

THE
NAME
OF THE
BLADE



BOOK THREE

FRAIL
HUMAN
HEART

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IT CONTINUES . . .

When Mio Yamato steals an antique *katana* from her family's attic, she awakens a nine-tailed cat-demon—a Nekomata—and a beautiful warrior boy—Shinobu, who has spent five hundred years trapped in the sword. Shinobu saves Mio and her best friend, Jack, from the monster's claws, but the Nekomata kidnaps Jack's sister, Rachel, and kills Shinobu. Mio, given extra strength, speed, and size by the *katana*, yields to rage and bonds with the sword to destroy the Nekomata. With the demon dead, Shinobu returns to life.

But then the Nekomata's mistress—Izanami, Goddess of Death—sends Shikome, monstrous winged women who spread a supernatural plague. With Jack sick, Rachel mutating as a result of the Nekomata's bite, and their friends the Kitsune—fox spirits—unable to help, Shinobu and Mio seek out answers from a sinister old man, Mr. Leech, who tells them to imprison Shinobu in the sword once more. Shinobu is willing, but Mio refuses—until an attack on the hospital leaves her with no other choice. The Shikome are banished, their victims—including Jack and Mio's father, who has known about the *katana* all along—heal, and Rachel regains control of her body. And Mio is determined to make the gods pay for what they have done. . . .

• CHAPTER 1 •

BROKEN

I couldn't see her.

The pearly-white flames sheathing the *katana* illuminated dark streaks of fungus on the concrete walls of the storm drain, the fleeting red gleam of a rat's eyes farther down the tunnel, and the murky black water swirling and splashing at my toes. It also lit up a few things floating in the water that I didn't want to look at closely. But it didn't show me the one thing I had wanted and expected to see.

Rachel.

"Everything OK down there?" my dad shouted into the manhole over my head.

"I'm fine—hang on!" I yelled back.

I walked along the narrow edge of brick that ran down one side of the tunnel, trying to avoid the splashing

water as I moved deeper into the darkness. I lifted the flickering light of the sword higher, squinting against the dark.

“You’re very quiet,” I whispered to the blade. “Nothing to say?”

The sword’s energy jumped against my palm like an uneasy heartbeat, but the familiar metallic voice remained silent.

I still felt the compulsion—a magnetic, physical attraction to the blade—twinned with a deep-down sense of responsibility to protect him, keep him safe. That was apparently hardwired into everyone in my family. It sat alongside my own rational awareness that allowing the sword’s destructive power to fall into the wrong hands would be disastrous for the whole world. But the influence that the *katana* had exerted on my emotions, the silvery, persuasive whispering that had put such pressure on my mind that I sometimes thought I was going mad? It was gone. For the first time in what felt like forever, I was really and truly alone in my head.

I hated it.

“Rachel!” I called out. My voice bounced around the drain eerily. “It’s me! You can come out!”

There were tiny skittering noises in the shadows as vermin fled from the noise and light, but nothing else. I strained my ears for any giveaway sounds: a splash, a footstep on the bricks, even a weak cry for help. This was

where I'd sensed her, almost *seen* her, during my vision. I knew I hadn't been mistaken. She'd been in this drain.

But not anymore. I was too late, again.

"Shit."

Exhaustion pulled my shoulders down into a weary slump. With a sigh, I turned and went back the way I'd come. The dim blue disk of the open manhole appeared overhead. There was a circle of heads silhouetted against the dusky night sky. My father. Hikaru, our friendly neighborhood fox spirit. And Jack, my best friend—Rachel's younger sister. They were all peering down anxiously at me.

"Well?" Jack asked. The word echoed around me, multiplying the single question into a hundred. I didn't have any answers.

"Make some room. I'm coming out," I called.

As they backed out of sight, I reached over my shoulder and eased the *katana* into his *saya*—the lacquered wooden sheath—which rested against my back in its leather harness. As the blade entered the embrace of the *saya*, the prismatic white fire of the sword was slowly extinguished, plunging the storm drain into impenetrable shadow.

When the *tsuba*—the sword's guard—clicked home against the mouth of the *saya*, I let go of the *katana*, flexing my fingers experimentally. Not very long ago, the simple action of replacing the blade in his sheath would

have taken almost impossible effort. It would have left me feeling shaken and bereft. The sword would have resisted all the way, beguiling me, tempting me, trying to convince me that I was only complete when I allowed him to wield me as if I were the weapon and he the fighter. I could hardly believe it was so easy now. It almost seemed like cheating—until I remembered the price I had paid for my free will.

I clambered carelessly up the metal rungs set into the wall of the storm drain until I could catch the edge of the manhole with both hands, then swung myself up and out of the hole in a jerky, abrupt movement. Crouching on the pitted blacktop, I grabbed the manhole cover, which we had found already pulled away from the opening in the ground, and pushed it back into place with a heave and a twist.

“She wasn’t down there, was she?” Jack said as I straightened up. “Do you think you were wrong about what you saw—dreamed—whatever?”

“No.” The deep white claw marks gouged in the grubby cement of the walls proved that my mental image of poor Rachel’s desperate struggle down there, the way she had lashed out in pain as she fought against the transformation, was real. But I couldn’t exactly share that with Jack.

“She must have gotten herself out and away before we arrived. She didn’t know we were coming to look for her.”

“Why was she down there in the first place?” Jack asked, pacing away and then back again. “What was wrong with her? What *happened* while I was in that hospital?”

