

DYNASTY CODES

ORIGIN CURSE



SARAH KATE ISHII

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Author's Note

Unless mentioned otherwise, all full names in this book are written with the family name first and then the person's given name. In some cases where a person is introduced with just a single name, it is their given name.

To the dreamers.

You can.

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The Dynasty Codes

Magic is disappearing. Gone are the days when mages wandered the globe and spirits crossed over from the world beyond. No longer do people deal out curses, receive wishes, or buy items imbued with magic, and the legendary creatures that inspired popular folk tales have been so rarely sighted for generations that they've slipped into myth.

Instead, the final dregs of magic linger on the cusp between worlds, noticed only by the few with connections to both the spirit world and the land of the living. There, the veil between worlds tore and the laws of this dying magic transformed when a curse placed on a noble family in the east unravelled the fragile and unspoken dynasty codes over the globe, forcing the world into a new age.

Where magic will belong in that new age depends on the actions of just a few.

ICE L



LANDS



WALL
OF ICE

HIÉ REGION

Aoyama Prefecture

Shogo Prefecture

SHRINE

ABANDONED FARMHOUSE

YAMAMOTO VILLAGE

GARDEN

FARMERS' HOUSE

HIÉ TOWN

HARBOUR

SECRET HARBOUR



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Prologue

Centuries ago—before westerners set foot in the far eastern countries, battling open seas in great wooden vessels for adventure and trade to make their fortune in uncharted lands—the far east of the map marked the edge of the world. At this edge, a small country named Hizen is left yet untouched by the expanding west.

Hizen, ruled over by the military power of warlords, was led by the shōgun and split into domains guarded like kingdoms by powerful families and their ruling household member, the *daimyō*. For centuries, these families fought to expand their territory, creating a feudal era of civil war that kept the country locked in a state of tension, creating a country with a dominant ruling class of warriors—the *samurai*—noble and strict to their code of honour, loyal to their daimyō and avowed to protect their domain. But should threat ever come from beyond the lands of Hizen, by the power of the shōgun, these warring states would unite under a single banner to protect their country, putting aside their grievances with the neighbouring domains to keep the land safe.

On the southern coast of Hizen, an ancient warring family rules a large domain called Hié, headed by a powerful matriarchal line that has gone back for generations. This family, being close to the shōgun and as trusted members of the Hizen court, was given great trust and position in the Hizen nobility, awarded a rich region with good natural defence. With the Taiheiyō Ocean

to the south and east and a mountain region with rich forest to the north, the Hié region thrived, rich in crops and trade, with people living in peace in towns, villages, and on farms, crafting items of great quality and skill for livelihood and trade. And from her castle home in the centre of Hié's main town, Hié's reigning warlord, Lady Ii Asumi, defends her land and her people to keep this thriving life, working closely with the shōgun in the neighbouring region of Shogo to the north to bring an age of peace across all of Hizen.

But her family line hid a secret—a curse that would bring her family's hard-earned position and peace toppling down on itself, and with it, the destruction of the prosperous region of Hié.

1

The Castle of the Dragon Daimyō

Night shrouded the *tenshu* keep of the Hié castle compound, and Ii Yoshiko flinched as wooden floorboards creaked under muffled footsteps in the corridors outside her sleeping quarters. Her heart thudded, and her fingers stopped tying her indigo-dyed *haori* as Yoshiko paused to listen to the quick steps shuffling towards her room. Her eyes flicked to the window. The light of dawn wasn't yet bleeding into the sky—daylight was still a way off. She frowned.

This sound didn't match the footsteps of her maid, Haruki, who padded confidently down the *tenshu's* wooden passageways, and no-one else should be coming towards her chambers at this time. The hour before dawn was for training. Yoshiko's mother, daimyō Ii Asumi, the ruling warlord of Hié, had insisted her daughter learn to fight and defend herself from a young age, and now Yoshiko was nearing adulthood, Asumi expected Yoshiko to rise for dawn training on her own, without prompting from castle staff. So Haruki wouldn't be coming here yet, nor anyone else.

