# *Poseidon of the East, Vast Blue Seas in the West*

A Twelve Kingdoms novel

by

**Fuyumi Ono**

Translated

by

Eugene Woodbury

Copyright © 1994 by Fuyumi Ono. All publication rights remain with the copyright holders.

The numbers in [brackets] at the beginning of each chapter reflect the original part/chapter numbering in the Kodansha X White Heart edition (ISBN: 978-4062551687).

Visit www.eugenewoodbury.com for the annotated online version and more information about the Twelve Kingdoms series.

Last updated 10/1/2023.

# Prologue

**A**t the ends of the earth was an ocean called the *Kyokai,* the "Sea of Nothingness."

Two realms sat at the borders of its eastern and western reaches. Although normally cut off from each other, with no communication or commerce passing between them, the same legend had arisen in each—of a land of dreams far across the horizon.

Only a chosen few could visit that blessed and fertile place, where riches gushed forth like fountains, and whose people, free from pain and suffering, never grew old or died.

One of these kingdoms was known to the other as *Hourai*. And the other called its mysterious companion *Tokoyo*. In both of these mysterious, isolated worlds, in Hourai and in Tokoyo, a child opened his eyes. In both it was the dead of night.

*He* was awakened suddenly by the sound of voices. The whispers crawled through the darkness. His mother and father were conversing outside the house.

It was less a house than walls and a roof formed by straw mats strung across four poles. The bare earth was his bed. The trill of insects filling the night spoke to the lateness of the season. But he didn't have even a blanket to burrow under, only the shared body heat of his brothers and sisters.

The family had enjoyed better accommodations in the past. But they were no more, reduced to ashes in a city consumed by fire.

"We have no choice," his father said under his breath.

"But—" his mother stammered. "He may be the youngest but he is so smart it's frightening."

The boy shivered in the darkness. Now that it was clear they were talking about him, the fog of sleep abruptly fled.

"Still—"

"He's got a good head on his shoulders. Other children his age have barely learned to talk. It's almost like he's from another world."

"That's true. But no matter what else, he is still a child. He won't understand what's happening."

"That is not what concerns me. I fear that anybody who takes that child's life will be cursed."

The child tugged his collar up around his ears, curled into a ball, and tried to fall asleep. He didn't want to hear what his ears were telling him. Though he wasn't yet four years old, he knew what this conversation was about.

The voices droned on. He did his best not to listen, driving consciousness from his mind, forcing himself to fall asleep.

Two days later. "Boy." His father peered down at him. "I've got to run an errand. Want to come with?"

"Sure." He didn't ask *where to* or *why*.

"All right, then."

His father reached out his hand, an enigmatic expression on his face. The boy took hold of it. The big, rough hand enveloped his. They left the house and set off through the sea of charred ruins. Forging deeper into Mount Kinugasa, they continued up and down the slopes until he had surely lost his sense of direction.

That was when his father finally let go. "Boy, you wait here. I'll be back soon. It won't be long."

"Okay." He nodded.

"Stay here. Don't go wandering off."

He answered with a bob of his head. His father strode off, glancing back over his shoulder several times before disappearing into the woods.

*I'm not going to budge an inch. I'm going to stay right there.* He clenched his fists and looked in the direction he'd last seen his father. *I'm definitely not going to do anything like go home.*

True to that pledge, he didn't take a single step from that spot. When the sun set, that was where he slept. When he grew hungry, he plucked the wild grasses within his arm's reach and nibbled at the roots. He drank the night dew. After three days, he could not move if he wanted to.

*Here is where I will wait,* for he knew that going home would only leave his parents fit to be tied.

The bodies of the dead were heaped in piles around the burned city. The man his father worked for had been killed by a common foot soldier in the West Army. Without a job or a home, keeping the family together might be possible if there was one fewer mouth to feed, one fewer child who could not work to feed himself.

He closed his eyes and surrendered to his muddled mind. Before consciousness fled, he heard a sound like that of a wild animal prowling through the grass.

*I am waiting here.*

He would wait for his family to survive and live on, for this ravaged world to settle down, for their fortunes to improve. Then they would remember him and come to bury his body and send his soul onto the next world.

He would wait forever, if that was how long it took.

*He* awoke in the middle of the night. People were talking. He was so tired he couldn't make out what they were saying, only that they were taking his mother to task. He tried to rouse himself and rush to her defense but could not tear himself free from the bonds of sleep.

The next day, his mother took him by the hand and they left the village. She wept as they walked along. He'd never seen his mother cry before.

He didn't have a father. His mother said he'd gone to a faraway place. They'd moved here after their farming hamlet burned down. They slept on the ground in a corner of the village.

The large group of people that had gathered there had dwindled away, leaving only a small number behind. He was the only child. The adults, except for his mother, treated him coldly, beat him cruelly, and showered him with abuse, especially when he complained that he was hungry.

Stifling her sobs, his mother led him through the scorched rice fields. They came to a mountain and continued on through the trees. He had never ventured this far before.

In the midst of the forest, she finally released her hold. "Let's rest here for a while. Are you thirsty?"

He was and he nodded.

"I'll go look for water. Wait here, okay?"

He was tuckered out from all the walking, so despite the unease he felt about his mother going out of sight, he nodded again. She patted him on the head several times, then quickly backed away and hurried off into the forest.

He sat down on the ground. At length, worried that she wasn't coming back, he set off to find her. But after stumbling through the forest, calling out for her, he couldn't tell where she'd gone or how to get back to the village.

He was cold and hungry. Worst of all was the thirst.

He walked on, crying and looking for his mother. Eventually the forest ended and there was the seacoast. Following the shore, he made it back to the village by evening. He ran through the village searching for her. He only met people he'd never seen before.

The only thing that made sense was that he'd somehow ended up in a different village.

A man approached him and asked what was wrong. He managed to choke back the tears long enough to explain what had happened. The man patted him on the head and gave him a little food and water.

After that, the man exchanged a long look with the people gathered around, then took him by the hand and brought him back to the cliffs overlooking the sea. Far across the blue water was a range of tall mountains that continued on and on like an immense gray wall.

They stepped up to the edge of the cliff. The man patted him on the head again, mumbled, “Sorry.”

And pushed him off the precipice.

When he next opened his eyes, he was in a dark hole. The smell of salt water filled his nostrils, twining together with the familiar odor of rot and decay. The smell of the dead. He was used to it by now so it didn’t frighten him or leave him especially unsettled.

He was simply wet and cold and lonely. He heard something moving nearby and turned in that direction. Due to the darkness, all he could see was a large, lumpy shadow.

Now he wept. Yes, he was scared but the loneliness was far more overpowering.

He felt warm breath on his arm and jerked backwards. Something light and fluffy ran across his skin, like a bird’s downy feathers. This dark place must be home to a big bird, and it had taken a good measure of his condition.

He was too startled to move. The feathers pressed forward and around him. The wings enveloped him. In that precious pocket of warmth, he clung to the feathers.

“Mama—” he cried over and over again.

There never was a Paradise waiting at the furthest reaches of the Kyokai. In the end, that dream was only a reflection of the deeply-held desire of people suffering in Hourai no less than they did in Tokoyo.

These two children had been abandoned in two realms to the east and west of the Kyokai. And yet one day, quite by chance, they would meet.

Together they would bear the ruin and destruction of the world on their shoulders, even as they sought to create a Paradise here on Earth.

# Part One

## Chapter 1

[1-1] **T**he *setsuzan*. A wasteland of broken mountains, as if the skyscraping peaks of Ryou'un Mountain had crumbled to pieces and been strewn across the landscape.

Rokuta examined the countryside in stark disbelief. The last time he'd seen this place he would have sworn things could not possibly get any worse. The sight before his eyes tempted him to question that conviction.

Wispy clouds lingered in the high vault of the heavens. Beneath the cruelly bright sky, summer would soon be upon them. But the expected red of flowers and green of grass was nowhere to be seen. The farmlands appeared no more fertile than a desert.

Fields of wheat that should be oceans of green were little more than overgrown tangles of weeds. The withered clumps of wavering shoots rising out of the dry, cracked earth had lost even their warm golden color.

The paddy causeways had crumbled, reducing the rural hamlets to plots of vacant land surrounded by stone walls. The stone walls themselves had fallen apart in places, been blackened by fire, weathered by the wind and rain, blanched to a dreary, desolate gray.

The stockades that normally would have surrounded the village at the foot of the hill were wrecked, the houses within piles of debris. Not one twig remained on the trees that once shielded the hamlets and village.

Only the *riboku* stood alone in the center of the village, scorched to the color of tarnished silver. Around its trunk sat several people, still as a ring of abandoned statues.

Birds perched in its upper branches. Far more flying youma circled above. Not a leaf or petal was left on the tree. Nothing prevented the youma in the sky from seeing through the spotted white branches. But nobody cast a wary glance over his shoulder. Youma and other predatory animals wouldn't attack anything in the shadow of a riboku.

Ignoring them, though, wouldn't make them go away. These humans were simply too exhausted to work up any additional fear of the youma.

The once verdant mountains were charred brown while the rivers uselessly flooded their banks. Any identifiable hamlets and villages had long ago been reduced

to cinders. Nobody bothered tilling this ravaged earth. Any hope for fertile ground was in vain, as was planning for next year's harvest. The farmers were too hungry and too tired to pick up their hoes, let alone gather together in sufficient numbers to share the work and watch each other's backs.

The wings of the circling youma drooped as well. The youma were starving. As Rokuta watched, one fell out of the sky. Not even these demonic beings could sustain themselves from the ravaged fields.

In this land of broken mountains, the kingdom was a dead man walking. *These surely are the last days of the Kingdom of En.*

The previous emperor was posthumously known as Emperor Kyou. Though he had governed long and well, at some point a demon took hold of his heart. He oppressed his subjects and even seemed to enjoy the sound of their suffering.

He quartered soldiers in every village. Let the slightest murmur of dissatisfaction with imperial rule be voiced aloud and that person would be arrested on the spot, then together with all their relations be put to death in the street.

When an insurrection broke out, they'd open the sluice gates and flood the village. Or spill oil into the gutters and set it ablaze with fire arrows, killing every man, woman, and child.

A kingdom had nine provinces and nine province lords. The emperor executed any of the province lords who possessed a backbone and a conscience. There was no one left to stop him.

When the Saiho took to his sickbed, his soul mortally wounded and his body struck down by the *shitsudou,* the emperor haughtily declared it was all according to Providence, and commenced construction of a huge mausoleum.

Conscripted laborers dug a double-ring moat. The excavated dirt and the corpses of the slaughtered workers created a burial mound so high a man standing near its slopes had to tilt back his head to see the top. It was rumored that a hundred and thirty thousand girls were slain in order to serve him in this "Inner Palace of the Dead."

Emperor Kyou died on the verge of its completion. The kingdom was already in ruins. The whole nation had been slogging for years through this swamp of misery, struggling even to take the next breath. Upon the news of the emperor's demise, they shouted with joy, so loud the neighboring kingdoms must have heard the roar.

The expectations of the people turned toward the next emperor. But no coronation was forthcoming.

In the world of the Twelve Kingdoms, the kirin chose the ruler. The kirin was a divine beast, an oracle in tune with the Divine. After choosing an emperor according

to the Mandate of Heaven, he became the emperor's closest advisor and chief retainer and served him as the Taiho.

However, thirty years passed without finding a new emperor. The Taiho came to the end of his natural lifespan and died. Such a great catastrophe had only occurred eight times since the dawn of history.

The emperor not only governed the kingdom but ruled over the cosmic forces of yin and yang. When the throne was vacant, nature spun out of control. Disasters continued unabated. In a land already devastated by the actions of Emperor Kyou, such a calamity only wreaked further destruction. The people soon lacked the energy to voice their lamentations aloud.

This wasteland was the result.

Standing there on the hill, Rokuta turned his gaze to the man next to him. He was looking at the ruined vistas before them.

Rokuta's official name and title was Enki. Although he appeared to be a mere boy, his essence was anything but human. He was the kirin of the Kingdom of En. Standing beside him was the man he'd chosen as the next emperor.

*Do you want a kingdom of your own?* Rokuta asked him. A kingdom on its last legs, with barely any people or property to rule over. *If so, I will give you one.*

*I do,* he answered without reservation.

What must he be thinking now, surveying this wrecked land? He surely couldn't have expected such wide-ranging devastation.

Rokuta looked up at him. Would he sigh? Would he rage? Perhaps feeling his eyes upon him, the man turned to Rokuta and said, "There's absolutely nothing here."

Rokuta only nodded.

"Fashioning a whole kingdom out of nothing is a big responsibility," he said, with no more solemnity than observing the time of day. "But if there is nothing to start with, then we'll be pretty much free to do as we see fit."

He raised his voice and laughed in what sounded like blithe disregard. Rokuta hung his head. For some reason he felt like crying.

"What?" a warm and gentle voice asked him.

Rokuta took a deep breath and let it out. For the first time, he really understood the crushing weight that had been riding on his shoulders. And now it vanished.

"Well, then." The man put his hand on Rokuta's shoulder. "What do you say we take a trip to this Mount Hou place and start the ball rolling?"

The only weight Rokuta felt now was the weight of the man's hand. According to human reckoning, Rokuta was thirteen years old. For thirteen years, he'd carried the fate of an entire kingdom. Only now could he entrust it to another person—for good or for ill.

The man slapped Rokuta on the shoulder and set off. Rokuta looked back at him and said, “I’m counting on you.”

He didn’t say for what. The man smiled. “Leave everything to me.”

# Chapter 2

[1-2] **R**okuta said, in something of a daze, “It’s turning green.”

He stood on the balcony of the Imperial Palace and gazed down through the Sea of Clouds at the city of Kankyuu. Twenty years had passed since the coronation. The land was slowly recovering.

Kankyuu was the capital of the Kingdom of En. Gen’ei Palace stood at the summit of the mountain, a small island floating in the vast expanse of the Sea of Clouds.

The Sea of Clouds at the top of the sky divided the world above from the world below. Staring up from the ground, the water arcing across the heavens was invisible to the eye, except for the white froth raised by the waves washing against the shores of Ryou’un Mountain.

Looking down from above, the faint blue of the transparent sea appeared no deeper than the height of an average man. But dive in and its depths proved unfathomable. Through those transparent depths, the land below came into view—the young fields of wheat and greening mountains, the forested windbreaks sheltering the hamlets and villages.

“And yet it’d be no less true to say we’ve only come this far in twenty years.”

Rokuta rested his hands on the railing and buried his head between his arms. Waves crashed with a roar against the balcony pilings and washed back out to the Sea of Clouds, leaving the scent of salt water behind in the air.

“Taiho—”

“To be sure, coming this far is no mean achievement. When we entered Gen’ei Palace there was nothing below us but blackened earth.”

Over the past twenty years, what was once scorched ground had turned noticeably green. The kingdom was on the mend. Refugees who’d fled to neighboring kingdoms were making their way back. The celebrations of the harvest festivals grew louder every year.

“Taiho.”

“Hmm?”

Rokuta turned and rested his elbows on the railing. The Imperial Magistrate was standing there, a sheaf of documents in his hands. He smiled.

“Thanks to your good offices, we have every confidence in harvesting a bumper crop of barley this year. On behalf of your subjects, I thank you for finding the time in your busy schedule to concern yourself with the world below. Now if you would

only devote a fraction of that attention to your humble servant's reports, how much happier I would be."

"I'm listening, I'm listening. Go on."

"Pardon me saying so, but I would appreciate it if you could treat the subject with a tad more solemnity."

"You have my undivided attention."

The Imperial Magistrate let out a deep sigh. "At the very least, you could stop acting like a child and direct your comments directly to me."

Rokuta was sitting on the statue of a lion's head that elevated him higher off the ground than a normal chair. He swung his legs back and forth against the balusters.

He turned around and grinned. "But I am a child!"

"How old are you, precisely?"

"Thirty-three."

Far from a man in his thirties, his outward appearance suggested at best a thirteen-year-old boy. Those who looked down on the Sea of Clouds didn't age. In Rokuta's case, a more mature bearing might have suited him better—kirin normally reached adulthood between their mid-teens and mid-twenties—but Rokuta hadn't aged since entering Gen'ei Palace.

Perhaps when he stopped growing on the outside, he stopped growing on the inside too. Or that was the result of others treating him like a child based on how he looked. In any case, he did seem stuck with the disposition of a thirteen-year-old.

Technically speaking, because of the demands of conscription and national service, a child's age was calculated by adding a year on his birthday rather than every New Year, as tradition once dictated.

"Here you are, a duty-bound nobleman in the prime of life and still carrying on like that. As the emperor's counselor, the Saiho has the duty to exemplify the Path of Righteousness for his subjects. As the sole court official holding the rank of duke, he is first among equals. It would behoove him to act as such."

"Like I said, I'm all ears. Except isn't this about the Rokusui River levees? You'll have to bring it up with the emperor."

The Imperial Magistrate was a pale, thin man with delicate features. Looks, though, could be misleading. His name was You Shukou. The emperor called him *Mubou* ("reckless") and not without reason.

"Then I will do just that. Where might His Highness be at this moment?"

"Search me. Chasing skirts down in Kankyuu or whatnot."

A slight smile rose to Shukou's gentle face. "Does the Taiho know why the Imperial Magistrate should be bringing up the subject of the Rokusui River levees?"

“Ah, got it!” Rokuta clapped his hands together. “When it comes to flood control, the appropriate minister really ought to be handling the matter. It’s not your job, is it?”

The Imperial Magistrate was in charge of law enforcement and judicial affairs. More specifically, he oversaw the conduct and behavior of the other ministers. Flood control fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Earth, namely the land and infrastructure portfolio of the Suijin. Though more formally, the Chousai (who presided over the Rikkan and the Ministry of Earth) reported to the emperor.

“No, it is not my job. However, En will soon be entering its rainy season. If flood control measures are not taken, the green land the Taiho takes so much delight in will end up underwater. Such things need his approval sooner than later. Where is His Highness?”

“Hmm.”

“I was asked to address myself to this matter today, at this time, by none other than the emperor himself. A man of his word does not break his promises. His Highness is the standard bearer for the other ministers.”

“Well, that’s the kind of man he is. He really is making it up as he goes along.”

The emperor is the central pillar that holds up the kingdom. When it wavers, so does the kingdom. He doesn’t attend the Privy Council and is nowhere to be found when the time comes for the performance of his official duties. I ask you, how long can the government continue to stand under such conditions?

Rokuta gazed at Shukou with upturned eyes. “A question I’d appreciate you posing to Shouryuu.”

Shukou’s graceful brows twitched again. He abruptly thumped the desk with the sheaf of documents. “How many times has the Taiho attended Privy Council meetings this month?”

“Umm—” Rokuta looked down at his right hand and bent his fingers. “Well, counting today and the last time and—”

“Four times, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“You’d know better than me.”

The Imperial Magistrate didn’t hold a high-enough rank to attend the Privy Council. When Rokuta looked up at him with a mildly surprised expression, a placid smile rose to Shukou’s face.

“Ministers can be heard complaining about it everywhere around the Imperial Palace. Did you know that the Privy Council was originally supposed to convene *every* day?”

“That was—”

“Yes, His Highness had scheduled the Privy Council to meet every three days. Even so, every three days adds up to ten times a month. What conclusion shall I draw

from the fact that the month is about to end and the Taiho has attended the Privy Council only four times?"

"Umm—"

"And His Highness has graced the Privy Council with his presence but once! What do he and the Taiho imagine the Imperial Government is there for?"

The loud crash rang out. A chair tipped over on the balcony. Looking in the direction of the sound, Rokuta realized that Baron Itan, the Suijin, must have been waiting there for some time.

No less than Shukou, the Suijin looked fit to be tied. The veins in the forehead throbbed. His shoulders shook.

"Why aren't you in the Imperial Palace like you're supposed to? What is it with the master and his underlings in this kingdom?"

"Itan, when did you get here?"

The glare in Itan's eyes just about froze the amiable smile on Rokuta's face. "My word! No better than wastrels and layabouts! It's a miracle En manages to hold together as is!"

"Baron, Baron," Shukou chided him, a wry smile on his face, but Itan had already turned on his heels.

"Baron, where are you going?"

"I'm going to grab him myself!"

Rokuta watched him stomp off and sighed. "What a foolhardy man."

Itan's nickname was *Chototsu,* which meant the same thing. And, again, not without reason.

"Alas," said Shukou, grinning at Rokuta, "I am not as short-tempered as he. But not by much."

"You don't say."

"When His Majesty doesn't attend Privy Council meetings, nothing gets resolved, nothing gets approved. Eventually Itan formally petitions the emperor and is told to put it off to later. Like today. At this hour. And so he waits and waits and His Highness doesn't show up. Under normal circumstances, he would then turn to the emperor's counselor, the Taiho, except the Taiho is nowhere to be found."

"Yeah, well, um—"

"When this kind of thing starts happening on a daily basis, I must also resolve to take the necessary measures. With all due respect, neither the emperor nor the Taiho should expect to be treated with kid gloves when it comes to their imperial duties."

Rokuta responded with a weak laugh and a bowed head. "I shall mend my ways."

Shukou smiled kindly. "That you would listen to my remonstrations with an open heart is reward enough. You do understand the point of this discussion?"

"I get it, I get it. Really."

“In that case—” Shukou retrieved a book from his pocket and presented it to Rokuta. “This first volume in the *Divine Chronicles of the Great Colonnade* details the duties and responsibilities of the emperor and Taiho. As a testament to this introspection, I would ask you to copy out the section detailing absences from the Privy Council.”

“Shukou—”

“Six copies by tomorrow should suffice. That surely should not be too onerous a burden?”

Rokuta glanced up at Shukou. “Waste my time doing that sort of thing and the whole government will grind to a halt!”

A guileless smile rose to Shukou’s kindly face. “At this juncture, another day of delay will hardly make much of a difference.”

# Chapter 3

[1-3] **B**uffeted by a brisk breeze, Shukou strode along the walkways of the Imperial Palace and exited the Inner Palace.

En was the northeast kingdom in the group of "Four States" (Sai, Kyou, En, and Kou). It was a cold land, scoured and chilled by the dry seasonal winds pouring out of the northeast during the winter, and buffeted by the cool prevailing breezes blowing off the Black Sea in the summer.

Summer soon slipped by and fall stole in. The prevailing winds weakened day by day. The land warmed by the sun gave up its heat to the atmosphere. The summers were cool and rain rarely fell, making it a place not well-suited for the cultivation of plants.

The autumns, on the other hand, were long, airy and warm. Then the seasonal winds picked up again and winter sprang upon them, as if from out of the blue.

Above the Sea of Clouds, the Imperial Palace was isolated from the seasons that visited the land below. But for the time being, the breezes blew here no differently. Autumn would soon be upon them. At the end of autumn came a month of rain. After the rain came the *joufuu,* the bone-dry, bone-shaking cold gales that spilled out of the Kingdom of Tai.

"The Rokusui—I can only hope we're in time." Shukou gazed west across the Sea of Clouds and asked himself again: *Would the levees be in place by the time the rains came?*

The mighty Rokusui River flowed from Sei Province, home to Kankyuu, to Gen Province on the Black Sea. Gen Province was known for its wide plains and fertile fields, formed from the silt left behind by the yearly flooding of the Rokusui.

The area had been uninhabitable since Emperor Kyou breached the levees facing the sea along the coast. Refugees who'd finally been able to return home had started on the restoration work. Word was the number of settlements was large and growing beyond the ability of the province lord of Gen to manage.

To start with, he had no actual authority to implement flood control measures. The province lords appointed by the previous emperor still hadn't been properly dealt with. Most of them held onto their titles while stripped of actual authority.

Shukou sighed and set off once again, only to meet Itan coming up the stone staircase. "How did it go?" Shukou asked with a smile.

"Oh, I collared him and hauled him back here. He's in the Inner Palace changing outfits."

Meaning they would have passed through the Forbidden Gate on their way to the Inner Palace. After saying whatever needed to be said there, he'd apparently returned through the Sei Gate.

Above the Sea of Clouds, only the Forbidden Gate had direct access to Gen'ei Palace. The corridor climbing the mountain from its base in Kankyuu to the summit passed through five gates. By tradition, the emperor and the Taiho alone had access to the Forbidden Gate.

Itan had been granted a special exemption, though in this regard alone he proved particularly strict about the letter of the law and did not abuse the privilege.

"In that case, I'll head there as well. There are a few things I need to get off my chest."

"Please, don't hold back. Tell him exactly how you feel. Where do you think I found him?"

"Well—"

"Gambling at a brothel in Kankyuu, where he apparently got taken for everything but the clothes on his back. He'd put up his horse as collateral and was stuck there. When I caught up with him, he was sweeping out the place with a broom, working off the balance doing janitorial chores."

Shukou laughed out loud. "That's Shouryuu for you. Did you cover his debts?"

"He's not one to run away from the bill collector, don't you know. If I didn't, he was going to keep at it until it was all paid back. I couldn't very well collar the proprietor and explain that he was the emperor and could you please write it off? It'd be a crushing disappointment to his subjects to see the mighty Imperial En reduced to such a sorry state."

"No doubt."

En had once teetered on the verge of destruction. That was how deep the wrack and ruin ran. Shouryuu's accession to the throne was an answer to his subject's prayers. The last thing they needed to see was exactly *how* those prayers had been answered.

"That man is too damned happy-go-lucky for his own good."

Shukou couldn't help smiling to himself. It was hard to imagine any court official who regularly rubbed shoulders with the emperor describing him in such terms.

Itan once held the post of Denryou, the minister responsible for the accounting of tax receipts and managing the population. After the change of regimes, he was chosen as Suijin. The emperor nicknamed him "Impetuous" and bestowed on him a wide range of special privileges.

He had free access to the emperor's sleeping quarters, could use the Forbidden Gate, ride his horse into the Inner Palace, and didn't have to kowtow in the

emperor's presence. Berating him behind his back, though, probably wasn't on the list.

"He's a bighearted man, which is probably why we still have our jobs and our heads."

The newly crowned emperor had been seated on his throne in Gen'ei Palace, the ministers and court officials gathered around singing his praises. In the midst of these festivities, Itan had grabbed the census records and thrown them down at the emperor's feet.

Itan grimaced. "Let's not go dredging up ancient history."

Millennia ago, back at the dawn of time, Tentei, the Lord God Creator, reached down from Heaven and raised up the Twelve Kingdoms. A human being was chosen and placed on the throne.

The actual selection was made by the kirin. There was but one kirin in each kingdom, a divine beast of great power who hearkened to the will of Tentei. The kirin was born on Mount Hou (known as *Taishan* in China) in the center of the world. The subject of a kingdom who wished to become emperor would climb Mt. Hou and meet with the kirin. Traveling to Mt. Hou to ascertain the Divine Will through the kirin was called the *Shouzan*.

So why did Itan slam down the census on the Imperial Dais?

"Why has the Imperial Accession taken fourteen years? Six years is plenty long enough for the kirin to choose the next emperor. You lounged around for eight years before going to Mt. Hou! Eight years wasted! Here are the census records from those eight years. See with your own two eyes how many of your subjects in Kankyuu died during that time!"

The merry atmosphere of the coronation fell still as death. Itan stared at the emperor sitting on the throne. A deeply intrigued look on his face, the emperor glanced back and forth from the census records lying on the dais to Itan.

*That was probably a little rash*. Itan only wanted to communicate to the new ruler the wretched state that En was in. The scale of the destruction had to be seen to be believed. The throne room and surrounding palace were suffused with light. The world below was filled with death and ruin.

Every last one of them clung to the hope that if only a new emperor were to accede to the throne, the world would begin to right itself. Itan wasn't so naive as to believe that alone would be enough.

Even though he knew as well that such insolence invited a quick end to his life, Itan himself was hardly a suicidal man.

During the despotic reign of Emperor Kyou, he'd remained loyal while not turning his back on the Way, had endeavored to not arouse the emperor's displeasure while

staying true to his own conscience. And so walking that moral, ethical, and political tightrope, he'd managed to hold onto his head.

The ministers all said that with the coronation of the new emperor, a new day would dawn. Except the emperor could not erase what had already happened. There was no bringing the dead back to life. Itan despised the ministers who put all of that out of their minds and mindlessly celebrated the coronation, and no less the emperor for the same reasons.

No matter what, the emperor wouldn't likely forget such an incident occurring in the midst of these grand settings. Witnessing the execution of a retainer so soon after the coronation would force the ministers to recall the despotism of emperor Kyou. That'd surely dampen the giddiness.

If nothing else, Itan had to hope this wanton display of insolence would lodge like a stone in the craws of those silly celebrants.

He looked at the emperor. The emperor looked back at him. For a long moment, the air seemed to freeze. Everybody else in attendance stood like statues around them.

The emperor was the first to move. He stepped down from the throne, picked up the census records, dusted them off, and said with a smile and a nod at Itan, "I'll take a look at these."

Itan stared in disbelief until the guards dragged him out. The then Daishito (Minister of Earth) stripped him of his position. Itan obediently returned home and awaited judgment under house arrest.

He had no desire to run away. Besides, with a doubling of the guards posted at the front gate, that would be impossible. He remained confined for five days. On the sixth, a messenger from the Imperial Palace knocked on his front door and delivered the verdict: he'd been reinstated and appointed Suijin.

When the flabbergasted Itan returned to the Imperial Palace to express his thanks, the emperor said with a grin, "Ah, there's the foolhardy man himself!"

The nickname had stuck ever since.

"At the time I'd just been seated as a junior minister. I heard the rumors and dearly wished I was there."

Shukou flashed an intrigued smile that only left Itan disheartened. However interesting others might find the story, it was anything but a laughing matter for him. He honestly thought he was going to die.

Naturally, at first Itan had nothing but respect for the emperor and voiced not a word of complaint. But those stores of devotion were exhausted in a flash. There was simply nothing about the man worth admiring. How could he bow his head to an

emperor who gambled with the petty cash and idled away the hours engaged in anything but the pressing affairs of state?

"Frankly, I loathe myself now for being so easily taken in by his magnanimity. He isn't magnanimous. He's lazy."

"Itan, perhaps you should govern your tongue a little more judiciously? Minding your manners and paying a bit more of the proper deference would do wonders for your peace of mind."

Itan looked at Shukou. "You are hardly one to talk."

Shukou was originally a junior minister in the Ministry of Spring, attached to the Naishi, the Imperial Scribe. During an inspection tour, he had addressed the emperor directly: "We've been working on your posthumous name. So far we've come up with *Prince of Prosperity* and *Prince of Destruction*. Will you raise En from the ashes or burn it to cinders once again?"

When Itan reminded him of this, Shukou countered with a slight smile, "I was only playing the part of a good baron. Apparently, it's the best way to win promotion around here."

"That excuse won't work with me. It was the third day after the coronation. I was still under house arrest."

"Oh? My memory must be failing me in my old age."

Itan scowled at Shukou's clear, composed face. Though their youthful countenances suggested otherwise, their true ages suggested they should both be very well on in years.

"Well, that junior minister is now the Imperial Magistrate. Goodness gracious, but His Highness is a generous man."

*I don't much care for either name,* the emperor had replied.

Shukou's recklessness and Itan's impatience had much in common. Shukou also knew he was putting his life on the line. He hadn't even been so much as a minister, but a low-ranked civil servant hired as a personal aide to the Naishi. Addressing the emperor directly was a grave offense. He could have been executed on the spot.

Instead, the emperor scowled and said, "So that's a *no* to both. It's embarrassing to imagine myself referred to with such prosaic language."

"Eh?" was Shukou's response.

The emperor turned his gaze directly on him. "With all your literary talents, that's the best you brilliant scribes could conduct? At least come up with something a bit wittier."

"Um—ah—of course."

"Makes me wonder if you're really suited to be a scribe."

*Probably not,* the abashed Shukou concluded. The best resolution he could hope for was his dismissal. But then a court messenger arrived with the news that he'd

been promoted to the position of secretary to the Naishi, an intermediate ministerial rank. He was later appointed Imperial Magistrate in the Ministry of Fall.

Itan said, “It must because you and I ended up in his inner circle. Perhaps the emperor takes a liking to those who impudently speak their minds.”

“That may well be the case.”

Shukou laughed. Though upon hearing footsteps coming down the corridor, he wiped the smile from his face. Coming toward them was the Chousai and his attendants. According to protocol, Shukou and Itan bowed and yielded the way.

The Chousai’s voice rang out. “Ah, I do believe this corridor continues onto the Inner Palace.”

“You,” said one of the attendants, addressing himself to Shukou. “What are you doing here? I can’t imagine you’re lost.”

Neither Shukou nor Itan answered. A restricted number of ministers had access to the Inner Palace. At one time, those with their rank weren’t allowed at all. They’d been specifically authorized by the emperor, undeniably special treatment. Not a few chose to express their jealousy with similar sarcastic asides. Shukou and Itan had grown used to it by now.

“Are you headed to the Inner Palace now?”

“Yes,” Itan said shortly.

The Chousai let out a loud sigh. “My word. As if His Highness has any interest in governing anything.”

“It must be playtime with his favorite pets.”

“Interrupt him and you’ll catch an earful. When in the world is he going to exert an equal effort on behalf of the government?”

“It’s because of all these underlings bending his ear and leading him astray.”

The sneering voice passed by them like a rancid breeze. They were probably returning to their offices east of the Inner Palace. Itan waited for the sound of footsteps to fade away before raising his head. He looked down the cobblestone path winding through among the buildings.

“Who are the underlings here?” he said with a sneer of his own. “A bunch of corrupt opportunists who purchased their posts from Emperor Kyou.”

The sarcasm aside, Itan’s description wasn’t far off. When Emperor Kyou strayed from the Way, he lost all interest in governing the kingdom. Ministers exploiting the situation for their own gain only deepened the despotism.

Some traded political appointments for money. When the bribes didn’t add up to their satisfaction, they resorted to looting the Imperial Treasury. Far from taking Emperor Kyou to task for the atrocities he perpetrated, they fanned the flames to win his favor, watching the kingdom burn before their very eyes.

“Best to let them be. Sarcasm is about all their little minds can manage.”

“They’re blaming *us* for His Highness’s wanton ways. Because that’s what *they* would do, they paint everybody else with the same brush.”

Itan ground his teeth. Shukou said with a wry smile, “Well, sticks and stones, you know.”

Itan was Suijin, a position equivalent to a mid-ranked baron in the Imperial bureaucracy. The Chousai was a marquis. That the lowly Suijin, four levels below him, should enjoy such special privileges, while the Chousai couldn’t see the emperor without going through the usual intermediaries, obviously ticked him off.

It didn’t help at all that Shukou, a low-ranked baron, was subordinate even to Itan.

“Just brush it off, eh? Something has to be done about those fools!”

“Hardly news to me.”

“Seishou has a lot to answer for! He’s the closest to His Highness. He should grab him and hogtie him to the throne!”

Itan couldn’t resist bad-mouthing even the emperor’s personal bodyguard. Caught a bit off guard, Shukou gave him a surprised look, “This has really got your dander up.”

“And not yours? They’re making us out to be a pair of two-bit pimps and hustlers, dragging His Highness off to one debauchery after the other!”

“Well, chin up. Don’t let it get to you.”

“Idiot! They’re talking about you too!”

“Let the blabbermouths blabber to their heart’s content. His Highness will launch a reorganization of the bureaucracy any day now.”

Climbing the stone staircase, Itan stopped. “Is that day coming tomorrow or sometime in the foreseeable future?”

“The government has settled down, the direction to take is decided, the path laid out. All that’s left to do is hitch up the wagon and start down it. A reorganization of the entire hierarchy has up till now proved a bridge too far, but the time has come to really shake things up.”

The serving ministers and province lords had been appointed by Emperor Kyou. Optimally, they should have resigned *en masse* on the occasion of the coronation so the new emperor could appoint a new slate of ministers. But with so many other pressing matters at hand, things had been left as they were.

Only the acting authority of the province lords had been checked. Imperial viceroys were posted in the provinces. Civil servants were not promoted to ministerial rank unless they could be personally vouched for.

But the parasites and sycophants who'd idled away the decades under Emperor Kyou, and were equally complicit in the persecution of the people, could no longer be ignored.

"The Imperial Court is in disarray. The bastards who weren't dismissed started thinking they'd gotten away scot-free and doubled down on their indiscretions. There's no telling where and how they might try to pull the rug out from under us. For the time being, a little discretion is the better part of valor."

"Twenty years. That's some staying power. Even so, no small number of those lowly men have experienced a change of heart."

"Only because the cupboards in the Imperial Treasury are bare. There's nothing left to steal. Though there have been more and more strange goings-on of late."

"With the coming of spring, all the critters that burrow underground to wait out the winter are beginning to stir."

Itan cast his eyes at the surrounding buildings. "And what a long winter it was."

At the time of the Imperial Accession—answering the heartfelt prayers of the people—Gen'ei Palace was still gilded in glimmering gold and silver. Once described in ethereal terms, those same buildings were now no better than drab. On the orders of the emperor, the Imperial Palace had been stripped of its adornments. The gold, silver and precious gems—down to the jewels decorating the throne itself—were sold to the highest bidder.

That was how deep the poverty in En ran.

The number of buildings had been cut by almost half. The emperor ordered them dismantled, the timbers and stone shipped to market. Only the black roofs rising up the peaks of Kankyuu Mountain remained unchanged from the previous dynasty.

The Imperial Palace itself was said to have been bestowed on the founding emperor of the kingdom by the Lord God Creator. Out of consideration for this hallowed past, while emperors had added to the palace over successive dynasties, none had removed any part of it.

That these buildings—in which the very history of the dynasty had been written—should not only be stripped of their ornamentation but dismantled and sold off piece by piece, shook the dismayed ministers like an earthquake.

*Do it,* the emperor ordered.

The corrupt officials who'd pillaged the Imperial Treasury and lined their own pockets under the rule of Emperor Kyou were left in place. He could have fired the ministers and province lords and confiscated their personal holdings, but couldn't spare the time or the effort. Restoring the land and bringing in a harvest from the devastated farms took priority.

The pastures and rice paddies were scorched and blackened. It took twenty years until a farmer could plow a field and plant a crop that could sustain himself and his family. The treasures of the Imperial Palace were sold to other kingdoms, the warehouses emptied until not even a soldier's dagger remained. And even then, they had barely managed to make ends meet.

