could jump onto a tree and run alongside them.

To take a carriage on foot without the high ground was risky. The wheels, the horse, the driver... It was not impossible but it was not a safe move. Desperation was a likely excuse for such a thing.
There were techniques for it and if he was not running away she would probably employ a bit of trickery. A little girl weeping on the road, pleading the carriage to stop, to help. If the performance was convincing enough men stopped, moved by the sobs and the defenceless female that could either be helped or raped. Depending on the occupant.

"That one." She whispered, claw pointing discreetly, as he rode, each warrior choosing a target as the Imagawas slid into the woods. Before crossing the trees she exchanged a look with Katakura-dono, nodding in reassurance. They had the right one. Victory and conquest was still possible.

As they moved Saki's mind was at work. She just needed a bit of room... Slowly she disentangled herself from Date's waist, standing on the horse, clawed hands on the Dragon's shoulders tensing for a jump, catching a glance of the perfect perch just ahead...

Speed and skill were bringing them close enough for her to attempt.

Shadows were starting to stir once again, answering her call.

A good jump, a dead driver and...

There was a sudden flash of black and white amidst the shimmering grey of the rain, a flare of silvery blades and piercing shrill scream. Saki stopped her preparations, staring the white-haired man balanced on the top of the carriage. He had ashen skin and a glint of insanity within those pale eyes. Blood was streaking his scythes, a twin pair of weapons held firmly in his hands, pinning Imagawa inside the traveller's box. New blood, red and bright was slithering slowly down the blades, washed away with the old and the rain drops. The screams were dying down to the whimpers of a man losing consciousness. The headless body of the driver fell on the road, sidestepped by Date's mount, dislodged by the hard pace of the horse and the lurch of the wheels.

Saki lowered herself once more, draping one arm over Date's chest, securing herself against him, the metal, flesh and bone of her hand and claws over his heart, keeping her right hand free. There was no warning. No one had told her about another army in the area... only if... they had known about Imagawa... her free claws clenched. Owari's army should be farther away… that was the battlefield Imagawa was headed too...

The man had a cold, sharp laugh, one that made her spine feel pierced.

"Who are you?" Date growled, riding on.

He didn't even pay attention to them. Just a scathing glance before looking towards his blades.

"This is the real one." He chuckled once more, slowly. "I'll be taking him."

"Are you mocking me?" Date's voice snapped as a fog started to build, sudden and thick, the carriage disappearing swiftly into it, the cloud swallowing them. The horse neighed, panicked, rearing. Saki gasped, unbalanced by the sharp movements. Date gripped the handlebars, trying to control the struggling animal...

Saki awoke in the rain, fallen in the mud underneath Date, the crescent moon of his helmet sunk into the soft dirt near her head. She moved a bit, trying to wriggle herself away from the still unconscious Dragon without causing either of them harm or pain. Which was easier said than done. His armour added weight, the rain added weight and slipperiness. The horse was still twitching near them. A wrong move and both of them could be wounded or crippled by a stray hoof.
Slowly she raised her claws to his lips, satisfied when they fogged. As gently as she could she moved him through leg and arm work to roll away from her, pushing him onto his back on the opposite direction of the animal, hissing with effort, breathing deeply when freed.

Sitting she looked around.

The fog was clearing and after a quick assessment nothing within her seemed to be broken. Bruised, beaten and abused but still whole. He also seemed to be unbroken despite the odd position in which he landed and after her shove. The path taken by the carriage and the white-haired man was clear, leading towards an empty, rocky area, faintly outlined in the distance, between the dwindling trees.

They were alone, mercifully. If he had had anyone else with him they might have been executed while unconscious. The man had seemed to work unaided but his goals did not appear personal. Few would target a general like that. He was hunting for Imagawa for a purpose and not being a recognizable grand warlord himself could only mean he was working for one. He had looked powerful enough to be respected even if her senses screamed unhinged.

"Boss?" Saki shook Date slightly, her voice low. He groaned after a few more tries, his one eye opening. Seemed clear and focused after a few blinks. At length the warrior sat, accepting her help while still unsure if anything was damaged, appraising the situation carefully as soon as he felt steadied. Saki stood. "Should we go?"

Date just nodded, his expression growing darker. This time he didn't accept her aid, standing on his own, moving forward. Saki walked alongside him in the rain, keeping her eyes trained on any sigh of pain, on any hint of trouble.

The path started to open soon enough, revealing the cliffs and the silent forces carrying Oda's banner, surrounding them in black and red. She slid closer to the One-Eyed Dragon's back and blind side, a gesture that most would perceive as a frightened female seeking a protector, a convenient bit of trickery, as the wind and rain howled, leading them to a closed passageway, the storm growing in strength, lighting splitting the air, thunder cracking loudly.

Saki tensed.

Date held a breath, his hands going immediately for his swords as both looked up.

From above Oda Nobunaga stared them down, a tall man in metallic armour, western-looking armour, a deep red cloak floating around him dramatically, spikes rising from his back, from his helmet, adding to his height, to his menacing posture, flanked by his generals... the white haired man... A woman in a black butterfly kimono, standing statuesque and coldly, her eyes trained on them disdainfully... and a kid? A child with a bow, his eyes on Nobunaga admiringly.

Oda's eyes... Saki felt cold, colder than the rain, the mud and the night could possibly make her. Intimidation emanated easily from him, urging them to fear... She clenched her claws, snarling, discarding the feeling. There were jutsus that could make a heart dread. Shinobi were trained to resist them. Then she noticed it... the slight hesitation in the One-Eyed Dragon's fingers...

"Masamune-sama" Katakura-dono joined them, emerging from another forest path, running, stopping, hand on his katana, catching the heaviness of the air quickly, growing quiet and menacing, assuming his usual spot. Date did not relax. Neither did she, truth be told. And suddenly both Sanada and Sarutobi were there, coming from the mountain. The Tiger of Kai's apprentice had somehow managed to keep the horse.
Sanada Yukimura seemed to be immune to the tension, his voice rising in a clear challenge as soon as his horse came to a stop, straightening, his spears in a tight grip slightly tilted, the bladed tip glistening in the rain.

"I assume you're the Devil King of Owari, Lord Oda Nobunaga! I am Sanada Genjiro Yukimura! My country is Kai and I am a vassal of Takeda..."

"Be quiet, Sanada Yukimura" Date whispered, his voice forceful.

Both Sarutobi and Saki exchanged a glance, stepping back, looking for a way out for their respective charges if the forces of the newcomer chose to attack.

Fear and waiting.

Oda was making a show of Imagawa Yoshimoto. He was still breathing as the white haired man hauled him up on one of the scythes that had impaled him previously, blood soaking the orange in garish blooms on the shoulders, a shotgun placed against his head. There was no reaction from the fallen general. He was unconscious, the pallor underneath the makeup clear to the ninja's eyes and the colour of a dying man spreading slowly over the skin that showed. The shot was accurate and sudden, the body tossed at the feet of those who had chased him.

Date tensed as he looked at the twisted corpse of the man whose life he had sought to claim. Most of his head was missing, blown away, edges darkened. The fall had broken his bones, some having torn the flesh and fabric, blood seeping through it. Katakura-dono glanced from the still for to his captain. Sanada looked around suddenly before staring up as the Devil King as he left, abandoning them unharmed but shaken, his army retreating with him.

The walk back was slow and dull, cutting once more through the forest, seeing the now still body of the horse, the marks of the chase clearly indented into the wet ground, pooling the water that fell steadily from the clouds, the murky day growing into night.

Date had gone into a dark thoughtful mood, aggravated because Sanada Yukimura and Sarutobi Sasuke were following them. Sanada had even dismounted, offering the horse to Saki in a considerate gesture, his eyes lingering on the bruises that peeked from her clothes, marring her throat, darkening by the minute. It was an abrupt, stammering offering as if he was unused in any dealings with females... then it dawned her that he was. She had thanked him, refraining from any snide comment, but refused.

The warrior walked, taking into account his company. Respectful of him.

Katakura-dono had pressed her for the details. Saki had told him what she could, wary of the presence of the rival warlord's ward and his shinobi, storing jealously any bit that could be unique or vital, but there was no denying that the plan had gone badly awry. The decoys and running of Imagawa was to be expected from the cowardly and childish general. But Oda's interference... It had rendered the battle, the plan to use Kai's army and all the consequences of Imagawa's death useless to Oshu.

Almost by instinct both she and Sasuke fell a bit behind, walking side by side as the distance shortened, eyeing each other carefully, weighing their options and needs. They belonged to different clans but were bound by the common traditions and bloodlines of the shinobi. Whatever happened in the battlefield and amongst warlords was just business.

"Did you know?" Saki asked softly.
"When he gave chase I asked him to turn away." Sasuke replied.

Good to know he had felt as uneasy as her.

"No whisper?"

"Not a breath."

Both sighed with a similar dissatisfied, long-suffering expression, shoulders slumping.

Sanada looked back, studying them for a long moment.

"You know each other?" He finally asked, stopping, waiting for them to approach.

"We..." Saki began then glanced at Sasuke. He smiled, signalling. She smirked. Impish. "Were lovers."

"For a while."

"Didn't work out.

"Shinobi politics"

"We haven't spoken in years."

"Broken heart." Sasuke finished, hand on his chest with a forlorn look.

"Oh... I'm sorry... I didn't mean to..." Sanada had flushed a deeper red at each sentence, growing flustered, trying to find a way out of the embarrassment, fidgeting and stammering, the blush covering his cheeks and part of his neck.

Saki snorted, her mood lightened.

They departed as soon as the river of the battlefield was visible, leaving them with the horse, headed back to Takeda Shingen, to report.

The battle was long over and the army had already found a place to camp. Bunshichi awaited them, standing tall near his horse, hair still pulled back into the neat thin ponytail he usually wore, his deeply set eyes, a feature that made him look older than his years, scouring the field, searching for them, the usual blue saru-bo in place, his excitement palpable, dimming a bit when he noticed the Head of Oshu's mood. He looked for answers in the Right Eye and Shadow but neither were able to give them to him. Not yet at any rate.

The camp was smaller and more protected this time, under the canopy of the trees to keep them as dry as possible. Saki went for her bag, left on a small sleeping mat they had been kind enough to prepare for her, fishing out a grey pill from her supplies of kusuri, swallowing it dry, coughing a bit.

Magobei, chubby and short approached, worriedly, his attention drawn away from his weapons.

"Saki-chan?" She smiled tiredly for him, managing some kind of easygoing expression. "What was that?" He was staring at her bag and the small wooden box she was putting down. Natural curiosity and just a small possibility of it being something sweet she might share.

"It dulls the pain." The kunoichi explained softly not realizing the words had left her lips until she caught the shift in his expression. She groaned inwardly, realizing that she had forgotten what kind
of man she was talking to.

"You're hurt?" Magobei knelt next to her, suddenly worried, his raised voice attracting the attention of the nearest soldiers, triggering every big-brother impulse in the area. Saki's first instinct, when the mob started to approach, was to shadow and get away but that would only get her chased until one of them made sure she wasn't gravely injured.

"Bruised, tired..." The reply had to be casual and easy, her tone hiding any strain. Then she made sure to redirect their worry towards one of the two people in the Date's army that were truly central. "Not as much as the Boss though." Just a casual mention, a preoccupied expression and the pressure on her loosened.

Problem slightly solved and a bit of his men's attention would probably force Date's mind away from his shadows.

Now there was something she needed to do before returning to Oshu.

Peasants often knew more than their lords suspected. It was one of the simplest disguises, one of the easiest ways to infiltrate a spy in an enemy territory. They rarely suspect of a man or woman that spent their days in the field. The village was small, the camps empty, the houses were dark. And the blood was still fresh, pooling underneath the corpses of two tied males inside the small nondescript house. Her contacts.

Saki sighed, avoiding the shimmering puddle, looking around for any leftover secrets or hints of their activities. Nothing was disturbed, nothing written in any stray piece of paper, fabric or ceramic. Good. It looked just like any other house, the quarters of a day labourer. Their weapons were simple knives and the tools of a farmer's trade, reinvented, sharpened and prepared for another use. The poisons mingled with the seasonings in the kitchen, unmarked, distinguishable only by scent and practice. No uniform was carried into the enemy's frontiers so no accidental glimpse of odd attire or rumours of insignias reached unwanted ears.

She returned to the bodies, claws touching them gently, respectfully as she checked the injuries without cutting the ropes. Their necks were gaping in a horrid second smile, the slash long and clean, exposing what was beneath the skin, deep enough to slice the bone, the livid white of the splinters mixed with the red and greying flesh, but there were no marks of torture. A quick death then, even though it was an execution in their own house. From the bleeding and near decapitations a body could only remain alive for five second or so. It was... more merciful than she had expected from someone with Oda's reputation and the fear his name brought.

"Not my best work but they were not the goal, now were they?" Saki turned slowly, claws twitching. The voice... the white haired freak. And the damn fog that could obscure even a shinobi's senses, invading the room, clouding the outside. He was standing in the doorway, scythes down, blood still in them, like he enjoyed the contrast of metal and red. Darkness answered easily to his call too, brushing against her senses. His chuckle filled the air, head leaning back, revealing the eyes and the smirk beneath the hair. "Shinobi just can't resist covering their tracks, can they?"

"I'm your goal then?" Saki moved a bit, unsettled. It was true that they preferred to see for themselves what was wrong with their spies. She would be the easiest member of Date's army to draw away and was always alone when working. And she was the one who held most of the information about pretty much anything. She hissed slightly.

Saki half expected someone to try this after her presence had been revealed but had thought her spies could hide a bit more effectively and such a trap usually took a bit more of planning.
"The Shadow of the Dragon they call you." His scythe moved, scraping her neck lightly, drawing blood. She didn't move, facing him. The house was small and she couldn't do much before having preparations in place. He was enjoying his play, giving her time while thinking her terrified. He took pleasure in terror, pain and cowardice. "Maybe I should make you a matching pair..." The blade slid up slowly, cutting an irregular path or just grazing the skin. Beads of blood slid down her cheek, like tears. Saki tilted her head upwards, exposing her neck, enticing him with a frailer target, showing vulnerability, closing her eyes instinctively. Not as powerful as Oda but the compulsion to fear was there. She gritted her teeth and endured. Then she stared him down, a scowl for his smile, focus against the dreamy look in his eyes. "What secrets will you sing for me?" He murmured slowly, making the tip of the blade slide lower, once more, seeking for the base of her throat.

"I don't sing." She growled, slapping the scythe away, sharply, the surprise and loose grip allowing her to evade. There was no point in fighting an enemy that had proved himself to be strong without knowing anything about him. She was at a clear disadvantage.

"Just scream then." The man laughed, swinging, undaunted by the challenge. His blade cut through the darkness accompanied by laughter as she vanished, shadowing away, nicking her shoulder. There was no pain but Saki knew the wound was there. There was warmth slithering down her skin, slowly as speed and shadow carried her back.

Saki took a deep breath standing near the trees that circled the edge of the camp before entering. Some noticed the fresh wound on her cheek but she brushed their concern away, saying she had gotten careless and a branch snapped at her. No one would notice the injury beneath the black of her vest, even if it was a bit torn... She just needed her bag. The nearby water stream, some more pills and a quick check should take care of that issue.

"Saki-chan!" Samenosuke of the spiky hair, long face and small glasses called her from the fire where some sort of soup was bubbling. "Come eat." She smiled a bit tersely, stopping.

"I need a bath first."

Bunshichi laughed from behind her, walking towards the group that surrounded the pot, placing a hand on her shoulder. The injured one.

"We need to let the girl be. My sisters always says..." He stopped suddenly, the expression changing, his hand withdrawing, staring at the reddened palm. The conclusion was obvious. The light from the campfire was enough for the others to see the deep red reflex of blood. Any soldier could recognize it.

Saki paled, her body tensing once more in preparation of a quick escape.

"Were you attacked?" Yoshinao stood, as if ready to defend her from a threat or swear revenge or to chase down any enemy remaining.

"No need for such a fuss..." She said, trying to stop the commotion before... Others were already looking, once more and this time she could not use Date as a decoy. She was pretty sure he had already discouraged any inquiry about his health. Her lips thinned. "Things like this happen. I just need to bathe and rest." She brazened her attitude as she walked towards her bag, sidestepping the men with a gesture of indifference. "A bad step, an out of place thorn..." A maniac with a blade.

Saki vanished towards the stream then, unwilling to be followed, even if their intentions were good.
It was a small thing but the water ran clear. She undressed silently, glad for her dulled sensations, rolling the dirty cloth for a later wash, placing them nearby, sliding the tanto out of the bag, placing it on a rock, nearby, reachable, even before she undid her claws.

The cold didn't feel biting but the iciness of the water helped to soothe the bruises and stem the blood that seeped out of the wound.

Her body had endured worse.

Bruises marked her back from the fall and her front from cushioning an armoured samurai. The slice of the scythe slid from her shoulder to her spine. It wasn't deep but it was quite long. She stepped out after washing away the dirt and grime, opening the bag once more, ingesting two different pills to help the healing and dusting a fine powder over the wounds so no infection could fester, field-dressing it as snugly as she could.

A shinobi had a good understanding and practiced of a lot of skills and trades. Anything a master could request of them was learned. Field medic was one of the many disciplines drilled into their minds and one also used to strike at the most vulnerable parts of another's body.

She grabbed a clean strip of cotton and redid her sarashi slowly, minding her injuries, keeping the ears open to what went on around, beyond her corner or the stream. Saki stopped for a moment when heard the steps. It was long before they reached her but the rhythm was familiar so she didn't bother speeding up her dressing process. She half turned, twisting her braid, the water dripping into the ground.

"You could also use the water." She whispered into the air, softly. The One-Eyed Dragon scoffed, walking into the small clearing between the trees and the river. Saki tied her obi, arms and feet still bare, waiting. "So they tattled on me."

"True. They care for you. You should have let them tend to your injuries."

"Have your wounds been tended, Date-sama?" Saki rebutted with a smirk using an honorific as a weapon. Date grunted noncommittally, sitting. She had escaped their care first. He had managed to break away of his men's worry wave in the couple hours or so it took her to investigate. Hence their heightened reaction when they found out she was hurt once more when returning from a scouting venture.

Frustration and worry at work.

Saki snorted against his quiet attitude and chastised silence, reaching for her bag, slipping out one of her pills, offering. Date eyed it for a moment before reaching for it, holding the small orb between his fingers.

"It dulls the pain." The kunoichi whispered, echoing the words that had made her the target, looking away, giving him the choice. He took it without questions. Saki moved a bit, reaching for his armour clasps, finding no resistance as she started to strip him.

No matter how much the medicine worked to hide it, the bruises and pain were still underneath and she could at least take a look at them, check for broken bones and reduce the swelling with some cold water. Seeing he had dodged the men and she had done pretty much the same... Tending to him so no lie would be needed upon return and they ridded themselves of the army's worry. It was an easy choice.

She worked out the outer jacket of blue, sliding it away, appraising it quickly, looking for traces of
blood or slashes that could have resulted in injury before focusing on the armour, taking the dou away from his body placing it on the ground, near the fabric. Next went the kote and yugake underneath, leaving his hands free. Date flexed his fingers slowly as the shinobi placed both pieces on top of the dou, keeping the leather, cloth and iron clean. The shitagi was the last layer of cloth covering the whole of his torso and arms, not counting with the sarashi. Layers of protection that served any samurai well, lessening the impact, fell away revealing the skin and muscle underneath.

Saki appraised the damage in the darkness, her eyes keener than a normal person. His back was marred by some dark blooms, few, most likely the result of a brush with the horse's hooves or Sanada's spears. A cluster of bruises ran from his chin to his stomach in the exact shape of her arm and shoulder, a match for her left arm, something he seemed to notice, tracing the bruises as she moved in her appraisal, his hand closing around the wrist, tugging at the arm, watching the darkened patches of skin. Saki allowed his exploration. He didn't press her bruises as it was obvious her bones were intact underneath. Date stopped her before she began to undo the haidate and hakama, a mild battle of gazes starting. She relented, releasing the straps that held them in place. He had walked there so only minor bruising should be evident. No blood tinged the blue and no slashes disfigured the fabric.

Date had no reaction of pain outer or inner when she pressed his ribs so she surmised nothing was cracked. There hadn't been enough of a time gap for the pill to take action and he seemed too tired to keep the stoic façade. Saki slid her hands down his torso in a wordless apology for the pain before standing, gripping a piece of cloth, walking towards the stream soaking it and returning, beginning her work, slowly, going back as many times as needed. There was a change in his expression, an appreciation and relief every time she moistened his harmed skin, a slight softening of his gaze.

He leaned against her, his hand ghosting down her spine, slowly, the fabric soft underneath his palm, warmed by her skin, sliding her closer in an embrace, his cheek against her head. Saki arched a bit against his touch, stopping herself from leaning further into him, from melting against his chest like a lovesick idiot, her hands busied on their task, redoing the sarashi around his waist, doing her best to ignore the bared flesh beneath them as the cloth covered his bruised skin. Date was numb, the pain now hidden and the pill did make some things a bit foggier for the inexperienced and his mind was in the disappointing events of the day. Looking for physical comfort was not unheard of.

"What happened?" He finally asked, his voice... she couldn't place it. Somewhere between anger and worry. His body language also gave her little, emotions hidden under exhaustion. He had stolen the wet fabric from her hands, wrapping it around her bruised left arm, tying it slowly. She broke away from his embrace. The Dragon's arms, although warm and sheltering had started to feel heavy, tense, confining.

"My men are dead. As any shinobi should, I went to check my information and suspicions. There was a trap in place and I escaped." She said unhurriedly. "There was no information leak. They were just arrogant enough to march ahead." She looked away for a moment, grimacing, keeping the anger in.

Date grabbed her vest, dragging her closer, levelling their faces, letting her see the rage clearly reflected in his expression. Saki kept her features calm and still, as she looked up, gulping abruptly when she found her lips level with his, close enough to feel a whisper of his breath.

"You should not be concerned about me." She gritted out forcefully.

"You're part of my army. They touch you, they're challenging me." Saki covered his hands
lessening his grip, slowly, caressing his fingers, hiding her struggle for distance. The proximity was messing with her senses, sharpening the previously dulled nerves, bringing pain, heat and anticipation.

"I am your Shadow." She whispered softly, calming his outburst, her words in an outward agreement. Not that he would be able to catch the nuance underneath. He let her go with a flash of regret, leaning back, resting against a tree, closing his eye, the expression unguarded. Saki slid back, kneeling again in companionable silence, wrapping her leather straps once more around her arms, slowly, resisting the urge to slide away the brown hair and reassure him. Cuddling… Coddling would not be acceptable. "Boss... You've been quiet."

"Oda outmatched me." He grunted, his mood darkening once more.

"You are not invincible." She tied her left armbands over the fabric and sighed before reaching for the right strap. "We cannot predict or control everything. It is a lesson we are taught but a hard one to swallow." She chuckled. "If we could do either we'd be less sore." There was a slight tilt in his lips at that. "Do you have orders?" She asked softly, finishing her protections.

"Go to sleep. The ride back to Oshu will be long."

Saki could almost taste the bitterness in his voice, washing away what little respite she had been able to give him. The One-Eyed Dragon needed time to heal.

---

**Dou** – 胴 or 仏胴 or 胸当て – Chest armour;

**Haidate** – 佩楯 – Thigh guards;

**Hakama** – 袴 – Pants worn underneath the armour;

**Kote** – 籠手 or 筧籠手 – Glove/gauntlets;

**Kusuri** – 薬 – medical and chemical supplies;

**Oyakata** – 親方 – Master, The literal sense is of someone *in loco parentis*. Latin for "in the place of a parent";

**Sarashi** – さらし – A *sarashi* is a long, winding strip of cloth, usually thick cotton, wrapped tightly around the midriff up to the chest. Historically worn under kimono or armour both by samurai (to resist injury) and by women (for more "obvious" reasons), the sarashi's samurai associations have made them a near-universal symbol of toughness in Japan;

**Saru-bo** – 猿の頬 – "Monkey cheek" A mask covering the chin and cheeks, framing the mouth;

**Shitagi** – 下着 – Shirt worn underneath the armour; double as underclothes;

**Yugake** – 弓懸 – Gloves worn under the kote;
"You will frighten little children away from Oshu if you keep walking around with such a frown."
Saki murmured, leaning against one of the columns of the engawa, exchanging the papers in her hand for a different stack, her tone soft, keeping her claws from piercing the frail material, sparing him a glance once the sword stopped singing. Masamune looked away from the pond, lowering the blade, and levelled a barely acknowledged stare at her. But there was a light of mischief in her downcast eyes and a subtle arch on her lips that told him she knew he was doing it. And the sharp pull away from his thoughts was a trick she had quickly mastered.

The inner garden was as beautiful place, meant for meditation and peace, a retreat. The stone path, made from circular flat rock, led to the small pond underneath a blooming sakura tree. Bushes and rough rocks peppered the landscape, harmoniously, the human-created architecture mingling effortlessly with the natural elements that were allowed to grow within, the picture little disturbed by the small decorative lights hanging from the branches, placed on the rocks, in any place the kunoichi had though needed them. The wall was there for protection but didn't keep the inhabitants from seeing the trees outside, green and pale with petals, the mountains framing the sky.

Saki had appeared and disappeared during the ride home, talking mostly to Kojuro, accepting whatever orders he gave her and vanishing once more, showing no pain in the glances he caught. She awaited them on arrival, by the main gates, having given the orders to the servants, allowing them to be ready for the tired army, reported something to the Right Eye and disappearing once more for a few days without a word. The One-Eyed Dragon hated to be kept out of whatever loop they had formed but Kojuro, when he had raised the issue, guaranteed they were only piecing together the current situation of the land. Saki had smiled and teased, telling him if he wanted to know all he had to do was ask.

It was not an odd answer from her but the secrecy and the whispers… It made it a bit bitter.

Okehazara… There was something uniquely annoying about losing control and blurting out secrets and fears to a shinobi even when said creature was under his employ. What would she do with such information?

Masamune could blame the slip on his mood, the disappointing battle or even, if one could be forgiven the farfetched assumption, the medicine she had offered. But neither of those was an excuse or a particularly good reason for either of his actions.

Women such as her were quite rare in a society of men. Maybe that was part of the allure. Nothing about her screamed frailty. Not after witnessing her in battle or in the bloody aftermath. There had been no fear, worry or care, no plea for help even when it was clear she had taken the brunt of the damage. She had offered a quiet presence, away from the nervous energy of the army, taking care of him without chiding or anxiety. Date had taken that opportunity. She had responded to his touch, arching into it. Then he had glanced into her eyes. Not a hint of shock or displeasure. But he had also seen no signs of Saki being truly affected. He turned on her, trapping her, almost threatening, the reality of his actions in battle, her actions in the shadow crashing into his mind. Loss and defeat did not sit well with him. But there was no attack, no running, no pleading, no gentle lies or platitudes. Just a reassurance that she was his. And those lips so close he could have stolen a kiss.

"You're staring." Saki lowered the papers, her tone dry. "What's on your mind Date-sama?"

A very clear picture of her malicious smile while wearing those threadbare and almost sheer
sleeping clothes he had seen her in before departing to the northern campaign, legs bared and hair down. Date shrugged it away.

"What have you and Kojuro surmised?" There was a hint of shock in her expression, carefully schooled once more, as if it had never existed, her hand dropping slightly as if feeling the weight of the metal, the paper whispering.

"I thought..." Saki shook her head softly, snapping into her official veneer in less than a blink. "Isei fell. Suruga was then taken by Oda and he launched an attack on Mino although he seems to be leaving the Eastern states alone. Katakura-dono's suspects that Devil King is expecting the generals to attack each other,annulling their forces and chances against his prowess. Then he'll swoop and take down all of them. And I agree because it is a sound and effortless tactic. Odawara belongs to Takeda now..."

"Enough." Date said softly, standing, retreating into the house, sheathing the sword.

Saki sighed, laying a hand down on her notes, her eyes saddened.

Too soon, then.

"Time to switch" Samenosuke and Bunshichi were rushing towards the gate, signalling Yoshinao and Magobei as they drew close to the gates, both a bit out of breath.

"You're late moron." Yoshinao criticized, straightening a bit.

Tension was building amongst the soldiers. Men cooped on a relatively small space, fraught with competition, worry, lack of regular training because they were supposed to be resting and regaining their strength, were bound to be problematic. The wounded hadn't been allowed to return for the time being, sent home.

Some handled it better, practicing the sword on their own, alone or against straw dummies, others ate and drank, occupying the teahouse like a swarm of locust, others lost themselves in simple labours or crafts... some brawlled in places where they could not be caught or punished for it. Anything that lightened the atmosphere.

"We went to see how the Boss was doing." Bunshichi said slowly, disheartened, keeping his voice low. That captured the curiosity of the other pair almost immediately.

"How is he?" Yoshinao whispered softly, curiosity and worry mingling.

Samenosuke shook his head, crouching near the guys, forming a circle almost conspiratorially.

"The same as always. Lately, morning or night, he's either swinging his sword around or staying lost in thought. We haven't had a war council in a long time too..."

"And Katakura-dono has been devoting all his energies to the fields."

"So after all the running around, we've given Odawara to Takeda and Suruga to Oda."

"I hope the Captain and Katakura-dono haven't lost their drive..." Bunshichi gasped suddenly, voicing the general fear that had been ghosting around Oshu, the same fear mirrored by the other three.
The rain came quite suddenly, dragged by a bitter wind, pouring into the fields, the sound of the water drops filling the air in a soothing rhythm. Saki sipped her green tea slowly, sitting on the outer veranda, protected, watching the Dragon.

Katakura-dono had asked her to stay close to Oshu so there was little for her to do but train, wait for her informants to report and lounge around.

From time to time Date-sama asked her to come along, usually at the less convenient times. It was a nice spectacle to watch his movements with the sword but it often felt like the One-Eyed Dragon was showing off. The silence was not uncomfortable between the as it sometimes became when he and Katakura-dono shared a room. It was a recent shift in their relationship but one that would pass. The Right Eye wanted to shake him into action, to see his spirit again and at the same time he wanted to stop his recklessness, his words slipping into chastising harsh advice that only served to irk him but Date was still their leader and his orders were clear.

Date's sword slashed the rain drops, his movements practiced and tense, mirroring the lingering mood a bit unfocused, just going through the forms, one after the other, the blade shimmering, his stance shifting easily, moving from single combat to multiple opponent defences and attacks.

Katakura-dono walked towards them in work clothes, his day finished.

Saki smiled. Looked familiar...

The echoes of steps reached her, making the shinobi turn discreetly, slowly, finding a man walking down the path from the gate under a red umbrella. She tilted her head, taking another sip, waiting. Even though he was armed there was nothing in his demeanour that triggered her instincts. A man with long brown hair, carrying a massive sword and a tiny monkey, dressed in colourful and mismatched clothes. Her eyes were drawn to the feathers that adorned the long ponytail and handsome features. Tall, bulky and seemingly dextrous. There was no doubt in her that he was a warrior but others might hesitate in labelling him so because of his appearance and the carefree aura that seemed to seep through his movements. The monkey did not help either.

"Would you happen to be the famous One-Eyed Dragon from Oshu?" He asked in a cheerful voice, stopping, smiling, adjusting the umbrella. Date half turned, his expression slightly confused. Katakura-dono moved, standing a bit behind, his gaze steady and distrustful. "The guys at the gate said you were here." He raised his hand, thumb pointing towards the gate, never losing the smile.

"If you're looking for food go to the teahouse." Date said, looking away, uninterested his body shifting as if the sword was going to take over once more. Saki stood, approaching the steps, leaning against the column, the cup carefully held between her claws, watching the scene unfold. It had been quite a while since any visitors came.

"I didn't think this would go well." There was amusement in his voice despite the cold treatment as he ran a hand over his hair, exchanging a happy smile with the monkey. "At least I came prepared." Despite the loudness of the words there was a quality in them that felt like they were meant for his own ears.

"What is your business with Masamune-sama?" Katakura-dono interfered suddenly as if tired of his antics, insulted on Date's behalf. "You are in the presence of the Head of Oshu. Don't you think it's only proper that you introduce yourself first?" The sharp bite of his voice didn't even scuff the man's attitude.

"Oh" The newcomer's face split in an embarrassed boyish grin, his hand going to his forehead, the tiny creature on his shoulder mimicking his gestures, adding to the silliness of it. "Right you are...
I'm Maeda Keiji. Nice to make your acquaintance. This guy is Yumekichi." The monkey chirped happily, jumping up and down, showing off as his name was called.

Saki chuckled sipping her tea softly, hiding the grin. That was adorable...

So the wanderer of the Maeda had come to the Dragon's door. His detachment of his own clan and friendship with Uesugi Kenshin made him quite an interesting piece in the game, one with freedom and a mind of his own.

Katakura-dono was not impressed. Maybe he hadn't made the connection yet... Did she relay her information or... No. It was a recent bit of intelligence. He was just coming in now and their meeting usually took place after he bathed. Also Maeda Keiji was early.

"This is no place for a street performer. You can go." Katakura-dono said, dismissing him, his voice tired once more, deeming the business that might have brought a performer there as done.

Maeda glossed over the cold treatment, ignoring the two warriors as the Right Eye spoke, looking around, curiosity in his expression as he examined the house, the grounds, his gaze softening as he ogled her, a mischievous smile parting his lips, making his expression a bit more charming. Yumekichi ran to the edge of his shoulder and waved, one hand grabbing the white fur trim of his outer jacket. Saki kept her smile hidden behind the cup for a moment before meeting his eyes. Warm brown irises, honest and open and still hiding something... How odd. She moved a bit, slipping the braid over her shoulder, barely keeping the blush away from her cheeks. It was a bit of a fight but training and knowing who was playing the game made it possible.

"You sure can tell this is a man's place. So lacking a woman's touch. It'd be pretty hard to win over any ladies around here." Maeda glanced at the One-Eyed Dragon and his second in command in a mild provocation, his smile saying exactly what he thought of such a life. "A hell of a chore to allow love to blossom in here." He said into the air, looking up before squaring his gaze on the kunoichi.

Saki chuckled, putting her cup down gently on the railing, sliding out of the protection of the veranda into the rain hiding a shiver when the cold started to touch her, the tiny droplets prickling the skin, placing herself near the newcomer, between the males before anything snapped. He had watched appreciatively as she moved towards him. It was a nice change of pace. Not the little sister or the shadow assassin. Just a woman. Her vanity felt vindicated.

The wanderer tilted the umbrella towards her, protecting her from the rain, sharing it with a very clear grin of victory on his lips.

"I never claimed to be a lady, Maeda-sama." Saki remarked with a smirk. "As for a woman's touch in this place... I was trained to kill, spy, guard, lie, betray and steal. Not the kind of feel you want around your home."

"Which makes you like a lotus flower doesn't it?" He lowered his head with a smile, deliberately ignoring the claws as he took her hand, smiling widely. The two men he had been talking too were also excluded of his attention once again. It wasn't exactly an act but it seemed to be a habit. "Blossoming radiant in the mud." Maeda's eyes focused on the faint marks of the healing slashes on her face. There was no calculation, a slight bit of worry and a gentle brush of his fingers over them. "Not a frail little bauble are you?" Maeda teased. Then his voice lowered softly, leaning into her as if sharing gossip. "Shinobi, right?"

"Not a secret." Not anymore. She raised one hand too, poking him on the chest. "And you are a shameless flatterer." She kept her free hand on her hip, looking away for a moment, rolling her
eyes theatrically.

"Ah beautiful, you wound me." Yumekichi chirped, leaning towards her too. Saki reached for him, carefully scratching his chin with the smooth metal of the back of her claws, drawing closer to Keiji, cooing, amused. "Would you like to join me and watch the sakura flowers after the business with the One-Eyed Dragon is done?"

Saki smiled slightly, almost openly, glancing at Date a bit indirectly, gauging the mood. He was not looking pleased, sword tightly gripped, his attention on them. She lowered her claws, slowly.

"I don't know what kind of festival you came from..." The Dragon growled, turning fully. "But you're too «happy» for my taste." The One-Eyed Dragon was keeping his voice cool but for those who knew him there was no mistaking the edge of anger and frustration.

Maeda Keiji didn't seemed phased, tilting his head with a bright smile.

"Oh... I have an alliance to propose." The tone was cheerful, an attempt to diffuse the mood, saying it as if he had only now recalled what had brought him to Oshu.

"An alliance?" Date said, his mind working around the idea, some of the harshness ebbing under the potential and curiosity. Katakura-dono seemed intrigued too, eyes narrowing, moving closer to listen in. Saki took a cautious step back, softly.

"It's believed that lots of countries are forming pacts to go up against the Devil King of Owari." Keiji started, his tone assured, leaning against his nodachi, focusing what was actually important. He wasn't just saying those because he believed that. There was a confidence and a shard of self assurance in his voice and posture that told Saki he was a driving force behind a lot of those "pacts".

"If that's a joke I'm not laughing. A street performer trying to control a bunch of generals." The One-Eyed Dragon scoffed at the notion, noticing the same tone, chuckling, his grip on the sword lessening. His interest had wandered a bit away.

"Masamune-sama." He hummed, sparing Katakura-dono just a bit of attention. So had recollected the information needed to identify the man. "This is the wanderer of the Maeda clan." Knowing the Right Eye he was already making plans, devising the most advantageous strategy for their army.

"Oh?" Date smirked, the connections dawning on his mind too. Then he glanced at Saki and his expression shifted. "I see. I thought you were just another drunk." It was intended as an insult, a mild one at best. Maeda just deflected with a good natured shrug.

"I know full well I'm a drunk." Yumekichi slipped away from his shoulder, accompanying Maeda's light dismissive words, and swung to Saki's, cuddling against her neck as his master explained his ideal, still keeping her and himself dry. "But this isn't the time to be arguing back and forth. People outside of a conflict are the ones that can truly see how big the fight as gotten. It's the same with war." The pain in his voice was unmistakable even though the façade of calm and lightness ruled the words. "With Date or Oshu, Takeda of Kai, Uesugi of Echigo and Tokugawa of Mikawa we can secure the Eastern front. From there we'll get Azai of Omi and Asakura of Echizen and the generals of the western lands to surround Oda. As humble as my abilities are I'll be part of it as well." Keiji finished the speech with a wide, confident smile.

"You're a talkative bastard." Date murmured, his eye on the sword, his mind revisiting the end of Okehazara. "Oda Nobunaga... He's definitely not your everyday old man."
Saki looked away, towards the stone at her feet. Yumekichi chirped near her ear, a tiny hand touching her cheek, a soft, almost human, concerned glance glistening in those black eyes. She looked up, gently caressing the tiny monkey's head, cooing for him again. He was a really empathetic thing wasn't he…

"You've met the Devil King?" Keiji seemed surprised, adjusting the weight of the nodachi. "Then you understand, right? If you..." Hope was rising in him, spilling into the voice.

"Unfortunately... I have no desire to be below anyone else." Date said, tossing the dark wet fringe away, smiling slightly, half turning, facing Keiji fully.

"No one is above or below." Keiji said, cutting the Dragon's attitude with a sharp gesture. "What I'm trying to say..."

Saki chuckled as Yumekichi hissed, jumping up and down on her shoulder, shaking a little fist at the Dragon. So Keiji was getting a bit angry, wasn't he?

"If you still want to talk..." Date straightened his sword, pointing at the wanderer. "then you'd better hold me down by force." He held his sword tighter, shifting his weight "Make me listen." The One-Eyed Dragon challenged.

"That sounded so..." She whispered to herself, her mind going away on its own for a bit.

"I didn't come here to fight with you." Keiji said, dismayed. "If you're looking for hand to hand match you could find plenty of partners in the red light district." That did not help her mind return now did it? "I'll even take you there after we come to a truce..." Keiji smiled again, reaching for Saki touching her chin, tilting her head up to share the light-hearted mood and the schemer's tone. "And you are more than welcome be with us."

"«Shut up»" The Dragon's shout snapped her back into the present.

Saki shadowed away, appearing next to Katakura-dono holding a very disoriented monkey in her arms, watching as Date attacked, slashing the umbrella in half.

Maeda Keiji just sidestepped the blow, sacrificing the protection.

"Fine One Eyed Dragon." Keiji assumed a combat pose, nodachi still sheathed. Didn't seem at all daunted by the display of speed and precision.

"What are you doing?" Date was looking at the oddity of a man fighting with his weapon covered. Most samurai would not fetter themselves in a combat. Display of overconfidence, a provocation or an attempt to do as little damage as possible?

"I heard you know some pretty amazing techniques. Enough so that I wouldn't have to hold back." Ah. For the sheer pleasure of a brawl. Saki shook her head with a small smile.

"Don't make me mad." Date was fuming.

"You mean you aren't mad yet?" The shinobi couldn't help a small chuckle from escaping in reaction to the words and the simply shocked expression of the wanderer.

"Kojuro"

"I know my lord. Please feel free." Katakura-dono lowered his head slightly, resigned.
Date charged, leaping, using the speed as a boost, attacking from above, stopped by Keiji who flexed his body, jumping high, pushing the katana out of the way, slashing downward with a smile, his body off the ground, trying to ram Date down as he blocked with an upward strike. They broke apart, their weapons balanced.

Their attacks were blocked again and again, their voiced mixing in a grunt as they struggled for dominance. The One-Eyed Dragon jumped again, his sword descending forcefully.

Keiji dodged quickly, swinging once again, keeping him away as he unsheathed the nodachi, his expression shifting slightly.

Saki caught it the shift beyond the freeing of the sword and so did Katakura-dono.

The wanderer was getting serious.

The naked steel clashed with a sharp note, both combatants blocking.

"Is this world not for people's happiness?! Wouldn't you rather care for those you love than shed blood on a battlefield?!" Keiji broke the stalemate, pushing Date back. "To think of Toshiie and Matsu in pain..." His blade was swung once more, clashing against the One-Eyed Dragon's, locking, both men straining to keep each other still. "That's one thing I never want to see! I don't care how little you think of it! To rule the country is to give everyone a life of love, fight, laughing, crying and having fun!" Keiji shoved Date again, raising the sword in a defensive stance. "That's the world I want!"

Date hesitated, his expression softening for a moment in the small breather, looking around quickly, towards Katakura-dono. He still had that blank resigned expression. Saki tilted her head, looking away. It was not her place to interfere in that.

Then the One-Eyed Dragon fought back, his face a mask of rage, focus, hiding the understanding. He jumped, back after the strike that broke Maeda's concentration calling his six claws to his hands, the move creating a lightning dragon, slamming his strength against the adversary, plastering him against the wall with the massive strike.

Saki grimaced, echoing the pain that move must have caused on the wanderer.

"Go try somewhere else, lover-boy." Date said calmly, walking away with Katakura-dono, guarding the swords.

Saki glanced at them as the rain stopped, waiting, petting Yumekichi gently.

The wanderer, by some miracle still conscious, tried to call them back, reaching for them, slumping a bit when his voice went unheard, grousing. The shinobi approached Maeda Keiji, crouching returning the monkey, extending her arm, claws against Maeda's shoulder.

Yumekichi patted his master's face with a couple of chirps as he left her.

"Heh... Definitely didn't go well." He murmured, smiling slightly.

"I disagree. You seemed to have jolted something in him." Saki stood, tossing her braid over her shoulder once more, glancing at the inner gate where they had disappeared.

"Do you want to watch the sakura flowers with me?" Keiji had leaned against the wall, legs crossed.
"I don't..." Saki smiled abruptly, charmed by his easy way but far from being fooled. "I don't think that would be wise of me. You do have a certain reputation... but thank you."

"Ah..." Keiji smiled, placing his elbow on his knee, resting his face on the palm of his hand, chuckling.

"I'm relieved Masamune-sama." Kojuro was kneeling in the shadows of the meeting room, wearing once more his warring clothes, fists placed on his thighs, swords on his belt, the listlessness that plagued him gone.

"What are you talking about?" Date was leaning against the open shoji, the fabric of his clothes still damp, the katanas placed in his room, looking at the inner garden tinged golden by the sunset. He glanced at the Right Eye for a moment, just a slight tilt of his head allowing the hair to unblock his eye, appraising his second's face carefully.

"At Okehazara, you feared the Devil King. It seemed you had lost your courage." Kojuro said, keeping his voice even, looking directly at his leader, as if urging him to understand his point of view.

"You bastard. Enough with the sarcasm..." Date scoffed at the notion, looking away once more. Despite the stillness in his position the fire was back, the intensity rebuilt. And both men knew it, both knew it would be impossible to just sit still, thinking about the lost battle again and again.

"Masamune-sama you must have noticed it as well. That was..." Kojuro hesitated for a moment before voicing his findings, the words he had been holding ever since they had returned. "You could not die. You felt that in instant, with all of your heart and soul, what your duty was: you must not die no matter what." His voice grew passionately, as he stated his own vision, part of the reasons why he was loyal. "You are the lives of the people. The pride of he that holds the burden of tomorrow, the figure of our nation's leader." There was a pause in that moment as he gathered his thoughts. "Before you reprimand me, please take heed of the wanderer, even though he did try to challenge you. The people and the soldiers of Oshu are prepared to go with whatever you decide."

"Kojuro" The words were similar and the conviction was unshakable. The same thing that had rekindled Date's heart hours ago. The One-Eyed Dragon was startled, touched.

"I've been your comrade since our first battle, I am your Right Eye, I am here and I will not leave." Kojuro smiled slightly, lowering his head then, looking outside too. "Though it seems that I've been merely telling you not to do things as of late. Admonishing you." There was amusement and regret in his voice as he stated his hopes, waiting.

"True enough." Date stood slowly, walking into the engawa, looking into the golden sky. "Someone has to do it. And I'll be the one." Date Masamune, the One-Eyed Dragon, Number One, Head of Oshu smiled slightly. "Go Straight». I want you to watch my back Kojuro." His order was the same as always, the tone sharp and clear.

"Understood." Kojuro lowered his head in a formal bow with a smile.

"Saki?" Date turned slightly, wanting her word, lowering his voice, seeing the shinobi sitting next to the room, outside, leaning against the column once more, staring at him with a soft smile, eyes tinted gold by the sun.

"I heard." She also heard Katakura-dono leave the room. There would be a war meeting soon. The
Right Eye was going to call the men. "I also watch." She shifted her gaze away, towards the horizon, frowning at the clouds that drifted away. "If I had suspected all it took to get the One-Eyed Dragon back was a good brawl..." She shrugged, amused. "But it wasn't just that was it?"

"Were you not supposed to watch sakura with the wanderer?" Date muttered dismissively.

"I'm watching sakura right now." Saki gestured towards the tree. "They're the last ones." She closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the sun, pulling her legs up with a sigh, leaning forward, resting her wrists on her knees, rolling her shoulders slowly. "Besides it is known that Maeda is a flirt. Do you want me to go, to find out more about his alliances? He went to the red light district and is staying at the..."

"No." Date sat next to her, keeping his expression cool. Any outing with Maeda Keiji would most likely involve booze and the One-Eyed dragon remembered how sweet Saki got when caught in a drunken state. She might be careful and measure what she ingested if it was a mission and when there was a clear objective to achieve but... there was no way he would let his kunoichi go. "What do I need to know?"

Saki smirked, opening her eyes softly, adjusting her position and began to talk, uninterrupted this time. Those were the things she would repeat later on with Katakura-dono, the hoarded information that she had been able to gather. But it would be a bit odd and embarrassing if their leader had no idea of what was being discussed in his own meeting room.

"«Are you ready guys?»" The words echoed clearly in the morning, punctuated by the thuds of the horses' hooves. The guys cheered. The army was gathered in front of the gate, arms ready, horses fresh, spirits rekindled and flags flying, held high. More of them would join as they rode out of Oshu, completing the numbers. There was joy in their echoes. "We head to Owari! We'll take the head of the Devil King!" More cheers, more energy in response to the One-Eyed Dragon's. «OK Let's get serious!»"

Date reared his horse, darting forward, the men following at the full flashy speed of a departure.

Maeda Keiji was also amongst the warriors, smiling a bit smugly.

Saki watched them go for a moment from the gate's top.

The road would be open as far as Kai. Then things might get a bit sketchier. The kunoichi shadowed, leaving them behind, scouting ahead.

---

Engawa – 縁側 – veranda, porch, balcony, open corridor;

Nodachi – 野太刀 – large two handed sword;
Death cloaked the land wherever the Devil King set his eyes. It followed him, slavishly devoted, the corpses of the defeated left to rot like a gruesome offering to the man that saw himself as worthy of worship. His rule was made of cruelty for its own sake, a crushing fist choking life and light out of the heart of even the most hopeful and resilient man, dampering the spirit of the Land of the Rising Sun, cloaking it in a darkness so deep that would snuff out hope itself.

And still some did not see it.

How could they not when crossing the scorched fields, the land soaked with blood, the air thick with ash? When the armies of the Devil King were clawing at their doors and the battlefields stretched from their borders to the horizon?

Saki watched, hidden in the shadows of the inner wall of Azai's residence, as Sarutobi left Omi, his face set in a disappointed expression visible for a moment as he perched on a nearby tree, collecting his thoughts, getting his bearings before vanishing, barely a whisper of shadow marking his path.

Azai was blinded by pride, his own honour and just a hint of love for the sister of a Devil. "There is no hope for a man so rigid on his views or path" her sensei used to say when the students discussed the scenarios he challenged them with. Assassinations, combat, defence, attacks, information dealing, sabotage, infiltration… every angle had its place and so many ways to be dealt with. Some insisted in using only the tried and true strategies when flexibility was a valued skill. They learned fast after that first mistake.

The shinobi was sure the man was nothing more than an expendable and pliable pawn to Oda. Anyone like him, well… The right words, the right push and pull and his own code would force his demise. The ninja clans were not the only ones who knew how to play that game and Oda had proven that his sense of honour was placed somewhere between malleable and non-existent. He had launched several attacks on the Iga and Koga clans, decimating their hidden villages and persecuting survivors and innocents alike, weakening the ninja as whole seeing those were the older families…

The presence of Kai's ninja could only mean Takeda Shingen was using the same plan the Maeda wanderer presented to Date. Unite and surround Oda. Or die alone and betrayed. And like Maeda's his plea was being ignored or denied. Who thought of it first was unimportant but the plan itself was proof of how desperate the ones who did see what Oda was doing were growing. To forge alliances between warring clans and trust them at their backs… It was almost unheard of.

The fear, the possibility of defeat would only grow as long the men that allied themselves with the Devil King of Owari chose to remain blind and bound.

She shadowed away, moving back. There was nothing that she could do for or in Omi. And there was no point in doing what she hadn't been ordered to do, now was there? At least when it didn't benefit the ones whom she served.

As she sidestepped the borders of Kai, knowing Sarutobi would already have arrived, moving stealthily to avoid his shinobi patrollers, the shadow of Kasuga passed by, returning to her own master.

Saki stopped for a moment, looking around, leaning against the tree, perched on a branch.
The renegade paid no attention to the surroundings, her expression determined, her mind on the destination, the environs forgotten. The Dragon's Shadow shook her head slowly. Easy to kill, that one. Sloppy work. Any ninja should have been aware that there was another so close, especially one whose protection was solely dependent on her master's life. Saki was making no effort to hide, even. But the bimbo's presence meant the truce between Takeda and Uesugi had evolved into something more. Cooperation at least, if not an outright alliance.

The shinobi moved once more, abandoning the borders, storing the new titbit of information, tracking the army, finding the camp, the lights from the fire bright enough to locate them with ease, a soft glow over the canopy, away from the roads. She stepped out of the shadows slowly at the entrance, saluting the sentinels, bantering playfully with them, reassuring that there was no threat that she had seen in the way back, before crossing the threshold. This time it was a more composed war encampment, the fabric panels, Oshu's symbol woven into them, surrounding the area for extra privacy and protection, dimming the glow of the lit the fire and torches, the scent of the burning wood, men and horses overpowering the forest. They usually sacrificed the tents for mobility and the weather was warm.

The men were satisfied to see their Boss on the move once more, to be able to fight, with a clear path to blaze through, slipping easily into their warring preparations, checking and rechecking supplies, weapons and armour.

There were some worries about the Devil King, fuelled by rumours that she could not control.

They had a vague idea what they were up against but the image was still foggy and those who actually knew what was like to face such a presence were not going to divulge it. Those men could not afford a broken spirit before the blades were even drawn. There had been enough blows on their pride as an army already.

Maeda Keiji had been accepted easily, even if only as an entertaining company. It wasn't hard to see why, as he was quite a nice talkative guy who showed interest in what the men thought that mattered, trying to learn things, show tricks for cooking, gambling, listening to their war stories, flittering from group to group with enthusiasm. Yumekichi pranced around too, chirping, playing. That had started during the ride and did not change in the hours that passed.

There had been a bit of tension early on, as they stopped to water the horses and rest a bit, the result of Katakura-dono's still suspicious demeanour, not that it could be faulted, the rumour about his challenge to Date and a group angry males seeking to protect their shinobi. Apparently no one had authorization to flirt with her or admit she had pretty curves. That was also part of the reason she had left early for scouting even before the camp was completely set. Their bragging was enough. Over-protectiveness was making her miffed and snappy, especially when she actually enjoyed talking to Keiji, finding the time at each stop. His easygoing manner hid more than one gave him credit for and seemed to have none of the issues warriors had towards her profession and flexible views.

The shinobi walked pass them slowly, relaxing a bit now that she was with friends, letting out a sigh.

It was obvious the wanderer had other objectives in mind. He was using the generals, the armies and the situation of the land for his own needs. Or dreams. Given his nature Saki was quite sure he was looking for a way out of the Maeda clan obligations to Oda. His family seemed to be at the heart of the matter but the peace of the rest of the land did not seem too far from his mind. Those were her estimates but she preferred not to share. The Right Eye seemed to expect a simple betrayal.
Katakura-dono and the One-Eyed Dragon sat on foldable benches, a bit away but still part of the collective, talking, their voices hushed. About Oshu, the crops, the army, just a hint of strategy. Their dynamic was once more restored, the tension faded. It was a grand sign of trust to allow someone at one's back, one that could reveal itself to be a foolish, emotional choice. But not there.

"Katakura-dono." She said, her voice even, kept in the same discreet tone they were using. The Right Eye turned his head slightly looking at her, his expression still relaxed, gesturing for her to report. Date leaned forward. Saki did what was expected, voicing her finds, kneeling next to the seats, on the grass, between them so no words escaped the small circle.

"And as we move they decided to make us the vanguard." Saki nodded, confirming Katakura-dono's conclusion after her voice had died down. "It was to be expected." Kojuro stood, placing a hand over Saki's shoulder, companionably, walking away, to make his rounds. He would be retiring soon so the army could begin the ride to Owari at dawn. Most of them were preparing to sleep too. Some were already lying on their mats, finishing up whatever rituals their minds needed. They had three or four more days of riding to do, keeping the current pace, trying not to overwork the horses, pausing in-between. Their greatest asset was mobility and tiring the animals that provided said asset would be foolish.

"Anything happened while I was gone Date-sama?" Saki turned to the One-Eyed Dragon stretching slowly, arms above her head, flexing the claws before lowering them, releasing the weapons slowly from her hands, placing the articulate metal pieces on the ground, flexing her fingers over her knees.

"There was quite a brawl between the guys and lover-boy." There was definitely mischief in that one blue eye as he leaned to share his own information. "Apparently they don't take it too kindly when some outsider gropes our shinobi." Saki tilted her head towards him, rolling her eyes, staring him down for a moment, before her attention shifted as she looked at the guys a bit more closely under the light. Bruised cheeks, busted lips, a couple of black eyes. She tskd keeping her eyes forward. They displayed them proudly when they realized she was appraising the damage. Some scurried away, gripped by a sudden embarrassment. They did that amongst themselves too but as they knew each other the bruises never quite grew so purple.

"He is a flirt. You're just daring him to be more outrageous." And she recalled he hadn't taken it kindly either in that first meeting. The combination of rage because of the proposal of alliances, the lack of position, the flirting and the reference to the red-light district... that still made her smile. "And they shouldn't cripple themselves before a battle." Even if the battle was a few days away.

Date shrugged, waiting for her to finish cutting the men down to size with a couple of glares, appreciating the show. Both of the men running away or pretending to be busy or preening and the way she was still moving, stretching her legs absentmindedly.

"Maeda claimed to know things about shinobi." Date continued, his voice flowing smoothly in a tone she perceived as playful. And she wasn't liking where that might be headed. Saki glanced at him, carefully while cooling down after the scouting trip, stretching and undulating, displaying her flexibility without a care, making sure she was ready for another night, for the next day, for as long and that campaign lasted.

"Kasuga is the only one he might know besides me." And there was no way she was going to accept a comparison. She crossed her legs, straightening slowly, exhaling slowly, finishing the routine, rubbing her shoulder carefully. It was a bit stiff, still healing under the unbroken skin. "And she is a traitor to the shinobi that's only alive because the War God took a liking to her."
"Saki."

"Date-Sama." She answered wryly in response to his teasing tone, her attention still divided.

"Is it true female shinobi often lie with their hirers?"

Saki stopped moving and breathing entirely, looking at him, eyes suddenly wide, a blush spreading on her cheeks, faintly visible in the dusk created by the torches. Date smirked. That was a new and very interesting expression. It lasted only a couple of seconds but it was enough. She snapped out of the daze and chuckled.

"If it is asked of us. Sometimes its part of the job. Or just because there is a bond between them." She looked away. "Most of the times lying with someone is just a faster way to plant a blade on their back..." Her voice grew quiet as Date touched her cheek, cupping it and turned her face towards him. Saki looked up as his thumb traced her lower lip, over the old scar, feeling the heat from his hand searing her skin. She closed her eyes for a moment with a sigh, lowering her head, brushing a kiss over his thumb.

So she did react to him. Masamune thought with a smile before letting go, enjoying the blush. She was smirking, though, as she looked away, half hiding it, as if amused by his gesture, warmth in those grey eyes. The One-Eyed Dragon looked around, catching Maeda's knowing glance and open smile, seemingly the only one that had noticed the small exchange. Date threw him a challenging look.

The first brawl had been with the guys because he had touched their shinobi in a way they found disrespectful. Saki had found a way to prove herself to them and earned her place amongst them. No one doubted her skills but none forgot that she was a woman. Traditional values clashed with her profession and demeanour and most of the warriors and soldiers chose to ignore the part of her that was causing the issue. In battle she was shinobi, in the camp she was a girl.

The next one would be with the One-Eyed Dragon because he had touched his Shadow.

"One-Eyed Dragon!" Saki opened her eyes, seeing Maeda Keiji approach, spurring his horse to keep up with Date's, smiling at her, for a moment, the gesture almost automatic. Female is present: turn on the charm, as it were.

The ride had been smooth so far and the day was starting bright and pleasant. She was perched on the usual place she used to rest when running grew tiresome, leaning against the Dragon. The shinobi wasn't exactly sure why he insisted in that arrangement but she also saw no need to complain. Gave her time to rest after her latest scouting venture, right before the sunrise. Also horse riding was not one of her finer skills. She could perch on one, jump on one, keep her balance on one, be fancy and acrobatic on one, as a circus performer. But controlling one? She was lucky if the beast didn't start walking backwards as soon as she picked up the reins. Her report was about finished when the wanderer's voice called.

The road was carved in a plain, the mountains distant, the grass green on each side of the path waving softly in the wind. The scent of dew and morning still hung in the air. It was difficult to believe war was brewing south of them if one was unaware of the struggles.

"What's up, lady-killer?" Date didn't bother to look over his shoulder, his voice rising above the thunderous sound of the hooves.

"Right about now Uesugi's forces should be passing through Shinano and heading for Kai." Keiji
said, looking towards the horizon, the hard ride upsetting Yumekichi's balance. He was leaning forward to give the horse a bit of boost, less resistance to catch up with Date's.

"Are they planning a rematch of the Kawanakajima battle?" Saki chuckled. As if he didn't know. After all she had just reported the same thing. He was toying with Maeda, wanting to extract a bit more. To figure him out, as it were.

"Nah. They'll meet up with Takeda and invade Owari using us as their spearhead." He glanced at them once more, smiling bashfully. "Don't think badly of me. But even if I hadn't spurred you on, you would have…" He was both apologising and justifying his actions. So there were some regrets in there for what he had to do. Or what he wanted to do.

"Kojuro's already seen through all that." Kojuro was riding alongside them now, his face stoic, his horse keeping the pace easily. Saki threw him a smile answered with a nod.

"I'm not decorative." She added, making clear where the information that had cemented to Right Eye conclusions had originated. Date chuckled against her back, glancing over for the first time since the conversation had started, a smirk growing in his lips.

"I don't care if there is a force of millions at my heels. I will be the one taking the Devil king's head «you see»." He straightened proudly, looking forward once more. "Then I'll sweep through and conquer the country. We'll end up crushing Takeda and Uesugi at our backs first." His voice quieted as his mind travelled. "Though I would have liked to save the fun with him for the end." Saki smiled and reached back, her claws patting his thigh, metal against metal, clinking.

"Even if it isn't the last battle it will be intense." She murmured against his covered ear, smiling.

The horses were being watered when the gigantic falcon arrived.

There was some alarm as its shadow passed, quickly fading once they realized what it was. It didn't screech or swoop down on any of the men, circling around as if waiting for something. Saki recognized the method and the movements that could only be derived from training, approaching an open area slowly raising her wrist into the air, whistling a sharp note, identifying herself to the bird, allowing it to dive and perch on it, sliding her clawed fingers over its proud neck, smoothing the feathers gently as his own claws surrounded her wrist carefully, without injuring it, before slipping out the message from its holder.

One of Sarutobi's birds, then. Saki examined the falcon for a long moment after glancing at the papers, seeing the symbol of Kai in the seal. He was easy to identify as a shinobi's tool but the colour of the feathers around the neck and chest were distinctive in all of Sasuke's pets.

There were more discreet ways to pass messages between shinobi. He must have wanted this delivery seen by her faction.

She shook the piece of paper open with a sharp movement. The letter was encrypted but it was an easy code, one that didn't belong to any clan but was still private enough for quick notes and lesser information. Some employers were schooled in it too, for an added layer of security to their orders and dealings. She frowned as the message became clear.

A move of her wrist sent the bird away, crossing the clear sky once more, turning towards his master quickly and sharply, still silent like a ghost. That was what unnerved most people about ninja-trained animals. They were as silent as their shrouded masters. She looked around for a moment, waiting.
Katakura-dono approached slowly, looking towards the direction the bird had disappeared into, noticing the message in her hand.

"Can you share?" He asked cautiously. Loyalty to the shinobi secrecy still came first. It was good of him to understand that about her contract. The Three Oaths she owed to both her loyalties.

"Sarutobi wants to meet. From the wording I believe Kasuga will also be there." She gave him the letter. The Right Eye looked at it for a moment, frowning, not recognizing the code. Saki grimaced. Something else she needed to add to her list of tasks to help Oshu and its leader. "Is there anything you'd like to transmit or keep secret?"

"I trust you know what to do." The second in command appraised. Saki smiled, pleased, tilting her head, lowering it in a respectful bow afterwards, shadowing away.

There were traps in the meeting ground Sarutobi Sasuke had pinpointed as the place where they would meet. Thin wires, invisible through tricks of light and shadow, linked to mild explosives were placed around. It was a simple trap and a quick security system for a gathering. Just in case a message was intercepted.

Saki avoided the trapped branches with ease, knowing the best perches from training and experience, refraining from the use of shadow skills in the last meters before the elder tree whose thick branches would support the three of them. She remembered the scorched trees back in the dojo, the ever-changing wiring of the training grounds, the mix of poison, explosives, arrows, shuriken, breakaway branches, pits, other shinobi... It was one of the training grounds that kept one on the razor's edge from start to finish.

Sarutobi was there with his trademark smug smile, leaning against the trunk, making no effort to disguise himself in nature or shadow. Saki walked towards him, sitting nearby on the branch, legs dangling, breathing deeply while looking around, searching the other possible precautions one could take.

There was a sudden explosion, followed by a shriek. Both shinobi exchanged a look and a sigh of embarrassment.

Kasuga arrived with an angry expression and a very much ruined stealth effort. Her agility was still a mark or a shinobi but the rest... Seemed incomplete, weakened.

"What is the idea Sarutobi? I..." She stopped her rant, eyes drawn to Saki, her expression growing wary. "You... I saw you when Oda killed Imagawa..." She snapped out of the thoughtfulness brought by the surprise of seeing other, kunai slipping into her hand, threateningly. "Who are you?"

"I'm the One-Eyed Dragon's shinobi. Name's Saki." Saki didn't bother to stand up, just glancing at the renegade before shifting her attention to Sasuke. "So you are indeed together."

"What are you saying... of all the nerve to imply that him and I... that I would..." Kasuga blurted out, suddenly outraged, staring down Sasuke. Saki snorted, keeping the laugh in. Sasuke smiled, reaching up, crossing his arms above his head, failing to look sheepish. Kasuga then realized what the other kunoichi meant. Her face grew a bit red, looking away suddenly as she tried to regain her composure. "The alliance."

"You are together?" Saki turned her attention to Kai's ninja, crossing her legs, leaning back, balancing on her arms, her meaning and demeanour changing slightly.
"I did try to convince her to join my forces." Sarutobi preened a bit, smiling openly at Kasuga.

"And Uesugi?" Saki leaned forward once more, resting her elbows on her legs, chuckling.

"Well... Fuma is out of a job is he not?" Sasuke waved the concern away as Kasuga fidgeted irritably.

"How's Sanada?"

"A message from your Dragon?"

"Curiosity on my part."

"Eager for a fight."

"Has he recovered from our little play?"

"I gave him another lead to chase." He glanced at Kasuga for a moment who was still looking at them like they were not quite right in the head.

"Why are you two doing this? We have to return fast so just... just stop that." Saki lowered her eyes with a smirk and Sasuke stretched, walking on the branch.

"You're an evil, evil man. I'm in awe." Saki stood slowly in reaction. "What did you want to say?"

"Kai and Echigo propose a temporary alliance with Oshu." Sasuke announced solemnly. "The wanderer contacted Kai and told us about the One-Eyed Dragon's move."

"I was instructed to say no. Oshu marches on alone. If you want to follow us so be it. But we'll win and the One-Eyed Dragon will claim Oda's head." Saki smiled widely, more a baring of her teeth than an actual sign of joy, a challenge. "It is a bit on the dramatic side but there it is." She looked away with a smirk, joining her hands in front of her body, the claws clinking softly before lowering her head slightly. "Now... I'll leave you two lovebirds alone." Saki vanished before Kasuga had time to blast out her outrage, accompanied by Sasuke's light chuckle.

There was unrest on the borders of Omi and Echizen. The rumour reached her before returning to the army and she thought it would be productive to verify even though it somewhat was related with her earlier qualms about interference. But it was a matter of information.

Azai's army was moving, the warlord accompanied by his wife, his intent clear, honour whipping him towards action: cut the path of the army that marched towards the land of his allies, one whose numbers raised thick dust as they rode and carried Oda's symbol under a skull. The shinobi watched from the shadows of the trees that edged the plain as Azai Nagamasa rode towards the opposing army, demanding explanations, straining her ear to catch every word greedily even as she kept herself safe.

Saki paled as she recognized the other man, the white haired freak that presented himself as Akechi Mitsuhide, the sun gleaming on his scythes, laughing at Azai's devotion to justice, his words twisted and bitter, reaching the kunoichi easily despite the softness of his tone, yet all of them seemed to be right, resonating with Azai's principles. He knew how to apply the spurs to the man.

Both armies were stopped before engaging.

Azai's Defenders of Justice went back, dismissed, some comrades glancing worriedly at their
leader, perhaps not as blind as him.

The others followed Akechi as he took Azai and his wife, grim banners held high, closing around
the man in white and his dark-haired wife.

Akechi Mitsuhide was most likely leading them to Oda.

Saki slipped away, stifling a foreboding shiver that seemed to accompany any dealing involving the
Demon King and his minions, bringing more of the information she had collected to the forefront
of her mind. It still didn't seem like something she could follow or interfere in.

Takeda and Uesugi rode together towards the plains of Nagashino where Tokugawa Ieyasu awaited
them, his forces too small to actually put a fight against the united might of the Tiger of Kai and
Echigo's War God. It was odd but there could be other shades and prisms in Tokugawa's strategy.
Sneak attacks, reinforcements waiting for their order, a trapped field… and Honda Tadakatsu, of
course. But she was not part of either of the opposing force's ninja so there was really no need for
her to speculate. It was just another piece of information for her hoard.

For now there seemed to be no impediment in Date's army charge toward Owari but with Oda that
could change abruptly… Sugitani Zenjubo from the Koga had failed to kill Oda with two bullets,
sniped from the shadow. He had been tortured and killed. Manabe Rokuro had failed to kill Oda,
discovered mid-attempt, taking his own life to protect the secrets of clan and master. Ishikawa
Goemon had failed to poison Oda although he had been successful in escaping his clutches. A four
person Iga rifle squad had attempted to take revenge for their clan's persecution... How could they
have missed the heavily armoured man in a red cloak was a mystery to Saki… the point was the
shinobi were full of hatred for the warlord, their methods were thwarted by the Devil King and the
nuke-nin who served and trained Oda's loyal ninja forces, and had learned to take none of his
actions lightly, something that was just dawning on the Generals' minds.

"Say One-Eyed Dragon, who's the guy you were talking about the other day?" Keiji approached
once more, prickled by boredom and curiosity. Saki watched, jumping from branch to branch. The
road was carved deeply between the trees, flowing straight in the shade. "There's somebody you
want to fight after you've defeated the Devil King?"

"Yeah you could say that." Date hesitated a bit on his answer, focusing his thoughts. The shinobi
moved, continuing in her path.

"You had a good look about you." Keiji said with a chortle. The dreamy glance of a warrior
longing for a worthy, challenging adversary. Saki though. She knew that look. She chuckled
looking forward again. Date hummed in question, tilting his head back. "When you were thinking
of that guy" There was an inquisitive expression in Date's eye when the ninja glanced again,
checking where the conversation was headed. Keiji shrugged and his gaze sharpened, seeing the
rivalry clearly reflected in that glance, merging it with the former. "That's the difference between
warring and fighting." The wanderer said, smiling, understanding. If he knew Uesugi Kenshin as
well as it was rumoured Maeda Keiji had a good base for comparison as the rivalry between the
Tiger of Kai and Echigo's War God was legendary in the warring states.

Date hummed in agreement, amused.

Katakura-dono glared as his horse sped by Keiji's. Yumekichi hissed at him as the wanderer looked
away with a smug smile. Bringing Sanada Yukimura into the conversation was a bit of a gamble. It
could make the One-Eyed Dragon happy with thoughts of battle, angry with frustration or get him
on the prowl for conflict. Which could make Katakura-dono's words hard to take and complicated
any kind of strategy and forethought he tried to impart.

But they were headed to a battle.

Maybe the One-Eyed Dragon could use the boost either of those emotions brought him.

Nuke-nin – 抜け 忍 – Fallen or rogue ninja;
Chapter 5

"Masamune-Sama" Katakura-dono rode faster, approaching the One-Eyed Dragon, seizing a moment of calm when Maeda was not near and there was nothing to see but the trees and road, the sun approaching the apex of the third day of travel. "About the wandered of the Maeda..." He looked back, towards the men of the army and the aforementioned wanderer. There was a bit of conversation still going around, the demeanour relaxed but expectant, growing tenser as Owari grew close. "Something about him does not quite sit right with me." The Right Eye was once more trying to mention his worries about Keiji.

It was just a sharpening of his earlier suspicions. There had been no real shift in the wanderer's behaviour but the doubt had been there since the beginning of their association and the times were too uncertain and his alliances too clouded for the lingering worry to fade easily.

Date looked over his shoulder, eyes narrowing slightly as he mulled over the words. His suspicions were not as pointed as Katakura-dono's but they were still there and his Right Eye's word carried a lot of weight in any decision. Maeda Keiji was too new of an acquaintance to be fully trusted within the army despite how well he was accepted as a companion.

"You think we're being deftly lured into the presence of the Devil King." The One-Eyed Dragon considered, keeping his voice low. They were entering a territory allied to Oda so the vigilance had to increase. From that day forward they had to keep the weapons ready.

Saki jumped out of the trees, running alongside them, to hear more easily and to be ready if any new insight was asked. She was still keeping her Keiji-related suppositions hidden as neither man was amenable to that particular turn of logic. As for battle... Her claws were sharpened and her skills primed. She had performed the Kata, the Dwell in Darkness ritual, a sort of dance where she flowed from form to form, increasing her speed and stealth, readying for any eventuality, increasing the speed in which her shadow skills answered to her call. It had been a twenty minute delay for her, doing what needed to be done but time was very malleable when one could do what ninja did.

"It is not inconceivable." The Right Eye pondered, looking around. The terrain was quickly changing and ribbons of clear blue were peeking through the trees, the sky becoming more visible, the trees thinning. There was an echo in the air, muffled but familiar. "He may not be fettered by his clan but he still claims the Maeda name. Maeda Toshiie supports Oda and as Saki informed us he was recently granted the land of Kaga."

Date shook his head, dismissing the worries once more.

"I don't care as long as he doesn't get in my way." Brash and arrogant but that was what he was when battle called. And in a way he was right. If another's actions had no influence in Date's battlefield or domains they could be ignored as inconsequential. And Saki could refrain from dealing with it covertly and harshly.

Their attention shifted as the plains of Nagashino became visible, the battle already raging, blue, red and gold banners in the wind, the fog of war obscuring men and horses, the sounds of metal and death reaching them in faint echoes, accompanying the wind.

Saki stopped, letting the horses pass her by, jumping to the top of a rock, standing, watching from the perch, feeling the wind, listening to the clash, to her army that rode on. Too little men power in one side, overwhelmed by the War God's swordsmen and flowing strategies and Takeda's famed
cavalry. And Takeda himself, his strikes powerful enough to stir the air into hurricanes, dragging men and horses into the air. Honda Tadakatsu was nowhere to be seen but she did not doubt it was close, a shout away from charging. Nothing had changed there. They had to have more in store...

"Tokugawa is blocking Takeda and Uesugi's way." Kojuro announced, slowing down, appraising the situation on the other side. Saki rejoined them, shadowing jumping, running to catch up.

"It's a skirmish." Date chuckled, just glancing at the other margin as Katakura-dono caught him. "Once we've knocked down the Devil King we'll double back and rush them. We'll take them, Shinano and all."

"So even the Tiger of Kai was unable to win him over." Keiji whispered, the low tone reaching Saki in the front lines. He knew. He had tried in his way to Oshu. Keiji had told her that while Ieyasu was a good young man with a great spirit and noble dreams he had also refused.

In a way Tokugawa was as inflexible as Azai. He had been lying low, enduring, waiting for his moment, however, instead of just bowing down and hoping for a sudden burst of humanity from a man who had proven once and again to be destitute of any traces of it. Under his loyalty he worked on his own land, his own dreams.

Date's army stopped suddenly when the figures of another army became clear, cutting the path, their lines formed and ready for battle in the plain, their flags waving in the wind. Saki's eyes narrowed as she stilled, sweeping the battlefield with a sharpened gaze. Azai? So that conversation with Oda, as suggested by Akechi, had not gone well and the path had changed, closing.

The One-Eyed Dragon whistled softly, arms still crossed, seemingly unimpressed, his knees nudging the horse, making it move forward softly, solemnly, staring down the adversaries, standing prominently in front of the mass of blue and horses that stopped and amassed behind him, waiting.

"You've got some nerve, blocking my way." Date's voice cut easily through the field. "Who are you and where are you from?" He was putting all his arrogance into the demand, goading the man in front of him with ease.

There were very few that would not answer when challenged and that man, the Head of Omi, seemed about to burst into a rage. Anger was an easy flaw to explore. In the battlefield it lead to mistakes, to wasted armies and vain movements, to a dissipation of energy and focus.

Saki would have given him the answers quickly but there would be no need of that.

Let the men play their games. Even the battlefield had its etiquette. Although most of the times the One-Eyed Dragon ignored it in favour of effectiveness.

"Listen well! I am none other than Azai-Bizen-no-Kami Nagamasa!" Azai advanced, his horse moving under him, carrying him to the midpoint of the field. "I cannot permit you to go any further!" The general turned his horse, making it walk a short line, tense. "In the Name of Justice I shall eradicate you!" His voiced carried well, burning with his own conviction, his gestures wide and steady, the white tail of his helm flying in the wind, whipping in response to each of his dramatic movements.

"Azai Nagamasa." Date murmured, recognizing the name but not placing it immediately. Saki shrugged when he glanced at her, crossing her arms slowly, ignoring Azai's speech, focusing on the slope, the river, the path. Azai's army was placed carefully, counterbalancing most of their mobility.
"He was refusing to act against Oda but was also doing nothing to help." That had been his stance three days ago. "There must have been some shift in the balance." As of that morning. She murmured for him, keeping her eyes in the opposing army, counting. They were a bit outnumbered but there had been worse odd before.

Katakura-dono approached, his horse standing directly behind her, his eyes scanning both fields, mirroring her analysis, placing his own bets and plans throughout the field.

"Azai Nagamasa." He repeated slowly, recalling. "The Devil King's brother-in-law. Perhaps Oda sent him here," Azai was uncompromising, willing to battle them until death settled the problem, that much was clear from his position, from his army's attitude, from his background and former actions. Who sent him to the battlefield or why had little weight in the outcome.

"He is missing a wife." Saki whispered, the pieces snapping into place. Blood leverage. Love weakness. Not sent. Coerced. The right strings had been plucked and he was pinned. So he would fight with all of his heart even if the cause crushed his spirit. She looked away from the plain suddenly, feeling the shift in the air, the clouds darkening by the cliffs, distant enough to be safe from either battle, close enough to interfere in case there was a delay in the plans or any need to crush either one of the armies with an overwhelming blow. His army stood at his back, waiting underneath the storm.

The guys started murmuring on their back as Maeda Keiji took off in that direction, suddenly, their attentions drawn first at the men and then to the direction he rode to. Some faces showed recognition. Some had traces of fear.

Saki turned a bit, her eyes narrowing as she examined their fugitive. His face was hardened into a determined frown. Yumekichi was nowhere in sight. Maybe he had retreated into the jacket so the hard ride would not dislodge him. There was no mistaking his destination.

The Devil King had come. Three powers were after him and his defenders were merely pawns that could be discarded. And Maeda Keiji hoped that bought him enough time to do whatever he needed to keep those he loved safe. The wanderer hadn't lost his faith in humanity yet, then. His words dripped with it in every conversation they had ever shared.

"That bastard." Katakura-dono seemed less than willing to have faith in anyone else, though. He turned to Date. "It seems Maeda Keiji has finished setting his stage and has returned to headquarters. I believe Oda intends to crush Takeda, Uesugi and us in one fell swoop here in Nagashino." Katakura-dono's jaw was set into a grim line as he watched the horse depart, as his gaze was dragged towards the Devil King's perch, hands clutching the reins, knowing the difficulty of the coming battle.

Date just chuckled, glancing at the cliffs and then at the field.

"Perfect. It'll just make a wilder «party»." His horse twitched, hooves clapping on the ground, snorting. If the beast was accurately reacting to his excitement... gods help them.

"I swear it... If we get out of here alive I will slap you Boss. I will." Saki groaned, upturning her claws, fanning her fingers, tips gleaming as she tensed for combat. Let the One-Eyed Dragon have this fun and then try to get some sense into him. "I'll be around." Saki whispered, vanishing.

"Go soldiers of Justice! Forward! Destroy the forces of evil!" Azai raised his sword, charging, leading his men with the conviction of his shout. They reacted immediately, charging, following the white horse.
"Masamune-Sama. Please leave the troops to us." Katakura-dono turned his horse, raising one arm, issuing orders quickly, starting his own attack.

"Okay, I'll be counting on you Kojuro!" Date smirked, looking towards his adversary.

The men were cheering, Magobei noting how long it had been since Date had fought with enthusiasm, in an open field, in a true battle, hands on their weapons, drawing them, following Katakura-dono, clashing with the warriors of the Azai clan.

"Let's be cool about this." Date stood on his horse as it charged, drawing his sword, jumping against the enemy, crossing blades, breaking apart as both armies clashed. He laughed, his attack deflected, both he and Azai landing on the field, turning towards each other. "That wasn't bad for a warm up." The One-Eyed Dragon assumed a combat stance, blade gleaming, smirking against Azai's fierce determination and unwavering glare as he took his time to prepare for combat. His eye narrowed "Number One of Oshu, Date Masamune, pressing on!" He shouted, attacking once more.

Saki shadowed and killed quickly, weaving through the rage of battle swiftly and quietly, taking both the cavalry and the foot soldiers. She jumped over the battle, kicking the head of one of the warrior, plummeting him into the ground, hooking one leg around the spear another thrust in the direction of Katakura-dono's unprotected back, slashing at the throat of a third man before spinning, taking the wooden handle away from the soldier's hands, gripping it as it spun, shoving the blade into his own sternum, before turning and dispatching a fourth man, running towards them with a simple katana, bowing her head to the Right Eye as he turned to strike at the now deceased threat, stopping in surprise. She stepped away then, vanishing, somersaulting over another enemy, avoiding the spear altogether before slashing his throat open, breaking into defences, the speed and shadows blurring her movement until all one could see was a dark form and the shimmer of blood and silver before another man fell into the ground as she used speed, agility and her element into a deadly mix.

The shinobi gave the enemy no chances and no mercy.

The fast and furious battle between Azai and Date still raged, the auras of both men flaring to life, their elements used as weapons along with the steel, skilled enough to keep other attacks at bay, draining them but both ability and armour keeping them uninjured.

They broke apart once more, the earth reacting to their clash, wind hissing to lightning and light.

"All right! Taste the full burst of my dragon claws" Date shouted as he drew the six swords, his blows growing more and more brutal, slashing, lightning edging the blade, circling his adversary before pressing any advantage Azai was foolish enough to give him as he swung his sword, using both hands for greater strength.

Azai refused to give in, defending and attacking when he could. He was slower than Date but his strikes were sure enough for that flaw to be partially mitigated. He also had a bit more invested on the defence, using the small buckler latched to his arm to deflect and defend, releasing the sword when one of the strikes could not be avoided through the use of the blade.

"I cannot yield even if it means my death!" Both his hand gripped the hilt of his sword harder, sliding into another combat stance, breaking from the One-Eyed Dragon, giving himself the space needed for a charged attack, the slash pure energy pressed against the Dragon, sending him upwards. Azai's stance relaxed slightly in anticipation of a deadly blow, of a victory.

Date turned in midair, smiling, having deflected the worse of it, using the impulse.
"You're a fine one" He complimented before attacking once more, pressing the advantage the sudden surprise he created in the other warlord, pushing him back, breaking his shield with three consecutive x strikes, the six blades slashing in turn, charged with lightning, charring the land around the Head of Omi.

Azai still looked defiant, ready to keep fighting even though his arm was close to broken, the metal of the buckler shattered, all his stance and poise demolished. He discarded the broken protection slowly, breathing heavily.

Saki shadowed away from the dwindling fight of the two armies, her eyes catching sigh of the harquebus squad sneaking into the fray. She paled, looking around, searching for a way out, a way to protect the males. On the other side of the river the battle was still raging. Honda Tadakatsu had arrived, his shadow clouding the sun as he flew to the field, his blows as monstrously powerful as Shingen's, the land shaking as he landed and started to do battle.

Katakura-dono was approaching Date, slowly, his swords returned to their sheaths. She did the same, appearing by their side, trying to speak… they still had a bit of time…

"My righteous will is unyielding… I go where the beacon of honour guides me. Even if I should lose all my limbs I will… not… falter!" Azai screamed, approaching, assuming another combative stance. Date tilted his head, five of his swords again in their sheaths.

"Nagamasa-sama!" The voice of a woman cut through the battle field, the battle dying down suddenly, the surprise of her presence. And there was also a new player in the field. Mitsuhide… Saki narrowed her eyes, seeing the lines…

Oichi was running towards her husband, dark hair and the tail of her clothes flowing behind her as she tried to gain speed, arms held upward, swaying with unsteady steps, the terror getting in the way for her movements, the harquebuses of her brother's army placed behind her, ready to take them down. She tripped, falling to the ground with a thud, trying to scramble to her feet, to reach the man.

"Nagamasa-sama! Run!" she shrieked, her eyes never leaving Azai, wide, stained with tears.

"Now, let us have you all dance together." Akechi Mitsuhide said softly, smiling, caressing the scythe's blade slowly, observing the battlefield, raising his weapon, giving the sign.

The shots started to echo, smoke rising from the metal muzzles.

Saki's hands moved quickly, defensively.

"Masamune-sama!" Kojuro reached for Date, shouting in fear as the bullets flew, one scuffing his helmet, too close for comfort.

Oichi stood still as the weapons pelted Azai, her expression of pure shock as he tried to stay standing, reaching for her, blade sunk into the ground, the smell of blood, battle and gunpowder overpowering the air.

"Ichi…" he groaned softly…

---

**Kata** – 型 or 形 – literally meaning form; is a Japanese word describing detailed choreographed patterns of movements practised either solo or in pairs. The term **form** is used for the
corresponding concept in non-Japanese martial arts in general;
Shadow lapped Saki's shape like wisps of dark fog, twirling around her slowly. Her left hand was outstretched, the tension and effort clear in her arm, in the stubborn expression, in the darkened, narrowed eyes as she stood on the battlefield when most of them had lowered themselves or thrown their bodies onto the ground with muttered curses or prayers to avoid the volley of projectiles.

Kojuro stared in surprise at their shinobi, eyes following the thin lines of shadow that mingled with her own flowing then like ribbons through the ground, latching on to the bullets' who stood still, suspended like a cloud in the air by their own silhouettes, kept from the army, from Date, from himself. Their distances differed but their intended paths were clear. Her arm was shuddering slightly, the claws twitching, reacting to the effort of keeping the justu in place with so many targets.

Saki lowered her hand softly, the lead bullets falling straight down, devoid of energy, clinking against the hard surface, their small sound whispering over Oichi's voice calling her husband's name, desperately, and still soft and hushed, mingling with Akechi's laughter, the same cold sharp sound that lured in a feel of cold hopelessness.

"Ichi, this is the field of battle. It is not a place for you." Azai was staring at his wife as blood drained from him, multiple wounds visible against the white of his armour, most of them clustering around vital organs. Blood was staining his face, dripping from an unseen wound. And still he resisted.

"Thank you for the service rendered Oichi-sama." Akechi was walking through the battlefield, scythe playing against the ground, determined to draw out every ounce of misery out of the scene. "That being said, you did not accomplish a single act that was expected of you, but all's well ends well." There was a clear, terrified look in the woman's face now as she cradled Azai, tears sliding down her cheeks. "Oichi-sama's marriage into the Azai Clan was originally ground work for our eventual attack on Asakura. Her role was to seduce you, of course" His slimy smile was turned to Azai, the expression of the dying man carrying a growing disbelief through the pain. "but also the leading generals of Azai and diminish Azai's capacity for war." He let the words sink, the doubt build, allowing Azai's reality breaking. "Or so it was supposed to go… but Oichi-sama ended up becoming a dangling puppet, incapable of doing anything. Foolishly she fell in love with you, but she was unable to reveal her true identity and yet she never carried out Oda's secret mission either." There was a definite scoff and despise in his voice as he looked down. "All because she imprudently nurtured the bond between husband and wife she has brought an even more tragic end… Deceiving all those around her and ensnaring them in misfortune." Oichi had lowered her head now, resigned to her tears, to the shock in Azai's face. "Beautiful to behold yet abominable… the condemnable younger sister of the Devil King…"

Akechi let the words hang, gazing around the plain, breathing deeply.

Saki bared her teeth in disgust, her attention also captured. It was impossible not to.

"Ichi have you deceived me all this time?" Azai Nagamasa was trying to keep his wits about, the hurt crawling over his weakening voice, the Devil King's actions and the words of his minions tainting his perspective.

"I'm sorry… I deceived all the people of Azai… I'm sorry… It's all Ichi's fault…" There was no mistaking the sudden flinch when he raised his hand. Saki cringed only to be surprised when he just cupped his wife's face, trying to make her look at him, his voice gentled as he gazed up at her.
"It must have been so hard... Do not be so maudlin any longer..." He whispered gently, wiping some of the tears away, slowly, tenderly.

"Nagamasa-sama" Oichi whispered, keeping his hand against her cheek, the tears giving no indication of drying.

"Soldiers of Justice, forgive me. To fall and perish here will be my deepest regret. But I, Nagamasa, have carried out the justice I believed in to my very last breath." The light was fading from his eyes quickly now. "Ichi... Tell me I was not wrong." He whispered, almost begging.

"No... Nagamasa-sama was not wrong." Oichi couldn't say much more than that. What could one say?

"Thank you Ichi..." Azai murmured before a last shadow of pain passed his face and his body went limp.

"Nagamasa-sama?" Tears streaked Oichi's cheeks slowly as she sobbed her husband's name, embracing him tightly.

Date was snarling silently, watching the drama unfold, his attention split, silently picking Azai's helmet, giving it to Kojuro, honouring the dead man as a general worthy of memory, keeping it untouched by Oda.

Saki looked away for a moment, feeling uncomfortable, claws twitching, wishing to rip the white haired freak to pieces and feed him to the beasts.

"They broke her." She whispered softly, keeping the anger in.