Yoshiko crouched, reaching instinctively in the dark for the short *tanto* blade she kept by her futon, and watched where the moonlight faintly hit the sliding paper door to her room. She tucked her long, straight black hair behind her ear and over her shoulder, out of the way, narrowing her dark, almond-shaped eyes

and listening to the shuffling. It paused on the other side of her door. Yoshiko slipped across the tatami floor and waited beside the door, blade ready, out of view of whoever entered.

The door slid in its frame, and a young woman peered into Yoshiko's room, the moonlight hitting the woman's features and making her look like a *yōkai* spirit from folk tales. Yoshiko, her breath held, watched the intruder from the corner of her eye.

The woman bent at the waist to bow and stepped into Yoshiko's bedchambers. Concerned, Yoshiko launched across the space between them, grabbed the woman's shoulder, spun her to face her, and bared her *tanto* blade as a warning.

'Who are you?' Yoshiko growled, feeling uneasy at the intrusion of her private rooms but trying to look firm. She didn't like violence, but she knew the defence of the Hié castle and its ruling family was crucial for the safety of the domain and the people her family protected.

The young woman let out a squeak as the tip of Yoshiko's blade stopped a finger's length from her small, pale nose. She clutched the sleeve of her light indigo kimono—the colour worn by everyone employed in the Hié castle compound. A maid. Yoshiko raised her eyebrows but awaited the young woman's answer, returning her gaze to the woman's wide eyes.

'S-Suki. I'm Suki. I was employed to work as your handmaid from today.' The maid bowed her head as much as she dared with a blade in front of her face and scrunched her eyes shut.

Yoshiko paused, thinking, choosing her words carefully. 'I've not heard of this. Who sent you?'

The young woman looked at the blade helplessly, then back to the warlord's daughter. 'Councilman Chinen, my lady,' she stammered. 'He said to come for you before training.'

Seeing the fear and honesty in Suki's eyes, Yoshiko let out a sigh and lowered her *tanto*, still not ready to sheath it. Her long

hair had fallen in the way again, so she tucked it behind her ear and straightened her back, watching the maid through tired, black eyes. Chinen *was* her training tutor, but this seemed wrong. ‘Chinen never sends maids—especially for training. I’m expected to rise by myself.’

Yoshiko watched the maid’s helpless expression deepen, searching for an answer she didn’t have.

She seems innocent enough, Yoshiko wondered. *Perhaps Chinen did send her*. But she remained alert for further movement in the corridor, unable to know for sure.

Yoshiko’s mother, Ii Asumi, was a renowned warrior and Hié’s proud daimyō. She was a woman of adventure and success, her strong ways and skill in battle earning her admiration across the whole country of Hizen—even among the shōgun and daimyō of other regions. This wild and proud woman had married a calm man of study and the arts, adoring her consort more than anything else in their world, not even being disappointed when their only child, Yoshiko, had taken more after her father, Hitoshi, in likes and nature, both preferring politics and the arts to fighting—though Yoshiko did enjoy archery, in which she could combine zen and peace with form and aim. Still, the daimyō doted upon her peaceful family and embraced the calm of the times she could spend with them at leisure when not caught up in her busy governing life—enjoying time in the gardens or kneeling to enjoy green tea and sweets while listening to her husband and daughter chat excitedly about their learnings, art, and philosophies. Asumi still insisted Yoshiko train, and while Yoshiko had no liking for battle, she found the alertness it had given her, mixed with her unusually good hearing, useful, particularly at times like now when she had to be alert to potential intruders to keep her domain safe.

‘Suki, does my mother know you’ve been employed recently? She’s warier than me. I don’t want you hurt because someone’s

made a mistake and we've not expected you.' Yoshiko sheathed her *tanto* and looked with concern at the young woman.

The maid's face paled further, and she stared without an answer.

