

GLORIA OLIVER

Free Sample

IN THE SERVICE OF
SAMURAI



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IN THE SERVICE OF SAMURAI

© 2003, 2011 by Gloria Oliver

ISBN 978-1-612710-53-2

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DEDICATION

This is for John, without whom this book would never have been written.

Great thanks to the House of Three Gaijin, especially Wendy "Dinzumo" Dinsmore, for all their help with the technical details of this book and support. I also want to thank all the great folks at Zumaya for their patience and efforts. And last but by no means least, Liz.

CHAPTER 1

The sun dipped beneath the horizon, taking with it the last light of the day. Toshi crouched a little lower over his workbench as the light faded, knowing his master wouldn't want the lamps lit while a moment of daylight still remained.

Bought from his family while he was very young, he knew his master's ways well. Just as Master Shun didn't want any money wasted unnecessarily, he also precluded spending it on unneeded frivolities. Toshi ran his hand over his black hair, fingering the old, thin, stretched tie holding it in a ponytail. Though the last few months had seen a growth spurt for him, he knew he would not be receiving a new pair of knee-reaching breeches or a loose-fitting tunic for several moons yet.

Still, he was well-fed, and the skills he was learning would earn a better living than some. Aside from his not-so-common profession, he was the same as hundreds of others, a boy with the usual dark hair, brown eyes, slightly tinted skin, and almond-shaped eyes—characteristics which made it virtually impossible for a foreigner to pass as a native.

With precision gained from long practice, his brush slid smoothly over the thick rice paper as he diligently copied the curving meridian lines from the yellowing foreign parchment pinned on the desk beside him.

As he squinted, he dipped his brush in the small reservoir of ink built into the desk. Gently twirling the brush on the bowl's long lip, he bled off any excess. His steady hand guided the brush in another slow curve, marking the outline of his map. His attention didn't waver from the delicate work, even as he heard the shop's front door slide open.

"If you would please wait a moment, O-kyaku-sama, I'll be right with you," he said.

At an unhurried pace, Toshi came toward the end of his curving line. An unusually cool breeze made its way through the long shop, carrying with it the heavy scent of the sea. Like most shops in town, theirs

was comprised of two stories, one in which to conduct business, the other for sleeping and eating. Master Shun believed in cleanliness, so a day did not pass during which Toshi didn't have to sweep the entrance or run a wet cloth across the floorboards. On days when it rained and prospective customers tracked in the mud with them, it was all he could do to keep up.

A large counter took up the left side of the front of the shop, while the rear held the working desk and wall-to-wall niches to hold their wares.

He rubbed his suddenly cold feet together, wondering why the customer hadn't bothered to close the door. His gaze snapped up as he realized the customer did shut the paper screen door, remembering the soft wood on wood sound as it had slid closed.

Yet the scent of salt and seaweed still crowded into his nostrils. It was strange the smell had come so far and was so strong since the shop was a distance from the port. Dismissing the oddity as he heard the late customer moving about, he set his brush carefully aside.

"O-kyaku-sama, I've finished." He bowed in the general direction of the visitor out of long ingrained habit though he couldn't see him. "I apologize for the wait. How may I help you?"

He glanced at the shadow-enshrouded figure on the far side of the room, just as the last of the sun's light dwindled away. He quickly left the side of his workbench and its wooden platform. A small, unexplained chill coursed through him as the customer's ever deepening shadow came to loom over him. "Sir?"

He didn't receive an answer. Realizing Master Shun wasn't likely to make a sale if his customer remained in the dark, he shifted past the familiar surroundings and reached for the nearest paper lantern.

"I'll have some light for us in a moment, sir. I apologize for it being so dark." He removed the paper covering of the lamp and exposed the candle inside.

"Where's your master, boy?"

The unexpected voice made him jump. Though the customer was standing less than five arm lengths from him, the low, monotone voice sounded as if it had been issued from far away. Toshi glanced up to answer, but he hesitated as he saw a flash of greenish light issue from somewhere around the customer's face.

He rubbed at his eyes, feeling foolish, even as a tinge of unreasonable fear tried to crowd into his mind. Realizing his continued silence could be misunderstood as rudeness, he turned away from the figure

and answered the question. At the same time, he reached to light the lamp. “Master Shun wasn’t feeling well today, sir. He retired early. If you wish, you could leave a message for him. I’m sure he’ll be feeling better tomorrow.”

Warmth tickled his fingers as the wick caught fire. He placed the oval paper covering back over the candle. Its light gently spread over the room. He then carried the lantern to the main counter in the front of the shop, and turned to get his first good look at the waiting customer.

The man was facing away from him, so Toshi’s gaze landed upon well cared for armor with its small steel plates hooked on lacquered leather. He wasn’t surprised by what he saw, having already figured from the harsh and emotionless tone his customer was samurai—an elite, upper-class warrior.

Dressed as if for battle, the samurai wore the commanding rounded helmet with protruding strips of plate to guard the back of the neck. Fitted back plates and metal shoulder pads were attached to the toughened leather that made up the sleeves and the lower skirt. Strapped-on leather tubes protected the warrior’s legs.

No, what made his eyes grow wide and his heart beat faster were the long tufts of wet seaweed hanging from the armor. Droplets of water reflected the lamp’s light as they fell from the armor and the soaked clothes beneath to make a small puddle on the floor. His eyes followed the water trail leading from the samurai’s feet back to the front door, his throat growing dry.

He took an unsteady step back, not sure what it all meant. His gaze traveled back to the armor and looked at the family crest painted there. The crest showed three white crescent moons facing each other within a thin circle. He didn’t immediately recognize it. It wasn’t one belonging to any of the prominent samurai families in town. Perhaps the man was a *ronin*, a masterless samurai, but the good condition of his armor and his kimono suggested otherwise.

Toshi watched with growing curiosity as the samurai slowly turned about to face him. His breath caught in his throat as a demonic scowl stared him in the face. He tried to still his racing heart as he realized the evil, horrifying expression before him was but a mask clipped to the front of the samurai’s helmet, hiding the man’s true face.