Such a trick, such a mission, could be asked of a kunoichi, to destroy an enemy from within using sex, seduction and trickery, but no shinobi clan would send one of their daughters if she was unwilling and unprepared. A failure like Oichi's would not be overlooked either. A failed mission that gave away clan secrets would mean execution or the ninja should have a very good point and proof of it for not completing the goals. Love was not an acceptable excuse.

Akechi Mitsuhide was smiling, watching the grief and pain, the confusion and indecision of two armies, conveniently placed, using the dead man and his wife as a shield against a direct attack and the squad of fire arms as a deterrent.

"Your sobs are music to my ears Oichi-sama. Most enjoyable... although one has to wonder... which would be lovelier? The cry of a woman who weeps easily, so effortlessly crushed or the anticipation for the unshed tears of a woman who bleeds without a whimper?" His gaze was dragged to Saki slowly. "What would it take to make you cry little shadow?"

Saki snarled at him, lowering her centre, claws clenching, ready to pounce.

"You again?!" Date Masamune held his sword tighter, remembering the defeat, the corpse of Imagawa, the victory taken away by his damn fog and scythes. Also... Saki had not bled when they had first met. Not when she fell from the horse... "Saki-chan left for the river. She was hurt while scouting. Bleeding from her shoulder and had some cuts of her face and neck..." Yoshinao had come to him, worried after Okehazara... "There was a trap in place and I escaped." Saki wasn't quite meeting his eyes then, the small cuts no longer bleeding, the skin around them red and irritated... He had assumed a literal trap, mechanical in nature...

"Ah... yes. Barging into battlefield was your speciality. Still to think that not a single round hit you..." Akechi looked at the One-Eyed Dragon, pale eyes appraising him, looking for any
weakness. "Even with the protection her speed and skills gave you… It seems you posses an extraordinary amount of luck."

"So you're an agent of the Devil King." He stepped forth, electricity charging the air suddenly, his voice a guttural growl, anger built to the breaking point. Katakura-dono moved, reaching for him, asking him to wait, to stop. But the Dragon was too far gone in his rage. "These people served as your shield and fought for you! And you shot them down from behind along with the enemy! There're some things that are allowed and some things that just aren't!"

"I see you are angry, One-Eyed Dragon. Shall we have fun for just a little while?" He moved the blades, chuckling, assuming a position of challenge, his intention clear. And being who he was…

"Okay, lots of luck" Date attacked, the blades clashing a few times, manoeuvring Akechi away from Oichi and Azai, managing to lock the blades, glaring at the man, noticing his expression, the surprise clicking into place. "What the hell's up with that drunk look on you face?" Date growled, eye narrowing suddenly.

"Why, I am savouring the afterglow, of course." Akechi jumped away, breaking the stalemate, looking towards Oichi who still held Azai, caught in the shock, touching his face slowly, eyes empty. "Trampling the strong bond between two people who love each other… There is no experience more delightful than that." The oily smile widened like a serpent's mouth, his eyes gaining a deeper glint of pure sadism. "If there were a pleasure that surpassed even that… it would be the sight of a powerful man covered in blood and tears, grovelling at my feet and begging for his life..." it was clear who he saw in that position at that moment. "Now… let the festivities begin." He attacked like a snake, in widening arcs blow deflected by Date, his strength faltering for a moment as the weapons locked, the sword shuddering under the weight of scythe.

There was a sudden movement in the air. Saki stepped out of the shadows suddenly circle kicking Akechi, catching him in the face, suddenly, pushing the man back, slashing with her claws, cutting only air where his throat should have been, back flipping, landing in front of the One-Eyed Dragon ready for combat, claws curved.

The white haired man stood, straightening, rubbing his bruised face, smiling. Her interference was something different for the Dragon who always chose to fight the generals alone. The Right Eye was approaching, quickly.

"Now the eastern lands are thoroughly battered." He glanced at the plain where a sudden explosion raged over them, wind picking up, bringing fire and ash. "They can now be destroyed at any time." Akechi provoked, relenting. "What is the matter, One-Eyed Dragon?" The teasing was jagged and cruel. "You are not as sharp as I expected you to be. Now, then, shall we have you dance soon?" He raised one of his scythes, the harquebus line preparing for their next strike.

Saki moved, straightening.

The sun would not help her, not yet, keeping the man's shadow away from her grasp and despite the kata she had performed, the earlier Seal was still draining and unrepeatable for the time being. But if the bullets came again she would be able to stop them with either her body or her skills. They just had to be close enough to her own shadow. She had no fear of bullets herself. As most shinobi, she could dodge them with ease although the dark and shadow elementals were more likely to succeed in such endeavour. But for her oath she had to remain where she could protect.

"Damn… You're well suited to be the gate-keeper of hell." Date grated out, still willing to fight.

"Masamune-sama, please order us to withdraw!" Katakura-dono advanced to his side, holding his
shoulder, subtly pulling him back. "With that many firearms if we face them head on we will certainly be wiped out. I, Kojuro, shall share in your mortification."

Date tskd.

Saki didn't look back.

"Withdraw Kojuro." The order was dragged out of him painfully.

The guys sounded the retreat in response to Katakura-dono's order, walking away, towards the horses, dragging the ones who could not walk fast enough.

"I will refrain from shooting them now. I think there will be more enjoyment to be had that way." Akechi said, still bent in provoking.

Saki growled, shadowing away, touching Oichi's shoulder gently as she passed by. The woman did not notice. The shinobi stayed behind until all the men had crossed into the forest, on horseback, wounded and healthy before rejoining the front with a last hateful glare towards Akechi Mitsuhide.

Night had fallen and the path was too long and the ride was slow, minding the ones that could not endure it. Saki ran alongside them, through the trees of the now familiar road, eyes forward. She hadn't dared to scout ahead and there shouldn't be any threats because the armies had gathered in the other direction… And it didn't feel right to leave. The kata had faded away, the lack of its support hollowing her further.

"Wait, One-Eyed Dragon!" Sanada Yukimura's voice was, perhaps one of the last things they expected to hear, cutting through the night clearly. He rode towards them, fast, without any subterfuge, alone. Saki stopped, crouching on the branch. "Date Masamune-dono! It is too far to Oshu. Come with us to Kai." The courtesy of a warrior that faced a tough battlefield too. The Tiger of Kai knew a warrior's mind and heart and the worries after a battle. She relaxed a bit, sighing. Katakura-dono would not allow this opportunity to pass and, as leader who cared about his men, neither would Date.

"Masamune-sama let us accept Takeda's offer." The Right Eye's voice rose as he rode a bit harder, pairing his horse with Date's "We have many injured among us as well..." No answer? "Masamune-sama..."

Saki noticed the One-Eyed Dragon slipping from the saddle as if the world had slowed. She moved, hastily, jumping from the branch, reaching him before he could fall fully onto the ground, supporting his weight, holding his head and chest against her crouched body, lowering him gently, the helm falling away revealing his pallor, eye closed. She smelled blood, felt his breath raspy and shallow. He was in pain.

"Masamune-sama" Kojuro dismounted, running towards them.

There was a collective cry of "Boss", the men stopping, trying to see, dismounting, swarming.

"Date-dono, what is the matter?!" Sanada was running towards them too, dismounting as Katakura-dono's hand showed blood when he touched Date, trying to help the shinobi.

Saki's eyes widened suddenly, realizing what had happened, her clawed hands going to the armour's weak spots, the clasps and ties, ripping it away and all that was in the way with swiftness, her eyes narrowed, growing cold as she appraised what needed to be done.
"Get my bag."

"Saki." Katakura-dono tried to reason with her as she pushed Date up unceremoniously, checking his back.

"Get. My Bag." She snarled.

Samenosuke ran to do so as the kunoichi bared Date's torso fully, finding the puncture amongst the dried brown blood and the new bright red. One bullet. Too much blood. Still bleeding. Need to get the lead out before it poisons what little blood was left. Coldly and quickly she pierced his wound with one claw, ignoring the screams of the men and the sudden lunge of Katakura-dono, as if to stop her.

The One-Eyed Dragon had screamed in pain, struggling faintly.

"Hold him." She asked Kojuro as she dug, her free hand on Date's chest, pressing him down, would not be enough. "This need to be done. Hold him." Even unconscious he was still feeling the sting and reacted accordingly. Katakura-dono understood, gesturing. Someone, she didn't care who, held Date's legs in place as the Right Eye pressed his weight against the Dragon's arms and chest. It could not be too deep because of the armour and she had seen no exit wound on his back. Also she didn't smell evisceration… So… metal touched metal and she curled her claw baring her teeth in a victorious grin. One simple pull and fresh blood brought a deformed piece of lead she tossed aside, her clawed hand pressing the injury, palm flush against his flank, stemming the flow, free hand digging through the bag. Saki picked something that the darkness did not allow any of the men to distinguish, slipping it into the wound itself, coldly ignoring the sound of pain and the cringes from the men that should know better, before spreading a powder into it, pulling it from her belonging with only a quick glance at it, field dressing the wound in quick moves with the fabric one of the man had enough clairvoyance to bring her, removing her hand, claws as red as after the battle.

The shinobi dug through her possession once more, dragging out the colourful and slick shell of a few pills. She appraised the unconscious man in an instant, pushing Kojuro out of the way, cupping the back of Date's neck, straightening him lowering his weight against her once more, keeping him half-sitting, one hand pressing down the quickly soaking fabric of the bandage, placing the pills in her own mouth, prying his lips open. There was a moment of shock between the men when Saki pressed her mouth to Date's, forcing, slipping the medicine in, suffocating him until he swallowed. She broke away from him suddenly, gasping for air, her eyes darkened, free hand quickly performing the symbols of a shadow skill. "Kai." She whispered for Katakura-dono, confirming her heading, before the shadows engulfed them both, making them disappear.

"Shinobi have the most amazing medicines…" the healer murmured as the worked on Date under Saki's eyes, undoing the bandage, checking the wound that no longer bled, applying his own salves before sewing it closed for added precaution, redressing it securely and in the right way, the way that would restrain movements and allow the cure to proceed. The shinobi was kneeling on the other side of the futon, taking note of every mixture, every tool, every move, claws curling and twitching. "The bleeding stopped, infection was prevented for now and he doesn't seem to be in pain…"
"They come from generations of poison study. We'd be foolish not to dabble in the other side of it." Saki whispered, her voice raspy. She coughed slightly to clear it.

The men of Kai were surprised to see her arrive from the shadows, in the middle of a guarded complex, holding the One-Eyed Dragon, asking for a healer but they were quick to act and to aid her in keeping him alive until true help came. Not that she had allowed them too close.

"It was crude, what you did, but in field medicine is best to use efficacy than dither about... You made my work possible, girl. Too much blood lost... He would not have made it on horseback." Saki nodded. She knew that. She had seen how thoroughly soaked his damn armour had been. But it had been a slow bleed. He would have been dead hours ago if the shot had been clean through. "Do what you did to keep him alive with your medicine and if any complications come please call." The healer left with a respectful nod, closing the shoji, leaving them alone in the dimly lit room with the old dark-red armour.

Saki let out a breath she was keeping contained, lowering her head, picking a rag, cleaning her claws slowly, her attention on the task. She just felt so tired... the smell of blood and gunpowder was everywhere, seeped into her clothes, into his skin, their hair. A grimace escaped her lips as her mind stayed on the task, the fabric tearing a bit as it slid over the sharpened tip. But she should not leave until Katakura-dono arrived. Even though Takeda Shingen and by default the land of Kai had extended their hospitality she would not lower her guard until she knew it was safe. There were others here. Echigo's troops, some of Tokugawa's men... they had not offered any guarantee of safety or no sign of not being a threat.

The shinobi stood, her claws clean and silver once more, walking around the sleeping mat, adjusting the covers over the One-Eyed Dragon absently, before sitting in the most vulnerable place of the room, the one where any enemy might come through, the place they surely had to cross and it was the one where little alarm would be raised.

Hours passed before she heard fast heavy steps in the engawa. It was like everyone was deliberately avoiding the room. Which would have been amusing in another context. As soon as the shoji opened her claws were pressed against the intruder's throat without piercing, waiting until her mind identified him as an enemy or ally.

Katakura-dono stared down at her, his expression bleak, tired but slightly surprised, standing perfectly still on the entrance. His hand had sought his sword too.

Saki lowered her claws and stepped back, occupying a place on the right of Date, surrendering the vulnerable spot of the room, as Katakura-dono sat on the left, staring at the unconscious Dragon, his hands clenching into fists before he took his swords from the obi, laying them near Date's claws. It was no easier for him, was it, even knowing he had seen Date wounded before.

"To think you had been struck by the harquebuses... Unable to prevent this, I couldn't even stop you from fighting Akechi. I, Kojuro, have never failed so greatly in my life." His voice rising softly, rumbling, dragging slowly as he considered the outcome of the day.

"Failed?" Sake whispered back. "You did not fail. What could you do against bullets? You weren't close enough to shield him with your body. And were you ever able to stop the One-Eyed Dragon from fighting anyone he really wanted to?" She looked away. "I stopped the bullets but could not keep two, a miserable pair, from hitting him. I broke them apart but it was not soon enough... I failed too. More than you ever did."

"You treated him. You brought him here." Katakura-dono said in return, letting out a sigh, a hand passing over his features, as he calmed. There was wonder in his voice... As if he hadn't realized
she could execute those skills. So someone had informed him of the state they had arrived in. And still… who did he think the Dragon had been going to for treatment after Okehazara? He’d seen her treat small cuts too but as those could be handled by any…

She managed a small smile. It was war. They knew the risks but dealing with a bad aftermath and the guilt that followed was harsh. Lesser leaders would demand their commander's lives for such a failure.

"You hired me for every task I can perform." She looked at the shoji, towards the shadows behind the translucent paper. "They are outside."

Katakura-dono stood finding the four retainers piled in front of the entrance, worry etched in their faces, their wounds minor and already treated. They tried to peek behind Katakura-dono's solid frame, to steal a glance of Date, just to make sure. If some had been shot before she could stop the bullets they were not them.

"Masamune-sama will be fine." That was said in a soft, almost fathering tone. Then Katakura-dono shifted, his voice gaining once more a commander's edge. "Don't you all stay here! Whoever is able-bodied, go, make yourselves useful to the men of Takeda! The entire village has roused itself to look after the injured, even those from other lands." He stopped talking as the men scurried away to fulfil order, watching them leave, taking a deep breath of night air. He hesitated in closing the shoji having seen Takeda Shingen and his charge approaching slowly, entering the room.

The Tiger of Kai looked at the One-Eyed Dragon for a long moment, before sitting at the bottom of the futon. Sanada Yukimura knelt outside, his gaze worried on his adversary, attention divided.

"You have our gratitude for your hospitable care." Katakura-dono said as he knelt next to their boss, facing Takeda Shingen, lowering his head in gratitude. Saki mirrored his position on the other side of the Dragon, claws placed in front of her, keeping her eyes on the tatami, bowing a bit deeper.

"It seems he is no longer at death's door. And that you are no longer suspicious of us to the point of being feral." Takeda looked at Saki, his deep voice kept carefully low in respect for the wounded.

"Only the paranoid are truly safe." Saki murmured the saying without focusing on anything. There was a small nod of agreement from the Tiger of Kai.

"My people are preparing something that can be poured down his throat so you can give that to him."

"Thank you Takeda-dono." Saki lowered her head slowly, her eyes now growing vacant.

"Right Eye of the Dragon, do you resent us for using Date as our spearhead in our attack against Oda?" That was a question of a strategist to another and also of a host trying to gauge the hostility of a guest.

"We merely acted of our own accord. From the beginning our actions bore no relation to the Takeda and Uesugi rising up in arms." Katakura-dono straightened, considering his words, his answer carefully measured.

"The generals who persist in fighting for land in their immediate vicinity wish us to defeat Oda and at the same time for us to fall as well. On the other hand there is one man, who is no general, has headed for the Inland Sea of Seto as an envoy to Mori and Chosokabe." Takeda said, resuming the situation in clear, simple lines.
In the aftermath of combat there would always be scavengers and vultures.

"Maeda Keiji." Katakura-dono surmised, his tone slightly startled.

"With us allied at his back it seems he had intended to meet with the Devil King and settle matters. A truly interesting man. He is wasted as a wanderer."

"He just wanted to make the carnage stop." The shinobi murmured absent-mindedly.

"So he had plotted to do the exact opposite of..." Kojuro looked at Saki. She had suspected that, hadn't she, or had Maeda actually told her his reasons? She had been truly friendly with the Maeda wanderer, much to Date's dismay and grumbling mood every time they conversed.

"Even if we defeat the Devil King if we are utterly spent it will be to no avail. The situation calls for urgency but I would like to have Oda fully encircled when next we attempt this." The plan was still the same, seeing it was the soundest strategy one could think of. But it depended too much of exterior variables.

"It will be most difficult to get Mori and Chosokabe to ally with you." Katakura-dono considered. "And joining forces to surround and defeat an enemy goes against the way of Date as well." Saki straightened slowly. It was what she had said to the other shinobi but the circumstances had changed. The Right Eye had to take that into consideration. And from the resigned, grave look in his face, he had. "However... necessity knows no bounds."

It was an alliance created with little fuss or flowery politic. But it could prove stronger than steel.

Takeda Shingen stood, gesturing Katakura-dono to follow, leaving the room. Most likely they were going to discuss logistics. As they left Sanada stayed behind, standing, undecided between following and staring at Date, his expression disturbed.

Saki looked up and stood, feeling her legs wobble. She needed him to leave. They had been kind enough to give her a small room in the "ninja quarters" but at that point anything would do. From sleeping on a tree to sharing a blanket with Kasuga. And she shouldn't go, not yet.

"You should not worry Sanada Yukimura." She managed a reassuring smile, touching his shoulder. "He will be fine soon enough and looking for a rematch in no time." Sanada smiled too, a bit shyly at her words.

"Thank you for your words Saki-dono." Sasuke had most likely given him her name as she couldn't recall ever introducing herself to him. She nodded in appreciation, closing the shoji, turning, taking a few steps into the room.

There was no sound as she slowly crumpled to the floor, losing all consciousness.

Kojuro entered the room hours later after a lengthy talk with Takeda and Uesugi, after seeing that the wounded were treated, that the dead were honoured and the ones that could help were sent to new posts. Also making sure they had lodgings, food and that the supplies Oshu's forces had packed could be used for the benefit of their hosts. He was satisfied to notice that Masamune-sama seemed to breathe easily and that there was some sort of broth leftovers near him, steaming, its scent enticing. Then he just needed too... His gaze swerved to his left and his eyes widened slightly. Saki was curled on the floor, claws still encasing her hands. Yet she hadn't awakened when he entered the room. Not even a flinch or movement. In the time she had served them he had never seen her not react when someone came near her when sleeping. He didn't even recall her sleeping that much either.
The Right Eye crouched by their shinobi, touching her forehead gently, tilting her head a bit. She murmured sleepily, looking so much younger… Dark rings marked the skin under her eyes and she seemed paler than usual. How had he not noticed those before? Carefully he slipped his jacket off, covering her sleeping form, smiling slightly when he noticed the fabric covered her completely, rolling the sleeves underneath her head. He knew better than to try and move a trained assassin no matter how disconnected from the world she seemed to be at the moment.
"Now the truth, Sasuke. How do you know each other?" Sanada demanded, sitting with the three ninjas who exchanged plans and information with tea, some papers strewn about them, codes and quick battlefield drawings covering their surfaces. What allies needed to know was being said while mining what they wanted to know about the clan and secrets. It was almost like a game, trying to see who floundered the most and surrendered what they did not want touched by daylight.

It felt like home.

"Shinobi often visit the other clans." Sasuke said easily, exchanging his cup for a piece of paper, reading it in a quick glance, crossing his legs, letting the paper go. "For knowledge, training, seeing other ladies…" He winked at Kasuga who huffed, then tried to hide her reaction from the Young Tiger.

Not a secret. Not a total truth either.

Saki sipped her tea slowly, glancing at Date's room. Katakura-dono was with him for now, allowing her time with her kind. It was productive and Sasuke had even lent her one of his birds so she could contact her clan to renew supplies. Also she had her orders. Don't leave. They were inconvenient but her contacts were in place and there was a steady stream of information reaching her in Kai, enough to keep the restlessness away.

"We met in those exchanges." She added. He had come to her clan to train, staying for a year. She had gone to his clan in a visit with her family a few times. "Also my father is part of Sasuke's clan." She chuckled, playing with the thought before releasing it. "And we also like seeing men. Shinobi training shirtless…" She winked at Yukimura, running with Sarutobi's initial game-plan. "It can get dull, seeing the same faces and bodies everyday… so women travel to appreciate the handsomeness."

"You're related?" Sanada Yukimura tried to hide the sudden blush their words were dragging to his cheeks, keeping himself in the important part of the conversation, the information he sought and the confirmation that there was no tension brewing between Saki and Kasuga, seeing the shinobi from Echigo was currently engaged to Sasuke and if a former lover appeared... He might not know a lot about women but he was certain that was a sure way to stir problems.

"Faintly." Saki smiled, shaking her head, dismissing the link, looking back once again. She sighed, frustrated. "I need to move." The kunoichi whispered, putting the cup down, standing, stretching.

"You're not fighting Sasuke are you?" Sanada asked, worried. Afraid one of them got hurt?

"Why not Sanada-dono?" Saki smiled and leaned conspiratorially towards the young warrior. "Do you prefer to see two women attacking each other while shirtless?"

Saki straightened and unclasped her vest, sliding it away, keeping the sarashi and her leather straps around the arms. The claws were away, the tanto taking their place in her obi for the time being. It was less threatening. She put it down with the fabric, stretching once more, the stiffness of the shoulder forgotten, the scar faded into little more than a red line, walking toward the centre of the garden, sauntering in teasing.

Yukimura stared for a moment at the white cloth that covered her torso, eyes widening slightly. It wasn't revealing but it did outline her more sharply than the silk vest. Then he glanced at Kasuga.
whose plunging neckline did not help matters. Nor did Sasuke's interested grin as he adjusted his position on the engawa, leaning forward, chuckling to himself with undisguised glee.

"Come play Kasuga-chan." Saki called. "I won't use weapons and you don't need to take your top off."

Kasuga stood, fuming. The kunoichi from Oshu was almost as infuriating as Sarutobi. It was not a surprise at all they were related. It also irked her that she couldn't find out who she was in the clans. No one from the villages talked to Kasuga so asking them would be a waste of time and Sarutobi was his usual unhelpful self. But a bit of combat might help her get rid of some of the nervous energy too.

Eight kunai slid into her hand suddenly, thrown in a sharp move before she moved in to attack.

Saki jumped back moving her arms in a circle, dodging the incoming attack, stepping away, raising her hands, the kunai caught by the blades between her fingers. She flared them open, letting them fall, tilting her head, mouthing "No weapons for me". Kasuga had hesitated, stopping her charge.

"She caught them..." Yukimura whispered, surprised.

"Saki's showing off." Sasuke whispered. "They haven't even started."

Kasuga shrieked, attacking once more, both hands sliding in crisscrossing punches, one arm thrusted forward while the other moved back to increase the next strike. Saki back flipped repeatedly, seamlessly, until she ran out of space, glancing behind her while dodging another punch, crouching, kicking Kasuga in a gut, sending her reeling back. The shinobi from Echigo grunted, one arm covering the impact area, ducking down to minimize the pain and the surface her attacker would have for the next charge.

Takeda Shingen walked into the garden, accompanied by Uesugi Kenshin, both stopping, staring at the fight, appraising it as warriors. They found the time to discuss their next move as often as possible. Knowing their enemy, the strategies, running possibilities, appraising the armies they had under the alliance and the ones that could come. And what to do in case the worst happened. Yukimura gasped when he noticed them, standing, looking a bit nervous.

"Oyakata-sama, Uesugi-dono" He said, suddenly, bowing slightly.

"Yukimura… what is happening?"

"They are sparring, training." Yukimura said carefully, glancing at them once more.

"And it's entertaining." Sasuke whispered as the women clashed, both men chose to watch, Shingen dropping into a sitting position and Uesugi occupying a place on the other side of the Tiger of Kai, smiling slightly, watching his Blade spar with the Shadow.

Saki moved suddenly, running forward.

Kasuga stood, raising her arms in a defensive position. A front aerial made Saki's legs connect with her shoulders, one at a time before she shadowed away, reappearing at the confused shinobi's back, sweeping her leg under hers, breaking her balance, disappearing once more.

Katakura-dono left the room, standing in front of the shoji, before closing it silently, watching the spectacle. It was a bit surprising but he understood the need to move.

"By now she would already have dived and slashed the adversary's throat." He murmured, sitting
next to Sasuke, waiting. Takeda grunted in agreement, arms folded.

Saki appeared near the wall, walking a few steps forth, hands on her hips.

Kasuga kipped up, cart-wheeling away, standing, sliding out another set of kunai, holding them in her hands, moving fluidly into another attack, slashing at Saki to keep her away.

Oshu's shinobi bent over backwards, making a bridge to escape. She slid into a handstand and both broke apart with a back jump, appraising the adversary. Saki tilted her head, lowering her centre, positioning herself as if her claws were still in place.

Kasuga hissed and threw her kunai once more, the blades sinking into the ground one by one. In her frustration she attacked once more, hands fisting.

Saki had been dodging and defending with her forearms, before kicking.

Kasuga kicked too, their legs crossing, sliding upwards in a perfect split.

Both lowered their gazes, glaring at each other.

"They are very flexible." Takeda said.

"I can see the Dragon's Shadow is a hand-to-hand combatant." Kenshin said softly. It was obvious in the way she felt more comfortable in kicking, dodging and moving into the offensive while Kasuga's attacks were slightly delayed, hesitating before a strike. "Kasuga is mainly a ranged fighter." The War God added.

Saki twisted suddenly, bending Kasuga's leg, locking it, throwing a punch against the other woman's stomach, pushing her away, her hands fisting, a series of quick jabs flowing from her, hitting Kasuga's most vulnerable spots. Echigo's Blade grunted as they both twisted, Saki applying pressure, Kasuga trying to break away, legs still locked in a split, glaring once more. Both kunoichi snarled, eyes fixed into a glaring match.

"Hey… Don't now." Sasuke stood suddenly, catching the shift, walking towards them, arms raised in a conciliatory gesture, grabbing their ankles, leaning. "Break it apart before you get hurt." Saki and Kasuga's attention split from their confront, staring at Sasuke's wide, smug grin.

Both women seemed to be relaxing their stances because Sarutobi let go of their ankles. Kojuro's eyes narrowed slightly. Shingen made a slight grunt, uncrossing his arms, leaning forward. They moved fast, just a glance marking the shift of target, their right arms recoiling and snapping forward, the double punch catching an unaware Sasuke in the gut, sending him backwards. They straightened in tandem, legs untangling.

Kasuga tossed her side-tails back with a proud toss of her head.

Saki chuckled, grinning.

"Thank you for your time Kasuga." Saki smiled, nodding, her whole posture changing, relaxing. She moved softly towards the men, donning the vest, hiding the tanto in her obi. There was a grudging bit of respect for Kasuga now, if only for her skills. She could hold her own after all even if her rank was a simple genin renegade. She walked back to the centre of the garden, extending her hand to Sasuke who lounged on the ground. He winked at her as he came up. Saki poked him over the metal that protected his forehead. She rolled her shoulders, ignoring the looks of appraisal around her. "Have you any need of me Katakura-dono?"
Kojuro moved with his blade under the growing moon, his own way to work out the tension left in him. It was a familiar routine in the last few days but now it had reached the boiling point. Enough for him to talk, to actually use a target instead of just moving through the training forms, enough for him to actually lash out.

"Masamune-sama… I, Kojuro, was able to neither admonish nor protect you. To always place the greatest importance on your wishes… Perhaps that will only hasten you, who are still young, to your grave." He was talking softly, slowly, as he moved fiercely, the blade slashing through air with enough force to upset the tree, to cut through granite, grunting with effort, his steps heavy.

Saki looked towards the outside space though the open shoji, pulling the covers over Date's form, finishing her appraisal of his wound, and feeding him some of the meaty broth, telling herself she shouldn't be ogling an injured man's chest and walked out of the room, closing the shoji behind her.

Forward thrust, curves strike from left to right, curved strike opposite direction, diagonal slash upper left to lower right, diagonal slash lower right to upper left, diagonal slash upper right to lower left and invert, horizontal slash… Did either of them notice they followed exactly the same pattern with their swords when upset?

The One-Eyed Dragon was healing, slowly but surely. There had been a few bouts of fever but they had been deflected through cold water and warm broths. But the longer the cure took the more guilt could run unchecked through the hearts of those who believed they had failed.

She sat on the edge of the engawa, watching, sighing into the night, rubbing her arms slowly.

The Young Tiger walked into the garden, coming from the outside, looking around, responding to the morose ambience. Echigo's troops, the ones able to move, had left Kai hours ago. The War God felt the need to solidify his position now that he was openly against Oda and he couldn't do so from Kai. Saki trusted in Katakura-dono's preparations but had also some of her own plans in place. Oshu was not left defenceless when Date's army left.

"Katakura-dono." The cub greeted. He hadn't been able to truly talk to Katakura-dono throughout their stay in Kai. Something always seemed to be in the way, be it training, responsibilities or the Right Eye unwillingness to talk. But he was determined to. Seemed to think it was rude of him not to have given his sentiments to the Right Eye yet. Especially knowing the place he occupied in the Dragon's heart.

"I thought I heard a strange noise from the west just a moment ago." Kojuro sheathed his sword, turning slightly.

Saki moved closer to hear. It had sounded like an explosion and the only thing that came to mind was what happened when Honda Tadakatsu had blown up on the other margin.

It seemed too soon to be a movement made by Oda's forces but one could never be too sure.

"My ninja corps should be heading there to investigate about now." Sanada said carefully, looking around, his eyes focusing on her, narrowing slightly, the worry palpable.

"I see." Katakura-dono went silent, noticing Saki standing next to them, a similar reaction clouding his visage.

"He's agitated. His sleep has been lighter and there's only so much I can do about the pain. Any medicine can become poisonous if overdone…" She paused, looking away. "The tea helps and he calms when talked to. Date-sama may awaken fully before long." He had been surfacing more and
more in the last two days… It was a persistent hope that he would be lucid soon enough. It was a worrysome wound that would take a few months to fully heal… But in five days he had come far.

"You have my sympathies. If it had been Oyakata-sama who had suffered the same before my eyes…" Yukimura looked away for a moment as if collecting his thoughts, as if the hypothesis was too painful to even consider. Saki rubbed his arm in camaraderie. "Your opponents were multiple fire arms. I believe you cannot be faulted for Date-dono's injury. In fact you could even say Date-dono took the harquebus fire in our stead. Considering that Oda’s harquebus squad was supposed to have reinforced Tokugawa…"

"One change of heart by the enemy… and such things can go either way. It is the way of the battlefield." Katakura-dono said with the ease of someone used to combat, to perceive those changes and know what to do if such an event occurred. "But… That Akechi bastard… It was as though war was a game to him." It was a game, wasn't it... He just wanted to sow suffering. Unfortunately his kind was not rare. What was rare was having them reach a position where they affected more than a handful of lives. "Even if the plan is to eventually crush everyone around them anyway, for Oda to vanquish his ally Azai at this stage and deceive Tokugawa… It cannot have been his best course of action."

"That's true…" Yukimura reflected too, almost drinking Katakura-dono's words.

"That bastard… the Devil King nurtured him but he may actually be an apostate." So Saki and Date were no longer the only ones with a major hatred for the white haired freak. Lovely.

"Akechi Mitsuhide…" Yukimura whispered softly, thinking about the name, trying to place it in what he knew and had seen.

"Sanada-danna" Sasuke's voiced cut through the air as he came, carrying a man in blue armour.

"Sasuke. Who is that?" Sanada turned suddenly, approaching, trying to see.

"Bunshichi!" Katakura-dono recognized him, approaching, crouching near him.

"Katakura-sama…" The retainer whispered slowly.

"Hey what happened?!" Saki moved quickly next to Kojuro, appraising the wounded man. He was hurt, beaten, seemingly disoriented. Sasuke had given him something already, it was noticeable in his eyes. She exchanged a glance with the ninja of Kai, receiving a nod that confirmed her suspicions.

"Katakura-sama… Yoshinao and the others have been…" His voice was pained and faint, with an undertone of panic and fear while trying to answer Kojuro's question.

"By the time I got there I only found this guy lying there by himself." Sasuke informed softly, putting the men down, still bracing him against his shoulder.

"What of the others?" Katakura-dono inquired.

"Taken. I found this there." Sasuke slid a piece of paper out of his camouflage, taken by Sanada who read it while Saki and Kojuro tried to tend to Bunshichi. The Young Tiger's expression changed, growing sterner and worried.

"Katakura-dono." The Right Eye stood, taking the letter away from him, reading it too. "It says that in exchange for those who were taken we are to hand over Takeda's Shieldless Armour along with Date's Six Dragon Swords. Not only that but the appointed time is tomorrow morning."
"Matsunaga Danjo Hisahide." Katakura-dono enunciated the name slowly, his hands trembling slightly in outrage, crushing the letter in his fist.

Saki narrowed her eyes. That was not far… but to get there by morning… It would be a hard ride. She could be there in less than ten minutes…

"This Matsunaga… He is called the Villain of the Warring States but he hasn't sought to seize power and now he's said to be living a hermit's life, putting his efforts towards collecting antiques." Sasuke provided the information easily. Saki grimaced, having placed him too. The man was not a major player in the warring states scenario but he was a curiosity. There were shinobi that she knew of that kept track of his collecting and blackmailing habits. Not a good man. Underhanded. Tricky. Ruthless.

"Sanada what is this Shieldless Armour?" Katakura-dono cut her thoughts suddenly.

"It is a Takeda clan treasure." The warrior answered softly. "When Oyakata-sama is about to embark on a great venture he gathers his chief vassals before the armour and the banner and determines the collective will of the Takeda clan. Oaths sworn upon such occasion are never broken." He took a deep breath. Saki frowned, listening to something odd, something disturbing the night but as he kept talking she dismissed it. It was such a tiny sound, a sudden gasp. Maybe Date was having another nightmare… "That armour is a symbol that upholds our unwavering will. It is literally a treasure. It is said that no weapon can pierce the armour and thus, in turn, when we wish for someone to recover from a serious wound we sometimes lay their bed in the room with the armour. Hence we put Date-dono in that room."

That explained the air of reverence that each servant had when delivering meals in the room… Saki shook her head once more, waiting.

"So it is that armour. Matsunaga Hisahide. Does he intend to decorate the alcove of his hermitage with Date's swords and Takeda's armour?" He was talking almost to himself, his anger finding a different outlet and still one he couldn't pursue.

"I shall notify Oyakata-sama." Yukimura offered. Saki almost smiled. He wanted to help. He also cared about the men. They had been doing everything they could for Kai, helping the army, the villages, the house. They were guests and the Young Tiger felt a bit responsible for them. Saki wouldn't care if it was the link to Date that made him think of asking for the sacred relic to help the men of other land. It was still the act of a good hearted man.

"No need" Katakura-dono said dryly. Saki blinked, staring at him, surprised.

"What?" Sanada wasn't sure he had heard right either.

"This was a failure on our part. We cannot make any more troubles for Takeda. Even if we were to notify the Tiger of Kai I am sure we couldn't take the clan's treasure away." He held the letter on his fist, crumpling it. Was that his issue? Delivering the relics to an old reclusive son of a bitch?

"Then send me." Saki said softly. She had thought the solution obvious.

"Saki…" Kojuro looked at her, eyes narrowing as if torn.

"I'm a shinobi. My job is to sneak into places and take what my army needs. They took our men. I'll get them back without sacrificing anything." Even with little information it should be easy. The man would be prepared for warrior to barge in, not a sneak attack... Takeda, Uesugi and Oda factions knew about her. She doubted her presence had reached farther.
"No." Katakura-dono didn't even stop to consider, looking away sharply.

"Why in the hells not? Use me." Saki moved, placing herself in front of Kojuro once more, defiant, forced to look up to catch his eyes in the shadow.

"Katakura-sama" Bunshinchi whispered, worried, seeing the second in command's objective.

"This news is not to reach Masamune-sama either. Think of them as having been shot to death at Nagashino. Got it?" He looked towards the warrior with a cutting look, all harsh and military.

"But Sir..." the retainer tried, moving a bit, clearly upset and shocked.

Saki shook her head slowly, looking away.

"I cannot. In your own terms I cannot do it." Date was not awake but she could not keep that from him. Loyalties were... conflicting but in that angle it was very clear to whom she should report. And she would not be the one to tell the One-Eyed Dragon they lost three good men because she had been forbidden to act and Katakura-dono had chosen the easier path to avoid debts or material losses. "Let me go. I'll get them back. Heck I'll even kill the man for no extra charge."

"We will not lose any more of our own for this." Kojuro said slowly, gripping her shoulders as if to shake her. Saki shrugged away.

"Should I perish there are others in my clan that will come to tale this place. Per our agreement. Let. Me. Go. Save. My. Friends." She punctuated each word with a nudge.

"Katakura-dono. Saki-dono" Yukimura was also struggling with the decision, watching their talk unfold with a bemused expression.

"Danna. It's the right decision." Sasuke said softly.

Saki turned sharply, glaring at the other ninja. He flinched. Hid it well from the rest of the world but she saw it.

"Stay out of this Sarutobi." She moved once more towards the Right Eye, prepared to shriek until he relented, if needed. And if he still refused she would go, taking her punishment after the guys were safe.

"You are going to let them treat us like fools and just ignore it Kojuro?" Date walked out of the room, almost fully equipped, carrying his swords. That had been the sound. He had awoken, the armour clinking... Despite the smile and the defiance in his stance there was no way Saki could overlook the pain that laced him underneath. Still she stood, unmoving, waiting.

All he had to do was overrule Katakura-dono, order her to go get the guys.

"Sanada Yukimura, where's my horse?"

Saki's eyes widened. She exchanged a glance with Kojuro, both allying now. One thing was going or not. Another was allowing their injured leader to go.

"Masamune-sama." Katakura-dono advanced, trying to cut his way.

"«Not to worry»" Date moved slowly, nonchalantly, crossing the garden. "We just have to get the hostages back, right?" He paused by Saki, caressing her cheek slowly, tenderly. She smiled, warmth flowing through them, some of the worry she had felt abating. "Come. We'll go and rescue
them." So he had listened to most of the conversation. "Where is this Matsunaga bastard?"

"You must not." Katakura-dono said a bit more forcefully.

"Losing even one man isn't something the Date army is going to stand for «you see».

"I cannot allow you to go." The Right Eye reached for his sword, gripping it, preparing to draw it, to make him listen to reason.

"Send me Date-sama. Alone… Please. All you have to do is send me." Saki whispered moving too, standing in front of the One-Eyed Dragon.

"Kojuro, you gonna turn your sword against me?" Date said softly, half-turning, glanced at his second-in-command.

"Your retainers are valuable. But most valuable of all is your own person Masamune-sama."

"Date-sama… I'm the one of least importance here and the one with the skills to accomplish this. You don't need to go. Just tell Katakura-dono to back off and send the shinobi." She cupped his face, forcing him to look at her, to see the pleading in her eyes. Date smiled slightly. Saki cursed. He was convinced that his own stubbornness could move Katakura-dono's.

"Then come with us." Oh he wasn't noticing she hadn't extended an invitation to go with her, now was he? "Guard my back like you always do."

"Katakura-dono" Yukimura murmured in shock as the Right Eye drew the blade, assuming an aggressive pose, preparing for confront.

"To allow you to fear nothing and proceed forward with your sights set on nothing but what is before you at all times. And I, Kojuro, would guard your back. I swore this… But to allow you to take to the field in your current injured state? Not on my life!"

"Guess you leave me no choice." Date reached for one of his blades.

Saki stopped him, placing her hand over his, keeping the blade in its sheath.

"You have a choice you stubborn Dragon. Send me." She hissed, staying in the way.

"My men Saki. I should be there too." He stepped forward, drawing the sword as Saki shadowed, moving next to Sasuke and Bunshichi. "I won't hold anything back, Kojuro."

Katakura-dono moved suddenly, circling through the right, clashing with Date, the blades crossing in a mirror. The Right Eye pushed, dodging, circling once more towards the right, the blade moving in an arch. The One-Eyed Dragon moved, a bit thrown, stopping the attack. But Katakura-dono did it, again, and again, widening or tightening the circling before the assault, keeping to Date's blind spot.

"Katakura-dono is attacking only Date-dono's right side…" Yukimura whispered.

It was unfair, it was underhanded and it was something she would do if Date was her enemy. Shinobi used any advantage they could. The One-Eyed Dragon was used to rely on the open battlefield and in the ever-present Right Eye to balance that flaw. And as his companion of so many battles that same man knew exactly where the chinks in the armour were located.

"He's so precise in everything he does. I like him." Sasuke complimented, his line of though similar
I hate them both so much right now." Saki grumbled. That fight had gone on long enough as it was. She shadowed into it as Katakura-dono attacked, stepping into Date's shadow as he flinched in pain, the wound surely reopening. He was unable to move as the Right Eye's sword handle jabbed next to the injury, stealing his breath.

Date groaned suddenly in pain and shock. She freed him long enough for him to look over his shoulder, to see her there, as if the binding wasn't enough for him to believe Saki had kept him still for the strike, before Katakura-dono's blind curve hit him on the shoulder, the sharp sting bringing on unconsciousness.

"Kojuro you bastard…” He grumbled before letting go, falling heavily.

"Boss… Boss…” Bushinchi ran towards them. Saki knelt next to him, turning the One-Eyed Dragon with quite a bit of effort, sliding some strands away from his face, feeling his temperature as a precaution. Katakura-dono was staring at his form, his eyes still and conflicted, the sword tightly gripped in his hand. "Katakura-sama that was unfair… Boss is injured so why…”

"Because we had to." Saki whispered slowly, eyes downcast.

"I understand Masamune-sama. I, Kojuro, will recover your men without fail."

"Oh you…” Saki stood, angered. "You're a warrior. You can't go and expect to get them alive just by…”

"Saki… I need you to stay behind." The kunoichi snarled, hands fisting shaking the hand he had placed over her shoulder, trying to connect, to make her see things from his perspective.

"Katakura-dono…” Yukimura whispered, still trying to understand the chain of events.

"I shall borrow these for a short time." The Right Eye whispered into the air, collecting the swords, cradling them in his arms, moving towards the house, towards the horses.

"He will not take only the swords Katakura-dono. You really should rethink this stupid plan your mind is calling strategy…” Katakura-dono paid no attention, walking away with the claws, disappearing inside.

"So in the end he is going to go himself." Sasuke said, crossing his arms over his head, tilting it back.

"Bunshichi. Stay with the Boss." Saki said, her voice icy.

"Your orders are to stay behind…” Sasuke said in a slight playful tone, knowing he would react with a similar plan. It was personal but she had a clear point and a loophole in which to act. The only other trained to do that kind of mission in that garden was him.

"Oh I'll stay behind." She snapped. "I'm not letting him go alone into that trap."

"But you would go alone Saki-dono" Sanada said, worriedly.

"I'm a shinobi. Stupid males." She shadowed away suddenly.

Sasuke sighed in relief.

"That woman is pissed. I feel sorry for her targets, I do."
Genin – 下忍 – Lower ninja rank; in this fanfiction a ninja ready to take the Kakan; not very experienced;
Chapter 8

Todai-ji, Matsunaga's chosen rendezvous point, was an abandoned Buddhist temple, broken, burned and forsaken. It was a bleak sight but it was also a place where she could sneak in easily, where the jagged remnants of walls, columns and statues provided convenient shadows and crevices to hide in. Saki had been sliding carefully through it, appraising every trap in place. There was no way for her to disable some, not if she wanted to stay under the cloak of secrecy. She had passed Katakura-dono's a couple of hours ago, spending that time in quiet scouting through the complex, trying to plot a way to get the men before the Right Eye arrived, to avoid all the drama.

Unfortunately Matsunaga Hisahide was standing in the temple courtyard, staring at the captured men in a contemplative silence. Had been there for all the time she had spent sneaking in. Not a guard but a powerful deterrent for any action she might take. Until he either left or was sufficiently distracted there wasn't much she could or would do. A single mistake, a sound out of place, a hasty action could spell disaster.

"What a surprise. Things are getting interesting." Matsunaga began suddenly as he saw Katakura-dono's horse barge into the first enclosure. The men stirred. From what she could see they weren't very injured. They had been unconscious so far which had made her suspect of a smoke bomb of some kind, added to the explosive mixture that had created the sound heard in Kai, used for the capture.

Bunshichi had been bruised and disoriented… Saki shook the speculation away and looked down. It was the advantage of that location on the top of the hill and the Villain of the Warring States knew it. It was his playground, prepared for his moment, for his needs, for his ego. There was an insidious, twisted mind inside that head, shining behind the cold eyes and the façade of ennui.

"I heard the One-Eyed Dragon of Oshu was wounded and took shelter in Kai. So I thought it was a golden opportunity to obtain Date's Dragon Claws and Takeda's Shieldless Armour. Which are two treasures that I have long desired." Gloating? Saki kept herself still in the shadows behind the statue's fingers. "But I had not expected you three to be Date's retainers. Though now that I think of it your appearance should have given you away." There was a clear derision in his tone as he moved languidly, appraising his captives, a slight smile in the aging man's lips, hands clasped behind his back.

"How dare you mock us!" Yoshinao growled, struggling against the thick ropes around the chest and knees, pinning them to the columns that had once held the ceiling and around the wrists, pressing them to their backs and to the wood.

"Don't think you can pick a fight with Oshu and get away with it!" Samenosuke shouted, allying his voice with the other retainer, trying to maintain his pride.

Magobei's stomach on the other hand chose to growl, the semi-conscious man muttering about his hunger. There Saki could not resist resting her face against her palm, the claws twitching, cold against her skin. There went the moment of Oshu's pride.

Matsunaga cared nothing for their words, too taken by the sound of his own voice, unravelling his plans. For someone who clearly loved the sound of his own drawling poisoned words hermit was a strange choice of life.

"I heard the Tiger of Kai has taken in those who were injured at Nagashino be they friend of foe but… It will soon be revealed for the hypocrisy that it is. To exchange the armour, a clan treasure,
for the sake of another country who may be your enemy tomorrow, much less to save common soldiers such as yourselves… No lord of any domain would do such a thing."

"If you're going to kill us just do it!" Yoshinao challenged, straightening as much as he could in defiance.

"We're ready for the worst at all times!" Samenosuke completed the thought.

"However it was the Right Eye of the Dragon, Katakura Kojuro, that has come here in place of the injured One-Eyed Dragon." Matsunaga completed his line of though, undaunted, turning slightly. The yard beneath them was misted, clouded. Trap. Poison. Saki's mind informed.

"Katakura-dono has?" There was shock in the men's faces, their voices hesitating, looking at each other.

"That is why I said it had become interesting." There was a slight shift in the Villain's voice, a smug self satisfaction. And a captive audience that seemed to be feeding him straight lines might have been his dream. "If I take Date's tactician and most trusted subordinate prisoner even Takeda, who must have ignored your plight, will surely be forced to deal with matters then. All because he took in the Date faction in the name of a hasty alliance."

"Like hell Katakura-sama would be that careless." Saki was not agreeing with that seeing that both she and he were there with a diverging view of how to save the men. And judging by the sound of battle whispering in the distance a different approach as well. "Besides Oshu hasn't allied itself with anyone." Samenosuke said.

Saki shook her head. It was no longer strictly true but they had no way of knowing.

"It may as well have, given the current situation. Or are you saying that the only ones playing friends were you men, who were guarding the borders in place of Takeda's men?"

"That was just to repay them for the meals and lodging…" Yoshinao said, confused. An act of kindness and an order to help had landed them in that situation. But if it wasn't them tied to those columns it would have been the pair of guards they had scared out of duty.

"Takeda's food sure was good…" Magobei mumbled.

"Things will surely become complicated between the two sides over whether to offer up the Shieldless Armour in addition to the One-Eyed Dragon's Claws." Matsunaga raised both his hands, staring at the palms as if weighting the treasures. "No general would hand over the clan's treasures to save the lives of outsiders." He turned a bit, his tone shifting to a thoughtful muttering. "The Devil King of the Sixth Heaven… Colluding to protect the land they had been fighting over before… Oda Nobunaga, the living embodiment of black misfortune, lays down his military rule across the land…" He shook his head, voice gaining power once more. "It is no more than a joke. Opening their hearts as a stopgap measure will prove detrimental and it is also possible that it will lead to infighting between Takeda and Date." He smiled, facing the warriors from Oshu once more. "No need to be grim. Even if all you did was play the role of showing them how foolish they are, the life you were blessed with has served a purpose. Rest easy. When death comes it will be over in an instant."

Saki grimaced. He planned on killing them anyway. Or at least as soon as he had one valuable bartering piece or the treasures he so desired. She heard Katakura-dono's laboured breathing as he ran up the winding stairs. Matsunaga turned slowly to face the Right Eye. She shadowed quickly, using the noise, perching on the tip of the gigantic statue's hand, taking the high ground. She threw
the kunai lifted from Kasuga and the shuriken Sarutobi had unknowingly provided, cutting the
main ropes, the sounds of metal and wood swallowed by the noises coming from the Right Eye's
breath, clinking armour and swords. As soon as she had a chance she would release them. There
was no acknowledgment of the actions going on behind him on Matsunaga's part but Saki kept
herself still, her hands making a couple of symbols to obscure her actions, sounds and shape even
further.

"Matsunaga Hisahide…" the Right Eye growled, stopping, straightening solemnly before the
enemy.

"Good evening. I have been waiting for you. I thought you might be brought to me as a corpse, but
it seems you are not to be underestimated." Such a polite and disturbingly calm appraisal. Villain
indeed.

"I, Katakura Kojuro, am not called the Right Eye of the Dragon for nothing!" Katakura-dono
glanced behind Matsunaga, his expression changing suddenly, noticing the men. And possibly her
too, outlined by the moonlight. After he had seen her shadowed by the kata in battle the signs of
concealment should be a bit more visible to his eyes. Like finding a tiger in the undergrowth. After
you knew where the stripes played with the shadow and grass it was easier to see. Not that it would
do you any good. The beast would already be ready to strike whether you caught a glimpse of it or
remained blissfully unaware.

"Katakura-sama" Yoshinao shouted.

"We're sorry. We were careless…" Samenosuke said, his voice resigned.

"Katakura-sama you can't do this. We'd love to be rescued but the Boss's swords are the one
thing…" Magobei was finally awake enough to forget the need for food.

"I'll have this settled soon. Wait there for just a little longer." Katakura-dono reassured them,
reaching for the blue cloth bundle he carried on his back.

"This is unexpected." Matsunaga said in an insidious tone. "Did you really bring the Dragon
Claws?"

"You're the one who wanted them!"

"The One-Eyed Dragon is a rare man indeed. To think he would hand over is treasured swords so
easily merely to save common soldiers." Derisive laughter rose behind the words, spilling over
them like oil, fuelling the Right Eye's rage.

"Don't think we're the same as any old army out there! There isn't a single common soldier in the
Date Army! That's also why we know they're prepared to accept the worst if it comes to pass."

"I see. Then why now, when the entire land is in jeopardy, have you become caught up with in this
trivial matter and come here as if you have no other concerns? I would think now would be the
time to abandon foot soldiers."

"That is obvious." Katakura-dono's expression changed, growing angry, forceful and proud. "This
isn't where they're meant to die. We've banded together and set out to fight in these turbulent times.
So I don't think we'll make it to the end without losing anyone. However! I won't let a single man
die in vain! That is the way of the Date! And also the will of Masamune-sama."

Saki smiled into the darkness.
Katakura-sama... Boss... Touched by his words, emboldened by his presence the soldiers of Date's army started to see a flicker of hope for themselves.

"You can have these for the time being!" He tossed the swords, allowing the six of them to scatter, to lodge themselves into the wood in front of Matsunaga, blue sheaths and grey handles.

"Katakura-sama!"

"You can't do that!"

"Give the soul of Date to a bastard like him?!"

"And with that done, fight me. If I win you will return both the hostages and the swords. If you're also a warrior..." Katakura-dono touched the hilt of his sword as Matsunaga started to go down the stairs, reaching for one of the swords, touching the hilt slowly, as if appraising the craftsmanship.

"I suppose that may serve to amuse. But this is not enough. Unfortunately unless both treasures are here I am afraid I cannot enter negotiations."

That was a cold punch in the gut but Saki recalled saying that to him hours earlier. So...

"That is all Date can offer! If you want Takeda's armour go bargain with the Tiger of Kai!"

"As I thought, Takeda may have welcomed you temporarily but this shows he will not go so far as to offer up a family treasure." Smug satisfaction laced Matsunaga's voice once more.

Did Katakura-dono not see that we was about to become bait?

"Hold. Hold. Hold." Yukimura? Saki smiled and moved, using his noise to reach the men, lodging her claws on the wood, releasing the shuriken, sliding them once more into the obi, letting the weight of the tied men slowly start to drag them towards the ground. It would be quite imperceptible. Quickly she looped rope around the wrist binds, to pull them towards her as soon as possible, repeating the gesture three times as Yukimura spoke loudly. "If you are looking for Takeda's clan treasure it is here!"

"Sanada" Katakura-dono was taken by surprise, looking at the new arrival.

"I am Sanada Gengiro Yukimura. I have come as Oyakata-sama's proxy. This is none other than the Shieldless Armour, heirloom of Takeda of Kai. It is indisputably the genuine article! Ascertain for yourself Matsunaga-dono!" He carried the armour from the gusoku bitsu, placing it on the ground, near the swords, stepping back, his expression determined.

"Oh? I never imagined that the two treasures... would come together so easily." Saki stopped moving entirely in the silence that followed. Sasuke moved, appearing behind a broken wall, winking for her. Saki grimaced, noticing the slight tilt in Matsunaga's head. Had he heard... "But now I have them, it is the end." Her eyes widened suddenly. The sharp snap of his fingers started the chain of detonations. The shinobi grimaced amongst the screams, fire and sound...

Date woke with a gasp, feeling the pain wrack him, originating from the wound as he sat, looking around. Just the moonlight entered the room through the slightly parted shoji. He calmed his breathing, thinking back, trying to make sense of the events. Tricked by his shinobi, impaired and stopped by his Right Eye.

"That bastard." He muttered sharply.
"You took a real beating." Takeda Shingen sat outside quietly. He looked into the room, watching him. "With the Right Eye of the Dragon targeting your right side I don't think any opponent could be more formidable for the One-Eyed Dragon. Also your shinobi was pinning you to keep the fight short did not maintain the field level."

"This is no laughing matter" Date said, his jaw set stubbornly. Saki… had agreed with him. She wanted to go. And still had allied with Kojuro when he had decided to charge forth. What stung more? Their choices or the fact that he could have avoided this fresh new pain if he had chosen to let her act like what she was?

Stubborn Dragon.

"But he narrowly avoided a direct hit to you gunshot wound. You have found a rare trustworthy subordinate."

Date scoffed.

"Never mind that. You sent Sanada Yukimura? The armour that was here was Takeda's…"

"It is needed with him right now. A man who is neglectful of small matters can never accomplish great deeds to begin with. Soon we will bid farewell to these troubled times and it is you, young men, who will carry the era to come." Shingen started with his tone matter-of-fact and then shifted to a philosophical rhythm.

"So you say but you're the type who'll be around forever as a force to be reckoned with." Shingen laughed heartily at his assessment.

"Perceptive of you." His mirth died suddenly though. "Matsunaga Hisahide is the only general that Oda Nobunaga has fought and did not kill. We could interpret this to mean that the Devil King put him under his command and ordered him to create a diversion for us, but this seems unlikely."

"How do you know that?" Date murmured, listening.

"Because I do not think he would take orders." It was a simple enough answer.

"Then why did the Devil King let him live?"

"I don't know but… well… perhaps he fancied keeping a cuckoo in a cage. Rest for now, One-Eyed Dragon. We have need of you." Shingen stood to leave.

"Old man Takeda. I'll pay you back for this in the battlefield."

"After we have defeated the Devil King let us fight each other to reach Kyoto. He wishes it as well."

"«All Right»" Date smiled, satisfied. Then he noticed a small note on the side of his bed, tucked under the helm. He slid it away and a small pill clattered on the floor before he opened the paper, staring at the letters, making them out in the faint moonlight.

For the pain. Stubborn Dragon.

Saki… He felt amused… and as the pain was still there and because it was radiating from the new bruise that was darkening over his stomach he took the damn medicine.

Saki grimaced under the hellishly hot rubble, moving, hissing in pain feeling bits of wood and stone poke her in places she would rather prefer undisturbed, her shoulder aching fiercely, pain
over the recently healed flesh. She tasted ash and blood and her vision swam, slightly blurry, her left eye stinging with the blood that slid from a cut on her forehead. Slowly she shook the pain away sitting in the pocket of protective debris. It was a hastily chosen place and it seemed like a good idea.

A bit of digging and they would be out…

They were there with her, freed but for the ropes, connecting them to her wrist, that still bound their arms, slightly more bruised than before but alive, looking bewildered.

Yoshinao stared, sitting down.

Samenosuke smiled, kneeling, slightly hunched over.

Magobei was lying on his back, shocked.

Saki moved, kneeling, recoiling when a sharp sting hit her side, her claws going to the spot, managing to keep quiet, pressing her lips together, face down turned to hide the scowl.

"We need to get out now." She murmured, standing walking towards each man, sliding a claw between the ropes, slashing them away with an abrupt tug. There was no telling how many more traps Matsunaga had put in place. She could feel more explosions rocking the ground as time went by. "Dig there, where the air is flowing. It's the shortest way to the surface." Saki had worked her shadowy skills to get them away from the explosion along with the more mundane tricks of dragging full grown males through a rope without spraining her wrists, and in case something else went wrong she needed to keep a bit…

"Saki-chan… why did you… and Katakura-sama…" Samenosuke whispered as she steadied herself, as they started to move the rocks and broken beams.

"We couldn't leave you. Date-sama would not leave you." She took a deep breath. "I'll go outside… dig, get out of here. They might need our help. Matsunaga has an army, small as it may be and there were traps. Please be quick." She moved her hands into the signs and shadowed away, finding herself under the moonlight, near the walls, breathing fresh air despite the fire that raged on the spot where the statue had been. They were behind the fire… under the belly. It was not the best place but as soon as they got out it wouldn't be dangerous.

Three men stood in front of the raging flames. Katakura-dono seemed to be breathing easily now. Sanada held his spears low to the ground and Sarutobi was staring at the destruction. The six claws and Takeda's armour stood proudly amongst the destruction, the charred ground and the bodies of Matsunaga's soldiers.

"I'm indebted to you." Katakura-dono was saying, refusing to let his voice break.

"No. You must be bitterly disappointed." Sanada was trying to be tactful, staring grimly at the Right Eye and the fire, keeping his grief in.

"I'm ashamed to say it was all I could do to protect myself..." Sasuke was saying. He had been able to move away as he was at the edge of Matsunaga's safe zone. "Saki was freeing them... if I had waited a bit more..."

"Saki was truly here?!!" Katakura-said slowly, turning. He had seen her outline in the dark. Thought it an illusion created by poison and the memory of her stubbornness. Had they lost their shinobi along with loyal men?
"MATSUNAGA!" Three voices in tandem rose from the fire, the men coming out, limping, carrying bits of wood as crutches and would use them as clubs if the fight still raged.

"Bastard, don't think we'll die so easily!"

"Fire bombs at us, bring on everything you've got!"

"We won't let you have Boss's swords!"

"You guys…" Katakura-dono murmured, surprise in his eyes.

"I told you I'd get them." Saki walked slowly towards them.

"Saki…" Sasuke whispered, surprised. Sanada sighed, relieved, smiling then.

"I had a bit more time to prepare." She murmured, using Sasuke's camouflage to wipe the blood away from her eye and forehead. And the smudges of dust and ash from her face.

"Preparation and talent work miracles, then?" The other shinobi said softly, quoting a saying with ease.

"Yeah."

"Katakura-sama…" Yoshinao whispered, looking around.

"Where's that bastard?" Samenosuke said, his attention also shifting.

"Could it be..."

"That it's already over?"

"Yes." Katakura-dono confirmed.

There was a collective sigh of relief.

"I'm hungry." Magobei whispered.

"We're sorry Katakura-sama"

"We're so ashamed"

"You did well."

"You're the one who said it Katakura-sama."

"This isn't where we're meant to die."

"There's no way we could die until the boss seizes the country!"

"Yes. You're right." He straightened, smiling with pride, turning towards their shinobi who appraised the damage to the ruin. "I told you to stay behind."

"I stayed behind. Behind you, behind the tree, behind the statue, behind the stone, behind the general… behind something." She smiled cheekily.

Katakura-dono looked away for a moment.
"You were right…"

"Don't." She patted his arm a bit awkwardly. "Your breathing was irregular."

"Sarutobi used an antidote."

"Hmmm…" She allowed him to go, planning on finding out what had poisoned him, as dawn came. They turned away, walking down the steps Katakura-dono laughing with the men, the relief palpable as they went down the stairs, leaving that place. Sanada carried the armour once more, smiling proudly, silently, following.

Sasuke stood by her side, his gaze on the dying fire, along with hers. No body. But they had to have defeated him.

The explosion had been too convenient.

"You don't believe it either?" Saki asked softly.

"Too…opportune."

"True. But as long as he leaves us alone…" She shrugged, flicking her claws. "Well now… How were things with your fiancée?"

Noon was approaching when they reached Kai once more. Magobei had spent his time muttering about his hunger and the others had been using that to poke fun at him. It was an easy ride, their spirits calm and at ease for the most part. Katakura-dono retold the fight with the Myoshi Death Squad and Matsunaga for the benefit of the men. And Saki’s too, as far as she could tell.

Sanada and Sarutobi left to report to their Lord, taking the slightly battered armour with them. It had been the Tiger of Kai's idea to allow the treasure to leave. Along with a lesson to his charge it was also proof that he was a truly unique and honourable leader.

The guys sought the healer, just to make sure, limping and complaining their way there.

Katakura-dono exchanged a look with Saki. She sighed. They had to face their own leader sooner or later.

The pair walked in tandem towards the room, silent and apprehensive.

Date was awake, sitting still, looking into the garden, bare-chested with only the bandages covering his skin. Katakura-dono knelt, placing the swords down as Saki occupied her place in front of the One-Eyed Dragon, lowering her head cautiously. The Right Eye then moved, kneeling next to her, waiting.

"They are safe." Katakura-dono said slowly before any question was asked. "Masamune-sama… When you have defeated the Devil King and then seized the country… after that I, Kojuro, am prepared to face the consequences." The One-Eyed Dragon moved softly, as if considering, reaching for his swords, unsheathing one, checking the blade, just a slight hum in his voice giving his confusion at Katakura-dono's request. "No matter the reason I still turned my sword against you. I will accept any punishment you deem fit."

There was a sudden whoosh of air and Date's blade was pressed against the Right Eye's throat, his grip firm, not even a shake. A smile of playful arrogance traced the man's lips. Katakura-dono gulped, surprised for a moment before closing his eyes with a slight smile of understanding.
"Give me that stupid talk and I'll hack you to pieces right here, right now."

"Masamune-sama." Katakura-dono whispered with a tilt of happiness in his tone.

"You weren't here." The One-Eyed Dragon sheathed the sword once more, placing it next to him, tilting his head to their shinobi. Saki thinned her lips, looking away despite not moving. "You went with him?"

"In a way. Date-sama..." She looked up, not sure of what to say. They needed to explain so much more than what had happened that night. A full five days worth of information starting with the moment Date had lost consciousness on the horse. Katakura-dono placed his hand over her shoulder, softly.

"I did tell her to stay behind. And yet the fact that she was there allowed Oshu to have its men back." Both condemning and defending.

The kunoichi sighed and straightened. Well... Justification might mitigate if not erase a misdemeanor. Shinobi liked their information and one good reason often cleansed a reputation. There was a bit more flexibility in their world. Kasuga might have not turned a renegade if she had bothered to check her facts. Uesugi Kenshin was not supposed to die, at least not because of the order of such a minor lord.

And she had learned that Date could be as flexible as one of her own.

"You never did specify who should go, being knocked unconscious at the time, so I disobeyed Katakura-dono's order, knowing that you were safe here in the heart of Kai, and obeyed you." She grinned slightly, bowing her head. "Will you add this to my failures?"

"Failures?" Date Masamune drawled slowly. Saki glanced up, humour lighting her eyes for an instant.

"Will you make me enunciate them?" Date chuckled. Saki answered with a sigh behind a smile. "I perceive them as failures but some are not my fault. War is messy. We carry our burned or discard it when ready. As simple as that." Some burdens she was not ready to leave behind.

Katakura-dono squeezed her shoulder softly, lowering his head in a compliment. He exchanged a glance with Date and straightened.

"I will see to our men." He said, leaving.

Saki frowned a bit, watching him go. She looked at the One-Eyed Dragon, staring at the fabric of the bandages. Still white. He stood, slowly, walking towards the engawa half nude, unhurriedly, lean, taut, and well-muscled overall. She watched for a long moment tilting her head, catching sight of the note she left. The shinobi undid the claws. She should check on him, verify the wound... Then she followed him, feeling restless, standing by his side.

The granite statue Katakura-dono had destroyed was conspicuously missing, the tree still leafless outside.

"Then I should..." Saki's voice died when without word or warning he pulled her towards his chest, claiming her lips in a firm demanding kiss, imprisoning her in his arms, forcing her to tiptoe to keep balance against him. Her body took a moment to move through the shock and melt against his, returning the kiss, hearing a slight rumbling of pleasure and approval coming from him as his hands slid down her hips.
"I like that expression. Dazed, startled. A blush over your cheeks." Date whispered against her lips as they parted for air. She looped her arms around his neck still bemused, leaning against his chest, listening to his heart, trying to get into a coherent line of though. His arm was around her waist, anchoring her, free hand releasing the bind from her braid.

Saki sighed, digging her hands into his hair, fingertips then grazing his jaw, kissing him once more. His tongue teased her lips, dragging a hum of approval and pleasure from her, as she fell some of the freed strands of her hair fall around her face as his tongue found his way to play against hers, hot, slick and scorching. Saki's hands slid down his chest slowly, stopping as she felt the fabric. She broke apart from him, panting silently.

"My Dragon." Saki murmured as Date's lips trailed from the corner of her mouth, to her jaw, to her ear, his breath warm and soft against the sensitive shell as if determined to drag a whimper out of her. The shinobi pressed her lips together, shivering. She could almost feel his grin growing. She wasn't quite sure how they ended up back in the futon, his lips sliding down her neck, hands pinning her wrists as his teeth undid the clasps in her vest, stopping for a moment, enough to make her actually whimper and struggle, wanting his touch back. Date looked at her with a smirk, freeing her. Saki didn't move, eyes on him, the grey silvered by light and daze. The soft blush, the inky hair fanned around her, lips reddened and moist... It could be counted amongst the best sights he had ever beheld. She felt good there. Wordlessly he let his touch convey how much he desired her...

"Masamune-dono?" Sanada's voice cut through their haze suddenly and sharply. "What are you..." His eyes went from Saki's undone braid, to the parted vest to Date's demeanour and the way he was placed... and a blush started to creep over his cheeks as he understood what was going on.

"Ah..." Saki's voice caught in a whisper, apparently too surprised to shadow away, turning her head slightly, staring at the Young Tiger that was standing on the outside, outlined by the sun. Date made a point to slide his hand down her side, from the curve of her breast under the sarashi to her hip, flustering Sanada further, as he sat.

"What is it Sanada Yukimura?" He growled slowly, eye narrowed.

"Saki-dono... Goodness I had no... I didn't..." Yukimura was fidgeting and stammering, eyes wide.

"Please stop." Saki whispered to herself, sitting too, sliding her hair away from her cheeks, tucking it behind her ears, kneeling, moving a bit away from Date, closing her vest quickly. He gestured, signalling her to stay. "Just stop."

"Oyakata-sama said you were awake and I... uh..." He couldn't just forget that moment dragging his gaze towards the One-Eyed Dragon in confusion, awe and embarrassment. He twiddled his fingers shyly. Masamune chuckled. Saki lowered her head with a tsk.

"I'm going now." She whispered, shadowing, leaving, walking away with a slight smile, touching her lips, keeping the laughter in.

**Gusoku bitsu** – 喜足 柜 – box for storage and transport of an armour;

**Shuriken** – 手裏剣 – "sword hidden in the hand" or "blade in the hand" is a traditional Japanese concealed weapon that was generally used for throwing, and sometimes stabbing or slashing. Ninja throwing stars;
Chapter 9

Hesitating by the shoji Saki sighed, turning away for a moment, looking up, towards the night sky. The day had been mostly uneventful after… well… She had sneaked back into the ninja quarters, retrieved her bag and gone for the baths, scrubbing until clean and soaking until her head cleared. Not noticing Sanada approaching, too lost in the moment, forgetting her claws… She had pinpointed the faults in that picture going from the feeling safe in Kai, being kissed mindless and being unused to such state. It was easily remediable in any event.

Date had shared the night meal with the army, letting them see that he was finally awake and healing. There had been a lot of cheering, booze and song, easily audible from a distance. It was a party in disguise but let Kai deal with that. And she had missed it, busying herself by sorting the stacks of letters and packages sent from her informants and from home, eating alone, enjoying the good news, making plans for the bad and keeping the events of the afternoon locked. It wasn't the fact that it had happened… It was more the fact that they had been interrupted before she could understand…

And now she was there with the bag that carried all she needed when campaigning. Fidgeting.

Katakura-dono's steps were audible, sharp and sure as he made his round before retiring. Saki turned slightly, lowering her hands. She hadn't braided her hair, leaving it down to dry. The shinobi tucked it away once more, straightening, a bit self-conscious about the tousled look.

"Masamune-sama said you hadn't checked his injuries." The Right Eye stopped to talk. He did? Was something actually paining him or was he using Katakura-dono in a ploy to drag her back? As if she was going to run away like a frightened little girl after a… Saki snorted softly, eyes narrowing.

"After you left the Young Tiger came to see him. As Date-sama was awake, coherent, not showing any signs of pain and there was no scent of blood, I left to tend to my cuts." If he hadn't tattled she would not either. But being the Right Eye he would figure it out soon enough. If the One-Eyed Dragon still wanted her after having most of the day to think about what he had demanded. "Did he show any sign of pain during dinner?"

"A few. It was to be expected and surely were minor things." Katakura-dono said, his tone dry, reporting. As a warrior he recognized the signs. As a long time companion he recognized Masamune's disguises.

"I'll see to it before going to sleep." Saki reassured him. "Also I received some notes we will have to discuss later on… and we should talk about practicing the sword, to allow Date-sama to go to battle even if he is not fully cured. Just taking a few precautions."

Katakura-dono nodded, moving on.

Saki took a deep breath and slid the shoji open, just a bit, sliding inside, not making an effort to disguise it, putting the bag next to the futon, picking her claws and displaying them close. The One-Eyed Dragon was lying on his back, breathing slowly and in a clear fakery of slumber. She smiled, shaking her head, igniting the candle.

"I know you're awake." She whispered, opening her bag, sliding the covers away, exposing only his bandaged torso. Date chuckled, opening his eye, looking at her, mostly unmoving. Saki knelt by his side and started to unravel the bandaging, carefully. "Are you in pain?"
"A bit." He admitted after a few grimaces as the fabric fell away. She nodded, revealing the skin fully. It was still red and angry-looking around the jagged star-shaped dried blood and stitching. There were no tears in either though and no odd scent. It looked raw and tender but it was no longer feverishly hot to the touch. The reddened edges of the trauma were being engulfed by the growing dark bruise from Katakura-dono's strike. She touched the mark lightly. As a puncture wound it would take time, the surface healing first, what was beneath slower and frailer and adding that bruise was not going to speed any healing. "You're looking thoughtful." The One-Eyed Dragon whispered tracing her thigh, tilting his head in her direction as she tested the flesh and his winces.

"Two bullets." Saki whispered softly, getting the salves and new bandaging from her bag, placing them carefully, preparing for work. "You fought wounded." She poured the salve onto his stomach with a sharp flick of her wrist, the cold liquid making him hiss and squirm. There was no mercy in her grey eyes though as she spread it over the injured flesh even though there was no vengeance in her touch. As soon as that thing got warm it was actually pleasant enough.

Masamune relaxed under Saki's touch as she kept it gently in time with his breathing, the strokes long and lingering. She allowed his breathing to set the pace for a moment longer before shifting her motions to a caress. He felt the difference sharply, groaning in appreciation. His pupil widened, his breath shortened, and excitement clearly grew. He took a deep breath with a bit of difficulty, catching the amused gleam in her eyes before a harder touch brought the pain back on the bruise, focusing him.

"And both of you have been moping about it." Saki stopped moving for a moment before shaking her head and helping him seat so she could redo the bandages. Date nuzzled her for a moment, playing with a strand of her hair, the other arm free to loop around her waist, dragging her closer. She chuckled.

"Pretty much. Also I wanted to slap you so badly you'd be flung to Shikoku." She straightened, sliding his hair away from the blue eye, cupping his face tenderly. "Reckless Dragon."

The One-Eyed Dragon laughed quietly.

"So you were not Sarutobi's lover." He began playfully, calling her on a lie that had made him slightly angry when both shinobi had used it on Sanada. Saki shrugged, turning away. "And this injury made me loose an epic moment in history." He arched his eyebrows, making sure she got his meaning.

"Me semi-dressed fighting an equally underdressed kunoichi hardly counts as..." Sanada Yukimura talked too much apparently. For a pair of rivals they sure were friendly.

"Male perspective says otherwise." He laughed as she tied the ends of the bandages, pulling them tightly and securely. He held his breath in a hiss before sighing slowly, releasing the air, adjusting. Saki just snorted, letting the silence reign for a moment, untangling from him, cleaning her hands.

"Does it bother you?" Date asked softly after a moment, leaning, resting his arm on a bent knee.

Saki sat still over her ankles, tidying her supplies, mixing something more in a small coarse clay cup. The shinobi glanced at him for a moment. He touched his eye patch lightly. Her expression shifted.

The teachings said their bodies were sacred, a gift from the gods and the parents, and the scars were disgraceful, disrespectful. He never thought about it that much. As warriors... there was no one in his army that hadn't felt the blade on their skin or carried the marks of healing. Women and
priests would fault them for it, be shocked and disgusted.

"It's strength." She whispered, giving him the bitter-smelling liquid. "Every scar shows that you bled, you fought, you survived something and became stronger for it." He sniffed the concoction carefully. Saki sniggered. "Now prove you're not a wimp and drink."

Date did so with a grimace. Saki took the cup back, putting it down on the tray, looking at him with a quizzical expression, appraising the effects of her answer. He lied back, staring at the ceiling, his expression growing darker, more pensive. She knew of his past. The mother who though his clouded eye a disgrace and then the brother she favoured after the death of his father... The war he waged to get his birthright, Oshu, back. The facts and legend became a bit blurry on the how he lost his eye but that mattered little. But for the usually so confident and brash Dragon to ask her such a question... "Bothering her" would only matter if they were more than samurai and shinobi.

"Masamune..." Saki whispered as if testing his name pulling the covers over him for the sake of modesty and the chill in the air. His hand slid through her hair until he was cradling the back of her head, tilting her mouth to hover but a hairsbreadth from his parted lips. Saki barely held back a sigh, his gaze heavy and thick with desire, covering the pain, focused on her. She closed her eyes softly, placing her forehead against his. So she had her answer. "I'm yours. For as long as you desire."

The training began with the basics. Swordplay, the forms, warm-ups made to push him to his limit, to check if he could keep up. Some of the movements were shaky and unfinished. Others flowed with the same accuracy as ever. When facing Katakura-dono he maintained a good pace and façade, trying to push farther. The Right Eye of the Dragon kept those attempts in check or allowed him push as far as he deemed safe.

Date had been moved from the Shieldless Armour room into one of the guests quarters, as his life was no longer in danger and the place was more cozy, comfortable and defendable than the large meeting room that housed the relic.

It had been only a couple of days from his awakening but his strength was returning easily with no bouts of fever to plague him and despite the tenderness of the flesh the pain was muted as long as he didn't overexert.

The Right Eye breathed easily, still unaware of the medicine Saki had steadily given him through the sake. Or if he knew he hadn't mentioned it. If he had stopped the poison would linger in an uneasy rasp in the intake of air and she would detect it. A few more days of medicine and it would clear away.

It was almost noon, the guys would be waiting for them to lunch in an hour or so and it was time to make him rest.

Saki stood and walked towards the Dragon, stopping his movement sliding her hand under his, stealing the katana away with a smile.

"You have two weaknesses." The shinobi said, keeping her voice low. She had been watching him fight, trying to figure out the best way to help him defend himself as neither Saki nor Katakura-dono could stay with him at all times. "A blind side and a wounded flank." It was dry but both were true and there was no reason to mince words. "This" She touched the tsuba he used as eye patch. "you already figured out with training, instinct and a good man at your back, ready to defend. This" Her hand slid downward, touching the place of the wound, keeping her eyes squarely on his face. "will soon be a memory but now you have to deal."
"You want to give me lessons?" The One-Eyed Dragon smirked, lowering his head a bit.

"Advice." Saki smiled, tilting her face, lowering her hand. They weren't exactly touching but were close enough to be considered intimate. They slept together, sharing warmth. She liked it despite fearing not being able to disentangle in time or fall too deeply asleep and not notice any noises. Who knew the Dragon liked to curl and nuzzle. Usually he ended up around her, front to back, one hand outstretched towards his sword and she used him as a blanket and a pillow, her tanto paired with the katana, within her reach. To get away from him before anyone came in the morning she actually had to shadow away. Possessive Dragon. "Trickery."

"Saki." Sarutobi appeared on the wall, calling Oshu's shinobi. Saki looked towards the man, straightening. She shadowed, perching on the wall too. They exchanged a look and vanished.

Date sheathed the katana and scoffed, turning back towards the bukeyashiki. The shadow was sick of being locked up in Kai. Unlike him Saki had been given permission to scout. Whatever she wanted to help him with could wait and her interruption was, as usual, in time for lunch. The One-Eyed Dragon shook his head and went to the guys.

"Not very discreet." Sasuke said while they ran, after allowing her to gather her equipment.

"Not trying to be."

"When did that start?"

"Discreet enough then." Saki smiled. "Ask Sanada."

"He found out before me?!" Saki laughed, waiting a moment for the shocked shinobi.

Saki returned to Kai three days after leaving for the scouting venture with Sarutobi. It had been a quick sweep of the country's situation and the delivery of a few warning. They had separated when she headed for Oshu, late yesterday, to make sure Katakura-dono's measures were in place and to fetch a few trinkets. She grumbled to herself, choosing to take the long way, going towards the housing of the soldiers, to give them the letters, the messages and mementos from families and loved ones, stretching, stopping on the stone path when she found Sanada Yukimura.

"Sanada-dono." She said softly, stopping. The Young Tiger looked at her, started to smile and then blushed and looked quickly away. Whatever the One-Eyed Dragon had told them when he caught them had been enough to keep him from talking to Sasuke and had been enough to keep most of the goings-on a secret. Still she was suspicious of what exactly had the Dragon said to keep the boisterous boy that subdued.

"Saki-dono." He stood a bit rigidly. "I am sorry for intruding when you were with Masamune-dono but I had no idea you were together… even though you kissed…"

"We hadn't kissed…" Saki interrupted the odd statement, raising her hand slowly.

"On the road." Yukimura provided, wide brown eyes focusing on her face. The shinobi smiled, shaking her head gently, understanding the mistake.

"Not a kiss. I was forcing medicine on a dying man, choking him until his body reacted and swallowed. It really doesn't count as a kiss unless you kiss back and actually enjoy it." Cold lips and a thinning life-breath… She grimaced, getting rid of the memories.
"I… I see…" Sanada rubbed his head slightly, blushing. "I still didn't know you were engaged." Saki's eyes narrowed, mouthing a what to herself. "Sasuke says that…"

Saki groaned.

"You're a good man Sanada-dono." She walked towards him tiptoeing, kissing his forehead, over the red fabric, leaving him even more flustered. She held his face between her claws, staring into his eyes for emphasis. "But you really should know better than to take everything Sasuke says seriously."

"I…"

"The One-Eyed Dragon is my Boss. What we have besides that has nothing to do with engagements or marriages or whatever you think is proper. Also it's a kunoichi thing."

"Oh… but…" He scratched his head as she let him go, looking around as if the answer was in the stone path or on the buildings around them. "Masamune-dono."

Date was walking towards them in house clothes, looking... Not very happy.

"Sanada Yukimura." He greeted slowly, turning to her. Saki bowed her head slightly, closing her eyes. "You are late."

"I don't recall giving a date for my return Date-sama." She answered slowly, with a mocking drawl on her lips, looking up to see a kindred amusement and ready jab forming in his lips.

"Why isn't Sasuke with you?" Yukimura asked suddenly.

"He hasn't returned yet?" Date said too, his attention shifting. Kojuro also hadn't appeared since last night's meal.

"I can't say. Also I don't need to." Saki was looking up towards the clouds now, distracted, a slight frown crinkling her nose. Both men looked at her with a frown when Takeda Shingen's booming voice echoed in the terrains.

The Tiger of Kai seemed to love his grand entrances, to fall from the sky with such an impact, standing tall as the fog it had generated, arms folded over his chest.

"We begin training as of this moment. Even crying children will be inspired, even sleeping children will be roused. The Takeda-Style Training camp, known to all as the Takeda Contest of Men… Begins now!"

"Goodness… Do… Do you speak true?!" Yukimura jumped and the fisted his hands, closing his eyes while shouting his joy. "Oh such a happy boon you have granted me!" His voice was stuck in delight and wonder, slightly stuck with energy and overwhelming emotion. Almost to the point of tears.

Saki and Date turned their heads to each other, exchanging a blank expression of bewilderment.

"Hey Sanada Yukimura…" The One-Eyed Dragon started slowly, carefully, interrupted by Shingen's boisterous announcement.

"Standing in the way of the warrior are the adverse, the inscrutable and the uncanny. All of these fuel one's diligence. Yukimura, show me you can triumphantly overcome every trial!"
"I, Yukimuram will live up to Oyakata-sama's expectations without fail and overcome all!" Sanada screamed, standing in front of the Tiger, overflowing.

"Yukimura!"
"Oyakata-sama!"
"Yukimura!"
"Oyakata-sama!"
"Yukimura!"
"Oyakata-sama!"

Saki raised her right claws to her forehead, the tips grazing the skin lightly, her eyes closing with a groan, the expression closing in a grimace. Date also seemed confused by the sudden onset of a screaming match.

"There you have it One-Eyed Dragon. You feel free to join the Takeda Contest of Men as well!" Takeda Shingen announced proudly, turning away from his charge.

"I don't see what you're getting at…" The Dragon deadpanned.

"I will await you in the Training Hall. Come with your wits about you, both of you." The Tiger of Kai jumped suddenly, almost flying away.

Saki stared, frowning. He had a presence that wasn't created only buy his size. Quite frankly he reminded her of her father. Same kind of body although Takeda was markedly taller. Although she could not recall one instance of her father ever shouting like there was no such a thing as indoors. Deep voiced but soft-spoken. She smiled. Father was trained as a shinobi but he was mostly used as a bodyguard and a warrior even though he was remarkably graceful and fast for a man his size and built. She noticed the homesickness with a shrug. Then she glanced at Date. Maybe it was worth it. Also the money. Money was very important.

"I understand most assuredly! Finally, I, too, will take part in the Takeda Contest of Men! Words cannot express how moved I am!" Yukimura was practically bouncing with excitement.

Words were not needed. Saki though, crossing her arms, staring at her claws, flexing them, examining the sharpness of the metal.

Date was just confused. She looked away once more, watching him turn towards Sanada.

"What the hell is this "Contest of Men?" Date asked slowly.

The Young Tiger turned suddenly, eyes wide and bright, slightly flushed.

"Ah, yes, you have been granted leave to participate as well, Masamune-dono. You are to be congratulated!"

"This merits congratulations?"

"The Takeda-Style Training Camp! Known to all as the Takeda Contest of Men! Since ancient times it has been the training ground for those chosen to rule Kai to challenge themselves to become true warriors. They say that almost none successfully overcome the numerous punishing obstacles. I have heard that the contest is utterly unforgiving. Those who overcome it have one and
all become an indelible part of Kai's history. Oyakata-sama is one of them. The Takeda Contest of Men is the battleground every warrior of Kai dreams of above all others. He stopped his solemn but heated recount of the history of the contest and kept bouncing. "And that time has finally come for me as well! I, Sanada Genjiro Yukinura, never expected such joy to be mine!"

"In other words, to you Takeda folk, this is the «party» of a lifetime." Saki tilted her head at the sound of his voice, recognizing the tone and the smirk. She shook her head slowly and followed him into the room as Sanada ran to collect his spears.

She was the one who closed the shoji as he started to undress, discarding the clothes methodically. Saki blinked for a moment, eyes roaming freely before shaking her head and approaching. The new bandages were carefully wrapped and she could see that he had been taking precautions. Softly she leaned in, kissing the hollow of this throat before helping him don the armour with sharp and precise gestures. Date went still for a moment at the unexpected contact. His arm went around her as she finished placing the armour in place, hand tilting her face up, kissing her on the lips, for a moment, her fingers never faltering as she closed the protection of the dou. Saki tugged the last knot sharply, parting from him, out of breath.

"Takeda craziness awaits you." The shinobi shadowed and walked away with a wicked glint in her eyes as he chuckled, picking his swords, walking, following her towards the hill behind Takeda's bukeyashiki.

Sanada awaited them at the bottom of the stairway, still bouncing as if physically unable to stand still.

"Do you have any issues with me watching?" Saki asked as they moved. Sanada shook his head vigorously.

"When not in war the first part of the Contest of Men is usually a great event with the people of Kai coming from far and wide to watch… But this is war and…" He lowered his head, sobered for a moment.

"I understand." Saki said softly, placing her hand on his shoulder companionably. "Do you want me to cheer for you Sanada-dono?" That made him smile. Date tskd. She rolled her eyes at him and moved on.

The door of the dojo opened suddenly and dramatically as they reached the shadow of its roof, revealing a figure through the fog, undistinguishable first. Until his voice echoed through the hall.

"Welcome to my dojo!" Sasuke stood in the centre, striking a dramatic pose. Saki snorted, curling her lips inward to keep the laugh contained. He had told her that he'd have to do such a silly thing for Takeda but hadn't gone into details… "I mean… is this embarrassing or what? And I have a feeling they'll see through the disguise too." So that was why he had left with a very unhappy expression. She nodded in agreement, giving him her sympathies.

"Goodness… Wearing a fox mask, carrying a giant shuriken and garbed in green shinobi attire that blends into the trees and bushes… who are you?" Sanada demanded suddenly, garbing his spears, assuming an aggressive pose. Date gasped abruptly, looking at the Young Tiger with a perplexed expression. Saki raised her claws to her mouth, turning her face slightly, a raspy sound escaping, the laughter still kept tightly choked.

"Sanada-danna are you trying to humour me here?" Sasuke leaned a bit. "No… he looks serious." The ninja of Kai sighed suddenly then straightened. "I am Tenko Mask, written as Heavenly Fox."
slowly. Without air no laughing, she hoped.

"Hey what the hell are you doing Takeda shi..." Sasuke screamed, interrupting Date, the expression behind the mask clearly distressed, waving his hand quickly.

"I'll be testing you to see if you have it in you to become true warriors!" Another dramatic pose that had Saki closing her eyes, gulping.

"I could not have asked for more! Soul aflame, I will fight you with all my might!" Yukimura tightened his grip on the spears, ready to battle.

"Count me out. Sorry, but I can't go along with this." Date grumbled, closing his eye, turning, walking away.

"What is it? Do you have some problem with Tenko-dono?" Yukimura straightened a bit, looking from Sasuke to Date, confused. There was a whimper coming from Saki as she fidgeted, claws placed against her forehead.

"Are you for real?" Date said, surprised, his voice catching, stopping, half-turning to face Sanada.

"Now, now One-Eyed Dragon-danna... That is just the kind of person Sanada-danna is. Let it slide will you?" Sasuke smiled, waving his hand dismissively, trying to smooth out the event. He hadn't bothered to disguise his gestures either. But knowing that Sanada Yukimura was the only one still blind to who he was... really, why bother?

"Goodness... you know about me?!" Another choked sobbing snort came out of Saki as she took a few steps back, sitting on the gold-and-red railing that surrounded the training area. This was worth watching from a front-row perch.

"What?" Sasuke noticed the slip, fidgeting. "Oh, uh, you could say that... Oh... uh... yeah... because I know Sarutobi Sasuke." He straightened, scratching his cheek after conjuring the weakest excuse he could have come up with.

"Ah. I had no idea! Please be good to Sasuke from now on as well." The Young Tiger bowed slightly as Date shrugged in the back. Saki couldn't help but to let a chortle out, her shoulders trembling slightly as she fought still to keep most of the sound in.

The One-Eyed Dragon sighed and turned once more, noticing the hidden figure on the doorway. His eye narrowed, trying to see beyond the bright light... recognizing immediately the design of the jacket. Saki looked over her shoulder when the silence stretched. Her eyes widened suddenly and a sharp hiss escaped her lips before she started to snigger quietly.