'Welcome to the keep of the dragon daimyō.' Yoshiko gave a small smile, relieved Chinen hadn't sent the girl to her mother. Wondering what he was thinking, Yoshiko resolved to head to the training grounds immediately to find out more. Yoshiko rested her blade on a simple wooden table in a corner of her room, breathing slowly to relax her instincts and reassure herself. *There's no danger; it's just a mistake.*

Here, in the castle of the dragon daimyō Ii Asumi, the line of cursed warlords reigned strictly, ensuring their care for their region and fierce reputation kept Hié running smoothly and well-protected against potential attack from neighbouring regions. Yoshiko's mother had great responsibility from the shōgun to watch over this region of Hizen and look after its people, and the Ii family had ruled this region for generations, almost as long as the curse ran through their bloodline. Yoshiko didn't know too much about the curse yet—her mother said she'd tell the full story when Yoshiko came of age in a few years, when she'd lived through more than twenty winters. All Yoshiko knew now was that something had happened in the age of magic, several generations ago, and her ancestor had been cursed with a consuming power—one that gave them advantages of strength, but at a great cost.

The curse started small, at a young age, with things like enhanced senses, increased speed, stamina, strength. This all sounded like a dream come true for Asumi, Yoshiko's mother, who was a famed warlord and made great use of these traits, but it all came with a price. One of those was hearing too much and losing sleep over any little sound. Asumi, even after decades of living like this, still suffered little sleep. Yoshiko was also starting to

realise what her growing powers meant, and the pain of them, too. Her senses had heightened like her mother had said they would, and her strength and speed had grown, too. At this early stage of development, it brought overwhelm and overstimulation among busy and noisy places as her senses adjusted, and clumsiness when dealing with her growing but awkward strength and speed. A day didn't go by when the family curse didn't cause Yoshiko some minor inconvenience, and she couldn't imagine what it would be like in later stages of development.

Even now, had Yoshiko truly been startled by the stranger entering her private room—perhaps woken by Suki—her shock and attempts to defend herself mixed with her adjustment to the growing curse could have badly hurt the girl. Yoshiko cringed at the thought.

Yoshiko turned to face Suki with a smile on her face, trying to make amends and show her true, calm nature. 'I look forward to the future of our acquaintance,' she greeted the maid politely. 'Where is my usual maid, Haruki? Is she still coming?'

Haruki had served as Yoshiko's primary handmaid for three years. A cheerful and chatty girl, in a castle with strict expectations, Haruki had been a wave of freedom Yoshiko had eagerly sought. The two girls were almost joined at the hip, Haruki telling Yoshiko of everything outside the palace, singing folk tales and telling traditional folk stories and even bringing Yoshiko simple flowers, teas, and sweets she'd found in Hié town. Yoshiko had loved and embraced every little thing Haruki had brought. Haruki hadn't just been her handmaid; she'd been her closest—and only—friend.

Suki's face went blank at Yoshiko's question, and she bowed nervously. 'I'm sorry, but I don't know that person.'

Yoshiko looked over the maid again, eyes narrowing and her brow creasing as much as her stomach knotted to hear this. Her senses raised another alarm. If the maid had been hired to work

in Yoshiko's rooms, she must have met, or even been instructed by, Haruki. There was no way she wouldn't know her. Yoshiko watched Suki for any tell-tale signs there was still a threat. The young woman was the picture of innocence—a fresh, round, bright face, dressed well, her dark hair twisted smartly with a simple, decorated pin behind her head and her *obi* tied impeccably. But then, you couldn't tell just by appearance.

Deciding not to worry until she could learn more, and waiting to see if Haruki came in later in the day, Yoshiko directed Suki in helping her finish preparing for her morning training, asking Suki to help tie her *hakama*. As she finished dressing, Yoshiko thought about why Suki didn't know Haruki. Perhaps she was trained externally in a samurai family's household and gifted to the noble family? Besides, for now, Chinen would be expecting her at sunup. With Suki here, Yoshiko would have more than enough time to get there, surprise the old instructor, and find out why he'd sent Suki to collect her when he of all people knew the risks of sending unknown people into the noble family's bed chambers when they'd all be on high alert, blades beside their futon, ready for a sudden attack.

