

Hills of Silver Ruins, a Pitch Black Moon

Book IV

A Twelve Kingdoms novel

by

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Translated

by

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Part Nineteen

Chapter 1

[19-1] Gyousou devised a trap to catch the suugu.

The snares he'd used in the Yellow Sea were made from iron chains. Iron chains were nowhere to be found here in the depths of Kan'you Mountain. Though rope wasn't nearly as reliable, the koushu did use rope as well. What they called "black rope" was woven from the bark of a hardwood tree that grew in the Yellow Sea.

There was no such bark here, so Gyousou had to make do with the boughs and branches he had on hand. He peeled away the outer bark and soaked the inner bark before working it over with a stone hammer, then split the pulped wood into strips to release the fibers, which he wove into cords.

The gemstones would come in handy as bait. On this count, he was fortunate to have been imprisoned in a mine. The gravel from the tailings yielded a generous variety. And then while clearing out the debris deposited by the landslides, Gyousou found a large chunk of jasper.

Even in the feeble light, he knew this was no ordinary stone. The perfectly clear green jasper had once been extraordinarily large. It was broken into five pieces. It appeared to have a twin, though its sister stone was wedged between several large boulders, making it impossible to extract.

Still, this one alone produced a considerable yield when broken apart. Though partial to agate, no suugu would turn up its nose at jasper of this quality.

After making rope from the tree bark, he salvaged the clamps and nails from the wrecked support timbers that once supported the tunnels. He reduced several of the wooden pillars to charcoal and made a forge. The charcoal was of poor quality but was sufficient to the task. Working the metal using a stone as the hammer and a boulder as the anvil, he stretched out the iron and created hooks.

Everything Gyousou was doing here he'd learned from the *shushi* in the Yellow Sea.

Emperor Kyou had on one occasion handed down orders of a sort Gyousou felt he could carry out only under protest. He was about to bow to the inevitable and do as he was told when he felt *that* gaze upon him.

Asen had Gyousou in his sights, always watching from the sidelines.

Gyousou could not act in such a craven manner in front of Asen. Far more than the disfavor of Emperor Kyou, the thought of Asen's scorn weighed many times heavier on his mind. In the end, Gyousou refused the orders. Bearing the blame himself, he resigned, relinquished his listing in the Registry of Wizards, and left Kouki.

He didn't know what to do next. His sense of self-respect wouldn't allow him to stay in Tai, so he left the kingdom. To his surprise, Ganchou also resigned his position, left government service, and accompanied him. He could hardly allow Gyousou to sally off on his own, Ganchou said.

At first, they considered a tour of the kingdoms. Gyousou had a particular interest in En and Sou. However, on their way to Sou, they encountered a group from the Kingdom of Sai heading to the Yellow Sea on the Shouzan. Though it didn't involve Gyousou and Ganchou in the slightest, they were curious to find out more about the Yellow Sea.

Some of the participants didn't know their way around a sword or how to defend themselves. Gyousou and Ganchou decided to tag along and see the Yellow Sea for themselves. Making inquiries about anyone who might need a bodyguard, they happened across a rugged bunch who happened to specialize in the bodyguard business. In the process, they met more shushi.

The shushi hunted youjuu in the Yellow Sea. Traveling through the Yellow Sea looking for potential kijuu struck them as more interesting than the Shouzan for another kingdom. Then came rumors that an emperor had emerged in the first group and numbers in the current group dropped off substantially.

This development also made following the shushi a more attractive option than teaming up with the bodyguards. Gyousou and Ganchou decided instead to apprentice himself to the shushi, capture his own kijuu, tame and train it.

Of course, saying as much didn't make it so. To start with, he and Ganchou were told to enter the Yellow Sea with the bodyguards so they could experience the situation for themselves. Rather than following those going on the Shouzan, they would then accompany the bodyguards who scouted ahead and cleared the trail.

Only after they committed themselves to that course of action, established their bona fides with the bodyguards and proved their mettle, did the shushi take them on as apprentices.

First off, together with Ganchou, Gyousou hunted down mostly harmless youjuu that resembled dogs. But they did a right fine job of it and were soon equaling the work of the shushi and even outdoing them on occasion.

After three years, the last hunt they took part in was for a suugu.

Gyousou wanted a suugu for himself. Even after returning to the Imperial Court, he traveled to the Yellow Sea whenever he could find the time. He finally came away with Keitou.

Keitou was a white suugu. Suugu were mostly white or mostly black. The latter was far rarer than the former. The suugu he'd found on Kan'you Mountain was mostly black.

The suugu's mane made him think of Taiki, the black kirin who ran after him as he descended the mountain.

What a stroke of luck, encountering a black suugu in a place like this.

He could almost believe someone sent it here with instructions to get captured, tamed, and trained.

Fortunately, this suugu that he'd met in the depths of the earth emerged from its hibernation in something of a haze. Having been asleep around the clock, it showed no signs of attacking Gyousou. When he drew closer, the suugu opened its eyes and flashed a menacing mien. But when Gyousou withdrew, the suugu didn't give chase and seemed content to stay where it was.

If he strayed too close, it most definitely snapped at him. He had to get the creature in restraints before it fully awakened.

He had the rope, hooks, and gemstones—everything he needed but a clapper. Hung from ropes at strategic points, the clappers detected the movements of a suugu hiding out of sight. In the Yellow Sea, they'd used rattler geodes. Too loud and they'd unnecessarily provoke the suugu. Too quiet and they wouldn't be any better than nothing.

Gyousou needed something small but with a sound that traveled well. He thought about making something out of the gemstones, but trying to shape small stones only resulted in splitting them apart. He simply didn't have the tools necessary. Using the reshaped nails and sand as grit, he could drill a hole in a rock, except that would take too much time.

On the other hand, big rocks didn't produce a sound with the right timber or respond with the right sensitivity. Wracking his brains, a thought struck him. One of the baskets that had washed ashore in the cave contained a girl's *otedama*. Three of them. He recalled the chiming sound when he picked them up, suggesting that each had a small bell attached.

He proceeded at once to the storage area he'd set aside with great reverence to preserve the offerings and searched for the beanbags. A close examination of the threadbare *otedama* revealed a bell attached to either end of the seed-filled pouches. From his memory of retrieving the basket, he'd been certain that each *otedama* had only one bell.

"Thank you."

One bell each wouldn't have been enough. For whatever reason, the whimsy of the girl who made them, she'd attached two to each. Here was another stroke of good luck. He needed at least five.

I guess Heaven is still smiling upon me.

By now, Gyousou had to believe that someone was arranging these little miracles on his behalf.

The key to catching a suugu was to get it mad without enraging it. Just mad enough for it to give chase so it could be lured into a trap. While the hunter lurked in the shadows, the suugu would simply stay put unless properly provoked. But overexcite the creature and get it really angry and the trap would prove useless.

The suugu knew where the hunter was hiding. Once it got its back up, it'd make menacing moves while closing the distance between them. If driven into a fury, a suugu didn't bother intimidating its foes and instead attacked in a single bound. There wouldn't be enough time to close the net.

In the Yellow Sea, they tracked down suugu dens and animal trails. A suugu had a keen sense of its territorial boundaries. Trespassing them was bound to attract its attention. Laying a trap within its territory was sure to get it riled up. Catching the slightest scent of an uninvited third party put a suugu on guard. Linger there annoyed it all the more.

That's when it crept closer, intending to drive the intruder from its territory. At this point, the trap had to be already laid out. Once the suugu took notice, the trap had to be ready to go as soon as it resolved to drive the interloper away. There was no room for mistakes or delays. One chance to get it right.

If the hunter wasn't ready to spring the trap, the suugu would charge ahead without mercy. Just in case, it was a good idea to have a handful of gemstones to placate the beast, but there was no guarantee they would do the trick. So fight the attacking suugu to the death or freeze up and then run.

This latter option was a last resort. A hunter in such dire straits who managed to escape wouldn't get anywhere close to that suugu's territory again, especially if wounded in any way. The suugu was a smart creature. It remembered a foe with all five senses, starting with its scent. As soon as it caught wind of a returning threat, it would attack at a run.

Discovering the den of a suugu made the job much easier but this was rare. The more reliable approach was to set a trap along the animal trails, but not without a good grasp of the suugu's whereabouts. Lurking nearby in a blind hoping to ambush the animal when it showed up rarely yielded results.

The trap was laid only after confirming that a suugu was in the vicinity and then determining its actual location. If the suugu was a long way off, there'd be plenty of

time to get everything set up right. But in the meantime, there was a good possibility the suugu would grow wary and take off in a different direction.

Get close enough to honestly annoy it and there were good odds the trap wouldn't be ready soon enough. If a hunter found a den and set up the snare right outside it, the suugu could be lured in with little trouble. But the trails were a different story. There was no telling what approach it would take. Read its movement wrong and the encounter might end on a tragic note.

Fortunately, Gyousou had discovered this suugu in what more or less passed for its den. Even so, he had only one chance to spring the trap as fast as he could. There was no margin for error.

While arranging the ropes and hooks, Gyousou stepped through the process and practiced the moves he had to make over and over. He couldn't help thinking back to the last time he had laid such a trap in the Yellow Sea. At the time, Taiki was with him.

An intense curiosity shone in the boy's eyes as Gyousou showed him how to prepare the snare.

In fact, at that time, Gyousou hadn't discovered evidence of a suugu in the area and wasn't trying to catch one along the animal trails. Rather, having captured Keitou in the vicinity, he had good grounds for concluding this was a suugu habitat. He didn't think waiting there for one to come along would yield results, but that didn't rule out setting up the trap just in case.

There was always the rare success story. In the unlikely event they did succeed, Gyousou scattered gemstones around to calm down the suugu and keep Taiki out of harm's way. Taiki apparently thought they were there to lure in the suugu like a trail of breadcrumbs, but that wasn't the case. The blind was quite a distance further away than normal from the trap.

Taiki said he wanted to see for himself, so Gyousou brought him along. He was equally interested in showing Taiki what capturing a kijuu involved, and wanted Taiki to know about the people who specialized in wrangling kijuu, such as the shushi. Many shushi had ended up as refugees due to the devastation of a kingdom, and Gyousou hoped he'd come away with at least a grasp of that reality beyond the simple abstract knowledge.

Thinking back about it now, Gyousou had to smile and shake his head. The events that would unfold as a result had been well beyond his wildest imagination.

How was Taiki faring now? Gyousou was still alive, so he could say for certain that Taiki hadn't been killed. Given that no one had come galloping to his rescue, at the bare minimum, he must have been captured or detained. How was he being treated? Gyousou could only hope he had not ended up in similarly wretched conditions.

Whenever he pondered such things, the image of the child rose up in his thoughts. Except many years had passed. Taiki must have grown a good deal. It was quite possible that he was an adult—an adult kirin. What manner of young man had he become?

The wizardesses on Mount Hou said the people of Tai were hot-blooded. A nice way of saying they were a violent bunch, which was not necessarily wrong. Without that stubborn contrariness at the core, they'd never hold up through the long winters and the fierce cold and prevail against the worst odds without giving up. That's what living in this kingdom required.

The reasons so many entered the priesthood, joined the land gangs, and became marauders and mercenaries were not unrelated to that innate temperament. Gyousou believed that to persist, to endure, and to act with undiminished resolve was an inherent trait of Tai itself.

The young kirin was said to be the exact opposite. Gyousou wasn't convinced, but he understood why people came to that conclusion. What kind of adult had the child become? Despite his best efforts, he had a hard time picturing him now.

Only that he is likely the furthest thing from safe and sound.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there to help."

Chapter 2

[19-2] Late in the afternoon, the warm rays of the sun slanted low across the horizon. The mornings and evenings remained chilly, so any sunlight helped to stave off the fierce cold.

Standing guard still guaranteed painfully frozen feet. Yet the overcast skies were thin enough for the brilliant light of the setting sun to shine through and reveal patches of blue through breaks in the cloud cover.

Boushuku heard Gogetsu say something under his breath.

“Yeah, it’s always a relief to see the sky,” Boushuku said, glancing up at the heavens.

That attempt at conversation was met with a tense shushing sound. Boushuku turned to see Gogetsu examining the building that jutted out from the gatehouse.

Boushuku craned his neck but spotted nothing out of the usual. It was merely the guardroom where sentries like him took their breaks and should be currently unoccupied. Hearing Gogetsu’s muffled voice, Boushuku responded with a look and didn’t say anything aloud.

Gogetsu again gestured toward the guardroom with a jerk of his chin. Without drawing more attention to himself, he pointed at the window. Boushuku narrowed his eyes, assuming he meant something on the other side of the glass. The interior of the building was dark. The evening sun shone brilliantly off the glass. Boushuku leaned back the other way. Changing the angle dimmed the bright glare, but now he saw a reflection of the outer courtyard.

Whatever he was supposed to be looking at, he couldn’t see inside the building.

He started wondering if Gogetsu, standing right next to him, was looking through the window. Just then, a shadow flickered across the surface of the glass. Toward the back of the reflected image of the courtyard, a silhouette flitted beneath the eaves.

Gogetsu said in a casual tone of voice, “I imagine Director Fukushou must be working his fingers to the bone today as well.”

Gogetsu shouldn’t be able to see through the window, and in any case, the Director wasn’t in. At that moment, a bundle of documents under his arm, he was headed toward the outer courtyard. Boushuku had spotted him walking in that direction with something of a weary air about him.

Boushuku looked at Gogetsu. Gogetsu answered with a small nod. The window reflected the silhouettes of several civil servants scurrying beneath the eaves, obviously trying not to be seen.

“Could you lend me a hand for a moment?” Gogetsu turned on his heels and entered the gatehouse.

“Sure thing,” Boushuku said, tagging along.

Coming in from the bright sunlight, the gatehouse was pitch black. Boushuku blinked a few times. When his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, he could see the tension on Gogetsu’s face. Gogetsu grabbed him by the arm and pulled him behind a pillar. Reading his intentions, Boushuku darted into the anteroom with Gogetsu close behind.

The two of them observed the empty gate room from the crack between the folding doors. A short time later, on the opposite side of the gate room, a face peered out from the vestibule where the gatekeeper usually retired. Boushuku recognized the man, a minor official recently dispatched by the Imperial government. A closer look revealed there to be six of them. They focused their attention on the outer courtyard before disappearing deeper into the compound, likely headed for one of the courtyard rooms.

Gogetsu made his move, Boushuku on his heels. They crossed the gate room to the vestibule. Through the decorative window they watched the silhouettes enter one of the courtyard rooms.

The room had been used by officials from the Naisai, the ministry responsible for the management of the Inner Palace. The provincial prime minister had banned Imperial government officials from the premises, so nobody should be using the room. When they’d been sent packing, they took all their belongings with them. They didn’t leave anything behind they’d have to retrieve at a later date.

At any rate, they wouldn’t be skulking around the manor if they had.

Boushuku and Gogetsu watched the room for a while. The people inside showed no signs of coming out.

“They can’t move, eh?”

“Ah,” Gogetsu said. “What about the windows?”

“That room has a skylight but it’s pretty high up. It’s too small for a person to squeeze through.”

“Meaning they won’t be sneaking further into the manor. Let’s get some reinforcements in here. Keep it quiet, though.”

Boushuku agreed. He slipped out of the gate room and summoned several of his colleagues. Along the way, he ran into Director Fukushou and summarized for him what was going on. The Director nodded with a firm expression and issued a brief series of orders. Leaving the rest in the Director’s hands, Boushuku returned to where Gogetsu had set up his observation post.

Gogetsu glanced at him and said, “Still haven’t made a move. Probably waiting for nightfall.”

The darkness deepened inside the gate room. But they saw lights coming on in the room the suspects had entered.

Gogetsu said under his breath, voicing his understanding of their motives, "They'd obviously prefer not getting found out, but in any case, they've got some unfinished business here that needs taking care of."

Boushuku replied quietly, "Sneaking around like this seems the least natural way to go about it."

"Well, it kind of makes sense given the expulsion order covering all the Imperial officials in Nightingale Manor."

"Of course," Boushuku said. "But there aren't that many. What's their objective?"

Taiki was the obvious answer, except there wasn't much they could do with the number of people they had. Taiki had Ganchou and Yari at his side. A bunch of bureaucrats didn't present much of a threat to those two, unless these were soldiers dressed up as civil servants.

"I don't think they are military men," Gogetsu said, thinking along the same lines. "I've seen some of them before."

Boushuku nodded. With that, Gogetsu's voice trailed off and the long night began. Together with Boushuku, fifteen guards lay low and kept their eyes on the room. The painfully cold night wore on. The dawn grew closer. The chill in the bones turned the sunny day gone by into a distant memory.

The sky over the Imperial Palace was still dark. But here and there came that feeling in the air of people getting up and going about their business. The break of day would arrive before long.

"The Daiboku knows what's going on?"

"The Director should have filled him in."

Meaning there was nothing to worry about? But then a thought occurred to Boushuku.

"The pavilion."

Dawn was upon them, silhouetting the main hall of Nightingale Manor against the pale gray sky. Looking past the tiled roofs, the decorative mountain in the garden came into view, the arbor and pavilion perched at its peak. The ridgeline of the pavilion barely poked above the roof of the main hall. Since being posted at the manor, Boushuku had become so accustomed to the scene it had lost all of its spectacle.

He'd heard that Taiki walked to the pavilion every morning, at times in the company of others, and at other times alone. The back courtyard of the main hall was Taiki's personal domain.

"What about it?" Gogetsu asked.

"The Taiho visits the pavilion every morning, sometimes by himself."

If the Daiboku had been informed of the malefactors on the premises, he would put a stop to it, or at least make sure the Taiho didn't head out there by himself.

That was when events started to unfold. As they watched from afar, the door of the room cracked open, someone inside taking a look around. For a long minute, nothing changed. And then the door opened wide enough for the people inside to slip out. One, then two, then six altogether. By the time the last one conscientiously closed the door behind him, the first was approaching the portico rooms.

The succession of shadows turned down the narrow hallway to the right of the portico rooms. The hallway was for the use of the servants.

Having confirmed where the interlopers were headed, Boushuku and his men passed through the portico. Though the morning light hadn't yet reached the rooms, they sensed movement around them. Perhaps alerted by their footsteps and curious about what was going on, the occupants peeked out at them from the shuttered windows.

Boushuku and his men proceeded deeper into the manor. A second utility corridor passed to the left of the main hall. They crossed from there toward the back garden. As expected, a guard was posted in the corridor. The passageway east of the main hall should have the same security.

Boushuku sank down in the undergrowth and said under his breath. "I don't imagine they would use the east utility corridor either."

Gogetsu nodded. He drew a scarf over his mouth to avoid puffing out a white cloud in the cold morning air. "I don't think so."

That was when they heard the quiet creak of an opening door. With the guard posted there, it couldn't have come from the side gate to the main hall. Dismissing that possibility, Boushuku peered through the faint light of dawn that hung over the courtyard like a gray haze. At the back of the garden, in a thicket of tall grasses and sculpted rocks on the far side of the decorative mountain, he made out the silhouette of a human form.

The adjoining property.

Now that he thought about it, the Nightingale Manor had once been an annex of the garden park with which it shared a common wall. The utility corridor connected the facilities in the park with the manor. At some point before he'd been assigned to the manor, the wall had been erected, closing it off. But wasn't there a back alleyway still available to the servants? If so, here was another way to access the garden.

Although the exterior perimeter of the garden park itself was patrolled as a matter of course, he hadn't heard of any resources being assigned to the partition wall separating it from Nightingale Manor.

"There aren't any guards back there, are there?" Gogetsu said with a disapproving cluck of his tongue, having come to the same conclusion.

Security for Nightingale Manor had originally been handled at the Imperial level. Then Zui Province asserted its prerogatives and brought manor operations under the jurisdiction of the provincial ministries of Heaven and Summer. Except the grounds around the manor fell outside their jurisdiction.

At first, the guards dispatched by the Imperial government had simply enforced the status quo, leaving any number of holes in the walls that enclosed the park and the manor. There certainly was that time when Asen appeared out of nowhere. To be sure, Asen could have exercised his own authority to breach any security cordon in the Imperial Palace. But Boushuku got the feeling Asen found a way through one of those holes.

Boushuku turned these thoughts over in his mind as he watched the suspicious silhouettes scamper across the back courtyard. They climbed the mountain behind the lake, weapons glimmering in the faint light. Doing their best not to be seen, they disappeared into the shadows of the trees and rocks around the pavilion.

“Ah, so they’re planning an ambush, eh?” whispered an unfamiliar voice.

Boushuku almost shouted in surprise. He froze reflexively before casting an apprehensive glance over his shoulder. At some point, a young woman had appeared in their midst.

“Y-Yari-dono—”

Yari nodded. She was wearing a long-hooded cloak. He could tell at a glance that the cloak was an unusually ornate piece of apparel, not the kind of clothing worn by an ordinary civil servant. It was an elegant court robe.

Reading the dubious expression Boushuku’s face, she said, “Oh, just a little something I borrowed from the Taiho’s wardrobe. I’ll head over to the pavilion in a few minutes. The rest is up to you.”

She pulled the hood down over her eyes and scurried off, fading into the mist in the direction of the main hall.

Nothing moved on the mountain. Nightingale Manor was quiet and still, as were the courtyard and garden. Around the time the faint light of dawn began to fill their surroundings, the back door of the main hall opened and a solitary figure slipped out wearing a hooded cloak.

Of course. Wearing that cloak, Yari could easily pass for Taiki.

Perhaps seeing what they took to be Taiki as well, the shadows positioned around the pavilion began shifting about.

You’ve got to at least admire the effort they’re making, I guess. It’s freezing cold out here.

Boushuku could barely keep his teeth from chattering. The top of that garden mountain was directly exposed to the wind. He stuck his hands under the scarf covering his mouth and warmed his fingers with his breath.

At last he was going to actually do his job on behalf of Taiki.

Yari adjusted the cloak as she followed the winding stone steps up and around the mountain. When she got within a few steps of the pavilion, perhaps having exhausted their patience, the shadows jumped at her from the thickets.

Gogetsu leapt to his feet, Boushuku a step behind him.

One after another, Yari felled the silhouettes swarming around her, sending them tumbling down the mountain. Boushuku and Gogetsu charged up the stone staircase. Their fellow guardsmen ran down the now hapless and whimpering bureaucrats hiding behind the boulders and seized them on the spot.

Shrieks and screams rang out from the pavilion. Swinging a cudgel with each hand, Yari sent her attackers flying as quickly as they came at her. Boushuku reached the summit to find most of them sprawled across the cobblestone ground. Knowing the authorities would want to question them later, she made sure not to kill anybody.

Moaning and groaning, the surly civil servants stumbled to their feet, very much a bunch of sore losers. Boushuku and the guardsmen took them into custody.

Boushuku pinned a flailing bureaucrat's arms behind his back. "Picking a fight with Yari-dono is not a smart move for a bunch of amateurs," he instructed his captive.

Yari doffed the hood of the duster and scowled. "What did they actually think they were going to accomplish with only this many people?"

"You think someone else is pulling the strings?"

"Someone like Shison." Responding to Boushuku's startled reaction, Yari added, "He's just the sort of idiot who would dream up something this stupid."

Chapter 3

[19-3] Gyousou stepped into the rocky fissure, torch and trap in hand. His quarry was still in a groggy state. He had time to lay down the snares. The light was faint and the footholds treacherous. He was thankful for any leeway he could take advantage of. He knew for certain the suugu wasn't going to stay that way forever.

In order to keep the pitons out of sight while securing the snares, he snaked the ropes between the rocks before tying them off. When he came to the knot that attached the guy rope, he switched his hold and stretched the guy rope across a gap in a place the creature was bound to brush against it. A bell chimed softly as the rope drew taut.

He backtracked to the first knot, set another piton, attached another length of guy rope, and repeated the process.

He proceeded as quietly as he could, keeping as low a profile as possible. The suugu showed no signs of fully waking from its hibernation, even after he finished stringing the snare like a spider's web.

He carried three poles with tapered ends. Once he threw them, there was no getting them back. He fastened the gemstones to his waist along with his sword. He'd resort to the sword only if he ended up on the losing end of this gamble. Would he have to kill these wings of good fortune or would he end up the prey? Or would the suugu disappear into the bottomless depths of the ravine?

Gyousou took a deep breath and slowly let it out. He aimed the pole to the left of the suugu and let it fly. The dull tip of the javelin did not impale itself but struck the rocks and tumbled away. Two round eyes lit up in the surrounding darkness. The suugu was awake now. Without waiting, Gyousou threw the second javelin, this time right above the head of the beast.

That projectile too bounced off the boulder and fell down on the suugu. He didn't bother checking where it went before throwing the last one. This time, at point blank range.

The javelin slanted into the ground right in front of the suugu. The darkness slowly shifted. A big forefoot snapped the javelin in two like a twig. A low growl resonated through the ravine. The sound crawled through the earth and reverberated through the rock, communicating the creature's anger.

Avoiding the piercing glare, Gyousou hid in the shadow of a boulder. He held the rope, stifled his breath, and craned his ears.

The angry roar echoed from the far side of the boulder. A small bell chimed. The suugu had crossed the first rope. The second bell rang. Then the third, followed by two bells singing in unison. Without a doubt, the suugu had reached the mouth of the snare.

Gyousou only had to pull the rope and spring the trap. After that, everything depended on his ability to rein in the beast through sheer force of will. If he lost his bearings or panicked for even a moment, the suugu would shake free of the snare. After all, the purpose of these traps was to give a hunter time enough to lay his hands on the quarry. Koushu hunted in large numbers. If one rider got bucked off, there'd be another right behind him ready to leap into the fray.

They'd keep at it until they'd broken the beast and slapped on the restraints. But Gyousou was the only person here.

The growls grew closer. The footsteps made no sound but each breath of the big beast whooshed past him like a rush of wind. Catching a whiff of the warm and moist air, Gyousou planted his feet on the boulder and yanked hard on the rope.

Reacting with a startled howl, the creature leapt off the stony ground, twisting its body to slash at Gyousou with glittering sharp claws. Gyousou sprang to the side. As it turned to follow him, the suugu's momentum tangled its huge frame in the ropes. A glance over his shoulder showed the suugu shaking its body in great aggravation, swinging its forefeet and kicking its hind legs as it tried to pursue Gyousou.

Those movements only further entwined the suugu in the ropes. It roared in vexation. Gyousou charged straight at it, ducking and weaving around the flailing claws, and leapt onto its back. Using the entangled ropes as reins, he straddled the suugu and grabbed hold of its mane. The suugu bucked its big body and unleashed a thunderous roar.

"Easy, easy. Calm down."

The suugu pawed the ground. Gyousou held on tight with his legs, gripping the mane with his left hand and patting its shoulder with his right. Bucking and growling, tearing at the restraints while trying to shake this foe off its back, the beast's wild actions grew all the more chaotic.

Gyousou clung on even harder in order to stay seated while he earnestly raised his voice. He couldn't let his grip slacken for even a moment. Communicating his indomitable resolve was the key to keeping the beast under the rider's control.

Maintaining a hold with his left hand, his fingernails biting into the hide like teeth, Gyousou pulled open the waist pack with his right. The suugu sprang back and forth, making increasingly violent attempts to escape the constraints. Mirroring the raging actions with his own, Gyousou scattered gemstones on the ground.

The most dangerous moment came next. The suugu tried rolling over, hoping to scrape the rider off its back. Caught and crushed between that huge frame and the

boulders, he'd in a world of hurt. Judging the direction the suugu was headed, Gyousou firmed his hold and pulled hard in the opposite direction, managing to haul the beast back to an upright stance.

Digging in with his knees, his hand on the scruff of the neck, he checked the movements of the struggling suugu and brought it under control.

The beast's frenzied state settled somewhat, perhaps the gemstones having their effect as well. The suugu's efforts to throw off the rider and the rider's efforts to stay put finally settled into a kind of dance.

"Easy, easy. You'll be okay." *I'm not your enemy. I'm not going to hurt you. Settle down. Relax.*

When it tried to kick off with its hind legs, Gyousou raised its head to sit it back down. When it veered left, he pulled right. Little by little, the suugu's movements grew more subdued.

"I'm not your enemy. I need your help."

The suugu responded with a low and bewildered growl. It stopped recklessly throwing its body back and forth about the cavern and gave up trying to buck the rider off its back. The hairs of its mane standing straight out from its neck eventually lay back down. It stood there drawing ragged breaths.

"I mean you no harm. Do you understand?"

A thrumming rumble emerged from the back of its throat. The suugu muffled its voice. As Gyousou perched on its back, the tension abruptly left its body.

"That's a good boy," Gyousou said.

He patted its neck, then gently stroked the beast's big head. The suugu had accepted him.

"I am eternally grateful."

Gyousou slid off its back. He didn't worry about getting attacked, but nothing now prevented the suugu from simply walking away. He placed the palm of his hand on its back and observed it with no little apprehension. The suugu shook its body in an almost relaxed manner.

So will you take your leave, then?

The disappointment stung only briefly, for the suugu instead lay down on the ground. Sprawled there in a carefree manner, it raised its head and looked back at Gyousou, its eyes reflecting a kaleidoscope of colors, eyes that invited Gyousou to reach out. The suugu sniffed his palm, then pressed the nape of its neck against his hand.

Gyousou stroked its mane and then wrapped his arms around its neck. "Do you think you'll be able to help me out here?" he said, grateful almost beyond words. "I'm going to call you Ragou, okay?"

The purr of the suugu sounded very much like an expression of satisfied contentment. Gyousoo listened for a long moment before raising his head and looking up. All he could see above them was the stone ceiling, except for that small point of white light very far away.

He finally had the wings to fly there.

Chapter 4

[19-4] The end of winter finally came to the northern quarter of Tai. Even in Bun Province, the wan rays of the sun grew warmer and the snowstorms less frequent. When it snowed, the heavy flakes melted quickly. The icy sheets of the layered snowpack thinned by the day. On patches of level ground facing the sun, black earth peeked out from beneath the white blanket.

Amidst these harbingers of spring, quietly and behind the scenes, a steady stream of people emerged from the northeast of Bun Province. In ones and twos, they left the towns and villages around Koutaku and moved along the highway. Some joined the larger groups on the main thoroughfare while others took the back roads in smaller numbers.

Some on horseback, others carrying packs on their backs as they hurried along. So as to leave no lasting impression on those around them, many wore triangular bamboo hats pulled low over their eyes or scarves across their faces and looked down at the ground as they continued on through the falling snow in their matter-of-fact way.

From the highway north of Mount You, they headed to Hakurou. Before getting to Hakurou, they left the highway and took a side road along the river towards what had once been Tetsui. Carts and wagons bearing white flags joined the procession of people.

Taoists dressed in white accompanied the well-stocked wagons. The word going around was that Sekirin Temple was restoring the Taoist facilities in Ryuukei. They'd been wrecked during the eradication campaigns and abandoned for years. Now with the support of Gamon Temple in Hakurou, it was being brought back to life on a bigger scale than before.

At the same time, temples further to the east were also being renovated. Crews of laborers and tradesmen traveled with carts full of supplies. Refugees with a keen eye for people on the move added to their number. Refugees gathered in places with large migrant populations. As best they could tell, the cities ruled by the land gangs weren't turning people away like they used to.

Along with the return of Sekirin Temple, rumors circulated among the needy and destitute that the gates were no longer closed to outsiders like themselves. Go there and they might find a place to live. And with all those people congregating in one place, jobs should be in the offing. Merchants with a nose for ground-floor business opportunities soon joined the throngs.

The castle at the heart of Seisai got put to the torch six years before and then collapsed during the troubles with the land gangs. The local gang set up shop in an inn a stone's throw from the ruins. But unlike before, travelers who approached the city were no longer driven off without a second thought. While anybody entering Seisai proper would have to prove their bona fides, no roadblocks prevented anybody from moving into the towns and villages around Seisai.

First the troubles and then the eradication campaigns had reduced most of them to ruins. Yet some structures remained intact and people were living in them. The surrounding fields were buried under the snow but the access roads showed signs of being used and maintained.

Nobody in the capital of Bun Province paid attention to these movements. Or rather, some people noticed but nobody put the pieces together. They had long ago written off the city of Seisai. It officially didn't exist and they had no reason to change their minds. If refugees and displaced persons were congregating there, that had nothing to do with them either, because as far as the administration was concerned, those people didn't exist either.

"Something must be going on there," observed a provincial official.

"Because the land gangs don't have the power they used to," Tonkou explained. "The gangs that flocked to Kan'you Mountain are down on their luck too. They don't have the resources to control the area like they once did."

The official nodded with a knowing look and lapsed into silence.

"Should we really just leave them alone?" someone else asked, glancing around at the faces of the surrounding civil servants.

"The province lord says he doesn't care."

That answer as well was met with silence.

"In the meantime, the land gangs may well abandon Kan'you Mountain and disappear into the countryside. When that happens, the towns and villages in the region should spring back to life. We don't need to worry about acting on any of these rumors until we start receiving petitions to revive the rishi, proof that actual redevelopment is going on."

Tonkou indirectly circulated this opinion among the provincial ministers and in time it became official policy.

The province lord himself had nothing to say on the subject.

Everything was done behind the scenes. Stand out and become the center of attention and the result would be exile or getting struck down by the illness.

"Long story short," Tonkou said to Risai, "I don't see the provincial government taking any action until spring."

Risai had paid Hoyou a visit to pick up some goods. "That's an optimistic way of seeing things," she said with a wry smile.

“What I’m saying is, it can’t get anything done. No government functionally exists at the provincial level. To be fair, you could probably say that of Tai as a whole.”

Risai nodded. Here and there around Bun Province, refugees with no roof over their heads were still freezing to death. Even among those who managed to avoid that fate, more than a few of the young and elderly were losing fingers and toes to frostbite. Anyone with the resources moved to warmer climes by the time winter arrived in earnest. Many of those who remained to face the harsh cold of Bun Province were the poorest of the poor.

“Even so,” Hoyou said with a grim look, “can we trust the kingdom not to notice so many people on the move? The puppet province lord is little more than an invalid these days, but the kingdom has its own eyes and ears.”

Tonkou assured her, “From all outward appearances, they are only part of the preparations for the restoration of the Sekirin Temple facilities in Ryuukei and Seisai and the construction of the Ordination Hall in Ryuukei.”

Labor migrations had long taken place during the winter months in Bun Province. Prodigious amounts of snow fell in the region between Mount You and the northern coast of Bun Province. Villages were frequently swallowed up by the snowpack, though before that happened, the whole village often packed up and moved elsewhere.

During the winter, the sight of evacuees fleeing the heavy snowfall and avalanches and refugees escaping the poverty and destitution, along with seasonal workers and other economic nomads traveling to and fro on the highways in ragtag groups, was one the people of Bun Province were well used to.

“Moreover, the kingdom has plenty of its own problems. To start with, we’ve heard they’re at their wits’ end dealing with repeated outbreaks of violence in I Province.”

“So they’re still holding out,” Hoyou said, half in admiration, half in despair.

Risai said, “I thought the resistance in I Province had been all but rooted out.”

“The protests dying down for a spell only meant they’d gone underground and were gathering their strength for the next revolt. The fierceness of the purges in I Province resulted in ever more anger against Asen roiling beneath the surface.” Tonkou then added, “Besides which, more and more people are moving south.”

“Moving south?”

“There are rumors that a better life is waiting for you if you can get yourself to Zui Province. They say Zui Province has opened the warehouses and are distributing provisions to the needy. The rika have expanded their roles to accommodate the ill, along with elderly and children.”

“Oh, really?” Risai murmured to herself.

She couldn't decide whether that was good news or not. The people being saved was certainly a good thing. But she couldn't tell out from here what was really going on, except that she sensed it was not unrelated to rumors of Asen's enthronement. In any case, she was thankful for this increased activity all across Bun Province. As a result, Sougen could mobilize the forces he had amassed without attracting too much attention.

"We can only hope that people moving south find the help they need," Risai said.

Tonkou said with a wry smile, "If the province had the ability to make a difference in that regard, I'd only wonder if it would only put us in a more precarious position. It is a matter of considerable concern for me."

Within the walls of the provincial castle, Tonkou was hard at work sowing confusion among the ranks. A general would get the job done faster, but recruiting a high-ranked officer was also a good way to paint a target on his back. He instead focused his attention on the centurions and battalion commanders.

Unfamiliar as she was with the inner workings of the Bun provincial government, Risai didn't feel it was her place to level any criticism. In any case, little by little, Tonkou was adding allies to the cause. Altogether, he'd amassed the equivalent of a division. However, as they did not all answer to a single chain of command, as a unified fighting force, these were less than reliable numbers.

"We'll just have to do our best with what we've got on hand. Do you think you're going to have enough manpower to take over Kan'you Mountain?"

Risai answered Tonkou's question with a grim smile. "Like you, all we can do is give it our best effort."

With the number of their brothers in arms growing by the day, and help from Kyuusan, they were approaching the troop strength that would bring such a campaign into the realm of possibility. When it came to the landslide in question, they were whittling down the possible locations and getting closer to the point where they could start working on the access tunnels.

"But we are still unable to get a picture of Kan'you Mountain in its entirety."

"I have indirectly made my own inquiries among the civil servants within the provincial government and have come across anyone who knows what's really going on there. In any case, it's a mountain with a long history, where miners with their knowledge of the gemstone fountains rule the roost."

In order to protect their claims, miners went out of their way to hide the location of the gemstone fountains and the access tunnels. As a result, no one person had a good grasp of the big picture.

"We await any good news," Tonkou said and Risai nodded.

"So next you'll be hanging out with the miners for a while?" Hoyou said with a smile. "We appreciate all the trouble you are going to."

Risai said, "As long as we've got a goal and a way to get it done, it's no trouble at all. We're grateful for everything you've done for us, Hoyou."

"Men and matériel are all the thanks I need. I suppose there's no need to send Risai into the tunnels too."

Risai laughed. "Good to know. I can't imagine I'd be of much use when it comes to digging holes."

Risai left Gamon Temple on Hien. When on her own with Hien, she traveled by air. Under better conditions, Hien could cover the distance between Seisai and Gamon Temple in half a day. But now she had to be conscious of who might be watching from below and couldn't freely fly through the outskirts of Hakurou. Taking the necessary precautions and picking the right roads to follow, the return trip took almost a day.

She got back to Seisai toward evening, the scattered points of light glowing in the falling dusk. A square of cloth was hanging in the main room of the new safehouse.

Sougen glanced over his shoulder. "You're back. How is Hoyou doing?"

"Same as always. By the way, what is that?"

She meant the simple sheet of white cloth. Whatever it was, they must be making do with whatever they had on hand. A gray line was drawn along the lower half of the square sheet, apparently with a brush dipped in diluted ink. It very much resembled the character for "one."

"Welcome back," Seishi said with a smile.

"The white Hakushi flags came in a crate of supplies from Gamon Temple, except we're hearing complaints that pretending to be Hakushi just doesn't sit right."

"Well, yes, I can see that."

People and goods were flowing into Seisai in large quantities. The ostensible reason was the restoration of a Taoist temple in the Sekirin Temple circuit, so naturally they flew the Hakushi. The white banners had long been a prized symbol of those affiliated with Sekirin Temple. But to Risai and her allies, the white banners carried a different meaning. They expressed the gratitude of the people of Tetsui for Gyousou's moral majesty.

Although not a great many, there were those who caviled at raising the Hakushi banner."

"That's why we won't be," Sougen said. "We're adding a few touches in order to set ours apart, something that conveys the message that while we aren't Hakushi, we strive for the same goals. We believe it's an approach Hakushi can get on board with."

The wry smile on Kenchuu's face said that regardless of whether they were in wholehearted agreement, at least they weren't going to oppose the effort.

“Sure,” Risai said. They didn’t have much in the way of materials or funds, so making do with what was on hand should more than suffice. “Works for me. You can’t beat clean and simple.”

A delighted Kyoshi slapped Houto on the back. “You came up with this idea, didn’t you, Houto?”

Houto nodded with a touch of self-consciousness. “I thought it was a bit on the rough side, but Sougen-sama said it was just right for the purpose.”

Risai took a closer look at the banner.

Since leaving Sekijou, she and Houto and Kyoshi had been together for a long time now. Kiitsu had lent a hand, and Seishi joined their band along with Yotaku. And yet they numbered a mere six individuals. The unadorned banner rather resembled their old selves. A bit of nostalgia couldn’t help welling up.

“I really like it,” Yotaku said, setting a cup of tea in front of Risai. She had the sense that Yotaku too was feeling those same deep emotions.

“We arrived in Koutaku like shipwrecked sailors washed ashore. There were only four of us,” Sougen mused aloud, “and two horses. We’ve since grown to a scale where we need our own banners to tell us apart.”

Risai nodded. *Of course*. They shared similar sentiments, having started out with no money, no connections, and no labor force to draw on. Like the Hakushi, all they had was hope. But they forged ever forward on their solitary journeys, the threads of good will from the people they’d met along the way weaving the tapestry that was their lives today.

These thoughts heavy on her mind, an exuberant cry from outside the house brought Risai back to the present. A contingent of mounted soldiers had arrived from Koutaku on horseback.

“This town is more spread out than we expected. It took us a while to track you people down.”

Taking those words under advisement, Risai and the others planted the white and gray banners around the town. With the safehouse they’d borrowed from Kyuusan already packed to the gills, they had to lease the residences next door and behind them as well.

Chapter 5

[19-5] Imperial civil servants had taken up arms and conspired to attack Taiki.

The news shook the palace to its core. The provincial Ministry of Summer rounded up the assailants and took them into custody. Imperial ministers wasted no time staking their own jurisdictional claims. The intense interrogations and negotiations that followed resulted in Shison being placed under arrest by the afternoon of the same day.

“What a fool that man is!” Kyoushou spat out in disgust.

Kyoushou was the Minister of Summer. Asen’s coronation should be taking place soon. In that light, the willful murder of the Saiho was the same as assassinating Asen himself.

“It’s grand treason. I’ll be asking for a death sentence.”

But in detention, the weeping Shison insisted that was not the case.

“Why can’t you understand? That person is not the Taiho!” He was an imposter pretending to be the Taiho, Shison insisted at the top of his voice. “Is it even possible to imagine a Taiho so ruthless and coldhearted? The Chousai himself has said the same all along. That person cannot be the Taiho!”

The conspirators had sought out someone who resembled the Saiho and brought him to the Imperial Palace in order to declare Asen the new emperor. That was the plan from the start, all the while mustering forces behind the scenes to crush Asen before he could ever ascend to the throne.

Shison’s excuses sufficiently resembled the stories Chou’un was spreading to arouse suspicions among the interrogators.

When they approached Chou’un, he roared in an apoplectic rage, “How much more of this nonsense do I have to put up with? It is not possible that I should harbor such doubts, even hypothetically! Moreover, I knew at the first glance that he was the Taiho. I would not have the slightest reason to doubt his authenticity!”

“And yet you argued as well on many occasions that the Taiho was pulling the wool over our eyes,” Kashaku pointed out.

“I was only raising the *possibility*,” Chou’un said, stamping his feet for emphasis. “Keeping His Highness safe and the kingdom secure requires taking all the necessary precautions. Therefore, *any* possibility must be considered, no matter how seemingly outside the bounds of reason.”

“Are you sure?” Kashaku pressed, his voice taking on a more taunting tone. “As best my memory serves, you were doing far more than raising *possibilities* on a number of occasions.”

Kashaku turned his attention to the rest of the Rikkan for confirmation. They nodded in the affirmative.

Idiot, Ansaku thought to himself.

No matter how much Chou’un twisted and distorted his own version of reality, he couldn’t revise the memories of others to fit his view of the world. Confronted by those who were there when it happened and knew what went on, Chou’un’s acts of self-deception came apart at the seams.

In the end, convinced in his own mind that he was telling the truth, his lies lacked any convincing logic. His only recourse was to yell louder. He seemed to be under the impression that if he just kept yelling until he wore them all down, his fabrications would take on a truth of their own.

“Like I said, I was only raising the possibility! Why are you blaming me, anyway? Shison is the villain here. Shison deliberately chose to misunderstand me. Whatever violent actions he conspired to commit, he did so without my knowledge and certainly without my participation.”

Chou’un continued with unbridled disgust, “If nothing else, shouldn’t this incident raise questions about Shison’s character? As provincial prime minister, he aroused the Taiho’s displeasure and was removed from his post. After that, at his insistence, I deigned to appoint him Naisai. But once again, he so offended the Taiho that he was physically removed from the premises. Can there be any doubt that, resenting the way he was treated, he resorted to violence in retribution?”

“Hoh,” Kashaku said, a cynical smile rising to his lips. “Perhaps the real crime here was appointing a man with such a troubled personality to be prime minister and then Naisai?”

“If I knew so at the time, of course I never would have trusted him with those portfolios!” Chou’un shouted in a frenzy. “I’ll admit this much. That bastard Shison had me completely fooled. But did anybody here object? You were all duped no less than me!”

Chou’un tilted his head back, as if pleading his case to the heavens. “Oh, he had us good and fooled. I never imagined him to be such a crude and cowardly hoodlum. Moreover, after being promoted to positions of such great responsibility, he proceeded to bungle one job after the other. In the end, eaten up by festering resentments, he dared even to attack the Taiho, the kirin of our kingdom!”

Chou’un blathered on and on, directing all the blame at Shison, lamenting how he was misled, and insisting that the Rikkan had been equally deceived and bore the same sins as himself.

The members of the Rikken looked back at him with cold eyes.

The Chousai is mightily upset,” the Minister of Fall said to Shison. He was conducting Shison’s interrogation. “It apparently grieves him to no end that he entrusted such weighty responsibilities to a person as insolent and insubordinate as yourself.”

“W-what?” Shison gasped through a torrent of tears. “This is all too much for me. I only—what the Chousai—”

It was Shison’s natural inclination to ingratiate himself. Except things had not gone as planned. He directed his growing resentment at Taiki, who stood in his way and left him with no other recourses. He fretted that should the status quo continue, he would lose his position and standing. He worried that he would lose Chou’un’s trust.

In order to curry favor with Chou’un, he did as Chou’un desired and set out to remove Taiki from the palace. Taiki had defied and humiliated not only him. Chou’un had been driven into a corner as well. Taiki was his natural enemy. If that enemy were removed from his presence, he might not say so in public, but he would surely rejoice in such an outcome.

“The Chousai is calling for the death penalty.”

Shison’s mouth dropped open. “T-that’s inconceivable!”

Such an outcome simply wasn’t possible. Even if he said so in public, behind the scenes, Chou’un should be pulling strings to save Shison’s neck.

Shison asked over and over to meet with an official from the executioner’s office, convinced that Chou’un had sent a messenger to intercede. He was repeatedly told, and in no uncertain terms, that no such messenger had arrived. Shison finally came to accept that Chou’un was not going to lift a finger to save him.

Dragged into court for his deposition, a stricken Shison addressed his interrogators.

“My ignorance and utter lack of discretion seeps from every pore of my body. Given my deplorable and outcast state, I now have no choice but to utter the unvarnished truth.”

He spoke in an enervated voice. When he raised his head, his eyes were filled with an unearthly glow.

“Everything I did I was told to do by the Chousai.”

A stunned Chou’un was arrested late that night. For all his connections, he had not the slightest idea what was afoot.

An equally dumbfounded Ansaku was also detained for questioning. “The Chousai—against the Taiho—?”

Impossible. For all his faults, even Chou'un is not that stupid.

Except Shison insisted that the orders came from Chou'un. Shison was responsible for the planning and execution, but everything was carried out according to Chou'un's instructions.

Chou'un insisted just as strongly that he did nothing of the sort. Unfortunately for him, every one of the ministers testified that Shison was Chou'un's lapdog. The fact of the matter was that Chou'un counted on Shison reading between the lines and carrying out his unspoken wishes.

"He is not one of my retainers!" Chou'un thundered in response.

"Oh, what nonsense," laughed the Naisai, who'd been previously dismissed from his post because of Chou'un. "Shison wouldn't take the first step without *your* permission. *You* made Shison the Naisai specifically in order to undermine the Taiho. Shison repeatedly turned to *you* for guidance. Money changed hands. There are any number of civil servants in the Office of the Naisai who will say so on the record."

Chou'un's rebuttal was a shriek of dismay. He was running out of ways to escape the outrageous trap that had ensnared him. There was only one person he could depend on now. He wrote a long letter and had it delivered to Asen.

The reply arrived the next day. "Your petition to the emperor has been heard," was all it said.

Chapter 6

[19-6] The report from Gamon Temple arrived at Seisai soon after the new month began. Sekirei delivered the dispatch on a kijuu that night.

“What’s this about?”

“Urgent news from Tonkou-sama about strange goings-on in the Bun provincial castle.”

“Goings on?”

“They’ve been ordered to set up supply depots for an army due to arrive from Kouki.”

In order to accommodate the army from Kouki, the Provincial Guard was to make ready the necessary provisions.

Risai felt a cold shiver of apprehension down her back. “What kind of scale are we talking about?”

“Based on the quantity of supplies, around a regiment. Not a large military force, but one that intends to settle down and stay for a while.”

“That would seem to rule out any kind of extermination campaign,” Risai murmured to herself.

Seishi nodded. “If it were, then this would be the scouting party. Evidence of our existence must have reached the ears of the central authorities.”

“Perhaps. In which case, however regrettable, we’re going to have to go into hiding for a while.”

And after finally figuring out where Gyousou was likely located. But they couldn’t get impatient and show their hand too early else all would come to naught.

“How many people are gathered here?”

“Over five thousand.”

Seisai bustled with people, activity that had reached the deserted towns at the outskirts. There their comrades in arms took up residence and quietly hung banners, the white flags Houto had designed. Soon after that, the Hakushi in those parts added the black line to their own flags as well, a kind of public pledge that they were one with Risai and her band.

At some point, they came to be known as the Black Flags and were numbered among the Hakushi as well.

At the same time, west of Seisai in Ryuukei, the restoration of the Sekirin branch temple continued in earnest. It soon became clear that the Koutaku Ordination Hall was setting up shop there, prompting repairs to nearby shrines and monasteries that

had long been unoccupied by even a priest. That drew in more construction workers, attracted shamans hoping for a license from the Koutaku Ordination Hall, and refugees just looking for a job, followed by traders and merchants ready to serve the needs of the burgeoning population.

These large inflows of humanity provided the perfect cover for the military forces gathering there. Moreover, to the surprise of those involved in more sectarian pursuits, a Danpou Temple branch was going up in Seisai. Already engaged in restoring one of the temple ruins, they raised a new signboard over the structure.

Dharmapala
Guardian of the Law

The signboard prompted startled expressions and double-takes from the tradesmen who arrived to work on the building.

Risai was surprised that they were surprised. “Is it really that unique?” she asked Kuushou. “Danpou Temple has a well-established presence in Eisou.”

“And those temples most likely did not have names.”

“Ah,” said Risai. Come to think about it, those temples were simply labeled Danpou Temple.”

“You see,” Seigen explained, “That is Danpou Temple’s way of saying it is a temple without a temple.”

Kuushou and Seigen had transferred from the Koutaku Ordination Hall to supervise the establishment of the Ordination Hall in Ryuukei and organize the supporters of the Black Flags.

“A temple without a temple?” Risai asked.

Kuushou nodded. “We recognize no other possession other than the robes on our back and a begging bowl.”

Clothing and utensils. During the winter, that included a straw mat to ward off the cold, the only possessions allowed a monk. Thus it followed they were said to not even possess the temple or the monastery itself. Heretical sects sprang forth from the more extreme interpretations of these rules, and over the years they transformed as well.

“Of course, the teaching that we are not even owners of the temple itself has not fundamentally changed. The temples you’ve seen before did not look like temples, did they?”

“Now that you mention it, they’re pretty ordinary buildings, even resembling civilian structures.”

Aside from the head temple, it was said they owned no actual temples or monasteries. The branch temples were quite simple structures. The individual temples weren't given their own names but were all known as "Danpou Temple."

"Danpou Temple emphasizes the importance of alms and offerings."

Alms and offerings fell into three categories of support: financial, educational, and humanitarian. The first meant making donations of money. The second, teaching the wisdom of the Buddha. The third, comforting and aiding those struck down by calamity and misfortune.

"Because money plays such an important role in society, amassing wealth is not allowed."

Whenever they received a donation, any surplus left over was given away in total. The same applied to clothing and other items. They kept only one set of robes and distributed whatever was left over to the needy.

"Well—" Kuushou chuckled. "Meaning you keep the new and part with the old."

"Of course," Risai said with a smile of her own.

"With no stores of cash on hand, there is no money to spare for temple building. Danpou Temple does not go around constructing temples hither and yon. The buildings are freely given. We don't make suggestions about where a building should be and neither do we solicit donations."

"Ah, and that is how ordinary civilian structures become temples."

"Yes, that is the reason."

That very same Danpou Temple was now building a branch temple. This was indeed a serious matter.

"But if you are not allowed to save money, where does the funding for the temple come from?"

"Apparently from the consolidation of the branch temples. The kingdom has experienced chaotic times since the waning days of the Kyou Dynasty, which has seen a growing number of people entering the priesthood. They, in turn, established branch temples. However, we've been hearing for a while that there are simply too many. As a result, quotas were set for each city. The existing institutions were combined. The buildings left over were sold off. Among the monks and priests made redundant, those willing to work on behalf of the kingdom headed for Seisai."

"That is heartening to hear, but can you be sure it will work out?"

"Well, we won't be needing those branch temples, in any case. Back in the day, the road was your ashram. You arrived in a town, slept at the side of the road, and preached the precepts."

"Sounds like a big bother, I'm sure," Seigen said with a smile. "Living on the road like a beggar, sleeping on a straw mat, sermonizing on the street. That is why Danpou Temple is known as a congregation of eccentrics."

Kuushou nodded in agreement. "And as a result, quarrels were bound to arise with the residents and the local government."

"Stands to reason. Hence the weapons?"

The priests and monks of Danpou Temple were always armed. Including the martial arts as part of their training was another of their peculiar practices.

"Humanitarian efforts constitute the third category of alms and offering. That means rushing to the scene of natural disasters and other calamities. Catch wind of rampaging youma and we'll head there to save the people. Though to truly save people from youma, you've got to hunt them down too. Whether you're talking about attacks by youma or brigands or the ravages of war, you've got to have strength on your side to make a difference. It helps when extricating yourself from quarrels and disputes too. That's why the martial arts are a part of training at Danpou Temple."

A monk once traveled with only the clothes on his back, a begging bowl, and a straw mat. Now he counted a weapon among those meager possessions. Kuushou carried a mace, a winter weapon gifted to him by fellow believers. But when weapons came into play, people were going to get hurt. So Danpou Temple established surgical hospitals to treat the injured.

"I've made good use of those facilities," Risai said with a smile. "Even in the army, everybody knows you're better off trusting your care to Danpou Temple than a field surgeon."

It'd long ago become common knowledge that an injured soldier healed faster and had a shorter convalescence at a Danpou Temple facility. A hospital had already opened its doors at Dharmapala Temple in Seisai, visited around the clock not only by members of the Black Flags but the workers as well.

Risai felt she could reliably expect the building of these social foundations to move forward as quickly as possible. The population of the area was increasing and the institutions required to support those people were coming together.

At the same time, disturbing news had arrived on their doorstep. The Imperial Army was on the move and the Provincial Guard had mobilized to provide logistical support.

"How would you judge the morale of the Provincial Guard?" she asked Sekirei.

Sekirei thought over the question, a pensive look on her face. "It's not like they are about to march into battle. I believe the Provincial Guard is mobilizing only in a support role. They certainly don't appear to be expecting to do anything but."

"Then our problem is with the army arriving from Kouki."

The question was what brought them here. There was no indication they were aware of the Black Flags, or if they were, regarded them as a rebel force.

Risai turned to Sougen. "What do you think we should do?"

Sougen pondered the question in silence. He said, “We should be prepared in case the worst comes to the worst. Given the scale of our operations, once the Imperial Army arrives, somewhere and at some point, we would not necessarily escape notice. We should lie as low as possible while retreating to Rokou. There is still snow in the mountains. If we don’t move at once, we can’t count on a fresh snowfall covering our tracks. The last thing we want to leave behind is a beaten path to our base in the mountains.”

With a crisp “Yes, sir!” his retainers bowed and ran off to spread the word.

Chapter 7

[19-7] **S**now flurries danced through the sky above a little town in the narrow mountain valley.

The traveler who'd brought home the body of the townswoman earlier that winter stayed on for a while. He claimed to be a vagabond from Hakurou but Teisetsu understood at once that this traveler was a knight of a chivalric order.

The man's name was Hakugyuu. With so few workers around these days, he pitched in to fix the houses in need of repair. They were honestly grateful for his help. Winter had just begun when he showed up. In order to endure the bitter cold months to come, the broken-down buildings needed repairs. A small giant of a man with skills well suited for the job, Hakugyuu contributed more than his fair share alongside the townspeople.

To their great relief, before the worst of the winter settled in, they'd patched up most of the walls and roofs.

Hakugyuu stayed another fortnight helping the town prepare for the coming winter. Then he moved on, continuing his search for the man with white hair and crimson eyes. Before he left, as an expression of their gratitude, Teisetsu and the others asked around the neighboring towns if anyone had caught wind of a missing person matching that description but heard nothing useful back.

"They all say His Highness is dead," Teisetsu reported to Hakugyuu, as if sympathizing with the passing of a loved one.

"There is also no evidence of his demise. I will keep looking."

"The rumors that he'd died began circulating six or seven years ago. If he truly still lives, why has he remained silent for so long?"

Perhaps because he was scared of the pretender on the throne in Kouki and scampered to safety. He cowered in secret, doing nothing to save Tai while the kingdom went to the dogs.

When Teisetsu voiced these suspicions, Hakugyuu countered in a consoling manner, "There must be reasons, circumstances beyond our comprehension."

"But—"

"Don't let your doubts get the better of you. Can we beg for alms from the same man we accuse of running away and hiding to save his own skin? If you believe that after he has returned to the throne, he will right the wrongs and bless us with his benevolence, if you believe that he wants with all his heart to save the people of Tai, then keep on believing."

Hakugyuu spoke softly and reassuringly. Teisetsu nodded. "You are right."

With an encouraging slap on the back, Hakugyuu gathered up his things and departed.

His steadfast belief that the emperor still lived, that he would return to save the people of Tai, had a lingering effect on the townspeople. The temptation to surrender to fate and throw up their hands in despair faded away. They joined hands and worked together to tide over the coming winter while fortifying the town's defenses.

Hakugyuu made it clear to them that the town was at a tactical disadvantage in any long-range attack. They had to be able to hold their ground under siege. They reinforced the gates and built ramparts and watchtowers to defend against a frontal assault. They fashioned bamboo shafts into spears and sharpened the cutting edges of their farm implements so they could be deployed as weapons at a moment's notice.

They gathered all the supplies they could before the weather forced them indoors and disciplined themselves to keep from exhausting their food stocks during the winter.

"We're not pushovers anymore, that's for certain."

Whatever it was that Hakugyuu left behind, not only Teisetsu but the despondent townspeople found a bit more steel in their spines. When it came to goods and materials, there was always room to negotiate. Sharing some of their supplies was unavoidable. But this time, they would not be handing over any of their own. Teisetsu and the townspeople came to that resolution together.

The day that tested that resolve arrived without warning.

Around the time the snow on the highways began to melt, several members of a local land gang showed up at the front gate. They'd run short during the winter and demanded food, charcoal, and some old person to be their servant.

Teisetsu took a deep breath and confronted them through the peephole in the gate. "We've only just made it through the winter ourselves. We're out of provisions as well. We're sorry but we have nothing to offer."

The gang members threatened him but Teisetsu refused. Standing his ground was much easier when there wasn't a direct confrontation. At the end of a heated dispute, he agreed to hand over a small quantity of food and charcoal, but nobody in the town would be leaving with them.

"You are not welcome to any of the residents living here. And that means now and in the future."

The gang leader roared and swore, but as long as the gate remained closed, there was nothing more he could do. They lingered at the gate shouting abuse before finally hauling away the few provisions given them in a decidedly bad mood.

The watchmen clambered down from the four towers at each corner of the ramparts.

“You did it, Teisetsu!” Gen’ei exclaimed. “Serves them right, getting a taste of their own medicine!”

Teisetsu nodded. It was good to know they could hold the line in the face of bluff and intimidation. He hated giving away any of their hard-earned goods to the likes of them, though he’d taken the possibility of parting with a portion into consideration from the start. The worst of winter was behind them and they still had enough to tide them over. Smiles returned to the faces of the townspeople.

The attack came five days later.

The land gang had mustered several dozen armed fighters, who charged the front gate with sledgehammers and ladders to scale the walls.

The lookouts on the watchtowers spotted them coming and sounded the alarm. The women and children gathered in a reinforced enclosure within the rika while the men seized their weapons and spread out along the ramparts. They only had their bamboo spears and repurposed farm implements, but those alone were far more heartening than going into battle bare-handed.

The leaders of the land gang began pounding on the gate with the sledgehammers. At the same time, their underlings leaned the ladders against the ramparts.

