

***Hills of Silver Ruins,
a Pitch Black Moon***

Book III

A Twelve Kingdoms novel

by

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Translated

by

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Part Thirteen

Chapter 1

[13-1] Keitou's appointment as provincial prime minister left Kouryou with mixed feelings. That evening after returning to his quarters, the accumulated anxiety felt like a heavy weight pressing on his chest.

Keitou had done well. Of all the mandarins in the Imperial Palace, he alone served Taiki with integrity and good faith.

"But he is one of Asen's retainers."

Kouryou threw himself onto his bed and crossed his arms beneath his head. Somewhere in the attic above his head, a dove cooed a faint and melancholy song.

Asen's retainers attacked Gyousou and stole the throne.

All the suffering endured by the people and by Kouryou and his colleagues could be laid at the feet of Asen. He didn't know what role Keitou played in the usurpation, but no matter how earnestly he served Taiki now, that didn't erase those past sins. Hadn't Asen tried to kill Taiki in the first place?

Did Keitou know what was in the offing? If so, why didn't he stop Asen? If he had no idea, why didn't he condemn Asen when he found out? Kouryou would have understood if Keitou had denounced Asen and then parted ways, something he had not yet done.

What was Taiki thinking when he made Keitou prime minister?

Kouryou couldn't bring himself to acknowledge Keitou. Nor could he get on board with publicly proclaiming Asen's enthronement. Doing so felt akin to declaring that Gyousou was no longer the emperor. How could Taiki—the first among Gyousou's retainers—have made such a proposal?

The way he spoke about Gyousou as well.

The calculating and coldhearted words he used. Even if it was all an act in order to deceive Chou'un, his choice of language struck Kouryou as more cruel than necessary.

Or else—

A cold chill ran down his back. Could Taiki possibly be telling the truth? Those doubts had plagued Kouryou's thoughts of late. Taiki told Asen what Asen wanted to

hear so he could act on behalf of Gyousou. But had the Divine Will truly changed? Was that why he said Heaven told him to change course and head to Kouki?

Did that also explain the ritual Taiki conducted every morning? Tokuyuu said he was praying to the gods but Kouryou couldn't help thinking he was praying for Asen. He would run all these questions by Taiki if he only had the opportunity. Shouwa was never far from Taiki's side. She'd recently brought in two more court maids to work alternate shifts. They only answered to her and Kouryou did not trust them with any secrets.

Maybe everything was part and parcel of Taiki's deception. Or maybe the exact opposite. Maybe his words and actions weren't a feint or a subterfuge. Maybe they were the truth. And maybe Kouryou had only deceived himself into believing that Asen was the one being fooled.

His head felt like it was filled with lead. All that accumulated weariness. Thanks to Yari, he could retire to his own quarters at night. But the days of camping out in the main hall and snatching cat naps here and there had gone on for too long. Those moments of fatigue accumulated like dust until they thickened into clods of mud.

He'd come to believe more and more that they should have stuck with Risai.

Overcome by the gloom and melancholy, he dozed off and woke the next morning at daybreak. His head throbbed like a bad hangover and his limbs felt like they were encased in a spider's web. His senses felt dulled down and at a distant remove. He sluggishly got dressed and headed to the main hall. About the time he entered the building, the dullness finally began to clear, though that numb sensation occupying his brain didn't change.

He wandered into the living room, where Taiki was already up and about. He had just finished eating. Shouwa was clearing away the dishes.

Taiki still did not have complete use of his left hand and required an assistant for many everyday tasks. Tokuyuu and Juntatsu had taken turns filling this role, but Tokuyuu hadn't shown up for the past two days. His room in the inner courtyard was empty and bare. Bun'en as well was incommunicado.

Taiki was understandably quite concerned.

Kouryou acknowledged the two of them with a bow. Taiki said, "Something the matter? You look a bit gray."

Kouryou casually sidestepped the question. He said instead, "I don't know what is on the Taiho's mind these days."

Taiki responded with a puzzled look. Kouryou clamped his mouth shut. Having openly voiced his misgivings, he wasn't sure how to walk those words back.

"Ah, you're referring to Keitou."

Kouryou didn't answer. Shouwa cast him a sidelong glance. Kouryou said to her, "Would you mind waiting outside?"

Shouwa looked at Taiki with upturned eyes. "Is that fine with you? Do you need anything?"

"No," Taiki said with a smile. "That's all right. The two of us just need a moment of privacy. Kouryou would like to get something off his chest."

Shouwa nodded with obvious reluctance. She gathered up the tableware and departed. Taiki watched her through the windows until she had exited the inner courtyard before turning back to Kouryou.

"How about you accompany me for a little stroll around the garden?"

Taiki called out to Yari, "We'd like the place for ourselves. No visitors for now."

Taiki left through the rear entrance to the main hall. Patches of ice covered the pond. The stands of peach and plum trees had shed their leaves. The bare branches sparkled with frost.

Taiki crossed a small bridge over the pond and continued down a narrow path surrounded by wintry vistas. From the back of the pond, the path wound among the snow-covered boulders and up a switchback stairway. From there, they climbed to a pavilion adjacent to a waterfall. Even the water tumbling over the stony surface sounded cold.

The pavilion felt no warmer. The spray from the waterfall froze on the boulders, forming columns of glittering icicles. The pillars of the pavilion and the encompassing pony wall did little to block the wind or the chill.

"Aren't you cold?" Kouryou asked.

"It is on the brisk side." Taiki grinned. "But here we can talk without worrying about being overheard by anybody."

"By anybody—"

Taiki nodded. "I take it you're not happy with me making Keitou the prime minister."

Kouryou hung his head. Their walk in the cold morning air had cleared away most of the numbness filling his senses. He felt fully awake for perhaps the first time that day. And now with his mind clear, he regretted the thoughtlessness of his earlier remarks.

"I apologize for that. I said too much."

"I completely understand how you would have mixed feelings about Keitou. But there is no one else with his qualifications I trust to fill the position. I hope you understand where I am coming from as well."

"Yes," Kouryou said with a nod. From the start, Taiki had no staff or roster of personnel to work with. His hands really were tied in that respect.

“I needed an ally to serve in the position of provincial prime minister. You would have been fine. So would Juntatsu. But I’m pretty sure you would reject such an appointment without a second thought.”

“Naturally.” He wasn’t about to hand off responsibility for Taiki’s personal protection to anyone else but Yari.

“And Juntatsu is a doctor through and through. He probably knows less about politics than I do. Unfortunately, that’s about the size of my candidate pool. I really need more trustworthy advisors and counselors.”

“I understand that perfectly well. I really do apologize.”

“And I grasp as well the burdens you are bearing. Of course, you’re not going to be happy with every decision and development. If you do have any concerns weighing on your mind, don’t let them fester. Spit them out.” Taiki added with a mischievous grin, “Just don’t spit them out inside the manor.”

Kouryou faced the waterfall and finally said, “Taiho, please answer me this one question. Is Asen the emperor?”

Taiki’s eyes widened, as if startled by the inquiry. He lowered his head and thought it over for a long minute.

“Soon after I returned from Hourai, Risai told me what happened. There was a traitor among Gyousou-sama’s retainers, someone secretly communicating with Asen.”

“And that would be Rousan-sama.”

“Can we say there is only one?”

Asked straight out like that, Kouryou did not have a ready reply. To be sure, if Rousan betrayed Gyousou, there certainly could be others.

“When I was debating with myself whether to part ways with Risai and return to the palace, I made another resolution as well. Except for those I could prove to my own satisfaction were not traitors, I would trust no one.”

“Those you could prove to your own satisfaction—”

“Risai, to start with. Risai risked her life traveling to the Kingdom of Kei to save my life. If she were somehow allied with Asen, she’d have no reason to do such a thing. It’d be far more convenient for Asen if I had simply stayed in Hourai.”

In a quieter voice he added, “If I had stayed in Hourai, I would likely be dead by now. Perhaps Asen discovered through unknown means that I had contracted the *esui*. Had I died in Hourai, a new kirin would have been born. In due time, that kirin would choose a new emperor. According to that logic, Asen dispatched Risai to save me and bring me back.”

“Wait a minute. You would carry your suspicions that far?”

“Calling them *suspicions* is not entirely correct. I am only considering the *possibilities*. Because I simply cannot afford to fail.” Taiki smiled a sad smile. “I met

Risai for the first time on Mount Hou and truly took a liking to her. It was Risai who put everything on the line to rescue me from Hourai. Words cannot express how happy I was and how grateful I am to her. But that by itself does not exclude the possibility that she could also be communicating with Asen and, as I have explained, *that* is why she came to my rescue.”

Kouryou was dumbfounded. Yes, such a *possibility* existed. The logic of the proposition was undeniable. But weren’t kirin creatures governed by empathy and compassion? Were they capable of such stone-cold reasoning?

“However, I set aside such possibilities when we left Sekijou. To start with, after I returned from Hourai, so many things took place that Asen never could have expected or foreseen. And observing Risai’s reactions to them, I found it difficult to believe that she was in any way conspiring with Asen. On top of that, Risai let me leave Sekijou unaccompanied by herself. If she’d been ordered by Asen to apprehend me, she would not have so readily allowed me to slip out of her hands.”

Taiki shook his head and said with a faint smile, “Then again, if I wanted to find reasons to doubt, I could doubt even the outcome of those actions. So I decided to trust Risai. If she turned out to be on Asen’s side, well, that would be my loss.”

Kouryou was too startled to speak.

“Having chosen to trust Risai, I could trust you as well. Meeting you and Kyoshi was a complete coincidence. It would simply be impossible to stage the whole thing in advance, you and Kyoshi and the people of Touka. You and Risai are not my enemies. I could believe that much.”

“I’m happy to hear that. What about Ganchou-sama? No, Ganchou-sama is a difficult case. How about Bun’en or—”

“I don’t trust anybody in the Imperial Palace. This kingdom is afflicted by that *illness*. Sure, I trust Bun’en insofar as his character goes, but I cannot tell if he has succumbed or not. Well, I *couldn’t*. Recently, I think I’ve gotten a better grasp of what this illness constitutes. I don’t know what causes the phenomenon itself, but the changes that Tokuyuu and Heichuu exhibited are likely typical of the symptoms.”

Kouryou felt a start of recognition. *Of course*, he thought. The loss of ambition, the dazed outlook on life—those were the symptoms.

“I believe you are right.”

“Heichuu was reassigned, apparently to the Rokushin. Tokuyuu stopped showing up. They are probably waiting on Asen hand and foot as we speak.”

Kouryou nodded. *Entirely possible*.

“At this point, I am more confident about being able to tell who is ill and who is not. That’s helped to let down my guard a bit. Before that, I had no idea, which is why I absolutely could not trust anyone but you and Risai. That hasn’t changed. I thought I could trust Bun’en and Juntatsu, but not after the past few days. As things stand

now, they may have succumbed. They've been out of contact for long enough that I think we should assume something happened to them."

Kouryou agreed.

"To tell the truth, I've been harboring suspicions about you too, Kouryou."

Kouryou nodded. "I know what you're talking about. I really can't explain it well myself, but now and then my mind falls into a complete muddle. The strange thing is, when I meet with you, the fog always seems to lift. If you are close by, everything becomes crystal clear."

Taiki nodded. "It was the same with Tokuyuu. His condition improved when he was around me. And when he wasn't, and especially at night, he got much worse. This illness grows stronger after sunset and it abhors kirin."

"It abhors kirin—"

"Be that as it may," Taiki said, "I cannot say anything of a sensitive nature when others might overhear. I know you've been beside yourself with worry. I'm sorry for causing you so much concern."

"Oh, you've no need to apologize to me."

Taiki shook his head and grinned. "But did *you* ever doubt that Gyousou-sama was the emperor?"

"Taiho—"

"Gyousou-sama is the emperor," Taiki said in a low but distinct voice.

The wave of relief washed over Kouryou with such force that it almost brought him to his knees.

"I would not have suspected that even Kouryou harbored such doubts."

"Yes, I know. Inexcusable on my part."

Kouryou then asked Taiki frankly if the ritual he performed every morning when he came to the arbor in the pavilion and faced the north was on behalf of Asen.

Taiki looked back at him, the surprise evident on his face. He remained silent for a while before answering.

"You really were questioning everything too, weren't you?"

"Tokuyuu said you were probably praying for the welfare of the people."

Taiki again did not answer for a while. Then he said with a small smile, "Sort of, but not quite. To be sure, Asen resides in the Inner Palace to the north. Except keep on going in that same direction and won't you eventually arrive at Bun Province?"

Kouryou almost groaned aloud. The pieces fell into place. Every day, Taiki prayed on behalf of Risai, who had continued on to Bun Province, and Gyousou, who had disappeared there.

"I really do apologize."

"Your explanations probably make for more plausible lies. I'd call that a good thing."

“Then all of this really is one big charade?”

“Of course.”

“It’s hard for me to imagine a more audacious fabrication.”

Taiki answered with a wry grin. “I said I had a plan, didn’t I?”

“I really am surprised. No matter how good a job you did convincing Asen and his whole lot, what would you have done if someone refused to go along? What if they rejected the whole thing out of hand as simply too fantastic to believe?”

“Well, if such obstacles popped up, I would think up ways around them too.”

In fact, Taiki was confident that the explanations he’d laid out so far would pass muster. Because only the kirin could vouch for the value of the Divine Will. No one else in this world comprehended the actual essence of the Divine Will. Even the emperor himself had no choice but consent to the Divine Will as the kirin defined it.

The manifestation of the Divine Will itself was closer to instinct or intuition. No miracles took place. No voice echoed down from Heaven. The thought only occurred to the kirin that *this is the person*. Nothing more.

Elevating what was at best a hunch or a feeling to the holy realms of the Divine Will defined the very existence of the kirin. The kirin was at heart a beast that also possessed a human form. He was born on a single tree on Mount Hou, subjugated the youma as his shirei, and exhibited many supernatural abilities. The existence of the kirin defied the normal constraints of the world, so much so that the reasonable conclusion was that Heaven had designed them that way.

When that miraculous existence identified it as such, what began as a mere hunch materialized as the Divine Will. Because the kirin said so, that’s how it was taken. And so it followed that the Divine Will was whatever the kirin said it was.

In any event, the people of Taiki had to be saved before winter arrived in full force. They had to find a way to survive the winter. Asen first had to be convinced to stop abandoning his subjects and provide whatever support he could, starting, if necessary, with the bare minimum.

“I had to return to the Imperial Palace for the good of the people. For whatever reason, I lost my connection to Gyousou-sama’s imperial aura. But Risai and the rest are searching for him.”

At the same time, it was possible that Gyousou was being held in the Imperial Palace. If so, there would be no way to confirm that without being *in* the Imperial Palace, and certainly no way of saving him. Someone had to go in there and look for him.

When Taiki laid all this out, Kouryou grunted in admiration. “You are definitely right about that.”

“If Gyousou-sama was being detained outside the palace, it’d also be easier to access information about him from inside the palace. If we ascertained his

whereabouts, we could then let Risai know. Since they've been finding shelter in the Taoist temples along the way, we should be able to get in touch with them through the temple network. And at the same time, lend Risai support from within the palace. I couldn't do anything if I was with Risai right now. And all the extra work guarding me was a constant drag on the mission. Perhaps more importantly, whether or not there was any substance to all these possibilities, I believed my place was here in the Imperial Palace."

"Yes."

"The safest and surest way in was to claim that Asen was the new emperor. With that claim as my collateral, he couldn't very well kill me. Far from it. He couldn't abandon the people or continue the cruel purges for fear of bringing on the shitsudou. Any reason Asen had for continuing the purges should have vanished as well."

Taiki paused and sighed. "That's how I *expected* the situation to unfold."

The state of affairs inside the Imperial Palace turned out to be far stranger than Taiki expected. He still did not understand how things had gotten so far out of kilter. Asen demonstrated not the slightest enthusiasm for the role of emperor even on the subject of his enthronement.

Though the constraints on Taiki's authority had finally loosened and he could begin to act, Chou'un and his faction effectively blocked Keitou's efforts to promote the Taiho's agenda. Their constant interference only ensured that nothing worked as it should. They ended up accomplishing the equivalent of nothing as the snow piled up. At this rate, none of their efforts expended on behalf of the people would take effect in time.

In the meantime, he had no idea what Risai and the others were up to in their search for Gyousou. None of their activities had come to anyone's attention in the capital. A good thing, because getting noticed by the wrong people could doom all of them. That's what Taiki told himself, except the lack of news left him all the more fit to be tied.

With the Imperial Palace frozen in amber, at the very least, Taiki hoped to motivate Asen to act in the best interests of his subjects.

"Anyway, this is a good opportunity to bring up another subject with you."

"What would that be?"

"The way things stand right now, we are getting nowhere on the welfare front. I want to arrange a meeting with Asen."

Kouryou furrowed his brow. "A meeting?"

Back when Taiki was a child, Seirai, his provincial chief cabinet secretary, often used "shortcuts" that took the back alleyways through the Imperial Palace. In fact, there were plenty of quicker and shorter routes from here to there. But taking the

long way around reduced the odds of running into the wrong person, getting collared by an eager bureaucrat, and wasting a lot of time. By that definition, there were always more efficient ways of getting around.

Along with this explanation, Taiki said, “According to my memories from back then, one of those shortcuts led to the Rokushin. Following the path from there to here, I believe I can get to Asen’s living quarters.”

“What you’re talking about is too dangerous!”

“Why is that?”

“What if you were found out by the guards?”

“That would hardly matter, would it? Of course, if I got caught, I’d probably be removed from the premises before meeting Asen. But all in all, the Saiho shouldn’t be forbidden from setting foot anywhere in the Imperial Palace.”

According to the preferences of the emperor, there was the practice of restricting access to rooms in the Inner Palace used by his wife or mistress, a practice defined by the rules of etiquette, not law. The kirin also respected those informal boundaries in regards to the Inner Palace. However, members of the bureaucracy, the Chousai included, were not allowed to enter the Rokushin without the permission of the emperor.

Neither could the emperor, in turn, enter Jinjuu Manor without permission from the kirin who lived there. Not because of a written statute—it wasn’t like anybody was going to arrest the emperor for trespassing in any case—but due to longstanding custom followed so faithfully it had gained the weight of law. This mattered because of the conflicts bound to arise between the emperor and kirin during the closing years of a dynasty.

But such restrictions did not apply to the kirin. The throne was only the emperor’s because the kirin gave it to him. The same could even be said of the Imperial Palace.

“I guess that is true.”

“So I thought I’d go see for myself. By the way, not paying Asen a visit is out of the question.”

“Understood. I’ll go with you.”

“No.” Taiki smiled. “You won’t be much good as a bodyguard if Asen’s guards lock you away.”

“That is—”

“I really would be in trouble if we got split up like that. I know how unbearable it must be, but please be patient. I’ll go by myself.”

Chapter 2

[13-2] Yari stood at the rear window of the main hall, observing the two figures standing beneath the arbor. The pavilion was perched on a mountain of boulders at the far end of the garden.

What an interesting kirin, she thought.

Yari had already concluded that Shouwa was a spy. Yari assumed the court ladies Shouwa selected reported to her as well. One way or another, Taiki must have figured out where their loyalties lay. Or was he simply being extra careful?

Either way, he'd shooed Shouwa out of the main hall to keep her from tagging along. And even if she had, he moved his conversation with Kouryou to the garden pavilion, well out of earshot.

Yari glanced at Shouwa, who'd returned to the living room and was now fidgeting about doing nothing. The two leaving in her absence clearly bothered her, but it wasn't up to Yari to chase her away. After another look at Shouwa, Yari again directed her attention to the pavilion.

"Must be cold out there."

Getting Shouwa out of the main hall for even a short time was hard enough. Getting her to budge while Yari was in the building was practically impossible.

Yari didn't know what kind of a creature a kirin was, except this kirin was not at all like what she'd imagined. She hadn't found the right words to describe what she'd seen. *Highly calculating* and *deeply distrustful* were the closest she'd come up with so far.

She'd once believed that the kirin only saw the best in the human heart. As the kirin acted only with the purest of intentions, so it followed that others must do the same. Such good-natured and even simple-minded creatures.

Were that not the case, those inexhaustible measures of mercy and compassion would surely not continue to well up.

The kirin of Tai was different. There was nothing simple or sweet about the Black Kirin. He was guarded, suspicious, and extraordinarily cagey. At times, he created an intimidating aura and spoke using surprisingly heartless language, though from Yari's perspective, he did so with specific ends in mind.

Before coming to Nightingale Manor, Yari asked Ganchou what Taiki was like. Ganchou remembered him as an ingenuous though sensitive and thoughtful child. The kirin Yari had gotten to know was anything but ingenuous. Thoughtful, yes. But his mind worked in cool and calculating ways.

Ganchou also said the kirin he knew was at ease around others and unconcerned about his social position. And perhaps that hadn't changed. She saw no evidence that Taiki cared, but he appeared keenly aware of the extent to which *others* were constrained by class and rank, and knew how to use those concerns and constraints.

Reading his thoughts and actions proved extraordinarily difficult. At times, when confronting a provincial minister, for example, his attitude changed abruptly. Yari often came away with the impression that this being, who was at once open and receptive to the whole outside world, could also close down completely. In order to keep his real feelings and intentions hidden away, he simply slammed the door shut.

She had to wonder what had happened to that ingenuous child to cause such a change. She suspected it had something to do with the shoku that swept him away to a strange and distant land.

"Fascinating." The depths of her curiosity knew no bounds.

As she stood there, watching and wondering, one of the figures in the pavilion turned and looked in her direction. Probably Taiki. He had agreed to her posting in the manor as his bodyguard.

He waved with a beckoning gesture. Yari nodded. She said with a glance back at Shouwa, "He's probably getting cold out there. I guess he's ready to come in." And exited the main hall into the garden.

Shouwa at first seemed keen to tag along, but after a moment of hesitation, decided against it. Yari suppressed a smirk. Shouwa wasn't very good at being a spy, and by this point was likely only going through the motions. Whoever her handler was, she owed him little in the way of loyalty and had no great passion for the mission given her. In any case, it wasn't worth braving the cold.

Yari cut through the wintry garden and climbed up to the pavilion. The freezing wind was all the more severe around the pavilion and chilled her to the bone.

Yari knelt on the cold floor. "You called?"

Taiki nodded. "I have a job for you, Yari."

"As you wish."

"I'm going to sneak out of the manor tonight. I need you and Kouryou to cover for me."

Yari blinked in surprise. *Again, the Taiho is as incomprehensible as ever.*

"Will one of us be accompanying you?"

"No. Better that you do not."

"Yari," Kouryou said in a pleading voice, "tell him to reconsider." Then a moment later mumbled, "Not that it would do any good coming from you either."

Though she hadn't served the Taiho for long, she had gathered that when he made up his mind, he was unlikely to deviate from that decision. Once he voiced his resolve in words, he would not budge from the actions that followed. Grumbling and

complaining did not sway him. Kouryou never could read him right when it came to that aspect of his personality, probably because he too had a hard time shaking his preconceptions about what a kirin was supposed to be.

“Well, take care of yourself. You can leave the rest to us.”

Taiki slipped out of Nightingale Manor at midnight. To the east of the rear courtyard, a side gate exited into the adjoining landscape park. In the shadows of the decorative boulders, the gate created a narrow passageway difficult to discern from a distance. It had likely been installed to allow the servants and gardeners to move back and forth between the park and the rear courtyard.

The landscape park might have once been a part of Nightingale Manor—or the manor had been part of the park—either way, it was now closed. It had been open at first, but sometime after soldiers started appearing around the manor, barricades blocked off the path through the park.

“Because it is dangerous,” was the explanation.

That wasn’t the real reason. But boarding the place up and physically securing it with chains and locks must have set their minds at ease, for no soldiers were posted inside the park. Though they patrolled the perimeter, any appearance of the manor being under siege would make it obvious that its occupants were under house arrest, an accusation Chou’un clearly wished to avoid.

Even Kouryou was pretty sure anyone could sneak through if he really wanted to. Though Taiki would be doing so alone.

“Everything will be okay,” Taiki assured Kouryou as they approached the gate. “For the time being, I’ll have less to worry about than you or Yari.” Kouryou answered with a nod, and Taiki added, “Just make sure nobody comes to check on me.”

Taiki was supposedly asleep in his bedroom. Juntatsu was resting in own room today, so if all went as planned, nobody had any reason to enter the bedroom until Shouwa arrived in the morning. Yari would be on watch in the main hall. The servants who worked the night shift and waited on call in the portico rooms would stay put unless specifically requested.

The only real concern was Keitou showing up because of some emergency, though that wasn’t likely.

“You take care, now.”

“I will,” Taiki answered politely, and disappeared through the side gate.

Kouryou watched him leave and returned to the main hall. “The place is in your hands now,” he said to Yari. “I’ll be pretending to sleep in my room. If you need anything, let me know right away. I’ll be up all night.”

“Understood,” Yari said with a nod.

With a goodnight wave, Kouryou let out a long sigh and left the main hall and went to his room off the main courtyard. No sooner had he closed the door but he headed straight for the window facing a small walled garden and climbed out of the building.

Like there is any way I am going to let him wander off alone.

He understood Taiki's assurances that he had little to worry about. There weren't that many soldiers on patrol around the manor and they didn't pass by very often. It should be easy to evade any prying eyes. Even if someone did spot him, they weren't allowed to physically lay hands on the Taiho in any case. All they could do was block the way and plead for him to return to the manor.

Taiki was not *officially* on hostile terms with Asen or Asen's Imperial Court. Quite to the contrary. Taiki was the Saiho. Asen had formally condoned his return and ushered him into the Imperial Palace. As far as the ordinary soldier or bureaucrat was concerned, Taiki was the one laying down the law. There wasn't a chance of him coming to any harm.

Rather, Kouryou was the one venturing into harm's way. If he got caught by the soldiers, arrest and detainment was inevitable. Detainment would undoubtedly be followed by severe punishment. Taiki would no doubt do his best to cover for him, but having assumed the role of the Daiboku, and yet standing accused in the past of committing the serious crimes of insubordination and deserting the army, Kouryou would hardly have any grounds to complain about whatever discipline was meted out to him.

But I really cannot allow him to do this by himself.

He had no idea what was going to happen next. Gyousou—and Tai itself—was only as safe as Taiki.

There was an unused bedroom west of the main hall. Kouryou had reconnoitered the room on a previous occasion and left the back window open. Now he snuck in through the window, quietly crossed the unlit room, and from there exited into the rear courtyard. He came to the gate Taiki had passed through earlier and put his hand on the door.

That was when a voice whispered out of the darkness, "Yeah, I thought as much." It was Yari. "I figured you'd try to follow him."

His hand resting on the gate door, Kouryou sighed. Yari's figure appeared out of the gloom. He said, "I'm not about to let him go wandering around the Imperial Palace in the middle of the night by himself."

"I figured you'd say that too."

"I'm not worried about the soldiers. They'd be the last ones to treat him with anything but kid gloves. When it comes to Asen's inner circle, though, there's no telling who they are or what they are capable of doing."

“Those mindless mannequins? They could stare straight at him and not know who he was or care.”

“You don’t know that for certain.” He couldn’t overlook the risk, no matter how slight the actual danger to Taiki might be.

With a sideways tilt of her head, Yari pondered the possibilities. “I understand your concerns. The mannequins only do as they are told. But Asen has laid down the law on previous occasions, that nobody should be allowed into his presence. If those orders still stand, calling for any intruders to be summarily removed, even the Taiho could face an armed assault, no questions asked.”

That’s what I’m afraid of.

Kouryou pushed the gate door open just as a hand clapped down on his shoulder and yanked him backwards. He didn’t feel that much force in the move, though it made him throw his head back and retreat several stumbling steps to regain his balance.

“Yari.”

Kouryou gave her another long look. *She’ll be useful around here*, his gut told him the first time they met. He wasn’t wrong. A sufficient force applied to a human being in motion could knock that moving center of gravity off balance. For the average person, much easier said than done. But clearly it was second nature for Yari.

“You should go back home.”

“I cannot allow the Taiho to put himself in danger alone, no matter how small a risk that might be.”

“I know. Which is why, in this case, you belong at the manor. *I will go.*”

“Yari—” Kouryou started to say with evident exasperation.

She cut him off. “Precisely because I know the risks is why I should go instead of you. *You* would be putting yourself in more jeopardy than the Taiho.”

“I could say the same about you.”

“I’ll be fine,” Yari said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. “Nobody will catch me. I’ve snuck into the Rokushin on many occasions and haven’t been caught once.”

“On many occasions?”

“I know my way around the palace better than most. It won’t be a problem. The Taiho won’t even know I’m on his tail. As long as he doesn’t get into any trouble along the way, he’ll be none the wiser.”

A startled Kouryou peered at the face of the utterly calm Yari. “Why the Rokushin?”

“Oh, there’s a place in the Rokushin I like to visit. You see, I don’t appreciate people telling me where I’m allowed and not allowed to go.” She added with a small smile, “Getting told a place is off limits only makes me want to check it out all the more.”

Chapter 3

[13-3] The central garden was the unifying element of all of the buildings in the Imperial Palace, here referring to a courtyard surrounded on all four sides. The entire structure might contain three or four such gardens aligned north to south.

Taiki had been taught this at Seirai's knee.

The central axis of the compound ran straight along a north to south line, with the main entrance at the south and the more important rooms located further north and deeper in. The gate accessing the building at the south end of the compound led to the first courtyard. The second courtyard was situated north of the buildings surrounding the first, with the third and possibly a fourth following the same pattern.

Whether a large castle or a small abode, the layout incorporated the same architectural approach. Only the scale differed.

If a structure with four courtyards proved insufficient, then parallel axes were added to the right and left, with the buildings organized around the same arrangement of three or four courtyards. The surrounding walls defined everything inside as a single compound.

Strolling about the grounds, Taiki learned that every structure in Hakkei Palace hewed to these architectural concepts.

Holding Seirai's warm hand and listening to his calm and reassuring voice, Taiki delighted in exploring the so-called shortcuts and byways around the palace. Starting with the occupations, customs, and cultural background related to each of the surrounding buildings, Seirai extended the conversation into the relevant etiquette and politics.

Seirai conducted many such lectures in disguise, and answered any of Taiki's questions using words he could easily understand.

Gathering together these scattered fragments from his memories, Taiki wended his way among the dark buildings. For good or ill, the waning crescent moon offered little illumination. One result was that lanterns were easy to make out from a distance. Since soldiers were the only ones carrying lanterns at this time of night, he had no problem spotting approaching patrols and finding a hiding place.

The Rokushin in which Asen must be ensconced was surrounded by a long wall. But Taiki knew of several secret passageways. To start with, according to the customary layout of the courtyards, the Rokushin was not one massive single

structure but a cluster of buildings linked together. There were bound to be gaps in the security cordon where one abutted another.

A variety of circumstances had allowed Taiki to confirm their existence. “The walls around my home must be filled with as many holes,” he once pointed out to Seirai.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about,” Seirai assured him with a gentle smile. “You see, the Taiho’s residence is surrounded by the sea. There is no easy way to approach it from below. There are only two gates and two ways in and out.”

In any case, a wall could be surmounted by anyone with the mind to do so, and a kijuu could alight anywhere. Kijuu were forbidden in the Imperial Palace and especially above the Sea of Clouds in the Enchou precisely because they had that capability.

Meaning there wasn’t really anywhere that could be locked down tight.

As a child, he’d wondered how wise that was. Now he was thankful. He crawled down a passageway beneath the floorboards that led to an empty room, quickly crossed it to the other side, climbed through an open lattice window, and hopped across the pond on a series of stepping stones to an open corridor along the waterfront.

In a corner of the corridor that wrapped around the inside of the building, he ducked through a side door. From there through the west flower gardens brought him to the Rokushin where Asen resided.

Making his way down a narrow alley, Taiki stopped in his tracks. The subfloors of the mansions built into the rising slope were taller than his own height. Once upon a time, he could follow these subfloors right up to the side of the building where he used to live. Taiki gazed into the darkness and resumed walking.

The buildings of the Rokushin housing the emperor’s living quarters came into view. Among them were those reserved as the personal quarters of the emperor and his consort. Asen must reside in one of them, or so Taiki supposed.

He sidled beneath the eaves and surveyed the compound, then continued deeper in. He hardly saw another soul, and no soldiers on patrol. The main wing of the Rokushin was dark, so he again headed north. The buildings north of the main hall could be called the inner sanctum of the Rokushin, the emperor’s true private quarters.

Here?

Only a few points of light glowed around the compound. Peering into the distance, he saw no signs of human life. One person in court dress stood on a nearby walkway doing nothing but staring off into space.

Concealing his presence, Taiki approached for a closer look. Despite the chill, the man wasn’t wearing a cloak or overcoat. He faced the open air, standing straight as a

pole. His enervated face slightly raised, his mouth slightly parted, he gazed at the sky. He hadn't moved an inch since Taiki first spotted him.

As a test, Taiki tossed a handful of small stones into a nearby thicket of trees. He clearly heard the clattering sound but the man did not react in the slightest.

Soulless, was the description that sprang to mind.

Taiki had grasped that much, but not what caused this phenomenon or what it actually was. He was only sure that it had some connection to Asen.

Those thoughts on his mind, he proceeded deeper into the compound. Through a gap between the buildings, he crept into a garden. The garden gave way to a courtyard paved with stones. The courtyard was surrounded by buildings and ringed by a covered walkway. Taiki took a good look around and then stepped onto the walkway.

He peeked into the rooms housing the sleeping quarters at the head of the courtyard. Though lit by a dim glow, he sensed no human presence.

So he's not in the official sleeping quarters.

Muffling his steps, he searched his surroundings for any signs of life while making his way further in. He passed the sleeping quarters, through the garden on the other side, and stopped before the soaring gate to the north. On the other side of this gate should be a plaza surrounded on all four sides by more buildings.

Heading north of the plaza would bring him to the gate of the annex compound reserved for members of the imperial family. To the northwest were gates leading to the East Palace and West Palace.

Taiki's knowledge of the palace grounds extended only so far. He hadn't been here on many occasions. Only once, in fact. One day before he met Seirai, Gyousou had taken him by the hand and brought him here.

Here the buildings and the gardens of trees buildings had been arranged to create a scenic point looking across the Sea of Clouds. There at the crest of a slightly elevated hill to the northeast was the Inner Palace itself.

If not in the sleeping quarters, then what about the Inner Palace annex? Here, in fact, were several people around the gate and many more occupying what he could see of the plaza. The surroundings were lit up to a degree he hadn't seen elsewhere. Most of the people appeared to be concentrated in the vicinity of the gate leading to the East Palace.

He could not possibly go straight from here to there.

Thinking about the arrangement of the security details, Asen must occupy the East Palace. The East Palace was originally intended for close relatives of the emperor, but as far as Taiki knew, Asen had no close relatives.

Taiki pondered the situation for a while, then took the road west. He recalled a path from the West Palace to the annex. Though he'd never tried it himself, Seirai

once confided to him that “If you go through here, you’ll end up in the annex.” And once he got to the annex, there had to be a way to get into the East Palace.

He headed west and picked up the road to the West Palace. Recalling those memories, he climbed the imposing outcropping of boulders that intersected the surrounding walls and came down on the side of the annex. With no marked path here, he scaled the boulders relying mostly on touch. But the slope was not that steep so he got to the top without much effort.

From atop this little mountain, he could tell that only the area around the gate to the East Palace was lit up. Strangely enough, from this vantage point, the East Palace was completely dark. Rather, in a corner of the annex compound was a building called Gen’i Manor. He could make out dim points of light arrayed around Gen’i Manor.

That must be it.

Having confirmed that no lights were on in the house at the foot of the boulder mountain, Taiki descended the slope.

The man heard a faint sound from out there in the darkness.

He was lying on his bed, eyes open, mind blank, staring listlessly at the dark ceiling when that faint sound reached his ears.

He got up as habit instructed him, without any good idea of what he was doing. The sound woke him up, so he should find out what made it. His body simply responded to that long ingrained common sense.

He went to the window next to the bed and gazed at the dark world beyond the glass. The soft sound of the ocean reached his senses. Mixed into the rhythmic rise and fall of the waves came a slight rustle distinctly out of place.

At the foot of the mountain of boulders not far from the window, he could have sworn he’d seen a human silhouette. Staring absentmindedly at that spot, the undergrowth close to the house wavered. He focused his attention on that spot. A figure popped out from the thicket. Despite the near absence of light, he clearly made out the pale features.

That is—

The man racked his brains. And then a moment later forgot what he was trying to remember. For a moment, a flash of recognition lit up his mind. And then vanished.

The man—Heichuu—gazed at the passing shadow in a daze. *I know I’ve seen him somewhere before.*

But when, and who, he could not rightly recollect. The impulse arose that he should go with him, but his feet would not move. He had to think, but the darkness filling his head pushed aside any cogent thoughts.

That is—

He did not abandon the effort. Groping through the darkness, he heard a sound above his head. It came from outside the building, somewhere beneath the eaves. A sound like a quavering voice, a moan pitched low but with an almost effervescent tone.

No sooner had the voice reached him but the darkness inside deepened. Surrounded by the pitch-black walls, there was nothing within his grasp and no desire to reach for whatever might be there.

As he could do nothing else, Heichuu simply stood there.

Yari saw the face at the window, and from his eyes could tell his attention was directed at Taiki as he moved away from them. She felt a sudden surge of alarm. Except the man didn't move in the slightest. Neither did he look at all flustered or surprised.

He must not be on the alert for intruders.

The personnel around the gate she'd passed a short time before appeared to be on the lookout for whatever came their way. That meant the mannequins inside the Rokushin need not concern themselves with trespassers. The man in the window must be one of them. Luckily.

She averted her gaze and was about to resume tailing Taiki. From somewhere above her head came a warbling voice, like the cooing of a dove, though pitched much lower.

She searched for the source of the sound. Near the end of the eaves, she spotted something moving on one of the crisscrossing brackets and joists. Whatever it was resembled a bird. A dove, she thought again, but it was rather big for a dove, bigger even than the average cat. Gray feathers covered its body. The tips of its wings were blue. Following the same pattern, its short blue tail feathers were yellow at the ends.

With a rustling of feathers, the bird awkwardly turned its body before finding another perch among the wooden joists and swiveling its head back around. What very much looked like the squashed face of a baby emerged from the gloomy darkness. Eyes shut, the bird squawked in a flat voice.

"Ajisen."

A youma that fed on human souls. *Yeah, I thought something like this might be responsible.* She'd heard a similar song coming from the eaves of Nightingale Manor. When she got back, a youma hunt would be in order.

But I don't have time for you right now.

She couldn't go meddling in the middle of the night and risk leaving behind evidence she'd been there. Yari gave the ugly, impassive face peering down at her one last glance, and took off after Taiki.

Chapter 4

[13-4] The maidservants were getting ready for bed when one of them asked Shouwa, “Are we doing something wrong?”

Shouwa wasn’t sure what to make of the question. She wasn’t entirely satisfied with the conduct of her staff, but nothing about them rose to the level of demanding pointed criticism. She had to wonder what exactly the maid was getting at, but going into the fine details would be a pain.

So she simply said, “No.”

“Perhaps you’re just worn out?”

“No—” Shouwa started to say again.

She stopped and pressed her hands against her temples. Now that she thought about it, her head had come to feel like it was filled with lead. She felt exhausted even first thing in the morning, and that sense of listlessness persisted throughout the day. She worried less about it while she was working, but now that they brought up the subject, there might be something wrong with her physically.

Though she hadn’t thought that should be a factor since she was listed on the Registry of Wizards.

Shouwa smiled and said reassuringly, “You know, I probably am just tired.”

The maidservant said in obvious relief, “Maybe you should take tomorrow off and recuperate.”

Shouwa politely agreed, though this was no time to go on vacation. With Heichuu absent, she was the only one Taiki had to depend on. Keitou had been appointed provincial prime minister. He’d promised to recruit more personnel for Nightingale Manor, so the staffing levels should increase any day now. But they hadn’t yet.

Shouwa sighed. All that aside, she had to keep a close eye on Taiki’s condition. That was her primary duty and the only one she could fulfill.

Why had Heichuu been transferred to the Rokushin on such short notice?

As far as Shouwa knew, the Rokushin was a haunted castle where people wandered around like ghosts. When she thought about his reassignment, however it constituted a promotion, she didn’t envy him in the least. She had no desire to join him and become another one of those creepy functionaries wandering the halls.

Speaking of which, she hadn’t seen the doctor, Tokuyuu, around either. Had he gotten fed up with his job? He too had often struck her as depressed and awfully tired.

Recalling the always weary Tokuyuu, she felt a jolt of recognition. It’d been the same with Heichuu. He’d spoken less and less and moped around as if overcome

with melancholy and lost in a fog of depression that never lifted. The same way she felt now.

Shouwa shook her head.

No, that couldn't be the case with her. She was simply tired. And cold. And weighed down by her duties. The mission given to her by Risshou only added to her burdens.

"It's because I can't get any sleep at night."

The dove nesting in the eaves was a noisy bother. Not a constant one, but that singsong voice haphazardly falling on her ears left her nerves on edge.

"That is definitely the reason why."

A voice echoed softly within the gloom.

"South of the castle we fought—"

A single light illuminated the surrounding night. Someone was singing far away in the darkness.

"North of the walls we died—"

A motionless silhouette painted a blacker shadow on the ground. Only the song issuing from its lips proved the shadow was not a statue but a living human being.

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

The enervated voice picked up a strange amount of cheer as it meandered through the dusk. Reaching the wall, that seemed to stretch out and seize the shadow, it faintly echoed in return.

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.

The silhouette wrapped his arms around one knee. He buried his face in his arms and stifled his voice. But his own derisive laughter interrupted the song.

The faint glow flickered. The shadows stirred. The man glanced at the light. Confirming that the flame had quieted down, he again buried his face between his arms.

There seemed no end to this weariness, to this eternal ennui.

How in the world might our rotten meat
Flee from the tip of your pointed beak?

Chapter 5

[13-5] Taiki closed the door as softly as possible. A gust of air trailed in his wake. The hinges faintly creaked. He slipped into the pitch black and waited for his eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness. He couldn't hold his breath forever. But no one challenged his presence. For a moment, he thought no one was there. Then he saw a faint light and heard a faint voice.

The voice was muffled and flat and seemed to be singing a song.

Brave knights sally forth to slay and be slain
Leaving behind their riderless mounts
That wander about loudly neighing and braying.

Peering through the fretwork folding screen, he observed a man lying on the ottoman next to the window. Light flowing from a low corner of the room coiled about the wan moonlight shining through the glass.

Taiki was struck by an unexpected thought. He'd never imagined that Asen, holed up in the Rokushin, spent the nights like this. All alone, with no one at his beck and call. Perhaps his current state reflected as well his inclination to cast aside the governance of the kingdom.

The shadow suddenly spoke. "Why are you here?"

He had noticed the intruder in his midst.

"Awfully dark in here, isn't it?" Taiki said.

Asen raised his head in evident relief. He set the leg propped on the ottoman down on the floor and turned toward the sound of Taiki's voice.

"Or do you spend every night here like this?"

Though Taiki hung back in the shadows and out of sight, Asen's silhouette looked straight at him.

"You surprised me. How did you manage to make it this far?"

"This is in the Imperial Palace. *My* Imperial Palace. I can go wherever I want."

Asen got to his feet. He stepped forward and retrieved the lantern sitting on the floor. Holding it over his head. Asen's face at last came into view. A wry smile rose to his face, "I will ask again, why are you here?"

"I have submitted numerous reports and requests to your office and have not received a single reply. I decided to pay you an unannounced visit for a face-to-face meeting."

Asen used the lantern he was holding to light the candle stands here and there. The room grew brighter as each flame flared to life.

“You can take those concerns to Chou’un.”

“Really? You’re leaving everything in Chou’un hands?”

“I hadn’t intended to, but—” Asen sat back down again on the ottoman. “Frankly, it’s all the same to me.”

Taiki sighed. “Didn’t you overthrow Gyousou-sama’s reign because you were dissatisfied with his governance?”

“Ah,” Asen said, his smile now more bitter than wry. “Do kirin always see everything with the best of intentions in mind? Emperors throughout history have been assassinated and pretenders have taken their place. Because you think they disagreed about the style of governance?”

“You say otherwise?”

“Oh, I am sure you can find the rare exception. But regicide more likely arises out of jealousy or ordinary contempt for the sitting emperor.”

“In your case as well?”

Asen laughed softly. “I’ll hold off on answering that question for now. Which reason would you prefer?”

“I do not think you are that sort of person.”

Evidently caught off guard by this response, Asen looked up at Taiki. “Oh?”

“If you truly despised Gyousou-sama, would you have made such meticulous preparations? Didn’t you harbor some discontent with Gyousou-sama? Were you unhappy with the way he treated you? Or with his administration?”

“You didn’t mention jealousy. Out of courtesy for me?”

“It’s out of the question.”

“What a strange thing to say. Wouldn’t that be the first reason offered?”

“If this all began with jealousy, I imagine you would be more self-satisfied and fuller of yourself by now. With the object you envied now in your grasp, it’d make no sense to cast it aside.”

Asen said with an amused smile, “Perhaps casting it aside and trampling it underfoot is how I drive the melancholy from my mind.”

“It doesn’t look to me like you’ve done anything to drive any melancholy anywhere.”

“Hmph,” Asen responded, a muffled chortle tinged by sarcasm and self-derision. “What do you want?”

“At the very least, restore my authority as lord of Zui Province. Winter has arrived in earnest. The people need aid and assistance.”

“Again, you say the strangest things. The Taiho is the province lord of Zui. There is nothing to restore.”

“In title. In fact, nothing I tell anybody to do gets done.”

“Then I suggest you take your complaints to Chou’un.”

Taiki ignored that aside. “The people require aid and assistance, and the sooner the better. If we wait until you are enthroned as emperor, it may be too late.”

“So you’re saying this so-called Divine Will of yours includes that as well?”

What is with this guy? Taiki wondered to himself.

Asen demonstrated no interest in governing whatsoever. He didn’t appear to care whether the kingdom continued to exist or not. If Tai went to rack and ruin, he seemed to be saying, so be it. But why was he so indifferent about the throne? Wasn’t this the throne he overthrew Gyousou in order to possess?

“At least take a step outside and look at the world. Are you just going to let Chou’un keep interfering even in the prerogatives of the Saiho? If nothing else, try imposing some discipline on how things get done around here.”

“You want me to tell everyone to stop getting in the way of the Taiho? There is no guarantee they will obediently listen to such a request in the first place.”

“You condone the emperor being taken for granted like that?”

“It hardly matters whether I do or not. Chou’un will think and do whatever strikes his fancy. He simply hides those cards whenever he is called on the carpet.”

“I am asking you,” Taiki said with a direct look. “Save the people of Tai. If you won’t, then I will. Tell Chou’un and his coterie to stay out of my way.”

“If that is what the Taiho desires, then I shall bear it in mind.”

“And do you think we could meet on a more regular basis?”

“I shall bear that in mind too.” He raised his voice. “Can I get someone in here?”

Taiki wasn’t done, but he was at a loss as to how to get Asen to act on anything. He hadn’t grasped the first clue. Before he could untangle that riddle, an aide-de-camp and his assistants ran in.

“Escort the Taiho back to the manor.”

With polite and yet resolute resolve, they grasped him by the arms. These civil servants didn’t appear the slightest bit surprised. The expressions on their faces could be best described as mechanical. In normal times, their actions—laying hands on the Saiho and forcibly removing him—would be unforgivable.

“Increase the security patrols. I can’t have people wandering in here whenever they feel like it.”

“I have one more request,” Taiki said over his shoulder as he was getting manhandled by the bevy of bureaucrats. “I need Seirai’s assistance. Please reinstate Seirai.”

“You make a lot of requests.” Asen stood there and grinned.

“Seirai is my official tutor.”

“You said it yourself. *Don’t take the emperor for granted.* In that case, all the more reason for him to fess up about the Imperial Treasury. I need those ledgers and he needs to be punished.”

Having already been dragged out of the room, Taiki could no longer see Asen. He could only hear his voice.

“Yes, it’s about time I imposed some discipline on how things get done around here!”

Taiki was forcibly returned to Nightingale Manor, where he was finally released. He was reassuring Kouryou and the rest of the night staff that he was fine and it was no big deal when Chou’un came running in, his face bright red and stiff as a board.

“What self-indulgent games have you been up to?”

“And by self-indulgent you mean?”

“No one may meet with His Highness. What were you thinking, sneaking into the Rokushin?”

“No one told me I couldn’t see him. He never said so himself. I would hardly say that I was indulging myself by doing what Asen-sama himself has not expressly forbidden. Are you saying I require somebody’s permission?”

Chou’un’s mouth twisted in evident displeasure. “Well, he doesn’t want to see you. He told me to make sure it doesn’t happen again. The Taiho is hereafter forbidden from entering the Rokushin.”

“If that is what Asen-sama wishes, then Asen-sama can tell me himself.”

Chou’un raised his voice. “As far as that goes, I am speaking on behalf—”

Taiki interrupted him before he could continue. “I will also make myself perfectly clear. Chou’un, you are hereafter forbidden from entering Nightingale Manor. This is the last time you will march in here like you owned the place.”

Chou’un’s mouth dropped open, his eyes wide with amazement. His body shook with rage. On the verge of shouting out a retort, he swallowed his rage and said with a curt bow, “Understood.”

He whirled around and rushed out of the room. Watching him leave, Kouryou said, “Taiho, are you sure this is the best course of action?”

Kouryou took in the cool expression on Taiki’s face and then directed his attention to Chou’un’s hasty departure. To tell the truth, it felt good watching Chou’un get his comeuppance. Except he was the kind of man who only got more vindictive after being put in his place. Anger the Chousai, even in jest, and he could make life difficult for them later on.

“I doubt currying favor with him would make any difference down the road.”

“That may be so, but—”

Falling in line behind Chou'un in no way guaranteed that he would show Taiki any more consideration than he did now. Any restraint on their part would only give his ego more room to grow. The best they could expect from him was contempt and neglect.

But openly defying him was bound to provoke a response. Up until now, he had stood like a wall in their way, blocking any attempts to advance their agenda. After this, he could well come straight at them in undisguised opposition.

Chapter 6

[13-6] Chou'un would see to it that Taiki paid a price for engaging in such willful behavior.

The official letter that arrived from the office of the Chousai said as much. Chou'un described how Taiki had spent the night sneaking about the Imperial Palace and ordered a redoubling of the security detail. For better or worse, the incident brought the feud between Taiki and Chou'un very much to Asen's attention.

Asen sniffed in contempt at the letter—that described at length Taiki's insolent behavior in terms that verged on the comical—and tossed it to the floor. The undersecretary who had delivered the letter stood there expressionless.