"Think of them like deposits in a bank," the emperor had advised. "People who zealously save more than they spend won't feel that great a loss. Only wastrels and spendthrifts will feel the pain. When the time is right, all will be restored."

That time had now arrived.

Itan said under his breath, "He's as carefree as the day is long, but he's no fool."

Shukou smiled. "Let's just say he makes the most of his considerable abilities in the most backassward ways possible."

# Chapter 4

[1-4] **E**mperor En and his considerable but backassward abilities were being taken to task in a private room in the Inner Palace.

"Yeah, I get where you guys are coming from," Shouryuu said, glancing around at the four men accosting him.

Itan glared at him in turn. "You *get* it? That's all?"

"I have mended my ways."

"Never before can I recall being placed in such a mortifying position. I fear the humiliation of that experience will stay with me for the rest of my life."

"Hear, hear," piped up a voice of agreement behind him, but Itan paid it no mind.

"Indeed," Shukou said with a sigh.

"In exactly what position does His Highness imagine he occupies? As the captain of the ship of state, how does he intend to bring the rest of the ministers into line? What should stand as a beacon and an example to the kingdom is—*this*. I could not bring myself to look your loyal subjects in the face."

"Absolutely." The man with an utterly impassive face who hardly ever said a thing now had more than a few words to say. "My jaw drops open with sheer astonishment. To be associated with such an imperial fool is more than I can bear."

"Whimsy, so even you're grousing out loud about me?"

*Whimsy* was his nickname. His real name was Seishou, a thin young man with tawny skin and a small frame. Nevertheless, as a secretary of military affairs, he headed the emperor's personal detail as the Daiboku.

Seishou was promoted to the Palace Guard under Emperor Kyou. A resourceful and skilled fighter, he was said to be without equal in the military arts. He was arrested for criticizing the emperor, but even the corrupt Emperor Kyou could not bear to execute him and had him imprisoned instead.

After the emperor died, he was ordered released. But Seishou said that, having been imprisoned by imperial order, he could only be pardoned by someone with the same authority. The stubborn man stuck to his principles and sat in his unlocked jail cell for close on the next fifty years.

"I would respectfully ask that you not refer to me in such a condescending manner."

"You don't like?"

"Of course not."

Itan gave the peeved Seishou an envious look. "Better than mine. I'm Foolhardy."

There could be no greater honor than the emperor bestowing a name of his own choosing upon one of his subjects, though they could hardly be pleased when that name was Foolhardy or Reckless or Whimsy. As far as that went, his nickname for the Saiho, Rokuta, was simply "Fool," because a kirin was "halfway between a horse and a deer."

The emperor was awfully pleased with the pun, though it was hardly a joke anybody else was bound to laugh at.

"Sakes alive," Chototsu said with a pained expression of his own. "We've become naught but a laughing stock."

"You got that right."

This time the three turned as one to the owner of those impulsive interjections. "The Taiho is just as guilty as he is!"

The cold glare of their eyes fell upon him. Rokuta shrugged. "Hey, I'm not the one with the gambling habit."

"May I ask, then, what you were up to during your absences from the court?"

Pressed by Shukou, Rokuta forced a smile to his face. "Oh, I was out and about observing the, um, recovery of the countryside."

"And how might you summarize the results of those observations?"

"Well—ah—"

"Little backbiting traitor."

Rokuta looked at his liege. "For starters, *you're* the one living the life of a libertine. And now it is rubbing off on me! You're right, not funny."

"Says the kid playing hooky."

"There's playing hooky and then there's dropping out and skipping town!"

"Six of one, a half dozen of the other."

"How little the six are and how big the half-dozen are makes a big difference where I come from!"

Shukou slammed his fist down on the table. "Could you two take this seriously, please?"

Shouryuu held up his hand. "Sorry. After this, I will be sure to tend to government affairs. Happy?"

"Can we take that as a statement of sincere intent?"

"There's the stink of suspicious goings-on in the west. It'd be a good idea in any case to lay low and keep the throne warm for a while."

The four all looked at Shouryuu. "The west—"

Shouryuu smiled. "Gen Province. Better get ready because here she comes."

Itan could help glancing behind him. He'd been sure to clear out the premises when he'd called this assembly together and again confirmed that there was no one else there.

“That is—” By *she,* the emperor meant Gen Province.

“Heard on the street. Gen Province has been feeling its oats of late. Soldiers from Gen are showing up in the city several times a month, spending like drunken sailors in the brothels. They arrive empty-handed and leave loaded down with baggage.”

“Something’s being stockpiled in Kankyuu?”

“Not a problem if it’s food. But weapons—”

Shukou cocked his head to the side. “I can’t imagine them amassing the amount of weaponry required to arm a rebellion. If they were scouring the city for military supplies, the rumors would reach us sooner or later.”

Shouryuu smiled and turned to Seishou. “The Imperial Armory is in Kankyuu.”

Seishou’s eyes narrowed. Was the administrator of the armories supplying the black market? Emperor Kyou had stockpiled an excessive amount of military hardware. A fair amount had since been sold off in order to replenish the Imperial Treasury, though saturating the market and driving down prices in the process. As a result, the armories were still piled high.

“The Province Lord of Gen?” Shukou said.

Itan nodded. “The word is, fearing the disfavor of Emperor Kyou, and then fearing the retribution of his subjects after he fell, and now fearing getting sacked, he’s barricaded himself deep within his palace and won’t come out. They say he’s a bundle of nerves.”

“A cornered rat will bite the cat. With their backs against the wall, these holdovers are a real worry. To make matters worse, the chief cabinet secretary reportedly has a sharp mind and all of his wits about him. His name’s Atsuyu, son of the Province Lord, I believe.”

Itan blinked. “Your Highness is certainly well informed.”

“Just a few of the rumors going around the city. You ignore what the common man knows at your own peril.”

“But, of course,” said Itan. He sounded honestly impressed.

Shukou glanced at him and cleared his throat. “With all due respect, Your Highness—”

“What’s that?”

“There is no need for you to mingle with your subjects like an ordinary commoner and prowl about pretending to be a spy!”

Shouryuu rolled his eyes at the ceiling. Rokuta grinned at him and got to his feet.

“What’s up, Rokuta?”

On his way out the room, Rokuta glanced back over his shoulder. “Seeing as the conversation is turning in a direction that’s got nothing to do with me, I’m leaving.”

# Part Two

## Chapter 5

[2-1] **L**eaving the emperor to the care of Itan and the others, Rokuta departed by means of the balcony. The sun had set, casting the Sea of Clouds into darkness. The thin sliver of a crescent moon rose in the east.

"The smell of blood is in the air."

War loomed on the horizon. Considering the number of scheming ministers and province lords mustering their forces, it was a miracle a civil insurrection hadn't already broken out.

Rokuta strode through the courtyard, that rancid sense of foreboding buffeting him like a brisk breeze, his spirits dampened by his inborn aversion to war and the shedding of blood.

*Leave it to me,* Shouryuu had said. But that didn't make the conflict of arms any less odious. Soldiers would die in droves while innocent civilians were inexorably drawn into the maelstrom.

Rokuta came to one of the palace annexes and casually pushed open the door. It opened with a faint creak. The alcove for the gatekeeper was empty. Under normal circumstances, a guard would be posted there. The Imperial Palace was seriously understaffed, Emperor Kyou having executed so many of his retainers. Given the sparse number of new ministerial appointments, there was little of the expected hustle and bustle anywhere in the Imperial Palace.

He made his way through the front garden and entered the innermost shrine. Inside the building was a small courtyard. In the center of an island of white sand stood a silver-white tree. The branches—that appeared to have been cast from molten silver—hung low to the ground.

This was the literal tree of life.

Parents who wanted a child petitioned the tree. If Heaven acknowledged the petition, a fruit called a *ranka* sprouted from one of the branches. Ten months later, a child would "hatch" from that fruit. However, before that happened, the ranka could sometimes be swept away.

Rokuta had been swept away. So had Shouryuu, swallowed up by a freakish natural disaster called a *shoku*. When the currents of two worlds otherwise separate

from each other crossed paths, a ranka would find its way into the womb of a woman in another world. Born cloaked in a "shell" that resembled his "parents," such a child was called a *taika*.

He'd been swept away to another world across the sea, to the capital of Hourai. He had a father and mother, a grandfather and grandmother, brothers and sisters. It never would have occurred to him that he was a child who should not, by all rights, exist.

When Rokuta was but a child, their home burned down. Crawling to safety through the clouds of smoke, they found Kyoto awash in a sea of flames. They spent the night fleeing the conflagration. When the morning came, his grandparents and one of his sisters were dead.

They moved to the western outskirts of Kyoto to escape the ravages of the war. But they had nothing saved and nothing stored, and with the capital drawn inexorably into the maelstrom, their father could find no work. A brother died, then the youngest sister, and then Rokuta was abandoned in the mountains.

They had no other choice if the family was to survive.

Deliverance came from this world. Dying of thirst and hunger in the midst of that mountain, Rokuta barely managed to stay alive. He was saved because he was no ordinary living thing. He was a *kirin*.

Had Rokuta not been a kirin, he would have died in that wilderness, as had so many other children. In that era, in that place, an abandoned child was not at all unusual.

*In this wasteland of broken mountains.*

When the storms of war came, misfortune rained down on ordinary souls. Amidst the new signs of life, the rumors of war were again echoing through the land. The bitter irony stung his heart.

More devastated hills and valleys, rivers of blood, orphaned children condemned to poverty and death.

Before taking his place upon the throne, Shouryuu said he wanted to see what this kingdom was like. Looking down from the crest of a hill, there was nothing to see. Only twenty years had passed since then. Children grew to adults in that span of time.

Having no fixed lifespans, the emperor, the kirin, their ministers and retainers often lost track of time. But the years still rolled by in the world below.

Those children abandoned in the wilderness—where were they now and what would become of them? Misfortune would surely pour down on them again.

Rokuta gazed up at the heavens, at the sliver of the moon high above, as if gouged out of the firmament by a sharp claw.

"Kouya—"

Rokuta had stirred from sleep late one night to hear his parents discussing how to get rid of him. And so had another child awakened deep in the night to be delivered to his fate.

What happened next occurred here in this kingdom. Eighteen years ago, in none other than Gen Province.

# Chapter 6

[2-2] **R**okuta sat astride Rikaku's back. Rikaku was a youma and Rokuta's servant. Only a kirin could bring a youma to heel. Or so he'd always assumed.

Racing Rikaku through the sky like a whirlwind, Rokuta was roaming down the coast of Gen Province when he passed another person. More specifically, a child riding a youma.

He hardly had time even for surprise. The youma was a large winged wolf with a raptor's beak, probably a *tenken,* also called a "sky dog." A child was perched on its back. Because of their high closing speed, they crossed paths for only a split second. It truly was a chance encounter.

Rokuta ordered his youma, "Turn around! After them!"

"Taiho," Rikaku cautioned, "that is a youma."

Rokuta nodded. "Yeah, I know. All the more reason. A kirin's shirei is one thing, but why would a youma give a kid a ride? What we just saw doesn't make any sense."

Searching the sky above the sea, they caught up again with the kid astride the red-haired youma. He saw Rokuta coming after them and scrunched down in fear.

The youma barked out a blood-curdling scream. The kid wrapped his arm around the thick neck. "No, no. Don't do that," he urged the beast, calming it down.

He looked younger than Rokuta. He had a pale face and slight frame, and his black hair was streaked with blue. Were he a kirin, his hair would have been the customary gold.

"Hey," Rokuta called out. Seeing the kid flinch, he forced an amiable smile to his face. "Who are you?"

The kid shook his head. A cool breeze whipped off the surface of the ocean. His clothing consisted of little more than layers of rags.

"I'm Rokuta. I never expected to meet somebody like you here. This is definitely a first for me, especially in mid-air."

The kid answered with a small nod. Rokuta took it to mean this was a first for him too."

"Where are you headed? In a hurry to get somewhere?"

The only answer was another shake of his head.

Rokuta said with a casual grin, "Me, I was feeling in the mood for lunch. How about we go get something to eat?"

The kid's eyes opened wide. "Together?"

Rokuta laughed and nodded. He pointed down at the seashore. His initial impulse was to reach out to the kid, but a move like that might send him scurrying away.

"What do you say?"

The kid craned his head over and peered into the face of the youma. "Okay," he said.

They set down on the dunes. Setting out a repast of fruit and rice cakes, Rokuta asked, "That's a youma, right?"

He'd never heard of a youma being tamed like a dog. Everybody said it was impossible. The kid only bowed his head.

"It is?" Rokuta was amazed. "What aside from a youma or youjuu would be flying through the air? How did you tame it?"

"I don't know."

"He says he doesn't know," Rokuta muttered to himself. "Unbelievable."

"Is it really?"

"Definitely."

They sat there on the dune and talked. Before them was the Black Sea. Across the sea, the peaks of the Kongou Mountains, surrounding the center of the world, rose up like an enormous wall.

*A child woke up in the middle of the night*. The next day he was abandoned in the mountains. That's what they talked about.

"I see," Rokuta said, all the more taken aback by this chance encounter. Two children, worlds apart, had been abandoned by parents impoverished by the ravages of war. And here, against all odds, they happened to meet.

"So the townspeople all ganged up to get rid of you. That's rough."

"I suppose so."

"What's your name?"

"I don't know," the kid said. "I must have had one once but I can't remember."

"And so you were washed ashore into a youma's nest."

"I wasn't washed ashore. The big guy carried me there."

"The big guy?"

The kid glanced at the youma behind him. The youma was watching over the child with a protective attentiveness.

"The big guy was bringing food back to the nest. I probably got carried along for the ride."

"Or you were the food. But it raised you?"

"Yes."

An amazing story—a youma looking after a human child—one he'd never heard of before.

"How about you? Does that kind of thing happen often?"

Rokuta addressed the question to Rikaku, who was warily watching the youma. No answer was forthcoming. Even in the face of a direct order, shirei would never divulge any knowledge of themselves or their kind. They truly were a species apart.

Rokuta didn't pursue the matter. He turned back to the kid. "Good thing you didn't end up dead. So you've been living in a youma's nest ever since?"

"I go out now and then to get something to eat."

"The big guy doesn't eat humans?" Rokuta asked, though he already knew the answer. He wasn't sitting that close to the youma but sensed the thick smell of blood about it. Human blood.

"Of course he does. He'd go hungry otherwise."

Rokuta cleared his throat and said, "Do you?"

The kid hung his head. "I don't. Not people or animals. The big guy tells me to, but I don't listen." He looked at Rokuta with beseeching eyes. "Attack people or animals and they get all panicky. The big guy does his best to stay out of their way. They all gang up together and do terrible things, or turn tail and run in the opposite direction."

"That's people for you," Rokuta said with a forced smile and a reassuring pat on the boy's shoulders. "I'm impressed. You certainly can't go around eating people. Best you avoid attacking or getting attacked."

"Sure. Where are you from, Rokuta? From this side of the sea?"

"That's right," Rokuta said with a nod.

The kid leaned forward. "Do you know anything about Hourai?"

"Eh?" Rokuta looked into his eyes. "And by Hourai you mean—"

"The kingdom across the eastern sea. People there never fight or do mean things to each other. That's where my father is. And maybe my mom too. I've been searching for them since forever."

Tears welled up in his eyes. Rokuta felt a pang in his heart. The boy's father was probably dead. Rather than be the bearer of such bad news, his mother instead made up a story about him sailing off to Hourai. A not uncommon tale. His mother had abandoned him and yet he continued to believe her, kept on looking for this fantasy kingdom.

"Um, Hourai doesn't border this sea."

The kid's eyes widened with surprise. "It doesn't? Not at its eastern shores? Aren't these the eastern shores of the sea?"

"This is the Black Sea. Hourai borders the ocean further to the east, the Kyokai. But Hourai is so far away that no matter how far you sailed, you would never reach it."

There was no getting *there* from *here*. It was said that only mountain wizards and youma could make the passage. Ordinary humans couldn't, except as an unborn *ranka*.

"Oh—I see—" His shoulders fell.

Searching for his parents had been a search for Hourai. Hearing that Hourai was in the east, he came here to the shores of the Black Sea. But having that youma in tow made him a menace wherever he went. Rokuta could easily imagine the reaction of any town they got close to, the direct consequence of being in the company of a man-eating youma. The kid thought that if he could only convince them that this youma was his guardian and wouldn't attack them, they'd welcome him with open arms.

"I'm sorry."

It was hardly Rokuta's fault but at that moment the kid looked so despondent he couldn't help feeling an apology was in order.

The kid sighed several times. *Come,* he chirped. The youma hopped down from its perch on a nearby boulder and sidled up to him. He pressed his face against the downy feathers, feathers stained with human blood.

"Ah." Rokuta finally took note of what had been actually going on. The kid hadn't been talking that much at all. Now that he thought about it, about half of everything he said was closer to bird calls. Kirin and mountain wizards could sense the meaning in the sounds made by youma and animals, which made them sound to their ears like human conversation.

The youma nuzzled the child's neck with its beak and chirped softly. Rokuta didn't hear the sound as words but understood the meaning: *Let's be on our way.*

The kid looked up and dejectedly got to his feet. "We have to go."

"Will you be around these parts again?"

"I don't know. If Hourai isn't here, there wouldn't be much of a point."

Rokuta started to answer but refrained.

"If I go to a town, the people there will do bad things to the big guy."

"Probably."

And they didn't aim only at the youma. The kid's legs, jutting out of his ragged leggings, bore scars left by arrows.

"You don't want to live in a town?"

He said, with a dubious glance over his shoulder, "Together with the big guy?"

"Well, not the big guy too."

"Then thanks, but no thanks."

Rokuta nodded. "If you change your mind—if you and the big guy go your separate ways—be sure to come to Kankyuu."

*Kankyuu,* the kid repeated to himself.

“Look me up. But—you don’t have a name.”

“No.”

“Why don’t you pick one for yourself?”

“I don’t know any names.”

“Mind if I do?”

The kid’s face shone. “Please.”

Rokuta thought it over, shaking his head several times in a row. Then he clapped his hands and wrote two characters in the sand: *Kou* and *ya*.

“How about Kouya?”

“What does it mean?”

“In the heart of the night.”

“Yes,” Kouya said with a pleased look, and happily repeated his new name several more times.

*We’ll probably never meet again,* Rokuta thought as he waved goodbye to the departing Kouya. But he said, “Kouya, if you ever find yourself in a fix, come to Kankyuu. I work in Gen’ei Palace. Just ask for Rokuta.”

Astride the youma, the kid nodded as they soared into the distance.

“There will come a day, Kouya! Count on it!”

# Chapter 7

[2-3] **B**y the time Rokuta got back to the palace, Itan and the rest had left. Shouryuu was seated at his desk.

"Done with all the blood and guts talk?"

"For the time being," Shouryuu said, his eyes focused on the work laid on in front of him.

Looking to see what had so captured his attention, Rokuta saw on the desk a sheet of paper and a volume of *Divine Chronicles of the Great Colonnade*. "So Shukou gave you homework too. Makes me wonder who's really in charge around here."

"Exactly." Shouryuu folded his arms as if deep in thought.

Rokuta leaned closer and examined the rough handwriting: *The emperor shall rule his kingdom with money*. "Hey, what's this, old man?"

*The emperor shall rule his kingdom with mercy,* was how the well-known phrase went.

"You don't want to give Shukou more reasons to get ticked off. He takes these things to heart, you know. He's not simply hardheaded like Itan and Seishou. He's like an elephant in that regard. He'll be cracking wise for the next century or two, a smile on his face the whole time."

"It's all the same to me. If you don't care what people say about you, all the wisecracking in the world is so much water off a duck's back."

"Now you've got me feeling sorry for him."

"I'd resolved to transcribe the whole thing right. But this is a bit of a mess."

"Now and then I am forced to conclude that you are a complete fool."

"Only now and then?"

"Yeah. The rest of the time I only think you're a big idiot."

"Little twerp."

Rokuta dodged the fist that came flying at him. He vaulted nimbly onto the big desk in the middle of the room and sat cross-legged with his back to Shouryuu.

"So, is a civil war going to break out?"

"Looks like it."

"A lot of people will die."

"Kingdoms are built from the blood wrung out of the common people. The fact of the matter is, they'd all be better off without kingdoms and the like." Shouryuu added, a smirk in his voice, "But the powers that be are clever enough to make sure they never figure that out."

“The last thing I’d expect an emperor to say.”

“It’s the truth. Life for the people goes on without an emperor, but an emperor can’t go on without his subjects. The emperor eats the food they harvest by the sweat of their brows, no different than a poacher or a thief. In exchange, he does those things they cannot do as individuals.”

“Probably.”

“An emperor exists by killing and exploiting his subjects. So he should keep the killing and exploitation to a bare minimum and do it as nicely as possible. Keep the numbers low enough and he may even deserve to call himself an enlightened despot. Though the numbers will never reach zero.”

Rokuta didn’t answer.

“There are five surviving province lords. Three were assassinated by Emperor Kyou, their provinces now under the thumb of their ministerial bureaucracies. Sei Province has the only province lord worth his salt.” Shouryuu raised his voice. “Hey, Rokuta, tell the province lord of Sei I’d like to borrow his army.”

“What’s mine is yours. It’s not like I’ll be leading them into battle anytime soon.”

The Saiho also governed the capital province. In the case of En, that was Sei Province. It had land and people and an army, but the emperor commanded the army and the land was divvied up and enfeoffed to the ministers as compensation for services rendered.

Shouryuu said, “You find war that frightening?” When Rokuta glanced over his shoulder at him, he grinned and said, “Naw, it certainly won’t be as bad as the fighting up till now. If you’re scared, run away and hide.”

“That’s not it. When it comes to the people, war is an unmitigated disaster. That’s what I can’t stand. Because I embody the voice of the people, you see.”

Shouryuu chuckled. “Because kirin are cowards.”

“Because kirin are creatures of benevolence and mercy.”

“Try too hard to kill no one and instead of sacrificing hundreds now, you’ll end up slaughtering tens of thousands later.”

Rokuta gave Shouryuu another look. “Don’t you go saying things like that to me,” he said, jabbing his finger at him.

“Don’t take it so personally. If I could settle this thing with a hundred casualties, I’d crow about it.”

“A hundred or a hundred thousand?”

Shouryuu answered Rokuta’s glare with a smile. “Do you think there are a hundred thousand fighting men left in En?”

Rokuta jumped down from the desk. “So you’ll be content to be remembered as the Prince of Destruction.”

With that, he headed for the door. Behind him Shouryuu called out, “Like I told you before, leave everything to me.”

When Rokuta turned to respond, Shouryuu had already returned to his desk. Shouryuu said, showing him nothing but his broad shoulders, “Close your eyes and stop your ears. If this is the only road left to us, then down it we will go.”

Rokuta stared at Shouryuu’s back for a minute before spinning on his heels. “I wouldn’t know. I left it all up to you.”

# Chapter 8

[2-4] **A** chastened Rokuta attended the next Privy Council meeting. He sat quietly behind Shouryuu, stifling yawns as he listened to the Rikkan's official report to the emperor. The meeting finally adjourned, and he was making a beeline for the Outer Palace when somebody called out to him.

Rokuta turned to find a court official kneeling there. "I beg your pardon, sir, but an audience has been requested with you."

"With me? From a minister?"

"No. A request came to the provincial government office requesting a meeting with a person identified by your name. This person was said to be working in the palace, though suspiciously enough, nobody else by that name fits the description except you. We thought it should be brought to your attention."

Rokuta blinked in surprise and stepped forward. "Who exactly requested the meeting?"

"He said you would recognize him as Kouya."

*Unbelievable,* Rokuta said to himself. He never thought they'd see each other again. To be honest, he wasn't so sure the kid would survive that long.

"The provincial government office, you said?"

"We had him wait at the Pheasant Gate."

"I'll take care of it right away. Treat him with all due respect, okay?"

"Yes."

Observing the official bow and then Rokuta whirl about and hurried the other way, Shouryuu stopped and cocked his head to the side and puzzled aloud. "What's up? You know somebody in the world below?"

"Unlike you, Shouryuu, I have more than a few friends."

"A friend?"

"That's right. I'll be going out for a while."

"And this afternoon's policy meetings?"

Rokuta coughed and shifted his stance. "Whether this is some calamitous portend or chickens coming home to roost, I seem to have been taken ill quite unexpectedly. I'd like to beg off for today."

Shouryuu said with a smile, "That sounds serious. We'll call in the *Koi*."

The Koi was the kirin's attending physician.

"I appreciate the thought but it is hardly that serious. Tell him I've retired to my room for a nap."

“Ekishin,” Seishou said to the court official standing next to him. “You go with.”

“That’s okay, Seishou. No need to get all excited. This really is about a friend.”

Rokuta hurried off. With a glance, Seishou urged Ekishin to follow him. Ekishin bowed and took off in pursuit.

The Pheasant Gate was located at the base of Mt. Kankyuu. The Palace and Imperial Court at the summit were known as the “Swallow Court.” High court officials had their homes and offices in the Inner Court, and lower-ranked bureaucrats were housed in the Outer Court, halfway up the mountain. Further down was the entranceway to Mt. Kankyuu.

That’s where the provincial government offices were located. People were free to come and go between the High Bluff Gate, the entranceway to the Imperial Palace, and the Pheasant Gate at the back of the provincial offices, also called the Middle Gate.

Rokuta ran down to the Pheasant Gate. Ryou’un Mountain literally referred to a skyscraping mountain that reached beyond the clouds. But the actual path was enchanted, making the distance traveled only a fraction of its true length. Nevertheless, Rokuta had to make his way through the massive palace and change out of his ceremonial dress, so it took longer than he liked.

Quite out of breath, he arrived at the building inside the Pheasant Gate reserved for guests of honor. As he’d been informed, somebody was waiting for him there.

His guest was sitting upright in a chair, taking in the courtyard. They had last met eighteen years before. The boy Rokuta knew at the time should now be a man in the prime of life. But the figure before him was still in his youth, fifteen or sixteen, still sporting a head of blue-tinged hair.

Rokuta paused at the entranceway. After a moment’s hesitation, he called out, “Kouya?”

The young man smiled as he came to his feet. “Rokuta.” He knelt and said, “I had hoped to meet you again, Taiho. It has been a long time.”

He bowed deeply. So he knew who Rokuta was and what position he occupied.

“It’s been eighteen years, hasn’t it? At the time, I didn’t know who the Taiho was. Forgive my impertinence.”

He conducted himself as a gentleman and spoke human language, not in bird-like chirps.

“But you—” Rokuta struggled to draw a connection between the child he’d encountered in Gen Province and the young man in front of him. He raised his head and smiled again.

“You’re a mischievous one. It would have helped if you’d said from the start you were the Saiho. I found out afterwards that the man with the golden hair was the Taiho. I was certainly surprised.”

“Ah. Well, there is that.”

The people in this kingdom sported all manner of hair colors, but not gold. That was a particular mark of the kirin.

“To think the Taiho gave me my name! Though at the time, I probably wouldn’t have understood the significance of the title.”

“So what are you up to these days?”

“A good-hearted man took me in and taught me human speech. I serve him in his capacity as a provincial civil servant.”

“So you’re in the Registry of Wizards. Hence your age.”

Kouya grinned. “That’s right. I accompanied him to Kankyuu. Once here, I really wanted to see you. I figured if I sought an audience with the Taiho, I wouldn’t get through the front door. So I asked for you by name. I hope that wasn’t too forward of me.”

“Not at all!”

“I was worried you’d forgotten all about me.”

Rokuta shook his head. The reunion was a most unexpected and pleasant surprise. “I hadn’t forgotten. It really is good seeing you after all this time.”

“Good to know,” Kouya said with a smile.

“Go ahead. Stand up. Seeing you like that somehow feels wrong.”

“Greatly appreciated.” He bowed and stood up. Then leaning forward, he said, “Since I met you for the first time as Rokuta, may I continue to address you as such?”

“Sure. That’d be fine.”

Kouya walked up next to Rokuta and looked down at him with a friendly if pained expression. “I’d wanted to visit ever since then but Kankyuu was such a long way away for me.”

“I suppose so. Sorry about that.”

“I couldn’t very well go where there were a lot of people with *him*. But without going to a town or city and asking the way, I couldn’t figure out where Kankyuu was.”

“Him? Oh, you mean the big guy?”

Kouya nodded.

“So how’s the big guy doing these days?”

“Oh, he’s doing fine,” Kouya said, a mischievous smile rising to his lips, more a look he would share with a fellow conspirator. “The big guy and I work together as bodyguards. Like him over there.”

He cast a glance at Ekishin, hovering nearby as if trying to fade into the woodwork.

“Yeah, it seems I’m stuck with him for the time being.”

“Makes sense, you being so high and mighty and all.”

“Oh, stop it.”

Kouya chuckled. He crouched down so the two of them were eye-to-eye. “So, are you okay with getting out of here?”

“I already told them I was taking the rest of the day off.”

“Good. The big guy was looking forward to seeing you too.”

“Is he nearby?”

“The outskirts of Kankyuu. Don’t worry. He follows my lead.” Kouya added furtively, “The big guy is very obedient in that regard.”

“The big guy is? That is impressive.”

Rokuta cocked his head to the side, thinking back to that time. *Don’t go eating people,* he’d admonished. He was honestly taken aback. A youma that had reared a human, that in turn obeyed what the human said. He wouldn’t have believed it otherwise.

“Shall we go? I hope you’re more familiar with Kankyuu than I am. All I know is the road I took coming here.”

Rokuta nodded. “Leave it to me. I know this city like the back of my hand. I’ll show you the way.”

# Chapter 9

[2-5] **T**hough Kankyuu was the capital of the kingdom, its streets were anything but broad and spacious. This was generally true of cities in En. Rokuta seemed to recall that the streets of Kyoto were much wider.

Inside the Pheasant Gate, he wrapped a shawl around his head. He could hardly escape notice without hiding his hair. For whatever reason, a kirin's mane wouldn't take a dye, so he had to employ other means.

He dressed in ordinary street clothes and without any ado accompanied Kouya onto the streets of Kankyuu, with Ekishin shadowing their every move.

Ekishin had previously been a military officer under Seishou's command. When Seishou was imprisoned, many of his subordinates submitted their resignations and resolved to confine themselves to their quarters until Seishou was released from jail.

Emperor Kyou rejected most of the resignations, transferred a good portion of them to the civil service, and executed any who refused. Still, at the end of the day, a fair number managed to survive. They served in the Palace Guard under Daiboku Seishou.

Having been personally picked by Seishou to start with, they were loyal to him, schooled themselves vigorously in the martial arts, and never let down their guard. Pulling the wool over his eyes being all but impossible, Kouya and Rokuta gave up trying to lose him.

Ekishin kept his eyes peeled. The kirin was a kingdom's sole divine beast. No matter what else, no harm could be allowed to come to him. If his identity was revealed, his own subjects might crush him to death with their desperate, earnest appeals. Fortunately, with his hair hidden, nobody noticed who he was.

The city of Kankyuu fanned out from the base of Ryou'un Mountain. The defensive walls surrounding the city could be accessed through eleven gates. Through one of them, broad green slopes came into view. And not far off, fields and farms. The countryside around Kankyuu was green and bountiful.

"Here we go," Kouya said with a smile.

They crossed a small hill. Ekishin insisted they not leave the city proper, but Rokuta ignored him and followed Kouya. Pushing into a forest showing twenty years of growth, Kouya beckoned with a chirping call.

"You can still do that?" Rokuta said, not a little impressed.

Soon enough, "*Here,*" came a cry from the middle of the forest.

"The big guy must have put on a few years."

“Yes. But not as fast as people.”

“So they live a lot longer.”

“I expect so.”

“Huh.”

Shirei didn’t have a lifespan. They had high intelligence and could communicate using human language. Rokuta had assumed that was because of their covenant with the kirin. Perhaps they possessed some of those skills from the start.

Walking toward the sound of the voice, they came to a small clearing. The red beast was waiting there.

“A tenken!” Ekishin shouted, going into a crouch and reaching for his sword.

“He’s okay,” Rokuta hurriedly assured him.

“But Taiho, that is—”

“Definitely a youma. But he’s no monster. He does as Kouya says.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“It is indeed strange. Which makes the truth all the more surprising.”

Though Ekishin was hardly convinced by Rokuta’s reassurances, he at least relaxed his stance. He’d never heard of a human training a youma. This one had the body of a large red wolf, blue wings, a yellow tail, and a black beak, clearly identifying it as a tenken.

Youjuu could be broken like horses, something that Ekishin had been told was impossible with youma.

“Like I said, it’s okay.” Rokuta grinned. “Hey, look at all the people around.”

Ekishin looked again. Several people were standing next to the youma. He’d been so focused on the youma he hadn’t noticed.

“Ah, yes,” said Ekishin, finally taking his hand off the hilt of the sword.

Rokuta smiled with relief and turned his attention back to Kouya. “The big guy hasn’t changed at all.”

“No, he hasn’t,” Kouya walked up to the youma. “Hey, it’s Rokuta. Do you remember him?” He next addressed the men standing next to the youma. “You’ve got her?”

The men bowed their heads. They must be Kouya’s servants, hardly unexpected even for a low-ranked bureaucrat. Rokuta looked at them too. One in their midst was holding a baby. He passed it to Kouya.

Rokuta gaped at him. “You’ve got a child?”

Kouya smiled at the child, sleeping peacefully in his arms. “No. Not my child. One we had to find. Because I was meeting you.”

He flashed Rokuta a knowing grin and held the child up to the youma. The youma opened its beak, revealing rows of razor-sharp fangs. Before the thunderstruck Rokuta could call out, Kouya placed the child in the youma’s beak.

“Kouya!”

“Don’t worry.” Kouya smiled over his shoulder. “This is how he carries around living things.”

Rokuta caught his breath. “Oh. Okay, then.”

“However,” continued the still smiling Kouya, “if you or your bodyguards do the wrong thing, he’ll swallow her whole.”

“What?”

“Tell your shirei to stand down. Try anything funny, and ROKUTA will tear her head off.”

In a flash, Ekishin positioned himself in front of the stunned Rokuta.

*ROKUTA,* Rokuta repeated to himself.

“I gave the big guy a name too. ROKUTA. At the time, I wasn’t aware of the impropriety.”

“Kouya—”

“If you value the life of this child, then come with me. You do, don’t you? Kirin are creatures of mercy, are they not? The smell of blood alone makes them sick.”

“Kouya, you—”

Kouya said to Ekishin, “I’d like you to accompany us. Don’t resist. That’s what I’m sure Rokuta wants you to do too.”

“Son of a bitch!”

Ekishin drew his sword. This wasn’t the kind of situation a kirin could get out of by fighting back. But he wasn’t about to let Rokuta get kidnapped right in front of his eyes. Even if that meant staining him with blood, even if that meant sacrificing the child, his duty was to defend the irreplaceable Saiho at all costs.

“No, Ekishin!” Rokuta shouted. “Stop!”

But Ekishin grabbed him by the arm and started to drag him to safety. Turning to spot an escape route, he froze in his tracks. A massive shadow blocked the way out. He hadn’t taken note of the creature sneaking up behind them. He would have heard human footsteps. This was no human.

A red torso, blue wings, and a black beak.

“Birds of a feather will flock together,” Kouya said with a sly smile. “You didn’t know that youma could call on reinforcements, did you?”

Ekishin swung the sword. The youma’s beak jabbed forward faster, having targeted Ekishin’s throat from the start.

“Ekishin!”

Rokuta’s shout turned into a scream. The youma’s beak punctured Ekishin’s neck, tearing through muscle and bone. Blood and flesh flew through the air. At that moment, a pair of arms wrapped around Rokuta from behind and yanked him out from danger.

“No, Taiho.”

A woman’s voice. The arms embracing him were covered in white scales. White wings enfolded him, covering his face. Rokuta’s shirei.

“Kouya!”

But the shroud of wings couldn’t shut out Ekishin’s voiceless screams. The stench of blood and the gruesome noises spelled out exactly what was happening—the thud of a body falling to the ground, Ekishin breathing his last, one animal devouring another, muffled only by the sudden wail of a child.

“Kouya—why—?”

“I need you to come with me to Gen Province.”

*Gen,* Rokuta muttered to himself.

“If you prize the life of that child, tell your shirei to behave themselves. No harm should come to you. Simply come with me and grant my lord an audience.”

“Your lord—” Hadn’t Shouryuu mentioned something about Gen Province?

“The Chief Rikkan Secretary of Gen Province.”

“Atsuyu, you mean.”

Rokuta pushed aside the wings covering his face. Kouya stood next to the youma, a smile still on his face.

“So you know the secretary?”

“What is going on in Gen?”

Kouya didn’t answer the question, only urged on the rest of the men there in an expressionless voice.

“Taiho—” inquired the voice behind him.

Rokuta shook his head. No, Yokuhi. Don’t so much as lift a finger.”

“But—”

“Let me go.”

The white arms gently released him from their embrace. Rokuta turned to the worried *nyokai.* “Yokuhi, you can leave.”

A woman covered with scales, sporting white wings and the legs of an eagle. She returned his look with a puzzled one of her own. With a sigh and a flick of her serpent’s tail she disappeared, slipping back into Rokuta’s own shadow.

Having confirmed that she was gone, Rokuta squarely faced Kouya, who only grinned back at him.

“As I expected all along, Taiho. Your innate sense of benevolence rises to the fore.”

# Part Three

## Chapter 10

[3-1] **A**round the time Rokuta gave Kouya his name, he was living in the Kongou Mountains.

The Kongou Mountains enclosed the Yellow Sea in the center of the world, the palisades formed by their peaks jutting through the Sea of Clouds. Youma nested in narrow caves that dotted the cliffs of the Kongou Mountains. Linked together by a vast network of tunnels, the caves perhaps continued all the way to the Yellow Sea.

Kouya sat in the foul-smelling nest and gazed at the youma. “I am Kouya. From now on, that’s what you will call me. If you don’t, I’ll forget who I am.”

*Understood,* the youma cooed in return.

“So, does the big guy want a name too?”

The youma only tilted his head forward.

“Then it’s ROKUTA. That way, I won’t forget who the human Rokuta is either.”

Rokuta was the first person he’d met who was not his enemy, who didn’t hunt him or the youma, who didn’t run away, but sat down beside him and talked to him and gave him a name.