Except the townspeople had prepared portable platforms in advance. Taking directions from the lookouts in the watchtowers, they rolled the platforms over to the ramparts. As soon as they spotted an attacker clambering up a ladder, they rained stones down on his head and hacked away at the ladder with axes.

The sledgehammer crew broke through one of the side doors at the front gate, only to find that the area inside the gate had been fenced off from the rest of the town. Though not all that high, the fences were taller than the average man. When they tried forming human pyramids to jump over the fence, the townspeople climbed up first and knocked them down.

The attackers shot fire arrows into the town but the townspeople had stored water at strategic locations to douse any blazes that broke out.

The skirmishes went back and forth for half a day before the land gang retreated. They launched another raid late that night. The town again fended them off. A great many of the attackers slunk away battered and bruised, a few even seriously injured. The defenders suffered nothing worse than a few bumps and scratches.

The next day saw a few more token assaults that only resulted in more injuries for the land gang before they ran off for good.

Having surrendered to every unjust provocation for so long, Teisetsu and the townspeople at last savored their first real victory.

Part Twenty

Chapter 8

[20-1] After a welcome break in the weather, winter returned for a spell. Snow was in the air the afternoon Yuushou arrived at Rin'u. The column was shrouded in snow and ice, as if the infantry and cavalry were wearing coats fashioned from strands of white gossamer.

They joined up with the Provincial Guard at Rin'u. There the regimental commander of the Bun Provincial Army of the Center informed them that Kan'you Mountain was occupied by the land gangs.

"The land gangs?"

"Yes. A faction led by one Kyuusan has controlled Kan'you Mountain for several years now. They've sealed off the surrounding areas."

Yuushou furrowed his brow. "How many men are we talking about?"

"Hard to say for certain, but we're told less than regimental strength."

"If those are all the numbers they can muster, why does the Provincial Guard allow them the run of the place?"

This news rocked Yuushou back on his heels. Imperial land belonged to the kingdom and the people. It was not a prize that any one group could grab and lay exclusive claim to. Especially when a land gang was doing the grabbing and claiming. How could such a state of affairs be tolerated?

"Well, um, I guess because no one issued orders to drive them off the mountain," the commander stammered. "For good or ill, the eradication campaigns left the region unpopulated in the first place. If civilians were being driven out, the Provincial Guard would certainly step into help, but without any such requests—"

Yuushou sighed. Rumors said the province lord was ill and disinclined to do anything to change the status quo. This malady of apathy had spread throughout Tai. Afflicted officials abandoned their duties. Afraid of taking the initiative and possibly offending their layabout superiors, their subordinates followed suit.

"In any case, station a battalion here in Rin'u," Yuushou ordered.

By all rights, he should leave everything in the hands of the Provincial Guard. But with the province lord acting strangely, he wasn't ready to place that much trust in the forces under his supposed command. The soldiers in Rin'u were primarily

responsible for handling logistics and maintaining the transport hubs. Those supply lines getting severed could, in a worst-case scenario, reduce the soldiers to scavenging for food.

“With forces at less than regimental strength, the land gangs don’t pose a threat and aren’t our enemies in any case. We will continue our march north.”

No matter what, Yuushou had to press onto Kan’you Mountain, hoping that the land gangs would take a look at the army under his command and run in the other direction. If they didn’t, they’d have a fight on their hands. He communicated this to his staff and advised them to remain vigilant and ready for either outcome.

On the morning of the next day, they resumed their march north along the highway.

Before the Imperial Army set up camp, reports reached Kyuusan about unsettling developments in Rin’u. Agents working undercover on the streets of Rin’u observed the Provincial Guard mustering its troops. Now on the alert, they gathered more information and began surveilling the roads from Zui Province. That day, a runner brought news of the Imperial Army’s arrival in Rin’u. A single regiment of the Palace Guard, with the Provincial Army of the Center in a support role.

Kyuusan could not figure out what these troop movements intended to accomplish.

Given a single regiment of twenty-five hundred troops, it hadn’t marched all the way here to subjugate the land gangs, nor was this a renewal of the extermination campaigns. More like a scouting party. But that didn’t make any sense either. According to his spies, the army deployed at Rin’u appeared to be moving north. Rin’u was simply a stop along the way.

Moving north to do what? There was as yet no proof they had their eye on the land gangs that occupied the northern territories in this part of Bun Province.

“I don’t think this is another eradication campaign,” Kyuusan said with a shake of his head.

The scale of the operation was too small. Or they had underestimated the size of the opposing forces.

Standing next to him, Sekihi asked, “What do you think we should do?”

“Well, for the time being, I’m praying they didn’t come here to get rid of us. Because if they did, we’d have no chance of winning in the long term.”

They had no realistic hope of going toe-to-toe with the Imperial Army. While it was possible for them to not lose, they were not going to win outright. Even following a strategy of fighting to not lose, they would inevitably take a lot of casualties. After that, disguised as civilians, they’d mingle among them in the cities and the fields, attacking the Imperial Army at times and in places of their choosing.

All they could do at that point was repeatedly attack and retreat and drag the engagements out for so long that their opponents would finally give up and wash their hands of the whole thing. In such a situation, Kyuusan had to wonder how many of his followers would hang in there over the long run. If they did and managed to survive, they could say they didn't lose.

Except he couldn't rule out the possibility that the Imperial Army intended to wipe them out from the start. With that danger in mind, they'd be better off abandoning the fight and running for their lives. Or rather, refuse to engage them in the first place. But going down that road would ruin their reputations. The other land gangs would hold them in contempt. And the miners and civilians alike would no longer quail in their presence.

They'd no longer be viable as one of the land gangs.

"What if we simply let them walk on by?"

"We can't afford to do that. Our claim to Kan'you Mountain rests entirely on controlling who comes and who goes. Anyone granted free passage by threat of force alone could just as easily go on to take the whole mountain from us."

Recently to the west in Seisai, people had arrived from outside the region. But they were engaged in the restoration of the Sekirin branch temples. Kyuusan had granted passage to the White Flags for a long time now. It was widely known that they were on good terms with Sekirin Temple, putting that situation in an altogether different category.

It's tough being a member of the land gangs, Kyuusan thought at times like this. A gang that couldn't throw its weight around at will wouldn't last long in this day and age.

"Well, in any case, we should reach out to Risai."

"Do you think she'll lend us a hand?"

Not bloody likely, Kyuusan thought to himself. He said aloud, "I wouldn't bet on a former general cozying up to the land gangs." He added with a grin, "We're hardly brothers in arms. Thanks to the force of circumstance, we ended up in the same boat together. It'd be over for them too if Asen caught wind of what they're up to here."

Shokyuu asked hesitantly, "Are you saying that if we asked for help, they wouldn't offer any?"

"Don't make us sound like such a pitiful bunch," Kyuusan scolded. "If word got out that the mighty land gangs of Kan'you Mountain were bending a knee to their once bitter foes and pleading for a lifeline, we'd never hear the end of it."

"But—"

"I lent Risai a hand on a whim, not because I was looking for a quid pro quo. I'll let the conditions of that whim define the limits of our cooperation. When I set them up

in Seisai, she said she'd help evacuate the women and children should the worst come to the worst. So we'll leave it at that."

Sekihi nodded. "Knowing Risai, she'll follow through on that promise."

"We won't ask for anything more. I've got no desire to either. I don't know if that's the right thing to do, but they're doing all they can to take Tai back from Asen. If they succeed, then we end up the enemy."

"We're the enemy?"

"Of course!" Kyuusan laughed.

The land gangs were the bad guys, after all, brigands who lived outside the law. Once the rule of law was restored to the kingdom, it'd be the job of Risai and her colleagues to rein them in and bring them to justice. And as long as they numbered themselves among the land gangs, it'd be the job of Kyuusan and his colleagues to resist.

They were incompatible by nature. Natural enemies.

"As long as they have every intention of taking back the kingdom, they won't be getting chummy with their future foes. And neither will we."

Sekihi and Shokyuu exchanged forlorn looks.

"Oh, don't give me those sad faces. Well, you never know. The Imperial Army could be after Risai too. We should let them know the troops arrived in Rin'u."

"She'll owe us one after this," Shokyuu said enthusiastically.

"Don't be silly. The Imperial Army targeting Risai doesn't mean we're not next on the list. If they don't make it clear they've got nothing to do with us while they're running away, we'll be in deep trouble too."

"I'm sure they know," Sekihi said.

"Yeah, probably. For the time being, just to make sure we don't get blindsided no matter what happens, let's move the women and children out of Sokou. In the off chance there is an attack, man the ramparts to buy us some time."

"Should they try to hold the castle too?"

"Not in Sokou. Defend the ramparts and buy time. If the Imperial Army storms the city, retreat to Anpuku. Outfit the castle in Anpuku and be prepared to hold out long enough to open a safe escape route for the women and children."

On the third day out from Rin'u, Yuushou and his regiment arrived in the vicinity of Sokou, said to be within the sphere of influence of the land gangs. From a distance, they could see that the gates to the city were closed and the parapets along the ramparts were occupied by armed men amidst clusters of catapults. This was no ineffectual and disorderly mob.

"How should we proceed?" his retainers asked.

Yuushou said, "We might as well ask that they not obstruct the way. But I don't imagine they will politely withdraw."

"And if they don't?"

"One way or the other, we'll have to clear Kan'you Mountain and its environs of the land gangs."

Ukou interrupted at that point. "If they get in the way, kill them. If they beg for their lives, take them prisoner and send them into the tunnels."

And then kill them once the job is done.

Yuushou took in the cold smile on Ukou's face with an admonishing glance. "If they want to run away, let them. They simply don't have the numbers to regroup for a return engagement. All that matters now is maintaining an unobstructed corridor from Rin'u to Kan'you Mountain."

Clearly peeved that Yuushou ignored his proposal, Ukou sniffed, "Naive."

"Nobody ordered us to engage the land gangs. We're here to complete the reconnaissance of Kan'you Mountain."

"Thinking you'll be fine just following orders is the way of the coward. The only way to prove the effectiveness of an armed force is a high body count."

Yuushou looked straight at Ukou. "Since when did I start taking orders from you?"

Ukou clucked his tongue in disapproval.

"Don't forget that insubordination is a court-martial offense and will be punished severely."

"Hmph," Ukou snorted and walked off.

"Why would Asen-sama give a man like that such important responsibilities?" Chouten asked. Chouten was one of Yuushou's retainers.

"Well—" was the sum of Yuushou's answer to that question. "For now, dispatch an envoy. Tell them if they open the gates, we will take no further action. If they do not, have our air cavalry attack the ramparts and destroy the catapults, after which the infantry will breach the gates *en masse* and secure our flanks. Then mounted soldiers will storm the castle, with the air cavalry offering support."

The messenger ran up to Kyuusan. "The Imperial Army sent an envoy. They are ordering us to open the gates."

Kyuusan rejected the offer out of hand. "Tell him no. This is my home ground and my territory."

"Let's just go ahead and open the gates," Shokyuu said in a sad voice.

"Hey!"

"If we don't, they are sure to storm the place. That's the Imperial Army out there. The one thing we can count on is a whole bunch of us ending up dead. Is there anything on Kan'you Mountain really worth the bother? At the end of the day, the

mines are all played out. There's no good living to be made here anymore. Didn't you say so yourself? It's a problem of time."

"Exactly." Kyuusan smiled. "That is exactly what I'm saying. We've got to buy some time." He glanced around the room. "Listen up, everybody. Square off against the Imperial Army and our chances of winning are slim. When they show up, we're over. If we try to hold our ground here, we're all goners. But if we turn tail and run, we'd lose any standing we had among the land gangs. Just another bunch of refugees living hand to mouth and trying to eke out a living."

Kyuusan paused for a moment to let that image sink in.

"Except this time around, they're offering us free passage. To be honest, if we could simply pick up where we left off, I'd take them up on the offer. But if we did, we'd be the beaten dogs who cowered before the Imperial Army before scampering away. No one around here would think twice about invading the territory of a beaten dog. Before long, every lowlife in the province would be showing up to steal the mountain away from us."

Boisterous voices erupted around him. "And we'd give them a beating they'd never forget!"

"Yeah, we would. We'd pound the living daylights out of them! But before long, we'd be wasting all of our time fighting every upstart gang in the province. I think we all got better things to do than that. At the bare minimum, we've got to bloody a few noses before heading for the hills. First, we have to make sure the elderly and any wounded get a head start, along with the women and children."

"Well, one scratch from the likes of them and there will be plenty of payback coming," said the surly guy standing next to him.

In a single motion, Kyuusan turned and knocked him clean off his feet. "Listen, if you can't take as good as you give, you got no business in the land gangs. Now is not the time for vendettas or getting even. Sometimes you just gotta let the punch land. Sure, if you bow and scrape like a good refugee, nobody's gonna hit you back. But you're gonna get beat down for the rest of your life. That's a guarantee." He glared at the man sprawled at his feet. "As long as that beast is sitting on the throne, a life of getting beaten down is never gonna end."

Kyuusan couldn't care less about the kingdom. Having an emperor on the throne meant nothing to him—except when that emperor started messing in his business.

"I've got no use for this Asen." Kyuusan looked around the room. "But Asen's got his eye on Kan'you Mountain. Not only the women and children, Risai and her crew need time to get away too. I don't care about this other emperor they revere either, but I'm hoping they will take Asen out."

The envoy returned to tell Yuushou that the land gang had rejected the offer and would not let them pass.

“What a bunch of fools,” Ukou sneered.

Yuushou ignored him and assembled his four battalion commanders. “We’ve no choice now. They’ve got to be eliminated.”

A squadron of air cavalry left the encampment at once. Though the battle for the ramparts took longer than expected, the skirmishes ended with them seizing and opening the Horse Gate. Mounted soldiers poured into the city. The land gang fought them off at first, but as evening fell, they slipped away into the darkness and retreated out of sight. Once out of the city, they scattered across the countryside.

“So now what?”

“If they come back, they could cause problems. Just in case, station a battalion here. Get in touch with Rin’u and request reinforcements. Once they arrive, follow along behind us.”

Chapter 9

[20-2] The blue bird arrived at Hakkei Palace in the midst of a cold rain.

At the end of the previous month, Yuushou set off from Kouki and led his army to Rin'u. The report delivered by the blue bird confirmed that they were now headed to Kan'you Mountain. Before Gyousou could be extracted from Kan'you Mountain, the buried tunnels and mine shafts had to be excavated. As for the scale and extent of the landslides, all anyone could do was wait for Yuushou's updates.

To be sure, this was not a task the Imperial Army could handle alone. A large workforce would be required and the army could spare only so many of its soldiers. They would have to recruit local laborers, which in turn required the cooperation of Bun Province. However, with the province lord indisposed, they could not expect the provincial government to act in an expedited manner.

Asen was again sitting on the throne as an acting emperor. The provinces were ordered to devote more resources to aiding the refugees. Except the afflicted province lords were slow off the mark. Unless directed in minute detail, many refused to take the initiative. Some reacted so sluggishly they barely appeared to be doing anything at all. Getting Bun Province moving again meant taking up the reins of local government themselves.

Unfortunately, Shison's clumsy attempt at a palace coup had created additional delays all the way down to the provincial level.

"These puppets are like dolls," Rousan said. "Six years—no, more like seven—if left untreated for that long, they turn into invalids. You can issue all the orders in the world to restore Kan'you Mountain, but there's not enough sense left inside their heads to even comprehend such a plan. If you want the resources of Bun Province at your disposal, you'll either have to tell them what to do, down to every jot and tittle, or replace the province lord."

Asen had no choice but to agree. The problem became one of choosing the right person.

"The only person in Chou'un's Imperial Court competent enough to serve as a province lord is Chou'un. As you might expect, he long ago got rid of anyone more capable than himself."

Shukuyou raised his voice and said, "What about Keitou?"

Asen furrowed his brows. Keitou was prime minister of Zui Province. Taiki appointed him and wasn't likely to go along with a reassignment.

“They say the Imperial Court may be leaning a bit too much in the Taiho’s favor of late,” Ansaku said in a furtive whisper.

Even with Asen’s return, the Rikkan continued to look to Taiki. Asen’s actions and many aspects of his impending enthronement remained murky. It was hard for anyone to throw his hands into the air in celebration. On that point, Taiki was not a concern. Heaven guaranteed that the kirin would always act in the right. Believing in Taiki was the clear and uncomplicated thing to do.

The imperial bureaucracy loathed having to contemplate deep and complex thoughts. They had by and large sided with Taiki. Helping to keep them all in line was Keitou.

Keitou was undoubtedly a highly capable civil servant, and reportedly had been in the running for division commander. Though one of Asen’s retainers, Keitou belonged to the Taiki faction. Moreover, he wasn’t simply a member of the Taiki faction. The two of them were said to be of one heart and one mind on most matters.

Even with Asen’s return to active rule and his impending enthronement, Keitou’s confidence in Taiki was unlikely to waver. In Ansaku’s opinion, that made him a potential impediment.

“I see.” A knowing smile rose to Asen’s face. He said to Ansaku, “Peel Keitou away from his side and cut Taiki’s power down to size.”

“Oh, no, such a thing would be out of the question. But I do think it is important to maintain an appropriate balance of power within the Imperial Palace. Questions have been raised.”

Shukuyou had pushed hard for Keitou’s promotion. As far as he was concerned, Keitou was more than qualified for a position in the Ministry of Summer as a vice-minister or assistant of military affairs. For some reason, the appointments never came and he ended up on the payroll but wasting away without a portfolio. This outcome Shukuyou had always regretted and he went out of his way to persuade the head of the Rikkan.

Ansaku whispered to Asen, “Bringing him on board would work too. Keitou has no deficiencies that I can think of.”

Asen nodded.

Quite out of the blue, and to his utter bewilderment, Keitou found himself promoted to province lord and transferred to Bun Province.

Keitou was currently the prime minister of Zui Province, an appointment Taiki had made himself. Under normal conditions, the policies of the Saiho were seen as indistinguishable from those of the kingdom. But conditions in Tai were hardly normal these days. Zui Province, which was by all rights a part of the kingdom, was acting as an independent political entity.

Keitou said to the envoy, "I fear I am stating the obvious, but I do have a job as provincial prime minister."

The envoy told him in no uncertain terms that he was delivering an order and the matter was not up for debate.

All the more confused, Keitou turned to Taiki. "I know," Taiki replied. "But I'd like you to accept."

Keitou asked in astonishment, "You're asking me to become the province lord of Bun?"

"Yes, I am. I strongly recommended you to Shukuyou for the position."

Why? Keitou didn't know how to respond. He felt a profound sense of disappointment. "You said my contributions were necessary here. Are you now saying my services are no longer required?"

"Nothing of the sort." Taiki looked straight at him. "You are absolutely necessary. There is nobody else of whom I can make such a request. That is why I asked Shukuyou for the transfer. I need you to go to Bun Province."

"But—"

"His Highness is in Bun Province."

Keitou fell silent. Gyousou was currently said to be in or on Kan'you Mountain. The Imperial Army had been mobilized to bring him back to Kouki so he could abdicate.

"In order to save Gyousou-sama, Risai also traveled to Bun Province."

"Risai—you mean, General Ryuu? The previous Zui Province commander?"

Taiki nodded. "I don't know how close to Gyousou-sama Risai and her colleagues have gotten. But with the Imperial Army on the move and events unfolding on Kan'you Mountain, it follows that Gyousou-sama must be there too. They're heading there to extract him. The remnants of Gyousou-sama's retainers in Bun Province are going to take note as well and their presence will become clear."

Though once exposed, they would be branded rebels.

"Keitou, I need to have you there in Bun Province when things come to a boil."

Ah, Keitou thought to himself. If he was there and orders came down for the Imperial Army to attack, he'd be in the position to intercept them. Far from merely disrupting the chain of command, he could even use the Provincial Guard to support Risai. In the unfortunate case that Gyousou was captured by the Imperial Army, he could use peaceful bureaucratic means to keep him detained there when the Imperial Army returned to Kouki.

And then there were the far more blatant strategies to consider, the thought of which made Keitou shiver. A burning sense of exhilaration welled up from deep within his chest. *Open the castle gates and invite in Gyousou and the rebels.*

Throughout the long spell of Asen's tyranny, none had suffered more than Bun Province. That cold and cursed land was further ravaged by the eradication campaigns. Reduced to little more than a mindless puppet, the province lord was left where he was, abandoned amidst all this misfortune.

If Keitou left for Bun Province, he'd not only be in the position to save all of those people but rescue Gyousou and even raise the flag of revolt against Asen.

"Please accept this assignment, Keitou."

"I will do so happily."

"Thank you," Taiki said, taking Keitou's hand in his own. "You've been a great help to me. Quite honestly, it will be hard carrying on without you."

"I feel the same. Not being able to work here by your side—"

"You needn't worry about me. Bun Province, Gyousou-sama, and Risai are now in your capable hands."

"I will do my utmost."

Keitou was formally installed and set off for Bun Province under a cool and cloudless sky that presaged warmer days to come. He left Kouki with a newly appointed inspector and chamberlain, escorted by a detachment from General Shinryou's army. Taiki had chosen them from among Keitou's trusted associates. So he could keep in touch with them directly, he entrusted them with a blue bird as well.

Seeing them off, Yari stressed the importance of keeping the wooden amulets on their persons. "The first thing on the agenda when you get to Bun Province is to hunt down the jisen. Even after you've secured an area, keep one with you at all times."

Keitou answered with a grave nod. He respectfully took Taiki's hand and bowed deeply. Soon thereafter, he disappeared into the distance across roads still packed with snow.

Kakei succeeded Keitou as prime minister. He'd been Kaihaku's right-hand man. He and Kaihaku were widely considered capable civil servants with good reputations. Though bearing the mien of an elderly gentleman, Kakei arrived on the job with sleeves rolled up, ready to grab the rudder and steer the ship along the course Keitou had laid out.

The cold began to abate and a more optimistic air flowed through Kouki. Refugees flooded into the city. The ministries tasked with handling the social services were prepared for their arrival, and parceled them out to the towns surrounding Kouki that had room to spare and were badly in need of workers.

The lingering snow melted away. The land was soon ready for the first tilling and farmhands were in equally short supply. In order to ensure there would be enough food to go around come fall, Zui Province made all the necessary materials available

through loan programs. With a collective sigh of relief, the farmers commenced repairing their tools and getting ready for planting season.

However, in the northern provinces of Tai, the snow still lay heavy on the ground. And Bun Province was on the cusp of a major turning point.

Chapter 10

[20-3] Slivers of a full moon shone through the low-hanging clouds as if from behind a tattered veil. That night in Seisai, Risai received news that Asen's army and the land gangs had clashed at Sokou.

"How did the land gangs respond to the situation?" she asked the messenger who delivered the report.

"The women, children, and the aged fled east. The rest will likely take refuge in Anpuku. I would expect the women and children in Anpuku to eventually head here."

As Risai contemplated this information, Kiitsu said, "Are they going to raise the barricades and ready themselves for a siege? They'd have no chance of prevailing if they did."

Risai agreed. "Once they hunkered down, they'd have no place to run. My bet is they're buying time to get the women and children to safety."

Moving from Seisai, to the west of Kan'you Mountain, toward Tetsui was an option. But if the enemy approached from Tetsui as well, they'd be trapped.

"The Provincial Guard mobilized in a support role. We've heard that at Josetsu, they turned off the highway north and headed east instead."

"That road skirts Tetsui and Ryuukei and heads toward Seisai. If the Provincial Guard passes through Ryuukei, Kyuusan and his gang will be clean out of options." Houto looked at Risai and asked, "What's our next move?"

Houto's question prompted a startled reaction from Sougen's men.

"Our next move? The land gangs drawing attention to themselves like this simply lowers the odds of our own positions being exposed."

Seishi nodded. "But any mopping up operations will increase the odds of them extending their patrols to the mountain."

"Then they'll have to run for it. We simply cannot risk our presence here coming to their attention. Sure, losing their weapons caches is going to sting, but we're talking about what the land gangs set aside for themselves in the first place."

"Hold on." Risai interrupted at that point. "We can't just cast them aside. We owe Kyuusan and his crew a lot."

"The land gangs?"

Risai nodded and Houto chimed in to agree. Risai said, "Kyuusan is a boss in the land gangs. No doubt about it. And knowingly or not, it sure looks like they were in cahoots with Asen during the troubles. Moreover, even now, they don't count themselves among the rebel forces opposed to Asen. Still, they helped out a lot when

we were looking for Gyousou-sama. They've also promised to lend a hand during our search of Kan'you Mountain. We cannot stand idly by and watch him and his crew get killed."

"But—"

"All this while, Kyuusan has been caring for many of the suffering and destitute people Asen abandoned. They barricaded themselves in the city to give their friends and relatives time to escape. A fair number are their families, but also the families of gang members who died and now have no way of earning a living."

"But aren't the land gangs our enemies?" came a shout from the back.

"Undoubtedly, they were. Even there, they were little more than Asen's pawns, and he tossed them aside as soon as they were no longer useful to him."

"They got what they deserved."

"I don't disagree," Risai said, her voice gaining strength. "The land gangs got what was coming to them and have paid the bill for their actions."

"With all due respect," Seishi broke in to say. "I don't think they have balanced the books quite yet."

"If that is true, then when His Highness returns to the Imperial Palace, at that time they should answer for their sins and be formally tried for their crimes. But it's a fact that Kyuusan and his gang lent us a hand on many occasions. We owe them and are obliged to settle that debt."

Seishi again couldn't keep quiet. "Except if we don't play our cards right and Asen learns of our existence, he'll rain down destruction on us and every town and village in the vicinity, just like he did before."

"Even so, we can't abandon them," Risai muttered. "I owe Asen. And I really don't think Gyousou-sama would cast him aside either."

Sougen looked at Risai. While he thought through the matter, Risai added, "Not doing the right thing in cases like this will surely sully Gyousou-sama's name. We carry the weight of that name on our shoulders. Not only the land gangs, but every civilian in the area will take the measure of him based on what we do."

"That is for certain," Sougen said under his breath.

Another voice called out, "To make sure that no news about us reaches Asen's ears, what if we annihilate the enemy and imprison any survivors?"

"But if nobody returns, Asen will know that something funny is going on in Bun Province. That'd be no different than proclaiming we are here."

"Exactly. Nevertheless, deserting the people when we're in their debt will reflect badly on His Highness. We should step up and save the land gangs even at the risk of revealing ourselves."

"It's too soon to get caught out in the open. We are nowhere near ready to stir up trouble with Asen."

“At this stage, won’t we end up kicking the hornet’s nest no matter what we do? Ideally, we would lie low until we took the castle. But things won’t always go the way we want. No matter how unwillingly, if we’ve got to show our colors, let’s make sure we’re on the right side of justice when that happens.”

Kenchuu glanced around the room before slipping away from the raucous debate. Leaving the main hall, he headed to a detached room in the middle of the compound. There he beckoned to two figures from among his colleagues who’d gathered there.

“Get a crew together. It’s going to be dangerous, but I’d like you to accompany me.”

The two nodded. After making the arrangements, they left the room one by one. Kenchuu got his weapons together and stopped by the stables to saddle up a kijuu.

“Hoh,” came an unexpected voice. “So, you’re heading out?”

Kenchuu turned around. A monk emerged from one of the stalls. Kenchuu recalled that his name was Kuushou, a monk with Danpou Temple transferred here by the Koutaku Ordination Hall. A man wearing armor stood next to him. This was Seigen, also from the Koutaku Ordination Hall, and a fellow Taoist.

Kuushou and Seigen were saddling up a pair of kijuu.

“You too?” Kenchuu asked.

The two nodded. “If Risai-dono can’t bring Sougen-dono around, nothing is going to happen.”

“You’re right on that,” Kenchuu agreed.

With this many people in one place, somebody had to be in charge. Being in charge meant keeping everyone on the same page and headed in the same direction. But that also meant that they had to convince the Koutaku contingent led by Sougen, and that was proving to be an uphill climb. Few of them had met Kyuusan. They were only familiar with the details from second-hand sources, according to which any member of the land gangs was assumed to be an enemy of Gyousou.

Moving them away from such established convictions and convincing them to the contrary wouldn’t be easy. But in the meantime, Kenchuu wouldn’t be casting Kyuusan aside either.

“Risai will probably ride out to help, even if that means parting ways with Sougen-dono.”

“So, the kind of mate you’re thankful to meet at the right time maybe once in a lifetime?”

Kenchuu nodded. He wasn’t a person Risai would casually abandon. Working alongside her, he’d come to understand that much about her character.

“Before that happens, she’ll do everything she can to bring them to her point of view. But events are moving too fast for us to wait and see how that debate turns out. Women and children number among Kyuusan’s followers, along with the elderly.”

He’d been through Sokou on enough occasions to become familiar with them. The faces of the many women and children and elderly who had lent him a hand rose up in his thoughts. Of them, those close to Kyuusan were likely the ones fleeing to Anpuku, along with miners from Sokou.

The miners were a rough bunch, but not in the same way as common rogues. Though quick to settle an argument with their fists, they were not combatants and had nothing to do with war. Their lives were no less worth defending.

He exited into the courtyard and found two of his subordinates and ten others waiting for him. They left the compound together and encountered another twenty or so at the main gate. The core members of this group consisted of the six Danpou Temple monks Kuushou brought from Koutaku. The rest were mercenaries of a chivalrous bent, both men and women, along with a few Taoists.

Kenchoo made a quick head count. “Thirty-seven, including myself. Not bad.”

He didn’t spot any soldiers. He didn’t imagine they’d tried to recruit any. The chain of command was no small matter for a soldier, as deeply ingrained as the blood in his veins. Unless Risai or Sougen issued the command, they weren’t going to mobilize.

“Let’s move out!” Kenchoo said.

Once outside the broken-down ramparts, another voice greeted them from the falling darkness.

“Hoh. I see you’ve assembled quite the company.” A brawny giant of a man strode up to them.

“You are?”

“Name’s Hakugyuu. Gamon Temple pointed me here.”

“Ah.” Kenchoo nodded. He couldn’t very well make out his face in the fading light, but he seemed to recall the man’s scarred features. Once one of the chivalrous knights of Hakurou, at Gamon Temple he’d been given the job of mediating among the other high-minded mercenaries. He normally carried a halberd that would drag any other man down like a boat anchor. His appearance otherwise suggested he was approaching middle age, though with a physique still as solid as a large boulder.

“Going off to help the land gangs?”

Kenchoo answered without a word. Hakugyuu returned the nod with equal gravity. Arrayed behind him must be those high-minded mercenaries of Gamon Temple. There were around twenty or so, all in peak fighting form though none bore the look of rank-and-file soldiers.

“Looks like we’ve put together the equivalent of two platoons,” Kuushou observed.

Kenchuu again silently agreed. Like Hakugyuu, Kuushou possessed a physical strength quite out of the ordinary. He carried a mace with a long iron handle, a common enough weapon except for its uncommon size.

“What they lack in regular military order they more than make up for in chivalrous spirit,” Seigen said with a touch of wry humor.

“It doesn’t really work that way,” Hakugyuu chided him. “Risai and her men are hardly lacking in chivalrous spirit. They are first and foremost soldiers. An army has to discipline itself so it won’t be devoured by every roving pack of hungry wolves. For a soldier, that discipline is a weapon in and of itself, and like any weapon, not a thing to be taken lightly.”

“Is that what you call it?” Seigen said, though he clearly wasn’t convinced.

Listening to him with one ear, Kenchuu reflected upon the growing band of brothers Risai had gone to such great pains to assemble. In order to eliminate Asen, she had to mold this motley crew of barely acquainted individuals into a single fighting force. Will and verve alone wouldn’t cut it. He could well imagine how hard the going would get after this.

“Are we alone really ready to fight?”

Answering Seigen’s misgivings, Hakugyuu said, “Not as well as a trained soldier. But certainly when it comes to raw courage, we yield ground to no one.”

Kenchuu was even blunter, “We don’t have the troop strength to do much more than annoy them. But more than enough to save the fleeing women and children.”

Kuushou agreed with that assessment. “In any case, better than standing by and doing nothing. Let’s go.”

The discussion was no closer to a resolution than before. Looking on, Kyoshi grew all the more irritated. He knew in his heart where he stood on the issue, and that was with Kyuusan. He only wanted to help him as best he could. Risai and the rest of them that had called Rin’u felt the same way. There was no way they could cast them aside.

But getting the Koutaku contingent to understand where they were coming from was proving more difficult than it should be.

Risai swept the room with her gaze. “We cannot wait until we are fully prepared to meet Asen’s army head on before confronting them. In an ideal world, perhaps. But this isn’t that ideal world. So when will that be? Please give some thought to the time frames involved. As we speak, our comrades are gathering here from the far reaches of the kingdom. There is no guaranteeing that we can keep our presence hidden until every last one of them arrives. In fact, the possibility grows day by day. Rather, it’d be stranger if we managed to somehow keep our heads down before we had everything ready to go.”

Sougen took in Risai's words with a calm demeanor. But his retainers were hardly so restrained, and they let their feelings show. They'd lost many of their own in the wars with the land gangs. In the end, they'd had to abandon the field of battle and beat a fast retreat. Kyoshi had no difficulty understanding how much they loathed the land gangs, and how they saw them only as the enemy.

At first, he'd seen them the same way.

"Escaping detection until we are good and ready will be no easy task. There are any number of ways by which our presence here might come to the attention of Kouki. But not right now. Now is too soon."

"That's right!" clamored voices around her. "It's too early to put ourselves at a disadvantage on behalf of the land gangs."

"We've still got people just arriving from Koutaku on foot. They are in no condition to go to war."

"Don't we owe the civilians some consideration?" someone else asked. "Once the powers that be find out about us, like it or not, they're going to get caught up in whatever happens next."

Uncertain about how to respond, Risai glanced at Kiitsu. He was with Shoushitsu and Tanchoku as part of the Gamon Temple contingent from Rin'u. The wrong decision at this point could prove catastrophic for everyone involved, soldier and civilian alike.

"In my heart," Kiitsu began, "I wish to assist the land gangs. Of course, I don't represent the people, nor do I speak for their feelings on the subject. However, wouldn't abandoning the land gangs also mean abandoning the people? Standing by the land gangs means we will stand by the people."

"Should the decisions we make cause trouble for everyone else, they're going to come to resent us as a matter of course," Shoushitsu said. "But cast aside the land gangs and we'll lose the trust of the civilians as well."

Kiitsu nodded. "People are bound to voice their displeasure. But the next time something happens to them, they can cling to the hope that you will ride to the rescue. That's when the value of your actions will come to the fore."

Risai agreed. "Of course the civilians are going to resent us if they get caught up in the fighting. But the one at the root of the injustice is Asen, not us." She looked across the room and raised her voice. "The injustice of abandoning the land gangs here and now would be all on us."

Sougen contemplated her words in silence for a long moment before speaking. "If nobody in the army made it back to Kouki, Asen would of course grow suspicious. But first, he'd have to figure out what happened and that would take time. If only just a little, that'll give us the leeway to put our battle formations in order and urge the civilians living in the vicinity to get ready to flee."

“Sougen!” Risai exclaimed, pleasantly surprised.

Sougen nodded. “Fortunately, April is upon us. The odds are high they’ll wait for the rest of the snowpack to melt before attempting to move large numbers of troops. In the interim, Risai will take a leave of absence to support the land gangs.”

Risai shot to her feet. “I will be departing for Anpuku. I’ll leave it to Sougen to hold down the rear and watch our backs.”

Chapter 11

[20-4] The land gang holed up in Anpuku had rebuffed Yuushou's army for two days now.

"They're holding out well," Yuushou observed. "In that, at least, they deserve our respect."

He studied the city off in the distance. Anpuku was a small city that was difficult to attack. The leader of the gang defending it was a man by the name of Kyuusan. That he chose Anpuku as his base, despite its outwardly inferior size, made him a man not to be taken lightly.

Despite the height of the city's outer ramparts, they did not appear very robust. The looming mountains behind the city created the bigger obstacle. To the north, the steep cliffs abutted the city walls. Battlements and catapults dotted the top of the cliffs. Though not large weapons, they were capable of firing a dozen stones in a single shot. The height of the battlements created additional problems for the air cavalry, who were forced to cover greater distances while dealing with the catapults at the same time. This combination of factors effectively closed the airspace over the city.

"How many men in the land gang holding Anpuku?"

"We can't say for certain, but this is likely just a portion of the land gangs. From what we've heard, they're also occupying Kan'you Mountain and Seisai. Word is that Seisai recently surpassed Sokou in size. If we assume that around half their numbers remained behind in Seisai and on Kan'you Mountain, then we're probably talking eight hundred to under a thousand."

Yuushou nodded. Eight hundred conformed to what he'd sensed in their battles so far. He faced them with a regiment of twenty-five hundred. Of those, he'd left two reserve battalions totaling a thousand in Rin'u and Sokou. Taking Anpuku with fifteen-hundred soldiers was no longer a sure thing. He could bypass Anpuku and march on. But he risked getting outflanked and attacked from behind.

"Just torch the place," Ukou said with a grin.

Yuushou shook his head. "Our orders don't say anything about subjugating the land gangs."

He'd sent reports to Kouki about the land gangs occupying Kan'you Mountain. But he'd gotten no orders directing them to annihilate them. He'd gotten no orders about anything at all.

“Is this not a battlefield? It’s only natural that we should take whatever measures are suitable to the present circumstances.”

Yuushou took a step toward Ukou and looked straight at him. “However that may be the case, I am the one who decides what those measures are. Not you.”

Feeling the pressure of his presence, Ukou stepped backwards. Without a word, he turned his head to the side and spat.

Idiots. All of them.

Ukou left the camp. He found the rest of the Red Armor platoon hanging out near a wagon train stocked with supplies. The brilliant colors of their armor differed but they all shared the same unifying shade of red. Ukou led this platoon of twenty-five soldiers. Ukou himself was a company commander. Of the four platoons under his command, one wore the same red armor as himself. These were his personal retainers, known as the Red Armor.

During Gyouso’s expedition to Bun Province, the Red Armor served as his security detail. Following Asen’s secret orders, they accompanied him to Kan’you Mountain. In the events that followed, they lost over half their number. Ukou subsequently filled the gaps in the ranks with soldiers he trusted and personally selected.

Ukou said, “It looks like the general prefers the company of the land gangs. We will do what we do on our own terms.”

The platoon all flashed fearless smiles as they rose to their feet.

“They’re letting the woman and children simply abscond from Anpuku. Hunt them down. Teach them to tremble with fear before the might of the Palace Guard.”

The Red Armor were a mounted platoon. Besides Ukou, none of their mounts ranked among the elite youjuu, but they were quieter than the typical warhorse and fleet of foot. With their crimson uniforms, mounts, and weapons, there was no shortage of soldiers who clamored to join the Red Armor.

Together with his subordinates, Ukou quietly left the camp. They followed the highway opposite Anpuku further south, and then having put a sufficient distance between themselves and the city, turned west. They passed through the charred remains of numerous villages before heading north and finally emerging along the levees of a river.

The river that flowed south of Anpuku from the west was a mountain rapid strewn with stones and dotted with deep pools. The river was not all that wide, but only a kijuu could cover its width in a single bound. The opposite bank provided an unobstructed view of the surroundings. Moreover, the undergrowth on the southern side alone was cut short. Other than a few remaining taller trees and shrubs, there was no good place to hide.

To the north, the vegetation was thick and overgrown. It'd be hard to tell where the land gangs might be hiding. Searching for a place with a relatively better outlook, they moved further west, until they reached a point where the ramparts and towers of Anpuku were no longer visible.

That was where they forded the river together.

Soon after the crossing came the trill of a whistle often associated with the land gangs. They couldn't see who was making the signal, but a lookout had obviously spotted Ukou and his men. Ukou clucked to himself and unsheathed his podao, a long-handled broadsword. It was always possible the land gangs would conveniently rush them all at once, but cutting them down piecemeal would get the job done just as well.

"Your prey is escaping west along the highway. After them!"

Ukou dispatched half of his forces. He remained behind. Before long, he spied several figures rushing from a hamlet a way off. He didn't wait for them to reach him. He spurred on his kijuu and flew full speed straight at the hamlet.

They came at him wielding hand axes, scythes, bludgeons, and whatever else they had on hand that could be used as a weapon. That included axes and pitchforks and other farm implements. Ukou didn't observe a lance or sword among them, which made it all the harder to take such an assault seriously.

"So, a bunch of roughnecks and ruffians." Ukou grinned at his men and plunged into their midst.

Astride his kijuu and barely rising from the saddle, he cut down three in his first pass. Though the blade of the broadsword Asen had given him was thin and light, he swung it like a battle ax. Frightened by the ferocity of Ukou's attack, the fourth turned and attempted to flee. Taking aim at his back, Ukou cut the man's torso in two with a single swipe. Without even time to scream, the two halves toppled to the ground, accompanied by a spray of fresh blood. The heavy scent of raw gore filled the air.

"Easy pickings, men!"

With that exuberant shout, Ukou raced into the hamlet. The residents ran about in confusion, scrambling to find a way out. The rest of the platoon followed right behind Ukou, slaughtering them one after the other without breaking a sweat.

They then turned their attention to the roka. After battering down the doors and windows with axes and maces and any other instruments of destruction they could lay their hands on, they hacked away at anyone they caught cowering in the shadows. When the gang members ambushed them from behind, they spun around at the first sound of movement, dodged out of the way and parried the hand axes slicing through the air, taking off the arms gripping the handles with a single sweep of their swords.

Their attackers barely registered their missing arms when their heads joined their severed limbs on the floor.

Ukou's men subdued the hamlet in a matter of minutes.

Ukou surmised that the land gangs would have located the hamlets with a clear view of the river into their strongholds. In that case, they should be prepared to storm any strategically important hamlets along the way. Ukou sent another half of the soldiers from the platoon he'd already divided north on the highway. The rest he sent in search of more hamlets and villages, except for a select few he took west along the river.

Most of the buildings at the next crossroads they came to were in ruins. Rather than gradually falling into a state of disrepair, these small structures likely collapsed under the weight of accumulated snow during a previous winter.

They found four individuals resting in the hamlet they encountered after that, an old woman and a younger woman and two children. Ukou handed over the woman and children to whichever of his underlings wanted them and handled the old woman himself.

She prostrated herself on the ground, weeping and begging for her life. Ukou severed a hand and a foot, and as she crawled off with her remaining limbs, cut her torso in two and finally lopped off her head. The blood and viscera spilled onto cold earth, raising a cloud of steam. With a glance at his underlings, playing with the children as a cat might with a mouse, he left the hamlet.

Further west, he spotted another small village.

Carried by the wind, the faint screams reached Kenchuu's ears. His kijuu raised its head and turned its ears forward and twitched its nostrils, sniffing the fetid odor drifting through the air.

"Those screams sound like they came from a woman," Kuushou muttered, bringing his mount alongside Kenchuu.

Seigen caught up to them on his kijuu. "I heard children crying too."

Astride a kijuu that resembled a horse, Kenchuu rode toward the river that ran south of the highway. A cold wind blew across the water.

"Upwind," he said, and glanced behind him.

His retainers were tending to a group of the elderly who'd just run up to them, helping them down the slope to safety. Kenchuu ordered one of his men to look after them and the rest to follow him, and raced his kijuu into the wind.

The hamlet soon came into view. A good half of the buildings had fallen down. The snow on the roofs around the chimneys of the houses still standing had melted away, evidence that people were still living there. Before they could see for themselves, more roars and screams echoed from the hamlet.

“On the double!” Kenchuu called out, urging on his kijuu.

When he got to the town square within the cluster of houses, he found it occupied by a ferocious kijuu barded with armor. At its feet lay the bodies of two robust men. The rider must have left the kijuu unattended there. It was now devouring the corpses. Voices of shock and anger erupted around Kenchuu.

Without a second thought, Kenchuu brandished his halberd and charged the kijuu. The kijuu skirted the attack, jumping backwards only to meet the sweep of Seigen’s staff. It only barely ducked out of the way, except that Seigen’s staff, known as a boatman’s staff or nunchaku, had a second shorter staff attached to the end of the shaft with a chain.

For all its dexterity, the beast couldn’t avoid the second half the staff as it snapped around at the end of the chain and thudded heavily against its forelegs. The kijuu flipped over in a somersault and tumbled to the ground. Kuushou swung his mace and brought it down on the kijuu’s back. The ball of iron, as big as a human head, shattered the armor and crushed the spine.

Blood frothed from the damaged armor. The creature’s death agonies lasted but a moment before it collapsed. At the same time, a man staggered from a nearby building. He wasn’t wearing armor. One leg had been severed. As he pitched forward onto the ground, a soldier wearing red armor came after him in hot pursuit.

He froze for a split second, taking in the scene in front of him. Then unleashed a howl of fury and turned on his heels and ran. Hakugyuu’s battle ax and Kenchuu’s halberd flew through the air after him. He ducked out of the way, almost as if he had eyes in the back of his head, and ran into a broken-down shack, using the furniture inside as a shield.

From the color of his uniform, he could only be one of the infamous Red Armor.

Hakugyuu and his men stormed into the dilapidated shack after him. Kenchuu raced his kijuu around the building. He reached the back of the shack at the same time the Red Armor jumped onto the back of a horse tied up there and galloped off. Kenchuu’s kijuu was faster. He closed the distance between them. The Red Armor spurred on his horse while raising an arm in the air.

Whatever he was holding in his hand glinted in the light. No sooner had Kenchuu’s suspicions been aroused but he felt a sharp blow to his right shoulder. The impact knocked him backwards and threw him off the kijuu before he even had time to shout. He reflexively tucked his body into a ball and rolled along the ground.

Kenchuu raised his head in time to see a second volley coming at him. This time he recognized the weapon. The fist-sized head of a mace attached to a handle at the end of a long cord. Also called a meteor hammer.

The hammer dug a furrow in the earth next to Kenchuu’s head. With a wave of his arm, the Red Armor flipped it back into his grasp, allowing him to unleash the third

attack in a row barely a moment later. This one grazed Kenchuu's arm. Knocked clean out of his saddle, Kenchuu lay on the ground just inside the furthest range of his opponent's repeated attacks.

It was amazing enough that he'd nicked Kenchuu's arm at that distance. He reeled in the meteor hammer with a strong jerk of his arm. The hammer traced a returning arc through the air and scored a direct hit on Kenchuu's kijuu, striking the back of its skull. With an indifferent glance at dumbstruck Kenchuu, the Red Armor retrieved his weapon and continued on his way.

Kenchuu abandoned any thought of pursuit and ran to his kijuu. The meteor hammer itself wasn't that big and hadn't inflicted a deep wound. But the impact left the kijuu groggy and unable to quickly get back on its feet.

"Are you all right?" Kuushou called out.

Kenchuu glanced over his shoulder and nodded. He tugged on the reins but found he couldn't grip his right hand. Kuushou ran up to him and took a closer look at his shoulder.

"A stone?"

"Meteor hammer. To think he hit me at that distance. Not only that, he took out my kijuu in the same throw. Hard to believe."

He aimed his first throw at Kenchuu's back. It moved so fast, Kenchuu didn't see it coming. Without a pause, without taking the time to gauge the distance or the spin, he'd scored a double hit. Kenchuu couldn't help but be impressed.

"Don't move. Let's move you to the rear. You need to have somebody take a look at that."

If a Danpou Temple monk said so, he really should listen. But now was no time to retreat.

"In any case, get after him. What about the wounded?"

"Hakugyuu saw to their wounds but they'd lost too much blood. There was nothing he could do."

"Damn," Kenchuu muttered to himself. As they were speaking, his men had already taken up the chase. "Watch out for that meteor hammer!" he called after them and urged Kuushou to join the pursuit.

"Those screams we heard a while back have me worried. Go check it out, if you would."

Kuushou nodded and left. More of his retainers had arrived by then and hoisted him onto his kijuu.

Ukou returned at a full gallop to the hamlet where he'd last left his men. His heart burned with indignation. That a kijuu he'd barded out of his own pocket got put down like that infuriated him. Well, it wasn't a total loss. He could always ask Asen

for another, and he'd bill Asen for another set of armor too. He'd get his hands on a much better kijuu next time.

All those thoughts aside, having to resort to a measly *horse* put him in a boiling rage.

He rode into the hamlet as a pair of soldiers stumbled from one of the houses. The crimson armor identified them as two of his own. Behind them appeared another person dressed in little more than rags. One of Ukou's men looked at him with beseeching eyes, extending his hand as if pleading for help. He opened his mouth to speak when a blow from behind drove him to the ground.

The man in rags held a child in one arm. Even bearing that burden, his movements were preternaturally agile, his swordsmanship so quick and efficient as to appear almost invisible.

Who is this guy? Ukou thought as he slowed the pace of the horse.

The second of his men continued to spar with the stranger. His men also possessed the "power" Ukou had bestowed on them. None of the land gangs, none of those so-called chivalrous knights, and certainly no rank-and-file soldier could hope to defeat them. Nevertheless, the stranger easily deflected each sweep of his sword while absorbing blows that would have knocked another man clean off his feet.

With each narrow miss, he corrected his posture, parried and responded with even sharper reposts. Before Ukou could run to his rescue, the duel was decided. A thrust to the solar plexus doubled him over. He stumbled forward, right into the receiving end of a ferocious blow brought down on his shoulders by the stranger.

By design and intent, a double-edged sword was a stabbing weapon, not a slashing weapon. The long blade of a slashing weapon meant it had to be held with both hands. But the stranger held a child in his other arm. Its size notwithstanding, the sword was clearly a single-handed weapon, and yet the stranger's diagonal slash across the shoulders nearly cut his man in two.

These were no ordinary skills and that was no ordinary sword. A cold chill ran down Ukou's spine. He recognized the deft combination of both stabbing and slashing techniques.

No. It is simply not possible.

The footsteps of his pursuers came closer. The stranger casually stepped over the corpses of his men and strode towards him. The hood of the cloak was pulled low over his eyes, covering half of his face. But the line of his jaw shook free a long-buried memory.

Ukou stopped on the spot, turned the horse, and galloped at top speed to where his men had left their kijuu. He drew aside one and jumped into the saddle. With a kick of the stirrups, the kijuu soared into the air. A great black beast followed a hair's

breadth behind him. It had no saddle or reins. But a short whistle from the stranger and it spun around and took off after him.

A kijuu, and the way it followed the commands of the stranger, no wild animal.

His underling's kijuu reacted badly to its intimidating presence. Ukou clucked and spurred it on. He glanced over his shoulder. The posse of pursuers caught up with the stranger. The gap between them grew wider. With a sigh of relief, Ukou again glanced at him. The stranger tipped back his head and returned the gaze, revealing the outlines of his face.

He came back to life.

No doubt about it. Ukou had served alongside the man and then attacked him from behind. And still his intended victim had almost killed him in turn. It all happened on Kan'you Mountain. Ukou somehow managed to deliver the coup de grâce, threw him down a mineshaft, and buried him beneath a landslide.

And yet he'd crawled up from the depths of the earth after him.

A shudder ran through Ukou's body.

That man is Gyousou.

When Kenchuu ran up to them, Seigen was interrogating the stranger. The man wore his tattered cloak down over his eyes. He was holding a child in his left arm. Seigen posed a question to him. He pointed at the roka. With a nod from Kenchuu, several of his men rushed into the roka.

"Why don't you hand over the child?"

Seigen thrust out his staff. Again without a word, the man set the child down on the ground. A small girl, she shrank away from them, trembling with fear, and started to sob. Her arms hung limply by her side. Her palms were cruelly crisscrossed with fresh wounds of a sort made by a sharp instrument indiscriminately stabbed into the flesh and yanked out.

The sight instinctively provoked sickening feelings of rage toward anyone capable of committing such a sadistic act against a child.

Seigen went to pick her up. She shied in terror and continued to weep. One of their retainers grabbed her as she tried to flee. A closer look at her wounds prompted from him a bewildered expression.

Seigen said, "It's bound to hurt, but bandage her hands, apply compression, and wrap them tight. That'll stanch the blood."

He turned his attention to the man. "Who are you? You don't appear to be a friend of the Red Armor."

The man started to speak, thought better of it, and closed his mouth.

"You're not a member of the land gangs either."

That statement elicited only a shake of the head.

Kenichuu dismounted from his kijuu and strode over to the man for a closer look. His bearing and appearance were anything but normal. His clothing consisted of little more than rags. The cloak covering the upper half of his face was in the same condition. The skin around his mouth and jaw jowls was usually pale. The coarse weave of the dirty thin cloth of the hood hid his eyes from view.

Could he even see? If so, could he see through the fabric of the hood? And if he could, then what accounted for the strange way he was dressed?

Seigen said, "If you're not in a fighting mood, how about you let us take care of that sword too?"

Without a word of protest, he drew the sword and scabbard from his belt and handed it over, still sheathed. The scabbard was nicked and scratched all over. The hand holding it out appeared to be no less marred and twisted.

Kenichuu glanced back and forth at Seigen and the man. "So, friend or foe?"

Seigen answered with a shrug.

At that moment, two of the men sent to search the roka came running out. One stopped in his tracks and threw back his head and screamed. Another sank to his knees and vomited on the ground. The rest piled out of the building, faces pale with horror and disgust.

"A young woman and an old grandma and a child. Tortured to death. It's something awful."

Kenichuu looked at the man. "You?"

"No," the man replied.

His voice was faint and hoarse, practically a whisper, as if withered or paralyzed by fear. Except nothing about his bearing suggested the slightest hint of cowardice or faintheartedness. As he stood there in silence, a black beast alighted on the ground next to him. Kenichuu and the rest of them couldn't help goggling. The beast nuzzled its head against the stranger's side, warily eyeing Kenichuu as sidled up next to him.

"Your kijuu?"

Kenichuu's question only prompted another nod. The stranger offered no excuses, and for all his silence, made no effort to resist their entreaties. Neither did he attempt to ingratiate himself with them.

"I'll ask again. Who are you?"

The man again didn't answer.

"Well, we can't let you go without knowing a thing about your background or identity. You wouldn't mind if we detained you for the time being?"

The stranger only nodded. One of Kenichuu's men approached the kijuu with a lead line. He was greeted with a rumbling growl. But with the stranger patting the kijuu's neck, it calmed down and accepted the makeshift halter. The stranger then took the end of the line.

Chapter 12

[20-5] Yuushou concluded that the only way to get rid of those bothersome catapults was to have the air cavalry destroy them one by one.

As he observed the progress of the battle, a commotion erupted in the camp behind him. Ukou pushed his way through a crowd of befuddled soldiers and strode toward him. With a glance at his disheveled state, Yuushou returned his attention to Anpuku.

Ukou came within speaking distance. The next words out of his mouth hit Yuushou like a bucket of ice water.

“I ran into Gyousou.”

Yuushou spun around. “What did you say?”

“It was Gyousou. In the flesh. No mistake about it. It looks like somebody already rescued him.”

“You met Gyousou?” Yuushou didn’t bother trying to quash the surge of excitement in his voice.

Ukou nodded. “West of Anpuku. I was circling around their flanks when we crossed paths.”

“Circling around their flanks?”

Yuushou hadn’t issued any such orders. Nobody in this conflict was attempting to outflank anybody. He couldn’t take anything Ukou told him at face value.

“Were you by yourself?”

“I was leading my Red Armor platoon. I don’t know what happened to the rest. But shouldn’t we be going after him? At this rate, he’s gonna get away.”

“Was he by himself?”

“He had a bunch of guys with him. At least twenty. They weren’t soldiers. Probably mostly land gang members.”

Yuushou looked at Ukou. “To the land gangs, Gyousou is the enemy. Do you really think they’d team up now?”

“I’m telling you, it was him!”

“Did he tell you his name?”

“We weren’t exchanging introductions! One look was all I needed. Not a doubt in my mind.”

Unusual for him, Ukou was fit to be tied. Whatever happened out there had thrown him off his usual game. He must have come face to face with something he never expected to encounter.

Yuushou turned to his retainers. "Muster a platoon. Ukou will show you where to go."

"A single platoon won't be enough. Three at the very least."

"Two, then. Move out!" In the off chance that Ukou was telling the truth, he added, "Don't kill anybody and don't get yourselves killed. If you run across anybody suspicious, capture them. Unharméd."

The platoons returned not long after they departed. Shishin, the platoon leader, reported to Yuushou, his face contorted with naked fury.

"They got away, eh?"

"They headed west and we gave chase. They had wounded with them so they weren't making rapid progress. Their numbers grew as they retreated, further slowing them down. The big problem was troop morale."

"Troop morale?"

Shishin nodded. He balled his fists so hard his arms trembled from the tension. "The soldiers had no interest in moving forward. The Red Armor circled around to the west of Anpuku at their own discretion, slaughtering any land gangs they encountered, along with women and children."

At that point, as if unable to keep the anger and disgust dammed up inside him, he unleashed a stream of profanities.

"Beg your pardon, sir. The land gangs in the vicinity caught wind of a military unit crossing the river and warned members of the outlying hamlets to go into hiding. Ukou forded the river and attacked two of them. They killed the land gangs hiding there. Seven dead in the first hamlet. Probably the only people there. Three dead in the next. Assuming their populations were similar, the rest must have taken shelter further west. However—"

Shishin faltered, his face flushed with anger. He paused to get a handle on his emotion.

"However?"

"Between those two hamlets was an abandoned village. Several women and children fleeing Anpuku must have stopped there to rest. We found the bodies of a grandmotherly type and a younger woman and a child."

"Ukou and his men killed them?"

"Saying they *killed* them is far too benign a term to describe the situation. They literally tortured them to death. They didn't leave corpses behind but *remains*."

The mother died holding the child in her arms. The child was cut in two from the head down.

"The soldiers who found them raised a stink. They lost whatever morale they had left after that. A few said they should bury the remains before picking up the chase."

And then all of them refused to take another step. I couldn't blame them. The woman's legs were severed in three places, and the child's entrails wrapped around her head." His voice shook. "It's Ukou that has to be brought to justice! Those aren't the acts of a human being."

Yuushou was at a loss as to how to respond. As he stood there in shocked silence, Shishin asked, "Why would Asen-sama trust such important matters to a beast like him?"

"Good question," was the only response that came to mind.

His old commander would have court-martialed a soldier like Ukou without a second thought. No matter how ugly and distasteful the task, he never would have placed it in the hands of a man like that. But here the reality was the exact opposite. Ukou was given the job precisely because he was such a beast.

He fights like a demon.

During the expedition, Yuushou had seen it enough times with his own eyes. The martial abilities of Ukou and his platoon of Red Armor defied common sense. No rumors of swordsmen with such skills had reached his ears. Their existence had completely escaped his attention. The reason the Red Amor had been held in such low regard was because Ukou kept their capabilities well hidden.

"Scattered around the women and child were several bodies of Red Armor soldiers. Six in total. Each one was dispatched with one or two slashes. Again, these were the Red Armor, so we're talking about an extraordinary swordsman."

Yuushou leaned forward. "The weapon?"

"Had to be a sword. With a frighteningly sharp blade."

No doubt about it. Yuushou clenched his fists. He didn't want to admit it, but when it came to the art of killing, Ukou and his platoon stood head and shoulders above his own men. He couldn't imagine any of his soldiers dispatching *six* of them with one or two strokes of a sword.

Even a soldier like a fox loose in a henhouse, killing anything that moved in a delirium of destruction, taking out *six* was beyond belief. As loath as he was to admit it, Yuushou was not capable of carrying out such a feat. And neither was Asen.

Yuushou knew of only one person in the world who could.

"Send a messenger to Sokou to move out. We are leaving too. The whole army."

"But—"

"Looks like Ukou wasn't making up stories, after all. That was indeed Gyousou."

Yuushou was already donning his riding gear and summoning his staff officers. "I promise we will deal with Ukou when the time is right. For now, our sole target is Gyousou."

"It's already sundown!"

"I am aware of that. Have Gen'yuu bring up the rear."

The enemy was on the move. The soldiers positioned at the bridge on the opposite bank withdrew from their positions. Then the army started to move west like water escaping an overflowing pool.

“Now they’re moving west?”

Standing on the watchtower, Kyuusan leaned forward. Of the military formations he could make out, a sizable portion of them were indeed marching west. Moreover, as far as he could see, the entire army appeared to be mobilizing, not just a couple of battalions. Camped out by the bridge, the entire Imperial Army was pulling up stakes.

“Hoh, what’s this? They’re just going to ignore us?”

Had they decided that taking Anpuku wasn’t worth the bother and decided to cut their losses? They’d probably move west beyond the range of the catapults and then cross back across the river.

“It’s sundown! They aren’t taking us seriously at all!”

Shokyu approached him in a clearly flustered state of mind. “Kyuusan, I’ve got to leave right away. The women have already fled. At this rate, they’re going to get overrun.”

Kyuusan nodded. “We’ll have the advantage once the sun sets. If that last battalion moves out, then so do we. Don’t let them out of your sight.”

Kyuusan’s men hastily prepared preparations for the pursuit. A few suggested that somebody should stay behind to man the catapults on the cliffs, just in case. But by evening, the remaining battalion had left the camp, so they withdrew as well. With the enemy gone, there was no point in leaving anybody behind. Kyuusan simply didn’t have that many followers, not enough to go toe to toe with the Imperial Army. He couldn’t spare a single man.