Taking another step back, he forced his eyes to leave the mask. Why would a samurai in full battle regalia come here to see Master Shun? He wondered what time it was and when the city watch would be coming by. Ever since the foreigners, the *gaijin*, had been allowed entry into the

ports and even certain regions of the city itself, the curfews and patrols had become more stringent than before. If he ran out to look for them, would they cut him down before he could explain why he had broken curfew? Or worse, would he even make it out of the store if he decided to try?

His eyes fixed themselves on the sheathed swords, the long katana and shorter wakizashi, hanging from the samurai's side. He wasn't sure he could run past the strange customer to get help before the warrior could draw either blade and make its razor sharpness cut through his hide.

Glancing up into the warrior's masked face, he froze. He had seen it again—a flash of greenish light in the eye slits of the mask! Excitement and fear clutched at his breast and a thin sheen of perspiration rose on his brow. He stared hard at the samurai's metal mask, noticing for the first time how dark the area beyond the eye slits were and how the brown eyes that should have been there staring back at him were nowhere in sight.

“Sir, it...it's time for the shop to close. Is there a message you wish me to convey to Master Shun?” He tried not to look at the snarling, demonic mask, though his eyes were drawn toward the unnatural emptiness of its eye slits.

“Can you read *gaijin* maps, boy?”

Toshi felt surprise rush through him at the totally unexpected question.

“Yes, sir. A little. My...my master has had dealings with a number of *gaijin* to try to learn their ways of making and reading maps. I have studied this with him.”

He hadn't meant to say so much. He didn't want to deal with the strange samurai. That was Master Shun's responsibility, but his frightened tongue hadn't known when to stop. With a long, silent shiver, he wished his master would come downstairs right then, even if it meant he would get a flogging.

“Do you have maps for the area with the chain of islands just to the north of here?”

The samurai's distant monotone slammed into him even as he tried to figure out what he should do. When he didn't immediately answer, the seaweed-covered samurai took a long step forward. Toshi took one back.

“Well, boy?” the samurai asked. His impatience was unmistakable; his voice sounded like it came from a deep well.

Not wanting the samurai to come any closer, Toshi tried to answer his question as quickly as possible.

“Yes, sir, we have many maps.”

“Show me.”

He scurried away to the shop’s rear. Against the wall, on the right, racks of small square-shaped shelves were stacked upon each other almost to the ceiling. Ruffling through the carefully rolled parchments in a number of the squares, he grabbed what he was looking for and walked cautiously around the samurai to stand behind the safety of the shop’s front counter. He laid the rolled parchment on the end of the counter closest to the unusual customer and then backed away from it.

Without a word, the samurai stepped forward. Toshi watched as the man raised his arm to reach for the map. Filled with a bolt of sudden fear, he jumped back, smashing his head against one of the shop’s wooden support beams as the hand he expected to see reaching for the map never appeared. With spots of color flying before his eyes, he stared in paralyzed horror as fleshless fingers reached instead to claim the waiting map.

“You’re *obake*. A monster!” The boy clamped his hands over his mouth as he realized the accusing words were his. He stared at the samurai in cold terror, sure his words would be the end of him.

The samurai ignored him.

As his death didn’t immediately manifest, Toshi’s eyes shrank back to normal. He made no attempt, though, to remove his hands from his mouth. With dread-filled fascination, he watched the samurai’s fleshless hand as the creature took the rolled map and, with another equally bare, undid the string holding it together. He observed the skeletal fingers as they spread the map out over the top of the counter.

All the old stories were true. Demons did walk the earth. But why was this demon here? He and Master Shun had done all Shinto prescribed in order to keep themselves out of the reach of evil or mischievous spirits.

Shinto—The Way of the Gods—made them aware of the spirits that inhabited every rock, tree, and mountain, and which spirits were best avoided and how. The two of them had exorcised the shop and its living quarters above on New Year’s as they did every year, driving the evil spirits out and good luck in. They’d gone to the temple and made the prescribed offerings. The prayer strips were all in place. Had the gods decided not to protect them? What had Master Shun done to bring such evil to this place?

The samurai's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Are all known reefs and other hazards of the area contained within this map?"

Toshi nodded rapidly, his hands still clamped over his mouth. He tried crawling back into the beam behind him as the samurai's empty stare turned toward him, a flash of eerie green light momentarily filling the mask's slits. Sweat poured down the side of his face as he realized with a start the samurai hadn't seen his nod and was therefore still waiting for his answer. He forced his hands to move away from his mouth.

"Y-yes, sir." He could barely keep his words from stumbling over each other. "It's...it's all there, as far as I know. Master Shun has spent a lot of money getting the gaijin to help him make accurate maps."

He clamped his hands over his mouth again, knowing he'd just told more than he liked. The samurai's stare shifted away from him back to the map.

"You can read this map? The numbers, the words?"

Toshi hesitated a long moment before nodding when the samurai's eyes turned toward him again.

"Could you guide someone with it if you had the gaijin instruments?" he asked.

Toshi stared at the samurai, caught off-guard by the question. Should he lie? Very few people got the opportunity to meet gaijin, let alone learn their ways. The demon couldn't possibly know the gaijin merchant they'd contracted had taught him a lot more than required. Even Master Shun didn't know how much he'd learned. Despite being a demon, the samurai wouldn't sense a lie, would he?

"Well?"

The deep voice didn't sound happy to be kept waiting. Green fire flared in the snarling mask's eyes, and Toshi knew he couldn't take the risk. Although he had a horrible feeling he would regret his truthfulness, he nodded.

"Fetch me paper, ink, and brush."

He cringed against the wall, not understanding the reason for the request.

"Move!" The samurai's fleshless hand dropped to the hilt of his katana.

Driven by the commanding tone as well as the unspoken threat, Toshi bolted to the back of the store. Searching for the items requested, he hurried back, the skin on the nape of his neck prickling as he noticed the samurai stood between him and the door.

He almost dropped the wooden ink well on the counter as he tried to put the requested items down. Laying all the supplies within the samurai's reach, he scurried back to stand against his wooden beam.

The skeletal hand reached out and expertly took hold of the thin, long-handled brush. With frightened eyes, Toshi noted as each of the delicate bones in the hand moved with careless grace. Goose bumps covered his arms and back as he saw there was nothing holding them together.