“All right, there are a lot of questions to be answered, but the best thing we can do is head home . . .” my father began in his usual commanding tone.

Jack was too worked up to listen. She spun back to face me. “Are we in, like, immediate danger from anything horrible right this minute?”

I cast an apprehensive look at the royal-blue sky. It wasn’t full dark yet, but the harsh orange glow of the streetlights behind the hospital made the shadows seem more intense, and my instincts were urging me to head for sanctuary. My parents’ house, warded against supernatural attack by the London Kitsune, was the only truly safe place for us—the one safe place left in the city, probably. But we’d already seen, on multiple occasions, that darkness was no more dangerous than daylight. Plenty of creatures from the Underworld hunted equally well in either. And Izanami had just suffered a devastating defeat. She was surely going to need some time to recover from seeing her plans turn to dust.

Reluctantly, I shook my head. The bones in my neck creaked. My dad made an exasperated face and folded his arms.

“All right, then tell me what is going on with my

sister,” Jack demanded. “I know it’s bad. She came to the hospital. She was talking with someone else’s voice—it said it was the Nekomata’s mistress—and her eyes were all black.”

Well, shit. I rubbed my hand over my face wearily. “I didn’t know that.”

“Rachel was supposed to be with you, Mio. You were supposed to be keeping each other safe.” The words were edged with an accusation that cut me more painfully than a knife in the gut.

“I tried my best. I did, Jack. She wasn’t . . . herself. The bite—the Nekomata bite—changed her.”

“*Changed* her? What? *How*? Did you know that could happen?”

“Of course I didn’t. When we left the hospital, she told us that she felt wrong. Different. She couldn’t control her temper. Kept snapping for no reason. The tooth marks on her neck disappeared. She got fast and really strong. Stronger than me. Right after you called us, she lost it. She attacked me and . . .” *No. Can’t say his name yet.* “Then she ran off.”

At her sides, Jack’s hands trembled, then slowly curled into fists. “You let her go?”

Sometimes the only thing you can do is let go. . . .

I flinched from the memory of his voice. “I couldn’t stop her.”

“You let her go and you didn’t tell me. You didn’t call

me. I can't believe this. She's my sister. I had the right to know she's turning into some kind of monster!"

"She isn't turning into a monster," I said flatly. I could see that my lack of emotion was riling Jack up even more, but I didn't have anything else to offer her. I was so bloody tired. "That explosion of power that healed you and banished the Shikome? It fixed Rachel, too. She's OK now."

At least, as OK as anyone could be when their soul had been invaded by darkness and they only just escaped before the point of no return.

Relief and gratitude passed fleetingly over Jack's face. Then the anger was back. She took a step into my space, poking my shoulder. "Then, where is she? Why should I believe anything you say when you've been keeping all this shit a secret from me the whole time?"

"Jack," Hikaru, his face chalky and drawn with tiredness, interrupted firmly. "I can tell you're upset, but this isn't —"

"You stay out of it. You, too, Mr. Yamato!" Jack snapped at my father as he opened his mouth. "This is between me and her. And you'd better not try to bullshit me, Mio, because I know you, and I can see right through it. What the hell were you *thinking*?"

For the first time, I looked Jack dead in the eye. She blinked, then took a faltering step back, suddenly uncertain.

“First I was thinking,” I said quietly, “that my best friend was in the hospital, dying, and her sister had just tried to carve my face off, and it was up to me to somehow figure out a way to save them both. A little while after that, I was thinking about not getting swept off a rooftop or slashed to bits or dying of the taint when a bunch of Shikome ambushed me.”

“Mio.”

I ignored Dad’s interruption, eyes still fixed on Jack. “Then I was thinking about how apparently everything I believed about my family and my father was a lie, because it turned out he knew about the sword and the monsters all along. And finally—”

“I didn’t mean—” Jack began.

I rolled right over her without raising my voice, refusing to stop now that I’d started. “Finally, I was thinking about how in order to close the portal to Yomi, save London from the Foul Women, turn Rachel back into a human, heal you, and stop my dad from dying at my feet, I needed to sacrifice . . . sacrifice . . . and watch him get sucked into an eternal prison of darkness. Again.”

Hikaru, my father, and Jack were all gaping at me now, wide-eyed and appalled. One of Jack’s hands crept up to cover her mouth as her eyes fixed on my shoulder. I knew what she was staring at: the black-silk-wrapped hilt of the sword poking out of the baggy neckline of my dad’s ruined old sweatshirt.

Jack had known *him* better than either of the other two. She had been there when he first broke free of the sword, had listened when he described the endless dark horror of his centuries trapped in the blade. She looked stricken. Maybe I'd said too much.

"So. That was what I was thinking," I finished awkwardly.

"Mimi, I . . ." Jack stuttered. "I'm sorry. . . . I didn't—"

"Forget it."

"But Shin—"

I flinched, cutting her off sharply. "Let's go home and see if Rachel's there."

Jack reached out. I avoided her as naturally as I could, and pretended not to see the hurt on her face or the warning look that my father gave her.

You must survive. You are the sword-bearer. You are the key to this battle.

I won't forget, I promised him silently, fingers stealing back to caress the grip of the *katana*. *I won't forget. Whatever it takes, I'll do it.*

I will end this war.

There was no sign of Rachel at the house. No sign she'd been there while we were gone, either.