“We were always ready to sacrifice Anpuku to give the women and children time to escape. No problem abandoning it now.”

Kyuusan split the forces he had into twenty-man teams. Once he’d determined that the Imperial Army had put enough distance between themselves and Anpuku, they all set off in its wake.

“I don’t hear any whistles. They must have gone as far as they could before crossing to the other side of the river and heading west.”

Their compatriots would be hiding along the north bank of the river. If so, they should have heard their whistles when the Imperial Army forded the river. Only silence greeted them. Running through the falling night, they spotted the gleam of a torchlight. The enemy had already crossed the river. Several scouts crept into the hamlet. They returned with shocked looks on their faces.

The hamlet had been wiped out.

“Damn it. When did it happen?”

The ten or so residents of the hamlet were all dead. “Every corpse cut to pieces. Something awful took place there.”

Expending so much effort simply to prolong the pain of the victims reminded Kyuusan of past encounters with the infamous Red Armor. During the troubles with the land gangs and the extermination campaigns that followed, that was the calling card of the Red Armor, a platoon of soldiers with deviant tastes who wore red and black armor and stalked the countryside like a pack of hungry wolves.

No less mortifying was the devastating talent they had for killing. Not even the land gangs measured up to their level.

“So they unleashed the Red Armor as their vanguard unit. Trash.”

When it came to winning a war, the ends justified the means. And so Bun Province had been trampled underfoot time and again by merciless armies employing the most brutal of means.

“We will have our revenge! After them!”

They knew the lay of the land. The sun had set, but wouldn’t lose their way in the dark. With the enemy all but announcing its position with their torches, one last chance for victory had not yet slipped beyond their grasp.

Sharing words of encouragement, they stuck close to the column of soldiers as it marched west. Aiming at the torches, they snuffed out the light one after the other, sowing confusion among the soldiers grouping their way through the sudden darkness.

Kyuusan and his men had marked their weapons with mulberry. They could launch their attacks without worrying about hitting each other. This particular species of mulberry came from the Yellow Sea. Dye made from the flower of the shrub was expensive but had the unique property of glowing in the dark. A mark using mulberry dye was stamped on the handles of their weapons, in places easy to cover with their hands. Exposing a portion turned it into a secret passcode.

The kind of knowledge passed on by those who’d lived their lives in the darkness of the mine tunnels.

Bearing the brunt of an unexpected attack, the rear of the Imperial Army column collapsed in confusion. By the time they realized to their relief that their fears exceeded the actual threat, conditions on the ground began to change. The soldiers gathered their torches together and moved into a battle formation. With order restored to their lines, they confronted the attacking land gangs. At that point, the land gangs posed no threat to them.

Kyuusan broke through a platoon at the perimeter, but stripped of one of his two battle axes, he retreated the way he came. Along the way, he ran across a subordinate carrying a colleague on his back as he hurried along.

“Are you okay?”

The man he was carrying was already dead. Kyuusan thought the blood-stained clothing looked familiar.

“Is that Shokyuu?”

His subordinate was pretty sure he was. He’d been hit hard in the head by a heavy projectile that smashed and disfigured his face beyond recognition.

“He’s dead. You can put him down.”

With an exhausted sigh, he set the body on the ground. His face filled with grief, he gave the corpse a parting pat on the shoulder. Kyuusan did the same. For a long time, Shokyuu had long served as one of his right-hand men. He’d always been on the timorous side, but he was devoted to his family and carried out whatever task he was assigned with a minimum of fuss and bother. They’d conversed only hours before, and now he had to leave him behind in this state.

“Let’s go,” he said.

As they retreated, they joined up with more of their fleeing comrades and found a place to lay low for a while. They’d taken heavy damage. Even knowing the lay of the land, the land gangs were at a profound disadvantage when it came to fighting a larger force in the field. In a more positive light, at least their pursuit had brought the army to a halt. They interrupted their westward march and formed a line of battle to face the pursuing Kyuusan.

“What now?” Sekihi asked. “Go back?”

Kyuusan shook his head. “The longer we can tie up the Imperial Army here, the more distance our friends can put between us and them. We’ve got to hold our ground for as long as possible.”

“We’ll be in a heap of trouble if they go on the offensive.”

“Then we apply just enough pressure to keep them from going on the offensive. We’ll hit them in waves. We’re not looking for a win here. Push them back an inch and retreat. As long as they stay in formation, we should have plenty of room to run to safety.”

“Got it,” Sekihi said with a nod.

He made a headcount of the gang members who’d made it back to their position and formed new teams. When he had enough to form a team, he sent them forward to harass the Imperial Army. As soon as they withdrew, he sent in the next team. With each engagement, fewer men came back. But no matter how exhausted, they had no choice but to go once more into the fray. If they gave the Imperial Army enough breathing room to turn its full force on them, they wouldn’t stand a chance.

Despite their dwindling numbers, they had to stay on the offensive and keep the enemy dug in right where they were.

“It’s going about as well as could be expected, almost to an almost eerie degree.”

“Looks like this strategy was right on target.”

“On target to the extent we had the dumb guts to face down the Imperial Army. That’s what it means to be a member of the land gangs, I guess.”

Another big reason they’d fought the army to a standstill was because the archers couldn’t use their crossbows at night. Though that was likely the least of their problems. They could attack the land gangs or continue marching west. Kyuusan was pretty sure the Imperial Army commanders were right now stuck on the horns of that dilemma.

Kyuusan had it right. Yuushou wanted to move the column forward. If Gyousou was here, they had to track him down. Yuushou had been ordered to conduct a reconnaissance of Kan’you Mountain, but that was for the sole purpose of opening the mines and taking Gyousou into custody. The odds were high that Gyousou wasn’t under the mountain any more. He was in the immediate vicinity. In that case, their first priority was to find him.

Except they couldn’t do either. Rancor against the Red Armor was running high among the rank and file, a roiling resentment over the fact that Asen had given such an important assignment to Ukou. The conduct of Ukou and his men was, to Yuushou and his retainers, intolerable. The willful insubordination, engaging in violent acts unrelated to the order of battle, to say nothing of the actions themselves, all constituted grave and indisputable court martial offenses.

Even when it became necessary to use their swords against civilians, the army had a code of conduct and moral principles it adhered to with pride. Soldiers were rightfully angry when those principles and that honor were trampled underfoot. There was no ignoring the clamor of voices calling for Ukou and the Red Armor to be arrested and punished. They deserved no free pass.

Despite Yuushou’s promises to discipline Ukou, he and the Red Amor sneered at such threats and defied him. Brandishing Asen’s name and attempting to negotiate a compromise only aroused more anger from the troops. In the end, knowing the tide was turning against them, they hightailed it out of camp.

A platoon of soldiers set off in pursuit. Yuushou suspected that a company commander had acted on his own and issued the arrest warrants. But if Yuushou called him to task, he’d have a mutiny on his hands as well.

He had to calm down the troops and reestablish the normal chain of command. With that much already on his plate, the land gangs attacked the rear of the column. They didn’t constitute a strong military threat, but harassing them in waves made them difficult to deal with.

He eventually got his own forces under control. Around the time the platoon chasing Ukou was persuaded to call off the search and return to the column, dawn

was breaking. With a constant cold wind blowing, the lack of any forward progress was as exhausting as an active engagement. Morale was sinking like a stone.

Yuushou sighed. "For the time being, let's retreat to Anpuku."

"What about Gyousou?"

"We are never going to catch up with him at this rate."

His staff officers sighed as well and agreed with him.

"Send reinforcements to back up Gen'yuu. Destroy the land gangs and march back to Anpuku. But first free up a company to search for Ukou."

Once again configured as a unified force, the Imperial Army wheeled itself around to return the way it came to Anpuku.

Kyuusan noticed the shift in maneuvers and quickly grasped that the tide was turning.

"Looks like they're coming our way."

Their constant and increasingly futile assaults had whittled down their numbers. The sky was beginning to brighten. It wasn't yet light enough to distinguish friend from foe, but once the dawn broke and archers entered the fray, they didn't stand a chance.

"We're heading back to Anpuku," he called out to those around him.

They beat a steady retreat only to find the air cavalry occupying the skies over Anpuku.

"Damn. They left a reserve force behind." Kyuusan clucked to himself in frustration. He was so sure the army had moved on, he'd left Anpuku undefended. A major blunder on his part. If they couldn't take refuge in the city, the archers in the surrounding hills and fields would pick them off like sitting ducks.

The enemy had seen an opening and seized the opportunity first.

Right now, the Imperial Army was little more than a human wall. But once it rolled into action, it'd crush them like an avalanche.

"Damn it all. What a bunch of amateurs we are."

"So you're only figuring that out now, sir?" Sekihi said with a wry chuckle.

This far in his life, he'd always been able to rely on his fists. He knew at some point they were going to fail him. Whether age or injury, the causes were innumerable. Kyuusan knew a life that depended on his fists had its limits, but he had no other choices. No, those choices were there. Living a life to its limits, those forks in the road never entered his vision. And now he could not even point to the road not taken, or say for certain if it had even been there at all.

"We were born in an ugly era."

Looking back on his life, that was all he saw, all that ever came to mind.

"Kyuusan—"

Responding to the doleful look on Sekihi's face, Kyuusan smiled and said, "You and me, good fortune was never part of the plan."

Sekihi responded with dry laughter and a shake of his head.

That was when they saw the faint outlines of the Imperial Army moving through the gray morning light. A big shadow bore down on them, reeling from side to side like a great shuddering beast.

"They're coming! Run!"

Kyuusan could only tell them to run for their lives, open up the distance between them, and head for the hills. Anpuku was out of the question. Stragglers dropped away from the group and collapsed. The Imperial Army pressed down on them like a giant wave. Kyuusan and his men ran on as the Imperial Army started to cut through their group, splitting it in two.

"Run!" he shouted until his voice grew hoarse and picked up his own pace.

If the advancing army punched through their center, they'd have to flee north and south. But the river lay to the south. The mountains loomed over them to the north. They had literally run out of room to escape. Knowing that the final assault was upon them, the option left to them was to circle around the enemy's flanks.

Maintaining as much distance between them as possible, he headed west from the north flank. Stretching out like a cresting wave to the east and west, the Imperial Army began attacking north and south.

A platoon of horses charged at Kyuusan and his men. There was too little light to make out anything more than the dance of shadows in the morning haze, but that was enough to aim a bow. If they came within range, they would be clean out of options.

As this realization struck him, Kyuusan stopped in his tracks and turned to face the horse coming at him. He readied his battle ax. It was not a weapon designed to fight a mounted soldier. But in this do-or-die moment, his only option was to aim at the horse's legs as it galloped past.

He'd set his resolve when the ground shook. That's how it felt, though it was the combined voices of a great number of people.

Hundreds of startled and confused voices shouting out a chorus that reverberated through the early dawn sky.

"What?" he exclaimed, reflexively turning toward the sound.

The westward edge of the Imperial Army appeared to disintegrate. The cavalry charging at Kyuusan veered off in all directions, frantically bringing their mounts around and pointing them west. The soldiers pursuing the land gangs along their eastern flank followed suit. Right in front of his eyes, the battle line of the Imperial Army started to tear apart to the left and right.

"What?"

Still in the dark, Kyuusan started moving again. He picked out Sekihi further to the west, so that's where he headed. Sekihi stood there in stark disbelief.

"What is going on?"

"I don't know. Maybe a fresh supply of troops?"

Peeling their eyes, the Imperial Army was indeed under attack.

"If they are enemies of the Imperial Army, I wouldn't call them fresh troops."

"Then—reinforcements? For us?"

Why was anybody reinforcing them? He couldn't think of a single military force the land gangs could count on to come to their aid.

He and Sekihi stood there gawking. Ahead of them, several of their mates starting jumping up and down and waving. They shouted, "It's Risai! She showed up!"

Kyuusan gaped. Then he yelled, "That woman is out of her mind!"

Risai and the land gangs were not colleagues. They were enemies by nature. They cooperated on occasion when the occasion called for it. But then and only then. Taking their fight into the open like this only raised the odds of their existence being revealed to a near certitude.

They had no business being here. And yet one company after the other smashed into the Imperial Army. These weren't amateurs like the land gangs. The evidence was right in front of his eyes. The Imperial Army's line of battle disintegrated in disarray as its soldiers fled the fight.

"Did she forget she's a wanted fugitive? How stupid can you be?" he shouted at her, though at the same time he felt a stinging in his eyes.

A platoon of soldiers rushed toward him. He wasn't their target. They were simply scrambling with all their might to get away, flailing at whatever was in front of them. Kyuusan and his men just happened to be standing there. Kyuusan formed a line and they turned aside the impromptu assault. A lance stabbed at him. Kyuusan hacked off the blade and smacked the shaft into the air. Deprived of his weapon, the flustered soldier scampered off.

Spreading its black wings, a kijuu swooped down and punched a gap through the crowd of soldiers milling about in confusion.

"Kyuusan!"

A kijuu, fast and powerful. Astride the kijuu was none other than Risai, wearing armor and holding a sword. Without a moment's hesitation, she hacked a path through the surrounding soldiers and in a rush of wind alit on the ground in front of him.

"Are you all right, Kyuusan?"

All Kyuusan could do at first was stand there and bob his head. Then he said, "You are a damn fool."

“That makes two of us.” Risai smiled. “Go west. Have everybody retreat to Kan’you Mountain.”

“But—”

“It’s okay,” she said with a nod. “You head out first. Your families are waiting for you further on.”

With Risai’s words, life returned to the faces of the land gang members, as if they could finally breathe again. Brandishing their weapons and attacking only those soldiers blocking the way forward, they escaped to the west.

Chapter 13

[20-6] With the land gangs forging on ahead, Risai and her crew began a slow and steady retreat. Winning was not the objective. It'd be enough to save the land gangs and create a safe zone where they could find shelter. All the better if they could stop the enemy from advancing and make a clean getaway.

After that, they'd reconfigure their forces and commence with the recon and mopping up operations. But until then, they'd either take refuge in Rokou or abandon the region around Kan'you Mountain.

"Sorry about all this. I gave too little thought to leaving Anpuku," Kyuusan apologized. He was bringing up the rear in their line of retreat.

Risai shook her head. "You had the right idea getting everybody out of Anpuku. If you'd left anybody behind, we'd have to back to get them."

Anpuku had catapults, making it risky to stray too close. If the Imperial Army seized those installations and then went house to house in the city clearing out the land gangs, rescuing them would be difficult in the extreme. It'd be no different if the land gangs managed to maintain control of Anpuku. Any rescue would have to start with them abandoning the city. If Kyuusan couldn't be persuaded to leave, they'd have no choice but join forces in the city, raising the odds that the entire effort would get bogged down there.

The Imperial Army was strong. The sudden arrival by Risai and her men was taken as an ambush and at first sowed confusion among the troops. But slowly and surely, they were restoring order to the ranks. Once they did, Risai wasn't about to defeat a more numerous and better equipped opponent.

With the rear of the Imperial Army column chasing the land gangs and the front of the column getting attacked by Risai, the column split in two. She'd managed to scatter the head of the line, but she couldn't bring enough forces to bear to finish them off. In the meantime, the remnants of the Imperial Army to the east fortified their positions and began to push back.

They retreated under fire, but soldiers lying low here and there were proving hard to deal with. If they rejoined the rear of the column, all the more so. Before that happened, Risai and the land gangs had to either withdraw to the west or double back to Anpuku.

We don't have enough soldiers.

Risai had the two thousand entrusted to her by Gamon Temple. Add a few more from Hakushi and Sekirin Temple and a complete regiment was in reach. At least

two battalions short, the Imperial Army was not at full regimental strength. That still left them with fifteen hundred. Even in terms of equipment and experience, neither side would prevail with roughly matched numbers.

The soldiers who confronted Risai and her forces head on must have noticed they were fighting Gyouso's retainers. At this point, they had no desire to cede the field. If possible, they'd rather take the Imperial Army as prisoners of war but woefully lacked the means.

Risai resigned herself to the inevitable retreat. Just then, a cheer erupted from the west. She raised her head in confusion and turned her attention toward the river valley. A fresh band of soldiers rushed into her field of view.

She was wondering who they were when Seishi cried out, "It's Kiro!"

Kiro was a retainer of Sougen. Kiro was the first familiar face she encountered back in Koutaku.

Kiro called out, "Risai-sama! How are you doing?" He ran over before she had time to reply. "The Provincial Guard shows no sign of mobilizing. So Sougen-sama gave us the go-ahead."

Not only Kiro. Toushi was a step behind him. Together, the two of them had three thousand soldiers under their command.

"I can't thank you enough."

Kiso said with a nod of acknowledgement, "Many still harbor hard feelings against the land gangs. But they also know that not everyone in the land gangs deserves that enmity. We can sort everything out once we've reclaimed Kouki. Right now, our primary objective is to make sure any reports of our presence get delayed as long as possible."

He urged on Toushi and glanced back at her. "We're going to hit the main body of the army. We'd like you to round up any soldiers who come your way."

Risai nodded. Kiso and Toushi moved with their men to their forward positions. Risai remained behind, tending to the wounded and issuing orders to capture stragglers from the Imperial Army. Soldiers who'd marched double-time throughout the night were honestly grateful to stop there and catch their breath.

Yuushou watched from a distance as an enormous mass of humanity poured forth from the river valley. He gulped in surprise.

They had this large a force in reserve?

He'd heard the land gangs numbered no more than a thousand. Yet well more than a regiment erupted out of that valley. His weary forces retreated, in sharp contrast to the reinforcements coming at them in high spirits. Confronting them, the fatigue of Yuushou's troops only deepened. Dispirited and listless, they had no energy left to maneuver.

The only option left was a retreat to Anpuku. Yuushou again issued orders and turned the column around. Just then a platoon of air cavalry flew in from Anpuku, the platoon he'd seen in the sky over Anpuku. Reserves in Sokou on standby must have had the sense to dispatch the air cavalry ahead of the infantry to occupy the abandoned Anpuku.

But as they drew closer, the blood ran cold in his veins.

That's not our air cavalry.

Of the two platoons of kijuu, Yuushou did not recognize any of his men among them. They wore a wide variety of armor and carried a wide variety of weapons. These platoons had clearly been cobbled together with riders from different units. But there was nothing ad hoc about the kijuu. And they were carrying winter weapons. That ruled out the land gangs and mercenaries.

A significant number of military veterans were collaborating with the land gangs. The way these riders carried themselves, they were no amateurs at waging war.

They could have attacked much earlier.

They could have struck at the rear of the column. Instead, they waited in the sky over Anpuku and showed no signs of going on the offensive. Yuushou and his retainers mistakenly assumed they were Imperial Army reinforcements rushing to offer them support. But they did nothing, as if nothing was amiss. They held back until the forces under his command abandoned the field and fled back to Anpuku.

"Damn it all!"

The events that had transpired since Asen had singled him out and ordered him to Kan'you Mountain rose up in Yuushou's thoughts.

The vastness of the territory occupied by the land gangs. The gross underestimation of their size and strength. Being ordered by Asen to take Ukou with him. The wanton and indiscriminate actions of Ukou and the Red Armor. The rage they aroused among his own troops. The stubborn resistance of the land gangs. The equally unexpected growth in their military might, with veterans fighting alongside them in significant numbers.

Taken all together, Yuushou had a hard time grasping how all these factors could have come together at the same time and in the same place. He'd been maneuvered into a no-win situation. He was Asen's retainer, a man appointed to positions of great responsibility and power by the late emperor and by Gyousou, the emperor who replaced him. They had served him and his senior staff with pride and confidence.

And now it was all dust before the wind.

Caught ahead and behind by the enemy, Yuushou's army broke ranks and fled in a total rout.

“So those aren’t the bad guys?” a flabbergasted Kyuusan asked Risai. What he’d taken for enemy forces were attacking the rear of what was left of the Imperial Army.

“The air cavalry, you mean?”

“They were in the sky over Anpuku. I was certain a contingent of the Imperial Army stayed behind in Anpuku,” Kyuusan said, admitting he was having a hard time wrapping his head around the most recent developments. “They were supposed to take out the catapults. I figured the Imperial Army’s air cavalry was still there, laying low and waiting to hit us when we least expected.”

“Oh,” was Risai’s response.

She didn’t know where those airborne forces hailed from either. She asked Seishi but he was equally in the dark. Risai didn’t have enough kijuu and riders under her command to form a platoon in the first place. And there were only so many soldiers with those flying skills.

Kyoshi ran up to them. “Who are those guys?”

“Don’t know,” Risai said.

The Imperial Army was falling apart in front of her eyes. The arrival of Kiro and Tousei put them at a distinct disadvantage. A platoon of air cavalry again struck the rear of the column, removing any doubts about the outcome of the battle. The column began to disintegrate. Risai’s forces and her allies swarmed over the fleeing soldiers, mowing them down and knocking them to ground and apprehending them.

By the time the sun lay low in the sky, it was all over. Hard to believe, but it was a decisive win for Risai’s side.

A platoon of the air cavalry that had helped arrange this little miracle swooped down and alighted on the ground in front of Risai. She recognized one of the kijuu.

With a startled cry, she exclaimed, “Is that Kishun?” And then noticed the kijuu’s rider. “Oukou!”

One of her retainers and a regimental commander in the Jou Provincial Guard.

“Risai-sama, it’s nice to finally see you again.”

He jumped off the back of his kijuu and ran over as Risai dismounted from Hien.

“Where have you been all this time?” she asked.

“I owe my life to Danpou Temple.” He smiled. “You appear to be doing well too.”

“And the rest of my senior staff?”

Of her five regimental commanders, three, including himself, had survived.

“We lost too many officers and soldiers. Still, I’d say at least half of your division is left. They’re lying low in the borderlands between Jou Province and I Province. As soon as they heard that Risai-sama had returned, they started moving toward Bun Province under Kouyuu’s command, doing their best to stay out of sight.”

Oukou grasped Risai's hand. "We decided you were due a status report without delay, and so put together the minimum viable force and paid you this unannounced visit."

Risai returned the gesture. "That is most reassuring."

She was, in fact, amazed. She'd heard her retainers had been executed in Jou Province without so much as a hearing or a trial. She believed that Oukou and her regimental commanders also numbered among the dead. Up until this day, she was certain that she had lost everything. Yet three members of her senior staff had survived.

Along with the soldiers still under their command, they joined forces with the rebel factions of the Jou Provincial Guard. Thankfully, in recent years, Asen had paid less and less attention to the provinces outside the capital. Because of its distressed and impoverished state, his wariness toward the once unrelenting Jou Province must have slackened as well.

This had become especially clear of late. People on the move toward Bun Province met with few obstacles. In fact, while taking all due precautions, they'd been able to hasten there without much trouble.

Once Kouyuu arrived, together with Tonkou's cooperation, they should be able to attack the castle of Bun Province from within and without and capture it. With the castle well defended against the inevitable siege, they could then unfurl their flags in all their glory and bring the fight to Asen himself.

Chapter 14

[20-7] With the numbers now on their side, Risai and her allies pressed home their advantage. They spend the next day mopping up the remnants of Asen's army and taking the survivors prisoner. The Imperial Army was smaller than they expected. Perhaps they'd only been after the land gangs all along. At the very least, it appeared that Asen was none the wiser about their presence there.

They employed all the means at their disposal in their sweep of the battlefield, though it remained pretty much a given that this remained their fight to lose. Asen was bound to learn at some point that there were forces hostile to his government in Bun Province. However, by the time Asen mustered his forces, the Black Flags would have strengthened their ranks as well. Slowly but surely, the odds were tipping in their favor.

Late that night, their prisoners of war in tow, Risai and her soldiers returned to the ruins of a city in the foothills of Kan'you Mountain.

Once home to the shire castle, the city of Saiho had been destroyed and deserted during the eradication campaigns. Little remained of the walls and ramparts, and only a few buildings remained standing. When the Black Flags mobilized to support the land gangs, they set up a base camp in Saiho. The thinking was, if they could hold their ground here against the Imperial Army, the land gangs could escape to Seisai and the abandoned mines in and around Kan'you Mountain.

Even if the Imperial Army overran their positions, there were no civilians to get caught up in the fighting. They stretched tarps across the remains of the ramparts and the still standing walls of what used to be homes and managed to make the place at least livable. An intact section of the council house became their headquarters.

"Looks like you won."

Sougen greeted Risai in the dilapidated structure. He'd made his way here from Seisai.

"One way or another."

They cheerfully clapped each other on the back. That was when one of Sougen's assistants tugged aside the tarp that took the place of the missing door and entered the room. He was holding a sword.

"Where did that sword come from?"

"It belongs to one of the prisoners."

Except this particular prisoner fought *against* the Imperial Army. He helped save the families of the land gangs fleeing to safety. He wasn't their enemy. But he didn't

belong to one of the land gangs either and nobody under Risai's command could place him. He refused to identify himself. He did not resist when they took him into custody, and when they asked for his weapon, he handed it over.

"Being an enemy of Asen doesn't necessarily make him an ally."

But his sword was so unusual, the assistant thought he should bring this particular prisoner to their attention.

Risai took the sword and examined it with a quizzical expression. The hilt and scabbard were so badly marred that it was hard to imagine what the sword had looked like in pristine condition. Still, she could tell it was a fine piece of work. Not a luxury but a weapon crafted with great care. A small bell was tied to the worn and faded scabbard like a good luck charm. The bell didn't make a sound and perhaps had been filled with wadding.

Puzzling over the out-of-place ornament, Risai pinned the scabbard against her side, wrapped her hand around the hilt, and drew out the sword. What emerged, in stark contrast to the scabbard, was a magnificent blade. The brilliant blue steel bore not a single nick or blemish, so clean and clear it cast off a white glow.

"This is—!" Risai exclaimed.

In her surprise, she lost her hold of the scabbard and it clattered to the ground. Sougen also raised a cry and jumped to his feet like he'd been launched out of a catapult.

"That is Cold Jade!"

Risai tried to explain to the rest of them but couldn't find the words. Her whole body shook so badly she could hardly breath, let alone speak.

Cold Jade was the sword Emperor Kyou had presented to Gyousou so long ago.

"Where—where is this prisoner?"

The prisoner sat in the gloomy tent. He was leaning back against the charred and blackened stone wall. A ripped and torn cloak covered most of his face. The coarse weave of the filthy cloth of the hood covered his eyes. Risai couldn't make out his appearance, except that his sunken cheeks were as pale as candle wax.

Risai peered at him from a tear in the tent. She drew a steady breath. Then holding the torch, she stepped inside. Hearing the sound, the prisoner barely moved. He only glanced over his shoulder at her. She looked back at him, desperately comparing every aspect of that face with the one etched into her memories—the bridge of the nose, the line of the jaw, the shape of the mouth.

Before she could utter the obvious conclusion, a small smile creased that mouth. "Well, I'll be! If it's not Risai."

Risai's only reply was an audible gasp. His voice was hoarse and faint but there could be no doubt.

As she struggled to get hold of her senses, the prisoner shifted his gaze. "Oh, and Sougen too."

From behind Risai came a sound akin to a howl. In the same moment she registered it as belonging to Sougen, Sougen ran toward him and fell to his knees like a man falling to the ground.

"Gyousou-sama! Your Highness!"

The prisoner removed the hood from his head, revealing his unmistakable crimson eyes. Lifting up the cloak, the white hair spilled out.

Risai stepped forward, feeling as if she were treading on a cloud. Then the strength went out of her legs. She sat down on the ground. Her head slumped to her chest. She couldn't speak. She couldn't breathe.

We searched for you. We knew you were alive. We believed you would return to us some day. No matter how much time it took, no matter how much suffering it required, we would find you.

"Is there something wrong with your eyes?" Sougen asked at length.

Those words brought Risai back to life. She took a breath. She raised her head. Gyousou squinted back at them.

"The light stings my eyes. That's all. It's gotten better of late."

At the sound of his voice, somebody hastily extinguished the torch, leaving a candle as the only source of light, and casting the space into shadows.

"Sorry about that," Gyousou said. He directed a consoling gaze at Risai. "It appears that you have met with hardships of your own."

For a moment, Risai didn't understand what he was referring to and then realized he meant her arm.

"Oh, it's not that bad. I've gotten used to it."

"I see," he said, his voice soft and low. "I must be hard to listen to. It isn't easy getting the words out. I guess this is what happens when you're shut away for a while with no one to talk to." He smiled to himself before glancing up at Sougen. "Well, there's a look I haven't seen on your face before."

Sougen quickly covered his face with his sleeve so Risai couldn't see the expression he was wearing.

"I believe you go by Seishi. And next to you is Oukou. Risai's retainers." He added with a gentle grin, "Like a couple of kids."

Risai glanced over her shoulder at them. Seishi and Oukou had their arms around each other's shoulders. The sight of them blubbering like children reminded Risai to dry her own face.

"I was worried about you all." Gyousou cast his gaze around the tent. "It is reassuring to see so many of you alive and well."

“That is what I wanted to say to you!” Sougen slid forward on his knees and grasped Gyousou’s hands. “It is so good to have you back with us again.”

From far away, the shouts of exultation echoed through the air.

Alone in the dark cellar, Yuushou raised his head. A big commotion stirred the air outside. The late hour notwithstanding, the sounds of celebration filled the night.

He could hardly blame them. They fought and defeated the Imperial Army.

Yuushou sat on the stone floor. The building was once a storehouse or cellar. The room was fairly large and covered with cobblestones. Most of the roof above had fallen in. The only light came from a single candle, making it difficult to see any details, but the stones appeared to have been recovered from a river bed. The smooth edges of the stones notwithstanding, the mortared cobbles and boulders heaped together into a rising wall shouldn’t be impossible to climb.

Except for the shackles binding his hands.

The melting snow dripped from the shattered ceiling and trickled from cracks in the walls and pooled on the flagstone floor. Though he’d tried to find a dry place to sit down, his clothes were already soaked.

Nodding off from the accumulated fatigue and feelings of emptiness, and listening to the commotion around him almost despite himself, the night air brought to his ears voices entirely different from the clamor before. In the hushed tones used when passing on information of a confidential nature came the words, *His Highness*.

The speaker must be standing next to the cellar. Yuushou heard him clearly. Then a stifled shout, not very loud and so less distinct, but Yuushou managed to make out. *He’s alive! He’s returned!*

Maybe Gyousou had joined forces with the land gangs, after all. The reinforcements arriving at the last minute and in the right numbers appeared to include remnants of the Imperial Army. They must have become aware of Gyousou’s existence. Yuushou didn’t grasp the relationship between the reinforcements, the land gangs, and Gyousou, but he understood the emotions of people around him.

The liege they thought was dead, that they had not seen for a long seven years, had returned. The great feelings of elation such a reunion must arouse in his followers.

Yuushou was struck by a sensation that could only be described as envy. He had to wonder whether he would react the same if he found himself in their shoes. That sense of dissatisfaction with Ukou’s presence since they left Kouki had only grown the further away from Kouki they traveled, as had his unease toward Asen.

The land gangs occupied Kan’you Mountain. The Imperial Army fought to drive them from the territory. It was a perfectly logical course of action, Yuushou believed. He couldn’t carry out his orders as long as they were there. They had to be removed as a matter of course. He had no problem accepting the inevitability of fighting and

killing those arrayed against them in order to achieve their objectives. It was what a soldier did.

But as the battle progressed, he could barely restrain himself from screaming, “This is the last thing we should be doing right now!”

Just because the forces facing them belonged to the land gangs didn’t make them enemies worth fighting. He felt it in his gut. He felt he should tell all of them to keep their distance from Kan’you Mountain. Even if the Imperial Army, and Ukou, and the Provincial Guard appealed to him directly, they should on no occasion ride forward. Ride forward and only death awaited them.

He imagined Asen simply disappearing off the map for seven long years. Would he really go searching for him? Would he rejoice like them when they met again?

Yuushou hung his head and grasped his knees with his shackled hands. “I probably would look for him,” he muttered.

In the end, he would. Asen was Yuushou’s liege. And when their paths finally crossed, he would celebrate the reunion. Of course, he would. But deep in his heart, he could never say for certain. He would be happy, yes, but would he rejoice? His mind remained stubbornly unsettled on the question.

It was a good thing he lost. Being defeated on the battlefield and taken captive meant he wasn’t able to carry out his duties as a retainer. But that was good too. He didn’t know what would come of him after this and he didn’t care. He’d been given his orders and did his best to faithfully carry them out. He’d done his best and failed.

He could live with that.

“This is Kyoshi. And next to him, Houto and Kiitsu.”

Brimming with happiness, Risai introduced the three of them to Gyousou. Anxious about Risai’s welfare and that of her men, they’d made the journey from Seisai to Saihou.

The meeting was held in a dilapidated house that was perhaps the least appropriate venue for an audience with the emperor. Whatever blankets and straw mats they had on hand covered the shattered windows and doors. The roof was barely holding together and the ceiling was spotted with water stains. Melting snow ran down the adobe walls.

Even in such a dismal setting, the three could hardly contain their emotions. Among them, Houto appeared the most profoundly shaken. The normally nonchalant man stood there like a statue, taking deep breath after deep breath.

“Ah,” Risai said with a smile. “Houto hails from South Ryou Prefecture.”

“You don’t say!” Gyousou looked at Houto with keen interest. “South Ryou!”

The number of lamps in the room were kept to a bare minimum to spare Gyousou's eyes, so it was hard to make out Houto's expression as he struggled form a coherent answer.

Seven years in the dark.

Risai asked Gyousou about the circumstances that brought him here. Gyousou, in turn, wanted to know more about how they were doing. The questions flew back and forth, filling in the lost time. Though Risai couldn't be happier, Gyousou's condition came as a shock.

Seven years by himself in the dark with never enough to eat. The only light from a campfire, and there too burning with a low flame to preserve precious resources. What kind of a life had he lived, feeling his way through the darkness for all that time? With no one to talk to, and surrounded by so much silence that his vocal cords withered such that he could not raise his voice.

As a soldier, Risai knew how to bear up under solitude. She'd gone through training on how to survive by herself if separated from her army. Nevertheless, the thought of spending seven years alone in the depths of Kan'you Mountain made her blood run cold. So she'd been all the more surprised at the nonchalant way he carried himself. After all that time, it was as if he'd been a part of the Imperial Army until a few days before.

In particular, his body had not wasted away. To a certain extent, that stood to reason. Living deep underground, he had to do all the heavy lifting himself. Still, only to a point could the protective powers of the amulet he wore around his wrist compensate for the lack of food. Compared to his past self, his frame was markedly more slender. His cheeks were sunken and his skin had paled to an unhealthy degree. Little strength remained in his voice and he constantly narrowed his eyes. The fingernails of both hands were bent and twisted from repeated damage.

She didn't see the man once brimming with drive and ambition. He appeared instead strangely calm and at peace with himself.

Gyousou and Houto softly exchanged words for a while. Gyousou then turned his attention to Kyoshi.

"A truly inexcusable fate befell Zui'un Temple. You have done an admirable job of carrying on. Tai owes you and your colleagues a debt of gratitude that can never be fully repaid. Very few people will ever know and fully appreciate the price you paid, but on their behalf, I offer my thanks."

Kyoshi answered with a deep bow. "Such praise is more than I deserve."

"To Kiitsu as well. The beneficence of Jokan-dono made this all possible, but I've heard he showed that same kindness to Risai and her comrades. I am grateful from the bottom of my heart."

"Oh, my—I—no—" Kiitsu's flustered reaction was unexpectedly amusing.

“I should thank Jokan-dono in person. But it doesn’t look like I’m going to have the time. Please convey to him my best regards. Once it becomes possible, I will most definitely pay him a visit.”

“That is already far more than we deserve.”

Risai flashed a smile at the befuddled Kiitsu. She said to Gyousou, “As we discussed earlier, I think you should stay here tonight. Tomorrow, we will go to Rokou, and after that, repair to En.”

By all rights, they should return to Seisai and make an appearance for their many compatriots. But unfortunately not everyone watching them there could be trusted. And so she arrived at the decision to travel straight to Rokou. Launching on their journey directly shouldn’t be a problem, but Gyousou and Risai’s men could both benefit from a bit of rest. They’d had little time to relax since rushing to the battlefield from Anpuku.

Following her explanation, Sougen added, “We’ll be putting together a security detail to accompany us. I’ve asked Risai to be in charge. The fact of the matter is, Risai is the only one among us who has met the Imperial En.”

“I’d like Kyoshi and Houto to come along too,” Risai said, turning to them. “The two of them have been a great help for a long time now. Their assistance had no small part in making possible the return of Your Highness. I think they have faced more than their fair share of dangers and deserve a return to the lives they used to live where they live in peace and safety.”

“Thank you,” the two chorused.

Sougen nodded as well. “Presently, the safest places to depart for En are from Ba Province, Kou Province, and Ran Province. Ba Province is the closest, though enemy forces are the weakest in Ran. However, Touka and Bokuyou Mountain are located in Kou Province. I’d like the two of you to accompany us that far.”

“To Touka?” Kyoshi asked, the delighted expression on his face making clear how pleasantly surprised he was at the request.

“Given the difficulty of the task ahead of us, we’ll make Touka our base camp and then climb Bokuyou Mountain to the Sea of Clouds in one go.”

“Much appreciated,” Kyoshi said with a bow.

Houto countered with a shake of his head, “I am sure the people of Touka will treat such a visit as great reward, but wouldn’t the risk be all the greater there? Mount You has a Ryou’un Mountain. What about heading out across the Sea of Clouds from there?”

“As you may be aware, the Ryou’un Mountain in the You range has never been developed. In order to get to the summit above the Sea of Clouds, there has to be a passageway. There is no such passageway in the mountains of the You range.”

“So that’s what it comes down to, eh?” Houto said with a wry smile. “I thought I was familiar with all the trails in the northern quarter, but it looks like there are a few more things I don’t know. Still, are there any other Ryou’un Mountain closer than Bokuyou Mountain?”

“We have heard of them but there is no way to know if they are usable or not. When a mountain has not been explored for many years, the trails can get blocked. Unsavory groups may occupy the territory. The Provincial Guard keeps an eye on any Ryou’un Mountains near a provincial capital, putting them out of reach. There’s no way to tell if a mountain is usable without seeing it in person. That makes Bokuyou Mountain our best bet. We know it is accessible. After talking it over with Risai, that’s the decision we made.”

“Understood,” Houto said, content with the outcome of the discussion. “I’ll see to the accommodations. The two of you and a few others. I’ll leave Risai and His Highness in your capable hands.”

Chapter 15

[20-8] The next day, Risai and Sougen entrusted Gyousou to their retainers. They set off for Rokou. Risai and Sougen stayed behind in Saihou to select the members of the security detail.

Kyoshi had the kijuu he'd borrowed from Gamon Temple. Houto didn't have a kijuu. Riding a horse would only delay his arrival, so he'd have to double up with Kyoshi or someone else.

They'd head due west through Bun Province into the southern quarter of Ba Province, and then turn south into Kou Province. Their final objective was Bokuyou Mountain in Ten Shire. From there, they could travel straight to En over the Sea of Clouds.

Once Gyousou reached En, he'd petition for support from other kingdoms, support that would make it possible for him to topple Asen and reclaim Tai.

With a clearer idea in mind about the way forward, Kyoshi and his companions returned to Seisai. Risai put her traveling gear and a few personal matters in order and traveled to Saihou by herself.

She went to see Sougen at his headquarters and caught him just as he was leaving. Sougen greeted her with a wordless nod. He cut through a dilapidated structure and headed toward a storehouse not too far away. Yuushou, the commander of Asen's army, was being detained there.

To get to the storehouse, they had to walk down a ramshackle corridor. The corridor connected to a broken-down room housing a number of soldiers. The occupants of the room were all Imperial Army staff officers. The regular troops were being held in another location.

Most of the doors and walls were missing. Risai felt their eyes on her and she walked past, all reflecting a variety of emotions. They were of course dispirited but other sentiments showed on their faces too. Risai glanced back at them as she strode down the corridor.

She'd reached the end of the roofline separating the buildings when a hoarse voice called out behind her, "How fares His Highness?"

Risai glanced over her shoulder. Besides the roof and supporting pillars, little else of the structure remained. There were enough people crammed into the room that she couldn't tell who asked the question. But they all looked at her and Sougen expecting an answer.

Risai glanced at Sougen. Though they hadn't made any public statements about Gyousou's existence, Yuushou's retainers must have realized that they'd been in pursuit of him all along.

Sougen stopped, turned on his heels, and faced the room. "He is resting for now."

"Has he suffered any injuries?"

"As far as we can tell, no injuries that could be called serious."

"What about his health? We heard he'd lost a lot of weight."

"No worse than yourselves. He is worn out, but once he's had time to rest, we expect a full recovery. Are you that concerned about him?"

A murmur flowed through the room, as if they were at a loss about how to answer. Among them, one raised his head and said, "His Highness bears the fate of Tai on his shoulders."

"He sure does," Sougen said with a nod.

The man started to add something more but changed his mind. With a shake of his head, he raised his head again, and with his hands bound behind him, straightened his posture.

"I pray that the fortunes of war be with His Highness."

He bowed deeply. Among his puzzled companions, not a few repeated the gesture.

"We will let him know," Sougen answered and urged Risai on.

They exited that room and entered the next.

"They don't appear to agree with Asen's actions at all."

"They don't, and yet that is understandable," Risai answered. "A good many of Asen's retainers understand reason and the Way. After all, they know what it means to serve in a distinguished and respected army."

"They would have been the most surprised by Asen's insurrection."

"I suspect so."

But the vast majority held loyalty in equally high regard. So they followed Asen. Wherever their commander told them to go, they went. That's what it meant to be retainer.

Risai turned those thoughts over in her mind as she and Sougen arrived at the warehouse. While the guards busied about unlocking the doors, Risai glanced through a large crack in the wall. Hands shackled, Yuushou was sitting on a broken-down bed, head slumped to his chest.

Yuushou had once been a regimental commander in Asen's army. After Asen usurped the throne, he was promoted to general in the Army of the Right in the Palace Guard. Risai took in the scene and hung back by the doors. Sougen nodded and entered the warehouse by himself.

He shut the doors and said, "I never imagined the two of us meeting like this."

Yuushou raised his gaze. "You don't say." He flashed a self-derisive smile and again bowed his head.

A few pieces of furniture had been left in the cavernous room, but there still remained the gaping hole in the roof. A tarp stretched out like a tent helped to stave off the cold, along with a rug and blankets. But even if they unshackled his hands, they couldn't very well bring in a hibachi.

"It's been a long time since news of you reached my ears. You seem to be doing all right. If nothing else, you've got your health."

There was a broken edge to his voice. The two of them had known each other for a long time. They'd both served as regimental commanders in the Imperial Army. Though they'd never been particularly close, Sougen was well acquainted with Yuushou's temperament and valued his achievements. Gyousou promoted Sougen to general when he became emperor, elevating his rank above Yuushou, who remained a regimental commander. But Sougen made sure that did not change the nature of their previous relationship.

Maintaining a respectful distance, Sougen sat down in the one chair.

"We captured your soldiers. For the time being, we're just keeping them tied up with rope. We will treat them as well as we can. Most are being kept out in the open. We're working to secure shelter as quickly as we can."

Sougen was sure that if he lost a battle and was taken prisoner, the disposition of the soldiers under him would be the first thing on his mind.

"Unfortunately, we don't have the wherewithal to keep all of the prisoners housed and fed. So there's a question I have to get an answer to. Why did you come to Bun Province?"

Sougen looked Yuushou in the eye. He should understand where the question came from. Like Sougen, Yuushou was a leader of men. If the aim of Asen's army was the subjugation of Sougen and all the rebel factions associated with him, there was no way he could release the soldiers they'd captured. Free them and they'd surely rally their forces and come at them again. Because if they didn't, they'd be in dereliction of duty. If told to attack, it was a soldier's duty to attack with all the means available to him and not retreat until ordered to retreat.

Sougen had two choices before him. Imprison and cast them aside, with not even enough to eat. Or execute them. Even as a subterfuge, if Yuushou could offer a reason other than to conquer them, he could very well leave it at that.

Yuushou said with a thin smile, "I will tell you the truth. We were sent here to conduct a search of Kan'you Mountain. It never occurred to me that you might be here. I doubt that even Asen-sama had the slightest inkling. Though messengers are likely headed to Kouki as we speak."

Yuushou then leaned his head to the side, as if struck by a thought. “In the end, I couldn’t say whether or not I realized it was you. Our intention was only to engage the land gangs. The land gangs were there, they had some military types with them, and perhaps they were Imperial Army veterans. That was about the sum of the intelligence we had on hand.”

Yuushou softly sighed. “We couldn’t advance on Kan’you Mountain with the land gangs in the way. Hostilities commenced. But with all those military personnel among them, the battle turned against us. We couldn’t prevail with a single regiment so we retreated.”

He paused before continuing. “Given those conditions, do you think you could find a way to release my men?”

“Do you think that’d be enough to pass muster with your men *and* your superiors?” Sougen asked.

Yuushou grimaced. “Highly unlikely. Even if I order them to hold their tongues, somebody somewhere is bound to say something about your presence here. And how the prisoner being held under Kan’you Mountain is a free man.”

“Yeah, probably,” Sougen said with a smile. “But I think calling it a retreat is the right way to go. We’ve known all along that news about us would inevitably reach Asen.”

They sallied forth to save the land gangs with that realization in mind. But it all turned out for the best. Rightly or wrongly, Risai and her contingent felt compelled to save the land gangs, and now Sougen was grateful. Thanks to them, they were able to meet Gyousou. If Risai hadn’t insisted on riding to the rescue, Sougen would probably not have mobilized his own forces. In that case, it was entirely possible that Gyousou would have been captured in the midst of the melee, and in the worst-case scenario, this time killed for certain.

“Are the land gangs your colleagues?”

“That’s not quite the right word for it. A while back, they lent a hand to some of our colleagues.”

That prompted a chuckle. “So despite your fears of being exposed, you chose the high road.” Yuushou craned his head back and stared up at the ceiling. “I quit.”

In response to Sougen’s puzzled look, Yuushou added, “I said we retreated. The fact is, I simply quit the field.”

“Yuushou—”

But Yuushou interrupted Sougen before he could point out that he’d have a hard time releasing his soldiers were that the case. Yuushou was digging his own grave with an admission like that.

“We lost to the land gangs. Returning to Kouki only to get raked over the coals by Chou’un and his ilk is well beyond the pale. My three battalion with disband here.”

Sougen looked back at him, eyes wide with surprise.

Asen-sama, this is as far as I will go, he told the man who lived on in his memories.

Yuushou had followed him for a long time now. There was a time when Asen was an object of pride for Yuushou. He was happy to be counted among his retainers and never shrank from letting anyone know it. But now he had to admit that was no longer the case.

Asen planned on recruiting the land gangs to excavate Kan'you Mountain, and then killing them to shut them up once the job was done. Sougen and Risai chose to reveal their existence in order to save those same land gangs.

He understood the cold logic of the former. The latter were fools for sticking their necks out for such a disreputable bunch. But Yuushou would rather be counted among the latter than the former. If he had to choose which camp he'd belong to, it would be the latter too. There was a time when he revered Asen as his commanding officer, and for a long time would have followed him anywhere.

Maybe Yuushou hadn't seen the real Asen from the start. Or maybe Asen had abandoned his own principles along the way. In either case, after this, Asen no longer deserved Yuushou's allegiance.

Yuushou corrected his posture. "Let me speak with my senior staff."

Yuushou assembled the regimental commander and three battalion leaders. With Sougen looking on from a distance, Yuushou began by stating, "I am leaving the army."

They no longer had a commanding officer. The officers and soldiers were free to do as they saw fit. They could go back to Kouki or they could return to their hometowns.

"General, what do you plan on doing after this?" asked one of the battalion leaders.

"As a follower of Asen, I inflicted much unnecessary suffering on the people of this kingdom. That is a debt I owe and a bill that has to be settled."

Yuushou had already shed the honorific language he had once consistently attached to Asen's name, which made his intentions all the clearer.

"Wherever you go, I will accompany you as well," said the man who had prayed aloud for the fortunes of war to be with Gyouso. He appeared to be the regimental commander and one of Yuushou's retainers. "If you will permit me."

Yuushou asked with a smile, "And if I decide to go home and take up fishing?"

"I don't see that happening."

Yuushou laughed. "I guess not." He looked at the three battalion leaders. "Gen'yuu has spoken his mind. However, having separated myself from the army and thrown

away my rank, you have no duty or obligation to follow me. You and your subordinates should decide what you wish to do on your own.”

“We will go with you,” said the first.

“Of course,” chimed in the second.

“I don’t need an answer right away. Take the time to think it through.”

The first battalion leader shook his head. “I am a soldier. Wielding a sword and charging into the fray is pretty much all I’m good for.” His mouth quivered. “So if I am ordered to strike down the enemy, then that is what I will do. If people are secretly harboring rebels and I am told that they are the enemy, it is my duty to strike them down as well. But their innocent neighbors? That is not something I can abide.” He pressed his fist against his mouth. “I’ve hated this for so long now.”

“You’re right.”

Unable to hold in his emotions, he began to sob. His fellow battalion leaders put their arms around his shoulders. Hanging his head and gripping his knees, the shoulders of the regimental commander shook as well.

Yuushou and his staff spent the whole of the next day meeting with their officers and soldiers. As a result, Yuushou’s captured battalions were placed under Sougen’s command. And so they changed their battle flags from followers of Asen to an army committed to his defeat.

“Who knew you’d end up taking responsibility for such a large family,” Yuushou observed, visiting Sougen at his headquarters.

“A responsibility I’m happy to have.”

“And I am truly grateful for that.” Yuushou pulled up a chair and sat down with an exhausted sigh. “The officers and soldiers despised Asen’s way of doing things more than I expected. They’d all been waiting for me to put my foot down and say I’d had enough.”

“You don’t say,” Sougen responded.

“They’d all been harboring feelings of guilt and remorse that I never sensed. A truly pathetic oversight on my part.”

“It’s probably the same with Asen. I have to wonder if it ever occurred to him that his retainers wanted no part of what he was doing. If it did, it must have weighed heavily on his mind.”

“I honestly have no idea.”

“Yuushou.” Risai stepped into the room. Accompanying her, Oukou and Seishi hung back by the entrance. “There’s something I really need to ask you about. Is it true the Taiho returned to Hakkei Palace?”

Yuushou nodded.

“Is he doing well?”

“Of course. He has reclaimed his position as province lord.”

“What about him calling Asen the new emperor?”

“That’s what we heard too. Which raises a matter I’d like to hear from you about. The Taiho said that Asen was the new emperor. If so, this time you are the ones engaging in a rebellion and Gyousou-sama is the usurper. Is that a state of affairs you are willing to accept?”

Sougen was the one who answered. “Yuushou followed Asen the way we followed Gyousou-sama.”

“So wouldn’t that make Gyousou-sama a rebel as well?”

Risai considered the question and remained silent. Moku’u had said there was something odd about the public pronouncement, and his information came from inside the Imperial Palace. But Yuushou had been there in the Imperial Palace and didn’t appear to have any doubts.

“And what of Gyousou-sama?”

Sougen said, “Concerning Gyousou-sama, tomorrow—no, probably today—he is moving to a safer location. He is resting for now. As is to be expected, he is quite exhausted.”

“Makes sense. You did a good job of rescuing him.”

“Except we didn’t rescue him. He rescued himself.”

Yuushou gaped at them. “You didn’t recruit the land gangs to help clear away the rockslides and extricate him from the mountain?”

“Nope,” Sougen said. “That’s not at all how things turned out. The land gangs were occupying Kan’you Mountain in order to sift through the mine tailings for valuable stones. Once we finally figured out that His Highness had to be in Kan’you Mountain, we intended to ask the land gangs to help search for him. But His Highness extricated himself before we even got started.”

“That is amazing,” Yuushou said. But then his expression tightened. “No, it is to be expected. If you don’t want Gyousou-sama to be labeled the usurper, you need to act with all due haste.”

“Meaning?”

“I am not familiar with the particulars. However, the Taiho made it clear that Asen could not be enthroned unless Gyousou-sama first abdicated. That’s why I was dispatched to Kan’you Mountain. In short, until Gyousou-sama abdicates, he remains the emperor. Only then can Asen accede to the throne.”

“Gyousou-sama is our liege and is in our camp. Abdication is out of the question.”

Yuushou nodded. “If no abdication is forthcoming, other means may be found. Should the Divine Will manifest itself to that end, His Highness would find himself aligned himself with those calling for rebellion. Asen must be overthrown before that happens.”

Yuushou spoke softly, a mixture of emotions playing across his face.

“Excuse me,” interrupted Oukou. “I don’t understand what you mean by the manifestation of the Divine Will. But as long as Gyousou-sama is still alive, there is no reason for the Divine Will to move in one way or the other.”

“I am no more enlightened than you on the subject,” Yuushou admitted, and briefly summed up how matters stood.

Listening to him, Sougen again recalled how Moku’u had cautioned them against putting too much weight in these reports. It was all strange in the extreme.

“What do the people in the Imperial Palace think?”

“They find it hard to believe but have no choice but to believe. Because that is what the Taiho said.”

“Could this be a scheme or stratagem on the part of the Taiho?”

Yuushou reacted with a startled expression. “A scheme—by the Taiho?” he said, eyes wide. And then he furrowed his brows. “That is possible. Chou’un and his faction did express those same doubts on a regular basis.”

“Are there people giving voice to such misgivings?” Risai interjected. “Is the Taiho doing all right?”

“As far as I know, he is doing fine. Because of the questionable people about, his freedom has been curtailed. But as you might expect, nobody has been able to stand in his way for long.”

“The Taiho should have had a companion with him. His name is Kouryou.”

“Yes, he was with the Taiho. One of Eishou’s retainers, wasn’t he? But Kouryou is no longer in the Imperial Palace.”

“No longer there?”

“He escaped and went on the lam. He attempted to help Seirai.”

“How is Seirai faring?”

“I wouldn’t say he is doing well. He is alive. Kouryou tried to rescue him from his predicament. He disposed of the guards and managed to make contact with Seirai. But I guess he couldn’t take Seirai with him, and fled before it became clear what he had done. I am not privy to more detailed information beyond that.”

“Is the Taiho by himself?”

“I couldn’t say how isolated he is. He does have people around him committed to his safety and well-being.”

Risai breathed a sigh of relief, as did Sougen, who said, “There are a mountain of things I would like to ask Yuushou. But let’s leave them for another day. Risai needs to rest too. It won’t be long until our departure.”

Risai nodded and left the main hall. When she returned to her room, Kuushou from Danpou Temple was waiting for her.

“I heard you’re leaving early in the morning,” Kuushou said. “Here.” He handed her a package. “Not necessarily as austere as military fashion might dictate. But he can’t have his sword getting separated from his person. Regular traveling clothes won’t do while wearing a sword. I apologize that this was originally garb for an apprentice.”

“Thank you.” Risai reverently accepted the bundle of clerical robes.

Beneath the conical bamboo hat and hood was a windbreaker and black outer robe designed to keep the cold at bay. The set also included a white tunic and divided skirt, *tekkou* gloves that covered the back of the hand and wrist, and shin guards. It was a wardrobe Risai had gotten used to seeing in Jou Province. That stood to reason, as the monks of Danpou Temple carried weapons.

The outfit rather resembled the white top and bottom halves Risai and her fellow officers wore beneath their armor. Though fairly thin material, the wool blend was the same as that in military winter gear. The *tekkou* gloves and shin guards issued by the military were made from leather. The monks, of course, made theirs from cloth, perhaps preserving the heft and thickness with cotton padding, bound together by fine stitching.

Risai packed everything together with new undergarments and footwear and waited for Gyousou to arrive from Rokou. After he completed his own preparations for the journey and went to bed, Risai arranged the items next to him. Along with the bell tied to his scabbard she attached the passport that Taiki had left with her.

The passport had been endorsed by the Imperial Kei. Should the situation arise, the mark of the Kei Privy Seal might even serve as a sort of talisman.

At the first light of dawn, a small band numbering but a dozen kijuu set off from the ruins of Saihou and headed west.

Those bidding them farewell watched until the silhouettes of the kijuu disappeared out of sight and then silently slipped back into shadows of the ruins.

Part Twenty-One

Chapter 16

[21-1] **R**ain fell on Kouki for the first time in many days. The rain gouged gullies in the snow that had accumulated in the shadows and steadily washed it away.

The depths of the previous winter were now behind them. With Chou'un banished from the Imperial Court, the ministers refocused their attention on the shifting tides of power. For the time being, the position of Chousai remained unfilled.

The portfolio of the Chousai was taken over by Ansaku. Ansaku was Chou'un's protege. The ranks of the anti-Chou'un faction remained formidable and they attempted to use the opportunity to shut him out of the Imperial Court.

The final decision was left up to Asen. "Well, for now, let's see how he does."

So Ansaku was appointed on a wait-and-see basis. The ministers had a hard time disagreeing with that line of reasoning.

There were also a few who observed, "He had a front row seat to all of Chou'un's biggest mistakes. He should know what he's doing," and approved of him taking over the job. And those who held him in poor regard for not having racked up any great achievements. With opinions about him evenly split, Ansaku got to work as the acting Chousai, paying all due respect to Asen and the Rikkan. The initial objections to him faded from public view.

With Chou'un gone and the keystone position of the Chousai no longer the face of the government, the ministers who had tied their careers to the Chousai also found themselves sidelined, which had the equal and opposite effect of diminishing the power of the opposing forces. Thought at first to be the most promising candidate, Kashaku failed rather spectacularly to garner any support.

The simple fact of the matter was, the civil service had gotten tired of all the political wheeling and dealing. Many believed a new era was about to dawn. There was no need to question the complex inner workings of the government. They couldn't go wrong by following the Saiho, who was also the kirin.

The power behind Taiki's pronouncements continued to grow. Some among the Rikkan were wary of that power, but after following and supporting Chou'un, and given the mess he'd made of things, they had no real choice but to act on Taiki's

advice. Nobody gave any weight to those who criticized Taiki for amassing the power he now wielded.

The kingdom began to move with a newfound vitality. Aid was delivered to the refugees with unprecedented speed. Regional distribution warehouses short of supplies were replenished. Reconstruction of the cities continued apace and employment increased. Villages that consumed their seed grains over the winter had their stocks replenished for the planting season.

And then came news that Yuushou's army had been destroyed in Bun Province.

"Yuushou?" Asen queried.

Ansaku answered with a deep bow. The messenger who arrived by air said that Yuushou's army had been routed and driven from the field.

"Three battalions under Yuushou's command had invaded territory held by the land gangs en route to Kan'you Mountain when all communication with them ceased. According to survivors who escaped from the battlefield, the three battalions were decimated and Yuushou was either captured or killed."

"What happened?"

Asen looked at Ansaku and then at the Minister of Summer kneeling behind him. He couldn't make out either of their expressions. As if readying themselves for a hurricane, they practically had their foreheads affixed to the floor.

"Shukuyou, I'm asking you what happened."

He'd given Yuushou the simple mission of surveying Kan'you Mountain in order to extract Gyousou from his subterranean prison. There shouldn't have been any need to engage in hostilities to begin with. And even if there had, he couldn't see how Yuushou could have possibly lost.

"Yes, Your Highness," said Shukuyou, who appeared trying to shrink through the cracks in the floor. "I don't understand myself. As best we can tell, the region around Kan'you Mountain is occupied by the land gangs. The army took one city fortress from the land gangs. They left a battalion there and one in Rin'u, and then advanced on Kan'you Mountain. What we know for certain is that a battle commenced and the forces under Yuushou's command were routed. Many of the officers and soldiers have not returned and Yuushou himself vanished."

"How many of these land gangs?"

Mulling over the question himself, Asen had to wonder if the land gangs in the vicinity of Kan'you Mountain even had the numbers to realistically engage the Imperial Army. He didn't think so, though he had no basis for that conclusion. The main land gangs should have been annihilated during the turmoil of the subjugation campaigns. But not all of them.

In the intervening years, Asen had paid no attention to the land gangs in Bun Province. Since the conclusion of the subjugation campaigns, their existence simply

had no meaning to him. And yet in the meantime, they'd not only survived but grown to such numbers.

Even if they regained all their lost ground, he had grave doubts that they'd be able to take on the Imperial Army. To be sure, the land gangs governed their territory with a mailed fist. But they weren't soldiers. In equal or even superior numbers, he didn't see how they could defeat a better armed and better trained Imperial Army.

"We don't know their troop strength," Shukuyou said. "Bun Province has no good idea either, other than they appear to control many towns and cities around Kan'you Mountain. The region was once governed by Kan Shire. The shire castle was in the city of Saiho, the gateway to Kan'you Mountain. Except it was destroyed during the subjugation campaigns."

Ansaku said, "In other words, the destruction of the shire castle gave the land gangs the opening to exert complete control over Kan Shire?"

Shukuyou nodded. "I think that pretty much sums it up."

"One shire comprises two thousand, five hundred households. Under normal circumstances, that rounds out to a population of five thousand."

"I cannot imagine there are that many left in the shire," Shukuyou countered. "But then Yuushou was commanding a force of twenty-five hundred. Many more than that would be required to so decisively crush his regiment."

