

## On a Winter Shore

### Chapter 1: The Visitor

She came with the first snow of winter, as silent as the snowflakes, her pale-gray kimono blended so perfectly with the veil of white that her presence barely registered on Maru's vision. Only her voice, so gentle her greeting barely carried the short distance from the street to the house, and the restless movements of the dark-clad maidservant behind her roused Maru from the hypnotic dance of the snow.

"There's someone at the gate," he called behind him, stepping back to close the sliding *shoji* screen. "A woman."

"Is there? Damn." Koike Toshiro's voice, peremptory with samurai irritation, dashed away the remnants of Maru's drowsy snow-spell. Footsteps thumped across the straw-matted floor, and the little *ronin* reopened the screen Maru had just shut. "Not a woman," he corrected. "There's a *lady* at the gate." A chilly draft blew over their ankles. Toshiro slapped the screen closed again.

“A lady?” Maru echoed, his ears pricking at the word his partner chose. “A *samurai* lady?”

“Indeed.” Toshiro exchanged a glance with Maru, and together they turned and looked over the room Toshiro used as his office, taking in the mildewed matting, the unlit and empty oil lamp, and the damp, smoky, pervasive odor of poverty and decay. Maru’s spirits sagged, but Toshiro brought his hands together in front of him with a decisive clap.

“Move the brazier into the front room, would you?” he said crisply. “Tell Sarutomi to make more tea. I’ll open up the front room and see to our guest.” He marched out of the office, gathering up the long spill of ink-black hair that hung loose down his back as he went.

Maru cut through the empty bedroom into the kitchen, where he found Toshiro’s manservant sitting cross-legged beside the stove, head lolling against its clay shoulder, sound asleep. He shook Sarutomi awake and shushed him as Sarutomi let out a startled protest. Toshiro had let the lady in, and his and the visitor’s voices were clearly audible in the hallway.

“Please forgive this intrusion,” the lady was saying. Her words had a musical inflection, so precisely enunciated that each syllable, no matter how softly spoken, reached the ear with perfect clarity. Its sound gave Maru a moment of floating unreality, as if he had fallen into a kabuki play—but no, the samurai lady’s voice was real, not the harsh imitation of a man in costume.

“Don’t worry about it. I have a great deal of time these days,” Toshiro replied, with just a trace of bitterness in his tone. His dialect had changed, Maru noticed, from his usual Osaka city jargon to the smooth, formal language of his life before Benten Street.

“You are most gracious,” the lady replied. A screen grated back, and the voices faded.

“Master Toshi wants you to make tea,” Maru whispered to the manservant. He took care to speak slowly, since telling Sarutomi too many things at once usually confused him. “There’s a visitor.” He paused only long enough for Sarutomi to nod his understanding before hurrying back to the office for the smoldering brazier. After a last check of his hair and clothes, Maru carried the pot of charcoal to the seldom-used formal room and eased the screen open.

“Forgive the interruption,” Toshiro said smoothly, as Maru set the brazier between Toshiro and his visitor. Toshiro and the samurai lady had taken seats on cushions opposite each other, and the maid knelt discreetly on the dusty *tatami* matting behind her mistress. Maru took his place beside Toshiro and tried not to stare too openly at the lady across from him.

Maru had seen samurai women before, but only rarely and from a distance. Close up, the seams of their guest’s elegant kimono showed signs of wear, and the pale-gray silk of her *haori* jacket had faded nearly to white across the shoulders. Her horsey face had probably never been beautiful, but she knelt with the straight-backed poise of an Imperial princess, and her gentle smile illuminated the room like a New Year lantern.

“The name of this useless person is Izumi Makoto,” she said in her soft, lilting voice, laying her fingers ever so lightly on her chest. She kept her eyes downcast as she spoke and her tone apologetic, as if her name wasn’t worthy of being spoken aloud, but the enigmatic little smile never left her lips.

“Lady Izumi. Of course,” said Toshiro. “You live at the end of the street, across from the Temple of Kannon, do you not?”

“Yes.” Lady Izumi gave a small, gracious dip of her head, and Maru bit back a grunt of surprise. Her worn clothes certainly fit the Benten Street neighborhood, but he had never suspected the place of harboring such refined manners. “My husband, Izumi Morinojo, and I

have lived there for many years.” She paused, and her maid, who had been studying the empty, cobwebbed *tokonoma* alcove at the end of the room with obvious distaste, transferred her attention to her mistress, alert and watchful.

*Not only a maid but a guard dog.* A good one, too. She looked sturdy enough to deal with any threat to her mistress.

“I’m sure this matter is an unimportant thing, and I apologize for taking up your time with such trifles,” Lady Izumi resumed, “but I have heard from persons of my acquaintance that you might be able to help me with a certain matter.”

Toshiro’s tiny frame inflated just a bit. “I’m flattered that my poor skills have received such favorable mention,” he said. “Please continue.”

Lady Izumi hesitated again, and for just an instant the ever-present smile quivered at the corners. She took a quick breath, squared her narrow shoulders, and raised her head a little higher. “Two months ago,” she said, “my husband left on what he said would be a short journey. He had been sending me letters as he traveled. However, I have heard nothing from him for nearly a month now. I’m sure I am being foolish, but his silence worries me.”