Kouya hugged his arms around the youma’s neck. “You should talk more too, like the human Rokuta.”

He was now old enough to understand what the word *loneliness* meant. There were many cities in the lands across the sea, and many people in those cities. People the same size as Kouya, people bigger than him, holding hands, carrying their children in their arms—

These were scenes Kouya enjoyed seeing, though at the same time they were painful to watch. Observing the parents and children, the kids running around everywhere, was so heart wrenching he couldn’t stand it.

And yet no sooner had he left but he wished with all his heart to see them again.

Kouya’s guardian youma never brought along any of his own kind. Youma they encountered in their travels were invariably itching for a fight. It was probably in their nature. So daily life for Kouya consisted of just the two of them.

If he sought out human companionship in the cities, the youma would attack the humans. The situation would soon blow out of control, and before long they'd be attacking Kouya too with swords and spears.

He begged the youma not to, but when a youma got hungry its appetite ruled all. And even when it didn't attack, people who saw Kouya and the youma would scream and flee for their lives, or turn and attack with any weapons they had on hand.

Kouya looked the youma in the eye and repeated "ROKUTA" over and over. "If you stopped attacking people, then we could go to Kankyuu together."

*Little guy,* the youma cooed.

"No. I'm Kouya. Kouya."

*Little guy,* the youma said again, in a voice that said he wanted to go out and Kouya to come with.

"If you don't call me by my name, I'm bound to forget it again, the same way I forgot my real name."

His mother had certainly addressed him by his name as she walked along, his hand in hers. But he couldn't remember it now.

"Call me Kouya."

The children playing in the streets, the parents shouting at them, the arms lifting them up, the slap of a disciplining hand—Kouya envied all of it. The only hands he remembered was that of his mother abandoning him in the mountains, the calloused hand of the man leading him to the cliffs overlooking the ocean.

Why was there no warm hand like that in his life? Why were people so kind to other children and yet drove him away and did such awful things?

There was a kingdom called Hourai across the sea. If could make his way there, nobody would chase him away. A warm hand would surely find his. If he looked long enough, somewhere there must be a city that welcomed him with open arms.

"Rokuta."

Rokuta listened to what he had to say, gave him food to eat, and patted him on the back. He'd ask Kouya to come with him. There'd be no end to the things they could talk about. Rokuta would always call him by his name. They could play together all day long like the children in the cities.

"Yeah, I should have gone with Rokuta."

Except this youma was the first living thing that hadn't tried to kill him. Kouya threw his arms around the youma's neck and buried his face in the red feathers.

"I'd be better if we both could."

Kouya again reminded the youma, "You can't go on attacking people."

When hungry, the youma would kill and eat the first animal he saw. So Kouya learned how to hunt game for him. When he was full, the youma listened to what Kouya said.

But even when the youma stopped attacking people, people still despised them. Get anywhere near a city and the arrows would rain down. And though he had no reason to keep visiting the opposite shore, Kouya couldn't bring himself to stop going there.

That longing for human companionship grew as he grew older. But there was no place where Kouya could mingle with ordinary people. The youma still didn't call Kouya by his name. All he could do was talk out loud to himself.

At times, Kouya couldn't help wondering if he'd only dreamed of meeting Rokuta. Rokuta hadn't been afraid of him or the youma. He'd talked to him like a true friend. Thinking back on it now, their meeting seemed so unbelievable. So he made sure to call himself Kouya and the youma ROKUTA.

No matter how hungry Kouya was, the youma got first dibs on the food. No matter his aches and pains, he always made sure to go hunting for him. Following Rokuta's admonition to not eat people somehow sustained the connection between them.

Kouya could dream that somewhere there was a place he could call his own, where simply fewer people screamed at them and fewer arrows were shot at them. He considered splitting up with the youma and searching for Kankyuu on his own, but the youma called him *little guy* with such affection that the impulse withered inside him.

Kouya was a youma's child, after all. He couldn't very well associate with humans.

He was ready to abandon the idea when he met Atsuyu, on the same shores of the Black Sea in Gen Province where he'd previously met Rokuta.

Kouya rode to the land astride the youma as he usually did. There he killed small game with rocks. A rabbit or two wouldn't fill a youma's stomach. Kouya left the youma to finish that meal while he hunted bigger prey. A recent wound from an arrow still hurt, so badly at times that he couldn't sleep. But he had to make sure the youma was fed.

Arrows streaked down out of the sky.

Kouya yelped and ran for the cover of the woods. He'd been shot at too many times to remember, and bore too many scars from the arrowheads to count. A wound worth complaining about now would set at naught everything he'd learned.

He tumbled into the trees and buried himself in the undergrowth.

"Boy, come out." The voice rang out loud and clear. As Kouya held his breath, the man went on, "Wasn't it you were riding that youma through the sky?"

Kouya had a hard time comprehending human speech. Strangely enough, he understood everything the man said. He spoke in neither fear nor anger. That piqued Kouya's curiosity. He poked his head out from the dense thicket.

Several soldiers were on the crest of the slope rising up from the woods. Most were kneeling, bows at the ready. In the center of the line, a step in front of the others, stood a man with his arms folded.

"Are you going to come out?" The man scanned his surroundings and said to the soldiers, "Stand down."

"But—" they protested. The man waved his hand and they lowered their bows.

Kouya watched them set aside their weapons and dared to scoot another few feet forward. The smiling man's eyes met his. Except for a patch of white over his right brow, he had a head of hair as red as the youma's. Kouya's wariness eased. He rose to his knees.

"Come on," the man reassured him. "You'll be okay."

Kouya slowly emerged from the thicket. He wanted to see what it was like being around people who weren't intent on making him the prey.

The man leaned over and stretched out his hand. "Nobody's going to harm you."

All the more drawn to him, Kouya was about to step away from the cover of the woods when a howl stopped him in his tracks: *Stop*.

With a rustle of feathers, the youma plummeted like a stone and landed on the ground in front of him. With a menacing roar at the soldiers on the hill, he crouched down and implored Kouya to climb onto his back.

The soldiers who'd set aside their bows hastily grabbed them again and drew a bead on the youma.

The man dropped to one knee. "Halt! Nobody shoot!"

The man looked at the youma and back at Kouya without the slightest sign of fear. More an expression of intense curiosity. "Fascinating. That youma is defending you." He reached toward Kouya again. "Come with me. You and the youma will be safe. Ah, but of course."

He turned to his perplexed retainers, some still bearing bows, others not. "Bring the deer." Then to Kouya, "You must be hunting too. But you can't very well kill a deer with a rock."

Kouya gaped at him and the deer carcass. The man surely intended to give it to them. He didn't understand why.

The man smiled at Kouya's consternation. "Do you eat venison too? Or is it for your companion?"

From a satchel at his waist he produced an item wrapped in green leaves. He peeled back the leaves to reveal a steamed rice and barley dumpling. Kouya remembered—like the rice cakes Rokuta had given him.

“Well?” the man cocked his head to the side. “You don’t like? Or would you prefer the meat?”

Kouya pushed out of the thicket and left the woods behind. The youma called for him to stop. Kouya didn’t listen. He faced the man and pointed at the deer, then back and forth from the youma to the deer.

The man nodded. He flashed a smile at the youma. “It’s for you. Go ahead and eat. Just don’t come after any of us.”

The youma answered with a suspicious coo, but stepped forward, seized the foot of the deer in its mouth and yanked it closer. Kouya watched the youma eat and cautiously turned back to the man, casting a hesitant glance at his retinue. They didn’t look like they were going to do anything bad to him.

Relieved, he sat down. The man reached out to him. Kouya shrank back a bit. He placed his hand on Kouya’s head, a big warm hand.

“What a strange child. You tamed a youma.”

The gentleness of his voice soothed Kouya’s senses. He pulled away. The touch of his hand vanished, replaced by a fierce feeling of longing.

“You don’t like being touched?”

*It’s not that*. Kouya shook his head.

“That’s okay. I won’t do anything you don’t like. Who’s child are you? I’d heard stories of a sprite about these parts keeping company with a *tenken*. Who’d believe it was a real human child?”

Kouya only stared at the man’s smiling face.

“Do you have a name? Where do you live?”

“Kouya.”

Being able to answer the question struck a chord in his heart. He had a name and here was a place where that name mattered. He’d dreamed of this scene for so long.

“Kouya, eh? Are you from around here, Kouya?”

Being called by his name was all the more delightful. Savoring the sensation, he looked back over his shoulder and pointed at the distant mountains soaring into the sky above the trees.

“The Kongou Mountains? Not the Yellow Sea. They say neither humans nor youma can enter and leave there at will.”

“The cliffs.”

The man grinned. “I see. You live on the cliffs. You understand what I’m saying, then. Bright kid.”

He patted Kouya on the head again. This time Kouya didn’t shrink away.

“How old are you? Twelve or so?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about your parents?”

Kouya shook his head.

“Another family with too many mouths to feed. A lot of kids got tossed into the Black Sea that way. You did a good job surviving this long.”

“Because of ROKUTA.” Kouya bobbed his head at the youma behind him.

“That is no less amazing. A child raised by a youma. His name is ROKUTA, eh?”

“Yeah.”

The man chuckled. He directed his attention to Kouya’s left arm. “What’s this? That wound is infected.”

When Kouya nodded, he took the arm and examined it more closely. “You’ve got the tip of an arrowhead embedded in the skin. You need to get that treated.”

The man got to his feet. Kouya already felt the sting of their inevitable separation. But he reached down. “Come with me. You really deserve a better life than this.”

“Come with you?”

“My name is Atsuyu. I live in Ganboku. Do you know where that is?”

Kouya shook his head.

“You can live with me. You’ll need clothes and an education. Not to mention medical attention.”

“ROKUTA too?” Kouya asked with great apprehension.

The man answered with a dazzling smile. “But of course.”

# Chapter 11

[3-2] **T**raveling on foot from Kankyuu to Ganboku, the capital city of Gen Province, took a month. With Kouya astride his youma and the rest of the company riding youjuu, the journey took less than half a day as the bird flew.

Rokuta rode with Kouya on the youma. The youma didn't reek of blood. Kouya had remained true to his word in that respect.

They flew on until the sun hung low in the sky. Responding to Rokuta's inquiries, Kouya described how he came to be in Atsuyu's employ.

"The secretary really did take me to Ganboku and taught me a lot. ROKUTA too. The big guy gets all the food he can eat, so he's fine with not attacking living things."

"So he hasn't killed anybody of late, then?"

"I wouldn't say that. Three years after taking me in, the secretary made me his bodyguard. Any man or beast that threatens him will have the big guy to contend with. It's our job, you see."

"Yeah, I see," Rokuta muttered to himself. He looked down as a large city came into view, bathed in the auburn light of the setting sun. It appeared bigger even than Kankyuu. "Is that Ganboku?"

"Yes. Prettier than Kankyuu, don't you think?"

That was the truth. Compared to Kankyuu, the streets of Ganboku were clean and well maintained. The surrounding fields and hills were markedly more verdant.

"Gen is a prosperous province," Rokuta observed.

Kouya turned and smiled. "It is, isn't it? Because of the secretary. He's a good person. The people of Ganboku hold him in great esteem." He eyed Rokuta's expression and added, "They say he's more trustworthy than the emperor."

Rokuta nodded. "I'm not surprised. Shouryuu is an idiot."

"You don't like the emperor?" said Kouya, clearly taken aback.

"I don't *dis*like him. But the fact remains that he's a fool."

"Why would you serve such a fool?"

"You've got to play with the cards you were dealt. How about you? Do you like Atsuyu?"

Kouya smiled. "Enough so that I'd be willing to kidnap you."

*But Atsuyu is a rebel.* Rokuta swallowed the retort. Getting kidnapped was evidence enough of Atsuyu's nature. And there was this stockpiling of weapons business. He was an insurrectionist. There were no two ways about it.

The kirin chose the emperor. That was an established fact. But that fact didn't mean that everybody accepted it. There was no end to the men and women who, throughout history, conspired to overthrow the emperor and place themselves on the throne.

Rokuta glanced behind him. The mountains of Sei Province faded into the mist and soon disappeared from view.

*What was Shouryuu going to do?* Rokuta had to hope he'd at least get a tad bit unnerved.

As in Kankyuu, the palace of the province lord of Gen was located at the summit of Ryou'un Mountain in Gen, called Mt. Ganboku. The riders set down on a ledge on the side of the mountain. From there Rokuta was escorted to the palace above the Sea of Clouds.

Among the assembled ministers in the room, one man in particular was waiting for him. A young man, from outward appearances, with dark auburn hair that might well be called red.

Rokuta had a man on his left and his right, each with a hold on his arms. Kouya and the youma followed up the rear. The youma still had the baby in its closed beak, from which her intermittent wails faintly echoed.

Atsuyu was the son of the Gen province lord. He was the chief secretary of the Rikkan and held the rank of viscount. He greeted them sitting in the chair reserved for the province lord.

"Good work, Kouya."

With those warm words of praise, Atsuyu stood and stepped down from the dais. Motioning for Rokuta to take his place, he knelt at the bottom of the steps, and bent his head deep to the floor.

"I humbly beg the Taiho's pardon."

Rokuta was being held captive. And yet the man who engineered his capture was bowing to him. It took a moment for Rokuta to center his thoughts.

"Atsuyu, eh?"

Atsuyu raised his head. "The province lord has retired for the evening. I apologize that a lowly minister such as myself should be left to make such a rude welcome. Knowing the cowardly and unjust means used to secure your presence here, there are no words sufficient to erase the insult. I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive us however you can."

"What are you planning? What's the endgame in all this?"

"The pressing matter before us is the Rokusui."

Rokuta furrowed his brows. "The Rokusui?"

“The big river that runs through Gen Province. Ever since Emperor Kyou breached the levees, the downriver counties suffer considerable damage after every hard rain. Fortunately, none of the communities in the flood plains have been destroyed. But there’s no guarantee that luck will hold. Large-scale flood control measures must be undertaken immediately. And yet the emperor has not approved the project. And neither has he granted the province lords the authority to initiate the work at the provincial level.”

Rokuta bit his lip. All those chickens were coming home to roost. Nobody should be surprised. But right now, Shouryuu and the rest of them were running around like a bunch of chickens recently relieved of their heads.

“The provinces should have become self-governing by now. I am well aware of the distrust and distaste for those who received their lordships from Emperor Kyou. But what is to be accomplished by stripping the province lords of their governing authority? The eyes of the Imperial Government cannot possibly reach into every nook and cranny of the kingdom. The rainy season will soon be upon us, while the Rokusui is left untamed.”

Still on his knees, Atsuyu looked up at Rokuta. “No heed was paid to our imperial reports, however many times we submitted them. These extreme measures were our last resort. I understand your anger, but at least you can now give your undivided attention to what we have to say.”

*You’re walking a fine line,* Rokuta had advised Shouryuu.

Imperial prerogatives alone couldn’t rule everything and everybody. That power had to be divvied up and entrusted to the province lords. No matter how many of them had been appointed by the previous emperor, if that authority wasn’t returned to them, the end result would be the emperor trying to rule all nine provinces by himself.

But it went in one ear and out the other. Shouryuu did whatever Shouryuu wanted. He was emperor and nobody could force him to act otherwise. His closest advisors simply became tools to his whims. Shukou and Itan constituted his innermost circle, but no matter what they said, they couldn’t make him do anything that didn’t strike his fancy.

Up until today, how much of Rokuta’s advice and admonitions had been ignored? The highest authority in the land, the emperor embodied the power of the state. When he set his mind on something, stopping him was well-nigh impossible, the same way that nobody could stop Emperor Kyou’s reign of terror.

Rokuta took a deep, long breath. “If I promise to deliver your reports to the emperor and plead for leniency, will you let me go?”

Atsuyu prostrated himself even lower to the floor. “Alas, I beg the Taiho’s pardon for having no choice but to inconvenience him a little while longer.”

“In other words, you’re keeping me hostage until the emperor starts taking this whole thing seriously.”

“I am sorry.”

“I understand.”

Atsuyu lifted his head, a startled expression on his face.

“Sure. You’re voicing a legitimate complaint. The way you’re doing it is quite beyond the pale, but perhaps there was no other way to get that imbecile to listen. So I’ll have to rely on your good offices for the time being.”

A look of sincere gratefulness on his face, Atsuyu deeply bowed once again. “I am indeed very grateful.”

“Sure,” Rokuta muttered to himself. He said to Kouya, standing behind Atsuyu, “So this is your lord, eh?”

Kouya only smiled.

# Chapter 12

[3-3] **R**okuta was taken deep within the palace, down to a room far below the summit. Somewhere around the base of Ryou'un Mountain, a door opened to reveal a woman standing on the other side of the iron bars.

"Taiho—"

"Ribi."

Ribi was the Imperial Viceroy sent to Gen Province. The viceroy served in a supervisory capacity to the province lord and while answering directly to the emperor. With the authority of the province lord and the prime minister frozen, the viceroy held the actual reins of power as the acting governor general.

With the exception of Sei Province, where Rokuta also served as the province lord, the viceroys and their staffs had been dispatched to the eight other provinces. Along with Itan, Shukou, Seishou and their staffs, they constituted the core of Shouryuu's support amongst his less loyal retainers.

The iron bars were raised. Kouya escorted Rokuta into the room.

Rokuta sighed. "So you've locked up Ribi too. Shouryuu's dogs have been shown to their kennels."

"The Taiho too."

"Well, we'll just have to put up with it. Anyway you look at it, Shouryuu is finally getting his comeuppance."

"You can't be serious!"

"When you take nothing serious, don't be surprised when the serious stuff takes a bite out of you."

Ribi said to Kouya, "You had better treat the Taiho with kid gloves."

Kouya grinned. "Of course. Wouldn't harm a hair on his head. But for now, Rokuta, you'll have to remain our prisoner."

"Yeah, I kinda figured that out."

"Come here."

Kouya motioned him to his side. Rokuta complied. Kouya took a spool of red thread and a white stone from his pocket. He pressed the white stone against Rokuta's forehead.

Rokuta flinched. "Stop that."

"Stand still. Remember the child."

Rokuta glanced at the youma squatting at the entrance to the dungeon. The youma opened its mouth in a taunting manner, revealing a small arm.

“I’m not resisting. I just don’t care for what you’re doing.”

“This is because of the horn in your forehead. It must be bound and sealed. Your shirei would otherwise take advantage of the slightest gap in our defenses.”

Rokuta was not, by nature, a human being. Exercising his will, he could return to his native form, that of a *kirin,* a Chinese unicorn. As a kirin, he sported a single horn in the middle of his forehead, said to be the wellspring of his powers. In human form, having that spot touched was quite unpleasant.

Binding the horn bound the kirin’s powers, particularly when it came to summoning and commanding his shirei.

“That is really disagreeable. Not simply unpleasant, you know. Rather repulsive.”

“Youma have a similar sort of hypersensitivity.”

Rokuta reluctantly raised his head. That spot was like an exposed raw nerve, so sensitive as to be painful to the touch. When the cool stone and thread pressed against it, he had to martial all his self-control to repress the innate reflex to fight or flight.

“That hurts. It’s making me sick to my stomach.”

“You’ll just have to put up with it.”

The thread was wrapped around the stone to hold it in place. Having secured it around Rokuta’s head, he breathed an incantation onto the knot. The pain suddenly subsided, replaced by a hollow sensation inside Rokuta’s body.

“Still painful?”

“No. But it feels funny.”

“You won’t be able to summon your shirei or turn back into a kirin, meaning you can’t fly. Try not to get stuck on any lofty peaks.”

Kouya smiled and turned to the youma. With a light tap, the beak opened. The baby was lying on the red tongue. Kouya twined the red thread around the child’s neck and tied it with a loose knot. With another incantation, the excess thread fell away.

“It’s called a *red line*. Cut your threat and this one decapitates the child.”

“Do you have to go that far? I told you, I’m not going to run away.”

“And I told you: for the time being, you are our prisoner and must be treated as such.” He nodded at Ribi. “It’s also linked to hers.”

Rokuta looked at Ribi. A similar white stone was fastened to her head with a length of red string. Government bureaucrats of her rank were listed on the Registry of Wizards and so didn’t age. On becoming a wizard, a person’s third eye opened, invisible to the outside world but still constituting a kind of organ.

When it was blocked, so were any magical powers associated with it, just like Rokuta’s horn.

“Even if she cuts her own thread, the one around the child’s neck will decapitate her. Cut the child’s thread, and the same thing will happen to her. Same with Rokuta’s thread. Granted, unlike that of an ordinary wizard, it probably wouldn’t sever a kirin’s head. But I’m sure it would prove quite painful— at the very least cut through the horn.”

“Got it.”

“There are threads strung outside your cell that will break if you try to leave.”

“In which case, bad things would happen to Ribi and the child.”

“Correct.”

“And when this is all over, you’re going to return the child?”

“Of course.”

“You’re very informed about kirin.” The average person didn’t know about the kirin’s horn.

“Thanks to ROKUTA—the big guy, I mean. It turns out that youma resemble the divine beasts in more ways than you’d suspect.”

“My shirei have always kept such knowledge to themselves.”

“And so has the big guy. But when you keep close company with a youma, all sorts of interesting things rub off on you.”

“Huh.”

Kouya took the child and passed it to Ribi. “I’ll leave her in your care. See to his needs. I’ll make sure you are provided with the necessities.”

“You are a monster,” Ribi spat out.

Kouya only smiled. “If there’s anything else you need, please let me know.”

Ribi didn’t reply, only glared back at him, her eyes filled with venom. Kouya merely shrugged it off and looked at Rokuta.

“Ribi and I will behave ourselves. And can I count on your company from time to time?”

“Naturally. I’ll be down to check up on you.”

Rokuta nodded. “I’d rather we’d met under different circumstances.”

“That makes two of us, Rokuta.”

# Chapter 13

[3-4] **R**ibi said, “Taiho, are you okay?”

Rokuta flashed a smile. “I’m fine, I’m fine. As far as prisons go, this place isn’t all that bad. Better furnished than I would have imagined.”

Glancing around the room, he had to wonder what it’d originally been intended for. Though by no means spacious, the room hardly resembled a traditional jail cell. It appeared to have been carved out of white rock. At the back was a sleeping nook furnished with a bed. A divan occupied a section of the room sectioned off by screens.

There was a well and a water basin in the corner, along with a set of kitchen utensils. Looking up—the high ceiling could almost induce a sense of vertigo—a skylight was cut out of the rock. It’d let in natural sunlight once the day dawned.

Rokuta said with a grin. “So, Ribi, can you look after the child?”

Ribi flushed a bit. “I have to wonder. It’s not exactly my strong suit.”

“You don’t have children?”

“Long ago I had a husband and a child. We went our separate ways when I was appointed a minister. That was during the reign of the previous emperor, so it’s been quite a while.”

“Weren’t you both entered on the Registry of Wizards?”

“My husband opposed doing so.”

“I see.”

Imperial and provincial civil servants becoming wizards made such partings inevitable. The immediate family could be registered but in-laws and more distant relations were excluded. And while they could expect preferential treatment in future appointments, the simple passing of time meant that a wizard could expect to lose many friends and relations along the way.

“What of your retinue?”

Imperial viceroys ordinarily traveled with several personal assistants and servants.

“I assume they’re being detained. I haven’t heard about anybody being executed, so I have to hope they’re under house arrest someplace safe. The rest of the imperial emissaries are probably in the same predicament.”

“Well, that’s good to know.”

Six imperial civil servants were dispatched as viceroys to “advise” each province lord and prime minister. Their job was to get the province lord back on the right

path, instruct him as to how the new regime worked, and correct any errors made along the way. But as they were mostly dealing with a bunch of cowardly old men, little good—or for that matter, little additional harm—came from these efforts.

That was how out of control En had become.

"How are you faring, Ribi? Nothing untoward has happened to you?"

A troubled expression rose to her face. "I suppose I should call myself blessed in that respect. Atsuyu has not yet strayed so far from the Way."

"What is up with Atsuyu? What about the province lord?"

"I've heard the province lord is in poor health. He secluded himself deep in the palace and stays completely out of view, leaving everything to Atsuyu."

Ribi rocked the child in her arms. Since being retrieved from the youma's beak, she'd been sleeping soundly.

"According to rumors circling amongst the ministerial staff, his mind is not altogether whole, and he is unable to execute his duties. Before, he lived in constant fear of Emperor Kyou. Even now, despite what anybody says, he refuses to set foot outside the Inner Palace. And yet he once seems to have enjoyed moments of sanity during which he summoned his ministers and issued directives. His condition has worsened since. He's convinced his retainers are assassins sent by Emperor Kyou. Atsuyu was left with no choice but to step in to keep the government from falling apart."

"Huh."

"That's right. I never expected Atsuyu to resort to such outrageous and outlandish measures. He has not taken leave of his moral senses, so it must on behalf of his subjects."

"Ganboku is certainly prosperous. I was surprised at how splendid a city it is."

"Atsuyu is a capable administrator. He has done extraordinarily well within the constraints imposed upon him, having no actual governing authority."

"There's no letting Shouryuu off the hook. He's played hooky one time too many."

"You can't mean—" Ribi said with a troubled expression. "He looks at the world through the eyes of an emperor, not one of us. Unable to fathom what the emperor was thinking, Atsuyu grew impatient and acted rashly. His retainers and subjects do love and respect him, but I fear all that adoration has gone to his head."

"I have to wonder."

"That aside," Ribi said, gazing at the child. "How are you really, Taiho? You look pale."

"Yeah." Rokuta nodded and sat on the divan.

"If you're tired, you should lay down and get some rest."

"Good advice."

He stretched out on the divan. Walking across the room to the bed wasn't worth the bother.

"Taiho?"

"The blood is getting to me. Sorry, but I think I'll call dibs on this one for now."

"Blood?"

"When Ekishin died."

Ribi gasped. "Ekishin. Wasn't he one of Seishou's officers?"

"Yes. He did the wrong thing for the right reason."

Momentarily at a loss as to what to do with the child, Ribi placed her on the table and walked over to the divan. "Excuse me," she said, and placed the back of her hand against Rokuta's forehead. The white stone was hot to the touch.

"You've got a fever."

"The blood is making me ill."

"Are you in pain?"

"I can stand this much."

"Excuse me for asking, but is the *Shashi* an acquaintance of yours?"

The *Shashi,* Rokuta repeated to himself, and then remembered that the Shashi was the minister who commanded the province lord's personal security detail. The *Shajin* was responsible for the emperor's security. Below the rank of emperor, the position was referred to as the Shashi, though it was the Daiboku who actually handled the day-to-day responsibilities.

"So Kouya's the Shashi. He's really come up in the world."

"He possesses the most unusual ability to tame youma."

"He didn't so much tame that youma as that youma raised him."

"Eh?"

"Sorry, but I'll explain it to you later. I am really tired."

"I understand."

Ribi nodded. Rokuta closed his eyes. The intoxicating smell of gore weighed on him like a wet and reeking blanket.

# Chapter 14

[3-5] **S**houryuu stared out at the darkness. “He hasn’t come home.”

It was the middle of the night and Rokuta still hadn’t shown up. He regularly slipped out of the palace but always returned by midnight. And even when he had reason to leave the palace late at night, he’d never be gone clear through till daybreak without a word to anybody. The ministers were in a state of high anxiety.

“Something must have happened,” Shukou said, concern coloring his voice.

“Looks that way.”

A flurry of footsteps signaled the arrival of Seishou, his face grim.

“What a rare sight,” Shouryuu jested. “Seishou wearing other than an unruffled expression.”

Seishou growled under his breath, “This is no time for frivolities. Ekishin’s body turned up.”

Shouryuu glanced from Seishou to Shukou to Itan.

“The Taiho wasn’t there. Nobody knows where he is.”

“A damned shame, after he managed to survive the reign of Emperor Kyou.”

Shukou glared at him. “Your Highness, this is hardly the time or place for such comments.”

“Well, at least Rokuta could do a bloody better job picking his friends. We can’t have his bodyguards getting killed every time they accompany him anywhere.”

“Your Highness!”

“Fools are best left alone,” Itan snapped with barely controlled anger. He said to Seishou, “Didn’t somebody mention the name Kouya?”

“That’s what I heard too. The guards at the Pheasant Gate confirmed it. This Kouya and the Taiho left the palace together, with Ekishin in tow.”

“After which he was killed. Where?”

“Outside Kankyuu. To make matters worse, the corpse was partly devoured, likely by a youma or youjuu. There are reports of a tenken being spotted earlier in the evening.”

“But no sign of the Taiho?”

“Not anywhere.”

“They must have taken him with them. A youma turning up gives me additional cause for concern. We haven’t seen one this close to Kankyuu recently.”

“I agree. I don’t know if this is related, but a child has gone missing too.”

“A child?”

“A girl born only this spring. Her mother took her eyes off her for only a moment and she was gone.”

“A strange story. Hard to say whether it’s related to the Taiho’s disappearance.”

“More important,” Shukou said in subdued tones, “is the well-being of the Taiho.”

“Like that little brat would go down without pitching a fit,” Shouryuu grumbled.

The three of them turned to the emperor, who was sitting next to the window. Itan shot him a piercing glare. “Dammit, how can you sit there being so blasted cool! We don’t know where he is!”

“How would my worrying about it accomplish anything?”

“You good-for-nothing son of a bitch!”

“Seishou, didn’t you recommend a search?”

Seishou nodded.

“Then what else can we do? In the meantime, somebody will find him. Or he’ll come back on his own.”

“Shouryuu, what the hell—”

“If not, we’re bound to start getting specific demands.”

“Eh?” Itan blinked.

“He was abducted or killed. If he was killed, wringing our hands won’t change a thing. Except killing him wouldn’t be easy. He has his shirei at his command. If he was abducted, somebody did it and with a specific end in mind. If Rokuta resisted in the least, his shirei would defend him. Again, not the kind of thing easily done. Only one dead body was left behind, so Rokuta must not have fought back. Our best bet is that this Kouya chap kidnapped him.”

“He didn’t resist because Kouya was a friend?”

“Probably, and using that missing child as a hostage. Either way, if Rokuta went along more or less willingly, there wouldn’t be a lot of clues lying around. And if he was kidnapped, there must be a reason. Appearances notwithstanding, this isn’t some cute kid eager to go along for the ride.”

“Look, Shouryuu—”

“They grabbed the queen off the chess board. It’s only a matter of time before they show off their prize. In the meantime, we’ll make no sudden moves.”

“There really are no other steps we can take until then?”

“What other steps would you propose taking, Shukou?”

“Yes, yes, I see your point.”

“But we can send a dispatch to Ribi in Gen Province.”

“Gen Province?”

Shouryuu said with a knowing smile, “Something rotten is going on. And when something’s raising a stink, it’s a good idea to take a closer look at where the smell is coming from. Well, we’ve got to do something or Rokuta will give me an earful about

leaving him behind when it does get back. Oh, and check the Registry of Wizards for somebody called Kouya."

"Understood."

Shouryuu looked out the window, a slight smile on his lips. "What a bundle of trouble that kid is. He goes on and on about how opposed he is to a civil war breaking out, and then he's the one who goes and strikes the spark."

"So Your Highness suspects that Gen Province is involved."

"They're definitely mustering troops. And weapons are disappearing from the armory."

Seishou nodded in agreement. As best he could audit the situation indirectly, the stockpiles in the armory indeed were shrinking.

"Pretty much everybody around here is guilty of something. Start sending out feelers and they'll know we know. Whoever is behind Rokuta's abduction—whether in Gen Province or elsewhere—when we move, so will they."

"Yes."

"Where will that rabbit poke its head out of the hole? For now, there are too many rabbits and too damned many holes."

Shouryuu stood at the window, watching the Sea of Clouds sink down into the tumult and darkness.

# Part Four

## Chapter 15

[4-1] **A**tsuyu mused aloud, “I hear the Taiho is not faring well. How serious is his condition?”

To answer the question for himself, he visited the dungeon the next day, accompanied by Kouya.

While he was sleeping, Ribi must have moved Rokuta to the bed. That was where he found himself lying when he awoke. Atsuyu knelt respectfully at the head of the bed.

“Nothing to worry about,” Rokuta assured him “It’s just the blood getting to me.”

“I don’t know a great deal about kirin. Is this the kind of condition that calls for more medical attention?”

“I’ll be okay.”

Rokuta tried to sit up but the fever hadn’t broken. Ribi rushed over and restrained him. “Please rest. This is the only body you’ve got.”

“It’s hardly the sort of thing that’s going to kill me. Oh, and Atsuyu?”

“Yes.” The kneeling Atsuyu bowed his head.

“Are the Rokusui levees your only concern? If so, I’ll badger the Suijin until he hops to and gets started on the construction.”

“Taiho,” said Atsuyu, “do you know how many rivers there are in En? And how many of those are equipped with levees that can survive the rainy season?”

“Sorry. I don’t have a clue.”

“Neither do I. Only that the Rokusui is one of our more famous rivers. Considering the state of disrepair it is in, you can begin to fathom what the rest must be like. Don’t you think?”

“You’re probably right.” Rokuta looked into Atsuyu’s fearless eyes. “But a kingdom is not a small place. When it comes to flood control alone, the demand already far outstrips the supply of labor. Ministerial staffs are miniscule. We can’t go hauling people—preoccupied with bringing in the next harvest—off their farms to man every public works project. Surely you understand that a kingdom can’t be turned around overnight.”

“I do understand.” Atsuyu took a breath and let it out. “But why must the Divine Decrees stipulate a province lord *and* the imperial viceroys serving at the same time? Stripping the province lords of their authority has effectively made unified provincial action impossible without the approval of the viceroy. I understand what condition the kingdom is in and why such things had to be done. But shouldn’t that mean the viceroys must also take on the duties of the province lord?”

“Well, that is—”

“The Rokusui is a constant threat. The levees must be built. Rather than leaving it in the hands of the province lord, if it truly would be faster for the viceroy to petition the emperor, receive approval, and supervise the effort, I never would have taken such drastic measures.”

Rokuta was momentarily at a loss for words.

“From what I hear, far from being consumed night and day with the affairs of state, the emperor is often absent from the privy council, leaving the ministers to search high and low for him. Then why deprive the province lords of the authority to act on behalf of their subjects?”

“Shouryuu is—”

“Autonomous rule must be returned to the provinces. The emperor is the focal point of a kingdom’s yin and yang, and I am in no position to judge one way or another. But if the emperor so dislikes the business of government, he should return that governing authority to the province lords. Leave the rest to the Rikkan and nobody would complain about how he spends his spare time.”

“Except this kingdom remains a work in progress. All the province lords pursuing their various objectives however they see fit are just as liable to make things worse. Take flood control. What accrues to the benefit of upstream provinces may well leave those downstream high and dry.”

“Then why not install officials with the full authority to act? Let them act as agents for the emperor and leave everything to them. Can you really tell me I’m being so out of line?”

“But Atsuyu—”

“Then there’s the matter of saving face. I completely understand that. But what good is the reputation of an emperor who can’t help his subjects? I intend to ask the emperor to appoint a regent to whom he can entrust all of his authority.”

“Not so much *ask* as *demand*. Atsuyu, although I can’t find fault with the substance of what you’ve said, taking hostages invariably calls into question the merits of your proposal.”

“Utter rubbish!” Ribi abruptly exclaimed.

Rokuta cast a startled glance over his shoulder. Ribi was standing at the foot of the bed, a taut expression on her face.

“What in the world do you two think you’re talking about?”

“Um, Ribi, look—”

“No!” she said with a violent shake of her head. “Don’t go trying to placate me with soothing words. Can you even comprehend the grave sinfulness of what you’ve been saying?”

Rokuta looked up at her in confusion. Atsuyu showed a grim smile. Ribi walked up and interposed herself between Atsuyu and Rokuta.

“If handing over imperial authority to a third party were in the slightest degree permissible, then why do the kirin even exist? Why should the kirin choose the emperor in the first place? The kirin embodies the will of the people and heaven when placing the emperor on the throne. Are you seriously proposing to raise a man to the *de facto* position of emperor without the decision of the kirin and the blessing of the Divine Will?”

“Ribi.”

“Don’t you understand? That’s what this all comes down to. If—*if*—Atsuyu were placed in such a position, what happens if he loses the Way and runs rampant like Emperor Kyou? The reign of a duly-appointed emperor would inevitably come to an end. But what of an immortal wizard wielding the powers of an emperor? Emperor Kyou was only able to wreak havoc on En for three years!”

Rokuta sank into silence. An emperor was immortal but that did not mean he could rule forever. If he turned his back on the Way and acted against the best interests of his subjects, the kirin who placed him on the throne would suffer the repercussions.

And though the kirin who’d chosen an emperor was also immortal, there was no cure for this malady. The *shitsudou,* the disease that struck down the kirin when the emperor strayed from the Way, would also kill the emperor. And so a despot could not rule forever.

“The Lord God Creator fashioned this world and organized everything in it. Why is it that the emperor is chosen by the kirin and is simply not king of the hill? No man can become emperor without the express recognition of the Divine Will. Doing otherwise threatens the very foundation of the world.”

Atsuyu smirked. “Have you forgotten? A kirin chose Emperor Kyou.”

“That is—”

“Emperors now and then do become tyrants. They stray from the Way and fall from power and so the tenure of their despotism is brought to an end. But that raises the question of why the kirin should have ever decided on such a man.”

“Do you hold the Divine Will in such contempt?”

“I only state what is real and what is true. It is said that the kirin has the entire populace to choose from, and thus places the best person on the throne. Then why

settle on a man like Emperor Kyou? If this were the miraculous expression of the Divine Will, then surely the kirin would only enthrone those who would not stray from the Way. For all this talk of the Divine Will and the kirin's choice, where is the proof of their efficacy?"

"Atsuyu!"

"It all starts with the Lord God Creator, doesn't it? They say the gods punish the wicked with thunder and lightning. So instead of afflicting the kirin, why not just strike down a wayward emperor with a bolt of lightning?"

"I can't believe I'm standing here listening to you say such outrageous things!"

"If it's true that the kirin chooses the very best person for the job, then show me the proof. If the Lord God Creator exists, then perhaps he could pay us a visit. I do not say this frivolously: he and his ilk do not exist. And if they did, they don't matter. If that makes me a heretic, then may lightning from heaven strike me down here and now."

Ribi didn't know how to respond to such arguments. To her mind, doubting the majesty of the Lord God Creator was no different than questioning reality itself.