Asen said with a dismissive wave of his hand, "Tell him his petition has been heard."

The undersecretary simply continued to stand there, blank eyes staring off into space, not looking at Asen, not looking at anything at all.

Asen clucked to himself. He got to his feet and left the room. He proceeded through the courtyard to the main hall. He told the civil servant sitting listlessly in the antechamber that if any more such missives arrived from the office of the Chousai, he was to acknowledge their receipt and send them back.

"And do something about that person in my room."

"Yes, sir," the bureaucrat mechanically replied, his face equally blank. Not even waiting for Asen to leave, he jerked into motion like a marionette. Asen crossed back across the courtyard and continued down the corridor along the courtyard rooms, then stopped and observed as the undersecretary was escorted from his room.

Those whose souls had been stolen by the jisen could be controlled through the use of talismans, which at the same time held progression of the disease in check. But there were limits to that solution. Even with two layers of defense around the palace, the depletion of souls continued unabated, like air being drawn out of a leather bag, until the afflicted person resembled little more than a living corpse.

Has that man really been with me for three years?

The immediate application of the talismans had held the disease at bay for only three years. The initial infection resulted in the cessation of idle talk and an inability to act at will, which turned the afflicted into docile sheep. That condition did not last long. Once his soul was depleted, the victim's life took on an ephemeral existence. He lost any sense of purpose and interest in the outside world. He lost even the ability to

speak. If lit on fire, he wouldn't react in the slightest, not even utter a scream as he was consumed.

Off to the side, a voice called out to him. "Another one bites the dust."

Asen turned and glared at the speaker. Rousan leaned with her elbows on the railing that lined the courtyard corridor.

"Nothing I had anything to do with," Asen shot back over his shoulder.

He strode into the main hall. Rousan brazenly tagged along and plopped herself down in Asen's chair without a second thought.

"I heard the Taiho snuck in here last night," she said with undisguised delight.

Rousan had surely placed spies around Asen. How many supposedly ill civil servants were only faking the symptoms? Or she recruited them among the staff and servants. She had informants in the Office of the Chousai and in the Rikken too. Just as Asen did.

"Chou'un is absolutely fit to be tied." Rousan grinned, all the more pleased to be the bearer of bad news. "What a funny fellow he is. He really has come to see the Taiho as his mortal enemy."

"So it seems."

"And? What was on the Taiho's mind?"

"He said I should get out more."

"Well, he would say that. The Taiho wants to save the people. He needs to find a way forward before they are crushed beneath the falling snow."

"If that's what he wants to do, then he should go ahead and do it," Asen responded curtly.

A teasing smile rose to Rousan's face. "You don't say. You never have forgiven him for choosing Gyousou-sama." She laughed. *What a small-minded man you are*, her laughter said. "Whether we're talking about Chou'un or talking about you, every one of you is proof that a deeply jealous man is a frightening force to be reckoned with."

Her words seemed to confirm that, as far as Rousan was concerned, jealousy toward Gyousou was behind Asen's usurpation of the throne. Rousan wasn't the only one. Pretty much everybody jumped to the same conclusion.

Even if he was only mouthing the words, Taiki alone said *that* was out of the question.

Asen didn't think he envied Gyousou at all, at least not consciously. He stepped to the balcony and looked out at the placid sea.

When had he and Gyousou first met? It was during the dynasty of Emperor Kyou, if his memories served him right. He was a regimental commander in the Palace Guard of the Left when the rumors first reached his ears.

Asen entered the army at the age of fifteen. At eighteen, he was chosen to attend the military academy. After that, he earned a recommendation to the affiliated

university. He graduated at twenty-six and was commissioned a battalion commander.

A battalion commander was in charge of five hundred soldiers organized into five companies. An army was made up of only twenty-five companies. It was hardly rare for a military academy graduate to also attend university. But rising to the battalion level was not at all common. Much was expected of Asen and he answered those expectations in full measure.

He was promoted to regimental commander with extraordinary speed, and eventually to general.

Asen recalled it was the year he was promoted to regimental commander. Just like Asen, and to the amazement of everyone around him, another person graduated from university and then rose from the battalion to the regimental level in similarly short order.

That person was Gyousou.

Gyousou concluded his university studies at twenty-four and was commissioned a battalion commander. Though following in Asen's footsteps, Gyousou hit the same milestones three years faster. Asen was promoted to regimental commander in five years, Gyousou in two.

Asen served as a regimental commander for three years before being promoted to general in the Palace Guard of the Center. At around the same time, Gyousou was appointed general of the Zui Provincial Guard of the Center. Though their ranks were the same, the positions did not enjoy the same status. Still, in terms of their respective responsibilities, they were equivalent.

In a flash, Gyousou caught up with Asen. Now they stood shoulder to shoulder.

Asen was not upset in the least. Quite the opposite, he was thrilled. He might even admit it made his blood race. He'd finally found a friendly rival. Having a competitor was a good thing. Until then, nobody had been able to keep up with him. He'd had his fill of the second-rate rabble whose hostility actually did arise out of jealousy and envy.

After every promotion, he heard rumors about how adept he was at flattering his superiors and ingratiating himself. Largely in jest, he was tagged with the *azana* of "Asen" around this time. Ostensibly the characters meant "the chosen one," though he knew full well the actual intent behind the sobriquet was anything but.

Nevertheless, Asen used the name free of any such concerns. He had no need to curry favor with anybody. And neither did Gyousou. Whatever rank or reward he desired, he put in the work and made it his. He disciplined his body and mind, studied hard, never shirked manual labor when it was called for, and constantly pushed himself forward. Any honor or achievement he desired thus fell into his grasp.

As far as Asen could tell, Gyousou ran his life according to the same rules.

Once he set his sights on a goal, he kept moving toward it, even a step or two at a time. If someone edged ahead of him, he'd accept the challenge and run faster. That's what it came down to. No matter how far ahead they might be, he was still in the race to win.

Too many of his colleagues took a different approach. They devoted less effort to staying in front than they did to making sure nobody caught up from behind. Single out a competitor, trip him up and drag him backwards. If that didn't work, they'd convince themselves there were easier ways to get ahead. They'd shut their eyes to their own lack of effort and instead go to great lengths concocting rationalizations about how anyone who succeeded did so because of some trick or loophole.

But Gyousou was a man who forged his own path. It felt good fighting for first place with someone like that. In the same way, when they met as generals, Asen was honestly delighted that Gyousou was there to level the playing field.

Of course, there were those who spoke of them as enemies or adversaries. Asen never thought of Gyousou in those terms. He never wanted to come in second behind him, but the impulse did not arise out of any kind of hatred or loathing. They weren't particularly close, simply because being worthy rivals ruled it out. When they met on occasion, they'd have a good laugh and a good time together, and anybody looking on must have thought they were the best of friends.

And yet I struck him down.

Asen looked at his feet.

Gyousou was an opponent worth competing with and Asen enjoyed the competition. Well, that was definitely true in the beginning. Both enjoyed the trust and loyalty of their retainers. Their achievements were acknowledged by many. The emperor appointed them to important positions. They were called the jewels in the crown, the two mighty rivals, the dragon and tiger.

When did it start? That indescribable feeling of suffocating?

Asen and Gyousou are two peas in a pod.

So many people said so. To be sure, as military men, their means and methods often matched up, as did their personal histories. So did the back and forth as their careers developed later on, each repeatedly taking the lead as they traveled along similar paths.

Asen's only equal was Gyousou. Gyousou's only equal was Asen.

Perhaps because of that, he was often said to be just like Gyousou. And it was the same with Gyousou. "He's just like Asen," he heard over and again.

They share the same surname of Boku. They resemble each other even in that respect.

It weighed on him so heavily he felt at times he couldn't breathe, not with his own shadow standing there in front of him. He couldn't help but be aware of it every hour of the day. Because when his own worth fell behind that of the shadow, it was he who would become the shadow of his rival. He had to remain invincible. If he failed on the field of battle and his fame and fortunes suffered as a result, that was no different than saying he'd become a mere reflection of the man who'd bested him.

The decisive moment came when Gyousou looked victory in the face and cast it aside.

Emperor Kyou ordered him to mobilize his army. The dynasty was rife with conflict at the time. Local governments constantly objected to imperial policy and disobeyed edicts issued by the emperor. With orders to subjugate the malcontents, Gyousou was dispatched to Sui Province.

Asen had triumphed in his own subjugation campaign just before that, and so had stolen a march on Gyousou. He was sure that Gyousou, in turn, would fly into battle to secure a decisive victory for himself and even the scales.

And yet Gyousou failed to sally forth. Quite to the contrary, he flat out refused. After repeated ultimatums from the throne, he did the last thing anyone expected. He resigned his commission, relinquished his listing in the Registry of Wizards, returned to a life as an ordinary mortal, and left government service.

The flabbergasted Asen could not comprehend what led Gyousou to make such a choice. Well, no. He did understand. Emperor Kyou's tax policies in regards to the provinces deserved to be called heartless. The local civil servants voiced objections and remonstrated with Emperor Kyou for his extravagant lifestyle. Gyousou undoubtedly determined that reason was on their side.

In short, Gyousou cast aside victory for the sake of victory and chose instead to follow the high road.

It wasn't that Asen necessarily took a dislike to this decision. At the time, he had a hard time putting his own thoughts and emotions into words. In response to the same imperial orders, Asen mobilized his army and Gyousou refused to. Given the decisive manner in which Gyousou acted, he had justice and righteousness on his side.

Gyousou was right. Asen belatedly concluded that he too should have refused the order. But at the time, the thought never occurred to him. He marched off to battle in order to engage in one more contest with Gyousou, and so eagerly racked up a win that went against moral principles.

The sweet triumph turned to bitter dregs in his mouth.

After gleefully sallying forth, happy to step once more into the lead, how must Gyousou look at him now? When the edict was handed down, Asen saw it as a chance for the two of them to show their stuff. He had taken a step ahead in their contest. Of

course, Gyousou would be aware of his relative disadvantage, and aware he'd have to score a win to pull even with him. Asen was sure that, fully cognizant of where he stood, Gyousou would throw himself into the battle. The odds said he would return home with another feather in his cap.

That was what made them worthy rivals.

With the best of intentions in mind, Asen observed Gyousou with a keen curiosity to see what he would do in order to once again stand shoulder to shoulder with him. When Asen set forth with his troops, he was absolutely certain that Gyousou felt the same.

But now the questions crept in for the first time. What did Gyousou think of him marching off for the sake of another notch in his belt? How did Gyousou view Asen's competitive instincts in the first place?

The only one so happy to have a worthy rival may have been me.

If Gyousou had been struggling alongside him to seize that brass ring, would he have thrown away such a golden opportunity? Perhaps the only one competing with anybody for anything was Asen. Any such inclination had been nowhere on Gyousou's horizon from the very beginning.

Asen actually could identify. Many of their colleagues seethed with animosity toward Asen, while Asen took no notice of them at all. He didn't care to compete with them. The thought never crossed his mind, certainly not when it came to the likes of them.

It was entirely possible that the relationship between Gyousou and Asen was no different. The entire contest existed only in Asen's mind. Gyousou never had and never would see Asen as some sort of friendly rival.

Such were the feelings of shame and humiliation, of inner rage and self-loathing, that he did not know what to do with himself. In that moment was born his abiding hatred for Gyousou.

And yet, for good or for ill, Gyousou disappeared from before his eyes. It seemed to Asen that time itself had left Gyousou behind.

Except nobody else did.

"If only Gyousou were here," people said. They looked at Asen and saw Gyousou in his place. Asen couldn't put Gyousou behind him even if he wanted to.

And then in the midst of all this handwringing, Gyousou returned. Not even Asen was clear on the whys and wherefores. A thousand reasons were bandied about, but no one knew the whole truth, only that Emperor Kyou had forgiven Gyousou for his insubordination and ordered him to return to the palace.

Emperor Kyou warmly welcomed him back. His reinstatement was widely praised.

Why? Asen wondered. Wasn't he accused of betraying the emperor? Had Asen been so insufficient for the job?

From some unknown quarter, he was overwhelmed by feelings very much akin to fear. After that, Asen continued to pursue success and achievements. He always just managed to step out from behind the shadow. He had never failed, not once, which was not true of his shadow.

But there was no sanctuary to be found in those facts. At some point, the relative merits of the two generals had been weighed in the balance and Asen had been found wanting. That was when envious courtiers began disparaging him as a pale imitation of Gyousou.

The sympathetic response to any error on Asen's part was, "Well, what do you expect? He's not Gyousou." His successes were praised as "Just like Gyousou would have done."

To an outside observer, any differences between them may have been slight, but Gyousou was on top and Asen didn't quite measure up. He had his deficiencies, but in a pinch could prove a useful substitute. He wasn't *that* inferior, so any job Gyousou wasn't available for could be handed off to him.

Any hint of a competition between them became an undisguised agony. With the emperor straying from the Way, the agonies only multiplied. Ever since the first inklings that the dynasty was foundering on the rocks, he'd been pursued by a growing sense of horror.

When the emperor died, a new emperor would replace him. Asen didn't think it too self-aggrandizing to assume that those harboring the highest expectations about that eventuality were himself and Gyousou. When the emperor passed away and the yellow standards were raised, they would embark on the Shouzan. The kirin would choose one of them. The chosen one became the new emperor. The one not chosen became his retainer.

That moment would settle once and for all which one of them was the real thing and which one of them was the mere reflection of the other.

In the grip of that terror, Asen could not accompany Gyousou on the Shouzan. He could not bear the thought of them standing side by side before the kirin, waiting for the decision to be handed down. The answer would probably turn out the same as it had been all along. He may have suspected even then that the kirin would choose Gyousou.

His premonition proved true, for the kirin chose Gyousou.

Of course, he thought. At the same time, he couldn't help thinking that things might have turned out differently had he gone on the Shouzan. But their ranks and roles had been set in stone. Giving himself over to pointless enmity would accomplish nothing.

His retainers did not agree, and some of them still got all fired up comparing Asen and Gyousou. Asen couldn't make them forget everything that had come before. That

feeling of drowning on dry land, of choking down every lungful of air. As long as Gyousou was there, Asen couldn't breathe.

He thought of leaving Tai. But he never followed through. Doing so would only prove he'd been a pale imitation of Gyousou all along. He had to outstrip Gyousou and show it to the world. But he could only surpass Gyousou now by driving him from the throne, taking it for himself, and building a dynasty better than anything Gyousou could have achieved.

Questions were raised from the very beginning of the Imperial Court of Gyousou's suitability for the role, along with misgivings that his would be a short reign. A "whirlwind emperor." Gyousou was too unsparing and too relentless, said the chorus of doubters. He was trying to do too much.

None other than Taiki, the kirin who chose Gyousou, seemed concerned. There definitely was discord amongst the emperor's retainers, even though the imperial accession had just taken place.

Rumors of a whirlwind emperor swayed few, but claims that Gyousou was acting rashly and taking on more than he could handle found purchase. In fact, Gyousou did appear to be moving at an unsustainable pace. He was trying to leave all the surrounding bewilderment and confusion behind them, bolster the confidence of his retainers, and harness the force of those whirlwinds to reform the Imperial Court in one clean sweep.

Those running alongside him were all on board with the plan, just as the ones who couldn't keep up had the feeling this whirlwind approach would eventually cause a catastrophe.

At the same time, many of those insisting it was all too much and too soon were clearly spurred on by jealousy and envy. Most busily engaged in backbiting and spreading slanderous gossip were nothing more than scheming two-bit villains. But Asen well knew that even two-bit villains were quite capable of causing a great deal of damage, all the more so when they were devoid of convictions and had no pride in their work.

On the other hand, it was entirely possible that, as the rumors said, Gyousou's dynasty was destined to end before it truly began. Asen clung to those expectations. If they proved true, then Asen still had a chance to triumph over Gyousou. He only had to wait him out and inherit the throne after Gyousou.

He knew all along he was indulging in the wishful thinking of an underdog. But leave it to Rousan to shatter that last ray of hope as well.

Rousan said, "Didn't you know? An emperor's immediate successor cannot share his same surname."

To tell the truth, Asen admitted, he didn't.

“This isn’t a matter of there simply being no precedent for such a thing. It’s part and parcel of Providence. Nowhere is this rule written down in the Divine Decrees, but it carries the same weight.”

Logic dictated that it wouldn’t be impossible for him to live through Gyousou’s dynasty and the one that followed. But by that time, would there be anybody left in Asen’s circle who remembered who Gyousou was? If there was no one left who knew Gyousou and thought Asen the better man, who agreed that Gyousou was a pale imitation of the real thing, then what was the point?

Rousan’s words shoved the cold, hard reality of the situation in his face. Asen would never shed the label of the “imitation Gyousou.”

“It’s too bad,” Rousan said. “You should have gone on the Shouzan.”

Asen shook his head. The situation was hopeless. But he possessed enough discernment to know he had to appear above the fray. He would not so readily acknowledge his own despair.

He said blithely, “Even if I had gone on the Shouzan, the result would be the same. Gyousou is the emperor.”

“You think so?”

Asen gave Rousan a puzzled look. Rousan looked back at him, an enigmatic smile on her lips. “What if I told you that the kirin did not choose an actual person?”

“Not an actual person?”

“The kirin acts upon the intentions of Heaven and chooses the emperor. That much is definitely true. But Heaven does not actually whisper the name of the new emperor in the kirin’s ear. Heaven communicates its intentions through instinct and intuition. In the world of mere mortals, it might be described as getting the gist across with a wink and a nod. But can anyone be certain such a system will never give rise to error?”

“Nonsense. The kirin has the last word when he speaks the Word of Heaven.”

“Indeed. The Word of Heaven is absolute. Except Heaven never utters a name. If Heaven did, there would be no need for an elaborate ritual like the Shouzan. As long as the kirin got the message that *this* particular person was the next emperor, he could find him and tell him directly.”

“But—”

“It’s called the aura of the emperor, the imperial aura. The sign or sense of the new emperor who has been acknowledged by Heaven. That is all it is, in fact.”

Rousan paused, then said with a cynical smile, “What is communicated to the kirin is nothing more than a vague impression. The person he must select as the next emperor feels like thus and so. You and Gyousou-sama are very much alike, so the impression grasped by the kirin should be quite similar as well. If both of you were standing in front of him, who would Taiki choose?”

Asen said nothing. He didn't move a muscle.

"I don't know either. But there is one thing I do know. Gyousou-sama went on the Shouzan. You did not. Gyousou-sama met Taiki before you did."

"So that's why the Taiho chose him emperor?"

Rousan didn't answer. She gazed at Asen. Her mouth turned into a thin smile. That look provided Asen with a sufficient push to surmount whatever was finally holding him back from his next course of action.

Thinking back about it now, Rousan looked at Asen with the same cynical smile as she did on that day. Rousan never hid her scorn. As far as she was concerned, Asen was the lesser man compared to Gyousou. Nothing would shake that conviction.

Then why did she never stop stirring things up and egging him on?

"What do you want?" he asked her. He'd asked her the same question countless times before. Her answer was always the same.

"I don't want anything," Rousan said coolly and got to her feet. "There's nothing I want from you. Or rather, whatever I want, the likes of you can't provide. After all, you're only an imitation of the real thing."

Then why was she always enticing him to strike down Gyousou?"

"How would you deal with Taiki?"

"I'd let him do whatever he wants," Rousan said without a second thought. "The Taiho is a kirin. What the kirin wants is plain as day. He wants to save the people of Tai. And anyway, saving the people is not a bad thing. All the better for you, in fact. Neglect your own subjects any more than you already have and that long desired Divine Will is likely to desert you once again."

"Is that what you want or not? You're the one trying to give the Divine Will of your master to me."

Rousan shrugged. "If Providence so decides, then so be it. You've done nothing with the throne since getting your hands on it. Once you're branded as useless, with the shitsudou as the inevitable result, I want to be there to witness that rack and ruin sure to follow."

Rousan was a master of subterfuge. She refused to offer forthright answers to Asen's questions. He sensed no authenticity in her words. Her actions never followed what she said.

What is she thinking? he wondered, and casually said aloud, "Maybe this obsession of yours with jealousy is a reflection of your own envy?"

Rousan responded to that statement with a blank look.

"If I stray from the Way, the Taiho will die. As far as the emperor is concerned, the kirin is his lifelong partner. And that is something you cannot abide."

In other words, Rousan idolized Gyousou and envied Taiki, whose existence was indivisible from Gyousou. Thus she wished to destroy them both.

Rousan tipped her head to the side and appeared to give the idea serious thought. A moment later, she burst out laughing. “That is funny. I mean, that is *really* funny.”

She chortled for a while before explaining, “It is true that I don’t hold the Taiho in the same high esteem as the rest of you. But I don’t think much of emperors either. Oh, I do admire Gyousou-sama, but emperors and kirin are all the same to me. I couldn’t care less about any of them.”

Another nod of her head and she added, “No, I wouldn’t say I couldn’t care less. I do care. I am very curious about the Providence of the world.”

“The Providence of the world?”

“My respect for Gyousou-sama notwithstanding, my curiosity wins out. I am intrigued by the way the world and the emperor are connected to each other and to fate. If *this* occurs, what will happen next? That’s what I want to know.”

Unable to follow her line of argument, Asen simply gazed back at her. Rousan nodded, as if to emphasize her agreement with herself. “I am intrigued by the Providence that attends to the emperor and the kirin. But, you see, no one has any answers to my questions. My only recourse is to put those theories to the test and observe the results for myself.”

Chapter 7

[13-7] Chou'un exploded in a rage as soon as the secretary opened his mouth. "That's what he said?" he bellowed, "Again?" He kicked the nearest chair across the room.

Ansaku looked on, absolutely taken aback by his behavior, but kept his counsel to himself.

The day before, Chou'un had gleefully rushed out of the office, stating there were a few things on his mind he had to share with Taiki, only to return fuming with anger.

"May I ask what this is about?" Ansaku said, though he could well imagine. Once again, Asen or Taiki or both of them had given Chou'un the cold shoulder. High officials were already whispering behind his back about how Chou'un should probably stick to picking fights with people like himself, who were already easy to manipulate.

The kirin was the keystone of the kingdom. Unlike Chou'un and his ilk, who were listed in the Registry of Wizards, the kirin and the emperor were listed in the Registry of the Gods, making them residents of a completely different world.

Among the courtiers, the kirin alone held the rank of duke. The kirin by nature wielded authority equal to the high office of the Chousai. The Saiho worked with the emperor but not directly with the ministers, much less issuing direct orders. Because that particular rule arose out of custom and precedent, Taiki would not have been aware of it. Once he got it into his head to exercise his authority in regards to the civil service, the only person who could stop him was the emperor.

Open hostility was a loser's game, but none of the parties involved were exactly receptive to that kind of advice. Enraged, Chou'un dashed off a missive to Asen seeking reprisals against Taiki. As per usual, "Your petition has been heard" was the answer he got back.

Sure, it was hard to stomach, but Chou'un should have known he never had a chance going in, Ansaku thought, looking on as Chou'un cast blame all around him.

"Who do they think I am? Damn, this is annoying."

Having spent his fury on the chair, Chou'un heaved a deep breath and turned to Ansaku. "Get Shison."

"Shison is confined to quarters."

Having defied Taiki and been shuffled out of his post, home confinement was the best outcome Shison could hope for. If he wasn't careful, an accusation of sedition wasn't out of the question. Of course, Chou'un pulled the strings behind the scenes to ensure that the necessary allowances were made.

"I know that! Just get him!" Chou'un barked, the veins throbbing in his forehead.

Ansaku bowed respectfully and issued an order to one of his subordinates to fetch Shison. This was not a matter that could be resolved by simply issuing an order. The reason for his dismissal in the first place was insubordination, so as a matter of course, the Minister of Fall was required to review the case to make sure it did not warrant any weightier charges.

Shison was being detained at his residence, and was being watched by the Ministry of Summer to make sure he didn't flee. Permission had to be granted to hold the meeting and the Ministries of Fall and Summer had to make the necessary arrangements for Shison to leave his villa.

Ansaku hurried about getting everything done. But even towards relatively high-ranking officials, Chou'un's small-mindedness was on display as usual, as if to say that whatever inconvenienced Chou'un had to inconvenience everybody else in equal measure.

What a pain in the ass.

Though it was precisely because Ansaku put everything in working order that Chou'un was able to maintain his hold on power. And as long as Chou'un remained in control, Ansaku's position was secure.

The summoned Shison arrived in a bedraggled state. He'd always been a bit of a scarecrow, and now he looked barely substantial enough to cast a shadow. He entered the room like a cowering dog fearing his master's wrath. Perhaps believing he'd finally been cast a lifeline, as soon as he spotted Chou'un, he threw himself at his feet and spewed out a stream of servile apologies and entreaties.

"Will you shut up!" Chou'un thundered.

Shison shut his mouth like a trap.

"Have you reflected on the error of your ways?"

"Yes," Shison answered. "That and more."

Looking on, Ansaku was struck by the sheer absurdity of the conversation. He could not help feeling some sympathy for the man. From the start, Shison had only been doing what Chou'un ordered him to do.

"You acted without thinking and incurred the Taiho's displeasure, and yet you bear the Taiho no malice?"

"Of course not! Not at all!"

"And if granted clemency, you would wish to work on behalf of the Taiho?"

"From the bottom of my heart!"

Chou'un nodded and said with a self-satisfied smile, "Good. I hereby appoint you the *Naisai*."

"The Naisai—" Shison raised his head, the surprise evident on his face.

“As recompense for your past errors, you shall serve the Taiho with all your heart and soul, and every ounce of respect due his office.”

“Y-yes—”

But of course. Ansaku couldn't help smirking to himself. If nothing else, Chou'un's forte was a knife in the back disguised as a grand display of excessive loyalty. It was a strategy he'd used to great effect before becoming the Chousai to kick out of the way anyone obstructing his climb up the social ladder.

He would deliver to the target of his ire subordinates like Shison whom he could twist around his little finger, who would then proceed to exhaust themselves with demonstrations of fidelity and attentiveness. Piling on gifts and goods and more and more servants, all the excessive meddling left the target with hardly the time to breathe.

If rejected, he would weep aloud with disappointment. If reprimanded, he would publicly lament his own foolishness. All that any onlookers saw was him going above and beyond the call of duty. Interceding as a matter of course, they would rush to his defense, especially had he been dealt with in a severe manner.

Already annoyed to no end, the true victim in all these antics was likely to feel the walls closing in, wondering why he had suddenly become the bad guy. Applied repeatedly, these tactics steadily chipped away the target's standing and self-confidence, until he lost any desire to fight back.

All the while, Chou'un made public displays of admiration for his own master and disparaged all others. Having already seeded the grapevine with exaggerated claims of his deeds, he insisted that the credit for the achievements of others really belonged to his master. Of course, everything he said was only and always the product of his steadfast loyalty and good intentions.

However, all this adoration notwithstanding, it was the target's reputation that ultimately suffered.

By couching his praise in relative terms, the persons he was comparing his master to naturally felt belittled by the comparisons. On top of that, rumors he was taking credit for their good work were sure to arouse feelings of animosity. As a result, without Chou'un lifting a finger, someone was bound to take it upon himself to take the target down a few pegs. And when that happened, few were liable to rush to his defense.

How very much like you, Ansaku muttered to himself.

But could Taiki be so easily knocked off his perch?

From the events that had transpired thus far, Ansaku had confirmed that Taiki had a tenacious streak quite unlike that of a kirin. Usually calm and composed, he exhibited a willingness to act boldly and decisively to get things done, such as

sneaking into the Rokushin. Moreover, his position placed him well above Chou'un in terms of social and professional rank.

Going forward, Taiki would likely prove to be the toughest opponent Chou'un had ever faced.

He certainly has so far, Ansaku thought.

Chou'un had come to treat Taiki like a prisoner. And on the surface, Taiki appeared willing to accept the status quo. But not, Ansaku believed, because he was being kept under lock and key.

Taiki always had the right to march into the Rikken and tell the ministers what to do. He possessed the aura and authority of the kirin. If he started issuing orders, the likes of Chou'un couldn't stop him. He couldn't dismiss Chou'un from his office because that fell under the jurisdiction of the emperor. But with Asen never venturing into the public arena, it should not be difficult to render Chou'un a Chousai in name only.

Taiki had surely grasped as much, Ansaku believed, but at this juncture didn't dare push things that far. Determined to work around Asen, who appeared only committed only to the neglect of his duties, Taiki needed the cooperation of the Rikken to save the kingdom and the people. In order to prioritize that relief and aid, Taiki was as likely as not to play along with Chou'un's underhanded strategies.

"Ansaku." Having drilled Shison in the fine art of doing wrong by others, Chou'un next turned to Ansaku.

"Yes."

"Dismiss the kirin doctor. That includes whatever medical officers are assigned to him as well."

"As you wish."

Ansaku communicated Chou'un's directives to the Ministry of Heaven. But Taiki was one step ahead of them. No one at the ministry knew the whereabouts of Bun'en and Tokuyuu, the kirin doctors. The medical officer, Juntatsu, had already resigned and been commissioned a minister in the Zui Province government.

Stands to reason, Ansaku thought.

At the same time, he decided to hold back on a few other bits of advice in his report to Chou'un. Assigning Shison to Taiki meant dismissing the current Naisai, who was not one of Chou'un's proteges. What must he be thinking after losing his post clean out of the blue and for no good reason? If he hadn't been well compensated in one way or another, the chances were good he'd be harboring more than a few ill feelings after this.

Well, I'd better keep an eye on him too.

Though not, of course, on behalf of Chou'un.

Part Fourteen

Chapter 8

[14-1] The freezing wind filled the air with white snowflakes. Every gust of wind carried with it sheets of powdered snow. It was impossible to discern whether the dancing snowflakes fell from the sky or were whipped up from recent snowfalls. Collecting in the shadows and windbreaks, the drifts gradually grew to the size of rolling hills.

Snow covered the compact courtyard, coming halfway up to the knee at the deepest. Only the walkways were swept clean. Snow cascaded across the paving stones like an ocean surf, tracing delicate patterns on the frozen hard surface.

Risai glanced over her shoulder. "How are you holding up in all this cold?"

She leaned back against Hien, who knelt there amidst the straw. Hien rested her big head on her forelegs and breathed softly, filling the air with a misty fog.

The quality of the stables at Fukyuu Temple was lacking, to say the least. The walls were sieves of holes. The wind filled the stalls with cold drafts. The small mountain of bedding straw offered only meager protection. Risai couldn't help but feel guilty about having to leave Hien in a frigid place like this.

As she absently stroked Hien's head, Risai heard the approach of muffled footsteps. Houto poked his head into the stall.

"I figured you'd be here."

"Something up?"

"Kenchuu stopped by."

"Kenchuu did?"

Risai got to her feet. *Are you going?* Hien raised her head as if to ask. Risai stroked her muzzle and apologized. She left the stables with Houto and exited Fukyuu Temple through the back gate. Early in the morning, the streets were mostly empty. This was the season when people holed up inside their houses as much as possible.

Pulling up her scarf around her nose, Risai hurried down the street. The weather had turned worse of late. The cold seeped into her bones. Ever since they returned from Rouan, every ounce of heat had deserted her body. She couldn't stay warm. Her

hands and feet often felt like they were encased in blocks of ice. But she urged herself on and picked up the pace.

Kenchuu was waiting in the living room of the safe house. He stood and bowed when Risai entered the room.

“Thanks for going to the trouble, especially at this time of year. What brings you here?”

“I received a message from Sekirin Temple.”

“Sekirin Temple?”

Upon hearing rumors of Asen’s enthronement, they had visited one of the shrines in the Sekirin Temple circuit. Perhaps word had gotten back to him. But why was Kenchuu running errands for Sekirin Temple?

“Kenchuu, do you have connections with Sekirin Temple?”

Instead of answering the question, Kenchuu said, “The head priestess would like to see you.”

Risai craned her head to the side in confusion. But this wasn’t an invitation they could afford to refuse. Urged on by Kenchuu, they headed for Sekirin Temple, perched atop a mountain that rose over the city to the northeast.

They had previously visited a shrine associated with Sekirin Temple. This time their destination was the head temple. From the start, the temple had devoted itself to ascetic practice and training and was not easily accessible by pilgrims, even true believers. Attesting to this policy, the towering gate at the end of the long flight of stone steps was shut and secured.

Kenchuu knocked on the side door. The gate opened from within. A young Taoist dressed in white robes greeted them with a bow. He escorted them deep inside the monastery. The buildings in Sekirin Temple all displayed the bare minimum of ornamentation and a meager use of color or paint. At the same time, the snow had been swept from the stone walkways, revealing the glistening cobblestones, while beautiful fields of white covered the courtyards, untrampled by a single footprint or stray leaf.

No refugees crowded the temple grounds, that were filled only with frozen and tranquil air.

“This way,” their guide said. He took them to the east side of a building annex at the back of the compound and showed them to the main room. The doors were closed, likely to keep out the cold. The smoke from incense wafted about the hall. The wan glow from a skylight shone through the dusky interior, illuminating a platform in the center of the room. The platform was elevated a step higher than the rest floor.

A small old woman sat in a chair on the platform.

“Thank you for coming. I am Moku’u.” The priestess nodded to them from the platform. “As you can see, in my advanced years, my limbs do not work as well as

they should. It was presumptuous of me, I know, but please forgive the impertinence of summoning you to my presence.”

People were assembled around the platform to the right and left. Half appeared to be Taoists dressed in brown robes. The rest were ordinary civilians. Among them was a boy of twelve or thirteen.

Risai said in a small voice, “Kaisei.”

The boy they’d met at the side of the grave in Rouan. A step to the side and behind Kaisei, hanging his head, was Boukyuu, the assistant village manager of Rouan. Several more people stood further back, watching over them. In this group was a woman Risai thought she recognized, maybe someone she’d seen in Rouan.

“You must be wondering why I so abruptly summoned these people I do not know and have not met. I will explain in due course. Please sit down.”

Moku’u indicated a row of chairs in front of the platform. Risai’s group lined up and sat down. A white-robed priest appeared with tea. In the meantime, Moku’u confirmed the names of Risai and her companions and then waited for the priest to depart.

“Risai-sama, I assume you remember Kaisei. A week ago, this Kaisei came knocking at the door to the temple.”

Over a span of six days, the boy traveled from Rouan to Rin’u by himself through the freezing snow and appealed to the priests there. Rouan had been hiding a military commander. But those same villagers conspired to kill him. That was what he told them.

“Kaisei—” Startled, Risai turned her attention to him.

“Because it was evening when you left the village. All the adults said it was too dangerous. I wasn’t scared.”

“That was a reckless thing to do all by yourself. You could have at least asked us.”

“And you would have stopped me, right? I can’t trust adults, and I trust the government even less. The soldiers we were hiding left as well. I didn’t know where else to turn. A Taoist temple was my last resort.”

“Are you a follower of Sekirin Temple, Kaisei?”

“Not really. But my mom and dad really respected Moku’u-sama. They always said what an honorable person she was. I was sure if anybody would listen to me, it would be Moku’u-sama.”

“I thank you. In order to make your request, you came to this temple by yourself and with no good traveling clothes. That being the case, I feel I must respond in kind to such a display of trust and good faith.”

Compelled to ascertain the truth for herself, Moku’u dispatched her own people to Rouan. The results of that investigation led her to summon Risai.

“I must begin by making it clear that His Highness is not dead.”

Risai raised her head with a start and stared at the comely yet elderly face.
“Really?”

“Yes.” Moku’u next turned her gentle gaze to Kaisei. “Your village was sheltering a military officer. But not His Highness. Kaisei, I take it you were made privy to the man’s name.”

Kaisei nodded. “I didn’t tell anybody in the village. But he told me. He said his *azana* was Kiryou.”

“Kiryou,” Risai repeated to herself. “So it was Kiryou!”

“Do you know this person?” Moku’u asked.

“He was a colleague. He came to Bun Province as a general in the Provincial Guard.”

Risai brought to mind the scene of that cold grave. She was elated to learn it did not hold Gyousou. But knowing that Kiryou was sleeping there was a bitter pill to swallow. Moreover, he had been alive until last fall. Had they ventured there earlier in the year, they could have seen him.

Another thought suddenly struck her. “Except Kiryou did not have white hair or crimson eyes.”

Standing behind Kaisei, Boukyuu’s head slumped lower to his chest.

Moku’u said, “They deceived you. They wanted you to believe His Highness died in Rouan. Because then a new emperor would ascend to the throne.”

With a look from Moku’u, Boukyuu took a step forward.

In fact, the commander collapsed and was brought to Rouan half a year after Gyousou disappeared. They assumed he’d been badly injured during Asen’s purges, an assumption they never confirmed. What they could say for certain was that his wounds were deep and he showed all the signs of having wandered through the mountain wilderness.

Boukyuu and the others cared for him with the best of intentions in mind. Of course, they opposed Asen as well. If Asen attacked, they would do whatever they could do to help. At the time, they believed he was a soldier in the Imperial Army. No one could remember who first made the suggestion, but somebody mentioned he might be the emperor.

They all knew about the emperor’s disappearance. At the time, the word went around that Asen had attacked him. However, that was at least half a year before. The rumor was that Gyousou had gone into hiding from Asen’s assassins but had been found out and a renewed assault was in the offing. At the time, Boukyuu and the others had no way of knowing what Gyousou looked like.

Though certain this person could not be Gyousou, they continued to hold out hope. They expended every effort taking care of him and went to great lengths to

keep his presence secret. When he at last opened his eyes, and they asked if he was Gyousou, “No,” was his reply, though they could not decide whether to take that answer at face value. The details that followed were as they had previously explained to Seishi and Risai.

Kiryou did not once respond when addressed as “His Highness.” He continued to insist that he was not. At some point, Boukyuu came to that conclusion as well. Then the year before, they caught wind of information that Gyousou had white hair and crimson eyes, and agreed among themselves that he could not be Gyousou.

But Kiryou stubbornly refused to reveal his true identity, leading them to believe he must have been a member of Gyousou’s inner circle. As long as they provided him a safe harbor, knowing more would only bring them trouble, so Kiryou stuck to his conviction that the less they knew the better.

Except his condition proved worse than they initially thought. At first, Kiryou planned to leave the village as soon as he recuperated. Except he repeatedly pushed himself too hard and collapsed before he could recover sufficiently. As a result, that fall, he finally succumbed.

“If nothing else, we wish you to understand that we meant him no harm and caused him no harm in any way. Yes, we did mix medicine into his food, but that was only because he insisted he didn’t need it. He was always concerned about being a burden and didn’t want us spending money on expensive medicine and insisted we mustn’t go out of our way for him.”

He was so determined not to cause us trouble, he tried to leave the village before he had fully recovered. They eventually resorted to serving him the medicine in his food.

“That’s what Kaisei became aware of. But he misunderstood. We had no intent to harm him in any way. All we could do was ask him to believe us.”

Risai nodded. “Your colleagues were a great help. We are grateful for all the care and attention demonstrated by the people of Rouan.”

“Thank you,” Boukyuu said, dabbing his eyes with the sleeve of his cloak.

“Pardon me for asking, but why did you go to such lengths? You worked with the shin’nou to get medicines and took on significant responsibilities. You shared the risk of sheltering him. Having doubts about him being the emperor was one thing. When you knew for certain he was not, why did you continue to show Kiryou such considerations?”

“I don’t really know myself. Of course, we couldn’t look the other way. He was in a bad way when we brought him to the village. We were delighted when his condition improved. We really wanted to see him healed and healthy again.” Boukyuu added in a small voice, “Especially in an era so devoid of hope.”

There was no hope left in Tai. The beast on the throne in Kouki did as he pleased with no regard to the consequences. Perhaps protecting Kiryou was their small way of fighting back. Even if it meant getting caught up in forces beyond their control, here was where they would not bend a knee in submission.

“Of course, he was a man of character. He expressed his thanks for our efforts and helped out in any way he could. Our village was able to surmount the tumult of the times in large part thanks to his advice. He rescued Kaisei’s father from a youma. His father later died of his wounds. Left without any close relatives, Kiryou-sama took Kaisei in and supported him as best he could.”

“I always knew Kiryou was a capable officer, but it is good to hear what you just told us.”

Boukyuu nodded.

Kiryou was in a hurry to get better. The desire to get his old body back made him push himself too far. He put on a brave front in order not to worry Kaisei. But his condition was poor and did not improve. Finally his strength failed him.

“The Taiho—” were his last words.

Kiryou intended to find Gyouso and then they would recapture Kouki together. But that proved a bridge too far. He implored Boukyuu and the others to search for Taiki.

“He never said so in so many words, but given the amount of time that had passed, I think he abandoned the goal of reuniting with His Highness. Even assuming we could track down His Highness, rallying soldiers to his side and raising an army would be next to impossible. And should he turn out to have passed away, the whole effort would be for naught. At the very least, we powerless commoners could continue the search for the Taiho. Well, no, such an effort was equally unlikely to bear fruit. But in his heart, he must have believed that was the one thing we could do to keep hope alive.”

“I see,” Risai said to herself. Reflecting on Kiryou’s state of mind prompted a painful pang of remorse. If only they had met him earlier, even if things turned out the same, at least they could have told him about Taiki’s return.

We were too late. Again.

“His death left the villagers very much dispirited. That was when rumors started circulating about a force searching for His Highness.”

Risai nodded. “Rumors arising from our activities reached our ears as well. I never dreamed of such a thing. A product of our own carelessness. But in any case, there were never enough of us to deserve being called a *force*. What you see here is our team.”

Boukyuu shook his head in disbelief at the gap between the rumors and reality. Rumors about a force holed up at a safehouse in Rin’u, that they answered to Asen,

or that they were Gyousou's retainers, and always the question of what to do if they were the former.

"Had he lived, we also could have kept our wits about us and settled the matter. We would have done everything in our power to protect him. If the hand of the beast moved against us, we would continue to keep his secrets. If the retainers of His Highness showed up, we would do whatever we could to bring the parties together, even if that attracted the attention of the beast."

But Kiryou was no longer with them.

"If the force searching for the commander were His Highness's retainers, at minimum, I hoped to communicate to them his last moments. But we couldn't tell who belonged to which camp. If we reached out to them and they turned out to be underlings of the beast, that would only bring calamity down upon our heads."

Boukyuu then added in a quieter voice, "I have a duty to protect Rouan."

Kiryou was no longer with them. Pointing out his grave would do no one any good. So they kept mum. But the situation changed when Shuukou showed up with Seishi in tow. The villagers who checked him out remembered that he belonged to the rumored "force" that was looking for a past member of the military.

"They said he belonged to that group in Rin'u, and that Shuukou's real apprentice was another person. He'd accompanied Shuukou to the village on several occasions."

In short, they believed the village had been under surveillance for some time. Except Seishi made no overt efforts to ferret out any rebels. He didn't confirm Kiryou's presence there. Which suggested he did not belong to Asen's camp. Had any of Asen's minions suspected a thing, they would have charged in and destroyed Rouan and everyone living there. That's what Asen had always done before.

"So we asked Seika-sama to initiate the contact. The two you met that time were once soldiers in the Bun Provincial Guard. Accused of fomenting rebellion and on the run, they'd found their way to Rouan."

"Makes sense."

"They told us that His Highness had white hair and crimson eyes. They met Kiryou-sama and confirmed that he was not His Highness. They'd been searching for him as well."

The way they interacted with Seishi told them he wasn't an Asen ally either. But until that group out of Rin'u convinced themselves, there was a good chance they'd stay in Rouan and keep looking for this military commander and asking questions about his identity. Sooner or later, the kingdom was bound to take notice.

"We pointed you to his grave in hopes of convincing you to call off the search." Boukyuu again hung his head. "We found ourselves in a bigger bind after he died, though we were not without a strategy. We talked it over with everybody and agreed

that if the beast's underlings showed up, we would say he wasn't His Highness. But to the retainers of His Highness, we would say he was."

"I'm not buying it," Seishi interrupted.

"Seishi," Risai said with a severe look.

He ignored her and addressed Boukyuu in a caustic tone of voice. "Supposing the person in question was Gyousou-sama, did you imagine we would slink away from Rouan with our tails between our legs and never show our faces there again?" He turned to Risa and said, "Risai-sama, I simply cannot go along with this nonsense."

Risai let out a long breath. She had to agree with him. To start with, she couldn't accept their claims at face value either—that the man had died and he wasn't Gyousou. It'd take at least a third visit before she'd be convinced. Claiming it'd been Gyousou all along wouldn't have been any more believable, not without confirming the facts with her own two eyes.

At the heart of it all were the rumors about Asen's enthronement.

The nervous Boukyuu tried hard not to look at him, but Seishi fixed him in his gaze. "There was no chance we would give up and not continue our inquiries about the identity of the military commander you sheltered. If true, we would have set up camp in Rouan, searched the houses, and interviewed the residents. The reason we didn't was because of the rumors about Asen's accession. You knew about those rumors as well."

Boukyuu's shoulders shivered with apprehension.

"This was never about a search team prowling around. It all began with information about Asen's accession. A new emperor on the throne. A new dynasty is about to dawn. A new emperor meant that Gyousou-sama must have already died. For us, searching for Gyousou-sama all along, you claimed he had died in order to drive the point home. Isn't that what's been going on here?"

The way Boukyuu averted his eyes confirmed to Risai the truth of what Seishi had said.

"Gyousou-sama died and is no longer emperor. Openly hostile to Emperor Asen, his retainers are now nothing more than rebels. You want nothing to do with insurrectionists. You don't even want to be seen in the company of anyone antagonistic to Emperor Asen and thus risk guilt by association. Needless to say, searching for someone no longer emperor is but a fool's errand. The new dynasty is upon us. Those who cling to the past and reject the new emperor will throw the kingdom into chaos and become a thorn in the side. That's what it comes down to."

Seishi all but spit out the words, and still had more to say.

"Since the time you heard of this so-called *force* searching for the emperor, the only thing on your minds was your own welfare and your own interests. You didn't want Asen looking at you. You were determined to distance yourselves from anybody

who might oppose him. Beginning to end, this was about your own self-preservation.”

Boukyuu raised his head, the anger evident on his face. Before he could respond, Risai broke in and said, “What is wrong with prioritizing self-preservation?”

Seishi flashed her a startled look. “That was *all* they thought about, to the point of deceiving us.”

Risai nodded. “Let’s stipulate that was indeed the case. I’ll repeat the question. Is there anything wrong with people prioritizing their own self-preservation?”

“I wouldn’t say there’s anything wrong with that, but—”

“Boukyuu is the assistant village manager. There is no village manager, so he alone is responsible for keeping the peace in Rouan. Without a doubt, that must be the first thing always on his mind. It is only natural that the villagers should prioritize their own safety as well.”

Moreover, she added, “The people of Rouan helped and sheltered Kiryou. Knowing the risks, they provided him sanctuary for several years and tried to nurse him back to health. If nothing else, we owe them our thanks.”

Boukyuu looked at Risai, clearly taken aback. She gave him a small bow and said, “As wizards, we enjoy a number of privileges in terms of special rights and financial resources, and with those privileges come commensurate responsibilities. We are not supposed to condone the prioritization of our own interests above all others. However, I believe commoners are correct in putting themselves first, along with their families and their neighbors. They do not have the power or the authority, and should not be made to bear the responsibility of acting on behalf of anyone outside that circle.”

“But—” Seishi started to say.

“We came here to save Gyousou-sama because we wish to save Tai. Isn’t that the same as saving the people of Tai? If we then criticize the means by which they try to save themselves, wouldn’t that put at naught the noble cause to which we have devoted ourselves?”

Seishi again tried to interrupt. Risai stilled him with a gesture. “I believe that if Gyousou-sama were here, that is what he would say.”

Seishi looked at Risai, blinked, and said nothing.

“We are Gyousou-sama’s retainers. Even if he is not here, we must not act in a manner contrary to his will.”

Risai concluded with that statement. She wished to save the people of Tai, but she could not respect Asen as the emperor. In short, Risai was first and foremost Gyousou’s servant. If Taiki chose Asen as the new emperor, he did so as a servant of Tai. Beyond a doubt, Heaven sent Taiki to Tai to act for the good of Tai. Despite Asen being his implacable foe, Taiki’s personal feelings did not enter into the equation.

Despite the contradictions and complications that stood in his way, the fate of Tai always took precedence.

“It is the same with the people of Tai. The fate of the kingdom is and should be their primary concern. That makes those of us searching for Gyousou-sama nothing but a nuisance.”

The right thing to do was to set aside her resentments and past obsessions and move on. But Risai could not rid herself of her animus toward Asen, or suppress the righteous anger she felt because of all the evil things he had done. If she had the chance to strike him down, that is what she wished in her heart. Even if Tai lost a newly enthroned emperor as a result.

“At the end of the day, I will choose Gyousou-sama over Tai. Because I am first and foremost Gyousou-sama’s retainer.”

Moku’u softly interjected, “Would you kill Asen?”

Risai said with a sad smile, “That is what I want to do but not what I would do. Given the respect Gyousou-sama holds for the office, he would definitely not want me to.”

“That’s right,” Seishi said, letting out a long breath. “That is exactly right.”

Taiki had once rejected Gyousou. On Mount Hou. That was when Gyousou decided to leave Tai. At the time, Seishi was on Mount Hou with Gashin.

Gyousou said with a wry smile, “I feel like I was invited to dinner and got asked to leave after only the appetizer.”

He had completed his first meeting with Taiki on Mount Hou. Soon after that, Taiki said to Gyousou, “Please take care of yourself until the next equinox.”

In other words, Gyousou would not be chosen emperor.

“There is no arguing with the Will of God. For lack of a better word, call it fate. Having accompanied me this far, you must think me a sad sack of a man.”

“But—”

Seishi was beside himself with righteous indignation, even though such emotions availed them nothing. Everything was up to Heaven. There was no blame that could be laid at Taiki’s feet or anybody else’s. They knew that very well, not only Seishi, but all those who came with Gyousou to Mount Hou, including Ganchou and Gashin and their retainers. And yet they could not contain their vexation with a decision they thought totally wrong.

As he gazed at them, Gyousou seemed to understand this feeling. “I had always believed there was nothing that resided outside my grasp. I could take possession of whatever I wished if I only strove long enough. Having thus obtained everything I wanted, I came to believe that, one way or another, I could claim the Will of God as well.”

Gyousou added with a smile of self-derision, "I've been thinking of leaving Tai."

He took in their startled countenances with quiet eyes. "You see, I have to wonder what sort of person that kirin will place on the throne. The workings of Heaven are such that I will not pretend to comprehend them. And yet, depending on the person, I wouldn't rule out snatching it away from him."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed an aghast Ganchou. "Even contemplating such actions is beyond the pale!"

