

**OF HONOR
AND LOVE**

S. J. Frost

Japan 1867...

Jonathon Addison wanted a night of companionship, to be in the arms of a man – any man – and no longer feel lonely. But he picked the wrong man, and events led him to make a twisted deal to save his own life. Now he's in the mysterious and distant nation of Japan, where the death of another means freedom for himself.

Kazuhiro Takezaki is a lord and samurai living in a country strained and ready for rebellion. He agrees to meet with Jonathon Addison, a representative of a foreign arms dealer, in an act of keeping his enemy close. Only, Jonathon isn't anything like he expected, and Kazuhiro can't stop himself from being drawn toward the man's exotic beauty.

As Jonathon and Kazuhiro's passion takes hold, danger looms close, much of it in the secret Jonathon keeps.

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Issued 2012

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I want to give a special thank you to Megan Derr. Your gift of inspiration is what allowed for this story to be written.

I also want to thank the M/M Romance Group at Goodreads for hosting the Love is Always Write event, and bringing authors and readers together. It was a pleasure to write this story for the group.

The Pacific Ocean, not far from the coast of Japan, June 1867

Dark waves crashed against the ship, sending whitecaps splashing up the sides, as if to batter it down to the depths. As far as Jonathon could see, the world looked gray and angry, the steel-colored sky meeting with the turbulent waters into the distant horizon.

Storms had plagued the journey from nearly the first day out of port in San Francisco. He'd hoped it wasn't an omen of what lie ahead for him at his destination. Now he was certain the weather foretold what awaited him in the mysterious, and from all accounts he'd heard, savage, land he was nearing.

Japan.

The country had lived in isolation for countless years before its doors were forcefully opened by Commodore Perry some fifteen years prior. From his recent education on the country, Jonathon learned the actions of the Commodore created a division within the nation. There were those who supported the Shogun, the military ruler of Japan, who had acquiesced to Perry's will to open Japanese ports to outside trade. On the other side, there were those staunchly opposed to the new influx of foreigners and sought to see the door to the outside world closed once again. Rumors of rebellion were rampant. It seemed some of the *daimyo*, the great lords who governed territories, wanted to reinstitute imperial rule and place the Emperor back in the seat of power.

Jonathon closed his eyes, pressing his fingertips to his forehead as if to keep the throbbing in his head from increasing. So much chaos. The country was on the verge of a civil war, and he was sailing directly into it. He had no other options, however. Not if he wanted to live.

A grim smile curved his lips. Or maybe he should say if he wanted to live a little longer. He was fairly certain this "mission" would result in death, but at least he would have some control over it, perhaps even the opportunity to defend himself and fight to preserve his life. Slim chances

were better than none. Had he turned down Benedict Barrett and remained in the prison, *none* was all he would have until he was given a noose around his neck.

Jonathon reached up to his right ear, toying with the gold hoop earring there, the match of which he wore in his left. It was comforting to feel the smooth gold between his fingers. He hadn't gotten to wear the earrings much over the years, but with going back to sea, he put them in again. During his earlier sailing days, they were his good luck charms. Granted, they hadn't brought much good luck to the pirate who he'd removed them from, but that was seven years ago and he'd managed to get out of more than one tight spot since then. Hopefully, there was just enough luck on the worn pieces of gold to get him through this time.

"'ey there, pretty! Mr. Barrett is wanting to speak with you. He's in his cabin."

Jonathon glanced in the direction the rough voice came, spying the first mate. He nodded to the man and turned from the rail. "Thank you."

As Jonathon neared the sailors, they gave friendly nods and greetings. He'd earned their respect when as they set sail he worked along with them and proved his competency as a seaman. But then, it was out to sea that he'd grown into a man, and even in the years since he'd left sailing to make a life for himself in America, his body still remembered its way around a ship.

If only he'd never left. He'd thought he would go to land to find wealth and live happily. None of those things came true. Had he stayed sailing the Atlantic, he may have been spared from so many hardships and heartaches. Certainly these most recent ones.

Jonathon entered a narrow hall. Reaching Barrett's cabin, he combed his windswept hair with his fingers and knocked on the door.

A gruff bellow replied, "Come in!"

Jonathon stepped inside to find Benedict Barrett at a table, leafing through some papers. A lantern swung with the roll of the ship, causing Barrett's balding head to alternately

shine, then be dropped into shadow.

Barrett leaned back in his chair, resting his hands on his paunch stomach. "Mr. Addison. Have a seat."

Jonathon made his way to a bolted down chair. "Thank you, sir." As he sat, he focused on Barrett with an expectant look, hoping to prompt the man to move onto business, which was likely to happen even without the look. In his time of knowing Barrett, if there was one thing he'd found true with the man it was when it came to business, Barrett was sharp... and ruthless. The man may have pulled him from prison, but he felt no gratitude toward him, and Barrett's actions were only meant to help one person - Barrett himself.

Barrett regarded Jonathon with a scrutinizing gaze. "You look well. You've taken care of yourself."

"You requested as much of me, since my appearance is paramount to the success of this endeavor."

"Indeed it is. Mr. Jenkins says you've done exceptionally well in your lessons on Japanese culture and language. He says you still struggle with the written language, however."

Jonathon nodded. "Yes, I still confuse many of the characters, but I feel confident in my ability to communicate."

After he'd accepted Barrett's proposition, Barrett had actually left him in prison until the day to set sail came, ensuring he wouldn't flee. Each day, the mousey Mr. Jenkins, a self-proclaimed expert on Japan, came to the prison to instruct him on the country and her people. He'd thought it was a form of torture at first, but gradually found his curiosity and interest piqued. Since he'd known so little of the nation, it was as though he were discovering a new and fabled land.

Of all the things Mr. Jenkins taught him, what captured his interest most were stories of the samurai; warriors reputed for their masterful fighting abilities, who lived by a sense of honor, duty, and loyalty. They rode through his imagination as romantic figures, fighting ferociously with swords and spears, having no fear of man or beast, or even death itself.

It was silly of him, he knew. Regardless of his fanciful notions of the samurai, there was much truth about them he

found appealing, from their Bushido code to their history of loving other men.

As Mr. Jenkins informed him, blushing the entire time, the samurai had their own romantic notions when it came to *bi-do*, the beautiful way, where it was accepted for a man to share intimacy with another man. The men weren't scorned and persecuted. They didn't have to fear for their lives for doing nothing more than following urges that were in his opinion, as natural as breathing. He knew for himself, he had about as much control over his attraction to men as he had over each breath he took. He could breathe quickly, slowly, even stop it for a while. But eventually, he had no choice but to breathe again.

Mr. Jenkins continued his education on all things Japanese through the voyage, and now he felt very well versed in the culture. He could even speak the language. He certainly wouldn't consider himself fluent, but he felt he was proficient enough. He just hoped to be able to interpret enough to know if a knife should be coming at his back.

"We should be seeing the shores any day now," Barrett continued. "As you know, the closest port to Kyoto that's open to outside ships is Hyogo Port. On a good horse, riding hard and fast, you can reach Kyoto in a day. I was told Lord Kazuhiro Takezaki is sending men to meet you. Make sure you don't let them take the lazy way on the journey. Time is of the essence in getting Takezaki taken care of."

Jonathon heard the loathing in Barrett's voice at having to say Kazuhiro Takezaki's name, and he knew why. Mr. Jenkins had relayed to him the lord was a supporter and close friend to Takamori Saigo of the Satsuma Domain, and Takamori's was one of the strongest voices against outsiders and calling for rebellion.

Jonathon caught his thoughts before they progressed. Damn. He needed to stop thinking so...Western. Surname before given, that's how things were done in Japan. He'd been thinking in the fashion he'd always known. An internal sigh passed through him. Maybe he wasn't as prepared for this as he thought.

He directed his thoughts back to Lord Takezaki. No matter how he thought of Lord Takezaki, there was one thing certain about him; he was a thorn in Barrett's side because he'd managed to not only block some arms deals Barrett had in the works, but the lord's men had also sent a load of weapons to the bottom of a harbor.

Barrett had one interest in Japan - money. To Barrett and all the world, Japan was an untapped well now that her doors had been opened. He and others hungry to see their pockets grow fat hoped to rush in and swipe up exotic trinkets that they could sell for an ungodly sum to the wealthy and privileged, who would then sit at their dinner parties and flaunt their hard won Asian treasure. Jonathon was sure Barrett and other traders also meant to do the same to the Japanese people, and most likely intended to rob from them even more since he knew for a fact Barrett viewed the entire culture as ignorant and uncivilized.

Jonathon nodded to seem as though he were paying attention. God how he hoped this conversation would end soon. Whenever he spoke with the loathsome man, it was a contest to see if he could keep the bile down long enough to make it through a conversation. He'd always won before, but this was his hardest trial yet.

"Certainly his *lordship* wouldn't deign to meet you personally," Barrett went on. "If he could've done us that favor, this deed could be done much quicker." He let out a derisive snort. "He's an arrogant bastard, as you'll soon find out."

Jonathon fought to keep his tongue still as he'd never met a man so pompous as the one before him. Pompousness in most men was nothing more than an annoying trait. In Barrett, it was deadly, as it filled him a sense of entitlement to things he had no right to, like Japan.

"So we'll send you ashore in a small boat under the cover of night to try and avoid any patrolling boats. There are so many damn rules and regulations against us coming into their godless land, and we don't have time to wait for clearance. You'll meet the samurai party and they'll escort you to Kyoto. You know what to do from there." Barrett reclined in his chair.

A smile that only added ugliness to his features curved his lips. "Do it right, and you're a free man."

Jonathon didn't share in Barrett's grin. "If I survive."

"Yes, but you were aware of that caveat when you accepted this venture."

"And should I survive, all I need to do is find my way to Hyogo Port and you'll bring me back to America."

"Exactly."

Then he was as good as dead. Even if he completed his task, how would he find his way to a port in a strange country where many were hostile to foreigners?

He reminded himself, there was still a chance, and with a chance, there was hope.

"If you could clarify something that's been on my mind," Jonathon said. "If he's such an enemy of yours, why has he agreed to meet with me, your representative, to discuss purchasing guns from you?"

"Because for all his *honor*, he's like any man, willing to sell his values for the sake of a victory, and ignorant though he may be, he knows if it comes down to battle, guns will win over swords."

Jonathon glanced away from Barrett, needing a moment without looking at the man's smug face. Disappointment filled him. Barrett's words wounded his idealized image of what a samurai should be, especially one who was a noble lord. But then, just as there were men in all classes in all parts of the world who didn't hold up to the ideals set for them, he supposed there were many samurai who were the same way.

"But it doesn't matter," Barrett continued. "The man's a pest. Even if he's interested in buying guns now, he'll come back around to bite me like any rabid dog. I'd rather be done with him. I've got other connections on both sides where losing him won't affect my profits."

Jonathon paused. "Wait. You're not selling arms to both the Shogun and those who are in opposition to him?"

"That's the plan."

“That’s all but encouraging a war to break out.”

“Whether I encourage it or not, it’s going to happen. It’s just a matter of time.”

Jonathon shook his head slightly. “But, isn’t there one side you believe in more?”

Barrett barked out a laugh. “What the hell do I care if they kill each other? This isn’t personal. It’s business. It’s not even our own people.”

Jonathon fell silent. It was long past time for this conversation to end. “Is that all? May I go now?”

“No.” Barrett stood, swaying for a moment with the ship, then moved to a large, worn chest. He rummaged inside and came out with a small, black velvet pouch. Returning to Jonathon, he held it out to him.

Jonathon stared up at him, then slowly took it from him. Loosening the silk strings, he withdrew a dark green vial. Through the opaque glass, he could see it contained white powder.

A condescending smile rose to Barrett’s lips. “Your color has suddenly paled. I thought arsenic would be fitting for one of your delicate kind. But perhaps I was wrong, considering you had no qualms driving a knife between my nephew’s ribs.”

Jonathon snapped his head up, locking a dark glare on Barrett. “Your nephew got less than he deserved. The knife should have been in his heart.”

Barrett burst out laughing. “There’s the devil I found in that prison, debauched and deadly all hidden beneath a pretty face. If the poison isn’t to your liking, then while you’re under the savage, imagine he’s my nephew and find your mark this time.”

Jonathon clenched the vial, the fingers of his other hand curling in a fist. “I ask again, are you finished?”

The humor dropped from Barrett, disgust replacing it. “Yes, save for a reminder. While you’re with Takezaki, remember your purpose. Don’t lose yourself in your perverse ways.”

Jonathon pushed to his feet without waiting for another word. He marched toward the door, tearing it open and slamming it closed behind him. He stormed the few steps to his cabin and darted inside. He sagged back on the door, his anger at Barrett still raging, but fear for his future draining his strength.

He lifted the hand holding the vial. Slowly, he uncurled his fingers and gazed at it. Strange how he felt its contents determined his own life and death just as much as whom it was intended for.

§ § §

Jonathon clung to the edge of the small boat, fighting to keep his gaze focused ahead rather than down at the water, black with reflecting the moonless sky. The depths were so dark, it was as if the boat floated on a sheer veil that at any moment could break and plunge him into a bottomless void.

Not that looking ahead to the shadowed shore was much more reassuring.

Jonathon closed his eyes, wondering just how it was that his life had brought him to this moment. He knew the direct action, and though it had been yet another attempt to protect his life, most didn't believe that. Or more likely, no one cared. To society, whether he practiced generosity and kindness toward all who crossed his path, or he was a wastrel preying on innocents, he was morally doomed. And those sentiments were excluding his near killing of Edgar Barrett.

Jonathon looked ahead as the two sailors leaped from the boat and began pulling it up to the beach. Collecting his satchel, he hopped out as well. The dark water swirled around his legs, as if trying to drag him back with each step he took. It seeped through his boots, chilling his legs from the knees down. He broke from the water and trudged ashore, stopping when past the waterline, and gazed into the darkness.

How were his escorts supposed to find him? To avoid being seen by patrolling boats, the ship had moved up the coast from the main port.

Rustling snapped Jonathon from his thoughts. He spun,

his head moving in quick, short motions, his eyes darting as he searched the darkness. A horse snorted nearby... and another from behind him. Jonathon whirled around, still seeing nothing other than large boulders and the forest's edge nearby.

His heart pounded, but he willed himself to be calm. If the samurai were watching him, he needed to appear brave. They wouldn't respect him if they saw fear in him.

He straightened his posture and lifted his chin, calling out, "Is someone there?"

Only the rhythmic lapping of the waves against the shore answered him. He glanced back to the boat, seeing the sailors fidgeting and shifting with unease. He flicked a hand toward them. "You may return to the ship."

One of them visibly startled. "But, sir, you'll have no way back."

Jonathon smiled, though he knew the sailors couldn't see it in the dark. "There's no way back for me regardless. Go, and be safe."

Both men nodded and began pushing to boat back out to sea, jumping in and rowing with more vigor than before.

Jonathon hoisted up his satchel. As his watchers didn't seem eager to make contact and he was in no mood to wait all night, he decided he would start in the direction of the village and port. Maybe he would meet his escorts...

A shadow emerged from between two massive boulders, a man on foot leading a horse. Another shadow manifested behind him, two more started out of the forest. Before Jonathon had time to realize what was happening, he was surrounded by four men, five horses. All feelings of fear fled, replaced by wonder as he gazed upon the samurai.

They were magnificent. They weren't large men, the tallest about his own modest height, but the air around them vibrated with a sense of control and strength. He never imagined it would be possible for any kind of warrior, in any culture, to appear elegant, and yet that's exactly how the samurai looked. They were all clean shaven, their hair

perfectly coiffed in topknots. Of the four, only one had his crown shaven and he appeared to be the oldest. It wasn't that the others hadn't yet reached manhood. More that as Mr. Jenkins had informed him, the samurai wore their hair in various different styles of topknots, and in recent years, not as many shaved their crowns as older tradition dictated.