* * *

A hint of molten orange-pink highlighted the horizon and washed a warm, pale light over the castle grounds. Situated on layers of folk-made stone platforms with sheer rock faces leading to a folk-made moat for defence, the castle grounds contained many traditional dark-wood buildings with gently curving roofs and ornate gables with large, overhanging eaves for residence, political meetings, administration, defence, and storage. Along with the multitude of buildings, the grounds boasted several gardens, all towered over by the main *tenshu* keep—a white, five-storey castle with sloping green tile roofs for each layer and highly-ornate

gables, large and small—that sat on the highest, inner circle of the grounds. At this time in the morning, the castle compound was still quiet, and Yoshiko, in her training *hakama* and a simple *kimono*, darted down the stone steps leading from the *tenshu* on the top platform to one of the training areas on the level below, dodging workers as she ran.

‘Sensei!’ she called out cheerfully as a familiar silhouette caught her eye across a stone-walled courtyard.

An older samurai—councilman Chinen—turned to watch Yoshiko run across the training courtyard, training *katana* in hand. A look of surprise flashed across the man’s weathered face, but his expression soon cleared to beam at Yoshiko as she arrived.

‘Lady Yoshiko, you’re early,’ he said.

Chinen was a leader of Asumi’s samurai in Hié, having joined the ranks as a young man. Since then, his skills, knowledge, and easy-going nature had helped him climb the rankings, becoming a trusted military advisor of Hié. Because of that, he’d been asked by Yoshiko’s grandmother, the previous daimyō, to train young Asumi—his recognised skills and energy were just what the old daimyō thought her wild daughter would need to settle down. Now, it was Yoshiko’s turn for training, and she enjoyed these moments in the morning, despite the early hour. Chinen was always kind, humorous, and energetic—if a little strict—and he trained her well. If she must learn how to fight, she wanted someone she liked to teach her.

Often, Yoshiko felt people treated her differently because of her position. She didn’t want that. On trips into the main town, she’d peered about her and admired the way the people joked and talked together. Upon re-entering the palace, she realised how much people guarded themselves around her. Haruki hadn’t done that; the young maid easily adapted to chat with Yoshiko. Chinen had learned to do the same, and Yoshiko

thought him to be relaxing further in his old age, becoming even easier to speak with.

She decided to push him. ‘Yes, I was disturbed early by *someone’s* clumsy new hire,’ Yoshiko said, watching the man’s leathery face for a reaction.

He hummed. ‘There is always the opportunity for testing. It’s dangerous to pick up habits.’ Chinen looked at her seriously and then nodded. Yoshiko rose a brow and waited for whatever he’d say next, but Chinen moved on. ‘Well, let’s begin. You can watch the sunrise from your place in the dirt when I sweep the floor with you!’ He sank into a strong, deep stance and gripped the hilt of his katana, face serious as he watched her, but black eyes glinting and crinkling lightly at the corners as Yoshiko saw he held back a smile.

Yoshiko scoffed and tossed her *haori* to the side, feeling the chill of the spring air prick her bare neck and lower arms. ‘Have at it, old man,’ were her famous last words before she parried the first hard and unrelenting hit of a tirade of incoming attacks, which set the tone for the rest of her lesson—sure enough, she wound up on the floor more often than she liked.

By the end of the training, Yoshiko had, of her own accord, flopped down into the dirt. Her muscles ached, she could barely stand, and several new blows stung her body. She stretched her legs out in front and rested back on her hands, staring at the pale morning sky. It was still cold, but it was soothing after Chinen’s tough training.

‘What’s this? The dragon daimyō’s daughter is going soft?’ Chinen teased, plonking himself down beside her and crossing his legs, looking up at the sky, too.