"Is it?" Gyousou looked at Ganchou, an intrigued expression on his face. "Isn't it in the nature of human beings to do so? Each one of us will size himself up against the new emperor and none of us wishes to come up short. That is human nature as well. We make such comparisons in the first place to take the measure of our own superiority."

With a "Hmph," Ganchou sank into silence.

"The result of which will inevitably confirm that it is the new emperor who doesn't quite measure up. And if only for a moment, the thought of taking that throne for yourself is bound to cross your mind."

Not bloody likely, Seishi wanted to say. Gyousou would be the last person to do anything of the sort. But Seishi had also thought it a given that Gyousou would be chosen as the emperor. For all his convictions, he turned out to be wrong.

His judgment had been clouded by favoritism. Based on the way things turned out, that was the only conclusion he was left with. Up until now, when he compared every possible candidate to Gyousou, Gyousou always came out on top. To be sure, Seishi didn't want to think of himself as beneath the role of emperor either. As Gyousou said, the whole point of such comparisons was to weigh the emperor's greatness in the balance.

He should hardly be surprised to see such shallow convictions ultimately betrayed.

"I think some time apart would be best for both Tai and myself. No matter how low I fall, I do not wish to become a thief. I will leave the rest in your capable hands."

Seishi stared at Gyousou in amazement, no less dumbfounded than Ganchou and Gashin, who raised a chorus of objections.

Gyousou looked back at them. "A new emperor may not soon be enthroned. Faced with a world of disorder, those capable of propping up the kingdom in the meantime must work together. You should return to Tai and put in the kind of effort that is commensurate with your talents."

Gashin spoke up at once. "I have no desire to serve anyone other than Gyousou-sama."

“Out of loyalty? If so, then take these words to heart. I wish to bestow Tai with my outstanding retinue. Whatever the reason I came on the Shouzan, I was not chosen emperor, and I should not have to remind you about the fate that awaits Tai.”

“I entirely agree. We as well will pray for the peace and welfare of Tai from afar.”

“Don’t say such nonsense. Why accompany me to this place to begin with? Because my becoming emperor would constitute some crowning achievement in *your* careers? In that case, you should take your leave. Being around me has obviously availed you nothing of value.”

“That is not what I mean. Even you should understand. I—”

“If you believed it was for the good of Tai, then do not lose sight of that sense of duty. Already impoverished by the profligacy of the previous emperor, the chaos accompanying the empty throne will leave the people of Tai struggling for each breath. The sooner a new emperor ascends to the throne the better. Otherwise, these trying times will only continue. Even when a new emperor is enthroned, it will take time to put the Imperial Court in order. All the more reason to have worthy and competent retainers on hand who can cast a lifeline to the people. In short, your hands are needed at the wheel.”

“If so, then Gyousou-sama should remain as well and work on behalf of Tai.”

“What I’m saying is, it would not be wise to leave a live coal behind in the straw. Not everything I do is for the good of Tai. My pride is at play here as well. If your loyalty to me means anything, at least allow me to walk away from this humiliation.”

“But—”

“I would like it said that at least Gyousou blessed Tai with the best of his retainers. To hope for such a reputation would suffice.”

Seishi looked down at his feet.

“Once law and order is again restored, then you may feel free to leave Tai and do as you wish. But should that era arrive and you find that you still cannot bear to live without me, well, at that point I would not object to you tracking me down.”

All Seishi and the rest of them could do was shake their heads and exchange wry smiles.

“That’s the kind of man he was.”

Seishi hung his head. “Risai-sama is correct. Gyousou-sama would not have taken Boukyuu to task. Nevertheless, serving under Asen is one thing I cannot do. As Gyousou-sama once resolved to do, I too shall leave Tai. Because if I remain in the kingdom, my loathing for Asen will surely lead me to try and kill him.”

Listening to Seishi, Moku’u was the only one who nodded. “If you had demonstrated no empathy for the suffering of the people, I would have held my

tongue. However—” She said with a soft smile, “I would not lend too much credence to news of Asen’s imminent accession.”

“Moku’u-dono?”

“We are in possession of information that advises against believing such reports, information that suggests there is something decidedly strange about calling Asen the new emperor.”

“Excuse me, but who delivered that information?” Risai asked with a dubious look.

“A man by the name of Genkan. I don’t know anything about him either.”

“You know nothing about him?”

“Nothing at all.”

“We have heard that you are familiar with the inner goings-on in Kouki.”

“We are familiar with the inner goings-on in places other than Kouki as well. Informed about the state of affairs in every region by their branch temples, the Taoist temples everywhere remain well informed. But in my case, there is the additional information that comes to me through the *shusei*.”

“The *shusei*?”

Moku’u smiled. “I was once a *shusei*, you see.”

Risai and the rest of them looked back at her in surprise. Moku’u explained that she had been sold to a *shusei* boss, her *oyakata*, back before she could remember and was raised as a dancer.

“However, I fell ill in Bun Province and was unable to continue on with the troupe. As I said, I was sold to the *shusei*. But my *oyakata* was a good man with a good heart and raised me as his own daughter. When it became apparent that I could not accompany them on their journeys, he used his connections to get me admitted at a Sekirin branch temple in Rin’u. I recuperated there for half a year. During that time, I decided to become a priestess. When I told my *oyakata*, he again made arrangements so I could enter the monastery at Sekirin Temple.”

Even today, her connections to the *shusei* remained strong.

“The *shusei* often forward us information about matters of general interest. In this case, the notice arrived directly from the capital. Though I don’t know the source, I can only imagine it came from a well-placed individual in Kouki or perhaps even inside the Imperial Palace.”

Moku’u craned her head to the side, recollecting the series of events. “The first time this person reached out to me, the *shusei* directed a blue bird to my location, saying they had taken receipt of a blue bird addressed to me. The *shusei* thought the whole thing curious as well, as they knew nothing about the matters in question. On that occasion, the message delivered was that Zui’un Temple had to stop what they were doing.”

At the time, under the auspices of Zui'un Temple, Taoist and Buddhist temples in Kou Province were raising questions about Asen's legitimacy. The message warned that Asen would likely respond with severe reprisals, in some cases launching punitive expeditions with no chance to appeal.

"Ever since, blue birds have delivered messages directly to me. The message is always enclosed in a black bamboo tube. That's why I gave my correspondent the name *Genkan*. The information provided by Genkan has always stood the test of time, to a remarkable extent. Moreover, these are *koshuu* birds, a species not easy for anyone to get his hands on."

Koshuu, Risai repeated to herself.

There were a variety of blue birds, each with different characteristics and uses. Among them, the *koshuu* was a rare *you* bird, that could only come from a *riboku* in the palace or the castle of a province lord. A *koshuu* could be directed to fly to a specific location or person. In the case of the latter, it must have met that person before. But having met them once, it would remember and thereafter find them no matter where they went.

The birds fell under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Summer. They were primarily used by the emperor and province lords to communicate with military commanders dispatched by the Minister of Summer. They were raised by *youjuu* wranglers attached to the Ministry of Summer, and although rare, now and then surplus birds did appear on the market. At the same time, no matter how well off, it was not the kind of blue bird the average commoner could afford to buy and own.

"That kind of access to a *koshuu* must mean your correspondent is a high government official or a commissioned officer."

Moku'u agreed. "Given that this Genkan said there was something strange about the recent developments involving Asen, these official proclamations should be regarded as equally suspicious."

"Meaning—"

"Meaning errors are being perpetuated somewhere at a fundamental level," Moku'u said. "Or rather, someone is playing a high-level game of deception."

Chapter 9

[14-2] The sun hung low over Bun Province.

Lanterns lit up the Sekirin Temple annex. Moku'u went out of her way to make sure the villagers from Rouan were well rested and fed before they departed. After they left, she glanced up at the darkening skies and let out a weary sigh that Risai couldn't help overhearing.

"You look tired, Moku'u-sama. We should take our leave as well."

Moku'u said with a soft smile, "When you get older, you've got to stay on your toes just to make it through the day. But you needn't worry on my account. Please take this opportunity to visit with us a while longer. There are limits to what we can do, but if we can help out in any way, please let us know. Over here—"

Responding to her beckoning gesture was the Taoist priest they had previously met at the shrine. Risai recalled that his name was Sodou.

"As you can see for yourselves, I am an old woman. The demands of my training and the related ascetic regimens can make it difficult to reach me. At such times, were messages to arrive from Genkan, there would be little I could do. So I will entrust such matters to Sodou. Do not hesitate to put him to good use. He can make the necessary personal arrangements, and though we are not wealthy, help with funding as well. You can leave all such matters in Sodou's capable hands."

Moku'u added with a smile, "In exchange, keep us up to date on how you are faring. The fate of the kingdom rests on finding His Highness, you see."

"That would be fine with us."

"Kenchuu has also indicated he would like to help in any way he can. Providing that Risai-dono does not find them an extra burden, I would appreciate you finding useful roles for both of them."

"We are deeply thankful," Risai answered, looking on as Moku'u left the room. Yet she was less than satisfied with the events that had just transpired. Having previously given up on attracting outside help, she was confused about why it should be offered in such abundance now.

"I look forward to working with you again," Kenchuu said.

"I appreciate it, but to be honest, I'm not sure why you and Moku'u-dono decided to lend us a hand."

Kenchuu said with a gentle chuckle, "We both share the same goal of saving His Highness."

“Though that would make more sense if we were the ones reaching out for your cooperation.”

“Well, then. How about because we owe you one?”

“You owe us one?” Risai echoed, shifting her attention as a woman stepped out from behind Kenchuu. She had been lingering in a corner of the room from the start. Risai had the feeling she’d seen her before—the *hakushi* wearing the white ribbon they’d met on the road to Sokou.

“You are—”

Kenchuu turned to the woman. “This is Shunsui.”

The woman bowed to Risai. “Some time ago, you went out of your way to look after us. We appreciate the help you gave us at that time.”

“In any case, it’s good to know you made it here safe and sound. And your daughter?”

“She is doing well. For the time being, I’ve left her in the care of our comrades.”

“Your comrades—”

“Our fellow *hakushi*.”

“Ah,” Risai said.

She hadn’t realized there were *hakushi* here as well. Well, no. Didn’t the *hakushi* have a close connection with Sekirin Temple? In terms of religious doctrines, they did belong to a different sect, but she’d also heard that they received assistance from Sekirin Temple.

Sensing her confusion, Kenchuu said, “We do enjoy the gracious backing of Moku’u-sama.”

“We—” Not expecting him to use that particular pronoun, Risai said, “So you are a *hakushi* as well, Kenchuu? You and the woman, Shunsui, are colleagues?”

Kenchuu nodded. “We didn’t start with that understanding in common. I didn’t know who Shunsui was at all. It was only when it became clear to me that she was one of the *hakushi* that I realized we were, in fact, fellow adherents.”

Responding to Risai’s quizzical expression, he added, “We are not members of a group with a defined organization. As companions who share the same resolve, we exchange information while each making our own way. There is no label that we apply to ourselves. Somebody called us the *hakushi* and the name stuck. That is fine with us. But we were originally survivors of Tetsui.”

Risai looked at Kenchuu, her eyes opening a little wider. Tetsui was the city with strong past connections to Gyousou. It was because of those connections that Asen singled it out for destruction during the purges.

“Refugees, then? You went to Kan’you Mountain to sift through the tailings from the mines?”

“No,” Shunsui stated firmly. “His Highness is not dead. Moku’u-sama said so as well. We must find him.”

All the more surprised, Risai said to her, “Find him—meaning that Taoist priest.”

The Taoist who became a mountain wizard on Kan’you Mountain. If they met him, a new day would dawn.

Shunsui drew her lips into a thin line. She paused and then said, “We heard that His Highness was attacked by beasts on Kan’you Mountain. But he did not die. He has to be there somewhere. By concentrating on Kan’you Mountain, we should be able to trace his movements.”

Risai nodded to herself. *So that’s what has been going on.* She said aloud, “Was your daughter born in Tetsui?”

“To be precise, my daughter and I were born in Ryuukei.”

Ryuukei was located on the highway between Tetsui and Kan’you Mountain, at the fork of the mountain road that continued onto Kakyuu. Heading from Tetsui to Kan’you Mountain, Ryuukei was the first city where travelers could stay the night. When returning from Kan’you Mountain to Tetsui, they’d arrive at Ryuukei the evening of the second day on the road.

Overlooking the valley that ran from Kan’you Mountain to Tetsui, Ryuukei was renowned for its majestic views. Along with an ancient shrine that was part of the Sekirin Temple circuit, it was home to many celebrated Taoist and Buddhist temples, and was a relatively big city compared to the others scattered across the valley floor.

“Tetsui once rebelled against the dictates of Emperor Kyou and refused to pay the levied taxes.”

“We’ve heard the tale. Tetsui shuttered and secured the warehouses and closed the gates. Gyousou-sama was dispatched to the city as commander of the Palace Guard.”

Shunsui nodded. “At the time, the people who gathered in Tetsui weren’t only residents of Tetsui. The Yoku Shire castle was located in Tetsui. Shuttering the warehouse was done with the consensus of Yoku Shire too. People from Ryuukei were in Tetsui too. They all raised their voices against the despotic actions of Emperor Kyou. That infuriated Emperor Kyou, and he sent the Palace Guard to crush them. But His Highness knew that Tetsui was in the right and instead rallied to their defense.”

Kyoshi blinked in surprise and said, “Please excuse the question, but are you referring to yourself as well? Didn’t these events take place long before you were born?”

“Of course,” Shunsui answered. “My grandparents were the ones saved by His Highness’s actions. To be sure, my grandfather hadn’t been born yet. But if His Highness hadn’t supported their cause, I wouldn’t be here today. Not only that. Had the general leading that army been anyone other than His Highness, Yoku Shire

would have been destroyed as well. The way it was recently. They would have branded the people of Tetsui and Ryuukei rebels, executed them, and eradicated all the towns and villages in Yoku Shire. But thanks to His Highness, they escaped that fate. Not only escaped death. His Highness declared that the people of Tetsui were in the right and the uprising was not a crime. He protected the honor and dignity of Tetsui. That is why the people of Tetsui have preserved the story and debt of gratitude we owe His Highness.”

“I see,” said Risai.

Kenchuu again urged Risai and the others to sit down. “We lost Tetsui and all the surrounding towns and villages, probably because of our strong connection to His Highness. His Highness has a special meaning to the people of Tetsui. The same way His Highness holds Tetsui in a special light, we consider His Highness the same way. We were mightily depressed when we heard news of his death. But later determined that information was not reliable.”

Shunsui agreed and added, “The beast attacked His Highness on Kan’you Mountain. But he was spared due to Divine intervention.”

“Except he did not return to the Imperial Palace,” Risai said under her breath.

“Surely because he was wounded. He was able to run away, but not all the way back to the Imperial Palace.”

“Though able to run away, you do not believe he died in the mountains?”

“Such an outcome is impossible. Even when wounded, he would not be so easily killed. He always has with him the emperor’s armor and talismans to cure his injuries.”

“I do know of a bracelet he most certainly would have been wearing.”

“Wouldn’t he?” Shunsui’s eyes lit up. “He must be somewhere in hiding.”

“For six years?” Risai wondered.

“If not in hiding, then he must have fled somewhere far away. We are looking for the trail he left behind. Somewhere we are sure to find the clues that will lead us to him.” Shunsui looked down at her feet. “And if—against all odds—he has passed away, we must still find him and send him onto the next world in a proper fashion. The people of Tetsui will not abandon His Highness in life or in death.”

“I understand the feeling,” Risai said with a nod.

Kenchuu said to her, “In fact, there’s something I need to apologize to you about.”

“To me?”

“Back when we were on our way to Kan’you Mountain, when we were heading to Sokou, you left to have dinner with Kyuusan. I made inquiries about His Highness along the way.”

Risai cast her thoughts back. “Ah, that’s what you were up to.” He must have asked around to see if anyone had evidence of Gyouso being on Kan’you Mountain.

“At that time, you see, there were those who weren’t sure whether they should say anything or not and kept their mouths shut.”

“Kept their mouths shut?”

Kenchuu nodded. “About there being a cave-in on Kan’you Mountain.”

“Eh?” Risai raised her voice. “A cave-in?”

“During that time, the hakushi and searchers from Tetsui were traveling to Kan’you Mountain.”

At the height of the troop movements, word arrived in Tetsui that the emperor had disappeared. The citizens of Tetsui felt compelled to rally together and send out search parties. Some of them ventured onto Kan’you Mountain.

“What I heard was, back then as well, organized teams slipped through the cordons thrown up by the land gangs and went into the mines to sift through the tailings. They reported back about cave-ins on Kan’you Mountain. A few even offered first-hand accounts about hearing terrified voices and the sound of the cave-in itself.”

“And that was on Kan’you Mountain?” Risai asked.

“I believe so,” Kenchuu said. He tipped his head to the side, recalling old memories. “Not much was going on at Kan’you Mountain around that time. Bands of the poor and destitute went into the mountain to carry out sacks of gravel. But then the troubles with the land gangs broke out and they had the territory locked down ever since. People were cleared out of the surrounding areas and denied access to the mountain. But some of the refugees still snuck in. It was a life-or-death proposition as far as they were concerned.”

Risai agreed with a bob of her head.

Noting her reaction, Kenchuu continued. “They were headed into the tunnels when they heard the sounds of the cave-in, along with human cries or those of terrified animals. Perhaps they came from the soldiers attacking Gyousou and their kijuu.”

“Except we didn’t find anything of the sort on Kan’you Mountain,” Risai said. “We searched the interior. Granted, it wasn’t an exhaustive search. We saw the remains of cave-ins and landslides here and there, but no signs of any human involvement. We didn’t hear anything to that effect from the miners working on Kan’you Mountain either.”

“There wouldn’t be. What I was told was, they cleaned up the remains.”

Risai gave Kenchuu a startled look. “Cleaned up?”

“The refugee miners said that from the screams they heard, it sounded like human beings got caught in the cave-in. In that case, search parties should soon follow up to rescue them. But if that happened, they never got anywhere near the mines. With that in mind, they kept their eyes and ears open. But nobody showed up.”

So they cautiously entered the tunnels to see for themselves. They found evidence of the cave-in all around them. Kan'you Mountain was always on the verge of collapse. Remains of previous cave-ins were everywhere. That wasn't the problem. If the authorities caught wind of dead bodies up there belonging to the land gangs or the Provincial Guard, searches and investigations were sure to follow. The refugees would never get back on the mountain.

"In order to hide any evidence, they dug up the places where it looked like bodies were buried. They turned up body parts and personal effects, so they figured out right away they were in the right spot. Clearing away the loose earth, they found the corpse of a soldier beneath a rock. Digging as far as they were able turned up six kijuu and eight soldiers wearing red armor."

Kenchuu paused for a moment and grimaced. "And the bodies of another three more people in a mineshaft not far from the cave-in."

Risai leaned forward in taut anticipation. "Anybody else?"

Kenchuu shook his head. "They didn't turn up any more corpses after that. That may have been simply because they didn't find them. They buried the bodies they uncovered in that mineshaft."

Kenchuu then added, "I thought there might be something to the stories about a cave-in involving His Highness. I could imagine him managing to escape but getting injured in the process and finally being unable to go on any further. I searched the mountain myself for any traces he might have left behind. All I found was the corpse of what appeared to be a soldier of the Palace Guard stuffed into a fissure in the rocks."

He returned to the mountain after that to continue the search. But in the meantime, Kyuusan and the land gangs took over and accessing Kan'you Mountain became impossible.

"Even so, I wanted to get back on the mountain to look for His Highness. To that end, I petitioned Moku'u-sama and secured her patronage in the form of the Sekirin Temple pilgrimage."

Kenchuu and his fellow survivors of Tetsui didn't belong to a formal organization. When Gyouso disappeared, Tetsui was still a going concern. At the time, Tetsui and the neighboring towns and villages talked it over and petitioned for volunteers to go into the mountains to continue the search. But then Asen destroyed Tetsui. The survivors dispersed and had to scatter throughout Bun Province to find shelter and places where they could continue their lives.

Kenchuu took refuge in Kakyou and later moved to a residence in Rin'u, where he established himself as a generous man of good character. He further built his reputation as an agent. While finding his own way to get by, Kenchuu also traveled to

Kan'you Mountain by himself. He put no stock in the rumors that Gyousou had died. He stubbornly continued to believe he must be alive, and therefore must need help.

"Traveling back and forth whenever I had the time, I learned about others besides myself who were going into the mountains to search for His Highness."

The survivors of Tetsui as well. They kept in touch in order to exchange information and, depending on the circumstances, come to each other's aid. But not as an organized group. Kenchuu hadn't formally taken on any kind of role as a mediator for the Tetsui refugees. He simply was the best known among the survivors. Kenchuu talked the matter over with the refugees he knew and then brought those discussions to Sekirin Temple, wondering if they might travel to the mountain under the guise of going on the pilgrimage.

Moku'u answered their petition in the affirmative, and offered her patronage by opening the shrines without condition to those displaying the white ribbons. She also negotiated with the land gangs and extracted a promise from them not to interfere with the activities of the pilgrims. In this way, Sekirin Temple arranged for the accommodations necessary for their travels and supported them behind the scenes.

"The word got passed along by word of mouth that Sekirin Temple had offered its patronage to pilgrims wearing the white ribbon. At the same time, information circulated about the locations that'd been searched and whether they'd yielded useful results. But no formal organization existed then or now. The survivors lived in fear of the purges, and also of getting ostracized by regular citizens who simply didn't want to get involved in any way. So they kept mum about the fact they were refugees from Tetsui. They weren't about to gather together and form some sort of organization. That's why Shunsui didn't know who I was. Although given that she was a hakushi, I was pretty sure she was a survivor of Tetsui."

Shunsui agreed. "Wherever you settled down, there was bound to be somebody there in the know, a person with connections. Where I was living at the time, there was one such trustworthy man. He was well known to the Tetsui survivors in the area. He passed along information and offered advice. But he didn't know anything about the refugees in other cities. When I took refuge at the shrine in Sokou, I was surprised to learn that Kenchuu was a survivor like me."

"So that's what was going on." Risai let out a long breath. "You've been carrying out a search for His Highness this whole time. Have you turned up any clues?"

The hopeful air of expectancy in her question was met with dejected silence.

Kenchuu answered at length, his voice quiet with disappointment. "All we can say for certain is that His Highness is nowhere in the vicinity of Kan'you Mountain."

"What about the possibility that refugees on the mountain offered him assistance?"

"I don't think so. From the start, Sekirin Temple has been harboring refugees forced to go into hiding, having escaped from Bun Province with the assistance of the shusei. No stories about encountering anybody like His Highness ever cropped up in the rumors that circulated among them. In all my searches, I didn't come across anything to suggest he'd been there either."

"I see," Risai muttered. "Kenchuu, would you happen to know how the refugees handled the stones they collected from the tailings?"

"I heard they traded with the Fu Clan. Seems the Fu Clan runs black market shops in Rin'u and Hakurou."

"Of course."

Kenchuu nodded. "We haven't given up. There are more than abandoned mines in the mountains. Logging cabins and prospecting shacks remain from back when they were cutting lumber for the mines. I've been intending to check out all of them, more than once if necessary."

The white ribbons having been imbued with the power and authority of Sekirin Temple, they ventured into the mountains. And continued to do so.

"I know His Highness would be delighted to hear of your fealty and kindness," Risai said. "Tetsui truly held a special place in his heart. His feelings for the people of Tetsui ran deep. That is true as well of his retainers. Many of the soldiers who participated in the attack on Tetsui later served as his retainers and on his senior staff. They all share a profound sense of gratitude for the people of Tetsui, who understood the depth of His Highness's conflicted feelings and with broken hearts finally opened the storehouse."

Shunsui buried her face in her hands. "Thank you."

"We are the ones who should express our thanks to you. We are grateful from the bottom of our hearts that you persisted in searching for His Highness, heedless of the weather and the risks. But we would also plead with you to not take any more unnecessary risks. His Highness is most definitely still alive. We promise to search for his present whereabouts and find him. There is no need to go to such extremes, such as traveling into the mountains with a child in tow."

"But—"

"Anything worse happening to the people of Tetsui would only cause His Highness to grieve all the more."

Shunsui cast down her eyes.

"Knowing His Highness, he would blame himself. That is the kind of person he is. I won't tell you not to. I'll fill in Kyuusan about the intentions of the hakushi, and importune with him to make sure you are granted safe passage. Kyuusan is a person who can be reasoned with. I am certain he will not do wrong by you. But I would implore you as well to not press your luck. I hope you would keep in mind that the

greatest gift the people of Tetsui can now give His Highness is to live long and productive lives.”

When it came time for them to depart Sekirin Temple, Kenchuu and Risai left the building together, along with their traveling companions.

Passing through the temple gates, Kenchuu said, “We’ll need more help searching for His Highness. I can recruit capable volunteers.”

“We’d appreciate it. But don’t you have your job as an agent?”

“I can leave that work to my apprentices. They’re also based in Rin’u, so it won’t be a problem.”

After a moment of thought, Risai said, “In fact, I’ve been thinking of moving to a new safe house.”

Rumors about them had reached as far as Rouan. Clearly, they had stayed in Rin’u too long. She explained this to Kenchuu and he agreed. “Probably the right thing to do. I’ll start looking around.”

“No,” Risai said. “I appreciate the offer, but I already have an idea.”

“An idea?”

Risai nodded. Rin’u was a big city. It was easy to get lost in the crowds and fade out of sight. But preserving that anonymity took all the more effort. For Risai, being away from Hien was particularly trying. Of course, she wasn’t able to care for Hien as often as she liked. More importantly, it stung to not have Hien available in an emergency. Given the extra precautions she had to take coming and going from the city, there was no straightforward way to leave on a moment’s notice.

And when they did set out together, Kyoshi and Seishi only had their horses, so even if Risai was riding Hien, there was no way to shorten the journey. But there were times when speed was of the essence. Risai often thought that quickly making the round trip by herself would greatly reduce the time and effort required.

“Considering all the options, I think we’d be better off moving to a location more out of the public eye. Seeing how we’ve become the subject of rumors, we need a place to lie low for a while.”

Kyoshi raised his voice, a dubious expression on his face. “You’re not talking about Rouan, are you?”

“No.” Risai shook her head.

When they got back to the safe house, Risai straightaway went to see Hien and left Rin’u just before the city gates closed. Clearly elated to be freed from her constraints, Hien spread her wings wide as they soared through the air. Risai was no less delighted.

With Risai in the saddle and Hien flapping her wings with great elan, they headed north at once, straight to Sokou. Risai had confirmed that Kyuusan was in town and arranged a meeting. It'd take a day on horseback to cover that distance. She arrived in less than a quarter of that time. Though it was the middle of the night, Kyuusan showed up to greet her.

"That's one fine animal you rode in on," he said, stepping out of the building. He looked at Hien with wide and admiring eyes. "She looks fast. But dangerous. I've arranged for you and the kijuu to share accommodations."

"Understood," Risai said. If she brought along a kijuu, those were the ground rules. "Kyuusan, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Depends on what this favor entails."

"I was wondering if we could settle down in Sokou for a while."

Sokou was the idea she came up with. Sokou had good access to the major highways. Because it was controlled by the land gangs, the opening and closing times of the city gates wouldn't be a constant concern.

"If Sokou won't work out, another city would be fine too. Even one of the depopulated villages in the area. We'll cover the rent."

Kyuusan thought it over. "I can't really recommend Sokou. Its place on the transportation routes is its most important feature. But miners from Kantaku gather here too. There's no telling what kind of information about where people are from and who they are is going to leak out and get around. Elsewhere though, I don't see a problem. Providing you lay low. Make a scene and the deal is off. But I figure that's something you've gotten good at, Risai."

"Naturally."

"No reason to object, then. Once you find a place to live, we'll do what we can to help out. Houses tend to fall apart when nobody's living in them. However—" Kyuusan let out a long lungful of air and said under his breath, "Keep in mind that whatever we're up to is none of your business."

"Comes with the territory, I figure. We'll keep our eyes closed to your activities."

"I'll ask around about any out-of-the-way places for the kind of person who might simply insist on settling down here."

"That works for me."

With that agreement in place, and based on discussions with Kyuusan, Seisai turned out to be the right kind of place. Though located fairly deep in the countryside, it wasn't far from Ryuukei, and sat adjacent to roads that headed to both Tetsui and Kakyuu, making it as convenient a location as Anpuku. When trouble appeared on the horizon, the residents could hole up in the nearby mines and wait for the approaching storm to blow over.

Moreover, the scale of the town ranked just below that of Sokou.

The hour grew late as they hammered out the details. Kyuusan encouraged Risai to spend the night in Sokou.

She found the kind of shed she was looking for in the corner of the lot of the rented house. When she got there, blowing snow was whipping all around them. The surrounding landscape disappeared behind the curtains of driving snow. The gusting wind stung her eyes. Struggling to the shed and ducking out of the elements, she breathed a sigh of relief.

I wonder if everyone else is resting in a safe place tonight.

Risai snuggled up to Hien, using her as a windbreak against the drafts. Hien, in turn, curled her body around Risai. Breathing in the scent of dry straw, Risai tucked herself beneath Hien's feathery warm wings.

Chapter 10

[14-3] The skies over Rin'u were clear for the first time in a long time. Early that morning, Kiitsu arrived in the company of a woman.

"She would prefer not to use her name for now, other than we are sheltering her at Fukyuu Temple."

Kyoshi eyed her suspiciously. At a glance, she appeared to be a gaunt and unremarkable middle-aged woman when she was, in fact, much younger.

"We believe we had good reason to grant her sanctuary. No, she is not wanted by the authorities. But when *he* disappeared, she was in the vicinity of Kan'you Mountain."

Risai invited her in. "I apologize for our shabby accommodations. Please sit down."

"She does not have any particular illness, but she does have difficulty eating and sleeping. Before Fukyuu Temple took her in, something terrible happened to her, the consequences of which have continued to affect her six years on."

"Six years—"

Kiitsu nodded. "Six years ago, soon after *he* fell out of sight, she was found floating in a river and was brought to Fukyuu Temple. The evidence suggested she had been attacked by persons unknown. Her whole body was covered with wounds, leaving her in a very serious state. Though we were able to save her life, for a long time, she remained in a constant state of fear and was haunted by an agitated state of mind. For a while, she could not summon the words to speak. The mere presence of another human being caused her to scream and run about attempting to flee. I'm afraid she likely has no good memory of what happened to her. All we know for certain was that she was treated in an exceedingly harsh manner. Her fingers were broken and her teeth pulled out."

"What in the world!"

Risai gave her a closer look. Her gaunt and emaciated condition notwithstanding, she was indeed a young woman. Risai placed her age in her mid-twenties or even younger. Six years ago, she would have been barely out of her teens.

"Is she all right with being brought here?"

"She has calmed down a good deal of late. She's able to go out now if it is sufficiently calm and quiet. Of course, her condition varies, but she is mostly able to get on with her daily activities. She no longer loses her presence of mind as she once did."

“You have been through a lot,” Risai said to her.

The woman nodded.

“She was one of the refugees on Kan’you Mountain. They holed up in the ruins and snuck onto Kan’you Mountain.”

Risai and Kyoshi both drew deep breaths.

“You don’t suppose—” Risai muttered.

Kiitsu nodded and gently urged her to continue. In a barely audible voice, she began to speak.

“I was on the mountains back then, along with four of my colleagues.”

She had a hard time speaking and struggled to string the words together. The softness of her speech made following her account all the more difficult. But according to the story she told, she was living in the mountains at the time, along with four fellow refugees. They ventured into the mines every day to comb through the tailings for precious stones. As refugees, she didn’t know where they came from or how they got there. There were three men and one woman. One was an old man. The other two men were in middle age. The woman was five years her senior.

Asen’s purges displaced large numbers of people across Bun Province. War and the ravages of war temporarily separated them from their registered towns and villages. The refugees were different. Once displaced persons themselves, some became refugees when their connection to the land was completely severed. In order to get by, others deliberately discarded their internal passports and registration papers. The refugees were those for whom this became their fixed and normal state. The refugees often gathered among the displaced persons, where it was easier to live amidst the relative disorder.

The woman was one of the latter.

The five of them stayed together for over a year as a kind of family. The old man in particular treated her as his daughter, her own parents having cast her aside as a child. She had no idea what became of them. She hadn’t seen them since they were separated in a big city in Jou Province, likely abandoned amidst the hustle and bustle. At that point, with no papers, she became a refugee. She didn’t even know the town she was born in.

While they were on the road, they met another man and teamed up together. In such a fashion, they added another to their little troupe and then lost one. Someone got sick and died. Someone simply disappeared. That was the state they’d ended up in when they arrived at the outskirts of Kan’you Mountain. Including the woman, there were six of them left.

Since the troubles, the others had become refugees due to the despotic rule of the land gangs. They lost their passports and became nomads.

They lived in the mountains, not in one of the abandoned hamlets but in a small cabin closer to the mines. The ground around the cabin was pockmarked with holes, ventilation shafts, and old test pits left behind by prospectors in various stages of collapse. From there they could slip deeper into the mountain to collect the tailings.

“Kan’you Mountain was uninhabited, though now and then a watchman came around.”

They didn’t know if they were actual watchmen. But they showed up now and then and poked around. Even if the mines weren’t operating, that didn’t mean people could just come and go as they pleased. That’s why they used the old tunnels to access the mine faces. It was dangerous, to be sure. In fact, not long after the woman arrived at Kan’you Mountain, they lost one of their number to an accident.

“A middle-aged lady. The ground beneath her collapsed and she fell down a deep hole. She was like a mother to me.”

They grouped their way through the pitch-black tunnels, relying on small pine torches. The work was hard and exceedingly dangerous and the profits were slim. But now and then they’d stumble across a valuable stone. That glimmer of hope was enough to keep them going back into the shafts. Besides which, they had no other means of supporting themselves.

They’d heard that several small bands of refugees like theirs could be found scattered across the mountain, living in ramshackle cabins near the mouths of the more accessible pits and mines.

One day, the woman went into the mines as she usually did. That day, she heard a human voice in an updraft of air. At the time, for reasons not at all clear to them, all human activity had ceased around Kan’you Mountain. The miners had long since deserted their claims. They found it all quite strange.

“It was not one of the refugees. We always whisper in the mines. We’d never shout like that.”

It was illegal to take stones off Kan’you Mountain without a license. They didn’t have permission to be on the mountain in the first place. If their presence became known to the authorities, they’d get kicked out at the very least, possibly arrested and hauled before a judge. To avoid being seen, they hid out on the mountainside and waited to see what developed. They heard the voice all that day.

“It was the same the next day as well.”

Perhaps mining operations had started up again on Kan’you Mountain. If that was the case, then they stood to lose their livelihood. With those concerns on their minds, they shifted their attention to the mountain approach. There they could clearly make out a group of what appeared to be soldiers. Dozens of them. Soldiers were going in and out of the mountain while others guarded two big wooden crates.

They laid down a bed of round logs and rolled the crates across the logs into a mine shaft.

“Big wooden boxes—” Kyoshi muttered.

The woman nodded. “Very big boxes. Each one was the size of a small barn. And build like strongboxes.”

Risai said, “A small barn. That certainly is big.”

“They had a whole team of horses pulling them. The soldiers guarding the boxes looked really nervous. There was something dangerous inside those boxes. They moved them into the hole and then a large number of soldiers followed behind with an assortment of tools.”

Moving such large objects around took a fair amount of time. The woman and her companion gave up on working the mines that day as well.

“In the end, their activities continued for three full days.”

Peace and quiet finally returned to the mountain two days later. The soldiers disappeared along with any evidence of the large-scale undertaking they’d been engaged in.

“They graded the earth and erased even their footprints. Everything was like it was before.”

“They literally covered their tracks. I wonder what was inside those boxes.”

The woman shook her head. “I do not know. But something moved.”

“Something moved?”

“That’s what the soldiers said. They grew quite alarmed. Something moved inside one of the boxes and made it shake back and forth.”

“A living thing—”

“That’s what I think too. It gave off the scent of a wild beast.”

Risai mulled over this information.

“The old man said something funny was going on. Those soldiers were up to no good. We’d better not go crawling back into the tunnels anytime soon.”

He insisted this was definitely a wait and see situation, and we ought to get off Kan’you Mountain for the time being. But the woman wasn’t ready to abandon the mines. If she found enough salable stones, she’d have enough to live on for a while longer.

“The men kept saying they needed a little more time, just a little more time. When we returned to the mine, we heard that voice rising up from the depths.” The woman hugged her arms around her shoulders as if recalling the fear she felt back then. “A dreadful sound, like the scream of a beast or a scream or a shout. Guttural and shrill and truly terrible. I froze in my tracks. That was when I heard the mountain collapsing around me.”

Along with a great cloud of dust, the thunderclap of the collapse roared through the mine shaft. They knew at once it was a cave-in, having experienced them too many times already. But the scale was completely different this time. Tremors shook the whole mountain. The sound of falling rocks reverberated again and again from the tunnels. The air grew so thick with dust it was impossible to see anything.

"I smelled something burning. I thought they must have used fires or torches inside the mine."

She didn't see any connection to the landslides. In any case, their only thought was to run for their lives. They were only able to escape because they had not ventured too far in. They crawled out of the tunnel. The scale of this cave-in was anything but normal. The mountain itself may have collapsed. Fearing such a possibility, they hurried down the mountainside. At the same time, they spotted soldiers descending the mountain in much the same way.

"They glanced around and saw us too."

For a moment, the soldiers started after them. The woman immediately turned and fled down the slope. The old man missed his chance to make a clean getaway. He later said the soldiers didn't pursue him but instead continued to descend the mountain.

"The old man said that since they'd spotted us, we should run away while we could."

But the rest of them couldn't make up their minds. They persuaded him to stay one more day and returned to the cabin. The next day, the soldiers returned to search for them, soldiers wearing red and black armor.

"Someone shouted to run for it. We tried but they captured us." The woman hugged her arms around her shoulders all the tighter. "Myself as well."

Her voice shaking, she said she didn't recall anything after that.

Risai held her hand. "That's okay. You don't need to remember."

The woman turned to Risai with imploring eyes. "They killed the old man and dragged the other girl into the tunnels. All I heard after that was her terrible screams."

"I see—"

"I was next. I do remember they called themselves the *Ukou*. A name I will never forget."

"The *Ukou*," Seishi muttered to himself. "There was a company of soldiers in Asen's army that went by that name."

"The enemy. They killed everybody."

Though she said they'd all been killed, Fukyuu Temple never recovered the other bodies, Kiitsu explained. They weren't able to get onto the mountain to search for them.

“And it probably wouldn’t have done us any good if we had.”

By the time the woman returned to consciousness, and at last regained possession of her senses, the seasons had changed. Despite all that had happened, rushing to the scene of the crime now would accomplish nothing.

“Given her condition, there was likely no one left there alive. They saw something they were not supposed to see.”

“I agree.”

The woman and her companions observed the soldiers making some sort of preparations at the mountain. But Asen’s army must not have known they were being observed. Subsequently, the sight of the soldiers leaving Kan’you Mountain was clearly something nobody else was supposed to have seen.

“Fukyuu Temple has sheltered her ever since. To be sure, Fukyuu Temple cannot confirm her presence there. Jokan-sama will only politely state that she went into hiding. He believes it is imperative not to give anybody in Kouki any reason to notice where she is or that she is even alive, and certainly not that Fukyuu Temple has given her asylum.”

“Makes sense,” Risai said. “No matter what, we will not disclose anything about her or make any inquiries about her. We would only hope to see her sheltered in as hospitable a manner as possible.”

Kiitsu thanked them with a bow, and Kyoshi finally concluded that the cool and reserved attitude they’d seen on display at Fukyuu Temple, and from Jokan himself, was because of this woman. He might have even thought it inhospitable considering the trust Enchou had placed in them, though now the reasons for that cool reserve became clear.

“But why all of a sudden?” Kyoshi blurted out.

A moment of awkwardness followed as Kiitsu hung his head. “I spoke out of turn before. In fact, Jokan-sama received a letter from Moku’u-sama at Sekirin Temple yesterday. In the letter, she cautioned that news of a new emperor being enthroned was likely in error and to exercise all due caution with any similar reports.”

“Moku’u-sama went to such lengths—”

Kiitsu nodded. “Meaning that Moku’u-sama concluded that you were deserving of her trust. On that basis, Jokan-sama also chose to entrust you with this evidence.”

“I see,” Risai said with a respectful bow of her own.

Chapter 11

[14-4] **Risai** harbored a hunch that Seishi appeared to share as well. While waiting for Kiitsu and the woman to get ready to return to Fukyuu Temple, a glance at Seishi told her he had the same thoughts on his mind.

“This is a good opportunity,” she said under her breath.

“That it is,” Seishi agreed.

Though Kiitsu indicated that they would be fine on their own, Risai and Seishi caught up with them at the front gate. The sun still hovered beneath the eastern horizon. The white streets were devoid of life, filled only with the freezing wind.

While Seishi lingered behind, Risai stepped forward alongside Kiitsu and the woman. “At least let me accompany you to the main road,” she said.

Kiitsu gave her a curious look and the woman looked a bit bewildered.

“Parting is such sweet sorrow,” Risai said, answering her doubts with a grin. That prompted a faint smile from the woman.

The wind kicked up a cloud of flurries. “Are you cold?” Risai asked conversationally. “How are you feeling?” Then right before they came to the intersection, she stopped in front of an empty storefront. “Well, be sure to take care of yourselves.”

This wasn’t anyplace in particular, which again prompted from Kiitsu a puzzled frown. But with a nod of his head, he urged the woman on, and they turned left onto the busier main thoroughfare. Risai watched until they were out of sight and then spun around.

As soon as she did, the man behind her averted his gaze and bent over, taking a sudden interest in the ground beneath his feet. The man’s companion strode by him, pretending he had nothing to do with any of them.

Feigning a nonchalant attitude of her own, Risai started to walk past, then stopped and grabbed him by the arm. “I have a few questions for you.”

He gaped up at her and tried to shake his arm free. The man staring down at the street flicked his gaze in their direction, and then with a disinterested look on his face, straightened and at once tried to put more distance between him and Risai. Except Seishi had already caught up and seized him from behind.

“W-what’s going on?”

“We’d like to have a little conversation with you two,” Risai said.

She hooked her arm around his shoulders, pressing the crook of her elbow against his throat, and dragged him beneath the eaves of the empty storefront. Following on

her heels, Seishi kicked open the door to the gated alley and pushed his captive inside. Risai followed suit. Bringing up the rear, Kyoshi secured the gate behind them.

Seishi drew the sword and backed the two men down the alley.

Risai's hunch had paid off. They'd been under surveillance ever since they returned from Gamon Temple. The people spying on them didn't appear anyway related to the government and were clearly amateurs. Risai was pretty sure they'd been dispatched by Gamon Temple and had ignored them until now. But now they'd taken an interest in Kiitsu and the woman.

She spotted these two familiar faces as soon as they left the safe house. She was sure they'd settled into nearby accommodations so they could avoid the discomfort of camping out on the cold streets and instead keep a lookout from a heated room.

They'd surely seen Kiitsu and the woman arrive and probably already figured out who Kiitsu was. But the woman was a fresh face. Depending on how curious the spies were, they might want to delve into her background and identity, and might wait for her to leave and follow her. That meant her whereabouts coming to light. Even if they had no way of finding out who she was, Risai could no longer let those sleeping dogs lie.

Under the guise of seeing off Kiitsu and the woman, Risai caught the spies in the act.

As expected, the spies tailed them from the safe house. But the way they brushed past Risai made it clear they were following the woman. Aware she was being watched, Risai didn't come armed, but Seishi brought her sword with him. Together with Kyoshi, he shadowed the spies from a safe distance. Not wanting to alarm the woman, Risai didn't mention what she was up to. But Seishi knew exactly what she had in mind.

"Who are you working for?"

"What are you talking about?"

The two men retreated until they huddled together in a corner of the courtyard.

"We know you've been watching us, and we know you followed us back from Hakurou," Risai said. "Or to be more precise, Gamon Temple."

That provoked the wide-eyed reaction she expected.

"Gamon Temple means Hoyou is handing out the orders. What I don't get is what you are after. Exactly why have you been spying on us?"

"We weren't—"

Their first impulse would be to deny everything, but they had a hard time coming up with a good excuse on the spur of the moment.

"At first, I thought you were looking into our backgrounds. But if that were the case, you were taking an awful long time getting the job done. You must have already

confirmed our connections to Fukyuu Temple and that we are looking for someone. Why are you spending so much time paying so much attention to us?"

"We aren't—"

"If you were here to make sure we weren't lying to Hoyou, you would have left long ago. We've turned a blind eye until today, but frankly, you're getting on our nerves."

"The faster we all wrapped things up here the better," Seishi said, forcing a cold edge into his voice. He handed Risai her sword. Bringing it with him had been no afterthought.

"We want to know what you're after."

"Doesn't look to me like they're in the mood to talk. No matter what they say, we have no way of knowing whether they were telling the truth or not. They seem to think they can just go on playing a couple of peeping toms."

"So it seems," Risai started to say, when one of the men raised his voice.

"And what are *you* really after?"

Though not as flustered as his companion, the tension was clear in his voice. This man clearly possessed measurably more intestinal fortitude.

"What *we're* after?"

"What do you plan on doing with these displaced persons and refugees you're looking for? Haul them back to Kouki?"

Risai furrowed her brows. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning take them to Kouki in order to make conscripts out of them."

Risai relaxed her grip on the hilt of her sword. "Are you guessing? Or do you have reasons to believe that is actually going on?"

"No doubt!" spit out his more frightened partner.

The tougher of the two glared back at Risai. "Enough of the lies. We can see them clear as day. Somebody gets in your way, the first thing you do is run them through. We may be nothing but dead men walking to you, but don't get too comfortable thinking Heaven will overlook your sins forever."

Risai and Seishi exchanged glances. At that moment, with a sudden surge of courage, the scaredy-cat reared up and threw a right hook at Risai's chest. Reflexively shifting to the side, she stumbled off balance. Like dancers changing partners, Seishi stepped into her place and pinned the man's arms behind his back, pushed him to the ground and knelt astride his back.

"Stop it," said the more stalwart of the two.

The scaredy-cat squirmed in Seishi's grip. "We'll get back at you for this!"

"That's not going to happen. Give it a rest."

Risai and Seishi again exchanged looks. There was something increasingly strange about this whole scene.

“Let him go,” Risai said to Seishi. To the man still standing, “We’re not looking to get anybody hurt here. Just keep him from doing anything stupid, okay?”

The man nodded, and when Seishi let his prisoner go, he squatted down and threw a burly arm around his shoulders, seizing him as tightly as Seishi had.

Risai knelt down next to them. “Are you from Gamon Temple?” she asked the big man.

“If you’re asking if we came from Gamon Temple, the answer is no. We live in Rin’u.”

“Do you or do you not have any connections to the Fu Clan?”

He didn’t answer the question.

“I’ll take that as a yes. So you are part of the Fu organization.”

The man hesitated. “Yeah,” he said.

The man in his grip squirmed like a fractious child. “Shut up! Don’t say anything!”

“Settle down. I understand where you’re coming from, but we won’t be going anywhere locking horns with people like them. Besides, there seems to be a basic misunderstanding here.”

“A misunderstanding?” Risai asked.

“Answer me this. What are you going after the refugees for?”

“We’re not going after the refugees for anything. I’ll tell you what I told Hoyou-dono. We’re looking for a colleague of ours, and we’re pretty sure the refugees might have clues that will help track him down. To that end, we’re looking for people well known among the refugees and their acquaintances. If that’s not possible, then we’d like to meet somebody with an ear to the ground, who could pass along the rumors and stories circulating in the refugee community. Do you know anybody like that?”

“And this is on the up and up?”

“Of course, it is. Now, what’s this business about taking people to Kouki you were talking about earlier?”

“You’re not collecting bounties on refugees?”

“Bounties? You mean there are bounty hunters tracking down displaced persons and hauling them back to Kouki? Who is doing this and why?”

“Don’t play dumb!” He shouted. “Your boss, that’s who! The beast that is kidnapping people and impressing them as soldiers!” He wrenched himself free and flung himself on the ground. “Why does Heaven allow such sins to occur? How much longer can these injustices continue?”

Risai leaned over and said to him, “What’s your name?” She urged him to sit up. “Listen, my name is Risai. What’s yours?”

“Risai-sama,” Seishi cautioned her in a quiet voice.

But Risai brushed aside his concerns. She turned to the man's companion. "What about you?"

The man looked back at Risai in obvious confusion. Risai smiled. "It's cold out here. How about we continue this conversation somewhere a bit more comfortable?"

Risai and Seishi returned to the safe house with the two men. Risai asked Houto and Yotaku to prepare something warm for them to drink and invited them to sit down next to the hibachi.

The tougher of the two said, "Risai—would that be General Ryuu?"

Risai answered with a dry smile. "A name with a bad reputation these days. All I can say is that I was framed and the crimes I'm accused of were made up."

"I know," the man said. "Call me Shoushitsu. I was a gendarme stationed in the city of Houtaku."

"A gendarme. A member of the Bun Provincial Guard?"

Shoushitsu nodded. Indicating his wide-eyed companion, he said, "He's a displaced person who fled to Hakurou. His name is Tanchoku. The beast put his city to the torch and killed his family. He ended up on his own." He faced Tanchoku directly and nodded. "She is one of His Highness's retainers. The beast made up stories about her committing regicide. She's been on the run ever since."

Tanchoku raised his head, the surprise evident on his face. "Then you're not bounty hunters?"

Shoushitsu shook his head and Risai said, "You mentioned that before. What's this business about hunting down refugees and displaced persons like yourself?"

"What he said." A hard expression rose to Shoushitsu's face. "They're recruiting refugees and displaced persons on the sly and shipping them off to Kouki where they conscript them as soldiers."

"Asen is behind this?"

Shoushitsu nodded. "I've heard them sweet-talking people to bring them along. But for the most part, they use strong-arm tactics. They round people up and impress them into service. They're doing this in such an underhanded manner to keep word from getting out that the Imperial Army is understaffed, and to hide the fact they're using forced conscription to fill the ranks."

Unbelievable, Risai was about to exclaim, except she could see how it all made sense.

Of the six divisions in the Imperial Army, desertions had reduced four of them to divisions on paper only. Asen had to be concerned about the chronic decline in troop strength, and there were limits to the number of soldiers they could reassign from the outlying provinces.

“Soldiers?” Tanchoku shouted. “Because they got a few minutes of training? They’re just a bunch of amateurs who barely know how to hold a sword. Human pincushions whose only job is to make the archers shooting at them waste their arrows.”

All too believable, Risai groaned to herself.

A draft was the normal response to a deficit of soldiers. But such measures aroused discontent amongst the citizenry. More importantly, they made clear to the enemy the rough shape of the armed forces. Hence the need to hunt down and conscript displaced persons in secret.