With elegant fluidity, the samurai inked the brush and began to write. Despite himself, Toshi appreciated the evenness of the samurai's strokes. The writing was very clear, and he had no trouble understanding it despite the fact it was upside down to him. With morbid curiosity, he found himself reading the message the samurai was writing for Master Shun. Literacy had been one of the few unexpected gifts he'd gained since being sold as an apprentice.

His face drained of color as he realized the meaning of what he was reading.

"No! Sir, please don't do this," he pleaded. "Master Shun doesn't want to sell me. I've been his apprentice for too many years. You mustn't do this, sir. You mustn't do this!"

Fear overwhelming his sense, he leapt forward to grab the offensive piece of paper. Before his fingers could even brush its surface, the samurai's bony hand lashed out and caught his wrist.

Toshi stared in desperation at the glowing eye slits as an unearthly cold spread into his arm from the samurai's fleshless hand. The cold moved through him like a living thing, paralyzing him where he stood.

Never loosening his hold on the boy's arm, the samurai returned to completing his message.

As the grisly metal face looked elsewhere, Toshi found his eyes and numbed mind free again. He tried to scream so he could wake up Master Shun or attract the watch—anything that might get him away from this demon, but his vocal cords were as frozen as the rest of him.

He read the note again and again, noticing as the samurai finished that it lacked a signature. Who was this demon? Studying the family crest again, he thought he might have seen it somewhere before. Was it important?

The samurai reached inside and produced a hand-sized silk sack from within the lacquered armor. The jingle of coins echoed through the room as the samurai let the sack drop on the counter. He then reached into a small bag at his side and brought out a long bamboo tube. He care-

fully rolled up the map and placed it inside. Returning the tube to the bag, the samurai turned his burning green eyes in Toshi's direction.

"Come."

The intense cold that had kept him rooted to the spot lessened. Toshi walked hesitantly around the counter, the samurai pulling on his wrist.

His worried gaze swept around the shop, a heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach telling him this would be the last time he'd ever see the place he'd called home since he was six. With a overwhelming sense of loss, of leaving all he had ever known, he stopped and planted his feet on the floor, not willing to let it all go so easily.

Without looking back, the samurai yanked his arm, pitching him forward. Landing hard on his knees, Toshi felt his eyes fill with pain-induced tears as the samurai then dragged him toward the door. The snarling mask with its glowing eyes glared at him without the slightest sign of pity or mercy.

With a soft whoosh, the samurai slid open the shop's paneled front door and wrenched him to his feet.

"Now walk." The samurai's free hand landed on his sword's hilt once more, reminding the boy of its silent but deadly threat.

Toshi looked away, hating the way he felt as he realized he had no choice. He slipped on his old sandals, sitting just outside the store entrance, and stepped out of his old life forever.

Keeping his gaze on the dirt road, he followed as the samurai set an easy pace away from the shop. As they walked, a thin fog sprang up around them. Toshi shivered, cold inside and out.

All he was being forced to leave behind flashed through his mind—Master Shun, quirky and strange though he was; the Kawa family next door and their gaggle of children; the sweet dumplings he always bought during festival nights from the old woman near the temple; his room and his few possessions; the friends he'd made from the gaijin ship. His heart ached.

Very few lights were on in the bottom floors of the many two-storied buildings surrounding them on either side. A number of the lights in the living quarters on the second floor had already gone dark as well. Only the howling wind and the lonely howl of a stray dog disturbed the silence as he was led down the street in the direction of the docks.

The scent of the demon's clinging seaweed wrapped about Toshi as they walked. He shuddered despite the warm night breeze as the samurai strolled on as if he were lord of everything around him. Toshi refused

to look at him, to look at the monster that was ripping him away from all he knew.

The buildings changed as they approached the docks. The wood-and-paper homes grew smaller as they crowded in side-by-side. The wail of a hungry child or a quiet, lonely moan occasionally escaped into the street, the smell of human waste and rotting garbage growing ever thicker. The samurai appeared to be oblivious to it all, yet for Toshi, these scents and sounds only too sharply expressed the despair and unfairness welling up inside him.

At last, he slipped a hateful glance at the samurai. Of course it wouldn't bother a demon if there was suffering and misery in the world or that he was about to add to it. After all, wasn't that what demons were for?

He quickly wiped at the tears threatening his eyes, determined not to show any weakness to this demon. Although he hoped for it with every step, the samurai's cold grip never lessened on his wrist. If he could only get a chance to try to escape!

With unbelieving eyes, as they crossed the last street intersection before the docks he spotted two samurai of the watch. Hope sprang in his heart, and he tried to scream for their attention as the demon pulled him across the street. Yet although he tried and tried, no sound made it past his lips. The two men continued walking as he felt his last chance for freedom being swept away by fate.

While his soul wailed with despair, his eyes lighted on a rock on the dirt road less than two feet in front of him. He felt an urge to look at the demon beside him, to make sure *he* hadn't seen the rock. He forced himself to curb the impulse and kept his gaze glued to his one possible means of salvation.

Leaving himself no time for thought, he dropped to the ground and swung one of his legs hard, tripping the samurai. The armored figure fell. Toshi lunged for the rock. Gasping, he felt the bitter cold from the fleshless hand that still held him pour greedily into his bones. He couldn't feel the rock as he wrapped his fingers around it. His body slowed as he fought with every ounce of his being to lift his arm so he could throw the stone to try and gain the attention of the watch.

Perspiration broke out all over his body from the effort as the flowing cold pierced him to the core. With a silent scream, he watched the two samurai disappear from sight as his raised arm froze at the top of the throwing arc.

Hot pain blossomed on the side of his face. Unable to move, he couldn't stop himself from toppling onto the dirt, the samurai's blow knocking him off his feet. A whispered hiss fell on his ear as his vision swam.

"Fool."

He would have cringed from the scorn in the samurai's voice, but he couldn't even do that. A hard yank brought him to his knees. He tried his best to ignore the grotesque mask and the glowing eyes before him.

"If you find someone willing to try to stop me from taking you, I'll kill them. Their death will be on *your* head."

The samurai's voice was cold. Toshi looked away. He knew the demon would do what he threatened.

Another rough yank brought him to his feet. He gasped in pain at the hard pull, the rock he had risked so much to grab falling forgotten from numb fingers. The samurai's words continued to reverberate in his mind as he was dragged forward once again.

