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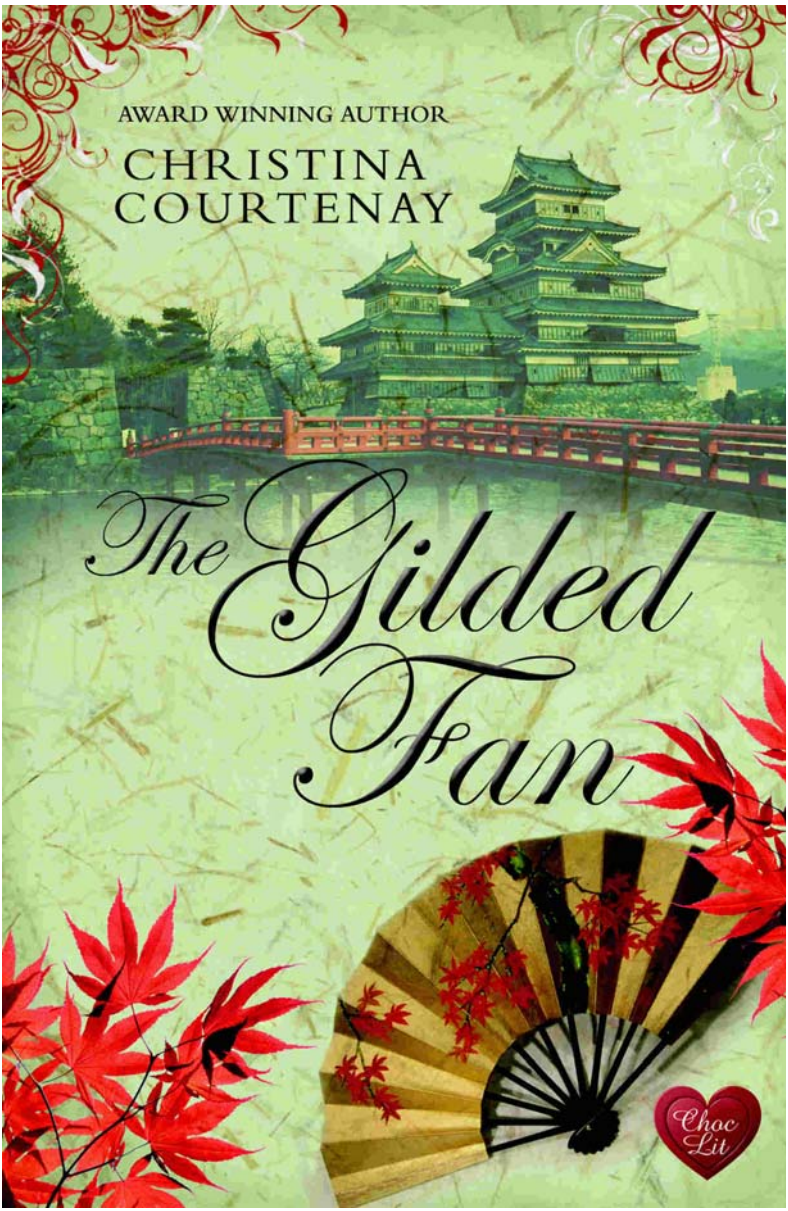
# The Gilded Fan

Written by Christina Courtenay

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AWARD WINNING AUTHOR
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The Gilded Fan
Choc Lit

# *The Gilded Fan*

Christina Courtenay




*Sequel to The Scarlet Kimono*

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# *Prologue*

*27 December 1640*

On the coldest day of the Year of the Dragon the great temple bell tolled, keeping time with the heavy steps of the mourners as they trudged through the snow. The deep, resonating sound echoed around the nearby hills and across the valley. Its harsh notes were as unyielding as death itself.

The snow which had arrived so unexpectedly the night before was soft and malleable, clinging to every surface as if to shield it from harm. The silhouettes of the rooftops were blurred and merged with the white-frosted trees behind them. On the ground an endless vista of smooth, shimmering surface assaulted the eye. It was almost blinding in its intensity, but so beautiful it was impossible to look away. The whole created a pleasing effect which, at any other time, would have delighted Midori Kumashiro. Today she felt nothing but a hollow emptiness at the sight, because her mother, Hannah, was no longer there to see it with her.

With heads bowed in respect, the silent group followed the urn towards the temple, high up on the hill opposite the castle, where Buddhist monks and priests awaited them. Their low-pitched voices, chanting prayers for the deceased, could be heard despite the din of the bell. Midori suppressed a shudder. To her, it was an eerie sound, as if the whispering of their ancestors' souls mingled with human voices to lament her mother's passing. The sad truth, however, was that her mother didn't have any ancestors here and there was no one who really cared apart from Midori herself.