Risai’s lips twisted into a frown. “They make victims of them to start with, and then again when they turn them into human shields and toss them aside.” She tasted bitter bile inside her mouth.

“It’s just like Tanchoku said. How can Heaven condone such abuses?”

If an emperor went to such lengths, Heaven would punish him for straying from the Way. But Asen was no emperor so Heaven could not interfere.

Risai harbored no doubts about the reality of Heaven. But the Heaven that Tanchoku mentioned when he asked why such sins went unpunished was a different matter. Those were questions he asked of the world. Risai knew there were those bearing the imprimatur of Heaven who looked down upon this world, and while commanding the emperor to hew to the Way, turned a blind eye to Asen’s injustices.

“No matter what, their crooked ways must be corrected,” Seishi said.

Risai nodded. “We intend to bring to justice all of those who have committed injustice. We are searching for His Highness in order to achieve that end.”

Shoushitsu and Tanchoku turned their attention to Risai. “Except His Highness—” Tanchoku started to say.

“He is not dead. However, we do not know where he is. Hence the search.”

“And that’s why you are asking amongst the refugees?” Shoushitsu asked.

“Yes. Putting together the information we have gathered so far, we have good reason to believe that, at the time, His Highness was assisted by refugees working on Kan’you Mountain. Do you know of anyone who might have seen or heard something along those lines? Even rumors would be fine.”

Shoushitsu and Tanchoku exchanged glances. At length, Shoushitsu said, “I haven’t heard about anything like that. But I’m not around the refugee community that often these days.”

“I don’t have anything to add either. If somebody did lend His Highness a hand, you’d think the word would get out eventually.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“Hoyou-sama may have more specific information about these matters,” Shoushitsu said. “Give us a little more time to look into it.”

Chapter 12

[14-5] *Another death.*

He looked down at the fresh grave in the snow-covered field. His childhood friend fell prostrate on the ground next to his feet. He couldn't say whether his friend's big frame shook from grief or the cold. He draped his coat over his back.

"Gen'ei, let's go home. You'll freeze out here."

Gen'ei buried his mother in that grave. She'd been so much more than the mother of his childhood friend. He was an orphan, but Gen'ei's mother treated him like her own son. Though he grew up in the rika, she visited on a regular basis to look after the elderly and the children who lived there. No matter that her own husband also died young, she remained a woman of strong character and a big heart.

And then at the beginning of winter, she was taken away.

Taken by a land gang holed up in a nearby mine. They needed a cook, they said, and dragged off a woman from the village. They resisted, of course, but were powerless to stop them. A young man was slain in the struggle, even though he had a child soon to be born from a ranka.

Gen'ei's mother died during the winter and her body was returned to them.

Consoling his reluctant friend, he half-carried Gen'ei back to the village. When they came to his house, Gen'ei shook off the helping hand and stumbled inside by himself. Though the woman who'd died had been very much a mother to him, she'd been, to his friend, his only living parent. It was one thing to say he understood those feelings, quite another to form those painful emotions into words.

In low spirits, he returned to the rika, where he served as the superintendent. A big man cloaked in a threadbare overcoat was waiting for him.

"I take it nobody's offered you dinner?"

"No," the man said.

Though well on in years, his robust physique lent him the appearance of a small giant. His white hair was turning gray in places. Deep furrows creased a darkly tanned face. A ragged old scar crossed his left cheek to his mouth.

The day before, he'd brought the body back to the village. At the very least, the superintendent could provide him lodging at the rika. Having accompanied his friend to the grave, this was their first opportunity to talk.

"You've concluded with the funeral?" the big man asked in a low, rumbling voice.

The superintendent nodded and bowed. "We are indeed very grateful. Let me introduce myself again. I am Teisetsu, the superintendent of the rika."

As best he could remember, the man's name was Hakugyuu. He wasn't from around here. The word was, he was a traveler passing through.

He'd visited the mines while searching for someone, but was turned away. While checking out the surrounding areas, he ventured into an odd and ominous valley. Teisetsu and the other locals called it Kimonkan Valley. That was where Hakugyuu discovered the body. He took the body to the closest village. They told him she was from this village and he brought her here.

"I'm sure she would have wanted to return home as soon as possible."

Hakugyuu had a kijuu with him. Bringing her straight to the village was much faster than delivering a note about where he'd found her. Teisetsu was impressed by the consideration Hakugyuu showed when he said, "She would have wanted to return home."

"I heard from the villagers the other day, but you are young for a superintendent."

"Yes," was Teisetsu's only answer.

"I imagine some tough circumstances led to your current situation."

Teisetsu nodded with another "Yes."

"Those circumstances wouldn't be related to the land gangs at that mine, would they?"

Teisetsu nodded again. "The woman was taken by one of the land gangs in Koubo. When they run short on help, they raid a nearby village and twist arms until someone steps forward."

And then mercilessly run them into the ground.

"They've taken away a lot of people. That's how a novice like myself ended up superintendent. We lose track of most, and far too many are eventually discarded like the woman in Kimonkan Valley."

People living in the vicinity regularly made the rounds, but depending on the season, the bodies that turned up were often too badly decayed to be identified or had been ravaged by the beasts that nested in the hills and fields. The woman was one of the few returned to them intact.

"That valley is where they abandon the bodies?"

"Dead or alive."

When they grew short on servants, the land gangs singled out a nearby community, threatened them to produce a "volunteer," and then took them away, willing or not. They were seldom seen again. If lucky, their corpse turned up in a recognizable condition. Otherwise, they disappeared without a trace.

"And yet knowing that, when they ask for these volunteers, you hand them over? It's hard to see any backbone on display in a story like that."

Teisetsu didn't answer. No, when push came to shove, they didn't show any backbone. At the same time, he didn't think an outsider would understand. Doing so was the only way they could stay alive.

An ironic smile tugged at the corner of the man's mouth. "But isn't that the way the world works? Better than waging a war you can never win. You may preserve your pride by fighting back, but at the cost of many lives."

Teisetsu hurriedly countered, "We surely shouldn't be slinking away just to avoid the inevitable reprisals."

"Well, you should. Factor cowardice into the equation, along with the lives saved and lives lost too. That is the job of the superintendent."

"Are—are you sure about that?"

The man looked straight at Teisetsu and nodded. Perhaps due to his age or because of other reasons, his eyes were faintly clouded with white. He was staring right at Teisetsu, so it surely didn't mean he couldn't see.

"It's pitiful how spineless I can be."

"It's natural for you to think that way because it's the truth. Rather than wringing your hands and moping about, you are protecting the people of the village."

"Is just doing that enough? I defend the village by bowing to the land gangs, and going along to get along. Is that really enough?"

He hardly did a thorough job of that either, to say nothing of preventing harm from the surrounding villages. He hadn't been able to do a thing. He couldn't end the misery, or stop the suffering of the people around him, or arrest the inexorable decline of the kingdom.

"There are some things you can't do anything about. But you keep those feelings in mind, and the time will come when you can do something."

"Well, I'd like to think so."

"Speaking of which, if you keep your eyes peeled, you might spot a wayfarer about these parts."

"Someone traveling through?"

The man nodded. "A man with a military pedigree. Anything spring to mind? He has white hair and crimson eyes."

At first, Teisetsu shook his head.

So Hakugyuu was searching for someone. There was nothing unusual about a man with white hair. Crimson eyes were unusual. He shouldn't forget meeting someone like that. On the other hand, telling the color of somebody's eyes was not always that easy. The available light had an effect, and without a clear look, the color of a person's eyes often didn't even register.

"I couldn't say for certain. Perhaps."

"You don't say," Hakugyuu muttered.

“Are we talking about a dangerous person?” Teisetsu asked with a sense of foreboding. An enemy of this man, for example. A wanted criminal.

He slowly shook his head. “No. The emperor of our kingdom.”

Part Fifteen

Chapter 13

[13-1] The Seishin in the western quarter of Hakkei Palace was the kirin's home ground. But there the domain of the Saiho was frozen wasteland. Though Taiki had returned, the desolation had not changed. At least the snow that started falling the night before covered the cold ruins with a pristine blanket of white.

Someone was making a commotion in another corner of the Seishin.

"The Taiho is surely still angry at me!" The exaggerated cry, followed by much weeping and wailing, echoed around the courtyard.

Already sick to the gills with the drama, Kouryou glanced toward the garden. At the far end of the living room, toward the entranceway to the main wing of the manor, he could see someone kneeling there. Standing next to him must be Keitou. The person blubbering on and on was Shison.

Shison had been appointed the Naisai, responsible for the care of the noblemen and women in the palace. The nobleman in this case was Taiki. Asen had removed himself from the Ministry of Heaven's portfolio from the start. Shison had added everything to do with Taiki's dress, meals, and his living quarters to his portfolio.

In announcing the appointment, the Minister of Heaven explained that Shison had reflected on the error of his ways and wished more than anything to be of use to Taiki. He saw this opportunity as a way to make up for his past record.

Taiki only went along with the charade because he didn't want to interfere with the prerogatives of the Minister of Heaven. But from that day forward, Shison wholeheartedly dedicated himself to being a monumental pain in the ass. He arrived three times a day to inquire about the Taiho's well-being. Every visit began and ended with much time wasted showering everyone present with empty praise. At the same time, feigning to put Taiki's personal living space in order, he brought along wagon loads of furniture and furnishings and other accouterments.

He wished Taiki to suffer no discomfort in his current accommodations, but having been cautioned against inflicting further financial burdens on the kingdom, he offered up his personal property so as to impose no strain on the imperial budget.

Hand-knotted rugs, elegant bedding, clothing too beautiful to wear, along with paintings, vases, and other luxuries. He was hauling in a set of breathtaking mother-of-pearl screens when Taiki finally put his foot down.

“I have no use for such things. If you have no need of them either, then donate them to the poor.”

Taiki addressed him in unsparing tones. Shison burst into tears and apologized profusely. Then when the crocodile tears had dried, heaped praise upon him.

“No matter the time or the place, the dire straits of the people are always first on your mind. What a magnificent disposition you possess.” The torrent of flowery rhetoric made it impossible to get a word in edgewise. “Shall I then bestow these goods on the displaced persons with a note explaining they come to them courtesy of the Taiho?”

Overhearing this one-sided conversation, Kouryou could not believe his ears. Handing such extravagant items to the refugees would invite much unnecessary chaos.

“Shison,” Taiki said in a reproving tone. “You speak blithely of displaced persons, but on what basis would select the recipients? There are so many people in the same plight. Can you imagine the consequences if you singled out one of them to receive that kind of charity?”

With this reprimand hanging over his head, Shison henceforth forbade bringing items of the sort to the manor, though that hardly prevented him from blabbering on well within earshot about how he had merely taken note of the Saiho’s parsimonious accommodations and had gone as far as to sacrificed his own personal belongings to try and bring a semblance of order to his daily life.

Now that he could no longer bring them to the main hall, he instead handed out the pricey baubles to the servants and junior retainers and soldiers on guard duty, claiming they were gifts from Taiki himself. The delighted staff applied themselves all the more diligently to their duties, which almost overnight produced a state of nonstop commotion around Taiki.

Shison was only getting started. He next reassigned a large number of civil servants to the already small manor. The once tranquil estate was soon bursting at the seams with activity. Servants busied about tending to the cleaning, the repairs and maintenance, pretty much around the clock.

Saying they weren’t needed only produced more lamentations. Pointing out they were a bother and a hindrance resulted in a further flood of tears. Taiki finally banned them from the main hall. After that, from morning until night, Shison made it a habit of showing up repeatedly at the portico rooms and beweeeping his outcast state. Having had enough of that and banning him from the manor proper, Shison carried on the sackcloth and ashes routine at the front gate.

Simply imagining what antics he might be up to next was enough to drive Kouryou up the wall.

“Is the man daft?” an amazed Yari wondered aloud.

“Oh, there is method to his madness. Claiming to always be acting on behalf of the Taiho deflects any criticism from himself. In fact, carrying on the way he does, spreading the wealth around by hook or by crook, makes a lot of people happy. Taking him to task and putting a halt to the charade makes you the heartless bad guy.”

Yari craned her head to the side. “A heartless bad guy? You mean, the kirin?”

Kouryou couldn’t help laughing. “Well, you’ve got a point there. Nobody is going to call the kirin heartless.”

The kirin were creatures of compassion. The people and the civil servants were cognizant of that fact.

Kouryou added with a wry smile, “One way or another, Chou’un is behind all this. There are no depths to which he will not stoop.”

Yari said, “What a crude man. How unfortunate that the Taiho should have to deal with a person like that.”

Kouryou couldn’t agree more. Shison and Chou’un were executing a strategy that was fundamentally flawed. Shison ran around praising Taiki to the heavens and drawing comparisons with everybody under the sun. But did he really expect that rhetoric to inflict humiliation or incur jealousy? There really wasn’t any room to compete here. In terms of social status alone, the kirin towered over everyone but the emperor. Only the gods themselves ranked any higher.

“Definitely an ongoing daily disaster for the Taiho. It must wear him ragged.”

Even Kouryou found it fatiguing to be in a manor overrun with servants and civil servants. In the meanwhile, handing down decisions with an unswaying discipline, Taiki delivered orders to Keitou that the provincial Minister of Heaven alone would be given responsibility for his care. The imperial mandarins henceforth had no part to play.

With these reforms in place, things finally settled down, and the peace and quiet from before returned to the manor.

Kouryou was enormously relieved. He could help noticing that, amidst all the tumult, Taiki had remained above the fray, never appearing agitated in the least. That display of inner strength impressed him deeply.

Even in the ordinary day-to-day, there is something about a kirin that sets him apart.

Turning these thoughts over in his mind, his eyes fell on Taiki. Taiki was sitting in a sunny place next to the window going over some papers. He quietly read through the documents, at times pointing to a difficult passage and explaining to Juntatsu

next to him that he didn't know how to read the characters. He grasped the overall gist, and understood if it was read for him, but that didn't communicate the meaning of the sentence itself.

Taiki was a *taika*, born and raised in a place apart from the Twelve Kingdoms. He naturally learned a different language growing up. As a wizard, he could understand the words spoken in any language. But that gift did not extend to written languages.

A kirin born and raised in a foreign land. That might be at the root of Taiki's unique perspective on his status and role.

Interrupting Kouryou's thoughts, Taiki said out of the blue, "I haven't seen Shouwa around."

Now that he mentioned it, Kouryou hadn't seen her either. The day before, she'd made a fuss serving breakfast.

"You could probably use a rest," Taiki said to her.

She nodded and left. Shouwa hadn't had much to say of late. She previously made a point of following Taiki around to an annoying degree and tending personally to his every need. Kouryou hadn't observed her behaving like that recently. Since the period when the manor was crowded with servants, she'd shown up, done the bare minimum, and then slipped away.

"I'll ask Keitou about her. But it's possible that Shouwa—"

Based on how she'd appeared recently, she might have succumbed to the illness. If so, they shouldn't expect to see her in Nightingale Manor after this.

Taiki nodded, a pensive expression on his face. "Kouryou, Yari, please come with me."

Leaving the papers in Juntatsu's hands, he urged them into the garden. The garden was cold. Patches of ice covered the shallow lake. Regardless, Taiki proceeded to the arbor. It was the one place in the manor where nobody else could overhear them.

Expect him to make some sort of outrageous proposition.

"I'm thinking of paying the Rokushin another visit."

Kouryou objected at once. "Taiho, that is out of the question. They haven't forgotten the last time you were there. There will be many more guards on patrol and no easy way to get into the place."

"Even so, I believe it would be possible to infiltrate the Rokushin. To start with, from where I'm standing, there are many ways through the Inner Palace."

"Of course," Kouryou conceded.

The kirin was the emperor's advisor, a critical part of the imperial government. As province lord, his offices were located in Koutoku Manor. As the Saiho, he conducted his political duties in the Inner and Outer Palaces.

"However, all of those accessways are blocked."

“Sure, the ones everyone knows about. I think it highly likely that the passageways *I* only know about are still open. And those aren’t the only ones.”

“There are others?”

Taiki nodded. “I don’t know who built the Imperial Palace, but it’s interesting how the possibility of conflict between the emperor and kirin was incorporated into the construction. The means by which the kirin could access the Imperial Palace were secretly maintained. Anticipating a time when the emperor strayed from the Way, shut the kirin out of the Inner Palace, and ruled by dictate, they made sure those avenues existed.”

As far as Taiki was concerned, those conditions existed right now.

“Asen hasn’t shut me out of the Inner or Outer Palaces, but only because he hasn’t bothered to engage in the political process. During a civil war or civil unrest, you could easily end up with a Privy Council that did not want to deal with the kirin and barred him from the premises. On such occasions, the kirin would need a way to force his way in and make his presence felt.”

“That may well be so.”

“I’d like you to look for those secret passageways. If possible, in order to arrange one more meeting with Asen, I need a way into the Rokushin. And not only that—” Taiki hesitated for a moment. “Something has been weighing on my mind.”

“Weighing on your mind?”

“The last time I snuck into the Rokushin, a building at the back was secured to a degree that struck me as strange. Soldiers on guard around the perimeter. None of those marionettes. They must have been posted there by the Minister of Summer.”

Kouryou furrowed his brow. That did sound like something worthy of a closer look.

“In the vicinity of the gate facing the East Palace. I have the feeling there is more there than meets the eye.”

“You don’t imagine His Highness—?”

Taiki craned his head to the side. “If Gyousou-sama is being held there—meaning that is why the Minister of Summer is handling the security—in that case, there should be no reason for Chou’un to be at such loose ends. If the Minister of Summer is in on it, there is no way the Chousai, namely Chou’un, wouldn’t know.”

“That stands to reason.”

“If not Gyousou-sama, then they must be guarding someone or something important. I’d like to find out who or what.”

Kouryou was struck by a sudden thought. “Seirai-dono, perhaps?”

“A good possibility.”

Seirai had been arrested for concealing the ledgers in the Imperial Treasury. Except Seirai was nowhere to be found in the government-run prison. Bun'en had confirmed as much before news about him ceased.

What he was asking them to do was not without risk, Taiki acknowledged when Yari spoke up. "If you're looking for a way in, I already know of one. A tunnel runs from the inner sanctum of the Seishin to the northeast of the Jinjuu Manor compound."

Taiki looked at Yari, clearly impressed. "Kouryou mentioned you knew the Inner Palace like the back of your hand. You really must have had the run of the place."

Yari grinned. Though still amazed, Kouryou had to point out that, "Jinjuu Manor no longer exists."

The buildings had been wrecked down to the foundations, leaving behind only piles of brick and rubble.

"I said north and east of the compound. Further east of the adjoining garden. To be precise, east and a bit south of the garden. There's a building like a shrine. The building itself is vacant but it is still there."

Taiki gave her an examining look. "Would you happen to have an idea of what is in that heavily guarded area?"

"I couldn't tell you who they have in there. But I know there's a part of the gate that leads to an underground entranceway. And I know it's being guarded. Whatever they've got, it's probably down there. A tunnel from the personal quarters of the Inner Palace extends that far. But there are heavily guarded points along the way. I've never been able to get close."

"Where is security the strongest?"

"Above ground, around the gate. You'd need a small army to break through there."

"And underground?"

"I might be able to handle them by myself, but not without raising a big commotion. So last time I was there, I beat a hasty retreat. But with Kouryou with me, they'd be easy pickings."

Kouryou gaped at her. "That's crazy."

"What's crazy about it?"

"Picking a fight with the guards down there would be as good as declaring war on Asen."

Yari laughed. "Well, we are at war, aren't we? C'mon, Kouryou. You don't think Asen and the Taiho are allies, do you?"

"Of course not. But—"

"Just because one side isn't attacking the other doesn't mean they aren't openly hostile to each other. Sure, as far as we know, Asen isn't plotting to take aggressive actions against the Taiho. But you do admit he is holding the Taiho prisoner, right?"

Kouryou groaned. He couldn't disagree. Yes, they were living in a gilded cage. It was still a cage.

"The Taiho is under house arrest. Though it is a very big jail, he has no real freedom, and Asen holds the power of life and death over him. If that doesn't describe a state of war, what does?"

Kouryou nodded, and then abruptly recalled what she'd just said. "Asen holds the power of life and death?"

"Of course," Yari said, as if there couldn't be any doubts about the matter. "Asen doesn't appear to me to have put much stock in being named the new emperor. He probably harbors more than a few doubts. I'm guessing he couldn't care less about the throne itself."

"He harbors—doubts?"

Yari responded at first with a blank look. "Well, a few were bound to be less than convinced. Naming Asen the new emperor was an effective strategy and definitely a clever one at that. Except you can't count on Asen being that gullible. I suspect not even Chou'un is completely convinced."

Taiki eyed her suspiciously. "So—what are we talking about here?"

Yari appeared honestly perplexed by this reaction. "Doesn't the Taiho want to save the people? So much so, you named that villain as the new emperor. That way you could safely reclaim your role as the Taiho."

Kouryou stood there dumbfounded as Taiki said to her, "Do I look like someone who would do something like that?"

"It hardly matters whether you do or not. That's what you did and that's how things stand. That's why I'm here. To keep you safe."

Even Taiki found himself speechless at that point. Yari took the two of them in with a surprised expression of her own.

"I haven't the slightest desire to serve Asen. To be honest—" Yari's words trailed off. Then she said with a shrug, "Well, nobody cares what I think so I'll tell you anyway. I have no interest in allying myself with Asen. Never did. Never will. I haven't met Gyousou-sama so it's not like I can vouch for his character or anything. But the person who sent me to serve alongside the Taiho believes Gyousou-sama is the emperor and is convinced the Taiho believes so too. Hence the importance of protecting the Taiho."

Taiki asked, "Yari, are you one of Kakei's private soldiers?"

Yari grinned. "Let's just say I won't try to persuade you otherwise and leave it at that."

"And your master before that role fell to Kakei?"

"That I cannot answer."

Taiki said with a wry smile of his own, "But he says Gyousou-sama is the emperor?"

"Milord says that Asen becoming emperor is simply not possible."

"And that's why I need to be protected?"

"Precisely. That's why I was asked to come here. Frankly, Milord might be reading too much into things, like saying this is all a scheme cooked up by the Taiho. But I do believe sending me here was the right decision."

"You don't say," was Taiki's response, with a tight smile and a shake of his head.

"I do not believe the Taiho is as safe as you might imagine. For the time being, Asen is not openly antagonistic. However, when it comes to the question of whether Asen is convinced your life must be defended in order to protect his own, I would err on the side of caution and assume he's not. Besides, Chou'un *is* your enemy. He clearly perceives the Taiho in hostile terms."

"Yari, you've got it exactly right," Taiki said with a crooked grin. "And that's why stirring up trouble with Chou'un is not about to change the status quo around here."

"Understood," was Kouryou's blunt response.

Chapter 14

[15-2] Taiki, Kouryou, and Yari concluded their conversation and returned to the main hall, where a clearly agitated Juntatsu was waiting.

Kouryou said, "Once we're done with dinner, you can retire for the night. Tokuyuu not being around has left a lot on your plate. Take a little time off for once."

Except Juntatsu stood there, a stiff expression on his face, his eyes darting from Taiki to Yari to Kouryou. He finally resolved to put his emotions into words and said, "Are you telling me to stay out of whatever you are up to?"

Kouryou responded with a startled look. Equally caught off guard, Taiki and Yari turned their attention to him as well. Having unwittingly made himself the center of attention and now feeling overwhelmed, Juntatsu hung his head and retreated a step. But then he resolutely raised his head again.

"The last time you asked me to retire to my room early was the night the Taiho snuck out of Nightingale Manor and headed to the Rokushin. The Taiho says he did so of his own volition, but I find it hard to believe Kouryou and Yari did not know what was going on."

"Juntatsu—" Taiki started to say.

Juntatsu spoke up before Taiki could continue. "That day as well, the three of you conferenced together out in the cold under the arbor. And now you've just done the same thing again."

"Juntatsu," Taiki said in a gentle and reassuring voice. "On that occasion, I acted entirely on my own, and for that I apologize. I'm sure you have plenty of reservations, but there are times when I believe you would be better off not knowing the whole story. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"If you think I am lacking in some way, or you have doubts about my temperament, such that I am not reliable enough to share your secrets, then I will have to resign myself to such judgements as they are out of my control. However, let me make it clear that I do not believe, as the Taiho stated, that there are things I am better off not knowing."

"Juntatsu—"

"Any criticism of the Taiho's actions will fall on me as well, as would any punishments meted out. To be sure, I am not questioning what the Taiho chooses to do or how he goes about doing it. The Taiho has his reasons, and I am perfectly willing to accept the consequences that fall on me as a result. However, the difference between accepting those consequences in ignorance and accepting them knowing the

truth is as vast as that between heaven and earth. The punishment would be the same either way. That being the case, I would like to at least be made aware of the circumstances involved.”

Kouryou cast Taiki a bewildered glance.

“More than anything else, I am concerned that, knowing nothing about what was going on, I might end up unintentionally getting in the way of what the Taiho and the rest of you are trying to accomplish. I mean the kind of trouble that I could have deflected with a well-chosen word or two but was unable to do so. I truly loathe getting caught in situations like that.”

His frame trembled as he made his case, no doubt due to the mental strain. Kouryou turned his attention again to Taiki.

Taiki let out a breath. “You’re right. Keeping you in the dark wasn’t respectful, Juntatsu.”

“There’s no need for the Taiho to apologize. I would not mind if you simply stated that I hadn’t measured up. In many respects, I could not disagree in the least. However—”

This time Yari was the one who interrupted him. “Look, you can’t possibly be in cahoots with Asen. And anyway, that weird illness that’s been going around is caused by a *jisen*.”

“A *jisen*? That’s a youma, right? Here in the Imperial Palace?”

Yari nodded. “Coos like a big dove. There were a couple nesting here in the manor. I got rid of them.”

“You got rid of them?”

“Of course.” Yari grinned. “Not all that tough as youma go. Once I realized they were on the premises, tracking them down wasn’t hard. I’ve kept an eye out since and no new *jisen* have crept in. Which means, Taiho—” Yari looked at Taiki. “I see no reason to doubt Juntatsu.”

Taiki heaved a big sigh. “So that’s what’s going on. Thank you, Yari.”

Yari answered with a little bow. Taiki nodded in turn and faced Juntatsu. “I had no doubts about your temperament, Juntatsu. But I was worried about the damage this illness can wreak.” With a polite tip of his head, Taiki added, “I will be slipping out again tonight. Juntatsu, any assistance you can render in that regard would be greatly appreciated.”

“A *jisen*, eh?” Kouryou said to Yari as they left the main hall. “Good job ferreting it out.”

“I saw one while I was tailing the Taiho when he snuck into the Rokushin. The cooing sound it makes has been on my mind for a while now.”

Kouryou sighed. “And I thought it was a dove.”

"Can't blame you. Like I said, it kind of looks and sounds like a dove."

"How many did you find?"

"Three."

Kouryou groaned. "That's what happened to Heichuu and Tokuyuu. I should have noticed sooner." At this juncture, he was indulging in useless regrets, to be sure. But those regrets still stung. "Is there any cure for the illness caused by the jisen?"

"Not that I know of. Well, it depends on how long the jisen has affected you. Once the illness progresses past a certain point, I don't think there's any going back."

Yari's ability to answer his questions in such matter-of-fact terms was impressive, which made thinking about Heichuu and Tokuyuu all the more painful.

"So that's what it comes down to."

"We weren't in time to save Shouwa. A pity."

"I had a close brush myself. After this, do you think more of them will sneak in here? Why are youma showing up in the Imperial Palace in the first place?"

"Must be Asen's doing."

Kouryou shook his head. "Not bloody possible. Controlling youma is well beyond his abilities. The only person who could do something like that is the kirin."

"It would not be impossible for someone who had a thorough knowledge of the youma."

"Are you sure?" Kouryou said, giving Yari a questioning look.

"True, only the kirin can command the youma and use them at will. However, someone familiar with the habits and habitats of the youma could also learn to control them."

"Really?"

Yari nodded.

"You're saying Asen might be the one using the youma? In that case, we'd better stay on our toes after this."

"We'd better stay on our toes in any case. At a basic level, youma despise the aura of a kirin. Perhaps a better way to put it is, their supernatural powers weaken in the kirin's presence. Call it luck or a great misfortune, but after Tokuyuu disappeared and Bun'en-dono went incommunicado, it fell on Juntatsu to fill their roles. Day and night, he was never far from the Taiho. I don't think we need to worry about his health."

"Well, that's good to know," Kouryou said with a great sense of relief. At the same time, he couldn't help being surprised. "You know a lot about youma."

"Stands to reason, I suppose," Yari said in an entirely offhand manner. "I am a *koushu*, after all."

For a moment, Kouryou didn't understand what she was saying. "A *koushu*?"

“Yeah. I grew up in the Yellow Sea. A certain someone said I showed a lot of promise and ought to learn more about the big wide world out there. So he shipped me off to Tai.”

“Why would a koushu—why would this certain someone ship you off the Tai?”

“Is it really that surprising? His Highness—Gyousou-sama—has deep connections to the koushu. He once worked alongside them and hunted youjuu. The friendships formed back then continue to this day. Gyousou-sama borrowed the wisdom of the koushu for the benefit of the kingdom. In turn, he helped the koushu expand their knowledge.”

“Borrowed the wisdom of the koushu?”

“I’ll give you an example. Gyousou-sama talked with them about ways to make it easier for the people to survive the winters in Tai. The koushu presented him with a thorn oak from the Yellow Sea. Gyousou-sama offered that thorn oak to the Imperial Roboku. The similar thorn oak of Tai was the result.”

“The gift of Kouki—” The true origins of this miracle plant left Kouryou dumbfounded.

“Ah,” Yari said to herself.

“Perhaps this is information you were not supposed to divulge?”

Yari muttered, “No, that’s okay. As long as it’s just you, Kouryou.”

“Of course, if it wasn’t meant to be made public, I’ll keep the particulars to myself.”

“Much obliged,” Yari said with a gracious smile.

“I imagine there must be others aside from yourself.”

“I am not the only one and neither is Gyousou-sama.”

Kouryou tipped his head with a quizzical expression.

“I am not the only koushu brought to the Imperial Palace and Gyousou-sama is not the only person who availed himself of their knowledge. Ganchou and Gashin-dono also have ties to the koushu.”

“You don’t say.” Kouryou felt the pieces of a puzzle falling into place. Gashin had often relied on the shusei as advisors on important matters. That practice likely arose from his connections to the koushu. “I had no idea.”

“Well, please go on pretending you don’t.”

“Stands to reason that the koushu would know a good deal about youma.”

“After all, the koushu do live in the Yellow Sea and live side by side with the youma. Like it or not, they have to learn all they can about them.”

The same way a farmer is deeply familiar with the livestock he raises and any creatures that might threaten the flock or the herd. The koushu wouldn’t live long without acquiring exhaustive knowledge of the youma, knowledge they could profit from and use to protect themselves from harm.

“In other words, Asen is exploiting the secrets of the koushu?”

“So it seems. Except this isn’t knowledge that Asen could have acquired himself. He must be using someone else who has access to that information. Except the person in question must not have learned very much about the youma. In fact, Asen is using youma in a particularly dangerous way.”

“A dangerous way?”

Yari nodded. “Without a doubt, Asen sent the jisen that nested here. But I don’t believe he wanted all the civil servants in the Rokushin to flock there. Asen can summon and dispatch the jisen but he can’t control them after that. The jisen are wreaking damage on their own and it is spreading. The problem is that simply abandoning the victims would soon arouse suspicions about the presence of the youma. Asen was forced to gather them together in the Rokushin. But when so many ill people gather together in one place, they create a miasma.”

“A miasma?”

“That’s what we call it. The youma in our world give rise to a separate Providence. Youma cannot exist under the same Providence as humans. They warp the Providence around them and stain it with one of their own makings. Think of it as them seeding their surroundings with poisonous air.”

“The jisen spread this poisonous air. And then the people they infect spread it as well?”

“That’s what it comes down to. When all these ill people get together, the poisonous air grows more concentrated. In short order, a miasma wells up, which summons more youma.”

“And Asen is okay being around these conditions?” Kouryou asked.

“There are talismans that keep the miasma at bay. I expect Keitou to have one too. A wooden amulet about this big.” Yari traced a small square in the air with her finger. “Ordinarily a badge that attests to the noble’s rank, but with a brand inscribed with the spell burned into the back. In short, Asen would have sent Keitou here with a talisman to unleash the jisen and another one to ward them off. Of course, Asen will have his own talismans.”

There were other ways of warding off the miasma, Yari explained, such as protecting an entire building. But the more the miasma welled up, the more the dangers inevitably multiplied.

“Whether they just don’t understand, or they know what they are doing and they are out of other options. Either way, they’re playing with fire.”

Kouryou folded his arms. “Then how big a risk is it sneaking into the Rokushin? Won’t we be exposed to this miasma?”

“One night only won’t pose that big of a problem. Moreover, we’ll be with the Taiho. His presence should disperse the miasma.”

“What about youma no one invited showing up out of the blue?”

“I don’t see that happening, though there’s always the chance that Asen will summon more of the monsters.”

Kouryou groaned. There was always the chance Asen would exploit the knowledge of the koushu to summon more youma, convinced he could use them to further his ends. Kouryou hadn’t heard of any connections between Asen and the shusei or the koushu. But once he started thinking along those lines—

He raised his head with a shock of realization. “You don’t think that maybe Rousan—”

Yari tipped her head to the side and mulled over the idea. For Kouryou, having put the thought into words, he strangely felt himself in agreement with it. Start with how Yari and Rousan resembled each other, especially how differently they behaved around the emperor and the kirin. They demonstrated none of the unqualified reverence and awe that was normal for Kouryou and his colleagues.

When had Rousan joined Gyousou’s camp? She’d likely served longer than Kouryou. By the time Kouryou rose to a commensurate position, Rousan was already a staff officer, and had carved out a rank and portfolio that was all her own. Ever since then, her extensive knowledge, intense curiosity, and uninhibited approach to whatever she did made her famous.

“Rousan is a koushu?”

Yari nodded. “I heard she was the first of the koushu entrusted to Gyousou-sama.”

Makes sense, Kouryou thought.

The breadth and depth of Rousan’s education was without compare. It was widely rumored that there wasn’t an artisan or engineer in the Ministry of Winter she couldn’t converse with at a level equal to their own.

Given everything she’d learned in the Yellow Sea and everything she’d learned since, together with her God-given talents, if Rousan was involved, there’d be nothing unusual about Asen using youma to his own ends.

“But why?”

Wasn’t Gyousou her benefactor? Why would she betray him? When Gyousou articulated these thoughts aloud, Yari averted her gaze.

“Well—” she began. “I don’t know. But I think it’s different.”

“Different?”

“The koushu have a different sense of priorities from everybody else. In general, the koushu feel a deep sense of obligation to their benefactors. However, they do not lend emperors and kirin or even kingdoms any particular weight or importance.”

“Does that apply to you as well?” Kouryou asked.

Yari shrugged. “The Taiho is an interesting person. I find everything about him fascinating. But unlike you, I do not hold him in unqualified respect.”

Kouryou had no idea how to put such sentiments in a context he could begin to comprehend.

Yari said with a knowing smile, “You have nothing to worry about. I will defend and protect the Taiho. That is what I was asked to do and that is what I want to do.”

Chapter 15

[15-3] That night, Juntatsu wished them well and saw them off.

As they had the last time, Taiki, Kouryou, and Yari left through the back gate of the garden that led to the adjoining landscape park. Taiki and Yari followed the route they had before. This was all new to Kouryou. Yari took the lead, pausing at every turn to scout the way ahead. Depending on the outlook, she might clamber to the top of a tree or fence for a better look around, or at other times, to the ridgepole of a snow-covered roof to confirm their surroundings.

The whole adventure would come to naught if guards or soldiers spotted them. Kouryou and Yari faced great personal risk if they got found out.

By all rights, taking their personal safety into consideration, Taiki ought to have left them behind in Nightingale Manor, where they would be safe and secure. Arranging to have Yari and Kouryou accompany him was decidedly out of the norm for him.

They exited the landscape park with relative ease and entered the shrine Yari had mentioned. The altar had once enshrined a wooden statue but now was empty. Yari walked around the altar and pointed to a narrow stone staircase. Originally it would have been hidden behind a set of shelves or other items that had since been removed or moved out of the way.

They descended the cramped set of stairs. Yari took from her pocket a short, slender rod, the tip of which produced enough light to illuminate the gloomy ground beneath their feet.

Before leaving Nightingale Manor, Kouryou mentioned that he had pine torches. “Don’t need them,” was Yari’s response. Because of whatever this was. A closer look revealed it wasn’t a torch or candle. The tip of the rod alone produced the light, though it appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary wooden dowel just long enough to fit comfortably in her pocket.

Noticing the intrigued look on Kouryou’s face, Yari held it out to him. “Use this to show the way for yourself and the Taiho. I’ve got good night vision.”

“What is it exactly?”

“A product of the Yellow Sea.”

Such things can be found in the Yellow Sea? Kouryou held the rod upright like a torch.

Yari said, “Point the tip down towards your feet. Otherwise, it’ll stand out too much.”

“Ah.”

The light didn't come from a flame. Holding it upside down didn't matter, which only puzzled Kouryou all the more.

“If I say to extinguish the light, stick it in your pocket or wrap your hand around the end. It's not that bright so that should be enough.”

Kouryou nodded. *Awfully convenient things come from the Yellow Sea*, he thought. Though at the same time, it wasn't a good substitute for a torch. Even pointing the rod down and at the ground, it was barely bright enough to show the way forward, and hardly enough light to cut through the surrounding gloom.

The stone staircase descended straight underground into the pitch dark. It was impossible even to make out how much further the stairs went on and where they ended. Following Yari down the stairs, Kouryou had to wonder if the light he was carrying would prove sufficient.

Having navigated two full flights of stairs, they reached a tunnel finished with old stones. The walls of the narrow tunnel were damp from rivulets of water trickling down the stone face. The low ceiling forced Kouryou to bend over as he walked along.

Coming to the end of the tunnel, a ladder appeared. It was made out of cast iron chains and hung down a vertical shaft. Yari raised her hand, signaling them to wait while she nimbly scrambled up the ladder. Reaching the height of the tunnel ceiling, she evidently released the latch or lever to a door, for a downdraft of cool air soon followed.

Yari spent another minute surveying her surroundings. Then she climbed up the rest of the way and motioned it was safe for them to join her. Following her, Taiki and Kouryou found themselves in a narrow tunnel that appeared to be a water culvert. A shallow gutter ran down the center of the culvert channeling a thin stream of water.

The ladder rose to a cavity in the culvert adjacent the channel. The door Yari opened from below was a large rock, much too large for Yari to move by herself. In fact, though it looked like a real boulder, it was hollow inside.

They crawled along behind Yari on their hands and knees. Along the way, they passed two more hollowed out areas like the one they'd emerged from. These narrow culverts made it possible to move about the Imperial Palace without crossing paths with anybody else. The engineering involved alone was astounding.

They hadn't proceeded very far when the mouth of the culvert came into view. Yari once again signaled for them to stop. She crawled out and disappeared from sight. While keeping an eye on Taiki, Kouryou followed her. The culvert opened into a large square shaft. The walls were formed from hewn stone. The shaft continued further on down to a considerable depth.

Kouryou stuck his head out and glanced up. The square top of the shaft framed the night sky. Small stones jutted out from the wall forming a kind of staircase. A chain took the place of a railing. Looking down he could make out the square surface of the water. The footholds wound around the walls to the waterline.

This must be a well.

Not a well for everyday use but reserved for emergencies like fires. The mouths of water culverts like the one they had used punctuated the stone walls of the well. Above his head, a latticework of scaffolding arced over the opening of the well, supporting a beam to which a block and tackle was affixed.

The stone steps themselves were large enough that it was relatively easy to hold onto the chain and ascend this circular staircase sideways. When Yari gave the signal, they climbed the stairs. The stairs ended at a short iron ladder that brought them to the surface.

They were surrounded on three sides by unlit buildings. The courtyard opened onto a cobblestone path that wound around the buildings.

Kouryou didn't recognize where they were. Yari spent a little time orienting herself and said in a small voice, "We're in the southwest corner of the inner sanctum of the Seishin."

Kouryou nodded in a matter-of-fact manner, but he was a bundle of nerves on the inside. He had never set foot so deep within the Rokushin.

Yari motioned for them to move on, not along the cobblestone path but into the gap beneath the covered walk of the building furthest to the rear. They crouched down beneath the walkway and came out in a small dark garden. Their surroundings were devoid of life. Without the slightest hesitation, Yari stepped into the nearest building.

It turned out to be an anteroom for the junior retainers who made up the local security detail. The walls of the room sported a variety of weapons. Yari tossed Kouryou a *podao*, a long-handled broadsword, and took one for herself.

In response to Kouryou's look, she said, "On the off chance we get into a brawl, we don't want anybody tracing the weapons back to us."

"Ah," Kouryou said with a crooked smile. He picked out two small knives and handed one to Taiki.

"I—" Taiki balked.

"Just carry it for me, if you wouldn't mind." He handed Taiki the long-handled broadsword as well, picked out another that he handed to Yari, and then shouldered a lance.

Yari grinned. "This way they won't know how many people were here. But a bit of a bother to carry around."

"We can toss them into the next available pond or thicket."

Yari nodded.

They left that building, crossed through two more courtyards, detoured around the next building, and passed through an unmanned gate. In the shadow of an ascending staircase, another set of stone steps descended underground.

“This is?”

“Well, before was the easy part. Now things are going to get a lot trickier. Once we reach the corridor at the end of this tunnel, chances are good we’ll start running into people. Keep your eyes peeled.”

Kouryou agreed. He discarded the extra weapons he was carrying along the way, holding onto the long-handled broadsword and the knives. Yari kept a broadsword for herself. Kouryou and Yari had their own personal weapons as well, that they would only use if push came to shove.

They carefully descended into the dark. The stone steps took them deep underground. Coming to the landing brought them to a corridor that formed a kind of vestibule. The room had an ancient feel about it. The rough-hewn stones and quarried walls were weathered and worn and speckled with lichen and moss.

So as not to attract attention, Kouryou pointed the light down and behind him. They proceeded down the hallway, following the wall. The passageway zigged and zagged, taking them up and down several short flights of stairs. Finally their surroundings brightened to a dim gray glow. The source of the light was a bit further on and around another bend.

In other words, evidence that somebody else was there.

Muffling his steps, Kouryou crept down the corridor and peeked around the corner. A little way on, the corridor ended at a door. In front of the door, the hallway widened into a waiting area of sorts. A lantern illuminated three soldiers without obviously little to do.

Kouryou held up three fingers. Yari reached out and straightened another. Looking more closely, a shadow cast on the floor suggested a figure standing further back and out of view. That being the case, Kouryou held up one more finger. This was probably a standard squad of five soldiers.

Yari nodded. Kouryou turned to Taiki, handed him the light stick, and motioned for him to retreat further down the hall. Confirming that he was a safe enough distance away, Yari leapt around the corner and then just as quickly jumped back again.

An eruption of confused voices immediately followed.

“Who was that?”

“Who was what?”

“Just now. Somebody was right there.”

“Somebody else down here besides us?” one of the guards asked with a carefree chuckle.

“I definitely saw a shadow.”

“Are you sure you’re not just imagining things?”

“Maybe it was a bat.”

“No. Looked human to me.”

The quarreling soldiers drew closer. They were going to see for themselves. From the sound of their voices and footsteps, three of them.

Their voices hushed as they cautiously approached the crook in the corridor. Estimating their distance, Kouryou nodded to Yari. Yari nodded in turn. They charged around the corner.

And were confronted by three soldiers bearing lances. Yari took out the first two with astonishing speed. The remaining soldier barely had time to flee before Kouryou felled him with a throwing knife. Having cleared the way, Kouryou gestured to Taiki to follow them.

They rushed further into the waiting area, arousing more startled voices. The first of the remaining soldiers hastily leveled his spear, but not before Yari stabbed him in the chest. Kouryou gave chase to the second. One of his knives caught up to him after no more than a step or two.

A space the size of a small room had been set up in the hallway, furnished with a simple chair and table and a cot. The wall opposite was lined with shelves and pots. This was clearly a guard station intended for long-term use as a watch post.

There were only two ways to access this section of the corridor. A short distance further on, the hallway ended at a door. The other end of the room opened onto the corridor. Kouryou brought down the soldier who’d shouted and started running toward the corridor with a dagger delivered precisely to the back of the head. But he’d made enough noise to prompt an inquiry further down the hallway.

“Hey! What’s going on?”

Retrieving his knife, Kouryou glanced around the corner into the corridor. He could hear people running down the stone steps.

Yari sprang toward the doorway. After checking the interior through the peephole in the transom over the door, she turned to Taiki, swinging her arm in a windmilling motion.

“Hurry up,” she said under her breath.

Taiki broke into a run. At the same time, Yari glanced at Kouryou, who indicated with a jerk of his head that people were running down the corridor toward them. *I’ll hold my ground here*, she said with a look.

Kouryou nodded. The approaching footsteps and a common sense understanding of how the security perimeter worked in these situations told him a reserve squad of

five soldiers would arrive any second. He added the slash of the broadsword to the bodies to hide the puncture wounds made by his throwing knives.

Taiki disappeared inside the door. Yari shut it behind him. Kouryou hid around the corner at the entrance to the room. Yari sunk down into a hollow next to the door just as the soldiers burst into the room.

“What the hell?” came the shouts of disbelief, as they took in the bodies of their colleagues sprawled across the floor.

Kouryou counted one, two, three soldiers rushing past him, then bolted from his hiding place.

Chapter 16

[15-4] Taiki ran through the door alone.

At the end of the corridor he encountered another closed door like the one he'd come through. More doors lined the hallway on both sides. Though old and worn, they were solidly built. An opening in the top section of each door was lined with iron bars. There was a small slot in the bottom section through which items could be passed back and forth.

The scent of blood accompanied the savage sounds of the battle being waged behind him. His senses reeled. He seized hold of the first door to steady himself and peered through the bars. The room was empty. The next two were vacant as well. Only the last cell at the very back showed any signs of life. A faint point of light in the darkness.

The cell was little more than a dark hole. A human silhouette slumped at the foot of the wall opposite. Taiki pressed against the door to get a better look. Perhaps realizing he had a visitor, the prisoner raised his head. The dim light cast a shadow across his face. Even so, Taiki recognized him.

He gasped. "Seirai—"

He tried to open the door. It was bolted shut. The bolt simply consisted of an iron bar threaded through the latch. Sliding it to the side would free the latch, except it was secured with a padlock at the end. Without unlocking it, the bar wouldn't come free.

The key had to be around there somewhere. Taiki examined the gloomy hallway and turned up nothing. He glanced through the doorway at the far end. The corridor continued on a short distance before ending at a short flight of stairs.

Making himself as inconspicuous as possible, Taiki opened the door and crept down the hallway. Crouching lower, he climbed the stairs. At the top of the stairs, the corridor opened onto another small guardroom. Rising from his crouch, he peered into the room. The glow from a lantern revealed a single soldier on duty.

Taiki observed the room for a short while. The bored-looking soldier sat in a chair fiddling with a deck of wooden playing cards. Taiki didn't see a key anywhere. If there was one, the guard must have it on his person.

No matter what, he had to get his hands on that key. *But how?*

He backed several steps down the staircase. He turned the question over in his mind but couldn't come up with a single answer. Taiki took a deep breath and pressed a trembling hand against his chest.

He muttered to himself, "One way or another—"

There was no way he could leave here empty handed.

The countryside was buried beneath the snow, the commoners reduced to dire poverty. And far, far away was a city by the sea likely still untouched by snow. Taiki's hometown, that he would never see again. All the people who perished there should not have died in vain.

His return alone occasioned such an enormous calamity. He left them all behind on that distant shore.

"One way or another—"

Given everything that happened there, he could only call that city by the sea his hometown because of one person, the one person who insisted he belonged. Even knowing the sorrow and suffering he would shoulder going forward, the personal battles he would endure just to get on with his life, Taiki left him behind because there was no place *here* he could call his own.

"Sensei—"

A place to call home. The struggle to preserve that alone coupled with the strength of a powerful resolve born from such unbridled naivete.

One way or another—

Taiki stifled his voice, took a deep breath, and rose to his feet. Hearing the approaching footsteps, the guard at the table lifted his head and glanced over his shoulder.

"Who are you?"

"I am Taiki."

The man responded with a dubious look. A moment later, he corrected his posture. But he couldn't erase the puzzled look from his face. He looked back and forth at Taiki's face, his hair, the staircase he'd just ascended.

"What are you—what is the Taiho doing in a place like this?"

"I wish to see the prisoner in the cell," Taiki said.

The expression on the guard's face changed at once. "That is not possible. Nobody is supposed to get anywhere close to that jail cell in the first place. Please leave."

"That I cannot do. You must allow me to inspect the cell. Unlock the door."

"Sorry." The guard stood to block Taiki's approach and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. "If it's really that important, bring along His Highness or the Chousai. Nobody gets in otherwise."

"A direct order from me isn't good enough?"

"No, it's not. My orders all along were to kill anybody who wandered in here, no questions asked. The only reason you're still alive is because you're the Taiho."

Taiki paid the implicit warning no mind and approached him. The soldier started to draw his sword, vacillated, then in clear irritation sheathed it again. He spread his arms wide and blocked Taiki's way.

"Where's the key?"

"You can't have it. Please leave." He seized Taiki by the shoulders and turned his head toward the hallway. "Hey—"

By that point, he must have decided to call out to his colleagues. The rest of the words never left his mouth. Taiki slammed his body against him. The man swallowed the rising shout, staggered to the side, tried to find his footing, lost his balance, fell forward, and tumbled down the stairs. He hazily raised his head, eyes wide as Taiki charged down the stairs after him.

Taiki grabbed the sword and jumped onto his back. The man thrashed from side to side and clawed at the ground with his hands, trying to crawl away and flee to safety. He again tried to raise his voice. That was when Taiki settled on the target and swung the sword against the back of the man's head.

The blow raised a heavy, sickening thud.

The soldier stopped moving. There was still residual movement in his limbs so he wasn't dead. Taiki of course couldn't kill him. He'd struck him instead with the flat of the blade.

I can't let him call his colleagues.

He didn't know what to do. A thousand thoughts warred inside his head. His nature as a kirin, the social norms instilled in him in a foreign land from his childhood on, the overwhelming danger of the man summoning more soldiers, Gyousou and Risai, Touka and the fate of the people of Tai—

Not killing him is a risk I cannot take.

I cannot do it.

And yet I can.

