

Hills of Silver Ruins, a Pitch Black Moon

Book I

A Twelve Kingdoms novel

by

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Translated

by

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Part One

Chapter 1

[1-1] The Taoist temples in Ten had enjoyed great renown since ancient times.

Ten was a shire of Kou Province in the Kingdom of Tai. Situated to the east and far north of the known world, the Kingdom of Tai had long been characterized by its severe winters, the bitter cold of its northern territories in particular. The upper reaches of Kou Province were no exception, the pervasive chill as fierce as the heavy snows. Crisscrossed by craggy mountains, arable land was scarce and the soil poor, yielding little in the way of agricultural produce.

Already sparsely populated with towns and hamlets, a whole region of Ten Shire was taken up by the Imperial Reserves in and around Bokuyou Mountain. There, on a ridge located along its southern slopes, the history of the Taoist temples traced back to the founding of Zui'un Temple.

Widely considered the head Taoist temple in the Kingdom of Tai, Zui'un constituted the core of a large temple complex. Taoist and even Buddhist temples large and small hugged the mountain peaks and promontories all around Zui'un.

The imperial ritual observances that reached all the way down to the local Rishi were not, by nature, religious, but were functions of the state. Instead, the faithful turned to the Taoist temples and Buddhist monasteries, which in turn became the birthplaces of many schools of knowledge and technology.

A desire to answer the wishes of the people for good harvests and good health lay behind the creation of these grand repositories of science and scholarship. Chief among the compounds formulated and manufactured in the temples were traditional herbal medicines and sundry elixirs of life.

In order to preserve the legacy and ensure the promulgation of these stores of knowledge, Taoist monks from across the kingdom gathered in Ten Shire. Although the majority of the Taoist and Buddhist temples were founded with study, discipline, and training in mind, many commoners also journeyed there on pilgrimages.

Settlements naturally sprang up outside the temple gates, followed in due course by incorporated hamlets and villages. Ten Shire grew along with the Taoist temples. And when they were destroyed and reduced to ashes, Ten Shire fell into an inevitable downward spiral.

Six years ago, Zui'un Temple had jumped to the forefront in criticizing the recently installed "provisional emperor."

It'd been half a year since a new emperor was enthroned in Tai. A short span of time after the accession, word came that the emperor had passed away. Though a successor quickly occupied the throne, the chain of events was suspicious. The accusation that this was a palace coup plotted by the current emperor against his predecessor first came from Zui'un Temple.

Not long thereafter, the Imperial Army launched an attack against Zui'un Temple. Branded guilty by association, the neighboring temples and the villages outside the gates were not spared.

Hence the desolate and deserted state of the region.

Only the charred ruins ravaged by the wind and snow remained on the scattered mountain peaks. Few of the villages escaped destruction. One in three had completely depopulated while the rest sank into privation and poverty.

Bathed in the glow of the setting sun, shadowy silhouettes struggled along the roads of Ten Shire. In the past, these same roads bustled with people traveling to and from the Taoist and Buddhist temples. Not a trace remained of those halcyon times.

The road wound up and around one hill after the other. With the steep decline in foot traffic, the weeds grew back in earnest, and now the late fall undergrowth covered the path like a blanket.

Three figures climbed the hill, two adults and a child—a middle-aged man carrying a pack on his back and a young woman in her twenties holding the hand of a child of only three. They cast long shadows on the road ahead as they climbed the hill at a snail's pace, matching the child's uncertain steps.

Ahead of them, Ryou'un Mountain rose like a towering black wall to pierce the clouds. The name of this Ryou'un Mountain was Mount Bokuyou. Word was that long ago it'd been bequeathed to a Wizard of the Air. But for the past several centuries it had sat there abandoned, neither occupied nor visited by a living soul.

Zui'un Temple once occupied the mountain ridges that descended like the folds in a fan from Bokuyou Mountain to the road. The band of golden tiles that reached across the ridgetops only six short years before had since been reduced to charred skeletons covering the cruel hills.

Here and there in the scorched and withered forests, scourged by hellish fires and pockmarked with patches of dead ground, a few young trees brandished green and red leaves. But they alone could not restore the devastated landscape. The undergrowth alone revealed some signs of vitality, forming a faded sea of wild grasses painted with the desiccated colors of autumn.

The three made their way along those slopes, walking determinedly toward the village atop the hill. They were by now the sole travelers on the road. Only the flitting shadow from a bird flying through the sky above cast any additional movements across their paths.

The whisper of a passing evening breeze compelled the young woman to raise her head. The road passed between two mountains, the course so narrow it resembled a cavern. The fall wind whispered through the ravine.

The young woman was from Jou Province in the northeast. The north of Jou was famous for its heavy snows. She'd been born in one of the poor small villages that clung to the sides of the cliffs in the steep mountain valleys.

At the age of eighteen, she married into a neighboring village much the same as the one she left. It burned to the ground three years ago, a conflagration that took her husband as well. Leaving their two children in her care, he had rushed off to fight the fires consuming the Rishi. He never returned.

With her newborn son in her arms, taking her young daughter by the hand, they fled with only the clothes on their backs. The fires raged for three days and three nights. When the conflagration subsided, nothing in the village remained except for mountains of ash and the pitiful riboku, charred as black as midnight.

The woman shivered as the cool breeze soaked through her clothing like cold water. Deep hues colored the clear evening sky above, staining the mountain ridges an indigo blue. The sky seemed farther away than the day before. This growing distance to the heavens marked the departure of the season, just as the darkening purple sky marked the dying of the day.

Autumn was drawing to a close.

The brilliant colors of summer—shockingly clear skies and vivid white clouds and warm rain falling on the bright green countryside—that sun-washed season was followed by too short an autumn—and when this shining season passed, all that remained was the steep descent into the bitter cold winter.

Such are the seasons of this kingdom, she thought to herself as she watched the bird high above drift into the distance and out of sight.

The man with the dark features who'd stayed for a while as a guest in the village—she later heard he had once been the prime minister of Jou Province. When the province lord of Jou swore allegiance to the new “emperor,” he tried and failed to assassinate him. Although he managed to escape the provincial capital, every village that took him in was punished with fire, a wave of vengeance that swept away the woman's husband and house and the lives of her neighbors.

She couldn't help thinking how the charred riboku represented the fate of the village as well. The tree that had blessed her with two children—and that she once

had every reason to believe would so bless the other villagers as well—had charred and died like withered old wood.

No helping hand reached out to save the mother and children who had lost the place they called home. Fire-ravaged villages were abandoned where they stood, showing no signs even of rebuilding and restoring the Rishi. In the face of the oncoming winter, the refugees had no choice but to seek shelter in nearby villages.

But such communities could not spare the resources they would need to rebuild a life and start over. As soon as the snow thawed, they were sent on their way. Ever since, with no permanent abode to return to, she had wandered wherever her instincts led her.

Having been burned out of her home, the woman fled with nothing to her name. She looked for work along the way, hoping to find a place where they could settle down. Three years had passed without success. Her journey finally brought her here to Ten Shire.

She hitherto had no destination in mind, no possessions, and no visible means of making it through the coming winter. Two years ago, she'd just barely managed to survive. A year ago, she'd somehow endured. The older of her two children had not. However closely they snuggled together, her four-year-old daughter had frozen to death.

How would they winter over this year?

Fall was coming to its melancholy end. Looking up at the sky, the woman drew her shoulders together and took a deep breath.

Ahead of her, a bright voice called out, "What's the matter, Enshi?"

Enshi turned toward the sound of the voice and smiled broadly in relief. The man carrying the big pack stopped on the rough road before her and glanced back at her. But of course, she was not alone.

"Something wrong?" he asked again, hurrying back to her side.

She shook her head. "Just thinking about how it's getting cold."

"That's for sure." He glanced down at the child holding Enshi's hand. "Ritsu could use a new coat too."

The child beamed in response. Still nursing when they'd been burned out of their village, the boy had turned three years old on the road.

"I think he'll be okay," Enshi said. "He's got the one from last year."

The man smiled again, crinkling his already narrow eyes. "But last year's clothes hardly fit him now." He patted Ritsu on the head. "He's already grown so big."

Enshi smiled. She'd met the man the previous winter in a city in the west of Ba Province. Weeping as she struggled to bury her daughter, Enshi dug at the frozen ground. Her own powerlessness mortified her. She couldn't protect her own child, utterly helpless to save her as she succumbed to hunger and the cold.

The snowpack was hard and unyielding. No matter how hard she leaned on the shovel, she made no progress. If she gave up and left her beneath the snow, the little body would be exposed to the elements when spring came and the snow melted. If Enshi could not protect her daughter, she could at least give her a proper burial. Yet she couldn't even do that. Disgusted by her own weakness, she drove the shovel into the snow as she wept.

That was when the man appeared and lent her a hand.

His name was Kouryou. Like Enshi, he had lost his home and gone on the road with no destination in mind. He'd been a carpenter in his previous life. His pack was filled with finely crafted household items and toys made out of scraps of wood. Along the way, he ventured into the nearby mountains, retrieved pieces of bamboo and tree branches, and fashioned them into ladles and spoons and other small items.

The goods sold for a pittance, but given the meager requirements of daily living, it was enough to get by.

Enshi had previously seen him several times on the street. She'd ventured into that town in the west of Ba Province in hopes of finding a way to winter over there. Kouryou played a flute on a street corner with a jolly air. When children crowded around, he passed out silly little toys. The delighted children dragged over their mothers and Kouryou garrulously pitched his household sundries.

He was just another one of the street vendors, but his thin, tall stature reminded her of her husband. He had a relaxed ambience about him, a ready and natural laugh around children, and narrow eyes that closed to slits when he smiled. Though a good ten years older than her husband, the memories he brought to mind moved her deeply.

He came to Enshi's rescue as she knelt in despair in the snow. He restrained her hands as she pawed at the ground and closed her fingers around a warm stone. Then in her stead, he shoveled away the snow and dug a grave in the iron-hard earth. When they were finished, he treated them to a warm meal at an inn and gave Ritsu a wooden toy.

Learning that Enshi and Ritsu would be spending the night beneath the eaves of the Rishi, he invited her to stay at his boarding house. After that, he helped out however he could. When spring came and the snows melted, the travelers and refugees who had gathered in the town moved on. He offered to accompany her. When she explained she had no particular place to go, he said he'd help find her one.

In any case, he wasn't headed anywhere either, so he might as well tag along until she found a place to settle down.

Kouryou said, "When we get to town, how about we rummage through a secondhand clothing store?"

He directed his gaze at the top of the hill, where a small village sat at the top of the rise. The stockade surrounding the settlement glowed red in the light of the setting sun.

“We don’t have far to go. Hang in there, Ritsu,” he said, taking the boy by the hand.

Chapter 2

[1-2] The three climbed the hill, approaching a small village that slumbered not far from the road in the evening quiet.

Though spared the scars of war, the village could not escape the widespread ruin. Within the stockade, nothing in the way of civic liveliness or the boisterousness of commercial activity interrupted the solemn stillness. The streets were empty. The rare unshuttered window revealed little in the way of any human activity within.

Only the fallow land around the village showed any signs of life, a young man herding goats from the heath to the village gate. Arriving at the gate, he glanced over his shoulder at the road and saw the three approaching travelers—a man holding the hand of a child and a young woman close behind.

Kyoshi—the young man’s name—furrowed his brow.

Pilgrims traveling to the Taoist temples once thronged the road. Now passersby were rare. The only people who came and went were residents from the surrounding communities, and hardly any of them these days. Which was not to say that a traveler never strayed off the beaten path and ended up in these parts.

Kyoshi stopped and eyed the three travelers in an effort to ascertain their destination. The village had only one gate that faced south. The path from the gate crossed the heath and joined the main road. Kyoshi raised his arm to block the rays of the setting sun and narrowed his eyes.

They did not appear to be trudging along aimlessly. They turned off the road and headed up the path across the heath. The man in front spotted Kyoshi. An affable smile rose to his face. Kyoshi responded with a heavy sigh. He drove the goats inside the stockade with his shepherd’s crook and then waited at the gate for the travelers to arrive.

“Hello, there!” the man called out in a bright voice. “You live here?”

Kyoshi’s initial response was a polite nod.

“Looks like we finally arrived at an inhabited village,” the man said with a broad grin. He gave the hand of the child—no more than three—an encouraging squeeze. The face of the woman behind them as well relaxed into a relieved smile.

“Any boarding houses in this village?” the man asked as they came closer.

Kyoshi grimaced. “You can’t stay here.”

The man came to a halt, a more suspicious expression replacing the smile.

“No strangers allowed. Those are the rules. I’m sorry.”

Kyoshi didn't register the man's expression, having averted his gaze as soon as he spoke. Probably one of disappointment. Or anger. It was only natural. Nobody lived in the towns along the road. Any village or hamlet that did exist had long been reduced to uninhabited ruins. The closest town behind them was a day's walk away. At a child's pace, more than a day. That meant they'd spent the previous night sleeping under the stars.

In fact, the three had spent the previous night in a hollow along the road, the night before that in a wrecked and abandoned house. Having not slept in a proper bed for two days, they had also not enjoyed a proper meal in that span of time.

"Are there any villages further on?" Kouryou asked the discomfited young man, who wouldn't look him in the eye.

"There are. But through the mountain pass. Another two days from here."

"That far—" said Enshi, raising her voice.

Kouryou gave her a comforting glance and walked up to the young man. "I'm sure we can work something out. As you can see, we've got a child with us. Two days for an adult, sure, but three days minimum for us. Considering how cool the mornings and evenings are, camping outdoors at this time of year is asking an awful lot of the child and his mother. We've already spent two nights on the road getting this far."

The young man only sadly shook his head.

"I see," Kouryou muttered with an air of resignation.

Enshi understood as well. Like it or not, any traveler knew the lay of the land. Ten Shire was poor, and had only sunk lower into destitution since the travails that beset Zui'un Temple. Most barely managed to hold their ground before the destruction. The villagers here were probably hanging on by the skin of their teeth and had neither time nor goods to spare for passing strangers.

The village was not unusual in this respect. In normal times, a village was a place where people freely came and went. But these days, most closed their gates to anyone they didn't already know. The inclination was all the stronger in small villages like this one where its only residents were the ones who lived and were registered there.

Winters in Tai were severe. During the winter, the villagers could only eat what they had stored away. If the household and village council granaries ran out, they would all starve. No single prospect caused more immediate concern than adding more mouths to feed. Foolishly allow strangers inside and they might never leave. So the gates were closed. To prevent the addition of children, so were the gates to the Rishi.

Kouryou again appealed to the young man. "We are not going to settle down here. Any place you have that's reasonably dry and out of the wind will do. We'll happily

pay to rent a place under the eaves of the Rishi. If you could possibly share a bite to eat, of course we'll pay for that too."

"I'm sorry."

"Could you sell us anything to eat? The provisions we've got on hand won't last us three days."

The young man responded to Kouryou's inquiry by lowering his head and apologizing again.

"Please," Enshi cried out behind Kouryou. "Anything you can do would be fine. If you can't help us, at least help the child."

"Unfortunately—"

Enshi gazed at the young man's face. *My hands are tied*, his expression plainly stated.

Kouryou sighed. "Well, that's that. Let's go, Enshi."

"But, Kouryou—"

"Everybody's in a tight spot these days," Kouryou said, urging on the reluctant Enshi.

But Ritsu, his hand still in Kouryou's, was unwilling to accept this turn of events. He plainly wanted to stay here. He frowned and pointed his finger at the gate.

"Ritsu, this is not the place for us," Kouryou said, doing his best to console him.

Ritsu shook his head. Even a child of three knew the village was their best option. When Kouryou put his arms around him, he broke into tears. He was a tough and patient kid, but at this point on the journey he was plain worn out.

From the look on the young man's face, the sound of Ritsu crying tore at his heart. But seeing that look, Enshi couldn't help but realize that the village truly was in dire straits.

Kouryou hoisted the crying Ritsu onto his shoulder and returned to the road. Enshi followed them. Reluctantly and regretfully, she glanced back. The young man stood there, eyes averted, head slumped. The signboard posted high atop the gate stared down at him. *Touka* was the village name written on the signboard.

"I'm sorry," Enshi apologized as they trudged up the road.

Deciding where to go was up to her. Kouryou had only promised to accompany her. Except Enshi had no destination in mind. For no particular reason, they'd traveled from Ba Province to Kou Province and followed the road south. Should they continue on in this manner? Or change direction and head instead for the capital, Kouki? Enshi couldn't make up her mind.

The road to Kouki would certainly be busier and more prosperous. But the odds of them running into ruffians and highwaymen was also higher. The cost of lodgings and food would climb. Unable to choose which way to go, she repeatedly made

decisions on the spur of the moment. As a result, they had ventured off the beaten track and eventually ended up on this dreary road.

“This is all because I’m so confused and indecisive.”

“What?” Kouryou said in a bright voice. “Don’t worry about it. We only have to bear with it for three more days.”

Except Ritsu’s sobs tugged painfully at her heartstrings. Enshi had headed west from the northeast of Tai, crossed Bun Province, then continued south through Ba Province to Kou Province. On a journey with no end to the trail in sight, she walked to and fro from one place to another. Her wandering ways forced her to realize how unforgiving a place Tai was. There were no handouts for the traveler who’d lost sight of her destination.

But knowing all that, what would be the best way to winter over this year? Ritsu’s weeping pierced her ears.

For the young Ritsu, surviving the harsh winter depended on getting enough to eat and sleeping in a bed that wasn’t freezing cold. For that to happen, they had to find a village that would take them in and let them stay for a spell. Alas, as the conditions in the kingdom grew worse year after year, the towns and villages willing to take in a traveler grew all the rarer. What Enshi needed now was a way of finding a place that would.

In an effort to raise her spirits, Kouryou said in a bright voice, “One way or the other, we’ll make it through the next three days. We can be thankful the weather is as good as it is around these parts.” He patted the still bawling Ritsu in an effort to reassure him.

Ritsu finally stopped crying and looked at Kouryou as if to say, “Really?”

Enshi observed the two with tender feelings in her heart. It was easy to imagine having a husband back and that Ritsu was their child. She needed him no less than Ritsu did.

“I’m sorry. Some days I would simply be beside myself without you here.”

Last winter, Kouryou had bought her the overcoat she had on. Enshi had come to rely on him for everything from their lodgings to their meals.

Kouryou said with a broad smile, “Just doing what I can while I can. Don’t worry about it.”

“Thank you,” Enshi said with a smile of her own, a smile tinged with complicated emotions.

“While I can” and “While you can” were pet expressions for Kouryou. When he got a room in a boarding house to do his woodworking, Enshi looked for odd jobs around town. She left Ritsu in Kouryou’s care while she worked. But he wouldn’t take any of her meager earnings. He told her instead to save up for when she did find a place to settle down and could start living a normal life.

“Nothing wrong with relying on others while you can,” he was fond of saying. “Nothing wrong with putting a little aside while you can.”

And whenever he did, Enshi found herself loathing the rationalization that he was nothing more than a convenient traveling companion.

They’d been on the road together for over half a year, and she didn’t sense that this arrangement would be ending anytime soon. Like a mother and father and a child. But those words shattered the illusion. *We are together for now. But that could change.* Kouryou’s intent was to keep that reality in front of her eyes.

Enshi couldn’t abandon the hope that Kouryou would take her and Ritsu under his wing. But neither could she bring herself to believe that would actually happen. This man spoke little about himself, not about where he was born or about his upbringing. There couldn’t be much money to be made at his chosen trade. Though his funds were meager, he knew the cost of basic necessities.

And yet Enshi had never seen him carry on like he was hard up for money. He wasn’t a wealthy man. Rather, he always had enough to spare. He must have a reasonable amount of savings somewhere, but he provided not the slightest hint of how they came into his possession. He’d taken to the road because he no longer had a place to call his own. He never explained why.

At first, his casual manner made her think he’d embarked on this journey for the sake of the journey itself. And yet he was no whimsical nomad. Though Kouryou had no particular purpose and no particular destination in mind, she was left with the distinct impression that he couldn’t stop. There was no end to the journey for him. He was driven by the pressing need to keep moving.

Kouryou was gripped by forces Enshi couldn’t see. At some point he would leave Enshi and Ritsu behind. She should not wish for things to continue on forever as they were.

Pondering these dark thoughts, Enshi urged on her legs as she climbed the hill.

Kyoshi hadn’t moved from the gate. The setting sun on their backs, the three figures on the road slowly grew farther and farther away. The woman must be exhausted by the journey. The child likewise was tired of traveling. The man bearing them along was surely also at the end of his rope. Kyoshi wanted to call out to them and offer to at least let them stay the night.

But that was not Kyoshi’s decision to make. The villagers were unlikely to agree. This was a poor village. Even a village with more resources at its disposal was loath to allow strangers inside the gate. Once inside, if they dug in their heels and insisted on staying, driving them out again was an unpleasant task.

Which was why, from the start, travelers weren't allowed inside the village at all. Moreover, the run of the mill poverty aside, other circumstances in Touka made the presence of strangers intolerable.

Though I still wish you well on your journey.

These thoughts occupying his mind, watching as they went on their way, he heard the sound of footsteps. He glanced back at the heath. A man rushed around a corner of the stockade, running as if for dear life. He was a resident of the village. Gasping for breath, he opened his mouth as if to shout, then looked toward the road and clamped his mouth shut. On the verge of tumbling over, he ran up to Kyoshi and grabbed him by the arm.

"People in the mountains," he panted in a harsh whisper. "Two of them. And *kijuu*."

Kyoshi pressed the wheezing man in a subdued voice, "They arrived on *kijuu*? Their appearance?"

"Their clothing is high class, no doubt about it. More importantly, those *kijuu* are anything but ordinary."

Kyoshi regripped the shepherd's crook he used with the goats. Long use had worn the hard oak staff to a dark amber hue. The old wood preserved the faint traces of bloodstains at both ends.

"Where are they?"

"I saw them descending the ridgeline from the remains of Fugen Temple."

Kyoshi nodded. "I'll go ahead. You let the rest of the villagers know."

Shoulders still heaving, the man agreed. Grasping the staff, Kyoshi broke into a run. With a backwards glance at the three travelers on the road, he circled the stockade and sprinted across the heath.

Chapter 3

[1-3] The evening sun slanted low across the landscape. Within the Imperial Reserve, the towering Mount Ryou'un cast its immense shadow across the road. Enshi glanced up at the darkening sky. Kouryou followed her gaze.

"It'll be night soon. We'd better find a place to bed down."

Enshi nodded. They hadn't traveled that far from Touka. The grade of the road grew steeper as it approached the pass, crossing through multiple switchbacks across the mountain slope. Walking the switchbacks was tiring work, especially considering the little distance covered.

Kouryou asked them to wait for a minute, handed Ritsu to Enshi, and hiked up the precipitous bank of the road. The high shoulders blocked out the rest of the world. He reached the top and soon came back down, shaking his head.

"Nothing but boulders and underbrush. I don't see any decent camping grounds further up the road either. I know it's asking a lot at this point, but there's a forest at the top of the rise here. We may find a place to stay safe and dry there."

"Oh," said Enshi in a half-dejected tone. She let out a breath. So they'd be sleeping outdoors tonight too. She squeezed Ritsu's hand and started up the steep shoulder of the road.

The night dew fell like rain in the thickets, making it difficult to sleep. Even worse, the sky was darkening in the west. The weather might change after sundown. During this season, when the mornings so often broke cold and chill, an actual rainstorm during the night was a horror. However small Ritsu was, getting soaked like a little wet mouse robbed him of what body heat he had. The forest canopy should help fend off the wind and rain. Though a little wouldn't nearly be enough.

Finding footholds between the rocky crags and clumps of overgrown grass, they hiked up the slope. Rewarding their hard work, at the end of the climb, a meadow spread out before them. As Kouryou said, across the gentle grassy slope a forest came into view. If they kept going in this direction, they'd probably end up back on the road they'd just left.

At this rate, how many more days will it take to reach the town on the other side of the pass?

This thought on her mind, she cheerfully admonished Ritsu, "Let's keep on going until we get there."

His hand in hers, they waded through the tall grass. A few steps on, Ritsu began to complain. He was still a small child and the path was a hard one. Moreover, the

rubble scattered beneath the thick grass and underbrush—perhaps the remains of a Taoist temple—constantly tripped them up.

Having not had a good night's rest in two days made it all the worse. Taking Ritsu's age into account, he had done well to make it this far. As a reward for his hard efforts, Enshi stooped to pick him up. Kouryou put down his pack. Hooking his arm through the straps, he crouched down in front of Ritsu. Ritsu happily scrambled onto his back.

How much better if we could keep going like this.

Ritsu as well would miss Kouryou terribly when the day came that he was no longer there. Enshi felt all the more despondent. This was a desolate kingdom populated by people with nothing to spare. Even if they found a place to settle down, she would have to raise Ritsu in an unknown town in the middle of an era such as this.

Enshi sank into her thoughts as she trudged up the meadow. Halfway or so across the grassy slope, Kouryou stopped. He set down Ritsu and shifted a leather bag from his waist to his overcoat pocket. The bag held several small knives and blades.

Enshi glanced around, thinking maybe Kouryou had spotted a tree that could provide the raw material for his woodworking. But they still had a way to go before reaching the forest. To their right and left, boulders overgrown with flowering fall weeds covered the ground.

Kouryou turned to her. When Enshi hurried up to him, he placed Ritsu's hand in hers.

Enshi said, "I'm sorry. I guess he does get heavy after a while."

"Not at all. But you need to look after him for now. Don't let go of his hand."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Kouryou said in a strained voice.

He abruptly turned his eyes up the slope. Following his gaze, Enshi was sure she spotted a shadow flitting along the edge of the trees before disappearing deeper into the forest.

"Right now—that was—"

"Yes. A fox or some other creature. Do what you can to cheer up Ritsu. He's still out of sorts. Climbing this far has left him all tuckered out."

"Yes, it has."

Enshi clasped Ritsu's hand. Kouryou strapped on the pack and pulled out the flute he usually kept stuck through the straps. When Ritsu got worn out along the journey, Kouryou played the flute for him. Ritsu loved the sound of Kouryou's flute. The bright and cheerful sound put him in a better mood and helped him pick up the pace.

This time as well, Kouryou smiled and exhorted Ritsu, "Chin up!" He raised the flute to his lips and trilled a lively tune.

Enshi didn't really didn't understand why, but she didn't think Kouryou was a very talented flutist. It was a crude instrument to start with and shouldn't be expected to produce a rich or pleasant sound. But his playing always lifted her spirits. Ritsu raised his free hand, grinning as he closed and opened his fist as he chased after Kouryou.

Kouryou abruptly ceased playing. He halted in his tracks and shot a look to the side.

Two, three dark shadows darted out from a low outcropping of rock and plunged through the sea of tall grass toward them. Startled, Enshi stopped as well. The men charging at them carried sickles and pitchforks. She pulled Ritsu closer. The men glared at Enshi, menacing her with their scowling faces and brawny frames.

"Not her," the man in the middle said. He clucked to himself and looked around. "Where did the rest of them go?" He turned his intimidating attention back to Enshi. "You see two people with kijuu?"

Enshi shook her head. Looking again, one of the men was carrying a crossbow. The small man hefting the weapon examined Enshi like a bidder at a cattle auction. *Highwaymen*, Enshi realized. She couldn't help shivering. In this impoverished land, there was no shortage of gangs that preyed on travelers for their money and belongings.

Even the ordinary resident of an ordinary village might take to assaulting passing travelers in his spare time—because that was the only way to put food on the table. Rumors held that entire towns eked out a living through highway robbery.

Enshi had in her pocket the small amount of earnings she'd saved thanks to Kouryou. Though a trifling amount, losing it would leave her in no little distress.

The man with the crossbow sniffed and lowered the weapon. "There's nothing for you further on. Stick to the road and keep going."

Nothing worth stealing here, he meant. Enshi breathed a sigh of relief and pressed her hand against her pocket.

"Whoa, not so quick," said the big man with the pitchfork. "Take another look. Don't let down your guard with this bunch."

Not aware of how her hand covered her pocket, Enshi started to retreat. The small man fixed her with a glare.

"Lady, what's that you got in your pocket?"

Enshi felt her body go numb. If all she lost were her material possessions, she could live with that. Except kind of ruffians were equally likely to kill their victims to shut them up. Enshi wrapped her arms around Ritsu. She wanted to at least save him. Considering his future, Enshi couldn't afford to die here either. But she hardly possessed the power to drive them off.

Her body was too enervated from fear to pick up Ritsu and run away. Even Kouryou—Enshi looked at him. In this age, and for all his years on the road, he still didn't carry a sword. He was a gentle man who liked people and had taken it upon himself to care for her and Ritsu. In a cruel turn of fate, that's how he'd ended up in this precarious position.

"If it's money you want, they you can have it, but—" *spare our lives*, she was about to say when a shout echoed from the rocky outcropping.

"Those people are only travelers looking for a place to stay."

She glanced up. The young man they'd encountered at the gate. He was holding the same shepherd's crook he had in hand when they met a short time ago. He was using it to herd goats. He regripped the crook—no, the *truncheon*—and gave Enshi a rueful look.

"This is not a good place for you to be. Best you hurry along and don't ask any questions."

Enshi nodded and turned on her heels. The big man stood in front of her. He seized Enshi's arm with an unforgiving grip.

"Hand over what's in your pocket."

Before she could even scream, Kouryou interposed himself between them.

"Stop it, Kouryou!" Enshi cried out. "Don't fight with him. If it's money he wants, I'll put it right here."

She reached into her pocket. Kouryou arrested her movements. "No," he grunted. "You're going to need those funds later on." He spoke in an unusually calm voice. His placid demeanor struck her as all the more curious. He narrowed his eyes and cast a sharp look at the big man. "Let her go. We're done with this place."

"That's not going to happen," the big man said.

He tightened his grip, wrenching her arm. Kouryou reached out. Enshi didn't understand what he was doing. His fingers closed around the man's arm. That alone compelled the man to release the rough hand holding her. He raised a surprised shout, stumbled backwards, and shot a bloodthirsty glare at Kouryou.

He'll kill you if you resist! Enshi was about to shout. The big man raised the pitchfork high in the air. She screamed instead. At the same time, she heard Ritsu's high-pitched cry. Everything had taken a turn for the worse.

Or so she was certain—except the only one left cowering was the big man with the pitchfork. The other highwaymen stood stock still and gawked as he staggered and sank to his knees. He pressed his forehead against the earth and moaned. Kouryou looked on impassively. He wasn't brandishing a knife or a sword. He was holding the flute.

Enshi stared in surprise. The man with the sickle raised an angry bellow. Kouryou parried the sweep of the curved steel and batted it away. Caught off balance, his

attacker pitched forward on his face. At almost the same time, the small man dropped the crossbow with a timid yelp. A small blade pierced his hand—one of the knives Kouryou used in his woodworking.

The man with the sickle took a firmer hold of the weapon and faced off against Kouryou. Kouryou deftly dodged the thrust and clobbered him with the flute, prompting a wounded shriek.

Enshi stood motionless, eyes wide in disbelief. Kouryou gave her a shove. “Get going! Run!”

Enshi nodded. She grabbed hold of Ritsu’s hand and ran in the one open direction left to them.

The tottering, staggering gang again roused themselves to action. They ranted and raved, twisted their faces into fierce scowls. All Enshi could see of Kouryou was his back as he turned his unruffled demeanor to his opponents.

No sooner had the scene registered in her senses but Ritsu awoke from his stupefied daze and began to bawl. Enshi picked him up and ran through the tall grass. If they reached the forest, they could hide amongst the trees in the deepening dusk.

She gasped for breath as she ran. Ahead of her, more men spilled down the slope.

Enshi came to a halt so suddenly her forward momentum knocked her head over heels. Ritsu yelped as if struck by a hot spark. She didn’t need to see the weapons in their hands to know these were the highwaymen’s confederates. Catching the sight of the brigand in the middle, his dirty jacket darkened with old stains, her head reeled.

“Who is that man!” he exploded, glaring at the bottom of the slope.

Enshi could hear Kouryou’s shouts behind her. Taking in the scene, the man raised the tip of his sword with a cruel nonchalance.

Enshi drew Ritsu tightly to her, shut her eyes, and resigned herself to the killing blow to come. The shock and pain never arrived. A roar echoed in her ears, jumbled together with heavy footsteps. A piercing shriek rang out, with other strange sounds mingling in-between—the growl of a beast and the flapping of wings.

A youma, was her first thought. Then she remembered what the first highwayman said when they attacked. *Two people with kijuu*.

Enshi opened her eyes. She found herself staring straight at a large beast with a white body. It lowered its black head and butted one of the highwaymen, sending him flying.

“Get on your feet,” someone said in a low voice.

Enshi looked up. A tall woman stood next to her.

“Take the child. Head for the far side of the meadow and hide in the underbrush.”

The woman spoke in a calm tone of voice. Despite great feelings of unease, Enshi nodded, picked up Ritsu, and ran back down the slope. She tumbled across the rocky

outcropping and plunged into the underbrush. Looking for a place to lie down, her feet slipped out from under her. The ground beneath her feet vanished. The soles of her shoes touched—nothing.

She didn't have time to scream. One arm around Ritsu, she grasped at the weeds with her free hand. The lower half of her body slipped out over empty air. The roots started to snap and give way. She could at least save her son. She was about to boost him onto the slope when the image of Ritsu wandering around in front of the highwaymen searching for his mother rose up in her thoughts.

Whether to let him go or not—in that moment of indecision, frantically flaying about with her legs in the desperate hope of finding a foothold—something touched the bottoms of her feet.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw only thin air. Beneath her, hands supported her feet. One of the highwaymen? Except if he was trying to intimidate her, he'd be dragging her down, not holding her up.

With one arm still around Ritsu, she relaxed her free hand and slid down the face of the cliff until her chest was clean over the precipice. Those hands were there, firmly holding her up, ready to catch her.

Glancing over the shoulder again, this time she made out a human figure beneath her. A young man in his teens. He encouraged her with a nod. With an overwhelming sense of relief, Enshi released her hold on the weeds and slid down the rest of the way. As soon as she fell into those supporting arms, her toes touched solid ground. The distance was at most no greater than her own height.

Saved.

All the energy left her body. She let go of Ritsu and collapsed into a sitting position on the ground. From above her came howls and curses and the brutal sounds of battle. As she could see nothing, the noise seemed far removed from her, a world away, leaving her with the impression that they had escaped the danger.

"Are you alright?" she was asked by a quiet and reserved voice.

"I'm fine," she answered in a small voice of her own. "Thank you."

That prompted a smile from her rescuer. For some reason, looking at him struck a plaintive chord in her heart. Perhaps his pitiful appearance was due to his worn and weary features. Perhaps because his travels had left him in an exhausted state. Or because his unusually black hair was cropped so short.

If he wasn't a monastic, then great misfortune must have hit close to home, leaving him in a profound state of mourning.

Enshi wanted to ask if *he* was all right. To harbor such an impulse struck her as altogether strange. The young man put his hand on Ritsu's head and brushed off the clumps of grass and dirt. In all his bewilderment, Ritsu had forgotten to cry.

They were at the bottom of what appeared to be a gouged-out terrace. The low cliff face formed a wall on one side. On the other, the rocky terrain sloped downward at a steep angle, covered by the fall undergrowth. A short step below them was another shallow terrace. Enshi could make out a large animal lying there in the tall grass.

Two people with kijuu.

“Are you with that woman?” Enshi asked.

The young man nodded. He directed his concerned expression at the cliff face. At some point, the angry echoes and retorts stopped. Amidst the falling dusk, the birds stopped singing. Only the sound of the autumn wind rustling through the grass remained.

What happened to them? Enshi wondered with a pang of unease. She examined the cliff face to the left and right. To one side was a surmountable jumble of rocks. Taking Ritsu’s hand, she carefully climbed to the top and peered over.

In the distance she saw the woman and Kouryou running toward her. She didn’t spot any kijuu or highwaymen. No, bodies were sprawled hither and yon in the underbrush. Their faint moans and writhing about meant they weren’t dead. There were fewer of them than she remembered. The rest must have run off.

Her feelings of relief at once clashed with a profound sense of unease.

She’d always thought of Kouryou’s amiability, his love of people in general, as his strong point. He didn’t get upset when treated unreasonably during their travels. When caught up in a quarrel, he never once raised his voice. Outward appearances suggested that he was anything but the sort of man who could calmly turn aside the blustering threats of the highwaymen, let alone defeat them in combat.

Kouryou approached the tall woman. Enshi heard him ask, “Are you alright?”

She heard her reply as well. “I’m fine. You’re not injured, are you?”

“Not at all. I see you helped out my companion. You have my gratitude.”

Listening to Kouryou’s cheerful voice, Enshi hoisted herself the rest of the way up and crouched in the underbrush. Kouryou didn’t appear the slightest bit flustered or out of sorts. Not at all like someone who’d been ambushed by a gang of highwaymen and was lucky enough to escape with his life. More like it was all in a day’s work and nothing that terribly difficult either.

“No need to thank me,” she said with an equally unruffled demeanor. You got dragged into troubles of our own making. Sorry about that.”

“I gathered they were tracking you. What about your friend?”

“He’s waiting for me. So you noticed us?”

“Ah,” said Kouryou, a smile in his voice. “I noticed an odd bunch coming down the slope, doing their best to stay out of sight. I figured they were chasing down someone or something. Then I saw you heading into the forest. Too bad we couldn’t stay out of sight too. But I thought we might draw them off.”

“In that case, you saved us.”

“Naw. With a mother and her kid in tow, pretty reckless on my part. You helped her get away. Thanks again.”

What is this? Enshi wondered with growing apprehension as she slowly pushed forward. The scene before her cast off a strange aura, leaving her with the feeling that bad things were about to happen. The highwaymen hadn’t escaped Kouryou’s attention. That explained his curious behavior. And yet he hadn’t run away.

“Is that an iron flute?” the woman said, indicating Kouryou’s flute. “The first time I’ve seen one in action.” She handed him a small object. “One of your throwing knives. You appear acquainted with concealed weapons.”

Kouryou blinked in surprise. Dumbfounded, Enshi stepped out of the tall grass. Kouryou noticed her, turned, and greeted her with a broad smile.

“You’re okay? Not injured?”

Enshi shook her head. The tumult of events finally catching up with him, Ritsu started to whimper. Enshi drew him closer.

“Ritsu didn’t get hurt, did he?”

Enshi again silently shook her head. She walked toward Kouryou. She couldn’t quell that sense of disquiet. Or her inexplicable fear. What was an “iron flute”? Or a “throwing knife”? The woman called them “concealed weapons.” What were those? And what was Kouryou doing with them?

Turning these thoughts over in her head, she heard a faint swishing sound behind her. The tall grass parted, revealing the young man from before.

“Ah, I apologize,” the woman said, as Kouryou craned his head to the side. “My traveling companion,” she said to Kouryou. She brushed past Enshi and ran up the boy. That was when Enshi noticed she was missing one arm.

The woman stood in front of the boy, blocking him from Enshi’s view, and whispered in his ear. Kouryou observed them suspiciously, his eyes flitting back and forth from the woman to the young man.

Enshi drew alongside him. *What’s going on?* she was about to ask him when his countenance completely changed. He ignored Enshi completely and rushed over to the woman and the young man.

Kouryou spoke to them. Then cast a sharp look back at her. The expression on his face was one she had never seen before, an expression that closed off human contact, as if an unbridgeable gulf had opened up between them.

“Enshi, go on to the next town.”

“Eh?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t accompany you any further.”

In that moment, Enshi knew *that time* had come. She’d always known it would. But why today—a day like today portending the end of autumn? No nearby village

would take them in. They'd just been attacked by highwaymen and evening was upon them.

Kouryou took a purse from his pocket and pressed it into her hands. "This should be enough to tide you over."

Enshi couldn't find the words. She stood there in stunned silence, unable to accept what he was offering.

Kouryou suddenly raised his head. "Watch out!"

He directed the warning at the young man and woman behind Enshi. Enshi followed his gaze and turned barely in time to see the young man lurch forward.

Chapter 4

[1-4] A few moments before.

Kyoshi crawled carefully through the tall grass. He'd barely managed to escape the fray. As best he could tell, his colleagues had run off or gotten themselves killed. He shouldn't be surprised. The man and that woman together made for an indestructible duo.

And I thought he was just an ordinary traveler.

Kouryou, wasn't that what the woman he was traveling with called him? When they met at the village gate, they had struck Kyoshi as a pitiful pair. He sent them packing anyway. *An annoyance*. But the man carried an iron flute. It looked for all the world like a musical instrument and certainly played like one. Except it had a core of solid steel.

A concealed weapon that could kill a man. Even worse, he knew how to use throwing knives. Small knives made to strike at a distance. And with an accuracy that sent a chill down the spine.

He was in no possible way an "ordinary traveler."

He was a weapons expert, something he could have only learned on the job. And that woman—not the woman called Enshi, the one with the child—the woman with the *kijuu* was the same. She might have only one arm but she clearly knew how to wield a sword.

The two of them had to be partners. He and his colleagues never saw it coming. After all, they were a gang that rarely experienced serious mayhem. They carried around their weapons mostly for show.

But no matter what, he simply could not flee the field of battle like this. His friends were lying all around him. If still alive, they had to be tended to. More than anything else, they could not ignore these intruders who had trespassed on their territory.

Starting with the two who'd brought those valuable *kijuu* with them, and one of them a swordswoman. At the same time, a man proficient with concealed weapons showed up, turned off the road, and headed into the mountains.

Kyoshi was certain he knew what sort of people they were. They had to be dealt with. Compelled by these pressing thoughts, Kyoshi kept close to the ground, hiding any signs of his presence. Fortunately, the late evening light made the visibility poor. A breeze picked up. He still did his best to muffle any extraneous sounds as he crept along the ground, closing on where the intruders were standing in the meadow.

He drew alongside one of his friends lying in the grass. "Are you okay?" Kyoshi whispered.

The man answered with a moan and a nod. He didn't look like he could move but at least he was alive. Uncertain whether he should tend to his wounds, his colleague urged him on.

"Get out of here. Please."

The desperate look in his eyes, intensified by the obvious pain, compelled Kyoshi to accept the entreaty with a nod. Leaving his mate where he lay, he crept forward and stealthily approached the intruders. Now within spitting distance, he stopped. Hidden in the shadowed grass, he took in the situation.

The woman with one arm. He didn't see the kijuu. He'd last seen it chasing down his colleagues. The creature hadn't returned. Next to the woman, who was closest to Kyoshi, stood the silhouette of a more slender figure. Across from them, her back to Kyoshi, was the woman with the child. Her name was Enshi. The man was called Kouryou. He faced Enshi, his head bowed. Kouryou must be talking to her.

Kyoshi sized up the situation, gathered his strength, and shot to his feet.

Kouryou noticed as soon as he moved. Kyoshi ignored him. He crossed the two paces separating them, grabbed the closest person in reach, and jumped back. Enshi and the woman spun around in surprise.

"Nobody move!"

Kyoshi took a deep breath and brandished a knife. That was when he realized his hostage was a teenage boy. Kyoshi pressed the blade against the startled kid's throat. To Kyoshi's great mortification, his own hands were the ones trembling.

"Give it up!" the one-armed woman shouted.

Opening the distance between them, Kyoshi yelled in turn, "Stay where you are!" He especially meant the man who used concealed weapons.

The woman and Kouryou froze in place. The young mother, named Enshi, was one who didn't.

"Stop it," she pleaded. "Please stop." Enshi reached into her pocket and pulled out the purse. She held it out in both hands, as if making an offering at a shrine. "Take it and leave. We won't lodge a complaint with the authorities about you. Then we can all go our separate ways."

Dragging his hostage backward, Kyoshi furrowed his brows. They clearly believed that Kyoshi and his colleagues were highwaymen. That misunderstanding came as a relief. But at the same time, it aroused fresh suspicions. Enshi and Kouryou were traveling together, were they not? In that case, she must know why he'd come here to the mountains.

Kyoshi took another look at Kouryou and the woman. "Who are you exactly? What did you come here for?"

Kouryou raised his voice. "Mere travelers. As you already know."

"A traveler who's an expert user of concealed weapons? Why would a traveler leave the road and venture into the mountains?"

"Because you wouldn't let us stay in your village. We were looking for a place to bed down. You don't think we'd spend the night at the side of the road, do you? We were looking for shelter in the forest. That's all."

"Then why did they head off on their own?"

The two traveling with the kijuu, he meant. Kijuu were *youjuu* captured in the forbidden Yellow Sea at the center of the world. The captured youjuu were domesticated as riding animals or *kijuu*. While they had distinct advantages over ordinary mounts, such as the ability to fly, their limited numbers made them very valuable.

Moreover, the kijuu these two had with them were rare even for kijuu. Never would an ordinary townsman or even a merchant who'd put away a little money on the side be seen with such kijuu. These were the kind of kijuu used in war, and not by run-of-the-mill foot soldiers. They were ridden by the elite air cavalry, by generals and regimental commanders. Only officers of an equivalent rank would ever think of owning one.

They had pursued them into the mountains. And then that man came to their aid. He appeared to be a common tradesman, had a mother and child with him. But he was in fact a skilled user of concealed weapons. The only conclusion Kyoshi was left with was that they were allies.

One team set off across country, traveling disguised as a family with a child. The other flew into the mountains on kijuu. That way they could converge on the mountain separately without attracting attention, and then meet up at a prearranged location. To Kyoshi, this was the only explanation that made sense.

"They headed off on their own because we were never together in the first place. We didn't know they were here. They didn't know we were coming. This *meeting* was pure coincidence."

"You're lying."

"You may think so, but I am telling you the truth. There aren't any other wooded areas along this road. The night dew falls like rain in these parts. The weather was taking a turn for the worse. I had a woman and child with me. We weren't about to sleep under a boulder. So we came here to find a better place to spend the night. That's when you people showed up. It sure looked like these two had a bunch of highwaymen stalking them. Speaking of which, who are you? Why go out of your way to attack them? Why us? Are you after money? Well, money is on the table. Just put away the knife."

Kyoshi again drew his brows. He had the sense, just beneath the surface, that Kouryou was pleading with him. Kyoshi didn't believe a word he was saying. Kouryou surely must have realized that too. Nevertheless, he earnestly continued to make the argument. What would such a dangerous man resort to such desperate ends?

Turning these thoughts over in his mind, a quiet voice said, "Let me go, please." The voice of his hostage. "I won't try to escape. If there is something you want, why don't you lay out your demands for us?"

The question left Kyoshi flustered. His hostage spoke in such a quiet and measured tone. Kyoshi grabbed him because he was within reach. But seeing as he'd come here with the woman in the first place, he might be as seasoned a fighter as Kouryou. Kyoshi tightened his grip on the knife. If that was the case, he never had a chance of winning from the start. He simply was not suited for this sort of thing.

The moment that thought crossed his mind, Kouryou abruptly raised his voice. "General! No!"

Kouryou was in his line of sight for only a moment. Then he saw the one-armed woman. She drew her sword and was about to charge at Kyoshi. And yet at the sound of Kouryou's voice, she whirled about as if yanked by a hidden string. She faced him and raised her sword. The tension in the air was palatable.

What is going on?

Kouryou addressed the woman as *general*. As he had believed all along, the two of them must be allies. So why did Kouryou lie and say they didn't know each other? If they were allies, they must share the same objectives. That meant they had come here together to scout the mountains. That meant they had come here to arrest Kyoshi and his colleagues and execute them after all.

And yet the woman now raised her sword against her supposed comrade in arms.

The confusion left him all the more tense. Kyoshi held his weapon as tightly as he was able. His hand trembled. He couldn't deny what was happening and neither could he stop. The tip of the knife pressed against pliable flesh. What suddenly sapped the force in his hand was the sight of Kouryou dropping to his hands and knees in front of him.

"Please stop! He is the Taiho!"

Kyoshi gaped. The outburst caught the woman by surprise as well and she lowered her guard. The young mother with the child stood there stock still.

"The Taiho?"

All at once, Kyoshi became aware of the body in his grasp, that he had seized and threatened with a deadly weapon. Who was he?

There was no Saiho in the Kingdom of Tai. Kyoshi knew that much. Each kingdom had but one Saiho. The true nature of the Saiho was that of a unicorn, the *kirin*, who hearkened to the Divine Will and chose the emperor. Afterwards, the Saiho advised

the emperor and served the people with mercy and compassion. The kirin was the greatest ally of the people.

For six years, no news about the Saiho had been forthcoming. Rumors said he had been killed. Kyoshi didn't believe them. Somewhere he was safe. Someday he would return.

Kyoshi peered at his hostage with growing apprehension. His hostage calmly glanced up at him. *But his hair*, Kyoshi thought. Then he remembered—the Saiho of Tai was the rare Black Kirin. A Saiho's hair was actually the mane of the unicorn. The mane of most kirin was golden in color. But for the Saiho of this kingdom—if this was Taiki—then his hair should be black.

Kouryou ignored the dumbfounded Kyoshi and addressed the woman. He said with a bow, "General Ryuu. A pleasure to make your acquaintance. Risai-sama, I served in the Palace Guard of the Center. The name is So."

"Palace Guard of the Center," Risai repeated to herself. Her eyes widened. "Regimental Commander So? I had heard of a skilled user of concealed weapons by the name of Kouryou."

"The very same." Kouryou turned to Kyoshi—no, to his hostage—and bowed deeply. "It is good to see that you are doing well."

The knife slipped from Kyoshi's hand. "Really?" He sank to his knees.

His equally dazed hostage looked at him and answered with a subdued nod. "And you are?"

"I was once an acolyte at Zui'un Temple."

"Zui'un Temple!" The exclamation chorused around him.

"Yes, I am a survivor of Zui'un Temple."

Six years ago, Zui'un Temple and the nearby Taoist temples were burned to the ground, the monks and priests killed. Kyoshi barely managed to escape. Sheltered by the local villagers, he had lived the life of an ordinary goatherd until now.

Kyoshi bowed to his hostage. "From the depths of our souls, we have long awaited your return."

Part Two

Chapter 5

[2-1] The new Tai emperor was enthroned in the thirty-third year and sixth intercalary month of the Wagen era.

After Emperor Kyou died, the throne sat empty for eleven years until the accession of Saku Gyousou, formerly a general in the Palace Guard. He was chosen by Taiki, Tai's Black Kirin. Not six months passed after his formal enthronement when the curtain closed on the dynasty of the new emperor.

The stage upon which these events took place was Bun Province, located in the north of the Kingdom of Tai.

Bun was a province marked by its harsh weather. All of the northern territories of Tai shared a similar cold climate. Though the snows were never that heavy, winters in Bun Province were widely known for the bitter cold. Spring came late. Summers were dry. The land was ill suited for farming and forestry. Most of its citizens earned a living in the mines.

