

WOMAN SCORNED ~怒妻大敵~

by Rawle Nyanzi

**NOTE:** All Asiatic names are written in Asiatic order, with the family name first.

Yokominé Akemi couldn't bear captivity any longer. Over a kimono stolen by a serving girl, Terauchi Saruemon, daimyo of Rinié Province, marched upon her home province of Hanoba and put thousands of men, women, and children to the sword. To add insult to injury, a Terauchi retainer had her skewer her young son with a naginata spear.

That barbarity, that disregard for innocent life, drove young, beautiful Akemi to plot the death of the cruel daimyo who ripped her from her home and seized her as a concubine.

In the darkness of night, Akemi sat on the soft bedding with her kimono at her waist.

A dark, masked figure entered through the high window, startling the captive woman.

"Who are you?" Akemi asked the intruder.

"It's only me," the intruder answered. Akemi smiled, for it was Yokominé Hiroshi, her husband. He lowered his mask.

Hiroshi went around to her back and held her from behind, cupping her breasts and stroking her soft skin.

"Hiroshi, let us end Terauchi's savagery for good," Akemi said.

Hiroshi leaned into her. "For you, I will slay him in broad daylight," he answered.

Akemi gasped at the suggestion of so bold a move. "It's too dangerous; allow me to poison him at tomorrow's feast," she said.

"Yet you say *my* plan is dangerous."

"The poison will only leave him bedridden. When I lay with him, I will finish him with only a whimper. Mark my words -- our little Haru will be avenged."

Hiroshi kissed Akemi on her cheek and pulled her tight against him. "Then my role is clear; I will inform Ina. Good night," he said. He gave his wife one last kiss, then he broke away, put his mask back on, and escaped through the window, quiet as a mouse. Come dawn, Akemi had much to do.

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The following day, Akemi and the servants wasted no time. They spent all morning preparing meals, laying out long, low tables, and helping the musicians and dancers prepare a hero's welcome for Terauchi Saruemon, who burned towns, slaughtered villagers, and brought Hanoba Province to its knees over a stolen garment. Once everything had been prepared, Akemi did not have to wait long for Saruemon to return. When he entered the courtyard, the music of taiko drums and reed flutes sounded, marking his triumphant entry alongside his most trusted samurai retainers. Saruemon even invited the castle servants to join in the festivities.

Before a steaming rectangular plate of grilled fish surrounded by all manner of sauces, rice dishes, and seafood, Saruemon sat beside Akemi on the decorative cushion as one of two concubines on either side of him. Akemi poured him saké, and he drank deeply of it before giving a speech on how the swords of his men reclaimed the honor of Rinié Province.

"A victory as auspicious as this," Saruemon said, taking another sip of the saké, "means that I must repay whichever of the eight million gods delivered me and my men safely home. To that end, I shall forego this generous banquet and watch as those below me partake of this food. My portion, therefore, goes to the concubines." Akemi's blood chilled, for she had poisoned the fish after the servants had prepared it.

"My lord, we can satisfy the eight million with a sacrifice of rice. Please eat -- you need to be strong for your men," Akemi said.

Saruemon rose his fist to strike the woman for talking out of turn, but he stopped himself and thought on it. "That is an acceptable solution, but I still cannot, in good conscience, eat this food. Nonetheless, a ceremonial bite will be more than adequate. Serve it to me at once," he said. Akemi took up the chopsticks and reached for a part of the fish that she knew had the most poison. She placed the piece in Saruemon's mouth, and the daimyo swallowed it. Time seemed to stop as Akemi stared into his eyes.

Then Saruemon slouched, grabbing his stomach.

"I ate when I promised them I would not," the daimyo said in between groans. "Why did you tempt me so, woman?" Akemi's palms sweated as everyone at the table glared at her. Two samurai guards marched over to her and dragged her to her feet.

"You have brought harm to our lord. For that, you shall be detained," one of the samurai said. They gripped Akemi's arms tightly and took her away.

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The guards had placed Akemi in a bare chamber secured with thick wooden bars. From the harsh words of the guards, she learned that all the food prepared for the feast had to be thrown out, since everyone believed it to be cursed. They couldn't even sacrifice it; they had to throw it into the dirt in addition to sacrificing a portion of the rice crop as the daimyo instructed. Clad in little more than a dull, gray robe, Akemi sat in the corner, slumped over, denouncing her own foolishness.

Akemi looked through the wooden bars and saw a petite serving girl, and in her hands was a tray with a small bowl of plain, watery miso full of vegetables on a paper placemat. Akemi's heart leapt, for it was none other than Ina, when Hiroshi had mentioned.

The samurai opened the wooden doors and allowed the serving girl to enter. Ina laid the tray before Akemi.

"Thank you for the meal," Akemi said to the girl. Akemi lifted the bowl off of the placemat, then took the chopsticks and dipped them in the warm liquid.

On the placemat, she painted characters that read, "Hiroshi, help." After that, she ate her meal, picking out the vegetables with the chopsticks, then drinking the soup out of the bowl. She turned the placemat over, then put the bowl on top of it to obscure the message further. Ina nodded knowingly, then slipped her a tanto dagger, took the tray and left the cell. The guards didn't trouble Ina, so all Akemi had to do now was wait.

And when night fell, her patience was rewarded.

The sounds of clanging steel, pained screams, and falling bodies signaled to Akemi that her ordeal would soon be over.

"Don't let him through!" a guard said. The two samurai charged with guarding her opened the door and rushed in. Since they planned to drag Akemi out, they didn't draw their swords.

Right where she wanted them.

Akemi drew the tanto from under her robe. The samurai paused, surprised that she had a weapon. Akemi jammed the tanto in one guard's eye, then pushed him away and did the same to the next guard. They yelled from the pain, but Akemi quieted them both with cuts to their jugular veins. As the blood soaked into the wooden floor, she heard hurried footsteps and braced herself for a renewed attack. When a man in a black mask and suit approached, she pointed her tanto at him.

"Hold, Akemi," the man said. "Terauchi Saruemon is slain." Hiroshi had come for her. He gripped her arms preparing to lift her, but Akemi held up her free hand.

"I don't want to burden you. Let us escape side-by-side," Akemi said. Hiroshi pulled her to her feet, then the two made their way out, cutting a bloody swath through the castle grounds and marching toward freedom.