Atsuyu only smiled. "Here is a creature who chose his own master and chooses to follow no other. A creature possessed of great and magical powers, gentle by disposition and keen of intellect. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that our forebears, prizing this creature's extraordinary talents, out of gratitude, made their decision into laws of nature."

Ribi leapt to her feet in anger. "Damn you, Atsuyu!"

Rokuta patted her on the back. "Maybe you could show your respect for the kirin by calming down a bit when you're around one of them."

Ribi caught her breath and hung her head. "I'm sorry."

"No problem." Rokuta said to Atsuyu, "So you're claiming the kirin placing an emperor on the throne is a mistake from the start?"

Atsuyu's eyes glinted like polished steel. "Can the Taiho say with conviction that the present emperor is the very best man for the job?"

Rokuta returned the look. Of course he had every reason in the world to respond in the affirmative to such a question. And yet he instead spoke the truth.

"No." He smiled. "But I don't accept the premise of your question, Atsuyu. I've always thought we'd do better without an emperor at all."

"A strange thing for a kirin to admit."

"Indeed. And from the heart."

"Taiho!" Ribi practically wailed.

Rokuta turned to her. "Ribi, when I first saw Shouryuu, I definitely thought to myself, *There stands an emperor*."

"In that case—"

"*The man who will destroy En*."

Ribi gaped at him.

"Shouryuu will tear En up by the roots. This is not something Shouryuu has anything to say about. It is what emperors do."

Rokuta faced Atsuyu directly. "If you'd simply proposed to strip the emperor of his authority, I might have condoned the effort. But you want to turn around and bestow it all on one minister. That would create a godlike position higher in station than the emperor. To which I would tell you to think again."

Atsuyu's eyes narrowed. "You truly speak of strange things, Taiho."

"All authority is vested in the emperor, authority that is useless unless exercised by he who holds it."

In the twenty years since the coronation, the kingdom was at last beginning to mend. But during its long winter of discontent, had only the bad had slept well? Perhaps the emperor had simply lacked the latitude and resources to oppress the people to his heart's content.

"Should not every man be his own master? Give power to those above you and they will inevitably use it against you. That is why I believe."

Atsuyu said with a slight nod of his head, "Alas, you speak of things I cannot comprehend."

"Well, as far as that goes, Atsuyu, neither do I."

# Chapter 16

[4-2] **K**ouya brought dinner to the bed where Rokuta was resting. He asked, “Do you despise the emperor, Rokuta?”

Rokuta shrugged.

Having decided that discretion was the better part of valor, Ribi retreated behind the screens and fed the baby with goat’s milk supplied by Kouya.

“If you really dislike the emperor, I can take care of him. As a favor for you.” Kouya peered at him closely. “Wouldn’t we all be better off without emperors?”

Rokuta took a breath. “Having many good reasons to quarrel doesn’t make us enemies.”

“But you don’t like him?”

“Oh, he’s a big pain in the ass, but that doesn’t make him a bad person. I don’t hate Shouryuu. It’s emperors and shoguns and warlords I despise.”

“How’s that?”

“Those types are always up to no good.”

“Huh.” Kouya grated a cake of tea leaves with a paring knife. “Six of one, half-dozen of the other, isn’t it?”

“Eh?”

“It’s human nature, this need to herd ourselves together. The more of us there are, the bigger we want our herd to be. When confined inside the cage of a kingdom, it’ll only be a matter of time before one herd runs into another.”

“There is that.”

“If we must form herds, our herd has to be the strongest. What makes a herd strong? A large, well-organized herd? Well, that calls for a strong leader good at organizing.”

“Probably.”

“Without an emperor, would the people just go on merrily living their lives? I’d wager it wouldn’t be long before they got together and built themselves a new throne.”

“Do you long for a strong leader, Kouya?”

Kouya shook his head. “I’m not a person, you see. No child of a youma would be so disposed. But after observing other people that’s what I’ve come to believe.”

“Then why do you serve Atsuyu?”

The hand holding the knife paused. “That is—different. Perhaps because I am human at the core. At the same time, my youma stands in the way of forming such

relationships. Atsuyu was able to make room for both. However strange and off-putting I was, he saw past all that."

"I don't think you're strange at all."

Kouya smiled. "You and Atsuyu are the only ones who would say such a thing, because of Atsuyu's courage and because you're not a human at all. Ordinary people think me detestable, all the more repulsive with a youma next to me, like I'm one too. If Atsuyu hadn't been there to watch my back, they would have killed Rokuta and me a long time ago. Look—"

He rolled up his sleeve, revealing a deep scar on his left arm. "From an arrow. A worse enough wound than I knew. If Atsuyu hadn't treated it, I might have lost the arm."

Rokuta looked at Kouya's face and said in a matter-of-fact voice, "I see. So Atsuyu is your benefactor."

"Yes."

"But I'm not itching for you and Shouryuu to fight. And as long as you call Atsuyu your lord, I don't want them to fight either."

"You really are a nice person, Rokuta."

"It's not that. There's no need to overcomplicate this. I am Shouryuu's retainer. No matter the position of the emperor or the man who fills the role, I cannot run away from that. Atsuyu has turned traitor. No matter what else he says, if he seeks to seize imperial power in opposition to the Divine Will, that makes him an enemy of the state. As soon as he starts making demands, there's no turning back. Once the die is cast, one of us must die: Kouya and Atsuyu or Shouryuu and me."

"And if you ran away?"

Rokuta shook his head. "There is no retreat after this."

"Why? When you don't care for the emperor?"

"No, I don't. Say, Kouya, do you remember how you once searched for Hourai?"

"I do. It lies at the far eastern reaches of the Kyokai."

"I was born in Hourai."

"You don't say," Kouya muttered. The longing that once colored his voice was gone. His interest in that mythical place had faded with the years. Nevertheless, he fashioned the obligatory response. "What kind of place is it?"

"Wars without end. I was abandoned too, Kouya. In the mountains."

Kouya couldn't hide his surprise. "You too?"

"Yes. My father took me by the hand and led me into the mountains and left me there. I was on the verge of death when my nyokai came from Mt. Hou."

Before losing consciousness, he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. But it was his nyokai, not his family.

"So kirin really are born on Mount Hou and raised there?"

“Yes. I don’t remember much after I got back. I still wasn’t accustomed to being around people back then. Time passed while I was in a daze. It was like waking from a dream.”

“When you truly became a kirin.”

“When I came to, I was in a strange place. I was really surprised to find myself in such luxurious surroundings. My family abandoned its own children to make ends meet. On Mt. Hou, I could pick all the food I wanted right off the trees. Not only the clothing but even the curtains were made of silk. I was more angry than grateful.”

“Yeah.”

Rokuta looked down at his hands. “And then I was told I had to choose the next emperor.”

He’d never forget the cold chill that raced down his spine when heard that, a word he associates with samurai clans like the Yamana and the Hosokawa. But that only confused the wizardesses, who didn’t understand what he was talking about.

“I thought it was all a big joke. I wanted nothing to do with it.”

“Despite being a kirin?”

Rokuta nodded. No matter how small or seemingly insignificant, the kirin chose the emperor and became his chief advisor. They were seen as precocious and were thought to have extraordinarily good judgment for their age.

“As a kirin, I was no exception. I was bright enough to figure out how much I didn’t like what I was hearing. And that wasn’t the end of it. The wizardesses taught me all sorts of disagreeable things, like once I picked the emperor, I had to work for him.”

The kirin in all this amounted to nothing. He chose the emperor and served the emperor and everything he might call his own—from his title to the land he lived on—belonged to the emperor. And though the power of anointing the emperor was bestowed upon him by Heaven, if the emperor strayed from the Way, it was the kirin who paid the price first. When he died, his shirei would devour his remains. Ultimately, they existed to serve the emperor too.

In the end, the kirin existed—body and soul—for the good of the emperor. *What kind of a life is that?* Rokuta had to wonder. Monarchs abused their subjects. It was a fact of life. Rokuta had no desire to become a partner to such abuse.

Driven to war by pride and ego, wringing blood out of the population with punishing taxes, a monarch was strife incarnate, his subjects mere kindling tossed onto the bonfire. The kirin had no choice but to participate in such atrocities, left with nothing to call his own, ultimately sacrificed as the whim of his liege.

“*You’ve got to be kidding me*. That was my honest reaction. A big reason for bringing me back to Mount Hou was to judge those going on the Shouzan. But not one of them was worth the time of day. Choosing the emperor turned out to be a

chore as bad as all the rest. So I ran away, to a place where nobody looked to me to choose anything."

Rokuta answered Kouya's startled look with a wry smile. What else could he do at this juncture but laugh about it?

At the time, he saw anything but the humor in it. War had taken everything from him. He couldn't help but despise all those fighting each other to be top dog and king of the hill. Thinking that seeing the kingdom for himself might awaken the kirin within, he asked the wizardesses to take him to En. It turned out to be a miserable wasteland, worse than the ravaged city where he'd grown up.

The whole world, it seemed, teetered at the edge of the abyss.

"Seeing that devastation right before my eyes reminded me of my own fondness for Hourai. I really wanted to believe my home town had to be better than this. Or I was simply fed up with the whole thing. I couldn't honestly say one way or the other."

So Rokuta did the only thing true to his own desires: he ran away from Mount Hou and returned to Hourai. This was quite unprecedented behavior for a kirin, and why he still didn't feel welcome on Mt. Hou.

"Except that back in Hourai, I didn't have a place to call my own or anything to do."

The city had been reduced to ashes in the meantime, fields of charcoal with views now unobstructed from one end to the other. He searched for his parents and did not find them. They must have moved to some part of the country that war had not yet touched. Or hadn't managed to survive.

On a whim, he turned to the west and wandered for three years with no goal or destination in mind. However Itan criticized the emperor for his listless ways, Rokuta was the guiltier party.

"I did nothing but bum around. In the midst of my travels, I met Shouryuu."

In a small domain on the shores of the Inland Sea. The domains he'd passed through all bore the hideous scars of war. Then as now, he found himself in the grips of a fever.

"It was vexing in the extreme. There I was, walking around with no goal in mind, and yet I was being drawn toward the emperor. I couldn't run away. To this day, I can't say whether I had fled Mt. Hou because I loathed choosing the emperor or because I had to return to Hourai to find the emperor."

"I see," Kouya said softly.

"And so here I am, Shouryuu's retainer. I've resigned myself to that as well. No sense arguing with the dealer about the cards I was dealt. If Atsuyu raises an army, that will make you my enemy as well. I have no desire to fight your or your liege. There is still time to stop him."

Kouya briefly sank into silence. From the expression on his face, Rokuta couldn't begin to fathom what was going through his mind. But then he opened his mouth and erased all hope.

"I cannot."

"Kouya—"

"Atsuyu knows what he is trying to do and is acting based on what he knows. I haven't the words to stop him."

"This means civil war. Many soldiers will die and many civilians won't escape the conflagration."

"You're right," Kouya mumbled, averting his gaze, his face blank of emotion.

# Chapter 17

[4-3] **S**houshun said to Rokuta, “Do whatever you can for En.”

Shoushun was a wizardess on Mount Hou. Wizardesses were immortal beings. Having stopped aging when she ascended, she appeared no older than twelve.

“My village was destroyed by Emperor Kyou. Only a few children and adults survived—but only by the skin of our teeth. So I went to the shrine of *Seioubo* and petitioned the Queen Mother of the West to make me a wizardess. I was the biggest of the children left behind.”

The shrine was in an awful state. She had to brace up the broken beams with her own body while she beseeched Seioubo, swearing with her heart, mind, and soul that she wouldn’t leave the shrine until the day she died. She would do whatever it took. She went without food and water, holding up the beams with her trembling limbs for two whole days.

She’d sung a thousand paean to Seioubo when an envoy arrived from Mt. Hou.

“I hoped I could be even the slightest bit helpful to En. I was indeed fortunate to look after Enki. Enki would grow up strong and healthy and choose an emperor. As the Taiho, he would return to En and serve the emperor as the Saiho and save our kingdom.”

“Think again!” Rokuta called out from far off. “Do you really think an emperor can save a kingdom? Save its people?”

All emperors did was call forth the dogs of war, kindle the fires of hell, and cast people into the flames.

“You’re kidding yourself, Shoushun! People can scrape by without an emperor. It takes an emperor to truly destroy a kingdom, turn it into a wasteland where nothing can survive.”

“Do whatever you can for En,” said Shoushun.

“I’m not about to put any more children in the same position as you. I’m not going to place an emperor on the throne!”

The smile on Shoushun’s face crumbled. Tears ran down her cheek. She was crying. How could the kirin abandon his kingdom and run away?

Or were those falling tears his own?

“Hey, boy.”

Jostled from sleep, Rokuta stared up at a clear blue sky. Sunlight shone in his eyes, momentarily blinding him.

“Are you awake?”

A coarse dry hand reeking of fish shook him again by the shoulder. From a nearby small hut, several pairs of eyes stared out at him.

“Oh, for goodness sake.” The old man let out an exasperated sigh. “You wouldn’t open your eyes for nothing, like you was dead to the world.” He glanced over his shoulder and said in a relieved voice, “He’s conscious. Seems he was alive all along.”

Debilitated by a land soaked in blood, possessed by a fever, worn out from walking, Rokuta had taken a nap on the rocky shore. That was the last thing he remembered. He took a deep breath and drew in the fresh sea air, untainted by gore and pestilence.

The man patted him on the cheek. “That young man picked you up and carried you here. You should say thank you.”

Rokuta followed the old man’s gaze. The tall young man was sitting on a rock in front of the hut.

“Still among the living, eh?”

He smiled. Rokuta felt a cold shiver down his spine. Not from fear. The sheer feelings of joy brought out goosebumps on his skin. *So this is what divine revelation feels like*. Even the smallest kirin had it in him to choose an emperor.

After leaving Kyoto, he’d wandered at will. At first, he journeyed east in search of his parents’ home town but soon grew discouraged. Turning toward the west, his spirits had lifted. As if in search of the setting sun, he’d ventured over the ravaged hills and fields until he arrived at this village on the shores of the Inland Sea.

“Where are you from?” The man got up and squatted down next to Rokuta.

Rokuta was so happy he could cry.

“Are you alone? Were you separated from your family?”

“Who are you?”

“A son of the Komatsu clan.”

*Now I know,* Rokuta thought to himself. *Here is an emperor*. The emperor who would lay waste to the Kingdom of En.

The man’s name was Komatsu Saburou Naotaka. He was a member of the family that governed this land facing the sea. According to the fishermen, he was the third heir-to-be of the Komatsu clan, destined to take over as head of the family. He got along well with the farmers and fishermen who worked outside the castle walls.

“You do have to wonder what a man like that will make of himself when he becomes lord of the manor. He’s not a bad person but is something of a rogue and a scoundrel.”

“So he’s big-hearted.”

“Well—”

Rokuta didn't hear many charitable opinions about him. They all lambasted him with a smile. Less out of love and affection than because of a friendly sense of familiarity, probably because Shouryuu—as the characters for "Naotaka" were pronounced in En—left the confines of the castle on a regular basis.

There apparently being nothing to keep him busy in the castle, he came down to the shore almost every day dressed as a common foot soldier. He played with the children, flirted with the young women, and rounded up the young men to practice fencing with wooden swords.

At other times, he went to sea and pretended to be a fisherman. He certainly had plenty of things to keep him busy *outside* the castle.

"You're really an important aristocrat, aren't you?"

Shouryuu smiled. The fishing line he'd cast onto the waves hadn't budged in a while.

"But aren't you destined to become lord of this domain?"

The castle sat at the crest of a hill overlooking the sea. The manor house and the town faced a small bay. A solidly-built fort sat on a small island at the mouth of the bay. This stretch of coast and the surrounding mountains along with the islands scattered across the bay constituted the territory of the Komatsu clan.

"I'd be embarrassed to call this speck of land a *domain,*" Shouryuu answered with a broad grin. "The Komatsu started out as pirates. Their stronghold was here in the Inland Sea. Being distantly related to the Taira, when war broke out between the Taira and Minamoto clans, they were ordered to establish a navy. A dubious proposition at best. But the motley crew of fishermen they scraped together managed to distinguish themselves and were rewarded with titles as country samurai."

"Huh."

"My pigheaded father strong-armed irregulars here and there into joining his retinue, enough to put on a convincing performance as a local nobleman, though he remained at the beck and call of the more powerful warlords. He had pledged to muster a navy in emergencies and the Ouchi clan finally granted him an autonomous fief. Or so the story goes. My oldest brother was an Ouchi retainer. He died on his way to Kyoto soon after the outbreak of the Onin War. My second oldest brother was with the Kouno when my father grabbed one of their islands and was killed as a result. As a result, the only person left to inherit is this idiot of a third son."

"Sounds like it's the commoners who ended up with the short end of the stick."

"No doubt about it," Shouryuu said with a loud laugh.

"Do you have a wife or children?"

"I do. The wife comes from an Ouchi branch family. To be honest, not that I had any choice in the matter."

"A good person?"

“Hard to say. We’ve hardly ever met.”

“Eh?”

“Seems that having a bunch of pirates in the family tree rubbed my in-laws the wrong way. When I got around to visiting the bedroom on the night of the wedding, I found two old hags blocking the way. They weren’t letting me in, come hell or high water. The whole thing turned into such a farce I never went back. All the more surprising that a child ended up in the mix.”

“Whoa, hold on a minute.”

He had, in fact, more concubines than he could count, sent to the castle by the country samurai he would one day ostensibly rule, his wife and daughter being but one example. But he never had much of an inclination to keep their company in the first place. Shouryuu spelled out the details to Rokuta, a complete stranger, without a second thought.

“Don’t you find that kind of life rather lonely?”

“I’m not complaining. Get out of the castle and go down to the town and there are plenty of *professional* young lasses happy to be there and eager to entertain. Far preferable to some pathetic girl shouldering the obligations of her family.”

Rokuta drew a deep breath. “You are quite the ass.”

“An opinion widely shared. You’re a well-informed man.”

“My heart goes out to these people.”

Rokuta couldn’t tell whether he was a fool or just too big hearted for his own good, only that he hardly seemed a man made for these troubled times. He didn’t appear to have a clue what was going on outside the borders of his tiny fief. War had reduced Kyoto to ashes. It inexorably ate away at civil defenses. Garrisons were stationed everywhere. It was practically impossible to escape the scent of blood in the air.

This particular corner of the world was at peace, but there was no telling how long that would last.

“All the while you are being entertained by your young lasses, the country is falling apart all around you.”

“There is that. One minute you’re on top of the world. The next, the wheel of fortune is rolling over you.”

“Your subjects all have this monkey on their backs. When war comes, they won’t know which way to turn.”

Shouryuu only smiled. He said with an indifferent air, “Better not to fight at all. If the Kobayakawa show up on my doorstep, I’ll raise my arms in surrender and tell them I’m on their side. If it’s the Amago, then we’ll call ourselves Amago. If it’s the Kouno, then we’re all for Kouno. Seems the most practical way to approach this thing.”

Rokuta’s mouth dropped open in surprise. “That settles it. You really are a fool.”

Shouryuu laughed out loud.

But however stunned he was, Rokuta couldn't resolve to pack his bags and leave. He had to make this man emperor first. That was the only thing he understood.

# Chapter 18

[4-4] **A** junior minister bounded into the room. “We found him!” he called out, and stopped with a start. Not only was Shukou there, but Itan, Seishou, and the emperor himself.

This room in the Inner Palace had originally been reserved for the emperor’s mistresses, so the emperor’s presence shouldn’t have been unexpected. But he’d given it to Shukou, and the government business Shukou conducted there was typically intended for his eyes only. So the minister didn’t expect the emperor to be there too.

Shukou only glanced over his shoulder. “Found him? Don’t tell me. He’s in Gen Province.”

“Ah, yes.”

The flustered functionary faced the emperor, dropped to the floor and kowtowed. With a wave of his hand, Shukou motioned for the junior minister to stand up. “Don’t worry about him. He’s only taking up space. Let’s hear your report.”

“Um, ah, yes. The culprit in question is the Shashi, Baku Kouya. The Shashi reports to the Minister of Summer in Gen Province. Kouya is the name he goes by.”

“Much appreciated.”

Another wave of his hand told the man to leave. Under more forgiving circumstances, Shukou would have been more fulsome in his thanks, but he didn’t have the time right now. He watched the stunned junior minister depart and returned his attention to Itan and Seishou, whose eyes were focused on the tabletop. For now, they were completely ignoring Shouryuu, lounging in the divan.

“Of course it was Gen Province. Not only Ribi but the Gen ministers of right, left, and privy seal, including anybody with any power and authority is incommunicado. It would seem that Atsuyu is pulling the strings of this Kouya and the rest of them.”

Itan nodded. He examined the sheet of paper in his hand, a perplexed look on his face. “He got to know the Taiho at some point. Seishou, what kind of numbers do we have on the Gen armed forces?”

“One division of the provincial guard, though it’s the army of the left with 12,500 men under arms.”

Three days had passed since Rokuta disappeared. Atsuyu would not have resorted to kidnapping the Saiho without first having all his ducks in a row.

“All the more reason to worry.”

Itan scrutinized the paper. The emperor currently had at his disposal one division of the Imperial Guard and one division of the Sei provincial guard, except both were at brigade strength, with 7,500 soldiers in the former and 5,000 in the latter. Combined, they barely achieved parity with the Gen provincial guard.

Under normal circumstances, the emperor should command six full divisions of 12,500 men each. En's decimated population couldn't support such numbers.

"He's bluffing," Shouryuu opined, though nobody rose to the bait. "He's probably at brigade strength, 7,500 men at most, with 10,000 conscripts filling in the ranks."

The Imperial Guard under the emperor's command was made up of three armies, designated "right," "left," and "center," each with a stipulated division strength of 12,500 men and manned by professional soldiers. If that wasn't possible, they could be downgraded to reduced divisions of 10,000 or brigades of 7,500.

The three armies of the provincial guard under the command of the Taiho also normally ran at full division strength. The rest of the provinces maintained brigades of 7,500. In emergencies, another 5,000 in reservists could be added to the ranks. In the direst of circumstances, conscripts could be forcibly drafted.

Provincial armies could be expanded from two divisions to four, but the Divine Decrees forbade both the Imperial Guard and the provincial guard from expanding beyond those limits. Invading another kingdom constituted the most grievous of sins and would result in the death of the kirin and emperor in a matter of days.

Armies were mobilized against internal threats only, with military buildups kept to the minimum necessary to deal with domestic strife.

When expanding the provincial guard to four divisions, an auxiliary division was added to the existing three. This auxiliary division normally had a regimental strength of 2,500 men. Though Gen Province had long maintained four divisions, having lost its right, center and auxiliary divisions, only the left remained.

Shouryuu gazed out at the Sea of Clouds. Six divisions of 75,000 soldiers facing off against a provincial guard with at most four divisions of 30,000 would reduce a rebellious province lord to easy pickings. At worst, all eight provinces together could field an army of 180,000. If the emperor strayed from the Way, the province lords could come together to remove the threat on the throne.

There just weren't enough people left in the kingdom to justify either option. At the time of the coronation, an original population of three million adults had shrunk to a pathetic 300,000. Refugees returning to the kingdom and children growing to adulthood might at best double that.

Finding 12,500 soldiers to fill the ranks of the Imperial Guard would be a miracle.

"An army of the left at full division strength simply isn't possible."

“Anyway,” Itan said emphatically. “We need hard proof that Gen Province is at the middle of all this. We can’t very well mobilize the Imperial Guard simply because we’ve identified this Kouya fellow.”

“Except time is of the essence. If by any chance the Taiho is there—”

Seishou said, “Tell the Imperial Guard to start making preparations.”

Hearing that, Shouryuu got to his feet. *Where are you going?* said the scolding glance on Shukou’s face.

“My presence doesn’t appear to be needed here, so I’m going to bed.”

“Your Highness,” said the exasperated Shukou.

Shouryuu only smiled. On his way out of the room, he paused at the door, as if something had just occurred to him. “Issue the following imperial order: the Rikkan and the Sankou are dismissed.”

Shukou and Itan gaped at him. Itan stormed, his face flushed, “What the hell are you thinking? This is hardly the time!”

It was hardly the time to start shuffling ministerial positions when one wrong step could lead to civil war. The selection process alone could drag on for well-nigh forever. Add to that the inevitable internal dissension as the ministers jockeyed for appointments.

These arguments didn’t sway Shouryuu in the least. “I’m tired of looking at the whole lot of them. Seishou, contact the Chousai and have him convene the Privy Council tomorrow.”

“Are you in your right mind?”

Showing no sign of having heard the rebuke in Seishou’s question, Shouryuu answered, “I’m the emperor, aren’t I? I’ll do whatever I feel like.”

Shrugging off the abuse from Itan and the others, Shouryuu left the Inner Palace and took aside a retainer.

“Lend me your horse.”

“Your Highness!”

“I’m just going out to clear my head. Don’t give me any grief about it.”

The retainer’s name was Mousen. He took a deep breath. “That’s what you always say. But if word gets out that *I’m* the one helping you, the Daiboku will have my head.”

“In that case, I’ll make you a province lord.”

“A fat lot of good it’ll do me when I’m dead.”

“Then I’ll appoint you to the Sankou.”

“Don’t joke about things like that. All right. But in exchange, I’m going with you.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

The astonished Mousen said, “Do you understand the gravity of the times we are living in? Unbelievable!”

“All the more reason. Something always bound to be afoot.”

“Get back soon. If I keep making up stories about how you got away from me and absconded to parts unknown, the Daiboku is sure to demote me.”

Shouryuu laughed. “Don’t worry. If it ever comes to that, I’ll come up with a much better excuse.”

# Part Five

## Chapter 19

[5-1] **T**en days after the Taiho disappeared, an envoy arrived from Gen Province.

"Gen Province? You don't say."

Shouryuu was in the middle of the Privy Council meeting, pretending to pay attention to the fault-finding and critiques offered up by the ministers. The Rikkan had been dismissed. The vice-ministers who'd risen through the ranks as protégés of their bosses were now whining about the dismissals.

Thankful for the interruption, Shouryuu ordered that the envoy be shown in. A short time later, a man in his fifties, dressed in formal court attire, entered the room. He knelt before the throne and bowed his head.

"So you're from Gen Province, eh?"

The man touched his forehead to the floor. "I am the provincial prime minister of Gen. My name is In Hakutaku."

"So what business brings you here?"

Hakutaku took a document from his pocket and held it over his prostrated head. "A letter to the emperor from the chief cabinet secretary."

"You can raise your head. I'd rather listen to your mouth doing the talking, not the top of your head."

Hakutaku raised a face framed by a white beard. "However presumptuous it is of me to say so, the Taiho Enki presently resides in Gen Province."

The assembled ministers collectively caught their breath.

"And?"

"You are to establish a position above that of the emperor to which our leader, Secretary Gen, will be appointed."

Atsuyu's surname was Gen. His given name was Setsu, though he currently went by Yuu.

"How about that. Atsuyu doesn't want to be emperor. He wants to do the emperor one better. You certainly have thought this one through."

"Secretary Gen means no insult to Your Highness. The dignity of the imperial position remains unchallenged. Only the acting authority would be relinquished."

"Would he settle for being prime minister?"

“Unfortunately, he cannot accept a position that would subordinate him to the emperor.”

“So he’s either superior to the emperor or no deal, eh?”

“Both a *de facto* emperor and *de jure* emperor serving simultaneously would tear a kingdom apart. Instead, relinquish your authority in deed and in name. Remove yourself to the imperial villa. There amidst the woods and fields, leave the vulgar world behind and turn your heart instead to the fields of lovely young lilies contending for your attention.”

Shouryuu roared with laughter. “Well, if you put it *that* way. So I raise Atsuyu to a position higher even than my own and then retire to the countryside to live out my days basking the rustic beauty of the blooming flowers.”

Hakutaku bowed his head to the ground.

Shouryuu said, “Tell Atsuyu the following—”

“Yes.”

“I am not so broadminded a man as to give to others what is mine by right.”

“Your Highness,” came a raised voice from among the ministers. Shouryuu shushed him with a wave of his hand.

“Tell Atsuyu that if he returns Enki, I will be compassionate enough to allow him to take his own life in a manner of his own choosing. But keep stirring up trouble while hiding behind Enki and I will track Atsuyu down and execute him as a traitor to the kingdom.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Hakutaku bowed deeply and said, “I understand.”

Shouryuu stood and drew the sword at his waist. Only the emperor and his bodyguards were allowed to carry weapons in the Privy Council room.

“Hakutaku, tell me, did you think I would just let you walk out of here and go on your merry way?”

Still kowtowing, Hakutaku answered in a clear voice. “No.”

“You’re the provincial prime minister. Did Atsuyu force you to come here as the envoy?”

“I asked to be appointed as such. I knew from the start that my chances of returning home were negligible. Better myself than a younger man with the rest of his life still before him.”

“The typical answer to demands like those would be your head on a platter.”

“Arrangements have already been made with my family.”

Shouryuu planted one knee in front of Hakutaku. He nudged the tip of the sword against his throat, forcing him to raise his head. “You know the fate of a traitor?”

“I never had any doubts.”

Not a flicker of doubt showed in Hakutaku's eyes. Impressed, Shouryuu showed a wry smile. "A man with guts. I like that. It'd be a shame to kill you. What would you say to serving in the imperial government instead?"

"I only serve Secretary Gen."

"And here I thought the ultimate allegiance of every minister in this kingdom was to the emperor."

"The province lord of Gen granted me this position. He was appointed by Emperor Kyou. My current rank cannot be credited to Your Highness. It is, however, within your power to affirm your confidence in the province lord by hereafter guaranteeing the permanency of his office."

Shouryuu grinned and sheathed the sword. "I see you have a stake in this game, after all."

Hakutaku only nodded.

"So all it takes is for your lord to command it and you willingly participate in this insurrection? Wouldn't the proper path for a provincial prime minister be to rebuke a wayward secretary?"

"The secretary has claims of his own. Please take into consideration the burden born by a man who dares to wear the mantle of a traitor."

"To start out with, Atsuyu is not the province lord and cannot make you answer to him. Isn't he the son of the province lord? Isn't nepotism against the rules?"

"The province lord has withdrawn from the political realm and relinquished power to the secretary. The provincial civil service voices no opposition to this arrangement. His qualities being clear to all those who have worked with him, we have accepted him as our leader."

"Making him the province lord in all but name? You've managed a two-fold betrayal. The emperor appoints the province lord. It doesn't matter what the provincial civil service agrees to, it is not up to them to decide. And that not being enough already, you want the throne as well."

"Remonstrate with me as you will, but as far as the province lord is concerned, this is a settled matter."

"Of course it is."

Shouryuu got to his feet. He said with a casual wave of his hand, "You can leave. Tell Atsuyu what I told you."

"Are you allowing me to return to Gen?"

"Well, somebody has to tell him. It might as well be you. Go back and join their ranks as a fellow conspirator."

"Understood."

"I'd rather this wasn't settled by the force of arms. If the spirit so moves you, perhaps you could prevail on Atsuyu to think better of this course of action."

“If the spirit so moves me?”

For the first time, Hakutaku looked at Shouryuu directly. Shouryuu averted his gaze with a smile. “This world puts a lot of stock in the Divine Will. If I’m in fact the emperor chosen by Heaven, then this rebellion has no chance of succeeding. But if you want to test that proposition, go ahead and we’ll see what happens.”

“Do you believe in the authority of the Divine Will?”

“Belief has got nothing to do with it,” Shouryuu said. “As long as I’m the one sitting on the throne, I’ve got no reason to doubt it. But if *you* don’t think it exists, then what are you doing paying me any reverence?”

“That question does go to the heart of the matter.”

“Everyone suffers when civil war breaks out. But trample on the Divine Will, throw down the gauntlet, and I will pick it up.”

Shouryuu glanced around at the joy and sorrow etched on the faces of those around him. “Escort the prime minister to the borders of Sei. I’m in no mood to send one of our own envoys and have him executed by Atsuyu. So the man who allows any harm to come to the prime minister will get to go in his place.”

# Chapter 20

[5-2] **I**tan slammed into the emperor's living quarters. Seeing the emperor lounging there on the divan, he exploded with rage.

"You—you—you *idiot*!"

Only at that point did Shouryuu realize he was there. He sat up and nodded, as if he never expected to see Itan in any other state. Besides Shukou, right behind him, and Seishou, who must have let them in, everybody wore the same pinched expression on their faces.

"What's this, all of a sudden?"

"Didn't an envoy arrive from Gen Province?"

"Sure did. Nice of them to send the provincial prime minister."

"Atsuyu has reportedly demanded that he be promoted to a place above the emperor himself. And you turned him down on the spot."

Shouryuu blinked. "You think I should have taken the offer seriously?"

"You bloody fool! Why didn't you play for time? Say you had to talk it over with your ministers while we figured out a way to trip him up behind the scenes! Time is running out. We have to divine the true state of affairs in Gen, their provisions and actual troop strength. Hasn't that sunk into that thick head of yours?"

Shouryuu smiled back at him. "I'm sure we'll think of something."

Itan was more than furious. He was at his wit's end. There were 12,500 soldiers in Gen's provincial guard against the same number in the Imperial Guard. If push came to shove, they could hope and pray to double that number—hopefully triple it—with conscripts. But all the draft notices in the world wouldn't increase the totals today or tomorrow.

Moreover, increasing the number of soldiers was only half the problem. They would have to be armed and trained, and their ranks organized. There was no telling how long that would take. On top of everything else, the march to Gen Province would take a month. Provisioning the troops for the length of the campaign was another question entirely. There weren't enough wagon trains available to do the job.

Shouryuu said with a startled look, "You must be the only man in any kingdom to disparage the emperor like that."

"What kind of emperor are you? If you want to be treated like an emperor worthy of respect, then start acting like one!"

"Not that it bothers me one way or the other."

Itan's shoulders slumped. "Indeed. I have come to the realization that remonstrating with you is a waste of breath."

"Only now?"

Itan ignored the quip and turned to his colleagues behind him. "Anyway, let's see what we can make of the Imperial Guard. It looks like we'll have to face Gen with no more than the 12,500 we have."

Shouryuu quickly broke in. "That will not be possible."

"Why?"

"Because Rokuta isn't here. We need his yea or nay to mobilize the provincial guard of Sei Province. Unfortunately, there's nobody here to give it."

"Don't you know the meaning of extenuating circumstances?"

"It's not me making the rules when it comes to that sort of thing."

"This is about rescuing the Taiho! How are we supposed to get his approval if he's been kidnapped? Are there any brains left in that head of yours?"

"Approval won't be forthcoming. Looks like we'll have to give up on that idea."

Itan felt the world spinning around him. "You do understand, don't you, that the Gen provincial guard is at full division strength?"

"I certainly do. Say, how about we shake things up in Kou Province?"

Itan's eyes opened wide. Kou was a big province situated to the northwest of the capital. The tip of its southern border wedged itself between Sei Province and Gen Province.

"Dammit, are you aware of the gravity of the times we are in?"

"It's certainly my intent to. Retire the province lord. Appoint the chief secretary the Lord Privy Seal in the Sankou. Except for the prime minister, promote everybody in the provincial Rikkan to the Imperial Rikkan. Dispatch an Imperial Edict and haul them all back to Kankyuu. Oh, and Seishou—"

Seishou came to attention. "Yes."

"By my authority, I appoint you commander of the army of the left. Lead your troops to Gen Province and surround Genboku palace."

Seishou acknowledged the order with a slight bow.

"What do you think you're doing? At least listen to what people are saying!" The tone of Itan's raised voice was that of a drowning man clutching at straws.

Shouryuu replied with barely a shrug. "It's decided. It's an Imperial Edict, after all."

"I don't object to making Seishou a general. But at most he'll have 7,500 men under him. Laying siege to a provincial capital is no mean feat. How are you going to provision them? How are you going to mobilize them?"

"I thought I was the emperor here."

"Unfortunately, you are."

“Then is it necessary for me to explain everything I say?”

Itan glared at him. “That doesn’t mean I have to go along with the whimsies of a fool as he leads the kingdom to destruction.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Shouryuu grumbled to himself. He got up and said, rapping on the table for emphasis, “To start out with, let’s see if you can digest this much. The eight provinces of En do not answer to me.”

Itan drew a sharp breath. The province lords had, in fact, been appointed by Emperor Kyou. But no one dared voice the obvious implications out loud.

“We can’t leave Kankyuu wide open. Dispatch the entire Imperial Army and ne’er-do-wells are bound to start coming out of the woodwork.”

“But—”

“Just listen. Gen Province has detained Rokuta and is blackmailing us while using him as a shield. Gen has no need to divide its forces and send troops to Kankyuu. Though it certainly does appear that agents aligned with Gen are smuggling a large number of armaments out of Kankyuu, I haven’t heard any reports of horses or wagons being stockpiled. That suggests no desire to mount a protracted attack on Kankyuu, not in the near term.”

Itan nodded. “For the time being.”

“Nevertheless, we can’t simply bide our timing waiting for Gen to make its move. *Because* Rokuta is there. If they won’t come to us, we’ll have to go to them. Even with an Imperial Guard of 12,500 against the provincial army of the left with 12,500, even ignoring the fact that they’ll be fighting on their own turf, we’ll still be facing an uphill battle. We’ve got to send all the soldiers we can.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying all along!”

“Surround Ganboku and threaten the provincial capital. Gen will be prepared for a siege. The situation will stalemate. It’ll quickly become obvious that this is no overnight campaign. Everybody in Gen will see it coming too. What steps will Gen take next?”

“Next—”

When Shouryuu glanced at him, Shukou said, “Instigate the province lords nearest Kankyuu to hit back. We should assume they’ve been laying the groundwork all along.”

“Exactly. By no means can we leave Kankyuu unguarded and exposed. We have the balance of the provincial guard. Spread the word about Gen’s treason and recruit soldiers from around the capital.”

“Will that be enough to hold ground?”

“We’ll make it be enough. They don’t need swords and spears. Gather a large population of civilians here in Kankyuu. None of the armies of the neighboring

provinces exceed 10,000. With 30,000 potentially armed soldiers, none of them is going to risk his neck for somebody else's vendetta."

Itan sputtered, "And if one of them does?"

"Then I guess lady luck wasn't on our side."

