



Lady Arikawa Michiru stared at the scarred and battered box in front of her. Like herself, it had seen much and travelled far. Now, only she could see its scars. Made from deep coloured rosewood and bound with bronze fittings, it radiated quality. She remembered when a spear had broken one corner. It had saved her from a broken back. She scrutinised the repair her husband ordered done. She could see none of the damage, especially not in this light and with her old eyes. But she knew. There had once been a furrow of the bullet across one edge and deep scratches on the underside. The repairs were masterful. She ran her fingers over the wood where the groove had been. It was gone.

It was not the box that was important now though. For her it had nostalgic value. A source of memories, of people and places, a token of respect, dignity, and honour. No, this was about the gold. She leaned forward to open the box, wincing at the sudden pain in her thigh. The old arrow wound ached worse in the cold. It was partly why she came here. To get some relief from the hot waters of the spa and warm her tired old bones.

The builder of this onsen had made it possible to heat parts of the inn from the natural hot waters. They even added private baths to the more expensive rooms. She decided she would happily pay for that. Money can buy anything nowadays. Can it buy peace of mind, she wondered? What about forgiveness?

The box had a rich crimson silk lining. A repeating pattern of four black diamonds arranged in a diamond decorated the fabric. The Takeda crest. The glistening gold ovals sat inside in neat rows, tied into stacks of ten with stark, white paper. She recognised her husband's writing in dark ink on the paper. So much wealth for one person, she thought,

running her fingers over the treasure. So much pain, death and terror. What was she to do with it? She closed the lid, as the maid slid the door open.

The young farm girl had little grace about her. Michiru had heard that the headman of her village had recently managed to get her work here. Well, she had a lot to learn, she thought. Shivering as a waft of chilled air reached across the room, she grumbled. 'Come on, girl, You are letting the cold in.' It had been snowing for three days now.

The young maid scurried across to Michiru. A clumsily arranged tea service sat on the tray from which she proceeded to make her cha. The old lady came close to interrupting more than once, making the girl even more nervous. Taking a sip of the proffered cup, her mouth pulled in tight in dissatisfaction. 'This cha is cold,' she scolded.

'Oh, I am so sorry, my lady.'

She did not mean to be difficult but there were some things she would not tolerate and cold cha was one of them. 'There is no excuse,' she snapped again at the mortified maid. 'All you have to do is boil water. You can do that can't you?'

'I am so sorry, Lady Michiru. Of course my lady.' She bowed repeatedly as she backed out of the room with the tray of offending cha. Tears clouded her eyes. The last thing the girl wanted was to lose her job for offending such an important guest. Especially when the weather was so bad. The inn had precious few paying guests at the moment. Many of the current residents were travellers trapped here by the early snow. If she could hurry back from the kitchens the Lady might forget about it and not complain to the innkeeper.

Michiru saw the fear in the young girl as she backed out of the room. She remembered the stories that Chika and Ōmono had shared with her about the lives of serving staff. The petty tyrannies, injustices and cold-hearted abuse. She thawed a little. 'Calm down, girl, it is alright,' she reassured her. 'Do not rush or you will break something and then you really will be in trouble. You may take your time with the cha. I have much to think about.'

The maid bowed with relief. At least there was a warm side to this scary samurai lady. 'Thank you, hime-sama.' But the old lady did not hear her. She sat, staring at the wooden box in front of her, engrossed in her own thoughts.

CHAPTER ONE

Michiru looked at the ground and scowled.

She clenched her teeth, shuffling her feet in frustration. She was going to kick her brother Kosei between the legs. Not too hard, but hard enough for him to remember. Then she would run for it. Darting a glance back towards the main house she saw the old samurai Shuji watching her. She decided against it. She did not need another lecture on lady-like behaviour.

Kosei bent the bow to its full extent, the string coming back level with his ear. He let out a slow breath, adjusted his aim a fraction and let the arrow fly. The solid wooden thunk told him that he had hit the target. A closer look showed the arrow had only nicked the edge of the black circle painted on the wood. His aim had been right the first time. The bow was not his favourite weapon.

