

## Wings of Honor

The vixen rode her mount hard through the trees in the dying light. “Please, Shikku, faster,” she desperately urged the horse. As though he understood, Shikku snorted and put on a burst of speed, his hooves drumming against the ground as he ran. Chou’s knuckles turned almost white under her titian pelt as she clutched at the reins. Since she inadvertently overheard the plans for the ambush, she had felt driven with a fierce need to warn Hochuuami and Hitodenashi, the first her childhood friend, the latter her arranged betrothed.

Chou marveled at herself. She would have never believed that she, only daughter to Takeda Fukun, would be doing anything like this. Fukun had taken such care to plan out Chou’s life for her and she had meekly accepted it. Even her wardrobe had been carefully orchestrated. Perfectly elegant butterflies, after her namesake, graced all of her kimonos, either blatantly or as subtle as watered silk. Even now, on her frantic ride, she had been unable to leave behind her elegant jade hair comb, carved into a breathtakingly lifelike butterfly, a gift from her deceased mother.

She shook her head to banish these thoughts and bent over Shikku’s head, silently urging him on. The samurai only left earlier that day, they couldn’t have gone too far, could they? She would not allow herself to think that she may not find them. To fail would mean losing her betrothed, her friend, as well as her father. She was sure Fukun would disown her once he discovered what she was doing.

Tears threatened to spill over from her eyes, down her wide, high cheekbones. She hurriedly brushed them away. How could her father do this? It was completely dishonorable! She knew Fukun wanted more power, but to acquire it this way?

Chou shook her head once again, threatening to send her long, jet hair flying from the makeshift bun she fastened. She forced herself to focus on the road as the sun slowly sunk toward the horizon. This was the main road from the Takeda estate. The samurai must be on it somewhere! She prayed that she would be able to find them soon. If night fell before she met them, she had no idea what she would do.

Finally, torchlight could be seen just up ahead. Nearly sobbing in relief, Chou turned Shikku toward them. A figure suddenly stepped out from the side of the road, startling Shikku into rearing up. The terrified vixen fought to regain control of her mount, but the horse would have none of it. Chou was thrown and landed with a scream.

The figure caught Shikku's reins and looked down at her in surprise. "Hai, it's a female!" he called out. Other figures appeared by him, like ghostly apparitions. Chou scabbled backwards in fear as they approached her. She tried to stifle a whimper, to not show weakness before these strangers.

One of the males stepped toward the horse. "Ho, that's Shikku!" he said in recognition. He produced a hidden torch and thrust it at Chou's face. She blinked and tried to turn away from the sudden light. The light revealed her slender muzzle, dark eyes, and unusual mask pattern. The mask was symmetrical, spanning both eyes and cheeks, in the shape of a butterfly. "Takeda Chou!"

Blinking as her eyes adjusted, she turned toward the speaker. She recognized that voice! And who else would know Shikku? "Hochuami?" she ventured softly.

The male moved the torch away from her face and held it aloft. The flickering light revealed a male of slight build and a dark, smoky pelt. The kitsune held his hand out to her. Chou hesitantly took it and allowed him to help her to his feet. She looked up

into his face, surprised to see a smile across his muzzle, his warm amber eyes dancing in the dim light. He gestured with the torch, signaling the others. “It’s okay. She’s a friend.”

Chou looked at the other kitsune, realizing that they all had weapons drawn. If they thought she was a threat, she was sure they would not hesitate to use them. She turned away from them, focusing her attention instead on the male before her. “It is you, Hochuuami.”

He grinned. “So I am, Chouchou,” he said, using her childhood nickname. “What brings you out here, riding as if an akki were chasing you?”

She shook her head, dismissing his gentle teasings. “Where is Hitodenashi? I bear grave news.”

He looked at her for a few moments before he turned to some of the others. “Take over the watch. I’m escorting Takeda Chou to the camp.” He turned, gently steering the young female away as the other males slipped back into hiding. He looked down at Chou with a lopsided grin. “You did as we expected most travelers would, head for the torches.”

She looked toward him, but not directly at him. Now that she had recomposed herself, her training kicked in. She was Takeda Chou once again, meek and demure, a properly respectful female. “A clever deception, Onaa Hochuuami,” she murmured softly, as she averted her eyes.

Hochuuami watched her in silence for a few moments, his expression guarded, before he sighed. “I had hoped...” he murmured under his breath, piquing her curiosity though her expression remained the same. He led the vixen away from the main road.

“The camp is hidden some distance away. Do you wish to ride Shikku as I take you there?”

Chou kept her face turned away, wishing she had her fans with her, to protect her modesty. “Thank you, Onaa Hochuuami, but I can manage.”

He nodded once in response before turning his attention to the hidden path before them. He slid his gaze to the vixen next to him a time or two. Hochuuami had been very surprised to see Chou sprawled on the ground. He knew how many tutors she had while growing up, training her to be the perfect female. Whatever had brought her out here must be terribly important for her to risk being seen in such a way.