Each was dressed in a *kimono* and the flowing *hakama* for their trousers. On each *haori*, the long coat over their kimono, Jonathon caught sight of what Mr. Jenkins told him to watch out for in identifying his escorts; the symbol of Lord Takezaki, two cranes, their wings outstretched, touching wingtip to wingtip in forming a circle.

For as immaculate as their clothing was, what captured Jonathon's attention most were the two swords each samurai wore on his left hip, pushed through the *obi*, the sash around their waist. Mr. Jenkins had explained at length to him about the swords and how they were the most treasured possession of any true samurai.

Jonathon knew he should have some fear of these fierce warriors, and yet he couldn't bring himself to be anything but fascinated. He wanted to speak to them, to learn all there was about them and their culture.

And yet, from how they were looking upon him, they didn't seem to share his sense of interest.

Jonathon realized he needed to make the first move. As Mr. Jenkins informed him, he should show absolute respect toward them. He focused on the oldest, seeming in the middle to latter half of his fourth decade.

Jonathon bowed low to him, speaking in Japanese, "I'm Jonathon Addison. It's an honor to be in your presence. I am here to meet your master, Lord Takezaki Kazuhiro."

Silence replied.

Jonathon stayed bowing. Was his pronunciation that bad? Were they unable to understand him? Had he used a wrong word and just insulted them? Why weren't they bowing back? Mr. Jenkins told him to bow was a sign of respect, and he was bowing very deeply...

Jonathon swallowed hard as the realization came to him. They weren't bowing to him because they didn't respect him. They weren't speaking because they found his very presence offensive. In meeting him, they were merely following the orders of their lord. Doing their duty as any true samurai would. They had nothing personally invested in him. If they wanted, they could kill him and tell their lord he'd never even arrived.

He slowly straightened. If he was to have a sword meet his neck, he'd rather see it coming.

The older samurai stared at him for a long moment. With a barely noticeable flick of his head, he motioned toward Jonathon. The samurai holding two horses stepped forward and stopped one of the horses before Jonathon.

Jonathon took it as a sign he was to mount. It looked as though his head would remain on his neck...for now. He bowed to the samurai who'd brought him the horse and expressed his thanks. No reply came.

Quickly securing his satchel to the saddle, Jonathon mounted and turned the little bay mare to follow as the samurai took to their horses and started toward the forest. It appeared they meant to travel for at least part of the night. He wondered if the entire journey would be like this, the samurai ignoring him. He hoped not, but he also didn't want to push conversation on them for fear of offending them.

A sigh passed through him. If this was how Lord Takezaki was also, getting close enough to him to carry out his deed was going to prove incredibly difficult. At least he'd already decided doing it wouldn't be as hard as he thought. Not after hearing from Barrett how the lord was willing to forego his beliefs for victory. It seemed his romantic notions that the samurai lived for honor were just that, nothing more than fantasy.

§ § §

A heavy sigh escaped Jonathon. An entire night and day of being ignored. They'd ridden only a couple hours during the night before setting camp, then were up with the sun and back in the saddle, not a word spoken to him the entire time.

The most interaction he got from any was assistance with his horse and being handed food and drink.

Of the food, it was simple for travel, *onigiri* - rice balls - and dried fish. Early that morning when they'd neared a small village, he smelled fresh food cooking, and he salivated like a hound, but the samurai seemed unaffected. Even more, they seemed to want to avoid contact with others and would nudge their horses into a purposeful trot to get by any populated area more quickly.

He didn't understand why, but then, as he was discovering, he didn't understand much of anything. For all his lessons with Mr. Jenkins, he felt like he knew nothing of the men or their culture. Of course, other than doing his best to express gratitude for food and assistance, he hadn't tried to interact much with the samurai either. He watched them. He studied them. But his fear of laying an accidental insult kept him silent.

Jonathon glanced to the side. The forest they traveled through was dense. Not far beyond the road - if the ragged path they traveled could be called such a thing - all was covered in shadow. Around them and above them, where the trees were thinned, the late afternoon sunlight streamed down, turning the leaves to a luminescent emerald. He saw flashes of bright colored wings and heard the unfamiliar songs of birds, but they were no less beautiful than the melodies of those he'd always known. He breathed the humid air in deep, closing his eyes in a long blink as he savored warm scent of moist earth and foliage.

One thing he already had to admit, Japan was beautiful. It was mountainous, with thick, verdant forests and well-tended farmland. From what others had said, excluding Mr. Jenkins, the people here were crude, uneducated. He knew he hadn't interacted with anyone other than his escorts, but the people he saw walking on the road, working in the fields, and in the villages didn't uphold those allegations. They seemed like... people. Just people. Going about their business, trying to live their lives.

It didn't seem so different from many of the rural areas in the United States he'd seen when he traveled from Boston to

New York and finally across the entire nation to San Francisco, and just like in the States, he had a feeling life in the cities here would be different. It made him all the more anxious to reach Kyoto, and it surprised him that was even possible with how much he was anticipating meeting Lord Takezaki Kazuhiro.

Jonathon sighed as he looked forward. He'd thought this was going to be easy. Or, as easy as killing any man ever was. With the sympathy he was already feeling toward the country and her people, he feared meeting Lord Takezaki and what that would do to his resolve. He could only hope the man would prove insufferable and make him want to season Takezaki's food with the arsenic. He would find out soon. For how long they'd been traveling, he wouldn't be surprised if were close to Kyoto.

He stared at Nakano's back ahead of him. The older samurai had yet to formally introduce himself, but he'd caught his name from the others speaking to him. His first impression that Nakano was the leader proved true, as he controlled their pace, when they rested, when they ate, and the others obeyed without question.

Jonathon glanced back. Directly behind him was Kita, the youngest of the group and who he imagined couldn't be beyond twenty years. He met Kita's gaze, and the young samurai gave him a small, but friendly smile. Of all of them, Kita seemed to be the most accepting of his presence. He was the one who brought him food, helped him with his horse and anything else he needed. He sensed Kita was interested in speaking with him, but wouldn't because it might incite disapproval from the others.

Bringing up the rear of their little band were Tanaka and Kawada, who spoke mostly to each other besides teasing Kita. So the samurai *did* talk. Just not to him. It didn't stop him from eavesdropping on their conversations, though, and while he learned he wasn't as proficient in Japanese as he'd thought, he was able to understand well enough.

It seemed Kawada was newly married, something Tanaka took great pleasure in teasing him about as it seemed Kawada had unwillingly given up his bachelorhood but pressure

from his father forced him to. Lord Takezaki's warhorse had kicked a groom and broke the man's leg, which then led to a discussion of Kita, who had recently been caught in a compromising position with one of Lord Takezaki's grooms, and that delighted Tanaka even more than Kawada's forced marriage.

Even if their banter and casual conversation didn't include him, it was comforting to see them acting like any group of men he'd been around.

As they rounded a curve in the road, Jonathon saw Nakano jerk his horse to a short stop. A downed tree blocked the way. All conversation silenced. Nakano sat alert in the saddle, scanning the forest. Jonathon looked to the others, as alert as Nakano. His heart started pounding quicker without warning. A sense of danger fell over him.

Nakano whirled his horse around toward them. He shouted to turn back.

A breeze whooshed by Jonathon's head, and he belatedly realized it was an arrow. More arrows rained through the trees. Shouts shattered the silence. Jonathon spun his horse. A band of five samurai charged up the road behind them. Two more sprang out from the forest's cover to his left, another two on the opposite side of the road to the right.

Jonathon saw Kawada snap off the end of an arrow lodged in his shoulder while turning his horse to meet their enemies. Tanaka galloped at his side. Two against five, and one of them injured. There was no way they could win, and yet they rushed their attackers without hesitation. Nakano shouted for Kita to take the two men on the left, as he intercepted the two on the right.

Everything was happening in the span of his rapid heartbeats. As the warriors clashed, Jonathon became all too aware he was weaponless. All he had was a Colt revolver in his satchel and that did him no good now.

Hearing a distressed shout, Jonathon snapped his head around. He saw Kita's short sword sheathed in the chest of one of his enemies, but the other grabbed the young samurai, ripping him from the saddle. Kita fell hard, but rolled to his

feet, drawing his long sword and striking the second attacker across the chest.

Behind Kita, one of the five samurai engaged with Tanaka and Kawada broke away. He galloped toward him, spear lowered. Kita twisted, the spear grazing his arm. The samurai swung his horse. Its hindquarters slammed into Kita, sending him crashing to the ground.

Jonathon put his heels to his horse. He may not have a weapon, but he couldn't do nothing.

The samurai raised his spear, the point aimed down at Kita.

Jonathon let out a loud, guttural shout as he charged Kita's attacker. It did what he hoped. The other samurai whipped around, his attention broken. Jonathon saw the man's shock an instant before his horse slammed into the samurai's. He caged the samurai in his arms, hurling himself out of the saddle and taking the other man off his horse with him.

Hands grabbed Jonathon, dragging him off the samurai. He started to fight, then realized it was Kita. He stumbled back, clearing the way for Kita to finish their enemy. But it wouldn't be enough. Nakano, Tanaka, and Kawada were all on the ground, back to back, and surrounded.

New voices rose over the cacophony of battle, shouting brave and clear.

Jonathon spun to the sight of another band of samurai racing up the road from the other side of the downed tree. The one leading the charge wore black and gold armor, a fierce black mask and horned helmet. His black stallion outpaced the other horses and leaped over the tree, as if the horse was just as eager for battle.

Their enemies charged the newcomers, but now found themselves outnumbered. Nakano, Tanaka, and Kawada all ran for him and Kita. Nakano grabbed him by the arm, dragging him into the forest and away from the battle, but not so far to not be able to help their allies if need be.

Jonathon's gaze remained locked on the lead samurai. He and his stallion were like a black fury, a whirlwind that

destroyed all who came near. The samurai struck with such grace and fluidity, and though Jonathon knew the actions were horrendous in their deadliness, he couldn't help but see beauty in the samurai's skill and strength.

It took only a few short minutes for the new group of ten to overpower the remaining enemies. Nakano led them forward, reaching the head samurai as he dismounted. He'd no sooner touched the ground than Nakano dropped to one knee, his head bowed. Kita, Tanaka, and Kawada all did the same.

Jonathon stared at them, shocked at their actions, especially Nakano's. This must be a man of great importance to warrant such respect. He wondered if he should mimic their actions even though he didn't know who this man was, then heard Nakano say, "Lord Takezaki, there are no words to express our gratitude for you coming to us in our time of need."

Jonathon's eyes widened. This man, this warrior, was Lord Takezaki Kazuhiro. He dropped to one knee, his head lowered. He hadn't quite been sure what to expect of the lord, but this certainly wasn't it. Like many wealthy and aristocratic types, he'd thought Lord Takezaki wouldn't directly engage in combat, but rather send his men to do it for him.

Jonathon chanced a glance up at him. Kazuhiro removed his mask and helmet. Jonathon's breath stopped, yet his heart beat harder, faster.

He was young. So much younger than Jonathon expected. He couldn't be more than thirty. Gazing at Kazuhiro's delicate features, Jonathon felt a pleasant tightness in his chest over their beauty. A few strands of ebony hair had fallen loose of the binding, clinging to Kazuhiro's cheek, which was damp with sweat. Though Kazuhiro's gaze was on Nakano, Jonathon stared at his eyes, drinking in their black depths. He was sure moments before they held ferocity, but now as Kazuhiro looked upon Nakano they held only warmth.

Kazuhiro's gaze flicked from Nakano to Jonathon.

Jonathon stared back on him...then realized he was staring and quickly dropped his head.

Kazuhiro focused on Nakano again. "Stand, all of you. Words are not necessary, Nakano-san. I'm the one who's grateful we arrived in time. We caught a Tokugawa spy and were able to learn from him of the attack." He looked to Kawada. "But we didn't arrive soon enough. Kawada-san, how badly are you injured?"

Kawada bowed to Kazuhiro. "Not bad, my lord. I can ride."

Kazuhiro nodded his head once. "Is anyone else injured?" His gaze scanned all his men as they shook their heads. "Good. Then let's get the bodies off the road and covered in the forest. Do it quickly."

His final word was answered with bows and the men leaping to follow his orders.

Kazuhiro signaled for Nakano, Kita, Tanaka, and Kawada to stay. He looked at the foreigner. He'd seen his share of Westerners, but never had he seen one like the man before him now. The young man was slender, lithe, and not very tall. Thick, golden hair framed his face. Rings as golden as his hair adorned each ear. His eyes were as blue and clear as the sky above, and those eyes were now looking at him with bold and unabashed attraction.

Kazuhiro stepped toward him. "Mr. Addison, I presume."

Jonathon coughed in shock. Kazuhiro had just spoken English to him. He bowed deep to Kazuhiro again. "Yes, my lord. I'm Jonathon Addison. You may call me Jonathon if you like. I'm here on behalf of Mr. Benedict Barrett. I cannot tell what an honor and pleasure it is to meet you."

Kazuhiro granted him a small bow and spoke in Japanese again. "The pleasure is mine, Addison-san."

Jonathon slowly straightened after Kazuhiro, noticing how the lord didn't take his offer to address him by his given name and couldn't help but feel disappointment at that.

"Have my men treated you well?"

Jonathon glanced to his side at his escorts, silent with their attention on their lord. Though, Kita shifted slightly as he stood, his gaze darting to Jonathon and back to Kazuhiro as if he wanted to say something. Jonathon looked

to Kazuhiro again, also deciding to speak in Japanese. "Yes, Lord Takezaki. Your men have been most gracious and fought with great courage to protect me."

"I'm happy to hear that."

Kita took a quick step forward, blurting out, "He saved me." He dropped to a deep bow before Kazuhiro. "Forgive my rudeness, my lord, but I had to tell you. I was on the ground, about to be run through by the enemy's spear, and Addison-san charged him and pulled him from his horse. It was my duty to protect him, and I failed."

Kazuhiro looked to Jonathon. "Is this true?"

Jonathan glanced from Kazuhiro to Kita, and back to Kazuhiro again. "It's true that I aided him, but I certainly wouldn't say he failed in his duty. Once he gained his feet, he took over the fight again, and he fought well and brave."

Kazuhiro contemplated Jonathon for a long moment before turning back to Kita. "Rise, Kita-san. You haven't failed me. If the one you were meant to protect says you've done your duty well, then you have."

"Thank you, my lord." Kita straightened and turned to Jonathon, bowing to him as well. "Thank you, Addison-san."

Jonathon returned the bow. "No, thank *you*, Kita-san."

Another samurai rushed up to Kazuhiro, informing him all had been done. Kazuhiro scanned the area, nodded his approval, and ordered everyone to mount up.

The samurai all went to their horses. Kita led the little bay Jonathon had been riding to him.

Jonathan ran his hand down the mare's face. She lowered her head at his gentle touch, and he whispered words of thanks to her for being brave during the battle. Sensing eyes on him, he glanced over his shoulder and met Kazuhiro's gaze. A soft smile curved Kazuhiro's lips, then he turned and mounted his warhorse.

§ § §

Jonathan rode a few strides behind Kazuhiro, gazing at the samurai lord. They'd stopped twice to rest and water the

horses, but it seemed Kazuhiro was determined to reach Kyoto as fast as possible. Still clad in his armor, minus the helmet and mask, Kazuhiro was like a shadow darker than the night. Nakano had ridden at Kazuhiro's side since they departed, and though they spoke in muted tones, Jonathon caught enough of their conversation to know Nakano had told Kazuhiro all that'd happened from the time they met him at the beach.

He couldn't help but feel a sting of disappointment that since they'd left the battle, Kazuhiro hadn't said anything more to him, hadn't even glanced in his direction. He worked to convince himself the disappointed stemmed from needing Kazuhiro's attention if he were to carry out his mission, all the while knowing he was lying to himself.

Kita kept him company, however. The young samurai rode at his side and had officially introduced himself with his given name, Masanari. His defending Kita in battle and also speaking for him to Kazuhiro seemed to have earned Kita's respect. Now, Kita no longer cared if others disapproved of interacting with him, he was open in his curiosity, asking him many questions.