The mines of Bun Province had established a reputation for gemstone production in Tai and throughout the known world. Though on a smaller scale, the region was additionally endowed with high grade iron ore deposits, along with gold, silver, and gemstone "fountains."

Unlike traditional mines, the water bubbling out of these springs was the source of the ore. The mineral water that welled up naturally concentrated the basic elements of gold and silver and precious stones in underground deposits. While those veins could be mined, the springs themselves refined the ore as well.

A mineral nucleus submerged in the water yielded a high purity nodule, though the entire process took a long time. Located south of You Mountain, Kan'you Mountain was said to be home to the oldest and largest gemstone fountains in Tai.

As a matter of law, the mines were owned by the state and administered by government officials. As a matter of fact, merchants ran the day-to-day operations. The work of prospecting for deposits, digging mine shafts, and extracting the minerals was further divided up and delegated to specialists in specific trades.

Prospecting for ore beds and fountains in particular attracted a large number of businesses. The result was a haphazard excavation of the mountain. The excavators complained at length about this seat-of-the-pants approach. The lack of any rhyme

or reason when digging test pits wasted their time and created risky working conditions.

The miners, in turn, complained about the excavators. Delays in tunnel construction ate away at their earnings. The teamsters carped constantly about the miners. If the miners didn't work, there was no ore to move. The teamsters didn't earn anything standing around doing nothing. So the teamsters badgered the miners to hurry up and get on with the digging.

On the other hand, no matter how hard the miners worked, if the ore didn't ship, the best of their efforts went for naught. Thus the miners hounded the teamsters. Going on day and night, the incessant bickering gave rise to local outlaws and their land gangs, who stepped in to settle the disputes with their fists.

The land gangs reconciled the various demands and arrived at a compromise. If words didn't do the trick, they were not above more physical forms of persuasion. Taking charge to keep things running smoothly, they preserved order on the mountain, and in the end, assumed control of the mountain altogether.

Consequently, an entire region of Bun Province could not be administered without the power and influence of the land gangs.

The outlaws grew all the more arrogant in their actions. In response, on behalf of the people—on behalf of their own political prerogatives—the government strengthened its regulatory controls. To no one's surprise, the land gangs fought back. The collision of competing interests meant the simmering war between the government and the gangs showed no signs of petering out.

This state of affairs was just as true six years ago. In the second year of Koushi, shortly after the first New Year since Gyousou's enthronement, rebel land gangs occupied the town of Kohaku in the south of Bun Province.

The Imperial Army marched forth to subjugate the revolt. At the same time, insurrections broke out in districts hither and yon, and grew in size and severity. Before long, all of Bun Province had descended into rebellion. The chaos spread like a wildfire, finally reached the emperor himself, and swallowed him up.

In the second year and third month of Koushi, reports about Gyousou in Bun Province ceased. At the same time, Taiki, the Saiho, vanished from the Imperial Palace. Those two events occurred six years ago. In Tai, that was the sum of what anybody knew about them.

Kouryou had been stationed in Bun Province at the time. A regimental commander of twenty-five hundred soldiers, he'd been dispatched to Bun Province with the Palace Guard of the Center to put down the revolt. Together with the Bun Provincial Guard, they were to subjugate the land gangs inciting the violence, liberate the occupied cities, and render aid to citizens caught up in the chaos.

Those were the orders they'd been given. At the time, it seemed a simple task. When they departed the capital, the land gangs were said to number no more than five hundred. Even granting them the advantage of operating on their home ground, such a force hardly presented a serious obstacle to the full twelve-thousand, five-hundred soldier fighting strength of the entire Palace Guard.

And that did not even include the Bun Provincial Guard.

Such was the mismatch that sending an entire army seemed ridiculous overkill. But when Gyousou ordered them to suppress the rebellion, he also wished to communicate to the people of Tai that the kingdom and all its might would always stand ready to protect them.

Bun Province had long suffered under the tyrannical rule of the land gangs. The previous province lord was even more unscrupulous than the gangs, and disputes between them over their competing rights and interests continued apace. When the province traded blows with the land gangs about who was or ought to be in charge, ordinary people paid the price.

With both sides hoarding the wealth, ignoring the rule of law, carrying on like despots and never paying the price, minor quarrels often escalated into full blown riots. The people of Bun Province endured it the best they could.

The enthronement of Gyousou meant that the arbitrary rule of the province lords would be held in check and the havoc incited by the land gangs brought under control. The new emperor of Tai would not condone such actions. The mighty armies of the Palace Guard would prove as much to the people of Bun Province. The Palace Guard of the Center was dispatched to achieve that end.

Nevertheless, Kouryou did not prevail and neither did his fellow commanders. As if the strategy had been in the cards from the start, the insurrections fomented by the land gangs linked up one by one and the scale of the rebellion grew to massive proportions.

As soon as they put out the flames in one location, another fire broke out elsewhere. By the time that one was extinguished, bigger conflagrations erupted elsewhere. The insurgent groups conspired to constantly expand the scale of the conflict.

These incidents were not so easily contained as a local riot, and were beginning to look like they'd been planned from the start to set the stage for a palace coup. In answer to these suspicions, another army was dispatched from the capital, with Gyousou himself leading a contingent of the Palace Guard.

Under ordinary circumstances, an emperor never fought on the front lines. But the expanding battlefield and Gyousou's deep connection to the city of Tetsui, now drawn into the maelstrom, compelled him to become personally involved in the fighting.

Gyousou set off with the specific intent of defending Tetsui from the predatory behavior of the land gangs and rescuing the city from the ravages of war. Then suddenly he disappeared.

Against all expectations, the Imperial Army was soon ready to abandon the field. The search for Gyousou divided their time and resources. The war with the leading land gangs had ground to a standstill. A fresh army from Kouki was thrown into the fray and finally managed to bring the situation under control. But the chaotic conditions on the ground showed no signs of abating.

In the middle of these roiling crises, a messenger bird arrived in camp. Stationed in Jou Province and confronting similar insurrectionists, General Risai of the Sui Provincial Guard reported that Asen had taken up arms against the emperor.

Once Kouryou recovered from his initial shock and turned this new information over in his mind, the state of affairs became much clearer. He'd believed for some time that the discord was spreading in a calculated manner. Now he had no choice but to conclude that it'd been planned that way all along.

The strategy from the start was to bog down Kouryou and the Imperial Army in Bun Province, lay siege to Tetsui, and coax Gyousou out of the Imperial Palace.

That strategy had been executed to perfection, General Eishou bitterly concluded. He was Kouryou's superior officer in the Palace Guard of the Center. When the rebellion broke out in Bun Province, Asen was likely the one pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Entice the Imperial Army under Gyousou's command out of the capital, exploit the gaps in its defenses, and snatch away the throne. The only force left in Kouki to strike at Asen was a single army under the command of General Ganchou. In the time it'd take Kouryou and his allies to return to Kouki, retaking the already impregnable capital would become well-nigh impossible.

Hardly any time had passed since news of Asen's betrayal reached them when a communiqué arrived from the capital stating that Risai had turned traitor. She had purportedly assassinated Gyousou in a plot to usurp the throne.

The machinations of the conspiracy were suddenly obvious. If they fell in line behind Asen and joined in the reprisals against Risai, all would be well. If not, they'd be labeled traitors too. Follow Asen or stand with Risai and become a hunted rebel. With that decision hanging over their heads, Eishou summoned all of the ranked officers to the main encampment and wasted no time mincing words.

"I plan to run away."

"Eishou-sama!"

"I will flee to the hills and find some hole in the wall to hide in. The rest of you may do whatever you feel is right." Eishou looked back at Kouryou and the rest of his

stunned audience. His mouth twisted into a cynical smile. "I consider this the only viable option left on the table. I am not about to take my marching orders from Asen. If that makes me a rebel, so be it. I shall go on the lam."

"You won't fight?"

And strike back at Asen, the real usurper? A natural and rational response. Eishou not only had Kouryou and the rest of his regimental commanders at his disposal, but the Sou Provincial Guard currently stationed in Bun Province, as well as the troops led by General Gashin.

"I won't fight. The White Pheasant has not fallen from its perch."

Risai had said as much in her report. The White Pheasant was the kingdom's sacred bird. It sang once to proclaim the enthronement of the emperor, sang once to proclaim his demise, and then expired. Reports that the White Pheasant had sung of Gyousou's death were, according to Risai, lies spread by Asen. The bird very much still lived.

Eishou declared with a cold smile, "If His Highness is not dead, then battles await us in the future. Not battles resisting Asen now, but the coming war between Asen and His Highness. If we cannot rouse ourselves to action when that moment comes, then we have no value serving Gyousou-sama. We run and lie low so when Gyousou-sama returns, we can rise up and flock to his standard. What the rest of you do is your own business."

Eishou turned his attention to the rest of the encampment. "I lack the resources to take care of you out of my own pocket. You can abandon the Imperial Army and go into hiding. Or you can follow Asen. The choice is yours. However—"

Eishou indicated the map of Tetsui and Rin'u and the surrounding areas spread out on the table. The map depicted in great detail the camps of their enemies and allies, the battlefields, and the topography of the region.

"If, at a future date, you wish to labor on behalf of Gyousou-sama, add your signature here as a solemn vow to stand by him when he returns. This is no mere pledge. I mean the same way the kirin swears fealty to the emperor, you promise to keep your word no matter the cost."

He tossed the map to the soldiers, who raised their voices in assent. Somewhere amidst the geographical features drawn on the sheet of parchment, their emperor had disappeared without a word.

"You promise to shoulder the coming trials in obscurity, and when His Highness returns, rush to his side. Those who harbor no such inclination may do as they see fit. But if you choose to follow Asen, keep in mind that you may live only long enough to see the final battlefield. When the decisive war between Asen and His Highness is waged, *I* promise to take your heads."

A hard smile rose to Eishou's face. "In truth, those who run from this commitment will hang their heads whenever they tread the road ahead, to make sure our eyes never meet. For if our eyes do meet, I will show no mercy. Those who make this pledge and cower in fear when the time comes should give no thought to scampering away but rather fall on their own swords. Because however dear their lives may be to them then, their lifespans will differ little hence."

Kouryou had no idea how many signed their names. But so many did that both sides of the sheet were rendered black with ink. With that map in hand, Eishou truly did disappear into a hole in the wall. Kouryou had heard nothing about him since, no rumors about him being arrested or executed by Asen. Given this lack of news, he must have gone underground somewhere.

Kouryou as well cast off his medals and insignias, disposed of his weapons and his armor, left Bun Province, and wandered aimlessly across the kingdom, waiting for the time to come.

"Risai-sama, I have been concerned for your well-being ever since. Search parties were organized in every province."

Kouryou gazed at the one-armed general. At the very least, when Kouryou departed for Bun Province, she still possessed both of her arms.

Risai nodded. "As you can see, I have managed to keep drawing breath. Though not without making sacrifices along the way."

They'd moved to a corner of the burned over ruins that had once been Fugen Temple. Where the temple once stood, only the stone foundation remained. A little way off, the courtyard was all but hidden beneath a carpet of grass, on which the wounded now lay.

The survivors of the Taoist and Buddhist temples who attacked Risai and Taiki were being cared for by villagers who lived nearby. Based on their kiju and attire, and the way they carried themselves, they'd jumped to the conclusion that Risai, Taiki, and Kouryou were members of a scouting party sent by Asen to hunt them down.

Those who'd collapsed here and there in the meadow, together with those who could move on their own, were brought to the Fugen Temple remains to rest. Messengers ran down the mountain to get help moving them back to the village. Thankfully, in the end, nobody was killed or even that badly wounded.

As part of keeping his identity hidden, Kouryou did not carry a sword. His "hidden weapons" were chiefly defensive in nature, not suited for assassination or able to inflict serious wounds on an opponent. Risai carried a sword, but having lost her dominant arm, and knowing that Taiki was nearby, she avoided dealing any lethal blows.

As a result, the melee concluded without any fatalities.

“What about your officers, Risai?”

Risai had no idea what had become of them. She’d been detained on Asen’s orders shortly after sending word of his betrayal to Bun Province and Kouki. Asen accused Risai of assassinating Gyousou. She was taken into custody while her army was marching to Shou Province to put down the rebellion there. Leaving her troops behind, she was transported to the Imperial Palace and told that the rest of her officers would follow shortly.

“I gathered that a new general was dispatched from Kouki and the army eventually proceeded to Shou Province.”

Along the way, Risai escaped. In that instant, she was branded a traitor. After much intense discussion, her fellow officers concluded they had been sent to Shou Province to suppress the rebellion. Except it was already hard to escape the strong implication that they were being punished for being commanded by a general accused of high treason.

They had no objections about working to suppress the rebellion, and otherwise would accept whatever punishment was deemed appropriate.

No sooner had they arrived in Shou Province but the uprising was quelled. With no reason for being there, they awaited their next orders. Their next orders were to hunt down Risai and execute her. By no means convinced that Risai was capable of treason to start with, these were orders they simply could not obey.

“I heard they disbanded and dispersed in Shou Province. Many were later captured or killed.”

Risai didn’t know how many and which of her officers had in fact been executed. Denied formal trials, they would have been killed upon capture, leaving behind no records and no graves. Since her escape, keeping out of sight and never staying long in one place, she had no way to investigate. All she knew was that they had refused an Imperial directive and scattered in Shou Province.

Risai had first been commissioned a general in the Shou Provincial Guard. Many of her officers were from Shou. They knew the lay of the land and had connections in the region. Surely they could find shelter and keep safely out of sight. That was the one ray of hope she clung to.

She’d been constantly on the run ever since. Whenever she met one of her own officers or one of Gyousou’s subordinates, she struggled to find some way of striking back at Asen, but all her efforts came to naught.

Not only Risai, but many civic-minded citizens sought to dethrone Asen. However, should they draw Asen’s attention by assembling in sufficient numbers to constitute a viable force, harsh retributive measures awaited them. Asen’s retributive measures

went far beyond the ordinary. Rather than spend the time trying to root them out, whole cities were destroyed root and branch.

The same fate that befell Zui'un Temple.

Reading between the lines of what Risai was saying, Kyoshi silently stepped away, shaken to the core.

The emperor had fallen in Bun Province. Then Asen occupied the vacant throne. At the time, no one outside the Imperial Palace had any reason to question this course of events. The emperor was divinely chosen. By means of the kirin, Heaven selected the best person to lead the kingdom.

However, in the meantime, before the one true emperor was chosen, someone must rise to the occasion and hold the Imperial Court together in his stead.

Since the reign of Emperor Kyou, Asen had been widely considered Gyousou's equal. He was treated with similar deference by the Imperial Court when Gyousou became emperor. His subordinates and courtiers held him in high esteem. That Asen should succeed Gyousou as emperor *pro tempore* until the accession of a new emperor struck no one as inappropriate.

However, Zui'un Temple questioned this state of affairs. As the central pillar of Taoism in the kingdom, information gathered by temples around the kingdom eventually made its way to Zui'un Temple. Moreover, being by their very nature places dedicated to the promulgation of knowledge and science, the Taoist temples had deep connections to the Ministry of Winter.

Further examination of statements from the Ministry and the temples revealed that Asen's route to the throne was a strange one indeed.

They first questioned whether Gyousou was actually dead. Initial reports had him being killed in Bun Province while fighting the land gangs. The surrounding circumstances were anything but clear. No one could offer a definitive account of what happened at the scene of the disaster. Even if he died in some sort of accident, no funeral had been held and there were no signs of an imperial mausoleum under construction.

Further investigations turned up not a single witness to his death. As things stood, all anyone knew for certain was that Gyousou had disappeared in the midst of the battle and no news about his fate had emerged since—facts that certainly did not justify the appointment of a provisional emperor.

The logical examination of such suspicions led to the conclusion that the chaos and confusion sown by the land gangs had been intended from the start to swallow up Gyousou. On top of that, Taiki disappeared at around the same time. It was rumored that an unusual natural disaster—a *shoku*—had taken place on the grounds of the Imperial Palace.

A shoku occurring in the skies above the Imperial Palace was a rare event. That it happened at the same time Gyousou disappeared made it even harder to accept as mere coincidence. No one knew Taiki's whereabouts. And yet a provisional emperor occupied the throne and administered the Imperial Court as if the throne were vacant.

No evidence condoning such actions could be found in the Divine Decrees, nor could anyone defend them as a matter of custom or convention.

A vigorous debate about the peculiarities of the situation arose amongst the Taoist monks and priests in Ten Shire. In the end, a council of the Taoist sects and Buddhist denominations concluded with calls for a public inquiry.

They anticipated that this would bring them into conflict with the Imperial ministries Asen had at his beck and call, and would likely put them all in a tight spot.

Beware, the sages warned, and Kyoshi concurred. After this, the kingdom will treat Zui'un Temple with cold disdain. Whatever happens from here on out, do not expect any help from them.

Based on their size, the Taoist temples received assistance from the kingdom and the provinces to support the large number of monks and priests. The likelihood of this support getting cut off was high, and provisions were likely to run short across the board. But despite whatever hardships they had to endure, the course must be corrected.

Thus spoke the sages.

The Imperial Edict came down several days later. No response to the public inquiry was forthcoming. Rather, the Edict stated that to raise any questions about the accession of the new emperor was tantamount to treason.

Zui'un Temple protested that the Edict constituted no answer. Nobody was contemplating treason. The subjects of a kingdom had every right to examine the legal and proper means by which an emperor was installed. If the provisional emperor was legitimate, then Zui'un Temple would cooperate with the government to the utmost. If not, that cooperation would be summarily withdrawn.

Retribution arrived in short order. Early in the morning on the last day of August, Kyoshi was shaken awake by a flustered colleague. Startled by the sound of his name shouted in a near panic, Kyoshi jumped to his feet.

"What's going on?"

Novice monks in training like Kyoshi banded together to share living quarters in a detached temple structure. He was sixteen years old. He'd just come to the mountains and was still learning the ropes as a young acolyte.

Along with worshiping at the ancestral shrine morning and evening, attending to the sages and listening to their lectures, the days were taken up with any number of

chores and assignments. They awoke at the same time every morning, cleaned and ritually purified their surroundings, and bedded down late at night only after they had again swept away the accumulated dust of the day.

In every other spare minute, they might be found hurrying about chopping firewood, tending to the livestock, working in the fields, helping out in the kitchen, all the while following exacting rules of decorum and propriety. Assiduously tending to these chores was but the first step in their training. Finally back in their beds, they fell into a deep slumber until the ringing of the gong woke them from a dreamless slumber.

Nevertheless, Kyoshi never once regretted the choice he made.

He had entered a Taoist monastery as he hoped. Born in Kou Province, Kyoshi had always longed to don the robes of the monks he observed rushing about to help those in need. He hadn't yet completed his formal religious education, so he couldn't wear those robes. But simply being able to call the magnificent Zui'un Temple his home and walk the grounds wrapped in the indigo blue cassock provided by the monastery made him brim with pride.

Being accepted at Zui'un Temple as a novice didn't happen because he wished it to happen. He commenced his training at Zui'un Temple after an unexpected series of connections bore fruit, for which he was especially grateful.

Nevertheless, exhausted from his chores and duties, rousing himself from sleep before the gong rang was no easy task. Had his fellow novices not pressed him so urgently, he would have rolled over and gone back to sleep. Aroused by painful cries impossible to ignore, he jumped out of bed. Meeting him was the unnerving sight of a red glow filling the room. It didn't come from a lantern.

Inside the dark temple quarters, other novices scrambled from the rows of beds, no less befuddled than Kyoshi as the wavering red light played across the room. With a collective start, they focused their attention on the windows. A sky brighter than midday met their eyes, stained with the crimson colors of dusk and slashed with black shadows cast by the rows of tiled roofs.

A fire, was the first thought that sprang to Kyoshi's mind. And no ordinary conflagration. They had to help man the fire brigade.

Kyoshi dashed from his bedside toward the hallway. Somebody grabbed his arm.

"Get out of here."

"We have to put out the fire!" Kyoshi shouted, still trying to run.

The hand yanked him back. "Get going. It's the Imperial Army."

Kyoshi shot a flabbergasted glance at his fellow novice. He was wearing his indigo cassock, so he must have been on the night watch. His face was streaked with soot, mottled by the rivulets of sweat pouring down his face.

"What's going on?" someone else asked.

“We’re surrounded. We wanted an answer from the emperor. Well, this is his answer.”

Kyoshi trembled. *This is what it means to incur the displeasure of the sovereign.* But going to such lengths boggled the mind.

“They set the temple on fire with no warnings whatsoever!”

“Unbelievable.”

His colleagues shook their heads. The flames burst forth all at once. When the baffled watchmen looked more closely, the mountain was surrounded on all sides by soldiers.

“The abbot?”

“In the main hall arranging his belongings. He said to bring the Holy Books and leave everything else behind.”

Kyoshi and the novices nodded.

“Go assist the abbot and then escape to the foot of the mountain. I’ll make sure everybody is up and ready to go.”

Kyoshi and the novices nodded again. With no time to change into their indigo cassocks, they hurried to the main hall. A large number of Taoist temples made up the core of Zui’un Temple. Attached to each was a sage who administered an independent teaching monastery as the abbot. Taken altogether, these institutions collectively took on the name of Zui’un Temple.

Kyoshi belonged to Tokushi Temple. The name of the abbot was Seimei. They raced to his quarters, gathered up his belongings, and fled with him under the cover of the night.

A thick cordon of soldiers from the Imperial Army surrounded Zui’un Temple. Tokushi Temple sat at the foot of a mountain, as if carved from an enormous slab of rock. A narrow path used in their training continued across the mountain. No wider than an animal trail, it passed over the next ridgeline and then halfway up the side of Bokuyou Mountain.

Each carrying a pack, and alternatively leading the abbot by the hand, Kyoshi and his fellow novices traversed the dark mountain path. In a bitter irony, the light from the fiery destruction of Zui’un Temple illuminated the treacherous trail before them. As expected, the Imperial Army overlooked this one small path. They encountered not a single soldier along the way.

And so were somehow able to escape, while most of the monks and priests shared the same fate as Zui’un Temple. The neighboring Taoist and Buddhist temples fared no better. A few survivors escaped and managed to flee to nearby towns.

The tragedy only expanded. Though having nothing to do with the public inquiry, the villages outside the temple gates bore the stain of collaboration and were targeted for retribution.

That they would incur the displeasure of the sovereign was a forgone conclusion. Depending on their individual circumstances, everyone at Zui'un Temple closely questioned the role they would play. Depending on the outcome, they understood it was entirely possible that the hierarchy of Zui'un Temple would bear the brunt of the blame and be punished in one fell swoop.

No one had anticipated that the unrestrained destruction would fall upon the laypersons working there and on the villages outside the gates, and not just the monks and priests attached to the temple. The residents included the faithful making pilgrimages to Zui'un and the surrounding temples and the infirmed staying there for medical treatment.

An entire region of Bokuyou Mountain was reduced to ashes, along with the kingdom's blameless subjects. Such was the perverseness of Asen's actions.

Even afterwards, Asen's forces relentlessly hounded the remnants of Zui'un Temple. They destroyed any town or village that gave the Taoists shelter, even when its citizens had no idea that a priest or monk with nowhere else to turn had found his way there.

There were also Taoists who voluntarily surrendered to the Imperial Army in order to protect a town that had given them asylum. This was true of Kyoshi and his companions. The seventeen of them fled to Touka at the foot of Bokuyou Mountain. Not long after, the Imperial Army showed up, ready to commence a search. If their presence was discovered, the village would be eradicated.

In order to forestall that inevitability, the abbot and six novices walked out to meet the Imperial Army. Or rather, they persuaded the reluctant villagers to turn them over to the authorities.

For better or worse, the Imperial troops advancing on the village still did things by the book. At that time, the manhunt for the remnants of Zui'un Temple having just begun, the Imperial Army continued to pay heed to their military code. Though they might destroy buildings and threaten villagers in their search for escaping monks and priests, they did not resort to violent means beyond the pale.

Villages that resisted were mercilessly put to the torch. Those that cooperated in the hunt were often given a pass. Including the abbot, six were handed over to the Imperial Army, with the villagers and the abbot insisting that they constituted the entire number that had shown up at the village gate. The Imperial Army did not press the matter. Their sacrifice spared the lives of Kyoshi and ten others.

Common sense dictated that, not only Kyoshi and the refugees from Zui'un, but most of those seeking sanctuary in the area would have dispersed and left the region. Except it wasn't that simple.

The Taoist temples housed facilities that played a critical role in the compounding of herbal medicines absolutely necessary to practitioners of the healing arts. With no

expectations of charity from the kingdom, the compounding of these medicines simply could not cease.

Kyoshi and his colleagues wandered through the ruins looking for the kilns and salvageable tools. They repaired broken items, dug others out of the rubble and ash. If they gave up and abandoned the area, not only would there be no way to deliver the medicines into the hands of the practitioners, but the technology and knowledge necessary to make them would be lost as well.

So they held their ground there in the mountains. Despite getting caught up in so many troubles and suffering so much misfortune, they did their best to help the people around them. Not only did the villagers feed them out of their own poverty, but delivered the medicines in secret to other Taoist temples in the region. Then gathered more raw materials on their return journeys.

With those precious raw materials in hand, Kyoshi and his companions traveled throughout the mountains. Because all of the equipment they needed could not be found in the remains of one temple, completing an entire manufacturing process required going from mountain to mountain, from ruins to ruins.

Meanwhile, in order to maintain their stores of knowledge, they compiled new manuscripts based on the books and documents they dug up and whatever they could remember. With the cold and hunger whittling away at their numbers, they had held out for six years now.

Responding to the questions asked of him, Kyoshi spoke about those years for a long time.

“You have endured well.”

Kyoshi felt a warm hand covering his. Startled, he raised his eyes. He was sitting on a makeshift platform formed by the foundation stones. To his befuddlement, Taiki himself knelt in front of him and clasped Kyoshi’s hands in his.

“Oh, nothing of the sort.”

Kyoshi hurriedly went to slip off the platform but Taiki didn’t release his hold.

“I am sorry. And I am thankful.”

Kyoshi found himself at a loss for words. *Be sure to protect the kilns.* Those were the words left behind by the abbot when he abandoned his hiding place in the village, and by Kyoshi’s colleague, who fell by the wayside while crossing the snowbound mountains and struggling toward the next kiln.

If the bamboo crates got drenched, the raw materials the people of Ten Shire risked their lives to gather and the medicines they’d produced so far would be rendered useless. Such sacrifices must have been weighing his mind, for after he stumbled off the mountain road, he wrapped the bamboo crates with his own cloak and froze as he curled around them.

It was really hard, Kyoshi wanted to say, a brutal six years that taxed the body and the soul.

“Taiho,” Kyoshi finally said. “There is one question I wanted to ask you.” The Taiho nodded and Kyoshi continued, “Where have you been up until now?”

“*Kyoshi*,” came a scolding voice, which was to be expected. In so many words, he was criticizing the Taiho for his absence. But even so, he had to know.

“I was in Hourai.”

At the edge of the known world and far across the sea was said to exist a fabled kingdom called Hourai.

“I heard the Taiho was born in Hourai.”

Though a rare phenomenon, those known as *taika* were sometimes born in that mythical place. The Saiho—one such *taika*—nodded. He raised his hand, still holding Kyoshi’s, to his forehead.

“Forgive me, for I did not know how to return.”

Of course, Kyoshi thought. He couldn’t explain what he felt in tangible terms, but sensed something from the palm of the hand grasping his, the trembling power within.

“Thank you for returning to us,” Kyoshi said. “Words cannot express the joy we feel.”

For whatever reason, Taiki responded with a small shake of his head.

Chapter 6

[2-2] The sun had long set when the village gate was closed and barred. It was dead quiet inside the stockade. The wan glow of lit lamps from the houses provided the only illumination.

Now past midnight, the village would ordinarily be quietly slumbering. But evident in the dim light coming from the rika, where the several dozen villagers had assembled, no one slept beneath the blanket of this apparent tranquility.

The villagers gathered in an arc around the guest house just east of the rika, so crowded together there was hardly any room to spare. Except a passerby glancing at the rika would not suspect there was anybody there. Carrying no lamps that would betray their presence, the villagers crept along the unlit corridors to the dark courtyard where they crouched low to the ground.

Maintaining a stubborn silence, they peered at the sliver of light coming from the building.

No, it was not completely quiet. Although the assembly was devoid of conversational chatter, muffled murmurs and stifled sobs resounded through the darkness—a family locked in a tight embrace—the trembling hands of a husband and wife clasped together—a sleeve held between clenched teeth to muffle her voice—a man clinging to the tree in the courtyard.

None of them averted their eyes from the guest house. Peering through the window and door at the shadows cast by the lamp inside the guest house, they focused their attention on a single silhouette.

An older man appeared in the window, blocking the view. As if trying not to attract any more undue attention, he directed his low and subdued voice at the darkness. “You all need to go home.” The man addressing them was the superintendent of the rika. “I know how you feel, but he cannot relax like this.”

The superintendent didn’t say *who* wasn’t able to relax though they understood his intent. And yet they did not respond, lingering there like a garden of statues.

“Time to call it a night, you know?” the superintendent added.

The crowd wavered, but not because they were heeding his plea. What made them draw a collective breath was the appearance of another person behind the superintendent.

“I have no objections,” he said to the superintendent. He took another step forward and for a long moment looked at the night. Then he said in a hushed and soft

voice, "There are small children here. The night dew will soak them to the skin. Please, at least bring them inside."

The superintendent turned to him with a startled expression. The crowd swayed again. With a faint gasp here and a muffled outcry there, the throng collapsed like a toppled wall, sinking to their knees and prostrating themselves on the ground. Then rising to their feet, the crowd slowly unraveled from one end as they filed out. Not a word was uttered until the last person vanished from the courtyard.

"Taiho."

The superintendent contemplated the young man next to him. With not a soul left in the courtyard, the Taiho gazed at the night, filled now with nothing but darkness.

"Surely there are things they wished to say. Fine people you have in this village."

"Thank you," said the superintendent with a nod of his head.

Kyoshi looked on in silence. The long-suffering villagers who planted their stakes in this barren ground continued to support the Taoist monks even at the cost of their own meager provisions. They deserved a reward. Seeing Taiki with their own eyes and hearing his voice may have provided some sort of recompense.

Taiki lingered at the window until, urged on by the superintendent, the two of them returned to the center of the guest house.

"Well, then," the superintendent declared in a bright voice. He addressed the several villagers who'd remained behind to serve the meals and take care of the guests. "We shall leave for now. Please have a good night."

He turned his grizzled face to Kouryou. "You and your companions are welcome to stay in our rika. Ours is not an affluent village, and hardly a comfortable one either. But we will do our best to accommodate you. Please set your minds at ease."

"Thank you very much," Kouryou said with a heartfelt bow.

Risai followed his example with similar words of appreciation. "We are indeed indebted to you for all you have done for us."

The superintendent answered with a deep bow of his own. The remaining villagers bowed as well and then withdrew. Left in the room, gathered in a circle around the Taiho, were Kouryou, Risai, Kyoshi and two others. One was a thin man in early middle age, the other an old man adorned in a simple robe.

These two had made it their job to support the refugees from Zui'un Temple. The younger of the two was the village manager, who went by the name of Doujin. The older man was a Taoist priest from Zui'un Temple.

When Kyoshi returned to the village along with his wounded comrades, Douji had been standing anxiously by the gate. Hearing about the return of Taiki, he had hurried there to await their arrival. The village manager, who himself was the very picture of a virtuous man, dropped to the ground in a kowtow as soon as he caught sight of Taiki in the distance.

He'd remained prostrated on the ground, weeping through clenched teeth, until Kyoshi and his party drew alongside. The sun had already set. The village of Touka greeted the party and then shut the gate, closing off the outside world. The guests of honor were ushered to the rika, where they enjoyed a brief respite and a hastily prepared banquet.

Receiving word of what had happened, Enchou hastened from his hiding place on a nearby mountain, arriving with the messenger Douji had dispatched a short time before. Enchou, whom Kyoshi had not seen exhibit a single moment of consternation or panic since the catastrophe that befell Zui'un Temple, appeared completely flummoxed for the first time in his life.

At a loss for words in the presence of Taiki, he bowed low to the ground, and thereafter retreated to a corner of the room and crouched there like a stone statue.

Taking advantage of a moment of silence, Kyoshi took him by the hand and brought him before Taiki. "Taiho, let me introduce to you the chief priest of Zui'un Temple. This is Enchou."

Zui'un Temple was home to nearly a hundred temples and monasteries. Each institution had its own head priest or abbot. Pulling all of their efforts together was the chief priest. Though there wasn't just one surviving chief priest. There were at least six at this juncture, of whom Enchou was "first among equals."

The other five had escaped to neighboring provinces. Enchou remained here, supervising the monks involved in the production of medicines, serving as a liaison to the temples of other Taoist sects that had also remained, and coordinating the efforts of all the sects and Buddhist institutions in the area.

When Kyoshi explained this, as he had done with Kyoshi, Taiki politely took Enchou's hand in his, and raising their hands together, thanked him for all he had done. Kyoshi held Enchou upright as the priest dabbed at his eyes with the hem of his robe. The poverty and cold he'd endured since the catastrophe had left the aging Enchou with aches and pains in his lower body, such that he required assistance to stand or sit or even walk.

Noticing this himself, Taiki offered his own arm along with Kyoshi's and led him to a chair. "Please sit down," he said. Glancing over his shoulder he said the same to the Douji. "The village manager should too."

The flustered Douji shook his head. "No, I—"

His refusal clearly surprised Taiki. "The floor is cold. And to start with, I am hardly qualified to have you kowtowing to me like this."

"Taiho!" Risai said with a raised voice.

Taiki cut her off with a glance. "Please, have a seat. I must apologize for my long absence. Not only that, I must tell you things that are bound to disappoint you." He stopped speaking for a moment, his face taking on a quiet, matter-of-fact expression.

“First, to the village manager and the chief priest, I express my heartfelt thanks for their tireless efforts on behalf of the people.”

Taiki turned to Kyoshi. “Kyoshi, I mean you as well. I greatly appreciate everything you have done up till now. While I was far removed from Tai, literally good for nothing, all of you were doing your level best for the good of the people. Despite returning at this late date, you gladly bore the terrible sacrifices demanded of you and welcomed me with open arms. However—”

Taiki again stopped speaking, searching for the right words.

“I have no miracles to offer you. I no longer have my horn. To be honest, I cannot even call myself a kirin.”

Risai jumped to her feet, slamming her foot against the chair in the process.

“Taiho, you should not talk like that!”

“It is the truth.”

Kyoshi didn’t follow the meaning of what they were saying. He noticed that Kouryou as well wore a dubious look on his face. Risai glanced at him and shook her head.

“What the Taiho said is incorrect. How can a kirin be anything but a kirin? The Taiho is the kirin of Tai. He is, without a doubt, the divine being bestowed on Tai by Heaven. He simply suffered an injury.”

“The horn, you mean?”

Kyoshi couldn’t help but pose the question. The true nature of the kirin was that of a divine beast. Most possessed the golden mane of a lion and a single horn on its head. The horn was said to constitute the wellspring of its supernatural powers. Was that the horn they were referring to?

“That villain Asen cut it with his sword. As a result, the Taiho suffered a grave wound and fell to Hourai. None of this was in any way the Taiho’s fault.”

As Risai earnestly launched into her explanation, the Taiho stopped her.

“Risai, however that may be true, it is also irrelevant. As she said, I was wounded. As a result, I cannot sense the emperor’s aura. I cannot transform into a unicorn, nor can I subjugate the youma and recruit them as my *shirei*. I can do none of those things for the Kingdom of Tai or for its people. All I am is what you see before you.”

“And that is enough,” Douji said before anyone else could speak. “You are the grace that Heaven bestowed upon Tai. The presence of Taiki, of the Taiho, in Tai is proof that Heaven has not abandoned us. That alone is reward enough for me.” Douji let out a sign. “The truth is, I was ready to believe that Heaven had abandoned Tai, that the kingdom and its people would sink beneath the waves and never rise again to the surface.”

Under normal circumstances, Douji was a constant source of inspiration to the villagers and to Kyoshi and his fellow monks. This was the first time Kyoshi had been privy to his inner doubts.

“Should I conceal such thoughts and let them cling to hope to the very end? Or was doing so just a cruel joke—”

Douji interrupted himself, raising his fist to his mouth, as if physically worn down by the weight of such questions.

“The villagers have done no wrong. Far from it, they earnestly supported the Taoists. They have worked harder and eaten less. How could I then tell them that Heaven had cast them aside? I could not allow them to suspect their good works had not reached Heaven, that their just devotions were tossed onto the ground.”

Douji appeared on the verge of tears. Now a smile rose to his face.

“But Heaven has not abandoned us. Telling them not to give up hope, that a reward awaited them if they endured through the bad times, was not a lie. I could not have imagined such a welcome turn of events.”

Taiki took in Douji’s words. Without a word, he bowed deeply.

Enchou added, “I agree with Douji. Despite your wounds, you returned to Tai. Traveling between here and Hourai cannot be something so easily done.”

“I could not have done such a thing on my own. Risai put her life on the line and traveled to Kei, where she secured the support of the empress.”

“The Imperial Kei,” Enchou repeated, as if he could not believe his own ears, as if the words themselves were so unexpected he failed to grasp their meaning.

Kyoshi reacted the same way. Did the Taiho mean the empress of the Kingdom of Kei at the eastern end of the continent? She came to the support of Tai? Kyoshi had never heard of one kingdom reaching out to help another in such a manner. Perhaps two kingdoms located on the continent. Eight kingdoms shared the same continuous land mass. Tai sat by itself in the middle of the sea. It enjoyed no substantive diplomatic relations with any other kingdom. He’d heard that other kingdoms had sent envoys to the enthronement of the new emperor—then who disappeared only six months later. But he knew nothing about the particulars.

For someone like Kyoshi, who did not reside in the world above the Sea of Clouds, the rest of the world might just as well not exist.

Taking note of the blank faces around them, Taiki urged Risai to continue with her account.

“Because it had come to my attention that the Imperial Kei, like the Taiho, was born a *taika*.”

In this world, life began as a *ranka*, the “fruit of life” that grew on the riboku tree. In some unfortunate cases, the ranka was swept away to that mysterious country,

where the transplanted ranka “hatched” and was born the same as a human child. The Imperial Kei was rumored to be one such taika.

Risai thought it possible that if she had also been born in Hourai, she might share an affinity of birth with Taiki and be willing to come to his aid. At that point, Risai had no other option but to rely on the good offices of another kingdom.

The young empress of Kei went to great lengths to save Taiki. By means of the empress, Risai was also able to secure the assistance of the Kingdom of En, which had close and friendly relations with Kei. Thanks to entreaties made by Imperial En, other kingdoms got involved as well. Taiki was located in Hourai. Using a shoku, he at last returned to Kei.

Securing the cooperation of the emperors and empresses to bring back Taiki was no simple or straightforward process. Even after his return, lacking his horn, Taiki could not defend himself to any satisfactory degree. Nevertheless, he insisted on returning to Tai.

As soon as Taiki had recovered from the maladies he’d suffered in Hourai, he and Risai left Kei for Tai. Risai had her kiju and Taiki rode a kiju lent to him by the Imperial En. They crossed the Sea of Clouds and headed first to Sui Province.

Located at the top of the sky, the Sea of Clouds divided the world between the heavens and the earth. As evidence of a kingdom on the decline, youma increased within the borders of the kingdom. The southern province of Sui Province was already infamous for the swarms of youma found there. But youma could not proliferate above the Sea of Clouds.

They intended to make the provincial palace in Sui their initial stopping point. Except the palace turned out to be inaccessible. Every inch of the surrounding area was occupied by the Provincial Guard, such that they could not even get close to the palace.

“Before departing for Kei, I traveled with a friend to Sui Province. We heard it had not yet surrendered to Asen’s forces.”

“No,” Kouryou interrupted. “Sui Province is out of the question. The province lord there fell ill some time ago.”

“Oh.” Risai responded with a groan.

Not privy to that information, she and her friend had headed to the provincial palace. Along the way, they had parted ways, with Risai flying off toward Kei, leaving her friend behind amidst the ruins of a desolate hill. Risai had no idea what became of her. Contemplating her fate, Risai fell silent for a spell.

“Not knowing the conditions on the ground in Sui Province, the Taiho and I set our eyes on Sui Province. However—”

Risai had considered the possibility that, in her absence, the province lord of Sui Province switched allegiances.

At first, Asen claimed only to be filling the throne as the provisional emperor according to established practice, and would abandon it when a new emperor was chosen. For the time being, the province lords who governed the kingdom's nine provinces had no reason to question his claims.

In time, Asen's usurpation became clear. Even then, not all of the province lords stood against him. A few raised objections. Asen's threats silenced them. Others bided their time, waiting for the right moment, seeing no point in swimming against the tide. One by one, the provinces lined up behind Asen. Among them, there were those who inexplicably and suddenly switched sides. It was said that they "fell ill."

Asen's opponents had a habit of abruptly "falling ill." Risai was aware of the phenomenon. Seeing the palace defended in depth by the Provincial Guard, she knew that Sui Province was no longer a viable option. The lord of Sui Province must have "fallen ill" and allied himself with Asen. Youma could not proliferate above the Sea of Clouds. But that constituted no sure defense against the devils in their midst.

She racked her brains for a place they could head to next. There were no waystations above the Sea of Clouds where they could rest and recuperate. They had to descend from the Sea of Clouds at some point. The provincial palaces were closed to them. Risai knew that Ran Province and Gai Province to the north had already surrendered to Asen's control.

And yet the only route available to them was a Ryou'un Mountain. Turning that thought over in her mind, Risai remembered Bokuyou Mountain in Kou Province. The Taoist temples in Ten Shire occupied the foothills of Bokuyou Mountain. News of their destruction by Asen had reached her ears. But as a result, the area around Bokuyou Mountain should be nearly depopulated.

In fact, with the gate towns eradicated and the nearby villages and hamlets reduced to ruins, Bokuyou Mountain had no defensive perimeter. Risai was amazed that anybody lived there at all.

"The Providence of Heaven perhaps," Risai mused aloud, "that Bokuyou Mountain should occur to me like that."

There were Ryou'un Mountains in the north of Sui Province and in Ran Province further to the north. Risai wasn't familiar with all of them, but she could recall at least two or three without much effort. Then why not only make a single bound across Ran to Kou Province but then proceed straight to Bokuyou Mountain at the top of Kou?

Though the tragedy of Zui'un Temple had indeed left a strong impression on her mind, the distance to Ten Shire alone should have been reason enough to look elsewhere. But once Bokuyou Mountain occurred to her, she dismissed all of the other options from her thoughts.

"A good thing you did," Kouryou said. "We would not have met otherwise."

Kyoshi also nodded. Recalling the circumstances of their chance encounter sent a chill down his spine. If they hadn't run into Kouryou, and continued to mistake Risai and Taiki for a posse sent by Asen to hunt them down, Kyoshi and his companions would have tried to drive them off. Given Risai's battle-hardened fighting skills, Kyoshi and the rest of them wouldn't have stood a chance.

And Taiki could have been caught in the crossfire. Taiki was a Black Kirin. He didn't have the golden hair unique to the kirin. Kyoshi never would have imagined that *he* was the kirin of the kingdom. With no shirei to protect him, he could have gotten wounded or even killed.

Almost as if he was privy to Kyoshi's thoughts, Kouryou said to Risai, "If you hadn't been there, I would have continued to wander around Tai waiting for the Taiho to return. I am indeed grateful."

Risai shook her head. "None of this is my doing. I prefer to believe that Heaven took note of the good people of Touka and their good works."

Overcome by emotion, the men around her pressed their hands against their eyes.

Chapter 7

[2-3] The night grew long in a little village in the far north of Kou Province. The village retained none of its prior glory. This region of Bokuyou Mountain slept the silent sleep of the dead and gone. And yet the small glow of a lamp illuminated the black night.

The people gathered around the lamp sank into their thoughts. None spoke for a long time.

“Well, then—” Doujin broke the quiet. “It’s time we turned in. The Taiho and General Risai must be exhausted. Please rest here for a while and—”

Taiki spoke up at that point. “We appreciate your concern. Risai and I will be departing first thing in the morning.”

Douji gaped at him. “But—”

“We must press on with all due haste. The search for His Highness has only begun.”

Now Kyoshi was the one taken aback. The true emperor of Tai was officially dead. The state of affairs in the kingdom since offered every reason to doubt such official pronouncements. Still—

“Um—” Kyoshi began, fumbling for the right words. After a moment of hesitation, he posed the question he feared to ask but had to know the answer to. “Taiho, what of His Highness?”

Taiki’s voice was soft yet firm. “He lives.”

Kyoshi clenched his fists. “Then—”

This time it was Risai who interrupted. “No. Unfortunately, we do not know where he is or how he is faring. Only that he has not died. That alone we can state for certain.”

Douji groaned with relief. “Thank you.”

The others buried their faces in their hands. Hope had not died in Tai. The possibility remained that all would be made right.

Risai explained, “Asen spread the false rumor that the White Pheasant had fallen from its perch. I heard as much directly from the Minister of the Two Cries. And not only that, no word of the emperor’s death was communicated to the other kingdoms. When the White Pheasant falls, the Phoenix in each kingdom sings forth those tidings. Both the Imperial Kei and the Imperial En confirmed that their Phoenix birds remained silent this whole time.”

Kouryou said, “If that is true, then where is His Highness?”

“I don’t know. And regretfully, neither does the Taiho. But a remnant of His Highness’s sash was found on Kan’you Mountain.”

Risai spoke about the vicissitudes of fortune that delivered that remnant into her hands. The sash was presented to the Imperial Tai by the Imperial Han of the Kingdom of Han on the occasion of his enthronement. It was discovered mixed together in a shipment of gemstones from Kan’you Mountain destined for Han, and was eventually returned to the Imperial Han, who entrusted it to Risa.

Risai took out an ornate handkerchief and showed them the fragment carefully folded inside it.

“This remnant was severed with remarkable precision. Based on its length, it would have covered his back.”

“Meaning His Highness was attacked from behind?”

Risai handed the handkerchief and fragment to him. “I think so. As you can see, it’s stained with blood. I believe that enemies of His Highness attacked and wounded him.”

Kouryou accepted the remnant with respect and scrutinized it. “Severed with a single blow. His attacker was not without skill.”

“I agree. His Highness is a skilled swordsman in his own right. I can’t recall any swordsman who could get behind him and deliver such a blow.”

“He might have been outnumbered and surrounded, perhaps using some sort of subterfuge.”

“Possibly. Such a clean cut suggests it was left behind at the scene. It wasn’t slashed to pieces but fell to the ground where the incident took place. In that case, there can be no doubt that His Highness was attacked on Kan’you Mountain. I can only imagine that Asen was the assailant. It was Asen’s plan all along to exploit the chaos he fomented in Bun Province to assassinate His Highness.”

“But His Highness did not die there. What happened to him next?”

“We don’t know,” said Risai, surveying her audience. “We’d settle for rumors at this point, even somebody who heard that somebody else had seen somebody who resembled His Highness.”

“I have traveled fairly far and wide. I have yet to hear any rumors of the sort. What about the residents of Touka?”

In response to Kouryou’s inquiry, the residents of Touka in the room all shook their heads.

“Such as stories about a military commander on the run from Imperial forces?” Douji said. “I’ve heard rumors to that effect. But none have stood up to close scrutiny and not a whisper about the person in question being the emperor. That’s why most people believe the official proclamations about His Highness being dead.”

“That’s right.”

“That piece of his sash definitely makes it look like he was wounded. Nevertheless, if His Highness is indeed fleeing from assassins, why have we heard no news whatsoever about such exploits? That he could make his escape while remaining completely silent about it is hard to comprehend.”

Kouryou nodded. “Under normal circumstances, we’d also be hearing stories about Asen’s rebellion. Perhaps he fell into Asen’s clutches.”

“In that case, it is hard to believe Asen would allow His Highness to live.”

Hard to believe, Kyoshi thought to himself. Asen’s actions sprung from his desire to kill the emperor and usurp the throne. Asen would indeed kill him if he got half a chance.

“Hard to believe,” Kouryou muttered aloud. “Making it all the more likely that His Highness is not Asen’s prisoner. But it also suggests he is not situated to rise up against him, nor situated to move about at will.”

Kyoshi cocked his head to the side. *Exactly what sort of situation would that be?*

Kouryou said, “At any rate, as long as His Highness is alive and well, the search for him takes precedence. As the Taiho stated, the sooner the better.”

Risai nodded. “In order to track down His Highness’s whereabouts, Bun Province must be the starting point.”

Kouryou shifted his seated position. “I’ll gladly take on that assignment.”

“That’s not what I was asking. Of course, I also would—”

Kouryou shook his head. “General, I think you should stay here for now. I’ll come back and report what I’ve found.”

Risai’s face noticeably stiffened. “It is true I lost my right arm. However—”

Kouryou hurriedly said, “Please don’t misunderstand what I’m saying. Two would certainly be better than one when it comes to searching Bun Province. But there remains the matter of the Taiho. I cannot see bringing him along to Bun Province. If the people of Touka do not consider it too great a burden, I think it is only right to ask them. The Taiho simply cannot be left here alone. That’s why Risai should stay here with him.”

Aside from a stifled groan, Risai didn’t reply. Raising objections was the Taiho, who until now had listened in silence.

“That is something I cannot do.”

Startled, Kouryou turned his attention to the Taiho.

“I will not impose myself on the people of Touka. Moreover, finding a safe place for myself alone is not an acceptable solution.”

“Please don’t make such outrageous statements. I understand how you feel but keeping you from harm really must take priority.”

Taiki again answered Kouryou directly. “It is true that I cannot sense the emperor’s aura.”

“Taiho, that is not—”

“I do not have my shirei and thus no means of defending myself. I accept that my presence would be akin to dragging along a ball and chain.”

Now Kouryou was the one who raised his voice. “Taiho, do not say such things!”

Risai remonstrated with him as well. “Taiho, you mustn’t speak in such a manner.”

“It is true,” Taiki stated with cruel clarity. “But haven’t we already trodden this ground, Risai? If I wanted a safe hiding place, there is no safer place than Kinpa Palace in the Kingdom of Kei. I have already explained at length why we could not remain there.”

Risai hung her head. Taiki looked at the people assembled there.

“Kouryou—all of you—I understand your concerns. I lack the powers normally associated with a kirin. Precisely because I lost those powers, I must turn to ordinary and unexceptional means to help save Tai. You have suffered great hardships and overcome them to get where you are today. I must do the same. Otherwise, when peaceful times return to Tai, I will have lost any right to enjoy them with you.”