‘Wasn’t I always?’ Yoshiko glanced over at the older man, noticing he, too, didn’t seem as energetic now as he usually would. His indigo-tunic-covered chest was heaving, and his dark brown eyes looked tired, with darkening shadows circling under his eyes.

When did he get so many wrinkles? Yoshiko wondered as she stared, then chastised herself for being rude. She looked away and back to the sky.

Chinen asked about the rest of her day, and Yoshiko casually responded about wanting to go into the gardens.

‘You’ll take Suki with you?’ Chinen asked, a hint of worry in his voice.

‘Yes, it should be fine.’

The older man seemed to relax, and Yoshiko wondered whether he’d been concerned—perhaps he’d realised his mistake in sending the unknown maid into her sleeping chambers in the morning. Either way, Yoshiko smiled at him.

‘How about yourself? Mother has governance. Will you be there?’

Chinen shook his head and pulled himself to his feet, brushing down his dark *hakama*. ‘I will be out of the palace so I will, unfortunately, miss the governance.’

Yoshiko nodded, understanding. And when the old samurai dismissed her from the morning’s training, she grinned and grew excited for her day ahead, the pains of her morning beating washing away. She leapt up, excited, dismissing herself and waving to the old samurai as she ran back up to the keep to have Suki help her prepare for her day of leisure in the gardens. She had an important gift to prepare, and she wanted to take as long as she could in making it perfect.

* * *

Later that morning, dressed formally in a yellow silk kimono that Suki had chosen for Yoshiko while she was training, the daimyō’s daughter hopped onto the stone steps outside the castle once again and took a deep breath. When she’d trained earlier, the morning still had spring’s early chill. Now, the sun’s heat brought energy to

the land, and it hummed with life. The recent rain brought green vitality to Hié, and as she looked down at the different levels of the castle grounds and the town beyond that, droplets of water glinted like jewels as the morning sun lit up the wet leaves of trees, the dark, sloping roof tiles of buildings, and the streams and ponds in the gardens below—her destination. She thought of her father. This was a perfect view for one of his spontaneous poems, and he loved poems about life and nature best.

Keeping to the stone path to avoid soaking her *zori*, accompanied by a quiet Suki close behind her, Yoshiko strolled down to the palace's eastern gardens on one of the lower levels of the castle compound. With small steps, limited by her kimono—and mumbling to herself about the impracticality of it as opposed to her favoured clothing of choice, the *hakama* trousers—Yoshiko negotiated the stone steps down to the next platform, past the one- and two-storey governmental buildings, towards the large gateway in the stone walls surrounding the second level compound, and down the low, wide stone steps into the lower levels and sprawling gardens below. There, Yoshiko crossed a small, red bridge that arched over a stream that fed several of the ponds around the garden. She paused at the crest of the bridge to observe a tiny terrapin pull itself past a giant, lazy, orange koi carp. Yoshiko smiled as the koi dashed away suddenly, leaving the terrapin to battle the ripples left in the koi's wake. Yoshiko watched the tiny creature a little longer before looking up and flashing a wide grin at Suki, who was equally enchanted.

'Every year,' Yoshiko started, 'I'm amazed at how tiny they start, and how they grow to be as big as, if not bigger than, the koi!'

Suki looked at Yoshiko, who could tell the woman was wondering what to say to nobility. Eventually, Suki responded with a simple, polite remark that left Yoshiko once more comparing her to Haruki and feeling rude for even thinking it. *Every person is different*, she chastised herself.

But what would Haruki have said? She'd have laughed when she saw it, large brown eyes flashing brightly, and called the koi 'rude' and crouched to watch. Yoshiko turned away as she smiled at the thought, wondering where her friend was and whether she was well. Should Yoshiko send someone to check, or send a simple flower or sweet to wish her good health? She thought of the flowers she'd come here for—Haruki had wanted to see them with her. Perhaps she ought to pick one and send a messenger with it.