Didn't the kirin use their shirei to those same ends? He'd seen it with his own two eyes at Kinpa Palace in the Kingdom of Kei. The shirei left by Enki to watch over Taiki did not hesitate to eliminate any threat to him. The kirin commanded the shirei to defend them. Of course that meant killing the enemy. *Depending on the circumstances, if you have to kill, then kill you must.*

That's what it came down to. All kirin killed and wounded people. They just didn't do it *themselves*.

An emperor who never got his hand dirty might have existed somewhere and at some time. But there was no such kirin. He simply removed those bloody hands in the form of the shirei and put them out of his mind. Moreover, the shirei had minds of their own. Even without an explicit order to kill, they could act of their own

volition. A kirin could never claim that inflicting bodily injury was not an outcome he anticipated or desired.

A kirin could certainly shed blood. That he could not was simply a widely shared belief, shared by himself as well. The unique way a kirin expressed that murderous intent gave rise to it as well.

A kirin born and raised on Mount Hou remained untouched by violence. No active steps were taken to counter that natural fear of blood and violence. More than nothing being done, those inclinations were strongly reinforced from a young age onward.

That certainly did not apply to a kirin who grew up in Hourai.

This kirin is on intimate terms with violence.

He wanted to say he was sorry, but only to salve his own conscience. Begging for forgiveness likewise served only to feed his own sense of self-satisfaction. The end result remained unchanged. All the words in the world changed nothing.

But this person could not be allowed to add to the accumulated harm. Taiki tightened his grip on the hilt. His hands trembled as if in the throes of a spasm. *I can't. I can't.* But he must.

As Taiki crouched over the prone soldier, frozen in indecision, the body suddenly slid out from beneath his feet and disappeared from view. Reflexively following the movement and glancing over his shoulder, he took in the man lying there face down, a knife sticking out of his back. Without uttering another word, the man stopped moving. A hand reached down and pulled out the knife. The hand belonged to Kouryou.

"Never hesitate. Now is not the time to be nice."

"Kouryou—"

Taiki turned to face him. Kouryou met his gaze with a severe look. "If he got a shout out, it'd all be over. If you let him live and he talked, it'd still be over. You start something, you finish it. That's the responsibility of the person who acts first."

Taiki let the sword fall from his grasp. Kouryou picked it up and returned it to the dead man's scabbard. Then he searched through the man's pockets, extracted the key, and handed it to Taiki.

Kouryou let out a long breath. "Let's suppose this man took pity on you and helped the prisoner escape. He would be punished. Somewhere out of your sight, somebody other than you would execute him. Because once you take that first step, there is always going to be a last."

Taiho didn't respond. He only nodded and took the key.

"Sorry for not getting here sooner. This is the kind of mess I should have cleaned up myself."

All Taiki could do was shake his head. Kouryou placed a hand on his back and gave him a gentle shove. “Go. I’ll keep a lookout here.”

Chapter 17

[15-5] With shaking hands, Taiki inserted the key into the lock.

The fit proved precise. With a twist came the sound of the mechanism letting go. He slid back the bolt securing the latch. Through the barred window at the top of the door, he saw the prisoner again raise his head in response to this unexpected disturbance.

Taiki placed his hand on the door and drew it open. Treading softly, he stepped inside the cell. With the interior lit only by the dim glow of a lantern, the light slanting in from the corridor cast a faint halo around the face of the prisoner as he sat slumped against the wall.

The prisoner looked up at Taiki, uncertainty filling his eyes. With the light at Taiki's back, he likely could only make out his silhouette.

"Seirai—" Taiki said.

The prisoner's body shook as if in surprise. He leaned forward for a better look. The motion revealed that his hands were chained to the wall behind him.

"Seirai."

Taiki fell to his knees. The prisoner said in utter astonishment, "Taiho? Are you the Taiho?"

"Yes," Taiki answered, his voice hoarse. Seirai's cruel condition brought a hard lump to his throat.

"Oh, don't make such a sad face. Here, let me have a better look at you." He twisted his body and peered at Taiki's face from one side and then the other. "Ah, it truly is the Taiho," Seirai said, words suffused with joy that clearly came from the bottom of his heart.

Seirai's left eye was a black pit. The lobe was missing from one ear. The scarred pate of his head peeked out from between the clumps of dirty, oily hair.

"This is all so horrible." Taiki touched his face with trembling fingers.

"Oh, it's nothing. I've gotten used to it for a while now. But more importantly, the smell of blood is everywhere. You should leave before it affects you."

"I'm sorry," Taiki said, hugging his arms around Seirai.

The man was all skin and bones. With nothing else to change into, his clothes were grimy and torn, the exposed skin scratched and bruised and covered with deep scars.

"Taiho, a messenger to Ba Province—"

Shaking his head, Taiki released Seirai's shackles. Seirai's hands were missing two fingers. Half of the rest were bent in ways that should not be humanly possible.

"I appreciate you coming here. Such a gesture is more than enough. But Bun Province—"

All Taiki could manage to do was grasp his cruelly contorted hands and continue to shake his head in disbelief.

"Taiho."

Taiki all but dragged Seirai outside the cell. But when Seirai saw Kouryou waiting there at the foot of the stairs, and the body lying on the ground next to him, he stopped.

"I can't run away. Running away will cause an uproar. Rather, say I killed the guard but failed to make good my escape."

Seirai looked at Kouryou, who responded with a look of astonishment. A moment later, his expression grew taut. He nodded. "Taiho," he said, urging him on.

"No. I can't run away either. If we leave Seirai here, what do you think is going to happen to him later?"

"No need to ask such a question. What happens will not be any worse than what I have already experienced. As I said, I've gotten used to it." Seirai turned to Kouryou. "Where is the weapon you used?"

Kouryou held out the dagger. Seirai took it.

"No," Taiki said, louder this time. He clung to Seirai all the harder. "This is crazy."

Kouryou had to step in to pry them apart.

Seirai was undeniably in an atrocious state. This had never been about the torture. The objective had always been about extracting information, not oppression for the sake of oppression. Killing him would accomplish nothing, as would pushing his condition beyond the possibility of recovery.

Rather, the intent was to create the *fear* of dying, the *fear* of ending up in an unrecoverable state and to use that to extract a confession from him.

But based on Seirai's physical state, his keepers had deviated from the program. He was living proof that the goal of producing a confession had given way to abuse for its own sake. Taiki wasn't wrong to worry about the treatment he would receive for "failing to make good his escape."

Seirai said he had gotten used to it, but there was no way anyone could get "used to" that.

Despite all that, Kouryou saw in Seirai's attitude an unwavering resolve. Sensing what had been communicated between them, Seirai focused his remaining eye on Kouryou.

"There is a man by the name of Sou Kouhei in Ba Province. The last I knew, he was in Gikou, not far from Iryou. He's probably moved around since, but he

definitely should have left a trail that you could follow. I think it is likely that Kouhei knows where to find Eishou.”

“He knows where Eishou-sama is—” Kouryou murmured in surprise.

Seirai nodded.

“Go to Gikou in Ba Province—”

“And search for Sou Kouhei. Say you are there to visit Fuki. They will know what you mean. This should prove most useful to Gyousou-sama.”

“Fuki. Understood.”

Taiki twisted away from Kouryou’s grasp. “Seirai—Kouryou—Please, I’m begging you—”

“No, I am the one begging you,” Seirai said in a clear and matter-of-fact voice. “In order to make sure His Highness takes possession of what is rightfully his, here I have planted my flag and will not yield an inch.”

Kouryou left the jail, half-dragging Taiki behind him, who was by now weeping with fury. Seirai saw Taiki off from the dark and gloomy corridor.

“A remarkable man,” Yari said, emerging from the shadows. She was equal parts impressed and amazed. “But it may get him killed.”

Taiki raised his head with a start while Kouryou nodded to himself. As long as Asen wanted to know what Seirai knew, he wouldn’t kill him on purpose. But Seirai ending up dead as the result of violence arising out of revenge was all too likely.

“Yari, you must do what you can to help.”

“That’s not possible,” she said without the slightest hesitation. “If he’d been left to rot here, I might agree to bringing him along. But he hasn’t been abandoned. He is questioned on a regular basis. If we brought him with us, his jailers would know at once who the culprit was.” Yari peered at Taiki’s face. “And the first person they would suspect is the Taiho. After all, the Taiho snuck into the Inner Palace on a previous occasion. He has the ability as well as a strong attachment to the prisoner. Means and motive. Would you want that all coming to light?”

“I don’t care.”

What an unusual creature he is, Yari thought. His emotions really had gotten the better of this calm and collected kirin.

“Your willingness to resort to violence will also come to light.”

Taiki looked at Yari, the shock of realization showing on his face.

“Well, they’re not likely to connect all the dots back to you. Kouryou and I are bound to fall under suspicion first. It is also possible that everyone in Nightingale Manor will end up implicated in the crime.”

Taiki bowed his head.

“The more important matter for now is how best to respect the dying wishes of that lionhearted man.”

“Yari, don’t say it like that.”

Yari shrugged. “I hope I’m wrong but I don’t believe I am. The odds of those being his last words are high. Whether or not he can be saved from his current state depends very much on what the Taiho does next.”

Taiki stared back at her. Yari nodded to herself. “First, Kouryou, you need to get out of here.”

Kouryou’s eyes widened in surprise. “That is—”

“Leave the Taiho to me. Someone has to go to Ba Province and that someone should be you. Weren’t you one of Eishou-dono’s retainers? If I went, simply trying to establish my bona fides would waste a ridiculous amount of time.”

“I see your point.”

Kouryou’s long-established ties to Eishou meant they could get down to business on the spot.

“And as long as you’re going, having escaped Nightingale Manor, now is your best opportunity to leave the palace.”

“Easy enough for you to say.”

“There’s nothing difficult about it at all. Pay Ganchou-sama a visit and I guarantee he can make the arrangements.”

“I can’t do that.” Kouryou was the Daiboku. He was responsible for Taiki. He had to refuse.

“Please go.”

Kouryou turned to see the firm resolve had returned to Taiki’s face.

“What happened here will come to light sooner than later. Seirai intends to bear all the blame by himself. Except nobody will believe that a man in his condition managed to free himself from his shackles, break out of the cell, kill the guard and then attempt to escape. Clearly, he must have had accomplices. The only question at that point is who.”

Yari agreed with him. “And if, at this point, Kouryou were to disappear, he’d become the obvious candidate, the accomplice who failed to get the job done. To be sure, suspicion will fall on me too, but I doubt anyone will lodge a formal complaint or press for an inquiry. There’s no evidence I was running the operation, so we should be able to keep everybody else out of it.”

“Taiho—”

“Please go to Ba Province. And promise me you will get there safely.”

For a moment, Kouryou appeared lost at sea. Then he nodded. Yari provided him with detailed instructions about how to find Ganchou. He confirmed the information with a curt bow and a “By your leave” and sprinted off.

Having decided to make good his escape, there was no time to spare. He had to leave the palace before the events of the night came to light and the security details went on high alert.

Yari watched as Kouryou vanished from their presence like a gust of wind. *That is no ordinary man*, she murmured to herself. She shifted her gaze to Taiki, his attention still focused on the departing Kouryou. *And there is no fox in this kingdom as sly as this kirin*.

Yari smiled to herself. Sensing the change in her demeanor, Taiki turned to her with a puzzled expression.

She said, "Let's get back to the villa. The sooner we put some distance between this place and us the better. Seirai no doubt plans on raising a fuss to cover our tracks. We should do him the favor of playing our part as well."

Taiki nodded, and set off at a run, as if following in Kouryou's footsteps.

I will decide who I call my lord and master. Yari recalled the meeting that got her sent to the Taiho's side. As long as they were both striving toward the same goal, who that was did not matter to her.

Yari and Taiki wasted no time returning the way they came. They arrived back at Nightingale Manor without once being stopped or challenged. They were making their way through the back garden when a great commotion erupted to the northeast. The guards must have tracked down Seirai.

I can only pray this all ends without him getting killed.

Yari didn't think Asen would have Seirai killed. The torture he'd suffered provided grounds for that belief. Asen had to keep Seirai alive if he wanted to recover the ledgers for the Imperial Treasury. She could only pray that the interrogators didn't get carried away and end up killing him while trying to extract that information.

When they entered the main hall of the villa, a nervous Juntatsu was waiting. Seeing Yari and Taiki, a look of relief rose to his face and he let out a long breath.

"You're all right—" he started to say, and then sensed the uncertainty in the air. He craned his head to the side and looked behind Yari. His expression changed. "What about Kouryou-sama?"

"He's in the wind," Yari said.

Juntatsu stood there stock still.

"And on the run. That's the strategy we agreed on. Kouryou won't be coming back. The story is that he simply disappeared at some point. Nobody knows why. Okay?"

Juntatsu blinked in surprise but nodded. He looked at Taiki, who had collapsed into the nearest chair.

"How is the Taiho faring?"

“The Taiho is suffering a fair amount of anguish. I suspect he’s been contaminated by blood.”

I’ll leave him in your capable hands.”

Raising an inarticulate cry of concern, Juntatsu hurried to Taiki’s side. With a glance back over her shoulder, Yari left the main hall. The courtyard was still and quiet. For the time being, peace and calm had returned to Nightingale Manor.

Once Seirai was found out, Chou’un was sure to suspect Taiki. Someone was bound to come running before long. With her directions in hand, Kouryou should avoid getting captured on his way to Ganchou’s manse. Once he got there, he could slip out of the palace with relative ease.

Ganchou had helped many government officials to escape. She’d provided Kouryou with the necessary passwords and could count on Ganchou applying his prodigious talents to the job.

She doubted Kouryou would face any great difficulties up to that point. She was more concerned about what he did after he left the Imperial Palace. But there was no point worrying about that at this juncture. Taiki was the problem she had to deal with now.

It wouldn’t take long once the civil servants started showing up for them to take note of Kouryou’s absence. The last time, a few simple diversionary tactics had done the trick. She didn’t think anybody was going to fall for them this time. The security detail had since been increased as well. Playing their cards poorly could expose the escape route through the back garden. If that happened, they truly would end up sealed inside the villa.

Their best bet was to play dumb, except Chou’un wouldn’t be fooled that easily. He would suspect them as a matter of course, convinced they were acting on Taiki’s orders. What would happen at that juncture? At some point, Yari would no longer be able to intervene. The rest would depend on Taiki.

It was anyone’s guess how this situation was going to play out.

Part Sixteen

Chapter 18

[16-1] Keitou arrived at the manor a little past noon. He was in a hurry and his face was filled with concern.

Later than I imagined, Yari mused to herself. She expected him to rush to the manor first thing in the morning. The civil service must have been thrown into confusion by the events of the night before. In any case, Keitou showed up at last and headed to the main hall, accompanied by a slender man a step behind him.

"I apologize for causing such a commotion, but there are inquiries the Minister of Summer wishes to make of the Taiho."

"What is going on here?" Taiki asked in a preternaturally calm voice. Though his complexion was a tad on the gray side, he deported himself with his usual vim and vigor.

The thin man scooted forward on his knees. "I beg the Taiho's pardon. I am Shukuyou, the Minister of Summer. As a matter of fact, last night, insurgents broke into the Inner Palace."

Taiki tipped his head to the side in apparent confusion. "Insurgents?"

"We are tracking down their whereabouts as we speak. I know this is terribly presumptuous of us, but we humbly ask that you allow us an audience with the Daiboku."

Taiki made a point of pondering the request. "I do not see what the Daiboku has to do with these insurgents you speak of."

"We only wish for him to hear us out. If you would, please."

To which Taiki responded, his demeanor all the more cool and composed, "Again, I fail to see any connection between my Daiboku and these so-called insurgents that you say entered the Inner Palace. What in the world happened there?"

Flustered by the demand for information, Shukuyou stumbled for a reply. "In fact, last night, a person or persons unknown trespassed into the Inner Palace. Several guards were killed before they retreated, covering their tracks."

"Did any harm come to Asen?"

"None whatsoever. As far as we can tell, their target was not His Highness."

"You don't say." Taiki sighed. "Then what was their objective?"

This question was also followed by a long silence. The bewildered Shukuyou finally put his thoughts together and explained, "They attempted to abduct a criminal being held in the Inner Palace."

"What criminal would this be?"

"I apologize, but I am not at liberty to divulge that information."

Taiki drew his mouth into a tight line. "Is this person actually a criminal?"

Shukuyou raised his head in surprise. "I am not sure what you mean by that question."

"It has come to my attention that many persons deemed inconvenient to the kingdom have been falsely accused of crimes and locked up. That is currently the fate of my Chief Cabinet Secretary. I have repeatedly requested that he be freed, or at the very least that I be allowed to see him, and have received no satisfactory response at all."

Even standing some distance away, Yari could tell that Shukuyou had been caught off guard. He never expected Taiki himself to bring up the subject. Assuming that Taiki had nothing to do with Seirai's attempted jailbreak, his *not* broaching the matter would have felt more unnatural.

My, my, but he is a shrewd one, Yari chuckled to herself.

"Nobody has been falsely accused of anything!" Shukuyou with great indignation. "All criminals taken into custody are done so on the basis of indisputable evidence. We would never allow a law-abiding subject of the kingdom to be arrested without incontrovertible proof of wrongdoing."

"Really? People routinely disappear from the Imperial Court for no reason whatsoever. Members of my own staff such as Heichuu and Tokuyuu and Shouwa. The kirin doctor and my Daiboku as well."

"The Daiboku?"

"We have seen neither hide nor hair of Kouryou since this morning, even after a thorough search of the premises. Come to think about it, Kouryou had recently begun behaving in a strange manner, much the same as Heichuu and Tokuyuu did before they disappeared. Some sort of change came over them and we were subsequently informed they had been sent to work in the Inner Palace. Our requests to see them were denied. We are not allowed to see them, and they have not been permitted to visit us. I am forced to conclude that they have been detained against their will."

"Such a thing—" Shukuyou started to say, but Taiki wasn't finished.

"Petitions to meet with past retainers and old acquaintances such as Rousan and Ganchou have also been rejected. Is that because they as well are being held prisoner? Or are you saying I lack the authority and the agency to see them?"

Shukuyou couldn't come up with an answer.

“I was separated from the kingdom for a long period of time. I am also a taika. I accept it as inevitable that I will not be taken seriously. However, I cannot condone these unreasonable incarcerations. And if they are *not* being detained, if something untoward has been inflicted upon their persons, Heaven will not turn a blind eye to the actions that left them in a such a state.”

“But, of course—”

With a flurry of prevarications, Shukuyou exited the manor rather like a man fleeing for his life.

Knowing Kouryou wasn't there should be all the information he needed for now. He would undoubtedly visit Chou'un forthwith and report to him as much. Chou'un had surely already concluded that Kouryou was the intruder from the night before. But no matter how much he might want to state his personal conviction that Taiki handed down the orders, the subject would simply not be up for discussion.

If Chou'un brought up the matter, Taiki would demand to know why he couldn't meet with Heichuu and Tokuyuu and Seirai and Ganchou. Should the Taiho call for an investigation, the Chousai had no actual standing to deny the request. That left him with the option of going public with his disregard for the rank and position of the Saiho. Or he could keep a lid on these untoward incidents and abandon any further pursuit of the matter.

Given the choice, Chou'un inevitably chose the latter course. This Imperial Court was riven with rival factions, all of them eager to bare their fangs if they sensed a gap in his armor.

Left standing there with a puzzled look on his face was Keitou. “Taiho, about Kouryou disappearing—”

Taiki nodded. “We haven't seen him since this morning. He didn't show up at the usual time to change shifts with Yari. We checked his room but he wasn't there. He doesn't appear to have returned to his room since last night.” Taiki let out a sad sigh. “He had been behaving strangely of late. I'm sure you noticed as well, Keitou.”

“Yes, well, to tell the truth, I thought he had been looking more tired than usual.”

It had occurred to Keitou that Kouryou had been afflicted by the illness, though he did seem to be improving.

“That was the conclusion I came to as well. Kouryou has been at my side all along. I thought it only natural that he should be getting worn out. On the other hand, Heichuu and Tokuyuu exhibited the same symptoms too. I can't help but worry that the same thing happened to him.”

“Indeed,” Keitou agreed.

“An additional concern is *who* is behind his disappearance. I wouldn't object if Kouryou and the others were simply being held somewhere for their own good. But if their lives and well-being are being placed in jeopardy, it is not out of the realm of

possibility that Heaven would withdraw the Divine Will it has bestowed. If these acts are being done on Asen-sama's orders, then he should be stopped. If other individuals are responsible, then the criminals putting the kingdom in such distress must be hunted down and removed."

"I will discuss the matter with Chou'un-dono."

"If you would, please," Taiki answered with a nod.

At that moment, Yari's countenance abruptly changed. Startled at the taut expression that rose to her face, Keitou followed her gaze. Glancing over his shoulder in the direction of the back garden, he froze in astonishment.

Through the glass doors facing the garden appeared the figure of a man. Taiki bounded to his feet as if bodily thrown from the chair.

Asen was standing there.

Chapter 19

[16-2] Asen strode into the main hall. "Of course. This is where you end up."

Taiki made the first move. With a respectful bow, he gestured for Asen to have a seat. Asen settled onto the ottoman. With a gracious mien, Taiki knelt in front of the ottoman.

"Your sudden arrival caught us all by surprise."

"Well, seeing that you were able to sneak up on me, I figured I should be able to return the favor." Asen smiled to himself.

"Being able or not is beside the point. It is a breach of protocol for His Highness to visit Jinjuu Manor without permission, quite beyond the bounds of propriety."

Taiki's objection only prompted stifled laughter. "You know, intruders entered *my* domain last night."

"So I've heard."

"Seemed they came to rescue the Chief Cabinet Secretary." Asen wasted no time beating around the bush. "They dispatched the guards and attempted to free the Chief Cabinet Secretary but failed to achieve that objective in the end. Retracing their steps brought me here. What do you make of that?"

"Surely you jest," Taiki said, equally point blank. He knew for a certainty they had left no trail that could be tracked.

Asen smirked. "I see. You're not about to fall into such a simple trap."

"More importantly, didn't you just mention the Chief Cabinet Secretary? And that someone tried to rescue Seirai?"

"That's the gist of it."

"And yet they failed."

"Well, maybe they did. Then again, maybe they didn't."

Taiki gave Asen a blank look.

"They were apparently not able to extricate Seirai from his predicament. The question is, why weren't they?"

"And why weren't they?"

"The intruders made contact with Seirai. They eliminated the guards securing the perimeter. Seirai claims it was all his doing, but that is quite impossible. Without a doubt, the intruders cleared away the security and made contact with Seirai but then left him behind. There was no good reason for them to do so. The guards on patrols above ground were still unaware of their presence."

Taiki looked back at Asen and said again nothing.

“They could have easily brought Seirai along when they fled. But they did not. Why didn’t they?”

“I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage here, as I am not familiar with the particulars of the situation.”

“You do know when to be discreet,” Asen said with a grin. “Perhaps they concluded they couldn’t make their escape with Seirai in tow. Or perhaps having accomplished their objective, there was no need for him to accompany them. Which of the two options strikes your fancy?”

“Accomplished their objective?”

“The ledgers. The Chief Cabinet Secretary is a thief who made off with the wealth of the kingdom. What did he do with them? I always suspected he’d passed them on to Gyousou’s subordinates. But that these intruders should break in *now* just to make contact with him persuades me otherwise. In fact, I don’t think Seirai ever had the opportunity to give them to any of his retainers. In short, he hid the ledgers and hasn’t since been able to pass them on. Somebody had to meet with him in person to find out where they were. Seirai wasn’t the objective. The objective was the location of the ledgers. As he would only become a hindrance, he was left behind. Seirai may have even chosen to do so. A satisfactory outcome if the ledgers found their way into the hands of his retainers.” Asen paused and said, “So, what do you think?”

Taiki furrowed his brow. Asen’s version of the events was slightly off target, but in a way that he couldn’t very well evaluate right here and now.

“In any case, I do not see your bodyguard around.”

“You mean Kouryou? He definitely has not made an appearance today. I have been inquiring about him as well.” Taiki pointed out that Heichuu and Tokuyuu and several of his servants had gone missing as well. “An illness seems to be spreading throughout the Imperial Palace. I am concerned that Kouryou has contracted this disease as well.”

“Or else he ran away,” Asen said. “The intruder most likely was Kouryou. He returned to Hakkei Palace in the first place to search for the ledgers. You lent him a hand.”

“I did?” Taiki slowly shook his head. “In other words, are you saying that I cooperated with Kouryou on behalf of Gyousou-sama’s retainers? If that was true, I surely wouldn’t still be here, would I?”

“I imagine you still have goals of your own.”

“Like getting in touch with Gyousou-sama’s retainers?”

“No?”

Taiki said with a wry smile, “Supposing that I did return to the palace to get in touch with his retainers, I would not have stayed a minute longer than necessary. Abandoning Seirai would be no less out of the question. I would have vanished from

the palace along with Kouryou and taken Seirai with me. Nothing would have made me happier than to pull off such a feat.”

“And why didn’t you?”

Taiki sighed. “Because that is not why I returned. I very much doubt Kouryou is the intruder that *you* speak of. Even in the off chance that he is, I am the last person on earth who would have cooperated with him. To start with, the ledgers belong to the people of Tai.”

Tai looked straight at Asen. “Let me see Seirai. I will persuade him to reveal the location of the ledgers. Winter is coming and Tai will only get colder. The support of the kingdom becomes all the more necessary. That makes the ledgers all the more necessary. However Seirai may have believed he was doing the right thing concealing them on Gyousou-sama’s behalf, it is not the right thing to do now.”

“That is out of the question.”

“Why not?”

“Do you really think you can convince him to give them up?”

“Seirai is a rational man. He will see reason once I explain that he would be doing so on behalf of the people. He won’t give the ledgers to you because he does not believe you will use them in such a manner. If I ask him to entrust them to me, I think it is likely he will understand. Furthermore, if Seirai himself put forth the request that they be used under my auspices and for the good of the people, I believe the possibility is high he would reveal their whereabouts.”

Asen responded with a cynical smile. “And what of the Imperial Court under *my* auspices?”

“It’s complicated. Asen-sama being the emperor, I would serve you as a matter of course. The same goes for the Chief Cabinet Secretary. Should he refuse no matter what, he would have to be removed from his position. But I do believe I can persuade him in regards to the ledgers.”

Asen narrowed his eyes and studied Taiki’s face. “Am I the emperor?”

“I have said so many times already. You are the emperor. Have you not been convinced?”

Asen did not answer. He stared at Taiki as if attempting to divine his true intentions. “No covenant has been made.”

Taiki answered in a cool tone of voice, “Because no abdication has taken place.”

“In other words, what?” A smile filled with scorn rose to Asen’s face. “With no covenant between us, I should take you at your word and march Gyousou in here? And if he refuses to abdicate?”

“The result of such an outcome all depends on the Will of Heaven. That is far beyond my ken.”

Asen sprang to his feet. He grabbed Taiki by the arm and yanked him toward him. “You think you can only do what is convenient for you?” he spit out. He seized hold of Taiki’s head and pushed him down to the floor. “Pledge your fealty. The rest will take care of itself.”

For a moment, Taiki raised his head and looked at Asen. A stone-cold expression filled Asen’s features. Asen couldn’t bring himself to trust Taiki. As a result, he couldn’t move. Without getting Asen to act, there’d be no way for the people of Tai to tide over the winter. Even given that Asen wouldn’t lift a finger to help his own subjects, if he didn’t at least step forward and bring Chou’un to heel, it’d be almost impossible for Taiki to do anything on his own.

“Please stop!” Juntatsu cried in distress, forcing himself between them. “No matter what Heaven may say, surely no new covenant can be forged when there are two emperors at large.”

Asen didn’t answer. He only wordless turned his icy cold eyes on Juntatsu.

Rising to Juntatsu’s defense, Keitou stepped forward. “It is not for us to put the Divine Will to the test. Doing so would be akin to blasphemy.”

At that moment, Taiki softly raised his voice. “Keitou, it is all right.”

Keitou turned to Taiki in stark surprise. Taiki looked back at him, a look of firm resolution on his face.

“Without a covenant between us, I should not expect Asen-sama to simply take me at my word. Doesn’t that explain why he keeps putting off the enthronement?”

Without waiting for Asen to respond, Taiki corrected his posture. *Asen must be compelled to take action*, he thought. He had once before tried to see what happened, but a kirin could not kowtow to anyone but the emperor. Not that he possessed a frame of mind that prevented him from doing so. He *physically* could not do so. Except this too must be akin to the problem of shedding blood, a barrier he could break using his will alone.

Taiki faced Asen and planted his hands on the ground. “I shall never part from thee nor disobey thy decrees. My fealty I hereby pledge—”

His forehead touched the cold darkness and stopped.

“—in covenant to thee.”

“I accept.”

He thought it was impossible when all he had to do was put down his hands and cross that mere distance.

That was all it took.

The inorganic gray ground rose up in his mind’s eye, carnage covering the bare concrete. This was a mere sliver of space compared to the gulf between the roof and the ground.

The abyss leading directly to death yawned open at the feet of the victims. Petrified by the fear of death right before their eyes, they got pushed off the roof. Following the logical chain of cause and effect, it was ultimately Taiki who pushed them. Could he now allow himself to claim that this distance was unbridgeable?

If he could marshal his will to kill, he could cross this distance as well.

Taiki lowered his head. He wrestled with the resisting force and sank his skull into the darkness. The pain was real, like a spike driven through his forehead, a throbbing pain that pierced his brain to the back of his head, that threatened to break through the bone with every beat of his heart.

Except their bodies too were likewise destroyed.

The pain racking his whole frame hardly compared. At that moment, Taiki was little more than a vessel filled with agony. But nothing compared to the pain *he* must have felt while being trampled underfoot by his classmates. Those torn apart in the jaws of his shirei. The destruction of the temple gates, the collapse of the wing facing the school quadrangle, the senseless death and fear—he who had sown such suffering was hardly qualified to complain about his own.

He reached the depths of the darkness. Amidst his pounding pulse and ringing ears, he heard Asen muttering something. Taiki couldn't move. Someone placed a hand on his shoulder. He raised his upper body and looked up. Juntatsu's face twisted with concern.

"Taiho—"

The voice came from far away. His vision misted red.

"Taiho, what happened to your eyes?"

My eyes?

He blinked. His vision slightly cleared. At the same time, something wet and warm spilled from his eyes and ran down his cheeks. Juntatsu wiped it away. His fingers came away stained with blood.

"Are you all right?"

Taiki nodded. There in front of him, Asen turned away.

"I'm fine. It turns out this body was indeed created by the Lord God of the Heavens. It doesn't really hurt so it must be some sort of auspicious sign."

Chapter 20

[16-3] The man who emerged from the manor caught Boushuku completely by surprise.

That day, Boushuku had been on guard duty at the front gate since early in the morning. He hadn't observed the man entering the villa, nor had he been notified that the Taiho would be receiving visitors. He could only conclude that here was someone who was not supposed to be there. It seemed a startling lapse in security at first, except that Keitou was seeing the man off, so he was unlikely to be an actual trespasser.

Boushuku concluded he must be a nobleman of one sort or the other. Standing there in amazement, he was about to raise his voice when Gogetsu let out a startled shout. More than startled, he appeared to Boushuku to be downright petrified.

At least Gogetsu knows who he is.

Boushuku was on the verge of forming this thought into a question when Gogetsu fell to his knees like he'd been punched in the back of his head.

"*His Highness*," Boushuku heard him whisper. Boushuku froze for a moment in shock and then hastily mimicked Gogetsu and knelt there on the ground.

That is Asen? he wondered. Not once when he was posted at the Inner Palace had he seen the emperor with his own eyes. His muscles tensed up so much his body trembled from the strain. But at the same time he couldn't stop another question from stealing into his thoughts.

When and how did he get into Nightingale Manor?

Boushuku felt like he had beheld some sort of miracle. He literally shook in his boots. Right there in front of him, Keitou humbly bade the emperor goodbye and he left the compound.

Gogetsu frantically called for a security detail. Director Fukushou ran up. Starting with Gogetsu, the director summoned the reserve junior retainers and organized an honor guard there on the spot. They formed a column and escorted Asen from the premises.

The emperor simply passed by Boushuku as he knelt there. He said nothing, did not meet his gaze. A chance meeting with no lasting meaning. Except Boushuku was deeply impressed, delighted to have finally seen the emperor in person, and all the happier that Asen had met with Taiki. He had heard that Asen paid Taiki no heed, but was convinced now that couldn't be true.

Whether he was taking care of some task or simply paying Taiki a visit, that he had left the Rokushin for the express purpose of meeting with the Saiho came as a great relief.

“How wonderful,” he murmured aloud, though the emotions reflected on the face of Director Fukushou were considerably more complex.

Gogetsu walked alongside the emperor in a state of no little confusion.

Gogetsu hadn't seen his old commander in quite some time. Once Asen might have called out to him in a cheerful voice and he would have responded the same way. But in the intervening years, the distance between the lord and his retainer had grown to an unfathomable degree. And then there was the stony hard look on his face.

As far as Gogetsu knew, this was not a man whose temperaments changed like the weather. The expression he wore was no window into his soul. Nonetheless, Gogetsu could tell that Asen was agitated and was carrying a great weight on his mind.

What happened in there?

His own thoughts brimmed with questions that he dared not give voice to. He gave Asen, his head bowed in thought, a sidelong glance.

Asen raised his head and looked back at Gogetsu, a spark of recognition in his eyes. “Gogetsu?” he said, as if realizing for the first time he was there. “So you were a member of the Taiho's detail. I wasn't aware.”

Here was the old commander Gogetsu once knew. Though immensely pleased, the moment was equally painful.

I served at your side not long ago.

They had not been allowed to approach him, but he had been on Asen's personal security detail. Gogetsu answered with a silent nod.

“Gogetsu,” Asen said with a bob of his head, a gesture familiar to all his retainers. As he had once before, Gogetsu walked alongside Asen, matching his long strides.

“It's been a while. How are you doing?”

“Well enough,” Gogetsu answered. He wasn't sure whether the cheerful sort of response that had once been normal was still appropriate.

Asen looked at him with an air of expectation, as if waiting for the corresponding question that naturally came next in this kind of conversation. Gogetsu added, “More importantly, it's good to see Your Highness in such fine spirits.”

“Your Highness,” Asen muttered to himself. “So you consider me the emperor?”

“Of course!” Gogetsu answered at once, with an intensity that surprised even himself. “I have always considered Asen-sama the rightful emperor. That has never changed.”

Asen ranked above Emperor Kou and Gyousou. That conviction alone had never wavered.

"You don't say," Asen said, an enigmatic expression on his face.

Gogetsu was familiar with that look. Fukushou reacted the same way whenever Boushuku exulted in his guileless way about Asen's accession. Without realizing it, Gogetsu suspected that he did too.

The thought occurred to him that perhaps Asen felt guilty about striking down Gyousou. Maybe he regretted what he did and blamed himself for the aftermath. That was why he retreated to the depths of the Imperial Palace and refused any contact with the outside world.

"It's good to hear that the matter of your enthronement has finally been settled."

"You don't say," Asen said again. The expression on his face didn't change.

Escorted by the security detail from Nightingale Manor, Asen returned to the Inner Palace, where only the hollow-eyed mannequins waited to greet him. Turning away from their expressionless faces, he saw Gogetsu politely bowing to him.

I have always considered Asen-sama the rightful emperor.

Gogetsu's words weighed on his mind. Up until now, his retainers must have harbored no end of complicated thoughts and theories. He could not help but pity them, what with all the grief he had put them through. Their faces rising up in his mind, he entered the Rokushin, only to discover he had a most unwelcome guest.

Rousan flashed an ironic smile as soon as he walked in. "Quite the ruckus you raised in there."

Asen stopped. "What are you talking about?"

"Like forcing the Taiho to swear his fealty?" This time her accompanying smile was tinged more by scorn.

"A covenant means nothing based on words alone."

"You are right on that."

Rousan threw herself onto the ottoman like she owned the place. Her insolence was a part of her nature and she made no attempt to hide whatever contempt she felt for Asen. Which was why he couldn't help liking her so much more than Chou'un and all the mannequins. Yet another character trait he loathed about himself.

"Except the Divine Will still rests with Gyousou. Heaven choosing you as the new emperor still depends on Gyousou-sama abdicating first. It simply shouldn't be possible for the kirin to promise you anything."

"Yes, but Taiki made the vow."

"That kirin is a monster. There is nothing normal about him. Be that as it may, your demand was utterly unreasonable. You knew it was and did it anyway, didn't you? There you go, upsetting another apple cart."

“Like I said, what are you talking about?”

“Seirai.” That cynical smile returned. “Seirai will never yield to you. Kouryou snuck in and got close enough to make contact with the prisoner.” Rousan smirked. “You may have stolen the throne but Seirai will never accept it. He’ll never recognize you as emperor. That’s why he made off with the ledgers and squirreled them away somewhere. You can call yourself the emperor of this kingdom all you want, but you still don’t have the ledgers and you couldn’t convince Seirai to tell you where they are. All you could do was imprison and torture him. Seirai wouldn’t bend then and he won’t now. Far from it, the only reason you keep torturing him is for the sake of torturing him. Because he is the personification of your everlasting shame.”

Asen shot Rousan a piercing glare.

“Hoh. You could kill a person with a look like that. A little too close for comfort, eh?” Rousan laughed. “And then, of all things, you put that shame on display for Gyousou’s retainers and made sure the Taiho knew all about it too. You’ve gone rogue. Or maybe you’re just jealous. Besides those mannequins, the only people answering to you are petty officials like Chou’un and his ilk. None of them would go to the same lengths on your behalf. You’re jealous of Gyousou-sama and took it out on the Taiho.”

Asen ground his teeth and turned away. “He pledged his fealty. How else am I supposed to interpret that?”

“The Taiho possesses the will of a monster when it comes to making the impossible possible. But this is one case where all the will in the world won’t make a difference. What is possible is only possible if Heaven says so.” She concluded with a disinterested shrug of her shoulders.

“You seem dissatisfied.”

“Of course I’m dissatisfied. You are a thief. The emperor of this kingdom is Gyousou-sama. Heaven should have no doubts about that. And yet—” She paused and then spit out, “It’s so bloody *exasperating!*”

Asen was completely taken aback. Rousan was Gyousou’s retainer. She despised Asen and recognized neither his position nor his authority. Nevertheless, Rousan was perfectly happy to collaborate in his usurpation. Whatever reservations Asen may have harbored, Rousan always showed up to fan the flames.

I have no idea what she is thinking.

Though perhaps Rousan found herself in the same boat.

Once before, on that fateful day as well, she’d said the same thing, that he was jealous of Gyousou. He denied it, of course, but Rousan didn’t put any stock in that answer either. She only smiled as if to say she already knew his real motivations.

Asen himself had to wonder where the truth lay.

Someone in the palace reached out to Seirai. He was in his rights to get worked up about hearing it was Taiki's Daiboku. So he went rogue, as Rousan put it, and forced a pledge of fealty out of Taiki. Rousan's version of events wasn't all wrong. Except he had no awareness of any sort of jealousy. He was simply irate. If the Daiboku was behind this, then he would have only done so at the direction of Taiki.

Just as Rousan said, Seirai was nothing but a blot on his name and reputation. Furious that Taiki, of all people, should have brought that to light, he wished to crush them all underfoot.

Jealousy had nothing to do with it. He had retainers who worked as hard and smart as the Daiboku, retainers as loyal and devoted as Taiki. The man he'd just met, for example. He had every reason to believe that Gogetsu was as capable as the Daiboku. Asen had no reason to envy Gyousou.

Mulling over these thoughts, Asen stood on the balcony and turned his gaze toward the sea. The Sea of Clouds was muddy gray, meaning the world below was clouded over.

That fateful day when Rousan said to his face that he would never become Gyousou's equal, no matter how much he struggled. What Asen felt at that moment was definitely *not* jealousy.

If he had to place a name on the feeling, it would be *darkness*.

The despair of forever being labeled the imitator, the hollowed out feeling of never being able to rise beyond his station in life. He was suffocating, gasping for air, and yet there was no escape, nowhere he could run.

So Asen rose up in revolt.

He separated Gyousou and Taiki. He convinced Taiki to send his shirei to aide Gyousou. With Taiki left defenseless, Asen would sever his horn, seal his powers, and imprison him. He'd lock Gyousou away as well. Thus the throne would fall into Asen's hands.

Rousan happily offered him advice. She even made youma available to him in large numbers. Asen didn't know how Rousan manipulated youma that, by rights, only the kirin should be able to control, and Rousan wasn't offering any explanations. She somehow pulled it off with amulets and talismans, taught Asen the techniques, and lent him many youma.

The one possibility they hadn't accounted for was Taiki triggering a meishoku and escaping to Hourai. Rousan pointed out that these results left him as good as imprisoned, and with his horn severed, he could not return.

The throne belonged to Asen. Except his accession was decidedly strange. The civil service and the people asked him to serve as provisional emperor and looked to him as such. But only at first. Little by little, the doubts started growing. Of course, Asen was cognizant of this as well. The original plan was to have Taiki behind him with a

sealed horn. Taiki wasn't there, and so Asen lost that symbol of Heaven's authority to back up his claim.

His only recourse was to stamp out those suspicions. In the process of sweeping away Gyousou's retainers, reducing the hostile forces arrayed against him to rubble, and setting up a government that answered only to him, Asen's status as a usurper became clear to any objective observer. At the same time, one more thing became perfectly clear.

Even after Gyousou disappeared from the scene, Asen remained nothing more than an imitation of the real thing. Whatever Asen did, someone was bound to say that Gyousou would have done it faster and better. No matter how slight the stumble, they said Gyousou never would have made such a mistake.

Asen's accumulated irritation upset his efforts to purge Gyousou's allies with any kind of finesse. Asen instead became obsessed with eradicating Gyousou. As long as any vestige of Gyousou remained, the comparisons would continue. Gyousou's retainers and allies were bound to weigh him and Gyousou on the same scale and find him wanting.

The thought terrified him, terrified him so much he careened from one extreme to the other. As a result, the youma he unleashed summoned more of their kind until the youma had a free rein and the kingdom began to collapse. The civil service and the people alike longed for Gyousou.

Compared to Asen, this short-lived emperor now took on the qualities of an infallible saint in their memories.

Asen had wrung his own neck, much the same as when Gyousou resigned his commission and descended to the world below. In his absence, he grew all the more perfect, his presence all the stronger when he was no longer there. Having been deposed after such a brief reign, he could now do no wrong. None of the expectations that attended the accession of an emperor could be betrayed, and that collective beatification bestowed on him a status that would persist forever.

Asen should have seen it coming. That lack of foresight was his own mistake.

Asen stole the throne, only to end up a pale shadow of the brilliant emperor who lived on in the memories of his subjects. No matter how he struggled, he could never surpass Gyousou. Could such despair even be called jealousy?

"If Gyousou were here, he'd have himself a good laugh," Asen muttered to himself.

"A good laugh? And why is that?"

"The world is paying a man no mind, and yet this man willfully chooses to wrap himself in enmity, picks a fight with the world, and subsequently ruins himself. I've seen so many go down that path. And to be honest, it always made me chuckle."

Rousan craned her head to one side. "The world was paying you no mind? You mean Gyousou-sama? Whoever told you that?"

Wondering what she was getting at, Asen glanced over his shoulder at Rousan.

“Of course, Gyousou-sama was entirely aware of you. You were the competition and he wasn’t about to fall behind. Isn’t that how you pictured the relationship between the two of you?”

“That was hardly the case. After all, Gyousou quit the contest and descended to the world below.”

“Because he was still in the fight,” Rousan said in amazement. “Gyousou-sama wasn’t one to confuse the ends and the means.”

Meaning what? Asen didn’t have time to ask before Rousan continued.

“How are you and Gyousou-sama different? The problem was who would shine brighter in the eyes of Emperor Kyou. You didn’t want to come in second behind Gyousou-sama. For you, it was all about winning the favor of Emperor Kyou, wasn’t it? Thus you chose to follow his unreasonable orders. As a result, you won the big promotion, not Gyousou-sama.”

“Because adhering to the Way took precedence for him.”

Rousan held up a finger. “No. In the end, Gyousou-sama was always competing about who was the better man. So you should have clarified what social status or acclaim or the favor of Emperor Kyou meant in that context. You took an appointment by the emperor to mean you were the better man. In the process, you lost track of what you were fighting over. No matter what, you sought the approval of Emperor Kyou. You wanted more promotions and the status that came with them. But Gyousou-sama never forgot what the competition was really about.”

Asen stared at her in blank amazement.

“And so you ended up a thief. I should hardly be surprised that you twisted yourself into knots pursuing something so utterly lacking in substance.”

Chapter 21

[16-4] The snow fell in curtains across Bun Province.

Rin'u was no exception. The fine white flakes drifted down from the sky without end. The snow melted during breaks in the storms, but never all of it. Winds swept across a frozen snowpack that grew deeper and deeper.

They set off on their journey in the fall. Almost before they knew it, winter had arrived, the snow piled up, and a new year dawned.

Bun Province really is cold.

Risai gazed at the whitewashed mountains. She could still make out the green of the mountain pine trees. Though flocked with snow, the trees were not yet completely covered. When she was stationed in Jou Province, she experienced snowfalls that quickly reached her waist. It never snowed that heavy or deep in Bun Province. The falling snow simply never let up amidst the bone-chilling cold.

Six days after their encounter with Shoushitsu, he paid her a visit at the safe house.

"Again, sorry about the other day. Hoyou-sama would like to see you. If possible, she's extended an invitation to Gamon Temple."

"We'll be there," Risai said.

Houto and Kenchuu remained behind in Rin'u to prepare for the upcoming move. Risai, Seishi, and Kyoshi set off for Gamon Temple, Hoyou having provided them with two kijuu to make the journey.

"Are you sure this is okay?" a nervous Kyoshi wondered aloud.

"You'll be fine," Shoushitsu assured him, handing him the reins to a blue kijuu that resembled a horse. "As you can see, hardly different than riding a horse. Of course, the kijuu does the riding for you so it's a lot more comfortable."

Shoushitsu explained that the kijuu Hoyou lent them regularly made the rounds between Rin'u and Hakurou.

"They know the road to Gamon Temple. They'll deliver you to the destination even if you take a nap along the way."

"Oh," said Kyoshi, though with no more confidence than before.

Risai grinned at him and then said to Houto and Kenchuu, "We'll leave the moving chores in your hands. Thus far I've only discussed the particulars with Kyuusan."

Houto and Kenchuu agreed, and Risai, Seishi, and Kyoshi left Rin'u. With the kijuu making good time, the journey to Gamon Temple would take three days. As planned, they entered the gate at Gamon Temple around noon.

They once again met Hoyou in the main pagoda of Gamon Temple.

"So you're searching for the Kouin, eh?" Hoyou said out of the blue as she lounged there amidst the opulence and splendor of the main hall. When Risai craned her head to the side in apparent confusion, she added, "The most precious treasure in the kingdom, lost on Kan'you Mountain."

Gyousou.

"Yes, we are. We are still looking for it."

"Some are calling that flawed stone in Kouki the Kouin."

Risai nodded. But, she explained, there seems to have been some sort of mistake. "According to Moku'u-dono at Sekirin Temple."

"If Moku'u says so, it must be true. Moku'u has a clear window into the state of affairs in Kouki." Hoyou furrowed her brows. "There is no outside chance the individual in question has passed away, is there?"

"None, so the story goes."

Hoyou signed. "And then? Are the refugees aware of his whereabouts?"

"Nothing has been confirmed. He met with an unforeseen misfortune on Kan'you Mountain. We are certain he moved somewhere else after that, but don't think he did so alone. At the time, there were refugees and displaced persons were coming and going from Kan'you Mountain, searching for stones in the mine tailings."

"You think they may have lent a hand? Yet no such rumors have surfaced among them. We have heard talk of a precious gemstone—a real stone—being discovered in the depths of a mineshaft and brought back to the surface."

"We're talking about somebody digging up the actual Kouin?"

Hoyou nodded. "Probably not the *actual* Kouin. We have handled gemstones of the sort. Clear jade, though not as brilliantly transparent as the rumors suggest, and paler than the expected green."

The word was that men in disguise brought in shards of jade from a source stone that had been divided into many pieces.

"That source stone must have been quite large. Probably much bigger than the legendary Kouin. Stones like that show up on Kan'you Mountain now and then. Stones that had been buried beneath landslides, cultured stones from gemstone fountains cut off from human access and left to grow. But those kinds of finds have declined of late. Our brokers are seeing very few high-quality stones these days."

"How detailed is the information you are gathering from the refugees?"

"Fairly," Hoyou said with a smile. "There are many refugees and displaced persons out and about, with the latter making up the majority."

“In your employ?” Risai asked.

A grin rose to Hoyou’s face. “As I’ve said, we make use of what’s useful.”

“But employed how?” Risai pressed. When Hoyou didn’t answer, she pressed, “For example, smelting ore and refining steel? Maybe manufacturing weapons?”

Hoyou finally nodded. “Weapons are necessary, in any case.”

“Hoyou-dono—”

Of course, Hoyou was manufacturing weapons. In her own words, she made use of what was useful and spread her wealth around however she saw fit. She bought the dilapidated Gamon Temple, turned it into a villa, and there gathered together refugees and displaced persons burned out of the nearby towns, the tattered remnants of the forces allied against Asen, along with anyone possessed of a rebellious spirit.

“Regular arms and winter weapons.”

When Hoyou set forth to build her own mountain villa of the gods, she assembled a large number of carpenters and craftsmen, but the majority of the workers there were swordsmiths tasked with forging winter weapons.

“I heard the White Pheasant had not fallen from its perch. That being the case, the day will come when it will become necessary to arm ourselves. The problem is gathering the people who know how to use them. Mostly what we have here are refugees and rebels. Whatever soldiers might be among them mostly come from the lower ranks. Too few with the knowledge and ability to lead an army that could seriously threaten Kouki. But we will make sure we are prepared.” Hoyou smiled.

“Risai would certainly be useful in that regard.”

For a moment, Risai was at a loss for words.

“Why else would a general be searching for His Highness?”

“When and if that time comes, I would be grateful to serve.”

Hoyou nodded. “And until it does, please make use of us as you see fit.”

Risai, Seishi, and Kyoshi were led deeper into Gamon Temple. The valley cut a deep and narrow notch in the mountains. Among the many arbors and buildings lining the valley floor, they caught glimpses of gardens reconstructed after ancient styles, often incongruously interrupted by rustic workshops and sturdy storehouses manned by equally stalwart individuals who very much embodied a chivalrous spirit.

Given the number of people gathered there and the large amounts of goods and materials, the delicate matter of winter weapons aside, arms were certainly being collected and stockpiled in significant amounts.

“This much military matériel—” Risai found herself at a loss for words.