But, Taiho—”

“And when you are celebrating those halcyon days, I will be left to curse my powerless state as a solitary man.”

Kouryou stifled any response on his part. But even accepting the substance of what Taiki said, none of them were ready to agree with him.

Taiki softly answered their unspoken objections. “If the good of Tai were your sole concern, then the most straightforward solution would be to kill me here and now.”

“You can’t be serious!” alarmed voices all shouted in unison.

“Why? In fact, that is the one sure solution. Kill me and Gyousou dies as well, wherever he is. The new kirin chooses a new emperor. A few years hence, the situation will have righted itself in its entirety.”

Kouryou stumbled for a satisfactory answer. Neither could Kyoshi find the words. In no respect was Taiki mistaken in his conclusions.

It was left to Enchou to break the heavy silence. He said, looking at them with a gentle expression, “The Taiho has made clear his desire to share in the same toil and turmoil as the rest of us. Our simple thanks should suffice. Is there any need to contend with such a resolve?”

“No, there isn’t.” Kyoshi raised his voice. “If it is all right, let me go with you.” When everyone turned their attention to him, he explained with a small bow of his head, “I know full well that I can barely defend myself, let alone the Taiho. In that respect, I will simply be another ball and chain. But if I accompany you, I will be able to petition Taoist temples along the way.”

“A good idea,” Enchou said, his voice lifting. “So you intend to set off on this journey?”

“Yes, and happily. Please let me go with them.”

Enchou agreed with a big nod. “I shall compose a letter asking that its bearer be granted shelter and to not ask why. Confronting the new and the unfamiliar won’t be easy, but go and assist them the best you can.”

“I will,” said Kyoshi with a deep bow.

Risai bowed to Enchou as well. “Thank you for everything. This will be a real help.”

Enchou nodded. He turned to Risai, reached out and clasped Risai’s hand in his. “And we express our gratitude likewise. You did well, going all the way to Kei. We are truly grateful to you for saving the Taiho. The path before you will be long and hard after this, but Heaven will not overlook your efforts.” He patted Risai’s hand. “And not only Heaven. People too. The people of this village are surely only the first of many. Tai is not on her deathbed. There are people of conscience everywhere in the kingdom waiting for the tide of history to turn.”

Not only Risai, everybody there nodded in response to Enchou’s words, each harboring the same prayer in their hearts, *Please let it be so*.

The faint sound of falling rain stole through the solemn silence. At some point, like a feathery shower of rice husks, the rain started to softly descend.

Chapter 8

[2-4] The quiet rain drenched the hills and fields on that windless night. The rain falling on the northern territories of Kou Province reached the mountainous border region it shared with Bun Province and strengthened to a gale, then retreated again to a mild shower as it descended into the foothills.

Approaching the center of Bun Province, it was more of a drizzle. There the foliage was changing color with the seasons. The heavy dew collected on the leaves and branches before cascading to the ground, where drops of water drummed against the earthen roof of the den.

In the darkness of the den, a human silhouette stretched out close to the floor. A muffled voice mingled with the sound of the rain.

“—we fought there—”

The murky interior was illuminated by a single dim light that appeared on the verge of winking out.

“—and died there—”

The shadow barely stirred in the darkness. A resonating voice spilled from his mouth. The boy paused and glanced at the bed. As he was about to do, the man lying there opened his eyes and gazed at the empty blackness. The boy returned his attention to the task at hand. Pressing the blade of a small knife against the whetstone, he added his voice in unison.

“Perished like dogs at the side of the road and ended up food for the crows.”

Despite the gloom and doom in the words, the song had a lively tune. The man entrusted to his care sang it so often that he’d memorized it by now. Seemingly startled by the unexpected duet, the man roused himself on the bed. Interrupting himself with smothered laughter, he continued with the verse.

Please tell the crows on our behalf
To spare a moment before gobbling us down
And shed a tear like they truly care.
Weathered and worn and without even a grave
How in the world might our rotten meat
Flee from the tips of your pointed beaks?

It was an old comical folk song, said to have originated with *sankyaku* from Kunlun, and now a bar song favored by soldiers. At the end of a party, full of liquor

and great good cheer, clapping their hands and stomping their feet, they'd join in the choruses together at the top of their lungs.

As the song said, the morrow might well find their corpses strewn across the countryside. So they laughed to scorn at the fate they had chosen for themselves, from which there was little chance of salvation. The man on the bed taught him as much.

The boy sprinkled water on the whetstone. Singing to himself, he continued to sharpen the blade.

The river burbles past dark thickets along the shore.
Brave knights sallied forth to slay and be slain.
Leaving behind their riderless mounts
That wander about loudly neighing and braying.

The town was home to a number of washed-up soldiers who sang with gusto whenever they got together to carouse, though actual singing seemed less a priority than raising a ruckus. Drinking to get drunk, the right melody was whatever came out of their mouths, as one soldier put it. As a result, none of them could be counted on to carry the tune.

Having been passed down in such a manner, the tune differed slightly from singer to singer. Lying on the bed, the boy's master imbued his version with a bright and pretty melody, a bit on the proper side for darkly comical ditty. More likely that, over a long time and countless repetitions, the master had corrected it to his liking.

Turning these thoughts over in his mind as he sharpened the blade, the boy's hand slipped. The steel bit into the stone. The scraping sound caught his master's attention.

"What happened there? You didn't hurt yourself?"

The boy glanced over his shoulder and shook his head. He leaned back and held the blade up to the lamplight for a closer look. A chip marred the edge he'd taken such pains to hone.

"I messed up again."

"Let me see," said the master, a smile in his warm voice.

The boy approached the bed and held out the knife to the man lying there. The master caught a cold at the end of summer and had been laid up ever since. He took the knife with a hand that now appeared a bit gaunt.

"It is chipped. You ground the edge too thin."

"Without a thin edge, it won't cut."

"Blame that on poor ore," the master said with a grin and a small cough.

"Are you alright? A drink of water?"

"I'm fine," the master said with a smile. "Make the edge a bit thicker."
The boy took the knife and returned to the whetstone.

So you'll plunder yourselves a fortune.
Why the south? What about the north?
Please don't pillage the crops there.
What would we have left to eat then?
How could we become loyal subjects then?
They are such fine subjects, you say.
Really, why don't you think more of them?

He heard soft laughter from the bed. Perhaps the master was thinking of the day when he too sang the song shaking with mirth. He'd been at death's door when he was first confined to bed, his condition dire enough to raise the worries of everyone around him. But since yesterday, his fever had gone down and his complexion had improved.

The boy felt a sense of relief for the first time in a long time.

The master was carried to this village six years ago, his body covered with wounds. The boy was a little child at the time. By now he'd grown old enough to sharpen knives. He hoped it wouldn't be long before he could wield a sword like an adult.

Four years ago, a youma attacked his father, his sole surviving relative. The master saved him, though his father later succumbed to his wounds. Ever since then, the master had kept the boy around and taken good care of him. *Treats him like a son*, the villagers said. Except the boy didn't want to be his son. He'd made himself the master's retainer, serving under his command.

He'd become a fierce warrior one day and fight alongside him to save the people of the kingdom from their oppressors.

Outside the window, the furtive sound of rain stole through the room on a draft of air, accompanied by the boisterous drone of insects, singing a eulogy for the last days of their short lives before winter set in.

Rather like the boisterous songs sung by soldiers marching off to war, the boy couldn't help thinking.

The day dawns
And full of life they set off for war.
The night falls
And none of them have returned.

Part Three

Chapter 9

[3-1] A bird welcomed the break of day in Touka with a song.

Though the falling rain had lifted at some point during the night, the gloomy gray still permeated the room. Enshi sat up in bed and listened to the cry of the small bird. Next to her, Ritsu slept soundly and still.

He must be exhausted.

Enshi gazed at the sleeping face of her young son and gently stroked his hair, damp with sweat.

They'd had to sleep in the open air the two nights before they arrived at Touka. They then carried that fatigue with them as they trudged up the long slope of the hill. At that point, one thing led to another and they got caught up in an altercation of altogether unexpected origins. But at the end of the day, they finally were given a bed in a small cottage in a corner of the rika.

A young man met them at the gates of the village—the same village that had previously turned them away—and treated them in an entirely different manner. The villagers welcomed them with warmth and courtesy and fed them well. The room provided for her and Ritsu included hot water to wash away the dust of the road and a simple but soft bed.

The night before, as they were settling in, a knock came at the door. Enshi got to her feet expectantly and answered the door. It was the village superintendent. He graciously thanked Enshi and asked if there was anything she needed. The room was small but she should feel free to use it as she saw fit. They could stay as long as they wished. The rika would look after Enshi and Ritsu.

Here was a place to “settle down” that Enshi had long been searching for. If she so wished, the superintendent would guide her through the process so she could live here as a member of the community. That would be possible because the village in which she was registered no longer existed.

They could stay at the rika or set up accommodations in the village. If she needed a job, he could arrange for one. It was a poor village but she should set her mind at ease and think of it as her own.

Enshi bowed and thanked him. She truly was thankful. No more wandering about with no destination in mind, no more getting soaked by the night dew, no more

freezing in winter. If she formally became a resident of Touka, she would receive an allotment. Thus her presence in the village would truly take root in more ways than one.

And yet she couldn't shake the hollow and forlorn feelings in her heart, such that she hadn't been able to sleep.

Right behind her quarters was a snug courtyard. At the back of the courtyard was the guest house for entertaining important visitors. Though Enshi couldn't see it from the cottage or sense anything about the place, peering over the hedge and through the trees that separated the cottage from the courtyard, she could make out a point of lamplight.

That must be where *he* was. The Taiho—he who would save Tai from its troubled and confused state.

In fact, he saved her and Ritsu. And at the same time, he stole Kouryou from them.

She knew she was being disrespectful, but in her mind, she couldn't help upbraiding him for casting aside such a heavy responsibility and disappearing off the face of the earth. While he was gone, Enshi lost everything important in her life, save Ritsu. Why would the Saiho abandon his kingdom? Where had he been and what was he doing all this time? Why couldn't he have come back faster? *Now* he returns, when she had nothing, only to take Kouryou from her and Ritsu.

Kouryou had already left her to fend on her own. The hedge blocking her view was more proof of the wall that separated them—herself and a commander in the Palace Guard.

From her perspective, he was one of the elites who lived above the Sea of Clouds. Before Tai degraded to the state it was in today, Kouryou likely lived in Kouki in a place close to the sky.

Enshi couldn't cross the hedge to the other side and Kouryou wasn't about to stay in Touka with her. She should be fine with that. Kouryou had remained with her until she arrived at a place that she could call home. That place was here and here was where her journey with Kouryou ended.

The day would always come when we would go our separate ways.

She knew Kouryou was shouldering a burden she could not see. He was carrying the Kingdom of Tai on his back, the kingdom as it truly was, the kingdom he saw with his own eyes as he wandered hither and yon. No true emperor sat on the Tai throne, hence its ragged and savage state. During his endless journey, Kouryou was constantly on the lookout for the best way to address the situation.

The best way came to him in the form of the Taiho.

Kouryou simply could not accompany her any further. As well as she understood this, looking at Ritsu's sleeping face, the stark reality broke her heart. *When did we grow so fond of him?*

Ritsu would be terribly upset when that stark reality became impossible to ignore. She'd even understand him longing for the hard days on the road when they were together.

However she tried to convince herself that it was all for the best, a part of her continued to raise objections. Her unsettled emotions kept her awake all night. When the singing birds signaled the dawn of the new day and the room began to brighten, she gave up trying to sleep.

She got out of bed. After assiduously brushing the dust off of her kimono and doing the same with Ritsu's clothing, she washed her face with the water from the pail on the dresser. Perhaps sensing her moving around, Ritsu woke up. Enshi helped him get dressed. Not knowing what they should do next, she took Ritsu by the hand and exited the room.

A woman working the courtyard noticed them. "Oh, I see you're up."

"Yes."

"I hope you're feeling better this morning."

"We rested well thanks to all you've done for us." Enshi did her best to muster a smile.

Perhaps sensing the polite lie in Enshi's answer, the woman smiled sympathetically. "You should take it easy for now. But just as well. I was thinking it was about time to wake you up anyway."

"Was there something we needed to do?"

The woman shook her head. "They will be leaving pretty soon now."

Enshi caught her breath. *Already?*

"There's no time to waste, they say. Did you wish to see them off?"

By *them*, did she mean Kouryou or the Taiho? Enshi nodded. Ritsu looked up at her, the puzzled expression on his face asking what was going on. Enshi knelt down in front of him.

"Kouryou has to leave on a journey. Let's say goodbye to him, okay?"

Ritsu tipped his small head to the side and then nodded. The young Ritsu perhaps didn't understand what "goodbye" meant this time. He probably thought that Kouryou was leaving the inn to go sell his wares, as he had so often done during their travels.

Holding Ritsu's hand, Enshi followed the woman back through the rika, down a corridor, and then followed the gallery around the courtyard before exiting through the courtyard gate. The gate led directly from the courtyard to the rika entrance. There they joined the people already assembled there.

A group of seven soon appeared. Enshi recognized the superintendent among them. The middle-aged man was probably a member of the village. A thin, elderly man. And then the travelers dressed for the journey ahead. Two kijuu, a young man and a woman. Also wearing a traveling outfit was Kyoshi, whom she'd met the night before. And one other person.

Enshi took a tighter hold of Ritsu's hand.

Kouryou had about him the aura of a husband, the husband who had returned for Enshi's sake. But she had to see things as they really were. Enshi's husband left Ritsu when he died. Now Kouryou was leaving. He was leaving to fight. And to fight meant to kill and be killed.

Enshi stood there stock still as these thoughts belatedly occurred to her. Kouryou looked at her. He had on the big pack he always wore on his back and that cheerful expression on his face. Their eyes met. He nodded. He looked at Ritsu and his eyes narrowed in a smile.

"How are you doing?" he said, drawing closer. "Did you sleep well?" He put his hand on Ritsu's head and tousled his hair in an affectionate manner. Ritsu answered with a bob of his head. Kouryou smiled. He turned to Enshi. "Risai did a good job making the arrangements."

Enshi wordlessly nodded.

"She's quite accomplished."

Enshi nodded again. She had no idea what else to do.

A troubled look briefly rose to Kouryou's face. "It's not like I'm abandoning you and Ritsu. Quite the opposite. I want to make sure you understand that."

Enshi responded with another nod. Kouryou had to leave to save ordinary people like her. She placed a trembling hand on Ritsu's shoulder. "Ritsu, say thank you to Kouryou and wish him well."

Ritsu responded with a blank stare. Kouryou again placed his hand on his head. "Keep your chin up until I get back."

"Get back?" Enshi echoed.

Kouryou turned his bright eyes to her. "Of course. I am definitely coming back and in fine fettle too. I know it'll be tough but do your best in the meantime, okay?"

Enshi said in a timid voice, "And when you get back, you'll soon be setting off again."

No," Kouryou answered with a smile. "When I get back, I won't be going on any more adventures. Nobody in this kingdom will."

Early in the morning, at the appointed hour, the gate of Touka opened. Two kijuu and four travelers passed through the gate and headed to the road. Seeing them off outside the gate were three men and a woman. And a child. But inside the gate, a far

greater number of men and women hung back. Kneeling on the ground, they watched them leave, their eyes fixed on the four travelers until they disappeared out of sight.

Chapter 10

[3-2] They headed north, Kyoshi taking the lead. The unsettled weather that brought the late-night drizzle moved on. Now not a single cloud hugged the black peaks of the soaring Ryou'un Mountain behind them. The clear blue sky went on forever. The bright sunlight stung his sleep-deprived eyes.

Spending most of the night preparing for the journey ahead had left none of them with any time for sleep. Kyoshi should be worn out but strangely felt no fatigue. Rather, his spirits were high, finally finding himself in the position to help save the people of Tai from the cruel fate visited upon them.

Dressing in traveling clothes for the first time in a long time certainly had an effect. When Zui'un Temple was put to the torch, Kyoshi headed into the mountains. His education incomplete, he could not then consider himself a full-fledged Taoist monk.

Later on, having completed his studies while in hiding and been awarded his certificate, given the current situation, he still didn't wear a cassock, let alone the robes of a Taoist monk. There were supposedly no Taoists in Touka so this was only the natural thing to do.

And yet that morning Enchou had given him a set of his own robes, apologizing that the sudden turn of events hadn't afforded him the time to procure new ones.

Custom dictated that a student received new robes in a formal ceremony upon completion of his certificate. It was a key turning point in the lives of all those who aspired to become Taoist monks. But Kyoshi and his colleagues hardly had the latitude to hold such a ceremony. Living their lives while staying out of sight, preserving the doctrines of their sect, and compounding medicines took up all of their time and energy. The ceremony was the last thing on their minds.

Amidst everything else going on, Kyoshi was deeply moved that Enchou had gone out of his way to present him with the certificate. The same held true for the robes. Kyoshi hadn't ever thought the day would come when he would have the opportunity to wear them.

Their usefulness during their travels aside, Kyoshi was delighted to slip his arms through the sleeves and don the cap. Enchou's robes were a bit short on him. But far more important than such quibbles, in the short span of time between the previous night and this morning, Enchou had bothered to dispatch a runner to his mountain refuge to retrieve the robes hidden there. The extent of such thoughtfulness touched his heart.

"I will do nothing to dishonor these robes," he pledged to Enchou.

Enchou nodded and grasped Kyoshi's hand. At that moment, Kyoshi felt the firm connection between them.

Kouryou's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Hey, sorry about butting heads the other day," he said, walking alongside him.

"Think nothing of it," Kyoshi responded with a smile. "I'm quite happy to join you on this journey."

Though he couldn't help reminding himself what a strange turn of fate had brought them together. They met at the village gate. A misunderstanding led to open hostilities. And here they were walking side by side.

"You don't say," was the sum of Kouryou's response.

The young man, now clad in the robes of a Taoist monk, seemed closer to his true self than the person Kouryou encountered yesterday.

It must have been a tough life. On the one hand, unfamiliar with actual weapons and yet defending the village with a stick, and on the other, scurrying about the mountains in order to keep the precious medicines in production. Kouryou had nothing but respect for the Taoists, who patiently endured those trials and worked their fingers to the bone on behalf of the people.

Kouryou had wandered about doing nothing more difficult than placing one foot in front of the other. He couldn't help feeling a tad abashed, comparing his efforts to those earnestly supporting the kingdom in silence. Though at the same time, that knowledge raised his spirits.

This kingdom is not over yet.

Turning this strong conviction over in his mind, he walked a step behind the taciturn Kyoshi. After passing by two uninhabited villages in a row, they continued onto a side road. Back in the day when the countryside was still populated with villages and hamlets, this was the route loggers took into the mountains to cut down trees and haul out the timber.

They climbed the mountain path, now eaten away by weeds due to the decline in foot traffic. The sun was setting when they left this shortcut and exited onto a narrow and deserted road.

"Further on is a village I've stayed at in the past. It's pretty desolate but we're the only ones who use the place so we can stay there without any worries."

That was all Kyoshi had to say about the subject but Kouryou understood the gist. Anybody traveling with kijuu was bound to stand out in a crowd. In particular, the *suugu* Taiki had on loan from the Imperial En was no run-of-the-mill kijuu and was bound to attract attention.

Still, Kouryou said, "I wouldn't want anybody to go out of their way for us."

Kyoshi answered cheerfully, "Don't worry. We're accustomed to traveling without creating a scene. No matter where you're transporting medicines to or from, you must do so in a way that leaves no one else the wiser."

A reasonably intelligent bandit observing the shipments on a regular basis could conclude that goods of a particular kind and quantity were being moved. Following those movements and tracking the paths the medicines took back to the destination points might then tie the loose ends together.

So Kyoshi and his fellow monks stayed away from the main roads while in Ten Shire. They lay low, avoided the public eye, and when they could not, chose routes that let them fade into the background, ensuring that no one remembered them. Once they left Ten Shire, they gradually merged onto the thoroughfares, mingling together with the larger crowds of travelers.

"I sincerely bow my head to the hard work done by you and your colleagues," Taiki blurted out.

Kyoshi was deeply humbled by the remark. It was easy to tell that he found himself at something of a loss walking alongside Taiki, an experience that was, for Kouryou, no less discomfiting. He couldn't help tensing up every time he reminded himself that Taiki was right there with them.

Only Risai exhibited not the slightest bit of stress in his presence. She carried on around him like it was only natural and spoke to him like an older sister. The sight of the two of them aroused in Kouryou a strange sense of admiration. Of course, he should expect no less of the general.

Doing his best to put Taiki out of his mind, he climbed the lonely road. Before sundown they arrived at a small village. Fall foliage covered the fallow ground. The path that continued onto the village gate was little more than a worn line in the grass. The stockade surrounding the village was broken down in one part and bore the scars of a fire in another. From the gate, the place appeared unoccupied. One small step away from complete collapse, this sort of small village was not rare in Ten Shire.

A bent-over old woman opened one door of the gate, stood back as they passed through, and quietly closed it behind them. Just inside the gates was a man sitting on a pile of rubble alongside the road. He was waiting for them. He was dressed in traveling clothes and had a pack on his back. A small man, he looked halfway through his thirties, about ten years older than Kyoshi.

He stood when they approached. Kyoshi raised a hand in greeting and glanced over his shoulder at Kouryou. "He'll be our *shin'nou*, our guide from here on out."

"Shin'nou?"

Shin'nou were traveling merchants who sold medicinal compounds. The *shin'nou* primarily delivered the medicines made at Taoist temples to other temples in the

same sect for distribution. Beyond that, the shin'nou also accepted commissions to transport medicines into territories outside the jurisdiction of the temples.

Kyoshi explained, "You see, I've hardly been outside Kou Province so I'm not familiar with the geography of Bun Province."

Kyoshi was born in Kou and entered Zui'un Temple at a fairly young age. Since then, aside from taking on particular assignments, he hadn't ventured outside of Ten Shire. So Enchou arranged for a shin'nou guide with a feel for the land who was familiar with the Taoist temples in Bun Province.

"Shin'nou are known for being trustworthy and keeping their business close to the chest. Among them, this is a man Enchou has great faith in, so you can set your minds at ease."

As Kyoshi spoke, the man in question approached them. Coming alongside Kyoshi, he slowly surveyed the group. Upon reaching Taiki, his gaze stopped. He gave Taiki a long look, followed by a small but respectful nod.

"My name is Houto. We are honored to have you here."

The tension in his voice suggested a man steeling his emotions. *Welcome home*, was the meaning behind the words.

"I'm honored that a lowly shin'nou such as I should have the privilege of accompanying you. Please, if there is anything you need, let me know."

Houto bowed to the group as a whole, then grinned and clapped Kyoshi on the shoulder. "Look who's outdone himself. You've certainly come a long way."

"I claim nothing on my own behalf but what Heaven kindly granted. Enchou said that a shin'nou would be joining us. It's reassuring to know that it's you."

"Well, I have to wonder how useful I'll be. Looks like you've already got some pretty sharp traveling companions. But I guess Enchou felt it necessary to go the extra mile."

Risai frowned. "The extra mile?"

"That's right," Houto said, again taking in the group as a whole. As Kyoshi led them further into the village, Houto said, "I was born and raised in I Province."

"I Province—"

Gyousou was from Garyou, a city deep in the heart of I Province.

"Where in I Province?" This question was unexpectedly posed by Taiki.

"South Ryou Prefecture. Gyousou-sama's home town is in North Ryou Prefecture."

Garyou was a fairly large city located in a narrow valley in the northwest of I Province. The prefectural castle of North Ryou Prefecture occupied a strategic point on the road crossing the surrounding mountains. South Ryou Prefecture, where Houto was born, sat on the border.

"North Ryou is right in the middle of a rugged mountain range," Houto said, walking alongside Taiki. There was a discernible touch of nostalgia in his voice.

“South Ryou is the gateway to the mountains in that region. You can still find arable land there and a thriving forestry trade. But once you get to North Ryou, there’s no good land to farm and the forests are threadbare. You’re close to the timberline up there. The trees that do grow aren’t worth cutting down. The only green you’ll see are the shrubs and pines clinging to the cliffs.”

Listening to Houto talking to Taiki, Risai nodded to herself. She recalled the last time she visited Garyou. The mountains around Garyou were high and steep and unpopulated. The patches of green painted on the brown cliffs created a panorama particular to the place. Houses dotted the road that wound through the precipitous mountains, but not enough houses on enough land to even form a hamlet.

Under normal circumstances, eight families gathered together in a hamlet. But there wasn’t enough land to support eight families in one place. Scattered along the road was a house here, two houses there. Around them, narrow strips of farmland clung to the mountainsides in terraced steps.

“And yet there are beautiful places to see in the summer. Though summer mornings are often blanketed by fog, the sight of the mist flowing through the tall mountains is truly breathtaking. As are the evenings. The setting sun sets the mountains aglow in dark shades of red and casts stark shadows across the sky. While it is a land of fierce winds and a severe climate, its famed Taoist temples are among its many outstanding points.”

Risai nodded here as well. She had visited there in the winter and had only seen Shungen but the views were indeed beautiful. The rustic yet proud vistas somehow reminded her of Gyousou.

“You expect a place like that to be poor by nature. And, in fact, the farmers lead hard lives. But Garyou is right there in the middle and it’s a fairly big city. Without taking the road through that unforgiving mountain range, you can’t get anywhere west from I Province. You can travel north or south to Jou Province or Gai Province, and there are large cities in the central regions and along the eastern seaboard. But if you wish to go anywhere else, other than circling around through Jou or Gai, the only way through is via North Ryou. Especially if you’re going west or headed to Zui Province, North Ryou is the fastest route. Cross the mountains in North Ryou and you’ll come out on the major highway that crosses Zui Province south of Kouki. For those travelers, a stay in Garyou is pretty much guaranteed.”

Garyou flourished as a vital crossroads along the way and the surplus spilled over to South Ryou. Because any trade from the south destined for Garyou had to pass through South Ryou, Houto explained with a grin.

“That’s for certain,” Risai said. “When I was there, the place was thick with travelers, along with traders hauling large shipments with packhorses and teams of oxen.”

Taiki turned to Risai. "Aren't the roads pretty rugged?" he asked, his eyes bright. No surprise that he should take a keen interest in anything to do with Gyousou's hometown.

Risai smiled. "The roads can be steep, to be sure. But they're surprisingly easy to walk. The roads are paved with stone. Rest spots and lots for carts and wagons were set up at all the critical points. For women, children, and the elderly lacking the leg strength, and for the carts and wagons as well, alongside the steeper hills are switchbacks and detours that climb at a gentler grade."

"Impressive," Taiki said aloud.

Houto said, "Gyousou-sama took charge of that road."

"Eh?" Taiki looked at Houto.

"Word is, back in the day, that was a precarious route to travel. Easy to lose your footing. Landslides and crumbling shoulders. Lots of places were hard to traverse. So even though the long way around took a good deal longer, it was pretty common to skirt North Ryou altogether."

Those who achieved success in their careers were wont to dote on their hometowns once they made a name for themselves. Many contributed money and materials to the rika and the public storehouse. Gyousou chose a different approach. He began paving the road in the eroded areas and built the switchbacks and detours.

"He caught a fair amount of bad-mouthing at first," Houto chuckled. "*Wouldn't send us even a bushel of barley.* That kind of griping. One year, the crops failed in the North Ryou region and food supplies ran low. But when they asked for help, he sent stonemasons instead of food."

A scowl eclipsed the amused expression on Houto's face. "Well, that's all stories and folklore. Everybody knows he did in fact promptly send food. According to the people living on the land, that's what assured them Gyousou was personally invested in the fate of his home town. He knew what they needed. They were sure he'd either send food or funds to buy food this year too. But, no, come the fall, he sent more stonemasons. That one's a true story. The best stonemasons in the land arrived from the capital. Of course, they were there to make sure the road got resurfaced."

Taiki said, "So Gyousou-sama understood what his home town really needed."

Houto nodded. "That's the way I read it too. Season to season, at each point along the way, Gyousou-sama saw to the completion of the road. As road conditions improved, the number of travelers increased."

"And as a result, North Ryou grew more prosperous."

"Exactly. Moreover, the stonemasons from the capital had to hire local labor to get the job done. Instead of donating money, Gyousou-sama paid them a just wage. That way, the workers learned a trade working under the skilled stonemasons from the capital. The next time, practicing that trade, they could support their families and the

farming community. Some could venture out on their own and earn a living as stonemasons too.”

“I see,” Taiki cheerfully responded.

“A family in a hut on a ridiculously small sliver of flat land could now lay down a proper foundation, raise stone walls, and build the kind of house anyone would be happy to live in. Fields once had to be farmed in the few places with arable land, more often than not a hard hike away. Now they could build the terraces and aqueducts themselves and till the land right next to the farmhouse on their allotment.”

And so North Ryou flourished. As the number of travelers increased, South Ryou as well shared in the prosperity.

“That’s why so many people in the northwest of I Province are fond of Gyousou-sama,” Houto said with a smile. Then he lowered his voice and added, “And that’s why, from the start, Asen had it in for them.”

“Ah.” Risai felt a tightness in her chest. “I once traveled to Garyou in hope of finding some trace of Gyousou-sama. But it had already been erased off the face of the earth.”

Surrounded by the rugged peaks, the remains of charred and fallen walls traced charcoal outlines on the valley floor. Within those outlines, the rows of blackened foundations—like ancient historic ruins—preserved the only evidence of the many buildings that once stood there.

Houto nodded. “The city got burned to the ground. But people living in the surrounding areas believe that Gyousou-sama lives. Even if the tides of fortune turned against him, they will not give up until they have discovered his corpse and buried his bones. There are still those of us who continue to search for Gyousou-sama.”

The last time Risai ventured to I Province, she found refuge in a little hut in a mountain valley. The old man living there had abandoned all hope. But his granddaughter had not.

“Despite everything, the girl still hoped for the day when His Highness and the Taiho would return.”

Though the price of giving Risai shelter was their own deaths.

Houto listened with a grim smile on his face. “If they knew that saving Risai-sama meant you would bring the Taiho back to Tai, they would rejoice to see their efforts so well rewarded.”

“I do have to wonder.”

“The people of I Province definitely would agree. They will lay everything on the line for the good to prevail. Indeed, because I happened to be in the vicinity of Touka,

I've been able to lend a hand like this. I too am thankful that Heaven granted me this opportunity."

"I see," Risai said under her breath.

They approached one of the private dwellings. At the front of their little troupe, Kyoshi stopped and rapped on the front gate to the house. "We'll stay here. Normally we would use the council house or the rika but both were put to the torch and have gaping holes in the roofs."

Not the roofs in their entirety, but the half-burned building had since been abandoned and weren't suitable for human habitation. No one had the time or energy to maintain them, let alone repair them.

Risai asked, "What of the village manager?"

"Doesn't have one. The council house exists in name only. As a practical matter, this village merged its administration with a neighboring town. Only the Rishi continues to function and is minded by the superintendent. The superintendent is away on business. That's why he's not here to greet you." Kyoshi added in a quiet voice, "All they know is that they're putting an important guest up for the night. I know it sounds impolite, but refer to him as the Young Master."

As Kyoshi finished his explanation, the gate opened. A stout middle-aged woman emerged. "Welcome, welcome," she said.

"Sorry for suddenly dropping in like this," Kyoshi said, and ushered the rest of them inside the house. Once past the gate, they found themselves in a courtyard that had a homey, live-in feel about it. The living quarters surrounded the courtyard on three sides. A quite ordinary kind of private residence, it was on the small side but clean and trim.

The woman was a resident of the village. A widow, her husband and child had died in the massacre. Most days, she worked in a nearby town and didn't return except to take care of business when she had lodgers. She spoke only when spoken to and otherwise didn't engage in idle talk or interrupt their conversations.

She addressed Taiki directly but once. "The Young Master appears quite worn out. How are you faring?"

"I'm fine. Thank you."

She smiled and said in a consoling manner, "Please have a good night's sleep." Then finished tidying up and left.

Risai said, "It takes everything these people have just to make ends meet and yet they set it all aside to help Kyoshi and his colleagues."

"Everybody in this village is doing the best they can," Kyoshi said. "Despite all they have suffered because of us, they bear us no ill will and will extend a helping hand at a moment's notice. Those who are healthy enough work in nearby towns and support the children and elderly as well."

Only six families remained in the village, not enough to even constitute a hamlet. Most traveled from the village to work in the towns along the road. Though, in fact, hiding out in the village were as many monks and priests as residents.

The children, the elderly, and the infirmed remained in the village, where they looked after the Rishi and manned the gate. Along with these and other public duties, they also farmed a few small fields and raised livestock. Working together, they managed to eke out a living and support the Taoists in their midst.

“They reduce their own stipends in order to make sure we get fed.”

Risai nodded. Kyoshi and his fellow monks had held their ground and earnestly put their lives on the line for the kingdom and the people.

Perhaps thinking along similar lines, Taiki asked, “Were the herbal medicines made only at Zui’un Temple?”

Kyoshi straightened his back and answered, “No. We aren’t the only ones producing them. Other sects and temples in other regions do as well. But we make different kinds—well, no, they’re the same medicines, but—”

When Kyoshi faltered in his explanation, Houto came to his rescue. “The Taoist and Buddhist temples that remained in the area also make herbal medicines, as do those in other sects, as well as Taoist temples around the kingdom. But even medicines made for the same use differ in efficacy from temple to temple. Moreover, Zui’un Temple alone has preserved the time-honored formulas, which will die out if the monks don’t continue to produce them. Not only at Zui’un Temple, but production processes across the kingdom are being shifted around little by little. Though where secret formulas and proprietary equipment are involved, it obviously can’t be done in one fell swoop.”

“And those medicines are what the shin’nou travel around to all these different places to sell?”

“That’s right,” said Houto. “The Taoist temples also operate as affiliated enterprises. The temples of the various sects basically handle only the herbal medicines compounded at their member temples. Dispensaries in the gate towns stock and sell medicines from all of the sects. In big towns and cities, pharmacies are supplied by wholesalers like us.”

Besides herbal medicines originating with the Taoist and Buddhist temples, the pharmacies sold compounds produced by the Ministry of Winter. As a rule, the Ministry of Winter distributed prescriptions with documented formulations, though the compounding was done at Taoist and Buddhist temples familiar with the techniques and equipment.

There was a class of medicines produced only by the Ministry of Winter and distributed directly to physicians and pharmacies. The efficacy of these medicines was proven and established, and thus carried a higher price.

“Fortunately, even today, we’ve seen no interruption in the supply of medicines from the Tai Ministry of Winter. But for people who have difficulty putting food on the table, these are not the kind of goods they’ll ever be able to put their hands on. So they rely instead on less expensive herbal medicines.”

The shin’nou shipped them across the kingdom, to the temples, dispensaries, and pharmacies in each region. And also to warehouses maintained by the shin’nou guilds. The warehouses in each region were supervised by a manager who handled distribution to the local shin’nou guilds. These local guilds directly employed the shin’nou, who restocked their inventories and peddled their wares to the villages and hamlets on regular routes and schedules.

“Do the shin’nou report to someone who acts as their supervisor?”

“Not somebody you would call a boss. There isn’t just one organization. Or rather, think of it as a group of related families. A *keiretsu*. Each family has a family head. Being members of the same extended family ties the family heads together. The warehouse manager who runs this area goes by the name of Tanshou.”

“Where is Tanshou located?”

“He moved his base of operations to a city farther away. No reason to stay here with Zui’un Temple gone. As a result, the shin’nou aren’t moving shipments through the area. Distribution to the Taoist temples instead depends on the people of Ten Shire. In numbers small enough not to attract attention, guys like me are sent to help out Kyoshi and his friends the best way we can.”

The shin’nou working under Tanshou relied on the assistance of people in Ten Shire to move shipments around the region. Among them, Houto handled a route that circled through Ba Province and Bun Province.

“From Iryou, the provincial capital of Ba, to Hakurou, the provincial capital of Bun, and Soukou, the provincial capital of Kou.”

From here in Ten Shire, they transported goods to warehouses in each of the provincial capitals. Houto’s route took him to those three places, but Tanshou also supervised members of the guilds whose tours took them through much narrower territories. Put all together, the shin’nou had a working knowledge of every inch of the kingdom.

“Traveling is what we do. You can leave the particulars of the journey to me.”

“Thank you,” Taiki said with a polite bow.

“I’m thinking we’ll head for Hokuyou. Like here, Hokuyou is a village that supports the Zui’un Temple so we can stay there without any worries. Though the road there isn’t the easiest to navigate.” Houto added in an apologetic tone of voice, “It’s a rough back road without any good places to rest. You’ll have to be patient.”

“No matter the road, we’ll take our lead from Kyoshi and Houto,” Risai said. “Don’t worry about us. Seems the presence of our kijuu is causing you some concern. Sorry about that.”

“We likewise apologize for the inconvenience. It’s just that we’ll have horses ready in Hokuyou, and fairly soon, a kijuu for Kouryou-sama. Granted, any kijuu we can get our hands on probably won’t amount to much. But we’re leaving no stone unturned. It shouldn’t take long for our associates to deliver one to a town we’ll be stopping at along the way.”

A flustered Kouryou raised his hand. “You needn’t go to such lengths,” he protested.

“No.” Houto shook his head. “Please let us do this much. We’d prefer to provide one for each of you, but unfortunately, riding a flying kijuu is not something I can do.”

He looked at Kyoshi, who also nodded. “Just getting on a horse taxes the limits of my physical abilities.”

Houto said with a knowing smile, “If Kouryou-sama has a kijuu, the three of you can stay out of sight in the sky while scouting out our objectives further on. And if we have horses, then we can move along at a safe distance without slowing down your progress too much.”

“We are indeed grateful for your careful consideration of every last detail. You really do have our heartfelt thanks.”

Risai bowed her head. They had all gone to extraordinary lengths to make these preparations on such short notice. Had Tanshou expressed such a keen concern? Or was it Enchou or Doujin? Perhaps Houto had seized the baton. Either way, considering the time and money involved, they must have all had a hand in making these arrangements.

Risai once again couldn’t help but thank the good fortune of remembering Mount Bokuyou when it truly mattered.

Chapter 11

[3-3] Kouryou pushed his pack beneath the bed. “Don’t hold back on my account,” he said.

Likewise removing his traveling clothes and arranging his luggage, Houto shot a puzzled look over his shoulder.

“About what?”

The residence they’d repurposed as an inn had but a single main building on the small side, with two bedrooms on either side of the narrow central hall. Two detached wings surrounded the courtyard to the right and left, though one was a shed and the other a store front facing the street.

The establishment once belonged to a grain merchant. Perhaps that explained why the structure as a whole was large and solidly built while the living quarters were limited to these two rooms. Taiki and Risai occupied one. Kouryou, Houto, and Kyoshi were bedding down in the other.

“Anyway, shouldn’t Kouryou-sama be staying with the Young Master? The other room is bigger. And—”

“Here is fine,” Kouryou said, cutting off the rest of Houto’s argument.

“But—” Kyoshi said, raising his voice in his usual reserved manner. “This may not be the politest way to phrase it, but Risai is missing her right arm. However unlikely the event, just in case something bad were to happen, shouldn’t Kouryou-sama be staying with them?”

Kouryou waved his hand dismissively and said for the umpteenth time, “Enough with the *sama*.” He added with a wry smile, “This is one of those situations where three really would be a crowd. Besides, I shouldn’t have to point out that a Taoist monk expressing such concerns might raise suspicions among the wrong sort of people.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Kyoshi said with a bowed head.

“Besides, don’t underestimate Risai-sama’s abilities. While she may rank her own skills on the rusty side, she was a general, after all, and she’s still good enough to place her among the best of the best.”

Swordsmanship did not arise solely from physical ability. Using a sword in close combat depended on sharpening the five senses such that conditions on the ground could be grasped in an instant. It required a state of mind able to calmly assess those conditions. And it demanded the courage to take the next step into danger even while all those factors were coming together.

In every one of those particulars, her skills had not languished in the least.

“We all walked different roads to get where we are. She rose up from the ranks. In a fair fight, she might get the better of me.”

“Is that really the case?”

“My specialty back in the day was the halberd and the lance. If I had enough confidence with a sword, I wouldn’t use concealed weapons.”

“The lance. Kouryou-sama—Kouryou—you’re familiar with stick fighting?”

“I am. Why?”

“I was hoping you could teach me.” Kyoshi made this request more forcefully than initially intended and added in a more subdued tone of voice, “Of course, it’s unlikely that a little more practice will make me any more useful in that regard. At the very least I’d like to know enough not to be a burden if and when the time comes.”

Kouryou grinned. “No trouble at all. Either Risai-sama or myself would be happy to be your sparring partner.”

“Risai-sama?”

“Not a realistic option for her these days but back in the day she knew her way around a lance. No cavalry officer worth her salt will get on a kijuu without first mastering the bow or lance.”

Listening in on the conversation, an intrigued Houto said, “So that’s what it comes down to. Incidentally, are you sure you’re okay bunking with us? We won’t take it personally if you want to move to the other room.”

“Like I said, I’m fine here. Do you really find my presence that much of a nuisance?”

“Not at all.” Houto waved his arms as if to swat away the implication. “I meant nothing of the sort.”

“Well, if I’m not, then I’ll stick around. Frankly, talking with the Young Master is like pulling my own teeth.”

“You too?” Kyoshi said, his eyes widening.

“The fact is, starting conversations with people is the kind of thing I’ve spent most of my life avoiding. Forcing myself to talk to someone out of the blue sets my nerves on edge.”

Kyoshi smiled. “And here I thought I was the only one. It’s a relief to know I’ve got company.”

“If you ask me, Houto here is the real mystery, the way he can talk up a storm without a care in the world. I’m truly impressed.”

Startled, Houto said, “Ah, so that’s what you meant by no holding back on your account. Of course, I can’t help feeling overwhelmed myself, but nothing’s going to happen if you don’t start talking.”

“Well, nothing’s happening in my case. Though I can’t speak for Risai-sama.”

“So that’s what it comes down to, eh?” Houto said with a grin. “I won’t deny I have a hard time getting a read on him.”

“You do?”

“I’m a commoner down to my bones, you see. I haven’t once caught a glimpse of what lies above the clouds. I never spent much time trying to imagine the sort of the folks who live there. But if I did, well, I might have imagined someone a bit more meek, softer, and more delicate.”

“He has certainly changed. I guess *guileless* was the main impression I came away with way back then.” Kouryou added with a wry smile. “Then again, the Young Master was a child the last time I saw him.”

“Only natural for a big change to come of that.”

Houto chuckled and so did Kouryou.

There was a time when Kouryou saw Taiki on a regular basis. He was attached to the Palace Guard of the Center. As such, his duties often brought him into contact with the Taiho. Not such much in a personal way. Only once had they conversed directly, when General Eishou brought Taiki a pony and Kouryou accompanied him.

General Eishou had a horse breeding center on his estate. It was renowned for the quality of its horses. Gyousou had discussed getting a horse for Taiki, so Eishou arrived with the finest pony in his stables. Eishou, the bearer of the gift, made the presentation. Kouryou had the honor of taking the pony by the reins and presenting it to Taiki.

Taiki thanked him and then asked, “It is a gentle horse?”

As Eishou was the man making the decisions in this regard, of course he settled on a pony with a mild disposition and had trained it thoroughly. Even when on a lead rope, the pony exhibited no skittishness or willfulness.

“A very gentle horse.”

“Aren’t horses sensitive animals?”

Seven years had passed since Gyousou’s accession. The enthronement ceremonies complete, they were seeing in the new year. Kouryou’s recollections placed these events shortly after that. Taiki was eleven years old at the time. His young eyes glittered with excitement, though he gazed at the pony with a palpable sense of wariness.

“Very much so. But this little horse has a big heart. No need to feel nervous around him at all.”

“Is it okay if I pet him?”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

The young Saiho reached out his hand toward the pony. The horse didn't shy away. Rather it turned its curiosity filled eyes to the Taiho. Not only bighearted but it had an outgoing personality as well.

Perhaps tickled by the downy hairs of the pony's muzzle, Taiki giggled. Kouryou's clearest memory of him from that time was his cherubic smile. If those memories served him correctly, Taiki had only recently returned from his trip to the Kingdom of Ren as Gyousou's envoy.

"Only natural, eh?" Kouryou said to himself.

Houto craned his head to the size, a quizzical expression on his face.

"Well, no. More likely because he was attacked by an adult, he had every reason to trust and suffered a grievous wound as a result."

Whenever Kouryou recalled Taiki's sweet smile on that day, the cruel turn of fate that followed weighed heavily on his heart.

"No small wonder that the many hardships he suffered after that should cast a shadow on his soul."

"Attacked—" Houto muttered. "I heard the Taiho had been killed. In fact, it was considered a matter of public knowledge at the time."

Kouryou shook his head. "I doubt you'll find any official reference to the Taiho in the public record."

Kyoshi agreed. "The only formal pronouncement declared the demise of the emperor. Not a single word about the Taiho."

That was why the inauguration of a provisional government seemed a natural development, the assumption being that it commenced with the approval of the Taiho.

"However, the conduct of the provisional government grew increasingly strange. Suspicions arose that a pretender had usurped the Imperial Court. In that case, the question debated even within the precincts of Zui'un Temple was what had become of the Taiho? Some wondered if the Taiho was dead. But that appears not to have been the case."

Despite the close relationship between Zui'un Temple and the Ministry of Winter, their combined efforts yielded no new information about Taiki. The one thing they knew for certain was that not a single person claimed to have seen Taiki in the Imperial Palace. No one had met him or caught sight of him or even heard rumors about somebody else encountering him.

"I heard that a disaster struck the Imperial Palace. Might have been a shoku."

Kouryou nodded. "I was in Bun Province at the time so I didn't witness what actually happened. But that's what I heard too. After the shoku, all news about the Taiho ceased."

“Some rumors said the shoku swallowed him up and transported him to places unknown. And at the same time, rumors spread that he’d been imprisoned somewhere.”

“The fact of the matter is, the Taiho himself caused the shoku.” Risai told him so the night before during a late-night discussion together with Taiki about how they would proceed next.

“His Highness had headed to Bun Province. The Taiho stayed behind in the Imperial Palace. He had his shirei—youma he’d subjugated as his bodyguards—to protect him. Told a pack of lies, he dispatched them to Bun Province to watch over the emperor.”

Most kirin had a multitude of youma in their retinue serving as shirei. Taiki only had two. Risai said this was because Taiki was a taika born in Hourai. Convinced to send his only two shirei to guard the emperor, the young Taiki was left completely exposed to Asen’s attack.

“Asen attacked the Taiho with a sword. In that split second, a shoku became his only means of escape. It’s called a *meishoku*, a small shoku triggered by Taiki in dire circumstances.”

“Unbelievable,” Houto exclaimed in unbridled indignation. “Was he hurt?”

“His horn, I was told.” Kouryou pointed at his forehead. “The Taiho is at heart a kirin. When in kirin form, he has a horn in the middle of his forehead. Asen’s attack struck that horn.”

“Don’t tell me Asen severed the horn from his head! A child of only ten or so.”

Kouryou nodded. He could not bring to mind the image of the young Taiki without shuddering in horror. Asen faced the child, raised his sword high over his head, and swung down with great force.

“A grave injustice to be inflicted on any kirin, let alone *our* kirin.”

The kirin was a divine guardian of the people. Under normal circumstances, an ally of the people who served them with compassion. The people were cognizant as well of the emperor as a link to that charitable impulse.

“The Taiho instantaneously triggered a *meishoku* and fled. Within that shoku, he was swept away to Hourai.”

“To Hourai—” Houto repeated in amazement. He looked at Kyoshi. Kyoshi agreed with a nod.

“The Taiho himself said he didn’t know the way home.”

Kouryou recalled Risai’s explanation. “To be precise, with his horn severed, he lost that sense of himself as a kirin. By nature, kirin can freely travel between *here* and *there*. Deprived of his powers and his memories as a kirin, the Taiho could not return.”

Houto blinked in confusion. “I don’t really get it.”

I don't either, said Kouryou's grim smile. Even after the explanations he'd been given, he still didn't understand. He really wasn't sure what a kirin was in the first place. What he did understand was that Taiki couldn't get home according to his own devices. Asen's actions had robbed him of that ability.

Houto let out a long breath. "Still, lucky it was Hourai, right? Bad men couldn't pursue the Taiho there. And Hourai is the best possible place where any of us could hope to end up."

Houto was referring to the popular myths and legends—that Hourai was the blessed land of the wizards.

Kouryou's grim smile now took on a bitter edge. "Turns out that Hourai isn't necessarily a blessed land of the wizards either. The Taiho suffered a severe bout of *esui* while he was there."

"Esui—"

"Apparently a disease that afflicts kirin, brought about by contamination of blood and long-harbored grudges."

"You don't say." Houto's jaw dropped in surprise and even Kyoshi's eyes opened wide.

"The Taiho couldn't return here by his own power. Far from it, day by day, the *esui* ate away at his lifespan. But Risai-sama made her way to the Kingdom of Kei and petitioned the Imperial Kei, a fellow taika. The empress agreed to search Hourai for him. Starting with the emperor of En, they enlisted the assistance of several other emperors and empresses, and eventually were able to secure the return of Taiki. Alas, because of the wounds received at Asen's hand, he cannot transform into a kirin, or command his shirei, or sense the location of the emperor."

"Does not that put him in a highly precarious position?"

"Very much so."

"If his presence was revealed to his enemies, they would surely attack him again. Makes you wonder if returning to Tai was really his best option."

"That is what the Taiho desired. He insists that Tai must be saved."

But simply returning to Tai did not mean anything in and of itself. As Taiki said himself, he could perform no miracles that would transform Tai. For the time being, Taiki was merely a powerless young man. Perhaps he would have been better off staying behind in Kei. However—

"As long as the Taiho was not here, the current state of affairs would not change."

Kouryou didn't even think that Risai returning to Tai and proclaiming that Taiki was alive and well in Kei would have made a difference. He felt keenly that Taiki standing there in front of them was what set everything in motion.

Six empty years had passed since he'd last seen that dazzling and cherubic smile. Looking back on that day now, that smile preceded the tragedy by only days. News of

the uprising in Bun Province arrived one day after Eishou and Kouryou presented the pony to Taiki.

Six years.

Gyousou had ascended the throne as the new emperor only a year before. Province lords had been dismissed and others appointed. A campaign to suppress the tyrannical rule of the local rebel groups began in earnest. This prompted a backlash from the rebels, who raised clenched fists and launched a full-scale rebellion.

The province lords dispatched their militaries to bring the situation under control. The rebels amassed weapons and fought back. These ongoing skirmishes had long constituted the status quo in Bun Province. But as Gyousou's first official year as emperor ended, the rebels overran and occupied Kohaku. It became clear that only a direct assault would dislodge them from their strongholds.