A sound from down a garden path made Yoshiko's ears twitch, and she pulled herself from her thoughts to squint at a figure picking its way towards them. It was Chinen.

'Sensei, it's a surprise to see you again. I thought you'd be away.' She greeted him with a smile and a bow, and he returned the same.

Chinen's worn and scarred old warrior face looked kindly upon Suki beside her, and he asked to escort Yoshiko a little way through the gardens alone. When Suki bowed and dropped back, walking behind, his face became serious.

Yoshiko looked back at Suki and sighed, turning to ask her teacher whether he knew of Haruki and where she might be. She was unusually late without sending a message. Yoshiko was worried, and she frowned, looking down at her feet as she strolled beside her teacher down a small garden path.

'Your mother's head maid never arrived this morning, either,' he replied, his voice gruff, Yoshiko sensing concern.

'Does she know why?' Yoshiko asked, surprised. Asumi was strict with the goings-on inside her palace. Not long ago, they'd been living in a warring world, with generations of feuds between the different regions of the country, and Asumi had grown up knowing to protect her lands from these feudal neighbours, working hard to create alliances for a breath of peace. Even now,

Asumi walked a delicate balance of peace and war. Even those you chose as palace staff were critical to the running of the domain.

Chinen shook his head and looked up at the light spring sky. ‘She seems disturbed by it. Like you, she chose those closest to her carefully. It’s unusual for your mother’s staff to fail to let her know they couldn’t come in.’

‘Where is Mother now?’

‘She hasn’t left her dōjō this morning.’

‘Still? I thought she had governance?’ Yoshiko looked up the tall folk-made stone platforms towards the keep and the grand, wooden governance hall beside it.

Chinen nodded and pursed his lips. ‘It was like old times when she trained with burning eyes and a desire to prove something.’ When Chinen trained Asumi, she was young and wild and felt the need to show her strength, as if to prove her place. Yoshiko heard it had given Chinen quite a hard time. ‘Something is upsetting her, so she’s doing what she knows—fighting until Hitoshi’s calm ways console her. Your father needs to return soon. Only he is good at helping the daimyō relax and share what’s on her mind; though her love for you may encourage her to calm, I wonder if she still thinks you too young to bear her concerns. And she doesn’t talk to me like she used to. No, only Hitoshi can help now.’

His old face seemed weathered, and Yoshiko felt sympathy for the old man. He’d been with her family for a long time, and it was clear Chinen was worried.

‘Father’s not due back yet. He was staying behind in Shogo a little longer after the peace talks with the shōgun to see a visiting poet and philosopher.’

Yoshiko thought of how her father had left several days ago to attend regular political talks with the shōgun and other political leaders in the domain to the north, Shogo, as a representative for her mother. Hitoshi had been excited to learn a well-known poet

and philosopher was staying in that region as a guest for a couple of months, and her father had spoken of meeting him for a while. Yoshiko had wished to go with him, to see more of the country beyond Hié, but she hadn't been allowed to accompany him this time. *Maybe next time*, she hoped each time she thought of it. She'd ask him when he returned.

Once again, Chinen shook his head, slowly this time, and closed his eyes. 'Lady Asumi received a message late last night. He returns.'

Yoshiko's heart leapt. 'Shouldn't Mother be pleased? She always gets excited when he returns.' Her face dropped when she saw her tutor's expression darken.

'The messenger arrived with two arrows in his back. He barely made it to the palace. It's a bad sign for Hitoshi's journey. The daimyō is rightly concerned. We had to persuade her not to ride out to fetch your father herself. If not for her guardian holding back her horse and warning her the archer might still be out there and trying to draw her out, she'd be long gone.' Chinen sighed, his haggard face making him look older than ever. Then he looked up at the sky and hummed deeply to himself. 'I just hope it doesn't spell war.'