"Fifteen hundred. Yuushou stationed reserve battalions in both Rin'u and Sokou."

"Even so, we're talking about the Imperial Army. Against fifteen hundred Imperial Army soldiers, the land gangs would need five times or ten times that number."

"We've been taking the land gangs for granted. Moreover, Yuushou did not go there to fight. He had no idea of the extent to which the land gangs occupied and controlled the area."

"Be that as it may," interrupted an irritated Asen. "What has Bun Province been doing all this time? To start with, how can the government have no good grasp of how many people are involved in the occupation of Kan'you Mountain?"

He spoke in a stern tone of voice but just as quickly felt his temper wane. Refusing to challenge the occupation by the land gangs and remaining ignorant of their true numbers—there was no mystery. The province lord of Bun was another one of those mindless mannequins. He wouldn't lift a finger unless Asen ordered him to. Since losing all interest in Bun Province, Asen hadn't ordered anybody there to do anything.

Shukuyou prostrated himself on the floor, mouthing a stream of apologies, as Ansaku looked on with a reproachful expression. Neither of them turned a critical eye toward Asen. Of course. They didn't know what was really going on in Bun Province. Asen was likely the only person in Kouki who knew what happened in Bun Province and was familiar with the true state of affairs there.

Asen was cursing his inattentive self under his breath when a hollow-eyed undersecretary approached him from behind. "Ukou," he said in a small voice.

Asen nodded. "That's enough of this for now," he said in a cool tone of voice. "Just make sure you two get a handle on what is going on."

After he dismissed them with a wave of his hand, and the two withdrew in a groveling manner, a brazen Ukou strode into the room. He didn't kowtow or even kneel, only walked right up to Asen.

"So *he* came back," Asen grumbled. Yuushou hadn't returned but Ukou had. On the one hand, that was a good thing because Asen had to know what was going on in Bun Province. On the other, Asen was equally irritated that the man hadn't conveniently gotten himself killed. And the latter reaction won out.

Maybe his toughness accounted for his survival. Or maybe he just wasn't tough enough to ride to Yuushou's rescue. Whether Ukou hadn't been inclined to help Yuushou from the start, or simply wasn't capable of doing anything about it, the loss of three battalions certainly wasn't weighing on his mind.

Ukou's ugly red uniform bore a few more stains than before but few additional blemishes. The man himself didn't appear injured in the least. Asen didn't have any difficulty imagining him picking easy fights and turning tail as soon as battle turned against him.

"What happened?"

Ukou's answer to Asen's curt question with unexpected ferocity. "Gyousou was there."

Asen almost rose to his feet. He managed to stifle the urge. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning exactly what I said. That man didn't just crawl out of his grave. He was reborn from the land of the dead."

Ukou sat down on the floor cross-legged.

"Yuushou was excessively naive. I told him about Gyousou and he was still too sparing with his soldiers. He cares too much about appearances. I said he should either kill the land gangs or enslave them. But he cared more about having himself a nice little textbook battle. That's what tripped him up."

After indulging in a bout of coarse laughter, he went on, explaining how they fought at a city north of Rin'u called Sokou. Ukou advised Yuushou to wipe them all out. Yuushou didn't agree. They traded blows with the land gangs and their ilk. As a result, a large number retreated to Anpuku.

"We faced off against them again in Anpuku. This time, they were holed up in a fortress. Probably wanted to give the women and children time to escape. We waited outside the city. As expected, they came running."

Ukou flashed a dark smile. Asen didn't ask what he did to them. He didn't want to sully his ears.

“How many of these land gangs?”

“I couldn’t give you an exact number. There weren’t that many confronting us in Anpuku. Probably more than a battalion. Less than two.”

A single battalion consisted of five hundred soldiers. Two came to a thousand. The land gangs in Bun Province probably numbered closer to the latter, but as a fighting force, they’d never been that big to begin with.

“They couldn’t take out a force of that size?”

Ukou said with a dismissive sneer, “Yuushou was never in the mood to fight. He had orders to investigate Kan’you Mountain so that’s all he thought about. If he could smash them with a direct attack, that’s what he’d do. But if they ran away, he was fine with that too. That kind of stupid naivete was a bad habit of his.”

“Even so, it wasn’t a fight he should have lost.”

Yuushou had three battalions under his command. Many more soldiers and they were better armed and equipped. The Imperial Army had kijuu and winter weapons. Many of the senior staff were registered in the Book of Wizards. The land gangs didn’t have winter weapons. Under normal circumstances, they’d have a hard time badly wounding a wizard with ordinary swords and lances.

Any battle between the two sides should have ended as soon as it began.

“They called up reinforcements.”

“Reinforcements?”

“They were in pursuit of the land gangs after they fled Anpuku. That’s when the reinforcements showed up.”

“Was Gyousou leading them?”

Ukou shook his head. “Nothing like that. A bunch more of the land gangs. Maybe some of those chivalrous knights among them. Not regular soldiers. Not in formation and organized like an army.”

Ukou and his men weren’t expecting reinforcements so they scattered.

“Back to the previous discussion, the land gangs numbered maybe eight hundred or so. We didn’t hear about there being more of them and Yuushou’s guys didn’t figure that into their calculations.”

“Enough about Yuushou,” Asen said. He’d be fine never hearing Ukou utter his name again. “And then?”

“That’s the sum of it. Those reinforcements came after us so we bugged out. That’s when my men got cut down by Gyousou. I would have liked to go one on one with him, but I figured updating you about the situation was more important.”

Ukou advised Yuushou to get Gyousou. Yuushou acted at once but sent only two platoons. They probably couldn’t have taken him into custody in any case. By the time they ran around mobilizing the whole army, it’d be too late.

“Then the reinforcements showed up. And here we are.”

If you asked him, he'd say the reinforcements who showed up after that exceeded the total that had assembled so far.

"It was the crack of dawn and the battlefield was pretty much a free for all, so it was hard to tell. But we're talking about a considerable number, with a bunch of veterans mixed up among them. I could tell by the way they fought."

"Gyousou's retainers?"

"Probably. Gyousou's retainers and rebel forces."

"That doesn't make sense. They're enemies of the land gangs."

Ukou shrugged. "Maybe they were ordinary rebels. That makes the Imperial Army losing to them all the more pathetic. Your weak-kneed retainers had no stomach for the fight. They weren't ready to take up arms, and when fresh troops showed up, they were clean out of luck. They looked for an opening and scampered away from the battlefield. Just as I could have told you, everyone who takes their marching orders from a lily-livered general will end up heading for the hills."

Asen glared at Ukou. Yuushou was no coward, and Ukou was the last person to be throwing that kind of abuse around. He felt the anger rising in his gut but averted his eyes from Ukou's scornful face and choked it down.

A mean man resorts to low means. He needed someone with dirty hands to clean up the mess Yuushou and his men had left behind.

Asen forced himself to maintain a cool demeanor. "And what of Gyousou?"

"Like I should know," was Ukou's answer. "Maybe Yuushou caught up with him. Or maybe he couldn't even accomplish that. Probably the latter."

"That's enough," Asen said, and dismissed him.

"I'll collect my reward money later," Ukou answered, the avarice written all over his face. With a cackle of coarse laughter, he turned his back and walked away.

That was the moment at which Asen's gut instincts solidified into murderous intent. The man knew too much. *Let the hired help handle the dirty jobs* was far too glib a solution for this situation.

Because Gyousou was out there somewhere.

Soldiers had to be sent to Bun Province. No matter what, Gyousou had to be taken into custody. When had he escaped from his prison? Asen could only imagine that someone must have been excavating Kan'you Mountain. The land gangs, perhaps? Gyousou and the land gangs should be mortal enemies. But that didn't mean they weren't willing to lend each other a hand.

Or these were just rebels dressed up like the land gangs. When he thought about it a little more, that was certainly possible.

Gyousou put himself in command of the rebel faction. Except they should have realized they were exposing their presence. They should expect reprisals as a matter of course. And yet they were still there in Bun Province. Though even if they were,

they could be counted on to move all the important people to a safe location, starting with Gyousou.

The problem came down to guessing where they would go if they left Bun Province. Common sense dictated that they had safe havens across the border in I Province and Jou Province.

He summoned Shukuyou. "Strengthen our troop presence in I Province and Jou Province and dispatch more soldiers to Bun Province."

While delivering those orders, it occurred to him that that Jou and I weren't the likely locations, after all. Gyousou would be on guard against such counter moves and would anticipate Asen building up forces there.

What would I do if I were him?

He'd do the last thing anybody expected and head west to Ba Province or south to Kou Province. But did Gyousou have any strongholds there? Without one, Asen didn't think Gyousou would risk making a move in that direction.

"The Bun Provincial castle."

That depended on how many allies Gyousou had amassed. If they had the numbers to capture the castle, they'd take it in one fell swoop. If they didn't, they'd storm the closest comparable fortress in the vicinity. A much safer option than Ba Province or Kou Province, where they had no firm base of operations.

They may be getting ready to lay siege to the castle right around now.

Asen summoned the Rikkan. "A rebellion has broken out in Bun Province, likely led by remnants of the Imperial Army."

He managed to keep Gyousou's name out of the discussion. The throne still belonged to Gyousou. He could hardly divulge that he was leading the rebels. The moment that information got out, Asen would be branded the rebel.

"By remnants of the Imperial Army, do you mean Gyousou's retainers? They and the land gangs joined forces?"

Shukuyou was nodding in the affirmative when a messenger ran into the room. "A second dispatch arrived from Bun Province. Elements of the Zui Provincial Guard have been observed in Bun Province."

"The Zui Provincial Guard."

Asen and the assembled ministers bristled with anger. The messenger prostrated himself on the floor.

"Eyewitnesses reported seeing what they believed to be the general of the Zui Provincial Army of the Center."

"The general of the Zui Provincial Army of the Center. Risai?"

So she's alive, Asen muttered to himself.

He'd heard nothing about her for so long he assumed she was dead. He'd sullied her name with the label of *regicide*. After that, she had to run for her life, with the

whole kingdom in pursuit. When it came to Risai, Asen as well had tenaciously stuck to her tail, making her fight for every inch of her freedom.

In the end, she made clean her escape, though she wouldn't have had an easy time of it. She lost her home town, friends old and new. That she was still alive was no small surprise. All the more remarkable was her continuing will to fight. What could account for such stubborn zeal?

She must loathe him, and certainly nurtured a righteous indignation toward the current state of affairs. But Asen had to wonder if that was the sum of the situation.

Risai had always struck him as an odd duck. She wasn't one of Gyousou's retainers. Far from it, she went on the Shouzan with Gyousou. If anything, he was the one who stole the throne from under her nose. Nevertheless, Gyousou appointed her to important positions that she accepted. From Asen's long experience, in such a situation, Risai should feel no little enmity toward him.

Well, *he* wasn't one to make the mistake of confusing cause and effect. The decision wasn't ultimately up to Gyousou, after all. But ministers and military officers alike were wont to go with their gut and come up with the reasons afterward.

Too bad their paths hadn't crossed earlier. He had to wonder what they'd say to each other if they'd met back when he and Gyousou were vying with each other as fellow generals in the Imperial Army.

Well, that was water long under the bridge. Ruminating about it now wouldn't change a thing.

A flustered Shukuyou raised his voice. "What if—what if Risai-dono is in Bun Province too?"

Asen mulled it over. "We should probably assume she is there. Yes, Risai is very likely in Bun Province. She is undoubtedly leading the rebels and allied themselves with the land gangs."

Risai and Gyousou. Otherwise, Yuushou wouldn't have been driven so easily from the field.

"Risai-dono is a former general. Armed civilians are flying the flag of revolt. This is a rebellion on a completely different scale!"

Asen took in the flustered Shukuyou and bellowed, "What are you running away from? They're nothing more than the stragglers from a lost cause! They lost their retainers and managed to patch together a fighting force by forging alliances with the land gangs and rebels. Nothing more than the desperate leftovers from the last war."

Asen gazed about the room. "Yuushou didn't go to Bun Province to fight in the first place. There's no reason to heap praise on the enemy that defeated him. There's no reason to be afraid of a bunch of bandits. Except his defeat is bound to inspire seditious elements in the kingdom and that is going to be a problem. We have to

strike while the iron is hot. Dispatch soldiers to Bun Province on the double and destroy them!”

“Yes, sir!” Shukuyou said, kowtowing before him.

Risai is alive.

The man by the name of Genkan quietly slipped away.

She’d been on the run for seven years, had joined hands with the land gangs, and managed to amass that much power.

But what comes next?

The rebels under Risai’s command in Bun Province had come to Asen’s attention. If the past was any guide, a subjugation campaign was sure to follow.

“No. That won’t necessarily be the case,” Genkan said to himself. Asen wasn’t about to let these rebels off the hook. But he didn’t have the capability to carry out the kind of subjugation campaign he had in the past. Because now the moral weight Taiki brought to the situation hung like a heavy stone around his neck.

Still, Risai was going to find herself in increasingly dangerous straits going forward. Knowing that picking a fight with Yuushou would reveal their presence there, they nevertheless went ahead and kicked the hornet’s nest. They must be confident of the countermeasures they would take next. They were no pushovers but they could not rest on their laurels.

Everything depended on keeping Risai alive and kicking.

Chapter 17

[21-2] After seeing off Risai and Gyousou, Sougen withdrew from Saihou.

With Sougen in command, they relocated for the time being to Rokou. Beginning with the Gamon Temple contingent, they left behind in Seisai those who'd have no trouble blending in with the city. The majority of the soldiers then moved onto Kan'you Mountain.

They had to start by assuming that Asen had already been informed about Sougen and his men. News that the land gangs responsible for the destruction of Yuushou's army had remnants of the Imperial Army among their ranks should have reached Kouki. But they wouldn't have a good grasp of their troop strength.

Should a scouting mission arrive in the area prior to a subjugation campaign, they had to keep the facts from getting out. In particular, that Yuushou's army had allied itself with the Black Flags had to be kept under close wraps.

"Though if they come away believing they face a far smaller force than expected, all the better," Sougen muttered to himself.

He gazed across the pockmarked walls of rock. The caves carved into the cliffs were under renovation, increasing the number of livable abodes. The outward facing structure of Sougen's grotto as well was being repaired. Once the partitions and furniture were installed, the rooms might even take on a respectable appearance.

Outside the snow was thankfully melting away. Long overdue repairs to the roads and aqueducts were proceeding as quickly as possible. Sougen had last seen Rokou when he came here from Seisai. Back then it'd been little more than ruins. With the worst of the winter behind them, the city emerged from the blanket of snow and ice.

The growing population was varied as well in age and vocation.

The women and elderly of the land gangs who'd initially fled the Imperial Army had remained in Rokou. They swept away the snow and began preparing the land for planting. After the land gangs defeated the Imperial Army, Sokou and Anpuku were still too dangerous to return to. Fleeing Bun Province altogether was the safest choice, but that option wasn't open to the people who'd ended up here.

"Our opponents aren't so naive that we can risk taking them for granted," Yuushou said with a smile. He took off his overcoat and tossed it onto the sleeping hearth. "If they can't see us, they'll assume we're hiding somewhere. Without knowing where, they'll be loath to launch an attack. I suppose that's a good thing, though."

"Probably," Sougen agreed with a wry grin of his own.

“More importantly,” Yuushou added, peeling off his tunic and sitting cross-legged on the sheepskin throw covering the hearth, “Shouldn’t we mobilize sooner than later? There’s still snow on the ground. That will slow down an army on the march. At a fundamental level, that means taking the Bun Provincial castle before the snow melts.”

Sougen nodded. “That is our intention. If we can believe Tonkou-dono, we already have the troop strength to conquer the castle. After that, it’d turn into a waiting game while we gathered our forces.”

Yuushou folded his arms and sank into thought. “How reliable is this inside man of yours?”

“No idea. Tonkou-dono is a civilian. I think it’s a bit of a stretch to say he completely comprehends the disposition of a soldier. No matter how odd the circumstances, a soldier is taught from day one that when the orders come down, he’s to do as he’s told and not ask questions. I think Tonkou-dono may not be taking that ingrained training seriously enough.”

There was some truth in Tonkou’s opinions, even given the risks involved in inveigling information from Provincial Guard generals. However, no matter how much a soldier could be manipulated, if his superior officer didn’t make the first move, he wasn’t going to either. On the other hand, no matter how loyal soldiers might be to Asen, if the general chose to ally himself with Gyousou, his army would follow him.

The same way that Yuushou’s retainers had not refused his orders, despite their loathing for Asen.

Yuushou said in an unruffled tone of voice, “Bureaucrats follow orders like soldiers, but believing the two are the same in that respect may be a bit naive.”

Lives often depended on the orders that came down from a military superior. There were times when an order had the same weight as telling a soldier to march to his death. And if so ordered, that’s what he would do. That’s what it meant to be a member of the military.

“Furthermore, there is a danger inherent in believing that holding the castle alone will be enough. Of course, taking the castle will give us another place to take refuge. The presence of his Highness will encourage our comrades in arms to gather there. Perfectly true. However, we may not be estimating the scale of the operation correctly.”

“Such as the number of soldiers not adding up as estimated?”

“That possibility is real. I don’t see a problem with you and your retainers. Wherever they are hiding, they will come running. The officers and soldiers under their command will gather when the orders go out. But what of those long removed from the chain of command? If they weren’t hunted down by Asen, then they would

have scattered far and wide and be lying low. Whether they will respond to the orders of their superiors now is a real question.”

Probably, Sougen thought.

“Likewise, after we take the castle, the logistical costs will be nothing like normal. Even if we can keep casualties to the minimum, we can’t dismiss the likelihood of losing men and material in the process, which will make maintaining a big castle a much bigger burden.”

Sougen again nodded in agreement. Yuushou had a good point. Bun Province itself had been unable to store up the blessings of the land. The decrease in the population, along with the decrease of arable land, the devastation left behind by the subjugation campaigns, would have reduced the harvests. Amidst all that poverty, corrupt officials skimmed off the lion’s share and that reduced the yields all the more.

And then there was the real risk of the warehouses and stockpiles within the castle being torched before the castle fell. And then if Asen launched a headlong assault of the castle, all the wealth of Gamon Temple wouldn’t be nearly enough.

“What if the ledgers that Seirai hid away fell into our hands?” Sougen murmured aloud.

“Definitely. With the Imperial Repositories emptied out, Concealing the ledgers has very real consequences. Asen himself doesn’t know their whereabouts. I never even heard a rumor of Seirai telling anyone. Seirai wasn’t going to talk no matter how badly he was tortured. He wouldn’t give up his secrets under any circumstances. The whole exercise was pointless. That’s the feeling that’s been in place for many years now.”

“That is a barbaric story.”

Yuushou nodded. “I couldn’t tell you anything about where any of this took place, only what I heard in the wind. At times like this, being a wizard might be the worst thing in the world. A tragic fate awaits those that casual cruelty cannot kill.”

He hadn’t heard any rumors about Seirai in recent years. He had no idea what condition the man was in these days. But everybody knew that Asen had been desperate to discover the location of the ledgers since the early days of the coup d’état, a quest that was never going to end quietly.

“Hold on,” Sougen said, raising his voice. “Kouryou definitely tried to rescue Seirai. And though he contacted Seirai in person, he didn’t bring him along when he escaped.”

“That’s what I heard too. And?”

“The man was right there in front of him. Why didn’t Kouryou take Seirai with him?”

“I wasn’t privy to the details, but perhaps the guards were closing in and he didn’t have the time to remove the chains and fetters, or Seirai himself was so weak he wasn’t capable of escaping with Kouryou and told him to go on his own, or some combination of those factors.”

“Both are possible. Either way, the two made contact. And Seirai knew the location of the ledgers.”

Yuushou opened his mouth to respond. Sougen nodded. “In such a situation, can you imagine him *not* entrusting him with the whereabouts of the ledgers?”

“No, I can’t. And if he really had, all the more reason to leave Seirai behind.”

Seirai would be so much dead weight during an escape, only making it more likely that both of them would get captured or killed. Kouryou had much better odds of getting away alone, so handing over that knowledge to him made the most sense.

“No, wait a second.” Yuushou held up a hand. “The ledgers are in fact just a big pile of bonds and certificates. A sizable volume. It’s possible that Gashin took them when he returned to Kouki. As soon as he was safely somewhere else, he buried them. In that case, the person truly in charge of the ledgers would be Gashin, meaning that Seirai wasn’t the only one who knew their secrets.”

“True enough,” Sougen said with a tip of his head. “Let’s turn things around and think about it from another angle. Risai delivered news of Asen’s coup to Bun Province and Kouki. Eishou and Gashin were in Bun Province. Seirai was in Kouki. Around the same time I was ordered to track her down, they had already decided to go on the lam themselves. When Gashin was ordered to return to base, they put a plan together.”

“Eishou would desert in Bun Province while Gashin followed orders for the time being and returned to Kouki. And subsequently vanished. Seirai likely concealed the ledgers while Gashin was making his way back to Kouki, and then entrusted them to him when he arrived.”

“I think so too. Eishou left Bun Province and went underground. Meanwhile, with the ledgers in hand, Gashin did the same. Seirai may have been planning to escape too. But Asen arrested him before he could disappear as well.”

“So even if Seirai said nothing about the location of the ledgers, Gashin would know. Eishou and Gashin came up with the plan to start with. But—” Yuushou’s voice trailed off.

Sougen picked up on his train of thought. “But Asen’s campaign to subjugate the rebellion got innocent civilians in the vicinity caught up in the fray. That boxed in Gashin and Eishou. All they could do at that point was go their separate ways, lie low, and stay out of sight. However, before fleeing to Bun Province and Kouki, they must have arranged to meet at a later date. Or else figured out a way to communicate with each other.”

“I would think so,” Yuushou said. “Seirai couldn’t help them out once he was in custody, but Gashin could use whatever means they’d devised to keep in contact with Eishou.”

“Except those means must have failed as well. Perhaps Seirai himself was intended as the mutual point of contact. In any case, they were acting under emergency conditions and couldn’t have made all the necessary plans in advance. When they first fled, they each took to the hills trusting in their knowledge of the lay of the land. In fact, they had no idea how things would turn out until they got to where they were going. Maybe Seirai was their only common point of reference. So when Asen put Seirai under arrest, Eishou and Gashin lost any way of passing messages to each other.”

“Makes sense,” Yuushou said. “Eishou lost track of both Gashin’s whereabouts and the whereabouts of the ledgers. Seirai would have understood this. So he would have told Eishou where Gashin—”

“No,” Sougen interrupted. “Though Gashin was in charge of the ledgers, we’re talking about a veritable mountain of documents. It’s not like he could stroll around with them stuffed in his pockets. He had to leave them somewhere for safekeeping. I’d say that Seirai knew about that hiding place, or had a good idea where it might be, and that’s what he communicated to Eishou. If he could manage to find a way there, they would learn how Gashin was faring as well.”

Sougen said with a firm nod, as if confirming to himself this line of reasoning. “Yes, that’s probably how events evolved. The three of them devised a plan beforehand to stash away the ledgers and escape. Accordingly, Eishou and Gashin ran off with the ledgers. But the ledgers constitute a huge mass of materials. Though they were able to haul them out of the Imperial Palace, they were never going to get far on foot, not to mention the big risk in doing so. So they found a safe place to leave them. Seirai knew where the safe house was so he remained behind in Kouki—in order to make the arrangements and communicate the particulars to the respective parties.”

“And that’s what ended up delaying his departure.”

“Yes. Gashin escaped to the safe house. Thanks to Seirai’s work behind the scenes, the preparations had been made to take custody of the ledgers. But Seirai ran out of time to forward that information to Eishou.”

“And that’s what he entrusted to Kouryou. I imagine Seirai had a good idea where Eishou was hiding. It’s equally likely that Eishou managed to get word back to Seirai before he was arrested.”

“Do we have any good way now of getting in touch with Eishou and Gashin? We have to take Kouryou into consideration as well, and whether he made it to his destination in one piece.”

While making this observation, Sougen wasn't entirely able to suppress a growing sense of excitement. Sougen and his retainers had been separated from their soldiers and forced to disband in Jou Province, that was at the time no better than enemy territory. Gashin had no choice but to leave a good half of his troops behind in Bun Province. Unlike them, Eishou had certainly acted without delay and gone underground with most of his army.

In fact, he had heard very few rumors of Eishou's men being captured or executed.

"Eishou had five regiments totaling twelve thousand five hundred soldiers under his command. Of course, his army would no longer be at full strength. But still—"

Sougen finished making his point. "Taking into account Gashin's losses in Bun Province, and the depletion of our officer ranks and with them the resources to mobilize the troops, his army should well outnumber our divisions."

Kouryou knew that Risai was in Bun Province. If it became necessary, it shouldn't be hard to reach out to them through the Taoist temples and the shin'nou. In any case, should Gyousou make his presence known, he would certainly come running.

Yuushou agreed. "Moreover, Gashin fled Kouki with two regiments. The odds are good that those two regiments at least came through the ordeal relatively unscathed."

"Seven regiments of the Imperial Army—"

"Of course, they all suffered losses. And more during the subjugation campaigns that followed."

"But the Black Flags will make up the difference."

Sougen had managed to scrape together two regiments from the survivors of his old army. Add about the same number of soldiers remaining under Risai's command. According to Tonkou, at least a division from the Bun Provincial Guard would respond favorably to their entreaties, as would a division from the Jou Provincial Guard. Altogether, four complete armies.

Sougen murmured aloud in stunned disbelief, "Asen is no longer beyond our reach."

Chapter 18

[21-3] The Bunkou Road linked Bun Province and Kou Province to the south. From Rin'u, it crossed the southern quarter of Bun Province before entering Kou Province. It then ran south through Kou to Soukou, the provincial capital. This was the same highway Risai had once taken north to Rin'u.

The Bunkou Road was the fastest way to Kou Province. However, the Provincial Guard was deploying additional troops in the vicinity of Rin'u. The battalion Yuushou had left behind and the battalion withdrawing from Sokou added up to two additional battalions now garrisoned there.

When reports from Yuushou ceased, these two battalions were believed to have fallen under Asen's control. The destruction of Yuushou's army also put the Provincial Guard on high alert. That made straying anywhere near Rin'u a risky proposition. There were few safe detours around Rin'u left. Moreover, the heavy pedestrian traffic on the Bunkou Road meant more witnesses. Even if they broke the larger units into smaller groups, any journey with kijuu was bound to attract attention.

Despite the improving weather, camping outdoors was still difficult given the current conditions, and all the more suspicious if anybody did happen to observe them. So moving off the highway and flying over the mountain roads to keep out of the public eye remained a less viable option.

Not to mention Gyousou's unique appearance. Anybody recognizing him would increase the danger. Foregoing a kijuu and mingling with the crowds might be the safest tactic but their flight to En absolutely required kijuu.

"Descending from Saihou to Rin'u would be dangerous in the extreme. What about coming from the other direction toward Ryuukei, then through Kakyou, and taking a side road to the Bunkou Road?"

That was Sougen's suggestion back when they were figuring out the route. It didn't sit well with Risai. The mountain trail from Ryuukei to Kakyou was none other than the same one used by Gyousou and his attackers. Going that same way with Gyousou struck her as a bad omen.

Don't be a fool, Risai laughed at herself. She knew she'd gotten more on edge of late. The thought of losing Gyousou after reuniting with him at long last scared her silly.

Except the tightened security around Rin'u was an undeniable fact. Not only Rin'u, the army could have set up camp in any of the surrounding cities. And where

soldiers gathered, the civilians grew more wary as well. Thinking through the problem with a cool head, it'd be best not to get anywhere near Rin'u.

After consulting with Sougen and his senior staff, Risai chose to avoid the direct route to Kou Province along the Bunkou Road. They'd instead take a short jog into Ba Province and then head south toward Hakurou via Ryuukei and Tetsui. Before arriving at Hakurou, they would turn onto a less traveled trail, and from there join the South Snow Road and continue along the highway to the south of Ba Province.

This road crossed the mountains into Ba Province and continued from the mountainous region in the south of Ba Province to the coast. Along the road were mountain trails from Ba Province to Kou Province. One of these led to the far side of Bokuyou Mountain opposite Touka and from there to the Kou provincial capital of Soukou.

It was the long way around, but rugged ranges otherwise blocked the way between Bun Province and Kou Province. If they skirted the Bunkou Road, traveling through Ba Province on the mountain trails was the fastest route.

Risai explained to Gyousou, "It will take several extra days, but this is clearly the safest way. Leaving the South Snow Road is the best way to stay out of public view." She glanced at Houto.

Houto agreed. "Only the South Snow Road is crowded. A short detour will reduce the traffic considerably, though that doesn't mean there will be no travelers at all. But it's an accessible route that should not attract attention or leave any lasting impressions. Once in Ba Province, the cities and people grow more scarce, making it possible to cover ground on kijuu more quickly."

Houto turned his attention to the map marking the route. Gyousou responded with a wordless nod.

"Not only will we stay out of view," Risai continued, "but in the off chance that anybody picks up our trail, we can rest easier knowing they'd be unlikely to figure out that our destination is Kou Province."

With the discussion concluded and the course settled, they descended from the mountain. Gyousou rode in the center of the group, with Kyoshi and his men filling in the gaps at short intervals in front of and behind him. Only Risai rode alongside, though again maintaining a respectful distance. Moving in a group was bound to attract attention, but the bigger problem was Gyousou's kijuu.

Gyousou captured the suugu in the depths of the earth. Already a high-strung creature, it was not yet entirely tame, and made all the more nervous by the surrounding kijuu. The rest of the kijuu were just as apprehensive toward Ragou. Hien had gotten better used to Ragou than the others, but preferred not to get too close. Hien wouldn't resist if Risai insisted but clearly wasn't at all happy about it.

Sorry, Risai apologized and patted Hien's neck. Hien responded with a low throaty growl, the kijuu's way of saying it understood. *I know this matters a lot to you.*

The long journey ahead was going to demand a lot of them. But once they arrived in En, that leg of the journey would be over. The kijuu could rest their wings before setting off to rescue Taiki. Hien was always delighted by the prospect of meeting Taiki. Taiki called Hien by name with pats and hugs. Sensing Taiki's presence always put Hien in a good mood.

This time, we're taking back the kingdom for good.

Turning those thoughts over in her mind, Risai led them down the mountain and along the highway. Aside from the Black Flags, few other travelers were found on this road. For the most part, they didn't have to worry about staying out of sight. Having descended the mountain, the ruins of Tetsui came into sight, the Tetsui where Gyousou had previously disappeared.

There they stopped. Knowing that Gyousou wanted to see the city again, that was where they decided to take a break.

What had once been a city was now an overgrown field, the remains of the ramparts and houses strewn hither and yon. The frostbitten wild grasses and trees that had grown up around the rubble were buried beneath the snow. Nevertheless, the place was not devoid of life. A narrow footpath cut through the fields of frozen snow, weaving north through the mounds of rubble to the riboku, that wasn't much more than a blackened trunk.

The people of Tetsui had not died out. Kenchuu, for one, was alive and well. The city was destroyed during the subjugation campaigns and its citizens driven out. After Tetsui burned to the ground, anything left standing was leveled as well. At the time, the local tax collector in the provincial Ministry of Earth reported the riboku as "expired."

An altar had been assembled out of flat rocks beneath the corpse of the riboku. The remains of incense sticks and thorn oak berries lined the top of the altar. People brought a sprig of thorn oak, or perhaps just the fruit, burned the incense, and presented their offerings along with their prayers.

Gyousou quietly gazed down at them. Then he reached into the knapsack on his hip and drew out a small item. A small bell that rang with a small clear sound. He added it among the thorn oak berries.

"That is?" Risai asked.

"My offering."

"An offering?"

"Something I hope will contribute to their prayers."

Puzzled, Risai craned her head to the side, then realized the bell was the same as the one attached to Gyousou's scabbard. Gyousou closed his eyes and for a short while bowed his head before the altar.

After leaving Tetsui, at the next town they split into two groups and found lodging. After leaving that town, they put more distance between themselves and the highway. Traveling parallel to the highway and keeping it in sight, they traveled across country. When they drew closer to Hakurou, coming in from the countryside would actually attract more attention, so they returned to the highway. They set down their kijuu and led them on foot along the road.

On the fifth day, they turned off the highway onto a side road, and that evening came to the South Snow Road.

The road was in good working order and busy with traffic. Following Risai's lead, they moved at a steady pace, quelling their impatience and showing no indications of being in a hurry. Gyousou as well betrayed nothing of his rank or status, and took in his surroundings with complete composure.

Beneath the conical bamboo hat, the hood of his windbreaker pulled over his face, his eyes peered out with a piercing intensity, as if to etch every sight into his senses. As he put none of his thoughts into words, it was difficult to imagine what he might be thinking.

Three days later, they veered off the South Snow Road onto a highway that took them through the heart of the mountains toward Ba Province. The day after that they noticed a thin veil of smoke hanging over the valley.

"A fire?"

They came to a halt. The smoke was the thickest around a town at the bottom of the valley where the accumulated snow had not yet melted away.

"Looks like trouble. Let's go!" Kyoshi said.

Kyoshi glanced over his shoulder and couldn't miss the indecision on Risai's face. *Of course*. She wouldn't want to do anything that drew attention to their presence, that would make people remember them later, even if that meant not getting involved in local strife. Not when they had the emperor with them.

Kyoshi said, "His Highness and Risai should go on ahead."

He heard Risai breathe a sigh of relief. But at the same time, he couldn't miss the guilty look in her eyes, as if she was skirting her responsibilities as a soldier.

Gyousou spoke up. "Dressed as we are, not answering a cry for help would reflect badly on Danpou Temple."

"But—" Risai started to object, then shut her mouth. Instead, she said with a firm nod, "Let's get as close as we can as fast as we can, then dismount before proceeding further."

They flew off, keeping low to the ground as they navigated the wintry desolation of the mountainous land. In a wooded area close to the town, they got off their kijuu. Leaving the kijuu in the grove, they ran down the snow-covered slopes. When they emerged from the woods, the town was right in front of them, smoke arising from within the ramparts.

Given the columns of smoke climbing into the cold sky, there must be several fires burning within. Nevertheless, the black ground peeking out between the mounds of melting snow in front of the main gate appeared untrammelled. They didn't see anybody running toward the gate. Crossing the open land, screams reached their ears. A fair distance still separated them, but a large number of people were clearly crying for help.

Kyoshi raced into the town. The main avenue was vacant as well. The snow had been cleared away, more evidence that people lived there. Further on, four columns of thick smoke rose from the council house, the rishi, and the rika.

"I still don't see the source of the fire. Hurry!"

Spurred on by Gyousou's voice, they picked up the pace. They arrived at the rishi to find the doors secured from the outside. The set of double doors should otherwise open inwards but boards had been hammered across each side. They could hear cries and the sound of pounding on the doors.

They all seized hold of the boards and commenced ripping them down. Smoke billowed from the gaps between the doors. The smoke from the courtyard engulfed them like a cloud.

They tore away the boards with all their strength, wedging their staffs under the boards as levers. Once they'd removed half of them, Toushi called to the people inside, "Stand back! We're coming through!"

He and two of his men slammed their bodies against the door and finally opened a space wide enough to let one or two through at a time. But no wider. The crush of people inside blocked the way. Dark smoke instead of people erupted from the doorway.

"Out of the way!" Toushi roared.

He reached in and dragged out a man kneeling next to the door, then a second and a third, creating enough room for the doors to open. Then the people flooded out.

Risai asked, "What happened?"

A man in the crowd shouted back, "The land gangs. Damn them all!" He coughed and spit out a mouthful of black sputum before continuing. "There are people in the council house and rika too. Please save them!"

Kyoshi was already running toward the rika. The human screams were joined by the crackle of flames devouring the structure. A red glow illuminated the smoke rising from the council house.

A conflagration. The smoke and heat and sinister light of the burning blaze.

This time the people pleaded for help not in ones or twos, but in larger numbers. Kyoshi raced through the main gate and into the courtyard. There he spotted a group of men in front of the main hall. The sense of relief lasted only a moment as it became clear that these men weren't trying to open the doors but were holding them shut.

"What are you doing?" he shouted in a furious voice.

One of the men looked back in surprise just as Kyoshi's staff made contact. He swept the staff sideways before that man hit the ground, sending the one next to him flying. Amidst the melee, Kyoshi shifted his stance and delivered a blow to the boards covering the door. Cracks appeared in the wood. He hit the door with his shoulder.

Smoke and people poured out of the hall.

Eight gang members set out to rob the council house. With the help of the townspeople, they apprehended five in the front of the building and three more at the back. The main hall of the council house burned to the ground while the fires in the rishi and rika were brought under control.

"Thank you so very much. We don't have the words to express how grateful we are."

Risai shook her head. "We only wish we had passed by earlier."

Nodding to himself, Kyoshi glanced over his shoulder as five corpses were carried out of the council house. Alongside them were townspeople suffering from smoke inhalation and others nursing burns. Though they had managed to save the town from getting wiped out, there were far more victims than there should have been.

"The land gangs, right?"

A young man nodded in response to Risai's question. He explained with tearful eyes, "They once had the run of a nearby copper mine."

When the mines closed, they attacked nearby villages and hamlets and otherwise behaved in the worst possible ways. At the end of their ropes, they launched a rebellion of their own and this was the result.

"They snuck in during the night, took women and children hostage, and imprisoned the rest of us."

Risai let him tell his story uninterrupted, interjecting only the occasional sympathetic word. Kyoshi listened in from the side as he tended to the wounded. He glanced around, sizing up the situation. At some point, Gyousou moved to a place where he wouldn't stand out. And then in all the confusion, he disappeared. Kyoshi was certain he was aware of what was going on.

"Are any of you injured? We can't offer much in the way of hospitality, but you are welcome to stay the night."

Risai looked up at the sky. “No, you needn’t go to such lengths. Sorry to leave you shorthanded like this, but we are in a hurry as well and will have to take our leave.”

Taking her words as a cue, Kyoshi got to his feet. He handed over the care of wounded to a woman close by and gave her instructions on the course of treatment to follow. She thanked him with a deep bow.

The place was still wrapped in confusion. The sun lay low in the sky. One way or another, they’d be camping under the stars tonight.

In order to not attract any more attention to themselves than they already had, after offering what aid they could, they should have slipped away amidst all the confusion. But they simply couldn’t run away without helping to put out the fires and tend to the wounded. The council house still smoldered and not all the injured had been treated.

However they wanted to do their part, if they stayed there any longer, people were apt to start asking uncomfortable questions.

An elderly man in the surrounding throngs raised his voice. “But they’re going to come back. There are more of them out there. They’ll be out for revenge. You’ve got to help us out.”

Risai responded to the old man’s pleas with a perplexed look. Kyoshi as well wasn’t sure what they should do next. If the brigands they’d captured didn’t constitute the whole crew, then the conflict was far from settled. Still—

Standing there in confusion, he felt someone nudge his arm. He turned to see Oukou. Oukou directed a glance behind him, which Kyoshi understood to mean it was time for them to disappear. While sharing words with the wounded, with painful reluctance, he moved farther and farther away from the crowds. His first and only priority now was getting Gyousou where he needed to go.

“Please. With this many wounded, there is no way we can keep them at bay.”

The people around her begged and pleaded, but the woman could only shake her head with a regretful mien. Glancing around at the people assembled there, she said, “I’m sorry. In any case, my companions have already moved on.”

Teisetsu looked for himself and indeed they had disappeared from the town square.

“But—”

“I am truly sorry. Due to circumstances beyond our control, time is of the essence.”

“At least stay until morning.”

“This is literally a matter of life and death for us as well. I can only ask you to forgive us.”

The townspeople surrounding her reached out as if to cling to her. Teisetsu stepped forward. "I believe you do have your reasons but you can see the sorry state our town is in. If the land gangs return, they will slaughter us for certain. But at this late hour, we do not have the means to escape."

"I'm sorry," was all the woman could say.

Teisetsu was about to again attempt to persuade her when he felt a tug on his arm. Gen'ei shook his head, a solemn expression on his face. "Such demands are entirely unreasonable. We're the ones who decided to fight back in the first place." He patted Teisetsu on the back. "It hardly makes sense to prevail on a bunch of strangers who happened to be passing through."

The woman bowed her head. Teisetsu watched her run off into the distance with a profound sense of disappointment. Gen'ei was right. These travelers had nothing to do with them. It was enough for them to spare the time and effort they had already.

Or so he tried to persuade himself. *What are we supposed to do?* he asked himself. Sure, they'd lived to fight another day, only to leave the land gangs angrier and out for revenge. They'd defeated the land gangs only a short time ago, and this was the result of them thinking a bit too highly of themselves. The land gangs weren't done with them. The only question now was how to deal with them when they paid a return visit.

What was the provincial government up to? What was the province lord doing? Why couldn't any of their superiors put a halt to this lawless behavior? All the pent-up frustration left him at his wit's end.

Also watching the woman as she departed, Gen'ei abruptly said, "You know, one of them, he was there one minute and gone the next."

Teisetsu cocked his head to the side and responded with a quizzical expression.

Gen'ei looked back at him. "In the midst of everything, one of them just slipped away. You saw him, didn't you? He was wearing a monk's habit with the hood pulled down over his eyes. He had on one of those big bamboo hats."

"I couldn't say," Teisetsu said listlessly. He had too many other things to think about right then. He turned on his heels. "Anyway, for the time being, we should get out of town. At least for tonight—"

"I know what I saw," Gen'ei said.

Teisetsu felt an ominous echo in those words. He turned around. Gen'ei's features were stiff from the cold, his face streaked with soot, his eyes bloodshot from the smoke. But those eyes glittered with a strange glow.

Chapter 19

[21-4] The Provincial Guard was on the move.

The dispatch from Tonkou caught up with Sougen in Rokou, where he had withdrawn with his forces. More than five days had passed since Gyousou set off on his journey. As before, Sekirei raced from Hakurou to deliver the news.

“On the move?”

“The province lord delivered the orders. They are preparing for war.”

“I see.” Sougen nodded. Asen must have become aware of their existence. He’d expected as much for some time now so he wasn’t flustered by these latest developments.

“But not like the subjugation campaigns carried out before.”

Sougen looked back at Sekirei with a puzzle expression. “Not like the subjugation campaigns?”

“In that case, they would be deploying in a far more expedited manner. Moreover, they’re ignoring the usual preparations and procedures you’d expect before a military engagement, though they are following all the legal and customary formalities. As Tonkou put it, the Provincial Guard is mobilizing by the book.”

As Sougen pondered what in the world they were up to, Yuushou said, “That makes sense. Asen can’t act in the arbitrary ways he has up until now, not with the throne dangling right in front of his eyes.”

But of course. That’s what it came down to. The next day, a communique arrived from Kouki confirming these suspicions.

“The Imperial Army is moving on Bun Province as well. Seems they’re heading north as we speak.”

“So they’re finally coming here to stamp us out for good?” Seishi said to Sougen. In Risai’s absence, Seishi had taken command of the Rin’u forces.

“Yeah,” Sougen muttered.

“The rebels and the land gangs. Anybody standing in the way of retaking Kan’you Mountain.”

That prompted a startled look from Seishi. Sougen nodded. “In other words, a full-on assault on Kan’you Mountain in order to retrieve His Highness. Except His Highness isn’t there any longer.”

“Meaning that Asen hasn’t found out yet?” Seishi wondered aloud.

Yuushou cocked his head to the side. “I find it hard to believe he’s still in the dark. At the very least, Ukou would have reported everything that he saw and heard.”

At the time, Yuushou's retainers in the immediate vicinity overheard what Ukou told him.

"Everyone who was there with me." Yuushou stared off into space. "I believe they are all in Rokou. I don't believe any of my men would have run back to Kouki with that information. Ukou is the problem here."

"What happened to Ukou after that?"

"I don't know. How about you? Did any of you manage to take him out?"

Sougen answered in a less than certain tone of voice. "We killed a fair number of those so-called Red Armor, but not all, I don't think. There's no way to tell whether Ukou was among them."

"I suppose not," Yuushou muttered.

"If they've still got Kan'you Mountain in their sights, that suggests that Ukou didn't make it back to Kouki. Maybe he got killed in action west of Anpuku. Or rather, he hightailed it out of there to places unknown."

"He very well may have run for cover. In any case, he violated every rule in the book along the way. If any of the soldiers who participated in the attack on Anpuku get back to Kouki, there definitely will be hell to pay."

Sougen nodded. "For the time being, I think we can assume they are still in the dark. Which would make this good news."

"Then what's our next course of action?" Seishi asked Sougen.

"Send a messenger to Kyuusan and tell them to escape while they still can. The last time, he faced a single regiment. This time he's got a whole division headed his way. That's not a fight he has any chance of winning. If they really are doing things by the book this time, he can expect to be on the receiving end of a scorched earth campaign. He needs to get away, the sooner the better. Kyuusan is bound to insist that there's no taking the land gangs for granted. But the kingdom has changed since the return of His Highness. They can't stay wedded to the world they used to know and the way things used to be."

Seishi raised his voice and said, "I'll go see Kyuusan and bring him around. Any problem offering them a place here in Rokou?"

Sougen shook his head.

Seishi left the compound and headed to see Kyuusan.

Informed of Seishi's visit, Kyuusan tossed aside his chopsticks in exasperation. He hadn't eaten since morning and had finally got his hands on a meal. Thanks to Risai, they'd escaped certain destruction. Nevertheless, Kyuusan's gang had suffered grievous losses. He had a mountain of things to take care of, starting with tending to the wounded, repairing the damage to the city, and getting basic services running again.

And now he had to get it done with a fraction of the manpower. He'd worked nonstop without a break or a meal. When he found a minute to sit down and eat dinner, they turned out to be short on cooks too. The only food available in sufficiently large quantities made him sick and tired just to look at.

"I apologize for interrupting. Were you in the middle of your meal?"

Kyuusan reached for a beer. "Don't worry about it. I've got an empty stomach and no appetite."

"It's exactly at times like this when you've got to get something in your stomach." Seishi hefted a boulder sized bundle onto the table. "It's got to be tough being so short-handed these days. I recruited the services of a local kitchen. I don't know if there's enough to go around but I hope it's a start."

"Thanks." With a big smile, Kyuusan opened the bundle and parceled out the items to the hungry crowd that quickly surrounded the table. "We've got nobody here who can cook worth a damn. All they make is stuff like this."

Seishi sat down across from Kyuusan and examined the untouched dishes. "I'll call it gourmet as long as it's edible," he said with a grin. "Mind if I have some?"

"Help yourself."

Seishi explored the plate with his chopsticks. It was piled high with deep fried vegetables and mystery meat. Even after pulling it closer, all he could smell was the oil. The meat and vegetables were garnished with rice that was two-thirds a mix of grains other than rice, floating there in the oil.

Watching Seishi eat it, Kyuusan chuckled. "You soldiers really are something. You'll eat anything."

"It's not that bad. Want some?"

"No," Kyuusan said with a wave of his hand. Instead he picked up a stuffed rice cake wrapped in bamboo leaves. A delicious aroma wafted up when he peeled back the leaves. "So, what's up?"

"Looks like another scorched earth campaign." Seishi delivered the alarming news without the slightest hint of alarm.

"Scorched earth—"

"The Bun Provincial Guard and the Imperial Army are mustering their forces. One to two divisions of the former and one division of the latter. The Provincial Guard hasn't moved out of Hakurou but the Imperial Army has left Kouki."

"Headed here?"

His appetite vanished in a flash. Facing down a single regiment, Kyuusan's forces racked up a serious number of casualties. Now a whole division was coming their way.

"The fruits of victory. The mighty land gangs smashed a single regiment. That kind of thing that will sober up your opponent fast."

“We’re not the ones who defeated them.”

“Don’t worry about that. They’re not going to make any fine distinctions between you and us. They will assume we’re allies.”

“Are we?”

“Well, it looks like we ended up that way,” Seishi quipped.

Kyuusan took in Seishi’s wry smile with mixed emotions. He didn’t recall allying the land gangs with these remnants of the Imperial Army. They weren’t at each other’s throats any longer, and depending on the circumstances, had been willing to lend each other a hand. But now they were headed in the same direction at the same time. In the end, he’d come to think of Risai and her crew as a fellow faction in the land gangs.

Meaning, if they didn’t have any reasons to fight each other, they wouldn’t. And if there were good reasons for mutual profit, they would cooperate.

“I see. So now you’re the rebels.”

That’s what they were to the occupants of the Imperial Palace. Though Kyuusan and the land gangs had lived outside the law, they weren’t interested in defying the emperor. It was never their intention to become rebels. But having lent the rebels a hand, it was probably too late to avoid that label.

“Sorry about getting you involved.”

“You saved our necks. That’s nothing to apologize for. If anything, the blame should fall on us. We dug in our heels when we could have backed off. We got you caught up in a mess of our making.”

“A decision we made all on our own. We reached out and they think you’re rebels too. We figured that was in the cards, but we couldn’t look the other way.”

Seishi glanced around the room. Kyuusan’s men crowded around the long end of the table as if frozen in place, their attention focused on Kyuusan and Seishi.

“A lot fewer of you than before. How’s Shoukyuu?”

“He’s dead,” Kyuusan said.

Seishi let out a long sigh. “That’s too bad.”

Kyuusan struck the table with his fists. “Bad isn’t the half of it. Shoukyuu died and his wife and kid got killed outside Anpuku. The child was ten years old and he got cut down like they were gutting fish. And his wife—” Kyuusan interrupted himself in the middle of the sentence. “I can’t forgive them. So go ahead and count me among the rebels. I don’t care if that’s the label they pin on me.”

In order to help his wife and child get away, Shoukyuu stayed behind and held his ground and lost his life as a result. In the end, they all died.

“This isn’t a case of who we forgive or not. We’re talking about a whole division of the Imperial Army. There’s no winning against them. You’ve got to get away while you can.”

“What are you guys going to do?”

“We can’t run. Even if we did, if we didn’t fight the good fight and quit the field instead, we’d have no place to go. But we’re fine with that. We are working towards a goal, and as long as we accomplish that goal, we can call it a win even if we all die in combat.”

“What kind of logic is that?”

“The logic of a military man. Run or die. Either way, if it gets the job done, we can count it a win. No soldier died in vain.”

Though at the end of the day, dead is still dead, Seishi added to himself. *We perished like dogs at the side of the road and ended up food for the crows.* He said aloud, “But this isn’t your fight. You’ve got no reason to stick around.”

“We—”

“Whatever honor or glory you think you’ve got in the balance here, there’s nothing to gain taking on a whole army division. If anybody holds you in contempt for saving your own hides, tell them to give it a try. I’m telling you to get ready to abandon Kan’you Mountain too. That time is coming.”

A voice chimed up next to him. Sekihi jumped to his feet. “Where are we supposed to run to?” Behind Sekihi, Seishi recognized the old face of Chuukatsu.

“Your best bet is to head into the mountains and from there make your way to Jou Province.”

“So we leave Kan’you Mountain and Kantaku? Abandon Takki and flee to a city where we’ve got no connections to anybody? What do we do then? Beg on the streets for a living? Indenture ourselves to the rich?”

“Better than dying.”

“Sounds like pretty much the same thing to me. Starve to death, freeze to death, or get beaten to death. You end up just as dead.”

“The weather is going to improve after this. The towns and cities won’t be so inhospitable toward outsiders.”

“And fall and winter will inevitably arrive after that.”

“Then head to Zui Province from Jou. Rumors says that the Taiho’s welfare measures are beginning to take hold.”

“That’s not the issue,” Sekihi spit out. “Don’t you get it? As long as the current regime rules the roost, it’ll be the same no matter where we go. As long as that beast sits on the throne, there’s no safe harbor where we can flee.” Sekihi looked at Kyuusan. “Like the boss says, counting us among the Black Flags is all the same the us.”

Kyuusan nodded. “That’s what it comes down to.”

Seishi took a breath. He said with a wry smile, “I still think you should run for the hills. At the very least, the elderly and wounded, along with the women and children.

The rest can relocate to Rokou. There are places there where you can lie low for now and enough supplies to tide you over. People have been settling down in Rokou since the attack on Anpuku. But I'm telling you, providing you can rely on your legs taking you where you need to go, I'd put as much distance between you and us as possible."

"So, in the meantime, mind if we whittle down the cost of room and board here?"

"It's yours to do with as you see fit. I don't know if it'll be enough, though."

"The wounded can't run anywhere," Kyuusan said. "We'll put what we've got to good use. You have our thanks."

Chapter 20

[21-5] The tail end of the Imperial Army column had left Kouki and was headed for Bun Province when sightings of a man matching Gyousou's description reached Asen. The reports originated in one of the shire castle towns on the borderlands.

An uprising had taken place and rebels seized the fortifications, or so Asen read into the reports. That being the case, where would it be? Including the Bun Provincial castle, he narrowed down the possibilities to six locations. But according to the eyewitnesses, Gyousou passed through Nanshou, a city in the south of Bun Province, and headed toward Ba Province.

"So they're setting up a base in Ba Province?"

Except Gyousou's crew was said to be small in number, making it unlikely they would launch an assault on a castle in Ba Province. Surely they intended to escape to a safe haven somewhere.

"If they had the forces to hit a castle on the spot, Gyousou would hardly be going on alone."

No matter what castle they targeted, they lacked the manpower to attack and occupy the castle, and then come up with the materiel to support the occupation. Asen had no doubt that capturing a castle was part of the end game but that still had yet to happen. It stood to reason that until the real uprising took place, they would hide Gyousou in a secure location.

"And Ba Province is the last place any of us want to end up."

As far as Asen knew, Ba Province was a decrepit place. He had little familiarity with the land. Neither did Risai and Gyousou. He'd never heard talk of any connections between them and Ba Province.

"If they were heading through the center of Ba Province, they'd use the South Snow Road."

Once past Nanshou, they'd move to the south or southwest of Ba Province and then probably to Kou Province. Once through the soaring mountain range along the border, the road branched off in many directions. Tracking them after that would become difficult. They'd have to seize Gyousou before he got clear of the mountains. Even after deploying the air cavalry, there'd be little time to spare.

"Looks like I've got no choice."

Asen turned his eyes toward the deepening night.

The messenger from the Inner Palace arrived on Kisen's doorstep around midnight. Asen wished to see him at once.

"His Highness wants to see me?"

"He has a task that needs to get done and none but Kisen-dono would do. Please make haste."

He hasn't forgotten about me. That was the first thought on his mind. Asen hadn't forgotten about them. He hadn't turned his back on them after all.

"I'll be there on the double."

Kisen told him to wait while he got ready. Changing his clothes, he recalled the last time they'd met, Asen's voice and smile. He also remembered that he'd promised to pay Santou a visit. They had a meeting scheduled with Hinken. The plan was to get together with Santou beforehand and hammer out the details in advance, and then go to see Hinken.

Hinken had probably been summoned by Asen as well. If so, they'd have to call off the meeting. Santou would have been notified about the cancellation by now. Having someone apologize on his behalf would be the polite thing to do. So he sent a runner to explain the situation.

"Thanks for waiting."

Having put these various odds and ends in order, Kisen returned to the main hall. The messenger stood there as motionless as a mannequin. He turned his emotionless countenance toward Kisen and answered with a mechanical bow.

Santou listened to the runner sent by Kisen. "I see," he said.

Even though they once counted themselves among Asen's retainers, they and Hinken had long been treated in an indifferent manner, as if they ceased to exist somewhere along the way. But along with Asen's recent change in demeanor, it seemed a little light was at last shining on them too.

"Good news," he told himself, and then thought himself strange for thinking so, even a bit guilty.

As far as Santou was concerned, Asen was his enemy, as should be Asen's retainers, though Hinken considered him a trusted colleague. He was sure Kisen felt no differently. As the flow of time took one turn and another, a person's station in life and the stories he told about himself got cast aside like stones along the road.

He was equally confident that neither Hinken nor Kisen had conspired to commit regicide. Asen was the one who hatched the plot and carried it out. His retainers simply went along with their general's decision. Such a course of action would never have occurred to them otherwise. They did what soldiers were supposed to do. Asen was the one who plotted the crime and saw it through.

However Hinken and Kisen cooperated in its execution, they were only tools Asen happened to have on hand. There was no sense in blaming the tools for what was done with them.

Kisen surely must be pleased with this turn of events, Santou thought to himself as he proceeded to Hinken's office. Hinken was waiting with his subordinates.

When Hinken asked about Kisen, Santou explained that he'd been summoned directly by Asen.

"A summons from His Highness?"

"So you weren't informed, General? In that case, this must involve a special set of orders."

Voicing the obvious aloud left Santou with an uneasy feeling. Kisen was Asen's retainer, but at the same time, he was also under Hinken's command, equally one of Hinken's retainers. Summoning Kisen without going through Hinken didn't sit well.

Santou said, "I imagine we can expect to get an explanation from Asen-sama."

Hinken nodded, though with an altogether dissatisfied expression on his face.

It was after one o'clock in the morning when their discussions about the reorganization of the army concluded. The main subject of the meeting was how to proceed now that Yuushou was missing in action, whether they should submit a recommendation to replace him, and if so, who that should be.

That raised the question about how to allocate the soldiers who'd been under Yuushou's command. One option was to assign them to a new general of the same stripes. However, as his remaining soldiers also included his former retainers, the personnel choice might also run afoul of their personal loyalties, which in turn could affect troop morale.

On the other hand, breaking down Yuushou's existing forces at the regimental and battalion level and dispersing them among the existing divisions would certainly degrade the unit cohesion and operational effectiveness for the officers and soldiers involved. Those losses could be lessened by keeping the units as large as possible, but that would only make them harder to integrate at the command level.

Hinken said with a sad smile, "Unfortunately, all the worrying in the world will do little to address the problem."

Santou said, "Any summons sent to Kisen should have included the general as well. Asen-sama wouldn't sideline the general like that."

This time Hinken didn't agree or disagree. He responded with a wan smile, his expression betraying only a momentary look of unease.

Santou said his goodbyes and left the office. Along the way, he parted with his colleagues and returned to his quarters alone. Kisen's house was along the way, a short jog down a side street. Santou might as well drop by and see how he was doing.

If Kisen was home, it'd be a welcome chance to see his bright and cheerful face and congratulate his steadfast, good-natured subordinate in person.

He'd entered the alley to Kisen's house when he spotted a shadowy figure approaching through the darkness. Based on the height and physique, it must be Kisen.

"Hey, great timing!"

As soon as Santou raised his voice, he was struck by the oddness of the scene. He shut his mouth and gave the silhouette a hard look. The solitary human shadow walked through the dark night, gait uncertain, as if following a meandering line with tottering steps, now and then swaying from one side or the other, almost to the point of falling over.

Santou observed the scene with increasing suspicions. When the curious figure came closer, it was undoubtedly Kisen. Santou thought at first he was drunk, but a closer look revealed that not to be the case. His enervated face tipped backwards and he stared up at the sky with turbid eyes. He took no notice of Santou, even when he was standing right next to him, his hollow eyes only staring at the heavens.

"Kisen?" he called out, but Kisen showed no signs of hearing him. Kisen didn't look at him but only stumbled along like a soulless marionette. Within arm's length of Santou, he turned the corner.

"Kisen, what's going on?"

Santou ran after him and grabbed his shoulder. Kisen didn't turn around. When Santou gave his hold a firm yank, Kisen finally faced him with hollow eyes, pupils like empty black pits that looked at him and saw nothing.

Gazing into those eyes, a shiver of dread coursed down his spine. He recognized the condition. *That sickness*. There was no Kisen left inside of Kisen.

At a loss for words, the strength left his hand. Kisen turned his head back in the direction he was headed and staggered off.

"The dove—"

"Kisen?"

"—in the warehouse," said the retreating figure. "How horrible—how dreadful—"

Asen summoned Ukou early the next morning. Ukou had spent the night drinking, only to be woken up soon after he went to bed, leaving him in a foul mood. But Asen only sent for him when he had some dirty job that only Ukou could do. The opportunity to show off his skills and throw his weight around the way he liked always raised his spirits.

As payback for waking him up, he made the messenger wait while he took his time getting ready. He always wore his red armor whenever he had business to tend to. He strapped on the podao given him by Asen and headed to the Inner Palace. Ukou

never went anywhere without a sword. Ukou even had special permission to appear armed before Asen. If he was permitted to carry a sword around Asen, he could do so anywhere else in the Imperial Palace too, and everybody around him had to be constantly reminded of that fact.

When Ukou entered the Inner Palace, Asen was already on the throne. The room was cleared. Asen and Ukou were alone in the large hall. Asen didn't start talking until he'd confirmed that all the doors were closed.

"We know where Gyousou is."

"Ah," said Ukou. He chuckled. "So it's time to resume the hunt?"

The assault seven years before rose up in his thoughts. How astonished Gyousou had been at Ukou's skills with a sword. Gyousou had been thoroughly thrown off his game. He'd never forget Gyousou's face as he rained down blow after blow. Ukou never grew tired of remembering and reliving that engagement.

They'd first met in battle at an inopportune moment and Ukou didn't have the time to finish him off. The next time, though, he'd cut him in two. Picturing the thought, Ukou frowned to himself. Except he'd been expressly told to *not* kill him.