Jonathon was glad for Kita's company. It was nice having someone be friendly with him. As he'd found out, they were close in age, with Kita being nineteen and himself only four years older. He could see himself becoming friends with the young samurai, but he felt he was starting out a poor friend as his attention kept drifting to Kazuhiro.

As if sensing his thoughts, Kazuhiro glanced back to him. "Addison-san, ride beside me."

Jonathon's heart did a nervous stutter. He nudged his mare to catch up to Kazuhiro, seeing at the same time Nakano rein his horse back. It struck Jonathon that Kazuhiro must want to speak alone with him. Or as alone as they could get surrounded by thirteen other samurai.

As his mare fell into stride beside Kazuhiro's warhorse, Jonathon smiled at the lord. Kazuhiro gazed at him in silence, his only motion being that from his horse. Kazuhiro's gaze lowered, traveling slowly over Jonathon.

Jonathon was used to being appraised by men, but there was a greater intensity to Kazuhiro's gaze than he'd ever seen. And yet the gaze wasn't harsh. It wasn't critical. If Jonathon could name it as anything, it would be appreciative. As though Kazuhiro liked what he saw of him.

He hadn't prayed in years, but he was now that Kazuhiro found him attractive, and with those selfish prayers he confessed it had nothing to do with his cursed mission.

Kazuhiro lifted his gaze to meet Jonathon's. "Thank you for saving Kita-san."

Jonathon shook his head. "Thanks isn't necessary, Lord Takezaki. He and all your men saved me many times over when we were attacked. If anything, I owe thanks to you. You also saved my life."

A small, but warm smile rose to Kazuhiro's lips. He looked forward. "Please speak to me in English."

Jonathon startled inside at the request, but did as Kazuhiro requested with his next words. "I apologize. Is my Japanese so bad?"

Kazuhiro laughed, still speaking in Japanese himself. "Yes, it is."

Jonathon choked out a gasp, but then started laughing with Kazuhiro, knowing the jest wasn't meant to be hurtful, and also, because the smooth, rich sound of Kazuhiro's laugh was infectious. "My sincere apologies."

"You needn't apologize. I find it charming you trying to speak my language." Kazuhiro looked at him again.

Kazuhiro's smile, the humor in his eyes, all sent warmth washing through Jonathon, centering in his cock. He couldn't bring himself to break their gaze, and something told him, Kazuhiro didn't want to either. "From what I've heard of your English, it's excellent."

"I'm sure if you heard me speak more of it, you'd find it as bad as your Japanese."

Jonathon laughed again, Kazuhiro chuckling with him. Kazuhiro was nothing like what Barrett described, which shouldn't be much of a surprise to him. He should've assumed

the lord would be the exact opposite of what Barrett said he was. Kazuhiro's mannerisms were more relaxed than Nakano, who was the epitome of stoic. He'd seen Kazuhiro display that type of restraint and formality as well, but he liked this more personable - and incredibly charming - side of him.

Kazuhiro slowly broke their gaze and looked to the road. "You seem to understand Japanese well, and since I understand English, it might be best if we both spoke in the tongues we're most comfortable with to avoid any misunderstandings. If I believe I've misunderstood you or I'm confused, I'll tell you, but you must do the same for me. Do you agree?"

"I do and I think it's an excellent idea. Where did you learn English?"

"From a missionary. He wanted me to give my soul to his Christian God. I told him my soul belonged to my sword, and if he continued trying to steal it, I would be sending his God a gift very soon when my sword removed his head from his body."

Jonathon snorted in an attempt to not laugh, but he'd run into missionaries before and had also been on the receiving end of their religious fervor.

Kazuhiro glanced at him, catching Jonathon's mirth at his comment, and smiled at him. "Despite my refusal to give my soul, the missionary was still kind enough to help me learn English, and I've studied it since." He saw the humor in Jonathon's expression faded to confusion. "You don't understand why."

"No, I'm afraid I don't. Everything I've been told about you is that you despise Western culture."

"I don't despise your culture. I despise your culture trying to change mine. Also, it's best to know as much about one's enemy as possible."

Jonathon continued to gaze at him, Kazuhiro's words striking him strong. He realized why Kazuhiro had agreed to speak with him. Kazuhiro viewed Barrett as a threat, an enemy, and he was nothing more than a means to keep that enemy close. If only Kazuhiro knew just how deep Barrett's

deceit went. "You have no interest in buying guns from Mr. Barrett, do you?"

"No. My men are more than adequately armed, in both swords and firearms. Ones purchased from a far more reliable and reputable source. Not that my men want to use them, but they've been trained regardless as the Shogun's army uses them."

"You should know, if you plan to hold me prisoner, I'm nothing to Barrett."

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"Because most men refrain from sending someone they care for into a dangerous situation unless they know the other could take care of themselves or they were the only one they could trust. It could quite possibly be such with you, but don't believe so. What I believe is that Barrett cares for no one but himself. You're here because he hopes I'll be the savage he believes that I and all Japanese are, and that I'll kill you. He'll then have reason to incite the Shogun further against me, perhaps even call upon your own government to see me punished."

Jonathon stared at Kazuhiro in silence. What he said made perfect sense, and he felt all the more of a fool for not having seen it himself. He was nothing more than the lamb being led to slaughter. Not that he could ever be considered so innocent, but in this case, he was. Or if not innocent, then naïve. But his knowledge of the politics here was only cursory, so he never would've been able to guess a maneuver like this. Whereas Kazuhiro was in the heart of the political struggles, living them every day of his life.

Now he fully understood Barrett's plan. In Barrett's mind, however this turned out would be a win for him. It was a completely sound plan...from Barrett's perspective. Now he understood even more why the samurai had fought so hard to protect him. If he was killed, even not by Kazuhiro or his men, the result would be the same in Barrett claiming it was Kazuhiro.

So while Kazuhiro clearly wasn't going to follow through

on Barrett's murderous expectations, now he needed to decide *he* would do.

Kazuhiro's voice pulled him from his thoughts.

"You seem surprised."

"I am." Jonathon paused. "And I'm not. To be honest, I'm not sure what to make of any of it."

Kazuhiro nodded, but stayed quiet.

Jonathon looked toward him again. "Then since you have no intention of doing business with me, and it seems you don't want to kill me, what are your plans with me?"

Kazuhiro's gaze roamed over him in the intense and intimate way as before. As he met Jonathon's eyes, the same soft, warm smile came to his lips. "I haven't decided."

Jonathon's heart hammered heavy and quick. His cock fully filled with the hopes the flirtatiousness he thought he'd heard was true.

Kazuhiro turned forward, his expression and voice carrying a serious tone as he spoke again. "But you have my word that I will keep you safe."

Jonathon bowed his head, whispering, "Thank you, Lord Takezaki."

Kazuhiro had just spoken a word he'd longed to hear and experience for more years than he cared to remember; safe. He never would've expected to hear it in this place, a country thousands of miles from all he'd ever known, and yet the calm certainty that Kazuhiro said it made him believe it.

§ § §

Sleep slowly drifted from Jonathon. He stretched out and opened his eyes, finding himself on...the floor? Why was he sleeping on the floor? His sleep sluggish mind finally caught up with him. Because that's where his bed was, the warm futon beneath him. They'd arrived in Kyoto at daybreak, and he thought he'd never seen a city so beautiful.

He rolled onto his back, closing his eyes to see his memories clearer. They had stood on a hillside overlooking the city. Kyoto was surrounded by the forested mountains.

Rivers shimmering in the early morning sun wove around it. The dark tile roofs of the wood homes and buildings reflected the sun. Even from his far vantage, he'd seen a great temple built into the side of a mountain, held there with massive timbers, as it watched over the city and her people. A light mist blanketed the city, making it appear as though it were raised from a dream.

When they rode down into Kyoto, the scents of earth and forest gave way to wood smoke and cooking. The fragrant smells of tea and rice, the pungency of grilled fish, all made his stomach rumble. People scurried out of their way, many dropping all they were doing to bow in respect to the samurai, though Jonathon still caught the curious looks directed toward him.

When they reached the section of the city containing the homes of the daimyo, he was in awe. He'd seen many beautiful homes before, many large mansions, but even the most elegant seemed to pale next to the sweeping, graceful architecture of the lords' homes. Lord Takezaki's included.

A tall, wood wall enclosed the estate. Passing through the gates, they came into a courtyard, where to the right was a long, single-story timber building; the barracks, as Kita had informed him. The stables were to the left. In the center, was the main house. Like the barracks, it was one story, but taller, with a sharply peaked, black roof that made it the height of a two-story. It wasn't as utilitarian in appearance as the barracks, the whitewashed walls lined in dark timber beams. A veranda wrapped around the perimeter. Warm lantern light seeped through the rice paper windows.

Kazuhiro had left him in the care of his servants, who guided him inside, though not before he removed his boots in the entryway. Inside, the walls and floors were wood, all polished and clean. In fact, as he noticed walking through the home, there wasn't a hint of dust to be found or a single thing that looked misplaced.

After showing him to his room, a servant brought him to the bath, and as he stepped into the wooden room and saw the massive wood tub filled with steaming water, he nearly melted. The servant insisted he sit on a stool and wash himself

before getting into the tub, which he thought was odd at first, then realized it made perfect sense. After all, getting clean in your own dirty water wasn't truly getting cleaned.

After his bath, he was shown to his room again, where his futon was laid out with the expectation he'd want to sleep, and his breakfast awaited him. He devoured the fresh rice, the bowl of soup with bits of vegetables, seaweed, and tofu floating in it, the grilled fish, and guzzled the tea. Even his clumsiness with the chopsticks couldn't slow him. As if anticipating he'd want more, a servant returned just as he finished his meal with a tray holding second portions. After finishing that, he collapsed to the futon and slept a dreamless sleep, his first in many months.

Now that he was awake, his mind was filled with one and only one thing; Kazuhiro.

He sat up, looking toward the sliding door. Sunlight illuminated the rice paper. He pushed to his feet and went to the door, sliding it open. Beyond, the manicured garden shone in the afternoon sun. The heat and humidity of the day crept through the open door to invade his room. He closed the door again, and made his way to his satchel. As he pulled out his clothes, something fell out from one of his rolled up shirts and landed on the floor with a soft thump.

Jonathon stared down at the black velvet pouch. Revulsion tightened his throat. He didn't want to touch it even to pick it up, but he had to. He snatched it and stuffed it back in his bag, pushing it to the bottom. He closed his eyes tight. He couldn't think about that now. He would know when the time was right, and it wasn't now.

He dressed quickly, and after a stop at the privy, he began a search for Kazuhiro. He spied a young female servant carrying an armful of linens and called out in Japanese, "Excuse me, miss. Have you seen Lord Takezaki?"

The young girl startled, nearly dropping her bundle, and averted her gaze. She bowed to him and pointed toward the front of the mansion.

"Thank you." Jonathon gave her a smile, but she kept her gaze cast downward until he passed. Was he so fierce

looking to the people here that he could frighten a young girl? He certainly hadn't been back home. If anything, people often commented on how he was as pretty as a girl. But he understood here he was different, and while there was no reason for it, different often frightened people.

Jonathon found his boots in the entryway where he'd left them and pulled them on. He stepped out the front of the mansion to the sight of the courtyard filled with men, all standing in neat lines as Nakano paced in front of them and spoke of fighting maneuvers. He realized this must be a training session, and scanned the courtyard for Kazuhiro. He spotted him instantly. Among all the men, he stood out, not only for his beauty, but also for the aura of confidence and strength that emanated from him.

Kazuhiro looked toward him. Even across the distance of the courtyard, his dark gaze stirred arousal in Jonathon, and it hit him stronger than it had the day before. Now rested, cleaned, having eaten a good meal, his body could think of only one other need it wanted satiated.

His cock hardened within seconds. Jonathon tried to will it go down, but that was impossible when all that filled his mind was images of his body pressed to Kazuhiro's, lying beneath him while Kazuhiro thrust inside him, pushing them both to climax. He knew how Kazuhiro would be, confident and in command, like he was now.

Though, there was no guarantee Kazuhiro would be a considerate lover. He hoped Kazuhiro would be. It'd been so long since he was with someone who was concerned for his pleasure, too. It seemed all the men he'd been with lately only wanted their own. It'd been so long - so very, very long - since he'd been with anyone who made it truly enjoyable.

Kazuhiro looked to the samurai near him. Jonathon saw him excuse himself, then start in his direction.

Jonathon moved to meet him. He bent forward in a deep bow. "Good morning, my lord."

"Morning has long since passed."

Jonathon straightened and smiled. "I'm in the habit of always saying good morning when I wake, but I'm not in the

habit of sleeping so late.”

“It was a long night.” Kazuhiro turned away. “Walk with me.”

Jonathon rushed to walk at Kazuhiro’s side. “Did you sleep well?”

“No, I didn’t. I was restless thinking about you.”

“About me?”

“Yes, and what I should do with you.”

Jonathon’s heart leaped to a galloping pace. “And, have you decided?”

Kazuhiro looked at him, a smirk at the corner of his lips. “Possibly.”

Kazuhiro’s tone was light, teasing, but Jonathon could hear the attraction in it. Was Kazuhiro trying to make his interest known? He had to be. Elation soared through Jonathon. He knew there was a chance he could be hearing only what he wanted, but he refused to give that theory credence.

They passed through a gate to the gardens. Kazuhiro motioned to the veranda for Jonathon to sit. As he did, Kazuhiro remained standing, but his pose was relaxed, his left arm casually resting on the hilt of his short sword.

It struck Jonathon for the first time that Kazuhiro had the weapon, but then during his lessons, Mr. Jenkins had told him a samurai was always armed. *Always*. Even if it wasn’t visible, somewhere on their person was a weapon. It seemed it was true. In the security of his own home, Kazuhiro still wore the *wakizashi* - short sword -, the longer *katana* most likely stored.

It also spoke to the danger of the times. Kazuhiro may be in his own home, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be attacked. An enemy or spy could still infiltrate the complex.

Kazuhiro fixed him with an unwavering stare. “Tell me about yourself.”

Jonathon looked up at him in confusion. “What? Why?”

“I want to know about you.”

“But why?”

Kazuhiro replied with silence, his friendly expression hardened.

Jonathon mentally cursed himself. Kazuhiro had made a direct request of him, and he'd questioned his motives. Twice. What he'd done was a gross insult. He'd been so focused on his arousal, he'd started looking at Kazuhiro as if he were just like any man. But he wasn't. He was a lord and a samurai.

Jonathon started to stand so he could bow to him. “I apologize, my lord. I didn't mean...”

“Don't stand to bow. I *do* have some patience for you since you're not familiar with our ways, and much of that patience you've earned by showing an effort to learn.”

Jonathon dropped back to sitting. “Thank you. I think I was just startled by your request. What would you like to know about me?”

“Everything.”

Jonathon stared at Kazuhiro. Was this an interrogation? It would make sense if it were. Kazuhiro would be seeking to gain any kind of information about Barrett he could. “I started working for Mr. Barrett about three months ago...”

Kazuhiro shook his head. “No, I want to know *all* about you. A man's past can reveal much about who he is today.”

“I see. Then I'll start from the beginning. I was born in London, England. The first twelve years of my life were fairly uneventful. My family lived comfortably, and I spent my days studying. My father was in charge of the accounts for a wealthy merchant, a job that cost him his life. He was working late one evening, and a man broke into the offices to rob them and he shot my father. My mother, who had suffered from fits of melancholy for as long as I could remember, was overwhelmed by a spell so powerful after his death, that she took her own life.” Jonathon's gaze lowered, his voice softened. “They were all I had.”

He looked up to Kazuhiro again. “I was afraid I'd be put in an orphanage, so I stowed away on a merchant craft bound for America, but was soon uncovered by the crew. Rather

than punish me, the captain took me under his wing, and I spent the next six years on the seas. It was during those years my formal education became complimented with the sailors teaching me not only their trade of seamanship, but how to fight with swords, knives, and my fists." He decided it was time to let Kazuhiro see a little of his own interest and allowed flirtatious innuendo into his voice. "And how to do *other* things."