“Weaponry and provisions,” Hoyou said. “And kijuu. Kijuu are harder to come by, but we’ve managed to get our hands on a fair number. Your companions should

choose mounts for themselves and take them with you. Not having good transportation on hand is awfully inconvenient.”

“Are you sure?”

“No problem at all. We’ve been rounding up kijuu trained to not be so particular about their riders.”

“Why go to such lengths?” Risai wondered aloud, her voice trembling with amazement.

“Well.” Hoyou smiled. “Yes, I suppose you might find it strange. The merchants who indulged in profiteering during the reign of Emperor Kyou and amassed fortunes are now raising an army.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily call it profiteering.”

“Oh, it was profiteering. Emperor Kyou always paid the asking price, no questions asked. So of course we overcharged like crazy.”

And if Hoyou wasn’t in a selling mood, there were plenty of other dealers happy to hawk their wares to the highest bidder. In any case, Emperor Kyou not getting his hands on a particular precious stone didn’t mean he would stop exploiting his subjects. However they abhorred Emperor Kyou’s policies, refusing to do business with him would in no way benefit the people.

At the same time, Hoyou despised welfare for the sake of welfare. Ostentation became her way of spreading the wealth around. The purchase of an article of luxurious clothing meant the money trickled down to every person connected with its production and sale, an outcome she approved of.

And then at some point, willing to take on far greater risks, that philosophy came to justify amassing arms and recruiting rebels.

The direct turning point was the disappearance of the emperor and the cessation of any news about him. Someone had deposed the emperor. That meant he would rise up again to reclaim the throne. If a war had to be waged against the pretender, she would ally herself with the rightful ruler.

Except Hoyou did not count herself among the righteous. She was not a person who pursued justice at all costs. No matter how much outrage she felt toward Emperor Kyou’s profligacy and the pretender’s despotism, she was not a noble soul whose righteous indignation would motivate her to rise up and take a moral stand.

Had Hoyou been a high-minded individual with a strong sense of right and wrong, she would have shared all that accumulated wealth with the poor and downtrodden. But philanthropy and charity work did not interest her in the slightest.

Then why was she going to such lengths? Hoyou didn’t really understand it herself. If forced to explain herself, she dispensed of her wealth however she saw fit, and that was what she was doing right now.

“Well, I really don’t like the way the pretender does things. I’ve got no use for the way he throws his weight around. Makes me want to hit back just as hard. Except I couldn’t reach him even standing on my tiptoes. So if someone is willing to deliver that blow on my behalf, I’ll lend them my support behind the scenes. I guess that’s what it comes down to.”

Risai nodded. But Gamon Temple was far more than a place that lent people support behind the scenes. Support on such a scale invited great risks.

“How many people do you have here?”

“We have gathered valiant souls from around the region. The rebels and champions of justice hiding out in Hakurou come to around two thousand.”

“That many? How could such a large force in the very shadow of the province lord escape the attention from the powers that be?”

“Precisely *because* we are in the shadow of the province lord,” Hoyou explained, a wry smile rising to her face. “The illness has spread to the provincial palace.”

“So I’ve heard. The province lord was one of the first to succumb.”

“And not only him. Many of the top ministers as well.”

But wouldn’t that make things all the more precarious? Risai had heard that infected people didn’t simply stop resisting Asen but began supporting him, willing to do as they were told, no questions asked.

“The reality is somewhat different. To be sure, people with the disease do submit unconditionally to Asen’s will. But what that really means is they comply mechanically with his instructions. They’re not trying to curry favor with him. Rather, they are going through the motions like wooden puppets.”

“Like wooden puppets—”

“The orders to the province lord of Bun were to remain on the lookout for insurrection, and so on the lookout he remained, ready to respond at the first sign of any insurgency. Should an incident occur even once, a report is sent to Kouki and a retaliatory strike is launched at the same time. Employing those tactics of extermination and annihilation particular to Asen, no steps are taken to discriminate between rebels and civilians. The surrounding towns and villages are destroyed without question and without remorse.”

Hoyou added with a frown, “I believe these scorched-earth policies had similar origins from the start. In short, when rebellion broke out, they were ordered to respond with overwhelming force and eradicate anyone opposing them. And so they did exactly as they were told. If a rebellion broke out in Hakurou, it would meet the same punishing fate.”

“Unbelievable,” Risai muttered. But at the same time, she felt pieces of the strange puzzle coming together. More than cruel and merciless, Asen’s methods had always

struck her as mechanical. Less callous and heartless than devoid of any human emotion from the start.

“They faithfully do as they are instructed. But never act beyond the scope of those instructions. Though on guard for rebellion, they never take the initiative to seek out those who might be contemplating a revolt. If we were told to keep an eye out for a possible insurrection, we would observe the flow of goods and people back and forth. We would make note of where people gathered and where large amounts of matériel were being stored. And then there are the rumors. We would send spies into every city and pay attention to the gossip going around. But the province lord does nothing of the sort and demonstrates not the slightest inclination to do so.”

“Remarkable.”

“For which we are very thankful. As a result, we can stay out of sight by taking a few basic precautions, though things can get precarious in the more outlying districts. When local government officials receive that guidance from the capital, they don’t go through the motions. They take active measures to root out any rebels.”

“A few basic precautions?”

“We seek out the favor of high officials still in their right mind. Not every provincial minister has fallen ill. And while the majority simply shrug and follow the lead of the central government, they have no respect for Asen or any province lord at Asen’s beck and call. When a person like me comes to their attention, they look the other way. There are those among them who may catch sight of suspicious individuals they think worthy of being reported. But on such occasions, having friends in high places can make those problems go away.”

“Friends in high places—”

Hoyou nodded. “Speaking of which, there are some people I’d like you to meet. They’ll be arriving shortly. What do you say?”

“I’d be happy to,” Risai replied.

Chapter 22

[16-5] That evening, Hoyou introduced Risai to a dignified man of sixty or so.

“The provincial Minister of Winter. He goes by the name of Tonkou.”

Tonkou was one of those friends in high places who supported Hoyou behind the scenes. Risai had to wonder to herself. The provincial and imperial ministries were approximately equivalent in their duties and functions. As a member of the Rikken, Tonkou certainly counted as a high-ranked official. Though in terms of its relative importance, his was the lowest seat in the government, not considered an influential voice in the provincial court.

On the other hand, while that did leave them largely free of interference from the provincial court, Hoyou being left to her own devices thanks to the patronage of the Minister of Winter was rather unexpected.

“This old fox rose straight up the ranks from the trades,” Hoyou said with a grin, the implication being that Tonkou was not one of those senior statesmen who ended up helming the ministry at the end of a succession of convenient coincidences and political appointments.

Risai asked, “Since the dynasty of Emperor Kyou?”

“From before that,” he answered in a deep voice.

Tonkou’s answer didn’t surprise Risai. The artisans and tradesmen who worked in the Ministry of Winter steered clear of the political turf wars that plagued other departments. As a consequence, it was not unusual to find ministers there who had occupied their posts for unusually long times.

And although she was aware that such people existed, this was the first time she had ever met a court official who’d served previous to the dynasty of Emperor Kyou.

When she said as much, Tonkou chuckled. “Well, among the artisans in the Ministry of Winter, not even this old fox qualifies as an old timer. More than a few knew the emperor from at least three dynasties ago. The Ministry of Winter holds a somewhat unique place in the Imperial Court as well, what with these gray areas beyond the reach of the usual political influences. That can give you a bit more latitude.”

“What is life like in the provincial palace these days?”

They knew that the province lord and the ministers had been suddenly struck down by the illness. But in concrete terms, they didn’t have the slightest idea what had specifically occurred or the state of affairs that followed. Only that the illness had

reached Bun Province and the Bun Province lord had been among the first to switch allegiances.

The unscrupulous province lord who governed during the dynasty of Emperor Kyou was one of the first to get shuffled out of his position. Gyousou appointed to the position a high official who had served as the Minister of Summer during the Kyou Dynasty. Gyousou and his retainers considered him an affable and well-acquainted man.

Risai had been attached to the Jou Provincial Guard before the dynastic change and so barely knew the man. But he enjoyed a good reputation among Gyousou's senior staff, and by all accounts excelled at getting along with people, so much so he was said to be better suited to head the Ministry of Earth.

And then despite all that, in the midst of the troubles in Bun Province, the new province lord abruptly switched allegiances. People suspected he had fallen ill before the troubles broke out, because the Provincial Guard was already behaving strangely around the same time the chaos became widespread.

The province lord of Bun had succumbed. Except that starting with the prime minister, he was hardly the only high governmental official. It was hard to believe that all of them had been afflicted too. The province lord simply wasn't capable of repressing the entire civil service through force alone. Any attempt to do so should have been met with an equal degree of resistance, leading to outbreaks of palace coups and purges.

But instead, the illness sapped the vitality out of any such resistance. No reports emerged of large-scale purges. Neither were there the expected signs of chaos arising from revolution or despotism. Only a pervasive and subdued sense of lifelessness.

What was happening within the reach of this miasma? When Risai posed the question, Tonkou stroked his rugged chin and said, "Nothing much in particular."

"It's not possible for nothing to be going on."

"Nothing is. Looking in from the outside, there's no sense of lives being lived. All you feel is the pervasive quiet. The province lord is silent. He shut himself away in the depths of the provincial palace, only now and then emerging to hand down this or that edict. I have no idea where he's holed up, what he is doing there, or what happened to him. As long as he remains in his burrow, life comes to a standstill."

There were those who, unable to remain indifferent, remonstrated with him. Possibly others had contemplated revolt. In particular, the few times he showed his face, the orders he handed down perfectly reflected Asen's will. So those who had been opposed to Asen from the start continued to resist, along with those who held out against arbitrary imperial rule and fought for provincial independence.

"It's just as you've seen from the start, Risai. People full of their convictions until the day before, who opposed the province lord and even embraced revolt as a

possible solution, changed their tune a day later. They fell into lockstep behind him. And like the province lord, they fell silent too. The high officials followed the province lord's orders, while the lower ranked civil servants did nothing. Perhaps they holed up in their houses. Or they wandered about the palace like ghosts."

Those who defied the province lord fell ill. Otherwise, they were purged. The purges followed the same pattern. Soldiers swooped down on a house or government office and killed everybody inside regardless of any actual complicity, including people who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Incidents like that were commonplace when the illness first struck. The loudest voices criticizing the province lord literally died out. The rest resigned while keeping their counsel to themselves. The firebrands petered out. All that remains are the mindless ghosts and what's left of the rebels who were wise enough to keep their complaints to themselves and faded back into the woodwork. And, of course, the scoundrels who always figure out ways to turn a profit in the worst of circumstances."

"Such as Kan'you Mountain?" Risai asked. "The land gangs have taken over that whole region. Why the province tolerates this state of affairs is a mystery."

"Hoh," Tonkou said, and contemplated the question for a minute. "I don't think we're talking about petty and corrupt civil servants looking the other way. If the region is reasonably populated, they'd want to collect the taxes. Otherwise, I can think of only one good reason."

"What one good reason?"

"Around the time His Highness went missing, orders came down from the provincial government to stay away from Kan'you Mountain and its environs. *Don't go looking for trouble. Don't get involved. It's none of your concern.* As far as I know, those orders still stand. The province lord never repealed them."

"Are the policies from that time being enforced?"

"Most likely," Tonkou said, "and hardly unexpected. The edict originated with Asen. So like a good puppet, the province lord carried it out. The edict was never withdrawn and so was left as is. Having been told not to get involved, not even the criminal element disobeyed."

For the time being, no one criticized the province lord. No one got taken to task for making a show of doing as they were told. There were civil servants of conscience who could not bring themselves to follow the more egregious orders, but all they had to do was say nothing and then do nothing.

Tonkou said with a wry smile, "A simple *Yes, sir!* will usually suffice. Make a big show of carrying out orders you don't care for. When asked for a progress report, grumble a lot and play dumb. You do what you're told only after you've run out of other options. That's the way things actually work around here."

“And you can get by like that?”

“You can get by with the people who are already ill. The problem is staying out of the way of the opportunists taking advantage of conditions to line their own pockets. They’ll drag you down like a boat anchor. Well, the Ministry of Winter manages to steer clear of those influences. At both the imperial and provincial levels, it’s like we’ve got people watching our backs.”

“You have people watching your backs?”

Tonkou nodded. “At least that’s how it looks to me. Not that anyone is making big or dramatic gestures, but there seems to be an understanding within the provincial palace to steer clear of the Ministry of Winter. It’s probably the same in the imperial government too. A good bet is that the Imperial Ministry of Winter enjoys the good favor of Asen.”

“Meaning Rousan?”

“Meaning her. Rousan-dono may have retired from her duties as the Minister of Winter, but she remains in control of everything that goes on there. The imperial ministry makes no unreasonable demands of the provincial ministry and so neither does the province lord. As long as nobody gets defiant, it’s a hands-off policy. Demonstrate no naked malice and you’re all clear. Everything from funding to mock-ups of new winter weapons, even swordsmiths to work as instructors—pretty much whatever we want, we get.”

“Has Rousan fallen ill as well?”

“Not hardly. She isn’t lying low or holding her tongue.”

“I find it hard to believe, but is Rousan double-crossing Asen?”

Tonkou mulled over the question. “That’s one way of interpreting what’s going on. The most striking characteristic of those who have fallen ill is their lack of vitality. That is certainly not true of Rousan-dono. More than anything, Rousan-dono loathes the loss of knowledge and technology, exactly what would be scattered and lost in the event of a purge. So she made it quite clear that a purge of the ministry was off the table. In accordance with her wishes, the Ministry of Winter has enjoyed a safe harbor. Long story short, there is nothing wrong with Rousan-dono’s health.”

In other words, as long as the civil servants in the Ministry of Winter kept their mouths shut, they were pretty much untouchable. Even the corrupt political factions left them alone.

“And thanks to all that,” Hoyou said with a cynical smile, “we can hire as many of the Ministry’s tradesmen and artisans as we can afford. We only need to get word to Tonkou about the skills we’re in need of and he will dispatch them under the guise of consulting engineers. As a result, quite a number of swordsmiths have built up quite a stock of winter weapons.”

Moreover, she added, “With a province lord who can barely be bothered to get out of bed in the morning, there is nobody in charge of the provincial palace. I believe the case can be made that a reasonably well-equipped and trained division could overrun the Bun provincial palace.”

Risai couldn’t help catching her breath.

“As things stand now, nobody inside the palace dares to take the first step. But if the walls were breached from the outside, our allies who’ve been biding their time would likely rally to our side. The soldiers and civil servants with the illness will be too enervated to mount a defense, so it would take them time to muster the troops. Moving quickly, we could take the palace in a single attack.”

Risai clenched her fists. If they could carry off such an offensive, that much needed palace stronghold would fall into their hands. “Enough of an army to storm the Bun provincial palace,” she muttered to herself.

Seishi nodded. “To only breach the palace walls, a single division should be enough. How many of the Provincial Guard are stationed here?”

Tonkou thought it over. “A single division, to be sure. And once mobilized, those numbers are likely to increase, not decrease.”

“It would be well in the realm of possibility for the combined forces of two divisions to take the palace.”

Risai agreed. At the bare minimum, another division to cover the logistics from the Bun provincial palace to Kouki. If they could only get their hand on those forces—

Seishi was thinking along the same lines. “We’d need three divisions to start with, and I’d prefer four. One to defend the provincial palace, one to handle logistics, and two to lead the assault on Kouki.”

Tonkou grinned. “And His Highness in camp raising the Imperial Standard.”

“Ah,” Seishi said in a small voice. He glanced at Tonkou and then at Risai.

Risai nodded in turn. “There is no starting anything without him. But with His Highness at our side, his supporters would come out of the woodwork. Raising three divisions wouldn’t be the problem. Feeding all those mouths would become a problem worth worrying about.”

Hoyou raised her voice and said with a smile, “Nothing to worry about at all. We’ve warehoused provisions as well. Though some of the grain may be a bit on the musty side.”

Risai returned the smile. Having soldiers and matériel on hand would suffice for the time being. If they could only find Gyousou, he could request aid from other kingdoms. She had the feeling of finally catching a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel. But life wasn’t that simple. Recruiting enough soldiers to form a single division alone constituted an enormous undertaking. That’s why they could honestly only say the *possibility* existed, more resembling an unrealized dream.

Nevertheless, there was a world of difference between a course of action being *possible* and it being *impossible*. Though as thin and precarious as a spider's thread, for the first time, a road that returned Gyousou to the throne existed, a road that Risai and her allies could begin to travel.

Heaven had not cast Tai aside.

There was still the problem of Gyousou.

"We haven't heard any useful rumors circulating among the drifters and refugees," Hoyou said.

Tonkou shook his head. "Over a span of three years, Asen waged a merciless search and destroy campaign against the remaining allies of His Highness, using men he personally selected and dispatched from Kouki. The Provincial Guard as well took up the manhunt in a frenzy. Nevertheless, we've heard not even a rumor of anyone fitting His Highness's appearance, while even deserters who fled to small villages were hunted down. And yet His Highness was somehow overlooked during this whole period."

Asen's approach to the problem was to put an entire town to the torch at the mere sighting of a rebel element. So for the average person, avoiding the brand of rebel took priority. As a result, news of deserting soldiers was often reported to the Provincial Guard. In practically every case, if anyone was providing shelter to such a person, it was at an individual's initiative, not the town collectively.

Since the town would likely end up getting destroyed anyway, the rumors widely circulated that those who voluntarily stepped forward were only hoping in vain to save their own skin.

Hoyou said, "In fact, the belief firmly took root that communities located farther away from Rin'u more often came under attack, while those closer to Rin'u were spared. Given those conditions, hiding His Highness in the outskirts strikes me as improbable. Better to focus on the immediate vicinity of Rin'u."

Tonkou added, "At the time, the inclination to curry favor with Asen and the province lord remained strong. Especially in the aftermath of the troubles with the land gangs, any rumors about a stranger with the bearing of a soldier passing through, or a group of travelers caring for a wounded man, would be thoroughly investigated. If His Highness came anywhere close to Hakurou, I'm sure the Provincial Guard would hear about it in short order."

"Just to be certain, we asked everybody visiting Gamon Temple if they'd run across someone resembling the emperor, and promised to reward useful tips. We gathered a good deal of information, and in the process identified many more deserters and rebels. I ended up recruiting most of them."

Hoyou had acquired six estates across Bun Province, along with two more residences in Ba Province and three in Jou. All had taken in soldiers and rebels, mostly a result of following up on the information they received.

“Soldiers, you say?”

“Approximately three thousand. The majority are not housed here. Leaving large remnants of the Imperial Army in Bun Province is far too risky. Jou Province is out of the question too. They are staying on the farms and estates in Ba Province under the guise of staff and servants.”

Some, though not many, worked in stores run by the Fu Clan. Thanks to Hoyou’s connections, a significant number of soldiers were also hiding out as monks in temples and monasteries throughout Ba Province.

“Gyousou-sama’s retainers among them?”

“No. Officers in the Imperial Army above the battalion or regimental level tried their best to disappear. Otherwise, they’d get hunted down and executed along with the rest of the rebels.”

So the troop strength was there, but someone with the background and the abilities to fashion them into any army had yet to appear.

“No matter how accomplished, you’re not going to rally the troops around squad leaders and company commanders.”

Risai nodded. *Pretty much a given.* In any army, rank spoke volumes. In other words, it was hard moving soldiers around well without first taking rank into consideration.

“Which is why meeting Risai has proved such a fortunate stroke of luck. When the time comes, we at last have the means to muster the troops we have assembled.” Hoyou let out a long sigh. “However, His Highness is still missing. I find it hard to believe at this juncture that he fled west from Kan’you Mountain. He could not have slipped through the pickets set up by the Provincial Guard and evaded our own search efforts as well.”

Tonkou agreed with a grim look of his own.

With mixed emotions, reasons to both rejoice and despair, Risai, Seishi, and Kyoshi left Gamon Temple the next day. As promised, Hoyou gave kijuu to Seishi and Kyoshi. She extended the offer to Houto as well, but he firmly refused. Instead, Kyoshi chose a kijuu capable of carrying two.

The kijuu assigned to Seishi when he was an officer in the Zui Provincial Guard had died in the subsequent chaos. Seishi was delighted to find another of the same species. “I never thought I’d ever get the opportunity to own another *dokukoku*.”

The kijuu resembled a white tiger, albeit a size smaller than a suugu. Its body sported the stripes of a tiger though its head was closer to that of a canine. From the

back of its head and down its spring flowed a mane of unruly hair. An uncommon kijuu by most estimations, though known as well for its fearlessness and intelligence.

“No offense, Risai-sama, but given its nimbleness of body and mind, and its pleasant disposition, a dokukoku really is the best kijuu a rider could want.”

Risai had to laugh. It was only natural that every rider should believe his own kijuu was superior to all the rest.

“I’d wanted a kijuu ever since I joined the army. To tell the truth, one reason I accompanied Gashin-sama to the Yellow Sea was because I heard I’d be given the use of my own kijuu.”

At the time, Gashin lent him a dokutoku from his own stables. Once Seishi rose to the position where he could have a kijuu of his own, he’d searched high and low for another one like it.

“The hard part will be coming up with the right name for you,” Seishi said soothingly as he settled into the saddle.

Observing him, Hoyou smiled. “If you’re happy, that’s all the thanks we need.”

Risai said with a deep bow, “We deeply appreciate your kindness and hospitality.”

Hoyou glanced over her shoulder. “Sekirei—”

Standing a short way off, a young woman with a martial bearing approached them.

Hoyou said, “This is Sekirei. She once served in the Palace Guard.”

Sekirei said with a courteous bow. “I was a company commander in the Palace Guard of the Center.” She straightened and added, “Risai-sama, it’s good to see you again. I have been praying for your welfare from the shadows.”

“Palace Guard of the Center—so you served under Eishou.” Risai gave the woman’s face a closer look but did not recognize her.

“Yes. At the lowest rank, though.”

After the army dispersed to the four winds, Sekirei had no place to go until Hoyou took her in.

“After this, when I need to get in touch with Risai, I’ll let Sekirei handle it. If we don’t establish some fixed lines of communication, there’s no telling what errors could crop up later. We are increasing the number of staff personnel little by little, but for now, I will leave that job in Sekirei’s hands. I’ll have her accompany you today so she can learn how to get to your safe house.”

Sekirei said with a deep bow, “I don’t know how helpful I can be, but I will do my best. I look forward to working with you.”

Risai smiled. “That’s good to hear. We’re happy to have you on the team.”

Chapter 23

[16-6] The New Year dawned in Kouki. In normal times, a number of events should have accompanied the occasion. Asen's Imperial Court had nothing on the schedule. Because of Asen's designation as the new emperor, there were expectations in the air about the old and established traditions being revived. But the day came and went with not even the Festival of the Winter Solstice taking place.

As usual, nothing has changed at all, thought Chou'un as he made his way to the Rikkan Privy Council chamber. But on that day, a surprise was waiting for him.

When Chou'un entered the Outer Palace, he should have been greeted by the heads of the six ministries, kneeling on the ground awaiting his arrival. Instead, all that met him were courteous nods and confused glances. The reason became apparent when he turned his attention to the throne. The normally empty throne was enclosed by a bamboo blind.

Meaning Asen had made an appearance.

Chou'un hurriedly found his place before the throne. Someone had again snuck into the Rokushin. This time, at the conclusion of his investigation, Shukuyou pointed his finger at Taiki's Daiboku, Kouryou. Upon receipt of this information, Chou'un intended to put forward a proposal about how to deal with Taiki at the Rikkan Privy Council meeting.

Taiki could not be allowed to carry on in such a flagrant manner. His contempt for the majesty of the Imperial Court was no different than disrespecting Asen himself. Not even the actions of the Saiho could be casually overlooked.

Chou'un was confident he could convince the Rikkan to have Taiki further confined to quarters while he reflected upon his boorish behavior. Given that not only had intruders entered the Rokushin and contacted the criminals housed there, but the guards on duty had been killed, it should be an easy argument to make.

The ministers of the Rikkan had more and more often of late demonstrated a willingness to take Chou'un to task while treating Taiki with kid gloves. Chou'un was determined to put an end to this exasperating state of affairs. It was long past time for him to put his foot down.

That thought on his mind, a gong rang, accompanied by movement inside the bamboo blinds and the sense of someone stepping onto the raised platform. The gong rang a second time, a signal for those in attendance to bow low to the floor. The blinds lifted. His hands still planted on the floor, Chou'un raised his head.

And gaped in astonishment. Not only Asen was sitting there, but the Saiho as well. Here was a sight that should have become commonplace by now but he had never seen before.

According to custom, and feeling compelled to say *something*, Chou'un opened his mouth and was about to speak when Asen silenced him.

"As all of you know by now, the Taiho has returned. He has been busy convalescing from a serious wound, but we must start thinking about the enthronement."

A murmur arose from among the assembled ministers.

"I have for too long neglected my political duties. I felt that those responsibilities could be left to my highly capable ministers. But I am afraid they have not proved as competent as I expected."

At the sound of Asen's cool tone of voice, the momentarily elated ministers sank back into a pensive silence.

"The current state of affairs must be corrected. Starting with Keitou."

Keitou was there in the entourage, at the foot of the podium opposite Chou'un. Hearing his name, Keitou faced Asen and bowed.

"In accordance with Taiki's nomination, you are hereby appointed prime minister of Zui Province. Political conditions in Zui are in an intolerable state. Please assist the Taiho in correcting this shameful situation."

"I will do my utmost to comply with your wishes."

"Chou'un."

Chou'un felt his spine stiffen. He broke out in a cold sweat.

"I am giving Chou'un and the ministers of the Rikkan one last chance. I am confident in your abilities as accomplished civil servants and am granting you the authority concomitant with your portfolios. Going forward, I wish to see that trust rewarded with tangible results."

"Yes, Your Highness," they responded with bowed heads.

That long dreaded moment had arrived. Chou'un felt a cold knot in his gut. The accusation of incompetence came as an unexpected shock, but he could say nothing in reply. Raising objections and making excuses before the majestic presence of the throne was unforgivable.

I could get cut off.

If he didn't do *something*, Asen might label him useless too and cast him aside.

One last chance, Asen said. Another blunder and the fear of getting summarily put out to pasture would become very real. And it all started with Taiki's return. No, it all could be traced back to the incompetence of the Rikkan.

“Every last one of them,” Chou’un growled as he hurried back to his office. “Every last one of them is only looking out for himself. Those incompetents dragging me down should try seeing things from *my* perspective for once.”

“Most certainly,” Ansaku agreed politely. “No matter how skilled the Chousai, if those ministers holding critical positions in the Rikken don’t do the work, then the job of governance simply won’t get done.”

“Indeed.” Chou’un gave his chair a kick, spun around, and flopped down on the seat. “If we don’t do something about those idiots, my reputation will suffer too. I should show the whole lot of them the door.”

“I wonder if that is the best approach to the problem. As I am sure you are aware, the Chousai could catch considerable backlash in the process.” After that gentle criticism, Ansaku said in more flattering tones, “His Highness did offer them one more chance. I am sure this time the ministers were left quaking in their boots. If they are truly serious about good governance, they will want to contribute to the Chousai’s achievements.”

“Do they even possess the ability to make such contributions?”

Isn’t your whole job to make sure that they do? Ansaku thought to himself. “Initiating the next round of personnel selections may be a good place to start. Explain that in times of crisis, having positions up for replacement picked out in advance will serve as a bulwark against any coming confusion in the political process. That may well be the most effective approach.”

“The ministers in the Rikken are going to complain, in any case.”

“And when they do, tell them it is time for them to put their true abilities on display. Call it a teaching moment.”

“A teaching moment,” Chou’un echoed with a grin. “Of course.”

“We must cultivate a fresh crop of assistant ministers for the good of the Imperial Court. Having worthy candidate ministers singled out beforehand will prepare us for any future eventuality. The ministers of the Rikken can no longer get away with cutting corners. That sword will always be hanging over their heads.”

“An effective threat.” Chou’un chuckled, his mood improving. “If they fall down on the job, someone will be waiting in the wings to replace them.”

“It doesn’t much matter how they take it personally. What’s important is that the ministers respond to your requests and work devotedly to accomplish them.” Ansaku concluded with a respectful bow, “The ministers of the Rikken should be burning the midnight oil on behalf of the Chousai.”

“Yes, they should,” Chou’un said with a self-satisfied nod.

Chapter 24

[16-7] Around noon, a bellowing voice practically knocked Boushuku off his chair in the guardroom.

“Where is the Taiho!”

Two steps ahead of him, Gogetsu also ran toward the gate. Boushuku hurried to catch up, and then stepped dead in his tracks.

A man the size of a big boulder stood in the snow in front of the gate. He wore a full set of armor and carried a big sword in one hand.

Boushuku felt his knees shake. In the grip of the equally huge man holding it, the huge weapon actually looked normal. Boushuku had no difficulty imagining the rush of wind when he swung that sword and the blade parted the air. He felt his hands and feet growing cold as the blood drained from his extremities. His hands shaking from the tension, he took a tighter hold of his lance, even knowing a single sweep of that sword would slice it in two.

He was settling into an offensive stance when Gogetsu held up a hand to stop him.

“Ganchou-sama?” Gogetsu said.

The big man narrowed his eyes and looked at him. “If you know my name, then announce my presence to the Taiho.”

Boushuku was at an utter loss for words. The Director ran up. “This is Ganchou-sama,” he said. “Ganchou-sama, what can we do for you?”

“Having received numerous summonses from the Taiho, I decided to pay him an unannounced visit. Please communicate that message to the Taiho.”

The next to arrive was Keitou, even before Ganchou had finished speaking. As soon as Keitou saw him, he straightened and then bowed deeply.

“Ah, so you have at last honored us with your presence. I shall let the Taiho know as soon as possible.” He called out to his assistants and motioned toward the villa. “We would be pleased if you could wait inside.”

Boushuku glanced around in confusion. Who was this general? Why had he so readily been granted an audience with the Saiho? Hadn’t they been told that any such meetings with outsiders were off limits? They had been expressly ordered to deny entrance to anyone unless specifically granted permission.

Gogetsu calmly pushed down the shaft of the lance. “Boushuku, it’s okay.”

“But—”

“He is one of Gyousou-sama’s senior staff. He commanded the Army of the Left in the Palace Guard.”

All Boushuku could do was nod in response. He'd heard that most of Gyousou's retainers had fled the palace. According to the rumors, the only one left was a general in the Army of the Left. He'd been relieved of his duties and placed under house arrest. And not just house arrest, some said he was being physically restrained as well.

Paying Boushuku's bewildered expression no mind, Keitou courteously escorted Ganchou to the outer courtyard. They passed through the garden and climbed the steps to the raised foundation and inner walkway of the villa. That was when several people rushed up to them.

Boushuku wasn't familiar with any of their faces. The young woman in their midst with a pair of swords tucked into her waistband must be the Daiboku. The young man behind her with the willowy build struck no chords. The young man stopped in his tracks, a startled look on his face.

A look of recognition rising to his countenance, Ganchou came to a halt as well. A hoarse cry arose from the bottom of his lungs and he fell to his knees. Placing the big sword on the ground next to him, he bowed his head to the ground.

"Taiho, your presence has been sorely missed."

That is the Saiho, Boushuku told himself, his eyes round with surprise. *But his hair—*

As if pushed from behind, the young man ran up to Ganchou. He knelt next to Ganchou and placed his hand on his back. "Ganchou, are you doing all right? Please, raise your head."

Ganchou straightened his upper body and looked again at Taiki. "You've grown up."

"Yes, I have," Taiki said with a nod.

His hair was the furthest thing from golden. A slightly different tint of black. *Ah*, Boushuku reminded himself in something of a daze. *Taiki is the Black Kirin*.

This really was the kirin of Tai? There in front of him, the Saiho knelt next to Ganchou and rested his forehead on his shoulder.

"I'm so glad you came."

This was the first time Boushuku had seen the Saiho. For that matter, the first time he had seen any kirin. He couldn't help thinking he looked rather ordinary, all the more so because he appeared on the verge of tears.

"Forgive my incivility, but I have been of two minds for the longest time now. I came here hoping to provide the Taiho with what little support I am capable of."

Taiki shook his head. "There is nothing little about it. Far from it, I need your strength and wish to borrow whatever you have to spare."

"I am happy to serve you in whatever capacity I can."

Keitou interrupted at that point to say with a sweep of his arm, "Let us proceed inside."

Taiki grasped Ganchou's hand and helped him to his feet. Then taking in the rest of them with a sweeping glance, even briefly looking Boushuku in the eye, he said, "This is Ganchou. Starting today, he is my Daiboku."

"Once the Chousai catches wind of these developments, he is bound to stick his oar in. I will make sure he hears the news from me first, and do my best to head off any objections."

On that less-than-reassuring note, having escorted Ganchou as far as the main hall, Keitou hurried off.

Yari bid Keitou goodbye and led Ganchou into the living room. She cleared everybody out and secured the entrances and exits. She then stood in front of the glass doors such that she could clearly be seen standing there blocking the way.

Taiki motioned Ganchou to a chair. "I was told you wouldn't meet with me."

Ganchou nodded. "I was delighted to hear you wished to see me. But I foolishly and willfully disobeyed your request. Then I heard about things of a suspicious nature taking place in your presence. And Yari—" Ganchou glanced over his shoulder at her. "Yari sent me word that you needed a guard."

Yari sent a message to Ganchou that morning. With Kouryou no longer available, they needed Ganchou's strength, at least one more trustworthy person at the manor to serve as Taiki's Daiboku.

"I hardly have the right to show my face at this late hour, but I decided to pay you a visit, hoping this unworthy soul could somehow be of use."

"Thank you," Taiki said. "When I was told you couldn't see me, I thought people were making up stories."

"Please forgive me."

Yari interrupted at that point. "He's had hostages to worry about."

"Yari—" Ganchou turned to her.

"There's no sense trying to keep it a secret now." She said to Taiki, "His staff officers and close associates are being held in locations around the palace. Stepping out of line puts them at risk. He locked himself away to guarantee their safety. He shrunk that big frame of his as small as possible and shut himself down like a clam."

Taiki said, "And that is why you couldn't come to see me?"

Ganchou nodded. "To tell the truth, I simply haven't been able to make up my mind until now. My actions could put many people in danger. But others urged me on. They said the Taiho needed me."

"Others?"

“There are many amongst the minsters and civil servants who have resigned themselves to the status quo yet remain opposed to Asen’s rule. To keep from getting caught out, they maintain as low a profile as possible.”

Taiki faced Ganchou and grasped his hands in his own. Nothing so clearly communicated how much he had grown since they had last met.

“You really have become a fine young man.”

“And you haven’t changed at all. I’m sorry, but I find that tremendously reassuring.” Taiki asked, “Do you meet Kouryou?”

“Yes. He made it safely out of the palace. He had to leave his kijuu behind so I lent him one from the stables at the Forbidden Gate. Not the best of the breed, but it should get him to Ba Province without any difficulty.”

“Thank you.”

“Kouryou said you would need a Daiboku to take his place. And since I didn’t have a job, how about it?” Ganchou lowered his voice. “He filled me in on what’s been going on around here.”

“Good.” Taiki glanced over his shoulder. “My thanks to you as well, Yari.”

Yari answered with a wordless nod.

“The decision not to meet with you was ultimately up to me, though it’s a fact that bastard Chou’un was against it too. I don’t doubt he handed down orders to that effect.”

“Not a problem,” Taiki stated crisply. “Whatever he’s got planned, I can handle it.”

“You’ve grown some steel in that spine of yours.”

“Well, I’m not a little kid anymore,” Taiki said with a faint smile. “And I’ve probably gotten just as good at being bad as being good.”

“However regrettable that may sound, I find your words tremendously reassuring.”

When the rumors reached Santou that Ganchou had gone to see Taiki, he reacted with a sigh of relief.

Welcome news.

Santou had risen up the ranks under Ganchou to become one of his retainers. Of the six generals in the Imperial Army, one openly rebelled and four disappeared. Ganchou alone remained behind in the enemy camp. Santou was sure he wanted to join the rebels, but so many of his friends and associates had been taken hostage, he couldn’t do so in good conscience. Ganchou’s decision to remain under Asen’s thumb broke something inside the man.

Santou’s commanding officer was a bighearted man, bigger than life in every way, like the gallant subject of a heroic painting. Everything he did was suffused with empathy and honor. Santou would always hold him in respect and affection, but he

had also sadly concluded that, unable to set aside his emotions or abandon his sense of honor and duty, Ganchou had become his own worst enemy.

Robbed of his rank and reduced to the status of a commoner, he holed up in his official residence and turned a deaf ear to the advice of his few remaining friends. At length, even his home was taken from him. In its place, he was given the use of one of the barracks adjacent to the Forbidden Gate, a residence in name only.

The reason given was that Ganchou was the only person who could care for Keito, Gyousou's kiju. But it was obvious to everyone that Asen had demoted one of Gyousou's senior staff officers to the status of stable hand.

Nevertheless, Ganchou uttered not a word of complaint. Every time they met, Santou counseled Ganchou that he should not simply lie down and take it like that.

Fortunately, Hinken, Santou's superior officer, was a general who understood the head and the heart. He empathized with Ganchou, and offered him a command position at the battalion or regimental level. Ganchou refused. He wasn't about to serve under Asen in any capacity. In any case, he was fully cognizant that Chou'un, and the Minister of Summer, who was at his beck and call, would never sign off on such an appointment.

Even so, Santou was grateful to Hinken for repeatedly reaching out to Ganchou, despite all the roadblocks.

On paper, at least, Hinken should have been Santou's enemy as well. In the first place, Hinken led two regiments on the expedition to Bun Province during which Gyousou disappeared. Though it couldn't be said that Hinken had participated in Asen's coup against Gyousou. Asen came to that decision and carried it off by himself. Given Hinken's character, had he become aware of what was in the offing, he likely would have intervened, even at the risk of his own life.

Santou was certain that Hinken possessed such qualities of character. Of Asen's five regimental commanders, he was no standout. At the same time, there was nothing lacking in his skills as a commander. He simply did not engage in the kinds of activities that made him memorable. Though widely considered honest and reliable, from the perspective of soldiers in other divisions, he was not a regimental commander who made a lasting impression.

Hinken undoubtedly understood that he came up short when compared with his colleagues. And yet that aroused in him no pointless enmity. The temperament of the unexcitable Hinken, who got down to business in his even-keeled way, somehow connected with the people around him.

At least, that's how it seemed to Santou, and, by and large, that's what Hinken's retainers apparently took away from their interactions with him as well.

A battalion commander like Kisen had no problems serving under an outsider like Santou. No one begrudged him for stepping in from the sidelines and taking over the

position. Far from it, Kisen paid him the respect due his office and worked for him in good faith. Kisen was the one who informed him that Ganchou had visited Taiki (and that information likely originated with Hinken).

“A welcome turn of events.”

He appeared honestly happy to hear the news. Such a temperament allowed him to fit in well with Santou’s retainers. *A man like him is hard to come by*, Santou thought. He said aloud, “I have to say I’m relieved. Ganchou-sama was doing himself little good by staying stuck in the rut he was in.”

“Yes,” Kisen said with a nod. “Outward appearances may suggest he is betraying Gyousou-sama, but he ended up in a really difficult position. He’s like a brother to Gyousou-sama.”

Santou agreed. To Gyousou, Ganchou was like the older sibling he could always trust to have his back. At the same time, to Ganchou, Gyousou was the overachieving kid brother he loved to boast about. Ganchou looked up to him as his lord and master without the slightest hesitation or regret. Ganchou truly delighted in serving Gyousou. Consequently, Ganchou celebrated Gyousou’s rise to the highest status in the world from the bottom of his heart.

Nevertheless, Ganchou ultimately yielded to sentiment and his sense of duty and surrendered to Asen. Unable to forgive himself for this fallen state, he retreated to a lowly corner of the Imperial Palace as a kind of self-imposed punishment.

Santou said, “Wishing to work on behalf of the Taiho, Ganchou emerged from his exile and volunteered his services. That truly is good news. Though I am sure Asen won’t treat it as such.”

Kisen shook his head in confusion. “Why would that be? Since the Taiho is supporting His Highness, wouldn’t working for the Taiho be the same as working for His Highness?”

“Well, it certainly sounds sensible when you put it like that, but—”

“I understand why he could not work for His Highness. But serving the Taiho should allow him to ameliorate those feelings of guilt. The end result is that His Highness can now count an experienced general among his retainers. I have long believed it was a shame for such a talented man to bury his abilities. Serving the Taiho is no different than serving the kingdom and the people. I think this will prove to be a beneficial decision for all involved.”

Santou nodded and said with a courteous tip of his head, “Thank you. I am indebted to you and to Hinken-sama too.”

Part Seventeen

Chapter 25

[17-1] **Risai** got right to the point in her report. “He did not proceed west from Hakurou.”

Houto mulled over this new information. Kyoshi craned his head in obvious confusion. There was no going north from Kan’you Mountain. There weren’t any open routes south toward Rin’u. East through the outskirts of Rin’u was equally impossible. In short, once they ruled out traveling from Kan’you Mountain to Rin’u, any course with an eastward bearing was out of the question.

The only remaining option was to head west, except there were no safe places between Kan’you Mountain and Hakurou where Gyousou might have found shelter. In that case, he could have continued past Hakurou and proceeded even further west, but Hoyou said no to that possibility as well.

“Without passing through the vicinity of Hakurou, he couldn’t have reached any points beyond, whether that’s north to Mount You or across country to Ba Province or Kou Province.”

“Hmm,” Kenchuu said, folding his arms across his chest. “Now might be a good time to rethink our assumptions.”

“How’s that?”

“Your working premise so far has been that he suffered a severe wound on Kan’you Mountain. Believing he was dead, his enemies abandoned him there. But he still had life left in him.”

Exactly, Kyoshi said to himself. A thought struck him. “Of course. There’s always the possibility he wasn’t badly injured.”

He glanced at Risai. The same idea must have occurred to her as well. She said, “Like the landslides and cave-ins.”

The premise they’d been working on all along was that, mortally wounded, Asen’s assassins had written Gyousou off as dead and abandoned the body without finishing the job. He had since recovered enough to escape. However, had a cave-in or landslide scattered Asen’s soldiers, Gyousou might have been left behind in relatively good health. In that case, he could have covered a fair distance under his own power.

Though the recovered sash certainly suggested a severe wound had been inflicted, he could have received medical attention somewhere or taken on a nurse or assistant. Either possibility would have greatly extended his range of movement.

“Let’s reexamine what we know,” Houto said, unfurling a sheet of paper. “First of all, we have Kan’you Mountain.” He made a mark in the middle of the sheet with a brush. “South of Kan’you Mountain is Rin’u. The highway ties them together.”

Houto drew a point below Kan’you Mountain, labeled it “Rin’u,” and connected the two dots with a line. “This highway heads toward Kan’you Mountain, continues on past the mountain to Tetsui and then ends at Hakurou. To be precise, it merges with the northern spur from Rin’u to Hakurou at Josetsu.”

The road from Kan’you Mountain to Hakurou and Josetsu was not a major highway built to imperial standards, but it was big enough for most purposes. However, the road from the gateway at Kan’you Mountain to Tetsui was narrow. The precarious mountain road that followed the river valley came close to impassable in places.

“Even today, horse wagons transport ore and tailings off Kan’you Mountain. With teamsters hauling provisions and supplies in and around the outskirts of the mountain, the road itself won’t be disappearing anytime soon. But despite it being called a highway, we would do well to keep in mind that it is still an often-perilous stretch of road.”

As he spoke, Houto filled in a dot to the left of Kan’you Mountain. He marked it “Tetsui” and connected Tetsui and Kan’you Mountain with a dotted line.

“Many villages once thrived along this road. Nowadays, they’ve fallen under the control of the land gangs or are devoid of inhabitants due to the purges. The mountain road once led to Tetsui. There is little left of Tetsui. The farms and fields have gone fallow and the surrounding regions have returned to the wilderness.”

Houto indicated a point on the road connecting Kan’you Mountain and Rin’u. “This is Sokou, the southern reach of the land gang’s sphere of influence. The road heading east from Sokou follows the far side of the mountain range north of Rin’u. It joins the Totei Highway at Nanto and continues into Jou Province.”

Houto drew a line for the road as he spoke.

“After a similar fashion, there is a single fork along the mountain road that joins Kan’you Mountain and Tetsui. This is the road the brothers living in Kakyou were on when they saw His Highness. It descends on a southern incline from Ryuukei to Kakyou.”

Risai stared down at the map Houto had drawn. Four roads reached out from Kan’you Mountain, south to Rin’u and Kakyou, west to Tetsui, and east toward Jou Province.

“There are no roads north of Kan’you Mountain,” Risai said under her breath.

Kenchuu replied, "There's a logging road that connects the abandoned mines in the mountains west of Kan'you Mountain. It's a narrow road used extensively by the delivery wagons."

"I've been there. Any others?"

"It doesn't deserve to be called a road but there is a path that circles Kan'you Mountain. It's steep and narrow and you have to push through the underbrush single file. The Taoists of Sekirin Temple and those of us wearing the white ribbons still make use of it. The trail starts the uphill climb around Anpuku, circles Kan'you Mountain, and then joins the logging road to the mines. Originally, the path made the circuit from Anpuku via the gateway to Kan'you Mountain, but our presence was getting the land gangs up in arms, so we turn back before getting to Kan'you Mountain."

When Kenchuu finished his explanation, Kiitsu nodded and added, "Even on foot, the going is hard. There are only shrines along the training circuit. No villages or houses. Several of the shrines have resident priests serving as caretakers, but since the troubles with the land gangs, I haven't heard any rumors from them about running across a wounded soldier or a traveler seeking shelter who wasn't a pilgrim."

"The lack of any rumors alone hardly constitutes proof," Risai grumbled to herself.

Kenchuu cocked his head to one side. "Are there other routes taken by the pilgrims?"

Kiitsu said, "There are. These are paths more treacherous than the regular pilgrimage routes. Midway along the circuit are training trails to the eastern peak of Mount You and the shrine on Takuou Mountain. There are no stations along the way and they do not take the traveler to any notable places beyond. Up to Takuou Mountain, we're mostly talking about a series of animal trails used by the Taoists as part of their training regimes. Not the kind of route anyone would attempt without the requisite experience. To start with, there's a dizzying ravine traversed by a pair of chains."

"A pair of chains?"

Kiitsu nodded. "Or so I've heard. I couldn't tell you exactly how you cross the ravine. From what I've been told, it seems to involve climbing a cliff wall while clinging to iron rings and then going hand-over-hand on chains strung across the ravine. The trails aren't used very often and so are overgrown in places. Without an experienced Taoist guide on hand, you'd have a hard time staying on course, to say nothing of also bringing along someone who was already injured. I don't see how it'd be possible."

"So we can cross that one off our list," Risai said with a grim smile.

"Still, there is a path there," Kyoshi said.

"There is. But—"

“Even if Gyousou-sama’s wounds were severe, they may not have been as bad as we imagined at first. He could have escaped Kan’you Mountain under his own power. Afterwards, if he’d been able to find refuge in an abandoned mine like Rokou, he could have recuperated there safe from his pursuers for the time being. And supposing he and some refugees chanced upon each other, received some modicum of assistance.”

“What are the actual odds?”

“Given but a slight amount of rest, Gyousou-sama had a treasured talisman of his own. He may have built up reserves of physical strength that allowed him to handle the training trails. Any refugees that knew about the trails could have shared that information with him.”

Risai took in Kyoshi’s argument with the same wry smile as before. “Nothing but suppositions.”

“Yes, I know—” Kyoshi hung his head. To be sure, all he was offering was conjecture based on wishful thinking. Except there wasn’t any other good explanation for Gyousou’s whereabouts.

“And yet I think these are suppositions worth checking out,” Risai said. “Let’s see these trails for ourselves.”

Kyoshi nodded in agreement.

Kiitsu said, “I can’t recommend such a course of action. If you insist on going, then wouldn’t it be better to follow the main highway around Mount You to Takuou Mountain? The snowpack is heavy on Mount You. Walking across country in these conditions is excessively dangerous.”

“We are aware of the risks.”

“Even so—” Kiitsu was about to continue when Kyoshi held up his hand.

Kiitsu reluctantly closed his mouth. Looking at him, Kyoshi said, “I think it best that we get permission from Moku’u-sama. These training trails are maintained by Sekirin Temple. We don’t want to break any taboos.”

“Good point,” Risai said.

Kenchuu took it upon himself to make the arrangements with Sekirin Temple.

The next day, they got their baggage and belongings together, preparing to move their base of operations to Seisai. Risai went to Fukyuu Temple to retrieve Hien. When she got back, Sodou had showed up.

“Sudou-dono has graciously volunteered to accompany us.”

“But—” Risai started to say, exchanging a look with Seishi.

Sudou said in a soft but matter-of-fact tone of voice, “Without an experienced guide with you, I’m afraid completing the journey would be well-nigh impossible.”

“We are pressed for time and so are planning on using kijuu.”

“That would be preferable. I borrowed a kijuu from Moku’u-sama. If you are short on mounts, Sekirin Temple can provide them.”

“Thanks, but we’re good on that score.” Seishi and Kyoshi had the kijuu from Gamon Temple.

“So Sekirin Temple has kijuu too?”

“In case something happens on the training trails or along the pilgrimage circuit.”

Especially when a group was setting out on the training trails, Sekirin Temple lent them a blue bird. If an emergency arose, they would release the bird. In the off chance that an accident occurred suddenly and left an apprentice monk disabled, the blue bird could return of its own accord and lead the rescue party back to the scene. This was a particularly valuable species of blue bird, testimony to the true affluence of Sekirin Temple.

Sodou changed out of his brown habit to white robes that were easier to move around in. On a kijuu, it was a three-day ride to Takuou Mountain. As they would be camping under the stars for two nights along the way, the necessary preparations had to be undertaken.

“Our winter training regimes accustomed us to the cold. Anyone who hasn’t will want to make sure they are properly dressed.”

“Understood.”

Risai and Seishi had gone through cold weather exercises in the army. So had Kyoshi at Zui’un Temple. Kyoshi also had a considerable amount of hands-on experience hiking through the mountains in the middle of the winter. But it occurred to none of them to make light of Sodou’s advice.

They completed their preparations according to Sodou’s instructions and left Rin’u the next day. In the meantime, Houto’s crew put the finishing touches on the move to the safehouse in Seisai.

Risai’s team reached Anpuku in a day. They spent the night there and picked up the training circuit east of Anpuku in the morning. Most of the narrow trail wound through the forest. In the clearings it was buried beneath the snow. At first, they worried that if they took to the air, they would lose track of the path. Fortunately, there was a shrine or temple located at all the critical waypoints.