Asen was unlikely to believe Ukou was trying to go easy on Gyousou and slipped up. He could probably argue that he was trying to pull his punches but his opponent fought like a madman and forced his hand. Ukou smiled to himself.

"A hunt it will be but you won't be the hunter."

Ukou responded with a quizzical tilt of his head. Responding to Asen's beckoning call, several figures appeared from behind the folding screens. They were clad in armor and held swords.

Ukou looked back and forth between Asen and the squad of soldiers that appeared out of nowhere. *What's going on*, he didn't need to ask. Asen intended to dispose of him once and for all. He glared at this band of assassins, his whole frame trembling with fury. A second look and that rage turned to amusement. Standing at the fore was Kisen. Kisen was one of Hinken's duller underlings, utterly average as a swordsman.

For someone like himself, who had cut down the great Gyousou, Kisen didn't rise to the level of a serious threat.

He was about to laugh out loud when he took note of the look in Kisen's eyes. The expression froze on his face. There was no life, no living soul, in those eyes. He glanced at Asen. Asen's icy gaze all but turned him to stone. Asen held up a paper talisman and slowly tore it in two.

Kisen and the rest of the puppets weren't his foes. If anyone was going to finish him off, that would be Asen. Well, killing Asen and seizing the throne for himself wouldn't be such a bad deal. He was about to shout out a battle cry when a sensation

like *something* being torn from his back numbed his vocal cords. That *something* slithered up his spine to nape of his neck and crawled out of his body.

At the same time, a great heaviness descended upon his shoulders. Ukou remembered the last time he felt that ponderous weight. Now he screamed. That feeling of his head and limbs being stuffed with straw after a long night of drinking. A pervasive sense of fatigue he had not felt since Asen had possessed him with the hinman.

He took it from me! He took my hinman from me!

The hollow-eyed Kisen effortlessly drew his podao from the scabbard. His stance left not a single opening in his defenses, every movement practiced to perfection, flowing naturally as water. How could this be the same run of the mill soldier who had never fought better than the average amateur?

Overcome by a wave of panic, Ukou grabbed for the hilt of his sword. His trembling hand closed at first around empty air. When he managed to draw his sword, it was like hauling up an anchor. By the time the blade cleared the scabbard, Kisen was already close enough to reach out and touch him. Ukou managed to swing the sword. But it traced no gleaming arc through the air toward its target. Kisen was already nowhere near the leaden tip of the weapon.

Ukou retreated in haste, only to realize that he had moved closer to Kisen, now standing next to him, holding the podao high above his head. The tip of the blade drew a sharp and shining line in the air, just as Ukou's sword once had.

And a moment later, cut Ukou in two.

Kisen gazed down at the corpse, sliced neatly in half from the crown of his head to the bottom of the ribcage. He felt nothing. He reflexively flicked the gore off the blade and slid the podao back into the scabbard.

Off to the side, a voice called out to him, "Good job!"

That voice somehow struck a chord, speaking words that he had longed to hear for so long. Even with his head wrapped in a dark cloud, he understood that much.

He felt a faint spark of happiness and nodded.

"Head to Nanshou and capture Gyousou. Under no circumstances should you kill him."

Within the pitch dark, that voice shone down on him like the light from the sun. Kisen nodded again. But for some inexplicable reason, he felt a touch of loneliness.

Chapter 21

[21-5] The day after the air cavalry departed Kouki for Ba Province, Taiki barged in on Asen while he was delivering orders to Shukuyou.

Taiki's face was flushed and his hair disheveled. "I heard you know the location of Gyousou-sama."

Asen dismissed Shukuyou with a wave of his hand. "So it seems. Right now my men are headed there to take him into custody."

"I was told you sent the air cavalry from the Zui Provincial Army of the Center. I would like an explanation for why you mobilized the Provincial Guard without my authorization."

It being in a kirin's nature to abhor war, he could not lead the armed forces into battle. Thus the Zui Provincial Guard fell under the command of the emperor.

"Time is of the essence. This is an emergency situation."

"I understand the need to act with haste. But I was not given even the courtesy of being told that Gyousou-sama had been found. Moreover, if only as a matter of formalities, mustering the Zui Provincial Guard is the sole prerogative of the province lord, namely myself. I would ask you to please refrain from arbitrarily assuming control of the Provincial Guard without consulting with me beforehand."

Asen tented his fingers. "As I said, it was an emergency."

"Without a doubt, you must meet with Gyousou-sama. After all, I am the one who made the request in the first place. But why ignore me on a matter as grave as mobilizing the Provincial Guard? Was there some reason you could not persuade me of the necessity to do so? This is otherwise not something I can simply close my eyes to."

Asen peered through the triangle of his tented fingers and smiled. "And if you cannot close your eyes to my reasons, then what? Will you petition Heaven and withdraw the Divine Will? Or order your shirei to remove my head from my shoulders?"

Taiki sighed. "I'm trying to carry on a serious conversation here. Going forward, I'm simply asking you to consider your actions with more prudence and foresight. I'd also like to hear a good reason for deploying *my* Provincial Guard."

"I am deploying *your* Provincial Guard to apprehend Gyousou and exterminate the outlaws."

"What outlaws?"

"The rebel forces. They can no longer be left to their own devices."

“Those rebel forces rose up because of their dissatisfaction with your policies. Why not first familiarize yourself with the substance of those grievances? The Imperial Court as well is in desperate need of reform.”

“Oh, you can never kill all of them. I’m sure a few will crawl out of their holes afterward. I’ll listen to what they have to say then.”

Taiki gave Asen a long look. He sighed again. “Fine. Whatever.” He turned on his heels and started to walk away.

“Where are you going?”

“If you are going to do however you see fit, then I will do what I have to do too.”

“You mean, get in touch with Keitou and tell him to lend a hand to the outlaws?”

Taiki stopped in his tracks and glanced back over his shoulder at Asen, his features exceedingly calm. “I sent Keitou to Bun Province in anticipation of this moment. When he arrives, he will replace the province lord. I instructed him to use all due discretion in the subjugation of the rebel forces, and depending on the circumstances, indeed, lend them his support.”

Asen once more studied his tented fingers. “I take it you consider Keitou a close ally and one you can trust. That you would send him off to Bun Province, out of sight and beyond your reach, speaks to your trust in him. But I have to wonder whether he will arrive in one piece.”

Taiki paled. He stood there stock still. A thin smile on his face, Asen reached into his pocket and took out a sheet of paper—or rather, a sheet of paper torn in two—and held it up for Taiki to see.

“A paper talisman. It and the wooden amulet are a pair.”

Taiki craned his head to one side in puzzlement. Then he took a sudden breath and said, “What do you mean by this?” The firmness of the inquiry could not disguise the quaver in his voice.

“It means exactly what it looks like. I tore it apart when Keitou left Kouki. The amulet he is carrying is no more effective than any other piece of scrap wood.”

“Keitou is one of your retainers.”

“Was. The past tense is more appropriate now. I no longer count Keitou among my men.”

“Think more carefully about what you are doing! What will you do if Heaven withdraws the Divine Will?”

“Now who’s losing his temper?” Asen chuckled. “Coming from you, a rare sight.” Then he added in a low voice, “The whole thing was a lie.”

Taiki held his tongue.

“Of course, I mean your story about me being the new emperor. That’s all it ever was, a sham from the start.”

Responding to the questioning look on Taiki's face, a wry smile rose to Asen's face. "Did you really think I believed you for a second?"

Asen had played along but not once had the play been anything but a charade. The reasons were simple and straightforward. Asen knew better than anyone how far he had departed from the Way. He had stolen the throne from the emperor chosen according to the Will of Heaven. And then in order to keep possession of those pilfered goods, he slaughtered his own supposed subjects.

The Divine Will could not possibly descend upon the shoulders of a person capable of stooping to such depths.

But theology was the least of Asen's evidence. He could make youma his shirei. Taiki was surrounded by youma. And yet Taiki—and Taiki's shirei—not only took no notice of them but showed no inclination to defeat or subjugate them.

That was why Asen had severed Taiki's horn in the first place. He heard from Rousan that doing so would seal his powers as a kirin. That being the case, how could Taiki hear the word of Heaven?

Taiki spun this deception out of whole cloth. Asen had been wise to it all along.

When he said as much, Gyousou's humble servant responded shortly, his face pale, "Implausible."

Asen laughed under his breath. As a kirin, the kid had guts, on a par with a veteran soldier.

That hadn't been the case when Asen attacked him with his sword. He appeared a fragile child, with those around him expending all effort and affection to cradle that gentle heart with the greatest care.

The kirin was said to be the personification of compassion. All the more so with such a young kirin, harboring a soul as pure as his crystal-clear eyes. When Asen raised his sword, those eyes looking back at him were no less lucid.

Asen could not forgive those eyes, all the more so because of their purity. This young kirin had chosen Gyousou with those eyes, unsullied by a single speck of corruption.

Beyond redemption.

If only he could bring himself to believe that a kirin was capable of acting with depraved motivations or with the kirin's own self-interests in mind. But this young child left no room for doubt.

Asen swung with every intent of killing the kirin. At the last moment, some lingering spark of reason caused him to shift the sweep of the sword. The blade instead sank into his horn. Even the scream ringing in his ears did not arouse in him an iota of sympathy. He felt only the joy in realizing his revenge and the regret that he had not killed him.

And then the kirin vanished from this world. He would never have to look into those eyes again.

Or so he thought. Six years later, the kirin returned. This time around he proved a frighteningly difficult adversary to deal with.

Asen was certainly startled to hear himself declared the new emperor. Although caught off guard, he didn't believe it. In the first place, Gyousou was still alive. Two emperors could not reign at the same time. On top of that, at least if Rousan could be trusted, no emperor could be succeeded by someone with the same surname.

He doubted as well that a kirin missing his horn could hear the Divine Will. And given his usurpation and the subsequential slaughter of his own supposed subjects, he could imagine no scenario in which Heaven would smile upon him. That being the case, Asen's immediate assumption was that this must be a subterfuge. Taiki had ulterior motives in mind.

But what were those ulterior motives? Did he want to save Gyousou? Gyousou was nowhere near Hakkei Palace. And in any case, Asen was in no position to interfere. If Taiki was inclined to save Gyousou, Asen would like to see him try.

Asen would very much like to see him try. Or was he more interested in the people of Tai?

Curious about his true intentions, Asen decided to meet him. Taiki's eyes were as clear as they had always been, but Asen sensed none of the anger in himself he had before. Rather, emotions stirred that he hadn't felt in a long time. In the person of Taiki, here was the return of an implacable foe.

He lost interest in Taiki's intentions. He didn't know what the point of this farce was, but whatever it was, Asen wanted to watch how it turned out. He wanted to watch him try and save Gyousou. He wanted to watch him navigate the obstructions thrown into his path by Chou'un and his clique.

And maybe deep down that feeling meant he wanted to watch Taiki to take on Asen himself.

Asen didn't lift a finger to help. He unleashed the jisen and stripped Taiki of his allies. What he really wanted to see was a fight on Taiki's own terms. Oust Chou'un, rescue Gyousou, and save Tai, and do it all by himself. If that was even possible.

He knew that Chou'un couldn't stop picking fights with Taiki. Served only by the mindless puppets, Asen holed up deep within the Imperial Palace. While making it look as if he'd lost all interest in political matters, he wasn't so foolish as to hand over the reins of government to Chou'un and his ilk.

Asen planted spies and informants around Chou'un and the ministers of the Rikken. He knew what they were thinking and doing practically before they did. Of course, Taiki was no exception. He had his troops observe Taiki's every move. Taiki,

however, took more precautions than Asen expected, making it difficult to anticipate the cards he was about to play.

“Naming me the new emperor and returning to Hakkei Palace was a clever move.”

Asen didn’t believe him and Chou’un’s faction in the Imperial Court harbored all sorts of doubts. But they had no evidence to say one way or the other. After all, the kirin alone comprehended the Word of Heaven. Everyone around him had no option but to believe in the inherent goodness of the kirin and accept everything he said.

But the situation did not develop as Taiki hoped. Growing impatient, he snuck into the Rokushin. Asen was delighted. *This is one audacious kirin.* Taiki told him to step out of the shadows and take charge. Asen was not inclined to do so, but neither was he going to stand back and let Taiki have the run of the palace.

At a loss as to what to do next, Taiki attempted to reach out to Seirai. The Daiboku failed to rescue him and absconded. And so Taiki lost his biggest ally. Another welcome development. Taiki was but a single person. It was only right that he should have to get the whole job done by himself.

Except Taiki began building a camp of followers in earnest. He brushed aside Chou’un’s enmity and quietly but effectively tilted the Imperial Court in his favor. He turned his attention to the welfare of the people and produced results. While encountering the same pushback from Chou’un as ever, he slowly but surely turned the tables on him.

Enemies though they were, Asen was impressed. At the same time, those murderous impulses welled up in his heart. Kill Gyousou. Vanquish Taiki. Lay waste to the world. If he really was the emperor, then force him to make the covenant. If that was even possible.

But Taiki went ahead and did it.

That planted a small seed of doubt in his mind. Asen still couldn’t bring himself to believe he was the new emperor. If true, then with the covenant in place, he should not feel this overwhelming sense of defeat. No, the whole thing was a scheme hatched by Taiki. Taiki couldn’t actually make Asen emperor. And so it followed that Asen going along with this scheme should back Taiki into a corner.

That’s why he played along. More than anything else, he had no desire to see Gyousou come back to life and no intention of restoring Taiki to his original position of authority. Well, no. He was fine with bringing them all back as long as he could crush their hopes and dreams.

Asen looked at Taiki, who stood there once again adorned with serenity. He wanted only to destroy them with despair and see them face down in the dirt. That’s all he was asking for.

“You were in the wrong for choosing Gyousou in the first place. After this, I will see you live to regret that decision.”

Taiki at last lost that aura of sangfroid. His face pale, a look of bewilderment filled those clear eyes.

Asen smiled. "Whatever grudges you might harbor henceforth, direct them at Heaven for choosing Gyouso."

Asen swore revenge on Heaven. The pretender who stole the throne and set forth to revive the kingdom would surely see those efforts come to naught. Because Heaven withheld its blessings and its divine protection. But he could murder a kingdom with impunity. Providence itself was Asen's ally now.

Later that day, after Taiki returned to Nightingale Manor, the Imperial Army marched in. At the head of the company of soldiers was the Minister of Fall, who announced that Kakei was suspected of treason. Chou'un had provided testimony to that effect.

"Impossible!" Taiki declared, but his protests were summarily dismissed.

Kakei, the provincial prime minister, was escorted off the premises for questioning.

"Taiho—" said an anxious Juntatsu, watching as the gates were closed and the building was sealed from the outside.

"Don't worry. They don't intend to reach into my immediate vicinity."

Though Taiki spoke with an icy composure, he was clearly putting on a brave front. The provincial Rikkan was shut out of its offices and any remaining government officials were banished from Nightingale Manor. The only people left in Taiki's entourage were Ganchou, Yari, and Juntatsu.

Not only Nightingale Manor, for the time being, no one was allowed access to the main courtyard. The Minister of Fall explained that these measures were being taken to thwart further acts of rebellion. Though everybody knew there wasn't a particle of truth in a thing he said.

Part Twenty-Two

Chapter 22

[22-1] The Imperial Army headed north, crossed the provincial border, and headed to Rin'u. Bun Province had been experiencing a spell of good weather. But winter returned the day before, bringing with it a bout of bitter cold. Earth that had finally yielded to the till again froze solid, covered by a dusting of snow.

While the Imperial Army marched north, Kyuusan and his recruits from the land gangs formally reorganized under Seishi's command. At the same time, they abandoned Sokou and retreated to Anpuku. Before leaving Sokou, the miners and merchants and tradesmen and everybody else who could flee the city departed for Jou Province along the outbound highways.

With only a mobile unit made up from the land gangs posted in Anpuku, they pulled the laborers back from Kan'you Mountain and gathered the bulk of the personnel in Seisai.

As it had all along, the Provincial Guard showed no signs of doing anything. The division deployed outside Hakurou came to a halt.

"How long do you think until they mobilize again?"

The key players in the Black Flags assembled in the main hall. Their internal organization arose organically out of the characteristics of the groups that formed it in the first place.

The Koutaku forces under Sougen's command comprised the largest number of soldiers and made up the operational core. Alongside them were the contingents from Rin'u that Risai had brought together.

The Koutaku forces included soldiers under the command of Sougen's retainers and remnants of the Imperial Army divisions led by Eishou and Gashin that had disbanded in Bun Province. They comprised the Imperial Army contingent.

The Jou Province contingent consisted of units that had broken away from the Jou Provincial Guard.

Civilian rebels and chivalrous knights that gathered in Koutaku, along with members of the Koutaku Ordination Hall, made up the Ordination Hall contingent.

Four divisions in total.

Though many of the members in the Ordination Hall contingent had little experience in warfare, what they lacked in skill they made up for in numbers. Furthermore, among the Danpou Temple contingent and the chivalrous knights were master craftsmen whose skills could not be taken for granted.

From Rin'u came the forces commanded by Risai's retainers and the land gangs led by Kyuusan. The Hakushi, chivalrous knights, and the Gamon Temple contingent could hardly be called battle hardened, but they were well acquainted with the state of affairs in Bun Province and had a strong sense for the lay of the land.

The most battle ready and best organized were the three regiments under Yuushou that had switched their standards. Moving discreetly along the highways, the gathering forces already exceeded ten thousand.

Examining the map in front of them, Yuushou said, "Will they advance all the way to Sokou, knowing we abandoned the city? Or will they march on Kakyou, aware that Kyuusan and the land gangs were gathering in Seisai?"

Sougen shook his head. "We can probably rule out Kakyou. The links between Kakyou and Ryuukei notwithstanding, none of the highways there are wide enough to accommodate the Imperial Army and the mountain roads are still covered with snow."

"Or rather Koukyuu?"

From Koukyuu to Houtaku and past Tetsui to Ryuukei.

"I think we can take that option off the table as well. Any attack on Seisai would have to take place on two fronts to make sense. Ideally, three fronts. March east from Tetsui and north from Rin'u and hold Kakyou simultaneously. Once the Provincial Guard has been fully mobilized, we're sure to see them advance from the west. Hakurou via Tetsui to Ryuukei. In that case, the Imperial Army likely intends to proceed from Rin'u to Sokou."

A division of the Provincial Guard had already deployed to Rin'u. The arrival of the Imperial Army would double their numbers to two divisions. Those two divisions from the east along with one to two divisions from Hakurou could annihilate the Black Flags with little difficulty.

"Except," Yuushou pointed out, "the Provincial Guard in Rin'u was dispatched to support us. The Provincial Guard had to be mobilized to keep the supply trains moving. Because logistics at the provincial level cannot be redirected to support the Imperial Army."

Logistical support provided by the province was intended solely for the Provincial Guard. The Imperial Army didn't have the authority to seize them. If only as a matter of formalities, any provisions first had to pass through the hands of the Provincial Guard.

To prevent this from becoming a point of contention, a set of procedures had been established. The Imperial Army did not normally exercise direct control over its own supply trains. When its soldiers moved through a region, it first secured the cooperation of the local Provincial Guard. Should the province and the kingdom come to loggerheads, the Imperial Army would have to bring everything with them or make arrangements along the way.

Moreover, the whole objective of Yuushou's expedition was to survey Kan'you Mountain. The Provincial Guard had been dispatched to that end. They hadn't expected from the start to engage the land gangs. As a result, most of the soldiers were from the engineering corps. They had only a token contingent of air cavalry with them and even the regular cavalry had been kept to a minimum. They certainly didn't bring along any siege equipment.

"Nobody informed them that the land gangs were occupying Kan'you Mountain. They only found out after they got to Rin'u. They didn't have the preparations in place to remove the land gangs from the area."

The Minister of Summer in Kouki made the call to mobilize the Provincial Guard. Namely, Shukuyou. He had no idea that Kyuusan had occupied Kan'you Mountain. In this kingdom, that was hardly out of the norm. The unnatural reluctance of the Bun province lord to engage in governance was not due to any kind of betrayal on his part but because he'd been turned into a useless puppet.

So Shukuyou ended up mobilizing the Provincial Guard based on incomplete information.

"According to the reports we obtained thanks to Tonkou, the Provincial Guard in Rin'u hasn't changed since Shukuyou issued the orders. The numbers are impressive but not so much as a fighting force."

"Still, we're talking about the Provincial Guard. We can't take them for granted."

"Of course not. More importantly, we're also hearing that the Provincial Guard is not interested in fighting us. Whatever Asen has on his mind, it's not being communicated to the Provincial Guard. Otherwise, the composition of the forces in Rin'u would substantially change. In that case, the odds are high that the army on standby in Hakurou is simply there as a show of force."

"A bluff, you mean. They're not actually going to deploy?"

Yuushou nodded. "They give every appearance of attacking from Hakurou and Rin'u. But only the Imperial Army is going to mobilize. In other words, they remain in the dark about the Black Flags. They still think they're facing down an ad hoc collection of the land gangs, rebels, and veterans. A few menacing moves with a single division should be enough to intimidate a motley crew like that."

"If threats are what they're after, wouldn't it make more sense to march the Provincial Guard as far as Ryuukei?"

“Do that and they’d block a primary means of retreat. Kan’you Mountain is the goal of the Imperial Army. If the occupiers of Kan’you Mountain are that motley crew, they won’t want to make any headlong attacks. However sure the Imperial Army might be of defeating them if they did engage, they’d still suffer a fair number of bumps and bruises in the process. More importantly, it’d be more efficient to attack along a single front and leave open other avenues of retreat. That would thus create ample room for them to escape.”

The thinking was that, if the Imperial Army attacked from Rin’u and inflicted enough damage on the land gangs, they’d abandon the battlefield. But the Provincial Guard was holding back in Hakurou, so they had to make good their escape before the Guard marched out of Hakurou and launched their own assault.

“The Imperial Army presses its attack from Rin’u. At the same time, the Provincial Guard moves out of Hakurou. The land gangs have no chance of winning if they stand and fight. If they don’t get off the mountain before the Provincial Guard gets to Tetsui, they’ll lose any safe havens. This increases the possibility that they will stop resisting and flee as fast as they can, making a beeline for Koukyuu before the Provincial Guard reaches Tetsui. Done right, the Imperial Army recaptures Kan’you Mountain without drawing any blood.”

“That makes sense.”

“Any mopping up activities would be left to the Provincial Guard so the Imperial Guard could focus on Kan’you Mountain.”

“In that case, we get on board with the plan and run away. We can expect a sweep of the area but they’re not going to hunt down the stragglers with the ferocity they did before. The throne is right there within Asen’s grasp. He can’t be seen launching another inhumane subjugation campaign. Better to wait until after the enthronement and launch the campaign against the land gangs in accordance with the law. No need to hurry.”

Sougen looked at Yuushou. “Our job here is not to wage war and win. We’re going to avoid any full-bore conflicts and keep our forces fresh to fight another day. We’re gathering soldiers from around the kingdom. Once we whip them into shape, taking Bun Province castle becomes a real possibility.”

Yuushou nodded.

Several days later, the Imperial Army arrived at Rin’u. Though in battle formation, strangely enough, the columns came to a halt. The Provincial Guard as well showed no signs of resuming the march.

“What are they thinking?”

“Maybe they still don’t know that Kyuusan and his men abandoned Sokou.”

“Hard to believe. Their scouting parties would figure that out soon enough.”

The Imperial Army should have already been informed that Sokou was deserted.

“So does that mean the reason they are not moving is because they don’t have to? They have no desire to take on the land gangs, and with Sokou abandoned, there’s no need to attack?”

“But they haven’t abandoned Kan’you Mountain. Hasn’t the enemy been after Kan’you Mountain from the start?”

“There must have been some sort of shift at the command level.”

Just then, Chouten ran in from a room off the main hall. “Sougen-sama, a blue bird arrived.”

“From Kouki?”

“I can’t tell.” Chouten held out a small black tube. “It’s addressed to Risai-sama.”

“To Risai? Who is it from and why?”

Chouten shook his head. “I don’t know. The blue bird is a *koshuu*. Quite out of the ordinary.”

“A *koshuu*?”

The *koshuu* was a species of blue bird mostly used by the aristocracy. They were limited in number and few people possessed the resources to get their hands on one.

“Genkan?”

This was the first time Sougen had seen one of the black tubes with his own eyes. Based on the rumors he’d heard, it must be from the mysterious “Genkan.”

“Risai-sama is not here so I thought you should see it.”

Sougen nodded and took the bamboo tube. As with an ordinary carrier pigeon, the tube had been carried there on the leg of the *koshuu*.

“We should probably run this by Moku’u to make sure. But why have it delivered to Risai?”

He extracted a roll of thin paper from the tube, the same used by the military. Narrow characters written in an oddly formal style covered the almost transparent paper. The message was addressed to Risai. It stated that a highly mobile air cavalry platoon in Asen’s army had departed Kouki with classified orders and was believed to be headed to Ba Province.

“Ba Province? Why there?”

Had Asen caught wind of Gyousou’s presence there? Except he shouldn’t yet know that Gyousou had left Kan’you Mountain.

“They could only be after His Highness.”

“It doesn’t seem possible but we can’t ignore it either. A full platoon of the air cavalry will be much better armed and equipped than His Highness and his security detail. If they run into each other, I don’t see them prevailing.”

Meaning they could kidnap Gyousou, or in the worst case, kill him.

“Should we send support?” Seishi asked.

Sougen couldn't agree. Asen's army was right in front of them and ready to advance. "If we move now, they're bound to follow."

Moreover, the forces under his command were anything but highly mobile. They wouldn't likely be able to catch up with Gyousou in any case.

"Still, we can't overlook this warning, not when we don't even know how close his pursuers might be."

"How many kijuu would we need?"

"Even making the most of Hoyou-sama's connections, I'd say ten would be the most we could lay our hands on anytime soon."

"Ten aren't enough. Our opponents are a platoon of twenty-five air cavalry. At the bare minimum, we'd need twice that to adequately defend His Highness."

"We need to scrape together as many as can accompany us. We'll have to make up the difference with horses."

"Horses won't arrive in time. We really don't have any other options here. Let's gather our best riders and set them off after His Highness as fast as we can."

"That many leaving at the same time will attract attention. Especially right now."

"We can't help the numbers. The safety of His Highness takes precedence."

Kouka was chosen as squad leader. He was one of Sougen's regimental commanders and had his kijuu with him. To a core group of soldiers also with their own kijuu, Hoyou helped to fill out the squad of fifteen mounts. If they could catch up and join forces with Gyousou and Risai and their ten kijuu, they'd have a full platoon of their own.

"Fifteen kijuu taking off at once would turn into something of a spectacle," Kouka instructed his squad. "Split off in groups of five and head for Ba Province. His Highness is following the highway toward Ba Province. If we stick to the roads, we should overtake him."

"The immediate problem is the Imperial Army in Rin'u."

The Imperial Army bivouacked in Rin'u still had not resumed its march. Not only that, despite having completed its preparations to sortie, the Provincial Guard outside Hakurou also showed no signs of breaking camp.

Seishi wondered aloud, "What's going on with that? Are they waiting for something?"

Sougen only craned his head to the side without answering.

"They could be waiting for reinforcements. From Kouki?"

"Or rather from Jou Province. In which case—"

Sougen stopped talking mid-sentence and bit his lip. Asen had revised his estimations of their troop strength and now sized them up as a much larger force.

"He may have more than an inkling about our change of loyalties," Yuushou said. "We should assume the air cavalry heading for Ba Province is after His Highness."

They already know His Highness escaped from Kan'you Mountain and fled west. Meaning that Ukou made it back to Kouki."

"Damn!" Seishi exclaimed, his face clouding over.

Even Sougen uttered a small groan. "Also meaning the Imperial Army didn't come here to attack Kan'you Mountain."

Yuushou said with a start of realization, "I get it. They're here to provide support to the air cavalry headed to Ba Province."

Sougen nodded.

Their mission was to pursue and capture Gyousou. But how easily could they return him to Kouki? If by chance he were able to escape, the whole situation for Asen would quickly go from bad to worse.

"The job of this air cavalry platoon must be to pursue His Highness, track him down, and detain him. Asen isn't about to trust a single platoon to bring him back to Kouki. He surely hasn't forgotten that he let Risai slip out of his grasp. He will deploy the Ba Provincial Guard to make sure His Highness stays in captivity. Once he's accomplished that, Asen will still have to transport His Highness to Kouki."

"And that is where the Imperial Army comes in."

"The Provincial Guard is on standby in Hakurou, as is the Imperial Army in Rin'u. The Ba Provincial Guard brings him to the provincial border and hands him over to the Bun Provincial Guard. They complete the journey to Rin'u. The Imperial Army takes him into custody and retreats to Zui Province. The Provincial Guard mobilizing will be the sign His Highness has been captured."

Sougen abruptly raised his head. "Send a runner after Kouka. As fast as you can."

"What's that?"

"Ba Province. Not only the air cavalry, the Ba Provincial Guard is also definitely on the move."

Nanshou was five days behind them when the rugged borderlands of Ba Province came into view. Following the highway, they continued the climb toward the summit. The last mountain range revealed the road through the pass. They sought shelter in inns at the foot of the mountains, and left early the next morning as soon as the city gates opened.

From there, it took another day to cross the remaining peaks. Descending the deep range into Ba Province they came to the next city. Then several more days through a mountainous region steeper even than on the Bun Province side. After that, they should find the highway to Kou Province.

"Keep out of sight and we can make it in three days," Risai muttered.

Houto agreed. “Given how quiet things are around here, there probably won’t be much pedestrian traffic. Pretty thick forests. We should be able to weave our way through the woods.”

Though proceeding beneath the canopy of trees cut the capabilities of the kijuu in half, doing so was many times faster than walking and reduced the danger of being spotted by civilians.

Risai nodded. After leaving the city, they stuck to the highway for a while. Confirming that there were no onlookers around, they headed into the forest. Oukou took point, now and then darting above the canopy to survey their surroundings. The third time through this routine, he dove back down, the alarm clear on his face, and raced over to Risai.

“What’s up?”

“Cavalry. They’re approaching from the foot of the mountains.”

“Horses?”

“Kijuu. Not airborne. By my estimation, a platoon of air cavalry.”

“Unbelievable.” Risai cursed under her breath.

“They can’t be following us!” exclaimed a flustered Kyoshi. “They shouldn’t know His Highness is traveling with us.”

“Still—” Risai looked at Gyousou.

Gyousou nodded. “If this is indeed the air cavalry, the only logical conclusion is that they’re after us.”

“Why—” Risai started to say, except if they were being pursued, there was only one explanation.

Somewhere along the way, somebody recognized Gyousou or Risai or someone in their entourage, had figured out who they were, where they were from, and where they were headed. That their hunters had come this far already meant this wasn’t a development that happened yesterday.

Houto raised his voice. “Let’s go up and over. On the other side of this pass, the ridgelines are rugged and the valleys are deep. The thick canopy will work to our advantage.”

“What Houto said.” Risai ordered, “Go as fast as we can. Don’t lose sight of each other. Take care not to stray off course along the way.”

With a nod from Risai, Oukou once again soared skyward. Practically hugging the side of a huge tree, he alighted on a branch near the top and looked back. He could make out the shadows of the kijuu moving among the trees. Enough of them to make up a full platoon. Though they weren’t closing the distance, they were clearly on their trail.

Do they know where we are?

Having confirmed the course they were taking, Oukou furrowed his brows. Running to the right and left of the platoon as it climbed hillside toward them, a hoard of black silhouettes flickered in and out of view. Among the hoard, one repeatedly veered toward the platoon and then circled away again.

Are they being pursued as well? he thought when he spotted one of the riders soaring into the air. He dove back toward the ground and flew back to Risai's side.

"Something strange is going on."

"Strange?" Risai queried.

A rustling sound arose from the undergrowth not far from where they were standing. Oukou spun around and leveled his lance. A rusty brown hare with white spots bounded out of the tall grass. It shot past Oukou, abruptly raised a shrill cry, and tumbled head over heels as if struck by a flying projectile.

An arrow, Oukou thought at first.

He jumped his kijuu straight up to the canopy of the forest. Those black shadows picked up speed as they raced beneath the trees.

Dogs?

They looked like a pack of black dogs. Big, fierce dogs. One of them ran up to the rabbit—and then ignored it completely and instead launched itself off the ground. Straight at Risai. Its mouth so wide its jaw appeared to split in two. Its entire head turned into a gaping maw.

Youma.

In the moment of that realization, Oukou swept his lance in a downward arc. Hien jumped back at the same time, crouched down, and unleashed an intimidating roar. The black doglike youma ran straight at them, mouth gaping open. Oukou's lance pierced its head through its upper jaw and lower jaw and pinned it to the earth. Oukou yanked out the lance and alighted again on the ground.

"Looks like a *kiki*," Risai said.

No sooner had she uttered the word but a second kiki attacked Hien head on. Hien dodged out of the way. The kiki clawed at the air, spun around, and set off at a run. Racing along, the kiki kicked the corpse of the hare into the air. No—the small animal that appeared at first to be a hare sported a beak like a bird. The short, squashed beak, the long tail covered with scales like a snake—this creature was the furthest thing from a rabbit.

A *kyuuyo*. A small youma that summoned other youma. A timid creature, it screeched and scampered away when threatened. If run down, it played dead. But its screech attracted other youma. The nasty beast scavenged the corpses killed by other youma.

If that kyuuyo wasn't brought down, it'd only call in more youma.

Oukou chased the rabbit youma but it was small and nimble and escaped every sweep of his lance. He was cursing having not brought a bow when he heard a human scream behind him. He wheeled around to see a kiki taking a bite out of Kiro's leg.

"Someone get rid of that kyuuyo!"

With that cry, Oukou urged on Kishun. Before he could level his lance, the kiki gnawing on Kiro's leg jumped back, taking with it Kiro's left leg from the knee on down. Kiro wordlessly slid off his kijuu, enveloped in the red mist of his own blood.

Kishun ran towards him. The kiki opened its mouth wide. Kiro's leg fell from its jaws. Howling like a baby, the kiki prepared to charge just as Oukou's lance rammed down its throat, piecing from front to back. With a shake of the lance, he flung off the corpse of the youma, and wheeled Kishun around back to Kiro.

Before Oukou could reach him, another kiki set upon Kiro, fastening itself to his shoulder as he attempted to sit up. The gaping maw of its mouth snapped shut and Kiro's shoulder disappeared, along with half of his chest up to the nape of his neck. His eyes, wide open with fear, rolled back in his head, and his body topped backward. What was left of his arm flew off with a spray of blood.

Before Oukou's lance struck the kiki, the youma split in two and fell apart. Oukou raised his gaze. Risai was there, sword in hand, her face white with rage.

"Kiso," Oukou confirmed, as she stared down at the corpse.

He turned Kishun around again. Until that kyuuyo was disposed of, there'd be no end to this.

Another high-pitched screech told him right where it was. The big black suugu fastened its jaws around what otherwise looked like a cute little bunny and tore the squealing youma apart before wolfing it down. Astride the suugu, Gyousou caught Oukou's eye and nodded. And then sprinted off after another of the black shadows.

Oukou estimated there were eight of the kiki. They'd taken down three. Oukou faced off against the fourth when Kishun suddenly swerved to the side. A spear sliced through the air behind them. He glanced around with a start and saw a soldier astride a kijuu coming toward them from quite far away.

From that far away—

Hitting the target with a throwing spear at that distance should be impossible, and certainly not with enough force to embed itself into the ground. There must be another soldier above him. He raised his head and saw nothing. Without a doubt, the spear had come from behind him.

What sort of martial skills are we talking about here? As soon as that thought crossed his mind, a far worse possibility occurred to him. *They caught up with us.* Held back dealing with the kiki, their pursuers had overtaken them.

Oukou spurred on Kishun and sped over to the big suugu. He said to Gyouso, "You've got to get out of here. We'll handle this." He called out to Risai, a short way off. "You too, Risai-sama. Keep him safe."

Risai at first looked around with a puzzled expression. The realization soon dawned on her. She called out, "Kyoshi, Toshi, you go ahead." She brought Hien alongside Gyouso, urged on a rattled Kyoshi and similarly reassured Houto, who was sitting behind Toshi.

Gyouso came to a halt. He no doubt intended to stay behind with Risai and guard their rear. They still had some distance to play with, making it possible to dodge and parry, cut down the kiki flying at them, and sidestepped the arrows shot at them.

If they didn't get away before their pursuers closed that distance, those archers would pose a real danger. She looked at Gyouso and he nodded, as if catching onto her thoughts. Urging on Kyoshi and Toshi, he turned Ragou around and set off at a run.

When Risai caught up with him, Gyouso said in a low voice, "That was Kiso."

"Yes. A pity."

In this situation, there'd be no opportunity to bury the body. *Perished like dogs at the side of the road and ended up food for the crows.*

Regardless of what happened, they had to protect Gyouso. They had to keep him safe until they could escape Tai.

A human figure leapt from the woods off to the side, moving so fast that Risai didn't have time to react. Hien acted first, jumping back to evade the attack. As the weapon sliced through the air, Gyouso answered with swordsmanship that was equally as remarkable. All the more surprising, with an unnatural twist and turn of his torso, his opponent parried and reposted without a moment's delay.

He seemed to be aiming at his arm but Ragou took away that target with a mighty leap. Risai thrust her sword at him and thought she caught his shoulder, but his sword met hers instead. Metal slammed against metal like a ringing gong. A numbing shock ran down her arm. Tip of her sword rebounded skyward. She didn't have enough strength left in her arm to force it back into line.

Damn.

The riposte came so fast the curse never left her mouth. So fast it was impossible to avoid. Except a blow from the side knocked away the incoming blade. The thrust came at Risai fast but Gyouso knocked it down faster.

Dumbfounded, Risai managed to level her sword and drive it forward. The enemy reared backward and escaped the thrust. The sweep of Gyouso's sword met that evasive movement.

With a short cry, their attacker tumbled off his kijuu. She confirmed the body lying there at the edge of her vision and raced Hien forward.

Who was that man?

Only now did Risai feel her body tremble. If Gyousou hadn't been there—if the two of them hadn't acted together—they might not have prevailed.

Gyousou rode up next to her. "Are you all right?"

Risai answered with a pained smile, "Thanks to you."

Fortunately, there appeared to be no enemy soldiers or kiki in their surroundings. They climbed the slope, weaving back and forth around the trunks of the trees as quickly as their kijuu could manage. They topped the ridge of the mountain and crossed the border.

"If only those kiki hadn't shown up."

None of their pursuers would have caught up with them. At the very least, Kiso would still be alive. She remembered their reunion in Koutaku. He'd spotted Hien amidst the crowds and introduced her to Sougen. He rode to the rescue at Anpuku. And yet—

"I can almost believe they sent in the youma to hold us up."

Risai ground her teeth in frustration. She couldn't believe bad luck like this happened by accident. A kyuuyo just happened to show up. The kyuuyo summoned the kiki to attack them. Then their pursuers overtook them while they were dealing with the kiki and attacked with martial skills far out of the ordinary.

"Who are those guys?"

"Asen's retainers, I suspect."

"Asen's?" Risai asked as they hurried to rejoin the rest of the team. "Are his retainers that good?"

Thinking back, nobody came to mind. She recalled many skilled soldiers in Asen's army but none that rose to such preternatural levels.

"Ukou," Risai muttered. He and his men boasted of abilities that were entirely out of the norm. That must be what was going on here. Abilities that could defeat even Gyousou.

"I don't think that squad is under Ukou's command. The armor is not the same."

Ukou's platoon was called the Red Armor, which was said to describe the color of their battle dress.

"Whether the Red Armor or that squad of air cavalry after us, I don't recall anybody on Asen's staff with those martial skills."

"Neither do I. They must be possessed by *hinman*."

"Unbelievable," Risai gasped aloud.

Hinman were said to be youma that haunted ancient battlefields. They possessed people and resumed their ferocious fighting ways. In that light, given martial skills made the blood run cold, this explanation made the most sense.

“I have heard of cases like that, people suddenly rampaging like hungry wolves and raising havoc with whatever weapons they could lay their hands on. But they behaved more like savage beasts.”

Could a human being possessed by a youma belong to a military unit and act in concordance with the demands of military discipline?

“I supposed you could say they’ve been domesticated.”

“Except—except that would mean that Taiki lent a hand!”

Only a kirin could domesticate youma and make them serve him as his *shirei*.

“That was not the case here,” Gyousou answered flatly. “The soldiers who attacked me were also possessed. Ukou was never that talented to begin with. To be sure, his fighting skills were always above average. But then he rose to such heights overnight. Though I don’t know how, Asen figured out how to enslave youma.”

“This all seems far beyond the pale.”

“It’s only natural to think that way. Asen being able to subjugate youma to his own ends—there’s no precedent for such a thing ever happening before.” If that was in fact the case, then Gyousou’s explanation was no less baffling. “Rousan set this whole scheme in motion together with Asen.”

“Rousan?”

Meaning what? Risai was about to ask when a fresh surge of forces arrived on the scene.

Chapter 23

[22-2] Oukou's shoulders heaved with labored breaths. The shaft of his lance was slippery with sweat. Sheer fatigue threatened to overwhelm him like a giant wave.

How can these guys be this good?

Confronting the Imperial Army platoon pursuing them left Oukou all the more bewildered. These were soldiers he'd never seen or heard of before and others he thought he might have crossed paths with once or twice. None of them had ever been anything more than run of the mill. Except these nondescript soldiers fought with martial skills that gave him chills.

Word of fighters this adept in the Imperial Army should have reached him long before now. But not a spark of recognition, not a single name came to mind.

Calm down. Concentrate.

This was not the kind of showdown where he could afford to overthink every move. He was already warring with the foreboding feeling that he had no chance of winning. The thought had taken root in the back of his brain that he was going to die here. Sweat coursed down his back like a waterfall. Goosebumps came out on his flesh. He couldn't stop shaking.

The only reason he still had his head on his shoulders was because Kishun didn't get all riled up. Kishun didn't care one whit about the skills of their opponents and so carried on unperturbed.

Oukou had noticed that, however extraordinary the riders, the kijuu were no different than theirs. He miraculously managed to parry a pointed attack, feigned a riposte at the rider, and instead drove his lance into the kijuu's flank.

The bucking kijuu threw off the rider and trampled him underfoot. That kijuu must be a borrowed mount with no loyalty to the rider. The rider struggled to his feet. Oukou ran him through and the frenzied kijuu stomped him again.

Oukou yanked out the lance. Kishun took off. Out of the corners of his eyes, he confirmed that one of his colleagues was in a tight spot. Before the enemy's blow could land, Oukou rammed his lance into the kijuu. The kijuu roared and leapt backwards, tearing the lance out of his hands. Without a moment's delay, he drew his sword and raced Kishun over to his colleague.

"Are you alright?"

"More or less."

"Aim for the kijuu."

After exchanging a few more words, he and Kishun galloped off in pursuit of the wounded kijuu. A kiki jumped them from the side. Oukou flattened himself against Kishun's back. The kiki flew over him, snapping its jaws around empty air. The kiki landed on the ground on the other side. Oukou braced himself as it turned and readied to launch a second attack.

At that moment, the kiki changed its mind and it darted off, targeting an enemy soldier struggling to pull the lance out of the ground. The kiki shot past him, leaving in its wake a headless corpse.

The kiki are attacking them as well as us.

Oukou couldn't help a small start of surprise. He'd come to the conclusion that their foes were using the kiki. But there shouldn't be any good way to use a youma like that. And even if there were, it'd be about as successful as trying to tame a stray dog with a scrap of food. He brought to mind the preceding events, the scene he'd observed off in the distance.

The dark shadows circled the platoon chasing them up the mountain. One strayed in too close and got shooed away. That made sense. The kiki were being summoned by the kyuuyo.

Was the kyuuyo showing up here a coincidence?

Could a kyuuyo attract that many kiki in such a short span of time? A pack of kiki just happened to be in the vicinity struck him as too convenient to be plausible. The enemy using the kyuuyo was hardly out of the question. After all, Asen had deployed *ririki* on Kan'you Mountain.

A good thing we finished off the kyuuyo. But that thought was followed by a chilling realization that made him blanch. *Who's to say that kyuuyo was the only one?*

Many of his comrades had already vanished from the vicinity. The enemy was decreasing in number as well but their losses were greater. They had to stand their ground and give Gyousou time to escape. If a fresh pack of youma showed up, that would become impossible.

He heard the sound of wings overhead. He glanced up as a kiki charged at him from a nearby thicket. He didn't have time to retreat. No, that was being generous. He barely had time to move. He could have swung his lance around to meet the attack but all he had in his hand was his sword. Bringing up his arm to meet the attack was going to take a second too long.

I could use a little help here, Kishun.

The only question was whether his kijuu could move itself out of the way fast enough. Oukou could only pray to the gods. That was when a lance shot down from the sky above and pierced the kiki. Oukou looked up. A host of silhouettes descended toward him like a hail of stones.

Someone called out, "How are you faring?"

He recognized Kouka's voice.

Kouka landed on the ground and extracted his lance. He'd flown straight here without a thought to the circumstances. Not caring who might see him or who got left behind, he flew his kijuu with a single objective in mind. He had fifteen with him when they left Seisai. By the time he got here and heard that strange sound like the wailing of a baby, half that number remained.

And yet they made it in time. Without a doubt, he'd saved Oukou's neck.

"His Highness?"

"He went on ahead."

Kouka nodded. He quickly sized up the situation. They were holding their ground here so Gyousou could escape. The battlefield was strewn with a jumble of enemy soldiers and youma, the living and the dead. The ground was painted with blood.

Oukou said, "Our opponents are quite out of the ordinary. Their kijuu are not."

Kouka caught the gist of what he was saying at once.

The shadows reaching across the forest floor grew deeper. The twilight filled the forest like a creeping stain.

Racing along astride Hien, Risai cast her gaze around the forest. The hubbub raised by large numbers of people reached her ears. The neighing of horses. Muffled voices. A great many of them. A good thing the thick branches and underbrush continued on for such a distance. There wouldn't be much point to deploying archers in this environment.

But their own movements were equally constrained by the surroundings. Going faster would raise more noise and give away their position. She wanted to fly free of all these obstructions but if the enemy had assembled in sufficient numbers, they would undoubtedly fire at them through breaks in the canopy overhead.

Carrying Houto behind him couldn't help but slow Toushi down, so naturally their pursuers first set out to surround his kijuu. It was hard to make out their formations but a large detachment must be tailing them. They couldn't stick to their heels on horseback or on foot. That meant there must be enough soldiers to spread out and encircle a large area.

No matter how fast they ran, there was no leaving them behind. Perhaps they should have Gyousou go on alone or at least have Risai accompany him. Except abandoning Kyoshi and Houto in the midst of their foes wasn't something they couldn't and shouldn't do.

And what they would have to do anyway if that was the only choice left to them, Risai told herself with a cold resolve. Because they had to protect Gyousou. *But still—*

“Don’t overthink the situation,” rang out a voice in front of her.

Risai came to herself and glanced up. Gyousou looked back at her. “Oukou will catch up with us soon enough.”

She couldn’t tell whether he believed what he was saying. But that look and his reassuring words told her that any decision to leave Kyoshi or Houto behind was off the table. They’d assume that Oukou was right behind them and keep moving forward. That was the only option available to them.

“Please go on ahead!” Houto abruptly called out. He unsheathed his podao and held it in both hands. “We’ll be fine. As you said, Oukou is going to arrive any minute.”

Though Houto struck the most upbeat tone he could muster, he couldn’t suppress the quaver in his voice. “We’ll continue on with Kyoshi. You two should steal away from here as quietly as possible.”

When Risai looked around, Toushi and Kyoshi nodded over their shoulders.

“By all means—”

Gyousou interrupted Houto with a wave of his hand. The still bright sky above and behind them was filled with the black silhouettes of flying kijuu, descending toward them like a rain of arrows.

Had Oukou finally shown up. Or else—

Those thoughts on her mind, Risai put herself on guard. One of those black shadows shot straight at her, too fast for her to duck. This time as well, it was up to Hien to get her out of harm’s way. Hien had probably sensed its approach earlier even than Gyousou and moved faster than the rattled Risai.

The black shadow landed on the ground, rebounded on the spot, and again flew at Risai. Risai did her best to swerve to the side. But it was Hien that dodged out of the way. The slashing attack grazed Hien’s legs. At the same time, a flurry of spears stabbed the ground one after the other in the direction she tried to jump to.

“Hien.”

Hien steered her clear. As a result, the attacker hit Hien instead. She set down next to Gyousou. There was nothing amiss with Hien’s gait. But the faint smell of blood was in the air. Hien reversed direction and came to a halt. Reading Hien’s movements, Risai braced herself. The next attack came at her torso. She barely managed to deflect it and jumped to the side.

As soon as they landed, a dozen more shadows swarmed around them. She tried to escape but this time there was no place left for her to run. The tip of a spear grazed her head.

Next to her, Gyousou suddenly disappeared as his suugu shot skyward with a mighty leap. Two spears from different directions shot through the space they’d occupied a second before. Gyousou knocked one to the side with his sword. Risai

attempted to parry the second but missed. It soared through the air without sufficient momentum to reach Kyoshi and clip his kijuu in the leg.

Kyoshi's kijuu tottered wildly, pitching him off its back. Risai galloped toward him, noticing only after it was too late that she'd cut off Gyouosou in the process. With a short guttural growl, the suugu changed directions mid-stride, taking it right into the path of a soldier aiming a crossbow.

Risai could practically hear the blood drain from her face.

The suugu reared and twisted its body, its long tail catching the archer in the face and sweeping him backwards off his feet. Waiting in his shadow, another soldier jumped forward brandishing a podao. Gyouosou intercepted the attack, flipped the blade into the air, and delivered a return blow.

In the meantime, the archer recovered his stance and again aimed the crossbow at Gyouosou.

Firing from such a short range, Risai had no chance of reaching him. She swallowed hard, just a human figure interposed himself between Gyouosou and the soldier with the crossbow.

He never saw the arrow. He only heard the sound afterwards, and the moment it reached his ears, the thudding impact pierced his throat.

He uttered a voiceless cry. He reflectively reached up and grasped the shaft of the arrow. His legs lost all strength and he slipped off the back of the kijuu. The sky peeking through the canopy of the forest spun above him.

They had flown through that sky in hot pursuit. "Detain them!" rang the voice in his head. They spotted their prey and set out to eradicate their foes. And failed. Setting off after them again, his eyes caught sight of that shock of white hair. *That's Gyouosou.* But no sooner had that thought crossed his mind but he saw the crossbow aimed at Gyouosou.

"Don't kill him!" came that voice again. "On no account kill him!"

The sound of that voice alone filled his thoughts. The dark clouds again engulfed him. He spurred on his kijuu and brandished his sword. His own actions felt like someone else was going through the same motions.

"Don't kill him."

The words rose up fresh and clear in his muddled mind. He threw himself into the flight of the arrow.

I didn't kill him. I didn't let him die.

And that should make him very happy.

Make who happy? Kisen asked himself.

The glimpse of man's profile rose up in his mind's eye before being swallowed by the dark clouds.

Risai froze. The archer had Gyousou dead in his sights when this person appeared like a shadow between them and took the arrow instead. The man tumbling from his kijuu was most definitely an armor-clad soldier of the Imperial Army. Without a doubt, the same enemy that attacked Risai just seconds earlier. He made himself into a human shield and protected Gyousou.

As Risai looked on in blank amazement, Gyousou cut down the archer. With a parry and thrust, he felled the soldier next to him holding the podao. Then rode over to her.

“Risai.”

His calm, strong voice brought her back to her senses. She hurriedly searched the slope for Kyoshi. A step ahead of her, Toushi over galloped to where Kyoshi had fallen. Houto reached down to pull Kyoshi to his feet.

A squad of soldiers charged out of the undergrowth. They wore the armor of the Provincial Guard. The Bun Provincial Guard? Except they had already crossed the border. The squad rushed at Toushi, directing their attacks at his kijuu. The kijuu collapsed, bucking off Toushi and Houto.

Without a moment’s delay, Gyousou and Ragou bounded over to them. Still in a daze, Risai followed them into the fray.

“Kyoshi.”

Kyoshi sat up. After being thrown from the kijuu, he hit the ground hard. His whole body throbbed with pain. He’d lost his fighting staff in the process. He scanned his surroundings but it was nowhere in sight. His hand next went to his scabbard. His sword was still there though he hardly knew how to use it. That ignorance only added to his fears.

Why?

He’d been turning that question over in his mind for a while now. Not only since descending the mountain from the border but while climbing the mountain to the border. Why were they being pursued? Why did their pursuers know where they were? Why were there youma everywhere? A youma had devoured one of their own. What an unaccountably cruel way to die.

Why had things turned out like this?

He was drawing the sword with an uncertain hand when Toushi galloped over to him. Toushi suddenly swerved. Rider and kijuu tumbled end over end. The kijuu slid across the ground and knocked the sword out of his grasp, leaving him with no way to defend himself. Enemy soldiers charged at them in waves, weapons ready.

Kyoshi fled the spot, tripping over his own legs. Toushi grabbed his hand, pulled him to his feet, and pushed him forward. Kyoshi took off with no idea where he was

going. He glanced over his shoulder to see Tousei draw his sword and launch himself toward the enemy.

Passing Tousei along the way, Houto came running toward him.

“Houto.”

Kyoshi raised his arm, a mere reflex. Houto spotted him and mirrored the expression with a look of relief. A soldier rushed from the side, sword leveled in front of him, and collided with Houto.

“Houto!”

Houto staggered backward. His assailant delivered another body blow. Before hitting the ground face down, he planted his hands and briefly managed to raise his head. His lips formed around a single word.

“Go!”

Kyoshi stood there stunned. A firm hand took hold of his shoulder. Gousou. Gousou dismounted, seized Kyoshi’s arm, and pressed something into his hand. Kyoshi looked down in a daze. It was a sword.

Gousou quickly fastened the sword belt around Kyoshi’s waist and boosted him, too numb to move, onto Ragou’s back.

“Listen up. Even if you die, don’t let go of the reins. I’m pretty sure if you fell off, Ragou would eat you in no time flat.”

“What? I—”

Kyoshi couldn’t think of anything else to say. He couldn’t tell him no. More importantly, there was the matter of Houto. He and Houto should be headed to Touka about now.

His thoughts spun in circles, leaving him unable to produce legible speech. Gousou swatted the kijuu on the flank and the big beast bounded off. Kyoshi gripped the reins with one hand and pinned the sword under his free arm with all his might. Even that was too precarious, so he flattened himself against the kijuu’s back, holding the reins between his teeth.

No one should expect him to handle a suugu like this. He shouldn’t be running off and leaving Gousou behind, in any case. Houto shouldn’t be dead. None of this should be happening at all.

But it has, a voice from long ago whispered in his ear. Something like this had happened before—at Zui’un Temple.

Kyoshi grit his teeth.

The monastery went up in flames. Together with his fellow novices and the abbot, they escaped along a mountain trail far darker than the mountain slope the kijuu was careering down. They surmounted the precipices and found refuge in a town. The images of the monks and civilians he saw slaughtered along the way were seared into his memories.

The abbot emerged from his hiding place to certain execution by Asen's army. The last backward glance revealed eyes looking at him very much as Houto had.

He could not put these thoughts into words. He bit down on the reins. An inarticulate howl rose from his throat. The view before him dissolved into a blur. He gripped the reins and clasped the sword against his chest. Just then, with a rumbling growl, Ragou jumped and twisted its body, clearly trying to buck Kyoshi off its back.

Kyoshi tightened his hold. The furious kijuu raced through the fading dusk.

Gyousou took a moment to watch Ragou soar out of sight.

This is for the best.

He tore his eyes away and ran to the fallen Houto. Snatching his podao off the ground, he cut down the soldier trying to pull out his sword.

Gyousou knelt down next to Houto and cradled Houto's head on his knees. The seeping pool of blood around him only grew larger. Houto's eyes looked up at him, still filled with a glint of life. A smile rose to Houto's mouth, softening the tortured expression on his face. And then the light went out.

I wanted to help him.

He'd hoped to take Houto back to the place he deserved to be. After being captured—to his everlasting shame—while being held in the depths of the earth, he had overcome every challenge and held out until this day so he could again do right by the people of Tai.

Houto left behind his home, family, and friends to save an emperor whose subjects could rightly be forgiven if they simply cast him aside. And now he was finally returning to the place where he belonged.

He should not have died such a cruel death on a mountain like this. He should not have been anywhere near this battlefield so far from home.

In a little corner of this ravaged world.

A world ravaged because there was no emperor on the throne. That responsibility fell entirely on his own shoulders. Risai said he should flee to safety. But saving his own skin did not sit well with him. His retainers insisted that, for the time being, he should escape for the good of the kingdom. He could see the logic in their arguments.

This ravaged world had impoverished the people of Tai. He had no business abandoning them while he scampered to safety, not until he had settled that debt.

If he could run for the hills, he should. That was his duty. But surveying the field of battle, he could see they'd been surrounded by what was probably the Ba Provincial Guard. There was no running for the hills. If he couldn't run, then any pointless resistance would only increase the body count. The soldiers were only following orders. They were all members of somebody's family, the same subjects he had sworn to protect.

So he was fine with the way things were.

Risai took in the scene with a backwards glance. Gyousou knelt on the ground in the midst of a throng of Provincial Guard soldiers. A person's head rested on his knees. Risai couldn't make out who it was. Was Gyousou tending to this person? But then he was yanked to his feet and the head slipped from his knees. Houto lay there lifeless, his corpse sprawled on the ground.

He shouldn't have come along. They should have left him behind in Seisai.

But what of Gyousou?

Risai brought Hien around and was about to set off in pursuit when Toushi stopped her.

"Risai-sama, head back and let Sougen-sama know what's going on."

"But—"

"Leave His Highness to me."

Toushi headed towards Gyousou, at least five soldiers soon hot on his heels. Risai debated following them and clearing the way for Toushi. Except more soldiers were encircling her as well.

The enemy closed on her from the right and left, weapons at the ready. She fought off the first wave, bounded over the second, trampled an archer readying a crossbow, and turned Hien skyward. She covered her face with her sword arm as they punched through the forest canopy.

Flitting among the dark shadows cast by the treetops, Risai returned to the mountain ridge. She saw Oukou flying toward her.

"Risai-sama!"

Oukou wasn't alone. Behind came several more riders.

"Kouka?"

"What of His Highness?" as the first thing out of Kouka's mouth.

"He was captured by the Ba Provincial Guard. There's still time."

"We heard the air cavalry was on its way and hurried here." Kouka peered down at the descending slope. "How many are left?"

Risai shook her head. "Just Toushi."

Oukou and Kouka exchanged pained expressions.

"We've got three."

"One was shot down and we lost contact with two."

Kouka nodded. "We will pursue His Highness. Risai-sama, you need to get in touch with Sougen-sama."

"I will go."

"You can't," Kouka stated matter-of-factly. "Please, go see Sougen-sama." He glanced over his shoulder at Oukou. "Take care of her for me."

“That’s not necessary! I will go.”

Oukou sidled his kijuu up next to her and grabbed her arm. “Let’s head back. Someone has to report what’s going on.”

“You can handle that, Oukou.”

“Risai-sama, Hien can’t take any more.”

Risai looked closer and was shocked to realize that Hien was covered with wounds, feathers bent and broken. Blood oozed from numerous raw nicks and lacerations in her legs left by swords and spears, along with a deep wound in her torso.

Risai bit her lip. Hien had taken all this damage on her behalf. She couldn’t ask Hien to do any more than what she’d already done. And even if she did, Risai would only end up dragging everybody else down. In any case, somebody did have to inform Sougen of the situation.

“Please see to Gyousou-sama.”

Overlapping that plea, a voice rang out from the slope. More troops than they might have expected from the Ba Provincial Guard had assembled below them. Carried on the wind, the new declaration rose up, “Don’t let a single person get away!”

“Looks like the mopping up operation. We’ll give chase and see what happens. We’ll draw as many away as we can.”

Risai nodded. “Don’t throw your lives away for nothing. Even if you’re captured, Sougen will surely formulate a response.”

“Should the tide turn, we’ll retreat. The Provincial Guard appears to be arriving from the north. We’ll be able to escape to the south.”

Risai was on the verge of agreeing with him. With a start of realization, she shook her head. “Kou Province is off the table. Try to find a safe haven there and the northern quarter of Kou Province will descend into anarchy. That alone is beyond the pale.” She turned her attention to Kouka. “I know I’m making a heartless demand. Avoid Kou Province. I am aware of the dangers involved, but I beseech you to move through the enemy lines and escape to the northwest.”

“If you so order.”

“Consider it an order. If you would, please.” Risai grasped Kouka’s arm. “Even at the risk of life and limb, you must not allow Ten Shire to get caught up in this conflict. Absolutely not.”

“Risai-sama.”

“Because Ten Shire is home to the survivors of Zui’un Temple.”

Chapter 24

[22-3] That evening, Sekirei rushed from Gamon Temple in the midst of a softly falling rain.

“The Provincial Guard at Hakurou is moving out.”

