

Wilting Flowers

The *House of the Daimyo's Men* is quiet; the peace of night disturbed only by the sound of Samurai snoring nearby and the occasional pattering of small brown cones down roof tiles as they fall from the cedar in the courtyard. Cool and damp air passing through a small vent carries earthy, moss smells that mix here with subtle whisps of old, burnt incense.

Holding his hand firmly with a dry palm, so he is sure that she is there, Misho Tsuki stares in his eyes and nods, once, reluctantly satisfied.

As she kneels beside him, Kai Moto Soko, the arrogant one, lies on his back. His low futon is centred on the woven rush mats covering the floor. They release a dry, grassy smell that rises between her knees, teasing her nose with a slow itch that must not become a sneeze. His room is sparsely decorated; a shrine by the cracked plaster wall behind his pillow, his armour and swords carefully stored in a small alcove to the right, three drawers below a single-doored cupboard, and sliding doors leading into the communal corridor.

Her clothes are simple and lightweight; black silk except for heavier linen padding on feet, hands, knees and elbows. It is difficult to suppress the instinct to prostrate herself before him, deferring to both his rank and literal power over life... but not impossible.

She moves her black face mask to one side and leans forward, whispering softly in his ear, careful not to make a discordant sound that might alert those guards who still live.

Close to him, she feels the heat of his body as he burns from the inside out, his breath holding a *sweet-yet-sour* smell, thick with odours from the fast, necrotising plant that is consuming him.

She has rolled down his quilt and sees the slight tensing of abdominal muscles betraying his fight to survive.

It is good that you try to resist it, Kai Moto Soko.

I know you do not know me, or remember that single moment when you destroyed my life and, not knowing, stepped onto the path that would lead you to eternal torments by Oni.

But we have time for you to remember.

She jabs at his stomach with her fingertip; his skin is still warm but there is a cold sweat of death gathering there.

Yes, you have just enough time left for that.

Fifteen years ago now, you rode into our little village with Akwa Minshakan, the sadist.

She sees his eyes open wide, shocked at her mention of that name.

She smiles – *Good. You are starting to see what is happening!*

He lay before me, much as you are doing now. But, a simpler death, as he did not take that fatal action... he simply laughed as he watched you do it.

It was obore-gusa that killed him... the drowning weed, smeared around the cup he used for his last sip of sake before sleep. Like you, it took away his strength, leaving him motionless before me as his lungs dissolved, drowning in the corruption of his own breaths.

She sees the fear in Moto Soko's eyes now – *Ahhh... now you have it. It is nearly your time... but just enough left for the last of this tale.*

You see, on that day, all those years ago, my father, whose back was bent after a life working the fields for your Lord, was a bit slow to bow before you.

Without a moment's pause, you drew your katana and chopped off his head with a single blow.

Nobody dared to make a sound. All we heard was Minshakan laughing, and you wiping your blade on a cloth before sheathing it once more.

You rode away without a look back, and never saw me, his daughter, just six years old, crying behind the well.

Blood is trickling from between his lips now and his chest spasms with the first of his last gasps to live. She sees him straining to scream, but the sound cannot come, and his throat only makes a burbling rattle as his eyes lock onto hers, pleading at last for anything but this.

She pats his cheek, almost lovingly and resumes the story.

It took time to train enough to kill you, Kai Moto Soko. You think that Ninja's are some sort of mercenary men, fighting from the woods with similar motivations to your own... power, money, conquest, patronage.

Pah! The men in our villages are too soft, too afraid of what you will do to us if they are caught.

But we women know of revenge that burns in the core, sharper than any blade that your swordsmiths could forge.

This time he coughs a harder spasm, ejecting a stream of bright red blood onto his chin and chest.

It took fifteen years, but I learnt all the arts... the garotte, poison... the silent stabbing. I learnt to move without a sound, despite all the traps you lay to catch unwary footsteps.

Do you see the Oni waiting for you?

It is Ryūketsu, the dragon's blood, burning in your veins. That plant is very hard to find, as you can only use the wilting flowers, and harder still to crush and distil into the powder I added to your washing bowl.

It tunnels through your skin, working fast, eating you from the inside.

His back spasms and more blood spatters, quietly, from his mouth.

So die now... scum son of Soko, and remember me, laughing in your face at your death.

His eyes roll back, and then he is still.

The daughter of Akiro Tsuki nods once, then nimbly gets to her feet and slips out of the door, with no more sound than a draft in a deep cave.