"Look—"

"Don't misunderstand. At this point, it's all or nothing for us. If Rokuta gets killed, I'm a dead man walking. And I don't think you'll be holding onto your posts much longer either."

Next to the dumbstruck Itan, Shukou broke in, "How many civilians can we sway to our side?"

"Spread lies like chum and cast a wide net."

"Lies—"

"The Taiho is a mere thirteen—no, let's call him ten. Spin some tear-jerking tales about the tender-hearted nature of our young Taiho and plant the stories where they'll spread the fastest. The pitiful child is being cruelly held against his will in Gen Province. Oh, and don't leave out the part about how the emperor is such a wise and inspired ruler."

The three other men there stood there with thunderstruck expressions on their faces.

Shouryuu said with a sardonic smile, "Didn't the emperor ascend to the throne in answer to the heartfelt wishes of his subjects? Now that newly-occupied throne is under threat. Will the kingdom again fall into chaos, the green valleys and fields once again become home to the nests and dens of youma? We'd all better pray the emperor is that good and smart. Who doesn't hope this renaissance will continue under his enlightened leadership? True or not, that's what they all want to believe."

"You sound more like a swindler than an emperor."

"We're merely taking advantage of their faith. The more soldiers there are in Kankyuu, the more secure we will be."

*Even so,* Itan grumbled. Next to him, Shukou said, "There's still the critical strategy for attacking Gen Province."

"I'll leave that to you, Seishou. Take all necessary measures to surround the provincial capital with the Imperial Guard's 7,500."

"But Gen's army of the left is at division strength—"

Shouryuu grinned. "I think not. We're talking about a fighting force scraped together from convicts and the dredges of society. At most, 10,000 souls."

"Where did you come up with a number like that?"

"First-hand knowledge. I'm a platoon leader, didn't you know? One of the first green shoots to spring out of the ground after the hay is mowed down. That's the kind of army we're talking about."

Shukou and Seishou exchanged glances.

Itan leaned forward across the table and looked Shouryuu in the face. “Just a minute. You? A member of the Gen provincial guard? Being a platoon leader would make you a warrant officer.”

A fully-staffed army consisted of five regiments of 2500 soldiers split into five battalions, and those further divided into five companies, four platoons, and five squads with five soldiers each.

“I was down in Ganboku looking for a good time when I got recruited into the provincial guard. If I kill fifty imperial soldiers, I’d get to captain a company. Two hundred will win me a promotion to battalion commander. Take the head of an invading general and one day I could lead the army of the left in the Imperial Guard. Kill the emperor himself and the post of Daishiba would be mine. Granted, collecting on that last one would be a bit tricky.”

Itan rolled his eyes at the ceiling. “I could weep in sheer amazement.”

Shukou took another deep breath and let it out. “I thought I told you to quit playing spy.”

“But it’s useful, no? Take the long view.”

“Anyway, sieges take time. During that time, the fate of the Taiho will remain all the more in doubt.”

“Pray that it doesn’t.”

“But if the worst comes to worst, the winds of fate will reach you as well.”

“Shukou.” Shouryuu looked squarely into the eyes of his retainer. “Should we hold Rokuta’s life so dear that we yield to Atsuyu’s demands?”

Shukou was at a loss for words.

“The kirin chooses the emperor. That is the bedrock principle upon which a kingdom is founded. A single instance of a traitor successfully undermining that principal would bring the kingdom to its knees. Such a bad precedent cannot be allowed to be established. Don’t you agree?”

“But—”

“Do we favor the kingdom or the king?”

Shukou had no ready answer. If Atsuyu killed Rokuta, the emperor standing before him would die too. That was the way this world worked. If against all odds the struggle turned to the emperor’s advantage, a cornered Atsuyu could kill the kirin. Acting in the best interests of the emperor alone, he should tell him to accept Atsuyu’s offer. But he couldn’t.

“The day we give Atsuyu what he wants is the day this kingdom loses whatever legitimacy it had.” Shouryuu flashed the dumbstruck Shukou a wry smile. “With a little luck, we’re sure to claw our way out of this mess.”

# Chapter 21

[5-3] **S**tanding on a balcony carved into the side of Ganboku Mountain, Rokuta gazed down at the Gen Province and the city below. The breeze brushing against his face carried with it the scent of rain.

"The monsoons are coming. It doesn't look like the Rokusui levees will be ready in time."

A long war was about to commence and the rains would come before the strife could be settled. The rainy season notwithstanding, provinces like Gen along the shores of the Black Sea didn't see that much precipitation. The threatening rains fell further upstream.

"It's too late to worry about that."

Kouya leaned against the railing, looking down at the world below. The surface of the twisting Rokusui glimmered dully in the sunlight. The Rokusui was always a threat to those living in the flood plains. There was no telling when this mighty river would overflow. The year previous had been fine. And perhaps this year the banks would hold as well.

But next year? Good luck one year only heightened the unease the next. Fear would inundate Gen Province before the floods did.

Rokuta blurted out, "In any case, the sooner this thing comes to a head the better."

Kouya replied with a wry smile, "Sooner or later, it hardly matters now. War is a bigger disaster than a flood."

"True."

"In fact," Kouya said, raising his gaze from the tableau below and looking at Rokuta, "the secretary wanted to mobilize his troops long before now. Except the odds did not favor a march on Kankyuu. He had to figure out a way to get the Imperial Guard to come to him. Only after he'd failed to find such a strategy did I mention my connection to you. I said that I knew the Taiho. And so you ended up here. Are you angry?"

He'd imagined that Rokuta had forgotten all about him. But hoped if he persisted, he might at least arrange a meeting. And if he played his cards right, entice him to Ganboku. Rokuta was sure to be surrounded by his protective detail. If things went badly, Kouya would never return to Ganboku.

In response to these concerns, Atsuyu devised an alternate strategy. "Better to lie a little than lose my Shashi," he'd said.

Rokuta nodded. “The ends justify the means. That’s the way the world works. Hey, is it really okay for me not to go back to my cell?”

“You must be getting claustrophobic in there. Besides, the secretary said you deserved time off for being so well behaved.”

“How nice of him.”

This time alone, Kouya responded with a genuine smile. “He’s very grateful for giving him your undivided attention. Maybe this is his way of thanking you. But take one step outside the palace and that thread will break.”

“Yeah, I know.” However Rokuta raised his eyes, he couldn’t see the stone attached to his forehead.

Kouya grinned. “Kirin are awfully inconvenient creatures. You need at least two hostages to keep one pinned down.”

“A lot more than two.”

“True.” Kouya smiled again. “There’s Ribi’s retainers, not to mention the rest of her entourage. If you try something, they’ll all die.”

“Can’t you at least let them go?”

“Think we should?”

“A single hostage is enough. I can see keeping Ribi, but why hold onto the rest of them, and that baby? It’s not like I’m going to run away or anything.”

“I’ll ask the secretary. But I doubt it. He is not such a humanitarian that he would let such spirited foes out of his grasp.”

“Probably not,” Rokuta agreed with a deep sigh.

Atsuyu came onto the balcony. “Oh, there you are.” He bowed deeply to Rokuta and smiled at Kouya. “The Imperial Army is on the move.”

Rokuta cast a surprised glance over his shoulder. “The army?”

“So it seems, Taiho. The Imperial Guard only. Its 7,500 troops should soon depart Kankyuu.”

“Can they win?”

“Them or us?”

Atsuyu chuckled. Rokuta couldn’t imagine what the laughing matter was.

“If you’re asking whether the Imperial Guard will win, I would tell you that we won’t be easily defeated. If you are asking whether we will win, I’d tell you we shall do our damnedest.”

“Why?” Rokuta muttered. “Why are you and Shouryuu itching for this fight, sewing confusion far and wide without a thought as to the consequences? You blithely talk of 7,500 soldiers. Do you really know what that means? You are not counting *things*. You are counting *lives,* individuals with families and hope and dreams.”

Atsuyu said with a nonchalant shrug, “I understand very well. But do you, Taiho, understand how many of your subjects will die when the Rokusui breaches its banks? Given the choice between ten thousand dying tomorrow or sacrificing a thousand today, I will willingly choose the latter.”

“The both of you—Atsuyu and Shouryuu—say exactly the same thing.”

Kouya placed a hand on his shoulder. “The thing has been set in motion. There’s only one way to stop it now: the secretary surrenders and apologizes. Rokuta, will you tell him to kill himself?”

“Kouya, that is a low blow.”

“But it’s the truth. Telling him to withdraw the troops is, in so many words, telling him to die. If it is acceptable for him to trade his one life for those of a thousand soldiers, then you’re striking the same moral bargain as him.”

Rokuta turned his back to them and rested his hands on the railing and buried his head in his arms. “You don’t understand. Nobody does, who can taste blood in the air without flinching.”

Kouya patted him on the back. “Then the emperor should agree to the secretary’s wishes. Even if he occupies a position superior to that of the emperor and wields the equivalent authority, the emperor would have no fear for his life.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“But, Rokuta, the moment you were detained in Gen Province, the road to war became inevitable.”

Rokuta raised his head with a start and glanced back at Kouya.

Kouya had a sad look on his face. “If you had wanted to avoid a war, back in Kankyuu you should have sicced your shirei on me, abandoned the baby, and run. Once you were in our custody, there was no going back for any of us, including the secretary.”

Rokuta hung his head. That was the truth. But there was no way he could have consigned to death the child right there in front of him.

“Kirin are pitiful creatures, doomed by their own sense of compassion. Sticking by the emperor’s side as the Saiho must be a constant strain. Leaving everything to Atsuyu would make your life so much easier. Look—” Kouya took Rokuta by the hand. “I want to resolve this without a war too. That’s why the emperor should hand things over to the secretary, and you should write a letter exhorting him to do so.”

“I could write all I want, but Shouryuu isn’t going to listen.”

“Really?”

“Shouryuu isn’t about to give up the throne. He really wanted a kingdom of his own. He is not the kind of self-sacrificing chap who’d let go of a thing like that without a fight.” Rokuta said to Atsuyu, “He’d carry on the fight all by himself, if

that's what it came down to. One of you must yield, and Shouryuu won't until he's dead."

Atsuyu said with a haunting smile, "The same goes for me, Taiho."

"Oh."

Atsuyu focused his eyes on the world below. "So he wanted a kingdom of his own, eh? Or he wanted to become the king of a kingdom?"

"I should ask you the same question."

"I have no interest in wielding power and authority. I didn't go on the Shouzan after Emperor Kyou died, however the minister encouraged me too. The throne holds no allure for me."

"Why?"

"All that matters is what's best for the people. The emperor who should be creating for them a safe haven thinks of them not at all. Are you aware how much the people of En yearned for a new emperor, Taiho?"

"That is—"

"The kingdom should change when the new emperor is crowned. But this new emperor reserves all authority to himself and takes the government for granted. That the long-awaited ruler should be such a fellow—in which case, somebody has to step forward and stand up for the people."

"And that someone is you?" Rokuta asked sardonically.

Atsuyu shook his head. "If the ruler existed who was truly well-suited to reign, I would yield to him in a heartbeat. As I said, I am not interested in holding onto the reins of power." He strode to the edge of the balcony and once again took in the world below. "I see. So the emperor only wished to see what it felt like to sit on the throne. No wonder he has so much contempt for the hard work of governance."

"Atsuyu, that's not what I meant."

With a single shake of his head, Atsuyu faced Rokuta and said with a polite nod, "Taiho, I can only begin to imagine the suffering you are going through. I haven't got the words. But if fortune smiles upon us and the Imperial Guard is turned back without incident, in the end we shall surely see all this evil turned to good, and find a way out of this darkness."

# Chapter 22

[5-4] **R**okuta trudged back to his cell. Ribi was playing with the baby.

"Oh, you're back," she said.

"Yeah."

Noting the moody tone of his voice, Ribi leaned forward with a questioning look. "What's going on?"

"Ribi," Rokuta said, taking a seat, "do you think wanting a kingdom is the same as wanting the throne?"

"Eh?"

Rokuta shook his head. "No, that's not it. How to put it—I don't know."

"What brought this about?"

"Shouryuu said he wanted a kingdom. Nothing about being emperor or making the most of his rank and position. Just the kingdom. My sense is that it's not the same thing as becoming emperor, one of the high and mighty. That's why I gave him the throne."

"Taiho—"

"Perhaps I was mistaken?"

"Taiho—what in the world—"

Rokuta plopped himself down on the bed. "Sorry. I'm just babbling."

The skies were clear over the tiny fief hugging the shores of the Inland Sea. In an era that more often than not saw bloodstains washed away with more blood, the smell of death and gore from the ubiquitous battlefields swept in across the sea.

So Rokuta was the first one to notice something was amiss. Fresh blood was in the wind. Three days after that growing sense of unease first began troubling him, a body washed ashore. It was one of the fishermen who sailed out from the shores below the castle.

"What's going on?" Rokuta asked Shouryuu. "You should know, if anybody."

Shouryuu was sitting on the dock of the bay casting his fishing line into the water. "You know about the Murakami?"

"No."

"Like the Komatsu, they're descendants of pirates with roots on the opposite shore. They serve the Kouno, but ever since the Onin War they've been tugging hard on the leash. Seems they've yanked themselves free and are roaming about at will."

Rokuta's eyes opened wide. "Are you going to be okay?"

“Hmm. The Murakami have long had their eyes on this place. Control the straits between here and there and they’ll control access to the Inland Sea. I expect an attack to come soon.”

“You’re going to run away? That’s what you said you’d do.”

Shouryuu said with a tight smile, “I told my father to accept the patronage of the Murakami, but he’s a man who values his pride above all.”

“Then will this land become a war zone too?”

Now Shouryuu laughed. “This is the only territory we’ve got. It’d be nice to have someplace to retreat to. Alas, there’s barely enough room here to swing a cat. However we once called ourselves a seafaring clan, we’d be facing down the famed In’noshima flotilla. The three Murakami clans are tight as thieves. If the battle turns against them, they’ll call on their brothers in Noshima and Kurushima.”

Shouryuu delivered his little lecture with the attitude of a bored professor. Rokuta frowned at him. “You talk as if it was happening to somebody else.”

“Kicking up a fuss about it won’t accomplish anything. Say we sidle up to the Oouchi and Suou and manage to stave off the Murakami onslaught. The Kobayakawa will then surely hit us at our weakest point. Time to gird up our loins.” He grinned. “I haven’t got any sisters and daughters to marry off. That means no reliable allies with blood ties. We’ll have to prepare for the worst.”

“Aren’t you the heir? Wouldn’t you be the most at risk?”

“All the more reason,” Shouryuu blithely responded, “for you to pack your bags. Leave before hostilities break out. Go west. Find a place war hasn’t reached.”

Rumors of war spread like wildfire. Itinerant workers without houses or boats were the first to abandon the fief. Shouryuu may have helped fan the flames to urge them on. He certainly stopped wandering around outside the castle. The fishermen going to sea armed themselves and stockpiled provisions on the small islands in the bay.

Despite the painful tension and the loathsome winds of war blowing all about, Rokuta resolved to stick around.

On one such day, a messenger came from the manor house to the fisherman’s shack where Rokuta was staying. He handed Rokuta some money and told him to flee for his life.

“The young master says there’s no reason for any children to die here who’ve got no ties to this place.”

Rokuta inquired about Shouryuu and was told he’d set off for the island forts early that morning.

“The young master is hard at work night and day. There’ll be no doubting his abilities after this.”

Holding the coins in his hand, Rokuta went down to the beach. From the rocky shore he scanned the nearby islands in the bay, the boats moored at the island piers. On the inlet side, they were building an anchorage for warships.

"What's to come of all this?" The woman's voice echoed from the shadows at his feet. Rokuta didn't answer.

"Is he not the emperor?" Yokuhi pointed out the obvious, but Rokuta remained tightlipped. "Didn't you leave Mt Hou and cross the ocean because the emperor was here?"

"If I did, I didn't do it on purpose."

"Warships are gathering at that far island. If you stay here, Enki, you will be caught up in the conflagration."

"I know." Rokuta tightened his grip on the coins. "Yokuhi, Rikaku."

"Yes," came the formless answer.

"If it becomes necessary, protect Shouryuu. Stay out of the fight. Don't kill any of the enemy. If worst comes to worst, grab him and take him to a safe place. I owe him. I cannot let him die."

"But—"

"Go. I have other shirei."

"Yes," came the voices of his servants.

*Because Shouryuu was there for me when it mattered,* he tried to convince himself. But he knew there was a lot more to it than that. *If Shouryuu dies, what will become of En?*

One voice assured him, *These things always work themselves out*.

*Are you sure?* asked another.

Did the Will of Heaven fall only on one man? If it did, then Shouryuu dying here meant that En would lose its emperor.

The fishermen and shopkeepers knew they had no chance of winning this battle. Rokuta could save Shouryuu alone, appoint him emperor, and take him back to En. But if that again brought war to En—he'd never let himself trust any creature who called himself an emperor.

Could Shouryuu really save En? He was equally capable of destroying En so thoroughly it would never rise again.

"Why must I be the kirin?"

He embodied the will of the people but could not hear what they had to say. If only he could ask those who remained behind in that shattered land what he should do.

The fighting began in earnest barely three days later. The Komatsu forces fought a good fight against the ships surrounding the forts. Rokuta and the others who'd

stayed behind watched from the coast. As long as the island garrisons held, the Murakami would not invade the land.

On the sixth day, a war cry rent the air behind them. Charging over the mountains circling the bay, the Murakami forces attacked from the rear.

Flames engulfed the watchtowers ahead and behind them. The chaos spilled down the hills, crowding Rokuta and the others onto the shore. They barely managed to pile into a fleet of small boats as the manor house was overrun. Fire climbed the corner turrets. Battering rams caved in the main castle gate.

Shouryuu's father, the ruler of the Komatsu domain, took to his heels and died as he ran. Shouryuu inherited his father's pirate kingdom even as the enemy closed in from all sides.

A mere four days remained until the Komatsu clan would disappear from history.

# Chapter 23

[5-5] **N**ews of the Saiho's abduction left Kankyuu in an uproar. Long lines wound out of the Imperial Provincial Offices. People eager for news about the situation packed every available space between the High Bluff Gate and the Pheasant Gate.

"Is Gen going to invade Kankyuu too?"

The kingdom had stepped back from the brink of destruction only twenty years before. Nobody had forgotten the wretched state of En back then. En was still impoverished compared to the other kingdoms, but its subjects had every reason to believe that tomorrow would be better than today.

They had finally finished disposing of the debris. The hollow sound of iron striking charred wood and bones no longer greeted their ears every time they planted a hoe in the ground. And now to have all their hard work burned to cinders all over again—

"What is the emperor going to do?"

"Don't tell me he's gone into hiding!"

"How is the Taiho faring? Is he all right?"

Harried by the inquiries from the city folk late into night, the exhausted bureaucrats crawled out of bed the next morning and opened the doors. The overflow spilled into the Ministry of Summer and the office of the Commandant, where the staff was run ragged from sunup to sundown.

One of the Commandant's officers, a man by the name of On Kei, was the first down to the provincial offices the next morning and opened the doors himself.

The previous day's commotion fresh in his mind, On Kei resigned himself to the tedium of more of the same, people again packing the provincial offices and peppering him with questions like, "Are we going to win?"

He wanted to shout back at them: *Be sure to tell me when you find out!*

"What happens if the emperor gets killed? We just managed to survive Emperor Kyou's regime and get some new ministers on the job and start living our normal lives!"

*You and me both,* On Kei grumbled to himself, the doom and gloom hanging like a wet blanket around his shoulders as he released the bolts and pushed open the doors to the Commandant's office.

As expected, a crowd had gathered outside the big doors. They surged forward. On Kei held up his hands, bringing them to a halt. When the expected protests erupted, he gestured for them to calm down.

“The office of the Commandant already has its hands fully occupied. We understand your concerns. If you have questions about the current situation, you need to look elsewhere for answers. We simply haven’t the time and resources to spare at this time.”

“But—” somebody protested. “Is war really going to break out? You can at least tell us that much.”

“That’s a question you should pose to Gen Province. When Gen raises the flag of insurrection, the Imperial Army has no choice but to respond.”

“How fares the Taiho? What about the emperor?”

*How am I supposed to know?* On Kei said to himself. Instead, he nodded. “The emperor is doing fine. He is more concerned that no harm befalls any of you. We don’t know the current condition of the Taiho and can only pray that he remains unharmed.”

An old man asked, “Is there any way to resolve this conflict without war?”

“If you figure out the answer to that question, please let us know.”

“Will the countryside become a battlefield all over again? Just when things were starting to improve! This time if our fields get trampled underfoot by the cavalry, we’ll be done for good. Doesn’t the Commandant understand that?”

On Kei gave the old man an exasperated look. “That’s why I said to speak up if you know a way to avoid war. The emperor isn’t looking for a fight. Gen Province is the cause of all this.”

“But—”

Confronted by a chorus of raised voices, On Kei waved his arms. “Please take it elsewhere. The Ministry of Summer is not the forum for such discussions.”

The people crowded in front of the gates exchanged glances. Several turned on their heels in search of more obliging bureaucrats.

One woman stepped forward. “Is the Imperial Army going to win?” She faced On Kei directly, a baby cradled against her breast.

“We shall endeavor to make certain that it does.”

“Gen Province abducted the Taiho. If they kill him, the emperor will fall as well.”

“That is certainly true.”

“But are you doing enough? Won’t you have to send the Imperial Army to Gen Province and bring the Taiho back to the Palace?”

On Kei couldn’t help starting a bit. “Exactly. That is what the Commandant and his staff are working hard at.”

“There’s nothing here worth fighting over in the first place!” shouted the old man.

The woman glared at him. “What will be accomplished without a fight? Are you telling the emperor to drop dead? Without an emperor, a kingdom goes to rack and ruin. Everybody knows what that is like.”

“War is nothing but rack and ruin.”

The woman’s mouth briefly twisted into a bemused smile. “You’re still not telling me anything I don’t already know.”

“Meaning what?” the old man demanded, in the manner of hitching up his britches.

She fixed him with an icy stare, then scanned the people still gathered there, male and female, young and old. “I know that there are those among you here—and no small number among the people in this city—who killed our children.”

She held up the sleeping child in her arms. “Look, my child. I petitioned the riboku and Heaven answered. You’ve all done the same thing. But I also know that there are those freely walking about who killed our kin. My own sister was murdered and cast into a well.”

The room fell silent.

“A man broke into our house late at night, abducted her even as she slept next me and threw the body down in a well. I know for a fact he is leading a peaceful, easy life today. That’s what happens when a kingdom goes to rack and ruin—the criminals wipe their mouths and carry on as if nothing happened.”

On Kei politely tapped the woman on the back. “That’s enough,” he said.

She coldly stared back at him. “You can all pretend that nothing’s wrong but the sin never disappears. I will never forget. For the rest of my days, I will remember the sound of my sister’s body hitting the water at the bottom of that well. Mark my words, the same thing will happen again. If this unrest continues and the emperor dies, this child will surely meet the same fate. When the destruction comes, it will come, and there’s nothing we can do to stop it. Is that what you all want?”

She surveyed her surroundings and turned to On Kei with a triumphant look. “Move aside and let me pass. I’m not here to bend your ear and whine and complain like this lot.”

She smiled at the flustered On Kei.

“I’m here to fight! I’m here to defend the emperor who has blessed our lives. This child isn’t going to die on my watch. I don’t want to live in a world where death is part of waking up in the morning, where everybody tells you there’s nothing they can do so just give up and accept it. That’s why the throne must be filled by an emperor chosen by the Divine Will. If making sure he can give this child a future worth looking forward to costs me my life, then so be it.”

“But—”

“Nothing says a soldier can’t be a woman. You need soldiers and every single one more counts. Send me to Ganboku. That’s what I came here to do.”

On Kei blinked in confusion as a young man stepped forward. “Me too. That’s why I’m here. Everybody says I haven’t got what it takes, that I got no guts, but if we let the emperor get killed, En is done for.”

The woman turned to the young man with a bright smile. “You’ve got plenty of guts.”

“Naw, it’s true. I can’t even win an argument. Still, I can push a wagon. My parents thought all along we were going to die together. And then we heard that a new emperor got chosen, so maybe the world wasn’t going to hell in a handbasket, after all. That gave us new hope. With an emperor on the throne, then maybe a little effort and persistence will pay off. So if there’s anything I can do to help, go ahead and put me to work.”

Laughter rippled through the crowd. A man with a receding hairline threw his head back and laughed aloud, his red face flushed crimson.

“Lots of promise in this here crowd. I regretted not being first in line, but if this is what it’s come down to, then don’t feel so bad about it.” He glanced over his shoulder and dismissively waved his hand at the people casting the woman and the young man consternated looks.

“If you came here looking for a shoulder to cry on, go elsewhere. This is the place for those exceptional citizens who want to become soldiers. So the rest of you must be headed to Ganboku too, eh?”

A wave of indecision rippled through the crowd. In ones and twos they took their leave.

Among them was a young married woman. She left the crowd of people almost as if running away. Arriving home, she found her husband at the back of their woodworking shop, planing down the panel of a cabinet. She told him what happened at the Commandant’s office.

“I couldn’t believe it. With memories of conflict and chaos so fresh in everyone’s mind, there they were chomping at the bit to go off to fight.”

Her husband gave her a cursory glance and returned to his work.

“Don’t we have an emperor so we won’t have to start fighting all over again? The only reason there’s a rebellion at all is because he’s not doing his job.” Her shoulders shook. “Ah, I hate it. The smell of blood everywhere. Going hungry all the time, nothing to feed the children. Is Kankyuu going to become a battlefield too? I’ve had enough of all this fighting.”

Her husband abruptly put down the plane and got to his feet.

“What’s this, all of a sudden?” she demanded.

She wasn't expecting an answer. He was the strong, silent type, a man who believed strongly in not wasting his breath or his words. But today would prove an exception to the rule in more ways than one.

"I'm going to the Imperial Provincial Offices."

"You're doing what? What for?"

"To march to Ganboku."

"What?" she exclaimed. "Ganboku? Don't joke about things like that."

He gazed at her, a rare look of affection in his eyes. "My parents and my brother starved to death. I don't want the same thing happening to you and the kids."

"But—"

"If we lose this emperor, the same thing will happen all over again. I'm not doing this for strangers I've never met. I'm doing it for you."

The next morning, a long line of people was again waiting in front of the Commandant's office. This time, though, they were all there to enlist.

# Chapter 24

[5-6] **I**tan slapped the bundle of papers down on the desk.

"Sakes alive!" he exclaimed. "There's certainly no underestimating the appeal of a new emperor. Even I can't help but be impressed. In three days we've got a thousand volunteers to defend Kankyuu and three hundred more willing to march off to Ganboku!"

"You don't say," Shukou said, reaching for the bundle.

"On top of that, cooperation and support are coming from the districts and prefectures outside Sei Province. Villagers from the most distant precincts are flocking to their town council buildings and setting off for Kankyuu. It's driving the ministers crazy."

"Those rumors sure are getting the job done."

"How far can rumors spread in three days? Word is, they've reached You Province already!"

"They're coming from there too?"

"That's what people are saying. Will they even get here before the troops depart for the front?"

Shukou lifted up the papers in a reverential manner. "I am grateful. And impressed. Expectations toward our new emperor have not diminished in the slightest."

"Good thing none of them have met the man personally. Once this reaches his ears, maybe even he'll turn over a new leaf."

"I wouldn't hold my breath," Shukou said with a grim smile. "Two provinces have offered their armies. Can we trust them? We don't want to invite them into Kankyuu only to end up getting attacked from within."

"We'll only accept rank-and-file soldiers and supporting materiel," Seishou broke in. "Any soldiers on loan to us we'll post outside the palace. How is Kou Province faring?"

"Excepting the province lord, the Rikkan ministers have already left the palace."

"The past Lord Privy Seal has been installed as the next province lord and has left Kankyuu."

This was a man who'd been so busily engaged in pilfering the public treasury that he had no interest in plotting political conspiracies or leading insurrections.

“His Highness has advised dismissing the entire provincial guard of Kou and confiscating their supplies. And on top of that, soldiers are to be actively recruited during the expedition to bolster the Imperial Guard.”

“But—” Itan interjected. “The soldiers embarking for Ganboku will really have to fight. Any idle soldiers from Kou we pick up along the way—can they be trained and molded into a disciplined fighting force overnight? And what if some among them turn their weapons on the Imperial Army?”

“We’re betting on their expectations vis-à-vis the new emperor.”

“This whole thing has been a gamble from the get-go.”

“That it has.” They all nodded together.

Somebody called from outside the room, “Um, could I interrupt you for a minute?” Mousen timidly poked his head around the screens.

Seishou nodded and motioned for him to enter the room. Looking more than a bit bewildered, Mousen entered with a bow.

“What’s the emergency?” Seishou said, in a manner suggesting that if there wasn’t one, he should leave forthwith.

“Well, not exactly an emergency—”

“Then what?”

Mousen glanced down at the floor and back at Seishou several times. He seemed entirely out of his depth. “I’m not trying to force anybody’s hand, but I would like to take part in Privy Council meetings—”

“What?” said Itan, raising an eyebrow. “Well, I have no objections. Speaking of which, you were once Seishou’s executive aide.” He glanced at Seishou. “How about it? Will you beckon an old subordinate back to military service? You can’t blame him for wanting to hang onto your coattails rather than bodyguard that wastrel.”

Seishou nodded in agreement. “Such was my intent. If Mousen would agree to become my executive aide once again—”

“I’m sorry, but I’m afraid that’s not possible.” Mousen took in Seishou’s reaction with upturned eyes, as if attempting to gauge his state of mind.

“Not possible? Why?”

“Um, I-I mean—I hate to have to say this, but—”

Mousen took a piece of paper from his pocket and held it out with a deep bow. “An imperial order. I’m sorry! I’ve been appointed Daishiba!”

Itan, Seishou, and Shukou gaped at him. As the head of the Ministry of Summer and the Imperial Army Chief of Staff, the Daishiba was a member of the Rikkan. He outranked a general, the position to which Seishou had just been appointed, making Mousen Seishou’s superior officer.

“What did you just say?”

“I’m sorry! B-but this promotion is supposedly only in force for the duration of hostilities. Please don’t take it personally!”

Shukou furrowed his brow. “Taking Mousen to task won’t change a thing. Where is the emperor?”

“Um, he’s out.” Mousen said.

“Out?”

“Yes. He left a message for the Daiboku—I mean, for the general.”

“What?”

“He said to make sure not to lose your head. A man can do a lot worse in this world than be made a general in the Imperial Guard.”

Itan covered his face with his hands. “That idiot.”

“Unbelievable.”

Shukou was too taken aback for words. Itan pounded on the table with his fist. “In what universe does an emperor join the army of the rebels!”

“I-I’m so sorry.”

Seishou wondered aloud, “Don’t you get the feeling that maybe there’s an inside job in the works?”

“Such as?”

“The emperor instructed me to surround Ganboku but not take it. Surrounding the city alone will hardly end the conflict.”

“Oh, about that—” Mousen produced another document apart from the previous Imperial Order. “This is for the general.”

Seishou took it, opened it, and read it on the spot. He handed it to Itan, who scanned it and sighed.

“What the hell is that man thinking?”

“Now what?” said Shukou, peering over his shoulder.

Seishou said, giving it to Shukou to read, “He says to recruit laborers during the march and construct levees in the vicinity of Ganboku.”

“So now he’s going to make a show of yielding to the will of the locals, eh?” Itan slumped into the nearest chair. “He’s like a tenant who skips out on the rent and then decides to pay up when the building’s burning down!”

“He must be up to something. No emperor in his right mind would set off for Ganboku otherwise.”

“I am running out of ways to express my astonishment. What if the unthinkable happens? What if he gets cut down in the fog of war? He must understand that is very much part of the equation too.”

“I’m sure he is well aware.” Seishou said with a wry smile, “Taking the Taiho hostage was never going to work with him. However he might hold his life precious

and hunker down in Gen'ei Palace, let the Taiho come to harm and it's all over. For the emperor, this has been a life-or-death struggle from the start."

# Part Six

## Chapter 25

[6-1] **H**aving nothing in particular to do, Rokuta spent his days wandering around the expansive palace grounds. The cooks peering from the galley—with a clear view all the way to Atsuyu's sleeping quarters—frowned at his lackadaisical attitude. But he couldn't sit down, kick back and relax.

Two months had passed since his abduction.

Rokuta pondered what to do about that. The whole thing was a mistake from beginning to end: Kouya becoming his enemy, Atsuyu plotting revolution, and him being here, the carefree prisoner. He should slip away from the provincial palace and bring his concerns directly to the emperor and the Imperial Army, but there was no way that was going to happen.

Troops had already been deployed around the outskirts of Ganboku and preparing to meet the enemy. Anticipating a decisive battle at Ganboku, provincial guardsmen scattered here and there were recalled and concentrated into a single force at the foot of the palace.

Observing what was going on, Rokuta felt he had to do *something*. To the west of Ganboku, the watchfires of the Imperial Army dotted the mountains overlooking the Rokusui River. War was inevitable. It could only be days until the fighting started in earnest.

He had to do *something*. He simply didn't know *what*. He was out of time. If he didn't act soon, there'd be no going back.

Rokuta was impatiently chewing his fingernails in his jail cell when Ribi sat down in front of him, holding the child in her arms.

"Taiho, won't you please tell me what is troubling you so?"

"It's nothing," Rokuta mumbled. "Just down in the dumps, that's all. Nothing to worry about."

"Now that you mention it, you don't seem too preoccupied with whatever it is."

"Naw, it's not worth that much effort. Anyway, Atsuyu is a well-liked man. I haven't heard a single bad thing about him from anybody in the palace. If it was Shouryuu, on the other hand, nobody would hold back."

Ribi sighed and patted the child on the back. “However competent Atsuyu may be, in no way can he be compared to the emperor.”

“You sure have got Shouryuu’s back. But Atsuyu is the kind of man who gets things done. Since coming here, I haven’t seen him sitting around watching the grass grow.”

“Taiho—”

“They say he’s daring and resolute, knows how to balance the head and the heart. He’s generous and understanding. Shouryuu could learn a thing or two from him. I can almost believe that leaving the affairs of state up to him would be an improvement.”

Ribi drew her brows and frowned. Straightening and half-rising out of her seat, she said, “Taiho, you can’t be serious.”

“I am serious.”

“Why do you talk like that? Don’t you believe in the emperor you yourself chose?”

“Believing’s got nothing to do with it.” Rokuta smiled. “He really is an idiot.”

“The emperor is nobody’s fool. I think the role of ruler suits him well. That is why I chose to serve him.”

“Ah, Ribi, don’t tell me you have a thing for him?”

“Taiho!”

Now she sounded really angry. Rokuta reflexively ducked a bit. He knew what was going on. His restlessness was getting the better of him, so now he was picking fights with Ribi.

“It’s so sad. Why must you belittle His Highness so? Why did you urge the throne upon him then?”

“Don’t ask me. Ask the Lord God Creator instead.”

“Taiho—” Ribi straightened again and said, “When I was appointed a viceroy, His Highness apologized to me.”

“Shouryuu did? How strange.”

“He said that the province lords didn’t answer to him. And if he tried to constrain their authority, they would surely rise up against him.”

Ribi had answered the emperor: “No matter. You can’t allow them to do however they please. You will have to dismiss them eventually. Some will fight back, even rise up in arms. Pilfering the provincial treasury is the least of our problems. You must be on your guard to make sure they are not raising armies behind your back.”

Her own words soon came home to roost.

“I expect to meet fierce resistance when reorganizing the province lords. To nip such impulses in the bud, make sure they follow the Divine Decrees and keep their

armies within the legal limits, to prevent them from conspiring together, we must have governors general there on the ground."

"You are bestowing such an enormous responsibility upon me?"

Ribi bowed reverentially, overcome by the gravity of what was being asked of her. She was a lower-ranked official in the criminal courts, the equivalent of a baron. Being abruptly raised to the post of viscount couldn't help but make her feel she was rising above her station.

Shouryuu shook his head. "Don't go thanking me yet. If the province lords raise the flag of insurrection, the viceroys will find themselves on the front lines. Ordering a viceroy to take up residence in a provincial palace could turn out to be a death sentence. The problem is, I'm playing on this chess board with very few pieces. I'm not one for handing out death sentences, but I don't have anybody other than you qualified to go."

Ribi fell still for a moment before facing the emperor, an unusually serious expression on her face. "I greatly appreciate you being so candid with me. Whatever the odds may be, I wouldn't want to do anything else."

"To tell the truth, I was deeply uncertain whether to appoint you or Shukou the eighth provincial viceroy. But adding up both your strong and weak points, you were the person better suited for the job. Shukou may not look it, but his temper gets the better of him. Regardless of what else is going on in the provincial palace, you must hold your tongue, observe, and report. Aside from specific instructions, don't get tangled up in long-winded exhortations. I'm afraid that's something Shukou just hasn't the patience for."

"Yes."

"Will you do this for me?"

"I happily accept the post."

Shouryuu nodded. *I'm sorry,* she heard him say. The low, tense sound of his voice was forever etched in her thoughts.

"Huh," Rokuta responded listlessly, staring off into the distance.

Ribi said, "That was the first time I've seen him looking so—serious. However he may play the fool, he is not irresponsible. He gives thought to those things that deserve thought, and acts when action is truly called for. He simply doesn't let it show."

"And maybe you're trying too hard to see the best in him." Rokuta smiled. "Shukou and the others would weep to hear you carry on in such a manner. They'd tell you the people closest to him wear themselves ragged picking up the pieces he leaves behind. He skips out on Privy Council meetings, sallies off to who knows

where, every word goes in one ear and out the other while he does whatever he decided to do in the first place."

"But His Highness hasn't actually done anything wrong. Itan and the others go on about how he's a good-for-nothing lay-about, while the emperor has deported himself in a most magnanimous manner. As a result, even when things were at their worst, we never succumbed to despair."

"You really do have a soft spot for Shouryuu."

Ribi sadly shook her head. "Why do you say things like that? To even imagine that you have no faith in the emperor grieves me terribly."

Ribi, I—"

"I firmly believe the emperor is anything but an incompetent ruler. He selected the most discerning ministers from among the civil service and placed the most important offices in their capable hands. There can be no doubts about that."