"Hey Saruto... I mean, Tenko Mask, is this guy here a buddy of yours?" Date asked slowly, going along with the play, if a bit resigned.

"What? Oh, that's the Right Eye of the..." He stopped suddenly, shaking his head and striking his "Tenko pose" again. "No! I mean, he is my partner!"

"Ah! Yet another opponent to test us!" And Yukimura couldn't sound happier as he turned almost fully to gauge the newcomer. "A blazing red tengu mask. And you wear your sword on your right hip. So you are left handed!"

"Hey, Kojuro, what's the big idea?" The One-Eyed Dragon approached his second-in-command, standing tall as Katakura-dono slumped his shoulders, clearly embarrassed. Saki couldn't help but to laugh out loud, receiving an odd glance from Sasuke and Yukimura.
"Masamune-sama for mercy's sake, please overlook this without another word." Katakura-dono was saying in a hushed tone, almost as if trying to make himself look smaller. She could sympathize with the plight, truly she could, considering some of the outfits a shinobi sometimes had to wear for their master's or mission's sake. Still…

"«Ridiculous» I never imagined you'd seriously go along with a farce like this." Date was… almost scolding him. Saki spun fully on the railing, crossing her legs, hands gripping the wood on either side. That would be a first…

"We owe a great debt of gratitude to Takeda for his recent actions and furthermore I, Kojuro, lost myself in my training the other day and destroyed the lantern in the garden at his residence. Accepting this role was the least I could do to make amends." Katakura-dono turned suddenly, too close, the mask's long nose almost poking Date's eye out. "I beg of you to let this go?"

"Kojuro?" Date stared at the mask for a moment, surprised by the plea.

"Ah! You two appear to be close." Yukimura said suddenly.

"Too close for comfort at the moment if you ask me…" Saki chuckled, touching the tip of her nose, her claws gleaming.

"So that man is an acquaintance of yours Masamune-dono." Yukimura said as Katakura-dono walked by him, his steps measured, jumping, somersaulting and taking the middle stage, standing tall on the training area of the dojo, starting his part of the play.

"My name is Ten…gu… Mask…" He started strong but embarrassment gripped him once more, stealing the thunder out of his voice, shoulders slumping once more, until the sound crossing his lips was little more than a breath with a slight whimper. Saki doubled over, braid falling forward, smiling as widely as a loon, a slight snigger coming out from behind her clenched teeth.

"What did you just say? Forgive my asking, but please speak a little more clearly." That, those words from Sanada towards Katakura-dono, dragged another bout of laughter from Saki, undisguised this time. "This may be none of my business, but if you behave so timidly the battle will be over before you even cross swords with your foe on the battlefield."

"Oh dear… The Right Eye of the Dragon just got a talking-to from Sanada-danna." Sasuke whispered slowly, tilting his head a bit.

Katakura-dono squared his shoulders, straightening, trying to drag his pride out of its hiding place.

"Your advice is much appreciated." The Right Eye said slowly, his voice gaining momentum and strength. "I'll be your opponent as of this moment! When they talk of Tengu Mask they mean me! You better be ready for this, Sanada Yukimura!" His lightning was building at each word, sliding through his arms and katana.

That stopped her laughter although the grin remained in place.

"Ah Tengu Mask-donno! What a formidable fighting spirit!" Yukimura smiled a bit, impressed, bowing a bit. "Forgive my rude remark!" He announced before returning to the combat posture, one spear forward, the other straightened on his back.

Date sighed suddenly placing himself in front of Sasuke, resigned.

Takeda Shingen's voice boomed around them, allowing them to start.
Date attacked, suddenly, his katana blocked by one of Sasuke's blades. The shinobi smiled, tilting his head.

"Whew, that's intense! Looks like it's true that your wound from Nagashino healed up." His voice rose up in provocation while maintaining the block.

"Hey I came because he said it'd be one hell of a hardcore «party», so what's with all this bullshit?" Date growled.

"Uh…" Sasuke looked around, making sure Sanada hadn't heard a thing. "I understand how you feel but it'll take too long to explain, so just play along for now." He smiled widely, head tilting. "Okay?"

"<Shit>"

Saki watched the clash, tilting her head, shifting her attention as Yukimura struggled against Katakura-dono, spears aflame, his face a front of concentration and eagerness.

"Skill and mettle no greater nor lesser than that of Masamune-dono." The Young Tiger said carefully, breathing deeply. "You are indeed no ordinary warrior."

"I've been wanting to see for myself with my own sword whether you're fit to be Masamune-sama's worthy rival. Sanada Yukimura! Show the Tengu Mask what you're made of!" Katakura-dono was getting into the farce, seizing his chance to challenge the man who was making the Dragon his contender.

"I most certainly will!" Sanada attacked, emboldened, spear against katana, Katakura-dono's lightning and Yukimura's fire leaving light and explosions in their wake. Saki sighed leaning forward, elbows on her knees, face between her claws.

"Kojuro, you bastard, you're totally into it." Date grumbled as he broke apart from Sasuke, glancing at the other pair for a moment.

"I'm going to change things up a bit here." Sasuke announced, raising his hand to the mask height. Saki narrowed her eyes. Shape-shifting techniques… she recognized the hand signs. "Even you'll be shocked by this, no doubt… about it." Smoke rose as he completed the sequence, a pair of red spears cutting through it as he revealed his new form "Unrivalled Spear of World Dominion! Sanada Yukimura is here." He struck Sanada's usual battle stance, winking. "So you like it?"

Saki groaned, pressing her teeth and lips together. Miscalculation. That would be the last form he should choose. She glanced at the Dragon's widening smile. It did not matter if Sanada was fighting his own adversary on the other side of the room. That Sanada was there and was supposed to fight him. Scratch an itch as it were.

"Sanda Yukimura… excellent! You look like him. No. You're his spitting image." Date moved a bit, gripping his sword tighter, adjusting.

"Really?" Sasuke's happy expression in Sanada's face was just… odd… in a funny way. Also he seemed really happy about his guise. Was it the first time he wore the cub's face?

"I like your surprise…" Date said, assuming an aggressive stance, lightning building too. "<Psyche up!>" the Dragon shouted, attacking in succession, the blows connecting with explosions, forcing Sarutobi to run, screaming, narrowly avoiding being hit.

"Uh… well… I was only trying to startle you a bit…" he murmured, jumping back, his expression
wary, using smoke to obscure his semi-retreat, repeating the symbols needed to change.

"That Dragon looks familiar." Date whistled softly, tilting his head, examining Sasuke's new form. Date's form. It looked similar enough but once again he hadn't bothered to disguise his posture or expression.

"Since it's come to this, I've got no choice but to entertain you. I expect you to make this worth my while, Boss." He mirrored Date's usual combative stance. "Number One of Oshu, Date Masamune, totally pressing on!" Sasuke smiled suddenly, dividing into ten Dates, creating a line.

Saki's eyes widened and she whistled softly.

"Perfect." Date growled as they attacked.

Katakura-dono had managed, meanwhile, to disarm Yukimura's right spear, the blow bringing him down to his knees. The cub lowered his head for a moment as the Right Eye moved, standing in front of him, katana pointing down.

"Looks like it's still a bit too soon for you to be going at it with Masamune-sama." He appraised, looking at the younger male.

"I still have… my left spear." Sanada moved suddenly, thrusting the offhand spear forward, tangling its blades with Katakura-dono's sword, pushing it to the left, applying pressure to the block. It was clearly a surprise when he tossed the spear away, the sudden lessening of the weight and press stealing the katana away while he threw a punch with his right fist, putting his weight behind it.

Katakura dono crossed his arms over his chest, the right one, the one with the heavier protections on the kote blocking the blow as both weapons hit the floor. He moved suddenly, shifting his weight in a kick to Yukimura's side, pushing him away.

The Young Tiger moved on the wooden floor, straightening slowly.

"So you excel at weaponless hand-to-hand combat as well." He murmured "I have lost." His voice was low and downtrodden.

"Talk about reckless. To think you'd strike out at me with your injured fist." Katakura-dono said, walking towards the weapons, sheathing the sword, picking up the spear.

"It was out of my ardent desire to overcome this trial…" Yukimura whispered, crestfallen.

"It's been a long time since anyone dragged me into a brawl. Maybe not since Masamune-sama was a child of tender years." Saki smiled, almost imagining the mischief a certain brown-haired young man could get into. "Looks like I've got no choice but to give you some credit. For your determination if nothing else. Here you go. It's your precious spear."

"Tengu-dono… you..." The fight between Date and Sasuke grew, dragging their attention. The One-Eyed Dragon was encircled by several copies of himself, attacking him one at the time or in group. "Goodness… so many Masamune-donos… but which one is real?"

"The one surrounded in the middle." Kojuro deadpanned, looking around. The shinobi was sitting on the railing, watching with an oddly blank expression. "Saki… why aren't you interfering?"

"Takeda Contest of Men." Her claws air-quoted before she looked down, at her chest. "I don't think I qualify."
"You know Saki-dono too, Tengu-dono?"

Saki snorted at the comment, looking like another fit of laughter might come once more and glanced at the fight.

"Looks like I'll just have to blow them all away at once." Date said suddenly, taking the six swords out of their sheaths, lightning trailing the blades.

"Masamune-dono has drawn all six swords." Yukimura said suddenly, eyes widening in awe. "Tenko Mask-dono is truly something to have forced him to draw them."

"Masamune-sama!" Katakura-dono whispered, worry clear even behind the red lacquer of the mask. He ran and sidestepped the clones, standing against his Lord's back, protecting him once again. Saki shook her head. "I, Tengu, will guard your back, Masamune-sama." He announced, still trapped within the role.

"Kojuro, are you done with your end of things already?" Date glanced over his shoulder, still in the slightly lowered position he used when the claws were out.

"Why is Tengu taking his side?" The clones said out loud, alerting the Right Eye of his slip up.

"S… Sorry, I didn't mean to drop out of character." Katakura-dono lowered his head, slightly chastised.

"For all that you still made sure to refer to yourself as Tengu." Sasuke referenced irritated.

"Did I?" He murmured. "Wait… none of that matters! I cannot possibly allow Masamune-sama to be taxed any further!" Katakura-dono declared, straightening.

"Then I guess we'll stop here." The multiple Dragons straightened and scratched their cheek. "But the real fight's still to come." Sasuke mentioned.

"Uh?"

"What?"

"Clones! Disengage." Sasuke's face appeared for a moment before he used smoke to make the doubles disappear and sneak away too.

"I see. This is all starting to make sense. Old man Takeda roped us in nice and good. But this is a pretty funny joke." He sheathed the swords once more. "What's up Sanada Yukimura? Let's move on to the next trial."

"You may go attempt it on your own. I have no injuries, as you can see, but I owe that to Tengu-dono's kind consideration. Much to my regret, I was unable to live up to Oyakata-sama's expectations."

"Yukimura." Shingen's voice echoed on the dojo once more. "Crushing your opponent is not the only mark that you overcome in the trial. Tengu said he recognized your determination, did he not? That means you have won yourself nothing short of the right to attempt the final trial of the Takeda Contest of Men. At the back of the dojo in the chamber or men that only the chosen are permitted to enter, your next opponent awaits you. Enter with your wits about you. And acquit yourself brilliantly."

"Yes." Yukimura stood, his confidence and enthusiasm building once more. "I will do as you ask. I
am to set foot inside the Chamber of Men…"

"Takeda's got a nasty habit of giving everything these gung-ho names." Date grumbled, looking around. Saki shadowed to their side.

"Masamune-sama, could it be that the Tiger of Kai…" Katakura-dono murmured, taking the mask off.

"I'll have looked forward to nothing unless I play along to the end."

"But…"

"Repaying him for his honesty won't be so bad." Date shrugged, looking at the doorway. "Though the next opponent… is way too extravagant for physical therapy."

"Please be very careful." Katakura-dono said quietly.

"I'll get my medical supplies." Saki whispered, rolling her eyes, half-turning.

"A bit of confidence in me would be nice." The One-Eyed Dragon groused, catching her face on his palm, turning her to him.

"Prove me wrong then." Saki challenged, grabbing his hand in a quick squeeze. Date chuckled, dragging the raspy sound for a moment before glancing at Katakura-dono, amused.

"Kojuro that Tengu mask… you were totally in your element."

"You do me a great honour." The Right Eye took the compliment, closing his eyes.

"Let's go Sanada Yukimura."

"I'm going. By the by Masamune-dono…"

"What is it?"

"Tengu-dono's unmasked visage… he looks very much like Katakura-dono, does he not?" There was a sharp bout of laughter coming from Saki, rising suddenly, smothered abruptly.

Saki was waiting for him, lying on the grass by the stone path, on the shadow of the sakura tree, napping. Date walked over to her, lying by her side, placing the swords near. They had time. She had opened her eyes as soon as he had stepped on the grass, waiting, turning a bit as he sat, propping on her elbow, looking at him coldly as he lied down, making a quick inventory. Then she smirked slightly, falling back once more, eyes closed.

"Fought old man Takeda… and I am not hurt." He mentioned, looking at the roiling clouds.

Saki chuckled, unmoving.

"Then you must be proud." She let out a sigh, relenting. "Tell me what happened while I was gone."

"The covers grow cold quickly." The Dragon chuckled when she huffed. "Rumours but with the shinobi gone we couldn't trust them. There are some plans in motion but we're still too crippled to act."
"Oda has his own shinobi. They don't belong to any clan, not anymore at any rate... they are either renegades that weren't eliminated in time or trained by one." Saki sat, looking grim. "Misinformation might win a war. Me and Sasuke have some..." She stopped talking softly as Yukimura walked out, bruised and battered but looking very pleased. Date stood, putting his swords in their place, walking towards his adversary.

"I'll be waiting for the day when we can finish our fight. Don't you lose to anyone until then." The One-Eyed Dragon said softly, smirking, pushing the thoughts of war away.

"That... is for me to say." Yukimura answered, smiling. "Masamune-dono, to have found in my lifetime a worthy rival such as yourself..." He began. Date raised one hand.

"Wait... Save that line for the very end, when I defeat you."

"No. I will hear you say it." Yukimura chuckled, challenging. Date turned his surprised expression into a calm, thoughtful smile.

"Perfect." He began to turn, to leave, stopping, staring at the extended hand.

"I suppose such a thing is not in your nature." Sanada said, taking his hand back slowly. The One-Eyed Dragon grabbed it suddenly, smiling.

Saki smiled too at the surprised and then pleased expression on Yukimura's face before standing.

"Do you need anything for those Sanada-dono?" Saki said playfully, seeing that Sasuke wasn't there to offer anything, touching his bruised cheek with cold metal, making him give an unexpected groan of appreciation.

Tsuba – 鎧 or 鎧 – end of the grip of the katana, the handguard, usually decorated;

(Takeda Contest of Men: Episode 13 2nd season, counts as OVA... died laughing)
"Satsuma province was invaded. Kyushu fell, Shimazu the Beast is reported dead. It was a complete massacre after he admitted defeat and tried to surrender. Hyuuga, Higo and the nation of Xavi fell swiftly after that. The smaller countries in between barely offered resistance, swept and taken down rapidly. " Saki informed the generals, keeping her voice even and cold. Those were the movements initiated after Nagashino, the ones that occupied the time the Dragon was confined in bed and the recovery. Finally they had been called to make their report on the darkened formal meeting room, an occasional lightning bathing the chamber in a clear sharp light for a moment. She and Sasuke knelt in front of the Tiger of Kai's seat, looking straight ahead, keeping their faces solemn and emotionless, Katakura-dono and the One-Eyed Dragon to her left, Sanada to Sarutobi's right. "Mikawa also fell. Ieyasu… is dead."

"He was killed by Akechi." Sasuke continued as her voice quieted down. "When Tokugawa formally declared his intent to Oda to break the alliance Akechi appeared as the Devil King's proxy and, word is, he cut down an unarmed Tokugawa without question."

Sanada shook with rage, hands fisting.

"Ieyasu-dono… How terribly Tokugawa's loyal retainers must be suffering from bitter disappointment and heartache." His voice raised, strained.

"So that means Akechi did not accompany Nobunaga's invasion of Kyushu." Katakura-dono surmised calmly.

"According to reports Akechi isn't alone in that. Two other conspicuously more powerful underlings of Oda's faction also stayed. The Devil King's wife, Nohime, and an archer named Mori Ranmaru." Sasuke continued.

"The intent may be to send their main forces to conquer Kyushu while those three are dispatched as assassins against us, when we haven't recovered from Nagashino and yet to surround them again." Takeda analyzed carefully.

"So they mean to break up the eastern alliance and take us down one by one." The Right Eye of the Dragon closed his eyes, calculating, sighing deeply.

"Assassins can be deployed more easily than an army and can get the job done much more quickly and efficiently." Saki added unemotionally. If skill and luck aligned. Sometimes one overrode the other. "Before launching his attack on the southernmost part of the Land of the Rising Sun he almost wiped out the Saica faction, taking out its leader and most of their forces. A new Saica Magoichi arose and swore to fight him. But the Crows are in no shape to be a threat at the moment."

Some said that whoever had the Saica on their side won the war. It could be true but for now their numbers and resources were seriously dwindled. There were also some other rumours about Magoichi. Her name, the one she left behind, was Oda Sayaka… And Saki had also hoarded a hint of hope for Ieyasu, one allied with the ascension of Magoichi. One of her contacts in Mikawa had heard word that Akechi's assassination had been stopped by a young woman wielding a westerner weapon. She asked them to verify that but had not shared with Sasuke. Such a lead could reveal itself a false hope.

"The Saica had been proving amenable to the idea of joining the alliance." Sasuke mentioned,
completing her line of thought, outlining another loss.

"In that case their next target will be old man Takeda, or me, or…" Date started, surmising the situation.

"Uesugi." Saki completed, glancing at Sasuke.

"Echigo has already been notified of this as well." The other shinobi said, lowering his head a bit.

"Your birds can't fly fast in this weather." Saki noted. "And a messenger…" Could be intercepted, killed, his message taken and their symbols used…

"I hope this foreboding is because of the rain." Sasuke agreed, as he lowered his head as they were dismissed.

"I'm just saying that my fiancée is beautiful. More than any other." One of the guys was bragging, his hands cupped in front of his chest, illustrating what he was saying, smiling smugly. There were laughs and hoots, taunts, some shouts of challenge and praise. Some said it was not so, other started to praise assorted females, comparing. Some tried to fantasise about their perfect creature. A group escalated into a shouting match about honour and beauty. Others just cared about the physical. It wasn't just missing female company. Some had dreams of family, others had left wives behind. A few had kids. Messages sometimes were not enough.

Saki smiled covertly behind a bowl of rice, looking down. Lunch was normal like that, even if the subjects often differed. Brawls were expected, fights broke out and faded away easily. She picked another bit of rice, looking around.

Katakura-dono and Date were talking to the men, easily, distracted, putting the darkened mood and cares of war behind for a moment.

"Saki-chan?" Samenosuke changed places, bunking down next to her.

"Hum?" Saki looked up, snapping out of her distraction.

"Do you have someone?" The retainer asked in the confusion, drawing a halt to the others, focusing on her. Some murmured about that, how odd it was that she had no interest in any guy, any interest, no fiancée that they knew of. Other shrugged and said ninja. Others gasped and starting imagining that she had been hiding someone, almost scheduling a man-hunt to give him a friendly warning. She rolled her eyes for a moment.

Like they would allow her to flirt or be with someone.

What happened with Keiji had been example enough.

"No." Saki kept her face straight and voice dry without effort. She didn't even glance towards Date but could feel his damn smirk stabbing her back.

"What about Keiji?" So they were relenting on that point or just thinking being with the army was harming her marriage opportunities as a woman?

"Keiji's just a friend." Saki shrugged, tsking, poking her rice before taking another bite nonchalantly.

"You call him by name." Yoshinao noted.
"Neither of us is that formal. Also he insisted." And she had stopped him before a "chan" could be added to hers.

"And Kai's shinobi?" Bunshinchi mentioned.

"We're family." Oshu's shinobi sighed, tone dead.

"Really?" There was a shocked gasp around as that came to light once more.

Saki shrugged taking another bite. Why anyone bothered to make a big deal out of it was beyond her. Shinobi had large clans, even if most of them kept themselves hidden and discreet, and they were all related in some way or another.

"Why the interest?" She murmured, looking up, eyes narrowed in annoyance. There was a sudden gulping from most men in the room, most of them backing away in result of whatever they had seen in her eyes.

Rain had been pelting Kai mercilessly, drenching the fields. Kojuro watched the grey skies carefully, worried. It was needed but it could be too much to handle. Days of water could flood the fields, destroy crops and houses. He shook his head slowly, moving through the Tiger of Kai's residence, deep in thought.

Masamune-sama had been restless. Normally he would believe that mood to be the result of a restrictive injury. Kojuro had seen it from time to time. But there had something more. A slight withdrawal when he was with the army, a frown of worry when he though no one was looking. During their sparring he had proven once and again that he was healed enough to take and dish out punishment, moving with purpose and precision. That had not changed... but the irritability had coincided with Saki's absence.

That had triggered Kojuro's suspicions.

The army wasn't indifferent to her and they all seemed to worry. He worried. Masamune-sama did the same. They all seemed to have found their ways to disguise it when she left and when she returned. Sometimes they didn't even realise she was gone until a shadow shifted and suddenly the shinobi was there with news.

She had returned once more, uninjured, carrying mementos from home she had given him to deliver. And those objects and letters had been left in Masamune-sama's room. And with Saki with them once more the restlessness seemed to have left the One-Eyed Dragon easily and with barely a trace.

The Right Eye shook his head slowly, dispelling the thoughts.

"You should sleep. This lull will not last." Masamune-sama's voice rose softly from the room, reaching his ears as Kojuro's steps took him in that direction.

"I heard..." Saki answered, her tone muted, slightly drowsy and raspy, as if awakened.

"Don't." There was a resigned sigh, soft, in response of the underlying order, almost inaudible under the rain and a rustle of fabric.

Kojuro turned the corner and stopped, a bit surprised although all his suspicions could only lead to that conclusion.
The One-Eyed Dragon was sitting in the room, shoji opened, staring at the falling rain. But the oddity was not in his contemplative demeanour. It was in the seemingly sleeping shinobi slumped on the open futon, her head resting on Masamune-sama's thigh, one hand on his knee lazily, gently, her hair loose, his fingers threading the tresses, shoulders and back. She opened her eyes when he came into view, their colour too sharp and focused. Clearly she had not drifted back into slumber.

"Kojuro..." Date said calmly, simply acknowledging his presence, as Saki sat, pulling her hair back, deftly tying it into a braid once more. And with that he left, walking away slowly. The shinobi flinched a bit but it didn't prevent her from finishing a flawless braid, kneeling formally. The Right Eye stared for a moment, finding only the slightest bit of blush on her cheeks.

"Saki..." Kojuro composed himself, kneeling in front of her, taking a deep breath. "What exactly are your feelings towards Masamune-sama?"

The shinobi turned slightly, facing him, a small smile curving her lips. She seemed to appreciate the direct approach, arching an eyebrow. Maybe "feelings" was not the right question to ask. Youth usually overrode such things... Masamune-sama was neither prudish nor inexperienced. He knew where he went and, admittedly, often went with him. But she was with them as a part of the army... And the men...

"What gave me away?" Saki whispered lightly, dragging the words, looking down thoughtfully, pressing her lips together. "I don't deny the attraction nor the fact that we started to share covers. It is a recent thing."

"Nothing gave you away." Kojuro said, biting the words. Not until they allowed themselves to get caught. Recent meant they had been hiding it for some time. He rubbed his forehead for a moment, trying to understand. It could not go farther back than their arrival in Kai. Campaigning did not give them any privacy for such a change. Saki nodded slightly. "But I know Masamune-sama." Another distracted nod on her part. "You understand what it is to be a warlord, a general, a territory ruler." Kojuro added calmly, touching her shoulder. She was not part of their world and yet knew everything about it. Shinobi were... different.

"Yes. Protect and expand your lands. And provide heirs to keep the lineage. He will need a wife that brings land or advantages, bloodlines, securing allies and power. I know." She looked away for a moment, focusing on his hand. "I... will step away when his duty demands."

"He may not want you to step away." Kojuro said quietly. His army, their lord was also different. She shook her head.

"I know. You will convince him to do it and I will leave when it happens. For now I want him, he wants me." She relaxed a bit, lowering her face, closing her eyes for a moment, sighing. "For now it is simple."

"Are you taking precautions? A child..." Any child made by those two... Kojuro almost shuddered to think of it and of what they might be doing. Still he had to... plan for any eventuality.

Saki's eyes darted a bit to the left, her lips thinning into a slightly embarrassed smile.

"Any shinobi knows what to do. We are very careful about..." her voice caught slightly in a slightly mortified whimper. "procreation." She sighed. "Besides we haven't..."

"You haven't..."
"We are both embarrassed enough so I'll say this… I won't have him defeated at the hands of Oda because I crippled him during sex." She chuckled slightly, twitching, curling her braid tip in her fingers. "His injury is healed enough and he can go into battle. But he can't fight for long before it tears open… so…"

The first sign of something wrong came in the form of a peasant, running towards the Tiger of Kai, informing him of the state of the dike, his voice filled with fear.

The Dragon King's river and its "nose" where Midaigawa and Kamashigawa met were important for the prosperity of Kai. But the river was also dangerous… So, for the safety of the villages of Kai, the dike had been planned and built as a way to prevent the devastating floods it was known for. It was a grand project to which the Tiger of Kai had devoted years… for it to be falling apart because of the rain… it was highly unlikely. It had already endured and resisted worse when it was barely more than a wall of wooden planks.

Takeda left in a hurry after the worker delivered his warning, taking only a few men, ordering Yukimura to gather more workers and material. The Young Tiger took his task seriously, performing it quickly, giving orders and running around without hesitation or mistakes. Date ordered his men to help too, as repayment, a way to chip away more of their debt. The four main retainers followed with Yukimura as the others equipped.

They rode in the rain, going towards the dike as fast as the terrain and weather allowed, following the group Sanada commanded. Saki ran alongside the horses, soaked to the bone, arriving to the stone and wood and the pit before her army, hissing, stopping, appraising the situation.

Soldiers of Oshu, men of Kai and Yukimura struggled to keep the dike whole. The white haired freak was being kept at bay by Takeda's massive axe. But the Tiger hesitated, knowing his power, fearful of it. Water leaked from any crack it could find, slippery mud forming on the bottom of the trench, complicating the task further.

There was a hiss of Darkness and poison as Akechi jumped back, laughing shrilly, swinging his blade, distorting the air, the weakened dike creaking and shattering the attempts of fixing the structure. Water breached through the fissures the strike had opened on the stone, a sudden distraction for the Tiger of Kai, enough for the scythe to find the flesh of the man. It caught a vulnerable area, behind the shoulder, the water taking Takeda's legs from under him, with enough force to drag him away.

Yukimura's scream was sudden and sharp, dragged from his chest, in pain as he dove after his lord. The Tiger of Kai could drown…

Saki glared at Akechi, who stood on the what was now the other margin, as the wind whipped her braid as her Dragon and his Right Eye arrived, their horses stopping behind her. The guys had found a safe place in the overrun remains of the dike or in the margins. The others Katakura-dono send downstairs to help those whose life would be shattered by the flood.

Date dismounted brusquely.

"Masamune-sama!" Katakura-dono called as he did the same, moving forth.

"Akechi… That bastard!"

"I would have liked to savour it more slowly, but it was a most exquisite sensation, Tiger of Kai."

"Akechi Mitsuhide."
"Bastard! Don't think you can leave just like that!"

"So you are alive after all, as I suspected, One-Eyed Dragon, Date Masamune." Akechi chuckles, staring at the blood. "No time to even indulge in the afterglow and already my next prey is here."

"He's got the same look in his eyes as that time with Azai. He's one «crazy» bastard." Date growled, his eye darting around for a moment. "Koju-ro, no need to hold back."

"Understood. Let us kill him here!"

Saki's lips parted into a slashed, wide smile, her claws twitching, shadowing suddenly, appearing behind Akechi, using the lightning the Dragon and Right Eye were flaring to capture the man's shadow firmly, extending her hand, claws piercing the first layer of armour.

Katakura-dono and Date attacked suddenly, three of the six draw, lightning following the edge of their blades. Saki jumped back as their blows connected, releasing the shadows, placing herself between them as they stood, recovering. Akechi turned, wobbly, the sode destroyed, the drunk smile still in place.

"How fabulous… I doubt there are many who are fortunate enough to taste the swords of both the One-Eyed Dragon and the Right Eye of the Dragon at once."

Saki snorted, shuddering a bit in response to the creepy undertones of the statement, eyes narrowing as darkness and poison rose once more. Her arms and hands moved in response, deflecting the strike of both those elements, grunting in effort as tendrils of it lapped at her skin with icy, disgusting, corrupted darkness too weakened by her wards to do her harm. She protected her men while he used the massive discharge of his element to run away, mounting on an equally disturbing horse.

"Damn… «shit»" The Dragon said, lowering his arm which instinct had made him rise protectively against his face as the gloating voice reached the, as the horse vanished into the rainy curtain.

"I have just enjoyed a treat called Tiger of Kai. Overeating is not good for one's health. Besides… I need you to play an important role."

"What?" Date whispered softly as Katakura-dono stood. Then he shook his head, turning to Saki. "Search for the Tiger of Kai." She lowered her head sharply, vanishing.

---

**Sode – 袖** - Large rectangular shoulder protection made from iron and/or leather plates;

Refer to Rise of the Saica for more information on the head-canon about Magoichi;
Yukimura came to his senses suddenly, dizzied, feeling cold, wet and disoriented, turning to the side coughing, spewing water until his throat felt raw. He sensed a cold but gentle hand on his shoulder, guiding him, helping him chase the vertigo away, accompanied by calm and kind words, whispering instructions. He followed them instinctively, feeling the sickness ebb away… The Young Tiger found himself staring into a pair of familiar grey eyes. Saki. Had she found him and…

Oyakata-sama…

His mind snapped into the earlier events, making him look around frantically, noticing the shinobi stepping back slightly as voices started to call. But he didn't understand them…

"Oyakata-sama!" He screamed, lunging towards the unconscious Tiger of Kai, shaking him, hoping he would wake up... "Oyakata-sama!" The men of Kai arrived, surrendering them, helping…

Saki sighed, walking over to the top of the small elevation, standing besides the One-Eyed Dragon who looked down, his expression tinged with sadness.

"One of my ninjas returned just now with information that the Devil King is headed for Yamashiro. He may be planning to go to Honnoji Temple, where he usually stays, in order to invade the Inland Sea region." Sasuke reported quietly, glancing at the Tiger of Kai laid down on the room of the Shieldless Armour, Sanada Yukimura kneeling by his side, his expression saddened and empty.

They had opened the shoji to the adjacent room so not to crowd the wounded man and discuss their choices. Saki knelt behind Date, thinking, half listening. As she arrived she had sent messages and put in motion a few plans. Then, between her, Sasuke and the healer, it had been easy to take care of the Tiger of Kai. He would recover but time was what they did not have. The blood loss and the cold would force him to a somewhat lengthy recovery.

"It is most likely a trap. The targets that should be of immediate concern to Oda are not Mori and Chosokabe, who have long maintained a local equilibrium, but us, the eastern forces who have clearly demonstrated our hostility." Katakura-dono reasoned. "Anticipating that we would be unable to make a move for a while after the losses we suffered at Nagashino, the Devil King invaded Kyushu. It was a surprise attack against the south, which had taken a wait-and-see approach. At the same time it would have served as a message to the two giants of the Inland Sea that they will inevitably be trampled."

"Then, even if the wanderer of the Maeda has managed to persuade the two generals, it means it is already too late." Sasuke added slowly, dismayed.

"For all intents and purposes Oda has the Inland Sea within his sphere of influence now and he can attack them at any time. Rather, better to take this opportunity to crush the eastern lands, who have lost the Tiger of Kai and Echigo's War God. That would be the best plan for Oda."

"That makes sense. So he's gone to Yamashiro, to show us his back, to lure us in. It's true, the remnants of Tokugawa's and Azai's forces both wish to avenge their lords. They're prepared to die in battle if it means a chance to fight Oda. That sentiment is also bound to grow in the Takeda camp and of course the Uesugi's camp as well." Sasuke muttered, his eyes darkening as he thought
back on… something. The remnants and hidden clans of Koga and Iga. But they were still shinobi and after the losses they might still hesitate in standing in the light against the Demon King. There were also no news of the Negoro clan. Saki glanced at him and then at the shadows behind the shoji, the soldiers that waited orders and news. Desire for vengeance would override their training and common sense, rendering them into little more than death seeking pawns.

"Defeat all the forces rushing in, bent on revenge, in one fell swoop. It's an understandable strategy. But whether it was through frontal or surprise attacks, without exception, Oda has crushed his opponents in one onslaught. So why did he devise this plot to deliberately murder the generals?" The Right Eye said carefully, glancing at the Tiger of Kai's fallen form.

"Maybe he decided at Nagashino that the eastern alliance was troublesome after all." Sasuke rubbed his forehead, sitting back, taking a deep breath.

"Why would he fear an alliance that was barely formed?" Saki mentioned slowly, looking up. "You saw him. I doubt he knows how to fear and such an action would be… out of character." The shinobi snorted. "He crushes and moves on, razing all to the ground."

"That could be part of it but above all else in this method I sense…" Katakura-dono nodded, taking into account the ninja's opinions, moving on with his conjectures.

"Madness." Saki piped in dryly.

"…a vicious desire to make sport of war and of people's hearts. Mocking and trampling on people's aspirations to seize the land and reducing them to a blood-thirsty desire for revenge…"

"Sounds familiar." Another dry comment, her claws upturned, twitching slightly.

"This obscenity is not the Devil king. Its most likely…"

"The freak." A hiss came out of her, the metal clicking against itself.

"Kojuro. Let's fall into this trap of theirs." Date said, taking part in the conversation for the first time since their arrival.

"Masamune-sama…" Kojuro turned sharply towards the One-Eyed Dragon.

"It doesn't change the fact that the Devil King will be there." Date reasoned calmly.

"He might not." Saki murmured, placing her hands over her knees, straightening with a sigh.

"Even if the one who came up with the cheap plot is Akechi…" The One-Eyed Dragon shook his head slowly. "I understand that bastard meant now. I've been chosen as the supreme commander of the forces that's to be defeated in one fell swoop." His eye narrowed as he looked sharply forward, lips thinning into a scowl "«I'm mad.» Taking me for a fool every step of the way!" He stood, hand placed over one of his swords. "Akechi once held the power of life and death over me. I need to make him pay for that too." His eye turned to Saki slightly. She closed her eyes, lowering her head with a huff. "And some other debts."

"Please wait!" Katakura-dono moved, staring the Dragon down. "I believe we should use the time we have until Oda grows impatient and switches to attacking us separately to prepare ourselves fully. If we do so, depending on the success of Maeda Keiji at the Inland Sea, we may also be able to encircle Oda."

"Too much hanging in the hope that one man's words will be heard by a pair of stubborn warlords."
For all we know he might be dead." Saki opened her eyes again, turning her head slightly towards the Right Eye.

"What have you heard?" Sasuke turned his face towards her, sniffing a potential addition to his information hoard. Saki looked up, startled.

"Oh? No, Keiji is alive but hasn't moved in a while. My contacts say Mori has him locked up." She still envied Sasuke's information net but her time in Kai had allowed her to place a few of her own contacts into his weave.

"Damn…" the shinobi of Kai muttered, his expression closing.

"Oda already knows what old man Takeda and that cheery bastard were plotting. Encircling an enemy that knows we're trying to encircle them won't get us anywhere at this point." Date reasoned, grinning in anticipation. Saki groaned. She knew that expression and so did Katakura-dono.

"But our opponent is too great to rush headlong into their midst. We must be cautious." The Right Eye's advice was sound but that was Date Masamune he was talking to.

"What's this Kojuro? We've been doing this all along since before we took control of Oshu. It seems you think you're personally responsible for the bullet I took in my side at Nagashino…"

"No… I'm pretty sure that one was my issue…" Saki muttered into the air. Date tilted his head a bit, glancing at her before refocusing on Katakura-dono.

"but what you're in charge of guarding is my back. «you see»"

"Masamune-sama, surely you are not…"

"Sanada Yukimura, what about you? I'd figured you'd be the first to charge out there,"

"Oyakata-sama please forgive me. When Akechi Mitsuhide sprung his surprise attack I was unable to…" The Young Tiger didn't even glance at them, standing oddly still, his expression blanking, spooked.

"Sanada-danna the enemy will always come after what you cherish the most. That's how the Takeda and the Date have both risen to power in these turbulent times. It goes both ways. You must know that." Sasuke went to him, crouching by his side, his caring side showing at the same time he scolded the younger man. That did not ease Yukimura's glum expression.

"I have never struck down a foe except on the field of battle. To say nothing of methods that embroil unarmed people…" His eyes dulled, the young man shrinking into himself. Saki closed her eyes. She could envy him in that. But her willingness to do whatever was needed was what kept those she cared about and those she was hired by safe. Date lowered his head for a moment, as if thinking about what Yukimura said. Underhandedness was also something the Dragon did not shy from.

"Then get angry about it! Do you plan to just hang your head by Oyakata-sama's bedside and wait to be crushed by Oda?! You're not the only one who feels like doing that!" Sasuke lectured.

"I do not know what I should do. I feel helpless. I am scared."

Date's eyes narrowed and he turned, walking outside. Saki stood too, following him, standing at the edge of the engawa, still dry as he took as few steps into the rain. The men perked up quickly when
they saw him. His expression was combative and his step had a purpose.

"Boss!"

"Are we to prepare for battle?!"

"We've been waiting for this."

The cheer was starting to build as Oshu's soldiers gathered behind the One-Eyed Dragon, awaiting their orders, sure that he would lead them to the battle that would restore their pride and honour.

"«Break it up»" Date said slowly, dragging the words before shouting. "As of today, this very moment, the Date Army of Oshu is disbanded." The determination did not falter, as harsh as his words were.

There were several expressions of shock, some disbelief, most of them not getting the words through the astonishment, the silence growing to oppressive levels.

Saki made a small sound of challenge, narrowing her eyes.

"Brash, bull-headed, stubborn, moronic Dragon…" She murmured quietly, straightening, her claws placed on her waist, watching the events unfold.

"Masamune-dono…" There was a slight whisper from Yukimura his head finally turning away from Takeda Shingen, looking beyond Sasuke to the scene on the courtyard.

"Where are you going One-Eyed Dragon?" Sasuke called from the entrance into the armour room, standing a bit behind Saki, arms crossed, leaning against the support column.

"Honnoji, of course. This time I'll be sure to take the Devil King's head myself!" Date announced, grinning cockily, looking back towards them, challenging anyone to be foolish enough as to question or follow.

"What's going on here?!!" Magobei blurted out, stunned.

"Boss…"

"We'll come with you!" Yoshinao stepped forward, lunging suddenly, almost making a grab for the Dragon's shoulder. Date's sword came out, slashing quickly, taking the pouf away of the retainer's hair, his expression unchanging, sheathing the claw in the same movement, looking haughtily towards the men.

"This isn't a «party» I'm meant to enjoy with you guys." Even through the harshness of his tone and actions he cared for him men.

"Boss…" there was fearful expression in some of the faces. Their boss had never turned his swords against his own men. At least never outside sparring or training matches. Bushinchchi had seen him face against Katakura-dono but even then he only had seemed half-hearted into the fight while the Right Eye was duelling to keep him safe. It was not a match to kill or maim and still… They all knew what the Dragon could do in battle.

"Masamune-dono… what are you doing?!" And Yukimura should know better than anyone. Saki watched as he finally rose, crossing the space that separated them, placing himself between Date and his men. Seemed the One-Eyed Dragon's actions had finally lit a spark within the Young Tiger. "Those men live for your sake! Saying they could not die until they had seized the land with
you, even when buried under the great temple… They are your invaluable retainers!"

"That's not convincing in the least. Howl all you want but you're the one who gave up without a fight." Date's hand shot out, grabbing the six coins, the rokumon sen, that hung around Sanada's neck, pulling him closer, the icy blue eye set in a glaring gleam. "I guess those were just decoration too! Ready payment to cross to the underworld. When I first met you that's what I figured these were for. It's too bad. I guess I figured wrong!" The One-Eyed Dragon let him go, turning.

Saki let out a sigh, tilting her head, shadowing and moved in front of him, appearing as if from nowhere. There was a sudden gasp from the guys. Yukimura was grabbing the coins, his expression shocked and slightly fearful. They either weren't expecting her or feared she would be throttled.

Katakura-dono stood at the engawa now, observing. He also knew what Date was doing. He knew what to do afterwards. Even if he didn't approve of the wild actions he would work with it.

"Saki-chan!" One of the guys shouted, worried, surprised. If he had turned his sword on one of his own men… They were being fooled once more by her size and looks. "Don't…"

"The army was disbanded." Date said carefully, appraising his shinobi. Saki could go somewhere safe, maybe back to her clan. She smiled, tilting her head up to look at him, stepping defiantly into his space, claws touching his chest gently, clicking against the armour.

"I never served the army. I serve you." The One-Eyed Dragon smiled slightly, the grin softening his expression as she stepped back glancing at his sword. He moved the blade swinging it towards her neck. She raised her arm, stopping the metal with the back of her clawed hand, holding it in place, the echo of the clash silencing the sudden shouts of worry. Saki shadowed, jumping away, attacking, left and right claws slashing against the katana, crossing in x patterns, metal singing. They both chuckled, grinning, as the last strike blocked them into an almost embrace, parting slowly, breaking the tension, looking at each other. She stepped forward with him, their claws touching solemnly in a warrior's promise. "I'll go with you."

Date tilted her head up for a moment, reaching for her with his free hand, sheathing the sword, stepping away, allowing Saki to take a deep breath, lowering her defences, before pulling her into his arms, taking her feet away from the ground, holding her fiercely, his fingers tightening on the small of her back, his lips crushing hers suddenly in a possessive kiss. Saki's eyes widened when he did it, the thought of struggling briefly flashing through her, closing them with an imperceptible sigh, surrendering, letting the moment fill her with warmth in the rain before he allowed her to touch the stone path once more.

There was an unambiguously shocked silence going around the yard, both the small fight and the kiss having their weight in the minds of the men. The point he wanted to make could not be clearer. Saki sighed and lowered her head. He caressed her neck softly before letting go completely, turning, walking away once more, his posture changing into a single-minded determination. The shinobi followed him simply shadow-stepping, disappearing from view.

"Boss…" One of the men shouted behind them, trying to move.

"Don't go after him." Katakura-dono's voice cutting through the whispered shock and the attempt to follow was the last thing they heard as they headed to the stables.

"I will scout ahead and see what kind of defences are in place." Saki said as he saddled the horse. As they were trying to move fast and vanquish Oda there would be no other time to plan.
Transmitting information was quickly done. "And who, besides an army, awaits us within. Also…" She sighed, the back of her claws sliding against her lips. "They were already shocked enough by the disbanding of the army. Did you have to prod the wasps' nest further?" Date shrugged, finishing his work on the saddle. "Not even a hint of regret my Dragon?" Saki shook her head softly, sitting on the horse, poking his shoulder with her foot as he tied some supplies to the mount.

"Wait One-Eyed Dragon!" Yukimura ran into the stable yard, spears ready. "I shall accompany you!"

Saki smiled, dismounting, regaining the more solemn poise, watching. Seemed Katakura-dono had finished Date's job, rekindling the flame in his heart. He was also adding help to Date's campaigning.

"All right" Date drew his sword, both crossing blades, their auras flaring suddenly. "Sanada Yukimura now is the time to take those fangs of steel, those fangs you've honed with the Tiger of Kai and set them against our foes!"

"My fangs are none other than all Oyakata-sama has taught me! And it is all in my heart!"

"That's the spirit!" Date grinned, sheathing his sword as they stepped back.

Saki nodded as he glanced at her, shadowing.

Rokumon sen – 六文銭 – Six coins to pay the fare to the underworld, doubling as Sanada Yukimura's family crest;
There was a morose ambience in the temporary barracks. The men were processing the shock of the disbandment of the army, their Boss's abandonment, the fact that their shinobi had been allowed to accompany him when others had been harshly turned away and the stunned disbelief that still accompanied the fact that their Boss had been the one all along to capture Saki-chan.

Yoshinao was taking the blow a bit worse than most, adding to it the loss of his carefully styled pouf. He sniffled a bit before looking up, towards the faces of the other three, seeing determination burning in their eyes. He steeled himself. They joined heads carefully, whispering. Being without an army should not mean they should allow the men they admired and the woman they cared about go to a trap alone. Their skill was uncontested but the numbers could still overwhelm them.

"Shall we go?" He asked slowly, looking around. At the resolute, affirmative nod of the others he stood, raising his voice as his shoulders squared. "Hey, you guys…" The shoji opened suddenly, letting Katakura-sama in, his voice overpowering theirs, his presence intense and pressing.

"You guys, prepare for battle!" He shouted curtly, hands fisting, face set into a stony façade, made for war and command. He was already equipped, the daisho in place.

"Katakura-sama…" Samenosuke voiced his surprise quietly, staring at the Right Eye.

"What are you doing just sitting there? Hurry up and get ready!" He urged the men. Soldiers jumped and gathered their belongings and armour, preparing to leave, to another campaign.

"But…" Magobei stuttered looking around.

"Boss said the Date Army was disbanded now…" Bunshichi murmured.

"Just come with me." Katakura-sama smiled slightly, looking at them slightly sideways, maintaining most of his attention on the busy men that prepared for war. "You were planning on it anyway, weren't you?" There was laughter in his voice as he guided the towards the main gate, showing them the gathered forces of the eastern alliance, the remnants of the generals that had fallen and the men that had taken arms to end Oda's cruelty.

"Awesome" Samenosuke said, eyes wide behind the glasses.

"This is… Katakura-sama?" Yoshinao almost stuttered, eyes roaming each of the banners.

"Just about when I expected it to happen, the folks that should rightly be together came together. Even those who've been laying low until now." Kojuro smiled looking proudly towards the gathering. "Masamune-sama never said a word to you guys about not being allowed to band together again. Am I wrong?"

"Katakura-sama" Samenosuke cheered.

"We couldn't have asked for more!" Bunshinchchi placed his arm around the other man, adding to the hype.

There was a sudden low whistle form the walls behind them, calling, demanding their attention. A man jumped down, crouching first, clinking with metal, standing in front of them after straightening slowly. It was almost as tall and wide as Takeda Shingen, wearing simple black shinobi clothes, a thick chain wrapped around his arms, neck and shoulders, the bladed tips tucked
into the kote that covered his wrists, on the outer side. His skin was tanned, golden-brown, but his eyes were grey, black hair pulled back into a thin ponytail.

"My Saki… where is my girl?" He asked suddenly with a grim looking glare set on his face, looking around, staring at each of their faces, towering easily over them, the chain adding to his width. Yoshinao turned to him suddenly, as did the other three, Katakura-sama examining the newcomer carefully, eyes narrowed. A potential threat to their army or just to Date? As he seemed to want Saki and being part of the ninja clans…

"Saki-chan is our shinobi." Magobei jumped to the defence sharply, taking on the duty that the army had claimed to themselves as soon as the woman had been accepted, glaring at the stranger, his short height further dwarfed by the massive shinobi.

"She's our Boss's woman." Bunshichi shouted, facing the man angrily, standing side by side with his comrade in arms, refraining the sudden need to reach for his weapon. Now that they knew they had another reason to defend her from other males. That still did not let their Boss get away without a stern warning. And none of them would actually tell her they did it.

"We're not letting some stranger just take her." Samenosuke completed the challenge.

There was a very disturbingly familiar grin in the newcomer's face as the men barked their threats that triggered a foreboding in Katakura-sama's mind. It was not Saki's slightly mocking smile nor Sarutobi's bastard smirk but had shades of both… Surely it could not be… the shinobi had no intention of joining the battle if they were not under the orders of a warlord, seeing as their earlier attempts of revenge and eliminating the threat had been failures, even though Nobunaga had chased and slaughtered their clans and was after any who might be associated even faintly with shinobi.

"Indeed? The newcomer asked slyly, dragging the word, scratching his chin slowly. "What is your Boss doing with my daughter?" The man's voice lowered softly and threateningly. There was a sudden shiver from the retainers that served the One-Eyed Dragon, stepping back, exchanging a panicked look, realizing they had just tossed their Boss into the path of an angry father. They allowed themselves a deep breath when her turned away, looking at the Right Eye. "You're Katakura-sama, aren't you?"

"Indeed. And you are…"

"Sarutobi Takeshi." He turned, his face changing to a formal countenance. "Saki sent some messages to the clans. We gathered some of our men and women to hunt down the renegades that serve Oda and to avenge our own. Which means we'll join the army here under your orders. Some are scouting ahead. Others await there." He signalled faintly towards the shadows. "We'll hear from them as we ride. So I'll say this." He bowed sharply. "The shinobi clans support those who fight Oda."

Kojuro nodded, looking around. He walked towards his horse and mounted, taking a deep breath, turning towards the newly created army.

"We head for Honnoji in the land of Yamashiro! We go to serve as a rear guard for Masamune-sama and Sanada Yukimura! We're going to rout Oda's forces down to the very last man!" The shout of support was loud and heartfelt, drowning the sounds of the horses and marching men.

"It's a walled temple complex. Easy to defend form the outside. There are guards at the entrance and a trio of patrols. There has been a steady but rather small flux of arrivals but it stopped a bit
before I reported back." Either the bulk of his army had come with Oda earlier or something was wrong with the situation. "Everything seems to be quiet but there is another army coming into this place. It carries Akechi's symbol… He's either late or has his own plans." Saki said quickly as she ran alongside the horses. "Knowing what you can do and what the Young Tiger has displayed, together, with the tight quarters and the possibility of ambush, it's quite achievable."

Date nodded as they approached, as the walls flashed through the trees. She exchanged a quick glance with him before shadowing away once more, parting from them.

"It's coming into view, Sanada Yukimura. «Are you ready»?"

"Though a hundred arrows come flying at me I shall not stop!"

"That's what I like to hear!" Both reared their horses, charging the terrified guards at the gate. Saki shadowed on top of the wall, observing the first courtyard, waiting. "We got no business with them. Let's go straight in!"

"Understood." Yukimura answered shortly, spurring his horse further, both animals rearing and jumping.

"«Here we go»" They reached the empty stone path, looking around for a moment, weapons ready. "Oshu's Number One Date Masamune has come for the Devil King's head." The One-Eyed Dragon announced easily, putting his strength behind the voice, glancing around.

"I am Takeda's general Sanada Genjiro Yukimura! Come forth Oda Nobunaga! And your dastardly generals." There was no less conviction in Sanada's voice as he lowered his spears, waiting.

Saki looked down, arms crossed, appraising the sudden silence. She could hear the creak of armour and weapons in the side buildings. It was when they attacked, rushing the pair down on the ground that she heard the aggressive movements of another man. The shinobi turned, shadowing away suddenly, crouching on the top of the gate, staring at Oda. Her eyes narrowed sharply, willing herself to see past the genjutsu. It faded away sharply, leaving one man. A quick appraise told her who he was. A renegade who had unquestionable loyalty for Oda. It could not be any other way for that man. Goto Jirou. Big reward for dead body. He carried a simple straight-bladed ninja-to and there should be kunai concealed within his clothes.

Saki lowered herself, claws flaring. He said nothing, attacking, the blade swung for her neck. She spun suddenly, shadowing, appearing at his back. He began to turn. She curled one arm around his chest, hindering his sword, the other around his neck, claws going for the throat. One of his arms moved, breaking the hold, the elbow sinking into her stomach. Saki moved away before the blow had time to completely hinder her, dodging a sudden volley of kunai, feeling a couple of tips graze the skin that was visible on her arms, slashing the surface of the leather on the right as she moved left, the ninja-to following while she was still on the defensive. She dodged and deflected, spinning, kicking, using her heel against any part of him that presented itself, holding the blade on a closed fist, her claws going for the chest, catching a moment of weakness, sinking with a crunch, clutching until the heart was pierced. Saki pushed, allowing the body to sink into the tile of the rood, unlatching her claws, moving near his head, crouching, slitting his throat as a precaution, standing then, shaking the blood away, appraising the One-Eyed Dragon's progression.

Goto Jirou was a specialist of infiltration, disguise, mainly a genjutsu and poison user. A master of information and illusion with little fighting experience. A part of the old Negoro mind training style, abandoned as a standalone discipline for the flaws it could create on an operative. She picked one of the kunai, claws sliding against the tip, gleaming wetly. Poison. She glanced at the scratches and groaned in annoyance, her claws going for the bag, swallowing the antidotes.
They had reached the last building after a long fight, an army pretty much slaughtered under their blades. There was another army surrounding the temple now, a small one but still problematic… Akechi was moving through the dead, looking around, as if wondering. The shinobi shadowed, leaving Goto on the roof tiles, moving towards the main temple hall, waiting.

"So that's it…"

"Akechi Mitsuhide!" Yukimura shouted, turning, his spears ready for combat.

"You sure kept us waiting a long time." Date turned with nonchalance, gripping his sword a bit tightly. "Where the hell is the old man Devil King lounging about?"

"It seems I am the one who has fallen for the trap." Akechi said, chuckling, tilting his head.

The door creaked closed, Saki appearing, dispelling her shadows, pressing both claws to each of the wooden parts, sealing them in.

"You might say that, you freak." She hissed in challenge glaring at Akechi. She turned to the men. "They changed banners and the archer, Ranmaru, leads them now. Also… I smell fire."

"You bastard. You've been forsaken, haven't you…" Date surmised quickly.

"Masamune-dono?" Yukimura looked from one to the other, confused.

"The Nobunaga that came here was a double." The One-Eyed Dragon began, connecting the pieces.

"It was one of my renegades. A nuke-nin. A shinobi in disguise." Saki added softly.

"The Devil King isn't in this temple." Date shook his head, catching the sound of creaking wood under the pressure of the fire. "Oda Nobunaga intends for him and us to get ourselves killed here at Honnoji." His eye narrowed, fixing on the man. "So you were planning to defeat the Devil King along with us and seize the land for yourself."

"I have no interest in land." Akechi dismissed the supposition, his eyes gaining a drunken haze as he displayed his hope. "A peerless general who calls himself the Devil King of the Sixth Heaven, attacked by a swarming force bent on revenge… I wanted to see him screaming and begging for his life. And finally to take his life with these hands…" he crossed his arms over his chest in a self embrace, with a gleeful smile, the scythes gleaming.

"How could this be?! A general who would wish to kill his lord?!!" Yukimura gasped, surprise clearly written on his features.

"And that lord tried to kill him too." Date tskd, looking away with disgust. "«So crazy». They're each as bad as the other." He shifted his weight, appraising. "Here he comes." He warned.

"This pent up frenzy within me… I shall take the liberty of venting it upon you." Akechi lunged suddenly, poison and darkness moving with him, a shrill scream, madness woven into it, escaped his lips as he attacked, spinning, using the speed and curve for greater effect with the scythes, forcing immediately Yukimura and Date into the defensive.

Saki dove in, gripping his shadow for a moment, breaking his balance, creating an opening for Sanada. The Young Tiger's spear snaked through the first defence, caught on the second move that Akechi made with his offhand scythe. Date attacked, taking his opportunity, hindered by the instinctive defence. The shinobi moved into the white-haired freak's space and slashed, catching
air when the man jumped backwards, breaking the stalemate, spinning once more, taking the
offensive against Yukimura, the long handles of both their weapons making the slashing,
crisscrossing match precarious. Saki gripped and tripped the shadow as Date moved in, attacking.

Akechi, brought to the floor by her trickery, barely holding Sanada's spears at bay spun, using the
impetus to stand, opening both his arms, scythes jutting out stopping the One-Eyed Dragon and the
Young Tiger.

"This is not bad. I think I'll enjoy this." Akechi murmured, sustaining the stalemate as Saki kept
herself calmly slinking on the edges of shadow, observing, waiting.

The shinobi moved, shadowing suddenly, appearing behind Akechi, her claws slashing against the
armour, pushing him, breaking his stance. He turned to her with a shout, scythe aimed for her
midsection. Saki smiled and vanished once more, letting the blade skin into the wooden wall the
fire had been eating away.

The moment when his weapon got stuck Yukimura charged, rushing him, pummelling Akechi to
the courtyard, reddened by the fire, cloaked in smoke. Oda's betrayer recovered, taking a few steps
back, shaking the wooden splinters away from his body, facing Sanada that ran after him, standing
defiantly, spears ready. Date moved towards the opening, observing, Saki shadowing to the other
side of the field of battle.

"Akechi Mitsuhide... you launched a dastardly sneak attack against Oyakata-sama which also
embroiled the people of Kai!" Yukimura announced loudly, preparing. "I will never let you get
away with it!"

His attack was not unexpected, spears and scythes crossing, the blades trying to reach each other
with almost desperation, his brown eyes widened in hatred and rage. He was losing focus. Akechi
dodged one of the solid blows, using the curve of his blade to deflect and toss the young warrior
against a stone lantern. Saki reacted, bracing him, helping him up as Akechi stepped back,
examining him disdainfully. Her claws slid over Yukimura's back, feeling his spine undamaged.
But from what she had heard from Sasuke he was extremely resilient to survive the Tiger of Kai's
training.

"A Young Tiger honest to a fault. Unlike the Tiger of Kai I need no tricks to deal with you." Saki
gripped Yukimura's shoulder before he could fall into such an obvious baiting attempt, keeping
him down, sinking the tip of her claws into him, piercing the leather as a warning.

"Don't get too fired up Sanada Yukimura." Date moved into the courtyard, sword in hand, his eye
steel. "Let's be «cool» about this."

"Though that may be a difficult proposition in this fire." Akechi mocked, looking a bit more wary
of the collected Dragon that circled him.

Date attacked drawing the six swords to increase his attack and defence when sustaining the
scythes. His attacks were diagonal and crisscrossing, biting the scythe, his aura flaring, the
lightning enveloping him as darkness kept a steady flow from Akechi, both grating against each
other until the balance couldn't be kept, the following explosion separating them, the aftermath as
sharp as a blade's, cutting, harming both. Date shrugged it off, sheathing the swords, drawing only
a claw once more, preparing.

"Ah it hurts..." Akechi hummed, the drunken expression clouding his face once more, staggering
slightly. "As expected from the One-Eyed Dragon. You make the very marrow of my bones
quiver." Saki gagged, shadowing next to the Dragon, half-dragging Yukimura with her as the
sudden hail of arrow interrupted the dragon's next attack.

Purple fletched arrows sunk harmlessly into the ground, their goal more distracting than offensive. The spiky haired kid with a bow, Ranmaru, jumped in front of Akechi, drawing an arrow, looking slightly sideways.

"I don't like you much, but I feel sorry for you, so I'll help you. So go apologise to Nobunaga-sama." His voice was childish but his countenance was that of a warrior. Another one of Oda's weapons.

"What a sweet thing to say." Date drawled, eye narrowed.

"Lovely." Saki snapped dryly. "Now can we kill him?"

"It makes me feel rather conflicted about this." Yukimura murmured, his eyes seeing little more than a child. But Ranmaru was a general for a merciless man and well on his way to becoming one also, responsible for soldiers and deaths. Partially responsible for the fall of Echigo's War God.

"That's why you get worn down." Date chastised as he sliced through a new hail of arrows. Saki's shadows were slightly unstable dancing with the flames, slipping easily away and sliding under control with the same glee but what she did keep arrows away too so the shinobi chose not to worry about it. "When you get to it its not like we're a 100% in the right. It's only when you stare fixedly at the future that even injustice become just… That's the way of these troubled times."

"How far have I fallen to garner the pity of a child…" Akechi was whispering to himself, his blades listlessly held down along his sides. "I understand. I shall offer a heartfelt apology to Nobunaga."

Saki shook her head, grasping a few more arrows, tossing them out of her way. Not even if he gave the Devil King his actual heart on a box would that apology be accepted.

"Kids should stay out of this." Date shouted suddenly, breaking the hail of arrows, going after the archer.

"Ranmaru is not a kid!" The archer general yelled, jumping back, trying to get away from the point blank range, to restart his attack, pin the Dragon down. The One-Eyed Dragon gave him no quarter and no chance, the blow sending the smaller body into one of the flaming buildings, breaking the fusuma, breaking his bow, walking slowly towards the fallen child menacingly.

"Better finish this quickly" He said gruffly, raising his sword, demeanour cold in response of Ranmaru's terrified expression, the moment extending until the kid's legs found their will to run, the child fleeing in terror almost crying.

Saki chuckled behind Date, watching.

"Scary man..." She whispered playfully, her voice growled and low. He had held that blow for way too long. So even the hardened warrior had a bit of a heart for the kid that had chosen the wrong side. "Sanada seems to be holding his own. However they went back into the fire."

"Ah it hurts." Akechi whispered happily, smiling, the blood Yukimura's last blow created sliding down his face, tinting his hair, pooling on the collar of the armour.

"Shall we finish this quickly?" Date interrupted quietly, standing next to his rival.

"Masamune-dono I must ask that you yield this battle to me after all!" Yukimura said, still poised
"Masamune-sama!" There was a sharp shout coming from the outside, the Right Eye of the Dragon running into the crumbling building.

"So you've come Kojuro." Date smiled slightly, turning his head as Katakura-sama stood in front of them, drawing his sword, claiming the match.

"The Devil king is at Mount Azuchi." Saki frowned. It was already completed? Her reports said it was... a construction zone... A ruse, an illusion. Goto might have suggested something like that... "I have that on good authority from an Echigo ninja." Kasuga? So she had tried to avenge the War God as Sasuke had predicted and been lucky enough to actually get away. More skilled ninja had tried so... blind rage and stupidity had guided that decision. And dumb luck and a hint of skill might have gotten her out. "From a great fortress built atop of a mountain blanketed by ominous clouds, he is preparing the finishing touches on his world in warrior rule. There will never be another opportunity like this. Please lead to the army waiting outside to the Devil King! You too Sanada Yukimura!" Katakura-dono surmised quickly, giving his instructions.

"But I must settle matters with this man!"

"We all have our issues with him." Saki mentioned, not moving watching the acceptance in Akechi's posture, his betrayal becoming heavy on his shoulders. Seemed he was only now grasping the full consequences of his actions.

"Leave this to me! Don't let your personal grievances make you forget the greater cause. What you swore to the Tiger of Kai wasn't supposed to be some petty act of revenge!"

"It is as you say." Yukimura admitted, abandoning his combative stance.

"Okay." We'll be leaving him to you Kojuro."

"We entrust this to you, Katakura-dono."

"I want to see him die." Saki murmured gently, lingering for a moment, before turning, following the One-Eyed Dragon and the Young Tiger.

"So, the construction of Azuchi had been completed. For the final festivities that may be the most suitable place." Akechi announced, looking up, peeping from the white strands of hair.

"Too bad for you. You're not wanted there." Katakura-dono said defiantly, gripping his katana.

Saki stopped, appraising the different colours assembled, the banners and the power Katakura-dono had managed to gather and control.

Kasuga stood near the banners of the men from Echigo.

Saica Magoichi and a few of her forces had joined in, carrying the crow of the Saica faction and their firearms. She was young but stood tall and defiant, strawberry-blond hair tousled in the wind and reddish-brown eyes staring steadily ahead. Saki smiled. So they had answered her notes, the urges from Takeda Shingen and the request she had managed to plea from Date.

Magoichi nodded for her. Saki returned the gesture, smiling slightly lowering her head then, feeling a bit dizzy. She and the new Saica Magiochi had started a bit of a friendship when she had delivered the alliance proposal and had given a few of her supply of kusuri to treat Tokugawa
Ieyasu. As it had turned out the rumours were true.

Sasuke relaying the information the One-Eyed Dragon and the Young Tiger, getting the horses and making the last minutes' adjustments before heading for Azuchi, for the final showdown. She took a deep breath, popping a few umeboshi in her mouth, chewing slowly, looking around.

All banners were there save from the western countries who could not cross from their dominated territories. But there was a chance that they stood ready to assist. Something to clear with Sasuke. Some shinobi hid in the shadows or lounged about in waiting, few of them actually tied down to any of the present armies.

There was a sudden movement that caught her attention. Saki stopped moving for an instant as the towering man came towards her his gait easy and relaxed. Then suddenly he was next to her, picking her up, embracing her, the warmth of his arms a sharp contrast with the icy chill of the kusari. She hugged him a bit more tightly than she wanted to display, keeping a sudden choked snuffle in.

"I thought you were dead…" She whispered cautiously. Recent reports of an Oda raid and slaughter in a hidden village exchanged through the ninja… Her clan did not know if Sarutobi Takeshi was dead or alive as he was the emissary they had chosen to carry out her plea for forces to the alliance… Sasuke hadn't known either.

"I will be if I don't report to your mother soon." He smiled softly. "The Devil King may want us extinguished but the mountain is Koga territory. As soon as they knew he was coming for another massacre the clan moved." Takeshi put her down, examining her with a critical eye. "All clans sent members. We will fight with this army." His fingers touched the scratches. "Saki."

"Yes. I took precautions." She admitted, turning slightly to hide the marks.

"Resistance is not immunity." He admonished. Saki nodded. It was common and she would get through it as she had in the past. It should not be a worrying matter but that was her father. He had an excuse to worry. The shinobi noticed the cautious glances from the guys, standing a bit on the background, mounted, and looked up, eyes narrowed.

"What did you do?" Takeshi smiled, his eyes bright and mischievousness.

"Ah… no time to talk. We have a fortress to invade." He moved away, whistling.

Saki huffed, eyes narrowed and mistrustful.

---

Daisho – 大小 – The pairing of a katana and wakizashi that are the main weapons of a traditional samurai;

Genjutso – 幻術 – Ninja misdirection or illusion; "illusion techniques";

Kusari-tanto – 鎖短刀 – Bladed chain;

Ninja-to – 忍者刀 – ninja sword, shorter and straighter than the katana;

Umeboshi – 梅干 – Pickled plums;

Wakizashi – 脇差 – Sword shorter than a katana and often paired with it;
Chapter 13

"This is a tad reckless, but this way we'll be able to get ahead of Oda's forces returning to Azuchi from Honnoji." Sasuke mentioned while the army rode through the mountains and wilderness, away from the road, in a mad dash to gain terrain and time. Saki moved side by side with him and Takeshi, the other shinobi disguised amongst the soldiers on foot, the speed of the ninja easily matching the horses' quick step.

Kasuga had been sent to Shikoku in an attempt to warn Keiji or Chosokabe Motochika, to make the alliances, if any had been secured, move.

Date glanced at them thoughtfully, knowing that was what the trio had been speaking about in hushed tones as they chose the path through the roads less travelled.

"Even if we beat them there, it'll be pointless if we get caught in the middle." The One-Eyed Dragon said, eye narrowed. A second battle after the army had been exhausted in a siege was not a good prospect. And if caught before the fight had been decided it could tip the scale into a disgraceful and disastrous defeat.

"Just leave that to us." Sasuke gripped Saki's arm, dragging her along. Takeshi moved to the front, waving them away, the kusari clinking, a smile on his lips.

"I'll take care of our forces then." He shouted, with a widening smile. There was a sudden blenching that was quite close to panic in Saki's face before she vanished, following Kai's shinobi.

"Masamune-dono." Yukimura called looking back for a moment, to the forces that followed them. "Could it be that you know this would happen and that was why you did that with the Date Army, to rouse me when my spirits were low?"

"Every last one of them knew the time had come to risk their lives." Date shrugged the question away, glancing back. "I'm not a fan of running in big crews, but a crazy-ass «party» like this just once isn't bad either." The One-Eyed Dragon chuckled to himself, taking a deep breath before shouting. "«Are you ready guys?!»" The cheer that rose was deafening and sharp, showing commitment and hope, echoed not only by those whose loyalty had always belonged to the Dragon but also by those who saw in him a way to avenge their lords and a warrior worthy of respect. "«Show guns up!» We're going to settle this in one fell swoop! The Azuchi castle will be the Devil King's grave!"

"We absolutely cannot hand over our future to a compassionless general!" Yukimura shouted after him, fire burning within. "All we will offer him are prayers for the dead!"

"That's the spirit. «Psych up guys»!"

Saki and Sasuke watched from the height of the trees as the bridge that connected the road from Honnoji to Azuchi exploded in smoke and fire, the wood collapsing into the chasm, the horses of Oda's army that could not stop in time falling in, neighing in panic, hooves flailing, men shouting in fear, silenced in death, followed by the shocked exclamations of fear, anger and shock.

"Nothing personal." Sasuke said softly, watching, making sure they took the actions they expected.

"Really?" Saki murmured in response, watching as they struggled to shape up, according to plan, their squadron leader gone to further the confusion with lack of orders. The sides of the road had
been peppered with makibishi which would cripple horses and foot soldiers further as they would try to circumvent the chasm through the woods and mountains. "After the slaughter in the clans? After the attack on your master?"

"It's war." Sasuke said with a practical mind.

Saki scoffed.

"True." She admitted. "Will you wait for Katakura-dono?"

 Takeshi grunted in annoyance as the gate stood against shinobi and Saica explosives, not even a dent showing after the fifth explosion, standing near the head of the stilled army that awaited for the chance to invade, arms folded over his chest, eyes narrowed as he examined the defences with trained keenness. That was not a good sign. The walls were high but there was no whisper behind them. The other shinobi told him little, not knowing more than him about what was waiting beyond the walls. They had all been tricked by the illusion of a construction site and not bothered to look further when the clans nearest to Oda's domains were endangered.

"No wonder he doesn't have any guards at the gate." Date said calmly, looking ahead, staring at the same structure with a thunderous glare. The other choice would be climbing the walls because they were too high for even his horse to jump. And that would take time and tools that the quickly assembled army did not posses.

"Still better than being greeted by a hail of arrow I would say…” Takeshi murmured as one of the Koga scouts returned, walking towards him, reporting quickly. There were traps for ninja on the walls, preventing a normal infiltration and door opening method and a small force of the nuke-nin had been drawn out and eliminated. "Take a few of the guys around and count. Sweep the yards."

"Truly, an invulnerable, impenetrable fortress…” Yukimura whispered. He glanced at the other man, his eyes widening slightly. "Masamune-dono… your injury from Nagashino?"

"I got bounced around a bit too much on the horse." Date admitted, placing a hand over his side. Saki had bound the wounds and placed a few precautions in the fabric of the sarashi and bandages but that had been almost two days ago, before the dike, and the intense fighting and riding had taken its toll on every measure that could have been taken. Date was starting to feel the pain and the exhaustion that could only mean he was losing blood under the armour.

"You must get immediate treatment. Saki-dono…” Yukimura started, worriedly.

"«Loving it»" Date growled. With Saki's wrath he could deal after the battle was won. "I've been used to pain since I was a brat. The more important issue is how do we get inside this castle?"

"Brave man." Takeshi whispered, still trying to think of a way to open the gate or breach the walls… But if the metal was unwieldy stone would be harsher to blow and would take a lot of time just to place the explosives in the right pressure points. Never mind the time it took to find the pressure points in a stone wall. On the other hand dealing with his daughter would be perilous for an injured young man no matter how much rumours said she cared for him.

There was a whistle and a flash of light coming suddenly from the west, exploding in fire as they hit the ground.

"«Shit!»" Date turned sharply, following the flaring bombs with his eye. "A new weapon of the Devil King?"
"What incredible destructive power!" Yukimura said, eyes wide in awe.

"Boss those things are flying in from way on the other side of the lake!" Yoshinao shouted suddenly turning on his horse, pointing towards what was beyond the mountains, shooting towards Azuchi, the echoing booms and bursts of light.

"Fugaku must be ready…" Takeshi reasoned. "Get away from the walls." He shouted to the shinobi. There was a sudden burst of fire and stone as the blast finally connected, opening a gap in Azuchi's defences.

"Masamune-dono!" Yukimura shouted excitedly, rearing his horse, ready to battle.

"Looks like we've got ourselves some western allies!" Date said with a smirk. "But he's a pretty reckless bastard." He completed as more explosions rang around them.

"C-Could it be…?!"

"Time to charge in, Sanada Yukimura!" Date gave a slight nudge to his horse, making it gallop ahead, going uphill, drawing his sword with a battle cry, quickly followed by the Young Tiger and the men they led.

Takeshi turned, whistling suddenly, signalling the shinobi, moving them to suit the situation. Take out archers and gunners, clear paths, disable traps or just plain combat. He slid the kusari-tanto into place, releasing the chain, left hand gripping the handle of the tanto, the other holding the metal loosely, ready to dive into battle.

Saki moved through the battlefield, arriving, dodging the explosions, crossing the stone walls into the pitched battle in the first courtyard. Spurred on by the sharp order of their leader and the desire to shed blood the men from the Oda faction were a relentless wave, willing to die and kill without a flinch. There was no mercy to be show and no regret as her claws slashed her way through unguarded necks, shadowing from man to man, striking before being seen and vanishing once more.

"Magoichi!" She shouted. The young woman had given up the horse, gun in hand, shooting with precision and coolness, walking through the battlefield with grace and aloofness. She saluted Saki quickly with her pistol as the shinobi reached her, both turning, back to back weaving through the battlefield in tandem, Saica taking out Oda faction gunners up high, when their guns started to show, raining a hail of bullets towards the invaders, as Saki killed a ring around them.

It was not hard to keep track of the dragon and Tiger's progress as fire and lightning and the shouts of the dying soldiers that had been foolish enough to cross the way pinpointed exactly where they were and it was not hard to guess where they were headed. Then they disappeared on the top of the tower whose defences had been activated, shooting lightning, sickly yellow bolts burning the ground where they touched, hindering their forces' progress further, adding to the pained screams, the blood smell in the air replaced with burned flesh and smoke.

They just had to keep going…

There was a sudden crash through the walls of the castle, loud enough to cut through the battlefield.

Saki turned as Saica tossed a few grenades against the enemies, opening a breathing space, both looking up.
Oda Nobunaga stood as the edges of the roof, cape picked up by the wind, gripping Date by the throat hauling him onto the empty air, the helmet of the One-Eyed Dragon falling away, the swords dropping from his hands, the sharpened tip of the Devil King's gauntlet poised to gouge his remaining eye out, dragging out the moment with the glee of a true sadist. Yukimura shouted suddenly, recovering from whatever had kept him behind, vaulting off the towers' top floor, poised to attack. Before he could come close enough, even for the reach of his spears the Young Tiger was forced away by the shotgun blast.

"All who are weak shall be destroyed. This is the way of this world. Bemoan it and die!" The Devil King announced loudly.

Saki grabbed Magoichi's shoulder, shadowing with her, moving quickly towards the tower. The gunshot of the phoenix rang out even before Saki withdrew the shadows, the Saica faction leader standing boldly on the roof, her body poised sideways to make itself a smaller target to the enemy's fire. The bullet was deflected by the armour but was enough to distract him, to make him look away, loosening his grip.

Magoichi did not waver as the Devil King's gaze was set on her, cocking her weapon once more, hair whipping in the wind, reddish eyes narrowed.

"Oda Nobunaga... I'll send you back to hell full of lead." She quasi snarled under her breath, shooting once more.

Saki moved, lunging, claws ready, aiming for the eyes and the small chink between the gap in the armour, where the neck and jaw connected, shadowing before the blood-red cloak slashed towards her as the shinobi got closer, the Devil King moving just a bit, as if he had been expecting that movement. She crouched on the edge of the roof, eyes narrowed. He could not manoeuvre too much as the shotgun was poised to keep Yukimura away, the other hand choking the life out of the Dragon and trusting his armour to deflect Saica's shots.

The sudden sound of jets cut through the air, breaking the stalemate. Oda looked up, eyes narrowed.

"Takechio's damn armour. So it didn't quite die!" The Devil King tossed the One-Eyed Dragon away, shooting upwards as Honda Tadakasu swooped down, drill-arm ready to attack. Saica smirked a bit, jumping off that tier, backing away from the battle.

The shinobi jumped, shadowing, hoping to break the fall, grabbing Date before he slid off the roof, bracing him against her. The One-Eyed Dragon looked at Saki, pain clearly written in his face as his arm slid around her shoulders, letting his weigh sag a bit. Both looked down towards the blood that stained the armour. She placed her claws over his hand the blood starting to seep over fabric metal and leather.

Magoichi moved to their side, perching on the edge of the roof, picking Oda's faction snipers carefully, helping the pitched battle bellow. Explosions blasted around them, the din of battle undiminished. Yukimura was tossed away from the fight, moving to their side, standing next to them, still half bent as if prepared to jump into the fray once again.

"How craven of you Oda Nobunaga!" The Young Tiger shouted. "To aim solely for the cracks in the broken armour..." He gripped his spears harder, as if ready to lunge as Magoichi's gunshots rang out at regular, careful intervals, so different from Oda's onslaught. Date grabbed his arm, straightening a bit through the pain.

"Don't let it be in vain." The One-Eyed Dragon gritted out, knowing that Honda Tadakatsu would
not last, at least not in his weakened state. "Sear the image of his form in you eyes." A sacrifice… a way to stoke Yukimura's spirit further, to help him do what had to be done. Yukimura noticed the blood suddenly, through Date's armour and gloved hands, starting to stain the underside of Saki's claws, then his eyes closed.

"Honda-dono" Yukimura whispered, looking back, towards the rather one sided battle. The failed attack rattled the building and allowed Oda's shotgun to be directly lined with Honda's armour's weakness, the large chink his wife's attack had chipped away. The shot was loud and the explosion sudden and harsh, smoke and fire obscuring the two opponents. Saki groaned, looking away, avoiding the hot winds and debris.

Date was straightening slowly with Saki's help, teeth clenched as Yukimura stared ahead, the battle below them stilling for a moment as if in shock. The Young Tiger turned as Date placed his hand on his shoulder, bracing him too.

Oda stood at the top of the ruined upper floors, cape destroyed but otherwise unscathed, tossing the useless shotgun to the side, gripping his sword once again, grinning as he looked down to his challengers.

"I only got one more attack left in me." The One-Eyed Dragon groused, raising one of his swords. His grip was unsteady due to the building pain and blood loss. Yukimura turned to him fully, pulling his red ribbon free, tying the sword into its place.

Saki closed her eyes and stepped back, reaching for Date's face, cupping it as he took a fighting placed her lips softly against his, turning away, moving towards Saica, watching the ground.

Date looked at Yukimura and then to the Devil King who smiled, thinking himself victorious.

"You finish this." Date allowed.

"I shall though it may cost me my life." Yukimura swore, calmer, taking the purpose to heart. As their auras started to flare Saki shadowed with the mercenary leader back into the battlefield.

"Allies have arrived." Saica informed her. "Oda is encircled." She shot in-between sentences as Saki scanned the field. Shinobi ran through the roofs, taking out gunners, tossing bombs and kunai to defeat some of the ground threats too. Soldiers fought and fell. Keiji brought the two giants of the Seto sea, Motonari Mori and Chosokabe Motochika. The Maedas had also joined in.

The sound of battle from Azuchi's tower top suddenly overcame that of the battlegrounds, making every eye turn up, towards the held blades between the sword of the Devil King, the Dragon claw and the Young Tiger's spears. The blade broke suddenly under the pressure, lightning and fire coursing through the metal, the last strike definite, darkness spilling into the dawning sky, as a last sigh.

There was a tense empty moment before the leaders of the alliance emerged, the One-Eyed Dragon supported by Sanada, keeping him from collapsing from exhaustion and pain, both sporting a slight, tired but victorious smile. The cheer of the victorious broke out suddenly, the remnants of Oda's forces loosing faith, retreating, abandoning the dead and the battlefield.

Saica gave the ground a slight smile before raising the phoenix, shooting three times, signalling the end of her contract, the rest of her faction joining her quietly, almost solemnly. She raised her gun once more, pointing it towards Saki. The shinobi raised her claws, metal touching metal. They sustained each other's eyes for a couple of seconds before the Saica faction as a whole turned away, without any words, disappearing.
The shinobi let out a sigh, rolling her shoulders. The unbound shinobi were leaving, ready to tell their own clans that the ninja destroyer was dead. Slowly she began walking towards the tower, undoing her claws, cleaning out the blood with a rag, revealing the bruises beneath the metal and leather, her bones snapping into place with small cracks when she closed her hands into tight fists.

Date was sitting on the floor on the base of the tower, still armoured when she arrived, Yukimura standing by his side, looking around, worried. She went to the Dragon's side, exchanging a quick glance before placing her bag on the stone floor, undoing the armour quickly, forced to cut and rip away the sodden and crusted bandaging to appraise the damage. Bruises were starting to form over the unbroken skin. The blood seeped from the reopened wound, freshly pulled from her actions, the first frail healed layers once again jostled open, the stitches torn, cutting new gashes along the puncture wound. It would need fresh stitches but to was not life threatening, despite the flashy amount of blood it had seeped away. It would make him feels sluggish and tired though.

"Lie back." She pushed him gently, suspicious when he complied easily. The One-Eyed Dragon must be truly weary. "You seem uninjured."

"A bit bruised Saki-dono. Nothing much." Sanada managed a smile as she organized her medicines.

"Grab his wrists. Hold them over his head." The Young Tiger's eyes widened for a moment, doubt and surprise crossing his face as she retrieved a curved needle and thread. He ended up doing what she asked. Date was awake and his mind unclouded. And what she had to do to stop the bleeding once again would hurt and instinct could override even the steeliest resolve.

Saki straddled him, locking his legs in place with hers, knees barely touching the ground on each side of his hips, moving a bit so the growing light of dawn would pour over the area that needed to be tended.

"Saki-dono?" Yukimura seemed to be a little shocked by her actions even as he held on to Date's wrists.

"This is payback isn't it?" Date groaned, looking up, doing little to get free, giving her a little smirk. Saki arched an eyebrow, pouring one of her bottles onto the flesh, making him hiss and writhe under her, responding to the sudden pain. She used the rest of the liquid on her own hands, enduring the sting when it found the small cuts that slid under the bruises, and the utensils before leaning a bit, starting to clean the wound, stitch it closed once more.

Even though the area was partially numbed it still was quite painful. Date had closed his eye, lips thinned, teeth clenched behind them as she worked, an occasional grunt and hitch on his breathing displaying the pain.

Yukimura helped keep him still even though the One-Eyed Dragon managed, somehow, to keep his body still under hers until the last couple of stitches, before the knot was made, the Young Tiger's face going from the earlier embarrassment to simple focus.

Tiny beads of blood welled and dripped from the pricks and thread, strikingly red against the skin and the fading bruise.

Saki let out a tired sigh, pulling the thread taunt after tying the end, leaning into Date, her cheek brushing his stomach as she snipped the excess free with her teeth. Yukimura was suddenly blushing fiercely, letting go of Date's wrists, staring. The shinobi straightened, a thumb absently wiping a blood droplet away, as she placed the needle on its place she stopped the grab for another of her kusuri, looking at Yukimura, eyes narrowing.
"Are you all right Sanada Yukimura?" Date tilted his head a bit, smirking, catching the change of colour, moving his arms, partially straightening. Saki moved a bit over him unbalanced by the gesture, placing one hand over Date's shoulder, leaning, the other touching the floor. Yukimura's blush grew deeper as he stammered.

"Y… yes… I just…"

"Are we interrupting?" Takeshi's voice cut from the entryway, utterly fake and cheery.

Saki groaned, straightening suddenly, stiffly, hands sliding away from Date as if he burned, plucking the fabric from her bag, going back to the bandaging. A glance told her Katakura-dono was with him. Date's hand, the one he was not using to prop his torso up, sneaking over her knee was not helping matters either.

"Go die." She growled, head lowered, hiding a hint of a blush she had been unable to control at her father's words and the… current position of a certain Dragon under her. His hand was certainly not helping. Nonchalantly, or at least giving that appearance, she slipped away, moving his questing hand to hold the fabric against the wound.

Katakura-dono stepped in, helping the One-Eyed Dragon into a full sitting position, kneeling behind him, his face revealing nothing as she worked, placing herself in a way that wouldn't have her looking at Takeshi.

"How long until he can ride?" The Right Eye asked.

Saki shrugged, wrapping the fabric around Date's torso quickly and methodically.

"A couple of hours." Saki moved the last band, tying the knots, letting Katakura-dono help Date in putting the bloodied armour back into its place. It was the best they could do for now and he would have to endure the discomfort for just a bit longer.

"He seemed to be in fine riding order a moment ago…" Takeshi mentioned, crouching by their side, smiling, hugging Saki, dragging her into his arms as if she was little more than a child or a doll. The shinobi growled, squirming like a wet cat, sliding away, taking a couple of deep breaths to regain her veneer of calm.

"We'll have to stop at least for couple of nights." It could not hurt the army either to stop for some time. They had to have sustained some losses and injuries in such an attack… Saki gave the advice and as Date and Katakura-dono turned to each other, talking quietly she packed her kusuri. Her vision threatened to swim, dizziness sneaking in with the remnants of the poison that still had no chance to truly act, her hands slowing down in its motions. Takeshi stopped his teasing smirk for a moment, pressing a hand to her back, steadying her gently, leaning forward, covering the change.

"You'll have to hurry if you want to hide what's to come." His advice was sound but she had no way to escape the army, not at the moment and not how Date was injured.

"Who the hell are you?" Date growled, staring at Takeshi. He had taken charge of the shinobi and was there when they left Honnoji. As they were headed for combat he hadn't cared about who the man actually was. Now in the aftermath he was growing suspicious.

Makibishi – 撒き菱 or 撒菱 – Caltrops;
"Sarutobi Takeshi. Ninja clans. Warrior class." Takeshi answered smiling slightly, tilting his head, still kneeling on the ground, moving to a bit more formal position, allowing them to see Saki once more, the traces of weakness hidden, as the armies outside rallied and prepared to either leave or scavenge, their shadows sliding from time to time into the hall, the voices reaching them very faintly.

"You're part of Sasuke's village?" Yukimura piped in, surprised, staring respectfully at the larger man.

"You could say that..." Takeshi smirked, standing, his chains jingling merrily, moving a few steps towards the entrance, taking a deep breath, surveying the area before turning towards them once more. "So... koneko... are you married now?"

Saki went stiff and groaned her eyes narrowing.

"Koneko?" Yukimura murmured, staring at Saki, his expression completely confused. She did not elaborate, lowering her head further, shoulders hunching. Then the memories clicked in place for the Young Tiger.

"Sanada-danna, we're ready to leave." Sasuke appeared on the partially destroyed doorway.

"Of course..." Yukimura stood and moved away. "I wish you a good journey." He said formally with a slight bow and went down the stairs, into the courtyard. Sasuke turned slightly, watching.

"Take him with you..." Saki pleaded, pointing at Takeshi who was moving towards Date, taking his face between his hands, appraising him, humming absentmindedly. Sasuke chuckled and disappeared. "Damn it Sarutobi..."

"Really?" Takeshi began, making her spine stiffen in fear. She turned to see what was being done "This is the men you chose to bond with? He looks kind of... bedraggled." Takeshi backed away a bit without letting go when Date swatted at him, easily deflecting the half-hearted blow, tilting the Dragon's head from side to side. "The face is not exactly symmetrical and the missing eye might be a problem..." He narrowed his eyes, drawing nearer to his prisoner's face "Also the colour is weird..." One hand was free now, ruffling Date's hair carelessly. "Not too coarse even if it looks a bit shaggy... At least his teeth look nice. Ooh feisty... he tries to bite." Takeshi jumped away, smiling as Date snarled and moved to an almost attack with the claw he still had nearby.

Saki placed her hand on the One-Eyed Dragon's shoulder, keeping him still. Date glanced at her under the sharp eyes of Takeshi. He didn't notice the glare nor the begrudging approval when he calmed down under the unspoken urge, settling back as to not upset his wound. Katakura-dono was saying nothing either... why wasn't he when the One-Eyed Dragon was being...

"He's not a horse." Saki murmured, her voice fading, eyes darting to the only possible escape route while keeping a brittle leash on her boss.

"Have you checked under the clothes to make sure he is healthy?"

"Would you stop it old man?" Saki groaned, hiding her face in her palm.

"I'm just making sure..."
"Go back home."

"But koneko…" Takeshi smiled wistfully and stood, backing away. "Ah… Children grow so fast. One day they are running through the house playing with your weapons next they're on top of their hirer making future ninja…" Katakura-dono paled considerably when he heard that. Date gritted his teeth. Saki blushed a deeper red, no longer bothering to control her reactions.

"Are you done?" She whimpered.

"Just about, yes." Takeshi smiled, feigning innocence. Then his expression turned serious. "He'd better take good care of you." The shinobi murmured, still loud enough to be heard, his tone dark and bitter, crouching in front of Saki, caressing her cheek very gently, tilting her head up. He leaned, kissing her forehead before disappearing.

"That bastard…" Date began to stand, furious.

"Masamune-sama… that man is Saki's father." Katakura-dono finally spoke up to break the reckless state Date was working himself into.

"What?" Date's rage ebbed away, shattered, replaced by confusion and then comprehension. He looked at Saki who hid a massive blush and shell-shocked expression between her palms. He smirked slightly. "Koneko?" Saki actually whimpered without him touching her, even though the sound was clearly pained, curling into herself.