Snorting in exasperation, he turned to look at Michiru, a frown creasing his forehead. ‘You will be going to Nagase tomorrow,’ he declared. How could someone so beautiful be so infuriating? Her face usually reminded him of the statue of the Goddess that sat in the family shrine. Beautifully carved and polished to a fine lustre, the artist had captured an expression of divine serenity. Michiru had that look when she was calm. Now she looked like a vengeful yokai, lips pressed together tight and eyebrows lowered. She glared at him through the strands of glossy black hair that had escaped her ponytail. He half expected ominous clouds to roll in over the mountains, complete with thunder.

They had always been close, but since Mother died she managed to get away with so much. For example, she had a preference for wearing men’s clothing when ever she was outside the house. Hardly dignified for a young samurai lady. The time for indulging her was well and truly past. He could not let her sway him on this. He wished Father was here. Kosei

loved his sister without reservation. But he was head of the clan now, and he required obedience. Steeling himself for the objections he knew that Michiru would throw at him, he put on his “Lord” face.

‘This wedding will take place, Michiru. Everything is ready. Sojiro-sama writes that all the preparations have been made. Shuji-san will escort you to Nagase tomorrow and I will be there in a week’s time for the wedding. The weather is good and the omens favourable. There is no reason to delay.’

Michiru remembered her betrothal to Lord Sojiro when she was fourteen. The marriage ceremony was to be on her fifteenth birthday. It had seemed such a long way into the future then. When the time came, Father had postponed the wedding saying she was not ready yet. That was two years ago. Now father was dead and Kosei was the head of the family. She did not know who was keener for the marriage, Sojiro-sama or her brother. All she knew was she did not want to marry yet. She was not ready to give up her life to become a quiet and obedient wife.

Kosei was particularly keen on the idea, considering how uncertain these times were. The neighbouring Soreda clan, were gaining strength, thanks mainly to their gold mine. They threatened to cut the Kotuden lands off and isolate them in their valley. The Arikawa clan were the Kotuden’s ancient allies. They held most of the decent farmland in the lower valley as well as the control of the river crossings. Having such large areas to defend was straining Arikawa resources. They were a tempting target for the Soreda. The larger Arikawa clan needed the alliance with the Kotuden as much as the Kotuden needed them. If the situation were more settled he might have waited a little while longer. Seventeen is not too young, he told himself.

‘Very well, Brother.’ Michiru stiffened, ‘It will be as you order.’ Her tone hovered on the edge of outright disrespect. Letting her eyes fill with tears she continued melodramatically. ‘I’m sure mother would be proud to see you casting me out into the world as a tasty morsel for the wolves.’ She knew in her heart the futility of protesting, but she could not accept her fate without a fight. She wanted to scream and shout, tie herself to a post, slash out at anyone who came near her.

Michiru wondered how far she could push Kosei. Could she get him to postpone the wedding or even cancel it altogether? Maybe she should run away. She could sneak off at night and disappear into the countryside disguised as a peasant. A series of improbable fantasies flitted through her mind as she fixed Kosei with a steely glare.

‘Michiru!’ he said gruffly. ‘Don’t pull that face at me!’ He handed his bow to a waiting page. ‘Our father arranged this marriage and he expected you to honour that agreement. I ask you not to make this difficult.’ Kosei’s “Lord” face slipped. ‘I could not agree to the marriage if I did not think this match would be right for you. Sojiro-sama is a good man,’ he asserted with genuine feeling. ‘He respected Father and I am sure he will look after you.’ His expression lightened, breaking into a lopsided smile. ‘I know you will love being the boss,’ aiming for what he thought of as her weak spot. ‘Just think. The only one who can tell you what to do will be your new husband, and you will have him spellbound within a week.’

Michiru’s head bowed, her expression surly.

Kosei took a hold of his sister’s shoulder and lifted her chin. ‘It will be alright,’ he reassured her as he looked into her eyes. ‘You will have lots of good advice and help from councillors that you can choose yourself.’ He added playfully, ‘And if anything goes wrong, you can blame them.’ Michiru tried to stifle a grin as he chuckled. In a serious tone he added, ‘You have grown into a fine young lady. You are the daughter of a lord of a small but respected clan. You are samurai and we are proud of you.’ He let go of her shoulder and stood back, ‘But now, you must leave us and start a new life with your husband. We will see you again from time to time. But we will always think of you.’ He offered her a deferential bow.

