

New Beginnings

From across the ballroom I could see him watching me. I had never met him before but I had seen his picture numerous times in the past. Continuing the dance took me away from his immediate sight but I was sure for some reason that he would seek me out again. The man definitely did not look happy to be seeing me. I sighed, which my current dance partner, Grand General Hoshimuri, mistook as a sign of boredom.

Gravely he said, "I am afraid that boring events and boring people are no place for the young."

I have always liked Hoshimuri. He was a nice, grandfatherly-type gentleman of impeccable manners and taste. I did not want him to have the impression that I was bored dancing with him. Smiling brightly I told him, "It is not the fine company, Hoshimurisan. With father stepping down as emperor, everything in my life is going to change. One hopes the changes will be for the better but one cannot help but be concerned and perhaps a bit apprehensive about how events may or may not pan out."

"That is true Clarissima," he agreed, using the endearment a number of the Edotomans used for me. "But everything is always changing. Most only notice it when a large change occurs but small changes happen all the time. You might consider taking advantage of this time of change to reflect on all of the smaller changes that have occurred both with yourself, and with the world around you." The dance came to an end and we stopped and clapped politely.

As we walked off the dance floor, I leaned next to him and whispered in his ear, "You are a treasure Uncle Hoshimurisan." He wasn't an actual uncle but he was closer to me than most of those who were. Closer than the uncle who once again studied me from across the rather large room.

Delighted with my pronouncement, Hoshimurisan patted my hand and took his leave. I tried to decide if I wanted to confront the man who watched me or put off our meeting until later. Was he trying to spook me? With a reputation such as his he could frighten most anyone in existence. But why would he want to frighten me? I had only recently graduated from finishing school. Perhaps this was another test like the ones that had been posed to us in school so very often. If so, I was determined not to fail.

Moving around the large, cathedral-like ballroom, I chatted pleasantly with various guests. I found a maid servant and checked with her to make sure the choker I wore was on straight and that my hair was in order. That done, I pulled out the lacy gloves that matched so well with my dress and pulled them on. And I then very openly and deliberately began studying him. I couldn't help but feel the slightest bit pleased with myself that my movements towards the man were reminiscent of a hunter stalking her prey. For the man's part he did not seem impressed. He merely watched my approach dispassionately. It took the better part of an hour as I was temporarily distracted by our many guests, but with a final promise to come visit the Tarino ambassador's family, I arrived within the man's presence.

Not a lot of people have a palpable presence to them. Uncle Lloyd does. Of course Daddy, the king, and Uncle Marcus do as well. Aunt Winter and Aunt Flosia are a bit different but they have a distinct aura to them as well. I suppose it is an air of confidence, of authority.... of power. This man's aura set me on edge which in some ways felt like

coming to life again. It was rather reminiscent of how all my senses become keener and sharper when I was about to assassinate someone who needed it... and there was a high level of danger in doing so. Perhaps this was the way I responded to mortal danger. Or fright. I wasn't really sure. I wasn't sure if I have every truly been frightened. I supposed if I was to be frightened, Victor of Regillus would probably be a good choice of someone to be frightened of.

"You must be Uncle Victor," I said by way of greeting.

He stood silent, looking down at me for a long moment, before nodding.

"I've noticed you looking at me most of the evening. Any particular reason?" There is a fine line between being direct and being confrontational. Right now I was being direct.

"You have in your possession a tanto. It is rumored to be one of the greatest blades ever forged by the hand of man. I was curious if this was true." His face never changed. His statement might have been true but it certainly wasn't the reason he'd been staring at me all evening. Granted, I was in fact wearing the tanto in question at my hip. And it was indeed one of the greatest blades ever forged by the hand of man. But Victor was here for another reason. This was just the warmup. Still, I would play the game. And play it well. Governor Ominato had given the blade to me just a couple of years ago for my sixteenth birthday and he was in attendance today. The blade had been forged by a master craftsman who had folded the metal perfectly hundreds of times. The haft was one piece and had been carved from a spirit dragon tooth. It rested in a sheath made of a single, beautiful piece of hand-sculpted rose jade which faded to cream in spots and bloomed to crimson in others. I wished to show Governor Ominato that I honored him and his great gift so I was wearing it to do just that.

I pulled the blade, still sheathed, from my belt. I couldn't help but run my fingers appreciatively over the haft and beautifully carved sheath. With a quick, sharp tug I bared two inches of steel without completely unsheathing the blade. Bowing gracefully, I held out the tanto to him with both arms extended, looking him in the eyes the whole time. Only when I'd held it there for several seconds did he break eye contact and turn his attention to the blade. Immediately, his eyes lit up.

Not saying anything, he took the tanto from my hands and began examining it. From all angles he looked at the tanto. His eyes showed his appreciation for the blade's quality even if his face remained passive. After several minutes, he gave a little bow and returned the tanto to me as I had given it. I thought I saw a bit of regret in his eyes when I took it from him.

"You are rumored to be the greatest warrior and general of all time," I told him. "If the rumors are even partway true, then you must have come across a great many quality blades. Tell me, Uncle, how does my tanto compare to them?"