Having raced all the way from Rokou, her shoulders heaved with exhaustion. As soon as they arrived, her kijuu keeled over, gasping for breath.

“They were bivouacked on the outskirts of Hakurou. Now they’re headed to the border with Ba Province.”

Sougen caught his breath. The Provincial Guard would only move out of Hakurou in order to take custody of Gyousou. That meant he’d been detained in Ba Province.

Yuushou groaned. “They didn’t make it in time.”

“So it seems,” Sougen said, a sour look on his face. He instructed his retainers to look after the kijuu. He had Sekirei sit down on the sleeping hearth and asked someone to bring her a drink of water.

“The army on the outskirts of Hakurou is marching to Ba Province?”

Sekirei nodded. “According to Tonkou, the Ministry of Summer issued orders for them to police the provincial border and all the highways crossing the border.”

“Makes sense,” Yuushou muttered.

“So their intention is to secure the roads.”

If Gyousou’s only escort was the air cavalry that had sortied from Kouki, they could still launch a raid to retrieve the prisoner. But there was no chance of that with an entire army watching the roads from Ba Province to Rin’u.

“There is nothing normal about putting an entire division on guard duty. Asen is not taking our fighting potential for granted.”

“He’d never be so naive as to take any opponent for granted. If nothing else, we have to hope that he overestimates our battlefield strength.”

A full division could provide defense in depth across the whole route from the border to Rin’u. The army and the air cavalry platoon holding Gyousou would likely merge forces and travel together. In that case, together with a division of the Imperial Army and a division of the Provincial Guard already stationed there, three armies would eventually occupy Rin’u.

These were well-provisioned and well-trained soldiers armed with winter weapons and riding war horses and kijuu. They had the run of every city and castle town along the way.

The Black Flags, by contrast, numbered no more than ten thousand, many of whom were civilian rebels unaccustomed to battlefield warfare. They had the bare minimum in equipment and armor. Kijuu were few and far between and they did not have enough war horses to bother counting.

“Sekirei, do you have any idea what battle formations we are talking about here?”

She nodded and produced a manuscript from her pocket. “Tonkou-sama looked into the matter. He advises caution as he was not able to confirm all of this information to his own satisfaction.”

Sougen took the manuscript and studied it for a while, furrowing his brows. Finally he frowned and passed the manuscript to a retainer standing next to him.

“Gaikatsu, what do you read into these troop numbers?”

Gaikatsu was a regimental commander who’d long been a member of Sougen’s senior staff. An accomplished general and one of Sougen’s right-hand men, he was never far from Sougen’s side.

Gaikatsu took the papers and flipped through them, busily tapping on his knee as if doing calculations with an invisible abacus. He looked up and said, “Based on the formations Asen is likely to deploy, and erring on the high side, a rough estimate says they’d have a little over five times our troop strength.”

“Five times,” Sekirei muttered.

In other words, resistance was futile.

“Given the differences in training, experience, and equipment, the disparities in weaponry along with the number of air cavalry and war horses, at least five times our troop strength. Moreover, their mission is to guard the convoy, not fight a war. At the first sign of danger, they’ll hightail it inside the nearest defensive perimeter. Even if we cut off the encampments along the route, they could always fall back to the castles and castle towns and make full use of the provisions stockpiled there. Factor that into the equation and we’re talking seven times the troop strength we can put into the field.”

“What is the situation on our end?”

“We’ve been reconnoitering the surrounding areas but have yet to ascertain the location of Eishou-sama and Gashin-sama. The Koutaku and Gamon Temple forces have all relocated. Risai’s retainers are currently moving toward Seisai, along with Kouyuu’s troops and most of the Jou Provincial Guard. The forces from Jou are several days out but Kouyuu is expected to reach Hakurou fairly soon.”

“There’s still no telling whether they’ll make it in time.”

“We should assume the Provincial Guard will be on high alert. In that case, Kouyuu will stop short of Hakurou. So, no, they won’t make it in time.”

The grotto fell silent. Overcoming a force five times stronger was well-nigh impossible. Moreover, at seven times their troop strength, stirring up any trouble at all was out of the question from the start.

“But if His Highness is taken into custody, the whole game is over,” Sougen said quietly. “Mourning our meager numbers won’t accomplish a thing. We’re talking total war. We can’t allow His Highness to get handed over to the Imperial Army.”

Sougen was handing down orders to his subordinates when one of his retainers rushed in. “Sougen-sama, Risai-sama—”

“What?”

Sougen was about to follow the messenger out of the room when Risai staggered into the grotto. It was obvious at a glance that she’d been through a fierce battle. Her face was as pale as moonlight.

“Sougen, Gyousou-sama—”

“I assume he’s been apprehended. The Provincial Guard joined up with the Imperial Army and they are mobilizing their forces.”

Risai nodded. She dropped to her knees with a heartbroken expression. “I am so sorry.”

Sekirei hurried over and helped her up.

“Did Kouka make it in time? How many men does he have left?”

“Not many. In order to draw away the Ba Provincial Guard, I had him retreat west to Ba Province. Only Oukou and I were able to make it back here.”

Seishi raised his voice. “What of Kyoshi and Houto?”

The grimace on Risai’s face told the story. Seishi could not help but stand there aghast. All of the days they had spent together since the start of winter the year before rose up in his mind. Once helpless and alone, they had come this far, together fighting a host of unseen enemies. The innumerable memories stabbed like needles at his conscience.

“I wasn’t able to protect them. I’m sorry,” Risai apologized, though this turn of events was nothing she had to apologize for.

“Kyoshi was a Taoist monk. Houto was a shin’nou. They weren’t soldiers. They deserved better than a dog’s death on a distant battlefield.”

A soldier knew from the start that he might end up dying in a fallow field, his corpse picked over by the crows. But these two weren’t soldiers. They didn’t sign up for this.

“We don’t have the time to mourn the dead,” Sougen said in a low voice. “The Imperial Army was never after us. They didn’t come here to subjugate us. They came here to apprehend His Highness.”

If we had only realized that earlier. The mortifying admission surely weighed on Sougen's mind. Considering the strange way the Imperial Army deployed its forces, they should have figured out that the Imperial Army had never been after them.

"The unit that captured Gyousou-sama joined the Bun Provincial Guard. After that, they will link up with the main body of the Imperial Army. We can't allow that to happen. Once they do, the Black Flags will have no chance of prevailing in any confrontation."

Risai agreed. "We'd be better off intercepting them before they joined the Provincial Guard. But given the distances involved, we'd never make it in time. That means we've somehow got to keep them from reaching the Imperial Army."

The expressions that rose to the faces of Yuushou and the others could only be described as dispirited. They'd been mustering forces in each region as quickly as possible. The entire fighting force of the Black Flags was by no means concentrated in Rokou and Seisai. The Black Flags had grown too large. They couldn't keep them all close enough at hand to mobilize on a moment's notice.

Their colleagues scattered amongst the nearby town ruins could be gathered into platoons in a day, but it'd take a fair amount of time to reach out to their allies lying low in the cities further away towards Tetsui and assemble them into viable fighting units. They simply couldn't afford to put things off long enough to get all of them together.

"It'll take about two weeks for the army headed to Ba Province to return to the vicinity of Hakurou."

Ten days at a forced march. Another two weeks from there to Rin'u. The Provincial Guard or the Imperial Army in Rin'u could still ride out to meet them and join forces in Koukyuu or Kakyuu. Taking the size of the city into account, odds were on the latter.

"No matter how fast they mobilize, it will take the Provincial Guard ten days to move from Hakurou to Kakyuu. Seven days to get to Koukyuu, eight at most."

"Stirring up trouble in Kakyuu is not the best strategy. It's close enough that the Imperial Army in Rin'u would soon catch wind of the emergency and come running. However, the road between Kakyuu and Koukyuu narrows in places, enough to slow down a forced march by the Imperial Army."

Sougen silently nodded.

Gaikatsu said, "Factoring in the number of days it'd take us to establish positions east of Koukyuu, we should figure a delay of ten days. Twelve at most. Until then, those who aren't able to assemble at Seisai should either sit out the fight or hasten straight to the battlefield."

Covering the distance to Seisai was a vexing chore, but gathering there in a haphazard manner risked betraying their intentions to the enemy. No matter what,

they could not give the Provincial Guard any indications about where they were going to attack. Except there was no way to coordinate the movements of so many scattered troops. Even knowing this, they were out of options.

“Most of our colleagues in Ba Province have yet to arrive,” Hoyou mused to herself. In a resplendent room in the main hall of Gamon Temple, Hoyou gnawed on her manicured nails. We’re never going to make it in time. What conditions do Risai and her men find themselves in?”

“They can’t be too badly wounded if they were able to escape,” Tonkou answered in a low voice. “We must preserve our troop strength.”

“But it will be all over if His Highness is captured. Asen’s reign will not end.”

“We are not yet without hope,” Tonkou said. “We don’t know what will happen after this. Reinforce your defenses and close the gates.”

With that, Tonkou left Gamon Temple. The new province lord was scheduled to arrive that evening. They’d already received news that he had passed through Josetsu the day before. Rumors said he was one of Asen’s retainers, but at the same time, up until now, had served as the prime minister of Zui Province with the approval of the Saiho.

At the very least, though his temperament and true allegiances remained to be seen, advice from Genkan via Moku’u recommended keeping the lines of communication open. The Ministry of Winter as well issued a note to the effect that he enjoyed Taiki’s full faith and confidence. No matter that he’d once been Asen’s retainer, he was no longer believed to be a member of Asen’s camp.

Perhaps, like Yuushou, long simmering opposition to Asen had finally risen to the surface. If so, he should be open to persuasion.

Tonkou raced his horse back to Hakurou. He changed into formal attire and prepared to meet the new province lord. Around sunset, he lined up with the assembled ministers of the Rikken as the palanquin arrived through the Road Gate. Illuminated by a brilliant array of torchlights, the palanquin opened and the new province lord stepped out.

Tonkou knelt on the cold cobblestones and bowed deeply. He prostrated himself there, awaiting an order from the chamberlain or words from the province lord himself. But no instructions were forthcoming. A confused and awkward air flowed down the row of ministers. Tonkou finally dared to raise his head and steal a look.

Several people had climbed out of the palanquin. The new province lord must be the one in the middle. With upturned eyes, he confirmed the man’s face, and at the same time couldn’t help but groan.

The man took in his surroundings with vacant eyes, eyes that did not see the ministers kowtowing there and probably saw nothing at all. He stood there and

stared into empty space, as if searching for his lost soul somewhere out there in the sky.

To a degree that sent a chill down Tonkou's spine, the expression on his face resembled that of the current province lord, who had long ago lost the ability to carry on a meaningful conversation.

Chapter 25

[22-4] At the end of the fourth month in the ninth year of *Koushi*, two armies clashed across a wide front in the center of Bun Province east of Koukyuu.

Even in frigid Bun Province, the snow had finally melted away, revealing the dark earth beneath. Planting had commenced in the fields around Koukyuu. The tilled ground surrounded the main highway, on which the Bun Provincial Guard continued its eastward march.

The column consisted of a single yellow division of seventy-five hundred soldiers. In the middle of the ranks were ten members of the air cavalry positioned around a horse wagon. The bed of the wagon was boarded over, making it impossible to see what was inside. The heavily armed guards surrounding the wagon and the ever-watchful lookouts made clear this was no ordinary cargo.

The column left Koukyuu on high alert and continued forward for two days without incident. The next day, as the column approached a narrow ravine, a large number of soldiers spilled over the crest of the low-lying hills and charged the column.

Despite being warned about the Black Flags, this was a larger force than the Provincial Guard had expected. Had the charge included chariots and cavalry, the plains they crossed before arriving at Koukyuu should have presented a greater threat. Except the Black Flags had few chariots or battle horses and little equipment, though this did make them more highly mobile than the Provincial Guard expected.

Surmounting the hills east of Koukyuu all at once, they attacked the Guard's exposed flanks. The charge broke the column in two. The rear half of the column had no choice but to retreat toward Koukyuu. The assault pushed the forward half into the ravine. At the same time, the narrowing road constrained how quickly the column could move.

Risai's regiment succeeded in taking the Provincial Guard by surprise and drove a wedge through the column that divided them east and west. The Black Flags controlled the terrain. Unfortunately, the Sekirin Temple contingent and the White Flags were not well armed. The Gamon Temple forces had not even settled on a chain of command.

Risai confirmed that the Provincial Guard had formed a second line of defense around the air cavalry and attacked the rear of the severed column. But the soldiers stayed in formation.

Meanwhile, the Koutaku forces under Gaikatsu proceeded to force the latter half of the column back to Koukyuu. Here as well, the execution of the strategy did not turn out as planned. The corps commanded by Gaikatsu consisted of forces from the Jou Provincial Guard, Danpou Temple, and the Koutaku Ordination Hall. There simply hadn't been enough time to come to a mutual understanding about the chain of command.

After forcing the back end of the column to retreat to Koukyuu, they could strike at the brigade holding Gyousou. After a great amount of effort, they turned around the frustratingly stubborn brigade and pushed it back, only to come under a completely unexpected attack.

A hail of stones thrown by civilians.

With no one left to till the land, much of the arable land in the middle of Bun Province remained fallow. But farmers were hard at work in the countryside around Koukyuu. Having exhausted their food supplies over the winter, they set out early to sow the fields. The first buds emerged and now it was time to cull the seedlings. The culled sprouts would compensate for their depleted supplies.

If they planted too soon, a spring freeze might take the crops. Knowing that, they sowed the fields anyway, fields that soldiers and horses were trampling underfoot.

"Get yourselves the hell out of here!"

"Are you trying to starve us to death?"

The abuse rained down with the stones. Gaikatsu couldn't very well start attacking civilians. His soldiers shouted back that they were trying to save the emperor. But the farmers weren't listening. Rumors about the imminent enthronement of a new emperor had circulated far and wide. As far as they were concerned, the only emperor that mattered was Asen in Kouki.

If they'd been sufficiently equipped, they could have shrugged off the stones. The Danpou Temple contingent didn't have any armor and the armor worn by the Koutaku forces was second rate at best. Though no one was getting badly injured, it slowed their pursuit of the Provincial Guard to a crawl. This gave the Provincial Guard enough time to regroup and turn the column around. They set off in pursuit of Gaikatsu, forcing him to retreat.

The momentarily divided halves of the Provincial Guard would soon join forces again. Realizing the danger, Risai and Sougen sallied forth to rally their troops, but the differences in force strength were impossible to overcome. The Provincial Guard continued to advance under heavy fire. In the lead, the chariots made it through the ravine and joined the Imperial Army, that the day before had already reached the outskirts of Kakyuu.

However resolutely Risai fought alongside her soldiers, they inevitably found themselves at an overwhelming disadvantage.

“If we could at least encircle Kakyou—”

“We don’t have the troop strength to pull that off.”

“The Provincial Guard is marching from Hakurou. If we don’t retreat, we’ll get caught in a pincer attack.”

Retreat and then what? Risai thought. With Gyousou taken from them, they’d lose their last best chance to save Tai. Even if they had the reserves to call up, in the time it’d take to put their ranks in order, the opposing forces would be doing the same thing, while drawing on support from the Bun Provincial Guard and the Imperial Army.

She no longer had the resources to see an attack through to a useful outcome. The longer this battle went on, the more the odds tilted against the Black Flags. Asen had the authority to mobilize all nine provinces.

“Regardless of whatever else, getting killed in action here and now would be worse,” Sougen said, as if reading her mind.

Risai agreed. Sougen nodded and said, “We’ll withdraw and head north to Ryuukei.”

Fleeing in twos and threes, the mountain trails would come in useful. As long as their pursuers could not throw large numbers of soldiers after them, the Black Flags would have the advantage.

Messengers were dispatched. Risai ran behind the lines ordering the soldiers to drop back and escape to the north.

“Damn it all,” Kyuusan said with a cluck of his tongue. “I guess we bit off more than we could chew.”

Both edges of his double-headed battle ax were badly damaged, making it good for little more than inflicting blunt damage.

“Retreat to Ryuukei. If you run into any roadblocks, head into the mountains.”

“Sure thing.”

Kyuusan turned to his fellow land gang members. Risai tugged on Hien’s reins to turn her around. At that moment, a spear flew past the tip of her nose. Risai immediately directed her attention to the source of the weapon. Hien jumped forward. With a downward sweep of her sword, the enemy sunk to the ground.

Scanning her surroundings, Risai again brought Hien around to the north. That was when she saw Kyuusan sprawled on the ground. He lay there face up, a spear shot into the left side of his chest.

“Kyuusan!”

Risai raced over to him at the same time that Kenchuu arrived at a gallop. She jumped off Hien’s back and ran to Kyuusan. A quick examination confirmed he was still breathing. The spear hadn’t penetrated all the way through his body. But it

probably hit the lung. Extracting the spear would open the wound and collapse the lung.

She'd grasped that much when Kenchuu vaulted off his kijuu and hurried up to them. Arrows began falling all around them. The archers shooting at them weren't close enough to make the shots count. They had to get away now.

"Kenchuu, take care of Kyuusan for me."

"You've got the faster kijuu."

"You go on ahead. I'll bring up the rear." Risai hadn't been there to protect Houto and Kyoshi. She didn't want to see any more sacrifices on her watch. "I'll hold them back long enough to give you a good head start. You run as fast as you can."

"But—" Kenchuu started to say when Kenchuu coughed up a mouthful of blood. Each breath grew more ragged.

"Don't pull out the spear. Get him aid as fast as quickly as possible. Please."

Kenchuu looked back at her. He nodded. He picked up Kyuusan and hoisted him onto the back of his kijuu. More spears came flying after him as he galloped away. Risai knocked them out of the sky before they reached their target. More arrows rained down, not with enough force to kill, but the archers were getting closer.

"Kyuusan!"

"Boss!"

Kyuusan's men shouted after him. Risai urged them to head north and they ran after their leader. Shadows flitted over their heads and banked through the air above them. The air cavalry. Risai launched Hien into the sky. She cut off a soldier shouldering a lance and dove straight at him. Taking aim at the end of the lance, she swung her sword.

Instead of severing it, the blade clanged against the iron shaft and bounced off, sending a numbing shock down her arm. She reeled backwards, unable to parry. A moment before the lance struck home, Hien jumped and swerved. No sooner had Hien alit on the ground a safe distance away but she uttered a short cry and rolled over on her side, as if her legs had been scooped out from under.

Thrown off Hien's back, Risai landed hard and tumbled across the ground. She managed to keep hold of her sword but got the breath knocked out of her. Her senses reeled from the shock as she clambered to her feet. Her vision dimmed.

The air cavalry would soon be on her, whoever attacked Hien landing right next to her. She braced herself for the oncoming assault. A weapon skimmed past her side. Her vision at last cleared. An enemy soldier advanced on her, lance leveled. She dodged the second thrust and righted herself. And then a third. The fourth came at her and she didn't have time to get back on her feet.

She rolled away from the attack, now sure he wasn't the only one. *Where's his wingman?* She rolled again and ran. She cast her eyes around the battlefield, only to find her line of sight swallowed up by something big and black.

Hien.

Hien wrapped her body around Risai like her personal bodyguard. Hien bit down on the collar of Risai's uniform and with a swift jerk of her head swung Risai up and around and onto her back. Clinging to her mane for dear life, Risai settled into the saddle and tightened her hold with her knees. Her legs slipped and her right foot slid along Hien's flank, slick with blood.

A spear. Hien must have taken another hit for her.

Risai didn't need to utter Hien's name before they soared into the air. A ferocious flapping of wings raised a whirlwind behind them. But Hien was faster. They headed north, skimming through the sky above the chaos and confusion of the battlefield. Below her, their battle formations disintegrated as her fellow soldiers scattered and began to make their way north.

Chapter 26

[22-5] Sougen returned to Seisai in a melancholy mood. They had failed to save Gyousou.

That didn't mean they were about to give up. Gyousou was still being taken to Kouki. They had to rescue him before he got there. Sougen ordered the key players to assemble on the double before heading to his residence.

He stopped first in the front courtyard where the wounded were being treated. The courtyard had been turned into a field hospital. Kiitsu was attending to many more casualties that occupied rooms just north of the courtyard.

"Kiitsu," Sougen said. He walked up to him and stopped. With a pained expression, Kiitsu pulled a sheet over the body of the man lying at his feet. Sougen caught a glimpse of the man's face. It was Kyuusan.

"I guess he was too far gone," Sougen said.

Kiitsu raised his head and hurriedly brushed his sleeve across his eyes. "Well beyond my abilities. He met a most unfortunate end."

"Indeed he did."

Sougen had heard that many of the wounded had families to support. He had to give thought to how they would fare going forward. Turning that thought over in his mind, he looked around the courtyard.

"Where is Risai?"

"She's in the middle courtyard. I finished treating her. But—" Kiitsu's voice trailed off.

"You can't mean—" *she's been mortally wounded*, Sougen was about to ask.

Kiitsu anticipated the question with a shake of his head. "None of her injuries are serious. The same can't be said of her kijuu."

"Hien?"

Sougen hurried from the room to the middle courtyard. Risai was sitting under a small tent propped up in a corner of the courtyard. The large head of the beast rested in her lap. Her head hung down to her chest as she tenderly petted the kijuu.

"Risai."

In response to Sougen's voice, Risai looked away. "Hien saved me again this time." She gently, even reverently, stroked the matted fur. "I can't tell you how many times she saved my life. When we traveled to Kei as well, she continued to protect me despite being covered head to tail with wounds."

"I see," Sougen said. He knelt on the ground next to the kijuu. Hien's coat shone with a beautiful and clean sheen. Her wounds were bound with strips of white cloth.

"We traveled together to Mount Hou. Hien and Taiki got along so well." Risai's voice faded away.

Sougen added a silent nod and petted the cold fur. When he'd fled from Jou Province, he lost the kijuu that had long been his constant companion. He understood Risai's grief so well it hurt.

You did a good job protecting Risai, Sougen said in his heart and got to his feet. Exiting the courtyard, he asked the first soldier he met to bring Risai a blanket and stoke the fire.

Though they had taken tremendous damage, they absolutely could not give up. The Black Flags were not at all ready for the fight. They still had not assembled their available forces. Given their inferior numbers, sending their entire army into battle was unlikely to yield a victory.

But if Gyousou ended up getting executed, the whole effort would be for naught, no matter what else happened.

"We've got to get His Highness back, even if it kills us."

And yet, said the disheartened amongst them. They hung their heads and protested that they'd made too many sacrifices already.

A young voice shouted, "The land gangs will fight!"

The speaker was a young man. Holding a sword and standing shoulder to shoulder with him, his companion could be better described as a boy.

"Who are they?"

"Kyuusan's kids."

Sougen examined the faces of the determined youngsters as Sekihi introduced them.

"Shiyuu and Houjun. Kyuusan raised them as his own sons. They're still young but Kyuusan brought them up well. They won't hold anybody back."

The next day at dawn, the Black Flags embarked on their final offensive.

Don't get bogged down in the particulars for now, just make your way to Rin'u with all due haste.

While messengers carried these instructions to the infantry units moving along the highways, each camp and unit set off pursuit of the Imperial Army as soon as they filled in their ranks. The camp members hardly had the time to get to know each other, let alone train in formation. Once the head count reached company or battalion strength, they set off to confront the Imperial Army or die trying.

They knew it was a reckless endeavor. But once the Imperial Army crossed the Zui Provincial border with Gyousou in custody, their whole cause was over. Unlike Bun Province, Asen had total control of Zui Province. Unlike Bun Province, there would be no gaps in his defenses they could take advantage of.

“I know I am making unreasonable demands. We’ll have to pray for a miracle or make one happen.”

So read the manifesto Sougen circulated to their allied forces.

That miracle never came.

The troops advancing along the highway from Koutaku rushed ahead recklessly with little regard for decorum or discipline. They drew blood in the first assault before the Imperial Army threw them back. This unprepared rabble presented no threat to the Imperial Army. In the face of the Imperial Army’s overwhelming material advantage, the intermittent and uncoordinated attacks never presented a viable threat.

If nothing else, the Imperial Army came away impressed by a foe imbued with so much pointless fighting spirit.

Risai waited to make the rendezvous but Kouyuu and his men didn’t arrive in time. Ever conscious of the dull ache in her heart, she galloped her unfamiliar kijuu to the battlefield. There was no sign of a victory in sight. Her brothers in arms fell one after the other and yet stayed on the offense despite being fated to die a dog’s death.

The civilian population lent them no support. By and large, they considered the Black Flags a rebel force and refused to cooperate. More than a few expressed open antagonism to their presence. All the zeal and bravery in the couldn’t turn around a lost cause.

Repeatedly routed in their pursuit, the Black Flags could only watch as the Imperial Army soldiers disappeared inside the defensive perimeter of Zui Province with Gyousou in custody. They had neither the time nor the reserves to reorganize and rally their forces.

Chapter 27

[22-6] Kouyuu was within a two-day march of Hakurou.

A messenger delivered orders for him to move with all possible speed. Understanding the circumstances involved, he picked up the pace and made no attempt to shun the public eye. Fortunately, the Provincial Guard had concentrated the bulk of its forces on the defense of Hakurou and the highways leading to Rin'u.

Taking advantage of the absence of pickets and guards, Kouyuu and his vanguard spurred on their mounts and surged ahead of the column. When they approached the city that evening, they encountered a group of people carrying what appeared to be their life's belongings.

"Get as far away from Hakurou as you can!" they called out in loud voices. "It's dangerous around here!"

When pressed for more information, a woman in a traveling outfit said, "War. A bunch of fools tried to take on the Imperial Army."

"They attacked the Imperial Army! Unbelievable! Another punitive expedition is surely in the offing. This is the end of Bun Province!"

The woman and the others around her unleashed groans of dismay.

The people of Bun Province had not forgotten. Under the pretext of hunting down the insurrectionists, cities were attacked and destroyed, regardless of whether any willing participants were there to be found or not. The mere suspicion of harboring rebels got everybody killed, including travelers who simply happened to be passing through.

"Except—if the rebellion succeeds—"

"No chance of that!" one of the bystanders spit out. "Those rebels got their heads handed to them!"

"They're already running for the hills. You can expect the usual mopping up operations to follow. It's bad news all around."

With that, the travelers turned their backs on Hakurou and Bun Province and continued their journey.

A determined Kouyuu called out to the man who'd last spoken, "Are you sure the Provincial Guard won the day?"

He gave Kouyuu and the several dozen men with him—all armed and on horseback—a suspicious look.

"We were on furlough and received emergency orders to return right away."

“Ah,” the man muttered, the relief clear on his face, though his aura of apprehension did not disappear altogether. “The bunch that attacked the Provincial Guard got routed outside Kakyou. After this, the Guard is just cleaning up the mess they left behind.”

“We heard the rebel forces were operating on a fairly large scale.”

“Yeah, sure, they had big numbers on their side. But they hardly posed a threat to the Provincial Guard and the Imperial Army. All that’s left is a long pile of bodies from Kakyou to Rin’u.”

And it happened at a time when, at long last, winter had finally ended and the fields were being tilled, the man grieved.

Kouyuu thanked him. Night was falling. The man hurried down the darkening road, weighed down by the heavy pack on his back.

“Kouyuu-sama—”

In response to the grief in the voices of his retainers, Kouyuu could only bite his lip. They had not arrived in time.

“And yet we came this far—”

One of his men said in a small voice, “We could still hurry to the battlefield and at least provide a modicum of relief and reinforcements.”

“Pointless. We’d end up throwing our lives away for nothing.”

“But—”

“Worse than nothing. We’d inflict more needless suffering on the civilian population. The word from Seisai as well was to first proceed with all due haste. If we didn’t make it in time, we were to minimize our losses and preserve what troop strength we still have.”

“Then—”

“We keep going and make a run for Ba Province.”

Kouyuu glanced up at the southern sky. The deepening twilight sky was dotted with clouds, but different from the heavy gray clouds laden with snow they became so accustomed to during the winter. The snow was finally at an end. The accumulated drifts disappeared from the plains.

A late spring had arrived in Bun Province as well, but they’d still been wrapped up in winter and unable to leave.

He cast his thoughts back to Jou Province, where he and his liege had last parted ways. No fortuitous reunion would be in the offing. How disappointed Risai must be with her unproductive retainers.

“All we can do now is flee.”

The sun set in the mountains. Far in the distance, Kouka could make out the lights of torches dotting the fallow fields around the city. His ears caught a faint sound

behind him, the crunch of footsteps on frozen snow. Though the snow had begun to disappear in the mountains, the remaining snow turned to ice in the shadows of the trees, melting away like old rot from around the trunks. The cold meltwater flowed away, accumulating here and there beneath pockets of frozen air.

"They appear to have been routed," came a quiet voice. The scout he'd sent to survey the camp of the Ba Provincial Guard in the valley below had returned. "The report came via a blue bird. They're in a good mood down there. Alcohol is flowing in earnest."

Kouka nodded. In truth, for a while now, the wind had carried the sounds of revelry up the slopes. He'd read as much into the celebratory voices.

"What about Sougen-sama?"

"We don't have any details about his current circumstances. All we are hearing from the Provincial Guard at this point is they routed the enemy. Once mopping up operations are concluded, they will return to base."

"I see," Kouka muttered. "Mopping up, eh? All we can do now is escape under cover of the night."

"There is a heavy concentration of troops ahead. What about heading to Kou Province instead?" the scout whispered.

"Risai-dono doesn't want us getting anywhere near Kou Province. We'll go west."

"But—"

"We're going west. It's not up for debate."

If Kouka took his troops into Kou Province, they would leave a trail behind. The northern quarter of Kou Province would become the stage for another punitive expedition. Getting Ten Shire caught up in the fighting would place the survivors of Zui'un Temple in great danger and deprive the people of much needed medicines.

After a well-deserved rest, Kouka rallied his troops and began moving them west into the mountains. Every soldier had good reasons to be wary of the dark. None of them could forget the fear of getting attacked by youma, the kind of terror that seeped into the bones. The whistling wind was no less disconcerting as they descended the mountain. The melting snow made the footing precarious, prompting a stream of stifled profanities every time one of them plunged through the thin crust of ice.

Concealing their presence and walking through the night, they finally felt the slanting rays of the morning sun on their backs. Kouka heard a soft neigh, proof of a trained war horse lurking in a thicket not too far away.

With a silent gesture, Kouka signaled his soldiers to close formation. He definitely felt a human presence encircling them.

The winds coursed south from the midst of the Ba Province mountains, carrying with them the raw stench of death. The winds followed the descending slopes through the forests and finally reached the northern quarter of Kou Province.

Spring had already arrived in the mountain valleys of Kou. The snow covering the countryside had mostly melted away. Pale green buds were beginning to sprout in the tilled fields.

The cry of a bird echoed from the small village in the midst of all that black earth. The winds blowing down from the mountains transformed along the way into a warm, soft breeze.

But the cupboard is already bare.

Enshi peered into the barrel. The sight of the bare boards at the bottom prompted a sigh of dismay. Enshi had been in the care of the rika for a while now. The grain in this barrel fed everyone in the rika. Since the beginning of April, they'd stocked up on potatoes and edible grasses in order to extend their supplies even a day longer, but they'd already exhausted their stores.

In two or three more days, the barrel would be empty.

The spring sowing notwithstanding, a fair amount of time would have to pass before they'd have anything to put in their mouths.

With another sigh, Enshi picked up the pot and left the storeroom. In exchange for the support of the rika, she took on odd jobs at this rika with its many elderly residents. The pot filled with grain in one hand and a bucket with the wash in the other, she left the rika and walked the short distance to the well.

She was quietly arranging the wash when a person approached on the nearby road.

He was an emaciated thin old man. His back bent over and each step uncertain, he resembled more the withered old branch of a tree. This was Enchou, who had brought together the Taoists sheltered in Touka.

Enshi acknowledged him with a nod of her head. Enchou must have taken note, for he altered his course and walked to the well. He crouched down next to Enshi, his countenance weary, his bearing devoid of its usual vigor. He looked very much like an old man.

In response to Enshi's puzzled glance, Enchou said, looking straight at her, "Have you heard back from your husband?" His gaze did not falter.

"Husband? You mean Kouryou? He's not my husband, you know."

She had not heard from him since he set off on his journey. She was about to state as much when Enchou said, "Seems there's been a strange turn in the weather."

Enshi followed Enchou's gaze and looked up at the sky. Whisps of white spread across the high dome of the darkening spring sky. There were no low-lying clouds to speak of.

“It’s growing dark in the north.”

“Is it, now?” Enshi answered with an ambiguous smile. The clouds didn’t look any thicker to the north.

Enchou leaned forward and folded his arms across his knees and stared off into the distance.

“I wonder how Kyoshi is doing,” he said, as if speaking out of concern for his own grandson.

Before Enshi could think of a response, Enchou interrupted her thoughts with a violent fit of coughing.

“Are you alright?”

She reached out to pat his back. He brushed away her arm and got shakily to his feet. Still coughing, he tottered toward the gate. Following the solitary figure with her eyes, she felt a pang of heartrending sorrow.

Enchou collapsed that night. The people of the village and his disciples did all they could, but the old monk never regained consciousness.

Two days later, Enchou quietly breathed his last.

Part Twenty-Three

Chapter 28

[23-1] **Seisai** was little more than a ghost town.

Once crowded with the members and associates of the land gangs and Black Flags and villagers, the streets of Seisai were now home only to the wind. Though the branches from catalpa trees dotted the fallow fields, few corpses were buried beneath these crude grave markers. The bodies of most who had lost their lives on the battlefield had been abandoned where they died.

Not enough manpower remained to bring them all home.

The land gangs were as good as extinct. The orphaned children Kyuusan left behind survived but most of the leadership died in the battles. Sekihi returned with grave injuries, fortunate to count himself among the living. Aside from a handful of commanding officers, hardly anyone from the White Flags and Sekirin Temple had returned.

Kenchuu managed to survive. Sodou was missing in action, along with Hakugyuu from Gamon Temple. The last anybody had seen, he'd taken on three enemy soldiers and was fighting them all at the same time.

The Koutaku Ordination Hall contingent was practically wiped out. Kuushou and Seigen had disappeared on the battlefield. Unsurprisingly, a greater proportion of the armies led by Sougen and Risai survived, though even there, their numbers had been reduced by a third. Only a few of the more poorly equipped soldiers without kijuu or horses returned.

The Black Flags saw their ranks reduced from ten thousand to several hundred.

Those weren't the only sacrifices. While Risai and her troops were attacking along a front that reached from Rin'u to the borderlands of Zui Province, the Provincial Guard launched assaults on Gamon Temple and Seisai. Observing the Provincial Guard advancing on the city, the residents of Seisai were able to quickly evacuate the most vulnerable and retreat to Rokou.

Most of those who remained in Seisai to fend off the Provincial Guard died in the effort, including Yotaku.

In the fallow field, Risai clasped her hands together over Yotaku's grave. *You did good work.*

He'd broken down in tears hearing of Houto's death. The encouraging words she'd offered were the last they'd shared together. She didn't have the time to bid him goodbye when she left for the front. When she returned, she found his body lying beneath a mountain of corpses.

"I should have stayed behind in Seisai." Beside her, Kiitsu hung his head. He clearly faulted himself for retreating to Rokou by himself. "I told him we should go together."

Yotaku declined and remained behind in Seisai.

Risai admonished him, "The women and children needed a guide to get them there safely. Don't blame yourself."

Kiitsu shook his head. Yotaku's death stung deeply. All the more painful, Hoyou shared the same fate as Houto. The Provincial Guard surrounded Gamon Temple and rained down fire arrows. Anyone attempting to flee was cut down outside the gates. Most of those who'd remained at Gamon Temple were artisans. With not even the means to fight back, they were quickly reduced to corpses.

In the end, Hoyou attempted to flee and was never seen again. A later search of the charred ruins turned up nothing. There was no way to identify her body among the countless remains.

In Hakurou, Tonkou and Sekirei alone survived. Sekirei had been tasked with delivering a message and was traveling between the lines when the siege took place.

"If I'd been with her, I know I could have gotten her out."

Sekirei wept with frustration and grief, though there was no guarantee that she could have protected Hoyou by herself. Without a body and no witness to her final moments. Hoyou's disappearance simply didn't feel real.

A sudden sense of emptiness suffused the city. Buildings that were once home to the Black Flags now housed only empty air. As if nature herself could not resist the irony, a balmy breeze and the smell of blooming flowers filled the emptiness instead. Returning from the field to her living quarters, there was no warm presence there to greet her. Yotaku's absence truly struck home.

Amidst that pensive atmosphere, Tonkou paid a visit. Or to be more precise, he fled Bun Province castle and took refuge there. The castle was undergoing an internal upheaval. After ignoring Bun Province for so long, Asen had taken an active role in its governance. The sleepy air that permeated the corridors of the castle dissipated overnight.

The old province lord was shuffled out of office. The new province lord arrived in the company of his subordinates. But when he entered the castle and announced with hollow eyes, "It's time to clean house," it was clear that he was already in the grips of the illness.

“Cleanse the province of all who stand against our Imperial polity. Anyone who collaborates with the land gangs and rebels, or through their own forbearance provides aid or comfort to the enemy, will suffer the most severe punishment.”

With that pronouncement, Tonkou knew that every minute longer he stayed in the provincial castle put his life in greater danger. His only remaining option was to take advantage of the chaos caused by the “cleaning house” and escape.

Everything we’ve done up till now ended in such a splendid disaster, Risai derided herself. Every achievement they’d earned with so much earnest effort had come to nothing. After this, for all they knew, loss would continue to pile upon loss.

A large army was gathering at the border of Zui Province. Another subjugation campaign was about to begin. Roadblocks were going up on the highway leading to Kouki. Not even travelers on kijuu were allowed into the province.

The gains Risai and her allies had accumulated over the winter were melting away like the snow. The arrival of spring promised to erase every last trace.

“All we can do is run for the hills,” Tonkou said when he showed up. “Face it. We haven’t got anywhere near the troop strength to break through those defensive lines.”

Neither Risai nor her colleagues knew how to answer that observation.

“We can’t rescue His Highness at this juncture. We can’t destroy Asen. For now, we lack the means to save Tai. For the good of Tai, we should quit the field, go underground, and make plans for an eventual comeback.”

“Quit the field?” Seishi raised his voice. “While His Highness is beyond our reach, the Kingdom of Tai still has Taiki. Asen isn’t about to restore His Highness to the throne. But as long as Taiki is still with us, the Divine Will may yet be revised. When that happens, another opportunity to save Tai will present itself.”

“If it was me, I’d have the Taiho locked up,” Kenchuu said in a wry voice. “Make it so he can’t change anything or choose anybody else. That way, Asen could rule the roost forever.”

“A kirin who cannot choose an emperor will eventually die. At some point, Asen will no longer have a Taiho.”

When that happened, the fruit bearing the next kirin of Tai would blossom on Mount Hou. The new kirin of Tai would be born and select the next emperor. That day would inevitably come.

“If we can hold out until a new emperor is chosen, Tai will have its rightful emperor.”

While they all understood the essential truth of what Tonkou was saying, they could not bring themselves to go along with the obvious conclusions.

Then what were all these sacrifices for?

If they were fine with abandoning Gyousou to save their own skins, then they shouldn't have gone on the offensive in the first place. Had they never embraced this doomed cause, they wouldn't have marched into these tragic battles resigned to die a dog's death.

Asen was unlikely to spare Gyousou's life, which meant much more than the loss of an emperor. If Gyousou died and the kingdom was left without its leader, it'd be impossible to garner aid from other kingdoms. Only the rightful sovereign could make such a request. That was a fundamental principle.

Isolated and alone, Tai departed from the Laws of Heaven. Tai now stood to lose everything. Everything in its entirety.

Despite knowing all that, Risai and her brothers in arms had no good choices before them.

Chapter 29

[23-2] Asen sat at the head of the Privy Council. He announced to the assembled ministers of the Rikken, “Gyousou trampled upon the Divine Will and stole his rank and position. This must be made public and spread far and wide. Before the enthronement can take place, he will be dragged before the people to face these accusations and apologize.”

The Rikken listened in stunned silence. No one objected. Asen surveyed the room, his face expressionless. His eyes focused on Ansaku.

“Ansaku.”

At the sound of his name, Ansaku fell to his knees.

“When those better days do arrive, we cannot be without a Chousai. I hereby appoint you to the post.”

Ansaku bowed low. *At last, my time has come.* He’d always believed the position was good as promised to him. Because he was the one who brought Asen around.

Even after Taiki named him emperor, Asen demonstrated not the slightest inclination to accede to the throne. Ansaku was fairly certain a sense of emptiness accounted for this attitude. Whatever the reason Asen struck out at Gyousou, it had nothing to do with being emperor.

If he’d been after the throne all along, he wouldn’t have so blithely brushed it aside. Thus it followed that Asen was targeting Gyousou himself. Ansaku identified Asen’s underlying motivation as jealousy. Asen loathed the more talented and accomplished Gyousou, and not without reason. Gyousou never would have handed over the reins of government to Chou’un and his ilk.

Chou’un struck Ansaku as deficient in every ability except self-promotion. The only reason the man could pretend to get anything done was because Ansaku was there covering for him. The only other thing above average about Chou’un was his high opinion of himself. Chou’un lacked any awareness of his own weaknesses, which made dealing with him a royal pain.

Any straightforward proposal was considered presumptuous and treated as a personal attack. Better to lead the horse to water and pretend that Chou’un came up with the idea on his own while offering him praise and support.

If any concerns arose in his mind about an issue, with all of Chou’un’s mental resources devoted to defending himself against all the possible contingencies, he would soon start tallying up the drawbacks and disadvantages. Handling those

objections and quelling his anxieties while bringing him around to a decision required a good deal of groundwork.

Gyousou, on the other hand, would have grasped the extent of Chou'un's incompetence on day one and understood who was truly capable of handling the job. That was the difference between Asen and Gyousou. This gap in abilities surely accounted for Asen's jealousy and hatred of Gyousou.

Having attacked Gyousou out of envy, Asen's reign soon foundered. No mystery there. After all, everybody knew Asen was nothing more than a pretender. Not even capable of evaluating the quality of his retainers, he gave free rein to incompetent and petty tyrants like Chou'un. So of course there was no chance of putting the Imperial Court in good working order.

In the end, Ansaku surmised, the rotten status quo must have finally gotten to him.

The tragic state of affairs Tai found itself in stood as proof of his mismanagement. So in order to see and hear no evil, he secluded himself deep within the Rokushin and closed his eyes and ears to the world around him. Before he could be dragged back to the throne, Asen first had to be convinced of his superiority to Gyousou.

To that end, Ansaku whispered in Asen's ear, "Before acceding to the throne, the people must believe it was stolen from you."

Asen considered Ansaku's proposal with a dubious expression.

Ansaku added, "Not that you took the throne but that Gyousou stole what was yours all along, an offense deserving of execution. He deceived the young Taiho, severed his horn, and compelled the Taiho to follow him. Those were the means he used to claim the throne. When you rose up against such injustices, he ran away and hid, with no regard to the cares and suffering of the people."

Asen gave Ansaku a long look. "And how would you have the people embrace those beliefs?"

"Parade him to the execution grounds and level the charges there. Compel him to confess his sins and apologize to the people."

"Gyousou will never go along with that."

"The spectators won't be convinced unless he does. If they show up for a reading of the bill of indictment, they will certainly expect to hear a confession as well." Ansaku lowered his voice. "The crowds will be impatient and on edge. Some may even start jeering. Should a stone be thrown, an avalanche is sure to follow."

"Oh?" Asen said in a small voice, his eyes narrowing.

Ansaku leaned in closer. "A formal abdication would take on too many risks, as would exiling Gyousou from the kingdom. Nevertheless, he must be driven from the throne. If his own subjects administer the last rites, the problem solves itself."

"You think being struck by a few stones will kill him?"

“Don’t take the stone throwers for granted. They’ll get caught up in the frenzy of the moment. Among them, a few capable of more direct action will step forward, having stolen weapons from the guards.”

“They’ll step forward, eh?” Asen said. “Are you sure of that?”

The thin smile on Asen’s face felt like a challenge. Asen was testing him. Ansaku said, “Preparations will be made beforehand in order to identify those with the biggest smoldering resentments and then fan the flames.”

“Instigating a third party to kill Asen is hardly different than killing him myself.”

“Oh, you would never *order* anyone do the deed. All you did was get into a conversation with a couple of guys with big chips on their shoulders and let it be known that if *you* were there, you’d be throwing the first stone. And if you could, a good whack with a sword would be all the more satisfying. Nothing wrong with words to that effect, say, while sharing drinks at a bar. Happens all the time. If one of them gets riled up and actually goes through it, that’s all on him.”

Or rather, Ansaku added, “There are statements open to being taken the wrong way, like how much you would appreciate it if someone could make a certain problem go away. Human beings have a habit of interpreting information in ways convenient to their personal objectives. Even when they don’t know the whole story, they’ll let their imaginations fill in the gaps and commit themselves to the most favorable outcome.”

“I see,” Asen said with that same thin smile.

Ansaku all but held his breath while he watched and waited to see what course Asen would take. In the end, Asen chose to go ahead with the enthronement. Ansaku’s plan won the day.

Not that any plan could be counted on to play out as smoothly as the planner imagined. But by the time the commoners got around to shouting and jeering and throwing stones, they were bound to come away convinced of Gyousou’s sins and that should be enough to satisfy Asen.

Asen himself was unlikely to care very much if Gyousou, the star of this little show, didn’t die in the end and no formal enthronement ensued. The status quo would simply continue as it had so far. Rather, the only one truly inconvenienced in that case would be Ansaku. But if he played his cards right, such an outcome could work to his advantage too.

In fact, ever since he heard that Gyousou had been captured, Ansaku had been scrupulously tending to his plan. He unleashed his minions on the city and had them single out anyone harboring a grudge, anyone dissatisfied with the status quo. In particular, in the rough parts of town where refugees were known to gather.

Seeking out fresh misfortunes, they found scores of people brimming with a wide variety of resentments. Stirring up those simmering feelings of righteous indignation among them was a simple task.

I'll never forgive him—

I'd give him a piece of my mind—

Yeah, I'd kill him if I got the chance—

Once such enraged individuals made their presence known, like-minded hangers-on were sure to follow. They only had to fan the flames and emboldened their resolve. Depending on their disposition, there could be cash in the offing or maybe a leg up in social status. Such hints and insinuations were always part of the package, along with constant reminders about the righteousness of their actions.

At the same time, they spread rumors about the military being on heightened alert for insurrectionists. Outraged citizens might even attack Gyouso! The word went around that more than few wished to add a few lashes of their own to heaven's divine wrath when he stood before the bar of justice.

The point of all this was to leave behind the mistaken impression that there were many more like them with large chips on their shoulders. If nothing else, the commoners could find strength in numbers. Realizing how many of them there were in their camps and neighborhoods should be enough to push them over the threshold into action.

Ansaku did not set out to do all this himself. He singled out his more capable subordinates and told them as much as they needed to know. They delivered the orders to their underlings. Somewhere along the line, money changed hands and people got put on the payroll.

What Ansaku had to do himself was communicate directly to his aides and assistants the importance of fanning the flames and creating the right atmosphere. That information was passed down the line and further down the line. If someone somewhere along that line came away with the idea that a reward awaited them if a real riot broke out, well, there was no accounting for fools with vivid imaginations.

At the end of the day, none of their wrongdoing could be traced back to Asen or Ansaku.

The coming dynasty was Ansaku's to do with as he pleased.

Taiki said in a melancholy voice, "A messenger from Asen just stopped by. Starting tomorrow, they'll be sending escorts to take me off the premises. It appears I am to resume attending Privy Council meetings with the Rikken as I have until now."

There were only four people in the main hall of Nightingale Manor.

"Does that mean they're lifting your house arrest?" Juntatsu said.

Taiki shook his head. A smile tinged with bitterness rose to his face. "I never was under house arrest, you know. The reason we've been shut up in Nightingale Manor is to protect against any prospect of rebellion."

"That's what this has been about," Juntatsu said with a sigh. "In other words, fears of an actual rebellion have passed."

Taiki nodded. "Kakei has been executed."

"Eh?" Juntatsu exclaimed. "But—Kakei-sama was—beyond the shadow of any doubt—"

"—blameless," Taiki muttered under his breath. Kakei was not plotting a rebellion. Nothing Chou'un said deserved a speck of trust. This was clearly a crime concocted out of whole cloth.

Yari said, "Was the provincial prime minister included in the indictment too?"

Taiki hung his head and nodded once again.

"Unbelievable!" Juntatsu couldn't find the words to say anything more.

"Gyousou-sama is being brought to Kouki where he will be put on trial."

Taiki summed up the impending events. Ganchou responded with a roar. "What manner of falsehoods are these!"

"And apparently I am to be present at the bar of justice."

Makes sense, Yari thought. Asen would thereby claim that the Divine Will had been with him from the start. Taiki absolutely had to be there in order to endorse that assertion.

A heavy silence descended on the main hall of the manor. Ganchou groaned, "It's no different than taking the Taiho hostage. Asen could extort a false confession from Gyousou by threatening to kill the Taiho."

"The Taiho dying would mess up Asen's plans," Yari pointed out.

"But he can threaten and intimidate all he likes. To be sure, Asen would be wringing his own neck if the Taiho died. But he's certainly capable of keeping his own actions in check in order to ensnare Gyousou. Moreover, Gyousou-sama is unlikely to know exactly what schemes Asen has in mind and so may give in if threatened."

The death of the kirin posed a far greater tragedy to the people of a kingdom than the death of an emperor.

"So Gyousou-sama becomes the usurper."

Ganchou sat there, head in his hands. Taiki rested his hand on his shoulder. "I won't let that happen," he stated. "Not as long as I am there. Whom I choose to kneel before will eliminate any doubts. Once it is made clear that Gyousou is the true emperor, some among the soldiers should have second thoughts. Moreover, civilians as well will be at the execution grounds."

"You are right on that," Juntatsu said with a sigh of relief and a nod.

Ganchou nodded too, but still harbored feelings of unease. To be sure, no one could question the identity of the real emperor if Taiki bowed before Gyousou. However, how would Taiki get that close to Gyousou in the first place? Asen wouldn't be so stupid as to allow him anywhere near Gyousou. And besides—

"I can't see you pulling it off so easily," Yari said, as if discerning Ganchou's reservations.

Ganchou added, "Yari and I would have to clear a way to Gyousou-sama." No easy task but not impossible to accomplish.

"If the Taiho got shot down the moment his knees touched the ground, that'd be the end of it."

"That'd be the end of Asen as well."

"Asen likely doesn't give a damn about his own end. His desire for revenge against Gyousou may be the only thing driving him forward."

Exactly, Ganchou thought to himself but kept his mouth shut.

"Are there any other concerns on your mind?" Yari prompted him.

"There are," Ganchou said. "Namely, the Taiho is the Black Kirin."

The mane of every other kirin had a gleaming golden hue, a color of hair unique to the kirin. That color possessed persuasive powers all by itself.

"That is not the case with the Taiho. When the subject comes up, even I have to remind myself that, yes, the Taiho of Tai is the Black Kirin."

"I see. So the visual evidence by itself wouldn't be very persuasive."

"Not the same visceral impact as a person with golden hair bowing before His Highness."

If Taiki had the same golden hair expected of a Saiho, the result would be an overwhelming spectacle. But Taiki could not count on such an outcome. The questions surrounding him upon his return to Hakkei Palace were proof enough. While those who'd known him as a young child accepted who he was and vouched for his identity, doubts that he really was Taiki continued to swirl around him.

"Most people wouldn't recognize the Taiho if he was standing right in front of them," Ganchou grumbled. "Moreover, with everybody up in arms, we could hardly count on them remembering that Taiki is the Black Kirin."

"That's for certain."

"Nevertheless, by all rights, he should possess the means to surmount any obstacles before him, such as transforming his appearance and deploying his shirei. But his horn was severed, rendering him little different than any other young man his age."

"Because of his miraculous existence, he is regarded as the final word when it comes to the truth," Yari said. Responding to Ganchou's quizzical look, she added,

“What the Taiho says stands because the Taiho said it. His Word of Heaven is deemed the truth precisely because of the kirin’s miraculous nature.”

“Hoh.”

“A most interesting personage. The Taiho really is a curiosity.”

“Don’t be rude.”

“The authority of the kirin doesn’t mean much to me. But I do find him fascinating. So calm and composed. That he can step back and examine himself in such a detached manner is hugely compelling.”

“Yari.”

Yari smiled at the rebuke. “How about I simply say instead there is nothing normal about him? That right there is no run-of-the-mill human being. In which case, if the issue rises to the level that Ganchou needs to worry about it, then he’s likely already thought it through and come up with an answer. So no need to get all worked up about it like Ganchou.”

Ganchou looked miffed for a moment. Then he blinked and said, “Like Gyousou-sama.”

“I don’t know His Highness. Is that the kind of man he is?”

“Not in terms of temperament. It’s just that you remind me of how Gyousou-sama’s retainers used to talk about him.”

“Huh,” Yari said softly, though in a tone of voice that suggested she was impressed. “Makes sense, I guess.”

In an ideal world, Taiki thought to himself.

They would have figured out where Gyousou was being held and set him free. But they hadn’t located him in time. Beginning with Kakei, the members of the provincial Rikken had been eliminated. For the time being, their protective custody (or rather, house arrest) had been lifted. Taiki once again met with the provincial Rikken, though throwing their support behind him would likely put their own lives at risk.

Taiki shared the same concerns, meaning that the best way forward was to keep everybody at a safe distance. With Asen’s minders never more than a few steps away, the range of actions Taiki could take were severely restricted, placing limits on what he’d be able to investigate.

The Imperial Army crossed the provincial border with someone in their custody under heavy guard. He had confirmed that much. From the border, the Imperial Army headed straight for Kouki. But when they arrived, Gyousou wasn’t with them. This person they were guarding and the guards themselves were nowhere to be seen.

He could only imagine that they had separated from the column somewhere along the road and gone into hiding. But he had yet to ascertain the when and the where.

The jurisdictional reach of a provincial minister stopped short of the Imperial Army, making the absence of Keitou all the more painful.

He'd heard rumors that three days after crossing the provincial border, the person in question was still with the army. But ever since then, though witnesses reported seeing the guards escorting him, any news about the person in their custody petered out. No one knew whether he was still with the army or not.

Along the return route, the personnel in the guard detail reduced in number little by little. Before the army reached Kouki, they'd all disappeared. No one could say for certain when their ranks began to dwindle. This special unit wasn't part of the normal chain of command and didn't interact with the rank and file. As far as the rank and file knew, their sole job was to protect that unit and head back to Kouki.

Beyond that, they weren't allowed to have anything to do with them.

Several Ryou'un Mountains were located in the northern quarter of Zui Province, along with the mausoleums of past emperors. Figuring that both were worth exploring, a search of the area nevertheless turned up no evidence of garrisoned soldiers or an equivalently large number of government officials stationed there.

Taiki recruited every outside contact he could follow from inside Nightingale Manor. There was a dwindling amount of time left to track down Gyousou. Arranging a meeting with him in advance, let alone saving him, became well-nigh impossible.

Their sole point of contact would be before this so-called bar of justice. If they couldn't save him before then, that would be the only place they would meet. Taiki had no choice but to wager his last best hopes on that encounter. If he could run to Gyousou, he could reassert the truth before the assembled throngs and flip the status quo upside down.

Except Asen would foresee such a turn of events as well. "All safety measures involving the Taiho must be strengthened," he said.

Taiki took in those words with a start. Except when summoned to Privy Council meetings like this, he was imprisoned in Nightingale Manor. After this, Asen directed the Rikkan, the Taiho would be surrounded by a reinforced contingent of guards—deemed his security detail by the officials in charge—wherever he traveled in the Inner or Outer Palace.

"A terrible calamity would ensue if the people ran amok and visited violence upon the Taiho. Nobody knows what might happen henceforth. His absolute safety must be guaranteed. Not even the slightest opening can be permitted. Our defenses must be water tight. One of our officials must be constantly at his side."

Asen looked at Taiki with something of a sneer. Though Taiki maintained a serene demeanor, he could not help but feel a deep pang of disappointment, accompanied by the rising concern that Asen had seen through his plans.

Asen added in an almost gleeful manner, “A small number of rebels may invade Kouki. This suicide corps will try to rescue Gyousou, or abandon that effort and at the very least attempt to preserve his honor. In any case, we must keep our eyes peeled and prepare for the worst.”

Taiki’s only recourse was to sit there and hold his tongue.

“Should we seal off and shut down Kouki?” asked the Minister of Summer.

Asen smiled. “No need. They’d find a hole in the walls somewhere. Close the city gates as soon as the trial begins and keep a close eye on the crowds. If disturbances break out, if anyone defies the authorities or covers for the criminals in the slightest, will be exterminated, regardless of the circumstances.”

“Exterminated?”

Asen answered with a big nod. “Merely arresting these people would be far too lenient and questioning them would be a waste of time. Execute them on the spot.”

“But the commoners—” said the Minister of Summer, clearly concerned that Asen was straying from the Way.

Asen laughed out loud. “Don’t worry your little heads about them. It will be enough to say they were remnants of the rebel forces.” He cheerfully elaborated, “It is entirely possible that rebels will be mingling among the crowds. We are not going to bother getting rid of them. If they show up, we’ll let them in. But we will check them for weapons. Weapons will not be allowed into the Imperial Palace. It doesn’t matter who they are, they’ll be eliminated at the first sign of trouble. Make sure that air cavalry and archers are ready and in place.”

Lock down Kouki. If any unrest breaks out, no matter how many are involved, nobody gets out. Put an end to all of them inside Kouki. That was the substance of Asen’s declaration.

All Taiki could do was listen. He made the obvious point that blameless citizens in the vicinity would get caught up in any enforcement actions, though he knew Asen was in no mood to listen to such objections.

This was nothing more than a scheme to lure anyone wishing to rescue Gyousou—providing any of them were still left—to Kouki and slaughter them there. Taiki didn’t have the means to prevent it.

It’s already too late for anyone to save Gyousou.

Taiki had come to the same conclusion. Gyousou was currently out of his reach. Taiki had no idea where Risai and her colleagues were either. He couldn’t tell whether they were dead or alive. As far as he could tell from the rumors circulating among the soldiers who’d returned from Bun Province, the chances that they’d survived the conflict were low. He wanted to believe they were alive but had few reasons to support beliefs.

Even if they’ve managed to survive—

Even if Risai had the good fortune of staying alive, it was doubtful she could punch through the pickets and defensive perimeters and get close enough to enter Kouki. And if she did, it was equally doubtful she could save Gyousou.

Risai's forces had been destroyed. Not enough of them remained for Asen's army to bother pursuing.

"Too many bodies to count," one soldier was heard to say.

Poorly armed and equipped, they faced off against Asen's army with little more than one shoddy spear each. So of course they died. Had they run away, they might have found the means to survive. But instead they set forth with useless determination. Some did flee the fight when the tide turned against them. They were chased down on the spot and turned into corpses before they could withdraw. Their fates were sealed from the start. They had no horses and lacked the numbers to also defend their rear and their lines of retreat.

There was nobody left who could rescue Gyousou.

The one remaining possibility rested with him. Even if he could free Gyousou, he had no way to make good his escape. And even if he could do that, he still couldn't save Tai.

Taiki returned to Nightingale Manor and gazed at the northern sky. That one option remained.

"Juntatsu," he called out. "I have a favor to ask of you."

"Yes!" came the earnest reply as Juntatsu ran to him.

Taiki handed him a letter. "I need you to deliver this letter. The journey will be long and fraught with danger. But you are the only one I can turn to now. Will you carry out this mission for me?"

"Of course," Juntatsu said, taking hold of the letter.

"Thank you. I want you to travel to Kou Province. In Ten Shire, there is a village called Touka. The village manager of Touka is a man by the name of Doujin. You must deliver this letter to him."

"A village in Ten Shire?"

Taiki nodded. "The one remaining force I can trust can only be found there. Though few in number, Doujin has brought together people with great hearts. That is why I am entrusting this letter to you."

Juntatsu took a deep breath and let it out. "Yes," he said with a bow.

"Ganchou will outfit a kijuu for you."

"But I can't ride a kijuu."

"Oh, you will do fine," Taiki said with a smile. "We are talking about a very clever kijuu." He summoned Ganchou. "Please outfit Tora for Juntatsu."

"Tora—you mean *that* suugu?"

Taiki nodded.

“But Tora—”

“Explain that Juntatsu has business to attend to outside the palace. I don’t think that will raise too many eyebrows.” He said to Juntatsu, “It is possible that soldiers will follow you once you leave Kouki. Tora won’t have any difficulty losing them if they do.”

Ganchou added, “Tora is a suugu, you see.”

“Under no condition can you allow anyone from the Imperial Army to follow you to the village. Mount up once you leave the Warehouse Gate, keep riding straight on through the Highland Gate, and proceed at top speed. Tora will carry you there. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Y-yes,” Juntatsu stammered. With a nervous bow he ran off to assemble his traveling gear.

Ganchou watched him hurry away and said, “Do you have something up your sleeve?”