"Important offices? I'll grant you that an imperial viceroy counts as such. It is never far removed from actual danger. Itan and Shukou risk little. But they are barons at best, no?"

Rokuta meant it as a jest. Ribi only shook her head. "Which is why the expected waves of discord never arose. His Highness ignored those countless bureaucrats who spent their time playing king of the mountain while the kingdom sank into chaos. Rather, he settled on those of us not in competition for any office. I was promoted to viscount in a capacity far removed from the gaze of other court officials. And so the Imperial Court was not torn by envy and discord."

"But—"

"The Suijin is at best a middle-ranked baron, and he has the important duty of managing the kingdom's lands. When tax monies intended for flood control projects disappear into a minister's pocket, what happens to the shoddily-built levees? Even in the Ministry of Earth, this portfolio critical to the well-being of the people was given to Itan. The Suijin is outranked only by the Daishito and his permanent undersecretary, a crook and a coward who would never deign to get their hands dirty doing honest work. Except Itan isn't intimidated by the likes of them, so the countryside has recovered."

Rokuta didn't respond.

"Shukou is the Imperial Magistrate, a lower-ranked baron at best. The Imperial Magistrate is independent of the court and can discipline even province lords, the only minister who reports directly to the emperor. Seishou is the Daiboku, and the closest to the emperor in the Ministry of Summer. He can stand close by in the shadows and protect the emperor against traitors and turncoats. He can cut a path through the fools in the bureaucracy so Shukou and Seishou can do their jobs."

"Ribi, enough already," Rokuta sighed, but she wasn't finished.

“The emperor gave Itan the position of Suijin. Without a minister of internal revenue or anyone to administer the imperial estates, over half of all taxes were disappearing into the pockets of corrupt officials. Since the new dynasty began, the estates themselves haven’t paid a penny in taxes, supposedly because of repeated crop failures. The restoration of the public lands, not the productivity of the imperial estates, was always the first priority. That’s why Itan was given that job. Can’t you see how these priorities reflect his concern for his subjects?”

“Shouryuu is no tyrant. I know that. But it doesn’t matter. Because he’s still the man in charge.”

Ribi let out a long breath. Her eyes cast down, she was silent for a while. Finally she placed the child in her lap on the floor and got to her feet.

“Taiho, do not forget. The destruction of the kingdom made the people suffer. The coronation of the new emperor made them rejoice.”

She walked around in back of him. Rokuta started to turn around to look at her, but he couldn’t as she had grasped him by the shoulders.

“Ribi?”

“Taiho, the leader you chose for us is Shouryuu-sama. It is not and never will be Atsuyu.”

“Ribi, it’s not that I—” *don’t believe in Shouryuu,* he was going to say. *It’s emperors I don’t believe in.*

“We are waiting for the Emperor of En, for Shouryuu-sama.”

“I know. But—”

“In a few more days, the Imperial Army will reach Ganboku.”

Rokuta wanted to glance behind him, but Ribi wrapped her arms around him. He couldn’t even crane his head back. Her pale hands cradled his chin.

“It’s time for you to return to the Imperial Palace,” she said, and shifted her hands up to his forehead.

Before he could stop her, she ripped away the stone sealing his horn. He heard the sound of tearing thread, a sound as light and airy as spider’s silk, and as heavy as lead.

# Chapter 26

[6-2] **F**rom above the Sea of Clouds, Atsuyu gazed down at the world below.

"They got here faster than I expected."

Standing behind him, Kouya leaned forward to see for himself. Across the meandering Rokusui encircled Ganboku, beyond the marshy land bordering the opposing banks, the flags of the Imperial Army dotted the mountain passes.

"And so it begins."

Two months had passed since the abduction of the Taiho, meaning the Imperial Army had mustered and marched on Ganboku in surprisingly short order. When its troops forded the river, hostilities would begin in earnest.

"With all due respect, Secretary."

The man who raised his voice was Hakutaku, the prime minister. He knelt behind them, his face pinched with mortification.

"What?"

"Many in the city and surrounding areas are in a high state of agitation. They say you are a rebel plotting insurrection."

Atsuyu smiled. "If a man who would abolish the prerogatives of the emperor and elevate himself to a higher station is not an insurrectionist, then who is?"

"The soldiers are in an uproar as well. Signs of desertion are appearing in the ranks. Do you really think explanations like that will be enough to raise morale?"

Atsuyu walked over to Hakutaku and said with an icy stare, "You knew where this road was leading, Hakutaku. To open revolt. Getting cold feet?"

"The soldiers did not. They knew nothing about any of this. The Imperial Army showing up on our doorstep is going to make the conscripts ask what they are doing here."

"That can't be much of a mystery either."

"Secretary, is this really the best course to take?"

Atsuyu grimaced. "It's a little late in the game to ask that question, Hakutaku."

Hakutaku only bowed his head. Kouya looked on with a sense of emotional detachment. He could hardly blame the man for harboring second thoughts. Nobody dared to be brutally honest in front of the soldiers or even in front of the civil service, but the state of affairs was clearly not turning in the best of directions.

The Imperial Army had arrived in greater numbers than anticipated. Leaving Kankyuu, the Palace Guard numbered a mere 7,500. The provincial ministers in Gen

predicted an easy victory, knowing that no ordinary assault could breach the near-impregnable defenses of the provincial palace.

Moreover, they were on their home territory and knew the lay of the land. *Defeat was out of the question,* they reassured themselves.

Atsuyu gazed down at Hakutaku. He asked in a cool tone, “What is the present troop strength of the Imperial Army?”

“At least twenty thousand.”

“What?” Atsuyu’s eyes open wider. “That is three thousand more than the last report.”

“Yes.” Hakutaku said with another bow.

*Three thousand,* Kouya repeated to himself. The Imperial Army added to its numbers with every step it took forward.

The majority of the new recruits, the ministers snickered at first, were farmers drafted off their fields, hoes still in hand. They stopped laughing when the totals topped ten thousand.

Rumors said that the Chief Rikkan Secretary of Gen was conspiring to usurp the throne, once again casting the kingdom into chaos. The discontent of the people grew day by day. Those who’d supported Atsuyu now openly voiced their dissatisfaction. Criticisms of Atsuyu were beginning to be heard among the Gen civil service.

The Imperial Army was even finding recruits in the towns around Ganboku. The streets were said to be lined with volunteers heading to Ganboku, eager to fight alongside the emperor.

“Dispatches from Kankyuu are reporting that the Sei provincial guard defending the city has reached thirty thousand.”

“Absurd,” Atsuyu barked with undiminished fearlessness, the resolution on his face as rock-hard as ever. “What is Kou Province thinking? They should be attacking the Imperial Army from the rear!”

Hakutaku only bowed lower. On paper, the Gen provincial guard numbered 12,500. The reality was closer to eight thousand. Three thousand of those were on loan to Kou Province, with three thousand additional civilians conscripted to fill the ranks.

“The province lord of Kou moved to Kankyuu and became prime minister.”

Atsuyu took a big step toward Hakutaku. He was practically standing on top of him. “Why haven’t I been told of this? What are our spies doing there anyway?”

“I’m sorry. This new information caught them by surprise.”

“Idiots.”

*You’re the idiot,* Hakutaku wanted to shout back at him. Suspicious at the lack of intel coming from Kankyuu, he’d sent agents of his own to follow up, only to discover they were purposely quashing the reports.

*What did you think was going to happen when you rejected the emperor chosen according to the Divine Will?*

Rising up and demanding independence for the good of the people of Gen was one thing. Kidnapping the Taiho and attempting to extort the emperor was quite another. With that, together with Gen's consulate staff, the spies marched out in plain view and joined the Imperial Army.

"I fear we have taken the weight of the Imperial throne and the majesty of the Divine Decrees too lightly."

"Would that be the same weight and majesty accorded Emperor Kyou?"

"The people certainly think so. They all fervently believe that the reign of the new emperor will bring forth a prosperous future. We have declared our intention to betray that future. It is perfectly logical that the people should choose to distance themselves from us."

"Hakutaku!"

As Atsuyu drew himself to his full height, Kouya heard a strange noise. From his pocket came a sound like the string of a bow snapping. He froze.

Atsuyu and Hakutaku both turned to him.

"What?"

The blood drained from Kouya's face. "The red line broke."

"It what?"

"I have to go see what happened."

Kouya whirled around and leapt onto the back of his youma.

# Chapter 27

[6-3] **K**ouya charged into the jail. “Rokuta!” he called out.

He stopped dead in his tracks.

A gruesome scene awaited him in the center of the cell. However accustomed Kouya was to the carnage left in a youma’s wake, this was so awful he reflexively took a step back.

Rokuta sat on the floor, an expression of utter blankness on his face. Bloody gore covered his head like a red shawl.

Kouya ran up to him. “Stop!” shrieked the youma behind him. Kouya didn’t, and a step later seized by the collar and dragged him backwards. The snout of a beast erupted from the floor and took a bite out of his shadow.

“Rokuta!”

A three-tailed wolf stood between them, blocking the way. Two winged arms reached out of the gore-strewn floor. The youma darted in front of Kouya and unleashed a menacing roar. Kouya again shouted his name.

Rokuta at last turned his head.

“Rokuta! Call off your shirei!”

*Stop,* Rokuta said, at first in a voice too soft to be heard. “Hold on, Rikaku.”

“But—” his shirei responded.

Rokuta slowly shook his head. “No. Spare me the sight of any more blood.”

Rokuta looked at Kouya, his voice barely louder than a whisper. “Help me.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Kouya ran to Rokuta’s side. The shirei stepped aside and disappeared.

“Rokuta, are you alright?”

Kouya placed a hand on his blood-soaked shoulder and tried to help him to his feet. Rokuta didn’t move, as if frozen to the ground. Kouya scanned his immediate surroundings and plucked the bloodstained stone out of the hands of the body lying nearby.

“Kouya, no—”

“Endure it the best you can.”

“Kouya—”

When he tried to fasten the red line, a woman’s voice arose from Rokuta’s shadow. “Please, spare us that alone.”

For a second, Kouya thought it was Ribi. A cold chill shot down his spine.

“Binding his horn again will only injure him further.”

“A shirei?”

“Please. Wash away the blood. It is poisonous to him.”

“But—”

“Inflict no harm on the Taiho and we will refrain from attacking any others. What do you say?”

As Kouya wavered, Rokuta’s hand fell to his side. He’d lost consciousness.

“Ribi?” Atsuyu asked.

Kouya had returned to report what had happened. He nodded. “She probably went ahead and cut the thread herself.”

The stunned Atsuyu blinked in surprise. He sat down heavily. “What courage. And the Taiho?”

“He fainted. I washed away the blood.”

“Will he be all right?”

“Probably.”

Rokuta’s shirei said to bathe him in the waters of the Sea of Clouds, and so Kouya had ordered it done.

“The seal?”

Kouya gazed down at his feet. “The spell is in place again.”

“Will the binding injure him in any way?”

“A little. But I cannot see how we have any other option.”

Atsuyu took a deep breath. “Didn’t you say that a kirin could be contained only by a jail made of people?”

Kouya cast down his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, that jail of yours destroyed itself, so that’s that, I guess. Still, I left the care of the Taiho in your hands. Why didn’t you have guards keeping watch?”

“It simply didn’t occur to me.”

Atsuyu took another deep breath. “We seem to have ended up where we started. We might as well make the best of it. Make sure the same thing doesn’t happen again.”

“Yes.”

“Secretary—” Hakutaku staggered up to him.

“Hakutaku.”

“Is there a minister in our province who would do the same thing? Did Ribi sacrifice her life for the Emperor of En or to preserve the integrity of the throne? In either case, we must confess to our crimes. Ribi was willing to give her life for the emperor. And if not for him, then she did as much for the good of the kingdom.”

“Hakutaku!”

“How many of the common folk flocked to Ganboku to fight with you, believing you were on the side of right? Ten thousand of them have instead gathered to attack Gen Province. Their numbers are only growing by the day.”

“Why tell me such things now?” Atsuyu said, his voice tinged with anger. “What are you asking me to do? You know damned well there’s no pulling back at this point!”

“Send me to Kankyuu once again. I will lay down my life to—”

“—to barter for mine? Don’t be a fool!”

Hakutaku cringed and prostrated himself lower.

“Success or failure is yet to be determined. What will all this indecisiveness accomplish? Persuade the people. Explain the reasons for our actions: who strayed from the Way and who did not. What it means to covet the throne and abandon governance.”

“Secretary.”

“We have justice on our side. The people will consent if they understand the reasons. To be sure, abducting the Taiho was not in accordance with the Way. But neither has the Taiho begged to be released. No, he commiserates with me and wishes to abide here in Gen!”

“Y-yes.”

“I didn’t wish to go to these lengths. An attack on Kankyuu would cause too much suffering. If we can explain ourselves and make a military campaign unnecessary, they will come to see things our way. I didn’t want to conscript any more soldiers than what we have now. I didn’t want to take farmers off the land and press weapons in their hands.”

# Chapter 28

[6-4] **R**okuta tasted the foul stench of blood, as if he'd been cast into a sea of blood. The tendrils of death and gore clung to him like the arms of an octopus.

He heard the muffled sounds of the ocean. The waves washing against the shore outside the walls of the pirate castle bore the bobbing bodies of the dead. However the occupants of the castle might want to recover and bury them, venturing down to the water's edge would only invite renewed attacks from the Murakami.

The Murakami would like to take the heads of their enemies as trophies but knew that venturing any closer to the shore would bring them into range of the arrows and stones raining down from the parapets.

Carried by a stagnant breeze, the odor of death and blood wafting in from the shore permeated the castle. Rokuta shut his eyes and shook his head like a wet dog, trying to physically fling off the smell of the gore. He stumbled over his own two feet, the result of suffering from a fever these past several days that was anything but low-grade.

He heard a loud, bright sigh behind him. "So you didn't run away after all."

Only Shouryuu could maintain an upbeat mood in a situation like this. Rokuta turned around to indeed see him standing there, holding a sword across his shoulder.

"I thought you might not have the necessary funds on hand so I even provided traveling expenses. You are quite the curious chap."

Rokuta wasn't alone. Several others who'd missed their chance to escape huddled together inside the castle, fear and anxiety etched on their faces. They now ran up to Shouryuu and gazed at him imploringly.

Shouryuu hiked up his eyebrows. "Why the sad faces? Whatever will be will be. In the meantime, best you buck up and ride out the storm."



"Don't speak such tripe," Rokuta scolded.

"It may be tripe but it's true tripe." Shouryuu smiled at the three old men, all but clinging to his sleeves. "Freeze up like that and when the time comes for you to flee, you'll be too terrified to move. Help lighten the mood instead and believe we'll find a way out of this."

Shouryuu laughed. The old men nodded with relieved sighs. Shouryuu said, "For starters, get some food in your stomachs. We're outfitting a boat to make good our escape, but if you're famished, you'll hardly be able to hold onto the gunwales."

They'd gotten stuck there in the first place because they could hardly dash to safety under the best of conditions. Maybe Shouryuu's carefree attitude did set their minds at ease. They smiled as well and murmured among themselves that they weren't too old to man the oars.

"Well then," Shouryuu said, "speak up if you need anything. Keep in mind, though, that there's no squeezing any blood out of the stones we have left."

"Yer always were a good-for-nothing," one old geezer jested.

Shouryuu grinned and with a wave walked off to the castle turret. Rokuta ran after him.

"Hey—"

"What? I wouldn't recommend tagging along. The Murakami aren't above taking pot shots at any head that appears above the battlements."

"What exactly are the odds of victory? How likely is it that everyone will be able to escape?"

"I wouldn't think there were any odds at all. We're surrounded on all sides, with all routes of retreat and resupply cut off."

Shouryuu gazed down at the remnants of his domain. A pall of smoke hung over the charred remains of the houses and shops, all that was left of the castle town.

"Attacks are less frequent than before, probably because there's no need for them to waste the lives of their soldiers. Easier to lay siege to the castle and wait us out. They can take their time until we exhaust our supplies."

"What of your provisions?"

Shouryuu said with a wry smile, "What provisions? We had been shipping supplies from the land but only enough to last two weeks. Economizing, you see. I told my father to watch his rear. He wasn't one for strategic thinking."

Rokuta had heard that, unlike Shouryuu, his father was a refined and elegant man. Turning aside family tradition, he hired teachers from Kyoto and amused himself with music and Noh performances.

Shouryuu's mother, who died young, the mistresses who came after her, and Shouryuu's legal wife as well, were sophisticated city girls. It was Shouryuu who ended up the odd man out.

"With all the people here, we're not going to last two weeks. We'd better find a way out before the pantry runs dry." Shouryuu scowled. "I offered to surrender, but haven't heard from the Murakami. They probably don't see the point. They're pirates too, so I can understand their attitude."

"Pirates?"

"We're down to women and children and old men. But they come from pirate stock and you don't take pirates for granted. They may not appear capable, but women and children can rig a boat and set out to sea. Those old men can swing a

sword. Put weapons in their hands and they'll fight. Even if we surrender and agree to be their retainers, they'll never let down their guard. The territory of the Murakami isn't the land, it's the sea, and they've had enough of sharing. They want to eradicate any competition, not conquer it."

Meaning that none of them was getting out alive. Rokuta looked up at Shouryuu. Shouryuu said with a smile, "I begged the women and children to escape, at the very least. This time they're certain to run for it. There's no future for any of them here."

"Meaning you plan on dying here."

Shouryuu laughed. "Wouldn't matter if the Murakami were holding hands with the Buddha himself, they still wouldn't give me a pass. Besides, why leave just when things are getting interesting? I'm here of my own choosing. I've got no regrets."

"Really?" Rokuta asked under his breath.

"Well—" A smile flickered briefly across his lips. Shouryuu turned his gaze behind the castle, at the charred town and the soldiers in their battle arrays. He couldn't see the manor house on the hill behind them, only the blackened remains of the stone walls.

"They all died. Your wife and child too."

"I told them to flee as quickly as possible. But in his wildest dreams, my father couldn't imagine losing. I daresay it never occurred to him that war was a real possibility. When I left for the last time, he reminded me to be back in time for the poetry recital." Shouryuu added with a bitter laugh. "It's tragic, the child dying too. Knowing he died with his father provides some small consolation."

Rokuta glanced up at him. "By *his* father, you mean *your* father?"

Shouryuu answered without emotion. "Probably."

"Provisions are getting low. We'd better make sure the townspeople can escape before we're too weak to fight."

It was the third day of the siege. Shouryuu was addressing his dwindling retinue when Rokuta showed up with dinner.

"But Shouryuu, I mean, milord—"

"If we wait until our supplies are exhausted, it'll be too late. No matter what, I want to make sure the civilians get away. Regardless of which way they flee, they'll need provisions too. If we don't come to a firm decision fast, there will be nothing left to take with them."

His followers sank into silence.

"If we stay here, we'll starve to death. We'll launch the last boat in the pier and shield it with our warships. As soon as we run ashore, we'll establish a defensive perimeter and allow the townspeople to escape behind us." Shouryuu grinned. "Anybody else who's tired of life is welcome to stay there with me. The rest will guard

the retreat. Once you reach the border, throw away your heavy weapons and melt into the countryside."

An old man with a scarred arm grabbed hold of him. "Milord, those escaping will need a leader. You should go with them and serve as their guide!"

221

"Don't speak such nonsense. Where I run, the Murakami are sure to follow. Ah, I could take off in a different direction and make them divide their forces. If things become that precarious, that's what I'll do."

"No," countered the old man. With a deep bow he explained, "The Murakami will never let us go. But you can surely make it to safety alone. If the Oouchi prove trustworthy, you should be able to find refuge with them. In time, the Komatsu will rise once again. I beg and implore you to lie low until then."

"And supposing I do?" queried Shouryuu, the surprise clear on his face. "Then what? With its people scattered wide and far, how would this domain ever be revived? We live in troubled times, helpless pups among wolves, and cannot pretend otherwise. I hate to have to say this but a man has to know his limits."

The old man shook his head. "After this, we are going suffer naught but one hardship after the other. Knowing you have survived to restore the Komatsu domain at a future date will make those miseries easier to bear. Getting struck down will surely spell the end of the Komatsu. Send out a doppelganger and mingle together with the fleeing townspeople. While the Murakami are chasing after him, you can make your way to the Oouchi."

"Rubbish!" Shouryuu roared.

The old man shrank back, a startled look on his face.

"I am the lord of the manor. I bear the fate of my subjects on my own shoulders! To even think I would cast that responsibility aside along with them too!"

The old man cast himself down onto the ground and kowtowed. "All the more reason, because you carry our fates on your shoulders. Please reconsider!"

"It was you townspeople who called me the Young Master and pampered me like one of your own. How could I possibly excuse casting you aside now!"

"Milord—"

"I am not such a fool to not know what that name means," Shouryuu raged. "You were hardly taken by my charming personality or by my abilities, but rather by the expectation that I would one day become the lord of the manor."

"Milord—"

"I know what that means and so do you. You put me here to answer your prayers for a peaceful world."

His retainers bowed low to the ground.

“I alone am supposed to survive and revive the Komatsu clan? Don’t make me laugh! You’re saying that I should stand by and watch you all die and bring the Komatsu back from the dead? What sort of kingdom would that be? I would seclude myself in the castle and do what?”

His retainers kowtowed there and didn’t move.

“It’s *my* neck that should be on the line. What does my life matter compared to all of yours? Every time one of my subjects dies, it takes a piece out of me too. That is a far more painful fate than losing my own head.”

Shouryuu got to his feet, his typically calm demeanor once again rising to the fore. “Anyway, my head should make as good a prize as a hollow gourd.” He laughed. “Let’s see how many souls this head of mine will atone for.”

The boats left the island the next morning at daybreak. Making a desperate last stand, putting up a fierce resistance as the bloodthirsty Murakami forces sallied forth to meet them, they barely made it to land, losing half of their six warships in the process.

After establishing a defensive line along the shore, they fought with every ounce of their dwindling strength to open up a line of retreat. But their ranks were depleted and the corridor collapsed.

With the majority of the soldiers guarding the only route to freedom dead, the fleeing townspeople were surrounded and cut off.

The Komatsu clan was no more.

# Part Seven

## Chapter 29

[7-1] **T**he same thought ran through the heads of everyone in the palace: *It wasn't supposed to turn out this way*.

Looking down at the Rokusui River winding below Ganboku Palace, the marshes beyond the far banks had become a forest of Imperial banners.

Atsuyu had long stood as the pillar of Gen Province. With the Kingdom of En ravaged and left desolate, the people and land of Gen remained the calm at the eye of the storm. Gen Province alone could not stop the inexorable downward slide or withstand all the waves of destruction washing upon its shores. But compared to the other provinces, its decline was far less severe.

Atsuyu fought the looming destruction. As crops failed and populations plummeted in other provinces and as anarchy displaced law and order, Gen alone had managed to turn back the tide.

The calamities continued and youma rampaged across the countryside. Refugees streaming through Gen, fleeing to other provinces, all said the same thing: *Gen was a blessed land. Ganboku was like a dream*.

Then a new emperor ascended to the throne and the kingdom began to recover, Gen had been left behind. Everywhere else, the farms and fields slowly greened, populations and harvests increased. The differences with the other provinces disappeared. Gen was no longer a place travelers singled out for praise.

By all rights, a ten-fold improvement elsewhere should have translated into a hundred-fold improvement in Gen. Surely a future full of unimaginable wealth awaited them.

The reality was far different.

The first priority of the Imperial Government was bringing all the provinces up to the same level. This imperative was deeply resented by the people of Gen. They believed that had the emperor not deprived Gen of sovereign rule, it would have flourished under Atsuyu's rule.

"How did things come to this?" grumbled a soldier perched on the watchtower at the third station on Ganboku Mountain.

His fellow guardsmen had nothing to say in reply.

"Shouldn't the secretary's actions have brought self-rule and prosperity back to Gen by now?"

Correct the mistakes of the emperor, secure sovereignty for the provinces, take the initiative in the revival of the kingdom, and they would thank Gen. Not a few imagined that, indebted to them, the province lords and the people would herald Gen as the linchpin holding the kingdom together.

But open up that can of worms—

"We're a bunch of rebels. These days, all you hear are people carping at us for trying to usurp the throne."

The Imperial Army gathered on the far banks of the Rokusui had reached 30,000. The citizens of Gen continued to march toward Ganboku to join them. There was no telling how large their numbers would swell before the fighting began. It hardly mattered at this point, though. The forces of the Imperial Army already outstripped those of the Gen provincial guard.

Quietly, furtively, soldiers of the provincial guard were abandoning their posts. Desertions increased by the day, especially among the conscripts. Keep drafting civilians to fill the ranks, and in a few more days there wouldn't be any civilians left. And not a few of those running away ran straight toward the Imperial banners.

"There's this rumor going around," said another guard. "A week ago, the governor general died."

"Yeah, word is she tried to free the Taiho and sacrificed her life in the attempt."

"They say the secretary attacked the Taiho in a rage, knowing he was in a no-win situation, and the governor general died protecting him."

"Rubbish. He'd never do something like that."

"Yeah, probably not. Still, rumors are everywhere. The thing is, nobody would have listened to them before. That's gotta send a chill down your spine."

They fell in a taut silence. A moment later, as if in concert, all eyes returned to the Imperial Army arrayed below.

One of them finally voiced the question on all of their minds: "Why aren't they attacking?"

"What's going on? They haven't taken one step across the Rokusui." Atsuyu stood on the balcony and gazed down at the river. "Are they waiting for more people to come to them? They're building an army of rank amateurs. They'll simply get in the way of the regular soldiers."

Hakutaku said with dubious expression his own, "They've recruited 20,000 along the way and are putting them to work sandbagging the riverbanks."

"What?"

“They’re building up the levees. These so-called soldiers don’t have any weaponry worth mentioning. They must have intended from the start to deploy them as laborers.”

“Now they get around to building levees? Are they trying to curry favor with us?”

“We can only hope that’s what they’re doing. The Imperial Army is at work on the far banks of the Rokusui from Shin’eki downstream to Sugo.”

“You don’t mean—they’re diverting the river?”

Atsuyu furrowed his brow. The Rokusui wound around Ganboku like a snake. For a long while now the levees kept the river inside its banks. Atsuyu had secretly had additional work done on the embankments, but they couldn’t build the levees high enough if the river was dammed downstream.

“Unbelievable.”

With the city situated in the lowlands, flooding became a real possibility. The far banks were lower, meaning that if it overtopped its banks, the river would flow *away* from Ganboku. If the far banks were built higher, the river would flow *into* Ganboku.

But extending the banks in one fell swoop was no mean feat. Ten thousand getting the job done was a stretch at best. But with twenty thousand on hand—

“In a siege, how many soldiers could the palace accommodate?”

The volume of water unleashed during the rainy season was significant. If not properly diverted, the fields around Ganboku being readied for battle would flood. The surging water might even reach the farmlands just outside Ganboku. Or at the very worst, inundate the base of Ganboku Mountain itself.

“Provisioning our forces is the more pressing problem.”

Stores inside the palace are running out. The harvest notwithstanding, Gen Province had not produced a surplus.

Bitter self-recriminations colored Hakutaku’s voice. “This uprising began with every expectation of Kou Province entering the fray and resolving the conflict with a brief but decisive battle. If Kou Province doesn’t act, we will face the end alone, making a long struggle inevitable. Except we don’t have the supplies to support a long conflict.”

“Then we have no choice but to impose an emergency tax on the nearby farms. Fortunately, the harvest just ended.”

Hakutaku grimaced. “Are you are proposing to expropriate what hasn’t already been taxed away? What they’ve put aside in their root cellars and in the village storehouses has to last them the rest of the year.”

Atsuyu cast a cool glance down at Hakutaku. “Are you asking the provincial guard to starve?”

Hakutaku returned the look uncowed. His temper was up. After being bathed in Ribi’s blood, Rokuta still hadn’t regained consciousness. That was only the beginning

of the troubles that had betrayed every hope Gen once held of holding the high moral ground.

"In the first place, whatever levy is imposed now won't be in time. And whatever stores we could collect, how long could we expect them to last?"

"Then get what you can and worry about the rest later." Atsuyu turned to the ministers hovering nearby. "Those levees must not be built. Send a division of the provincial guard to the Rokusui."

"Hold on," the defense minister said with a frown of concern. "The provincial guard is already outnumbered by the Imperial Army. Are you telling us to divide our forces even further?"

"Then send the entire army."

*Madness,* the defense minister grumbled to himself. He said aloud, "Please keep in mind the number of our soldiers. The Imperial Army already has three times as many. Without enough reserves to turn back an assault on the palace, we have no chance of prevailing."

"I am perfectly aware of that!" Atsuyu shot back. "When the rains start, dispatch an elite force and have them break down the levees on the opposite back upstream from Ganboku."

Hakutaku grew all the more livid. "What are you saying!"

"It's the only recourse we've got!" Atsuyu shouted back. "Cut the levees above Ganboku and divert the river to Shin'eki. If you've got any better ideas, now would be a good time to speak up!"

Atsuyu's nerves were no less on edge. The swelling ranks of the Imperial Army, the betrayal by Kou Province, the unconscious Taiho—everything was conspiring against him. The ground was crumbling beneath his feet.

"The rainy season is coming. Don't even think it."

"That's why the levees must be cut! After the rains start, it will be too late. With the far banks built up, a dam downstream would back water into Ganboku."

"You are willing to flood Shin'eki for the good of Ganboku? The provincial palace is a mountain. If Ganboku floods, at worst we'll get our feet wet. I'm begging you, put such thoughts out of your mind."

"We are out of options. Do as I've ordered!"

# Chapter 30

[7-2] **R**okuta opened his eyes. His eyelids were so heavy it took several moments for him to focus on his surroundings.

"He's conscious."

The sound of hurried footsteps, a woman's voice. It couldn't be Ribi, of course. Remembering that, Rokuta groaned aloud.

Rokuta covered his face with his hands. *Why go to such lengths? All, in the end, for the emperor*.

A woman leaned over him and said, her voice very close, "How are you doing? Are you in pain?"

Rokuta shook his head.

"You were asleep for a long time. We were very worried."

Rokuta put down his hands and sat up. The world spun. "How long?"

His attendant was a woman in her thirties. Her court dress identified her as a low-ranked deputy minister.

"It's been a full week."

"A week. What about the Imperial Army?" He cast her a worried look. The war couldn't have started already.

She shook her head. "They're camped on the opposite banks of the Rokusui and haven't moved." She added with a nervous laugh, "But they are building up the levees."

"They're doing what?"

Was Shouryuu attempting to ingratiate himself with the rebellious province at this late date? Though Rokuta was grateful the fighting hadn't yet broken out.

"Is it all right for you to move?"

Rokuta nodded. A heavy fatigue still dulled his senses but this was no time to sleep. Climbing down from the bed, he stopped. *I have to do something before war breaks out*. But he didn't have a clue what to do.

"Well, then."

The deputy minister draped a robe around his shoulders. Rokuta slid his arms through the sleeves. As he got dressed, he felt a cool sensation on his forehead.

*The stone*.

He touched it with the tips of his fingers. The deputy minister said, "I'm really sorry about that. It must be uncomfortable. I don't know how to take it off."

"That's okay," Rokuta said softly, muffling his surprise.

*The stone wasn't touching his horn*. Though affixed to his forehead, it was offset just a tad so that all Rokuta felt was the cold hardness against his skin, none of its binding power.

*Kouya,* Rokuta said in his heart.

Kouya had gone through the motions. Perhaps because Rokuta found it so displeasing or out of consideration for his physical condition, Kouya hadn't sealed the spell.

"Can you move around?"

Rokuta glanced up at her with a dubious expression. With a gentle smile she held out a cloth satchel.

"This contains all the basic necessities. You should get away from here as fast as possible?"

"Huh—what?"

"We rebelled against the emperor believing we could secure a better future for our subjects by ourselves. We did not intend to set the kingdom once again on a downward course. We did not think deeply about the emperor's priorities or the consequences of our own actions. We only waxed indignant at the chaos around us and lashed out in anger. If you could rejoin the Imperial Army, return to the palace, and relay to His Highness these words of apology on our behalf—"

"If you do something like this—"

"Please." The deputy minister draped a veil over Rokuta's head. "The rumors cannot do justice to the depths of the Taiho's compassion. That you allowed yourself to be imprisoned here to spare the life a single baby tells me all I need to know. As long as you remain at the emperor's side, I know that he will not be a heartless man. The people of Gen Province have surely acted in a most foolish manner."

She urged him to his feet. Rokuta stood there in confusion. Something was going on in Gen Province. Such had been the widespread affection for Atsuyu that the resolve of the entire province approached the monolithic. That unity was now crumbling to bits inside the palace itself.

"Did Atsuyu sign off on this? He'd be giving up his one remaining hostage."

The deputy minister sadly shook her head. "He's changed. If he really cared about his subjects—"

"What?"

The deputy minister ignored Rokuta's query and pushed him forward. "Turn right after you leave the room. Go around the corner and you'll come to a flight of stairs leading to a tunnel. The tunnel ends in the Inner Palace. At the back of Choumei Palace, head straight down. Once you get to the lowest level, a path will lead you out of the palace."

"But—"

“I know you must still be in pain. But do not let this opportunity slip by. Another like won’t present itself again. It was only luck that gave me this moment alone with you. I am begging you. Return to Kankyuu. Do not let the sacrifice of the governor general go to waste.”

The deputy minister pushed Rokuta out of the room. He was about to protest that she’d surely have to answer for her actions when she slammed the door shut in his face.

*Now what?*

After a moment of confusion, Rokuta started walking. His knees threatened to buckle with each step. He braced himself against the walls to stay on his feet. He briefly considered calling his shirei. Perhaps due to the lingering effects of the bloody miasma, he couldn’t discipline his thoughts sufficiently to summon them. Though they could appear of their own will, they might be no less muddled than he was.

Rokuta dug his fingernails into the gaps between the stones and slowly made his way down the hallway and turned to the right.

Kouya entered the room accompanied by twenty men. “Secretary, I have arrived with the additional men you requested.”

Atsuyu turned to him, a grim expression on his face. “Thank you.”

His countenance was haggard. The Imperial Army bivouacked on the far shore of the Rokusui had reached 31,000. On top of that, voices of discontent and criticism were being heard not only in the city but within the palace walls. As there was no telling when those words might turn into actions, his detail was being supplemented with troops from the rapid deployment forces.

“I’ve assembled the most adept soldiers in the corps. There is no love lost among them for the emperor. Their fealty to the secretary is unquestioned.”

Kouya glanced at them as he spoke. The fact was, he didn’t know them well enough to trust them unconditionally. In any event, he would stick close to the secretary. His and the youma’s presence would deter anything bad from happening.

Atsuyu nodded. As he scanned the soldiers kneeling there, another messenger rushed into the room.

“Secretary!”

“What?”

The flustered messenger forgot to kneel and simply shouted out, “The Taiho is gone!”

“He’s what?” Atsuyu jumped to his feet.

The deputy minister you assigned to look after him must have let him escape.”

Behind the messenger, a retainer appeared dragging in the aforementioned woman.

“Find him,” Atsuyu commanded in a low growl.

Kouya whirled around. “Search for the Taiho. Be sure to treat him with kid gloves. Return him here with all due deference.”

The new recruits behind him nodded in unison and ran off with the messenger. The deputy minister was left alone in the middle of the room. Atsuyu turned his attention to her.

“Why would you do something like that?”

She looked back at him, a bitter reproach in her eyes. “That is a question *I* wish to ask *you*. Why are you breaching the levees?”

Atsuyu let out an exasperated sigh. “That is—” He rubbed his temples. “What do you people expect me to do?” With a shake of his head, he addressed her again. “This is our only chance of prevailing. Or are you telling me that I’ve already lost?”

The deputy minister glared back at him and didn’t budge an inch. “So you will raise your banners over the banks of the Rokusui after dragging them through the mud?”

“Enough already.”

“Didn’t you rise up in revolt for the good of the people? How is inundating Shin’eki in accordance with the Way?”

“What else can we do at this point?”

“Surrender. It has become abundantly clear that you have taken this emperor far too lightly.”

Atsuyu sighed again and glanced at Kouya. “Kouya, take her with you.”

# Chapter 31

[7-3] **R**okuta clung to the wall to keep his legs from collapsing beneath him.

"Rikaku—Rikaku—"

He called to his shirei and got no reply.

"Rikaku. Youhi."

Now he sensed them weakly but heard only their anguish. That was how closely bound together a kirin was to his shirei. When a kirin suffered, so did his shirei.

"Rikaku."

There was rank and status among the shirei. Rikaku and his nyokai Youhi were preeminent among them. And yet they were suffering that much. Rokuta couldn't even sense the reactions of the rest.

He wished more than anything to lie down and sleep. But he was out of time. He'd already escaped and no more hostages were linked to him. Others might have been forced to take the place of Ribi and the baby, except the spell that once bound him no longer possessed its malevolent powers.

*Head to the Imperial Army and tell them to stay put until he could return to Kankyuu and confer with Shouryuu.*

There was logic in what Atsuyu had told him. Deprived of their sovereignty, the nine provinces were too big for any one person to manage. It made no sense. The discontent was understandable, not to mention the perpetual unease of those living in the flood plains of the Rokusui. No matter. War must be avoided at all costs. Ekishin and Ribi and the child were enough. Nobody else needed to die.

Rokuta urged on his feeble legs, managed to pass through the tunnel and emerged in the heart of the Inner Palace. The palace in every kingdom and province followed the same general design. He grouped his way toward the very back and headed for Choumei Manor. Every palace had a Choumei Manor, where the family of the emperor or province lord resided.

Grabbing hold of the wall decor to stay on his feet, he proceeded down the corridor.

A faint voice called out to him: *Taiho.*

"That you, Rikaku? What?"

*People.*

Rokuta stopped. Here in the depths of Choumei Manor the Inner Palace was still. No signs of life. But that didn't mean it should be devoid of human activity.

"Retainers? Servants?"

*No,* Rikaku answered, equally puzzled.

Straining his ears, Rokuta heard a faint noise. A man shouting. Maybe a beast bellowing. In front of him or behind him. He couldn't tell. He took a hesitant step forward. Turning the corner, a crystal-clear cry struck his ears.

As he jerked back reflexively, Rokuta looked in the direction of the cry. A few moments later, he moved toward it again. He couldn't understand what it was saying. All he heard was a raised voice.