Kazuhiro's smirk returned. "You sound very skilled. What did you do after being a sailor?"

Jonathon swallowed the disappointment that he hadn't distracted Kazuhiro enough to have the man drag him inside and ravish him, but he also wasn't surprised. Kazuhiro seemed to not be easily swayed from anything he had a focus on. "I traveled America. My captain had passed away when I was eighteen, and I decided it was time to return to land. I made my way across the entire country, from coast to coast. It took me a few years, since I would stop in places and settle for a while before I would feel the itch to move on. I've been living in San Francisco for some months now."

"Employed by Barrett?"

Jonathon swallowed. This was the area he'd tried to get over with fast, and now he didn't want to face it. "Yes. Most recently."

"And before?"

"I've worked a variety of jobs. There's a lot of building in San Francisco now, so I've mostly been a laborer."

"How did you come to work for Barrett?"

"I...I knew his nephew."

Kazuhiro contemplated him in silence.

Jonathon could see in Kazuhiro's eyes that he knew there was more to his connection with Barrett and it seemed he was waiting for Jonathon to volunteer the information on his own. Jonathon wanted to tell him. All the words were there inside him, but his throat was almost too tight to breathe, as if blocking the words from coming out.

Kazuhiro slowly looked away, and Jonathon thought he

saw disappointment on his face. He shifted on the edge of the veranda to be even a fraction closer to him. "You're not what I was expecting."

Kazuhiro glanced back to him. "What were you expecting?"

"I didn't think you'd be so young. And I certainly wasn't expecting a nobleman who would charge into battle. Where I'm from, many who have any kind of power or wealth delegate dangerous and unpleasant tasks to others."

"It's the same here. But as you said, I'm young, so perhaps I'm still rash. My father said that of me more times than once."

Jonathon's mind jumped on Kazuhiro mentioning his father. It only struck him then, if Kazuhiro was head of the Takezaki clan, then his father must have either passed or turned the clan over to his son's control. "How long have you been head of your family?"

"Six years." Kazuhiro's gaze moved over Jonathon's face. "I was only a little older than you are now, if my guess of your age is correct."

"I'm twenty-three."

Kazuhiro's slender eyebrows rose in surprise. "You look younger. That was my age exactly when I became head of my family and lands."

"That's still young for so much responsibility."

Kazuhiro shook his head. "I don't think so. The responsibility was good for me, and it was my duty to accept it. My father had the wasting sickness."

Jonathon offered a look of sympathy and softened his voice. "I'm sorry."

Kazuhiro inclined his head in appreciation for Jonathon's words.

"It must be difficult for you," Jonathon said, "leading your men, trying to take care of your lands, when things are so volatile. I've heard revolution is on the verge of breaking out."

"It's already started with small skirmishes and many

seeking alliances. The Satsuma and Choshu clans aligned last year against the Shogun.”

“And your allies with the Satsuma.”

Kazuhiro tipped his head to the side, contemplating Jonathon. “Barrett ensured you were very knowledgeable about me.”

“Yes, I suppose he did.”

Kazuhiro nodded slowly, speaking more to himself than Jonathon. “It seems he wants to know his enemy better, also.” He looked away from him to the garden. “But you’re correct. The Takezaki and Satsuma clans have long been friends with our lands being so close. But I also believe in some of their ideals.”

“Some? Not all?”

Kazuhiro glanced back to him with a smirk. “If I believed in all, then you wouldn’t be here.”

Jonathon nodded. It seemed though Kazuhiro’s sympathies were toward those rebellious to the Shogun, he was also a man of independence.

Kazuhiro continued. “Because things are very tense, and as alliances are being formed, so too are new enemies being created, I want you to stay here. Don’t go out to the city, even with an escort. My enemies would attack you without hesitation, and my allies don’t yet know you.”

“I’ll stay here. But it sounds like you’re planning on leaving.”

“I am, briefly this afternoon.” Kazuhiro fell silent again as his gaze roamed over him. “I’ll be back by evening, and I’d like for you to have dinner with me tonight.”

“Of course! It would be my pleasure.”

Kazuhiro laughed softly. “You’re very eager.”

Jonathon focused on Kazuhiro, giving him his most sensual smile. “I can’t help that I enjoy your company.”

He saw the look in Kazuhiro’s eyes shift, the humor fading as a new heat came into them. Kazuhiro was dropping all restraint and showing his attraction for him. Jonathon’s cock

ached with arousal. He stood to let it shift and adjust. As he did, Kazuhiro's gaze dropped, focusing on the bulge.

Kazuhiro took two steps toward him, closing the distance between them until they were nearly touching.

Jonathon's breath came quicker. Kazuhiro was so close, he could feel the heat of him. He breathed deep, taking in the washed scent of Kazuhiro's body with the delicate smell of flowers, mostly likely from the fragrant oil used to style Kazuhiro's hair into the smooth topknot. He could now see just how stunningly beautiful Kazuhiro's features were.

Kazuhiro's voice left him in husky whisper. "I've never seen such beautiful eyes."

"I was thinking the same about yours." Jonathon moved his hand forward the slightest bit, touching Kazuhiro's in the gentlest of touches. He looked down to the hands, his own skin so light and fair, Kazuhiro's a more golden hue, and the thought fluttered through his mind how beautifully they complimented each other.

Kazuhiro also had his gaze lowered to their hands. Jonathon had his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbow, and Kazuhiro touched his fingertips to the top of the forearm, brushing down it to Jonathon's hand.

A hushed moan slipped from Jonathon's throat at the soft caress. He closed his eyes in a long blink, and when he opened them again, he found Kazuhiro's focused on him. He smiled. "Perhaps we should move dinner up to now."

Kazuhiro let out a warm laugh. "I—"

"Lord Takezaki, please forgive my intrusion."

Both Jonathon and Kazuhiro looked in the direction of the voice to a samurai bowed low in the gateway to the garden.

Kazuhiro faced him. "What do you need?"

"A messenger has arrived for you, my lord. Nakano-san sent me to inform you."

"Thank you." Kazuhiro looked back to Jonathon. "It seems our time will have to wait until later."

"I'll look forward to it."

Kazuhiro gave him another smile, then turned to leave.

Jonathon watched him walk away, and when Kazuhiro disappeared around the corner, he dropped to the veranda, as if all his strength had fled. It'd taken an immense amount of control to not start stripping and beg for Kazuhiro to mount him.

Though it was more than the intense arousal making his legs feel weak. Swirling in his stomach was a nauseous sense of betrayal. He should've told Kazuhiro everything; how he really knew Barrett's nephew, what'd happened between them, why Barrett had sent him there.

He felt he'd missed an opportunity to gain Kazuhiro's trust, and now that it was gone, he feared it would be too late to capture it again. If he told him everything now, Kazuhiro would wonder why he'd kept it secret to begin with.

Jonathon closed his eyes, thinking on the velvet pouch he'd held just minutes ago. For as much as he wanted Kazuhiro's trust, he also feared what he would do with it once he had it.

§ § §

Kazuhiro reclined in the tall, round wooden tub, his arms draped back on the edge. He breathed in the steam, letting it relax his body further. Beneath the water, his rigid cock rested on his lower abdomen. He savored the sensation of arousal humming through him. It had lingered within him all day, but now he was able to let himself enjoy it.

That afternoon, he'd met with Saigo-san, general of the Satsuma troops, and informed him about the outcome of the attack in the forest, as it'd been some of Saigo's men who'd uncovered the plot. Saigo wasn't fully pleased he was housing a foreigner, but he wasn't speaking out against him either. And he told Saigo that night the same thing he told him when he agreed to stand against the Shogun; he didn't consider himself at war against the Westerners. This was against the Shogun, whose weakness had allowed them into their country. Saigo-san wasn't the most pleased with that line of thought, but he accepted it since it ultimately meant they were allies.

Kazuhiro opened his eyes, staring into the steam. If he was to be fully honest with himself, he wasn't sure the Emperor would be any different than the Shogun, despite his promises to expel all foreigners. To him, they seemed like words the Emperor knew a few powerful men wanted to hear, and with their support he could gain back the seat of power rather than being just a figurehead. He feared this was a lost battle, even though it hadn't fully yet begun. It had been lost from the very moment the black ships of Perry sailed into Edo Bay. There were many in Japan who saw the value and profit to be gained from the outside world. Even he did to some extent.

Kazuhiro's thoughts turned back to their original focus. Addison-san... How did so lovely a man come to be connected with one as vile as Barrett? When he'd agreed to meet with Barrett's emissary, he thought Barrett would send someone as disgusting and ignorant as himself, not a young beauty who seemed almost desperate to show respect.

However, he suspected there was more to Addison than what appeared. The lovely surface could be meant as a distraction, and the secrets Addison had could be deadly, but he was willing to take the risk. It was likely the only way he'd uncover further schemes from Barrett. And more than that, he wanted Addison.

Kazuhiro took a deep breath, his voice leaving him in a low rumble. "Jonathon." He tested the name on his tongue. Addison had requested he call him by his given name. He refrained, as it seemed too intimate, especially in front of his men. He knew, though, Westerners were often more casual in such regards. It was a mark of trust, of friendship, to call one by their given name. He wondered if he should make the concession and use Addison's given name, since Addison had worked so hard to follow his ways.

A smile rose to Kazuhiro's lips. He'd spoken true when he told Addison...Jonathon...that he found his attempts charming. And he appreciated his efforts. All the foreign men he'd met had no interest in learning Japanese ways. They expected the people, the entire country for that matter, to concede to them and do things *their* way. But just as when

one is a guest in another's home and one must abide by the owner's rules, so it should be when in a country. One should respect the laws and the people. Not expect them to change and make allowances for them.

His smile faded. Change was going to happen to Japan. Even if all the outsiders left, their presence would always be felt. It was just as when the Dutch first came to Japan so many long years ago and were granted the right to trade here. Even their very limited, very restricted presence effected change.

Kazuhiro pushed to his feet, water cascading off his body as he stepped out of the bath. He needed to stop his thoughts before they darkened his mood. He wouldn't allow that to happen. Not when Jonathon was waiting for him.

Allowing Jonathon's name to float through his mind vanquished his dark thoughts. He felt eager to go to him. Once he had him in the privacy of his chambers, he knew he wouldn't be able to stop from touching him. Jonathon had almost broken his control that afternoon. Had the messenger not arrived, he knew he would've taken him.

The way Jonathon's golden hair captured the sunlight made him want to run his fingers through it, to feel if it was as silken as it looked. But of all the beautiful attributes Jonathon had, it was his eyes that enchanted him. When he looked in them, their light blue reminded him of every spring day he'd ever lived, and a sense of calm came over him.

Kazuhiro pulled on his kimono and took up the obi, deciding to forego his loincloth as he wouldn't be wearing it long. Not if Jonathon was as anxious for him.

He left the bath, striding quickly toward his chambers. Stepping in, he found the servants had followed his orders and had set the low table with food. The scents of fresh, steamy rice, grilled fish, pickled radish and other vegetables came to him, but didn't stir his appetite. His body was focused on only one thing. He glanced toward his bedchamber, and through the open double doors, he saw his futon laid out.

He moved toward the doors that were open to the garden, feeling the warm night air wash over him. He leaned against

the frame, looking out to the garden. Kazuhiro forced himself to be still and quiet, when what he wanted was to pace off his anxious energy. Each motion he made brushed the silk of his kimono against his cock, and it only added to his desire to have it buried in Jonathon's soft hole.

A tentative knock sounded on his outer door.

Kazuhiro glanced toward the door and called, "Enter."

The door slid open. The lantern threw a warm glow over Jonathon. He wore only a white shirt, tight brown trousers, and his feet were bare. It seemed he'd also decided to wear as few clothes as possible.

A smile came to Kazuhiro's lips. What a beautiful vision it would be to see his golden-haired lover in Japanese clothes. He would have to be sure to buy him a kimono, if for nothing else than his own pleasure.

As Jonathon slid the door closed, Kazuhiro started toward him. They met in the room's center. Kazuhiro saw Jonathon's gaze flick to the right at the futon. He grinned at how Jonathon seemed to share in having more interest toward that than the food. Jonathon brought his gaze back to him, and Kazuhiro drank in the sky blue of his eyes. He lifted his hand, cupping Jonathon's cheek, brushing his thumb along it.

Jonathon's eyes closed. He tipped his head into Kazuhiro's touch. As he opened his eyes, he let his gaze travel lower to where the dark blue kimono was parted in a wide V, showing Kazuhiro's smooth, muscular chest. Jonathon reached toward him, resting his palm flat on Kazuhiro's chest. The warmth of Kazuhiro's body moved through his hand, and he could feel the deep, steady rhythm of his heart.

Kazuhiro took a half step closer. He laid his forehead on Jonathon's. Both of them closed their eyes as they shared the quiet intimacy. No words in any language were needed. Differences in culture and status didn't exist. At that moment, they were just two men, wanting to be together.

Jonathon ran his hand down Kazuhiro's chest. Reaching the obi, he worked the knot free. The sash slid through his fingers to the floor. The kimono parted. He got his first look at Kazuhiro's cock. It was fully hard, the foreskin drawn back

from the head to reveal the wet slit.

Kazuhiro settled his hands on Jonathon's hips, slipping them beneath the cotton shirt. He slid them up Jonathon's sides, watching as more and more fair skin and a torso of lean muscle was exposed.

Jonathon lifted his arms to accommodate Kazuhiro in removing the shirt. As soon as it was off, he pressed his body to Kazuhiro, pushing aside the kimono to wrap one arm around Kazuhiro's waist. He rested his other hand on the side of Kazuhiro's neck and leaned forward to bring their lips together.

Kazuhiro drew his head back.

A soft smile curved Jonathon's lips. It seemed what he'd heard that kissing was not common here during intimacy was true. But he wanted to feel Kazuhiro's lips on his. He wanted to show him how good it could feel.

Jonathon touched his fingertips to Kazuhiro's lips and whispered, "Trust me."

Kazuhiro remained still, allowing Jonathon to bring their lips together. It was a gentle brush of soft skin. He was well familiar with *seppun* – kissing – as a way Westerners expressed affection. More than one courtesan attempted it with him, but he'd always refused. He had no desire to put his mouth on another's. It seemed unclean. Now, with pleasure tingling in his lips from the touch, he understood better.

Jonathon grazed his lips over Kazuhiro's again. He licked with the lightest touch of his tongue. Kazuhiro tensed, but didn't pull away.

Jonathon spoke, his lips close to Kazuhiro's. "Open your mouth a little for me."

Even with how close they were, he could see Kazuhiro gazing at him. Jonathon could tell he was trying to decide if he wanted to follow the request.

Slowly, Kazuhiro parted his lips.

Jonathon softly closed their mouths together and eased his tongue into Kazuhiro's mouth.

Kazuhiro focused on the new feeling. Jonathon's tongue was so soft in his mouth. Its movements going in and out mimicked a thrusting cock. Pleasure came from the slick gliding of it over his own tongue, and he felt himself becoming more aroused, wanting to respond and enter Jonathon's mouth, as well. He moved his tongue tentatively against Jonathon's, then pushed to go into his mouth. As Jonathon opened wider to accept him, a moan passing from Jonathon's mouth to his, Kazuhiro forgot all thoughts of it being unclean. All he wanted was to feel and taste more of him.

With Kazuhiro kissing him with equal passion, Jonathon turned them both so he could walk backward toward the futon.

Kazuhiro slowed the kiss, reluctantly drawing his lips away, and only doing so to see in opening Jonathon's trousers. Now he fully understood why Westerners shared their mouths. There was such intensity to the closeness, the intimacy of sharing and feeling each breath.

Jonathon dipped his head down to catch Kazuhiro's gaze, grinning at him. "Why are you smiling?"

Kazuhiro hooked his fingers over the top of Jonathon's trousers and met his gaze. "You've taught me something new, and I'm enjoying it."

Jonathon laid his hands over Kazuhiro's and pushed them down, making him lower the trousers. "Sometimes sharing cultures is a good thing."