The province formally dispatched the provincial guard to Kohaku with orders to drive the rebels out of the city, an objective that remained elusive even come the new year. The conflict took on the appearance of a drawn-out war. Reports of an insurrection in Bun Province soon reached the capital.

Gyousou decided at once to dispatch the Imperial Army. The orders came down to the Palace Guard of the Center. They were to join forces with the Bun Provincial Guard, suppress the rebel groups instigating the uprising, liberate the city, all the while safeguarding the citizenry.

Chapter 12

[3-4] Kouryou was at army headquarters when the orders came down. He remembered muttering in bewilderment, “A whole division of the Palace Guard?”

“One whole division,” Eishou replied in blunt tones mingled with undisguised cynicism.

“But—” broke in Rikei. A regimental commander like Kouryou, his confusion was just as evidence. “I heard that the brigands occupying the city number around five hundred.”

The voice faded to a whisper. Rikei was the youngest of the five regimental commanders and was still intimidated by Eishou’s presence. Not only the youngest, also the most recently promoted. Kiryou, the previous commander, was appointed a general in the Bun Provincial Guard. Formerly a battalion commander, Rikei was chosen to fill the opening three months ago.

Considering the crusty personality of his superior officer, Kouryou thought with a small smile, a little timidity was to be expected.

Kouryou said, “The enemy occupied a shire castle and barricaded themselves within its thick walls. Moreover, they know the lay of the land.”

In response, Eishou laughed through his nose. “Stuff and nonsense,” he spit out. “However well they may know the territory, in the end, they’re a bunch of rogues and villains. No match for the regular army. And we’ll have the Bun Provincial Guard. A motley crew of chicken-hearted country bumpkins and hangers-on they may be, but General Kiryou will whip them into shape. Pitting the twelve-thousand, five-hundred soldiers of the Palace Guard against five hundred brigands should prove about as difficult as breaking eggs with a catapult.”

At the conclusion of this little rant, Eishou turned to Kouryou and said, “I take it that’s what you meant by *a whole division*?”

“Well, more or less.”

This sardonic attitude was nothing out of the ordinary for Eishou and nothing to get offended about either.

“His Highness agrees.” Though the sarcasm was still there, Kouryou knew full well that Eishou simply wasn’t capable of harboring negative feelings when it came to Gyousou. “His Highness believes it is vital to convince the people of Bun Province that the kingdom will be there to protect them.”

The mighty power of a full military division of the Palace Guard would make clear that they had nothing to fear from the brigands. That was why Eishou was being dispatched to Bun Province.

Of course, Kouryou thought. “When will you deploy?”

In answer to Kouryou’s inquiry, Eishou answered crisply, “As soon as possible.”

“Snow is falling. The Ministry of Spring forecasts it will keep falling for some time.”

“The Zui Provincial Guard will remove the snow along the route.”

It was a foregone conclusion that replacing the top leadership of Bun Province would sooner or later lead to strife with the local land gangs. With that expectation in mind, guardsmen had been stationed at key points along the main roads. Whenever it snowed, they expedited snow removal as well.

“Well, I would expect no less from Gyousou-sama.”

From before he became emperor until now, both he and Eishou had served Gyousou as their commanding officer with great respect and admiration.

“In any case, we don’t have the leeway to wait until spring. There being no way to avoid a hard winter march, best we get it done earlier than later. In fact, a letup in the weather would come with its own problems. It would definitely affect the mopping up operations.”

Kouryou and the other regimental commanders chimed in to agree. The hill they had to climb after that was nevertheless a steep one.

Having anticipated the likelihood of such a situation, every care was taken getting ready for a quick deployment. Nevertheless, preparing for the expedition to Bun Province took a good deal of time and trouble. With little sleep or rest, the plans were put in motion and a regiment left Kouki the next day as an advance guard.

Thereafter, the remaining regiments departed at regular intervals and proceeded north along the highway to Bun Province. The rear guard led by Kouryou and accompanied by Eishou departed Kouki three days later.

The road from Kouki to Bun Province was a frozen sheen of white. During the winter, the sky seemed constantly blanketed by snow-laden clouds from which white snowflakes constantly fell. No sooner had the heavily trampled highway been cleared but fresh snow piled up. Kicked up by the wind, the footsteps of the troops soon disappeared beneath a white haze.

After proceeding along the snow swept roads for two weeks, Eishou’s army arrived at Rin’u in Bun Province. They set up camp at the outskirts of the city. The troublesome town of Kohaku was a day’s march from there.

“They suddenly came surging into the city,” stated the complaint lodged by the mayor of Kohaku.

The outlaws responsible for the violence hailed from nearby Koumon. The mines developed on Koumon Mountain had yielded no ore deposits worth exploiting in recent years, only gemstone fountains. The stones produced by the gemstone fountains were second grade at best. In terms of the overall scale, it was not a wealthy mountain.

The outlaws running the territory belonged to an up and rising land gang. The entire operation was beset by one problem after the next. The provincial government sent in an inspector to get a handle on the situation. The outlaws on Koumon Mountain sent him and his crew packing and used strong-arm tactics to close off their access to the mountain.

In order to restrain the violence-prone land gangs and restore order to the Koumon region, the provincial justice minister sent orders to the shire justice minister along with a contingent of gendarmes. At this juncture, the situation still fell under the legal jurisdiction of the Ministry of Fall.

“Normally, we would handle the matter locally,” said the Bun Minister of Fall, who’d arrived to explain what was going on.

While under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Fall, the incident was classified as a public disturbance. If the disorder spread to the point that it became a rebellion, the jurisdiction shifted to the military and the Ministry of Summer and the Provincial Guard took over.

None of the land gangs could fight and win against the military in a face-to-face conflict. Knowing this full well, they looked for a way to settle their differences while the issue was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Fall.

“They didn’t know when to quit and ended up trading blows with the gendarmes.”

Though the gendarmes acted under the direction of the Ministry of Fall, they were in fact soldiers on loan from the military. Their objective being the apprehension of criminal suspects, they were under strict orders not to use military tactics and weaponry. However, even with their hands so tied, there was little chance of them losing to the land gangs in a direct confrontation.

The gendarmes defeated the outlaws at Koumon in short order. But instead of surrendering, the outlaws fled down the mountain and holed up in Kohaku. Then taking advantage of its light defenses, they stormed the shire seat, killed the administrator, and occupied the citadel.

“Quite the head of government,” Eishou said with a thin smile. “A big brawl was going on right next door. But instead of strengthening his defenses, the administrator decided to take it easy and had the shire seat stolen out right from under him. Well, not before stealing his life first.”

The Bun Minister of Fall hunched his shoulders as if the criticism were personally aimed at him.

The city enclosed the village at its core. The village manager of Kohaku was a kindly middle-aged woman. One of her feet dragged along the ground as she walked.

“There’s bound to be trouble when civilians get caught up in a melee. What happened to your foot?”

“When the outlaws came storming in, they straightaway tried to break into the public storehouse.”

The storehouse contained emergency reserves of the basic necessities the village depended on during a crisis. In the winter, when the frozen land yielded nothing in the way of edible produce, the storehouse was the villager’s lifeline.

“We cannot live without food and charcoal. We never have enough in the first place. Because those brigands kept showing up and pilfering our goods at every turn. We have to offer a helping hand to those hit by hard times. As a result, even in good times, we’re going to have fewer supplies than we need. And yet here they come to steal more.”

People from the surrounding area pitched in and they held off the invaders as best they could. They got battered and bruised with little to show for their efforts.

“Looks like the shire administrator never showed much interest in defending the village. Well, what goes around comes around. He received a just reward for his incompetence.”

The outlaws attacked the storehouse and the homes of the inhabitants. Nobody else sallied in to defend them. Around that time, the shire citadel had already fallen to the main force of the land gangs. The village manager fled Kohaku with all the residents well enough to move.

“A good thing they didn’t take your lives as well. We promise to return Kohaku to you as soon as possible. You don’t worry about the storehouse. Expend your efforts nursing the wounded back to health.”

“Thank you,” said the village manager, bowing her head low.

She bowed several more times as she left the camp. Watching her leave, Kouryou said, “Are you sure it was a good idea to make promises about the warehouse?”

“It’s all the same to me. His Highness desires peace and prosperity for the people of Bun Province. Once we retake Kohaku, we can replenish the storehouse from military stockpiles. Have the Provincial or Imperial quartermaster arrange the shipments.”

“Providing there’s enough to spare.”

Little time had passed since Gyousou’s enthronement. The dissolute rule of the late Emperor Kyou and the empty throne that followed ravaged the realm. Even the Imperial storehouses hadn’t been adequately maintained.

“If not, you can take it from my estate,” Eishou said with an indifferent shrug.

Eishou ran a wealthy estate. To start with, not only Eishou, but all of Gyousou's officers managed their estates well. When evaluating the merits of his subordinates, General Gyousou took into consideration their military skills and also their ability to manage their lands. No matter how well a commander fought on the battlefield, a mismanaged estate ranked him lower in Gyousou's eyes. This explained why, after his enthronement, he so speedily put the Imperial Court in order.

Kouryou grinned. "Well, that settles the matter of the storehouse, which leaves us with your promise to retake Kohaku."

"Not losing any sleep over that either," Eishou said, a cruel smirk rising to his face.

True to those words, as soon as the Palace Guard bivouacked, he called up three regiments and surrounded Kohaku. They sealed the gates, locked down the city, eliminated the outlaws, and freed the besieged citizens. The troops advanced to the city center and mopped up the remaining brigands holed up in the shire castle.

The whole operation was over in less than two weeks. Kohaku was liberated as promised, with a minimum of collateral damage. Nevertheless, Kouryou's work was far from over. Before the Palace Guard had retaken Kohaku, the outlaws incited insurrections in three nearby locations.

Along with cleaning up the mess in Kohaku, they had to deal with three more conflicts. On the verge of getting a grip on that mayhem, the fires spread elsewhere. In the time it took to suppress *those* outbreaks, more riots broke out in yet another location. When the Provincial Guard was mobilized and sent into the fray, the insurgents banded together and expanded the field of battle.

Answering suspicions that this was less a grass roots uprising than a carefully calculated rebellion, General Sougen of the Sui Provincial Guard was dispatched from the capital. Not only that, but Gyousou himself departed for the front with a contingent of the Imperial Army.

"The emperor?" exclaimed Rikei upon hearing the news. Kouryou was no less surprised.

"That's right." Eishou tossed aside the document brought by the blue bird carrier pigeon. The thin, nearly transparent sheet of paper drifted like a big snowflake to the slushy ground, where Eishou stomped on it with the heel of his boot in an obvious pique.

Kouryou picked it up. It was for their eyes only, after all, and should be properly disposed of.

Rikei hardly looked satisfied but wasn't about to press Eishou on the matter. The tide of battle showed no signs of turning. That left Eishou in a chronically bad mood. Relying on the help of the Provincial Guard stung his pride. Now the situation had deteriorated to the point that General Sougen was rushing to his aid.

Moreover, with the subjugation of the outlaws dragging on day by day, the snow was growing soft. The battleground turned to slush during the day. At night, the snow froze, preserving the footprints tracked across fields in blocks of ice and making the ground as treacherous as rocky terrain.

Now and then came a day warm enough to bring out a sweat. And then temperatures plunged the next, bringing fresh snow. Even the elements conspired to exasperate Eishou to no end.

“Under normal circumstances, the emperor himself should not depart for the front,” Kouryou said, taking over the conversation. “The battlefield is constantly on the move. At this rate, I wouldn’t be surprised if Tetsui got involved.”

“Isn’t Tetsui located to the west of Kan’you Mountain? Once you cross over the mountain. It’s got a mid-sized shire citadel.”

“The size of the city isn’t the problem. Tetsui is a special place for His Highness and for us.”

Back in the day, Tetsui refused to pay the harsh taxes demanded of them and shuttered the municipal treasury. This was during the dynasty of Emperor Kyou. The emperor’s extravagant lifestyle exhausted the wealth of the kingdom. The tax burden rose accordingly, falling all the heavier on the poorer districts. If the weather worsened and natural disasters increased, there might be nothing to live on once the taxes were paid.

Pay the taxes and starve to death. Refuse and be condemned to death. Tetsui chose the latter. They turned away the tax collectors, shuttered the treasury, barricaded the city, and continued to resist. The kingdom in turn labeled them rebels. The military officer Emperor Kyou dispatched to subjugate them was none other than General Gyousou.

“That’s right,” Eishou muttered. “You were there, Kouryou.”

“I was. Among the current regimental commanders was Kiryou—who was transferred to Bun Province—and myself and Gouhei too, I believe.”

“Yeah, I was there.” Gouhei spoke up. “I’d just been promoted to company commander.”

Rikei shook his head. “An army of the Palace Guard pitted against citizen rebels holed up in the shire citadel—sounds a lot like this current business in Kohaku.”

“I hope the resemblances stop there,” Gouhei answered with a grin. “You see, we lost that one.”

Rikei’s eyes grew wide with surprise. “You lost?”

“More accurate to say we didn’t win,” Eishou interjected. “We didn’t lose. We simply didn’t win. Not because Tetsui was well defended. Gyousou-sama decided that Tetsui was on the right side of the argument. The treasury had to be opened but the inhabitants of Tetsui were not rebels.”

“I thought that Gyousou-sama never lost a battle.”

Eishou scowled. “Hard to even call it a loss. He applied that sort of tendentious logic to the situation and threw away a certain victory.”

Kouryou and Rikei exchanged wry smiles.

“There are some in the rank and file who misunderstand the meaning of the term, but among Emperor Kyou’s generals, the only one who truly never lost a battle is Asen-dono.”

Two others had similar records. One of them had only recently been promoted and the other was a wily old badger who never engaged an enemy he wasn’t already assured of defeating.

“Huh.”

Momentarily lost in reflection, Gouhei said, “I’ll never forget that battle. Our opponents weren’t rebels, so we just couldn’t attack them.”

“You didn’t attack?” echoed the astonished Rikei.

“Our orders stated so, in no uncertain terms. The result was, they came at us with shovels and hoes and we defended ourselves using our shields like tortoise shells.”

“Swords?”

“We carried no weapons into the fray. Only shields, wooden shields with metal sheets attached to them. When the command came down, it felt like we were being told to die.”

Kouryou grinned at the rekindled memory. “Sure did. We gritted our teeth and waited for them to wear themselves out.”

The stories later told of that day called them “white cotton shields.” The wooden shields had a cotton or wool backing to protect the citizen soldiers. In fact, the “white cotton shields” were used only at first. They couldn’t withstand too much punishment, not considering the kind of beating the soldiers were taking. Strictly disposable. There wasn’t enough material to go around in the first place and soon it was getting left out. Gyousou expected as much. He deployed the “white cotton shields” at the onset solely as a symbol to display the intentions of the Palace Guard.

Gyousou announced as well when the battle began that any soldier coming away with a bloodied shield would have hell to pay. He meant it. Severe consequences awaited any soldier who let things get out of hand and stained his shield by drawing blood.

“As our raw supplies diminished, the metal plates shrunk as well.” Gouhei chuckled. “Pretty soon there wasn’t any left. We had no choice but to make the shields bigger and bigger. And heavier. Wielding them with any kind of dexterity became impossible. We couldn’t counterattack if we wanted to.”

Rikei asked Kouryou, “And that was how the battle was finally concluded?”

“The battle never really concluded. That’s why nobody lost but nobody won either.”

“What a strange battle that was,” Gouhei muttered with a sentimental sign. “When they first saw we weren’t carrying swords, they came at us with a vengeance. But gradually eased up on the attacks.”

“More like they got worn out and bored. And they hadn’t had anything to eat for a while. In the end, they simply lacked the physical stamina to stay on the offensive.”

“We’d stick rations in our pockets, and when our small-town brawlers started getting wobbly and had to take a break, we’d hand them over.”

“On the other hand, I was given some boiled butterbur. My benefactor pitied me for the hard job we’d taken on.”

“It happened,” Gouhei said with a smile. “Others expressed concerns about our health, asking us if we were okay.”

His eyes still wide with amazement, Rikei said, “Sounds an awful lot like one of those ancient battles out of a folk ballad.”

“Nothing like a ballad. It was a battlefield, after all, a place where people were out for blood.”

The people of Tetsui, surrounded by the Palace Guard, resolved themselves for annihilation. Certain the army had come to kill them all, they launched their initial counterattack as a fight to the death. It took them a while to realize that Kouryou and his officers had no desire to engage them, though some in Tetsui still believed they were going to all end up dead in the end.

“People got killed and suffered heavy wounds. I put so much strain on my shield-bearing arm that I couldn’t fully extend it for several years.”

The righteous indignation Kouryou and the soldiers felt on the behalf of the people of Tetsui—who were being sacrificed on the altar of Emperor Kyou’s luxurious lifestyle—helped them carry out Gyousou’s order not to strike out in anger. Paying such heavy taxes would leave the people with nothing to live on. Refusing to pay the taxes resulted in situations like this. Even the lower ranked officers keenly grasped the cruelty of the dilemma the villagers found themselves in.

So Kouryou was delighted to hear Gyousou state that Tetsui was on the right side of the argument. That made following such unconventional orders all the easier.

“As far as battles go, it was a bad one,” Eishou said, “and not one I care to remember. But the people of Tetsui weren’t bereft of reason. In the end, they opened the gates and complied with the levies.”

“They were weeping as they opened the gates,” Gouhei said. “The soldiers carting off the goods from the municipal treasury couldn’t help tearing up as well.”

Because paying the assessed taxes meant they would starve that winter. They’d boarded up the city gates knowing they’d be branded rebels and exterminated.

Forced to pay the taxes against their will, they knew that suffering and starvation awaited them. Kouryou saw the shadow of death in the dejected expressions on their faces, the faces of the young, the old, and the walking wounded. And yet the taxes had to be paid if the war was ever going to end.

“As expected, that incident brought the problems of excessively heavy taxes to the fore, which were only expected to grow worse from the next year onward. After the battle, we all chipped in out of our own pockets. But make no mistake, the coming winter was a hard one.”

Knowing all that, the taxes had to be collected. Giving tax outlaws a pass would shake the financial foundations of the kingdom. Tetsui had to be attacked to prevent that from happening. If they resisted, they had to be destroyed. Gyousou had resolved to not attack the people of Tetsui. But the longer the conflict dragged on, the higher the possibility of reinforcements getting sent in. If that happened, it would be impossible to avoid the complete eradication of Tetsui.

“It must have broken their hearts to open the gates, knowing that starvation awaited them in the future. But Gyousou-sama said that Tetsui had reason on their side and continued to search for common ground, so they must have come away with a sense of his feelings about the matter.”

Tetsui didn’t win and neither did the Palace Guard. Though both were left with nothing to celebrate, bonds were born between them.

“That was why His Highness sent himself into battle,” said Rikei. “But when exactly did all this happen?”

“Well—” Gouhei tilted his head to the side. “A long time ago. I doubt any of the chaps throwing themselves at us on the battlefield are still alive. And most of their children will have likely died of old age by now.”

“Very likely,” Kouryou agreed with a tight smile. “To the people of Tetsui, it’s become a legend. Though we are still alive and lived through it and carry those memories with us.”

Tetsui held a special place in their hearts. They could not overlook the crisis. So Gyousou set out to take back Tetsui from the land gangs and protect the city from the ravages of war.

And then while marching toward Tetsui, Gyousou suddenly vanished.

Chapter 13

[3-5] The regiments under the command of General Eishou bivouacked outside Rin'u. General Sougen and Gyouosou arrived at the beginning of March. As the ineffectual conflict dragged on, the snow began to melt. In open fields and on the south-facing slopes, the lingering snow disappeared, revealing the brown earth beneath.

Even in Bun Province, known for its interminable winters, spring was not long off.

As emperor, Gyouosou had no actual army to lead. Rather, he put himself in charge of two regiments from the Palace Guard of the Right. The commander of the Palace Guard of the Right was none other than General Asen. With no way of knowing what was soon to occur, Gyouosou marched to Rin'u with two regiments that included five thousand of Asen's troops.

Gyouosou headed directly to Eishou's field headquarters as soon as he arrived. Kouryou was in attendance and found the experience humbling. Gyouosou once conferred with Eishou like this as a matter of course, but here was a sight no one expected to see following his enthronement. This was the first time since then that Kouryou had stood face to face with the emperor. The always busy Gyouosou had other duties to tend to when Kouryou delivered the pony to Taiki.

Gyouosou had not been blessed with a physique that stood out in a crowd. Surrounded by his soldiers, what set him apart was his white hair, crimson eyes, and solemn demeanor.

That much about him hasn't changed at all, Kouryou thought as he observed the interaction between the two men.

"What is the situation on the battlefield?" Gyouosou asked Eishou, then quietly and attentively listened to Eishou's explanation.

If anything, Gyouosou was a bit thinner than the last time Kouryou had seen him. And perhaps because of his time away from the battlefield, paler than before, which had the cumulative effect of making him appear all the more sagacious.

"In any case, the land gangs in Anseki must be stopped from advancing east." Eishou indicated a point on the map. Anseki was located northwest of Rin'u, between the Bun Province capital of Hakurou and Tetsui. With the Provincial Guard marching on them from Hakurou, the land gangs there fled toward Tetsui in the east.

"The Mount Shou district south of Tetsui is also seeing suspicious activity. Reports from the field have the land gangs massing in Houtaku."

“Suspicious developments indeed. Stands to reason how you’re getting bogged down here, Eishou.”

“I find myself in a situation not at all to my liking,” Eishou sulked.

Gyousou smiled. “We can at least rejoice that, having gotten his hackles up, Eishou has not yet burned Bun Province to the ground.” He turned to where Kouryou and the others were standing. “You too have encountered unexpected difficulties.” His eyes stopped on Kouryou. “Kouryou, it’s been a while. I take it you’re doing well.”

Kouryou couldn’t help jumping to attention. “Yes, thank you.”

“You’re looking in good health, Gouhei,” he said with a nod. He added, addressing the regimental commanders as a group, “More importantly, Rikei seems to be holding up well. As this is his first deployment since his promotion, I’m sure he’s got more than enough on his plate to worry about.”

Rikei appeared at a loss for words. This was likely the first time he’d met Gyousou in person. The realization that the emperor had bothered to familiarize himself with his career brought a flush of delight to his face.

And yet not at all that surprising. Gyousou possessed an almost otherworldly ability to remember his subordinates. He only needed to meet someone once—an ordinary foot soldier, for example—to thereafter recall all the relevant details about that person. Even without a memorable confrontation, he wouldn’t forget a soldier he’d encountered even as a friend of a friend.

Eishou interjected in his always irritated tone of voice, “Not only Rikei, but as we are all only carrying out our duties, laurels are hardly called for. More importantly, what do we do going forward?”

“Aren’t you the one in charge here?”

“I’m not in the mood for unfunny banter. The Palace Guard is the emperor’s personal army.”

Gyousou flashed a smile. “Well, then, let me rephrase that question. What do you intend to do?”

“I plan to move on Anseki and check the eastern advance, closing from the east and west with the Provincial Guard and executing a pincer attack in the mountains. However, an unchecked advance will leave Mount Shou in our rear. One way or the other, the land gangs appear to be joining forces behind the scenes. That being the case, maneuvering with Mount Shou behind us is a bad idea.”

“I agree.”

“This road here.” Pointing at the map was General Sougen, who had accompanied Gyousou on the march. He commanded the Army of the Left from the Zui Provincial Guard. “This road would appear to lead to the highway that runs alongside Anseki.”

“It exits west of Anseki. We ended up pushing them east while the Provincial Guard has been holding its ground west of Anseki. At this juncture, we’d accomplish nothing by linking up.”

“Is there a way to get to the east of Anseki?”

“There are several. But these aren’t roads that can accommodate large armies. The snow is deep and the risk of an ambush high. I do not recommend splitting up large regiments into smaller companies.”

From conditions on the ground, Eishou and Kouryou and the regimental commanders decided to proceed toward Houtaku and halt the advance there. Tetsui was a two-day march from Houtaku. They’d be able to shift forces quickly if the land gangs in Anseki moved on Tetsui.

The problem was the suspicious activities of the outlaws on Mount Shou. If the army rushed in heedlessly, they could kick the hornet’s nest and invite chaos. On the other hand, the arrival of the army might temporarily tamp down local unrest.

If, as suspected, the outlaw groups were conspiring behind the scenes, then the land gangs holding Anseki would likely get word as soon as the army occupied Houtaku. Moving on Tetsui from Anseki would become all the more difficult. And doing so would make any plans to draw the army toward Anseki, with the outlaws on Mount Shou launching a pincer attack from behind, all the less tenable.

Gyousou concurred with Eishou’s proposal. The army began its march on Houtaku the next day at dawn. General Eishou took the vanguard with Kouryou and the regimental commanders. The advance guard under Rikei’s command left Rin’u first. Following the highway that skirted the foot of the mountain, they headed toward Houtaku. Gyousou’s army followed behind and General Sougen brought up the rear.

Things went disastrously wrong on the third day.

It was an unusually warm day, the clouds hanging low to the ground. As they approached a narrow ravine, the land gangs launched a sudden attack on General Rikei and the advance guard. Hiding among the surrounding ridges, the outlaws came at them without warning. They did not number that many, and did not align themselves in an intimidating battle formation. But the geographical conditions were bad and a hard fight was in the offing.

Eishou dispatched a runner to Gyousou as soon as he received the initial reports, only to be informed that Gyousou was nowhere to be found.

According to the soldiers in the vicinity who were questioned about Gyousou’s whereabouts, soon after the march got underway, Gyousou announced he was going to join General Sougen, who was coming along behind them. Accompanied by his guards, Gyousou separated from the column and waited there for General Sougen to catch up to them.

The soldiers took this at face value and continued on, leaving Gyousou behind. Except when they reached that spot, General Sougen's soldiers didn't see Gyousou or anybody else. Twenty-five elite guards and their mounts had disappeared as well.

The soldiers in his army equally had no idea when it had happened. They should have observed him waiting at the side of the road as they passed by but their stories were all over the place. No one could pin down an account of when and how he had disappeared, except it must have been something other than a battle.

In short order, the conflict with the land gangs was left in the hands of General Rikei and the remaining troops launched a search of the area for Gyousou. Around sunset, the first rain of the year began to fall. The failing light reduced visibility to near zero. Though the rainfall was not heavy, the incessant drizzle washed away any remaining traces in the snow.

Conditions only got worse. The search continued well after dark and turned up nothing that might point to Gyousou's whereabouts. The twenty-five guards assigned to his detail vanished as well. Only Keito, Gyousou's mount, returned alone the next day.

"How goes the battle?" Eishou asked, returning to his tent late that night.

Gouhei answered, "Rikei came here with me. He managed a retreat to safe ground. But this strikes me as more the result of the enemy making the most of all the tumult. They don't seem that formidable an opponent. A battalion should be enough to deal with them. Time is our enemy now."

"Indeed." Summoning Rikei forward, Eishou glanced at him and nodded. "And what of the kijuu?"

"A tad skittish, but it appears to be in good condition, as are the saddle and packs. Whatever happened didn't happen while His Highness was riding the kijuu."

Eishou laughed through his nose. "Obviously. If he got attacked while in the saddle, I doubt that a kijuu like Keito would simply wander back to camp and calmly head for the stables."

Rikei asked, "Is his kijuu that temperamental a creature?"

"I wouldn't so much call it temperamental as say its eccentricities mirror those of its master."

"Eishou-sama—"

"It's the truth," Eishou said, with a wave of his hand. He sat down on his cot. "His Highness caught and trained Keito himself."

"Is that even possible?"

"It can obviously be done if *he's* the one doing it. Hardly the same way a wrangler or dealer would, though. As a result, Keito is a handful for anybody to handle but His Highness. Not that it attacks people indiscriminately, though."

“A clever creature, to be sure,” said Sougen. “It knows who you are. And if you’re not His Highness, it won’t listen to anything you say.”

“Huh.” Eishou sniffed. “Keito didn’t so much return to camp as it came looking for Gyousou-sama. Not finding him in the expected places is what put it in a bad mood. Gyousou-sama must have dismounted at some point. Based on the evidence gathered by General Asen’s men as well, Gyousou-sama definitely set off on his own accord.”

“That is indeed the case. However—” Sougen lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. “There’s a reason I had you all assemble here in Eishou’s tent.”

“You have information for our ears only, you mean.”

Sougen nodded. “The fact of the matter is, the evening before he disappeared, His Highness visited me in my quarters. He wanted to borrow a contingent of soldiers off the record.”

Not only Eishou, a clearly dubious expression rose to the faces of everyone present.

“He said he was coming to me directly and in secret and asked me to lend him several of my troops. I asked why but he did not offer any explanations. I was to summon one highly capable officer to my tent, no questions asked. He would be designated the platoon leader, responsible for building a team of fifteen elite soldiers that would be loaned to His Highness.”

The officer was summoned to Sougen’s tent. Sougen excused himself and so had no idea what instructions Gyousou conveyed to this freshly designated platoon leader.

“The platoon leader selected fifteen elite soldiers and quickly organized them into three squads. They all brought kijuu with them.”

These soldiers, ostensibly under Sougen’s command, slipped away that night without a word to anyone.

“And never returned.”

Having gone to such lengths to “borrow” these soldiers meant that Gyousou was definitely up to something. He left the column with his personal detail in the middle of the march. Where he had gone and what he had done after that—all anybody knew for certain was that Gyousou vanished not long after he stopped by the side of the road.

Wherever he’d gone, he’d gotten into an accident or perhaps been set upon by the land gangs. Kouryou and his fellow officers conjectured the best they could and expanded the scope of the search.

In the midst of these efforts, startling news came from Kouki. A shoku had occurred in Hakkei Palace, killing or wounding no small number of ministers, officials, and government workers.

“How in the world could a shoku occur above the Sea of Clouds!” Eishou exploded in a rage. “Such a thing should be impossible!”

Sougen worried aloud, “We can only pray that nothing amiss has happened to the Taiho or the members of the Rikkan.”

“According to the dispatch, the Taiho is missing.”

The statement was met by wordless exclamations of dismay all around.

“We need more information,” Sougen insisted. “Send a runner at once.”

Eishou cut him off with a grunt. “Messengers are already headed our way. There is nothing more we can do until we know exactly what happened.”

More importantly, their priority at the moment was Gyousou. In the wake of the troubling news from the capital, soldiers were organized into search parties, but they turned up neither hide nor hair of Gyousou or his personal detail.

The entire Imperial Army was fit to be tied.

In order to clarify the situation at their end, Sougen left at once for Kouki. The search for Gyousou divided their time and labor. The critical campaign against the land gangs ground to a complete halt. Then came the devastating news from Kouki that the White Pheasant had uttered its last cry.

Meaning that somewhere Gyousou had died.

Even today, Kouryou could not forget the shock. The corrupt rule of Emperor Kyou had ravaged the countryside. No sooner had a new emperor at last been chosen and a new dynasty began but he perished after a mere half-year reign. The dispatch from the Imperial Palace that Taiki had vanished only drove home the despair.

Thoughts of what would become of the kingdom now grew mired in gloom and doom. The lamentations of the people resounded like thunder. Having invested so many hopes in the dynasty of the new emperor, his death left the people of Bun Province sorely dispirited. Soldiers and civilians banded together in the search. At the very least, if they could recover his body, they could conduct a proper funeral.

But such efforts came to naught.

The land gangs were blamed for carrying out the fatal assault and were branded bitter enemies overnight. General Gashin arrived from Kouki and conducted a thorough mopping up operation, finally imposing some semblance of control on the mayhem in Bun Province.

However, the chaos on the front lines only grew worse. Rebellions subsequently broke out in Shou Province while numerous incidents continued unabated.

A flurry of detailed orders came down the chain of command. The army was divided at the regimental level and the scope of their activities increased. In the midst of this confusion, a blue bird arrived in the camp bearing a message from Risai.

Asen betrayed the throne.

Chapter 14

[3-6] An unexpected knock at the door brought Kouryou back to the present.

Encouraged by Kyoshi and Houto, he'd gotten absorbed in the story and the night had grown long. Houto got to his feet and opened the door. Risai was standing there.

"Is something the matter?"

"Oh, nothing. I saw the light from your room and heard you talking. The Taiho can't sleep so I was getting him something warm to drink."

"In that case, I'd be happy to."

"That's fine. I'll take care of it. But as long as you're up, we can make enough for you too."

Houto thanked her with a bow. Exiting the room into the main hall, the three of them found Taiki waiting there.

"Our chatter wasn't keeping you awake, was it?"

"Not at all. Just having a hard time settling down. How about yourselves?"

The night before, Kyoshi had hardly slept at all. But now, after a day on the road, he was wide awake and not sleepy in the slightest.

"Kouryou was telling us about the events in Bun Province."

"Ah," Risai said with a nod.

The previous night, while Kyoshi was running around making preparations for the journey, Risai and Kouryou talked with Taiki until dawn. So Kouryou was probably covering ground that Risai and Taiki were already familiar with.

Houto cheerfully lit a fire in the hibachi. He heated a kettle and then rummaged about the kitchen for a tray and a set of cups.

"So there's no truth to the claim that the White Pheasant uttered its last cry?" Houto asked as he brewed the tea.

Risai nodded. "I was headed to Jou Province at the time. The *Nisei-shi*—the minister charged with the care the White Pheasant—rushed into camp. He personally witnessed Asen fabricating the supposed last cry."

"Another scheme the Pretender—Asen—dreamed up," Houto said with a sigh. "At the end of the day, what sort of chap is this Asen? I've heard that he is a capable general. If memory serves, after Emperor Kyou died, Asen was the odd-on favorite to be his successor. I take it that until certain facts came to light, nobody harbored any doubts to the contrary."

Risai, Kouryou, and Taiki exchanged glances.

“No, not at the time,” Kouryou said. “We didn’t suspect a thing until we received that dispatch from Risai.”

“I didn’t either,” said Risai. “Not until I met the Nisei-shi. Before departing for Jou Province, friends of mine expressed misgivings about Asen, but I couldn’t bring myself to believe them. Asen had always ranked alongside Gyousou-sama in his generalship. His political talents matched his skills in military matters. He could reason without succumbing to his emotions and was popular among his men. Gyousou-sama often acknowledged Asen’s abilities, as did junior officers like ourselves.”

“He was warmly regarded by my fellow regimental commanders. None of us imagined him capable of high treason. Even now I find it hard to believe.”

“Does he have personal connections to Bun Province?” Kyoshi asked.

“I don’t know. Certainly nothing out in the open. I can’t think of any one person tying Asen to Bun Province. To start with, when the riots involving the land gangs broke out there, Asen wasn’t even in Tai.”

Taiki nodded. “I was visiting the Imperial Ren of the Kingdom of Ren. Asen accompanied me.”

Risai added, “He got back just before the decision to dispatch troops to Bun Province. When the decision was made to send a punitive expedition to Bun Province, General Asen’s name wasn’t on the table. By sending in the Palace Guard, His Highness wished to let the people of Bun Province know that reestablishing peace and order was his top priority. Because Asen had so recently returned from his trip abroad, it was also only natural to exclude him from consideration for leader of the expedition. To be sure, none of his soldiers had accompanied him abroad and were still in barracks. But the long journey had just concluded, leaving him with little time to prepare to depart for the front. Common sense argued against making him run around in a frenzy getting ready.”

Kouryou said, “Up until that point, I hadn’t even heard any rumors of discord between His Highness and Asen. Or rather, at least when it came to outward appearances, everything was going smoothly. Before that message arrived from Risai, no one had any reason to doubt Asen. Once we knew that Asen was the traitor, we figured his personal detail carried out the attack. They were, after all, Asen’s subordinates, and they disappeared at the same time. They somehow caught His Highness by surprise and struck him down. Except he didn’t die. The logical conclusion is that they hauled him away with them. But after talking it over with Eishou, that doesn’t seem very likely either.”

Gyousou disappeared. The column came to a halt. Ever-expanding search efforts commenced. At first, the land gangs caught the blame for the attack. Any suspicious persons and any suspicious baggage came under close scrutiny. The army was no

exception. Agents of the land gangs could have infiltrated the engineering and transportation crews or the day laborers hired from the local communities to work around the camp. The area was searched for anything Gyouosou might have had on his person, and for anyone carrying weapons that suggested nefarious intent.

“In the end, we didn’t find a single thing of any use.” And, Kouryou added, they were none the wiser about what had happened. “Under normal circumstances, a comprehensive investigation into what had happened would be absolutely necessary. However—”

The army sent to Bun Province was in chaos. Searching for Gyouosou, on the one hand, while Sougen returned to Kouki by air with his senior officers to report on the developing situation. At the same time, the now leaderless troops from Asen’s army were placed under the command of Regimental Commander Hinken and ordered back to Kouki. Taking their place, Gashin was dispatched from Kouki with his army to subjugate the land gangs.

With his forces fully engaged, Gashin had, for the time being, pacified Bun Province by May. Except like falling dominoes, then came news of violence breaking out on the Jou Province frontier. Due to her in-depth knowledge of the area, Risai and her army were dispatched to Jou Province. With his troop strength cut in half, Sougen was directed to move his army from Bun Province to Jou Province to support her.

Those orders came from Asen, who already had the Imperial Court at his beck and call. Two weeks later, just as the army led by Risai crossed the border into Jou Province and Sougen was setting off from Bun Province, Gashin and his army were ordered to return to Kouki, the pretext being that the mopping up operation against the land gangs had concluded. However, in order to keep the peace in Bun Province, he was to leave half of his soldiers behind.

“What a tangled mess,” muttered a nonplussed Houto.

“It certainly was,” Kouryou said with a sour smile. “In fact, there was method in the madness. Start with a punitive expedition, a bunch of reports, a flurry of support missions, and a well-disciplined army chases its own tail hither and yon. The reasons given in each situation sounded reasonable enough to go along with at the time. But taken altogether, the whole thing began to feel wrong. And yet not so wrong that you felt compelled to openly voice disapproval.”

Wherever they went, they were castigated for showing up a step behind and a day late. Though no one at the time thought it was strange. And then in June, a blue bird arrived bearing that message from Risai.

“It dawned on us that of all of His Highness’s close associates, only Ganchou-sama remained in Kouki. Moreover, in the meantime, two of his regiments had been dispatched to other provinces, leaving him in Kouki with the remaining three.”

Soon after the blue bird arrived, a bulletin from Kouki designated Risai a rebel. On a march to Jou Province, Sougen received orders to execute Risai. Currently bivouacked in Bun Province, Eishou was ordered to do the same. They already knew that Asen was pulling strings behind the scenes. At the time, having been recalled to Kouki, Gashin had just departed Bun Province.

“Risai’s troops could do their part in the punitive expedition or be branded rebels as well. That’s what it came down to.”

Asen made it look like he was targeting Kouryou and the regimental commanders for overreacting and rebelling. Around this time, rumors suggested that the Minister of Summer had openly cooperated with Risai. Minister Haboku voiced objections to Risai’s designation as a traitor. Rather than standing up for Risai, the rumormongers had an old school retainer like Haboku inciting a newcomer like Risai.

Naturally, Gyousou’s supporters did not view Haboku as an opportunistic manipulator. A backlash was inevitable. Under the pretext that the capital defenses were shorthanded, contingents of the Provincial Guard from all nine provinces—excepting Sui Province—were transferred to the capital. In Kouki, Asen surely lay in wait, hoping to provoke open insubordination and smoke out anyone else loyal to Gyousou.

“In the end, together with Eishou’s army, and Sougen-sama and Gashin-sama and their officers, we disbanded in Bun Province, threw away our uniforms and insignias, and left Bun Province.”

Along with the soldiers he commanded, Sougen disappeared in Jou Province. Recalled to defend the capital, a day or two after he arrived in Kouki, Gashin vanished as well.

“I wonder how they are doing.”

Responding to Taiki’s question, Kouryou said, “There’s nothing in the wind about any executions. I’m sure they’re lying low somewhere. But I cannot bring myself to believe that all have fared well.”

In fact, after going on the lam in Jou Province, Risai caught word of many targeted killings. “Kouryou, do you have any idea of where Eishou is presently?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

Kouryou and his fellow commanders scattered in Bun Province. They did not do so in a haphazard or random fashion. They maintained means of communication with Eishou and created a network of contacts with their staff officers and battalion commanders. Rikei was the key link that tied this network together with Eishou.

Rikei had assured them he had a solid base of support in his hometown where he could go safely underground, but something had happened or someone got to him. Nobody knew what. And only Rikei knew where Eishou and the regimental commanders were headed.

“Yet I haven’t heard anything about Eishou being captured or killed. Whatever the circumstances, the information Rikei was privy to didn’t make its way to Asen.”

Whether that was good or bad news, Kouryou couldn’t say.

“I’ve lost three of my battalion commanders. I told them to split up and lie low. But that’s a hard thing to do. Tests a man’s patience. Those three raised a standard of revolt and got killed for their efforts. Those lines of communication we set up are too dangerous to touch now. That, I think, explains the silence of the two remaining battalion commanders.”

“How about the others? Do you know what happened to Ganchou after that?”

Gyousou had four key senior staff officers when he was a general—Ganchou, Sougen, Gashin, and Eishou, to whom Kouryou directly reported. All had served in his army as regimental commanders and later became generals in the Imperial Army. The fifth of his regimental commanders, Santou, transferred at the same rank to Ganchou’s staff after the enthronement.

“I haven’t heard of any executions but neither have I heard of anyone seeing Ganchou-sama after that. His army is apparently confined to Kouki but commanded by someone else. The ranks were definitely reorganized.”

It seems that Ganchou’s staff, including Santou, were incorporated into Asen’s army. Though more than a few chose desertion or death, the majority ended up reporting to Asen and were tasked with the defense of the capital.

“I see,” Taiki muttered.

Houto said, “Of the six divisions in the Imperial Army, with the exception of Asen’s and the Palace Guard of the Left, four have scattered and dispersed. I haven’t heard a thing about them since. At the very least, the generals have not been captured. However—” Houto smiled and glanced at Risai. “Rumors circulated that Risai-sama had been assassinated. It’s good to see you alive and well.”

Risai managed a wry smile in response. “Let’s just say that Kouryou and his fellow commanders wisely chose to beat a hasty retreat. Asen was surely offended by the mere existence of Gyousou-sama’s senior staff. Not only that, stick them in Kouki and he risked getting stabbed in the back. Stick them in the countryside and they could rally their forces and threaten an uprising. Where allegiances were clear, Asen could shake up the command structure, as with Ganchou. Or as in my case, fabricate charges and execute the accused after a drumhead court martial.”

“So that’s how it worked,” Taiki said. “What of the Rikken? Does anyone know how they have fared?”

Kouryou answered, “I heard the Chousai is dead and the Minister of Heaven disappeared to parts unknown. I do not know what came of him after that. Haboku fled the Imperial Palace but was reportedly captured and executed in I Province. Rousan-sama, the Minister of Winter, remained in the Imperial Palace but was

dismissed from her post, and like Ganchou-sama, hasn't been seen since. Ganchou-sama and Rousan-sama were said to be His Highness's closest confidants. It is possible that they are being kept captive as hostages somewhere."

"I see," Taiki said in a small voice. He'd been close to Ganchou and Rousan as well, and the likelihood of their loss distressed him deeply.

"That's about all the news I know of. In any case, they're no longer a part of the government. I understand that Chou'un, the Minister of Spring, resides in the Imperial Palace as the Chousai."

As if taken aback, Taiki raised his head and furrowed his brows. "Was Chou'un-dono one of Gyousou-sama's appointees?"

"No," Risai said. "He became a government official during the reign of the late Emperor Kyou. He hadn't held any major posts but worked hard and made enough of an impression to win a promotion from Gyousou-sama."

"Strange that he should side with Asen, don't you think?" Kouryou grumbled to himself.

"He's probably Chousai in name only. There's no telling what condition the government is in these days."

Kouryou nodded. "After that, I guess there's Seirai-sama. I believe he's still in Kouki."

Taiki looked straight at Kouryou. "Is he all right?"

Seirai was Chief Cabinet Secretary of Zui Province and Taiki's tutor, perhaps the closest to him of all of Gyousou's retainers.

"I can't say whether he is or not. Seirai-sama was accused of embezzling from the Imperial Repository. During the chaos before Asen seized the throne. I heard he was arrested by Asen and interrogated within an inch of his life."

He may have been executed after that. But observing the look on Taiki's face, Kouryou was loath to let those words escape his mouth.

"I see."

Taiki's expression betrayed no signs of relief. He obviously had no difficulty guessing at what Kouryou didn't say.

"These certainly are tragic times," Houto said.

The majority of Gyousou's generals and staff officers and government officials had disappeared. Asen had utterly laid waste to Gyousou's dynasty.

The people had no doubts about what was going on—that Asen had stolen the crown. When Asen initially occupied the throne under the guise of filling in for the absent Gyousou, he was supported and believed. But little by little, the doubts began to grow. Zui'un Temple was the first to voice reservations, and when Zui'un Temple was destroyed, Asen's usurpation became clear. As a matter of course, voices of censure arose and rallied forces of opposition. None prevailed.

Recollecting the events that brought them to this moment, Kyoshi felt that shiver of dread. Even now, he could not forget the terror and anger of that night. Spurred on all the more by the fury and outrage was the realization that, having stolen the crown, Asen was doing nothing of use with it.

“Why is Asen casting the people aside?” Kyoshi blurted out. “After going to such lengths to seize the title of emperor, why does he refuse to govern?”

Risai and Kouryou exchanged puzzled looks of their own. When Asen first occupied the throne, he appeared to be in the process of enacting an agenda.

At the time of Gyousou’s enthronement, Tai had suffered under the despotism of Emperor Kyou and then the ten years of an empty throne. Tai wasn’t blessed with a temperate climate. The only food available during the winters and summers in the northern territories was what people had in store. Without assistance from the kingdom, they would starve in short order.

Attempting to return the kingdom to a firm footing, Gyousou took active measures to bestow mercy on those lands. Asen seemed to continue the policy, except the kingdom had been functioning as a kingdom for less than a year. This time around, there was no obvious intent to punish the people. There was simply no charity forthcoming.

Every district was governed according to the expectations of the local governments. The kingdom showed no signs whatsoever of exerting any oversight over their administrations. They were all left to fend for themselves.

Houto said, “I’ve heard rumors that General Jou Asen doesn’t even occupy the throne these days.”

The rest of them responded with expressions of mutual bewilderment. Kouryou added, “I’ve heard the same. Some say an assassin already got to him and the throne sits there gathering dust.”

“Is that even possible?” Houto asked.

Risai shook her head. “I do not think the Imperial Court would be able to function without someone there to bind it together.”

“Does that explain why the kingdom doesn’t get anything done? Precisely because the Imperial Court is not functioning?”

“Things can’t continue the way they currently are. Lose the critical center and you’ll see power struggles breaking out among the ministers and bureaucrats. Someone will try to extend his power base and resort to violence to make it happen. If the Imperial Court collapses, the situation will grow all the more chaotic.”

Risai paused and thought about what she had just said, then shook her head once again. “No. At this juncture, I do not think the Imperial Court has fallen apart. For now, the government itself has managed to preserve basic order, doing the bare minimum to keep its own peace and collect taxes. It cannot let an actual rebellion

break out. The power is in place to preserve the fundamental semblance of a kingdom. However—”

There would be no rescuing the people.

Insects trilled softly outside the window. Day after day, the nights grew colder. The singing insects would soon disappear altogether. Snow followed the frost, after which winter arrived for good, another winter that would deliver life or death to the people of Tai.

Kyoshi thought about the residents of Touka. People died every winter. Even after stocking up in preparation for winter, the question always remained whether their stores would last until spring. With Kyoshi’s departure, and the arrival of Enshi and Ritsu, the community added one more mouth to feed. He could only hope that they all survived the winter and nobody starved.

The next morning, after bidding goodbye to the landlady and thanking her for looking after them, the party departed the little town that seemed more of a hidden village.

To keep their troupe from standing out, Houto kept discretion in mind when choosing the route. They stoically tread the deserted roads and by dusk arrived at a run-down city.

Before entering the city, Taiki stopped and glanced back over his shoulder at the evening sky.

Risai asked, “What is it?”

“Do the city gates close at sundown?”

“Yes. And once they close, they will not budge until morning.”

“Is the time predetermined or does it change with the setting of the sun?”

“With the setting of the sun. They follow the times listed in the almanac for sunrise and sunset.”

“Ah.” Taiki nodded. He averted his gaze from Risai and once again looked up at the darkening sky. The autumn sky was stained a madder red, entirely appropriate for the season.

“What?”

Taiki murmured, “After this, the distance we can cover every day will grow shorter too.”

His voice was swept away by a passing fall breeze. They arrived at a small, quiet city called Hokuyou. As Houto promised, horses were waiting for them there.

Part Four

Chapter 15

[4-1] After one night in Hokuyou, they continued on their journey with a solemn resolve. Another two days later, a kijuu had been made ready for Kouryuu. The kijuu, known as a *kou*, resembled an oversized dog, though its coat was spotted like that of a leopard and its head sported a pair of short, arced horns like that of a bull.

Presented with the *kou* at the inn, Kouryuu couldn't hide his surprise. "What a fine kijuu!"

Even a member of the air cavalry would be proud to claim such a mount as his own. This wasn't the kind bought by the wealthy to show off their social status but a kijuu that served the practical needs of a military man. Moreover, this species of *kou* domesticated well. It'd take a short period of time to familiarize himself with the animal, but once they got used to each other, it should prove to be a good riding kijuu.

Kouryou could only begin to imagine what such a creature must have cost.

Both Kouryou and Risai said, thanking Houto, "Our apologies are in order as much as our gratitude."

"Oh, apologies are hardly called for!" Houto responded.

But Kouryou knew that imports to Tai had ground to a halt. Kijuu dealers from the Yellow Sea were no exception. The fortunes of Tai were on the wane. As youma proliferated, it seemed, so did the youjuu. There were wranglers willing to capture and train them but in numbers too small to take advantage of the situation. The market had bottomed out and many kijuu traders folded up shop.

Houto must have sweated a lot of details getting his hands on a kijuu as fine as this *kou*.

"You outdid yourself, finding such a kijuu and in such a short span of time!" exclaimed a similarly impressed Risai.

"We're on good terms with the *shusei*," Houto responded. "Broadly speaking, *shusei* and kijuu traders are all *koushu*, citizens of the Yellow Sea, members of the same tribe. Shin'nou like myself who also wander among the kingdoms share strong ties with the *shusei*, just as we do with the Ministry of Winter and the Taoist and Buddhist Temples. While those of us who root ourselves in society operate above board, as opposed to the *shusei* who belong to no kingdom and can maneuver behind

the scenes, we are nevertheless a band of brothers who travel the same byways and share information and help each other out.”