And mingled with it, the sound of chains, ringing and clanking, being dragged and yanked with great vigor. The sounds made by a person struggling against his shackles. What sort of prisoner would be confined in the bowels of the Inner Palace?

At the end of a narrow corridor, Rokuta came upon a stone staircase descending through the semi-darkness. These must be the stairs the deputy minister had spoken of. Further down was the source of the sound and the source of a sour smell wafting up on a languid current of air.

Taking hold of the railing, Rokuta made his way down a single flight. The corridor narrowed even more and continued deep under the palace. The walls were black with dust and mold, suggesting that it was rarely used.

"This must be the way. But who in the world is making those strange sounds?"

With every step the voice grew more distinct. He spied a set of doors at the end of a side passage. The noise was coming from behind those doors. A groaning, howling mouth that formed no words.

But a kirin possessed the ability to sense the meaning behind them: *Let me out*.



Rokuta lost his bearings for a moment, then ventured down the alley. He couldn't ignore such a desperate cry for help.

When he got to the door, the sounds suddenly ceased. Seeking out the soul within, his senses now recorded a man softly weeping.

Rokuta placed his hands on the door and pushed. The door opened slowly, without any resistance. Why was immediately obvious. Facing the door was a cell like the one he'd been confined in, the lattice of iron bars locked in place.

Though fairly large, the only source of light in the windowless room came from the open door. At first, Rokuta could only make out a shadow squatting at the foot of the barred iron door.

A thin and haggard old man. He sat there gripping the bars with grimy hands.

He noticed Rokuta. Raising his tear-stained face, he shook the bars and raised his voice. A chain coiled like a snake across the filthy stone floor and attached itself to the man's leg. The chain rattled and clanked with every movement.

Rokuta looked down in amazement at the miserable, tormented old man. "Who—who are you?"

There was no answer. The old man opened his mouth to scream but only managed a moan. *Let me out,* he meant. *Let me out. Stop. You're wrong, you're wrong—*

"Who would do such a thing?"

The reason for these wordless cries was cruelly apparent. There was no tongue in the old man's mouth.

"Rikaku." *Can you open these bars?*

"No. The lock securing them is charmed."

Indeed, the characters etched into the rough, rusty surface spelled out a binding hex.

*Why?* Rokuta muttered. "You can't be—are you Genkai?"

Genkai. Atsuyu's father. The province lord of Gen. Atsuyu said he was ill. Rumors said that he was insane, that he hid himself inside the Inner Palace and showed his face to no one. Perhaps he had shut himself away—and now was chained to a wall and locked inside this cell.

The old man offered neither a yea or nay, only repeated himself: *You're wrong, you're wrong. Stop. Because, you see, because—*

"Calm down. If you don't calm down, I can't understand you. Are you Genkai?"

The old man shook his head. Rokuta sighed. He didn't know who this person could possibly be or why he was being held captive, only that he wasn't Genkai. He couldn't help feeling relieved, though at the same time, he couldn't ignore the painful reality that a prisoner was being kept here in miserable condition.

"I know, I know. Don't cry. I can't help you right now. But I'll do something. I promise. Just hold on a little longer. Okay?"

Weeping copious tears, the old man nodded over and over. Even if he'd committed a heinous crime, no human being should be chained up like this. How could Atsuyu overlook such barbaric conditions? Rokuta couldn't believe he didn't know what was going on in the provincial palace.

*Don't leave me here,* the old man blubbered.

Rokuta reassured him the best he could and continued on his way.

"Atsuyu, how could you possibly condone something like this going on right under your nose?"

*Didn't you say you were doing all this for the sake of the people?*

# Chapter 32

[7-4] **R**okuta burrowed beneath the palace, in places reduced to crawling on all fours. Answering his repeated summons, Rikaku finally appeared. He still wasn't in a fit enough condition to carry Rokuta on his back. Instead, Rokuta clung to his dark gray hair and used him as a shoulder to lean on as they wended their way through the dimly lit tunnels.

The tunnels wound back and forth inside the mountain, branching multiple times in the process. They could wander off course in a heartbeat. Rokuta lost track of how many levels they'd descended, and then couldn't find the passage leading them further down. Bewildered, he hastily attempted to backtrack.

"Where are we?" he asked aloud, looking for his own footsteps.

But there were so many places where falling water had washed away the mud—places where protruding boulders rose out of the ground—places where the light was so dim that he could barely see a thing—that the trail was impossible to follow.

"Youhi. Can you figure out the way down?"

Shadows flickered in the gloomy air, followed at length by a pained reply. "Nowhere—around here. We've somehow—wandered off into—a completely different underground chamber."

"We're somewhere under the palace. Can you tell where?"

"Forgive me. I cannot pass through the walls or floor."

Shirei normally had the powers of the *tonkou* at their disposal. Using the tonkou, they could pass concealed through the veins in the earth, the currents in the water, and anything permeated by a seam of spirit matter. Using the kirin's presence as a kind of lighthouse, they could come and go at will, even when separated by thousands of miles.

Except that was all but impossible in their current condition. Some kirin born on Mt. Hou could do the same thing. Alas, Rokuta wasn't one of them.

Groundwater spilled into the corridors hewn out of the rock. The only light came from scattered patches of luminous moss.

Rikaku suggested in a faint voice, "Perhaps if we rested for a while."

He leaned against the wall and slid to the ground. The vertigo was overpowering. Simply walking along with a hand on the wall felt like clinging to the gunwales of a ship in rough seas. His consciousness faded in and out. He had to steel what was left

of his nerves to stay on his feet. The shawl over his head was drenched with sweat. He'd long ago discarded everything else he was carrying.

Casting another look around him revealed nothing that might prove useful in the slightest degree. Water trickling down the passageway turned the accumulated dust to mud and didn't preserve a single footprint.

Rokuta slumped against Rikaku's back and took a deep breath. A nearby sound made him glance around with a start. He craned his ears until he could hear the sound of his own breathing.

"Is somebody there?"

The question struck the empty air like a drumbeat. The silence flowed back. And then a similar question came from not far off.

"Who are you?"

Rokuta examined the facing wall. The voice came from a narrow crack.

"Um, a lost kid."

Peering into the crack revealed only more blackness. Though the crack itself did not seem to be very deep.

"A lost kid? What were you doing wandering around in a place like this?"

"I, um, went out for a walk . . . where is this place?"

He chuckled. There was a touch of madness in the laugh. "Welcome to hell."

"Who are you?"

"Don't be rude. Don't you know the name of your lord?"

Rokuta shivered. The number of people who could call themselves *lord* of this palace was very small. The image of an old man in chains rose up in his thoughts.

"I don't believe it—are you Genkai?"

"That's *milord* to you. I'm still alive enough to deserve some respect." Derisive laughter spilled through the crack.

"I heard that Genkai—sorry, milord—was in poor health."

So the other old man wasn't Genkai. Which made him?

"Poor health. I wouldn't doubt it. I haven't had anything to eat or drink in ages."

"No one brings you dinner? You're imprisoned here?"

"Imprisoned? You call this a prison? More accurate to say I was thrown away. Thrust down to hell and forgotten. Nobody once came to see how I was faring."

Rokuta gulped. Province lords were wizards, which made them immortal. Until their names were stricken from the Registry of Wizards, death could only come from a beheading or a drawing and quartering. Any less grievous injury would heal in time. Mere neglect wasn't enough. Kirin and emperors were no different.

"I haven't heard the sound of a human voice in ages."

"Unbelievable," Rokuta mumbled to himself.

Genkai stopped laughing. “Just how many years have I been here? What exactly would he have me do? He coveted the position of province lord for himself. But I am not the emperor. Province lords are appointed by the emperor. It’s not a position I can bestow out of the kindness of my heart. Surely you understand that much.”

Clinging to the stone face, Rokuta’s fingers shook. “You can’t mean—you mean Atsuyu?”

It didn’t seem possible. The secretary was so widely praised for his depths of humanity, his compassion for the common man. Kouya had said as much. He considered Atsuyu his benefactor, Atsuyu who had rescued him when Rokuta hadn’t. That same Atsuyu, who claimed to be acting for the greater good and in accordance with the Way couldn’t have cruelly imprisoned Genkai here.

“Of course I’m referring to the little bastard.” Genkai answered without hesitation, making no effort to hide the loathing in his voice. “It’s not like I decided one day to quit being province lord. No sooner had I turned him down but he insisted that I become emperor. Well, it wasn’t like the thought never crossed my mind, but that’s up to the Divine Will. It wasn’t going to happen. He said I was a coward and a fool with no imperial aspirations. I was trash content to curry favor with the emperor, flatter and cajole my superiors in order to hold onto my job and my life for a few years longer.”

He must be referring to Emperor Kyou. Rokuta had heard that Genkai had not appeared in public since the reign of Emperor Kyou.

“I most certainly did curry all the favor I could. I was ordered to arrest duplicitous vassals and nip insurrections in the bud and I did as I was told. If I didn’t kill enough commoners, it’d be my head on the chopping block. When I didn’t meet my quota of executions, I was accused of being lazy. I was even accused of harboring treason in my heart. The only way to prove my fidelity to the throne was to kill more innocents. By the way, is he dead yet?”

“Emperor Kyou? Of course. It’s said he received his reward in direct proportion to the number of so-called traitors he offered up.”

“I promise you, there was more to it than that. Believe me.” Genkai’s protestations overflowed with bitterness. “Atsuyu said I wasn’t qualified to be province lord and dumped me here. How does he think he became chief Rikkan secretary? Because I chose the prime minister. I’m the province lord, after all. I treasure Gen province more than the emperor.”

“Under Emperor Kyou’s despotic rule, you sold out your own subjects and prized your status above all.”

“What else could I do?”

“That’s why Atsuyu despises you, isn’t it? No matter how often he admonished you, you only threw up your hands and said you had no choice. You didn’t want to oppress the people. You were just following orders.”

“That’s exactly it.”

“You never took a stand and remonstrated with the emperor. When Atsuyu asked you to hand over the reins of government, you protested that the emperor had appointed you. And so you ended up discarded in a place like this.”

*That’s what it came down to,* Rokuta thought to himself. Atsuyu concluded that Gankai wasn’t competent to govern, didn’t have the best interests of his people at heart, and locked him up in this prison.

When Emperor Kyou strayed from the Way, the only viable course left to men of conscience was to strike back at him. Except Genkai fawned on Emperor Kyou and persecuted his people to save his own skin. He had to be locked away for the good of his subjects. At the time, during the reign of Emperor Kyou, Atsuyu concocted the story that the province lord had fallen ill and he had to take provisional control of the government. Rokuta understood all that.

*But what of that other prisoner?*

When Genkai finally ended his soliloquy, Rokuta said, “If my luck holds out, I’ll come back and help you.”

Meaning if the insurrection was quelled and the reigning emperor won.

Rokuta took a breath, scolded his uncooperative legs, and got to his feet. As he walked away, Genkai’s acrimonious voice chased after him. “I know. All Atsuyu really wanted was to be a province lord.”

Rokuta stopped. He didn’t turn around.

“He needed an excuse, that’s all. Anything to justify shutting me away down here.” Rokuta could actually hear him grating his teeth. “Did Atsuyu ever tell you about his prowess with a bow?”

“No.”

“He never missed, even at the *Tsuina* festival. Well, he missed once.”

Genkai chuckled, a twisted sort of laughter. With no idea what the point of this story was, Rokuta stood there and listened.

“That one time, Atsuyu blamed the servant who’d prepared the target. Having called on the gods and driven out the evil spirits, the target dared to tilt to the side. He insisted that sorcery was the cause of his own mistake and had the poor fellow executed.”

Rokuta furrowed his brows.

“Atsuyu was a precocious child, capable of anything he set his mind to. He was discerning, empathetic, and smart. He had but one flaw in his character. He could never admit he was wrong, admit that a mistake was of his own making.”

Genkai chuckled again.

"After the death of Emperor Kyou, why didn't he go on the Shouzan and have Enki take a measure of his soul according to the Divine Will? He could never do that. What if he failed the test? Even the *possibility* of failure was a shame he couldn't imagine bearing."

"But—"

"But what of his courage? His great abilities and accomplishments? Well, an easy act to pull off when your sins always belong to someone else, when the blame always falls on somebody else's head. He's never admitted to being wrong about anything. There is no end to *that* kind of courage."

Rokuta looked down at his feet, his eyes misting over. Listening to Genkai, he felt the doubts welling up in his heart.

*That prisoner*.

"He thinks he's perfect, you see. He wants to believe it, so he ignores anybody he's unjustly wronged. To hide the scars he's inflicted, he makes them go away. That's the kind of man he is."

Rokuta's legs shook as he walked away. This time he didn't stop.

Atsuyu claimed he'd risen up for the good of the people. There was wisdom in what he said, which was why Rokuta hadn't resisted becoming his hostage. But had he forgotten that those who preached justice the loudest were the least likely to be just?

Championing justice is what people did as a matter of course. Emperors, rulers and kings never sent soldiers off to war without claiming justice was on their side. But it was a hollow virtue. And so people suffered in the name of that justice.

*A civil war will only make them suffer more,* Rokuta told Atsuyu over and again. Why did he keep saying it was all for the people and insist on raising armies, no matter what? If he really was putting the people first, why did the military always take priority?

Perhaps the hollowness of that virtue accounted for the strange sense of helplessness Rokuta felt whenever he tried to point this out to Atsuyu.

"Atsuyu—" Rokuta said aloud. *That prisoner*. "Is he supposed to be Genkai's body double?"

Squirrel Genkai away and leave that doppelganger in his place, hidden right underneath the Inner Palace.

*Stop,* the old man had wailed over and again.

Or that was what Rokuta thought he was saying. Atsuyu hired the old man to sit in this unlit cell and pretend to be Genkai. But the actor grew tired of playing the part.

*I want to stop*. That's what he meant. *Let me out of here*.

Instead he'd been chained and detained, his tongue cut out to keep him from saying too much.

"Dammit, Atsuyu—"

Rokuta felt as if the sound of Genkai's voice was going to follow him everywhere.

# Chapter 33

[7-5] **K**ouya took the deputy minister down to the very depths of the palace. Deep within the bedrock beneath Ryou'un Mountain, in a place untouched by the rays of the sun, was a long row of cell blocks. Rokuta's jail was a mansion in comparison to this bleak row of stone and iron boxes.

Only an exhaustive search of the historical records would reveal their original purposes. Though if the reasons they'd been constructed could not be publicly acknowledged, it was also unlikely that any newly-appointed province lord would find mention of them in the court histories presented for his perusal.

Kouya led the deputy minister through the corridors with accustomed ease. Criminals were brought here while awaiting final judgment. Most were charged with treason and locked away.

Atsuyu could do nothing to prevent his subordinates from harboring treachery in their hearts. Whether a ruler was a genius or a fool, some would always rebel against him.

At the far end of the corridor was a much larger cell. Kouya opened the door. "Inside," he said, giving her a push.

He unlocked the shackles pinning her hands behind her back. He touched the pine torch he was holding to another sitting in a fixture in the corner of the room. The two points of light revealed a stark space roughly hewn from the surrounding rock, the very barest of furnishings, and the woman standing there like a stone.

"Sit down."

Kouya motioned to the bed. With obvious unease, the woman looked back and forth from the bed to the rest of the room.

Kouya asked in impassive tones, "Why did you disobey the secretary? You must be aware of the dire straits Gen Province finds itself in right now."

"I know very well. You have turned your backs on the Way and trampled on the Divine Will."

"You should have known that from the start."

"Well, nobody informed me," she spat back. "I was told the secretary rose up to champion justice, not to rebel against the duly-appointed emperor. Can you appreciate the gravity of your actions? Do you know what it means to topple an emperor chosen according to the Divine Will?"

"The welfare of the people is never far from the secretary's thoughts."

The woman smirked. “The welfare of the people? Then why breach the levees? You can count the size of the Imperial Army. Gen Province will lose. The secretary read the situation all wrong. The outcome is no longer in doubt. Why is war so necessary that you must breach the levees and further subjugate the people? Are these the actions of a man truly concerned for their welfare?”

Kouya didn’t answer. Having already raised an army, defeat now was simply not an option worth contemplating.

“A friend of mine works in the Ministry of Public Works,” she said, casting a glance at the torch. “I’ve known her all my life. That’s what she’s been saying all along. Was the province really better off with the secretary pulling the strings behind the scenes?”

“But the province lord—”

“He’s ill and unable to govern, isn’t he? The servants in the Inner Palace say they can hear him moaning and weeping. These past fifteen years he must have lost the ability to speak. That meant it was up to the secretary to stand at the helm and guide Gen Province through these rough waters.”

Kouya quietly looked back at her. “If you knew all that, then why?”

“That’s what I said to my friend. It only made her angry. The secretary preached wisdom and the Way. He had the face of a saint. But if he was really such a self-sacrificing person, why didn’t he report the province lord’s condition and ask for a replacement? A province is conferred upon the province lord. Only the emperor has the authority to appoint one. If the position is vacant, shouldn’t the Rikkan be notified and their instructions heeded in that regard? That was the right thing to do and the one thing the secretary didn’t do. He held onto power and wouldn’t relinquish it, even when a new emperor was crowned.”

Kouya stared back at the angry woman’s face.

“You call this selflessness? You call this justice? I didn’t understand. She did. Atsuyu is a pretender, a despot, a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Except he doesn’t lust after power or riches. It didn’t make sense to me until today. All he wants for himself is glory.”

“You’re being irrational. You can’t keep galloping off to such extremes.”

“I’m not. My friend was right. Atsuyu wants to bask in praise and adulation. That’s what this grasping after power is really about. The demands of justice and the welfare of the people have nothing to do with it. He only wants to be adored as the Chief Rikkan Secretary.”

She grimaced. “I blame myself for not figuring this out earlier. I was a fool for arguing with her. Do you think you know everything? Can you read the secretary’s mind, divine his true feelings about his subjects? Hardly. The only ones left in this place are the patsies who fell for his lies hook, line and sinker. You can’t turn around

without running into them. The ones who saw through him, where are they? Where's my friend?"

Kouya lowered his gaze.

"One day, she confronted Atsuyu directly. You grabbed her and forced her to resign. After that, she disappeared. The Daiboku told me that so many people worshiped Atsuyu she'd end up being persecuted. So she was told to flee Gen Province. Is that true?"

"I believe such things have happened. The secretary does not enjoy punishing criminals like that. He is a magnanimous person when it comes to criticism."

"Then why haven't I heard a single word from her since? Everything she held dear in her life got left behind. Why?"

"Well—"

"Son of a bitch."

Kouya raised his eyes to meet hers.

"You fed her to that youma of yours, didn't you? And you plan to do the same to me."

Kouya looked back at her. A wan smile rose to his lips. "You do not seem likely to change your mind anytime soon. But I suppose that was inevitable from the start."

The woman rose to her feet. "Just as I thought."

"It's my job, don't you see? Alas, I am one of those patsies you spoke of. I believe in the secretary. Seeing as you will not cease from slandering him, your existence does him no good."

"Atsuyu told you to do this, didn't he?"

Kouya shook his head. "No, the secretary would not condone what I do. But in the end it is all for his benefit." He stroked the youma's coat. "The secretary is far too forgiving. *I* never let go of a snake without cutting off the head first." He said without any emotion, "Time for dinner, Rokuta."

The woman spun around and leapt backwards. With a gleeful shriek, the youma bounded after her. It was in its nature to take supreme joy in snuffing out the life of its prey.

*Atsuyu never ordered me to,* Kouya thought as the woman's screams echoed in his ears.

Not once had Atsuyu issued such a command. There was only his repeated and incomprehensible suffering—from the malice of traitorous retainers—from the profound anxieties that arose when then ended up in his custody.

*What if they managed to escape? Would they come after me? And if they did, what would happen if you weren't here, Kouya?*"

Over and over. He did not appear to fear for his life, only expressed these silent realities with his eyes. Over and over. To Kouya. Had Kouya offered to kill them,

Atsuyu would have rebuked him. Nonetheless, he never ceased to instill in Kouya the clear and present danger the traitors inhabiting these cells represented.

Unable to bear it any longer, Kouya ventured down to the dungeon alone. Many years ago, he'd asked Atsuyu to give him the responsibility for the prisoners in the cell blocks. Atsuyu agreed.

Kouya brought the youma with him when he visited a prisoner. When Rokuta was done—nothing left behind, every last drop of blood lapped up—Kouya told Atsuyu that the prisoner had resigned himself to the inevitable and Kouya had banished him from the palace.

Anybody else might have convincingly sold such an outlandish lie. But when that report came from a messenger whose face was pale, his teeth chattering and his knees shaking so bad he could hardly stand?

"I see," Atsuyu said with a smile. He patted Kouya on the head. "You really are the best of my retainers."

Kouya looked down at his hands, the sounds of the masticating youma still fresh in his ears.

Atsuyu said, smiling, despite the unease evident in his eyes, "It's like you can read my mind. You know what I want without me having to say so. I am indeed grateful to have such an empathic shashi."

He clapped Kouya on the back. Kouya read in the weight of his hand what Atsuyu had wanted from the start and what he wished Kouya to continue doing.

Atsuyu reported the incident to the assembled ministers and made a point of praising Kouya. He announced that from that point forward, Kouya would be responsible for the disposition of all criminals.

In short, Kouya became the court executioner. He and his youma eliminated not only those who might bodily harm Atsuyu, but anybody who threatened his reputation and standing.

So of course, from the moment she turned against Atsuyu, this woman's fate was sealed. Kouya brought her here to become a meal for the youma. As always, he would make sure that the youma had disposed of everything. When he reported to Atsuyu that she had elected to return to the countryside, not a speck of blood or flesh would be left behind to prove otherwise.

This was the unspoken secret the two of them shared. Atsuyu never told him to kill anyone. Kouya acted out of consideration for Atsuyu, out of devotion. That was the way it must be. And so he told Atsuyu he had let the woman go.

That's what it meant to win Atsuyu's praise as a good and faithful shashi, as an accomplished and capable retainer.

*I've gotten used to it by now.*

Kouya watched impassively as the youma finished her off. Here the accusations leveled against Atsuyu, the screams of his victims, his blood-soaked hands did not touch his heart in the slightest.

# Chapter 34

[7-6] **R**okuta searched back and forth through the tunnels, in the process climbing a good distance higher up. A fair amount of time after leaving Genkai, he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. He instinctively hid in the hollow of a rock.

"Is he there?" somebody called out.

"I don't see him."

"Any deeper in than this and things will get chancy. We'll get lost ourselves."

"Then start here and work back toward the surface."

"Yes, sir." Footsteps echoed off into the distance.

"The rest of you come with me. We're taking a look further down."

That tense command was answered by one almost airy in its nonchalance. "So he got lost down here in the catacombs, eh?"

Rokuta felt himself start—*that voice*.

"Kirin sure have a bad sense of direction. What a little idiot."

"Who's the idiot? Shut yer trap."

"Yes, sir."

Rokuta crawled out from behind the rock and stared through the darkness in the direction of that voice. *It simply wasn't possible—not in a place like this*.

"By the way, Daiboku, if he comes wandering into our clutches, what do we do with him?"

Though Rokuta couldn't make anything out, he could see lights in the distance. "Hey!" he called out. "Anybody there?"

A moment of silence was followed by a flurry of footsteps. Lights bobbed about near and far at the far end of the passageway.

"There he is!" one of the guards finally shouted.

The only available light came from the pine torches, but Rokuta had the odd feeling that the light itself was streaming through the air and flowing up to him.

"Imagine finding you in a place like this."

Looking at the guard running up to him, Rokuta almost burst into tears. The tall stature, the hint of the bad boy in that smile. But he swallowed his emotions and held up his hands in lieu of an answer.

"Daiboku, is this kid who you're looking for?"

"That's him," answered the man hot on the guard's heels. "How are you faring? The secretary and the ministers are all worried sick."

"I went looking for Kouya and lost my way."

“Take him with you,” said the Daiboku.

“Yes, sir,” the man answered.

Rokuta reached out and tapped him on the knee. “I can’t walk,” he said, peering up at him. “Carry me.”

A wry smile flitted across the guard’s lips. Without a word, he squatted down and turned his back to him.

*What are you doing here?* Rokuta wanted to ask. This was exactly the kind of thing that gave Shukou and the rest fits. What an irresponsible rapscallion the man was.

A soft voice said, almost swallowed up in the rustling of the clothing, “Don’t make me worry like that, okay?”

The Daiboku’s voice greeted Kouya when he returned from the dungeon. “Shashi, we found him.”

The Daiboku was coming up from the lower levels himself. “He was lost in the catacombs,” he said, motioning to one of his retainers, a man by the odd name of Fuukan. Fuukan was an itinerant worker who’d been conscripted in Ganboku, or so he said. Fuukan was carrying Rokuta on his back.

Kouya let out an exasperated sigh. Not binding his horn hadn’t been entirely by accident. Rokuta had freely shared his provisions with Kouya when they first met. The only reason he would go against Atsuyu’s wishes was the thought that Rokuta might die because of his bound horn.

“Rokuta—” Kouya hurried over to him.

“How’s he holding up?” mused Fuukan. “Seems to me he’s hanging on for dear life.”

Rokuta in fact had his eyes fast shut. He didn’t appear to be conscious.

“Take him to his room. He doesn’t look well.”

*This way,* Kouya said with a nod of his head. He was about to set off down the corridor. Hearing the Daiboku chuckling behind him, he stopped.

“And what became of that woman?”

Kouya glanced back at him. Fuukan stopped as well and turned his head.

“I persuaded her to leave the palace. After that, there would be no place for her here. She is free to flee to wherever she chooses.”

“Into the mouth of that youma, you mean.”

“This is no laughing matter,” Kouya answered shortly and turned on his heels.

He knew well enough how much the palace staff distrusted him. They weren’t gullible enough to believe that his prisoners had all voluntarily exiled themselves to the countryside. Kouya didn’t care. All that mattered was that those doubts did not bubble up to Atsuyu.

Kouya urged Fuukan to keep going. Fuukan cast a curious look at the youma following behind Kouya.

"So that's a real youma, eh?"

"It is. A tenken."

"Well behaved as well. Doesn't bite, does it?"

"Not at all."

"You don't say," he said and kept walking.

Kouya gave the man a hard looking over. However accustomed the palace staff was to the sight of the two of them, when they appeared together, everybody took a step back.

"You're not scared?"

Fuukan glanced over his shoulder and shrugged. "You said it doesn't bite."

"Yes, more or less," Kouya said. *What a strange man,* he thought to himself.

# Chapter 35

[7-7] **K**ouya came to a newly prepared jail cell and ushered Fuukan inside.

"He can rest there."

The guardsman slung the boy off his back and laid him on the bed. "Looks dead to the world."

"He really is in a bad state."

Kouya placed the back of his fingers against Rokuta's cheek. The skin was hot to the touch. He never would have imagined that *blood* could be so debilitating. He looked down at Rokuta's face, confusion and worry muddling his thoughts.

Fuukan said, "That woman they were talking about, you really did feed her to the youma, didn't you?"

"Please. I would never do a thing like that. The secretary is too gentle a person. He would never forgive me."

"You sure? This is one scary place."

Kouya smiled at Fuukan. "I said I didn't. In any case, you're better off keeping such thoughts to yourself." He said in an utterly nonchalant tone of voice, "Do anything that adds to the secretary's burdens in any way and you will find no mercy from me."

"Like I said, scary," the guardsman mumbled to himself.

"I'll leave him in your care for now. Keep a close watch."

Kouya turned on his heels.

"Kouya," Rokuta said behind him.

Kouya turned back and rushed over to the bed. "Are you okay? Do you hurt anywhere?"

"I'm okay." Rokuta peered up at him. He started a bit and took a quick breath. Then for a long moment he examined Kouya's face. He let out a long sigh and closed his eyes as if to shut out a painful sight.

"Kouya, you have the smell of blood about you."

Kouya flinched and took a step back.

"You—killed somebody—" Rokuta covered his face with his hands. "You didn't smell of blood before."

"These are perilous times. Of course, I've killed. That's my duty. If you threatened the secretary's life, I would have to kill you too."

"Oh," Rokuta muttered. In a louder voice, "Kouya, I have a favor to ask of you."

"What?"

“Take me to the Imperial Army.”

“I can’t do that!” said Kouya, clearly taken aback.

“Then ask Atsuyu.”

“I can’t, Rokuta.”

Rokuta hadn’t defied Atsuyu. That’s why he was still alive. Though Atsuyu was fast being driven into a corner, he did not seem inclined to kill his hostage. There was no telling how he might react if Rokuta turned that possibility against him.

Rokuta opened his eyes. “Now that I know what’s going on, I will not cooperate with Atsuyu.”

“Rokuta—”

“A man who made you his personal assassin is not a man I can respect. Didn’t you once say that you detested human slaughter?”

“Eh?” Kouya blinked in surprise.

“The first time we met, didn’t you say the big guy wouldn’t listen when you told him not to attack people? It made you sad.”

Thunderstruck, Kouya looked back at him.

“And yet you are commanded to kill. And comply. I could never respect a man who would do such a thing.”

“Rokuta—” Kouya said.

However he protested, nobody believed him. However he insisted the youma wouldn’t attack, nobody dared put that promise to the test. Not even Atsuyu would pet Rokuta.

“That isn’t something I lose any sleep over. I am Atsuyu’s retainer. I will kill anybody who hurts him.” He turned a mournful look on Rokuta. “Kirin are no different. I’ve heard that they can’t defy the emperor.”

“Shouryuu would never command me to kill anyone.”

“Can you say that for certain? Nobody knows what he’s capable of until he does it. Your lord and master is no different.”

Even Kouya wanted to believe the Chief Rikkan Secretary was pure as the driven snow. But no government could function effectively without ever dirtying its hands. Could the emperor as well? Hardly.

“Well, I can say that for certain.”

Kouya cast a flustered glance at Fuukan. He was sitting on the bed as if ready to kick back and take a nap himself. He looked at Kouya and smiled knowingly.

“I’d never tell Rokuta to kill anybody. It’d be a helluva a lot faster to do it myself, you see.”

Kouya gaped at him. “You—”

Rokuta sat up. “Shouryuu, you idiot!”

Shouryuu poked him in the forehead. “Who’s the idiot here? You need to rest.”

“The Imperial En,” Kouya murmured.

“And you must be Kouya. If you truly call him your friend, then why don’t you let him go? To be honest, he is nothing but trouble. But things do go to pieces when he’s not around.”

Kouya placed his hand on the youma’s head. “So when the kirin’s not there, you lose track of your humanity?”

“Naw.” Shouryuu grinned. “When he’s not around, all the ministers come bitching to me instead. It’s a real pain in the ass.”

Kouya tensed the hand resting on the youma’s head. “What did you sneak into Gen for?”

“I couldn’t find anybody else as capable as me to get the job done.”

“The secretary, you mean?”

No sooner had Kouya slipped his hand off the youma but Rokuta called out, “Stop it, Kouya! If anything happens to Shouryuu, I’ll never forgive you!”

Kouya cocked his head to the side. “You still insist on covering for him?”

Rokuta nodded. A single word and he’d known it was Shouryuu. Down in the catacombs, there was a glow about him, a ray of sunlight that should not exist. Shouryuu was the emperor. That alone he could not deny.

“I told you, didn’t I? I am Shouryuu’s retainer.”

“And I am no less to the secretary—to Atsuyu.” Kouya faced Rokuta and said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, “I’ll do whatever he commands. I’m here to protect him, even if that means killing anybody who stands against him.”

“And if Atsuyu commands it, become an accomplice to insurrection? Even if that means Atsuyu being branded a traitor? Even if that results in every arrow fired in anger coming back to strike him?”

“If he desires the rank of emperor, then so be it, even if he is branded a traitor. He fully expects to be targeted as a rebel and is fine with it. With the kingdom sliding toward destruction, if he wished to become the Lord God Creator, that would be fine with me too. I’d be there to give Atsuyu whatever help I could.”

“Then what about me?” Rokuta looked at Kouya, that other child who awoke on the same night to find himself cast aside. “I do like you. But I cannot abide the odor of blood about you.”

“Whatever it takes. The same way you rise to the defense of Shouryuu, I will rise to the defense of Atsuyu.”

“And to do so you will kill anybody who stands in your way? That doesn’t disturb you in any way?”

There was no way it could not, Rokuta thought. The Kouya that Rokuta knew hadn’t been that kind of person.

“You will kill if Atsuyu condones it? You will deviate from the Way and raise up armies? And send the kingdom to rack and ruin? Do you want to create more children just like yourself?”

Kouya answered quietly. “They’re all strangers to me.” His pale face was devoid of emotion. “So what if the kingdom goes to rack and ruin?”

Rokuta gaped at him. “Kouya—”

“Why do people die? Because people are born to die. Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall. However painful this realization may be, we cannot stop our own inevitable destruction.”

Kouya was the youma’s child. When youma appeared on a kingdom’s borders, they came to sow destruction. He was undoubtedly the child of destruction.

“As long as Atsuyu lives, the rest can hang.”

Rokuta gazed back at him, amazed. Why hadn’t he realized it before? The hardness of his heart shouldn’t have surprised him in the least.

“Though I might make a small exception for Rokuta alone, Atsuyu has no particular interest in your fate, so I have no particular reason to care. I would find any number of ways to torment you. How much anyone suffers, how much the kingdom decays, none of that matters in the end. If it’s all right with Atsuyu, it’s all right by me.”

“Kouya!”

“Is the fall of a kingdom that frightening? Is destruction? Is death? Shall I teach you the way to find peace?” He flashed a bright smile. “Let it all go to hell.”

“And if Atsuyu dies too?” Rokuta asked.

Kouya answered with barely a shrug. “If that’s what Atsuyu wants, then so be it.”

“This is your kingdom too!”

Shouryuu’s voice abruptly rang out. Rokuta and Kouya started in surprise and looked up at him.

“Atsuyu isn’t the only thing you can call your own. The same goes for this kingdom.”

Rokuta averted his gaze. “Shouryuu, it’s pointless.”

“Not until I say it is!” Shouryuu roared. He said to Kouya. “Let it all go to hell, you say? Live and let die, you say? Those are my subjects you’re talking about! With that kind of attitude, what am I doing here?”

Kouya blinked.

“What good’s an emperor without any subjects? Ask for a kingdom to rule and it’s the people who entrust it to you. That’s the only reason I’m emperor! And you’re fine with it all going to hell? What do you think I’m doing here?”

The people—*his* people—fled only to come face to face with a wall of arrows. The castle and the countryside and everyone who lived there vanished in the flames.

“Why was I allowed to live in disgrace? Why was I allowed to escape? I was given a kingdom to rule and it died. I would have willingly given my life for them. But I was told another kingdom had been entrusted to me. That’s the only reason I hung on.”

*Do you want a kingdom?* Rokuta had asked him.

“The only reason I exist is to hand over to you a rich and bountiful kingdom, Kouya.”

For a minute, Kouya only gazed up dumbstruck at Shouryuu. Then he said slowly and deliberately, “I am not so naive as to believe such sugar-coated promises.”

He got to his feet. How he had longed for a place where he could lead such a peaceful life. But he’d come to realize that it was all a fantasy. Just as Hourai forever remained beyond his reach, such a kingdom populated by such a people was the summit of a mountain he’d never reach no matter how long he climbed.

“I’ve heard nothing. I know nothing.” Kouya grimaced and turned his back to them. “I’ll leave you in charge for now, Fuukan. The ministers charged with the Taiho’s safekeeping will be here soon. The Taiho will have to stay here for the time being.”

“Kouya.”

Kouya glanced over his shoulder. “Like I told you. Anybody who threatens Atsuyu will have to answer to my youma. That is one thing you must never forget.”

# Part Eight

## Chapter 36

[8-1] **S**treaks of silver light pattered against the ground. The low-hanging clouds shrouding Kankyuu brushed up against the Sea of Clouds, blanketing the horizon as far as the eye could see.

The rainy season had arrived.

"Dammit. I should have gone to Ganboku."

At a station halfway up Kankyuu Mountain, Itan took in the storm clouds hugging the base of the Sea of Clouds above him. Every autumn, the cold waters of the Sea of Clouds flowed down from the north, turning the "sea bottom" muddy white, as if coated with frost.

The wispy thin cirrus strands thickened day by day, forming monsoon clouds over the center of the continent. And then the rain began to fall.

Shukou gazed at the Sea of Clouds. "It's started to rain," he said, stating the obvious.

"As long as we're all rolling the dice together, I'd rather be standing where I could see the action unfold. This waiting for the results from afar is unbearable."

"We can only pray the game plays out according to His Highness's expectations."

"You've got that right. It's all up to that reckless fool."

Several days later, Seishou stood on the far banks of the Rokusui and gazed at the river. The rain falling upstream had increased the flow of the river. To the east, in the direction of Kankyuu, the clouds closed out the sky. The monsoons would hit Gen Province sooner than later.

As the sandbags piled up around Shin'eki, the levees at Ganboku were already being overtopped.

"Any day now," Seishou muttered.

"What?" queried one of his lieutenants.

"Oh, nothing. Don't let your vigilance slacken. It will begin soon enough."

Further upstream from Shin'eki was Hokui. That evening, Yuuzen strolled through one of the small hamlets clustered around the Rokusui, inspecting the sandbags forming a waterproof wall along the river road.

"The Imperial Army really came to the rescue," Yuuzen said.

The fellow villagers with him smiled as well. They were returning to their homes from the fields.

"That's the truth," said one of the women. "Life this time of year has hardly been worth it up till now. But now we can spend the rainy season with some peace of mind."

They looked up at the levees. On the spur of the moment, Yuuzen hopped to the top of the levee and from there to the sloping bank of rocks and dirt. He examined the river.

"Yeah, it's filling up plenty fast. Must be coming down hard upstream."

Several of the others were curious enough to climb the levee and see for themselves.

"That's how high she's running, eh? One less thing to worry about this year."

"Well, yeah, get too comfortable and we'll wake up in our beds soaking wet."

They all laughed. Climbing down from the levee, Yuuzen was taking a last look across the river when he spotted a group of mounted soldiers on the opposite bank. He ducked out of sight.

Recent rumors said the Imperial Army was damming the Rokusui downstream in order to flood Ganboku. At the same time, other rumors said the provincial guard was going to breach the levees to protect Ganboku.