The familiar rooms suddenly seemed too large, the space echoing with the memory of voices that weren't there, the shadows of people who should have been. I

lingered in the doorway of the living room, my eyes trailing over the ordinary shapes of my home as if they were rare, exotic artifacts in a museum. Nothing seemed real.

“She hasn’t called her own phone,” Jack said fretfully, putting Rachel’s mobile down on the coffee table. “Maybe she tried your house phone?”

She moved past me, back into the hall. Hikaru trailed after her, looking awkward. I realized it was the first time he’d actually been inside the house—in fact, it might be the first time he’d been inside a human house, period. I should probably say something to make him feel welcome. I should reassure my dad, too; he was sitting on the arm of his favorite chair, staring at me expectantly. But I didn’t know what to say to either of them, or how to comfort Jack. It was like my little tantrum in the hospital car park had sucked out the last of my words and now I was empty. I felt distant from them all. I felt alone, even though they were right here with me.

I felt broken.

“Holy crap, there’s more than a dozen messages on here,” Jack said from the hallway. There was a loud beep as she hit the play button on the answering machine.

My dad’s voice flooded the hall. “*Mio, why aren’t you answering your mobile? I don’t know exactly what is going on over there, but I’ve got an idea, and I’m coming back. Stay inside. Stay out of trouble. Don’t do anything until I get there—do you hear me? Nothing.*”

My dad rubbed his hand over his face, looking rueful at the echo of contained fury in his recorded voice. “I was . . . worried.”

The phone beeped again. “Mio?” My mum’s voice now. *“Pick up if you’re there, honey. No? Listen, Rachel called. Your father didn’t give me the chance to talk to her, but I know something’s happened. Are you all right? Please call me back as soon as you get this.”*

After the next beep, I heard my mum’s voice again, this time snarling. *“How dare you do this to me, Takashi? You had better have the best explanation of your damned life—no, I don’t even care about explanations. Call me back as soon as you get there and tell me what is going on or I am getting a divorce, you bastard.”*

The next message from Mum was quiet and steely. *“Someone has to be there. Why haven’t you called me? Why hasn’t someone called me? Mio, Takashi, one of you pick up the phone. I need to know that you’re both OK.”*

I spoke over the next message. “You have to talk to her.”

My father’s expression was artificially calm. “I know. But I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.”

I restrained the urge to throw something at him and scream, *How the hell should I know?* “You say you’re sorry. That we’re both safe. And tell her she can’t come home. No matter what. She can’t come home.” And that was it. I was done. I walked quickly toward the stairs and began

the climb. “I’m—I’m going to my room. I need to rest. I need to think.”

“Mimi!” Jack ran after me. “Are you . . . ? Look, are you going to be OK? About what I said before—”

Various responses cycled through my head. I settled on “I’m fine. Just tired. Don’t worry about Rachel—I promise she’s OK. But if she hasn’t turned up by the morning, I’ll come up with a new plan.”

I went on up the stairs, leaving everyone behind.

I opened my bedroom door and stepped inside with relief. He had never been in here. I flicked on the bedside light and pulled off my leather sword harness with quick, efficient movements, removing the sheathed *katana* so I could check him over for wear, damage, or dirt. Despite everything, the sword was still pristine. The one unchanging, perfect thing in my world.

After turning the light off again, I sat down on the edge of the bed, clasping the sword upright between my hands so I could lean my forehead against the silk-wrapped grip.

Are you . . . are you there?

Are you there?

Nothing. I braced myself.

Shinobu?

The moment I let myself think his name the flashback hit, tearing away my bedroom, dark and quiet, and flinging me back, back there—

The cold sidewalk under my knees. My father lies on the ground in front of me, rash turning black on his face. The fading rumble of Hikaru's lightning, and the stink of burned hair and feathers. Foul Women shriek and swirl overhead.

His face. Pleading, begging me. His lips still wet from mine. The faint resistance as the blade slices through muscle and flesh, the awful thud as the sword guard hits bone. That sharp gasp of agony, and his eyes, the eyes I love so much, too full of pain in that final moment to see me . . .

My stomach convulsed; bile rushed into my throat, burning like acid. I tumbled over the edge of the mattress, one hand thudding onto the floor to keep my balance as I threw up into the plastic wastepaper bin by the bed.

I knelt there, hollowed out and numb, until the arm that was holding my weight began to tremble. My other hand had kept hold of the *katana*. I still couldn't let him go. I could never let go. Because when I held the *katana* in my hand, I held not only the fate of the world—but the soul of the boy I loved.

Slowly, I hauled myself back up onto the bed. Then I curled up around the *katana* and closed my eyes.

• CHAPTER 2 •

WHAT DREAMS MAY COME

Back when he'd been obsessively reading the *Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings* in the Great Library in his grandmother's palace, dreaming of a human life of freedom and adventure and change, Hikaru had never had any idea how confusing it would all really be. Take this, for instance. Gate-crashing a wild rave in someone's student house was very different from being invited into a friend's home—their family home—for the very first time. There were rituals for this, ways to make your respect and gratitude clear. But those were Kitsune rituals, designed to be performed in the spirit realm. Not for humans, in a human building in the mortal realm. No one seemed to expect anything of him right now anyway, and it was both liberating and terrifying.

All his life, people had pushed and pushed and pushed at him. No achievement was great enough, no amount of effort or talent impressive enough to meet everyone's expectations.