"Please don't…"

"Kojuro. Go gather the guys." He waited for his Right Eye to leave before addressing her. "Saki." She looked up, the blush still bright, answering to his soft call. "Help me up." The shinobi went to him gently, sliding her arms around his waist. The One-Eyed Dragon stood smoothly, needing no true help from her despite his tiredness. Date placed his hand against her cheek, brushing a quick kiss over her was dead. Oshu needed to be rebuilt, their losses covered, part of the army reassembled and trained, new soldiers were needed. It was… almost surreal. There was time now. If only for a while there was time. "Scout ahead, find a spot for a good camp."

Saki nodded softly and turned away, picking her bag, vanishing.

The ride was uneventful and smooth, the stops kept to a minimum as they all seemed eager to return home. Saki closed her eyes for a moment, leaning against Date's back, feeling numb, dizzy, sore and sleepy. Her antidote was running out and soon her body would have to expunge the rest of the poison on its own. But the symptoms she was experiencing were no different from what everyone else was going through. No complaint about it ever left her lips.

There was a feeling of festive hopefulness as they crossed Oshu, the army thinning as its members were allowed to return to their homes for the time at least. Summons would be issued later on, after. It was just a handful that stopped at the gates of the bukeyashiki. Saki opened her eyes tiredly when she felt Date stir, dismounting. She tilted her head a bit over her shoulder, seeing the familiar walls and did the same, sliding down the horse with little grace, sighing.

"I'm going for a bath…" She whispered, faking a smile. "Don't be surprised if I don't come to you tonight…" Date smiled slightly, distracted.

"If you don't come I'll get you." He challenged, guiding the horse through the gates before the servants swarmed to welcome their lord.
"If you can find me." Saki conceded, turning her back on him, keeping the smile for show, going towards her room, the steps she took widening and quickening into an almost run as soon as she was out of sight, sparing only a quick nod to those she found on her path.

Saki checked her temperature quickly, without bothering to close the shoji, abandoning her belongings in the room, the bag vaguely clinking as it hit the tatami, picking her sleeping shirt, one she had left behind. It hadn't started yet but true pain was settling in, radiating from her centre in waves, striking and ebbing away, little more than an annoying cramp for the moment.

It was a quick affair with warm water and a brisk scrubbing but what mattered was feeling clean once more. It gave her a slightly hopeful outlook on the situation. It was an illusion that would burst soon but she had been taught to embrace what she could for as long as it lasted. She slid out of the water carefully, tying the towel around her, walking towards the clothes when the first wave of actual pain gripped her senses, making her hiss, kneeling gracelessly, arms going around herself in a hug, as if curling could lessen the sharp stabbing sensation, the feel of being ripped apart, her breathing turning laboured and harsh, fluttering on the edge of tears.

Too soon…

Saki closed her eyes for a moment, struggling to get up, to move, to simply inhale. Nothing seemed to be obeying properly, too focused on hurting her… another wave hit, freeing tears this time. She could feel them slide down her cheeks, cooling the rapidly heating skin… and still… she was feeling so cold…

"Saki-dono?" One of the servants, a young girl… she must have heard her… the fusuma slid open, the sound on the back of her senses as the shinobi sighed, the onslaught ebbed away, leaving aching muscles behind. There was a sudden gasp as the girl found her curled on the floor. She ran towards her, touching her shoulder, helping her to sit straight, going through the motions, placing her hand against her forehead… did she… she had a little brother, the shinobi remembered that. She was treating her like she would an ailing child. Saki had made sure to calm the fears of the servants in the house, given the reputation ninja had as cold-blooded and random killers in the eyes of the people… and seeing that they always knew what happened in the household and surrounding fields she also used the friends inside as a secondary and unknowing spy net. The girl gave her the meaningful look, allowing Saki to know that she was indeed looking sick.

There was an easy way out. Tell her she was a bit ill, having sustained the awful weather in the war, that the cold air had gotten to her lungs and the wounds of the previous battles were bothering her and she needed to sleep so much… but before she could lie to assuage the servants' fears and misdirect their attention another wave hit, making her curl once more, her nails digging into her arms, drawing blood as a reminder to keep quiet in front of others.

The girl's worried expression turned to a clear panic as she stood, her mouth opening, clearly intent on calling help. Saki's eyes narrowed and she moved, standing, grabbing her arm, covering her mouth coldly.

"Not a word of this. Not to anyone. Understood?" Her voice grew icy and harsh, keeping the girl pinned against her, using her nails against her back, mimicking a blade she did not have. Why didn't she have a blade? Saki though dimly… she usually had weapons everywhere…

Whatever the servant was seeing in her was enough to make her tremble in fear, nodding quickly.

Saki tsk, freeing the girl gently, grimacing as she walked past her, now truly fighting to hide the pain, not allowing the audience to witness it again, and knowing what she was about to do would only make it harsher. She picked the shirt, slipping it over her body, letting the towel drop before
shadowing, vanishing completely from sight.

Her room was empty... The One-Eyed Dragon looked around, catching on the signs that she had been there but no hint as to where she might have vanished to. She was not bathing and not in his room... Maybe he actually had to give her orders to sleep and rest. If Saki had left already to do "ninja things"... No. Her bag was still there and knowing some of its contents it was very unlikely she would leave it behind like that. Date turned, starting to leave. Maybe she had gone to Kojuro for some last briefing before retiring. A servant caught his attention, flitting about, walking briskly but hesitating before peeking into the rooms, a terrified look in her eyes as she looked around after each action, clearly searching for something. He turned slightly, eye narrowing in suspicion, walking towards her.

"Have you seen Saki?" His voice came out a bit more forceful and gruff than she had intended but the young woman seemed not to be aware of his presence. Indeed she jumped when he greeted her, turning around, eyes wide and face pale.

"Date-sama... I... hum..." She bowed deeply, suddenly, shivering, stammering a bit before clearing her throat to answer his query. "I can't seem to find her."

"Why would you need to find her?" The One-Eyed Dragon drawled slowly unmoving.

"I... huh..." She took a deep breath, not straightening. "Forgive me for this broken promise." The girl whispered quickly to the air. "Saki-dono is sick. I saw her and she was hurting and didn't allow me to call for help. She actually threatened me... that is why I know that it's bad..." The servant gulped suddenly, looking around once more. "I haven't told anyone... please, I swear it, but I need to find her."

"Go back to your post." Date sighed, staring at the girl. "I'll take care of it." Whatever the girl saw in him at that moment was enough to send her scurrying away with a very terrified expression, more so than the one she had worn when Saki had actually extracted her promise.

"You should sleep." The One-Eyed Dragon whispered looking at the fabric of the tent. Saki made an uncommitted sound sitting next to him on the mat. Date pulled her braid playfully, tugging her down to his side. She resisted every step of the way but ended up settling down next to him, staring with a challenging expression in her grey eyes.

"You're the one who needs healing." She grumbled, looking away, keeping her expression neutral, shifting it quickly as he moved, sliding his arms around her, drawing her near, his fingers finding little more than scratches as he patted her in a search for the wounds that she usually kept quiet about.

"So?" He whispered against her ear, humming.

"I'm not doing this." Saki turned her back on him, moving as if to crawl away from the mat and covers. He pulled her close once more, back against front, nuzzling her neck.

"And? He grabbed both her wrists, pinning them against her chest, opening his hand over them. The simple fact that she hadn't shadowed already was telling.

"I'm not." Saki whispered, her voice lower and sweeter, unconsciously moving closer, fitting in.

"Because?" He settled back, parting a bit, satisfied when she sought him out, coming closer with a hum.
"I can't believe you made me do this." She whispered, her voice growing sleepy, curling against him, her hand moving under his, slipping away, covering it, closing her eyes, falling asleep quickly enough.

The slap to the back of his head as soon as he had taken off the helmet had no sting in it. It was more of a playful way to remind him he had been careless. Actually Kojuro's attempt to hide a quiet chuckle had stung quite a bit more. When a tiny uninjured ninja female scolded her hirer with sarcasm in her voice there was an audience to check her actions and call them cute.

Cute was not the word he would have used.

"You really should be a bit more careful Boss." She smiled, patting the scratch that seemed to be the only wound he received in the northern campaigns after dousing it with some kind of dust. "No one knows when a weapon might be poisoned. Even the tiniest scratch could prove fatal then... Dead Dragon is not good."

Scratches...

The house was big and there were too many hiding places. That was not the point of construction but anyone could find a hiding spot with a bit of imagination and trickery. He knew this, remembered a lot of them from his child exploits, the days of running wild, taking years of Kojuro's life... and pretty much any of them could easily hide a shinobi. Under the house alone was an entire different world. Above, under the roof, was as vast space that the agile could reach with ease. And there was no guarantee that she had remained in the area... Although if the servant's words about Saki's current state were true there was no way she could have gotten far.

So the One-Eyed Dragon chose to search the territory above his head. The wood creaked under his weight as he hoisted himself up, sneaking from his room, the wound now little more than aching remnants. There was little light in there as the day was at its end, the slight luminosity pouring from his entrance point alone. A few steps away from that darkness reigned, broken only by a few slits on the wooden planes. The sounds he heard as he moved came from the rooms under him. Conversations, creaks, pots, pans, weapons being tended, laughs... So he waited a moment for his eye to get used to the darkness before starting his search, trying to be silent.

In the darkness there was little to guide him so Date moved towards the edges, trying to methodically sweep the area. And there was a sudden gasp in the dark and a soft shuffle. Unless some servant child had found their way up there it could only be his quarry. The One-Eyed Dragon turned slowly, following the general direction of the sound, finding Saki curled over herself like a child on the dusty boards, a thin blanket under her, her eyes closed, shivering. Despite looking paler than usual there was a hint of red over her cheeks and her breath was coming out in short gasping bursts when it didn't stop completely as Saki curled tighter, tensing as if in pain. The light from bellow vanished suddenly and darkness fell once more.

Date moved closer, crouching, touching her cheek, waiting once more to get used to the lightless conditions, leaning softly, picking her up, placing her partially upright against his chest. Saki made no sound, her body moving like a doll's under his hands, head lolling back without strength. He cupped the back of her neck, drawing her closer, touching his forehead against her, grimacing as he felt the heat against his skin that could only mean fever. He moved a bit, looking down, parting one of the wooden boards. Apparently she had chosen a place over a cupboard. Food and water would be easily swiped from up there if whatever was gripping her ebbed away... He shook his head, bundling her up with the blanket, tossing her body over his shoulder.
There was barely a hint of protest as he stood. Saki was truly unconscious. He made his way back to his room, jumping down with his burden, taking a deep breath to ease his own aches, closing the ceiling with the help of a sheathed sword before placing Saki over the covers, checking her status once more under the light, slipping the loose black hair away from her face, tying it in a ponytail. Her eyes were still closed and all of her body spoke of pain, the skin both pale and reddened, brows damp with sweat. Almost as soon as his hands were away the shinobi curled once more with a silent groan, suddenly and sharply, a couple of tears sliding down her cheek, her shirt riding up, showing her legs and waist.

Date gritted his teeth together and stood, opening the shoji and signalled a servant, asking him for towels and water, his gaze going almost immediately back, waiting impatiently for the items he has asked, unwilling to allow anyone within the room. He moved her a bit besides him placing a cup against her mouth, tilting it until the water splashed her slightly parted lips, making her take a couple sips.

He allowed her to lie down once more, soaking the fabric, placing it on her forehead. There was a slight sigh of relief, even though she was still tense. The One-Eyed Dragon didn't know what to do about the pain, just that it was the result of poison... How could he soothe that?

There were a few memories that stayed within her through the thick haze that clouded her mind through pain, burning cold and freezing heath. Brief snippets of conscience, colour, shapes and movement that either made sense or were as lopsided as a dream.

Saki opened her eyes a bit, flinching when the light hit her, even as soft as it was seemingly too much to bear, closing them again with a pained sound, trying not to make any sudden movements, her mind and body trained to do what they should do when poisoned. A resistance was not built without suffering.

The pain was still coursing through her but was continuous and gentler, giving her a bit of a rest from the sharp stabbing waves, and she no longer felt cold or hot. Dawn was coming and her fever was giving her a moment of reprieve. There was something light covering her and something cool and wet on her forehead. Her hand went for it, touching the moist fabric, confused, dizzy.

There should be none of those... she opened her eyes suddenly, ignoring the sting and contrast, sitting, cringing, looking blindly around, the room a bit strange to her, the moist fabric falling near. Someone grabbed her, embracing her, whispering something, soothing to her before she could panic. She couldn't understand the words but she knew that voice and that scent. Her hand closed around the fabric that was pressed against her cheek, curling into him, asking silently for that comfort.

Her Dragon was there, making her eat and drink, taking care of her as she wept and begged when things grew worse... she wanted to go home but at the same time she was sure that she was there already. There was also a second Dragon whose voice was deeper and treated her a bit more like a child, talking to her, assuring her, usually holding her hands when the pain crashed.

Lucidity came at times, cutting sharply through the haze and confusion, when her fever slid down enough for her to feel only the pain. Saki remembered their names and their positions, why she should not be there. A couple of times she had tried to get away without even being able to leave the futon either because of the poison or because one of them was there to keep her still. If they had noticed the attempts, that it was not just the usual movements of a person in pain trying to find a way to ease the ache, they said nothing.

She just closed her eyes and remembered that it should not be like that, again and again.
They were not supposed to see her while she was weak.

Then it was finally gone. The poison was out of her body leaving only a slight soreness as the aftermath.

Saki woke up to the dying light with her head cleared and the sickness gone, sitting with a sigh, closing her eyes for a moment. There was a sound to her left and then she felt Date's hands against her cheek, caressing some of the wild strands of hair away as he moved closer. She opened her eyes, watching him lean over her, placing his forehead against hers, his blue eye closing.

The One-Eyed Dragon sighed and allowed a smile to touch his lips.

"How long has it been?" Saki asked without moving, closing her eyes too, surprised when her voice came out so small and ragged.

"Five days." He answered in a calm tone but his eye was darkening as he sat back. There was a scolding coming her way but something was containing the words. For the moment at least.

"Five… it…" It fit. She had been delaying that for so long that her body had taken a couple of extra time to completely balance itself. Saki moved slowly, checking under the cover, seeing if she had something on before standing. It was not her shirt, of that she was sure. He stood with her, waiting, watching for any sign that her legs might give in. "I will go now Boss…" She bowed slightly, feeling the blush creep over her cheeks.

Date slid one of his haori over her, the fabric reaching a bit below her knees, closing it around her frame, heavy around her shoulders, comforting and warm, pulling her closer suddenly, breaking her balance enough for her to sway towards him.

"You will go nowhere for the next weeks." He ordered. "Even if I have to chain you down to the floor."

"You're angry." Saki whispered, touching the embroidered edges of the haori, fingers closing around them. Date moved, gripping her face, making her look up at him. Her eyes tried to avoid his but a sharp shake forced her back.

"You were planning on going through that alone in the dark." He growled.

"It is our way." She took a deep breath, flinching when her chest stung.

"You thought we would not worry?"

"You should not. I am…" He silenced her suddenly, his lips warm against hers, a kiss that seemed to be holding back a fierce need to crush her against him, to reassure himself that she was no longer frail, his hands holding her arms with a steely unflinching grip. Worried. Not angry. Saki realized when they parted and he kept silent, forehead against hers, arms around her body. "I understand."

Bathing felt like a pressing need.

Unfortunately Date decided to extract some sort of twisted payback. There should already be some rumours regarding her disappearance. In a normal situation most would assume she was just out doing shinobi-things, working for Oshu, killing people in the night, poisoning enemies and whatnot. But Date had been looking for her, a maid had seen her sick, the One-Eyed Dragon and his Right Eye had been pretty much locked into the formers' quarters and requiring things that would only be of use if someone was nursing a fever and it was clear neither of them was sick. She
was sure the army would not keep quiet the fact that she and their Boss had started to sleep together, and that rumour would mutate soon into something more as people didn't realize they had been both too hurt and too tired to do more than kiss, and the fact that said Boss had her wrapped on his clothes and was currently carrying her towards the bathing room would not help a bit.

Saki had decided against making a fuss, trying not to attract attention but that did not save him from a sharp glare as he placed her on the floor, keeping his arm around her so tightly she had no choice but to be squashed against his chest, closing the fusuma with his free hand, before letting her go, slowly watching. She looked up for a moment, narrowing her eyes, stepping back cautiously.

So he did intend to watch, giving her the excuse that her legs might give in, that her conscience might fade and she would drown.

Fine.

If he wanted a show she would play along. The shinobi huffed and let go of the haori's edge, the embroidered dragons slithering down her skin in a wavy dance, turning slightly, unbinding her hair, using it to hide most of her, in a sleight of hand as she discarded the clothing he had clad her on. Then she looked over her shoulder, appraising his expression, appreciating the unhidden enjoyment in his eye.

The water was steaming hot, waiting as she washed her body, untangling the hair, pretending not to notice the decidedly wolfish glances thrown her way as water and suds slid down her skin, into the floor, draining away. Inky wet strands slid over her as she poured a last bucket of water over herself, wiping the blinding flow from her brow, sliding her hands over her neck, capturing the black wet mass, twisting it and pulling it upwards before standing, back turned to him, using one hand against the wall to steady herself.

"You're teasing." His voice rose warmly, laden with amusement.

"Payback Boss... You had your time to do it now it my turn." Saki moved into the furo, sliding in, sighing in appreciation when the hot liquid began to undo the myriad of knots left behind by the poisonous fever bout, climbing up her legs, her belly, her chest, the steam reaching her neck and cheeks. She closed her eyes for a long moment before sliding her arms out of the water, bracing them on the edges of the furo, rolling her shoulders, a slight frown touching her forehead.

Date moved, getting his sleeves out of the way, his hands sliding softly over her neck, caressing the column very slowly, leaning against her ear, rubbing her shoulders, digging his thumbs on her shoulder blades, dragging a moan of relief from her, her head tilting back against his chest, dampening the front of his shirt.

"Always tit for tat isn't it?" he murmured impishly, hands diving suddenly under the hot water, sliding over her skin, gripping her waist, moving up, cupping her breast. Saki gasped and arched, her eyes closing in shock and pleasure.

"Please stop. This has gone too far..." Even if she had pledged more than her shinobi skill to him he should not have cared for her like that, he should not be acting like a servant towards her. Still her arms refused to move and her body kept still, refusing to dislodge his questing hands.

"Not far enough." Date whispered against her ear, nipping the lobe sharply, pinning her against the wall of the furo from behind, the water sloshing around her, dipping his head to lick the slight trail of water droplets that slid down her neck.

"Masamune..." The One-Eyed Dragon's name came out faint, pleading. He smirked and stood,
letting her go, leaving Saki alone to finally relax. The shinobi sighed, closing her eyes, sliding deeper into the water, a smile of her own in place, as her eyes fluttered closed, finally able to get over the tension, settling into the water before thoughts of work intruded in her blissful haze.

Furo – 風呂 – Japanese bathtub;

Haori – 羽織 – Hip length kimono-like jacket, originally worn only by men, used often to add formality to an outfit;

Koneko – 子猫 – Kitten;
Chapter 15

It was so much worse than Saki had anticipated.

It was her first assessment as the middle of the day approached at an exceedingly slow pace.

It wasn't because of the reports she hadn't been able to read and the information that went unsorted.

It wasn't about dealing with refugees, army and the aftermath of a war.

Katakura-dono had received the intelligence meant for her as her instructions stated, admitting he hadn't tried hard to break their encryption most of them were penned in. They were mostly status messages, reassuring her that their presence, loyalty and contacts were, for the most part, intact. Some already brought the hints of how the other warlords were planning to rebuild and rise.

What worried her were all kind of rumours that grew like mushrooms under a damp rotting tree in the shadow of a waterfall.

From threads of loose information had been weaved the most insane tales…

So far she had caught stories of illicit affairs with Date, with Katakura-sama or, the preferred and most salacious one, both. Five days indulging… that was the village's favourite. The soldiers were divided between the story of a pregnancy and whispering terrified about a miscarriage, quick to set the record straight about who was her actual lover. The servants in the house knew she had been sick but added the affair with both men as an explanation for their bedside presence, turning the whole thing into some sort of romance with forbidden connotations. The reasons for her sickness were either attributed to an assassination attempt on her, on Date and she had taken the poisoned dagger for him or, as the army insisted, a miscarriage. They liked their drama and the entertainment of those pieces of gossip was proving too tempting to let pass.

Working to put all of those down was tiresome, morose and time consuming, needing painstakingly placed words and actions, talking to the right people... Some minor ones, like the kidnapping story, had already vanished. All agreed now that she was the Boss's lover. Katakura-sama had been at her sickbed at Date's order as he was older and more experienced. Missing was the why she had been sick but that would come to fruition a bit later.

What she could do was done and the only choice she had now was to let the planted gossip flow, the truth take its place and try to avoid a mass strangling of the people of Oshu and the never-ending succession of nuisances that were biting the bridge of her nose.

Katakura-dono was of some help as he was as concerned about those out of controls rumours as she was. They were currently sharing headaches. They were just lucky Takeshi had not appeared asking for her. Insanity would have broken loose.

Saki sighed glumly, piling the notes into the brazier, burning them. They were unimportant clutter.

"Saki." Date's voice rang out, the man standing in front of the opened shoji.

"Boss." She acknowledged him softly.

"Come. I need a sparring partner."

"Katakura-dono..." she folded another bunch of useless papers as she spoke and tossed them into
the flames, the liquid they had been coated with before any words had been traced onto their surface reacting to the flame eagerly, aiding in their transformation into ashes.

"Is away." He stated quietly, the tone not allowing her any leeway.

"Very well Date-sama." Saki sighed, standing slowly, following him into the inner garden.

The choice felt odd but she was in no mood to question it, watching as he drew one of his claws, placing it on her hand. It felt unusual as if the metal itself was charged with lightning. The length and weight was also quite strange to her as she balanced it. The soul of a warrior they said... It would be very unpractical for a shinobi despite the flexibility demanded of them when it came to weaponry. Usually to brandish one of those one would have to kill the rightful owner or the katana be the only available piece of weaponry in a room.

The One-Eyed Dragon moved behind her, nestling Saki in his arms, his hand sliding over hers, adjusting her grip slowly, before letting go, languorously, making sure she had no intention of abandoning the practice request, picking another of his katanas, slashing it through the air, balancing himself.

The blade danced forward suddenly, without warning or sound. Saki's eyes narrowed, the reflexes honed by years of training forcing her movements, sliding into a closely guarded position, deflecting and defending each of his thrusts, the extent of the weapon she was holding hindering her actions slightly, as she tried to adjust and found no quarter to do so. She spun, ducking under his blade, attacking from underneath, the metal connecting in an unavoidable parry, a spark flickering briefly, the force of his riposte enough to make her grip falter slightly, fingers instinctively tightening on the blue-wrapped hilt, backing away. It would do her no good to be locked in a test of stamina and strength.

The One-Eyed Dragon had given her no rules, no request, just pressing her into combat, the weapon, the place, the movements made to confuse and hinder a number of her skills. Saki was focusing, growing accustomed, effort making her breathe a bit harder, eyes changing and refocusing, turning him from sparring partner to adversary. So he had no time to play further. Date used the opening of a particularly aggressive strike, blades sliding together, dodged flawlessly as expected, the katana she held tilting her balance to the right, still slowing her own attack and recovery considerably, smashing into her, invading her space relentlessly, knowing any hesitation would allow Saki to understand and escape, picking her up by the waist effortlessly as she gasped, trying to recover the air that had been knocked out, tossing her body over his shoulder.

"Date-sama?" Saki grated out, hoarsely, still too breathless to produce more than a whisper, holding onto the katana, unmoving. Why hadn't she shadowed away? Her mind asked softly. "One-Eyed Dragon" Her voice came again, unsteady as he moved away, inside, closing the shoji behind him, the wood clattering harshly, stealing the blade from her hand. She liked the dance but... "Boss..." Saki whispered softly, going limp. She wanted to be captured and yet... "Masamune-dono?" Tossed onto the open futon, glancing down suddenly, surprised, seeing through his plot, berating herself for not catching on as soon as he said the Right Eye was gone. Saki looked up, towards the warrior, her heartbeat in disarray. "Masamune..."

He was smirking, undressing unhurriedly, unabashed, the fabric rustling towards the tatami, revealing his well toned body, hard muscles flexing and moving as his hands worked on the sarashi, katanas abandoned near him. Saki's lips parted, eyes following his shape, appreciating what was revealed, desire answering immediately. The Dragon knelt, moving sinuously towards her, like some predator, forcing her to make an effort to stay still, unflinching as his body loomed over hers, one hand capturing her head, pulling her towards him, pressing her against him fully, as
binding as shackles, bringing them down, completely lying on the futon, kissing her lips hotly, his mind focused on the claim.

Saki's hands ran down his chest in the little leeway he gave her, answering his need, enjoying the feel of his warm skin, the tense play of muscles underneath, sliding over his scars as lovingly as any other part, unbothered, aiding him in getting rid of her own clothing, their kiss growing heated his tongue playing with hers hungrily, hands on her breasts, waist, hips, moving slowly, with purpose. Her moans were short and sharp as his touch progressed, dragged out by surprise, silenced by her stubbornness and training, as if she didn't want him to know his actions had a very definite effect in her body.

The movement was swift and sudden, using his distraction, as his hands teased her thighs, to roll the One-Eyed Dragon onto his back, pinning him down, straddling his waist, glaring at his face playfully, hands skimming his chest, fingertips fist, lightly, them the palms flush over the hot smooth surface before leaving the Dragon's skin, dragging a groan out of him, reaching for the bind of her braid, her body bared to his gaze. Black hair fell loose around her, shaken free, the tips grazing his form, covering parts of her. Saki looked at the appreciative gaze that marked his features, feeling satisfaction bloom within her.

A caress swept her hands to his shoulders, arms bending slowly as she bowed over the One-Eyed Dragon's prone form, her heavy breaths teasing the skin as his hands inched agonizingly slow over her thighs, around her waist, his whole body bucking under hers, squirming to get rid of the last of his clothes, goading her into moving just a bit lower, feeling her twitch in response, looking up with dazed eyes as his movements made his shaft surge beneath her, slipping slowly against her damp sex, for one perfect moment so near to claiming.

Masamune kissed her tenderly as she playfully rubbed his flat nipples, before parting, slipping his hair away from his features as he caressed her back. That one blue eye was faking innocence for the briefest moment before his gaze shifted towards hungry and greedy, hands caressing, groping, guiding, goading.

Slowly she moved down, straddling him lower, taking him carefully into her, arching as he filled her, warmth and need flooding her senses, sharply as he stretched her, hard and hot, his hands anchored to her waist, allowing her time, even as his chest heaved with the effort to hold back, stay still under her.

Saki leaned a bit forward with a sigh, eyes closed, nipping her own lips to keep whatever sounds that wanted to escape mute, moving with deliberate long and slow strokes, rising and falling, riding him in a gentle motion provoking him, her, them into a frenzy of heat and need.

The One-Eyed Dragon growled, feeling her wet warmth around him, tightening every time he moved, abandoning herself and still refusing to let him hear her moans, her screams… Her hands roamed in slow touches over his chest, the pace increasing until she stopped suddenly, leaning forward, pressing her breasts against him, kissing his face, anywhere but the lips, butterfly touches lingering only for a moment, neck and chest.

His body arched, rigid as he clasped her tightly to him straining wordlessly upward within her. Saki whimpered, her hands sliding over his before settling on his taught stomach, moving with him, lips parting, mirroring his own pleasure, allowing just a sigh out as he drove her beyond the shattering point, his own control snapping, dragging her down against him, using her body hard until his own pleasure burned.

Saki moved slowly as he was still catching his breath, playing with her hair slowly, resting against him, flushed on his skin as if his chest was a comfortable futon she had no reason to leave.
"The preparations are underway for the celebration and, according to everyone, are running rather smoothly." Saki reported to Katakura-dono. His return had been as uneventful as the trip. Peace was returning and just a few rumours of bandits came from the nearest towns. Most likely starved war refugees, trying to live any way they could. One should also be on the lookout for renegades, deserters, remnants of the Oda forces. "We received a few request from the neighbouring lands."

"Unrest?" The Right Eye questioned further.

"Needs." Saki explained calmly, giving him a list of names and actions. The Right Eye read them before returning into the fire. "Those who though that Oshu was weak enough to be plucked have been dealt with." Just warnings so far, some subtle enough to be mistaken as accidents that would make it impossible for their plans to come to fruition, others a bit more dire and clearly stated as punishment. The shinobi looked around carefully. "Also I can report that all the rumours have been put to rest and will not reach farther than this bukeyashiki." Katakura-dono allowed a sigh of relief to leave his mouth, nodding gently.

"How have you been holding?"

"I'm not poisoned anymore and I'm perfectly able to do my job." Saki said a bit tersely.

"Have you been sleeping?"

"I…" There was a sudden pinkening on her cheeks carefully controlled after a brief moment. "When I have the opportunity, yes." The shinobi smiled slightly, glancing away. "About Oshu… there are some plans that need to be discussed to ensure the food supply…"

It was a festival for the people and the army, although she had no inkling of the reason why they had delayed it for more than a few days after arrival, but there was still a slight formality required of their attire seeing the province leaders would be there... and after issuing her challenges to keep the One-Eyed Dragon safe she should be seen near him and look as unthreatening as possible. Katakura-dono was enough of an obvious deterrent. The army would also be around even if divested of most of their weapons and armour. Years of training did not simply disappear just because one was in a relaxed environment wearing fancy clothes.

Saki examined the kimono thoughtfully. It might be slightly formal but it was what her age and station demanded of her and appropriate for the message of non-aggression. Also the kofurisode with dragons and flower patterns in Oshu colours her clan had provided was the only choice to her normal clothes. The second was an ofurisode with purple blooming flowers throughout the silk whose sleeves dragged on the ground unless her arms were folded against her chest. Too ceremonial for a simple celebration and rather impractical to move around in. Either way they were the only ones that were prepared to carry hidden weapons and trickery.

Saki sighed placing the garment and weaponry in front of her, prepared for equipping after a long bath, trying to loosen some sore muscles. Layers of silky fabric, layers of steel each with a specific placement, direction, knot, bow, over or under stratum… Tiresome but there was no need to call anyone else. The female version of an armour, some would joke. Also it would be bothersome to explain some of the marks peppering her skin when the damnable rumours had finally died. She chuckled at that, rubbing a knuckle against her cheeks, easing the growing warmth.

Carefully she knelt in front of a polished bronze mirror, staring at her own reflection for a moment before loosening the braid and combing the hair, pulling it back into a mage.
"Ojou-sama." Saki sighed, slipping the undecorated pins that would hold the hair in place before adding the rounded kushi and bira-bira kanzachi. One of her clan's ninja knelt behind her, solemnly without a hint of threat.

"I should not be addressed as such on the outside." She chastised softly, voice dropping to barely more than a murmur, slicking her hair back slowly. The mage was done.

"My apologies." The man whispered calmly. She glanced through the reflection. He was marking the official or urgent nature of the visit by addressing her by a title? It was Shiro this time. One of the Twins Masks, the nickname they used for the wearers. Shiro and Kuro masks, the clan Matriarchs' personal servants. "The Iga clan as whole allied with Tokugawa Ieyasu, sending Hattori Hanzo as their representative."

"Oni-Hanzo..." Saki whispered, stopping her movements for a moment before placing the first kushi, the mother-of-pearl dragon inlaid on the spine gleaming for a moment, making sure both the bun and the ornament were secured before continuing. Peace would not last forever but that was quite a bold move so soon after the fall of Oda. On the other hands Tokugawa was in quite a frail position so boldness would either favour him or break what was left of his faction and pride. It was not a time where a warlord could survive with timidity.

"Also Tokugawa and the Saica allied with Toyotomi Hideyoshi." Same with Saica... If Magoichi allied with those two men it was because she was seeing power and future. Her vow was to rebuild the Saica and bring back the strength Oda had tried to crush.

"He was a vassal of Oda if I am not mistaken..." A minor one, determined to defend what was his, a warrior whose beliefs placed him at odds with the Devil King despite the rumours that said he desired the same prize. The land, the people, the power.

"We see him as dangerous man." Shiro continued. "While he seems to be reeling from the war he is also gathering soldiers, resources, allies... His strength grows slowly but surely."

"Sounds troublesome." Saki murmured, placing the second twin kushi on the opposite side before examining the bira-bira. Sharpened tips, made of silver gilded steel, the thin rectangular silver ornaments twinkling softly, accompanying the movement. She began to place them, forming a fan to her left, tilting them so the ornaments could chime freely. There had been nothing about that in her reports. Had Hanzo already smothered her people in the region or were his servants good enough to keep every dealing hidden? Or was there someone else moving the strings? "How much is known?"

"Not nearly enough." Shiro answered as Saki stood, carefully, adjusting the minute details of her kimono, primping. "There is also this matter." He placed a few bound rolls of paper down. "They disregard our clan's traditions but nonetheless the Celestial Mistress demands that you examine them. And decide."

The Matriarch ordered the shinobi did.

Saki nodded patiently.

Shiro bowed once again and shadowed, leaving her alone. But she wouldn't be dragged into her clan politics at the moment.

However for the Celestial Mistress to delegate something that had been addressed to... Saki frowned for a moment, deciding to look, just have a general feel of what the demand was about. Not addressed to the Matriarch. To Takeshi? The shinobi shivered with a bit of foreboding. The
Celestial Mistress was delegating the decisions about such insult to the man's daughter so her anger wouldn't start anything... Still Saki took a deep breath and kept her curiosity locked.

The One-Eyed Dragon and the Right eye were also in semiformal kimonos, waiting for her at the bukeyashiki's entrance. There was slight silence of shock as they watched her small dainty steps. Every movement had to be controlled and careful both because of the kimono and the simple weight of the weapons concealed under the fabric. Saki said nothing despite catching the devious gleam in the Dragon's eye. Kimonos seemed to have that effect in men. Or he just wanted to unwrap her. She smiled, head tilted, silver trinkets chiming. Couldn't say it wasn't a mutual want.

There were lit lanterns in the twilight, leading to the plaza where laughter, music and the scent of food came from, attracting Oshu's people. Families, soldiers, elders... they had been drawn by more than the festivities. They wanted a chance to see the one that protected them, preserved their independences and their lives.

Saki poured the sake formally as Date looked bored. Even though he laughed with the men that stopped by, acquiesced in giving encouraging words to the children women dragged to him and heard the requests and praise of the minor lords.

"You are on display Boss. People want to see their Dragon." The shinobi chuckled when he did just a groan, touching the swords impatiently. She was not going to tell him to smile but it was amusing enough imply it.

"It's troublesome. And I'm sick of the grovelling." Date spat out, glancing at some of the province rulers that had done such displays of humility and now tried to flatter each other, trying to garner favour and forge minor alliances. "I would bet you some of them would like nothing more than see me fall." Then scavenge the carcasse of Oshu for their own selfishness and greed.

"Such is their nature." She agreed evenly.

"You seem troubled." He picked on her tone quickly, glancing over his shoulder, eye narrowed.

"Just restless." Saki reassured him with a slight nod. "Yoshiaki Mogami." She said, noticing the tall, thin and oddly moustached dandy's approach. Unguarded, uncaring, slightly challenging. Date's posture grew colder, more distant, watching the man. Bitter history. Mostly would be easily ignored if it pertained only to warring matters. The family link however was harder to overlook. Not that it was wildly spread or know. They barely acknowledged it.

"Masamune-kun." He announced flamboyantly without any of the overly humble attitudes of the other. Disdain and dismissal one could say.

"«Gentleman»" The Dragon spat out, almost growling.

"Well, well it seems congratulations are in order Masamune-kun." He stated disdainfully after a snide sniff. "Such a reckless campaign that luck granted success when the world would be opposed and seek to eliminate to one such as you..."

The bira-bira twinkled softly, sunk into the wooden support behind Yoshiaki's head, chiming gently, having come close to ruining the moustaches' symmetry. Saki lowered her hand gracefully, appreciating the shocked look of the older man. Date chuckled, downsing the sake.

"Even though that is not the way of the Date I exist to protect him and will not hesitate if a threat is present." She bowed softly. "Yoshiaki-sama must forgive my actions but your words and deeds in
the past could be considered quite threatening and harmful." And she was reminding him that no one had forgotten his unskilled assassins earlier in the year.

Breeding mare.

Saki curled her lips in disdain.

So that was why the letters had been given to her. Someone named Akio demanded her for a wife as her increase in reputation after the defeat of Oda made her an attractive choice. Skill, experience, clan, status... And the way the letters were addressed and to whom made the whole incident quite insulting for the clan and the Matriarch. And for her also. And she had a very clear suspicion her father hadn't come anywhere near the paper.

Traded like livestock… Especially vexing when he gave no clan name of his own. It was one thing to keep the clan name hidden when working for a warlord or another. But in dealings with other shinobi one should always tell unless ordered not too or unsure of what the other ninja's standing was.

So her choice was to simply ignore and inform the Matriarch to do the same. For the sake of his survival.

Also Oshu had not dismissed her.

---

**Furisode** – 振袖 – A style of kimono distinguishable by its long sleeves, which range in length from 85 centimetres for a kofurisode (小振袖) to 114 centimetres for an ofurisode (大振袖). Furisode are the most formal style of kimono worn by unmarried women in Japan although its formality is also connected to the colour, pattern and sleeve length;

**Kanzashi** – 簪 – Hair ornaments used in traditional Japanese hairstyles. *Kushi* (櫛): rounded or rectangular combs made of tortoise shell or lacquered wood that are often inlaid with mother of pearl or gilding and placed into a *mage*; **Bira-bira** (ちらちら): Fluttering or Dangling style, these are composed of metal strips attached by rings to the body of the ornament so that they move independently, tinkling;

**Mage** – 髪 – Bun-style hairdo, chignon;

**Ojou** – お嬢 – Formal Japanese word for "young lady", the term Ojou (often Ojou-san or Ojou-sama, as they are the more formal honorific) is typically used when referring to wealthy, high-class females;
"I do not need a wife." Date growled as the suggestion was displayed and the letter from the warlord presented.

"At least meet the woman." Saki encouraged. It asked for a formal meeting and was clearly just a ploy to enhance the status and power of the father-warlord. "So you don't risk relationships and alliances with neighbouring lands. Tact my Dragon." His reputation and Oda campaign raised him to almost legendary status. And with that vultures turned their attention to the One-Eyed Dragon. A threat, an ally, a tool.

"Saki is correct. We knew your success would attract all kinds of alliance attempts." Katakura-dono reasoned calmly, rereading the words after Date tossed the paper away, dismissing it.

"I do prefer such pleas to outright assassination attempts or underhanded dealings. Just accept the request." Saki encouraged.

"Do as you wish." The One-Eyed Dragon said, leaving the room with a tired gesture.

"This is wrong." Katakura-dono said after a moment, looking outside, towards the garden.

"It has parental greed spread over the request like cobwebs, as it not?" Saki agreed. "But there are ways to prevent any harm from occurring. So we should prepare for the guest."

Katakura-dono nodded resolutely, picking up the writing materials, ready to prepare a response in their Boss's behalf.

The woman in question arrived with a small army of attendants, twenty soldiers and being gracefully carried on a palanquin, wearing the most formal furisode possible with all the symbols and ornaments one could think about placed on her person. A display of status, full of undertones and suggestions. Saki's neck hurt just thinking how much that hairstyle would weight. Some of the Oshu's servants fidgeted nervously, watching the size of the entourage they would have to care of. There were a few grumbles from the soldiers, examining the forces and weapons of the Ojou's guards. It was a bit more followers than they had been informed but, despite the fact they had to shelter them, it made it easier if the woman had her own people with her. Less chance of any kind of accusations and drama.

The shinobi and Katakura-dono were the ones waiting to greet the Ojou and take her to the meeting room where the One-Eyed Dragon would welcome her.

Said Dragon was not happy about the arrangements but would bear with it for the sake of his land. He was visibly happier after being told that in Katakura-dono's opinion a wife should only be chosen after he conquered and ruled the land. A wrong choice at that time could have dire consequences for the future he dreamed. Saki said nothing. Her opinion about the matter was that the requests and parading brides would not be stopped just because the warlord said no. It would just get underhanded.

The army wasn't exactly happy either. Saki had given up on explaining a bunch of idealistic men what was happening and settled with the for Oshu explanation. There would be mining for gossip on the Ojou's side. The trick was to tell little or misdirect.

All in all Oshu was prepared for the uproar. The four main retainers were with them as were the
senior servants. Everybody had their orders. And everybody was forbidden from even mentioning anything regarding her. Threats had been made.

Saki reviewed her knowledge as the Ojou stopped and was helped out of the palanquin, looking around with an appraising eye.

Kira Kamiko, daughter of a minor branch family of the Ashikaga clan, the rulers of the bordering Shimotsuke province. Unimportant so they were trying to pawn the daughter to ascend higher and the Dragon was the closest and most influential target they could reach in the least amount of time. Maybe he would not be too demanding about lineages, maybe she could capture his attention.

All in all her entrance was that of a traditional demure lady, listening with an elegantly put together expression as Katakura-dono introduced himself and Saki, guiding her into the meeting room.

Kamiko was followed closely by a pair of attendants who composed her outfit when she knelt, waiting.

Saki took her place near the platform where Date would sit, waiting, staying silent, feeling the woman's eyes on her. Not as innocent and sedate as all the clothes and hairstyle tried to convey it seemed. That was a samurai's child ready to enter a cutthroat world. What she saw was an armed shinobi and one that did not hide. But she also saw another female in a very preeminent position that could be a menace to whatever plans she harboured. Especially if her plans had any harmful effects for her hirers.

All respect and elegance when she took her bow when Date entered the room, Katakura-dono kneeling on the opposite side of Saki, perfectly composed while the One-eyed Dragon made no effort to soften the scowl, starting the meeting formally with a couple words.

The attendant reached with slightly trembling hands to once again perfect the image of their Ojou. A minor thing, just a rustle of fabric so the sleeves pooled gracefully around her white hands. She hid it well but the disdainful and disgusted look was present, quick and telling. As was the bright look in her eyes while staring at Date, repeating the words of greeting flawlessly.

So her interest might not be all derived from simple greed and duty to her family. He was a handsome man after all.

Tradition and formality made it easy enough to track the woman's movements. And some things were obvious from the start, about her, about the motives that made her the one that was chosen for the task and what she actually desired from the connection. While she acted sweet and demure around Date, flirting and making elegantly worded advances she was icy at best with Katakura-dono or anyone carrying the insignias of the army. Even her own men. If it was a warrior other than Date addressing her there was a layer of spite in her voice. She demanded her guards to be without weapons in her presence. How could they defend her then? While it was true that while inside the household Date had removed the arms and armour, as his own men were enough and guest should not be worried about defending themselves, it was a bit jarring when the situation formally demanded an armed escort.

Saki had caught rumours through the woman's servants that she planned to dismiss the Right Eye when she became the Clan's leader wife, whispering about his poisoning of Date's mind, making him think about nothing more than war and conquest. Kamiko did not care for any kind of campaigning either and wanted nothing more than to gain power for herself. She wanted the Dragon.
In those troubled times it would be unthinkable to lose any kind of warring asset.

After a few hours of careful guidance and helpful smiles and reassurance she no longer saw Saki as a threat but as source of information. She acted like a magnanimous lady towards her. Saki made her best to act very deferent and non-threatening, answering in the most polite form she could while pulling the threads, trying to see beyond the words, the gestures and the personality she currently projected. In Kamiko's mind if the shinobi's service was for Oshu that meant she had to fully obey the future lady of the household. There was no chance that she was after the One-Eyed Dragon because the ninja already had a husband. Even if it was that "horrid general". She took a bit too much delight in forcing Saki to beg, to keep her from deciding to make Date banish Katakura-dono from Oshu.

Katakura-dono saw the woman's plans as further proof that she would be a bad choice. There was no worry for his position. The Right Eye had made his oath to Date Masamune and there would be nothing in the world that would keep him from fulfilling his vows. He touched the tender green leaves of one of his prized plants, leaning over it for further appraisal.

Saki was looking at the bukeyashiki, the lands and fields around it, letting the Right Eye think about her report. Ever since the Ojou arrived they met at his personal garden, pretending to be having an intimate interlude as a couple, keeping the lady's mind unbothered. She quickly showed little tolerance for gossiping even though her maids were just asking Oshu's servants for another set of linens as the Ojou-sama was rather sensitive. The shinobi had witnessed the punishment, hidden in the shadows.

The handmaidens hated and feared Kamiko bitterly. So Saki garnered a bit of goodwill amongst them by offering a simple salve to soothe the bruises. The house servants of Oshu helped a bit further and the men were gaining the hearts of the soldiers.

"Anything else you can tell me?" Katakura-dono asked as he began weeding.

"Of course my darling husband." Saki smiled. Katakura-dono kept a straight face for a few moments longer, pulling weeds, before smiling too, slightly. While it was a ploy though out to make Saki seem less of a threat and keep her closer without further suspicion it was also being done to the entertainment of the three involved. The soldiers were less amused but again the for Oshu worked its wonders. "That she was harsh on her servants, we knew. Suzuna came into my room yesterday, before dinner. She was worried, distraught. Kamiko hit Shiho and she did it in way that would not be seen." The word of an Ojou against a simple servant. Suzuna simply did what she had been asked to do and now they had a little more against the woman.

"We know the ilk of those who serve in the house." Katakura-dono stated simply. Whatever had made her attack had most likely not been the girl's fault

"Shiho was in tears," Saki had helped the head of the house servants console the girl, brewing her a tea to ease any pain and to help her rest. "Suzuna said she was also pestering her charges with questions." Old news also but the questions were growing bolder and more invasive. No longer the curiosity of a guest towards their hosts but a shameless prying into Oshu's daily businesses. Katakura-dono caught the slight change in inflection, understanding what was beneath it.

"Where is she now?" He asked, standing, clapping dirt away from his hands, joining her on the lookout, shielding his eyes from the sun, scanning the area.

"Horse ride... She wanted to see the mountains. Four of her soldiers, six of ours." Saki answered promptly, glancing at the shadows. Shouldn't take much longer till they returned.
"Trap?"

"If anyone was planning to murder Date I would know. And there would no longer be any need to inform you." Her claws twitched subtly. "No. She is just eager to some alone time where Katakura-sama does not whisper counsels and I'm not examining her like any good shinobi should."

"Where are you sleeping?" The Right Eye asked suddenly.

Ski frowned, a bit surprised.

"My room. We agreed…"

"Go back to Masamune-sama's room."

Saki paused, staring at the man for a long while, nipping her lower lip. While she liked to sleep alone she also missed the way her Dragon curled around her… but that was not the point. Katakura-sama was worried about what a woman could do by sneaking into man's room in the night.

"You think she is that desperate to cement an alliance?" The kunoichi asked calmly, thinking the possibilities over, projecting scenario, solutions and outcomes.

"To take the Dragon." He had also noticed that Masamune seemed to be the only thing she wanted more than the prestige and power of the union. As the days passed her advances lost subtlety. "I do not think this Ojou cares that much about alliances." He rubbed his forehead, slipping fingers under the fabric that kept the sweat of the day's work from dripping into his eyes. "Are there techniques the shinobi know about…" He hesitated, ever bashful. Well… maybe only when it came to her and Masamune. That never kept him from asking or saying what he felt was needed.

Saki coughed, covering a chuckle. Yes there were techniques for a number of effects that were exclusive to the kunoichi. And some were a bit too weird for the mind of men. Most of them could be used to harm and kill the partner during the act.

"Yes. But I do not believe a Samurai clan Ojou would be able to use any of them. It takes a very high degree of control over one's body. But the old fashioned method is enough to force an alliance. With or without child…" Duty, honour, shame, the need to restore status and appearances…

Katakura-sama nodded calmly. Saki lowered her head gently.

"We need to make her leave in a way that does not create an enemy of her branch clan nor the Ashikaga but keeps them permanently from trying these tricks." Katakura-dono summarized, glancing at the horizon.

"I do have an idea…" Saki murmured in a thoughtful tone. "Darling husband." She poked fun, trying to ease his mood.

"Date-sama. Ojou-sama." Saki bowed as they walked into the house, surprised they had actually arrived on time. Date liked to ride and sometimes forgot or ignored lesser duties when out on a horse. Maybe the company had proven to be an annoyance greater than the horse ride could deal with. "Katakura-sama asks an audience of you Date-sama." The One-Eyed Dragon nodded, ignoring Kamiko, walking away.

Saki sighed, straightening, seizing the opportunity after a quick appraisal.
"Do not fret Ojou-sama. They are just going to the Red Light district and most likely return drunk."
The shinobi shook her head, smiling softly, demure as a doormat.

"Drunk?" Kamiko scoffed but there was the expected calculating look in her eyes. "Men and their vices…"

"Indeed Ojou-sama… Now… forgive me you must be tired and needing a bath after the ride. Excuse me." The shinobi simply shadowed and moved onto the room where Katakura-dono informed the One-Eyed Dragon of their plot.

It didn't take long after Date and Katakura-dono's departure. Just a bit after sundown Saki heard the noises in the inner sanctum of the house, where the rooms were located. She looked up from another wedding request, this time addressed directly to her, slightly bothered by the persistence of someone the Matriarch had already harshly turned down.

The woman was skulking through the halls, thinking herself stealthy while the fabric rustled, the jewels she adorned herself with clattered and the scent of the lotions and perfumes covering her skin drifted through the air. The floorboards creaked too, accusing each heavy, tense step.

Saki folded the missive, sighing, waiting for the right moment, standing, opening the shoji, catching her before she had time to reach towards the frame. The brown eyes widened in surprise and then suspicion. The shinobi bowed slightly.

"Ojou-sama." She acknowledged softly. "Did you require something?"

"Indeed." She composed herself quickly, taking a deep breath. Kamiko looked around once more. "I do believe your servants were of no use in informing me. They said this was Masamune-kun's room."

"No… This is the room I share with my husband… Date-sama's room is there… But I do advise some caution Ojou-sama. I fear what would come of such a curiosity, especially on these nights…"

"Do not trouble yourself." Kamiko smiled softly, glancing on the direction given, frowning, mumbling about unreliable untrustworthy servants.

The night was advancing, uneventful when Saki felt the smooth, caress of his lips over the nape of her neck, a slightly sleepy and tipsy Dragon nuzzling her while his arms went around her waist, peeking at the words that had been confined in the paper, eyes narrowing as he tried to make something of it. Encoded he realized, giving up, returning to her skin, a gentle nip over her earlobe, demanding attention. She smiled slightly, making just a small sound of pleasure, letting go of the papers.

"I missed you." Date whispered against her ear. His tone was kept low and playful, eyes darting towards his own room.

"You should still be out…" Saki chastised.

"Like I would miss this." He chuckled coldly, the anticipation of the hunt running through his head.

"My Dragon… even though this is not a good match you'll eventually have to marry…" The shinobi was keeping true to her role, even if it meant saying something that neither particularly wanted to consider.
"We'll see. Now... How long do you want to bet it will take for her to scream?"

Not very long apparently. It was a shrill sound in the night, echoing through the garden, attracting servants, guards and the pair that was waiting for the situation to unfold. From then, from the moment where the sound ended, they reached the engawa and the hushed sounds of gossip started, the plan was completed.

Kamiko left disheartened but keeping the same luxurious and haughty veneer that had brought her to their doors. Her mission had ended in disappointment and humiliation, marked by events that left her looking as the unworthy one in the Clan's Head eye.

It had little weight the fact that she had left her own room and guards, entered the domain of a married man and seduced him. It was not the fact that he had done just enough to trick her, to make her believe her devices were working.

It was however the fact that she had been discovered and compromised without a shred of proof that could validate her actions or possible defence in said situation... Found by the man she was should be capturing in the arms of the man that should have been eliminated from the One-Eyed Dragon's side. Most likely she had also upset a whole shinobi clan as Saki had also been there, staring coldly before slipping away, a small choked sound coming from her. It was not lightly one of her kind entered any kind of relationship with a samurai.

There was little to nothing that could be done to salvage her reputation. Kamiko now only hoped that the Dragon's word held true though. As long as she brought no ill will to Oshu that incident would be kept secret, allowing her and her clan to have a future and choices.
Chapter 17

"This is getting ridiculous." Saki said coldly to the duo of simply clad shinobi kneeling in front of her, having delivered a written and a verbal demand. "I have refused. My clan's Matriarch has refused. My father was barely contained after he learned of this." And holy heavens was that a fight… Mother had actually resorted to broken bones and poison. "The Sarutobi's were not pleased either." Although that might be because they were hoping she could drag one of their men into her clan to strengthen alliances and bloodlines. She was, after all, a successful result of such a match. "I have ignored this for almost two years now." Still the requests hadn't diminished and had returned once again to demands that bordered on a coercive threat. All burned with a sneer and in secret.

For the first year after the end of the war the main concern of Katakura-dono and Saki had been the remnants of Oda's forces and a possible suicidal attack by them, made in an attempt to eliminate all that had contributed for the Devil King's downfall. As nothing had stirred that concern had been put aside and the focus had moved towards Oshu and the One-Eyed Dragon's desire to rule the Land of the Rising Sun.

Even though there was a fragile peace reigning it was no reason to be lax on ones training. Prepare for war in times of peace although you should not actively search for it. They would launch the campaign only when ready. It was a wisdom Oshu's leader had learned well. The army trained, the horses were taught and carefully bred and Katakura-dono pushed Date's limits. Saki paired with either of them for combat training in the spare time, when Kojuro was in the fields or Date visited the lands, his subjects and holdings. Though she and Date rarely lasted long… it got heated and it tended to end in the same way, intimate, hard and fast.

Rumours had been planted and had successfully dealt with engagement issue. For one of them at least.

It was said that the One-Eyed Dragon would not accept any wife until he ruled. It would be a betrayal of the heavens and his honour to be any less when he decided that the Date Clan needed to be continued. He would either succeed or allow his line to fall into oblivion.

Some hopefuls still sent requests from time to time, rejected on accounts of honour and duty. One's word should be maintained after all. And that belief also kept the Kira clan quiet.

Her own problem seemed to be an idiot with enough skill to keep in the shadows, one that was somehow amassing power, most likely by allying or being part of the Iga, and had no head to understand her clan had its own rules within the shinobi. All of them were different anyway and it would be polite to learn how much before approaching. As mercenary as they were there was such a thing as professionalism and common curtsey.

"Akio-sama is undaunted. You are the best choice." One of the men said. She had no recollection of his face. But then again who could remember them all when something as trivial as a face was so easily changeable? Still she felt no jutsus in place.

"You do realize that being a shinobi I could easily make myself unable to have children. That would defeat his purpose quite nicely. Or just eliminate the whole issue." Anyone marrying her, coming into her clan would have no formal power only their skills, he would be judged on what he could accomplish and, of course, on the children he would father. Picky didn't even begin to describe how shinobi went about the whole baby-making issue.
"You have been unable to track Akio-sama so far." The second man said smugly, implying that it was not an unexpected failing in her skills. She was known now for combat, much like Fuma. When one skill built a reputation others would forget that a ninja was not hired because of a single capacity. One that followed their path should know a vast array of skills. So the implication of incompetence along with everything else was making her fell irritated and hostile.

"I have had no interest in finding the man. It would be wise to keep my mood that way." She said in a low tone, calm and quiet. They seemed to have understood, vanishing from sight. Saki allowed a slow sigh to come out of her lips, pressing one hand against her forehead before steadily burning each scrap of paper.

The low rumble awoke her. Saki sat up, feeling the One-Eyed Dragon's arms slid down around her, settling around the waist, sleepily. The sounds of the animals echoed on the cold gray air. Namazu was thrashing... Earthquake... her mind gripped the idea immediately as the Dragon stirred, awakened by the sound as the ground began to shake. His eye focused almost immediately, her lover gone for the leader, the orders clear. Saki stood and moved out as the ground under them shivered violently, the ruthlessness of nature threatening to break the world.

The aftermath was made of landslides, floods and destroyed fields, some fires that were swiftly put out and watched carefully for any signs of resurgence... all of it was a serious setback on the campaign plans.

Bury the dead, rebuild and fix buildings, feed the people. Forget the war and conquer for now, just take care of what you already possess.

As soon as the situation was settled, almost a year dealing with the aftermath, and making plans to the future once again, Saki ventured outside of Oshu to ascertain the loyalty of her contacts and personally appraise their needs, to see if any had died, needed to be replaced or had been compromised. Saki did what she had to do, eliminating threats, keeping a watchful eye for spies and infiltrators and monitoring their own men. Hearts and loyalties could change over time, poisoned by others. She noted changes and decided if she should act.

Things were growing tense once again.

Toyotomi was increasing his power faster than in the previous years, the Saica and the Tokugawa clan had regained most of their influence, their loyalty steady, the Iga firmly placed in their side. Whispers said Toyotomi Hideyoshi's army started to rival Oda's in size. The nation of Xavim had rose up once again. Nothing seemed to change in the balance of the Seto sea although wild rumours of strange weapons always floated around the Demon pirate. The War God and the Tiger of Kai still skirmished with no clear victor. Sasuke and her took the cub and the Dragon for play-dates occasionally... they ended up dragging two bruised men home and soothing their prides while hiding the smiles. Keiji sent messages from time to time, most of them just cheeky reminders and playful invitations. He still wandered about, living his life as he pleased. Although some of them seemed to have a particular tang to them, an undercurrent of sadness she could only attribute to the death of someone close to his heart.

"Enough." Saki's voice was raised in anger sharply, a tone much darker than Date had ever heard her use. He stopped in the corridor, alerted, curious and turned towards the workroom, listening. "If your harebrained, idiotic bastard of a boss thinks he can play with me he didn't do his research very well. I will not be his bride." The Dragon's eye narrowed at that, opening the fusuma slowly and
silently, examining the scene. A man groaned, choking, the other shouted in fear, eyes wide, both dressed in dark colours, most likely ninja's from other clan or employer. "I will be his killer."

Shadows connected her to them, clearly visible. One was steady and simple, the pinning technique, the man caught in it, unmoving, barely able to talk, staring at the one that was fallen on the tatami. The shadow that captured that one was thicker, blacker and moving. The ninja wasn't even twitching and could already be dead if it wasn't for the strained sounds he was making, as if trying to breathe. She was killing him with some sort of jutsu, head tilted down, one hand against her chin, watching, calculating.

"Saki." Date called carefully, in a low voice, closing the screen, just so she knew he was not one of them trying to sneak attack her while the shadow games left her vulnerable.

"In a moment Boss." Saki acknowledged him. "This is shinobi business and I ask you to not interfere." Every sound of struggle vanished, the life snuffed out. The shadow withdrew and vanished harmlessly. "Take him as a warning and inform your Lord I will be coming for him soon enough." She broke the other shadow. Cowered and frightened the remaining shinobi obeyed, vanishing from sight. Too young to actually have seen much combat Saki appraised, sighing, stretching for a moment, seeing how she felt after that effort. Drained, tired. She a had a bit of time. Maybe a nap would do her good although that lack of stamina might be a bit worrying… Could be because she had been practicing that morning, playing with her katas and jutsus. Also fully paralyzing someone from muscles to organs took a bit of skill, resilience and concentration. Keeping him paralyzed until the trick was lethal was also a bit demanding.

"Bride?" Date Masamune asked carefully, trying to sort his mind. Curiosity mostly but there was also a slight bitter feel of jealousy. He shook it away.

"I have refused and I have warned him. Now I have to hunt." She smiled for him and kissed his forehead, tiptoeing to reach, easing his frown. "My Dragon…" Saki whispered playfully, catching the mood, making him chuckle as his arms went around her frame, pulling her down, looking around.

Work was placed neatly around the writing implements. Kojuro should be arriving soon.

"I suppose that's to be expected. People are driven to preserve their bloodlines." He said thoughtfully, looking outside towards the clear sky. Saki curled against him, showing some signs he recognized as sleepiness. It was hard to tell but after those years together he was catching on some of her tells.

"Yes and when I walk away from Oshu I am expected to search for a man as surely as you must find a wife." Relaxed she closed her eyes, using him as a pillow, comfortable enough to show a small yawn. "But it is extremely rude for all shinobi clans to approach a ninja while they are within a contract."

"You are mine." Masamune said softly, almost to himself.

"For as long as you desire me." She mumbled drowsily, a butterfly caress over his thigh before falling deeply asleep. Date shifted a bit, slipping out the kunai that was poking his thigh, placing it nearby with a small smile, freeing her hair so he could caress it.

Clever, clever renegade… Saki though as the information reached her or she dug it out of his frightened genins. It was becoming more of a methodical elimination of all the spies in her area. Some she knew and could deal. Other she caught and sent back to their hirers, mostly unharmed.
Others she would need a special order to deal with. Amusingly enough it seemed he was not being able to track down her own contacts. Saki was unsure if it was a ploy or genuine but so far it suited her purposes.

A nuke-nin from the Koga, allied with the Ida, nestling under Oni-Hanzo as a pupil, leading his own forces for someone named Takenaka Hanbei, the main general and strategist to the Toyotomi rising faction…

So he would be a bit of tricky boy to eliminate.

Fine.

Challenge me.

Come play with the Dragons, Akio. That was the dare she left along with the Celestial Mistresses' seal in his room, hidden within the fortress of the Toyotomi, Osaka-jo.

"My Dragon… their armies are on the move." Saki said, slipping out of her shadows, bowing softly, smiling calmly.

Date smirked as she spoke, standing, a hand touching the swords.

Katakura-dono nodded solemnly in acceptance.

"Then so are we. «Have a party»" He shouted, amused, rallying Oshu's forces.

Note – It has been 5 years since the Oda war. Historical accuracy? This is Basara. You get very little of it. Sacrifices are made for awesomeness.
Late… damn it, I'm late… Saki thought while slashing the seemingly never ending number of shinobi that were chasing her, the corpses heaping in one location before she had a chance to shadow jump away from them, only to be met with more numbers, resuming the killing easily, the shadows of the trees providing easy-to-pin targets. She could hear the sounds of a battle that was not hers.

If they had started Yukimura would surely have already reached the place where Date was waiting for the moment to swoop which meant… an explosion echoed in the air, distracting her opponents, a chance she took to slit more throats and move on. It had started on both fronts and she was late. Saki thought in annoyance glancing back, checking her body count once more finding something else, throwing a greeting that way with sarcasm and contempt. Although Akio was not a bad looking man, average height, slight built, dark hair and tanned skin, she simply thought he would look so much better deathly pale, stained red and buried.

Akio had not joined his minions in combat, watching from one of the trees away, as she killed everyone as if their training was worth nothing. Some managed a few blows but she refused to give in, surrender or falter. As they were forbidden to kill or maim her it added an extra disadvantage to the mission but they should know how to deal with it. They were shinobi, they should be capable.

He had learned at least one thing about that woman… she was merciless in combat. He had the scars to prove it. Those silver weapons had almost ripped his heart out when he had first confronted her, after receiving the dare. He had wanted to scare her, to subdue the little challenging bitch. Only an undignified and hasty retreat had saved him after a short scuffle where she had thorough beat him, almost choking the life out of him with those shadows.

Saki hadn't even bothered to give chase. Still it was that kind of strength he wished. She just had to be broken.

"Katakura-dono!" She shouted, reaching the battlefield, catching sight of Date and the Tiger's cub engaged in combat, Katakura-dono giving the signal for the charge. "Wait! Don't…" Unheard under the stomping of the hooves. Late… Saki groaned and shadowed, jumping onto Katakura-dono's horse, making him stop. "Sneak attack. An army is surrounding this battlefield, coming from northwest." She finally allowed a long sigh out, trying to catch her breath. Message delivered. She needed a bit of a breather while Katakura-sama figured out what had to be done.

Date heard those words too, the three swords he had raised to deliver Yukimura's final blow stilling, looking over his shoulder. The Right Eye stopped the charge almost immediately with a few gestures, looking around as the sky darkened. Said army was assuming its positions, the ranks closed, the spears poised so any charge would cost more than any army was willing to sacrifice. A pair of men stood on the hilltop, looking down at the field. A thin white haired man, his expression of absolute smug confidence. The other was gigantic, looking larger than life, his face filled with an emptiness that bordered nature's mercilessness.

"Let it be known to all generals and all soldiers gathered here at Kawanakajima!" The white haired man, Takenaka Hanbei if she was not mistaken, voiced the demands of his faction clearly and carefully, making sure to reach down to the river. "We, the Toyotomi army, have completely surrounded this battlefield! Surrender to Toyotomi. We promise you that upon surrender you will be dealt with fairly and your livelihood will not be threatened."
Katakura-dono's eyes narrowed as he glanced around.

No one seemed to be heeding those words.

In fact the Tiger of Kai and Echigo's War God were moving their armies into a new position, ready to face the newcomer, combining their might with the ease of old friends, agreeing to postpone their combat.

Arrows flew.

Hideyoshi moved forth, unflinchingly, focusing, moving when the moment was right, his strength stirring the winds, returning the volley with little more than will and fists.

Screams of fear and death filled the valley beneath them, horses neighed in panic.

Kojuro stared at the sharp tip of an arrow that had been coming towards his head, maybe two palms away from contact, the shaft gripped by Saki's claws. She snapped it in half, letting the now harmless projectile fall, her eyes narrowed, looking around. He did the same, looking once again for some flaw he could exploit.

"Six men. Two horses." She whispered calmly. Toyotomi had purposely aimed for the ones that attacked. Their fallen were near the head of the charge.

Not content with the first display Hideyoshi rose his fist to the heavens, forcing the clouds to part, light pouring over him and his general while he straightened further, red eyes glaring down at all who stood beneath him, booming voice filling the air, trying to sap out the wills of the armies below.

"My name is Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Bow before me and become one under my control!" So it was true, Saki though back on her information. "To bring prosperity to this country as valiant soldiers." Not to the degree of Oda's desire for conquest but nonetheless he wanted to forge a world like one would create a sword. Only for the strong, only for one purpose.

"That's quite an entrance for a newcomer." Date scoffed, stepping up in challenge, the built up energy manifesting, lightning slipping from the blades even though they were sheathed. "But there is something not cool about you." He saw it too. A cold desire for conquest without the passion that fuelled warlords like him.

"Date Masamune-kun. I expected as much." Hanbei said dismissively, looking around, surveying his troops, looking for any sign of breaking ranks, hesitation or sloppiness.

"Oh he sure did a number on you." Sarutobi said, appearing with a couple of his shinobi near the fallen Yukimura. Saki glanced at him, nodding in greeting. He nodded back before scratching his chin, checking the situation on that plateau. "Now... how to fight our way out of this... Katakura-danna?" Kai's shinobi looked up when Katakura-dono's horse approached, the strategist showing a clear intent in his gestures, looking slightly down.

"Sarutobi." The Right Eye said carefully, mindful of prying ears. "I need you to run a message."

"Obey me. Those who do not will not be shown mercy." Toyotomi was demanding once again, shaping his voice into an ultimatum. It was not a least bit appealing for the men whose battle had been interrupted. Sasuke was fast to move away, catching Kasuga, giving her the words needed to break out of the trap. Saki lowered her head against Katakura-dono's shoulder as he whispered her part in the plan, nodding curtly, vanishing from sight, delivering his instructions and waiting for the right moment.
"«Relieve» If it's a fight, you're on" Date shouted in answer, touching the katana's grip lightly, preparing. "If you can peel off even one of the Dragon scales I'll do what you want." He was more than ready to start a fight, assuming the usual stance, both hands on the handle of a single claw.

"You do not know your place boy. We'll find out just what you're made of." Hideyoshi barely moved, showing no more emotion than disdain, contempt, dismissal.

"Perfect." Date growled, moving slightly, preparing. "It's been a while since I've run into someone who really disgusted me."

"Masamune-sama." Katakura-dono had jumped down from the horse, joining their Boss, side by side, still keeping his katana sheathed.

"Kojuro don't interfere." Date said, focusing on his target.

Katakura-dono said nothing, glancing back for the briefest moment.

"Great generals of unusual quality. The Tiger of Kai, the War God of Echigo and the One-Eyed Dragon of Oshu." Hanbei was appraising, the battlefield looking divided and ready to stand against his trap. "It's a bit of a waste but I seems we have no choice but to crush them." The general gave his final opinion to his leader without changing the soft polite tone.

"No matter. All we desire are the troops." A practical man it seemed although his concept of loyalty seemed to be based in simple strength, on the idea that a defeat meant submission, acceptance and devotion. Replacing one leader who was admired by his army would not grant him the troops support.

"Number One of Oshu, Date Masamune pushing on..." Date shouted, attacking, moving to reach the higher terrain, to ease the disadvantage of his former position, Kojuro following closely, earning a reproachful look from the One-Eyed Dragon. He lowered his head for a moment as their adversaries turned away from the battlefield where the plan aligned, explaining himself quickly.

"Masamune-sama our opponents number two as well. Please let me, Kojuro, offer my assistance." It was a sound, simple excuse that would buy them time and arouse no suspicion. And it was just something they did time and again. He guarded him. That was it.

Hideyoshi's defensive strike was hard enough to shatter the earth beneath them and treated by his own men as if nothing had happened.

Saki's lips thinned in apprehension, nibbling on her old scar, moving slightly, adjusting to the altered terrain.

"All right... I'll let you deal with the man in the mask." Date conceded before charging, lightning trailing him, aiming for the head with ease and determination.

Katakura-dono just frowned slightly, feeling that the attack fell into a known pattern, turning towards his adversary. A straight long sword, held on one hand, balance kept in a graceful stance. Unlike his master who defended against Date's strikes with a deep-rooted stance and punishing counter strikes with his massive armoured hands.

Keeping Hanbei's attention in their match Kojuro glanced occasionally towards the combat that moved next to him, making sure to keep the general's back towards the field. He broke away suddenly, as Date was pushed back and adjusted his stance, going deeper into a warring mindset, lightning and earth rushing to meet in devastating attacks, cutting them down, cancelling them out as if Narukami lived within his katana, the light generated, blinding, covering up their actions.
Saki moved in, abandoning all subtlety that had covered her from view, grabbing both men by their arms, taking advantage of their unbalance to pull them closer, her shadows growing darker, deeper and larger, engulfing them, taking them back to the horses. She wobbled slightly, sighing to gather herself, looking up calmly.

The general meanwhile stood still, appraising the changes that were shattering his plan down below.

"Masamune-sama… let us take this opportunity to retreat." Katakura-dono advised, mounting quickly. Date grunted in annoyance, doing the same, following his men, glancing back for a moment, eye narrowed, temper flaring.

The war council hadn't been that dark and gloom filled since the battle of Okehazara.

The One-Eyed Dragon faced his soldiers, looking straight ahead with an angry, lazy expression, leaning over his leg, head resting on his palm, casually dressed. Saki knelt to his left. Kojuro to his right, stretching maps between them. Both still wore the battle trappings.

"To think he let Utsunomiya and Odawara fall… what the heck was that old man Takeda doing?" Date finally spoke as the pair finished their reports and analyses of battlefield and outer movements.

"We believe clandestine troops simultaneously attacked multiple holdings belonging to Takeda that were not under the Tiger of Kai's direct supervision. Additionally we have reports that Mori Motonari of Aki is on the verge of joining forces with Toyotomi." Saki nodded softly, the new common enemy giving all of them excuses to trade information. Sasuke was incensed, feeling utterly duped. "However the most immediate problem for us is that the surrounding lands that we conquered show signs of unrest." Katakura-dono opened a map of their holdings. Saki sighed. She had been pacifying then for the longest time. It seemed the focus of trouble just shifted areas after she dealt with one. Still all had the same origin that she could trace but was, for the time, forbidden to deal with.

"So this clandestine invasion is about to begin in Oshu too." The One-Eyed Dragon concluded.

"Indeed. I appreciate your desire to march on Osaka immediately but we will stand no chance if they trip us while we are away." Katakura-dono advised, glaring at the map before facing his lord. "We will have to ascertain the movements of our neighbouring lands and if necessary to conquer them once more."

"Troublesome." what a pesky bunch." Date complained, annoyed by the succession of events.

"Or possibly we may already be infiltrated." Katakura-dono brought the other issue to light, staring at Saki before glancing at the army.

"We are. I have done nothing in fear of dragging too much attention towards Oshu." Saki admitted. They had been a bit vulnerable for a while and then the task of uniting conquered areas left little time to focus on what was away. "I have monitored these movements." From the corner of her eye she caught the flinch of their traitor. But she made no move, no acknowledgement. For now it was enough that he knew that she had not been blind.

"Toyotomi knew not only Takeda and Uesugi's movements but also ours, as we once again sought to intrude upon Kawanakajima. That information could not be had without being a part of the war council." Saki disagreed a bit on that point seeing that it a strategy the army had tried before, the
place was perfect for breaking into a battle through a sneak attack and that it was rather hard to make a whole army of boisterous horsemen be swift and silent. But as she knew who was the little rat it was indeed the place where the information had been gathered. Unfortunately she had been too late to intercept the message, what with all the kidnapping attempts she was having to deny as of late. After that stunt at the battle she was feeling stretched thin.

"Toyotomi had planned to settle matters there. If the spying bastard job was just to get that point…" Date reasoned. Actions would be different depending on a lot of factors.

"No. That man named Takenaka Hanbei would likely have anticipated the possibility of failure. I believe they would have kept their man in place." Waiting for orders and possibly disrupting the army further.

"If that is the case do we smoke him out?" He glanced left. Why not make use of her... "Saki. Do you know who the spy is?"

"Yes. Do you want me to deal with him now?" She stood, clenching her claws, slightly turning towards the soldiers. Men shivered. Katakura-sama stood too, looking at the blue-clad group, one hand on his katana. They were fully flinching back now, a low whimper coming out of them.

"I am reluctant to get rough with our own people but... we can get started first thing in the morning." The Right Eye conceded.

"No choice then." Date allowed, glaring.

"You should not go." Saki walked with Katakura-dono as he headed for his garden. She was carrying her travel sack, either planning a long stay or anticipating the need of some of its contents. Night hadn't come yet, dusk painting deep colours on the world. "A routine makes a trap easy to lay." And he had some repetitive habits while in Oshu's terrain. From his prized garden from working on the fields, to the time he bathed. Which she unashamedly admitted she had spied on a few days after her arrival. She had been curious to know if she had left bruises. She had also spied on the One-Eyed Dragon after the murder attempt. Saki told herself that it was a security matter.

"From my garden I can see Oshu. I can see if someone leaves in the cover of darkness." And he needed the peace his plants provided. To clear his head, to find his centre. Some were nearly ready to harvest. Other needed a bit more. Weeding should be done, as well as watering... simple work.

"Katakura-dono... two of my patrols have not reported." Saki informed him carefully, glancing around with a frown. And they were too close together, creating a blind spot in her netting. Also their prey knew he had to either get away or do as much damage as possible "I fear we have been infiltrated by actual troops this time." She sighed and looked towards the darkening sky, the mountains in the horizon wearing a light and fog halo. "I am heading out to deal both with my men and the unrest." The shinobi bit her lip, noticing the Right Eye's lack of acknowledgement about his situation. "They will be after you because of your head and influence on the One-Eyed Dragon. You should stay in the house and wait for morning."

"Do not worry." He reassured her, placing one hand over a slender shoulder. The shinobi scoffed.

"Worrying is my job. Please." Saki was insisting, standing her ground firmly.

"No." Katakura-dono began to walk once more. Saki followed with light steps.

"At least take someone with you. Yoshinao for example. Or even Date. That way you can also keep
an eye on him." Hopefully he wouldn't tear anyone's head out before morning.

"I need to be alone. I know you understand this."

"I do. But still…" She sighed, relenting. "Please be safe then."

A trap could still be effective even if one knew it was there, ready to be sprung. A sure way to beat someone was always through ploy and exhaustion. It was calm and dark where her men had gone missing, slight sounds giving her a feeling of unease. The lack of bodies or traces was also worrying. She sighed.

Saki knew she was not alone but was rendered unable to pinpoint where exactly were her stalkers. A misdirection jutsu was in place, an air element trick. It could be as simple as the symbols carved on a tree to an actual shinobi keeping the ploy in place. Yet they were also making the noises in a very specific pattern and direction.

She sighed once more, nibbling on the lip, claws twitching slightly.

No real choice if she wanted to be useful, now was there... she took a deep breath before dashing through the trees, reaching some sort of clearing, the noise dying in one last shrill call, looking around carefully, eyes narrowed. Trap could not be spelled out more clearly.

"Perhaps I should leave." She mused carefully, out loud.

What moved in those shadows, carefully, taking their places deliberately was not what had guided her there.

The attack started with a volley of arrows, a sudden bright light exploding above head, shoving the shadows away from her, forcing her to rely on her physical skills, speed and agility to dodge, grab and snap the projectiles. A few arrows nicked her arms and made small marks of her leather protections but no blood was drawn. Still barely a breath after the rain of sharp tips had stopped was allowed, the soldiers moving in briskly, creating a circle of spears around her, standing still as the light faded away. They were blinking, affected by it.

Toyotomi pike-man carrying medium range polearms, coming from in-between the unnatural darkness between the trees, having a short blade as backup. Smart. She had to get close, risking the spear, either metal or wood and when she got close they had the chance to drop it for the more convenient blade. Her claws twisted as she shifted her weight, finding herself truly surrounded. To shadow away she needed a bit of a break and a place to go. They were leaving her very little room for it.

The spears jabbed at her from time to time from above keeping her from opening the room needed. Most of them attacked in the normal fashion, trying to gore. Saki cut shafts, kicked men, slit throats when they came close enough, spiralling around, up, down, dancing within their range, the attacks coming in fast and not within any rhythm she could use. Mostly they seemed to want to keep her pinned. The ground was getting crowded by corpses, useless arrows and broken spears. Not even balancing on a spear to jump away worked. Others spears came down on her and on the weapon she was using.

Saki dodged brusquely, concocting a plan, sacrificing herself to a strike, the wooden staff of one of the spears catching her leg with bruising force, making her struggle to keep from faltering in pain, grabbing one of the men, claws sinking into the armour, pulling him towards her as a shield, breaking the ranks by tossing him into his compatriots, somersaulting, using a pair of shoulders as
leverage, the spears following her sinking into their companions as she moved away, running into the trees.

Arrows were fired again but this time she was far enough and deeply enough into the foliage for them to be completely harmless. Also her shadows were returning once more, lashing out against the arrow's faint traces, keeping them still, dropping them harmlessly. She stopped on her run, turning in the direction of the soldiers that gave chase, her grabbing the head of the one that could not stop in time, slamming him down onto the ground, snapping his neck, dodging a pair of spears, snapping the tips away, leaving their holders with nothing but jagged wooden handles before lunging for their lives.

They came from several directions, not just pursing. A few shinobi also appeared from the branches, plunging into the fray from time to time. Dead when she caught them, escaping injured when Saki just grazed them. She was being manoeuvred again and there was very little she could do against it.

Her breath was starting to break into uneven tired gasps, claws slick with red, her leg began to throb where the spear had bruised, discouraging her from using it for support. She grimaced, feeling one of the spears slash her shoulder lightly before she spun, capturing it on the crook of an arm, pulling so she was face to face with its wielder, punching and slashing his throat before looking around, calculating.

Shadowing to a branch she ran through the trees, trying to double back, avoiding the tripwires and exploding devices. A click echoed suddenly to her right. A shinobi had thrown himself or was tossed against one of the mines. Her eyes widened, speeding up.

But there was no outrunning an explosion.

The shockwave tossed back first against a tree, a grunt escaping her lips, tears welling to her eyes in a pained reflex, falling down to the dirt, trying hard to breathe, kneeling shakily, head snapping up, looking around, standing, appraising her body, waiting for her enemies.

Some strands had slipped free of her braid, glued wetly to her face by sweat. Her whole back would be a bruised mess by morning. Her leg was no better, worsened by the impact. Her elbows were scraped from the fall, the leather torn away. No time to perform a kata and the presence of the shinobi meant she had little concealment options, mostly because they were watching.

She could run but not outrun.

Trapped in place and only allowed to go where they wanted her to.

She took a deep breath, shook her wet claws and prepared to fight.

In that case she would just had to stand her ground and kill till there was nobody else.

Soldiers, shinobi, explosives and arrows just kept pouring against her.

One of the shinobi was, without a doubt light element because he broke her shadows from afar, freeing the ones she deemed more threatening at the moment, allowing them to strike, catching her when she was engaging another. One blade was close enough to slash of the tip of her braid and its tie, the strands starting to unravel as she moved and fought.

Each broken shadow was like a physical blow that left no trace, pinpricks at first, growing more painful with each ruined bind. Her exhaustion was mounting, not fully recovered from the shadowing she had done in Kawanakajima. Dragging people through her shadows was always
wearing, doubly so when they had no training or affinity with her element.

A spear shaft caught her unawares from the back, over the bruises, knocking her to the ground. Her hands slid into a jutsu, quickly, hitting the ground, creating a Seal, the Shadow Cage spreading, capturing everyone present, from spearman to shinobi, including the meddling light user. He would break free sooner but as the shadows used for that were not her own it would not harm her further.

Desperate enough to cripple herself further for a chance to get away.

Saki stood slowly, gasping, blood slipping down from multiple cuts, most of them shallow, none of them poisonous, her clothes torn in places, stained red, glued to her body, hair loose around her frame, growing tangled with loose twigs, leaves and sweat, the satchel hanging limply from her back, some of its ties cut. She gritted her teeth and tried to run. When that did not work, the pain shooting up from too many nerves, too many hurts, she simply shadow jumped away from the bound people, trying to pick an unused path, somewhere Toyotomi and his generals and Akio had not planted traps.

She still had her mission, she still needed to get to the provinces and deal with the unrest so the One-Eyed Dragon could focus…

The rustle of leaves while someone ran caught her attention.

Saki turned and defended as a sai was aimed at her shoulder, the attacker, using her distraction and unbalance to throw her down. She recovered and moved, now forced to ignore the pain in her legs, recognizing Akio.

So he only came when she was almost too exhausted to function, shadows spent, abilities hindered by pain, bruises and cuts? Her chuckle was pained and breathy, shaky from her uneven breathing.

"I should have expected a cowards' game." She whispered, leaning against a tree, using it to protect her back.

"Your own fault." He said calmly, approaching. Saki played the game, showing what he wanted to see. Her frightened, pressing against the tree as if shyly trying to avoid his touch. A gloved hand slid her hair away from her cheek. She looked away but didn't avoid it. "For not accepting. But I want a strong child. And you will be tamed."

If he was there he was alone as he believed her already beaten.

So she had one shot to get away without further pain.

Saki gritted her teeth when he moved closer, holding her in place, leaning, nuzzling her neck. Her claws sank into the tree, telling herself to keep still and quiet till she could strike, till she was sure there was a way out. His hand burned over her wounds, running over her leg, distracted while fondling her.

Now… where was she and where were her patrols for that time… maybe she could use her own men to… that depended however on reaching the area.

Too fast for him to see, distracted by the cleavage he was revealing, believing her weak, she struck, taking him down, bleeding from multiple deep scratches, unable to kill because even his defence seemed too much for her current state, stomping on his stomach before shadowing, dashing away, as far away as she could. Panic set when her vision faltered and started to sway, legs failing suddenly, making her meet the ground. Saki groaned, breathing heavily, trying, failing to muster the strength to continue, blacking out, the last sounds she caught being the rustle of leaves
disturbed by light steps.
"Boss! Boss!" Date rose his head from the recent reports he was sifting through to keep his mind quiet, plotting through the information he was being given while waiting for news and dawn, reacting to the sound, frowning, his attention broken. Saki had not reported yet and if the men were calling... Perhaps she had been unable to quell the unrest. Unsettling but not unexpected. She had accounted for the possibility of failure and so had the Right Eye. Kojuro should be coming to start going through the ranks, to smoke out the spy. Even though his Shadow had left the papers detailing the identity and actions of the man he wanted to observe how the army reacted to such an accusation. The One-Eyed Dragon could see the faint grey light of dawn coming through the shoji, telling him it was almost time to start.

"There is trouble Boss!" Samenosuke's voice made a chorus with Yoshinao, the sound of armoured men running towards his room, crossing the garden in a hurry. He stood and opened the shoji, glaring quietly, examining them as they knelt, out of breath.

"What? Have you found the spying Bastard from Toyotomi or something?" He asked, seeing them visibly worried, fidgeting, waiting for permission to speak.

"We're under attack!" Yoshinao blurted out as soon as Date had finished speaking, urgency on his tone.

"Nabu, Tsuruga and Souma! From all three fronts at the same time." Samenosuke completed.

"«Shit»" Date growled, fists clenching. So Saki had indeed been unable to pacify them. So why hadn't she reported? "So they've come already." The One-Eyed Dragon turned, walking inside once more. Armour and weapons... he stopped, frowning, half turning to face his me once more.

"You've notified Kojuro?" He asked coolly.

"Yes Boss. Bunshichi has gone to get Katakura-sama…" They calmed a bit. Now that he knew Date would make them fight, would make them win. The One-Eyed Dragon smirked a bit.

"Boss! Katakura-sama…" Bunshichi was running, awkwardly while trying to be as swift as possible, followed by Magobei, both looking panicked. In their haste they tripped and fell, looking up towards Date, scrambling to recover.

The One-Eyed Dragon started to grow uneasy, his attention was caught by the familiar katana carried by Bunshichi.

"Suzu-chan from the village and her granddaddy came running to my place!" Magobei shouted, eyes wide. "They say someone has gotten Katakura-sama!"

It took a few seconds of disbelief before Yoshinao and Samenosuke reacted, shouting in shock.

"We found this in the field on the hill." Bunshichi said carefully, presenting the blade.

"That's Katakura-sama's…" Yoshinao shouted, in shock.

"The Kokuryuu…" Samenosuke said as Date approached, picking up the weapon, staring at its inscription, the grip hardening in rage.

Bonten will become the One-Eyed Dragon Soaring the Heavens. A promise made to his young lord whose eye had been lost and gouged out, un-favourite and looked down upon.
"It seems he was attacked by a group of men late at night." Magobei was saying, repeating the words of the young girl and old man had relayed to him, panicked, fearing their presence had collared the Right Eye, making it easier to capture. "Using dirty tricks they took Katakura-sama away somewhere…" He took a deep breath, remembering the carnage in the hilltop, blood feeding Katakura-sama's prized plants. "We found out who the traitor was too."

"Who was the ringleader of this band? Did he reveal himself?" Date asked, lowering the blade, staring at the men.

"It seems it was Toyotomi's…" Magobei said, fists clenched.

"Takenaka Hanbei." Bunshichi completed.

The One-Eyed Dragon hissed in annoyance, looking around.

"Saki…" Date tried calling for her after a moment, trying to right his thought. By some strange trick most of the time she just appeared. And if he did not have Kojuro she could greatly mitigate the loss through her own skills.

"Boss." A shinobi appeared suddenly to the left of the men, bowing. Date recognized Saki's second in command, a young man with black eyes and a permanent scowl on his face. After what had happened with Oda she had created another layer in her ploys, a group to protect the heart of Oshu when the army was away. Kiko was the one in charge. "Ojou-sama is missing." He informed calmly. "Two of Ojou-sama's patrols were killed a few hours before sundown yesterday and she believed it was the place used to infiltrate some troops into Oshu. Ojou-sama went to check before heading out. We found dead Toyotomi men and some of his shinobi when we went to verify after Ojou-sama lack of report. According to our contacts Ojou-sama never came into the provinces."

"Taken?" Date spat, his rage mounting.

Now the men were even more into shock. Katakura-sama and Saki-chan missing, taken by the enemy… it was simply impossible, unacceptable…

"Most likely." Kiko admitted with a deeper scowl. The Celestial Mistress was going to have their hides… the ninja thought worriedly.

"Send scouts to Osaka." Date ordered, snapping the order harshly. The shinobi bowed his head curtly and vanished. "Once we reunify Oshu we'll immediately march to get them back." He turned to his men, seeing them straighten, ready.

"Yes sir." They shouted.

"Don't just sit there. We're going to war!" They stood up and moved out, calling guards and soldiers, starting the rallying. "Good courage! Maybe I'm too hard on them." Date mused as the horns started to sound. He lifted the blade, staring at it. "Make a fool out of me will he?" He growled, thinking of Hideyoshi. Then he took a deep breath. Three fronts of battle, each separated by roughly half a day by horse, deprived of two of his main supports… "Looks like it's going to be a rough party."

Date Masamune ended up dividing his forces evenly sending each portion to its province, relying on swift, crushing strength, fighting hard too, destroying the enemy army along with his men, on foot to use his abilities to their maximum effect to protect what was his.

Dawn was slowly turning into noon, the light and heath weighting heavily on the armies and his
blade had no rest, covered in blood, lightning coming from him like a wild storm.

Almost done in that battlefield.

Almost ready to move on to the next, to support his men and see how much still had to be done…

Crushing the enemy forces might not be enough to pacify a region.

"Boss!" Yoshinao cut through enemy soldiers to reach the One-Eyed Dragon, bringing news. Judging by his haste it could be nothing good. "Our scouts have reported. The Ashina Army is apparently closing in on us coming from Aizu. They're about to approach Suriagehara."

The soldier was beginning to show the first traces of exhaustion. At that rhythm the Date army would be spent before sundown. Still Date had to count on their will to fight, in the will to move on when their bodies wanted nothing more than to give out.

"How are the others doing?" The One-Eyed Dragon asked, looking around quickly, pausing, moving his blade in an arch, shaking the blood away from it.