"I'll agree in this regard."

As the trousers reached Jonathon's thighs, Kazuhiro lost all thought. Jonathon's hair around his cock...even it was golden. He didn't know why he thought it wouldn't be, but it still surprised him. As for the cock itself, it was a beautifully formed piece of flesh. The foreskin still covered the flair of the head. He gently pulled it back, caressing down the full hard length, and back up over the foreskin again to the head, smoothing the clear drops of pre-cum across the tip.

Jonathon's head fell back with a soft moan. Kazuhiro glanced up at him. Jonathon looked as though pleasure was

overcoming him. He'd noticed it that afternoon, how when he drew close, when he touched him, Jonathon's responses were so strong. The wantonness only made him desire Jonathon more.

Kazuhiro watched him bend to remove the trousers, admiring how his muscles shifted and stretched. How was it that this stunning man from so very far away had come to him, and was now bare before him, ready to give his body to him? It left him in a state of wonder, but it was probably better that he not think on how Jonathon had truly come to him. If he did, his dark thoughts would return.

Jonathon straightened, and Kazuhiro moved behind him. He touched the base of Jonathon's neck and drew his fingers down the center of Jonathon's back in a feathery caress. He brushed over the rounded curves of Jonathon's ass. Kazuhiro slid his hand forward on Jonathon's hip. Jonathon stepped back, nestling his ass against Kazuhiro's cock.

Simply feeling the hot, hard rod against his ass was enough to make Jonathon moan. He tipped his head back, turning it to nuzzle Kazuhiro's cheek. Fingers wrapped tight around his cock, rough calluses from years of handling a sword gave a pleasant scratching sensation against his sensitive skin. Kazuhiro's warm breath washed against his cheek, and through his desire Jonathon heard a single word, "Kneel."

Without question or thought, Jonathon eased down to his knees on the futon. He expected Kazuhiro to drop behind him, but instead, the samurai lord walked a few paces away to a low chest. After retrieving something from inside, he turned to walk back to him. Jonathon watched the kimono floating around Kazuhiro nude body with each step, then noticed a glass vial - thick liquid moving inside - in Kazuhiro's hand.

Kazuhiro knelt behind him. There was a soft clink of the stopper being removed, and an instant later, cool oil was running down Jonathon's crack and over his hole. Kazuhiro's fingers followed, rubbing through it. Jonathon spread his knees further apart and lowered down to his elbows, doing all his could with his body to show Kazuhiro he wanted him. A low, appreciative groan came from Kazuhiro as he pushed

a finger into him.

Jonathon dropped his forehead to the futon. His breathing was already quick. His heart pounded, and warm throbbing pulsed through his cock. Drops leaked from it to drip beneath him. This was what he'd wanted, how he'd hoped and wished Kazuhiro would be. No rough fumbling. No driving into him for frantic copulation to meet an end. Kazuhiro was taking his time to ensure both their pleasure. As two fingers stretched him, Jonathon gripped the futon in both fists. He let out a high, needy moan. He had to have Kazuhiro's cock soon.

Kazuhiro heard all Jonathon wanted in the single moan. He drew his fingers out of him and oiled his cock. He pressed the tip to Jonathon's hole, pushing for entrance. Kazuhiro watched Jonathon's body stretch to accept him, squeezing his cock head. He closed his eyes and fought to control his breathing and body's urges as more of his cock became buried in Jonathon's heat.

He started thrusting. On each push, he was rewarded with moans and hushed needful noises from Jonathon. He could feel Jonathon's muscles tightening and loosening. Jonathon started rocking back on him, moving faster than he was thrusting into him, unabashed in his desperation for pleasure. Sensing Jonathon's pleasure was rising, Kazuhiro stopped and pulled out of him.

A shocked and distraught gasp left Jonathon. He snapped his head around to see him, ready to beg for Kazuhiro's cock, but Kazuhiro pushed on his hip, guiding him to roll to his back and lie down.

Jonathon quickly followed Kazuhiro's direction. Once on his back, he slid down the futon toward him and pulled his legs back, holding them in place with his hands under his knees. He lifted his head slightly to better see Kazuhiro, and the sight of Kazuhiro's hard, finely muscled body framed in the soft, elegant silk kimono only increased Jonathon's desperation to join their bodies again. It seemed even more sensual to him that Kazuhiro hadn't removed it.

Kazuhiro gripped Jonathon's hips and tugged him closer. His cock lined with Jonathon's hole, he sank into him again.

Jonathon tipped his head back, moaning loud and long. Kazuhiro gazed down at him, drinking in how Jonathon reveled in the pleasure. After entering him the first time, feeling Jonathon move, hearing his moans, he needed to look at Jonathon's face and see him when his climax claimed him. He knew it wouldn't be much longer. Fluid leaked from Jonathon's cock to roll off his abdomen and down his side.

Kazuhiro shifted his angle, aiming for the hidden spot inside all men that held so much pleasure. Jonathon sucked in a sharp breath, the fingers of one hand clenching the linens in a fist. Kazuhiro took Jonathon's cock in hand, stroking it firm and quick.

Jonathon's release hit him hard and fast. He groaned hard, his body shuddered as his cum left him, splashing across his chest and stomach.

A moan of admiration sounded in Kazuhiro's throat at the beauty of Jonathon lost in pleasure. He breathed in the salt and bitter scent of the thick, white fluid, then his own climax was on him.

Jonathon opened his eyes, watching ecstasy light Kazuhiro's features, feeling the gentle pulse of Kazuhiro's cock spilling cum inside him. He'd craved this for so long, to have a lover like Kazuhiro; kind, strong, skilled, intelligent, beautiful. His throat and chest constricted as he remembered why he was here. To do this with Kazuhiro was to earn his trust to betray it. At least, that was his original purpose. Tonight, his only purpose was to be with a man who he'd felt drawn to the instant he saw him.

Kazuhiro eased out of him. He shifted around him and settled down to his back beside him. Jonathon rolled toward him, snuggling into Kazuhiro's side and laying his head on him. A single amused laugh left Kazuhiro, but he still held Jonathon with one arm around him. Jonathon smiled to himself. Such affection after lovemaking seemed to not be a usual habit for Kazuhiro, but it spoke volumes about Kazuhiro's character that he'd put their differences aside and was open to *his* needs.

Jonathon closed his eyes. There were so many things

about Kazuhiro he didn't know, many things about his ways he didn't understand. But he did understand how others could be loyal to him and be ready to serve him until their death. Honor, pride, strength, compassion; that was Kazuhiro. To simply be close to such qualities was enough to make him willing to give up his own freedom.

§ § §

Jonathon walked down the hall toward Kazuhiro's chambers. His heart raced, his stomach churned with nerves. He wanted desperately to have this conversation with Kazuhiro, and at the same moment, he wished he could avoid it. After the time they'd spent together the night before... and that morning when Kazuhiro took him again, he feared what he was about to tell him would shatter the trust they'd built. He knew he couldn't delay any longer. If he did, it was certain all trust would be lost between them.

He wondered what this would mean for himself. Kazuhiro's death had meant his freedom. Providing he lived long enough to collect it. But he came to a conclusion in the quiet of the morning, as he lay watching the rising sun illuminate the garden, still feeling Kazuhiro's presence around him though Kazuhiro had already left for the day. What would be the point of freedom in body, when his mind and heart would forever be imprisoned by guilt?

He didn't know what the future would be for him and Kazuhiro, if there would be any future at all. What he did know was of all the men he'd ever known, none were as noble as Kazuhiro, and he'd rather be damned than take the life of so magnificent a man. Then to even consider doing so to appease the whims of one so lowly as Barrett disgusted him to the point of nausea.

Jonathon reached Kazuhiro's chambers. He stared at the closed door. It was quiet inside, but he was certain Kazuhiro was there. He'd seen him return, but Kazuhiro had hardly dismounted his horse before a servant rushed up to him with a message. It seemed important because Kazuhiro took it and hastened inside.

Jonathon drew in a deep breath and lifted his hand to

knock. He hoped he wasn't interrupting him, but he couldn't wait any longer to speak with him. Before he could knock on the doorframe, Kazuhiro's voice came from in the room, "Enter, Jonathon-san."

For all his worry and concern, a smile came to him at hearing Kazuhiro say his given name. He slid the door open, seeing Kazuhiro on the other side of the room seated before the open doors to the garden.

Kazuhiro paused in reading a letter, looking up to him with a smile. "Is there a reason why you're lurking outside and not coming in?"

Jonathon stepped into the room, closing the door. He started toward him. "I was collecting my courage."

Kazuhiro's gaze moved down Jonathon's body. "Your courage was unbound this morning and last night."

Jonathon kneeled across from him, sitting on his heels. "It was easy to be courageous in that way with you."

"Have I made you feel you can't be so in other ways?"

Jonathon's nervousness returned full force and silenced him. He lowered his gaze, unable to continue looking into Kazuhiro's eyes. He opened his hand, which clenched the velvet pouch. He pulled the dark green bottle out of it and set it before Kazuhiro.

Kazuhiro stared at it, silent. All humor faded from his expression.

"Do you know what that is?" Jonathon asked.

Kazuhiro looked away from the bottle, his gaze focused out to the garden. "I have a suspicion."

"It's poison. Arsenic. That's why I'm here. Barrett sent me to kill you." Jonathon dropped his gaze again, his voice softening. "I have so much to tell you, starting with how I really came to be under Barrett's control. What I said before, about knowing his nephew, that was true. Only, I didn't give you the full details.

"I met the younger Barrett, Edgar, in a secret club where men go to be together. You see where I'm from, men are

persecuted for wanting to share their body with another man, so we do so in secret to avoid arrest, scorn, and humiliation. I loathe going to such places, but I was so lonely. Sex would happen. I knew that. But it was the comfort of another person, a touch, a caress, the warmth of a body that I craved.

“Edgar...” Jonathon shook his head, “there were many things I didn’t care for with him, but company was thin that night, so I accepted his. We went to a private room, and he began undressing me. Roughly. When I asked him to be gentler, he shoved me to the bed. I began to struggle. Both of us fell off the bed to the floor. Before I could recover, he punched me in the face. He pinned me to the floor by my throat, choking me as he hit me.

“I thought I was going to die. That’s when I saw the knife sticking out of his boot. I caught it, jamming it up toward him. The blade sank into his side. He threw himself off me, screaming, and I sprang up and fled the room...only to run into an officer, as the club had been uncovered. I was arrested and charged with more crimes than I can remember, or that I’d committed.

“While in prison, the elder Barrett came to see me, the wretch who’d taken advantage of his nephew. Though, as Barrett had stood outside the bars of my cell, a devious light in his eyes told me he had no concern for his nephew. Barrett was looking for a very specific tool for his plan against you, and I fit what he needed. With a little influence and a lot of money, Barrett got the charges dropped against me as we’d come to an agreement, my freedom in exchange for your life.”

As Jonathon finished, silence like a suffocating fog fell between them. Long seconds ticked by. He wished Kazuhiro would at least look at him. He scrambled through his thoughts for something to say, and only one thing came forth. “I’m sorry. I should have told you last night. Actually, I should’ve told you the moment we met.”

Kazuhiro spoke, his voice low. “Why didn’t you?”

“I...” Jonathon stopped. How could he say the truth? He couldn’t. If there was any trust in Kazuhiro’s heart toward him,

that would surely break it. But Kazuhiro spoke what he feared to say himself.

“You needed time to decide if you were going to kill me.”

Jonathon swallowed and took a breath. “Yes.”

“Now you’ve made your decision?”

Jonathon gasped, shocked that Kazuhiro could think he would even still consider harming him. “Yes, of course. That’s why I’m here telling you everything.”

Kazuhiro slowly turned his head, looking into Jonathon’s eyes. “How do I know this isn’t a ploy?”

Jonathon shook his head in confusion. “How could it be?”

“By your claims of telling the truth to not lose my trust, you could hope to gain further trust in which you could then have a greater advantage in taking my life.”

Jonathon’s mouth dropped open, the hurt that Kazuhiro could think him capable of such deceit making him speechless. His gaze dropped to the poison. Warranted, though, Kazuhiro’s thoughts may be.

He met Kazuhiro’s gaze. “I have no other agendas. I know there’s nothing I can say to make you believe otherwise. All I can offer is my word that your life will never be in danger from me.”

“And what of your freedom? If I live, Barrett won’t return you to your country, so what will you do?”

“I don’t need him to return to America. Yes, the arrangement was for his freeing me I would do this task, then he’d bring me back to live my life, but if I could make it to Hyogo Port where other American trade ships may be, I don’t think a captain would turn down one of his own countrymen in need. I certainly couldn’t return to San Francisco, but there was little left for me there. But, if I could have anything, I would rather...” Jonathon paused. How could he say this to him after all he’d told him? The trust between them was so delicate at this moment. To make any request of Kazuhiro could be more than the fragile trust could bear.

“Speak what you want,” Kazuhiro prompted.

Jonathon took a breath, letting the words rush out on his exhale. "I would rather stay here with you."

The heavy silence returned. After several moments, Kazuhiro looked back to the letter he'd been reading when Jonathon came in. He folded it and tucked it in his kimono, then stood and turned to walk into his bedchamber. "I have to dress. I'll be leaving soon."

Jonathon shoved to his feet and moved to follow him. "Where are you going?"

Kazuhiro shot him a sharp glance over his shoulder that warned to not question him.

Despite the look, Jonathon pressed on. "Will you be returning tonight?"

"Forces greater than I will determine that."

Jonathon's chest tightened at the ominous words. He reached toward him, resting his hand on Kazuhiro's arm, a small measure of relief washing through him that Kazuhiro didn't pull away. "Let me go with you."

"I have my men chosen for this mission."

All relief vanished. The truth behind Kazuhiro's words being he was going with men he knew he could trust. He felt selfish for even thinking it, but he had one more thing to ask. "What of my request? To stay with you?"

Kazuhiro stood silent for a long moment. Without looking at him, he said, "You had time to make your decision. I need time to make mine."

Jonathon slowly drew his hand back from him. He nodded, doing his best to understand, trying to think of any words, anyway, that could sway Kazuhiro to give him his trust, but to do so wouldn't be fair. Kazuhiro more than had right to make his decision without him trying to add bias.

But there was one thing he had to do.

Jonathon stepped around Kazuhiro. As he looked into Kazuhiro's eyes, he saw for as stern as Kazuhiro was attempting to be, there was hurt in his gaze. Jonathon lifted both hands, hoping Kazuhiro wouldn't back away from his

touch. Kazuhiro didn't. He laid his hands gently on the sides of Kazuhiro's face and leaned toward him, touching their lips together in a tender, chaste kiss.

He ended the kiss, but kept his lips near Kazuhiro's. His voice came hushed, desperate. "Wherever you're going, please, *please* be careful."

He caressed both of Kazuhiro's cheeks as he stepped back. His gaze lowered, he walked from the room.

Kazuhiro stood motionless. He listened to the door slide open and shut again. He closed his eyes tight, fighting for control over new and unexpected emotions.

§ § §

Jonathon moved through the dark and quiet courtyard. He looked up to a sky so black, each star burned with white luminescence. The nearly full moon was high, casting a silver glow from the heavens to earth. It was well past midnight, and Kazuhiro still hadn't returned.

From the words Kazuhiro spoke, it sounded as though he was going into danger, but when he saw him leave, Kazuhiro didn't look like a man about to go into battle. Fresh from the bath, his hair perfectly set in the topknot, wearing fine clothing bearing his house seal of the two cranes, he looked like the noble lord he was. More so, he looked like a nobleman prepared for a night of pleasure in the city. Kazuhiro also wore his swords, but like all samurai, he always did.

Jonathon leaned back on a tree. He knew when he accepted Barrett's offer that he was making the wrong choice. If he were truly a courageous man, he would've accepted his fate and the hangman's noose instead. Cowardice and selfishness brought him here. He'd tried to right those wrong intentions with honesty, but the truth came too late. He didn't know what fate Kazuhiro would decide for him, but no matter what it was, he would accept it. This time, he wouldn't run.