“Even so, it’s a remarkable accomplishment in times like these—such as the kijuu provender you supplied yesterday.”

The day before, the provender arrived by the time they reached the city. This provender was specially formulated for kijuu of the youjuu family. Kijuu were omnivores who could consume both fodder and grains. Some even fed on rocks and minerals. Still, their physical condition began to degrade without raw meat in their diet, which was hard to obtain in the middle of a march or journey. The provender made up the difference.

Using complex production processes, special kinds of youma meat were reduced to a dehydrated form that was lightweight, compact, and easy to transport. Only the Ministry of Winter made this kijuu provender. It wasn’t the kind of thing otherwise found in the marketplace. Although not impossible, getting hold of kijuu provender outside of official channels was extraordinarily difficult. And yet Houto had it delivered practically to their front door. Taiki’s kijuu, for one, could not be fed raw meat.

“The provender was entrusted to me by a kijuu trader. The only official source is the Ministry of Winter. In fact, kijuu traders make it themselves to feed the kijuu in their stables. You see, the Ministry of Winter got the formulations from the koushu in the first place. As a rule, kijuu traders don’t sell their own supplies, though they will make an exception for their friends.”

Knowing that Taiki could not tolerate the scent of blood, Houto custom ordered the provender for his kijuu, Tora.

“You shin’nou are really something,” Risai said.

“Naw,” Houto answered with a shrug and a smile.

Nevertheless, since setting out on this journey, even Kouryou had been honestly surprised by the resourcefulness of the shin’nou and the information networks they had access to. *I never imagined what they were truly capable of.*

Kouryou had known shin’nou since he was a child. The only shin’nou he knew back then were traveling merchants who visited the village on a seasonal basis and sold medicinal goods. To a child, they were people from afar who came bearing curious toys and telling fascinating tales. To an adult, the arrival of the shin’nou was a sign of the seasons and an opportunity to talk over any health concerns.

That had been the extent of Kouryou’s awareness of the shin’nou. “And a pretty lacking awareness at that!” he ruefully admitted over dinner at the inn where they were staying.

Risai nodded. “Same with me.”

They were in Risai and Taiki's room. As a rule, Houto arranged for them to stay only at the homes or inns of supporters of Zui'un Temple. Generally speaking, the inns ranged from the top of the lowest quality tier to the bottom of the middle quality tier. Though with a shin'nou making the arrangements in advance, they could settle into their lodgings and enjoy a meal and trust that the kijuu were being cared for out of the public eye.

"At the same time, it does all stand to reason."

"Stand to reason?" Kouryou queried.

"Gyousou-sama always granted the shusei a special place at his table. I image the shusei are much like the shin'nou."

"Ah, yes. That stands to reason as well."

"It does, doesn't it? Speaking of which, Gashin did the same. He was on good terms with both the shusei and the shin'nou."

"Was he? Well, Gashin set himself apart when it came to gathering military intel."

"The tiniest bit of enigmatic information can shape the grandest of strategies," Risai said with a smile.

Houto chuckled. "When you're breaking bread with the shusei and shin'nou, the rumor mongering alone can be worth a small fortune."

"No doubt," Risai agreed. "Speaking of which, would the shusei have any idea where Gyousou-sama might be? What do the rumors have to say on that subject?"

Houto's face clouded over. "Unfortunately, I haven't heard a thing since he arrived in Bun Province. The complete lack of news is as strange as anything else, that's what the shusei and shin'nou say."

"Any news of his retainers?"

"Plenty of rumors about seeing his generals on the run here and there. I couldn't tell you who is doing the seeing. The veracity of such incidents is difficult to confirm. They are doing a good job staying out of sight."

Risai mused, "Staying out of sight—someone is giving them shelter, I wonder?"

Houto tilted his head to one side and puzzled over this question. Risai added, "I don't think that, relying solely on their own resources, even Eishou and Sougen could stay so well hidden that not a single word leaked out. Whether wandering around alone like Kouryou, or based in a specific area and hiding out there, the support of the surrounding community is indispensable, people with heart and integrity to skillfully cover for them. Such as the people of Touka."

"Though once you get more than a few in one place," Kouryou interjected, "rumors are bound to get out. They might have scattered and are keeping a low profile."

Houto didn't appear at all convinced. "We're talking about four armies, right? That many people dispersing would inevitably show up on the roads and in the cities

and towns. It's hard to imagine how they could all stay hidden. Makes me think that there must be some sort of organization supporting them behind the scenes."

"You have a point there."

"In which case, they'd need money to maintain that support. Where would those funds come from?"

Risai thought about it for a minute. "There are estates that could furnish those funds. Though in my case, those assets were seized by the government."

"Because Risai-sama was branded a rebel," Kouryou pointed out. "Having been labeled a criminal made it that much easier to confiscate her property. My estate was forfeited on grounds of desertion, though I was able to liquidate the assets before that happened."

"Did the soldiers who resolved to desert and disperse have the time and resources to do likewise?"

"It was very last minute and not all could have managed it in time. But then what of the Imperial Treasury? One way or the other, it seems Gashin conspired with Seirai to smuggle out whatever he could."

Taiki craned his head with a dubious expression. "The Imperial Treasury— isn't it located within the Imperial Repository and contains the assets of the kingdom? Could Gashin have smuggled out much of anything by himself?"

Kouryou answered, "Ah. Of course, it is possible. The physical assets in the Imperial Treasury are mostly in the form of grain, along with precious minerals and other specialty items. But they aren't kept in the Imperial Repository. Some are stored in regional warehouses. The largest portion are consigned to merchants in the marketplace. The merchants receive those assets on deposit and issue promissory notes. When the kingdom reclaims those assets, they are returned in the form of goods or money. So the Imperial Treasury actually exists as the entries recorded in the ledgers."

"Ah. And then—"

"Without the promissory notes, the kingdom can't redeem those assets. Even if the kingdom were to invoke the power of the state and demand repayment, lacking the ledgers, they wouldn't know where and from whom to redeem those notes. Smuggle out those ledgers and keep them under wraps and Asen would be forced to fund the government with forcibly expropriated goods, new tax revenues, and public debt."

Houto nodded. "It seems Asen is issuing enormous amounts of debt. That together with the mountain of liabilities left over from the dynasty of Emperor Kyou has left the finances of the kingdom in an impoverished state. So when officials supporting His Highness are executed or exiled, those empty positions go unfilled."

Taxes grew all the heavier. Localities that didn't cooperate in collecting the levies got cut off from government support. During the winter, these communities in Tai

had long depended on support from the kingdom. The result was to thrust them immediately into poverty.

“That’s why the province lords of Ran, Ba, and Gai so readily raised their hands and aligned themselves with Asen’s camp. I Province and Jou Province saw their province lords executed and their replacements assigned from Asen’s inner circle.”

“I heard the illness has spread to Sui Province.”

“I heard the same. The province lords of Bun and Kou are under the weather as well. Of Tai’s nine provinces, none stand against Asen.”

“I figured as much,” Risai muttered.

Kouryou sighed to himself. There was nobody in power left to trust. Confirming the truth once again left him numb and depressed.

“Officials in every province who show any kind of a negative attitude in public are reassigned at best and executed at worst. Fearing the worst, not a few of them quit at the first opportunity and head for the cities, hoping to disappear among the crowds.”

Nevertheless, government officials with character and courage who stayed put and remained in their posts were not all hunted down. Here and there across the kingdom were those who, while bowing down to Asen, held their ground and did their best to save the people. The people of Tai clung to their compassionate works like the lifelines they were.

“And yet their numbers dwindle year by year. The fortunes of Heaven are on the wane. Youma are on the rise. Even in Ten Shire, last year’s winter took many of its citizens by spring.”

Houto’s words were met by a blanket of glum silence.

Chapter 16

[4-2] Even after returning to the room, Kyoshi couldn't shake that feeling of melancholy. They were doing everything in their power to keep Tai alive. There must be others like them out there. But they could do only so much in the towns and cities. At a fundamental level, there was no saving the people without first reforming the central government.

The air in the room was cold. The season had arrived when a fire in the hearth was in order. Would they greet the winter simply idling away the days like this? How many of their fellow citizens would survive until the spring?

Staring out the window at the darkness, Kyoshi asked no one in particular, "Is Asen really all that powerful?"

No one answered. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Houto shrug while Kouryou maintained a stubborn silence.

"More powerful than any of us could hope to oppose, right?" Kyoshi asked again.

This time, Kouryou answered with a sullen nod. "Asen currently controls all nine provinces. In all but name, Asen is the emperor. It goes without saying that the power of the emperor is absolute."

"He's got political power and the power of the military," Houto grumbled in agreement.

"That's what it always comes down to."

"Is his military power that overwhelming? After so many in the Imperial Army deserted?"

"Without a doubt," Kouryou answered. "Six divisions of the Imperial Army are normally stationed in Kouki. All of them Black Divisions."

"Black Divisions?" Kyoshi queried.

"That's full fighting strength, or 12,500 soldiers. Three divisions of the Palace Guard and three divisions of the Sui Provincial Guard. All of them Black Divisions. Of course, that is optimal troop strength in normal times. It's unlikely that Asen could muster those kinds of numbers. I couldn't say how many soldiers he actually has on hand."

Kouryou paused at that point and Houto broke in to say, "Two Black Divisions and four Yellow Divisions."

"Hoh," Kouryou exclaimed in admiration. "That's the shin'nou for you. You guys know everything."

“Oh, nothing of the sort,” Houto said, waving his hand in front of his face. “I couldn’t spell out the particulars. Those happen to be the number made public.”

Kyoshi was still impressed. “What is a Yellow Division?”

“Usually three regiments or 7500 soldiers. The commander can change the mix of the troops as needed but not the 7500 number. Generally speaking, the troop levels a kingdom needs to maintain the peace. In tranquil times with no war and no natural disasters, a division strength of 7500 is considered optimum. They say that’s why the name is derived from the color of a kirin’s mane.”

Actual conditions differed according to the times and circumstances, but as a rule, this was the model the kingdoms used.

“Two armies of 12,500 and four of 7500,” said Kyoshi, doing the math in his head. “That adds up to a whole lot of soldiers.”

“Making assessments on numbers alone is difficult. We’re talking about a field army with a default troop strength of 75,000. You could say that puts 55,000 on the small side. Then again, gathering people together and giving them weapons doesn’t make them an army. Soldiers are specialists in war. The Imperial Army once had six full divisions. Four of those divisions have deserted and dispersed. Essentially, 50,000 soldiers disappeared. If you scraped together 30,000 civilians and armed them, you wouldn’t call them soldiers and you wouldn’t call all 30,000 of them an army. Think about it and even four Yellow Divisions adds up to a big number.”

So that’s what it comes down to, Kyoshi thought to himself.

“Asen has his intact division and Ganchou’s division on standby in Kouki. Even if subsequent pacification campaigns whittle down their numbers, they have plenty of reinforcements to fill in the gaps. That is the hard truth of having two Black Divisions on hand. Unfortunately, of our four divisions that deserted, a fair number remained loyal to Asen. I can imagine them making up a good portion of those four Yellow Divisions.”

Kouryou furrowed his brows and added, “Though not nearly enough. They must be getting those extra reserves from somewhere.”

“From the other provinces, I believe.” Houto raised his voice again. “His Highness’s birthplace, I Province, and Jou Province, which Risai-sama has strong ties to, have the usual three divisions. The others, practically speaking, only have two. I heard Asen is incorporating them into the Imperial Army.”

“And there’s the somewhere.”

Of the nine provinces of Tai, Zui Province was the domain of the Saiho. The Zui Provincial Guard was part of the Imperial Army. From the remaining eight provinces, with the exception of I Province and Jou Province, Asen was enlisting a division from each. That was likely what made up the difference.

“Wouldn’t that add up to six divisions?” Kyoshi asked, “Asen’s army reportedly added four.”

Kouryou said, “Those six divisions on paper probably work out to four in fact. Among the six divisions there must have been units that didn’t want to be used by Asen and deserted. Then there are the losses from natural disasters and the pacification campaigns. In particular, the serious proliferation of youma in the south. But the poverty and privation has been going on since the closing days of Emperor Kyou’s reign. Though the Imperial Army consists of six Black Divisions, the provinces are incapable of supporting large scale armies. During normal times and when the purse strings are tight, maintaining three Yellow Divisions is the standard. I’ve heard that many provinces are chiseling away at those minimums.”

Kyoshi nodded. “Makes sense.”

Thinking it over, indeed, youma were multiplying in the south. Rumors abounded about cities simply disappearing under the youma assault. If so, wouldn’t southern provinces like Sui and Gai need those three divisions? Even if cut to two divisions, troop strength in Kouki, I Province, and Jou Province could not be pared back. That was the fate shouldered by the evil presence known as the pretender. At the same time, those were the hardships thrust upon the subjects of a kingdom ruled by the pretender.

The 55,000 troops mustered to defend Kouki.

“Does that mean we would need 55,000 soldiers to overthrow Asen?”

The people of Ten Shire committed themselves to the protection of a little over a hundred Taoists. Altogether, their population did not exceed two thousand. A small number, to be sure, and when it came to saving Tai, practically insignificant.

Both startled and intrigued, Kouryou flashed a look at Kyoshi. “Overthrow Asen?”

Kyoshi returned the look with an equally surprised expression. “You don’t intend to?”

A wry smile rose to Kouryou’s face. Kyoshi couldn’t help feeling abashed. He didn’t exactly know why, except he had uttered something imprudent.

“Sorry, I—”

“No,” Kouryou said with a shake of his head. “I don’t mean to make fun. What you said is perfectly logical. It just caught me off balance. Hence my reaction.”

His countenance took on a grimmer cast. For a long moment he seemed to be turning an idea over in his head. At length, he said in quite sober tones, “Of course, Asen must be overthrown.”

Kyoshi reacted with a slight bob of his head.

“However, that will be no simple feat, not something that can be pulled off overnight. First of all are those 55,000 soldiers defending Kouki. Moreover, Kouki is a walled city with rugged ramparts and supported by the massive Ryou’un Mountain.

The rule of thumb when assaulting a castle is to have three times as many on offense as they have on defense.”

“Three times.”

“In other words, 165,000 soldiers. As I stated before, you can’t calculate troop strength from the number of people armed with weapons. Consider yourself as a case in point. There’d be no making a soldier out of you without first putting you through the necessary amount of training.”

“Yes.”

For a long time, Kyoshi had fought with his staff to defend Touka. Yet he knew full well he didn’t possess the skills to call himself a soldier. The frustrating reality of the matter was, Kouryou and Risai alone could take on the entire village without breaking a sweat.

“Even without training all 160,000 to that level, it would still take time to get them working together toward the same objectives. From the start of training until the end of the conflict, that many mouths have to be fed. Simply arming and feeding them would require enormous amounts of funds.”

That is indeed the case, Kyoshi thought again, embarrassed all over again. He was about to apologize for speaking out of turn when Kouryou continued.

“However, it is not impossible.”

“Not impossible. Meaning it is possible? Possible to assemble that many people and accumulate that much capital?”

“Yes. Providing His Highness is present.”

Kyoshi caught his breath.

“His Highness stands forth, the Taiho at his side, and calls out Asen as a pretender. Which one of them is the rightful emperor will become perfectly clear to everyone. An army of 160,000 soldiers would by no means be impossible to achieve.”

“Yes.”

“The question is whether Asen would fail to take note of such things happening under his nose.”

“Ah.” Seated next to Kyoshi, Houto groaned.

Kouryou nodded. “In order to stand forth, His Highness would have to make his presence known and let the public hear his voice. As soon as that happened, Asen would surely attack before His Highness could summon any soldiers to his side. So when His Highness stands forth, he must be prepared to take on whatever Asen throws at him.”

“What scale of activities are we talking about?”

“Depends on the situation. In Kouki, it’s said that two divisions at the bare minimum are required to defend the capital and the Imperial Palace. The highly mobile Air Cavalry of the Imperial Army is also well represented. The soldiers are

superbly trained and morale is strong. Nevertheless, two Black Divisions are deemed absolutely necessary. If His Highness stands forth, Asen will dispatch soldiers to confront him. Doing so won't leave Kouki empty. Those two Black Divisions will stay behind. That means deploying Four Yellow Divisions in such an attack. Matching their troop strength wouldn't be enough. You'd need at least twice that many."

"Meaning 60,000."

"However, that number can be significantly reduced when defending a castle. Facing off against four Yellow Divisions, a force of only 10,000 in a strong castle position could repel an attack by Asen. Ideally the castle of a province lord. But a district or prefecture castle on a similar scale would suffice. Except I can't imagine Asen idly standing by while His Highness took over a castle and recruited 10,000 soldiers."

"Ah," said Kyoshi, raising his voice.

Kouryou said with a pensive nod, "In fact, we'd have no problem gathering the men and materiel right now. Because of the Taiho. If the Taiho made a stand in Touka, publicly took Asen to task and commanded that we rescue His Highness, all the resources would be there. But the moment he raised his voice, Asen would come at us like a lightning bolt. And just like he's been doing all along, that beast would sink his fangs into Touka and Ten Shire. Asen has to be kept in the dark about any opposition out there. Up until the moment the castle is in our hands and we have the power to strike at him on our terms, we absolutely cannot give Asen any reason to suspect we exist. Except how likely is it that we could stay hidden from Asen's eyes while assembling a force large enough to seize a castle?"

"Highly unlikely."

Kyoshi's voice trembled. The thought alone of Asen's attention falling on a backwater county like Ten Shire terrified him—a mere hundred or so Taoists amidst a few thousand local inhabitants. But it was naive to believe they were so insignificant that they would always escape attention.

"I would not claim that even Ten Shire is safe. And I doubt there is a single castle that would fall to whatever forces Ten Shire could muster." When Kouryou didn't disagree, Kyoshi asked, "So is what we're talking about still impossible?"

Amass the numbers needed and Asen would march against them. A force small enough to stay out of sight would present no threat to Asen. In short, there was no overthrowing Asen and the suffering and turmoil enveloping Tai would never end.

"There are stories of a small force prevailing against a great army, of ten thousand soldiers taking a castle defended by fifty thousand. Most are more fiction than fact, though some are grounded in actual historical incidents. However, such incidents are so rare they have taken on the aura of legend and fable. For all practical purposes, it doesn't happen."

“You mean storming a castle takes three times the troops defending it?”

“At a bare minimum. The right equipment can be a force multiplier but it can’t reverse those ratios. Stone cold reality always holds sway on the battlefield. On level ground, a mounted soldier is worth many times a foot soldier. The air cavalry all the more so. The troop strength of a regiment fighting with a castle to its rear must be increased accordingly. The results of all these detailed calculations is that the stronger force prevails.”

Kyoshi hung his head.

“Granted, there are those battles where nothing goes as planned. In such cases, troop strength on both sides was likely miscalculated because the variables weren’t correctly taken into account.”

“The variables?”

“A mountain of them, such as the weather, meddling third parties, troop morale. But none of them alone can overcome a basic difference in troop strength. The larger number wins. When the numbers match, the better weaponry wins.”

“That’s the cold hard truth, eh?” Houto said with a sigh. “We do like to say how the enemy was defeated by our superior spirit.”

“We don’t,” Kouryou said with a smile. “Spirit doesn’t have much to do with battles fought by a professional soldier. A superior spirit can intimidate a foe in a one-on-one contest. But if your opponent scampers away, that’s the end of that fight. This idea that a strong resolve can help you prevail against overwhelming odds is nonsense. While you’re recklessly running around, a hail of arrows from afar will make short work of you. Sure, with luck on his side, a quick-footed fellow can dodge a single arrow, but not two or three. Two at the minimum will do the job in most cases.”

“Then is troop spirit worth anything at all?”

“Stronger is better, because you can better size up the enemy and the battlefield. Take the positioning of troops and weaponry. If the enemy exposes holes in its battle line, it takes guts to rush into the breach. That strength of spirit is necessary.”

Kouryou coolly added, “What it comes down to in the end is not leaving yourself open to attack.”

“That stands to reason.”

“No matter how strong your spirit and resolve, if the attack strikes home, you lose. You feel the blow. And the pain wrecks your concentration.”

“Obviously.”

“The reality of the matter is much worse than that. When you get hit, your body recoils. You can’t stand your ground or hold your position. When you do focus your attention, it’s not uncommon to simply not feel the pain. But if you took a hit in the arm, that’s where you’re going to lose speed and strength. Your muscles grow numb.

You can't hold your own weapon. Moreover, when you take that hit to the arm, your whole body responds to the shock. One small part affects the whole. Get wounded in a limb and it's not only that limb that feels the pain. For whatever reason, it's directly connected to your feet too."

Kouryou smiled. "In fact, your feet feel like a pair of boulders. You get caught up in that thought and take a closer look and that's when an arrow catches you in the shoulder."

"Hoh," said Houto, his eyes wide with surprise. "Something you have personal experience with?"

"Every time before, the point of the sword never reached you. As soon as that thought crosses your mind, you realize it did and you didn't realize it."

"You didn't feel the impact?"

"I knew something struck me from behind and pitched me forward. In the midst of the melee, I thought maybe I'd taken a punch. And then the arrow."

"Bad luck."

Kouryou responded with a wry smile. "Bad luck without a doubt. When I pulled it out and checked, the arrowhead was one of ours. Friendly fire."

"All the more awful."

Houto and Kouryou both laughed. Kyoshi stood off to the side and looked on listlessly. His limbs felt strangely heavy as other thoughts filled his head—the bloodless mechanics of the battlefield.

If numbers ruled the day, then they didn't stand a chance. Didn't that mean there was no saving Tai?

Houto asked, "If the side with greater spirit had the advantage in each individual contest, then taken all together, the battle fought by any army of equally spirited comrades should also prevail. Isn't that what the story comes down to?"

"Now we're talking about morale. All things being equal, high morale wins against low morale. But it can't reverse differences in troop strength." Kouryou then added, "The smaller force will not defeat the larger one. A familiar scene in the theater has one swordsman going against dozens. But in real combat, that does not happen."

"But—" Kyoshi raised his voice. "What about you and the people of Touka?"

"Because you hesitated," Kouryou said with a smile. "Definitely a small force pitted against a much larger one. But you had no familiarity with war. When wielding your staff, you worried as much about hitting the man next to you as the man in front of you. You constantly checked your swing and never followed through."

"Ah. I see."

"When you've got numbers on your side, you must still overpower your opponent. That is absolutely fundamental. Unlike the theater, when you face off against one rival, all your other enemies won't sit around waiting for the outcome. While you're

locked in one duel, you're going to get attacked from the side and the back too. Superior talent may pull you through in the short term. Long term, the law of numbers is inviolable."

Houto wondered aloud, "And with a familiarity with war, would a favorable outcome be in the offing?"

"It comes down to experience. The more experience you gain, the better accustomed your eyes become. You learn to read the lay of the land and predict your enemy's movements. That is why there is such a thing as a professional soldier. Training included, the experience a soldier gains is unique."

Kyoshi found himself bobbing his head in agreement. In short, soldiers were necessary. Overthrowing Asen would demand a commensurate number of troops with a commensurate amount of training. Except the Imperial Guard had scattered to the four winds. Gyousou or Taiki would have to stand forth and publicly summon them, something they definitely must not do. The soldiers instead should—

Turning these thoughts over in his mind, Kyoshi blurted out, "If we only had the cooperation of the province lords—"

Kouryou nodded. "That is a reasonable way to approach the problem. If we had the cooperation of the province lords, the castles and the soldiers would move to our side of their own accord. Even more than the Taiho alone, that was always the more plausible route. If the Taiho made the entreaties, any province lord with a heart would respond. Usually when a pretender arises, even when the province lords voice their allegiance, they rarely all support the pretender down the line. Some may resist out of sheer righteous indignation. It's only natural to expect others to use their influence to twist true intentions into demonstrations of loyalty to the pretender. If the Taiho is present, then in those cases he could weigh in on behalf of the truth. But we have this strange disease in the kingdom."

"We can't expect any support for the Taiho from these stricken province lords," Houto responded. "Moreover, if a province lord stepped forward to support the Taiho, he would no doubt fall ill too."

"And so we are left without a strategy." Kyoshi raised his voice. "What this all comes down to, is there any way to save Tai?"

Kouryou did not answer one way or the other.

"A long way off—" Kyoshi gripped his knees through the thick fabric of his robes. The end of this road was so far off he could not see it. How was that different than being without hope, what with winter soon being upon them?

"The end is a long way off but I will not give up," Kouryou stated crisply. Kyoshi turned to face him. "The Taiho and Risai-sama are not giving up either. I believe finding His Highness is deeply tied to the salvation of Tai."

“No matter how far away,” Houto said to Kyoshi in a bright tone of voice, “with every step we draw a step closer. Look at the way Taiho and Risai-sama have been moving forward all this time. There must be something in their hearts giving them such confidence.”

His optimistic and almost carefree attitude made Kyoshi catch his breath. Indeed, nothing good could come of despair. His first necessary task was not to lose hope. Repeating that counsel in his head, Kyoshi nodded.

Chapter 17

[4-3] Now that Kouryou was equipped with a kijuu, he and Risai and Taiki parted ways with Houto and Kyoshi every morning and scouted the road ahead. Eyeing the highway from a distance, they flew over the countryside until they identified a town just short of their destination. There they waited for Houto and Kyoshi to arrive on horseback.

All that waiting felt like so much wasted time—or at least that was the sense Kouryou got from the thoughtful Taiki.

“Don’t you think we could give Houto and Kyoshi a ride?”

Kouryou answered with a wry grin. Every day, it seemed, since Kouryou got his own kijuu, Taiki had posed the question in a roundabout fashion. Today he cut to the chase.

“Houto and Kyoshi can’t ride kijuu.”

“I’m pretty sure Tora and Hien wouldn’t mind.”

“It’d place an extra burden on the kijuu.”

“But if we took more rest stops going forward?”

“Well, there is that—”

“Using kijuu, we wouldn’t have to follow the highway and could cover a lot more ground at once.”

Kouryou shook his head. “I’m sorry, but we can’t put too much distance between us and the road ahead. Bypass the highway and we’d lose the use of the inns along the way.”

“How about taking more shortcuts? Rather than winding around the mountains, wouldn’t it be a lot faster to fly over them?”

That simply will not work, Kouryou wanted to say, but hesitated, unsure of how to politely express himself.

Sensing his bewilderment, Risai said, “The Young Master’s earnest but unreasonable proposals have left Kouryou in a muddle.”

“Unreasonable?”

“The Young Master suggests crossing the mountains by air in one fell swoop. But in what direction should we fly and how would we determine which way to go?”

“With a map?”

Risai grinned. “I take it that such detailed and accurate maps are easily obtained in Hourai where the Young Master grew up. However, such maps do not exist here.”

The maps available to the general public were mostly rough guides that identified the major landmarks and estimated the distances. They were good for identifying the towns and cities along the highways and how many days it took to travel between them. But not much beyond that.

While the land registries maintained by the government were based on detailed surveys, they were limited to farmland and residential property. Created for each administrative region separately, areas where people didn't live tended to get left out. The military drafted precise topographical maps during times of war, but the geographical scope of these maps was limited and the maps themselves were rarely revised except out of necessity.

"Hypothetically speaking, even given a sufficiently accurate map, how would you place yourself on that map and know where you were at any given time?"

When he got to a city, a traveler could at least determine what city that was. But away from the city, there was no way to know exactly where he was. No matter how accurate, a map would be of little practical use without the ability to locate himself on the map.

"What if you confirmed it yourself? Observing the terrain from the air would give you an unobstructed view of the surrounding area."

"An unobstructed view on level ground. But a lot of details get lost in the mountains and forests."

It was possible to navigate using the sun and the stars. The military relied on such methods, though this approach depended either on the existence of precise maps or the creation of precise maps during the march.

"To get to a city in question, you stick to the highway and make a note of all the cities you pass through along the way. Even if you don't use the highways themselves, you'd best keep them in view or risk losing your way."

Taiki fell silent and Risai smiled. "Thinking that leaving the highways will get you there faster is a common enough mistake, especially on the ground. While proceeding straight north seems a natural approach in theory, the obstructions presented by the topology and the forests and other natural features means there is no way to actually do so in practice. Once you stray from the line tying your starting point to your objective, you'll never get to where you want, no matter how far north you travel."

In fact, relying on an innate "sense of direction" was difficult enough to start with. Maintaining a given course was practically impossible without a magnetic compass. Even knowing the direction, heavily forested areas had to be avoided and mountains detoured around. Rivers had to be forded where the water didn't run too fast or too deep. Simply climbing and descending hilly ground presented its own challenges. There was no way to travel in a straight line when forced to follow the only paths that

provided good footing. Add up all those twists and turns and it was easy to wander off course.

“Take to the air on a kijuu and at first glance everything looks clear. But that’s a hole you don’t want to fall into either. No forests get in your way and the land won’t rise and fall. But you still have to navigate the mountains. You can’t see through a mountain and have to detour around the high peaks as well. In particular, in mountainous terrain, after a couple of detours you lose track of where you are. And once that happens, you’ll never get to where you’re going even if you know the direction.”

On the other hand, flying high enough to skirt the mountains completely made it difficult to recognize the landmarks below. Any town surrounded by trees completely disappeared into the countryside.

“Above the Sea of Clouds, you can reliably follow a compass. That’s how we returned here from Kei. But that was only possible because kijuu know the scent of the land. Point them in the right direction and kijuu will seek out the land on their own. The only land found above the Sea of Clouds are the Ryou’un Mountains. Knowing the distance flown and the direction and the geographical features rising above the Sea of Clouds, you can do a good job of guessing what mountain it is.”

“So if we set off across the Sea of Clouds from a Ryou’un Mountain and headed straight for Bun Province—”

Risai shook her head. “There is a Ryou’un Mountain called Mount You in the northern quarter of Bun Province. But there is no way to descend from the summit of Mount You to the ground. Moreover, there are no cities above the Sea of Clouds and very few below. If you took Kyoshi and Houto with us over the Sea of Clouds, we’d need someplace to rest the kijuu on a regular basis. There is no place like that there. Hien does not have the stamina to carry two people directly to Bun Province without a rest.”

Risai added in a sympathetic tone, “The Taiho being by nature a kirin means he has a lighter frame. If push comes to shove, we could both ride Hien. So I can’t say the idea would be impossible to carry off. Tora is a smart kijuu and I think he’d be willing to carry Houto and Kyoshi. However, only as a last recourse. Getting to Bun Province is only part of the objective. We need to gather actionable information along the way too.”

“I understand,” Taiki said, hanging his head in an abashed manner.

For the time being, at least, Taiki gave up on the idea of racing ahead, though while waiting for the other two in their party to catch up, he said he wanted to go into the town. That day, after hiding the kijuu in the countryside, they approached the gate. The gate was open but they weren’t allowed to enter.

“Times must be tough,” Taiki observed empathetically.

“You can’t take things at face value,” Risai consoled him. “Even if they were running a surplus, if all the surrounding villages closed their gates and only one left them open, then all the passers-by with no place else to go would flock there.”

Taiki nodded, though more out of pity for the town’s inhabitants.

“We’ve left Ten Shire. The villages around here are probably not as poor as Touka. Still, the mornings are growing colder. Everybody’s thoughts are turning inward as they prepare for winter.”

Taiki nodded here too and glanced back at the gate from which they’d been turned away. The gates were open but guards hovered inside just the entrance to prevent them from entering. Forming a kind of invisible wall, two skinny kids sat on the ground drawing pictures with pieces of white chalk on the cobblestones. An even skinnier old man squatted nearby, adjusting the collar of his cloak as he watched over them.

A sign of poor health perhaps, their eyes appeared jaundiced and their complexions were ashen.

After observing the scene, Taiki turned to Risai. “I don’t think there’s any doubt that they’ve got problems other than poverty. Can’t we at least give them medicine or some nutritional food?”

Risai shook her head. “We can’t. It must be unbearable given what you can see with your own two eyes, but please be prudent. Our generosity would only ensure that they remember us later.”

“But—”

“Under normal circumstances, they won’t remember who we are and won’t care where we came from. But once we start giving alms, we would be remembered as kind-hearted travelers with enough to spare. And among them, some might read that as meaning we were easy marks.”

Taiki held his tongue in evident bewilderment.

“What I’m saying is, kind-hearted travelers with enough to spare do not seek out lodging in little villages. Because impoverished little villages have been known to assault travelers like that.”

Taiki looked silently back at Risai.

“I know it is painful to hear me say things like this, but as long as you reveal no such weaknesses and present no opportunities, no matter how impoverished they are, the impetus to commit such a crime should not arise. I’m asking you to be patient enough to not create incentives for wrongdoing where there need not be any.”

“Yes,” answered a clearly disheartened Taiki.

Kouryou spoke up at this point. “Simply doing your best to not stand out is all we’re asking. If something does happen down the road, making ourselves memorable in the wrong way could put anyone who remembers us at risk too.”

“I understand.” Taiki finally nodded.

Noting his assent, Risai also turned and watched the guileless children drawing on the cobblestones. Their gaunt shoulders alone were enough to arouse sympathy. The complexion of the old man squatting next to them and that of the villagers manning the gate left no doubt that this village was already running short on provisions.

They should have brought in a harvest during the fall. And yet they are already in distress. How will they survive the winter?

Any thought of where these children would end up was altogether depressing. No small wonder that Taiki—the kirin—should feel the pain of that knowledge in his bones.

Risai accompanied the glum and silent Taiki back to the kijuu, where they waited for Houto and Kyoshi to catch up.

Houto and Kyoshi arrived before too long. Reading the mood, Houto said, “Sorry to keep everybody waiting. Did something happen here?”

Risai explained the situation. Houto said with a wry smile, “Certainly it’s better not to stand out. But we can’t always be so cautious. In the first place, our appearances make it clear at a glance that we’re hardly at the end of our ropes.” Then he added, “Wait here a little while longer, okay? I’ll run over and see what I can do. Visiting as a purveyor of herbal medicines should be a good enough excuse to leave some samples behind.”

“You’re not going to make trouble for yourself, are you?” Kouryou asked. “Won’t you be cutting in on the territory of another shin’nou?”

“Well, it’s no way to win any praise, but making up for a shortfall in their medicine supply shouldn’t present a problem. Tanshou-sama can see to it that the shin’nou who operates in this territory gets compensated.”

With that bit of big-hearted confidence, Houto raced his horse to the village. He returned a short time later.

Taiki ran forward and called out, “Is everything okay?”

Since Risai and Kouryou had been threatened by the guards when they first approached the village, he’d fretted about Houto’s well-being.

Houto answered with a big smile. “Everything’s fine! The kids had gone home already but the old man was still there. He certainly didn’t look in the best of health. When I suggested some remedies, he said he didn’t have any money. So I said they could have it on credit and left a couple of packets with him. Thinking that others in the village might be running low, I left a few more with the guards. They were all very happy.”

“Wonderful,” Taiki quietly exulted.

“They had a long spell of rain during this year’s harvest and the crops rotted in the fields. The prefectural governor in charge of the region seems a good and wise man and he promised to deliver the minimal necessary food supplies until winter.”

“That does give me some peace of mind. Houto, thank you very much.”

“No, no,” Houto said with a smile and a bright tone of voice. “That’s why I’ve been hauling this around on my back.” He stood and proceeded first down the road, raising his hand over his shoulder and pointing at the pack as he spoke.

“But doesn’t a donation take away from a sale?”

“A day I don’t do any business can be a good day too. Even I have to take a break now and then.”

Houto’s garrulous and glad-handing manner made Taiki smile. “Does that go for all shin’nou?”

“Hmm. Hard to say. We come in all types, don’t you know.” A genial smile rose to his face.

They couldn’t stay at the inn in the city they arrived at the next day. They had now finally moved beyond the scope of people like them from Touka.

“When it comes to inns that take in kijuu as well, I’m afraid I’m out of my depth. Perhaps Kyoshi should ask for shelter at a Taoist temple.”

Following Houto’s advice, Kyoshi inquired at the temple in the city. The letter that Enchou had prepared for such an occasion yielded results. They were welcomed into the temple but received a cool reception from the priests, the unspoken criticism being that anybody traveling with kijuu should have the wherewithal to stay at an inn.

“I apologize,” said an abashed Kyoshi, though it was hardly his fault. Nor was it the fault of the temple. Though this temple was said to be the biggest in the city, it was clearly in financial straits. It received no public assistance and those otherwise willing to offer support did not have the means to do so.

Houto said in a bright and encouraging voice, “We’ll get to Sekijou tomorrow.”

Situated at the crossroads of the major highways from Kou Province to Bun Province and from Kou Province to Zui Province, Sekijou was the largest city in the region.

“Past Sekijou, the road starts to climb, and when we get to the top, we’re in Bun Province.” Houto grinned. “See, we really are moving forward.”

Chapter 18

[4-4] In Sekijou, they found shelter at a large Taoist temple outside the city. Perhaps because Sekijou was relatively well off, the temple still had an aura of grandeur about it. The chief priest was polite and hospitable.

After a warm reception, a much-relieved Risai took to her bed. When she awoke the next morning, she lingered a while longer in her room arranging her traveling clothing. Her growing efficiency at the task prompted a smile of realization. When she was in Kei, doing anything took time. Well, practice made perfect.

Keeping company with Kouryou helped sharpen her sword handling skills as well. Already second nature to her, once she grew accustomed to using her left hand, she had improved faster than expected.

We really are moving forward, she thought with a small sense of satisfaction, as she knocked on the door to the room opposite hers.

“Good morning,” she called out.

She received no answer. Assuming that Taiki must be worn out by their travels, she opened the door. If he was that tired, maybe they should take the day off.

Except as soon as she stepped inside, she realized the bed was empty. The futon was neatly folded and the room straightened up. He must have already gotten up. She hurried back to the main hall and down the corridor. A young priest in indigo robes was passing down the hallway, so she asked him if he’d seen her companion.

The portly and good-natured priest answered brightly, “Oh, he set off at sunrise.”

“Eh?” Risai said in complete befuddlement. “He set off? Set off where? When?”

The priest’s eyes widened with surprise at her reaction. “Well, he said he had to leave as soon as the dawn broke and the temple gates opened, so I showed him the way to the gates.”

“I don’t believe it!”

Evidently discomfited by Risai’s reaction, the priest explained, “He called on me before daybreak and said he was getting a head start. I helped him get his kijuu ready and saw him off.”

“Impossible!”

In the face of Risai’s unexpectedly frantic exclamations, the priest cringed and took a step backwards.

Impossible that Taiki should set off on his own. If he really had left the temple, it couldn't have been of his own accord. Risai found herself unconsciously reaching for her sword.

"Where did he go?"

"But—you see—"

Now the poor priest simply looked terrified. Risai had taken a step forward when she heard her name being called.

"Risai-sama! Wait!"

His face pale, Kyoshi ran down the corridor and interposed himself between her and the priest, blocking her forward motion. He said to the priest, "I apologize. There has been an unfortunate misunderstanding here. You are in no way at fault. Please take no offense."

"Kyoshi."

Kyoshi shushed her with a glance. He again apologized to the priest and urged him to be on his way. Once the priest rushed off at a near sprint, he pushed Risai back in the room.

"What's going on?"

Still facing her, Kyoshi closed the door to the main hall. "The Taiho has already departed."

"Which means what? I'm asking you what's going on!"

"Early this morning, he woke me and said he was setting off on his own."

"That—that makes no sense."

All the more convinced she had to pursue him, Risai moved toward the door. Kyoshi stopped her again. "The Taiho made it perfectly clear that he did not want you coming after him."

"Why?" Why would he do something so out of character? Risai's surprise was only exceeded by her confusion. Now was the time to begin the search for Gyousou in earnest. Every day they came one day closer to their goal. Why would Taiki suddenly take off on his own now?

"It's dangerous out there. We've got to find him."

Kyoshi retreated until his back was against the door. He shook his head. "That is exactly what he said you would say. And then he said to make sure you didn't."

"Kyoshi."

"He said not to waste your time running after him. Instead, head straight to Bun Province and start looking for Gyousou-sama."

Kyoshi had gotten jostled awake before dawn, and a good span of time before dawn at that. When he opened his eyes, Taiki was standing next to his bed. He was already dressed in his traveling clothes.

Taiki apologized and said he wanted to leave the temple at sunrise. He hoped that Kyoshi could speak to someone in charge and see to it that the gate was opened.

The already startled Kyoshi was all the more taken aback. He couldn't have imagined being put in the position of doing something so risky. Risai would never stand for it. At first, Kyoshi refused, but when it became clear that Taiki wasn't going to nod and acquiesce, he implored him to talk it over with Risai. Taiki steadfastly refused that request as well.

"Please don't tell Risai. She would do everything in her power to stop me."

"Of course she would."

A small smile rose to Taiki's lips. "I'm afraid Risai will always see me as that ten-year-old boy."

"That is not the problem here. And even if it were, there's no way I could agree to let you leave by yourself."

"Please don't worry about it. I understand my own position very well. The memory of how the people of Touka rejoiced at my mere presence will be with me always. I am not about to let myself get captured or throw my life away on a whim. I know what a cruel betrayal that would be to the rest of you."

"But—" Kyoshi objected and realized he had no convincing arguments left to offer.

"Please, Kyoshi. This is something I must do. I know I'm no good at defending myself. Fortunately, I have my kijuu. Tora will carry me out of harm's way at the first whiff of danger." Taiki grinned and added, "He's a lot smarter than me, you see."

"Taiho—" Kyoshi stopped and fumbled for the right words. "At least tell me where you are going and what you hope to accomplish."

"I can't tell you any of that now. Well, no. To be honest, I don't rightly know where I am going and what I will do once I get there."

"Seriously?"

"But maybe you'll understand if I put it this way—I am hearkening to the Divine Will."

Kyoshi caught his breath.

"Heaven tells me to go and so I must go."

Kyoshi wanted to ask what he meant, whether Heaven had literally told him. Those and so many other questions filled his thoughts. But with the kirin standing in front of him invoking the Divine, Kyoshi was at a loss for the words to form the proper inquiries.

"I understand," he said with a bow. "But you can't go off on your own. Take me with—" He thought better of that suggestion. "No, take Kouryou. Kouryou can protect the Taiho. If you take Kouryou with you, I will make the arrangements with the temple and keep Risai-sama in the dark for now."

Taiki craned his head to the side and pondered the proposal. He nodded. Kyoshi ran to the adjoining room. He shook Kouryou awake and spilled out the particulars of what was going on. Kouryou was no less startled than he had been. He was up in an instant. He earnestly tried to persuade Taiki otherwise. Taiki only said that he was hearkening to the Divine Will and couldn't explain himself to any greater extent than that.

"I will accompany you," Kouryou said with a clear resolve. "Wait while I get ready."

While Kouryou dressed and packed, Kyoshi asked one of the temple attendants to bring around their kijuu and open the main gate.

Kyoshi laid out all these details. Risai slumped into a nearby chair. "So Kouryou is with him?"

"Yes. He said that if anything happens, he will contact us through the temple or the shin'nou guild. They will stay in touch even if nothing happens, so we shouldn't worry."

"We shouldn't worry," Risai muttered with a thin smile. "Talk about demanding the impossible."

Kyoshi nodded. There was no way that Risai wouldn't worry. He offered helpfully, "We can take heart that Kouryou is with him. He's not about to let anything get past him."

"Better if he could have put a halt to the whole thing." Risai laughed to herself. "As if anybody could dissuade the Taiho once he made up his mind. That's right—the Taiho is most definitely no longer a ten-year-old child."

Risai looked at Kyoshi, still showing that wry grin. "He was around ten the first time I laid eyes on him. After that, he was attacked by Asen and swept away to Hourai. Then he finally came home. He really is no longer ten years old. I know that in my mind, but—"

When they were in Kei, he had similarly persuaded her to take him back to Tai. She couldn't stop him. She could hardly expect Kyoshi to do what she hadn't been able to.

"Sorry for causing such a commotion."

"Perfectly understandable," Kyoshi answered with a quiet sigh of relief. Saying he needed to get ready to depart, Kyoshi took his leave.

In the meantime, turning these events over in her thoughts, Risai must have tied up all the loose ends. When he returned, he found her in the company of a fully informed Houto, breakfast for the three of them in hand.

"I apologize for all the excitement," Risai said to Houto.

“Well, he’s with Kouryou so I have every reason to believe he’ll be alright. Just as the Taiho said, we should get on to Bun Province without wasting any more time.”

“Indeed,” Risai answered in a much calmer tone of voice.

Chapter 19

[4-5] **Risai**, Kyoshi, and Houto left Sekijou and proceeded due north on the highway as planned.

They didn't have to factor in the normal precautions to keep Taiki safe. At the same time, Risai's regal kijuu couldn't help but attract attention and she had been accused of regicide. They kept a wary eye on their surroundings and traveled along the highway doing their best not to stand out. As usual, Risai split with Houto and Kyoshi when they left the inn and flew ahead over the countryside where no one was likely to see her.

She had no concerns about traveling alone, but the routine grew dispiriting day in and day out. When she was with Houto and Kyoshi, she could turn her attention to the next goal and dismiss the storm of thoughts crowding into her mind. But waiting in the hills outside their destination for the evening rush to commence had the cumulative effect of weighing down her spirits.

Her primary worries revolved around where Taiki was going, what he was up to, and if anything bad had happened along the way. Exacerbating her anxieties was the disposition of the passport given to him by the empress when they left Kei. He'd left it with Risai and didn't take it with him. Should worse come to worst, that passport could prove a lifesaver, so she had to wonder whether he'd be all right without it.

He should be. Because Kouryou was with him.

Like Risai, Kouryou was a veteran soldier. He had unsurpassed skills with hidden weapons and now carried a sword. Kouryou would see to it that attacks from highwaymen or youma or other misfortunes wouldn't present too great a risk.

Even after doing her best to convince herself, the uneasiness remained. Taiki didn't have a natural familiarity with the land. He didn't know very much about Tai to begin with. As a taika, he lacked a commonsensical understanding of the world. That must be at the root of whatever was bothering him. If Risai were there with him, she could sense the particulars of the situation and do what was necessary to help. She wasn't certain that, in her place, Kouryou would catch on to the same degree.

But she knew she was getting carried away with her emotions and was being foolish.

She knew well enough that the worry itself had become the cause of her worry. What it came down to was, she was terrified at the thought of him being out of her sight. She could no more let him travel out of view than she could leave a precious gem at the side of the road. She felt anxious whenever he wasn't within her grasp,

and in order to rationalize that anxiety, she cast about for anything that might go wrong and counted up the reasons.

And that was why Taiki hadn't consulted with her beforehand.

Even knowing that, Risai couldn't help wishing he had said something to her before he quietly disappeared, had explained why he was setting off on a different course and with what goal in mind. She knew full well that if he had, she still wouldn't have agreed to whatever he was planning to do. No explanation would have convinced her to let Taiki set off on his own. So he simply vanished without a word.

No matter if she couldn't trust Taiki and let him go—no matter if she couldn't trust that Taiki and Kouryou would be okay—she already had no way of knowing where he was and no way of running after him. Worrying about him was pointless. While she was tormenting herself like this, there was a mountain of things she ought to be thinking about.

Even so, she couldn't stop thinking about Taiki and the situation he was in.

What did he mean by saying he was hearkening to the Divine Will?

Taiki was a kirin. He had a direct connection to Heaven. Risai and the rest of them were never going to comprehend what that meant, except there must be moments when Taiki communicated with the Divine.

At the very least, he could have explained that much.

Risai felt something akin to betrayal. Not that Taiki had betrayed her. If anything, it'd be more accurate to say her expectations had betrayed her.

Though thin on the ground, the clues they needed to find Gyousou were not beyond their grasp. Those clues and Taiki's return inspired a vague sense of hope. *That's* what had betrayed her. She still believed they could save Tai. But doing so would not be easy. Even given the cooperation of so many emperors and empresses around the Twelve Kingdoms, the salvation of Tai was a long uphill climb.

They'd returned to Tai aware of the gauntlet that lay before them. They first met the people of Touka and at last things began to move, though now that they were making real progress, it seemed more like a stumble.

By and large, the Taoist temples were less than cooperative when Risai and her traveling companions showed up on their doorsteps. That surely had an effect. They'd depended on the Taoist temples since leaving Ten Shire. None were happy to see them. They weren't treated badly but neither did the monks and priests offer any heartfelt thanks or words of support or encouragement. They didn't go out of their way to help.

To be sure, the temples didn't know who they were, where they came from, or what they hoped to accomplish. Enchou asked for their cooperation so they gave it. And it went without saying that every temple was doing its utmost just to stay alive.

Risai and her party were simply another burden added to their backs that they could not refuse.

I understand all that.

Every day was another day closer to their ultimate goal. Every day they put behind them was another day of accumulated fatigue. Another day passing through a ravaged city, witnessing the worn and weary faces of the displaced inhabitants, encountering another pair of shuttered village gates and crumbling hamlets that showed no signs of coming back to life. Fallow lands lined with graves.

Like it or not, the mornings and evenings growing colder and the daylight shorter could not help but constrain her emotions.

Risai crossed Kou Province and reached the border with Bun Province. Before her was a relatively large city. Behind her were the soaring mountains of Bun Province she had recently surmounted. She was undoubtedly drawing closer to her destination. And yet she felt no closer to her hopes.

Again, more a stumble than a leap. At the heart of that emptiness was Taiki's absence.

What was Taiki thinking and where had he gone?

Chapter 20

[4-6] **W**here does a life go when it ceases to be?

The man crouched down, that thought occupying his mind. Cast into shadows by the falling dusk, the silver branches of the tree before him reached out in what struck him as a modest and reserved manner. Buildings surrounded the small courtyard on all sides. The silver tree stood in the center.

He knelt beneath the branches that hung to the ground. Thin shards lay scattered around his knees.

That day until noon, a life had thrived within those shards, a new life bestowed by the silver tree. The riboku. A year before, a young couple tied a ribbon to the tree. He had allowed them to do so.

He was the superintendent of the town. Normally the position went to the most senior of the town's elders. Far from an elder, he hadn't yet turned thirty. But the previous superintendent died and he succeeded him. He'd grown up an orphan, after all, and had long relied on the good offices of the rika.

The superintendent also administered the Rishi, and that included presiding over the riboku. At the same time, he was principal of the rika. Though young, he well understood the duties of the rika and Rishi here at the center of the town, having long served under the late superintendent.

The couple he'd allowed to petition for a child were old friends of his.

It was a poor town, nestled in a narrow and desolate mountain valley. In recent years, rough and violent brigands had settled in the region. The brigands often descended from their dens in the mines and forced their way into the surrounding towns, where they shook down the people for goods and money. Any resistance was met with cruel reprisals. The previous superintendent stood his ground and lost his life as a result.