The male sighed to himself. He remembered how carefree Chou had been when she was younger. Takeda Fukun had been busy raising his firstborn, a son. All that changed when Fukun remembered how advantageous marriage alliances could be. Since then, Chou had been forced to become a perfect, courtly female. It seemed to Hochuuami that the spark in her life had been severely dampened.

Though most nobles preferred their females soft-spoken, demure, and properly respectful, Hochuuami came from a lesser family. They had only recently joined the samurai caste, having been farmers before. Hochuuami respected a female’s mind, liking to carry on in-depth conversations as though gender had no part. He used to enjoy Chou’s company before her training. Damn her father.

The camp was a long walk away. Finally they walked amidst tents. Chou kept her face down, hoping no one would pay too much attention to her. Being out of the Takeda House without being properly covered to hide her modesty or the proper

accompaniment of servants was disconcerting. She was glad she had run into Hochuuami. His presence helped to steady her.

The smoky hued kitsune weaved through the tents before standing before the largest. He scratched at the tent flap. A gruff voice answered irritably, "What is it?"

Hochuuami looked at Chou. "Someone you should speak to, I think."

A pause, then, "Very well, come in."

He pulled back the tent flap, allowing Chou to enter first. She dipped her head in thanks as she slowly entered. At a desk in the center of the tent sat a male of copper coloring dressed in armor. He watched them with cool, golden eyes, his face showing traces of his annoyance at the disturbance. "This had better be important," he growled. "I've no time for foolish females. Who is this?" he demanded.

With a sigh, Hochuuami bowed respectfully to the kitsune. "Kimijika Hitodenashi, I would hope you remember your betrothed, Takeda Chou."

Hitodenashi stared at Chou incredulously. His raking gaze pinned her where she stood. She became acutely aware of her disguise, that of a peasant. The clothing she found earlier that day, along the small stream that ran by the Takeda house. The poor peasant must have disrobed to clean or wash. It looked to be the perfect disguise, well-worn shirt and trousers. Now she stood, covered in trail dust. To be presented in such a state was a great embarrassment and she could feel herself flushing. She kept her face averted in respect. "My lord, Hitodenashi," she said softly, her voice quavering slightly.

He stood and strode purposefully to her. He sneered at her state. "You are a disgrace. Why have you allowed yourself to be seen publicly like this?"

As she flushed in deep chagrin, Hochuuami raised an eyeridge. “With respect, my lord, I believe a more important question would be why she is here at all?”

The copper kitsune shot him a cold look before grunting. “Very well, Takeda Chou, why are you here? This had better be good,” he added.

She took a deep breath. “Kimijika Hitodenashi, Onaa Hochuuami, I come with a warning. This day, not long after you left my father’s estate, I overheard a plot. While you hunt down the ronin, the bandits, you will be ambushed.”

Both males stared at her, one in skepticism, one in thoughtfulness. “Ambushed? Why would we be ambushed? And how could you have overheard such?” Hitodenashi demanded.

Chou stared hard at the floor. She had expected him to speak this harshly, but she was still not prepared for how hard this was. As a noble female, she was expected to keep her thoughts to herself and be intelligent house decoration. *He could at least be more grateful, a small part of her thought. I could have stayed at home and left him to die. But that would have meant Hochuuami would die, as well as the others. They did not deserve death.*

Her face betrayed nothing of her inner thoughts. “I was in my room, writing poetry, when I heard voices from the gardens below my window. I moved to close the window so that I would not eavesdrop, but as I drew nearer, I could understand what was being said. I could hear my father speaking with someone, whom I did not know. When I looked down, Fukun was addressing one who looked like a ronin. They spoke of all being ready for the ambush of the samurai Fukun sent from the estate. Then the ronin left the gardens while my father merely smiled.”

Hitodenashi started pacing the room, his great tail swishing angrily behind him. “Impossible! Takeda Fukun would not do such a thing,” he muttered

Hochuuami blinked slowly as he watched Chou. “Why? Why would he ambush us? He asked us to take care of the ronin bothering the edge of his property. To what end would this serve?” he asked quietly.

She turned her attention to him, relieved that he did not discount her tale as Hitodenashi was doing. “Takeda Fukun is ambitious. He craves power. That is why he arranged for a marriage alliance with Kimijika. Our two families combined would be most advantageous.”

Hitodenashi snorted. “So why would he want to kill his future son-in-law? That makes no sense.”

*Perhaps if you stopped braying like an ass, we could find out,* Hochuuami thought. “Please continue, Chou,” he said instead, shooting the other male a quick glare.

The vixen dipped her head in silent thanks to him. “You have brothers, my lord. With you dead, I could be betrothed to one of them. And your father would be out for blood. He would gladly help my father destroy those responsible for your death.”