"Addison-san, what are you doing out here?"

Jonathon turned toward the voice. Kita walked toward him. He replied in Japanese to the young samurai. "Admiring the night. Why are you out so late?"

Kita stopped in front of him. "I was on guard duty. Are you waiting for Lord Takezaki to return?"

A ghost of a smile came to Jonathon's lips. "Yes. That's the truth of why I'm out here."

Kita nodded, his gaze turning toward the gates leading out of the estate. "I understand. I won't be able to rest until he returns either. I implored him to take me with him tonight, but he said he needed strong men here."

Jonathon's heart started to pound quicker, fear for Kazuhiro spurring it. "Where exactly did he go?"

Kita looked at him. "He didn't tell you?"

Jonathon shook his head.

Kita shifted his stance, seeming suddenly uncomfortable. "Then I've already said too much. If he didn't confide in you—"

"It was to not worry me," Jonathon interrupted. He had to get the truth from Kita. "He and I, we've become...close. But I still worry. It would comfort me greatly if you told me."

Kita's voice quieted. "I don't think knowing the truth would bring you comfort."

Jonathon took a step closer to him, trying to express his desperation in his eyes and voice. "Please, tell me."

Kita stayed silent for a moment, then lifted his gaze to meet Jonathon's. "He's leading an attack on some of the Shogun's men."

Jonathon's heart stumbled in its heavy pound. His breathing stopped.

"A few days ago, the Shogun's men attacked and killed Ito Hidemasa," Kita continued. "He was a minor lord, and mostly a lord only in title, as his lands and wealth are minimal. He was a good man, but a poor leader, and that cost his clan a great deal. He released many of his retainers, and Lord Takezaki took many in. But Ito-san was a harmless old man. He *did* speak out in support for the Emperor, but he had no means to support him. His death was unnecessary, and it seems his life was taken for no other reason than an opportunity to kill a sympathizer of the Emperor."

“His son, Hidetoshi, sent a message to Lord Takezaki asking for his assistance in obtaining revenge. The Ito and Takezaki have been allies for several generations, and Hidetoshi was a lover to Lord Takezaki.”

Jonathon tensed at the last statement. He tried to quell the jealousy that sprang up in him at hearing of Kazuhiro running to the aid of a former lover.

“It’s not surprising with the history between their families that Lord Takezaki would avenge Ito-san. It’s the honorable thing to do. By the pace the men who killed Ito-san were traveling, they would arrive in Kyoto today. Lord Takezaki believed that like most men who have been traveling and who have shed blood, they would visit the pleasure district tonight, and it’s there he plans to attack. But since it was a covert attack on Ito-san, Lord Takezaki plans to respond in the same way to try and avoid inciting more bloodshed. He doesn’t want this incident to further fuel the rebellion. He and the other men are under the guise of seeking their own enjoyable night, hoping to find them, and when they do...”

Kita didn’t need to finish the sentence for Jonathon to know what would happen, and he couldn’t let Kazuhiro face it alone. “We have to go to him.”

“We can’t. He said-”

“I don’t care what he said!”

Kita startled, his eyes wide.

Jonathon took a deep breath to gather what few shreds of calm he had. He needed to remember where he was, how things were done. “I understand and respect Lord Takezaki’s wishes, but we have to help him.”

Kita shook his head. “He ordered me to stay here.”

“Yes, for guard duty. But you said your watch is over now. You’ve been relieved by another, correct?”

“Yes, but...”

“So your time is yours now. What’s to stop you from going to the pleasure district yourself for a night of enjoyment?”

“I would still ask Lord Takezaki’s permission to ensure he

had no further need of me.”

“But he’s not here, and where he’s at, he *does* need you. I know you’re torn between following your orders, but you’ve done your duty as Lord Takezaki requested. And isn’t your greatest duty above all others to protect him?”

Jonathon could see struggle and internal battle over what to do in Kita’s expression. He felt terrible doing this to him, but there was no one else who he could even hope to convince to take him to Kazuhiro.

Kita spoke slowly. “I’m sorry, Addison-san, I can’t-”

Jonathon turned from him, walking away. “I understand, Kita-san. I’m sure I can find the pleasure district on my own.”

Kita hastened after him. “You can’t go alone.”

“I don’t have a choice.”

Jonathon heard Kita swear under his breath, then the footsteps that were trailing him stopped.

“You can’t go in those clothes. Any samurai who’s against foreigners will kill you on sight.”

Jonathon stopped and looked back to him.

Kita scowled, but turned toward the mansion.

Jonathon knew to follow without Kita directly expressing it. Entering the home behind him, he realized Kita must have a room there rather than sleeping in the barracks, showing his favored position with Kazuhiro.

Kita slid open a door and went inside. Jonathon stepped in after him.

Already digging in a chest, Kita pulled out a faded green kimono, along with flowing black hakama trousers. Next he retrieved an obi and a pair of sandals. He closed the chest, laying the clothing atop it, and started toward the door. “Dress quickly.”

As Kita stepped out of the room, Jonathon stood still and stared at the clothes. He wasn’t even entirely sure how to wear everything, but he had little choice. He stripped, and picked up the kimono. In another time, he would’ve enjoyed the slide of the silk over his skin. Now, he was donning these

clothes for a purpose. He folded it over in front as he'd seen it worn, but when he tried to wrap the obi around his waist, he fumbled with the long sash, trying to manage getting it around, not twisting it, and keeping the kimono closed in front.

The door slid open, Kita reappearing with a long and short sword in hand. He paused long enough to take in Jonathon, then shook his head at him. Without a word, he took the obi from him and helped him finish dressing. He grabbed the swords and pushed them through the sash. "You might not know how to use them, but you can't go into the city unarmed and this will help with the disguise that you're a samurai."

Jonathon rested his hand on the hilt of the katana. "I think I can manage with them well enough."

Kita let out a snort to express his lack of confidence. He opened the chest again and pulled out a wide, conical shaped straw hat. He placed it on Jonathon's head, tying it beneath his chin. "Keep your head down and don't talk to anyone, even in Japanese. Your pronunciation will tell everyone what you are."

Jonathon adjusted the hat and nodded, picking up the sandals.

Kita strode quickly toward the door. "Stay close. We have to go out the back. If we try through the front gates, the guards will never let you out."

Kita led him to the garden, where they both stepped into their sandals. Keeping to the edge and shadows, waiting for a patrolling guard to pass by, Kita guided him to a small gate built into the wall and bolted with a rusty latch. They waited in silence. Jonathon could tell Kita was listening. In a single quick movement, Kita wrenched the latch free, opening the gate just enough to slip through to the alley beyond.

Jonathon no sooner closed the gate than Kita sprang into a run. He rushed to catch up to him, jogging only a couple paces behind him, one hand on the swords to both steady them and feel the reassurance of them on his hip. He felt clumsy in the sandals, the clothing awkward to him, but he pushed it aside to focus on keeping pace with Kita as he

weaved down narrow, dark alleys. Kita turned down one, darted down another, guiding him through what Jonathon thought was a veritable labyrinth in trying to avoid main streets.

These backstreets showed none of the beauty of Kyoto. The buildings closed in around them. They dodged around baskets, barrels, and refuse. Only the moon and the occasional weak lantern lit their way. The soft, steady falls of their sandaled feet sounded in the night.

Jonathon's breathing came heavy, his lungs burned for more air than he was giving them. He could feel fatigue beginning to weigh down his legs, and wondered how much longer they were going to run. Kita didn't seem the least bit fatigued or winded, proof of his years of training to be an exceptional warrior.

The silence broke with the distant sound of voices. Ahead, Jonathon saw the alley met with a wide street. Lanterns in red dyed rice paper hung at the end of it. Kita slowed his pace to a walk, and true to Jonathon's suspicion, the young samurai seemed unfazed from the run other than a light sheen of sweat on his brow.

As they reached the end of the alley, Kita put out his arm, stopping him from coming too close. He peered up one way, the other, then with a nod, dropped his arm and stepped out to the street.

Jonathon followed, doing his best to keep his head lowered so as to hide his face, but sounds of revelry broke his willpower. He looked up as a samurai passed by, a large bottle slung over his shoulder with his finger looped through a straw rope around the neck. From the way the samurai wavered with each step, Jonathon felt it was a good guess to say the bottle held *sake*, rice wine, which he'd tasted for the first time the night before with Kazuhiro.

Raucous laughter came from the teahouses, which sold more *sake* than tea at this hour. The scents of noodles and fried vegetables drifted out the doorways. As they passed one doorway, the curtain pushed aside, Jonathon's gaze was drawn in by the sound of delicate music. On a small stage, a

beautiful woman, her face white with rice powder, her lips deep crimson, danced with two brightly colored fans, while another woman worked the strings of a samisen.

They came upon yet another building, where women sat in a large window behind wooden bars. The kimono of one fell off the shoulder of one woman. The red paint on another's bottom lip was smeared down to her chin. One more had a purple bruise around her eye. They all looked tired and haggard. One called out to Kita in a lifeless voice, offering her services.

Jonathon's heart went out to the women. Keeping his voice hushed, he said, "I thought geishas were supposed to be elegant and respected."

"Those are not geishas. Just common whores. And I told you to keep your head down."

Jonathon dropped his head...and ran into Kita's back. "If I'm to keep my head down, you can't stop without warning."

Kita replied in a harsh whisper, "Lord Takezaki."

Jonathon snapped his head up, peering over Kita's shoulder. Kazuhiro and five of his samurai stood outside an opulent teahouse. Their gazes were focused up the street, where a band of six loud and laughing samurai were coming out of a brothel.

Kazuhiro and his men started toward them. Kita jumped into a quick walk as if to catch up. Jonathon moved with equal speed.

As they two groups met, Kazuhiro moved into the path of one swaying samurai, allowing the other to bump into him. He spun, shoving the man back, shouting about the offense. The samurai yelled back. One in the group pushed another. Chaos began to break out in a matter of a few heartbeats. The sound of swords sliding free filled the night. Steel shone in the moonlight.

Kita broke into a full run. Jonathon surged past him, his gaze locked on Kazuhiro.

Kazuhiro snapped his sword up, blocking a strike from the offending samurai. The samurai swung his sword around

to attack Kazuhiro's other side. Kazuhiro twisted and blocked again. One of Kazuhiro's men cried out, crumpling to the ground with his hand over his abdomen, blood already covering it. The samurai who'd brought him down spun toward Kazuhiro, lunging at his back.

"Kazuhiro! Behind you!" Jonathon shouted.

Kazuhiro whipped around at the sound of Jonathon's voice, the movement saving him from getting a sword in his back, but the attacker's blade sliced across the top of his left arm. He leaped back. Kazuhiro's thoughts race too fast, too strong, for him to notice the pain. Jonathon-san. He couldn't be here. But the voice...

Kazuhiro's reflexes reacted faster than his mind, his arms rising to save him from another strike. His mind fell back into the battle. All thoughts gone save for those of the fight. In an instant, he saw both his opponents closing in on him. His men were held back with their own enemies, fighting hard. He would have to defeat the two samurai on his own.

Both rushed him. Kazuhiro swept to the side, avoiding the sword of one, knocking aside the sword of the other with his blade. The action of stopping one, gave the second the little time needed to make another attack. In a flash through his mind, Kazuhiro saw there was no way to win. They were fast, skilled, and though individually he could defeat them, together they were using each other as a distraction to create openings.

The first samurai came at him. Kazuhiro leaped to meet him, knowing it would leave his back exposed. But if he was to die, he would take one of them with him.

Kazuhiro caught his opponent's sword with his, steel sliding against steel. He directed the other samurai's blade to the side, aiming the point of his at the attacker's chest. As his sword met flesh and bone, he waited for the blow to his back.

A grunt of pain sounded behind him. He snapped his head around. Shock stole his breath. Jonathon faced off against the second samurai, whose chest was soaked with blood from a deep gash. Jonathon clenched the long sword in both hands,

but his grip was wrong and weak, his stance unstable. He must've caught the samurai by surprise, but it wouldn't be enough to save Jonathon now that the samurai was on guard. Kazuhiro saw the other was ready to attack again.

He yanked his sword from his enemy and whirled around just as Jonathon's opponent made his move. Catching Jonathon around the waist with one arm, he spun him away, putting himself between Jonathon and the samurai's sword. He blocked the strike, and as he did, two of his men appeared, driving his opponent back and finishing him.

Kazuhiro quickly surveyed the area. His men were all standing, save for Akai-san. He didn't need to look closer to know Akai was gone. He closed his eyes, giving a moment of mourning and silently promising to hold a funeral fitting of Akai's bravery. He saw injuries on two of his other men, but they weren't life threatening. He also saw Kita standing beside Nakano-san, the older samurai shaking his head at the younger.

Kazuhiro turned, looking at Jonathon, who was also taking in the death. Jonathon glanced up, and he gazed into the blue eyes. What was he doing here? It was obvious Kita had brought him. He noticed the hat, now behind Jonathon's head, as it must've blown back from running. Jonathon was sweaty, dirty, as though he'd run the entire way, and he was wearing...

Kazuhiro looked down Jonathon's body at the kimono, the swords, the hakama, the sandals. Jonathon had clearly come to find him, to help him. And Jonathon had saved him.

Kazuhiro stepped close to him, touching Jonathon's hand with a brush of his fingers. "Are you hurt?"

Jonathon shook his head, his gaze going to Kazuhiro left arm and the slashed, blood-soaked sleeve of his kimono. "But you are."

"I'd be hurt worse if you hadn't come." A grin tipped up one corner of his lips. "Even if I have a feeling you manipulated Kita to bring you."

As if knowing his lord had spoken his name, Kita rushed up to Kazuhiro's side. He dropped to the ground, fully

prostrating himself before Kazuhiro. "My lord, please forgive me for disobeying your orders."

"Stand up, Kita-san. Blood's covering the ground, and seeing you covered in it is far more offensive to me than your actions."

Kita scrambled to his feet, whispering Kazuhiro's name before falling speechless.

Kazuhiro smiled at him. "You did well. But now I'm going to give you another order and see that you obey exactly. Escort Jonathon-san home safely."

Kita bowed deeply to him again. "Yes, Takezaki-sama."

Jonathon laid his hand on Kazuhiro's uninjured arm. "Can't I stay?"

Kazuhiro shook his head. "Authorities will be here soon to question about what happened. You need to leave quickly or your presence will complicate things." He reached over Jonathon's shoulder and pulled the hat up, pushing it down on Jonathon's head. "Go with Kita-san. I'll return to you soon."

Jonathon couldn't contain his smile, brought by the joy of Kazuhiro's words, *I'll return to you soon*. He wanted to throw his arms around him, to feel Kazuhiro's warm, solid body and know he was truly all right. But he knew such a display of open emotion and affection would be considered unseemly by those watching, and he didn't want to embarrass Kazuhiro.

Jonathon nodded and stepped around him, passing close enough to at least brush against him. As he approached the other men, they all bowed to him. He was stunned by their display of respect and returned their bows. He neared Nakano. The samurai looked into his eyes, then bent forward in a stiff bow. Jonathon's shock froze him for a moment. He came out of it and bowed to the older samurai. As he straightened, he gave Nakano a smile, but the older samurai's expression remained stoic, though not as hard as before.

As Jonathon followed Kita, he glanced back and saw Kazuhiro watching him with a smile.

§ § §

Sitting on the veranda in the garden, feeling the night weakening with dawn drawing closer, Jonathon continued to wait for Kazuhiro. When he and Kita had arrived back at the mansion, he washed and soaked in the tub, hoping Kazuhiro would arrive while he was in it. But he didn't. He wondered what was taking so long. Worry began to invade his heart that Kazuhiro could've been attacked again.

"Jonathon-san."

Jonathon snapped his head around, his gaze shooting up to meet Kazuhiro's eyes. Kazuhiro had moved in such silent grace, he hadn't heard him approach. He still wore the same blood stained kimono and looked fresh from fight. He must've arrived home and came directly to him.