But what was he, really? Nothing. Just an infant immortal of no significance. Painfully young and unprepared.

He didn't know what to do.

Mio's father was sitting in the armchair in the living room, lost in thoughts that looked unpleasant to say the least. He had a mobile phone clutched in his hand. Hikaru guessed that he was nerving himself up to call Mio's mother. Jack—lovely, funny, angry, sweet-smelling Jack—was still hunched over the hall table, her shoulders tense with strain, one of her strong, long-fingered hands clutching the edge of the table as she played the messages from the answering machine, hoping for one from Rachel. Her eyes kept straying back to the stairs. Personally, Hikaru wasn't sure if he wanted Mio to come back down right now so they could figure out a way to somehow help her, or if he preferred her to stay up there so he didn't have to see the dead, frozen look on her face again.

Hikaru had known these people for only a few days, but they had been pretty hellish days, and they had all been through a lot together. He had seen Mio Yamato fight, cry, freak out, seen her pushed to the absolute limit of what any person should have to endure. And through it all, she'd shone. There had been a light inside her, a sort of shining that made them all willing to follow her, even when the Underworld broke loose around them and it wasn't certain whether anyone would get through the next five minutes alive. Now it was as if that light had flickered out. Shinobu had taken it with him.

He already missed Shinobu. He couldn't imagine how Mio must feel. What had happened out there in those awful moments when Mr. Yamato was dying and the Shikome were swarming on them? He had turned away to defend Mio and Shinobu with his lightning, only to look around and find Shinobu . . . gone.

What had Mio done in those desperate moments when Hikaru's back was turned?

And what had it done to her?

Hikaru had never had human friends before. He didn't know if they were always like this, so frighteningly fierce and fragile. But he did know that the less they expected from him, the more he wanted to give them.

"Nothing," Jack muttered as the last of the phone messages ended. "Why hasn't the inconsiderate cow called? She must know that we're worried sick."

"She probably has a good reason," Hikaru said tentatively.

"A good reason? There *is* no good reason to run off and leave me freaking out this way."

Hikaru shrugged. "She might need a bit of time to get her head straight before she faces us again. She seems like that sort of person."

"That kind of . . . How would you know?" Jack demanded. "You don't even know her. You don't know any of us!"

He flinched inwardly. "Maybe. I know that Rachel loves you, though. She's going to come back." He met Jack's gaze,

even though the sight of those lovely, dark, heavy-lashed eyes focusing on him made his whole body go tight. “She will.”

Jack stared back at him defiantly for a heartbeat. Then she crumpled, hiding her face in her hands. Hikaru struggled with himself for a minute—*I could move in for a hug. That would be OK, right, not creepy? But what if she does think it's creepy? Damn, I overthought. Now it's definitely creepy*—and settled on reaching over and lightly rubbing her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered. “I don’t know what I’m doing. First I blow up at poor Mio. Now I’m having a go at you. I’m a hot mess.”

“It’s OK. Don’t worry about it,” Hikaru said. “We’re all messes here.”

Behind them in the living room, Hikaru heard Mr. Yamato clear his throat. “Aiko?” he said into his phone. “It’s . . . I’m sorry—let me . . . No, she can’t come to the phone. She’s . . . No, she’s not OK. I don’t know, Aiko. I . . . don’t know what to do.”

I had dozed off and woken, dozed and woken again. I was so tired that my whole body ached with the weight of exhaustion. But I couldn’t give in to it. I forced my eyes open and stared down at the *katana*.

I know you’re in there. I’m right here. I’m right here with you. You’re not alone.

Can you hear me?

Shinobu?

Still no response. No spike of energy, no tingle in my skin, no voice in my head. Nothing. If Shinobu's spirit was cloaking the *katana* so tightly that the blade couldn't speak to me anymore, then why couldn't Shinobu communicate with me in its place? He had before, on that first night, in the road outside Natalie's house, when I was dying.

Shinobu. Please. Please?

I had to hear his voice. Grasping the hilt more firmly, I slid the blade free of the *saya*. The distinctive black and silver ripples of metal glowed in the moonlight. I drew in a slow, even breath. And held it.

I visualized everything inside me—the dark, flowing shadows of my soul—reaching out, reaching into those flame-shaped markings, into the fibers and atoms of the folded steel. That was where Shinobu was. We were so close. He had to know I was there. That he wasn't lost and alone again.

I had to be able to reach him.

Shinobu. Shinobu. Shinobu.

My lungs burned, begging for air. Sparks burst across my eyes. The sword trembled in my hands.

Answer me!

My vision narrowed to the shining silver of the blade's cutting edge. I caught a glimpse of my own eye

staring back at me, reflected in the polished metal. My dilated pupil seemed to open up like a black hole. It swallowed me.

I fell.

The warmth of the sun on my face. Long grasses whispering. A fleeting echo of laughter.

A low, rambling house, with a steeply pitched thatched roof and yellow-brown walls, tucked into the curve of a forested hill. A clear stream dancing beneath ornamental bridges in a garden. Mountains beyond, blue and mist shrouded in the midsummer sun. The sleepy scratching song of cicadas. A deep, commanding voice calls out:

“Hajime! Mae! Mae! Ato!”

The smell of warm, polished wood and fresh sweat. Long dust motes spiral in auburn rays of sunlight filtering through rice-paper screens fixed over large round windows.