They'd sought assistance from the government on numerous occasions but no one rushed to the rescue. Rumors of the brigands colluding behind the scenes with government officials became increasingly hard to refute.

The young and able turned their backs on the town and left. This couple did not flee. Instead, they set out to begin a new life together. They prayed earnestly and the riboku blessed them with a child.

The ripening golden fruit hung from a silver branch. A new life dwelt within it.

Where did that life come from? he thought as he picked the shards off the white sand.

The tiny fruit, looking so much like a nugget of gold, grew and swelled over time. The husk that resembled gold leaf stretched and extended as it ripened, gradually growing thinner over time. The life it housed was the hope of the town. And as if in proof, a faint light glowed within the thinning husk.

That was about the time the mother was slain by the brigands.

The fruit had grown large enough to fill two hands. The mother died before the child within was born. The father steeled his grief until it was large enough to hold in his arms—by which time the husk had stretched so thin as to resemble blown glass—and that was when he met the same fate as his wife and by the hands of those same brigands.

Having lost both its parents, the fruit fell to earth and tumbled onto the white sand. The husk cracked apart, spilling out the pale crimson water and the blackened remains of what could only be called a withered life.

That gestating life that until so recently had glowed with its own light. The only reason for living left to its father, it harbored the dreams of its parents and the hopes of the village. All waited impatiently for its birth. And yet—

Into what void did that light disappear?

“I am sorry that your father and mother could not protect you,” he apologized as he picked up the fragments of the husk. He buried the remains in the father’s grave. Now he retrieved the rest of the shards and replaced the rust-stained sand.

“I am so sorry.”

His tears spilled onto the thin slivers of gold in his hands.

A small campfire burned in the darkness. The kindling had already reduced to embers, the fire on the verge of dying out.

“South of the castle we fought, north of the walls we died.”

A solitary figure sat beside the fire. The man wrapped his arms around his legs and rested his chin on his knees. Watching the dying fire, he sang the song in a small voice more like a murmur.

“Perished like dogs at the side of the road and ended up food for the crows.”

Please tell the crows on our behalf
To spare a moment before gobbling us down
And shed a tear like they truly care
Weathered and worn and without even a grave
How in the world might our rotten meat
Flee from the tips of your pointed beaks?

“You have mighty bad taste when it comes to music,” piped up a nearby voice.

He glanced over his shoulder. A young man stood there with an armful of firewood and a quizzical look on his face.

"Is it a popular song? You sure seem to like it, though it is on the creepy side."

"An old folk song," he replied. "An old drinking song."

"Huh," said the young man, tossing the wood onto the fire.

Camped out alongside the deserted road, the only shelter from the falling dew were the big branches of a cedar tree stretching out over their heads.

"It's getting colder. None of the villages are offering us lodging of late. I can't help feeling uneasy about how things are going."

"How about quitting the shipping business?" he asked with a grin.

The young man sat down next to him. "Please, be serious. There is no way that is going to happen."

"You mean the boss won't let it happen," he said, casting a glance in the direction the boss had taken off to relieve himself.

"That is not the problem," the young man answered indignantly. He patted the hefty pack sitting on the ground next to him. "People are waiting for us to make these deliveries."

"Yeah, they're waiting but they won't let us in."

"Well, that's life. Letting us in would make it all the harder to say no to the next traveler who happens by. We're not in a position to make unreasonable demands either. Ultimately, we're all in this foundering boat together."

"You've got a big heart."

"Everybody knows what's going on. The more difficult traveling becomes, the fewer travelers you'll see on the road. But even knowing that won't stop people from doing what they do. That's how hard life is."

He hugged his knees all the tighter. "Tai is hurting everywhere. Especially Bun Province."

"You can count on there being places worse off than here. Either way, all the complaining in the world won't change a thing."

A cold wind whipped around the campsite.

"We'll probably see some frost tonight."

"Probably."

Snow would follow soon after, snow that would cover the north until spring. How many people would they lose this year? How many villages would sink beneath the drifts and never rise again?

No stars shone in the moonless sky above. The clouds had already moved in.

He drew his coat around his shoulders.

The day dawns
And full of life they set off for war.
The night falls
And none of them have returned.

Part Five

Chapter 21

[5-1] As he walked along, leading his kijuu, Kouryou couldn't help wondering how willing Risai had been to go along with this arrangement. He glanced at the darkening western sky. Three days had passed since they left Sekijou, when he and Taiki parted ways with Risai, Kyoshi, and Houto.

The moonlight lit up the landscape in forlorn hues, casting the deepening fall into stark relief.

Taiki's unexpected actions must have taken Risai by surprise. Though Kyoshi had persuaded Kouryou to accompany Taiki, he doubted Risai was willing to go along with the whole thing. He wouldn't have been surprised if she insisted on chasing him down.

Were Kouryou in her position, he probably would have gone looking for Taiki too—or so he argued with himself. He cast a sidelong glance at the shadowed figure next to him, who looked up at the same dusky sky as he led his kijuu. The travelers around them streamed toward the city like a current. The gates were going to close before long.

Kouryou and Taiki had taken the road east when they departed from Sekijou. Following the highway and keeping a low profile, they proceeded across the countryside and sought out the closest convenient city at sunset. This day as well, they joined the throngs entering the city. Passing through the gate, Kouryou felt a chill down his spine that again reminded him they were taking one chance too many for his own comfort.

Since leaving Sekijou, that sensation struck him in every city they came to. The highway ended at Kouki. All the more alarming, heading down this road took them closer and closer to Kouki.

Taiki was setting the itinerary here. When they set out from Sekijou, he asked which road led to Zui Province and Kouryou indicated this one. Ever since, Taiki had not deviated from the course.

The gate was thick with guards. Kouryou could not escape the fear of getting stopped and questioned. Avoiding the cities and camping under the stars seemed a plausible option, except that where wild animals prowled the countryside, there were

bound to be youma too. Here in the heart of the kingdom, the possibility struck him as slight but he could not dismiss the odds, no matter how small.

Even if they found an acceptable campsite, Kouryou would have to travel to the city for water and food and other provisions. That would mean leaving Taiki alone in the wilds, something he absolutely could not bring himself to do. Not knowing the dangers that awaited them, he couldn't quench the belief that if he left Taiki alone for any span of time, he'd return to find that he had disappeared.

So the city it was. Call it good luck or bad, but Taiki had grown up during his time in Hourai. He was unrecognizable to anyone who knew him then. Though his steel black hair set him apart, people associated the kirin with golden hair. Despite Taiki being known as the "Black Kirin," the image of the kirin was so firmly entwined with golden or blonde colors that the relationship of the one to the other was a difficult assumption to overcome.

Kouryou only recognized Taiki because he was with Risai. Otherwise, it likely never would have dawned on him.

With their kijuu, an inn was their only choice. In fact, not staying at an inn would raise more eyebrows. Thankfully, as they approached the capital, the number of travelers with kijuu also increased. As before, they found an inn and got a room. Only after Taiki left the kijuu at the stables and returned to the room did Kouryou finally dare venture into the city to buy dinner.

Though he always stopped at the stables first and made it clear that his companion's kijuu was not to be released without Kouryou's explicit say-so.

The streets grew congested around the time the gates closed. Mingling with the crowds, Kouryou breathed a sigh of relief. He eyed the food stalls, looking for a meal palatable to Taiki as well, meaning nothing that contained any blood or meat.

For a short while, Kouryou could relax and enjoy some time by himself. This day, though, his emotions remained clouded. They followed the highway but he didn't know where they were headed. They didn't have to wait for the horses to catch up and so traveled as fast as their kijuu could carry them.

"Where are we going?" Over and over he tried to raise the question. But then his sense of protocol kicked in. He hesitated questioning Taiki so directly.

"Which way?" he'd asked when they left Sekijou.

"East" was the succinct answer. He hadn't made any further inquiries since.

Tonight was different. No matter what, he had to know their destination. If they kept going down the road like this, they'd arrive in Kouki tomorrow.

Wrapped in these heavy thoughts, he returned to the inn. He climbed the stairs to the room and found Taiki standing at the window in the main room looking down at the city. Inns that accommodated kijuu attracted an upper-class clientele and the room was furnished accordingly, though it was still rather cramped. The sleeping

quarters on either side of the main room lacked even windows. Kouryou had chosen such a small room on purpose. This way, no one could get close to Taiki when he was in the main room and neither could Taiki leave without his knowledge.

I'm treating him like the enemy.

Kouryou had to smile at himself. More like transporting a prisoner, around whom he could not let down his guard for a minute. He couldn't avoid the irony that he was treating the *kirin*, of all people, in such a way.

Amidst the strained silence, he waited for the opportunity. With dinner over, he took a deep breath. He couldn't drag things out any longer.

"Beg your pardon," Kouryou finally said. "But where are we going tomorrow? I do need to ask what our destination is here."

Having returned to the window where he again stood and took in the city below, Taiki glanced over his shoulder. He gazed at Kouryou as he mulled over the question.

"Same as it's always been," was all he said.

Up to this point, Kouryou would have taken such an answer at face value. But he couldn't stay quiet any longer.

"If we keep going the way we've been going, we'll arrive in Kouki. You don't really intend to go to Kouki, do you?"

Taiki turned away and again directed his gaze at the hustle and bustle beyond the wall around the inn.

"I'm begging you here. Where are we going and what are we going to do when we get there?"

Taiki didn't answer, only looked down at the street below. "More and more people are wearing heavy coats."

Kouryou heaved a big sigh. Dispirited, he joined Taiki at the window and took in the view below. He really didn't need to see for himself, but day after day, the travelers were donning heavier clothing. Naturally. The onset of winter was not long off. At a loss of what to do or say, he stood there and watched the people passing by.

Taiki spoke in a soft, low voice. "I'm going to Hakkei Palace."

Kouryou turned to him, making no attempt to mask his utter amazement. "That is completely crazy!"

But Taiki remained serene. With a calm and collected demeanor, he closed the window and looked at Kouryou.

"I know you would have stopped me. That is why I didn't mention it until now."

"Of course I would have stopped you! It's too dangerous! I could not possibly look the other way!"

"If you think it is dangerous, then you can go back and catch up with Risai."

"As if I could do that!" Kouryou practically shouted.

Taiki said with a bemused look, "Then what will you do? Place me under arrest?"

"I will return you to Risai by whatever means necessary."

"You're going to tie me up, then? I would run away otherwise. Your kijuu would never catch my Tora."

Kouryou was at a loss for words. Taiki was right. His kou was no match for a suugu. That meant his only recourse was to bind him hand and foot, something he could not possibly bring himself to do either.

"I'm going to Hakkei Palace," Taiki said again. "The only question that remains is whether you will go with me or turn back and catch up with Risai. Please decide on your next course of action."

Kouryou heaved another big sigh. "Answer me this only. Before we left Sekijou, you said you were hearkening to the Divine Will. Is that true?"

Taiki didn't answer.

"Or was that the most convenient explanation that you figured would sway me and Kyoshi?"

Taiki puzzled over the question for a minute before answering with a nod.

"I can't believe you'd do something so outrageous!"

"Yes, it is," Taiki murmured with wry humor. "It is entirely outrageous."

He crossed the room to the table and sat down. He picked up one of the handful of walnuts spilled across the tabletop and rolled it around in his hand, as if testing the soundness of the shell.

"Kouryou, I was born in Hourai."

"I know."

"I grew up in Hourai. At the age of ten, I was brought back to Mount Hou. There I chose Gyousou-sama as Emperor and returned to Tai. In the spring of the next year, I once again returned to Hourai."

"Of course. I know that too."

The exasperation in Kouryou's voice brought a flitting smile to Taiki's face.

"The fact of the matter is, I have lived in Tai all of six months and experienced winter only once." *It came as a complete shock*, he murmured to himself. He said aloud, "The climates of Tai and Hourai are completely different. Winters in Tai are very cold. Surprisingly so. Gyousou-sama once took me to the Forbidden Gate so we could look down on the city. The city was covered in white, a scene so beautiful it was almost frightening. I will never forget what I saw that day."

He glanced at the walnut. "*A beauty as pure as it is cruel and terrifying*. That was how Gyousou described it. That terrifying winter will soon be upon us."

Taken aback by this turn in the conversation, Kouryou caught his breath.

"The wind grows cold. Travelers don heavier and heavier coats. Snow will fall before long. Finally, snow will cover every last inch of everything. When that happens, a little walnut like this can spell the difference between life and death."

Taiki opened his fingers to reveal the walnut in his hand.

“Asen has cast the people aside. Town governments no longer function. Most have been abandoned to their own devices. How will the villagers of Touka fare this winter? What about the inhabitants of all the towns and villages we pass by every day? Will they have enough to eat? And if their stores of food run short, what will the people living there do?”

“Taiho—”

“Kouryou, before the snow completely shuts down the countryside, the minimum necessary steps must be taken to save the people of this kingdom.”

At last, Kouryou began to grasp something of Taiki’s state of mind, what was so incessantly driving him forward.

“And you’re saying that to bring that about, we must head for Hakkei Palace?”

“No emperor occupies the throne. Asen has no desire to save his own supposed subjects. In that case, I must step into the breach. That is the reason I am here, is it not?”

“I understand how you feel,” said Kouryou, clenching his fists. “I understand so well it hurts.”

“That is only the half of it,” Taiki said, interrupting him. “There are prisoners being held in the Imperial Palace. Seirai and Ganchou and Rousan.”

“Right,” Kouryou said with a nod.

“We cannot abandon them. Someone has to go to Hakkei Palace and ascertain their well-being and, if possible, rescue them.”

“I agree with you, but how would you bring that about? If you show up at Hakkei Palace, won’t you get apprehended and executed all over again?”

“Probably. But I do have a plan this time.”

Kouryou blinked. A way to get within spitting distance of Hakkei Palace without losing his life in the process? Was such a thing even possible?

“And this plan of yours?”

Taiki shook his head. “I can’t make any promises about the actual effectiveness of my plan, so I will say nothing for now. Because if it doesn’t work, we’ll have to come up with something else on the spot. If we had the time, I would prefer consulting with you on every detail. But that isn’t a viable option now. So I think it’s better to leave you in the dark. If I did a poor job laying out the course of action beforehand, and then suddenly had to do an about face, I’m not sure you’d be ready to follow my lead.”

“This is madness!”

“You’ve got a mountain of concerns, I know. But I don’t think it’s as crazy as you can imagine. I’ve been mulling over these strategies ever since we returned.” Taiki spoke in a subdued tone of voice. Then he added, “I honestly don’t think we’ll end up

dead. Simply believing *that* is a good place to begin. But if you stick with me, you'll be in for a lot of surprises, a lot of things that will make no sense. If you come along, I'll have to ask you to leave everything to me. Keep your own counsel and go with the flow."

"You are asking the impossible."

"Would it do any good to argue that this will be the safest course of action for both you and me?"

Taiki asked that question with an utterly straight face, to which Kouryou had no ready rebuttal.

"Are you saying there will be absolutely no risk to the Taiho's life?"

"I am saying that I will not do anything to cause the people of Tai—who up to now have shouldered so many hardships—to lose any more hope."

Kouryou did not understand where Taiki was going with all of this but he nodded anyway. He couldn't do much else.

The next day, Kouryou and Taiki headed straight to Kouki. These days, no one entered the city without their credentials being subjected to a thorough check. Anticipating such an eventuality, Doujin, the Touka village manager, had forged travel papers for them. Getting inside the city should not pose that great a challenge. The far larger obstacle came later.

While flying low over the countryside, eyes drawn upwards as Kouki's towering gray mountain drew ever closer, Kouryou asked, "So how do we get into Hakkei Palace?"

"Through the front door."

The sun hung low in the western sky when Kouryou and Taiki arrived at Kouki.

Rising like a bundle of stone pillars, the immense mountain soared into the sky, the hard, white contours of Mount Ryou'un framed against a light veil of clouds. Hakkei Palace was located at the summit of the mountain, though the lingering cloud cover hid it from view.

And yet there was no denying the beauty of the sight. The trees and shrubs clinging to the cliffs and outcroppings dotted the mountainside with daubs of dark green, vividly contrasted against the pale bare rock. The city traced undulating lines around the hilly base of the mountain, spreading out in waves of white. Glazed blue roof tiles covered many roofs and decorative crimson was visible everywhere.

Kouryou hadn't visited Kouki in six years, not since the launch of the military campaigns in Bun Province. After his promotion, his face had become a familiar sight to soldiers in other regiments as well. If he was recognized, he'd be arrested for desertion on the spot. Though he'd previously strayed into the vicinity of Kouki, confident of keeping clear of any danger, he'd never actually entered Kouki.

From the highway, Kouki appeared to be right on top of them. To his eyes, the city hadn't changed in those six years. His heartbeat drummed in his ears like an alarm bell. He forced himself to maintain a steady pace as they approached the massive southern gate.

The Horse Gate was a complex of five separate gates. The center gate was reserved for use by the emperor and Saiho alone. Kouryou got ready to present the travel papers they'd obtained in Touka and pass through one of the side gates into Kouki. But without a moment's hesitation, Taiki headed to the central gate.

Kouryou frantically called out under his breath. Taiki answered only with a small nod and walked right up to the guards at the gate. The guards exchanged dubious looks and lowered their lances to block the way.

"Who are you? If you're going to Kouki, use one of the side gates."

Disregarding the obvious wariness of the guards, Taiki said, "Please open the gate. Six years ago, an accident separated me from Kouki. I have returned at long last." Addressing the increasingly suspicious guards directly, he added, "I wish to convey a message to Asen-sama. My name is Taiki."

The flabbergasted Kouryou managed to clamp his mouth shut and maintain an even composure. That hardly mattered, because what Taiki said next left him speechless.

"I have made this unannounced visit in accordance to the Divine Will. I seek an audience with the new Emperor of Tai."

Chapter 22

[5-2] Asen is the new Emperor of Tai.

Kouryou wasn't the only one astonished by this statement. The guards and the local official who came running in response to the urgent summons were equally befuddled. Kouryou fully expected to get arrested along with Taiki. But after again confirming who they were and the reason for the visit, they were confined to an anteroom in the gate annex building.

This is the Taiho's plan? Kouryou desperately wanted to ask, except with guards posted right outside the door and on patrol around the gate, the risk of being overheard was too great.

This is still completely mad.

However calm and collected he appeared on the outside, a cold sweat ran down his back. He just didn't see anybody believing this lie. To start with, Gyousou still lived. It was flatly impossible for the Divine Will to be overturned while the emperor was alive. A child could see through Taiki's claim that Asen was the "new emperor."

For Asen, this was a heaven-sent opportunity. He'd tried to kill Taiki once before, and here was the kirin showing up on his doorstep. If the kirin died, so did the emperor. Asen failed to assassinate Gyousou on Kan'you Mountain. Now he could kill Taiki and eliminate the emperor in one fell swoop.

Any minute now, soldiers are going to burst into the room with daggers drawn.

Imagining that imminent moment, his hands trembled. Kouryou caught his breath and waited for the gathering storm to arrive. He heard a flurry of approaching footsteps, steeled his resolve, and prepared to go on the offensive. But the only person who appeared before them was the aforementioned official.

No sooner had he entered the room but he knelt down. "I am deeply sorry to have kept you waiting," he said, practically prostrating himself on the floor. If nothing else, his excessive politeness sucked all the tension out of the room. The soldiers accompanying him bowed in unison. They showed no signs of exposing Taiki to any kind of danger.

"I will show you the way. Please, after me."

So they were not being treated as a hostile presence. The guards did not even inspect their personal effects or confiscate their packs or Kouryou's sword, and returned their kijuu to them.

Are we going to at least make it past this first obstacle unscathed?

Kouryou finally allowed himself a quiet sigh of relief. The official leading the way stuck to the main thoroughfare and exited the gate area, at which point he urged Taiki and Kouryou to get on their kijuu. He followed alongside. A cordon of soldiers surrounded them, but in a manner more typical of guards escorting a nobleman.

Now that Kouryou could cool his head and think rationally, it all made sense. Only the word of a kirin could vouch for the Word of Heaven. The Word of Heaven being communicated through the kirin was itself a miracle, and nobody else had any way of discerning the authenticity of what the kirin said. All they could do was bow and acquiesce.

The Word of Heaven had declared Gyousou emperor. Kouryou never doubted that it must be so because that's what the kirin said. It never occurred to him to doubt what he'd been told. The same must be true of everyone everywhere in this world. In that case, Taiki's plan wasn't half bad.

If Asen was the new emperor, he would have no cause to hurt Taiki. Far from it, he would make protecting Taiki a priority out of sheer self-interest. In short, Taiki had guaranteed his own safety.

As the Saiho, or rather, exercising his authority as the Province Lord of Zui, Taiki could then act on behalf of the people. Thinking about Taiki's plan in these terms, Kouryou had to admit that the crazy scheme might actually work.

The problem was how far this particular lie would travel.

There was no fallback strategy here. The White Pheasant hadn't sung. No auspicious omens had occurred. Asen would know full well that Gyousou hadn't died. There should be no good reason to believe that a new emperor occupied the throne. No matter how many people they fooled at first, somewhere and at some point, the doubts and suspicions were bound to blossom.

Why hadn't the White Pheasant fallen from its perch? Why hadn't it uttered its portentous cry? Those questions alone exposed the fatal flaw in the plan. This house of cards was bound to blow over in the slightest breeze.

Wrestling with so many reasons to feel relieved and many more reasons for profound concern, Kouryou and Taiki continued north on the main thoroughfare that bisected the city from south to north. With so many eyes on them, Kouryou didn't risk conversing with Taiki but focused his attention on the sights and sounds of Kouki.

Even inside the ramparts, the city looked the same. The luxurious avenues, the side streets lined with small shops and bustling with pedestrians. There was no sign of the impoverished people that lived in a place like Ten Shire. Nothing had changed since he left for Bun Province, not the streets he'd once walked or the stores he'd once frequented.

Or Hakkei Palace.

The Highland Gate—the entrance to the palace—hadn't changed either. They walked through the gate and passed by the Hall of Government. From the Warehouse Gate to the Pheasant Gate, one gate after the next, they ascended the Imperial Palace, finally exiting the Zenith Gate just below the Sea of Clouds.

Here the government ministries and official residences spread out across the mountainside. Soldiers did not normally live in the Imperial Palace. The generals of the six divisions of the Imperial Army and their regimental commanders were exceptions. The generals lived above the Sea of Clouds. The regimental commanders had manors here in the Administrative Palace below the Sea of Clouds.

Kouryou had always thought it too much of a bother to live in the Administrative Palace. He did have the run of a small manse he rarely stayed in, though he visited his colleagues at their manors on a regular basis. As a result, he was well used to the sights and sounds of the Administrative Palace.

I wonder where are they and what are they doing now?

Kouryou doubted they were all safe and sound. The painful but undeniable realization was that he must have lost some of his friends and colleagues in the intervening six years.

The Road Gate stood to the north of the Administrative Palace, as if carved out of the cliffs. There they dismounted from their kijuu and were escorted inside the Gate Hall and shown to a room deep within the building. The official opened the door and ushered them into a small anteroom.

"Please wait here," he said, and turned to leave.

Fixing a stare on the official, Kouryou stepped forward and held the door. He scanned the room and caught his breath. "What is the meaning of this?"

The windowless room was furnished with a single desk and two chairs. It rather resembled a subterranean prison cell.

The official looked over his shoulder as he backed out of the door.

"You're tossing us into jail?" Kouryou demanded, his voice hoarse.

The official alone turned his frightened eyes toward Kouryou as he exited the room at practically a run. The door slammed shut. Kouryou didn't hear the sound of a lock sliding into place but he sensed a sizable contingent of soldiers waiting just outside the room. They were being detained, no doubt about it.

Taiki turned to him, a puzzled expression on his face. "What is going on?"

Kouryou felt his stomach clench up. It looked like the powers that be hadn't bought their tall tale after all.

Asen and his supporters should treat any pronouncement declaring Asen the new emperor as good news. Impossible that *this* was how they treated the kirin who came bearing such glad tidings. They should joyfully give him a warm reception at his living quarters in the Inner Palace, certainly not treat them like prisoners.

Kouryou could only conclude that Taiki's lie had fallen flat.

Except he found it hard to believe they'd be brought all the way to the Road Gate with the sole intent of turning the tables at the last minute and executing them. Even so, soldiers could be massing outside the door, debating the right moment to rush in. In which case, Kouryou had to make sure that Taiki escaped. Alas, the cell had no windows and offered no other means of escape.

Our only chance is when the soldiers charge through the door.

The instant the door opened, they'd muscle the soldiers out of the way and run for it. They had to get through the anteroom door as well. If the anteroom door was secured and more soldiers were waiting for them in there, they wouldn't be going anywhere.

Even if he cut them all down and they fled the Gate Hall, then what? They could hardly expect their kijuu to be waiting for them. Kouryou felt himself overcome by a cold wave of hopelessness.

He said under his breath, "Taiho, no matter what, stay behind me."

Taiki answered with a smile. "Don't get ahead of yourself. We are not necessarily in any more danger than we were before."

"But—"

"It's only natural that they'd be more wary than usual. Some kid shows up out of the blue calling himself Taiki and they're going to just take his word for it?"

Of course, Kouryou was about to say, before he clamped his mouth shut. And all the more so hearing him say so aloud. *Of course*. That was the reflexive impulse that immediately crossed his mind. Supposing that the kirin showed up and called himself Taiki, there should be no room for doubt.

Because whether he was or wasn't the kirin should be clear as day. Because of his golden hair.

It was common sense to someone like Kouryou, who had been around since the dynasty of Emperor Kyou. The color of the kirin's mane—that golden hair—was a symbol unique to the kirin. Even if a kirin went to the trouble of concealing his identity, he could prove who he was in an instant. And as far as that went, there'd be no need for him to "prove" anything.

However, Taiki was the Black Kirin. His cropped hair was black, a somewhat odd color in the Twelve Kingdoms, but still a world away from the golden mane of most kirin. Forthrightly stating who he was wouldn't convince most people on the spot.

"It's only natural that the authorities would take a closer look at such claims. At the same time, they hedged their bets and brought us this far into the Imperial Palace. Once we cross paths with a familiar face, all will become clear. Please relax."

Taiki calmly sat down on one of the chairs. Perhaps he really didn't sense any danger in the air, for he did not appear particularly perturbed.

Kouryou said, "Did you anticipate that we would end up like this?"

"Like this?"

"Getting locked in a room like this."

Taiki responded with a small nod. "I considered the possibility of being arrested and detained. As things stand now, Asen is going to see me as the enemy, so it's possible we may be forcibly separated, a possibility we must strenuously resist." He added with a small smile, "Alas, to tell the truth, I have not been able to decide on the best way to do that, only that we'd be better off sticking together."

"Yes," Kouryou said with a nod of his own.

"Given that they didn't tie us up or take your weapons and left us here together, I believe they bear us no malice."

Kouryou didn't disagree with what Taiki was saying. He nodded again. At last he felt the tension draining from his body. Thinking about the situation in common sense terms, even if Asen concluded that Taiki's statement about him being the new emperor was a complete fabrication, he had no need to deal with Taiki on the spot.

He would at least investigate the matter first. Realizing that Kouryou was Taiki's only retainer, rather than kicking up a fuss, he'd settle the matter by quietly locking them away somewhere.

Like they were right now.

Chapter 23

[5-3] **R**elieved from the strain of all that stress, Kouryou now found himself keeping company with his own thoughts. A long minute passed, and then another. His confusion only deepened. Why were they being left alone like this for such a long time?

“What the hell is going on?” he grumbled with a good deal of pique.

The sunlight had long disappeared from the gap beneath the door. By now, a puzzled look had even risen to Taiki’s face. Finally reaching the limits of his patience, Kouryou strode toward the door. He was about to demand answers from the soldiers on the other side when the door abruptly opened.

“Hoh.”

Finding Kouryou right in front of him, the middle-aged government official pulled back in surprise and then hurriedly corrected his posture.

“Excuse me. You gave me a start.”

“Sorry about that. I was getting a little stir crazy in here and was going to pester the guards with some questions.”

The official, a man of small stature, bowed deeply. “I apologize for the long wait. My name is Heichuu. I am a valet with the Ministry of Heaven.”

This particular rank of valet waited upon the Emperor and Saiho and assisted them in the conduct of their personal business. The position was not unknown to Kouryou. Because of his commission in the Palace Guard, he had often associated with those who served the emperor. Still, the name of Heichuu did not ring any bells.

Though on second thought, that did make some sense. This valet didn’t belong to Gyousou’s retinue but Asen’s, and Kouryou would expect considerable turnover in Asen’s inner circle.

The valet turned to Taiki and bowed low to the floor. “It took some time to make ready your quarters. I apologize for the delay.”

He motioned for them to proceed to the door. The five soldiers posted outside the room were not wearing armor but regular military dress. They did not appear on edge or ready for a fight.

“Your kijuu were entrusted to the stables with instructions to take the utmost care. You have nothing to worry about in their regard.”

He indicated the end of the corridor. A soldier with a lantern led the way. Passing through a passageway hewn out of the rough rock, they exited onto a long colonnade set into the face of Ryou’un Mountain. On one side was a white wall carved out of the

bare rock. On the other, beyond the retaining wall filling in the spaces between the stone pillars, the vast expanse of sky was filled with glimmering moonlight. The Sea of Clouds hovered just above their heads. The countryside unfurled beneath them.

“There are several inquiries we wish to make of you but you must be tired. You should rest for now.”

Heichuu opened a door bored into the rock wall. Another long colonnade climbed up and down the side of the mountain before widening at the end into a portico. Beyond a doorway of solid wood decorated with black iron hardware, the portico merged into a small living room furnished with only the bare necessities.

At the back of the room was another heavily engraved doorway, and through that doorway was a space larger than the parlor in both width and depth. Facing the entranceway along the back wall was a set of folding screen doors inset with glass. The bright glow of the lamps illuminated the interior. The room was filled with luxurious furniture.

Having shown them to their quarters, Heichuu bowed deeply to Taiki while gesturing toward the couch. “Your dinner will arrive shortly. Please accept our apologies. These were the only accommodations available on such short notice. Rest assured they are only temporary.”

After several deep bows, he backed out of the room as if yanked by a rope. Taking this as their cue, the soldiers who’d accompanied them shut the door. This time Kouryou clearly heard the clank of a bolt being thrown.

“Heichuu-dono—” a flustered Kouryou called out after him.

No answer came from the other side of the door.

More strange goings-on.

Kouryou looked around the room. Everything was perfectly arranged, the furniture and fixtures all of the highest quality. Kouryou crossed the room with long strides. Except for the parlor, he counted four doorways facing the main room. Three of them led to finely accoutered bedrooms with luxurious beds. The fourth appeared to be a study, equipped with a large regal desk and shelves.

Opening the folding doors revealed a veranda as wide as the main room carved into the rock face. The countryside lay far below them. Covering the face of the veranda was a finely crafted latticework of iron bars.

What a nice jail cell this is, Kouryou fumed.

At the same time, the cause of his unease became clearer. Though Heichuu told them his name, he never asked for Taiki’s name and didn’t once refer to him as Taiho. Even while walking alongside him, Heichuu hadn’t asked Kouryou who he was.

They were below the Sea of Clouds. The heavens above the Sea of Clouds were home to the inner sanctum of the Imperial Palace. Here they were on the other side

of the palace wall, so to speak. By rights, the Saiho did not live beneath the Sea of Clouds. For Taiki, the “Imperial Palace” meant the *Enchou*, the buildings that encompassed the Imperial Living Quarters of the Inner Palace and the Imperial Court of the Outer Palace. As far as Taiki was concerned, he had yet to be welcomed into the Imperial Palace.

How to explain what was going on? Pondering that question, Kouryou felt a cold night breeze sweep around him and closed the doors to the veranda.

Taiki glanced at Kouryou. He said with a small smile and a knowing expression, “You look like a man who doesn’t trust the direction he’s headed in.”

“That is indeed the case. Taiho, are you fine with all this?”

Taiki answered with a small shrug. “And by fine you mean?”

“I mean—”

Kouryou swallowed the rest of the sentence. This was neither the time nor the place to question the state of their elaborate deception. The doors notwithstanding, soldiers might still be posted in the parlor. Nor could he dismiss the possibility that spies were eavesdropping on them.

Taiki sensed where he was going and said with a nod, “Impatience will get us nowhere. Let’s give things time to work out on their own.”

“Sure,” Kouryou agreed.

Having kicked the wheels into motion, as Taiki said, all they could do now was go along for the ride.

After that, Heichuu personally supervised the serving of their dinner, though he demonstrated not the slightest inclination to keep them company. Beyond uttering the occasional polite word with a courteous air, he said nothing of substance and studiously avoided answering any of Kouryou’s questions. When asked how long they were going to stay there, he only said that he didn’t know.

They could only conclude that Heichuu had been given sole responsibility for Taiki and Kouryou. He knew nothing beyond that. Asen wasn’t about to come bounding in, and neither was any other high official. The soldiers weren’t going to storm into the room for an interrogation. So no warm welcomes but no signs of impending danger either. They were very much being left alone.

Kouryou found it all incomprehensible. He could understand a cross-examination by a host of suspicious wardens. But simply being abandoned like this?

The status quo didn’t change the next day. Any question posed to Heichuu went unanswered. Kouryou tried striking up a conversation with the guards posted outside the parlor door and got nowhere.

“What is the meaning of all this?” Kouryou raged after another day of fruitless waiting.

Heichuu averted his gaze and said nothing while he gathered up the dishes from the evening meal.

“At the very least, you could show the Taiho some respect!”

For whatever reason, Heichuu responded to this request with a small bow. He delivered the dishes to the soldiers outside the door. In exchange, he brought in a tea tray and set it on the table.

“So this is how you behave in front of the Taiho, eh? Uncouth bastard.”

Confronted by Kouryou’s intimidating demeanor, Heichuu took an anxious step backwards. He was about to beat a hasty retreat out of the room when Kouryou stepped in front of him.

“Explaining what’s going on here is *your* responsibility.”

“I’m sorry,” Heichuu squeaked in a small voice. He stepped around Kouryou and headed for the door.

“Hey!” Kouryou grabbed him by the arm.

“Kouryou,” Taiki said in a soft voice, “You can’t blame Heichuu for any of this. Please show him more respect.”

Heichuu gulped a sigh of relief. Kouryou glared at him, then turned to Taiki. “I’ve had enough of this nonsense. This is nothing more than house arrest.”

“Something we can’t do anything about for now,” Taiki answered with a wry smile. “The fact of the matter is, the two of us are Asen’s enemies.”

“But—”

“I’m sure being cooped up like this is getting on your nerves. Heichuu likely doesn’t know why either. And even if he did, it’s equally likely he was ordered to say nothing to us. Were he to strike up a conversational tone, he might well be seen as colluding with the enemy. Try to see things from Heichuu’s point of view.”

Taiki added with a nod to Heichuu, “Kouryou is concerned for my safety, you see. I hope you will take no offense at his actions.”

“Of course not,” Heichuu replied with a bow.

“Thank you for all you have done. Please take your leave and have a good night’s rest.”

With another bow, Heichuu proceeded to the door. But upon reaching it, he turned back. “Um—” he began hesitantly. He faced Taiki. “With all due respect, are you really the Taiho?”

“Yes,” Taiki responded simply.

Heichuu stood there like a statue in obvious consternation.

Kouryou said, “If he wasn’t the Taiho, who did you think he was?”

“I—all I was told was that he was somebody claiming to be the Taiho.”

“Ah,” said Kouryou, with the look of a man for whom everything was becoming clear. “He is most definitely the Taiho. You’ll have to take my word for it, though. I can’t exactly prove it to you.”

“Then Kouryou-sama is the Taiho’s bodyguard?”

“I was previously a regimental commander in the Palace Guard. The responsibility of being his defender fell rather unexpectedly into my lap. But I did know the Taiho before and had several opportunities to serve him in the course of my duties.”

“But if he is, as you say, most definitely the Taiho, then why is he being detained here?”

Kouryou gaped at him. “That’s what *I* want to know! Why is he being treated like this?”

Heichuu shook his head in a manner that suggested he had no idea why. If he indeed had been told Taiki was only *claiming* to be the Taiho, then someone somewhere must harbor doubts about his identity. The problem was, if that was the case, then why hadn’t he been handed over to that someone for questioning?

“It’s only natural that my identity should be in doubt,” Taiki broke in. “Though if I met with Asen-sama, all those questions could be cleared up in an instant. Please tell that to the people who sent you here.”

“Yes,” Heichuu said with an ambiguous nod and retreated from the room.

Taiki watched the door close and sighed to himself.

Kouryou was about to speak up when a look from Taiki and a shake of his head warned him otherwise. So Taiki as well sensed the presence of the soldiers stationed in the nooks off the parlor. Taiki was right to be on his guard about people listening in.

There was no telling whether the way they were being treated was a good or ill omen. Given this turn of events, Kouryou wanted to ask if Taiki could still assist the people as he hoped. He closed his mouth.

With a bob of his head, Taiki cast his eyes toward the veranda. The moon was rising in the cold night air. Across the countryside below, set aglow by the moonlight, the leaves on the trees were beginning to turn.

Chapter 24

[5-4] Kouryou awoke the next morning to a cool draft and the faint sound of something moving about. He reached for his sword. A quick glance from the couch in the living room to the entranceway confirmed the door was closed. He breathed a silent sigh of relief. Taking another look around the living room, he saw Taiki walking to the veranda.

Startled to see Kouryou sitting up, Taiki stopped in his tracks. "Good morning. Looks like I woke you."

He said so apologetically though Kouryou was the one who felt abashed. Because he hadn't even heard Taiki leaving his room.

"Going outside? It's cold out there."

"I'll be okay. You can go back to sleep."

Taiki stepped onto the veranda. Kouryou released his grip on the sword and sighed again. Something was bound to happen sometime but he had no idea what or when. The parlor door could be locked from the outside. There was no way to lock it from the inside. The door swung open into the parlor so securing it from inside the living room was practically impossible.

Anybody could walk right in whenever he wanted to. That's why Kouryou slept in the living room. And still he hadn't heard Taiki get out of bed.

What am I going to do about this?

He was getting rusty. Those six years of idleness had taken the edge off. His senses were razor sharp when he first went on the lam in Bun Province. In the intervening years, wandering here and there, that state of alertness had dropped off to a considerable extent. Considering the little distance that separated them, the Kouryou from six years ago would have been wide awake the moment Taiki opened his eyes.

This was no different than the kind of situational awareness required on the battlefield when a night attack was in the offing. And yet Taiki had made it to the veranda door before he woke up. Kouryou felt as sluggish as an earthworm.

Supposing that Taiki had taken all due precautions and concealed his presence to keep Kouryou from taking notice, a true soldier still would have been wide awake as soon as Taiki got out of bed. Remaining able to draw on those inner reserves of strength while maintaining that level of vigilance was the ideal.

Aside from how possible such an ideal actually was, that it ought to be went without saying in the military. Kouryou had once achieved it for himself and sought it out among his subordinates.

Just how wretched a condition is this body of mine in?

"Pull yourself together," he scolded himself. Right now, he was the only person who could protect Taiki. It was no exaggeration to say that by doing so he was protecting all of Tai.

These thoughts on his mind, Kouryou followed Taiki onto the veranda. Taiki glanced over his shoulder and gave Kouryou a pensive look. "Something wrong?"

He tapped the latticework. The surface of the black iron was wrapped in a white shroud. Frost. The season was turning inexorably toward winter.

Kouryou put a hand on Taiki's back and nudged him back into the living room.

"So it's finally time for the frost to fall. Seems a little late this year."

"A little late?"

"I haven't seen frost on the ground until now, later than most years. Come to think about it, this year has been a bit warmer than most."

"You don't say," Taiki mumbled to himself. His shirt was cold to the touch. A cold wind blew across the veranda.

A fire wasn't lit in the living room. Kouryou at least wanted to get Taiki something hot to drink but that meant waiting for Heichuu to show up. He didn't even have a warm tunic to wrap around him. Neither of them carried much in the way of clothing. They hadn't packed with winter in mind.

"Is it still warm in Hourai this time of year?"

"The mornings are usually cool, though it still gets warm during the day."

"Quite a different world. What time of the year does snow begin to fall in Hourai?"

"Around December. But I don't think the calendars match up exactly. When I returned from Hourai, the calendar was a month off."

"Huh," Kouryou muttered. He hadn't imagined that even the *calendars* would be different.

Taiki said with a soft laugh, "The last time I was here, I was really surprised when it started snowing in October. I thought at first that winters came early in Tai. But that was because the calendars didn't match up. It was more like November in Hourai. Though snow falling at the beginning of November in my home town is almost unheard of too." He grinned. "As a child, I remember feeling how strange it all was, and yet I accepted it for what it was. For a kid who grew up in Hourai, everything around me was aglow with fantastic and wondrous things."

"Aglow with fantastic and wondrous things?"

"And strangest of all were the kirin. When I was told that they were beasts at heart and could at any time revert to that form, I was completely dumbfounded."

"Yeah, I think I can see where you're coming from."

As a human being, Kouryou had no difficulty imagining how bewildering such a revelation must have been. The kirin weren't the only creatures who could transform

from human to beast and back again. Hanjuu could too. But attempting to grasp what that actually involved always left him with those feelings of the mysterious.

Kouryou abruptly asked the question on his mind at that moment, though he did so with all the nonchalance he could muster. “Taiho, did you perhaps think this world was a bizarre place?”

“Not at all,” Taiki said with bright eyes. “Quite the opposite. I thought all the fantastic craziness was really fun.” He added as a casual aside, “Mount Hou in particular is both a beautiful and a pleasant place to live. Thinking about it now makes me kind of nostalgic.”

Mount Hou was the holy mountain where the kirin were raised.

“Nostalgic, eh?” Kouryou responded when a voice rang out from beyond the door. Heichuu had arrived with breakfast.

Kouryou opened the door to find Heichuu there as expected. This morning, a female attendant accompanied him. The two of them bowed to the floor at the door before proceeding into the living room.

“I brought with me a lady of the court to be at your service.”

Heichuu glanced over his shoulder at the woman behind him. The court lady appeared to be a woman in her forties. Her plump cheeks lent her a warm and pleasant demeanor.

She knelt and identified herself as “Shouwa.”

“Shouwa,” Taiki echoed, with a tilt of his head.

“Yes,” the woman responded. She lifted her head and looked at Taiki with unblinking eyes. A moment later, those eyes filled with tears. “Taiho—are you doing well?”

As soon as he heard her voice, Taiki jumped up and ran across the room and fell to his knees in front of her. “Aren’t you Shouwa? My lady-in-waiting?”

The ladies-in-waiting of Shouwa’s rank looked after high-ranked officials. They handled the many small but necessary chores that cropped up in the course of their daily lives.

“Oh my!” Shouwa exclaimed. “How this brings back the old days. Just look how big you’ve grown!” Daubing at her eyes with her sleeves, she began to weep in earnest.

Taiki placed his hand on her shoulder. “I am pleased to see you safe and sound after such a long time.”

“Oh, I worried about you so much. There’s nothing wrong with you, is there? You’re eating and sleeping well? You don’t feel out of sorts, do you?” She again faced him squarely. “What a fine young man you’ve become! Nothing in this world could have made me happier. Though I can’t help regretting that I wasn’t there while you were growing up.”

Shouwa buried her face in her sleeves. Looking on, Heichuu let out a long sigh and sat down on the floor next to her as if the energy had suddenly drained out of him.

“You really are the Taiho?”

“Of course he is!” Shouwa said with unexpected vehemence. And here he is in a room more like a jail and without any of his attendants!”

“Ahh—” Heichuu was literally at a loss for words.

Shouwa dried her tears with the undersleeves of her kimono. Then she bounced to her feet and strode to the soldiers behind her and retrieved the serving trays from them.

“It was cold this morning so the breakfast is cold as well,” she said, briskly arranging the dishes on the table. “I see no one has stopped by to clean the premises. And these gentlemen are wearing little better than rags! Heichuu-dono, please see to it that these matters are taken care of.”

“Oh, yes. My apologies.”

The care of the kirin was once entrusted in its entirety to these ladies-in-waiting. Taiki was a child at the time, having left Mount Hou a short time before. While at Mount Hou, he’d been attended to by the muses of Mount Hou, the female sages charged with raising him. With that in mind, Kouryou heard that Gyousou instructed Taiki’s ladies-in-waiting to create as similar an environment as possible.

Alas, Shouwa explained, most of the women who once served Taiki had long since left the Imperial Palace.

The shoku occurred six years before on the grounds of the Imperial Palace. *Here* and *there*—that enchanted and magical country known as Hourai—mingled together and swallowed up Taiki. The shoku caused tremendous damage in Tai. In Bun Province at the time, Kouryou heard that many buildings were wrecked and government officials injured.

The court ladies were in a house adjacent to the living quarters—Taiki’s home at the time—and were spared any injuries. But with Asen’s subsequent rise as the pretender, they scattered to the four winds.

Shouwa said as she served them, “Asen said the emperor was dead and Taiki had been swept away by a shoku and would never return.”

Asen claimed the shoku that stole Taiki away appeared completely out of the blue. But rumors soon spread that the shoku was a *meishoku*, triggered by a kirin *in extremis*. If that was the case, then Asen must have been the attacker. The ladies-in-waiting who cared for Taiki opposed Asen with one voice. As a result, some were punished severely, others were stripped of their titles and positions and expelled from the Imperial Palace, and the rest eventually left of their own accord.

Shouwa stayed at her post, even while weathering a storm of severe censure. She did not bend a knee in the slightest to Asen. As a reward, she was relegated to the kind of menial chores usually handled by maidservants and houseboys.

At the time of the shoku, many of the servants who weren't listed upon the Registry of Wizards were badly injured. It was up to the government officials who had served Taiki and Gyousou to fill the ranks. Or so the reasoning went.

Shouwa once worked in the Zui Province Ministry of Heaven. She was appointed a lady-in-waiting and personally attended to Taiki. Now she spent most days washing dishes for the cooks in the palace kitchens.

"Life's been pretty hard on you."

"It was all but a passing shower once I was able to see you again." Shouwa picked up the teapot, a smile dimpling her face. "Nothing could make me happier than being able to serve you as I once did."

Chapter 25

[5-5] As if eager to fill the emptiness left by all the fruitless days that preceded this one, Shouwa worked without pause, ordering Heichuu about as they refitted the bedrooms and turned the living room into a comfortable living space.

She finally retrieved the dirty dishes and said, "I shall have Heichuu-dono make sure this place gets a good cleaning. So much dust cannot be good for the Taiho's health. After I return these to the cook, I will find more suitable clothing for the Taiho." She paused. "Where were the Taiho's items stored away? No, that hardly matters. None of those clothes would fit him now. I'll see what I can put together."

"You too," she said to Kouryou. "When I get back, we'll see if we can't do something about your wardrobe."

Leaving those words in her wake, she scurried out of the room, though not before pressing a bundle of dish towels into Heichuu's hands. Eyes wide, he watched her leave, letting out a big sigh only after the door closed behind her with a soft click.

"Goodness gracious!" he exclaimed with a shake of his head that tossed his white hair back and forth, creating a scene no less comical.

Kouryou chuckled. "A force of nature."

"And one altogether needed," Heichuu said. "I have hardly done my duty until today. Shouwa was certainly correct in her assessment." He again bowed to Taiki. "I must apologize profusely for the many slights you have so unjustly incurred."

"Oh, think nothing of it. No one could have expected you to act in any other way."

"I am grateful for such kind words."

Kouryou added, "It'd be only natural to be suspicious of some kid who showed up out of the blue calling himself the Taiho."

"That is also deeply reassuring to hear. I know I am making excuses, but I did not previously have the pleasure of meeting the Taiho."

"Was yours a recent appointment?"

"No. Previously—well, until quite recently, in fact—I was an undersecretary at large in the Interior Ministry. Quite out of the blue, I was made a valet and appointed the Taiho's personal assistant."

"Who is currently in charge of the Ministry of Heaven?"

"His name is Risshou-sama. He served under the Minister of Spring so you likely never met him."

"I've heard rumors that Kaihaku-sama went missing." When Kouryou was dispatched to Bun Province, Kaihaku was the Minister of Heaven.

“Because of the shoku. His whereabouts are still unknown.”

“Oh,” Kouryou muttered.

This news left Taiki all the more dejected. “The shoku sure caused all sorts of damage.”

“Yes—well—what you’d expect—”

—*what you’d expect from a shoku*, Heichuu meant to say before his voice dropped to a whisper. Word around the palace was that, of the high officials in Gyousou’s inner circle, only Chou’un, the Minister of Spring, remained in the Imperial Court. Also that Eichuu, the Chousai, died from injuries suffered during the shoku. Kaihaku disappeared. Senkaku of the Ministry of Earth was executed by Asen.

Kaei, the Minister of Fall, and Haboku, the Minister of Summer, escaped the Imperial Palace to places unknown. Rousan of the Ministry of Winter was dismissed from his post.

“Is Rousan faring well?”

“I think so. A person in my position doesn’t know a good deal of such goings-on. At the very least, I’ve heard nothing to suggest he was executed or any rumors that he fled the palace.”

“Rumors, eh?” Kouryou said.

“Ah, yes. The fact of the matter is, I can’t say anything definitive about the inner workings of the palace these days. All I know for certain is what goes on around me. Everything else is based on hearsay.”

“In other words, the flow of information is being blocked somewhere along the line?”

Heichuu craned his head to the side. “I don’t get the feeling that anybody is actively intervening to stop that knowledge from getting out. If I had to describe what’s going on, I’d say the information gets—well—*scattered*.”

“Scattered?” Kouryou asked.

Heichuu again craned his head to the side and thought about it but couldn’t find the right words to articulate that feeling.

As a government worker, Heichuu rose through the ranks during the final years of Emperor Kyou’s reign. He started as an executive assistant in the upper echelons of the bureaucracy and steadily added to his resume. At the time, he considered his portfolio the kingdom itself. Cracks were already showing in the dynasty of Emperor Kyou. Many worried that the Imperial Court was beginning to list.

Despite those conditions, Heichuu felt a firm sense of belonging. He was a subject of the kingdom, a part of the whole. Falling behind in his work would only shift the burden to his coworkers and frustrate his superiors, the trouble then spilling over to other departments. There was a clear cause and effect. He knew what he was doing and why.

And if he didn't know why, he could always find someone who did. He understood his place and his purpose in the whole that was the Kingdom of Tai.

That didn't change during the waning days of Emperor Kyou's dynasty or during the era of the empty throne. No matter how distorted in outward appearance, the kingdom was there and he knew his place in it. He grasped how his work contributed to the governance of the kingdom. If not, he could always come up with a plausible explanation.