Like an echo in her mind, it was Father, speaking those words. Her brother’s voice was so similar that it gave her a chill. The scent of Kosei’s sweat mingled with the sharp tang of the rosin from the bowstring. The familiar floral undertones and fragrances of the garden she had grown up in stirred her memory. It felt strange that Father was not here anymore. She missed him. She knew that wishing he was still here was selfish. Father was somewhere better, already reborn into his next life. His shade moved on, the moment passed. It was her brother in front of her, reassuring her. She knew that in many ways Kosei was much like Father, and that he did want the best for her.

She knew he was right and that she was behaving like a spoilt child with no manners. Michiru could not give him a total victory. She looked at him and sniffed, saying, ‘I still don’t want to go.’ Raising her bow she snapped off a shot in one fluid movement, still holding his gaze. The high pitched zing of the arrow’s flight ended with a wooden thunk. Kosei looked at the target and laughed.

Michiru stomped along the verandah. She was glad that she wore hakama rather than more feminine attire. Stomping would have been harder in a kimono, which only allowed her to take short mincing steps. She did not feel feminine. She was angry. A furious scowl distorted her delicate features. Her bottom lip protruded like a spoiled child on the edge of a tantrum. Remembrance of her mother’s scolding words intruded into her petulant self absorption, “Pull that bottom lip in or you will trip over it!”

Her eyes grew hot with tears. Whether it was from the perceived injustice of her brother’s decision or remembering her mother, she could not tell.

She stopped outside the door to her room and looked at her sandaled feet. She wanted to prove to the household how annoyed she was by walking inside with them on. Her leg twitched, almost taking the step, but years of conditioning intervened. ‘Nanny!’ she called. To stop and engage in the mundane task of removing them herself risked losing her anger’s momentum. ‘Nanny!’ she yelled again, feet firmly planted, the bow still gripped in one hand.

Michiru’s nanny, Hisa, was old. Old enough to remember Michiru’s grandfather, who some said she had served as a concubine. Dressed in a simple dun coloured kimono, her graying hair tied up in a neat bun, she slid the screen aside and bowed to the fuming girl. ‘Ohh, Mi-chan. whatever is the matter? What’s wrong? Did you hurt yourself again?’

Seeing her standing there expectantly, she anticipated her charge’s requirements and hurried to her thankless task.

‘Baka!’ Michiru cursed.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, hime,’ said the old woman in a pained tone as she fumbled with Michiru’s sandals. ‘I am getting clumsy in my old age.’

Michiru felt a slight pang of remorse for her rudeness, but it was soon burned away by the heat of her anger. ‘Not you, Nanny! Kosei!’

‘Oh?’ She knew perfectly well what the problem was. There were few secrets in this house. She had taken care of Michiru since she was a baby and knew her well enough to let her have her rant. ‘What seems to be the problem, deary?’ she asked with infinite patience.

Freed from her footwear, she stepped onto the tatami matting of her room. ‘He’s still insisting on this stupid marriage to the stupid Arikawa.’

She almost flung the bow into the corner in frustration. But Shuji had trained her too well for her to disrespect the kami of her bow, or the craftsman who had convinced it to reside there. She placed it reverently on its stand and felt her anger drain somewhat. She imagined the bow’s spirit laughing at her childishness. Did she deserve the kami’s blessing if she acted this way? Was this the behaviour of someone of noble birth? She sat down, her shoulders slumped dejectedly.

‘Sit up straight, hime,’ the old woman said, as she had many times before. Michiru corrected her posture without thinking. The old woman sucked in her cheeks, empathizing with the young girl but all too aware of the real way of the world. She knew the girl was better off than many of her age. Young women often only had the options of working as servants, farm labourers, nuns, or prostitutes. ‘Mi-chan. You must get married. It is the way of things for a woman.’

‘I don’t care,’ she pouted.

Hisa tried to soothe her. ‘Come now, Mi-chan. It is the same life whether we spend it laughing or crying. And your brother has decided. He is head of the family now.’ That should have been the end of the matter, she thought to herself. Young people these days. No sense of duty. Michiru’s young maid, Namika, came in from the hallway. The old lady shooed her back out. ‘Go get the hime some cha, girl.’