A man stands to one side, arms folded, his neat topknot and beard streaked with gray. His face is stern, his gaze keen, but crinkled lines around his eyes and mouth show that he laughs often, and deeply. In the center of the room, two children—a boy and a girl, no older than ten or twelve—circle each other, holding bokutō, old-fashioned wooden practice swords. Both are dressed in plain black kendogi. The boy is tall and skinny, his back very straight, his limbs lanky in that funny puppyish way that means he’ll probably be a giant in a few years. The girl is small, delicate, with wrists and ankles like fragile bird bones. Her hair is drawn severely back, but strands

have worked free around her ears and forehead and are plastered to her warm, golden skin. The small, pointed face is taut with determination, but her large, dark eyes are shining.

She lunges forward. The movement is shocking, too fast, too fluid for a child. The boy responds just as quickly. As he turns, I catch my first glimpse of his face.

Shinobu.

The scene changes. I'm outside. The same girl—older now, more like fourteen or fifteen, but still tiny and bird-boned—stands in the shelter of a huge tree, one small hand resting on its pale, papery trunk. A heavy canopy of pink blossoms dances overhead, sending petals spiraling down into the girl's black hair and over her pale blue kimono. She is smiling. A boy walks toward her.

Shinobu walks toward her.

This is Shinobu's past. I'm dreaming his memories again.

He is taller now. His face shines, alight with happiness. He reaches out to pluck a cherry petal from the girl's hair, and then smooths a silky stray strand behind her ear with a quick, practiced movement. The girl turns her cheek into his palm. They love each other. Anyone could see it. It makes the air around them seem almost to glow. It's beautifully bright, painfully beautiful.

My heart contracts with a mixture of yearning jealousy and terrible sadness. He lost her before I was even born. Oh, Shinobu.

Who is she? Who was she?

The scene changes again. They are back inside the house. Time has leaped forward again—they are older. The girl looks the same age as me, and Shinobu looks the age I've always known him—seventeen.

Something is wrong. The girl's face is pale and streaked with tears. She stares at Shinobu as if she doesn't know him. He is still and grave. God, such a familiar expression, that shadow of anguish in his eyes.

The girl makes an abrupt gesture of repudiation with her hand, palm opening as if to fling something away. She speaks. The words are in Japanese, and I don't understand them, but they seem to tremble in the air. Shinobu recoils, his whole body jerking. He opens his mouth, but she has already walked away. She does not look back.

What did she say? What's happening? What's wrong?

I know I'm not really here. Even if this is "real" in any sense, it's still the past. Hundreds of years ago. I can't change any of it. But I can't help reaching out to him with my heart, trying to wrap some kind of comfort and love around his poor bowed shoulders.

Shinobu. It's all right. I'm here. I'm always here, Shinobu.

His back stiffens. Those beautiful dark eyes search the room with an expression of disbelief. And just for an instant, they meet mine.

A shrill, unearthly wail assaulted my ears, making me gasp with pain.

The vision, Shinobu, the colors and warmth, everything disappeared as if someone had flicked off the light.

I found myself on my knees in a dark corridor that stretched out ahead of me as far as the eye could see. The walls were glassy black, rough and jagged. And it was cold, so cold. As cold as death. Clouds of vapor breathed off the warmth of my skin. I could feel ice crystals forming around my eyes and nose. My face and the tips of my fingers were already going numb.

A woman stood ahead of me in that long, narrow channel of rock.

Her back was turned to me. She scintillated, burning with a light that made my eyes sting. Every detail of her was as sharp as if I were seeing her through binoculars. Glossy dark hair cascaded in a perfectly straight waterfall over her waist and hips, almost to her knees. She wore a white-and-gold kimono, decorated with great swirls of intricate embroidery, each stitch as tiny and fine as a grain of sand. She was very slender, and not very tall. One hand, as delicate as a child's, rested on the rock beside her, the fingers slightly curled.

Her back shuddered. The faint sound of a sob reached me.

I knew who this was. I knew. I was looking at the Goddess of Death.

You feel for him . . . so much. The sweet, singsong tone sounded so eerie, so wrong, spoken with a grown woman's voice. Such love. You ache for him. But you will do

nothing for me. You deny me. You care nothing for my pain!

The icy air abraded my windpipe as I sucked in a ragged breath. "I—I can't give you what you want. I'm sorry."

A low moan of despair wavered through the corridor. Her loneliness, unbearable, ancient, and cold, washed over me like a suffocating wave.

He promised me. He *promised*. I only want what I was promised!

"I'm sorry," I repeated, the words hoarse with unshed tears. "I'm so sorry. I can't let you destroy my world."

Her head jerked. I never wanted to hurt anyone. Crunch. Snap. Little white bones all poking out. I just want what he promised.

"I know. But you do hurt people. You've—you've hurt my friends." I tried to speak as gently as possible. Her sorrow was like some kind of horrific radiation, so powerful it could kill. The cold of it gnawed the heart of my bones. My fingers were blue. I couldn't feel them anymore. I couldn't feel my lips. "You're hurting me—right now."

Slowly, she turned toward me. Just for a second I saw a flawless white profile—a delicate nose, soft full lips, a beautiful slanting eye fringed with thick black lashes. She looked so young. Years younger than me. Practically a little girl.

Then she completed her turn.

I shuddered, doubling up over my knees as I saw her properly for the first time.