Hannah had been a *gai-jin,* a foreigner from a land so far away Midori had trouble even imagining it. She'd come to Japan by stowing away on a trading ship and once there she had met and fallen in love with Taro Kumashiro, Midori's father, a powerful *daimyo* warlord. Her parents had loved each other deeply and, despite their cultural differences, lived happily together until the

previous year, when Taro had been killed in a hunting accident. From that moment on, Midori knew her mother no longer wanted to live.

*Well, you have your wish*, she thought now, *but did you think of me?*

She knew she was being unfair. Her mother had loved her very much, but that love was as nothing compared to her feelings for Midori's father. The two belonged together, in death as in life, and it was something their daughter knew she'd have to accept.

The cortège reached the gates to the temple, and as she passed through, she looked up briefly at the chanting monks. Forty days had passed since her mother had died and they had first come to begin the rituals of death, but the pain was still intense. Midori felt it twisting her insides and struggled to breathe. She knew it would become easier to bear with time, if only she could endure the here and now.

The procession moved on and Midori was nudged slightly from behind as a reminder to keep going. She followed the others to the burial ground in a numb haze, instantly forgetting everything else as she caught sight of the small hole in the ground. It was the place where her mother would now rest for eternity. Midori's entire body felt as frozen as the earth all around them and she didn't register any of the priest's words.

A crow sat silent and watchful in a nearby pine tree and Midori concentrated her gaze on his magnificent black plumage, fluffed up to withstand the cold. It helped her to keep the pain at bay and as she noticed the bird's stoic acceptance of everything around him, she straightened her backbone, determined to copy his example. Somehow, she got through the ordeal in this way, and when her half-brother, Ichiro, touched her arm, she jumped and stared at him with unfocused eyes.

'It's time to go,' he whispered.

'Go? Oh, yes of course.'

She caught a brief glimpse of grief in his eyes, but it was

quickly masked. It made her realise she wasn't as alone as she'd thought, however, and this gave her added courage. She turned to follow him, after one last glance at the small pit in the ground, so dismally black against the white of the snow. The dark soil echoed her mood and the white no doubt reflected her pallor, but she refused to give way to her emotions. She was the daughter of a *daimyo*; she would endure this with dignity.

She squared her shoulders and made her way down the hill with her head held high and the grief locked away inside until later.

# *Chapter One*

*September 1641*

Nico Noordholt, first mate of the *Zwarte Zwaan*, sat cross-legged on a large silk cushion, fighting a desperate battle to keep his back straight. The Japanese officials seated opposite him, in their costly robes of smooth silk, seemed to have no difficulty in maintaining their upright positions. Nico envied them as his back muscles were beginning to twitch from his efforts. On his left, Corneliszoon, chief factor of the VOC – the Dutch East India Company – in Japan, didn't even make the attempt, but squirmed and slouched repeatedly. The man on his right, however, Captain Casper de Leuw, sat as if he'd had a fire iron rammed up his backside, but Nico could see the effort it cost him.

*Damn it all, he should be lying down!*

Nico had said as much to his superior before the meeting. 'You're not well. Let me handle this for you, please.'

'No, not this time. I trust you, you know that, but it's my responsibility and mine alone,' de Leuw had grunted, mopping his sweating brow with a somewhat grimy handkerchief. 'I must negotiate a good cargo now the officials have finally consented to come. Besides, there's nothing wrong with me other than a little bit of fever.'

That was an understatement, as they both knew, but Nico wisely held his tongue. He'd known de Leuw for more than a decade now and the word 'stubborn' didn't even begin to describe the man. Arguing with him would only have the opposite of the desired effect.

Underneath the cushions they were sitting on was a floor woven of tightly matted rice stalks. It felt soft and springy and gave off a fragrance that reminded Nico of a dewy meadow at dawn. He wished he could fall backwards on to these wonderful

*tatami* mats and stretch out his long legs before his knee joints became permanently stuck in the unnatural position they were in at the moment. However, to do so would mean to lose face to these strangers. And since they were willing to trade, despite their reservations about foreigners, that was unthinkable. He couldn't let de Leuw down.

'*Ah, so desu ka, demo …*'

Nico liked the sound of their language, but the business discussion seemed to be taking forever. Although the translator did his best, Nico still had trouble understanding all the nuances of the conversation and didn't feel part of it for most of the time. Corneliszoon yawned openly, earning himself a glare from the translator, which he ignored. Nico prayed a cargo would be negotiated as quickly as possible, before the officials lost all patience with the rude man.

'We need to return to Amsterdam soon, and it's absolutely essential that we bring valuable goods,' de Leuw had told the translator. 'We'd be very grateful for your help.'

Having command of a VOC ship was a huge honour and failure was not an option for a man like de Leuw. He'd always been successful before and if the Chief Factor ruined everything now with his cavalier attitude, Nico knew he'd never be forgiven. He tried to send Corneliszoon a warning glance on de Leuw's behalf, but the man's attention was elsewhere.