"Most favorably," he answered after yet another brief pause. I had the feeling he was carefully weighing everything he said to me before he said it. "It is probably the highest quality knife I have ever seen that was not inherently magical. Magical folk use other means of forging their blades. This tanto rightly deserves its reputation."

I bowed at the compliment to my gift. "I will be sure to tell Governor Ominato, through who's generosity I acquired the treasure. He will be honored at such praise from a renowned warrior such as yourself." Victor said nothing. Flattery was not the key to him. Just as well with the level of destructive talent he was supposed to embody.

"Would you do me a great favor, Uncle Victor?" He looked at me warily for a

moment before agreeing to listen to my request. Not trapped so easily into giving his word. Also a good trait for someone with his talents.

"Please tell me why you've been staring at me all evening."

"Very well. A couple of months ago I received a call from Marcus. He suggested that if I wanted to speak one last time with my old friend, Emesaku, I had better do so quickly. When I arrived at his finishing school, he was plainly dying. We spoke of old times together. He told me that a new order would grow out of the dying of himself and all the other masters of the school. Up until that moment, I hadn't realized that the other masters were dead or dying. They had been murdered. I began to get angry.

"But he took my hand in both of his weakened ones and told me not to be upset. A new order was needed. He then told me about you." My blood ran a bit cold for a moment but I kept a court face on betraying nothing of this and waited for him to continue. "He was... proud... of you. Emesaku considered your training to be one of the greatest accomplishments of his life. And then he died. Later, I watched you and the others burn his body from the woods. The ceremony was nicely done. Had you not paid him proper respect, I probably would have killed you then and there."

"And now here we are, you and I," I said quietly into the ensuing silence. "What are your plans now?"

"Instead of answering, now, I would ask you a question," he replied.

"You were gracious enough to answer my question," I responded with a smile that didn't quite reach my eyes. "It seems only fair that I answer your question."

"Why did you kill them?"

I didn't have to think long upon this answer. This was a question I'd asked myself many, many times already. "They refused to change the policy on the final graduation challenge. The policy wasted more than three out of every four lives. All that training and talent thrown away like so much garbage. It was inefficient. The new system loses only perhaps one in twenty and creates graduates just as skilled."

"You killed them because they weren't efficient enough?" he asked with a flat voice.

"No," I said as remembered anger and frustration fought to creep into my voice and I struggled to keep my tone clear and level. "I killed them because they had become inflexible. I killed them because they had wrapped common sense around an impenetrable knot of honor and tradition. They would not change and I needed them to change."

"You needed them to change because of your boyfriend," he replied. I almost slapped him but that would be going too far and would cause immediate and public reaction. The change of subject - even though it was to a more sensitive one - seemed to clear away the anger my memories had brought back. I could understand now why he was angry. Instead, I smiled again and this time the smile actually reached my eyes.

"No. I wanted them to change. My boyfriend was one of the reasons why. I needed them to change for other reasons."

He did not really seem surprised. Perhaps his court face was on as well. Or maybe he already knew what I needed so many trained graduates for. I didn't really know or care at the moment.

"Emesaku was one of my friends. He was one of my first students. I was rather surprised when he took his training the direction he took it. It was one of the few surprises I have enjoyed in my life. I hold the value of my friend's lives very dear." It seemed to me that this was the real Victor. And that this was without a doubt the true reason he had come

to Daddy's ball. The real reason he had come to meet me. The whole situation made me feel sad.

"Master Emesaku was very dear to me as well," I replied softly. "Most of the masters were. They had become a second family to me. It has been driven into me since I was a little girl that duty comes above all else. Master Emesaku could no longer perform his duty as was required. I could not live with the thought of him being forced to retire and losing the honor his position held - a position that he held more dear than life itself. So I killed him. He was your friend but he was my friend too." I dabbed at my eye with a knuckle. I noticed I was still wearing the lace gloves. I gave a little sigh.

"Do you plan to kill me?" I asked plainly into the silence.

"No," he answered after a moment. "I do not think so. At least not over this. Perhaps later you will do something to offend me that will cause me to hunt you down with the promise of your death... but not today."

"Then we understand each other?" I asked.

"No. We most certainly do not. But perhaps we have the beginning of an understanding," he said with a faint smile playing across his lips.

"Good," I said, giving him a genuine smile. I took out a specially coated handkerchief and began wiping off the tanto. I quickly replaced it at my hip. "It pleases me to hear that. It gives us an opportunity at a fresh start." I then took off my lace gloves and returned them to the small compartment in my purse from which they'd come. "In that same spirit I'd like *you* to understand something. Over at the buffet there is a wonderful cherry salad in a large silver tureen. If you don't eat some of that salad during your stay here in Edotoma, you and Master Emesaku are going to have an untimely reunion. Enjoy the party Uncle Victor."

I enjoyed the memory of his laughter the rest of the day. And I was pleased to see he him eating a healthy portion of the salad as he later spoke with Daddy.