Soft, pale skin hung in torn spiderwebs over the sharp yellow bones of her skull. Her left eye was missing, and the left side of her mouth and the flesh of her left cheek had been eaten away, exposing the teeth all the way to the roots in the spongy bone of her jaw. Worms and insects crawled through the gaps in her flesh. A thin black snake slithered out of the empty eye socket and coiled around her neck before disappearing into a gaping hole in the skin just below her collarbone. The clean white kimono seethed; the fabric was barely able to contain the movement beneath it. Ants, cockroaches, millipedes, and gleaming beetles worked busily around the skeletal remains of her feet.

Give me what I was promised, or it shall be war . . . the half-rotted face hissed. Maggots gleamed white on the pulpy black of her tongue. And you will join me in hell, Yamato Mio. Soon. Soon.

Ssssoon!

Her voice rose into a hideous shriek that pierced my ears like a hot needle.

I snapped back into my body with a silent wheeze of terror, flying off the bed before my eyes were even fully open. My back slammed into the wall next to the window. I brought the *katana* up, ready to strike. Fighting for breath, heart palpitating wildly, I scanned the corners of my bedroom, searching every shadow for the awful pale gleam of shredded skin and exposed bone.

The room was empty.

Slowly I let the sword drop. My sigh turned the air in front of my face white. When I looked down, I could see patterns of frost riming the back of my hands. My fingernails were blue-gray in the dim light.

It was nearly dawn. I had been out of it for a long time.

With Izanami.

She's coming after me. And she is angrier and more insane than ever.

Before I could begin to process everything I'd seen—the memories that seemed to be Shinobu's, Izanami's threats—I heard another scream. Not Izanami this time.

Someone human.

I swore and ran for the door, my unsheathed *katana* in my right hand, his *saya* clutched in the other.

The others were piling into the front hallway as I arrived downstairs. I realized they must have been sleeping in the living room when the sound woke them.

"What is that?" A bleary-eyed Hikaru demanded, rumpling his copper hair with one hand. He was wearing a white tank top, which revealed a slender but surprisingly muscular build with strong, wiry arms. His bottom half was clad in what looked like a pair of my father's pajama pants.

"It wasn't me," I said in response to Jack's worried look. She was wearing an oversize T-shirt and clutching her purple-skull comforter around her.

“No, it came from outside,” my father said, fastening his *katana* to his belt with quick, automatic movements. Like me, he was still fully dressed.

I stepped past him, put down the *saya* on the hall table, and unbolted the front door. The street lay quiet under a thick blanket of sickly yellow clouds. The sun wasn’t up above the skyline yet, but the streetlights had already winked off.

A woman flashed past the doorway. She was sprinting flat out, thin, pale legs flashing under the hem of her black coat. I had a blurred impression of a dead-white, terrified face as she whipped her head back to look behind her, hair streaming over her shoulders. She screamed again.

I couldn’t see what she was running from at this angle. It didn’t matter. Under my hand, the faint buzz of energy emanating from the *katana*’s grip had become a fierce sizzle.

There was a monster out there.

I turned to look at my dad. He stared back for a second, his gaze searching my face. Then he nodded shortly, squaring his shoulders.

“You two stay here,” I said to Jack and Hikaru. “We’ve got this.”

• CHAPTER 3 •

INCY WINCY

My dad stepped out behind me and shut the door on Jack's and Hikaru's worried faces.

The woman stumbled to a halt, staring at us. "Can you see it? Do you *see* that?"

I turned in the direction of her pointing finger and got my first look at the danger that was causing the *kata-na*'s energy to growl.

The thing lumbered clumsily down the center of the road. Its massive, hair-covered abdomen seemed too heavy for the thin black-and-white-striped legs that heaved it forward. The body was black, marked with white zig-zags, and had two segments. Mandibles bigger than steak knives rubbed together with a dry, papery sound.

It was a spider. A spider the size of a Doberman.

The creature's cluster of gleaming black eyes were fixed on the woman. It was slow and didn't seem very

agile, but it never stopped moving and it never looked away. I wondered how long it had been chasing her. Long enough to make her frantic. Long enough to make anyone frantic.

“You see it, right?” she begged us. “Please tell me you’re seeing this!”

“We can see it,” I promised.

“Unfortunately.” My dad’s face had screwed up with revulsion. “I mean, my God, what’s next?”

“Never ask that question,” I advised. “Can you get her inside? I’ll deal with this thing.”

“Are you sure? Don’t you want me to —?”

“I can handle it.”

Dad hesitated again, giving me another of those searching looks. What was he looking for? What did he expect to see? Whatever it was, he obviously didn’t find it in my eyes. When he finally nodded and peeled off toward the woman, his expression was tense and worried. “I’ll be right back.”

I sighed and made for the other end of the street, twisting the *katana* in slow figure eights to limber up my wrist.

The spider took no notice of me at first, just pulled itself steadily along with arrhythmic lurching motions, as if I weren’t there. Then I stepped into its path — blocking its view of its prey. That got its attention.

The spider let out a weird sound, a series of oddly

mechanical clicking noises. It reared back, and the top half of its body heaved up off the ground. While the front set of legs began to wave in the air, its back legs strained, lifting its body until the bulbous head was nearly level with mine. The razor-sharp jaws clashed together in warning.

An involuntary sound of disgust popped out of my lips. I was so busy trying not to gag, I almost failed to notice that the back half of the creature was curling up underneath it to point the sharp tip of its abdomen at me. *That can't be good.*

I jumped aside as a stream of grayish web stuff splattered onto the road.