Why would a demon be willing to kill to keep him? Why then pay Master Shun instead of just stealing him away? This wasn't the way demons did things.

Toshi offered no more resistance as the samurai pulled him onto the platform for the docks. He kept looking back, however, trying hard to engrave the memory of the home he was being torn from in his mind. He wiped at his face with his sleeve, his eyes burning.

The majority of the boats tied close to them were long and flat-bottomed, most of them fishing boats. On the dock's far side were the gaijin ships. Their tall masts and swollen bodies dwarfed all the other boats around them.

The samurai paid him no attention as he pulled him along and strolled down each of the platforms, gazing at all the ships gathered there. After several minutes, they came across a fishing boat with a small skiff tied to its side. Toshi was dragged toward it, and he wondered what the samurai was planning.

Moving through the fishing boat toward the single-oared dory, the samurai left three coins wrapped artistically in paper next to the ship's tiller. Toshi's eyes strayed to the small bundle, puzzled by the fact the coins had been prepared as a gift. It then dawned on him what they were being left for. His brow furrowed. Why would a demon have need of a skiff?

With his one free hand, the samurai pulled on the rope tied to the small craft and drew it closer to them.

“Get in.” Flashing green eyes turned in Toshi’s direction with the barked command.

He tried to do as he’d been told. His legs, though, still filled with the samurai’s unearthly cold, were numb and unresponsive. As he tried to crawl over the ship’s rail, he shifted his weight too quickly and fell. Watching in startled fear as the boat rose up to meet his face, he felt his arm wrenched from behind. Pulled upward, he was kept from landing face-first into the boat. His legs continued to go down and smacked into the side of the craft as he dangled there by his arm, but he barely felt the impact. This bothered him more than the fact he could have been hurt.

The samurai pulled him up farther until he got his legs into the boat before suddenly letting go of his wrist. Toshi collapsed to his knees, the thread of cold pouring through his bones replaced by a jolt of warmth from his pumping heart.

The fog that had followed them on the streets slithered from the fishing boat down into the skiff as if it hungered for them. Toshi sat still in the bottom of the craft, trying to dispel the memory of the wooden deck rushing toward his face.

The samurai lowered himself into the skiff in a fluid drop, barely rocking the boat. Gazing down at Toshi for a moment, he slid his hand onto the shorter of his two swords before whipping it out of its sheath and slicing through the skiff’s mooring line in one smooth motion.

“If you try to leave this craft, I will cut you in half before you can hit the water.”

Toshi would have laughed at the irony if he hadn’t thought the samurai would cut him down for that, too. His body felt so numb and slow he doubted he could even save himself if the boat suddenly tipped over, let alone try to escape.

He felt the samurai’s green gaze staring at him again. He tried his best not to let his own cross its path.

“Take the oar and row us out to the middle of the bay.” The samurai waved his hand toward the back of the boat.

He crawled to where he’d been ordered and stared at the long angled oar waiting there. Watching to make sure his hands got around it, since he still couldn’t feel them, he moved it back and forth to get the craft moving.

As the small boat inched away from the docks to deeper water, he glanced back at the city one more time. His eyes grew moist as he stared at the dark silhouette, no hint showing in the darkness of the bustle and life that had made it so dear to him over the years.

The fog grew in intensity. It cut off his view of the city. In a way, it made it seem as if the city had never existed.

After a time, the skiff picked up speed. Toshi became ever more grateful for the task the demon had given him, as it loosened the numbness from his body. The heat of the work was exhilarating compared to the unearthly coldness that had gripped him before.

He stared at the samurai's armored back, seeing nothing but fog and sea beyond him. When he was feeling more like himself, he worked up the courage to speak.

"Sir, might I ask where we are going?"

The samurai didn't react to his question, just remained fixed, facing the prow of the boat. Toshi continued rowing and didn't speak again. He still had no idea as to their destination when his arms began to tire.

"Stop here." The samurai made a chopping motion with his hand.

Toshi stopped rowing, staring at the samurai in surprise, able to see nothing but the swirling fog around them. Keeping his gaze locked on the samurai, he waited to see what he would ask him to do next. An unwanted chill cut through him as he tried his best not to guess at what it might be.

His attention was drawn to the water as bubbles formed on its surface. The bubbles grew to a writhing mass, a soft glow coming from beneath them. The fog slithered away as if afraid of what was happening in the water. He watched the spot of light beneath the bubbles get larger and brighter.

His knuckles turned white as he gripped his oar in apprehension. The knocking of his pulse in his ears was the only sound he could hear as an eerily glowing rod broke through the surface of the frothing sea.

The rod rose higher. A crossbeam broke the surface beneath it, long strands of seaweed strung from its length. A tattered square sail followed, emblazoned with a gold-colored replica of the crest on the samurai's armor.

As terror welled within him, his gaze was inexorably drawn to the samurai. The warrior slowly turned to face him and stared at him with his burning green eyes. Toshi shook his head in helpless denial as the samurai stood up and pointed toward the still-rising ghost vessel.

"No! This is not my karma," he said. "I won't go to a cursed ship!"

The samurai stared at him impassively, the green light issuing from the demon mask's eyes brighter than before.

"Row."

Toshi shook his head again, forgetting whom he was denying in the grip of his horror. He let go of the oar as if it burned him. His gaze darted around, as he looked for a way to escape and saw his only option was to dive into the sea.

He turned, determined to leave the boat. Something solid struck the back of his knee, folding his leg under him. As he struggled not to fall, the samurai's lacquered scabbard flashed ahead of him just before it slammed into his stomach. He fell hard into the boat.

Panic drove him to ignore the flaring pain in his leg and stomach as he fought to throw himself overboard. He'd reached the side of the boat when his cotton tunic was wrenched from behind and he was yanked with it. He tried desperately to pull away, his fists flying, but a shot of unearthly cold wove down his spine, draining his resistance as fleshless fingers wrapped around the back of his neck.

He screamed.

His terror and desperation multiplied as the cold spread through him. Still screaming, he tried to pry the bony fingers from his neck, but his hands were slapped away. Soon he could no longer move. With a soundless cry of fear, he shut his eyes, not wanting to see what awaited him.

The flat-bottomed ship had come fully to the surface. Indistinct shapes moving within it silently brought out long poles with hooks and snared the small boat. As the skiff was secured to the side of the larger vessel, a number of fleshless hands reached down toward it.