Yoshiko was trying to process it all when a young samurai not too much older than herself in a dark indigo kimono and black *hakama* ran down the path to meet them, holding his *katana* close to his side. He bowed. When he stood, Yoshiko's eyes widened; surely he was too beautiful to be a samurai, she wondered. He was more elegant than powerful, with clear, creamy skin that would make any noble woman envious. She didn't remember seeing a guard like this around the compound. Hair just longer than his shoulders was pulled back into a short ponytail at the back of his head, and a full, slightly wavy fringe swept across the side of his sculpted, youthful face. He tucked it behind his ear as he addressed them.

‘My lady ...’ It was customary for him to address her first, and his cheeks flushed as his soft brown eyes briefly met hers. He immediately tore them away to address his commander. ‘Sir, Captain Daiki says the escort is ready for the journey. Awaiting you.’ He bowed once more and waited for further orders.

Yoshiko spoke out before Chinen could, looking at the older man. ‘You’re leaving?’

At a time her mother was regressing to her wild, warrior days, her father’s return was unsafe, war could be brewing, and her maid had mysteriously disappeared, Yoshiko wished her calming teacher would stay.

Chinen merely bowed and apologised. ‘I must go and show my face in my holdings on the western border, show them our military still holds those parts. Your mother has agreed to it. We can’t risk the Aoyama domain to the west thinking it’s safe to raid—they push enough as it is. The days of civil war aren’t yet behind us, as much as the shōgun tries to bring peace amongst the regions. If war is coming, the western border needs to hold.’

The young warrior stood as still as a tree during the encounter. Yoshiko glanced back at him, watching his eyes widen once more as he realised she was looking at him. He tried to look nonchalantly past her as if he were merely a part of the scenery. Yoshiko smiled at him and watched his face flush again. Old Chinen grinned too, a twinkle in his eyes.

‘Ikeda, tell Daiki I’ll be making my way once I finish saying my goodbyes to the lady Yoshiko. We can come back to see her again.’

Ikeda bowed and dashed off almost too thankfully.

‘Did I do something wrong?’ Yoshiko teased, smile widening. She was never one for stiff interactions. It made the palace lonely. Her mind flashed back to Haruki, who had always made Yoshiko feel at ease.

‘He’s just a young man facing the beautiful child of the powerful dragon daimyō and a renowned philosopher and artist. Some might find it awe-inspiring.’

Yoshiko fidgeted and allowed her eyes to wander to a little duck that swam past, thankful for a reason to distract herself. She didn’t like being thought of that way—as someone who made people uncomfortable or nervous.

Chinen laughed at her sullenness, his eyes crinkling almost shut. Then, he turned and bowed. ‘I must take my leave. My lady, I wish I could stay for Hitoshi’s safe return. As it is, it’s a long journey to the western border to ensure my holdings are well.’

‘I understand. Safe journey.’ Yoshiko didn’t know what else to say. Something felt as if it had dropped heavily into her stomach, like a warning against him leaving.

The old guard bowed again and left. As she watched him stride in the direction Ikeda had darted off, she heard the shuffling of Suki approaching from behind. The maid said nothing, merely waiting at a distance she felt appropriate. Yoshiko sighed. Haruki would have bound up to her, talking about the sun, the ducks, or light gossip of something she had somehow overheard about the attractive young guard. Where was her light and energy now at the time things seemed most confusing?

War? It was almost too much to think about.

Taking a deep breath, trying to re-energise herself and ignore the things she couldn’t solve for now, Yoshiko brushed her hands down her yellow kimono and thought of why she’d come down to the gardens today. She’d come to paint the blue flowers for her father. And, though he might be due to arrive soon, she would still paint them for him—it would be an excellent distraction for her now buzzing mind, which was unable to stop thinking about all that Chinen had revealed. Besides, Yoshiko was still eager to show her father the ink paintings. If there was anything she

and he could talk for hours about, it was artwork. Decided, she smiled at Suki and beckoned the maid deeper into the lush green of the compound's eastern gardens, embracing the cool breeze that rustled the leaves and the soft, constant buzzing of the cicadas that fluttered amongst the trees.