He observed his colleagues getting on with their jobs and their superiors passing the results of their work up the chain of command. He had long figured out how information moved from the bottom to the top in an organization. He was no less familiar with the people who made it happen. Even without every seeing them or meeting them in person, based on his own eyes and ears and from the grapevine, he knew *somebody* was there and he had a good idea what they were doing.

In short, he never lost that feeling of people being behind the scenes and making sure the wheels of government kept turning.

That was the case at first during the Asen's reign. Despite the Imperial Court being in disarray, with a complete lack of coordinated efforts here and inexplicable delays there, such that there seemed no way to surmount the problems they faced, everything still made sense.

However, little by little, that was no longer true.

Perhaps it started with the high officials injured and killed by the shoku. And then in the process of seizing control of the Imperial Court, Asen dismissed and reassigned many senior officials or had them executed. Many more government workers were replaced or simply disappeared, so often that Heichuu had no time to familiarize himself with their names or faces or dispositions.

The government of the Kingdom of Tai was incomprehensible in such a state. Except the same had also been true during the twilight of Emperor Kyou's dynasty and the era of the empty throne, and even soon after Gyousou's enthronement.

But those periods hardly resembled the current state of affairs. When a senior position opened up in a ministry or department, no one knew who would fill it. When it was filled, no one knew who that person was, what they did, or if they even existed. Nothing like this had happened before.

Whether Asen was a pretender or the emperor *pro tempore*, as the leader of the Imperial Court, he was nowhere to be seen. They at least knew who was ostensibly in charge of the Rikkan. Many more new faces were complete strangers. All anybody could say for certain was that a person was on the premises. No one knew what they did, what they intended to do, or in what direction they intended to move the kingdom. A complete mystery.

The organizational outlook had grown murky and incomprehensible, until nothing was clear and nothing made sense—as if they'd been swallowed up by a thick fog.

They at least knew that Asen, a former general of the Palace Guard, occupied the throne. When the shoku occurred, throwing the Imperial Court into chaos, they knew he had gone to great lengths to reassert control. They knew the means by which he seized an Imperial Court that had lost its emperor. They knew how he removed Gyousou's subordinates and replaced them with personnel he found more compliant, while pushing out anyone who might stand against him.

But in the process, something else began to change. The Ministry of Heaven, for example, in which Heichuu served. During Gyousou's reign, Kaihaku was the Minister of Heaven. Kaihaku went missing in the aftermath of the shoku. The assistant minister filled the post.

The reasonable expectation was that the assistant minister would reorganize the Imperial Palace according to Asen's plans. But at some point, he simply disappeared. His instructions to the Rikken grew further and further apart, and then without so much as a rumor about his departure, he wasn't there anymore.

After that, Risshou was appointed minister. Risshou previously worked as an assistant in the Ministry of Spring. The promotion made everyone blink. Even as an official in the imperial bureaucracy, Risshou came from the lowest ranks of the civil service. No one imagined him as one of the ministerial heads of the Rikken. The promotion defied common sense.

No one knew a thing about his career, about his accomplishments, or, at the very least, what kind of person he was. Everyone in Heichuu's circle drew a blank. In any case, the first question on their mind was whether "Minister of Spring" referred to Chou'un, the Minister of Spring under Gyousou, or the current Minister of Spring.

Then there was the mystery of what Risshou did every day. The ministerial reorganization already underway was left as is. The shake-up left many positions vacant. Heichuu's superiors had gaps in their ranks. And yet job assignments suddenly showed up out of the blue. From someplace above his pay grade, instructions came down to do this or that, with no indication of their origins or intentions.

Asking for clarifications only puzzled the person delivering the orders. No sooner did he do as he was told and get to work but a set of contradictory directives came down. These too were delivered on behalf of parties unknown and for reasons nobody knew, leaving Heichuu with no idea of which of the conflicting assignments to prioritize. Inquiries produced answers that in no way reconciled the problem. Repeated inquiries produced only silence.

Not that the original directives were withdrawn, just that whoever was sending them stopped communicating. Heichuu and his colleagues had no choice but to do as they were told.

They reasoned a power struggle was underway high in the bureaucracy and concluded that whatever side shut up first lost the argument. But that was mere conjecture. In any event, they learned not to be surprised when the orders to do a particular thing came at longer and longer intervals. And then, with no rush to competition and no one taking charge of the work done so far, the whole project was often simply tabled.

“That is pretty much the pattern,” Heichuu said. “My fellow colleagues and I haven’t the slightest idea what is going on.”

This latest incident involving Taiki and Kouryou proved to be no exception. Heichuu was an administrative official at large in the Interior Ministry. His job involved keeping the administrative laws and the institutions that managed the civil service in working order. And then he was abruptly made a valet. No one took credit for the appointment and no reason was given.

One day he was summoned by the Minister of Internal Affairs, who was responsible for managing the personal lives of the Emperor and Taiho, and told that, as a valet, he was now to look after this person calling himself the Taiho.

For Heichuu, it was a demotion from his position as an administrative official. He must have messed up somewhere to get shuffled out of his post, but if so, no one told him, leaving him in the dark as to why he ended up a valet. He was only told to get the job done, with no indication of how he was supposed to get the job done or who could tell him.

He asked his new direct supervisor, the emperor’s head butler, but the head butler had no idea that Heichuu had been appointed a valet. His only question to Heichuu was, “Who are you again?”

After that, word must have come down from above, and then the head butler’s only advice was, “Do as you see fit.” There was a person calling himself the Taiho waiting at the Road Gate. “See that he’s taken care of. The rest is up to you.”

That was the sum total of Heichuu’s job description.

So he had to prepare a place for them to stay. When he proposed the Taiho’s residential estate in the Imperial Palace, he was hastily informed that it was far too soon to allow them access to the Inner Court.

“Then where?” he inquired. “What place would be appropriate to his status? How long could he be expected to stay? What kind of reception should he be given?”

Heichuu received a satisfactory answer to only the first question. But when he approached the property manager for the key, the manager hadn’t heard about any

such goings-on. Heichuu got similar responses when it came to catering meals and arranging for the bedding and practically everything else.

Finally, Heichuu met separately with the supervising party in each case, presented his credentials, introduced himself, and explained the situation, basically starting the whole process over from the beginning each time.

“That is how things have gone on all along. That’s how we end up doing what our betters tell us to do. Everything else we figure out on our own. We have no other choice. I imagine it’s equally true of the people handing down the orders. Maybe every civil servant in the imperial bureaucracy is in the same situation that we are.”

Again, Heichuu said it was like an impenetrable fog had enveloped the Imperial Palace. He could clearly make out his own immediate surroundings, but expand the view and objects farther away grew vague and indistinct before disappearing from view.

Is this how a kingdom loses its way? Kouryou asked himself as he listened to Heichuu. He could only answer the question in the affirmative. This was why the kingdom could do nothing for the people. The kingdom itself was losing the very shape and form and substance that made it a kingdom.

“I wonder what Asen is up to?” Kouryou asked this question aloud.

Heichuu took the query as addressed to him. “These days, it seems Asen-sama has holed himself up in the Imperial Palace and rarely shows his face in public.”

“He doesn’t appear in public?”

“That’s right. I’ve heard that anything having to do with the kingdom is handled entirely by Chou’un-sama and his faction. Asen-sama left everything up to him and hunkered down in his quarters. But even more curious than that—”

Heichuu lowered his voice to a loud whisper. “Rumors say that Asen shutting himself away like this has given Chou’un-sama a free rein and he is taking every advantage. Frankly, getting appointed a valet piqued my interest in palace politics and I’ve been asking around ever since. As best I can tell, Asen-sama hasn’t the slightest idea that the Taiho is on the premises.”

“Chou’un is covering it up?”

“That’s one possibility. If not Chou’un-sama, then somebody else with vested interests. People in my position have no way of knowing which.” Heichuu paused and said, again in hushed tones, “For some time now, I have been getting a strange feeling about this Imperial Court. Despite the number of civil servants working here, it often feels like a deserted ruin.”

Heichuu himself was pleased to hear the news that Asen was the new emperor, believing that now law and order would finally be restored to Tai. If the reign of a pretender, as it had come to be known, became a true and proper imperial dynasty,

Heichuu would happily be a part of it. But such a celebratory mood was nowhere to be found in the Imperial Palace.

“Like it never happened. Still as death. No, like everybody is holding their breath. Like they are all nervously waiting for the next shoe to drop.”

With that, as if suddenly realizing what he was saying out loud, Heichuu snapped his mouth shut. He said apologetically, “Forgive me. I have gone on much too long. I fear I have been speaking out of turn. Please forget everything I said.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kouryou said. “We didn’t hear a thing.”

Heichuu bowed his head in relief, then in a rushed manner began haphazardly wiping down the furniture with the bundle of dish towels he was holding. Kouryou watched him for a minute, then cast a glance at Taiki. He didn’t say anything but Taiki caught the gist and nodded.

News of Taiki’s presence hadn’t reached Asen. It was hard to believe that was really true. But it meant Asen didn’t know that Taiki had pronounced him the emperor. Maybe Chou’un was suppressing the information. If so, Chou’un might have reasons of his own to not celebrate Asen being named the new emperor.

As Kouryou turned this new information over in his mind, Shouwa was heading deeper into the Imperial Palace. Now shouldering her long-sought commission, she hurried higher in the heavens toward the Inner Court. Passing through a tower that continued onto the Outer Court, she turned down the corridor and headed east. With a glance at the gate leading to the Imperial Court, she scurried to the executive offices of the Rikkan.

At the gate leading to the buildings that housed the Ministry of Heaven, she paused and called out to the guard, “It is Shouwa. Please let Risshou-sama know I am here.”

One of Risshou’s assistants soon appeared and accompanied Shouwa to the main building. Waiting there was a man in his fifties, a man with a glint of steel in his eyes. This was the man who had rescued Shouwa from her maidservant duties and restored her to her former position of lady-in-waiting.

Shouwa knelt before him. “Without a doubt, the young man is the Taiho.”

“Without a doubt, you say?”

“Yes,” Shouwa said with a bob of her head.

The young man was indeed the master she once served. Though not a member of his personal retinue, she had been at his side on a daily basis, speaking to him and being spoken to in turn. He had grown up since then but she was certain he was Taiki.

Risshou nodded vigorously. “Well done. Please continue to serve him as you did before.”

“The Taiho’s current accommodations leave much to be desired.”

“I will leave all such matters up to you. Whatever personnel or material goods you need will be made available at your discretion.”

“Yes,” Shouwa said, bowing low to the floor.

“See to it that he wants for nothing. And also—”

Shouwa nodded. “I will make sure to keep you informed of anything I might see or hear.”

The man responded with a satisfied smile.

Chapter 26

[5-6] In reality, rumors that Taiki had appeared in Hakkei Palace and declared Asen the new emperor shot through the Imperial Palace like a bolt of lightning.

“Is he really the Taiho?” came the inevitable question.

Assurances that he was only further muddled the waters.

“The Taiho was only a child when he last occupied Hakkei Palace. Would anybody here recognize him as an adult?”

“Whether they do or not, it’s not likely that somebody would go around pretending to be the kirin.”

Under normal circumstances, there would be no room for doubt. The kirin’s golden hair settled the issue. Except the current kirin of the Tai was a Black Kirin.

The mention of that fact was met with silence. Once hair color was removed as the determining factor, how could a person calling himself Taiki prove he was Taiki?

“Even if he grew up, his features shouldn’t have changed that much.”

True enough, but they might also have changed quite a bit in the meantime. Either way, the only way to settle the issue would be to talk to somebody who knew him back then. And that pretty much limited any trustworthy eyewitnesses to people who lived above the Sea of Clouds.

The news raced from the foot of Ryou’un Mountain, up through the Road Gate, and right to the summit.

“What about one of the civil servants in the Ministry of Heaven? Or the Rikken of Zui Province?”

“Nonsense!” said a man who once worked in the Ministry of Heaven. “It’s not like we ever had the chance to give him a good hard look. In normal circumstances, you’re simply grateful to be in the presence of people like that. Staring at them would be the height of disrespect.”

What it usually came down to was, if they did find themselves in the presence of Taiki, they’d be looking at the floor in a deep bow.

“Frankly, you’d have an easier time discriminating between two peas in a pod than you would picking the grown Taiki out of a crowd.”

“I do have a vague recollection of his face, but all I could tell you today is that he was young.”

“Perhaps the only person who would recognize the grown Taiho is Gyousou-sama.”

Except Gyousou wasn’t there.

“Or the chief cabinet secretary of Zui Province or regimental commander Risai-sama.”

“What about the previous head of the Rikken?”

The furor reached every corner of the Imperial Palace.

“They’ve all died or disappeared. The only ones left—” In the office of the Chousai, the lowly civil servant bowed low. “The only ones left are Rousan-sama, once the Minister of Winter. And the Chousai, who was the Minister of Spring.”

The current Chousai, Chou’un, had indeed once headed the Ministry of Spring. He groaned aloud. “You’re hoping *I* would recognize him now?”

Though Chou’un had served as Minister of Spring, he wasn’t a member of Gyousou’s personal retinue and thus had never formed the kind of relationship with Taiki that might have made them comfortable acquaintances. Basically, he only saw Taiki during Privy Council meetings and then only looking up at him on the dais. He could count on the fingers of one hand the times they had met face to face and exchanged words. And since he was mostly bowing at those times as well, he had formed no strong impressions of his countenance.

“Now, Rousan or Ganchou of the Palace Guard—”

As part of Gyousou’s inner circle, they should be on more familiar terms with Taiki. The problem was, that wasn’t the real problem.

“Far more important than examining the Taiho’s bona fides is whether Asen-sama is truly the new emperor.”

“A hard question to avoid.”

“You do not think it likely?”

Chou’un had gathered his closest aides together in the office of the Chousai. Still, nobody dared answer the question he posed.

“Or perhaps—” Another thought occurred to him. “This means that Gyousou is dead?”

“Impossible!” chorused the voices around him.

Chou’un asked them in turn, “What of the White Pheasant?”

If Gyousou died, then the White Pheasant would fall dead as well. No such news had arrived thus far, though nobody observed the White Pheasant on a daily basis. It was entirely possible that at some point it had uttered the Last Cry.

“We’ll confirm this right away,” said one of his assistants, jumping to his feet.

He ran out of the room and with all due haste dispatched a messenger to the West Palace to make the confirmation. The office of the Praetorian Guard forwarded the request to the Minister of the Two Cries, who hurried over to the Palace of the Two Cries.

Nothing now occupied the silver branch where the white bird once made its perch. Rather, at the base of the tree was a small mound from which protruded a section of bamboo. The Minister of the Two Cries crouched down and brought his ear up next to the bamboo. One end of the bamboo branch was embedded in a large vase buried deep in the earth. Listening more closely, he could hear the rustling sound of the bird moving around in the vase.

“The White Pheasant is not dead,” he reported.

This news left Chou’un and his assistants all the more confused.

“That being the case, the Divine Will stands as is in regards to the emperor.”

“Can we go so far as to say the Taiho lied?”

“What is the Taiho up to then?”

“I cannot believe the kirin would engage in any sort of political machinations.”

“Does it mean somebody is using the Taiho, perhaps even against his will?”

“Somebody behind the scenes?”

Listening to the back and forth, Chou’un pondered the possibilities. Either unknown forces were pulling Taiki’s strings or Taiki himself was orchestrating all this confusion. If so, what was he trying to accomplish? Why go to such lengths and risk kicking the hornet’s nest?

“More importantly, shouldn’t we establish the bona fides of this person who calls himself the Taiho?”

“What about Asen-sama?”

“Not a chance,” Chou’un flatly stated. “Let’s say they happened to cross paths and something happened to Asen, then what? Anything of the sort would constitute serious business indeed. Someone else should establish his identity. Like the Minister of Heaven.”

Chou’un glanced at Risshou, the Minister of Heaven.

“I was only recently appointed to the position and am not in the position to make such a determination. However, there are those who once served alongside the Taiho. The Zui Province Minister of Heaven might have been the closest to him. But the Taiho was usually in the company of Gyousou. In that case, we’d want to look for a civil servant in the Ministry of Heaven who served on Gyousou’s domestic staff and helped run the household.”

In the end, Chou’un ordered that such a civil servant be found. The result of the search was Shouwa.

And Shouwa positively identified Taiki as the kirin of Tai.

“How could the kirin ever act against the interests of the emperor?” objected many. “Supposing the hands of Providence still rest upon Gyousou’s shoulders, it does not stand to reason that the Taiho should repudiate the Divine Will.”

“Yes, there is that.”

“And if Gyousou truly has not died, does it not follow that, for reasons unknown, some alteration has been made to the Divine Will?”

Chou’un thought it over. “Leaving us again with the problem of whether or not to inform Asen-sama.”

Chou’un still hadn’t dared to report any of this to Asen. None of the bureaucrats on the premises had Asen’s ear. Their subordinates were also ordered to stay mum on the subject, though the subject was so incendiary that putting a halt to the rumors proved impossible. But call it good luck or bad, aside from ordering them around, Asen did not interact with the civil servants that attended to him. They were unlikely to communicate to him whatever rumors caught their attention.

The Minister of Earth spoke up. “The Taiho may have a scheme up his sleeves. The Taiho—or more likely, someone using the Taiho—is attempting to bring the fight to Asen-sama in person. Carelessly allowing them to meet would play right into their hands. We must take care not to become unwitting partners in such a conspiracy. Until we know the true intentions of the Taiho, he should be kept at a distance.”

If Asen became aware of these disturbing events, he might request an audience with the Taiho. The situation demanded a closer look before that could be allowed to occur.

“In any case, we should be on the alert for any suspicious behavior among Gyousou’s followers. Moreover, as we have found no comparable examples in the historical accounts, including those of other kingdoms, that as well warrants the need for a thorough investigation. Until the actual designs of the Taiho are determined, none of this should be communicated to Asen-sama.”

Everyone in attendance nodded in agreement.

Chapter 27

[5-7] The rocky ledge reached out over open air. The city of Kouki unfurled far below the towering palisades. The distance was so vast it made the head spin. The colors of autumn deepened day by day. Harbingers of winter crept into every gust of wind and tinged the great expanse of the sky.

The large, flat slab of finished stone formed a platform. The cliffs of Ryou'un Mountain rose around it on three sides.

Cut into the side of the cliffs, a walkway wound around the face of the mountain. Here and there the path widened a bit to form a terrace. At the highest point along the walkway, a small figure appeared next to the precipice. A bird perched on her arm. She stood at the edge showing not the slightest sign of fear. For a long minute, she gazed at the world below.

And then launched the bird into the air. Blue wings beat against a blue sky as it wheeled about and headed north. The young woman watched the bird fly away.

She was not dressed in ministerial robes. Her personal attire suggested she was in the Imperial Palace of her own accord. She wore a divided skirt and a kimono jacket that normally reached the knee but was hemmed short. Though the jacket was made from lightweight material, the cloth matched that of court attire in cost and quality.

A matching pair of swords hung from either side of her waist. As hefty as the swords must be, they did not weigh her down in the least. Rather, she carried herself like a lithe animal. Even now, standing at the very edge of the cliff, she didn't stir an inch. Having followed the walkway to the far end, she climbed onto a crenel in the parapet and curled her toes around the stone lip.

Not even the brisk breeze made her sway.

The girl watched the bird until it disappeared from view, then turned and hopped gracefully onto the walkway. She left the terrace and followed the path along the face of the cliff. Descending a flight of stairs, she passed by the doorway from which she had emerged earlier. She continued down the walkway, negotiating multiple switchbacks, and finally arrived at the platform.

The giant doorway set into the platform was the shuttered Forbidden Gate. The other walkways leading to the platform were devoid of life. The gatekeeper's room adjacent the gate looked like it'd been gouged out of the cliff. She peeked through the long horizontal slit in the rock. The room's sole inhabitant was a civil servant. An utterly bored look on his face, he looked back at her with vacant eyes.

His expression didn't falter in the least. He wasn't ignoring her. He was a loyal functionary going through the motions like a mannikin. His job was to challenge anybody who approached the Forbidden Gate. He knew who the young woman was and couldn't be bothered to demand that she identify herself. That's what it came down to.

Sparing him only a glance, the girl moved on to a large building carved from the stone of the cliff. These were the imperial stables. The emperor's kijuu were kept there, along with the kijuu of the guards assigned to the Forbidden Gate. Visitors entering the Imperial Palace through the Forbidden Gate might temporarily stable their mounts there too.

Next to the stables were the barracks for the guards. Five soldiers stood there like a row of statues. Knowing the girl was permitted to come and go from the gate, they acted no differently than the gatekeeper. Faces blank with disinterest, they looked at the girl and didn't budge. They might as well have been propped up corpses.

Though had a stranger strolled into their presence, they would have sprung into action and cut him down with mechanical precision, no questions asked.

The whole of the Imperial Palace is not much different than this.

That thought on her mind, the young woman peered into the stables. Half of the stalls were boarded up. In front of the last stall at the back, a man sat on an overturned bucket, his large frame almost curled over into a ball. When she stepped inside, the man turned his head and looked at her with listless eyes. But then a mix of emotions rose to his face. He was not one of those lifeless mannikins.

"Wearing the same glum face as usual," the girl said.

Showing no inclination to answer, the man returned his gaze to the stall in front of him. Inside crouched a creature that resembled a white tiger. It was a ferociously beautiful animal, black stripes on a white coat, a tail as long as its body, eyes that glittered like cut glass.

"How are you doing, Keito?" the girl called out.

She wanted to get closer to the kijuu but could not. Only the man sitting there in front of the stall was allowed to approach the suugu. The stall was enclosed in iron bars. The suugu would attack anybody who carelessly strayed too close. The beast likely only wished to remove any nuisance from its presence, but one swipe of its forepaws could kill a man.

The girl stood next to the man and looked into the stall. "I heard the Taiho has returned," she said, gazing at the suugu.

She heard him draw his breath. "The Taiho—" he echoed, as if in a daze. The boulder of a man rose to his feet. "Yari, is that really true?"

Yari glanced up at him. "Seems so."

"Was he taken prisoner?"

“The Taiho returned to the Imperial Palace of his own volition. Walked right in the front gate. Nobody had to arrest him or anything. Because apparently Asen is the new emperor.”

The man leaned over to seize her by the shoulders. Yari skipped out of the way like a leaf blown by a gust of wind. His hands grasping empty air, the man glared at her in stark astonishment.

“Asen? The emperor?”

“According to the Taiho.”

“Impossible!” the man roared. “A villain and a thief! He stole the throne and butchered his own subjects. He isn’t qualified to be emperor in the slightest!”

Yari craned her head and said, “Gyousou butchered his share of his subjects too. A military man, after all.”

“Not the same meaning at all!”

“Not the same? He killed the people of Tai with his own hands. What other meaning is there? Aren’t they all birds of a feather? Asen and Gyousou and even you, Ganchou.”

Ganchou fumed. “Having the right reasons matters. We never set out to kill innocent people on purpose.”

“I suppose Asen had his right reasons too.”

“Are you saying the usurper’s reasons are right?”

“They’d be right if he wasn’t a usurper. Because apparently the Divine Will has been revised anew.”

“Nonsense,” Ganchou spit out. “There is no need for a new emperor in the first place. The emperor of Tai is even now—” He closed his mouth in the middle of the sentence. A look of fear rose to his face. “No, that cannot be—”

“You want to know if the White Pheasant has fallen? The answer is, no. I’m told the White Pheasant is alive and well. That means you are right, there is no reason for a new emperor to step forth. And that fact has the Imperial Court in a tumult.”

Ganchou craned his head back and stared at the ceiling and let out a long breath. Then he returned his attention to Yari. “And what does your boss say?”

“He says it is impossible too.”

As if to quench his irritation, Ganchou sat down on the pail in a huff. “There is no new Emperor Asen. He must have grabbed the Taiho and made him say what he said.”

“That doesn’t make sense either. Everybody says the Taiho came back because he wanted to.”

“Then what is going on?”

“Hmm.” Yari returned her gaze to the suugu. The animal stared back at Yari and Ganchou with deep interest.

"A storm is coming," Yari said under her breath.

Ganchou glanced up at her, a dubious look on his face.

"That's what my boss says," Yari explained. "A storm is coming. The times are changing. For better and for worse."

"I don't understand a thing your boss says."

"Not the kind of person that people like us are ever bound to comprehend."

Meaning what? asked another deep sigh from Ganchou. He asked, "How is he doing?"

"The Taiho? I haven't met him so I don't know."

"Oh," Ganchou muttered.

"But I hear he's all grown up."

Gogetsu heard the kirin of Tai had returned to the Imperial Palace from Boushuku. Boushuku was another junior retainer like himself.

"Really?" He felt a reflexive jolt of delight, followed by a deep sense of unease.

"The news seems to check out," said his young colleague, his voice and expression bright as he sharpened his sword. "Somebody confirmed that he is the Taiho, without a doubt. Moreover, the Taiho declared that Asen-sama was chosen as the new emperor."

"That's absurd!" Gogetsu blurted out.

"Absurd? Why do you say that?" Boushuku stopped what he was doing and turned to Gogetsu. His youthful face took on a look of honest confusion.

"Ah, no," Gogetsu prevaricated. "Not at all."

Boushuku shook off the puzzled expression, smiled, and returned to the work before him. "Of course Asen-sama is the new emperor. Tai at last has better days before her."

Boushuku spoke with great enthusiasm. He clearly looked forward to finally being able to wield his sword on behalf of the kingdom.

"Sure," came the reply. Gogetsu sat back on the chair, drew up his knees and wrapped his arms around his legs. He unconsciously found himself gnawing on his fingernails.

This room in a corner of the Inner Palace was consigned to the junior retainers. Gogetsu joined their ranks five years before. Boushuku took up a new post here last year. They'd been chosen from the rank-and-file soldiers to serve on the emperor's security detail. In light of their heavy responsibilities, they typically held the rank of centurion or higher.

A centurion commanded a hundred soldiers, a position that, in and of itself, demanded commensurate achievements. The young Boushuku had only recently become a centurion and was soon promoted to this post as a junior retainer. He had

every reason to be pleased with his performance. Gogetsu considered his rise dazzling.

A new emperor. Gogetsu turned the statement over in his mind with a mix of emotions. Tai had been without its kirin these past six years. While Asen took on the role of the emperor in holding the Imperial Court together, the emperor and the kirin moved the kingdom forward together, like the two wheels of a cart. Misfortune was inevitable when one of them went missing. Tai could have hoped for no better news than the return of the Saiho.

The absence of the Saiho from the palace should never have happened in the first place. Asen was at the root of that misfortune, Asen who had committed high treason.

Gogetsu was one of Asen's subordinates. He had commanded a battalion under Seikou, the current general of the Palace Guard of the Left. Though neither Seikou nor Gogetsu had any part in the treason, when it came to the loss of the emperor and the disappearance of the Saiho from the palace, he couldn't say they were without sin.

At least Gogetsu couldn't call himself blameless. He hadn't raised a voice of censure, hadn't taken Asen to task. Knowing of his treason, Gogetsu never defied him. He'd simply gone along.

And so Gogetsu wound up on the side of those who'd driven the Saiho from the palace. He didn't think he had the right to rejoice over his return. At the same time, he knew it was wrong that such a malefactor should become emperor.

Boushuku has no comprehension of what this feels like.

To begin with, Boushuku hailed from Gai Province in the south. When General Shinryou of the Provincial Guard transferred to the Imperial Army, he brought Boushuku with him. Boushuku thus bore no responsibility for any act of treason and no responsibility for the current status quo in Tai. He could rejoice in the return of the Saiho with a clear conscience.

They certainly had every reason to expect that this dynastic change meant they would now be able to honorably carry out their duties. Gogetsu understood those expectations so well it hurt.

The junior retainers served as the emperor's personal bodyguards outside of the public eye. Protecting the emperor was their primary charge, except for a long time, all Gogetsu and his colleagues had done was report to their posts and sit around all day.

A slow death from a thousand cuts.

When his spot in the rotation came up, he headed over to the Inner Hall and camped out in the guardroom. He did nothing of note until his shift was over and

then went home. That was the sum of his idle life day after day. Because Asen had not commissioned the junior retainers for his own protection.

Any appearance Asen made at the Inner Hall also involved building security, though that happened hardly at all, and he often didn't bother summoning them when it did. Gogetsu had no idea whose orders the security detail was supposed to follow or what they were supposed to actually secure.

Why doesn't Asen want anyone anywhere near him?

As one of Asen's subordinates, personal concerns aside, Gogetsu should be able to take honest satisfaction in having won Asen's approval and the honor of serving alongside him as his bodyguard. But here he was, twiddling his thumbs. For the past five years.

He'd given up asking for reasons and pleading for more productive work. Like the other retainers, he'd resigned himself to the job being what it was, nothing more and nothing less.

Though Boushuku saw things differently. "When do you think the coronation will take place?" he happily inquired.

"Hard to say," was always Gogetsu's answer.

Kisen was fit to be tied. Asen had once again left his retainers in the lurch. *Why does this keep happening?* he wondered.

Kisen considered Asen his esteemed sovereign. Asen was exceedingly virtuous, capable, and resolute. Unbeaten on the battlefield, he had been Emperor Kyou's most valued vassal. He was no less revered by his soldiers and respected by everyone who knew him.

Comparisons to Gyousou often arose, but as far as Kisen was concerned, Asen was the better man. Kisen thought Gyousou had difficulty keeping in step with his surroundings. Gyousou tended to jump to his own conclusions and pursue them with a dogmatic sense of conviction.

Asen was different. He listened to his subordinates. He took their opinions into consideration and did not hesitate to explain his decision. He was frank and honest in his personal and professional associations. He paid attention to even seemingly insignificant details and kept his promises.

In contrast to the timidity that Taiki showed around Gyousou, the way he took to Asen was surely proof of this.

Asen had a great capacity to accept others, an aura of magnanimity that put them at ease. Gyousou lacked such qualities. At times he walled himself off emotionally, creating a tense atmosphere in his immediate vicinity.

So why Gyousou and not Asen? That was a question Kisen still could not answer.

Asen-sama is the true emperor, superior to Gyousou in every way.

That was the belief Kisen had clung to all along. When he learned of Asen's rebellion, he was not surprised in the least. It only made sense. Heaven made a mistake. Asen corrected it. Justice was served.

Asen would prove that he should have been emperor all along. Kisen worked alongside him with that strong sense of determination. He refused no task that was for the good of the sovereign. Such work was never trying or difficult. Kisen believed a wrong decision had steered the dynasty astray. They would return it to the right and proper course under the leadership of the rightful ruler.

And yet, at some point, Asen stopped appearing in public, stopped meeting with Kisen and the rest of his staff. They heard from him as rarely as they saw him. Far from it. He issued no orders or instructions.

"What is going on with Asen-sama?"

Unable to contain his frustration, Kisen posed the question to Hinken, another one of Asen's senior commanders. Hinken said with a self-deprecating smile, "We must not be rising to Asen-sama's expectations in a satisfactory manner. We are not doing the requisite work."

"Except we haven't done—" *anything wrong*, Kisen started to say before clamping his mouth shut.

They had undeniably been given orders, but he couldn't say they'd accomplished what Asen was striving for when he issued those orders. He ordered them to put down the civilian uprisings, so they put down the civilian uprisings. Those objectives they saw through to the end. Except what Asen desired was a world *without* civilian uprisings, a goal they were nowhere close to fulfilling.

Seen in that light, Kisen and his colleagues had not risen to Asen's expectations.

"Except that doesn't apply only to us," Kisen pointed out.

Hinken sighed. "We haven't measured up for some time now. We've been putting in insufficient effort going all the way back to Bun Province."

Kisen swallowed his response. When Gyousou disappeared, Kisen and his fellow commanders were headed to Bun Province along with him. Kisen hadn't been privy to Asen's plans beforehand. He did as he was ordered, which, he believed, was to support Gyousou in the defense of Tetsui. So that's what he did.

As a result, his efforts may have not aligned with Asen's true wishes. In fact, though no one had seen Gyousou since, rumors said he was still alive. His assailants must have failed. Unaware of what was going on, Kisen and his men might well have inadvertently hindered the assassin and obstructed his subsequent course of action.

"Asen is likely disappointed with us," he said in forlorn tones. Kisen hung his head.

We have undoubtedly performed in a less than exemplary manner.

The Imperial Court was in chaos and the kingdom was not at peace. Kisen and his colleagues weren't working hard enough and their work did not innovate or inspire.

Moreover, Hinken wasn't one of Asen's original retainers. He served under a different general during the reign of Emperor Kyou. When Kisen joined the military, Hinken was already one of Asen's subordinates, though his different roots may well have affected his reception.

And yet—

Kisen's approach to his work had indeed been described as "ham-handed." Asen told him so, right after he messed up in a major way.

"You really are a bull in a china shop," Asen said with a warm smile. "You have a hard time getting things done without ruffling as many feathers as possible in the process."

When the humbled Kisen apologized, Asen slapped him on the back. "But that is exactly why I can trust you. There's no need to hold yourself in contempt."

The mistake wasn't Kisen's, Asen explained. It was his failure for giving Kisen that particular order. No need for regrets.

Hinken later explained, "Asen-sama straight-up calls you tactless and gauche. But what he's also saying is that nobody sets out to be that way. Handled right, such qualities could prove a rare gift. See that you don't take them for granted. That's the gist of it, I think."

Hinken's words put Kisen in a good mood. Compared to others, he knew he didn't measure up across the board. All he could do was serve as earnestly and diligently as he could. No matter how hard he worked, his achievements would lag behind. And yet knowing that his efforts didn't go unappreciated was intensely reassuring.

And yet, he couldn't help feeling he'd been cast aside, that Asen had finally thrown up his hands. He truly was nothing but a fool and an incompetent.

When Kisen confessed these feelings to Hinken, Hinken responded with a wry grin. "You know, Asen-sama likes to say the two of us are a lot alike. If so, then I must have been cast aside just like you."

"No, we're not at all alike! You think things through. You're solid and reliable. You have so many achievements to your name. You are completely different from people like me!"

Hinken grinned and clapped Kisen on the shoulder, this time showing him a truly pleasant smile. "Subordinates like you are truly hard to come by."

"Um, sure," Kisen replied, unsure whether he was being praised or not.

"Take that as a compliment," Hinken said, the smile lingering in his voice. "I appreciate how you press forward without any compulsion to change. Well, the time will come when we will be of use once again. Believe that and keep your shoulder to the wheel."

“Yes,” Kisen said with a nod.

Get to work. He should be hearing those orders before very long. When he did, he’d be ready to do his part the best he could. There could be no slacking off in the meantime. That was the course of action he committed to in his heart.

And now that time had come. Taiki returned and proclaimed Asen the new emperor.

The Imperial Court was bound to change in significant ways after this. The moment in time when they could literally create a new era was upon them. The stagnant air lingering around the Imperial Palace was going to lift. Asen’s wounding silence would melt away. He’d send down the orders to his once and future senior staff.

Get to work.

Any day now. Without a doubt.

Part Six

Chapter 28

[6-1] A gloomy, moonless night. Clouds covered the sky and hid away the stars. The waning drone of the insects foreshadowed the impending end of fall. According to the calendar, a new month was upon them.

The craggy You Range in the north of Bun Province was home to four Ryou'un Mountains. The first snows of the season fell there that night.

The city had a distant view of the mountains. Wrapped in the black cloak of the night, the residents of the city looked forward to the brief respite of dreams. Outside the city, there were those who also waited for sleep and perchance to dream. Unable to secure lodgings or find anyone in the city to take them in, they huddled around a fire in a fallow field.

They had no idea where the morrow would take them or how far they would have to travel so they could settle down with peace of mind.

Along the hills looking down on that fire, dew dampened the graves of the travelers who had exhausted the last of their physical reserves along the way. As if mourning those lost hopes, the insects trilled once more before lapsing into silence.

No one rested well that night in Bun Province.

In a hut not far from the graves, an old man wrapped himself in a tattered cloak. The hut had once been a tool shed. Save this shed, he had lost everything, including his house in the hamlet and his family. Working their fingers to the bone, they'd managed to save up that much, only to have it stolen by bandits. The old man alone was left alive. He had long since lost the will to live. Now all he could do was pray.

Pray to travel more quickly to where his family was waiting for him.

He had reached his limits. During this hopeless era, when such a prayer was the only wish left to an ordinary man, the sooner it all ended the better. He'd lived long enough and looked forward to nothing. He no longer possessed the inner strength to wish for anything more except to finally end things himself on this miserable night.

Save me, the old man muttered and tugged at the lapels of his cloak.

Except so many in so many places voiced the same desire. His own suffering was but a drop in the ocean. He harbored no yearning for salvation other than to be freed from suffering by leaving the world behind.

As he prayed, a woman stood at a window and gazed at the black night. Her winter home in the hamlet was home to no one but herself. She once lived here with her husband and child. Visions of that beloved family flickered in and out of the corners of her eyes.

Tonight is better. Because there is no light.

Any glint of light made the visions all the more piercing in their clarity. The chair where her husband sat. The son playing with wooden blocks around his feet. The daughter who had finally learned to stand while holding onto the table. Eating a frugal dinner around the table. Laughing and sleeping and crying.

That was why she did not light the lamp, why she did not wake during the day and kept the door shut tight while the sun still shone. During the day, she could see the claw marks left by the youma on the dirt floor and on the furniture, and the splatter of blood stains on the walls. The sight was sure to revive in her mind's eyes those heartrending remains lying in a pool of blood.

She usually worked in the garden about now. But the lack of light made that impossible. These idle times weighed the heaviest on her heart.

A life like this can't end too soon.

Pondering that same thought, a local civil servant lay in the dark and breathed out a painful sigh. He lived in a deserted village at the foot of the mountain. This house was the only remaining residence and he was the only remaining resident. His breath as well seemed on the verge of petering out.

He was born in this dying village in Bun Province. To the delight of his friends and acquaintances, he became a provincial civil servant. Then after ten years, he deserted his post and returned to the place where he was born.

The provincial palace had become an unrecognizable den of thieves. Bureaucrats wandered the hallways with lifeless eyes. Every time he tried to make things right, he was demoted and threats were made against his life. He had no choice but to quit. His name removed from the Registry of Wizards, he slipped out of the palace and went into hiding before finally making his way home.

The village was deserted. Anticipating his moves, the Provincial Guard had laid waste to the area, killing his beloved mother and father along with the neighbors he so dearly missed.

Since then, having no idea what he should or could do, he stood watch over the ruins.

But that was coming to an end too. He'd fallen ill over the summer. His condition grew worse day by day. He was no longer a wizard. That meant an illness could take

his life. And perhaps that was a good thing. He had no desire to see how this world was going to turn out.

Lying on his sick bed for these past three days, he first lost his voice, and then he couldn't even sit up. His hands and feet grew numb. He could barely move a muscle. Up until the day before, his joints had throbbed unbearably. Though today they felt strangely fine.

They were all waiting for him in that other world.

Wringing each breath out of him, he stared into empty space.

A small hamlet located not far from that small village.

A girl came running out of a ramshackle shack barely distinguishable from a lean-to. She hurried down the road carrying a basket in one hand and a lantern in the other.

In the north of Tai, people didn't usually live in the hamlets. Common practice in this world was to divide the house and farm properties between the hamlet and the village. But during the winter, the vacated buildings were bound to collapse under the snowpack.

Consequently, the buildings in the hamlets consisted of little more than temporary shelters thrown together during the summer while they eked out a living tilling the land and grazing livestock. The structures that collapsed over the winter were easily rebuilt once the snow melted.

These homes were furnished with the bare necessities. Except this was the house where the girl lived. Fire had destroyed the town she and her family had once lived in. Wandering along the road, a passing stranger said that one of these hamlet shacks should suit them fine. And so they ended up here.

They dug a fire pit inside the cramped quarters, heaped dirt around the outside of the thin walls, rethatched the roof with strips of bark, and managed to make a home of it.

The girl's mother was dead. She'd been told her mother died in an accident. By and by she came to learn that her mother had been assaulted by sadistic soldiers and murdered. Her father worked in a nearby town for a wealthy farmer. He'd leave, work, and return. In their father's stead, as he labored with all his might, the three children managed the household.

On days like today, when their father couldn't return home, they took on the chores their father normally did, such as watching over the charcoal kiln and gathering branches from the mountains. They split the wood, peeled off thin strips of bark and steeped them in water. Weaving the properly soaked strips into boxes and baskets was the only thing they couldn't do on their own.

Passing the night so engaged, the girl suddenly remembered that this was the night of a new moon. On the night of a new moon, her father always went to a nearby mountain to make offerings. Her father wasn't home that night, so one of the children had to go in his place.

But her older brother was standing watch over the charcoal fire. Their father could catnap throughout the night while keeping the fire from going out, something her brother couldn't pull off yet. The charcoal was critically important. They could sell nuts and berries instead of charcoal but there was little profit in them. Charcoal was the only way to earn a living.

One of them had to stay up with her brother and make sure he didn't fall asleep, and the only person who could do that was her older sister. She stripped the bark off the boughs as she chatted to keep him awake.

The girl was still only nine. She couldn't stay awake all night peeling the bark off the tree limbs. In their stead, she ran down the pitch-black road bearing the offering.

Though the road at night was frightening, she didn't want to disappoint her father. He wouldn't get mad at her if she didn't. But he would surely grieve. And the next day, despite having returned home ragged and worn, he would still set off, even a day late, to make the offering himself. Bringing the offering once a month was terribly important to him.

With a tight grip on the basket, she hurried as quickly as she could. She left the hamlet and scampered down the dark road. Descending the mountain path brought her to the deep stream pool in the valley river that would carry the offering away. She ran on with all her heart and soon arrived at the edge of the pool.

A wide rocky ledge pitched slightly below the grade of the path skirted the edge of the pond. Coursing down the mountain from its headwaters, the river slowed here and pooled. Tucked into the embrace of the gorge, the brimming pool narrowed to a gap at the far end. Beneath the fissure that rent the cliff like a torn cloth, the black hole gaped open. The river poured through the mouth.

There must be a cave at the back of that mouth, though the throat appeared too constricted for even a child to wiggle through. To be sure, She and her siblings hadn't ever tried. The opening was set into the base of the cliffs on the opposite side of the pool. It could only be reached by swimming across the widest part of the pool.

Worse, the placid surface of the pool hid the strong undertow, making it dangerous for children to swim there. The water was deep and the black mouth swallowed water at a prodigious rate. A little harmless wading could easily result in being swept into the hole. The girl did not dare do such a thing even in the middle of the day.

This night as well she swallowed hard and carefully inched toward the edge of the ledge. Along the way she paused and cast her eyes upwards in the direction of the

headwaters. The farm her father worked on was located near the headwaters of the mountain river.

The girl once asked why they performed such a ritual. Her father always put a few edibles and a few coins and scraps of clothing into the basket they wove from vines and strips of bark. The girl knew what it was like to go hungry when there was no food to put on the table. And yet food was placed in the basket and cast into the water. She simply couldn't understand why items they could all share were going into the basket.

Her father explained that a very important person dwelt at the far reaches of this river. The water that flowed from the pond was consumed by the mountain, Mount Kan'you. That very important person had died there.

He died on Mount Kan'you and resided in the spirit world located on that mountain. A lack of food and clothing would leave him in distress. Though their family was poor, they had enough for a daily meal. As that august person could only partake once in a month, they should do their best to persevere. That's what he taught them.

Much the same way, they left food and clothing on their mother's grave. While treating someone she didn't know as a close acquaintance was odd, in truth, she did not know her mother that well either. She'd died when the girl was young and she didn't remember her face or voice.

It's so sad that he can only eat once a month, the girl thought as she checked her footing and dropped the basket from her small hands into the water. The covered basket did not sink but bobbed along in the current until the wan light of the lantern no longer reached. The girl watched it disappear out of sight, then turned her gaze toward the cave, now hidden behind the black veil of the night.

She wondered if she would have to live in that scary place one day when she died.

Not far from the ledge overlooking the pool in the ravine of the mountain, a man hunched down in the gloomy dark. A voice echoed faintly around him.

—we fought there—

So dark the single point of light appeared on the verge of winking out.

—and died there—

Surrounded by the night, the figure sitting there didn't move. The song spilled from his mouth more like a hum.

“Perished like dogs at the side of the road and ended up food for the crows.”

The low and lifeless voice, altogether bereft of emotion, flowed through the gloom. From not far off, the sound of rushing water chimed in like a chorus.

Please tell the crows on our behalf
To spare a moment before gobbling us down.
And shed a tear like they truly care
Weathered and worn and without even a grave.
How in the world might our rotten meat
Flee from the tips of your pointed beaks?

The man hugged his knees and buried his head between his arms and shook with stifled laughter. Perhaps he remembered the day when he roared with laughter while singing the song. Or perhaps he was laughing to scorn at his own private recital in the dark.

The dim light wavered again. The figure stirred, lifted his head to make sure the fire had steadied again, and then lowered his head again.

The day dawns
And full of life they set off for war.
The night falls
And none of them have returned.

Chapter 29

[6-2] Over half a month had passed by the time Risai, Kyoshi, and Houto arrived at Rin'u.

Situated in the southeast, Rin'u was the largest city in Bun Province. During the subjugation campaign against the land gangs, this was where the Imperial Army set up camp, where the Imperial Army brought the fight to the land gangs, and where the Imperial Army disintegrated and dispersed.

As a result, this was where the eradication operations against Gyousou's senior staff also took place. When Risai started her search for Gyousou, she came first to Rin'u. But on the run as she was, she couldn't get anywhere near the city.

This was the first time in a long time that she had seen Rin'u up close.

Rin'u rose majestically in the middle of a high plateau, the long slope of the mountain at its back. The tall and wide barrier wall enclosing the city climbed the gentle undulations of the foothills up to the mountainside. Within the walls, the buildings crowded together as if to form a single tiled roof.

From the vantage point where Risai and her companions paused along the road, the city spread out as it ran up the rising slope. What must be the prefectural castle occupied a promontory toward the back of the city, ringed by the castle wall. Buildings that looked like temples continued on to the right and left along a mountainside carpeted with green.

The city unfurled along the slope beneath these palatial buildings. Situated at the lowest point of the slope was the soaring multistoried structure of the Horse Gate. Strung together like links in a chain, the shops, booths, and street stalls spilled forth from the city, crowding the shoulders of the long, straight road that neatly divided the broad plain outside the barrier wall.

Far beyond the shops and stalls and throngs of people, craggy mountains pierced the clouds. Together these four Ryou'un Mountains were called the You Range. Risai and her band were headed toward the southernmost peak, known as Kan'you Mountain.

"A Taoist temple called Fukyuu Temple is located here," Kyoshi explained as they passed through the Horse Gate. "Enchou-sama said that's where we should go. A blue bird was sent ahead of us with the necessary details, so the abbot should be informed of our situation and be ready to receive us."

Risai nodded. The blue bird that Kyoshi mentioned was unlikely to be the same species of blue bird used by the government. The blue birds deployed by the civil

service and the military in their communication networks were enchanted *you* birds, distant relatives of the youma.

Under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Summer, the chicks were harvested from the riboku in the administrative castle. Surplus birds were sold to civilians, though they were so terrifically expensive that only those with means could hope to lay their hands on one. As a result, most people relied on common carrier pigeons and inexpensive *you* birds like the *meng*.

But as a class, all birds used for communication purposes were called blue birds.

With Houto taking the lead, they passed through the gate. They were struck at once by the lively atmosphere of the city. The main boulevard bustled with pedestrians and wagons, the stores on both sides of the street busily doing business. Many travelers led kijuu like Risai and not a few wore swords and gave off a martial air.

And yet, an aura of barely contained chaos hung over the city. The colors of disarray and decay stained every surface. Bands of rough men and refugees seemed a constant presence. Civility and moral discipline had long gone to the dogs.

“Except nothing here suggests the aftermath of a war or a natural disaster,” Risai muttered to Houto.

“Because Rin’u itself is in the eye of the hurricane, untouched by the winds of war. The armies set up camp in the surrounding fields but the actual fighting took place to the north of Rin’u and in cities to the west.”

“Ah,” Risai said with a nod. *Though it was surely caught up in the mopping up operation after the Imperial Army disbanded*, she thought as they wended their way through the throngs.

They continued along the gently rising foothills. The mountain rose like the back wall of the city. The citadel soared above a ridge that jutted toward the city center. The prefectural castle, by all expectations, though the immense scale more closely matched that of a district fortress.

Vibrant green covered the slopes that reached out to the left and right of the fortress, dotted with clusters of buildings large and small. Houto headed straight toward the mountain. Halfway up the hillside, they turned off the road and climbed stone steps until the tiled roofs of Fukyuu Temple finally came into view.

The simple but sturdy temple gate was shut. Fukyuu Temple belonged to the Zui’un branch of Taoism. Unlike many Taoist temples, Kyoshi explained, it was not a destination for pilgrimages but a place for the study of the Taoist disciplines, and had taken up the responsibility of protecting and preserving the science and technology developed at Zui’un Temple.

Hence the shuttered gates. Risai grasped that much, except when the doors opened in response to Kyoshi's hail, she could see that the grounds inside were crowded with the poor and needy.

Kyoshi introduced himself with a bow. "I am Kyoshi from Tokushi Temple."

The priest who opened the gate offered a polite bow in turn. "The abbot has informed me of your situation. My name is Ki'itsu. I am the prefect at this temple."

The prefect was a priest who took on the role of instructor in directing the student priests in their studies.

"The abbot is waiting for you. Please."

He motioned for them to enter and they followed him inside the temple gate. They climbed a cobblestone path toward the top of the foothills. The buildings of Fukyuu Temple were suffused with history, each bearing a distinctive quality of its own.

The large number of people occupying the grounds around the buildings was another matter entirely. The walls surrounding the ancestral hall were strung with tarpaulins. Women tended cooking fires on the raised platform inside the walls. Small huts dotted a courtyard populated mostly, it seemed, by scampering children and chickens.

Risai found the sight perplexing. Kyoshi was equally taken aback. "Ki'itsu-sama," he asked, no doubt puzzled by a scene foreign to any temple he'd previously visited, "who are these people?"

Risai had long heard that entering the priesthood for academic and ascetic pursuits had a rich tradition in the northern provinces of Tai. But none of these people wore indigo clerical robes. They certainly didn't look like Taoists there to study and otherwise discipline their minds.

"Just call me Ki'itsu," he said calmly. "They are refugees who lost their homes and hamlets."

"You're offering shelter to refugees?"

"That's what it comes down to. For the time being, they came to the temple and declared their intention to become Taoists."

Having taken note of the people around him, those in the immediate vicinity bowed to him. He bowed to each of them in turn.