Toshi fought as half a dozen hands attached to his body and pulled him upward. The samurai's hand left the back of his neck. In panic, he snapped his eyes open to see why the demon had deserted him. He gazed straight into a grinning skull.

Empty eye sockets stared into his own, a reddish glow flaring for a moment in their depths. He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound passed his lips. The fleshless face came closer. The creature's eyes flared with bright-red light. Toshi tried to squirm away, but in vain. His heart threatened to burst from horror before that fleshless grin.

An arm thrust between them. Sudden hope flared within him as his frightened gaze shifted to seek the samurai's masked face. He didn't feel the samurai's hand as it latched onto his. His numbed body was turned around, and he glimpsed the rest of the crew. His mind wouldn't count them, it didn't want to see them. It shrieked in disbelief as he stared at the white gleaming skeletons before him.

They stood upright and wore clothes he would have seen on men on any common street. Some wore short pants and sleeveless shirts. Others

only wore *fudoshi*—a long cloth coiled around the body that served to cover the genitals like a loincloth—and short vests.

Half-supporting, half-dragging him, the samurai took him toward a door set in the wall of the raised deck housing the tiller. His mind as numbed by terror as his body was by cold, he didn't resist as he was taken into the small hallway beyond.

Ignoring the ladder going below, the samurai pulled him forward, stopping before the second doorway on the right. Throwing the door open, he thrust Toshi inside.

Unable in his paralysis to break his fall, he slammed onto the glowing floor. The door was closed and bolted behind him.

The pain of the fall a very faint perception, Toshi gave in to his fear and despair. He scooted to a corner and hugged his knees to his chest. His wide eyes stared at the glow that permeated everything in the room.

CHAPTER 2

Toshi sat bolt upright, aware that at some point during the night he'd fallen asleep. He glanced about him, dislodging a thick blanket from his shoulders. He was on a ship—a haunted ship. A chill coursed through him as he recalled all that had gone before.

He grabbed the fallen blanket, not sure where it had come from, and wrapped it about himself. The thought repeated over and over in his mind that normal walls didn't glow like a million fireflies. The cold air in the cabin made him shiver.

"Would you like some tea?"

He whipped around, entangling himself in the blanket, looking for the source of the voice. He stared in surprise at a well-dressed woman sitting at the far corner of the cabin, serving tea. The cut and style of her light-green kimono and her lavishly coiffured black-haired wig with its silver bells told him she was geisha, an entertainer. Yet, unlike any geisha he had ever heard tell of, this one wore a noh mask over her face.

The delicate traditional theater mask of white-painted wood was of a handsome young maiden with large almond-shaped eyes, rounded nose, and thin, smiling red lips; but its illusion was dispelled as he noticed the woman's hands and neck were as fleshless as those of a hundred-year-old corpse.

"Who...who are you? What...what do you want from me?" He inched away from the geisha, his voice cracking as he spoke.

The woman looked up at him, soft blue light showing through the narrow eye slits of the mask. With surprising grace and beauty, in spite of her lack of flesh, she bowed to him and introduced herself.

"I am Akiuji Miko, entertainer for his lordship Asaka Ietsugu."

Feeling awkward at the unexpected show of formality, he made himself return the bow.

"My...my name is Chizuson Toshiro," he said, absurdly thinking that by the rules of the foreigners his surname would have come last, not

first. "Though most people just call me Toshi. I was an apprentice map-maker to Hirojima Shun." He licked his lips, apprehension filling him to the core.

The geisha said, "I'm very pleased to meet you, Chizuson-san."

He glanced away and said nothing, in no way feeling the same. He was also surprised she'd added the honorific to his name. Why would a demon give him such consideration?

"Won't you have tea? If you're hungry, I've some rice cakes as well." Her voice was kind.

He stared at the floor and said nothing.

"Won't you do me this small courtesy? It's been a long time since I've had a chance to serve tea." Delicately, Miko lifted a steaming cup and held it out toward him. "Please, Toshi-san?"

His stomach rumbled as the green tea's aroma drifted toward him. His cold hands and feet insisted a little hot tea would do no harm. He wondered why she'd decided to use his given name instead of his surname. That was normally a habit of people who knew each other well.

"Hai."

Keeping his blanket snug about his shoulders, he rose hesitantly to his feet and advanced to the small table set in front of the geisha. Making sure the table stayed between them, he sat down. Without comment, Miko placed the cup on the table before him.

Waiting until her fleshless hands were well away, he took the steaming cup. He held it, thrilled by the warmth flowing from it into his hands, his eagerness for the drink itself gone for the moment. When he finally drank, he closed his eyes, grateful for the warmth spreading inside him.

He quickly placed the empty cup on the table, hoping for more but not daring to ask. Miko lifted a plate full of seaweed-wrapped rice cakes from a tray beside her and put it before him.

"Won't you have some?" She then proceeded to refill his cup.

Studying the rice cakes and figuring they looked safe enough, he picked up one of them and took a small, hesitant bite. Finding that it tasted as it should, he gobbled it down and reached for another. Before he realized what he'd done, he'd eaten them all.

"Toshi-san, how old are you?"

He almost smiled, content now that he was full, until he glanced up at his unusual hostess and remembered where he was.

"I'm almost sixteen." He wondered why a demon would want to know, but he wasn't about to ask.

Miko held his attention as her head tilted slightly to the side making the small bells in her hair ring. By the way her shoulders were gently shaking, he got the impression the geisha was laughing behind her white mask.

“All young boys are always in such a hurry to grow up, to go out into the world and meet their destinies.” Miko’s broad green sleeve rose to cover the smiling mask’s mouth.

Toshi felt his cheeks grow hot. Yes, it was true he was only fifteen, but he would be sixteen—a man—soon enough. What difference did a few months make? Especially to demons!

He stared at his teacup, stung by the geisha’s silent laughter. Unhappy about this, he said the first thing that came to mind in an effort to distract her.

“Why do you wear a mask?”

He noted with satisfaction that the geisha lowered her sleeve away from her mouth.

“I wear it out of politeness,” she said. “You see, I have no wish to make you afraid of me. My features are less handsome than I would desire and don’t complement my profession very well at this time.”