"All fronts seem to be on the offensive for now but we'll need to assign troops against these guys too…" Yoshinao hesitated, knowing a desperate situation by instinct.

Date tskd, anger building. There were very little choices he could take.

Saki woke up with a gasp, as if a weight had suddenly been lifted from her chest, almost choking in that first greedy intake, sitting immediately, looking around, recognizing a safe-house.

Outwardly looked abandoned, shabby and a place for travellers to rest without pay.

On the other hand it was a ninja yashiki… a dragon was discreetly coiled around one of the rafters, carved simply, in her line of sight, informing her of a few more things.

It belonged to her clan.

And she was still within Oshu's borders.

She smiled, calmed and sighed, relaxing a fraction, looking around, shivering suddenly. Both Shiro and Kuro were there, staring at her through the masks, kneeling to her right like a pair of statues. Knowing them for all her life she could see the small signs of relief. And there was third person there, a familiar ginger to her left.

"Magoichi…" The kunoichi acknowledged, turning towards the woman. It had been five years since they saw each other and corresponding didn't tell much when they knew their factions were in opposing sides of the battlefield. "I thought you worked for Hideyoshi."

So it made little sense for the Saica Magoichi to be there.

"We do. But we have grown increasingly wary and weary of his demands." The leader of the Saica faction spoke on behalf of her men. They prized their individuality and independence. The demand to annex both the Saica faction territory and be absorbed into the might of the army were starting to grate on her nerves. The man who had allowed her to rise in power was trying to cull the Saica. Nothing but another Oda to them. Submit or die. They proved once they would rather die and take as many as possible with them. "Also I dislike that man." Not hard to guess who she was referring to. So Magoichi had been part of the ambush? Or maybe just heard the plans…
"You found me?" Saki asked, appraising her state. Some bandages covered the scrapes, arms, torso, legs, neck. Most of them were done over the fabric of the torn clothes in a quick patch job. Her claws were placed next to her, hands bruised and bloodied from the overuse, wrapped in red-stained fabric. She felt tired, hollowed and hungry. Her body was in need of food, water and a few kusuri. She picked up a cup that sat next to her in a tray along with umeboshi, a bowl of rice, a couple of kikatsu-gan and hyoro-gan. Five types of colourful pills were also waiting for her consumption. The shinobi swallowed them down with the water, the effect of one immediately evident as the room stopped swaying and her pain dulled.

"Yes. It took a while to convince your guards to allow me to help." She stood, touching her guns carefully. Firearms and backups were strapped to her thigh to counterbalance the weaknesses of some of the arms and provide a vast array of bullets and effects. "I will return now. But know this… the Red Bell may be tolling for Hideyoshi soon enough."

The hulking brute of a man clearly was having some dissent within his army then.

Good to know.

Saki made a note to check on that after. On every single faction that walked under Toyotomi's banner but still refused to be one. There should be a way to exploit that…

"Thank you Magoichi." Saki bowed, grateful. Shiro and Kuro would have found her, or one of the other patrols, but nothing guaranteed her they would have arrived before any of the Toyotomi.

"I will collect this favour some day." Saica smiled slightly.

"I would gladly repay as long it does not endanger what is mine to protect." Saki answered with another slight bow. Magoichi left, the sound of a horse outside soon fading in the distance. "Not my guards." Saki grumbled, turning to the duo, attacking the rice.

"Not entirely true Ojou-sama." Shiro said, slipping a blanket around her shoulders.

"The Celestial Mistress is incensed you failed to report that that nuke-nin had not given up." Kuro relaxed a fraction and helped her pull her hair into a tail. Frankly they had always been like doting uncles when within the clan. Despite that they were hard trainers to every girl and boy, in charge of the lessons that pertaining defending one's contract while forced to be formal in their presence. It was also their way of checking the new candidates to don the masks when they reached an age where their bodies could fail. And evaluated the lines of succession for the Celestial Mistress. Every female had a chance, calculated on their bloodline, temperament, skill and mission/training successes.

"And that you have been fighting off his attempts alone when this implies the clan." Shiro continued, sitting back on his ankles, watching as she moved on to the pickled plums, restoring her energy.

"We have informed the Celestial Mistress that he involved Toyotomi soldiers." Kuro spoke again, sitting next to his pair. "Takeshi also feels rather strongly about this." He was apparently putting it mildly. Saki had managed to hide most of the affair. Still saying that meant Mother had not been clear enough when telling him to stay out of it... But maybe that no longer applied is the masks had been sent to check on her.

"We are at war with Toyotomi now." Shiro informed coldly, his fist clenching.

"And with the Iga." Saki whispered, staring at the last of the meal. "I was... I did not want to be a
reason for the clan to involve himself in outright war." It was her reason to keep it a secret. She knew the temperaments of her clan and of the ones that had their bloodlines linked to them.

"You were one of the reasons." Kuro bowed. "Although I am sure the Celestial Mistress will commend you on the way you were able to hide this and about your thoughtfulness towards the clan."

"Explain." Saki demanded, swallowing the last things on the tray, followed by more water, starting to place the claws on her bandaged hands.

Dusk was a few hours away.

"Shinobi have been pressured to become part of the Toyotomi. All but the Iga are uniting once again. It is a shared enemy." Shiro completed. "Ojou-sama…"

"I have to go." Saki stood and walked towards the shoji.

"Your collapse was more due to exhaustion than your wounds." Kuro mentioned. "What you feel…"

"Even though you've eaten enough to re-establish most of your strength it is a frail balance without rest." Shiro continued.

"Is just temporary energy that will serve me for a day at most." She smiled, feeling that she was back in the dojo being scolded for overkill. "I must go." Saki said softly. "My oath to Date remains the same." They understood that.

"As you wish Ojou-sama." They said in tandem, bowing.

"Katakura Kojuro has been taken away. As we speak he should be reaching Osaka." Kuro started, bringing her up to speed. If she was decided to fulfil her job she had to be prepared for what awaited.

"As you were unable to reach the provinces in time Toyotomi's agents made their armies move." Shiro admitted. "The One-Eyed Dragon split his forces and dealt with all the combat fronts."

"Reckless Dragon." Saki whispered, repairing her bag, sliding it into place. "Kiko... how is he dealing?"

"Rather well. Oshu's core remains protected, the patrols rebuilt and the shinobi are gathering there." Kuro delivered, looking up. "He was instructed by the One-Eyed Dragon to send scouts to Osaka."

"Why?" For the gathering shinobi. The other words were clear to her.

"Ojou-sama is being used by the Celestial Mistress as an example of Toyotomi's disregard for shinobi and their traditions."

"Then another force rose form Ashina. Takenaka Hanbei is with them."

"If you take the right path you'll be able to meet both armies in Suriagehara."

"Father?"

"Sarutobi Takeshi was put in charge by the Celestial Mistress of moving the clan to a new stronghold."
"We are ordered to not disclose the location to Ojou-sama yet."

"Not until all is set and safe." Saki nodded. "Mother..."

"In Osaka." Kuro said.

Saki shivered.

The masks seemed to agree that anywhere a severely pissed Nobuko was it would be a bad location to dwell.

"Akio?"

There was a slight chuckle from both masks.

Saki arched an eyebrow.

"Your aim might have been off because of your exhaustion Ojou-sama." Shiro said.

"And he was ready to deal with that kind of attack after almost being torn apart last time he confronted you directly." The armour and jutsus she had felt under her claws... "Because otherwise he would have been dead." Kuro completed.

Saki smiled.

"So I bought myself a breather. Good." The shinobi moved out, going to the battlefield.

The rocky fields of Suriagehara were tinted red when the army arrived, a united front, the horses tired, the men in no better shape although only lightly injured, armours showing signs of hard battle. The banner of the Ashima they might carry but the one leading and the formation used was Toyotomi’s through and through. Made one wonder if they were simply using the colours to simulate a different threat.

"Takenaka Hanbei you saved me the trouble of coming after you." Date’s voice carried through the field, both armies still in appraisal of one another. His voice was full of contempt, almost bordering on outright hatred. He was riled and an upset Dragon was bound to make mistakes, to act hasty. It was something Toyotomi’s general and strategist was quick to use.

"It was a mistake to divide your army equally Masamune-kun." Hanbei began in a soft even voice, making his horse advance a little, standing out from the army.

"What?"

"If it was Katakura-kun…" The name was used like a knife on Oshu's pride. "He would have sent the smallest force possible to the provinces and fought evenly matched battles or drawn them in as close as he could before dealing with them. Because he would have been wary that it was a feint to make it easier for another invading force." The general moved, sword in the air, ordering his men to charge.

Date nudges his horse, charging himself, his army following suit, horsemen against foot troops. As soon as he was in the middle of the fray he abandoned the mount to charge directly at the general, fury creating lightning and a bloodthirsty, single-minded need to eliminate that man.

"«Be Right there!»" he shouted, claw bared, diving, bypassing the soldiers. Hanbei whipped his sword, breaking it apart, slithering it upwards, the chain wrapping around the One-Eyed Dragon's
blade. He slashed it suddenly, pulling the general off the horse. It was not unexpected and Hanbei landed firmly and balanced, waving his arm the chain and blades chiming around him in perfect shimmering arcs before slashing forward.

As soon as Date was able to move forward, deflecting the attack a gesture brought soldiers to the forefront, to defend, to deflect, moving, as soon as the men fell moving behind Date, the whip-blade striking the helmet fist before growing compact once more, slashing the One-Eyed Dragon's jacket, kept from sinking further by the metal underneath. The hit was loud, the men loyal to Date turning, staring in disbelief.

"Normally that back of yours would have been protected by Katakura-kun… It's so easy to slash apart now…" Hanbei was saying dismissively as the One-Eyed Dragon moved out of the closed blade's reach, the army, the soldiers that were close still staring at the slashed back in shock.

"Bastard." Date growled. The Right Eye was being used to rile him further into error. But Toyotomi's general had no idea what he was unleashing. Tactics could be something he cared little for but battle was something he understood well, a place where he excelled.

"I promise that he will be treated cordially." Hanbei continued, preparing the blade, balancing his form. "So rest easy and die a noble death here at Suriagehara."

"That's just perfect. I'll pay you back for that right here, right now!" Date growled attacking with a viciousness rarely used, going into a berserk war dance, the six blades slashing madly, pushing Hanbei back, leaving him no time to use the whip-blade or do more than defend, loosing terrain.

The general's purple eyes widened in shock, keeping his footing fluid on the rocky terrain, teeth clenched as the Dragon's blades sought his life.

"Perhaps I underestimated him a little…" The man was whispering as he turned suddenly, catching something moving through the battlefield, resolutely towards him, the sword ribboning out for a slash, forced to show his own back to the Dragon.

A fast shadowed form moved within his blade's circle, allowing it to be wrapped around her hand and wrist, claws gripping tightly, the free arm going for his throat. He was able to dodge both that and Date's attack, stepping back hastily. The shinobi shadow stepped away pulling the trapped length of the sword, making him struggle with the grip, unwilling to let go.

"You know what is so complicated about using chained weapons?" The Dragon's Shadow... The general's eyes narrowed in distaste and annoyance. They had failed to capture her... She was injured but did not seem to falter. Actually she was looking rather spiteful.

The One-Eyed Dragon and his six claws walked next to her, fury still creating lightning around the metal of his blades, assuming another combat stance, snarling with hatred.

She broke the tension of their tug-of-war and then whipped the blade back at him, using the flexibility of the segmented weapon against its wielder. Forced to avoid his own blade Hanbei had to think. Calling soldiers to protect him as before worked but it was a temporary solution while his movements were controlled and the One-Eyed Dragon used it to press the advantage his miscalculation had created.

"Three quarters of the time you have to focus just to keep it under control..." The Shinobi was saying, tugging playfully with flicks of the wrist, the vibrations cramping his gloved hands as Date dispatched the wall of soldiers he had called to his aid. "Leaving yourself open when someone like me whose weapons can't be pried off gets a hold of your toy." She pulled suddenly and arched to
the left, dragging him to the spot where the One-Eye Dragon immediately struck.

A careful retreat was in order.

Hanbei had bought enough time for the second wave to come. He could see the dust of the cavalry approaching. He whipped the sword back at the shinobi, moving. Her eyes narrowed, seeing through the movement, choosing to let go and avoid the chain of segments to wrapping around Masamune-kun's neck as he called soldiers in, mounting, retreating, still smiling smugly towards the adversaries.

It should not take long now for Oshu to belong to the Toyotomi.

"Damn it…" Date said trying to pursue the withdrawing general before the shouts of his men brought the one-Eyed Dragon's attention back to the combat, looking around quiet, understanding what kind of trap was closing around them.

Saki was back on the move, rallying some of the stunned retainers, making them budge, forcing them into action. She exchanged a quick look with him. Blood stained the bandages that crossed her form, soothe and burns on her cheeks and neck. Her hair was just pulled back. She was as spent as all of them. But still moving, still fighting, still there.

"This is not «cool»." He growled, annoyed. "The moment I am robbed of my Right Eye and this is the mess I get into…" His Shadow had returned somehow, surprising even the man that supposedly had planned her capture. "Even I have to admit it disgusts me." As soon as he got Kojuro back he would never hear the end of it… He also had a feeling she would not be forgiving either. Date gripped his swords, fighting off the rush that was trying to overtake him and shouted. «Come on. It's not over yet.»"

---

**Hyoro-gan** – 兵糧丸 – simple ration balls made from wheat, sake, honey, carrots and sticky rice, cooked, mashed and rolled into small balls. Thirty equalled a full day's nourishment.

**Kikatsu-gan** – 飢渇丸 – Energy bar equivalent, hunger and thirst quenching rations made of dried carrots, buckwheat, wheat, yam, licorice and sticky rice ground to a powder and soaked in sake, rolled into balls the size of a peach pit.

**Yashiki** – 屋敷 – Ninja Yashiki is a gimmicked house. Ninja abode, full of secrets, trapdoors and hiding places;

(Rise of Saica, chapter 2; details on Magoichi)
Chapter 20

"«Wake up.»" Date growled into the reddened battlefield, standing tall amongst the ruins of the army. Dusk to dusk. The battle had been long, painful and dragging on for what seemed like an eternity. Men were dead, men were fallen, both enemy and friendly. They stirred, Oshu's soldiers answering to their Boss's call, standing, gathering. "«Wake up guys»" He shouted again. Saki stood slowly, flinching, blood staining the metal, not all of it from the men she had killed, some of her bandages askew, further darkened by blotches of dry reddish brown. "«All right.»" Date nodded after counting heads, one arm snaking around Saki, pulling her closer suddenly in an atypical display in front of everyone. She sighed and gladly accepted the support, closing her eyes for a moment, flexing her stiff fingers, feeling a layer of blood crack over the skin. Then she gave up and just embraced him despite the unwieldy armour and the many onlookers. "You guys did well to survive." He praised calmly, the words seemingly easing his men's gloom. "We've taken back Oshu for now."

"Yes." They shouted in tandem with as much enthusiasm they could imprint into their voices.

Date relaxed a bit, turning his back to the army, looking around the battlefield, still holding Saki a bit too tightly. Even though the pressure was killing her bruised back she was not about to tell him to let go. Judging by the way her claws were, seemingly of their own will, tangled on his clothes she was not ready to let go either.

"Damn it all…" they were whispering, concerned about the slash one the One-Eyed Dragon's back.

"Katakura-sama always protected the Boss's back…" She flinched slightly, unable to be there to do the same, loosening her grip, preparing to step back. He didn't let her again.

"Boss…" She whispered, her voice raspy, harming her dry throat. "We need to go. Tend to the wounded, regroup…" Date nodded, loosening his grip around her a little, facing his army once again.

"We'll go back and prepare for war." The One-Eyed Dragon began with confidence, challenging anyone to try and stop him. "We'll head out to Osaka. To crush Toyotomi while we're getting Kojuro back." He smirked as he watched his soldiers move, scavenging the battlefield, recovering horses, preparing to move out. Then he looked at the woman in his arms that was refusing to look him in the eye. "What happened?"

"They had plans and traps. Unfortunately both Katakura-dono and I fell into them." She said quietly, staring downwards. She slid closer again, steadying herself quietly.

"You were able to escape." And came back to the battle. Came back while looking... he had only seen her like that when she was lying on his futon poisoned. And fought along with them without faltering. His Shadow...

"I was..." She hesitated for a moment, glancing up and then at the battlefield. "very lucky things worked out that way for me."

"You need rest." He assessed easily. It was what all of them needed after those long days of combat. War took its toll. Doubly so when multiple battles overlapped and dragged on.

"You're not too far from breaking either." She could see it easily too. She took a deep breath, stepping away more forcefully, kneeling down, head bowed. "Oshu's heart was kept completely
isolated from conflict so it will be easy to march to Osaka in two days as preparations are minimal and supplies should not be too depleted. I'm waiting for word from the shinobi placed within the castle about his arrival into its walls.

"Saki..." She shook her head, the ponytail whipping slightly. Her claws clenched on the ground, leaving marks.

"Please forgive me..." She said softly. Date sighed, his blade touching her cheek, tilting her head up.

"You were not taken away from me. You are mine and you returned." He smirked. Her eyes narrowed slightly. "For you two I would storm Osaka. But seeing you are not there the task of invading Toyotomi's fortress just got easier «you see»." Her lips softened into a smile.

"Cocky Dragon..." She whispered before a sudden hush fell over the army that was almost ready to leave. Date turned. Saki stood.

"That's..." Date whispered, noticing the approaching shadow.

"T...Toyo..." Yoshinao stammered, the army gathering near the One-Eyed Dragon.

"Toyotomi Hideyoshi. You've got a good attitude coming to greet me in person." Date walked towards the man, his soldiers parting to let him through. "You've saved me the trouble of going all the way to Osaka." His eagerness to fight was overwhelming his prudence. He was... they all were... too exhausted to be any kind of threat, especially knowing what Hideyoshi could do.

"Snakes are more tenacious than one might expect, no matter how little they are." The brute was saying, appraising the field and the soldiers as the Dragon walked towards him, uncaring, showing only strength. Saki moved a bit, flinching, starting to feel her body once more, knowing she had been pushed too far for too long. It was not pleasant and would grow worse as the effect of the shinobi kusuri reached its limits.

"So you say but I heard the same about you. Especially for someone of your size. «So easy»." Date scoffed, still confident, still looking dangerously self-assured, smirking. "You left the extermination of a snake to your underlings just showing up to see what happened... it means that those eyes of yours see me for the Dragon that I am."

"A miserable retort. So you intend to defy me? When all of your scales have been peeled away and you even lost your Right Eye?" There was no change in Hideyoshi's tone. Just a cold appraisal while he waited for the combat to begin.

"Is that right? Looks like I overestimated you. Your judgement leaves a lot to be desired." Date scoffed at his words, assuming a battle stance, blade parallel to his face, ready to strike. "So let me tell you this... you can't take a Dragon's scales until he's dead. Not a single one."

"You should know deference." Hideyoshi's fists clenched. "Know your place." The behemoth shouted as the attack struck.

The lightning strength faltered against the bright and heavy strike, the blade splintering, the One-Eyed Dragon falling to the ground, struggling to stand. Saki's eyes widened along with the army's chocked gasps, stepping forward as Toyotomi grabbed Date's head, forcefully yanking him up, tossing him away. She shadowed, quickly, catching him before his head hit the ground, her legs buckling under the weight, bringing them both down hard, rolling, ending up tangled. His consciousness had slipped.
Saki struggled on top of Date, moving a bit, hearing the shouts of the army. She extended her claws suddenly as Hideyoshi advanced, shadows grasping his, stilling him as she propped herself up, arms shaking, trying to get away from Date, to allow the guys to pick him up. But they were not moving and her body was not exactly being cooperative.

"Get him out of here." She shouted towards the army. If they were fast they could take the One-Eyed Dragon back to Oshu while she kept Toyotomi pinned. As soon as they were gone she would either be able to get away or die. "Yoshinao..." She began once more, trying to make them move, snap out of their shock, crying out loud when her shadows were suddenly shattered by a forceful step taken by the behemoth, arm recoiling towards her chest, panting in pain.

Saki looked down, at the unconscious Dragon, fear constricting her throat, allowing her body to slump, covering Date's, one clawed hand gripping the fabric of his jacket. The she looked up, glaring at the advancing warlord. Light... he was a light elemental... there was no use in use more shadows in trying to pin him. She would need her strength, what little she had left, to fight him off when the warlord got close enough. She kept glaring while he moved forward, adjusting her stance. He would not take Date while she lived...

There was a sudden flurry of movement around her, screams of boss and Saki-chan, weight and pressure suddenly appearing, around and above her. Her eyes widened as she glanced around. Guys... Some had thrown themselves over them as human shields, as she had been trying to be for the One-Eyed Dragon, others had taken the spears from the dead infantry of the enemy and created a sharp wall between them and the advancing Hideyoshi. She could hear whimpers, could feel them shiver but not one left, everyone held their ground. Loyalty returned.

Hideyoshi had stopped, staring at them with still red eyes. He seemed to be hesitating... Saki looked a bit to the right, hearing the sudden galloping of horses, the animals used by Bunshichi as a distraction. The army scrambled in the stampede, each grabbing their mount and riding away, taking their leader with them.

"This way." Saki guided them towards the yashiki, Date horse's reins in hand. She had bossed them around, making sure the wounded were carried on horseback, the ones that could walk and fight creating a ring around the ones that were vulnerable. After the mad dash away from the field Saki had forced them to be an army again, asking for the discipline they could display in combat. She had decided against sending scouts, knowing exactly where she was taking them and unwilling to lose anyone else.

Night was growing deeper, approaching its apex. Everyone was too silent. She sighed shakily. Her vision was swaying once more, her legs wanted to give up and what she didn't feel wet with warm blood was rough and dry, the same substance coating it and gone cold.

Samenosuke glanced at her, approaching, one arm going around her shoulders companionably, helping her to stay steady while advancing. So many of the others were doing the same. Some laboured breathing patterns reached her. Troublesome.

"Saki-chan you shouldn't be walking." He said worriedly.

Saki smiled, feeling most of the conscious men's eyes on her.

"I can't ride, you know that." She gave a mirthless chuckle. It was one of Dragon's failures when it came to her, according to multiple frustrated attempts to teach her. Guiding one of the fast moving beasts while sitting on its back was still impossible. Riding him on his back on the other hand was a favoured pastime. Her mind seemed to have room to be perverted. Her body on the other hand...
was too tired to mirror the embarrassment she was feeling about the sudden line of thought. She sighed. "Here we are..." Saki bit her lip slightly and took a deep breath. There quite a bit to do. There were lit lanterns. The masks had stayed there, most likely anticipating the army's need after the battles. "Shiro, Kuro." She called curtly, startling some men, their hands immediately reaching for their katanas.

"Ojou-sama." Both masks appeared, bowing slightly, staring at the army for a long time. They were also tensed by the sudden appearance of strangers. The yashiki they did not find suspect. The shinobi were another matter. Saki shook her head and stood taller, pulling the horse's reins, making him move, showing the prone for of the One-Eyed Dragon.

"Take care of him." She nodded to Shiro. The shinobi took the One-Eyed Dragon inside with a bit of effort. When protests tried to start behind her she gestured them shut, glaring at the army, surprised when she notice them lower their head and obey without further question. She turned to Kuro who waited patiently. "Send a message to Kiko and get him to deliver some supplies here both healing and food. I will also want a report on Oshu's situation. Tell him he has authorization to eliminate anyone within the provinces that shows the slightest inclination to continue this unrest." It shouldn't take more than a few hours... She though as Kuro penned a note quickly and called a bird of prey to deliver. Saki turned to the stunned army next. "Who's not too badly injured care for the ones that are. The rooms are spacious enough and whatever supplies you find within you can use. Whoever feels up to it water and feed the horses. Drink water, eat rations and rest up." She took a deep breath, swaying, using a pillar to steady herself, grimacing. "You four meet me when you're done. I will want to know what you think of the current situation." Saki turned away as they started to obey. "Kuro." He bowed slightly. "Scout for enemies. I am not sure if the Toyotomi followed our retreat."

Kuro disappeared. She looked around. Horses were drinking from a nearby creek, men carried supplies from the saddles silently and resolutely. Some shouts and moans of pain came from the yashiki behind her. The forest echoed with the cries of the animals and the sound of nature. Saki took a deep breath that hurt her inside, flinching, turning, walking into the room where Shiro had chosen to take care of the One-Eyed Dragon.

"How is he?" She asked, her voice growing dimmer, kneeling down near the kusuri, glancing at his prone form. He looked rather pale under the bruises that were forming. There weren't many slashes or cuts. His armour stood in the way of that. He was dusty and sweaty but that could be said for all of them.

"He'll live." Shiro answered handling the linen and cotton strips carefully, soaking them in one of the ointments, placing them on his skin after a quick pass of a soaked rag. From the empty cup she could tell he already had given Date some of the medicine for such a case. They would sneak some of the same for the soldiers as soon as the food was delivered. If Kiko hadn't remembered to do it already.

"Good." Saki sat down and started to undo her claws, prying them away from blood soaked bandages. Her hands were a mess she thought while flexing them. Bones creaked and made snapping sounds while she forced them into place. With another deep breath she moved on to undressing, calmly with clipped gestures, peeling the bandages away, wounds reopening superficially, wincing as she had to rip them away from her skin, sharing the supplies the white mask had displayed. The water grew dark red quickly. Shiro said nothing as Saki redid her sarashi and bandaged herself with the same method the shinobi had used on Date, before taking out clean clothes from her bag, redressing rather slowly.

"Talk." She asked, reaching for her claws.
"You need to sleep now Ojou-sama." Shiro took her weapons away, starting their maintenance with sharp, self-assured gestures. Saki frowned, eyes narrowed in an attempt to keep the world focused for just a few moments more.

"I know. But I also need to know what is happening and if we were followed." Her reasoning might be sound but there was not much she could do with herself and the army in that state.

"You were not, Ojou-sama." Kuro returned. He sat behind Saki, holding her upright. She needed to keep them safe. Saki glanced at Date and allowed a small smile to appear. Just a few more moments, a few more questions, a few more decisions and she could curl away somewhere and sleep for as long as she would be allowed.

All three noticed the peeping retainers in the next room, unsure if they should interrupt.

Saki turned slightly and gestured them in. Yoshinao, Magobei, Bunshichi and Samenosuke sat down, fidgeting nervously. She sighed weary. They scanned the room, taking all in, from their prone boss to the bloodied bandages, to the medicine, to the strange shinobi holding Saki, to the woman that seemed too pale even in the candlelight. The foursome didn't seem too injured. But they were trembling, fists closed tightly.

"How are they?" Saki asked calmly. There was a sudden shriek and four sobbing man hugging her, much to the shinobi's shock. "Guys?" She whispered utterly baffled, stiffening.

"We thought those bastards had taken you too like Katakura-sama…" One of them said, she wasn't sure who.

"And then we were unable to protect the Boss's back…" Some other spoke up, grip tightening around her.

"How can we face Katakura-sama…" Another.

Saki sighed and moved a bit. Dwelling in what could not be changed would do them no good.

"You survived and protected him." Saki smiled, closing her eyes. "No warlord can really ask for more loyalty and devotion than what you have shown." She shifted uncomfortably. "Now please let go… it's hurting." The foursome backed away hastily.

"Saki-chan…" Magobei took her white-wrapped hand. "You should be resting." They had been listening in, most likely snooping through the shoji.

"I can… go on for a little longer." She smiled, tilting her head, the movement making her wince.

"Saki-chan…" Bunshichi was the next to attack. "Protecting the Boss also means protecting what he cares about." Saki glanced at him and looked towards the One-Eyed Dragon.

"We could do nothing for Katakura-sama…" Yoshinao said, looking away. "But we can force you to rest for your own good." He threatened, turning to her once more.

Saki's eyes widened a bit then closed with a small smile. Shiro and Kuro were silent as they should, observing the interactions without judgement. As the silence stretched they moved away, having heard the arrival of the supplies. She sighed.

Nakama. All of them.

"I trust you to protect everyone then… while I cannot." She whispered bowing slightly in thanks,
watching them retreat, except Bunshichi who decided to stand guard in case Date woke up, to do what they thought best before she chose a place, curled under a blanket and blacked out.

_Nakama_ – 仲間 – True companions, family;
The army was spying on Saki as she listened to the three shinobi, pretending to walk by on their way to the horses, because they needed water or just standing around, staring at the group. The two masked ones they did not know at all and Kiko whom they recognized as one of hers were with her. It was still suspicious. What if they were infiltrated enemies?

The waiting was making the men antsy, worry-prone.

The four of them were outside, in the sun seemingly careless and open. Their shinobi sat down on the engawa, leaning against one column. The others were kneeling around her on the ground or on the wooden floor. It was like a little war council. Saki had slept, woken up and returned to work, checking on everybody and everything, ordering some of them to sleep, noticing who had and hadn't taken care of themselves. The One-Eyed Dragon hadn't regained his senses yet. Saki said they had drugged him so he would have a while longer to heal. As soon as he was conscious he would want to move and that would not be helpful.

"The Maedas attacked Uesugi. It was a failed attempt and they have retreated back to Kaga." Shiro was saying. "Maeda Keiji seems to have fought against his own family but not under any banner."

"Uesugi used a ploy to trick them into a more favourable battleground and box them in. In the end no one won." No land for Toyotomi, and minor losses in the Maeda Army. "According to our contacts Maeda Toshiee was rather wounded and will be unable to take to the field for a while."

"And his wife?" Saki asked, her fingers moving in a soft rhythm, training them.

"Unharmed as far as we know."

"Keiji?"

"Missing once more." Shiro said. "There have been some sightings that suggest he's going to Osaka.

"Sanada Yukimura left Kai and heads towards Satsuma. It appears as though he is an envoy." Kuro changed the warlord, still and calm.

"Alliance most likely." Saki reasoned. It seemed to fit the Tiger's style. When caged look from help outside. Then hammer the enemy down on both sides.

"Kai seems to be pinned by the conflicts outside and around its lands and by the loss of some of its controlled lands." The black mask completed his train of thought.

"So the armies that were attacking us if victorious would storm through Uesugi's lands and then, joining with the Maedas, move on to take Kai." Saki shook her head. Awfully sure of their army's strength. They followed the plan single-mindedly… which meant the Date defeating the uprising would upset all the balance Takenaka Hanbei had planned. Hopefully that would buy the Land of the Rising Sun some time to take measures against the Toyotomi.

"Katakura Kojuro has been delivered to Osaka-jo's cells." Shiro picked up the conversation as the silence has stretched for a bit longer. "Nobuko-sama sent word telling us he was not severely wounded but had not regained his senses. Also it seems little measures against his person will be taken."
There was small cheer behind closed shoji, a flurry of movements as the word was passed. The Right Eye was imprisoned but alive and Saki knew where he was. That would make storming Osaka easier, like their Boss said. The army gained some peace of mind with that information. Saki was uneasy.

"Nobuko-sama also expressed a strong desire to eliminate the nuke-nin." Shiro mentioned. Saki grimaced.

"Tell her it's my fight." There was a very hard silence that clearly meant *you tell her.*

"The alliance with Aki will be completed within a few hours. A day at most." Kiko spoke up. "Ojou-sama's agents say they saw Takenaka Hanbei on the move." So he was talking to Mori personally. Two soft spoken girly-boys in the same area with the same kind of scheming, slimy mind. The highlight in that was that most likely they would betray each other as soon as they ceased to have any use.

"Do we have anyone helping Chosokabe Motochika?"

"There is a clan in the employ of the Demon of Shikoku." They gave her no name so it should be a small clan, maybe no more than thirty, forty shinobi. Maybe one of those families that did it to protect their territory rather than gather money.

"Does he know about it?" Saki asked, smiling slightly.

"No." Kiko said with a scowl, amused.

Saki nodded and stood slowly. Sleep had worked wonders. She stretched slightly, looking up. While they had no choice but to wait she could see if a few more cat naps could be added to her duties. She plopped down one her back, arms behind the head as a makeshift pillow. They didn't seem to care about the laid back gestures. They were also quite relaxed themselves.

"Oichi-sama, the sister of Oda Nobunaga, has been found alive by some remnants of Oda's forces. They shown no hostile intent so far." Kiko said. "Near Azuchi."

Saki frowned. After five years… and Date had told her how he had seen the devil King murder his own sister… it was hard to believe but it could be possible.

"Investigate a bit more." She asked softly, arching her sore back, eyes closed. "Could be an impersonator."

"Matsunaga Hisahide has resurfaced, hunting for treasures." That she could believe more easily. His convenient death at Todai-ji… she opened one eye, watching as Magobei fidgeted at the entrance of the yashiki, having recognized the name. "There are rumours about the wondrous items in Toyotomi's collection that one such as him might desire."

"So an alliance is a possibility." Saki admitted sourly. He was a crafty general.

"Fuma Kotaro also reappeared and is currently under his employ." Fuma… So another shinobi to deal with that was under the Toyotomi wing.

"Saica?" The kunoichi inquired.

"Their movements are covered by the army's motions. It is impossible to tell if they are planning on rebelling and abandoning Toyotomi soon." Kuro supplied. Any rebellion would look like a simple preparation to move out with the behemoths army.

"The Celestial Mistress ordered you to reveal yourself to Date Masamune." They said.

Saki groaned, rubbing her nose bridge.

"Fine. Go. I won't need anything else for the time being." The Masks disappeared leaving her alone.

"Saki-chan?" Saki looked up, towards Yoshinao who approached carefully, trying to appraise her mood. "What do we need to do?"

"Nothing of what was said to me affects us at the moment." Saki smiled in reassurance and stared at the trees that protected their location.

The slight shift in Date's breathing pattern, a sharp intake, the surprise of waking up after almost two days of unconsciousness, was enough for Saki to awaken, sitting quickly. Bunshichi was nodding off.

"Boss..." He mumbled softly, glancing with bleary eyes. Then the retainer focused, almost shouting. "Boss..." He stood quickly, running, shouting at the army, letting them know. The men began to move, pouring into the room, relieved. Some laughed, some wept discreetly. They gathered around.

Saki moved in quietly, kneeling behind Date, placing his head gently on her lap, caressing his hair, slipping it away from his face as his confusion ebbed away, taking in his surroundings, understanding the situation.

"Wait for them." She whispered, kissing his forehead, giving him time, adjusting the covers and the haori over him. He closed his eye once more, getting comfortable.

"Was I dreaming or something?" Date asked slowly, his voice weary as all the men were in the room, relieved.

"No." Bunshichi hesitated in his answer but spoke nonetheless.

"You were already worn ragged and then you went at it with Toyotomi Hideyoshi..." Everyone flinched, quietly as Magobei spoke.

"So I lost." Date reasoned. "Why am I alive?" He asked then tiredly, deflated. Saki caressed his head softly, allowing the men to explain.

"The thing is..." Yoshinao started then hesitated.

They explained how Saki had tried to defend him, shouting at the army to get the One-Eyed Dragon away, how they, in the end, had protected him with their bodies.

"The odds were stacked pretty badly against us but..." Samenosuke gulped and shook his head, the memory of their loss clearly painful. "He eased up on attacking us for some reason. We took that chance to make a mad dash and..." Get him away.

"We just knew we had to protect you, even if it killed us..." Bunshichi said sharply, leaning, almost bowing.
"Or else we'd be worthless..." Yoshinao fisted his hands, expression closed. "And we'd never be able to face Katakura-sama either."

"Did anyone get killed bringing up the rear?" Date asked tiredly.

"No. All the survivors managed. Saki led us here."

"I see..." Date said, moving, eye closed. "«Thanks.»" He whispered to the shock of the army while he sat up. Saki adjusted, wrapping her arms around his waist, letting him lean against her.

"You shouldn't get up yet." Magobei gestured, almost dashing to help. In the end they did not, just waiting for orders. Saki felt the effort Date was making to stay upright and slid a bit closer.

"Bunshichi, Mago is there anything to eat?" The One-Eyed Dragon asked, watching as they left, groaning in annoyance, staring at his fist. "«Insufficient blood»" Date grumbled. That masked lackey and that ape general... Talk about both of them slacking off in the end game...

"We are glad you live though." Saki whispered. "All of them felt lost. They are loyal to you to their deaths. And most likely beyond it..." She gestured one of the soldier to help, standing. "There are things to discuss after you eat."

"Saki-chan?" Samenosuke called.

"Not now." She said, shadowing, walking out of the room.

The cell was encased in the stone foundations of the fortress. The light came from a narrow barred slit between the ground level and the fortress. The wooden cage was concealed behind shoji. The stone walls were hidden behind opaque wooden fusuma. The flooring was tatami. If one did not know it could be though he was in a simple guest room. Kojuro was not a fool to think that although that prison was indeed nicer than the outside pits. He had been taken there to be manipulated, moulded and brought to another warlord's cause. How long would it take for Takenaka Hanbei to understand that his loyalty to Masamune-sama would remain unchanged?

The Right Eye of the Dragon had assumed a meditative position, waiting, planning and pondering.

"Awake I see." A female voice whispered in the quiet room suddenly. He opened his eyes calmly, refusing to show any kind of emotion or surprise. A shinobi was kneeling in front of him, sitting upright and at ease. She had black hair pulled back into a simple braid and very dark eyes, narrow and cunning. Her age was unclear. She was completely covered in a black outfit. And she looked very familiar. A smile spread over her lips as he stared her down. Not a flinch, no sign of discomfort. "Seeing the resemblances I believe?"

"You are Saki's mother." The Right Eye spoke.

"Kizune Nobuko." She introduced herself. "And you are Katakura Kojuro, the Right Eye of the Dragon that may or may not loose his hands for touching my child." Kojuro lowered his head slightly, letting the threat slide, acknowledging her. A mother had that right.

"Why have you shown yourself?" He asked in the same muted tone she was using.

"To be of some relief. It will be easy for them to tell you lies. And confined in this walls soon enough your defences will start to erode. When the truth is hidden a lie is easy to take, to mistake for reality. It grows and festers." She paused, letting him feel the honest, plain truth in her words. "Also I am bored." She admitted then with an ease that was close to her husband's. "I cannot
exterminate a man I want to eliminate because my daughter claimed the kill. And yet he is right here, within reach.” Nobuko scoffed. Kojuro nodded. He understood such a frustration.

"That could compromise your secrecy." He pointed out.

"Everyone knows I'm here. It is amusing to see the wide berth they give my reputation even though they don't recognize my face. They speak of my presence in frightened whispers when I am standing right there then tell me to be careful, that I would not want to find myself in the winding corridors of Osaka-jo."

Kojuro felt a slight amusement at that.

Nobuko stared at him for a long moment.

"I will inform your faction of your current state."

"Can you tell me nothing?" Kojuro asked. Had the unrest exploded into battle or been quelled, had the traitor been named after he killed him, were there more?

"I can… but I will always let the Toyotomi talk first. I want to see how sharp your mind is." Nobuko vanished smoothly, leaving him alone. The Right Eye regained his calm posture when he heard steps on the corridor. Light and fluid, heavy and clacking with armour. Soon enough a key was turned and Takenaka Hanbei was allowed inside the cell, accompanied by a soldier carrying a shrouded bundle.

"Pardon my intrusion Katakura-kun. Your Lord is really something else. Nanbu, Tsugaru, Souma and Ashina…” Kojuro stirred a bit, worried about such occurrences. They had indeed attacked and in a coalition. "It seems he did not succumb even when boxed in by four armies." Relief and pride coursed through the Right Eye although he showed nothing. "I didn't think the Date Army could accomplish so much without you."

"Of course they could. You better not underestimate Masamune-sama." Kojuro's words were firm and cold, dismissing Hanbei's assumptions.

"Thanks to that… I had intended to have Hideyoshi store up his energy for a while but I wound up needing him to pay a personal visit to Oshu." Worry made his hand twitch. Hanbei seemed to have picked up on that, smirking. "You can rest easy. As to Masamune-kun's fate… I won't tease you by not telling you what ultimately happened." He gestured. The soldier placed the bundle in front of Kojuro, opening it to reveal the broken claw, the metal twisted, the handle darkened. "A souvenir for you, brought by one of the soldiers that accompanied Hideyoshi. It's one of Masamune-kun's six swords right?" Toyotomi's general looked down, the soft voice dripping with fake reassurance and comprehension. "I won't ask that you join our cause immediately. First I just want you to accept that the man you used to serve is no more. I won't be able to wait long but I believe I can sympathize with how you feel right now."

He left then, abandoning the Right Eye to his rage. He calmed down finally, touching the handle of the katana, trying to feel anything, a connection, trying to feel the truth.

"So… what was what?" Nobuko appeared again after a long silence as Kojuro stared at the broken and battered blade, hands clenched into fists. The Right Eye looked at her with confidence.

"Masamune-sama is not dead."

"Show me. If I was not here to say it was not so how would you convince yourself?"
"A sword can be easily lost in the battlefield. Especially if its wielder is in such a desperate situation. Masamune-sama wields six. He can afford to lose one claw to keep his life safe even though most of the times he returns to reclaim it." Kojuro shook his head. "Boxed in... But... they did not bring his head. Hanbei talked about Hideyoshi going to Oshu but never once stated with the clear pride and admiration he hold for his lord that Toyotomi Hideyoshi killed Date Masamune and claimed Oshu. All he spoke about were suggestions, hints that can be taken as a general informing another of his Lord's death. In the end all words were meant for me to break my vows to Masamune-sama."

Nobuko nodded slowly.

"The One-Eyed Dragon is indeed alive. The army suffered a hard blow but it will be able to recover. According to Saki in a week they will be moving out." She sat a bit more at ease. "You reasoned that your Lord was alive because he gave you no true evidence of his death and his words were unclear and lacking on his usual gushing over Toyotomi's absolute perfection in his eyes."

"That. And I feel it in me. The One-Eyed Dragon will not die before he claims all of Japan."

Kojuro stated firmly.

"What if I told you that my daughter was carrying his child." Kojuro paled suddenly, eyes widening. Nobuko started to laugh. "The faces you men make when you learn one of us might be pregnant..." The Right Eye sighed in relief, noticing the teasing. "I swear... Takeshi passed out, flat on the ground."

"It is not so much about Saki carrying a child. It's Masamune-sama's blood influence that worries me."

"Troublesome boy was he?"

"Indeed."

"Saki was a calm child for the most part... but when Sasuke came to visit they were a pair of kitsune loose in the clan... he taught a two year old child to walk on the ceiling upside down and having stolen my husband's chains to swing around. Footprints on the ceiling..." Nobuko smiled fondly.

"I thank you for trying to ease my mood." Kojuro bowed his head slightly to the woman before she disappeared once more, leaving him with his through and the broken katana.

Date looked up towards the starry sky, leaning against the solid column, slightly irked he had needed a bit of help to walk that distance. The night felt cool and soothing. He could see some men on watch. The horses nary made a sound. Most of the army was asleep. Saki joined him with tea, placing the rough cups between the before kneeling down in front of him, sighing.

"What's on your mind?" Date asked calmly. Even though it wasn't obvious with the army fumbling around him, relieved by his recovery, she had been avoiding him even though she had expressed her wish to talk.

"I don't know if you'll understand but I was ordered to tell." The shinobi looked at him for a long moment, nibbling on her lower lip before letting go, straightening. Her eyes had grown formal and distant. Whatever it is was making her suddenly uncomfortable. "My name is Kizune Saki, daughter of Kizune Nobuko the Eleventh Celestial Mistress and Matriarch of the clan." Noble blood? Unsurprising Nobuko was surprised how she carried herself but rather jarring seeing she was serving..."
under him, seeing that she had given herself to him. But then again… shinobi. "I am first in line to the title." She added sourly, extending her arm, a jade piece resting on her bandaged hand. A dragon coiled around a plum blossom. Date smiled, thinking of her kimono. Then he had thought those dragons slithering on the silk around her marked his claim. Now he could see something more. Both his claim and her origins. "This is our crest." She continued softly. He picked it up, brushing his fingers over her wounded palm, seeing her shiver, breaking away from the formality.

"And what does it mean?" The One-Eyed Dragon asked carefully.

"It means you know. Nothing more." Saki shrugged and picked up the cup, staring at the tea.

"Are you abandoning me?" He pressed, curious as to why she was talking about it. Saki looked up, surprised. She let go of the tea and came closer, embracing him gently, her warmth welcome in his arms.

"No." She moved, kissing his lips slowly, chastely. Silence was comfortable while she stayed there. Even though it made his body ache he liked her weight against his chest, the hand that played with his hair and traced the exposed skin on his neck gently. "Let me go to Osaka." She whispered calmly. "Let me get Katakura-dono back while you heal." Saki offered her skills. She had been in the fortress. She had spies within. And then there was her mother. It would not be a hard mission to do with a little surveillance and patience. Especially at the moment when the country though Date either beaten or dead.

"No." The One-Eyed Dragon stated firmly.

"Don't be stubborn." She insisted. They all knew what the plan would be. Back to Oshu, get the soldier reserve, get supplies and march down to Osaka for war and raid. "Look at your state. You are hurt. It will take a while before…" Saki whimpered in pain when he pressed her wounds, caught by surprise. Date let go of the source of her pain almost immediately, soothing it with a light caress, moving just a bit to look her in the eyes.

"You are also hurt. I will not let you go. Ojou or not you are still mine." He smirked slightly. Saki groaned, looking at the sky through the branches.

"I am expendable." She pointed out.

"Do you have a sister?" Date retorted.

"No."

"Then you are not expendable for your clan."

"Any woman of dragon blood can take the title." She brushed the issue aside and moved a bit out of his arms, facing him sternly. "I will not be coddled because of my blood, my title or my station. I will not stay out of combat or missions just because…” Saki stopped and chuckled. "I am babbling your feelings to the world and yet I was not understanding it… Forgive me." Saki returned to his arms, snuggling, closing her eyes. Soon it would be time to take him back inside, convince him to rest a bit more.

"Judgements get clouded when we feel tired and cornered." Date said in a measured tone, thoughtful. Without his Right Eye he should pay more attention to his temper…

"Can I go to Osaka to get Katakura-dono?"

"Drop it."
Chapter 22

Dawn was breaking through the clouds as what was left of Oshu's army arrived home. A pair of the soldiers dismounted slowly, with clipped movements due to injuries and exhaustion, opened the heavy double doors. Others scattered, starting to fulfil the orders they had been given, asking a bit more of their mounts. Despite the sullen, grim mood, made mostly of fatigue and disappointment, everyone knew they would be leaving once more and making sure there would be no losses that time. And they were eager.

It was a soldier's determination and loyalty towards a worthy warlord that pushed them forward.

Date was staring gloomily at the blue banners fluttering above him, his mouth twisting suddenly into a scowl, one hand on the handle of one the three katanas on his left. A space was conspicuously there and it had made him the target of many stares. One claw was missing and it was something the army perceived as grave but no one had said a word about it. It was a reminder of a near fatal blunder. The gesture on the other hand made them feel like they had too. He rarely rested his hand on the top katana. Usually the middle left one was the chosen.

"We're sorry Boss…" Magobei started, very softly, gulping before taking responsibility.

"We just couldn't find the last of the six swords on the plains of Suriagehara." Bunshichi continued, eyes downcast, sharing the burden.

Saki shook her head.

They just had to get over it and move on as brazenly as ever.

They had kept the Dragon alive at the expense of a single claw.

It was an acceptable price for her.

"«No Problem»" Date looked towards his men, smirking. If the leader showed no fear, doubt or shame his example would influence the men. Especially seeing how much they respected and admired the One-Eyed Dragon. Morale was important. "These will do me just fine." The confident smirk he had displayed faded almost immediately as he turned away, walking towards the house, freeing himself from the helmet and waraji, crossing the engawas silently, stopping in front of Katakura-sama's room.

Saki followed him quietly, looking around. Her shinobi moved around, easing on the vigilance for a moment. She signalled, telling them to have the supplies ready, call the reserves and tend to the arrivals. As soon as the army left the defences the ninja provided should be reinforced. Seeing that the clans were gathering in Oshu it seemed easy to send them a message, persuading them it would be in their interest to help.

The One-Eyed Dragon hesitated for a moment before pushing the shoji aside, staring at the empty room. Faint sunlight traced his shape on the tatami. Saki stayed back, watching. He seemed to be seeing something else as he moved in, the armour clinking faintly, loosely put over the bandages, standing in front of the Kokuryuu, picking up the blade unhurriedly, staring at the words etched near the tsuba, blue eye closing, releasing a deep breath, calming, before shifting his grip, slashing the katana through the air, testing its balance on his hand before slipping it into the empty sheath.

The Right Eye would always be there to give him what he lost.
The shinobi smiled softly. She could only hope his blade would give him some of the Right Eyes' temperance, insight and balance. Or at least remind him of Katakura-sama's voice asking him to act with forethought.

Date looked up decisively and followed her wordlessly into the meeting room. He did not sit down nor did he show any of the usual reflexive demeanour that he wore within his borders. His tension did not seem to abate either. It was an almost palpable need to move that created a buzz in the air, contagious in its restlessness.

Quietly Saki opened the maps.

Kiko had penned the other warlords' movements clearly.

It was easy to think of alternate strategies or what they might have planned through those neat annotations.

The situation seemed mostly unchanged from two nights ago, the last report she received.

Toyotomi had left to campaign against Chosokabe. The battle would be beginning soon enough, in two days at maximum. Mori might even be already working on depleting Chosokabe's resources.

Kai was still, in waiting, some reports of enemy patrols around the borders. There had been little progress in reclaiming the lands they had lost to Toyotomi and there was a high probability of a very prolonged siege to the Tiger's lands.

Sanada Yukimura seemed to be on par with Hideyoshi's march. Her shinobi said he seemed to stop and help with every pleasant plea directed to him. His good heart was costing him and his liege precious time... If the alliance with Satsuma was not made... the situation could turn dire very easily.

Echigo had deployed a contingent... Saki frowned for a moment at that. What was the War God doing? So soon after defeating the Maedas and with no other threat making itself known. Could be anything. From an invasion to simple border patrols.

Katakura-sama was awake and in the attempt of turning his loyalty he was being lied to, manipulated. The missing sword was broken and used as a persuasion symbol. Nobuko seemed impressed with the Right Eye which made some things easier. She was also sending a hit list. Shinobi, generals, advisors, suppliers, merchants, artisans... Saki frowned. If any of those names were near her agents she would let them act. War did not depend solely on an army.

The Saica had returned to their territory. It was still unclear if they had broken their alliance already...

Oni Hanzo was away with Tokugawa, joining the march towards Shikoku. It created a little chink on the ninja in service of the behemoth. Akio was on the move again, compensating for his protectors absence. Saki hoped he moved somewhere near Kai. It would be fun to involve Sarutobi.

"The fastest route to Osaka is this one." Calmly she pointed the path through Oshu, edging Echigo and Kai, cutting through Owari. "The situation seems mostly unchanged but we should be prepared for confrontations at any point. If Toyotomi keeps their pattern of action stable traitors from within these armies might try to stop your charge."

"Have the army ready by noon." Date ordered, barely looking at the maps, considering his options though.
Less than six hours… Saki sighed and straightened. A bit tight but feasible.

"Yes my Dragon." She whispered as he walked towards his room. Hopefully he would settle down for a bit, rest up, take the medicine, change the chinked armour. Now… where to start…

"«Are you ready guys!»" Date shouted as the horses sped through the path.

"Yeah" The answer was immediate, the sound rolling over the thundering clap of the hooves, showing nothing but determination. The One-Eyed dragon smirked at that, the noon sun bathing them sharply with light. It was time to get back, to fight back. To recover his Right Eye. His soldiers were still tired and battered but their enthusiasm was rekindled.

"«Hurry up!»" The horse reared its head up, dashing, the answer from his men, fuelling the speed. "<Burning up!»" There was soft scoff behind him. Saki leaned against his back in her usual spot, mocking his encouragement techniques. She had a grim frown etched on her features, her claws edging the rip on the fabric on his back. The fact that he had chosen not to change that, and only that, was somewhat meaningful.

"Uesugi's army is on the other side of the Setogawa river." She informed him softly, gesturing towards the men, deploying scouts to further assess the situation. A pair of horsemen separated from the army, one to the right, the other to the left. Date chuckled at the ease with which she bossed them around. "For now my opinion is this: We won't be able to pass those lines."

"Do they look ready for combat?" Date questioned.

"No. It looks more like a blockade."

"Then we'll wait and see."
scouts that had joined the formation moments before the foursome had crossed half of the bridge.

"And we can't find anyone resembling Uesugi Kenshin." Bunshichi looked back once again as if the warlord would appear from nowhere.

"Maybe the Uesugi have been taken by the Toyotomi too…" Samenosuke blurted out in a sudden panic.

It had happened to the four former opponents of the Date Army. Not implausible.

"Another? Are they trying to box us in again?" Yoshinao jumped into the worrisome state again.

Saki shook her head. The armours, adornments and weapons were correct for Echigo's forces. Toyotomi just changed the banners… And anyone from the Toyotomi faction would be attacking. Date was a surviving proof of Toyotomi Hideyoshi's fallibility. They would want him dead.

"©Be quiet!"» Date said, his voice slightly harsh quieting them down immediately. "Getting all worked up about this won't get us anywhere." He shook his head, chasing away some stray thoughts. "Make a quick camp. Rest up." The word was passed on quickly, the horses freed from their burdens, the formation broken. The army was somewhat appeased by that order despite the possible enemy on the other side of the stream. "Hitotoribashi huh?"

"Your greatest battle and the one that gave you control of Oshu." Saki answered, softly, picking up on his mood and memories the place was bound to evoke. He looked back. She did not seem overly worried about the forced stop. And the once bloody and barren war field was purified into rolling hills of green grass, soft warm winds and the scent of water and trees. "And the one where you lost most lives." Afterwards, a couple of weeks later, she had been hired.

Date sighed and nodded, sitting down on a campaign bench, taking the helmet off, placing it on the green grass, staring into the other side of the river one more.

"First their standoff against the Takeda at Kawakanajima and now this… they sure like to take their sweet time. The War God of Echigo…" Saki bit her lip and bowed.

"I will scout once more." She would try to find Kasuga to ask what that was about. For the moment it seemed the man was simply forcing them to break their traversing of the land, to rest up. Could it be like when the warlords had planned Oda's demise? Just trying to give each other the chance to live and fight for one more day and for the Land's sake?

Saki moved quickly and quiet, tracking down Echigo's shinobi, catching a glimpse of the War God as he was riding towards Setogawa. Uesugi Kenshin had a small guard to add to the troops already present. He did not seem in a hurry and neither did he carry any supplementary weapons or war machinery.

Maybe something would start soon despite that lack of aggression.

Kasuga was not far away from the point where Saki had spotted the man that kept her life intact, clearly returning from some sort of reconnaissance, grimly staring forward. While her focus was admirable it was still a bit reckless to loose sight of the surroundings.

Saki tossed a kunai suddenly, stopping Kasuga in mid dash, making her look up, eyes widening slightly, relaxing when she noticed that it was no enemy. At least not at the moment. Oshu's shinobi signalled her calmly, showing only willingness to talk and exchange information.
The hours spent at Hitotoribashi were of peace and quiet.

The Uesugi troops tensed only when some of the Oshu soldiers took the horses to the water, when they got too near, twitching in anticipation of a surprise attack or an attempt to break away. As nothing happened nothing was triggered.

Magobei had decided to start a fire and cook some sort of broth. Most of the men had shed their armours and tended to their wounds leisurely, relaxing on the grass, talking amongst themselves, preparing, going through motions, checking their saddlebags. They had found the time, the peace, the breathing moment that had lacked on their arrival to their territory.

Saki was glad for that forced stop.

Kasuga did not know why the War God had set his troops that way but she had confirmed that the Toyotomi infiltrators had been dealt with on her end and that her master seemed to bear no ill will against Oshu. So Saki had repaid with some titbits about Maeda Keiji and Toyotomi's movements. Whether the other knew them already or not it was irrelevant. Information had been offered.

The One-Eyed Dragon was now calmed.

Saki was sitting next to him, playing with the pair of little birds that had chosen to perch on the crescent of his helmet with bandaged hands. She had been able to check his wounds again, do some light bandaging and adjust his armour. She had walked around the plain, talking to the men and lending a hand here and there. She had poured medicine for men and horses into the boiling pot of soup and the rations. She had also declined his teasing about riding lessons. Saki refused to look foolish in front of part of Echigo's army. The shinobi opened the maps once again and peered down at them, lips thinned.

There was a sudden tension when Uesugi's white horse stood at the top of the hill, overlooking his troops. He gave no orders.

Oshu's soldiers stood, looking at the other margin, worried whispers starting to form.

Date barely reacted, just acknowledging his presence.

"Are we going to be fighting Boss?" Magobei ran to the base of the hill, shouted worriedly.

"You guys enjoy your picnic for a while longer." Date smirked and he told that to his army. "Toyotomi isn't going anywhere." He added a bit more quietly.

"Do you want to send another envoy?" Saki asked holding the little bird gently, caressing his smooth feathered head as it chirped softly. The map was telling her nothing new.

"No need." The One-Eyed Dragon dismissed the request, standing, stretching slowly.

"How are your injuries?"

"Stiff." His hand rested on the Kokuryuu. Saki nodded. It was reassuring to know. He had fought in a much worse condition once. So he should be all right and he should practice a bit. That seemed to be his intent as he drew Katakura-sama's blade, moving away and into a combat stance, going into the usual pattern.

The little bird escaped Saki's hands and perched again on the helmet, preening.

Date's stance was balanced and flowing easily, showing no inner conflict.
Whatever memories made his eye grow distant were not unpleasant ones.

Saki stood slowly as he moved through the stances, slashing the air and looked at Echigo troops after a quick sweep of her people. They had settled and the other side was not doing anything either. An unbroken standstill. Kasuga was a dark spot next to the horse, most likely reporting.

The One-Eyed Dragon stopped, sheathing the blade, pausing for a moment before slipping the last inches in, staring at the inscription. The shinobi approached.

"In the end what did the outcome of Hitotoribashi changed?" The shinobi asked calmly, trying to understand.

"I won't let the Date Army lose anyone else." Date said calmly, looking at her for a moment before checking the situation once again. It had changed him. It had given him his revenge and rule at a price he would never be willing to pay. Ever again. The One-Eyed Dragon felt ready to continue, the tension different, tempered by calm. They would still storm Osaka but it no longer was blind, devil may care dash to get to the fortress as fast as possible and improvise till he had Kojuro back. There was a semblance of a plan now.

"Uesugi is pulling out." One of the men shouted suddenly, pointing as the lines broke and the soldiers walked away from the field. Some reached for their weapons, unsure if it was really a retreat or simply a change in formation, a preparation for an attack. It was a silent, orderly withdraw as the sun rose once more. It had been roughly a day since they had settled into a makeshift camp. A night and a bit more since Uesugi had arrived.

"What the hell?" Another voices said.

Oshu's soldiers were gathering from their laid back positions, staring.

"What's this about?" More added to the bewilderment.

Date smirked and sent a challenging look at the War God, taking the reins, pulling the horse, mounting much to the confusion of his men. Saki yawned quietly and began the placing of her claws, flexing stiff fingers, looking around.

"I'm going to go say a quick thanks." The One-Eyed Dragon announced, throwing the horse into a gallop much to the shock of his men. Nevertheless they moved out of his way.

"Pack up, gear up. Get ready to move out." Saki said to the nearest retainer, breaking the daze. The rustle of movement began around her broken by occasional curious glances towards the bridge.

On the other side Uesugi seemed to have done the same, leaving the men behind, riding down the hill, both warlords crossing the bridge, blades drawn, meeting in the middle, the katanas clashing in ice and lightning, exploding in a blinding light.

They stared each other down in silence.

"I had a nice rest to cool down there." Date stopped his horse, facing the War God.

"An indomitable spirit." Uesugi Kenshin praised before sheathing his katana, turning the horse slightly. "The rest will be up to your quality and heaven's will."

"I'd say that was a clever stunt you pulled there but don't think I'm in your debt. You'll regret it." The Dragon announced cockily, smirking. Uesugi answered with a calm smile, acknowledging the
challenge.

"If you should not return I shall unify Oshu. It would not be so bad to seek to conquer the country from there." He looked towards the hills, the army and further away. Then he looked back to Date. "So you may rest easy."

"You sure are a crafty one." Date scoffed as Kenshin passed him by. "There's something about you that's a lot like the Tiger of Kai."

"You honour me." The War God said with a small smile before departing to joining his forces to return to Echigo.

Saki sighed, standing on bridge's railing.

"The army will be ready to depart in a few minutes." She announced quietly.

"Perfect."

---

Waraji – 草鞋 – A woven sandal also known as zori;
"It's demoralizing to see that broken blade..." Nobuko commented in her quiet, measured tone. Kojuro looked up from the remains of the katana that was still resting on top of the purple fabric. She was sitting formally over her ankles. "A good tactic if your heart and mind were weaker."

"I am flattered by you appraisal of my strength." Kojuro bowed his head slightly. When she chooses to appear the woman was good company. It did help ease the time and doubt. Meditation and conviction could turn brittle if a single whisper of doubt found a way to worm through.

"You are annoyed by inaction and yet considering your options carefully." Nobuko tilted her head, eyes narrowed. "How far can you be stretched before you snap?" She considered tapping the tatami gently with her fingertips, creating a foreign pulsing rhythm. The Right Eye frowned, looking down, getting caught on the blade's faint gleam.

"I could ask the same of you." He retorted finally, breaking the stare.

"We are severely trained Katakura Kojuro." The shinobi smiled, stopping the sound, hands resting on her thighs once again. "We are hurt, we are poisoned, we are tested. We treat each other as weapons when in training and duty."

"And that is how Toyotomi trains its soldiers." Kojuro mentioned. Just harsh practice with no hint of compassion or humanity, breeding a false sense of duty and loyalty born from the lack of choice.

"In a way." Nobuko admitted. "But in the end there is more to our lives than training, killing and missions."

"There is a question I would like to pose."

"I'll answer if I see fit."

"Saki. If Masamune-sama were to die what would happen?"

"She dies." Kojuro's eyes widened slightly in surprise. Nobuko nodded solemnly. Her tone had shown nothing, note one of the emotions of care she had expressed before. "My child has made two oaths to the One-Eyed Dragon." The first one was a simple service contract. The second one was a personal bond. She made it clear that it had been Saki's choice. Nobuko also believed that if the One-Eyed Dragon died both the Right Eye and her daughter would already have fallen. "If he forfeits her services it ends as any normal contract. Mission accomplished, ties severed and Saki returns to the clan to take on other duties." There was a deep pause for a time. Nobuko glance at the small slit of a window and frowned. There was a sound again, dull and cadenced. Kojuro frowned. Had she been exchanging information before? "They are returning." She informed before disappearing.

"Do you think it's about time I could get an answer from you?" Takenaka Hanbei came in, walking with a calm, victorious gait. Barely an hour had passed since the shinobi had informed him of the army's arrival. The outcome of the last campaign seemed clear to his eyes, based solely on the general's disposition. Another victory for the Toyotomi. Hanbei was arrogant enough to bring no guard with him this time. It was also a way to prove that he held no fear and felt assured of his prowess.

"I haven't seen Masamune-sama's head yet." Kojuro barely moved, still sitting meditatively in front
of the blade, eyes closed. He chose not to acknowledge any of the signs Hanbei was displaying. But it was time to confront once more. He faced the man, eyes narrowed. "Bring Toyotomi Hideyoshi here." He demanded, aggressively, arrogance in his tone. Showing him again and again the lack of proof was one of the best blows Kojuro could deliver at the moment. An angry man made mistakes more readily. "If he really did defeat Masamune-sama then I've got a score to settle."

"It seems you have absolutely no understanding of your situation." Hanbei announced haughtily, trying to mock and demean the request, as if dealing with a petulant child. The demand was still inflexible under the polite tone. Kojuro was not impressed or intimidated, much less interested. "The responsibility you bear is grave Katakura-kun." Guilt? Why was he trying to evoke guilt where not a droplet of it existed? "As the man who thwarted us a Kawakanajima, delaying the unification of the Land of the Rising Sun as well as our expansion out into the world... It is in part also your obligation to work for Toyotomi you will be a staff officer of the great army that will, in time, rule the world." Hanbei stopped, back turned towards him, staring to towards the faint sunlight that poured through the barred window. "Don't you think it's a dream come true for any man of war?" He faced Kojuro again, advancing. He was offering power. A weaker man would have taken the chance, betrayed their lord.

"I've got no interest in any world ruled by you people." Katakura Kojuro was still firm in his belief and resolve, returning to a clear dismissal.

"I am sure you'll eventually change you mind once Toyotomi takes the country." Hanbei stated once again, his conviction bordering on the obsessive. "After all there will be no other Lord to serve except Hideyoshi." And there were thousands who would rather follow their own lords to death before bowing to Toyotomi.

"I just don't get it Takenaka." Kojuro attacked suddenly, the words snapping, throwing Hanbei's discourse out of balance. It was risky but he still had to make his position known.

"Get what?"

"Don't you think this is a waste of time? At the very least you're not some idiot. And yet you take the last man in the world who would listen to you and try to recruit him using tactics that have no hope of getting him to" The lesson was ignored through a blow with the sheathed straight blade. That had managed to overset the usually calm and smug general.

"I would ask you to watch what you say." Hanbei was able to regain his serenity though. "Understand that you have no choice but to join our cause." Again. His resolve was similar if misdirected.

"What are you in such a hurry for?" Kojuro asked slowly, frowning in suspicion.

"I'm sure you'll come to admire Hideyoshi too. To admire his overwhelming strength." Hanbei stated as he walked out.

"So your patience did snap." Nobuko returned as Kojuro meditated, approaching, tilting his head, making a slight sound of disapproval applying some sort of gooey paste on his bruised cheek, patting the other side and stepping back. Rather motherly of her but he didn't comment. "Yet his words only fuel your resolve." The shinobi continued, looking around, checking each spot of the small room once again, tapping on the shoji covered stone walls, smirking, making a few quick hand gestures. "Though badmouthing the general that he fanatically devotes himself to might have been a bit of a risky gamble."
Kojuro knew. He could have broken his interest and created an execution order on his head.

Still he had to take the gamble.

"The world they desire is bleak." Nobuko settled down, staring at him calmly as he spoke. "War without meaning? Peace is not the opposite of war. It is its goal. And anyone who does not comprehend that…"

"The concepts do elude them. Choice, peace, life. Servitude is not the same as service. The strength he reveres is not real. In the end it will crumble upon itself."

"But while it does not, causes harm to everything around him." The Right Eye shook his head grimly. "Will you enlighten me now?" Kojuro asked politely. Nobuko smiled slightly, lowering her head in a nod.

"Date Masamune marches now, coming towards Osaka. He was briefly detained by Uesugi in Hitotoribashi. No hostilities resulted of that encounter."

"Hitotoribashi?"

"A rather apt choice on the War God's part. Rumours said you attempted seppukku afterwards. As a lesson to a very young, very reckless Dragon."

"In the end he had already learned the lesson I was trying to impart and showed a greater understanding of the situation than I had hoped. It was humbling."

"You were proud."

"Your child was younger still when you sent her to us. Why?"

"She was a good fit for your army."

"She is a good fit for Masamune-sama." Kojuro admitted ruefully.

"That was not in any plan, I admit." Nobuko sighed. "But from what I've heard it is rather hard not to admire him."

"Such unions are not unheard of." Kojuro said carefully.

"Are you trying to negotiate this?" Nobuko laughed. "Katakura Kojuro you are a sneaky man. Still you would need to have the One-Eyed Dragon in a position where he had the authority to shut down everyone who disagreed and you'd need an exceedingly clever trap to make my daughter back away from what she thinks is right."

"I am aware." Kojuro sighed. "Continue please."

"When Date reaches Kai there will be some difficulties as Toyotomi had been keeping the Tiger caged. A fight might be unavoidable if the army wants to keep a fast time."

"All I can do is hope that he will show some restraint and calculation. That he thinks before plunging into battle."

Nobuko shrugged.

"Toyotomi will adjust his plans to whatever comes out of that encounter. Not much to consider there."
"He might already have some ideas. The situation that would suit him best would be the same that
brought down Oda. His army is prepared for that kind of battle." Kojuro considered.

"The Demon of Shikoku, Chosokabe Motochika, has been defeated along with Fugaku." As it was
obvious from Hanbei's visit. "Mori was left in charge of conquering the Island itself." Nobuko
smiled. "He has not informed Hideyoshi that he left Shikoku alone though. A resistance was
created in the island. Some pirates that escaped, the villagers that took arms and the mechanical
traps Chosokabe is so fond of made it very difficult. But as Shikoku only fights defensively it might
be some time before Toyotomi realizes it was not a conquest, just an assassination of the land's
leader and part of the army. Some of Chosokabe's men are imprisoned here." No doubt another
attempt to convert troops to increase his own.

"Mori is not the type to stay still now that he has a clear advantage. It could be possible that he is
planning a betrayal."

"Quite true. Hanbei planned to betray him also. Now it's a matter of who springs their ploy first.
The Saica have abandoned Toyotomi and returned to their territory. They are furious. Saica
Magoichi decided it was enough."

"It is a harsh blow in Toyotomi's prowess."

"And it's making Tokugawa waver on his resolve and support. What was done to Shikoku also
weighs on his mind, especially after what Chosokabe did to rebuild Honda Tadakatsu. He was sent
away to the West afterwards with his men and a deployment of the main army. But nothing might
come of that part seeing he feels a great deal of gratitude towards the Toyotomi and is still firmly
set in the notions of honour and duty."

"Kizune-sama." A pair of voices spoke suddenly. Kojuro tensed. Nobuko barely blinked,
straightening a little. A man with a white mask and one with a black kneeled behind her, heads
down. "The location is secure."

"Start blinding them." She ordered, calmly. The two men bowed and disappeared.

"What are you doing?" Kojuro asked.

"We are tired of traitors and Warlords who destroy the land and see nothing more than glory and
conquer. We will be dealing with this unrest from the shadows." Nobuko admitted easily. "It will
come with a fee later on but it will be one that I believe is easy to pay."

Kojuro blinked as she left, thinking about her meaning.
"Boss!" Yoshinao called suddenly as the path turned sharply and the bamboo forest parted for a moment, letting them see a bit further ahead. Saki glanced in that direction, eyes narrowed, moving against Date, turning on his horse. On a plain the Takeda symbol fluttered over red fabric. It was all they could see. No soldiers were actually visible in that fraction of time, just the symbols, letting them know that a contingent stood there. "Takeda banners!" He shouted. Date had also looked, staying silent, a tic moving silently in his jaw.

Kai was still an hour or so away and that was while forcing the horses to a hard ride. A patrol there did not bode well. Still at that time it could mean a varied number of things.

"Don't tell me Toyotomi also got Takeda!" Samenosuke said, his horse slowing down for a moment as he looked away, towards the field. But that would be the first hypotheses, as worrisome as it was. The murmurs started to spread, hushed under the sound of the horses and metal. Having such an underhanded enemy was taking its toll on the trust the soldiers placed in borders, banners and other warlords. It made them uneasy and chatty amongst themselves, clamming up as soon as a stranger was nearby.

"Maybe they did." Date spoke up, silencing the talks. He scoffed, arms crossed, thinking. Saki moved a bit, examining his façade. "I don't know if the Old Man, the Tiger of Kai, would go into it with us right now." Date pondered loudly enough to be heard. The shinobi glanced up slightly, towards the sky and the tips of trees and bamboo stalks, catching the sound of the rustling leafs, finding one of Sasuke's shinobi, watching as she abandoned her post. Most likely reporting their presence. That was a good sign that the Tiger of Kai was still the one that held Kai's rule. "At any rate they're an opponent we'll have to fight someday." The One-Eyed Dragon considered slowly, almost philosophical, sighing and shaking his head before looking towards his army. He smirked, anticipating the skirmish. "Increase speed We're going to smash through them." He shouted. Saki lowered her head, taking a deep breath calmly. "Has the old man fallen to Toyotomi?" Date considered as the horse galloped.

"I'll go confirm." She answered, placing her clawed palm on his shoulder, shadowing, chasing the other ninja, trying to intercept before going into the Tiger's territory.

The Tiger of Kai's abode had not changed much on those years. Maybe it was a bit brighter, less gloomier than last time she had been there but still... She arrived quickly and carefully with no threat or alarm raised. The soldiers were well trained but she was not too keen on announcing her presence just yet. The audience room was still in the same place and she could hear voices from within, the tone hushed. Saki reached for the shoji to announce her presence when the Tiger's voice rose once again, deep and grave, less contained than before but nowhere near its usual boisterousness. The shinobi stopped, glancing around, trying to pinpoint spies or patrols, moving her hands softly, further camouflaging her presence, listening in.

The Tiger still ruled. Now if she heard something else to give Date an edge before reporting the issue with the banners it would be lovely. In her way she'd seen them, the Toyotomi keeping vigil over the land of Kai discarding their banners and donning the Tiger's colours.

"What of the movements of the troops surrounding us?" The Tiger of Kai was asking after the long silence that had preceded her arrival. It seemed what they had been discussing before seemed to weigh heavily in their minds. A lost general away from the land and the warlord's influence.
"They have done nothing so far." Sasuke answered without hesitation. "They have shown no signs of hostility towards our people nor of preparing any attack. They only seem to be keeping an eye on the Takeda in force. I have arranged for us to be informed immediately is something happens." Sarutobi reassured his employer calmly. Most likely he had already proceeded to eliminate the ones that had infiltrated Kai in the years before Toyotomi revealed his ambitions.

Saki smirked slightly, ruefully. No. She had interfered in that. But she would warn them anyway.

"Having survived Toyotomi clandestine invasion of Oshu Date Masamune has taken back control of the surrounding lands. I expect he must be heading for Osaka." The Tiger continued after careful consideration. So all the Land of the Rising Sun knew already that the Dragon had not been truly defeated.

"I believe he shall e passing nearby soon." Sasuke informed. He either had someone else she missed in the paths or was just guessing based on the quickest and easiest route an army could take. "But I am surprised. With his Right Eye taken I believed even the One-Eyed Dragon may be in a precarious position now…" Sasuke was saying.

"Takeda-sama." Saki called softly, opening the shoji, walking inside, closing the screen. There was slight sign of surprise crossing Sasuke's face. Bothering to use an actual entrance was something of an oddity. Takeda Shingen laughed heartily, slamming one hand against his knee. The shinobi moved, bowing respectfully but not too close. Old alliances were shifty and that one had been temporary and out of a desperate situation. "The Toyotomi force that surrounds you has donned Takeda banners and is trying to cut the One-Eyed Dragon's path." She informed him, smirking at Sasuke's expression, the knowledge his people had yet to report. "I was sent here to see if you were still alive and ruling."

"So that is what's going on." Shingen considered, examining the shinobi. Then he sighed, growing quiet as he considered what those movements meant in terms of strategy and in the greater scheme of world domination Toyotomi upheld. "That damn Toyotomi." Takeda growled out, annoyed, standing, reaching for the axe.

Saki closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath, shaking of the slight tiredness that seemed to linger. So the Tiger of Kai was going to interfere. She stood and turned to leave. Might as well inform Date of the situation and go from there…

Sasuke gripped her shoulder and smirked.

"Come on." He encouraged, extending his hand. Saki smiled back and clasped it, walking outside, their free hands moving in tandem, the symbols clear and sharp.

"All Right!" Date shouted, going into the fray, the horse charging quickly amongst the soldiers, his troops following closely, the open field perfect for combat, the enemy lines firmly planted, his hand falling on the Kokuryuu, the gesture stopping, his head stopping for a moment, looking around suddenly.

There was something that was not right there… the formations… his soldiers swept through the tight lines. But the organization, the way they stood their ground as he circled and flanked them preparing to attack. And the lack of Takeda's presence when the Old Man had a very clear habit of presiding and stepping into all of his battles.

"One-Eyed Dragon!" He recognized the ninja of Kai's voice, looking up. Sasuke and Saki flew over the field, carried by a bird of shadow created through their connected hands, crossing the place
where a living creature would have the heart. "These guys aren't our troops. It's a Toyotomi trap." He shouted as the bird pulled up, the Tiger of Kai's arrival was announced by shouts, the man standing in the middle of the battlefield, suddenly, without flinch or fear hoisting his axe.

"Had to be, right..." Date chuckled, smirking, slipping the katana free, charging towards the Tiger who assumed the position to withstand and combine. The enemy soldiers seemed to be hesitating, caught between their actual loyalty and the farce that was broken by the appearance of their supposed leader.

Fire and lightning swept through the battlefield as the blades of their weapons crossed in a storm of war.

The field had been cleared and the Date army was standing by, ready for orders. The Tiger of Kai was waiting for the Dragon to talk. Date looked around, seeing the damages after the combat, standing in front of Shingen without actually acknowledging him for the time being. He was thoughtful and calm for a moment, the blade in his hand waving slightly before being sheathed.

The One-Eye Dragon scoffed, resuming his usual outside attitude.

"To think they'd set up a fake force to egg me on..." Derision and disdain didn't even begin to cover the shades poured within his tone. "Toyotomi uses some childish tricks." He criticized, crossing arms, waiting for the Tiger's opinion.

"Though it looked as if you had been fooled at first." Takeda commented, glancing at the katana that replaced the missing claw. "Did you perhaps hear the Right Eye's voice scolding you as you were about to unsheathe that sword?" His tone grew serious once again after that playful banter, examining the troops that had taken the guise of his men. He adjusted the axe, sinking blade into the ground to have his arms free, one hand rubbing his goatee, growing deep into thought."This is likely an opening gambit." He declared, having reached his conclusion. "Toyotomi probably intends to decide on what measures to take next depending on how we react."

"If he went to the trouble of throwing me against you..." Date shrugged while pondering.

"It is unlikely that they think such a tactic would result in the Takeda and Date's mutual demise." The Tiger of Kai gave his opinion. They shared a history and had relied on each other to defeat Oda. There would be losses until the misunderstanding had been cleared but total elimination would not be a realistic outcome. Most likely they just wanted to force them to contact. "They may be hoping that we will join forces once again." Shingen concluded with grim finality.

"What do you mean?" Date asked, eye narrowed. It was his conclusion also but the Tiger's strategist reputation deserved some consideration. And if he could garner some advantage from that conversation it would be perfect.

"They must want to dispose of us at the same time." The Tiger of Kai elaborated calmly, looking at the field and the fallen. He was not referring just to Date or Takeda. He was talking about all the warlords. "From their perspective they boast an overwhelmingly powerful force so rather than defeating individual opponents it is more convenient to attack everyone at once." Small battles were more costly and could be unpredictable. "Perhaps what is most desirable for Toyotomi is a re-enactment of the encirclement on the Oda."

An all out attack with little strategy but a burning desire to eliminate the enemy.

"All they do is sit back and wait and then take us down all at once, leaving the country under their
rule huh?" Date scoffed, fingers tapping over the handle, annoyed. "That is an awfully convenient scenario." They were playing them for fools, creating a trap and just staying low and take them out when they fell into it, lured by a situation that would make them think they were safe.

"However we could actually take him up on it as well." Takeda pointed out the opportunity. "We may enter an alliance but that does not necessarily mean we have to march together." He straightened and announced his proposal. "One-Eyed Dragon would you think of trying to take Odawara?" Date tilted his head, eye narrowed. "If the Date take Odawara we can take Utsunomiya and rely on Uesugi to play his part we would have warriors from Kasugayama in Echigo to Oshu at our backs and it would be possible for us to form a solid wall across the east."

Instead of attacking they would create a sort of fortress behind a line of alliance. That being said it could mean the Toyotomi could use their army as the sea, sending wave after wave and chipping at their walls until the alliance fell.

"That may be a wise plan on its own way but you know what my answer will be right?" Date smirked and glanced at his men. "The Date Army marches straight to Osaka." He announced cockily, his enthusiasm and confidence mirrored by the shout that answered his order. "There is something I've got to take back and a score I've got to settle first."

Saki clicked her tongue, sitting next to Sasuke on a nearby tree, listening in attentively. The sun was high. If they departed soon they would have a few hours of hard ride but would be able to make up for the lost time. Sasuke was examining the list that had been intercepted by Toyotomi shinobi before reaching him.

"The Celestial Mistress thinks its time?" She ruled Saki's clan. But none of her predecessors had ever ruled all clans. They mostly kept separated but tightly knit by bloodlines, cooperation and business sense. Regardless she had now assumed control.

"As far as I know she already started." Saki admitted.

"Where does that leave us?"

"The effect will only be clear after Toyotomi falls."

"But the scale will weight heavily towards the One-Eyed Dragon's faction."

Saki lowered her head a bit. Nobuko was scheming and crafty. But in the end she was still her mother.

"Look at him. That would have been the case regardless."

Sasuke shrugged noncommittally.

"If the Right Eye of the Dragon was here he might tell you to go along with my plan." Takeda noted. It was a sound plan that maximized their advantages. Still if one fell it would leave the others somewhat weakened.

"Too bad for you Kojuro's not here." Date scoffed, slightly aggressive on that note, mimicking the Tiger of Kai's gesture. "That's why I'm going." He shrugged, getting rid of the bad traces that covered the issue. "Where is that Sanada Yukimura?" He changed the subject to his playmate and favoured opponent.

"I sent him to Kyushu to form an alliance with the forces defending Satsuma." Takeda announced, watching him walk towards the dark horse, gripping the reins.
"Well bravo. So you plan to attack from the far west as well." The One-Eyed Dragon smirked. "But I feel bad for him. I'll be taking down Toyotomi before that happens."

"Surely even you do not think you can bring him down so easily no matter how much pride and will power you bring to bear." The Tiger of Kai warned, slightly worried. "They are not an opponent you can win against in a proper fight by charging their inner sanctum with a solitary force."

"I didn't plan to go there to die." Date said with ease, shrugging. Saki shadowed away from the tree and joined him near the horse, near the rest of the army. "Not that there's any chance that I won't die either."

"A Dragon who does not soar might as well be dead to begin with, is it?" Shingen said philosophically, examining the younger general.

"That's right. I can't let him have it." He went silent for a moment, thinking back. "When I saw those guys... when I first saw that battlefield my gut feeling told me there was something wrong with Toyotomi Hideyoshi." Date glanced at the distance, in the direction of Osaka and the man's den. "True he is strong but there is something just not right. I will not recognize his strength as strength even if it kills me." His hand tightened on the katana, scowling for a moment. "Something about him makes me feel that way."

Shingen nodded, understanding the issue. He glanced at Saki.

"Would you advise him to take the path I proposed?" It was a last attempt to sway Oshu's army.

"I would not. Katakura-dono would believe it best. If it were any other enemy I would agree. But this..." Saki admitted, sighing. "I on the other hand think that any kind of alliance is exactly what Toyotomi is looking for. Why else would he force contact?" Date placed his horse on parallel with her, pulling her onto the beast's rump, moving towards the Tiger of Kai.

"Old Man... if I end up kicking the bucket..." Date stopped, smirking. "Nah. That's just not me. Give my best to Sanada Yukimura." He said, waving jokingly, the horse passing the Tiger of Kai, signalling the army to move on.

"Owari should be reached tomorrow, by day's end." Saki opened the map, placing it between them, the small gandou providing the light, showing him the army's progress after finishing her report. Where was the enemy, who had he lost or destroyed, how much support or advantages they could expect while on the move.

"Then it's a simple matter of cutting through here and Osaka will be in sight." Date pointed out, tracing the path with his fingertips. In the map it seemed fairly straightforward. But they were getting closer. He grinned, eager. The shinobi smiled slightly. That was far from reassuring but it was his way. She was there to make sure he survived.

"There will be traps. Mostly because we'll be skirting Iga territory." Saki stared at the map for a while before rolling it and placing it on its place. There was also the possibility that one of Toyotomi's deployments or even a general could be placed to stall or destroy them. It would have been so much easier if he just allowed her to go to Osaka and break the Right Eye out of his cell. But despite her pleads it was a path he kept firmly forbidden.

The camp had been set, the area scanned and prepared to be as defensible as possible, the time lost in battle and negotiations recovered as best as they could, the horses and men settling into the
assigned patrols or resting times. There was water and food for men and beast. She and Date were away from the confusion, plotting.

"This makes you uneasy?" Date noticed the closed expression in the silence that followed as he removed the armour and most of his clothes. The bandages were stained with sweat and the remnants of the medicine she had used to soothe the bruises. Saki was placing the kusuri near, around her, preparing for the usual. Not one person on that army was immune to the aches pains and residual soreness from the last combats. Especially the battles that happened before leaving Oshu. Her wounds needed tending too although most of them were already closed and with a fresh layer of frail skin under the dried blood. The stiffness of her members was irritating.

"The Iga are under Toyotomi control due to their contract with Tokugawa Ieyasu." It was not news but it was something to be wary of as they rode. "What worries me it's the Koga traitor under Hanbei's employ."

"What can you tell?" Date asked calmly.

"In this it's not a matter of can." Saki said, her voice low as she started to work on the bandages, her movements slow, poking the bruises occasionally to test how tender they were. "It's an issue of not wanting." Date grunted in acknowledgement, staying out of the bulky war apparel, watching as she undressed, ignoring him after all was done.

The light was deliberately pointing away from her. It looked like it was a casual thing, just the light left there, but he knew better. Saki hadn't really allowed him to see what had been done to her. The One-Eyed Dragon moved as she was distracted, hitting the gandou lightly, making it shine on her.

Saki's back grew tense, noticing the shift of the light, glancing at him for a moment but saying nothing as she worked. He mentioned nothing either, just taking the situation into account, moving closer, wrapping his arms around her shoulders from behind, pulling her down, allowing her to settle against him. As soon as he felt her relax, eyes closing for a moment the One-Eyed Dragon moved, picking her up. Her eyes opened suddenly, searching his face for a moment, deciding what to do.

Sorrow and worry, hunger and longing… They hadn't... but she had not missed the urgency with which he held her when she was sleeping nor the tightening on his arms when she left them. His claws were keeping what he had close and protected.

The shinobi remained still against him, turning her head slightly against his skin, kissing it over his heart. He placed her down on his sleeping mat, straddling her upper thighs, warm against her, resting most of his weight on his knees, hands on her back, softly, lightly, letting her grow accustomed to his touch before sliding them down her spine, rubbing slow patterns, stealing away what little fabric prevented him from touching her fully.

Date smirked when she groaned, crossing arms under her head, hiding her face between them, a small telling sound, arching into him only to be pushed down by his hands, calloused by the swords, increasing the weight of his touch as he repeated the path, sliding firmly over her back, around her neck before kneading her shoulders. It seemed to be working.

"You're usually so quiet..." He whispered, leaning fully against her, his hands around her hips, slipping easily into the fabric of her pants, nipping the shell of her ear before going lower, getting the rest of her clothes out of the way, nuzzling her neck for a moment before longs strokes moulded her legs, avoiding the ticklish spot behind her knees.

Saki pressed her lips together, keeping her voice mute, hiding deeper between her arms.
Which only made him grow bolder with his hands and lip.

The shinobi arched, her hand grasping the mat, letting out a small grunt, eyes closed. Date's hands had slid under her, moving her altogether too relaxed form, cupping her breasts, slipping down her stomach, going lower still.

"And you are too loud my Dragon." Saki managed to whisper as his fingers coaxed her. He nipped her harshly between shoulder and neck, punishing her quip, getting a gasp out of the action, petting her to an orgasm that she was barely able to muffle.

The One Eyed Dragon smiled, a touch of arrogance in his expression, parting her thighs for him, thrusting into her, feeling her wet and warm, as welcoming as ever, chuckling when a barely contained mewl came from her lips, slender but bruised and cut fingers scrapping the mat under her. He bowed over her, a gentle touch moving over her skin, leaning, taking Saki's hand, moving his body demanding, his voice whispering her to follow, to give herself once again. Saki arched in a feline manner, gasping his name, letting him hear it even as he roared.

It was a stolen moment, maybe all they would have for days or even months if the rushing of Osaka failed and the campaign dragged on. Or if the worse came to pass and Oshu fell. She touched her unsettled heart lightly. They just had to fight.

Gandou – ? – Portable lantern using a bucket to focus the candlelight in a beam. A gyroscopic device inside kept the candle steady;
Chapter 25

Nobuko smirked as she heard about the foiled plans and Hanbei's plotting. Another loss for him, another setback, another need to repurpose their army. And as a servant announced the Maeda presence in the fortress she knew Toyotomi was about to lose another piece of their prowess. As little as it was it would still be a hindrance. And all the talk of a new weapon. If it was what she believed it would sooner be used against the Toyotomi that in their benefit.

The losses that were happening from the shadows all over the country were still silent. She walked away calmly, her path crossing with Akio who had been summoned to Hanbei's presence. The Celestial Mistress's hands slid lovingly over the hidden blades in her sleeves while keeping her face neutral. *Not your kill...* she reminded herself, vanishing when no one was near.

So that was it. Nobuko thought, observing from the upper halls, peering into the courtyard, listening to the coughs and wheezes that were growing louder and more pained, audible even in her above spot.

Takenaka Hanbei was dying. It was interesting that he had been able to conceal it with so many agents within those walls. But it was not a vital piece of information. Too bad he hadn't died already. No one had ordered a hit and the ones against Toyotomi had failed. And she had forbidden any more losses.

But a dying strategist only meant that he was in a haste and explained the forceful way he wanted to proceed with Toyotomi's army. It also explained a bit more clearly why he had taken Kojuro.

A substitute.

He would have been luckier trying to persuade Mori.