Jonathon sprang to his feet and flung his arms around him. Kazuhiro laughed softly, and Jonathon knew it was both out of amusement at his unhindered affection and out of happiness. "You're safe."

"You assured that before."

Jonathon leaned back from him to meet his eyes. "I know, but I was beginning to worry." He looked toward Kazuhiro's injured arm. "We still need to take care of your wound."

"I had it tended before I came home."

Silence fell over them, but where before its weight had been almost more than Jonathon could bear, now he could feel their closeness in it.

Kazuhiro brushed his thumb along Jonathon's cheek. He leaned toward him, touching his lips gently to Jonathon's.

Emotion rushed through Jonathon. Kazuhiro had initiated a kiss. To have Kazuhiro do such a thing, and especially after their words that afternoon, meant more to him than words existed to describe. He opened his mouth for Kazuhiro's tongue, sucking on it, caressing it, with his own.

As the kiss ended, Kazuhiro spoke softly. "I still need to bathe. Come with me."

Jonathon walked at his side as Kazuhiro turned to go in. Kazuhiro collected clothing, and Jonathon noticed he tucked the vial of oil among the clothes. All fatigue in his body was

forgotten.

In the bath, Kazuhiro placed the clothes on a shelf. As he started untying the obi, Jonathon moved in front of him and took over in loosening it. Gently, he removed Kazuhiro's clothing, noticing the gash on his arm had been neatly sewn. When he pulled the loincloth away, he saw Kazuhiro's cock was half filled and fast on its way to being fully hard.

Kazuhiro reached up to undo the binding for his topknot.

Jonathon caught his hands. "Let me."

Kazuhiro lowered his hands in acceptance.

Jonathon led him to the small stool, standing behind him as Kazuhiro sat. He unbound the topknot, Kazuhiro's hair spilling down to past his shoulders. It was the first he'd seen him with it down, and with how Kazuhiro folded his hair in the particular style of topknot he wore, Jonathon had no idea it was so long.

Jonathon combed his fingers through the silken, ebony strands. "Your hair is beautiful."

A pleasure filled groan sounded low in Kazuhiro's throat. "I thought the same the first time I saw you. I'd never seen hair so golden."

Jonathon picked up a bucket filled with warm water. "Shall I wash you?"

Kazuhiro smiled. "Only if you undress, as well."

Jonathon quickly shed his clothes. As he lifted the bucket again, Kazuhiro closed his eyes and tipped his head back. Jonathon poured the water slowly over Kazuhiro's head, watching as his hair became saturated. Rivulets rolled down Kazuhiro's body around the curves of muscle. He ran his fingers through Kazuhiro's hair, and poured another bucket over him.

Taking up a cloth and rice bran soap, he began going over Kazuhiro's body. He kneeled close to him, kissing, licking, touching, every part of him he washed. Kazuhiro's face, neck, shoulders, back, chest, abdomen, Jonathon sought to explore all of him. Throughout it all, hushed moans left Kazuhiro.

Jonathon glanced down at Kazuhiro's hard cock, waiting for its turn in the ritual. Kazuhiro had incredible patience to not rush him, but he also thought Kazuhiro was enjoying this just as much. And to Jonathon, it was more than foreplay. It was connecting with Kazuhiro again.

Jonathon ran the cloth down Kazuhiro's thighs, over his feet. He pushed Kazuhiro's knees wider apart, his gaze focused on the solid rod and soft sac hanging beneath. He poured a stream of water over it, earning a louder groan from Kazuhiro. Setting the bucket aside, he leaned forward, his lips a fraction from touching the head, letting his breath caress it. He could tell Kazuhiro's breathing had quickened in anticipation with the rise and fall of his chest. Clear drops filled the slit. Jonathon drew his tongue slowly over the pre-cum.

Kazuhiro settled his hand in Jonathon's hair on the back of his head. Jonathon knew the gesture was of affection, but it was also a sign to how much Kazuhiro wanted in his mouth. Kazuhiro stood, the tip of his cock brushing Jonathon's lips as he rose. Jonathon took just the tip in, sucking at it while licking at the slit.

Kazuhiro's fingers tightened in Jonathon's hair. He pushed his hips forward, asking with his body for Jonathon to take more of his cock. Jonathon opened wider, allowing him to slide his cock in deep.

Jonathon sucked up to the head again, then back down the shaft. He took hold of Kazuhiro's hips, jerking him forward. Kazuhiro placed his other hand on Jonathon's head, holding it gently with both, and rocked his hips, his cock gliding in and out of Jonathon's mouth.

Jonathon tasted the salt of pre-cum and moaned around Kazuhiro's cock. He felt Kazuhiro shudder, saw his abdomen clench and release. He sucked harder on him, wanting Kazuhiro to spill his fluid in his mouth, but Kazuhiro drew his hips back until his cock slipped out of Jonathon's mouth. He gripped Jonathon's arm and pulled him to his feet, turning him to face the tub.

Jonathon gripped the edge, bending forward and

spreading his legs wide. Kazuhiro stepped away from him, but returned quickly. He wrapped one arm around Jonathon's waist, pressing his body close as he eased two oiled fingers into him. Jonathon groaned between clenched teeth. The pleasure of Kazuhiro's touch making it so he could only focus on him.

Kazuhiro thrust his fingers in him a few times, but his own need to be inside him took over. He pulled his fingers away and put his oil slicked cock at Jonathon's hole. As he pressed it in, Jonathon pushed back, taking it deeper faster. Kazuhiro grabbed a fistful of Jonathon's hair and tugged his head back as he sank fully into him, pleasure overwhelming him at having his cock wrapped in Jonathon's tightness and heat.

Pushing, thrusting, grinding against each other, they set a frantic, urgent pace.

Jonathon moaned each time their bodies slammed together. Along with holding him by the hair, Kazuhiro had a firm grip on his hip, as if Kazuhiro needed to feel his body and keep him close. He felt the same way. After the danger of the night and his fear he'd never have Kazuhiro like this again, to feel Kazuhiro's strong body, knowing he was safe, compounded his pleasure.

Kazuhiro's muscles tightened. A breathless moan left him, and he thrust faster. He released Jonathon's hip to take his cock in hand. A few strokes was all Jonathon needed. He bucked against Kazuhiro, moaning loud as he came.

Kazuhiro drove into him hard, adding his voice to Jonathon's as his cock pulsed and throbbed, shooting his release deep into his golden-haired lover.

Kazuhiro rested inside him, his eyes closed, savoring the feel of Jonathon's body rising and falling beneath him in quick breaths. After a few long moments, he stood straight and took a step back, easing his softening cock out of him.

Jonathon turned to him, wrapping his arms around him as he delivered a languid kiss. He rested his forehead on Kazuhiro's. "Shall we get in the bath?"

Kazuhiro nodded. "Briefly, or I may fall asleep in it."

Jonathon gave him another gentle kiss. "You survived a sword fight tonight. I certainly won't lose you in a bath."

Kazuhiro smiled and climbed into the tall tub. As he settled in the water, Jonathon sat next to him, resting his head on Kazuhiro's shoulder. Kazuhiro wrapped one arm around him, burying his nose in Jonathon's hair.

"Why did you come to me tonight?" Kazuhiro whispered.

"I feared for your safety. After I learned the truth from Kita, I had to come to you. I didn't know how much help I could be, but I couldn't know you were going into danger and not be there with you."

Kazuhiro tipped his head back on the tub's edge, a heavy and tired sigh leaving him. "You continue to surprise me."

"Is that good or bad?"

"I haven't decided."

Jonathon lifted his head, looking at him. "Is that the only thing you're undecided about?"

Kazuhiro stayed quiet for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was soft. "Why do you want to stay with me? Why wouldn't you want to go home to your own people? Your own ways?"

"I like your ways. And I have no one back home who cares that I'm gone. No one who's waiting for me to return." Jonathon brushed Kazuhiro's cheek with his thumb. "And I want to stay with you because after just a few short days, I find myself caring for you so very much."

Kazuhiro closed his eyes as if he were holding off inner pain. "I want you to be safe, and things are only going to grow more dangerous here." His voice hushed more. "I could never forgive myself if something happened to you. It would be better if some of my men escorted you to Hyogo Port."

Jonathon sat up and shifted around until he was straddling Kazuhiro's lap. "How can I get on a ship and travel thousands of miles away knowing I'm leaving you behind to face everything alone? That upsets me more than the thought of any danger here. And haven't I already proven I can take care of myself?"

“To some regard.”

Jonathon blinked, startled by his response. “What do you mean?”

A half smirk curved one corner of Kazuhiro’s lips. “You fight terribly with a Japanese sword.”

A laugh broke from Jonathon, easing some of the tension. “But if I stay, you can teach me to use one better.” He brought his lips closer to Kazuhiro’s, whispering, “Do you really want me to go?”

“No.”

“Then will you let me stay with you?”

Another sigh left Kazuhiro. “Yes. Even if I don’t know if it’s the right thing to do.”

“It will be. There’s just one thing that concerns me.”

“What?”

“Barrett. When he finds out you’re still alive and I’m with you, he could send someone else to kill you.”

“Then we’ll have to eliminate that threat.”

“I agree, and I have a plan, but it’ll still require a trip to Hyogo Port. One thing about Barrett, he’s underestimated me, looking at me only for what he saw on the surface and judging me based on my *personal* preferences.”

Kazuhiro ran his fingers through Jonathon’s hair, enjoying the soft slide of it between his fingers. “Your beauty makes it seem as though you’re soft, delicate, but you’re like a sword in a gilded scabbard. The real strength is inside.”

Jonathon gently cupped Kazuhiro’s face in both hands. “Then if that’s what you believe, don’t think of sending me away. Let me stand and fight at your side, to share in your beliefs and what you care for.”

Kazuhiro’s voice hushed. “You should know, you may be on the losing side.”

Jonathon cocked his head in confusion. “Why do you say that?”

“Even if the Emperor is placed back in full power, he’ll

also eventually bend to the outsiders' will - despite his promises - and sell our country to them. There are many among us, besides the Shogun, who see the profit to be gained from allowing others in." He drew his fingers down Jonathon's cheek, neck, to the center of his chest. "I'm not so extreme in my beliefs that I feel we shouldn't associate at all with the outside world. There's a lot we can learn from each other. I *do* see the value in that. I only want to ensure we as a country, as a people, don't lose ourselves."

"But if you believe if the Emperor is placed back in power that he'll do the same as the Shogun, why would you still fight?"

"Because I'm not fighting for him. The Emperor has yet to prove himself, but the Shogun has already shown what kind of man he is, and it's one who's not worthy of his position. I'll fight for what I believe in, and that's to remind others to not forget who we are. I would rather fight knowing I'll lose, than stand back and do nothing. Apathy is one of the worst traits a man can have."

Jonathon nodded. Simply listening to Kazuhiro's words invigorated him. He'd never been around anyone who stood so strongly, so bravely, for what they believed in. "Hearing you explain it makes me want to stay by you even more." He paused, one thing still nagging at his mind. "But, if my presence could complicate things between you and Ito Hidetoshi..."

One of Kazuhiro's slender eyebrows lifted in a look of amusement. "Jealousy is also not a becoming trait."

"I'm hardly jealous."

Kazuhiro continued to stare at him, clearly not believing him.

Jonathon huffed. "Maybe there's a trace of jealousy, but I mainly want to know where I stand."

"Exactly where you are now." Kazuhiro wrapped his arms around Jonathon's lower back and pulled him forward so his hard cock was tucked behind Jonathon's ass, resting between the cheeks. "My actions tonight were less aiding a former lover than they were seeking justice for the wrongful

killing of an old family friend.”

Jonathon looped his arms loosely around Kazuhiro’s neck. “I understand. I didn’t mean to seem jealous, but after what Kita told me of the situation and how things were between us earlier, I couldn’t help but wonder.”

“Kita-san talks too much. I’ve told him that more than once, and it looks like I’ll need to tell him again.”

“Don’t be upset at him. I’m grateful he told me what he did. If he hadn’t, I may have just stayed here waiting for you, and then who knows what could’ve happened. And it *did* take some convincing on my part to get him to take me to you.”

Kazuhiro made a grumbling noise of agreement. “I’ll grant him a reprieve this time, but more because of him putting you in a kimono than of his assistance.”

Smiling, Jonathon rocked his hips so his fully filled cock rubbed against Kazuhiro’s abdomen. “So you enjoyed seeing me dressed like that?”

Kazuhiro gripped Jonathon ass in both hands. “Very much. Though, you’re deserving of something finer than his secondhand clothing.” He lifted his hips, his cock-head touching Jonathon’s hole. “Which is why I’m having a few kimonos specially made for you.”

Jonathon pulled his head back to better look into his eyes. “You are?”

Kazuhiro nodded. “From the best kimono maker in Kyoto. I ordered it all this evening before going to the pleasure district.”

Jonathon playfully splashed water at him. “Then you’d already decided you were going to let me stay with you!”

Kazuhiro laughed. “Yes, but after your rash actions tonight, I thought it might be best to send you back to America before you got yourself killed.”

Jonathon gasped in pretending offense. “You’re cruel to me.”

Still grinning, Kazuhiro moved one hand off Jonathon’s ass to grip his own cock, pressing it more firmly to Jonathon’s

hole. "Do you not like it?"

Jonathon sat back, pushing his ass down until the broad head penetrated him. His eyes slowly closed. He sank further down Kazuhiro's cock, moaning soft and low. "I do. So very much."

He touched his lips to Kazuhiro's, joy rushing through him in knowing he would get to stay in the arms of his samurai.

§ § §

Jonathon paced the inn's small room. He'd left the door leading out to the inn open, and also opened the second door going outside to a garden. Sweat dampened his skin, but he wasn't sure if it was from the summer heat, or nerves at waiting for this confrontation. He stopped before the door to the outside, gazing at the garden.

He couldn't begin to predict how this meeting would go. The last place Barrett would expect him would be Hyogo Port, and he was certain when he'd sent his message to Barrett's ship, the man's jaw had to drop. He wondered if Barrett would even meet him. He hadn't replied back. It could be Barrett was so infuriated that he was alive, he would ignore his plea to give him safe passage back to America after not being able to take Kazuhiro's life.

But that wasn't the type of man Barrett was. He *would* be infuriated, and that fury would bring Barrett here to kill him on his own.

"You pathetic, worthless bastard."

Jonathon tensed at the snarling voice. He glanced over his shoulder, locking his gaze with Barrett's condemning one.

Barrett marched into the room, slamming the sliding door closed so hard, it bounced off the frame to be left slightly open. He stopped inches from Jonathon's face. "You're a little piece of shit, and I should've known better than to think you could do this job!"

Jonathon flinched at the spittle flying from Barrett's lips and took a step back. "I just couldn't do it."

"Of course you couldn't! You're weak, like all of *your* kind,

and you lost yourself in sinful ways.”

Jonathon snorted, carrying a sardonic tone as he spoke. “Yes, because me sharing my body with another man is much more sinful than plotting murder or profiting off war.”

Barrett stepped close to Jonathon again. “And look at yourself.” He flicked his hand at the light blue kimono Jonathon wore. “You’re even dressed like the heathens. I should’ve gone with my gut that you couldn’t be trusted. I’ve come to the conclusion my nephew’s story was the true one, that you lured him to that place of debauchery and then tried to rob him. You’re a manipulator and a deceiver. You disgust me.”

On his final word, Barrett lashed out, backhanding Jonathon across the cheek.

The force of the hit knocked Jonathon to the side. He closed his eyes against the pain. He moved his hand toward the wakizashi on his hip and snapped upright, unsheathing the short sword in a single, fluid movement, landing the tip at Barrett’s throat. He glared into Barrett’s eyes. “I won’t deny I have those qualities. They’re what brought you here, after all.”

A harsh laugh left Barrett. “You don’t have what it takes to kill me. You didn’t even have it when my nephew was forcing himself on you, as you claimed, but then I’m sure you enjoyed that.”

“You can think what you want about me. You have since the moment you saw me. But even if you think I’m not capable of driving this sword through your throat, what are your thoughts on them?”