While the others droned on, Nico stared out of the window, across the narrow strip of water which was all that separated him from the city of Nagasaki. The Dutch trading post was situated on a man-made island called Dejima, just outside the town, but the foreigners weren't allowed to go any further. Entering this exotic country was forbidden and Dejima was the only place where they were permitted to trade with the Japanese. Indeed, it was lucky their ship was Dutch, since that was the sole nation allowed any trading rights at all now. The Spaniards had been banned years ago, the English had given up of their own

accord and Nico had heard that the Portuguese had been thrown out of Japan only two years ago.

'The only way on to the mainland is across a small bridge, which is guarded at all times,' he'd been told on arrival. 'Don't ever cross it.'

Nico didn't even try – he knew it would have been a pointless exercise – but he'd spent many hours gazing longingly towards the other side. Japan fascinated him. It was like no other place he'd ever seen during his extensive travels. He admired the orderliness with which everything was conducted – be it negotiations, cooking or gardening. The Japanese seemed to have rules governing all aspects of life, and if some of them seemed cruel to outsiders, at least they were effective. From what Nico had seen, their society ran very smoothly indeed.

Nagasaki harbour was ringed by hills and a scenic coastline. It was beautiful and it irked him that he couldn't see it up close. *I've come all this way, only to be left on the outside looking in.* It seemed like a wasted opportunity. Soon, however, they would leave it all behind and return to Holland, hopefully with a highly valuable cargo, which was all that mattered. The profits in the Far East trade could be enormous and well worth the risks of the lengthy journeys.

'De-ruh-*san*, Nohduh-hortuh-*san*, Kohnehlison-*san*,' the translator said, standing up to bring the meeting to an end at last. Nico smiled inwardly at the man's inability to pronounce their names, but made no comment.

He helped de Leuw to his feet, and steadied the captain when he swayed slightly. The man's skin was so hot to the touch, Nico felt as if his hand had been scorched. *Damnation! Little bit of fever indeed …* Nico tried not to show his concern. Only a few more minutes and the captain could go and lie down.

De Leuw drew in a deep breath which seemed laboured. '*Hai,* Ito-*san*,' he replied with a bow. Nico followed suit and nudged Corneliszoon into doing the same. Both Nico and his superior had

attempted to learn a few Japanese words and phrases, and it hadn't proved too difficult.

'Dutch traders will be respectfully and considerately treated by Japanese officials if they make an effort to understand their hosts and their customs,' an older VOC official had told them before they left Amsterdam. 'I should know, I've made the journey myself, twice.' It had proved good advice.

'Negotiation finished, cargo ready in one week. This good?' the translator asked.

Nico stifled a sigh while de Leuw nodded. They'd already been kicking their heels here for long enough and the crew were becoming a nuisance, with their constant demands for whores and entertainment. There was nothing to be gained by impatience though, especially not when it came to trade.

'Very good. Thank you. *Domo arigato gozaimasu*.' The party all bowed once more, Nico and de Leuw slightly lower than the Japanese officials to show them respect. The foreign men's expressions gave nothing away, but Nico had the distinct feeling they appreciated the gesture.

'Thank goodness that's over with,' he said as soon as the officials had gone. He turned to smile at de Leuw, but the smile died as he saw the older man turn a waxy shade of pale. With a faint cry of distress, de Leuw's legs crumpled and he started to sink towards the floor. Nico lunged, his reflexes honed by years aboard a pitching ship, and managed to catch the man before he hit his head on the corner of a low table.

'Captain!' He lowered him on to the fragrant *tatami* mat and slotted a cushion under his head, then shouted at Corneliszoon, 'We need a physician, now. *Go!*'

The chief factor blinked as if he hadn't quite taken in what had happened yet, but Nico's words finally registered and he nodded. 'I'll send for the ship's surgeon immediately.'

As he hurried out of the room, Nico knelt on the floor by the side of his captain, friend and mentor. 'Don't leave me yet,

Casper,' he whispered. 'We're in this together.'

But judging by the unnatural colour of de Leuw's face, he wasn't long for this world.

'You must go … and see *Mijnheer* Schuyler.'

The rasping voice startled Nico awake and he sat up straight. He'd been leaning against the wall next to de Leuw's *futon* on the floor and had nodded off. The room was in near darkness and he had no idea how long he'd been dozing, but it must have been a couple of hours at least.

'What? Casper – how are you feeling?'

'Been better.'

Nico lit a lantern and could see that for himself. Three days had passed since de Leuw's collapse and his face appeared to have shrunk in on itself. The colour was now more ash than wax. *Not a good sign.*

'Well, don't talk. You must rest and conserve your strength if you're to get better. Would you like some water? Something to eat?'