“Not at all,” Taiki said with a smile. “I borrowed that suugu in order to rescue Gyousou-sama. Just to be on the safe side, I thought I ought to return it.”

“Ah.” Ganchou nodded, though Taiki’s explanation had clearly not assuaged his suspicions.

“I am hardly standing on secure ground right now. Juntatsu has served me well, which also places him in a more precarious position. I think this is a good opportunity to relocate him to more hospitable surroundings.”

The letter expressed his thanks and apologies to Doujin and Juntatsu. Writing that much was hard enough for a taika like Taiki. A postscript to the effect that he hoped they would release Tora into the tunnels of Bokuyou Mountain really tested the limits of his abilities.

A suugu like Tora should be able to navigate through the tunnels to above the Sea of Clouds and fly home.

“Whether things go well or go badly after this, I will become Asen’s enemy. I think it’ll be better for Juntatsu if he isn’t here when that happens.”

Chapter 30

[23-3] Mopping up operations were expected to commence in earnest at any time.

There was nothing Risai and her comrades could do about it. They were perfectly aware of the fact. No matter what happened next, they had to keep the civilians in Bun Province from getting caught up in the fighting.

While working with heavy hearts to ensure the safety of the civilian population, news arrived from Genkan. Seishi brought the blue bird to Risai.

The slender black tube attached to the leg of the blue bird confirmed that the report came from Genkan. Seishi removed the tube. He extracted the thin roll of paper and handed it to Risai. Risai read it there on the spot. Her countenance changed in a flash, her eyes opening in surprise, the blood draining from her face.

Bad news, to be sure.

Though Seishi and the rest of them couldn't help wondering how much worse the news could get at this point. They were momentarily lost in a benumbed and bewildered state.

Risai said, "Gyousou-sama is to be executed."

Those words woke them up like a slap across the face. *What did she just say?*

"A month from now in Kouki, before the Hall of Supreme Harmony in Hakkei Palace. The charge is usurpation of the throne."

Sougen strode over to her. "What nonsense is this?" he barked in a fury.

"The gist seems to be that Gyousou-sama stole the throne from Asen."

Seishi couldn't make sense of what he was hearing. He wasn't the only one. Everyone there exchanged looks of shock and confusion.

"We're not talking about a supposed crime that was committed yesterday. Eight years ago, Gyousou-sama stole the throne. In other words, the enthronement itself was the usurpation."

"Falsehoods and fabrications!" Sougen stood there, bolt upright, his face white with rage.

"Because of the suffering inflicted upon the public by this usurpation, he will be compelled to apologize."

Rendered speechless, Sougen grasped the hilt of his sword with a shaking hand, a visceral reaction with no meaning aside from the expression of his rage.

Seishi asked, "Compelled to apologize? Is that all? What does it say about him being executed?"

Risai answered with a disheveled expression. "Genkan says that agents are being deployed undercover at the execution grounds. They will incite people into throwing stones."

Risai held out the gossamer-thin piece of paper to Seishi. There was a limit to the amount of information that could be contained in the string of slender characters. Risai had summarized the entirety of the message.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"In other words, eight years ago, Asen should have acceded to the throne. But Gyousou-sama stole it from him. He will be forced to apologize to the public for the crime. To that end, he will be dragged into the courtyard before the Hall of Supreme Harmony."

The Hall of Supreme Harmony was one of the few buildings in Hakkei Palace open to the public. Multistoried structures surrounded the expansive courtyard before the soaring Hall. From the Highland Gate, people were free to enter the palace as far as the courtyard. Many state ceremonies were conducted there, starting with the enthronement of a new emperor.

"The place will be packed with civilians. We can expect agents mingling among them to whip the crowd into a frenzy and instigate the stone throwing."

"That is madness!"

"We're talking about people who believe that Asen is the new emperor. I'm sure we all understand where that's coming from. The salvation of the people began with the Taiho's return to Hakkei Palace. A great many are going to attribute that blessing as well to Asen, the new emperor."

That certainly is the case, Seishi thought. Even the people of Bun Province showered abuse on those who counted themselves as allies of Gyousou and called them traitors.

"So Asen has been the rightful emperor all along and Gyousou-sama's enthronement was a deception? That makes the eight years of suffering since his accession his responsibility. The people will heap abuse on him. All it'll take is for someone to throw a stone and the rest will get caught up in the frenzy of the moment."

"That is certainly possible, but—"

"As the villain in this show, Gyousou-sama will likely be bound. Caught up in the avalanche of anger sweeping through the crowds, they will stone him to death. In other words, an execution."

At a loss for words, Seishi could only shake his head. Sougen said, his voice hoarse with emotion, "We absolutely cannot allow that to happen!"

But even Sougen had to know how empty those words were. He was simply cursing fate, nothing more and nothing less.

Gyousou was the rightful emperor. He was accused of stealing the throne. The tidal wave of suffering that engulfed the kingdom in the seven years that Gyousou was imprisoned in Bun Province must be laid at Asen's feet. Asen had ensnared Gyousou and then abandoned the people. And now came the fiction that it was Gyousou's fault.

Such an injustice could not be allowed to go unchallenged. But they had no way to stop it, no way to strike back at Asen. With their shattered forces and diminished numbers, they couldn't save Gyousou or stop the madness of the crowds. All they could do was shout at the heavens, "This shall not stand!"

Seishi fell to his knees on the ground. "It is too much." Despite Gyousou being the emperor. Despite Heaven having recognized him as such. "The Taiho pledged himself to Gyousou-sama."

Seishi was there. The young Taiki transformed into a unicorn and flew after Gyousou. He knelt before Gyousou and acknowledged him as his liege. Gyousou accepted.

"Gyousou-sama is the emperor!"

"No matter what, we must put a stop to this," Risai said in a resolute tone of voice. Seishi raised his head as Risai knelt next to him. "We cannot allow such a charade to take place."

"But—"

"We don't have a method or the means. We have to do something. Nothing would bring any greater shame upon Gyousou-sama or any greater misfortune upon his subjects." Risai's frame shook with anger. "Asen will inevitably be exposed as a mere pretender. When he is, the people will realize they murdered the true emperor. We cannot allow that to happen."

Risai's gaze swept her surroundings. Everyone there responded with firm nods of agreement.

"How do we go about doing so?" Tonkou raised his voice. "Attacking Kouki would only get us killed and get us no closer to rescuing Gyousou, in any case. Far from it, wouldn't such actions regrettably damage his honor all the more?"

There was no denying the logic of Tonkou's words. They weren't about to cause a commotion on the execution grounds and use the diversion to scamper away with Gyousou. If anything, they'd simply reinforce the impression that they were a bunch of hoodlums, accomplices to the villain who had stolen the throne.

"I do not care," Sougen retorted. "Losing my life in the company of His Highness is fine by me. If nothing else, I shall see him released from the yoke around his neck."

"Sougen-sama—" Seishi admonished him.

Sougen glanced at Seishi with quiet eyes. "His Highness—Gyousou-sama—is a military man. However the soldier may regret leaving his corpse behind on the field

of battle, there is no shame in doing so. The shame comes from not being able to fight the good fight and dying while being branded a criminal.”

“So you’re saying your first priority is to defend your honor and die together as lord and retainer?” Tonkou thundered. “I see. Of course. What matters to you military men is preserving your pride. But no matter how fulfilling you may find such an achievement, what of Tai? Are you going to step aside and let a despot like Asen have his run of the kingdom?”

Risai had nothing to say to him on that account.

“If you are giving all due consideration to the future of Tai and its people, then you avoid dying a dog’s death at all costs. You endure, you bide your time, you wait for the moment to arrive, and then strike back at His Highness’s enemies. At the end of the day Asen is the one who must be taken out.”

Tonkou concluded forcefully. Then he said in a softer, more persuasive tone of voice, “You have all certainly been asking yourselves all along what you would do in the emperor’s stead. But now, ask yourselves, what would Gyousou-sama do if he were here? Would he prioritize his own feelings or would he put Tai first?”

Tonkou urged them to think through these questions and come to their own conclusions.

Seishi spent the rest of the day in a pensive melancholy, turning the question over in his mind. There could be no doubt that Gyousou would tell them to cast aside their own preoccupations and save the people.

But every time he came to that conclusion, dark waves of despair welled up from the pit of his stomach, the same feelings of hopelessness that had previously overcome him in Rouan. He was sure that Gyousou was gone, and was equally certain he had let Gyousou die because he hadn’t gone to the trouble of making sure for himself.

Seishi lost hope in the future of Tai. But more than that, he lost hope in his own abilities. He might have been able to do something but the opportunity slipped through his fingers due to his own incompetence. Such was his disgust and self-loathing that he could not help but hold himself in utter contempt. Whatever forgiveness was offered to him, he couldn’t forgive himself.

They had to save Gyousou.

Except they had no plan and no time to reorganize their forces from scratch. Invading Kouki and rescuing Gyousou by force would never work, not with six divisions of the Imperial Army defending the city. Not six full divisions, to be sure, but given the two hundred or so able-bodied soldiers they could put into the field, a good three hundred times their number.

Not only three hundred times their troop strength, they had the unparalleled fortifications of the Imperial Palace at their disposal and public sentiment on their side as well.

At the end of the day, cold and uncaring arithmetic reigned over the battlefield. The most optimistic estimates in the world weren't going to make the impossible possible.

Kiitsu asked, "At the very least, would there be any way to slip into the capital and make off with His Highness?"

But that was equally implausible.

Risai said, "The Imperial Palace is too heavily defended. If we'd been able to sneak in and execute a meaningful assault with the forces we have, we would have taken Asen's head as our first move."

While Kiitsu mulled over her answer in silence, another voice piped up. "What about the execution grounds? If he will be dragged before the assembled crowds, nothing should prevent us from being there too."

This line of argument prompted nods of agreement from the people around him.

"That's right. We mingle with the crowds and enter the execution grounds. Once we're inside and we've identified the guards around His Highness, we can rush them all at once."

"What you're proposing is more difficult than it sounds," Sougen said with a heavy sigh. "Asen will be counting on us attempting to launch a rescue operation. Sure, we could join the stone-throwing civilians and run toward him. But once we reach him, do you think we'd be able to hack a path through the oncoming throngs?"

"Of course, turning our swords on civilians is the last thing we'd want to do, but when it comes to rescuing His Highness, we might not have a choice."

"We'd end up no different than Asen!" someone objected.

"If that's what we have to do, then that's what we have to do," another answered.

Seishi raised his voice. "Even supposing we could suppress our humanity, we could well be surrounded by thousands of people in attendance. Do you really think we could open up an escape route in those circumstances?"

"Well-nigh impossible," Risai said. "In the first place, we'd be disarmed at the Highland Gate. If I put myself in Asen shoes, I'm going to make damned sure to inspect everyone entering the grounds and not allow in a single weapon."

"And supposing we managed to open an escape route," Sougen continued, "where would we go from there? Can you really imagine us fighting through all those layers of security and escaping the execution grounds, to say nothing of fleeing the capital?"

Seishi brought to mind Hakkei Palace. The towering Highland Gate and the skyscraping spires of the Gate of Supreme Harmony within. Equally imposing building loomed to the right and left. The surrounding structures formed walls of

high ramparts in every direction. Passing through the Gate of Supreme Harmony, tall towers on either side overlooked the courtyard.

Soldiers would certainly be on hand in the courtyard, with countless more biding their time on the ramparts between the Highland Gate and the Gate of Supreme Harmony. At the slightest sign of a disturbance, they'd come running. Any air cavalry would be on them in an instant. The arrows would start flying and the spears would start falling long before they'd pushed aside the waves of humanity and reached Gyousou.

Far from it. They had no chance of reaching him. Slowed to a crawl by the crowds, the volleys of arrows and spears would turn them into pincushions.

When Seishi explained as much, someone objected, "Except they wouldn't be able to target us amidst the surrounding crowds."

Seishi answered with a wry smile, "Do you think Asen would hesitate for a second if such an attack would inflict collateral damage on any civilians in the vicinity?"

The answer to that question was obvious.

Asen cared not one whit about the lives of his supposed subjects. As long as he had enough air cavalry on hand, it was questionable whether they could get anywhere near Gyousou. And even if they did, they'd simply be lining themselves up for target practice. There was no way to remove that factor from the equation.

Supposing they pulled off some sort of miracle, as soon as the uprising began, Asen would close the Highland Gate and trap them inside the Imperial Palace. At that point, the surrounding soldiers only had to press home their attacks in order to destroy them. The main gates to Kouki would have already been closed too.

Asen could make every wrong decision and they'd still never get out of Kouki alive.

"If we managed to escape, we'd have no place to go," came a loud grumble. "They'd run us down and pick us off one by one. They'd leave us no safe quarter for us to retreat to."

"But—" The rest of the sentence went unsaid. *We can't just give up.*

The room fell silent, prompting a pained smile from Risai. She said in a low voice, "Moreover, the Taiho remains in Asen's clutches. No matter how many miracles might bless us, if Asen kills the Taiho, everything is over in that moment."

"In other words, a rescue attempt is impossible."

Seishi raked his fingers through his hair. No matter how many ways they thought it through, there was no way to save Gyousou. But however impossible, they couldn't give up the fight. Not about to accept defeat graciously, they considered every possibility in minute detail, and still couldn't arrive at a solution.

In the end, they were simply getting carried away by impossible delusions, imagining being blessed with this stroke of luck or that good fortune.

Cowards with no way to hit back.

“Nevertheless, I am not about to cast Gyousou-sama aside,” Seishi said. That alone he could not abide.

Sougen nodded. “Saving the Kingdom of Tai is our first priority. No doubt about it. And that is exactly why I have to save Gyousou-sama. I know he would tell us to put the kingdom first. But I also know he was giving his all on behalf of the kingdom. Casting him aside, abandoning him to a fate like that, even for the good of the kingdom, is not something I can allow myself to do.”

He added with a quiet smile, “Call it a matter of personal privilege, I guess.” It was clear from the look on his face that he had made up his mind. “I know we can’t save him. Even so, I still want to rescue him from a dishonorable death. We’re out of options when it comes to striking back at Asen. But we cannot allow Gyousou-sama to die in disgrace. Even if defeat and death await us in any event, I want to at least liberate him from the execution grounds and let him die in action on the battlefield.”

Risai nodded. “Despite all our sacrifices, we haven’t been able to do anything for the good of Tai. I don’t have the feeling we have accomplished anything. And that is why I will at least see my loyalty through to the end.” She added with a derisive smile, “Though for me to make such a statement at this late date might strike Sougen as comical.”

“You are also one of Gyousou-sama’s retainers. How early or how late does not matter.”

Risai agreed. “Of course, it is well and good that there are people prioritizing the salvation of Tai. We would be deeply troubled if there were not. I wish to entrust the future of Tai to all of you who harbor such convictions.”

She cast her gaze around the room. “We shall leave the fate of Tai in your hands. For now, I hope you will find a safe harbor in En.”

That was the course of action they settled upon.

Chapter 31

[23-4] Gyousou was already beyond their grasp. There would be no rescuing him. For the future of Tai, Risai wanted the rest of them to escape to a place where their safety could be guaranteed.

Some of those assembled there nodded, persuaded by her words. Others stubbornly shook their heads in disagreement. Risai marshaled all her arguments in order to persuade them, starting with Seishi, but couldn't get him to agree.

"I am going to Kouki."

"Seishi—"

Seishi stopped her before she could launch into another round of reasoning. "Let me come with you. I must insist. Given how much we have gone through together, you surely know that I am not about to back down."

Risai lapsed into silence. She recalled Seishi's grief when he learned that the soldier in Rouan they'd believed was Gyousou—his name was Kiryou—had died. There was no way she could forget. Force him to remain behind and he would only blame himself as he had then. She had no choice but to honor his request.

Oukou said, "I am going too." Before Risai lectured him as well, he added, "Kouyuu must be down in the dumps these days. But he couldn't help being delayed. That's all water under the bridge now. So let's say we give him something to honestly get hopping mad about."

"Oukou, you can't throw your life away for nothing."

"It wouldn't be for nothing. Standing firm on your principles is never for nothing."

Risai sighed. "I have my doubts about that. I don't think any sense of honor towards Gyousou-sama demands that you take things that far. Of course, you do have your duty as subjects of the Tai emperor."

"No, it's not that," Oukou countered with a surprised look. "We're your retainers, are we not? Wherever you go, we go. It's only common sense."

The feelings that welled up inside of her were such that Risai couldn't respond at first. "Well, then. If I ordered—"

Oukou interrupted before she finished the sentence, "I would refuse. There is one sure way to keep me from getting killed. If Risai-sama retreats, then I will turn tail and run away with you."

"I'm begging you, Oukou. When the new day dawns, the next dynasty will need talented people like you."

“There’s always Kouyuu. Think of me as your shadow. Wherever you go, it’ll be right there with you. That’s the kind of burden a general has to bear.”

“You’re a damned fool.”

“Only because my general is a bigger one.”

Risai flashed a wry smile and swallowed the emotions she was bottling up inside.

Oukou watched her leave. Then he picked up a whetstone and turned his attention to the blade of his lance.

This time, I’m not about to let you sally off on your own.

They’d once been dispatched to Jou Province to put down a civilian uprising. Oukou set off for Jou Province. In the middle of the march, Risai was served with a summons and taken away by herself. None of her retainers were allowed to accompany her. His commanding officer was surrounded by hostile forces and treated altogether like a prisoner.

Seven years passed since then, during which he had no idea if she was alive or dead. The last thing he wanted at the time was for her to go off alone. Regardless of whether she was able to escape or ended up dead, he didn’t want her to face that fate by herself.

This time, he swore he would stay by her side to the very end.

“I’m going with you too.” Sekirei stated in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, intending to deflect the expected objection from Risai.

“Sekirei, if anyone, Eishou is the one who deserves your loyalty.”

“I know. But Risai-sama is the one I wish to follow.”

Risai unconsciously raised her hand to her forehead. “First Oukou and now you.”

“What’s that?”

“This burden I’m being asked to bear is getting awfully heavy.”

Only a meaningless death awaited them at the end of this road. There’d be no escape route around the corner. They had chosen to venture forth on their own terms, not on behalf of the kingdom or the people or in the service of any great and moral cause.

“Well, I’m going because I want to. You don’t have to hold yourself responsible, Risai-sama.”

“It’s too much,” Risai blurted out. “I can’t carry all this weight.” The tears she hadn’t shed for Seishi and Oukou now welled up.

Sekirei took hold of Risai’s hand. “Don’t think about it that way, Risai-sama. The same way you wish to go in fealty to His Highness, I am going for you. Just as His Highness bears no blame for your decision, you are not responsible for mine.”

All Risai could do was shake her head.

“I am a woman,” Sekirei said. “I think you know what I mean by that, what it means to be a soldier and a woman. I wasn’t blessed with the strength or stature of my colleagues. By my very nature, I would always be inferior to them in those respects. You know as well as I do how mortifying that can feel.”

There was always a touch of contempt in the air. If she won a training bout, it must have been because her opponent took her for granted, and ridicule was heaped upon him for losing to a woman. As a result, none of them honestly wanted to square off against her.

“I couldn’t allow myself to cry or lose my temper in front of them.”

Risai nodded while she wept. That was why she’d kept a stiff upper lip in front of Seishi and Oukou. Even when she reunited with Gyousou, she didn’t allow herself to break down as Sougen had done without a second thought.

“I joined the army as I wanted, but it was like I was surrounded by high walls. When you showed up as a general, that really saved me.”

Even high walls could be surmounted. Risai confronted the same trials and tribulations and overcame them.

“That is why I continued being a soldier until today. I don’t want to be pitied and told to stay behind because I’m a woman. Please indulge me on this.”

“But you are Eishou’s—”

“Yes, I am one of Eishou’s retainers. If Eishou were here, I would follow him. But I don’t think that would change the outcome.”

Risai answered with a nod and a tear-streaked smile. If Eishou was there, he’d definitely be heading for Kouki.

“But Eishou-sama isn’t here. So please let me accompany you instead.”

Risai reached out and grasped Sekirei’s hand. She couldn’t find the words to say “Thank you” and “I’m sorry.”

Kenchuu said in his blunt and unsparing manner, “I’ll be heading out. You guys stay here.”

“Naw,” said Shiyuu. “Now’s not the time for me to start taking orders from you. I’m going.”

“You got no duty or obligation to do so.”

Shiyuu laughed through his nose. “Same goes for you, Kenchuu.”

“I was born in Tetsui.”

“What you are talking about happened decades before that. It’s not like you were rescued or anything. Sure, you could say you owe it to your ancestors. In that case, I could make the same claim.”

Shiyuu looked at Kenchuu’s grim face and said, “Look, I’ve got no sense of duty sitting on my shoulders. But I’ve got grudges a plenty.”

Shiyuu's father died a violent death during that anarchic time when the lawless land gangs ruled. And yet Shiyuu thought of Kyuusan as his one and only father. His real father was a member of the gangs. When he died, leaving Shiyuu with no way to live or defend himself, Kyuusan took him under his wing. Kyuusan raised him as his own and told him he was happy to do so."

"I can't and won't forgive Asen. This is the only way I have to drive that message home."

"Everybody's saying it'll be meaningless death."

"I don't care how meaningless it is. Payback is due. If nothing else, we'll knock his reputation down a few notches."

"Shiyuu—"

Shiyuu said, "You know as well as any that the land gangs will never sit still for a sermon."

Kenchuu replied with a shake of his head. He got to his feet and left the room.

As Shiyuu watched him leave, his brother said, "That's just what I was thinking." Shiyuu looked over his shoulder and Houjun continued, "Asen and his thugs—"

Shiyuu cut him off mid-sentence. "You're staying here."

"Shiyuu—"

Shiyuu turned to face him. Though the shorter of the two, Houjun was already bigger boned than Shiyuu. He'd probably end up taller and heavier when he grew up but that growth spurt was still ahead of him.

"Someone needs to take care of the family."

"I'm going too."

"No, you're not." Shiyuu put his hands on Houjun's shoulders and gave him a gentle shake. "Everybody will be looking to you after this."

"Then you ought to be looking after them. This is more than I can handle."

"You know, you're right about that. You are definitely going to have your hands full." Shiyuu gave his brother's shoulders another reassuring shake. "You're still young. We can't do anything about that. But that's why we can't go dragging you into danger. You'd just be so much dead weight."

"No, I wouldn't. I can hold my own. I've been working hard this whole time."

"Yes, you have. For a kid your age, you are doing more than your fair share. That's why I know everyone can turn to you for support. The mothers will be counting on you."

"No." Houjun grabbed his arm. "Shiyuu, you can't go off by yourself to die. That is not all right."

"Our father definitely wouldn't have wanted us both to die."

"Our father definitely wouldn't have wanted you to die either."

"I know," Shiyuu said with a nod. "That's why you have to stay behind. No matter what, promise me you'll do whatever it takes to live as long as you can."

"Isn't that what we've been doing all along?"

Shiyuu swallowed his retort and hugged his little brother instead. By all rights, the two of them should have been complete strangers. They were only brothers because Kyuusan raised and cherished them as his own.

Shiyuu hugged his weeping brother as tightly as he could.

"I am going," Yuushou said to his retainers. "What are your plans?"

"I am too," Gen'yuu said, as if he could imagine no other response. "If Yuushou-sama is going, then count me in."

"And if I said I wasn't?"

"Then here we say our goodbyes. I am going to Kouki. I don't care what anybody else says or does."

Yuushou gave his retainer a measured look as Gen'yuu gathered up his weapons. "Well, that's cold," he said.

"I do bear some responsibility for Tai being in the mess it is in."

"I see." Yuushou turned his attention to his three battalion commanders.

Senshi spoke up first. "Of course I'm going."

Chouten agreed without uttering a word.

"What I thought you'd say," Yuushou said with a wry smile. He looked at the third of his battalion commanders.

Shishin bowed his head. "As much as I would like to, I'm afraid I won't be joining you."

"Ah," Yuushou said with a nod.

"Please don't get me wrong. It's simply not possible with this wound."

"I understand."

Shishin grimaced. "On orders from Asen, I slaughtered more innocent civilians than I care to count. At this juncture, I've got no right to hold my own life dear. For a miscreant like me, raising the flag of rebellion against Asen is my duty, as is defending the honor of His Highness, so wrongly waylaid and maligned."

"Indeed."

"I don't think my death would constitute an atonement. I don't think it's right that we alone survived. But no matter how much I want to accompany you, it's not possible with this leg."

"Shishin, I understand," Yuushou said with a slap on the back. "I know exactly where you are coming from."

"I really hate that I ended up a useless bystander."

“I get that too. We’ll leave the rest to you. This is by no means the end of anything. At some point, Asen must be knocked off his pedestal, for the good of the kingdom and the people.”

“Yes,” Shishin said with a nod.

“And when that time comes, you do what you have to do and follow after us.” Yuushou leveled his gaze at Shishin. “You got that? When you show up, make sure to bring Asen-sama along for the ride.”

They would, without fail, take the head of their liege.

“That is the final duty of all of us as his retainers.”

Risai did her best to persuade the others. Escape to En if they could. If that wasn’t possible, head west. The rebel civilians knew as well that a punitive expedition was coming to Bun Province. She also urged them to go west.

The only people who should be heading into the jaws of death to throw their lives away were fools like them.

In the end, forty did not respond to her pleas. Tears in his eyes, Tonkou exclaimed with amazement, “Who knew there were this many fools among you!”

Kouki was on high alert. Anyone going brought neither weapons nor armor with them. Each carried a concealed knife in a pocket and set off in regular traveling garb. Along the way came the official proclamation. The usurper Gyousou would confess to his sins and beg for forgiveness before the people.

The news aroused cries of anger from the assembled throngs, who would hardly be satisfied unless they could direct their feelings of discontent and dissatisfaction toward the man in person.

In twos and threes, Risai and her colleagues disappeared amongst the multitudes headed for Kouki.

Chapter 32

[23-5] A wave of humanity surged toward Kouki like a rising tide rushing to the shore.

The public tribunal was set for the following day. Long lines of people streamed into the city from the road. Equally long lines of soldiers perched behind the parapets of the soaring ramparts surrounding Kouki. Weapons at the ready, they gazed down at the rabble as the crowds narrowed to single file as they approached the gate and submitted to a security check.

Though Yari couldn't help noticing that hardly anything was being checked.

She watched over the flowing lines of people. The changing seasons made heavy cloaks and overcoats unnecessary and thus made it all the more difficult for a person to disguise his features or hide weapons beneath his clothes. As a result, perhaps, the inspections were less than diligent.

The guards only challenged anybody openly carrying weapons. They didn't open boxes or bags or bother with passports. Now and then, a traveler with a sword or lance got shoved outside the gates but not frequently enough to obstruct the movement of people or slow down the lines.

Yari observed for a while from astride her horse before turning her mount around. The streets to the Imperial Palace were more crowded than usual, with sentries posted at every key point in the city and soldiers on patrol at the intersections of the main streets.

Now this is what deserves to be called defense in depth.

After further confirmation of what she'd observed, Yari headed to the Highland Gate. With a glance up at the palace walls, teeming with soldiers, she passed through the gate and rode straight to the palace. Closed to civilian traffic, the Warehouse Gate sported a wartime array of defenses. Everybody received a close inspection here.

Despite wearing a badge that identified her rank and station within the palace, even Yari got patted down, which seriously annoyed her. Once through the gate, she finally breathed again.

They are expecting a rescue attempt.

Or were paranoid enough to prepare for any contingency. She'd heard that the outlaws had been annihilated. There shouldn't be enough of them left to stage an invasion of Kouki and rescue Gyousou. She noted the gradual reduction in the number of soldiers as she climbed higher through the Imperial Palace. She returned to the Enchou and headed straight to Nightingale Manor.

The empty manor was filled with little more than a serene silence.

We've been wiped out here too.

Of Taiki's inner circle, only Yari and Ganchou remained. She dismounted at the gate and proceeded to the main hall where Taiki and Ganchou were waiting in what now felt like an empty cave.

"Yari, what's the situation?" Ganchou asked as soon as he spotted her.

"They've spared nothing in order to secure the palace. If anyone comes to rescue His Highness, the plan is obviously to round them up in one fell swoop. I didn't see any gaps in their defense worth taking advantage of. They're deploying troops in an order of battle no different than if the rebel forces were alive and well."

"So they're not taking any chances," Ganchou said with a heavy sigh.

It'd be easy to deal with an opponent naive enough to believe that the destruction of the rebel forces meant they could drop their guard. But that was the last thing they should expect Asen to do.

"His Highness?" Yari asked.

Taiki silently shook his head. He didn't expect an outside intervention either.

If anybody was going to save Gyousou, it'd have to be Taiki. But no one knew where Gyousou was being held. Given the timing of the tribunal, he should be in a location near the city or already in Kouki. Taking all the security measures into consideration, probably the latter. The security would be heaviest in his immediate vicinity, though nothing of the sort yet stood out.

He was probably locked in a cell beneath the palace, deep within Mount Kouki, far further down in the catacombs than Seirai had been.

If so, the entranceway was likely in the Rokushin. Sneaking in there and conducting a search would be dangerous in the extreme. Even putting their lives on the line, there wasn't enough time to locate Gyousou. In other words, they had no way to rescue him beforehand.

"Go for broke and take Asen's head?" Yari said only half in jest.

Ganchou responded with a grim smile and a shake of his head. In actual practice, that'd be just as impossible. Yari and Ganchou weren't about to stage a palace coup by themselves. The two of them couldn't eliminate Asen, and rescue Gyousou, and save the people of Tai by themselves.

The chime of the clock interrupted the heavy silence. Ganchou let out a long breath, got to his feet, and left to patrol the grounds. He had no reason to be any more wary than usual, though he did have to make sure that nothing was amiss in Nightingale Manor, that no suspicious shadows were attempting to gain entry.

Yari watched the heavy-hearted Ganchou leave the room before drawing closer to Taiki, who sat there like a stone statue gazing at the courtyard. Except no encouraging words sprang to mind, so she stood there silently.

Taiki said, "Do you think there's a way to save Gyousou-sama?"

"I don't think so," she answered honestly.

Taiki nodded. "In the end, I wasn't able to do anything for Gyousou-sama or for Tai."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Well, it's the truth," Taiki said with a wistful smile. "I was ten years old when I chose Gyousou-sama and came to Tai. I didn't know a thing about the kingdom or the world. The palace was my whole world."

That's why, he muttered. "When it actually came to governing, all I could do was watch Gyousou-sama. I couldn't do a single thing by myself. I caused a shoku and disappeared."

Taiki certainly triggered the shoku but Asen was the one who brought it about. Yari thought of pointing that out, though Taiki was certainly aware of the fact.

"I can't do anything now either," Taiki blurted out and lapsed back into silence.

"And?" Yari said in an encouraging manner. She got the feeling that Taiki was not lamenting his own powerlessness as an idle complaint. He had weightier concerns on his mind.

Taiki glanced up at Yari. A wry smile rose to his lips. "Not only in this world, I left a trail of victims behind in that other world as well. I was the furthest thing from a powerless pawn. I was a one-man wrecking crew."

Yari looked at him without a word. She sensed she understood what he was trying to say.

"There is one last thing I can do on behalf of the people of Tai," Taiki said, his voice as soft as falling snow. "At the same time, I wish to grant Gyousou-sama a final favor. This worthless kirin was of no use at all to him. But I do not regret choosing him as emperor. I harbor no doubts that he is and always has been the emperor."

Yari only nodded.

"Gyousou-sama is the emperor," Taiki said. "I will prove as much." He took Yari's hand. "Thank you for all you have done during our time together."

Yari looked into those quiet eyes and again nodded without a word. She patted the back of his hand, then let go, and with a bow left the main hall. A breeze drifting through the courtyard bore a faint but pleasant scent of flowers blooming somewhere.

Yari breathed in the cool fragrance as she walked down the open corridor. She spotted Ganchou in the annex and called out to him.

"Anything going on?"

Gazing up at the ceiling, Ganchou said, "Nothing so far as I can tell."

"Oh," Yari replied. "You know, the Taiho plans on dying together with His Highness tomorrow."

Ganchou jerked his head around and stared straight at her.

Yari took in his startled expression and said, "The Taiho has come to the conclusion that he has no way to save him. But he also has no desire to hand over the throne to a thief and a pretender. I'm guessing he'll run to His Highness and prostrate himself before him. Having proven that His Highness is indeed the emperor, they will both die together by Asen's hand."

"That's just plain stupid," Ganchou growled and took several long strides in Taiki's direction before Yari stopped him.

"If the kirin dies, then Heaven once again takes Tai into its hands. The entirety of Providence begins to function as it normally would in expunging Asen from existence. That is the one way the Taiho can strike back at him."

"I'll stop him."

"You can't. This really is the only way. That is why, Ganchou—" Yari grasped him by the arm. "That is why you must leave the rest to me."

Ganchou looked her in the eyes for a quiet moment. Yari bowed. *You should have a good idea what I'm talking about.*

"You're the one to get it done," Ganchou said in a hoarse voice.

"There is something else I've got to take care of."

"Something else?"

Yari placed her hands on the hilts of her swords. "Someone has to get the Taiho close to His Highness."

"Yari—"

She didn't know if it was possible. Taiki would be surrounded by a heavy cordon of guards. Taiki surely understood that as well. He undoubtedly wished to kneel before Gyousou in front of the crowds and thus prove that Gyousou was the emperor. Or perhaps Taiki's only goal now was to demonstrate to Gyousou that he was Taiki's one and only lord.

With these thoughts on her mind, Yari flashed Ganchou a smile. "The Taiho calls himself useless. But to me, he has been a most splendid and fascinating liege. Whatever his last wish may be, I want to make sure it comes true."

She would carve a path for Taiki through that phalanx of guards. And if by chance Asen proved himself willing to do whatever it took to seize Taiki and deny him what he so dearly desired—

This is probably something only a koushu could pull off.

Yari tightened her grip on the hilts of her swords.

In that case, I will put an end to everything.

Part Twenty-Four

Chapter 33

[24-1] The soaring summit of the Ryou'un Mountain pierced the Sea of Clouds beneath a cloudless sky.

The seasons moved on their own accord without regard for worldly matters. Before anyone was aware, the summer-tinged sunlight once again lit up the rocky face of the mountain. The slender spires basked in a gleaming white glow as they rose toward the heavens. Adorned with translucent green, the tapering peaks and ridgelines stood silhouetted against the clear blue dome of the sky.

Deeply moved, Risai took in the sight from the far side of the highway.

Soon to become the stage of a terrible tragedy, the brightness of the scene only sharpened the irony, and that somehow made it all the more beautiful.

Risai hadn't seen Kouki up close for over half a decade. On that fateful day seven years before, her friends bid her goodbye with anxious eyes and she set off with her army for Jou Province. A final glance over her shoulder in the dawn's early light was her last memory of Kouki until now.

What a stark difference.

That the world could be so beautiful without any regard to her own emotions came as an unexpected shock, one that she was powerless to comprehend.

With such melancholy thoughts occupying her mind, she camped on the side of the road not far from Kouki. She made her way to the gate when it opened the next morning. Unlike the day she'd set off on her journey, soldiers lined the parapets atop the city walls and civilians had already queued up along the highway.

The crowds buzzed with a strange excitement. People around Risai chatted with their traveling companions. She closed her ears to the noise. They had nothing good to say about Gyousou. She'd been on the road for over twenty days and the tenor of every conversation she'd overheard was the same. She knew that listening in now would only expose her to those same bitter voices.

Carried along by the wave of humanity, Risai entered Kouki through the outer gate. The inner gate was closed, resulting in the crowd getting packed in cheek by jowl. But nobody made a point of inspecting them individually. Though Risai wasn't

carrying anything out of the ordinary on her person, many around her had packs and travel bags with them. Nobody seemed to be inspecting those either.

In her group, the guards only singled out a traveler bearing a spear. They exchanged words. After glancing at the outer gate and then the inner gate, the man surrendered the spear. So there'd be no carrying weapons into the city. Either hand them over or leave. That was what she surmised.

Jostled about by the unusually lively throngs, she passed through the inner gate and into the city. She didn't see any familiar faces around her. They'd stand out if they moved around in a group, so they blended in with the crowds and traveled alone.

The plan was to meet that day at a Taoist temple near the Highland Gate.

Everything comes to a head tomorrow, Risai thought, her feelings unusually calm. She certainly harbored regrets. After all was said and done, being unable to strike back at Asen made her seethe with anger. At the same time, she could live with that. All the bottled-up agony that threatened to burn her alive had faded to a whisper, a sensation that felt like removing a heavy burden from her shoulders.

There were soldiers everywhere in the city. Risai deported herself in as nonchalant a manner as she could manage and avoided meeting anybody's gaze. She couldn't rest assured that none of the soldiers here knew her. In particular, if any of the retainers in Ganchou's army had been enlisted as guards in Kouki, she couldn't dismiss the possibility that she might run into an old acquaintance.

But what about Sougen?

Though she still wasn't that familiar with Ganchou's retainers, she'd served for a long time with Sougen in Gyousou's retinue and knew many of his men on sight.

Risai proceeded directly down the jam-packed street. The Highland Gate came into view. Here as well, soldiers swarmed around the gate and lined the ramparts. There were kiju everywhere and undoubtedly similar numbers of air cavalry in reserve. Above and beyond the sheer number of personnel, the size of the palace walls and ramparts left Risai in a dispirited mood. Seeing the walls of Hakkei Palace for the first time in seven years was a stark reminder of how tall and massive they were.

Once the gates to Hakkei Palace and Kouki were closed, it was little different than being shut inside a jail. If an uprising occurred, Kouki would close down in short order. Given their numbers, there'd be no way for Risai and her colleagues to break out. Once inside, they could never leave. The facts on the ground once again confirmed their expectations.

Opening the Highland Gate provided an expansive view of the plaza that led to the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Though it looked small when compared to the courtyard before the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the plaza was large enough in its own right.

Surrounded on all sides by rugged walls and tall buildings, the plaza had the appearance of a box with the lid removed.

Close the gate and it turned back into a simple box. Archers firing down from all four directions would turn that box into a casket.

Mulling over these thoughts, Risai turned to the Taoist temple designated for the rendezvous. Sougen and several others were already there. Risai gave Sougen a nod. Sougen responded with a flicker of a smile and a nod in return. Risai made a point of saying nothing and Sougen made no attempt to initiate a conversation.

Far from it, nobody there said a word but only gazed up at the main building of the Taoist temple. Or rather, there was nothing that needed saying.

Standing there in silence, Risai spotted Seishi and Seishi soon noticed her. He sauntered over but of course had nothing to say.

The public tribunal was scheduled for noon. The first thing that morning, the whole team gathered together. They had all made it to Kouki.

“Well, it’s early,” someone said, “but let’s get going.”

Risai only nodded. They again made their way to the Highland Gate. The boulevard in front of the gate was heavily congested by the crush of the crowds. The plaza leading from the gate to the Hall of Supreme Harmony was no less packed with people.

It stung her heart knowing that so many people had come to gawk at the supposed thief who’d deceived them.

The gates to the Hall of Supreme Harmony were open, revealing the majesty of the Hall of Supreme Harmony ahead of them. As far as the eye could see, the crowds jostled elbow to elbow through the impossibly large courtyard and plaza before the equally enormous edifice.

The Hall of Supreme Harmony soared above the footings of a triple-tiered foundation. The bottommost tier projected outwards to form a raised platform. During the enthronement ceremony, the elite five thousand chosen from the Imperial Army stood at attention on that platform. Risai had been one of them, a story that was long in the past.

Lines of soldiers now occupied the same place where Risai once proudly assembled with her colleagues. Right below the platform was a podium constructed from unfinished wood. A post rose out of the center of the podium. Twenty soldiers surrounded the post, spears at the ready.

Tie the criminal to the post and put him on public display.

Risai felt as if a claw had reached into her chest and seized hold of her heart. That was where the emperor of this kingdom would end his life.

She considered moving closer but found it difficult to get anywhere near the abominable thing. Maneuvering ahead of the jostling waves of humanity was proving harder than expected.

“Doesn’t look good,” Sougen said in a soft voice next to her. “Let’s go as quickly as we can.”

Sougen indicated a way forward. They pushed their way through the crowds. They had to get nearer to the loathsome place. She turned and drove her shoulder like a wedge into the wall of people.

Seishi grasped her arm. Risai glanced back at him and followed his eyes down to her feet. The ground was strewn with stones.

There was no reason for the courtyard here to be littered with stones. The stones were fist-sized, perfect for being picked up and thrown. Now and then, a wave washed through the human sea, the result of someone stumbling over one of those rocks and sending a ripple of reactions through the crowd.

The person tripped up inevitably cast an annoyed glance at his feet. If he later caught sight of those instigated with evil intentions to start throwing those stones, he would recall the dangerous weapons lying there on the ground. With no real thought as to whether he could actually hit anything, he was bound to pick one up and throw it at the post.

Very likely nothing more than an impulsive act of anger, with no murderous intentions in mind. But with so many people present, a significant number would strike home. And thus rob the kingdom’s rightful emperor of his life.

Despite Gyouso being that rightful emperor.

Would he really be crucified like a thief on the scaffold, his life brought to an end under a hail of stones? It should take a fair amount of time for him to breathe his last. The stones strewn hither and thither wouldn’t be enough to end the life of someone listed in the Registry of the Gods. What would they do then? One likely option was that the “civilians” surrounding the scaffold would “steal” weapons from the soldiers and finish him off that way.

Making an all-out effort, they opened up a path through the crowds and pushed their way through, at times physically forcing apart the people in front of them, manhandling them if necessary. At last battling through the tide of humanity, the shape and form of the execution site came into view.

A low barricade in front of them had the effect of damming and diverting the human tide. It only came up to Risai’s knees. It too was made out of those fist-sized stones. Inside the stone wall was a poor excuse for a fence, and inside the fence was a ring of soldiers armed with cudgels held horizontally to form a kind of railing.

The scaffold stood in the center, defended by the surrounding soldiers. Except they could all disappear in a flash. The moment the stones started flying, they'd go through the motions of quelling the riot while scampering to safety.

What an unholy farce.

Rectangular human walls formed in rows around the execution site. Risai came to a halt before reaching the innermost row and surveyed the line of people. A man in an obvious state of agitation. A woman glaring at the post with furrowed brows. Someone else talking in a loud voice to the person next to him. Their expressions all varied but none of them showed the slightest signs of grief. They hadn't come here out of concern for the emperor.

Whatever their states of mind, a good many simply stood there strangely expressionless.

"Unforgivable," said a hushed voice next to her.

Risai came to herself with a start. She turned to see Seishi shaking with anger next to her.

Enough is enough, he muttered to himself over and over. It was all too calculating and cruel. The installation of the scaffold was an insult in and of itself, making the commoners arriving in such numbers and in high spirits—as if attending a festival—all the more disgraceful. They swallowed whole the rumors Asen spread about the "usurper," an outcome so mortifying Seishi could not help but loathe them all.

Observing Seishi with a bewildered expression, Risai could only nod.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," said a soft voice behind them.

They turned to see Sougen and his retainers coming up behind them. At some point, they had formed a tight cordon around Risai. With a clamor like the roar of the seashore filling the plaza, and only their allies at hand, they did not have to worry about being overheard.

"We can't let them get to that pillar," a hushed voice said behind Seishi, meaning that if Gyousou got dragged to the podium, they had to rush out of the crowds before he got tied to the post.

"That'd be too soon," Risai answered under her breath. "The soldiers will clear out before the stones start to fly. We'll wait for them to make the first move."

"But—"

"Let's ride along with the chaos once the crowd starts to riot. Holding back at first will keep us from simply getting slaughtered. A little patience."

Risai was right, of course. But the thought alone of Gyousou being bound to that pole made him burn with anger.

"Besides, everybody charging forward at once is not a strategy. We need to divide our forces into two waves."

Seishi cocked his head to the side with a puzzled expression.

“Half of us should remain here, act like onlookers, and push back against the onslaught. Otherwise we’ll be left with no line of retreat.”

“A line of retreat?” someone scoffed. “We hardly have the latitude to worry about that in a situation like this.”

“Even if we don’t, it’s the only option we’ve got. Will half of us be enough to save him?”

“I don’t know. But no matter how unlikely, we can’t take any path to survival off the table. Even at this late hour, there is no need to cut off the possibility of retreat and harden our resolve.”

“True, to be sure—”

“Half is too many,” Sougen responded. “Fifteen will stay behind.”

Risai nodded.

Seishi thought Sougen’s response was remarkable. Without a doubt, no line of retreat meant no path to survival. What did it mean to leave such an avenue open? Supposing they opened a line of retreat from the scaffold through these waves of humanity and clawed their way through the packed crowds, he couldn’t imagine where they would flee then.

No matter where they fled, once the gates were closed, they’d be out of options. In a worst-case scenario, they’d get penned in and cornered by the surrounding civilians themselves.

“We fight until the very end,” Risai said, as if sensing the doubts on Seishi’s mind. Her old resolve was there in the look she gave him. “However we may have resigned ourselves to such an outcome from the start, we are not going to throw our lives away.”

Swept up by the strength in her eyes, Seishi nodded.

“Besides—”

Risai drew closer to Seishi but the solemn reverberations of a gong swallowed up the rest of the sentence. All at once, the throngs crowding the huge courtyard fell silent, as if doused by a deluge of water.

Seishi directed his gaze toward the main building. Activity picked up around the doors at the front of the Hall of Supreme Harmony.

The large doors set into the facade of the main building swung open. Government officials in formal dress emerged from the dark interior. The two and the head of the line stepped to the right and left of the doors with hoisted banners. The imperial attendants followed behind them.

Watching these proceedings, Seishi caught his breath. As soon as the officials lined up, the honor guard in ceremonial armor appeared. From a distance, the open doors provided a glimpse inside the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Visible within the

shadows, the throne sat on a raised dais. The bamboo blinds were drawn, proof that the throne was occupied.

So Asen makes his entrance.

With a gasp, Seishi finally remembered to breathe.

“The Taiho—” Risai murmured. She added in response to Seishi’s look, “The blinds are drawn next to the throne as well. That means the Taiho is present.”

“What is going on?”

Another familiar voice groaned next to them. Bringing a *kirin* to a scaffold where such tragic events were scheduled to unfold was—

“—cruel beyond words.”

This said with a knot in the stomach and through clenched teeth, just as a nervous rustle arose from the courtyard. Searching for the source of the disturbance, the crowd swayed as if caught in a passing wave. Following the motion, Seishi shifted his attention to the right of the elevated base of the great hall, the part known as the Sumera Throne.

A squad of soldiers marched out of the adjoining building.

Seishi groaned.

A member of the group was the court executioner. At the center of the cordon of soldiers, the prisoner wore a kind of poncho fashioned from coarse brown fabric. He was being led like a dog on a leash, with his hands bound behind him.

They proceeded in front of the Sumera Throne. With each step, it seemed, another wave rolled through the crowds. Voices welled up like the rumbling of the earth as they solemnly advanced to the scaffold. The procession of death stopped at the foot of the podium.

His head held high, Gyousou showed no signs of cowardice. Despite the rough attire and the bonds and fetters, he evinced no shame as he surveyed the sea of people with a serene expression, the glare of the sun perhaps forcing him to slightly narrow his eyes.

“Let’s go save him!”

“Hold your horses,” was Sougen’s reply.

Seishi couldn’t help reaching into his pocket and grasping the knife there. He wanted with all his heart to rush the podium, even if he ended up not accomplishing a thing. That’d be better than the unbearable agony of simply watching from the sidelines.

The one thing we can’t do is throw our lives away for nothing, he lectured himself.

They had to avoid ending up the butt of the joke, the foolish retainers who died useless deaths and got turned into a pile of bones without getting anywhere near Gyousou.

The executioner hauled Gyousou onto the scaffold. The accompanying soldiers untied his fetters. Grasping his arms, they positioned him in front of the pillar. With the pillar pressed against his back, they again bound his hands behind him.

Having confirmed that the prisoner was secure, with exaggerated and theatrical gestures, the executioner unfurled a scroll of paper. The clamor around him grew to a crescendo, rendering his words illegible. But it was clear he was reading the bill of indictment against Gyousou, accusing him of stealing Asen's title, ravaging the kingdom, and inflicting needless suffering on the people.

Seishi shook with anger. Risai grasped his hand to calm him down.

Once the crowds started to move and a line of attack opened, they'd split into smaller groups and run toward Gyousou.

The question remained of whether they would get from here to there in the first place, whether they could protect Gyousou from the onrushing mob while cutting him free. And more importantly, ignore the jeers and stones from all around them while they got on with the vital task at hand.

He could not countenance any stones being thrown at his liege. There was no good reason for hurling even a single one in his direction.

"Risai-sama," Seishi growled under his breath. "We have got to do something!"

At that moment, something *was* happening inside the Hall of Supreme Harmony.

Chapter 34

[24-2] We shall now backtrack an hour or so to an earlier point in the story.

The doors to the Hall of Supreme Harmony had yet to open. An atmosphere of pervasive gloom filled the shadowed interior of the building.

Yari was met by a phalanx of officials and escorted into the Hall. Three raised platforms occupied the center of the structure. The throne sat on the luxurious platform in the center. To the left and right of the throne were seats for the Imperial Consort and the Taiho. The officials led Taiki to the latter. Guards stood at attention at each platform.

Taiki climbed onto the platform and took his seat. Yet another cordon of guards surrounded him. Before the bamboo curtains dropped, he saw that Asen occupied the throne in the middle.

Yari stood behind Taiki. Though the guards were armed as a matter of course, they didn't allow Yari to carry any weapons. She was ordered at first not to accompany Taiki, but Taiki refused to attend unless Yari was by his side. The officials in charge eventually relented.

Yari stole a glance at the faces of the soldiers surrounding them. They weren't the elite "Rapid as Tigers" unit of the Imperial Guard division that usually filled this role, but officers stationed at Nightingale Manor. There'd been a significant turnover in personnel after Kakei was taken away. Few familiar faces were left.

Previously, many of the soldiers were well disposed toward Taiki. With the literal changing of the guard came an abrupt change in attitude. None of them were those mindless manikins, but they remained cold and distant. Although they didn't carry on in a haughty manner, neither were they approachable.

The guards constituted a full platoon of twenty-five soldiers, ten inside the blinds with Taiki and the remaining fifteen situated around the base of the platform. With this many armed soldiers in such close proximity, it appeared that Taiki barely had room to move a muscle.

So what had Asen so on edge?

Asen peered through the bamboo curtains at surrounding cordons of officers and officials and smiled to himself.

He can't budge an inch.

Asen wasn't taking these precautions for any one reason in particular. It had occurred to him that Taiki might bolt to Gyousou's side and kowtow before him.

Doing so would attest that Gyousou was the rightful emperor and Asen was the treasonous pretender.

Except Taiki was the Black Kirin. However loudly he claimed to be the kirin of Tai, whatever he said promised to have little persuasive power. To start with, the roar of the crowds packed into the huge courtyard would drown out anything he shouted at them.

It was always possible that the rebels would attempt to spirit Taiki away. Asen concluded there weren't enough of them left to make a difference. He was assured they'd been all but obliterated. A handful of stragglers were bound to show up. He had no idea how many were left. If any of Gyousou's retainers were among them, they'd surely try to save him.

Asen expected as much. That was why he had Kouki shut down as tight as a drum. By now, all of the gates to the city were closed and soldiers filled the parapets atop the city walls.

The walls surrounding the palace were no different. Large contingents of soldiers filled the buildings surrounding the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Four times the usual number of troops guarded Kouki and Hakkei Palace. Enough additional forces had been mobilized in the provinces to blanket every square inch and create an impenetrable defensive perimeter.

Even if one or two hundred remnants left over from the old order were able to save Gyousou, they would never get out of Kouki alive. No, rescuing Gyousou was a dubious proposition at best. The biggest barrier they faced was the packed courtyard. The crowds had Gyousou completely surrounded.

Asen captured Gyousou in Ba Province. The Imperial Army took him to Zui Province. As soon as they entered Zui Province, a special detachment secretly separated from the main force and delivered him to Mount Takubi, a Ryou'un Mountain north of Kouki.

Mount Takubi was an imperial mausoleum. Emperor Kyou was interred there. Normally, Mount Takubi was occupied by a bare bones crew of officials and soldiers. Asen stationed his own men on the premises and then brought in Gyousou. There they waited until the time was right. The day before, they transported him to Hakkei Palace above the Sea of Clouds.

Until a few minutes before, he'd been locked in a prison cell in solitary confinement. From there, they'd drag him to the scaffold, his miserable self exposed for all the world to see. And after that, he'd die by the hands of his own subjects.

Take a good hard look.

There'd be no fleeing from here or averting the gaze. Unable to stop the tragedy, cursed to do nothing but watch it unfold before the eyes. Everything was as it should be.

A cruel smile rose to Asen's face. The booming of the gong announced the final act of the play he had orchestrated.

In a dimly lit corner of the building, Genkan watched as the doors along the front of the building opened onto the courtyard. *It has begun. All we can do now is pray.*

Ganchou hung back in the shadows of one of the massive columns inside the Hall of Supreme Harmony. He could make out Asen's throne fairly close by. Waiting next to him in the darkness behind the throne platform, Rousan was his unexpected companion.

The doors to the Hall finally fully opened. A brilliant shaft of sunlight slanted into the interior of the building. As his eyes grew accustomed to the light, the crowds filling the vast courtyard appeared before them. So many people had assembled there to shower abuse on Gyousou. The loud and reverberating voices washed around them in ragged waves.

With clenched teeth, Ganchou said to Rousan, "Are you satisfied with how things turned out?"

Rousan murmured in response to Ganchou's stifled voice, "You should ask that question of Heaven, not me."

The clamor raised by thousands of boisterous voices echoed off the walls of the building, shaking the air itself and pushing against them like a rising tide.

Ansaku smiled to himself. Whether expressions of anger or rising expectations about the impending punishment, *either way, it works to my advantage.*

Having situated himself behind Asen, he gazed down at the human wall advancing toward them, like a stormfront rolling in, the very tool of Gyousou's execution. The same storm that would bring to pass a new dynasty that belonged in actual fact to Ansaku, the new power behind the throne.

What thoughts must occupy Asen's mind as he ushered in this moment?

Yari cast a sidelong glance through the blinds at the throne. Taiki turned his head to the left with a start of surprise and fixed his gaze on the tall building to the east. Following his gaze, Yari focused her attention on the same structure. As she looked on in confusion, the doors of the building swung open.

A large group emerged from inside the building. The roars and reverberations raised by the multitude struck her ears like a thunderclap. The scene soon resembled a raging ocean. Like an onrushing wave, the surging sea of people matched the prisoner's movements as he was dragged before them.

For the first time, Yari looked at Gyousou. *So that is the emperor of this kingdom*, she thought. Here was Taiki's liege, whom fate and Heaven had so freely trifled with, in the flesh.

In the same place where Asen now sat upon the throne, there was a time in the past when Gyousou was enthroned before the crowds filling the courtyard, a time when the multitudes raised cries of joy instead of the curses they hurled at him. Unknowingly manipulated by evil men, they conspired to assassinate the emperor they once welcomed with open arms.

Yari observed his calm disposition as the prisoner was tied to the scaffold. He showed no signs of fear or even putting on a brave front.

What must he be thinking?

No sooner had that thought passed through her mind but Taiki took a deep breath.

Yari took a step closer and leaned in to look at his face. In that instant, Taiki jumped to his feet. The soldier standing next to him reached out. "Sit down" surely would have been the order that followed. Instead, Taiki grabbed his arm and pulled toward him, as if to share a word in private.

The soldier gave Taiki a curious look. Now the two of them had Yari's attention. Taiki yanked the man closer with his left hand. At the same time, Taiki drew the sword from its scabbard with his right.

The soldier hadn't taken his next breath before Taiki jabbed the sword into his abdomen. Yari acted at once. The rest of the soldiers didn't realize that anything was amiss. Even if they did, their brains couldn't grasp what had occurred.

Yari doubled over the guard standing next to him with a blow to his solar plexus and took his sword. Before he could gasp out a startled cry, Taiki lowered his sword and slashed aside the bamboo curtain.

Sunlight flooded the platform.

Taiki ran into the light. Yari followed a split second behind, then stepped forward to cut down the guards standing at attention in front of them.

Boushuku had no idea what just happened. It looked to him like Taiki stabbed one of his men, except such a thing could never happen. Standing there stunned and motionless, he only came to the bewildering realization that something had gone dangerously wrong.

As far as he could tell, Taiki seemed to have stolen a sword from one of his men. Again, Boushuku couldn't imagine the Taiho doing such a thing. Taiki surely only wished to protest the discourtesy of having armed men stand over him and remonstrated with them to put down their weapons. Attempting to retrieve his

sword, the soldier stepped forward and unfortunately ended up walking into the business end of the blade.

Was that what had taken place? Or perhaps that was only what it looked like. Rather, the soldier sank to his knees because he was kowtowing in apology to Taiki. Then why did Taiki jump out of the chair? Why did he jump down from the platform? Boushuku had to stop him. Except he couldn't move. Frozen in place, the scene played out before him like a living nightmare.

His body a blur of motion, Taiki descended the steps as the rest of the security detail looked on in almost comical disbelief. A few came to their senses in time to seize at him in a panic, but managed only to grab empty air as they teetered off balance.

Yari dashed past them and took point in front of Taiki, having at some point armed herself.

What in the world is going on?

Boushuku couldn't make sense of the fleeting images in front of him. Struggling to root his senses in something real, he reflexively searched for Gogetsu and Fukushou. Except they hadn't been a part of this security detail from the start.

The two silhouettes darted through the open doors into the brilliant white light. They somehow appeared to be moving slowly past the astonished soldiers, most of whom also reacted as if mired in mud. A few frantically and awkwardly set off in pursuit.

Behind them, guards toppled wounded from the platform, raising painful cries of distress and filling the air with the smell of blood.

Risai realized at once that something was amiss inside the Hall of Supreme Harmony.

The officials and members of the honor guard standing at attention broke formation. They turned toward the Hall, narrowing their eyes and trying to see inside.

A pair of silhouettes barreled down the steps. A squad of soldiers raced after them.

The soldiers lined up along the extended footing of the Hall of Supreme Harmony glanced over their shoulders. As if set in motion simultaneously, the crowds and the executioner and the guards posted around the scaffold all turned their attention to the Hall.

"Let's go!"

Risai might have given the order. Or they all voiced the same intention at the same time. Their one chance had arrived. It was now or never.

Risai set off at a sprint. Half a step ahead of her, Seishi pulled the knife from his pocket. The soldiers ahead of them glanced back with bewildered looks, slow to react

to his slashing attacks. They collapsed one after the other. Seishi shoved the bodies behind him and kept going. Risai slammed into one of the staggering soldiers and took his sword.

Sweeping the sword in wide arcs as they passed each rank of soldiers, she cleared the path. They continued forward. In the time it took to cover half the distance to the scaffold, the rest of her colleagues had similarly armed themselves.

The angry roars ringing in her ears grew all the louder. They pushed aside bystanders too stunned to move and mowed down the soldiers frantically charging toward them. They halved the distance yet again. By now, soldiers were closing in from before and behind. Except the soldiers weren't heading at Risai and her crew. They were racing to confront whatever was charging out of the Hall of Supreme Harmony.

The melee on the steps of the Hall dissolved almost at once. The knot of soldiers collapsed. A young woman burst forth. Dispatching anyone who opposed her with frighteningly fast reflexes, she swept aside each onrushing phalanx of her foes and continued on at top speed.

Registering the girl's progress out of the corner of her eyes, Risai swung her sword and dispatched the remaining soldiers to the right and left.

The scaffold and its pillar of unfinished wood appeared before her.

"Stop them!"

The voice registered in his ears. Boushuku came to his senses. He raced after Taiki. The interior of the Hall of Supreme Harmony was in a complete state of chaos.

Court officials and what was left of the honor guard huddled around the base of the throne in the center of the room, now stripped of its bamboo curtains, and shouted at everybody to protect them against the rebels. In response to their cries, more soldiers flocked in to form a reinforced cordon around them.

Except it was clearly written on all their faces that they had no idea what was going on. Besides those who'd been standing next to Taiki, nobody would know.

People running recklessly out of the Hall while others were running in added to the bedlam. Boushuku forced his way through and ran toward the open doors. He had to dodge right and left around the soldiers lying on the ground—dead or alive, he couldn't tell—to keep from tripping over or stepping on their bodies.

He made his way to the doors. The pandemonium intensified. A tight knot of people headed toward the scaffold. Others were trying to flee. Others ran toward him. Nobody was moving with any kind of coordinated action. Here and there came the sound of collision and conflict, accompanied by roars and screams.

Obstructed by the rampant disorder, Boushuku couldn't move forward. He looked again, and saw that part of the seething mob had split away, descended the steps to the Hall, and was making a beeline for the scaffold, with Yari leading the way.

Another wave rushed toward the scaffold out of the crowded courtyard, cutting down the soldiers that stood in their way. With more guards chasing them, and more troops arriving to back them up, and more gangs welling up out of the civilian population, the courtyard had turned into a seething cauldron.

What is going on here?