As a rule, I wasn't a spider killer. I preferred to catch them with a glass and a sheet of paper and put them outside. But this situation definitely called for an exception.

I ran around the side of the spider onto the sidewalk, tracking its awkward movements. It tried to turn and keep me in sight, but those crooked legs were just too slow. I struck from behind, two fast diagonal slices that made the blade flash in the predawn light. Four of the spider's six back legs parted from its abdomen and slid away with papery rustling noises. The heavy body crashed onto the road. The creature cried out again—a series of dry clicks that rose and fell almost like a human voice speaking. More of the sticky web goo spurted out. I

brought the *katana* down on the most vulnerable point of the spider's body: the join between the swollen abdomen and the upper carapace.

The blade severed the creature's exoskeleton neatly in half. Rusty liquid gushed out, mixing with the pool of web liquid under the body. The spider collapsed onto the ground, front legs thrashing in its death throes. I waited for it to fall still, then turned to see if my father had come back yet.

There was no sign of him.

The street was deserted except for the running woman—who wasn't running anymore. Standing motionless in the middle of the road about a hundred yards away, she smiled.

Dread dropped into my stomach like a ball of cement. The sword was still humming in my grip.

"Where is my father?" My voice was toneless. Flat. A killer's voice.

"He's gone. You're next." Her voice was different now, too: deeper and more resonant.

She wasn't a woman. She wasn't any kind of human. She was a monster in disguise.

Sparks crackled to life on the *katana's* blade.

Dad's all right. He has to be all right.

I won't lose him, too.

Her smile widened as she watched me approach, like a patron in a restaurant as the waiter rolls the dessert

trolley to her table. In my mind I drove the hilt of the *katana* into her stomach, then brought my elbow down on the back of her neck, and finally applied my boot to her face until she told me where my dad was and that he was OK.

A second before I reached her, she threw her head back. Mechanical clicking sounds rolled from her mouth. I staggered back as a swollen spider's abdomen burst out of the bottom of her black overcoat. It was dingy white, and the size of a hatchback. Six segmented white legs unfolded, lifting her from the road. The monster rose until her upper carapace towered six feet above me. Her human arms stretched and grew. Thrusting out of the sleeves of the coat, they reached the ground and then turned back on themselves. The jagged white limbs were each longer than my whole body and tipped with a curving, razor-sharp claw.

She bowed her head slightly, dark hair falling over her face in long, lank coils.

"They call me Jorōgumo," she said with a hint of ceremony. "Mother of Spiders."

I darted forward, bringing my flaring blade sideways for a clean slice at her front leg. She twitched it away. I ducked under it and thrust up at the vulnerable joint of her body hidden beneath the remains of the overcoat. She was gone before the sword could make contact, skittering backward onto the sidewalk with a lightning-fast,

alien movement. Her taunting laugh echoed down the street.

“Where. Is. He?” I stalked after her. “What did you do with my dad?”

“What do you think?” she asked. Her tongue flicked out to caress her lips. “Were you listening when I introduced myself? I am a spider, after all.”

No. No. She’s lying.

There hadn’t been time for her to kill him and suck out his blood. He would have fought her—I would have heard the struggle. He was too strong to go down that easily. She was just trying to shake me, mess with my head.

“Oh, I was listening.” I drew near her again. “I’ve just sliced up one of your babies. How do you feel about that, Mother of Spiders?”

Her upper body moved in a jerky shrug. “Eh. I can always have more.”

She lurched forward, one of the massive forelegs slicing at me. I dodged, and the clawlike foot smashed into the road, sending chips of pavement flying. I reversed the blade to strike at the limb—and saw her abdomen curl up. I abandoned the strike, skidding to the left as a string of white web stuff thicker than my arm squirted past me. The movement brought me straight into the path of her other foreleg, forcing me away from her again.

“Some mother you are,” I sniped.

She bared her teeth at me. “Some daughter you are.”

The spider-woman maneuvered sideways, driving me back. She was so much faster and more agile than the small one. I needed to concentrate if I didn’t want to get skewered, but my gaze kept flitting past her, desperately searching for any sign of my father.

What had she done to him?

I won’t let go again.

Something barreled into my side. My knees went out from under me, and I hit the edge of the curb with a bone-jarring thud, rolling instinctively. A striped black-and-white leg stabbed at my chest. I rolled again—and tipped into the gutter.

A spider the size of a Great Dane landed on top of me, its hairy abdomen crushing my legs. Chattering mandibles lurched toward my face. I thrust my *katana* up between us. The mandibles clamped on it, and the blade flared white-hot. The spider made an anguished clicking sound. It wrenched backward, trying to jump off me and drag the sword out of my grasp. The flames seared its face. One of the bulging black eyes popped with a loud snap, showering me in goo. The stink of its burning flesh was rancid.

Long legs thrashed around me as I jammed my hand up under its thorax, trying to push it off. It lifted a couple of inches—and I felt the abdomen fighting to curl up between us and spray me with web. Hurriedly

I let its body drop and grabbed one of the legs. Bristly hairs abraded my palm as I twisted the limb up, trying to snap it off. I would rip the thing apart bit by bit if I had to.

I had to find my father.