'No, listen please.' There was a pause while de Leuw drew in a few more laboured breaths, then he continued, 'I'm not going to make it. You must see Schuyler … he knows … left you something.'

Nico gripped de Leuw's hand, which felt like mostly skin and bone. It wasn't hot any longer, but an icy cold that sent a chill through Nico. The frail hand trembled and he squeezed it as if to imbue it with his own strength, but he knew it was no good. 'You mustn't talk like that. Of course you'll get better,' he said bracingly.

The older man slowly shook his head on the pillow. 'Nico, let's not pretend. You're strong. I've prepared you. You must take over now. Your turn.'

Nico blinked away the sudden stinging in his eyes. He hadn't cried since he was a little boy and he wasn't about to now, but …

*Damn, this is so unfair!*

He'd first come across Casper de Leuw when he signed on as a crew member on a ship under de Leuw's command. Nico was only seventeen at the time and new to life at sea. For some reason the older man singled him out and took him under his wing, teaching him all there was to know about sailing a ship and trading. A strong bond grew between them and Casper was everything Nico had never had before – kind father-figure, mentor and friend. Ever since that first journey, they'd sailed together, and Nico knew life without Casper would be very empty.

'You don't need to give me anything,' he muttered. 'I've made enough from our trading ventures and my share of the profit from this trip will ensure I can live well for years to come. Besides, you've already given me more than you know and your personal possessions should go to your nieces and nephews.' He knew there were several of each and was sure they'd expect to inherit everything Casper owned. 'I'll be all right.'

'I've left them something, too.' The breath hissed out of Casper with a harsh rustling that sounded painful. 'There's enough for you all. Too late to argue … my will is signed and legal.'

'Well, thank you,' Nico whispered. 'Thank you for everything.'

Casper's feeble hand managed to squeeze Nico's and the older man smiled. 'No, thank *you*. You've been the son I never had. Live your life to the full and be happy! You're the captain of the *Zwarte Zwaan* now … you'll do me proud, I know.'

Nico could only nod, and watched as Casper's chest rose and fell one more time before he breathed his last breath. No one else had ever believed in him or been proud of him, and he was determined to prove Casper right.

'I'll do my best. Rest in peace, my friend.'

'I really don't think this is wise, Midori. You should wait until I can find some official to bribe so I can go with you.'

Midori glanced at her half-brother and tried not to show her impatience. They'd discussed this already, at length, and she thought he had reached a decision. 'You agreed it might be too late then. The foreign ships are leaving soon, your informant said so. Please, Ichiro, let me try this on my own.'

So much had changed in a year and Midori didn't really want to think about it. She needed to act, and fast, before it was too late. There was no time for arguing, no time for regrets.

They were standing in the grounds of a small temple near the island of Dejima in Nagasaki's harbour. The little island, curiously shaped like the *Shogun's* fan, housed foreign traders and it was these they'd come to see. They were Midori's only hope now. She needed to buy passage on one of their ships, back to her mother's country. It wasn't something she'd ever wanted, but she had no choice.

She had to leave Japan.

*How has it come to this?* She suppressed the thought and tried to focus on the task at hand instead.

It was after dusk and the temple gate shielded them from view, but someone might come along at any moment. Midori drew deeper into the shadows and listened for the sound of footsteps. All was quiet.

'The foreigners may not speak Japanese,' she whispered, 'and although you were taught English, you're not as used to speaking my mother's language as I am.'

'And what if these Dutchmen don't understand you, either? We know nothing of their language.' Midori could see Ichiro frowning, despite the gloom.

'I have no idea. We'll have to hope they understand at least a little. How else do they trade with the English?'

'Going alone isn't seemly. You'll be among men who are not your family nor your equals. Under normal circumstances I should go with you.'

'Yes, but these are not normal circumstances, are they?' Midori

pointed out gently, but firmly. 'I'll be alone during the journey, too. I can manage. I have to.'

Ichiro argued against her going by herself for quite a while longer, but in the end he admitted it seemed the only way. She had to start to look after herself at some stage, and now was as good a time as any.

'But my men and I will hide near the gate and if there is any sign of trouble you call for help, is that understood? If the island is as small as they say, we should hear you easily.'

'Yes, brother.' She was grateful for his concern, but at the back of her mind lurked the thought that very soon now he wouldn't be around to help and protect her.

'I really ought to send someone with you to England,' Ichiro muttered, as if he'd read her thoughts. 'Take Satoshi, he'll not refuse if I ask it of him.'

Midori caught the horrified look on the servant's face before he hurriedly assumed his usual blank expression. She shook her head. 'No, Ichiro. He has a family and if he comes with me he might never see them again. I couldn't do that to anyone. It wouldn't be right.'

'Very well, have it your way. Go now and hurry back!'

To be continued …

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