Either way, that meant keeping an eye out for anybody hanging around the levees who wasn't supposed to be there.

"What's going on, Yuuzen?" somebody called from the road.

He shushed them. Staying out of view, they quietly crept back up to the top of the levee.

"Those are—"

The sun had set. Twilight was falling. Dark shadows stretched across the countryside, making it hard to see what was going on. But they could make out at least two hundred horsemen descending the opposite bank.

"What are they up to?"

"Maybe looking for a shallow place to ford the river?"

"Plenty of places to do that further upstream."

"Must have reasons for doing it here instead."

The lead horseman hesitated at the far shore before stepping into the water.

"They're coming."

"Is this an attack?"

Yuuzen balled his hands into fists. They could be launching a sneak attack on the Imperial Army camped downstream.

"Yeah, but if they're planning an attack, they'd do it before the sun sets. By the time they got to the encampment, it'd be full night."

The women still on the road came up to see what the fuss was all about.

"Look, they're carrying shovels."

Yuuzen gulped. As they watched from the cover of the levee, the horsemen began to cross the river. The currents were flowing fast, pushing them further down past the widest part of the river and closer to where Yuuzen and the rest were hiding.

They were now close enough to see clearly. Two hundred horsemen. And those indeed weren't lances they were carrying but shovels.

The soldiers dismounted and Yuuzen jumped to his feet. "What the hell! Do you bastards think you're gonna breach the levees?"

The soldiers whirled around. Yuuzen called out to the women, "Run back to the village and warn them! Provincial guardsmen are trying to breach the levees!"

The soldiers rode toward them. Yuuzen and the others scooped up rocks and started throwing.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Go back to where you came from!"

Seishou received the dispatch not long after Yuuzen spotted the horsemen. The twilight still cast its dying light across the sky.

"The Gen provincial guard are in Hokui! They're skirmishing with the villagers!"

"What in the world?" Seishou broke into a run. "A battalion will do. Follow me!"

He jumped onto his kijuu, a *kitsuryou* Emperor Kyou had given to him. As much as he despised the late emperor, those feelings didn't extend to this magnificent youjuu. He said to his aide-de-camp, astride a *tenba,* "Go on ahead and get the villagers out of harm's way!"

His aide-de-camp flew away. Seishou took command of the battalion and marched east. They arrived in short order. He'd already secretly bivouacked a regiment of 2500 at Hokui.

"Just what I'd expect from that bastard Atsuyu," Seishou cursed to himself. He motioned to the soldiers behind him, "Defend the levees!"

Yuuzen dodged the slashing swords, dove to the ground and grabbed a rock. No matter what was at stake, the Rokusui could not be allowed to break out of its channel here.

As the two hundred cavalry surged up from the river, a dozen or so men sallied forth from the village to meet them. They spared no time wading into the fray. It

seemed insane, farmers facing off against fighters, but as soon as one of them was cut down, another stepped forward to take his place.

"Fall back!" rang out a loud but distant shout.

*Not a chance,* Yuuzen thought to himself.

He threw the rock in his hand, grasped another, raised his arm and aimed at the nearest soldier. The sweep of the soldier's sword grazed his arm. He ducked and rolled, picked up the rock again, and was about to throw it when another cry came from close by.

"The Imperial Army! The Imperial Army has arrived!"

Seishou allowed himself a wry smile as he drew his lance free of its scabbard.

*Build up the levees of the Rokusui. Watch for Atsuyu's reaction.* Those were Shouryuu's instructions to Mousen. *If Atsuyu breaches the levees, we'll own the high ground in more ways than one.*

"That damned son of a bitch is nobody's fool."

Seishou cast a brief, backwards glance at Ganboku Mountain rising over the far banks of the river. Then he spurred on his kitsuryou.

# Chapter 37

[8-2] **A**tsuyu asked, “How are you feeling?”

Rokuta shook his head. “Not so good.”

“Then you should probably avoid going on more long walks. Or was there something in particular you needed to see me about?”

“I’d like to go back to Kankyuu.”

Atsuyu frowned. “I’m sorry, but that alone is out of the question.”

“Every nook and cranny of this palace is stained with the stink of blood. It isn’t overpowering, but it constantly disturbs my rest. If you cared for my well being at all, you could at least find a place for me outside the palace.”

“I can’t do that either.”

“By the way, Atsuyu—”

“Something else on your mind?”

“Why do you keep your father locked away in solitary confinement?”

Atsuyu’s surprise was only exceeded by the perplexed expressions on the faces of the assembled ministers.

“His body is a wreck, to be sure, but he does appear to be in full command of his senses. The story is that Genkai fell ill, retired, and passed his authority to you. Except *retirement* hardly means the same thing as *solitary confinement,* does it?”

Atsuyu got to his feet. He furrowed his brows, then smiled. “My father is not well. If he didn’t appear so to you, you must have mistaken him for somebody else. Where is this person? And why was he using my father’s name? Explain the circumstances of the encounter.”

“Then who do you have locked away inside the Inner Palace?”

“The Inner Place,” Atsuyu echoed suspiciously. “That would be where my father resides.”

“You’re admitting that you bound your father in chains?” Rokuta looked Atsuyu squarely in the face. “You bound him in chains and cut out his tongue and left him there to rot? Answer me, Atsuyu!”

“That was—”

Rokuta turned to the ministers. “Did any of you know? You knew and continued to serve him? If so, that makes Gen Province nothing more than a den of thieves.”

Most of the ministers reacted with alarm and looked at Atsuyu. Only a small number averted their eyes.

“You do preach a lofty sermon, Atsuyu. But for all your professions of allegiance to the Way, what are you really up to? Kidnapping? Imprisonment?”

“I do apologize for resorting to such foul means in order to entice the Taiho here. When the Shashi said he could bring you here, I never imagined he would resort to such untoward methods.”

Kouya raised his eyes and took a long hard look at Atsuyu’s anguished countenance.

*You’ve done well, Shashi.* Kouya knew the true meaning lurking within those words. *I wouldn’t want to lose my precious Shashi.* Even if he only meant it would be inconvenient to lose the services of a useful retainer, Atsuyu was the only person who held Kouya’s life dear.

Kouya hung his head. Atsuyu turned back to Rokuta and said, “However, I am responsible for the deeds of my retainers. There are no words to express the apologies you are due. Please find it in your heart to forgive us. As for my father, again, I can only confess to being totally in the dark about his condition and who could have conspired to commit such injustices. I will see to it that an investigation is launched at once.”

Rokuta drew his brows. At that moment, somebody came running into the room. The provincial prime minister, Hakutaku.

“Secretary, what have you done?” Hakutaku stumbled and fell to his knees at Atsuyu’s feet. “Did you really order that the levees be breeched? After I pleaded with you to not take such a drastic step!”

The ministers raised the voices in shared alarm. Atsuyu waved his hands in obvious displeasure. “Hakutaku, you should leave.”

“No! Didn’t you claim you were acting for the good of the people? And yet you are destroying the levees the Imperial Army built! Do that and what will the people think of your good intentions? Who will they think is acting with their best interests in mind and who is not? Can’t you grasp the repercussions of these actions?”

“Hakutaku—”

“You are fighting the same villagers who are trying to save the levees! The provincial guard raised the sword against them and the Imperial Army rushed to their rescue. How did you think this was going to turn out? The citizens of Ganboku heard the rumors too and are leaving as fast as they can. Not only the conscripts but your own soldiers are opening the city gates and running away!”

“What?”

Atsuyu rushed to the window. But the cloud cover obscured the world below.

“This is the end of Gen Province. You have achieved your long-cherished desire, Secretary. You have exceeded yourself and rebelled against the entire kingdom.”

Hakutaku staggered to his feet and faced the clearly disturbed ministers. “Run away while you still can. Surrender to the Imperial Army, confess your sins, and plead for mercy. A battalion is marching on Hokui as we speak and they’re chomping at the bit. That’s where the fighting will begin in earnest. After that it will be too late. Your heads will be adorning the tops of their pikes.”

Atsuyu’s shoulders shook. He pushed himself away from the windows and spun around, his face contorted with rage.

“Hakutaku!”

Atsuyu strode up to him, seized the front of his cloak, and threw him bodily to the ground.

“The only traitors and betrayers here are the lot of you! Hakutaku!” Atsuyu glared down at him, malice gleaming in his eyes. “So now you cast aside the man you flattered as the most capable chief secretary, the man under whose feet you struck the spark? You are the prime minister! When the province goes astray, isn’t it your duty to set things right? Call me a rebel if you like, but you did nothing to stop me! When the label of traitor at last falls on you, you turn right around and abandon the man you called your leader?”

“You too,” he added with a withering glare at the cowering ministers. “Didn’t you say you wanted the levees rebuilt? Didn’t you say you wanted political autonomy for Gen Province, authority over flood control and land reclamation efforts? Weren’t these all necessary to improve the lot of our people? Wasn’t it *me* you pledged your loyalty to me in the first place, not the emperor?”

Atsuyu’s voice rose to a shout. Standing in front of Hakutaku, he said, “When it comes to what happened in the first place, this was all at *your* instigation.”

“I—”

“Things as they are simply can’t be left in the hands of the Imperial En! A man with a conscience must rise up and set the world right. Weren’t you the one who told me that?”

“Secretary, I—”

“*You* were the one who goaded me on, saying that *I* was the only one who could get the job done.”

“I—something like that—”

“And you dare to lecture me about turning traitor? You fool!”

“Atsuyu-sama—”

“You took advantage of my feelings for the people and provoked me to rebel. As soon as the tide turns against you, you pin the blame on a scapegoat and run away? I never imagined I would be taken advantage of by such disloyal retainers.”

Atsuyu spoke as if lamenting a great loss. Then he turned to Kouya, who’d retreated to a corner of the room. “Take him.”

“Secretary—”

Kouya’s own grief was evident in a single word. Atsuyu ignored him and addressed his defense minister. “Initiate measures to counter this civilian uprising. Defend the palace to the last man. I shall go to Kankyuu with the Taiho and lay out all the facts for the emperor, including who the real guilty parties are, and beg for his discretion in the matter.”

Rokuta looked on in amazement. *Here is a wounded man who ignores the true cause of the injury and instead does everything in his power to conceal it.*

Atsuyu’s face was suffused with bitterness. The casual onlooker would truly believe he had been betrayed by his retainers, ensnared by connivers and confidence men, one misfortune after the other heaped upon his shoulders.

“Taiho, you have already faced much adversity. I promise upon my life that I will deliver you to Kankyuu. I blame my own naiveté for being so deceived by my disloyal servants, and will accept whatever punishment is judged right and proper. But I would implore the Taiho to petition the emperor to spare the ministers of Gen Province the full brunt of their deserved censure.”

Rokuta gazed back at the anguished man. “So, Atsuyu, now we see your true colors.”

Atsuyu reacted with a suspicious frown.

Rokuta said, “You claim to be rising up on behalf of the people at the same time you breach the levees and obsess over snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. You call yourself the master of all you see while pinning the blame on Hakutaku and Kouya. Are we seeing the real you at last?”

He scanned the herd of stupefied ministers. “So you shut Genkai away in the dungeons in order to make this man your leader?” Nobody answered. Rokuta turned on his heels.

“Where are you going, Taiho?”

He didn’t bother to look at him. “Back to Kankyuu. By myself. I’ll make sure the emperor is informed about all that’s been going on here.”

Watching from the corner of the room, Kouya let out a long breath. He was watching the wheels fall off the cart.

Most of the ministers had really believed in Atsuyu’s integrity. That belief was the only reason Kouya was still alive. They were an idealistic if naive bunch. But when the gravity of the sin came fully to their attention, they set aside their loyalty to Atsuyu, abandoned the hoped-for glory of walking in his shadow, and chose the high road in a heartbeat.

As Rokuta walked away, Atsuyu’s lips twisted into a sneer. Kouya couldn’t bear to watch. He hugged his arms around the youma’s neck and hung his head.

“So the Taiho intends that I, Atsuyu, bear all the blame!”

Rokuta didn't answer. It'd be a waste of breath.

Atsuyu whirled around. "Hakutaku! So you conspired with the emperor and the Taiho!"

"Secretary!"

"That's it, isn't it? You've been scheming with the Taiho from the start! The emperor was jealous of my acclaim and plotted for us to get branded as traitors! Right? Right?"

"Atsuyu," Rokuta said with a weary sigh. "The emperor wouldn't do anything like that. Because he wouldn't need to."

"Do you think I haven't heard about the complaints coming from the Rikkan, about what a fool the man is? Oh, why didn't I trust my instincts more? I was filled with too much self-doubt to go on the Shouzan to Mt. Hou and seek the Mandate of Heaven."

"A waste of a trip, that would have been," Rokuta said under his breath. "You never had what it took to sit on the throne."

"Are you saying I don't measure up to *him*?"

"Compared to Shouryuu, you are trash." Rokuta turned and headed out of the room. Then stopped and glanced over his shoulder at Atsuyu and the posse of retainers behind him. He raised his voice and said, "Which I hope isn't taken by anybody here as praise for Shouryuu!"

Hakutaku looked back and forth from the departing kirin to the man in whom he'd once placed his faith and trust and held up as his leader. With a sad sigh he said to the retainers, "If you have any scruples left in you, any desire to do the right thing, then arrest the Secretary!"

Then recognizing one of the retainers behind Atsuyu, he started in surprise.

"That couldn't be—"

The soldier grinned.

"I don't believe it—" Hakutaku shook his head.

The soldier cut through the crowd of bewildered retainers and walked up to Atsuyu.

Atsuyu watched him approach and said, "Seems you don't know what side your bread is buttered on."

"Not at all," the soldier said with a smile. He knelt down. "I thought I should bring a bit of important information to your attention."

"Important information?" Atsuyu cocked his head to the side. "Weren't you promoted from the provincial guard?"

"I was. Thanks to you."

"Well, then. What important information? What is your name, soldier?"

His smile widened. "Komatsu Naotaka."

Atsuyu shook his head at the unfamiliar sounds, as if bothered by a persistent mosquito. The soldier came to his feet.

"Though some people insist on calling me Emperor Shouryuu."

He stepped forward, at the same time drawing his sword and pressing the cold steel tip against the hollow of Atsuyu's throat.

"You!"

"Kouya! Don't try anything. Or this sword will see the other side of his neck."

While reflexively going into an offensive crouch, Kouya caught the look in Shouryuu's eyes and froze in place.

"The same goes for everybody else. You can hold onto your weapons. Just move back against the wall."

He glanced over his shoulder at Rokuta, who'd stopped at the door. "I appreciate the compliment."

"I wasn't complimenting you, dammit!"

While resting the tip of the sword against Atsuyu's throat, Shouryuu laughed out loud.

"You bastard, what's this about?" Atsuyu grumbled.

"You wanted to test the Divine Will, didn't you? Well, I thought I'd give you the chance to try."

"What?"

"Call it Providence or whatever. Even without getting any innocent bystanders involved, the question wouldn't be resolved until you and I came to blows. Don't you think, Atsuyu?"

Atsuyu glared at him. With a small smile, Shouryuu turned his attention to the ministers, standing there like a row of statues.

"Hold your horses and listen."

Whether to flee for their lives or rush to Atsuyu's aid, several of them had begun to stir. They stiffened once again.

"I received the Mandate of Heaven and was placed upon the throne. If you're unhappy about that, complain all you want. But to strike down the emperor is to strike down that Mandate. If you wish to test the limits of Providence, there's no need to raise armies and hoard provisions for the troops, not when the people can barely feed themselves. Their exhausted stockpiles now cannot be replenished by next year's crop. If Atsuyu kills me here, that leaves you in charge. You can work to revive En or destroy it, whatever strikes your fancy. Because that would be the Divine Will, would it not?"

Shouryuu next turned to Kouya. “Kouya, restrain your youma as best you can. I wouldn’t want to kill it in front of its owner. Or you either, for that matter. Rokuta would be unhappy with me.”

Now he addressed no one in particular. “If Atsuyu has any devoted followers who wish to sacrifice their lives on his behalf, it’s time to stand by his side. Somebody arm the man. Whatever weapon suits him best.”

Nobody moved.

“What? I don’t see anybody rushing to his defense.” Shouryuu had no takers, his goading notwithstanding. “I see,” he said with a wry smile. “Well, Atsuyu, it looks like you ended up on your own.”

“Sons of bitches—”

“For pity’s sake, somebody at least give the man a sword.”

Shouryuu directed his gaze at one of the retainers. The perplexed guard stepped to Atsuyu’s, unstrapped the sword from his waist and pressed it into Atsuyu’s shaking hands.

“If you would forgive me, Your Highness.”

Hakutaku prostrated himself on the ground. The rest immediately followed suit.

“Your Highness, I am ashamed to say that this sums what was at best a petty provincial rebellion.”

“As coup d’états go, it certainly hasn’t adorned itself in glory.”

“Yes. But while you would certainly be in your rights to strike down the Secretary, let us avert any more futile conflict and end things here. Surely you can find it in your heart to pass the most humane judgment possible.”

*But of course,* said the grim smile on Shouryuu’s face. He looked down at Atsuyu, who’d dropped the sword to his side and fallen to his knees. “Open the palace gates and demobilize the provincial guard.”

Atsuyu bowed his head low to the ground. “I concede.”

Shouryuu glanced around him. “For the time being, somebody take him into custody.”

He sheathed his sword and stepped away from Atsuyu. Looking on, Rokuta felt a cool chill of apprehension.

Shouryuu said, “However humane a man I may be, he still has a lot to answer for. Post a guard and make sure he doesn’t hurt himself.”

From behind him came the *whish* of a blade cutting through the air.

“Shouryuu!”

Shouryuu pivoted in a flash, hand on the hilt of his sword. Atsuyu stepped toward him, swinging the sword over his head. Three paces separated them. There was no telling whether Atsuyu’s blow would land before Shouryuu could parry.

Everyone gulped at once.

“Rikaku!”

“ROKUTA!”

Kouya and Rokuta shouted simultaneously. Everything came down to those three paces.

Except Rikaku moved faster than Atsuyu. A spray of blood erupted as the shirei seized him by the jaw.

Rokuta averted his eyes. He looked at Kouya. Both of their cries rang out at the same time. Kouya, though, had ordered the youma to halt.

The call to save a life and the call to stop the slaughter decided the fate of Atsuyu and Shouryuu.

Rikaku’s fangs bit down on Atsuyu’s neck and just as quickly let go. His sword fell with a heavy clatter. Leaping back out of the way, Shouryuu took stock of Rikaku’s intervention and rushed forward once again.

Rikaku had torn Atsuyu’s head half off his shoulders. Because he was a wizard, he still had the breath of life in him. He lay there in a pool of his own gore, eyes staring up in incomprehension, seeing what no one there cared to imagine.

“Let’s put you out of your misery,” Shouryuu said.

The sweep of his sword cleanly severed Atsuyu’s head. The sound of steel striking the marble floor rang in all their ears.

# Chapter 38

[8-3] **S**houryuu scanned the row of stunned ministers as he put away his sword.

"Kouya," Shouryuu called out. He walked over to him. Taking in the vacant expression on his face, he said, "Kouya, I'm sorry I had to do that."

"But—" Kouya's voice was broken and thin. "I—"

"I'm grateful."

Rokuta came to his side. "Kouya."

Kouya knelt down and stuck out his neck. "I accept the judgment I deserve."

"Kouya!"

Shouryuu only looked down at him. "I'm not going to kill you, Kouya."

"Beheading is the customary sentence for high treason."

"No."

Kouya raised his head, his features twisted in despair. "I wasn't trying to save you!"

The youma cooed and tapped his shoulder with its beak.

"I didn't want to save you. I wanted to save Atsuyu. But ROKUTA stopped at the last moment. It wasn't me. It was you. Your will, not mine. I never meant for him to die."

"Kouya—"

"I would have done anything for him! Kill people without a second thought! I would have killed you too! The kingdom could go to hell. No matter how many people suffered, no matter how many children ended up orphans, I didn't give a damn!"

"Kouya, I told you before. The only reason I'm here is to give you a better world. If there's nobody left to accept that world, then my existence has no meaning."

"Give it to somebody other than me. There's no end to the people who hope for a better tomorrow."

"I'm a greedy man, I guess. Give me a choice between a million and a million and one, and I'll always choose the latter."

Kouya bowed his head. The youma continued to pat him on the shoulder with its beak. Kouya wrapped his arms around the youma's neck. "But me and the big guy have no place to call our own."

"Kouya—"

"No matter how bountiful this kingdom becomes, I'll never be able to call it home. I am the child of a youma, you see." He looked up at Shouryuu. "The richer and more

peaceful this kingdom is, the more miserable and resentful I will become. I once dreamed of Hourai, but that is a place forever out of my reach. If you have any pity for me at all, please don't try to kindle any hope for the future."

"You're asking for a speedy execution, then? Not going to happen." Shouryuu knelt in front of Kouya. "Youma attack people. Those people suffer no less than you do when you are attacked. That youma chose you alone. It cannot live together with anybody it did *not* choose."

"The big guy doesn't attack people!" Kouya hugged the youma. "He listens to me. He doesn't attack anybody against my wishes. Maybe it's in a youma's instincts to attack people but the big guy behaves himself for me."

"Well, then," Shouryuu nodded. "I will give you a place where you and the youma can live."

Kouya laughed, his face twisting in painful scorn. "What sort of luxurious prison would this be? A jail with silver bars across the windows and doors?"

"A kingdom where nobody gets attacked by youma."

Shouryuu reached out and placed his hand on the youma's head burrowed against Kouya's shoulder. Next to the startled Kouya, the youma tensed up, but let itself be petted.

"People keep their distance from youma because youma run rampant when a kingdom goes into decline. When a kingdom revives and the natural order reasserts itself, youma no longer haunt the countryside. The fear of youma attacks declines. When that happens, people will have no more reason to fear you or your foster parent. It'll be nothing but a curious-looking youjuu."

"Shouryuu," Kouya murmured, clearly taken aback.

Shouryuu smiled. "I'm not going to punish you. Or the ministers of Gen Province. Or anybody else. The population of En is too small as is. We need to hold onto every able-bodied man and woman we've got."

"But—"

"Your name will remain on the Registry of Wizards. This isn't a problem that can be solved in ten years or twenty. We all need time. You and your foster parent will get land of your own, that you will never be driven from. In the meantime, there's a garden in the Imperial Palace you'll have to make do with."

Kouya gazed intently at the man making these promises. "Do you really think this world you imagine will ever arrive?"

"That's why I'm here, Kouya."

Kouya blinked. For a long minute, he pondered those words in his heart. "Then I will await that day in the Kongou Mountains."

"Kouya, come to Kankyuu."

“This is for Rokuta’s sake. We will live in the Yellow Sea and wait for that promised land to become a reality.” He hugged the youma all the tighter. “We will wait forever, if that’s how long it takes.”

# Chapter 39

[8-4] **K**ouya and his youma flew off toward the west. Rokuta watched from the balcony until they disappeared out of sight.

*ROKUTA.*

Kouya had restrained his youma even as Rokuta summoned his.

*Rikaku, save Shouryuu.*

In the end, Rokuta would always prize Shouryuu's life over that of anybody else. It had been that way from the start. As he'd fled with the harried subjects of that tiny fief back in Japan, he'd called out to Rikaku.

Shouryuu opened his eyes. Above his head was the broad expanse of an indigo blue sky. He swayed back and forth—due to his own vertigo or some other cause?

He blinked, heard the sound of water, felt the breath of sea air. Stars twinkling in the darkening sky swayed gently back and forth, the swaying of a boat, he imagined.

Lying there, he turned his head to the side. A child sat on the prow of the boat, the child Shouryuu had found on the beach. Thinking he was dead, he'd retrieved the body for burial, only to discover that the child still had breath in him.

"How did I end up in a place like this?" Shouryuu mumbled to himself. His voice sounded in his ears like a rasp against rough wood.

He'd stayed behind to guard the rear as his people escaped. They were outflanked and surrounded by the Murakami forces. However much he wanted to rally to their defense, he could barely hold his own ground. With more arrows, at least he could slow down the Murakami soldiers disembarking from their boats. But he'd long since run out.

He cut down three with his sword, grabbed a lance and speared two more. That was the last thing he remembered. His luck must have run out before getting to the third. He'd probably taken a spear in the back. And then—

Shouryuu frowned and sat up. He should be wounded. He couldn't tell where. His entire body ached. He drew each breath with difficulty.

"Don't tell me you came to my rescue," Shouryuu said to Rokuta.

Rokuta nodded. He'd prevaricated to the last, but simply couldn't let Shouryuu die without raising a hand. Engulfed by the smell of blood, he ordered the tormented Rikaku to intervene and carry him to safety.

"What about the others?"

Rokuta shook his head. Perhaps if there hadn't been so much blood. Wandering through the warring domains left him enfeebled. The travails of the Komatsu had thoroughly debilitated him. He didn't have the strength left to save anybody else.

"Why did you save me?"

"You saved me first, Shouryuu."

"You didn't lie down on the shore expecting to die. Or did you?"

Rokuta shook his head. Shouryuu leaned back against the gunwales. Rokuta gave him an examining look. "Did you want to die?"

Shouryuu craned his head back and looked up at the sky. "Whenever somebody called me the Young Master, I took it as a sign of faith in me. *We are trusting this fief to you, our lives to you.* But I wasn't able to rise to their expectations."

"You hardly bear the blame for that."

They weren't big enough or strong enough. Their soldiers were easily overwhelmed. They never had a chance of winning and the Murakami never entertained thoughts of a negotiated settlement.

"So it wasn't my fault, eh? It was all in the cards from the start."

"Then there's no need for you to get so disheartened about it. Didn't you do the very best you could?"

"I was the appointed heir. They doted on me, raised me as one of their own."

"That's—"

"There was a sense that we were all in it together. That's what I heard when they called me the Young Master, a mutual trust that grew deeper every time they addressed me that way. I was never able to repay that trust in equal measure. There was no way I ever could."

Shouryuu stared up at the heavens. He didn't look at Rokuta. He took a deep breath and caught his breath. Perhaps because of his still aching wounds.

"It was what they wanted. Once I shouldered that burden, I couldn't put it down. No matter how happy-go-lucky a guy I may appear, it's the kind of thing that begins to wear on you after a while."

The boat drifted on the Inland Sea currents. Rikaku had borne Shouryuu on his back until he spied this unmoored boat.

Rokuta gazed at Shouryuu. Even now the man was a mystery to him.

Shouryuu's wounds were severe. He had to be in a lot of pain. Or else the physical pain only served to dampen a far more excruciating torment, one that he himself hadn't fully come to terms with. Either way, the more Rokuta dithered, the faster Shouryuu approached the point of no return.

Rokuta couldn't abandon him. Saving him meant bestowing on him an immortal body. That's what fate had driven him to do. Or what the will of the people of En demanded of him.

Rokuta asked in a low voice, “Do you want a kingdom?”

“Yes,” said Shouryuu, still staring up at the sky.

“A ragged kingdom, dirt poor and threadbare.”

Shouryuu sat up. The hint of a smile rose to his own ragged features. “Big or small, it doesn’t matter. I was raised to inherit a kingdom and I did inherit one from my father. A king without a kingdom is a laughingstock.”

“A ravaged kingdom breeds a ravaged people. Their confused hearts may not hearken to anything you say.”

“Exactly the kind of place I was made for.”

Rokuta looked back at him. “Shall I give you a palace?”

“Do you have one to give?”

“It’d be more accurate to say that the kingdom and its subjects do the giving. If you are willing to accept.”

“What kingdom is this?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. But if that is what you desire, then you must part with everything you know.”

Shouryuu answered with a hollow laugh. “Something so grave I must abandon everything? Then tell me what I have left to abandon.”

“You can never return to the Inland Sea and its islands.”

“Oh?”

“But if you accept, I will give you that kingdom, assuming you want the throne that goes with it.”

Shouryuu quietly answered Rokuta’s unwavering gaze with a single word. “Yes.”

Rokuta nodded. He stood up from the bow, knelt at Shouryuu’s feet, and bowed his head to the planks of the hull. “According to the Mandate of Heaven, I anoint you Emperor. From this day forward, I pledge my loyalty, and will not turn my back on this Divine Call or you.”

“Rokuta?”

Rokuta raised his head and looked directly at Shouryuu. “To accept this kingdom is to accept me as your retainer. If it can be said that you bear the expectations of a kingdom, then I bear the kingdom itself.”

Shouryuu sat there quietly. Whatever he thought of Rokuta and everything he’d said, finally he nodded and smiled.

“Then you are my retainer. But this had better be a real kingdom. Not a measly castle sitting in a measly field.”

Rokuta bowed his head to Shouryuu’s feet and granted him what he desired: a palace and a ravaged land, a wasteland of broken mountains, and a mere three hundred thousand souls.

The entirety of the Kingdom of En.

Atsuyu wasn't the first and he wouldn't be the last. Many more like him were sure to follow, and it wasn't written in the stars that Shouryuu would always prevail. En would always be exposed to the risks of rack and ruin.

Shouryuu promised Kouya peaceful days ahead, but when they would truly arrive was anybody's guess.

The tiny figure faded into a hazy wisp and disappeared into the vast blue yonder. Rokuta looked up at Shouryuu. Like Rokuta, Shouryuu was there to see Kouya off.

"Thanks."

"What for?" Shouryuu said, still looking to the west.

"For forgiving Kouya."

"I didn't do it for you." His voice had a hard, blunt edge.

"You're mad at me."

Shouryuu finally turned his gaze from the sky to Rokuta. "And with damn good reason. You blundered right into a kidnapping. What did you think was going to happen?"

"It was my fault."

"I haven't forgiven anybody," Shouryuu said in almost a growl.

Rokuta looked up at him in confusion.

"Ekishin and Ribi and that child. Three people for starters. Three of my people you've all but gouged out of my soul."

Rokuta visibly started.

"I am here to give my people life. And my kirin goes and gets them killed."

"I'm sorry."

"You couldn't come up with any way to save them? Kirin may be creatures of compassion, but you bestowed that compassion on the wrong person."

"Shouryuu, I'm sorry."

Rokuta couldn't look him in the face. He only hung his head and clung to him. Shouryuu rested his hand on the crown of his head. A big hand, because Rokuta hadn't grown since the age of thirteen.

"*Leave everything to me,* I said."

Rokuta nodded. And so he had. If the kirin was the embodiment of the people's will, then it only makes sense to let the man he chose act as he saw fit. He'd fully resolved himself to proceed on that belief.

He really felt like bawling. It was the kind of thing that made him think he was thirteen after all, and never had become an adult.

"Not just Shukou and Itan and the rest of them, but you as well. My retainers sure are rotten judges of character."

This time, though, the kind kidding in his voice made Rokuta smile.

“Shouryuu.”

“What?”

“Like you told Kouya, are you going to create a place I can call my own as well?”

He sensed Shouryuu was on the verge of laughter. “Well, sure, when it comes to the people of En, you count as one of my subjects too.”

“And?” said Rokuta, raising his head.

“What sort of place do you want?”

“One with green mountains and fields.” Rokuta took a step away from Shouryuu and turned to face him. “A prosperous kingdom where nobody goes hungry and nobody freezes, where people live in houses that shelter them from the rain and heavy dews. Where everyone lives in peace, with no need to worry about the next meal or the next war. A harmonious land. That’s what I’ve always wanted, a kingdom wealthy enough that no parent ever has to abandon a child.”

Shouryuu smiled. “You were good to your word: you gave me a kingdom. And I promise to return that kingdom to you.”

Rokuta nodded. “And I’ll keep my eyes closed to all the rest until you say so.”

# Postscript

**R**okuta spied a minister strolling through the Inner Palace. “Shukou!” he called out. “Do you know where Shouryuu is?”

Ten years had passed since Atsuyu’s revolt. The reorganization of the Rikkan was complete, and the effects of the reformations were showing up in the Imperial Court. Shukou had been appointed Daishikou, in charge of the Ministry of Fall.

“No idea,” he responded with his usual sigh.

Several vice-ministers from the Ministry of Fall were also present, Itan among them.

Shukou said, “He probably headed down to Kankyuu.”

Itan waved the sheaf of documents he was holding. He was the Daishito in the Ministry of Earth. “He stopped by the stables to check up on Tama.”

Tama was Shouryuu’s latest mount, a youjuu called a *suugu*.

“Heh. The kind of thing that really gets your goat, eh?”

“I’ve resigned myself to it. He enjoys hanging around the city and observing his subjects going about their everyday lives. It doesn’t bother me like it used to.”

“You don’t say.”

“He’s not the kind of leader that needs to sign off on every little thing. We do what we have to do, and if he’s got a problem with it, he’ll say so.”

Rokuta said to Itan with a great deal of earnestness, “You really have seen the light.”

Shukou couldn’t resist answering with a jibe of his own. “If you’re only going to show up at court to trade insults, you needn’t go to all the effort. The emperor and his entourage should apply their efforts where they’ll be the most useful.”

“Goodness gracious, when did everybody start coming to their senses? It pains my heart to think about how long it took for that realization to dawn on you all.”

“If it pains you that much, perhaps now and then you could prevail upon the emperor to execute his responsibilities with the seriousness they demand.”

“But of course,” said Rokuta.

He did an about-face and headed out the door. Behind him, the vice-ministers and civil servants stifled their laughter.

Rokuta ran up to the palace proper and headed for the Forbidden Gate. At the far back of the Enshin, he descended a flight of stairs. Halfway up Mt. Ryou’un, a big

door was set into the rock. The door was open. Rokuta waved to the guard and darted through the Forbidden Gate.

Outside the gate, a large, flat ledge was hewn out of the rock: a landing platform for flying kijuu. Rokuta hurried over to the stables, set into the side of the mountain. Inside Shouryuu was saddling Tama.

Shouryuu glanced over his shoulder, smiled and nodded. “How’d it go?”

“Your ministers don’t appear the slightest bit concerned about your absence.”

Shouryuu chortled. “Yeah, they’ll manage. Another ten days will hardly make a difference.”

“And by the time they notice and raise a stink, we’ll be long gone.” Rokuta pulled his cloak up around his head. “So where are we headed?”

“I thought Sou deserved a visit. The Imperial Sou is said to be one of the wisest emperors around.”

“Yeah, what with you getting down on yourself and needing a boost to your flagging self-esteem and all.”

With a devilish grin, Shouryuu heaved Rokuta’s luggage at him. “Sourin is said to be a rare beauty, worshiped almost like an angel. So who’s the one here with the flagging self-esteem?”

“Not me, weirdo.”

“I hear they’re doing interesting things with the local municipal governments.”

“Which you plan on copying? So this is really all about the ulterior motives, eh?”

“Well, if it’s a prosperous kingdom, what’s wrong with that? If anybody notices, I’ll plead that I’m just a blockhead. Monkey see, monkey do is all I’m capable of.”

“Well, you are a blockhead, that’s for sure.”

“Hoh. Here I’ve been hiding it all these years and finally noticed?”

“You really are the king of fools.”

“I’ve made it my specialty.”

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that.”

Shouryuu took hold of the reins. “Say, Rokuta, what about Hourai?” When Rokuta looked up at him, he said with a shrug, “I was wondering what kind of condition the place is in.”

“No. Taking an emperor with me would cause all kinds of damage.”

The way these two worlds were isolated from each other, people couldn’t ordinarily travel between them. Forcing open a portal triggered all sorts of natural disasters—unless the kirin went alone.

“Then go by yourself and tell me what’s going on.”

A proposition Rokuta wasn’t expecting. “You don’t mind?”

“As long as you’ve got your shirei with you, not at all.”

“So now the monkey’s going to ape the Japanese too?”

Shouryuu answered the playful insult with a smile. “Like I said, what matters is that a kingdom is thriving and why.”

“You are a thoroughly unprincipled man, in the literal sense of the word. I don’t mind going, but the smell of blood is bound to permeate the place.”

“Still in a fight for its life, that country?”

“Probably still,” Rokuta mumbled to himself.

Shouryuu said with a triumphant grin, “So you *have* been to Hourai.”

“Eh?”

“Seeing as we haven’t crossed paths in Kankyuu lately, I was pretty sure you were off somewhere.”

“Well, now and then I—”

“When you’re simply skulking around the city, you always make sure to hide that shiny head of yours. If you’re not in disguise, I figure that’s where you’ve been.”

“Heh, heh, heh,” Rokuta said, in the manner of a sneak thief caught in the act. “Well, ah, I—”

“En has a most capable roster of civil servants, you see.”

“That’s right! The good-for-nothing emperor and his idiot Taiho notwithstanding.”

Shouryuu laughed out loud. “Shall we go?”

“Sure.”

Rokuta jumped onto the suugu’s back. They raced out of the stables, the guards scrambling after them. Before the guards could catch up with them, the suugu gave a mighty leap and flew off the cliff. With a great gust of air, it plunged straight down. Descending to the right altitude, this extraordinary creature—that could cross an entire kingdom in a single day—leveled out and began to fly.

Looking down at the world below, an unbroken sea of green reached out to the horizon.

# From The Chronicles of En

**I**n the year Taika 21, Setsu Yuu, Chief Rikkan Secretary of Gen Province, came to covet the Imperial Authority of the Emperor and even the Divinity of the Lord God Creator. Setsu Yuu, commonly known by the name of Atsuyu, was the only child of Gen Province Lord Kai.

Setsu Yuu subsequently conspired against the Imperial Throne and raised an army.

Answering this challenge to His Rule, the Emperor struck back at Ganboku in Gen. Atsuyu was beheaded in Ganboku and the Disturbance was eradicated from the Land.

The Emperor thereupon changed the Era Name to *Hakuchi*.

In Hakuchi 87, the Emperor changed the Era Name to *Daigen*. In the first year of Daigen, He promulgated a Decree reorganizing the classification of domesticated animals.

Ridden animals had traditionally been designated as Horses, Beasts of Burden, and Youjuu. To these three, He added a fourth: Youma.

To the six categories of domesticated Fowl and Livestock, He added a seventh: Youma.

The Decree was proclaimed throughout the Land, prominently posted at every place of employment, on every castle gate, at the entrance to every village, from the coasts of the Blue and Black Seas all the way to the Kongou Mountains.

Of all the Twelve Kingdoms, En stood apart as the only Kingdom having made such amendments to the Three and Six categories of domesticated animals.