“Then you and your lord look just like the crew?” The question had left his lips before he gave it proper consideration.

“Yes, we do,” she answered. “Asaka-sama thought it would be less of a shock to you if we minimized our current state in your presence.”

Asaka-sama. Lord Asaka—the honorific said it all. Asaka was their master, and he looked just like the rest. A small chill crawled down Toshi’s back. He felt himself tense as he gathered his courage to ask the only thing he really wanted to know.

“Why am I here?”

Miko’s masked face turned away from him, the bells in her hair ringing softly as she moved.

“Lord Asaka needs a navigator, one who can read the more detailed maps of the gaijin.” She turned to face him again. “It’s partially because of the knowledge we lack that we have come to be as we are. It is our hope that, with you, we’ll now be able to complete what we must. To follow the way and regain our honor.”

He stared at the geisha. He had no reason to disbelieve her, although who could honestly ever trust a demon, yet this couldn’t be all they wanted from him. And since when did demons follow *bushido*—the samurai code of conduct?

“You mustn’t judge Asaka-sama harshly, Toshi-san. I know all of this is a major change for you,” she said, “but Asaka-sama wouldn’t have done it had our need not been so great. You’ll be safe with us. No harm shall come to you.”

He turned away to hide his expression of confused suspicion, his hand rising unconsciously to brush back his mussed hair. He never felt the leather band that held his hair in a ponytail loosen and fall to the floor. His long black hair spilled over his shoulders.

Only too vividly, he recalled the demon mask with its glowing green eyes and the deep voice booming from behind it. He recalled his first view of the crew, and that white skull with the menacing red glowing stare as they stood watching him. That he would be safe and unharmed here was not something he was in any way willing to believe.

He stared at nothing, a shiver moving through him, as he remembered the implied threat he thought he’d seen in the crewman’s red eyes.

“Let me fix that for you,” Miko said.

He heard the rustle of silk as the geisha stood up and moved behind him. He saw her reach for the fallen leather band. As her skeletal hand rose, it finally dawned on him what she meant to do. Terrified, he jerked away before her hand could reach his hair.

“No!”

He turned on Miko in a half-crouch, waiting for her to come after him. Instead, he found her sitting perfectly still, her hand half-raised.

“What’s wrong?” She leaned forward. He scooted away from her. “I was only going to tie your hair. I wasn’t going to hurt you.”

He watched her suspiciously as she held out the leather band for him to see.

“No, that’s all right, thank you,” he said quickly. “I would prefer to do it myself.”

Miko turned her head to stare at him at a curious angle. To his amazement, she suddenly bowed to him, her forehead touching the floor.

“Please forgive my thoughtlessness, Chizuson-san. I had forgotten that all you’ve had from us so far was the paralyzing touch. I did not mean to frighten you.”

He felt foolish, seeing her apologizing to him. He was just a peasant boy; she was a geisha and a demon. This wasn’t the way things were supposed to happen in the world.

“I just thought...”

Miko’s white mask turned up as he hesitated.

“Of course. You had no reason to believe otherwise. But it isn’t true. When we touch others, it doesn’t have to be the paralyzing cold they feel. We can make our touch warm if we like. Almost as warm as a living human’s.” She sat up. “Won’t you let me show you?”

With a fleshless hand, she gestured to the floor right before her. His misgivings showing on his face, he slowly nodded then inched toward her. Turning his back, he knelt on the floor. Despite what she had told him, he bit his bottom lip, waiting for her cold touch to creep into his skin.

He tensed as a comb gently sifted through his hair. He hardly dared breathe as the small comb descended past his shoulder, stopping once to take care of a painless tangle. Miko worked on his hair, her soft silk kimono occasionally brushing against his arm.

He stiffened as he felt her reach to gather his hair. The burst of cold he expected as her hand brushed his neck, however, never came.

“There, I’m finished. It wasn’t that bad, was it?” Her voice was close.

He shook his head as he gingerly turned to face her again.

“Why...why are you being so kind to me?”

Miko stopped in the middle of placing her small comb back into her own hair.

“Is there a reason why I shouldn’t be?”

He stared at his coarse blanket, not knowing what to do with the unexpected reply.

“No. Well, yes,” he said. “I’m not a noble or a samurai. I’m a peasant, a lowlife. You shouldn’t be wasting your time on someone like me. You are geisha! You are of art, of beauty, of dance—all those things. Why waste your time on one such as me?”

He dared not mention the fact spirits and demons weren’t known for their thoughtfulness, either. His babbling could get him into trouble, and he had no wish to offend Miko in case her kindness was, for whatever bizarre reason, genuine.

The geisha laughed out loud. It was a soft and gentle laugh.

“Oh, dear Toshi-san, where do you think geishas come from? While some may like to forget their humble origins once a wealthy lord has bought their contract, their past is still the same.

“I, like you and countless others, was sold as a child to a merchant who favored me, and have been trained in the arts of the geisha since I was three. I have been lucky compared to those who’ve ended up in the red lantern districts, and I’ve never forgotten it. Every evening I send a prayer of thanks to the gods.” Her eyes glowed. “You and I have more in

common than I do with any of the nobles and samurai I have served during my life. Toshi-san, do not belittle yourself.”

“But, Akiuji-san, you have no idea what I’m like.” He stared at his hands, not sure why he was saying these things to her. “I could be evil...or vicious. Maybe even a pervert.”

Miko’s eyes shone bright blue. “I don’t think I have to worry about keeping my virtue intact anymore, do you?”

Realizing he’d yet again made a fool of himself, he nevertheless grinned as her sweet laughter once more filled the cabin.

“Even if I had to, I wouldn’t worry while in your presence.” Miko leaned toward him for a moment. “I’ve always had good instincts for people, and it has rarely failed me. I like you very much already.”

He blushed at the flattery and turned away so she wouldn’t see.

Before he could think of something to say, a bell sounded just outside the door.

“I’m sorry, Toshi-san, but I must go now.” Her hand rested for a moment on his arm. “Try to get some rest. Asaka-sama will want to test your skills this evening, once it is safe for us to rise above water.”

“But—”

“I’ll meet with you again before then with your meal. Perhaps you would enjoy some music as well?” Without waiting for his answer, Miko stood and silently slipped past him toward the door.

“Rise above water?” He stared at her as she rose, perplexed.