A booted foot slammed into the spider. The sharp blow knocked the *katana*'s burning blade free of the locked mandibles and drove it into the side of the monster's head. The spider shuddered. The boot kicked again, and the spider flipped off me and landed on its back. It curled up into a ball, legs twitching.

"Need a hand there?" asked a familiar voice.

I rolled to my feet, gaping like an idiot. It was really her, all in one piece, neat and tidy as ever. I couldn't believe my eyes. "Rachel! Are you OK? Where have you been?"

She gave me an "Are you serious?" look. "How about we catch up later, Xena. Is that your *dad*?"

"Where?" I whipped around.

Relief made the world spin dizzily around me. It was him. He was alive and, judging by his expression, seriously pissed off. Several globs of web goo plastered him to the side panel of a van parked on the street. His whole right arm, one leg, and his upper left arm were immobile. Another piece of web was stuck over his mouth, but he'd managed to get his left hand up and was working at it.

His sword was still stubbornly clenched in his trapped right hand. I leaped forward to help.

He ripped the spiderweb gag off. "Look out!"

Behind me, Jorōgumo let out another clicking cry.

"Get him off there," I said urgently, giving Rachel a hasty push toward where he was trapped. "Quick."

I turned back to face the monster.

A tide of spiders crawled over the houses behind Jorōgumo, washing down onto the sidewalk. They ranged from house-cat size to nearly as big as the one Rachel had just nuked. There were dozens of them.

Way, way too many for me to hold off alone.

The *katana* seemed to tremble in my hand, energy throbbing. I could call on the power of the sword's first true name—Shinobu's name—but what if that broke the blade's intelligence free again? The baby spiders surged around their mother's legs and scuttled across the road straight at us.

Jorōgumo grinned.

My eyes flickered back to Rachel. She was sawing at the web with my father's sword. "Hurry up."

"I am *trying*," she snapped.

"Mio, run!" my father ordered. "Get back to the house. Rachel, you, too."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Me neither, so shut up and help me," Rachel told him.

The spiders kept coming. I braced myself.
The front door of my house flew open with a crash.
“Yippee ki-yay!”

Hikaru shot down the steps and into the road, his tail whipping at the air. A spray of lightning bolts zipped away from him and hit the first line of spiders. A large one popped, messily. Jack skidded out after Hikaru, slamming the door behind her. She clutched one of my mother’s wicker shopping baskets in one hand, and there was a glass bottle in the other. Her arm went back like a cricket player’s. She pitched the bottle straight at Jorōgumo.

The spider-woman dodged. The bottle hit the ground next to her and burst into flames. Jorōgumo shrieked as fire licked her legs. Several of the smaller spiders went up with a loud sizzle.

“Go get her, She-Ra!” Jack yelled at me.

Behind me, Rachel laughed. “It’s Xena, Jacqueline. Xena!”

I saw Jack’s face light up with joy as she heard her sister’s voice. Hikaru whipped his tail again, driving the sea of spiders back toward their mother. His mouth was set in a mad grin of effort and elation.

OK, time to try something really stupid.

I charged Jorōgumo.

Spiders crunched under my feet as I leaped from back to back, picking up speed. When I hit the edge

of the road, I jumped, putting everything I had into it. With a mad war cry, I flipped in midair and landed on Jorōgumo's back. The impact traveled through her body like a pile driver. Her spindly legs buckled.

Weird clicking sounds almost deafened me as I seized the back of her overcoat to hold myself steady and brought the *katana* straight down in a powerful one-handed thrust, aiming for her waist—the narrow point where the torso met the abdomen.

The blade went through the spider-woman's chitin armor like a warm finger sinking into melting ice cream. I dragged the sword sideways to inflict maximum damage. She convulsed, legs jerking and flailing. I let go of the coat, spread my arms for balance, and kicked. My boot thudded solidly between her shoulder blades.

With a *crack*, Jorōgumo's upper carapace separated from the hairy abdomen. Her human-looking torso toppled down onto the pavement. The rest of her body juddered and then collapsed, almost throwing me off. Down in the road, the baby spiders let out shrill sounds as they saw their mother die.

I leaped away from the spider-woman's death throes. My landing crushed two of the smaller spiders, and I diced two more with a quick two-handed slash of the *katana*. To my right, Hikaru and Jack closed in, herding the spiders toward me with lightning and fire. My father was finally free, and was quite calmly instructing Rachel

on the best way to use his sword to kill the monsters, even as he crushed them underfoot, punched them down, and ripped off their legs with his bare hands. Overhead, the sun was finally rising above the buildings, casting long fingers of light between the clouds and into the street.

Within five minutes, Jorōgumo's army was nothing more than ashes, twitching legs, and splatters of goo staining the road.

"What now, boss?" Hikaru asked tiredly, looking at me.

When did I become the boss? A glance at the others showed them all—even my dad—staring at me expectantly, as if they were waiting for orders. I cleared my throat awkwardly. "Um. I think we're done here. Showers?"

To my relief, everyone nodded.

"You! You can make bacon sammies to apologize for scaring the crap out of me," Jack said roughly, grabbing at Rachel and attempting to put her in a headlock.

Rachel fended her off with one hand, holding my father's *katana* carefully away with the other. "Ew, get off. Don't get spider guts on me!"

They headed for the house, and I took a moment to sag, dazed with relief. We'd survived again. All of us, this time. We were safe. I had no idea how.

And I had no idea how long it would last.

Frail Human Heart: The Name of the Blade,
Book Three
Zoë Marriott

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