‘But what about Sojiro-sama’s family?’ Michiru whined, knowing she was clutching at straws. ‘What about his mother? She could be a mean mother-in-law who pinches me or beats me. What if

his retainers are rude? What about his consorts? How many does he have? What if he lets them be mean to me and won't punish them? What if I make a bad mistake and ruin everything?' In her nervousness she was working herself into an undignified state.

The old lady came to stand behind her, lifting her gently to her feet. 'Shhh. Let's get you changed, hmmm?' She turned to one of the concealed wardrobes, taking out a folded kimono from its wrappings. 'How about this lovely blue one with the waves. You like this one don't you? It was your mother's favourite colour too.'

Michiru silently complied, shedding her clothes with resignation. She had always known she would have to marry. Her father had tried to prepare her for it. Her aunt Hitomi had helped as best she could, but she had her own household to deal with. She had not been able to spend much time with her. Michiru had overheard other women talking about their marriages. About painful sex, sleepless nights with drunken husbands, undeserved beatings and long, agonising childbirth. It all scared her.

It was not that she had no experience of what happened between men and women. Living within paper walls she could not help but hear much. Although she had spent time exploring pleasure with one of the young pages, she had never let it go too far. He had been as inexperienced as she was, and he was not a man. Her maids had told her men were usually insistent, rough and uncaring. Michiru dreaded having to suffer through pregnancy, then childbirth, only to have to do it all over again, until she either died or could not quicken with life any more. Her mother had died in childbirth, delivering Michiru's youngest sister, Kochiyo, her fourth child.

Michiru had learned many of the things that she needed to know to run a samurai household. But being responsible for everything scared her. She was to be ultimately responsible for the smooth running of her husband's household. However everyone who served them would be relying on her as well. That scared her the most.

Dressed now in a more feminine manner, she knelt down to allow the old woman to comb her hair. 'Such lovely hair,' said Hisa, releasing it from the cord that held it up. With a cherry wood comb anointed with camellia oil, she combed out Michiru's glossy black hair. 'I used to do your mother's hair like this, you know,' she reminisced with a sigh. 'She was proud of how long it was. Long and beautiful like a Fujiwara princess.'

Michiru relaxed under the old lady's tender ministrations. The anger drained out of her as her thoughts turned to the parents that had given her everything they could. She owed it to both of them to be more gracious about this wedding. She knew she should accept her karma with dignity. 'I wish they were both here, Nanny,' she said quietly.

'They are here, sweet one. They always have been. And they are so proud of how beautiful you have grown,' she smiled, believing it in her heart. A single tear slid unnoticed down her cheek.

Michiru sat in her room as they carried out the last of her chests, packed with the necessities of her wardrobe. Sunlight, muted by the translucent screens, shone across the empty room. Dust motes danced in the golden sunlight as if alive. Her eyes took in all the little details of this room that she had grown up in. The shoji that led out to the garden had been custom ordered for her by her mother. The screen-maker's wife had layered ferns, wildflowers and wispy tendrils of vines into paper. Michiru knew every panel intimately. She had stared at them on countless rainy days throughout her life, tracing the outlines with her fingers.

She took a last lingering look at the carved cedarwood frieze above the door. Tiny wooden birds darted through the intertwined branches of two cypress trees. She had spent hours watching them move in the flickering light of the lamp. She loved the way the craftsman had made new details appear whenever you looked at it from a different angle. It was masterful work.

The final items taken were her naginata, which rested in their wooden brackets on the wall. They were not only weapons. They were a symbol of a samurai woman's resolve to fight to protect her home, her family and herself. Michiru had her own plain weapon, one she had used for years and practiced with every day. But above that was the heirloom given to her on her fourteenth birthday. It had belonged to her maternal grandmother, made in an older style. The blade was wider than a sword with a more pronounced curve at the end. Its haft gleamed with rich warm wooden tones bound in aged iron and bronze. She would take this with her to her husband's home.