Even if it would backfire horribly in the end.

But surely he was prepared for that.

"Matsunaga is arriving." Shiro whispered, deeply shadowed. Nobuko glanced at him for a moment, frowning. That man was very eager to answer the call after hiding and pursuing his treasures silently for those five years.

"Can you get me a copy of what he is being promised?" The reassuring silence and sudden absence of her guard was a good answer. She leaned forward, eyes narrowed.

Another wildcard that would sooner stab a man in the back and then take his possessions without qualm or care for promises other warlords held so sacredly high. Such ruthless flexibility was admirable. Unfortunately it was also in her way.

Most of the land was clean already, the subplots Hanbei had created with the shinobi and traitors he had available undermined. They had had some success in shattering some of the support of the hidden north force but not disabling all of them. Battle would soon break in Satsuma as first Toyotomi's deployment should be arriving. Mori would leave Aki to support and then betray. Toyotomi would be leaving for Odawara at dawn and Hanbei would be headed to Harima to intercept the future Mori betrayal as soon as he was informed of the movements.

Date was still on the move and edging closer, the only general that was not pinned or defending.
Nobuko fully expected her child to disregard Date's orders as soon as he loosened the leash and just grab the Right Eye so the One-Eyed Dragon could perform a proper and speedy defeat of the Toyotomi.

Nobuko tapped the wooden railing gently and went back inside to find a comfortable eavesdropping position in the main meeting room. She did not like repeating hiding spots and with Fuma Kotaro coming along loyal, for now, to Matsunaga she preferred to employ a lot more care.

Fuma was a clan-less mercenary but had never betrayed the shinobi. He chose to stay free of the family obligations and links, keeping the all in good business politics. If she could, as soon as he showed signs of completing his agreed duties to Matsunaga, it would be in the allied clan's interest to present a proposal and a hefty sum.

The steps were different from the usual.

Patrols had a rhythm.

Hanbei was easy to tell by the light sounds and the sounds the armours made when bowing.

The ones that came closer were harder, more self assured. New and unfamiliar was all he could say for the moment.

Kojuro opened his eyes slowly, breaking out of his meditative trance. He should be ready to face whatever, whoever came through that entrance.

Dusk was settling, making the cell darker and oppressing. Another trick to break the imprisoned. Soon though a faint moonlight would pour through the small gaps in the bars. As soon as his eyes grew accustomed it was quite soothing.

The lock mechanisms creaked when the guards outside allowed the visitor to pass. Or could be an executor. His words toward Hanbei could not have been clearer. Maybe it had been finally decided he was too much trouble and indeed impossible to turn.

"It had been a while Right Eye of the Dragon." A deep voice stated, accompanying the general that no one had seen for the last five years.

Kojuro's eyes widened for a moment, in recognition, rage and wariness.

"Matsunaga." Kojuro gave him his name, harsh and in disgust, to hide the stare the view had brought him. Matsunafa crossed the cell, barely glancing at its imprisoned, looking towards the small window, a slight smug smile on his face.

The Right Eye of the Dragon had seen them man blown with the statue at Todai-ji. At the time he had not questioned it. It was a common attitude. A better to die than be killed sort of path that left the victor incomplete, the target snatched away before triumph. Or just feeling relief that he was finally gone.

Sarutobi and Saki had questioned the convenience of the setup.

Kojuro had been happy to let the dust settle and walk away with the swords and men, with no lives lost on their faction and alliance.

"Oh… the netherworld had little in the way of noteworthy treasures, you see." The ermit general turned, still wearing the same smug smile, seemingly unchanged by time. It was unsettling but his
discipline was not going to break because of the return of a supposedly dead man. Even if at the
time he had been the one that had been robbed of the finishing blow. "I thought I would come and
find some more amusement amongst the living."

The same kind of provocation said in an unemotional way.

"Free to come and go amongst the living and the dead?" Kojuro stated, keeping his own veneer of
calm, sparing a glance, a glare. "I wouldn't put it past you."

"Sensibly received." Matsunaga appraised with approval, turning, hands behind his back, still
looking around, cataloguing everything in sight. "Life and death of men is ultimately a trivial
matter."

"So you're after Toyotomi's treasures, is that it?" It was the only thing Kojuro believe would make
Matsunaga move and actually act.

"It is not as if I have come to steal." It was an easy admission, a slight shrug moving his shoulders
as he approached. "Toyotomi's commendable strategist asked for my help." Matsunaga turned,
measured steps bringing him closer. "I have been charged with the task of annihilating the Date
Army. I will receive the treasures as remuneration for that." He was staring at the broken blade
after casually announcing his mission, uncaring about the lies Hanbei had planted. "You must have
sensed that the One-Eyed Dragon is still alive." Matsunaga smirked for a brief moment, something
that reassured no one. "There is no better bait than his Right Eye to lure the Dragon in."

"Why bother assigning this task to you?" Kojuro kept his voice under control, slightly worried,
baffled.

"Unfortunately for you I have no interest in Toyotomi's strategy." That was all he was going to say
on the question. Whether he knew or just did not care was anyone's guess. His eyes were on the
broken claw. "But what a shame. I thought this would be an opportunity for me to obtain the Six
Dragon Claws as well, but to think that is now one sword short..." He placed a knee on the tatami,
gloved hand hovering above the sword before gripping it, examining it in the fading light. Kojuro
kept still, without reaction. Broken and lost it was still part of a set, a shard of Masamune's soul
and it pained his general to have it taken like that. "But treasures are profound things. There are as
many ways to appreciate them as there are people. Worn, scarred and no longer quite in its original
shape..." He took the blade, standing, walking a bit, back turned. Why? It was such a careless,
carefree thing to do... "One could say that that is what makes a truly supreme and rare article." There was a slight thoughtful pause.

The fusuma was open, the wooden bars beyond it also left unbolted.

Kojuro's eyes darted towards that. It was a chance. If he timed it right he could actually... go
through the corridors, go through the gates. Take a katana, take a horse...

"If the One-Eyed Dragon himself were also such a man..." Matsunaga continued, dragging his
attention back. Kojuro tensed under an unmoving aspect. "If he finds his Right Eye all but dead...
reunited with his greatest treasure might he not rejoice, shedding tears from his one eye?"

"You are trash." Kojuro answered simply to those mad ravings. A shadow shifted outside for a
briefest flicker. But in a fortress full of shinobi he could not be sure that that one shift was an ally,
an enemy or simply a light moving in the corridor due to wind or patrol.

"There is but one thing that Toyotomi strategist has forbidden. That I must not kill you. Put another
way..." Matsunaga still had not turned.
"Matsunaga!" Kojuro interrupted, taking his chance.

Throwing one of the pins of his jacket's collar, the one inscribed with Duty, throwing it hard towards the man, was a first decoy, crouching when he used the broken sword to deflect the projectile, gripping the katana, pulling it out of its scabbard, preparing the blade to attack.

Before he could a blade was pressed to his neck, the space in-between him and the enemy occupied by a shinobi clad in black and white appeared in a flash of shadow and feathers, forcing him to a still stalemate.

"It means that as long as I don't kill you he does not care what I do to you." Matsunaga continued, having him pinned, chuckling slightly. "How intriguing."

"Reckless. The lot of you men." Kojuro flinched slightly in response to the acrid harsh tone Nobuko was using, cutting though the haze that was caging his mind. He recalled Matsunaga's presence and the shinobi he used against him. And a mist... "You faced him before and were fully aware that he has a preference for trickery and poison." The Right Eye sighed and began to move, sitting. The shinobi helped him carefully until he was once again sitting in a meditative position, taking a deep breath, his eyes clearing.

"It was a chance." He justified sourly, the edges a bit frayed after the dragging of time between the walls, thinking back on the open cage. It could have been a trap but it had been a chance. "I had to take it."

Nobuko's dark eyes narrowed.

Then she slapped the back of his head, huffing, unbalancing him.

Kojuro's hands touched the flooring. He stared at her, startled. Then he coughed, pulling his hair back, regaining the usual calm and calculation that made him a master strategist. As the days passed he found that he had to actually make an effort to be and act calm. It was not a good sign.

It had been a long time since anyone had treated him like a stubborn youngster.

"Was it a poison?" He asked, still feeling the after-effects.

"A mild one. Then..." The shinobi said softly, staring him down. "Tell me what you believe."

Kojuro closed his eyes and analysed the facts.

"He broke the masquerade Hanbei was keeping." Which meant the loyalties were not solid. Matsunaga only served himself. "I believed he would take me as bait." He added.

The conversation about the Dragon shedding tear and Matsunaga's usual methods...

Nobuko scoffed at him, still glaring.

It made his spine feel iced actually.

"A rumour is a lot easier to handle than a live male that when he had a chance to make it and actually escape, goes for the nearest katana and head on against the enemy." The kunoichi said in a very silky tone. "An enemy that has all the advantages." He flinched. It was a miscalculation born of anger, throwing the original idea away, true. Nobuko sighed in the moonlight, standing, looking towards the outside. "He is a bomb specialist. He can take down an army without needing an
army."
Chapter 26

Another empty day of riding.

Too much of that with all the delays and doubts was starting to dampen their spirits.

Fortunately they were two days away from being close enough to unleash the planned attack.

That perspective seemed to perk the men up.

Still they had to reach Toyotomi’s city.

Throughout the day she had disposed of a couple of scouting patrols, five shinobi, misled the guards of several posts on the roads and found a multitude of side paths to cut even more the riding time and the distance to Osaka.

Now night was falling and she was sure the camp was being made. But she was away from them, watching a suspicious group dig the ground, moving heavy devices around. There was a heavy scent of explosives on the area. They had no banners and no one seemed to be there to command them. Just men, soldiers and workers, following orders. Maybe a building project?

She nibbled her lip uneasily.

It was on a path that would not be a first choice. As choices went it would be the last resort road they would pick. Unless something like a truly imposing army force pressed them out of the roads.

Still something was wrong with that...

Report.

It was a simple call she whispered to the wind before she vanished from sight. If any of her contacts or ally was in the area she would have her answer. If not she could safely assume that there was an enemy about.

People moved in the shadows, behind the trees, as she returned, stopping, watching. The edges of the camp were visible, the glow of torches marking its position. A very small army of simply equipped men was preparing what seemed to be a quickly patched and executed ambush. The shinobi sighed, bowing her head for a bit. They had insignias that she recognized and they were not associated with Toyotomi.

On the contrary actually.

Still they were displaying a bit of hostility in that plan to waylay Date.

Saki shadow stepped, appearing next to the One-Eyed Dragon.

"Claws our Boss. We have company." She announced calmly as the adversaries started to move in. The army was quick to mobilize, to answer defensively. No one attacked on either side.

"They got some nerve. Let's see what they got." Date smirked, looking around quickly, pinpointing the boss.

A tall man, built like a warrior and not shy about showing it, the spiky white hair pulled back. His
left eye was covered but his right was a clear sea-blue. The massive anchor and chain rested across his shoulders and under the magenta jacket he was bare-chested, smiling widely, swaggering towards the One-Eyed Dragon. Saki smiled slightly, just a tilt of the corner of her lips, appreciating the figure he cut between shadow and light.

Chosokabe Motochika moved the anchor, slamming it on the ground, staring at Date. For a man that was believed dead, killed by Toyotomi, he was looking unbelievably spry. The again so was the One-Eyed Dragon.

"Hey there. Mind if we borrow your horses." He announced, the voice slightly rough and boisterous, the smug smile extremely familiar. That did not sit well with the army that started murmuring and growing agitated.

Saki took a sudden deep breath and allowed a deeper sigh out, pressing one clawed hand against her forehead, the sharp tips curled away from her skin as she rubbed the sudden frustrated headache that was sure to come. Another one… after almost six years it was very easy to recognize when the Dragon was getting riled up and ready to start a brawl.

All the signs were there.

The encouragement and readiness to enter said brawl on part of his own army and adversaries would not help matters at all.

"You're hilarious." Date crossed his arms after gesturing to his army to tone it down, stepping forward to be right in front of the newcomer. Like mirror images despite Motochika being clearly taller and buffer. The weapon most likely helped built said physique. It most likely also made him slower to attack than the One-Eyed Dragon. She had only words, information and rumours one the man. What she had seen of him in the final battle against Oda were mere glimpses. No true way to gauge his potential but to speculate. "You're nothing but a bunch of bandits." True they looked ragtag but there were still hints about their actual natures scattered about. "Who the hell do you think I am?"

"Ah. Hold it there." Motochika chuckled, tilting his head in a mild challenge. "Too bad for you we're not bandits. We're pirates." There was a cheer erupting from his men at that, a sort of answer born of pride and loyalty. "We finally managed to get here by drifting along the sea. Sorry but I've got my reasons for doing this." An apologetic attacker… interesting. Still it would be empty bravado on anyone else.

Those two were serious though.

"Perfect." Date's hand was in the swords, getting ready to draw the in challenge. "Either way this is no way to ask someone for a favour." He scolded with nonchalance. "You show in the middle of the mountains but you call yourself a pirate so you've got a decent sense of humour too. Put that together with that «crazy» weapon of yours..." Both men were smirking, amused and cocky. Saki sighed, seeing the mirror all too clearly. "I like you." Dear gods, spirits and demons protect the world… the shinobi thought, not amused in the least. Those two would be too much for the land to handle, a terror... Katakura-sama would have grey hairs even before his time if that encounter ever became some kind of alliance.

"Hey bro here's some friendly advice. Hand over the horses without a fight." One of the pirates was shouting, clearly egging the army on. Behind him his brothers in arms cheered and jeered.

"Aniki is on the edge right now." Another added, arms crossed, head tossed backwards, in provocation.
"You'll be sorry if you get into it with him." More instigation yet again. Pirates liked to be loud. It made their threat seem even greater.

"The hell was that?!" The Date army was not one that liked to be outdone or mocked. It was deeply ingrained in their pride. Seki kept rubbing the edges of the promised migraine, actually considering getting some kusuri for it.

"You better not get cocky with us!" Yoshinao was next in the answering roster, pulling one of thuggish faces, glaring ahead. Everyone was behind his statement, making noise. So much damn noise. Saki looked around a bit worried, thinking about the little cover and deceit she had woven around their path, feeling it thoroughly shattered.

"If you think you can go against the Boss you're ten years early!" Magobei spat out, hands raising to further demark the difference in their levels.

"You got a pretty enthusiastic bunch there." The Dragon commented. Both leaders seemed mostly unaware and uncaring about what was transpiring behind them. Actually no. they seemed to enjoy that their armies were such a painfully un-stealthy horde.

"Looks like you've got a lot of spirited men yourself." The Demon retorted, swinging his anchor, taking a combat stance. Date chuckled and responded.

"The least you can do is let me enjoy this." The One-Eyed stepped further into the empty field that separated the armies. "Since you've decided to take this gamble."

"Don't worry. I've got a policy against cheating."

"Saki. Don't interfere." Date called, unsheathing a sword, swooping down for the first attack.

"I am not Katakura-dono." Saki retorted calmly. She would not interfere unless there was a true danger.

The attacks were quick, the size of the weapon seemingly not hindering the man at all. He had the style and the confidence to pull attack after attack but it seemed they were evenly matched, capable of keeping each others' speed and strength.

Motochika lost his weapon. Saki's eyes widened slightly, noticing that he had done it on purpose, moving on to attack with his hands, hitting Date in the gut, caught off guard, walking calmly and cockily, trying to land a kick. It was answered with a swift jab of the Dragon's elbow on the white haired head. The pirate stepped back, recovering the anchor, returning to the frantic attacks of metal clashing with metal.

"Aniki!" The pirate's crew was chanting in unison, fists pumping into the air sharply, marking each cheer.

The Date army was brought to a silent moment of shocked disbelief, exchanging glances. Yoshinao groaned angrily, moving suddenly, starting to clap and intoning, quickly followed by the rest of the men, both hymns echoing sharply around them.

"Boss!" clap, clap, clap.

Saki groaned and crossed her arms, still watching the match. That seemed to be the problem with it actually. They were matched. So the fight was bound to drag on until they were the ones dragging around and claiming they could still fight when lacking the strength to even move their legs.
"Unexpected party. Looks like it'll be a warm up before I go beat up Toyotomi." Date was saying as they stopped, parting to prepare the second part of the combat, the first impressions taken.

"I guess you're not just the leader of some lame crew tooling around." Motochika was now appraising Date a bit closer, both men circling each other in preparation.

"«That's right.»" Date smirked, sheathing the single blade before pulling out all six, lightning building around the metal. "Even if you develop a taste for it now that you made me draw my six swords there won't be a second time. «You see»"

"Right back at you."

They jumped against each other once again, this time seemingly holding nothing back, roaring, one of fire, the other electrified, the weapons crossing with such speed and precision it became a blur of light and sparks. Saki scoffed. They were both getting seriously into it and yet not actually. It had become more of a friendly spar she though as rock was shattered from one of the missed blows. Fighting people of similar skills was always such an important thing for these warlords. She sighed and looked up, waiting.

"Six swords and that crescent moon…" the pirates were starting murmur.

"Could it be…"

"He's seriously strong and the way he wields that anchor…" the army was starting to feel confused too.

"Can't be…"

Saki smiled slightly as the combatants stopped with gleeful smiles etched on their faces. It was a rather beautiful thing to see.

"«You rock» So you really are a pirate huh?"

"No wonder. Who'd have thought I'd run into the Azure Dragon I have heard so much about."

"What is the Demon of Onigashima doing, trying to steal horses?"

"Don't say that. Well to put it bluntly our backs are to the wall. I'm out to get some payback for the expensive fortress they wrecked and to rescue my men who were captured. I'm headed to Osaka, same as you."

Saki sighed again, seeing the dreaded alliance come to life. She moved closer softly, taking the helmet Date passed to her. Motochika was giving orders as his men joined the small war camp. The shinobi smirked suddenly and moved, slapping them both on the back of the head, tilting the forward before vanishing, leaving the men alone.

"Feisty little thing you've got there…" Motochika commented.

"It's her way to tell us we were fools." Date chuckled rubbing away the sting.

"«Hop to it»" Date shouted as the armies moved, sharing horses. As discussed after Saki had returned from another venture, trying to see if anyone had been following Motochika's progress, the added number of men created a greater advantage whether on the field or in the possibility of diversion. It was something to consider after that day when Osaka would be a mere three hours
away from the spot they had chosen to camp in. "Osaka's just a stone's throw away. Let's get our revenge!"

Date's army answered with a loud cheer.

"We'll pay back the Toyotomi for everything they did and get all our friends back! Got it you sons of bitches?!

"Aniki!" the Demon's army was no less enthusiastic when they shouted.

"Excellent." Date took a deep breath, turning to Motochika. "I heard your ship was something else. But it's good that you're not tied down anymore."

"True the Fugaku itself is not good for sneak attacks. It's been a while and the land breeze feels fine too." The pirate paused for a moment, his expression growing dark. But that bastard Mori… teaming up with Toyotomi like it was nothing. Why didn't he at least show enough mettle to settle matters between us on his own?!

"Eh?" Date asked without words, catching the sounds over the sounds of war.

"Sorry. I was thinking." Motochika allowed a sharp sigh to come out before glancing at the One-Eyed Dragon. Saki found it funny that they rode with their blind spots turned to each other. If it was trust of they simply forgot about the fact that one of their eyes was useless was anyone's guess. There was someone I wanted to have it all out one-on-one before starting my conquest of the country. Unfortunately he wasn't interested. Too bad for me, I guess I wasn't fortunate enough to find myself a worthy rival. What is it Dragon man? You look like you were just reminded of someone."

Yukimura was not around and their last play-date, before the more serious encounter at Kawakanajima, had been at least two months ago. Saki believed it would have been time to scratch that scale itch soon if the cub had survived the previous encounter. But Toyotomi had simply ruined the dynamic and balance that had been maintained after Oda. No one had been that eager to start another war for supremacy that soon.

"There is this one annoying guy that's way too intense." Date admitted easily, glancing towards the horizon. "But there may be no next time. It's nice that he's as pure as the day he was born but he won't survive these turbulent times like that. He'll probably be the death of some people too."

"Oh? But if you still admire him even then…"

"Yeah. Burning soul. He's out of this world. No exaggeration. He wields those spears of his with such intensity. I can't keep my «cool».

"Is that right? I'd like to see that myself."

A three way duel? Saki shook her head with a chuckle, closing her eyes, feeling the wind. It would be indeed something to see.

"Now then. The question is how do we attack?" Samenosuke was saying.

Both warlords had the habit of holding war councils to discuss the tactical decisions. It seemed typical of one that valued their men and abilities. They were gathered around the campfire, each army standing behind their respective boss. The said leaders were sitting on fallen logs, facing one another. Saki was kneeling on the ground in-between them, her maps open and marked for all to
"How about we split up into two groups and go through wakasa and yamashiro?" One of the pirates suggested.

"All right. You guys launch a surprise attack by way of wakasa and draw their attention. The One-Eyed Dragon will finish them off." Date said with confidence.

"All right. You guys launch a surprise attack by way of wakasa and draw their attention. The Demon of the Western Sea will finish them off." Motochika followed almost immediately, no less self-assured.

"What?" They growled at each other, glaring, going immediately into a scrap.

Saki sighed and stared at the possible paths.

"You tell us to be bait?"

"And what about you?"

"Hold on you two…" The armies were trying to ease their leaders, chuckling slightly, noticing the situation.

"How alike are you two…" Someone said, almost laughing.

"We are not!" Both men shouted at the same time.

"Your are like mirror images." She said quietly, not glancing at either of them, looking a bit aggravated.

Saki's head whipped up suddenly, standing, moving, grabbing the kunai that had come flying seemingly out of nowhere. It seemed to have no human target and there was a note attached to it. Silence was filling the camp, people nervously looking around, other moving into defensive positions almost immediately, other walking the ring of shadow and light that marked the edges of the camp, as she unravelled the paper wrapped around the handle, making sure no poison or traps were contained in the materials.

"Where did that come from?" was the prevalent whisper.

Her eyes widened for a moment as something metallic and hard hit her claws, falling to the ground. Katakura-dono's… Her eyes scanned the letter quickly before giving it to the One-Eyed Dragon, waiting.

"Matsunaga Hisahide…" Date whispered harshly as he finished, eye narrowed, crumpling the paper.

It was out of the way and she had seen it be trapped. She thought the place and preparations unimportant, unlinked to what they were doing…

Now Date had a reason to actually go there and instead of three hours to Osaka they would be forced to march almost double that and without any guarantee that they would survive or keep the armies in one piece after fighting whatever that monster had prepared. She also felt deeply within her sensed that the whole thing was merely a ploy, a trap.

The ones that had been hurt and captured were fidgeting in discomfort.
Motochika was showing something akin to recognition in his eye, the grip on the anchor-weapon that rested against his shoulder tightening for the briefest instant.

Saki approached.

"Let me go." She asked, bowing. "I have successfully retrieved men from him before. Please allow me to do so once more."

Date glanced at her for a long moment, the engraved pin Katakura-dono wore on his jacket slipping between his fingers slowly, shining with the fire reflexes.

"We will still march to this meeting point. If you manage to retrieve Kojuro before we reach the man, then perfect. If not I count on you to be there to fight this bastard." Date ordered.

"Am I to understand my mission is to retrieve Katakura-dono?"

"Yes." Date stated firmly, staring her down.

Saki smirked very slowly, her eyes narrowing in calculation.

"Perfect." She whispered, shadowing.
Chapter 27

Date watched Saki go, vanishing. She had the skills for that task and as proven in the past she would not be shy about bypassing him by any means necessary. So a smart general might as well take advantage of what was offered. Still that did not weaken his resolve or changed his plans. The whispers were going around, hushed and worried, the eyes focused on the letter and insignia on his hands, on the shinobi that had left them. The pirate's crew also seemed somewhat uneasy.

"What's this all about Dragon man?" Motochika asked, standing, balancing the anchor, gauging the mood.

"My second in command was captured by Toyotomi but now has been stolen by Matsunaga." Date said, crushing the letter on his fist, tossing it to the flames. "It seems he is waiting for me up ahead."

"Is he after the swords again?" Magobei was asking, worriedly.

"Why is he even alive in the first place?" Samenosuke was saying, raking fingers through his hair. 

"And Saki-chan?" Yoshinao asked suddenly.

"Demon of the West Sea." Date called, approaching the horses. "I leave you in command of these men. Attack Osaka as planned." He mounted, making the horse trot forward, surveying the men. "I'll be back as soon as I've settled this." It had been a bit of trickery within his order to their shinobi, telling her he would take the army too...

"Boss..." Several voices rose from the ranks, some going for their horses as well.

"Let us come with you!" Other joined in.

Date shook his head, guiding the horse, prepared to leave.

"Hold it." Motochika called calmly.

"What?"

"It will take more than your swords to take him down." The pirate stated, gripping his attention.

"Do you know him?"

"Matsunaga Hisahide. I've got a bit of a history with him." Motochika moved, slamming the anchor into the ground, leaning against it. "Tell you what, you can let me, Chosokabe Motochika, help you..." He smirked suddenly, shaking his head under the blank glare Date was throwing his way. "Ah, I don't mean that you can't handle yourself on your own. I am just saying it will be faster that way. Toyotomi is aware that the Date are coming but none of them knows that I, the Demon of the West Sea, is alive and out for revenge. This line-up is a rare opportunity to blow a hole in their defences. To have that go to waste because of Matsunaga's interruption would be just a bit pathetic. Don't you think so?"

Date smirked suddenly, one hand over Kokuryuu, feeling an old sting on the back of his head. It was a sound plan.

"So do it.» You're right." Date admitted, looking up towards the night sky.
"The One-Eyed Dragon of Oshu." Matsunaga stood alone in the little plateau next to a closed cell, looking at the dark horizon. Everything had been carefully prepared and displayed. The traps would be well hidden now and believing her hunch was correct and Katakura-dono was not there the next task would be mapping them out so she could guide the army. "I assume you are coming." The man continued speaking to himself, relishing the sound of his own voice. "It's entertaining to admire a Dragon brought down for fleeting amusement." Saki adjusted her position on the edges of the stone clearing surrounded by trees. "Ah. Deception."

That confirmed it then. Katakura-dono was not there. She could leave now… the soft whoosh of a wind user alerted her. The shinobi turned, her claws ready, deflecting Fuma's strike quickly and without pause, both shadowing away towards different directions, staring each other down, ignoring the distance.

All checked out.

Every piece was in the place they should.

Now… was he going to attack her again?

Was it just a warning?

Matsunaga had not reacted…

The lunge came suddenly, his shadowing empowered by his element's swiftness.

Saki defended, shadowing too, forcing a chase, disliking calling attention to a battle near the hirer, especially while she was still making a stealth effort.

Fighting Fuma was an affair of shadow and speed, her claws defending and deflecting without even bothering to strike out as he vanished almost as soon as his charge failed. There was no winning against him as long as both seemed unwilling to go all out and she was not focusing on him but on returning and informing Date. Once that was done she was hoping he could be convinced to ignore Matsunaga's challenge and go immediately towards Osaka to finally deal with Toyotomi.

The hired shinobi seemed to have other plans. Through each shadow and attack he was blocking paths and keeping her busy. Delay tactics… were that his orders or his own will? Did Matsunaga know about her? So they played the game.

The sound of hooves in the distance made her pause for a bit in the cat and mouse game that had been going on throughout the night with Fuma. She sighed, glancing around quickly, pinpointing the mountainous path the army had to take. It was a good thing Date had brought the army. For a moment, after she left Saki had felt a bit of apprehension, thinking that the One-Eyed Dragon could take the challenge to a very personal level and simply forego the guys.

The whisper of the wind told her nothing while the soft sigh of the shadows denounced the man immediately. Saki dodged once again and moved. Just a bit more, a bit longer and she could rejoin them… hopefully in time to show the path through the explosives… the first explosion in the distance made her sigh in slight frustration.

Fuma was just making her waste time…

The path that led to the appointed locations for the encounter, showdown, however they wanted to call that demand to meet, was narrow and winding, forcing the army to move with lines of four
horses side-by-side, stretching the forces into a too long tail behind the Demon and Dragon. It was a perfect place for an ambush and everyone seemed quite aware of that situation. Contrary to their usual rambunctious ways the army was quiet, just riding with determination and intensity. It seemingly mirrored the closed off and sombre mood of their leaders.

The trigger was a subtle thing, a very low clicking sound under the first layer of loose slabs of rock, unheard by every human, creating unease on the war-trained horses. Still they followed the touch of their masters even as the explosions started to spew fire and brimstone into the air. There were neighs and fidgeting, some backing away from the danger. Some, mostly the pirates, unused to the animals and burdened with a second passenger, struggled harder to stay on the saddle.

"Even though they called us here... what kind of welcome is this?" One of the pirates shouted, wide eyed, spooked as the horses picked up speed, truing to keep up and avoid the danger. There were just some things where they could trust their mounts.

The explosions continued. Some fell, others veered off course, some were forced to stop and stay behind by rock slides. Then there was a sudden chain of explosions as they reached a more open area, creating thick smoke and floating debris raining down before revealing a newly created chasm.

The bosses and army stopped, staring at the deep and wide pit and the explosion that still shook the ground behind them. Motochika tskd. Date grunted, arms crossed, his dark horse shaking its head, anticipating.

Traces of shadow were in place now. Saki was still moving, dodging, defending and lashing out, their timings and speeds still similar, both keeping up and ignoring any sort of exhaustion that should be creeping into their strengths. Fuma seemed to be unaware of her shadow weaving throughout the area where their game had been hopping about. As the chain of explosions grew bigger, tighter and closer Saki chose to begin and terminate.

The shinobi shifted the pace against the kamari, taking the lead, her hands performing seals after each strike. Fuma started to grow tense, noticing her hand motions and unable to tell what they were meant to. Shadows were her clan's. She smirked, pausing on the last spot, her claws twitching. Fuma lunged as expected, tossing shuriken this time, worried about her shift, deciding to change up his tactics too.

Saki deflected and her claws lashed out, into his defended, uncaring about the blade that slid up against her arm, cutting through the leather, scraping her flesh. She was able to grip his neck, tightening the metal claws around the column drawing blood. Slippery as an eel Fuma would be able to break free in a few seconds, barely injured. But her aim was not that. Her free hand moulded the last seal, slamming it against his chest, pushing him backwards, shadowing away. The sequence was repeated in fast succession as Fuma stumbled. She extended her right and, finishing it. The shadows she placed and anchored moved suddenly, raising up and around. The kamari tried to move. Saki smirked as every direction was covered and finally Fuma was a pinned cocoon amongst the shadows.

Shadow webs.

Oshu's shinobi sighed and pressed one arm against her stomach, bowing a bit to ease her back, tired. Her bruises were not getting any better with all that moving about and worrying. Now… to return to her stubborn warlord and the frighteningly similar pirate the fastest path would be…
"Let's fly." Motochika gripped the reins tighter and made the horse move, facing the chasm without fear. His intentions were clear to all. That did not make them less idiotic or any more feasible.

"That's impossible Aniki..." One of the pirates shouted.

"Say that after we do it." The Demon of the West backed his horse, forcing the animal to ignore the explosions that still raged behind them, blocking the path methodically.

"«That's right.» we'll go in all at once." Date guided his horse to do the same, to prepare. «Are you ready?» The One-Eyed Dragon shouted.

"You insult me by even asking." Motochika chortled, inciting his horse forward. Date did the same so he would not be outdone by the newcomer. They made the jump, forcing horses and soldiers to the maximum, finding more traps on the other side, further dwindling the numbers that could be there for backup.

Matsunaga could be seen from the curve the horses were passing, standing on a plateau with a narrow stripe of rock to connect it to the main path where the bombs still raged. Date grinned, shouting, making his horse move faster, prepared for a charge. The general didn't even flinch as the pair approached, the horses stomping fearlessly.

"So you're Matsunaga. You've met my men before." Date shouted as they drew closer, his hands going to the swords, starting to curl around the handles.

"It's been a while. I've come like I promised a while back." Motochika saluted, gripping the anchor, readying a swing.

"My, My. The One-Eyed Dragon and the Demon of the West Seas." Matsunaga was still making no gesture to attack or defend. He called no army, and the bombs were only echoing in the distance.

"Where is Kojuro?" Date shouted, slipping one blade free, hauling it.

"My apologies but... the Right Eye of the Dragon is not here." Matsunaga moved finally, one hand raised, his palm laced with some sort of wiring.

The explosion was sudden and violent, the man watching with a slight smirk on his lips. Then slight surprise touched his eyes as a sudden shadow moved before the flash and the growing flames that raced to swallow the Demon and Dragon. Shadow slithered about as clawed hands gripped both generals, glaring at him viciously, vanishing in a flurry of darkness before the flames closed the trap.

Interesting… was that new or just something he had overlooked? In the end it mattered not. Matsunaga had his fun. Now all that was left was to retrieve his relics and treasures.

"Your dedication is greatly appreciated." His voice reaching an almost mocking tone as he turned away from the charred cliff and road.

Shadows were dispelled away with a light sigh. Date fell forward, onto his knees, groaning both in annoyance and slight motion sickness. Motochika, having never experienced something like that was on his back, sprawled on the ground, staring at the sky, groaning, looking slightly sick.

The shinobi sighed and stood, looking around. The two agents she had in Osaka were standing
behind her, waiting.

"Gather the armies. Steal supplies form Toyotomi if need be." Both ninja bowed and moved out to obey. Osaka only had Nobuko and Katakura-dono inside now. At least in the form of people she counted as allies. There was also a challenge she had to go through with before going into the walls.

"Saki." Date stood, walking towards her, placing his hand on her shoulder. It had been a waste of time a resources to advance against Matsunaga.

"I would ask you to wait till dawn to spring the attack. Toyotomi deployments should be leaving Osaka and the fortress will soon be vulnerable. Now if you'll excuse me… my mission is not done yet." The shinobi bowed and disappeared once again.

Date tskd, amused while the pirate recovered and the guys started to gather to their location.

---

Kamari – ? – Those Who Hide. Another term to refer a shinobi, ninja. Historically though Fuma Kotaro was referred as a Rappa (another term for ninja, a regional variation in the Kanto region.) but in Basara his skill set is more for stealth, speed and strike; So I believe this particular variation fitting.
Chapter 28

Saki walked slowly through the forest, waiting. She preferred that the challenge was met away from the fortress. She looked at her claws, flexing them slightly in preparation. The she heard the hushed approach of another shinobi. Her presence should have been noted a few miles ago and suitable intercepted. The lack of such proved that her measures were having the desired effect. A slight smirk crossed her lips before she schooled her face into a cold, unemotional mask.

Akio arrived shortly without an entourage that she could see or sense. It was doubtful he was alone for longer than that moment. They would appear as soon as he found himself threatened. It would be soon because she intended to assassinate the man before breaking into the fortress. It was just easier to fight away from the wall so the defences would not be increased by the discovery of a corpse.

"Obedience is a foreign concept to you woman."

"It is not but owe not ounce of it to a traitor, a man and an enemy. You have been in my way."
Saki moved, claws ready. His expression became closed and tight, drawing the sai. "I will kill you now."

The shinobi lunged, shadowing suddenly, appearing behind him, left hand producing a signal as the right shot out, connecting in a slashing blow as Akio was turning to defend. He staggered, holding onto his weapon, the cloth where she had connected tattered, padded enough to show only light scratches on his arm, attacking out of rage. Saki was no longer there, appearing behind once again, creating a new hand gesture, sweeping her leg under his, as Akio twisted, trying to follow the movement, making him fall, claws shooting out, grabbing his head, slamming it against the ground, piercing the surface slightly, drawing blood, before vanishing, appearing again as he knelt, trying to stand and retaliate, a new sign in place before kicking, catching Akio in the ribs, propelling him forward, vanishing appearing before he hit the ground, claws closing in a fist, as the other hand placed another part of the jutsu, slamming into his gut, opening, slashing the fabric, finding resistance under it.

Akio coughed, fallen. His eyes darted around. It was clear he was waiting for backup that was not coming for some reason. It was then he snarled, angered, attacking without thought. Saki scoffed, noticing the speed and skill, dodging, defending, slashing, creating another mark. For a moment as they clashed it was hard to tell who had the advantage. Every terrain she lost to a strike as another placed part of the web. Every advance she was able to make through the bladed dance tore clearly into his defences until blood welled from the skin, never stopping her weaving.

Claws curled suddenly around Akio's wrist, yanking it, forcing his hand to drop the sai, shoving him to the side, breaking the balance. There was a soft whooshing above her, shinobi from Kai gliding on some of those new flying contraptions for speed-deprived novices or from when spending their own energy would be frowned upon.

Something had happened.

If it had anything to do with Akio's missing backup remained to seen.

As soon as she could Saki moved her hands, pulling the web to life, the shadows faint in the darkness, pinning her suitor down. As per shinobi training he was able to stifle his voice. Saki approached the bound man, hand shooting out, gripping him around the throat, constricting. This was how it had to end. Her claws sunk, stealing his life quietly, the shadows loosening and
vanishing, allowing the limp body to fall to the ground, listless.

Soft murmurs were reaching her now that the fight was won. It was easy to recognize Sasuke and Kasuga's voices. They seemed have found a dead Toyotomi scout. As she walked towards their location she found the backlight that had never come to Akio's aid, stab marks on their backs, black feathers like the illusions and real ones that accompanied Fuma's wind-enhanced shadowing skills.

So Matsunaga's betrayal was already under way. If Fuma Kotaro was already sneaking into the fortress she hoped it would not interfere with her own sneaking in attempt. She shadowed, appearing near the other two ninja. Kasuga startled. Sasuke just glanced up, smiling slightly, nodding, his attention on the movements below.

"Evening" Saki whispered.

"Recon mission for Oshu?"

"Retrieval. Finally I dragged the damn order out of him." Saki answered Kai's shinobi while pinpointing the cell bars that were visible slightly above the ground. For now there seemed be entirely too much activity within the walls.

"Katakura-kun the time we gave you is running out." Hanbei returned, never giving up on his purpose. Kojuro barely reacted, same as always, staying with his back turned on an enemy. The army had been extremely active outside. It was nearing the end, he could sense it as a general. "Have an answer ready when I return." The demand was not as smoothly weaved as before. Time was running out as Toyotomi placed their end game in the final stages.

"Are you abandoning Mori of Aki?" Kojuro asked calmly. With Matsunaga revealing that Date was alive there no longer was a point to Hanbei's lies. "That alliance had only that purpose, right? But Mori Motonari thought the same. From what I heard the main force marches east. Odawara is my guess. You have two or three contingents separated from the main army. Do you want to finish it once and for all?"

Good, sound guesses. If they were correct would make any enemy think twice before continuing their challenge. But for Hanbei it simply seemed like proof he would be pliable to their cause, being an exceedingly clever man.

"You can choose between one of two paths." Hanbei began to talk once more, making time. He took the questions as interest. "You can either serve Toyotomi and the land of the rising Sun from now on or you can keep wandering fruitlessly, looking for Masamune-kun's ghost." If an execution did not await him first. Maybe that was what the strategist meant. Two ghosts looking for one another in the mist. "Surely you don't have the foolishness to oppose Toyotomi alone." Foolishness... others could call it courage or even loyalty.

"There's one other path to take Takenaka." Kojuro challenged, bitterly, turning around calmly, still sitting. "The Date break through yours and Matsunaga's makeshift trap and defeat Toyotomi." He kept the defiance in place, knowing it would irk the strategist. Any mistake would benefit the ones that opposed the Toyotomi.

"That's not realistic." Hanbei stated calmly, keeping his temper in check. "I rather doubt that Matsunaga consigned Masamune-kun to oblivion as well. He had no intention of doing that." So he knew him better than he had been led to believe. "At best his role is to slow him down. Until I return that is."
Kojuro watched him leave without comment. When Nobuko said nothing, not even deigning to appear he knew something had changed.

"I don't know whom he serves but he made our job that much easier." Sasuke was commenting while he saw the shadow of the shinobi moving through the night after decimating part of the guards and patrols after the army deployment that accompanied Hanbei had passed through the gates. With that last batch of soldiers the numbers within the fortress were subtracted to less than a fifth of the Toyotomi prowess. It was still a daunting number but it was less perilous than it would have been otherwise.

"Depending on his objective we may clash with him later." Kasuga said, crouched, little Yumekichi hiding next to her neck. Her eyes were still lingering on the point where Fuma had disappeared.

Saki nodded lightly, thinking. The path she had taken last time would be the best for this particular infiltration. And while she preferred to go at it alone the pair did not look like they were going to leave her be. They wanted the battle plans and even with Nobuko's inside knowledge Saki felt there was a need to actually see the maps.

"He serves Matsunaga." Oshu's shinobi informed. "His objectives would be the treasures within."

Sasuke nodded. That should keep him out of their paths.

"The scope of Toyotomi's strategy has exceeded my imagination." Sasuke mentioned watching the torches gleaming in the night, gaining distance. "I hope his skill does not exceed mine too." He whispered a bit more calmly as they left their hiding places.

The abrupt and deep silence was Kojuro's first hint that something was wrong within the fortress. By now he knew the patrol routes and the guard's steps, the times and rhythms of the lower levels. So when none of the usual sounds came to pass he grew suspicious. The wind shifted a bit, agitating the still night air. So when the ninja of Kai appeared there was no stopping the surprised exclamation that left his lips.

"Sarutobi." Kojuro whispered as the shinobi made a joking shush sign, winking.

"You owe me one." He said, softly

"He does not." Saki walked silently out of the shadows. Kasuga opened the cell's door a moment later. "You are interfering with my orders." Saki whispered, a bit annoyed to her familiar before appraising Kojuro, allowing a slight sigh of relief to abandon her, nodding to acknowledge him.

"Apparently they left just enough soldiers to guard the fortress." Kasuga said, glancing at the corridor that was littered with bodies. "If we remain silent we should be safe." Both Sasuke and Kasuga left, scouting the ahead. Saki waited for a moment before hugging Kojuro, much to his surprise.

"Please let's do this fast…" She whispered. "I left him with a pirate that is frighteningly like him that I'm terrified about what they'll do together unsupervised." Kojuro paled a bit too before nodding, picking up the broken blade and following the shinobi from different factions. "Forgive my outburst." Saki whispered, accompanying him, bowing her head slightly.

The strategy room seemed crowded with four people and a tiny monkey in it but the maps they
unfolded on the table were very clear and startling. The information was clearly penned and each seemed to have at least two backup plans meant for any kind of setback or situation. Nothing seemed to be left to chance.

"This is it." Sasuke whispered, eyes narrowed, focusing. "That line approaching Aki is the mobile fortress we've been told about." He traced the path with one fingertip. Dozens of lines traced the map, each carefully etched and labelled. Details littered the region maps, demarking positions, movements and likely attitudes. "Mori must have repaired Chosokabe's Fugaku."

"Until he has taken command and integrated it into his own forces Toyotomi's alliance with the Mori will hold." Katakura-dono considered. While aware of betrayal both parts would use each other to the limit. Or even further, depending on what they plotted.

"Oh? I see." Sasuke stopped for a brief moment before nodding.

Saki nibbled her lip, thinking back. That was not news. So far everything was as it had been detailed. Which was good. It meant the clans were in position, that everything was ready to be used and done.

"Which means Mori will want to attack Osaka by himself." Kasuga leaned to eye the map once again, her expression closed. "Both are stubborn."

"This... are they sending troops from the northern tip by sea?" Sasuke pointed to another bold black line.

"They plan a sneak attack on Uesugi." Katakura-dono stated. Saki nodded. Also correct. If nothing had changed their general would be Ishida Mitsunari.

"There is also an army in Northern Kyushu. And here is the force suppressing Satsuma. What a formation..." Sasuke continued, his voice growing with slight disbelief and wariness.

"Your charge is dealing with it nicely according to the information I have received." Saki stated. "With Mori's retreat to see to his new toy Satsuma gained the advantage."

"The perfect plan for a total war that could be done by no other than Toyotomi." Katakura-dono considered, his voice slightly angered.

"Kenshin-sama..." Kasuga whispered, worry etching her face. Sasuke glanced at her, hiding a slightly pained expression, extending one of the flying contraptions to her.

"Go quickly and let him know." Kai's shinobi said, calm and professional.

"Thanks..." She whispered.

"Matsunaga is here." Katakura-dono pointed out

"So he lives, I guess."

"It was always too convenient."

"We did say that at the time."

"That bastard Takenaka plans to use Matsunaga to slow down the Date and then crush them with the fortress taken from Mori." Katakura-dono said, his hands tightening into fists.

"He has no interest in doing anything else than what he has already done." Saki said. "He managed
to delay the Date but his plan was always to have Fuma sneak in and take what he was promised.” She left out the bombs and traps. It was over and done. No need to worry Katakura-dono when it was obvious Matsunaga had no interest in following through with Toyotomi's orders.

"Take this with you." Sasuke said, approaching a katana that was displayed, taking it. The wind whispered. Saki tensed. "Even for you going unarmed is..." Kai's ninja continued, seemingly unaware of the sudden feathery formation that was sneaking, a hand shooting out.

"Sasuke!" Kasuga shouted.

"Sarutobi." Katakura-dono warned.

Sasuke half turned, waving the sheathed blade haphazardly, managing to slap the threat away. Fuma shadowed and attacked. Saki moved, tossing kunai to break the man's focus, allowing some time for Sasuke to gather his balance and stance. Kasuga attacked while Sasuke somersaulted away. Fuma dodged easily, jumping up, creating a sudden twister of air. Sasuke was launched against the shoji. Kasuga hit the wall with a gasp. Saki crouched and slammed her shadows against hers and Katakura-dono's feet, rooting them in place to withstand the force. Her claws left small indentations on the wooden floor.

Fuma came down from his attack, blades out, focusing on Sasuke, walking slowly as the other shinobi stood, groaning over his new bruises. He had drawn the blade taken from the wall.

"Now then... are you the legendary ninja?" Sasuke growled, prepared to attack.

"Fuma Kotaro?" Kasuga gasped, shocked.

Fuma attacked with his trademark speed, crossing blades with Sasuke that was barely able to keep up.

"Go Kasuga." He shouted, managing a blade lock between katana and tanto, gritting his teeth even as he talked. "If you don't hurry the God of War will be overrun." Kasuga hesitated, looking out the open windows.

"Sarutobi! Give me that sword." Katakura-dono shouted, having recognized the objective of the kamari. Saki was staying still in front of him, tense and ready to attack and defend if the threat came her way.

"You go too." Sasuke shouted as Fuma started to mix his blades, his wind and illusion, creating a storm of slashes. Kasuga jumped out, using minor explosives to breach the walls, flying away with Yumekichi while Sasuke defended. Saki let go of Katakura-dono, having dragged him to the roof, next to the crumbling wall, avoiding the worse of the explosion and debris. Sasuke had fallen back, near them once more.

"Sarutobi! Drop that sword." Katakura-dono said urgently, command in his voice. "He works for Matsunaga. He's after that katana."

"Really?" Sasuke glance at the blade. "If so tell me earlier." He said, sheathing the blade running to the edge of the roof, tossing it to the emptiness. "Go get it." The shinobi shouted, letting the path clear. Fuma simply followed, jumping, gripping the blade tossing kunai before vanishing in wisp of black feathers.

Saki sighed, dropping the blades caught by their shadows, looking at the two men that were still there.
"You'll need a horse Katakura-dono." She said softly, walking inside once more.

It was impossible to keep the stealth effort when half a wall in the top floors had been blown away and a flying device launched from it. So when Katakura-dono was able to get a horse half the remaining men within the walls were trying to give chase. Sasuke kept them guessing, leaving on the other direction, creating diversions along the way.

The horses available were not the best but they would serve their purpose. Katakura-dono started to equip one quickly and quietly. Saki watched, bowing her head when he mother appeared.

"It was a good effort."

"I made some miscalculations."

"You quickly fixed them." Nobuko smiled slightly. "He's dead."

"Yes."

"Good. I'll head out for now. I'll meet you both by the gates."

Even with all the commotion the stables were a logical place to look for an escaped man. But foot soldiers were no match for a horse's speed. But even through the screams and sounds of pursuit it was hard not to notice the shouts of some of the imprisoned outside.

"Hey. Let us out."

"Don't underestimate pirates!"

The shouts were coming from the ground jails, simple pits covered with iron bars.

Saki stopped glancing at them.

Katakura-dono's horse broke its race, the rider glancing at the pits too.

"It is a very good idea for a distraction tactic." Nobuko praised holding a key, opening the cells. Saki smiled slightly, nodding, getting a rope. Katakura-dono tied it, letting the pirates pour out and take their revenge, riding out of the gates followed by the two kunoichi following.

"Oh. So you survived." Matsunaga whispered into the waning darkness, watching the Dragon and the Demon that waited, not having formed a camp but also not holding to any formation. "Will you go to Odawara? How wonderful." The whisper somehow caught the attention of the warlords. They glance up, staring at him with anger. "Don't mind me. The general said softly, without a care, just examining them.

"Matsunaga..." One of the men whispered.

"So it was true..." Another added.

"You... why did you do that to us?" Date growled, looking up, annoyed.

"It can't be simply to get treasures from Toyotomi." Motochika said, his grip tighter.

"I am the sort that easily forgets a promise to someone that does not trust me. Collecting takes energy." Matsunaga talked slowly, thoughtfully, not thinking much of the issue.
"Pretentious as always." Motochika scoffed, ready to fight.

"I'll give you a good one for what you did." Date drew one of the blades, ready to attack.

A ninja appeared suddenly, extending a katana to the general, making the warlords hesitate.

"Good job." Matsunaga said, gripping it, his gaze focusing only on the object. "Mikazuki Munecchika. The famous katana Outenta. I welcome this more joyously than any other of the numerous treasures in my possession. To honour this treasured sword let us raise a toast tonight with sake drunk from the skull of the devil king." There was a slight smirk as his shinobi approached, engulfing him in his own way of shadowing. "Well then... excuse me."

"Masamune-sama!" the shout and the familiar voice broke the aggression that was about to be unleashed. The warlords hesitated, looking towards the sound.

"Katakura-sama." The men shouted, several looks of relief and pride crossing their faces.

"Kojuro." Date murmured quietly, both turning, facing each other for a long moment. Katakura-dono seemed to be the first to regain his focus. Saki smiled slightly looking around, looking for anything out of place. Nobuko was focused on Date, clearly examining him.

"You are Chosokabe Motochika correct?" Katakura-dono asked, his attention shifting towards the pirate. "A battle for revenge in your name rages in Osaka. The enemy has overwhelming numbers. Hurry and join them."

"Aniki..." The pirates whispered, reacting to their leader's serious mood.

"I see." Motochika said softly. "Looks like I can't put it off. After I save my precious subordinates I'll follow you to Odawara..." He grinned and turned to Date. "or so I'd like to say but..."

"Humph. It is as you have guessed." Date said, sheathing the blade, walking away with a smirk. Katakura-dono tensed clearly when he noticed the slashed back. There was no way that came from Toyotomi's fists. So it only left Hanbei. Saki lowered her head in a nod. He had not been there to defend him and neither had she. So it was something that weighted on their minds. Date seemed uncaring about his Right Eye's reaction."By the time you get there it will be over already." He announced to the pirate.

"One-Eyed Dragon." Motochika called.

"Huh?"

"Don't kick the bucket."

"Yeah."

Dividing the horses was a quick affair, done by sunrise. Nobuko left without a word. Katakura-dono readied himself although he took a blade from no one, keeping the horse he'd taken from Toyotomi.

"Next time we meet we'll have a roaring party out on the sea." Date announced, each army facing an opposite direction. Saki groaned, praying for such a thing to be postponed or at least when she was away with her clan in a rare time off. "«Good luck.»"

"Yeah. You too. Let's go you guys. Off to Osaka."
Katakura-dono waited till the pirates were gone to speak.

"Masamune-sama. My failure this time..."

"Don't sweat it." Date cut him off before it could go any further. Saki smiled, perched a bit away from them, looking at the horizon. "I'm glad you're back." He finally admitted, not quite looking at the Right Eye. The army was still bawling, moved by the reunion. Katakura-dono closed his eyes with a slight smile before shifting once more into his duties. Saki abandoned her perch and stood next to them, waiting.

"Mori's fortress approaches from the west. Toyotomi's army plans to steal it then march to Odawara. Together with a separate army of his from the north he intends to subjugate Kanto from three sides."

"Since we lack in numbers we can only strike first. Is that what you mean?" Date concluded, making his horse pace for a bit.

"Indeed. Leave this to me. I, Kojuro, will make sure to guard your back." Katakura-dono announced, turning, making his way to intercept the deployment Hanbei commanded. He was angered and he knew he would finally be able to pay his debt.

"«All right.» I'll leave it to you Kojuro" Date whispered calmly, smiling.

Saki sighed. It would be done soon, one way or the other. At least Nobuko had chosen to just watch and no questions had been asked about her presence. The shinobi exchanged a quick glance with the One-Eyed Dragon before vanishing, scouting ahead as usual.
Chapter 29

"I've been a while One-Eyed Dragon." Keiji whispered fallen on the main path. Saki was waiting with him, trying to ease some of his discomfort. His nodachi was broken and he had been trampled to the ground. It was not something most would endure with dignity. Keiji was holding on, almost too solemn, the man she remembered drowned by a clear layer of sorrow and regret. There was just a shadow of a smile as he greeted Oshu's leader.

Date stopped his army and the horses, dismounting, approaching. Others would have ridden on, uncaring. The men knew Keiji. Those who did not had heard about him. All seemed to feel something akin to pity towards the fallen man. Most likely it was the last thing Keiji would want them to feel.

"Hey since when do you seriously wield a sword?" The One-Eyed Dragon seemed to be the only one immune to such things, approaching and crouching next to him. Saki stood and examined the road. The Toyotomi had taken the main path which meant that the Date army could outrun them by taking a secondary path. They could beat them before reaching Odawara, in one of the fortresses that defended the path to the main castle…

"I'm always serious. Always." Keiji's answer was not unexpected to anyone who bothered to look beneath his wanderer and carefree veneer. "If you use brute strength to settle every little thing conflicts will never end. You know I think if people tried to show some empathy towards others they wouldn't want to hurt each other anymore. Don't you think people are like that One-Eyed Dragon?" Keiji asked directly. Saki glanced at both men, nodding lightly. It was a beautiful view but people were not like that and it only took one, one whose reach and poison could touch others, to destroy such an idyllic view of the world. "He just brushed past me but still... why... why do people always... why is he of all people..."

So that was what was consuming him in those five years. That was the sadness that seeped through his letters and occasional visits. But that also seemed just the tip of what he truly felt, what was truly hurting his heart.

"You didn't run. I just know that." Date stated finally, his voice encouraging but still belonging to a general, letting him know he had earned his approval. "And that guy called Toyotomi Hideyoshi seems he's just the type of guy I thought he was." To cut down, trample and ignore someone who clearly had been his friend, who still thought of him as a friend... "I don't know the relationship between you two but don't tell me thing like he used to be a nice guy." It was the past. For what Toyotomi had done there was no turning back. At least not in the perspective of the One-Eyed Dragon. "Let him rest there." He instructed the guys who had been hovering nearby, hesitating, not really knowing what to do to help. "That gentle man fought with all his might. He was knocked out but he's not a looser."

Saki smiled as he mounted, waiting before signalling the army to leave.

"Are you not going Saki?" Keiji asked in a quiet voice, so different from his boisterous energy and love of life.

"I am. Be well Keiji." Saki knelt and kissed his forehead.

"Yes." He smiled gently. "Love him so he doesn't follow Hideyoshi's path."

"His wife..." the shinobi whispered, the disconnected pieces she had finding their place.
"Yes…" Keiji whispered with sorrow, remnants of his love also clear.

"Then I agree with my Dragon. Who he used to be and who you were friend with is dead. What remains is a husk of a man and a threat to the land. He must be expunged."

The faster path was narrower, more difficult and less travelled. But for the horses of Oshu, used to the mountains and trained to be fast and agile was easy. Now they just had to hope luck was on their side. Saki left them midway through it to scout and pinpoint the location of the enemy. She did not return but they met her where the path converged, before the first fortress that marked the edges of the territory Toyotomi coveted. They had ten to twenty minutes to set a front and a defence that would challenge the march of the behemoth.

"I finally caught with you monkey Toyotomi." Date issued his challenge standing his ground, blocking the path. He had dismounted and the horses added bulk to the defence line. Even though sacrifices did not seem to matter to the Toyotomi there was no way pass that that would not deplete them to the point a siege to Odawara would be unfeasible to impossible. Toyotomi seemed to have reached the same conclusion, dismounting and advancing to meet the Dragon, his unchanging scowl deepening in anger and hatred. "How's this... the winner gets to conquer Odawara. While we sort who gets in the others can storm the castle..." Date assumed a combat stance, one blade drawn. "This One-Eyed Dragon will take it all together, Date of Oshu will conquer the country."

Words. Sometimes they held power, others were just used to shout nothings into the air in hopes the enemy got the point faster than the steel. On the other hand stating one's purpose was just the polite thing to do.

"You don't have one in a thousand chance of winning against me." Hideyoshi had not yet taken an attacking stance, glaring, observing. "Have you forgotten both your narrows escapes from death? You dare oppose me?" Now he was growing incensed, remembering the events not as a defeat for Masamune but a failure for himself. "Your skull shall serve as a warning when I rule this land." He threatened, now assuming a combat position, readying himself.

Date paused, eye narrowing. He returned the katana slowly to its sheath before tensing, dragging out all six claws. The actions had shocked and confused the opposing army. Saki took a deep breath. If he was this serious from the start there was no going back. His army knew that and waited solemnly for the start of the fight, fists clenched, hoping. Her claws twitched but she forced herself to remain loose and still. She had made no promises but there were some orders that went without saying.

"Looks like the viper finally developed some poison to match his bite. But no matter how many blade you wield your form is powerless against me." Toyotomi acknowledged the shift although it changed nothing in his view.

"Don't get me wrong. Doing this will be no «party»." Lightning built through the blades, sparking and hissing. Saki gestured towards the army, making sure they got out of the way. "And if I'm not in the mood the «party» is over." Date growled before attacking swiftly.

Fury seemed too light of a word to describe the demeanour of the Dragon's Right Eye while he dismounted swiftly and walked unflinchingly towards the enemy whose path he had cut, ready to do battle and to accept nothing less than total victory, seeking to avenge his days of helplessness and the insult he perceived, the affront his capture had placed on Masamune-sama's name and reputation. His own reputation was secondary to that.
So when the guards gained enough presence to attack, Katakura Kojuro just mauled them barehanded, dispatching a handful only through punching and kicking, lightning building and following his movements, fuelled by the frustration he had felt. The rough movements, unpolished and brutal did not stop even when he gained hold of a katana, slashing his path, cutting men down with ease as if they were not an elite, as if they had had no training whatsoever, advancing with a steady, menacing gait.

Kojuro's hair was falling away from its usually neat, slicked back placement, disarray brought by rage and combat. It could not be clearer what had been stirred into that warrior's soul.

Hanbei watched with growing shock his mistake, his folly. In his devotion to Toyotomi and haste to find a suitable replacement it seemed he had forgotten to take into account that there could exist others that displayed the same fierce loyalty towards their lords that he devoted to Toyotomi, that there were people who could not be taken out of their chosen path by the simple promise of power and position.

"I see." Hanbei admitted, steadying his horse, looking down to his adversary who had just eliminated a company of elite soldiers as if they were nothing more than the peasants they had started as. "So in the end we are different. The oath inscribed on your katana is not that of a loyal subordinate. Instead is to seal the darkness deep within of you." He dismounted, uncaring.

Kojuro waited, blade in hand.

"Prepare yourself Takenaka Hanbei. I'll give you that much time." He stated in challenge.

"I have no regrets but my life isn't yours to take." Hanbei answered, drawing his own blade, eyes narrowed, ready to face the general he had held prisoner.

The clash was brutal but not as one sided as the first confrontations had been. But it was still very difficult to withstand the raw power that Hideyoshi used in each strike. Date was keeping up nonetheless. But it was clear it would not be enough. The behemoth's punches were driving the Dragon back as the man's rage build.

"Do you understand your weakness One-Eyed Dragon?" Hideyoshi growled, smashing a wall to bits, the impact sending Date hurtling to the ground, disoriented by the blow and the debris that refused to settle, the drawn claws wavering in his grip for a moment. "If that one eye you have left can see the path to ruin the land now walks prove it with one blow." He struck as Date prepared to slash, gripping him by the throat, hoisting him up. Saki's claws clenched slowly, struck between the need to attack and the lack of leeway around her orders for that moment. "If you wish to howl follow it with a bite." Even when finding it hard to breathe Date did not let go of the katana, did not let go of his convictions and did not stop challenging the man. It served to irk the behemoth further, the grip tightening. "In the land I will create there is no place or need for the weak. I shall crush the powerless with my own hands."

"«Give me a break.»" Date growled, grinning, refuting the most flawed but most vital point of the Toyotomi's doctrine. "After that kind of conquer the land will be fit for nothing but soldiers."

"Strength is absolutely vital to rule this land." Hideyoshi was almost raising his voice above the booming commanding sound he always used. Which meant Date Masamune's words had hit somewhere too close to a vulnerable part. If anything in that armoured monkey could be called that.

"Boss..." the army called, panicking when another blow tossed the One-Eyed Dragon against the
stone walls of the frontier fortress, breaking the half-moon of his helmet.

"My Dragon..." Saki whispered as Date stood again, determined. The shinobi shook away the weakness. "Stay back." She ordered the guys who were too close to the battle and too close to jumping into the fray. Her voice had the desired effect but it went unnoticed by the two warlords.

"I... We, the Toyotomi army shall sweep away the weakness that plagues the land." Toyotomi was saying, loudly, for show while Date struggled but got to his feet again, his sneer clearly telling the man he would not succeed in his plans.

Hanbei's blade ribboned outwards, cutting the ground as it moved closer to an attack. Having fallen for such a trick the first time Kojuro knew what to do, how to avoid, how to deflect. He sidestepped the strike and slashed with the borrowed sword, forcing the strategist to return his own blade to the original form and get close to attack. The strikes crossed, steel against still, bringing neither closer to a decision, to a victory.

"I hate to admit it but Masamune-kun is truly a Dragon." The man dragged out behind a ragged breathing preparing himself to attack once again. "Hideyoshi is stronger than anyone but against him... against that dragon I feel something I cannot comprehend. Someday he will hold out against Toyotomi"

Until the last blow on the crisscrossing pattern of attack and defence there was no way to break the match. A misstep caused Kojuro's defence to falter, the step back he was forced to take for the sake of his balance used by Hanbei who struck, blade downwards like a scorpion's strike. It would have been a successful cut if not for the moment where his own body betrayed him, a gush of blood following a hacking cough, giving Kojuro's his answer of why was he in such a hurry to conquer the land for his lord.

The Right Eye of the Dragon stayed his blade, watching carefully, thoughtful.

Toyotomi's strategist recovered.

"I had come here to duel to the death." Kojuro stated. "But in your condition you could never defeat me. I won't hold back though."

"Very well. In the end no one could replace me." Hanbei moved, making his blade storm out, raining flechettes. It was hard for Kojuro to defend from such a thing and he was forced to fall back, to the ground.

As Hanbei advance to continue the combat he discarded the stolen blade, pulling out of his jacket what remained of the broken claw, wielding it against Hanbei's attack, calling the lightning dragon through Narukami's blessing and what lingering soul of the Date remained within the steel.

The Lightning Dragon struck straight and through, piercing the other man without a mark. Hanbei shouted in pain, his hand going to the harmed area, his eyes searching. Then he simply smiled, resigned, walking slowly backwards, towards the cliffs, falling down. Better to die than be killed then.

Kojuro approached, the edge, watching his enemy disappear into the rock and sea below. He calmed and looked into the distance-

"The Dragon devours even gods. No one can stop Masamune-sama." Katakura Kojuro stated with finality, hiding the broken blade once again, turning away, walking to the horse, riding off to meet his army.
"What are you doing, staring off into space?" Date asked, standing once again. Blow after blow, after blow he was still standing, and stood, again and again, his determination undaunted. Saki watched with the army. The pain was so clearly etched in the Dragon's features that anyone that looked could feel echoes of it. But he would not give up. "You've got things to look around your own feet before you can look at the horizon."

"Cease your howling. If it hadn't sunk yet I'll show you just how much power you foolishly oppose." Toyotomi attacked again, pushing the dragon against the wall again, punching hard enough for the wall to start to crack and crumble beneath Date's body, striking until it collapsed, caging the One-Eyed Dragon. Hideyoshi turned away smugly, even though he disguised it under the usual cold stoic attitude. "You were presumptuous to even attempt contest for yourself." The warlord turned and began to walk towards the army. "This is the fate of the powerless." He announced to the shocked men.

"Leave." Saki whispered to the army, standing in front of them against the shadow of the behemoth that approached. "If Date is dead the army is disbanded. Leave." If Date was dead her duty was to die trying to avenge him. Her claws flared outwards as she took the stage, braid snaking slightly with each step.

It was hard not to see Hideyoshi's sneer of disgust. He thought them weak. Saki glanced over her shoulder when she hear the army move slightly, going for the weapons. She sighed, closing her eyes.

"Leave." She repeated simply and icily. That gave them pause. Even if death was her path she would not let them take it unnecessarily. Before she could attack a blue light came from the rubble, accompanied by the sounds of a storm. Saki hesitated. The stone fell away, the One-Eyed Dragon walking out, smirking, his blades melting into dust, except for the Kokuryuu. The strength of his element had grown, answering to the display of willpower. That did not mean that he would be able to keep it up for long. A second wind, a desperate surge of energy would not be a long lasting experience.

"Damn you… you're just like that damn pirate. Why won't you just die!" Toyotomi lost it this time, turning, shouting. The army cheered. Saki allowed a sigh to come out, easing a bit of her tension.

"Looks like having that brown-noser around wasn't good for you at all." Date stated, discarding the useless handles. "«No limit»! Even if it kills me I will not let you conquer this land." Lightning, strength, conviction, the oath etched into the sword glowing with its own kind of power. The armies were overwhelmed, looking on with awe. Saki smirked and her hands began to move. If she had to play a support role there were still some tricks to be used.

"So you intend to rule it yourself? You're nothing but the boss of a few punks. How could you handle the whole country?" Toyotomi was still spewing his hatred and doctrine.

"That's what will make it so fun." Date was unaffected, smirking, the katana pointing towards his enemy. Soft wisps of shadow reached him, mingling with his armour, touching the skin underneath it, expanding to cover it.

"Fool!"

"Don't think so hard about it." Date said, dismissively. "As long as I know what I want to protect everything else will fall into place." The shadows were in place now. If she could not pin nor control Toyotomi she would control Date. Keep his body from collapsing, keeping her shadows in the way of the blows. Saki closed her eyes slowly, giving everything to him. "«You see»"
"I won't let someone like you have this country." Toyotomi finally snapped.

"Then the boss of Oshu, Date Masamune will fight you." Date shouted, the blue glow of lightning covering him, the shadow on his skin, the trust, love and loyalty of his army, of his people behind him. He jumped, going upwards to gain momentum, to build the final strike, slamming it downwards, blade against armoured fist, the lightning seeping through, shattering the behemoth's armour.

Saki flinched. It was burning her too and she could feel the strain in him. She kept the justu in place despite the tremors and the pain. This needed to be done. Toyotomi needed to be ended. She moved her arm, feeling Date's tension, helping him to be faster, breaking the stalemate, hopping away from Hideyoshi, building and blasting him off, away against what was left of the fortress.

Though the blade was in rough shape and everything around was in ruins there was a peaceful silence now. Saki sighed deeply and allowed the shadows to leave him, slowly, her vision swimming for an instant. Just another thing to add to her pains… but she smiled for a moment as Date placed the blade back into its sheath.

"Now I can finally get going." He was saying to the silence. "You've made put off this party for long enough." She shadowed to his side before the army had time to move, catching him as the One-Eyed Dragon collapsed, holding him against her. The guys shouted in worry, approaching. She cradled his head against her shoulder, kneeling.

"He will be fine." Saki stated, helped by the foursome. She stood and looked around. "Get the horses. We'll return to Oshu and force him to rest properly this time." She looked around and approached the former enemy that stood still, dumbstruck. "You… Toyotomi army. Disband. Your leader is defeated."

Proof that nothing but fear held them to the man was the speed with which they abandoned him in the ruins. Saki shook her head, approaching. He was not dead, just very injured and close to it. If no one found him he would be gone by sundown. She felt doubt. She should kill him for the good of all but there was no order given or lifted… It was really not her place? Should she just eliminate the threat?

"Hesitating child?" Nobuko said, approaching.

"Is it my duty or am I being selfish?"

"Neither. It's your choice. What will he do if he returns?"

"Hanbei is surely dead by now. Katakura-dono would not fail to do so. He has other generals but the main problem was the strategist. After this defeat he will think himself weak and strive harder to force his brand of strength onto the world. But by the time he is found… if he survives this time of exposure, that is, most of his conscripted soldiers will have disbanded and the doubts we seeded into ever mind will have a stronger place to take root."

"You believe he will collapse from within. If he survives and returns."

"Yes." Saki wobbled for a moment. Nobuko supported her.

"What is wrong?"

"Tired and hurt." Saki answered. "This has been a trying time."

"You will leave him?" Nobuko asked.
"I... know what I have to protect." Saki smiled in response to her mother's chuckle. "He was defeated by my Dragon. That is good enough for now."

"What will you do?"

"Return and rest." Saki answered, stopping, puzzled. It was rather obvious, wasn't it? "Why?"

"If you're anything like me koneko you'll need ginger tea every morning." Nobuko said, still chuckling. "I'll catch up with the Right Eye and tell him to go home."
"You keep having these flimsy excuses of camp defences Dragon Man." Motochika swaggered into the war camp with his men, smirking, accompanied by a smiling soldier, the same that had been charged with being on the lookout. He was returning the horses and according to the reports Saki had received as soon as everything was settled in that small spot under the trees, away from the latest battlefield, had left Osaka fortress, but not the city itself, close to destroyed. Payback from ruining his prized Fugaku the Demon of the Seto Sea had announced loudly as the men freed inside and the ones he brought from the outside drove Toyotomi forces away and to the ground within their own stronghold. It had a sort of karmic justice to it.

As for the camp defences Saki was smiling as she soaked bandages into ointment, shaking her head in amusement. Knowing someone that had shown no recent hostility was coming and allowing them inside without a fuss seems just a bit of common courtesy. Not to mention the presence of the lookout and the fact that much like the Dragon and his group he was extremely conspicuous and loud.

"Just join us you damn Pirate." Date called, returning the informal greeting with a smirk, staying near the one of the fires, half supported by a pile of armour and his own saddle, torso and face once again crisscrossed by whitish fabric. Autumn would start soon and temperatures already fell, turning the nights chilly. All his movements were slightly cautious and stiff due to the amount of bruises spread throughout his skin.

Kakatura-dono was lightly injured, making room for Motochika, watching the interactions with interest. The small amount of time he had spent with the man had left only a passing impression but he was noticing the signs that had made Saki frightened of leaving them without supervision. Only a fool who knew nothing of Masamune-sama's disposition would not notice that kind of gleam in his eyes. He was planning some sort of mischief. They were too alike. It was the kind of perfectly aligned friendship with the occasional bout of friendly but serious fighting that would either keep them as allies or force them to clash. They laughed, drank and talked easily, almost competing. Most of the men only had the exhaustion and old wounds to complain about. And they had forgotten about it when faced with victory and the prospect of celebrating. Laughs, dances and contest were already started in-between food preparation and blister tending.

Motochika seemed a bit ill-treated but what he and his pirates sported was mostly a tired body, same as the Date army.

Saki finished the bandaging work on Date, appraising it and the people around her. The water she had tampered for the army's use and strengthening would suffice for all. The shinobi passed the soaked bandage to Katakura-dono who started to wrap his scratched arms, the jacked folded next to him.

The army, already loud and excited about their victory against the Toyotomi only turned more rambunctious with the addition of the pirates and the booze and news of their own victory.

Motochika sat next to Date, sharing the sake, letting go of the anchor, getting comfortable.

"I got a proposal Dragon Man." Motochika said while taking a deep gulp of the drink. "My ship will arrive soon. How about we have that uproarious party and I deliver you to Oshu afterwards?"

Katakura-dono narrowed his eyes slightly, thinking. Most likely he believed in the advantages of
that even though it would leave the men drunk and useless for a couple of days afterwards. It meant less stops due to Date's condition, as a horse would be punishing and a more direct route with less possibilities of being ambushed by Toyotomi troops looking for revenge or any other straggler factions roaming the land. The older man smiled slightly. Maybe he would also have a little time to enjoy himself and relax.

Saki had left them to Motochika, feeling slightly worried about the state they would be delivered in, and returned to Oshu in a matter of hours after seeing them off on a protected bay where the prototype awaited, taking her role once again, allowing Kiko to take some time, go home. It had been interesting to the change on the Demon's behaviour as soon as he had seen his boat. The Fugaku prototype was smaller scale vessel, surely no less sophisticated than the one that had been lost, but as soon as Motochika stepped on it the pride was obvious, touching the wood with a light and experienced hand, clearly showing himself as the captain before starting bark orders to depart.

Oshu was no longer under the stiff martial rule that had ensured its survival and protection while the Toyotomi pressured their borders and sought to conquer. Even within such a hard imperative the land had thrived. The inner conflicts were the first chore to merit her attention, reviewing the notes and actions the rulers of the provinces had taken while the Dragon was away, searching for any sign of betrayal, of any remnants that Kiko could have been unable to identify and eliminate.

The ginger tea was placed next to her, its spicy and warm scent very soothing as she worked. It turned into a constant in the morning, as soon as she started the day. Saki sipped her tea slowly, spreading the paper sheets, fighting off another bout of uneasiness. It was unfortunate but the amount of medicine she had taken to function while traveling, fighting and sleuthing was taking its toll, making her feel tired and nauseated. It would pass. It was nothing new and nothing the ninja had not been trained to endure from time to time. Demands of duty and all.

So far the news were clear and arriving steadily.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi had been found. He was healing and showed no signs of desiring to give up his dream of a united and strong Japan. He had indeed lost most of his might. From a massively overwhelming army he was reduced to a force that matched their origin. Betrayal ran rampant as a small rebellion led by Kuroda Kanbe had shown, and the only general who stood firm in his belief to the behemoth was Ishida Mistunari. Rumours pinned him as an easily angered man, quick to see a word as an insult to his lord. The loss of Takenaka Hanbei was something that could never be overcome. The shinobi Akio had trained solely for the Toyotomi use had been hunted down and dispatched further weakening the army. Tokugawa Ieyasu was closer and closer to defecting and the Iga that served him provided less and less information for the Toyotomi, hoarding it for their master's protection. Oni Hanzo saw the breaks as clearly as any other and was preparing a way to save his master as his duty demanded.

Saica Magoichi took contracts but their paths were nowhere near close to crossing at the moment. She was still focused on keeping the Saica faction safe and strong. Whispers that she might ally with Motochika were common.

Dark rumours about the remnants of Oda were whispered here and there but without any clear conclusion.

Takeda Shingen had fallen ill, leaving Kai under Sanada Yukimura's, freshly returned and victorious from the battles against the Mori, leadership. Sasuke was not very optimistic about that. Still saw little more than a kid in his charge. The Young Tiger did not seem very enthusiastic about his situation.
Uesugi Kenshin had withdrawn within his territory, having repelled Toyotomi's sneak attack with relative ease. There was a rumour going around telling that Mitsunari had abandoned the battlefield to reach his Lord. Leaderless and lacking reasons to fight the army broke and returned home, forbearing the arms, armour and banners that marked them as Toyotomi's.

Others had either fallen or recovered.

It mattered little at the moment.

The campaign against Toyotomi hadn't been as grave or as crippling as the Oda aftermath and there were already rumours floating around about finally realizing the One-Eyed Dragon's dream of conquest. It was high time. But for the moment the challenge was forcing a Dragon with a tarnished hide to recover while reforming its claws and returning the Kokuryuu to its original state. As soon as he returned.
Saki glanced outside at the bandaged form of the One-Eyed Dragon sparring with the Right Eye, smiling slightly, shaking her head at their antics as she forged some documents to further weaken the opponent's cause and leave the country open to a storming takeover. Several signs looked rather favourable.

As soon as he had been able to move without wincing and recovered from the grand hangover that had plagued the army as they disembarked, practice had started for one and all. Motochika did not seem much more sober as he bid them goodbye. But training was their pattern, their routine and habit. And it was still very pleasant to watch she thought, pausing the careful brush strokes, placing it down softly, picking up the ginger tea.

In the end as soon as the blades were made and ready to use in combat the army was marching to take the castle Takeda Shingen had claimed from Hojo all those years ago and the Toyotomi still desired. Reports informed the shinobi that after his recovery the course had been clear. Ishida Mitsunari had been sent to capture the place where his lord had fallen once.

Odawara remained unclaimed, tossed into chaos by the factions seeking to claim it, defended by what seemed to be a coalition of Takeda's troops and old Hojo's loyalists. Date loathed to leave such a situation unresolved, unclear who defended it or to whom they devoted loyalty, and as a place he had left unclaimed, but it was being regarded as a stepping stone for all the warlords.

Finally it was within sight, the fortress in white and greyish blue, rising above the trees. Its reputation and mystique had increased over the years and Old man Takeda hadn't been idle. Some things looked stronger than the last time he had seen the place, while storming by to take Imagawa Yoshimoto's head.

Date stopped, the army behind him doing the same. The ranks had been slightly bolstered and he counted with more swords and horses. Kojuro made his horse move, patrolling the area while the men gathered, making sure everything was set. Saki reappeared suddenly, hopping down from a tree.

"The battle has several branches," She informed, bowing quickly. "Nearest to Odawara is the part of the Toyotomi that is being led by Ishida Mitsunari. While I was out I have not seen him in the field. "From within the fortress seems to have bolstered its defences and Saica Magoichi is fending off ninja that are led by Fuma Kotaro. He has shed Matsunaga Hisahide's contract. It's unclear who he serves but the ones he controls seem to have every intention of taking Odawara. Kuroda Kanbei, a former general of the Toyotomi is with the Saica." She paused. That was what concerned their army most. "Sanada Yukimura fights with Tokugawa Ieyasu's forces, still under Toyotomi banner. A secondary force led by Toyotomi himself heads for that location."

Date nodded. This time. This time the country would belong to the Dragon.

"Keep an eye on the frontlines. Inform me if anything shifts."

Saki bowed and vanished, her eyes set, determined.

"Fight to your heart's content Masamune-sama. I, Kojuro, will guard your back with my life as
always." The Right Eyes stated simply.

"We too Boss!" The army cheered behind the One-Eyed Dragon, horses stomping, voices raised, loud and sure.

Date grinned, guiding his own horse, turning to face those who were loyal to him.

"I won't allow anyone to fall in battle." He announced. "Psyche up guys!"

Silence met Saki when she arrived at the battlefield. Odawara's defendants were scattered about, dead. It had not been that long since she had checked that path and an army that could deal such a blow would not simply vanish… The shinobi looked around, checking the corpses. Their wounds were long slashes, unwavering, through and through. They could have only been dealt by an experienced and skilled samurai with a simple single thin nodachi. Longer than a katana but used with the iaido style… Had Ishida…

There. She pinpointed the white and purple cloth of the man's clothes. He was waiting, fists tight, face set into a cold rage. Slowly she stepped back into the shadows of the battlefield. A one man army that had annihilated a considerable number of defensive forces as if they were nothing. Saki had witnessed such powers before but usually they still had an army there, just in case…

Ishida Mitsunari stood alone in the killing field. He had made his small army move out, continue the fight in another front...

Saki had to return. They needed to rethink their approach. Where he stood had been a vulnerable spot reinforced by men that an armed and mounted company could deal with some ease. What was there now was a man with a personal hatred for Date Masamune that would go for the Dragon's throat the moment his helmet showed. There were at least three other exploitable places in Odawara's defences as the siege and attacks progressed.

There was a small twinge as she started to shadow. Ishida's head whipped up, pinpointing her through a shared element. Saki grimaced. Had she been that careless or was he just that good? His eyes narrowed.

"You…" He snarled suddenly, turning to her, assuming a combat stance. "Serve him…" He moved. Fast. Saki dodged and blocked the blade with her claws, feeling it uncomfortably close to her neck, curling the metal around the cutting edge, locking it into place for a moment, giving her time to think while they struggled in the balance. Very fast… As close to shadow stepping an untrained, samurai, not related by blood to a clan, could come.

Rage and hatred were the most palpable emotions he was displaying.

The rendezvous point had been a bit back and still no word or sign. The ride was progressing and Odawara's castle was closer and closer. Then suddenly the horses turned ornery, neighing and rearing, forcing a stop. It was messy and some soldiers were thrown off the mounts. Nervous looks were exchanged.

"Calm the horses!" Kojuro took command easily, making the confusion cease.

"A killing intent?" Date whispered almost to himself, focused, staring ahead, glancing back, tsking in annoyance. "Stay here guys." He shouted, inciting his horse forward without hesitation.

"BOSS!" the soldiers not lost to the task of calming their mounts shouted, soon joined by the others.
that noticed the break away.

"Masamune-sama!" Kojuro sounded, faint in the distance as the One-Eyed Dragon dashed forward, destroying the last gap between him and the battlefield. Sounds of combat echoed, metal and a man's scream of rage. He stopped the horse, looking down at the corpses and the blurs of shadow that moved and clashed. Saki stood her ground, deflecting the enemy, not allowed to escape by the massive speed of the man. They moved fluidly with each other, as if linked. She wasn't even attacking, solely focusing on speed and defence.

The man had not seen nor sensed him yet it seemed.

Date drew three of the six claws, attacking suddenly, blocked. The swipe of the nodachi threw Saki's balance, tossing her out of the way mostly unharmed. Her eyes widened as she saw him. Ishida Mitsunari looked at him, his scowl growing deeper until he bared his teeth.

"I know you... you..." he pushed his blade out of the block, sheathing it, stepping back, adopting a battle stance once again. Date was ready too with the three claws out. "Hideyoshi-sama..." In-between the rage it was almost a prayed whisper. "I will take this man's head in your name, taking you revenge." Ishida attacked suddenly. Saki stayed back. While Date was used to that kind of velocity from sparring with her the length of the weapons each used made a world of difference. But on the other hand a katana, no matter what shape, length, form and style was something a warlord was conditioned to fight since early childhood. Most likely he could balance both things in those seconds he had to adjust to the enemy.

"Unforgivable..." Mitsunari spewed his rage before moving, quick and shadowy, circling the One-Eyed Dragon, preparing to attack from the back, once, twice, defended and rebuked by three blades. The next time the dust whispered around him as he sped around Date twitched, whipping out the six claws, crisscrossing them to stop the harder strike, holding the balance before swiping them outwards, pushing Ishida back.

Toyotomi's general returned his blade to its place, still in fury, preparing another strike, charging. Date leaned back, speeding forward too, attacking with a whisper of lighting following through the new metal. Saki tensed and moved her claws, preparing to strike as soon as Date's attack opened a vulnerable spot.

Even though the impact was brutal the blade locked themselves away from the adversary's body once more. Saki's eyes scanned the scene. Was that? The sound of fast footsteps alerted her before she could tell Date to back away. Katakura-dono ran, the reformed blade drawn, sweeping towards the apparently wide open front defences Ishida Mitsunari was displaying.

"It's a decoy!" Saki shouted, moving, trying to reach as Mitsunari's longer blade slid free of Date's block and slashed horizontally towards Kojuro's head. Three kunai hits the blade in quick succession, a shuriken swiping towards a small gap in the kote. The Right Eye did his part, moving out of the way and using his katana in the defensive way. Still the slightly off target strike was enough to cut through Kojuro's upper right arm.

"Kojuro..." Date whispered as the combatants separated, appraising the new situation. Saki shadowed next to them. Being left handed that wound would not impair him that much. But the bleeding created some concern

"You can't leave your guard so open Masamune-sama." Kojuro berated, one knee to the ground, breathing hard. Date looked at him for one moment. Saki was preparing something too, her shoulders were slightly tense in a tell hat had taken him years to notice. Then he looked ahead again. The murderous intent had not changed. He sheathed his blades and walked forward, one
hand over one claw.

"Stay back." He ordered evenly.

"Masamune-sama..." Kojuro protested.

"My Dragon..." Saki answered to the order with the same amount of disbelief and annoyance as the Right Eye.

The One-Eyed Dragon answered to neither, shaking his head, charging with a shout, that single blade swinging against Mitsunari's strike, the tone of the combat changing, a duel appearing, made of crisscrossing strikes and dodges. Ishida's Mitsunari's aimed high, never stopping his rage, his snarl, trying to take the Dragon's head. Date aimed for whatever gap he could find at that moment, thwarted by either blade or sheath. The speed and reaction time of the white haired general was simply very hard to overcome.

The strikes sped up to a blur. They barely moved from that spot amongst the dead. Whatever steps they took were nullified by the next movement.

Saki pressed her lips together, tying a bandage around Katakura-dono's arm, just a quick fix. Order or not they would have to interfere soon... She could hear the hooves. The army was coming and seeing what had been done to the ones that had stood there to defend Odawara...

Mitsunari was pushed back, falling down, looking up with hatred. Date smirked, shifting his grip. He had used both hands on a single blade to increase the weight of his strike and had done so moments before hitting. It was something he had not attempted before with the general so he had been unprepared. For all his speed and the damage that blade could inflict Ishida Mitsunari was still a very thin and fragile looking man.

"I have received orders to kill anyone who tried to come through while Hisdeyoshi-sama's army takes Odawara." Ishida shouted, standing, swiping the blade, the movement slightly broken before steadying his hand and returning it home, taking an attacking form once more. Date scoffed.

"I don't care for your ape. I will be the one to take the country." Date stated simply, glancing at Odawara. Smoke rose from within its walls. The army came now, lining in the killing field, staring in shock at what had transpired. Saki grimaced noticing the shiver in the general's hands. He was beyond fury.

"You... dare to insult Hideyoshi-sama with such a churlish moniker!" He shouted vanishing from his spot.

Saki tried to move, vanishing too, keeping up with Ishida who gathered speed for an attack. Her claws went after his throat, dragging him away from his target and attacking to keep him that way. He snarled, stopping, turning on a dime, slashing at her.

Kojuro stood slowly, readying himself.

Date turned, uttering a curse and preparing to attack. Retreat was not on his mind. Not against a single crazed assassin-general.

Mitsunari attacked, his speed fuelled by rage, the broken movements a bit harder to read. The shinobi ducked and tried to get close again. The sheath hit her chest and the blade slashed her leg, tearing the cloth, leaving a fine line, the results dimmed by the fact that she could simple shadow step away. But stepping away from him cost her his attention, shifted immediately towards the object of his hatred. He vanished again in a bout of speed.
She tried to follow, her leg fine enough to allow her to keep up. It was just a cut, not even deep enough to do more than weep thin beads of blood. But the blunt strike to her chest was what was slowing her down. When she tried to move dizziness from the momentary lack of hair made her step falter, bringing her to the ground of her knees.

And Katakura-dono just wasn't fast enough to reach him before the attack struck.

"Masamune-sama." Kojuro shouted in shock.

"No..." Saki whispered, her claws digging into the red stained dirt as she dragged herself up.

"Boss..." The army had a single voiced shout.

Date Masamune, the Boss of Oshu, the One-Eyed Dragon stood in the killing field with a look of disbelief on his face, Ishida's Mitsunari's blade piercing his side through and through. The general pulled it out, blood staining its length, getting ready to strike again, to finish it. He staggered, covering the wound, anger crossing his features as he turned.

Kojuro gripped his katana and attacked, blinded by rage as surely as Mitsunari had been.

"No... Stay back." Date ordered, ignored. Saki shadowed to his side, dragging him a bit away, supporting.

"I won't forgive you..." Kojuro was shouting while none of his attacks connected. The army was following, rushing down the field.

"Idiot... Stay back!" Date shouted again as Saki's hands moved on a pattern, pulling her shadow to him, trying to make it as solid as darkness. He was losing too much blood at that rate and... the army was not faring any better than the one that had been slaughtered. Kojuro was the next to fall pushed back, wounded.

"Kojuro..." Date whispered in shock. Saki moved, standing up, between Ishida and the army.

"Masamune." Kojuro called faintly. The army was whispering and groaning his name, some still trying to stand up. Some were already dead. Date pressed his wound, moving, the shadows over it bringing some relief. But with so many hand symbols what she had done had to be very taxing on her strength.

"No matter how much you try it's futile." Ishida was lecturing, looking calmer amongst the blood, focused solely on Date. Saki shifted and swayed with each of his movements. This time even if she had to loose blood and limb she would not move out of his way. She would buy them time to retreat. She would protect him. Them. "From the moment you opposed Hideyoshi-sama your fate was decided. From the moment you injured his pride my blade was sworn to take your head! I will eliminate you!" Mitsunari assumed his combat form once more. Saki leaned forward, ready to intercept.

"Sorry but I can't die in such a place." Date moved slowly, standing next to her, placing his free hand on her shoulder, still believing this to be his battle. "I will protect these guys. I won't let a single thing be taken from me. I will create a world in which everyone can live with a smile."

"Please... Don't." Saki pleaded softly. "Please go."

The One-Eyed Dragon ignored her, attacking.