As he finished, Kazuhiro stepped through the outer door, Nakano and Kita following him. Through the door from the inn came Tanaka and Kawada. All surrounded Barrett. Kazuhiro stood at Jonathon’s side.

Barrett snapped his gaze back to Jonathon. “You traitorous son of a bitch!”

“That’s your point of view,” Jonathon said. “Mine is that I’m standing for what I believe in.”

“What you believe in? You’re betraying one of your own!”

“First, other than race and country, there are *no* connections between you and me. And second, what I believe is to not propagate and profit from war. You don’t even have a side you care more for, one who you believe is in the right. All you care is that your pockets keep getting fatter with every gun you sell and every bullet that’s shot.”

“Listen to you, suddenly so righteous. Did you discover your new morality when your legs were wrapped around him?”

Jonathon clenched the sword. “Kazuhiro-sama, you better take over before I open his throat.”

Kazuhiro laid his hand on Jonathon’s arm, bringing the sword down. He spoke in English to Barrett. “You have two paths before you, Barrett. Leave and never return, and you’ll live. Or stay and you’ll die.”

Barrett’s lips curled in disgust. “Do you think I believe that you’re going to let me walk out of here?”

“Yes.”

Barrett stared at Kazuhiro. His gaze darted to the other samurai, then back to Kazuhiro. “Why would you?”

“Because I’m not you. I give even my enemies a fair chance. That’s why I came here to give you a warning to leave. If you don’t, it’s certain you’ll die. If not by my hand or those of my men, then by those of another daimyo. Word is traveling very quickly that you’ve been selling weapons to mutual enemies while trying to keep your dealings secret to each.”

Barrett attempted to take a step toward Kazuhiro, but the hiss of swords being pulled free stopped him. “What difference does it make? If they’re not getting guns from me, they’re getting them from someone else.”

“True, but no one likes to know that while you’ve been so graciously helping them gain an advantage in arms, you’ve been doing the same to their enemy. Suddenly that advantage means nothing and now the probability of their own death has increased. They feel betrayed. If you continue

your business, with each daimyo you meet, you'll never know if he's meeting with you to buy arms, or to correct the insult you've committed."

Barrett glared at Kazuhiro in silent contempt.

Jonathon could see Barrett trembled slightly, but whether it was from fear or rage, he wasn't sure. If he had to hazard a guess, he would say rage. He was sure Barrett couldn't see through his righteous indignation to the truth in Kazuhiro's words.

Kazuhiro stepped closer to Barrett, his expression hardening, his eyes becoming colder. His voice lowered to a threatening timbre. "Make your decision now, or I'll make it for you."

Barrett visibly swallowed. "I'll leave."

Kazuhiro gave a derisive snort. "As I expected. To men like you, there's nothing more important than money, except your own life, and if you're to enjoy your precious wealth, you have to live."

Barrett looked back to him. "If you think my leaving changes anything, you're wrong. Another guns merchant will take my place."

"I'm well aware of that. You're not the first arms dealer to come to Japan, you won't be the last. You are, however, the most vile, and seeing you go is victory enough. My men and I will escort you to your ship."

"I don't need your damn protection!"

"It's not to protect you. It's to see that you hold to your word and to watch you sail away. But first..."

Kazuhiro struck with such speed, Jonathon almost didn't catch the movement until Kazuhiro's fist slammed into Barrett's face.

Barrett toppled to the floor, hands over his nose, blood seeping between his fingers.

Kazuhiro stood over him. "That was for Jonathon-san. If you touch him again, speak to him, or look at him, it'll only be your soulless carcass returning to America."

Jonathon couldn't help but feel a burst of pride at Kazuhiro defending him. He tried to not look too satisfied, but saw even the stoic Nakano had a small smirk.

Kazuhiro nodded toward Barrett. Tanaka and Kawada grabbed Barrett and hauled him to his feet. Kazuhiro started toward the door leading out to the inn.

Barrett balked and tried to pull free of Tanaka's and Kawada's hold. "You can't drag me through the streets like this! I'll be..."

"Disgraced?" Kazuhiro finished. "That's the point."

Jonathon disregarded any attempt at not looking satisfied and allowed a large smile to spread over his features. He glanced to Kazuhiro, who looked at him at the same moment. He took in Kazuhiro's soft smile, the affection in his eyes, and knew then that when he had been confronted with two paths not so long ago, he'd without doubt chosen correctly.

§ § §

Kazuhiro walked quickly down the hall on his way to his chambers. They'd arrived back in Kyoto that afternoon, and nearly as soon as he dismounted, he was riding out again after receiving a message from Saigo wanting to have dinner with him and learn what had happened with Barrett.

He hadn't wanted to be bothered with the meeting. He'd hoped to spend a long evening with Jonathon after their journey, but the meeting served its purpose in more ways than informing Saigo of the incident. It also allowed him to inform his ally that he would be leaving Kyoto soon to return to his home and lands.

It'd been a long time since he'd been home, so it was true he needed to return to see how things fared. He received regular updates, but especially with Ito's murder, it was best if he made his presence known there again. And, he wanted to bring Jonathon to his family home. The thought of him there, spending their days together in peace, filled him with sense of happiness and serenity that he hadn't felt in a very long time.

He reached his rooms and slid open the door, closing it

behind him while looking for Jonathon. Jonathon was nowhere in sight, but the door to the garden was open. Kazuhiro crossed the room, stepped half outside, and stopped, his movements halted by the beautiful vision before him.

Jonathon leaned back on a post, the black night sky and brilliant white stars behind him. He wore not just one of the kimonos Kazuhiro had bought for him, but all three of them, so he was layered in the fine silk. Kazuhiro knew the clothing had been delivered while they were in Hyogo Port, along with a few other gifts he'd gotten Jonathon, but he hadn't gotten to inspect them before giving them to him. It seemed Jonathon had found them and must be pleased with them.

And they looked stunning on him. Their beauty complimented Jonathon's just as he envisioned they would. Of the first that Jonathon wore closest to his body, he'd bought it to be an autumn kimono for him. The base colors of red and orange were accented by maple leaves and blossoms, all reminiscent of fall season.

Over it, Jonathon had pulled on the kimono of black, stitched with white to mimic the very stars that shone so brightly behind Jonathon at that moment, and bearing a white chrysanthemum on the left. This kimono he'd intended for his eyes and his alone. To him, there was something immensely sensual to have Jonathon's fair skin wrapped in black silk. The way this kimono draped off Jonathon's left shoulder, exposing the autumn kimono beneath, Jonathon holding it gently in his graceful fingers, compounded that sensuality.

Lastly, Jonathon was draped in the kimono in shades of gold, colored with soft blossoms and leafed branches. He'd selected the colors for this one because he felt the color would complement Jonathon's golden hair, and the delicate blossoms, his beauty.

Around his neck, Jonathon wore the strings of gold with a large silvery pearl in the center, dotted with beads of red jade and gold. Jonathon had removed the gold earrings and replaced them with the ones he'd bought him of deep green jade, carved to look like a blossom. In the center of each was a large, round red jade, and trailing from them were beads of

silver down to another ball of red jade.

Kazuhiro leaned back on the doorframe, wanting to admire Jonathon, to keep forever in his mind how he looked at that moment. Jonathon's expression was serious, and he knew Jonathon's thoughts were of him, probably worrying about him and wondering when he'd return. Even clothed in the soft patterns and silk, he could see the inner strength, the pride, in Jonathon's gaze, and he knew however many days were left in his life, he wanted each of them to be spent with Jonathon.

As if sensing he was there, Jonathon looked toward him. The serious expression faded under a bright smile, and not even the darkness of the night could dim the brilliance of his blue eyes. Kazuhiro found himself smiling back at him without thinking of it.

Jonathon started toward him. "I'm happy you're home."

Kazuhiro pushed off the doorframe and walked to meet him. "So am I." As soon as Jonathon was close enough to touch, he laid his hands on him, running them up and down Jonathon's arms, feeling the slide of silk beneath his palms. "Do you like your gifts?"

Jonathon placed his hands on Kazuhiro's waist. "I love them. How do I look in them?"

"You make them look beautiful." Kazuhiro grinned and leaned closer to him, his lips nearly touching Jonathon's. "Even if I hadn't intended for you to wear all of them at once."

Jonathon laughed softly. "But I loved each of them so much, I couldn't decide which I wanted you to see me in first."

"You made a good choice." Kazuhiro caressed the Jonathon's bare chest, his gaze following where his fingers traveled over Jonathon's skin. "And it'll build anticipation as I take each one off you."

"I like the sound of that." Jonathon dipped his head slightly, searching for Kazuhiro's gaze. "Did things go well with Saigo-san?"

Kazuhiro nodded. "He thought I should've killed Barrett, but he also said I handled the situation with great honor and

I should be proud. I think it was because of that he wasn't upset when I told him I'd soon be leaving Kyoto."

Jonathon pulled in a startled breath. "Leaving? For where? You know I'll go with you."

Kazuhiro chuckled low in his throat. "I do know that, even if I asked you not to. And it's nothing to be concerned over. I'm returning home, and you'll be going with me. That's one of the reasons I'm leaving. I want to take you to my family home and lands."

Jonathon's smile returned. He wrapped his arms around him and looked into Kazuhiro's eyes. He knew how meaningful it was that Kazuhiro wanted to take him to his ancestral home. Part of him had feared when the time came for Kazuhiro to return there, that he would leave him in Kyoto. Even though Kazuhiro told him he could stay at his side, he understood how some daimyo and samurai had boundaries. But it seemed from Kazuhiro's words, there would be no such boundaries between them.

Jonathon stroked lightly up and down the back of Kazuhiro's neck. "You truly mean that?"

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't. When I told you that you could stay with me, I meant it. And to stay with me means to go where I go."

Jonathon lowered his gaze. "But I know that's not wholly true. There'll still be things you do and places you go that I can't."

"Now *that* is what's not true."

Jonathon looked up to Kazuhiro's eyes again. "What about meetings like tonight?"

"This was the last of those. My friends and allies about you now. While some aren't certain they're ready to accept you, all trust my judgment, including Saigo. He actually wants to meet you before we leave."

Jonathon closed his eyes, giving himself a moment to feel the joy rising inside him.

Kazuhiro pulled him closer. He nuzzled Jonathon's cheek, whispering, "You look very happy."

“I am.” Jonathon caressed Kazuhiro’s cheek with the backs of his fingers. “It may be strange of me, but here, with you, I feel more at home than I have anywhere in a very long time. I know I’m an outsider, and I’ll probably always be viewed that way, but I feel I’m where I belong.”

A warm smile graced Kazuhiro’s lips. “You’re not an outsider. You may have come from a different land, but even before arriving here you had your arms open to our culture and you’ve embraced it since. You’re one of us.” He brushed his thumb across Jonathon’s bottom lip. “And you’re also mine.”

Jonathon’s breath fled at Kazuhiro’s declaration. He could only express himself in one way. He pressed his lips to Kazuhiro’s, kissing him deeply, putting all his passion and happiness into it.

Kazuhiro tightened his arms around him, returning the kiss with equal emotion. Jonathon sucked Kazuhiro’s tongue into his mouth, and as he released it, Kazuhiro did the same to his.

The kiss came to a slow end with both of them smiling.

Jonathon gave him a light, tender kiss. “You’ve done so well for someone who wasn’t sure he wanted to be kissed.”

“Yes, I’m happy I decided to be open to that aspect of you rather than you speaking my language.”

Jonathon laughed and attempted to halfheartedly push Kazuhiro away. “I thought I’ve gotten much better in the past couple weeks.”

“You have. Your swordsmanship, however...”

Jonathon gasped, but Kazuhiro brought their lips together, smoothing over Jonathon’s pretended offense with a smiling kiss.

With each second, the kiss grew more heated. Kazuhiro drew back from Jonathon’s lips, but only to cover his neck in kisses, licks, and gentle bites.

Jonathon let his head fall back to give more of his neck to him. He loved how bold Kazuhiro had become with his kissing. When they made love now, it was as though Kazuhiro

wanted to kiss and taste all of him. He felt Kazuhiro guiding the gold kimono off his shoulder and brought his head forward. "We should go in."

Kazuhiro managed to speak between kisses, "Why?"

"The guards will see us."

Kazuhiro grinned against Jonathon's neck as he pulled the kimono down, letting it fall in a soft rustle of silk. "I don't think this is a secret. The doors are very thin and you're very loud."

Laughter slipped from Jonathon's throat. He broke from Kazuhiro's hold and scooped the kimono off the veranda. He walked backward inside, beckoning with his index finger for Kazuhiro to follow. When he saw Kazuhiro move forward, he turned and went to the bedchamber.

He stopped at the large chest, and as he carefully folded the kimono, Kazuhiro bumped into him from behind. Jonathon smiled and pressed into him more.

Kazuhiro buried his nose in Jonathon's hair, his eyes closing at the softness brushing his face. He curled his fingers around the black kimono at the neck and drew it off Jonathon's shoulders.

Jonathon placed the gold kimono on the chest so his hands were free to let the black one slide off. It slipped to the floor, but before he could bend to pick it up, Kazuhiro's hands were untying the obi holding the last kimono closed, as it was also the only one he'd worn a sash with.

As the obi floated to the floor, Kazuhiro slipped his hand between the folds of silk, parting the kimono further, and found no barrier between his touch and Jonathon's bare cock. He brought his lips closer to Jonathon's ear. "You forgot a loincloth...again."

Jonathon glanced at him out the corner of his eye. "I did, didn't I?"

Kazuhiro shook his head at him. "You need to get comfortable wearing one."

"I don't know why. The only one who'll know I'm not wearing one is you, and I think it's to your benefit that I don't."

“With that reasoning, I agree.”

Kazuhiro wrapped his fingers around Jonathon's solid shaft. As he started stroking it, Jonathon leaned back on him, soft moans passing over his parted lips. He tipped his head back to Kazuhiro's shoulder and turned his head toward him, kissing Kazuhiro's cheek and neck.

Kazuhiro ran his other hand up Jonathon's body, the feel of lean muscle beneath his touch arousing him further. He caressed the length of Jonathon's throat, and at reaching his jaw, he leaned over him more and closed their mouths together in a long, slow kiss.

The warmth and softness of Kazuhiro's tongue made Jonathon want more of him. He turned fully toward him, but Kazuhiro stopped him from embracing him by dragging the red kimono off his shoulders. The slide of the supple silk over his skin evoked a low moan of pleasure from Jonathon. As it fell free of his body, he reached to untie Kazuhiro's obi.

Kazuhiro gently caught his hands. He flicked his gaze toward the futon, then back to Jonathon. “Lie down. I want to look at you while I undress.”

Jonathon kissed him softly once more, then turned for the futon. He kneeled onto it, going to his hands, sliding down to his elbows and leaving his ass raised for Kazuhiro's view before moving all the way to his stomach and rolling to his back. A sensual smile curved his lips, with a hint of satisfaction, at seeing the lust burning in Kazuhiro's gaze.

Kazuhiro's hands moved seemingly of their own as he removed his clothes, his full attention on Jonathon spread out before him. He'd thought Jonathon was beautiful wrapped in silk. He was even more so bare, wearing only the strings of gold and jewels about his neck and the earrings. The last of his clothing discarded, Kazuhiro moved toward him. He knelt between Jonathon's legs and brought his body over him.

Jonathon reached up with both hands, laying them on the sides of Kazuhiro's face, looking into his eyes. Warm emotion flowed through him at what he saw in Kazuhiro's gaze. He whispered Kazuhiro's name, and the soft utterance brought Kazuhiro down to him, their lips meeting in the softest of

kisses. It reaffirmed to Jonathon what he'd seen in Kazuhiro's eyes; their future together, where he knew each day of their lives would be ones of honor and love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.J. Frost resides in Ohio with her family and pets. Her short stories have been featured in several romance and erotica anthologies, and her gay erotic romance novels are published at MLR Press. To learn more about her writing, please feel welcomed to visit www.sjfrost.com and <http://sj-frost.blogspot.com/>