With those landmarks in mind, they could fly as far as the crossroads along the way. There they found a simple shrine. The caretaker provided them with dinner, and explained that under normal circumstances from there to Takuou Mountain took over half a month.

Risai and the others asked around the shrine about a wounded military man who might have passed through at some point. The question itself didn’t hold much meaning for them. Around the time of the troubles in Bun Province, nobody had been able to enter this part of the training circuit.

The province lord of Bun instructed them to withdraw all of their personnel. The land gangs subsequently drove out anybody who stayed behind. Asen appeared obsessed with removing anyone from the vicinity of Kan'you Mountain.

"Refugees and displaced people stuck it out, as living and working there was the only way they could eke out a living."

"That's what it came down to in the end," Sodou said with a nod.

Next to the small shrine, a steep stone staircase climbed toward the rocky mountain behind the building. The staircase rose at an angle that was best climbed at a crawl. In some places, the riser of each step was chest high, requiring the skills of a mountain climber. Moreover, at this time of year, the stairs were covered with frozen snow and ice.

The stairs could be readily surmounted with kijuu. On horseback, they'd be impassable.

Even without the snow, a rider would have to dismount and lead the horse by the reins, and the way would still be difficult and fraught with danger. The trail had already proven to be entirely out of the ordinary. Reaching the top of this summit, it'd be more of the same on the way back down, with the apprentice monks descending hand and foot.

Once over the mountain, the trail continued on through a forest. They didn't have to go far before encountering another rugged mountain covered with deep snow. Here and there they chanced across flat rocky outcroppings barely large enough to sit on, but most of the time they had to rely on chains to climb the walls of rock.

"Risai-sama, is there any way an injured person could make it through here?"

Risai could only groan in response to Kyoshi's question. It'd come up on previous occasions, but clearly anybody with bodily injuries would find it next to impossible. Supposing that snow wasn't an issue when they were told about the trail, it didn't seem something the refugees could easily manage. Horses were out of the question. If horses were deemed necessary, large numbers of people would have to winch them up and down the cliffs.

Climbing to the summit of the next mountain, they emerged at the crest of a cliff that ran along a steep valley. The trail ran through a gap that appeared to have been carved in the cliff face, just wide enough to pass through single file. While clinging to the rock face with one hand, the shoulder opposite jutted out into empty space.

To make matters worse, the ankle-deep snow was frozen hard, making it hard to tell where the trail ended and the snow overhanging the edge of the cliff began. Fortunately, however, in the narrow places, wooden planks made from split logs covered the bare stone, secured by spikes driven into the rock face.

"Horses could never manage without the planks here."

Sodou craned his head to the side in confusion. “The last place I expected to find a plank road.”

“No?”

“Not at all. From the start, the entire length of this part of the trail was carved out of the cliff.”

Risai flew Hien down to the trail. She brushed away the snow and took a closer look at the construction. The wooden spikes securing the planks were smaller logs that had been roughed down and hammered into holes drilled into the stone. The planks themselves hadn’t been sawn but split horizontally in half with wedges. The work here was not new. Based on the weathering of the materials, several years had passed since this plank road had been laid down.

“Someone went to a lot of effort to make this trail navigable under tough conditions.”

“So it appears. Probably horses—”

Sodou shook his head. “I have a hard time imagining horses could make it this far. You don’t suppose they planned on using kijuu that couldn’t always be counted on to fly?”

Not all kijuu could fly. Many capable of bounding great distances through the air were still not able to remain aloft at will.

“When was the last time this trail was used?”

“Before the troubles with the land gangs. Apprentice monks walking this section of the circuit are rare at best.”

No one would go to the trouble of building a plank road to reinforce a rarely used trail. Wood and rope deteriorated and decayed. The cables and chains up to this point had been fashioned from cast iron. When an apprentice monk was approved to walk the circuit, more experienced hands at Sekirin Temple inspected the route on kijuu and repaired any parts of the train that had badly deteriorated.

“Someone must have passed through here after that.”

“For certain, probably accompanied by kijuu.”

“Soldiers, I believe,” Seishi reasoned. “This looks like military engineering to me.”

“Sure does,” Risai agreed. These were methods used when an army had to repair a road in short order, making maximum use of the tools on hand and the materials available on site.

Checking for any other evidence left behind, they passed over the trail where it followed the cliff face, and then crossed another ridge further on. Arriving at the summit, they found a huge boulder entwined with the thick roots of a grove of ancient pine trees. A smaller table of stone ringed the boulder. The dusk was falling, making this was as good a place as any to set up camp.

“It wouldn’t matter how many kijuu you had at this point. They’ve got good night vision, so they’d avoid getting into trouble. But we wouldn’t be able to make out the landmarks.”

Kyoshi seconded Sodou’s observation.

The light faded from the gray and overcast skies. The peaks soaring above the far banks of the mountain ravine soon disappeared into the gloom. The bitter cold set in as soon as the sun set. A bone-chilling wind swept up from the deep ravine with a swirl of snowflakes.

They lit a fire and surrounded the fire with a tarpaulin screen as a windbreak. Then snuggled up to their kijuu and shared their warmth. The winter coats of the kijuu could not completely stave off the brutal cold that seeped deep into the marrow, but enough to allow them to sleep.

In the morning, they tidied up the campsite. They were getting ready to set off once again, hovering in the air above the grove of pine trees, when they made a discovery.

Two stones covered with snow were nestled among the roots of the trees. Each stone was no larger than what could be carried in a man’s arms, and had clearly been moved there from someplace else. The stones sat on mounds made up of smaller stones and packed earth.

“Risai-sama—”

Seishi pointed out the mounds. Risai brushed away the snow for a better look. The drifting snow obscured their overall shape, but upon closer inspection they were graves. With so little soil to work with, this was the only way to bury a body, with the stones and raked together earth. The corpses had decayed over the intervening years as had the graves.

Risai was convinced now that someone had definitely crossed this trail. Not a single person but a group traveling together on foot. And several soldiers among them. The trail could not have been repaired and resurfaced by one or two people. These two had been left behind. Killed in an accident or driven to exhaustion by the rigors of the journey, they collapsed along the way.

Perhaps a group of wounded soldiers gathered together to help each other out as they made their way to safety.

“Makes sense,” Seishi muttered aloud. “Refugees weren’t the only ones hiding out in those abandoned mines.” Answering Risai’s quizzical glance, he explained, “If His Highness managed to escape to an abandoned mine after he was attacked, the only people there at the time would be refugees and other displaced persons. However, while he was on the mend, the Imperial Army dispersed and the purges began. I can well imagine fleeing soldiers finding their way to the mines as well.”

“But there was no evidence in the mines of soldiers having been there,” Kyoshi pointed out.

“The soldiers would make sure not to leave any traces behind. Especially if they were on the run, they would erase their tracks before moving on in order to make certain their pursuers couldn’t pick up the trail.”

Risai felt a slight tremor in her hand, a sense of anticipation arising from hope reborn. Gyousou might have been one of those soldiers.

There should be other clues waiting for them along the way. Keeping their eyes peeled, they continued forward. They eventually came to the rumored spot where the only way to cross the deep ravine was by using two iron chains. One positioned vertically above the other, the chains stretched across the chasm.

The rest of them looked on with puzzled expressions until Sodou gave them a demonstration. Keeping the upper chain tucked against his waist, he slid his feet sideway along the lower chain. Fortunately, the ravine there was fairly narrow so a kijuu could easily jump or fly to the other side. On the other hand, there was no possible way for a horse to cross the gap.

Here was more evidence that the group taking this trail had kijuu with them, quite likely kijuu that couldn’t fly. Or injured kijuu.

On the far side of the ravine was another mound. This grave marker was smaller than the ones before, fashioned only out of stones. There were no signs of a body being buried there. An unfortunate soul must have slipped off the chains and plunged into the depths of the ravine below. The least his companions could do was leave a memorial behind. This as well suggested that some in the group had kijuu and others did not.

The near vertical cliff wall of the ravine was dotted with iron rings. The only way to climb the wall was to grab ahold of the rings and find a foothold. Reaching the crest of the cliff wall, the side opposite was the same. Thanks to their kijuu, Risai and her team simply detoured around it. Otherwise, they would have had to climb up and down a cliff the height of a multistoried building ring by ring and foothold by foothold.

Having finally found a patch of flat ground to take a breather, Risai asked Sodou, “Is it all like this?”

“More or less.”

“I’ve heard that the training pilgrimage of the Tensan school comprises more than just this trail.”

“The circuit starts at Sekirin Temple and crosses into Kou and Ba Province before returning to Bun Province. Some places are flat and level, and other places follow regular roads. But for the most part, it consists of rugged mountain trails, not limited to the risky stretches we’ve faced so far.”

“Meaning there’s more along the lines of what we’ve been through so far.”

“Very much so. There are particularly rough spots in the mountains along the borders with Kou and Ba Province.”

“Even worse than this?”

“Even worse than this. There are points along the route where they strap themselves to the iron rings and camp out while hanging against the solid rock, halfway up the cliff. It can take over five days to scale a solid slab of stone that way.”

And during that time, of course, nobody was getting a good night’s sleep.

Risai said to Sodou, “Why go to such extremes?” What drove them to undergo such rigorous training regimes?

“They must believe that doing so is the only way to scour away the evil thoughts and impulses clouding their minds. They would otherwise never perceive the reasons and mercies of Heaven.”

“And having passed this way, do they perceive the reasons and mercies of Heaven?”

Sodou fixed his gaze on Mount You. He nodded. “Yes,” he said at length. “But the desire to achieve success alone will not take you to the end of the road. Attempt to get there through desire alone and your own cowardice will rise up and immobilize your legs as if they were mired in mud. Only by losing yourself in the task ahead and pressing onward without guile and self-deception can you surmount the obstacles before you. And when you do, you will know that you would never have succeeded without the divine protection of Heaven.”

Sodou turned to Risai. “It’d be easy to say that the journey of my life brought me here and that’s why I believe in Heaven. But I do not see my life in those terms. I am but a tool in the hands of Heaven.”

His own faith, his own training, everything that began with himself as the starting point—he turned that commonplace reasoning upside down.

“My understanding is that what I call my existence was not the beginning, the cause of what came next. My existence is the end result. I did not create what I call my life. My life created me.”

“Oh,” Risai said with a nod, though she wasn’t at all sure what he was getting at. Then again, if these mysteries could be comprehended without the necessary training, there would be no need for the training in the first place.

Risai got to her feet. “Let’s get going. We’re not even halfway there.”

Chapter 26

[17-2] Following the training trail east toward Mount You proved as difficult as the rumors claimed. Even riding kijuu, they encountered obstacles that sent a cold shiver down the spine. Traversing Mount You itself wasn't any easier.

Along the way, relying on Hien, Risai scouted ahead by herself. The spires of the peaks soared into the sky like tall trees in a forest. Weary of surmounting one after the other, she instead tried to thread her way through the deep ravines between them. But after weaving back and forth, she soon got herself turned around and lost her sense of direction.

Patches of level ground were few and far between and the ridgelines obscured the view. The walls of rock turned back and forth and circled around like folding screens made out of stone, turning the landscape into a giant maze, vistas that reminded Risai of her journey to Mount Hou.

From deep in the valleys that sank like fissures into the earth, she tried pinpointing the peak of a Ryou'un Mountains to use as a landmark, but with so many clustered together, they proved useless as signposts. It was equally unlikely that any other road led in their direction. When she attempted to follow the cataracts upstream, the countless waterfalls slowed her progress to a crawl. Without a flying kijuu, it'd be impossible to get anywhere close to where they were going.

She had no difficulty imagining what a huge challenge getting past such natural obstacles would present to anyone traveling on foot.

There is no other way north. The training trail is the only course to take. With no accessible southern or western routes, this was the only option. The evidence left behind clearly suggested someone had been this way before.

On the third day, the looming peaks to the right and left finally fell away. The road grew straighter and flatter. After crossing one more valley, the peaks of Takuou Mountain came into view. Descending the mountain trail the rest of the way, they arrived at a shrine.

The trail diverged at the shrine, with one path ending at Tenjin Shrine on Takuou Mountain, the final station along the training trail. The other continued onto Koutaku in the foothills of Takuou Mountain.

"So if we keep going, we should get to Koutaku?" Kyoshi asked.

Despite wearing thick gloves, both hands were wrapped in bandages. Unaccustomed to riding a kijuu, it took him a while to shed the bad habit of gripping the reins with all his might. The first day was a trial for the poor kijuu as well. But by

days two and three, he'd begun to relax a bit in the saddle. So he'd made some progress along the way.

"They likely passed through Koutaku," Sodou answered.

Koutaku would otherwise have been nothing more than another city on the borderlands. However, to Sekirin Temple, it was the gateway to a major shrine. Moreover, it also encompassed land administered by Danpou Temple, headquartered in Jou Province. The area was home to many shrines with connections to Zui'un Temple and teemed with Taoist temples and Buddhist monasteries.

In order to accommodate the pilgrims and shrine visitors who flocked there, the city had grown to the size of a prefectural capital.

"Bigger than I imagined," Risai said.

Seishi nodded. "The kind of scale you wouldn't expect from a city at the foot of a mountain and at the end of the road."

Koutaku was the final stop along the highway. The only landmark beyond that point was Tenjin Shrine, affiliated with Sekirin Temple. As the training trail was not something the average person had any use for, it could be said that there was nothing after this.

"It would be fair to say that Koutaku was created by the Taoist temples here," Sodou explained.

Temples and monasteries of all types and sizes crowded together side by side. There were inns to accommodate the pilgrims and visitors, shops and bazaars targeting the crowds, the theaters of the shusei troupes, and the bars and brothels—the high and the low of society all harmoniously crammed together.

Sodou said, "On top of everything else, there is the Koutaku Ordination Hall."

Risai said with a puzzled look, "Don't temples and monasteries all have ordination halls?"

Kyoshi nodded. The rules that governed Taoist and Buddhist clergy were known as the *precepts*. Temples of both faiths had ordination halls where initiates who had taken vows were taught the precepts. Zui'un Temple also had an ordination hall. Elders well versed in the precepts gathered there to define and defend the precepts while instructing the initiates and qualifying applicants as apprentices.

Zui'un Temple had only three ordination halls in Tai. Member Taoists had to undergo the initiation rites at one of them.

Sodou said, "True, but the Koutaku Ordination Hall holds a unique position among them."

Koutaku being a city of religions, a special group was chartered to create an ecumenical organization. It administered an initiation ritual to screen out theologically suspect acolytes. Anyone wishing to proselytize in Koutaku had to

demonstrate a basic allegiance to the precepts established by the Koutaku Ordination Hall.

“Amongst the folk religionists and shamans, there are those with less than forthright intentions. Unlike the Taoist and Buddhist temples, these groups and individuals have no unifying or governing organization. As a result, they often have little in the way of developed rituals and practices. Some new religious sects lack any kind of defined theology to start with. However, anyone wishing to proselytize in Koutaku must be initiated at the Koutaku Ordination Hall and pledge to adhere to and uphold the principles taught there. Subjects such as the character of the preacher, the internal consistency of the doctrines, and means and methods used are covered. If the Koutaku Ordination Hall recognizes the petitioner, it will issue a license. For example, a shaman who belongs to no organized religion can present that license as proof that his teachings are free of heresy.”

“Ah,” said Risai.

Sodou’s explanation struck a chord. A common inquiry made of folk religions was whether its priest or preacher had a license. If they did, the inclination was to take that as a sign of confidence.

“So those licenses come from the Koutaku Ordination Hall?”

“That’s right,” Sodou said. “Religious practitioners come here to obtain a license from the Koutaku Ordination Hall. There they are given an exam. If they fail, they receive further instruction, and in some cases undergo a minimum required training regimen.”

The Koutaku Ordination Hall brought together theologians from the leading Taoist and Buddhist institutions. Applicants there underwent a vigorous array of inquiries. If any logical holes or inconsistencies arose, the cross-examination that followed promised to be no less demanding. Nevertheless, no one failed for not conforming their doctrines to the teachings of the prevailing sects. The integrity of the results thus bolstered the reputation of the Koutaku Ordination Hall as an unbiased arbiter.

“Makes sense,” Risai murmured to herself, when a voice arose behind her.

“Hien?”

Risai turned to the crowd of people. Bundled up against the cold, they wore their hats and caps low over their eyes. Among them, several stopped and raised the hood of their coats and were looking back at Risai. One of them pulled down the scarf covering much of his face and peered up at Risai, eyes wide.

Risai recognized him. “Kiro?”

“Risai-sama!” he called out and ran over to her. It was most certainly Kiro. He’d served under Sougen as a battalion commander.

“Is that really you, Risai-sama? Goodness, you certainly appear to be in fine fettle!”

“As are you, Kiro.” Risai set Hien down on the ground. “You’ve been doing okay?”

“As well as can be expected, thank you. I’ve been plenty concerned for your welfare, but here you are all in one piece!”

“It’s good to know you are also faring well.”

Kiro dabbed at his eyes with his sleeve, warm eyes set into a worn and wrinkled face. He turned to his colleagues and said in a loud whisper, “It’s General Ryuu!”

The three men nodded. Risai recognized one of them though she couldn’t recall his name. They were also members of Sougen’s entourage. Having served together in the Sui Provincial Guard, Risai and Sougen were naturally familiar with each other’s subordinates.

“Are you living here, Kiro? What about Sougen?”

“He’s here too,” Kiro answered under his breath. “He’s been staying here a while.”

“The actual dimensions of Koutaku are as you have seen. But as far as the kingdom is concerned, it is only a shire castle town on the borderlands.”

Kiso offered to guide them to Sougen’s location.

“Except the eyes of the kingdom do not reach this far. Besides, at a basic level, the de facto authority of the Ordination Hall far outstrips that of the local government offices. Nevertheless, both parties get along well with each other.”

“The Koutaku Ordination Hall?”

“Yes,” Kiro said with a nod. The Koutaku Ordination Hall had taken it upon itself to keep Sougen and his soldiers hidden from the authorities.

Risai asked him, “Did you come here across the training trail?”

“Ah, is that how you got here too, Risai-sama? Ah, in fact, Gaikatsu-sama arrived from Bun Province using the training trails.”

Gaikatsu was one of Sougen’s regimental commanders. When Sougen’s division was ordered to support the subjugation campaign in Jou Province, Kiro and Sougen headed to Jou Province while Gaikatsu remained in Bun Province and took charge of two regiments.

“Gaikatsu disbanded his forces in Kakyou and fled together with his troops. They were pursued by the Provincial Guard and ran out of places to run. Their hideout came under attack and he was badly wounded in the assault. He fled into the mountains. Without knowing where he was headed, he wandered down the training trail and managed to make it here alive.”

Around that time, Sougen dispersed his army in Jou Province. Constantly on the move, he eventually ended up at Danpou Temple, where he was given shelter. Meanwhile, the Koutaku Ordination Hall granted Gaikatsu asylum. Communicating

with the head temple through a branch temple in Koutaku, Sougen and Gaikatsu reunited their men.

Realizing the geographical advantages of the area, Sougen and his retinue moved to Koutaku a year after Gyousou's disappearance.

"Danpou Temple—"

For Risai, who called Jou her home province, this was a familiar sect. It was a Buddhist temple that, like Sekirin temple, emphasized ascetic training as part of its core doctrine. It had also earned a reputation for restricting access to the extent that permission was required before visiting the temple. Though it interacted rarely with other religious orders, it was nevertheless renowned for its "warrior monks."

Risai often caught sight of the burly armed monks in their clerical robes. The temples and monasteries in the Danpou Temple sect maintained outstanding medical facilities and provided free emergency treatment for injuries that was second to none. Many made use of them, including soldiers in the Provincial Guard. Risai recalled availing herself of their services on several occasions before she was listed on the Registry of Wizards.

"I see. So they gave Sougen asylum. Greatly appreciated."

"And Oukou-dono before that."

Risai grabbed hold of Kiro's elbow. "Oukou?"

"Yes." Kiro blinked. "Oukou-dono is doing fine. He was the one who connected Sougen-sama to Danpou Temple in the first place."

Risai closed her eyes and bowed her head. Oukou was one of her retainers and had been at her side since their days in the Jou Provincial Guard.

"Oukou is still alive!"

"Oukou-dono made it to Danpou Temple by the skin of his teeth. They took him in and he's been working ever since to support the surviving remnants of the Imperial Army."

"I am deeply grateful."

Kiro smiled. "Oukou-dono should currently be in Jou Province. We should send a messenger as soon as possible. Ah—" He raised his head. "Here we are."

He looked up at what could be described as a large manor house. The gate was shut, but the building itself was a good indication of the standing Koutaku had afforded Sougen and his retinue. They were being provided with all the support and protection they needed.

Risai asked, "How many do they have here?"

Kiro had to stop and think that one over. He soon arrived at an answer and said with a big nod, "Not that everybody I'm talking about lives here. But in terms of those under his command, what remains of Sougen's army comes to almost six thousand."

Chapter 27

[17-3] They passed through the big gate. While they were handing over their kijuu to the stable hands, a servant ran off deeper into the compound. Along with Kiro, they entered the outer courtyard and passed through the middle courtyard. About the time they reached the main pavilion at the back, a tall, rugged man bolted from the bedroom off the central hall.

“Risai!”

It was Sougen, the first time Risai had seen him in seven years. He ran up and stopped in front of her. Struggling to maintain his composure, he placed a hand on her shoulder and bowed his head. “It’s good to see you’re alive and well.”

“You too, Sougen. I’m so happy we could finally meet.”

Sougen responded with a big bob of his head. He led her to the living room and offered her a chair. Risai removed her overcoat and tunic and sat down. Sougen reacted with an obvious start of surprise, then leaned forward and gave her an examining look.

“Risai, you’ve been injured—”

For a moment, Risai didn’t understand what he was referring to, and then realized he meant her missing limb.

“Oh, yes. A youma made off with my arm.”

“Ah,” Sougen said with a pained expression.

Risai smiled in a way that said it was no big deal. It truly wasn’t. She surprised herself at how often she completely put it out of her mind. Could a person really get accustomed to such a drastic loss? By this point, no longer particularly inconvenienced by having only one arm, she wasn’t constantly conscious of the loss.

“You did a good job of figuring out where I was.”

“To tell the truth, we didn’t know you were here before we set out. We’ve been following the training trail and only just arrived. Meeting Kiro on the road to Koutaku was a happy accident.”

“You braved the training trail in this weather?” Sougen said in evident surprise.

“Well, we did have our kijuu.” Risai introduced Seishi, Kyoshi, and Sodou. “And Sodou-dono here as our guide. Thanks to him, we were able to meet you, which made the journey well worth the effort. In fact, we set off in search of Gyousou-sama, the theory being that he might have taken that route in the past.”

“So that’s what brought you here,” Sougen said, a pensive look rising to his face.

“Someone had passed that way before. That was the sliver of hope we clung to.”

“You saw what Gaikatsu and his men left behind. We’ve also made use of the route to move back and forth to the more central regions of Bun Province.”

“Oh. I see.”

It was discouraging news, to be sure, but Risai was not about to give up in despair. Thanks to Gaikatsu and Sougen, the training route was a viable transportation option. The work done by Gaikatsu and his crew in particular made it a far easier route to traverse.

“We are also searching for Gyousou-sama, but—” Sougen lowered his voice. “Don’t you think it is possible that—”

“No,” Risai stated in no uncertain terms. “Gyousou-sama is not dead.”

Sougen rose to his feet. “Are you certain?”

“Without a doubt.”

“Except just the other day, Asen—”

“Do not trust anything to do with that man.”

Risai related to Sougen what Moku’u told them. After that, the conversation grew beyond the subject at hand. Sougen caught her up on the past seven years of his life and Risai did the same. By the time Sodou retired for the evening, their discussions had barely gotten started.

Familiar faces gathered around as they continued to talk—about their retainers and staff members, about Tai and the people of Tai. Late into the night, the subject moved onto the matter of Taiki.

“According to official announcements, Taiki chose Asen as the next emperor.”

“So I’ve heard,” Risai said, and then with a look urged him to clear the room.

Sougen caught her meaning at once. Aside from Gaikatsu and Kouka, he shooed everybody away and had Kiro stand watch for anybody entering the main pavilion.

“So this is information you want to keep off the record?”

Risai nodded. “The Taiho is doing fine. Despite being swept away to Hourai by a shoku, we were able to bring him home. But right now I do not know where he is.”

Risai admitted that Taiki disappeared quite out of the blue. “Kouryou went with him. I’m sure he had his reasons. We haven’t heard a word since then.”

Kyoshi said that messages could be passed using the Taoist temples and the shin’nou, but no such communiques had reached them yet.

“According to Moku’u, the Taiho is in the Imperial Palace. I have no way of verifying that information.”

“Do you think it is possible that Asen captured him and is using him to further his own ends?”

“I don’t think so.”

Sougen heaved a big sigh. “So we don’t know for certain where the Taiho is and have no idea where His Highness might be.”

“We do have good news. Gamon Temple has five thousand men at their disposal. Combined with your forces, that comes to eleven thousand. A full division.”

And if Tonkou could be taken at his word, a division was enough to take the provincial castle.

“That definitely is good news. But just how far can we trust his reading of the situation? People are falling ill at both the imperial and provincial levels.”

“After talking with Tonkou, I don’t think his outlook is as naive as it sounds. It’s not likely that everybody opposed to Asen was purged from the civil service. The province lord of Bun is ill, but we have reasons to doubt whether contracting the disease alone means they can be counted as allies of Asen. To be sure, they act in ways convenient to Asen, though without any sense of loyalty or devotion.”

“So in that light, you do think it is possible?”

Risai nodded. “All we need is His Highness.”

If they could take possession of the provincial castle with Gyouosou in command, they could raise the standard of revolt against Asen.

“If we have His Highness, the people will certainly rally to the cause. But that will take time. In the meantime, we would need to be fully prepared to defend against a first strike from Asen. Having Gamon Temple on our side is reassuring and we can expect support from the Koutaku Ordination Hall. But we lack the manpower and matériel to pose a serious challenge to Asen.”

“If only Gyouosou-sama were here, we could make up for those deficits.”

Responding to the dubious expression on Sougen’s face, she explained, “All the better if Gyouosou-sama escaped from Tai to En. If he sought support from the Imperial En, he could receive assistance from many of the emperors and empresses of the Twelve Kingdoms.”

“Unbelievable!” Sougen exclaimed, his eyes flying wide open. “*Many* of the emperors and empresses?”

“I am sure the Imperial En would be willing to make the arrangements. Given the exigent circumstances, starting with En, we should be able to solicit the support of Sou, Han, Kyou, Kei, and Ren.”

“En and Sou—” Sougen muttered. “Are you sure about that?”

“I am positive,” Risai said.

She understood the look on Sougen’s face. The great kingdom of Sou lay far to the south of En. To speak of seeking the support of En and Sou in the same breath was hardly different than asking the same of the entire world.

“The only task left to us is to find His Highness. Sougen, we would like your help searching to the east of Koutaku.”

“To the east of Koutaku?”

Risai nodded. Gyousou was nowhere to be found within the vicinity of Kan'you Mountain, she explained. There would have been no way for him to move north or south, nor could he have escaped to the west. They concluded that he had fled east using the training trails.

As Risai laid out her reasoning, the expressions on the faces of Sougen and his retainers only grew sterner and more skeptical.

Finally Risai stopped and said to Sougen, "What?"

"Risai, we have already searched for His Highness."

Risai caught her breath. *But of course they had.*

"Like you, we've spent the past three years searching in and around Rin'u. And like you, the results of that three years of work led us to abandon any possible escape routes to the south or west. We do not believe His Highness headed in either direction."

"Then—"

Sougen nodded. "We arrived at the same conclusion. He must have used the training trails. Since relocating to Koutaku, operating on that premise, we continued our searches of Koutaku and Rin'u and their environs. We also hoped to turn up any officers in the Imperial Army who might have gone into hiding."

Risai found herself at a loss for words. The training trail had been their last ray of hope.

"I'm sorry, Risai. You won't find His Highness here either. I think it highly unlikely that His Highness traveled over the training trails."

"You're sure about that—" Risai said, ready to argue with his conclusions, but Sougen only quietly shook his head.

"We've set up our base of operations here in Koutaku. Put another way, this whole area is our home territory. As a result, we've become thoroughly familiar with the lay of the land. A web of human connections exists, often just out of sight. We kept up the search but haven't found a single footprint. No rumors of seeing an injured military commander or people moving a wounded man fitting his description."

Sougen paused. "Well, no. There have been whispers here and there. We hunted down every piece of evidence we turned up. You can see those results for yourself."

Risai recalled the people she'd met so far in Koutaku. Not only those who escaped with Sougen, but those they'd found along the way, and those who had gathered around them. He'd left no stone unturned in his unflagging search. The evidence was everywhere she looked.

"We've found plenty of people, but none of them were His Highness. All I can say for certain is that he did not come down this road. Or if he did, for whatever reason, he did not reach the end."

Risai was momentarily too taken aback to speak.

Sougen looked at her with sad eyes. “I couldn’t say so for an absolute fact because nothing in this world is ever that absolute. But His Highness did not cross the training trail. That’s the conclusion we came to.”

Risai finally found her voice. “So Gyousou-sama simply disappeared—”

“Hold that thought,” Kyoshi said. “Did you know that a wounded military officer was hiding in a village called Rouan in Bun Province?”

Sougen drew his brows. “Rouan?”

“By no means a large village. I don’t suppose you have heard of it. We saw no signs there that search teams had been there before.”

This revelation prompted a flurry of consternation among Sougen’s retainers. They exchanged glances and muttered under their breaths.

“Of course, the people of Rouan went to great lengths to keep his presence secret, which was why he probably never came to your attention.”

Sougen said, with a stony expression on his face, “In other words, we might have overlooked His Highness in the same way?”

“As you said yourself, there are no absolutes in this world. You’ve got limits on your manpower and you’ve had to operate undercover during your search efforts. On top of that, everybody everywhere is extra wary about anything having to do with Asen. There is a group in Rin’u that’s been sheltering a woman that nobody else had known about until today.”

Sougen sank into silence.

Kyoshi continued. “I think it might be premature to declare that His Highness couldn’t have come this way. When you can’t find what you’re looking for, that doesn’t mean it’s not there. It’s possible that we’re looking the wrong way or looking in the wrong place. At the very least, we’d like to reconsider the problem in that light.”

Kyoshi glanced around the room. “I apologize for showing up like this at this late hour and saying such things. However, the subject has long been on my mind. I am well aware how presumptuous this counsel may sound. Risai-sama has thus far put an enormous amount of effort into the cause. Sougen and his men have been hard at work even longer. It stands to reason, then, that you should want to make progress and tally up results by ruling out this and ruling out that. I understand the desire so much it hurts. But you’ve got to distance yourself from the impulse to keep score. That knowledge is ingrained in all those who walk the training trails from the start.”

“That knowledge—” Sougen echoed.

Kyoshi nodded. “Instructors repeatedly warn their apprentices not to do so during their training because it will only dull the value of what they’re trying to learn.”

“Makes sense,” Sougen said with a wry smile. “Not finding what we’re looking for means the search isn’t over, not what we’re looking for doesn’t exist.”

“Wait a minute!” Risai said. She wrapped her arm around her head and stared down at the ground, as if struck by a violent headache.

“Risai-sama, I understand how you feel—”

“No, no, no. Not that! Just wait a minute!” Risai grabbed at her bangs. Pressing her hand against her forehead, she raised a finger. “We’ve assumed that Gyousou-sama was badly wounded. But if he wasn’t, then he would be sure to reestablish contact with his army as quickly as possible. If he suffered severe wounds and attempted to flee under his own power, then Eishou’s patrols surely would have found traces left behind. He couldn’t have covered that much distance in the meantime or covered his tracks.”

Risai kept her finger raised, as if to ward off any interruptions.

“At the time, anybody attempting to break through the pickets and encampments encircling Rin’u would need help. The more of them there were, the more noticeable they’d become. Their movements would be severely constrained. All the more so if ordinary folk were involved. Making a successful escape without leaving a trail behind is no simple task.”

“But, Risai—”

“Hold on to that thought. There is no safe passage north of Kan’you Mountain. That is rocky terrain with no paths or roads to speak of. We didn’t find any evidence of Gyousou-sama in the vicinity of Kan’you Mountain. The hakushi have been searching for years and have confirmed as much. If he fled south, he would have come into contact with Eishou’s pickets, if not the army itself. Moreover, the hakushi found nothing that indicated he had passed through those encampments. The west is out of the question. For a long time now, Hoyou’s people have been on the lookout for any such signs and have also found nothing. That leaves the east. Except Sougen and his soldiers have continually scouted the area without turning up anything.”

Risai raised her head.

“That being the case, we are left with one logical conclusion. Gyousou-sama never left Kan’you Mountain.”

That statement prompted a collective gulp of surprise. “But, Risai-sama,” Kyoshi started to say when Seishi said in a startled voice, “The landslides.”

Risai nodded, her eyes bright and shining. “Kyuusan and the people who work on the mountain said so repeatedly. Landslides and cave-ins happen all the time.”

The result of the haphazard and unregulated mining. In order to keep the stones they cultured from getting stolen, many miners staked claims to gemstones fountains and never revealed their locations or even the access routes. They dug mines here and there and everywhere at their own convenience, without any thought to safety. Having gone on for so long, these practices left the mountain in a fragile and unstable state.

Cave-ins in unknown mines and shafts buried hidden treasures like the Kouin. Everybody knew that digging through the rubble and finding one would provide windfall for life, and yet they went undiscovered, out of reach from the start.

“In fact, there was a big landslide on Kan’you Mountain the day Gyousou-sama disappeared. We think it stopped his attackers from finishing him off and gave Gyousou-sama a chance to escape. But what if the landslide also trapped him in the mountain and he was never able to leave in the first place?”

Risai answered her own question with an emphatic nod.

“Going in, Gyousou-sama was caught in the trap they had laid, but the landslide prevented them from delivering the coup de grace. With His Highness caught up in the disaster and presumed dead, his attackers considered the job done and withdrew. But when the White Pheasant did not fall from its perch, Asen would know that Gyousou-sama hadn’t died. Nevertheless, there’s no evidence of Asen sending a large-scale search party to Kan’you Mountain. Perhaps Asen conducted the search behind the scenes, and subsequently captured and detailed him. Except if Asen had Gyousou-sama in his grasp, there is no way he would let him live. As he is not dead, Asen must not have captured him.”

Seishi leaned forward, an intrigued expression on his face.

“But look at it from an opposing perspective. Asen wouldn’t necessarily have to kill Gyousou-sama. If he never again appeared in public, and was rendered incapable of influencing the political process, the reins of government would remain securely in Asen’s hands. In fact, that approach might well be preferable. If Gyousou died, the Taiho would choose the next emperor, bringing Asen’s reign to an end.”

“Ah!” Seishi exclaimed.

“That’s right,” Risai said. The intent never was to kill him. From the start, keeping Gyousou-sama alive and out of Imperial Palace guaranteed trying times for Tai. During those times, Providence could not act to correct the errant conditions.”

“So that was Asen’s objective all along?”

“I think so. Consequently, it had to be Kan’you Mountain and it had to be Bun Province. The plan all along was to attack him and confine him in the depths of the mountain itself. Except Asen is not the cornerstone of the kingdom. The Taiho posed the greatest threat to an Asen dynasty. He would sense the Imperial Aura and know that Gyousou-sama was on Kan’you Mountain. Knowing where he was, he would sally forth to save him.”

Sougen said in a low voice, “He couldn’t because his horn was severed.”

Risai nodded. That was when Seishi raised his voice. “Risai-sama, now it makes sense! The wooden boxes!”

“The wooden boxes?”

“Two big wooden boxes were transported to Kan’you Mountain shortly before Gyousou-sama disappeared. That unfortunate woman said living creatures were inside those boxes. Everyone we talked to who lived through the landside recalled hearing a terrifying sound, like a beast in its death throes.”

“Yes, they did. Meaning?”

“It was a *ririki*. A youma.”

Seishi became familiar with the *ririki* when he accompanied Gyousou on the Shouzan. It was said that the roar of that beast could shatter stone. On the verge of death, it could change the shape of an entire mountain. Asen somehow got his hands on a *ririki* and used that destructive force for that purpose.

Risai and Seishi exchanged a long look.

“They attacked Gyousou-sama and mortally wounded him. Then they dragged him inside the mountain and used the roar of a *ririki* to collapse the mineshaft.”

As emperor, Gyousou would not easily lose his life, no matter how severe his wounds. With Taiki under Asen’s thumb and Gyousou sealed away in the depths of Kan’you Mountain, Asen had all of the power and authority of the kingdom at his disposal, with no need to fear the judgments of Heaven.

As long as the rightful emperor lived, the throne rested in Asen’s hands and nothing could upset the status quo.

Chapter 28

[17-4] In order to keep Gyousou alive, common sense said he had to eat now and then.

That thought on his mind, Asen stood on the balcony and looked north across the Sea of Clouds. It was a moonless night. Gyousou was out there, at the far reaches of the calm and black seascape.

What condition is he in? What is on his mind?

The White Pheasant had not fallen, so he must be alive. Even Asen didn't know anything else beyond that. It had never occurred to Asen to kill Gyousou. Kill Gyousou and Providence would adapt as well, expressing the Will of Heaven in the selection of a new emperor. In order to prevent such an outcome from occurring and keep the status quo frozen in place, Gyousou had to be imprisoned alive.

Asen's men attacked Gyousou, triggered a landslide, and sealed him deep underground. That was the plan from the start and it succeeded in every way. With Gyousou buried alive at the bottom of a mineshaft, Kan'you Mountain became the tombstone marking his living grave. The only thing they hadn't counted on was the enormous scale of the landslides.

No, that wasn't the only thing.

The report filled Asen with regrets. Gyousou fought back harder than expected and killed several of his attackers in the ensuing struggle. They responded in kind and badly wounded him. Then succumbing to their fury, threw him down the nearest mineshaft. A succession of landslides and cave-ins finished the job, entombing him completely.

Asen chose Ukou to lead the team. Ukou was a beast whose bad reputation preceded him. Asen felt nothing but disgust toward the man, and intended to use him and discard him once he'd served his purposes. Ukou believed in nothing but himself. He possessed no sense of duty or honor. Asen could hardly count on Ukou to deport himself as a loyal retainer.

Having wounded Gyousou and rendered him immobile, the original plan was to abandon him in a mine at the face of one of the gemstone fountains, and then collapse the tunnel behind him, entombing him there. That particular gemstone fountain had a ventilation shaft that reached the surface, through which water and food could be lowered into what remained of the mine.

While secretly keeping Gyousou alive, Asen intended to put his status and standing on a firm footing. Once he was secure in his own position, they would

excavate the caved-in areas and clear away a passageway. At that point, Asen could take Gyousou into custody as a prisoner under his personal supervision. Except—

“Yeah, he might be dead.” That was Ukou’s conclusion when he returned. “He made it hard to go easy on him, you know?” Ukou said with a thin smile. They ended up wounding him more severely than expected. Caught up in the frenzy, his soldiers tossed Gyousou into the nearest hole in the ground.

Human trash, Asen thought. He didn’t say so aloud.

These weren’t the kind of men who knew how to hold back. They lacked the ability to judge their own skills against those of other men. Ukou could never have held his own alone with someone like Gyousou. He didn’t even rise to the average level of Asen’s retainers. He was not blessed with a commanding physique and nothing laudable could be said about his training ethic.

Where he really sunk to new depths was in cruelty and foul play. And those depths knew no bounds. The ends justified the means. Having taken their characters into account when he recruited them, all of Ukou’s Red Armor members—no small number—resembled him in every way. Augmenting their abilities with *hinman* and relying on the powers of the youma, the Red Armor upgraded their skills without any additional work and had no little pride in the fact.

They probably wanted to beat Gyousou to death. Having been ordered *not* to kill him, they stayed their hands at the last minute. It wasn’t like they knew he was going to die, but it was certainly their intention. If it came down to just him and them, they figured they were capable of beating him senseless. Except Gyousou managed to take out a good half of them during the fight, leaving them dead or wounded.

This came as no surprise to Asen. He expected such an outcome. Ukou hadn’t. Giving into their anger and wounded pride, Ukou’s men threw Gyousou down a mineshaft. Orders not to kill him and to instead abandon him in a mine near the gemstone fountain flew out of their heads.

Had Asen’s retainers been in charge of the operation, they would have grasped the overall goal of the plan, and if unforeseen exigencies had arisen, wouldn’t have abandoned it in the midst of carrying it out. At the end of the day, Ukou and his kin were nothing but rogues with badges pinned to their chests. They weren’t even capable of evaluating the merits of their own actions.

“Well, what’s done is done!” they laughed, and went ahead and triggered the landslide right on schedule.

“Yeah, they’re idiots.” Asen shook his head and laughed in self-derision. “But that’s just the pot calling the kettle black.”

He should have given the job to his trusted aides in the first place. But Asen was not confident he’d be able to win them over. Regicide was a great crime. His retainers would want no part of it. They’d undoubtedly try to change his mind instead. Asen

didn't want to have his mind changed and he didn't have it in him to try and change theirs.

He could twist arms and issue orders and count on his retainers to obey him. But as their leader, he could not reveal himself as the kind of man ready to descend to such unjust depths. And so in the end, he turned to Ukou to put the finishing touches on the plan. That decision was the first of many mistakes that followed.

The arbitrary actions of Ukou and his crew started them down the road to chaos, with the power of the youma pushing the end results in directions even Asen had once thought unimaginable.

The ririki was a youma the size of an elephant that resembled a giant boar. An extraordinarily ugly and dirty creature, its thick and flabby hide sprouted moss in places. It barked like a dog, except when under distress, when it raised a piercing scream. That shriek so weakened solid rock that massive stones shattered like eggshells beneath its boulder like feet.

Except that sound alone could not trigger a massive landslide. Rather, it was the howl of a ririki in its death throes that possessed the power to peel away an entire mountainside.

The ririki was locked inside in a cage and carried into a mine. A pit beneath the cage was filled with charcoal and lit. The cage was placed near an air shaft. Before the fire directly beneath the cage flared to life, there was enough time for the soldiers to run for safety.

Two ririki were transported into the cave. In most situations, ririki were mild mannered creatures that did not attack human beings, and were all the more docile when around others of their own kind. However, when one became agitated, that frenzied state got transmitted through the herd. Given their huge frames and enormous power, that made them extraordinarily dangerous youma.

The ririki had been smuggled from the Yellow Sea. They were able to keep the ririki alive inside the cages thanks to Rousan's advice. There was a species of youma in the Yellow Sea called a *shiniku*. Whether a shiniku was a carnivore or herbivore was anyone's guess, but it provided a way for ordinary humans to keep a youma.

To start with, Rousan explained, a youma was a youma because it couldn't be domesticated by human beings. The lives of humans and youma were each governed by their own natural laws. But a shiniku bridged that divide. Stick one inside the cage, and until it was completely devoured, the youma continued to thrive in keeping with the laws of nature that governed the human world.

Following Rousan's advice, all the necessary preparations should have been completed to perfection. Except—

Thinking back about it now, mastering all the actions of the youma and putting them at their beck and call had been impossible going in. Nevertheless, had they

made the necessary preparations beforehand, they could have exercised some modicum of control.

They should have first brought a ririki to Kan'you Mountain to see what happened. Had they done so, they would have learned that the roar of a ririki was more powerful than they imagined and that Kan'you Mountain was more fragile than they expected. But without such a practical approach, "preparations" that were made without first conducting the necessary research didn't mean anything.

So the ririki wreaked a massive amount of destruction on Kan'you Mountain and Gyousou disappeared, dead or alive, amidst the dirt, dust, and debris.

To Asen as well, Gyousou ended up in an unreachable state. Any control over his life or death was now out of Asen's hands. A complete blunder on his part. Not that he couldn't reassert that control. But that first meant digging through a literal mountain of earth and stone to retrieve him.

In the aftermath of the chaos, launching a recovery operation would only reveal to Gyousou's retainers where he was, while pulling the curtain back on Asen's role in the attack. It'd be no different than making a public confession.

Asen believed that his blunders had cost Gyousou his life. No living thing could survive buried so deeply in the earth. If Gyousou died, his own downfall was inevitable. They were all destined to die on each other's swords, in which case they just should have battled each other to the death to start with.

"And yet he lives—"

The White Pheasant had not fallen. Gyousou somehow remained alive in his grave.

But how?

Despite being listed on the Registry of the Gods, no emperor could survive this long without food and water. Moreover, Gyousou had suffered severe wounds before being entombed in the mountain. Getting thrown down a deep mineshaft certainly inflicted more bodily damage. And then on top of everything else, he got caught in the ensuing landslides.

To emerge alive from such conditions was nothing short of a miracle.

Asen could not begin to imagine the physical state Gyousou must be in. By now, his life was surely hanging by a thread. Should his wounds prove fatal, there was no way for Asen to step in and stop the inevitable from occurring.

If Gyousou died, Asen's life was over too.

Once the wheels of Fate began to turn, the Providence of a stalemated Heaven would surely manifest itself again, forcing Asen to account for his sins. That could occur a year from now. It could happen today.

It could happen today. The thought had scorched his conscience for the past six years.

“So this is how you exact your revenge,” Asen mumbled to himself, turning his gaze toward the distant horizon.

Far off to the north, an island broke the surface of the Sea of Clouds. The island was the peak of Mount You. At the base of the massive mountain, a village sat on a plot of level land alongside a mountain stream on the southwest slope. Crossing the stream and looking up, the palisades of Seisai came into view, perched on the cliffs that ringed the hamlet.

The region was occupied by the land gangs. No one else could enter the area at will. All of the neighboring hamlets were deserted during this coldest part of the year. Closed in by the snow, within the dark and quiet village, a small light illuminated the exterior of a single small house.

Holding her father’s hand, the girl left the house. In her other hand, she held a basket with a tight grip. A flicker of light came from her father’s lantern. Thick clouds hung low in the starless winter sky. It was the night of a new moon and no other light peeked through overcast shrouded skies.

“Looks like snow—” the girl said in a quiet voice.

The father glanced back at her with gentle eyes. “The weather should hold out until we get back.”

The girl nodded with the sad realization that they were going no matter what. It was hard going, trudging through the accumulated snow in the dead of night, under a winter sky, without even the light of the moon. Not to mention that inside the basket was what little food the family had, three steamed rice cakes wrapped in bamboo grass scraped together from a scant amount of grain.

As if reading her thoughts, “Are you hungry?” her father asked in a sad voice.

The girl shook her head, but they had to go hungry that night in order to make the rice cakes.

“I should be getting my hands on some barley tomorrow, so please endure the best you can tonight.”

That being the case, they could have eaten this meal that night and cast the basket into the water tomorrow night. She kept these thoughts to herself. On the previous night of the new moon, her father hadn’t let the basket get swept away. He was placing nuts and berries inside the basket when he stopped. With trembling hands, he instead shared them with her and her brother.

And then he wept. He must have been thinking about her older sister, who had starved to death. That’s why he didn’t place the basket upon the water. And yet a month later, he once more prepared the basket. With mixed emotions, he hesitated again and again, but finally put the rice cakes inside the basket and closed the lid.

The girl was hurt and disappointed. At the same time, she was relieved. She sensed that her father felt a bit better after that. But she couldn't help thinking that tomorrow would be just as good as today. They could eat well today and put the basket off until tomorrow.

Though she didn't mention any of this either, her father guessed what was on her mind.

"It has to be the night of the new moon. Break that deadline and the rest is all for naught. So much so it frightens me."

"Frightens you?"

The girl tramped through the frozen snow, following the trail made by her father.

Her father nodded. "I understand what you're going through. You don't have enough to eat. Your sister died, and the tragic fact is, there was one less mouth to feed. But you are a growing girl and such meager amounts cannot possibly be enough. I feel terrible about what you are going through, and all the worse since your sister's death. That's why if I fail again now, it's like I have been defeated by those emotions."

"What's wrong with that?" the girl asked.

Her father did not speak for a while. They walked on, their breath freezing into flowing white clouds in the cold night air. *He must be angry*, she thought uneasily to herself. But at length, her father answered.

"Perhaps there is nothing wrong with surrendering to the inevitable. Causing your sister's death was a truly stupid thing to do. Maybe it would be better if I put a stop to this nonsense and made sure you were fed instead. Except your father does not wish to admit defeat."

"Why?" she asked.

That was when the father and daughter arrived at the edge of the deep pool. The pool had frozen over and collected a thin dusting of snow. The black surface of the water only appeared along the flow of the rushing current.

Her father found a foothold on a rocky outcropping facing the current. He knelt down and took the basket from his daughter. He opened the lid and examined the contents. The basket was mostly empty, except for a tunic made from joss paper, several pieces of charcoal, and three rice cakes wrapped in bamboo grass.

"Your sister died and you never have enough to eat because a bad person sits on the throne. Acting contrary to the will of Heaven, this evil man reduced this kingdom to what it is today. Your father cannot allow this state of affairs to go on."

"Us eating the rice cakes allows it to go on?"

"That is how it seems to me. Though if we divided them amongst ourselves, we could set aside thoughts of hunger, at least tonight."

"Do the dead matter more?"

“What matters more may be somewhat different. But I understand. The dead no longer dwell in this world. They cannot come to our aid or save our lives. Even this—”

Her father gently rocked the basket back and forth. The few items within rattled back and forth.

“Even this will surely go to waste. We’d be better off sharing the food and warming ourselves with the charcoal. But that man was our benefactor. If he didn’t exist, your father may not have existed at all and you would have never been born into this world. You suffer and go hungry because your father holds you dear. And the only reason such adorable children are here is because of him.”

When the girl craned her head to the side with a puzzled expression, her father said, “A long time ago, your father’s father, and his father before him, faced an almost certain death. He rebelled against the kingdom and should have been slain as a traitor. But that man spared his life.”

“Was Grandpa’s father a bad man?” the girl asked in evident surprise.

“He wasn’t a bad man. But under any other circumstances, he would have been labeled one and killed. But that man said he wasn’t. The kingdom was in the wrong, he said. Rebelling didn’t make them traitors. That’s why he couldn’t allow them to die. In times like today, I can’t help thinking how right he was.”

The girl nodded.

“He saved them. It was thanks to him that your father is with you now. Our great benefactor was killed by truly evil men. Putting him out of our minds means also forgetting the grievous sin they committed and accepting this fallen world the way it is.”

Her father added under his breath, “No matter what becomes of this world, the people of Tetsui alone will never forget what he did for them.” A wry smile rose to his face and he looked back at her. “Sorry for dredging up such a difficult subject at a time like this.”