"The fact of the matter is, they have no place else to go. At the bare minimum, the Taoist and Buddhist temples provide them with a meal and shelter from the elements. Many take the tonsure simply to survive. Many more have come to the mountain during these times of poverty and distress. The result is what you see before you."

A wry smile rose to Ki'itsu's gaunt face.

"Though when the numbers grow to this size, there's not much in the way of training and study going on. They came here in the first place because they had no

place else to go. They're not really here to become priests and monks. When circumstances improve, most will return to their secular lives, so there is little point in spending much time and effort on religious education. Under the guise of waiting to take the tonsure, we let them stay."

Ki'itsu added in a small voice, "We couldn't actually fend off the outside forces arrayed against us. Allowing these unfortunately folk to gather here in large numbers invites suspicions that we are fomenting rebellion. An investigation by the Provincial Guard becomes all but inevitable."

Kyoshi asked, "The Provincial Guard is that unforgiving?"

"Only the rika are officially allowed to take in refugees and the indigent. Unfortunately, none of the rika around here are equipped to do so. They lack the provisions to feed every stranger who knocks on their doors. At the same time, we cannot abandon those in our care."

Which was the real reason why the gate was shut, Ki'itsu explained.

"We admitted them in the first place with the expectation that we could somehow deal with the situation. Alas, we have long past exceeded the capacity of the temple. We cannot see to the needs of any more people. We had no choice but to close the gates."

"So that's what it's come down to," Kyoshi said, surveying his surroundings as they walked along.

The strange scene had taken over Fukyuu Temple as far as the eye could see. Any spare land had been turned into gardens, the courtyard of the ancestral shrines into livestock pens. Laundry hung from the cloister railings. The refugees had settled into huts that now occupied every available inch beneath the overhanging eaves. Where the slanting rays of the sun reached into these makeshift dwellings, the vacant eyes of those within reflected the hard reality of their impoverished state.

"Given the situation, we can offer you only so much assistance," Ki'itsu apologized as he led them to the sculpted grove alongside the lecture hall.

What had been a beautifully sculpted grove now grew vegetables. The once breathtaking placement of placid water, mossy rocks, and grove of trees, their low-hanging branches twined together, was home to pigs and poultry. And yet there still wasn't enough to eat. None of the refugees had eaten a full meal in quite some time, hence their enervated condition.

"Here," Ki'itsu said, showing them into a study in the lecture hall.

The old abbot of Fukyuu Temple came to the vestibule to greet them. His name was Joukan.

"The grounds of the temple must have caught you by surprise. We regret not being able to offer you a more peaceful respite."

“And we apologize for imposing on you at such trying times as these. You have done more than enough by going out of your way for us.”

“No, no, no,” said Joukan. He escorted them into the study and seated them at the chairs around the desk. “That Enchou-sama made the request is reason enough. The refugees and ourselves have long relied on the medicines formulated at Zui’un Temple.”

Joukan glanced at Ki’itsu. With a knowing nod, Ki’itsu secured the doors to the study and shuttered the windows. A lit lamp illuminated the dim interior.

Having confirmed that the necessary measures had been taken, Joukan said, “We heard from Enchou-sama that Tai has been blessed with a great good fortune.”

“Yes,” Kyoshi answered with a nod. “This is Risai-sama, a former general in the Zui Provincial Guard. Risai-sama brought the Taiho back to Tai.”

“And the Taiho?”

“The Taiho—” Risai began. “Due to unavoidable circumstances, the Taiho could not accompany us here.”

Joukan drew his white brows together with a questioning look. “Is that so? Well, no, that is probably for the best. Here in Bun Province, the inspections and interrogations have grown severe of late. To tell the truth, I was concerned for the Taiho’s well-being.”

“Does that include Fukyuu Temple well?”

“More recently, raids by government agents have dropped off. Nevertheless, with all the people currently under our roof, rumors from anywhere and about anything can spring to life overnight.”

“I see,” Kyoshi said with a nod. “Let me introduce our guide. This is Houto, a member of the Shin’nou Guild. With all the burdens you are already bearing, we are deeply grateful to you for letting us impose on you like this.”

“You are a member of the Shin’nou Guild?” Joukan greeted him politely. “And you are looking for His Highness?”

“Yes. We believe the best evidence for his whereabouts will likely be found on Kan’you Mountain.”

“The land gangs currently have the run of Kan’you Mountain. Getting close enough to find that evidence could prove a challenge.”

“Are conditions such that you would call it impossible?”

With a grave nod of his head, Joukan added, “However, if I may venture to say so, when His Highness disappeared, the Imperial Army mustered its forces and searched the area, including Kan’you Mountain. Any number of dragnets for rebel groups have been conducted since. I do have to wonder if His Highness will still be found in the area.”

Hearing her uncertainties so clearly stated aloud left Risai in a bit of a muddle. "The fact is, we cannot say anything definite about where he might be at the present moment. At this point, we are willing to grasp at any straw offered us."

"That certainly does seem to be the case," Joukan agreed, though in a manner that did little to dispel the lingering air of dejection. Risai couldn't shake the feeling that Joukan might not be so happy about their visit after all.

Joukan bowed his head for a moment as if deep in thought. Then he straightened and said, "Ki'itsu will see to your needs after this. If any arrangements have to be made, he is more than capable of figuring out what needs to be done."

With that, Risai, Houto, and Kyoshi bowed deeply to the old Taoist sage.

Chapter 30

[6-3] They were escorted to a standalone building in a back corner of Fukyuu Temple. Isolated from the rest of the compound, it was off limits to the refugees. The building was surrounded by cart sheds, stables, and workshops for formulating medicines.

“The accommodations are rather run down and I apologize for that.” Ki’itsu opened the door. “The artisans who build and maintain the hearths and kilns live here. The main temple compound being in the condition it is, when priests from other temples come here to learn how to make our herbal medicines, they use these facilities too. You should be able to stay here safely out of sight.”

Showing them around the tidy interior, Ki’itsu further explained, “I will have meals brought from the kitchens out front. I’ll see to it that you are served in a timely manner. Given the current circumstances, much here is not up to our usual standards. We appreciate your patience and understanding.”

There was no way Risai’s kijuu was not going to attract attention. So as not to involve Fukyuu Temple in their affairs any more than necessary, they cleared out the stables for the kijuu and lent them the use of their horses in exchange.

“We deeply appreciate the lengths you all are going to.”

“No, not at all,” replied an abashed Ki’itsu. “We really are deficient these days in every respect. We can only offer you the same food that we eat, so I’m afraid you’ll have to endure it the best you can.”

“Not a problem,” Risai said. She looked at Kyoshi. “With so many people to take care of already, at the very least, we should donate the cost of our meals.”

“A good idea—” Kyoshi agreed, except Ki’itsu batted away the idea with a frantic wave of his hands.

“That is out of the question. No, we simply could not accept such an offer. Even rumors of a change in the status quo going around would cause no end of problems.”

“But—” Kyoshi started to object.

Houto interceded at that point. “You have already done more than we could ever ask for. We are humbled to accept your kind offer. We are the ones imposing on your good offices and would be delighted to accept whatever you have to offer, no matter how meager. Please do not trouble yourself any more on our behalf.”

Houto paused and said, “More importantly, to return to the matter at hand, would you know if His Highness’s retainers are still being pursued?”

“Ah,” Ki’itsu hesitated. “I wouldn’t say they’re on the run. We don’t see a great effort being made these days to track them down. Of course, that doesn’t mean they’re being given a free hand. According to some of the more dubious rumors going around, the gendarmes will show up at a moment’s notice to break up any gathering of refugees and displaced people.”

Risai asked, “Are you going to be all right here?”

“For the time being, as long as the Taoist temples and monasteries do nothing to attract unwarranted attention, they are being left alone. Because the local authorities ultimately answer to Asen, I attribute that less to any sense of magnanimity and more to simply letting sleeping dogs lie.”

Risai nodded. Support for Asen usually came down to self-interest. Asen had no strategy or big ideas for governing the countryside. As a result, the political operatives pulling the strings in local government made a show of backing Asen and little else. They didn’t treat Asen’s policies concerning the refugees with any seriousness and were just as likely to exploit them for their own gain.

“Which is why the activities at this temple have been largely overlooked.”

Nevertheless, any attempt to foment rebellion against Asen would not be tolerated in the least. Joukan took great pains to ensure that no such accusations could be directed at Fukyuu Temple.

“The last time I was in these parts, anything in the vicinity of Tetsui had been wiped clean. What about now?”

“That hasn’t changed. The regions to the northwest of Rin’u are mostly burnt fields. In the vicinity of Tetsui, the land has completely gone fallow.”

“What about the residents of Tetsui?”

“It looks like they’ve gathered in small hamlets in order to support their local Rishi. They all keep their gates shuttered, so it is hard to get good information about the conditions inside.”

The burned and abandoned villages along the road to Hakurou were struggling back to life, somehow managing to maintain the form of functioning municipalities.

“Is there anybody left still holding out against Asen?”

“Anyone who openly resisted was long ago eradicated. Not a trace of them left. The campaign against the remnants of His Highness’s retainers was relentless. I don’t think any of them remain around here.”

“The campaign against the remnants,” Risai murmured to herself. “I see no evidence of an armed struggle here in Rin’u. How did such an eradication campaign leave no trace behind?”

“Because none of it took place inside Rin’u,” Ki’itsu said, and the explanation clearly pained him. Before the campaign launched, the prefectural mayor shut the gates of the city.”

“Shut the gates?”

“Yes. The Imperial Army bivouacked north of the city. When it disbanded, as soon as it became apparent that the reprisals were imminent, the prefectural government drove off any soldiers within the city limits and ordered the gates closed.”

“Even though Asen himself appears utterly apathetic about the fate of the rank-and-file soldiers and the citizenry,” Houto observed.

“At the time, nobody knew Asen’s thoughts on the matter. The prefectural mayor was watching out for his own interests. He made sure that any spark that might start a fire was quenched immediately. That meant cutting the Imperial Army loose, with a large number of soldiers getting arrested and even executed. At one time, a hill not far from the fallow land at the outskirts was heaped with their remains. We did not dare interfere and let them decay where they lay. At some point they simply disappeared. I could not say whether they turned to dust and returned to the earth or someone interred them elsewhere.”

“I see.”

Many of Risai’s acquaintances would have been among the targeted members of Gyousou’s senior staff. General Eishou, General Sougen, General Gashin—and so many others. She could only hope their remains were not numbered among the dead.

Perished like dogs at the side of the road and ended up food for the crows.

That old folk song came to mind. However common a fate it was for soldiers to meet their end in a field, their bodies exposed on the ground, the dead were never far from her thoughts.

Risai having fallen unexpectedly silent, Houto picked up the conversation in her stead. “We must renew the search for them. Would inquiring about the city put you here at any risk?”

Ki’itsu paused, flustered by the question. A moment later he said, “I can’t really say. Asking around might attract attention from unwanted quarters. So, yes, there could be some danger there. And I have to wonder if anybody would speak to you in any case. The inquisitions following the strife with the land gangs were so severe that the man on the street is going to keep his own counsel on the subject. Most shrink from even mentioning His Highness’s name.”

“How about we speak with the refugees here in the temple?”

“That alone—” Ki’itsu said with a deep bow, “If nothing else, we must quash any rumors you came here to search for His Highness. Were such a rumor to escape these walls, an official investigation would be inevitable. So far, we have managed avoid the prying eyes of the government inspectors and they have not paid close attention to the conditions here. But given a reason to glance our way, the number of refugees alone is certain to arouse their suspicions.”

Ki'itsu then added, "It pains me to say this, but Fukyuu Temple privileges the safety of the refugees above all else. I truly understand how important the search for His Highness is for the kingdom, but certainly we must also avoid inflicting any more suffering on these poor folks who have already lost so much."

"In other words," Kyoshi said, "don't do anything that would draw the attention of the powers that be."

"He's asking us not to get Fukyuu Temple caught up in our crusade," Risai interjected. "That is not something we want either. I think Ki'itsu has every right to insist that the people under their care are their first priority. We shall take every precaution possible."

Ki'itsu let out a long, relieved breath. He bowed and headed for the door. Then he hesitated and glanced back at them. "And when will—" he started to say and stopped. "No," he muttered to himself, bowed again and left.

"I imagine he wanted to ask how long we were going to be hanging around here," Houto said, looking at the now empty doorway.

"I suspect so," Risai agreed with a wry smile. "And I completely understand, given the number of refugees here. If you ask me, cramming so many people into one place is asking for trouble. The only reason it hasn't become a problem is because the government is looking the other way. But all it'll take is for some bureaucrats to start wondering aloud what in the world is going on at Fukyuu Temple and you can bet the blame will come raining down. That's what they want to avoid."

"Sorry about all this," Kyoshi apologized in a dispirited tone. "I'm sure Enchou-sama never imagined Fukyuu Temple was in such a state when it penned the request."

"It says a lot about the dire straits Bun Province is in everywhere," Risai observed.

It was tough not being able to count on willing allies. But then they probably shouldn't have been harboring such expectations in the first place. Because going head-to-head with Asen would mean leaving a lot of victims in their wake.

"Nevertheless," Houto pointed out, "if we're not going to do anything that might on the off-chance cause trouble for Fukyuu Temple, that's going to severely limit our options."

"We can't very well go around asking people if they've heard anything about His Highness. To start with, we'd have to keep everybody from figuring out that we are guests of Fukyuu Temple too."

"That's what it comes down to," Houto said. "When problems do arise, we want to be able to claim that Fukyuu Temple knew nothing at all about our activities. We begged and pleaded and they gave us a place to sleep. We'll have to be able to sell that story."

"That's why we can't make any donations?" Kyoshi asked.

“That’s one reason. Taking our money would raise suspicions they were doing our bidding too. We have to maintain the appearance of being strangers to each other.”

Risai let out a long breath. Things were not going the way she wished, but wringing her hands wasn’t going to help either.

“We want to cause as little distress as possible to Fukyuu Temple and the refugees struggling to get by here. That means watching our steps however well we can.”

Houto responded with a heartfelt nod. “We need to establish a home base somewhere else. As long as we’re staying here, Joukan-sama and Ki’itsu-sama aren’t going to rest easy. And without more freedom to act on our own, coming here to Bun Province will end up a waste of time and effort. Let’s see if we can rent ourselves a room or a house.”

Chapter 31

[6-4] While Houto reached out to his shin'nou contacts to find another place to stay, Risai and Kyoshi took a stroll around Rin'u. Ki'itsu offered his services as a guide, though Kyoshi got the feeling he was tagging along to make sure his guests didn't stir up the kind of trouble that might cause them grief.

As far as Risai was concerned, their relationship with Ki'itsu and Fukyuu Temple had started off on entirely the wrong foot, but one that was also unavoidable. Rin'u was overflowing with refugees who had no place else to go.

Caught up in the chaos caused by the conflict with the land gangs, followed almost immediately by the eradication campaign against Gyousou's retainers, and then the purges of any remaining anti-Asen holdouts, they'd been cast aside without a second thought.

The refugees who'd come to rely on Fukyuu Temple received the bare minimum in terms of housing and subsisted on a meager diet.

But scattered throughout Rin'u were many more fending off the wind and rain with a single blanket, the great majority with jaundiced skin and clouded eyes. An emaciated mother cradling a baby against her skin and bones frame. Scrawny children fishing through the garbage piled up on the street. The elderly curled up in the alleys, clothed in rags, and showing no more life in them than old fallen trees.

"Can't the administration offer them any aid?" Kyoshi asked.

Ki'itsu shook his head. These refugees were not citizens of Rin'u. The official stance of the government was that those benefits extended only to legal residents of the city. In their eyes, any squatters not there legally did not exist at all.

But that didn't mean the legal residents of Rin'u had access to social services that came anywhere close to meeting their needs. The granaries and public warehouses where foodstuffs and material goods were stored in case of natural disasters and hard cold spells had long been emptied. The wagons delivering the harvest had a habit of disappearing along the way.

The officials claimed they distributed the proceeds to impoverished villages and hamlets, except no one ever heard a word from the supposed recipients of this generosity.

"Then how will they fare during the winter?" Kyoshi asked. "Snowfalls are heavy in this region."

Ki'itsu explained, "The cold is a greater fear than the snow. Aside from the northern coast of Bun Province bordering the Kyokai, snowfalls around here are not

so severe. Heavy enough to collapse the roofs of older houses, to be sure, but not enough to leave villages cut off and isolated. Rather, the wolf at the door is the cold that seeps into the bones.”

Every year, refugees camped out alongside the roads froze to death. Even those with homes to live in could find themselves at risk if they ran out of firewood and charcoal.

Ki'itsu said, looking around, “Were this the dynasty of Emperor Kyou, the damage would likely be all the greater. And yet—”

They'd come to the suburbs of the city, to the banks of the river that flowed through the outskirts of Rin'u.

The southeast of Bun Province was marked by hilly land that rose over and again into mountain ranges. In the midst of the highlands, Rin'u and its environs occupied the only level land that reached to the horizon as far as the eye could see. The Hokusui cut through the middle of the flatlands. It was a big river that ran north to the Kyokai from the capital city of Kouki far to the south.

Having collected the runoff from the streams cascading down from the surrounding mountains, the river turned abruptly to the west in the vicinity of where they were standing. The geography here resulted from the imposing presence of Mount You.

Home to numerous towering Ryou'un peaks, the enormous mountain range occupied the middle of northern Bun Province, dividing north from south in the eastern half of the province. No navigable roads crossed Mount You straight through to the north, meaning that any passage to the northeast of Bun Province required a detour around the mountain.

The Mount You range dominated any view of the north, the ragged ridgelines fading into the distance beneath the clear fall sky. The giant pillars of the Ryou'un Mountains, that otherwise would have loomed overhead, instead dissolved into the air. From Mount You, the mountains sloped down to the flatlands around Rin'u. Harvested fields spread out from the foothills.

A cold wind blew across empty plains thick with withered autumn growth. What looked altogether like a land of wrack and ruin reached out before them.

The Hokusui neatly bisected the plain. A considerable distance separated the three of them from the opposite bank. High levees lined the river, though they looked less like levees than great gouges left behind in the earth by the flow of the river.

The embankments were covered by white flowering shrubs.

“We owe our lives to these,” Ki'itsu said. He reached out and plucked several of the yellow fruits from amongst the small white flowers and deposited them into a bag that hung around his neck.

The shrub was called the thorn oak. It thrived even in depleted soil and flowered from spring until late fall. The fruit emerged after the flowers fell, about the size of a small stone. When dried, it made a fine substitute for charcoal. The plant did not exist before the battles with the land gangs. When Gyousou ascended the throne, he petitioned Heaven and obtained the new seed.

After Gyousou went missing, the seeds were distributed throughout the country. During the six years of his absence, the thorn oak had made life bearable. People came to call it the Gift of Kouki.

The way the bag hanging around his neck was discolored with the oily stains from the fruit, Ki'itsu probably picked several every time he went out. Kyoshi and Risai did the same. They were by no means the only ones. Others along the levee were picking the fruit.

The thorn oak bushes were everywhere, covering the banks of the river, the causeways between the rice paddies, and the rising slopes of the mountains. It was a testament to just how important charcoal was. While the thorn oak did not burn with as much heat as charcoal, when charcoal became too expensive to afford, there was a substitute available at the cost of a little effort. It was indeed a gift of great worth to the people of Tai.

On their journey, Kyoshi and Risai and Houto had regularly gathered the thorn oak berries. For young children in particular, it'd become part of their usual chores.

Picking the thorn oak berries, Ki'itsu stopped. Holding the bag in his hands, he slumped to the ground. "The person who blessed us with these gifts—where is he now and what is he doing?"

Kyoshi didn't know how to answer such a question. Risai silently gazed down at the berries cupped in her hands.

"Is he even still alive?"

"He is without a doubt," Risai declared.

Ki'itsu glanced up at her. "Then why has he hidden himself away?"

"He isn't hiding because he wants to. I don't know where he is and what he is doing, but if he is safe and sound, then I know the present state of Tai pains him as much as any injury. Whatever he is doing, he is doing it in order to save Tai. It may not appear that way because conditions are so dire and are not improving. All the more reason we must come to his aid." Risai paused and added, "That is what I honestly believe."

Holding the bag in his hands, Ki'itsu nodded. "If true, then shouldn't we mobilize Fukyuu Temple and help you out as well?"

"No need to go that far," Risai said. Ki'itsu fixed his gaze on her and she explained. "Saving *him* means making an enemy of Asen, which will invite a high degree of danger. Those who have someone or something to protect should give *that* their

undivided attention. For Ki'itsu-dono, the people sheltering at Fukyuu Temple are your first priority. Saving them is your way of saving Tai."

"You really think so?"

"Leave it to people like me, who have nothing else to lose, to save His Highness. Your support of Tai, in turn, gives us the peace of mind that makes it possible for us to dedicate ourselves fully to our objectives."

Ki'itsu responded with a deep bow.

The next day, Houto brought a man to see them. "This is Kenchuu. He runs an agency here in Rin'u."

Kenchuu was a brawny man who made no unnecessary movements and said no unnecessary things. He stood next to Houto, his arms folded across his chest.

"The shin'nou in Rin'u introduced me to him. He recruits laborers for the mines in the mountains. The miners who come to Rin'u looking for work need room and board until a job comes through. Kenchuu here makes sure they get it."

"Nice to make your acquaintance," Risai said.

Kenchuu answered with a wordless nod. *A man of few words*, Kyoshi thought. More than just a man who had little to say, he carried about him a curiously intimidating aura. Keeping rough men like miners in line certainly required a particular ruggedness of both muscle and mind. He was as much a knight errant as a mere job recruiter.

Houto drew closer to Risai and said under his breath, "Not the kind of thing he wants bandied about, but amongst the miners are a fair number of exiles and refugees. Word is, the refugees gathered in Rin'u have come to depend on his good offices in one way or another."

"You don't say."

"He arranges room and board for the miners. To that end, he maintains a portfolio of rental properties. I gather he's willing to lease one of them to us."

"For which we would be very grateful," said Risai, turning to face Kenchuu.

Kenchuu finally opened his mouth. "There are conditions."

"Such as? We will, of course, do our best to make sure that our actions do not conflict with your interests."

"The shin'nou tell me you're looking for His Highness. That true?"

Risai nodded.

"Are you starting a revolution?"

"Not at all—" Houto started to say.

Risai cut him off. "You heard correctly. I am searching for His Highness. During the battles with the land gangs and the chaos that followed in Bun Province, we lost

all contact with him. I need to ascertain his condition, and if he is well, offer him whatever assistance I can. That is all. Would you call that fomenting a rebellion?"

"I'm asking whether His Highness is for the people or against them."

"That depends on what you mean by being against the people."

Risai-sama, Kyoshi whispered tersely under his breath.

"What I mean?" Kenchuu fixed Risai with a sharp glare.

Risai did not retreat. "His Highness surely holds no malice against the kingdom or its people. But I could not say he would show allegiance to the kingdom that exists today. Observing its current state, he might well find no righteousness in it. If that is what you mean by *against*, then I could not categorically say he is not against the people. Though I couldn't say so for certain without meeting with him in person and hearing him speak his own mind."

Kenchuu narrowed his eyes in a way that said his suspicions had in no way been allayed, but he did not argue. "I'm not looking for trouble."

"And we're not looking to cause you any," Risai said.

He nodded. "The place is not far from here. After me."

Kenchuu led Kyoshi, Risai, and Houto out the back gate. With Houto in the lead, they wound their way down through the narrow alleyways.

His eyes on Kenchuu's back, Kyoshi said to Risai in a hushed voice, "Do you think it wise to answer the way you did?"

Not being able to speak the truth made the lies inevitable. But Risai's choice of words did not quite amount to a falsehood while skirting close to dangerous territory.

"At least he didn't ask if we were deserters," she muttered to herself.

By which she meant deserters from the Imperial Army. Or more precisely, the remnants of Gyousou's retinue. She suspected that's what Kenchuu really wanted to ask them about.

"It seemed to me that he left us enough room to maneuver around the stone-cold truth, so I ran with it."

Chapter 32

[6-5] Kenchuu led them to an estate not far from Fukyuu Temple. It housed a broken-down building that had seen better days. But they could make good use of it.

Kenchuu handed over the key. That day they moved their things from Fukyuu Temple. There was no way to bring the kijuu without attracting attention, so they left it in the care of the temple stables and brought the horses with them.

Ki'itsu came along as well. They needed someone to look after them, he said. They didn't want to inconvenience Fukyuu Temple more than they already had, but even if they were no longer on the grounds of the temple, clearly Joukan wanted to keep an eye on them. Were they to stir up any trouble, the blame would fall on Fukyuu Temple.

With this in mind, Risai did not protest Ki'itsu's presence.

As was common in the north, the main wing of the house was deeper than it was wide, with four rooms attached to the central hall. There weren't any detached buildings to the right and left of the main wing. The narrow courtyards on the east and west were situated in order to allow the main wing at the north end of the property as much exposure to sun as possible.

The south wing of the house was a lean-to used for the stables and sheds, constructed so that the low-pitched roof did not block the sunlight. Though the south wing appeared on the verge of falling down, the sleeping hearth in the main wing was in good working order. Channeled beneath the hearth, the flue from the cooking stove in the kitchen off the west courtyard heated the house.

Scrubbing the water basin, Risai said to herself, "This is the season that calls for a fire in the morning."

Behind her, Kyoshi lit the stove and agreed with a nod "That's for certain."

The residents of Touka would be lighting the fires in the sleeping hearths about now as well. For an old sage like Enchou, with his aching back and joints, this was increasingly a tough time of year. As the villagers bantered back and forth about whether it was colder this year than last, the snow began to fall, at first melting away when it reached the ground, then more and more often freezing and accumulating.

And soon the hard winter would be upon them, a blanket of cold covering the countryside. The snow left the roads impassable and isolated small hamlets in the mountain valleys. And then all anyone had to eat was what they had laid up in store.

How many villagers will make it through the winter this year? Wondered Kyoshi as he always did.

During the depths of the winter that accompanied the new year, the food supplies running low, they'd count the days until the snows melted and start rationing the consumables. Seeing the snowpack still high and the stockpiles low, the anxieties grew all the greater. It was a feeling impossible to grow accustomed to, even though that pervasive sense of unease stalked them year after year.

Their thoughts focused on the coming season, the room had fallen into a gloomy silence when Ki'itsu returned from his errand to Fukyuu Temple. A step behind him was a middle-aged woman. She deposited the meager bundle of firewood on her back in a corner of the kitchen.

Looking on, Ki'itsu prefaced her introduction by explaining, "She is one of the refugees staying at Fukyuu Temple."

Kyoshi and Risai couldn't help tilting their heads, wondering if she was the hired help. Their puzzled looks notwithstanding, Ki'itsu urged her forward.

With a downward glance in lieu of a bow, the woman said, "I saw His Highness six years ago."

That statement immediately seized their attention.

"No, to tell the truth, when I caught sight of him, he was some distance away. It was outside Rin'u. He was riding a magnificent kijuu and wearing black armor. He was far enough away that I really couldn't make out his face. His white hair made me think at first he was a weathered old general, except the way he rode the kijuu was so regal and the way he moved so full of life."

A man who appeared old but looked young—a passing stranger clued her in. "That's the new emperor of Tai," he explained.

According to the woman, the incident happened soon after Gyousou arrived in Rin'u. Several in her village had also seen him while working on their farms. Spring was not far off and they were shoveling the snow off their huts and sheds.

"I saw him purely by happenstance. But rumors spread soon enough that His Highness had arrived. Hoping to see him for themselves, many of the villagers ran off to a vantage point where they could see the camp."

For every one among their number who pointed from afar and said that was him, another thought he was in a group over there, and yet more couldn't make out anything for sure from that distance. As far as the woman knew, she was the only one who'd seen him that close.

"Even though I couldn't clearly make out his features, I had no doubts in my heart. I just had this feeling about him. I was envied my good luck."

"Good luck, indeed." Risai nodded.

“The army camped outside of Rin’u for just a day. Most of the troops soon moved west. The encampment was still there, so some hurried over thinking he was still there. But that wasn’t the case.”

“Because the army left Rin’u the day after they arrived and marched west. How did His Highness appear to you?”

“In good spirits. No signs of apprehension or timidity. At the same time, neither did he appear impatient or agitated. He was surrounded by ranks of stern and solemn soldiers but carried on with them in a cheerful manner, as he might around the campfire. The soldiers he spoke to appeared entirely pleased by his presence. I remember everyone there remarking about how popular he was with the troops.”

“Ah,” said Risai, for she could picture such a scene herself.

Gyousou was born with the blood of a soldier coursing through his veins and was popular among his men. Gyousou as well considered them kindred spirits and conversed with them easily as his band of brothers. Without exception, they were happy to be under his command.

The same was no less true of Risai’s army. Risai’s senior staff had served with her since her days in the Jou Provincial Guard. As a result, she didn’t meet Gyousou until she was appointed a general in the Imperial Army. She hadn’t known Gyousou when he was a general in the Palace Guard. She met him for the first time as emperor. But ever since, simply seeing him raised her spirits.

“His Highness came all the way here to Bun Province to answer our needs. Thinking about him in those terms always left me deeply thankful. When the land gangs first went on the rampage, we had no choice but to adapt to their violent ways. No one was coming to save us. They could sow chaos to their heart’s content and our only choice was to meekly submit and wait them out. Then His Highness dispatched the Palace Guard and clamped down on them overnight.”

The woman pressed her stubby hands against her chest. “When I say how thankful we are, I mean His Highness had not cast aside this godforsaken land. It lifts our hearts to know he spares a thought even for us.”

“Do you know what happened after that?”

“I do. A great uproar erupted over his disappearance. It was said the land gangs must have done something to him. That enraged all of us. Whether he was attacked or abducted, we had to do what we could to help him, and so we searched the countryside every day, looking for any place that looked out of sorts or people that looked out of place.”

“You did?”

“But His Highness was nowhere to be found. While this fruitless search was underway, strange events consumed all of Bun Province. The ranks of the Imperial

Army hollowed out. In their place, new troops were dispatched from the capital. And they—”

The woman stopped talking. The new troops were forces loyal to Asen. They began a systematic eradication of Gyousou’s retainers and subordinates. Any village or hamlet caught harboring them was mercilessly put to the torch.

“Bun Province has since fallen into the state you see today. We look back fondly on that brief moment in time when His Highness reigned, and we tell how much better our lives would be had he remained on the throne.” The woman peered at Risai. “Ki’itsu-sama said you were interested in any stories about seeing His Highness. That you are gathering such stories now can only mean you are searching for him.”

For a moment, Risai didn’t reply. Then she said, “We will do whatever we can to save Tai.”

Risai wasn’t sure how the woman would respond but she answered with a deep bow. “I hope what I have told you today will prove helpful. I’ll be sure to mention it to my friends—”

Risai interrupted her at that point. “We appreciate the sentiment, but you should probably keep this exchange to yourself. You simply brought us firewood. Understand?”

The woman nodded, a stiff expression on her face, and after repeated bows left the kitchen. When Ki’itsu returned after seeing her off, Risai asked him, “Ki’itsu-dono, do you think this is going to be alright?”

Ki’itsu only answered with a small smile.

If the refugees set about gathering information, that would increase the risk that somebody would notice something was going on. Especially if that something concerned Gyousou, it’d be easy to jump to the conclusion that forces were arraying themselves against Asen. The refugees were such a motley bunch, there was no way to shut them down or shut them up. Any rumors that started to circulate could cause problems for Fukyuu Temple.

Despite Risai’s concerns, Ki’itsu later brought another woman and then a man by to see them. These two had seen Gyousou from closer distances.

“I lived in Kakyuu at the time,” said the man, who had a bad limp.

Kakyuu was one of the towns occupied by the land gangs. It was a relatively large town on the highway west from Rin’u. A major conflict occurred there shortly before Gyousou disappeared.

“The land gangs stormed the town and easily occupied the shire castle. The Imperial Army came to drive them out. The battle went on for seven days before the castle was recaptured. After the land gangs fled, I saw the man himself entering the shire castle.”

The woman was a resident of Shikyuu, a village to the north of Rin'u.

"The land gangs raided Shikyuu as well, but they just came for our money, food, and clothing, and disappeared almost as soon as they'd appeared. Despite taking only our goods, they rampaged about and wounded many in the process. Unlike Kakyuu, no battles took place and nobody was killed."

Not long after the land gangs were subdued, Shikyuu was accused of harboring deserters from the Imperial Army and put to the torch. The majority of the villagers shared the same fate as the soldiers. The woman barely managed to escape with her family to Rin'u and finally made their way to Fukyuu Temple.

"Once the land gangs were sent packing, the Imperial Army replaced the goods taken from us. At the time, word went around that one of the military units outside the town was led by a quite impressive commander that was in fact the emperor. He wore armor trimmed with black silver and rode a kijuu that resembled a tiger."

"Keito," Risai muttered to herself. After Keito lost sight of Gyousou, he'd returned to camp by himself. Speaking of which, what had become of Keito?

"And you haven't seen him since?"

"Well—ahh—" she mumbled.

"If you know anything at all, please let us know."

"The thing is, what I know is—"

Ki'itsu gently encouraged her to continue. "Won't you tell us? Of course, nothing you say here will be repeated outside these walls."

"No, that's fine. You see, I did catch sight of him."

"At camp?"

"Not at the camp but not far from the camp. I can't rightly recall the finer details." An awkward smile rose to her face and she turned to leave. Ki'itsu retrained her and in soothing tones urged her to relate the rest of the story.

"I happened to visit a small shrine not far from the village and saw him in the nearby woods. He wasn't wearing his armor but that kijuu was with him, the one like a tiger, so I am sure he was His Highness."

The shrine was adjacent to a small hillock formed from boulders piled atop each other. Evergreens rooted here and there in the gaps between the rocks formed a sparse grove of trees that didn't obstruct the view.

"He was with two or three others. They appeared to be discussing something. And one of them—" Her voice faltered and her downcast eyes focused aimlessly on the ground. "A military man wearing garish red and black armor. I will never forget his repellent countenance. After the conflict with the land gangs, he was the one in charge when they laid waste to Shikyuu and hunted us down like animals."

"Laid waste to Shikyuu—so a member of Asen's army?"

The woman nodded. "I believe so. It was hardly human, the way he slaughtered women and children with unbridled glee."

She spit the words out with unrestrained disgust. The precise details of her story were hard to make out, but apparently these otherwise ordinary men went on explaining something or other while Gyousou listened without interruption.

Risai thanked her and promised again not to divulge anything she said. Watching as she hurried back to the temple, Risai scoured her memories. Had there ever been such a man among Asen's officers?

Asen had always been ranked as Gyousou's equal. He was highly respected as a general, and many of his staff officers had well-earned reputations as exceptional commanders in their own right. Hardly a gang of undisciplined barbarians, his army conducted itself according to form. She couldn't imagine any soldiers among their ranks so vulgar that they would gleefully hunt down women and children.

The next day, Ki'itsu brought another man to see them, a small man with a tattered and worn air about him.

"I saw His Highness only once," he said, recalling the scene with evident nostalgia. "I was born in Tetsui."

"Tetsui—"

"At the time, I was living in Kakyou. I grew up in Tetsui. My work brought me to Kakyou."

He worked at a business in Kakyou. His parents and siblings remained behind in Tetsui. When the land gangs abandoned Kakyou, they fled toward Tetsui. At the time, a rebel army was advancing on Tetsui from the west. With wild rumors circulating of an imminent invasion, his frightened family reached out to him and they relocated to Kakyou. Many residents in and around Tetsui also sought refuge in Kakyou.

"The people in Tetsui were overjoyed that His Highness decided to come there. Eager to catch a glimpse of him, if only from a distance, many ventured to the military encampments. Nobody could get close enough to pick him out from the rank and file, though."

Before that golden opportunity could present itself, the troops broke camp and shifted their forces towards Tetsui. Responding to the heightened risk of an invasion by the land gangs, the Imperial Army took on the mission of defending the city.

"They weren't going to let us anywhere near the battlefield so this was our last good chance. Together with my brother, we chased after the Imperial Army."

That was when his brother suggested that they might be able to see him if they ran ahead and waited in the mountains. Not far on, the highway crossed a range to the southwest of Kan'you Mountain. The highway climbed a gentle rise out of Kakyou.

There was a town at the crest of the grade. Past that town, the highway cut through a low-rising mountain ridge.

From atop that ridge, they thought they might be able to spot Gyousou as he marched with his troops through the pass.

“We expected the army to arrive at the town in the evening and set up camp there. My brother and I got there ahead of time and climbed the ridge during the night. But the mountain was more treacherous than we anticipated.”

In the middle of the night, wandering up the slope with no marked path, they lost track of where they were until the next morning. Initially disappointed that they wouldn’t make it to the lookout before the troops marched through the pass, they unexpectedly overheard people talking.

“My brother and I made it to the crest of a low-lying ledge. From below us came the sound of human voices and the footsteps of animals. Delighted that we had emerged from the forest at a spot where we could overlook the pass, we turned our attention to the voices. But when we peered down from the ledge, below us was only a narrow mountain trail. Navigating the trail was a platoon of mounted knights.”

The two of them were familiar with the trail. Heading from Rin’u to Tetsui, the highway to Hakurou skirted the foothills to the south. Heading north at the fork in the road, the route circled around to Tetsui, west of Kan’you Mountain. But there was also this narrow trail from Kakyou over the mountain to Tetsui.

“People like us from Tetsui took that route to Rin’u. You had to sleep under the stars along the way, but it cut the distance considerably. Using the main highway, it took seven days to Kakyou, and just three on the mountain trail. Granted, it was impassable during the winter and not wide enough to accommodate an army. That’s where they saw the soldiers on their kijuu.”

One of them appeared to be Gyousou himself.

“He was a good way away, but based on the rumors spread by people who claimed to have seen him up close, I was pretty sure it was him. He was wearing black armor and riding a kijuu that resembled a white tiger. He didn’t have on a helmet and his hair was white.”

Risai nodded. “That does sound like him.” She said with poorly contained impatience, “And?”

The man weakly shook his head. “That’s all. As you’d expect, riding kijuu like that, they climbed the mountain trail at a brisk pace.”

“What about his condition? Did he appear to be in danger or under threat?”

“No,” the man answered. “There wasn’t anything in the air that suggested he was being menaced or intimidated or that he was coercing those around him, only that they were briskly moving forward in an entirely normal fashion. All of the soldiers

around him wore resplendent red and black armor. While maintaining a comfortable distance, they surrounded him on all sides. I figured they were his bodyguards.”

“Did they look like they were in a hurry?”

“Yes. I think they were headed to Tetsui. That trail leads to Tetsui. If you aren’t going there, the only other destination is Kan’you Mountain.”

Risai found herself clenching her fists. *Kan’you Mountain.*

“My brother and I were pretty happy with the way things turned out. And very tired. We’d been wandering around the mountain all night, after all. Fortunately, we were just above the trail that led back to Kakyou. We wouldn’t have to run around in circles, only climb down from the ledge and follow the trail. Relieved at the way things had turned out, we decided to take a nap on the ledge. Except the sun was high in the sky and we were in high spirits so sleep was out of the question. We might as well head straight back to Kakyou. The problem was, we didn’t have anything to eat or drink and every bone in our bodies ached. We talked for a while until we nodded off. No sooner had we fallen asleep, it seemed, but a noise woke us up.”

As it turned out, they had napped a good part of the afternoon. The sun was low on the horizon. They couldn’t figure out at first what awoke them, but his brother had as well so they must have heard the same sound.

“Guess we fell asleep,” he said.

That’s when they caught the sound of footsteps coming from below the ledge. They peered over the edge. The platoon of mounted knights was coming down the trail. As best they could tell, these were the same soldiers who had climbed the trail that morning.

“Except His Highness was not among them.” Moreover, the platoon was at half its previous strength. “And some had suffered wounds. We thought maybe they’d been ambushed by one of the land gangs.”

The scene had an ominous feel about it. Where had the emperor disappeared to? They didn’t want to imagine such an outcome, but they had to consider the possibility the battle with the land gangs had taken a bad turn.

“We wanted to run after them and ask what happened, but that wasn’t possible. Getting down from the ledge posed a big obstacle to start with, and there was the strange feeling we got about the whole thing.”

“The strange feeling?”

“Supposing that a battle had taken place, and something bad happened to His Highness, that platoon should have rushed back to the main force to report the situation. They’d deliver the news and call up reinforcements, right?”

“Stands to reason.”

“Except they didn’t appear to be in any kind of a hurry. Though they were riding kijuu and so were covering ground faster than soldiers could on foot, they weren’t

moving nearly as fast as they could. Far from it, some of them looked like they'd been out for a jaunt, joking around with each other. Well, we weren't close enough to make out their individual expressions, so we might have only imagined them laughing. The voices carried to our ears on the wind were unquestionably those of people in a giddy mood. And not the normal kind of casual happiness. Gallows humor."

Their presence was cloaked in such grim shadows that he and his brother watched them ride off without calling out to them. After the sound of pounding hooves disappeared, they climbed down from the ledge and returned to Kakyou.

"We didn't think any more about it until His Highness disappeared. When the word got out the next day or the day after, in the uproar that followed, that was when my brother and I started putting the pieces together—" The man quieted his voice to a taut whisper. "Those soldiers probably did something to His Highness in the mountains. Traitors in the Imperial Army betrayed and assassinated him—"

He'd harbored these doubts all along and kept them to himself. At first, he couldn't bring himself to admit the possibility. Then later, saying such things in public grew all too dangerous.

"I see."

That platoon must have comprised the bodyguards Kouryou had spoken of, Asen's personal retainers. They departed in the company of Gyousou and returned without him.

"Thank you. We've learned a lot from your account."

The man nodded with brimming eyes. At length, he asked, "Would you perhaps be looking for His Highness?"

Risai only nodded in reply.

The man covered his eyes with his sleeve. "His Highness is no longer with us."

Risai wanted to assure him otherwise, but felt it prudent not to do so. The less the people around them knew the better. The closer to the vest they kept this information the better, for all parties involved.

The man wept quietly for a moment, then bowed deeply and left.

Chapter 33

[6-6] A platoon of soldiers ascended the mountain with Gyousou and came down without him.

The heavy meaning in that simple recounting left Kyoshi harboring dark thoughts.

He asked, "Risai-sama, is this what you meant when you said the best evidence would be found on Kan'you Mountain? That His Highness was attacked there? Given the pace of such kijuu, they definitely could make the trip to Kan'you Mountain and back in a day."

Risai nodded. "Gyousou's sash was discovered in a shipment from Kan'you Mountain, stained with blood and severed in a way that suggests he was attacked from behind and slashed with a single stroke. It likely fell where the attack took place."

"So that's what happened," Ki'itsu muttered, closing his eyes as if deep in thought.

Houto said, "Considering the descriptions of that platoon, I don't think there's any reason to doubt that Gyousou-sama left the column of his own accord. Though the testimony of Asen's own troops is not to be trusted in this regard."

"So it seems." Risai said, a puzzled expression on her face. "Why would Gyousou-sama separate from his own column?"

Under normal circumstances, she went on to say, answering her own question, it should never happen.

Houto agreed. "But then there's the account of Gyousou-sama at the shrine outside Shikyu, carrying on a conversation with a military commander wearing red and black armor and several seemingly ordinary men."

"That red and black armor was worn by his bodyguards. Kouryou did say a platoon went missing at the same time. This platoon was suited up as his security detail. The soldiers in Shikyu accompanied him there ostensibly to protect him. The problem that leaves us with are these civilians."

"Would an ordinary civilian be able to wrangle a meeting with His Highness?"

"Normally it'd be out of the question, unless a longstanding friendship or other circumstances were involved. And unlikely even then. In any case, even Sougen and Eishou don't appear to have been familiar with them. One possibility is that someone in Asen's army made the introductions and arranged the meeting. We're not talking about any common foot soldier. Perhaps General Hinken. He had command of Asen's troops at the time."

"What kind of man is this Hinken?"

Risai tilted her head to the side. "I don't really know. We don't share any common acquaintances that I know of. He is a regimental commander in Asen's army. I haven't heard anything that suggests his skills are in any way exceptional. I don't even think he was one of Asen's subordinates originally. During the dynasty of Emperor Kyou, he might have served in a different chain of command."

The command structure of an army was rarely made up solely of the general's personal retainers. That was true of the army Risai led as well. Her five regimental commanders had risen up the ranks with her. But at the battalion level and below, more than a few of the soldiers and officers were assigned there by the Ministry of Summer, including some with decidedly less than stellar reputations.

"I never heard of any problems that set him apart from the rest, but he didn't exactly make his presence known, if you know what I mean."

"That being the case, it's hard to imagine a regimental commander like Hinken setting up a meeting with Gyouosou-sama."

"Not necessarily. To be sure, Hinken might not have been a stand-out as a military leader. But however imperfect, he was the face of Asen's army and in charge of its officers and soldiers. Though Gyouosou-sama was formally in command as the acting general, the army was basically on loan to him. It wouldn't be good form to not take Hinken seriously. If Hinken insisted on a specific course of action, it'd be difficult to refuse."

"So Hinken made the arrangements?"

"I think it highly likely. In which case, these arrangements in Shikyuu ended with Gyouosou-sama leaving the column. Having kept any knowledge of the meeting from Sougen and Eishou in the first place, they were equally in the dark when he set off on his own."

"In other words, you're saying he was lured out?" Ki'itsu was clearly doubtful. "That would be careless of him in the extreme."

"Based on how things turned out, so it would seem." Risai was no less taken aback. "But Gyouosou-sama also must have sensed something strange going on. That's why he borrowed additional soldiers from Sougen the night before."

"Ah, I see," Houto said with a soft clap of his hands. "Hinken offered to arrange a meeting with some third party. The circumstances being what they were, Gyouosou-sama couldn't reject it out of hand. This third party had the ulterior motive of separating him from the main column. Gyouosou-sama agreed, but thinking things seemed suspicious, he took extra troops along with him and had them standing guard."

"That seems the rational conclusion to come to. However, those guards never returned. I think we can conclude that when things took a turn for the worse and they came running, they got attacked along with Gyouosou-sama."

“And the stage for these events was Kan’you Mountain.”

Risai agreed. But Ki’itsu responded with a questioning look. “I don’t think these events can be confined to Kan’you Mountain. That shortcut certainly exists. Except starting out west of Kakyō and climbing north brings you to Ryuukei. Without a doubt, heading west from Ryuukei takes you to Tetsui. Heading east takes you to Kan’you Mountain. But there are a number of towns on the road between Kan’you Mountain and Tetsui.”

“Any attack would have been planned to take place out of public view,” Houto observed.

“Even so, would they deliberately go all the way to Kan’you Mountain? Kan’you Mountain is hardly unpopulated. On the other hand, that mountain path is perfect for an ambush, mostly deserted and no homesteads in sight. I think it more likely His Highness was attacked somewhere along that route.”

“You have a good point,” Houto agreed.

“In that case,” Risai objected, “why was Gyousou-sama’s sash found in a shipment from Kan’you Mountain? What was the state of operations on the mountain at the time?”

Ki’itsu cast his thoughts back and nodded. “Now that you mention it, Kan’you Mountain might have been shut down around then. Not just the mountain. The whole area was infested with the land gangs. I recall the local residents relocating in great numbers.”

“Asen was pulling the strings of the land gangs. If he designed the ambush to take place somewhere in Kan’you Mountain, he could have deployed the land gangs to clear out any people in the vicinity.”

“But if you’re going to go to the trouble of clearing out of an area like that, it wouldn’t have to be Kan’you Mountain.”

“There is a degree to which, if you’re not in an area that’s been cordoned off and you miss your mark, that makes escape all the easier. Choosing Kan’you Mountain makes more sense in that light. And Kan’you Mountain is where the sash—”

Ki’itsu broke to say, “Don’t you find that strange? Asen attacked His Highness—or to be precise, the soldiers he dispatched as his security detail bungled the job. At that point, Asen having shown his hand, his subordinates would do whatever it took to keep any knowledge of the attack from getting out. They’d scrub the area clean of evidence that might lead back to them. They wouldn’t leave a scrap of clothing just sitting there.”

Risai furrowed her brows. “True enough.”

“Moreover, having gone to all the trouble of luring him out, I find it hard to believe his security detail would carry out the attack alone. If it were me, I would have allies lying in wait at the designated spot, hiding out of view in a place nobody

else was likely to chance upon. Carry out the attack and then dispose of the incriminating evidence, including the body of His Highness. And the disposal site was Kan'you Mountain."

With all the mine ventilation shafts, fissures in the earth left behind by cave-ins, and test digs by prospectors, Ki'itsu explained, there were no end of deep holes where the truth could be buried for good.

"Hold on, there," Houto said, raising his voice. "If they really did go to such lengths, Gyousou-sama could not have possibly survived. And yet he is very much alive."

"I have voiced these doubts before," Ki'itsu said. "But can we say for certain that is the case?" Ki'itsu cast his eyes down at the ground. "I don't want to believe that His Highness is dead, but—"

"He lives," Risai declared. "Beyond the shadow of a doubt, he lives."

"Then why haven't we heard a word from him these past six years?"

"That is—" Risai started to say and couldn't find the words to complete the thought.

"Is he not aware of the current state that Tai is in? Knowing how things are, how can he remain silent? Why won't he step forward to save Tai?"

"Perhaps because no matter how much he wants to raise his voice, he cannot," Kyoshi interjected. "As Kouryou said, Tai is caught between a rock and a hard place."

"A rock and a hard place," Ki'itsu echoed, a puzzled look on his face.

"Saving Tai means striking Asen down. Doing that requires military force. If His Highness stood forth and denounced Asen, his retainers now in hiding would rally behind him and those military forces would gather to the cause. However, as soon as they came out in the open, Asen would certainly attack before those military forces could assemble in a meaningful way."

"Ah, yes. That makes sense."

"We can't strike back at Asen without showing our hand. But showing our hand invites immediate reprisals. Moreover, innocent civilians would inevitably get caught up in the ensuing chaos. With such concerns in mind, His Highness's retainers are keeping so out of sight that their activities are not even fodder for gossip. The same would hold no less true for His Highness."

"Exactly," Risai said with renewed conviction. "I believe His Highness is alive and somewhere in hiding. He is surely distressed by the present state of Tai, but his hands are tied."

"That makes sense to me. But then where?" Ki'itsu asked.

"Hence the importance of this search. Our only clue is that sash. Regardless of how it came to be cast aside, the fact remains that it is somehow connected to

Kan'you Mountain. There is no way to tell what the connection is without going to Kan'you Mountain and seeing for ourselves."

"And yet with conditions on Kan'you Mountain being what they are—"

"Meaning that one way or another, we will have to find a way," Kyoshi said.

Risai and Houto nodded with great resolve.