She went over to the wall and ran her hand along the shaft. Her fingers traced the silver circled maple leaf of the Kotuden crest, inlaid into the wood. Michiru lifted the naginata from its mounts and felt its reassuring weight. With practiced precision she spun it full circle once. She cut from side to side,

feet shifting to adjust the balance of weapon and wielder. Becoming one. Her heart swelled in pride at her control of the ancient weapon. With a sigh she sheathed the blade in its scabbard. 'This is the last, Keiko,' she said, handed it to her lady-in-waiting. Keiko accepted the heirloom with deep reverence, serious as always. She carried out the naginata and loaded with the rest of Michiru's trousseau.

Michiru watched the young woman carry away the weapon. She was still getting to know Keiko. The daughter of a local samurai, she had come to serve as her lady-in-waiting six months ago. Michiru was doubtful if she had ever seen her laugh. She was a slight girl, not quite as tall as Michiru but around the same age. She had a melancholy about her which made her seem older. All Michiru knew was that her family were poor samurai, little better off than peasants. She had hoped that they would become friends, but the young woman maintained her reserve

Her maid, a peasant girl called Namika, she knew more about. She had been employed two years ago to serve as her maid. She always had something to tell. Michiru had heard all about her family's orchard and beekeeping dramas. She also told of her grandmother's strange preference for radishes and the gas it produced. That she would be leaving behind two hopeful paramours showed how she had settled in to the household.

Michiru knelt in the middle of the room, closed her eyes and breathed in the scent of her home. The cedarwood beams, the straw of the tatami mats and the burnt oil in the lamps. In the background was the turmoil of floral fragrances from the courtyard garden outside. Hints of other smells wove through the air. Camphor wood from her closet, camellia oil she had spilled in the corner when she was ten. All these things took her back to moments throughout her life.

So absorbed was she in her own thoughts she did not notice Kosei standing on the garden veranda watching. 'Time to go, Mi-chan,' he said quietly.

Brought back to the moment by the sound of her brother's voice, she realised that others were waiting and the day was moving on. 'I apologise for keeping everyone waiting,' she said with a slight bow. There was a strange expression on his face. He seemed to be struggling with something as he stood outside the open screen to her room. Sparrows chirped furiously in the courtyard garden, engaged in their own dramas. They were close enough to be heard over the murmur of those waiting outside for the procession to begin.

‘Are you ready?’

She paused. ‘I think so.’

Kosei’s hands gripped his fan behind his back. ‘We will miss you, you know.’

Michiru felt the heat of tears growing behind her eyes. She pressed her hands flat against her thighs, willing herself to maintain her composure. Now was definitely not the time to start crying. Not just before stepping out into public. ‘Thank you, Onii-san. I will miss you too.’

‘I’m sorry if you feel...rushed,’ he stated, toying absently with his fan as he stood at the door.

‘I understand that I must do my part, Onii-san,’ she said, trying to keep her voice under control.

‘Yes,’ he said, clearly wanting to say more. He stared at her a moment longer, struggling to keep his own thoughts off his face. ‘Well. I will see you again shortly.’

He turned abruptly and strode along the verandah to the reception room. The sound of his footsteps receded, leaving her alone. She could hear the priests beginning the rituals for her departure. She smoothed her already immaculate white kimono and willed herself to stand.

Incense and expectation filled the air. The final strains of the priest's intonation faded away. The rituals for her protection and wellbeing were complete. Michiru stood and looked out onto what would be her procession. In the dappled shade at the edge of the courtyard, a crowd of onlookers waited in colourful confusion. The chatter of their conversation rose and fell like wash of the tide on a pebbly beach. A black lacquered norimono stood in the middle of the column of porters, waiting for her. The gilded metal fixtures glinted in the sunlight. The gold of clan’s maple leaf crest contrasted starkly against the gloss black of the laquer. The team of bearers, all dressed in fresh new clothes, bowed to the ground nearby.

Two miko, women from the Family’s shrine, flanked the norimono dressed in stark white. Another miko bearing a spear waited to lead the porters. The singing of the miko now took up where the priests left off. They would divert the attention of any spirits that might harm Michiro on the journey. Two bowing samurai waited, holding open the door and roof of the norimono for her.