Mitsunari sneered, drawing his blade, moving fast, each strike multiplying, leaving a shimmer in
the air. Saki screamed as her shadow was slashed, forcing it to hold through the pain. Date fell
down, a multitude of cuts having destroyed his armour and his helm, reaching under protection and
fabric to reveal a thick cover of blood-soaked shadow torn in a few places.

Ishida prepared for the final blow, the blade falling down.

Metal rang out.

"I will protect him." Kojuro, heavily wounded and kneeling was blocking the final blow. "As the
Dragon's Right eye I will protect Masamune-sama." The shinobi said nothing, walking towards her
men, standing next to Kojuro. Behind her the shadows grew thicker, stemming the bleeding. Date
was unconscious but through the cocoon she could feel that his life was preserved. A few more
moments and the blood would stop. But that also meant he was consuming her. Standing up at that
moment was little more than bravado on her part. But then again… looking around… the guys that
stood, clinging to their weapons. The weakened way Katakura-dono made Ishida take his blade
back as he struggled to his feet.

"How foolish." Ishida Mitsunari said in a calm sleepy voice, appraising the circle around him.
"Very well. I desire nothing more than to end his life for Hideyoshi-sama." Still giving them a
chance? Where was the murderous man from moments before? "But I will kill every single one of
you. It is unforgivable to stand in Toyotomi Hideyoshi's path." There…

"Ishida-sama…” A voice cut through the silent field. The One-Eyed Dragon did not know that one.
He opened his one eye, seeing nothing but the ground in front of his face. He moved slightly.
There was tension above and around him. The murderous intent that hadn't abated…”Toyotomi-
sama… betrayal…” The intent broke into confusion and a hint of doubt and fear.

"Speak." Mitsunari ordered. Around him the forces of Oshu were fallen, dead or dying. The woman
was trying to recover from the paralyzing blow he had dealt to open the way to his prey. The One-
Eyed Dragon was before him and his blade had been moments away from taking his head when
the messenger arrived. The man was breathing hard and shivering.

"Toyotomi-sama has been killed by Tokugawa Ieyasu… we have been betrayed!” He announced.
Ishida blanched howling in hatred and hurt before taking off, seeking his general, revenge
forgotten by the need to see and deny that particular event, followed by a fearful soldier.

Date waited for a moment, recovering his strength. Around his skin shadows still clung. He sat
down with some difficulty. The battlefield was filled with bodies. He was not sure if any life
remained within them. His eye scanned the surroundings, looking for the familiar shapes and
faces.

Kojuro was fallen nearby, the Kokuryuu still in his gloved hand, blood staining his clothes and
face. His eyes were closed and from that distance he couldn't see if he was breathing. Some guys,
the ones close by he could see that were still alive even though their breaths were quick and
shallow. Saki the closest, fallen on her back, her hair undone around her, strands caked with blood.
Her front was stained red and some wounds marked her skin. She looked like she had been ripped
away from him and tossed out of the way. In the dying light she also possessed no shadow.

The One-Eyed Dragon moved a bit, still trying to process what happened.

Kojuro… Saki… guys…

"My Dragon…” Saki whispered softly, suddenly. His head snapped on her direction. She was still
on her back but managed a slight smile while moving a bit, dragging herself to him, embracing him. "You're alive..." She whispered then broke down, tears falling down her cheeks. Date clenched his jaw, arms going around her.

"Kojuro..." Date whispered.

"He is alive as well." Saki whispered as she glanced at the Right Eye. "Ishida's goal was you. Always. He just... maimed us enough to get to you. If we died along the way it was because of our own weakness." She whispered softly, still embracing him closely, feeling his heartbeat. "Please... forgive my selfishness but I will need my shadow back... I'll get you all out of here... I'll make sure no one else has to die."

The Dragon's lamentation echoed suddenly as his Shadow held him, roaring for a loss that had to be avenged. Saki closer her eyes, allowing him and herself to shed tears before making him fall unconscious, deprived of the strength her shadow had been offering. Sickness welled into her along with dizziness as she stood, letting the Dragon down gently, walking wobbly towards the place she had seen some horses escape to.

Iaido – 居合道 – A sword art know for controlled and smooth movements in the drawing of the sword, slashing and then returning the blade to its place. Uesugi Kenshin in Basara describes it as "Swords are made to return to their scabbards. ";
Chapter 32

Too many blades littered the battlefields along with the bodies of those familiar and those who had died to defend their clan. But the katanas belonging to Oshu's army had all been recovered. They were easier to carry than the corpses of their fallen and their souls were in the metal. Their souls had to be taken back to Oshu.

Saki had managed to drag the army to a safe house, finding the spooked horses and making them carry more than their share… What was left of them was not much but it was still enough to make the task daunting. Especially when she was just one woman and had to work fast. Sundown brought predators and scavengers. It could also bring soldiers, ordered to eliminate them.

Some of her men answered readily as the news spread, converging to the battlefield.

Others took a bit more time, needed at their spots.

Every action was understandable in light of the events.

What happened next was falling in an all too familiar routine.

A quick stop in a secure yashiki, taking care of the army as best as possible and then a forced march towards the only path left open. Those who recovered walked in an attempt to spare the horses, allowing the beasts to carry more wounded and helped take care of them. True to his nature Katakura-dono didn't take long to shrug away the damage and walk alongside Saki and the guys. Date on the other hand was in a very critical state. He needed to go home and be tied down to the futon and the floor. And nursed back to health.

"Matsunaga…" Kojuro said as the path coiled around them, finally taking them into the territory of a known enemy. It was not a silent column of soldiers. Amongst the sound of the hooves there were moans and wails of pain.

Saki nodded slowly, confirming.

It was early night and they would not stop until they reached another safe spot. In any event few paths were open to them and crossing Matsunaga's and the Uesugi's territory was the less harmful way they could go now that Tokugawa Ieyasu showed signs of conquering the Land and Ishida Mitsunari was quickly rallying what was left of the Toyotomi to stop him and avenge his lord.

"He disregarded Toyotomi's orders, got his artefacts and recovered his land. It's safe to assume he will still be after the six claws despite the fact they were reformed…" Saki stopped suddenly, looking uncomfortable, pressing her lips together, claws twitching.

The Right Eye tensed in response scanning the area. Even though he was heavily bandaged underneath the armour he did not let it show. She was not displaying bandages but a sheen of blackness peeked under her clothes, over her skin. What kept her going was the same that made all of them move forward.

Either she sensed an enemy or one of the wounds was bothering her…

Saki vanished suddenly but she did not go far, alarming everyone as she reappeared on the road's shadow, under the trees that flanked it, heaving, bowed, throwing up, her claws sinking in frustration against the tree bark.
The shinobi groaned, exasperated, straightening with a bit of difficulty. That one had come out of nowhere, not giving her time to hide behind a scouting excuse or simply saying she had noticed an enemy. She could hear the murmurs behind her and the steps of the Right Eye approaching. Her eyes closed in resignation. Saki took a deep breath, trying to play it off.

"It's the fact that the One-Eyed Dragon wields them that makes them valuable not the sword itself..." She turned, trying to continue the conversation and move on with the plan to cross the territory undetected.

"How badly injured are you in truth?" The Right Eye asked.

Saki smiled softly, not truly saying a thing.

"I am steady enough to continue."

"Poisoned?" In all the years that had been the only instance of Saki throwing up he had witnessed.

"No." Saki said dismissively. "We need to carry on before a scout spots us and gives our location to a patrol. The army is in no condition to fight"

"Saki..." Kojuro paused for a moment, considering. She hadn't been too steady since the march to Osaka and the battle against Toyotomi. Having been told what kind of combat she had been involved in and the constant use of her skills to further advance their faction and being fully familiar with simple facts like her lack of regard for sleeping cycles when working and the constant use of shinobi kusuri to keep herself going beyond what a body could take Kojuro just assumed she was exhausted. He had not broached the subject, trusting Masamune-sama to control her.

There was another terrifying hypothesis and the fact that she was brushing aside a bout of sickness when not a flinch from the army went untreated much less unmentioned and not scolded... and maybe Nobuko had not been playing with words.

"Are you with child?" The Right eye asked, his voice dropping with dread. He did not want the army to overhear any of that. They seemed to be grateful for the pause though. Hopefully they would not pry yet. Saki's eyes widened for a moment and she started to blush before regaining control, looking away with an empty mask. Kojuro panicked.

"With all the kusuri I was forced to take after that attack on Oshu something was bound to interfere with one or another." She admitted easily, looking away. "Although I had hoped it would be the pills that make me sleepy. Yes." Saki continued, answering to his growing alarm.

Masamune-sama's child, a continuation to the clan, a promise of the future of Oshu and most likely a hellion that would have everyone in the household frazzled as soon as it came out of the womb. Nobuko's words haunted him a bit. Footprints on the ceiling... his own past with Masamune-sama, the questions, the brawls, the hiding in places not even a tanooki would find... the Right Eye shuddered.

But... a child would assure Oshu's security in a lot of strategic ways if its survival could be ensured. A direct line of succession in a way that could not be denied. And a way to keep Saki, something that she had dismissed so far even though the shinobi admitted her attachment easily. Even though the Right Eye felt a terror the likes no man should feel with the perspective of a dragon-ninja baby there was a possibility in that situation...

"Katakura-dono... right now it does not matter." Saki called him back to reality. "We need to get Date to Oshu."
It mattered. If the One-Eyed Dragon, and he and Saki would do everything in their power to prevent it from happening, died in the way she would have no choice but to have the child and live on. He would have no choice but to protect them and Oshu. He would not let the land of his lord be torn apart by the greedy people who had shunned him when he lost his eye, when he was powerless. But in a way it did not, as she said, because their goal was to keep the man draped over that horse alive.
"Katakura-sama!" Magobei shouted, his voice edged by worry and urgency, riding back to the main branch of the group, his horse looking ornery and nervous. The retainer looked panicked and worried, sweating due to exertion and pushing himself to be able to function. Some men hadn't even woken up for more than a few hours, much less found themselves able to ride and work. "A scouting group with Matsunaga's colours spotted me."

The Right Eye ordered a momentary stop, looking worried while facing the news. Saki sighed, straightening and stretching, approaching, patting the horse's neck.

"Did you see where he went to report?" The shinobi asked, steadying the animal.

"West Saki-chan..." Magobei mumbled. She nodded, turning to Katakura-dono.

"Keep moving east towards Echigo." Saki advised. "I'll scout and see what does he want to bring to us."

"Saki..." Katakura-dono started, approaching, looking around quickly.

"Do not." She whispered, slightly threatening vanishing on that note.

Troops, scouts and Matsunaga himself along with what seemed to be a reborn Miyoshi Death Squad. Saki concealed a sigh as she head-counted and took note of every explosive device and battle implement they could use and carry. It was very clear to her Fuma had been too effective in hiding his contracted Master's move in those years everyone had thought him dead. She wasn't even sure she knew who the mask that ruled that territory for him had been... In any event he had all possible paths covered even though the time lapse created by moving troops to where they should be would create a small but doable gap through which they could move through, reach Echigo... the only choice was move forward and destroy whoever got in the way... as best as they could. They were making no real effort to conceal their manoeuvres. And thanks to the scouts they knew where to go.

"We need to move out." Saki announced as she caught up with the army, having left some simple traps on the way, erasing tracks. Makeshift measures but they were all she could do with the time and means available. "Fast and carefully and take a gambit. Forced march." Katakura-dono stared at her, keeping the rhythm. The path was starting to grow narrower and steeper, leading into a mountainous road. The temperatures were dropping slowly and surely.

"We're already stretched thin." The Right Eye considered, looking back. Indeed many of the ones that had stubbornly decided they could walk and keep up with the less injured were wobbly and unsteady.

"The other option is combat and we might be unable to defend some." Saki was also staring at the same men, reaching the heart of his concerns easily. "Or even attack properly." She continued, glancing at the amount of blades that had lost their wielders.

"I could be used as a vanguard." Katakura-dono placed his hand on the katana by his side, looking determined. Saki shook her head.

"And what?" Her voice cut curtly and harsh. "Throw yourself recklessly into combat without a care?" She chastised, her arms down, the claws twitching slightly.
"You shouldn't talk about reckless..." Katakura-dono retorted acidly. She just shrugged the jab aside.

"Do not." Saki repeated in annoyance. "We need to give them firm orders." If they were going to fight whatever was standing in their way the army should be instructed to move forward without a backward glance. They had to stress how important it was for Date Masamune to remain alive and how their loyalties and honour should matter.

The ambush was no surprise but it was still an effective ploy. Katakura-dono slashed the path forward, his combat skills complemented by those who could not fight who kept a tight horse formation, protecting its core. Saki fell behind, eliminating stragglers and making sure there was no way left through which they could be followed, be it with explosives or simple misdirection.

Small groups, attacking in patterns that would cause maximum damage to any opponents using a protection strategy. The intervals were irregular, clearly moving to the sway of the terrain, always choosing the point where the attack launched would be as heavy as possible, favouring Matsunaga's troops. Saki suspected they were being led towards some sort of trap. Moving ahead and picking up the groups was a good effort and had kept the men mostly safe. So far no losses had been registered on Date's side although some injuries had been aggravated.

Saki shadowed and moved ahead once more after the clean-up on the last ambush was done. The winding path that she had to follow for the sake of mapping things for the army would be a perfect ambush spot as a man standing four horse's lengths ahead of some other would see nothing beyond the curve. And yet there was not a single deployment placed for an attack. It only intensified her notion of trap although to someone tired and untrained it could be seen as a breather, a small flicker of hope that said that the worst was over.

It led to a gate-blocked valley where the Miyoshi Death Trio, recreated and retrained, awaited, surrounded by lazily floating smoke, the scent of ground roots reaching Saki high above. The bow shaped form of the area trapped the poison in the area. The same trick to weaken opponents. But judging by the smell a different type of poison.

The shinobi rummaged through her bag, finding the appropriate countermeasures. Last time Katakura-dono had faced them he had ended up heavily poisoned and severely weakened before facing Matsunaga. So the presence of the trio there told her they were getting near the man and that he was still stacking his odds. She pulled out two bottles of liquid and smirked. Well... he was not the only one to do that.

"Fall back and do not advance until I give the signal." Kojuro instructed the men, preparing for combat, cleaning up recent wounds, checking his weapons, tightening the armour effort-loosened ties. "If we do not return of send a contact within two hours..."

Saki rolled out a quickly traced map made of traveling paper and charcoal. It outlined the area and her finds.

"There are alternate routes through here and here." She pointed the marked paths quickly, her claw hitting the paper and the rock beneath it. "They add days to the journey but are still mostly unoccupied. We trust you to do this if we fail." The shinobi handed the map to Yoshinao, noticing him close to tears of pride before approaching Katakura-dono.

"You fought them before." She said slowly, helping with the do. An extra pair of hands was always useful when making sure the armour sat right. Katakura-dono nodded.
"They move in synchrony and trust the poison to weaken the opponent."

"I took care of one of those factors. The simple presence of two people attacking will also throw them into a scramble seeing that I will not follow your path." Saki stated as Katakura-dono mounted. "In any case It will be simple if you keep attacking directly and I get through the gaps they are sure to show in the back."

"And if there are no weaknesses in their form?"

"I’ll create one."
Chapter 34

The trio stirred readily and without much preamble, abandoning the rest positions as soon as the horse entered the valley, standing slowly, the movements fluid and controlled clearly part of some sort of intimidation ritual or strategy. Metal and leather sounded faintly, as deliberate as the lowering of their weapons and the steps taken to create a formation. The now harmless fog still floated about, lying to them about the advantage of weak newcomers. It could still be used as an obscuring method, something Saki planned to take full advantage of.

Saki gave a quick sniff, confirming her trick hadn't been discovered or undone, nodding silently at the right eye, allowing him to know she was ready to start as soon as he acted.

Katakura-dono dismounted, taking a couple of steps into the combat area, hand over the katana.

It was enough.

A challenger was singled out and the backup was nowhere to be seen.

So the Miyoshi Death Squad advanced, falling into their trademark routine.

"One person falls, another appears." The one that served as the head or the trio, standing on the centre began, the voice gravely and muffled, giving away the presence of a filtering fabric under the mempo, approaching, blade tapping the ground, lowered. The rhythm was somewhat hypnotic.

"Two persons down two more appear." The left one said, readying a spear, the tapping complementing the blade's.

"Three persons down and it's the end." The right one echoed the final part of their combat motto, standing in a mirrored position, halfway through the valley, where the fog was thickest, the three weapons silent from their repeated tapping. They seemingly melded into a single entity, one behind the other, weapons jutting out.

Kojuro shifted his grip on the katana, pulling the blade free and charged, moving forward in a straight line. The spear wielding pair moved forward too, breaking away speedily from the main blade of the trio, running to intercept, their weapons crossing for a greater impact as they curved out, away and onward. The Right Eye stopped the attack easily, keeping his focus steady, knowing the former squad's strengths, trying to see if this reformed trio had anything different from before, blocking the pair into a stalemate, giving them just a bit of terrain, just enough to make them believe they had some sort of advantage, that the poison was quickly making its presence known.

Saki had moved closer to the sword wielder who readied himself for his own attack in the wake of the spears, prepared to cut through the blockade, directly through an enemy that should be weakening due to effort and poison, too centred on the fight he had in his hands to notice the third part of the fluid attack. From the outside it was easy to see through the flow.

For Katakura-dono who had fought them before the movements were also apparent.

Yet if the strike was successful the Right Eye could be pressed into a corner.

Hence the shinobi's movements, taking advantage of the single-mindedness needed to strike with precision to stand behind the man, one clawed hand ripping away his helm and mask, slashing at the now vulnerable neck before he had time to realize the sneak attack had been launched.
The gurgling sound of a man drowning in his own blood broke the focus of the spear wielder to the right, leaving the task of pinning Kojuro in place to his pair, turning to see what was happening, to face the unknown threat. He saw nothing but a fallen body. Saki shadowed through the mist, reappearing behind Kojuro's remaining opponent, slashing from behind, allowing the Right Eye to escape the stalemate and go after the distracted spear holder as the shinobi kept the other preoccupied with avoiding her strikes.

The length of his weapon and the kind of enemies he had been trained to face hindered him against Saki who moved close and slashed deep. Especially when the spear was just broad enough for her to perch on it after a somersault, running through its length, pulling her claws back for a devastating blow. As soon as she broke through the barriers of the armour the enemy was down.

Katakura-dono lost no time to press his advantage. A quick slash to the distracted opponent's back, followed by a kick fuelled by fury and lightning before the blade pierced him, ceasing his life and threat.

It was faster than expected. They had felt like weaker, untested adversaries. Which was most likely true due to the fact that Matsunaga and all thing associated with him, had been in hiding. They had seen no true combat, most likely. Then again reliance in gimmicks and easily dispelled tricks would harm one's skill when needed to use them.

Saki cleaned and checked her claws as Kojuro returned the blade to its place.

The gate keys were stuffed into the sword wielder's obi and it took the combined efforts of the two to move it away, revealing a gently rising and curving slope. Saki took a deep breath, stepping onto the path.

"Will you wait?" Go back, walk forth or scout were the available choices. Katakura-dono looked around carefully, thinking, breathing slowly. The shinobi was doing the same pattern, cold claws pressed against a shadow-dark shoulder.

As usual Matsunaga stood alone and in the way, near a cliff, staring at the smoke-scarred dawn, right in the way to the mountain pass that would lead to Echigo and the nearest yashiki, without looking as if he cared anything about his own security as no measures were visible… well apart from the multiple threads, near invisible and discreet that crisscrossed the air. The quiet solemnity that seemed to be his style surrounding him like a cloak.

"I know you are there Dragon woman." He called slowly.

Saki's eyes narrowed for a brief moment. Even if it was a gamble, a simple sentence he said from time to time until it became true, as he knew about her from the last challenge and it wouldn't be that had to understand where she stood in the shinobi world, Saki chose to walk out of her hideout.

"So your time with Fuma gave you that perception." It was also valid option, another explanation. The slight smirk and chuckle told her nothing but she also did not need to know a thing. That was a challenge, a game. And also there was a slim, almost null truth be told, that they could be allowed to pass without further combat.

"Why indeed?" The warlord asked, turning slowly.

Mempo – 面頬 – Mask-like armour, covering the lower half of the face, from the nose to the chin.
"Diplomacy?" Katakura-dono said in a quiet voice as Saki finished her report as the army followed, still in formation, going through the cleared winding paths. The shinobi nodded, sighing as the air was both too little and too much, adding to a momentary pain and discomfort. Her shadows tightened around her skin, answering to it.

Anything to cut short the travel time but there was no persuading Matsunaga out of his treasure hoarding.

So she had left before the time was spent and re-joined the Right Eye.

Nothing had changed and Katakura-dono would have to be the one to fight as he had done once before.

"So you did come instead of searching for another path." Matsunaga greeted with same dragged voice barely giving them any attention. Whether pleased or not it also very hard to tell. "The same loyalty you displayed years ago even towards meaningless peons. But have you come to fall and deliver the swords or eliminate me once and for all?" The warlord turned, examining them without taking his hands from their resting place, behind his back, neither the katana nor the straight blade he used for combat out of their scabbards.

Katakura-dono on the other hand drew the blade almost as soon as he saw him, ordering a stop, walking unflinchingly ahead. A greedy look towards the blades sparked the battle, the Right Eye charging ahead, lightning trailing him, the blade touching the ground, the form broken and aggressive due to rage.

It was something one usually saw. But when it happened it augured nothing good for the look's recipient. That was years of frustration, two run ins with gored expectations and humiliation, of works against Masamune-sama.

Matsunaga stopped the sudden attack with a calculated movement but there was a hint of straining underneath the veneer of pleasant ennui, just a note that the battle would be a harsh one if not resolved quickly. His form was flawless and unaffected by the emotional side the Right Eye of the Dragon was displaying.

Kojuro focused and moved, breaking the balance, stepping back to gather balance and attacking once again, slashing in quick succession, and despite all there would be no flaws to take advantage of, nor from fury nor pain, each strike hitting nothing but the warlord's defences.

"Rage, Right Eye? Ever hardly contained." Matsunaga said dismissively before taking his turn, striking from above, moving to frontal slashes, a pair in quick succession, each from his side, finding a defence weakened by pain on the right side, broken by the attacks, a strike from beneath severely hindering him, almost a hit. Kojuro's Kokuryuu was able to stem the blows but his body still felt the impact.

Never had the pair experienced a fight that did not favour Matsunaga.

The men fidgeted nervously, obeying.

Saki's lips thinned.
There was no room to sidestep the battle and there was a small but plausible chance that Matsunaga had plotted a surprise attack, a way to bottle them into the mountain, force a conflict with no room to manoeuvre, a situation where it would be easy to wipe them out. The shinobi moved a bit, standing between the combat and the men, crouching, her claws touching the ground, arched and flared out. The shadows moved over her skin reluctantly, as she was poised to strike in case the Right Eye could not.

Kojuro growled charging again, losing the samurai posture and poise, giving into something baser, more aggressive. Sword, fist and kicks flowed into speedy attacks, throwing off the warlord. The fight style of a delinquent, using what was fastest and most devastating, It was paying off and was being the surest way to deal with that opponent as Matsunaga was clearly being pushed back, abandoning his nonchalance, both hands on the sword.

"Your life is mine." Kojuro growled out, adopting another stance, the blade pointing outwards, lightning building up. Saki tensed, noticing the shift as the battle flowed, dawn and cliff nearing. He was trying to finish it in a single strike, a movement with all he had.

Masamune-sama's life depended on the success of the combat. Oshu…

The Right Eye of the Dragon steadied himself and charged, fast and sure. Surrounded by light and strength Kojuro stroke, the slash and impact making Matsunaga step back slowly, once, twice, a stunned but smiling expression on his features, the third step taking him over the edge, falling down, away from sight.

Kojuro slammed the blade down and wobbled, finally taken down by the weight of wounds and effort. Saki approached and steadied him.

"You did well Katakura-dono." The shinobi said calmly. "Bring a horse, take him. Move out. I'll meet you at camp." She stood and approached the edge of the cliff looking down, waiting for all of the men to have crossed, left, the place.

This time... the shinobi started to move, the shadows moving away, down, creeping in a search. She focused and allowed them to move, weaving the jutso. She found the body, a flicker of life. It was Matsunaga. The shinobi took a deep breath. This time she would make sure the man would not have a chance to try any trick against them. As soon as she reached the camp and sent a message the rest of the faction would be dealt with.

"Shadow Extinction." The kunoichi whispered, striking him down.
Date groaned, stirring half-awake for a moment. Saki smiled, working on the bandages, using the small, clipped, stretching movement to move his arm a bit, continuing the wrapping, slipping his damp hair away from the face afterwards, noticing that the blue eye was misty but open. He was not fully aware of what surrounded him, blinded by pain and a hint of fever but being conscious was good enough for the time being. Despite the traveling conditions and constant motion the wounds were closing and showed no signs of infection. Whether it was due to his constitution, luck or the medicine it would be anyone's guess.

The shinobi sighed, sitting back, examining her work for a last time before pulling the covers over him, steadying herself for a moment before looking around, at the small and secluded camp they had been able to make. They were finally away from Matsunaga's territory and the warlord was no threat now they were in a secure niche in the mountains, half inside Echigo. She would have to leave soon and meet with the War God of Echigo and get him to understand their situation, to let them pass through the territory without having to attack or defend themselves.

Katakura-dono was recovering too, brought down by exhaustion and standing up again by sheer stubbornness, sitting near a fire, leaning forward, looking grim. The men were scattered around tired and relieved, the one that had been struggling to move forward resting. Saki joined the Right Eye, sighing again, dizzied by exhaustion. Rest… just for a moment…

"You could have returned to Oshu." Kojuro said, noticing her arrival. After that forced march he had to ease up on the men, give them at least a day's rest.

"Meaning?" He glanced at her. Saki sighed. Might as well make something very clear. Kunoichi had a vast array of skills to deal with the particulars of her situation. "My mother went into battle seven months pregnant with me. There is no need to worry any more or any less."

Sunrise caught her asleep, as most of the camp, bundled up under Katakura-dono's jacket. The shinobi sat up slowly, muffling a groan, standing and returning the piece of clothing to its owner, containing the urge that every morning seem to drag. With some luck and after the feeling of sickness had passed, the army would be free to move once more.

Uesugi Kenshin was not unreasonable and with pressure on him and his borders it was somewhat easy to convince him to allow passage without needing much negotiation or any help from Kasuga or other kinds of trickery. Still one should be wary of a ruse or trap as it had been done with the Maedas when they retreated from Echigo in the Toyotomi conflict.

It was an easy walk through the War God's lands despite the wary atmosphere. His only demand had been that they crossed the terrain and abandoned his territory within three days. Invigorated by last night's rest neither Katakura-dono, nor Saki nor the army whose spirits were picking up a bit saw any problem with rushing and pushing through. The coming winter and its fickle weather would be more of a challenge if it chose to stir.
Chapter 37

A hill of blades served as a memento to the fallen, half hidden away within Oshu's centre. It had grown so vast, too vast, in those… six years now. A cold wind blew around it, bringing storm clouds, hinting of the nearing winter. Saki barely flinched, watching the shadows and the creping darkness. Her stance slackened a bit before stiffening once more, thoughts running, clashing with plots and needs. Conquest of Oshu, Oda, Hideyoshi and now what Mitsunari had done… Lost soldiers, friends… all the losses showed in that field.

War.

The shinobi sighed. Not even the most stalwart general could prevent fatalities. Not even all information gathering or planning could help if fate was set up against them. All they could do was fight and survive. And it was what they had done. In the last journey luck had favoured them. For now they were home, safe, resting and recovering. But already things were stirring outside the borders.

Katakura-dono barely left Date's side and the army lingered about, also waiting for him to return to the conscious world for longer than a few hours at a time. It was looking good on that part but they needed time and she was determined to give it to them. And it was easier to car for them if they were not spread out. Meanwhile the army was also replenishing, calling on the reserves. Katakura-dono had always showed the foresight of not taking all the soldiers away. There was always a little bit of hidden strength that remained behind, ready to come when called upon.

Ieyasu… had been the first one to take advantage of the situation.

So far Saki felt the situation was controlled.

Within they had no idea the borders were being attacked. And in the borders her shinobi, aided by the joint forces of the other clans that had, for some reason she had not yet been informed of, gathered under the Dragon clan's claws, fought and ensnared.

So far minimal wounds, no losses versus massive defeats and quite a few deaths on Tokugawa's side.

But with that kind of pressure she was fearful that Honda Tadakatsu would be called into action.

"Have you told him?" Nobuko said, stepping out of the shadows, walking towards the field.

Saki shook her head. It had been quite a while since her mother had contacted despite sending the forces to help Oshu's defence.

"I have had no chance to do so yet. Does Takeshi know?" She asked after a moment of silence.

"No one will talk until a decision has been reached." Nobuko assured her. "Even so if… well there is always Yadokari." Saki sighed. There was that. Within the clan there were kunoichi that either because they disliked combat and strife or had been too crippled by some accident of conflict to be able to go on missions that specialized on having and training the new generation. It was not something that was on her mind at the moment.

"What have you heard then?" Nobuko prodded carefully. There was no room to perform a real alliance at the moment, not while the One-Eyed Dragon was unaware.
"The turmoil is starting again. On one side is Tokugawa Ieaysu. On the other Ishida Mitsunari."
Saki summarized and began to walk away.

"Where will Date Masamune be?" Her mother asked, following.

"His own side. This time… I…"

"You are not steady enough to do this at the moment." Nobuko said coldly. She could see the shadows under her clothes. What she gave to the others Saki was not allowing herself to have.

"I have to."

"Koneko…" Nobuko started but Saki was already gone. The older shinobi sighed.

There would be a time to drop the act but it was not looking good. Neither one of her men were in any condition to help. Slowly her claws rubbed over sore arms as she sighed, sitting down on the branch, overlooking the terrain, seeing the torchlight of Tokugawa's moving army.

The traps and ambushes deflected most of the scouting ventures and infiltration attempts despite the fact that they were supported by Oni-Hanzo's techniques and the Iga. The few stragglers were quickly eliminated by the patrols or the other traps placed just further ahead. It helped that her network had been left intact year after year and had grown large and steady enough that no spy could be easily denounced. They were too ingrained into the other's army. There was another danger there, that they started to believe they belonged to the other faction but in well trained spies the danger of that was usually minimal.

So she knew where to strengthen the defences to maximize the forces available to her every time they attempted to move into Oshu. When battle was forced, by the pressure or hurry on either side of the field, Saki walked into combat with her shinobi, not caring if the adversary were soldiers, cavalry or other ninja.

The conflicts had to be won.

Yadokari – Technique that allows an unborn child to be transferred without harm to another woman;
Chapter 38

The battlefield was empty now, leaving only behind bodies and banners of the Tokugawa faction. The last attack had been odd, full of aggression but incomplete. They seemed to be more focused in fighting than advancing. Saki moved a bit, sharpening her claws slowly, getting a better view, rethinking the causalities. Only two losses, one captured, most likely dead now as well due to the inner workings of the shinobi conduct. Several injured but nothing that kept them from combat.

Despite the situation of siege and guerrilla she had found moments to rest and recover. Her shadow was once more firmly trailing behind her instead of acting as a second skin. So far she hadn't been called back to the bukeyashiki, letting Katakura-dono believe she had gone back to her clan for the time being, to heal and report. He didn't question it although it felt like an uncomfortable lie, still the less he knew the better.

The shinobi sighed and sat down, clenching her hands, listening to small snaps underneath the metal. It felt a bit underhanded on her part but Tokugawa was no less opportunistic and calculating by choosing that specific time to attack. The contact, most likely spurred by Hattori Hanzo, came as no surprise after almost eight days of combat and strategy. Perhaps it was naive optimism but there was a small chance an understanding could be reached.

Both Oni-Hanzo and Honda Tadakatsu were there when she arrived to the designed meeting place, flanking the young man. He had grown, both in body and ambition. Saki examined the trio quickly, noticing the subtle differences in Tadakatsu's armour, the tension of Hanzo's grip of his favoured weapon, the spear and the fierce, determined will of Tokugawa's eyes. It was disquietingly similar to the intensity one could see in the Tiger of Kai… She bowed and waited. The shinobi had very little to tell them beyond "get out of my lord's territory".

"If the One-Eyed Dragon was to ally with me my strength would be greatly increased." Ieyasu tried, making her feel reassured that her efforts to keep them out was not in vain or a waste of time and lies. There was the old saying if you can't beat them join them. Meaning that all the attacks had also been a way to gauge their strength.

"Date does not need such compliments." Saki dismissed the underlying flattery. "And neither does he need such an alliance." Not one where he would be subordinate to another. And not when he had used a time of weakness to strike. Tokugawa Ieyasu pondered for a moment, quiet.

"Mitsunari…" Saki tensed. Then she shook the feeling away. He was as much, if not more, a Tokugawa enemy as he was the One-Eyed Dragon's. "Would he be willing to forgive him?"

"Forgiveness is for after the battle." The shinobi stated, frowning for a moment. Why would he care about such a thing? But the answer was rather obvious. Toyotomi had linked them in the past and for the younger warlord such bonds did not disappear simply because their paths flowed in opposite directions.

"One will always die." Tokugawa said, standing, ready to leave. "I cannot lose no matter what." He stated hand encased and protected by metal closing into a fist. Saki's claws twitched but she remained still, looking ahead.

"Then leave." She advised. "No matter how strong your army is the Dragon will not fall." The shinobi whispered the last words before shadowing away smoothly, leaving the meet, readying for battle once more. After a sudden bout of sickness reminded her of another reason for winning fast.
"There is something we need to discuss." Saki spoke out after the usual work with the medicine bag. Date grunted as an answer, still moving slowly, trying to make the bandaging a little less tight. Knowing there was a need for such a thing did not diminish the annoyance of feeling like a fish within a tangled net. She was wearing the light shirt that showed her legs, hair loose and wild. Hardly formal or the usually primly done braid and cold look but he liked it that way. "About my oath."
"Katakura-sama?" The Right Eye of the Dragon looked away from the straw dummies he was using to practice, despite the bandages that ran over his torso, arms and hands, exposed by the fact that he had chosen to allow the sleeves and top part of the simple dark green kimono to pool around the obi, standing topless in the training patio. The katana pointed downwards has he calmed down, half turning to hear what the guys had to say. The cold air of twilight was turning bitterly cold as it moved towards night. The sweat of the small bout of effort was drying over his skin, adding to the cold. He was not feeling it for the moment, still focused. The aftereffect of the battle, defeat and travel were still being felt very acutely, showing themselves as a stiffness in his joints that did not seem to leave.

Samenosuke was waiting for his acknowledgement, also bandaged and beaten, the expression tight and closed. The mood had been eased by their arrival and the peace but everyone knew that war was brewing out of their borders. And everyone was striving to be ready as soon as the Dragon called.

"We have prepared some food but the boss isn't in his room anymore." The retainer informed, worried. It was too soon. Date had been only able to move freely for a few days and movement too soon could aggravate his condition. Kojuro slipped the blade into its sheath and walked onto the engawa, nodding in understanding, placing the blade down, pulling the kimono top into place, noticing the other three were waiting just around the corner.

"I will seek him out." The Right eye said curtly. "You guys rest and heal." He ordered, moving out. Knowing his lord like he did there was a good chance he would be there despite the hour and the weather.

"Masamune-sama." The cemetery of those lost. The blades that still linked their spirits and wills to the land, proving that they still served Oshu, even in death, as it should be. A reminder of war, duty and loss. A place for mourning and thought. Masamune-sama was indeed there, staring at the blades in the dying light. Quiet and thoughtful, bladeless, wearing house clothes with a simple haori for protection against the winds. Kojuro sighed, averting his eyes from the field after a quick nod of respect. "This is bad for your health." He called, taking his lord's attention away from his ponderings. "Please let us return."

"Saki came back yesterday." Date said suddenly, still looking at the standing blades. Kojuro approached, worried.

"She did not report…" He admitted.

"No." Date smirked and turned away from the fallen, walking back to the bukeyashiki, followed closely by Kojuro. "It seems now I have a time limit to conquer the country. I have to rule the country by the time the little one comes." The Right Eye paled. So she had informed him of the pregnancy and Date was determined to keep the child. It… was both a good think and deeply unsettling.

_Saki had paled when he smiled for her, dragging her closer, the embrace surprisingly crushing for a wounded man. It was not the reaction one expected when speaking of oaths and the issue of a bastard._
"Don't say such things..." She urged, unsure if it was a joke. "Eight months is hardly enough..."

"Saki... it was a challenge." His palm skimmed over her stomach slowly. She closed her eyes. While relieved she would not have to get rid of that little life that was growing or lie and give it to the clan so she would not lose it that plan was just to hare-brained to be... his eye was steeled and serious though. It sent a shiver through her. "I will have you, I will have this child and I will have this country. To hell anyone who disagrees." He chuckled, kissing her forehead, laying down with the shinobi in his arms. "I have six claws to make them see it my way."

"There was something else." Date said as they reached the lights that spilled out of the household. "She had the look of battle in her eyes."
A spear was not the trickiest of weapons to use or do battle against even if its wielder was regarded as one of the craftiest men alive. It was also a difficult weapon to sue if one was trying to perform a sneak attack, even within the cover of a raging battle. It could work if the enemy was otherwise engaged, less attentive or simply unprepared for such honour lacking attempts. But Oni-Hanzo was dealing, on behalf of his master, with a small army comprised entirely of shinobi. So attacking the one leading them was no easy task despite her presence in the thick of battle.

The claws were heavy and slick with blood but it did not diminish its sharpness as they curled around the wooden shaft of the spear as the Shadow sidestepped the blade's blow, her protected wrist twisting, leaving deep, weakening slashes in the wood, deflecting the blow and the wielder out of her way, turning to face him, claws outstretched, leaning forward.

Hanzo stepped back, readying, charging.

Saki moved, not entirely unfamiliar with the style.

They clashed, the spear's shaft keeping her claws away from its wielder body. Oshu's shinobi smirked at the block, tightening her claws around the wood again, carving once more deep cuts onto its surface before shifting her weight, forcing Tokugawa's operative to hold her weight, somersaulting over him striking fast, slashing at his back as he spun to attack, dodging the wide arch of his weapon of choice, hopping out of the way.

She attacked once more from above, avoiding the spear, actually attacking it instead of the man when she had the chance, hacking at the wooden body, weakening it before moving again, avoiding the skewering blow, lunging forward, slipping within the spear's range. Hanzo gritted his teeth as she stomped on his shadow, pinning part of it as her claws snapped forward, aiming for the throat.

The shinobi was able to move his weapon to protect himself but the structure was weakened by the series of gashes Saki had carved along, snapping when she struck once more, the closed fisted, metal weighted blow. Undaunted he attacked with the two broken pieces only to have his movements stopped by something gripping onto his legs. His eyes widened when he noticed she had moved away not out of fear of any blow but to stand on his shadow that pointed towards the west.

Saki glanced at him, opening her claws, making a single symbol, pinning the shadow without the need of her physical presence over it, attacking, prepared for the final blows. Hanzo's eyes tightened but there was not much he could do when the kick brought him to the ground and the claws slashed neatly though his throat.

Hanzo was out, the battle was thinning. Saki took a deep breath, slowly, thinking, still moving, still fighting. The ground shook suddenly, the roar coming from the skies. She gritted her teeth. Honda Tadakatsu...

"Get out of the field." She ordered to the shinobi, walking towards a hill, against all teachings, making herself visible. That was another one that needed to fall. Wind snapped up against her as the warrior reputed to be the best in the warring states fell from the sky and prepared to combat.
Chapter 41

Dodging was what she could do, the armour too thick to get through with her claws and strength, the weapon too massive to break or block. But Tadakatsu was also rather slow and easy to avoid. It did not meant he was allowing her to leave in any way. Not that she had intention to. Saki somersaulted, getting out of the way of the weapon that slammed down, cracking the ground. A single weak spot was all she needed to find. Even rebuilt there was bound to exists something like that in the so called strongest warrior.

Agility was her best bet while keeping her eyes on him, trying to pinpoint any weaknesses. Joints and junctions, gaps in attack and defence… anything she could exploit. But while Honda Tadakatsu had some clear, basic drawbacks she had her own disadvantages, enhanced by the simple fact that she hadn't left the battlefield since morning and the afternoon was stretching. The toll it was taking was steadily increasing with each tick of time.

Saki avoided the massive spear-club once more, her eyes still on target, making a dash to the left, wincing in annoyance and lunging for the ground when the thing made a sharp change of direction, aiming for her middle. Reacting by instinct she shadowed away and as soon as she had a grasp on the movement she lunged forward. The eyes were still a rather vulnerable area even for him.

Tadakatsu moved into a shielding position readying a ranged attack, rockets moving out of his armoured shell.

The shinobi hissed and dodged each, still trying to move forward, pouncing suddenly, her claws claiming blood from an unprotected cheek. Tadakatsu reacted almost immediately without losing his countenance, swatting the weapon sideways. Saki avoided that strike easily but it was the sudden burst of speed from the back thrusters that allowed him to move out of the area and swing the spear-club in a wide arch that caught her almost unawares.

A grimace traced her lips as the hasty dodge on her part came to an end, shadow jumping away from the adversary, coming to an ungainly, undignified stop, her ankle twisting, having brushed the metal, protected from a cut by the layer of leather. A sharp jolt of pain coursed through her as she relieved the weight from her leg, standing like a crane, staring at the adversary.

Shinobi were conditioned to show no hesitation in combat. What needed to be done was done. If one needed to attack, kill, run, hide or retreat… the action did not matter. It just had to be done with swiftness and resolution. Hesitation was to be avoided.

Letting an annoyed his out Saki signalled the others. As it was expected she alone was an ill match for that kind of warrior.

Ambush was also a shinobi thing to do and traps had been prepared all over the borders. Arrows and bombs started to fall against Tadakatsu. If there was no weakness it had to be created. Yukimura had done so when the Takeda forces had faced Ieyasu in the war against Oda. Oda himself had almost done away with Tadakatsu using the damage of the previous battles.

The ground itself shifted as traps were actioned, pits, spears, bombs, caging devices… Most of the damage seemed to be bounding off the hard metal shell. But the persistence was paying off. The greatest warrior was unable to use armour and weapon against all of the consecutive attacks and every time he wanted to move a trap was in place to hinder the progress.

A truly crippling strike came when the warrior tried to fly away, the revealing of the thrusters
leaving them open to a round bomb that lodged itself in the mechanism, blasting them out of commission. Saki adjusted her position a bit, her hands moving, signalling another strike.

Honda Tadakatsu shook, readying himself, his sight locked on her. The shinobi moved her claws, ready to confront him, crouching, picking up another bomb. If she could manage to jam that one deeply enough into the armour and move out of the blast area… the Tokugawa warrior charged suddenly through the fog of war.

Saki began the time countdown in her head. There was a moment where he would be open, the precise second where he would lower the spear-club to skewer her as he was noting she was not moving at all beside a slight tension, a readiness that few recognized as such. Her pose could also be interpreted as a blinding pain. But in battle, in that moment she was not allowing herself to feel it. The moment she was waiting for would allow her to shadow into his defences and slam the bomb against his armour, binding it with the shadows of his helmet…

There…

As she began to move a flash of blue lightning crossed the field, blocking the warrior's path with a single katana. Saki's eyes widened for a moment as the Right Eye of the Dragon strained, keeping his block in place. She shook her head. Failure. Sadly a failure. She hadn't been able to keep them away, keep them safely away from that… she lowered her head for the barest of instants as the Right Eye started to fight, trading fast blows against which Tadakatsu seemed hard pressed.

The kunoichi's claws gripped the bomb a bit tighter. Still had to finish that, the defences. And if Tokugawa did not retreat after losing his most trusted and skilled warrior then he would lose his life too.

Katakura-dono was forcing all kinds of opening into the warrior's defence. Even if he had interrupted the previous plan he was still giving her all the chances she needed to make it happen. So Saki did.

Her shadowed self moved fast, cutting into the battle, catching Katakura-dono's surprised expression, slamming the bomb down, claws lighting the wick and performing the binds, somersaulting on one foot from Tadakatsu's chest, gripping the Right eye's jacked, vanishing with him to the edges of the field.

Unable to remove the bomb the strongest warrior perished in a blast of fire.

Saki sighed, sinking to her knees, glancing up to the Right Eye who appraised the battlefield for a moment, making sure the enemy was down before looking at her. The shinobi pressed her lips together and fidgeted.

"Good evening Katakura-dono. What brings you to the borders of Oshu?" Saki said tiredly, taking her claws off to rub her ankle through the clothing.
Chapter 42

They were staring stone-faced. Saki kept still and waiting. The only ones present were The One-Eyed Dragon and the Right Eye. The shinobi that had rallied for her had created a small encampment for them, still waiting for orders, as Katakura-dono returned with her.

News were arriving and waiting but for now…

"What were you doing?" Date asked harshly.

"My duty. Protect you." She answered without hesitation.

"Keeping information from me, walking into battle unaided…"

"I was hardly out of support." Saki cut him out, answering once again, eyes narrowing. "And yes. I do whatever it takes to assure your safety and Oshu's survival. If that means keeping a wounded man ignorant so be it. I have done it before and you can be sure I will do it again. That is what I do. That is why I was hired." Her lips pressed together. "It was clearly a sentimental mistake to go see you before the battles were resolved." She bowed then, formally. "Punish me accordingly but know all I do it's for your sake."

Katakura-dono said nothing while watching the exchange. There was no anger any longer, just frustration. For not being told, for missing out on the battles. He understood her motives and actions. He also understood Masamune-sama better than anyone.

Date stood up slowly and approached, smirking suddenly, patting Saki's head gently. She looked up, startled. Then her eyes softened and she approached a bit.

"I am not a squeamish warlord. I know what has to be done in the shadows to keep me standing." Date tilted her head up, speaking up softly but with purpose and energy. "What has been done so far and what do you need to do to come home and rest while the army regroups?"
"Tokugawa lost his two major supports and we have been steadily decreasing his army's numbers." Saki stated while showing the campaign maps and locations of each confront, showing the amounts of losses and the tactical advantages won. "He has some choices open. Either retreat and face the other enemies that lurk around the land, namely Ishida Mitsunari, hoping we will see him as an ally of sorts, seeing the same faction is not very... agreeable to us, press the attack with all his strength and guile and what remains of his forces, or try to keep Oshu contained and create a siege situation."

"What is your opinion?" Date asked of Kojuro.

"He was the one who brought aggression to our door." The Right Eye appraised. "Saki would have kept it hidden and most likely have eliminated the player from our future fields of battle... I believe we should keep that current path."

Saki nodded. Her ankle was bandaged and she was ready to move out once more.

The shinobi placed a map between them.

"We should attract them to the Dragon Spine." There all the advantages would be with those that knew the terrain and what few numbers Tokugawa had left would mean little to nothing. It was a long, winding gorge, a place where they trained horses for the hard terrains and testes the mettle of their soldiers. It was also heavily trapped and Saki had been using it and charging for it as a training ground for the clans. Nobuko was particularly pleased with the gauntlet it offered. No mere novice was able to escape it unscathed. And said training ground was easily adapted to defensive trapping.

It was an easy fix and an easy plan to plant and deploy.

There was not even any need for them to get directly involved.

But being who they were meant they wanted to be in the thick of the action.

So Date decided he would be the bait, riding out and then away.

Katakura-dono would be stationed at the narrowest point of the Spine, dealing with straggling survivors.

Saki would keep to the shadows and instruct her ninja.

Tokugawa took the bait almost immediately, setting out to chase the Dragon who taunted and laughed, having been informed of the traps along the way, weaving through them, leaving Tokugawa behind with ease, even as the man left his own army behind intent of one-on-one combat. The traps he triggered where taking strength away from him and the faint screams of his army echoed through the walls.

Saki peered from the high ground, lifting a signal to the other side. Katakura-dono should let Tokugawa Ieyasu pass. The man had glanced behind several times. Signs of worry and grief marked his posture. He had lost a lot of what mattered most to him in that attack. Even if he won, which was highly unlikely, even with a wounded One-Eyed Dragon, he would have been extremely weakened, practically ripe for the fall Ishida Mitsunari would drag him to.
Katakura-dono followed the plan and then waited for the army to come, standing tall, katana unsheathed. Half a dozen of shinobi had joined him in waiting, looking ahead quiet as shadows. When the remnants of a broken army came a warrior's death befell them quick and quiet.

The duelling ground under the dragon statue… a grief stricken Ieyasu barely hesitated before shouting, attacking with armoured fists. Date shook his head and charged to, only one claw bared.
Tokugawa Ieyasu had been quick, powerful and precise. His fists had been fuelled by his own aspirations, dreams for a greater Land of the Rising Sun. He had known what he was doing and looked ahead, beyond war, knowing strife was needed to achieve that dream. He had fallen to the One-Eyed Dragon's claws but had gone knowing that the man who had defeated him aspired to the same world and promised to move forward with that purpose.

And he was being treated as one of the fallen of Oshu, the blades of his men and his metal cuffs finding their place amongst the blades that stood proudly on the windswept fields. His death had not been taken lightly by any. He could have been a great man. But he had also brought war to them before even attempting talks. The remnants of his army either left or joined, seeing Date Masamune as a worthy leader not because he had defeated their warlord but because he had not treated his death as just another stepping stone on his path. Another ally gained were the Iga, the ties that kept them linked to the Tokugawa severed. Which meant Oshu now had virtually all of the ninja clans in employ.

Unfortunately the fact that it was the One-Eyed Dragon that had claimed the life of the man that had killed Toyotomi would only make Ishida Mitsunari's rage grow. Date now represented a single entity to hate, embodying the man who had humiliated the faction and the one who had denied Ishida's revenge. Osaka and its accursed general had to fall next.

Date returned from the field of blades entering his room, finding Saki already curled under the covers, sleeping. He could not ask for a greater proof of trust than the fact that she did not stir. Slowly he undressed, glad to feel that his wounds had lessened their grip on his mobility, wincing as the bruises from the combat with Tokugawa throbbed. He slipped into the warmed nest of covers, his hand finding its way to the still flat stomach of his woman.

Saki murmured something, one hand going for the knife she kept next to her, tracing the hilt with a frown before sighing and drawing closer, instinctively recognizing him. The One-Eyed dragon dropped the tension, embracing her. Eight months to conquer the Land of the Rising Sun. It had to be done by summer... and he knew she would not stay behind. In fact he didn't want to leave her behind. He chuckled. In fact he suspected if he did try something like that she would come anyway and make him pay in some unpleasant way.

Nobuko worked on the new information, received and hoarded while the battlefield made it useless, when the fusuma was pushed aside roughly, with a hiss, almost torn out of its rails. She looked up, unimpressed to see her husband standing there, both as white as a sheet and red with rage. The Matriarch sighed and placed her work down, agrivated.

Takeshi had found out.
The message wasn't even encrypted when it arrived, proving a state of some urgency about its contents. It was indeed something to worry about. Takeshi could be a bit… impulsive and protective. And what had happened with Akio was in no way helping the situation. It was a good thing that she was able to intercept him before reaching the Bukeyashiki, pinning him down with shadows. Being who she was Takeshi didn't even try to break the bind, showing, at least some, willingness to talk.

But the conversation kept circulating to three key points.

The child, the lover and his pressing need to beat Date Masamune to a bruised mess.

"But a child?" Takeshi insisted, looking down. A child from a warlord and all the trouble it dragged… with the fear of politics and assassination one such as he would have to consider and the fact that it was his girl having a baby in a time where conflict was growing thicker and more aggressive. He was not happy about it. The shinobi would not ask her to lose the little one but he had at least to try and protect her. Bad enough that Saki, Nobuko and most of the Kizune clan felt no need to inform their males of whatever they were plotting. He had grown used to some of that. But when it came to those he cared about he wanted to be informed, to at least try to make it easier on them.

Also he was being serious, barely teasing.

"It was an accident." Saki admitted, a smidge of annoyance showing that she was not entirely pacified about the mishap. Mistakes were something they rather abhorred. "Then it was my choice. Now it's also his choice." She tried a small smile, reassuring him.

"That… boy…" Takeshi shook his head, fidgeting within the shadows.

Saki chuckled. She suspected he would have a similar attitude to anyone she would have taken to her bed, clan, shinobi or otherwise.

"Is my boss. And my lover." She pressed that point.

"Koneko…" Takeshi pressed his parental disapproval, half asking.

"Yes. He demanded." Demanded a lot.

"And then?"

"What he wishes."

"A wife?"

Saki shrugged.

"If needed."

"And the clan?"

"I am still a shinobi." She pressed her stomach. "This does not change because of a baby. And if you're worried about inheritances there are other women who can become the Celestial Mistress."
Takeshi chuckled.

"No… I'm pretty sure you mother is delighted with the possibility of having the new Matriarch of the clan sitting right next to the unifier and ruler of Japan."

"Isn't that a bit too much?" Saki sat down, releasing the binds. "Besides I doubt I'll be with him in that way. To secure the country he needs someone else to be the one shown to the other warlords."

Takeshi patted hugged her calmly. And he doubted the One-Eyed Dragon would even consider keeping her where Saki wanted to be. But the issue still stood.

"That boy still needs a lesson." At least to know he could not take advantage of his Koneko just because she was bound to the One-Eyed Dragon of Oshu.

"It was within his rights and I happen to enjoy it…" She shook her head. "He rarely shies away from combat. If you are so keen on fighting just… call first and don't cripple him. We'll be leaving for Osaka in a week." Takeshi huffed and disappeared. Saki shook her head. She doubted her words had had much effect. But at least she had stopped him from rampaging through Oshu looking for Date. Now she had to warn Date and ask the same no crippling clause out of her lover.
The whistle sounded suddenly, accompanied by a myriad of shouts and warnings. Saki sighed and finished the packing of the tools she might and would need for the campaign, standing slowly, in annoyance, carrying the items in their bag, walking out of the room where she had once slept and now used mainly for storage. A few hour away from departure and they were at it again?

Sighing she found the source of the commotion, the duelling pair surrounding by betting soldiers and watched by Katakura-dono. Saki advanced until she was next to the man, frowning. Takeshi and Date were at it again. From a simple combat to an event that took place several times a day with no clear winner. Her first signs of worry had given way to the urge of pummelling them both to the ground.

"Why do you allow this to continue?" the shinobi asked Katakura-dono softly.

"It is a good training for Masamune-sama. So far they have only been bruised."

There were bets going around for the result. Who would have the advantage this time, who would lose more terrain… Saki groaned and shadowed, weaving through the next attack, ignoring the shocked shouts, mingling into the battle with calculated speed.

Takeshi tried to pull away when her recently sharpened claws gripped the chain, yanking and locking part of it against her wrist, unbalancing him for a second, enough to for her to turn, throw a loop of the same chain around Date's incoming claw, the shift on his charge to avoid her giving her working room, undoing his attack, shadowing away from them, letting go, her free hands moving into a sequence, slamming onto the ground, tendrils of shadow moving and gripping theirs, pinning them down.

There was a heavy silence around before the crowd started to move away, quickly and quietly.

"We are leaving within the hour Boss." She answered very softly, taking away the binds. Both men looked sheepish as they put their weapons away. Saki's eyes narrowed slowly. She was not believing the contrite act for a second. "I trust whatever issues you may have been settled?" No answer apart for a shared glare. Saki sighed. "Mother called you back home." She told Takeshi harshly. Saki had not said a word. Nobuko had 'simply' walked by to see how she was doing and deliver some, more appropriate kusuri for the mission and her current state of 'mind and body'. Pissed and pregnant. "As for you, Boss… We have to move out immediately."

"What changed?" Date asked, approaching. His eyes roamed her for a moment, checking if no damage had been done when she walked into their scuffle. Takeshi glared but disappeared, grumbling. It was unlikely they had harmed her. Both were unwilling to and she could fend for herself. He made no tender gestures. Her eyes were telling him he would be the one harmed if he attempted anything that looked like coddling or soothing.

"Ishida Mitsunari plans to move out and take down the Saica. We have to take Osaka before he has time to leave. Also by doing this we will be in a comfortable and advantageous position to propose an alliance with the Saica faction. Magoichi… will be a bit more agreeable if we show both the skill and the determination. And the money."

"Have you run this though Kojuro?"

"Yes. As the One-Eyed Dragon conquers there is also the need to find and cement alliances with
the powers that are in play."
Her mission was easy for the moment. Infiltrate the fortress, deactivate all the traps, hinder their troops and wait for the invasion, aiding every step of it without being seen. While Osaka was familiar now there were a few new things to worry about. Weaponry, soldiers and traps were common. The fact that the few remaining shinobi that had been trained by Akio were after her blood for killing their leader. And there was this odd little character named Otani Yoshitsugu. He was shown as a friend, an ally to Ishida Mitsunari, a leper whose hatred for humanity was rumoured to go deep. A mad sick dog that had to be put down as he was poisoning and already enraging man into doing more than avenging his Lord. Both had to be eliminated sooner rather than later. Saki had also informed the Saica faction of Ishida’s movements and plans against Magoichi’s territory and men. If all went well they were looking at a facilitated alliance. If all went superbly they might have some Saica backup in the taking of Osaka. If the plan went south they were looking at either complicated negotiations or, as disheartening as it would be, elimination of the entire mercenary force. Assuming they survived the challenging of the last of Toyotomi loyalists.

Redemption from defeat and payback for the lives taken. That was a driving goal.

The kunoichi moved quietly through the shadows. There would be no need to fight if she was quick and quiet. First she poisoned the water supply. It was a concentrated poison but it would thin in the vast amount of liquid and would do just enough damage to the soldiers to make them sloppy. Weakening their weapons and armours next would have been ideal but she only had till nightfall to accomplish all the little things that needed to be prepared before attacking under the first winter moon.

Noticing some war carriages she weakened the harnesses and stole cogs and parts of their inner mechanisms, tossing them into the poisoned wells as she walked away once again, slipping through the yards and halls, jamming gate mechanisms, keeping the main path cleared, placing small bombs of smoke, fire or poison along the way. She had been feeding the army some temporary antidotes, just in case. She left the ones with stronger toxins in places where the enemy’s army was bound to gather while attacking or defending.

Slowly she adjusted the supplies over her shoulder and looked around. The cannons were a big addition to the fortress from last time. It would be wise to disable them.

A slight chuckle left her lips when she found out the cannons distributed poisonous incense that would cloud the battlefield. Somehow she believed that could have been a gift from Matsunaga. She sniffed the substance carefully, from a distance. Strong and undiluted. It would be very hard for the measly defences her faction possessed to overcome the mist when the stuff started burning. The cannons were a little more mechanical work that usual but by the time she was done their innards and mechanisms were such a tangled mess of missing parts and crisscrossed sections that they would most likely explode if they attempted to use them. Still the outside was left looking pristine and flawless.

What else to do… Saki though, perching on the walls, pressed against a shadow and looking around calmly. Maybe raid the kitchens… and put a bit more poison in the rations… and get something for the short journey to the hidden campsite…
"Boss." Saki bowed quickly, stepping out of the shadows unthreateningly. "All is ready." Date scoffed and stood up, his eye steeling itself as he looked ahead, around. The army was also prepared. Kojuro was returning from the last inspection to horses and men. Saki was unfolding a quickly drawn map of the fortresses' insides. "These paths are blocked. It serves to contain the number of soldiers they can throw at us at a time." She explained softly, pointing and marking the spots with her claw tips. "There are some traps meant for groups here, here and here. The mechanisms were absorbed into the stone so I could do nothing but if we move through them with about ten horsemen at a time they should not trigger." Saki thought back. She was not going to inform them of the sabotage. It was not essential for them to know about that now.

A big, pale winter moon hung in the sky, its silvery glow staining the land in icy shadows, shifting and fluttering about, the first cold wind of winter stealing warmth from men and horses. The army awaited in the roadside. She would give the sign as soon as the gate was wide open and the sentinels eliminated. The One-Eyed Dragon was eager to settle that score. The loss of warriors and friends, the defeat and the harm Mitsunari had brought to those closest. The memory of what Toyotomi had done. It all weighted in his mind even if he joked about looking as grim as Katakura-dono. It was time.

The same skills that made a sentinel useful also made them easily distractible and gullible. They had to check each sound, see if any were entering the perimeter. So a clatter of a rock had to be investigated by a soldier confident in his own skill with a lance to deal with any foolish intruder. One would think that Mitsunari had learned his lesson from the fact that Osaka-ji had been invaded and thrown into chaos by the presence of four shinobi in one night. What Nobuko had done before also had gone unnoticed and remained as weak spots.

Her orders were rather simple and she believed he believed were the ones that would keep her away from the fray. But "facilitate the army's path" could really mean so many things... the kunoichi dispatched the last of the sentinels of the walls and the first patio, looking around calmly, counting, activating then the gate's mechanisms. She shadowed moving to the highest spot of the fortress, lighting a flare that shone brightly and died quickly.

The pounding of the hooves started as a low thundery whisper, approaching. Saki took a deep breath. It had started.
Chapter 49

All according to plan. It was seemingly a first seeing most of the times Date made decisions in the heat of battle, much to Katakura-dono’s worry. Still the alarms were kept silent, the reinforcements stalled, disbanded, destroyed or deceived, the defences shattered and each yard occupied and defended by the Forces of Oshu. The progress seemed steady and they were handling each of the challenges issued with ease. Maybe there would have been no need for her interference but better safe than sorry. No one’s state of health was at its peak.

Unfortunately there were things that they would not be able to avoid. A battle, no matter how subdued would always produce noise. Especially if it involved horsemen. So it was no surprise when the inner yards began to be fortified and Otani Yoshitsugu roused from his slumber to lead the troops.

Saki frowned as she noticed the new movements. They hadn’t stopped attacking but as the soldiers fell the pattern was clearly taking them towards the place where the only man Ishida Mitsunari seemed to trust waited on his floating platform, fuelled by some sort of twisted spiritual power that came from hatred and suffering.

All she could do was warn her faction as he was not waiting alone. An assassination under those conditions needed a bit more care and he was right in the middle of an open, well lit yard even in the night. The shadows were erratic and thin. The people around the general created even more trembling threads of faded darkness, increasing the possibility of catching the wrong one. The gates were closed and blocked and the army drew closer…

The kunoichi pursed her lips and shadowed, approaching the gate. The easiest was to simply let the army fight while opening the way. Then she could signal them to bypass the combat and close the gates on the pursuing forces, deploying then some killing jutsus… in the end what mattered was Date reaching and killing Mitsunari, achieving redemption, revenge and showing all that the Age of the Dragon would be won.

The horses arrived not too long after she had started her endeavours, stopping, The One-Eyed Dragon and Katakura-dono heading the charge.

Katakura-dono dismounted and Mitsunari’s general floated a bit to the front, metallic orbs circling him. Saki stopped moving for a moment, discerning his intention. The Right Eye of the Dragon had claimed that kill. She gritted her teeth and worked faster. Date had to get through before the battle was over and before Otani Yoshitsugu realized the plan.
Warriors in combat usually abided by some very specific duelling rules. As in leaving the duelling pair alone to finish their scuffle if the adversary had been called and singled out. Otani Yoshitsugu cared not for such pleasantries or courtesy. He fought for pain and made the men around him create situations where his adversary would be at a disadvantage. Between a constantly flowing number of charging soldiers and the metallic spheres the man kept sending as a way of ranged attack with something significantly heavier than an arrow, Katakura-dono seemed to be struggling slightly to stay out of harm's way and fight swiftly.

Saki finished the gate, watching it as it was forced to open, slowly, inch by inch. They would have to keep fighting until the gap was wide enough. She surveyed the field quickly. Date and the troops were moving around and keeping the swarms that tried to rush Katakura-dono at bay. As for the man himself he was battling for every inch of terrain to get within slashing range of the leper.

The spheres flowed in a cross pattern, one a bit delayed. Sidestepping only made one the target of the object that came next. Katakura-dono was doing admirably but he had already taken a few hits and those things would surely dull his blade if the man defended too much. In the field their shadows mingled with others but were still clear in their difference…

The shinobi moved down of the wall and approached, slashing her way through. Slipping onto Katakura-dono's back, tapping him lightly. The man was startled, half-turning, avoiding the ball that was aimed at his head. Saki smiled slightly and slid her leg against the man, letting him see her, understand that she was moving him until it was time for him to do one of the things he did best. It was almost as a puppetry show without strings. Through touches and bumps she weaved Katakura-dono through the pattern, briefly stepping onto shadows, changing the course of projectiles through the use of kunai and shuriken.

The distance dwindled and the man was starting to grow nervous, the gestures to control the spheres tighter and the orders barked to the diminish number of soldiers and reinforcements growing more and more aggressive and defensive. Rally around me.

Saki slid one hand around Katakura-dono's waist, spinning him around, coming face-to-face with Yoshitsugu, finally having crossed the spherical defences. He was taken aback by the abruptness of the invasion, raising his arms, the spheres going upwards, prepared to hammer down. Saki began the countdown, two bombs held between her claws, tossing them against the man's face, shadowing away as one blew up in a cloud of dust and fire and the other produced an heavy flash, appearing a bit away, slamming her hands down when she reached five, shadow flowing in the path the flash-bang had opened.

Yoshitsugu's eyes behind the cloth that covered his body opened wide.

"Warn Mitsunari!" He shouted, panicking. "Wake Him!" the words died into a shrill scream.

Katakura-dono charged through the dust, blue-white lightning following as he slashed the man down in a vertical cut, the platform losing his buoyancy as the gate opened. The Right Eye took a deep breath as he sheathed the blade. Saki nodded, letting go of the spheres that fell around him, cratering small craters and cracks on the stone. The army dealt with the remnants of the forces that had gathered.

Date Masamune approached, sheathing his blades nonchalantly.
"What next?" The One-Eyed Dragon asked, appraising his army and commanders in that brief respite.

"More guards. A patch with several stairs. Without the horses the terrain is a bit disadvantageous. But with the horses we lose manoeuvrability because the paths grow tighter." Saki informed as the way opened fully, revealing a speared line of defence.
Chapter 51

Keeping the horses was a gamble. But the loss that had occurred time-wise was compensated by the lack of death and lack of wounded it allowed. But then there was the fact that the defences around the innermost yard, the place where no doubt the final conflict would take place would surely be heavily reinforced. They were at the foot of the stairs of that final stage of the invasion. The first pale signs of dawn were starting to break the purple-tinted darkness.

Katakura-dono was giving orders to reinforce their position, choosing to leave a part of the army behind before advancing. Date was looking ahead, eye narrowed. Saki approached. She was feeling slightly wobbly but nothing that was too worrying. Most likely due to the lack of sleep.

"Single him out. Ignore any soldiers that might be around" She began, speaking low, soft and fast. "Hit harder and faster than him. If possible keep his blade away from the sheath as much as you can. Most of his attacks rely on that return and a broken stance will harm the whole flow of his strikes." She took a deep breath. "If he vanishes look behind and turn to the right first, katana outstretched. He will try to get on your blind side as soon as he realizes you have grown faster."

"You fail to mention any role you and Kojuro might have." The One-Eyed Dragon joked. She kept her face straight despite the small smile that managed to escape.

"You have been very clear in your orders for us to stay out of this fight." She said, looking around. "Still I will always interfere if things go too awry." The shinobi admitted, looking up as well. "Finish this before dawn."

"I know. Too damn long…" Date shook his head, taking his helmet off. He was waiting for Kojuro to assure him that everyone was well and in place. If things did not go the way he had planned or desired the army needed to be allowed out… although he had no inkling if they would do as they were ordered or as they felt. "Are you injured?"

"I am fine." Saki answered. His gloved hand slid down her cheek with a small cocky smile. The shinobi gripped it lightly with her clawed fingers, closing her eyes for an instant. The other hand ghosted over her waist for an instant, the thumb just brushing over her stomach. "Do not worry." Saki whispered. "It will not show and a woman is made to be like a fortress." She winked playfully.

A crow interrupted them suddenly, cawing, perching on the horse's saddle. The shinobi stepped away from the One-Eyed Dragon, relaxing, opening the letter it carried, surprised. Then she smirked.

"The Saica say they are thankful for the warning. If we survive we are welcome to try to secure an alliance." The kunoichi chuckled. Katakura-dono approached. Date was free to proceed to confront the general of what remained of the once powerful army of the Toyotomi.
The simmering anger had overshadowed the calm and precise warrior Mitsunari had once been. As they had once seen it made him no less deadly but it was also an exploitable flaw. As long as the warrior facing him was fast enough, hardy enough to withstand the attacks. There were no introductions, announcements or wait. As soon as Date Masamune reached the top of the stairs, the last square before the entrance of the inner sanctum of the fortress Ishida Mitsunari was already charging, hand on the nodachi, ready to strike. So the One-Eyed Dragon wasted no time and met him halfway, blocking the strike with a single claw.

Both backed away sharply, Ishida returning the blade to its scabbard, his lanky form assuming the stance once again, Date returning the lone claw and pulling out all six, leaning forward, also ready. Darkness and lightning clashed as they charged once more.

Saki extended her arm, claws outstretched, signalling the men they should go no further. Katakura-dono nodded and ordered them to set new defences to keep that battle uninterrupted.

They clashed once again.

Date manoeuvred swiftly, grinning.

"I just came to say this to you." he growled slowly, slashing forward against his enemy, making sure there was no way for him to get anywhere near or through the six blades that traced the air with strength and lightning, aiming to rip his flesh from his bones. "Go to hell». Date shouted suddenly, lunging forward, gaining every advantage he could, slashing and breaking into Mitsunari's defences.

The pale general was clearly surprised by the increased speed of his enemy but unwilling to acknowledge his power due hatred. In his blind quest to kill he was outmanoeuvred, wounded before he could even land a blow, cornered.

Having heeded advice and training Date managed to entrap Mitsunari onto a place where he could barely draw or sheathe his blade in-between attacks as his style of combat demanded and the speed was rendered moot.

"I can't lose to a bastard like you..." Ishida growled, another strike of the Dragon's blades making him falter, fall down to his knees, broken.

The One-Eyed Dragon lost no time and no focus. He struck him down as mercilessly as he would have been killed but not as cruelly, pulling the blades free with a nod to acknowledge his adversary, nary a scratch on his body.

Ishida Mistunari fell with his former lord's name on his lips, asking for the man's forgiveness for the revenge, twice robbed, twice unfulfilled.

Date sheathed the katanas and looked around. Saki and Kojuro approached. The One-Eyed Dragon took his helmet off, shaking the sweat away from his forehead.

"Well... I guess it's over." He grinned, looking over the horizon as dawn broke. The army was dealing with the ones that still wanted to fight and the ones that ran away. "Splendid job for a stepping stone. Kojuro!" Date called.

"Yes." Katakura-dono stepped forth and knelt, waiting. Even though his face was stern the pride
was showing a bit. Saki smiled and imitated him, bowing slightly, covering a slight discomfort. Still queasy...

"What is Sanada Yukimura up to?" Not an unexpected question. It was the man he wanted to fight most. It would be disappointing if he had been engulfed in the turmoil.

"According to reports he is headed to Kyushu, seeking advice from Shimazu the beast to increase his strength with the goal of Takeda revival."

"Kyushu... rash as always."

"You are one to talk boss." Saki said in a calm tone. Date chuckled, still looking at the golden tint that turned black to blue with hints of pink and red.

"He might have visited Shimazu in an attempt to inherit the old..." Katakura-dono continued.

"The old will vanish one day." The One-Eyed Dragon answered a bit more seriously, deep in thought. "But bringing such things to the future ain't bad at all. As long as the inheritor doesn't stumble and fall." He began to walk, his eye burning with determination. "Next step is the unification of the country. The old and the new... I will take everything upon myself..." He smirked cockily but there was denying the will in his words. "I will lead this country."

Saki and Kojuro exchanged a look as he walked away to rejoin the troops, standing then. They would be with him throughout it all. The shinobi smiled a bit. When he spoke like that it could even make one believe foolish wishes like... her claws clenched. First war. The rest could only be decided when the fog cleared and the Dragon soared.
The Saica alliance would join with little fuss as the terrain had been prepped and favours had been traded. Despite the fact that Magoichi regarded the One-Eyed Dragon as "reckless and crazy". But every event had proved that despite that he was the one that kept surviving and moving forward without wavering on his goals. He had survived. He had eliminated rivals. And he had secured one of the most key military forces in the land.

Saki observed as the soldiers as they settled away from Osaka. They needed to rest before entering Saica territory and finalizing the alliance. Only five losses. The soldiers that had managed to come that far would be the best. At least fifty wounded with some degree of concern. The rest was virtually unscathed. It was unsurprising at that point.

They would stop for a few days.

Saki had questioned the wisdom of simply leaving Osaka, a leaderless, unclaimed place but it was not her decision to make. As Katakura-dono said nothing of it either she just allowed the issue to be forgotten.

So far the plans involved crossing the Seto Sea, after securing Magoichi as an ally and gathering news of the Land's warring status, and securing an alliance with Chosokabe Motochika. Which would immediately put them at odds with Mori Motonari. The easiest way was to assassinate him directly as it was known that his people and soldiers had no love for his "rule of the sun". Then it would either be easy pickings, weakened soldiers, or men eager to join with the newest force.

It was a bit of a gamble but the prize could outweigh the risks.

There was also a stirring in a small hidden part of the Land of the Rising Sun. Deep within Kanegasaki the remnants of the Oda faction and the rumours of Oichi were once again gaining strength. Those were the ones who worried Saki at the moment. Years of inaction and silence and then an outburst of action and whispers… so as the party raged on she vanished into the shadows.
Chapter 54

Nature had done great strides in reclaiming the burnt and destroyed fortress and the battlefield surrounding it. But the echoes of cruelty were still about. And there were the people of flesh and blood that worked, hidden amongst the ruins and trees, carrying the symbols of the Oda clan, muttering half drowned in madness, dreaming of rebuilding the clan and the dream, praising Oichi as the devil queen. But they spoke of her not as part of the Oda bus as if she represented something, or was something, a tool, a weapon...

Saki sneaked through the buildings that had been placed in between ruined walls, paying attention to all while inching nearer what seemed like an inner sanctum. If Oichi was indeed alive there was a chance that talking to her could resolve that situation. If not all of the people that wore Oda's mark with pride would be eliminated swiftly.

A solid bloom of darkness encircled and protected Oichi, generated by her... or for her. It seemed that whatever power over darkness she commanded was rudimentary at best. Which meant they could easily overwhelm and drown her. So Saki decided to use a respectful approach, something that should always be done when talking to a warlord. The shinobi stepped out of the shadows and knelt, bowing.

"Oichi-sama" the darkness agitated, opening like wings showing a woman that had not changed in all those years since the fall of Oda. Her eyes held empty darkness. She was but a vessel then, a shadow of a person, a puppet to something else. "Greetings."

The woman looked at her blankly, fallen on the tatami, as if half asleep. Hands of darkness rose and waved softly around her. Her dark eyes turned to Saki, blearily, empty, holding no memory or recognition. A tool. That's what she was now, just something they were using. And judging by the fanatical devotion to Oda they were willing to cross a barrier that not even Mitsunari in his devotion had considered.

"Another dream?" She whispered. "Just a dream... Just a dream... Just a dream..." Oichi sat up slowly, staring now. Saki supressed a flinch.

Ishida Mitsunari had tried to avenge his lord by sending all the people he perceived has enemies through the barrier between life and death. The Oda remnants were surely plotting to use that woman, who toed the line easily, being back when Date and Yukimura had seen her shot to death to make a monster come back from death.

Wander freely, wander far, off beneath the Devil's star

In the dark, the girl so bright, got up to see the day by night

Her fear in hand, her fear in heart, her fear did tear her soul apart

The white of flesh, the white of bone, the worms will leave your soul alone

Ask you now, and ask you may, the fate of all on this fair day

On and on the road does go, down into the depths below

Off you went to call the king, you wish to hear the Devil sing...

The singing whisper moved against the night softly. Saki sighed. Pitying her in that state was
altogether too easy but… her claws twitched.

"Ichi is alone… all alone…” Oichi whispered once more, breaking away from the song, standing with the gentle help of those hands.

"Oichi-sama…” A familiar voice that Saki had not heard in years came from the entrance. The shinobi blanched, gaing for the shadows as a white-haired figure entered the small room, barely acknowledged by Oichi. "You seem quite active today. Auspicious."

"Father Tenkai." One of the remnants outside called. "It's ready…”

Saki shook her head. As unbelievable as Oichi being alive… But this one… this… man that hid behind another name without bothering to conceal much more… Katakura-dono had killed him in Honnoji… Akechi Mitsuhide…

"Come Oichi-sama. We have left your brother waiting for too long.” He said smugly, guiding the lost woman out of the confining room as Saki hid in the shadow, worrying about the outcome and her duty.
Hands of darkness rose up, when Tenkai, Akechi, attacked Oichi, a show of power that did not deter him. Saki awaited, hidden, staring at the ruins of what had once been a yard, the gates still broken, blown open by the old Fugaku's strike.

The soldiers and servants that awaited the return of their Lord, as promised by Tenkai, as foretold by Oichi-sama herself, screamed in fear and rushed in, plucked away from the ground, tossed aside like rag dolls, lifeless, staining the ground red as they were crushed against the rock and soil.

Despite being limp and livid she fought. It was actually a terrifying sight to watch. The people that had gathered for the Oda had been dealt with. All that was left to focus on was Akechi who attacked with a single-minded determination. She barely reacted when the scythes ether nicked or hit her, the darkness that flowed around her protecting her figure.

The hands gathered from many, flowering around her feet to two, grew monstrous when the woman screamed, not a sound of pain but of a deep grief and sorrow, perfectly still over a swirling well of pitch black.

Akechi was faltering, swaying under the weight of his own scythes, the hands Oichi commanded having slashed away at him many times, never quite able to grip him and crush him down, looking up at the final blow that was surely coming.

"I... failed? But... I've drawn enough of your blood, enough to revive that man..." He mumbled as the clawed, clenches gigantic hands slammed down on him, pinning him to the ground, crushing and piercing. "The enemy is at Honnoji!" He was shouting, the sound of his voice growing in pitch as his life faded, a last breath of madness and fevered revenge. "Nobunaga I will kill you one more time!" He laughed before gurgling, dying once and for all.

From her perch Saki fidgeted. Oichi was swaying around, looking worried. The darkness around, the very night was starting to grow stifling, oppressive, tainted red. And then it bled from the ground itself, swallowing the bodies littered about. Saki's eyes widened as she looked around making sure that... gate... was not reaching her.

The Devil King emerged from it, still in that grey armour, still wearing the blood red cape that had been his hallmark in life. But there was nothing human left in the eyes that showed a red glow, a harsh feature on the stoic face.

"The sewer rat that died once, clinging to your shrivelling life..." He said disdainfully, the raspy voice carrying in the night.

"Nii-sama..." Oichi whispered. But it was just a fact, stated neutraly. There was no fear in the word any longer. She stood straighter, taller, with purpose. All went unnoticed by Oda Nobunaga who gave her a passing glance before staring at the sky, not even smirking.

"Ichi... yours was a great deed." He praised without feeling, like one might tell a pet. "You heard the voice of my birth which makes all things rejoice and despite your human body came to me without hesitation... you have my praise. Come!" Oichi shook her head, hands clasped in front of her chest. Startled by the blatant disobedience Oda showed a bit of anger. "What is this supposed to mean?"

Saki swallowed her fear at the witnessed rebirth and appeared next to the woman. Oichi glanced at
her for a moment, a bit of recognition showing."

"The One-Eyed Dragon almost gave his life to fight you. I will not allow an abomination like you to threaten this land again." The shinobi said. It was just another fight, no matter how powerful he looked, no matter what had been done in the past.

"Ichi remembers you..." She whispered as Oda fumed, still flabbergasted by the defiance. "On the battlefield... you tried to stop all the bullets. You offered Ichi a hand."

"You did not take it." Saki answered. "I felt for you Oichi-sama."

"Ichi loved Nagamasa-sama. Ichi did not want to leave... but..." She swayed, shaking her head, smiling a bit behind the sadness in her eyes. "The meaning of Ichi’s life is to take Nii-sama to the depths."

"I will fight at your side for now." Saki offered. One of the hands of darkness gripped her by the waist suddenly, lifting her in the air.

"Ichi thanks you but this is Ichi's task..." She whispered, stepping forward slowly.

"Die." Oda Nobunaga had had enough, the shotgun he used pointing towards his sister. Saki twisted with the hand's grip, noticing it was just keeping her away from battle, tossing a kunai, defending the shot as Oichi floated up in gloom hands, striking down with thousands of claw-like fingers.

Each strike was a slash.

The shotgun was knocked out of his gauntleted hand.

He waves his broadsword to fight the darkness. Oichi screamed, the darkness gathering, thickening. Saki closed her eyes for a moment, affected by the sudden shake the hand that held her made, allowing her down, away from the place where the darkness when mad, reacting, attacking in all directions, barely giving Oda time to react.

It all faded away suddenly, leaving the woman fallen, a bit away from the warrior, hands gripping, pinning him. A thin sword speared him through the chest, the ghostly form of Azai Nagamasa letting go of it, his expression determined.

Oda seemed somehow still, frozen in the darkness, the weapons fallen to the ground, the red cape that had waved like a flag of war fallen, listless.

Saki's eyes widened as Azai approached Oichi, embracing her, whispering in a farway voice, praising her for her determination, for finally being able to act, to move on even against the fear, the duty, the things that had been hammered into her mind until she broke. His spirit had lingered, waiting for his wife, the one who had seen him die, the one that had held him as life faded away from his eyes, taken by the man she had just killed, compromised by the man that was now frozen by the darkness stemming from her smaller body.

Oichi wept in her husband's arms as the darkness bubbled up one again in a smaller ring, taking both of them and the imprisoned one to the depth once again, a true smile finally tracing her lips. Azai looked at her with love, his ghostly form caressing her hair.

Oichi’s duty was to be shared with her husband. Guardians of the Devil King for eternity but finally reunited.
In the desolate fortress at the break of dawn Saki dried her tears with a small smile. In the end it hadn't been a true threat, had it?
Chapter 56

Scouting was the most likely answer to be had if he asked himself what was Saki doing, having left the army the day before, not returning by the time they reached the Saica stronghold or while the negotiations were being made and finalized.

The red bell of the Saica tolled as Magoichi made their alliance official and set.

Still, and even after years where she had given nothing but proof of her competence and resourcefulness a man could worry. Especially when the woman was his lover. Especially when she was carrying his child.

Date observed the Saica settlement from the engawa of the small house, the sake left untouched for a moment while he thought about the day's events. Even if they had to share it with the Saica it was still better than the camps a moment of comfort in the war that should be enjoyed and remembered for they could be scarce. They were getting ready for the assigned tasks be it guerrilla war, joining with Saki's agent throughout the land or simply playing the role of emissaries. Most of his men had gone to sleep already except those that had some specific errands to accomplish so they could depart to the Seto Sea as soon as possible. Chosokabe Motochika had finally answered, proving amenable to the idea of an alliance. So the meeting was set.

By the light of the small candle he opened the updated map, examining it carefully, frowning as he calculated movements and possibilities. Sanada Yukimura was working with the West, battling in a three way conflict. Allied with Shimazu the Beast, set against Otomo Sorin and the Reborn Nation of Xavism and the men that had rallied around the former general and prisoner Kuroda Kanbe.

A slender, declawed hand touched the map, first at Kanagesaki. The One-Eyed Dragon looked up. Saki smiled softly before speaking.

"The remnants of the Oda are now truly gone and the fate of Oichi-sama was chosen." She said, her fingers then moving to the lands ruled by Kobayakawa Hideaki. "He was being manipulated by an Oda cultist called Father Tenkai. I took the liberty of contacting him after that… creature was disposed of."

"Kingo the coward?" Date asked doubtfully. Her fingers retreated from the map's surface.

"He greatly admires and respects Katakura-dono. With a promise of protection, kind words and the man he admires Kobayakawa Hideaki will remain an ally. I have heard about the Saica and Chosokabe so allow me to congratulate you and with your permission I will talk to them as…" Saki gasped, startled by the sudden kiss, started with the sudden tug of his hands on her wrists, pulling her forward, dragging her over the map into his arms, crinkling the surface terribly, his lips claiming hers with ferocity and a hunger that was well able to make her forget about pain and exhaustion.

"Drop the formality." Saki chuckled at the husky words said with the company of a crooked grin, leaning against him to ward off the cold.

"Masamune." The whisper was small and secret but his name was there, free of titles, intimate and possessive. His woman, his stubborn woman. He stood, offering his help so she would do the same, taking her inside, closing the shoji as they entered, forgetting the candle outside, cupping her face to claim another kiss. Clasps and lacing were dealt with a familiar ease and speed, falling, discarded amidst touches and whispers.
Not too long ago she had refused any kind of touch, of intimacy out of concern for his state, for the wounds Mitsunari had left on him, never saying a word about the scars and marks she bore, the results of that encounter, the marks earned in his defence, for him. His fingers traced them as they were bared, discovered, followed by his lips, a warm smooth contact over the heated skin. Her shoulders, arms, the bruised skin of her fingers, followed by a wicked-minded nip on the slender tips before kissing her palm, the hold on her wrist pulling Saki closer to his body, letting go to smooth his hands over her waist, her hips, the marks that slashed her thighs, still reddened, not fully gone…

Saki gasped at his touch even as she struggled to keep her voice down. It was growing increasingly harder to do so as throughout the years he had learned too many of her soft spots, too many of her weakness and defenceless areas. Her breath hitched, broke and sang for him though, letting Date know that she grew flustered and frustrated as he teased and kept her from teasing back.

And then it was his turn to gasp when suddenly he could not move, thrown to the ground, landing on top of the open futon, prepared for the night but still undisturbed. Saki chuckled at the shadows she had used, ready to play turnabouts on the body that was nude, vulnerable and fully displayed in front of her, starting by kissing those smirking, challenging lips, making sure his blue eye closed in pleasure as she moved on, on to the neck that corded in effort as he both tried to keep himself from making a sound and free himself from the binds. Her hands traced his strong shoulders gently, moving against the slick skin, of his chest, avoiding or returning a lighter caress on the places where the bandages still protected vulnerable, hurt areas. She regretted those, the fact that she had been unable to stop them. But hearing the pleasure in his voice as her kiss and touch traced his form was…

The shinobi stopped abruptly, stepping back, her shadows fading a woozy spell came over her, eyes closing with a silent grimace. After all the exertion it was natural that the child within protested rather vehemently… Date was free, sitting, a glance telling him what he needed. The One-Eyed Dragon laughed, taking Saki into his arms, waiting, stroking her hair before touching her belly gently.

"An ally from within just got me my freedom." He whispered into her ear, kneeling, making her sit on his lap. Saki embraced him with a sigh, her hands tangling into his hair as his followed her shape.

"So what will you do with it?" The shinobi whispered playfully a moment before he claimed her lips once more, taking what was his.
Chapter 57

A few hours before the departure of the boat to Shikoku Fuma Kotaro arrived with a newly cemented contract with Saki's clan and information. It was slightly startling to see him there, neutral and not attacking as soon as someone of Date's faction was on sight, knowing who he had served during the campaign against Toyotomi Hideyoshi. But Fuma was nothing if not a consummate professional. Past contracts, especially dead ones meant little to nothing. He survived master to master, moving on as soon as the conditions were fulfilled or the pay vanished.

It was nothing new or unexpected but it was good to see things progressing smoothly. Fuma disappeared, his mission fulfilled, as she burned the papers after committing the information into her mind. Oshu was safe, defended and standing strong even as some made attempts at stealthy takeover, unrest or tried to provoke those left within. The allies were mobilizing according to the new movements and objectives. Ready to face Mori when Chosokabe asked it of them. As for Sanada Yukimura he seemed to be having quite a bit of success against Kuroda Kanbe. That would also mean Mori's attention would be divided between the rival in the see that was tipping the scales in his own favour and the movements of an enemy that was showing a bit more power on his own then expected. Despite that Otomo Sorin seemed ready to back up Mori, for some rather obscure reasons that seemed to predate the young man.

Whispers of the other warlords were also taking form. In Kai the old Tiger was still sick despite Yukimura's efforts to both rise up to the challenge of warring on his own and find a cure. Uesugi was being cautious and appraising the field. The Maedas this time had chosen no side as of yet. They had been in a small, cautious alliance with Mitsunari but that was voided by death. Mogami had not stopped his scheming but he was… as much as Date disliked it… family.

Saki sighed, returning to the warmth of the futon, snuggling against Date with a sigh, still wanting to enjoy those few hours they had. Once in the boat she doubted her body would be as forgiving with food and ginger tea as it was on land.
There was a last and unexpected arrival as they were embarking. From the until then still Uesugi Kenshin came an emissary in the form of Maeda Keiji. He was supposed to present an alliance as far as Saki had been able to gauge from the circumstances of his arrival. The North was being both conquered and threatened by Mogami Yoshiaki and as Oshu stood against the man and was campaigning to the south and west anyone not desiring an alliance or submission with the the Noble Fox of Dewa would have to seek the One-Eyed Dragon as the stronger ally and deterrent. But as soon as Keiji came to the dock his attention was diverted by something and in his own words "promising. Like ba-bang." That being Saica Magoichi's curves as she oversaw the loading.

Saki chuckled from the deck as she noticed that, her mind wandering away towards business once again as the wanderer of the Maeda joined them. Seeing he was also friends with Chosokabe Motochika he could give them some edge in the negotiations. Not an edge he'd be aware of but still the presence of the familiar and friendly sometimes swayed an opinion subtly.