She turned back to face him for a moment.

“It would be wise if you didn’t try to go above during the daytime.”

With a rustling of silk, she left. A cold shiver coursed through Toshi as he forced himself to sit back down.

Alone, with nothing else to do, he examined his cabin. Other than the small table in the corner with its half-filled teapot, his cup, and an empty plate, the glowing space contained nothing but himself, his blanket, and two empty buckets sitting against the far wall.

He stared at the closed and possibly unlocked door as the weight of his predicament once more settled around him. For a moment, he thought again of trying to escape, yet Miko’s parting words and his own recollection of the ship as it rose from beneath the water made him realize there was nothing he could do, except maybe die. It was amazing he wasn’t dead already.

The concept of being underwater yet still able to breathe was more than he could grasp. And he had other problems besides that. He was to be tested by the samurai that night. He shuddered at the thought. In the

unfamiliar silence, he wondered what would happen to him should he fail the test. He doubted Asaka would be gracious enough to return him home if he didn't pass. His mind easily pictured his most likely reward.

Now colder than when he had awakened, he curled up in his blanket and returned to his corner.

CHAPTER 3

“Toshi-san. It’s time to get up. Toshi-san.”

His heavy eyelids flickered open as he felt himself shaken by the shoulder. A bright silver kimono with glowing gold-and-red flowers filled his field of vision as Miko knelt at his side. Smiling slightly, glad she was there, he let his eyes close again.

“Toshi-san, it’s time to eat. Asaka-sama will be coming for you shortly.”

The demon’s name brought him awake. With a grimace, he opened his eyes and pushed himself up into a sitting position. Rubbing at his face, he gradually became more alert as the scent of freshly brewed tea wove around him.

“That’s much better,” the geisha said. “Now, come, let me serve you. We haven’t much time.”

He draped his blanket about himself and rose groggily to his feet before sidling over to the small table at the corner of the cabin.

Serving him tea, Miko also placed in front of him a plate filled with dried fish and rice cakes. To his delight, he also noted she’d brought him a couple of sweet cakes.

As he ate, he watched as the geisha rose from the table and headed to the door. Sitting beside it, propped against the wall, was a *koto*. He watched with awakening interest as she picked up the long, gently curving wooden instrument and set it on the floor before her.

Miko bowed to him then took up a pick after sliding small wooden blocks beneath each of the strings over the main body and setting them up in a specific pattern. Long, lonely notes filled the cabin as she wove her music for him.

Downing a second cup of hot tea as fast as his throat would tolerate, he listened. With a bit of surprise, he found himself caught up in the music as its sounds turned from sweet melancholy to a brash, more up-beat pace. He became fascinated just watching her play.

He slid his plate from the table to set it before him so he wouldn't have to look away to eat. Miko's movements were so fluid, so precise, her fleshless fingers handling the instrument almost as if it were a part of her.

While he sat there, he dared to try and imagine how the geisha might have looked in life. That a spirit could create such beauty dazzled him. He wondered if she were trying to imprison him in some sort of spell. He found that, at the moment, he didn't care if she was.

He continued to eat, lost in the music, until a loud knock on the door reverberated through the cabin. Miko stopped playing. The door opened.

Toshi felt his throat go dry as the armored samurai filled the doorway. He swallowed hard as he forced his fear-frozen body to bow.

"Come, boy," the samurai said.

He darted a glance at Miko and saw her nod. Hiding himself in his blanket, he stood up and shivered, wondering if he would feel the samurai's cold touch tonight.

"Leave it." A bony hand pointed at his blanket.

Toshi released a heavy sigh. He let the only warmth he had fall off behind him and continued to the door.

The samurai removed himself from the doorway and strode down the hall, leaving him to follow. Asaka stopped, blocking the way to the exterior door as splashing sounds came faintly from beyond it. They stood there for almost a full minute before the samurai reached to open the door.

A blast of cold night wind smashed into the boy's shivering body as the door was momentarily ripped from Asaka's grasp. The samurai stepped outside, and Toshi grabbed for the doorway as the ship abruptly rocked to the left. Nervously, he stared out at the wet, glowing deck. Two columns of skeletal men sat toward the bow of the ship, all holding long oars, which they were using to move the flat-bottomed vessel. He looked away from them and their fleshless bodies, a shudder crawling up his spine.

Stepping out onto the deck, he looked up at the overcast night sky. The wind slapped his face. The ship shifted back to the right, and he felt his filled stomach knot up inside him. Doing his best to ignore it, he carefully climbed the ladder next to the doorway, following Asaka.

The ship tilted again, but he held on, his stomach knotting up a little more. Reaching the top, he stood uneasily on the glowing deck and waited for the samurai to tell him what to do.

“You will now determine our present position. Do not attempt to lie, for I already know the answer.”

Hating the fear growing inside him, Toshi glanced behind the samurai as a stooped skeleton approached them at Asaka’s signal. Stopping before the boy, the retainer offered him the map Asaka had taken from Master Shun’s store and a number of gaijin instruments.

Struggling to keep his footing as the rocking of the ship grew worse, Toshi took the map, avoiding any contact with the skeleton’s hand. His vision swam for a moment. The map’s contents seemed to move with the tilting of the ship.

Attempting to ignore his dizziness, he returned the map and took a heavy coil of measuring rope with a weight at one end and a round cork on the other. Leaning against the rail, he dropped the weighted end into the rolling waves below. He dared not look at the moving water, which strove to make his dizziness worse, as he tried to get a depth measurement as quickly as possible.

The choppy water wouldn’t allow an accurate assessment, but he was sure the samurai wouldn’t care for the excuse.

As soon as he thought the bottom had been reached, he noted the marked depth of three fathoms where the cork bobbed and began to carefully coil the rope up again. He hurried as much as was prudent, his dizziness making his stomach knot up worse than before. Because of the roughness of the water, he decided he wouldn’t try for a speed reading.

Returning the coil of rope to the waiting skeleton, he next picked up a large compass. The small bowl-like contraption had a colorful card face showing all the major directions and was submerged in liquid to keep it still. Quickly looking it over to make sure it was in working order, he stood as still as possible to get a directional reading from the bulky instrument.