Dumfounded, Asen surveyed the scene before him. Pandemonium had suddenly broken out where Taiki was supposed to be sitting. He turned to see the bamboo blinds fly apart. Two figures leapt out. The walls of guards split apart in surprise as they rushed through.

The surrounding soldiers scrambled about, finally falling into a haphazard formation hot on their heels. All Asen could make was a roiling mass of humanity. Obstructed by the wall of soldiers and civil servants milling about in front of him, he had no idea who was running where or what they were doing.

He reflexively came to his feet and followed the motions of the people moving about. Some were running away. Others were running after them. Amidst the mayhem, he picked out one knot of individuals charging out of the Hall and straight toward the scaffold.

The alarm finally rang out. Every soldier shouted as they ran around the Hall. For a moment, "Taiho!" was the one word they all had in common. Then confusion again swept through the Hall and what they were attempting to say about the Taiho was lost in the din. He'd fled, been kidnapped, been killed—every possibility reached his ears.

"What's happening?" he heard Ansaku screaming. "Somebody give me a report!"

As if acting on that signal, one corner of the packed crowd at the front of the courtyard collapsed in disarray. A handful of people charged toward the scaffold. Soldiers moved in to stop them. The gang from the Hall and the gang from the crowded courtyard pressed closer to the foot of the scaffold holding Gyousou.

Boushuku tried to join them but the swarms of people kept him from making any progress. Ahead of the rest, Yari reached the scaffold with Taiki right behind her. Soldiers thronged around them but were unable to restrain them. Not only Yari's preternatural swordplay kept them at bay, Taiki brandished a sword as well.

Though Taiki demonstrated no martial abilities with the weapon, simply waving the blade in their faces was enough to bring them to a halt. At the same time, the second gang approached from the crowded courtyard. Boushuku still didn't

comprehend the situation. He looked on in confusion and dismay as the rebels swarmed around the scaffold.

Sougen got to the scaffold first. He seized a lance from a stupefied soldier and cleared the rest from the platform. Risai reached the podium at the same time as the young woman. A young man accompanied her.

The moment Risai recognized the girl's companion, she turned and ran to them, pushing aside any enemies in her way. She positioned herself right behind him, back to back, in order to confront the soldiers pursuing them. With Taiki covered on both sides, together they retreated to the scaffold.

Glancing around to get a read on their surroundings, Risai caught his eye.

Taiho—

Risai—

"You did a good job staying alive," Taiki murmured.

He next looked up at the pillar in the center of the scaffold. Ignoring the fighting going on all around him, Taiki ran to the scaffold with such determination that he didn't stop in time and struck the podium and fell to his knees. Crimson eyes looked down into his upturned gaze.

Taiki couldn't find the words to speak. Instead, a soft voice drifted down like a falling leaf.

"Ah, is that Kouri?"

Though bound to the post, the man showed not a whisper of hesitation or awkwardness. A smile filled every aspect of his face, the crimson eyes, the white hair, even the sunken cheeks.

"You've grown up."

"Gyousou-sama." Taiki moved forward on his knees. "I apologize for my long absence." He lowered his head and bowed low to the ground. "Your Highness."

There could, of course, be no other emperor of Tai but Gyousou.

Boushuku heard the ripple of voices through the crowd growing into a towering crescendo. He stood there frozen in place. Taiki bowed at the feet of the prisoner.

Well, then. That's what this all comes down to in the end.

Ansaku couldn't move a muscle either. Taiki had kowtowed before Gyousou. All of Ansaku's hard work turned to rubble in an instant.

Charging toward the chaos erupting around the scaffold, Ganchou stopped in his tracks and looked on in blank amazement. Taiki bowed at Gyousou's feet. A soldier ran up to him, put a hand on his shoulder, and tried to pull him away. Faster than any of the rebels around them could react, Taiki slashed him with his sword. He

imparted a good deal of force to the tip of the sword. The soldier staggered back a step, clutching his knee.

“That boy is a monster, all right,” said a mildly amused Rousan. When Ganchou glanced at her, she narrowed her eyes and added, “I don’t imagine there has ever been another kirin in the whole history of this world who inflicted such wounds with his own hand.”

“Kill them!” shrieked a voice close by. “He’s an imposter!” Ansaku screamed. “He is not the Taiho!”

The shriek reached Boushuku’s ears as well. *So that’s what’s going on*, he thought. But an equally strong reaction told that was of course not the case. The two thoughts warred inside his head, rendering him immobile.

Perhaps Ansaku’s words reached the scaffold and the core of the chaos. A soldier ran toward Taiki. One of the rebels intercepted the attack. Seishi ran up to Gyousou and quickly cut away the fetters. A soldier charged in to stop him. Taiki drove him back with a sweep of his sword. The soldier stepped back holding his wrist and Sekirei cut him down.

Sekirei didn’t recognize the face of the young man who had just inflicted that arm wound. His countenance, pale as wax, was spattered with drops of blood. The hand gripping the sword shook as if from a spasm. Then another hand reached down and enveloped his.

“Well done. But you’ve done enough.”

Gyousou pried apart the fingers clenched around the hilt and retrieved the sword from Taiki’s hand. Like a cornered animal, those dark and glittering eyes gazed up at Gyousou. Gyousou responded with a single nod.

Without a doubt, he is the lifeblood of Tai. The rough blood necessary to survive the harsh Tai winters flows through his veins.

In that moment, as Gyousou gazed down at him, Taiki’s human form began to dissolve.

Chapter 35

[24-3] At that same moment, all that met the eyes of everyone around them was chaos and confusion.

The criminal was dragged to the scaffold. The executioner started to read the bill of indictment, proclaiming the man's crimes against the kingdom. In the same moment that his voice rang out around the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the wall of guards circling the scaffold crumbled apart. Like floodwaters washing away a levee, a wave of people swept toward the execution platform, leaving utter disorder in its wake.

What in the world was taking place?

As the crowds looked on with blank amazement, at the very center of the pandemonium appeared the figure of a beast.

A beast with a silver black body that glimmered like burnished steel. A pearl white horn projected from its forehead.

The beast bowed at the feet of the criminal, then peered up at him and nuzzled his neck against his side. Coming nimbly to its feet, it leaned forward and gave the criminal a nudge with the side of its head.

That is a kirin.

At first uttered here and there, the murmur spread like a wave through the immense courtyard. *Why?* asked some. *You don't say!* came other flustered responses.

The man dragged onto the scaffold was no criminal. *He is our emperor.*

A bystander looked on in stunned disbelief, his fingers numb. The stone he was holding dropped to the ground. He'd come here to pay back the ringleader who'd stolen the throne and inflicted so much suffering on them. He had no bow or sword so he grabbed a rock. The hand that once held that rock now shook with fear.

Boushuku stopped dead in his tracks. Like the nameless bystander, his weapon fell at his feet.

That is the kirin. Of course it is. Because Taiki is the kirin and the kirin of Tai chose Gyousou.

Asen as well rose from the throne and took in the scene before him. *He shouldn't have a horn.* Asen severed the horn himself. That should have prevented Taiki from changing his form and summoning his shirei.

Where did the plan go wrong?

"Looks to me like he's all healed up," Rousan murmured in awe.

Ganchou was no less taken aback. “The Taiho did say he’d recovered from the *esui*.”

And having recovered, his severed horn grew back in time. A living being at the level of a kirin surely could regrow its horn. But Ganchou had never spied the shadows of any shirei in Taiki’s vicinity. Nor had Taiki appeared to pay attention to the jisen youma proliferating around the palace. To start with, if he was in possession of his horn, he could have sensed Gyousou’s imperial aura. Instead of hanging around the palace, wouldn’t he have gone straight to help him?

But thinking about it now, there was a point in time when the people in Taiki’s immediate surroundings grew strangely immune to the youma. Could that be because his lost horn had healed and grown back? With his powers as a kirin restored, his abilities to keep the youma at bay also grew. Although fully recuperated, Taiki had hidden that fact until today.

“Damn, but he played us good,” Rousan said with a wry smile. “That kirin is a monster like no other.”

“General!” came the shout behind Seikou, almost a scream.

Seikou had just launched his kijuu from the turret of the pagoda and was headed toward the scaffold and the chaotic execution site with his men. They were armed with crossbows and within firing distance. But he had orders that they must not kill the criminal. On no account should he attack until he could be assured that not a single arrow touched his person.

In the process of executing that strategy—getting close enough that none of their shots went astray—the beast suddenly appeared before them.

“Seikou-sama, that is—” They closed on the target with their kijuu. “That is the Taiho! So he must be the emperor.”

Seikou nodded. Of course, Gyousou was the emperor. The fact was entirely beside the point.

“I’ve known that all along!” He shouted at his men, “Gyousou is not our liege. We answer only to Asen-sama and serve his dynasty.”

“But—”

“Ours is not to reason why! Charge! Annihilate the rebels!”

The soldiers did as they were told. No matter how absurd and nonsensical, orders were orders. On the battlefield, there was no greater offense than disobeying a command. If told to charge, they charged. Even knowing an order would inflict great harm on the army or the kingdom, the soldier who refused risked being charged with insubordination.

The rightness or wrongness of the order was never the issue at hand. The possibility of problems arising later that might require those so ordered to answer for their actions was another matter entirely.

Yet most of the archers could not bring themselves to fire. Whatever their reservations, having been ordered to shoot, they should not hesitate. But a volley of arrows unleashed at the target would surely hit the kirin.

That alone was something they could not do.

From another location, another demanding voice called out, "Close the gates! Don't allow the rebels to escape! Kill every last one of them here and now!"

Following those orders, they attempted to close the gate to the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Observing the turmoil all around them, a wave of people fled the courtyard and surged toward the gate. The soldiers massed together, trying to stem the flow. But the mounting pressure behind that tide of humanity pushed the guards aside and wrenched the doors open.

Fear energized the masses. Someone had dared to oppose Asen. A riot erupted in the middle of the courtyard. That being the case, *every last one of them* would be dead if they lingered there a minute longer.

The swelling multitudes created a rushing current of people that swept them from the Hall of Supreme Harmony toward the Highland Gate. The river carried Risai and Sougen and their retainers along while Gyousou jumped onto Taiki's back. Gyousou could withdraw from the battlefield at any time.

Some of their colleagues held back, opening up holes in the wall of humanity created by the throngs for others to fill. It should be possible to ride the flow out of Hakkei Palace.

The army began to mobilize in greater numbers. Though they couldn't divert the people streaming through the gate, they picked Gyousou out of the crowds and rushed toward him.

"Can we make it out of the Highland Gate?"

"Probably. But where do we go after that?"

After exiting the Highland Gate, they still had no safe haven. Asen could hunt them down and kill them at will.

"His Highness and the Taiho must leave here at once!" shouted Sougen.

"No," Gyousou refused in a single word.

"Your Highness!"

"Calm down. Once we're in the clear, a kirin can really pick up the pace. Nobody will overtake him then. But breaking through the sky above Kouki? Take a look at the number of air cavalry up there."

"Still—"

“His Highness is correct,” Risai interjected. “Don’t give up now. For the time being, let’s at least make it back to Kouki.”

“Risai-sama—” Seishi glanced back at her. He’d come here intending to fight to the death. Except Gyousou had returned. Gyousou had to be protected at all costs.

“I was about to say this earlier, but I spotted Kouryou in the crowds.”

“Eh?” came Seishi’s startled reply.

“Didn’t Kouryou leave to join forces with Eishou? He must have returned with him. Eishou has got to be here too.”

Risai left open a path of retreat with that assumption in mind. Quite unexpectedly, drawing Asen’s army into an extended engagement in Bun Province had given Eishou more freedom to maneuver with his forces. Though securing a path of retreat reduced her own ability to go on the offensive, Taiki more than made up for it by drawing all eyes to the Hall of Supreme Harmony.

Attempts to close the Highland Gate ground to a halt. Carried along by the human stampede, Risai scrambled through the gate with the others. The crowds began to disperse. The wave of people crested and thinned out around them. A squad of heavily armed soldiers ran toward them.

Risai prepared to meet them with her sword. Gyousou called out to her. She didn’t hear him in all the commotion. But she understood what the men coming at her were shouting.

“Your Highness!”

“Gyousou-sama!”

“Oh, is that Santou?” she heard Gyousou respond.

Santou was one of Ganchou’s officers. As they came closer, the soldiers reinforced the defensive perimeter forming around Gyousou and Taiki.

Gyousou never failed to remember and recognize his retainers.

Another group appeared, this time civilians. Gyousou also identified them by name. As fast as people could join them, their defenses swelled in number. While crossing swords with the soldiers hot on their heels, they arrive in a rush at the Horse Gate. The massive doors were closed.

“This far and no further!” someone groaned.

Just then, the doors opened. Asen had positioned his men on the spires adorning the gate and the nearby city walls above them, but they soon came under attack by another line of soldiers charging down the ramparts. The gate opened and what appeared to be an entire army poured through. Risai was not surprised to see who was leading them.

“Eishou!” she called out.

“Risai! You’re still alive!” Astride his kijuu, Eishou waved his lance.

Sougen shouted at him, “Where have you been hiding all of this time?”

“Oh, here, there, and everywhere. Looks like you managed to lay low enough to save your hide, Sougen.”

Sougen ran over to the mounted general. “Thanks for riding to the rescue.”

“You performed a magnificent feat, rescuing Gyousou-sama like that. Well done!”

Eishou pointed behind him. Additional columns of soldiers had engaged the Imperial Army. They weren’t well equipped and their ranks had clearly been slapped together at the last minute. But they made up for those deficiencies in numbers.

Risai and her colleagues scampered inside the cover provided by Eishou’s army. They left Kouki with all due haste.

“Where do we go from here?”

“What, do you think I’d go anywhere without a plan?” Keeping pace alongside her, Eishou flashed a clever smile and indicated the way south with a nod of his head.

The highway south cut a course through the fallow fields ahead, where another army was waiting for them.

“That is—”

At the head of his troops, a buoyant Gashin greeted them with a cheerful smile. “Long time, no see, everybody! Follow us to Kou Castle!” Gashin chuckled at Risai’s dumbstruck expression and gestured over his shoulder. “The provincial capital belongs to us. We’ve secured all the roads between here and there.”

Heading south, white banners lined the road as far as the eye could see. Decorating each flag in faded black ink was the character for the number one. The standard of the Black Flags that Houto had created.

Chapter 36

[34-4] From a turret atop the Highland Gate, an enraged Asen surveyed the city of Kouki. The guards in charge of the Highland Gate couldn't hide their consternation and dismay at the sight of the emperor who, under normal circumstances, should absolutely never put himself in such a precarious position.

Chaos reigned across the city. From even this far away, Asen could make out the swirling ebb and flow in the jam-packed streets. The soldiers manning the ramparts had lost any semblance of cohesive action. The silhouettes of the air cavalry flitting through the air over his head like so many gnats perfectly symbolized the status quo.

Off in the distance, a great mass of people moved along the highway from Kouki, in enough numbers to fill the road from end to end. While engaging the pursuing Imperial Army at their rear, they moved south at remarkable speed.

"What just happened?" Asen muttered to himself in disbelief.

Only minutes before, Asen had looked on in mute amazement as the kirin and its rider formed the core of a massive procession of people in the center of the courtyard.

The crowds filling the immense courtyard flowed into a human tidal wave that surged toward the gate to the Hall of Supreme Harmony, pushed it open, and broke through. The wave next crested against the Highland Gate and again broke through.

From his seat on the throne inside the Hall, that was all he could see of the unfolding events.

The Imperial Tiger Guard unit approached and urged him to step down from the throne and leave the building. He followed their lead at first, but as the human wave receded from the courtyard, he hurried instead to the Highland Gate, where he climbed to the top of one of the high turrets.

Enclosed within the encircling ramparts and barrier walls, Kouki spread out below him. Beyond the walls, the main highway ran south from the city. By the time Asen reached this vantage point, the multitudes were already disappearing down the road in a great flowing river of people.

"Why?" Asen asked himself, gritting his teeth in frustration. "How could any of this have occurred?"

"Because none of those mindless marionettes were able to act on their own," Gashin explained.

He'd assumed command of the makeshift stables that sprang up at the outskirts of Kouki, outfitting kijuu and assigning them to riders as more people arrived.

"Those puppets ended up in charge of each regional office. They followed Asen's orders to the letter but wouldn't do anything aside from what they were told. No matter what maneuvers we undertook, as long as the people who were supposed to be watching us were not inclined to see anything, it was relatively easy to stay out of sight. And then you guys up in Bun Province did us a big favor by creating a huge commotion."

After that, all eyes focused on Bun Province. Ever vigilant about rebel activities led by Risai and her retainers, Asen deployed more forces to Bun Province. In preparation for mopping up operations, he also sent troops to Jou Province to track down any stragglers attempting to flee. Leading up to Gyousou's execution, frequent uprisings by pro-Gyousou factions forced Asen to constantly be on guard in I Province as well.

More than any other single factor, maintaining the necessary minimum troop strength in Kouki required drawing forces from the outlying provinces.

"The result was a remarkable hollowing out of the ranks. From Ba Province to Kou Province and Ran Province, our home grounds were practically devoid of military activity. In particular, the provinces of Kou and Ran within spitting distance of Kouki couldn't muster a single army between them. They'd all been rounded up and sent to the capital."

No matter how often the puppets were instructed to be on the lookout for insurgencies, they didn't have the inclination or the ability to root them out in advance. On top of that, the Provincial Guard already had their hands full just carrying out their normal day-to-day functions.

"At first, we had no idea what was going on either. But then Kouryou made his way to Eishou's headquarters. Not long after that, a messenger showed up on our doorstep too. That's how we learned what was going on in the Imperial Palace and that Risai-sama was alive and holding out in Bun Province."

Gashin and Eishou considered heading to Bun Province. At the time, rumors had reached them about rebel forces gathering in Bun Province. They figured Risai was behind the uprising. They mobilized an expeditionary unit in hopes of linking up with them and ran into Kouka in the mountains of Bun Province. From Kouka they learned that Gyousou had been rescued and then abducted again. If they kept going to Bun Province, they wouldn't arrive in time to make a difference. So they changed tactics and sent all their forces into Kou Province.

"It's a bluff!" Asen roared in response. "They haven't got anything more left in their arsenal!"

“Well, he is right about that,” Gashin said with a nonchalant smile. “What you see here is all we’ve got.”

Gashin had four thousand troops undercover in Ran Province. Eishou commanded less than seven thousand hiding out in Ba Province. The banners raised along the highway were in fact simply posted there. Although all those banners appeared to be in the hands of Gashin’s men, he had actually done nothing more than send a company of a hundred soldiers ahead of the main body of the army, plant the banners, and then circle back to the column.

“Unfortunately, most of the castles along the way are empty,” Gashin said, taking to the air himself. The riders he’d assigned mounts saluted and took their places along the column.

What appeared at first glance to be a long column of soldiers only maintained that form until it reached the Kou provincial castle. They occupied the minimum number of critical strategic points along the route and manned them with handpicked civilian volunteers. The rest holed up in the castle.

Even so, the castle was mostly empty.

“Nothing but a bag filled with air!” Asen reproved everybody in earshot. “A single attack will break them into pieces!”

“At this point, not so much a bluff as a paper tiger,” Gashin said with a grin. “But if everybody sticks to their posts and holds their ground, then all’s well that ends well.”

“Holds their ground with a paper tiger?” Risa said with a quizzical tip of her head.

“Yes. The special envoy from En is on his way here.”

Risai’s reaction was a spontaneous yelp of surprise.

The power of the throne was immense and Asen was a formidable man. But he had a fatal weakness. He knew nothing about receiving aid from other kingdoms and had no means of obtaining it even if he did.

Despite his meticulous planning, the military capabilities of other kingdoms never factored into the equation. From the start, Asen failed to notice the gaping hole in his reading of the forces arrayed against him.

“We will rendezvous at the castle. All Gyousou-sama has to do is petition the envoy for assistance himself.”

An En flagship was waiting off the coast of Tai, Gashin further explained. Then he added with a smile, “We discovered a most interesting kijuu in Kou Province. Though the young man on his back had his hands on the reins, the kijuu showed not the slightest desire to carry him. As you can imagine, he was holding on for dear life. When we tried to detain it, the kijuu bucked him off and fled. For whatever reason,

the kijuu did not stray far and eventually accompanied us. The rider was unconscious and covered head to toe with wounds. He was holding a sword against his chest.”

“A sword?” Risai said with a start.

Gashin nodded. “None other than Cold Jade. Moreover, tied to the sword was a passport inscribed with the Taiho’s name and carrying the stamp of the Imperial Kei. Of course, we immediately took it into safekeeping.”

“What in the world!”

“The rider’s name is Kyoshi, a Taoist from Zui’un Temple. Kyoshi filled us in on the details. He said the Kingdom of En had the Taiho’s back.”

“Kyoshi is alive!”

“That being the case, the faster we made inquiries with En the better. That passport should win us an audience. We sent an envoy of our own to En. Thankfully, the Imperial En himself agreed to meet with him. He was familiar with the passport and also recognized Cold Jade.”

That was the way things stood now, Gashin concluded. “Even if the provincial castle was recaptured, En could take it back in an instant.”

“I see,” Risai said. *So that was how the subsequent events unfolded.*

She recalled the night she attached the passport to Gyousou’s sword. Having reunited with Gyousou, they only had to make it to En and then take the Bun provincial castle. Victory was within their grasp. She was filled with hope that night. And then almost overnight, everything was stolen away. So many of her friends and colleagues died. More than she could count.

She believed at the time that all their accumulated gains had gone to waste. But all had not been for naught.

“Thank you,” Risai found herself murmuring aloud.

A startled cry ahead interrupted her thoughts. Reflexively turning toward the sound, she saw the kirin—Taiki—tumbling out of the sky.

“Taiho!”

He fell more like a falling leaf. Risai brought her kijuu around and spurred it on.

He must be exhausted. He hasn’t completely recovered from the esui after all.

As Risai flew toward Taiki, a beast shot past them like a flash of lightning and seized Taiki by the throat. Or to be more precise, scooped up the kirin’s deer-like neck in its mouth. The beast was a suugu. The suugu was wearing a saddle but had no rider.

“Keito!” Gyousou called out.

He flew after the descending suugu. Risai followed and more riders joined the chase behind her. She glanced over her shoulder and caught sight of two figures at the edge of a grove of trees alongside the highway. They looked straight up, nodded, and disappeared into the trees.

Acknowledging their presence, Keito alighted on the ground. A team of mounted kijuu gathered in a circle around the suugu. Keito lay Taiki on the ground. The kirin drew ragged breaths.

Starting with Gyouso, the riders formed a second ring inside the circle of kijuu. They spread out blankets and brought water.

“He’s okay. He’s not wounded,” a young woman confidently assured them. She was one of the riders who’d been escorting Taiki.

With a sigh of relief, Risai scanned her surroundings. “I’m positive that was Rousan I saw just now.”

Keito was outfitted with a saddle. Rousan must have been the rider. She saw Taiki falling out of the sky and came running.

“Rousan? Where?” came a heated inquiry.

Risai turned and found herself facing Kouryou. “Kouryou! You’re alright!”

He answered with a nod. Looking in the direction Risai was pointing, he said, “I have a few questions Rousan needs to answer.”

He was striding to his kijuu when a familiar voice rang out. “Kouryou, it’s okay.”

Beneath the blanket the young woman had covered him with, Taiki had reverted to human form.

“Taiho.”

Kouryou ran up to him. Taiki said, “It’s good to see you well. You don’t need to worry about Rousan.”

“But she—”

“Rousan is not our enemy. Isn’t that right, Yari?”

Taiki looked at Yari. A blank expression on her face, Yari returned the look with neither a yea or nay.

Taiki didn’t consider Rousan an enemy and had felt so from the start. When he returned to Hakkei Palace, Rousan encouraged Asen to strike Taiki with his sword. She *didn’t* recommend the far more obvious method of simply having Taiki pledge his fealty. Because a kirin could not, by his very nature, bow down to anyone but his own liege.

But it shouldn’t be impossible for a kirin to instruct his shirei to stand down. If an attack came out of nowhere, he would be unlikely to restrain them. But if warned beforehand, Taiki could order his shirei to not intervene and to not assault Asen as he approached.

Taiki was confident that Rousan deliberately steered the discussion away from the easiest and most reliable method available.

“Wasn’t Rousan the one who assigned Yari to be my bodyguard?”

Yari didn’t answer this time either. Instead, she hoisted Taiki onto Keito’s back. Gyouso was Keito’s master. Keito should not object to carrying both of them.

“Let us move along with all due haste. We must relocate to safer territory.”

That day, after converging on Kouki and rescuing Gyousou, the Black Flags withdrew to a shire castle south of Kouki. Though not far from the road, it did not face the main highway and was not all that big, even for a shire castle.

In fact, the Black Flags had taken over the castle only early that morning. By the time Risai and the others arrived, the town had finally been brought under control and pickets were set up to defend the access routes.

After attacking Kouki and fending off the Imperial Army, the Black Flags retreated while keeping themselves between Gyousou and his pursuers. They took losses along the way, though not in greater numbers than the Imperial Army. As news spread that Gyousou was indeed the emperor, desertions from the Imperial Army increased. Not a few of the deserters immediately crossed the lines and joined the Black Flags.

Making their way deeper into Kou, each time the Black Flags retreated to another town within their established sphere of influence, they linked up with the contingent of soldiers they'd left to hold the town. Hearing the rumors, both civilians and soldiers joined the ranks, soon more than replacing their depleted numbers.

Meanwhile, the size of the Imperial Army continued to dwindle. The long supply lines needed to sustain the column eventually collapsed. Incapable of keeping up the pursuit, the Imperial Army was left with no choice but to return to Kouki to defend the capital.

A vanguard unit took to the skies, skipping from town to town as they raced to Soukou Castle in Kou Province. They arrived at Soukou Castle three days later.

The Provincial Guard marched from the surrounding areas to recapture Soukou Castle. Though the battle to defend the castle was still underway, the retreating Black Flags now threatened to catch the siege army in a pincer movement and they were forced to withdraw. By this juncture, there weren't enough forces left in Kou Province to mount a credible attack against the province lord and his castle.

On the fifth day, a new set of standards rose above Soukou Castle. The standards of the Imperial Palace Guard and the Zui Provincial Army joined those of the Black Flags and the Kou Provincial Guard, along with banners bearing the emblem of a jet-black flying dragon and a kirin set against a deep orange background.

The latter two were the standards of the emperor and the kirin, signaling to all who could see that the emperor and kirin had united once again.

Part Twenty-Five

Chapter 37

[25-1] Soukou, the capital city of Kou Province, towered above the island in the river.

Divided in two by Soukou Mountain, the mighty river flowing west from Zui Province split into north and south forks. The rocky outcroppings caught between the two tributaries climbed toward the heavens, forming a Ryou'un Mountain.

Over the eons, sand carried by the river accumulated around the mountain, forming massive sandbars crisscrossed by water channels that fed into the city at the foot of the mountain. The sluice gates that dotted the barrier walls around the city diverted the water into a gridwork of canals that encompassed the city.

The countless bridges spanning the canals, the anchorages and boats tied up next to residences, created a vista unique to Soukou in all of Tai.

When Risai arrived at Soukou, skirmishes were still ongoing inside the city and on the sandy lowlands around the city. Though they had established control of the castle itself, scars from the battle were evident everywhere, along with a pervasive sense of barely contained chaos. Soukou was not yet a city where civilians could walk the streets in safety.

Along with Risai and her colleagues, Gyousou and Taiki entered the castle, where they were informed that the envoy from En had arrived and was waiting at the provincial council building.

Not stopping to change out of the traveling clothes they'd worn during their retreat from Kouki, they all headed for the council building.

As soon as they stepped inside, "Risai!" a voice called out.

They stopped in their tracks at the sight of the small figure. Risai exclaimed in turn, "En Taiho?"

What appeared to be a child with golden hair gamboled across the wide atrium. So *he* was the envoy! Risai directed her gaze at Enki. Behind him, a tall figure approached with long strides. He acknowledged her with a small nod. By the time his identity registered, the boy bounded up to them.

Risai beat a hasty retreat and held out her hand. "No, no, no. Not in the condition we're in!"

Enki instead bumped her hand with his fists. "You are in a pretty shabby state!" he said. He looked up at Risai. "But you did well."

He seemed to be holding in his emotions. Looking down at him, Risai felt a hard lump rise in her throat. The night she and Taiki left Kei, fully aware of the hopeless situation ahead of them, the last one to see them off was the same Enki standing before her now.

"You really came through, Risai."

"Thank you," Risai said. She could barely get the words out of her mouth.

"You did," Enki assured her, grasping her hand. "I'm so glad you're okay."

That was when a hand reached down and grabbed him by the nape of his neck and moved him off to the side like a piece on a chess board.

"And in less than a year. That is some mighty fine work, General."

"We are honored you went to the trouble of coming all the way here."

"When your envoy showed me that passport, I could hardly believe my eyes. He filled me in on the details but had no idea about how you were faring. So of course I had to come here and see for myself."

"You needn't have, but thank you very much."

With a laugh and a nod, the Imperial En turned his attention to the man standing next to her. "Well, it looks like you managed to make it back in one piece. You have yourself some fine retainers here."

"Your words are greatly appreciated," Gyousou said. And then in a straightforward gesture of respect, he touched one knee to the ground. "Please lend us all the strength and resources you can afford to save Tai."

Without giving it another thought, Risai followed Gyousou's lead. Everyone around them knelt in succession and bowed their heads.

"I accept the challenge! You will have the backing of many kingdoms other than En. Do what you need to do to get the job done."

In that moment, the fate of Tai took a dramatic turn.

Ten days passed. Soldiers gathered at the Kou Palace barracks as units of the Black Flags arrived in Kou Province, having fought an ongoing rearguard action against the Imperial Army during their retreat from Kouki.

Watching them straggle in, Risai called out in delight every time she caught sight of a familiar face, celebrating their safe return and thanking them for their service.

Yuushou trailed in at the end of the column. "Are you alright?" she shouted, running up to him. She recognized Hinken with him but couldn't place the name.

"This is?"

Yuushou nodded. "A great help during the retreat. Hinken, this is Risai."

Hinken offered her a polite bow. "I know the general well. What matters more is that you are in good health."

Behind him was Santou, one of Ganchou's retainers.

"Santou, it's been a while."

Santou ended up serving under Hinken when Hinken took over Asen's division after Gyousou's disappearance. When Eishou's army poured into Kouki like an avalanche, Hinken ordered his men to "Defend the rebels!"

Now that she thought about it, hadn't one of the brigade commanders in the army Asen sent after Gyousou in Ba Province also served under Hinken?

"Hinken, didn't you have a subordinate by the name of Kisen?"

"Yes, I did," Hinken said with a nod. "But he had his soul stolen by Asen. He was summoned by Asen. When he returned, he'd contracted that accursed illness. I heard he was dispatched to Ba Province and died there."

"So that's what happened," Risai murmured to herself. Perhaps Kisen's fate had contributed to Hinken switching allegiances. She'd heard he treated his subordinates well. Not a man to put on airs, he was a general with a strong sense of honor and duty.

Hinken seemed about to ask a question but thought better of it. He only bowed and went to look after his retainers. He might have learned that Risai had been in the battle and wanted to find out how Kisen met his end. But concluded there was no changing the past at this point and let the subject drop.

Risai watched him leave with mixed emotions.

"Risai-sama!"

She turned to find Kouyuu standing there. He was one of her retainers. She knew him on sight despite having last seen him long ago in Jou Province.

"Kouyuu, you're alive and well!"

"Yes," he said. He ran up to her and bowed. "We didn't make it in time."

He was surely referring to the failure to join their forces in Bun Province. Kouyuu was leading the remnants of Risai's army to Seisai. But in the end, they were too late to engage in the hopeless battle to rescue Gyousou.

Risai clapped Kouyuu on the shoulder. "No matter. I'm just happy to see you here safe and sound."

The inevitable delays he'd encountered were no fault of his. He kept the army intact and the troops safe. They encountered Eishou, hastened to Kouki, crossed paths with Gashin, and worked together to bring Kou Castle under control. With that mission well underway, they then sortied to defend the retreating Black Flags.

"You stayed alive and that's what matters now," Risai said.

Kouyuu covered his face with his arm. Risai patted him on the back. When she raised her head, a host of familiar faces had gathered around them. Here was the

long-awaited reunion with retainers she hadn't seen since they were forced to part ways in Jou Province seven long years ago.

After rekindling these old friendships, Risai climbed above the Sea of Clouds to the Enchou, the highest level of the palace. There in the domain of the heavens, the castle of the province lord was simply referred to as the Inner Court.

Risai arrived at the Enchou with heavy feet. However delighted she was to meet Kouyuu and her retainers, now that she was alone, she couldn't help recalling all the faces she'd never see again. Of the five regimental commanders in her division, only Oukou and Kouyuu remained. Two of the others had been executed. Oukou informed her that the third died on the way here. That knowledge notwithstanding, she felt the pain anew.

"South of the castle we fought," she hummed to herself. *North of the walls we died.*

At some point, that old song had become all the rage among the Black Flags. There was also a time when Risai sang it on a regular basis. Though less and less often as she rose higher in the ranks.

The higher a soldier's rank, the lower his odds of dying in action. A heavily defended field headquarters behind the lines was safely out of the line of fire. For good reason, too, as the death of a commanding officer was often synonymous with defeat. A sufficiently talented and wary officer was more likely to survive and enjoy a long career. But over these past seven years, their status and rank rendered meaningless, Risai and her senior staff found themselves back on the front lines.

Perished like dogs at the side of the road and ended up food for the crows.

They had all been in a constant fight for their lives. These were the wages of war.

Singing the song under her breath, Risai climbed the stairs and exited the high pagoda into the Inner Court. A tense atmosphere filled the Inner Court on the day that Risai arrived. It had since settled down. The number of civil servants freely going about their jobs could be credited to the efforts of the Minister of Spring.

The Kou province lord was debilitated by the illness, along with the prime minister and the Minister of Summer. When Gashin and his troops first occupied the castle, the Provincial Guard and government officials put up a stiff resistance. But starting with the province lord, those with the illness only repeatedly ordered that Kouki be notified and otherwise didn't oppose them in a meaningful way.

So Gashin rounded up the high officials and ranking officers, confined them to house arrest, and raced his army off to Kouki. With no time or troops to spare, he only left behind two platoons of fifty soldiers to enforce the house arrest.

Two days later, when Kouyuu arrived in Soukou and entered the castle to relieve them, he discovered that, in the meantime, the Minister of Spring had won over the incarcerated officials.

No matter how you think about it, the province lord is not in his right mind.

From the start, the province lord of Kou had opposed Asen's enthronement, saying that he behaved more like an opportunist taking advantage of the calamity to usurp the throne. When Gyousou went missing, it was beyond belief that the kingdom should keep going as usual. When Gyousou's death was announced, he declared it improbable in the extreme that no imperial funerary services would be held or a mausoleum made ready.

But then came a sudden switch of allegiances. Immediately afterwards, Zui'un Temple was put to the torch. The province lord they knew would never have condoned such actions. Without a doubt, the incomprehensible actions of the Imperial Army would have enraged him. After all, the province lord of Kou himself had once been a Taoist monk at Zui'un Temple.

An unconscionable betrayal had taken place, the Minister of Spring argued. The purges that followed, the abandonment of the people and the dereliction of his duties, was not like him at all. Even if the province lord switched sides in pursuit of some sort of greater strategy, there could be no forgiving these past seven years of Asen's rule. There could be no forgiving a province lord that approved of Asen's methods and means either.

Moreover, the supposedly dead Gyousou was now said to be alive. If Gyousou has usurped the throne, then why insist all this time that he'd been dead? Why label him an usurper at this late hour and not at the time?

If His Highness lives, then there can be no other emperor of Tai but him.

When Kouyuu opened the building where they were being held, he realized that the Minister of Spring had taken the initiative. Though the civil servants were not unanimous in their support, they did not resist his entreaties and were open to his arguments.

When Risai arrived along with Gyousou and entered the castle, they did not take up arms to oppose him, and so control of the provincial castle was settled once and for all.

Uncertain of whether to believe Asen or Gyousou, and indignant over the occupation, an air of confusion swirled around Soukou, leading to multiple incidents of nonviolent resistance. But then under Yari's direction, the jisen were hunted down and eradicated. Seeing the great heap of youma corpses, provincial ministers grasped the true nature of the situation.

And so the civil servants and soldiers in the castle yielded to Gyousou's leadership. Risai was sure that if the Minister of Spring had not done his part, needless blood

would have been shed. And if it had, a fiery sense of indignation on behalf of the victims would have swept through the castle, only inviting more bloodshed.

Considering all the dire hypotheticals that hadn't come to pass, she could only sigh in relief.

Chapter 38

[25-2] “**Risai!**”

A familiar voice called out to her. Risai turned to see Eishou and his retainers. She stopped and waited for them to catch up. Eishou hadn’t changed at all, almost as if the past seven years had never happened.

She couldn’t help a small smile.

After retreating from Kouki, as soon as Eishou arrived at the first small castle along the way, he ran over to Gyousou. Risai and Sougen had reunited with Gyousou in Bun Province. But Eishou and Gashin met Gyousou that day in Kouki. The two of them scrambled over to Gyousou like a couple of kids. Risai maintained a discreet distance during their reunion, so she was not privy to all that was said among them.

Rumors of Eishou breaking down in tears were already circulating, except that Gashin being the source of the story was reason enough to question how much was being told in jest.

Still, it made for a charming tale.

As Risai mulled over these thoughts, Eishou drew closer and stopped, motioning for his retainers to continue on ahead.

“Going to see His Highness?”

Risai shook her head. “If you’re looking for him, he went down to welcome the soldiers who have just returned.”

“So he’s met with Kouyuu?”

“He’s doing fine. Thankfully.”

“Kouyuu really outdid himself, leading his soldiers from Sekijou to here at a remarkable pace. Gashin was full of praise. We owe him a lot.”

“Indeed,” Risai agreed.

“Speaking of Gashin,” Eishou said, as if the thought had just struck him. “I heard that Kaei showed up.”

Risai answered with a big nod. “She arrived yesterday.”

Risai was there to greet her. She’d previously parted ways with Kaei in Sui Province. Having grasped that something was rotten in Sui Province, Kaei returned to her home town in Ran Province, where a shusei agent had helped Gashin go underground and stay out of sight.

Kaei eventually reunited with Gashin. When he determined the time was right to besiege Kou Castle, Kaei put her extensive personal connections in Ran Province to good use.

Having resigned herself to Kaei's likely demise, Risai was delighted to meet her old friend. Kaei was no less happy. Knowing that Risai fought her way through hordes of youma when setting off on her journey, she too had assumed that Risai no longer numbered among the living.

One after the other, Gyousou's old retainers began to gather in Kou Province. Kaihaku, the very much alive Minister of Heaven, put in the most surprising appearance. He'd long been presumed dead, washed out to sea with the rubble from the shoku. But his servants dug him out from the debris along the shore.

Observing the discord in the Imperial Court, he remained in the shadows. The attendants who rescued him later confirmed that Asen had killed the civil servants serving in the Palace of Two Cries. Convinced that Kaihaku would share the same fate if his presence came to light, they persuaded him that the safest course of action was for him to stay dead and escape from the palace.

His Highness always treated his servants well, the attendants told him.

In fact, servants were not held in contempt during Gyousou's dynasty. Taiki found the whole class system a mystery and was quick to voice objections when he caught wind of servants being badly treated.

They're human beings the same as everybody else. It's strange that they alone have to kowtow on the ground and never raise their heads.

Risai had heard the young Taiki say as much. Kaihaku fully agreed and worked hard to improve the treatment of servants and attendants. He was deeply moved to learn that his trusted retainer Kakei served Taiki up until the very end.

Risai had increasingly come to believe that, without anyone realizing it, the small stones accumulated in the past would one day produce a mountain of results.

The past creates the present.

In that case, the present also created the future, even when the connecting threads were no longer visible.

"By the way, have you met Seirai?"

Amidst the chaos that engulfed Kouki, Ganchou came to Seirai's rescue. After hoisting the wounded and bedraggled Seirai onto a kijuu, he remained behind to fend off any pursuers. They heard that Asen's own soldiers, who'd been charged with guarding Seirai, ended up cooperating with Ganchou. Before being reassigned, these were the same soldiers who'd been posted at Nightingale Manor.

No one had seen Ganchou after that, or heard from the soldiers who'd backed him up. Risai hadn't met Seirai yet either. When he arrived in Soukou, Seirai hadn't been well enough to see anyone.

"I did, to be sure," Eishou said with a scowl. "He can't stop summoning people around the clock."

That being the case, his condition must have stabilized. “Then it sounds like he’s doing fine,” Risai quipped.

“I planned on sending him off in a grand style as soon as he died. Looks like I lost the chance. He’s sure to crawl out of bed one of these days and show us all his dumb mug.”

“You two can’t stop badmouthing each other,” Risai said with a smile. “How is he actually doing? All I’ve heard is rumors.”

The rumors said that when Seirai was first brought to Soukou, everyone around him was stunned by the terrible state of his health.

“The fool is too stupid to know when enough is enough and too stubborn to die,” Eishou grumbled to himself, though loud enough to be overheard. Hearing Risai’s sigh, he put on a straight face. “It’s going to take a while before he can move around on his own. The doctors say he’s going to end up with a limp. Still, he’s getting to the point where he can walk, so we’ll call that an improvement.”

Eishou said in a quieter voice, “But some parts of him aren’t going to heal. The Minister of Winter is confident he can make an artificial eye. He’s going to be scarred all over, though in time it’ll take a second look to see them. His mouth works as well as it ever did. The man won’t shut up. As far as Seirai is concerned, that means everything is just fine.”

“Seirai never slackened in his defense of the Imperial Treasury ledgers. We owe him a lot on that account alone.”

“I’ll give him that. Except all his bullheadedness was mostly for naught once the Kingdom of En showed up. As a reward, I’ll stay mum on the subject.”

Risai responded with a shake of her head. Seirai’s heroic efforts were far from futile. To the Black Flags and to Gyousou himself, the existence of the ledgers had significant symbolic value. Most importantly, concealing the ledgers put a significant check on the scope of Asen’s actions, an achievement entirely due to Seirai’s efforts.

“He’s happy enough to have a hospital bed next to His Highness. My goodness, but His Highness spoils him like a baby.”

Risai laughed. Gyousou’s condition also demanded a fair amount of medical attention. Still, he insisted that Seirai’s sickbed be brought to his personal quarters. And thus Seirai had taken up residence in the Seishin.

“They will want to discuss imperial policy going forward.” After all, Risai pointed out, Seirai remained the Chousai, the chief cabinet secretary of the Rikken.

“Seirai certainly wants to keep serving alongside the Taiho. How is the Taiho faring?”

The Taiho was still in a bad way. Risai had missed greeting Seirai because she had to take Taiki to Mount Hou in the Yellow Sea. He hadn’t been up and about since collapsing outside Kouki. When they finally arrived at Soukou, Taiki had to be

carried to a hospital bed. He couldn't even rise to his feet to greet the Imperial En and Enki. They came to see him instead. Even there, Enki was unable to enter the room.

No wonder.

As Enki stood there stock still, Risai could only watch over him in sorrow. Enki glanced up at her, on the verge of tears.

"Risai, what is going on here?"

Most likely what was known among kirin as a curse of malice and resentment, the same as his condition upon his return from Hourai. When swallowed up by such a curse, no other kirin could get anywhere near him. Now was no different. Taiki had killed a human being with his own hand.

"The Taiho really went above and beyond."

Risai had heard about the lengths Taiki had gone to save the people of Tai after he slipped away that winter and returned to Kouki, how he'd maneuvered his way into the Imperial Palace and the battles he'd waged there. The countless actions he'd taken that were completely contrary to common sense and his own nature.

Risai went to see Taiki when they first arrived at the castle. Taiki looked grief-stricken and distressed. Bits and pieces of his exploits having already reached her ears, Risai felt the same.

"Risai, are you mad at me?" was the first question out of his mouth.

Risai smiled and shook her head. She took his hand and said, "I can only imagine how much you have suffered."

"Risai, I—"

Risai again shook her head, cutting off the rest of the sentence. "I am not unfamiliar with what kind of a creature a kirin is. But we needed people willing to do the wrong thing in order to do right by the people of Tai. If you are going to blame yourself, then please lay that blame at our feet, who pleaded for your help."

"Risai—"

"Any sin attributed to the Taiho is not his alone, but a sin borne by everyone in the kingdom, and thus the burden of all of us who ever begged for peace and prosperity."

For good or ill, the past was inextricably tied to the present.

"There is a saying that goes way back. *In this kingdom, when the snow is deep and the clouds hang low over the land, the only clear skies are in Kouki, where the emperor and the Saiho reside.* If the palace is that patch of blue and the emperor is the sheltering canopy, then the Taiho is the light shining forth."

Risai firmly clasped the scrawny hand. "Please do not summon any more clouds around you now."

"Yes," Taiki nodded.

However he took her advice, Risai didn't think a few words from her would rescue Taiki from his own self-condemnation. His condition worsened from day to day. Even when the Imperial En and Enki paid Taiki a visit, he slept the whole time and that day he never woke up.

Reluctantly taking his leave, Enki said to Risai, "Take him to Mount Hou. That was the plan to start with."

"We will. What will the Imperial En and the Taiho be doing after this?"

"We'll be heading back to En. It's too bad we weren't able to speak. We'll visit again once things settle down. Next time we'll bring along Youko and Keiki."

Risai nodded and bowed. The next day, as promised, she set off for Mount Hou with Taiki. And at Mount Hou—

Risai shook her head as if shaking the memories out of her mind. She had been to Mount Hou once before. That first visit gave her a mighty shock. There was no similar assault on the senses this time, only an echo of what she'd experienced before, a reaffirmation of the cool ruthlessness of the legendary goddesses and the sheer irrationality of Heaven, that made everything about it appear suspect.

It was by no means a pleasant experience. She simply resigned herself to that being the way Heaven was and how it operated.

Risai realized that Eishou was eyeing her with a dubious expression and hastily put on a reassuring smile. "The last time I saw him, his color had markedly improved. He said he should be able to rejoin us in another month or so."

"Good," Eishou said with obvious relief. "I was more than a little taken aback at how down in the dumps he was."

"He's receiving all the attention he needs on Mount Hou, so I don't think we have anything to worry about. He got his horn back, along with his shirei. Though certain aspects of his current condition may continue well into the future. The esui was that severe."

"Huh." Eishou's face clouded over for a moment, but his high spirits soon rebounded. "The Taiho and Seirai make a good pair, don't you think? They can go on walks together and totter along at a snail's pace like a couple of old geezers."

Risai had to laugh. "You may be right about that."

Chapter 39

[25-3] Humming the tune to himself, Kyoshi looked down at the banners of the Black Flags fluttering above the city.

South of the castle we fought,
North of the walls we died,
Perished like dogs at the side of the road
And ended up food for the crows.

From a perch high on Mount Soukou in Kou Province, just beneath the Sea of Clouds, Kyoshi surveyed the lowlands reaching out below him. The river forked to the north and south. Mountains towered over the opposing banks. Raising his gaze beyond the river, the mighty ranges climbed in staggered terraces toward the border with Bun Province.

From the Forbidden Gate set into the cliffs on the eastern side of Ryou'un Mountain, Kyoshi looked north. On the other side of those mountains was the final resting place of Houto and so many of their colleagues.

Please tell the crows on our behalf
To spare a moment before gobbling us down.
And shed a tear like they truly care,
Weathered and worn, without even a grave.

He learned the song while supping with the soldiers in Bun Province. Thinking of all those corpses reduced to weather-beaten bones, as in the song, made his heart ache. Whenever the tune rose unconsciously to his lips, it was like tearing the scabs off old wounds that had begun to heal.

If he ever started to forget, the pain made those memories once again very real. No matter how much he wanted to erase death from the world, he did not wish to forget the dead.

That shared feeling was probably why so many soldiers love the song so much.

How in the world might our rotten meat
Flee from the tips of your pointed beaks?

“There you are. Finally found you.”

Kyoshi turned to see a familiar face standing there.

“Kouryou.”

“It’s been a while,” Kouryou said with a smile.

He strode over to Kyoshi and sat down next to him. The flagstone wall overlooked the broad ledge before the Forbidden Gate. Perhaps this lookout point had been quarried away to expand the view, or was simply a place to stack unused slabs of stone. Either way, it offered an impressive view. Kyoshi had taken a liking to this rock table.

“A fair wind is blowing.”

Kyoshi directed his gaze upwards. A large pine tree had long ago taken root in the precipice behind them. Soft sunlight filtered through the gnarled branches. Beyond the branches, the bright summer sky reached out forever, unmarred by a single cloud. The shadows from the tree fell around them, inviting in a refreshing breeze.

“Kou Castle is awfully big. It wasn’t easy tracking you down.” Kouryou paused and said, “I heard about Enchou-dono. That’s too bad.”

Kyoshi nodded. Another scab torn away. Enchou brought together the Taoists from Zui’un Temple in Ten shire. He passed away before the good news reached him. Given his advanced years and the impoverished environment, hardly surprising news. And yet Kyoshi couldn’t help wishing that he’d had the chance to see him one last time so he could tell him about the emperor’s return.

Touka lay north of Soukou, a mere three days by kijuu. Alas, the enemy occupied the far bank of the river and the surrounding land. The Kou Provincial Guard was gathering around Soukou.

Word of Enchou’s death came from Juntatsu. Juntatsu was one of the court physicians who’d fled from Hakkei Palace.

On Taiki’s instructions, Juntatsu headed to Touka. He searched out the small village. There he met with Doujin, the village manager, and delivered the letter from Taiki. In the letter, Taiki did not ask for help or assistance but only expressed his gratitude and regrets. Having seen Touka’s small and impoverished state for himself, Juntatsu didn’t think Taiki would do anything other than that. Touka hardly possessed the resources to ride to anybody’s rescue.

Rather, concerned about Juntatsu’s welfare, Taiki had sent him on this mission to get him out of Hakkei Palace. More evidence that Taiki had already resigned himself to his fate.

Together with Doujin, Juntatsu mourned Enchou’s passing. And then as the letter instructed, he took the kijuu to Mount Bokuyou and released it into the tunnels. But instead of ascending the mountain, the kijuu flew off and disappeared over the western horizon.

At first, Juntatsu fretted over this turn of events, but then concluded that the suugu must have caught the scent of its master somewhere in the west. In fact, not long thereafter, Tora landed on an En flagship sailing off the coast of Tai.

Concerned for Taiki's welfare, Juntatsu set off for Kouki. Along the way, it became clear that a mighty change was in the wind. Caught up in the column of rebel soldiers surging out of Kouki, he eventually ended up in Soukou, where he met Taiki once again.

The word on the street was soon up to date about everything anybody needed to know. With the emperor back and his retainers massing their troops, Kyoshi's presence was no longer necessary.

In particular, Kyoshi had no role to play in the assault on Kouki. All he could do was watch over the unfolding events from his little corner of Soukou Castle. He'd met Risai when she arrived in Soukou. They hadn't gotten together again since celebrating their reunion.

He heard from Risai that Kouryou was alive and well but hadn't found the opportunity to see him until now. He was happy and relieved that Kouryou made a point of seeking him out.

"Good to know," Kouryou said with a smile when Kyoshi explained all this.

Kyoshi nodded. Here too were more scars lurking beneath the surface. Show a physical wound to the Danpou Temple monks and they could heal it right away. But none of the Danpou Temple monks in the Black Flags had survived.

War was a heartless business. Kyoshi witnessed Houto's final moments, though he never confirmed his remains. It was probably enough for him to see what happened with his own eyes. It was not difficult to accept that he was gone. But during a war, most of the victims went unseen in places unvisited. Nobody knew when, where, or how they died.

Even in reports confirming the deaths of Kyuusan and Yotaku, there was reason to hope. Sekirei and Kyuusan's children simply disappeared. The same with Seishi.

They could still be alive. He surely hoped they were. He might be harboring these unsettled feelings for the rest of his life.

Kyoshi blurted out, "Kouryou, you've probably been dealing with these emotions for a long time."

Kouryou looked up at the sky and nodded. Then he turned to Kyoshi, took hold of his hand, and held it out in front of them.

Ticking off his fingers one by one he said, "Kyoshi and Risai-dono, the Taiho and His Highness." Kouryou tightly gripped Kyoshi's hand. "At times like this, remember to count the living as well as the dead."

That was the nature of war. And the war was not over. Asen was reinforcing Kouki's defenses and attempting to surround Soukou Castle. At the same time, the people inside the castle tore holes in the encircling net and slipped through. The curtain would soon rise on the final act of the fight.

The battle that determined the fate of Gyousou and Asen would likely consume many who had survived the conflicts that came before. But nothing was set in stone. Such was the uncertainty of life in this world.

"Be sure to stay alive, Kouryou."

Kyoshi would not be following the troops into the field. "There's no place for an amateur like myself in the decisive battles ahead of us."

Kouryou agreed. "You're a monk, after all. Your job is to preserve the medical knowledge and traditions of Zui'un Temple. You have your own fierce struggles ahead of you. It's a world apart from the wars waged by soldiers, but no less demanding."

Kouryou added with a smile, "Besides, even if I do end up dead, as long as I smoothed the way ahead and ensured your survival in turn, such a death would not be in vain. I helped to preserve that knowledge and those traditions."

"Are you sure you can set things right?" Kyoshi muttered, a crooked smile on his face.

"Positive. I guarantee it."

He isn't guaranteeing he'll come back alive, Kyoshi couldn't help thinking.

As if reading his mind, Kouryou said, "Oh, I plan on getting through this in one piece. I've got promises to keep, you see."

Kyoshi gave him a puzzled look. Kouryou laughed and looked up at the sky. "I promised to head home when my adventure was over. I imagine Ritsu has grown an inch or two in the meantime. He'll certainly be needing some new clothes."

Chapter 40

[25-4] Rivers of air wound between the mountain peaks, tousling the fields of flowers blooming along the valley floor. A passing breeze carried with it the sound of lively voices. Placing the flowers she'd picked in the basket, Enshi turned toward the source of the bright laughter.

The wind swirled over the patches of red and yellow dotting the side of the mountain. Enshi could make out Ritsu and three other children playing on the cape facing the sea. The superintendent watched over them as they cavorted about the blustery spit of land.

The villagers from the neighboring districts gathered here to pick flowers. Together they created a bustling and cheerful atmosphere.

When Enshi came to this patch of ground between the mountains in the fall of the previous year, clumps of withered and brown grass covered the hilly terrain, creating a bleak and desolate landscape. That same land was now covered everywhere with green.

Verdant thickets blanketed the castle ruins. Clusters of white flowers lined the slopes from the ruins all the way down to the village, while more yellow and red flowers filled the bottom of the valley. Enshi never dreamed that this place could be adorned with so many flowers.

These thoughts on her mind, she reached toward the next.

"Oh, you want to leave those red ones." A plump hand reached over and stayed Enshi's hand. "You see, the red flowers start out yellow and gradually turn red." The woman explained with a gentle smile, "The colors of the flowers are still changing. The red color marks the peak of the bloom. They'll fall soon after that. For making dye, you want to pick them when there's just a hint of crimson."

Enshi nodded. She left the red flower alone and picked the bright yellow flower next to it. These flowers would be turned into dyes and medicines. The people of Touka had cultivated safflower since ancient times. The little arable land in the area was mostly suited for buckwheat and millet. Where those crops wouldn't grow, safflower would.

The blooming buckwheat fields looked like swaths of white cloth scattered here and there over patches of ground. Once the safflower picking was over, it'd be time to harvest the buckwheat.

"Then there's the thatching grass."

Enshi observed the withered reeds when she first came to Touka. The faded stalks rustled in the wind as they swayed back and forth in lonely rows alongside the road.

"They're not weeds?"

"No, we plant them to protect the village against landslides washed down from the mountains."

Now that she mentioned it, the previous year during late autumn, Enshi had observed villagers cutting the reeds and tilling straw into the soil collected from the landslides. While the men repaired the rock walls, the women sorted the stalks and tied them into bundles. They used the bundles of thatch to insulate their homes during the winter. Meanwhile, the children and elderly collected thorn oak berries from the levees.

And then came the long winter. Enshi worked hard to become a part of village life. She gathered dead limb wood, thinned the saplings, and made charcoal, weaved cloth and snow bleached the fabric.

About the time she grew used to the persistent sense of cold and hunger that arose as the supplies of thorn oak berries and food ran low, the snow began to melt.

Over the winter, a child was born and six people died. Four were villagers and two were the Taoists hiding there, one of them being Enchou.

The villagers all agreed that the year's snowfall was an improvement over the past and the temperatures didn't get as cold. Although there wasn't a sizable surplus left over, at least they had not completely exhausted their supplies of thorn oak berries.

"Next winter should be better still," said Enshi's flower-picking companion. "There will be more flowers than this year too. More bees buzzing around the buckwheat fields. That means more honey and a better harvest."

"It must be the result of His Highness's return."

"Probably so," the woman cheerfully agreed.

The emperor now reigned from Soukou Castle in Kou Province. He hadn't yet reclaimed Kouki but his supporters were flocking to Soukou day by day and hour by hour. Rumors said that war was bound to break out before too long. Nobody doubted that he would win.

When the emperor finally returned to the imperial throne, life would surely improve even more.

Except war was in the offing.

Enshi glanced over her shoulder at the southern sky. How was Kouryou doing? She hoped he was in good health and remained that way in the days to come.

Enshi had found a home here in Touka. She'd worked hard and little by little made it a place where she belonged. She enjoyed the work. This wasn't at all like wandering from place to place with no destination ahead of her.

She looked forward to tilling the soil and sowing the seeds. When she planted the seeds, she pictured the plants as they grew. The seeds she scattered across the tilled ground yielded sprouts and then flowers like these. The flowers collected brought back to the village were crumpled and pressed into cakes that were then fermented. After that they were dried and stored before being turned into valuable dyes and medicines.

The feelings she came away with was that every action she took was directly tied to a future result. The joyful daily reminders that she and Ritsu were alive made the physical pains and strains so much more bearable.

But with that knowledge also came the sad reminder that all would be forgotten in time.

That alone is the one certainty.

Enshi heard the patter of footsteps approaching. She glanced around as a small figure leapt into her arms.

"What is it?" she said. "Your mother's still at work."

Catching her breath, Ritsu opened his hand. Resting in his palm was a flat white stone about the size of a coin. A delicate design was engraved in the center of the stone.

"Oh, would you look at that!" exclaimed the woman next to them. "A stone amulet! The Taoist temples sell them. Did you find that one, Ritsu?"

"Yeah," Ritsu nodded with obvious pride. He held it out to the Enshi. "Mom."

Enshi smiled. Perhaps due to the trappings of poverty and their long and lonely journeys, Ritsu never had much to say. Since this spring, he'd become a tad more talkative. Enshi found those few clumsy words so endearing.

"You want to give it to me? Is that okay, Ritsu?"

Ritsu answered with an exaggerated nod. He dropped the amulet into Enshi's hand, then spun around and ran back to the cape.

"Where are you going?" she called after him.

"I'm going to find another one!"

Another one for whom? she meant to say, but couldn't bring herself to ask the question aloud.

The boy darted off through the fields of crimson. The red flowers swayed in his wake. A passing zephyr brought with it the song of a bird. The small village and the surrounding meadows basked in the glow of the short-lived Tai summer at the height of its glory.

According to the calendar, the first day of autumn had already passed. From here on out, like a wagon at the crest of a long hill, autumn would slowly but surely roll toward winter. But for now, these sunwashed days were painted in the glittering hues of every color nature could imagine.

For at least these few precious moments, the approaching winds of war fell still.

From The Chronicles of Tai

In the Ninth Month of the Eighth Year of Koushi, the Saiho returned to the Imperial Palace.

Asen detained the Saiho and imprisoned him within the Imperial Palace. On the occasion of the Winter Solstice, the Saiho proclaimed Asen's Accession to the Throne. His Highness's loyal retainers despaired for the future of the kingdom.

In the Second Month of the Ninth Year, the Chousai and the Naisai conspired to abduct the Saiho. Their efforts were thwarted by the Minister of Fall, who placed the Chousai and the Naisai under arrest.

In the Third Month of that year, a rebellion broke out in Kan Shire in Bun Province. The Rebels called themselves the Black Flags. Asen deployed the Palace Guard of the Right against them with the evil intent of inflicting upon them a dreadful slaughter.

The Black Flags brought the Palace Guard to a standstill west of Anpuku in Kan Shire.

In the Fourth Month, Asen captured His Highness in Ba Province. During that same month, the Black Flags engaged the Imperial Army in hopes of saving His Highness but were defeated at the cost of many lives.

In the Sixth Month, the Black Flags besieged Kouki and retrieved the Saiho and His Highness.

In the Seventh Month, the dynasty of His Highness was reestablished at Soukou Castle in Kou Province.

In the Tenth Month, His Highness struck down Asen in Kouki.

Having pacified the Nine Provinces of Tai, His Highness inaugurated a new Calendrical Era and gave it the name of *Meishi*, meaning "the bright banners."