At the mention of death, Hitodenashi stopped pacing and finally paid attention to her. “Father would. Since Takeda Fukun would not betray himself, who would he pin this on? And you’ve yet to say to what end,” he added with an irritated growl.

Chou nodded, keeping her movements precise and elegant, keeping her gaze down in modesty. “Fukun would claim that Geppeki, our neighbor, had been wanting to increase his holdings. That Geppeki had hired the ronin to attack the peasants on the border to drive them inward, expanding his territory.”

She looked up. “As to why, Father wants Geppeki’s estate. More land means more power. With Kimijika, Fukun would defeat Geppeki. And he would get the land and a greater position in Court.”

The males stared at her as they digested this information. “It could have worked, too,” Hochuuami said blandly.

Hitodenashi shook his head. “How? How do you know this?”

Chou wished for a fan once again, but this time to snap close to show her irritation. Such little gestures were all females were allowed. “I have eyes and ears, my lord. I see and hear things. And I know my father.”

Hitodenashi started pacing once again, this time in agitation. “This is hard to believe. But I cannot deny Fukun’s ambition and cunning. That he would sink to such depths is unthinkable.”

Hochuuami watched the copper male pace for a time. “Now that we know, what do we do about it?”

Hitodenashi paused in his pacing. He stood immobile for several heartbeats. Then he turned and struck out with his gloved fist, striking Chou in the face. She spun, falling to the floor with a cry.

“What are you doing?” Hochuuami demanded, kneeling by her. “She saved our lives!”

He drew his sword. “That’s precisely why she must die. To be saved by a female! The dishonor!”

The smoky male stood once again, hands clenched into fists. “What nonsense are you babbling about?”

Hitodenashi sneered at him. “You are of a lesser house. Perhaps you are content to have a female save your worthless hide but the Kimijika would not allow the dishonor to continue. I would be expected to commit suicide to salvage my honor. I am not ready for death yet. No one must know she came here to warn us. She must die!”

He raised his sword. Chou cowered in terror, raising her hands to ward off the blow. But the blow never came. Faster than a striking snake, Hochuuami lashed out, landing a solid punch. Hitodenashi dropped like a stone.

The smoky male rubbed his fist as he stared down at the kitsune. “Bastard.”

Chou did not realize she was weeping until Hochuuami knelt by her once again. “Hush, Chouchou,” he murmured, gently wiping away her tears. “Everything will be fine.”

She shook her head. “No, it won’t. He’s right. I’ve brought dishonor to you by coming here. I should have just let things lie. You would have at least died with honor.”

He took her face in his hand and turned her to look him full in the face. “Little Butterfly, you have more honor and spirit than that pile of pig’s droppings,” he said, nodding toward the fallen Hitodenashi. “You broke all custom to come warn your betrothed. Fukun will be most displeased his plan was foiled.”

Chou moaned at her father’s name and turned her face away. “He will know I am not home. He will guess where I am and what I’ve done. I am ruined. He will disown me.”

Hochuuami chuckled. “I daresay he can’t. If he tried, he would have to explain why, and that would reveal his treachery.”

She shook her head. “He would lie and no one would doubt him. I am a mere female. No one will listen to me.”

He fell silent, knowing she spoke true. Then an idea dawned. “Unless you didn’t go back.”

Blinking in confusion, she turned back to him. “What are you saying?”

“Come with me,” he said, urgently. “My family can hide you. We were farmers before we entered the samurai caste. Most of us are still. No one will find you on the Onaa estate. My brothers are samurai. I would lose no honor in becoming a farmer once again. If you wouldn’t mind helping in the garden, of course.”

Chou stared at him. “You risk much.”

“No more than you when you came here to warn Hitodenashi,” he countered.

She looked away shyly. “I didn’t come to warn him,” she said softly. “I came to warn you.”

It was his turn to stare. A slow smile spread across his muzzle. “Ah, Little Butterfly,” he said, wrapping his arms around her. He felt great joy simply holding her. “Never did I dream you would say such.” He reluctantly released Chou and helped her to her feet. “Come, leave him to his fate. You warned him, he can do as he wishes.”

Chou looked at her former betrothed. Reaching up, she undid her hair, letting it fall nearly to the floor. She set her jade butterfly hair comb on Hitodenashi’s chest. “A token showing I sever all ties to my nobility,” she said. “A farmer’s wife I will be.” Then she slipped her hand into Hochuuami’s and allowed him to lead her from the tent.

Outside, she felt as if the weight of the world had fallen off her shoulders. She turned a dazzling smile to her savior, who answered with one of his own. For so long,

she had felt like a butterfly trapped in someone's net. Now, Chou had found a net that she didn't mind, knowing that Hochuuami was more likely to keep her in a garden than pinned in a collection. And she would love to help make it a beautiful garden.