"You are not well." Magoichi stated as she approached Saki. The shinobi groaned, leaning against the ship's railing, staring at the water that weaved and bobbed beneath the ship's movement with a desolate grimace. So far she was only feeling queasy with no actual spewing involved.

They had not taken the horses and only a handful of the elite soldiers, the ones that had managed to survive throughout the years. Date prowled about, watching the sea, as restless as the waves and wind. Katakura-dono examined her reports and had asked for a meeting as soon as he was done. The guys talked with the Saica forces, gambled and laughed with Keiji. It was good.

"I am well enough." The shinobi answered softly, not straightening, closing her eyes for a second. Then she smiled lightly, peeking at the red-headed leader of the mercenary faction they had hired. "Keiji seems to be quite taken with you." She mentioned.

Magoichi hesitated for a moment, her expression suddenly softer and unguarded. It was just a brief moment. Then the leader of the Saica replaced the woman once more. "Have you looked into his eyes?" She asked, looking at the sea steadily. "They are not the eyes of someone in love with you." Saki straightened a bit and looked ahead as well. "It is a bluff. The eyes of someone lying to himself." Magoichi shook her head, one hand on her hip, fingers tapping one of the gun's hilts softly, rhythmically. "It was just an excuse in order to flee from something."

"Keiji is a bit more complicated than people give him credit for. That is one of the reasons why he is in such a friendly relationship with Uesugi." Saki stated. "And while he is indeed fleeing from confronting what happened to his friends, he is not one to lie about his feelings." The kunoichi chuckled. "True he is a major flirt. In our first meeting he managed to make the One-Eyed Dragon jealous when there was barely something between us. When he did not think of me as anything but his shinobi."Magoichi joined in her chuckle, nodding in understanding. "But if he says it's love… he is being sincere."

"An excuse to flee." The leader of the saica said once more, stressing the point. "But I… will leave him be." Magoichi straightened a bit more, as if both touched and conflicted. Saki just chuckled. "The Saica value freedom. The enormous selfishness that is freedom"

There was something on the horizon, Saki noticed, eyes narrowing, her claws gripping the wood in front of her. And it was not one of Motochika's ships despite every in that vessel expected an
interception at sea. It was neither changing course nor looking aggressive but still… the warnings started to fly. Those were not friendly waters they were sailing.
Chapter 59

The young and sweet shrine maiden of Iyokouno was sheltered, pure, innocent and clueless. Saki and Magoichi stood in front of the young girl wearing a slightly amused demeanour under a stern frown. That she wanted to protect her homeland sea was commendable. That she was trying to defend it from Motochika while benefiting Mori Motonari was idiotic. There had been no battle once the leader had been identified as the little girl. Magoichi had kept the men away and Saki had caught the little girl and dragged her into the Saica boat, kicking and screaming. That had immediately broken her troop's morale into surrendering out of fear of hurting their little hime. She was pouting, deprived of her bow and still not getting the whole situation. The men were waiting, hovering about as they had been requested.

Both heard and tried to understand. The issue though went back to Ishida Mitsunari and Ootani Yoshitsugu. They had managed to deceive the young girl into waging war against Chosokabe Motochika and benefit them by hindering the warlord. That she still did it after they were dead only showed how much she believed the lie. Motochika's reputation as a pirate was not helping to clear the situation in the young girl's head. Pirate were, in her view, still the standard evil doers, pillaging, plundering and destroying.

"We understand the situation." Saica said, facing the pout evenly. "But there is only one thing we can say. From now on reaffirm your will and advance." The leader of the mercenary group advised calmly.

"What… what does that mean?" Tsuruhime looked up, sensing finally that she was missing something important. Her big eyes went from Magoichi to Saki, staring to show a little dazed awe for the older women.

"Humans who get ahead of themselves when praised are mere fools." Saica continued with a sharp nod. "Hime, don't let that happen to you." Her tone softened a bit.

"People use others ruthlessly." Saki picked up the line of thought. "It is even easier when the used one is innocent."

The words finally clicked and Tsuruhime's eyes showed a bit of fear. Despite her oracular reputation in the end she could also be misled by misconceptions and half-truths.

"Could that… could that mean I have been deceived?" She whispered. Then she burst into tender tears. "What should I do onee-sama?" She blubbered. Oracle, leader and shrine maiden mattered little when youthful pride crumbled. And her kind heart had also realized she had caused harm to her followers.

Saki sighed. Magoichi shook her head.

"Think for yourself." Magoichi said.

"Appraise the situation before leaping into action." Saki continued.

"Distrust flattery." Both stated harshly and somehow at the same time before exchanging a look and chuckling, amused at the overlap.

"Onee-sama…” Tsuruhime whispered, slightly awed.
Hime – 姫 – princess, Saica Magoichi nicknames her as such. Tsuruhime - crane princess;
Chapter 60

A war summit where you had to cater to three sides while knowing there were at least two more waiting for any hope of alliance to crumble was no easy task. When they met Motochika's boat, a couple of hours away from land, an apparently a miniaturized version of the new, new, new fugaku, Tsuruhime was prickly and hissy, going on about pirates and their misdeeds.

It started with something along the lines of "you pirates should go home and play with your boats." Motochika then called her a "loud-mouthed brat" much to the young girl's annoyance. The cursing did not help to elevate him in her eyes and the label of toys applied to the contraptions Chosokabe Motochika took so much pride in also did not help top elevate his opinion of her.

Keiji was the one trying to be a peace maker between the young lady and his friend, laughing with a good natured humour.

Despite the jabs traded by Tsuruhime and Motochika as soon as Date brought up talk of alliance, in a small pause between childish insults, it was immediately met with an affirmative, as long as Mori was the next target to be dealt with.

Magoichi, already in the alliance and with her demands met stayed out of the conversation, amused by the events.

Saki breathed a sigh of relief by the fact that he showed that he was willing to fight the battle with them and not just wait for a positive outcome. There were details to straighten and settle but as the discussion carried on the shinobi simply shook her head and decided to leave them to exhaust themselves into a more agreeable state.

A soft wind and a black feather was the usual warning Kotaro gave before appearing. Saki was waiting when he stepped out of the shadows, extending a note towards her as the bickering continued on the background. There was a little gasp that broke the flow of the quarrel as Tsuruhime stepped forward, starry-eyed.

"You are..." she began with a little, breathless voice. "I looked all over for you!" She said while twirling happily. Saki pressed her lips together, recognizing a crush when she saw it, stepping out of the pink and sparkly area of effect of a little girl's fantasy-dream-romance sequence as Tsuruhime showed flair for the teenage drama. "Your refreshing look and noble figure. There can be no mistake." And only the unexperienced would mistake Fuma's stillness for calm. Under the mask and under the skin he was fidgeting. "You are my Twilight Ninja!" Saki concealed a laugh. Date, Motochika and Keiji did not. Magoichi shook her head. Kojuro just covered his face with his palm and groaned. "I will follow you everywhere, anywhere!" the little oracle said, going for a hung, happy.

It was clear to any shinobi watching carefully that Fuma was leaning backwards seconds before he shadowed, leaving the little girl to a tumble and little squeak.

In any case after the event where Tsuruhime learned that her "protector" was working for the army she had "joined" and Motochika was "joining" too there was a little less protest on her part and the conditions could be settled with less childish insults flying around.
"Mori was one of the few that came out of the wars with Oda and Toyotomi relatively unscathed." Kojuro began. That was not an adversary they could take on directly and without some thought. It was just him, Saki and Magoichi for the moment as the ship returned to Shikoku and below them, on the deck, the party continued. "He remained neutral and even stopped fighting with Motochika during the Oda war, waiting for the moment where all allied. And then remained calm and planned an alliance with Toyotomi."

"Arguably." Saki nodded, the map opened between her and Saica, small darts piercing the lands, ribbons of different colours representing the factions. "The Toyotomi alliance brought on his biggest blunder to date and he has only partially recovered from it. Militarily wise his home... is fortified and his mind his sharp. However his army is severely thinned."

"He has little to no regard towards his own men." Saica entered the conversation. "He might actually try to attack despite the situation.

"I am unsure. Chosokabe Motochika as long been the one threat at his doorstep that he never ignored." Kojuro shook his head and joined them by the map. "Saki. What were the enemies movements and how do we fare?"

"Shall I start with Sanada Yukimura? He is shaping up to be a major threat as we move forward, having the alliance with Shimazu, having taken down Kuroda Kanbe and being at this moment in a campaign against the nation of Xavism. Sorin will be unable to help Mori as we campaign against him. Furthermore even with the Tiger of Kai sick and some whisper on his deathbed, even though those whispers seem to have no fundament, Kai is still well protected, much the same way we keep Oshu safe at the moment."

"Sasuke's involvement?"

"Shinobi share several techniques, true." Saki nodded. She could see their shadows in the ways Kai was dealing with little pushes and stragglers from defeated armies.

"Theoretically we have him locked in place." Kojuro stated.

"All we need to do is reach the island, send the orders and set sail to the mainland once more." Saica appraised. "Fugaku is Motochika's pride. This model should be able to easily cut a path though Mori's defences."

"His soldiers also bear him no love." The shinobi said thoughtfully. Maybe that could be used.

Their list of allies grew as the list of enemies dwindled. Even the almost always neutral Maedas were theirs after Keiji had brought the alliance of Uesugi Kenshin and offered Maeda Toshiie's letter, composed of a tentative offer of support. After Mori was dealt with they needed to stop, pause for a moment and look around, count what was lost and what they still held…

Absently she thought that Date might actually be able to keep his promise to conquer the Land before their child was born. It was a silly thought, the shinobi considered, standing, watching the party with a small smile. Kojuro glanced at her and finished the meeting.
Aki was not quite ripe for the plucking yet. But as the army got ready and dispatched the official orders, amusingly enough the same tactic that had been used by Toyotomi to fence his enemies in their own lands.

Saki took it a step further with her own means.

All the clans and the ones that offered their services freely were under control of the Celestial Mistress who had plainly stated her support rested with the One-Eyed Dragon's claim. While most could argue and claim a biased support the truth was that Date Masamune was, of all the players left on the field of duelling warlords, the one that showed both the capacity and temperament to unify and lead the land.

So while they talked and discussed option on the other side of the sea, after dealing with the massive hangovers the partying had left them with, she was sending her shinobi to sabotage Aki in every way possible, from smuggling out food, supplies, weapons, peasants, workers and soldiers, to destroying vital spots in their defences such as lookouts, road and bridges, issuing fake orders to the army and planting seeds of dissent amidst the already wary soldiers. Then there was the smuggling in of her own people and the opening of spots in the defences to allow the others in.

All had to be carefully done and articulated, seeing that Mori's reputation was that of the greatest strategist. But with the blur of action around him and his land at the time there were bound to be some blind spots and sometimes all it took was a loose rock to start a landslide.
Chapter 63

The first phases of the plans in motion were proving to be productive. A few skirmishes had already occurred between Mori's men and Date's army and they had come out victorious. Each debacle in any of the areas Saki and her people had been able to interfere with was driving Mori deeper into a sea-shore fortress where rumours whispered of a sun-based weapon similar to the one that had been on the destroyed copy of Fugaku, Nichirin.

It was inaccessible at the moment.

The sea was protected by his boats. Motochika was on the way to destroy them and invade through the beach. The land was protected by cliffs to the east. Date's army, led by Katakura Kojuro, smuggled to the mainland by Fuma Kotaro, who had somehow managed to avoid Tsuruhime while doing so, was best suited to come from that side. Their home land was mountainous and the horses were used both to the terrain and the strategy needed. A second part of the army, reinforced by the Saica was being led by Date and coming from the west. The one Eyed-Dragon was not hiding this, drawing attention when the main player of that campaign was Motochika. Keiji had his own plans, coming from behind and performing small, flashy sneak attacks to further break Mori's focus. The other allies simply had to remain in their own pieces of land and come if called. At first glance it would not be needed.

But they were invading, not defending. It was usually a bit harder but something Date was good at.

Saki finished the summary of the day's actions to keep track of everything and prepared the maps to calculate possible outcomes and actions taken by the enemy.

Both Date and Katakura-dono needed to start their attack in two days and keep the fighting going hard and strong. Then Motochika would be able to storm the weapon-fortress with little trouble and take down Mori in Date's name, satisfying the conditions of the alliance and paving the way to…

"You need rest." Date stated, slouching nearby after placing down a tray with food. It was rations, rice and water, the same as what the army ate. Saki looked up slowly, blinking amidst the papers. The One-Eyed Dragon chuckled as the storm roared outside the tent, making it shake and flutter. She looked up at the structure and frowned. He chuckled, amused. "What have you been doing in my back this time?" She glanced at him with a blank look. That was her way to fidget. Date called her closer, amused. Saki moved slowly, suspicious of him. His fingers traced her cheeks gently and he kissed her forehead. "Know I am always thankful for it. Even when I shout at you, telling you to sleep more."

"I grow wary every time you say something like that." Saki whispered. "Usually precedes another zany plan." The shinobi kissed his lips lightly before allowing her tension to seep away while snuggling into his arms, the light disappearing as soon as she closed her eyes, the man moving slightly to envelop her, luring her into sleep.

Saki would leave the army in the morning, going to meet a small group of shinobi. If the fortress had that fearsome weapon ready to be used it needed to be disabled before anyone part of the alliance came within its range.
Chapter 64

The weapon was indeed an improved copy of the one Mori had tried to use against the Takeda forces during the Toyotomi war. It was made of polished mirrors, too many to count that would focus the sunlight into some sort of scorching beam. Towers and rows of mirrors and gears could be used to direct the attacks. All in all, between the soldiers guarding it and the men in charge of using it, it was too difficult to sabotage and keep it that way. Mirror certainly broke all the time, especially when the heat of simply using the weapon could turn the materials brittle.

Saki stood next to the main mirror, the last one, the one that actually received and redirected the sunlight. She had already sent a message to the armies about doing most of their advancing at night. That of course was to be the expected course of action. Mori was sending small forces to engage them and delay. The time estimates on both sides said if he kept that kind of pressure Mori could fight the armies when they were near enough into positions where his weapon could reach.

So she asked the army to behave accordingly to the warlord's plots. And was now calling her shinobi, asking to allow the weapon to be used... after a few subtle alterations to the gearing systems. There was a ninja stationed at each main mirror. Every time Mori chose to use it they would manipulate them into massive barrages of "Friendly Fire" for Mori.

The kunoichi had also made a few maps of the fortress and sent them out, highlighting points of entrance and weaknesses either natural or man-made. Now they had to remain hidden until Motochika disembarked his first assault on the beach.
Chapter 65

Katakura-dono had arrived first, dragging attentions to the east side of the fortress. Mori's delays had been effective enough because they arrived at the break of dawn, half pouring out of the hills, the others waiting for their signals. It was a full-fledged battlefield by the time the sun broke through the peaks of the mountains, high enough to be reflected. When the orders to start using the sun-weapon were given Saki was ready to signal her people into action. Mori's attention was into that front when the Date-led forces broke through from the other side, the confusion fuelled by Saica artillery. That helped to disguise that the sun-beam's strike took out a straight path towards the beach and the gates. Even though they tried to cover it and hinder the advance of the mounted horsemen… Saki watched as another beam cut through the attempts to for a defence. All according to plan.

Date and the Saica had just avoided the first beam-attacks from that side of the field.

Saki had instructed that those should look well aimed but having missed because of the other army's actions. One would not want Mori to catch on too soon.

The signal to stop that and start taking out the enemy came in the form of a loud blast from Fugaku, the canon smashing the formations of soldiers that awaited on the beach, diverting Mori's attention once more, leaving the shinobi free to operate the weapon as Saki wished.

Motochika lacked nothing in a dramatic entrance, storming the beach with fire, canons, pirates and backed by an angry Tsuruhime.

Mori's army had no place to go but back inside the fortress and its gates were closed. His weapons were turning against him. The enemy had soldiers willing to fight with no reservations for their lords. From her perch Saki could see deserters in green, already fleeing the field.

The Kunoichi turned to Fuma who waited quietly and patiently.

"Let's start the offense from within." Cleaning the corridors. Blocking reinforcements. Open the gates.
Chapter 66

Mist and smoke cloaked the beach. Patches of sand were blackened, burned. Pits had been dug up by cannon fire. But soldiers still fought and the plan was proceeding. The generals of each section had finally fought their way to the gate and were holding the position.

Date, Kojuro, Motochika and Keiji were catching their breaths.

Tsuruhime and Saica kept the small attempts at recovering that essential piece of the fortress away with their ranged prowess.

It seemed to be the only angle where the sun weapon was unable to reach. A bit of forethought on Mori’s part that he failed to use for the rest of the battlefield.

The sun was starting to decline.

The fight was dragging but as soon as they entered the ones outside had orders to sweep the field and stage a siege.

The gates groaned open. Saki stepped out, looking back for a moment. Fuma nodded and vanished.

"Move out." She told the men who straightened, readying. "The path is mostly clear but the inner sanctum is still protected." She tossed a small bag of red little balls at Katakura-dono. "If you need backup in any form just throw one of these into the air. We will come for you." She joined the other two women in the battlefield and looked ahead, her claws twitching slightly. "Just follow the dead." Saki ordered the gate closed afterwards, looking ahead.

"They are not that tired and this battlefield is all but won." Saica stated, lowering her gun for a moment.

Tsuruhime nodded, enthusiastically.

"I read the portents." The young woman said it with all the certainty of an oracle. "It will work out."

Saki nodded.

"We still need to stay here." Whether to defend from the soldiers that tried to get in or prevent any reinforcements from getting out. And in the middle of the field of battle there was little chance to know how the outside world fared… "I will go within the fray and organize the men." Saki decided, shadowing, going into the beach, slashing her way through the enemies.

If any word of what was happening in that fortress came out there was a chance, a slight chance but a chance, that Mori could get word out and mimic their earlier attack, boxing them in. True it would not have the same effect as weapons and positions were already cemented as the One-Eyed Dragon's but one had better be ready. So she had to rally the men and set the camp not only as a resting-siege placement but in a way that could double as a quickly assembled battle-formation.
Within the fortress a few forces remained, stationed in ways that would not impede but would delay progress. Mori was proving once more he was not above sacrificing his men for any sliver of an advantage that could buy. In that particular battle and with two paths to the inner sanctum of the fortress where the general was secluded and prepared to defend it translated in depleting the enemy's force. Literally throwing men until exhaustion left them an easy enemy to defeat.

As Motochika had claimed Mori as his adversary, to finally settle the long-standing rivalry, Date's solution was simple. He and Kojuro would break the lines, opening the path with all their strength. The pirate was to do none of the fighting, simply advancing. Maeda was left behind after each stretch of terrain was gained, keeping the ground for as long as it was possible before moving after the trio.

But even as they found resistance it was obvious their numbers were severely dwindled.

Keiji slammed his blade down, facing away from the long staircase that lead to the final obstacle before Mori. He was at the lynchpin of the fortress and he needed to defend that path, not allowing whoever was left alive after their rampage through the corridors to get up those stairs.

The doors to Mori opened smoothly, no doubt operated by someone Saki had left behind to deal with the mechanical part of the defences. It was no surprise for the trio when Mori stood there, in the centre of a sun-bathed wide arena surrounded by the elite of his army, all willing and expandable. Date gritted his teeth, sheathing the single claw, pulling all six at once, counting quickly. Kojuro took a deep breath shifting to the right. It was implicit. I deal with right, you deal with left. Fight in tandem, protect the Dragon's back.

With the assurance the One-Eyed Dragon and his Right Eye would deal with crowd control Motochika tilted his anchor against his shoulder and advanced with a determined, heavy step towards Mori, whistling a challenge before swinging the weapon with a war cry.
Chapter 68

Ring-blade and weaponized anchor clashed, crossing, blocked, swung again, meeting the same impassable wall of steel and will. Each of Motochika's anchor strikes was pushed aside by the blade's rotation and angle but it was clear that a miscalculation on Mori's part would give the advantage to more physically fit pirate. And it was also clear he could not handle that kind of impact too many times. The clashing stalemate was broken when Motochika moved his anchor in a wide arch, striking down and through Mori's defences, pushing him back.

Unbalanced and vulnerable Mori raised one arm, calling for his men. A small unit promptly answered to the call, breaking away from the fight against Oshu's Dragon and general. Motochika scoffed adopting a defensive position as the arrows were pulled back. Suddenly the wall was crashed and slashed through as Date cleared Motochika's path, moving on with a grin and an arrogant shout, joshing the Pirate.

Using the opening he charged against Mori who was now on the defensive, the blade spinning in a pattern, defending. Instead of going for another fruitless clash the pirate threw the chain, managing to tangle it into the loop, pulling Mori to another round of close combat before he had time to react or call another group of "expendables".

Mori took a few hits before managing to separate the ring blade into two curved sword-like weapons, hopping away, re-joining them in front of him, spinning the loop.

Motochika grinned, twisting the chain around the anchor again, slamming it, broad head down, into the wooden floor, resting his foot on one of the prongs, slouching, glancing around.

Bodies littered the floor but the fight was still going strong. The One-Eyed Dragon and his Right Eye ravaged the men Mori could have used to shield himself although, at the moment, that seemed to be something that was far from the Warlord's mind.

It seemed he was finally locked on the simple concept that it was a duel and it was something that would end with that day.

Mori moved his weapon, standing at its core as it spun, moving fast, charging, the fast moving blade grinding against the defensive movement Motochika managed, the tilt of the ring blade and the fast movement reflecting the sunset, columns of light created from it, blasting the pirate down, away, fire countering the green warlord's attack as soon as he touched the floor.

The fast, charged attacks of the heavier weapon pushed Mori back into the defensive mode, trying to back him into a corner where the ring would be all but useless. Noticing this Mori countered fast, a sudden arch of the ring blade leaving afterimages, striking, the air itself answering, cowing to the pressure.

Blasted back by something that could not be physically defended the pirate lost the grip on his anchor, pulling it back by the chain in time to stop what Mori thought would be the last blow. The strike was deflected and Mori was forced to shield himself from a fierce counter attack.

The pirate warlord shouted, twisting his anchor mid-air, using the moment that had finally opened a breach cutting through the ring-blade, through Mori. Frailer of body he would not have withstood such an attack even if it had been done without the strain of combat and other blows to add to it.

Mori's death brought a hush to the field, his men stopping the combat entirely, retreating quietly
and without a glance back.

Motochika stared at his old rival. It was done. What was left was to move forward and make sure the country he was fighting for, united by the One-Eyed Dragon was worth his allegiance.

Date approached, placing one hand on his shoulder.

"It's over." Motochika said in a raspy voice, leaning against the anchor.

"Yes. «Good fight»." Date looked around and the ahead as the night settled in. "Join us at camp when you're ready. I'm sure your guys will throw a hell of a «party»."
Chapter 69

There were celebrations and preparations. And there was a difference amidst the men and their warlords. Motochika had walked away for a while. Understandable as he had lost his rival, someone who had stood on his way for so long that the lines between friend and enemy were somewhat blurry in the pirate’s mind. Despite knowing Mori was no friend. Still it had been almost fifteen years of constant conflict-and-tense-peace.

The weight of that loss was both a relief and a worry.

If he had done it simply for the sake of eliminating a rival it would have meant less and less over time.

But the deed had been done for the One-Eyed Dragon, for the sake of the future under his rule. So, as soon as the pieces were sorted Motochika would still have a purpose and something to grasp, a source of resolve, a goal to work towards.

Date was in a similar mood, thoughtful. Saki approached softly, appraising, checking for any need of medical supplies. Surprisingly he was not wounded. The kunoichi sat down next to him and began to loosen his armour, helping him out of it as he seemed to have forgotten, immersed in the thoughts that followed the battle’s outcome.

"Feeling the weight of their lives and loyalties?" Saki asked, pressing a light kiss against his cheek.

"It’s a greater pressure than what I was expecting." Date admitted, looking around, ahead. He grinned, showing that despite that the challenge was accepted and he would not balk.

"Good. That means you understand." Plans could wait. What was needed now was rest. She pulled away the last piece of armour and embraced him, welcoming him back. Even when an oracle told you things that you were hoping were true… it was hard to believe until it actually came true.

"Are you relenting yet?" Date asked mischievously, pulling her to his lap, one arm around her, hand over her stomach. Saki covered his hand and chuckled.

"My Dragon." She answered although it pained her. "No."
Chapter 70

Stepping back and facing the map was the next appropriate step to take. See who was left to battle, who were the allies, what was left in the reserves, what had to be defended or ignored. So sitting around the map that showed more darts with dark-blue ribbons than any other colour were all the allies gathered or the people they represented.

Saica Magoichi, leader mercenary Saica faction, her eyes analysing the situation calmly;

Chosokabe Motochika was next to her trading quips with Date, his mood improved, having come to terms with the demise and new purpose of his life;

Tsuruhime pouted every time the pirate spoke and sighed every single time her eyes strayed towards Fuma Kotaro; between her and Chosokabe the Seto sea was firmly under the Dragon's claw;

Fuma was there as an independent shinobi, standing behind Nobuko, who was there representing all the shinobi clans, except for the Sarutobi's. Those kept a semi-neutral stance because of Sasuke and Takeshi. Those who were bound to a warlord would fight. Those who were not were not going to interfere;

Keiji was there as a triple representative. As himself, the wanderer, the Maedas and Uesugi Kenshin;

Kobayakawa Hideaki shivered, looking around nervously. But every time he glanced at Katakura-dono he looked calmer and more able to stand his ground.

Katakura Kojuro stared at the map, determined, thinking, his face set into a grim mask.

Saki sighed, slightly uncomfortable. That baby liked to kick and with all the organs shifting around it to make the pregnancy unnoticeable she had lost track of where was what. Not it though. The little thing always seemed to aim for her liver.

The map showed only two major players now. Sanada Yukimura to the West, making his way towards the Dragon-controlled lands and Mogami Yoshiaki to the North and East, pressuring Oshu and currently engaged in battle with the War God. Undoubtedly Date would want to go after his rival… but a good leader now should chose the safety of his lands over a combat that heated the blood. Both her and Katakura-dono were there to advise him to return to Oshu and deal with that threat before going after the Sanada-led Takeda.

Still for a five month campaign they had made an amazing amount of progress that rivalled with the last Warlords to make an attempt.

Now all the One-Eyed Dragon had to do was choose wisely hold his advantages.
Chapter 71

Date Masamune's choice showed two things. His growth as a leader and his lack of progress as a rival.

Mogami Yoshiaki was indeed the main threat to Date's rule and the stability of the alliances, and his defeat would solidify further the agreement with Uesugi Kenshin who still opposed the Takeda in any case. If it could give way to a more permanent treaty and avoid another conflict it would be perfect.

Choosing to return and deal with the man was, all in all what was desired of a good, solid leader.

Then there was the other side of the story about the Dragon who wanted to have the last battle be a meaningful one.

"Just a few words and I would have taken care of the issue for you, Date-sama." Saki said formally, looking ahead, around. The camp had been rebuilt away from the battlefield and the breached fortress. They were still in alert, seeing a recently conquered land was still an unstable land, despite the campaigns and manipulation Saki had placed around to make the transition smoother and easier. As they had to do more than just conquer to keep the lands under the Dragon's claws progress had to be carefully considered beforehand.

Most generals would stay behind, to defend their lands in the name of another, giving up only a handful of forces for the march north. Saica and Keiji would be following the main branch of the Date Army north.

"We need a show of support and force to secure Uesugi." Date stated, grinning as they walked through the camp. Katakura-dono had already retired after the meeting and the plans had been firmly decided. "One hell of «party»."

"Of course." Saki stated, her lips tilting up in amusement. "We'll be ready to leave for Dewa in three days and reach the first battlefield in four, right at the edge of Uesugi's lands." The kunoichi informed him.

"You've been pushing yourself too hard." Saki scoffed, shaking her head. "How long?" Date asked. the shinobi stopped, confused for a moment, looking up. "Until you're due." Date clarified, approaching, protectively placing his arm around her.

"Three months." Saki admitted.

Date chuckled.

"I keep my promises." He reiterated, still taking it as a challenge.

"I don't doubt your word." Saki said smiling. "But I do doubt your adversaries will struggle that little." The shinobi the chuckled. "My mother is sure that a child of yours will arrive at the worst possible moment and in the middle of a battlefield it has no business butting into." Date looked at her with a baffled expression. "I dare not ask the oracle because I'm fairly certain and afraid she will tell me this, word by word."
Chapter 72

The look of the north resembled a barrier created by Oshu and Echigo against the expanded Dewa. In a map one could see three crests, two allied and one antagonizing. And Kai, left alone, neutral for all intents and purposes. There was no need to provoke Sanada into attacking sooner than needed.

Theoretically it was an easy situation. In practice things could be a little... sketchier for a number of reasons. From the damp spring weather to the simple fact that Kasuga's status as an outcast made it hard on the diplomatic situation. If she had taken Sasuke's offers it would be slightly easier. Still she was protected by the God of War so there were some things that could be overlooked.

The border skirmishes Mogami had chosen as the main strategy for his army were small and apart in the terrain. Uesugi would be hard pressed to divide his frontier divisions amidst the hotspots in a timely manner. Also they would chip away his defences if allowed to go for a long time. Mogami on the other hand could pull the strings and feed the conflicts where he pleased to press his advantages with minimal damage to his forces. Oshu was under a similar attack but the clans could easily deal with that threat and the ones Saki had trained had the experience of Tokugawa's incursion.

Saki weaved through each battlefield, making the most of her claws, shadows and small scouting unit, balancing or outright erasing threats while waiting for Fuma to finish the requested actions and Kiko to report the end of the same fights in Oshu's border. It was all about presenting their actions as an act of goodwill and pave the way to the rest of the army, making sure Uesugi was ready to jump when asked to.

Uesugi's men acted reasonably as soon as they saw Oshu's symbol, proving that their alliance was indeed committed to memory. They willingly followed Saki's plan as the commanding figure of the scouting unit and were rewarded by a speedier resolution. She ensured the stability of each patrol and left one of her own in place, to help.

Kiko was the first to appear, bringing news from Oshu. There were a few people that had spoken up for Mogami, due to the sketchy ascent of Date as the clan head. Results of bribery and old grudges that had once been dead. It was not consequential. Their bitterness had been laughed about without need of shinobi intervention and life continued within the borders as the war ravaged the exterior.

"Find anyone under Kasuga's employ and give them the battle's heartbeat. They will have to be ready if and when they attack at night or dawn." Saki ordered her second, fixing her claws, noticing a few frayed knots that made the metal too loose and prone to rattle. "Then find the woman herself. The terms of her exile have been changed and we have to deal with that before going to the War God." Kiko bowed and vanished, ready to continue.

Fuma appeared as the sunset approached, a few hours before the deadline to the change of meeting location. He reported that to the south things seemed to have settled easily. The army should arrive by next sundown and there seemed to be no major banditry arising as it had happened when Oda had warred. Toyotomi had recruited anyone that could have turned into a bandit. Still it was too early for the One-Eyed Dragon to be able to guarantee the people's safety but the lack of challenge or internal struggle was a good sign.

The kunoichi stood carefully, looking around. The semi-permanent border camp seemed ready enough to stand on its own again.
All that was left to do in Echigo was contact Uesugi and deal with Kasuga. She and Fuma would be moving further north, behind enemy lines to see what the old man was really plotting.
Idle Mogami had not been.

Patrols marched through his lands methodically.

Small camps had been created on the fields that could have been used to sneak an army in or in the places any mass of people had no choice but to cross if they wanted to advance.

Even the rivers seemed to be equally protected.

He had invested in weapons, armour and fortress defences that relied on metal and gunpowder. Saica should be able to give advice on disabling those when she saw the sketches and descriptions.

It showed a rather staggering and surprising amount of effort and forethought. Some of those defences were not new, most likely dating from the war with Oda Nobunaga, made stronger when Toyotomi had marched over to the northern part of the country and had almost taken it.

The old man had a reputation resting on his cunning. It seemed it was not ill-gotten. While his land had been mostly untouched by the other armies he was well prepared to deal with whatever came his way. Had he fought back then... his land was protected in a way that would have given him a very good chance of surviving and avoiding conquest. Had he surrendered to any of those forces... It would have done a significant pressure to the Northern provinces and would have made it rather hard to resist as any army of his neighbours would have been spread too thin, fighting two enemies.

Ultimately he was simply ready for any eventuality and causality of a conflict.

Saki sighed, reviewing the findings as they returned, thinking. Any invasion, done fast or in stages, would ultimately end up in a siege situation. What fortress would be used by Dewa's warlord, if a final conflict could be forced sooner rather than later, would depend solely on their progress and speed, on their ability to reach and lock him within the supposedly protective walls.

Unlike Mori who had relied solely upon one magnificently crafted fortress Mogami had more than a handful of places to challenge them with and unfortunately they sat in a pretty straight route.

One wrong piece of information and it would mean siege after siege until the man ran out of options and decided to either hole up deeper or attack head on with his personal guard, a small army of fifty. Either option was bad for an invading army. It chipped away their strength and sapped their resolves.

The army should have arrived by now and be rested. Saki would try one more plea to solve things her way before spilling what she knew would help Date's way. Katakura-dono would be able to sort it out in a plan that took the least amount of stress to their army. Uesugi would certainly prove a bit more level-headed and help with that endeavour... She glanced at Fuma and sighed. And that man was still not saying exactly why Nobuko had stationed him with her at virtually all times though going from what they suspected would be her due time he was, most likely, there to send the alarm and protect her while pain was too disabling.

That stage of conquest seemed to be posing a higher challenge when it came to organizing their advance.
Chapter 74

The question that lingered around the maps, papers and information boiled down to a simple "what to do". They had an army. The enemy had a field prepared to thwart that. Any wrong decision, every loss would make a difficult task even harder. And yet it had to be regarded as unavoidable despite their amassed experience and abilities.

The shinobi were silent, having said what they needed to. Another attempt at having Mogami assassinated had been shot down.

The warlords were silent as well.

Katakura-dono spoke up at last.

"We need to know exactly where Mogami is at all times." Saki nodded. That could be done with relative ease by deploying a ninja. And it was the only certainty they had so far. What Katakura-dono wanted was a way to direct their attacks at the source of the problem at all times.

"I have a suggestion." Nobuko spoke up. "If you are so averse to eliminating the man but still want to fight I would suggest that we sneak your army directly to where your enemy is. Instead of invading from the outside in this can be resolved from the inside out."

"We still need to find him." Katakura-dono remarked.

"That should be easily done." Uesugi answered, glancing at a blushing Kasuga. The implicit compliment was not lost. "You would need to keep his attention focused somewhere and I believe we would be using my borders to do so."

Date's eye narrowed as he thought it over.

"It has to look as if your army is ready to sweep his lands clear." They had Uesugi's army, the Saica, some of the Maeda had arrived when Keiji had asked and they had his army. "And the force that sneaks in cannot be that big."

"We will give you several of ours own as soon as you're inside the fortress." Saki stated. Nobuko nodded. "Kasuga will keep the trickery going on this side of the border."

It took them less than two hours to lock in the location of the man: Hasedo. And it took about the same time to make sure that by an odd number of innocuous coincidences it would be impossible for Mogami to leave the area for the next five days at least. All the while feeding him the information of how the Date and his allies were preparing for a morose invasion of the Dewa province, coming first from Uesugi's lands.
Chapter 75

A force of twenty soldiers and ten shinobi was the token force readied to take down a fortress and a warlord. Their incursion was to rely on stealth and silence as Saki emphasised harshly as they waited for the way in. Despite the speedy discovery of the fortress mapping the moves of the boats had eaten away a bit more of their time. They had to capture the patrol boat without any fuss or delay so no suspicion would be aroused and that meant knowing precisely when and where they were moving through.

Then it was a matter of wearing the enemy's colours as they sailed through the water-gates into the inner part of the fortress that would be then taken by storm.

Discovery any sooner than Hasedo's first inner gate and the fight would turn into a hard trek through the walls and soldiers, a harder to win and riskier still path.

The boat should follow its path unbothered due to the need for soldiers the alliance was creating in the borders. Uesugi had bolstered his defences and made a few incursions. Small raids were being launched periodically from his lands and Oshu. And all the while, as war was diverting his attention his ego was being flattered as those attacks meant his strategies were working and putting a strain in the alliance. It had not reached a level of lessening his guard but it was making the land between the borders and his fortress slack.

The wooden gate groaned as it opened, allowing the oar through with a good luck cry.

Below deck Saki smiled, finishing the filing of another claw and cutting the map, eliminating another pressure point, exchanging a nod with Katakura-dono. So far so good. Those from the army that were easily recognizable due to their positions and seniority were down there, hidden away and keeping silent as instructed. Despite that they were buzzing with energy and eagerness. The others had donned the stolen armours and were behaving like the regular crew. They had water, food and were behaving according to her instructions.

The journey up the river would take two more days. Three if any of nature's conditions turned less than favourable. There were eight more water-gates to go through before Hasedo. And within the walls there were five more with a distinct possibility of a thorough investigation before entering. For that Nobuko had some mind techniques ready that were being passed around and practiced by the ninja.

And, finally, even if the men that served Mogami had already removed the accidents that had made their lord's escape possibilities null, the man was not seeing any reason to flee. And if the boat was close enough when and if discovered there would be no way for him to run as the shinobi also had their instructions in accordance to that occurrence. Box him in. Lead him to Date.
Chapter 76

Not unexpectedly the alarm was given as soon as they were able to cross the first gate within a fortress. Security was too heavy to bypass by sneaking and that had generated the alert. 20 men poured out of the boat and started the fight, pushing back the surprised soldiers with ease. Shock was keeping them from recognition and from being effective in their defence. Shinobi had vanished towards the walls and dealt with sentinels and artillery, disabling some of the canons, pointing others within.

They were in. Not as far inside as Saki and Katakura-dono would have preferred but the outer wall, where the defence had been reported as thickest, was crossed. Faint signs of distress were peppering the fortress without a clear message. They would be scrambling to understand what was happening until it became obvious.

Saki signalled the change of plan, showing the setback was too great to be shrugged off.

Half the soldiers would stay in the boat and move steadily towards the inner fortress. Shinobi had been deployed to monitor their progress, open the gates and deal with the soldiers that manned the cannons. They had also been ordered, as usual, to appropriate the enemies' weapons that could be speedily used against them. It had been such a success with the modified Nichirin ray that no one saw any issues in keeping that plan alive.

Katakura-dono had chosen and ordered those soldiers into the boat. The second gate was opening. The third gate started to fire. It was immediately answered by the commandeered mortars. He had also chosen the one soldier amidst that elite that would stay behind and keep the camp in their possession. They had to be wary of trickery as reports spoke of a fortress that was well armed and as gimmicked as a shinobi house.

It was not until the last task pertaining to the battle was distributed, horses stolen for greater mobility, their colours restored, the invasion force that would take the land path ready to move out, that they noticed the One-Eyed Dragon was missing.

The sound of fighting and the sharp light of lightning, flickering fast, the rumble of the enemy's steps giving away their number. Heavens help them… he was having fun again, charging first and changing plans as he pleased.

Katakura-dono sighed, his expression changing from determination to a long suffering frown, and looked around, focusing on the fastest one. The army would catch up as soon as they could but… Saki groaned, shaking her head, her clawed hands joining with a clink, vanishing into a wisp of shadow.

Kojuro mounted and made his horse turn, facing the men, baring his blade.

"Move out!" He gave the order, leading the way towards Date and the goal of conquest.
Chapter 77

The window of time they could work with before word got out about the sneak attack that had targeted specifically the fortress where their lord was hiding was at most two hours. After that reinforcements would start to arrive. But for those next two hours their focus should be kept entirely in the taking of the fortress and defeat of their Warlord.

It was easy to find the One-Eyed Dragon as he razed the enemy to the ground, advancing like some sort of war machine. That did not spare him a glare that promised more chastising to come. One thing was expendables like her and Katakura-dono doing reckless actions for his sake. Another was the future ruler of the land running off when there was a plan.

He had stolen a horse as advised though, moving forward. Most fell when he charged. Some kept their distance and those Saki dealt with, leaping from the horses back and clawing them down before dealing with the gate. Some of the gates had keepers. Others had to be blown away by the cannons when the key was lost. Either way she delayed each opening just slightly, just enough for Katakura-dono to catch up with them, bringing up the rear against the second wave of warriors that had been hiding per Mogami's orders.

A small scale battle had to be fought in that courtyard before they could go further. The reinforcements had come from behind. Some were the men that had been spared as they stormed through the camps. Most were fresh. And they had them surrounded.

Date grinned, dismounting, his blades hissing out of their sheaths. Katakura-dono's mouth was set to a thin line of grim determination as he took his place at the One-Eyed Dragon's back. Saki hoped down from the horse and her hands started to form the needed triggers for her jutsus. The army answered to the situation promptly, forming a circle of men, blades and horses.

For the inexperienced eye the tide of the battle would favour the enemy that had the familiar ground and the men that had not exerted themselves. But the ones that fought back had not survived years of war and campaigns against Oda and Toyotomi for naught. They allowed the enemy to have the first move. And they counterattacked swiftly and heavily, to turn that tide and damn it away.

A fast silver shadow moved around the battlefield as the army from Oshu made progress and screeched suddenly. It made a sudden dive towards Date's head. Saki moved, capturing it by the neck, not bothering to keep its beak and talons away from her hands and arm. They were, after all, covered in metal and thick leather. A falcon?

"«The gentleman's" stupid pigeon." Date chuckled, amused.

"It seems he is indeed delivering a message…" Saki whispered, pulling the paper away from its contained, handing it to Date as a horn sounded the retreat for the enemy. And while doing its job had tried to go for the other eye Oshu's boss had left.

Katakura-dono shouted at the men to hold their positions, approaching to see what the note was about.

Despite it being a bit too late for such it seemed Mogami wanted to… parlay. Or at least negotiate. They were far into the fortress. If they desired it would be easy to ignore the note and keep moving. But… how much was any of the choices they had left part of any sort of trap Mogami had staged?
Chapter 78

Mogami's human defences were nowhere to be seen after that retreat. The apparatus was still apparent but no one seemed to be manning the weapons, gates or any other traps hidden within the walls, ground or towers. The sudden emptiness after an all out conflict was unnerving. And surely that was part of the old man's ploy. Saki walked carefully, staying a bit behind with some of the shinobi as the small invasion force walked unimpeded towards the inner sanctum. Doorways were left ajar until they reached the outer yard of the innermost part of the fortress.

There was still no army to be seen but the way Mogami was displaying himself, standing tall, proudly, holding a teacup and looking derisively at the ones that had just walked in along with the lack of preparations for any kind of talking activity that would not fall into combat was telling.

"A pleasure seeing you, Masamune-kun. The afternoon tea is as exquisite as ever." As was the snide way he was addressing the One-Eyed Dragon. Saki sighed and moved smoothly towards the front, joining Katakura-dono. What the old crafty fox wanted was to buy time and burn those few hours they had until the reinforcements arrived. And in an ambush situation they had discussed a small detail: Mogami could not be dispatched right away. For a smooth run and a swift resolution he had to be captured, convinced to pacify his men and then offered the choice to fight or die.

"Yo, «gentleman»." This time Date was more amused by the old man's antics than outright angered. He had grown and that was not left unnoticed by allies and enemies. "Doing pretty damn fine lately, aren't you?" He jabbed right back.

"Hmm?" Mogami arched an eyebrow, gesturing with his tea, noticing the lack of effect he was having. But he kept trying to harm Date's pride, that troublesome thing. "My boy I do wish I could say the same of you."

"Heh." Date scoffed, slightly amused when a derision before would have brought a blinding fury. "Not as bad as you think." He answered, glancing back. Saki nodded briefly. She was looking fine. Not too pale, not too worn.

"Masamune-sama." Kojuro approached grimly. "It is clear he is simply buying time. He should be dealt with swiftly so we do not lose focus of our goal." He then turned to him, as if the words were meant only for him. "Dealing with this crafty old fox can bring nothing but harm." The tone did not change. If Mogami Yoshiaki could bait so could they.

"I heard that Kojuro-kun." The old man, steeped in annoyance, angry at being ignored and dismissed, walked right down the path they needed him to. "And I cannot let such insults pass."

"I spoke out loud so you would hear." Katakura-dono admitted, stepping back, placing his hand on Saki's shoulder. She lowered her head, hand raised, ordering her people to deal with the incoming forces that had been slowly and stealthily getting ready to attack them.

"Such insolence. Let the duel begin." Mogami was shrieking, losing a bit of his flair, tossing the teacup on the ground, shattering it.

Katakura-dono ordered the soldiers to move out and around, to keep the enemy away from the duel.

"Fine by me…" Date drew one blade with a slashed smile, ready. "I'll be your opponent then."
Chapter 79

A lot could be said about the «gentleman». Abilities could be mocked or praised. But in the end, when it came down to the reality of a fight denying did not minimize skill. His uncle had not changed his ways preferring fast strikes born of trickery. For a normal adversary or anyone trained within a closed tradition, someone without actual experience, without having been tested by other styles, other blades, it would be hard to deal with the sudden barrage of blows and then swift retreat.

While Mogami's technique made the follow-through of the movements difficult to predict the One-Eyed Dragon knew how to counterattack and even defend accordingly. He was far from the young one that Mogami, at his mother's behest, had believed easy to overthrow. So he allowed the first attack to the «gentleman», meeting him blow for blow with a grin, the thinner blade of the other man, made for precision cuts, not for hard battle giving out. Mogami hopped back, his smug expression faltering as Date shrugged off the icy shards that matched the old man's disposition.

The armies did not move. If the generals had decided to leave the whole conflict's result to a simple duel it was to be respected no matter the outcome.

Without even taking out all six claws Date attacked, easily overwhelming and dominating the duellist. Each strike grew harder and harder on the other man's blade until his defences broke down completely with the shattering of the blade, lightning skimming through the metal as Date pounced, to deliver the final blow.

Mogami shrieked theatrically, tossing the blade away and throwing himself on the ground, proclaiming surrender.

The One-Eyed Dragon growled, stopping his attack, stepping back, sheathing the katana. There was no way to kill him after that spectacle that did not shame Oshu. He was unarmed, on the ground, having surrendered and pleaded for mercy. If it had been in the heat of a true battle it could have been ignored. All-out war had different rules from a duel. And the crafty old man knew it.

Date could see the ploy for what it was. But there was nothing he could do about it.

"I see. Young people are indeed striving to overcome their predecessors. I have decided. So be it. Do whatever you please. For the Youth shouldering the future I shall become part of the earth." Mogami was starting his little drama once more, trying to goad him into a lesser action that would affect his standing.

"What will you do?"

Date asked Kojuro wearily. The Right eye watching the scene shook his head, confused.

"...even if you ask me..." He answered, hesitation. Date shrugged.

"We're off." He ordered. Saki joined him.

"You could have asked me... my Dragon." She whispered, walking beside him, between his frame and Katakura-dono's. Date chuckled and shook his head.

"«Leave it be.»" He said with affection, ignoring Mogami who had stood and shrieked, running after them and shouting suggestions.
"Wait! Then I'll make a proposal! I'll become your mentor Masamune-kun! It is a rather good deal is it not?"

"Tch… annoying old man." Date complained, out of the armour, pouring a drink. "Kojuro. I think my patience is at its limit." He grumbled, downing the booze, shaking his head.

"Mine is already gone." Kojuro answered in a rare moment of his own usually infinite supply of tolerance being overcome by the sheer pressure of someone else's annoyance.

Saki smiled softly, readying a report, sitting on the engawa, looking at the river's agitated flow. The first hints of summer were in the air. And the only enemy left was the one the Dragon craved to fight. So that should lift his mood and made easier to endure the few negotiations left between him, Uesugi and Mogami before marching on.

Nobuko stood in front or Mogami with an icy expression, waiting. The man was befuddled, blindsided. In his surrender he had expected to find favour and worm his way closer to being able to claim Oshu if any kind of unfortunate event befell the One-Eyed Dragon. But that shinobi, proclaiming a formal alliance instead a submissive contract towards Masamune-kun was trapping him.

"I will repeat Mogami-dono." The woman said, softly. "Either forfeit any and all claims towards Oshu and serve faithfully and quietly or forfeit your life." She bowed softly. "While the One-Eyed Dragon may have shown you mercy due to the trick you used to surrender know that there is nothing that keeps you safe from us." Evidence of treason could be forged. Even if it could not there were his actuals intentions that, while not technically treason skirted close. Uesugi could demand his life as payment. Date could eventually execute him as an example… Mogami shook his head nervously and gave the only answer he could give.
Chapter 80

With Oshu so close Date saw no reason to stay away while the treaties of the new alliances were finalized and the information re-gathered. Common sense and a bit of reward for his men. Kojuro for one vanished immediately to tend to his garden. Saki said something about a bath. Men thought about families, friends and lovers. The One-Eyed Dragon looked around. At the mountains, at his house entry, at the men that were dispersing… with a light shrug he decided to delay his return for a bit. He wanted to personally check the state Mogami’s pressure had left the borders.

Sanada Yukimura, and by default Kai were the last obstacles they had to overcome. It was still in her mind even if they were taking a break as Mogami was forced to make reparations t Uesugi and the God Of war trained the forces he would be offering Oshu to cement his alliance. Saica, followed by Keiji, had moved back to the mercenary territory, carrying a message for Chosokabe. He should sail west, press the lands Sanada had claimed for himself and Kai.

Saki twisted her hair into a moist bun, opening the shoji that led to the garden. The light of dusk was fading, darkening. Her lanterns had just been lit, mixing with the last reddened light. She sighed, sitting down, rubbing her back lightly, soothing a small ache. Her pregnancy was now showing a bit, a little bump on her stomach that would have looked much more in place in a woman with much more time to spare before the delivery.

It was fairly amusing that Sanada and those allies he had gathered in his stay and battles in the West had all but walked, unthreateningly and without suffering any attacks, through Date-controlled land and made their fortress in the place that the One-Eyed Dragon had chosen to abandon. For the last Month and a half they had rebuilt and fortified Osaka. Hence he had all the advantages if they wished to chase him down. Even if he was pinned and surrounded by those who had placed their allegiance on Date.

There was another choice, the underhanded path to make him leave the place he had prepared as a stage. Pressing the newly conquered territories was to be expected, seeing they had been in a conquering streak. Pressuring Kai itself where the Tiger was still weakened and sick was a sure way to make the protégée fall into a blind rage and abandon his hole for an open combat that would favour Date.

Ultimately it was up to the general to decide. What he sought with Yukimura was a one-on-one duel. So the shinobi was fairly certain he would take them down to Osaka again. Even with the new fortifications the castle and surroundings were familiar. And they had already won a battle in that terrain which was always good for the morale...

Saki looked towards the night sky, shrugging, listening to the household. Those were issues for the next day though. For now they should rest…
Chapter 81

The war meeting had been called with only those belonging to Oshu and its army. Kojuro was briefing them about the situation and showing how each scenario would affect their choices. He wasn't going too in-depth about the situation either. Just broad strokes about the terrain, the fields, the allies, the movements, what had been done, what was left to do. They had learned about the folly of blind trust with the Toyotomi and Saki had warned them thoroughly about Sarutobi Sasuke and those he had in his service.

It was something that still left a bitter taste in the Dragon and his Right Eye but as their power grew more noticeable and the standing of the One-Eyed Dragon threatened those around it some things had to be lost. He was no longer a simple Warlord warring for his territory.

He was on his way to rule an entire country.

Even with like-minded allies there were still those who could harbour treacherous feelings or power-hungry motives.

Saki sighed and glanced at Fuma who still followed her around like a shadow much to Tsuruhime's dismay. She had tried to explain that those were his orders but the girl's infatuation seemed to colour everything into a skewed pink mist. Despite that she was still effective, if amusing. The young priestess had left, saying that there was a foreboding in her head that she had to see to before meeting in Saica territory.

Their first move was to test Kai's defences. Just a few strikes, akin to a poke. Few soldiers, a few scouts, ranged attackers, little to no damage. They could ask Uesugi to keep that pressure on the Lands of the Tiger. A few raids, just to see how deep they could push and how many soldiers were left within the land. It was not a threat or an attempt to conquer. It was a simple diversion, an action and information allowed simply to unbalance Sanada. With his loyal streak he would feel the constant need to return, scrambling his focus. Which would in turn divert and divide the efforts of his men, splitting their focus and drive.

The second need was to keep Sasuke misinformed and distracted. The shinobi had ways to do the first simply. But those were ways he knew and could use as well. But they had a shortcut to do the second. A blond stacked shortcut. Along with his clan and in-depth knowledge of his work methods. Sarutobi would not know what clan was doing what in their side and as methods had subtleties in each family he would be a bit more focused which could lead to a greater over sight if something too diverse from his idea was pulled. If they showed a Kizune brand and later showed their true colours as Iga, for example…

And third they had to see what had changed in the terrain and work ways around it. That was a scouting job, something that could be done on the move. And the fresher the information the less likely it was to stumble on a trapped and changed ground.

Still what was being said was simply along the lines of we have these allies.

They know what to do about the places in the West, the place up north and the place right about in the centre of the country. Oshu would just ride along and take it by storm, as usual. The actual plans and formations would only be given when the situation called for it, as a way of minimizing any possibility of treason.

"We ride out as soon as we're able." Date stated, grinning, finishing the meet, the soldiers shouting
in support and eagerness.
Chapter 82

Summer had barely started and already it was a scorching blaze. A bad thing to endure while crossing the country on horseback and in armour. But at the same time it was something that had been done several times by any army. The nights cooled a bit but it never seemed to be enough.

Saki sighed, opening a fan and trying to cool down, turning the report's pages. Fuma still looked very much unaffected despite the heavier garments, kneeling nearby like a guard. But it seemed everything was going smoothly. Sasuke was not behaving but neither was she for that matter. The allies were doing what they had been told and the efforts Sanada was making were small but focused. He was bolstering defences and conserving his energy. All in all a smart move that showed growth. Date would be happy to know his adversary had progressed in strength.

There was a difference from before while crossing the land. A difference that had little to do with the fact that they were using the roads. The lands they were journeying belonged to the One-Eyed Dragon and they had been the first to fall into his grasp. They had chosen to ride along the coastline, the main army avoiding going anywhere near Kai. Unlike Oda and Toyotomi, Date had taken care of them as soon as all the conflict was settled, just before moving on, leaving them to heal and flourish as conquest continued to the west. In a way he had isolated them from war after blasting through their armies and lords.

That meant that as they travelled there was little danger of being attacked by enemies or even bandits, that they saw people who greeted the army in a friendly way, traveling people, people belonging to nearby villages, that they saw planted fields, houses, life. That also meant that the roads had resting houses available and camping would be something postponed until they reached Saica territory and then started the last approach to Osaka.

"You should rest now." Date approached, closing the shoji, his voice interrupting her reading, kissing her forehead, taking a place behind her. Fuma disappeared discreetly. "Tomorrow is another early start."

"You will be doing the same." She smiled slightly, placing the paperwork aside, leaning against him for a moment before groaning. It was too hot for that. "Everyone is surprised though."

"They thought I would go, riding recklessly and without any plan?" Date answered to that, amused.

"Yes." The shinobi admitted. "What do you think of your lands?" Date just showed a little prideful smile. It said it all didn't it... "Also... I... this had been happening for a while now but... can you talk to the men and convince them I do not need to be given sneaked extra rations?"

"Have you tried talking to Kojuro?" Date advised, amused. That explained why his bowl always looked a bit fuller nowadays. What she was given she slipped to him. Still Kojuro had a tighter grip on the men when it came to some aspects of the army.

"My Dragon... he is the ringleader in this." Date glanced at her with a puzzled expression. Saki looked less than amused. "No one in this army would be stupid enough to pick his vegetables without permission. And before we left both the garden and the pickle stash were looking a bit ransacked." She paused. As if someone that had been for so long in Oshu would not recognize his prized leeks. "Stop smiling."
Chapter 83

The arrival at the Saica-controlled part of the territory cleared away some prying eyes that had been following and documenting the relatively quiet journey. It was not too worrying, seeing most of the preparations for war were being undertaken by those allied to Date. Spying on the army that came from Oshu alone would not provide enough intelligence for a properly assembled defence.

Aware that Sasuke knew that Saki had refrained from being given too many factual updates on the current army condition while moving and had sent as little word as possible. The misdirection in place should be enough. If it had not been now was the time to correct any mistake.

While the army broke into small groups that went to rest, greet friends or celebrate whatever Saki gathered with her people. Magoichi joined in with a couple of her men. The terrain around Osaka had been mapped. New camps stood in the way. New defences had been created. Cannons had been brought in and/or repurposed. There were units of men ready to simply block the path of cavalry. There was Sanada's own cavalry stationed for sweeping attacks. The summer weather would prevent Shimazu from using too much waterworks but the old man was still a good combatant without his trickery. Locations were missing but those were understandable as the general's position would be a very well-guarded secret. Saki would be betting that Date's presence was bait enough for him to come out and wreak havoc with Sasuke's plans.

They had their cannons and guns as well. They had Motochika's mobile ships, armed to the figurehead with all kinds of clockwork inventions. They had Saica with traps and guns. Date's army was made from cavalry so the manoeuvres of the enemy could be easily predicted and outdone. They had shinobi and all that entailed. They had soldiers on foot. They had a surplus of food supplies thanks to the Maedas and Kingo. They had moral boost in the form of Tsuruhime, who was currently mooning and peeking through the opened shoji at Fuma who was doing his job unrelentingly and dodging her affection.

After the recently arrived army was rested they would be ready to go.

Word had been sent and the territories around had compacted their defence on the frontiers. The sea was kept under guard by boats. No help would come from Kai, distracted by Uesugi.

All that could be done was in place. All what was left was the execution.
Chapter 84

It started with the Date army descending through the pass, aiming at the first garrison in the usual sweeping way. Sasuke was immediately engaged by the shinobi Kasuga led. Her role in the battle was to simply follow and fight Sasuke, impeding most, if not all, his attempts to carry out orders. That scrambled the first line of defence as much as the fire that rained from above as Motochika's long range mortars fulfilled their first and foremost order: *destroy the gates*.

The path to Osaka had been, predictably, refortified and reworked but that was not the reason why they were not sneaking and aiming at a rear sneak attack or going directly for the fortress that had witnessed Mitsunari's defeat. The field was a series of gate-garrisons, intercalated with wide-open areas whose side-forts supplied backup to the patrolling cavalry.

Sanada Yukimura had behaved according to the expectations and tried to be in the frontlines. While he had been prevented from actually being there, placed within the last garrison and asked to control the battle like an actual general in a situation that did not demand a direct clash.

Saki observed the field for a while. Nothing seemed different from last night's reports. The mortars had already taken down the first gate meaning Date was already within the first field. Sasuke had retreated, chased by Kasuga. The Saica had divided their force, each setting their aims in the backup forts. Keiji was defending the taken areas, controlling the path that Motochika's Akatsukimaru were taking. The tank managed to increase both the firepower and the distance covered. They were also aiming at the harder gates that led to the main fortress.

The kunoichi sighed as Sanada started to return fire. She winced a bit when she moved, taking a deep breath. Fuma glanced at her sternly. She shook her head, stopping him from any questions or action. It was time for her group to enter the field and lend support.
The field was steeped in confusion, screams, smoke and death. At least, with the Takeda forces on horse moving about, there were no ground traps to impair the mounted warrior of the opposition. Saki moved easily through the confusion, cutting down foot-soldiers with her claws, using shadows to pull horsemen down and small bombs of smoke and noise to stir the horses into a panic that would further muddle the battle. Fuma and three others were spread out deep within the enemies’ lines, mimicking her actions for maximum advantage.

The battle seemed to be going their way. Not exactly easily but still it was favouring their preparations.

The kunoichi glanced around, searching for the One-Eyed Dragon amidst the commotion. It was almost time to move on to the next phase, to press on the main garrison and face the Tiger Cub.

Sanada's main cannon echoed, the ripple of the falling ammunition and explosion hitting the other side of the field in fire and death. That thing needed to be taken out. At the same time the Akatsukimaru were chipping away at the gates and there seemed to be already some returned fire from the side camps.

Her claws moved quickly, taking down a swordsman, sidestepping the weapon fast, whistling in a pattern as he fell, calling for a report. Not even a few seconds had passed before Shiro was back-to-back with her. Answering the trained cue Saki created a shadow jutsu, a ring around them whose shadows could become solid spikes, controlling them calmly as she listened to the Mask. It was a passive, mainly defensive battle skill but every trick had its purpose and the Shinobi should use all to succeed.

The Saica had secured the camps, preventing reinforcements and rest. They had set portable mortars and formed lines of gunmen. Part of the ranged forces Tsuruhime stayed with the mercenary leader.

The Maedas led by Toshiie and Matsu had locked the rear two ways with the forces offered by Uesugi. No one came into the field and no enemy was allowed out.

It all kept the battle forcibly in the centre. By their own design a retreat was also locked away as Sanada had created that field to keep the people of that land out of the conflict. Osaka in itself was being used as a bastion to defend those who could not fight and to keep it that way hinged on not allowing an enemy through that pass.

Kingo kept the camp secure. It was best if the nervous man was kept away from the actual combat, placed in a calm and Date-controlled land, feeding and tending to the wounded.

Keiji had moved through the field, leaving the Saica after they were set and lending help wherever. In a stroke of luck he had found and locked Shimazu in a duel. The more experienced old man would be too busy as the wanderer of the Maeda was not actually lazy when it came to a good fight for reason he believed in. Or to impress Magoichi. Saki could not decide on that one.

Kasuga was doing a good job, spanning the game throughout the battlefield, spreading Sasuke thin and keeping him from interfering or giving too many orders. His men were well trained but in the end all the other clans were already under Nobuko and that meant allegiance to Date. So they were fighting a myriad of techniques without a way to tell who belonged to where and what speciality did they bring to the field.
Takeshi had been sent inside to sabotage the cannons.

Motochika defended his toys and the gate, barking orders to his men mixed in the main fray.

Saki took a deep breath, nodding, dismissing the man, pulling the shadows back and moving towards Date, to give him and Katakura-dono her assessment. If all went well the gate would fall in less than ten minutes. They had to be ready to storm in immediately while the troops inside scrambled.

An explosion within the garrison rattled. The cannons had exploded and fire was spreading in the areas that had housed them.

Well… that would split their attention as well.

"Boss!" Saki called, shadowing, swaying as she reappeared on his horse's back, touching his shoulder, leaning to whisper. He glanced at her, turning the horse, easing its stride without breaking the battle momentum, turning the animal in a tight circle, defending, listening. "Call the core. Get ready to move in." She told him before scanning the crowd for Katakura-dono.

Date's black horse reared on its hind legs when she was barely a whisper of shadow, leaving him for his Right Eye, the One-Eyed Dragon's claws, three of them, lifted to the sky as he laughed.

"«Are you ready guys!»" Date Masamune shouted, his voice echoing through the field.
Smoke and fire rose and dragged with them distraction, panic and a way into the fortress. Sanada was still not being allowed out to play. Kasuga informed the Sasuke had been able to break away and return to the fortress, keeping the path protected. Still with distractions everywhere it was rather easy for the horses to storm through, for the force to break apart and engage those soldiers who were not too worried about the smouldering state of their walls.

Date pressed on. Kojuro was staying close. The hastily sketched field maps had shown them where to go and that was the goal that should be pursued with a single minded purpose. Faltering at that point would be rather harmful to their goal. It could mean that from a battle that should be resolved in a few hours they would have in hands a lengthened campaign with too many unknowable factors.

"Close every gate on their path." Saki asked her men. "Hold back support and stragglers." With that the force accompanying Date also thinned but what the One-Eyed Dragon sought was a one-on-one combat so it was not altogether too worrying.

The horses were halted suddenly when they came to a mostly empty plateau.

Sasuke stood there with a pair of his shadow clones. There were no soldiers, no reinforcements, no shinobi.

Saki glanced at Fuma, standing behind her. Her claws gestured quickly, causing him to vanish and the wooden gates behind them to close. The rappa then took his second position, waiting for Saki's command.

"Well... Sanada-danna went and gave orders so I'm here." Sasuke said in a flippant tone, ready. Date and Katakura-dono dismounted. Saki stepped in too. That left two shadows and one real to distribute amidst them. "You'll find him through the next gate if you can get through me."

"Boss go after the ones that don't cast a shadow." Saki asked, lowering, claws fanning out.

"Move in as soon as the gate is opened." Katakura-dono continued the advice, his blade freed.

"So this time I don't have to tell you to stay out of it." Date grinned, his own katana ready for the fray.

"For a time." Katakura-dono answered.

"How long we stay out of anything depends on your own ability." Saki mentioned, pinpointing the real Sasuke.
Chapter 87

Visually it was three against three.

In actuality it was the trio versus one with the ability to produce multiple, albeit weaker, copies of himself, each prepared for a different kind of conflict. Depending on the final seal Sasuke placed on the jutsu so would the shadow double act.

They were easy to tell apart by someone trained in the same arts.

They were easy to rip apart by anyone sufficiently trained in combat.

Saki guided the pair to strike at the ones that would be beneficial, releasing a binding jutsu before attacking a doppelganger, testing it through a quick spar, gauging how Sasuke had evolved over the years. Overall they were still challenging. But not as much as they had once been. Date had some knowledge on how to deal with them if he cared to remember the challenge Takeda had issued so many years back. Tenko mask…

Katakura-dono clashed blades with the real one, proving his skill, giving chase every time he tried to break away to aid the one shadow that was currently being mauled and steamrolled by Date. The way the Right Eye fought was to make sure there was no way a sneak attack could be performed.

With three blades out and an unflinching walk the One-Eyed Dragon was managing to keep the clone he was fighting unbalanced, breaking his defence attempts. It vanished into wisps after a few slashing blows, leaving the terrain clear.

The kunoichi shadowed as she saw the chance to advance fast, her claws plunging into the solid darkness that her adversary was made off, ripping it apart with wide slashes, signalling Fuma.

With a creak the inner gate started to open.

If they timed it right Date should be able to cross without further interruption.

That meant dodging the shruiken Sasuke had just thrown and shadow-stepping to the location where he would pop up after disengaging from Katakura-dono, stopping the blade with opened claws, kicking into his stomach to push the shinobi back.

Katakura-dono came immediately after, striking with his usual diagonal slash, forcing Sasuke to pay attention to the two attackers instead of the one that was breaking away from the fray to pursue the true goal of that skirmish.

Fuma closed the gates behind Date, appearing next to Saki, joining in.

In a few short blows they all came to a standstill, stepping back when the gate's lock fell into place. Sasuke grimaced, still ready. Katakura-dono regained his battle-stance. Saki glanced at Fuma who had taken his daggers out of their sheaths. She opened her claws and glared.
Chapter 88

There was really no need to fight in that section of the battlefield any longer so they had simply relented after a few tense moments, listening to the echoes of a waning battle, resigned to wait for a bit, allowing their respective leaders their moment of combat.

Saki sighed and sat down, groaning tiredly, looking pale and sweaty.

Fuma lowered himself next to her, staring through his mask. She waved a hand, uncaring.

"Not yet." The kunoichi whispered low, glancing around, arching her back a bit, huffing.

"So now what?" Sasuke asked, his arms raised behind his head, stretching nonchalantly.

"We let them fight." Katakura-dono answered with a put upon sigh, sheathing the katana, staring ahead.

"We've done our part for now." Saki whispered, leaning against the wooden wall, grimacing. Fuma still stared. "Yes. It's wearing out." She stood slowly, supported by the rappa that had been tasked to care for her. "Katakura-dono. I'll be taking my leave now." She bowed slightly. "Take care of him."

"The baby?" Katakura-dono almost shouted, startled, noticing. "Are you going into labour?" Urgency overcame the shyness and discomfort men usually felt when discussing those things.

Saki chuckled.

Sasuke was looking rather shocked as well, staring, arms falling limply to his sides, mouth agape.

"You are pregnant?" Sasuke asked, shaken before starting to look around, frantic.

"I've been in labour for the last four hours." She confessed. That was why she hadn't done much. It hurt but it was still bearable and the contractions were too far apart. As it was her first child it would take a lot longer for the baby to pop out. And the same breeding that had made kunoichi not show external signs of pregnancy also meant that its toll was taken on the other stage.

"We need to inform Masamune-sama…" Kojuro began to rush towards the gate.

Without a warning he was pushed back by a quick slash of Saki's claws. She groaned and curled a bit, left arm resting over her stomach. Whatever she had used to mask the pain was indeed gone. And still she had fought and was ready to continue, even if he was her adversary.

"I will not allow anyone to interrupt." She breathed slowly, standing straighter. Kojuro hesitated.

"I know my mother gave birth to me in the field but there is no need for you to stay in this battle now. It's almost decided anyway." Nobuko appeared, approaching. Saki relaxed slightly. Really. There was no need for such panicked stares.
Chapter 89

There were no obstacles in the way. Just an open path to reach the last adversary. Knowing Sanada it was probably quite intentional. Ever straightforward. The One-Eyed Dragon paused for a moment, looking back. The fort had been built for that view. The battle had calmed, having found a point of balance between aggression and defence.

"Yo." Date greeted his rival nonchalantly, stopping at the edge of the wooden plateau surrounded by Takeda banners, right hand touching nonchalantly the swords.

"At last." Sanada Yukimura straightened, taking a deep breath. He looked somewhat strained, having been told not to participate in the fray below, having to curb his instincts and inclinations to favour a cleaner, more thought-out plan. Unshackling from the responsibility of commanding from afar seemed to have renewed his spirits.

"Well..." It had been a long time since the last battle and one year of campaigning, keeping the rivalry just at the edge of though. "What did you find when looking for the old ways..." the ruler of Oshu and the one whose ambition was so close to fulfilment mused. He chuckled, a mild amusement cracking the serious disposition. "I get it just by looking at you." Whatever he had sought during that time he seemed to have found.

"Go back to yourself." Sanada answered, sharing the end of his journey, spears moving just a bit, also serious, measuring. "And you? In this war what did you..." Worthy rival. Saw the past, respected what they shared in battle and glimpsed the change, understood that the shift had its weight.

"That is something I can't afford to tell you." Date stated, charging, a sweeping slash of three claws pushing Yukimura back immediately.

"Then I shall understand when our blades cross." Sanada moved, spears ready, one tilted forward, held low, the other straight and held outwards, balanced as the younger general stormed forward with a full blown war cry.

Grinning wildly Date Masamune pulled out the claws, advancing to meet the strike.
Chapter 90

The clash of metal was a harsh sound echoing throughout the fort, carried by the winds.

The pressure between the grinding steel, kept in place by stubbornness, doubling into to a battle of wills soon followed by a surge of lightning and fire.

The strength used to keep the weapons locked refused to be broken, the small measured adjustments that keep themselves from being moved from their spots, spilled over in raw energy twisted with the elements disturbing the very air.

That strain was proof of power and growth.

It all made the blood boil, the challenge come alive.

That was what they had been anticipating.

That was what the years had been building up.

Date was the one that shifted his weight first, forcing the chance by throwing away caution, loosening the grip on the blades held by his left hand, changing it so the adversary's stance was chipped, weakened. It was a way out of the locked impasse, a gamble.

No warrior would take long to catch on and fix their defence even if the unbalance proved grave.

But it was up to the instigator of that breach to take full advantage of the situation.

Be it the battlefield or a duel the reasoning stood.

The One-Eyed Dragon slashed forward, seizing the opportunity without hesitation, aiming to breach the defence, the left blades striking first, pushing the spear to the side, forcing Yukimura to backtrack, smirking smugly as his trick worked, the adversary raising his weapon at an awkward angle to fend off the punishing strike that followed, emerging from the steadily held right blades.

Hard-pressed Yukimura swept his spears, gritting his teeth, trying to gain some manoeuvring ground.

Date defended the blow but there was little he could do besides blocking and disengaging.

Jumping away they eyed each other carefully, readjusting. The One-Eyed Dragon opened his arms, blades spread before hunching down, lowering her stance, making himself a smaller, harder target, barely twitching when he attacked once more, going for the kill.

Recovering momentum Sanada unleashed a flurry of jabs, a roar growing as he stormed. Even if he had been unable to read the sign of the incoming attack, even if his adversary no longer showed his intentions carelessly or casually.

Dodging the spears with ease as they whistled, fast and from almost every direction of Sanada's range, Date answered with semicircular motions of the blades in alternate, keeping low, reflecting what came closer and keeping his footwork light while Sanada seemed plastered into place, holding his spot like a fortress, only adjusting his torso and weapons. If a spear strike came too low it would take longer for his adversary to recover and the advantage would be on Date's side to land a blow or even finish the fight. All it took was a miscalculation for the longer weapons to be lodged
into the fortress floor.

The blows were, however, not getting either of them closer to the actual target.

Like a sparring match where there were no victors, only gained experience and wild relish.

Parrying brought them to another deadlock, a suspended moment of crossed blades, and straining arms, pushing harder, trying to break through without ceding room.
Chapter 91

Strikes fell and followed. The field was taken, used and prowled. The intensity was undiminished despite the time that threatened to wear them down. Blades crossed and repelled. The One-Eyed Dragon ducked, avoiding a sweeping spear before stepping away, sheathing the six claws and jumping, pulling a single blade for a strike from above, both hands on the handle for a greater focus.

"And this is «the END»!" He shouted, grinning.

"I will not allow it!" Sanada answered, spears adjusting, firmly planted on the ground, trying to be as unmoving as a fortress.

The clash was hard and sudden. And their grips faltered, weapons torn from their hands. The katana sank into the wood, landing on its blade. The spears skidded away, spinning, each following its own path. Both adversaries stopped and stared, breathing hard, finally allowing the exertion to show.

"So it is a draw." Date said, his grin lessening but not exactly surprised. "Huh." He chuckled at that conclusion, turning to the younger warrior. But in the end he had what he had sought. For now. "Sanada Yukimura our duel will wait until the next occasion." Sanada looked confused, relaxing a fraction, stepping back. "After you and Kai pledge their loyalty." The one Eyed-Dragon set the conditions easily. Not that there was much choice. His army and his alliances had subdued what Sanada Yukimura had prepared. Resisting or fighting from that point on was an empty struggle with little true reward.

"Masamune-dono..." Yukimura called as Date picked his katana, wielding it indolently before sheathing the blade, grinning.

"See ya." Date Masamune said, waving one arm leisurely, walking away, leaving the younger warlord slightly befuddled. Kojuro was waiting by the opened gate, falling into his step, following easily, his face thoughtful.

"Masamune-sama... I am not dreaming." The Right Eye of the Dragon referenced, not looking back. "But why have you..." It still was an unlikely decision.

"You don't get it, do you Kojuro?" Date asked with a widening grin. "With this new era starting why should I take away any chance of having fun?"

"I see." Sanada Yukimura had an honour code. A way of driving himself that would not be a threat to Masamune-sama's rule. "Indeed." As soon as the oath was sworn all would be truly under the Dragon's rule.

"That's what that was about." The One-Eyed Dragon continued, crossing the gates, signalling the gathered men to sound the call of victory, to allow the lingering fights to stop and all of them to go care for themselves. "Something to look forward while remembering the past." Date said softly, looking around, checking the progress. "Where is Saki?" Odd of her to be missing especially. Kojuro stopped, looking doggedly around. Almost like fidgeting.

"She left the battlefield with her mother and some of the shinobi." Kojuro started, carefully. "The baby..."

"«What!»" Date shouted, startled.
Hours of struggle culminated in a sharp cry of life, the child making its presence known loudly and boisterously. Tired beyond what she believed possible Saki smiled observing as the ones that knew what to do did what needed to be done. Travelling while in labour had been onerous. The birth itself had been as hard as expected. But there it was, a baby, tiny, wrinkly and demanding attention.

Chuckling at the child’s constant struggle one of the kunoichi that had assisted the birth gave the moving bundle to Saki. Nobuko smiled as well, dismissing them, patting her daughter’s head as she stared at the baby. The hair was still braided, kept out of the way, damp.

"Disappointed because it's a boy?" Nobuko asked softly, keeping her voice low.

"Yes." Saki whispered too, cradling him softly as she fed him. "It's going to make leaving complicated." A boy was a boy. In that society that little baby in her arms would always be the first born, even if he was a bastard, unless his father said otherwise. Stubborn as her Dragon was...

"Why not stay?" Nobuko argued once more.

"It is not what is best." Saki answered without changing the reasons. "I protected him for years. If I become anything more than that I will be used as a reason as to why he cannot rule."

"And they would be foolish to think that just because you stepped out of your shadows you will be any less." Nobuko said calmly. "If you leave you'll have to give up the baby."

"I know. But he will be fine. My Dragon can have his dream without any unnecessary obstacles." Saki smiled. Nobuko shrugged. She was seeing an obstacle. But what she and Katakura-dono had once plotted might come in handy at that time if they allowed the One-Eyed Dragon into the scheme.
Chapter 93

The army disbanded as they returned to Oshu, no longer needed, the warlords that had led the allied factions leaving to tend to the lands that still belonged to them and to wait for further orders. Asks and loyalty pledges were being sent from the ones that had stayed out of the war or just kept their heads down and protected their people. Some came from the defeated.

The army Sanada had built would swear fealty as one and then as individuals in a month time. They had worked out the agreement in the camp after the fight had ended and the wounded were being tended to and the dead were being honoured.

After the long campaign home was what appealed to them.

Date glanced at Oshu's army, slowing making their way through the land. Saki had sent word from Oshu, telling of his son, mentioning that he still had no name but was. She had also mentioned her contract again. Which told him the answer was still no even after the child was born. He had hoped the little one was a stronger ally. Maybe they just needed to wear her down a bit more.

Saki came awake when a footstep made the floor creak, sitting up, gripping the tanto, placing herself between the intruder and the basket where her baby slept, ready to kill. More than a few servants had already been startled by that behaviour.

Date merely laughed. Of course he waited until she lowered the blade and took off the aggressive mask to approach. The kunoichi embraced him, her lips finding his in a kiss. He smelled like camp, smoke, fire, ash, sweat but at that moment it didn't really mater. The One-Eyed Dragon was home and was safe. Even if her reports had said that several times she worried about rebellion, upstarts, assassins in the name of fallen lords… Chapped lips responded to her with passion, with longing before drawing away. He was content to just embrace her.

"I'm home." Date whispered against her ear, cradling his love against him. In a way he had kept his promise. He ruled Japan by the time his son had been born.

"Go take a bath before you meet your dragonling." Saki told him in a choked voice, her arms still locked around him, fingers clenching the edge of the armour, making it very difficult to leave and do just that.
Date Kazuya. The One-Eyed Dragon cradled the little one whose name had just been chosen, smiling widely, happily. Saki was observing the scene carefully, her breathing very slow. Like she was waiting for a disaster to happen at any moment. Granted he had never handled a baby but it was not likely to be careless with his own son. Still she pressed her lips together firmly, holding her breath every time either of them moved.

"I have received word of the campaigns' result. So..." She bowed low, smiling. "I heard the guys are throwing a big party. Should you not be there?"

"I'll swing by. Eventually." He placed the baby down carefully, still staring. Kazuya had been changed and fed before he arrived and handed to him asleep once again. In any event it was too early to see the colour of his eyes. Tuffs of black hair peppered his head and little hands clenched in his sleep. "The warlords and minor lords have been summoned for a gathering in one month's time. It will be the time to swear alliances and make treaties."

"So we will need to search for those who are trying to gain advantage without having ever supported you and those who would try to backstab you." Saki nodded, sitting straighter. "It would be best if you briefed my replacement as well as our contract will come to an end after that."

"You won't relent? Even after..." He glanced at their child.

"I cannot. What you have accomplished... I will not be used against you." Saki answered. "Please. Bear me no ill will my Dragon." The kunoichi pleaded, lowering her eyes, hiding her own hurt for his sake. "I will be gone by the end of that meeting. Our child will stay here, yours to raise. You'll always have my clan's support..."

Date stood, grimly, leaving without a word.

Saki sighed, closing her eyes, gritting teeth.

Telling herself it was truly for the best made all that hurt no less.

"Kojuro." Date called, slumping down next to his second in command, reaching for the booze, looking around briefly, the merriment managing to drag a small satisfied smile before his demeanour turned grim again. Think of that as another campaign, another fortress to claim. Walls to crumble, motives to manipulate, a prisoner that had to be captured for the most advantageous result. "I need to capture Saki."

"Masamune-sama." Kojuro acknowledged the request. "Allow me to present our current and most steadfast ally in this endeavour." Nobuko approached, slipping out of the shadows easily, joining them with a quick nod. "And ask you who else do you want to draft into this campaign."

Of course the bastard had seen that coming the One-Eyed dragon thought, grinning.
Chapter 95

Saki breathed a sigh of relief as the baby settled on the covers that created a cradle between her crossed legs without waking up once more. She picked the papers and reread the information that was pouring, separating information calmly and methodically. Amidst flowery words vipers could be hiding and it was till part of her job to catch them before they even though of attacking.

They had been preparing.

The warlords had arrived to Oshu's heart.

The official gathering would take place in a week. Small meetings and deals were being run an arranged throughout the days so all was settled when the time came.

"The party from Kai had arrived." Katakura-dono walked out of the room to the engawa. He sat down next to the kunoichi, glancing at the Kazuya. Loud and rambunctious and already pampered by all. Himself included. There were already plans to start teaching him the sword, riding and he would attempt to interest the little boy in the relaxing art of gardening at least as an attempt to gentle his nature before it became too wild. "And the Tiger of Kai is already having a drinking match with the War God."

"And Sanada?" Saki asked, looking up, amused by the gossipy nature of that talk.

"Masamune-sama dragged him around to do much the same." Kojuro admitted.

It was a relieve to finally have a truce. Her Dragon had been belligerent but Katakura-sama seemed to have convinced him of the necessity to accept that their time was over, their relationship had to end as the country belonged to him and the second contract had to be renegotiated and her services officially dismissed.

Kazuya was with her mother. And that would be the last she would see of the child and Date.

Steeling her will Saki entered the audience chamber fully equipped, glancing around, looking for traps automatically, out of habit. She settled down and took a deep breath, waiting.

The One-Eyed Dragon was fitted into formal armour as he had been solidifying his hold over the Land of the Rising Sun throughout the day.

"One of the contracts has already been settled." Date said, taking his place. Saki nodded. Until he ruled. That first contract that had all her main duties listed annulled itself as soon as the clauses were met. "What remains is more personal."

"I ask you to free me so no harm will befall you due to our affair." Reason she repeated time and again and they still failed to convince him. He had all he had fought for. It was a small thing to let go of.

"You once told me you were mine. For as long as I desired." Date answered firmly.

Saki’s lips parted, startled, her breath hitching. She stared at the tatami, frozen. A talk about scars and strength. The teasing of a kiss that had only been satisfied after her words, pledging herself, her life to his. Wounded in Kai after a gruelling defeat... *I am an idiot who forgot her own words.* The shinobi thought wishing she could drop that bow all the way and hit her forehead on the flooring.
"That did not change." She admitted after a moment where only silence filled the room. The tethers had been her doing. She had not though he would... they would... "But what you ask..."

"I ask for your life." Date said.

Saki glanced at her claws before straightening.

"If that will settle our contract My Dragon." The shinobi whispered formally, claws moving upwards, towards her jugular. If it was the only way out so he could rule unchallenged unimpeded... her eyes closed. "I love you. And I give my life so your reign may be long and blessed." She announced, claws clenching, ready to plunge.

A vicious snarl echoed as her wrist were gripped and wrenched outwards, body falling back under Date's as he pinned her down. Her eyes shot open to see his angry scowl.

"Why is it that every time I secure a goddamn significant victory one of the people I care and trust tries to commit seppuku because they think is fucking best for me?" Date Masamune growled. "Did you think I would ever demand your death? And to give it because you love me?" he scoffed, his grip gentling. "Why is it so hard for you to see yourself by my side, married to me, as my wife?"

"Because I want to be there! I want to marry you. I would call myself your wife with pride." Saki shouted back, breaking. "But you need someone else. Someone that makes this country see you as more than someone who warred his way to power. You conquered this land. No one will forget that. You will need to be more than a warlord in their eyes and I... am... I am a weapon. A tool for war." The shinobi looked away, growing silent. Oda and Hideyoshi had left that land scarred and wary of warriors.

Date chuckled. It soon bloomed into a laugh.

"You are cornered." Masamune told her, standing. "Admit it."

"Fine." Saki whispered grouchily, sitting, looking away, blushing. "Do what you will."

"Admit it." He teased, embracing her, calming. For a moment there, a sickening moment of dread when he had seen the sharp metal so near her neck... It had not been unexpected and he had been on guard for it but still...

Kojuro had set the moment, lead her to believe he had fulfilled his half-hearted promise to help the shinobi break away from him when the times no longer demander her services. Has advised him to be alone and to look as formal as possible for the first moments, lure her into a state of calm before striking.

Push until she can't push back. Break that shell of duty. Remind her that the way you and your army do things is very different from the norm. Think, find a moment, any moment, where her words have give you any leverage, any additional power over her. Anything. A slip, careless words during an unguarded moment can be used. And, most importantly, stop her if she tries to null the contract with her life. We have been trained to think that it is the only choice left. But it's not this time, is it One-Eyed Dragon? Nobuko had said.

Saki glared, sighing.

"You outplayed me. I bow to the will of the One-Eyed Dragon as the caught prey that I am." She snarked acridly before smiling, leaning against him. Date nudged affectionately, guiding her away from the formal meeting room, towards the inner garden, towards his room. All that was left was
make it official and make it very clear that his swords awaited any naysayer.
Chapter 96

The dawn of the last summit day greeted the Date Clan as the absolute ruler of the Land of the Rising Sun. Ceremony and celebration outside under the clear Summer sky. Banners and colours were still displayed by the provinces that had once warred against each other and now united under the One-Eyed Dragon.

It was a sight that once had been very hard to envision.

Years of war would give way to rebuilding, growing, allowing the army to put their arms down and become something other, something more.

What, was for them to decide.

Those who had no desire to refrain from the path of battle, as the Saica were being used as security forces, to walk through the country defending those who needed and putting down those who would try to take advantage of those that had been caught in the middle of the multiple conflicts. Magoichi was talking to the Maedas. Keiji sat next to her, drinking and flirting. Yet the arm he was leaning against was also at Magoichi's back. Yumekichi danced on the table.

The clans of Shinobi had also shown some inclination towards aiding in those efforts. Sasuke and Kasuga had expressed some interest in helping out, merging operations and informants. And of course finding those who disagreed and tried to have the new ruler assassinated. Saki had tossed out a would be assassin from their room, cursing as the man had not only interrupted a very wonderful moment when her Dragon played with her skin and his lightning, he had also woken up the baby.

The last generation of warriors had taken upon themselves to drain Oshu's booze. Tiger of Kai, Shimazu the Beast, Echigo's War God sat companionably, exchanging cups and stories. Motochika had joined in and drank in a similar rhythm, adding to the tales his plans for machines and relaying stories of his piracy. For most warlords life would much like before. Ruling their lands in someone else's name was in essence no different than ruling alone. Things still needed to be done for their people. Defend, provide, protect...

The next generation seemed eager to be involved in creating the Great Japan that Date Masamune had been setting the foundations to through the multiple agreements, meetings and talks. In a way it had been set in motion when they had left Oshu last winter, burning with a desire to take revenge before pursuing a true goal. And it had been crafter throughout the years ever since the One-Eyed Dragon had claimed his clan back.

The pirate's voice and plans for a fleet of patrolling miniaturized fugaku could be heard in every table, loud or faintly depending on where one sat.

Kobayaka Hideaki talked to anyone who wanted to hear about crops. It helped that Kojuro seemed interested. Imagine, his idol listening to him... and answering, respecting and sharing knowledge. The shy and skittish lord could burst into tears of joy at any given moment.

Sanada, after having spend a good part of the prior day congratulating Saki and Date had found an ear in Sarutobi Takeshi, asking for perspective. Nobuko, in the full regalia of the Celestial Mistress was listening to the conversation, amused, steering the topic, mining information from the younger Tiger, gauging where would he serve best.
Mogami skulked about, fitting with the crowd of minor lords. He was toothless but still bragging. Nothing he did would be enough to tarnish that time.

Tsuruhime had done her duty as an oracle, her arrow aimed at the sun telling her of trials to overcome but a future that could be achieved, full of promise and growth. If she had seen darker things she did not speak of them at that moment. If there were such grave portents the young priestess would tell them later. For now she chased merrily after her twilight ninja who, still bound to provide Saki's protection, could not evade her too far or too often.

Saki sighed, wearing a formal kimono, dressed for the part of the wife. The wedding had been the day before almost as if he feared she would try to wriggle away once more. She smiled softly, turning her head to watch him. Still proud and handsome away from weapons and armour, smiling as he watched the guests, delegations and friends.

"I love you." Date Masamune, the One-Eyed Dragon said quietly, looking at the kunoichi, waiting until she squirmed, blushing softly, unaccustomed to the words, to their full meaning under the light, under the sky, under the gods. There was no answer she needed to give but that little look that darted away. His shy Shadow.

Still looking at her he extended his left hand.

Saki took it, fingers closing, clasping with his, palm to palm, warm and sure.

Both were calloused from battle, marked by their crafts that while different had delivered death swiftly, surely. Now their hands should guide a child, a country, to grow and prosper in peace. It was a daunting project. But as they had gone into battle so would they brave peace.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!