When he was done, he traded it for a cross-staff. With that, he looked up into the cloud-crowded sky, trying to catch sight of the North Star. Finally spotting it as a bank of clouds broke for a moment, he lifted the cross-staff in its direction. He felt his dizziness worsen as he put the long bar of the cross-staff against his eye, his gaze following the rod upward.

The ship kept shifting, making the star weave in and out of his sight. He stubbornly tried to keep it in view. He slid the crosspiece over the scale to align it against the star and the horizon to find the angle of their latitude, just as Captain Valéz had taught him.

The North Star wavered again in his vision, and his stomach rumbled. The swirling wind whipped his ponytail up into his face as he handed the cross-staff back. Taking the map again, a few of the other tools, and an empty logbook, he sat on the ice-cold deck. He tried to recall all the necessary computations and, although lightheaded, calculated them as best he could.

He was aware of Asaka's green stare raking him.

After several minutes, Toshi came up with what might be a close answer. He was about to give it to Asaka when his tortured stomach gave up and heaved with all its might. Clamping his hands over his mouth, he tried to keep in the lumpy, burning mess that suddenly rose from inside him. Forgetting everything but his screaming stomach, he ran for the ship's rail.

Almost falling overboard in his eagerness to get there, he clung to the railing as his stomach heaved again. Not able to hold back anymore, he opened his mouth and let the burning torrent empty from him to the sea. The acrid smell of vomit filled his nose as his throat burned. His stomach continued to heave long past the point at which it was empty.

Even in his present misery, he couldn't help but notice the quiet, overbearing presence of the samurai, who came to stand by his side. It occurred to his tortured mind to wonder if Asaka was considering throwing him overboard. Perhaps it would prove to be a kindness if he did.

"Sir, I mean no disrespect, but I don't think this ignorant boy is going to be of any use to us," the steersman said. "It may take a long time, but I'm sure I can eventually—"

"Silence!" the samurai roared.

Toshi ignored it, still trying to stop his heaving stomach, inwardly grateful the shouting hadn't been directed at him. After another minute, his stomach finally began to settle a little. He closed his eyes, letting the flowing wind cool his face as he tried to disregard the ship's continuing movements.

"I asked you for our location, boy." Asaka's voice bore down on him.

Toshi turned his drawn, pale face away from the rail and stared at the map the samurai held out to him. Leaning against the bar, not trusting his wobbling legs to remain beneath him, he carefully took the map and then the other tools and sank back to the deck, his back against the railing.

He stared at the swaying map and rechecked his calculations. Getting the same answer, he moved an unsteady finger to point out their

position, which lay near the coast. Trying not to glance at Asaka as the samurai looked over him, he held his finger in place.

Asaka took the map, his only acknowledgment of the information a barely audible *humph*. Not looking back, the samurai strode to the skeleton manning the ship's tiller. Toshi tried hard not to care.

The bent skeleton came over to him. Although he had no liking for the fleshless grin that approached, he couldn't find the strength to move from where he was. Never looking directly at him, the retainer took the instruments from Toshi's unresisting hands and walked away.

Unable to swallow away the acrid taste still in his mouth, Toshi closed his eyes and sat as unmoving as possible on the rocking deck. He drew his knees up, trying not to moan in his undiminishing misery, and curled his arms around his legs, the cold seeping into him from the deck beneath.

He suddenly opened his eyes. He felt someone staring at him. He barely realized it was Asaka before the latter abruptly reached for his arm. He cringed at the unavoidable touch, a spear of fear shooting through him. Yet, when the fleshless fingers wrapped around his flesh, there was no trace of the paralyzing touch.

"Get up," Asaka said.

Using the rail and the samurai's grip on his arm for support, Toshi scrambled to his feet. He swayed with the ship's movement, but Asaka's firm hand kept him from falling.

Steering him toward the ladder, Asaka held on to his arm until he started to descend. Feeling a little steadier by the time he reached the main deck, the boy didn't wait to be led but quickly stumbled to the door. He opened it and staggered inside as his stomach began knotting up again.

Moaning softly in despair, he shivered, feeling the cold radiating from the walls, assaulting his exposed skin from every angle. Hurrying to his assigned cabin, he careened toward the wall as the ship abruptly tilted to the left. A steady hand kept him from smacking into it, and he glanced behind him in surprise. It was the samurai.

Asaka's firm grip back on his arm, he was led the rest of the way to his cabin.

His prison's blank, glowing walls glared silently at him as he entered. Seasickness washed over him. A dead certainty came over him then, and although the unearthly cold of the ship mercilessly flowed into him, he didn't run for his blanket when he was released. Instead, he turned around to face the departing samurai.

“Asaka-sama, please. I beg you!” He sank to his knees, his hands palm-down against the floor and his eyes closed in supplication. “Release me. Take me home. I can be of no use to you. Please, I don’t belong here!” His voice caught in his throat. “Please, Lord, I beg you!”

“Worm.”

Toshi pressed his forehead against the floor’s glowing planks, shooting cold stabbing it as was already happening with his knees and hands. He shut his eyes tighter with a prayer, his heart quickening as he heard the sound most dreaded by his people everywhere. His acrid breath hung still in his raw throat as the soft click of a katana being slightly drawn from its sheath reverberated in the silence. He waited for the end.

“I will ignore your offense this once. I expect it never to be repeated.” Asaka’s voice was cold.

Toshi heard the katana click back into place.

“The only release you will find if you do is from your flesh,” the samurai told him. “I will have you, one way or another. If I must kill you and then trap your spirit from rising to its next plane, then so be it. It would mean nothing to me to have you join the ship’s crew permanently and find myself one who has the courage to endure what you do not.”

Asaka left, slamming the door behind him.

Horror and shame poured through Toshi, although he couldn’t explain the reason for the latter. Tears ran freely from his closed eyes to fall on the glowing floor as his mind’s eye cruelly provided him with a picture of himself as a fleshless, moving corpse.

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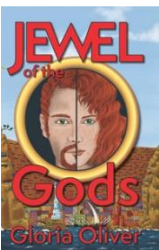
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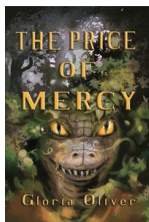


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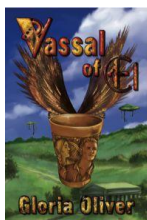


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