Michiru would be travelling to her new home, carried inside a lacquered box. It had windows and a door, yes, but it was still a box. She had never particularly enjoyed travelling by litter. She was not one of those girls who disliked exerting herself. It was not that she did not like being pampered. But sitting in a cramped little box, feeling every bump and jolt made her head ache and stomach churn. Michiru preferred to ride. A good horse was a glory to ride, especially on a sunny day. She planned to pester Shuji until he let her get into the saddle.

Father had sometimes let her ride along with him, but the price had been calligraphy lessons. “There is a cost for everything,” he had told her. One hour of calligraphy for each hour of riding had been the price. He even hired wandering monks to continue her lessons when they travelled. They all seemed to think that repetition was the only way to learn. “Do it again. Do it again. And again. Once more, please.” There had been times when she regretted that deal. But now, she had to admit her brushwork was respectable. Anyway, she had learnt to ride.

Four more teams of porters carried Michiru’s belongings between them on poles. It had all packed into lacquered chests bearing the clan's crest. Behind them another five teams carried boxes containing gifts for her new family. On both sides black armoured ashigaru waited. Some carried spears, others bore fluttering green Kotuden banners. She spotted four horses under a nearby tree, tails flicking and coats twitching. Young pages held their reins, ready for the samurai officers. Michiru smiled to herself.

On one knee before her was the escort commander, Yoshioka Shuji. A veteran samurai in his fifties, he wore his grey hair tied in a traditional topknot. He was wearing a black jinbaori over his dark lacquered armour, the circled maple leaf in white on the back. The helmet tucked under his arm bore his own crest, a right granted to him by Father. On the front of his helmet, three comma-shaped whorls swirled inside a gold circle. He was the clan's senior councillor and most valued retainer. Now he served Kosei as he had Father. He was also Michiru’s sensei, the one who taught her to ride, how to fight with a naginata and to shoot a bow. She felt relieved that Kosei was sending Shuji with her as an escort. He had been her sensei since she was ten and she would be glad of his company on this trip.

Waiting behind him were two other samurai officers. Both wore the clan’s green jinbaori over their armour. One was of medium build and a dark complexion. His long face rarely smiled but she knew he had an easy sense of humour. The other was shorter by half a head and rather plain. But he

brimmed with barely suppressed excitement. Both were well known to her, although the situation called for formality.

‘I will be accompanying you to Nagase, hime,’ Shuji informed her with a bow. ‘Your other officers are Kikuchi Masahide-san,’

The dark samurai bowed in reponse to the introduction. ‘Hime.’

Shuji gestured to the other samurai, ‘and Otō Hirakazu-san.’

The smiling samurai bowed likewise. ‘Hime,’ he answered with enthusiasm.

In her best formal tone Michiru responded, ‘I look forward to your company on this journey.’ She performed a delicate bow, as regal as she could manage. Excitement started to grow in her stomach as she was swept up in the mood exuded by those around her.

‘It is our honour, hime,’ Shuji replied, offering her a hand over the sill. He smiled and confided to her, ‘We are all tremendously proud of you today, hime.’

She blushed a little, uncomfortable with the praise yet revelling in it.

It all hinges on you, girl, Shuji thought. Our strongest ally needs a son. Even if you were a giggling idiot you could give him that. But I wonder if Sojiro-sama realises just how much of a gem he is getting. Oh yes, I know she is a raw stone, uncut, not yet tested for hardness. What I have seen gives me confidence in the future of our clans.

Michiru secretly felt pleased that this was all for her. She looked around the crowd, the whole household lining the area, coming to see her off. They were part of her everyday, part of her heart, and now she had to leave them. Michiru tried hard to hold back her emotions. Sadness and tears would be most undignified. Gathering her composure, she remembered her mother’s words and prepared for the performance. ‘In front of others we perform a role, as if in a play. If people expect a lady then give them a lady like no other.’

Michiru stepped elegantly onto the veranda, moving with as much grace as she could muster. She became the spectacle they all wanted. Descending the steps, she took one last look around the house and grounds of her home before they put her in the box. Michiru tried to memorise it all. The

new leaves on the maple trees fluttering in the slight breeze, the delicate trickle of the bamboo waterfall that she and Kosei had built as children. It was no longer her home. Shuji led her to the norimono, offered her a hand and waited. With a sigh, she accepted his hand, stepped in and sat on the cushion. With that, the roof and door closed, cutting her off from the outside world.