The girl shook her head. Though she didn’t have a very good idea of what her father was talking about, she sensed a glimmer of comprehension in his words. But then a thought struck her. She reached into her pocket and took out three *otedama* beanbags her sister had made filled with grass seeds. She’d attached small bells to the beanbags so that they produced a clear ringing sound when tossed around.

These were her only toys, but she placed them inside the basket.

“Are you sure?”

“He doesn’t have anything to play with, does he?” she asked with a quizzical expression.

Her father responded with a happy smile. “I’m sure he would be delighted, especially knowing that such an adorable girl was willing to part with such a prized possession.”

The girl nodded. With a serious look on his face, her father closed the lid of the basket. Then again checking his footing, lowered the basket into the water.

After they left, her father's hand holding hers, the currents carried the basket across the deep, dark pool until it was drawn into the mouth of the crevasse. The girl did not know, but the crevasse constantly feasted on offerings swept away like this. On a regular basis, the rushing waters brought them down from the upper courses of the mountain stream to this pool, where they were swallowed by the earth.

Many sank to the depths of Kan'you Mountain, never to be seen again. But now and again, one continued on its journey.

The basket prepared by the father and daughter was one such offering. The father having set it afloat, the basket plunged deep underground, tumbled down the rocky rapids, barely skimmed past the stagnant ponds while miraculously navigating the many forks and tributaries, until it finally arrived in the subterranean depths of the mountain.

In the most distant reaches of Kan'you Mountain, a narrow shore had formed along the stream in a spacious cave. The basket floated toward that shore and snagged a rock in the shoals.

Despite being located so deep underground, the faint light from a small fire illuminated the surroundings. Illuminated by the glow, the basket rocked in the wash of the current.

For a long moment, briefly balanced against the small rocks, the basket bobbed back and forth until the swirl of the stream turned it about and the basket again resumed its journey into the pitch-black deeper underground.

Just then, a hand reached down and grabbed hold of the basket and pulled it from the water before the rapids could reclaim it.

Amidst the darkness of the bottomless pit, in the unfathomable depths beneath this huge mountain, gifts from above arrived along the shore. He had a hard time imagining what had brought them here, to a place so isolated from the surface of the earth and the known world above.

This was not an event that happened only once or twice. The baskets showed up on an unexpected but regular basis. They resembled offerings for the dead and likely constituted part of the ancestral rites following a person's funeral.

He opened the lid of the basket. In the dim light, he could make out paper handicrafts that had lost their form from the dampness, several lumps of charcoal, three cloth beanbags, and three rice cakes wrapped in bamboo leaves. He picked one up for a closer look. It was a child's toy, an otedama.

It followed that this must be a child's funerary offering. Or else a plucky and self-sacrificing girl had included it as a condolence. Probably the latter. The otedama showed the wear and tear of long and loving play.

I'm taking toys from children, Gyousou thought with a wry smile.

He lifted the basket over his head and bowed in thanks for the bounties received.
And then walked off, basket in hand.

These offerings for the dead had kept him alive up until now.

Passing as intended from the hands of the sender to the hands of the receiver,
swept along to their destination on a tide of deep feelings and profound convictions,
these meager blessings had become the emperor's lifeline.

Though his benefactors were in no way aware of that fact.

Part Eighteen

Chapter 29

[18-1] That day, an unusual flurry of excitement arose in a neighborhood of Koutaku.

“Is it true they figured out the location of His Highness?” asked one of Sougen’s retainers.

Sougen nodded. “We can’t say so for certain, but we’re much more confident this time around.”

The harder you wish for results, the faster those results recede into the distance.

They kept Kyoshi’s words engraved on their minds. On top of everything else, another search of Kan’you Mountain was in the cards. They hadn’t found Gyousou yet, which meant their efforts to date had been insufficient. They had to rethink their whole way of doing things. The first step was to reexamine every inch of Kan’you Mountain.

“But Kan’you Mountain is huge.”

“No doubt about it,” Risai agreed. “Right now, even Kyuusan admits he doesn’t know the half of it, and he rules the roost on the whole mountain.”

“A thorough search will require a lot of manpower.”

“We have plenty of manpower, though I can’t say it’s what we need to get the job done.”

Sougen still had most of his division. Add to that the forces from Gamon Temple and the Hakushi.

A Taoist monk by the name of Seigen pointed out, “If you all converge on Kan’you Mountain at the same time, you’ll stick out like a sore thumb.”

The Koutaku Ordination Hall had for a long time sheltered and supported Sougen and his men. Douhan, the head priest, brought them together and made the introductions. A Danpou Temple monk by the name of Kuushou, and Seigen, a Taoist priest from the Zui’un Temple circuit. They’d both come here as followers of Douhan.

Responding to Seigen, Risai explained, “By splitting up and moving in small groups, we should avoid attracting too much attention. Refugees traveling through the area have become a common enough sight, and the roads from Hakurou through Tetsui to Seisai are largely out of the public eye. With pedestrian traffic falling off,

the roads are often deserted. As long as we don't do anything to stand out, I think the risks will be manageable. Once we get to Seisai, there are places where we can lie low."

There were abandoned mines all around Kan'you Mountain. A mining camp on the scale of Rokou could support several thousand. With the nod from Kyuusan, they could keep a significant number out of view along the way from Seisai to Anpuku. Gamon Temple had the resources to supply their room and board.

"Sekirin Temple will help too," Sodou said. "That includes reviving the Taoist temple in Seisai. Sekirin Temple has a large temple further west of Seisai in Ryuukei. The one in Seisai was on a similar scale. Time has passed since the purges and eradication campaigns. There would be nothing unnatural about rebuilding the temple now. In that case, it'd be perfectly normal to have people hauling goods back and forth."

"Thank you."

"We can also assist you in that matter," said Douhan, the head priest of the Koutaku Ordination Hall. Douhan was an old man who carried about him an air of detachment from the world. His weathered features and bright eyes also appeared well suited for his vocation.

"For a long time now, a great many shamans have sought licenses from the Koutaku Ordination Hall. Koutaku is filling up. It's become something of a burden and a bottleneck."

The shamans by and large did not belong to a single unifying religious organization. Most consisted of the master and a small number of disciples, and each little group wanted a license.

"Because not having a license significantly limits their activities, they flock to Koutaku. Their sheer numbers fill the inns to overflowing. They end up gathering on vacant land. A city at the bottom of a mountain valley doesn't have more land to expand into. It's a problem for the shire government as well. There's long been talk of moving the shaman licensing to another location. Setting up an Ordination Hall in territory ruled by the land gangs is out of the question, but historically speaking, Ryuukei would be a good fit."

Back in the day, Ryuukei had been a city of religion and a center of Taoist activities. Though the city depopulated during the purges, little by little, the old residents had begun to return.

"Ryuukei is pretty remote, isn't it?"

Risai thought that Hakurou or Rin'u would be more convenient but Douhan pointed out that, "Big cities really aren't that well suited. Thanks to the commendable officials running the shire government in Koutaku, we long ago reached a mutual understanding. But governments are not eager to share power. For Taoist temples

and Buddhist monasteries that wielded considerable authority in the past, a far-flung town is more suitable.”

“Ryuukei would be ideal. However—” A stern-looking priest raised his voice. This was Kuushou from Danpou Temple. “If this starts taking a long time, the danger of exposure will only increase. Won’t conducting a survey of Kan’you Mountain in its entirety become well-nigh impossible?”

“Kyuusan controls all the entry and exit points. There’s no evidence that His Highness passed through them. That suggests we should be looking in the area where the landslides sealed off access to the mountain itself.”

To the murmur of assent, Risai added, “In that case, we’ll need Kyuusan’s cooperation.”

While Sougen prepared to mobilize his forces, Risai and her crew returned along the training trails. Kenchuu, Houto, and Kiitsu had set up shop in Seisai and were waiting for them.

The new safehouse was located in the east of Seisai, a location that provided ready access to Kan’you Mountain further east. Kyuusan had made the accommodations available so Risai visited him first thing to thank him personally. He took up residence in Seisai in order to be more accessible to them.

Risai headed to the inn where Kyuusan was staying. The almost deserted road was packed with snow, piled here and there in deep drifts.

“A search of Kan’you Mountain?” Kyuusan said with startled expression when she laid out the particulars of the situation. “That mountain is a monster.”

“I know. But it’s something we have to do.”

“Hmm.” Kyuusan folded his arms. “Well, to start with, feel free to use Seisai as you see fit. We’d prefer you maintain a low profile, but as long as you’re using Sekirin Temple and the Koutaku Ordination Hall as a front, I don’t see a problem. More people moving in should keep the place from going to the dogs. The buildings are already in bad shape as is.”

“According to the information we’ve gotten from Gamon Temple, people gathering here haven’t attracted any attention from the government. The government wrote off Seisai a long time ago as a place of no importance.”

“Yeah, I get that. But are you going to have enough supplies on hand?”

“I believe that support will be forthcoming. You’ve got enough on your plate already, but in a worst-case scenario, getting the women and children to safety would be our first priority. You can count on us to step up to help in that case.”

“I don’t have any concerns about that. Sounds like you’ve earned yourself the trust of these guys. The problem is Kan’you Mountain. However happy we are to lend a hand, that mountain is huge.”

“Unless you’ve run across new evidence worth tracking down, the place to start is the area around the landslides. Some excavation work will be in order. We can’t pay a lot, but we will pay wages to any workers you can lend us.”

“I’ve got no reason to turn down an offer like that,” Kyuusan said with a nod.

With that groundwork in place, and while preparing for any eventuality, Risai and her team moved forward with plans to refit the abandoned mining camps in the mountains. They moved in supplies and people from Gamon Temple, and little by little, additional personnel from Koutaku. Those with kijuu used the training trails and the rest came via the highways along the northern route.

There were just three of us when we left Sekijou. Risai, Kyoshi, and Houto. Half a year later, they had a whole army at their disposal.

“With these military forces aligned, we could mount an assault on the Bun provincial capital,” Seishi said.

Risai nodded. *At long last, we have finally arrived.*

All they had to do now was find Gyousou.

Chapter 30

[18-2] Behind the scenes, the village manager of Tetsui reached out for help. The request was passed along to Gyousou when he arrived at the village of Shikyuu.

Tetsui was home to the shire castle. It also enclosed the village of Tetsui. The manager of that village was the one seeking assistance. He claimed that something strange was going on with the people in the shire castle.

The village manager was driven out by the shire. Along with several of his friends and relatives, he fled to Kan'you Mountain. But there they were cornered. They really needed his assistance. If that wasn't possible, then he at least wished to get a fair hearing, or so said the messenger sent in their place.

Feels like a trap, Gyousou thought.

He leaned back against a rock wall and let out a long breath. Given that the village manager had dispatched the messenger, Gyousou could bring him along on the return trip. He had reportedly loaded up with food and provisions and was heading back on his own. If the land gangs helped themselves to those provisions along the way, the whole thing would be for naught.

As long as they were going to see the village manager, it only made sense for Gyousou and the messenger to make the journey together.

It had to be a trap. There were no two ways about it. So why take him up on the offer?

Contempt probably had something to do with it. Reports about a company of Asen's men led by a man named Ukou had reached his ears. Ukou first came to his attention on the punitive expedition to Bun Province, when they were attached to the army as sentries. Though Gyousou had never spoken to the man, he remembered his name and face.

During the reign of Emperor Kyou, he'd served in the Army of the Center. Gyousou recalled that no one had anything good to say about him or his martial skills. That being the case, if he was walking into a trap, he was more than confident he'd have no problem fighting his way out of it.

His pride came into play in no small way as well. Once Tetsui was mentioned, there was no backing down. No one was going to accuse him of leaving the village manager in the lurch.

But of course, even as emperor, he was willing to face any danger for the good of Tetsui.

If this was a trap, those were exactly the kinds of rumors he'd expect to hear. The whole situation had been shaped in such a manner that he had no choice but to meet those rumors head on and once again rush in where angels feared to tread.

And so it was from the beginning, Gyousou thought.

The same thoughts crossed his mind when he heard that Tetsui was in danger. The mere mention of Tetsui roused him to action. He had two choices. He could mobilize a division of the Palace Guard Army to save Tetsui or go there himself.

The Palace Guard was his to do with as he saw fit. If he dispatched the Army of the Left, and an entire division at that, then any sense of obligation would surely be satisfied. But rumors were bound to arise that now that he was emperor, he was simply playing it safe. He'd have to venture to Bun Province in person.

At the same time, he understood perfectly well his hand was being forced, and by going to Bun Province he was heedlessly putting himself in harm's way.

Given the exigencies of the situation, Asen undoubtedly expected Gyousou to lead Ganchou's division to Bun Province. If that's what he expected, then Gyousou would instead divide Asen's forces. Ganchou, Gashin, and Risai remained in Kouki along with three regiments of Asen's army. That should curtail Asen's range of options.

These thoughts on his mind as they approached Bun Province, Gyousou couldn't shake the feeling that Asen had already factored his countermeasures into his plan. Perhaps Asen wasn't as interested in Gyousou going to Bun Province as he was in separating him from the capital while in the company of Asen's retainers.

He'd considered bringing Ganchou along. Even accompanied by Ganchou and his army, Gashin and Risai would remain behind in the capital. Two divisions of the Imperial Army against Asen's one. If an insurrection actually broke out, they could quickly muster reinforcements from the provinces. There was no chance of the Imperial Palace falling during his absence.

The problem was Taiki.

Bringing Taiki with him to Bun Province was out of the question. Nor could he just send Taiki to a more secure location. He shouldn't have any reasons for doing so in the first place. If he did, he'd be all but announcing he was wary of assassins lurking in Kouki. He had to avoid giving Asen grounds for believing that Gyousou harbored any doubts about him before he made his move.

So Taiki remained in the Imperial Palace.

Even though Asen couldn't possibly take the palace with a single division, he could kill Taiki. That was why he had to divide Asen's army. The odds were good that doing so would heighten Asen's wariness, but it was the only compromise he could come up with at the last minute.

And the only choice left to him, which only made him suspect Asen's motives all the more. He had to wonder if he'd been led in that direction all along.

I've known so from the start, Gyousou reminded himself with a wry smile. Even if he figured it all out in advance, all he could do now was dance to Asen's tune.

He was at a distinct disadvantage. Asen could either go forward or call the whole thing off. The one or the other was always up to him. Gyousou didn't have those options at his disposal. He would have to pick up whatever gauntlet Asen threw down. But he couldn't attack Asen before he acted.

Much better if he could have laid his hands on hard evidence of a brewing rebellion before it happened. Asen was too smart to let that happen and Gyousou couldn't have him killed without any evidence. He wasn't the kind of man who would fabricate crimes in order to justify taking out a feared foe.

Gyousou was certain that Asen would rise up at some point. He couldn't predict when and what the inciting factor would be. In public, at least, Asen showed Gyousou all the respect and deference he was due. He got along well with Gyousou's retainers and appeared to be on good terms with Taiki. There were no reasons to doubt him. That was just as true now as then.

If Gyousou had to sum up his feelings in a word, it was the *atmosphere* Asen carried about him. He felt a chill whenever they met, like the touch of cold steel at the back of his neck. Gyousou sensed nothing in Asen's speech and conduct to justify this reaction, but at some point, he'd come to believe that Asen had every intent to stage a coup d'état.

Gyousou didn't know why. Perhaps Asen desperately desired the throne and could not stomach the fact that it belonged to Gyousou.

Strangely enough, he was pretty sure that wasn't the case here. Asen's motivations were that transparent.

"What has taken possession of you?"

He turned the question over and over in his mind and came up with nothing, except that whatever the answer was, it must have left Asen infuriated.

With no other avenues left open to him, he departed for Bun Province with Asen's retainers under his command. Knowing he was walking into a trap, he let Ukou take point. Ukou detoured down a side road with twenty-five mounted soldiers. Gyousou thought so little of them he was confident he could take on that many if push came to shove.

And if they did attack him, that would provide proof positive of Asen's conspiracy.

Which was why he borrowed a small number of Sougen's men and ordered them to tail him at a safe distance. Gyousou didn't know what happened to them. He doubted they were still alive. They wouldn't have been any match for Ukou and his crew, but then Ukou's actual strength far exceeded the capabilities Gyousou expected from him too.

Thinking about it now sent a shiver down his spine. Ukou wasn't the only one. All of his men possessed a chilling set of martial skills. Ukou was a more talented fighter than Gyousou thought. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that Asen had a whole company of soldiers just like him at his disposal.

Despite being listed on the Registry of the Gods, it was a miracle he was still alive. Sure, he could have handily handled one or two of them. But he was no match for that many and ultimately had no chance of prevailing in the fight. He'd never experienced such a crushing sense of despair since the day he was born.

"My pride got the better of me."

That's what he wanted to believe. Having taken his enemy for granted, he was caught off guard by the overwhelming force of an attack that exceeded his expectations. These unexpected developments caused him to lose his composure, making his opponents appear stronger than they really were.

Because if that wasn't the case, he would be forced to admit the existence of soldiers with skills nothing short of the supernatural. For entirely different reasons, that was something Gyousou did not wish to accept.

Because that would mean Asen had resorted to using youma.

In any case, Gyousou was attacked on Kan'you Mountain. Resigned to his own death, he lost consciousness. When he came to, he was engulfed in darkness. For a while, he couldn't move. Though not in any great pain, he could not feel his limbs. Surrounded by the pitch black, he wasn't sure whether he still had his arms and legs.

The sensation eventually returned to his extremities. He had no idea how much time it took, but after what seemed forever, his nerves slowly came back to life, accompanied by a flood of pain. When the agony subsided, he was finally able to move, except he had no idea where he was or what sort of situation he was in. He could not see beyond the darkness, a darkness so pervasive that at first he thought he'd lost his sight.

He managed to move around, his hands and feet almost numb from the pain. He slowly searched his surroundings relying on touch alone. He detected hard stone and narrow fissures and water. He eventually concluded he'd ended up on a bed of gravel between craggy outcroppings of rock, next to several shallow pools of water.

The presence of water was a stroke of good luck, as was the minimum rations of medicine and food he'd been carrying on his person during the march to Bun Province. At the same time, the bracelet wrapped around his wrist was undamaged. The silver bracelet was one of Tai's Imperial Regalia. It provided a kind of life support. Every kingdom had at least one such piece of jewelry. That the one belonging to the Kingdom of Tai was a personal accessory not easily separated from his person saved Gyousou's life.

As best he could tell, both of his legs were broken. Though his arms were intact, several of his fingers had been fractured as well. Despite his body being covered with wounds, he could still move around. Fortunately, he was able to gather a fair amount of dry wood, which he used first to make splints and then light a fire.

The flickering illumination at last allowed him to comprehend the nature of his surroundings. He was at the bottom of a deep vertical shaft.

The top of the shaft was so far above him the light from the fire disappeared into the gloom. The floor of the shaft formed a misshapen bowl like an earthenware mortar, piled with boulders and gravel, perhaps from the nearby landslides. Mixed among the boulders were the remains of the timbers that likely once held up the mine roof.

Several of the timbers looked relatively new and may have collapsed at the same time that Gyousou fell down the shaft. The almost vertical stone walls left after the ceiling collapsed clearly showed the chisel marks left by human hands. Here and there he could make out glittering bands in the striated gravel beds.

He was at the bottom of a mine shaft on Kan'you Mountain.

Believing Gyousou was dead, Ukou must have thrown him down the mine shaft, intending to consign his body to oblivion. This mine shaft was deep. Not only deep, but the tunnels accessing the shaft were sealed off by cave-ins. Otherwise, when the White Pheasant did not fall from its perch and Asen realized that Gyousou was not dead, Ukou should have returned to finish him off.

No matter how badly they blundered, now they couldn't easily get anywhere near him. That was why no assassin had paid Gyousou a visit while he was incapacitated.

Though they were bound to show up someday.

The fall had broken his legs at odd angles. He pounded on them with his hands and set them in place. He had a compound fracture in his left leg. He retracted the flesh himself and pushed the bones back into place. He was happy enough that there was no one there to hear his cries of anguish.

When he finished treating himself and was at last able to move, Gyousou crawled around and inspected the bottom of the hole. He discovered several tunnels branching off from the main shaft, mining tunnels most likely, six in total. Two were low enough for him to reach. Water had collected in them. He concluded that when the underground water table rose, water channeled through the tunnels filled the bottom of the shaft. It was possible that when he was thrown down the shaft, the water was deep enough to break the fall.

He chose the tunnel from which he felt with the strongest draft of fresh air. It led him to a grotto alongside a subterranean river.

The grotto was probably also what remained of previous cave-ins. Boulders littered the undulating ground, except for a room-sized space next to the river. There

the cave floor was free of fallen rocks and was mostly smooth, having been hewn with human hands. The high ceiling above retained its natural form. He could imagine someone chiseling level the ground below.

The cave had originally been created by the underground stream. The risk of further rock slides should be slight. Water was close by and air flowed through the chamber. So this was where he settled down and set up house.

Gyousou could hardly begin to grasp the many months and years he had stayed there.

A long time passed before he was able to freely walk around. When he could, he explored the maze of mining tunnels and committed their particulars to memory. He hammered away at the bedrock with small boulders stones to create footholds, allowing him to move up and down through the caverns.

He knapped stones to make spears, which he used as digging bars to break up the rockslides blocking off the tunnels, which he then dug through by hand.

Strangely enough, he never wearied of his efforts. Ukou undoubtedly could have stripped everything he had from his person. He didn't, leaving Gyousou with the bracelet. He lost his sash when he was attacked from behind. But as he carried his scabbard, short sword, and whetstone on a separate belt, he kept them all with him.

Hanging weapons from the sash was an old custom. The scabbard was fitted to a metal ring in the sash. But the sash Gyousou wore was a gift from the Imperial Han, and it came with no rings attached. Fortunately, as it turned out, Gyousou chose to consign those utilitarian uses to an old-fashioned belt instead.

The belt was woven from silk. Unraveling the strands turned them into effective tinder. On a subsequent search, he found Cold Jade. That was the name he'd given his sword. He was holding the sword when he was slashed from behind. He was certain he had dropped it, but it must have gotten tossed into the abyss with him.

Cold Jade was a gift given to him by Emperor Kyou. Anyone would identify it as a rare and renowned weapon at a glance, which meant that no thief could sell it or use it in public. Its existence alone was proof of the assault that took place. With that in mind, Ukou must have disposed of the sword the same way he did Gyousou's body.

More random actions that in the long run accrued to his benefit.

With an army on the march, personal belongings had to be kept to a minimum. He fell into water, breaking his legs but not his arms. These strokes of good luck were becoming too innumerable to count.

He felt like someone had delivered orders from on high for him to live, whatever the odds.

Like the baskets carried along the river to the shallows of his narrow shore from somewhere high above him. They contained spirit money and paper garments, some

actual paper implements, and food. He felt a new lease on life whenever he plucked these occasional gifts out of the water.

No matter what I have to endure, no matter what it takes, I will live on.

As emperor, he had one primary task before him and that was to survive. A kingdom losing its emperor upset the balance between heaven and earth and threw the elements into confusion.

Counting the time from when he awoke to when he went to bed as one working day, he carved a calendar onto the cave wall. He could only make rough estimations, but he did his best to attend the festivals and holy days too. He had to depend on the baskets that arrived on the shore of the cave. Meager though they were, Heaven should accept the intent with which the offerings were made.

Beyond tending to those daily tasks, he searched for a way out. He explored the tunnels as far as he could walk and found no way out. He followed the subterranean river upstream until it disappeared underground for long stretches. Diving into the pitch black and fighting the current yielded no productive results.

The only option left to him was to dig through the rock slides left from the cave-ins. He excavated the weakest parts of the slides, piled up the rocks and created a path he could crawl through. He cleared three tunnels this way and found no exits on the other side. The fourth proved so unstable that the columns of rock couldn't stabilize the tunnel walls and he finally abandoned it.

But the fifth tunnel eventually led him to a large cavity in the rock. It was likely a natural formation, the rock walls carved away to form an almost vertical ravine. Far, far away in the inky blackness glowed a tiny dot of light, glowing like a single star in a perfectly dark sky.

In all of his explorations, Gyousou hadn't found a way of descending deeper into the earth. He had probably ended up in the depths at the bottom of Kan'you Mountain, meaning the summit was now a vast distance above him. But there definitely was a passageway to the outside world. When it rained, a fair amount of rain water fell down the shaft.

Given the great distances involved, the hole the light was shining through must be fairly large.

He chiseled footholds into the rock and built scaffolding out of wood and stone. Day in and day out, traveling back and forth from the cave where he lived, the work proceeded at a snail's pace. He lost track of how long he'd done the same thing over and over, and yet was clearly making no progress. He hadn't climbed the ravine walls to even ten times his own height.

At this rate, it would take him years to reach the top, surely longer than Heaven would allow the throne to remain empty. Warring with that growing sense of unease,

one day as he traveled to work in the ravine, he came face to face with his final gift from the gods.

There next to a cluster of descending fissures in the rock, Gyousou heard the first sound of a living thing besides himself.

The low-pitched growl told him this was a youma welling up from the depths of the earth.

His immediate reaction was that his luck had finally run out. He had a sword, but there was no telling whether that weapon would be any match for a youma. But all the more concerning was that the proliferation of youma meant that Heaven and Earth were out of balance and the decline and fall of the kingdom had begun.

Heaven had finally decided to cast Gyousou aside. If so, he had no defense to offer, given the years he had abandoned the throne entrusted to him.

Except this wasn't the case. The creature that appeared in the flickering light of his makeshift lantern was not a youma but a youjuu.

A black suugu.

Heaven had bestowed one last miracle upon him. Gyousou knew how to wrangle a suugu.

Chapter 31

[18-3] The civil servant visited Yuushou on a cold and wintry day. The man gave him a courteous bow and stated without the slightest emotional affect that His Highness had summoned him.

The shocked Yuushou got dressed and hurried to the Inner Palace. There he was met by another servant with an equally blank face and led inside.

A man dressed in black was sitting on the throne. This was the first time in almost three years that Yuushou had laid eyes on him.

“Yuushou, I’m sending you to meet with Gyousou.”

Kowtowing there before the throne, Yuushou raised his head. He’d heard that Taiki had insisted Gyousou must formally abdicate. So Asen was finally getting around to having him do so. Surely that meant he’d also determined to go forward with the enthronement.

“I would be honored to do so.”

Asen nodded. “However, there is no need to mobilize an entire division. You will lead a regiment to Bun Province.”

“Bun Province?”

“Kan’you Mountain, to be specific.”

From the expression on Yuushou’s face, Asen must have guessed the question on his mind. “Gyousou is currently deep under Kan’you Mountain. Buried beneath a landslide.”

“A landslide?”

Getting buried beneath a landslide was pretty much synonymous with getting killed. Was he being sent there to dig up the corpse?

Asen gestured for the puzzled Yuushou to approach him. “Gyousou fell to the depths of Kan’you Mountain.”

“Down a mine shaft, you mean?”

“Exactly. The landside sealed off the access tunnels.”

That explanation didn’t leave Yuushou any more enlightened than before. He couldn’t imagine how human beings could cause a landslide on such a scale. If there was a way to collapse a wall of rock at a moment’s notice, the military would want to know about it first. Such methods would be invaluable to a military that, far more than fighting, was involved in civil engineering projects on a regular basis.

Asen said, answering Yuushou’s apparent confusion, “These are secret means previously known only to myself.” He flashed a derisive smile. “What I’m telling you

is for your ears only and should be revealed to no one else. You will be leading a single regiment to Kan'you Mountain, but I will be choosing who will accompany you. Your guide will be Ukou."

Yuushou immediately voiced an objection. "A guide will not be necessary."

"You can't take Kan'you Mountain for granted," Asen countered flatly. "That place is a natural labyrinth." His severe expression softened. "Well, the miners dug all those tunnels, so I don't suppose you could call them natural. Nevertheless, once you get below the surface, Kan'you Mountain is riddled with catacombs. Without Ukou, you'd end up running around in circles."

Yuushou asked, "This Ukou, is he the one who sealed Gyousou within Kan'you Mountain?"

Asen's nod aroused in Yuushou a vague sense of disappointment. Only Asen knew how to trigger such a landslide. The one person he'd shared that secret with, the person who'd actually carried it out, was Ukou. Not himself.

"The fact of the matter is, in order to extract Gyousou you will first have to excavate the tunnels. When the landslide sealed off the tunnels, many other rickety mines and tunnels throughout the mountain caved in as well. That will make the job all the harder and rounding up the necessary manpower will take time. The Bun Provincial Guard and the land gangs will be at your disposal. Go inspect the conditions of the tunnels and take command of the preparations for the excavations."

"Yes," said Yuushou.

Asen rose from the throne and drew closer to him. "Have the land gangs recruit the miners and handle the critical parts of the excavation. Ukou knows where those critical parts are. He'll also know what to do once the job is done."

Yuushou drew a sharp breath. That meant killing the miners involved in the excavation. He took a long look at the face of his liege, that he hadn't seen in three years. He never would have expected him to hand down such an order. No, to tell the truth, Yuushou had already known for some time. When Asen launched the extermination campaign against the rebels, he gave no thought to the civilians caught up in the conflict.

"What?" Asen said, narrowing his eyes. "I'm not asking you to get involved. Leave it all to Ukou. No need for you to get your hands dirty."

Was this Asen trying to be nice? Yuushou felt a faint quiver of apprehension when he asked, "Aren't the miners and members of the land gangs also innocent civilians?"

"Well, then don't involve any innocent civilians. Have the land gangs round up their friends and associates."

But it's fine if they're related to the land gangs?

Yuushou did not dare voice that question aloud. During the troubles with the land gangs, they were ostensibly the enemy. The Imperial Army took the fight to the land gangs and anybody involved with them.

But— Yuushou couldn't help thinking as he left the Inner Palace.

Warring with the land gangs who had risen up in naked opposition was one thing. Soliciting their cooperation and then slaughtering them afterwards was quite another. Using the land gangs to unseal the tunnels and then betraying them and killing them—that was the plan of the man he had long served.

Asen had changed between then and now. Or perhaps he'd been that way all along.

In any case, what was this secret weapon, the details of which could not be revealed to anyone? How in the world could a man-made landslide be triggered on such a scale?

So Yuushou had to get his troops ready for the departure to Rin'u, select his staff officers, and organize the regiment. The march to Rin'u would take a fortnight. After that, he could only guess at the time required to begin the search of Kan'you Mountain and open up an access road to where Gyousou was located. Having no idea of the scale of the landslide, he couldn't begin to grasp the steps he'd have to take at this stage.

During that time, having to bring Ukou with him weighed all the heavier on his mind.

Just how close were Asen and Ukou? When did Ukou become a part of his inner circle? What circumstances brought them together?

These questions on his mind as he returned to the barracks, he ran into the last person he had any desire to see. He knew Yuushou had been summoned by Asen and wanted to know what his orders were. He'd been waiting to get the news from the horse's mouth.

The man wearing red and black armor leaned back against the gate post. As soon as he spotted Yuushou, he grinned and said, "Rin'u, eh?"

"Yeah," was all of Yuushou's reply.

"Works for me," Ukou said with a gloating look. "Happy as always to show you the way."

Yuushou walked on without another word. *Why Ukou?* he muttered to himself. Asen turned to Ukou as well in the previous attempt on Gyousou's life. When committing himself to as grave a matter as high treason, why did Asen pass over the lifelong retainers that had risen up the ranks with him and instead engage with people like Ukou?

Because if ordered to assassinate Gyousou, Yuushou was bound to harbor second thoughts.

Yuushou had no qualms about Gyousou being chosen as the new emperor. They belonged to the same military brotherhood. Yuushou respected him as an army general. Though he didn't know Gyousou personally, he had no particular reason to dislike him. Of course, in terms of raw talent, he ranked Gyousou behind Asen. Asen was in every category the first among equals. Still, he had nothing bad to say about Gyousou.

So blithely consigning Gyousou to oblivion left a bad taste in his mouth. Were he ordered to, he had no inclination to refuse, though if he accepted such a mission, he doubted he would come away with any sense of accomplishment for having done so.

Gyousou was the emperor. He carried the Kingdom of Tai and everyone who lived there on his shoulders. More than killing the man, killing the long-awaited emperor struck a particularly bitter chord.

Moreover, grand treason was a grave sin and the greatest crime in the law, an offense against the kingdom and the people. If it was within his power to do so, Yuushou would dissuade Asen from continuing down this road. He naturally felt a strong resistance to participating in these events. Yet at the same time, he wanted to be involved.

Yuushou was a bundle of contradictions. He hoped to persuade Asen otherwise. *You're the only one I can trust.* Perhaps those were the words he wanted to hear.

But Asen turned to Ukou instead. Yuushou loathed Ukou from the start. The previous dynasty saw the death of a particularly pompous and ineffectual general. Ukou was one of the soldiers furloughed in the aftermath. Requests and favors from above overrode any objections and he was assigned to Asen's division under Hinken's command.

His colleagues didn't think much of him. He was said to be fearless. But lacking the skills, he reduced every fight to an indiscriminate brawl. He was not only upfront about his low and mean character, but shamelessly boasted about it to a discomfiting degree. Yuushou had seen nothing in him since to change his opinion.

There was a time when Asen would have gone out of his way to avoid associating with such a man. Yet it was Ukou to whom Asen assigned such critical tasks. Ukou grew even more full of himself as a result. Hinken had him transferred to Shinryou's division, but Shinryou hailed from Gai Province and Ukou didn't hide his disdain for the fact that Shinryou and the rest of them were his superior officers in name only.

Turning his back on the smirking Ukou, Yuushou headed for his office. When he got there, he unexpectedly found Shukuyou, the Minister of Summer, waiting for him.

“Quite out of the blue, orders came down to dispatch Yuushou to Bun Province. From His Highness, I assume.”

Yuushou nodded. Now Shukuyou bore the weighty title of Minister of Summer. He’d previously been a staff officer overseeing a coterie of mid-ranked officers. He was also Keitou’s superior. Shukuyou and Yuushou went way back together.

“I heard you’re to meet with Gyousou in order to secure his abdication.”

“So it seems. Although I won’t be taking point on this one. Ukou is coming with me.”

“Ukou. Huh.” Shukuyou drew his brows. “Why has His Highness entrusted that villain with such important assignments?”

“Precisely because he is a villain.”

“I cannot condone any of this,” Shukuyou spit out. He could not abide a man like Ukou even breathing the same air as His Highness.

Asen’s soldiers prided themselves in their irreproachable conduct and physical fortitude. Yuushou and his fellow officers felt fully justified in boasting of those qualities. They always received superior reviews compared to Gyousou’s army in this regard.

A big reason for this was the insubordination Gyousou engaged in now and again, the kind of disrespect for authority that Asen’s forces had never once demonstrated. They understood the position they occupied as an army and believed they deserved the reputation they’d earned for never overstepping those bounds.

All the more reason they simply could not condone the presence of boorish and unprofessional mercenaries like Ukou in their ranks.

Shukuyou had never been anything more than a staff officer, but as a member of the military, he took part in campaigns, and that included being stationed on the front lines. Although he never picked up a sword and charged into battle, he thought of himself as a soldier and recoiled as well from this stain on their honor and reputation.

When he explained as much, Yuushou answered with a wry smile, “The honor and reputation of a usurper?”

Shukuyou stiffened. “Nothing of the sort. Asen-sama will ascend to the throne as the emperor chosen by Heaven.”

“Well, then. Let me rephrase that. Someone in authority who hears of rebels rising up here or there and slaughters them together with all the unfortunate civilians who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Yuushou!” Shukuyou responded at once from the gut. He couldn’t dismiss Yuushou’s point out of hand.

“I guess I struck a nerve,” Yuushou said with a smile. “Well, it’s not a burden you’ll have to bear. The likes of Asen-sama and Chou’un make the decisions. We’re the one who actually get their hands dirty.”

That was the cold, hard reality that left him shaken. However heartless the orders Shukuyou handed down were, at the end of the day, they were carried out by Yuushou and his men.

“Oh, I’m not donning a hairshirt and placing the blame on you. That’s what it means to be a soldier. You don’t question orders. You do your duty and wash the blood off your hands later. We don’t have the right to cast aspersions at Ukou. From the perspective of the civilians, they could hardly tell the difference between us.”

Chapter 32

[18-4] Keitou arrived at the manor in the midst of a snow storm, adorned from head to toe in white. He entered the main hall and stated, “I humbly wish to take my leave of the Taiho’s service.”

“Keitou?” Taiki responded with a startled expression. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean what I said. I shall be retiring from Hakkei Palace.”

“Then please explain why you are doing so.”

“I regret that is something I cannot do.”

Taiki craned his head to the side in confusion. “If you wish to leave my service, I will not force you to remain. But you play a necessary and important role here. What reasons do you have for resigning? Is it because of me? If so, I’m sure any such differences could be resolved.”

“Not at all! This decision has nothing to do with anything the Taiho has said or done.”

“So the matter is already out of my hands? Are you sure there is no way for me to change your mind?”

Keitou remained silent for a long moment. To be sure, Taiki was happy enough that, as his retainer, Keitou had chosen to explain as much as he had. All the more so considering that Keitou had once been his enemy.

“Unfortunately, given the nature of the situation, I do not believe that even Taiho could offer a satisfactory resolution.”

Taiki studied Keitou with a puzzled look until Keitou bowed his head. “I cannot agree that His Highness—that Asen—should ascend to the throne.”

Taiki pointed out that any decision to seat Asen on the throne was the choice of Heaven, not Taiki himself. But he made no headway with that argument.

“I understand the intentions of Heaven. I simply cannot accept them.”

“Are you not one of Asen’s retainers?”

“I was,” Keitou said, using the past tense of the verb. “It is true that he was the man who chose me and whom I called my commander. For a long time, I venerated Asen-san and served him with pride.”

A retainer is a strange creature, Keitou couldn’t help thinking. Their relationship was not that of a parent and child, nor of older and younger siblings. At first, the retainer was little more than a stranger who answered to his orders and joined his

camp. They met as subordinate and superior, then as leader and follower, and then at some point, he became the person he served without condition.

Looking back, Keitou could not recall when or on what occasion the transition took place. At first, there were surely times when it was little more than a contrarian impulse. And, in fact, he'd heard that Eishou of Gyousou's army was dead set against it.

Somewhere along the line, Keitou decided that Asen was his lord and master, and was delighted to be counted among his retainers. Though others contrasted and compared Asen with Gyousou, Keitou never once felt that Asen was inferior to Gyousou in any way. Asen was always the greater of the two. Of course, he also believed that Gyousou was the best of the rest, superior even to Emperor Kyou.

"However, in that respect, I was probably in error. I simply cannot believe that the man I served struck down the emperor approved by Heaven."

Had Asen deceived him or had Keitou failed to assess his true nature? Perhaps he'd placed him on an impossibly high pedestal and then forced whatever he knew to conform to that ideal.

"Even if such compelling circumstances existed and the throne thus fell into his hands, it is beyond the pale that he should treat the kingdom and its people with such cavalier disregard."

Because Keitou was his retainer, if Asen had said, "Such things cannot be helped," Keitou would have gone along. That alone might have sufficed, even without Asen explaining himself. If he had maintained the relationship with his retainers that he had before the coup d'état, Keitou likely would not have questioned his actions.

But Asen severed that connection. Nevertheless, Keitou continued to think of himself as his retainer and looked up to Asen as his lord and master. He rationalized that Asen must have had his reasons for the coup, and persuaded himself as well that the merciless purges that followed were unavoidable.

Then any sense of Asen's presence vanished from the Imperial Court. Keitou was shouldered aside without a title or portfolio. He must have made some sort of mistake. If so, he stubbornly persisted in believing he could put it right.

"I was Asen's retainer. I thought I only needed to put my faith in him and follow him wherever he chose to go. I convinced myself that was the proper course of action."

However—

"Asen dispatched Yuushou to Bun Province. He's been sent there to meet with Gyousou-dono. Asen has known where Gyousou-dono was all along. In short, he's been keeping him prisoner. He drove the emperor from his seat of power and imprisoned him to prevent him from returning to the palace. Thus he stole the

throne. Asen planned and executed this strategy with exacting thoroughness, and so cast Tai in its current condition.”

A plan none of his retainers knew anything about.

“I did not want my lord to stain his hands committing a sin as grievous as regicide. If he felt that circumstances demanded such a course of action, he should have convinced his retainers first. Of course, had I known of these schemes beforehand, I would have stopped them, because I did not wish him to be branded a criminal. Even so, I still hoped to be persuaded there was nothing else he could do. Once he laid it all out, I wanted to agree with him. At the very least, we would shoulder the same sin together and atone for our crimes by working on behalf of the kingdom and its subjects. Asen trampled underfoot every last one of those hopes and expectations.”

Keitou trembled and his voice shook.

“Retainers are foolish creatures. When your lord and commander lays down the law, there is no room for disagreement. The foolishness arises in how a lord and his aides relate to each other. Asen holed up alone in the Rokushin and refused to meet with the members of his senior staff. He cut all ties. I do not know why. I no longer wish to know why. Having severed the connection between himself and his retainers, Asen became little more than a common thief who stole the throne, threw it away, and now lays waste to the kingdom and persecutes its people.”

Keitou was no longer able to persuade or deceive himself.

“I cannot overlook conduct that stole the throne from an emperor chosen according to the Divine Will. Nor can I excuse actions that squander the authority granted him. Policies that pay no heed to the kingdom and the people and instead rely on tyranny and oppression arouse in me nothing but revulsion.”

He had felt this way for some time. He simply pushed those thoughts out of his mind with the repeated mantra that he was “Asen’s retainer.”

“I cannot concur with the choices that Heaven has made in this regard. I find no reason to accept Asen as the rightful emperor or anything like it. He has no right to occupy the throne. That is why I will not take part in an Asen Dynasty.”

And so Keitou cast off the outer husk of “retainer” and revealed his *hon’ne*, the essential nature of his soul.

“As long as he lives, Gyousou-sama is the emperor of this kingdom. Only Gyousou-sama should be addressed as His Highness. Asen deserves no such respect.”

At some point, the tears welled up. Were it permissible, he would have sunk to the floor and wailed aloud in grief and mortification.

“Keitou, if Gyousou-sama returned to the throne, would you be willing to work on his behalf?”

“I would, most happily.”

“Even if that meant standing in opposition to Asen?”

With a wild gesture that knocked over a nearby writing desk, Keitou exclaimed, “Look at the state of the kingdom! How many people are going to die this winter? If Asen hadn’t committed high treason, the citizens of Kouki should have enjoyed a temperate winter here in the home of the emperor. Instead they are freezing to death!”

Even in Kouki, people were dying from the cold. Within the city limits, hollow-eyed and exhausted refugees huddled together in growing numbers.

“If rebels are reported to be in a certain city, having no idea who or where they are, do you know how many civilians get slaughtered rooting them out? Even infants not old enough to have reached the age of discretion will meet their deaths by Asen’s hand. Asen is not a man I will ever acknowledge as the emperor. In no way does he belong on the throne.”

Keitou spit out the words and fell silent.

Taiki answered in a soft voice, “Gyousou-sama is the emperor of Tai.”

“I know—” Keitou started to say. He stopped, a startled look rising to his face.

Taiki looked back at him with quiet eyes, like the surface of a lake on a windless day. “Asen is not and has never been the emperor of anything.”

“Taiho—that is—” Keitou felt the blood drain from his head and his knees go weak.

“That is why you are so necessary to me, Keitou.”

Keitou collapsed to the floor and sat there in a daze. “Taiho, what are you doing?”

“What we are doing is saving this kingdom and its rightful emperor. And I need your help to get the job done.”

Chapter 33

[18-5] Chou'un was in a hurry.

How did things come to this?

Asen was showing up at the Privy Council chambers on a regular basis. As per usual, he kept everybody around him at arm's length. But with Asen himself appearing in the Outer Palace, the ministers took their orders directly from him. Up to this point, Chou'un had ruled over the Imperial Court. Now Asen had stepped back onto the stage and was reasserting his privileges and authority.

Whatever impulse led him to do so, it left Chou'un in a quandary. As the reach of his authority contracted, so did the goods and favors he extracted using that authority. He couldn't very well tell Asen to ignore that impulse and return to his old ways. What he could do was spread the message around that Asen being the new emperor was a charade cooked up by Taiki.

Except no one listened. People flocked to Taiki. Not only Gyousou's old retainers but prominent and distinguished administrators began to gather at the provincial offices. At one time or another, Chou'un had dismissed many of them from the Imperial Court. Naturally they now gave him a cold shoulder.

Though they didn't have the same rank or authority as the Chousai, members of the provincial government ignored Chou'un's directives and gave not a thought to his status or position or his feelings about anything at all. The imperial ministers ignored Chou'un and went straight over his head to Asen. Even worse, many of them sought out Taiki's opinion before his own.

Asen had dispatched troops to Bun Province in order to take Gyousou into custody. The unexpected repercussions of this action were felt far and wide.

The civil servants who did not count themselves among Gyousou's retainers and did not owe their positions to Chou'un's patronage had accepted the official announcement that Gyousou died at face value. That being the case, they also accepted that, usurper though he may be, Asen was the man sitting on the throne.

But then came word that Gyousou wasn't dead after all. Asen going to parlay with him meant that Asen had been keeping the rightful emperor under wraps the whole time. This, in turn, aroused animosity toward Asen for proceeding forward with his own enthronement and put more weight in Chou'un's accusation that Taiki had orchestrated this travesty.

Twisted and distorted like any rumors, these voices ended up bolstering public sentiment on behalf of Gyousou. A consensus began to spread that “Emperor” Asen was Taiki’s creation and Gyousou of course was the true emperor.

If proclaiming Asen the new emperor was indeed a falsehood promulgated by Taiki with the intention of ensnaring Asen, then didn’t that mean ensnaring Asen was the Will of Heaven?

On the other hand, the Rikken fawned incessantly on Asen. With Chou’un expanding his own power base and vying for supremacy while kissing up to the increasingly determined Asen, calls to remove Chou’un from office grew louder and more strident. Among them, the loudest were the ones also singing the praises of Asen’s impending enthronement.

Chou’un found himself caught betwixt and between. The patterns of power within the Imperial Palace had begun to shift and change in a major way.

Ansaku gazed upon the flustered Chou’un with cold eyes. *Every way you look at it, this man doesn’t stand a chance.*

Butting heads with Taiki had clearly weakened Chou’un’s position. He was reaping what he had sown.

But as far as Chou’un was concerned, “I have no reason to lock horns with the Taiho. Harboring any animosity toward him is out of the question.”

Even at this point, Chou’un thought nothing of reversing course and pretending he’d been heading in that direction all along.

“Though the Taiho may not see things that way,” Ansaku said, an air of sympathy in his voice.

“Why? What have I done?”

Ansaku bowed his head and kept his shocked reaction to himself. He understood how the man’s mind worked. Chou’un would already be rearranging his recollection of past events in ways more favorable to the current state of affairs.

“I hate to say it, but I’ve had my doubts about the Taiho’s bona fides from the start,” Ansaku said, further testing the waters.

Chou’un responded with a look that suggested he treated any such suspicions as all the more outrageous.

“I have never doubted the Taiho. There may have been the rare occasion when I exercised an additional degree of caution.”

Ansaku answered only with a nod.

“So this person shows up claiming to be the Taiho. Why should I doubt him without giving him a fair hearing? The heart tells me to believe and rejoice. But I am the Chousai. The mind must remain focused on keeping His Highness safe and the kingdom at peace. I cannot afford to dismiss the possibility that this Taiho is an

imposter. Given my position, such credulity would be unforgivable, no matter how callous it might appear.”

But of course, Ansaku chuckled to himself. As far as he knew, Chou’un wasn’t rationalizing or making excuses. These were the man’s honest thoughts. He wasn’t lying. From one moment to the next, he simply glossed over any inconvenient realities. With a subtle shift of nuance, applying a slight shade to the meaning, he twisted the truth one way or the other. Repeated over and over, he produced an imagined reality more accommodating to his own.

In another two or three months, he would forget any doubts he ever harbored. Rather, he was surrounded by doubters, whom he had opposed at every turn.

Because it had become Chou’un’s “truth,” he shamelessly asserted it was so without the slightest shame or remorse. Anyone not familiar with the particulars of the events in which he was involved would tend to trust him based on that attitude alone. Once convinced, should they later catch wind of the truth, they would interpret it only as a malicious attempt to sully Chou’un good name.

Despite his deep-rooted incompetence, Chou’un thus created an aura of competence around himself. From his personal perspective, what might have been mistaken for doubt was simply his competence shining through. His version of the truth followed a similar course, constantly conforming to the reality that Chou’un personally experienced, according to which he never failed.

Ansaku’s own experience had taught him that the minds of many high-ranked civil servants worked the same way.

“Wasn’t Kashaku the one who first raised questions about whether he really was the Taiho and deserved to be sitting alongside His Highness?”

Ansaku again smiled to himself. No, that was Chou’un. Kashaku was simply following suit. Typical of those eager to be seen toeing the party line, Kashaku didn’t echo the words of Chou’un alone. This was also a pattern among incompetents who papered over their deficiencies, but as a result of this conduct, it was not long before all those misdeeds ended up being laid at the feet of Kashaku instead.

And so the chickens came home to roost.

“If the Taiho has misunderstood, those misunderstandings must be addressed. Ansaku, you wouldn’t perhaps know of someone who could serve as a mediator in such a situation?”

Ansaku answered that he would look for such a person.

Good to his word, Ansaku commenced a search for an intermediary in Taiki’s circle who could build a bridge between the two sides. He didn’t know where Chou’un was going to end up in all this, but if an avenue of communication could be established, he wanted to make sure it remained intact.

The problem was, the animosity toward Chou'un was strong in anyone close to Taiki. He sought out an independent third party who could fulfill that role, except by and large they already held a strong affinity with Taiki's camp. Those loyal to Asen hesitated to participate in such an exercise, and were not at all disposed to support Chou'un.

In any case, everyone he trusted to be a truly honest broker already supported Taiki. Because the righteousness of the kirin alone could be taken as a given.

Chou'un's authority as the center of power in the Imperial Court slowly waned while that of the Zui Province government, led by Taiki, clearly grew. They recruited talented people to the effort and nimbly began to move in the directions Taiki desired.

They opened public granaries across Zui Province enough to tide over the bitter cold of mid-winter. But the lives of the people would still be hard. Reserves collapsed during the worst of the winter weather, inflicting additional difficulties on the survivors going forward.

Displaced persons were resettled in towns where the population had collapsed and given the opportunity to homestead the places where they settled down. Soup kitchens and boarding houses were built in cities where large numbers of refugees had congregated. Agents set up shop among them, recruiting workers to rebuild the towns and cities damaged by war and natural disasters.

Despite the meager wages, news of paying jobs drew in more refugees from outside Zui Province.

At long last, a new source of light, small but certain, sprang to life in Tai.